CHAPTER THREE

THANATOGRAPHY AND THE POETIC VOICE: HAIZI

Ask any Chinese about the poet Haizi, and the first thing they will say is that he killed himself.

Really? First, not all Chinese people know of Haizi. Second, one doesn’t have to be Chinese to remember Haizi’s suicide at the mention of his name. That public discourse has had more time for his death than for his writings is not just true in China. Many who haven’t read his poetry do know that he was a poet and killed himself, and there is probably no one that has read his poetry and doesn’t know that he killed himself. Third, there are some Chinese readers, mostly fellow poets and critics, who resist the domination of Haizi’s poetry by the memory of his suicide.

On the other hand: first, Haizi is in fact one of the best-known contemporary Chinese poets, among younger readers even better known than Bei Dao, Shu Ting and Gu Cheng. The latter three are among the Obscure poets who, in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, were more visible in Chinese society at large than any generation or individual poet has been ever since. As noted, what I have called their rock stardom at the time was really an anomaly, occasioned by particular historical circumstances. Gu Cheng’s fame further increased because like Haizi, he killed himself. He did so after killing Xie Ye, and publicity surrounding the murder-suicide spread far beyond the literary world. Second, to be sure, the suicides of artists and writers fascinate readers everywhere. This includes those who only “read” the suicide, not what the self-killer wrote, painted and so on, as well as professional critics like Alfred Alvarez and Jeroen Brouwers, whose analysis encompasses both authors and works. Still, as Michelle Yeh has shown, literary suicides particularly enthral Chinese poets and their audiences—and the number of modern Chinese writers that have killed themselves is remarkable. I have seen Yeh’s findings confirmed in many instances of formal and informal critical discourse, a recent example being Mao Jian’s The Last Myth: The Riddle of the Poet’s Suicide (最后的神话: 诗人自
Figure 3.1. Haizi, late 1980s (Haizi 1995, inside cover)
杀之谜，2005). And third: yes, there are those who attempt to rescue Haizi’s poetry from the popular, near-complete identification with his suicide, but they fight an uphill battle.¹

A study of Haizi as a literary phenomenon, then, highlights the issue of what we may call creative suicide. Is his suicide a poem, or the poem to end all poems, even if he didn’t literally write it, or publicly orchestrate it like Mishima? More generally, is Haizi’s life part of his work, and should we view his life and work as one? Elisabeth Bronfen observes that one of the thrilling things about artistic representations of death is that they allow the survivors to experience death by proxy. One can see how this holds all the more for artists who not only produce representations of death but actually “live it” by committing suicide, especially if the suicide is visibly premeditated. Depending on the circumstances, a view of the artist’s life and work as one can make it possible for life to mean the artist’s death, or more precisely: their death, with the preceding life as a process predestined to lead up to this death and no other. Then, often triggering a deceptive mechanism we may call post hoc inevitability, biography becomes thanatography. That is, the rewriting of a life as first and foremost the build-up to a death.²

As a reader, I don’t try to retrieve authorial intent or verify the historical authenticity of experiences that the poem evokes. What does the author mean? Or Should we identify the speaker in this poetry with the historical figure of the author? are but two of the many questions one may choose to ask once someone releases their poetry into the public domain. Moreover, in Haizi’s case, if we let ourselves be swept along by the trend of conflating his life and work, the historically authentic experience we claim to explore is that of an individual’s sui-


² Bronfen 1992: x. Bronfen calls the field that informs her study that of thanatopoetics, focusing on the conjunction of femininity and death or, in an alternative formula, on the triangulation of femininity, death and textuality (403). Simon Patton, reviewing poetry by Yang Lian that he finds “monotonous in its morbidity,” uses thanatography to mean ‘a prolonged investigation of death and decay, a literary mortuary’ (1995b). In its occasional medical usage, thanatography means ‘description of a death.’
cide. I would venture that the state of mind directly preceding the act of suicide—not so much in time as in experience—remains incommunicable in language, beyond a superficial level of essentially meaningless verbalization. As such, discussing actual suicide, always someone else’s, is the domestication in words of something unspeakable. Literally so, as it is undergone by human beings of their own initiative but impossible for them to speak of once it takes place.

One of the factors explaining suicide’s popularity as a topic for reflection among those who live on is the absoluteness of self-determination by self-destruction. While suicide can be plausibly imagined as such, a vision of killing oneself as an assertion of subjectivity shouldn’t block out another, perhaps less thrilling but equally convincing. At the risk of stating the obvious, I mean the possibility of an individual life simply becoming unbearable, for reasons ranging from the grand to the pedestrian: from war guilt to continual shortness of breath. Suicide, in other words, not as an act of strategy but as the embodiment, and the disembodiment, of despair.³

The above reservations don’t mean that we should limit ourselves to studying the strictly textual dimensions of Haizi’s poetry. A work of art can make people curious about its maker and what they learn about the maker can influence their appreciation of the work. In this sense, fascination with the suicides of poets and artists rather than with their daytime jobs as insurance agents, to cite a useful cliché, makes total sense. Especially if the suicide is young and violent, creation and (self-)destruction present a powerful mix. It is hard to maintain that the music of Joy Division didn’t change when Ian Curtis hanged himself, or that Haizi’s poetry didn’t change when Haizi had himself cut in two by a freight train. The retroactive nature of mechanisms such as these is something to marvel at rather than deny, as does Alvarez when he writes that “the suicide adds nothing at all to the poetry,” a contestable claim made in an otherwise convincing study of the power that suicide has exerted over the creative imagination.⁴ Central to reflection on these things, especially in professional commentary, is the question where one draws the boundaries of the text and how much space one gives the author, if the author is inside them to begin with. Any answer

³ On the essentially private and desperate nature of many suicides, see Alvarez 1971: 44, 85-90, 144, 206 et passim.
represents a choice by the commentator that will benefit from explication.

In this respect and others, the case of Haizi tells us much about the avant-garde’s metatexts, especially about the extraordinary importance of poethood discussed in chapter One, self-evident to many Chinese poets and critics. In recognition of this point, section 1 of this chapter explores mythifications of Haizi’s life as part of his work. These identify his poetry with his suicide and make what he wrote inseparable from everything else he did. As a counterweight, section 2 examines more or less text-immanent features of Haizi’s writing, in order to foreground aspects of the poetic voice that have been drowned out in the uproar over the fate of the author.

1. Thanatography

Most if not all critical writing on Haizi appeared after his death, and makes explicit reference to his death. This in itself provides evidence for a widespread view of his life as part of his work.

Life

During his lifetime, however, Haizi didn’t go unrecognized as a poet. In 1985 his early writings were given prominent positions in *Modern Poetry Materials for Internal Exchange* (现代诗内部交流资料) and *Contemporary Chinese Experimental Poetry* (中国当代实验诗歌), two ground-breaking unofficial journals out of Sichuan province that brought together avant-garde poets of various literary generations and persuasions from across China. Full, multiple-author sections of both journals were named after a poem and a poetical statement by Haizi respectively, the only other poet to have such honor bestowed on him being Bei Dao. Over the next several years, Haizi’s work was included in major anthologies drawing attention to the avant-garde’s dynamic development beyond Obscure Poetry. He received awards from the Peking University May Fourth Literary Society (北京大学五四文学社) and the official literary journal *October* (十月) in 1986 and 1988, and appears in both issues of the unofficial journal *The Survivors* (幸存者), as a member of the prestigious poetry club of that name. According to Luo Yihe, about fifty of Haizi’s poems had appeared in print
before he died. His publication record aside, however, what we know of his literary status while alive comes to us in articles and books written after his death. Until that time, he was a poet’s poet.\(^5\)

In light of my interest in views of Haizi’s life as part of his work, a biographical note is in order. Born in 1964, Haizi stands out in the avant-garde because he came from a rural background. Growing up in a village in Anhui province, he was a precocious child that stunned those around him with his talent for learning, remembered in the anecdote of his victory in a Little Red Book recitation contest, at age ten or so. In 1979, when China’s schools and universities were still reeling from the havoc wreaked upon them during the Cultural Revolution and recruiting students of all ages between mid-teens and mid-thirties by scholarly examination rather than political pedigree, Zha Haisheng, as he was then still called, enrolled in the law department of Peking University at fifteen years of age. His student years overlapped with those of literary activist and editor Lao Mu and poets Luo Yihe and Xi Chuan, three others who were to contribute to the status of PKU as a breeding ground of modern poetry throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Generally a shy character, Haizi did develop lasting friendships with Luo Yihe and Xi Chuan. Upon graduation in 1983, nineteen years old, he was assigned to the Chinese University of Politics and Law, initially for editorial work and later as a lecturer. He moved to its new campus in semi-rural Changping, a suburb about thirty kilometers north of Beijing.\(^6\)

Over the next few years, he continued on a track of maniacal reading and writing, with few distractions. Writing was more important to him than anything else. When he traveled to other parts of China, this was for writing projects, too. Calling himself Haizi from 1984, he lived what appears to have been a life of absolute, feverish dedication to poetry and to a grandiose vision of poethood, however consciously or unconsciously his embodiment of this vision took shape. Supporting his family in Anhui, he could afford few luxuries, even if he wasn’t

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poor by Chinese standards nationwide and across social strata. He had few social contacts and apparently suffered heavy blows from ill-fated love affairs. He wrote at an astonishing pace in several genres at the same time, the most important being short, lyrical poems, long, narrative-epic poems and plays in verse. Living by himself, writing at night and sleeping in the mornings, displaying no desire to partake of daily realities in the world around him, eating little and drinking heavily, suffering from depression and in his final months from delusions and pathological symptoms possibly indicating cerebral aneurysm, Haizi was the epitome of romantic poethood.

Deaths

On 26 March 1989, twenty-five years old, Haizi threw himself under the wheels of a train near Shanhaiguan, a couple of hundred kilometers east of Beijing, close to the sea. On his body, he carried a note:

My name is Zha Haisheng. I am a lecturer in the philosophy teaching and research group at the Chinese University of Politics and Law. My death has nothing to do with anybody. My previous will herewith becomes wholly invalid: my posthumous manuscripts are to be given to Luo Yihe of the editorial office of October, for him to administer.

