At the start of the twenty-first century, the most talked-about thing in avant-garde poetry in China was a controversial group of authors called the Lower Body (下半身). Section 1 of this chapter is a critical introduction to their poetry, poetics and poethood, with special attention to the work of Yin Lichuan and Shen Haobo. We focus on the years 2000-2002, when two book-like issues of the unofficial journal named after the group appeared and its members made their way into a wide range of other publications. The Lower Body has since ceased to be active as a group but secured a place in literary history, even if this is fiercely contested. In addition, its legacy lives on through the individual literary careers of some of its one-time members, including Yin, Shen and Duoyu. Section 2 sketches the Lower Body’s lineage within the avant-garde, from three angles summarized as demystification, bad behavior and social concern. As regards the third, although the Lower Body is an extreme manifestation of the Earthly aesthetic, a feature it shares with texts across the full spectrum from Elevated to Earthly is that it regularly positions literature as a medium for the expression of such concern. This confirms that while the Elevated and the Earthly provide useful points of reference for discussing the avant-garde, they are not pigeonholes and they do not constitute a binary opposition.

The Lower Body’s reception in literary circles is sharply divided. If some critics dismiss it out of hand as immoral, this is evidence of a mismatch of critical expectations and actual poetic production more than anything else, as in the crisis discourse identified in chapter One. As this chapter hopes to show, shock value doesn’t suffice to explain the publicity generated by the Lower Body. Nor does the fact that Lower Body poetry is grounded in the social realities of contemporary China make awareness of these realities indispensable for enjoying this poetry as art.
Figure 9.1. Yin Lichuan, 2004 (photograph by Martin de Haan)