

DESECRATIONS?
THE POETICS OF HAN DONG AND YU JIAN*

PART ONE

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Chinese poetry has gone through changes of astonishing magnitude in the last hundred or so years.¹ China's painful awakening to the powers of a world beyond its borders in the wake of the mid-19th-century Opium Wars brought increasing exposure to foreign cultures and their literatures. Then came attempts at political and cultural reform from within in the late 1890s, the abolition of the examination system with its strong classical-literary overtones in 1905, the collapse of the last imperial dynasty and the founding of the Republic in 1911-1912. The "literary revolution" of 1917 was part of a larger-scale, modernizing movement for the promotion of the vernacular or something not unlike it [白话 *baihua*] to replace classical Chinese [文言 *wenyan*] as the language for writing.

Almost overnight, poets cut themselves loose from the security of a sophisticated and respected classical tradition in which many of them had still been raised, but which was felt to thwart the development of a modern literature. As a consequence, they found themselves without the position of social esteem that their premodern predecessors had enjoyed for over two thousand years. The 1920s and 1930s saw a New Poetry [新诗 *xinshi*] whose practitioners grappled with the resulting identity crisis as they experimented with new forms and contents reflecting both a cosmopolitan spirit and a continuing concern with Chineseness. Especially from the late 1930s onward, literature on the Chinese mainland grew ever more politicized, as it became well-nigh impossible—whether by individual choice or because of peer pressure—*not* to reflect on the nation's disastrous socio-political situation amid civil and international war. In the 1940s the Communist government institutionalized a view of literature and art as subordinate to politics that determined the face of culture in the People's Republic until the late 1970s. These conditions generated much state-sanctioned, orthodox poetry designed to meet the requirements of the state's poetics-*cum*-policy summed up as Socialist Realism—a Chinese edition of the Soviet example—and, later, the Combination of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism.

Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the Hua Guofeng interregnum and Deng Xiaoping's 1978 political comeback, poetry marked a turning point for mainland-Chinese literature and art in the unofficial [非官方 *fei guanfang*] but hugely influential journal *Today*, published in Beijing in the days of the Democracy Wall and

* 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 and 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 Amid a growing body of English-language scholarship on modern Chinese poetry, the work of Michelle Yeh stands out. In the context of this paragraph and the next, see Yeh 1991a and 1992.

the Beijing Spring, from December 1978 until the police closed it down in 1980.² *Today* first showcased the underground beginnings of a contemporary “avant-garde” that has since enjoyed the mixed blessings of (relative) artistic autonomy and social marginality. Its first generation of authors, known as the Obscure [朦胧 *menglong*] poets, was taken to task by the official [官方 *guanfang*] literary establishment for being insufficiently political or politically incorrect. Simultaneously, however, they were hailed by younger and open-minded readers, who saw their efforts as poetry (re)claiming a space of its own and an identity as art in its own right, rather than an aestheticized extension of politics. Still, much of the early Obscure poetry remained unable to shed the influence of maoist discourse, and before long met with criticism from unofficial quarters as well. As such, it really constituted a transitional phase from orthodoxy to more mature trends within the avant-garde.³ While the pioneering role and the significance of early Obscure poetry are beyond a shadow of a doubt, the avant-garde only truly found its footing with the emergence of newer poetic trends in various places across China in the early to mid-1980s.

Perhaps the biggest impact, and one that continues to make itself felt, was that of the Colloquial [口语 *kouyu*] poetry associated with the unofficial, Nanjing-based journal *Them*, published intermittently between 1985 and 1995. Of the journal’s contributors, two names of lasting prominence are those of Han Dong (1961) and Yu Jian (1954), who are easily among the ten or so most important poets of China during the past thirty-odd years. For both, two decades of regular publication in journals and multiple-author anthologies as well as individual collections have recently culminated in beautifully produced books that survey their poetic careers to date.⁴ Han Dong has wielded additional influence as an editor, first of *Them* and in recent years of the *Epoch Poetry Series* [年代诗丛 *niandai shicong*] published by the Hebei Education Press.

This essay examines both poets’ verse-external poetics: their views of poetry as expounded in poetical statements, essays, interviews and so on—not in their poems. It is part of a research project on poetry in contemporary China considered in terms of text, context, and metatext. By *text* I mean the poetry itself, on the page and in recital; by *context*, its socio-political surroundings, ranging from government censorship to the creative energy of unofficial scenes that stage readings to the accompaniment of live rock music. Such events have been sponsored by companies and wealthy businesspeople, to name but one type of occasion that poetry in the People’s Republic may not immediately bring to mind. *Metatext* simply means what people have to say *about* poetry, and denotes a discourse that includes anything from one person’s inability to name a single contemporary poet to someone else’s ambitious, learned genealogy of the entire poetry scene—and, of course, the poets’ own verse-external poetics.

Why would we want to know about the verse-external poetics of Han Dong and Yu Jian, or that of any other author? As far as I am concerned, research such as this is not in order to test “practice” against “theory” and see whether the poets keep their promises. More often than not, that will tell us that an author’s poetry and poetics match or that they don’t, but add little to our appreciation of either. If someone’s poetics turns out to be indispensable for a successful reading of their poetry, it be-

² Titles of Chinese texts are rendered in English and Chinese names transcribed, to accommodate non-sinophone readers. For bibliographical detail and names in Chinese, see WORKS CITED and GLOSSARY. All translations are mine.

³ Yeh 2003: 525.

⁴ Han 2002, Yu 2000 and especially 2004.

comes part of text rather than metatext. None of this means, however, that a verse-external poetics could not be a fascinating document of discourse on poetry in and of itself. Furthermore, my attention to metatext as a separate category is motivated by the sheer scope and intensity of metatextual activity in present-day China. The avant-garde has generated stunning amounts of metatext, with poets' verse-external poetics as an important subset, notably featuring what Pierre Bourdieu calls the specific principle of legitimacy, or consecration of artists by other artists.⁵ A large number of Chinese poets who constitute a canon in the making, then, have also published *on* poetry. Han Dong's and Yu Jian's publications are among the most influential, as evidenced by frequent citation by other poets and critics alike.