On 31 May Luo Yihe, Haizi’s fellow poet and closest friend and now his posthumous editor, died after developing a brain hemorrhage and entering a coma earlier that month. The story of Luo’s death at age twenty-eight, shortly after he and Xi Chuan had begun work on Haizi’s literary legacy, was uncanny from the start. The popular view was that Luo had over-exerted himself while working to establish Haizi’s memory. Moreover, he had first collapsed on Tiananmen Square, oc-

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7 See Yang Li 2004: 16-17 and Liaoyuan 2001: 340. Yang Li 2004 contains Luo’s letter to Wan Xia describing Haizi’s suicide. Luo cites only the latter two thirds of the note on Haizi’s body, leaving out his identification of himself and his employer. Liaoyuan’s version of the note differs from its citation by Luo. According to Liaoyuan, the note’s penultimate sentence reads: “My previous will remains wholly valid: please give my poetry manuscripts to Luo Yihe of October.” Upon Haizi’s death, Luo was the one who went to Shanhaiguan to handle the formalities of the situation and was given the note. There is no reason to doubt the reliability of his letter to Wan. The difference between Luo’s and Liaoyuan’s accounts may be explained by a typo, with remains wholly valid (全部算数) being a miswritten version of the near-homophonous becomes wholly invalid (全不算数). The issue doesn’t affect the argument made in these pages.
cupied at the time by students who had gone on hunger strike as part of the 1989 Protest Movement, and according to some his death was the result of medical complications after he joined in the strike: Luo’s fate became all the more dramatic when June Fourth caused many more young deaths soon thereafter. Over the next few years Haizi’s and Luo’s deaths were followed by the suicides of poets Ge Mai in 1991 and Gu Cheng in 1993, and by a good ten lesser-known suicides, deaths by illness and other violent incidents in mainland Chinese poetry circles. One recalls the phenomenon of “suicide epidemics” such as those following the publication of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*).8

**Publications and Publicity**

Haizi’s suicide triggered an explosion of publications and publicity, on a scale much larger than would have been possible had he lived on. Between 1983 and 1988 he had published several unofficial collections, but evidence of his posthumous rise to fame lies in four official books of his poetry, published between 1990 and 1997, and is reaffirmed by his publication and publicity record at large. This includes the sales numbers of his individual collections, his status in multiple-author anthologies, all manner of commemorative activities and a floodwave of commentary on his life and work, ranging from the scholarly to the sensationalist.

In 1990 the Spring Wind Literature & Art Press brought out Haizi’s *The Land* (*土地*), one of seven parts making up the unfinished «The Sun: A Play in Verse» (*太阳: 诗剧, 1986-1988*), selected by Luo Yihe and Xi Chuan for stand-alone publication in book form. *The Land* would have gone to press in 1989, had it not been for the temporary paralysis of avant-garde literature and art after June Fourth. In 1991 the Nan-

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Figures 3.2 and 3.3. Small Station (unofficial, 1983) and The Poetry of Haizi (People’s Literature Press, 1995).
jing Press brought out *Works by Haizi and Luo Yihe* (海子、骆一禾作品集), containing selections from every genre that Haizi had practiced. Nominally edited by Zhou Jun and Zhang Wei, *Works* was in fact a reprint of the second issue of the unofficial journal *Tendency*, edited by Chen Dongdong, which had appeared in 1990. Also in 1991, the People’s Literature Press sought out Xi Chuan to compile a collection of Haizi’s short poems, after several other publishers had contacted him with the same request but failed to convince him of their integrity. Because of personnel changes at the Press, *The Poetry of Haizi* (海子的诗) didn’t appear until 1995. In an afterword to the first print run the publisher is relieved to satisfy at long last the many reader requests for such a book. This was no idle prattle. By the twelfth run in June 2005, as many as 110,000 copies of *The Poetry of Haizi* had been printed, and in 2006 People’s Literature Press brought out a new edition with minor changes simply called *Haizi* (海子), in a series entitled *Selected Poetry by Famous Contemporary Chinese Poets* (中国当代名诗人选集). Finally, in 1997 the Shanghai Triple Alliance Bookstore published *The Complete Poems of Haizi* (海子诗全编) in 934 pages, edited by Xi Chuan and containing Haizi’s short and long poems and all 350 pages of «The Sun», as well as his essays on poetry, forewords and afterwords to individual poems and diary entries.9

*The Complete Poems* is one of four such collections of similar design, published by the Triple Alliance between 1995 and 1999. The other three contain the oeuvres of Gu Cheng, Luo Yihe and Ge Mai. Dead authors lend themselves more naturally than live ones to the publication of their complete poems, but most of the work in three of the four books (Haizi, Luo Yihe, Ge Mai) had remained unpublished while its authors were alive. Clearly, these big, black volumes embody the special status of poets who died young, suddenly and violently, and by their own hand. The suicidal criterion extends to Luo Yihe by association, through his dramatically thwarted editorship of Haizi’s legacy. This observation also applies to the very idea behind *Works by Haizi and

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Luo Yihe, and to early essays by critics and fellow poets such as Li Chao, Zhu Dake, Xiao Ying and Chen Dongdong. Chen writes:10

When the one strangled his own song, the other could listen no more; when the one’s outstanding voice fell silent, the clamor and the screams destroyed the other’s ears.

In view of Luo’s personally and poetically intimate relationship with Haizi, it is but a small step from suicide by association to a vision, if only implied, of Luo Yihe having sacrificed himself: for Haizi, or for poetry, as Luo himself maintained that Haizi did. Commentators’ factually inaccurate inclusion of Luo Yihe in a list of contemporary poetsuicides has trickled down into literary historiography, foreign and domestic. In a 1999 essay on Mao Dun and Gu Cheng, Raoul Findeisen mentions Luo Yihe, Haizi and Ge Mai as poets “who died early and by suicide,” and Chang Li and Lu Shourong’s China’s New Poetry (中国新诗, 2002) names Luo Yihe and Ge Mai as “two outstanding poets [who] offered their young lives as tribute, just like Haizi.”11

In addition to the huge exposure that Haizi’s hitherto largely unpublished poetry received in his own books, a posthumous explosion of publicity is visible in the many commentaries on his life and work since his death. Countless journal articles aside, Haizi receives special attention in surveys, histories and genealogies of contemporary poetry. He was, for instance, the third individual poet to have a series of articles devoted to him in the scholarly Poetry Exploration (诗探索) after its revival in 1994, in what would grow into one of the journal’s regular features. The first two were Gu Cheng and Shizhi. A romantic vision of poethood is in evidence yet again: Gu Cheng and Haizi killed themselves, and Shizhi—still known to many as Guo Lusheng—has famously suffered from mental illness ever since the Cultural Revolution, when he wrote the poetry that has brought him so much renown. It is no coincidence that these three names also represent the avantgarde in the Selected Poetry by Famous Contemporary Chinese Poets series mentioned above—in addition to Shu Ting, whose work has enjoyed uncontroversially canonical status ever since Today. As for literary histories, a telling source is Hong Zicheng’s Research on 20th-Century Chinese Literature: The Contemporary Era (20世纪中国文学研究: 当代文学研究, 1999).

2001), a survey of (Chinese) scholarship on Chinese literature since 1949. The poetry chapter includes a section entitled “Research on Important Contemporary Poets,” which has subsections on Ai Qing, Tian Jian, Guo Xiaoqian and He Jingzhhi—and on Haizi, making him the only avant-garde author in this hall of fame. Hong’s track record shows that this is no attempt to claim Haizi for the orthodox lineage within the literary establishment. It simply signals Haizi’s enormous exposure as compared with most other avant-garde poets. Similarly, Luo Zhenya’s On the Avant-Garde after Obscure Poetry (朦胧诗后先锋诗歌研究, 2005) devotes a full chapter to Haizi, other chapters covering broad topics involving scores of authors, such as Individual Writing in the 1990s and feminist critical discourse.\(^\text{12}\)

Furthermore, to date there are at least two edited volumes and four single-author monographs that are exclusively dedicated to Haizi’s memory and his poetry through the eyes of others. First of all, the 1991 Works by Haizi and Luo Yihe includes early commemorative essays on Haizi by fellow poets including Luo Yihe—in this book, Luo is both commemorator and commemorated—Xi Chuan, Zou Jingzhi, Han Dong, Chen Dongdong and Zhong Ming, and by critics including Liaoyuan, Wu Xiaodong and Xie Linglan. Second, in 1999 the tenth anniversary of Haizi’s death saw the appearance of a commemorative collection of essays, most of them previously published. Edited by Cui Weiping, this beautiful volume contains several dozen photographs of the poet. It is called 不死的海子, a title that is at variance with its English caption: Hai Zi Whose Poetry Will Never Be Dead. The Chinese title really translates as The Undying Haizi and claims immortality for the poet, that is: for his life and work as one. A diverse collection, The Un-dying Haizi accommodates two skeptical voices (Han Dong and Cheng Guangwei) as well as straightforward mythifications of the self-killing poet (e.g. Xie Mian, Li Chao, Yu Hong and Zhu Dake) and textual analysis with occasional and measured reference to his death (e.g. Yeh, Cui Weiping, Zhang Qinghua and Tan Wuchang).

The four monographs are Liaoyuan’s Leopard Pouncing on the Sun: A Critical Biography of Haizi (2001), Gao Bo’s Interpreting Haizi (2003)—which claims to focus on the poet’s writings rather than the story of his life—Yu Xugang’s A Biography of Haizi: Hero of Poetry (2004) and Zhou Yubing’s Face to the Sea Spring Warmth Flower Glee: Haizi’s

Poetic Life (2005). Haizi is the second contemporary Chinese poet to have inspired commentators operating in domestic discourse to produce full-fledged, book-length studies, both monographs and edited volumes, and dedicated websites. The first was that other famous suicide: Gu Cheng.

The sheer space that scholars, critics and editors devote to Haizi and the commentarial perspectives they adopt are functions of his suicide. What Yeh has identified as a cult of poetry in contemporary China was conducive to a widespread interpretation of the act as quintessential proof of Haizi’s poethood. Moreover, he killed himself—and Luo Yihe was seen to follow in his wake—right when exhilaration in the life of the mind was about to be cut short by a traumatic instance of political violence that could not be publicly discussed: on the cusp of the mind wave, so to speak, shortly before times of mayhem and money would set in, as discussed in chapter One. Retrospectively, his suicide has come to symbolize the beginning of the end of the Eighties. Repressed lament over June Fourth, then, was doubtless projected on Haizi’s and to a lesser extent Luo Yihe’s deaths, in poetry as well as commentary. This assumption finds emphatic support in an essay on Haizi by Wang Jiaxin. Michael Day, citing poetry by Bai Hua that foregrounds the fateful year 1989, argues that poems on “personal” suicides are often thinly veiled references to public deaths, with these tactics forced upon the authors by political repression. Chen Dongdong and Gao Bo—again, with reference to Bai Hua—explicitly connect Haizi’s and Luo Yihe’s deaths to June Fourth, and many others do so implicitly by speaking of unspecified “hard times,” “upheaval” and so on.

