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CHAPTER 4: MACHO MEN OR POETS ERRANT?

Poetry on University Campuses

By 1980, poetry, or writing, groups probably existed in every university in China. Zhong Ming attested to the presence of self-published poetry collections circulating on Sichuan's university campuses in the previous chapter, specifically his group's journal *One, Two, Three, Four* (一, 二, 三, 四).⁹⁵ Some of this activity may have been inspired by the *Today* group in Beijing, but the majority of these students would have known little of them, aside from the few officially published poems, and would have been taking advantage of the new, relative freedoms of association and expression. This was abetted by Chinese intelligentsia's traditional love of literature in general, and poetry in particular. Students were living in relative isolation in walled campuses where comings and goings were closely monitored and only authorized visitors were allowed to enter. There were curfews and single-sex, same-department dormitories that were also policed. However, under varying degrees of school and CCP supervision, students were encouraged to create their own social and cultural life within campuses.

The explosion of poetry groups out of these educational quarters and into society in 1984-1985 in Sichuan was to some degree triggered by one poet-activist who had a foot in the campuses of schools in Chengdu and Chongqing – Wan Xia (b. 1962). A resident of Chengdu, though born in Chongqing, Wan was a student (class of 1980) in the Chinese department of the Teacher's College in Nanchong, a town of 200,000, equidistant to the east of Chengdu and to the north of Chongqing. There were groups of students from both

⁹⁵ This group consisted of himself and classmates Xiong Yu, Meng Ming, and Lu Lu at the Teacher's University in Beipei, a suburb of Chongqing, in 1980-1982.

these metropolises and many more from the countryside and small towns in eastern Sichuan attending the school.

In <Heroes and Toughs> (英雄于泼皮),⁹⁶ Li Yawei (b. 1963 in Youyang, class of 1979) briefly describes the genesis prior to 1984 of the poetry group that would take the name of Macho Men:

During their time in university, Wan Xia with Li Xueming, Zhu Zhiyong, and others put together *Rainbow* (彩虹); I, Hu Yu, and others did *An Instant* (刹那); and because these groups of poetry wall-poster-paper (诗歌墙报) makers used Gold Shield brand hardcover notebooks to write in, they united to form *Gold Shield* (金盾). Hu Dong was the head of the *Flowers of a Hundred Colors* (百色花) poetry society at Sichuan University [in Chengdu]. These activities and ‘writing groups’ (写作班子) can be said to be the prelude to the Macho Men group (流派). From the start they seemed to hint at this generation of poets’ fear of solitude, need of the collective, and an inability to leave the organization; later the appearance in their hundreds and thousands of poetry societies all over China was a clear-cut illustration of this point.

As Li goes on to point out, it was as if these younger student-poets felt the need for collective action as a way of making up for what they had missed out on, but had observed at a distance – the collective activities of the Red Guards and rusticated youth of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the poets born in 1960, or later, would not have witnessed the extremes of violence during 1966-1969. Instead, it was the free rides on trains all over the country, being reviewed by Mao Zedong on Tian’anmen Square, collective action without adult leadership or supervision, and even being sent to the countryside in the 1970s that might seem romantic to a boy in the countryside such as Li Yawei. Especially as it was from these youths Li had been able to borrow translations of works by Platonov, Hegel, Pushkin, and other foreign writers at the time.⁹⁷

Yet, this seems a far too simplistic explanation. The isolated conditions in which Chinese students of higher education were forced to live were combined with what students like Li Yawei and Wan Xia, felt was bad teaching methodology, bad teachers,

⁹⁶ Li Yawei (1996a).

⁹⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the background material for this chapter can be found in separate interviews with Wan Xia and Li Yawei by Yang Li in November, 2001, in Chapter 4 of *Splendor* (灿烂); Yang Li (2004): 189-268.

and a bad selection of literary materials – an unsurprising fact what with the reopening of universities after as much as a twelve year hiatus in 1978.⁹⁸ This situation led students to seek out other avenues to education and life. Li goes as far as to say: “One thing that I will take pride in till the end of my life, is that my endless skipping of class totaled over three years at least [of the four spent at college].”⁹⁹

Wan Xia, for instance, turned his attention to several other activities beyond school and his love of poetry: he learned to play the guitar and mouth organ, was known as a fashionable dresser, even though he had to find money by selling whatever could be sold on the local markets (most students had to get by on what little money was sent from their families) – money that also financed drinking and womanizing. Li Yawei was neither the fop Wan was, nor the successful womanizer, and had joined the school boxing club. Wan, on the other hand, was arrested in 1981 along with one other classmate (three others were released without charge) for a drunken brawl in the town that occurred after a disco he and his friends had organized.

According to Li, he first met Wan Xia in his third year, 1982, because of their common pursuits of skipping class, womanizing, and fighting. Li says of himself that he was not much of a poet at the time, and was primarily influenced by Pushkin and Xu Zhimo, while Wan and Hu Dong were more influenced by the songs of Taiwanese pop-star Deng Lijun and others then popular on campuses in China. Prior to university, like many others during the 1970s influenced by Mao Zedong’s poetry, Li had first self-studied classical regulated verse and written traditional-style poetry. It was Wan Xia and Li’s classmate Hu Yu were the best poets at the time. Hu Yu would ransack the libraries for pre-1949 translations of western poetry of every Ism, and work to emulate these. No poetry of Li’s pre-1984 phase is extant (all were confiscated by the police upon his arrest for involvement in the Liao Yiwu poetry-based performance-art video case in March 1990). Here is one of Hu Yu’s poems:

⁹⁸ This situation was witnessed and experienced by the author as a student at Shandong University (1982-83) and Nanjing University (1983-84). During the early 1970s, some universities were reopened and offered 2-year technical degrees to specially selected students – the poet Zhai Yongming was a graduate of such a program.

⁹⁹ Li Yawei (1996a): 132.

<**Window Flower**> (窗花; October 18, 1983)¹⁰⁰

From out of the unclear outline of the riverbank
 you insert
 a champaign in autumn
 in my firm chest
 making the autumnal sun sing out your joy
 making joy illuminate the path beyond the door
 and on your shadow too
 stamping my great, coarse postmark
 as if I'm driving a big wagon
 past your door for the first time

There are elements of surrealism and symbolism, and no punctuation. Here is a dreamlike riverbank inspiring a stream of consciousness beating a path to the door of an object of desire. Is the flower a woman in a window, seen in passing? And are the “big wagon” and the “door” sexual symbols? This all seems plausible and in keeping with the interests of these young men at the time. If so, this is a surprisingly refined rendition of Hu Yu’s supposed lust, something not noted of the Macho Men poets who came together in 1984, including Hu Yu. However, before this was to happen, Wan Xia had an important role to play.

A Third Generation

In 1982, Wan Xia brought the university poets of Chengdu and Chongqing together for the first time. Wan had become friends with poets in both cities by 1981: through Hu Dong he had met Zhao Ye, Tang Yaping and others in Chengdu (all students at Sichuan University), and through a former high school classmate he had met Liao Xi and others who went to school in the Beipei suburb of Chongqing. During the summer of 1982, they all decided to get together and do something big for this newcomer generation of poets, as they saw themselves. Hu Dong was responsible for organizing in Chengdu, Liao Xi in Chongqing, and Wan Xia in Nanchong. They agreed to meet and to bring poetry they had gathered to the Southwest Teachers’ University in Beipei over the October First holiday

¹⁰⁰ Li Yawei ed. (2001): 19.

period. In Wan Xia's words: "We'd come to feel that if we united, we definitely could have a fight with 'Misty poetry'. Our poetry was different from theirs; they were all in all much better than us, they'd been rusticated, suffered, had extremely complicated experiences. All three of us were very excited...."¹⁰¹

While admitting that the quality of their poetry was not up to Misty standards, the decisive factor was the difference in life experience and view, and the corresponding need for the voices of the younger, newer generation to be heard. In total over twenty poet-representatives from the three cities gathered in Beipei: four from Chengdu (Hu Dong, Zhao Ye, Tang Yaping and Beiwang), three from Nanchong (Wan Xia, Zhu Ziyong and Li Xuemin) and the rest from schools in Beipei and other parts of Chongqing. Watches and clothing had been sold, rooms made available, and food tickets collected by the students in Beipei. Everyone threw their poetry on one big table... and then the arguments started. About writing styles. About who was more modern, more progressive, or less so. However, the big argument came about over the name of this new generation. (Small semi-official poetry collections had already been distributed on campuses in Beipei under the names of *This Generation* [这一代]¹⁰² and *An Ordinary Generation* [普通一代].) Someone asked what it should be called, and very quickly, "the Third Generation" was suggested – Wan Xia remembers it coming from the Beipei/Chongqing side, Liao Xi or Chen Lin.¹⁰³ The name was agreed as a title for a journal that would feature the work of all three cities' poets.

