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

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CHAPTER 6: THE POETRY OF *MODERNISTS FEDERATION*

The work of Sichuan avant-garde poets in *Modernists Federation* was a first nationwide, public signal of a radical shift away from Misty poetry among China's younger poets. A few weeks later in 1985 another unofficial journal, Nanjing's *Them*, would also indicate as much. In *Modernists Federation* however, the placement of Misty poetry before that of the newer work set the issue in stark relief, although Yang Lian's <High Plateau> acted as the bridge to some of the poetry that followed. Like Misty poetry in general at the time, this new strain of what was termed 'roots-seeking' poetry was also under critical attack by the literary establishment. In March 1984, an article by Xiang Chuan attacking Yang Lian's <Norlang> (诺日朗)[199] appeared in the official *Literary Arts Bulletin* (*文艺通讯报*):

> Since the publication of his long poem <Norlang>, the young poet Yang Lian has been criticized for being too obscure and esoteric and ideologically unhealthy. The poem beautifies the ugliness of hooligans, scoundrels and "sexual liberationists." In order to enhance the supreme sanctity of this "male deity," the broad masses are portrayed as muddle-headed and insensitive.
> …..
> This is not the cry of a nation, not the call of an era; it is the voice of one individual over-riding a whole nation and a whole era. Its incantatory riddles express a presumptuous will to dominate.[200]

This, it might be argued, is precisely the poet's intention. The name of the poem is that of a Tibetan male deity, but also the name of a waterfall in Sichuan's Jiuzhaigou, as well as that of a mountain on the high plateau on the Sichuan-Gansu provincial border. Yang

[199] In Yan Yuejun et al. ed. (1987) and Tang Xiaodu ed. (1993b).
[200] This translation is from Barmé & Minford ed. (1988): 249.

Lian's poem sparked interest among younger Sichuan poets in local mythology and religious practices, past and present, of the Han Chinese and minority nationalities.

The objections to obscurity were common with regard to Misty poetry in general, but the use of, and the critical reaction to, sexual imagery, and national soul-searching not specifically related to the Cultural Revolution, were something new. Yang's poetry found an appreciative audience among Sichuan poets, Liao Yiwu in particular.

Ouyang Jianghe

After the Misty poets in the first section of the journal, the first of the poems in the second, <Asian Bronze> section is Ouyang Jianghe's <The Suspended Coffin: Part I A Book of Heaven with no Words> (悬棺：第一章 无字天书)[201]:

> Every moment is the same moment.
> The silence you now hear is absolute: With the honor of a despot it enters the body of flesh and blood that rules all things and becomes five fiery horses galloping in five directions. The internal organs fracture and scatter into five elements – metal, wood, water, fire, and dirt.
> The Book of Heaven you now read has eyes for words: Each eye is the disappearance of a language or a pile of shattered vistas, propagating taboos and subterfuge. Echoes drift by, ranges of mountains sleep like beauties. The rain of yellowing plums is suspended without comment, everywhere songs and sobs are dried by the sun to become the salt in salt.
> The body you now touch is shaped like nothing: Facing empty waste lands, facing a species all of one face, sometimes collected, sometimes scattered, of incessant life and death, there is no soul to be called to the suspended coffin, nothing sacred to manifest. The shining path of heaven splashes out to become wind and water, all empty illusions of your eyes and ears.
> A king of kings with no country and no crown: Who is that?

Here again, as in Ouyang Jianghe's contributions to the *Born-Again Forest*, there appears the vision of a resident in Eliot's <The Waste Land>, but this time the poet is wandering through ruins of the once great culture that was China's. The image of the suspended coffin refers to an ancient, and little understood, Sichuan burial practice, and this corpse of culture and tradition allows Ouyang a unique perspective and voice within

[201] Parts I and III anthologized in Xi Ping ed. (1988).

the poem. Also, his delving into ancient mystical customs is yet another sign of western modernist poetical influences, which had been influenced by the theories of Carl Jung and Freud, and is a new trend in Sichuan's avant-garde poetry reinforced by most of the works in the <Asian Bronze> section.

Ouyang's poem as it appears here is prefaced by a quotation from Diderot, the eighteenth-century French *encyclopédiste* whose works appear to be another influence on the writing of this poem:

> They walked toward a huge castle. On the front of the castle was written: "I belong to no man, but to all. Even before you have entered you are in its midst, and after you leave you are still within."

The writing technique Ouyang adopts for this poem is seemingly that of St.-John Perse, a favorite poet of Eliot, who translated Perse's *Anabasis* (1922) from the French in 1931. Furthermore, a reading of Perse's poem reveals that Ouyang appears to have written his poem as a partial response: *Anabasis* is a series of images of migration, of conquest of vast spaces in Asiatic wastes, of destruction and foundation of cities and civilizations of various races and epochs of the ancient East. In his poem (and the following two parts), Ouyang creates a detailed image of China as just such a destroyed civilization, with its now seemingly unending corruption, decadence, and brutality. This subject matter would be revisited in a different form and more spectacular style by Liao Yiwu from 1985 until 1989, first in one long, five-part poem and, subsequently, two trilogies of long poems.

Ouyang Jianghe is one of the first poets of note in China to attempt Perse's form of what could be called 'prose-verse' poetry. For this reason, Eliot's justification of this form of poetry in his preface to Perse's poem is worth repeating:

> … Its sequences, its logic of imagery, are those of poetry and not of prose; and in consequence … the *declamation*, the system of stresses and pauses, which is partially exhibited by the punctuation and spacing, is that of poetry and not of prose.[202]

Other Sichuan poets would also attempt this form of poetry, and several would exhibit this tendency in *Modernists Federation* with poems written in 1984. Aside from Ouyang

[202] Perse (1959): 10-11.

Jianghe, there is formally similar work by Shi Guanghua, the brothers Song Wei and Song Qu, Li Zhengguang, Zhou Lunyou, and even Wan Xia.

This first part of Ouyang's poem was written in 1981 and seen by Yang Lian at the time (the other two parts were completed by 1984). Ouyang claims he sees the influence of this poem on Yang's later work, noting that Yang was half a teacher to him,[203] as presumably Ouyang and many other Sichuan poets had been earlier moved to write poetry of this type under the influence of Yang's and Jianghe's earlier poetry. (<Norlang> was written following a trip to Jiuzhaigou in the company of Ouyang, Zhai Yongming, and others in 1981, as noted in chapter 3.)

Liao Yiwu

Liao Yiwu's <Lovers> (情侣) follows Ouyang Jianghe's <Suspended Coffin>. This poem stands as a milestone in Liao's development as a poet. Previously, Liao's poetry had been rooted in the people and places of his experience as indicated by the titles of some of his officially published poetry: <The Great Basin> (大盆地), <The Great High Plateau> (大高原), <A! The Bamboo-shoot Diggers> (啊！挖笋的人), and <The People> (人民), the first two and the last of which would go on to be official award-winning poems. In these poems, Liao's style was a blend of romanticism and realism, but recurrent themes of 'death' and 'distant travel' hinted at what was to follow. These were suggestions of his future inclination towards metaphysical themes and a tendency to devalue the world of man in the face of the far greater mysteries of the universe. In addition, the influence of Walt Whitman was evident in both Liao's imagery (the sexually charged forces of nature) and his long poetic line, with which Liao attempted to replicate the powerful overtones and clumsy eloquence of Whitman's odes to America, progress, and democracy.

Yet, <Lovers> was something of a departure from this Whitmanesque free verse form. Life appears as a maiden, as the speaker's nearest and dearest companion. She is,

[203] Yang Li (2004): 435.

however, a tyrannical lover who never, not even after corporeal death, releases one from one's vows:

Onward
Who's governing me?

(In this kind of night the starlight's very bright, the black sun
roars incessantly outside the world. As if a hand
from inside pulls shut my eyelids, suggesting --- don't go)

Onward
Who's governing me?

