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Featured Scholar
Maghiel van Crevel



Early 1990s, working as translator/interpreter at the Poetry International festival in Rotterdam, for which I obviously needed dark glasses. Photo by Pieter Vandermeer.



Poetry in the Field

An Interview with Maghiel van Crevel

Jonathan Stalling


Jonathan Stalling and Maghiel van Crevel talk about the “wild and crazy” mainland Chinese poetry scene, insiders and outsiders and shifting positions, learning Chinese over and over again, (not) being a Sinologist, (new) area studies and the disciplines, and literary anthropology.

“I like good live music as much as a good footnote.”

In June 2017, I met with Maghiel van Crevel over a long breakfast in Hong Kong near Lingnan University, where we were taking part in a workshop on Chinese poetry and translation. I first met Maghiel at a symposium on the Chinese literary journal Today at Notre Dame University in 2004, and later at conferences and readings in China. I have always been a fan of his work, but this was the first time we had had a chance to talk at length. I was glad for the opportunity to pick up from our previous conversation in Hong Kong, on e-mail this time, in October and November 2018.

Jonathan Stalling: Let’s talk about your “Walk on the Wild Side: Snapshots of the Chinese Poetry Scene”¹ (downloadable from the MCLC Resource Center), which offers a kaleidoscopic vision of the poetry world in China today. What I find compelling is how you present an overview of the poetry scene not simply in the abstract, but through a series of thickly textured vignettes of people, events, and publications—of *moments* in poetry

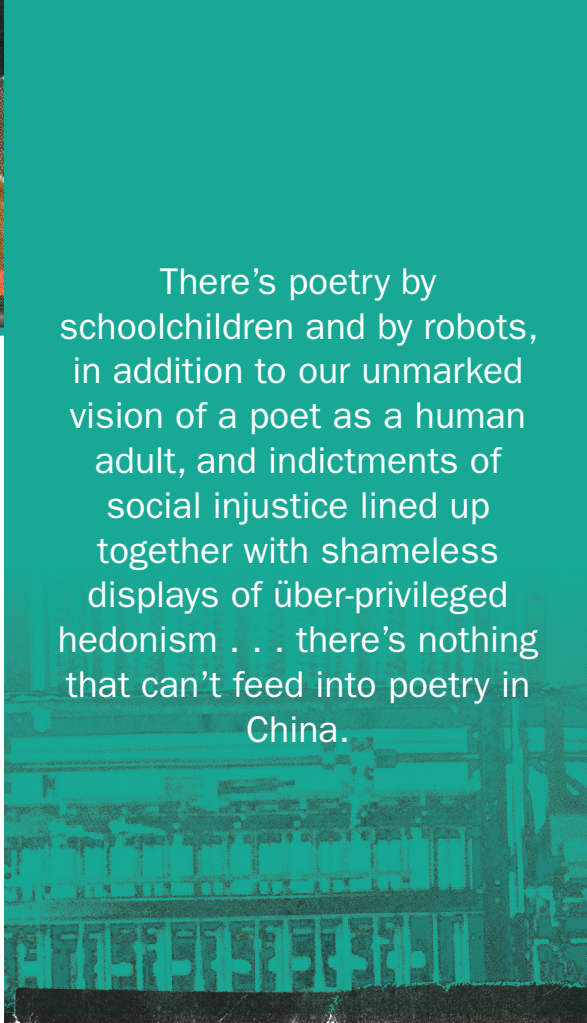
that are inextricable from their local ecologies. You acknowledge that some of the contours we draw for contemporary poetry reflect the relentless polemics that mark the scene (like the 1998–2000 collision of so-called popular and intellectual poets) and are further codified by scholars, critics, anthologists, and by the poets themselves. But your essay also reveals a deeper picture of the national scene that is remarkably coherent given its heterogeneity, and I am interested to get your take on how the parts relate to the whole here. I was reminded of how Alexis de Tocqueville came away from his 1830s fieldwork in a young America with a fascinating portrait of the “whole”—is there something about being an outsider that elicits a more legible description of one’s interlocutors’ lifeworld than they might articulate in their domestic discourse communities? Do you think your interlocutors are more likely to really spell out their poetic practices because you are not from “within the scene,” and you will be communicating to other outsiders about it?



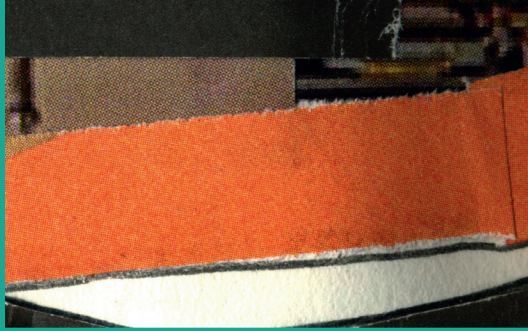
Or do you think that poets in China simply have a more clearly defined sense of how their work exists within a larger conversation on poetry? Is it more like a living geography that is at once split sharply into discrete literary and social practices (regionally, aesthetically) *and* anchored in deeply held and defended, shared beliefs? To sum up, does the Chinese poetry scene's holistic coherence arise from within the Chinese literary community or is it (also) articulated especially vis-à-vis the outsider?