According to Wan, the name was inspired by Mao Zedong's 1949 article, <Farewell, Leighton Stuart> (别了, 司徒雷登),¹⁰⁴ in which Mao says that the Imperialists' hopes lie with the third or fourth generation of post-revolution children. In other words, the Imperialists' hopes lay in 'peaceful evolution' (和平演变) and the consequential

¹⁰¹ Yang Li (2004): 206.

¹⁰² *This Generation* was a student-run, literary journal, a national-level cooperative venture involving editors from thirteen different student magazines. Like other of its kind in China at the time (1978-1981), it was partly funded by the schools and monitored by the Communist Youth League. Another influential student magazine in Sichuan was *Jin River* (*Jinjiang* 锦江, mis-transliterated as *Jinhe* 锦河 in Link), published by Sichuan University in Chengdu, 1979-1980 (4 issues). See Link (1999): 93, 188-190.

¹⁰³ Yang Li (2004): 207-208.

¹⁰⁴ Mao Zedong (1968): 1380-1387. John Leighton Stuart (1876-1962) was the last American ambassador in Beijing before the Nixon-rapprochement, leaving China in 1949. He had been born in China to missionary parents and was fluent in Chinese.

overthrow of the CCP. The generation of Wan Xia and his friends was that Third Generation, after the generations of socialist realist poets such as He Jingzhi (b. 1924, the first) and Misty poets such as Bei Dao (b. 1949, the second). Although the age difference was not great between themselves and Bei Dao, for example, the differences in life experience were and this seemed valid enough to classify the ex-Red Guards and rusticated youths as a separate, previous generation.

On the third day of the meeting, the day when they were to decide on the pieces that would appear in the collection, a furious argument broke out over the writing of a preface. According to Wan, Liao Xi and the Chongqing group wanted it made clear that their group had come up with the name, Third Generation. The Chengdu and Nanchong groups felt that it was ridiculous to differentiate between each other, to divide into groups, when they were all in it together as the Third Generation. Ultimately, this led to a shouting match, with Zhao Ye and Tang Yaping at the forefront battling it out with the Chongqing poets. In the end, all parties left unhappy, no journal was produced, and relations between the poets in Chongqing and the rest of Sichuan went into a deep freeze.

In 1983, Zhao Ye, Beiwang, Tang Yaping, Hu Xiaobo, Deng Xiang, and other Chengdu university poets did put out a collection of their poetry entitled *The Third Generation*.¹⁰⁵ A couple of weeks after the failed Chongqing conference in October 1982, Wan Xia wrote the outline of a manifesto for a mooted journal of that name after discussions with Zhao Ye, Hu Dong, and Beiwang in Nanchong, but, although a manifesto was published, Wan's poetry was not used in the *The Third Generation*.

At about this time in 1982, Wan Xia wrote the poem <Red Tiles> (红瓦).¹⁰⁶ In it are the long flowing lines, over a lengthy eleven stanzas, which would characterize later Macho Men poetry. The poem is also an explicit attack on 'Third Generation' poets – in apparent reference to Liao Xi and other Chongqing poets who claimed the title – clearly implying that they were too closely following the model of second generation, or Misty, poetry. In fact, it can also be interpreted as an indirect, critical response to the publication of *The Born-Again Forest*, which appeared at this time. Nonetheless, there is much more

¹⁰⁵ See Deng Xiang (2004).

¹⁰⁶ This version of the poem is from the October 1986 issue of *China Literature Monthly*.

to the poem than this, as it is strikingly experimental in form and subject, essentially a stream-of-consciousness triggered by the sight of red tiles:

Who told me
what these rows of red tiles
actually mean

see the city eyes wide-open walk by
see the classical crowds pass through buildings of no consequence
see the four limbs in days of love experience recurrent tremors
see wrinkles scatter over the entire body
see the hair occupying the face go completely white
see raindrops crawl up a red curtain
see music plaster a belly onto a watery surface and mutely skim over
see me obscenely catch a cold
sneezing a sneeze that doesn't lose the air of a gentleman

.....

see the sky on the roof whoosh away
see Chinese people earnestly spit
see Du Fu¹⁰⁷ disappointed as an official suddenly find great inspiration in poetry and
become an immortal poet
see there is never an emperor in Zhaojun's¹⁰⁸ bed and suddenly sadness finally flees
see the cobbler nailing horseshoes up on the whole street
see the crazed laughter of ducks sweep over the riverbank
see the pillow has a bad habit of excessive masturbation
see Confucius make a date

see Lu Xun¹⁰⁹ creaking as he scrubs the thick filth off Ah Q¹¹⁰
see the Middle East fighting nonstop
see a teleconference solemnly convened
see too much sun cause dizziness eyes to go black veins to curl and dilate
see poets picked out with fire tongs by editors and thrown into WCs

see fat flying saucers flee hither and thither
see Gu Cheng and Bei Dao quickly escape into the mountains
see second-generation eyes swollen by tears incessantly make self-criticisms
see the Third Generation ceaselessly have wet dreams in a loving relationship
with a dandelion

¹⁰⁷ A Tang dynasty poet.

¹⁰⁸ A Han dynasty imperial concubine sent to be the wife of a barbarian king.

¹⁰⁹ China's most famous early writer of fiction in plain language.

¹¹⁰ The title character of Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q* (*阿Q 真传*, 1922), noted for his ability to interpret every defeat and humiliation as a psychological victory.

see he is a page in a gilded book
page after page leafing through broken records
see a fish that has shed its scales become a bird and try to land before the dry
season
see him in all seriousness take off his real face remove skin, teeth
take off thick socks in all seriousness
iron them in a low-hanging sack
see clouds with lipstick in a forest walking back and forth
see the sky suddenly tilt dumping people into the sea
wanting to enjoy it and then the quick birds happily share a cup

.....

see an erroneous outcome in my suppositions
 see me as uncertified testimony
 I am the testimony of all people

see stomachs perforated
 see dating concentrated like a rain of bullets
 see one eye obscured
 see the world seen as two halves
 see husbands rape wives
 see the silent sacrifice of a ship's captain under attack of torpedoes not leaving the
 banquet
 see a yawn batting a morning out the window
 see this city as
 a great chess game in which a king moves

The city is apparently contemporary life, and China, and the general the speaker in the poem, or Wan Xia, who presumably has ordered the world as he sees fit. There is an emphasis on the speaker's perception, as this is a poem written one rainy morning, while the bored speaker, with a cold, gazes out his window on the red-tiled roofs of the city below.