(The legendary stone conch has thrice sounded, the mountains are restless
hippopotami attracted to the sea
see the rise and fall of steep banks, open land grows ever narrower, the ocean has
thrice risen, painting pretty ripples on the sky --- what sort of scenery is this)

Onward
Who's governing me loosen your hand
like releasing a gradually cooling human life --- there is no alley on the earth
but I follow an alley without beginning or end, two feet in front four legs behind

…..

Never ending ….. is this destined to be? Onward onward onward
on the solid earth, until flesh fades away
and the soul continues on, soberly
walking on over the vast white continent

unapproachable love
Oh such unapproachable love

This poem is the first of many in which Liao catalogues the pain and suffering of mankind in general, and of the Han Chinese and the poets of that nation in particular, and renders the results in a surrealistic yet lyrical stream of rhymeless verse. In this respect, he is unique among this younger generation of poets. While others focused on intellectual-philosophical details, existential circumstances and the absurdities of everyday life, Liao developed a poetry centered upon the concept of a universal spirit or soul (泛灵观), mining ancient Chinese legends and religion of pre-Confucian times. Like Whitman, Blake, and Dylan Thomas (a major, direct influence), the imagery of Liao's

poetry from here on is elemental – of birth, energy, sex, and death. In Liao's poetry, this is the cycle to which mankind has been condemned since creation and which has taken on tragic overtones ever since mankind began to aspire to the status of creator – a transformation which occurred when man achieved self-awareness or, in Liao's terms, when man emerged from the ocean of his mother's belly. Liao does more, however, than give voice to the dirges that spring from his soul. His are also songs of his glands and nerves in an effort to free his poetry of what he, like Thomas and Whitman, felt was poetically sterile reason.

The influence in Liao's poem of the poetry attributed to pre-Han dynasty poet Qu Yuan is also apparent. In Qu's *Songs of Chu* (*楚辞*) – an ancient land that included eastern Sichuan – there is heavy use of erotic imagery that could be found in local shaman songs. Both in Qu's <Encountering Sorrow> (离骚) and in Liao's <Lovers>, the poet takes on the part of the suitor of an unattainable love-object – although in Qu's case traditional Confucian-influenced readings believe that to have been the king who has dismissed him from court.

<Lovers>, like the previous poem by Ouyang Jianghe, is not standard 'roots-seeking' or some form of Confucian revival in poetry, to which some critics have relegated both for their poetry of this period.[204] If Liao's poem is in some respects a rewriting of <Encountering Sorrow>, he appears to attempt to eliminate the Confucian reading of Qu Yuan's poetry: that the achievement of official favor and a position within the establishment was the traditional poet's greatest desire. In his poem, Liao stresses the shaman-esque, nature-centric elements – elements that are also abundant in Qu's poetry, but generally are overlooked or ignored for political interpretations favored by later Confucian (and CCP) rulers and critics.[205]

Poetry of Wholism

The next two lengthy poems are by Shi Guanghua and the brothers Song Qu and Song Wei, the latter two writing together. These three initiated the idea of Wholism poetry in

[204] For example: Xiang Weiguo (2002): 118-122.
[205] See Schneider (1980).

June 1984 in Muchuan, home of the Songs, as the result of a quest to write epic poetry and a related poetic theory dating from the spring of 1983.[206] On page 30 of *Modernists Federation* can be found their initial public explanation of Wholism. First, they claim that Wholism is not a poetry group as such, but a basic thought structure for a state of culture: "an open state of consciousness accentuating the deterministic nature of Wholism and a tendency towards its manifestation." Wholism itself is claimed to be the true nature of Chinese ancient culture. Wholism is, however, a rejection of the dualistic *yin-yang* 阴阳 theory and the Confucian ideals of *renli* 仁礼 (benevolence and ritual), and an acceptance of Daoism's concepts of the Dao, the one, and nothingness, and the Song dynasty neo-Confucian ideal of *he* 和 (harmony); they claim that the description of the constitutive culture in the *Book of Changes* (*易经*) is as near to a complete description of the concept Wholism as can be found. However, they do not see this as a return to, or an obsession with, Chinese tradition, but as a natural, necessary result of developments in worldwide twentieth-century skeptical thought, which they see as moving in this direction in any case, and which brings together east, west, past, and present. This may have been a reference to the Asian-influenced New Age beliefs and cults that began to enter western culture in the 1950s.

Shi Guanghua states that he and the Songs were moved to create an Ism of their own by the example of the Macho Men and the fear that they would otherwise always be considered followers, or late-arriving confederates, of the type of poetry written by Yang Lian and Jianghe.[207] Shi also goes on to claim that the group's choice of name was a result of the influence of the three popular theories of the time: systems theory, control theory, and information theory. As people were always talking about life and existence as wholes, the name Wholism suggested itself to Shi. Later they would discover that such a theory, or Ism, with minor differences, already existed in the west. (More will be said about Wholism in Chapter 9.)

[206] Shi Guanghua (1986): 44-46.
[207] Yang Li (2004): 415.

The writers of the brief (four-paragraph) note on the Ism consider all the poetry in the <Asian Bronze> section as inclined towards their concept of Wholism.[208] However, as the work of Shi and the Songs here is clearly influenced by their admiration of the *Book of Changes* and the Song dynasty reworking of the concept of harmony, commentators such as Xiang Weiguo and Xu Jingya classify these poets as writers of "modern great fu" (现代大赋),[209] thereby dismissing them as modern descriptive prose-poetry writers and Confucians.

The titles of the poems in *Modernists Federation* speak to the interests of Shi and the Song brothers. Shi Guanghua's poem is one five-part chapter of a larger work called <The Imagery of Harmony> (和象) and bears the title <A Dream-talked Eagle> (呓鹰).[210] The speaker in the poem becomes the eagle and soars through the universe, commenting on the strife and futility observed below and within himself, finally coming to earth and to tranquility in the image of the eagle at harmony in its element. Song Qu and Song Wei's poem, <Tranquility and Harmony> (静和),[211] also records a search for peace and harmony in the world of nature, and an escape from the wearying world of man, symbolized here by a castle.

The great reclining Buddha at Dazu in Sichuan is the subject of the following, similarly themed poem by Li Zhengguang: <The Reclining Buddha> (卧佛). In this four-part chapter of a planned longer poem entitled <The Grand Spirit of the Vast River> (巨川雄魂), the poet is on a path to inner enlightenment and discovery of his place in the vast, harmonious river of life in the universe, loosely based on a legend of Sakyamuni's miraculous recovery from illness.

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[208] In addition, in the note, the writers refer to Liao Yiwu's poem <Happy Earth> (乐土) as a poem of the Wholism tendency, but this poem – written in late 1984 – only appears in the 1986 issue of *Han Poetry*, yet another unofficial journal, but organized by the Wholism group. Similarly, the second part of Ouyang Jianghe's <Suspended Coffin> also appears in that same issue, while the third part was published in the unofficial *Chinese Contemporary Experimental Poetry*, which appeared in September 1985. Several other poems and articles in *Han Poetry* were written during the first half of 1985, all of which indicates a Wholism journal was originally planned for publication that year. However, events dictated a later appearance of the journal in December 1986.

[209] Xu (1989): 143. The *fu* 赋 is a traditional form of poetry dating from the Han dynasty. One of the forms earliest and most famous practitioners was Sima Xiangru, who wrote elaborate descriptive verse on the emperor's gardens and hunting grounds, among other subjects. Sima was a native of what is now Sichuan province.

[210] Anthologized in Xi Ping ed. (1988).

[211] Ibid.