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14 E.g. Chen Zishan 1993, Xiao Xialin 1994, Huang Lifang 1994 and Jiang Xi & Wan 1995. Two other biographical works, also prompted by Gu Cheng’s death but of narrower scope, are Wen 1994 and Gu Xiang 1994. Like Huang Lifang 1994, Mai & Xiaomin 1994 is a commemorative volume containing commentaries on Gu Cheng and samples of his writings. The latter also has a section on other recent suicides in Chinese poetry, specifically Haizi and Ge Mai. Over the years, there have been several websites dedicated to Gu Cheng and to Haizi; for examples, see Works Cited.
15 As noted in chapter One, my occasional use of *the Eighties* and *the Nineties* is with reference to a widely perceived sea change in the intellectual-cultural realm at large, as distinct from *the 1980s* and *the 1990s* as neutral indications of calendar time.
Amplified by reverberations of “1989” ever since the massacre, the impact of Haizi’s suicide also shows in instances of commemoration and identification, both institutionalized and individual. Remembrance of Haizi at PKU has been institutionalized since the early 1990s by fixing the date of the May Fourth Literary Society’s annual poetry readings on or around 26 March, the anniversary of his death. When in the 1994 edition, the MC began to read Haizi’s poetry on stage, large parts of the audience joined in, hundreds of people shouting out the lines of poems they obviously knew by heart. The Chinese have a formidable tradition of memorizing poetry but this was a stunning scene nonetheless, with Haizi’s poetry recited in an atmosphere like that of collective prayer or the singing of an anthem. In 1999 the University’s Theater Society (北京大学戏剧社 or 北大剧社) staged «Regicide» (弑), an acclaimed part of Haizi’s «The Sun». In 2001 a group of students traveled to where Haizi killed himself and collectively lay down on the railroad tracks in imitation of his suicide. Incidentally, while Haizi himself hadn’t lain down but had thrown himself in from the side, most references to his death use the expression 卧轨自杀 ‘lie down on the tracks to kill oneself.’ His alma mater aside, ever since the appearance of The Poetry of Haizi and The Complete Poems, public commemorative activities—mostly poetry recitals, but also theatrical activities such as that described above—have been taking place all over China.17

As for individual instances of commemoration and identification, Xu Yi, editor of the works of poet Fang Xiang who took poison to end his life at age twenty-seven in 1990, notes in a chronicle of Fang’s life that in 1989, he “was influenced by the posthumous manuscripts of Haizi.” Fang Xiang may well be the anonymous poet referred to by Xi Chuan when he relates how a young man from Zhejiang province traveled to Haizi’s Anhui home to perform memorial rites in his honor before taking his own life.18 In light of the poetry cult and the series of high-profile suicides and other deaths in poetry that began with Haizi, stories such as this shouldn’t be dismissed as mere legend. And even if they were just that, they would still reaffirm cultish features of the Chinese poetry scene.

As measured against the impact of Haizi’s poetry during his lifetime, commentarial and commemorative practice are disproportionate. This is precisely the position of a small number of dissonant voices, barely audible amid the general eulogy. Cheng Guangwei, for instance, notes in 1991 that

commemoration of the poet cannot take the place of cool-headed criticism, and his biography should no longer serve as reference material for scholarly critiques.

In 1999, in a book called *Assassins of Fashion: Three Musketeers Challenging Fashion* (时尚杀手: 三剑客挑战时尚), co-authored with fellow poets and literary provocateurs Xu Jiang and Qin Bazi, Yi Sha observes that Haizi’s renown is a direct consequence of his death. Yi Sha recalls how as early as 1990, when poets and critics had begun to make Haizi a “martyr of poetry”—in Rimbaud’s words—he had made a point of attacking them for advocating Haizi’s style and creating an atmosphere that stifled pluriformity in poetry. Yi Sha’s own breakthrough as a poet came in 1994 with the appearance of his collection *Starve the Poets* (饿死诗人). The title poem is a dig at Haizi, Luo Yihe and other poets in whose work the word ‘wheat’ occurs frequently, leading to association with the (Chinese) countryside and the natural world, and with (Chinese) ethno-cultural identity. Yi Sha’s satire is also directed at what he perceives as overblown critical acclaim for the “wheat poets.” Liaoyuan, for instance, presents Haizi’s and Luo Yihe’s association with the image of wheat and wheatfields as analogous to Van Gogh’s association with that of the sunflower, in an early essay and in his later biography of Haizi. Such praise for the “wheat poets” has by no means disappeared since. In 2005 Mao Jian approvingly describes Haizi’s poetry as a “wheat Utopia,” Gao Bo organizes several sections of his case study of Haizi around his “wheat” and “wheatfields” imagery, and Liu Shuyuan has this to say:19

Haizi’s wheatfields are lonely. Lonely wheatfields are the shared background to our lives as a nation of peasants. Once the endless sufferings over wheat in our history enter poetry, they turn into a golden light that refracts all of our lives.

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Yi Sha has long taken a different view. Here is a passage from «Starve the Poets» (1990):

*the poets have eaten their fill
their bellies are filled with the fragrance
of wheatfields as far as the eye can see
grand idlers from the city
become glorious peasants in poetry
wheat in the name of sun and rain
I call on you: starve them
those fucking poets*

Writing on the tenth anniversary of Haizi’s death and living up to his notoriety as a polemicist, Yi Sha calls all Haizi’s writings other than his short poems garbage. He says that the propagation by others of Haizi’s poetics has thrown back the development of Chinese poetry by ten years, taking an entire generation of fledgling poets born in the 1970s into the poet’s grave, as sacrificial funerary objects.\(^20\)

Also writing in 1999, Qin Bazi asserts that no one dares speak the truth about Haizi’s long poems. He calls exaggerated praise for Haizi “cheap” and concurs with Yi Sha’s opinion that Haizi’s influence has made Chinese poetry regress: no less than two hundred years, according to Qin, who cites Haizi’s admiration of European Romanticism. Like Yi Sha, Qin expresses dismay at how the poet’s death has meant the birth of a myth and how this myth has been abused in the 1990s by poets and critics whom he calls “countryside intellectuals”—as Haizi once called himself—and “spiritual aristocrats” in their efforts to monopolize the Chinese poetry scene. Qin’s essay, entitled “Criticizing Haizi: Shattering the Myth of the Epic,” is part of an edited volume called *Criticizing Ten Poets* (十诗人批判书), with an outspoken, anti-canonical agenda that also attacks other established reputations such as Guo Moruo, Xu Zhimo, Ai Qing, Shu Ting, Yu Guangzhong, Bei Dao and Wang Jiaxin. Around the same time, Xu Jiang takes aim at Haizi by comparing him to Wang Guozhen, whom we briefly encountered in chapter One, in what is a horrible insult to an avant-garde poet: Wang is so popular and well-behaved that his poetry can’t be any good. An understanding of these attacks on Haizi’s legacy and

on contemporaries like Wang Jiaxin—by Yi Sha, Qin Bazi and Xu Jiang, but also by Yu Jian, as we shall see below—stands to gain from contextualization in the Popular-Intellectual Polemic of 1998-2000 to which we turn in chapter Twelve, with Yi Sha, Qin, Xu and Yu as representatives of the Popular camp.\(^{21}\)

**Mythification**

As is true for many other modern poetries, romantic notions of poethood featured prominently in the early stages of modern Chinese poetry. The beginnings of this poetry are commonly associated with Huang Zunxian’s writings in the closing years of the Qing dynasty and Hu Shi’s early in the Republican era. An important moment in between occurred when Lu Xun published “On the Power of Mara Poetry” (摩罗诗力说) in 1907. Lu Xun’s remark that “Poets are they who disturb people’s minds” recalls Jonathan Culler’s characterization of modernity in poetry as essentially disruptive in nature. According to Kirk Denton, Lu Xun introduces to the Chinese reader “a demonic model for the poet (based on Western Romantics like Byron and Shelley) that was essentially alien to the tradition.” In an essay on the image of the mad (狂) poet in Chinese tradition and modernity, Yeh shows that this “Chinese Romanticism” is by no means a purely European or Western, imported affair and that its impact didn’t cease after the early years but has persisted. She argues that the motif of the mad poet is “a key to understanding the dynamics of modern Chinese poetry” up to the present day. That Haizi’s romantic poethood partook of both indigenous and “foreign” or international discourses would have spurred the process of mythification outlined below.\(^{22}\)

Whether Haizi’s commentators offer praise or blame, none dispute that his suicide did indeed cause the emergence of a myth (神话, literally ‘story of things divine’), elevating him to godlike status. It is this mythification that leads to a vision of his life and work as one. The suicide of the poet as the most romantic of public persons provokes

\(^{21}\) For the “countryside intellectual,” see Xi Chuan 1991a: 6. Qin 1999: 227, 234, 248ff. Qin’s essay is undated, but he claims to write ten years after Haizi’s death (227). While Criticizing Ten Poets (Yi et al 2001) also contains a tongue-in-cheek essay by Yi Sha about Yi Sha (sic), and one by Xu Jiang about rock idol Cui Jian as a poet, Qin Bazi’s piece is entirely serious. Xu Jiang 1999a.

curiosity and the desire to identify with a life lived and died to the full, all the more so in cultish quarters of the poetry scene. As such, the audience of the suicide demands the posthumous construction of a public identity for someone they largely failed to notice while he was alive.

The right words are easily available. Haizi’s poetry and his explicit poetics contain a wealth of material that invites projection on his life, all the more enticing because that life only caught the public eye in its spectacular finale. His work contains musings on death and burial and on suicide, including the identification with famous role models like Van Gogh, addressed as “my thin older brother.” Van Gogh is wildly popular in Chinese literary and artistic circles, for his biography—or, of course, his thanatography—as much as for his paintings. He fits perfectly into what Yeh calls the genealogy of spiritual forebears appropriated by the builders of the poetry cult. The majority are marked by personal tragedy, often suicide: from Qu Yuan, role model of tragic-heroic poethood in “Chinese” antiquity whose moral-political hues were aestheticized in the modern era, to (early) modern poets from across cultural traditions such as Hölderlin, Tsvetayeva, Rimbaud, Plath, Celan and many others. Haizi’s work also features images of poetry as fire and the sun, source of creation and destruction, giver and taker of life, and of the speaker—easily equated with the historical figure of the poet—as plunging into the fire and consumed by the sun whose son he wants to be.23

The process of projection, and more generally of mythification and the conflation of Haizi’s life and work, is further constituted by voices that derive authority from their status as Haizi’s fellow poets and critics. This holds in particular for Luo Yihe’s and Xi Chuan’s early commemorative essays. The personal grief they feel as friends and Luo’s own death on the heels of Haizi’s add to the public tragedy of Haizi’s poethood. In the introductory words to his first commemorative essay, Luo Yihe states that Haizi “died for poetry” or “sacrificed himself for poetry” (殉诗, cf expressions like 殉国 ‘die for one’s country’). Luo presents this as a self-evident truth, without explaining what dying or sacrificing oneself for poetry means, much like Wang Jiaxin’s remark that Haizi’s suicide “expressed his love for poetry per se.” Does poetry need poets to kill themselves in order to safeguard its existence? Do

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great works of art require the destruction of the artist? Luo calls Haizi a Chinese poet who will live forever, a martyr of poetry and an immortal. In his second essay he explicitly projects Haizi’s work on his life, by citing Byron’s contention that one should not just write but live the way one writes, and calling this an apt description of the relationship between Haizi and his poetry.24

Xi Chuan is the first to call the myth by its name, in the opening sentence of his 1990 essay “Remembrance” (怀念), when he declares that “The poet Haizi’s death will become one of the myths of our time.” A few pages on, he writes:

This man who so ardently wished to take flight was doomed to die on earth, but who can say whether his death was not a different way to take flight after all—freeing himself from the long, dark night and his soul’s deep-rooted suffering to respond when the Messiah’s resounding voice called at daybreak.