The reference above to 'self-criticism' by second generation poets possibly alludes to an article written in praise of Misty poetry by Xu Jingya, then a student at Jilin University. First published in the 1981 second issue of Beijing's *Contemporary Literature Research Series* (当代文学研究丛刊), the article was extensively rewritten and published in 1983 in the January issue of *Contemporary Literary Arts Thought-Tide* (当代文艺思潮), a literary criticism journal out of Lanzhou in northwest China. Xu, together with the *Today* poets Bei Dao, Gu Cheng, and Yang Lian, were later among the primary targets of the

campaign launched by the CCP against ‘spiritual pollution’ (精神污染) in October 1983. Under great pressure, Xu wrote and had published an essay meant as a self-criticism and a rectification of his critical stance in the *People’s Daily* (人民日报) on 5 March 1984. This indicates that part – if not all – of the above highlighted-stanza was written in 1984 and not in late 1982, when the bulk of the poem may have been written.¹¹¹

That said, this is one of the first overtly mocking attacks on ‘second generation’, or Misty, poet behavior – but not their poetry – by younger poets to appear in China. However, the following lines commenting on ‘Third Generation’ poets and poetry are a bit more complicated: either Wan Xia – or the speaker in the poem – is being self-critical as well, or the speaker is distancing himself from this so-called new generation. This latter view carries some weight, given the 1982 clash with the Chongqing poets over ownership of the term ‘Third Generation’. Furthermore, the rest of the stanza seems to be devoted to satirical comments specifically aimed at the poets and poetry of *The Born-Again Forest*. The reference to “dandelions” recalls Zhai Yongming’s eponymous poem and the Misty-influenced style of much of the poetry in the journal. The “gilded book” seems to refer to the *Born-Again* itself in all its plasticized, arty glory, which is perhaps regarded as a perceived-ticket (by the journal’s poets) into the Misty ranks. The poetry is like “broken-records” all repeating a similar mantra, and the poets are like “clouds with lipstick in a forest” as they attempt to attract attention and establish themselves as masters of the Misty art. The connection between *Born-Again* and the ‘Third Generation’ in Chongqing is explained by Zhong Ming’s continuing close-links with the poets in Beipei where he had recently graduated from university. Presumably, at the time he supported their poetry against that of poets such as Hu Dong and Wan Xia, who sought to strike off on poetical paths away from Misty poetry. In due course, however, the term ‘Third Generation’ would be wrested away from Chongqing and re-branded by Yang Li, Li Yawei, and others. Yet, how very ambiguous and confusing the stanza in question must have struck the vast majority of readers of <Red Tiles> in *China Literature* in 1986, when the poem was first officially published. Nonetheless, this stanza, and also the form

¹¹¹ The above translation is based on the version of the poem published in the October 1986 issue of Beijing’s *China Literature Monthly* (中国文学月刊). An earlier version, published December 1984 in the unofficial poetry journal *Macho Men*, is unavailable to the author.

and technique evinced by the poem itself, is indicative of the ‘generation gap’ and the growth of hostile feelings that already had sprung up between some older and younger poets in Sichuan by the end of 1982.

Hu Dong, Wan Xia, and Macho Men

Meanwhile, by October 1983, Hu Dong was getting restless and working out a new style of poetry for himself. The following is an example of what he was writing at the time:

<Intersection 2 Subjects> (街口二题)¹¹²

A. Finally look down on them from head top
 obverse sides • flanks • reverse sides
 distribute the same actual smiling expression
 leaning under an advertising billboard
 pretending to be serious about examining every face
 the look of a vigilant secret agent
 the head slowly turns to question the air
 absorbed in calculating the time red lights flash
 two hands simultaneously inserted into trouser pockets
 whistling without a care in the world
 pondering the color of the sky at eventide
 I don't want to keep up one pose
 yawn for forty minutes
 then ruthlessly pinch out a cigarette butt
 and speedily traverse the avenue
 traverse some day in 1983

B. In the past I walked past
 a pagoda-shaped construction a sluggishly swelling
 dusk telling an extremely unreal story
 pedestrian • pedestrian • pedestrian
 definitely at a distance of three meters apart
 I love listening to peddlers shouting their wares
 apples leaking out of a shopping bag
 briskly rolling toward the curb
 In the past I walked past
 a pagoda-shaped construction a sluggishly swelling

¹¹² Li Yawei ed. (2001): 14.

dusk • the parasol trees are a row of ugly men
 trunks exposing horny muscles • biceps • pectorals
 shirttails and iced beer
 the avenue wafting a fragrance
 of fried chestnuts overdone

These appear to be views and memories of a street, or streets, in Chengdu, tales of the like one might expect from a truant university student with time to kill. Not surprisingly, as Wan Xia recalls, poems like these were not recognized as poems at the time, not when compared to the exalted subject matter and diction of Misty poetry. Boring events related by a bored narrator? Superficially yes, but, in fact, no. This was life too – life for many of these younger poets and other people their age who had no opportunity to define their lives in a ‘great historical age’, as the Cultural Revolution might be termed. In place of this, there is restlessness, brooding discontent, and an unruly identity apparently in search of an outlet. Although it could be argued that the conclusion is somewhat poetic, just possibly that is Hu Dong’s way of laughing at those who look for such things in his poetry. Lots of insignificant action, and no aspiration to more, no sight of anything beyond what is laid out before the reader with words from a normal vocabulary. That is life too – but not necessarily the life that the poet (or the reader) wants.

Still, this is not yet what would be called Macho Men poetry.

Before this was to happen, in October in Chongqing, *Poetry* and the Chongqing branch of the official Literary Association held a poetry conference. At this conference there were calls to “raise high the flag of socialist poetry”, “eliminate capitalist spiritual pollution” and sharp criticism of the so-called “three risings” (三个崛起), referring to articles written by Xie Mian, Sun Shaozhen, and Xu Jingya in support of the ‘new poetry tide’ (新诗潮) that had begun uprising with the *Today* poets in 1979. This led to a national campaign that continued for some months in the national media and in universities. The fact that this campaign began in Sichuan means that all poets and aspiring poets in the province were well aware of it, but the reaction was rather the opposite of what had been intended, if the poetry Hu Dong, Wan Xia, *cum suis* went on to write is any indication.

During the Chinese New Year holiday, Wan Xia and Hu Dong decided to do something big of their own, to create a masculine, active, story-based poetry that would make full use of colloquial speech. During January and February of 1984, they proceeded to write the first Macho Men poems.

<I want to Board a Slow Boat to Paris> (我想乘上一艘慢船到巴黎去) and <Woman> (女人)¹¹³ by Hu Dong are remembered by Wan Xia and Li Yawei as being the first of the Macho Men poems, written in January, 1984. The first stanza of <Slow Boat> is startlingly different from poems written before this by Hu Dong:

I want to board a slow boat to Paris
to go see van Gogh see Baudelaire see Picasso
to further check up on the family class status they hid
then execute all these scumbags by shooting
do all the women they planned but had no time to do
evenly allotting them to you allotting them to me
allotting them to Confucius and his disciples and followers

There are a further ten stanzas of varying line counts between seven and ten, the shortest line being seven characters long, the longest nineteen, and most of the rest of ten or more. The use of colloquial language is extreme and unseen in poetry at the time in China: “scumbags” (混蛋) and “do” (搞), a common colloquialism meaning ‘fuck’, are clear examples of this, with “cock” (鸡巴) appearing later in the poem. Then there is the broad use of politically loaded terms reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution that would also stand out: “check up on hidden family class status” and “evenly allotting”, not to mention “execute by shooting”. Overall, the poem was expressly designed to shock and unrelentingly continues to do so up to the very end:

I want to board a slow boat to Paris
on the way I'll make love with the girls of every country
no matter of what country the girls must all be pretty
they'll bear me sons of many varieties
after the little scumbags grow up they'll also wander hither and yon
become good guys bad guys become outstanding humankind

¹¹³ Both poems in Zhou Lunyou ed. (1994d); <Woman> also in Xi Ping ed. (1988); <Slow Boat> also in Chen Xuguang ed. (1994).

no matter where they go people will notice them
 their eyes will be a pitch-black color
 in the rumbling river of man in any situation
 I will take extra precautions against these bastards Who are they
 They are my sons My fine sons

Given the time when this was written, this poem strikes readers today as being funny, daring, and irrepressible, and in this sense, artistically interesting. It is also a tongue-in-cheek rant designed to mock those who have wild dreams like those described, thinking – or dreaming – of themselves as some sort of god’s gift to China and the world. Big talk from little men who can do no more than talk. Even more so coming after the events of the previous year at the ‘Third Generation’ conference in Beipei, where many little men (and women) thought so much of themselves and fought so hard about such a little thing as the copyright to the name of an unofficial poetry journal. In doing so, it was possible for others (and themselves) to characterize them as acting like Red Guards (in Wan Xia’s words), or like scumbags (in Hu’s) who were birthed by Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Only, in this case, it is not the homes of Chinese ‘capitalists’ and their lackeys that are being ransacked, but the supposed home of modern western culture, Paris and its museums. In very real figurative and literal senses, this was what many newcomers to the avant-garde of every field of the fine arts were doing at the time, and continue to do to this day. And this was even more reason why a such a poem could not have expected a rapturous welcome among China’s other precocious, pretentious, and very serious young poets and lovers of New Poetry.