Zhou Lunyou

<The Man with the Owl> (带猫头鹰的男人)[212] is the first in a series of poems seemingly written as self-analysis by Zhou Lunyou. Over the next three years from the writing of this poem in June 1984, the exclusive subject of Zhou's poetry would be 'Man'. Focusing on experience, human nature, and reason, and the mask of personality, or personae, he would map the adventures of the human spirit under the control of the subconscious, and the automatic nature of man's manipulation of (and by) language. Through personal experience, illusions and dreams, Zhou would explore the irrational aspects of life by way of the formal linguistic management of the conscious and the unconscious. Compared to Zhou's previous Misty-influenced poetry, this new style is a radical departure and indicative of Zhou's new intellectual interests, as well as that of many other intellectuals in China. With regard to the sub-field of avant-garde poetry, Zhou and several other poets in *Modernists Federation* were staking out new positions differentiating themselves from Misty poets.

<The Man with the Owl> is a super-empirical cultural meditation intended to expose the pain and revelations resulting from alienation of the self from culture. This poem has structural and formal devices that Zhou would adopt in many of his future longer poems. Letters from the Latin alphabet demarcate the seven sections of the poem: A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. Here also for the first time Zhou brings into play his acerbic wit and ironic sense of humor, elements of the classical Chinese language, and Daoist references, all brought to bear in his assault on present-day Chinese cultural and linguistic characteristics. Remarkably, this poem is placed together with the work of Haizi, Shi Guanghua, the Song brothers, and Li Zhengguang, despite the fact that, at times, Zhou seems to be mocking, if not undermining, their work:

A

A plume stuck in my hair, I feel myself change into a different species.

[212] Ibid.

Infelicitous wings part the jungle, mountain ranges flee. Innumerable days have not bleached your feathers, you're a sage of yore.

Everything returns to tranquility.
A mountain chain determines your direction, valleys fill with wind. In a slow-moving twilight, a stalagmite silently prays to heaven. Gradually growing black, segment after segment peels off, like time, fingers. Between poses of sleep and wakefulness, the high plateau raises a basin and splashes out the dazzling flames of lamps……

On an orb the world in sleep becomes a river of moving dreams.

B

Was that noble prince awakened to the Way like you have been?
I emulate you in deep thinking one eye open one closed, and can never master it.
Two leaves coming together, inside the fruit is another prospect;
A river drinks the name of goddess Mi[213], slender and pure:
A mountain lies naked beneath tree roots enjoying the blue horse's shower:
Ring-shaped silver ornaments coldly shake, a pale hand picks up wine suffused with snake venom and pours it into a porcelain bowl with a pattern of human faces; Suddenly, your wings catch fire, on the white flames blooms the flower of a dream of mandala[214]……
Just as I was going express surprise, your open eye described to me the vision I had seen in a dream.
I was even more shocked: Shouldn't that closed eye of yours be able to see even deeper images?
The two eyes swap positions, still one eye open one eye closed.
I get it. Things a fish sees a bird cannot describe.

Zhou seems to ridicule the growing obsession for roots-seeking poetry and the members of Wholism, as much as he may be mocking himself. Furthermore, this poem was written not long after the Wholism group was formed in early June 1984. It was also at this time that Wang Shigang began to develop his ideas for what would serve as the central theory of Not-Not-ism (非非主义) from 1986: namely, 'pre-culture consciousness' (前文化意识), the ultimate in Chinese anti-culture theories. It seems likely that this is also the time when Wang took the pen-name of Lan Ma, or the 'blue horse' above, and would later "urinate" on all the fashionable cultural theories, just as Zhou seems to be doing to those

[213] *Mi fei* 宓妃: Goddess of the river Luo in Shaanxi.
[214] *Mantuo* 曼陀 is a variant of *mantuoluo* 曼陀萝 which in turn could be a variant of *mandana* (mandala), or the name of a Liang dynasty monk who was a famous translator of sutras, or the name of the plant *datura alba.*

who incorporate Daoism, neo-Confucianism, and Buddhism into their poetry. It is quite possible that poets in Chengdu did not yet know of the pen name Lan Ma, which appears in print for the first time in the first edition of *Not-Not* in May 1986.

The miraculous transformation of the speaker in the first line of Part A of Zhou's poem from a normal person into a sort of winged deity (the owl), possibly a Daoist immortal, by simply placing a plume on his head is far too easy. This plume itself seems to be a reference to the writer's pen (admittedly a western image, but Zhou is nothing if not eclectic in his approach to poetry). Another reading of this points to a split personality, the actor in the poem becoming the owl of the poem's title, and making possible the conversation between 'you' and 'I' that is carried on throughout the poem. Given that the word for owl in Chinese, *maotou ying* 猫头鹰, literally translates as 'cat-headed eagle', this may be a play on Shi Guanghua's poem above, if Zhou was aware of the plans and theories of the Wholism group. This birdman has "infelicitous wings," yet he is also a "sage (or immortal) of yore." Later this creature is caricatured as a "stalagmite silently praying." The final line of Part A has a variant reading: 云梦成流, translated above as "a river of moving dreams," can also be read as "sex dreams becoming a flow [of semen]".

The poem concludes with:

G

> You give me a pair of blind eyes, [they] fly even farther than wings.
> The Han gorge releases Laozi, do you know the direction he went?

The Han Gorge Pass (函谷关) is located in the southwest of Henan province. This treacherous gorge was the entrance to (or exit from) the state of Qin (located in northern Hubei and eastern Sichuan) during the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.E.). It is not clear whether Laozi is 'released' into or out of the pass. In any case, his whereabouts are unknown and unknowable. And yet even so, this blind man will go off on a febrile quest, having blind faith in his imagination and the visions this imparts to him – a flight of fancy heavily laden with the baggage of dimly grasped cultural and linguistic traditions.

For the next few years, in poetry and prose, Zhou would continue with this vein of poetry, ridiculing the vain posing (or position-takings) in the poetry of others, and trying

thereby to attempt to reveal the elusive, if not vacuous, nature of the words and values contained within much contemporary poetry. These interests and inclinations would help him gather a group of like-minded poets, such as Wang Shigang, Yang Li, and Shang Zhongmin, in early 1986, and together they would make up the core of the Xichang-Chengdu-based Not-Not group.

The Third Generation

Page 31 of *Modernists Federation* is headed, like the previous two sections, by a bold-faced title: <Third Generation Poetry Conference>. Beneath it, however, is a further motto that acts as an explanation of the section's title:

> Following on the rise of the republic's flag came the first generation
> The ten years molded the second generation
> Beneath the broad backdrop of a great age, we were born –
> **The Third Generation**

As explained by Wan Xia in the Macho Men chapter, the first line refers to the poets who rose to prominent positions in the literary establishment after the triumph of the CCP in 1949; the ten years of the second line refers to the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution period during which time the Misty poets learned their art; and the Third Generation has been born into the CCP's 'new era' (新时期) – only here it is termed a 'great age' (大时代), perhaps ironically, but also possibly because the poets now felt themselves to be in just such a great, freer age for poetry, and wanted their own, more appropriate term for it.

Aptly, Yang Li's <The Stranger> and <Noon> are the first two poems of the section. The next poet, however, is not a native of Sichuan. Zhang Zao is a native of Changsha in Hunan province, but after graduating from Hunan Teachers' University in 1982, he was accepted as a Master's student in the American and English Literature department of Chongqing's Sichuan Foreign Languages University in 1983. Although he was to leave for Germany only three years later, during his time in Sichuan, he made a great impression and many friends, produced three self-funded poetry collections, and

appeared in several of the province's major Second World poetry journals. This was his first such appearance.

The first two poems by Zhang Zao's in *Modernists Federation* are lyrics replete with traditional literary and Buddhist imagery – <Apple Orchard> (苹果树林) and <Story of Deep Autumn> (深秋的故事)[215] – while the third is a take on the *Book of Changes* – <Water of the Tenth Month> (十月之水).[216] Zhang's interest in China's literary and cultural tradition would seem to indicate a greater affinity with the Wholism group than with the Third Generation, but – as noted previously by Yang Li and Wan Xia – editorial politics had a great role to play in the making of this journal, and at times outweighed textual considerations.