There are more reasons for paying attention to Han's and Yu's explicit poetics. Chinese avant-garde poetry can be viewed as a broad spectrum contained within the outer limits of two divergent orientations that we may summarize as the Elevated and the Earthly.⁶ These notions are not pigeonholes, but co-ordinates in a multi-dimensional body of texts and metatexts. In principle, the elevated and the earthly or similar notions could be applied to literature and art from any time or place, and there is nothing inherently Chinese or poetic about them; yet, poetry in contemporary China brings them to mind with particular force. In that literary-historical framework, the dialectic of the elevated and the earthly goes back to the early 1980s, when (Earthly) Colloquial poets such as Han Dong and Yu Jian began to write back to the (Elevated) Obscure poetry with Bei Dao (1949) and Shu Ting (1952) as its best-known authors—and soon broke through the confines of merely writing back, to find their own voices.

Roughly a decade-and-a-half later, this divergence, having gone through several twists and turns from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, fed directly into a polemic between (Elevated) “Intellectual” [知识分子 *zhishifenzi*] and (Earthly) “Popular” [民间 *minjian*] writing. This debate raged through Chinese poetry circles in the years 1998-2000, mostly instigated and fueled by the Popular camp, with Yu Jian taking the lead. The polemic produced a plethora of material ranging from the consciously tendentious to the scholarly-critical, and involved just about everybody that was anybody in the Chinese poetry scene. Its subject matter included crude dichotomies of foreign influences vs. Chineseness, intellectualism vs. authenticity, and the capital Beijing vs. the provinces. Another fiercely contested issue was the role of strategically positioned editors and critics in creating publishing and publicity opportunities for some poets, while effectively “obstructing” [遮蔽 *zhebi*] others. If we allow for some rhetorical distortion, the opposition of Intellectual and Popular reflects the divergence of Elevated and Earthly orientations; but some contextualization in the larger history of modern Chinese poetry helps us to arrive at a more profound, synthesizing answer to the question what was really at issue. Arguably, nothing less than the legacy of Chinese poethood was at stake. Political prescriptions and restrictions on literature and art had receded far enough to allow internal re-positionings within the avant-garde. At the same time, 1990s socio-cultural developments such as commercialization and popularization were felt by many players on the poetry scene to demand such re-positionings. The polemic was a defining moment in contemporary Chinese poetry—

⁵ Bourdieu 1993: 50-51.

⁶ Cf Van Crevel 2003b. My replacement of *sublime* by *elevated* is in order to steer clear of the philosophical-aesthetic discourse activated by the former in the light of European enlightenment and Romantic traditions. There is an obvious connection with research on other literary genres presented in Wang 1997 and Tang 2000. Written with upper case E, the Elevated and the Earthly point to literary-historical categories in contemporary Chinese poetry, rather than generic ones.

and it featured Han Dong, and especially Yu Jian, in crucial roles at the Popular end of the spectrum.⁷

In recent years, Han and Yu's relationship has soured and they have entered into semi-public conflict. On the whole, however, they have constituted something of a joint presence on the poetry scene ever since the mid-1980s. One of their early metatexts, for instance, is the 1988 publication of a dialogue they held in the city of Taiyuan in 1986, at the annual *Poetry Review* Youth Poetry Conference [青春诗会 *qingchun shihui*]. Another example is the extensive interviews with both Han and Yu that appeared back to back in *Them* no. 7, in 1994. More generally, their status as the two foremost Colloquial poets evolved from their first contributions to *Them*. Regardless of their recent fallings-out, critics continue to mention them habitually in the same breath.⁸

A final reason for studying the poetics of Han Dong and Yu Jian lies in my wish to complement earlier research on the poetics of Xi Chuan (1963), another of the most prominent poets in today's China. For all its playfulness and indeterminacy, Xi Chuan's work sits at the Elevated end of the spectrum,⁹ which has hitherto received more critical attention than the Earthly, certainly in western-language scholarship. In that respect, this essay hopes to help redress the balance.

Desecrations? in its title points to two things. First, Han and Yu are well known as desecrators, or demystifiers, of the self-aggrandizing tragic heroism of the Obscure poets of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and, in later years, of similar features in authors associated with what Michelle Yeh has called the cult of poetry in contemporary China. The cult of poetry is in many ways a cult of poet-*hood*. It incorporates romanticist and religious elements, and suggests complicity with the personality cult surrounding Mao Zedong, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). On the other hand, while Han's and Yu's Earthly desecration of the Elevated discourse surrounding poets like Yang Lian (1955) and Haizi (1964-1989) is successful, if only rhetorically, they themselves can be seen to construct a cult of their own, over and above what Yeh calls their anti-cult behavior, in reaction to the Elevated.¹⁰ Han and Yu ascribe a kind of regular-guy authenticity to the poet, but on closer inspection, their vision frequently proves to be as pompous as that of the poetry worshippers [诗歌崇拜 *shige chongbai*] and the "intellectuals" they claim to oppose. As such, this vision constitutes a cult of ordinariness—as a positive, indeed a *sacred* quality of an undertaking requiring unconditional loyalty—that is in its turn susceptible to desecration. In other words, Han Dong and Yu Jian are not just desecrators, but desecratables too; hence, the question mark.

My sources are a series of publications by Han Dong and Yu Jian that cover two decades, from the mid-1980s to the present. I have opted for a thematic discussion that moves back and forth through time, and made a point of including long quotes so as to give the reader a direct sense of this particular type of metatext, albeit in translation. Yet, the selection of what I perceive as representative and salient topics and passages is in itself of course an act of interpretation. Beyond that, my aim has been to present Han's and Yu's poetics rather than take issue with them on theories of poetry or its practice in contemporary China. Where implicit or explicit inconsistencies, contradictions and untenable claims occur within each poet's writings I have

⁷ A detailed analysis of the Intellectual-Popular polemic is forthcoming in Van Crevel 2005.

