

Desecrations? The Poetics of Han Dong and Yu Jian*

Part Two

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Part One of this essay appeared in the Spring 2005 issue of *Studies on Asia*. Following an introduction, Part One discussed Han Dong's and Yu Jian's views on the following issues: where poetry comes from, the poet's innate receptiveness and his divine qualities, the making of the poem, language usage, what the poem expresses, and the poet vis-à-vis his 'worldly' surroundings. The full list of citations and the glossary for parts One and Two are included below to give the reader full access to each poet's metatextual publications.

Enemies of poetry and of the authentic poet

As noted in the first half of this essay, Han Dong and Yu Jian distinguish implicitly between an abstract, idealized concept of the poet and its (un)authentic manifestations on the contemporary poetry scene. Especially the latter prompt them to dwell frequently on what Han Dong identifies in "On the Popular" (1999) as three "colossal monsters" [庞然大物] threatening the real, right kind of poetry. "On the Popular" is a key publication in the Intellectual-Popular polemic, and the best example of what I have earlier called—complementary to Michelle Yeh's work—an Earthly cult of poetry.¹ The three monsters are: the System, meaning official cultural policy and establishment literature and state-sanctioned ideology, the Market, or the all-pervading commercialization of Chinese life, and the West, including foreign sinologists. Han's and Yu's anti-western sentiments have strong anti-intellectual overtones, which were made more acute by the polemic. Following their occasional appearances in Part One of this essay, let us review some enemies of poetry—and hence, conversely, of the authentic poet as poetry's true disciple—as perceived by Han and Yu.

Yu Jian, interviewed by Zhu Wen, feels that in China, the corruption of traditional views of poetry has led to insufficient respect for the genre. This is visible in the arrogance of those who cannot claim true literary skills yet continue to write—including political leaders—and hence, by extension, in types of literature sanctioned by the System:

The Chinese tradition takes poetry as a type of everyday karaoke for lyricism and the articulation of what is on the mind intently [抒情言志]. People will not lightly engage in dance, musical composition,

* This essay was first presented at Harvard University, during a workshop on the representation of character in Chinese literature convened in November 2004 at the Department of East Asian Languages & Civilizations, in honor of Wilt Idema; and subsequently, in January 2005, at Nankai University and Peking University. For its revision, I have benefited from stimulating comments by the workshop participants, the audiences in Cambridge MA, Tianjin and Beijing, and the anonymous reviewer for *Studies on Asia*.

¹ Han 1999: 7 and 10. Han frequently uses 民间 as a noun.

painting or writing novels, but no one feels any inhibitions about writing poetry . . . In this millennia-old poetry country, poetry is no longer a specialized art, but from its leaders to its common folk, it is an everyday laxative they “love to hear about and use themselves.” In China, among those that have gone to school, there are but few who haven’t written a couple of poems . . .²

By contrast, reporting on his impressions of the 1997 Rotterdam Poetry International festival, Yu writes:

[There,] the poet is not the object of sarcasm on the part of the masses, nor karaoke for the masses, and much less an obsequious servant to the throne, but [one possessing] deeply revered wisdom that is both ancient and novel.³

As for commercialization, Han Dong launches into a characteristically grim, didactic exposition in response to Liu Ligan and Zhu Wen’s questions:

The bigger picture behind commercialization is something to disapprove of . . . In ancient times, the standpoint of the artists was one of opposition to commercialization, but nowadays they’re reduced to a handful of people who are out of keeping with the times. It is definitely not as some people claim: “What’s wrong with commercialization? Commercialization makes those who were unfit for writing to begin with go into business, and those who persevere will prove to be born artists” . . . This is nothing but a rationalized explanation . . . If a poet has a strong desire for money and is a gifted artist, under the present circumstances his desire for money will of course harm his writing. In every respect, commercialization is doubtless an obstacle to writing. What are the intentions of people who attempt to come up with rationalized explanations? One problem is that under the pressures of commercialization, one’s energy for writing is scattered . . . and completion of the work will be manipulated by principles that are external to art. If you have no readers, your work cannot turn into money and consequently has no value . . . Many people will invoke supporting evidence to say that in western countries, every single artistic act is to do with commerce and is realized inside a commercialized system, and hence China’s ongoing commercialization is not a bad thing for the poets, and is indeed entirely reasonable and necessary. Something that is so common in the West cannot be questioned: the West’s today as China’s tomorrow. It’s hard to believe that poets’ and politicians’ judgment of historical values is in fact totally consistent . . .⁴

