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Chinese Poets Since 1949

Edited by
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and

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A Bruccoli Clark Layman Book



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Thomas E. Moran

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—Christopher Lupke

For Rebecca Purdum, with esteem, love, and gratitude.

—Thomas Moran



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Shen Haobo 沈浩波

(2 October 1976 –)

Maghiel van Crevel

Leiden University

and

Liang Yujing

Victoria University of Wellington

BOOKS: *Yi ba hao ru* [A Handful of Tit] (Beijing: Privately printed, 2001);

Xin cang da e [Great Evil Hidden in the Heart] (Dalian: Dalian chubanshe, 2004);

Hudie [Butterfly] (Shanghai: Jinxiu wenzhang chubanshe, 2010);

Wenloucun jishi [The Wenlou Village Chronicles] (Yinchuan: Yangguang chubanshe, 2011);

Bu lan zhi she [Rotless Tongue] (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2016);

Xiang ming yao shi [Asking Fate for Poetry] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2017).

Collections: *Mingling wo chenmo* [Order Me Silent] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 2013);

Hualian zhi ye [Hualian at Night] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2019).

OTHER: “Na yi duan lishi, wo hai congwei hepan tuo chu: Zai taopao de rizi li” in *Zhongguo shige quan* (16 April 2009) [Web, accessed 4 September 2019].

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATION—UNCOLLECTED: “Shei zai na ‘Jiushi niandai’ kai shuan” [Who’s Making a Fool of “the Nineties”], *Wu Si wenxuebao*, 10 October 1998, pp. 1–2.

Shen Haobo is among the most prominent of China’s *Qiling hou* (Post-1970) poets and poetry activists. He has produced an original, controversial body of work and is an influential and contentious figure in Chinese poetry, not just as an author and polemicist but also as an organizer, publisher, and sponsor who can draw on a financial fortune built in the publishing business. (In addition to published sources, information on Shen’s life and career has



Shen Haobo, circa 2006 (courtesy of the author)

been drawn from unpublished interviews conducted with him by Maghiel van Crevel and Liang Yujing since 2000.)

Shen Haobo was born on 2 October 1976 in Fentie, Taixing county, Jiangsu province, in an earthquake-proof shed, the family’s temporary home after the Tangshan earthquake that occurred in late July that year. His father, Shen Xueli, taught mathematics in primary school. His mother, Zhang Guilan, taught Chinese and Chinese literature in high school. The elder of two sons, Haobo was keenly aware that his mother had an

unfulfilled literary dream of her own and hoped her son would become a writer. He remembers their strict parenting being effective, in that he earned excellent grades through junior high, but also instilling in him a desire to escape. In 1991, after he left home for the nearby town of Huangqiaozhen to attend senior high school, he began to turn rebellious and to struggle with his studies, especially the sciences. As a result, he had to repeat the first year.

Despite his difficulties in school he did well on the university entrance examination, which did not cover science subjects. In 1995 he was admitted to the Chinese department at Beijing Normal University (BNU). While he was still attending junior high school, he had been impressed by the role played by BNU students such as Wu'erkaixi in the 1989 protest movement centered in Tiananmen Square. He recalls that he became skeptical when, after the government's brutal crackdown on the protests, students were depicted in the media as violent troublemakers.

Like other top schools throughout China, BNU has consistently been a breeding ground for academics and creative writers, and Shen began to read and write poetry in earnest there. He got to know poets and BNU alumni Hou Ma in Beijing and Xu Jiang in Tianjin. He corresponded with their Xi'an-based classmate Yi Sha (all three were about ten years older than Shen) and with renowned older poets elsewhere, such as Yu Jian in Kunming and Han Dong in Nanjing. His alma mater became and remains his "literary hometown" in the network he started building in Beijing.

Most if not all of the poets Shen first worked with were men. While Shen's network has grown tremendously and diversified over the years and he has worked with many women poets—Yin Lichuan, Wu Ang, Chun Shu (also known as Chun Sue), and Li Suo to name some of the best-known—his ur-connections mirrored the male-dominated mainland-Chinese poetry scene at large. Even as the significance of *nǚxìng shīgē* (women's poetry) is acknowledged, it is still overwhelmingly men who produce and shape the discourse through editorships, event organization, group formation, access to funding, jury memberships, and academic and publishing leverage. When asked in 2017 by Maghiel van Crevel who were his five favorite poets, Shen named all men: Yi Sha, Hou Ma, Han Dong, Tang Xin, and himself.

