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

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CHAPTER 1: AVANT-GARDE POETRY NATIONWIDE – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

For 30 years, until 1978, the term avant-garde poetry (先锋诗歌) had little or no meaning in China. The sense of the term avant-garde in China is potentially double-edged due to its political, Marxist usage as a reference to the communist party as the 'vanguard' of the proletariat. However, since the mid-1980s the term has been borrowed from western literary theory to refer to works of art that push out the edges of accepted artistic practice, in other words in reference to experimental forms and techniques.[2] In China in 1978, there was a public rediscovery of modern poetry – and for those readers under the age of thirty possibly the appearance of poetry they had never read nor heard tell of. For the majority of Chinese poets and poetry-readers the assumption to power of the CCP in 1949 eventually led to the inability to read, or continue reading, translations of contemporary Western avant-garde poetry and the modernist poetry written by Chinese poets. This situation did not change until after the death of Mao Zedong and the fall of The Gang of Four in 1976, and the subsequent rise to power of Deng Xiaoping in 1978. The poets of the 1940s, and, often, their translations, were still available to an ever-dwindling readership throughout this period, but it is in no way evident that these resources had any discernible impact on Chinese poetry until the public appearance of unofficial (非官方) or underground (地下) poetry written in the late-1960s and 1970s by young poets born after 1949.

The public reappearance of this poetry was in large part due to the purely political needs of Deng Xiaoping and his supporters in the CCP who encouraged the opening of a Pandora's box of free speech in 1978, as witnessed by the Beijing Spring (北京之春) and

[2] See Yeh (1991c).

Democracy Wall (民主墙), in order to depose Mao's anointed successor, Hua Guofeng. One of the spirits to leap out of the box was poetry. And leap out it did – after a period of 10 years of gestation – in the form of the poet Huang Xiang and the Enlightenment Society (启蒙社) in Guizhou and Beijing, and the unofficial literary journal *Today* in Beijing and its pack of aspiring poets of a decidedly modernist bent.[3]

Apart from the clandestine reading of translations of foreign works, banned Chinese literature, and the occasional poem written by exceptional individuals, before 1976 there was little homegrown underground literature to speak of in China. Much of what little there was consisted of escapist fiction (romances, detective and spy stories) none of which addressed the domestic social or political situation at the time.[4]

Underground poetry in the 1960s and 1970s did exist, but was largely confined to small groups of friends and trusted poetry lovers. A detailed account of these individuals, in particular the genesis of the *Today* group of poets, can be found in Chapter two of Maghiel van Crevel's *Language Shattered*.

The first transformative public appearance of domestic underground literature on any scale of note occurred during the Beijing Spring of November 1978 - May 1979. Literary journals such as Beijing's *Today* appeared among numerous unauthorized political journals that were sold at Beijing's Democracy Wall and similar locations in other major Chinese cities. Many of these journals also published poetry of a political nature, but *Today* was the only journal with a professed commitment to non-political literature, both poetry and fiction.

Although these journals were illegal, they were permitted to exist for as long as politically useful during Deng's purge of Maoists from the CCP leadership – hence the use of the term 'unofficial' rather than 'underground'.[5] In China, all books and magazines must receive permission to be published from CCP-controlled publishing and censorship organs. Once such permission is granted, the management of a publishing house or journal receives a book number (书号) and a fixed selling price, both of which must be

[3] For more on *Today* poetry and poets see Yeh (1991c): 85-88; Chapter 13: 421-440 in McDougall & Louie (1997); also van Crevel (1996): 21-68; and essays by Pan & Pan, and Tay in Kinkley ed. (1985).
[4] Howard Goldblatt & Leo Ou-fan Lee, <The Dissenting Voice> in Hsu Kai-yu (1980a): 911-916. Also, Yang Jian (1993a).
[5] As used in Goodman (1981).

printed in the book or journal. This situation has in recent years been relaxed somewhat at certain times, but this description of controls over publication holds more or less true for the period of time covered within these pages.