As it happens, Yu Jian is one who “comes up with rationalized explanations”. In an interview immediately following that with Han Dong, in the same issue of *Them*, he says:

² Yu 1994: 129-130. The translation of 言志 is Stephen Owen’s (1992: 26ff).

³ Yu 2004, vol. 4: 302.

⁴ Han 1994: 122.

Commercialization cannot subjugate poetry. It will in fact subjugate a whole bunch of “talented scholars.” Only in a commercialized society will the real poetry survive.⁵

As for the West as an enemy of poetry, Han and Yu often object to what they see as admiration for, submission to, and slavish imitation of western models on the part of contemporary Chinese poets, rather than to the West or western poetry *per se*. In “Brushtalk at the Old Sluice” (1993), co-authored with Zhu Wen—brushtalk [笔谈] meaning a dialogue in writing—Han says:

Every writer must start from reading. Well, these days, the works that possess the most authority and persuasive power are of course translations. We all deeply feel that we have no tradition to fall back on: the great classical Chinese literary or written tradition seems valid no longer . . . we have become orphans in the literary tradition.

To seek consolation, as if by prior agreement everyone has turned to the West. How to graft oneself onto the western literary tradition has become the main orientation in the efforts of many poets these days, so as to make themselves strong, and to “go toward the world”. Sadly, these efforts can only reach their goal indirectly, through translation. For our writing, we study translations, and then imitate them to write the same sort of thing. And then, that has to be translated yet again into English or other languages, to occupy the “international market” . . . they cunningly replace the literary traditions of humankind with the western literary tradition, and believe it to be incomparably superior, purely to advance their own interests . . .⁶

Of the two poets, Yu makes the more fiercely anti-western statements, in the sense outlined above. One of his favorite targets is (Chinese) exile poetry:

I’m afraid it is not exile literature like that of Joseph Brodsky. When poets of the Chinese language go to countries of the English language, they must necessarily form their own small clique and be their own audience . . . Aside from the westerners’ respect for the word *exile*, I’m afraid there are few people who actually realize that the exile poets are *poets*. For Chinese poets, exile mostly means fleeing from their existence . . . Brodsky didn’t want to leave but was forced to leave. For Chinese exile poets, it’s the opposite: they consider it an honor to be in exile in Europe and America, they will scramble to get in and worry about being left out. Why don’t they go into exile in Vietnam, or Burma, or Tunisia? Taking pride in exile shows that deep down, their mindset is that of colonized men of culture.⁷

Stilted as the phrase *countries of the English language* [英语国家] may be, it retains Yu’s emphatic contrast with the syntactically parallel *poets of the Chinese language* [汉语诗人]. “English” is, of course, a questionable metonym for various foreign languages.

⁵ Yu 1994: 134.

⁶ Han & Zhu 1993: 71.

⁷ Yu 1994: 133.

The bloody suppression of the 1989 Protest Movement, on and around Tiananmen Square in Beijing but also in other cities in China, is remembered as June Fourth. When, in 1995, Jan De Meyer asked Yu Jian whether June Fourth was a turning point for poetry, Yu said:

I think it is wrong to link poetry and politics together. There is a limit to the influence that changes or revolutions exert on poets. After Tiananmen I got letters from several poets informing me that they would never write again. I don't understand attitudes like that at all. I wrote quite some good poetry in 1989. Whatever happens in the world around me, I remain a poet before anything else. That doesn't mean I subscribe to an ivory-tower mentality—not at all. As a citizen, as the man-in-the-street I am of course concerned about what happens, and I will voice my opinions, but as a poet I cannot let myself be dominated by every political change of course in China. Since 1989, a good number of poets have left China, but I don't understand them. Look here, Chinese history has seen numerous great poets, and many of them lived in times of extreme brutality and cruelty. Yet they continued to write.