The critic Wang Yichuan notes that poets the age of Hu Dong would know Paris as the site of the Commune, the song *The Communist Internationale*, and the place where many of the old CCP leadership (including Deng Xiaoping) went to study early in the twentieth century.¹¹⁴ However, Wang misses the significance of Paris also being the birthplace of the avant-garde movement: the Macho Men go to Paris to destroy the consecrated avant-garde (van Gogh, Picasso, Baudelaire) and in so doing take part in a new (for China), acceptable (in the west), bloodless revolution in culture. Critics such as Li Xinyu recognize that Macho Men poetry was a challenge to ‘serious’ poetry, but fail to provide the context or a satisfactory explanation for their behavior, stating that these and other

¹¹⁴ See Wang Yichuan (1999): 253-261.

newcomer poets often satirized life as they saw it with the plain, and sometimes coarse, language that people really speak.¹¹⁵

On the other hand, <Woman> is something else again:

You are a spear you are a shield you're a corridor a big broad bridge
you're a city gate open wide rivers enter freely pass through
I freely pass through

You're a hotbed begetting poetry begetting me begetting yourself
you are art you're love you're power the hermit crab of
wealth you are a bogus big-tailed donkey
my big-tailed donkey

You are soft curly hairs a lower abdomen a soft
passed-over area you are a dirty public toilet a
complete excretory system you are my abruptly
swollen Adam's apple stiff stubble

You're a steel sash a water tower a smoke stack an assault gun concentrated
fire-power you're the fear of first-time copulation the sobs
after virginity's lost this kind of thing
we do it a thousand times

You're a French horn a deafening bass drum my bass drum
you are music in complex keys an oval playhouse an equilateral
triangle a low-class pub you're free association let me
associate again

You're a diary a phone number too much poor wording during
the pickup a military review a trip you're us alone
together dizzy for no reason I fully approve of dizziness

You are Mona Lisa Jane Eyre an Anna Karenina you're Lin Daiyu
you're a seventy-year-old Dowager Empress Catherine
the Second you're any woman I know
I'd rather choose a cow that meets my needs

You're a brawl a raised switchblade a drug dealer a
venereal disease you're a fresh wound pain-killing cream insomnia
amnesia an absolutely perfect mask
you're a brilliant suckling animal

¹¹⁵ For example, see Li Xinyu (2000): 289-290 and Chen Zhongyi (1994): 159-163 for treatment of Macho Men poems in this manner.

You're a mural a tapestry a potted landscape carefully crafted by
 a gardener you are the gardener a red cape-draped
 bullfighter you're military regulations for all
 males I resolutely adhere to those rules

You're the dripping sweat before birth an annual plant
 a pretty duck-billed beast any old ugly
 monkey an oily raisin the raisin I most love to eat
 I don't care about these things good wine gets better
 with age

You are milk stains on the chest you're disheveled clothes bright
 flowery nappies you're a homecoming after a twenty-seven-year sentence you are my
 home if you become a widow my widow
 you can just beat it

You're the question you're the answer a totem a brutal circumcision
 you're a great mass the earliest pictograph the
 first encyclopedia and this book every man must
 keep on his desk at this moment I'm laboring to read it

You are the start of man you are the root you are woman

What starts as an obvious, very crude backhanded paean to woman becomes slightly more subtle and well meaning by the end. The obvious spear-shield usage opens the piece (namely, *maodun* 矛盾 'contradiction'), followed by clear sexual innuendo ("corridor" and "city gate", etc.). That is the hook – a hook that more or less continues for the first five stanzas. Alternatively, not a hook, as the crudity and low humor may turn off most readers who are not young men with women/sex on their minds, and emancipated readers (or listeners) would probably be horrified.

However, by the end, after a brief rehearsal of what life of woman-with-man might mean, the woman is idolized for what she brings to man and to the life of the man, and for the gift of life itself. By the end of the poem, there is nothing but the sound of truth: After all the filthy jokes and 'fun', there is the serious subject of life and all that woman brings to it. In China, woman is held up as the 'dutiful wife and loving mother'. In reality, as depicted, for example, at various points in Cao Xueqin's classic, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (红楼梦), women in China (as elsewhere) are more often used and abused by men. The appearance of Lin Daiyu, the novel's principal female protagonist, in Hu's

poem reinforces such a reading, just as her juxtaposition to the Qing dynasty Dowager Empress, Ci Xi, highlights extreme, unrealistic images of women in general. This poem seems to reposition the woman in the more sordid truth of reality – the male view of woman as an object of very selfish sexual desires, as playthings, and the reality of woman's positions as mother and wife. This is not what could be called a progressive, feminist picture, but it is one that fits well with current reality and seems well meaning on the part of the poet.

Aside from the subject matter of these two poems by Hu Dong, there is also the matter of poetic form. To a western reader of poetry, an immediate response might be to ask if Hu Dong had read Ginsberg. The subject matter of <Slow Boat>, long lines, lists, etc., all seem reminiscent of his work. However, both Wan Xia and Li Yawei claim in their interviews with Yang Li that they did not see translations of his poetry (namely, <Howl>) until it appeared in a Sichuan unofficial poetry journal during the summer of 1985. The poem in its entirety, translated by the Xi'an-based poet-translator Daozi, appeared on the last six pages of *Chinese Contemporary Experimental Poetry* long before any officially published version became available. (Ginsberg and other Beats are all the rage now in China. Interestingly, Bai Hua in *The Left Side* writes of possessing a 1978 edition of *Howl and Other Poems* – a reprint of the original 1956 book of Ginsberg's poetry.¹¹⁶ He does not state when or how he came into possession of it, but that was presumably after 1985.) Despite this, critics, such as Cheng Guangwei,¹¹⁷ state the influence of Ginsberg and Beat poetry in general as if it were fact.

In 1984, there were already available translations of the poetry of Whitman and Neruda, as well as Senghor, replete with similar long lines and the free adaptation of the unpoetic, the vulgar, the profane, and the obscene. However, were Chinese readers ready for the realization that poems need no longer look like 'poems', or need, for that matter, no longer 'sound' like poems? This goes back to ideas that seem to have been adopted from the western avant-garde tradition – primarily those of self-willed marginalization and permanent revolution as newcomer avant-garde poets reacted against those perceived to be moving toward some form of consecration. In the context of 1983-1984 China, the

¹¹⁶ Bai Hua (1996a), Chapter 4, Part 2.

¹¹⁷ Cheng (2003): 294.

target of newcomers in search of recognition would have to have been Misty poetry and those who held such poets to be exemplars of the craft, such as many of the poets who contributed to *The Born-Again Forest*. Furthermore, the first target audience for these poems was university students of a similar age – the attempt to shock (the girls and conservatives) and at humor (for the like-minded) is deliberate.

Wan Xia soon began producing similar poems, about thirty in total to Hu Dong's twenty, over the first three months of 1984. Here is one of Wan's first:

<**The Date**> (约会; Jan. 31, 1984)¹¹⁸

Knock before you enter
 respect for her is of the utmost importance
 when you see her nose mouth and other organs
 fully plugged by tubes a bottle or a cork
 don't be greatly shocked by small things
 don't ask
 what's wrong
 you must don an air of nonchalance
 and absolutely must not compare a former wife to the present

Quickly find a chair and sit tight by her side
 allay all sense of urgency you don't want breathing difficulties
 by all means don't be boorish
 while talking strive to look into her eyes
 make her feel you're sincere
 given the chance massage some major pressure points
 intimate expression conveys another type of tongue

When love is at its fiery point
 it benefits a patient body and soul
 so visiting times are best not too long
 normally best between ten to twenty days
 once before sleep
 three tablets a go washed down with tepid boiled water

A lot of optimistic talk is a stimulus
 like the normal cordial shaking of hands

¹¹⁸ From *Macho Men*, 1984.

This is a description of a wife or girlfriend in hospital, being visited by a lascivious husband or boyfriend.¹¹⁹ Physical love is suggested as a form of medicine. This is a crude poem, evidently meant to shock; yet, it could just as easily be an accurate psychological portrayal, if one accepts sexual urges as a normal part of life. Orthodox Chinese critics, such as Gong Liu and Zheng Bonong in essays published in 1983,¹²⁰ would have it that too much reality is a bad thing for poetry, if not all art – particularly if that reality is not the one they see, or, in the case of the CCP, the one they want to see. Then again, if poetry’s ‘task’ were to somehow beautify the world, how different would that be from a CCP task to present the world in a form that was favored by the party? Although, at the time, these criticisms were aimed at *Today* poets in particular and Misty poets in general, these also seem to be issues indirectly addressed by Macho Men poetry simply by these poets’ choice of subject matter, language and form. (These poets, like other intellectuals, were surely aware of the criticism.)

