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Photo taken during 'Louder Than Words', a public interview event organised as part of the Prince Claus Fund Awards Week. Source: Heba Khamis.

On Being Queer and Underclass

Mu Cao and His Poetry

Hongwei BAO, Maghiel VAN CREVEL

The Prince Claus Fund is a Netherlands-based independent organisation dedicated to the advancement of culture and development, particularly in places where culture is under pressure. Every two years, it gives out six Impact Awards to outstanding cultural practitioners and artists worldwide. One of the 2024 laureates was Chinese poet and fiction writer Mu Cao (墓草), who was selected for his promotion of 'queer expression through bold, dark, and expressive poetry' (Prince Claus Fund 2024a). In December 2024, he travelled to Amsterdam to receive his award at the Royal Palace.

Mu Cao, whose literary name means 'grass on the graves', is China's first openly gay poet and his writing is 'marked by a forcefulness that can sow the seeds of emancipation and social change' (van Crevel 2024: 98). He has been described as a 'poet from among the common people' and a 'voice from the bottom of Chinese society' (Words Without Borders 2016). The biographical details that accompany his work are at once ironic and serious. They are characterised more by what he is not and has not done than by what he is and has done: 'He has no diplomas, he is not a member of the Chinese Writers Association, and he publishes almost entirely outside of official channels' (Words Without Borders

2016). In one of his poetry collections, the inside cover notes tongue-in-cheek that he has ‘not yet won the Nobel Prize for Literature’ (Mu Cao 2002).

Mu Cao’s work is defined by its rootedness in unofficial, outside-the-system subalternity in Chinese society and its striking difference from mainstream literature. Both his queer sexuality and his decades-long experience as a precarious migrant worker put him at the margins of Chinese society. This double marginalisation has shaped the content and aesthetics of his creative work.

A Queer ‘Battler’ Poet

Mu Cao was born in 1974 into a rural household in Xihua County, Henan Province, one of the poorest regions in China. He dropped out of high school at age 15, following a conflict with his teacher. After helping his mother, a dressmaker, to run her makeshift street stall for a couple of years, he went to the provincial capital, Zhengzhou, to look for work. He thus joined the countless precarious internal migrant workers known in China as ‘battlers’ (打工者 or 打工人), meaning people who work for the boss, selling their labour because that is all they have, with no control over their destiny. The English translation used here comes from an Australian expression for lower-class people faced with similar economic insecurity who persevere in the face of adversity. It matches the linguistic register of the Chinese source term and, just like the latter, it can be either pejorative or worn as a badge of pride (van Crevel 2017b: 246; Wikipedia n.d.).

Since the 1980s, about 300 million people have left the Chinese countryside for the cities to seek economic betterment and urban adventure, and escape poverty and the strictures of village life. Having become fixtures in the Chinese cityscape wherever low-status work must be done (construction, cleaning, factory work, courier services, waste-picking, sex work, etcetera), they often generate unease or disdain among native urbanites and are structurally confronted with discrimination. Over the decades, first in Zhengzhou, then in Beijing, then in Zhengzhou again, Mu Cao has held a series of odd jobs—cleaner, cook, barber, street vendor, garage keeper, factory worker, and many more—none of which lasted long. He works to save enough money to quit so he can write, until the money runs out and he must find work again. Mu Cao has lived this precarious life, usually without a stable residence or medical insurance, for 35 years.

Mu Cao loves literature and his childhood dream was to become a writer. He taught himself poetry and fiction by reading whatever he could get his hands on, which meant an eclectic curriculum featuring many cheap pirated editions of Chinese and foreign classics. In 1998, he self-published his first poetry collection, titled *Mu Cao’s Poetry* (墓草的诗). He has since disowned it, dismissing his earliest work as immature lyricism. The real start of his creative career as a writer coincided with his discovery of his own gay sexuality. Around 2000, he

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Mu Cao's works. Source: Maghiel Van Crevel.

discovered underground gay life in Zhengzhou and online. Soon after, he came out as gay in his poetry. The double marginalisation outlined above has underpinned his work ever since.

Despite being talented and writing diligently, Mu Cao found it difficult to get his work published, since both queerness and socioeconomic inequality count as politically sensitive topics in China. Having received numerous rejections from publishers and literary journals, Mu Cao was among the earliest literary authors to take to the internet to explore what came to be known as 'web literature' (网络文学). Under that umbrella, he worked tirelessly to advance 'comrade literature' (同志文学), with 'comrade' being an informal Chinese term to refer to LGBTQI+ people. In 2000, thanks to his web design skills (for which he had presciently taken a course in Zhengzhou), Mu Cao founded the 'Comrade Poetry Web' (同志诗歌网) and the 'Comrade Poetry Forum' (同志诗歌论坛), two websites that promoted queer Chinese-language poetry online. Later that year, he joined his fellow Henanese poet Ren Yu (人与, later known as Xiang Yu 向与) in establishing *Scrutiny* (审视), an unofficial poetry journal, and serving as its vice editor-in-chief. Mu Cao came out as gay in the first issue. The 'Comrade Poetry Web' was shut down in 2006, but Mu Cao continued showcasing his writing on his own website—designed in the colours of the rainbow flag—for many years, until this was also shut down, in the late 2010s (Mu Cao 2018).