Whatever happened, those people consistently made sure they didn't lose touch with their mother tongue. If a poet allows himself to be separated from his mother tongue, how can he write any longer? As a poet, I need direct contact with China, its people and its language. That benefits my poetry. You know, for some writers Tiananmen was just an excuse to get out of China. I find that irritating. However badly things may be going politically, that should never be an excuse for a poet to flee. And there is something else: it's often precisely the ones in exile, who have severed their ties with China, who present themselves in the West as authorities, as spokesmen for what is happening in literature in China. And foreign countries accept them more or less automatically in that capacity. That makes one wonder, doesn't it?⁸

Yu presents his view of the West and related issues at length in an interview by Tao Naikan called “Clutch a Stone and Sink to the Bottom” (1999). The title is a reference to Qu Yuan (ca 339 – ca 278 BCE), the legendary poet of the Chu kingdom immortalized in the *Songs of the South*, who was said to have drowned himself. He has been invoked by Chinese poets through the ages as the epitome of extraordinary qualities gone unrecognized: uprightness in officialdom and, later, patriotic poetic genius. The latter required the retrospective appropriation of Qu Yuan's Chu provenance by a “Chinese” identity. Tao's interview shows Yu's style growing ever more belligerent, rambling and logically problematic, not to say uninformed or indeed opportunistic. Some of his tirades appear to aim at rhetorical intimidation of other players on the Chinese poetry scene and sheer, “loud” visibility, rather than clarification of the issues. Notably, Yu certainly knows how to clarify the issues if he sets his mind to it. For one thing, his consistent attention to language as a key component of poetics has made important contributions through mainland-Chinese poetic discourse over the years.

⁸ Yu 1995b: 30.

What Yu Jian says about the West and Chinese poetry when his implied audience is domestic is rather different from his occasional communications addressed to foreign readers. As is well known, after much uncritical celebration of foreign literatures and literary theories in the 1980s, in the 1990s the relationship of modern Chinese poetry and the West became the uneasy subject of critical reflection involving issues of (Chinese) identity. Seen in this light, Yu has a point when he takes some of his contemporaries to task for their extreme eagerness to seek publishing opportunities in the West and any fringe benefits that may come with it: “connect” [接轨] is the word used these days.⁹ However, Yu himself has always enthusiastically welcomed foreign interest in his work, and indeed worked hard to generate such interest. In 1990, for example, Yu acknowledged his indebtedness to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Walt Whitman, and Robert Frost in a preface in English (!) to the third of his unofficial, privately-produced poetry collections in Chinese. This is but one example of his active advancement of foreign attention over the years. There is nothing wrong with the ambition to address an audience larger than the domestic readership. One who writes wants to be read, after all, and read as widely as possible. But as poet Wang Jiaxin (1957), Yu’s most formidable opponent in the Intellectual-Popular polemic, points out, it is remarkable how Yu finds fault with others for transgressions against a vaguely nationalist code that apparently does not apply to himself.¹⁰

Yet, for a domestic audience, Yu reserves a different type of rhetoric, as seen in the following passage:

To non-native speakers, English is a second-rate language, but its position is that of Esperanto, of the Standard Language of the world. It leads toward set patterns for communication, toward standardization, and is turning into a computer language, a language that every human being can use. I feel that today’s Chinese still retains the poetic nature it had in antiquity . . . Unlike English, it is not a language that anybody anywhere can simply control. Chinese constitutes an older kind of wisdom, a language that’s been poetic in nature ever since it originated. To master it, one needs an animal intelligence [灵性]. I feel that Chinese *per se* presents a challenge to global integration and materialization . . .¹¹

In this passage, Yu alludes to the “second language” that English is to many Chinese when, in a casual twist, he calls English “a second-rate language” [二流语言]. By subsequently comparing it to the failed project of Esperanto [世界语, literally ‘world language’], he turns the global significance of English upside down. At the same time, he hints at its (global) hegemonic ambitions through association with the Chinese-domestic role of the Standard Language. Yu continues:

Modernization by way of the English language [英语现代化] leads to “cloning”, to duplication in the fields of economy, culture and modernization—isn’t that what the world is coming to right now? Ultimately, it will mean the duplication of human beings. The Chinese language, on the other hand, by virtue of its special and regional

⁹ In Yu 1998, 1999a and many other publications.