Maghiel van Crevel: Both. The image of a holistically coherent, living geography of poetry is spot-on. And here geography is both metaphor and literality. I would say that while the poetry scene is permanently being pulled apart by collision and conflict, this is also what holds it together, precisely because divergent positions ultimately feed on the same beliefs even if these beliefs are marked by a high level of abstraction. In fact, I marvel at the ability of Chinese poets and critics whose poetics are utterly incompatible to still make the conversation work by employing such abstractions as, say, the need to “return to poetry itself” (*huidao shi benshen* 回到诗本身)—as a declaration that will miraculously get a mob of polemicists who’ve been at each other’s throats to go have dinner together and loudly reaffirm a shared commitment to the cause. In a nutshell, what I think this highlights is the sheer importance of poetry as a meme in Chinese cultural tradition (in the pre-social media sense of “meme,” as a cultural sibling of the gene).

At the same time, the fact that I wrote “Walk” (or rather, that it wrote me—it came gushing out, perhaps because I’d religiously written fieldnotes for a year) is directly connected to my outsider status. I had long wanted to not just draw on my fieldwork to support desk research, but to write something that takes the fieldwork as its point of departure and as its object of inquiry—including



There’s poetry by schoolchildren and by robots, in addition to our unmarked vision of a poet as a human adult, and indictments of social injustice lined up together with shameless displays of über-privileged hedonism . . . there’s nothing that can’t feed into poetry in China.



ing some serious reflection on being “in” and “out.” There’s plenty in that category in disciplines that place more emphasis on fieldwork than does literature. Anthropology and its decades of soul-searching is the obvious example. But literature can do with more of this. And there was another reason for telling stories, or drawing vignettes, as you put it. “Walk” also wants to speak to the non-specialist, if only because the Chinese poetry scene is kind of, well, wild and crazy, and you want to spread the

word. All the more reason to try and shed the drier types of discourse the academy teaches us to produce.

And, yes, the outsider does stuff to the insiders, if you’ll allow me to grossly simplify a major philosophical and methodological issue. They see other things, and they ask other questions. Of course no two outsiders are the same, and no two insiders. And, equally important: outside and inside aren’t pigeonholes but coordinates. Between them runs but one of the multiple axes that intersect in the individuals involved (poets, critics, local scholars, cultural officials, publishers, translators, foreign scholars, festival directors): gender, ethnicity, social class, the roles played in the encounter, and so on.

Also, your position on the outsider-insider axis can shift, depending on who is looking. In late 2016, Peking University Press turned me into almost an ideal type—or, a caricature—of the outsider when they were creating a buzz for Zhang Xiaohong’s 张晓明 Chinese translation of *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*. Their PR machine painted me as a lonesome traveler from Over Yonder (*yuwai* 域外), coolly observing “from the sidelines” a poetry scene I was supposed to know “like the back of my hand.” And then Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 crashed right through the placidity of the book launch by saying he was disappointed because he found my book not at all “outside” and in fact very Chinese. Needless to say, we had dinner together afterwards.

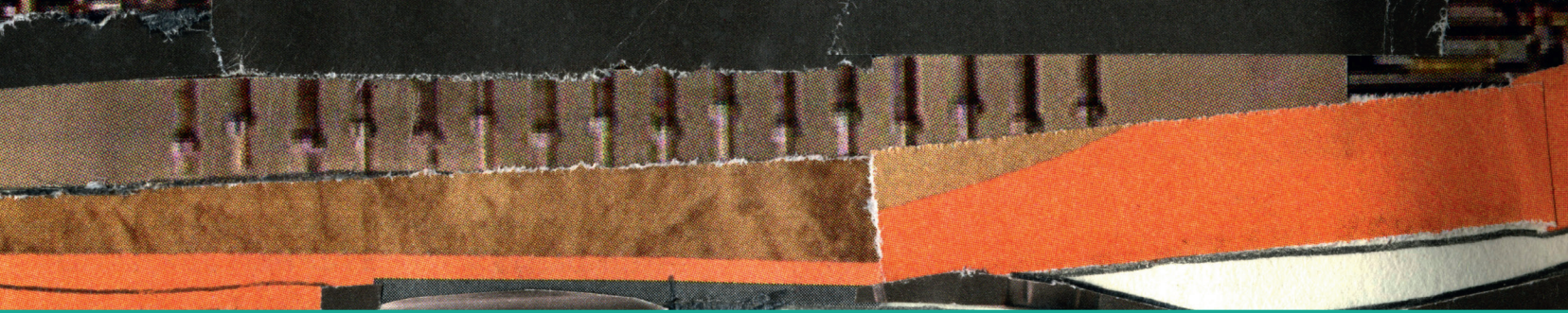


Nanjing University, 2016. Photo by Yang Wanguang 杨万光.

JS: In “Walk,” you relish the untranslatability of *jianghu* 江湖, and render it as “the wild side,” “roughhouse,” “vagabonds,” and “freebooters,” among other translations. *Jianghu* is often used in conjunction with *shi* 诗 or *shige* 诗歌 “poetry” to describe the microclimates of the greater Chinese poetry ecosystem—so, “poetry roughhouse,” “the poetry arena,” “poetry vagabonds.” The notion of *jianghu* is really interesting to me, perhaps in part because I am a Jin Yong 金庸 fan and grew up reading Manga Wuxia comic books, but also because the term does seem to imbue the notion of poetic affiliations, schools, and lineages with specifically Chinese cultural ideas such as *yi* 义 (“righteousness”), *li* 礼 (“virtue”), *zhong* 忠 (“loyalty”), and *chou* 仇 (“vengeance” or “revenge”). Just as a word like “ecosystem” suggests certain organizational principles, the notion of poetry as

an underworld parallel to but separate from officialdom comes with a lot of connotations. Should we take such terms lightly, or do they point to distinct cultural sensibilities that should be explored more fully—a *shiwulin* 诗武林 (“martial forest of poetry”)?

