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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Playing with Liquid Fire: Reading Chinese Dagong Verse Through Classical Poetry Tradition and Vice Versa

Joanna KRENZ
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland
jk61735@amu.edu.pl

This article traces multiple connections between contemporary Chinese rural migrant workers' poetry (*dagong shige*) and the classical poetry tradition. In part one, the author investigates explicit allusions to traditional poetry in the form and content of workers' poems, asking how and why dagong poets actively seek connection with the literary past and strive to remap it onto the psychological and social-political matrices of their own existence. Emphasis is placed on the communitarian aspect of poetry on the one hand and its transcendental qualities on the other. Self-inscription into poetry tradition is discussed as a powerful manifestation of workers' full-fledged participation in the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual heritage of the nation and of humankind at large. Part two focuses on less tangible structural resonances between classical poetry and rural migrants' verse, construing the latter as a natural continuation of what is deemed the "lyric-toward-the-epic" tradition of Chinese poetry as distinct from the "epic-toward-the-lyrical" Western tradition. Rereading the classical poetry tradition through dagong poetry, the article hopes to demonstrate the literary-critical and literary-philosophical potential of migrant workers' artistic output in understanding (Chinese) poetry and as a factor that may contribute to a possible paradigm shift in its vast universe.

本文旨在探究當代中國農民工詩歌（打工詩歌）與中國古典詩歌傳統之間的多重關聯。在第一部分，作者考察了農民工詩歌在結構和主題上是否存在對傳統詩歌的直接暗示。通過論述詩歌的社群特點和超驗屬性，文章探討了打工詩人如何一方面有意識地延續文學傳統，同時又基於自身的心理和社會政治環境，對這一傳統進行新的詮釋和重構。打工詩人通過將自身融入詩歌傳統，展現了他們在傳承中國乃至全球文化、知識和精神遺產方面的參與意識。文章第二部分側重於古典詩歌與打工詩之間草蛇灰線的結構關聯。打工詩歌被視為中國詩歌"從抒情走向敘事"傳統的自然延續，這與西方的"從敘事走向抒情"形成鮮明對比。本文通過打工詩歌重拾古典詩歌傳統，旨在展示農民工藝術創作在文學批評和文學哲學方面的內在潛力，並探討這些作品如何有助於在更廣闊領域中實現潛在的範式轉變。

Keywords: rural migrant workers, dagong poetry, Chinese classical poetry, tradition, lyrical poetry, epic poetry

關鍵詞： 農民工, 抒情詩, 史詩, 中國古典詩歌, 打工詩歌

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Introduction: literary tradition and tectonic movements of the poetry scene[1]

There is a famous adage often ascribed to Gustav Mahler, although its primary source is likely in premodern English literature: "Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire." This rhetorically effective statement smoothly reconciles conservative and progressive approaches to culture, offering a promising point of departure for discussions on the relationship between continuity and creativity, among other things. Fire, however, can be preserved in many ways. It can be placed on an altar of a temple located on a holy mountain guarded by gods and (artists-as-)priests. It can be maintained in neat, meticulously designed fireplaces in artistic salons funded by wealthy patrons. It can be passed on as a torch by brave, persistent runners ready to sacrifice their individual achievements to take part in the anonymous intergenerational relay through millennia as educators and mentors. It can also be kept in a theoretical or scientific way: as knowledge of how to rekindle the spark, that is, as purely algorithmic structures, such as certain fixed genre matrices, which can be mobilised at any point and filled with new content according to formal rules. Finally, speaking of algorithms, fire can be maintained with the use of increasingly sophisticated technological means, its continuation (or imitation) being electric light and heating systems, intended here as physical analogues of phenomena such as classical poetry recreated by artificial intelligence, which has been gaining tremendous popularity in recent years in China.

That said, we must remember that fire also has an incredible natural potential for self-preservation. It may survive, for instance, in the form of flashes of lightning that appear seemingly out of nowhere but in fact strike in a logical consequence of long accumulated tension (voltage) inside a cloud/culture. Finally, and in the context of the problem that will occupy us in this paper, most importantly, fire may self-propagate in the liquid form of magma that bulges beneath the earth's crust, causing slow movements of tectonic plates that consistently shape our landscape, and that occasionally makes its way to the surface as lava, often violently, burning everything in its path. When well-meaning socialist-minded Prometheuses make sacrifices to steal a tiny spark from sacred mountains or bourgeois fireplaces to bring it to the people and kindle the passion for literature and culture at the grassroots level of society, the vast sea of fire wells up under their feet and sculpts the collective consciousness unbeknownst to them and to those who are being sculpted by the invisible liquid flames.

As in natural geology, certain areas are tectonically more active in culture, while others remain almost static during particular periods. As far as poetry is concerned, in many Western countries, culture seems to be temporarily in a period of lesser tectonic activity; therefore, the responsibility for preserving and passing on the fire of tradition indeed lies mainly on the shoulders of Promethean activists determined to put their ideals of democratised verse into practice. Many of them, however, in their attempts to give voice to the voiceless through poetry and to offer poetry as a form of sociopsychological therapy, tend to underestimate the fact that, unlike in other (para)literary genres (such as diaries or essays), both poetry's vocality and its therapeutic value stem to a large extent precisely from its

[1] The paper is part of the project *The World Re-Versed: New Phenomena in Chinese Poetry as a Challenge and Inspiration to Literary Studies* carried out at the University of Zurich within the Bekker 2019 program funded by the Polish National Agency for Academic Research (Narodowa Agencja Wymiany Akademickiej NAWA).

rootedness not in the present—that is, in the mundane reality of huge factories or impoverished city districts that the precariat experiences daily—but in the centuries-long tradition and, partly, in what is still commonly recognised as verse's special, if not sacred, status, or at least is presented as such by educational institutions where the elevated Romantic paradigm of poetry seems still to prevail today. Inscribing their life narratives in the alternative space of poetry they were taught as being a universe inhabited by highly self-aware individuals of idealistic temperament and unusual sensitivity to beauty allows many aspiring authors to mitigate their loneliness by connecting themselves via language to those whom they perceive as likeminded, and thus elevate their own lived experience and give it a new meaning that comes with this connection. It is not so much—or not only—about being heard as about creating links and exploring the higher dimensions of reality beyond the miserable here and now.

People who eke out their existence doing menial labor need poetry for fundamentally the same, and equally diverse and complex, reasons as anyone else in society, including intellectuals. Offering them only prefiltered and predigested poetics that "fit" their precarious condition, presumed taste, and cultural sensibilities is patronising at best, even if done with the purest intentions. Jacques Rancière expressed it powerfully in the new preface to his *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, republished in 2012, where he tries to do away with the mythic distinction between "popular intelligence" concerned with practical things and "scholarly intelligence" concerned with abstract thinking, and to restore the long-questioned right of workers to dream and think beyond the most utilitarian sphere of existence. Modern social sciences, in his view, indirectly,

> confirmed the social order that has always been constructed on the simple idea that the vocation of workers is to work—good progressive souls add: and to struggle—and that they have no time to waste playing at flaneurs, writers, or thinkers.
>
> (Rancière 2012, viii)

Thanks to texts found in the archives of the proletarian revolution of the 1830s that testified to workers' interests in not only everyday affairs but aesthetics and metaphysics, it became apparent to him

> that workers had never needed the secrets of domination explained to them, as their problem was quite a different one. It was to withdraw themselves, intellectually and materially, from the forms by which this domination imprinted on their bodies, and imposed on their actions, modes of perception, attitudes, and a language. [. . .] For the workers of the 1830s, the question was not to demand the impossible, but to realize it themselves, to take back the time that was refused them by educating their perceptions and their thought in order to free themselves in the very exercise of everyday work, or by winning from nightly rest the time to discuss, write, compose verses, or develop philosophies.
>
> (ibidem, ix)

However, in the following decades, the Western proletariat class has, to a great extent, internalised the idea of their putative "vocation to work" and *only* work, and at some point, started not only to believe

that they have no space and time for poetry but also that there is no space and time for them in cultural and literary tradition, which, they assume, has been created by and for different people. Paradoxically, Marxism, which claimed to be concerned with the proletariat's fate, has contributed to the deepening of the chasm between this class and the wealthier and better-educated people by ideologising economic disparity and presenting it as fundamental to class conflict. In order to revive grassroots poetry in the West, social stratification must be de-ideologised and de-essentialised. At present, those with a lot to say are seldom interested in language as anything more than a tool of oppression and consider themselves its slaves rather than masters.