¹⁰ Wang 1999: 48-49.

¹¹ Yu 1999b: 80.

features and its five-thousand-year-old poetic nature, cannot become a linguistic tool used throughout the world. Chinese is a language that . . . is capable of arriving at another world view than that of western logic . . . and guiding human civilization in a different direction. English provides access to the computer; Chinese, to human beings . . . While English leads people to move forward toward modernization and turns them into slaves of the material, Chinese makes them stay in touch with nature, with the traditions of antique civilizations and with the old world of all living things.¹²

In “All True Writing Is Retreative in Nature” (2001), written together with fiction critic Xie Youshun, who joined the Popular ranks during the 1998-2000 polemic, Yu Jian expresses similar concern about modernization as a process of copying or derivative reproduction [复制]:

Other people do the creative work, and only then do you get to share in it. Now if a high school student who worships the Nike swoosh thinks like that, or an old lady in a butcher shop who dreams of sending her grandson to America to study, or an official in the foreign trade ministry, that is not necessarily something to hold against them. The problem is that today, those guys availing themselves of the Chinese language to write poetry think like that, too . . . There are even poetry professors at universities who declare that Chinese poetry must force its way [into “international writing”], and the standards are controlled by sinologists in the developed world . . . My anger is the anger of a poet. If, in this country, nationalism now meets with the disdain of all intellectuals, then the poet should be the last nationalist. He is the guardian and the creator of our mother tongue! I am a mother-tongue-ist nationalist . . . I will forever reject so-called “international writing”¹³.

In the following passage from the interview by Tao, the caricature of “the West” aside, one could argue that it is precisely the colonized mindset of which Yu Jian accuses his fellow poets that leads him to call a series of countries from Ireland to Latin America “the margins.” His identification of the Cultural Revolution as a determining factor for contemporary Chinese poetry sits uneasily with his earlier admonitions to separate poetry from politics:

Having been abroad myself, the feeling I get is that the West is a society that has already reached completion, where people enjoy high position and live in comfort. Concerns in the early stages of modernization matter less and less. Very few of their poems will excite me, as far as their expression of human life and human nature goes. They’re mostly word games. In my opinion, the good poetry from the West was all written before the 1960s. Now, outstanding authors in this world all come from the margins, like Ireland, the Czech Republic, Russia, Poland, Latin America. . . . Contemporary Chinese poetry is in fact truly excellent, it’s just that it is cultivated inside the boudoir and no one knows about it . . . China is a society on which work remains to

¹² Yu 1999b: 80.

¹³ Yu & Xie 2001: 32.

be done, and which therefore still brims with creative vitality and all manner of potential. Having gone through the terrible totalitarianism of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese poets' experience of human life is especially profound . . .¹⁴

In the Chinese context, poetry inside the boudoir brings to mind women's writing in imperial times. But whereas pre-modern women and their writing were in many ways effectively kept from public exposure by men, it is unclear who it is that imprisons the—predominantly male—Chinese poets in the contemporary period. For all the socio-political limitations imposed on avant-garde authors, most of them have ample opportunities for publishing, not least through a dynamic unofficial circuit that retains its importance to this day. In “The Light . . .,” published around the same time as the interview by Tao, Yu says:

In the final two decades of [the twentieth] century, the world's most outstanding poets have dwelled in the Chinese language. But on this point we remain silent, we keep it a secret and don't spread the word.¹⁵

A possible reading of this strange declaration and the image of the boudoir is that Yu Jian turns his frustration over what he feels is insufficient recognition for contemporary Chinese poetry into an assertion of its splendid isolation.

