Periodization entails simplification. A summary in three words and two decades—mind, mayhem and money, “the Eighties” and “the Nineties” and beyond—does no justice to the complex dynamics of the social, political and cultural context of contemporary Chinese poetry. It’s not as if the switch from high culture fever to all-pervading commercialization can simply be explained by pointing to June Fourth, or as if the transition from one era to the next took place instantly in the summer of 1989. Anecdotal evidence is provided by the spoken pun that told people to 往前看 or 往钱看. This can mean ‘look forward’ (往前看, 向前看), as in political rhetoric, but also, written differently, ‘look to the money’ (往钱看, 向钱看), and it had begun to circulate as early as the mid-1980s. June Fourth, then, was a catalyst of change rather than its root cause, as noted in the preceding chapters. Yet, from the periodizer’s point of view, catalysis was swift and powerful enough to make it likely that the contrast of the 1980s and the 1990s will go unchallenged for a while. Avant-garde poetry, for one thing, shows a contrast of extraverted collectivism in the 1980s and Individual Writing in the 1990s that is striking enough to make the advantages of periodization outweigh its drawbacks.

Since the 1990s, Xi Chuan (1963) has been one of the two most prominent poets writing inside China, the other being Yu Jian. Xi Chuan had been well known on the poetry scene ever since the mid-1980s, but his breakthrough came in 1992, when he published the poem series «Salute» (致敬). In section 1 of this chapter, after supplying some coordinates for situating Xi Chuan within the avant-garde at large, I review early and mid-1990s commentaries that proceed from an opposition of mind and money, pitting what they perceive as the Elevated spirituality of Xi Chuan’s poetry and his poethood against the vulgarity of Earthly trends in poetry and of an increasingly materialist society. In section 2, after noting that Xi Chuan’s 1990s writing
Figure 5.1. Xi Chuan, 2000 (photograph by Maghiel van Crevel)