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China's Second World of Poetry: The Sichuan Avant-Garde, 1982-1992

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Cover Page



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EPILOGUE

I hope readers have been able to reach this point without having felt they have been buried under a seeming avalanche of the names of poets and journals. Given the size of the task I have undertaken, this study is also a guide to further research in any number of areas, and with this in mind, I have attempted to illuminate resources necessary to further study.

It is my hope that the regular repetition of names has made the reading of the text easier for ‘newcomers’ to this field. I feel an early familiarity with such names will allow the reader to make judgments on linkages, relationships, and the relative importance of poets, poetry, and journals, which I have not always felt it necessary to stress.

With this in mind, Chapter 12 was most difficult to write due to the necessity of covering a period of three years in one chapter after having covered the previous three-year period in four. Part of the reason for this is that many of the materials from the later period are readily available and relatively well known. Scholars such as Maghiel van Crevel have begun work in this area. My wish is to illuminate the foundations, built during the 1980s, from which the poetry avant-garde developed during the 1990s and into the new millennium.

There was a strong autodidactic element in the make-up of most of the poets who entered the avant-garde during the 1980s – a characteristic shared with the Misty poets – and this bespoke their dedication to the art. The only advantage that might have been enjoyed by university student poets, who styled themselves the Third Generation in 1982, was possible access to more literary resources in university libraries. Otherwise all benefited equally from the cultural and political liberalization of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which allowed the establishment of poetry societies in high schools, universities, and even factories.

A national obsession among intellectuals with cultural renewal and modernization in the wake of the Cultural Revolution spurred experimentation and competition within the poetry avant-garde. In turn, public criticism and restrictions imposed by the CCP's cultural establishment led to the development of a Second World of Poetry, which was the true home of the avant-garde, although public recognition in official publications (as well as publication fees) was still prized and necessary. As this thesis has shown, networking and various linkages tie the Second World and First World of poetry together, and it is therefore possible for poets to move from one to the other without feeling they have 'compromised' anything.

Poets such as Liao Yiwu and, to a lesser extent, Zhou Lunyou, who turned away from establishment success, were rare exceptions who took the idea of sacrifice for one's art to extremes. Other poets achieved compromises without being seen (by others and themselves) to do so, stepping back from earlier, more radical poetical forms (Zhai Yongming) or working to develop aesthetic solutions through avant-garde polemic that effectively would make establishment tolerance easier to obtain (Ouyang Jianghe *cum suis*). Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of these accommodations – whether conscious or not – occurred in the wake of June Fourth 1989. That what was later termed Intellectual poetry developed in such a manner among poets who wished to belong to the avant-garde and to also relieve themselves of political pressures brought to bear by the CCP is shown through the position-takings adopted by contributors to *The Nineties* and *Against* later in 1989.

The initial stimulus to the growth of a Second World and the avant-garde in Sichuan, and elsewhere, was the founding of *Today* in Beijing in 1978, the poetry therein, and the concomitant double rejection of CCP-sponsored poetry and the aesthetics embodied by their censorious editorial committees. At first, like-minded aspiring poets, most born in the 1950s, drew on the new aesthetic models, and in 1982 this resulted in the appearance of *The Born-Again Forest* in Chengdu. At the same time, groups of younger university student poets, most born in the 1960s, registered their differences with the Misty-influenced avant-garde at an informal conference in Chongqing. The distinctive term Third Generation, and an eponymous journal, was the result of this, and in 1984 the Macho Men grouping further embodied these differences in a highly influential manner.