One wonders, who is Yu's intended audience here? Obviously not foreigners who don't read Chinese. He is also unlikely to have sinologists in mind, whom he has classified as operating on the level of children in primary school, even though it was in the provocative context of the 1998 *Rupture* [断裂] project that he called them that.¹⁶ In *Rupture*, a number of contemporary fiction writers and poets, several of them socially controversial, responded to a questionnaire on established individuals, notions and institutions in the literary field, from acclaimed Republican Era author Lu Xun to the role of the Writers' Association in the People's Republic to foreign sinologists. The project encouraged iconoclastic responses. Han Dong and Zhu Wen were its driving force. Here is what Han had to say about sinologists at the time:

Unless we make contemporary [Chinese] literature stoop to the level of alphabetic transcription, the idea that sinologists possess any authority is ridiculous. Sure, they can make certain things happen, but they more often do serious damage, out of naivety. The sinologists are a bunch of troublemakers.¹⁷

Later, Han clarifies what he means by the concession that sinologists “can make certain things happen,” they can organize

travel to foreign countries to take part in pen clubs or be poet-in-residence at some university . . .”¹⁸

In “Ten Aphorisms . . .,” Han depicts sinologists—not without some justification—as ignorant of the achievements of contemporary Chinese poetry. We should perhaps add that their numbers are negligible when set against the vast majority of the Chinese domestic reading public, who share that ignorance. Han recognizes that in China,

¹⁴ Yu 1999b: 80.

¹⁵ Yu 1999a: 16.

¹⁶ Wang 2000: 264.

¹⁷ Han 1998b. Also included in Wang 2000: 264.

¹⁸ Han 2004a.

contemporary poetry “has been given the cold shoulder,”¹⁹ but probably doesn’t include himself in the “we” that appears below:²⁰

Modern Chinese extends farther than classical Chinese. Classical Chinese lives inside modern Chinese, not the other way around. Modern Chinese poetry is not to classical Chinese poetry as ever weaker descendants are to a once-formidable empire on the wane. Classical poetry is to modern poetry but an honorable point of departure. These are two radically different views of history. Western sinologists are invariably in happy agreement with the former, and we, in our turn, are in happy agreement with the sinologists. This is a twofold passivity, misunderstanding and insult.

Finally, the remarkably critical angle that both Yu Jian and Han Dong frequently take on their contemporaries—as a corrupted version of poethood—merits illustration through some fiery examples of their anti-intellectualism. When asked in 1994 about his reputation for being an “angry poet”, Yu responds:

When I occasionally lift my head, sunk into the depths of poetry, to the surface of the poetry scene and see so much flotsam and jetsam and trash making a racket, there’s no way I can *not* be angry. In China’s poetry circles, especially in the so-called avant-garde clique, I regularly have this feeling of being forced to find my place between the others to squat in a public toilet. You must write, but at the same time you must ensure that your value is in evidence vis-à-vis a big heap of trash . . . When you keep hearing that Mr So-and-So, a man of extraordinary poetic talent, has recently published a book by cutting-and-pasting some of his erudition [知识 ‘knowledge’], and bought himself a new pair of shoes, for 500 *yuan*; or that . . . this or that poet has run off to this or that foreign country to be a dishwasher, you get this feeling inside of having been sold out. It’s as if in this country, there’s never anyone that takes poetry seriously . . . The image of the poet has by now changed to one of an idler that holds forth about culture, whose talents go unrewarded, joyless and depressed, pallid and thin, a suicide who cuts down others with an axe [*a reference to Gu Cheng’s 1993 murder of his wife Xie Ye, before he killed himself—mvc*] . . . and I, as the poet that I am, often find myself lumped together with all that by naive, muddle-headed and disingenuous readers . . .²¹

In 2004, when interviewed by Malingshu Xiongdi, Han Dong was similarly outraged:

The affected, boastful, self-emotionalizing and hypocritical behavior of those who insist on their status as “intellectuals” is disgusting to my instincts. In my opinion, the biggest evil is not evil *per se*, but hypocrisy [伪善, literally ‘pseudo-goodness’].²²

In the opening paragraphs of Part One of this essay, I mentioned that in recent years, Han and Yu have entered into semi-public conflict. An interview conducted with Han

¹⁹ Han 2004a.