⁸ E.g. Wang and Xiao 1999 and Xia 2005.

⁹ Van Crevel 1999 and 2003a.

¹⁰ Yeh 1996. Yeh brings up the "anti-cult" on p 78.

duly noted them, but tried to avoid hairsplitting. The issue of individual development aside, some of the more strikingly rhetorical and polemical passages are perhaps best seen as strategic moves in a metatextual arena characterized by frenzied activity around the coordinates of the Elevated and the Earthly—even though they are hardly the absolute opposites that poets and critics, especially those of Earthly persuasion, often make them out to be.

In comparison with Xi Chuan's poetics, the phenomenon of poethood—what a poet is, and what it means to be a poet—is highly significant to both Han Dong and Yu Jian. Hence, the overarching subject of this essay is the character of the Chinese poet as he appears in Han's and Yu's writings, in a central position among interrelated aspects of their poetics that include things like the origin of poetry, the making of the poem, language usage, enemies of poetry and so on. I conclude with some remarks on each poet's concrete ways of operating in the metatextual arena. My use of masculine pronouns throughout this essay reflects male monopolization of that arena.

Where does poetry come from?

In Han Dong and Yu Jian's "Conversation in Taiyuan" (1988), Yu asserts that the crucial thing is not where poetry appears, but through whom.

[For good poetry, all that is needed is] for the poem not to choose a fashion or a culture or a philosophy or a history or the West or the East and so on, but to choose the poet himself . . .¹¹

The notion of poetry as an abstraction that precedes the poet and avails itself of him as a medium recurs in the writings of both authors. Han discusses this most elaborately in "Two Thousand Words on Poetry" (1997):

The poem originates long before the poets appear. It exists before the poet but is in no hurry to alight amid human beings. The poem chooses the poet, and is born through the poet, who is but the channel of this birth. And the poets, having gone through the throes of birth, wrongly assume that it is they who have created the poem, and try to appropriate the result of this act of reproduction, just like the fathers and mothers of human beings naturally own their sons and daughters. But sons and daughters are not born of fathers and mothers. Their soul, their predetermined form and the procedure of their production all stem from Heaven and go back to a mystery. Fathers and mothers are but common workers at the assembly line, they are not the designer, the machinist or the boss, they work mechanically and are moved [by a force outside themselves]:¹² such is [the poet's] fundamental character, that of a worker . . . For the poet to take advantage of poetry or apply it toward his own achievements is a despicable act, and to think that poetry is an individual construction of and for oneself is a psychological obscenity . . . Truly great poetry belongs to no man, all it does is borrow the poet and his name to descend into a concrete time. This is ver-

¹¹ Yu and Han 1988: 77.

¹² 被动 *beidong*, literally 'be moved', is usually translated as *passive*. In itself, that would work well here: ". . . they work mechanically and passively . . ." I have rendered it as *are moved [by a force outside themselves]* in the light of Han's play on the ambiguity further on in this passage, when he dwells on the poet's "potential to be moved".

ily an honor incomparable to anything else—the question is whether we are prepared for it.¹³

The poet's innate receptiveness and his divine qualities

Of the two authors, Han is also the one who has most to say about the qualities that make the poet receptive to poetry's advent:

Narrow-minded, headstrong, arrogant, self-satisfied people and the like have no predestined relation to poetry . . . This is all the more so for those who hesitate and waver, carelessly running hither and thither, opportunistic and bent on intrigue, and without peace of mind. Poetry will not flutter down like a leaf off a tree onto their dodgy heads. As poets, we need first of all to concentrate and never be the least bit indolent, and secondly to vacate ourselves, just like vacating a house, not leaving any preconceived ideas in there . . . Whether or not the poem will alight is a matter for it to decide, a mysterious matter from high up and far away. All we can do is hope to be the lucky ones, and hold out our bodies of flesh and blood to take in its arrow-like, brilliant rays of light.¹⁴

Here, and on several other occasions, Han employs imagery that echoes the very grandiloquence he sets out to deconstruct in the work of others in the early and mid-1980s, through his poetry and his poetics alike. What appears to be the earliest record of his poetics is included in *Young Poets on Poetry*, edited by Lao Mu: the book came out in 1985, but Han's contribution was likely written earlier. He may well have had the Obscure poets in mind for this indignant outburst:¹⁵

Spiritual life in the poor country of China, of all places, has now produced this bunch of unbearably vulgar noblemen. Laughable? Lamentable! Where are the [poetic qualities of being] plain and unadorned, and [of being at] the source of things? How to explain that the popular and the primitive possess continuing, immense artistic charm? How to explain what it means to “return to the real and revert to the simple”?

In order to be among “the lucky ones” who may hope to find themselves exposed to poetry's “brilliant rays of light”, one must be endowed with qualities of poethood that are innate. In an interview by Liu Ligan and Zhu Wen (1994), Han says,

The poet's character, his potential, the particular factor he embodies from the very beginning, that mysterious thing comes to him naturally [天然, literally ‘in heavenly manner’] . . . Our efforts are merely to release these things to the fullest possible extent.¹⁶

Yu Jian pays more attention to what happens once poetry has chosen the poet. Throughout his poetics, Yu's primary concern is with language and its relationship to the poet. Early on, in a publication in *Poetry Review* following the 1986 Youth Poetry Conference, he puts forth the notion of the feel of language [语感 *yugan*] as the poet's

¹³ Han 1997.

¹⁴ Han 1997. Cf Han 1995a: 85.

¹⁵ Lao Mu 1985: 125.

¹⁶ Han 1994: 114.

distinguishing characteristic, which Han Dong accepts and supports in their “Conversation . . .” Yu concurs with Han on the innateness of poethood:

The most important thing in poetry is the feel of language . . . The feel of language is not an abstract form, but a meaningful form poured into the rhythm of the poet’s inner life . . .