The appearance of these newcomer poets – a relative term, as almost all could be considered newcomers at this point – helped to create an avant-garde that can be recognized as such in the west. While poets born in the 1950s initially reacted against CCP-dictated aesthetic guidelines, the younger poets were primarily reacting against a consecration of aspects of Misty poetry within the emergent avant-garde. With this act, the nascent avant-garde and the Second World began to turn its back on a wider poetry public, which enjoyed Misty poetry, and began a cycle of poetical experimentation and renovation that, by 1989, fed upon itself, with poets primarily producing poetry for other poets, most motivated to a lesser or greater extent by the slogan of ‘art for art’s sake’. If this was not yet the case before 1989, the renewed political repression of 1989-1992 denied avant-garde poets the public forums they had enjoyed in 1986-1989, and further pushed them in this direction. During 1989-1992, China’s avant-garde poets were effectively isolated within cliques and reliant on unofficial publications of their own as they worked to consolidate their positions or developed new position-takings out of sight of a larger reading public.⁷⁶⁴ Ironically, it is continued cultural repression in China that keeps the unofficial poetry scene alive.

Politics had a large role to play in this development, as they had in France during Baudelaire’s time. Then, too, poets reacted against a moralizing, censorious cultural establishment. Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal* was banned and became a public scandal that served to stimulate the growth of what is now known as the avant-garde, as competing salons and privately published journals appeared. Considering how much of Baudelaire’s poetry was being read in China at this time, it would be surprising if poets were not also reading about the social environment in which he wrote his poetry and the avant-garde poetry sub-field that resulted. I do not mean to imply that Sichuan’s poets (and Zhou Lunyou in particular) copied what they read about. However, it seems clear that poets were able to select and adapt various strategies that seemed applicable to China’s unique situation. *Today* was a more pertinent model with regard to the production of an effective unofficial journal, but the sub-field that was developing – partially in response to *Today* and Misty poetry – required new strategies, especially as China’s cultural scene appeared to be on the verge of liberalization.

⁷⁶⁴ See Maghiel van Crevel (1997) and (2003a).

In late 1984 in Sichuan, conflicts with the cultural establishment and unpublishability led avant-garde poets to attempt to establish the Sichuan Young Poets Association. The adoption of the epithet ‘young’, like Third Generation, is highly telling. However, established local Misty poets, such as Luo Gengye and Fu Tianlin, were recruited into the Association, as were contributions from Bei Dao and others to its 1985 journals. At the time, most poets were superficially united because of state-sponsored cultural repression of all avant-garde poetry. However, establishment liberalization during 1985 meant that in 1986 Misty poets were no longer welcome in Second World journals in the province. Rivalries and aesthetical disputes within the avant-garde led to the creation of groups and journals, centered around Wholism and Not-Not in particular.

In many ways, *Not-Not* was the archetypal avant-garde journal, as described by Bourdieu. Its theory and poetry marked it out as the anti-institutional institution *extraordinaire*. The Wholism group was founded almost two years earlier in 1984, and its poetry and theories seduced many local avant-garde poets, if only briefly. That Not-Not should be founded and the group’s first journal appears at the same time as Wholism’s *Han Poetry* was being planned appears to have been no coincidence. With poets such as Yang Li and Shang Zhongmin joining Zhou Lunyou and Lan Ma in relegating poetry of the Wholistic tendency to a second wave of avant-garde poetry (after Misty poetry) and announcing themselves as representing the third, there was no ambiguity. Essays and poetry written by Zhou indicated that he was well versed in the history of the western avant-garde. In fact, Zhou specifically advocated the permanent cultural revolution (if in not so many words) that is the avant-garde, as described by Bourdieu.

It is clear that by 1986 most Chinese avant-garde poets were familiar with the western avant-garde tradition, and readily adapted selected aspects to their poetical practice and activities – Wholism can be seen as fighting a lonely battle against this trend, and such a tendency is also evident in the appearance of ‘new classicism’ (新古典主义). This had begun with the apparent influence of Symbolism and high Modernism on Misty poetry, and gathered pace during the early 1980s with the reappearance of translations of Whitman and myriad other foreign poets, and first translations of poets such as Ginsberg and Plath.

