CHAPTER EIGHT

NARRATIVE RHYTHM, SOUND AND SENSE:
SUN WENBO

As a distinguishing characteristic of poetry, the synergy of form and content has come up more than once in the preceding chapters. It features again in this chapter, now with attention to narrativity (叙事性) in the work of Sun Wenbo (1956). Critical discourse to date presents narrativity as an important trend in Chinese avant-garde poetry in the 1990s, contrasting it with lyrical trends in the 1980s, but it has focused on content and had little time for form.

A native of Chengdu, Sun began to write in the early 1980s and was recognized as a distinct voice within the avant-garde in the early 1990s. Since the mid-1990s he has spent most of his time in Beijing. His track record includes many journal and book publications, frequent citation in domestic criticism and invited readings abroad. He is one of those whose work has been anthologized in the Blue Star Poetry Treasure House series, discussed in chapter Seven. Invariably associated with Xiao Kaiyu’s and Zhang Shuguang’s poetry but also akin to that of Wang Jiaxin, Sun’s work is characterized by a relative paucity of imagery, a thoughtful mood and a forceful, flowing tone. On the scale from Elevated to Earthly, Sun, Xiao and Zhang display a greater affinity with the former than with the latter, although all three make room for “realist” representations of the quotidian in their writing.

Their style has been invoked by critics such as Hong Zicheng, Cheng Guangwei, Li Shaojun, Tang Xiaodu, Luo Zhenya and Wei Tianwu—and by poet Xiao Kaiyu in his capacity as a critic—to help identify a so-called Poetry of the Nineties, a contested notion briefly mentioned in chapter Two. Aside from its particular, controversial usage in the Popular-Intellectual Polemic, which we will examine in chapter Twelve, an oft-cited feature of Poetry of the Nineties is that of narrativity. The concept of narrativity has been stretched to fit a mixed bag of texts, but one can see how it applies to the poetry of Sun, Xiao and Zhang, and how it led to their labeling as Narrative poets in the mid-1990s, with Zhang generally recognized as having pioneered the
Figure 8.1. Sun Wenbo, 2000 (photograph by Magiel van Crevel)