Mu Cao's contribution to queer literature has been recognised in the pages of *GaySpot* (乐点), China's longest-running queer community magazine—also an unofficial publication. He served as co-editor of its first issue and the magazine has since championed his work. *GaySpot* anthologised his poetry in *Islands* (屿), a special issue on Chinese queer

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literature published in 2018. In 2022, the magazine also released an exquisitely crafted survey anthology of his poetry titled *20: Twenty Years of Mu Cao's Poetry* (20: 墓草20年诗选).

Mu Cao's contribution to Chinese literature has largely been overlooked, perhaps due to the double stigmatisation of his sexuality and underclass status—and, of course, because censorship has rendered him close to invisible outside the official literary circuit. In fact, his talent and vision have long been in evidence, not just in his own writing but also in his work as an editor. In 2002, he edited an ambitious volume called the *2001 Chinese Web Poetry Yearbook* (二〇〇一年度中国网络诗歌), which was intended as an annual publication but never made it past the first issue. In 2006, he served as editor of *The Gaze: Twenty-First-Century Chinese Unofficial Avant-Garde Literature* (凝望: 21世纪中国民间先锋文学). Both these books are headstrong, original publications that show an ambitious editorial vision and a determination to raise the visibility of contemporary Chinese writers whose styles 'rock the boat'. In 2015, amid an ever-tightening political climate, Mu Cao was awarded the Underground Poetry Award by *Freebooters* (江湖), one of the most radical unofficial Chinese poetry journals in the new century.

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Mu Cao's work often follows the literary tradition of critical realism, depicting the harsh realities of people's lives on the margins of society as a form of social critique. Sometimes, his writing is mixed with surrealism, black humour, and magic realism. Death is a key theme in his works and the graveyard a recurring trope. In a laudation for Mu Cao's work that the Prince Claus Fund asked him to write, Maghiel van Crevel (2024: 98) describes Mu Cao's writing style as follows: 'His raw, down-to-earth language can be at once mischievous and deadly serious, provocative and introspective, proud and devastated, hilarious and heartbreaking.' The Prince Claus Impact Award jury concludes that

Mu Cao has a ‘unique literary voice, characterised by its raw and fierce qualities, fearlessly delving into taboo subjects with rare expressiveness’ (Prince Claus Fund 2024b).

‘Comrade Poetry’: A Queer Voice from the Margins of Society

Much of Mu Cao’s poetry qualifies as ‘comrade poetry’ (同志诗歌), a Chinese term for queer poetry that focuses on the gay experience. Because of his underclass background, his poems often depict queer lives that are repressed and erased from the middle-class imagination and embodied in activities such as cruising in public places like parks and public toilets. This poem conveys the fleeting but beautiful feelings of a same-sex encounter between two migrant workers:

走在我右边的兄弟

太阳升起来的时候
走在我右边的兄弟
比我年轻
鞋子上还带着油菜花的清香
他匆匆的赶路
影子遮挡住了我的脸

我额头的汗水已经冰凉
眼角的皱纹还在延伸
冷笑与他搭话
言语中漏下槐花般的忧伤
我知道他不会停下来
我知道我不会停下来

太阳落下去的时候
走在我右边的兄弟
回忆和我一样美好的兄弟
他匆匆赶路时
我的影子全部笼罩

a brother walking on my right

when the sun is up
a brother is walking on my right
he's younger than me



Mu Cao in conversation with Willem Alexander, King of the Netherlands, prior to the Impact Awards ceremony. Source: Frank van Beek.

his shoes carry the fragrance of rapeseed flowers
he hurries on with his journey
his shadow covers my face

the sweat on my forehead is ice-cold
the crow's feet near my eyes are getting longer
a cold smile, the exchange of a few words
from our words drips the sorrow of the pagoda tree
I know he won't stop
I know I won't stop

when the sun goes down
the brother walking on my right
remembers a brother just as pretty as me
when he hurries on with his journey
my shadow captures him in full

Similarly, the following poem portrays the cruising scene in a park in Tongzhou, Beijing, where Mu Cao lived for 18 years after leaving Zhengzhou (and before returning there again):

西海子公园

在中国 有公园的地方
总有同性恋者的脚步
这是县城的一个小小的公园
没有花朵 只有石头和树木
听说这里的他们都很饥渴

在靠近WC不远处
游逛 注视 叹息 忧郁
痴呆 自卑 发泄 孤寂
我像你一样 我像他一样
你和他像我一样被生活抛弃

在中国有黑暗的角落
总有弱势人群的呻吟

Xihaizi Park

in China where there are parks
there are the footprints of homosexuals
this is a tiny park in a county town
no flowers just rocks and trees
they say the men around here are hungry and thirsty

they gather around the public toilets
pace gaze sigh sadly
freeze self-pity let go lonely
me like you me like him
you and he like me abandoned children of life

in China wherever there are dark corners
you can hear the groans of the vulnerable