The testimonies of activists such as American poet Mark Nowak, recorded in his inspiring monograph *Social Poetics* (2022), confirm this observation. Nowak has spent much of his life organising poetry workshops for factory staff in the United States and formerly colonised countries in Africa and North America. He has struggled continuously not only to obtain funding and institutional support but also to attract participants to his initiative, expending much energy, on the one hand, trying to convince the workers that poetry is also for them and that there is room in it for their precarious experience as well and, on the other, connecting their writing to the tradition of English-language poetry and thus "legitimising" it in the eyes of broader poetry audiences and critics.

Notwithstanding my admiration for initiatives such as Nowak's, they are still only a drop in the ocean and fail to address the entire spectrum of workers' cultural interests, temperaments, and dispositions. Encouraging workers to write about topics closely related to their everyday experience is one way to raise their interest in poetry, but certainly not the only one, and it often seems to be based on a hidden assumption that everyday life is the only, or at least the most convenient, point of departure available to them. Perhaps the problem lies in the fact that topics like workers' writing mainly attract poets who are fascinated, like Nowak, with the aesthetics of the quotidian, which often goes hand in hand with an anti-elitist attitude. In contrast, the more conservative part of the literary scene, clinging to conventional principles such as decorum, remains mistrustful of the precariat's ability to create works of more universal relevance. Trained, curated, and read mostly by those who represent this former mindset, workers have limited chance to make their way out of this aesthetic-ideological bubble.

A markedly different attempt to reintegrate workers' cultural production into mainstream Western culture occurred in the 1930s and 1940s. Then, as capitalism and socialism locked horns in a high-stakes showdown in Western Europe, Simone Weil invested her considerable intellectual energy into making the case that workers need poetry and literature and that masterpieces should be translated—or, as she specifies, "transposed"—into their language and specific imaginary to be absorbed and creatively reprocessed as part of "growing the roots". In *The Need for Roots*, having thoroughly re-examined her initial fascination with Marxism, she notes that those who declared their concern for the lives of workers, in fact, did them a disservice and reinforced their alienation:

> Whoever is uprooted himself uproots others. Whoever is rooted himself doesn't uproot others.
>
> Under the same name of revolution, and often using identical slogans and subjects for propaganda, lie concealed two conceptions entirely opposed to one another. One consists in transforming society in such a way that the working-class may be given roots in it; while the other

> consists in spreading to the whole of society the disease of uprootedness which has been inflicted on the working-class. [. . .] A few really want the workers to become rooted again; only this desire of theirs is accompanied by imaginary pictures most of which, instead of having reference to the future, are borrowed from a past which is, moreover, partly fictitious. The rest want purely and simply to see maintained or reinforced that category of human material to which the proletariat has been reduced.
>
> (Weil 2002, 48–49)

Although based on a problematic assumption—that workers need to receive culture tailored to their presumed needs—this reasoning leads Weil to an interesting argument, one that resonates with that proposed by Walter Benjamin (another unorthodox Marxist with metaphysical tastes) on the high translatability of great literature and omnitranslatability of the Bible, as laid out in his essay "The Translator's Task" from 1923. The greater a literary work, suggests Benjamin, the more it lends itself to translation (Benjamin 1997, 164–165). Being translatable, or transposable, into the language of the least privileged, claims Weil, testifies to a work's value, which she defines as the text's ability to encompass truth, understood by her in both intellectual and metaphysical terms. It is thus not workers' cultural activity that requires legitimisation through tradition but precisely the other way around: tradition becomes legitimised and most fully actualised in workers' cultural activity. She explains:

> What makes it so difficult for our culture to be communicated to the people is not that it is too high, but that it is too low. We apply a strange remedy, indeed, by lowering it still further before distributing it to them in little doses.
>
> The cure for that consists in an effort of translation; not of popularization, but of translation, which is a very different matter. It isn't a question of taking truths—of already far too poor a quality—contained in the culture of the intellectuals, and then degrading them, mutilating them and destroying all their flavour; but simply of expressing them, in all their fullness, in a language which, to use Pascal's expression, makes them perceptible to the heart, for the benefit of people whose feelings have been shaped by working-class conditions. [. . .]
>
> Furthermore, transposition is a criterion of truth. A truth which cannot be transposed isn't a truth; in the same way that what doesn't change in appearance according to the point of view isn't a real object, but a deceptive representation of such. In the mind, too, there is three-dimensional space.
>
> [. . .] On the whole, and saving exceptions, second-class works and below are most suitable for the élite, and absolutely first-class works most suitable for the people.
>
> (Weil 2002, 65–66)

For example, Weil cites ancient Greek poetry, particularly the theme of misfortune that carries through Greek literary tradition. "A workman, for instance, who bears the anguish of unemployment

deep in the very marrow of his bones, would understand the feelings of Philoctetus [*sic*] when his bow is taken away from him, and the despair with which he stares at his powerless hands." Weil supplements her argument by invoking the case of Electra, whose hunger is only understandable for the precariat, never for the bourgeois, "including the publishers of the Budé Library" (ibidem, 70).

Continuing Weil's line of reasoning, which is quite close to my own thinking about the problematic stratification in literature and the arts, one may say, tongue in cheek, that contemporary Chinese culture could be regarded as perhaps the most extensive testing ground for the classics, and Chinese classical verse as maybe the best proven phenomenon in terms of greatness in the world. Compared to Western culture, China may boast a vast poetic landscape with an incredible grassroots dynamic, a dynamic that poetry written by rural migrant workers reflects most clearly, offering an excellent perspective on interactions between the sacralised tradition and disillusioned modernity. Whereas in most places that remain under the dominant influence of Euro-American culture, grassroots poetry is today stimulated mainly by external literary-critical discourses and activist academics, the poetry of Chinese workers—and indeed other social groups not considered among the country's intellectual elites—has emerged organically, without external stimuli, and has been flooding underground spaces such as factories, mines, and construction sites, surfacing from time to time through dramatic events, including the suicides of under-recognised poets, and making its way to literary-critical debates in China and abroad.

