What is Chinese poetry today? Following a quick look at former times, this chapter examines two phenomena that have been central to the situation in mainland China since the late 1970s: the unofficial poetry scene and the avant-garde. It then recalls salient moments in the avant-garde’s history, with sketchy reference to context. After sampling four individual texts and identifying two overall textual trends, it considers metatextual images of poetry and poethood. Finally, it introduces the next chapters and explains what this book wants to do.

By text, I mean poetry, on the page and in recitation; by context, poetry’s social, political and cultural surroundings; by metatext, discourse on poetry.

1. What Went Before

Chinese poetry boasts an uninterrupted, enduring tradition of a good two and a half thousand years. Early specimens are found in the Book of Songs (诗经) and the Songs of the South (楚辞), the latter with China’s arch-poet Qu Yuan as its (co-)author. They remain popular to this day, with Chinese and foreign readers alike. So do the works of celebrated Tang and Song dynasty poets such as Li Bai, Du Fu, Li Shangyin, Su Shi and Li Qingzhao. Their lives span a centuries-long period that predates modernity by roughly a millennium and their works are widely seen as the pinnacle of Chinese literature, indeed of Chinese culture at large. And if poems from the Tang and Song have been canonized to the point of being imperishable to the mortal eye, there is a wealth of accomplished poetry before the Tang and after the Song, too.

Classical Chinese poetry comes in a variety of sophisticated, musical forms and styles. It employs archetypal themes that include the majesty of the natural world, the fate of kingdoms and empires, and
the tragedy of the official whose advice goes unheeded by the ruler. The ruler’s failure to appreciate his servant’s loyalty also serves as a habitual interpretation of poetry that speaks of unrequited love. This illustrates the age-old entanglement of Chinese poetry and politics, brought on by poets as well as politicians, and by poetry’s readers as well as its writers. Writers are usually readers, too, and Chinese poets and politicians have coincided in the same bodies. Li Yu, the last emperor of the Southern Tang dynasty, is an example of a thousand years ago. Mao Zedong is one from our time.

In China, such coincidence is perhaps less coincidental than elsewhere, in light of an ontological association of government and literature. In a traditional Chinese worldview both reflect the Way (道 Dao, alternatively transcribed as Tao), a cosmic principle that determines the order of all things, from the changing of the seasons to human relations within the state and the family. According to a central component of traditional Chinese poetics, the value of literature lies in its capacity to “convey the Way”: to praise, for instance, a virtuous ruler, or remonstrate with one unworthy of the throne. The notion of literature to convey the Way (文以载道) doesn’t contradict the ancient Chinese adage that poetry “articulates what is on the mind intently” or “verbalizes emotion” (诗言志), in Stephen Owen’s and Zhang Longxi’s renditions. Here, emotion and what is on the mind intently refer not to individual feelings and even less to idiosyncratic obsession, but to the entire mental state that is appropriate in a given set of circumstances and will prompt equally appropriate expression and action prescribed by the socio-moral code of Confucianism—the sort of mindset, in other words, that one would want in a government official. This explains why in premodern times, imperial civil service examinations tested aspiring officials for their command of poetry. It also explains how it is that in a traditional Chinese view of literature one’s command of poetry can be objectively assessed, and reading the poem is, in Owen’s words, reading the poet.¹

acute concern, but such speculation and the limits of living memory aside, it is a fact that in the last one hundred years or so Chinese poetry has crossed several watersheds. It has moved from one language to another, from relative self-containment to vigorous interaction with foreign traditions and from entanglement with politics and society to the mixed blessings of autonomy—or, depending on one’s perspective, of marginality.

After the last imperial dynasty had collapsed and the Republic of China emerged (1911), champions of change such as Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu advocated literature in a colloquial, modern language, in what has gone down in history as the Literary Revolution (文学革命) of 1917, triggered in the pages of New Youth (新青年). Vernacular usage (白话文) was to supersede the classical Chinese (文言文) that had been the exclusive medium of high literature. The classical and the vernacular were not different linguistic registers but distinct languages, as far apart as Latin and present-day French. Incidentally, for all their modernity, many vernacular texts from the first years and decades after the Literary Revolution were still anything but colloquial. They retained heavy traces of classical Chinese and incorporated many neologisms of foreign origin. A New Poetry (新诗), in free verse as well as foreign and indigenous modern forms, set out to replace a time-honored tradition whose rigidity and elitism were now felt to thwart the development of a modern literature, and by implication of a modern society. The drive for literary reform was motivated in large part by social concerns and was by no means a purely aesthetic affair, so the Way was never far away. Crucially, however, now that poetry was no longer an integral part of officialdom, China’s poets lost their self-evident social status. As scholars such as Lloyd Haft and Michelle Yeh have shown, they began to grapple with an identity crisis and problems of legitimation that continue to this day, forcing them to reconsider why, how, what and for whom they wrote.2

If in early modern times the marriage of Chinese literature and politics became uneasy, in the public sphere its fundamental validity was rarely questioned with any profound impact. The period up to the 1940s saw foreign-influenced experimentation and heated debate on the New Poetry and its social obligations, by authors whose work is regularly reprinted in China and has been translated into many lan-

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guages: Guo Moruo, Wen Yiduo, Xu Zhimo, Bing Xin, Li Jinfu, Bian Zhilin, He Qifang, Feng Zhi, Dai Wangshu, Ai Qing, Zang Kejia, Tian Jian, Zheng Min, Chen Jingrong and others. At the end of the day the New Poetry’s practitioners were forced to engage with the crisis in which their country found itself, meaning imperialist aggression, crippling social problems, a world war and a civil war. Art for art’s sake, or art that could be construed as arrogating the right to remain aloof from its national and social environs, fought a losing battle. Tendentious though the metaphors of aloofness and battle may be, it is difficult to deny them access to this particular bit of literary history.

As Chinese leaders have done through the ages, Mao Zedong thought highly of the political potential of literature. In his 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” (在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话), he laid down the law for writers in Communist-controlled areas, subordinating their work to politics in so many words. This meant a ban on many types of literature, including those of the so-called Individualist (个人主义) and Humanist (人道主义) kinds. It also led to the active commission of literary works designed to advance the war effort against the Japanese and the Chinese Nationalists. In the People’s Republic of China, established in 1949, these wartime rules for literature and art remained in force for decades after the war was over. Taiwan, now home to the Nationalist government of the Republic of China, and Hong Kong, still a British colony at the time, were worlds apart from the mainland, as is borne out by their subsequent literary histories.

In China, literature and art—production, publication, distribution, criticism, scholarship—came under near-complete control of the Communist Party and were institutionalized as ideological tools in state-sponsored bodies like the Chinese Writers’ Association (中国作家协会) on national and local levels. Successful and popular works in all genres treated of politically correct subject matter in politically correct forms. Their aggressively prescriptive poetics was that of Socialist Realism (社会主义现实主义) and later the Combination of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism (革命现实主义和革命浪漫主义的结合). For poetry this gave rise to a dominant trend known as Political Lyricism (政治抒情诗). Control and activism extended to issues of style that reached down to the sentence level and

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indeed that of the individual word. The mark this left on the Chinese language as it was spoken and written in the PRC over the next three decades and beyond, especially but not exclusively in public discourse, is known as the Mao Style or MaoSpeak (毛文体), with a predilection for political lingo, ideologically heavy abstractions and the grand gesture. Censorship, including systematically stimulated self-censorship, became the order of the day, and many writers abandoned their art for safer occupations. Those who continued to write but failed to toe the line risked punishment, ranging from harassment in their private and professional lives to domestic exile, house arrest, incarceration and mental and physical violence, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This led, for instance, to the alleged suicide of famed fiction writer and dramatist Lao She—or effectively his murder by Red Guards. They were youngsters who had been instructed by Mao to “bomb the headquarters” and take the law into their own hands, but soon became the pawns of infighting within the Party that led the country to the brink of mass psychosis, economic collapse and civil war.

In the 1950s and the early 1960s there had still been a regular production of literary texts, albeit monotonous and predictable, with much banner-waving, heroic battling of sinister landlords, glorious steel production and so on. Also, while the People’s Republic was incomparably less cosmopolitan and outward-looking than the Republic had been and went on to be in Taiwan, and the selection of works for translation was increasingly determined by the political loyalties of their authors and their countries of origin, foreign literature did continue to be published in 1950s and early 1960s China. But by the late 1960s, after the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, literary activity in China came to a virtual standstill.4

2. The Unofficial Poetry Scene and the Avant-Garde

Ideological repression was now at a fever pitch. In a Maoist anti-intellectual outburst, schools and universities were closed, and urban high school and university students designated as Intellectual Youths (知

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4 Yang Lan has shown that the production of new fiction did not stop altogether, but his research confirms the general picture of a literary wasteland (1998). Cf Hsu 1975.
were rusticated to learn from peasants and factory workers instead. This drive at reeducating the urban youths was frequently counterproductive and led to their disillusionment with official representations of reality, including state-sanctioned PRC literature and art to date. At the same time, in a quirk of history, Red Guard razzia’s of public and private “bourgeois” libraries exposed many of them to foreign literature in translation. This acquainted them with texts that were normally not widely available because they were older publications or because they were for “internal” (内部) use, restricted by the authorities for access by a high-level cadre readership: works by Baudelaire, Kafka, Akhmatova, Tsvetayeva, Kerouac, Salinger, Solzhenitsyn and many more. Inside the particular synergy of the tumult of the “Ten Years of Chaos,” estrangement from official culture, foreign inspirations and the exploration of their individual talent, the Intellectual Youths began to meet in informal, clandestine circuits for reading and writing that became the breeding ground of the poetry that this book is about.5

China’s unofficial (非官方) poetry scene (诗坛) has its origins in this literary underground (地下) during the Cultural Revolution. Strikingly, literary historiography and literary events show that it is in the un-official scene—as opposed to the official (官方) scene, also called orthodox and establishment in English—that everybody that is anybody in contemporary poetry from the PRC first published and developed their voice. Equally remarkable, most if not all successful contemporary poets subscribe to a designation of their work as avant-garde (先锋), a category which is of narrower scope in many other literary histories. Hence, we should take a closer look at the notions of the unofficial poetry scene and the avant-garde as they occur in Chinese-domestic critical discourse. I have extensively analysed these notions elsewhere: they overlap, and each can be used in aesthetic as well as institutional senses, which are not always easy to separate.6 Here, we first focus on their primary associations. For the unofficial poetry scene, these are institutional. For the avant-garde, they are aesthetic.

By scene I mean poets, poetry and their circumstances, including critics and other readers. The contemporary poetry scene as a whole is anything but homogeneous. Authors identify with the unofficial and

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6 Van Crevel 2007.
official scenes and their subsets—regional, gendered, stylistic, medi-al—to varying degrees, ranging from high-profile organizational activism to dismissal of any identity that transcends the individual.

**The Unofficial Poetry Scene**

From an institutional angle, the unofficial poetry scene is that part of contemporary poetry that operates of its own initiative, outside the publishing business as formally administered by the state. After the underground preliminaries during the Cultural Revolution, the unofficial scene moved to the overground in December 1978, with the publication of the Beijing-based journal *Today* (今天). This was a landmark in PRC literary history, as the journal defied the state’s monopoly on literature. *Today* featured authors such as Bei Dao, Mang Ke, Shu Ting, Gu Cheng, Yang Lian and Duoduo, to name some of the best-known poets of the first generation that ventured beyond the Maoist pale. Since the early 1980s, as the state’s grip on literature and art has progressively weakened, the unofficial scene has expanded in urban centers throughout the country—Nanjing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Chengdu, Kunming, Harbin, Guangzhou—and made its texts available to whoever is interested. In a self-protective measure, these texts often claim to be aimed at “internal” exchange, in an ironic appropriation of orthodox terminology for a designation that is demonstrably untrue. Unofficial publications make no attempt to control their readership and would indeed love to see it grow uncontrollably. Tapping into highly effective, informal networks of poets and critics, the unofficial scene produces serial journals and one-time single-author and multiple-author anthologies, from the scruffy to the glossy, in print and online. It also organizes literary events such as poetry recitals and cooperative projects with other arts like theater and music.

In many places elsewhere in the world the institutional notion of publication hinges on formal involvement by members of officially recognized, professional communities such as publishing houses and book reviewers. In discourse on mainland-Chinese unofficial poetry, however, and in other literary scenes where writers and politicians en-

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7 Usage of *underground* has continued after the Cultural Revolution but no longer denotes active concealment from the authorities.

8 Yang and Duoduo called themselves Fei Sha and Bai Ye at the time.
tertain seriously conflicting visions of literature and politicians have the power and claim the right to interfere, the notion of publication should be taken in the broadest possible sense. Publication then simply means the making public of a text beyond inner-circle audiences hand-picked by the author. The point is illustrated by the difference between the Chinese terms 表发 ‘announce, make public’ and 出版 ‘come off the press, publish’ (cf German veröffentlichen ‘make public’ and herausgeben ‘publish,’ meaning ‘act as publisher of’; the English publish is ambiguous in this respect). Not everything that is made public is brought out by an official publisher. Even if it rarely appeared between the covers of officially published books or journals until the late 1980s, unofficial poetry was definitely published in the said, broad sense.

