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Stepping Forward and Back: Issues and Possibilities for "World" Poetry

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A dozen years ago I reviewed a translation of Bei Dao's poetry for *The New Republic*. The review was submitted without a title; but the editor, in his wisdom, saw fit to give it the fatal heading "World Poetry." The review stirred a fair amount of reaction, not a little of which was wrathful, from the community of contemporary Chinese poets and those who study them.[1] The argument of the review was a simple one, one that in fact touched on Bei Dao's poetry only as a case of a larger issue of contemporary poetry in languages other than English and those languages we recognize as "international." Of all literary forms, lyric poetry has been most closely tied to the particularities of national languages; at the same time, insofar as a lyric poet is seen as part of an international community of poets and readers, there is a pressure for linguistic fungibility. As national recognition seeks the supplement of international recognition, a literary text not only has to be translated, it has to be able to claim that its essential values are still present in translation. Like movie dialogue with subtitles, novels often shrug off the potential problems here. This presents a special problem for lyric poetry, however, a problem commonly solved by the assumption that, no matter how good the translation, there is an original that is always still better—sometimes located on a facing page, but more often

1. Stephen Owen, "World Poetry," a review of Bei Dao's *The August Sleepwalker*, trans. Bonnie McDougall, *New Republic* (November 19, 1990), pp. 28–32. The best-known early Chinese reply was Michelle Yeh, "Chayi de youlü——yige huixiang," *Jintian* (*Today*) (1991.1), pp. 94–96. See also Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 1–4; Gregory B. Lee, *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism, and Hybridity in China and Its Others* (London: Hurst, 1996), pp. 93–101; Huang Yunte, *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 161–82.

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to be found only in major research libraries. Such an implicit claim for all translated poetry has its obviously troubling aspects: the reader or critic who might feel confident facing a translated novel modestly defers both judgment and pleasure when facing translated poetry; the poem comes to us as existing elsewhere. The only escape from this peculiar doubling of poetry's other and greater meaning would seem to be a new identity for lyric poetry, one that is not dependent on any particular national language. This is a troubling possibility for lyric poetry, but a not uninteresting one.

The theme of this centenary issue of *Modern Philology* seems an appropriate occasion to revisit some of these issues in light of a dozen years of continuing change. The central question is one of how poetic value is and can be constituted across language boundaries. Perhaps because of lyric poetry's ties to national languages and to a history of poetry in a particular national language, it encounters problems when situated in the context of world poetry. I would like to follow the old argument a bit further, then to consider how things have changed in the past dozen years, and finally to take what may seem an odd detour, in the poetry I know best, Chinese.

I readily concede that contemporary poetry still operates primarily in the context of national literatures and national languages. If international recognition is a force, it is a force only on the edges of a national literature, pressing in different degrees and different ways. It is, to my knowledge, not a force at all on poetry in English. Cultural power is not evenly distributed, and the poet writing in English (or French) can work in blithe self-confidence regarding the universal adequacy of his or her linguistic community. "International recognition" means recognition by certain centers of cultural power and recognition in English or one of the other international languages. For a young Korean poet to be translated into Tagalog and acclaimed in Manila is, no doubt, a matter of satisfaction; but it has less cachet than to be translated into English or French and invited to New York or Paris. It is unfair, but it is a fact. The cultural globe, like the financial globe, has capitals, but the capitals of the cultural globe are far less evenly distributed over the demographic globe.

Within particular national literatures, the structures of recognition and literary valuation remain much as they have been throughout modern times and earlier. Circles of recognized poets and critics discover new poets—and sometimes neglected older ones. University students and young intellectuals have their favorites, and such poets sometimes enter the more formalized structures of recognition in national literatures (perhaps because university students and young intellectuals join national literary establishments). Sometimes there are

national institutions that recognize a poet of lasting achievement—poet laureates, permanent or transient—which is often a gift of honor received only ambivalently. Established poets enter anthologies and literary histories, sometimes to stay and sometimes as mere visitors. Collectors of used books in the various national languages can accumulate a rich array of anthologies of recent poetry from across many decades and observe the remarkable changes in the fates of poets. Competition for prominence and survival—what commonly gets called "canonization"—is an issue, and an issue that few feel comfortable addressing as a sociological question in contemporary poetry (though it is a commonplace question in the academic representation of the past).