One of the first large-scale attempts to bring this poetry to light was Qin Xiaoyu 秦曉宇, Wu Xiaobo 吳曉波, and Wu Feiyue's 吳飛躍 project, consisting of the documentary *Wode shipian* 我的詩篇 (*My Verses*), which narrates the lives of several rural migrant authors and the anthology of workers' poetry of the same name. This anthology, published in 2015, was, after an additional round of selection, translated into English by Eleanor Goodman in 2016 as *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*. The topic fascinated scholars in China and abroad alike, generating a vast number of publications within just a few years, including those by Justyna Jaguścik (2011, 2014a, 2014b, 2018, 2019), Maghiel van Crevel (2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022), Zhou Xiaojing (2015, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022), Sun Wanning (2010, 2012a, 2012b), Gong Haomin (2012, 2018), Li Yun and Rong Rong (2019), Federico Picerni (2020), Sang Qiu (2021), and others, which offer different angles and representatives of the group labelled as the *dagong shiren* 打工詩人 (dagong poets).[2] The term *dagongren* 打工人, or *dagongzhe* 打工者, rendered by Maghiel van Crevel into Australian English as "battlers," is often paraphrased as "those who work for a boss." In poetry discourse, however, it refers mostly to work that takes places in a very specific social-political context, namely by those belonging to the huge "floating population" of rural migrants in search of a better life in the big cities, specifically in southeastern China, where they undertake the most precarious jobs with unstable contracts, low wages, poor accommodation, no health insurance, and few of the social benefits available to those born in the city or those who have the city *hukou* 戶口 (household registration), which is virtually unobtainable for villagers. "I'm not a Chinese worker, and I'm not a farmer / my status is that

[2] A comprehensive and regularly updated bibliography of studies on migrant workers and subalternity compiled by Maghiel van Crevel is available on the Modern Chinese Literature and Culture blog: https://u.osu.edu/mclc/bibliographies/lit/theme-1/#MWS.

of a man held in suspense / doing an odd job here and there in the south / tightening screws, pounding nails," sighs Tian Xiaoyin 田曉隱 in his poem *Wo yong dingzi luosi xuanyi Zhongguo duanban* 我用釘子螺絲懸疑中國短板 (I Use Nails and Screws to Fix China's Failings), which I will analyse later in this essay, capturing the shared experience of this group.

Unlike in the contemporary United States or early and mid-twentieth-century France, Chinese workers' poetry is anything but uprooted. Quite the contrary, it remains inherently linked, on multiple levels, in individual and collective dimensions, to the national poetry tradition; it is being shaped by the underground currents of this liquid fire that many authors learn to tame and employ for their purposes, while some bravely and creatively play with it. A significant part of these linkages has already been explored, and Chinese commentators in particular, including Qin Xiaoyu in the introduction to *Wode shipian* (Qin & Wu 2015, esp. 8–16), refer to classical poetry when discussing dagong works, especially to the first anthology of Chinese verse, the *Shijing* 詩經, composed of anonymous texts that circulated among early society in oral form. Interestingly, however, the parallel they often draw is based on the notion of authenticity; that is, technically, lack of—presumably hands-tying—anchorage in the poetry tradition that might distort their message or make the author's voice sound unnatural. As Lucas Klein (2019) has shown, and I largely subscribe to his argument, this hypothesis is defensible only if we define authenticity, in a seemingly paradoxical way, as mediation; that is, we acknowledge and re-evaluate all sorts of translational (and transpositional, to nod to Weil) processes that co-constituted *shi* 詩 poetry and dagong poetry respectively, instead of sustaining the harmful illusion of their respective authors as innocent noble savages speaking pure language unpolluted with and by culture (Klein 2019, 203; cf. van Crevel 2017a, 275). It is only very rarely that someone speaks appreciatively of dagong poets' active and conscious dialogue with and reinterpretation of tradition, as if they existed in some intellectual void, isolated from all cultural production and deprived of critical thinking.

In reality, Chinese blue-collar workers are sometimes more familiar with the history of Chinese verse than graduates from top universities, as demonstrated by the example of Lei Haiwei 雷海為, a delivery man from Hangzhou and the winner of the popular national TV show *Zhongguo Shici Dahui* 中國詩詞大會 (*China Poetry Congress*), to mention just one instance. In 2010, as a student, I was exploring a local bookstore in Wuhan when I met a chef from a university canteen with many years of work experience in different jobs across the country. He approached me by telling me in great detail, one by one, the biographies of the poets whose books I was randomly browsing. In the following months, whenever we met, he would show up with his head full of poetry, be it other people's or his own, which he eagerly recited and patiently explained to me. At the time, I was stunned. Today, I still see him as a rare bird, but indeed not the only representative of this beautiful and puzzling species.

Another keyword that often comes up in discussions of classical verse and dagong verse is nostalgia or homesickness, which is almost omnipresent in both strands of poetry tradition. Yet, again, this connection is relevant only to a limited degree and only under certain conditions. Moreover, it constitutes one manifestation of a broader affinity. I will try to pin this affinity down by reflecting on the importance of community and how it plays out in the fundamentally lyrical Chinese poetry tradition as distinct from traditions that, like Western European poetry, influenced by Greek and Roman

antiquity, emerged out of the culture dominated by the epic element and have evolved toward more loosely structured lyricism. Interestingly, Qin Xiaoyu, in the afore-mentioned introduction, before signalling resonances between workers' verse and *shi* poetry, and perhaps influenced by the dominant political rhetoric, mobilises the category of epos, calling his anthology a "social epos" (*shehui de shishi* 社會的史詩) of the era of transformation, as well as a "life epos" (*shenghuo shishi* 生活史詩) and a "spiritual epos" (*jingshen shishi* 精神史詩) of the Chinese working class. In the very next sentence, however, as if sensing the bombastic character of his claim, which does not concur with the tone of a large part of this poetry, in particular the writings of the contemporary dagong authors, he adds more carefully:

> This epicity does not have to imply a magnificent whole consisting of a set of authoritative narrative structures; on the contrary, more likely, it is a pluralist pseudo-whole that is made from fragmented piled-up pieces.
>
> 這種史詩性並非指由一套自製的敘事邏輯結構而成的宏大整體；相反，它更有可能是某種多元異質、碎片疊加的偽整體。
>
> (Qin & Wu 2015, 2–3)

This is, I believe, a good theoretical intuition that is worth further exploration. First and foremost, however, we should broaden the perspective from one book, a "pseudo-whole," to the unlimited cultural space in which all potentially dangerous illusions of wholeness and completeness are immediately dispelled, and epicity thus presents itself as a moving horizon of lyricism, which remains stimulating as long as it recedes. All attempts to prevent its expansion and stabilise it in a specific configuration to "fence off" Chinese poetry and give it a concrete (ideological) shape put the inherently lyrical universe under the threat of collapse, as examples discussed further in this essay demonstrate.

My reflection will unfold in two stages. The first comprises a series of naked-eye intertextual readings aimed at detecting explicit and intended allusions to the classical tradition and identifying their functions and implications in and for dagong verse. In the second stage, I will attempt to detect less tangible connections: nuanced, topical overlaps within single texts and (static and dynamic) structural resonances between ancient poetry landscapes and the dagong poetry scene. Two books inspire my argument in this part of the essay: Li Hongwei's 李宏偉 *Guowang yu shuqing shi* 國王與抒情詩 (*The King and Lyric Poetry*), a literary-philosophical sci-fi novel from 2017, and Michael Hunter's 2021 study *The Poetics of Early Chinese Thought: How the Shijing Shaped the Chinese Philosophical Tradition*, which brings out the specific kinetics of premodern verse in China. This dynamic, I will argue, is also discernible in dagong poetry, although not without some significant rdisturbances. Finally, I will try to identify the causes and consequences of these perturbations, reading dagong poetry as a recent (multi)chapter in the hypertextual open-ended epic-in-the-making of Chinese lyrical poetry culture. This second part, which departs from workers' writings and expands into broader reflections on the nature of (Chinese) poetry, is, in a sense, a Weil-style attempt to invert the perspective, asking what new insights into literature are revealed once we incorporate dagong verse into our literary-critical imaginary as a source, and not only an object or target, of reflection. That is, as a contributor to, and

not simply a beneficiary or parasite of, literary discourse. My observations also concur with those made by Liu Chang 劉暢 in her 2019 monograph *Shige wei Dao: Guanyu dagong shiren de shehuixue yanjiu* 詩歌為道：關於“打工詩人”的社會學研究 (*Poetry as the Way: A Sociological Study of "Dagong Poets"*; translated on the cover as *Poetry as Coping Style*). Liu, similarly to Rancière, emphasises the spiritual needs and pursuits of workers, and distinguishes in their poetry three types of attitudes toward reality: adaptive (*shiyingxing* 適應型), critical (*pipanxing* 批判型), and creative (*chuangzaoxing* 創造型), each illustrated with numerous examples of authors she interviewed. However, as Liu's work mostly investigates the sociological aspects of dagong writing, and my main focus here is on literary discourse, I will not engage in more depth with her argument.