²⁰ Han 1995: 85-86.

²¹ Yu 1994: 125-126.

²² Han 2004b: 100. Malingshu Xiongdi is a peculiar name: it means ‘Potato Brothers’.

Dong by Yang Li in 2001 shows that by that time, Han's angry criticism comes to extend to Yu Jian, that other figurehead in the battle against the "intellectuals," with whom he has been mentioned in the same breath by all and sundry ever since the mid-1980s. Han finds fault with Yu, especially in the latter's famously long poems, for being too ambitious and "squandering language," instead of being meticulous about every single word:

That sort of stuff you don't even need to read at all anymore . . . It only wants to show how cool [牛逼] this person is . . . Yu Jian is refuting the intellectuals in an intellectual way . . . He has lost his own language . . . he wants to prove he's more learned and knowledgeable about the past and the present and more cultured than Xi Chuan [*the archetypal "intellectual"—mvc*]. When talking about poetry, he will just carry on about that Tang and Song dynasty stuff . . . Aesthetically, too, he has changed direction, he wants to prove that he is more cultured and broader-minded than the other contenders, he wants to make it bigger than them. Essentially, he is a traitor, self-satisfied and smug, he has entered that order of things . . . I feel his poetry changed a lot in the 90s, and I feel that this change is intellectual in its orientation.²³

The most striking thing about this torrent of incrowd abuse is the image of the traitor—which, in turn, recalls its victim Yu Jian's feeling of "having been sold out." For all Han Dong's Earthly, desecrating credentials, his words depict the poet as one involved in a sacred cause. The legitimacy of his involvement in that cause, in the Bourdieuan sense, requires unconditional loyalty.

Han Dong's and Yu Jian's styles in the metatextual arena

The conflict between Han and Yu seems to emerge around the time of the Intellectual-Popular polemic of 1998-2000. It is noteworthy, for instance, that "On the Popular," Han's most substantial contribution to the fracas, contains not a single reference to Yu Jian, who counted as the foremost representative of the popular camp. Yu's conspicuous absence tallies well with the fact that throughout the essay, Han cultivates an image of the true poet, and by implication of himself, as a *lonely warrior*.²⁴

Yu Jian, in his turn, works hard—much harder than Han—to create a similar image for himself, more specifically that of a warrior that is not just lonely but also very tough, in romantic fashion. We recall his exasperation at having to "ensure that your value is in evidence vis-à-vis a big heap of trash" and being "lumped together" with all the wrong poets. In fact, Yu portrays himself as an outsider from the beginning, in a seminal anthology of avant-garde authors from younger literary generations than that of Obscure poetry, edited by Tang Xiaodu and Wang Jiaxin (1987):

I belong to "the generation that stands off to one side of the table". God has arranged a kind of outsider's treatment for me. I'm used to being overlooked by the times and by those with experience. There's nothing I can do about it, it's been like that all my life. As far as literature goes,

²³ Yang 2004: 302-309.

²⁴ Han 1999.

[the status of] an outsider may well be an important factor in the making of a master. It means he'll always keep a certain distance from life, the better to observe it.²⁵

In “All True Writing . . .,” the 2001 essay jointly written with Xie Youshun, at a time when his own and other polemicists’ publications are becoming riddled with vulgarities, Yu writes:

Here’s a thing that sometimes makes me lose the desire to write: is it worth it to be so solemn and serious about writing, in an age whose vision of the poet is that of a dumb shit? Not a few friends have woken up to all that and wised up. They are through with being dumb shits. I am the last incurable poet. I write for the past . . .²⁶

And in an interview by Duoyu, recorded around the same time:

In Kunming, I’m really just an ordinary guy without any crowd around me, and hardly have any contact with literary circles. Hardly any of my friends are in literature . . . And in national poetry circles, I’m obviously becoming ever lonelier: the leftists criticize me at every turn, and the *China Times* recently carried an article calling me “an enemy of poetry”. Those engaged in “intellectual writing” are scolding me too. Who knows? In the end I might even offend the young . . .²⁷