The feel of language is not something one obtains by searching or cultivation or reconceptualization. It is something one is born with. It only belongs to the true poet.¹⁷

The poet’s innate qualities—what Han Dong calls the poet’s potential, and Yu Jian calls the feel of language—are more than just a talent: they make the poet a godlike being. In the concluding paragraphs of “After Three Worldly Roles” (1989), Han writes:

The poet does not exist as a person bound to any historical moment, he is an emissary of God, or of the divine. His link to the earth is not horizontal but vertical, from up there to down below, from heaven to the human world to hell and back . . . The barriers he encounters are those of the flesh, because they keep him from living the life of an immortal. But his real goal is not that of the flesh . . .

The poet is like God in that he forever creates being from nothingness, he deeply loves illusory things, forever facing the infinite un-arrived and un-known.¹⁸ The only difference is that God took just six days to create the world (resting on the seventh), but the poet will take a lifetime to write a book of poetry, and to make the most of that rare divine quality of his.¹⁹

As to the poet’s divine status, Yu Jian says in “Resurrect the Spirit of Poetry” (1989):

The poet’s role is no longer that of the model personality of God or of a pastor, he is the reader’s friend . . . He doesn’t instruct, instead merely expressing his own most authentic life experience.²⁰

In “Resurrect. . .,” Yu Jian partakes in a favorite activity of Chinese authors across genres and media throughout the twentieth century when he announces the advent of a new era. Features of the new poetry according to Yu include cool objectivity as well as intimacy and ordinariness, and the reflection of authentic life experience, even if it be oppressive, lowly, and vulgar. He sets these things off against aspirations to loftiness and purity on the part of unnamed fellow poets whom he relegates to a past that begins with the “May Fourth” literature of the late 1910s and after, but does not stop in, say, 1942, with Mao Zedong’s “Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art;” or 1949, when the People’s Republic was founded and the maoist view of literature became government policy throughout the nation. It does not stop even in 1978, with the launch of the post-Mao avant-garde, through the watershed publication of *Today*. In so doing, Yu lumps together poets from the Republican era, Communist orthodoxy,

¹⁷ Yu 1986b; see also 1986a: 1-2 and 1988. I follow Simon Patton’s translation of 语感 as *the feel of language* (Yu 1996: 65).

¹⁸ I have rendered 未来 [‘the future’] and 未知 *weilai he weizhi* as *the un-arrived and un-known* to retain the parallelism of the original.

¹⁹ Han 1989: 20.

²⁰ Yu 1989: 63-64.

and the 1980s as obsolete, a powerful rhetorical move that he repeats more or less explicitly in several of his other essays, discussed below.²¹ Among his fellow 1980s poets, he obviously targets Obscure poetry and, most of all, authors associated with the Elevated “cult” of the late 1980s, which was at a high point when he wrote the essay.

Yu’s comments on the poet’s divine status are typical of his own and Han Dong’s poetics, in that both frequently distinguish implicitly between an abstract, idealized concept of the poet on the one hand, and its (in)authentic manifestations on the other. The inauthentic, old poets, whose “role is no longer that of God,” lose the god-like status they have arrogated to themselves. The authentic poets of the new era, including Yu Jian, do not seek after such status to begin with.

A few years on, however, in “What Is a Poet?” (1993), Yu appears much less adverse to notions of the poet-as-god:

It looks as though in this world, the poet always plays the role of [one offering] spiritual redemption. I certainly won’t deny that today, at a time when the dominant discourse and the set of values it has constructed are on the verge of collapsing, there is a need for new gods to guide us . . .

Great, healthy poetry will guide us to escape from the spiritual hell of utopianism [*one of Yu’s habitual descriptions of Elevated poetic practice—mvc*], and to return in health and freedom to man’s “here and now” . . .²²

Around the same time, in an interview by Zhu Wen, Yu describes the mature poet as one of divine vigor [神性奕奕 *shenxing yiyi*], a rewriting of the expression 神采奕奕 *shencai yiyi* ‘glowing with health and vigor’.²³ In “The Light of Poetry, Cutting through the Chinese Language,” (1999), he calls poets divinities [神灵 *shenling*] and emissaries of the divine who operate language. “The Light . . .” was one of the key texts of the Intellectual-Popular polemic: note the derogatory use of *intellectual* in the passage cited below. In the same essay, Yu also presents the notion of poets’ writing [诗人写作 *shiren xiezu*], presumably as undertaken by the “true poet” we have encountered earlier. It confirms the poet’s divine status:

How could there be any kind of writing that is even higher than poets’ writing? Poets’ writing is writing that sits atop all other types of writing. Poets’ writing is a divine not an intellectual type of writing.²⁴

The making of the poem

The actual making of the poem is a subject on which Han Dong has little to say. We recall his description of the poet as someone who is under the illusion of having engaged in an act of creation, but is really no more than a mechanical, passive medium. Han’s “Ten Aphorisms or Sayings on Poetry” (1995) includes similar observations:

²¹ Especially Yu 1998.

²² Dated 1993 and likely a journal publication around that time; included in Yu 1997a: 237-238.

²³ Yu 1994: 129. The interviewer remains unnamed. Yu 1993, unofficially circulated, identifies him as Zhu Wen.

²⁴ Yu 1999a: 13-16.

The direction of poetry is from above to below. It drifts through the air, dimly discernible, and because of gravity caused by the waiting and longing of the one who writes [写作者 *xiezuozhe*], it lands amid men. Poetry is not downward digging, it is not coal. The one who writes is not a laborer, he must abandon any attitude of using force.²⁵

In “The Light. . .,” Yu Jian, without detracting from the importance of the poet’s innate receptiveness to poetry, gives him a much more active role, involving actions that do in fact lead to association with the downward digging Han Dong says is useless. Yu offers this illustration of “poets’ writing”:

A few days ago, in Kunming, in the area around Wucheng Road, I picked up a carved, wooden window frame from amid some rubble. At the time, a few people standing around nearby disdainfully watched me as I tied the decrepit old thing onto my bicycle—maybe they thought I meant to take it as firewood. Having been exposed to long years of smoke, it had become pitch-black. The next day at noon, in the sun, I cleaned it . . . and the original window, long obscured from view under a thick layer of soot, emerged at last. Only then did I discover that in between the regular squares, the carving included several flowers . . . That’s when I suddenly heard the sound of the chisel in the hands of the carpenter who had long ago created [创作 *chuangzuo*] the window, and I saw the flowers opening up one by one under his hands. My state of mind at the time, I believe, was the same as that of the carpenter. It was one of creation [造物 *zaowu* ‘the divine force that created the universe’, ‘Nature’], of having removed any obstructions to seeing the true nature of the world. In the eyes of others, a piece of wood is but a piece of wood, a window or just firewood—but in the eyes of the poet, it is a flower garden. Now that is a poet, and that is poetry . . .