My selection of scrutinised poems may not seem immediately apparent since it hardly reflects the popularity and recognisability of these particular authors nor my own aesthetic preferences and assessment of their literary skills. I do not discuss, for instance, the immensely popular and talented female author Zheng Xiaoqiong 鄭小瓊[3] and I say relatively little about Xu Lizhi 許立志, whose tragic death in 2014 drew the attention of worldwide audiences to the situation of migrant workers. Instead, I focus on works that, even if sometimes artistically flawed and considered marginal even within the margins, ask or inspire me to ask questions that I find interesting and necessary for our broader understanding of culture(s) and beyond.

1. Visible intertext

Many intended allusions to classical poetry are easy to identify at first glance, even for those unfamiliar with traditional Chinese verse. Numerous authors, including worker poets, still reach for classical genre forms, reproducing, more or less faithfully, their paradigmatic syllabic and sometimes tonal patterns; this is immediately visible in the graphical arrangement of the text, given the same "size" of each syllable/character in the Chinese language, which translates into visual regularity. In online and offline resources, such as dagong magazines and general literary/cultural magazines, there are occasionally sections containing a variety of classical-style poems speaking of a broad range of experiences, from queues or meals served in the construction site canteen through the author's commitment to building a new socialist homeland, to their yearning for their native home and family. Liu Chang in her book discusses a remarkable case of a Dongguan 東莞 worker, Xie Mingheng 謝敏恒, who invested his private resources to establish an independent magazine *Nantian* 南天 (Southern Sky) dedicated to classical-style worker poetry and advocating for a return to tradition; he even singled out specific aesthetic rules of what he called "Southern sky style" (*nantianti* 南天體) (Liu 2019, chap. 6.2). Likewise, scattered quotes from classical poetry in modern-style verses are often easily discernible due to the specific language features that distinguish them from the rest of the poem. Among clear intertextual road signs, one may also count the names of ancient great masters, famous lines of poetry, and

[3] I discuss Zheng's work more extensively in a different context in *In Search of Singularity* (Krenz 2022, chap. 7).

allusions to literary-historical periods or terms, all of which we will see in examples examined in this section.

Formal intertextuality as a sign of belonging

This is anything but an absolute rule. Still, one may venture a general observation that the first kind of naked-eye intertextuality—on the level of form—very often goes hand in hand with the implicit assumption of the author's belonging to—and, in a sense, co-owning of—the great cultural realm of Chinese civilisation, regardless of their social and material status and literary skills; a feeling of being a tiny anonymous part of a great and glorious whole. Poets who write in this manner generally do not lay claim to being anything more than that, but they do make unrestricted use of their right to participate in this whole, filling available genre matrices with, and to, their heart's content. Put differently, their verse embodies tradition without problematising it (which is not an indictment, as I will make clear soon). Of course, there are poems written entirely in the classical style and retaining formal rules but intended to explode rather than preserve traditional conventions, for example, by employing irony, thus emphasising the author's independence and subversive ambitions. Still, they constitute a relatively small subset of dagong verse. Among its prominent representatives, one should mention in particular Zeng Shaoli 曾少立 widely known as Lizilizilizi or Lizi, whose sophisticated classicist verse contains sharp critique of modern reality. Although Lizi himself does not consider himself a dagong poet, a large part of his oeuvre builds on his experience of "floating in Beijing" (北漂) as a migrant worker.[4] Much more frequently, one encounters authors like Xue Jundong 薛俊東, whose short biography published in *Wenxue jiayuan shi ci mei kan* 文學家園詩詞美刊 (*Literary Homeland: A Poetry Journal*) tells the story of an astonishingly prolific literary career yet without any spectacular individual achievement, such as the publication of a single-author poetry collection. Instead, the poet contributes works dispersed across various magazines, journals, and newspapers.

> Xue Jundong, born in Linyi, Shandong Province. Member of the Sunshine Poetry Society and Linyi Poetry Society. A drifting migrant worker raised in a village. From childhood he loved poetry; his works, set against a personal background, express all the varied experiences of the dagong group with genuine affection and concern; due to their strong artistic appeal they have attracted broad attention among poetry lovers; he is considered a "representative of rural migrant workers." His representative works have been included in *Chinese Poetry*, *Chinese Cifu*, *Stars*, *Poetry Monthly*, *Contemporary Poetry*, *Shaanxi Poetry*, *Zhongzhou Poetry*, *Lishan Poetry Magazine*, *Changbaishan Poetry*, *Nanlaoquan Poetry*, *Inner Mongolian Poetry*, *Red Leaves of the Liberation Army*, *Shenzhen Poetry*, *The Poet*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Militia Daily*, *Writer Journal*, and around 200 other magazines and journals across the country. They have never been submitted to any poetry contest.

[4] An extensive German-language study of Lizilizi's poetry is found in Kraushaar 2022. I thank Frank Kraushaar for drawing my attention to Lizi in this place.

Views on poetry: To write out what I love and think of with pure and sincere devotion; to record life truthfully and in detail. To be the authentic me and write like the authentic me.

薛俊東:山東臨沂人，日照詩詞學會、臨沂詩詞學會會員。一個來自農村的漂泊打工仔。自幼酷愛詩詞，其作品以親身經歷為背景，抒發了打工族的酸甜苦辣，情真意切，感染力強，深受廣大詩詞愛好者的青睞，被譽為"農民工詩人代表"，代表作刊登于《中華詩詞》《中華辭賦》《星星詩刊》《詩詞月刊》《當代詩詞》《陝西詩詞》《中州詩詞》《曆山詩刊》《長白山詩詞》《難老泉聲》《內蒙古詩詞》《解放軍紅葉》《深圳詩詞》《詩詞家》《詩詞報》《兵團日報》《作家報》等全國各地 200 多家詩刊、詩報發表，未參加過任何詩賽。

詩觀:願用赤誠之心訴說心中所想所愛；願執真實之筆記錄生活點點滴滴。做真實的自己，寫詩亦然。

(Xue Jundong 2021)[5]

As a sample from his rich oeuvre, let us read two works representing respectively the "down-to-earth" and "spiritual" ends of the spectrum of his thematically diversified poetics: the heptasyllabic *Shihuangzhe* 拾荒者 (Scavenger), which belongs to a series of poem-portraits of workers doing different jobs (including a construction worker, a cleaner, a delivery boy, a hairdresser, etc.) titled *Yong nongmingong* 詠農民工 (In Praise of Rural Migrant Workers), and the pentasyllabic *Zhongqiu yidi ganhuai* 中秋異地感懷 (Thoughts in a Strange Place on the Mid-Autumn Festival), which is composed around the classical leitmotif of wild geese in autumn, symbolising nostalgia for his native Jiuqu village. I translate the poems literally, without preserving their formal and rhythmical regularity and rhyme.