Xi Chuan’s words reflect the religious experience that poetry was to Haizi and himself in the late 1980s. So does the exclamation, repeated four times, that through their encounter with Haizi, “blessed are” (有福了) the students who heard him recite, the four girls he loved, the Chinese earth he gave a voice and the new Chinese poetry of his day. Xi Chuan recalls that Haizi identified with Rimbaud as a self-styled martyr of poetry and concludes that Haizi himself has now also entered the ranks of the martyrs.25 As is true for many other passages in Xi Chuan’s essays on Haizi—emotional, anecdotal, analytical—the notion of the myth recurs in commentaries by various authors in subsequent years. Notably, in 1990 Xi Chuan’s attitude toward Haizi’s ongoing mythification is anything but questioning, skeptical or critical. Indeed, he can be seen to launch the myth of Haizi in so many words. He does so at the onset of a time of harrowing transition and radical changes to his worldview and his writing that we will examine in chapter Five. These things would compel him to revisit the episode a few years later, as we will see below.


Mythification of Haizi is in evidence from the early 1990s on, in glorification of his death and representation of his suicide as the ultimate poem and the completion of poethood. Wu Xiaodong and Xie Linglan write:26

Haizi’s death is nothing less than a divine sign [神示] to Chinese intellectual circles, after they have been fast asleep for thousands of years in the midst of delusion and deception . . . Suicide is the only active resistance to the predestined fate of death . . . Haizi’s death means the ultimate completion of the image of poethood.

Li Chao concludes a review of Works by Haizi and Luo Yihe thus:27

[Haizi and Luo Yihe’s] death should be given the highest possible appraisal. We cannot do without this indomitable spirit. Such a death is the poet’s predestined fate, and indeed the poet’s most revered quality.

While Wu, Xie and Li focus on the person of the poet, Yu Hong’s glorification of Haizi’s death can be seen to establish a connection with his art, in words, language and song:28

Blood becomes words, language returns to myth: this is Haizi’s offering, at the end of humankind . . . Because of Haizi, death has finally become sacrifice, become birth, become song.

Zhu Dake goes further, presenting Haizi as a poeta vates or poet-seer and prophet, and his suicide as a well-planned work of art. His comparison of Haizi’s fate to that of Jesus Christ fits religious and cultish features of Chinese poetic discourse at the time. These features—in Haizi and his commentators, but also in numerous other poets and critics—qualify Wolfgang Kubin’s claim that “the idea of the poet as a prophet . . . which Guo Moruo may have borrowed from German and English Romanticism, has survived modernity only in socialist art.”29 In fact, socialist orthodoxy has left obvious traces in the avant-garde, captured to a considerable extent by the notion of romanticism and that of “literature of euphoria,” which Kubin borrows from Broia Sax.

Remarkably, Zhu Dake not only presents art as religion, but also turns religion into art, and Jesus into an artist.30

27 Li Chao 1999: 60-61
28 Yu Hong 1999: 120.
30 Zhu Dake 1999: 139-140.
[Haizi’s fate] means a flying leap from poetic art to performance art. Through a careful design of sheer genius, in his suicide he completed the purest articulation of life and the ultimate poem of greatness; in other words, he completed his ballad of death, his song to end all songs [绝唱] in death . . . Haizi’s song to end all songs in death was a modern imitation of the great art of Jesus, the difference being that Haizi completed the deed alone. As such he had to shoulder the missions of both hero and traitor by himself.

Xiao Ying’s essay “Existence Leading toward Death” (向死亡存在) is reminiscent of Xi Chuan’s “Remembrance,” in that it contributes to the very process of mythification it identifies.31 In an era that has brought us the failure of poetry, the death of the poet in itself becomes a possible form of poetry . . . Haizi’s poems are an enlightenment of poetry, an enlightenment on the verge of death [绝命] written by a poet on the verge of death . . . In contrast to his nameless lot while he was alive, poetry circles reacted to the death of the poet in inevitably drastic fashion—overnight, the poet and his poetry were made into myth. Thus, the enlightenment given by the death of the poet to contemporary poetry changes into a conscious, unequivocal sign . . . If poetry were still a possibility and a thing of hope, the poet would never choose death to break off poetry, never put death in poetry’s place. Insisting on their desire for poetry, yet having lost the possibility for poetry, the deaths of [Haizi, Luo Yihe and Ge Mai] become a symbol of the night of this age in which poetry withers away—the death of the poet becomes the ultimate poem.

As soon as the world learns of Haizi’s suicide and the myth emerges, it becomes thanatography and extends backward to determine the image of the poet in the preceding years. Writing after the event, several commentators mobilize references to his poetry to come up with what we may call post-dictions of his suicide. Thus, in retrospect Haizi’s textual production already endows him with potentially divine qualities while alive, and makes the particular death he died his logical apotheosis, literally so: as not just his finest hour, but in fact his elevation to divine status.32 Mythification has accompanied Haizi’s poetry on its way into English in at least two publications. Wang Yuechuan’s “A Perspective on the Suicides of Chinese Poets in the 1990s” is an exercise in righteous

31 Xiao Ying 1999: 231.
psychologizing. Wang depicts suicide as the inevitable consequence of “pure” poethood “witnessing truth” and hence “facing death” in an age governed by “the logic of commerce,” adopting a deceptively simple opposition of poetry and money that is questioned at various points in this study. While decrying a popular tendency to glorify deaths in poetry, Wang himself does just that. His essay was written for Li Xia’s 1999 Essays, Interviews, Recollections and Unpublished Material of Gu Cheng, Twentieth-Century Chinese Poet: The Poetics of Death (1999), a volume whose thanatographical motivation shows in the writings of its editor and several contributors. Zeng Hong’s commentary in An English Translation of Poems of the Contemporary Chinese Poet Hai Zi (2005) is also thanatography. While Zeng makes a laudable effort to acquaint Anglophone readers with one of the best-known modern Chinese poets, her introduction of the poet and his poetry is less than balanced. It is, however, a paragon of levelheadedness when read side to side with Zhao Qiguang’s preface to her work. Referring to accounts of Haizi’s suicide that listed several books he had taken with him on his way to the railroad at Shanhaiguan, Zhao writes:

I was saddened and flattered when I saw the title of the last book that Haizi took to another world, because I compiled, co-translated, and preaced the Selected Novels of Joseph Conrad. Before leaving for the US in 1982, I handed the manuscript to a publisher and I had scarcely heard anything about it since. Now I received the most overwhelming feedback that an author or translator can expect. Haizi is no stranger anymore. I didn’t know I had such a sincere friend and fellow traveler. Together we penetrated the heart of darkness and sailed through a typhoon. We went there together. We both decided we liked the beauty in those places. I left but he stayed there, forever.

This borders on the perverse. Zhao proceeds to call Haizi’s death “a gallant and romantic declaration of his passions, devotions and beliefs,” and his life a poem—written, of course, in blood.33

Other representations of Haizi in what foreign-published scholarship there is to date are less overdetermined by the end to his life and less inclined to mythify and frame his life and work as one, even if he is almost invariably mentioned in connection with suicide. Yeh’s essays on death in poetry and the cult of poetry in China are literary-

33 Wang Yuechuan 1999; Li Xia 1999—see, for instance, the opening paragraphs of Li Xia’s foreword, and the essay by Henry Zhao that gave the book its name (1999); Zeng 2005 and Zhao Qiguang 2005 (ii and v-vi), both in Haizi 2005.
sociological in orientation and primarily focus on images of Haizi’s poet-hood as part of broader discursive practice. When she does engage in detailed textual analysis, in a 1993 essay on Haizi’s programmatic poem «Asia Bronze» (亚洲铜，1984)—in Chinese, but published outside China, in the new *Today*—this is quite possibly the only commentary written after 26 March 1989 that makes no mention of the poet’s death. As such, it pointedly implies a defense of the poetic voice against the thanatographical hullabaloo that threatens to drown it out. David Der-wei Wang mentions Haizi in passing in an essay on the politics and poetics of (Chinese) literary suicides, with Wen Jie, Shi Mingzheng and Gu Cheng as case studies. Wang draws on Yeh’s suggestion of the poetry cult’s complicity with Maoism, a notion he himself puts forward in his earlier writings on fiction. Like Yeh’s work, Wang’s offers a wealth of stimulating analysis, although Alison Bailey is right in calling the connections between the case studies tenuous. While Wang is quick to point out that Alfred Alvarez’ categories of the “totalitarian artist” and the “extremist artist” are anything but absolute, he shows how thoroughly “political” suicides can in fact be occasioned by romantic desire and seemingly “morbid” suicides may well expose latent political trauma. The parameters of Wang’s analysis would, however, be less applicable to Haizi than to Wen, Shi and Gu, if we were still to arrive at what Wang calls the dialectic between late modern Chinese culture and its body politic. Day calls attention to the linkage of Haizi’s suicide and June Fourth in poetry and commentary, discussed above. Mi Jiayan examines epistemic reconfigurations of the river as a national symbol contributing to Chinese identity, in the fiction of Zhang Chengzhi and the (epic) poetry of Haizi, Luo Yihe and Chang Yao, duly noting the effect Haizi’s and Luo Yihe’s deaths have had on the reception of their work. In fact, Mi might have extended this observation to Chang Yao, who took his own life by jumping off a building at age sixty-four, when he was terminally ill. When Chang Li and Lu Shourong include Chang Yao in their discussion of Newborn Generation Poetry, they can only do so by stretching this category considerably, and their lament that the poet’s talent was insufficiently recognized while he was alive comes as no surprise.34

The most significant, palpable example of Haizi’s thanatography is Liaoyuan’s 2001 monograph Leopard Pouncing on the Sun: A Critical Biography of Haizi (扑向太阳之豹: 海子评传), prefaced and hence more or less authorized by Xi Chuan, who remarks on unpleasant memories of other, would-be biographers of questionable intentions and style. No one would have thought of writing Haizi’s biography if he hadn’t killed himself. As such it makes perfect sense that Leopard starts with a brief account of his suicide. The narrative reversal of historical chronology is of course not exclusive to stories of which the end is widely known, and a death foretold can sharpen our perception of the vitality we know it will terminate, thus creating dramatic tension. This is, however, not what happens in Leopard. While Liaoyuan consolidates the myth of Haizi, his book is no hagiography and he commands respect by the way he pulls together information on a scarcely documented life—but from start to finish the foremost level of coherence in his account of Haizi’s life is dictated by the poet’s eventual suicide. Liaoyuan weaves Haizi’s poetry into the rest of his life, on the explicit assumption that his oeuvre can be taken biographically in its entirety. In itself, certainly in light of a traditional Chinese poetics, this is a defensible position, but it makes passages that may be read as pointing toward Haizi’s death acquire disproportionate weight.