In fact, the poetry of *Today* was so well received at the time that several poems by poets such as Bei Dao, Shu Ting, Jianghe, and Gu Cheng were soon published in official literary journals, such as Beijing's *Poetry Monthly* (*诗刊* – hereafter referred to as *Poetry*). Bei Dao is perhaps the best known and most influential of the *Today* poets, and his poem <The Answer> (回答)[6] and its refrain "I don't believe...." marked an important turning point in the history of what is known in China as New Poetry (新诗).[7] However, while publication in official literary journals was recognition of a sort – something very desirable to aspiring poets – it was a potentially double-edged sword, given that this was recognition by an official journal in which the bulk of the published poetry necessarily served politico-cultural goals espoused by the state cultural apparatus.

Nevertheless, *Today* poetry featured the hitherto forbidden themes of alienation, humanism, a striking use of personal symbolism and imagery, and a pervasive spirit of skepticism, which distinguished the best of this poetry from the staid realistic, or idealistic revolutionary verse, which after 1949 had been inspired by the CCP-dictated national mood and prevailing political ideology and vision.

At a national poetry conference convened in Nanning, Guangxi province, in May 1980, the overwhelming tone of the debate about *Today* poetry was negative. The *Today* poets and their many fellow travelers, who had sprung up throughout China, were termed 'misty' or 'obscure' (朦胧) poets because of their use of personal symbolism and other modernist literary devices not common to post-1949 poetry. Older poets and readers of establishment poetry who did not share the experiences and backgrounds of the rusticated youths,[8] and whose faith in communism was not yet shattered, found this so-called Misty poetry incomprehensible, if not subversive. This led to a rebuttal in defense of Misty

[6] In Duke, ed., (1985). This was the first of the *Today* poems to be published, appearing in the March 1979 edition of *Poetry*.

[7] This term refers to poetry written in the vernacular language -- spoken Mandarin Chinese. Before 1917, all poetry had been written in the classical written language (文言), which bore little relation to vernacular speech and thus was beyond the grasp of 99% of the population, who had insufficient education.

[8] These were normally recent urban high school graduates, 16-18 years of age, who were sent to live in the countryside to learn from the farmers and thus eliminate bourgeois tendencies. Those without good contacts in the CCP found it very difficult to return to their homes until the early 1980s.

poetry by the critic Xie Mian in the national *Guangming Daily* newspaper (*光明日报*) in May, and sparked off an on-again off-again polemic over avant-garde poetry in official literary periodicals, which continued throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.[9] A reluctant acceptance of sorts of Misty poetry by the CCP cultural establishment was apparently granted in 1985 when the first of many Misty poetry anthologies was published.[10] Meanwhile, the apparent popularity of Misty poetry and the official publication of anthologies also had the effect of solidifying Misty poetry as a target for newcomers to the emerging literary sub-field of avant-garde poetry.

Establishment critics in officially published essays attacking the poetry of the Today group initially used the term Misty poetry as an expression of abuse. Only poetry that praised and bolstered the spirit of the nation (民族) and the CCP, poetry that is of the people and by the people, and in the service of the CCP, could hope to encapsulate truth, goodness, and beauty in their work.[11]

The source of this enmity can be traced back to Mao Zedong's <Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art> (在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话) in May 1942.[12] While interpretations of Mao's comments have varied with changes in the political climate, since 1949 this document has been held over the heads of all Chinese cultural producers in an effort to have them turn out morally uplifting, educational art and literature in a realist mode (socialist or revolutionary realism, depending on the time period in question).

The first sentence of Mao's <Talks> set the tone for what was to follow in the text itself and over the years since 1942:

> The purpose of our meeting today is precisely to fit art and literature properly into the whole revolutionary machine as one of its component parts, to make them a powerful weapon for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and annihilating the enemy and to help the

[9] <Facing the New Rising> (在新的崛起面前), in Yao Jiahua ed. (1989): 9-13.
[10] Yan Yuejun et al. ed. (1987; 5th edition).
[11] *The people* (人民) here is used in a traditional communist sense as referring to those people who are deemed to be supportive or useful to the revolution or the party. See, Ai Fei (1992), for a typical critical attack on all Misty and avant-garde poetry.
[12] Mao Zedong (1968): 804-835.

people to fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.....[13]

Mao went on to state: “Our standpoint is that of the proletariat and the broad masses of the people.”[14] And the people, who constituted over 90 percent of the population according to Mao, were the workers, peasants and soldiers (a holy trinity referred to by the shorthand Chinese term 工农兵), and the “... working masses of the urban petty bourgeoisie together with its intelligentsia, who are also allies in the revolution and are capable of lasting cooperation with us.”[15] Plainly, poets and other artists were required to fall into line with the party if they were to be welcomed into a CCP-controlled cultural establishment. During the wars against the Japanese, the Nationalists (国民党), and the Americans (in Korea and Vietnam), in addition to continuous class warfare until 1976, the line that they had to toe was drawn both clearly and conservatively during most of the following four decades.