Wan was entering his last few months at university and, appropriately, he made this the topic of one of his more successful poems of this variety:

<Tests> (考试; Feb. 22, 1984)¹²¹

Riding a stout warhorse with a great shout
 a professor aims a huge fist at my head and blocks all escape routes
 luckily last night I committed adultery with all the world’s masterpieces

I avoid an annihilating blow

Heavens what guy invented this logic
 this is the ancient Chinese language of what land!
 which planet Mars possesses this odd question for aspirant graduate students
 you must rub your eyes must tighten the strings
 this is a conspiracy the restoration of the old order
 momma’s whatever
 see them furiously swallow the bait
 I abruptly ignite a homemade landmine¹²²

¹¹⁹ The term ‘wife’ (妻) here most likely means girlfriend, given the ages of the writer and his likely target audience – young men of a similar age – who would use the term as slang in conversation with others of their age group.

¹²⁰ In Yang & Chun ed. (1986, vol. 2).

¹²¹ Li Yawei ed. (2001).

¹²² Meaning ‘fart’ (拉响土地雷).

The woman who likes to type dashes
 takes big round ellipses
 and types them like a rain of bullets on all questions
 on the cafeteria the cinema on men's and women's toilets
 the braid on her head
 sways a bright oily piece of shit

.....

Round up the professors with an armed flying saucer
 review round the clock with a flashlight in a toilet
 test re-sitting more than once
 at test time decline time extensions
 register the artful hellion as one of the best
 drop the one who works against you
 to the class of 'eighty-one
 to test in ancient Chinese

This poem allows an insight into Wan Xia's mind as his graduation and other exams approached in 1984. He seems conflicted – mocking, yet anxious to do well and even remain as a graduate student. Coincidentally, March 1984 was the end of Wan Xia and Hu Dong as Macho Men poets. Li Yawei speculates that this was possibly due to 'round the clock reviewing' for their finals.¹²³ In any case, both Hu and Wan would move on to different styles of poetry in the months to come. Hu and Wan coined the group name Macho Men in February after the Spring Festival holiday, following a poetry reading they gave on campus in Nanchong. The public response to their poetry had been uniformly one of shock at what listeners thought was little more than coarse language and swearing. This led to consideration of group names like His Momma's (他妈的) and Momma's Whatever (妈妈的) – the former is the national swearword in China, and the latter is another version of that taken out the mouth of Lu Xun's fictional character, Ah Q. According to Wan Xia in his interview with Yang Li, Hu Dong suggested Toughs or Good Men (好汉) as a better choice, before Wan Xia himself came up with Macho

¹²³ Li Yawei (1996a): 131.

Men.¹²⁴ One of Wan Xia's last Macho Men poems was eponymous (and possibly inspired the choice of group name) and described these 'men' as he imagined they should be:

<Macho Men> (莽汉; Feb. 26, 1984)¹²⁵

must have a strong stink of sweat of smoke of urine an oily black face
 deep sunken eyes dangling arms
 must exercise mightily must brawl must beat the bottoms of the old lady and children
 must hold you close to their bosoms
 must have a loud voice must speak coarsely must weep wildly laugh madly swear
 must be of few words be silent
 must order the kid at the inn to bring big bowls of booze big bowls of beef must only
 stop when drunk must drink and have fun not go crazy with booze

want coarse women want bastard children want good men want fierce action want
 violence want speed
 want revenge but in ten years if necessary want to stand in front of an enemy and say
 don't stand so firm
 must have an upright attitude must take responsibility must on one's own initiative
 step up and say I did this
 must kill oneself must jump into the sea must write a will but if no time then don't
 must shout it's another life in twenty years must help victims of injustice

.....

The poem is clearly influenced by Hu Dong's <Slow Boat>. Here also are strong elements of romanticization in a very traditional sense. The reference to the big bowls of beef and booze are right out of *Water Margins* (水浒传), a classic of Chinese fiction, reminiscent of tales of characters such as Li Lu, Song Jiang, and Wu Song, big-hearted, yet violent, outlaw-heroes. Macho Men seem almost indistinguishable from the traditional figure of the medieval Chinese knight errant, the most popular male figure in China's popular fiction and films.

¹²⁴ This is corroborated by Li Yawei in both his interview with Yang Li (2004), and in Li Yawei (1996a): 130.

¹²⁵ Li Yawei ed. (2001).

Li Yawei

While Wan Xia was busy writing this new poetry in Nanchong, he was also busy proselytizing, convincing his poet friends to lend their pens to the effort. Li Yawei, who had graduated the previous year, had been assigned a job as a high school Chinese and music teacher in a small eastern Sichuan town called Dingshi. Wan had written to him in January and asked him to come to Nanchong, where Li then fell under Wan's sway and took to writing Macho Men poetry.¹²⁶ Wan and Li then worked on converting others in person, or by letter: chief among these were Hu Yu, Li Ao, Er Mao, Liang Yue, Wang Jianjun, Chen Dong, and Ma Song. Li was to be the convert-in-chief, the man who would take the banner from Wan and Hu and run with it, spreading Macho Men throughout Sichuan and beyond its borders to the rest of China in years to come. What follows is one of the first poems Li wrote as a 'Macho Man', and the first poem in the *Macho Men* collection Wan Xia compiled in December 1984 in Chengdu:

<I am China> (我是中国)¹²⁷

However, possibly I'm a woman
 My history is a few lovely years of roaming
 I live, to forget my
 Big tummy easily birthing many sons, so as to
 Not forget me, for
 Him still to become a real something
 Or not become a real something
 I live, I will be another me
 I am my own man, drinking bad booze
 Smoking duff cigarettes, growing a face full of stubble
 I am my own man
 For his tiger-cub courage, I act as his woman
 I am the whole voluptuous world
 See --- the roads on my fat belly wrap it so tight
 Take me completely, devil!

Actually, I'm a foul poet turned back by fate
 I want to snatch back those words spoken with the dead
 We reckon that's everything or simply everything is nothing

¹²⁶ Li Yawei (1996a): 131.

¹²⁷ In Xi Ping ed. (1988) and Zhou Lunyou ed. (1994d).

Possibly I'm another me, many me's half me's
 I am future history, the road at the other end of the bus stop
 I am success abandoned halfway there
 I am a great bridge, a city, a chimney and a wholesaler of cheap tobacco
 I am many poets and foul poets ---
 A wanderer within the riddles of matter
 Trouser crotch ceaselessly ripped by dogs and poverty
 I am the father and son of science and an experimenter on 45 bucks a month
 The hubbie¹²⁸ of a big-footed farmwoman

I have innumerable developed physiques and countless malicious faces
 My name is man --- the nickname of a pirate
 I'm absolutely not a foul poet picked out with fire-tongs by editors
 I am not a foul poet, I'm innumerable men
 I construct the world, construct my old lady
 I'm my most familiar friends, I'm Wan Xia I'm Hu Yu
 Old-lady Qin the loan shark and the fiancée who flings me far away
 I'm the face glimpsed and then forgotten by me
 I'm the fatherland's present, past and future
 I'm the Yellow Emperor, the deceased, [but] mainly a living person
 I'm an academic report and have been approved by academia
 I am a map of China
 I am China
 I'm a police baton stuck into this piece of dirt
 a hoe, a pair of big feet or a calculator
 On this piece of dirt the many me's female me's half me's
 All are me and other me's
 I am China

Here Li incorporates the expansive "I" of Whitman and Guo Moruo of *The Goddesses* (女神, 1921) poetry collection in describing a China that in many ways appears to be the antithesis of Whitman's America. The spirit of China is depicted as a passive, inert thing typified by the female principle (阴), sexually repressed to the point of castration. The poem's humor and tone of self-mockery are recurrent elements in Li's poetry of this period. The critic Wang Yichuan sees the poem as a deconstruction of the image of China found in the poems of the Misty poets Shu Ting, Jianghe, Liang Xiaobin, and Yang Lian, who approach the topic in a serious, cultured way, treating the nation as a sacred cultural construct.¹²⁹ Instead, Li's China is the China of everyday life by everyday people, made

¹²⁸ 女婿 literally translates as 'son-in-law', but often means 'husband' when used colloquially.

