CHAPTER ONE

AVANT-GARDE POETRY FROM CHINA:
TEXT, CONTEXT AND METATEXT

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

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

1. What Went Before

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

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

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

The specialists know better, but still: it is also our mortal perspective that is wont to divide Chinese poetry into classical and modern corpora whose size appears unbalanced. There is close to three millennia of the former and one century of the latter. Whether we will still call ourselves modern a hundred or a thousand years from today is not an