Therefore, the fact that *Today*, the journal, was merely banned in 1980, and none of its poets arrested, sent to labor camps or executed, as would have been the case in previous years, indicated that some measure of tolerance or differences of opinion now existed within the CCP literary establishment. Further evidence of this appeared in the publication of state-run media where several articles were published in defense of Misty poetry by such noted establishment poetry critics as Xie Mian and Sun Shaozhen.[16]

In autumn 1983, as part of the campaign to ‘clear out spiritual pollution’ (清除精神污染) launched so as to combat the spread of ‘bourgeois liberalism’ (资产阶级自由化) from the west, an all-out attack was begun by establishment critics against humanism, alienation, and the use of modernist literary techniques in general, and Misty poetry in particular.[17] However, by this time, it was already too late – the damage the CCP sought to prevent had been done. Between 1979 and 1983, a larger number of newcomer poets (generally five to ten years younger than the *Today* poets) in all parts of China had been reading and emulating Misty poetry and formerly forbidden translated poetry from the west. By 1982, they had begun to find their own, very different voices, and the

[13] In Hsu Kai-yu, (1980a): 29.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.: 31.
[16] See Yao Jiahua ed. (1989).
[17] See <1979-1987: A Chronicle of Purges> in Barmé & Minford ed. (1988): 343-352.

emergence of what became known as the ‘Second Tide of Poetry’ (第二次诗潮) began. Other terms used are ‘the Third Generation’ (第三代), ‘Post-Misty Poetry ’ (后朦胧诗), and ‘the Newborn Generation ’ (新生代).

The term ‘Second Tide of Poetry’ can be readily understood, coming as it did in the wake of the ‘tide’ of Misty poetry. ‘The Third Generation’, however, is somewhat problematic in that there are three or four possible interpretations of the term. For the purposes of what is written here, the Third Generation is best understood as a generation of poets following two earlier generations who had experimented with modernist poetic techniques in China: poets such as Li Jinfa and Dai Wangshu in the 1920s and 1930s and poets of the Nine Leaves (九叶）group,[18] such as Mu Dan and Zheng Min, in the 1940s (First Generation); and the Misty poets, such as Bei Dao, Mang Ke, and Shu Ting in the 1970s (Second Generation).[19] A thorough account of these developments can be found in Michelle Yeh’s *Modern Chinese Poetry: Theory and Practice since 1917*.

In part, the rise of the newer poets (not all were younger) was a reaction to what they viewed as the unacceptable dualistic aspect of Chinese poetry – either establishment poetry or Misty poetry. Their dissatisfaction with both types of poetry can be traced to a pronounced generation gap between them and earlier poets. Misty poetry seemed a natural outgrowth of disillusionment with Maoism in the pre-1978 period, and was inaugurated or stimulated by *Today* poetry. The poetry of the newcomers was written against the backdrop of a relatively liberal (by modern Chinese standards), rapidly changing social environment during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and their poetry was a reflection of this quite different background, or individual habitus. This more open and outward-looking environment encouraged the search for and development of new artistic impulses and the growth of individuality as not seen in China since at least 1949. Moreover, as already noted, the CCP attempted to act against these tendencies by way of cultural campaigns, thus stimulating reactions.

[18] The group name was not formalized until the publication in 1992 of *The Poetry of the Nine Leaves Group* (*九叶派诗选*), edited by Lan Dizhi.
[19] See Zhu Lingbo (1987).