¹²⁹ See Wang Yichuan (1998): 222-230.

up of innumerable individuals (the character “I” or “me” appears 43 times). Wang seemingly cannot see the link between this and the poetry of Walt Whitman.

<Graduation Work Assignment> (毕业分配)¹³⁰ is a longer poem written in March 1984, and is closely connected to Li’s experience of the previous year. It jokily addresses the current concerns of old classmates, such as Wan Xia:

In summer all things
are graduated and assigned work
buddies all leave girlfriends in lower years
leave them in spacious classrooms reading dead books reading dead letters to
themselves

But I will contact you of my own accord, will in letters
talk about my new life, new environment and interesting neighbors
promptly report the happy news when my swollen liver has improved
at New Year’s and on holidays
I will also mail you a false diamond made of a bitch’s tooth
mail out mountain goat skins, Fuling pickled mustard tubers or other local specialties

.....

And so on, ultimately comparing the place he lives to an uncivilized land peopled by horse-riding barbarians with no use for writing, himself among them, together with a girlfriend as his wife and also mother to a pack of wild children.

Themes such as these offered imaginative escape and freedom from China’s – and Li’s own – social reality, at the same time commenting obliquely and humorously upon it. Here also could be found a modicum of comfort and companionship now that he was isolated from his old school pals. For example, Li could wander into ancient China and from there, in satirical visions, comment caustically on the present day, as in a poem written in April 1984:

<Su Dongpo and his Friends> (苏东坡和他的朋友们)¹³¹

....

¹³⁰ Li Yawei ed. (2001); also the first poem in this collection.

¹³¹ Yang Shunli & Lei Mingchu ed., *Chinese Contemporary Experimental Poetry* (1985).

This group of horse riding
 intellectuals wandering about in antiquity
 occasionally carry their pens in supplication to the emperor and frolic before him
 raise intricately rhymed opinions
 sometimes accepted, and the land is at peace
 most of the time they become the esteemed forerunners of rightists

.....

The celebrated Song dynasty poet Su Dongpo¹³² is not the intended target of any real criticism here; he is presented as just an ordinary guy. Instead, that seems to be directed at poets who, like the “foul poets” (臭诗人) in <I am China> and those ‘Third Generation’ poets mocked by Wan Xia in <Red Tiles>, are willing to produce art which suits and pleases the powers that be, whether that be the CCP cultural establishment or important Misty poets, such as Bei Dao. More common for Li were humorous poems on quotidian events or ordinary people, such as <Life> (生活), <Sunday> (星期天), <Girlfriend> (女友), <Wife> (妻子), <Menopause> (更年期) and <Old Zhang and a Love that Blots out the Sun> (老张和遮天蔽日的爱情).¹³³ These are all good examples of the ‘story’ aspect of poetry that Macho Men poets espoused, and the last listed is possibly the first such poem Li wrote:

Old Zhang a glossy stick¹³⁴ of the milk-suckled two-limbed variety
 lives in a monsoon in the northern hemisphere
 when mankind enters April by twos and threes
 He once sat in a teahouse and affirmed:
 Love will come and blot out the sun

A female of the milk-suckled two-limbed variety
 with a love like gas-bubbles caused his nose to run for several years
 then, after watching watching he’d had enough

He began to swear all women were whores
 even began to swear at his ma
 after swearing, like ordinary people he’d drown his sorrows in booze
 so drunk his mouth’d curl into a strange face

¹³² For biographical data, name in Chinese characters, etc., see Glossary of Chinese Names.

¹³³ In Yang Shunli & Lei Mingchu ed., *Chinese Contemporary Experimental Poetry* (1985); <Old Zhang> is also in Xi Ping ed. (1988).

¹³⁴ 光棍 meaning ‘bachelor’.

These days, love is mixed with lies, booze with water too

Aged love is as strong as old reserve spirits
 “Women can’t appreciate this sort of thing”
 Old Zhang’s head shakes like a street vendor’s cymbal

He sees the ocean of the accordionist
 and still must remember, beats his chest stamps his feet
 When he walks into the mysterious night of playing reed flutes
 sometimes he still somberly thinks of a sixteen-year-old girl

Now, Old Zhang has the wrinkled head of a walnut
 a body as thin as the second hand of a watch
 he roams the streets, silent like a squid
 occasionally hears a woman, then says: “Ai!”

This is the story of an old man who has had an unhappy experience of love rendered as a poem written in colloquial diction. The eastern Sichuan dialect term for ‘whore’ (梭叶子) would have been both shocking and humorous to natives of the province, condemned as sordid and unpoetic by traditionalists, and not understood at all by outsiders. An old, drunken bachelor alone with his memories, a thin squid with the head of a walnut wandering into a night full of accordion and flute music, could he be the imagined future self of a young poet? Or a young poet prematurely aged? Regardless, there is more romance, sensitivity, and poetry in the poem than at first meets the eye. This does not appear to be a poem mocking old drunks or a subtle piece of self-mockery alone. Such sensitivity and close observation of others, and of life in general, was to become a hallmark of Li’s poetry in later years.

Ma Song

Both Wan Xia and Li Yawei, in their interviews with Yang Li, remark on the surprising emergence in May 1984 of Ma Song as a true ‘Macho Man’ poet, stating that he was, and still is, the real thing. As they tell it, Ma was one of the wildest of their many wild non-poet friends in Nanchong. Like Li, he was of the class of 1979, but upon making the acquaintance of Wan and his buddies a year lower than himself, in 1981 he

successfully feigned insanity and got the year off, thus reentering school as their classmate the following year. Ma was a student in the mathematics department yet his main interests at the time were not in mathematics or poetry, but in drinking, womanizing, and fighting, which is how he met Li and Wan. Li had written to Ma in his hometown of Ya'an about Macho Men poetry in February 1984, sending him copies of Hu Dong's, Wan Xia's, Li's own, and others' poetry. (Ma Song had instigated a brawl between three Nanchong schools and two factories in the spring of 1983, was arrested by the police, and subsequently expelled by his school.¹³⁵) However, it was not until May 1984 that Ma responded to Li and the others, and produced a poem that surprised them all:

<The Coffeeshouse> (咖啡馆)¹³⁶

The coffeeshouse awakes,
it's like a female night-shift attendant in a guesthouse,
stretching long and hard,
preparing to receive a spring night as messy as an obstetric bed,
so as to consume all sorts of difficultly-birthing new lessons of life,
allowing one to attain a trinity of delight;

The coffeeshouse appears with a motive in the city and
on streets like leavening bread,
as soon as it's alight,
it takes those roaming like a basketball,
and airdrops them into a black boxcar,
from then on rendering all cries powerless on tenterhooks
throughout the day,
it always exhibits itself as a titular homicide scene,
causing the coroner, thrill-seeking young men and girls
to experience lovers after they've been ravaged, to remember a wrinkly
golden wedding and a malnourished poet attending university in autumn
yet selling off his autumn clothes • boxing gloves, an older sister, a younger brother,
a lover with a mask of techniques practicing in a Chinese medicine hospital,
a wealthy businessman • a contractor • the blood debt for winning the Nobel Prize,
isn't it beneath the spotlights of a photo studio isn't it at thirty-five
seeking and still unable to find a proper lover,
giving a not-yet-adult illegitimate child a pathetically small inheritance and
here a bundle there a pile of dark purple family belongings;

¹³⁵ Li Yawei (1996a): 132.

¹³⁶ The first published version can be found in *Macho Men*. There are several differences – most of which are apparently the result of mistakes and sloppy editing – in the version of this poem found in *Modernists Federation*.

