In March 1991, slightly less than two years after the violent crackdown on student protesters in Tiān’ānmén 天安门 square in Běijīng on 4–5 June 1989, during which, even according to very conservative sources, at least four or five hundred people were killed, a poem appeared on the occasion of the annual spring festival on the front page of the overseas edition of the People’s Daily (Rénmín Ribào (hǎiwàibàn) 人民日报海外版). The poem, entitled “Lantern Festival”, and, seemingly, a perfectly innocent double quatrain of heptasyllabic lines with a conventional x-a-x-a rhyme scheme and some tonal patterning, was authored by a certain Zhū Hāihōng 朱海洪, apparently a UCLA graduate student at the time. At first sight it looked like one of those poignantly patriotic pieces so typical of the PRC government controlled newspaper. Poems of this type, still routinely encountered in contemporary PRC papers and journals on the more festive seasonal occasions, are rather stunning not only for their stubborn insistence on a thoroughly pre-modern poetic form in media otherwise aiming at the propagation of a technocratic state-designed overdrive modernity, but also for their adherence to a whole set of thoroughly clichéed classic images, intermingled with socialist buzzwords:

* Part of this essay was written when I was a research fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in Uppsalla (March–July 2005), the support of which is gratefully acknowledged here. I am indebted to Bernhard Führer, Alex de Voogt, and two anonymous reviewers for several insightful comments.
(1) 元宵 (朱海洪)  

<table>
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<th>中文</th>
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<td>東風拂面催桃李</td>
<td>东风拂面催桃李 dōng fēng fú miàn cuī táo LĪ</td>
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<td>鶴鳴舒翅展鵬程 lì yáo yìng shù chì zhǎn PĒNG chéng</td>
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<td>玉盤照海下熱淚</td>
<td>玉盤照海下熱淚 yù pán zhào hǎi XÌÀ rè lèi</td>
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<tr>
<td>游子登台思故城</td>
<td>游子登台思故城 yóu zǐ dēng TÁI sī gù chéng</td>
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<tr>
<td>休負平生報國志</td>
<td>休負平生報國志 xiū fù PÉNG shēng bào guó zhì</td>
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<td>人民育我勝萬金 rén MÍN yù wǒ shèng wàn jīn</td>
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<td>憤起急追振華夏</td>
<td>憤起急追振華夏 FĒN qǐ jí zhúi zhèn Huá Xià</td>
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<tr>
<td>且待神州遍地春</td>
<td>且待神州遍地春 qiě dài shén zhōu biàn dì chūn</td>
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Lantern Festival (Zhū Hǎihōng)¹

East wind strikes the face, bringing on the peaches and plums [LI]  
Sparrow hawk unfurls its wings, spreading towards a giant [PENG]  
future  
Moon, like a jade-disk, shines on the sea, DOWN fall his stinging  
tears  
A sojourner ascends a PLATFORM, thinking of his home town  
Never failing, ALL his life, to dedicate himself to the goals of his country  
The PEOPLE’s nourishing me is worth more than zillions in gold  
FURIOUSly I rise to reinvigorate the civilization of China  
Waiting for spring to spread throughout this sacred land

As the more perceptive among the readers soon discovered, much to  
the dismay of the less attentive frontpage editor of the journal (sacked  
shortly afterwards), the poem had an acrostic line embedded, diagonal-  
ly from the last character of the first line to the first character of the  
penultimate line, seven,

李鹏下台平民愤 Lì Péng xià tái píng mín fèn,  
which can be read as either “Li Peng step down, appease the people’s furor!” or “Li Peng step down, the common people are furious!”.
Ending in fèn ‘furious’, the line joins with chūn ‘spring’ in an impure,  
but conventional rhyme² in the last line (“waiting for spring to spread  
throughout this sacred land”), thus surreptitiously evoking the “furor  
of the people”, and associating it with what had come to be referred to  
as the shortlived “Beijing spring” in Western media.

¹ The translation aims at transparency of the embedded polysemes. For a less jar-  
ring rendering, which endeavours to maintain the acrostichic structure through poetic  
² On rhyming standards in colloquial Mandarin see Li Wen-Chao (2000).