In his preface to a 1992 anthology of Post-Misty Poetry,[20] Tang Xiaodu, one of China's most knowledgeable critics of post-1976 poetry, offers a useful – although necessarily generalizing – comparison of the different social-political circumstances and attitudes which differentiate the newer poets, whom he terms Third Generation, from the Misty poets:

-- Misty poetry was a manifestation of antagonism directed against the unified ideological front that had existed in all areas of Chinese society prior to 1976. The Third Generation, on the other hand, evolved out of a society on the road to pluralism (in the realm of the arts in any case) that had witnessed the collapse of Marxism (and Mao Zedong Thought).
-- Misty poets had limited choices in terms of form and content because of the CCP's tight control over culture before the 1980s. The Third Generation, however, enjoyed the possibility of several choices in the environment of relative cultural liberality that accompanied Deng Xiaoping's opening to the outside world in 1979.
-- Misty poetry evinced the crisis of values in Chinese society in the wake of the Cultural Revolution that had done so much to destroy the value system that the CCP had been attempting to inculcate. By the time of the rise of the Third Generation, values of any kind were at best loose, or were far removed from the realities of everyday life.
-- In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, many Chinese artists attempted to reintroduce human and spiritual elements into commonly held morality as a direct response to the ideological and physical excesses of the preceding years. By the mid-1980s however, morality was rapidly becoming just another commodity, an object like any other that could be bought or sold when the price was right.

What Tang fails to note is that the Misty poets' very interest in inculcating moral values to readers smacked of the didactic goals pursued by CCP-sponsored art, as well as traditional, Confucian-influenced art. That younger poets would react against this, and against the moralizing tone of some Misty poets, is understandable when considered in light of Bourdieu's model of the cultural field. Newcomers to poetry, in search of recognition, would accordingly highlight such differences in order to stake a position in the literary sub-field. Because of the different backgrounds, or habitus, of the poets, the poetry of the two periods also exhibited very different intellectual attitudes:

-- Misty poetry was suffused with humanism, thoughts on human nature and lyrical strength, while Third Generation poetry put greater emphasis on the primal state of

[20] Tang ed. (1992): 1-8. What follows is a paraphrased version of Tang's observations, with some necessary expansion.

the life of the individual.

-- The Misty poets enjoyed the lofty feelings engendered by their pursuit of freedom. The newer poets, on the other hand, had to endure the weightless feeling that accompanies freedom attained, even if, by western standards, this freedom was still of a strictly limited variety.

-- A universally held, healthy spirit of skepticism brought Misty poets together, as evinced by Bei Dao's <The Answer>. The sense of responsibility felt by Misty poets was torn asunder by the self-centered, individual nature of Third Generation poetry which was questing after a deeper exploration of individual circumstances, perception and language. 'Man' was no longer a concept writ large as it had been by much Misty poetry as poets strove to empower the self with the dignity and respect lost to poetry during the preceding decades, but was now writ small by the Third Generation, in part as a reflection of a rejection of the romantic-heroic stance of much Misty poetry, and in recognition of the insignificance and powerlessness of the individual in China's modernizing state.

-- Finally, Misty poetry was suffused with a tragic consciousness that accompanied the poet's revolt against alienation – having been somehow expelled from a perceived group, be that the Red Guards or The People. Third Generation poetry, however, was characterized by the sort of empty feeling which results from the acceptance of alienation and from poets perceiving themselves as outsiders.

As individuals perceiving themselves to be outside all establishment conventions, for avant-garde poets there were no limitations on what could be written or on how it could be written. Everything but politics, which was left to establishment poets, was fair game thematically. All forms of diction were now the language of poetry. Standards were those that poets set for themselves based on their understanding of the modern masters (in translation or otherwise) and the often short-lived influence of other avant-garde poets. This situation came about after 1982 and the gradual establishment of the restricted sub-field of avant-garde poetry centered on several unofficial poetry journals. By 1983, polemics among the poets in this 'Second World of Poetry' had already begun and were expressed through groups and their journals. What Tang sketches out is the generally shared *illusio* of the poetry avant-garde in China, and the grounds for claims to the disinterested positions within that field of poets who propound the slogan of art for art's sake.

Avant-garde links with any form of Chinese literary tradition are tenuous at best. It was easy to assail the ideological and formal constraints of the CCP literary establishment's socialist and revolutionary realism, and then to revolt against Misty conventions and style, but much more difficult to locate a literary tradition from which they could work.