The next poet, Zhang Xiaobo, is also from out-of-province. Zhang was a native of Jiangsu, but had recently graduated from university in Wuhan in Hubei province, and still lived there. His poem, <A Great Hill of Ice> (冰大阪), has much in common with Macho Men poetry. He writes of "modernist braves" who come at the world in waves: "We are / twenty first-century beasts, highly civilized beasts…" However, they do not survive this icy world that injures and ultimately annihilates these tragic heroes of poetry – only not quite all, as publication of this poem would indicate.

Zhao Ye has seven poems selected from two sequences of poems – <A River of Summer> (夏之河) and <Landscapes> (风景) – on the next three pages. As the titles indicate, these are bucolic thoughts apparently written while on sojourn in the countryside. They are of formal and technical interest, but cannot be considered 'experimental'. In fact, they would not have seemed out of place in an official literary journal – another of Wan Xia, Li Yawei, and Yang Li's criticisms of some of poetry in the unofficial journals in Sichuan during 1985. However, Wan and Yang had been intimately involved as editors in the production of *Modernists Federation*, so such criticism today sounds self-defensive, like an attempt to disassociate themselves from problems they may have perceived only in hindsight and in which they themselves played no small part.

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[215] Both poems in Xi Ping ed. (1988).
[216] Anthologized in Tang & Wang ed. (1987).

Pages 42-49 of the journal are given over to Macho Men poetry: namely, Ma Song's <Coffeehouse> and <Birthday March>, Hu Dong's <Slow Boat> and <Woman>, and Li Yawei's <I am China> and <Hard Men> (all discussed in Chapter 4). A brief note explaining the provenance of the group and naming some of the current members prefaces this. Aside from the work of the poets above, Chen Dong's <Fresh-looking Fruit> (鲜色水果) is the only other typical Macho Men poem selected, and is found in the fifth section of the journal.

Hu Dong, like Wan Xia, no longer considered himself a member of the group, but his early Macho Men work is still selected. Wan Xia, on the other hand, has a new style here: <The Tattooed Wife> (黥妇, pronounced *qingfu*). The character *qing* was apparently obscure enough to require a footnote explaining its meaning. The word '*qingfu*', however, is an obvious homonym for a female 'illicit lover'情妇. What the footnote does not record is that this *qing* 黥 originally referred to an ancient punishment whereby criminals were tattooed on a visible part of their body (usually the face), and that its secondary meaning referred to the number of a slave, or conscript soldier, carved into the flesh so as to discourage escape.

The opening three lines of the first part of this four part sequence hint that all three of the possible meanings of *qing* apply: "Verbally born to this breast / the body of my bright red lips is still overlaid by the posture of it / roots scurry off into blood vessels". <The Bird> (鸟), the first part of the sequence, has obvious sexual connotations as a title,[217] and is packed with obscure language and archaic grammar in shorter lines than was Wan's custom when writing Macho Men poetry. It is replete with violent, sexual imagery, bringing man/animal and nature together in one character: *jun* 君, a term used in classical poetry as a polite form of 'you', but also carrying the possible alternative meanings of 'lord', 'father', 'husband' or 'master'. In the stylistically similar <Consequence of Illness> (病果), the second part, sexual organs shrivel into impotence before the breast. In part three, <The Heart of Stone> (石之心), written in prose-poetic form, there is the return of a heartless form of courage in a new world full of violence and sex, where long

[217] As in English slang, 'a bird' can be a reference to a woman in colloquial Chinese. Also, in Chinese, it is often a near-homophonous reference to the male genitals (*diao*), or 'swingers' in both Chinese and UK slang.

hair, blue jeans, kissing, pornography, and murder are acceptable, justified by convenient re-readings of the past, of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and so on. This section is populated by shamanesses (女巫), murderous wives, foolish boors (愚氓), and cruel tyrants (暴君). Finally, in <The Fate of the Rose> (玫瑰之命) – a title hinting at the loss of some form of virginity or perfection[218] – the consequence of all this seemingly random lechery, violence, and theft, is a cruel self-love which results in an illusory immortality for the practitioner and an abnormal death for the good and the talented. The wretched inherit the earth.

Given that Wan Xia had previously written poems such as <Red Tiles> and <Macho Men>, among others, it is tempting to read this as another attack on China's contemporary poets. However, <The Tattooed Wife> reads more convincingly as a generalized condemnation of modern Chinese culture and society in its narcissistic, insular nature. All are suckled at the breast of the mother/wife/whore and thereby infected, including the poet, as the first three lines of the poem indicate. But then again, possibly this is Wan Xia's take on 'roots-seeking' poetry, given that the word 'root' (根) appears so prominently in line three of the poem. The final line of the poem reads: "The self-love of the wolf pup develops a heart of stone and bears narcissus as fruit."

Zhai Yongming and Women's Poetry

The nine pages devoted to the work of six of Sichuan's woman poets may seem scant to the contemporary western reader of poetry. However, in terms of China's unofficial poetry publications – not to mention official – this degree of representation for women amounted to something of a breakthrough at the time.[219] In total the work of 41 poets fills 74 pages in *Modernists Federation* – not including the four pages given over to the translated poetry of, and an essay about, Sylvia Plath that conclude the journal. The space devoted to the six woman poets is roughly proportional to that of individual men.

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[218] The title may appear to be a pun on Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*, as *ming* 名 (name) is a near homophone of 命. Also, there is some overlap in subject matter between the poem and the novel. However, it is unlikely that a translation of this novel was available in China at the time. Eco's novel was first published in 1980, but it is not clear if there was a Chinese translation of it in 1984. The Hollywood movie version of the book was distributed in 1986.

[219] See the discussion of Zhai Yongming in Chapter 3.

However, before the appearance in the 1990s of officially published anthologies and unofficial journals entirely devoted to avant-garde – or post-Misty – poetry by women, only the 1987 edition of *Not-Not* ever equaled this level of female participation.[220]

Despite this qualification, an even more remarkable achievement than the sheer number of female participants is the inclusion of two poems from a twenty-poem cycle that would in later years become a canonical work for China's women's poetry (女性诗歌). In fact, it could be said that these two poems represented the birth of the modern-woman-as-poet in China, and a new genre of poetry. The poet is Zhai Yongming and the series is entitled <Woman> (女人). That the *Modernists Federation*'s editors should choose her poetry to lead the section was no error, despite their possibly dismissive titling of the section as <Woman Poets>. By shunting the women into one section in the second half of the journal they were effectively ghettoized. As mentioned in Chapter 3, there had been few noted female practitioners of New Poetry or any other form of poetry in China. Perhaps it can be argued that giving women a section all there own would draw more attention to their writing and prevent them for being mistaken for men – as is regularly the case. However, given the circumstances of women poets in China, it is even more likely that their poetry could be more easily avoided by being clearly titled. It was not common practice to note the sex of authors in unofficial journals – *Today* and *Born-Again Forest* being cases in point – yet some of Sichuan's journals would continue to do so until 1987.[221]

During the early 1980s, the All China Women's Federation conducted a 'Four Selves' media campaign, as part of an effort to restore the individuality of women after their sex had been effectively de-feminized during the Cultural Revolution period. Focusing on individual women, the campaign called for self-respect, self-confidence, self-determination, and self-realization.[222] This latter goal of the campaign was to be seized

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[220] Pages 62-84 of the journal's 138 pages are given over to seven woman poets. Of widely recognized officially published anthologies of avant-garde poetry of the 1980s, Tang & Wang ed. (1987) only have four female poets from a total of 31 poets selected. Similarly, Tang ed. (1992) – originally compiled for official publication in 1989 – selects only five women for a collection of 38 poets. Official poetry journals do, very occasionally, produce issues devoted – in whole or in part – to woman poets.

[221] This would also occur in *Chinese Contemporary Experimental Poetry* (Sept. 1985) and *Not-Not* # 2 (1987).

[222] See Jeanne Hong Zhang (2003) for a brief synopsis of this situation and the role that women poets played in the expansion of gender consciousness and female subjectivity in recent years in China.

by women poets, but the first results – the appearance of women as self-empowering makers of poetry and other art forms – would not bear fruit until 1984, as demonstrated by the work of Zhai Yongming.