In 2002, interviewer Jin Xiaofeng was impressed by Yu’s report of his participation in the 1997 Poetry International festival in Rotterdam. She cites him as describing a student of Chinese poetry in attendance at the festival who said that reading Yu’s poetry made her sad, because she felt it wasn’t very graceful, to which he had replied:

I am not in the business of making enamelware. What I do has a rocky surface. That sort of thing is very rough. It will hurt you.²⁸

From Yu’s “Palm Bark Records”, a common denominator through the years for his (informal) essays [散文], jottings [随笔], travelogue and so on, comes this passage, reinforcing the image of his loneliness, and depicting him as being out of others’ reach:

For many years, I’ve lived in a big old compound on the Cui Lake North Road. I’ve never moved house, and the compound has never changed. But the house number has changed five [*sic*] times, from 2 Cui Lake North Road to 1 Cui Lake North Road to 25 Cui Lake North Road to 3 Cui Lake North Road, with the result that we wouldn’t even get our mail any longer. It’s just like everyone around a person has changed, and he is the only one that hasn’t. At that point, those who once knew him won’t be able to find him anymore.²⁹

The lonely warrior is like many images of poethood according to Han and Yu—both implicit and explicit, several of them discussed above—that point to an Earthly cult of

²⁵ Tang & Wang 1987: 153.

²⁶ Yu & Xie 2001: 31.

²⁷ The interview is dated 2001, and is included in Yu 2003 and Yang 2004. This citation comes from Yu 2003: 279.

²⁸ Yu 2002: 216.

²⁹ Yu 2004, vol. 5: 80.

poetry and poethood, over and above any “anti-cult” behavior in reaction to Elevated trends. While claiming ordinariness and a kind of regular-guy authenticity for the poet, and contrary to their warnings against self-importance, Han and Yu ultimately view poethood as a superior quality of extraordinary importance and—as manifest in the Intellectual-Popular polemic—of social relevance. This is exemplary of the way modern Chinese poets have sustained the importance of poethood by cherishing it as an abstraction, made concrete and interpreted in different ways that succeed one another or co-exist, often rooted in romantic notions of the artist in one way or another. In Han’s and Yu’s writings, the said superior and indeed sacred quality of poethood appears in the poet’s divine status, as well as his moral goodness, especially in Han; and his significance as one battling ubiquitous corruption of the trade, especially in Yu.

While we have noted the occasional difference between the two poets’ respective views of poethood and related issues, across the board the poetics of Han Dong and Yu Jian are compatible in many respects. Their styles of operation in the metatextual arena, however, are markedly different. Metaphorically speaking, Han Dong is the abstemious of the two, and Yu Jian the gluttonous. Alternatively, we might sum up Han’s general presentation as one of *Verneinung* or fundamental rejection, and that of Yu Jian as one of *Bejahung* or fundamental affirmation, notwithstanding Yu’s deconstructive and indeed destructive slant on poetic practice of which he disapproves. Han Dong is the Great Negator, as he himself realizes:

When discussing poetry, I’m in the habit of speaking in negative terms [排斥性的概念], such as what poetry is not, and what the poet is not. All claims about what poetry *is*, and how the poet *should* act, are biased . . .³⁰

Typically, when asked by Malingshu Xiongdi whether he writes to get closer to people or remove himself farther from them, Han answers:

It seems that it’s neither [似乎都不是].³¹

And of his influential 1980s adage that “poetry goes no farther than language” [诗到语言为止], which bespeaks the rejection of ideological claims by PRC orthodoxy and early Obscure poetry alike, Han says:

[I]t has a negative intent [排斥性的意向].³²

And

it wasn’t a theoretical formula . . . when a one-time saying like that turns into a truth, that’s very scary . . .³³

Yu Jian has had considerable success in advocating the “rejection of metaphor” and the “deconstruction of language” and, often together with Han, in waging war on whatever “colossal monsters” present themselves on the Chinese poetry scene. But in spite of the many negations he utters, Yu produces metatexts that come across as positively wanting to be there, and to appropriate discursive territory. Most of Han Dong’s writings, on the other hand, strike one as exercises in disappearance, written

³⁰ Han 1998a.