This resulted in a great deal of confusion over the importance of literary tradition, the poet's relationship to it, and even over what the term 'tradition' actually refers to. Bourdieu notes that the avant-garde sub-field of culture is the site of continuous polemics over the definitions of who is a poet and what is poetry. The following chapters will show that the only tradition that seems relevant to the events that unfolded in the sub-field of avant-garde poetry during the period under review is that of western avant-garde poetry dating from nineteenth-century France as well as that of the Anglo-American tradition dating from Walt Whitman. However, given the political dangers inherent in claiming such a tradition as one's own, China's avant-garde artists tend to approach the issue in an oblique manner.

Comments, published in April 1993, by Nanjing-based poet Han Dong, are indicative of the unique difficulties China's young poets feel themselves forced to deal with:

> ... Each writer gets his start from reading. Today, therefore, convincing and authoritative works are naturally translated works. We all feel deeply that there is no tradition to rely upon -- the great Chinese classical literary tradition seems to have been invalidated. Actually, this is in fact the case. With the exception of the 'great classical spirit', concrete works and the classics have already been cut off from us with regard to the written language. They are of no use to the writing of today, and the so-called spirit of the classics, if it has lost the immediacy of the written word, necessarily lapses into mystical interpretation and speculation. This point is not only obvious, but it is also gladly admitted to by all. In fact, we have already become orphans of literary tradition.
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> In search of solace, by coincidence everyone turned to the west. In order to strengthen oneself and also to 'move towards the world', how to graft oneself onto the western literary tradition has become the direction of the efforts of very many poets today. Unfortunately, this goal can only be arrived at indirectly through translated works. In terms of written texts, we study translated works and afterwards write similar things imitatively. Later, they must still be translated once again into English or other languages and promoted to the west in order to capture an 'international market'.
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> ... So as to remedy gaps in logic, poets have expounded an illusion: namely so-called 'cosmopolitanism'. They think of themselves as first being a member of the human race, only afterwards are they born into a particular nationality and use a particular language in writing. In my opinion this is merely a kind of moral defense and incapable of changing the [fact of] isolation from the [Chinese] written language....
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> Learning from translated works is the same as learning from classical literature. It can be one of our sources of inspiration. We can only speculate about and imagine the spirit, the interpretations and all the possibilities which lie

behind the concrete written word....[21]

Here we find new evidence of what Lin Yusheng deals with in his book *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*.[22] Lin shows how, in fact, anti-traditional writers often attacked tradition while apparently unaware that they themselves were still within it. In fact, the argument has been made that this behavior is in itself part of that tradition. How, for instance, can the modern Chinese language which derives from and still retains elements of the classical language be said to be entirely unrelated or incomprehensible? Moreover, how does native tradition become mere 'inspiration' when a poet clearly goes back to it for thematic or linguistic material? Most post-1976 poets, and the majority of educated Chinese for that matter, have read and continue to read the masterpieces of China's classical tradition. The continuing strength of China's linguistic and other cultural traditions begs the question what traditions are truly applicable, and suggests primary borrowings can only be forms and ideas, such as the model of permanent cultural revolution inherent in the functioning of the western cultural avant-garde.

Han's views also go some way towards explaining why China's avant-garde poets have had a tendency to form groups around poetry journals or otherwise. Some groups were loosely based on friendships, charismatic individuals, and general poetic tendencies or commonly held poetic theories. In the former USSR, by contrast, there was only one recorded attempt to create an unofficial literary journal before the mid-80s.[23] Perhaps the continued strength of and accessibility to the modern Russian literary tradition is one of the reasons for this apparent anomaly there, and the lack of such a strong modern tradition in New Poetry one of the reasons behind the tendency to group together in China. Then again, these are the classic tactics of newcomers to poetry as they seek recognition and positions in the field. Nor are they new to China, as such activity was commonplace during the 1920s and 1930s, a situation described by Michel Hockx in *Questions of Style: Literary Societies and Literary Journals in Modern China 1911-1937*.