The queer life in these poems stands in stark contrast to the middle-class, cosmopolitan gay urban life portrayed in Chinese queer films and *danmei* (耽美) fiction—that is, the Chinese version of Boys Love literature, which depicts romanticised gay love between beautiful young boys (Bao 2018, 2020). Mu Cao's writing shows a squeezed-out, repressed queer life demarcated by the men's social class and their urban geography. The contrast Mu Cao offers serves as a reminder of the 'quali-

ties of desire’ (Rofel 2007)—that is, how neoliberalism crafts desiring subjects such as gay men in China but at the same time divides them into desirable and undesirable, along intersecting lines of class and sexuality.

‘Battler Poetry’: Poetry as Social Critique

Mu Cao’s writing also comes under the category of ‘battler poetry’ (打工诗歌) (van Crevel 2021), written by precarious migrant workers and addressing their socioeconomic experiences. Like other battler poetry, Mu Cao’s poems depict the drudgery of work and the gruesome labour conditions many battlers face. The protagonists of his poems are often people living at the bottom of Chinese society: cooks, thieves, street cleaners, construction workers, factory workers on the assembly line, and so on. Some of his poems are characterised by black humour, satirising the authorities and official ideology:

小偷阿星

无业的阿星

在公园附近偷自行车时
被一名警察抓住带走
阿星想这下可完了

警察却把小偷带到家中
请他喝酒吃饭洗澡
然后此慈善教育英俊的阿星
还答应帮他找份工作

警察哥哥带来一只安全套
用口给小偷弟弟戴上
又在自己肛门上涂上油脂雪花膏
像观音坐莲似的坐在阿星身上
阿信感激万分热泪盈眶

此时四壁微微的颤动
一面镜子掉在地上

发出兴奋的呼叫——
如果全世界的警察和小偷
都这样！！！！！！！！
天下不是太平了吗！

Petty Thief Ah Xing

jobless Ah Xing
stealing bicycles near a park
was caught by a policeman
this time I'm done for, thought Ah Xing

but the policeman took Ah Xing home
wined, dined, and showered him
mildly reprimanded the handsome Ah Xing
and even offered to find him a job

uncle policeman took out a condom
mounted it on Ah Xing with his mouth
lubed himself with some greasy cream
and sat on Ah Xing like a praying Buddha
hot, thankful tears gushed from Ah Xing's eyes

the four walls trembled
a mirror crashed to the floor
an exciting scream—
what if policemen and thieves all over the world
were like this!!!!!!!!!!
wouldn't all-under-heaven see supreme peace?

If we take this poem as a form of subaltern expression, humour becomes a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott 1985), not only for the socially marginalised to make their lives more bearable, but also to subvert political authority through language and the imagination.

'Writing Is the Faith That Keeps Me Alive'

In a video interview conducted for his Prince Claus Impact Award, Mu Cao says: 'Writing is like a religion to me. I see it as a spiritual thing.' He concludes by reiterating that 'writing is the faith that keeps me alive' (Prince Claus Fund 2024a). In plain words, Mu Cao lives for his art. It is in the act of writing itself that his life is lifted from hardship and drudgery, from displacement and discrimination, and becomes meaningful.

In the following poem, the poet describes pursuing his literary dream despite extreme poverty:

梦游者

有时候
我对生活要求的并不太多
一盏灯都不需要
我在黑暗里走路
条条道路通向理想之门

有时候
我对生活的要求的并不太多
一张床我都不需要

sleepwalker

sometimes
I don't expect much from life
I don't even need a lamp
while I walk in darkness
all paths take me to the dream

sometimes
I don't expect much from life
not even a bed

The philosophy of the Prince Claus Fund is that ‘culture is a basic human need’. Mu Cao’s writing testifies to this, and it is truly fitting that this fiercely original and persevering creative mind has been recognised in such a resounding manner, outside the Chinese studies bubble. The fund concludes Mu Cao’s video interview with the statement that ‘culture is defiance’. Mu Cao defies the objectification of human life by the state and neoliberal capitalism; he celebrates queer life and precarious life; most importantly, his writing shows human resilience, dignity, and creativity against the odds. ■

In addition to Mu Cao’s writing and what little there is in the way of secondary sources on his life and work, this essay is based on the authors’ longstanding professional acquaintance with Mu Cao and extensive fieldwork on the Chinese poetry scene. The authors wish to thank Mu Cao for his permission to translate his poems into English and the Prince Claus Fund for granting them permission to use some of the images from the award ceremony. They will jointly publish a biographical essay on Mu Cao in an upcoming volume of the Dictionary of Literary Biography series (van Crevel and Bao forthcoming).

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