The date of the completion of <Woman> is given as November 1984 on the title page of a 1985 mimeograph of the series that also includes an essay as preface, <The Consciousness of Black Night> (黑夜意识), completed on April 17, 1985.[223] In fact, according to Zhai, most of the poetry was written in 1983, and it took her some months to have them printed up into a private collection.[224] On the page following the title page and before the preface, there are four lines of poetry as epigraphs: two attributed to Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962) and two to Sylvia Plath (1932-1963).

Jeffers: Of utmost importance
There must a black night on our bodies

Plath: Your body hurts me
As the world hurts god[225]

It is not clear whether these epigraphs were attached to the collection that was in circulation before or after the preface was written. However, Zhai herself admits to the influence of Plath on her poetry from 1983 until 1993,[226] and many critics have written on Zhai's <Woman> and this subject in both Chinese and English.[227] In an interview with Yang Li in November 2001, Zhai states that she only "liked" the poetry of Plath until 1985, but acknowledges the continuing influence of Plath's "tone" or manner of writing.[228]

Zhai composed <Woman> during long stays in hospital where she was accompanying her sick mother, at the same time she was reading translated poems by Plath and Jeffers,

[223] A copy of this mimeograph is in the author's collection of unofficial materials.
[224] Yang Li (2004): 473.
[225] From Plath's <Fever 103° >.
[226] Zhou Zan (2003).
[227] For example, in Chinese, two essays in Tang Xiaodu (2001), Zhou Zan (2002c), Huang Lin (1995), Xie & Liang (1993), Xiang Weiguo (2002), Chen Xuguang (1996), Li Zhen (2001), and Cui Weiping (1993a), ed. (1993), (2001); and in English, Yeh (1995) and (1999), Naikan Tao (1996) and (1999), and the only article to date devoted exclusively to the influence of Plath on Zhai by Zhang, Jeanne Hong (2002).
[228] Yang Li (2004): 480.

among other works that friends in Chengdu were bringing her.[229] In fact, Zhai spent the greater part of three years (1983-1985) in hospital and wrote two other well-received sequences of poems as well as <Woman>. Zhai states that this situation and environment attracted her to the poetry and images of agony, violence, and death that are so much a part of Plath's work, but these were not the only reasons why they began to appear in her poetry.[230] In the 2001 Yang Li interview, Zhai goes on to say that the sense of desperation she felt at the time was due to difficulties with her very traditional parents – specifically a desire for her father's love – and difficulties at her place of work because of her life-style and writing.[231] While much of Plath's favorite imagery (night, mirrors, stones, the empty house, etc.) can be found in Zhai's poems, the blackness in Plath is more of the heart, of her life, and of her obsession with death, than explicitly of the night. Zhai has said she has had no fear of death since she was very young, has never contemplated suicide, and that her concept of the consciousness of black night has more to do with sex than death.[232] It is also true that she often did her writing at night sitting on a bench in a corridor, after lights had been turned off in her ward and the hospital was quiet.[233]

Jeffers also makes use of many of these images and issues, but his is a search for strength in the face of danger, bleakness, and death – and he finds that strength in the sudden, violent strength of the hawk, in dead men's thoughts that have shed weakness, and in the enduring, permanent strength of rock. A 1935 poem by Jeffers seems a possible influence on the poetry of <Woman>:

<Rock and Hawk>[234]

Here is a symbol in which
Many high tragic thoughts
Watch their own eyes.

This gray rock, standing tall

[229] Zhai (1996a).
[230] Zhai (1995a).
[231] Yang Li (2004): 476-479.
[232] Ibid.: 478-480.
[233] Zhai (1995a).
[234] Ellman & O'Clair ed. (1970): 392.

On the headland, where the seawind
Lets no tree grow,

Earthquake proved, and signatured
By ages of storms: on its peak
A falcon has perched.

I think, here is your emblem
To hang in the future sky;
Not the cross, not the hive,

But this; bright power, dark peace;
Fierce consciousness joined with final
Disinterestedness;

Life with calm death; the falcon's
Realist eyes and act
Married to the massive

Mysticism of stone,
Which failure cannot cast down
Nor success make proud.

As women and as poets, Zhai and Plath both seek the strength and the mysticism of this stone,[235] but Zhai rejects and fears the violence of the hawk – the Chinese universal 'male principle' incarnate – while Plath is both attracted to and repelled by it, and at times in her poetry seeks to possess it. The images of the hawk and rock appear in various forms in Jeffers' poetry as principles of dynamism and revered inertness, which correspond nicely with the *yang* and *yin* of traditional popular Chinese thought.[236] Images of birds and rock (including mountains and stone objects) are also in frequent evidence in the poetry of Zhai. However, hawks and other birds of prey are rejected for neutral birds that embody freedoms and the strength derived from them.

An extract from the beginning of <The Consciousness of Black Night> (in its 1985 mimeograph form) serves to show how different from Plath Zhai Yongming is in her approach to this series of poems:

Now is the time I become truly powerful. In other words, now I'm finally aware of

[235] Zhang, Jeanne Hong (2002).
[236] Ellman & O'Clair ed. (1975): 386.

> the world around me and the implications of my presence in it. The consciousness inherent in each person and the universe – I call this the consciousness of the black night – has determined I must be a carrier of the thoughts, beliefs, and emotions of the female sex; and, furthermore, injects this burden directly into what I view as the greatest work of consciousness. And this is poetry.
>
> As half of the human race, the female sex is faced at birth with an entirely different world [from that of the male sex]. Her first glimpse of the world is necessarily tinged by her feelings and perception, even by a secret psychology of resistance. Does she spare no effort in throwing herself into life and creating a black night? And, in all sorts of crises, does she transform the world into a giant soul? Actually, each woman faces her own abyss – personal anguish and experience that continually vanishes and is continually confirmed – far from every person is able to defy this proportionate form of hardship up until their destruction. This is the initial black night: when it rises it leads us into a world that is entirely new, a world laid out in a particular way and at a particular angle, and which is unique to the female sex. This is not the path toward deliverance, but the path toward a full awakening…

Given that this essay was written at least five months after <Woman> was completed, it is difficult not to take this as a manifesto or a warning of sorts, for Zhai herself and other female poets. The essay incorporates Zhai's new, personal creed, but further on in the text she warns other female poets of the dangers of succumbing to male poetic interests and Isms, of losing themselves in the world of men. She firmly connects this unique female consciousness to the body of woman, which places her apart from man, and exhorts female poets to avoid the narrow, alienating company of male poet-dominated groups which will, either consciously or unconsciously, draw them away from their true selves, the consciousness of black night.

In *Modernists Federation,* the first poem of <Woman> is also the first poem of the journal's selection of women's poetry:

<A Premonition> (预感)[237]

> The woman in the black gown comes with the night
> her darting, secretive glance exhausts me
> suddenly I remember this is the season all fish die
> and all roads pass through the traces of birds in flight
>
> Like a corpse, a mountain range is dragged off by the darkness
> the heartbeat of a shrub nearby can be heard faintly

[237] In Xi Ping ed. (1988), Chen Chao ed. (1989), and Cui Weiping ed. (1993).

giant birds look down on me from the sky
with human eyes
all winter a consciousness rises and falls, cruel and male
in a savage, unheard-of atmosphere

I've kept an unusual calm throughout
as if blind, and so I see night in the day
a childlike frankness, my finger prints
can provide me no more sorrow
Footsteps! A sound getting older
dreams appear to know something of this, in my own eyes
I saw a blade's edge that had forgotten to flower
dancing on a multitude of bones, weighing down on the dusk

Fresh moss in their mouths, the meaning they besought
pours knowing smiles back into the breast
the night convulses, or doesn't, like a cough
choked back in the throat
I've already quit this dead-end hole

Jeanne Hong Zhang suggests it is possible the woman in black of the first line might be Plath invoked as an eyewitness to the I-speaker's journey both through this poem and the rest of <Woman>, and that there may be an explicit "anxiety of influence" at work.[238] This darkness – the woman, the night, the winter, and the dead-end hole – could equally refer to the *yin* principle (of which these images are all representative), which is a potentially hostile companion of the I-speaker, if this speaker is taken to be the female poet or Zhai herself. The giant birds in the sky are linked with an oppressive, cruel male consciousness – clear referents to the *yang* principle, which dominates the world, and through which the female poet must negotiate her way. The dead-end hole of the last line can be read as the place were the world of the *yin*, of all Chinese women, is located, and a place that the I-speaker no longer inhabits – the implication being that this is, or was, the place where she belonged, the place of other women. And if this is plausible, then the woman in black in the first line, who exhausts the I-speaker, is the role model that is rejected and left in the dead-end hole.