One important feature of the unofficial poetry scene is its rejection of the strictures of official cultural policy. In the Reform era, since 1978, such policy has seen considerable if fitful relaxation. This raises the question why the unofficial scene should need to exist any longer, for contemporary poetry has explored an infinitely larger space outside orthodoxy than that which continues to be off limits, with explicit political dissent as an example of the latter. Still, the unofficial scene retains its significance to this day. For one thing, political repression does in fact continue at fluctuating levels. Many of the poets involved are highly educated, well-connected people who generally have a good time, and tired Cold War visions of the poetry scene as a theater of artistically inclined guerilla warfare are grossly inaccurate, but it is certainly not the case that anything goes. Censorship and other types of political interference with literature remain very much operational: witness, for instance, the cultural purge that followed June Fourth (六•四), the violent suppression of the 1989 Protest Movement. When it happened, the unofficial scene rallied together on a national level to keep poetry alive.

More generally, there is ample reason to question Geremie Barmé’s claim, made in an admirable study of contemporary Chinese culture that is slightly marred by cynicism, that unofficial poetry stands out only “against the gloomy backdrop manufactured by the state,” or what we may call the art of the state—whose quality hinges on being embedded in its own, orthodox discourse, except when it is viewed as camp. In its own right, the unofficial scene lies at the core of a lively poetry climate that is instrumental for the development of individual poets and the poetry landscape as a whole. This is in evidence in lit-
literary historiography as well as in poetry’s general impact, domestic and international. In this light, Lü Zhouju’s and Luo Zhenya’s classification of the unofficial scene as a subculture (亚文化) is open to debate.⁹

Of course, historiography can be disproportionately dominated by particular interest groups. In the present context, an obvious example would be the repression of popular literature from late in the Qing dynasty and early in the Republican era (1911-1949) by the May Fourth (五四) and New Literature (新文学) paradigms, whose near-monopoly over “the modern” has only come to be seriously questioned since the 1980s. Early in the twentieth century, however, the fact that literary reform was part of a nation-building project gave its proponents singular purchase on the making of literary history. No such thing is true for the contemporary avant-garde.

Avant-Garde Poetry

What goes by the name of avant-garde poetry in post-Cultural-Revolution China is a mixed bag of texts. Their designation as such in this particular socio-cultural framework has little to do with the various meanings of avant-garde in discourse on, say, modern Western literatures, Chinese literature from the Republican era and the Mao years and in Taiwan, and modernism at large. And while one could explore interfaces of contemporary avant-garde poetry in China with what is known as the avant-garde fiction (先锋小说) of the late 1980s and early 1990s—for instance in each genre’s negotiation of social change—in this case poetry and fiction are distinct if not separate operations that hardly interact. A more meaningful comparison might involve trends called avant-garde across literature and other art forms in contemporary China, but this lies outside the scope of the present study.¹⁰

Especially in the early years the poetics of the avant-garde was negatively defined, by dissociation from and exclusion of the thematics, imagery, poetic form and linguistic register that appear in the products of orthodoxy. Since the mid-1980s, however, avant-garde poetry—at


¹⁰ Cf Huot 2000: ch 5.
first also called experimental (实验) and explorative (探索)—has out-
shone orthodoxy in the eyes of audiences in China and elsewhere,\textsuperscript{11} and it has tremendously diversified. This has rendered orthodox po-
etics irrelevant as a point of reference. It enables the study of vari-
ous trends in contemporary poetry not as Others of orthodoxy but in
their own right, or with the simple qualification that orthodoxy is not
among them.\textsuperscript{12} Carrying this argument further, one might contem-
plate a negative definition of orthodox poetry instead, as unreceptive
to the individual, original and idiosyncratic language usage, imagery
and worldviews that have been associated with literary modernity.

In a clichéd comparison, positive observations are attractive be-
cause defining blue as the color of the sky on a bright day tells us more
than defining blue as not the color of blood. If by now, four decades
into the avant-garde’s history, we can in fact make observations of
this nature, one might be that in present-day China, more so than in
other times and places, an opposition of two broadly defined aesthet-
cs that I call the Elevated and the Earthly is of particular relevance; a
detailed discussion of these notions follows below. This holds for po-
etry but also for images of poethood and explicit poetics, which avant-
garde poets generate in large amounts. Second, on the Elevated side of
things, avant-garde poetry stands out by its rich and idiosyncratic use
of metaphor. Third, the avant-garde has produced many poems that
stand out by their sheer size, albeit in very different styles.

\textit{Aesthetic ↔ Institutional, Unofficial ↔ Official}

As practitioners and students of avant-garde movements the world over
have observed, relations between the aesthetic and the institutional are
complex if not problematic. China is no exception. On the face of it, in
the titles, blurbs and introductions of multiple-author poetry antholo-
gies and historical and critical survey works, the notion of the avant-
garde often appears to operate in the aesthetic dimension rather than
the institutional.\textsuperscript{13} Since on closer inspection it works as catchall for
different and indeed divergent poetics, it must at the same time be fun-
damentally institutional. Similarly, \textit{unofficial} is an ambiguous term in

\textsuperscript{12} Cf Hu Xudong 2005.
\textsuperscript{13} E.g. Li Lizhong \textit{et al} 1990 and Lü 2001.
that beyond its institutional connotations it can also refer to aesthetic matters. This ambiguity has been put to clever use in poetical debates within the avant-garde, most of all during an extended polemic in the years 1998-2000. More generally, it is operational in various stakeholders’ claims to symbolic capital, in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms. No self-respecting avant-garde poet will accept being called official in the aesthetic sense, meaning that their work reflects orthodox preferences in thematics and so on. In addition to publishing through unofficial channels, however, just about every such poet sets great store by appearing in publications that are official in the institutional sense. That is: they are formally registered, and their colophon contains library catalogue data, a fixed price and so on. One can, in other words, publish in institutionally official books and journals or hold membership of official institutions such as the Writers’ Association, and yet enjoy recognition as an aesthetically unofficial poet.

Yu Jian and Xi Chuan, two authors whose work features prominently in this book, are cases in point. Since the 1990s both have counted as leading poets in China and built up international renown. While they are aesthetically of unofficial provenance and formative stages of their careers unfolded through institutionally unofficial channels, both have published collections with major official presses. In addition, Yu Jian has been employed by the Yunnan Province Federation of Literary and Art Circles (云南文艺界联合会) as editor of the Yunnan Literature and Art Review (云南文艺评论) for the full length of his parallel career as an unofficial poet. Xi Chuan, who teaches at the Central Institute for Fine Arts in Beijing, was one of five poets who received the eminently official, four-yearly Lu Xun Award for Literature (鲁迅文学奖) in 2002, and Yu Jian was among the laureates in 2007. Rather than letting these things influence any assessment of the integrity of these or other poets vis-à-vis caricatures of an orthodoxy that continues to ideologize literature, Yu Jian’s and Xi Chuan’s literary output raises the question whether this is perhaps a sign of the unofficial scene changing the official scene.

As part of overall rapid social change, cultural life in the People’s Republic displays increasing pluriformity. This pluriformity and the said ambiguities clarify how, in spite of a chasm of aesthetic difference that continues to separate official and unofficial poetry scenes, their

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institutional distinctions have become blurred. Little remains of the antagonism that made them incompatible and indeed mutually exclusive in the early years, up to the mid-1980s. Nowadays they coexist in parallel worlds with their middle ground awaiting further exploration, as John Crespi and Heather Inwood have noted.\(^\text{15}\) Official and unofficial scenes do occasionally brush past one another and indeed interact, even if such interaction is rarely explicitly recognized. It occurs, for instance, in institutionally official book and journal publications whose aesthetics are clearly of the unofficial kind. These are often contracted and produced by aesthetically unofficial poets that have “gone to sea” (下海)—that is, into business—as book brokers (书商). While these books and journals usually have ISBN or book license numbers (书号), this has long ceased to indicate any compatibility with orthodox aesthetics.\(^\text{16}\) There is a lively trade in such numbers that involves public institutions, private individuals and everything in between, and niceties such as the procurement of single numbers for multiple-author series of individual collections, for cost effectiveness. Crudely put, one can now buy the status of being an officially published poet, at prices to the tune of RMB 5000 and up. It is common knowledge that this happens all the time, even though it is illegal.

Distinctions of orthodoxy and avant-garde, and of official, unofficial, underground and so on, also operate in other media and genres of literature and art in China: theater and performance, music, film, painting, sculpture. They do so in similar or comparable fashion, from utter incompatibility to fluid interaction. As part of a society that has been transformed in the past three decades and continues to be in flux, these distinctions are anything but static. They reflect an ongoing, multidimensional dynamic of forces ranging from government ideology and cultural policy to personal initiative, the market and the politics of place, from the local to the global.

\(^{15}\) Crespi 2005, Inwood 2008: passim.

Let’s return for a moment to the notions of text, context and metatext. First of all, text → context → metatext is the order in which, by and large, my interest in poetry has developed over the years, but not one to which I necessarily adhere for the presentation of my material. In this chapter, for instance, it seems practical to have the present section, on context, precede the sections on text and metatext; and in this study at large, to have the present chapter with its extensive treatment of context and metatext precede the first of several textually oriented case studies. Second, text + context + metatext is a pragmatic, flexible trinity, not a trichotomy. I have no desire to cut these things off from one another, for in a project such as this they inter-act more often than not, with boundaries that are positively fuzzy and occasionally deceptive, for instance in the case of Xi Chuan’s explicit poetics. There is much text that is also context and metatext, context and metatext often overlap, and so on. Text, context and metatext are real categories and anything but arbitrary or interchangeable, but their mobilization depends on one’s perspective.

Subtitling this section *times of mind, mayhem and money* is an attempt to sum up vast changes in the social, political and cultural context of contemporary poetry from the late 1970s until the present, often simplified as a contrast between “the Eighties” (八十年代、80年代) and “the Nineties” (九十年代、90年代) and beyond that applies in the intellectual-cultural realm at large. It is in this particular usage that I occasionally write Eighties or Nineties—mostly in the phrase Poetry of the Nineties (九十年代诗歌、90年代诗歌), which we will encounter several times—as distinct from 1980s and 1990s, the latter being neutral indications of calendar time.

*Mind* refers to the upbeat atmosphere during the Reform era until the summer of 1989. In these years the subordination of literature and art to politics gradually came to an end. There was a great deal of exhilaration in the life of the mind, that expressed itself in a high culture craze or high culture fever (文化热), in Wang Jing’s words.17 Poetry was positively hot. This was apparent in frenzied, extraverted activity, much of it practiced in joint initiatives linked to journals, multiple-author anthologies, societies, slogans, Isms and events.

17 Wang Jing 1996.
Mayhem refers to the violence of June Fourth and its aftermath. For the atmosphere on the poetry scene, June Fourth was a catalyst in the transition from the roaring, collectivist 1980s to private and sober, questioning if not skeptical and cynical moods in later years. The bloodshed of June 1989 and reintensified repression over the next three years or so—until after Deng Xiaoping told the nation to keep its eye on the money during his 1992 Southern Tour—meant a shocking end to the Eighties, and traumatizing disillusionment for large parts of the intelligentsia. Its direct reflection in poetry is complicated by the fact that inside China, the portrayal of government action as violent and repressive remains taboo in any kind of writing. To be sure, there are poems that can be seen to be about June Fourth even if they don’t explicitly address it, but the political sensitivity of this topic is such that most if not all poets tread extremely carefully. Palpable responses aside, there is only so much one can read into particular types of silence, including the silence of the many poets who stopped writing altogether after 1989, something that was caused by not just mayhem but also money.

Money, then, refers to the China of the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, where, as economic whistle-blower He Qinglian writes, “the championing of money as a value” has reached unprecedented heights. This period has seen poetry keeping itself afloat in a maelstrom of consumerism, entertainment, (new) media and popular culture, as marketization, commodification, commercialization and indeed moneyfication—not a common word, but one that captures the day-to-day experience—sweep through all spheres of life, including elite practices in literature and art.

Some Avant-Garde History

A few contextual observations hold across the contemporary period in its entirety. While mechanisms of literary censorship have remained operational, political interest in poetry has declined, in a shift from totalitarian pre-scription of compulsory form and content to authoritarian pro-scription of dissent. After high visibility in the 1980s poetry has been subject to overwhelming competition by other distractions

in high and popular culture and consumables of every kind, and has had to reposition itself in a radically commercializing environment. Poetry’s relation to foreign literatures, most of all an ineradicable generalization known as “the West” (西方), has moved from the uncritical celebration of cultural imports in the early 1980s to the problematization of source and target cultures and to reassessment of Chinese cultural identity in an age of globalization, in criticism as much as in poetry itself.