Having said the newly emergent avant-garde poets were opposed to the romanticism and heroic posturing of many Misty poets, it should be pointed out that this did not

[21] Han Dong & Zhu Wen (1993).
[22] Lin Yusheng (1979).
[23] Edward Brown (1982): 342.

preclude elements of romanticism in their own poetry. However, given the apparent insignificance and powerlessness of the individual and this self-perceived outsider's position within Chinese society – a situation which in itself led to a great increase in the numbers of avant-garde poets late in 1984 or early in 1985, many avant-garde poets adopted an anti-heroic position, and most of the rest took on that of a self-perceived neutral observer. Self-assertion remained an important element, but now the focus was shifted from that of the Misty poets upon the human condition and society in general, to a focus upon the specific details and circumstances of life and poetry. Individual truth supplanted Misty attempts to speak truth for a generation – even if the generation they addressed had been restricted to former Red Guards and rusticated youths during and immediately after the Cultural Revolution period.

The first of the avant-garde unofficial journals were Chengdu's *Macho Men* (*莽汉*) and *Modern Poetry Internal Exchange Materials* (*现代诗歌内部交流资料*) also known as *Modernists Federation*, Nanjing's *Them* (*他们*),[24] and *Day By Day Make It New* (*日日新*) of Chongqing. Having been published without book numbers, these journals were all eventually banned by the authorities, not because of overtly subversive political content – for there was none – but due primarily to the illegality of truly free expression or dissident viewpoints and, secondarily, an intolerance for the poetic themes and diction of the products of the 'Second World of Poetry '. It is also at this point that it became evident to close observers of Chinese poetry that such a Second World existed.

However, repression did not result in a reduction of the number of such publications, but in a plethora of new titles as old groups dissolved after journals were banned and then reformed again under new titles. The production of a journal in China is a matter of collecting the necessary manuscripts and funds, and then searching out a small printing operation that suffers more from financial need than fear of local authorities – a process much easier today than it was during 1982-1992. Furthermore, local repression meant that printing was often done in towns or provinces other than the ones in which the editors resided.

[24] The longest-lived unofficial poetry journal: 1985-1995, 9 issues. The journal reemerged as a website with a bi-monthly e-journal in August 2002 at www.tamen.net .

Between December 1984 and December 1986, six of China's most influential unofficial poetry journals of the time came out of Sichuan, despite what were arguably the most repressive local conditions in all of China:

1. *Macho Men*; Chengdu, December 1984.
2. *Modern Poetry Internal Exchange Materials* (*Modernists Federation*); Chengdu, March 1985.
3. *Day By Day Make It New*; Chongqing, March 1985.
4. *Chinese Contemporary Experimental Poetry* (*中国现代实验诗*); Fuling, September 1985.
5. *Not-Not Poetical Works and Poetics* (*非非*); Xichang-Chengdu, May 1986.
6. *Han Poetry* (*汉诗*); Chengdu, December 1986.

By mid-1986, a small number of establishment literary journals, such as *Guandong Literature Monthly* (*关东文学月刊*) and *The Poetry Press* (*诗歌报*), had begun to publish Third Generation poetry on a regular basis. The latter half of the year was marked by the official Third Generation coming-out party in the pages of the *Shenzhen Youth Daily* (*深圳青年报*) and *The Poetry Press* of Hefei, when the poet-critic Xu Jingya organized <A Grand Exhibition of Modernist Poetry Groups on China's Poetry Scene 1986> (中国诗坛1986' 现代诗群体大展).[25] Of the 65 'groups' (群体) featured, several were individuals masquerading as groups or small groups made up of two or three poets who came together – or were brought together by the editors – just for the occasion. Furthermore, many of the groups had already ceased to exist. Despite this, most were represented by an abbreviated manifesto and one or more poems.

There was a method to this apparent madness, or sickness, as many establishment critics termed it. At the basis of all this loud clamoring was a demand to be recognized as poets and to be taken seriously as such in China. Unfortunately, the limited selection of poetry and abbreviated manifestos constituted a confusing array shorn of context that obscured some fine poetry and allowed establishment and foreign poetry critics to effectively dismiss the lot as immature, talent-poor boors.[26]

[25] Published in book form as part of Xu et al. ed. (1988).
[26] For example, see critical articles published by numerous critics in *Poetry* during 1987.

During a brief period in the mid-1980s, it seemed that all the modernist and post-modernist experiments with form and content were flooding from the west into China during a mad rush to 'catch up', to become part of a worldwide community of poetry once again after an absence of almost 40 years. This same rush was also occurring in many other areas of Chinese life, <A Grand Exhibition> was merely a graphic representation of the seeming chaos that existed in the realm of poetry at the time.