Liaoyuan’s desire for coherence combines with his regard for Haizi’s art and a romantic vision of poethood, when he concludes that Haizi “died for poetry” (为诗而死). He bases himself on the note in which Haizi wrote that his death had nothing to do with anybody, which Liaoyuan says was to stop us from guessing at the reason for his death from any mundane angle. And what he expressed about giving his poetry manuscripts to Luo Yihe is in fact a public authorization. On one level his will was about dying; on another it was about poetry. From this it isn’t hard for us to experience his words as delivering a mental note to the effect that he cleanly died for poetry.

The argument is uncharacteristically weak, if not a glaring non sequitur. An alternative interpretation of Haizi’s suicide note is that he wished to make sure no one would be blamed for his death, but one
surmises that the issue is simply too important. Like Luo Yihe and others who hold that Haizi “sacrificed himself for poetry,” Liaoyuan sees the poet’s life—again, most of all, his death—as part of his work. Ever since the cult of poetry came to full bloom in mainland China in the 1980s, it has been forcefully challenged. But Liaoyuan’s book, published in 2001, shows its continuing impact.

So does Yu Xugang’s A Biography of Haizi: Hero of Poetry (海子传: 诗歌英雄, 2004). Yu, a fine arts student proud of his and Haizi’s shared Anhui provenance, presents it as a commemorative document fifteen years after Haizi’s death. Innocuous detail on Haizi’s childhood has no relevance to the book’s thrust as advertised on its back cover—homage to Haizi as a true “emperor of poetry” and “hero of poetry”—and merely reaffirms his mythification. The same holds for some of the photographs in A Biography, such as the front covers of “journals that Haizi often read” and textbooks used in law courses he attended as a university student. Both would have had many other readers, who failed to become heroes of poetry. Yu’s account is occasionally semi-fictional, when he includes dialogue and appropriates what he assumes to be his protagonist’s perspective. The most striking example is when, in the closing paragraphs of his book, he describes the moment of Haizi’s death:36

A freight train approached, its whistle screaming.

Haizi fled into the sun!

Yu’s book adds nothing of intellectual substance to previous publications, offering instead a sugary and naive account of Haizi’s life and work. This is not meant to cast doubt on its author’s sincerity or the conscionable nature of his interviews with relatives and acquaintances of Haizi. If anything, it indicates that in 2004 the reputable Jiangsu Literature & Art Press felt that there was a (non-specialist) readership for another monograph on Haizi—a book that compares to Liaoyuan’s work as a light variety of the genre—or that its publication would add to the publisher’s prestige.

Zhou Yubing’s Face to the Sea Spring Warmth Flower Glee: Haizi’s Poetic Life (面朝大海 春暖花开: 海子的诗情人生), published by the Anhui Literature & Art Press in 2005, is a similar production and another major instance of thanatology. The blurb starts thus:

Haizi was a dazzling shooting star on contemporary China’s poetry scene. In his brief life, he kept a holy and pure, elevated poetic heart. Misunderstood in his time by the people of this world, he bore loneliness and pain. Through his own literary talent and sheer perseverance, he wrote close to two hundred short lyrical poems and seven long poems. When, like maxims and holy songs, lines from his poetry were collectively recited by university students in the square, included in junior high school teaching materials, used for profit by real estate business in advertising slogans for seaside homes,... people recalled with emotion this “son of the wheatfields,” this “hero of poetry.”

Like Yu Xugang, Zhou underpins his status as biographer by identifying himself as a fellow Anhuinese of the poet. The many pictures in his book include a prominently placed, sorrowful portrait of Haizi’s mother and images of a well-maintained house with a plaque that reads “Haizi’s Erstwhile Residence” over the front door. Face to the Sea is a romanticized, tear-jerking account of Haizi’s life. Zhou rehearses all well-known anecdotes about Haizi and, like Yu, semi-fictionalizes his biography. He provides detailed, empathetic descriptions of Haizi’s fateful love life and of dreams that he portrays Haizi as having had, for instance of his suicide. The narrative is set up to take the reader unerringly toward Haizi’s death. Zhou’s description of Haizi’s final moments—“he slowly lay down, his back pressing against the ice-cold iron rail”—is at variance with Luo Yihe’s letter to Wan Xia, based on the freight train crew’s report, that said Haizi had thrown himself under the train from the side. It is not unlikely that Zhou saw this letter before completing his manuscript. If so, his decision to make Haizi “lie down slowly” in readiness for the approaching train may bespeak a desire to orchestrate the climax in style, as the glorious end to a tragic-heroic life. Zhou’s version of events is of course easier to picture as a ritual “sacrifice” than Luo’s.

Demythification

Just like there are a few voices that question the uncritical celebration of Haizi’s poetry, there are some that refuse to go along with a simplistic, abstract reading of his suicide as a “death for poetry.” Writing in 1991, poet Han Dong, disbeliever in high-blown representations of

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poetry and poethood, first remarks on contemporary poets’ inclination for “experiment”: 

Taken to extremes, they even deny that the material of which poetry is composed must be that of language. The use of paper and pen, too, is strictly unnecessary or optional. At this point, poetry can be body art, or action art. In order to distinguish poetry from daily life, action artists continually seek action that is out of the ordinary, and free from the mundane. They get drunk, fight, womanize, drift around and cultivate eccentricities, so as to prove that they are poets. In the end they discover that not only have they failed to escape from the mundane, but their situation is in fact getting worse and worse. Now the only thing they haven’t tried is death.

Yeh rephrases Han’s words as follows: “In other words, self-willed death seems to offer a new way, even the ultimate way, of asserting one’s identity as a poet.” Notably, however, Han Dong continues by dissociating Haizi from the “experimenters”:

It goes without saying that Haizi’s death means a lot for the establishment of their self-image. But none of this has anything to do with Haizi himself.

In any case, Yeh doesn’t take speculation on the cause of Haizi’s suicide further than the suggestion that it cannot be separated from his poetry, specifically that the self-imposed pressure of an overly ambitious poetics may have been too much to bear. Han Dong accepts the possible validity of a biographical reading of Haizi’s poetry, but takes a “death for poetry” to mean something radically different from its usual interpretation:

Haizi’s death only counts as evidence of the misery and internal conflict in which the poet found himself. We cannot proceed from his death to establish the origins of his poetry; we can only try to discover in his poetry the secret of why he went to meet his death. If we say that Haizi died for poetry, that must mean that his creativity faced an impasse. Death then becomes a way out, not elevation in any sense . . . I insist on believing that Haizi was someone who, when he could no longer write poetry, would rather die—although it is highly likely that such was not the concrete cause of this death.

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Cui Weiping’s “In Memory of Truth” (真理的祭奠, 1992) ends on a thanatographical note, and the section “Split and Rupture of the Self” in “The Myth of Haizi” (海子神话, 1992) was likely inspired by Haizi’s physical rupture on the railroad track. On the whole, however, Cui’s analysis is based on textual evidence, not all-powerful visions of poethood and of the poet’s life and work as one. Toward the end of “The Myth of Haizi” she wonders whether a sense of calmness and resignation in Haizi’s poems from his final months points to a resolve to end his life, or to a quiet spell preceding a new outburst of creativity. But she interrupts her own speculations:

Be all that as it may, it remains impossible to draw any conclusions about the reason why on 26 March 1989 he suddenly chose to leave this world. There was a crisis all along, but its outcome was by no means necessary. In the end, to go by his poetry for drawing conclusions on the cause of his suicide is not all there is to it—and to go by his suicide for an understanding of his poetry makes even less sense. His fate harbored a few more secrets (they may be very simple ones) that he has taken away with him forever.

The most powerful instance of demythification is Xi Chuan’s “Afterword to Death” (死亡后记, 1994). This is a different voice from that in “Remembrance,” forceful yet reluctant and sometimes angry, intimating that “Afterword” was difficult to write, and was perhaps written not out of the urge to continue speaking but from a sense of duty to the memory of a friend and fellow poet, that had taken on a life all of its own—spurred, incidentally, by Xi Chuan’s own earlier commentary as much as by others.

Xi Chuan begins his intervention with critical reflections on the publicity that Haizi’s death unleashed. He then gives a systematic account of “what he knows and what he conjectures” about possible reasons for Haizi’s suicide. The first is Haizi’s “suicide complex.” Haizi had apparently attempted suicide in 1986 and was fascinated by the popular idea that artistic talent or genius often brings a young death (天才短命、天才早夭). The second is Haizi’s disposition, which Xi Chuan calls pure, stubborn, sensitive, puritan and sentimental among other things, and generally gentle but “leopard-like” when he was angered. Liaoyuan’s biography of Haizi presumably took its name from

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“Afterword,” which occupies a central position among commentaries on Haizi, even if it expresses what is clearly a minority viewpoint. Xi Chuan cites Haizi’s lifestyle as a third possible reason. He recalls that Haizi lived in seclusion and kept social contacts at bay for fear of distraction from his art, and as a result suffered from loneliness and lacked a social network that might have kept him from killing himself. Allegedly, Haizi once asked the owner of a Changping restaurant for drink in exchange for a public recital, and the owner replied that he could drink all he wanted, as long as he did not read any poetry. In poetry circles, the anecdote has become something of a classic, if only because it is well suited to serve as an illustration of the “marginalization” of poetry or indeed its being in “crisis” as measured against social trends of consumerism, commercialization and so on.

Xi Chuan’s fourth category is that of “the issue of honor” (荣誉问题), meaning public acceptance of one’s art. He depicts Haizi and all other Chinese avant-garde poets as facing mistrust by society at large and conservative forces in literature, calling this “not a literary but a political problem.” In addition, he remembers Haizi as vulnerable to infighting within the avant-garde, a famous example being poet Duoduo’s and others’ scathing criticism of Haizi’s epic poetry at a gathering of the Survivors poetry club at Wang Jiaxin’s home in central Beijing, late in 1988. The event reputedly left Haizi devastated. Wei’an, writing around the same time as Xi Chuan, also associates it with his suicide. Wang Jiaxin, reminiscing in 2001, disagrees.41 Xi Chuan goes on to note that on one occasion, a better-known poet—whom he calls “LMN,” in a series of alphabetically veiled attacks (“poet AB,” “poet CD”) on those who wronged Haizi in one way or another—plagiarized a typescript Haizi had sent around to friends, fellow poets and editors, and got away with it. The fifth category is Haizi’s fascination with qigong, a traditional Chinese technique to control one’s vital energy, mostly through controlled breathing and meditation. Qigong is associated with exceptional physical abilities, such as in martial arts and medicine. According to Xi Chuan, when Haizi felt that he was entering higher stages of qigong he began to suffer from delusions. Specifically,

he felt there was someone speaking into his ear all the time, which made him unable to write. And to Haizi, being unable to write meant thoroughly losing his life.