Actors real and fictional may have claimed credit for having performed before the crowned heads of Europe, but international recognition is a relatively new constituent in the politics and economics of poetic judgment. Such recognition does not always mean translation, but it often does. International recognition and translation can bring substantial financial rewards for novelists; for poets they bring only prestige. The full structure of international recognition is complex, but in the cultural imagination of many writers it has been embodied first and foremost in the Nobel Prize for literature. Young poets in many countries are encouraged to aspire to this, and works that receive the prize are not only quickly translated, but even studied to understand where world literature is at the present moment and what sorts of things are valued. The prize has become a cultural force in ways never imagined in its founding, which may be the common fate of all prominent and long-established institutions.

As the world grew increasingly integrated in the second half of the twentieth century, the Nobel Prize entered the imagination of cultural communities outside the core circle of literatures in the main European languages (including Russian). Within this enlarged horizon of contenders, one factor became prominent. Although I am not privy to their discussions, I strongly suspect this has also been a factor in the deliberations of the prize committee itself. This is a presumed right of representation: "It is time for a writer from country X to get the Nobel Prize." I have heard and read this many times, with only the "X," the variable nationality, changed. This was certainly long a sentiment in China. Literary communities in various countries feel that one of their best authors ought to be chosen, representing them among the Nobel laureates from other countries. Unlike the Olympics, the other great example of structured international competition, neither winning nor failing to win the Nobel Prize for literature is a self-evident judgment.

The problem with representation in this context is the question of who gets to choose the representative. We will return to this question in greater length later; here we may simply observe that this choice of an imagined "best in the world" may reveal itself as a judgment of the best by a small group of people in a faraway country. If a writer from some other country wins the Nobel Prize, then a national literary community can read the works of the winner and hope for their own success in the following year. If, however, the winner of the Nobel Prize implicitly represents a particular national literature and yet the person chosen is not someone well known or admired by the literary establishment or readership in that country, then the members of that community suddenly realize that they have no say in world literature.

In this way an imagined right to be represented can easily turn into a demand for self-representation. Not only does no structure for this exist in the global cultural community, but it is hard to see how such a structure could be created. It is, however, one of those nice cases where irreconcilable values meet. We can easily understand why a large community of writers and intellectuals within a particular national culture might resent their literature being celebrated in a choice made by a group of even very thoughtful and conscientious Swedes—if that choice ignores all the writers they consider important. At the same time, the mind pauses in quiet horror at the thought of a "United Nations" of poets, each elected by writers' associations in the constituent countries, taking annual turns as a Global Poet Laureate. We have here a conflict of legitimate values for which there is no possible reconciliation.

Literature, in both the original language and in translation, has been moving across cultural and national borders ever since literature existed. Nevertheless, many national literatures still have distinct histories and distinct values. It is therefore worth considering what an international structure of value would have to look like. Since literature is a matter of taste, in the several senses of the phrase, I will take food as my metaphor—though I am not sure whether it is merely a metaphor or the instantiation of a structure of value that operates on many levels. I need a location where international food comes together. If I find such a location in the food court of a mall, I hope it will not seem too demeaning to the claims of literature in general and of poetry in particular.

Food courts have certain rules that function within the grammar of mall planning. Before the construction of any particular mall is completed, the planners design a structured representation of food types, a large proportion of which are recognized international types. In the

planning stage various individuals or chains may compete to represent the type (the decision on who is allowed to represent a type being left in the invisible hands of the mall planners); but once the structure is realized, the competition for consumer attention is displaced from the relative quality within any particular type to the competition among types. The consumer may choose to patronize an "Italian" fast food stall (pizza, spaghetti, and lasagna), a Chinese stall, an Indian stall, a Japanese stall, a Mexican stall, a New York deli, a hamburger stall, or a stall that serves "healthy food." I believe most of my readers will be familiar with the range and variations. The size of the mall determines the extent of choices, and one can outline a rather clear hierarchy of the types that will be added as the size expands. Not all national cuisines are represented—only those with constituencies.

In observing such a cultural structure, it is always worth noting possibilities so habitually excluded that they eventually become all but invisible. What you do not generally find is competition between restaurants of the same type. Choice is displaced from a hierarchical judgment of quality to a lateral preference for a certain type—a matter of taste, in one of the possible senses of the phrase. It is easy to see in this an allegory of American culture, but it has become an international form as well.