For example, most if not all avant-garde poets have read Baudelaire. Described by Bourdieu as the founder of the avant-garde, Baudelaire's reliance on self-confidence and individual inspiration resulted in the belief that each 'creator' of an original artifact was authorized to embed his or her own *nomos* in the work. This implied the subservience, if not rejection, of universal laws and formal rules to the creator's own perception, which as an original itself was without antecedent. Furthermore, Baudelaire's idea of *correspondance* created a mysticism of sensation and – in opposition to then prevalent naturalism, socialism, and positivism – pushed the avant-garde poetry to become a spiritualist art that cultivated a sense of mystery. The later introduction of ideas from Freud and Jung served to entrench these tendencies further, as demonstrated in the work of Liao Yiwu and the Not-Not theory of Lan Ma, for example.

Poetry was not all that poets were reading at this time. Like other intellectuals, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, poets born in the 1950s had an initial overriding interest in renovation of China's culture in its entirety. This led to the reading of all manner of philosophy and theory – Freud and Jung being of specific interest to poets – and this overarching interest apparently inspired the creation of the pan-cultural theories that were the foundations of both Wholism and Not-Not. Zhou Lunyou and Lan Ma make this clear when they chose 4 May as the symbolic founding date of their group. Just as the New Culture Movement – the longer-lived precursor to and contemporary of the anti-western, political May Fourth Movement, but often conflated with it – sought to modernize and strengthen China through heavy borrowing from western practice, Not-Not was trying to do the same with regard to China's post-Mao culture.

However, this seemingly was the aim of Zhou and Lan alone. Instead, the journal's success, if not the group's, can be put down to its recruitment of fellow-traveler poets from various parts of China and offering a platform to younger newcomer poets born in the 1960s. In doing so, Not-Not was able to promote and extend an interest in the use of language and the production of aesthetic value in poetry, which had been hitherto neglected. Such recruitment and promotional activities impressed critics and poets alike.

The reaction against the pan-cultural theories of Not-Not and Wholism within the avant-garde is indicative of the developing autonomy of the avant-garde sub-field. Such theories were too broad and too political, and thus dangerous. The insular indifference to

outside events that characterizes the western avant-garde was attractive to poets who wished to avoid the dangers inherent in implicit political activities and position-takings that held significance beyond the sub-field, in society at large.

One of the first calls for a greater stress on technique and purely aesthical interests can be found in *Day By Day Make It New* (1985), and this was renewed in *Han Poetry* and officially published essays by Ouyang Jianghe (thus described by some as the Ezra Pound of the Sichuan avant-garde) and others in later years. After the bloody repression of peaceful protests on June Fourth, *Against* and *The Nineties* openly advocated the indifference and professionalism that was championed by Baudelaire, who was reacting against the flabby Romanticism and socially responsible literature of his time. However, in China, such a position-taking also appears to be a conservative act taken against innovators and rowdy activists (many of whom were imprisoned in 1989-1991), and thus, also, can be seen as a form of accommodation with the CCP's cultural establishment. In addition, this can be linked with the idea of 'pure' production – as advocated by Eliot and Valéry – that called for purely internal readings of poetry.

In a sense, during 1989-1993, journals such as *Against* and *The Nineties* can be seen as sites of consolidation for the previous, public prominence of poets such as Ouyang Jianghe, Xi Chuan, and Chen Dongdong, while others, such as Sun Wenbo and Xiao Kaiyu, were able to establish themselves as major poets during the 1990s as a result of their association with these journals and poets. However, while more or less the entire avant-garde was thrown back into the Second World during times of political and cultural repression, unofficial publications continued as the avenue to recognition for almost all newcomers – whether that led to publication in a major unofficial journal such as *Not-Not* or in a liberal official journal.

The poetry avant-garde's ambiguous relationship with official publications is also of note. As the number of young editors who graduated from universities in the 1980s increased, publication opportunities likewise grew for the avant-garde. This was particularly the case from 1986 until June Fourth 1989, after which advocates of avant-garde poetry were silenced for a lengthy period of time. Journals such as *Guandong Literature* in distant Liaoyuan in China's Northeast effectively became 'official' Second World publications, and, when politically possible, avant-garde poetry was favored at

larger, nationally circulated journals such as *The Poetry Press* and *Author*. The smaller regional journals can be seen as barometers of the Second World, in the sense that even newcomers are publishable once they are featured in an unofficial journal that strikes the eye of young, liberal editors.