Poets’ writing is a thing of humility and ordinary talent [谦卑而中庸的 *qianbei er zhongyong de*] . . .²⁶

This passage is consistent with the following pronouncement, made in “Retreat from Metaphor” (1997), an essay foreshadowed in “Tradition, Metaphor and Other Things” (1995)²⁷—and equally deceptive in its concreteness, since Yu speaks in the very metaphors from which he urges retreat: poetry as carpentry. “Retreat. . .” is typical of his unceasing attacks on Elevated, tragic-heroic and romanticist poetics, and of his overriding concern with language:

The poet is no talented scholar [才子 *caizi*], not a so-called king of the spirit, nor one who endures suffering, bearing a cross on his back. The poet is a craftsman in his workplace, a specialized manipulator of language.

²⁵ Han 1995: 85.

²⁶ Yu 1999a: 10.

²⁷ Yu 1995a.

The concrete act of writing implies a rejection of the traditional inclination to represent writing as a mystery (in China, many poets will declare they can only write in autumn or by the light of the moon) . . .²⁸

The cross on the poet's back is one of several examples of the superficial, momentary use of Christian imagery in contemporary Chinese poetics, as part of a larger discourse of poetry as religion, noted by Yeh in her discussion of the Elevated cult of poetry and poethood.²⁹ But it occurs in Earthly quarters too, reinforcing their own (re)construction of the sacred in poetry: for example, in Han Dong's reference to the biblical story of Genesis, cited earlier.

Language usage

The making of the poem brings us to the issue of language usage. As poets, Han Dong and Yu Jian are best known for their employment of spoken, colloquial language [口语 *kouyu*], as opposed to written, formal or "bookish" language [书面语 *shumianyu*]. Indeed, they are often referred to as Colloquial poets [口语诗人 *kouyu shiren*]³⁰—somewhat to their chagrin, because to them, that label represents but one aspect if not a crude simplification of their art.³⁰ From the perspective of the general poetry-reading public, however, the label makes sense. In the mid-1980s, Han's and Yu's poetry as well as that of other authors publishing in *Them* stood out against prevailing trends of Obscure and Root-Seeking [寻根 *xungen*] poetry on account of their colloquial diction. In the interview by Liu and Zhu, Han Dong says:

The basic language of my poetry is the modern [Chinese] spoken language . . . Of course, that's not to say my language is the exact same thing as everyday conversation, but its fountainhead obviously lies in the spoken language . . . If our language were the result of inbreeding within the written language, it would progressively lose its usability, wither and become insipid, and move toward extinction . . .³¹

Yu Jian, too, has commented at length on the virtues of the colloquial. He links the opposition of formal / written vs. colloquial / spoken language on the one hand to an opposition of the Standard Language vs. regional languages [普通话 *putonghua* vs. 方言 *fangyan*, usually translated as *Modern Standard Chinese* and *dialect*, respectively]³² and one of the North vs. the South, on the other. This passage comes from the opening paragraph of "The Hard and Soft of the Tongue of Poetry: On Two Different Directions in the Language of Contemporary Poetry" (1998):

Especially in the South, the Standard Language may have effectively made its way into the written language, but it has never thoroughly done so for the spoken language. Dialect is always capable of effectively dispelling the Standard Language: indeed, that has become an everyday language game among people . . . The Standard Language

²⁸ Yu 1997b: 72.

²⁹ Yeh 1996, especially, 53-57.

³⁰ See, for instance, Yu 1986a: 1-2.

³¹ Han 1994: 119.

³² From a scholarly, linguistic point of view, *regional language* is the preferred translation of 方言. Hereafter I use *dialect* to situate the issue within the popular socio-political and cultural discourse of which it is a part, and to avoid the appearance of *language* in both terms, so as to reflect the difference of 普通话 and 方言 in Chinese.

has hardened a certain part of Chinese, while the soft side of Chinese has been maintained through the spoken language. These are two states of one and the same tongue: hard and soft, tense and flaccid, narrow and broad . . .³³

Yu Jian is one of remarkably few contemporary Chinese poets who engage in more than a fleeting way with linguistic, political and artistic implications of national language policy. The considerable differences between the Standard Language and various dialects clearly have a bearing on the poetic practice of native dialect speakers. Some feel that they inevitably “switch to the Standard Language” when *writing* poetry, which ultimately makes recital in their native tongue problematic.³⁴ Recent years, however, have seen a rise in the status of dialect writing and recital, as well as growing interest in the poetic potential of the Chinese script, as a regional quality distinguishing Chinese from other languages.

Yu depicts the Standard Language—and those who allow the Standard Language to rule their poetic practice—as having hegemonic ambitions. The issue is closely linked to his vision, laid out in “Retreat . . .,” of lamentable trends that have made modern Chinese poetry a rigid, all-encompassing and ultimately politically motivated system of clichés in which the distance between signifier and signified has reached unacceptable lengths. Yu’s use of linguistic and literary concepts and terminology in “Retreat . . .” is questionable, but his essay should not be taken as scholarly writing. It is a rhetorical intervention in contemporary Chinese discourse on poetry before anything else.