Each of the limited number of national cuisines here represented is, in its native context, actually constituted of a wide range of often very divergent regional styles. While one may find upscale restaurants featuring regional cuisines of other countries in large cities, as a general cultural phenomenon regional variation is replaced by a national style—indeed, a national style of cuisine that exists only in relation to a specified set of other national cuisines. Like that of the nation-state itself, the coherence of a national cuisine exists with perfect clarity only outside its own borders. This national style of cuisine is further mediated by the local taste of the place in which the mall or restaurant is located. There is no "Chinese food" in China; there are only regional and local cuisines and specialized types of food that transcend region. Chinese food does indeed exist outside of China, but it is not quite the same in Boston, Prague, or Madrid.

Within any national cuisine (as a collective of local cuisines), there are many things commonly eaten in other countries, if not universally. If you break an egg and whirl it in a hot pan, the same thing happens in whichever country the egg is broken, no matter how long that country's cultural history. National cuisines also contain dishes and foods that no one in another country would willingly eat, except for a broad-minded intellectual determined to expand his or her gustatory horizons. These extremes—the too common and the too exotic—have

no place in the stalls of the food court. Chinese food stalls in food courts, like most Chinese restaurants catering to an American clientele, serve neither steamed bread buns (*mantou*, which are, indeed, just bread) nor shredded pig's belly nor seasoned jellyfish. To function as a commensurate map of different food types, including the international, the cuisine of the food court has to exist on a comfortable margin of difference—with plastic knives and forks provided.

The choice of a commercial and popular cultural form as the analogy for a high cultural enterprise may seem to verge on the satirical, but it remains a persuasively minimalist model for an empirically possible structure of valuation within historically diverse cultural sets. University students, like the Nobel Prize Committee, hear only of those literatures for which there are talented translators and academic brokers. The literature in question can be neither too common nor too exotic; it has to be on some comfortable margin of difference for the target audience. What seems satirical in the shadow of the food court analogy becomes simple pragmatism when trying to talk about non-Western literary traditions to scholars of European literature, not to mention students. When you deal with texts from China or Japan or the Indian subcontinent or the Islamic world, you are dealing with cultures with histories that are as deep as everything you know or don't know about Europe; and they know much about European cultural history as well. To do any one of these literary cultures well takes a lifetime.

Our culinary map of the food court is not all that far from planning a syllabus for a course on world literature—or even from planning a syllabus for a course on a single literature that presents formidable cultural difficulties. The model is not identical: we modify it out of the larger hopes of our university system. We may challenge the taste and expectations of our student consumers more strenuously than a Chinese or Indian fast food stall in a food court challenges the hungry shopper. We will try to include texts that are valued in the cultures that produced them, despite the difficulties—though we may flavor them a bit differently. These are important differences. But underneath lie intractable problems of constituting global culture or world literature; it is always constituted in a local "somewhere," creating a structure of commensurability that maps and essentializes easily attainable margins of difference. This is not a local problem of the United States or Europe; the Chinese also tend to generalize about the West in ways that forget history and regional difference, as an imagined entity that exists only on a Chinese cultural map.

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Critics and scholars working within the context of a single national literature have the luxury of innocence: they can read a set of poems and judge poet X to be the best. If poet X can sustain a history of such judgments, he or she may enter the canon. At this point the poet moves beyond effective judgment in any radical sense (witness the attempts to jettison Milton in the first half of the twentieth century). Rather, the canonical poet becomes a constituent in the evolving values by which other works are judged. The truly canonical poet cannot be extracted without destabilizing the whole system. Shakespeare is not self-evidently a great poet—he certainly was not such to French neoclassical critics—rather, his works historically came to instantiate certain values, values by which other works were judged over a continuing history. When those works entered a canon, they became a set that defined a certain range of literary values, with the consequence that those values appeared self-evident.

