REJECTIVE POETRY?
SOUND AND SENSE IN YI SHA

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Contemporary avant-garde poetry from mainland China—meaning poetry itself as well as poetics, including visions of poethood—covers a spectrum between the outer limits of two divergent aesthetics that can be summed up as the Elevated and the Earthly.* In itself, there is nothing Chinese about these categories, but the contemporary Chinese poetry scene brings them to mind with particular force. In Chinese-domestic discourse on poetry, this is reflected by the frequent use of dichotomies such as heroic v. quotidian, literary v. colloquial, sacred v. mundane, elitist v. ordinary and Westernized v. indigenous. In these examples, heroic, literary, sacred, elitist and Westernized count as features of the Elevated; and quotidian, colloquial, mundane, ordinary and indigenous, as features of the Earthly. Another such dichotomy, which has not systematically appeared in discourse on the avant-garde in the way that others have (e.g. heroic v. quotidian), could be that of receptive v. rejective. Both terms apply to form and content alike. Neither implies value judgment. Receptiveness would come under Elevated, and rejectiveness under Earthly.

An example of receptive poetry is found in the work of Haizi 海子 (1964–1989). His oeuvre contains many long, unconstrained poems made of long, unconstrained lines that try to accommodate a range of things of great magnitude, from the heritage of ancient civilizations and mythologies to the pinnacles of world literature and art, and to profound, individual emotion. In the process of making space for all this, they display constant, lyrical exaltation.¹

The present essay explores the notion of rejective poetry, through a case study of Yi Sha 伊沙 (1966), focusing on the dimensions of sound and sense and on their interaction. If applied to poetry’s formal

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¹ See Maghiel van Crevel, Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money (Leiden: Brill, 2008), for the Elevated and the Earthly (23–27), receptiveness and rejectiveness (125, 325), and Haizi’s poetry (chapter Three).
features, rejectiveness can be in evidence in things like the prosody of recitation, for example through an aggressive pace and tone of voice, and deconstructive rhyme schemes; and in lineation on the page and in recitation, through short lines and interrupted enjambment. If applied to poetry’s more or less paraphraseable semantics, rejectiveness may emerge in attitudes and strategies of the poetic voice such as cynicism, disbelief, negation, demystification, desecration, deconstruction, aggression and destruction.

Does Yi Sha’s poetry sound rejective? If so, is this but an educated intuition inspired by his notoriety as a literary provocateur, who appears to have made it his business to offend as many people as possible? Or can it be substantiated by reference to the materiality of the text—and does it matter who does the reciting? Or is a perceived quality of rejectiveness really engendered by shock value on the level of sense, meaning the “standard” referential value of the text on the page, aside from the realization of this script in its recitation by one individual or another? If a characterization of Yi Sha’s poetry as rejective can be argued convincingly, is the mechanism of rejection—on the levels of sound and sense, and between them—a one-way operation that leads to closure in the experience of the poem as a whole? Or is it one of several forces at work that synergize unresolved tension, and invite the multiple readings often seen as something that poetry is uniquely capable of triggering in its readers?

To answer these questions, after some remarks on Yi Sha’s significance in the literary field I will go back and forth between sense and sound in his oeuvre—or, to be more precise and in recognition of the inextricability of the two, between sense-oriented and sound-oriented explorations of his poetry. I will start with two of his most famous poems, one for its sense and the other for its sound, and then present some generalizing ideas on the interaction of sound and sense in his work, with reference to other texts. The analysis draws on audio recordings as well as written texts, and I enthusiastically second Charles Bernstein’s professed aim of overthrow[ing] the common presumption that the text of a poem—that is, the written document—is primary and that the recitation or performance of a poem by the poet is secondary and fundamentally inconsequential to the “poem itself.”

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