Scavenger (New Prosody)
As the wind blows it about and the rain soaks it, the scavenger turns waste into small banknotes.
To pave the way to education for his children, he ignores people's icy looks.

拾荒者（新韻）
風也翻來雨也淘，撿拾廢品換微鈔。
為鋪兒女求學路，何懼人間冷眼瞧。
(Xue Jundong 2020b)

Thoughts in a Strange Place on the Mid-Autumn Festival
Wild geese passing over the vast and empty sky, wind shakes off yellow leaves.
Autumn is drawing to its end amid thousands of mountains, the moon at night like frost.

[5] All translations from Chinese, unless otherwise indicated, are mine. For officially published translations by others, I do not include Chinese originals.

Mulled wine can't warm the heart, in an inscribed poem my dreams grow cold.
Affection for the native place is like flowing water, Jiuqu reverberates in the mind.

中秋異地感懷
雁過長空寂，風欺落葉黃。
千山秋欲老，一夜月如霜。
煮酒心難熱，題詩夢易涼。
鄉情似流水，九曲繞愁腸。

(Xue Jundong 2020a)

The second poem is a more obvious example of classical-style verse, given the strong compatibility of its conventional aesthetic and rhetorical measures with the traditional theme and imagery. This, of course, does not make it less personal and "authentic" in the popular (and Xue's own) understanding of the word; on the contrary, it testifies not only to the author's psychological discomfort (nostalgic content) but also to a genuine struggle of the marginalised, alienated individual to preserve his dignity through beauty (regular form) and remain part of the cultural universe in which he is too often denied room.

Shihuangzhe, which places a portrayal of an ordinary person representing a particularly low social status in an exquisite genre frame, seems to be quite liberal in terms of decorum. For all its perceived modernness, however, it does not detract from the spirit of classical poetry, which in the past used to serve as a medium of social-political commentary on current reality; this commentary gradually acquired universal value and philosophical significance as it was circulated and recontextualised in various ways in cultural discourse. The still all too common belief that new topics and images are not sufficiently noble or universal to be narrated in sacred classical genres or, contrariwise, that classical genres are not capacious enough to convey new content leads to an undesirable ossification or incineration of tradition. In many cases, precisely the opposite is true, as was beautifully demonstrated by Haosheng Yang in her monograph *A Modernity Set to a Premodern Tune: Classical-Style Poetry of Modern Chinese Writers* (2016), which investigates classical-style poetry in the oeuvres of leading advocates of putatively iconoclastic (in her words) New Poetry: Lu Xun 魯迅, Zhou Zuoren 周作人, Yu Dafu 郁達夫, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, and Nie Gannu 聶紺弩. Reflecting on "the old within the new," Yang asks provocatively why some "newness" *can* and even *has to* be represented in old forms. "Despite their allegiance to the May Fourth dichotomy between the 'stagnant' old and 'living' new cultures," she argues, at various critical moments, all those authors "found the new vocabulary of modern vernacular language inadequate to represent a puzzling reality, and therefore often sought more effective modes of expression in classical poetry" (Yang 2016, 8–9). Addressing the reasons behind this unobvious choice, she notes:

> When writing in the old language and form, modern writers aligned themselves with their ancient predecessors, reflecting on contemporary events by means of a historical perspective

> that was distant from the present. This approach justified their joy and sorrow in dialogue with history and gave new meaning to the current situation. Through this process, they exerted significant effort to explore a critical framework of modernity that keeps the present open to both the influence of the past and the perception of the future. Their practice allowed for the continuity of values by creating a historical perspective based on succession, while also leaving room for discontinuity and difference drawn from new visions of the world.
>
> (ibidem, 21)

Of course, Xue Jundong is not Lu Xun, and he probably does not reflect much on the far-reaching philosophical implications of fitting the new into the old, taking permission for granted. Perhaps, some would say, turning his simple mottos of devotion and authenticity against Xue, this kind of writing is but a childish play—like making sculptures using colorful plastic molds on the seashore that the first big wave of history will wash away. One author can produce hundreds of such poems in one year; conceivably, only a few, if any, will survive him. Indeed, but . . . so what? Let's look at this image again, without the usual patronising attitude. Children are not so naive as to believe their work in the sand will not be destroyed by water and weather, and yet it would never occur to most of them to consider themselves victims of the sea. If anything, they will be grateful to the seawater for wiping clean the "blackboard" of the beach and making space for them to create a new sand landscape. Children's incredible power lies in immediately turning what grown-ups with their overgrown egos might take as a personal assault or an act of cosmic cruelty into an opportunity, intuitively refusing self-victimisation and ultimate surrender. This is the kind of healthy humility and balanced sense of proportion between "I" and the world that has been largely lost in modern societies in which a distorted individualism often results in irrational fear and thus mutual hostility. Many migrant worker poets, as Liu Chang's study confirms, among the hardships they experience daily, manage to preserve this admirable, if rare, attitude, and manifest it in their writings.

Sadly, the sea sometimes devours even the most careful castle builders, (brain)washing them from the beach and carrying them off in an ideological storm. As it happens, the current ruling power in China knows how to stimulate people's sensibility to traditional aesthetics and make it work to their benefit. By inscribing communism into classicism, they leave ever less space in classical forms for a different kind of content, on which I have written elsewhere.[6] The appearance of Xue's poems in official state-run media such as *Jiefangjun hong ye* 解放軍紅葉 (*Red Leaves of the Liberation Army*) or *Bingtuan ribao* 兵團日報 (*Militia Daily*) cannot fail to alert us to the various entanglements between poetics and politics, or the possible appropriation of the former by the latter. That said, the sea of history also devours watchful grown-ups who believe that the power of the critical mind will let them ride on its waves in search of treasure, knowledge, pleasure, and adventure. They struggle for a different kind of

[6] In a paper submitted to the journal *Porównania / Comparisons*, titled "Lyrical Dictatorship: The Poetic Face of Xi Jinping," I show how skilfully Xi Jinping employs classical poetry in his rhetoric to redefine it as the genre of communist propaganda in order to manipulate the nation's structures of feeling.

eternity: the maximal perseverance of individual bodies and minds, whether in a personal or a collective sense. The former ("childish," "sandcastle builder") kind of play assumes a discrete structure of cultural time (the repeatable cycle of micro destructions and micro recreations), the latter ("adult," "windsurfer") a continuous one (the constant struggle against the sea to retain one's output untouched; more lasting than bronze, as Horace famously put it). These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Also, neither of them should be considered superior. If we, as humankind, dream of approximating eternity, we should embrace both modes of temporality and both modes of subjectivity accordingly.

Explicit intertextuality and the desire of belonging

The second, inherently critical approach, which involves an active dialogue with cultural-historical tradition and problematising one's own (or one's generation's, community's, or group's) place in and relationship with it, is more specific for poems that depart from classical formal conventions and loosely allude to poetry tradition on the level of content. Many such poems raise the question of (artistic) identity, defining it through or against tradition. They do so, on the one hand, by borrowing specific images and concepts or using comparisons to facilitate expression and (self-)understanding or, on the other hand, by emphasising the poet's will to distance themselves from these images and concepts to bring out differences and, usually, the difficulties of the author's particular situation.