It is against this backdrop that the development of avant-garde poetry takes place. This book doesn’t offer anything like a comprehensive history of the avant-garde, if only because we are up against a difficult side of studying something from our own time, namely its closeness and its ongoing transformations. Still, it may be useful at this point to recall some salient moments in what is by now forty years of avant-garde history, if we start from its earliest inspirations in the Cultural Revolution underground.20

The avant-garde had two precursors in the late 1960s, Huang Xiang and Guo Lusheng, who has also been known as Shizhi since the mid-1970s. The work of neither can be called avant-garde in the aesthetic sense, but they returned to poetry the ability—and, in a traditional Chinese poetics, the right—to defy political authority rather than function as an artistically shaped extension of its ideology, and to speak with the voice of something like an individual self. Huang’s work centrally featured in the unofficial journal Enlightenment (启蒙). The inaugural issue appeared two months before that of Today, but Enlightenment was much more political and short-lived, and has had nothing like Today’s literary impact. Especially Guo’s poetry, circulated among rusticated Intellectual Youths throughout the country at the time, has been cited as an inspiration by early avant-garde poets.21

One example is that of Bei Dao, China’s best-known contemporary poet, who has recalled how Guo’s poetry made him start writing in


the early 1970s. At the end of the decade, together with Mang Ke and painter Huang Rui, Bei Dao was the driving force behind Today, the fountainhead of the avant-garde and the home of early Obscure Poetry (朦胧诗) before this made its way into official publications. This poetry sustains tragic-heroic images of poethood that have traveled with modern Chinese poetry since its inception, drawing on the Qu Yuan lore and its modern transformations as well as European high Romanticism. Early Obscure Poetry is characterized by a defiant, humanist indictment of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, a high-flown tone and fanciful, often private metaphors. The metaphors were certainly obscure to orthodox critics in the PRC, and they are by no means transparent to all other readers. Obscure Poetry provoked a protracted controversy which showed that neither poetry nor literary criticism and scholarship were mere mouthpieces of government cultural policy any longer. In 1983-1984 Obscure Poetry and sympathetic criticism ended up among the targets of the campaign to Eradicate Spiritual Pollution (清除精神污染), an orthodox backlash against what was perceived as a rising tide of Western “modernism.”

When the campaign had fizzled out and it appeared safe to assume that poetic innovation wouldn’t simply be stamped out by the authorities, it became clear that the avant-garde no longer presented a united front and that regional actors no longer accepted the hegemony of the single geographical center in Beijing that had existed around the Today poets. New poetics were put forward in unofficial journals that mushroomed throughout the country from the mid-1980s on, sometimes explicitly dissociating themselves from their Obscure predecessors—who had once been hailed for being courageously artistic but were now coming under fire for naïve utopianism and for being ideologically and stylistically dated if not complicit with orthodoxy, in a literary landscape that was changing by the day. One of the new trends was that of the Colloquial Poetry (口语诗) associated with the Nanjing-based journal Them (他们), known for its low-key language usage and

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down-to-earth semantics, with Han Dong as its driving force and contributors from all over the country. Another was that of the Macho Men (莽汉) in Chengdu, with authors such as Wan Xia and Li Ya-wei enthusiastically offending against social and educational taboos. A third, that of Women’s Poetry (女性诗歌) and an accompanying critical discourse, with Zhai Yongming, also from Chengdu, as its foremost representative. A fourth, yet again based in Chengdu, Root-Seeking (寻根) trends toward reviving cultural origins, such as those found in the Wholism (整体主义) championed in the pages of Han Poetry (汉诗) by poets including the brothers Song Qu and Song Wei and Shi Guanghua. A fifth, also out of Sichuan province, that of the rambunctious Not-Not (非非) project, deadly serious and flippant at the same time, involving Zhou Luyou and Yang Li among others. A sixth, the self-mocking Coquetry School (撒娇派) in Shanghai, with Momo and Jingbute as central contributors. A seventh, poetry of Intellectual (知识分子) inclination by poets including Xi Chuan and Haizi in Beijing and Chen Dongdong in Shanghai, with Tendency (倾向) as their journal. These examples are from 1984-1988, and there are many more in those and later years. And while Beijing, the greater Shanghai area—including Nanjing and Hangzhou—and especially Sichuan were centers of activity and activism, they certainly weren’t the only places where the avant-garde was developing and diversifying.24

Perhaps because of the immense, initial impact of Obscure poetry and the convenience of thinking in neatly successive generations, literary historiography has tended to lump together divergent and indeed incompatible trends of the mid- and late 1980s and the early 1990s such as those listed above, under denominators like the Third Generation (第三代, pre-Cultural-Revolution poets being a First, and Obscure Poetry a Second Generation), the Newborn Generation (新生代) and Post-Obscure Poetry (后朦胧诗). These labels have occasionally been made to encompass so much that they border on the meaningless, apart from representing slices in time of the avant-garde’s history. Something similar is true for later examples such as the Fourth Generation (第四代), the Middle Generation (中间代), the Post-70 Generation (70后一代) and the Post-80 Generation (80后一代).

代), often actively propagated or “stir-fried” (炒作) by their proponents to ensure coverage in criticism and literary histories.\textsuperscript{25} Be that as it may, two important, generalizable points about the 1980s are that the avant-garde exploded into pluriformity and abundance, and that the first signs of the opposition of the Elevated and the Earthly as one of its distinguishing features became apparent.

The first point is illustrated by Xu Jingya’s spectacular “Grand Exhibition of Modern Poetry Groups on China’s Poetry Scene, 1986” (中国诗坛1986’现代诗群体大展), followed up in 1988 by a fat survey anthology entitled \textit{Overview of Chinese Modernist Poetry Groups 1986-1988} (中国现代主义诗群大观1986-1988), from among a wealth of other evidence. For the second point, witness the late 1980s self-proclamation of (Elevated) Intellectual Writing and, in Yeh’s words, the emergence of a “cult of poetry” on the one hand—tragic-heroic like Obscure Poetry but semi-religious rather than semi-political—in mutual antagonism with an (Earthly) anti-cult of colloquializing and vulgarizing trends on the other. To both sides, poet-hood was as important as, if not more important than, poetry. Beyond Obscure Poetry, the opposition of the Elevated and the Earthly was also visible in a broad association of the notion of a Third Generation with the Earthly side of things, and of the notion of Post-Obscure Poetry with the Elevated.\textsuperscript{26}

Then came June Fourth. Its most immediate consequence was an added sense of identity and urgency for an exile poetry scene that had gradually formed in the late 1980s. This abruptly gained in visibility as authors who found themselves outside China, such as Yang Lian, Bei Dao and Duoduo, were given huge international media exposure, occasioned by widely felt outrage over the PRC government’s violence against its citizens. The significance of poetry by authors exiled from the PRC is the reason why this chapter’s title speaks of avant-garde poetry \textit{from} China, encompassing poetry written within the nation’s


borders and elsewhere. Meanwhile, inside China the cultural purge that had started in the summer of 1989 limited the avant-garde’s access to official publication channels. Poet and avant-garde advocate Wang Jiaxin, for instance, soon lost his job as editor at the influential *Poetry Monthly* (诗刊). The unofficial scene, however, showed its resilience in several new journals out of Chengdu, Shanghai, Beijing and other places between 1989 and 1992. One called *Modern Han Poetry* (现代汉诗)—with the *Han* in its title referring to the Chinese language rather than ethnicity—was managed from Beijing but rotated editorship between contributors in different cities, in an explicit effort to unite poets and readers from all over the country.

Inside China, later in the 1990s new unofficial journals continued to appear. Especially from 1993 on, after the purge had abated, possibilities for official single-author and multiple-author book publication increased. Still, the extraverted, collectivist atmosphere of the 1980s was definitely a thing of the past, with objectifiable reasons for this change lying in mayhem and money. If June Fourth didn’t fundamentally alter individual poets’ voices, the massacre certainly caused them to reflect on the future of an art that had been at the forefront of cultural development not long before but now seemed futile in light of the recent social trauma. Such misgivings were reinforced by lightning-speed socio-economic change that appeared to have relegated poetry and other elite practices in literature and art to irrelevance almost overnight, at least in the wider public domain. As noted, not a few poets who had published in the 1980s stopped writing altogether in the 1990s.

Yet, many others continued or began in earnest. In retrospect, publication histories show that while on the surface—for example as regards collective, high-profile projects—the poetry scene was less bustling than in the 1980s, the number of published poets was in fact rising.²⁷ Poetic production was becoming more diversified and, arguably, more sophisticated. If, aside from the sociology of the scene, we had to summarize textual developments in the 1990s in one word, this would have to be individualization, or, in two words taken from domestic terminology, Individual Writing (个人写作) or, less frequently, Individualized Writing (个人化写作). Up until the end of the 1990s it would be hard to identify collective initiatives in poetry or criticism.

²⁷ Van Crevel 2008a.
with a public impact that could compare to that of journals like *Today* or *Not-Not*, or of Xu Jingya’s “Grand Exhibition,” but there are any number of successful individual poetic trajectories that run through these years and are equally if not more interesting from a literary-critical point of view. Diversification of styles didn’t mean one poet per style, of course—or, for that matter, one style per poet. Still, some labels applied to particular authors or groups of authors in more or less fixed terms, such as the famously unclassifiable Alternative Poetry (另类诗歌) of Che Qianzi and the Narrative Poetry (叙事诗) of Zhang Shuguang, Sun Wenbo and Xiao Kaiyu.

As the decade progressed, however, especially in its final few years, the opposition of Elevated and Earthly resurfaced with a vengeance, leading to the formation of two veritable camps in poetry. In the years 1998-2000, scores of poets and critics were involved in a high-profile Polemic (论争) between so-called Intellectual Writing (知识分子写作) and Popular Writing (民间写作), the origins of which can be traced back to the rift between Elevated and Earthly that had first opened in the early and mid-1980s. If we go by rhetoric, loudness and aggression, and publication strategies such as the production of partisan poetry Yearbooks (年鉴), the Popular camp was more effective in publicizing its case, although this resulted in collateral damage to the reputations of renowned poets and critics in its own ranks, in addition to casualties among the Intellectuals. Even though the Polemic didn’t end in anything like an undisputed Popular ≈ Earthly victory, it did provide a launch pad for extreme manifestations of the Earthly aesthetic in the first years of the twenty-first century, often invoking taboo artist and polemicist Yi Sha, celebrated and denounced ever since his proposal to “starve the poets,” as something of a patron saint. The clearest examples are the 2000-2001 Lower Body (下半身) troupe, with Shen Haobo and Yin Lichuan among its core members, and the Trash School (垃圾派) and the Low Poetry Movement (低诗歌运动) of subsequent years. Interestingly, while these trends scandalized the poetry scene and many see the behavior of their proponents as a violation of the rules of literary and social decency, their poetry displays above-average social concern for disadvantaged groups in the urban jungle, such as migrant workers and prostitutes.28

28 On the Polemic, see Li Dian 2007 and chapter Twelve of this study; on the Lower Body, chapter Nine; on Low poetry and Trash Poetry, Day 2007a and Inwood 2008: ch 2. In English, Trash Poetry has also been called Garbage Poetry and
At around the same time, roughly in 1999-2000, the poetry scene acquired a new dimension as it began to explore the possibilities of the Internet. What happens on the web lies outside the scope of this study, but some brief observations are in order here, drawing on scholarship by Michael Day, Heather Inwood and Michel Hockx. First of all, the web is a natural habitat for the unofficial scene and the avant-garde in that it provides endless possibilities for publication in the broadest sense, as defined above. The amount of text uploaded in the past decade or so is frankly astonishing. The open-the-floodgates feeling of it all confronts the online reader with what Day calls an anarchic state of poetry. This includes digital versions of recent and older print publications as well as texts whose first publication happens online. There are currently about a hundred dedicated websites for avant-garde poetry alone, and, after a recent upsurge, several hundreds of blogs maintained by individual authors, with women poets as notably successful bloggers. The other side to the coin is that, just like elsewhere in the world, web text quality is uneven and cannot keep up with its quantity.

Second, as regards medium-specific features of poetry on the web, Chinese poets near-exclusively employ the Internet to facilitate publication of linear text that could technically appear in print just as well, as opposed to poetry that enables multimedial and interactive reading and writing. But there are other medium-specific features to online poetry than the strictly technological. Poets avidly use the web to communicate directly with other poets, critics and general readers. As Inwood notes, if not so much on text, the medium does have striking effects on metatext—and on the relationship between text and metatext, illustrating what I have called positively fuzzy boundaries—and on the overall sociology of the poetry scene. This appears to remain true when the Chinese scene is considered in international comparison. In China the web has sped up intracommunal and intercommunal traffic to a breathless pace, with remarkably frequent and fiery polemical components.