MvC: Again: both. I have no hesitation in saying that *jianghu* is a specifically and perhaps uniquely mainland Chinese vision, and reality, of contemporary poetry. I haven’t systematically checked for the rest of the world, but what I know through reading and conversations with fellow poetry buffs who travel elsewhere gives me the confidence to minimally put this out there as a possible script. This holds for the ways in which *jianghu* is imagined, verbalized, and experienced as, in your words, holistically coherent, and it holds for what happens on



With Shizhongren 世中人 in his Archive of Chinese Poetry (Hanyu shige ziliao guan 汉语诗歌资料馆) in Changyang, Beijing, in February 2017, checking out unofficial journals. The packets in my right hand are poetry card decks Shizhongren has just given me. Photo by Chen Xia 陈霞.



the Chinese poetry scene. There are the floodwaves and the variety of writing: poetry by schoolchildren and by robots, in addition to our unmarked vision of a poet as a human adult, and indictments of social injustice lined up together with shameless displays of über-privileged hedonism . . . There's nothing that can't feed into poetry in China. But also the incredible activism in encounters and events across regional, generational, aesthetic, ideological, and other divides. On that note, though, the gender gap appears sadly unbridgeable when it comes to running the show. Male dominance of the discourse and the organization of the field is painfully conspicuous, all the more so in light of the quality and diversity of female-authored poetry.

But there's a catch. For as much as contemporary voices, poets and critics alike, identify with a vision of poetry as being part of China's "national essence" (*guocui* 国粹) through the ages, their poetics come from, and talk back to, a different world than that of classical poetry, in theory and in practice. And, in that sense, yes, I think it's OK to take the bandying about of Chinese traditional concepts and values lightly. Just like the notion of *jianghu* itself, when the posturing as premodern desperadoes takes itself a little too seriously. Minimally, we should assume that while today's incarnations of *jianghu* gesture to native traditions at the lexical level, they are contemporary reinventions before anything else.

JS: Now let's shift from the poetry scene in China to your own background. How did you first become interested in poetry and Chinese? Which came first?

MvC: Poetry. It would have got a hold on me sooner or later, but I can pinpoint the day it did. It was my fourteenth birthday, and Lo, my elder brother's girlfriend, gave me a book of Hans Lodeizen's poetry. When I opened it, I felt the proverbial shock—it was, to marshal a tried and tested cliché, as if a door had opened onto [*insert glowing description of mythical vistas, etc.*]. No, but seriously, I was blown away. And beyond loving what Lodeizen wrote, the excitement extended to the realization that this was not just a connection to the work of a single individual, but a kind of writing of which there was bound to be more. Line breaks, musicality, imagery, and most of all something I'll summarize as a kind of self-evident unaccountability. Then there was the urge to learn it by heart, which has been called a defining feature

of the genre—and which was somehow the same thing as the feeling that a particular line, or sometimes an entire poem, was learning *you* by heart. An immediate, physical, mutually transformative action of text and reader. I'm not sure how much of this I'm projecting back from the vantage point of forty years on, but that's OK. If I couldn't have said all this at the time, that doesn't mean it didn't happen.

As for Chinese, it would have been around the same time that Daan Bronkhorst, a Sinologist working for Amnesty International and a literary translator, came to our place for dinner (he was with a colleague of my dad's) and made a clever rhetorical move when I asked him if it was hard to learn Chinese. "No," he said, "Chinese children learn it too." Right. My dad then gave me a copy of H. R. Williamson's *Chinese*, in the Teach Yourself series. I was into learning foreign languages, the kind of child that starts dictionaries of self-designed New Tongues. I remember leafing through the book and being intrigued by—you've guessed it—the characters. But it failed to grip me, and I put it on the shelf. I didn't think about learning Chinese again until college.

JS: I love the way you describe finding poetry and I will return to this topic in a moment, but I want to hear a bit more about your language acquisition experiences, both in college, but also in terms of preparing yourself for your fieldwork in China.

MvC: In 1981 and 1982, between high school and university, I spent a year at Augsburg College in Minneapolis on a Fulbright scholarship. Looking back, I can see how I used this to go back to a love of languages that had been sidelined by the science curriculum I'd done in my final years at high school. (I liked all subjects, and I felt the languages would happen anyway; and of the foreign languages I'd taken so far—English, French, German, Latin, and classical Greek—the science stream still included English and Greek.) At Augsburg, cherry-picking my way through the space I had as a non-degree student, I took courses in linguistics, philosophy, Hebrew, Russian—and Chinese, which had sort of lingered in my mind even though H. R. Williamson had not persuaded me to "teach myself." Chinese classes were at Hamline University in St. Paul, one of Augsburg's partner institutions in the Twin Cities. It was just four hours a week but I really got into it, and at the next opportunity for



My reverse entry into Chinese poetry, from the Dutch: the anthology I edited and translated together with Ma Gaoming 马高明.

registering for university in the Netherlands, I signed up for Sinology at Leiden.