Its rhetorical qualities are clear from the beginning, when Yu tells a story that is as infectious as it is nonsensical, and contingent on the peculiarities of (modern) Chinese rather than any intrinsic qualities of poetry. He relates how the first man to see the sea 海 *hǎi* uttered the near-homophonic 嗨 *hāi*, an exclamation normally equivalent to *heave ho*, but here presented as one of surprise and awe at the sight of the sea, and an expression of authentic experience. By way of a counterpun, we might translate 嗨 as “See!” As soon as the original seer—the resonance in that image of the *poeta vates* is more appropriate than Yu’s reputation as desecrator might suggest—passes that sound on to others whom he tries to tell about the sea, the word is dislodged from the thing, (poetic) expression is alienated from authentic experience, and the rule of “metaphor” begins. In Yu Jian’s usage, metaphor [隐喻 *yinyu*] can mean anything from simile, symbol and imagery to fixed expression or cliché, presented in contradistinction to the original act of naming [命名 *mingming*].

In spite of glaring holes in the argument—that is not the point here—the message is clear when Yu laments the fact that whereas the original namer said “Sea/e!”, modern poets have been conditioned to exclaim “eternal and vast!” instead [永恒而辽阔! *yongheng er liaokuo*]. Conventional representation in language controls the poet, in a system rooted in a massive literary-cultural history that is a millstone around his neck.³⁵

³³ Yu 1998: 1.

³⁴ Noted in my interviews with poets across China during regular fieldwork since 1991.

³⁵ Notably, in his 1995 poem <Watching the Sea in Holland> (Yu 2004, vol 1: 292-293), this is what Yu Jian himself has to say about the sea: “ah, immortal force | startling the myriad creatures | but forever laboring to no avail” [不朽的力量啊 令万物惊悚 但永远劳动无功 *buxiu de lilian a ling wanwu jingsong dan yongyuan laodong wu gong*].

According to Yu, things should be the other way around. As he says in an extensive interview that appeared in *Them* in 1994:

The mature poet is not manipulated by the magical powers of language; he soberly, coolly, rationally controls those powers instead. His method is to construct language amid its deconstruction.³⁶

In “Retreat . . .,” Yu Jian extends the deconstruction of language to that of metaphor—in his scheme of things, the two are difficult to disentangle. Here are some of the operative passages:

Poetry is a language game that exterminates metaphor . . .

Poetry is the dissection of language.

To reject metaphor is to reject the metaphor hegemony of our mother tongue, to reject the dominant discourse. Rejecting the metaphor system it imposes, the poet should write from inside a position of questioning and resisting the mother tongue’s heaven-granted powers. Writing is the disposal and elimination of metaphor trash . . .

As a subjective, made-up world, the poem offers a linguistic reality that constitutes a method for removing the imagination, for removing illusions and romanticism, for removing Utopia and the beauty of evil . . .

With regard to poetry’s fundamental direction of writing, there are two kinds. One is poetry made of words that “advance”, the other is poetry made of words that “retreat.”³⁷

“The beauty of evil” [恶之美 *e zhi mei*] is a reference to Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, one of several much-cited foreign influences on contemporary Chinese poetry, whose alleged worship by Intellectual poets is a source of anger to Yu Jian. He has called Haizi’s oeuvre “the flowers of evil, grown in the Mao Zedong years.”³⁸ The word 前进 *qianjin*, translated as *advance*, also means ‘progressive’, with strong connotations of PRC political orthodoxy. Yu’s notions of advance and retreat tally with the various, analogous oppositions in his essay on the hard and the soft, noted above: the formal vs. the colloquial, the Standard Language vs. dialect and the North vs. the South.

What does the poem express?

What is the poem once it has been written, that is: to the reader? What does it reflect, or express? In “Ten Aphorisms . . .,” Han Dong says:

Poetry has nothing to do with learning . . . For their communication, the one who writes and the one who reads rely on innocence not learning. It is certainly not the case that a good writer has more of a right to

³⁶ Yu 1994: 129-130. See also Yu 1995b: 29.

³⁷ Yu 1997b: 71-73.

³⁸ Presentation at the Leiden International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) workshop on modern Chinese poetry (September 1995) and personal communication (February 1997).

... speak on poetry than a good reader . . . A good reader is definitely superior to a second-rate writer.³⁹

But like other contemporary Chinese poets, neither Han Dong nor Yu Jian are particularly reader-oriented. In a somewhat contradictory formula, Yu Jian holds that,

the mature poet definitely doesn't aim at readers or other poets from his own time, he doesn't even see those people, he only writes for language, he forces the reader to accept his way of speaking, but he does so by "caress" . . .⁴⁰

Nor do Han and Yu expect the reader to bring the poem to life or, more generally, consider the possibility of slippage or discrepancies between authorial intent and lectorial experience. According to Yu,

In the poet's subconscious, there is a living sediment formed under the influence of the society in which he finds himself, and the politics, culture and religion of the times as well as his family's hereditary features, history, aesthetic values and all that he has personally observed . . . All the poet needs to do is combine his intuitions into a meaningful form, into the feel of language, and his life [生命 *shengming*] will find expression . . .⁴¹

Yu thus emphatically situates expression of the poet's "life" in a social context. Similarly, in "Conversation . . .," he says to Han:

The poet's view of human life and his social consciousness . . . will all naturally be revealed in his language . . .⁴²

Recorded around the same time, Han Dong's words in the Youth Poetry Conference report in *Poetry Review* (1986) recall a traditional Chinese poetics even more strongly:

In a truly good poem we can see the author's soul, his way of life and his understanding of the world.⁴³

Han does not see—nor does Yu Jian—poetry as a vehicle for conveying content that can somehow be isolated from the rest of the poem:

All this must blend into the poem, as opposed to being expressed through the form of poetry.⁴⁴

³⁹ Han 1995a: 85. The original has 写作者 'the one who writes' and 阅读者 *yueduzhe* 'the one who reads' (as opposed to, say, 作家 *zuoja* 'writer' or 诗人 *shiren* 'poet' and 读者 *duzhe* 'reader') in the final two sentences, too. In the interests of readability I have decided against a literal rendition like *a good one-who-writes*.