One specific example of affirmative explicit intertextuality in *Wode shipian* may be found in Zheng Dong's 鄭東 poem *Dujuanhua* 杜鵑花 (*Azaleas*). The I-speaker unexpectedly encounters blooming azaleas amid an industrial landscape. Trying to make sense of this image, he first thinks back to the prehistorical past and then to the ancient poetry of the two periods considered the peak of Chinese verse: the Tang and Song dynasties.

I must have seen in ancient times
there are collective and individual myths all around
I have seen in Tang poems, hard to say how many times
perhaps, in Song poetry there are their gorgeous silhouettes too
like girls briskly passing through the industrial zone in late spring

我應該在上古時候見過
那裡到處是集體和個人的神話
我在唐詩裡見過，不知數次
或許，在宋詞裡也有它們絢麗的身影
就像在工業區的暮春疾步的姐妹們

(Qin & Wu 2015, 321–322)

Interestingly, all mythical, literary, and real-life aesthetic experiences have exactly the same status for the I-speaker, displaying undisturbed continuity. As if they were just different petals of the same flower. This also holds for the next four lines, where he recalls flowers seen in the Sun Yat-Sen Park between which he envisions supernatural creatures engaged in carefree play:

I've seen them in Sun Yat-Sen Park
Slipping through them my body was stained with scent
those spirits that fed my soul with their atoms
were natural, bright, beautiful, sublime

我在中山公園見過
在它們中間穿過去鑽來，肉體沾上了香味
那一個個分子移動到靈魂的
精靈們，是自然、光明、美麗、優雅的

(Qin & Wu 2015, 321–322)

The azaleas he sees by the roadside in April accumulate all these layers of meaning. Their "purple language stirs memory and root buds of desires," only to fall prey to a heavy equipment vehicle in the evening, which buries them under a heap of mud. One careless move by the driver destroys the plant's finely woven multilayered semantic structure. Out of its smashed corpse, however, sprouts one more memory, like a phoenix rising from the ashes—that of the I-speaker's native village he left long ago to pursue economic stability, where azalea flowers accompanied him from his earliest years:

In the countryside, I grew up with them
there are no other colours
red represents life, white represents death
their roots are in the mountains, so they are called red that shines on mountains

我在農村和它們一起成長過
那裡沒有其他顏色
紅色代表生存，白色代表死亡
它們的根源在山間，它們就叫映山紅

(Qin & Wu 2015, 321–322)

Thus, in the end, when the landscape of the "superego" sculpted by cultural experience, to use Freudian jargon, turns into ruins, the most real, deeply hidden, and profoundly nostalgic core of one's inner world is revealed. This forces one to go back to the fundamentals of one's existence and the primary

notions of life and death, with bright red azaleas as the vehicle of brilliant memories and the most faithful guardians of life.

Zheng first maximally broadens the poem's space-time by invoking the cultural artifacts of classical landscape poetry, only to gradually narrow it as the poetic narrative progresses, and in the end, spectacularly explode everything that does not belong to the very heart of his individual subjectivity and humanness; to that core which, like the earth's core, lies below the layer of liquid fire and evinces little or no plasticity. No one has ever managed to reach the earth's core, and hypotheses about its physical qualities are drawn from analyses of the seismic waves it sends into other layers that conduct the waves and partly shape (or distort) their patterns. Similarly, the culturally shaped layer of one's self allows others to hypothesise about the innermost core of an individual's world and allows this inner world to express itself in an intersubjectively comprehensible, partly conventionalised way, but always at the risk of a certain degree of imprecision or distortion.

To minimise this imprecision, many authors add a metalevel to their poems; that is, an additional (self-)commentary spelling out the differences between the poet whose work they employ as a matrix for their reflection and an account of their peculiar circumstances, which often produces strong emotional and rhetorical effects. This is demonstrated, for instance, by Li Yongpu's 李永普 poem *Ye du Dongpo* 夜讀東坡 (Reading Dongpo at Night), which constitutes an extensive intertextual dialogue with Su Dongpo's 蘇東坡 poem *Nian nu jiao. Chibi huaigu* 念奴嬌·赤壁懷古 (*Nian Nu Jiao*: Nostalgic Thoughts at Red Cliff), and Wu Niaoniao's 烏鳥鳥 *Qin'ai de, ci ke wo hunshen dou zai pinming de xiangzhe ni kuangxiangqu* 親愛的，此刻我渾身都在拼命地想著你狂想曲 (Beloved, My Entire Body is Missing You: A Rhapsody) dedicated to the author's wife, in which he exploits Li Bai's 李白 *Jing ye si* 靜夜思 (Quiet Night Thoughts), probably the most recognised Chinese poem in the Sinophone and non-Sinophone worlds alike. Whereas Li Yongpu consistently filters his life story through Su Dongpo's exquisite, metaphysical narrative, trying thus to free himself from the material confines of his precarious existence, Wu Niaoniao appears to be blaming Li Bai for creating what we may perceive as an abstract aristocratic abyss that looks like a spiritual luxury to people doomed to everyday struggle, for giving a poetic promise of existential depth where there is only numb, tediously tangible, down-to-earth pain and fear, or at least for profoundly misunderstanding what real suffering is. While Li Yongpu makes active efforts to inscribe his personal story into the tradition that underlies his cultural community and hence remain a full-fledged member of that community, Wu Niaoniao laments his fate and the fact of being jettisoned from his community onto an unknown land indescribable within the sacrosanct language which institutions developed by that community taught him.

Referring to Li Bai's image of bright moonlight spread in front of the bed, which evokes nostalgic sentiments in the lyrical subject, Wu Niaoniao complains:

> In front of the bed of humankind, there is no bright moonlight
> you fear the dark, you are alone
> full of nerves in the native village where there's no me
> and I am alone in a foreign place where there's no you
> like a cactus in the Sahara

my body covered with thorns of thought
At this moment, I'm sitting on the bed with no moonlight in front of it
and each thorn on my body desperately longs for you
Beloved! Thousands of miles away from me, do you feel
your body all itching
from my thinking

人間的床前沒有月的光
你害怕黑，你獨自在
沒有我的故鄉，提著心吊著膽
而我獨自在，沒有你的異鄉
就像一顆撒哈拉沙漠的仙人掌
渾身長滿了思念的刺
此刻，我坐在沒有月光的床上
我身上的每一根刺都在拼命地想著你
親愛的！此刻千里之外的你
是否會因我的思念
而感到渾身發癢

(Qin & Wu 2015, 323–324)

Although he must be familiar with Li Bai's complicated life story and longtime banishment and rejection, Wu does not try to develop a personal connection with the ancient master on the emotional or psychological (that is, the purely "human") level by searching for similarities. Instead, he takes Li Bai's work as a negative point of reference, building on the implicit opposition between Li as a legendary figure enjoying a safe place in tradition and privileged access to natural resources of metaphors, on the one hand, and himself as someone deprived of this privilege, on the other hand. This is a rhetorically effective but low-resolution image of the poetry tradition as a construct made from dead monuments rather than a living tissue in which dynamic metabolic processes of transforming existential matter into meaning constantly take place and require the conscious, active effort of every individual "cell" of the collective organism, whether we are speaking of Wu Niaoniao or Li Bai.