This was in 1982. Deng Xiaoping's reforms were making themselves felt outside China as well, and annual intake numbers for Sinology at Leiden were rising dramatically, from a handful of students—as in areas like, say, Assyriology and Egyptology—to, eventually, about a hundred. Those in my cohort (of about sixty, I think, including a certain Michel Hockx) got a letter from the university congratulating us on our interest in China but

urging us to think twice, as in *Will There Be Jobs for All Those China Scholars?* Yes, this actually happened. I suppose that, like many other things that actually happened, it was done with the best intentions. Anyway, it was fun to be part of the next big thing, even though the language classes—Mandarin and classical Chinese, and lots of both—were intense enough to cause many students to drop out or switch programs.

In retrospect, I can confidently state that our language training was really good, and this is not because I'm worried about being ambushed in the neighborhood by a gang of retired professors. Language took up about half of the time we spent studying, with the other half dedicated to Chinese history, philosophy, literature and art, linguistics, and modest but increasing offerings in modern China studies exploring the social science side of things. We were simply made to work hard. And our teachers, mostly Dutch and Chinese, knew what they were doing. The grammar-translation approach they used has its drawbacks—we didn't get to do a lot of spoken Chinese—but the program certainly wasn't conservative for its time, and it taught us a hell of a lot. Of course what we know and do about teaching Chinese as a foreign language has changed since then, and I like to think the Leiden program reflects that today. It's important to us to retain "traditional" elements such

as full-form characters, writing by hand, explicit discussion of syntax, translation, and so on alongside things like extensive reading (in the technical sense, as opposed to intensive reading for translation), IT-supported learning, and all manner of oral/aural work we couldn't have dreamed of back then.

JS: So how did you develop your spoken Chinese at the time?



Well, poetry had never really left me—and maybe this was when I realized that I was *not* going to be a Sinologist, even though I was in a Sinology program.



MvC: In 1985 or so we staged a polite rebellion to demand more spoken Chinese in the curriculum. Still, in August 1986 on my first visit to China, when someone was blocking my way near the luggage pick-up at the Beijing airport, all I managed was, “Hey.” It worked—who needs language training? But it ended well. Coupled with that rigorous, reading-and-writing-focused foundation, immersion in a Chinese-language environment worked like a charm, and within weeks I found myself talking my head off. And of course classes at Peking University helped a great deal. I spent 1986 to 1987 there on a Netherlands–China exchange scholarship.

During that year, together with Ma Gaoming 马高明, a poet and translator trained in English and American literature who worked as a newspaper editor, I compiled an anthology of Dutch poetry in Chinese. A couple times a week I would cycle or take the bus from PKU to Gaoming’s home in Hepingli. My memory stubbornly shows pictures of a Third Ring made of red brick, and if that’s a forgery I can say for sure that it was home to donkey carts among other vehicles and to traffic lights—no overpasses—and that there were no traffic jams. I would show Gaoming my draft Chinese versions of whoever’s poetry we were working on, and we would argue our way to the final translation word by word and line by line. This taught me an awful lot, and it was my first encounter with the local poetry scene. The anthology came out in 1988, in the days of high-culture fever. It had a monstrous typo in the Dutch caption on the front cover, the kind of thing you freak out over when it happens and grin at later. I keep meeting strangers who have a copy, during lectures and conferences and so on. When I was in China in 2016–2017, this happened in Beijing, Hohhot, and Yangzhou. In all, it was kind of a reverse entry into Chinese poetry from the Dutch.

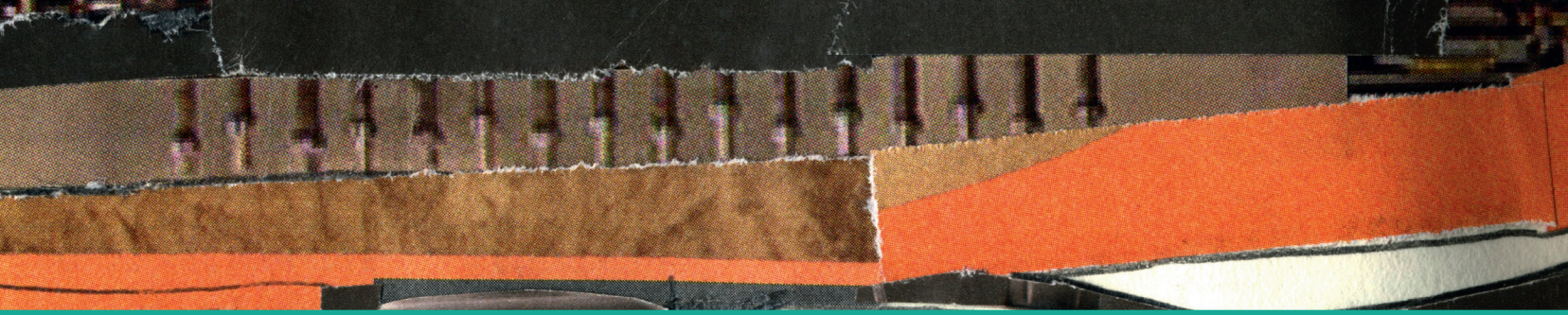
JS: So we see the return of poetry into your life and the first moment of what would become a lifelong convergence between Chinese and poetry, but was this the first moment that you knew you wanted to become a Sinologist?