⁴⁰ Yu 1994: 129-130.

⁴¹ Yu 1986b.

⁴² Yu and Han 1988: 76.

⁴³ Han 1986. Owen 1992 provides a rich analysis of traditional Chinese literary thought, and many masterful translations.

⁴⁴ Han 1986.

“Miracles and Foundations” (1988) shows that Han attaches central importance to poetic form:

Poetry is not established for the perfection of one type of culture or another . . . Poetry has more profound goals, namely to bestow form on the world. To explain poetic form one may need the help of culture. Alternatively, it is possible that such explanation only exists within the entity we call culture. But explanation cannot replace form . . . Poetry as the existence of form is transcendental and independent of anything outside itself. It is related directly to the soul of humankind, it is the soul’s activity and its need . . . It is the formed existence of the emotional relation between humankind and the world.⁴⁵

In “Conversation . . . ,” Han reiterates the inseparability of form and content. Here, he speaks not of the soul of humankind, but of that of the individual—or rather, of the souls of two individuals:

When you read a truly good poem, you will feel the intimacy of another heart. It is not just a resonance . . . you use your soul to experience the authenticity of another soul, a living soul. Poetry doesn’t express anything, it is in itself a person’s soul, it is life. And even if it expressed anything, that thing could only be expressed in this particular form. The entire sense of beauty in poetry is instilled in it by individual life, and then experienced by another concrete life. Otherwise, poetry has no meaning whatsoever. I cannot conceive of a poetry that does not bear the signs of life yet has aesthetic value.⁴⁶

The poet vis-à-vis his “worldly” surroundings

Whereas both poets’ ideas lead to association with traditional Chinese poetics in that they situate poetry and what it expresses in a social context, they insist that the poet is under no obligation to take on any social role, and should in fact actively avoid doing so. In “After Three Worldly Roles” (1989), Han Dong finds fault with his contemporaries for being “political, cultural and historical animals,” even if that status is to some extent forced upon them by their surroundings. He exhorts them to break free. “After . . .” is a caustic, bitter piece:

In a politicized country, everything can be understood from a political angle. Developments [outside politics] in the sphere of art often remain unknown. People aren’t interested, and they don’t have the energy. So Chinese and foreigners trying to understand things Chinese all believe that [contemporary] China has no art . . .

Bei Dao’s success has been misconstrued in precisely this manner. Bei Dao himself recognizes that his success derives in large part from political pressures. Later, we were disappointed by the way he took advantage of the situation. Then again, any efforts toward subsistence and immortality as a human being are permitted . . .

Bei Dao never took advantage of the Chinese, but he did take advantage of the westerners, and that is essentially the same thing . . .

⁴⁵ Han 1988: 51.

⁴⁶ Yu and Han 1988: 76.

If we want to cast off the tragic [role] of the political animal, we must also discard all attempts to gain fame and fortune from it . . .

Westerners don't know about China, and they have no wish to know. Westerners harbor colonialist demands of China to this day. To make this claim for the spiritual realm is by no means an exaggeration. The Chinese are still taken as rare cultural animals that live on a patch of ancient earth for strictly decorative purposes. This is all there is to the westerners' view of the Chinese.

Chinese human beings [中国人 *Zhongguo ren*] can only adopt the standpoint of *Chinese* human beings. Anything else falls outside their lot. The standpoint of human beings *per se* is the monopoly of the West . . .

This is how the Chinese have been stripped of their right to be human beings. If you are not contented with being a lower animal, fine: then you can be a richly mysterious cultural animal—that's what the Chinese are. That is how A Cheng has gained the westerners' trust . . .

Once we have cast off the two roles of the brilliant political animal and the mysterious cultural animal, we arrive at the forefront of artistic creation. Here lies another pitfall: the role of the profound historical animal . . .⁴⁷

Like certain other claims by Han and Yu, especially the more polemical, Han's comments on Bei Dao and A Cheng are debatable, not to say untenable, or misleadingly incomplete at best. As for Bei Dao, much has been said about the politics of his poetry in every sense of the word.⁴⁸ Suffice it here to note that fifteen years on, in an interview by Chang Li (2004), Han Dong says that his own generation's attempt to break free from the overwhelming influence of Bei Dao and Obscure poetry "may well be called an act of patricide".⁴⁹ But as noted above, the aim of the present essay is to present Han's and Yu's poetics, rather than take issue with them on theories of poetry or its practice in contemporary China.

In the interview by Liu and Zhu, Han reiterates his disapproval of Chinese poets who make the political reality of their surroundings a selling point. At the same time, he acknowledges that political pressure on poets in China is real, and a terrible thing. Asked about avant-garde poets as "dissidents" holding radical political views, he says:

This is first of all determined by political life in our country. If a poet doesn't toe the line, and insists on his own artistic position, he will be misunderstood by the outside world, and hated by jealous fellow poets . . . An important feature of political life in our country is its regard for stability and unity. As such, anything alien, unusual, outstanding or rebellious constitutes a threat to the political order. Hence, if our poetry doesn't fit in with mass [culture] and has its own ideas and individuality, perhaps even wants to give expression to unconstrained abnormalities, and demands to be circulated and spread around, that will of

⁴⁷ Han 1989: 18-19.

⁴⁸ E.g. Owen 1990 and Yeh 1991b, in the light of Han's claims; but also Li 1996.