One of several alterations over the years made by Zhai Yongming to the twenty poems of <Woman> was to reduce the amount of violent imagery present in poems such as

[238] Zhang (2002): 113.

<Premonition>. The final two lines of the third stanza have now been changed to read: “I saw a time that had forgotten to flower / weighing down on the dusk”. Perhaps she found the imagery in those two lines too violent, too blunt, and too Plath, as well as being unnecessary. Certainly, replacing “blade’s edge” (刀刃) with “a time” (时辰) and completely excising “dancing on a multitude of bones” (在一群骨头上跳舞) is a dramatic change of imagery and of tone, but there is a resultant lesser change of overall tone between what went before and the final, more muted stanza.

<Premonition> begins Zhai’s journey on a path of self-creation – the creation of a space for her as Zhai Yongming, the I-speaker in the poems, a woman and a poet, to be herself within her chosen vocation. The series leads the reader through a hostile world – both internal and external – seemingly set against the I-speaker who, nevertheless, goes on to negotiate an ultimately safe path for herself.

The other of Zhai’s two poems in *Modernists Federation* is the fourteenth in the series:

<July> (七月)[239]

From now on summer is occupied by July
and restraint becomes conviction
from now on I hold up a heavy sky
and turn my back to the sun

You are a season beyond comprehension
only I discover your secrets when I’m in death’s embrace
I smile because there’re still these last black nights
my laugh is my right to remain in the world
and today the hand is still on the crown of my head
what sort of eye is it forces me to see
all methods now no longer exist

July will be another death
summer is its most appropriate season
I was born as a bird, and only die in the sky
you are the shadow encroaching on my perch
silencing me with mankind’s only trick

I’ve never had deep feelings, so sustained
so attentive, I’m a tiny teardrop

[239] In Cui Weiping ed. (1993).

gulping down the sun, I ripen in order to complete myself
and thus my heart is invulnerable

Can it be that I have been the black night that remains in my heart?
In the shadows of the setting sun I've felt
the flesh concealed within you, from start to finish
and so you're the misfortune poured over my body
in July wrapped in dewdrops and dust you sleep soundly
but who knows with what heaviness your bones
are waiting in the dusk

Here, Zhai Yongming seems to admit that the black night is inside her (or all women) and not in the world in which she lives, which is here a world of bright, hot light. The I-speaker lives freely and happily as a bird – but a bird that does not fly. Again, the fire of the sun and the heat of the summer are part of the universal *yang* principle, as is the sky, which is the only place in which the I-speaker/bird can die. However, the shadow, which encroaches on the non-flying bird's perch, is of the *yin*-principle, as is the earth on which she is perched. So there is a conflict with the world, but ultimately it is the conflict within that is defining, as the final stanza makes clear. The I-speaker turns her back to the sun and is oppressed by a heavy sky from the very start, but in the end the struggle, and its resolution, is internal like the heaviness of expectation of the black night, even in a season of light. The night takes on the flesh and bones that are finally discovered to be the I-speaker's.

Selecting only two poems of the twenty in <Woman> could never have done the series justice – presumably, the editors never had the intention to do so, given space considerations.[240] The hostility of Chinese male poets towards female poets and their work has been frequently noted by the author in everyday discourse, and has been commented on by Zhai Yongming herself,[241] unless a woman chooses to write on subjects that men write on too, in which case she is seen as inferior, but not threatening. It is therefore also possible that Zhai's perception that this was the case led her to write

[240] It is possible that the editors knew that six poems from the series would be published semi-officially – also in early 1985 – in Beijing University May Fourth Literary Association's (五四文学社) *New Poetry Tide Poetry Collection* (*新诗潮诗集*), a two-volume anthology of Misty and recent avant-garde poetry edited by Lao Mu. In the order in which they were published, the six poems from <Woman> were: #6 <The World> (世界), #4 <The Desolate Room> (荒屋), #5 <Desire> (渴望), #7 <Mother> (母亲), #11 <Monologue> (独白), and #9 <Anticipation> (憧憬): 717-724.
[241] Zhai (2003): 6-7.

<The Consciousness of Black Night> in May 1985 and attach it to <Woman> as a preface. A closer look at the poetry of the other Sichuan female poets may also provide part of the answer as to why Zhai felt moved to write this essay not long after *Modernists Federation* appeared in public.

The influence of *Modernists Federation* at the time, and Zhai's poetry in particular, is difficult to quantify. Anecdotes indicate that it had powerful affects on individual poets, and university students in particular. As a 20-year old Chengdu university student in 1986, the now well-known poet Tang Danhong relates how reading Zhai's two poems and the translated poetry of Sylvia Plath, in a copy of the journal given to her by her poet boyfriend, had a profound affect on her.[242] Ultimately, on meeting Zhai shortly after this, and observing her in the company of male university poets, Tang decided to take up poetry.

Other Woman Poets

Of the six female poets selected for inclusion in *Modernists Federation*, only three are still active as poets today: Zhai Yongming, Liu Tao, and Chen Xiaofan. The names of two of the other three – Li Jing and Li Juan – appeared in the previous chapter as friends of Liao Yiwu, and the third – Li Yao – was a friend of Zhou Lunyou and his brother, as were Chen Xiaofan and Liu Tao. (The work of these three female poets would reappear in *Not-Not*, the unofficial journal edited by Zhou Lunyou from 1986.)

This left Zhai as the odd woman out. As a long-term patient in a Chengdu hospital, she was left out of all of the male-dominated politics of poetry that were occurring at the time in Sichuan, and was able to concentrate on her craft with excellent results. Conversely, it is not known if the three Li's above were somehow negatively influenced by the poetry groupings to which they belonged, or if their later decisions to quit participating, or writing poetry, were linked to the male domination of the poetry circles that they inhabited.

A cursory reading of the work of the other five female poets leads to the conclusion that Liu Tao and Chen Xiaofan were the most adventurous of the five, though not writing

[242] Tang Danhong (2002b).

what could be termed ‘women’s poetry’, as Zhai was. This is possibly another clue to their continued survival as poets.

Li Yao has two poems here – <The Tree of Life> (生命树)[243] and <Love Lost> (失恋) – and both deal with the subject of love addressed by an I-speaker of mixed emotions. Much the same can be said about the two poems by Li Jing that follow – <The White Crown of a Grave> (白色坟冠) and <A Leaf of Love> (爱之叶). Interesting as these poems may be in certain technical aspects, they would have been more at home in an official journal. The subject of these poems would have been considered appropriately feminine by the editors, and non-threatening – unlike Zhai’s <Woman>, especially once they had had a look at her later essay/preface. Perhaps this is part of the reason why all of the five other poets received more space for their poetry than Zhai did in *Modernists Federation*.[244]

The poetry of Li Juan is of more interest, if only in that she does not write on love, and that one of her three poems is dedicated to Yang Li. The poems are labeled as a sequence (组诗) under the title <3155 and something else> (3155 及其它): the first poem being the eponymous <3155>, followed by <Ship of Dreams> (梦船) and <The Eagle> (鹰). <Ship> is addressed by the I-speaker to a male friend, while <Eagle> is dedicated to Yang Li and explicitly borrows imagery from his poem <The Stranger>, and the male-figure is the I-speaker’s lover. <3155> is the better of the three poems, but is clearly influenced by Yang Li’s poetic techniques of the time (as described in Chapter 5).