This is the old model of value formation in national literatures—and, indeed, Shakespeare played an important role in initially imagining national literature. Our food court model suggests an important change in the structure of value—a change, we have argued, that is one of the fundamental rules of the food court. Rather than asking whether poet X in category A is better than poet Y in category B, we presume that poets X and Y are best in their own categories (which can be a problematic assumption, allowing that poets X and Y have been brought to our attention because they fit into a system in which they are understandable and comparable). We are not allowed to say that category A is better than category B: we may prefer Chinese beef and broccoli to chicken koorma, but we may not say that it is superior. When neoconservatives proclaim the superiority of Western civilization (not asking how and when that category came to be constituted), the liberal academy is scandalized: one simply prefers to read Wordsworth; it is not that one believes Wordsworth "superior" to Du Fu. While it is silly on the level of the food court, such a concession to the possibility of different values—however naively and habitually made—is a profound step in understanding the historicity of values that have come to seem as if natural.

This brings us back to the Nobel Prize. Even with the pressure to represent different national literatures, the judgments of the Nobel Prize Committee are claims of value and not of preference. If the Nobel Prize Committee chooses a Romanian writer over a Chinese writer, such a choice cannot possibly mean that Romanian literature is better than Chinese literature. How do we explain it? This writer is better than that writer. But in the context of comparing writers from different cultures, isn't that an old-fashioned failure to understand context and cultural difference?

We need to underscore the fact that within any national culture there is no hesitation or embarrassment in declaring this writer better than that writer. And there are national structures of cultural power that are perfect analogues to structures of international cultural power. A young poet in provincial Guangxi is on a different footing than the favorite young poet of Beijing University. The rules seem to change only on the level of comparing national cultures, of however recently the nation-state has been constituted. On this level, comparative evaluative judgments become problematic. And the Nobel Prize Committee braves those problems every time it makes a decision. They are trying to play the old game of literary judgment in a new world.

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The price of common global structures of value is that much of the world must play the game by rules (including those of literature) that are not of their making and in whose making they have no say. This is a serious price, but in many areas it is a price well worth paying for the advantages gained. In most global venues of judgment, spokespersons for the "rest of the world" at least participate: in Olympic committees, world courts, the United Nations, and so on. In literature, however, and particularly in poetry, the issue of national language returns as the remnant of indigestible difference.

It is not fair that a Russian air traffic controller has to speak English and an Indonesian pilot must understand it. We do, however, understand that air traffic controllers and pilots must have a mutually comprehensible language, and we are exceedingly grateful if they can understand one another. To find a common ground to reflect on world poetry is something else again. If we decide—as pragmatically we must—to work through translation, we have opened a Pandora's box of problems that call the very enterprise into question. Suppose we take the leap and accept that we must work through translation. Who then is competent to comment and judge? Should this be restricted only to native speakers of the language of translation? If we have a translation from Japanese, why should an Arab speaker of English be less qualified than a native speaker of English? And what is being read in these translated poems—the English or the poetic ideas and images?

When it comes to the prizes that have come to symbolize global values in literature, the question comes back to who is doing the choosing. The choice of Gao Xingjian for the Nobel Prize in literature sparked a strong response in China and on Chinese Web sites. Politics played some role. Gao Xingjian is intensely opposed to the Communist

government and is much admired by a segment of the exile community and in Taiwan. Certainly the Chinese government's disapproval of the choice was political. The generally negative response by intellectuals in China, however, went much deeper.[2] Gao Xingjian prides himself on being an international writer, which for all intents and purposes means a European writer who uses the Chinese language. His plays were known in Beijing for a time, but his subsequent work was almost unknown. Political reasons were an important factor in this ignorance of his work; but the poetry of Bei Dao, who was also considered for the Nobel Prize, was also politically sensitive yet well known in China. There were also quite a few other writers widely known and admired in China who were passed over for consideration time and again. The conclusion, obvious yet invisible earlier, was foregrounded with perfect clarity in the choice of Gao Xingjian for the Nobel Prize: this was a European choice and not a Chinese one—or, in a term often repeated, a "Swedish prize." There seems a new awareness in China that there can be no world literature or world poetry except as constituted locally, from some center that mediates and judges according to its own values—in Europe or the United States.

We have problems here that admit no solution—except by throwing away the questions and the historical institutionalization of literature that generates them. Once we let go of a certain kind of story of poetry that we are used to telling, we find some interesting things.