⁴⁹ Han 2004a.

course lead to commotion . . . Unconventional avant-garde literature's conflict with politics is a totally normal thing . . . Under these special political circumstances, those who insist on their individual artistic pursuits will in fact run into problems . . . The obstacles and the pressure can be formidable, even deadly . . .⁵⁰

In “The Life and Times of *Them*,” which first appeared (1992) in the post-1989 revival of *Today* outside China and was later excerpted for domestic publication, Han asserts again that the poet has absolutely no “non-poetic”—political, social, moral—responsibilities, and that writing “to establish poetry in its own right” is by no means a form of escapism. In one of the most solemn and moralizing (!) parts of a poetics that regularly bespeaks the romanticist, tragic heroism Han has a reputation for condemning in others, he writes:

In an era full of temptations, it is all the more important that the poet adopt a stance of rejection [拒绝姿态 *jujue zitai*] and a lonely countenance. He must return to writing by himself. Any act or thought inspired by his judging the hour and sizing up the situation or being zealous for the common weal will damage his character as a poet. He is out of keeping with the times, he has no foundation to fall back on, and what is more, he will never adapt. His cause is God's cause, the creation of being from nothingness but without any practical use. He has no support and no one responds to him. And if these things do happen, they have nothing to do with him. He must understand all this. His writing is for the soul, it is art, it is absolute, and that is all there is to it. He must treasure and respect himself.⁵¹

Yet, typically, Han warns against self-importance on the poet's part:

The relation of the poet and the reader should really be that of the poem and the reader. There's no need for the poet to appear. To read your poetry the reader need not know about your life, about what you are and do outside your poetry. If a poet actively seeks [a part in] poet-reader relations, I feel that he's after a kind of stardom that is way beyond his reach.⁵²

Yu Jian, too, habitually remarks on the poet's roles and characteristics throughout his poetics. In “The Poet and His Fate” (1999), he decries the fact that starting in the Song dynasty, the poet began to “rise up” [上升 *shangsheng*] and see himself as being “higher” than the poem as he became conscious of the heaven-granted right to speak that had been his since antiquity, but until then not been considered his “abstract privilege,” that is, something that made him special. According to Yu, in certain quarters this trend continues to the present, “making the poet more important than the poem,” as visible in the disproportional attention paid to “the death of the poet.” This is one of Yu's frequent allusions to specialist and general media hypes following the suicides of his contemporaries Haizi, Ge Mai (1967-1991) and Gu Cheng (1956-1993).

In contrast to what he describes as the poet's unjustified self-importance, Yu Jian paints a grim picture of current social disregard for the poet:

⁵⁰ Han 1994: 114-115. Cf Han and Zhu 1993: 69.

⁵¹ Han 1992: 199-200. Cf Han and Zhu 1993: 71-72.

⁵² *Ibid.*.

The poet is a man of magical powers. When as a young man, I traveled through Yunnan Province, I saw many indigenous tribes. I learned that the sorcerers in those tribes on the Yunnan earth constituted the soul of the tribespeople, their history, the presence of their mother tongue—but a soul that resided outside everyday life and only functioned any longer on the occasion of festivals and celebrations, to recall people’s memory, their shame and their dignity, their gratitude and their fears. The difference with the sorcerers of antiquity was that then, too, the latter were the organizers of activities to establish contact with ghosts, but all members of the tribe would [join them to] take part in those activities. But things are different now. Either the sorcerer occupies a position above all others in the tribe, or he has been completely forgotten. I saw not a few Yunnan sorcerers, and they were invariably the poorest and loneliest people in the tribe. That is the poet’s fate—and a matter in which he has no choice . . . ⁵³

Elsewhere and earlier in this piece, Yu claims that poetry was a crucial and ubiquitous element of ordinary people’s everyday life in traditional Chinese societies up to the Song dynasty.

He goes on to predict that in a globalizing world, the first one to be forgotten will be the poet, who has become “a tour guide in a museum”. However,

The real poet should resist the poet’s fate as it takes shape in this our time . . . The poet should refuse to rise up, and sink low instead [堕落 *duoluo*]. Sinking low is a verb [动词 *dongci*, literally ‘word that moves’]⁵⁴ for which one needs a certain weight. It is harder than rising up . . . ⁵⁵

Yu’s use of 堕落, which means ‘degenerate’ among other things, is presumably intended to ridicule the poet’s noble calling, in the eyes of others, to “rise” to higher spheres.

While Han Dong’s variety of the poet’s loneliness is of the proud and glorious kind, Yu makes it part of a miserable fate that the poet should work to turn around. He agrees with Han on the practical uselessness of poetry—which, in a reference to the book *Zhuangzi*, makes it ultimately useful on less tangible, superior levels:

Poetry should be useful to human life. In the uses of the useless lies the use of poetry [无用之用，就是诗歌之用 *wu yong zhi yong, jiu shi shige zhi yong*]. ⁵⁶

* * *

Part Two of this essay, forthcoming in the 2005 fall issue of Studies on Asia, contains an extensive, final section on the poetics of Han Dong and Yu Jian entitled “Enemies of poetry and of the authentic poet”, as well as concluding remarks on Han Dong’s and Yu Jian’s styles in the metatextual arena. The full list of Works Cited in Parts One and Two combined is included below, so as to retain its function as a quick overview of each poet’s metatextual publications; so is the Glossary.

⁵³ Yu 1999c: 81-83.

⁵⁴ Yu Jian’s conscious, literal employment of terminology from linguistics (such as the names of parts of speech) and from rhetoric stands out in his long poem <File 0>; see *Renditions* no. 56 (2001): 24-57.

⁵⁵ Yu 1999c: 81-83.

⁵⁶ See Chuang-tzū 1981: 75. I follow Graham’s translation of 无用之用.

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GLOSSARY

A Cheng	阿城
Bei Dao	北岛
Chang Li	常立
Duoyu	朵渔
Ge Mai	戈麦
Gu Cheng	顾城
Haizi	海子
Han Dong	韩东
Lao Mu	老木
Liu Ligan	刘立杆
Lu Xun	鲁迅
Malingshu Xiongdi	马铃薯兄弟
Mao Zedong	毛泽东
Qu Yuan	屈原
Shu Ting	舒婷
Tang Xiaodu	唐晓渡
Tao Naikan	陶乃侃
Wang Jiaxin	王家新
Xi Chuan	西川
Xie Ye	谢烨
Xie Youshun	谢有顺
Yang Li	杨黎
Yang Lian	杨炼
Yu Jian	于坚
Zhu Wen	朱文
<i>Zhuangzi</i>	《莊子》