Aside from China’s rich tradition in discourse on poetry, an explanation of this metatextual hyperactivity should take into account the web’s annihilation of vast domestic distances and its cautious appro-

Rubbish Poetry. For Yi Sha’s proposal, made in a poem of the same name, see Yi 1994: 3-4.
priation of greater freedom of expression than exists in print culture. The PRC government has at its disposal cutting-edge technology and vast human resources for controlling web traffic, and predictions that the web would mean an end to effective censorship have not at all come true. Clearly, however, online poetry goes farther than print culture in testing the limits, quite aside from the literary merits of the texts in question.

Another factor at play here is the sheer intensity of web traffic at large among those parts of the Chinese population that are online, especially the urban young. On that note, it is safe to say that to younger generations of poets and readers who have come of age in the Internet era, the poetry experience quite simply starts on the web. For many it stays there as well, for there appear to be increasing numbers of poets and readers who hardly encounter poetry in print. Still, print editions of online poetic production continue to function as tokens of cultural consecration in the Bourdieuan sense. This has been observed for poetry on the web in other regions and languages as well, and it may be because books still involve higher measures of editorial selection than most websites and certainly than blogs, or because print culture per se hasn’t lost its charms. Yet, according to Inwood, print culture no longer has automatic relevance for China’s online poetry scene, which is fast developing its own, internal dynamic. In all, research to date suggests that the advent of the Internet has meant vastly more than technical change and that its effects on the poetry scene at large may be sufficiently far-reaching to make it a major topic of scholarship and criticism, and a landmark for literary-historical periodization. 29

Online developments have an interface with multimodal poetry performance that is crying out to be further explored. Performances such as Hei Dachun’s recitals to the accompaniment of the rock band Vision (目光) and especially Yan Jun’s multifaceted shows are well suited to (online) documentation. Yan combines poetry with electronically managed soundscapes and VJ-ing, often working together with

29 On the avant-garde and the Internet, see the DACHS poetry chapter, Day 2007a, Inwood 2008: ch 2 and Yeh 2007a: 31; for online poetry scenes in China at large, Hockx 2004 and 2005. Loss Pequeño Glazier makes a convincing case for “digital poetics” as being a fundamentally different type of writing from print poetics, in both textual-critical and sociological respects, but also notes the continuing weight of print culture in matters of cultural consecration (2002: ch 8, esp 156). Day has signaled the latter point for the Chinese avant-garde (2007b).
the experimental duo fm3 and video artist Wu Quan. Growing Internet use and multimedial poetry performance illustrate how the avant-garde’s development is part of larger cultural trends, regardless of its relative (in)ability to ride the technology tide.30

4. TEXT: FROM ELEVATED TO EARTHLY AND FROM WHAT TO HOW

Before we take a first glance at some of the avant-garde poetry reviewed in more detail later in this book, let’s recall the range of claims currently laid in China to modern poetry at large, through a contrastive comparison similar to those made in essays by Gregory Lee and Ronald Janssen. Consider these two red flags:31

We
The youngest citizens of the Republic
Know how in the long river of history
The venerable older generations
Weathered battle after battle of blood and fire
The slowly rising Red Flag with its five stars
Once again makes us shed hot tears
Ah, salute!
The Red Flag with its five stars
As before the eyes of each of us
Images from the long night
Flash up in multitudes

and:

«Red Flag Limo in Wind and Rain»

behind the provincial government building
behind the trees and the lawn
in a small open space
sits a red flag limo long discarded as useless
that’s weathered untold years of wind and rain
rusty to the point of being unrecognizable
you get all cynical again
but it’s really not worth it

30 On Yan Jun, see chapter Thirteen.
let’s make our way in
let’s sit in it
let’s enjoy it together
and then ponder it
and finally dissolve in
this scrap-metal
modern sculpture

The first text is excerpted from the book-length poem «Manifesto of Youth» (青春宣言, 2002) by Gui Xinghua, composed at the request of the Chinese Communist Youth League Shanghai branch. «Manifesto» is straightforward Political Lyricism, commissioned by the political establishment. It is a socio-moral policy document in verse, set against background photographs signifying dynamic modernization (computers, mobile phones, spaghetti junctions), nationally symbolic sites (Tiananmen Square, the Jinggangshan Museum) and China’s status as a major player on the international stage (the 2001 APEC summit, the 2008 Olympics). The second text is a short poem by Yi Sha, typical of a style that doesn’t invariably rise above the provocative and the witty. «Red Flag Limo in Wind and Rain» (风雨中的红旗车, 2000) is roughly six hundred times shorter than Gui’s poem and as different as can be from Political Lyricism in all other respects, too. Although included in an officially registered publication, it qualifies as unofficial by virtue of its aesthetics, which display irreverence with some condescending nostalgia for a socialist past symbolized by the decrepit Red Flag limo: this is an unabashed send-up of orthodox discourse. Between these two poems lies the full distance from vintage orthodoxy to roguish avant-garde. Somewhere toward the orthodox end lies an oeuvre, less aggressively political than Gui’s, that is perhaps the closest that contemporary poetry has come to popular culture: the mawkish lessons-in-life of Wang Guozhen, whose fame reached remarkable heights in the late 1980s and the early 1990s.32 After this broader positioning, once we focus on the avant-garde side of things, two textual trends are apparent amid a jumble of styles since the late 1970s. They are a trend from Elevated to Earthly and one from what to how.

Avant-garde poetry can be viewed as a spectrum between the outer limits of two divergent, broadly defined aesthetics. This is manifest in

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poets’ and critics’ frequent use of dichotomies such as these, in individual case studies as well as sweeping descriptions of the entire field:

| heroic     | v | quotidian             |
| literary   | v | colloquial            |
| cultural   | v | anti-, pre- or non-cultural |
| lyrical    | v | anti-lyrical          |
| mythical   | v | anti-mythical         |
| sacred     | v | mundane               |
| utopian    | v | realist               |
| absolute   | v | relative              |
| elitist    | v | ordinary              |
| academic   | v | authentic             |
| Westernized| v | indigenous            |
| central    | v | local                 |
| Northern   | v | Southern              |
| mind       | v | body                  |
| intellectual| v | popular               |

These dichotomies apply to subject matter and style, and they often run parallel to one another. Together, the items on the left and those on the right represent the said two aesthetics, which I have identified as the Elevated and the Earthly. There is a connection here with previous research on poetry and other genres by scholars including Leo Ou-fan Lee, Michelle Yeh, Wang Ban and Tang Xiaobing.  

In principle, notions like the Elevated and the Earthly can be applied to literature and art from any time or place, and there is nothing inherently Chinese or poetic about them. Nor is the current trend unique to China, with an eye to a deconstruction of “serious” literature and art in various genres and media that has been going on for decades in global and local settings. Poetry in contemporary China, however, brings the Elevated and the Earthly to mind with particular force. This doesn’t make these notions into tools for reifying an image of the poetry scene as something that can be captured

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in binary oppositions, as polemically inclined critics have done. In fact, even individual oeuvres easily seen as quintessentially Elevated or quintessentially Earthly resist such simple classification. Xi Chuan’s work tends toward the Elevated but contains important “anti-mythical” and “relativizing” elements; Yu Jian’s work is representative of the Earthly but contains important “absolute” and “mind” elements; Zhou Lunyou is a central figure in the “anti-cultural” or “pre-cultural” Not-Not group, but his work contains important “cultural” elements. The Elevated and the Earthly, then, are not pigeonholes but coordinates in a multidimensional body of texts. If we bear this caveat in mind, it is safe to say that across the contemporary period, the overall trend has been away from the Elevated and toward the Earthly.

By a trend from what to how I mean a development away from easily paraphraseable, often historically-referential subject matter and toward the elaboration of individual style, made up of things like (experimental) idiolect, thematics, figures of speech, and acoustic and visual poetic form. Crudely put, in the 1970s and the early 1980s, after the gruesome upheaval of the Cultural Revolution and in the midst of exhilarating developments toward regaining a modicum of individual freedom, so much needed to be said that how it was said was of secondary importance. Hence, the message dominated the medium at the time—but the balance shifted from the mid-1980s onward, and especially in the 1990s. For reading the earliest avant-garde poems, basic knowledge of recent Chinese history is indispensable: well-known specimens of Obscure Poetry such as Bei Dao’s «Answer» (回答, 1972) and Gu Cheng’s «A Generation» (一代人, 1979), for example, hinge upon the reader’s interpretation of the dark night and the ice age as metaphors for the Cultural Revolution. In later years one can usually do without such background knowledge. Often, China is simply not there. When it is

35 Yan Yuejun et al 1985: 1, 122. «Answer» was written in 1972, not in 1976, as has been widely and understandably assumed. When Bei Dao published it in Today in 1978, he dated it April 1976 to give it an ideological alibi by linking it to the Tiananmen Incident, which the Beijing Party Committee had recently reassessed as not “counter-revolutionary” but “completely revolutionary” in nature. See Van Crevel 1996: 51 (note 87) and 59-68.
there, for instance in Lower Body writings, it tends to be identified explicitly.

Neither the trend from Elevated to Earthly nor the trend from what to how is constant, absolute or irreversible, but this is what a bird’s-eye view of the past several decades shows. We will presently take a look at four texts from recent years, to get a sense of where the avant-garde was at around the turn of the century and hopefully whet the reader’s appetite for the case studies that follow this chapter. The selection of these samples, all from the late 1990s and after, is informed by the considerations noted above. Xi Chuan and Yu Jian have been the two most influential poets writing in China since the 1990s, and they are associated with the Elevated and the Earthly trends, respectively; Yin Lichuan is a prominent voice in the Lower Body group that emerged toward the end of the Popular-Intellectual Polemic; and Yan Jun has made a name for himself by innovative, audio-visually supported poetry performance. In addition to their domestic impact, all four have undertaken many invited readings abroad.

Below are two of the ninety-nine stanzas of a prose poem called «What the Eagle Says» (鹰的话语, 1998) that is typical of Xi Chuan’s writing since the 1990s. One of his enigmatic texts that invite and yet resist interpretation, this poem contains a wealth of subject matter and yet remains elusive. Addressing issues such as identity and relations of self and other in a tone that is solemn and humorous at the same time, it strikes something of an expository pose, but ultimately turns out to flout the rules of expository logic and celebrate ambiguity, paradox and contradiction instead. Playful and down to earth, and generated by its own musicality and sentence-patterning as much as anything else, it exemplifies what Marjorie Perloff calls the tension between reference and the compositional game.  

56/ Thereupon I shun my flesh and turn into a drop of perfume, actually drowning an ant. Thereupon I turn into an ant drilling my way into an elephant’s brain, upsetting it so that it stamps all four of its legs. Thereupon I turn into an elephant, my entire body exuding a great stench. Thereupon I turn into a great stench, and those who cover their noses when they smell me are men. Thereupon I turn into a man, and a plaything of fate.  

Perloff 1999: 72. Bibliographical detail for the following poetry samples is provided in chapters Five, Seven, Nine and Thirteen.
Thereupon I turn into my posterity and let the rain test if I am waterproof. Thereupon I turn into rain, and splash upon the bald head of an intellectual. Thereupon I turn into the intellectual, detesting the world and its ways, and I pick up a stone from the ground and hurl it at the oppressor. Thereupon I turn into stone and oppressor at the same time: when I am hit by me, that sets both of my brains roaring.

Yu Jian’s poetry could hardly be more different from Xi Chuan’s. Thus begins Yu’s 71-line «Outside the Poet’s Scope: Observation of the Life of a Raindrop» (在诗人的范围以外对一个雨点一生的观察, 1998):

right it’s going to rain
the poet on a bar stool in the coffee shop
shoots a glance at the sky quietly mumbles
and his tongue withdraws into the dark
but back in those dark clouds its life its
drop-by-drop tiny story is only just beginning
how to say this this sort of small thing happens every moment
i’m concerned with bigger things says the poet to his female reader
obedient to that invisible straight line coming down
maintaining consistency with surroundings equally perpendicular to the earth
just like the poet’s daughter always maintains consistency with kindergarten
and then in skies twisted by pedagogy
becoming twisted it cannot but become twisted

In his patiently insistent tone of voice, characterized by the absence of punctuation characters and the use of blank spaces instead, Yu Jian makes room for the conventionally trivial and the quotidian. The parallel stories of poet and raindrop come together when at the end of its short but eventful life, the raindrop leaves a wet mark on the poet’s trouser leg. The text exemplifies the phenomenon of objectification in Yu’s poetry, meaning the presentation of everyday human realities as dislodged from habitual perception and interpretation, and imaginative attention to (inanimate) objects.

Yu Jian’s dismantling of clichéd, heroic visions echoes domestic debate on notions of poethood, and goes together well with Xi Chuan’s caricaturing portrayal of the intellectual and the oppressor. One feature of poetry in China today as compared with earlier times is that it
contains plenty of irony. In this respect, Yu Jian, Xi Chuan and others have opened new perspectives, starting in the 1980s and coming into full swing in the 1990s.