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What has changed since 1990 is, of course, the remarkable expansion of the Web—with its textual fluidity, its monstrous capacity to archive (a technological "Funes the Memorious"), its proliferation of centers located in e-space rather than quotidian geography, its democratic lack of judgment, and its interest groups. Poetry has taken on a new and strange life here. All one needs to do is to go on-line and do a search for "Turkish poetry" or "Hindi poetry," and so on. The implementation of Unicode as a standard has solved the considerable problems of non-Roman scripts on the Web. Exile and émigré communities have often played a significant role in literature; they are active here too but with a new twist: works from the exile/émigré community mix with works from the home country instantly and usually

2. Since the government strongly discourages comment on Gao Xingjian, there is little in the public media; most of the response appeared soon after the decision in Web forums. It is also a topic of private conversation.

invisibly. Often one cannot tell where a Web site actually originates (Yahoo! China does have an interesting function that allows one to select only those Web sites from China itself, a function that bespeaks the inability to distinguish them otherwise).

On the Web we see clearly the resurgence of national language communities detached from nation-states. Although more authoritarian states seek to control the political dimensions of this, as in the recent Chinese crackdown on unlicensed Internet cafes, it seems to be an endeavor that is hopeless in the long run. Politics and pornography are the obvious favorite targets, but poetry is one too. Clear hierarchies of authority in literary judgment have been replaced by interest groups of invisible membership and scattered through terminals everywhere. In place of the cultural establishments of nation-states, charged with defining literary history and canon (these have their Web sites as well), we have an immaterial medievalism of shifting texts and authors, working in an e-space that is peculiarly local. In this space, diaspora dissolves, and Romanized Yiddish poetry continues in an e-shtetl.

Few of the critics and academicians with curatorial oversight over national literatures would be so heartless as to deny grandmothers the right to compose poems in their favorite language and post them for their far-flung friends. Those same critics and academicians, however, might be troubled by the thought that this could be poetry's future (even though it bears some similarities to medieval poetry before the latter was integrated into national canons). When I look at a nicely constructed Turkish Web site with the poetry of an individual or an anthology of recent poems, I have no idea how those poets are considered (if at all) by the Turkish national literary establishment.

Sometimes here we see the hope of international readership. Introductions in English are provided, and sometimes there are translations. This is, to some degree, a function of English keywords in the search. If one types in keywords in the national language, what one thought before was a flood turns out to be only a modest pond. Insofar as lyric poetry, with its ties to particular languages, resists globalization, it is, in its relative brevity, the ideal form for the Internet and is thriving there.

At this point it might occur to us that in looking for world poetry, we have been looking for the wrong thing. We want poetry to be important in a way that helps define and represent a national culture, a poetry that can contribute to a story of canonical writers, the very best of which may emerge on some global horizon with the best of other national literatures. These can provide resources for courses in contemporary poetry in the academy. We want a literary Olympics,

the apotheosis of the food court. We may want to change a judgment here or there, but we do not want ten thousand names and hundreds of thousands of poems in every language with a community that is plugged into the Net. The very idea of world literature depends on the continued power of national literary establishments sorting and recommending, giving us representatives. The moment we abrogate that structure (the structure of the Olympics and other transnational institutions), the moment we recognize the talented exile poet who comes to see us personally, is the very moment we have to start reading the Web and local publications.

Those who deal with contemporary poetry know that it is, unfortunately, as much a social venture as an aesthetic one. If we admire the venturesome contemporary Chinese poet who appears in Germany and do not know of the no less poetically bold contemporary poets in Beijing, we become brokers in an exceedingly troubling game of reputation that is centered in the West.

If, in the United States, we are particularly interested in world literature or world poetry, that is very much a function of one aspect of our own national culture, both local and imperial. The national literary establishments that can provide us material for world poetry are very much alive and well in most of the world. They have their centers and their provinces, their hierarchies and ventures on canonicity; they have complex structures of national prizes, recognition, and status that still serve to articulate prominence. We may see the talents to which they are blind—but those talents appear through our local history of values.

The system of national recognition is the way poetry works as we have known it, and it has served us well in finding memorable poets in a morass of versifying. It is not a bad system, so long as we understand its historicity and historical contingency. I will honor my role as broker for one particular national literature in this system by suggesting that China has recently been producing poets truly worthy of international note, such as Bei Dao and, more recently, Yu Jian, a poet whose rejection of world poetry and the national literary establishment has, ironically, contributed to his prominence.