Here, Xi Chuan’s words recall those of Han Dong, an author whose poetry and poetics could hardly be more different from his own, but who shares his belief that Haizi was someone who would rather die than live with the concrete, physical inability to write. Recognizing that toward the end of his life Haizi showed signs of terrible confusion, Xi Chuan still questions his official medical diagnosis as “schizophrenic.” In the sixth section of “Afterword,” he suggests that the trigger of Haizi’s suicide—as opposed to its deeper causes—may have been the guilt he felt about having said disrespectful things about a former girlfriend in a bout of drunkenness, although Haizi’s companions at the time insisted that he had not. In the seventh section Xi Chuan points out that “Haizi was fully dedicated to writing. There was no distance whatsoever between living and writing.” This formula makes Haizi’s life and work seamlessly contiguous if not indistinguishable. Xi Chuan concludes, however, by saying that Haizi could have written more and better poetry if he had handled his talent differently.

Having noted the impact of “Afterword,” we see how a voice that launched the myth of Haizi in 1990 retains its authority a mere four years later, when it takes others to task over their contributions to that myth. The explanation lies, again, in the speaker’s status as a personal friend of Haizi and in his own rapid rise as an acclaimed poet. For the present analysis it is important that Xi Chuan’s claim that Haizi had somehow mishandled his talent invalidates the notion of his suicide as the poem to end all poems.

Reading the Poet

In light of the overwhelming conflation of Haizi’s life and work in critical discourse, it stands to reason that thanatography extends from the poet to his poetry. Haizi’s death, in other words, is projected backward to determine not just his life but also his writings. For biographer Liaoyuan the one-on-one relationship of life and work goes both ways. He takes Haizi’s poetry as biographical documentation but also reads evidence from other spheres into the poetry. Textual analysis by other commentators, too, displays a vision shaped by Haizi’s extra-textual death. We find a telling example in the first edition of Chen...
Chao’s *Critical Anthology of Chinese Explorative Poetry* (中国探索诗鉴赏词典, 1989). Chen completed the manuscript in 1988, when Haizi was still alive. It contains discussions of two of his poems. In his comments on «Clasps a White Tiger and Crosses the Ocean», Chen is puzzled by the phrase *mother leaning towards death* but then notes that Haizi presents life and death in equilibrium. He concludes:

> The poem avails itself of the form of a dream, and reveals the true nature of life: that magnificent, great force, duty-bound not to turn back, conquering death.

Ten years on, in the revised and expanded edition of his *Critical Anthology* (1999), Chen adds discussions of three more of Haizi’s poems. He inserts them between his two previous mini-essays, abruptly placing a posthumous eulogy for the poet at the head of the first of his new commentaries, which is the second of the full set. All three newly added poems had received much exposure in the years following Haizi’s death. Disregarding a possible contradiction with his earlier characterization of “the true nature of life” emanating from Haizi’s poetry as “conquering death,” Chen says that in the 1987 poem «Ancestral Land (Or: With a Dream for a Horse)», Haizi prophesied his fate. With or without reference to the Chinese tradition of equating speaker and author, this is a reasonable claim, as we shall see below. Still, the fact remains that canonization of «Ancestral Land» was only triggered by Haizi’s fulfillment of the “prophesy,” by the author doing what the speaker had said. Chen’s anthology has a predilection for individual poets’ “representative works”: «Ancestral Land», then, only became a representative *work*, in the anthology’s second edition, once it was endorsed by the poet’s *life*—that is, by his death. Chen’s commentary confirms this when he compares the poem, in its “tragic emotion and holy purity” (悲慨与圣洁), to an epitaph. It is no surprise that he finds that Haizi’s play in verse «The Sun»

> was in a sense “completed” after all, and that the poet gave his life as a final record of inspiration toward [the poem’s and his own] completion.

In closing, Chen approvingly cites Luo Yihe’s Byronesque vision of Haizi’s life and work and says that, among other things, reading

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42 Chen Chao 1989: 615.

Haizi’s poetry brings about a sacred (神圣) feeling, while being firmly rooted in the concrete world of humankind.

One commentary that deserves special mention, if only because it presents itself as questioning Haizi’s mythification, is Gao Bo’s *Interpreting Haizi* (解读海子, 2003). The motivation of Gao’s book—and of the case study of Haizi in his *Modern Poets and Modern Poetry* (现代诗人和现代诗, 2005)—is akin to that of the present chapter in that Gao questions a vision of Haizi’s writings that is determined by his suicide. Gao’s discussion of central images in Haizi’s poetry is certainly worthwhile, as are his reflections on Haizi’s rural provenance and his affinity with folk art and popular cultural forms, and his contextualization of Haizi in twentieth-century Chinese poetry. Still, *Interpreting Haizi* fails to reach its professed goal of clarifying matters and keeping people from “misreading” mythified versions of Haizi, largely on account of a reading attitude that is similar to that of Haizi’s biographers. Gao tends to take Haizi’s poetic genius as a given that precedes any textual analysis, and Haizi’s explicit poetics as the unassailable truth about the poet’s own writings. To Gao, the historical Haizi’s intellectual and emotional experience is self-evidently knowable, and its acute relevance is beyond a shadow of a doubt. This limits his textual-interpretive space.

We have seen that the great majority of Haizi’s domestic commentators mythify his life as part of his work, identify his poetry with his suicide and make what he wrote inseparable from everything else he did. In itself, this is perfectly understandable. After deduction of some rhetorical exaggeration, there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of Haizi’s image as a worshiper of poetry, as one absolutely dedicated to and indeed possessed by poetry, and hence, in a romantic vision, as the embodiment of poetry who wanted, in his own words, to “speed up the pace of life and death.” Nor is there any reason to deny that certain passages in his work lend themselves to a biographical reading. There is textual evidence to that effect that is more concrete than a general compatibility of mood or temperament between the poet’s personality and his writings. Several of his poems feature a protagonist called Haizi, and there are phrases and words that fit biographical fact, such as the names of places Haizi visited and a reference to a family of six,

44 Gao Bo 2003: e.g. 91, 96ff, 113-125 and 169ff. Gao Bo 2005: 132-179 (there is considerable overlap with Gao Bo 2003).
thanatography and the poetic voice

More importantly, a biographical reading is defensible if not self-evident because Chinese literary practice continues to reflect a biographist, traditional view of literature to this day, even as it vies for influence with contemporary socio-political circumstance and all manner of foreign and indigenous modernities in literature and art.

To readers not natively steeped in Chinese literary traditions, however, the case of Haizi shows biography as not just one of several possible reading strategies that is occasioned by a particular textual situation. It is rather something like a fundamental assumption which stipulates that when all is said and done, the poem is a means to the end of getting to know the poet—or, in Stephen Owen’s words cited earlier, that reading the poem is reading the poet. As Michel Hockx has shown, this assumption holds all the way into the new media of today’s Chinese literary production. Notably, Chinese biographism is different from the eponymous nineteenth-century European method that mobilized endless “facts” about the author’s life as tools for interpreting their writing and became anathema in the twentieth century. Gao Bo’s Interpreting Haizi is perhaps the best example, precisely because it claims to set out from the primacy of the written text but ends up interpreting the author instead. In Chinese scholarly-critical discourse on contemporary poetry, the biographist component of a heterogeneous reader’s intent competes with many others but effortlessly comes to the fore once the need arises. That is what happened when Haizi killed himself and has kept happening ever since, without much reflection on the vision of his suicide as the said particular textual situation—a poem, or the poem to end all poems—or on the implications of this vision for Haizi’s representations in literary history.

2. The Poetic Voice

As a counterweight to the trend outlined above, I will now examine some of Haizi’s poems and attempt to hear the poetic voice in its own right, without necessarily linking it to the fate of the author. This presumes no ability to unlearn Haizi’s biography and block out associations with his suicide, nor does it make his suicide in itself any less

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shocking. Notably, the questions I have raised about conflations of his life and work do not invalidate biographical readings per se, as long as they are based on textual evidence—nor do such readings reduce his poetry to documents of “mere” human interest.

Haizi himself found his long poems the most important, calling them “the only real poetry.” His commentators differ in their assessment. The posthumous publication of *The Land* shows that Luo Yihe especially admired his epic poetry, and the same is true for Liaoyuan. Tan Wuchang, too, while recognizing that Haizi’s epics provoked fiercely negative reactions among his fellow poets, maintains that they deserve a prominent position in literary history. Luo Zhenya calls Haizi’s efforts toward the epic “legitimate” but concludes that his ambitions were not realized. Cheng Guangwei is critical of Haizi’s failure to structure or limit his torrential outpourings of language, and Qin Bazi, as we have seen, calls Haizi’s epic poetry fundamentally unfit for the age. I concur with Cheng Guangwei. Large parts of «The Sun», for instance, present clichéd megalomania and unexplained allusions to private experience in a bombastic mix that simply fails to gel, notwithstanding the beauty of passages such as those in the part called «Night Song» (夜歌).47

I find Haizi’s short, lyrical poems easily the best part of his oeuvre. Many contain archetypal subject matter and imagery from the natural and rural worlds. This includes the sun, the earth, the moon and the stars, the sky and the sea; fall, winter and spring—but not summer; dusk, nightfall and night, darkness, dawn and daybreak, light; fire and water, wind, rain, snow and sunshine; grasslands, rivers; the soil, wheat and wheatfields, grain, farming villages, harvest, shepherds, livestock; blood and death. The poems usually unfold from the perspective of a first-person speaker, in whose mood moments of euphoria stand out against a keynote of depression: sad, somber, sometimes downright bleak. Haizi’s usage combines pompous expressions with colloquialisms and moments of intimacy. Most of his poetry is in free verse. Yet, critics of various persuasions agree that he made a major contribution to reestablishing the phenomenon of song (歌唱) in contemporary po-

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etymology, with Wang Yichuan making an especially strong case. Form and content are in agreement in that both are often unconstrained. This is frequently a weakness and rarely a strength, and directly reflected in the sheer amount of poetry Haizi has to his name.