The third of Liu Tao’s three poems – <Black Windbreaker> (黑风衣) – is also a love poem. <The Reflection> (影子),[245] the first poem, revolves around a couple, primarily from the perspective of the female who possesses a lively imagination – something the male seems to lack. The second poem is worth a closer look:

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[243] In Xi Ping ed. (1988).
[244] Zhai had a little less than one page for her two poems, Liu Tao a little more than one for three, Li Juan a page and a half for two, Li Jing a page and a fraction for two, Li Juan a little less than a page and a half for three, and Chen Xiaofan two and a half for one.
[245] In Tang ed. (1992).

<The Cracked Clock[246]> (裂钟)[247]

A. does not disappear the beams of light
from half an eyeball drum up shadows of the moon
beyond your forms they flow transforming an arm
it teases like
mad incites a voluptuous
axial heart
from there going past difficult-to-traverse rifts
a mouth open in enormous apprehension
when and where did the cursor start
to set off beneath my feet
revolving is it one of my
legs

B. I light up[248]
this night this is my quiet light of day
the world noiselessly squirms
in the arms of my sleep-walking a commotion of shadows
within the distance extended to them
always distance stuffed full a position in the night
on a waste land losing blood fire in water
clusters of postures in memory drifting
return the burning patterns to that sudden delineating stroke
from this arm the wind flies to
that arm, only the body of wind explosively cracks open

C. Again it's night my days spin in the space of a pair of arms
spin my detritions my final calibration
about to shatter
is completeness born in the roar of ruin
the clear, melodious knocking of moonlight, the path is speechless
gracefully curling up the twisty summit

The poem is a meditation on temporality and life/death with clear female images not dissimilar to those present in the poetry of both Sylvia Plath and Zhai Yongming, but on the whole having more in common with Zhai's work in <Woman>. It is night again – although the color black is never stressed as it is in Zhai's work – and it is clear that Liu Tao takes Jeffers' line about everyone, man and woman, having something of the night about them, quite literally. The moon and shadows introduced in the second line are

[246] "Clock" may also be translated as 'bell'.
[247] In Xi Ping ed. (1988).
[248] The term 照临, here translated as "light up," may also be 'rule' or 'am present in'.

aspects of the *yin* principle. A note of increased ambiguity enters in line three with the plural form of 'you' in "your forms" (你们的形体). Logically, these forms would be those of the cracked, or damaged, clock and the moon and its shadows (women?). However, a half-moon has been likened to half a human eyeball, and a human arm becomes a time-telling arm attached to an "axial heart" (轴心), or axis, described in human (and female) terms as "voluptuous." A human mouth wide open and anxious seems a reference to The Scream, the famous woodcut of Edvard Munch's. Then the arm (手臂) becomes a "cursor" (指针) that begins its spinning planet-like journey "beneath *my* feet." In addition, it is the I-speaker's journey, the cursor now transforming into a leg of hers. So, the cracked clock is a body clock, the I-speaker's time which runs from birth through life to death, but through its comparative status with the moon, etc., takes on cosmological significance – despite the appearance of the I-speaker at the end, who thereby takes possession of the previously disembodied eyeball, arm, heart, and mouth.

The I-speaker as the fulcrum, or axis, of this poetical universe is unambiguously present in 'B' and 'C'. In B, from the start she is the light – but a night-light – and simultaneously rules the night (我照临 / 这夜), but inhabits the day in this stanza. In a Chinese context, this universe is now clearly feminized – even the "waste land" which loses blood, hinting at the I-speaker's self-identity as poet, then moving on to "fire in water" – the creative impulse is in the female form, the incessant creative mix of *yin* and *yang*. However, she is silent, sleepwalking through a world always perceived at a distance, not of herself.

In C, the I-speaker returns to the night, which is in fact her day – 我的白昼 – and the harmful contradictions *may* ultimately break her like an egg, or a clock, and birth a new whole self. However, this is a question yet to be answered. Meanwhile, time monotonously passes and the I-speaker's path twists up and away in silence. That said, the poetry of Zhai Yongming and this poem by Liu Tao effectively marked the end of that silence for female poets as practitioners of avant-garde poetry in China, if only at the unofficial level, in 1985.

The final two-and-a-half pages of this section are given over to a long work by Chen Xiaofan. Both the subject and form of this poem indicate it should have been included in *Modernists Federation*'s second section with other poetry that delved into cultural soul-

searching and prose-verse form. The title of the poem is <Emotions in B-Major> (情感 B 大调).[249] It consists of fifteen paragraphs, or stanzas, with lines of three to 23 characters, separated by three-character spaces between 'lines', set out left-to-right across the page. In fact, the poem is an ode to summer – to which the poem is explicitly dedicated – but a very Chinese summer, linked as it is throughout to popular Chinese mythology. The title is misleading in that it refers to western musical traditions. The music in the poem is in fact that of the 'poet', but a celestial Chinese poet of legendary qualities who has appropriated western form, as is made clear in the first paragraph. The poet/creator abandons the world of his creation (the poet is male) and his absence gives rise to legends in an attempt to fill the void, leading to the questions: "Who are you / Where have you gone / ?"

It is at this point, over one third of the way into the poem, that the I-speaker appears. The I-speaker finds herself on a waste land-like beach, populated by walking, cackling corpses and shades, washed up here by the tide, her hair green. There are clues that encourage the reader to identify this period with the Cultural Revolution – blamed on the ice and snow of the northland (北国) – and the poet/speaker's concurrent birth, physical and psychic. A treacherous reef is compared to a memorial plinth (纪念碑), presumably the one located in Tian'anmen Square in Beijing, on which *Today*'s Jianghe had previously written a famous poem by the same name. A spring of sorts is intimated after this, or the hope of spring. The I-speaker calls out for the return of the poet/creator ('you') from within herself, who is now identified as the "daughter of the ancient Yellow River," enticing her with the I-speaker's "emerald green wooden flute of the south." Ultimately, the summer approaches from the *fusang* 扶桑 tree of Xihe 熙和, the god who harnessed the sun at this tree where it rested at night – bringing with it a time of ripe and rich creation, of the songs and poetry of the southland (南国的歌). However, the summer is not quite there yet. If the volume and richness of poetry in China throughout the rest of the 1980s is anything to judge by, that summer did arrive for poetry and for poets such as Zhai Yongming, Liu Tao, Chen Xiaofan, and many others, both female and male.

[249] In Xi Ping ed. (1988).

Bai Hua and Others

The work of the Sichuan poets in the final section of *Modernists Federation* is an interesting hotchpotch of differing poetical techniques and subjects. The familiar name of Zhong Ming, the editor of *Born-Again Forest* (1982), appears here with two poems. A bleak and violent biographical poem, <Enter> (进入) is dedicated to Vincent van Gogh; <Reflection> (反射) adapts French behavioral science, the thought of Descartes, and the images of white mice subjected to electrical shocks, as a reflection on life and fate, and the Cultural Revolution in particular. Also appearing here for the first time, officially or unofficially, is the now well-known name of Sun Wenbo. His <The Clock Has Struck Seven P.M.> (钟，敲过下午七点) is a brief metaphysical meditation on death in the form of prose poetry.

Of greatest interest in this section, however, is the poetry of Bai Hua. The poem <Expression>, first published in *Born-Again Forest*, is reproduced here as the third of his three poems. Part of the reason for this must have been that Bai had altered the poem since 1982. For example, a line is added at the very end of the poem: instead of ending "it can't be calmed, can't be sensed and known," this line is now followed by "because we don't want to die" in reference to the "white mood" being 'expressed' by the poet. It would be this version of the poem that was selected by editors Tang Xiaodu and Wang Jiaxin for official publication in their 1987 collection of new, experimental poetry. It may also have been due to the fact that *Born-Again*, and the work published therein, had been ignored by official journals and publishing houses up to the time that <Expression> was reproduced in *Modernists Federation* – a more successful and widely-circulated publication. Tang and Wang also selected the other two poems by Bai Hua in *Modernists Federation* for publication in 1987.