* * *

Negation, of course, includes what it negates: to reject world poetry, even with the greatest sincerity, is to remain within its vast purview. Is there another level, however, where poetry flourishes beneath conceivable international notice? By noticing the unmentionable, I run the risk of another round of wrath from colleagues. Yet the "world of

poetry," in the sense of the poetry actually being written and enjoyed worldwide, deserves some small note as well as "world poetry."

Although I will discuss primarily the Chinese case, the phenomenon I will describe appears throughout the old civilizations of Asia, though in different ways in different countries. A little background in cultural history is necessary here. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European culture, including European poetry, collided with the great civilizations of Asia, each of which had an indigenous poetry with a long history and established traditions. The process of influence and change was remarkably similar in a wide variety of quite different literary cultures. First, there was an attempt to extend the old, indigenous poetics to account for modern realities. This was followed by a "new poetry," often in free verse, that rejected the metrics, imagery, poetic language, and social ethos of the older poetry. The new poetry was often created by Western-educated intellectuals or by intellectuals in major urban centers where Western influence was strongest. In some countries the indigenous elite poetry disappeared altogether—as in Korea, whose elite poetry was composed in Chinese, and in Turkey. In both these countries the language reform was radical. By now the new poetry has taken root everywhere; it has matured and developed its own histories, from China and Japan to the Arab world. When we think of world poetry, we are always thinking of the new poetry in these countries.

We may then ask: What happened to the older poetry, which often inspired immense affection and whose practice carried great cultural prestige? The answer to this question differs by country, as does the relation between the new poetry and the continuing practice and popularity of classical verse. The Urdu *ghazal*, for example, apparently continues to flourish as a serious form, with satisfying compromises between tradition and modernity. In Japan modern haiku and modern *waka* flourish as an autonomous sphere of traditional poetry, with huge contests and recognized modern masters. Although the new poets often hold such verse in a certain contempt, it has remained a recognized part of Japanese poetry in the twentieth century and continues into this new century. It has even entered English anthologies of modern Japanese literature. It exhibits the tensions that the oxymoron "modern classical poetry" shows everywhere: a debate between traditional poetics on the one hand and new themes and language on the other, and a certain joy in the interplay between the two.

Nowhere is the tension between the new poetry and modern classical poetry greater than in China. The "new poets" and their spokespersons at once have contempt for contemporary classical poetry and feel the threat that a widespread affection for the older classical poetry

presents. The new poetry is institutionalized in government supported writers' associations, in the university, and in textbooks (not to mention translation into other languages and representation in the foreign academy); but Mao Zedong wrote classical song lyrics that are widely known by heart. *Shikan* (*Poetry*), the official poetry journal of the National Writers' Association, has a column for classical poems, but it is essentially a journal of the new poetry. The new poetry has its passionate admirers and its brilliant poets. At the same time, those who love the new poetry are well aware that many people do not like it and will privately admit that many people are still writing classical poetry, perhaps more than the new poetry. Thus, despite its nearly complete institutional dominance, the new poetry often feels embattled in a struggle for domestic acceptance even more than for international recognition.

To those who have read modern Chinese poetry outside China, the continued flourishing and popularity of classical poetry is a well-kept secret. It lives primarily in provincial capitals, which in turn represent most of China. This is not the poetry of the young intellectuals of Beijing and Shanghai. A few home pages of the more technologically advanced practitioners of modern classical poetry and yearbooks (*nianjian*) will reveal the names of a large number of journals devoted to contemporary classical poetry, some with long and regular runs going back to the end of the Cultural Revolution; even a very large Chinese library like Harvard's has only a handful of these, most of which are unread and safely off to the depository as soon as they arrive.

The new poets might criticize modern classical poetry for being out of touch with modern realities. But Chinese classical poetry has long been engaged with the particulars of everyday life—one might even say all too engaged. In opening at random *Dangdai shici* (*Contemporary Classical Poetry and Song Lyric*) 4 (1984), one of the longest running of these journals, I encounter a song lyric modeled on a twelfth-century predecessor with the following subtitle: "On October 5, 1980, I received a long-distance call from my son asking for a tape recorder under the pretext of studying foreign languages; I wrote this to admonish him." A few pages earlier I note another lyric, modeled on a different twelfth-century lyricist, indignantly subtitled: "On hearing that the Japanese Ministry of Education has revised its school textbooks" (on the issue of removing references to the Japanese war in China). There are long and learned poems responding to various television series. Then there is an unforgettable long poem on a neighbor building a new home replete with Sanyo appliances; at the housewarming party, the neighbor is carried away by the police (for crimes that led to his wealth), the guests disperse like "startled swans," and the poem concludes with an allusion to the pop singer Teresa Teng:

> The tape recorder knows not the pain of him who leaves;
> it still is singing: "When will be the day that you come back again?"[3]

Framing the line from the Teresa Teng song, every modestly educated Chinese reader will here recognize an allusion to a famous poem of the ninth century. We should ask: What is going on here?