In the work of several younger authors who build on that of their predecessors and grew up at a time when solemn social and political ideologies were fast losing ground, irony goes without saying and cynicism is never far away. This is evident in Yin Lichuan’s use of literary phraseology in «Why Not Make It Feel Even Better» (为什么不再舒服一些, 2000). Toward the end of the poem, which contains cynical instructions to a clumsy man by a woman maximizing her sexual pleasure, Yin ridicules the Popular-Intellectual Polemic. There is more to Lower Body poetry than irony, cynicism and sex, but this definitely counts as one of its “representative works” (代表作):

«Why Not Make It Feel Even Better»

ah a little higher a little lower a little to the left a little to the right
this isn’t making love this is hammering nails
oh a little faster a little slower a little looser a little tighter
this isn’t making love this is anti-porn campaigning or tying your shoes
ooh a little more a little less a little lighter a little heavier
this isn’t making love this is massage writing poetry washing your hair your feet

why not make it feel even better huh make it feel even better
a little gentler a little ruder a little more Intellectual a little more Popular

why not make it feel even better

Xi Chuan, Yu Jian and Yin Lichuan are accomplished reciters of their own work, Xi Chuan the most musical and Yu Jian the most theatrical. If Yin Lichuan likes to preface her readings by saying she’s not much good at them, this comes across as part of her act. When reading her poetry she studiously keeps her eyes on the page and away from the audience. The detached, monotonous use of her voice combines with bleak subject matter to produce an effect that is at once hilarious and painful.

Yan Jun’s readings are sensational, because of the spectacular use of his voice and the audio-visual media that support his recitation. His poetry breathes a jumpy, unruly type of social engagement, not unlike that found in the above-mentioned extreme manifestations of Earthliness, after the Popular-Intellectual Polemic. Yet, stylistically, «Against All
Organized Deception» (反对一切有组织的欺骗, 2000) also brings to mind the work of Xi Chuan, by its prosaic form and its use of imagery. Here’s one stanza:

against advertisements, against forgetfulness. against tearing up anyone’s ID and ugly face. against coming through meteoric showers clad in a golden cape but forgetting your daughter’s name. against carnivores dancing, against computers dying, against living like a sickle. against night fragrance dying at night. against faddish magazines and dotcoms. against day-dreaming, see-through garments, the heart exploding like goose feathers.... drink killing a man from ten steps away.... dumb shits ruling the world.... porn magazines for exam papers.... against fear.

Yan Jun’s multi-media performance tallies well with contemporary cultural trends. As such, it is slightly closer to popular culture than the work of most if not all of his fellow poets. Xi Chuan’s, Yu Jian’s, Yin Lichuan’s and most other avant-garde poetry is definitely high art. This is reflected on the metatextual level.

5. Metatext: Images of Poetry and Poethood

Metatext, or discourse on poetry, includes everything from one person’s inability to name even a single author—“Are there still people who write poetry today?”—and the identification in 2006 by the People’s Daily online edition (人民网) of poet (诗人) as one of “forty-nine old words that have disappeared from people’s lips in the last ten years” to someone else’s scholarly genealogy of the avant-garde ever since its underground beginnings, and from theories of writing to ad hominem polemics on poethood.37

What Others Think

The textual trends from Elevated to Earthly and from what to how decrease readership in light of a traditional Chinese poetics, which continues to enjoy considerable influence: poetry as the epitome of serious, high art and inherently incapable of aspiring to any other status, literature to convey the Way, and the poem as offering insight into the

poet’s exemplary morality and worldview as well as his (sic) personal position within a stable conception of social order.

This helps explain why the general public’s overall perception of the avant-garde is characterized by prejudice and disregard, if not plain ignorance. To most Chinese, poetry means classical poetry. Few people know that there is such a thing as modern poetry beyond the products of 1920s-1930s New Culture Movement (新文化运动) and Communist cultural policy since the 1940s, and perhaps the work of Bei Dao, Shu Ting, Gu Cheng and Haizi in the 1970s and 1980s. With the exception of Shu Ting, whose work bridges the gap between orthodoxy and archetypal Obscure Poetry, the latter four poets are remembered primarily for their extra-textual impact: Bei Dao’s “dissidence” and legendary success abroad, and Haizi’s and Gu Cheng’s dramatic suicides, the latter coupled with Gu’s murder of Xie Ye, his wife. If people do know about contemporary poetry, even if they haven’t read it, they usually assume that whatever is being written now cannot possibly compare to the New Culture poets, much less to scores of premodern greats. The poets’ own relation to premodern predecessors is ambiguous. No contemporary poet will question the beauty of classical poetry other than in theatrical settings—say, the manifesto with which the Lower Body burst upon the scene. Simultaneously, poets experience the classical tradition as near-insurmountable and a potential source of frustration. This is reinforced by the public’s aforementioned prejudice, disregard and ignorance.

So why was there a full house when in June 2003, with minimal preparation and publicity, a new Beijing mega-bookstore specialized in anything but high literature organized a reading called “Open Your Eyes: Chinese Poetry after SARS,” in which most if not all participants were avant-garde poets? Cynically put, any standing that the Poet retains beyond the poetry scene may be a misunderstand-standing based on traditional expectations. Doubtless, part of the crowd were disappointed to find that the reading included idiosyncratic texts that failed to touch on topics of general concern like the SARS breakout and the infrastructural face-lift of the capital.

Less cynical and more to the point, even if the avant-garde cannot dream of the number of readers that classical poetry continues to satisfy, it is in fact a small but tenacious industry in its own right, a

38 Haidian Book-Buying Center (海淀购书中心), 6 June 2003.
high-cultural niche area populated and held together by highly educated and well-connected practitioners and supporters. The latter include editors and specialist and amateur readers, meaning professional critics and scholars as well as dedicated fans: university students and generations of graduates, and generally those whose lifestyle means keeping abreast of high-cultural development. Also, one effect of the commercialization of culture in China has been the emergence of financial sponsorship—by companies and individuals, named and unnamed—for poets, publications and events, and indeed for academic institutions for the study of poetry. Beijing-based real estate tycoon Huang Nubo of the Zhongkun Investment Group, also known as poet Luo Ying, is one of several patrons of poetry who come from corporate life.39

Thus, while the poetry crowd might barely constitute even a single-digit percentage of the population of a few big cities, not to mention parts of the country that cannot afford to be poetically inclined, this still means a sizable reference group in absolute numbers. What’s more, they are influential in terms of symbolic capital. Yet, since the mid- and late 1990s, even specialist readers have despaired at what they perceive as a crisis (危机) in poetry, often presented as the result of its marginalization (边缘化). A famous instance is Peking University professor Xie Mian’s concern, voiced in 1997 at a large-scale international conference on modern Chinese poetry held in Wuyishan, that “certain types of poetry are moving away from us” (有些诗歌正在离我们远去). This was all the more telling because in 1980 Xie had courageously intervened in the controversy surrounding Obscure Poetry, coming to the defense of a budding avant-garde that had just emerged from its underground origins into overground culture.40 During the discussion at the Wuyishan conference, Xie’s colleague Hong Zicheng opined that “we” might just be “moving away from certain types of poetry” instead. The exchange between these two renowned scholars reflects the shifting relationship between primary texts and commentary. This has become thoroughly unpredictable in comparison to the Maoist years, when scholarship and criticism were allowed little ambiguity, and even in comparison to the 1980s, although this decade saw the beginning of real debate rather than foregone conclusions.

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40 Xie Mian 1980.
The crisis discourse shows how growing contestation of the nature of poetry requires that legitimizing and morally evaluative powers of scholarship and criticism, once self-evident, be rethought. It is no longer obvious with what kind of authority critics such as the Poetry Monthly editorial board, Cai Yi, Wu Xinhua, Zhang Hong, Chen Chao, Wu Sijing and many others announce that there is a crisis and there are “problems” or “issues” (问题) in contemporary poetry, often speaking in an unspecified first-person plural, like that used by Xie Mian in the above citation. Moralizing and nationalist overtones of the crisis discourse are out of sync with the texts on which it professes to comment. The same is true for the mobilization of prescriptive notions such as poetry’s “alignment” (走向), meaning the speaker’s preferred direction of poetry’s development, often coupled with multiple oughts and shoulds, and of “optimism” and “pessimism” as critical positions, implying dated judgmental perspectives that block out much of what is going on.

But there is a larger issue here, that is common to modern poetries in various cultural traditions, not just in China. If poetry is no longer a stable concept but fiercely contested, this need not automatically constitute a crisis. Or the other way around: perhaps embodying crisis is something modern poetry inherently does. As scholars such as Derek Attridge and Jonathan Culler point out, modern poetries tend to challenge assumptions of order and cohesion in the world and in ourselves, and to be disruptions of culture rather than the repositories of time-honored, canonized values often found in classical texts. In China, the massive weight of the classical tradition and its prominent place in (national) cultural identity produce an especially acute discrepancy with what Yeh sums up as modern poetry’s international, hybrid, iconoclastic and experimental nature. If this discrepancy is disturbing to many readers, this is because they set off contemporary poetry and its position in society at large against expectations that continue to be shaped by the classical paradigm. A similar mismatch is in evidence when contemporary poetry’s unmarketability is framed as a cause for lament and ridicule by unwarranted comparison to flood waves of commercialization in other spheres of life. We will return to this below.41

41 现代汉诗国际研讨会 (福建师范大学中文系、中国社会科学院文学研究所举办), 26-30 July 1997; 《诗刊》编辑部, 〈中国诗歌现状调查〉 [Investigation into
Writing in 2003 on a Nanjing-based group of novelists, Henry Zhao dismisses poetry in China today as self-indulgent and inconsequential: they were all formerly poets who made their name in the late 1980s . . . In the 1990s they turned to fiction, knowing that writing poetry is now very much a narcissistic ‘karaoke’ art.

Although Bourdieu may not have had karaoke in mind, it certainly comes under “production for producers,” exemplified by the avant-garde. As such, Zhao’s metaphor makes sense. Inasmuch as karaoke means performing other people’s words and music, it does not. Production for producers is a useful notion but also a hyperbole, and only valid if we take into account that proportionally, in poetry there are many more readers = consumers who are also writers = producers than in other genres and media of literature and art, virtually all of them amateurs, unknown outside a small number of more or less private readers. But this qualification is not enough. Measured by individual and multiple-author collections, unofficial and official journals and websites, the avant-garde scene has quite simply displayed vitality and resilience all along, albeit with notable changes from the 1980s to the 1990s and beyond.

As for poetry’s high visibility in the 1980s—beyond a cultural elite, or the incrowd audience for karaoke, so to speak—aside from hardcore readers who came mostly from artistic and academic circles, it is doubtful that others forayed beyond the best-known specimens of Obscure Poetry: Bei Dao’s «Answer», Shu Ting’s «Motherland, My Beloved Motherland» (祖国啊, 我亲爱的祖国, 1979), Gu Cheng’s «A Generation», Liang Xiaobin’s «China, I’ve Lost My Key» (中国, 我的钥匙丢了, 1980), Mang Ke’s «The Vineyard» (葡萄园, 1978), Jiang He’s «Monument» (纪念碑, 1979), Yang Lian’s «We, from Our Own Footsteps....» (我们从自己的脚印上...., 1980) and a few other quickly canonized texts, most inviting socio-historical, allegorical readings to do with the Cultural Revolution.


Zhao (Henry) 2003: 203.
Bourdieu 1993: 39 et passim in parts I-II.
E.g. Lovell 2006: 149.
More fundamentally, while the rock star status that the best-known poets enjoyed from the late 1970s well into the 1980s was real, it was also an anomaly, captured by the aforesaid metaphor of high culture *craze* or *fever*. It resulted from a happy meeting of the public’s hunger for cultural liberalization and poets’ activism, before other distractions had begun to compete. There is a popular saying that in the 1980s a stone thrown over one’s shoulder was sure to hit a poet, but this reflects the conspicuous presence of a relatively small number of avant-garde authors, not so much the emergence of truly great numbers of people writing in a truly great variety of individual styles. The latter image is in fact a defensible description of the 1990s and beyond. If falling stones have stopped hitting only poets, that is because the streets have become crowded with other potential victims, following rapid intensification and variegation of people’s socio-cultural activity and mobility at large.