In *The Left Side*,[250] Bai Hua writes that just prior to writing the following poem he had been reading poetry by André Breton,[251] specifically *Nadja* (1928), a collection of surrealist poems heavily influenced by Freudianism and Marxism. One August afternoon in Beipei, Bai and a friend escaped the oppressive heat of the afternoon in an air-

[250] Bai (1986), Part 3, Chapter 1.
[251] Ibid., Part 2, Chapter 3.

conditioned office. Given the heat and his jumpy nature, Bai was frightened by a sudden sound and his resulting emotions were the direct inspiration of what follows:

<A Shudder> (震顫; Aug.-Sept. 1982)

The black night sleeps soundly here
Nothing can happen
In this entire room only the waves upon the piano speak softly like a song
When you face an empty, motionless doorway
you'll be alarmed, frightened, you'll suddenly lose confidence
you'll jump nimbly aside
curling up in a corner of the room
within a minute a thousand dark thoughts flash by

At the end of a corridor a young girl washes her snow-white skin
murmuring she pours out her heart to you
loneliness is the poet's empress
the sound perplexes you
shadows are already swaying in the window

The lonesome scents of the flower garden
blowing into your thin breast
you will suddenly open the curtains
and happily take a peek
at the vast increase of lights outside

The flames are still slowly falling
not a trace of wind here
the sound gradually disappears
you will suddenly think of the Tokyo philharmonic
at this moment it is busily performing
you think of Alexandria's vast summer nights
the boiling seawater erodes the blockhouses of antiquity
a golden-haired maiden of Rome
has arrived on the teetering coast
listening closely to the angry roar of the tiger in the depths of the thick forest
she still smiles serenely
waiting for your song, you bitter wail
on a winter night next year you will kill a wild beast with a pistol

Each evening you spend half the night in meditation
you can't imagine how large the flocking throngs of thoughts are
like a swarm of bees roiling in your head,
waltzes, snow-bright lamplights, a full-figure of white skin
the stranger who's turned his head toward you

an elegant rigid corpse
a flame-red Spanish woman
trains, black clouds and waves bearing down on you
you won't be able to bear it
you'll suddenly drop heavily on the couch
clutching at your chest you'll gasp, rage, worry or forget
you'll die for a night
after a long while you'll revive
the sound comes toward you again
very near, almost brushing up onto your face
its breath and odor entering your body
surrounding you entirely
no matter what, you must die tonight
because she will be coming tomorrow
the dawn already passed on her distant seaside love-song

As the Taiwanese critic Huang Liang has pointed out,[252] there is still much evidence here of Bai's earlier symbolist phase, of which <Expression> was a product – only here the end product is more satisfying, more mature and confident, with Bai feeling no need to clarify possible obscurities. Instances of this can be found in his handling of the sound of the piano in the first stanza, the form of the girl in the second, and the description of the heat in the fourth. Emotions and memories, personal or second-hand, flood the mind of the you-speaker who lives in terror of "that sound" and of "her." No real clues are given as to who or what they are, ample space being left the reader to find an understanding.

In the spring of 1984, Bai Hua began to mine Chinese classical poetry for images and inspiration, while retaining symbolist and surrealist techniques as the fundaments of his poetry. In April, the Tang dynasty poet Li Bai (Li Po) wells up out of a glass of wine in <Spring> (春天)[253] instructing and inspiring the practicing poet. In *Modernists Federation*, another Tang dynasty poet materializes in the following poem:

<Precipice> (悬崖: May 1984)

A city is one person
two cities, the one direction
the outskirts of loneliness wait soundlessly

[252] Huang Liang (2000): 309-310.
[253] Also in Tang & Wang ed. (1987).

A strange trip
timid but aimlessly pressing forward
to pay back for some old atmosphere
restraint is murdering time

Don't climb the pavilion at night
an address has a death in it
that vague white neck
will turn its head toward you

At this moment if you make a poem
it's the same as building a sunken ship
a black tree
or a stretch of dyke on a rainy day

The exercise of restraint becomes unfathomable
a riddle of passage
the ears of a courtesan that can never be opened
the inexplicable departure of willpower

Your organs wither suddenly
Li He[254] cries out in pain
the hand of the Tang will not return

Again here, as in <Expression> and <Shudder>, the difficulties of poetic expression, and Bai's admitted fears of lyrical inadequacy, play a clear role in the poem. The title of the poem itself – <Precipice>, an image also used in <Shudder> -- hints at the danger the speaker feels about the situation he is in. The pavilion, the dyke, and the courtesan all hark back to the imagery of classical Chinese poetry. Ultimately, the speaker reassures himself that Li He and "the hand of the Tang will not return," are just ghosts – but he still fears them. Is this a clear case of the anxiety of influence? Or just the fear of ghosts? More likely a mixture of the two, and very skillfully mixed at that.

In Conclusion

This has been an exhaustive study, over three chapters (including that on Macho Men), of Sichuan's avant-garde poetry as it publicly – if yet unofficially – appeared throughout the province and other parts of China for the first time in *Modernists Federation*. While some

[254] A Tang dynasty poet also latinized as Li Ho.

of the poets and their poetry had begun to be known outside Sichuan before 1985, this unofficial poetry journal proved to be a showcase of groundbreaking, nationwide significance. As noted, many of the poems in *Modernists Federation* were to appear in officially published literary journals and anthologies from 1986 on, and up to the present day. Such a list includes the poems of Bai Hua, Zhai Yongming, Ouyang Jianghe, Liao Yiwu, Shi Guanghua, Song Qu and Song Wei, Zhou Lunyou, Yang Li, Ma Song, Hu Dong, Li Yawei, Chen Xiaofan, Wang Shigang (Lan Ma),[255] and Liu Tao. This success was not the result of presentation alone, but primarily a reflection and recognition of the poetical qualities and experimentation of interest to poets and readers of poetry inside and outside of Sichuan. The interest and encouragement these poets received from each other, their readers, and even the editors of official literary organs (such as Tang Xiaodu, Wang Jiaxin, and Zong Renfa) in Sichuan and elsewhere would serve to encourage continued literary experimentation and related activities.

The avant-garde poetry and poetry-related activities of Sichuan's poets during 1984 were no more than a hopeful beginning to what would prove, during the course of 1985, to be a necessary consolidation of relationships and interests. The firm basis which resulted from these efforts during the rest of 1985 would prove to be the springboard from which Sichuan's, and indeed much of China's, avant-garde poetry would explode into view, seemingly fully-formed, before the eyes of the Chinese poetry-reading public in 1986. This occurrence was partly the result of a degree of liberalization in the CCP's cultural policies during the course of 1985, but the greatest credit must go to the poets, who were already poised to expand their activities and take advantage of the official publishing opportunities that came their way in 1986. The continued activities and poetical experimentation of avant-garde poets during 1985 was the key to the apparent breakthrough that occurred during the following year.

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[255] This poem, <Decline>, noted in the previous chapter, is over 250 lines in length and, written in the spring of 1981, seemingly dwells on the sorrow, alienation and confusion of an educated youth's return to the city/civilization after wasted years in the countryside, and forms a resolution to seek the deeper truths of life and escape from nihilism. The version of the poem that appears in *Modernists Federation* is severely edited-down to less than half its length. However, the full version does appear in *Chinese Contemporary Experimental Poetry* in September, 1985. Although not explicitly stated, it is possible that the editors chose to publish this 1981 poem due to its impact at the time, but also to indicate the source of the impetus to write poetry of the roots-seeking and Wholism tendencies in more recent times. The full poem can also be found in Xi Ping ed. (1988).