After June Fourth, the avant-garde sub-field experienced the arrival of newcomer poets and newcomer journals throughout China. This is as much a result of the political repression of the early 1990s as it is of the struggle for recognition by younger poets and innovators, and their exclusion from journals such as *The Nineties*. The Second World continues to exist as the necessary home to newcomers who wish to enter the avant-garde, but who also wish to have a platform from which to challenge the status quo that exists there and achieve recognition within the sub-field.

Among poets, there is a better understanding of the avant-garde ‘game’ today than there was in the 1980s. For instance, the targets of such newcomers are only now beginning to be canonized in textbooks and classrooms in China, such as Chang & Lu ed. (2002). Otherwise, newcomers react against the poetical practice of frequently published (officially and unofficially) and critically approved (within the avant-garde) poets. Poets invited overseas are also potential subjects of suspicion and challenge, especially as the attention and favor they receive is unlikely to be lavished on Second World poets residing beyond China’s coastal areas.⁷⁶⁵ Sichuan’s poets have shown how moving to coastal regions and establishing friendships with the increasing number of overseas poets can help to overcome such anonymity. An argument that only the finest poetry is so recognized runs aground on the operating principles of the avant-garde – a sub-field of culture that produces its own aesthetic due to new position-takings and continuous internal polemics that are the result. However, given that the western avant-garde tradition has been adopted and adapted to the requirements of China’s avant-garde, it is difficult to see how poets can achieve the levels of consecration accorded to western poets such as Baudelaire and Eliot within China. On the other hand, China’s Second World tradition is unique and deserves to be recorded, as I have attempted to do here.

The avant-garde and the Second World fostered the growth of women’s poetry in China, from Zhai Yongming’s <Woman> to *The Woman’s Poetry Paper*, and on to a number of

⁷⁶⁵ See van Crevel (1996): 97.

woman-only unofficial journals that have appeared in print and on the Internet in recent years. Zhai's early woman-centered experimental verse (1984) encouraged further experimentation by younger woman poets, such as Hai Nan and Tang Danhong, several of whom were first published in Second World journals, such as *Not-Not*. And these events emboldened more radical feminist poetry, such as that found in *The Woman's Poetry Paper* (1989).

The poets and poetry in *Modernists Federation* in early 1985 were a harbinger of what was to come later in the 1980s. Only the names of some Shanghai poets and Han Dong are lacking, but they would all appear in other Sichuan journals before 1989.

In the late 1990s, new groupings of poets that Maghiel van Crevel terms practitioners of poetical 'bad behavior' are reviving practices previously seen in the work and activities of the Macho Men, Not-Not, and Liao Yiwu, for example.⁷⁶⁶ This apparent reproduction of disused position-takings is common to Bourdieu's model of behavior by individuals and groups in the avant-garde sub-field, but also highlights a lack of awareness among contemporary and newcomer poets of the pre-June Fourth development of the avant-garde sub-field.

In recent months, I have had conversations with two Chinese poets that focused my mind on this issue. One was born in the 1950s and the other in the 1960s, and both had participated in the Second World, but are no longer practicing poets. Both stated that there was little remarkable about the poetry of the 1980s. In doing so, they discounted or 'forgot' the historical context and the difficulties poets of the time had in establishing an autonomous avant-garde sustained by a Second World of Poetry in the face of continuous attempts by the CCP to restrain, if not eliminate, free speech, public or otherwise.

I hope that this study will help to prevent such forgetfulness in China and allow a fuller appreciation by outside observers and enthusiasts of avant-garde poetry and the Chinese literary field. China's poets live in a constrained society and often write similarly constrained forms of poetry. It is only in the Second World of poetry that China's poets have an opportunity to give full and free voice to their song. Offering a window onto this scene for readers on the outside has been my foremost wish.

⁷⁶⁶ See van Crevel (2004b).