MvC: Well, poetry had never really left me—and maybe this was when I realized that I was *not* going to be a Sinologist, even though I was in a Sinology program. To my mind, a true Sinologist is someone with the ability

to synthesize reflection on things Chinese in the *longue durée*, across a wide range of historically and culturally contextualized experience, with the depth and scope and localized conceptual sophistication that make the study of China a meaningful field of inquiry per se—and, obviously, with the linguistic skills for direct access to the source materials. I have some of that expertise, but certainly not all of it. Wilt Idema, one of my PhD advisors, is the real deal. His ability to identify and place issues large and small when commenting on China-related scholarship in just about any field is astonishing (and he’s got a wicked reputation for never asking just *one* question). I’m someone who loves literature and foreign languages and ended up learning Chinese in a program where language and literature came as part of a package deal also including lots of other subjects. My sense is that this is closer to the approach taken by Lloyd Haft, my other advisor, who is a well-known poet in his own right—but Lloyd, too, is definitely more of a Sinologist than I am. He’s just done a new, radically creative Dutch translation of *The Book of the Way and Its Expressions*, his preferred rendition of *Daodejing* 道德经. I’m something like a China scholar with a research specialization in literature, but with a keen interest in the sociology of culture and what you might call literary anthropology—and, increasingly, in translation studies.

JS: So your relationship with the title “Sinologist” is ambivalent?

MvC: Yes. The discussion is fascinatingly endless—how we produce and organize knowledge in academic institutions (departments, journals, associations), how this has been shaped by colonial modernity among other things and how the resultant ur-categories in the Euro-American university system have been contested and reshaped, how academic disciplines and their theories and methods are functional, human-made, changeable



Leiden, 2019. Photo by Nora Uitterlinden.

categories rather than ontological givens, and on it goes. These debates are less productive when people mechanically link, say, Sinology (or Persian studies, and so forth) with Orientalism, naïve visions of “translating cultures,” caricatures of anti-theoretical + anti-methodological philology, and so on. Sure, there’s plenty of Orientalism and bad philology, but the lazy pigeonholing is totally off-putting—and by the way, any academic specialization can be caricatured and shown to have produced questionable scholarship. Lots of non-Orientalist, theoretically and methodologically astute work is done in fields that, who knows, a national science foundation might still require you to list under Sinology because that’s what it says on the form. So let’s yell at the terminology every now and then, but also let’s put this in perspective and get on with the work.

JS: It sounds as if you feel strongly about these things. Where does that come from?

MvC: I really got into all this stuff—as in battling the caricatures, and trying to connect people working in different fields—when I was director of the Leiden University Institute for Area Studies (LIAS) from 2009 to 2016. LIAS is a recently established unit in the Faculty of Humanities that brings together a dozen programs in Asian studies and Middle Eastern studies—and that enthusiastically welcomes social science as long as it’s not of the number-crunching or Universally Valid Model type. Not least because these days, in addition to the classical humanities subjects that were the bulk of my generation’s training, Asian and Middle Eastern studies at Leiden include lots of social science, which attracts a lot of student interest: anthropology, sociology, political economy, international relations, law, and more.



The term “area studies” is of course fiercely contested, especially the Cold War know-thine-enemy variety, but there have been interesting initiatives in “new area studies” and “critical area studies” since the 2000s in various places around the world. In Leiden, we have tried to push the notion backward and forward from the Cold War to cover evolving practices in what you might call the study of places in the human world (of course our official definition is about ten times the length of that phrase), from colonial-era Oriental studies until the postcolonial present—and crucially involving critical reflection on the history of the field, positionality, and theoretical and methodological components.

But yes, I do feel ambivalent about being a Sinologist. Sure, I hope I know more about China than, er . . . those who know less about it—but it really all started with the language, rather than the *Book of Changes* or Maoism. Not just of poetry but also of the *People's Daily* (“The Forest Fires in the Northeast Have Basically Been Extinguished,” meaning they have not been extinguished), of Beijing cabbies downing *baijiu* 白酒 from large white bowls after work (this was in 1986, near the red-brick Third Ring, in a shack I had stumbled on and kept going back to in doomed attempts to play guess-fingers), news-readers (effortlessly, supersonically formulaic), people around you uttering sentences that are *so cool* in their disregard for textbook rules, and the rhythm and the pauses and the fillers that make them work nevertheless.


Anyway, ever since saying “Hey” at Beijing Capital Airport in 1986, speaking Chinese has continued to thrill and frustrate me. There’s a pattern: I rarely speak it outside China except for occasional conversations with students or visitors, and when I arrive in China, I can physically feel it being switched back on. And then, I go full-throttle, putting in as many hours as I can, and I enter a kind of linguistic flow—until time’s up, I leave the country, and it all starts to go rusty again. I have ambivalent feelings about this that I know I share with many [insert tirade against misrepresentation of fields such as *Chinese studies* as “just learning a foreign language”]. How seriously do people take you if they say you’re a *Zhong-guotong* 中国通 (whose translation as “Old China hand” has to be among the most hilariously stilted phrases in the profession) because you may just have uttered an eight-word sentence that kinda sounds like it ought to sound? Especially if you realize time and time again, at every

level, how much you don’t know about this language? Is it disingenuous to be interested as much in someone’s word choice and their intonation as in what they’re trying to tell you? (These things are of course inseparable, but you know what I’m saying.) Was Han Dong 韩东 right when he dismissed foreign scholars of Chinese literature as operating at the level of primary school students, or might they have something useful to contribute?