From 1996 to 1998 Shen wrote under the pen name Choushui, literally "hatred-water" and a near-homonym of the Chinese word for sewage. This pen name can be seen as a harbinger of his and his kindred poets' aesthetic positioning and Shen's mode of self-representation in later years. In a nutshell, that aesthetic has been one of transgression against the rules of a literary establishment associated with offi-

cial, state-sanctioned culture and the academicization of literature, and it has generated much controversy.

Shen's student days marked the early stages of his literary activism. In 1997, he became president of the BNU Wu Si wenxueshe (May Fourth Literary Society) and founding editor of the student paper *Wu Si wenxuebao* (May Fourth Literary News). Also, through his acquaintance with older poets, he began to contribute to mainland Chinese poetry's formidable tradition of *fei guānfāng* (unofficial) or *mínjiān* (popular/unofficial) publishing, whose history goes back to underground writing during the Cultural Revolution and continues until the present day. Unofficial publishing offers a more or less subversive alternative to the *guānfāng* (official), state-controlled literary scene, with student publications and the notion of *xiàoyuán shīgē* (campus poetry) somewhere in between. China's unofficial poetry journals, some one-off productions and some sustained for years and indeed decades, have shaped the face of Chinese poetry. Shen was part of a group that launched the unofficial journal *Pengyoumen* (Friends) in 1998. He later contributed to many other such periodicals.

By the late 1990s Shen consciously identified with the *kōuyu xiězuò* (colloquial writing) first advocated by authors such as Yu Jian and Han Dong and later in a different, more provocative brand by Yi Sha, with whom Shen built a close, collaborative relationship over the years. In the big picture, colloquial writing is one of the key features of an "earthly" aesthetic in contemporary Chinese poetry, its counterpart being an "elevated" aesthetic, in the terminology proposed by van Crevel in *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* (2008).

The distinction between elevated and earthly aesthetics goes back to the early 1980s. When an antagonistic opposition between poets advocating the two approaches developed in the late 1990s, Shen was centrally involved. In 1998, scholar and critic Cheng Guangwei published a poetry anthology called *Suìyuē de yǐzhào* (A Portrait of Years Gone By) in a book series called *Jiushi niandai wénxué* (Literature of the Nineties), which promoted only the poets of the elevated aesthetic. Shen reacted with an explosive piece called "Shei zài nà 'Jiushi niandai' kāi shuān" (Who's Making a Fool of "the Nineties"), launching a frontal attack on Cheng and the elevated camp and putting his talent as a polemicist on full display. First published in the BNU *Wu Si wenxuebao*, the essay was republished and read widely. It marks Shen's entry into the nationwide poetry scene, not least because it constituted the opening shot of what has become known as the Panfeng Polemic (after the Panfeng Poetry Conference, April 1999) between

minjian and *zhishifenzi* (intellectual) writing, which were associated with the earthly and elevated aesthetics, respectively. *Minjian* can mean many things and can be used in the service of different and even divergent cultural agendas, which is how the term can be rendered as either “unofficial” or “popular” in the two contexts mentioned above. The polemic raged from 1998 until early 2000 and remains a defining argument in the history of mainland Chinese poetry. For Shen, it established him as a transgressive and controversial figure.

In 2000–2001, drawing on his expanding network, Shen became the driving force behind *Xiabanshen* (The Lower Body), an unofficial journal produced in two eye-catching, book-like issues by a group of young poets, with Shen and Yin Lichuan as its most prominent members. Conservative critics were inclined to equate Xiabanshen poetry with pornography, but its thematic scope far exceeds sex and sexuality, and its negotiation of sex and sexuality is too frequently ironic and insufficiently focused on sexual arousal to justify such a classification. Rather, Xiabanshen poetry reveals the dark sides of life in post-Socialist China’s big cities, viewed from within the ideological vacuum surrounding urban youth. Angry and provocative, cynical yet humorous, it systematically breaches socio-moral taboos by addressing subjects such as sex work, substance abuse, corruption, and flaws in the nation’s education system; but at the same time, it exudes a palpable social concern.