Such an effort to remain connected to the organic intergenerational community of poets can be seen in Li Yongpu's poem, which should perhaps be read in a double frame of reference: to Su Dongpo's *Nian Nu Jiao* and well-known modern Taiwan-based poet Yu Guangzhong's 餘光中 *Ye du Dongpo* 夜讀東坡 (Reading Dongpo at Night) with which it shares its title. A hypothesis of possible inspiration drawn from Yu's poem is supported by the fact that Li has been in close relationship with many representatives of the Taiwan poetry scene since the mid-1990s. In 1994, he established a rare connection with the accomplished poet Ya Xian 瘂弦, who was born in the same Dengzhou 鄧州 city in Nanyang prefecture in Henan. Ya Xian highly valued his work and encouraged Li to continue his

poetic endeavours, offering to arrange publication in Taiwan. In 1995, the editor-in-chief of *Hualian Qingnian* 花蓮青年 (*Hualian Youth*), Lin Wendong 林文棟, having received a selection of his poetry, praised him with the following words: "Sir, your works are imbued with a strong sense of this great era and emotional attachment to the loess land. Residing at the intersection of the Baihe River and the Han River, you've inherited the literary styles of Du Shaoling [Du Fu] and Meng Xiangyang [Meng Haoran 孟浩然], which is truly breathtaking." (先生作品頗具大時代氣息和黃土地情感。先生居白河漢水之交，秉承杜少陵與孟襄陽之大家文氣，令人歎為觀止).[7] Having had his poetic identity and ability confirmed by acknowledged authors early on, Li Yongpu does not doubt his being part of the great community of poets, even though his life experience is not one most immediately associated with poets. Pressed by circumstances due to the difficult material situation of his family, he had to drop out of school at fifteen and started learning furniture making from his neighbour instead. Soon, he left his native village and for more than three decades was doing various jobs in brickfields, coal pits, on construction sites, and elsewhere, in Xinjiang, Hubei, Shaanxi, and Gansu provinces. Never married himself, after the premature death of his brother and the disappearance of his sister-in-law, who could not face the reality of single motherhood, he had their two small children to support. At the same time, he continued cultural education on his own, reading extensively in classical and modern poetry alike, and begun to publish in numerous journals and magazines in mainland China and Taiwan.

In the poem in question, on the one hand, Li presents Su Dongpo as a legendary figure, a god of poetry to whose pen all elements naturally submit. On the other, he also carefully reconstructs the "earthly" circumstances in which the original *Nian Nu Jiao* was written, including its complex psychological context: Su Dongpo, slandered literary genius and patriot who was convicted and exiled after the infamous Crow Terrace Poetry Trial for his supposedly treacherous writings, visits the site of the great battle of the Red Cliff. Recreating historical detail and dwelling on the fates of heroes from the era of the Three Kingdoms, similarly to Yu Guangzhong, Li Yongpu ponders what he sees as his own existential and artistic failure. In his high-resolution reading of tradition, he recognises that the classical masterpiece is not a monolith but a complex texture in which the individual experience of the now-mythologised author is intertwined with intertextual references to earlier works and myths. Moreover, just like Su Dongpo, whose writing gives new dynamics to old images, Li considers himself not merely a recipient or a reader of Su's verse but also a (or *the*) source from which the ancient poem draws energy for its vivid afterlife in the modern world. The first, longer, part of his work reads:

> Because it's a spirit journey / the Great River you've so effortlessly brought in
> paper is its basin / I am the source
> on my mattress on the floor I drift to the Northern Song / or even Eastern Wu
> in the light of a flickering lamp as faint as the ancient moon
> rising in the mirror of water / there is always only one moon in the river
> washed in a cup of wine and wavering
> in the wind the colour of your hair / testifies that starlight and moonlight are your homeland

[7] The information comes from Li Yongpu's blog post in which he collects excerpts from various publications about himself: https://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4db25e590102vuiy.html.

westward from the former fortress that emerged out of floating catkins
the precious land where Zhou Yu fought a ferocious battle in the Three Kingdoms era
and the origin of your brilliant pen which makes dragons fly and phoenixes dance
At this moment / tumbled rocks have a reason to return to your side
embrace your body sky-piercing sheer cliffs
terrifying waves hit million-year rock walls
and a multilayered fierce snow
from one sheet of tissue paper / return
to the very heart of the undeserved banishment of the vice-chief of the Huangzhou armed militia
recalling the old dream of a high position in the capital
heroic talented with a feather fan in hand silk hat on head
rather than passing judgment over the coffins of heroes in the glow of ladies
take a step back in order to move forward / use another kind of height
another ancient flow of brilliance / to push aside / open the metaphor of the Great River flowing eastward

因為是神遊 / 你順手牽來的大江
紙為流域 / 我是源頭
地鋪之上漂泊北宋 / 甚至東吳
燈光很容易恍惚到故國明月的亮度
空明升起 江月從來只有一輪
在一杯濁酒裡浸泡且搖晃
你風中的發色 / 確認星光和月光為故鄉
蕩蕩飛絮抽出的故壘西邊
可以是三國周郎風水寶地
也可是你生花妙筆龍飛鳳舞的來歷
此刻 / 亂石有理由回到你身邊
抱緊身體 / 穿空壁立
驚濤除了拍擊億萬年的岩岸
還有千堆萬堆狂雪
由一頁綿紙之上 / 回到黃州團練副使橫遭貶謫的內心
召回冠蓋京華的青雲舊夢
雄姿英發 / 羽扇綸巾
與其為美人光照的英雄蓋棺定論
毋寧以退為進 / 以另一種高度
另一種千古風流 / 推開大江東去的隱喻

(Qin & Wu 2015, 169)

The ambiguous final lines of the excerpt reverberate with the belief that tradition should not be the contemplation of hermetically closed coffins—or the worship of ashes—but something that allows us to move forward, a reservoir of fire and wisdom that helps one access new dimensions of things and events and add new layers to metaphors, as Zheng Dong, for one, did in the above-discussed poem *Dujuanhua*. The metaphor whose semantics Su Dongpo's work expands, and which Li's poem solemnly takes up, is *Da jiang dong qu* 大江東去 (lit. "the Great River flows to the east"), meaning that history always moves forward, just as the Yangtze River always flows eastward to the sea. The phrase *tui kai* 推開 he uses may signify both to open something up by pushing, for example a window or a door, and to push something aside to make space or unblock the passage, in this case, presumably to dispense with metaphorical meanings and directly access the object as such. Either way, however, the expression suggests the desire to grasp the hard core of the ancient image and build one's narrative around it.

In the shorter second part, Li Yongpu speaks first of Su Dongpo's monopolisation of the metaphor, similar to Li Bai's purported monopolisation of the moon in Wu Niaoniao's *Qin'ai de*—leaving little space for others to add anything to it. And yet, in the final lines, he enriches the image of the Great River with one more stratum, invoking Su Dongpo, as Su invoked those who had come before him in the context of his own everyday battles. Thus, he reiterates the dynamic pattern of meaning-creating and sense-making present in Su's highly intertextual poem, reconfirming his desire to remain an organic part of the growing body of tradition.

> and thus a great river became conquered by you
> and monopolised forever
> I think my travelling in spirit is not enough
> supporting myself with your restless inexhaustible talent / looking for a way to live the romantic poetic life
> a rural construction worker ant reading at night
> can at best take the walls of the construction site / for the Red Cliff
>
> 一條大江就這樣被你獨佔了
> 並且永遠獨佔下去
> 我想我僅有神遊是不夠的
> 借你浪淘不盡的才情 / 尋求一世風流的依據
> 工棚夜讀的建築民工螞蟻
> 只能把工地大牆，當成赤壁
>
> (Qin & Wu 2015, 169)

Some may consider the final contrastive comparison strained or overly dramatised. Still, I would argue that it bespeaks a precious (wishful?) intuition of tradition as radical homeness: not a repository of pompous, theatrical props but a space in which everybody feels safe and accepted as they are, where

they do not have to pretend anything, and where they may bring in all their joys, sorrows, concerns, hopes, ambitions, successes, failures, and disappointments unadorned, unedited, uncensored, and without the fear of rejection.