None of this, needless to say, is unique to Chinese. I would have found and loved and frowned at the same things in India or Ireland or Italy. And, yes, language is the most clichéd *and* the surest way into Real Conversations (duh)—which matter a great deal in fieldwork (duh).

JS: Apropos of fieldwork, in addition to classicists and philologists, I have also associated Sinology with a sense of rigor as being based in evidential modes of analysis where you rely on firsthand observations gathered to validate and verify your arguments rather than literary theory. You clearly engage with theory in your work, but I am interested in learning about how you developed your methodology of situating close readings of poetry within thickly textured social and historical contexts. Your work shares something with the very best investigative journalism—a willingness to immerse yourself in the lifeworlds of your research subjects, in this case those who operate in and around contemporary Chinese poetry. Did you receive training in ethnography, or have you created your research style organically over time?

MvC: Definitely the latter. It has evolved along the way. The big picture is that I get into lots of different things and I’m never just in one space. I like a good workout as much as a good class and good live music as much as a good footnote—and I get excited about fields X, Y, and Z, none of which are my own, and start reading about them, often without (visibly or explicitly) using this in my own work. Learning from scholars in the LIAS who do political economy of the Middle East or the iconography of temples in Middle Kingdom Egypt (“They’ve got their own middle kingdom!”) or the colonial history of Sri Lanka was infectious in this respect. It was very much part of my job to know about my colleagues’ research, which left me with little time for my own work in those years—said the guilt-ridden Calvinist—but I wouldn’t



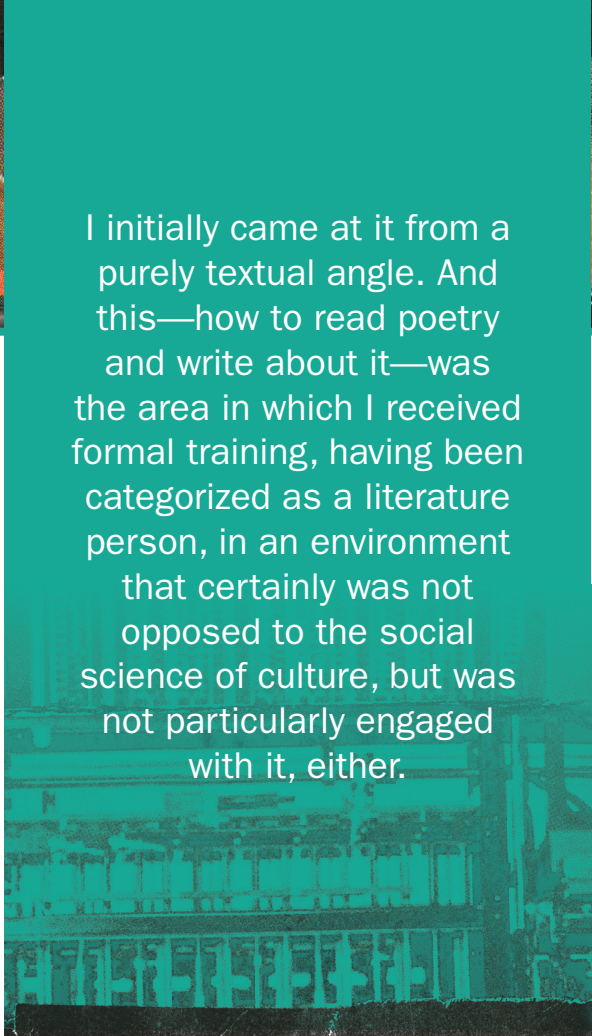
have missed it for the world. It's fun, and forays into other fields help you reflect on your own. At any rate, I haven't exactly traveled a straight line to where I find myself now.

JS: So how did this happen?

MvC: In a nutshell, after my MA, I first went from a research assistantship in a psycholinguistics project at the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen to substituting in the Mandarin program at Leiden and fanatic freelance translation on the Dutch literary scene. There was a real interest in Chinese poetry in the late '80s and the early '90s, so I started publishing, interpreting at festivals, and so on. Lloyd Haft and I published an anthology of ten contemporary poets, and I published individual collections of Duo Duo's 多多 and Bei Dao's 北岛 work, and essays on Chinese poetry in literary journals. Then one day Lloyd said, "Why don't you do a PhD on Duo Duo?" The penny dropped, and I was lucky enough to find a funded position at Leiden.

I initially came at it from a purely textual angle. And this—how to read poetry and write about it—was the area in which I received formal training, having been categorized as a literature person, in an environment that certainly was not opposed to the social science of culture, but was not particularly engaged with it, either. But, since our library, like most others, held very little on contemporary poetry, I had to go find my material in China (yes, it's a hard life). And during my first real fieldwork trip, about ten weeks in 1991, I was hooked by the sheer intensity of the poetry scene.