Xiabanshen is a milestone in twenty-first-century literary historiography and criticism. First, it ushers in a poetry experience that takes the earthly aesthetic to extremes, inspiring later trends such as *Dì shige yundong* (The Low Poetry Movement) and *Laji yundong* (The Trash Movement). Second, and equally if not more important, the Xiabanshen poets were among the first to take to the Internet, which has become a most important medium for poetry in China. For the Xiabanshen poets and many others, the Shi jianghu (Poetry Roughhouse) online forum established by poet Nanren in 2000 was a key site for meaningful poetry in the first decade of the new century, with Shen as moderator and sponsor. Like *minjian*, the term *jianghu* is notoriously hard to translate, and the forum’s name has also been rendered as “Poetry Vagabonds” and, more literally, “Poetry Rivers and Lakes.”

In 1998, while Shen was still at BNU, he had already started contributing to the *Zhongguo tushu shangbao* (China Book Business Journal), and upon graduating in 1999 he became editor in chief of the *Yuedu daokan* (Reading Guide), but this ceased publication in 2000. After a period mostly spent writing

poetry in the cafés that were then becoming part of the urban landscape in Beijing, Shen returned to the publishing business as a *shushang* (book broker) and private publisher in 2001, when both categories were still relatively new players in the literary field. His company was called Tiehu wenhua chuanbo zhongxin (The Iron Tiger Center for Culture and Communications). In the Mao years, publishing had been a state-controlled and state-subsidized business that was driven more by cultural ideology than by financial profit. Commercialization began making deep inroads into the literary field starting in the 1980s and operating more comprehensively through the mid-1990s. In the additional space that now emerged, the *shushang* represented aspiring authors vis-à-vis state-run publishing houses in order to purchase from the latter the *shuhao* (book numbers) required for formal publication, which could take place under the label of the state-run press itself or under that of a nominally private publisher.

From the start, Shen brought colleagues with professional corporate expertise into the management of his company, with Qi Junhong and Zhang Kaifeng among his most important coworkers. In 2004, the business was renamed Motie (Beijing) wenhua fazhan youxian gongsi (Irongrind [Beijing] Cultural Development) and adopted Xiron as its foreign name. Deploying unorthodox publishing and marketing strategies, Xiron quickly became a competitive company whose strengths included a continuing reliance on individual editorial talent as well as a notable capacity for author-branding, where the media presence of the author became as important as their work. An early example of this approach was the way Xiron marketed Chun Shu’s *Beijing wawa* (2002; Beijing Doll), even though profits remained negligible because of pirate editions. In the mid- to late 2000s, Xiron established itself nationwide as a large, competitive, and financially successful private publisher. Renamed Beijing Motie tushu youxian gongsi (Beijing Irongrind Books) in 2008, it continued to thrive and employed more than five hundred people. Shen remained its director-general, overseeing a vast field of cubicles from a glass-walled corner office high in one of the office towers near Deshengmen in Beijing.

Shen moved into publishing during China’s rapid economic growth when traditional Chinese graphomania could flourish once again after the strictures of the Mao years, and he achieved success as a businessman and great wealth. There are other examples of poets who “xia hai” (went to sea—that is, went into business) as book brokers or otherwise, after the disillusionment brought about by the sup-

pression of the 1989 protest movement and the end of the *wenhuare* (high culture fever) of the preceding decade. Some, such as Liang Xiaoming and Lang Mao, have recently returned to poetry, with an appreciable dose of nostalgia for the roaring 1980s. What set Shen apart from other successful poets-turned-businesspeople is that his commitment to poetry never ceased. He continued to read widely and further develop his own writing, to publish poetry and commentary of various kinds (including a public quarrel with Han Han after the latter's denigrations of poetry), to organize and sponsor publications and events, and generally to be a force on the poetry scene. Shen's network of connections, access to literary infrastructure, and financial power in the poetry world doubtless shaped the nature of many of his encounters and relationships with other individuals and institutions. The nature of his influence augmented the controversy surrounding his public persona, especially for those who regard material riches as morally suspect.