While contemporary classical poetry remains in large measure occasional, the more recent pages of journals such as *Jiangxi shici* (*Jiangxi Classical Poetry and Song Lyric*) tend to avoid these more outrageous occasions of the early 1980s. The journal does, however, provide an outlet for moments of spontaneous patriotism, as well as for commemorating sites visited on one's vacation. There is something embarrassing about this poetry to the higher levels of the Chinese elite.

In this phenomenon of continuing and even resurgent Chinese classical poetry, we can again find collisions of values that cannot be reconciled. We can see at once the reasons why supporters of the new poetry generally hold modern classical poetry in contempt. Although there is much poetry that is quite wonderful by the standards of classical poetry, it often carries the unmistakable whiff of poetry one wrote on one's vacation. This poetry suggests elderly gentlemen practicing a craft that will soon expire along with their persons (and elderly gentlemen are indeed well represented). Contrary to expectations, the craft is not expiring, and the writers are often young and female.

We also see that many people are having a good time with this poetry and using it to deal with life's little ups and downs—in an old craft that rubs in moving or humorous ways against modern realities. It is a poetry that apparently has a significant readership. These journals are not vanity publications. The first issue of *Contemporary Classical Poetry and Song Lyric* (despite its general title, a local Guangzhou journal) had a print run of 36,000 copies and sold out in less than two months; the second issue was down to 33,600—enough to make any publisher of a journal of contemporary poetry envious.[4] Most journals of new poetry come nowhere near such numbers, even the major state-sponsored ones.

For someone like myself who loves both the older classical poetry and that world poetry of which the Chinese new poetry is a part, the conflict of irreconcilable values is particularly sharp. Modern Chinese classical poetry basically is of the same kind as the old canonical poetry of the Tang and Song in China. Looking back from the vantage point of modern classical poetry, we can see Tang poets giving pious advice to their sons, expressing their reaction to current political events, and writing poems on the sites visited on their vacations. Since those

3. *Dangdai shici* 4 (1984): 7.

4. *Jiangnan shici* was running at about 20,000 an issue. *Jiangnan shici* (1989.2), p. 1.

vacations were taken twelve hundred years ago, they have acquired a certain patina, not to mention a considerable body of commentary. What charms us about that poetry in the past—its imaginative engagement with the particulars of life in a shared poetic ethos—is what troubles us about the same poetry continuing in the present. These poems are not going to make it into my syllabus of world poetry; for one thing, they would require too many footnotes. These poems will never be presented to the Nobel Prize Committee, who would not know quite what to make of them. Many poets who write classical poetry live abroad, but I can't imagine any one of them presenting himself as an exile poet. Like most of their predecessors in the Tang and Song, people who write classical poetry do other things for a living—even if writing poetry is what they most care about. The "poet" as a profession seems restricted to those who write new poetry. Writers of modern Chinese classical poetry can get no grants; universities will not support them so that they can continue writing poetry. In the world of poetry, they are invisible, except to a community of classical poetry lovers in China. It is a poetry with much hack writing but also a poetry with much that is valuable—"valuable" only in a separate sphere of a classical something we must still call poetry.

Contemporary poetry is sometimes supposed to be difficult. If modern classical Chinese poetry is too difficult for a non-Chinese reader to appreciate, it is a worthwhile reminder that the difficulty of contemporary poetry, like its liberty, is in fact strictly governed by many unspoken rules. These rules, like many other international rules, were created in the West. They have now become naturalized in many countries; they have been extended and are no longer a foreign import. There can indeed be a "world poetry," so long as we understand that this is not the whole world of poetry. Other kinds of poetry stubbornly continue outside the scope of world poetry. This is poetry for internal consumption.