³¹ Han 2004b: 103.

³² Han & Zhu 1993: 69.

³³ Han 2004a.

in spite of themselves: reluctant and reticent, often attempting to reason their very subject out of existence. Incidentally, verse-external poetics aside, we could easily draw parallels with poetry by both authors.

That the voices of both Han Dong and Yu Jian carry weight in the metatextual arena of contemporary China is evident from things like their authorship of flagship essays in multiple-author anthologies, the many reproductions and citations of their work, and interviews.³⁴ Perhaps predictably, the contrast noted above also finds expression in their productivity, in terms of sheer volume. While Han Dong has a respectable list of publications to his name, Yu Jian has generated frankly astonishing amounts of metatext. This is not just because he has so much to say—which he does—or because he wants to make money, or because many of his pieces appear to have been edited only carelessly if at all, or because he has no problem with repeating himself. That happens, for instance, in “Poetry Articulates the Body” [诗言体] (2001)—the title alludes to the traditional notion 诗言志（也） ‘poetry articulates what is on the mind intently’—which subsumes a jumble of earlier, well-publicized ideas under an opposition of the cerebral and the corporeal.³⁵ It is also because Yu displays exceptional activism in recycling his output, even by the standards of the graphomaniac, frenzied and anarchic publishing world that has emerged in China since roughly the mid-1990s.

When recycling his writings, Yu occasionally fails to make clear that one publication is a reprint of another, for instance, by omitting titles. The fifth and final volume of his collected works to date, *Reject Metaphor: Palm Bark Records * Criticism * Interviews* (2004), is a striking example. In the first eighty or so pages of the book, literal or near-literal reproductions of several earlier publications discussed above appear without being identified as such. These works are part of a continuous flow of musings on poetry and other things, divided into large chunks ascribed to periods of a few years each, sometimes not even marking the transition from one original piece to the next by inserting so much as a blank line. They contain equally unmarked textual revisions that are not without significance: for example, from “Chinese as *the* poetically richest language” to “*one of* the poetically richest languages in the world.”³⁶ Other examples of recycling are the omission of interviewer Zhu Wen’s name upon publication in *Them* of a conversation previously circulated as an unpublished typescript that did acknowledge Zhu, and the relegation of co-author Xie Youshun of “All True Writing . . .” to the status of interviewer, when the piece was reprinted in Yu Jian’s collection *Poetry and Pictures* (2003).³⁷ Yu Jian is not just a highly productive author, but also one who actively engages in image-building to support his status as such.

* * * * *

For all their differences, in a framework of Chinese avant-garde poetry and its metatexts as contained between the Elevated and the Earthly, both Han Dong and Yu Jian sit at the Earthly end of the spectrum. Especially if we consider that the Elevated view of things is relatively closer to the much-studied Obscure poetry that paved the way for the pluriform avant-garde of the present day, Elevated poetics have to date received more scholarly attention in western languages. This essay hopes to have

³⁴ E.g. Han 1999 and Yu 1999a.

³⁵ Yu 2001.

³⁶ Yu 1999a: 15 and 2004: 75.

³⁷ Yu 2003: 257-268. Cf Yu 1993 and 1994.

provided some complementary material for the ongoing project of identifying dimensions of poetry in China today.

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GLOSSARY

A Cheng	阿城	Haizi	海子
Bei Dao	北岛	Han Dong	韩东
Chang Li	常立	Lao Mu	老木
Duoyu	朵渔	Liu Ligan	刘立杆
Ge Mai	戈麦	Lu Xun	鲁迅
Gu Cheng	顾城	Malingshu Xiongdi	马铃薯兄弟

Mao Zedong	毛泽东	Xie Ye	谢烨
Qu Yuan	屈原	Xie Youshun	谢有顺
Shu Ting	舒婷	Yang Li	杨黎
Tang Xiaodu	唐晓渡	Yang Lian	杨炼
Tao Naikan	陶乃侃	Yu Jian	于坚
Wang Jiaxin	王家新	Zhu Wen	朱文
Xi Chuan	西川	<i>Zhuangzi</i>	《庄子》