Shen's involvement in the publishing business facilitated the publication of his first two books, *Yi ba hao ru* (2001; A Handful of Tit) and *Xin cang da e* (2004; Great Evil Hidden in the Heart), the former being an unofficial publication which included many poems that were reprinted in the latter. Just like *Xiabanshen*, both books are of good material quality and visually attractive in comparison with the standards of the day. Combined with their titles, their cover images clearly aim to shock the bourgeoisie. *Yi ba hao ru* features a set of autographed baseballs—suggesting breasts being handled by men of physical prowess—and *Xin cang da e* has a man's bare abdomen rising from a pair of jeans, his crotch at the center of the picture. The poetry in these two books sums up the early Shen. Whether in the staccato, short lines such as those of “Huang Si de lixiang” (Huang Si's Ideals), a fantasy about sexually humiliating a high school teacher, or in the breathless, long lines of “Linbing jiang zhi” (All Hail the Clap), an overwhelming portrait of (low) life in the big city, this poetry overflows with anger, aggression, and machismo, punctuated with sarcasm and ridicule (both poems are in Shen's first book).

Shen is an able reciter of his work, and foreign audiences first heard him when he read in Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands in April and May 2004. At around the same time, *Xin cang da e* was published by Dalian Publishers, but Shen's company undertook its printing and distribution. In the process, Shen re-inserted several of his favorite poems, which the publisher had removed from the manuscript in an act of pre-publication censorship that

is typical of publishing in China. As a result, within a few weeks after his Northwest-European reading tour, the book was officially recalled and banned by the authorities as “pornographic, obscene, and reactionary” (*huangse, xialiu, fandong*). Also, *Xiabanshen* was designated as an “illegal publication” (*feifa chubanshu*), and the group of poets associated with it was identified as an “organization” (*zuzhi*) with Shen as one of its core members. In China no “organization” without state control is tolerated by the authorities, and so there was cause for concern and fear for the poets involved. Several of them kept low profiles for the next few years.

It became clear that the case was not going to blow over, and eventually, while he was on a trip in southern China, Shen was urgently advised by friends to leave the country—so urgently that right after their phone calls, he decided to turn off his phone, throw away his SIM-card, and get out at once. He spent about three months in “exile,” as he characterizes it, in Hong Kong and Malaysia, where he experienced desperate homesickness, and then partook in a poetry event in Norway in September. When he reconnected there with Yin Lichuan and Chun Shu and read in the paper that a high official associated with his case had stepped down, he decided to return to China. Soon after his return, in October, Shen and his girlfriend Fan Jihui were married in Shen's hometown. The couple had a son in 2005 and a daughter in 2010; they are called Shen Botian and Shen Yiyi, respectively. In a 2009 blog post titled “Na yi duan lishi, wo hai congwei hepan tuo chu: Zai taopao de rizi li” (On That Bit of History, I've Never Yet Laid It All Out: My Days on the Run), Shen describes his 2004 clash with the authorities as a turning point in his life. The former “dissolute youth” had started a family and locked himself up in his office and at home in order to work and make money; he writes that he was “on my [his] way to middle age.”

Shen did not stop writing poetry, however, and the 2010 publication of *Hudie* (Butterfly) marked his public re-emergence on the scene. This book, a single long poem that constitutes a spiritual autobiography, departs from his earlier work to a more elaborately rhetorical, lyrical style. It drew much critical attention and Shen received the 2010 People's Literature Poetry Award. The book blends different modes and techniques, starting out in Part One with the image of a butterfly time and again “tearing off its colorful wings” to reveal “an ugly body— / the true face of a worm,” followed by childhood and adolescent memories in brief narratives. Part Two explores Shen's family history. Part Three adopts an occasionally exalted, moving tone:

How deep a sadness is needed
to overcome gravity?
A blind butterfly
crashes into the world of clouds.

Shen's next collection was *Wenloucun jishi* (2011; The Wenlou Village Chronicles). The poem series titled "Wenloucun jishi" lies at the core of this book, which also includes some of the work that had first officially appeared in *Xin cang da e*. Shen wrote the series after visiting Wenlou, one of China's "AIDS villages" in Henan province, where a paid blood plasma collection campaign undertaken by the provincial government (1991–1995) infected an estimated forty percent of three million donors with HIV/AIDS. He depicts these horrors by focusing on individual villagers. In "Shishi shang de Ma Heling" (Ma Heling, in Fact), Ma is an AIDS victim whose husband has died of the disease. Her new "suitor" has no choice but to marry an AIDS victim if he wants a wife. In a typical example of Shen's expression of social concern in transgressive rhetoric, the protagonist comments on using condoms: "In fact, to a peasant, fucking your wife with a rubber sheath— / that is in fact more fucking unthinkable than death."