Well isn't it,
 the coffeehouse says to me:
 The Yangtze's waves in back push those in front,
 a generation of new men sturdily grows,

For a twenty-one-year-old poet this seems strangely mature. In addition, it appears to be evidence of what Ma Song has been doing with himself since being expelled from school. (Ma would go on to become, at various times and in various places in China, a peddler, a piano tuner, a drummer, a book merchant, and a marketing man.) The coffeehouse itself seems to be a symbol of modernity: it is unlikely that there was a coffeehouse in a small town like Ya'an in 1984, and even in Chengdu and Chongqing in 1988-1989 the author has no clear recollection of more than a handful of such establishments. Coffee, cigarettes and alcohol would have been the only 'drugs' available to these poets in those days, coffee perhaps seeming the most 'western' and, therefore, decadent. There is also a suggestion that this may be a take on the coffeehouses in which French avant-garde poets congregated on the Left Bank in Paris during the nineteenth century.

Ma goes on to describe how disappointed girlfriends have been in him, how poor he is, how he is unwilling to do more than dream and bitterly play with words while the world passes him by.

.....

The coffeehouse is actually a hermaphrodite
 hidden in the deepest depths of life after Liberation an old secret agent,
 in China this fertile, beautiful land of great area and many things,
 it is a devotion that fosters maturity,
 and a thought that blows apart
 devotion
 it peers haphazardly about in all seasons,
 always like a fashion show as ripe as the open fields,
 enticing different tall short fat thin ruses and loneliness,
 to dance a trendy collective boogie;
 it's friendly, approachable,
 presenting 30-year-old widowers and 40-year-old widows with one
 dinosaur egg after another,
 causing the museum extreme anxiety,

under the moon it raises a faith in the dawn of a great fire and
 functions as a fire extinguisher,
 it always causes a stream-of-consciousness so red it goes purple to flow from the
 bottom
 of one heart to another.

I and you,
 you and her
 are you willing to come again and drink a cup of coffee like that?
 Don't forget when young,
 all must nonetheless take from the smiles dissolved in coffee and
 the short lives like the smiles the feeling of an eternal wooing,
 filtered in the north wind, accreting,
 to become immovable by force of nature
 guts forming a stone
 a brightly colored
 gallstone.

Despite the hash that has been made of this poem in several official collections due to a poor job of editing in the unofficial journal *Modernists Federation*, it stands out as one of the most thoroughly modernist poems of the Macho Men group. This is not only because of the successful use of a stream-of-consciousness style, but also due to the darkly humorous, anxiously lonely words of the narrator seated with his cup of coffee as he ponders the world and his place in it. Artistically, at times, some of the longer lines are well handled, but others are bogged down in overly convoluted conceits. Yet it is the very 'gall' of this poet, of these poets – in the sense of their impudence – that often made their work a delight to read (and hear, if one was lucky enough to come across them in Sichuan) at the time. Whether or not the Macho Men poets had read or even heard of Ginsberg is not an issue. Drugs and homosexuality were not subjects of conversation or poetry in China in 1984, unless the discussion was about foreign customs: however, the wish to shock readers out of old habits has been common to avant-garde poetry since Baudelaire. Moreover, writing about and for friends was common to classical Chinese poetry as well as New Poetry. Instead, the Macho Men, like Ginsberg, owe something of a debt to Whitman, Neruda, and the western avant-garde tradition for the form and language they used – namely, the long poetic line driven on by expansive emotions and subject matter and diction closely connected to the interests of the 'common man' of their experience.

That said, the content was their own, fashioned out of their lives and the Chinese language.

Ma Song went on to create another lengthy, much-praised poem entitled <The Birthday March> (生日进行曲) in August, which was also published in the unofficial poetry journals *Macho Men* and *Modernists Federation*.¹³⁷ This poem was written by Ma during a visit to Ya'an by Li Yawei, Liang Yue, and Hu Yu in the summer of 1984. Li remembers a drunken Ma Song standing on a table in a restaurant giving an impromptu recital of <Birthday>.¹³⁸

Finishing with University

It was also at this time that Li wrote another of the well-anthologized pieces of Macho Men poetry: <Hard Men> (硬汉们).¹³⁹ In some senses, this poem and not Wan Xia's <Macho Men>, is the poetic manifesto of the group. No longer trapped within campus walls, the Macho Men poets sought direct and complete engagement with the world as "... porcupines with poems dangling from our waists / we're dubious characters / submerged drifting masts." They sought to embody the male principle (阳), which they believed to be largely absent from China's culture. Shamelessness and fearlessness were to be their trademarks. The self in Li's poem is both the creator and the victim of conflict. Here, again, the prevailing tone is one of self-mockery. In contrast to the once-heroic stance of the self in Misty poetry (of the 1970s variety), the self is crushed, collapsed, a situation revealed by the contrast between the insignificant, powerless individual and the monstrous, overpowering nature of the world he enters. Action and movement are the keys to existence in such a world. The 'hard men' embody an anti-heroic consciousness as they refuse all modes of existence dictated by a repressive regime and dead traditions. China lies passive before them:

¹³⁷ In *Modernists Federation* simply entitled <Birthday> (生日).

¹³⁸ Li Yawei (1996a): 133.

¹³⁹ The second poem in *Macho Men*, also included in *Modernists Federation*. Anthologized in Xi Ping ed. (1988), Zhou Lunyou ed. (1994d), and Tang Xiaodu ed. (1992).

.....
 Go, and along with roads choke whole mountains
 along with the trackers for the boats pull the Yangtze straight
 with the Yangtze force the sea back
 go set out and see our vast world
 see the wasteland history has left to us
 let's go, my hard men!¹⁴⁰

In Wan Xia's preface to *Macho Men* in December 1984, he does not refer to 'macho men' at all, but uses the term 'hard men' to refer to the poets and poetry he and Hu Dong brought into the world in January of the same year. He states that both he and Hu had "withdrawn from the 'hard man' poetry group" in March or April. His use of the term and quotations from Li Yawei's <Hard Men> indicates that he now considered Li to be its leader. Wan's editing of this *Macho Men* journal and the inclusion of their poetry in the *Modernists Federation* journal, which he also edited, indicate that he was still supporting them in their endeavors and wanted to promote them and their poetry within Sichuan and beyond, an intention he clearly states in the preface to *Macho Men*. 1985 would see just this happen, and the style of poetry, as well their lifestyle, would prove to have a lasting impact on several poets and some of the poetry groups that were to come into existence in the province over the next few months.

In conclusion, it seems fitting that this chapter end with an autobiographical poem written by Li Yawei in November 1984 – too late, apparently, for inclusion in the two journals edited by Wan Xia discussed above, but a poem that has proven to be Li's most anthologized piece of work: <The Chinese Department> (中文系).¹⁴¹ Unfortunately, an abbreviated version of this poem,¹⁴² presumably edited down for reasons of limited space, was first published officially in *The Poetry Press* on October 21, 1986, as part of <A Grand Exhibition of Modernist Poetry Groups on China's Poetry Scene 1986> edited by the poet Xu Jingya.¹⁴³ A similar version also was reproduced in a resultant book

¹⁴⁰ These are the concluding lines to the rewritten version of the poem that first appeared in Li's own unofficial collection, *Macho Men: Li Yawei Poetry Selection 1984-1985* (莽汉: 李亚伟诗选 1984-1985); reproduced in Tang Xiaodu ed. (1992): 80-83.

¹⁴¹ In Xu Jingya et al. ed. (1988), Chen Chao ed. (1989), Tang Xiaodu ed. (1992), Chen Chao ed. (1993), Chen Xuguang ed. (1994), and Zhou Lunyou ed. (1994d).

¹⁴² See a translation of this version in Day (1998).

¹⁴³ Part I appeared on the date above in the *Poetry Press*, and Parts II and III in the *Shenzhen Youth Daily* on the same date and on October 24.

published in 1988,¹⁴⁴ and consequently has often appeared in this form in other anthologies. Below is a translation of the version that appears in Li Yawei's own unofficial collection of poetry for the years 1984-1985. All other versions, including those in anthologies edited by Tang Xiaodu and Zhou Lunyou,¹⁴⁵ are missing at least three whole stanzas and parts of others. Not surprisingly, one of the complaints about the <Grand Exhibition> during discussions with Sichuan poets, was about the sloppy editing job done by Xu Jingya and the other editors.

That said, this poem, even in its edited-down form, offers the reader a peek into the lives of the Macho Men and serves as one of the better examples of the group's poetry. At the same time, this poem allows one to better imagine what life and study – or the lack of it – were like for young literary-minded men and women in universities that were still recovering from their closure during the Cultural Revolution period.