Piet Gerbrandy proposes a matrix for the classification of poetry with the attributes “open” and “closed” on one axis, and “accessible” and “inaccessible” on the other. For an open text, he writes, “however compelling its language, one still feels that it could just as well have contained more of fewer lines.” Through association with Gerbrandy’s approach, in which most of Haizi’s poetry would be open and accessible, we may call his poetics extremely receptive. It wants to accommodate a range of things of great magnitude, from the heritage of ancient civilizations and mythologies to the pinnacles of “world literature” and art and to profound, individual emotion, and it displays constant exaltation in the process. In the modern Chinese context, obvious precursors are Walt Whitman and Guo Moruo, in addition to orthodox Political Lyricism. On the spectrum from Elevated to Earthly, Haizi sits squarely at the Elevated end. His work confirms the connection between the sublime (崇高) on the one hand and ethnocultural identity and ambitions on the other, noted by Wang Ban.

Those among Haizi’s short poems that strike me as the strongest—four of the five considered here—are not at all megalomaniacal or bombastic, but individual, private and introspective instead. In contrast to the unconstrained parts of Haizi’s oeuvre, they employ structuring devices such as repetition and rhyme, to appreciable effect. The 1986 poem «Clasps a White Tiger and Crosses the Ocean» (抱着白虎走过海洋) is an example of Haizi’s rare attempts to impose formal limitations on his writing. An earlier version in an unofficial collection of poetry, published jointly with Xi Chuan, reveals that Haizi must have consciously moved toward the poem’s eventual strict form at some later stage.

I include the Chinese original to show that all its lines are visually and aurally of the exact same length: eight characters = syllables, without any punctuation. The final syllables of each stanza rhyme. The poem’s semantics, too, are tightly and indeed formally controlled. The poem’s first line takes its cues from the second, fourth and sixth stanzas for mechanical rewritings in the third, fifth and seventh by the replacement of one word, followed each time by a repetition of the first stanza’s second line, which is also the poem’s title. The central scene, of mother clasping a white tiger and crossing the ocean, is mystifying. The word translated as clasps is 抱 ‘hold,’ ‘embrace,’ meaning that mother is sitting on the tiger’s back, with her arms around its neck. While crosses (走过) doesn’t specify the means or mode of transportation, an image of the tiger walking or running across the water comes to mind. The scene’s mythical qualities are enhanced by the maidservants that represent life and death, and by the vision of mother as a powerful presence interacting with the formidable entities of “magnificence,” the hometown (故乡 ‘place of origin,’ an important constituent of Chinese identities), the sun and death, all of which recur throughout Haizi’s oeuvre. The sick sons vis-à-vis the sun are familiar, too—we will encounter them again below—but the dynamics of their relation...
to mother remain unclear. An alternative reading proceeds from the image of mother holding the tiger the way one holds a child, and carrying it rather than riding it across the ocean. The homophony of the poet’s name and 孩子 ‘child’\(^{51}\) may then lead to identification of the poet-speaker with the white tiger, portraying the poet—both the historical figure of Haizi and the abstraction of poethood—as a species that is dangerous and rare. The form of «Clasps a White Tiger» makes it a remarkable, catchy text. It sticks in the reader’s memory, because it combines these qualities with stubbornly repeated riddles that spur the imagination.

«Moved» (感动)—as in ‘experiencing profound emotion’—was also written in 1986. It is in free verse, and closer to Haizi’s usual style than «Clasps a White Tiger»\(^{52}\).

«Moved»

Morning is a dappled deer
that tramples my forehead
what a wonderful world
wild flowers in the mountain cave
go along my body
burn all the way to the light of day
burn all the way out of the cave
what a wonderful world

But night, the deer’s
master, entered long ago
into the depths of the soil, leaning on tree roots
to redirect some kind of
happiness you cannot possibly see

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\(^{51}\) In Mandarin, three differently intoned pronunciations of 海子 are possible: third + neutral tone, as in the dialect expression meaning ‘lake’; second (through tone sandhi) + full third tone; and second (through tone sandhi) + neutral tone. The latter two would be personal names. Depending on its position in the sentence, Haizi’s name is commonly if not invariably pronounced in the second + neutral tone, just like 孩子 ‘child.’ Xi Chuan (1994a: 92) recalls a fellow student at PKU ridiculing Haizi when handing him a series of newly arrived letters, and switching from identifying the addressee as “Haizi/child.... Haizi/child.... Haizi/child....” (海子, which Xi Chuan writes as 海子 but interprets as 孩子) to calling him “grandchild... grandchild... grandchild...” (孙子 ‘grandson’). Its literal meaning aside, 孙子 is a term of abuse.

\(^{52}\) Haizi 1997: 129.
Formally, the poem is held together by the modified return of the first couple of lines in the last couple of lines and indeed by the resonance of the entire first stanza in the last, with the significant addition that the wild flowers turn out to burn you and hurt you —just like in “The Wheatfields and the Poet” (麦地与诗人, 1987), the speaker is scorched and hurt by the unforgiving wheat that other people... find mild and beautiful. The flowers burning to the light of day and out of the cave denote more than just bright colors. Dramatic tension between their loveliness and the pain they inflict on the speaker-protagonist echoes the role of the dappled deer, with its trampling of the speaker’s forehead and face destroying connotations of pretty innocence and any pristine qualities of the morning hour it is said to represent. Elsewhere in Haizi’s oeuvre, too, the speaker’s relation to the natural world is ambiguous, involving opposing forces such as creation, nurture and comfort on the one hand, and violence and destruction on the other. In light of his pain, the speaker’s repeated exclamation what a wonderful world, which strengthens the cohesion of the first and last stanzas, invites an ironic reading. In this poem and throughout Haizi’s oeuvre, however, the tone of the poetic voice is one not of irony but of utmost sincerity. As such the said exclamation conjures up an experience of ecstatic self-destruction. I take the first-person and second-person pronouns to refer to the same, passive speaker-protagonist, who moves from individual experience, in my forehead and my body, to omniscient observation in happiness you cannot possibly see and beyond. In the second stanza, the action moves into the soil, connected by the wild flowers to the cave where the speaker finds himself. «Moved» derives its strength from the conjunction of loveliness and horror.

Let’s now turn to a text that is much more famous than «Clasps a White Tiger» or «Moved», presumably because it suits a romantic

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poetics that is widespread in contemporary China and because it lends itself to commemorative uses. For a short poem, it is rather long and extremely unconstrained: two full pages holding 38 lines, some of as many as 25 characters. It brings to mind Haizi’s long poetry in other ways as well, in qualities discussed above that I sum up as an inclination toward clichéd megalomania. I am referring to «Ancestral Land (Or: With a Dream for a Horse)» (祖国[或以梦为马], 1987), one of the poems that triggered the collective recital at PKU in 1994, and one of those in which, according to Chen Chao and others, Haizi prophesied his death. Here are the opening and closing stanzas:54

I will be a loyal son of faraway parts
and short-lived lover of things material
Like all those poets with a dream for a horse
I cannot but go the same road as martyrs and clowns

... The sun is my name
The sun is my life
On the sun’s mountain peak is buried poetry’s corpse—a millennial kingdom
and I
riding a five-thousand-year-old phoenix and a dragon called “horse”—I must fail
but poetry itself, being the sun, must emerge victorious

«Ancestral Land» is not original or subtle by any standard, in content or form. It doesn’t suggest experience but announces it instead. It harbors no ambiguity or paradox and doesn’t generate any dramatic tension. It is composed of big words on big themes such as the pain of human existence and the identification of the speaker with nature and the universe. These themes, however, are not stimulated to emerge in the reader’s mind but explicitly asserted, on the assumption that a tormented, self-aggrandizing soul has poetic value in itself. The poem doesn’t require an active reading attitude, leaving the reader little room for initiative. As regards a possible concern with poetry or language per se, it makes manifesto-like statements which the reader is asked to accept without what we may call artistic arguments in modern poetry: things like original imagery, defamiliarization and discernible rhythm on the level of lines or stanzas. The centrality of the first-person

speaker doesn’t grant him, or the poem, any individuality. On that note, the line I plunge into this fire (我投入此火, in a passage left untranslated here), recalls establishment poet Guo Xiaoqian’s Plunge into the Fiery Struggle (投注火热的斗争, 1955)—just like Haizi’s In the Fall, Remember the Pain of Spring And Remember Lei Feng (秋日想起春天的痛苦 也想起雷锋, 1987) echoes the Song of Lei Feng (雷锋之歌, 1963) by that other figurehead of Political Lyricism, He Jingzhi.55

These things call attention to an interface of avant-garde texts—including famous works of early Obscure Poetry as well as Haizi’s work—with Maoist orthodoxy in their shared predilection for solemn, deeply ideological grand narratives, a connection that Yeh has characterized as one of subtle literary complicity.56 Haizi’s intertextuality with Guo is especially interesting because while his style in Ancestral Land is similar to that of Guo’s collectivist Political Lyricism of the 1950s, he employs it to preach a kind of social heterodoxy in which the I is an ill-adjusted figure by mainstream standards. And yet, in its loudness and its appeal to ethno-cultural identity—references to China as the birthplace of a new poetry “of greatness” (伟大) occur throughout Haizi’s writings—this poem seeks a kind of social endorsement, a measure of approval within the avant-garde.

Judging from its present status, it has succeeded. Witness, for instance, the fact that its subtitle (With a Dream for a Horse) is the name of a multiple-author anthology edited by Chen Chao, part of a 1993 six-volume set with obvious canonizing ambitions, edited by Xie Mian and Tang Xiaodu, called A Review of Trends in Contemporary Poetry (当代诗歌潮流回顾).57 In addition to its potential for a romantic reading, supported by Haizi’s biography—in phrases like short-lived lover of things material, poetry’s corpse and I must fail—this is explained by the manifesto-like characteristics of the first stanza. The line like all those poets with a dream for a horse recurs in penultimate position in the first eight of its nine stanzas. Its semantics fit the said romantic poetics perfectly. In addition, the original is rhythmically beautiful and the line’s central word group, with a dream [mèng] for a horse [má] (以梦为马), contains a powerful alliteration in two of four equally stressed syllables. Last but
not least, the concept of the ancestral land (祖国) and the fate of the nation is a favorite topos throughout the history of Chinese poetry, classical and modern alike. «Ancestral Land» is typical of Haizi’s grandiloquent side. Qua poetry, I find it much less successful than the other poems in this section. I have discussed it in recognition of its popularity in China.