Mingling wo chenmo (2013; Order Me Silent) is an edition of Shen's collected poetry to date. In the afterword, he explains the inclusion of previously published work by referring to "some unfortunate problems" surrounding *Xin cang da e* in 2004 and to the limited circulation of *Wenloucun jishi*. *Mingling wo chenmo* is not, however, a fully representative collection of Shen's work. The original manuscript of *Wenloucun jishi*, seen by Shen's English translator Liang Yujing, suggests that one poem in the Wenlou series, which depicts a violent conflict between AIDS victims and the local government, never made it into the published book. In this light and more generally, the line "order me silent" from one of the new poems that provides the name of the anthology is easily read as an indictment of censorship.

Bu lan zhi she (2016; Rotless Tongue) appeared in a series of nineteen small books commissioned by the novelist, poet, and publisher Jiang Yitan, containing brief, fragmentary poems of a few lines. Shen's next substantial collection, *Xiang ming yao shi* (2017; Asking Fate for Poetry), is made up of works written in the preceding five years. Not unlike *Mingling wo chenmo*, it shows Shen as a lyrical, meditative poet negotiating profound themes, such as time and eternity, in poems such as "Hualian zhi ye" (Hualian at Night), "Bai xue qipan" (A Go Board Made of Snow), "Yueyuan zhi ye" (Night of the Full Moon), "Bai niao yu yin hu" (White Birds and a Silver Pot), and "Shizilukou" (Crossroads).

The volume confirms that Shen's literary horizons had come to exceed those of his early Xiabanshen work—always, however, retaining the accessibility that has marked his writing throughout.

Hualian zhi ye (Hualian at Night), published early in 2019, presents a rich overview of Shen's poetry to date, with a lot of room for work from the late 2010s. At well over five-hundred pages, with photographs by Gui Jin and beautifully produced, the collection embodies Shen's access to literary infrastructure: published by the China Youth Publishing House, it is also explicitly marked as a Xiron product. At the same time, it can be seen to reflect the tightening of cultural control in today's China, as it does not include some of Shen's best-known transgressive or "sensitive" poems. The absence of *Wenloucun jishi* is a case in point.

Periodic translations of Shen's poetry have appeared in print and online in Arabic, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Hindi, Korean, Russian, and Spanish. After his 2004 travels in Northwest Europe, he did not conduct other readings outside China until 2017–2018, when he read in Macau, Costa Rica, Chili, Peru, and Russia. In 2017 his first collection of poetry in a foreign language was published, the Spanish/Chinese bilingual *Palabra hablada* (Spoken Word), translated by Isolda Morillo and Tyra Díez. This beautifully produced book is more evidence of the ways in which Shen's various identities overlap: it was published by Xiron but also distributed in Costa Rica.

A notable product of Shen's activism has been the establishment in 2016 of the Motie dushi hui (Irongrind Poetry Club), a community built online through social media, including WeChat and Weibo, and platforms such as Douban and Tengtun/Tencent. The club describes its mission as the publication of high-quality poetry books, the organization of valuable poetry events, and the advancement of the translation and dissemination of excellent poetry in Chinese and other languages. The club's style and positioning reflect an ideology that can be traced back to the early days of Shen's activism on the poetry scene in the late 1990s when he began engaging in transgression against the literary establishment.

The question remains whether Shen himself has not long since come to be part of the establishment, especially since the boundaries between official culture and *xianfeng* (avant-garde) culture are anything but absolute and the same holds for boundaries within *xianfeng* poetry. That said, for someone of his status and connections, he takes an exceptional interest in mentoring and sponsoring new, young authors, as is apparent in his selection of authors

and texts for the various Xiron-supported events and anthologies with which he is directly involved.

In December 2016, in a public WeChat announcement, Shen claimed that he would not accept any Chinese literary awards, in line with many disparaging comments he has made over the years in regard to what is a veritable award industry in mainland China. While he may have since declined (unofficial-circuit) awards, he has also contributed to the award industry himself through activities organized by the Irongrind Poetry Club. In 2018 he did accept an achievement award affiliated with Yi Sha's ongoing, multiple-volume *Xinshidian* (New Poetry Canon) project, continuing the twenty-year-old collaborative relationship between Shen and Yi Sha that started in his student days, visible not least in Shen's sponsorship of five volumes of the *Xinshidian* publications since 2012 and of Yi Sha's five-volume collected works (2017). This reciprocity reaffirms that in the Chinese poetry scene, running the show is as important as writing the poetry. Shen Haobo embodies this vision.

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