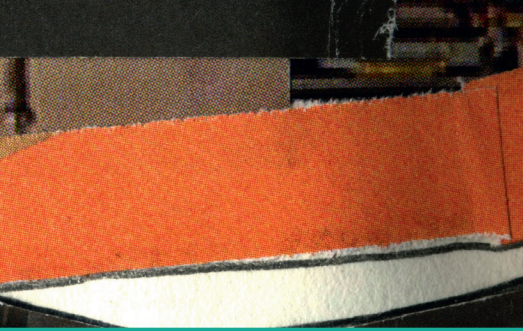
At the time, right after the political turmoil at the end of the 1980s, this manifested as a kind of explosive restraint rather than the loud exuberance and the hyperactivity that had marked the decade (and would later mark the early twenty-first century, albeit in a very different cultural ecology). I started doing what I suppose was



I initially came at it from a purely textual angle. And this—how to read poetry and write about it—was the area in which I received formal training, having been categorized as a literature person, in an environment that certainly was not opposed to the social science of culture, but was not particularly engaged with it, either.

she leafed through a draft of a chapter on the literary "underground" I had just finished (my advisors hadn't even seen it yet), just sort of skimming the pages—it was ridiculously long—and turned to me and said: "You should send this to Howard Goldblatt *now*." He was then editor of *Modern Chinese Literature*, the predecessor to *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*. Another penny-drop moment: OK, so this might be valuable to others in its own right, and something I could do more with, not just as the background to Duo Duo's private symbolism. This bit later ended up at the core of the literary history part of *Language Shattered: Contemporary Poetry and Duo-duo*.

So I have lots and lots of fieldnotes taken over the years. Like the oral history, the fieldnotes started happening long before I became aware of professional discourse on ethnography. By the time I began to think about my work in those terms I was in a regular teaching position, first at the University of Sydney, where I taught from 1996 to 1999, and then at Leiden, in my current position. I didn't do a postdoctoral stint but hit the ground running in Sydney right after getting my PhD, and when I returned to Leiden, the department was at a transitional moment in terms of staff and identity and I had a lot of admin responsibilities. Those years, until the mid 2000s, were breathless, and there was little time to retrain, so to



oral history *à l'improviste*, realizing how important and how little-documented the stories of this poetry were—starting with its underground provenance during the Cultural Revolution and branching out into the nationwide network of unofficial journals that had such a major impact. Of course foreign researchers knew about *Today* and the Obscure poets, but in retrospect we were really only seeing the tip of the iceberg. Later, in 1994 or 1995, when I was at PKU again and Michelle Yeh came to give a talk,



speak. But I continued honing my own fieldwork practice whenever I had the chance, including a crude variety of what real ethnographers call coding.

JS: So this becomes one element of a research practice you've summed up as bringing together text, context, and metatext in *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*?

MvC: Yes, but again, my work at the LIAS, starting right after the book had come out, was a formative experience and has helped me along further since. By way of an example, I've worked with colleagues from elsewhere in the university to set up two courses for PhD students across the humanities and the (narrative) social sciences. This is meant to counterbalance the tunnel vision that can come with the permanent focus of young scholars on a direct return on investment from what they read and think about and discuss: "If this fantastic public lecture doesn't relate to my project, I shouldn't go, and I might be able to put in fourteen hours today without being distracted." This is deeply misguided, but it's not their fault. It is not for no reason that academia is frequently called a cult, and faculty should do more to disabuse grad students of the illusion that working yourself to death in isolation is glorious and rewarding.

One of those courses is called "Discipline and Place"—and yes, these are verbs as well as nouns, and yes, it's a reference to Foucault. This is a lecture series by scholars across specializations who are asked to reflect first on what defines their field (art history, religious studies, history, linguistics, gender and sexuality studies, political economy, law, museum studies, you name it); and then, on how their field relates to realities, representations, and issues of *place*. This is a question that is often given short shrift at the deeper levels in fields sometimes uncritically called the disciplines: often of Euro-American provenance (which moves scholars like Chen Kuan-Hsing 陈光兴 to ask if the disciplines might not be considered area studies themselves, an argument Bryan Van Norden might be sympathetic to as well from his vantage point in philosophy), and with the definite article in "*the* disciplines" obscuring the local, contingent, and changeable nature of *any* field of inquiry, in its origins, its development, and its diversification.

The other course is on methodology: archival work, discourse analysis, oral history, visual analysis, inter-

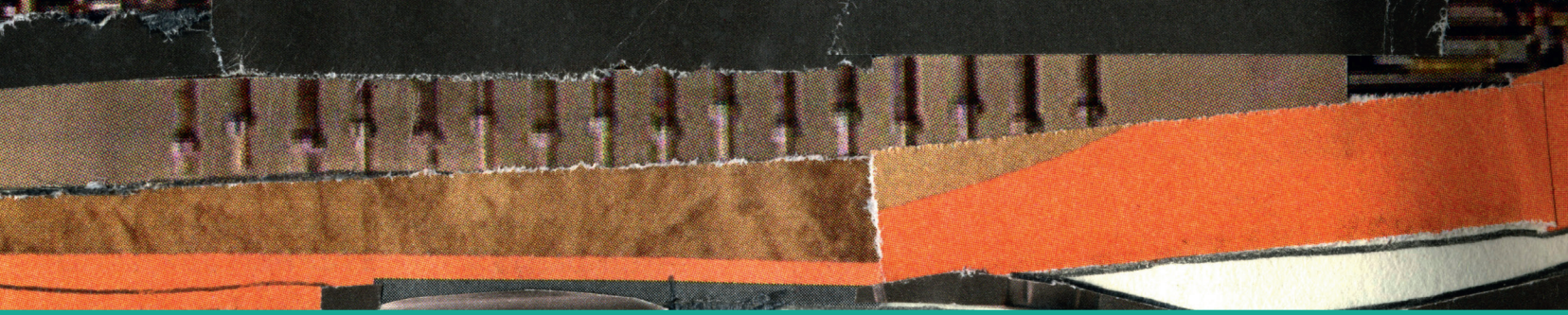
views, and more—and we link this to the ways in which notions such as truth, reflexivity, ethics, access, contradictions, and so on play out in research. Here I had the privilege of working with Erik Bähre, an anthropologist and a truly free spirit whose work on methodology I find spectacular, both what he writes about it and how he teaches it. I learned an enormous amount from him by playing devil's advocate when he drew up successive drafts of the syllabus—and then taking the course myself as well (formal training at last . . .) and contributing where I could from humanities perspectives to complement Erik's social-science profile.