«Spring: Ten Children Haizi» (春天, 十个海子, 1989) is radically different from «Ancestral Land», but equally famous. My rendition of 海子 ‘Haizi’ as child Haizi is motivated by the homophony of the poet’s name and 孩子 ‘child,’ noted above. It is inconceivable that any sinophone reader—or writer—would be unaware of the ambiguity, not just when hearing the poem recited and knowing its author’s name but also when reading it on the page.58

«Spring: Ten Children Haizi»

Spring: ten children Haizi all come back to life
in a landscape of light
laughing at that one wild, wretched child Haizi
you slept a long, deep sleep, but what was it for

Spring: ten children Haizi and their deep, angry howl
surrounding you and me, dancing and singing
tearing at your black hair, straddling you, speeding off, dust flying
the pain when you’re chopped open spreads across the earth

In spring, that wild and wretched child Haizi
is the only one left, the last one left
this is a child Haizi of night, immersed in winter, admiring death
unable to free himself, burning with love for the hollow, cold countryside

There, the grain is piled up high, blocking out the windows
they use half on the mouths of a family of six, their eating and stomachs
and half for farming, their own reproduction
winds blow from east to west, from north to south, defying night and daybreak
you spoke of the light of dawn, but what does it mean

Most if not all of the manuscripts in Haizi’s legacy were meticulously dated, noting the year, month and day the poem was written, completed or reworked from earlier drafts. «Spring» is dated “14 March 1989,

58 Haizi 1997: 470.
in the small hours, 3 to 4 am,” the specificity of the moment before dawn contributing to the romantic image of the poet. By all accounts, it was the last poem Haizi wrote. Zou Jianjun’s admiring, exclusively biographical = thanatographical reading—he says the poem shows Haizi “going bravely unto his death”—illustrates how such information can reduce the poem to a document of human interest and fail to do it justice as literature. Poet-critic Yu Jian, one of Haizi’s most vociferous detractors, does something similar, but in derogatory fashion. He refuses to take the image of ten children Haizi as anything but an instance of megalomania and vanity on the part of an author whose poetic oeuvre he calls “The Flowers of Evil, grown in the Mao Era,” calling attention to the interface with orthodoxy with much aggression and little nuance. Yu presumably borrows Baudelaire’s phrase to summarize his assessment of Haizi’s work rather than point to any textual kinship with the French symbolist’s oeuvre.59

As is true for «Ancestral Land», there are textual triggers in «Spring» that lead to association with Haizi’s life, and with his suicide: a family of six, ten children Haizi come back to life and a child Haizi . . . admiring death, as well as the poem’s general tone of despondency. The last line, for instance, yields two distinct readings. One intimates that in spite of what you said, the light of dawn doesn’t appear. The other questions the light of dawn as an archetypal moment of hope and new beginnings, which Haizi does in a 1986 diary entry as well: “Daybreak is not at all a beginning, she should be the last one to get there, the one that clears away the night’s corpse.”60

But if the said textual triggers may be seen as another “prophesy of death,” this is where the similarity with «Ancestral Land» ends. I find «Spring» an infinitely better poem, hard-hitting with an entirely different kind of power, which I attribute to its original imagery and its personal, private style, as well as to a sense of proportion. The speaker produces no clichéd, predictable phraseology, but lays out despair without marshaling the loud and none too subtle strategies of persuasion encountered elsewhere in Haizi’s oeuvre. As such, of the three

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60 Haizi 1997: 880.
poems discussed above, «Spring» is closest to «Moved», but it has a stronger sense of urgency. Authenticity is a tricky notion, but «Spring» and «Moved» come across as authentic in that the poetic voice isn’t on a quest for social endorsement or even understanding—and yet leaves a lasting impression, in spite of or indeed thanks to the poem’s weirdness and its casual embrace of diverse semantic domains, moods and protagonists. Just like in «Moved», one senses the possibility of transfer between them: the various children Haizi, both come back to life and wretchedly still alive, as well as you and me. Different from Yu Jian, I hold that the astonishing image of ten children Haizi and their return to life (复活 ‘come back to life,’ ‘resurrection [of Jesus Christ]’) does in fact steer clear of megalomania. This is because any self-aggrandizement is undercut by the cruel scenes in the rest of the first and second stanzas and because of the poem’s questions at two crucial moments, their dejection visible in the absence of question marks: but what was it for... but what does it mean.

The canonization of «Spring» is evidenced by its appearance in numerous multiple-author anthologies, including those covering orthodox poetry as well as the avant-garde.61 Its reception history is inseparable from the issues raised in the first half of this chapter. «Spring» is one of Haizi’s best poems, but not because it was the last thing he wrote before he killed himself.62

Haizi wrote a good number of ode-like poems in dedication to various addressees, including someone identified as “S,” the Pacific Ocean and “the last night and the first day.” Two are simply called «Poem in Dedication» (献诗, both 1989). Dedication as a fundamental attitude, regardless of its application to any particular object, or perhaps dedication to poetry itself, both fit the exaltation that Haizi’s poetry and poetics exude. These are the opening and closing stanzas of «In Dedication to the Dark Night» (黑夜的献诗), written in February 1989.

62 In the title and the first line of «Spring», there is a curious echo of Wu Shaoqiu’s «Spring: There Is a Child Falls in the River» (春天, 有一个孩子掉进河里). Wu’s work appears in Born-Again Forest (次生林, 1982), an unofficial collection of avant-garde poetry compiled by Zhong Ming, using the pen name Shi Jile (1982), which Haizi is likely to have read. Wu’s poem contains this long line: The child has not got up again.... as if there were footprints, together with the rivulet, slowly wriggling, slowly coming back to life.... But the intertextuality is strictly lexical (spring, child, coming back to life), and fragmentary at best.
and with the additional caption “in dedication to the daughter of the dark night”.63

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{The dark night rises from the earth} \\
&\text{blocks out the brightest sky} \\
&\text{on the bleak earth after harvest} \\
&\text{the dark night rises from inside you}
\end{align*}
\]

You come from afar, I must go afar
the long road comes through here
there’s nothing at all in the sky
why does that comfort me

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Flocks of birds like dark raindrops} \\
&\text{fly from dusk into the dark night} \\
&\text{there’s nothing at all in the dark night} \\
&\text{why does that comfort me}
\end{align*}
\]

Walk down the road
and sing out loud
wind across the mountains
above it all the endless sky

黑夜， literally ‘black night’ or ‘dark night,’ is conventional poetic usage, usually best translated as night. I have added the adjective—and made the English heavier, perhaps clumsier, than the Chinese—in order to retain the contrast of darkness and brightness in the first stanza, the resonance of dark night in dark raindrops (黑雨滴) and so on.

The first stanza is another example of the effective formal organization that is visible in a small number of Haizi’s poems. Just like in «Clasps a White Tiger», all four lines in the original are eight characters long and unpunctuated. There is end rhyme in lines 1 and 3, and lines 2 and 4. These qualities enhance the effect of typical Haizi imagery—night, earth, sky, harvest—in that they make it cohere. Night falls, or rather, it rises, when the daughter of the dark night in the poem’s motto arrives and the speaker leaves on a journey afar. What follows in the third and fourth stanzas, left untranslated here, is rural scenes in which the harvest is equated with bleakness, logically yet

\[63\text{ Haizi 1997: 319, 359, 472-478. For the «Poem[s] in Dedication», see 474 and 476; for «In Dedication to the Dark Night», see 477-478.}\]
paradoxically, both in the fields and in the granaries, and the speaker claims to see the eyes of Yama, the Chinese-Buddhist King of Hell, inside it. Throughout the poem, the speaker undergoes an ever stronger, yet ambiguous identification with the rural and the natural world, beautifully captured in the penultimate stanza through more patient variations on dark night. The original of the first two lines of the final stanza shows Haizi’s ability to fit powerful plain words (大白话) to poetic, song-like form. Like «Ancestral Land», «In Dedication» is made of big words on big themes. Here, however, they derive powerful effect from the poem’s musicality and from the thoughtful, repeated negotiation of central imagery. Rather than announcing this or that type of “greatness,” «In Dedication» evokes an intensely personal vision that is at once vulnerable and detached, and hence capable of generating profound emotion. Just like in «Spring», a question without a question mark suggests that the speaker doesn’t expect any answers: there’s nothing at all in the dark night / why does that comfort me.

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Inasmuch as Haizi’s writing can be characterized as a poetry of exaltation located at the Elevated end of the spectrum, his work is akin to Obscure Poetry, and specifically to its ethno-cultural streak in Jiang He and the early Yang Lian. Also, Haizi took part in a late 1980s discursive move by Xi Chuan, Chen Dongdong and others, embodied by the journal Tendency, which aimed to counterbalance colloquializing and vulgarizing trends that had challenged the Obscure poets’ primacy within the avant-garde. Yet, Haizi’s work is fundamentally different from Obscure Poetry in that it moves away from socio-political ideology and toward the establishment of a truly individual lyrical subject—that is, when it doesn’t indulge in clichéd megalomania. Also, it contains much less “difficult” imagery, quite aside from the question to what extent such imagery ever functioned as camouflage for a political message in Obscure Poetry.

Haizi’s significance in Chinese poetry is easy to deduce from his publication and publicity record, meaning both what he wrote himself and how well it has sold, and what others have written about him.

64 Van Crevel 2007.
That things would have been different had he not killed himself is another matter. His poetry and his poetics present an amalgam of diverse material and influences, including Chinese history, mythology and language as well as the (Chinese) natural and rural world; and predecessors in literature and art from a wide range of times and places, most of them foreign, as they came to him in Chinese translation. While traceable influences in the works of many contemporary Chinese poets and their reading histories display an international outlook, most of them also cite (classical) Chinese poetry as a source of inspiration and pride. Haizi, however, felt little regard for classical or modern Chinese poets to date. He makes an exception for Qu Yuan, who qualifies for poetic “martyrdom” as the tragic-heroic founding father of Chinese poetry and poethood—even if he lived in the kingdom of Chu and had his Chineseness imposed on him only retrospectively—and, of course, as one said to have drowned himself. Also, the occasional echo of Maoist Political Lyricism such as that practiced by Guo Xiaochuan and He Jingzhi is unmistakable in Haizi’s work. Perhaps his tendency toward self-aggrandizement, exaltation and a romantic vision of poethood is the flipside of what I have called the receptiveness of his poetics. Be that as it may, the best parts of Haizi’s oeuvre will stand the test of time by virtue of their sheer intensity, and his current popularity in China reaches far beyond the avant-garde inner circle and exceeds that of most other authors. Finally, as much as his material and influences may be historically identifiable and regardless of any inclination to demythify his life and work, we shouldn’t lose sight of the individual impulse that lies at the root of his art—without taking recourse to mythologies of an all-powerful creative genius whose very existence annuls the need for critical, intersubjective reflection on the work it leaves behind.

Thanatography is presumably as old as suicide itself. This doesn’t disqualify it as a topic for continuing reflection. For Haizi’s poetry, I hope to have shown that the poetic voice deserves more attention than it has hitherto received.

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65 Haizi 1997: 880. See Schneider 1980 for a fascinating discussion of the myth of Qu Yuan through the ages, including its rewritings in early modern era and contemporary times.