From the rise of Obscure Poetry through the campaign to Eliminate Spiritual Pollution, poets’ activism was in part a reaction to extreme repression and monomaniacal prescriptions for literature and art in the preceding years, the memory of which made the experiment extra thrilling. The second half of the 1980s was a time of unprecedented freedoms, with an exuberant life of the mind unfolding in borrowed time, before mayhem and money made themselves felt. By contrast, in China as elsewhere, production for producers—as qualified above—is the normal situation for innovative poetries that claim no social or economic significance and are not primarily instruments of propaganda for government policy. Bob Perelman sums up the matter in an essay that is also a poem:

> “The Marginalization of Poetry”—it almost goes without saying, *Jack Spicer* wrote,

> “No one listens to poetry,” but
> the question then becomes, who is

> *Jack Spicer? Poets for whom he matters would know . . .*

Zhao’s metaphor is defensible in that poetry will normally not draw large crowds, and neither will karaoke. The term *incrowd audience,*

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46 Perelman 1996: 3.
above, covers settings from a handful of people in a private room to the entire clientele inside a bar with public karaoke facilities, whose joint spectatorship is to some extent coincidental. But whereas successful karaoke operations make money, avant-garde poetry is unmarketable in terms of economic capital, making it the foremost example of what Bourdieu calls the reversion of the economic world.\(^4^7\) As such, inside China, poetry is different from fiction and film and to a lesser extent from most drama, art and popular music. Paradoxically, as Crespi argues, it is precisely because its unmarketability can be construed as the quality of being untainted by the market’s immorality that both avant-garde and official poetry have recently been able to enter into intriguing advertising partnerships with real estate development, with poetry’s symbolic value balancing the image of the business as utterly corrupted by money and power. One surmises that the unmarketability is structural and the partnerships are incidental, even if they are well-paid.\(^4^8\) At any rate, while Zhao’s contention is inspirational in that it offers avenues into complex metatextual issues, poetry is not karaoke. We will recall the metaphor once more in a discussion of the visual presentation of poets and their publications, below.

With regard to internationalization, poetry’s economic unmarketability stands out when compared to the successes of Chinese film and visual arts, whether in public places such as movie theaters, galleries and museums or in private ones like the homes of wealthy individuals. Yet, through translations, international festivals and writerships in residence, Chinese poetry has made itself heard and seen inside a long list of foreign poetry scenes—which, in their turn, tend to be equally unmarketable in economic terms. Crudely speaking, what foreign audiences know of Chinese literature is mostly classical poetry and modern fiction.

In sum, the general public is ignorant of avant-garde poetry, and some of its (specialist) readers are angry, disappointed or at a loss. These things reflect only part of what others think—here, I won’t dwell on poetry’s many optimistic readers—but they are acutely relevant to what poets think.


\(^{48}\) Crespi 2007b.
As do many other Chinese poets, Xi Chuan and Yu Jian have extensive explicit poetics to their name. Xi Chuan’s poetics contains solemn, sometimes grandiloquent claims. In 1986 he writes: “The poet is both god and devil,” and in 1999: “When the strong poet touches iron, it turns to gold.” By contrast, Yu Jian, writing in 1997, holds that the poet is no more than a processor of language, a craftsman anchored in everyday reality who uses language to “retreat from metaphor,” indeed as “a method to eliminate the imagination”—nothing like a tragic genius who writes by moonlight or an alchemist, as in Xi Chuan’s book.

Still, neither author’s poetics are unequivocal in this respect. In 1995 Xi Chuan writes: “There are indeed those who announce that although they do not write poetry, they are poets.” In their turn, Yu Jian’s exercises in demystification and indeed desecration are invalidated by pompous statements that bespeak the romanticism they claim to oppose. In 1999, Yu calls poetry

a movement of language that cuts through forgetting and returns to the home of being . . . an original truth of the world, the light emitted by wisdom and the soul.

These remarks show the usefulness of the Elevated and the Earthly as coordinates in not just text but also metatext. Poetics of the Elevated are powerfully present in the cult of poetry, with its origins in the late 1970s and the 1980s, elevating the poet to superhuman if not divine status and as such very much a cult of poet-hood. Its impact in the 1990s and beyond is manifest in the continuing worship and mythification of Haizi, whose apotheosis was occasioned by his suicide, and of Hei Dachun on account of his bohemian lifestyle. Recent years have shown aggressive explicit-poetical efforts at the Earthly end of the spectrum, with Yu Jian as the most prolific contributor, especially during the Popular-Intellectual Polemic of 1998-2000.

One thing the Polemic showed was that for all their self-proclaimed ordinariness, members of the Earthly camp still view poethood as a superior quality of extraordinary importance and social relevance. As for authors of Elevated persuasion, the special status of the poet has

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49 Bibliographical detail for the following citations is provided in chapters Ten and Eleven.
always been among the tenets of their poetics. Perhaps the need to reclaim something of the dwindling visibility of the poet was extra pressing for the Earthly polemicians in light of their professed ability to stay in touch with the realities of everyday life (in China) and “ordinary people”—whose ignorance of their art would hence have been all the more painful. At any rate, the primacy of bread and circuses in today’s society has made it hard for poets of varying persuasion to maintain a prideful self-image. Up to a point, the removal of their art from mainstream social consumption can be turned into incrowd dignity, but they cannot indefinitely do without an audience beyond the “inner circle” (圈子). In modern times, in China and elsewhere, for a poet to be publicly misunderstood and suppressed by Uncool Powers, be they political dictators, the bourgeoisie or the stock market, can be an honorable fate. Conversely, in the interaction of artists and whatever type of audience has the power to suppress and to the extent that artistic achievement is measured in terms of rebellion and controversy, a variation on Oscar Wilde suggests itself. There is only one thing worse than being misunderstood and suppressed, and that is being ignored.

The textual trend from what to how, then, has a metatextual pendant in one from what to who, meaning the promotion of poet-hood. Since roughly 2000 this has found expression in the visual presentation of poets and their publications. Young authors such as those in the Lower Body group and generally the Post-70 Generation and beyond—meaning those born after 1970—were the first to include all manner of photographs and spectacular formatting in unofficial journals like Poetry Text (诗文本).\(^{50}\) Older poets and editors soon caught on, as visible in poetry collections by Yi Sha and Yu Jian, Momo’s book-like revival issues of the Coquetry Poetry Journal (撒娇诗刊) and so on.\(^ {51}\) Then there is the popular genre of illustrated memoirs and informal histories regaling stories of the avant-garde from its underground origins to the present day, by authors such as Zhong Ming, Liao Yiwu, Mang Ke and Yang Li. In Song Zuifa’s The Face of Chinese Poetry (中国诗歌的脸), portrait photographs of a hundred and fifty poets and twenty critics constitute the primary material, “illustrated” in turn by poems and poetical statements; Song’s portraits received high-profile exposure during a “poetry exhibition” in Guangzhou in 2006, curated

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\(^{50}\) E.g. Poetry Text 4 (2001).

by Song with poets Yang Ke and Qi Guo. Likewise, a good dozen poets are included in Xiao Quan’s This Our Generation (我们这一代), a portrait collection of writers and artists published in various editions since the 1990s.\textsuperscript{52} Especially for younger authors, to whom it would come naturally, this visualization of the poetry scene is explained in part by overall cultural trends of other media encroaching upon the hegemony of the written word, embodied in the changing physical presentation of books among other things. It is, however, also a strategic exercise in poet image-building, in order to sustain readership or indeed spectatorship.

Photographs and other illustrations come in three types. The first is hip, stylized, sometimes theatrical and provocative portraits, individual or collective, typical of Poetry Text and kindred publications: a loud, visual extension of poetry as performance, vaguely showcasing rock-n-roll lifestyles. The second is a mix of pictures taken at public events such as poetry readings and conferences on the one hand, and banal snapshots on the other, mostly recent but sometimes including family-album-type childhood pictures, facsimiles of the poet’s handwriting and so on, as in Yi Sha’s and Momo’s recent books. The third type, frequently encountered in the upsurge of poetry memoirs, is that of (group) portraits to mark public occasions that belong to literary history as opposed to the here and now. It will be hard to distinguish from the second once both may reasonably be called old.

The transition between what is experienced as past and present is gradual, and Yi Sha has been around since the early 1990s. Still, a picture of Yi Sha is not the same thing as one of Bei Dao and Mang Ke just out of the underground and about to trigger a sea change in overground literature, pointing to a moment that is definitely in the past, has left its mark and can claim stable historical significance. Something similar holds for the facsimile of a letter by Luo Yihe to Wan Xia in April 1989, describing Haizi’s suicide shortly after the event—as opposed to that of a manuscript of a 1990 poem by Yi Sha, advertising the authenticity of his handwriting, that may have been copied out anew in 2003 for all we know. On that note, many pictures in Mang Ke’s memoirs aren’t old at all but have been reproduced in sepia colors and less than perfect focus, conjuring up the image of a past that is barely retrievable and therefore all the more special.

Figure 1.3. Family-album-type childhood pictures: Yi Sha at age eight, when he first went to school, and age nineteen (inset), when he entered university (Yi 2003: 30+1).
Figure 1.6. Page from Luo Yihe’s letter to Wan Xia, describing Haizi’s suicide. The second paragraph reads: “The train was going slow, and [Haizi] had thrown himself [under the wheels] from the side. His head and heart were intact, but he had been cut in two at the abdomen. The freight train crew (it was the 1205 service) never realized he had been run over. In the instant that he had thrown himself under the wheels the glasses he was wearing hadn’t even been cracked or damaged” (Yang Li 2004: 16).
Figure 1.7. Manuscript of Yi Sha’s “Starve the Poets” (Yi 2003: 30+3)
One reading of the snapshot-type pictures takes its cue from Zhao’s karaoke metaphor inasmuch as it portrays poets as addressing an audience of friends and colleagues, even if their performance is photographically and historically insignificant. Another reading, that fits squarely with strategic image-building vis-à-vis an audience beyond the incrowd, draws on the continuing currency of poethood as a thing of extraordinary importance, especially in earthly circles: if the picture is of a poet, that should automatically make it interesting, even if all the poet does is eat a bowl of noodles. Notably, while the professional quality of author portraits on book covers has improved across the board, proponents of Elevated poetics appear much less frequently in this process of visualization.

(Self-)images of contemporary poethood, then, have seen multiple reinventions. In early Obscure Poetry there is the humanist spokesman for the emancipation of art, akin to political activists of the 1978-1979 Democracy Movement and to some extent still operating on the terms

*Figure 1.8.* If the picture is of a poet, that should automatically make it interesting, even if all the poet does is eat a bowl of noodles: Han Dong (Yang Li 2004: 295).
of the Maoist discourse he seeks to question. From the mid-1980s on, when overt political messages have all but disappeared, opposing constructions of the poet emerge: elitist high priest of a cult of poetry, and “ordinary” demystifier-cum-desecrator advertising the realities of everyday life as the building blocks of art. While the Elevated and Earthly aesthetics develop and diverge, the 1990s bring the disintegration of groups and Isms, and a shift toward individual efforts incapable of claiming social significance and not necessarily aspiring to do so anyway. The turn of the century shows efforts at image-building, partly in reaction to the poet’s removal from center stage in society at large, and partly reflecting overall cultural trends: visualization, but also things like the increasing popularity of personal columns in lifestyle magazines.

My generalization of masculine nouns and pronouns for the poet reflects the near-exclusive male dominance of the metatextual arena. This is all the more remarkable in light of women poets’ important textual contributions to the avant-garde, made from what Julia Lovell calls a marginal position within a marginal genre— even if marginality is a complicated notion, an issue to which we will shortly turn. In metatext, in spite of attempts by male activists to enlist their female colleagues for the cause, female poets appear less inclined to leave their mark on the debate, or less driven by compulsive ambition and aspirations to priesthood or desecratorship. Zhai Yongming’s refusal to take sides in the Popular-Intellectual Polemic is but one example.

The said reinventions and image-building facilitate a modest, politically disinterested celebrity discourse and commodification of poethood in the contemporary avant-garde, a category that has now traveled the full breadth from the proud and righteous to the hip and shameless. Any understanding of its versatility, not to say its frantic leaps and bounds amid diverse and conflicting stimuli, must take into account modern Chinese poets’ identity crisis and their problems of legitimation, beginning early in the twentieth century and evolving up to the present day, triggered and perpetuated by unceasing social, political and cultural upheaval and exacerbated by the recent impact of capitalist market ideology. Poets sustain the importance of

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54 Cf Yeh 1996a: 75 and Day 2007a.
poethood—whether as representing (traditional) cultural essence, or (modern) national salvation, or (contemporary) individual identity—by cherishing it as an abstraction that permits different manifestations and interpretations to succeed one another and coexist.

Whose Margins?

In metatextual matters, avant-garde poetry in China remains part of a society whose values and styles are changing fast. While any attempt at marketization would be doomed—in the sense of generating real money, not just fame and free drinks—the genre has had some success in the celebrity discourse noted above and in new media.

These things work differently for different generations and personalities, as evidenced by the poets whose work we have sampled above. Yu Jian can be seen to adapt, actively working toward a hip presentation in his general pursuit of publicity, through sheer noise and notoriety if need be. Yin Lichuan and Yan Jun, whose age more naturally puts them in touch with rapidly expanding youth culture, help constitute socio-cultural change, and their careers are tied to the Internet. Xi Chuan is typical of reticence at the Elevated end of the spectrum in matters like the visual presentation of publications and events.