Then, toward the end of my time as LIAS director when the prospect of a sabbatical and a full year's fieldwork in 2016–17 drew near, I did another round of reading on issues in ethnography, from the practical to the ethical and the philosophical, and another bunch of things fell in place. This helped me to make the most of my time in China. I came back with more material than I can process in ten lifetimes, not just in terms of poetry but in terms of insights, ideas, new questions.

In sum, I am nowhere near as well versed in ethnography as your regular anthropologist, but I'm not clueless.

JS: OK—so what *is* this fieldwork? What do you do?

MvC: Pretty much the proverbial deep hanging out and some participant observation. By the latter I mean things like attending poets' conferences that typically combine recital with debate on Whither Chinese Poetry, "instructional commentary" (*dianping* 点评) sessions where people present their work and get feedback, such as those organized for Yi Sha's 伊沙 *New Poetry Canon*, and so on. The hanging out is not of the kind where the researcher lives in a (family, village) community and is in daily contact with a small number of key interlocutors for extended periods of time. It's more like I'm trying to understand a huge, multi-headed organism that I run circles around while it speaks, sings, screams, and mutters in myriad voices [*bad metaphor award*]. My object of analysis, and my *location*, is the poetry scene at large, so the research is multi-sited, both in terms of geography (I've done fieldwork in about twenty cities over the years) and in that it takes place at public poetry events as well as at private encounters in people's homes, bookstores, cultural venues, offices, restaurants, bars, and so on. It's sometimes



facilitated by introductions but also I have often taken the initiative myself to get in touch with people by writing to them or calling them up or approaching them at events. In this way, over the years, I've met and worked with a large number of Chinese poets, critics, poetry scholars, and other stakeholders. And, they have crucially helped to build the unique holdings in contemporary poetry we have at Leiden.

I focus on New Poetry, and within that category I spend little time in "official" (*guanfang* 官方) settings, even if official/unofficial boundaries have been blurred from the word go. I feel more affinity with the scene around the diverse body of writing that is called "avant-garde" (an ever more inadequate term) and other writing that is less aligned with the instrumentalist vision of literature that informs the government's cultural policy. Migrant worker poetry, for instance, which I prefer to call "Battlers poetry" to stay closer to what remains the most vivid and widespread term in Chinese (*dagong shige* 打工诗歌). (Incidentally, Battlers poetry entertains fascinatingly ambiguous relations with officialdom. In 2017, I attended a conference in Hengxi, near Nanjing, where funding from the local municipality appeared to be forthcoming in exchange for, shall we say, a display of optimism as regards the lot of the migrant workers: patriotism and faith in the future rather than anger and despair.) But even after limiting the scope of my interest in this way, there is no way of systematically keeping up in a poetryscape that is home to Datui 大腿 as well as Huang Xiang 黄翔, Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 as well as Yin Lichuan 尹丽川, Yu Jian 于坚 as well as Haizi 海子, and the list goes on. All you can do is try to push back a little against the forces that narrow your vision: generational and poetical divides, processes of canonization inside China, the ways in which friendships and networks can lock you in as well as empower you, and so on.

Then again, deep hanging out and participant observation intersect with more or less formalized moments in which I step back and quite literally speak *to* the people

whose poetry lifeworlds I study and tell them what I see—which involves textual analysis just as much as ethnography, the point being that I try to combine the two—and this involves shifting roles and positions in the conversation. By that I mean giving public lectures in Chinese, usually at universities (in 2016–17, I did about forty of these at twenty-five universities) and sometimes at cultural hubs, like Zhai Yongming's 翟永明 White Nights bar in Chengdu. I find this to be a meaningful element in a fluid dialogue that involves multiple stakeholders and doesn't need to be too strictly compartmentalized, especially since in China the academy is so closely interwoven with the poetry scene. Such campus events often bring together graduate students and faculty with local poets and critics, and are a great way to get access and renew old acquaintances and make new ones. And much like media appearances inside China, they are a way to talk back to and hopefully contribute to the community where it all starts. This won't make me less of an outsider, but that's OK.

In fact, if you'll allow me to paraphrase from "Walk on the Wild Side," I am convinced that physical proximity and distance to the *places* we study continue to matter, as do the dynamics between lingual and cultural selves and others. There is no need to essentialize native/foreign or practitioner/observer binaries. But we all begin from somewhere, and I have not ceased to marvel at this particular elsewhere.

JS: Well said. Talking to you has been a real pleasure. I am already looking forward to our next conversation!

MvC: Thanks, I enjoyed this, too.

Note

¹ Maghiel van Crevel, "Walk on the Wild Side: Snapshots of the Chinese Poetry Scene" (Columbus: MCLC Resource Center, The Ohio State University, 2017), <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/walk-on-the-wild-side/>.