Translations of recent foreign poetry and new translations, or new editions of old translations of foreign literary classics and of western literary theory, both ancient and modern, had begun to flood China's bookstores and establishment literary journals in the early 1980s. Taken together with the influence and significance of *Today* and its poetry, the resulting explosion should have come as little surprise.

However, the favorable turn of events in 1986 came to an abrupt halt in January 1987 when CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang was forced to resign his post and a campaign against 'bourgeois liberalization' in the arts resulted in tight editorial policies weighted against avant-garde poetry. National negative examples were made of Sichuan's Liao Yiwu and Yi Lei of Tianjin, two poets whose work had been published in the combined number 1-2 issue of *People's Literature Monthly* (*人民文学月刊*).[27] Their poems were held up as examples of the kind of poetry that was not to be published in China: Liao's poem was too dark, obscure, and obscene, and Yi Lei's was considered overly lewd. [28]

At the same time, harassment of the editors of unofficial poetry journals was stepped up. The first of the now seemingly annual campaigns since the 1950s began in early 1987 against illegal publications and pornography. Unofficial poetry journals were specifically targeted as illegal publications. During 1987, avant-garde poets disappeared from the pages of establishment literary journals, the only references to their existence occurring in numerous articles condemning their poetry.[29] In 1988, however, the cultural atmosphere in China was once again sufficiently liberal to allow avant-garde poetry to begin reappearing in official journals and poetry anthologies.

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[27] Yi Lei, <A Single Girl's Bedroom> (独身女人的卧室), pp. 51-54； Liao Yiwu, <The City of Death> (死城), pp. 58-62.

[28] As told to the author by the poets involved. Liao was suspended from his work, the official literary magazine he edited was closed, and his poetry was not allowed to be published in official literary journals until June 1988.

[29] See relevant issues of *Poetry* and *The Poetry Press*.

By the summer of 1989, unofficial avant-garde poetry journals appeared to have attained for their poets results comparable to those of *Today*: their journals had brought avant-garde poets and poetry to the attention of other poets and poetry critics in China and the west. This led to a limited penetration of the establishment-controlled print media and public discussion of their poetry, and gave avant-garde poetry access to a broader reading public.

The Tian'anmen Massacre of June 4, 1989 proved to be a watershed for avant-garde poets. Many felt that as anti- or non-establishment poets they had an obligation to respond to the situation. However, many other poets lost the impulse to act because of prolonged circumspection during the summer of that year.[30] For these poets self-imposed silence was the only answer they could muster. While their professed neutrality or revulsion at all matters political was called into doubt, and while they did feel an urge to explore their emotions in their poetry, almost all did no more than ponder the issue as they shifted uncomfortably under the weight of impending responsibility. After a respectful period of silence, most avant-garde poets picked up where they had left off -- habit, social and material pressures, and fear ultimately won out over their initial reactions of outrage and horror, and pangs of conscience. A number of these poets, faced with their inability to respond, gave up writing poetry entirely.

This leads one to ponder the thesis propounded by Geremie Barmé in *In The Red*. Speaking of Chinese culture in the 1990s, he states: "... Individual artists struggle to maintain or achieve their independence ... they are faced with a choice of suffering complete cultural ostracism or accepting the State's efforts to incorporate them in a new social contract, one in which consensus replaces coercion, and complicity subverts criticism." [31]

And it has always been thus. Poets such as Ouyang Jianghe and Zhai Yongming, like the Misty poet Shu Ting before them, were anxious to join the CCP's Writer's Association in the early 1980s (unlike Shu, Ouyang and Zhai were unsuccessful). And Liao Yiwu traded on his friendships with elder establishment poets (Bai Hang and Liu

[30] These observations are based on the author's discussions with numerous Second World poets in various parts of China during the summer of 1989 and after.
[31] Geremie Barmé (1999): 2.

Shahe) to obtain an editorial post at a small official literary journal – although he lost this post in 1987 and was expelled from the Association in 1989.