For Yu, Yin and other poets—and to a lesser degree for Yan—there is a discrepancy between text and metatext: high art and few readers on the one hand, and celebrity discourse and the commodification of poethood on the other. Even if we count not just those who read poetry on paper and include the many visitors of poetry websites, the fact remains that beyond the field of restricted production, texts by the avant-garde are incompatible with overall socio-cultural trends whose dominance is defined by numbers. While this holds for poets from all quarters, it is exemplified by the self-proclaimed Popular poets. Yu Jian’s claim that classical poetry was part of the everyday life of ordinary people in the Tang and Song dynasties and that the right kind of contemporary poetry operates “among the [ordinary] people” is unconvincing. When Yin Lichuan says that for all its professed anti-elitism, Lower Body poetry hardly reaches beyond an elite audience, that is easier to believe. That Lower Body poetry’s relative accessibility allows it to count more of Bourdieu’s “non-producers” among its
readers than Xi Chuan or a typical poet’s poet like Che Qianzi doesn’t change this.\textsuperscript{55}

Questions of the type Whither Poetry? occur frequently in mainland-Chinese critical discourse, and trigger discussions in which the value of poetry’s development to date and the desirability of this or that among its possible futures are linked to the said socio-cultural trends. This happens through lament—or jubilation—over poetry’s \textit{in}-compatibility with these trends, but also through the confident assertion of its ability to avoid falling behind the times. But what’s the point of appraising the suitability of various poetics to their physical surroundings, and deploring or celebrating the fact that there are more people who watch TV than poetry readers, or that poetry’s contribution to the Gross National Product is hard to quantify? Instead, we may wish to observe that starting in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s and beyond, a large number of authors have written a wide variety of avant-garde poetry that continues to appear through channels that range from reputable publishing houses to privately run websites and sustains a dedicated, well-positioned audience. Equations of the 1980s with the rise of contemporary poetry and of the 1990s and beyond with its decline say something about context, not text or metatext, and are not substantiated by evidence.

Let’s return to the two red flags for a moment. The publication of Gui Xinghua’s poetry is the product of government policy; that of Yi Sha’s, the product of a publisher’s decision. The latter is informed by considerations of prestige at a time when automatic government subsidies have long been a thing of the past and any expectation to make money from poetry is as unrealistic as ever under normal circumstances, as opposed to the anomaly of the 1980s or people’s fascination for self-killing poets. Many rank-and-file avant-garde publications wouldn’t appear without external sponsors, but publishers will in fact make an effort to publish the work of prominent poets as so-called “original editions” (\textit{本版书}), meaning books for which the author gets paid. At any rate, to make numbers—money, print runs, readership—the measure of all things, in this case of the “relevance” of a poetry whose objectives do not include traditional and orthodox ideals of broad recognition and dissemination as an instrument of social moral-

\textsuperscript{55} Yu Jian 1999b: 12; Yin & That’s Beijing 2004 and Q & A session, Gent: De Centrale, May 2004.
ity, is socio-economic reductionism. Bourdieu recognizes this when he defines the literary field as

a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy.

Yet, subsequently he writes that to understand literature is to understand how it is defined in relation to the field of power and, in particular, in relation to the fundamental law of this universe, which is that of economy and power.

Throughout the twentieth century and beyond, with the Maoist interlude as a complicated exception to the rule, Chinese-poetic modernity has proven difficult to combine with traditional poetics summed up as literature to convey the Way. Seen in this light and according to Bourdieu’s “fundamental law,” modern poetry’s oft-noted marginalization is a valid, indeed an ineluctable notion, as Yeh argues—not without suggesting that the margin is where modern poetry can be at its most creative and powerful. But with an eye to its inclinations since the 1980s and to radical changes in the relations between social, political, economic and cultural forces at work in contemporary China, we might ask: Whose margins? What makes the classical poetry paradigm, socio-economic development or power relations the center? Whose center? Artistic creativity gives a unique twist to our efforts to make sense of an ever-changing world, and perhaps its uniqueness lies precisely in the fact that it isn’t easily made to fit consensual truths, or financially quantified, or translated into palpable power over others. Lest we reduce it to a flaw in the fabric of rigidly canonized cultural identities or all-encompassing economic “rationalism,” we should be wary of an argument that may appear plausible enough but is deeply problematic. For anything like a comprehensive understanding of Chinese poetry today, it makes no sense to apply criteria informed by forces that are largely alien to the avant-garde’s development: orthodoxy—be it premodern or modern, Confucian or Communist—and marketization. Is this poetry suitable for conveying the Way? and Does this poetry sell? are the wrong questions.

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56 Bourdieu 1993: 162-164.
Who Cares?

Answering the wrong questions would be turning a blind eye to a demonstrably thriving if somewhat self-contained cultural scene, and do little more than reaffirm disparaging comments on the “relevance” of (modern) poetry that are something of a genre in themselves, across diverse cultural traditions—as are, conversely, apologies for poetry. If there is a need for either, there is nothing Chinese about that.

Alternatively, while recognizing changes in the cultural landscape that surrounds and obviously affects poetry in contemporary China, we may wish to leave sufficient room for approaching it on its own terms, gleaned from the niche where it finds itself. This is not a gratuitous assertion of the absolute autonomy of art, but an attempt to grasp what this poetry means, and how it works, and for whom.

6. The Case Studies, and What This Book Wants to Do

The twelve chapters after this one are in rough chronological order of literary impact. I like to think of the ground they cover as a coherent poetic discourse, in Anthony Easthope’s definition. That is, what happens above the level of the individual line, in individual poems and then individual oeuvres, but also between these oeuvres and occasionally across several or all of them. As noted, if I have found the categories of text, context and metatext useful to organize my thinking, I haven’t drawn strict boundaries between them in the organization of this book. By and large, however, chapters Two through Nine focus on text—with large metatextual and contextual components in Three and Four—and chapters Ten through Twelve on metatext. Context runs through all. Chapter Thirteen functions as a coda, with a little bit of everything.

Within the overarching, interwoven notions of the Easthopian discourse and text + context + metatext, the majority of the case studies are delineated by another organizing principle, that of the poetic voice. By this I mean a distinct, individual presence in both form and content, that is discernible throughout a poet’s oeuvre and enables one to recognize previously unfamiliar texts by the author in question. Por-

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trait photographs aside, the historical person of the author appears in biographical notes, and in the argument proper if their story advances the discussion. I consider authorial intent to be unknowable and irrelevant, the only relevant intent being that of the text and that of the reader, once they meet. After Hugo Brems I hold that for poetry of the sort that is considered in these pages—different from premodern and Maoist traditions—what matters is not the emotion that creates the poem but the emotion that the poem creates. Accordingly, I take declarations of authorial intent as statements made by authors in their capacity as readers. Case studies of individual oeuvres are not surveys or summaries but each have a particular focus, identified in the chapter titles. They are complemented by chapters that take their cue from moments in literary history that transcend the individual. Some additional remarks on theory and methodology follow below.

The selection of a dozen voices in text and metatext from among scores of widely published poets and poet-critics entails the act of canonization and at the same time remains a personal affair. Canonization, of course, is rarely objective or systematic, whether by design or with hindsight. It is at best intersubjective, and usually subjective on individual and collective levels, and it can indeed be coincidental and arbitrary. I hold, however, that each of the authors studied in these pages has had demonstrable impact in the public domain and made distinct contributions to the avant-garde’s multidimensional discourse as a whole. While this study doesn’t attempt anything like a full overview of avant-garde poetry from China, it does hope to give the reader a rough idea of what such poetry is all about, with reference to critical discourse to date and facilitating access to the material through the research bibliographies mentioned in the preface.

Twelve Case Studies

The case studies start in the early 1980s, after Obscure Poetry, which has been well covered in previous research. Han Dong’s poetry (chapter Two) has often been discussed in terms of its resistance to Obscure poetics. This is a notable part of the story, but negative defi-
nition is as problematic for individual oeuvres as it is for larger trends and the significance of Han’s work in its own right extends far beyond its classification as anti-Obscure. Similarly, while the late 1980s high point of the cult of poetry in the work of Haizi was in part a rejection of colloquializing and vulgarizing trends in the work of authors including Han Dong, Yu Jian and the Macho Men, the poetic voice in Haizi’s work presents something new, rather than a simple return to pre-colloquial and pre-vulgar days. Subtle, intensely personal aspects of his poetry have been drowned out by his mythification as a martyr of poetry after his suicide in March 1989 (Three). Later that year, June Fourth spurred the development of an exile poetry scene involving authors such as Yang Lian, Wang Jiaxin and Bei Dao (Four), whose art catalysed rather than fundamentally changing it. June Fourth also catalysed poetic practice by poets inside China, including Xi Chuan, for whom the year 1989 was a turning point in a personal sense as well. From the early 1990s onward Xi Chuan’s poetry becomes truly innovative through the quality of creative indeterminacy, visible in interaction of the text’s surface and its “deep meaning,” among other things (Five). The sheer length of two early 1990s milestone texts of the Elevated and Earthly aesthetics, by Xi Chuan and Yu Jian, invites a comparison of the work of these two most prominent voices of the avant-garde and some reflection on generic definitions of poetry and prose (Six). Another rewarding angle on Yu Jian’s poetry lies in its central feature of objectification, briefly introduced above. This is, paradoxically, a highly subjective process, to do with form as well as content (Seven). Likewise, the mutual reinforcement of form and content is essential to Sun Wenbo’s poetry of the mid- and late 1990s, with poetic rhythm as a co-constituent of its narrative character (Eight). Written in 2000-2001, right after the Popular-Intellectual Polemic, the work of Yin Lichuan and Shen Haobo shows that Lower Body poetry is intimately linked to rapid, radical social change and concomitant generation gaps, but that there is more to it than meets the socio-documentary eye (Nine).

Chinese poets are remarkably active as contributors to metatext. In this respect, too, Xi Chuan has fascinating writings to his name, for one thing because his work exemplifies the fuzziness of the boundaries between text and metatext (Ten). Han Dong’s and Yu Jian’s abundant explicit poetics (Eleven), on the other hand, contain much more commentary on the actualities of the poetry scene, even though their
concerns can be subsumed under topics similar to those explored by Xi Chuan. The work of all three poets brings out the relative nature of the Elevated and Earthly as textual and metatextual labels, without detracting from their usefulness as discursive coordinates. This is further illustrated by the Popular-Intellectual Polemic (Twelve). Around the turn of the century, poetry treads new ground through Yan Jun’s multimedia performances (Thirteen). While their textual component exceeds the realm of the written, as writing they belong inside the poetic discourse of the avant-garde. Yet, in other ways, as part of larger cultural trends summed up as technologization and remediation, Yan Jun’s work is sufficiently different from most avant-garde poetry to prompt reflection on the nature and the scope of this discourse to date and in future.

At this point a few disclaimers are in order. First of all, poetry from Taiwan and Hong Kong, two sinophone communities with extremely rich literatures, lies outside the scope of this study. When I say China or Chinese, unless otherwise indicated, I refer to the People’s Republic as defined by its borders prior to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong, and within the PRC my research does not extend to poetries written in other languages than Chinese. This reflects two things: the limitations of my work and the observation that the historical circumstances which hold for Chinese-language poetry in the People’s Republic add to the coherence of the avant-garde as an EastHopian discourse. In recognition of the work of scholars such David Der-wei Wang and Michelle Yeh, the latter point isn’t intended to reify geopolitical dividing lines as having literary significance per se. Second, of the ten poets whose work I examine closely, only one is a woman. I have guessed elsewhere that the proportion of male-authored poems in the avant-garde lies around ninety percent, but I seek no justification in these numbers. My original outline for this project included a chapter on Women’s Poetry and I had published a preliminary essay on Zhai Yongming; but subsequently I had the privilege of acting as advisor to Jeanne Hong Zhang, whose work on Women’s Poetry made anything I could have done in this respect pale in comparison. Third, I had planned a chapter on the 1980s Sichuan scene with its singular activism and aesthetics, but then I had the privilege of acting as advisor to Michael Day, whose work on the Sichuan avant-garde.... etc. Of course, that others have written on a given topic is anything but a reason not to do so oneself. In these two cases, however, I found my energies redirected into talking back to Jeanne and Michael, and hap-
pily so. Fourth, as noted, this study doesn’t extend to poetry on the Internet, for the simple reason that I have found it hard to keep up with poetry in print to begin with. Fifth, while the emergence of modern Chinese poetry has involved close encounters with foreign literatures, I haven’t attempted anything in the way of influence studies beyond noting the occasional intertextuality.62

**Chineseness, the West and Sinologists**

What is Chinese about the poetry studied in this book? To borrow Rey Chow’s pertinent question, isn’t it just poetry, rather than Chinese poetry?63 First and foremost, this poetry is written in Chinese, as part of the larger linguistic environment (语境) of cultural China (文化中国) and specifically contemporary mainland China—which, in exile poetry, doesn’t stop at the nation’s borders. This raises a question that is as thrilling as it is difficult. Could this poetry have been written in another language? I won’t go into this here, but I’m disinclined to assume that the answer is a simple yes. Second, this poetry operates as a coherent discourse within local socio-historical and literary-historical contexts. Here, one can think of Communist Party policy or the particularities of the unofficial poetry scene, but also of the lingering influence of traditional Chinese views of literature. Many poets will declare that poetry should be autonomous from mainstream social development, but metatextual traffic shows that they have not internalized this view.