The Chinese department is a great well-baited river
 in the shallows, a professor and a group of lecturers are casting nets
 the netted fish
 when brought up on the bank become teaching assistants, later
 they become secretaries for Qu Yuan,¹⁴⁶ the retinue of Li Bai¹⁴⁷
 and kings in tales for children, then
 go to cast their nets again

Sometimes, an old woman like a tree trunk
 comes to the river dock --- the place Lu Xun washed his hands
 whips up some long since stagnant soap suds
 and has children eat them. An old man
 while at the lectern quick-fries weeds
 and throws in some expired MSG
 those who want to consume weeds¹⁴⁸ completely and the edges of flowers¹⁴⁹
 deposit Lu Xun in a bank and eat the interest

On the upper reaches of the river, Confucius is still angling
 some profs use the tufts of beards as fishing line
 and in the name of Confucius lay out the innumerable people they've hooked

¹⁴⁴ Xu et. al. (1988)

¹⁴⁵ Zhou ed. (1994d); Tang ed. (1992).

¹⁴⁶ The earliest named Chinese poet.

¹⁴⁷ Also transliterated as Li Po, a Tang dynasty poet.

¹⁴⁸ A reference to Lu Xun's work of prose poetry, *Weeds* (野草) (1927).

¹⁴⁹ Lu Xun's collection of essays, more properly translated as *Literature by the Flowers* (花边文学), is here translated differently according to the clear intentions of Li.

when the bell sounds on the steps of lecture theatres
 stairs and the lattice of windows raise up waves of the setting sun
 a small bespectacled fish is still on its own chewing the bait
 being a big poet in antiquity leading a band of small poets in writing poems
 writing the rock that Wang Wei¹⁵⁰ wrote
 some stupid golden carp or a foolish silver one
 in term-end fishing interrogations will probably
 be slapped with exams and quickly stumble out the door

The teacher told us to be great men
 we must eat their leftovers and recite their coughs
 Yawei wants to be a great man
 wants to work together with the great men of antiquity
 everyday he coughs up all sorts of sounds from the library
 to the dormitory

Sometimes in the reading room Byron speaks in anastrophic sentences
 man is floodwater because woman is too small a riverbed
 children in groups of boys and girls go to the riverbank to practice
 and when Zola begins to lecture in the teahouse
 man is floodwater because woman is an old wood deep in a mountain
 some naughty carp come ashore to go to West mountain, mount Hua¹⁵¹

After Yawei and friends read Zhuangzi
 they imitated white clouds and loitered on mountaintops
 went to let fall the spring rains of pre-Han times
 a portion of these pals
 on the weekend after gnawing on crusty bread still want to
 chew the eighth level of *Inferno*, until they sleep
 under duvets still feeling the ferocity of hellfire
 sometimes unsleeping they rock their bodies
 through the portals of thought swimming into burning cinemas
 or other places inappropriate to mention

First-year students, those
 little goldfish, gold carp still not frequent eaters
 of bacteria in libraries and teahouses often moor in classrooms or
 beside fellow-villagers sometimes under tables of the Queen of Spades
 joyfully shuttling to and fro

Poet Hu Yu is an old hand at social intercourse
 but he isn't very good at roller-skating, so
 on his long hair he often slides into
 places where female students congregate and uses his cheeks

¹⁵⁰ A Tang dynasty nature poet.

¹⁵¹ This and the following two stanzas are commonly left out of anthologized versions of this poem.

to sing of evening breezes blowing over Peng Hu bay
 more often he's with Yawei
 in the cracks between stones in pubs spitting out all kinds of gas bubbles

Twenty-four-year-old Brother Ao
 hasn't written a poem in twenty-four years
 but is a poem himself
 forever loving a girl from five meters' distance
 on holidays sending half-price telegrams
 due to not remembering if Han Yu¹⁵² was Chinese or Russian
 Brother Ao tragically dropped a grade, he wanted to escape
 but feared that when he crawled up on a Hongkong beach the police would
 immediately haul him away to a classical Chinese language test

Everyday after getting out of bed Wan Xia's problem is
 whether to keep eating or
 never to eat again
 together with his girlfriend after selling his old clothes
 the signal to drink often buzzes in his head
 the angry waves of the Yellow river, in a corner hangs
 in his body like a water faucet strike
 a missing-persons poster and his easel

Little Mianyang the sworn brother of us all
 after taking a month to read half a page in a textbook went to the cafeteria
 picked up his food and also picked a fight with a cook
 yet ultimately he was blown out of the shallows
 by the deep-water mine put together by model-student Jiang
 now no one knows at which far-off bus stop he's starving to death

The Chinese department's like this
 students worship the ancients and Wang Li¹⁵³ and the blackboards by day
 and by night worship the silver screen or just as easily
 chase women through the streets
 Chinese department girls normally only mix with department boys
 there's no time to speak with kids of other departments
 this demonstrates the department's capacity for self-reliance
 that medical school golden girl Yawei loved in the dew
 was pawned off for a long time to a skinny monkey in history
 but finally returned to Yawei
 he is the founding father of attacks on the medical school he refused to negotiate
 there's a possibility of medical school girls all dying young and the medical school
 having the glorious possibility to be the wife-school of the Chinese department

¹⁵² A Tang dynasty poet.

¹⁵³ The editor of the standard textbook on classical Chinese language in China.

Poet Yangyang is always planning
 to marry a girl he's just met always
 gliding up to the food voucher gambling table with a shark face
 this thug is acquainted with four cooks
 but to this day still doesn't know the writing class teacher
 he once had the brilliant idea that the textile plant
 is a cinema and the cinema is a delicious hot-pot
 the hot-pot is the medical school and the medical school is knowledge
 knowledge is a book and books are women
 women are tests
 and each man better make the grade

The Chinese department flows on like this¹⁵⁴
 professors in lectures move about murmuring
 once students find the key words
 outside they write them into a vortex write out
 the traps the profs probably set
 blowing the gas bubbles spat out by mumbling
 profs out on tree-shaded avenues at term's end

The professors also ride on their gas bubbles
 floating down as if their hands hold a long mythical spear
 like a Boxer general patrolling on a river
 on that side of the river saying "zhi"¹⁵⁵ on this side "hu"
 on encountering a situation the prof alertly asks the password: "zhe"
 in the dark a student answers "ye"

According to twenty-two rules of military conduct the leaders order
 students' thought to be free order students
 not to talk nonsense at assemblies of any size
 the twenty-two rules of military conduct require that professors urge students
 to bring forth new fruit but when reporting back to waitresses in pubs
 not to soil final exam papers

The Chinese department also studies foreign literature
 primarily Baudelaire and Gorky, one evening
 a flustered looking lecturer raced out of the toilets
 he shouted: Students
 disperse immediately, there's a modernist inside

The Chinese department flowed on ancient battlefields
 on professors cherishing chastity and profound artistic conceptions of the moon

¹⁵⁴ These final six stanzas are often reedited as three, and those three are even further abbreviated, taking lines willy-nilly from the six.

¹⁵⁵ Zhi 之, Hu 乎, Zhe 者, Ye 也: these four words are characters of many meanings and frequent occurrence in classical Chinese language.

beneath which flowed female defenders of their own chastity running on riverbanks
 the stone caverns were seated full of widows loyal to Du Fu
 and third concubines seated full of the humiliated concubines of scholars

The Chinese department flowed from the ancient path of Ma Zhiyuan¹⁵⁶
 later took on the identity of an object
 and was placed before life by a passive sentence
 today the Chinese department flows onto the lectern of the Mao Duns¹⁵⁷ and Ba Jins¹⁵⁸

Sometimes the Chinese department flowed in dreams, slowly
 like the waves of urine Yawei pisses on the dry earth like the disappearing
 then again rising footprints behind the pitiful roaming little Mianyang, its waves
 are following piles of sealed exams for graduation off into the distance

¹⁵⁶ A Yuan dynasty play-writer of classical nationalistic *zaju* 杂剧 drama (ca. 1250- between 1321 and 1324).

¹⁵⁷ A writer of fiction (1896-1981).

¹⁵⁸ A Chengdu-born writer of fiction (1904-).