Barmé goes on to apply the thesis of Miklos Haraszti's book, *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism*,[32] to current realities in China. While the six cultural-political purges carried out by the CCP over the ten years between March 1979 and June 1989 did little to appease artists and intellectuals, the effects of economic reforms during the same period, and particularly in the years since, have led many to make the compromises required of them. Haraszti speaks of "Naive Heroes" who espouse humanistic values and freedom of expression while speaking out against self-censorship, and "Maverick Artists" who are true dissidents as they reject the state culture and its system of reward for compromise in order to retain their independence. These categories tend to merge into one in the cases of Liao Yiwu and Zhou Lunyou (whose 1991 tract, <A Stance of Refusal> [拒绝的姿态], Barmé paraphrases to conclude his second chapter, <An Iron Fist in a Velvet Glove>). While one may call the gestures of these two Sichuan poets "naive" (Barmé's choice of words with regard to Zhou) or "maverick", in the case of Zhou his choice was made after spending almost two years in jails and prison camps after several years of what Barmé and Haraszti would term compromise and self-censorship. In Liao's case, he ceased all compromising on the morning of June 4, 1989 when he sat down to pen the final two parts of his long poem, <Slaughter> (屠杀), and then wrote the poem <Requiem for Souls> (安魂), which he and six other Sichuan poets produced in video format in March 1990 – after which they were all arrested. Both have continued their careers as poets and literary activists since their release from China's labor camps, but are essentially unemployable, living off what money they can earn while undertaking clandestine literary projects, or off the support of family and friends.

However, these two are the exceptions to the rule. This rule, as Haraszti and Barmé explain it, sees artists pushing outward on the borders of what is acceptable to the state cultural organs, and, after some difficulty, finding what was once deemed outrageous becoming acceptable, if not actually encouraged. Initial cultural establishment resistance to modernist (Misty) and avant-garde (Third Generation) literary techniques and themes

[32] Miklos Haraszti (1987).

during the 1980s has been overcome, and since 1993 most avant-garde poets and poetry are potentially publishable – provided there is a market for them and their work.

As in the west, this is the biggest difficulty faced by avant-garde poets. In China, not much poetry is read in comparison to the heyday of Misty poetry in the early 1980s (for reasons already mentioned, i.e. lack of generational bonds and appeal, etc.). Poets often have to find their own financing for collections and anthologies they wish officially published (which are still subject to limited censorship), unofficial poetry journals are still published (on paper or on the Internet), but primarily due to a lack of money and readership rather than the overt hostility of the cultural establishment. In Bourdieu's terms, and as his research shows, the cultural avant-garde consciously marginalize themselves, primarily producing cultural goods for peers and connoisseurs, and posterity.

Given that by 1986, avant-garde poets had managed to establish a Second World, or sub-field, of poetry of their own, it may seem confusing that they still desire official publication. Part of the reason for this may be due to the absence of universally acceptable legitimizing institutions, of institutions of consecration, as university curricula and official literary journals are still unable to fulfill this role due to continuing CCP controls. In partial compensation, there has been an increase in the official publication of partisan anthologies (many privately funded) that have fueled Second World polemics, which are consequently aired in establishment literary journals and on the Internet, as well as – and often first – in unofficial journals. The result has been the continuing existence of China's Second World of Poetry, especially for newcomers to the sub-field who have less access to official publication than better known, older poets, who may also be invited to poetry conferences in China and overseas. In line with the permanent cultural revolution inherent in the avant-garde, newcomers see these better known poets as being on the road to consecration by the Chinese establishment or overseas sinologists, and thus positions or markers against which to measure their own position-takings – much as the Third Generation had with regard to Misty poets. Consequently, the adoption of this western avant-garde tradition, and a tendency toward art for art's sake, has led to increasing marginalization, a process already well under way by 1986. In China, as in the west, readers must be trained in the aesthetic traditions of the avant-garde by universities and specialist publishers – in other words, introduced to the field – or else poets in China

are reduced to writing for poets, within an avant-garde that has little opportunity to achieve the relative success of its western mentor.

What follows is a record of the path Sichuan's avant-garde poets took from the early post-Misty 1980s, through cultural battles with the establishment and their own internecine travails during the mid- and late-1980s, to positions inside and beyond the pale of the state-tolerated poetry of today's China.