Speaking of Chineseness along these lines is another way of saying that my data is regionally and linguistically defined, and that certain aspects of this definition are particular to this data and don’t necessarily hold for poetries in other regions and languages. I hope my study will show that calling this poetry Chinese doesn’t mean its readers must be Chinese in whatever sense, or make it the object of a misguided quest for essentialized, exoticized types of authenticity. Moreover, the resonance of Chinese contexts doesn’t make the poetry discussed in these pages exclusively Chinese. On that note, let’s switch perspectives and recall that since day one, modern poetry in China has regularly been

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63 Chow 2000: 11.
taken to task for being insufficiently Chinese, and for being “foreign” (外国的, 外来的) and “Westernized” (西化). Such assessments are still being made today, by specialist and non-specialist readers, and occasionally lead to representations of this or that poem, oeuvre or trend as being derivative material or second-hand news imported from abroad.

A major part of the bigger picture is China’s precarious, troubled relationship to the West and Japan ever since the Opium Wars, even if in the contemporary period, things are not what they were in 1839. In the cultural and academic realms, this geopolitical situation is reflected in what is widely perceived as uneven exchange between national literatures and academies in the modern era, within contested notions of “world literature” and “international” scholarship, usually meaning scholarship in English. In plain words, modern literatures from elsewhere—not just from the West and Japan, but also from Central and Eastern Europe and from South America—have exerted greater influence on modern Chinese literature than the other way around. Similarly, Western theory is overwhelmingly present in not just international but also Chinese-domestic scholarship on modern Chinese literature.

On interindividual and intercommunal levels, cultural and scholarly development rarely start from “purity” and usually involve some measure of hybridity, and the long-term view tends to problematize representations of influence as a one-way affair. A stock example is how classical Chinese poetry influenced the modern Western poetry that went on to influence modern Chinese poetry. In spite of such qualifications, the issue of uneven exchange remains topical and sensitive. Understandably so, for with regard to literature it activates explosive notions such as authenticity, originality, primacy, imitation, inequality and subordination, and with regard to discourse on literature, it highlights the dangers of centrism and chauvinism in various quarters. This has generated much debate involving Stephen Owen, William Jenner, Michelle Yeh, Rey Chow, Perry Link, Zhang Longxi, Zhang Yingjin, Andrew Jones, Gregory Lee, Huang Yunte, Bonnie McDougall, Julia Lovell and many others, for poetry often focusing on the work of Bei Dao. The discussion isn’t limited to Chinese literature and its relationship to other literatures but extends to the study
of Chinese literature as conducted in China and elsewhere, and to its translation.\textsuperscript{64}

Can Western studies of Chinese literature steer clear of Occidentocentrism (西方中心主义), if we were to accept the static homogenization of the West that this question presupposes? A few basics, none of them terribly original, may serve to outline my position. Most if not all literary theory and methodology that claim any universal validity originate in a particular (literary, linguistic, social, ideological) framework Fx. There are many such frameworks, and they are rarely “pure” at any point in time. Their interaction contributes to cultural development and entails the encounter of perspectives that are experienced as relatively “native” and “foreign”—even if neither the native nor the foreign view themselves as such prior to the encounter, neither are pure or fixed and both will change as a consequence of the encounter. In the contemporary world this interaction is inevitable. Theory and methodology from Fx shouldn’t be mechanically applied to literature from Fy, nor should their applicability to literature from Fy be mechanically rejected. What scholars who come from Fx bring to the study of literature from Fy includes a perspective Px, without excluding others. Px, in its turn, sometimes includes explicit theory and methodology and always includes a general intellectual-cultural make-up, which is usually less explicit. It reflects communal orientations but also has room for individual aesthetics. Scholars from Fx who study literature from Fy cannot block out Px, which has a bearing on the questions they ask of this literature, and hence on their representations of it. This need not be a problem, as long as they are aware of this situation and know that Px is but one possible perspective and not a truth claim.

In the present context, a controversial perspective is that of foreign, usually Western sinologists (汉学家) who study and translate Chinese literature and function as its brokers vis-à-vis foreign publishers, media and university curricula. Their role is often considered in the context of a general discontent with modern Chinese literature’s low international impact. Assessment of their achievements ranges from the wel-

coming and complimentary to the deprecatory and hostile, by “native”
and “foreign” commentators alike; the latter distinction is of course
increasingly problematic. Optimists emphasize that the sinologists ad-

cance cultural exchange, sometimes classifying their work as support-
ing a cause called Chinese literature’s “march toward the world” (走向世界). Pessimists believe that the sinologists’ command of Chinese
is insufficient and they work from a Western perspective, and that this
disqualifies them for judging literary works in Chinese and producing
responsible and effective translations. Occasionally, the pessimists will
cast doubt on the integrity of the sinologists and that of the authors
they translate, suggesting that Chinese writers’ success in “connecting”
(接轨) with a globalizing literary market and more generally their ties
of allegiance (关系) with the scholar-translators ultimately determine
who ends up in world literature and who doesn’t. Chapter Eleven of
this study contains examples of avant-garde poets engaging in such
sinologist-bashing and Chinese-author-bashing.

For poetry, some academics have hyperbolized the sinologists’ role
and that of the foreign audiences they create, in a way that leads to
association with an overly literal reading of Bourdieu’s production for
producers and doesn’t reflect the realities of the poetry scene. Writing
in 1996, Gregory Lee claims that in the early 1990s, “internal clamp-
downs and enforced exile ma[d]e the West the [Chinese poet’s] main

audience,” although he later notes that in China, “there [was] still a
significant readership of poetry . . . not a negligible readership either
in terms of size or influence.”66 Zhang Xudong holds that67

the aesthetic institution of “pure poetry” or “global poetry” has proven
to be the last refuge of this ephemeral high modernism [i.e. Obscure Po-
etry], now surviving as an endangered species outside China, thanks to
the “academic” interest of Western universities and foundations.

This is a stark exaggeration clad in questionable rhetoric, as Haun
Saussy has pointed out.68

Western literary and academic institutions have paid much less at-
tention to modern Chinese literature than to literatures in European
languages. Chinese studies are on the rise throughout the world, but

65 Cf Yeh 2007a: 33.
66 Lee (Gregory) 1996: 13, 38.
68 Saussy 1999.
foreign scholar-translators of Chinese literature are still relatively few in number and thus exert considerable, perhaps unbalanced or disproportionate individual influence on representations of this literature to audiences elsewhere. Their pivotal role is reinforced because foreign consecration of Chinese literary works carries much weight in domestic discourse, as a consequence of the uneven exchange noted earlier. Before anything else, however, we should note that sinologist means different things to different people. Especially in North-American discourse, if it is used at all it often has connotations of Orientalist representations of traditional Chinese culture, insufficient disciplinary theorization and delusions of all-encompassing visions of an essentialized “China.” Remarkably, China scholar, which should really mean the same thing, carries much less of a negative connotation. In Europe these issues are recognized but sinologist is a less controversial term, perhaps because the study of China is generally concentrated in departments of Chinese Studies and less developed in disciplinarily defined departments such as Comparative Literature or History.

For now, with regard to modern Chinese literature’s low international impact and the role of the scholar-translators, suffice it to observe the following points. One: while the presence of European languages in Western high school curricula doesn’t automatically generate top-quality translations from these languages, there is doubtless room for improvement in the field of translation from a language that most of the current professionals started studying only when they went to university. Two: there are many examples of successful cooperation between native speakers of Chinese and of the various target languages. Three: when assessing scholarship and translation we should bear in mind that modern Chinese literature “itself”—the primary text in the exercise, so to speak—has had a hard time finding its footing during the extreme upheavals of modern Chinese history. Four: concerns about sinological and Western perspectives, which are often grossly generalized, should perhaps not move scholar-translators to stop studying and translating Chinese literature. As others have done, Bonnie McDougall rightly cautions against the naive adoption of Western perspectives, but whether one should “adapt criticism to native expectations”—and whether one can, to begin with—is open to debate. This position implies that foreign scholar-translators can do little more than report on domestic discourse, and presupposes a view of literature as primarily social documentation that limits the potential of
the text to be realized in various ways in its encounter with a variety of readers. McDougall recognizes the complexity of the issue when she urges the scholar-translators not to accept domestic canons uncritically.69

Theory and Methodology

In light of the variety of the poetry studied in this book, I haven’t adopted one single literary-theoretical angle throughout. Instead, I draw on the work of various theorists as it speaks to questions I believe are raised by the material: John Glad on exile, Marjorie Perloff on indeterminacy, Amittai Aviram on rhythm and so on. One issue that informs several of the case studies is that of the synergy of form and content, which I view as neither a dichotomy nor two simply equatable concepts, and rather as relative to and dependent upon one another. I take the position that poetry is art before anything else, that any socio-documentary or generally representative function it may have is secondary, that its form is essential to its realization, and that we should be alert to the pitfalls of content bias and what Chow calls the informationalization of literature.70

My methodology is best summed up as close reading. I read not for completeness but for coherence, which is not the same thing as all-encompassing, rigid consistency, and often emerges in unresolved tension rather than closure. In this respect, too, the material doesn’t always ask the same questions. Close reading makes more sense for Sun Wenbo’s poetry, for instance, than for Shen Haobo’s. Several years ago Kirk Denton said of a journal article containing an earlier version of chapter Five, on Xi Chuan, that it showed that close reading was “still a valuable activity.”71 That this needed to be said illustrates the extent to which close reading has been discredited since the mid-twentieth century. To some extent this has happened through association with caricatures of blinkered New Critics in exclusive worship of the literary text in the narrowest sense, grudgingly admitting that the words on the page might have a generally accepted referential value. This is not what I do. The development of literary and cultural

70 Chow 1993: 132.
71 Denton 1999.
studies over the past several decades is a wonderful thing, most of all because of their current diversity and inclusiveness. There is room for projects that keep the text on board, with attention to “minute detail” like syllable stress and punctuation if need be. This particular type of respect for the text informs my preference for citing individual poems in their entirety. For poetry, this is often pragmatically possible and theoretically desirable.

If only because I have wondered whether this poetry could have been written in another language than Chinese, a few words on translation are in order. All translations in this book are mine. This is for practical reasons—in a book written in one language on poetry in another, analysis and interpretation are hand in glove with translation—and out of love for the art. For a few of the poems in question, other translators have gone before; while I have organized my personal encounters with the texts in question, I haven’t changed my phrasings if they coincided with those of my predecessors. As for the issue of academic versus literary translation, I am inclined to the latter but aware of the limitations that come with the claim of commenting on the Chinese originals. There are no hard and fast rules for these things, as I hope the reader will remember in chapter Seven, where I argue that a particular occurrence of 灯 ‘lamp’ should really be rendered as window in English. Another perennial issue is that of the translatability of poetry per se. While this is obviously not unique to the Chinese case, I would like to cite fellow specialists of Chinese poetry to clarify where I stand. I second Brian Holton’s dismissal of the myth of untranslatability, and I express my admiration for Holton’s own, Andrea Lingenfelter’s, Simon Patton’s, Michael Day’s and Steve Bradbury’s translations as some of the strongest English-language evidence against this myth.72

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Translatability in a broader sense takes us to a final, contiguous point, which concerns the very nature of scholarship on literature and especially on poetry, within linguistic borders or across them. Why speak about texts, perhaps even claim to speak for texts that should speak for themselves? The question brings to mind classifications of criticism as

the most influential high literary form of our day at one end,\textsuperscript{73} and the clichéd, hostile image of medical dissection for the scholarly discussion of poetry, at the other. The dissection metaphor is an extreme case of the rejection of paraphraseability: a poem is a poem precisely because it is unalterably made of the exact words of which it is made, and as the other verbalizations that they are, words about the poem are useless at best and a fatal violation of the poem’s integrity at worst. But there are other possible answers. Tonnus Oosterhoff presents an image as powerful as that of dissection, but infinitely more engaging and productive:\textsuperscript{74}

Does secondary, interpretive literature have to be hard science? Isn’t the genre more comparable to singing the second voice? Around the main melody, that of the work of art, a second melody plays its way, lending perspective and depth. The writing reader must be precise, but what s/he is after is meaningful polyphony, rather than the impersonal, context-immanent meticulousness of science.

To the second voice.

\textsuperscript{73} Cited in Yu (Pauline) et al 2000: 6.
\textsuperscript{74} Oosterhoff 2006.