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Journals of modern classical poetry usually contain a section of prose essays, both on the problems of contemporary classical poetry and on particular writers. In a fairly recent issue of *Jiangxi Classical Poetry and Song Lyric* we find the reprint of a preface by Shu Wu, an important figure in the Chinese literary establishment and not someone one would expect to be prefacing a 1998 anthology of contemporary classical poetry.[5] Judging from the preface, Shu Wu was himself a bit sur-

5. *Jiangxi shici* 49 (1998.2): 173–87.

prised to find himself in this role. After reciting the impressive classical literary lineage of his family (reminding us of the prestige that this confers, even on an establishment writer in the vernacular), Shu Wu expressed his surprise that these poets were writing "well," referring to the mastery of craft that readers look for in classical poetry. He seemed no less surprised to find that the anthology included young people, as well as aging gentlemen educated in another era. Shu Wu is a professional writer and intellectual; he discovered that the authors of these classical poems included "an air-force pilot, an electrician, and a woman worker at the Capital Airport." Although Americans may willingly give the benefit of the doubt to poetry by insurance executives, poetry by an electrician is more charming as a possibility than an actuality. In the Chinese context, the composition of poetry by people other than intellectuals has a weight and resonance, both in the premodern context and in the Communist modern context. What is at stake here is the kind of poetry being composed by electricians: classical poetry.

Shu Wu knows quite well that composing classical poetry has no official status. No twenty-four-year-old can be recognized as an "important young poet" if he writes classical poetry. The literary establishment reserves fame for those who write the new poetry. He concludes—with an admiration that also has historical resonance—that these people can be writing only for the love of the art, because it gives them pleasure.

The preface is a nice moment in which a member of the Chinese literary establishment, which basically supports the new poetry as a form, confronts the continued existence of classical poetry, indeed its continued flourishing. The flavor of his discomfort has its delights. He attacks the classical poetry that occurs commonly in magazines on occasional topics—perhaps he saw the father's poem of rebuke to his son who had called long-distance to ask for a tape recorder. If Shu Wu is going to be compelled to acknowledge that modern classical poetry exists, he is going to demand "pure poetry" and "serious poetry." He offers a long list of the "best writers" of modern classical poetry and concludes—with a shocking radicalism in this context—that perhaps the best classical poetry should be included as a part of the history of modern poetry.

Modern classical poetry has, of course, never been part of the "history of modern Chinese poetry." Its death was legislated long ago. What is of particular interest is that Shu Wu can name an impressively long list of the "best writers" of modern classical poetry, from the early Republic on through the present. We realize that he has obviously read them all before and is quite familiar with their work. Through this

acknowledgment, Shu Wu comes out of the closet, suggesting that all of these poets he probably admires may be worthy of consideration as "serious," as part of Chinese poetry.

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This discussion is not meant to be a brief on behalf of modern Chinese classical poetry—or for modern *waka*, haiku, and *ghazal*s. The areas of our interest are, rather, the nature of national literary establishments and how poetry, in various ways, has found a life outside of national literary establishments. Insofar as they are national in the modern sense, these literary establishments exist in an international context. Through them (or explicitly against them, as in the exile poets or the "poetry of the common man," *minjian shi*, represented by Yu Jian) there is indeed a rich literature that is world literature. It can win prizes and be recognized by the academy. These poems can appear in a university course syllabus or in an anthology of world poetry in many countries. This is a poetry with its canons, hierarchies, and a narrative of change that we call literary history.

There are, however, other poetries, invisibly flourishing. These poetries sometimes have a far more enthusiastic readership than the poetry in the academy. They are on the Web. In the Chinese case this means primarily the new poetry, though classical poetry is there as well with increasing frequency. Young poets put up their work and get responses. They have readers and fans. Texts get reproduced with uncertain accuracy.

There is also a world of older poetry, happily continuing outside the notice of those who take a global overview of contemporary poetry. Writers of new poetry on the Web generally do not read the new classical poetry, and writers of the new classical poetry tend not to be interested in the new poetry. There is no unity, except in the domain of the literary establishment and the academy. Poetry is going off on its own in many directions. Both the new poetry on the Web and the older poetry (sometimes on the Web, but primarily in special journals) belong exclusively to national language communities. We will see, someday, how this all plays out and where poetry, in our new century, is. Perhaps it is in all these places.