In light of the above, a noteworthy example is the work of a representative of the younger generation of dagong poets: Zeng Jiqiang 曾繼強. Zeng is the author of a twelve-poem series titled *Shiren, huo yingxiong* 詩人，或英雄 (*Poet, or Hero*), in which he paints an abstract image of the poet as an inheritor and somewhat quixotic guardian of traditional ethical and aesthetic values; the last three poems in the cycle are addressed to Li Bai, Du Fu, and Qu Yuan 屈原, respectively. The text that drew my attention, however, resonates with traditional poetics, perhaps unintentionally but very powerfully, on a different plane; namely, it speaks to its very conceptual and ethical core. Titled *Wo zheli jianda yi xie shige de gutou* 我在這裡揀搭一些詩歌的骨頭 (Here I Gather Up Poetry's Bones), it recalls the notion of *fenggu* 風骨, literally "wind and bones," whose translatability into English is widely questioned,[8] sometimes considered equivalent to and used interchangeably with *shigu* 詩骨 (poetry bones). Long present in classical poetics, the notion was first theorised in the fifth century by Liu Xie 劉勰 in the treatise *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) and has since been particularly strongly emphasised in discussions of poetry of the Jian'an period (196–220),[9] but not only there. In Liu's not entirely consistent definition, by and large, *feng* (wind) stands for poetry's *qi* 氣[10] and its affective and pedagogical power, whereas *gu* (bones) refers to a concept or a higher meaning which the verse wants to convey. In literary discourse, "poetry bones" are sometimes also contrasted with *shiyan* 詩眼 (poetry eye), with *yan* meaning personal, emotional content, and *gu* a kind of extract that best embodies the universal, intersubjectively essential core of the poem, technically obtained by singling out one semantically central character from each line and putting all so selected characters together.[11] Last but not least, it sometimes refers to a particular author, Chen Zi'ang 陳子昂 (661–702), known for his noble bearing and the high moral standards conveyed in his writing.

Wo zheli jianda yi xie shige de gutou reflects on the possibility and peculiarity of poetry in industrial zones as opposed to the much more lyrical landscapes in which many well-known poets have produced their works. In the eyes of the I-speaker, the bare-bones verses, stripped of delicious lyrical meat and scattered all around by the wind, are not only not inferior but, in many ways, more desirable. They are believed to be more nutritious and durable than the flesh that rots quickly unless stored safely in the fridge or, in this case, a morgue, given that the poem associates the lyrical flesh with dead verse and bones with life. The text, in Eleanor Goodman's rendition, reads:

> Poetry's flesh has been eaten away
> chewed up by pedantic poets

[8] For a critical examination of various translations of the term *shigu*, see Dai 2021.

[9] See, e.g., Wu Xing 2019; Zhang Xiaohu 1981; Liao Zhiwu & Liao Jinzhi 2014.

[10] For more on the understanding and role of *qi* in literature, see, e.g., Xiong 2000.

[11] For practical examples, see He Xin 2017.

who use sharp teeth to rip it to shreds
those bones of poetry, these cold leftovers
bones that even dogs won't get their noses near
have been tossed into the industrial areas, tossed into the mechanical roar of the factories
thrown into dim workshops, thrown onto assembly lines
thrown onto the machines, in the midst of helplessness and suffering
no one wants to pick up these stripped bones
"Oh, the great so-and-so . . ."—the flesh of romantic
poetry! The fresh tender flesh of poetry
smells worse than rotting meat, it isn't for me
it's only good for bloodthirsty ants or for flies.
I peel away the flesh of that poetry
I only want the bones
I want to take wage disputes and backpay, black brick kilns, gas explosions
severed fingers, death, and make it seep into the bare bones. These
abandoned bones are more significant than flesh
none of them know that the calcium in bones
is more nutritious than flesh, more valuable
they don't know that what rots first is the flesh
and what remains is the bones
(Qin Xiaoyu 2016, 192)

Although Zeng Jiqiang does not pair bones with "wind" or "eye" and uses the contrasting image of flesh instead, he conceivably has a roughly similar set of aesthetic-philosophical "bony" ideas in mind as did the ancient theorists and practitioners of classical verse: simple but solid language structures supporting plain imagery and rhetoric that produces an electrifying effect on readers, allowing them to absorb the very essence of reality through poetry. There is also a moral aspect to his work: the social responsibility of the poet, the righteous one, who speaks for the oppressed and suppressed, writes of things that others do not (want to) see, in this case, "wage disputes and backpay, black brick kilns, gas explosions / severed fingers, death." But what seems to be quite significant is that he does not speak of violently sucking out the marrow and stuffing empty poetry bones with all those things that belong to the bleak landscape of his everyday existence, as my imagination initially suggested after reading the passage in question. Instead, he wants to soak the bones, together with the marrow, to season them with industrial life so they can keep all their inherent qualities but acquire the specific bitter taste of workers' fate. At the same time, the unpoetic, watery surroundings "cooked" with poetry bones turn into a more filling and invigorating "broth" that helps people survive difficult circumstances.

From Zeng's oeuvre, in which dialogues with tradition constitute an essential source of artistic energy and inspiration, we can see how certain traditional notions and conceptual models and practices of poetry writing, if applied reasonably, may be assimilated in individual poetics and subsequently strengthen the tissue of modern poetry at large. We also see how this poetry, in turn, consistently tries

to heal the tissue of modern life itself. Although, of course, one must be careful not to choke on the bones. Used in overabundance and recklessly thrown into each dish without warning, they may suffocate poetry and the society that consumes it, as in the following example from literary-critical discourse. In May 2019, *Guangming Ribao* 光明日報, a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in a newly created column that aims to align poetry production with Party politics called *Wenyi guan chao. Chuangzuo wukui yu xin shidai de shige* 文藝觀潮·創作無愧於新時代的詩歌 (Observing Trends in Arts: Creating Poetry Worthy of the New Era), published an article by Luo Xiaofeng 羅小鳳 titled *Xin shidai shige xuyao Zhongguo fenggu* 新時代詩歌需要中國風骨 (Poetry of the New Era Needs Chinese *Fenggu*). The author lambasts all contemporary poetry schools, styles, poetics, and their representatives—sparing, of course, several pro-Party poets, such as Jidi Majia 吉狄馬加, also a prominent state official—pointing out the lack of true Chineseness and "boneness" in their verses; that is, the commitment to the public and collective dimensions of life (the so-called *dawo* 大我 or "big I") rather than to subjective feelings and concerns (*xiaowo* 小我, "small I"). Among the many anti-role models, he named Yu Jian 於堅, which may be surprising given how much Yu has done to turn poetry back to its roots and restore its premodern condition. Instead of offering a constructive discussion that would itself embody the noble concept of *fenggu*, Luo treats his audiences to poisonous criticism, prudishly and patronisingly disguised as concern:

> If *fenggu* is to be inherited and glorified, first and foremost, poets ought to evince *fenggu*. To put it more precisely, this means poets should have a sense of mission and responsibility. The ancient saying has it: "Poetry is the heart of the universe." Poets, as creators of the heart of the universe, should cherish this heart. But today, many poets indulge in writing about the petty and trivial everyday matters of the "small I"; they lack broader feelings and horizons, focusing instead on publishing, releasing, rising to fame, or attracting attention, clicks, and followers. This lack of mission and responsibility should be blamed for the serial production of tasteless and worthless works.
>
> 繼承與發揚風骨的關鍵在於詩人要有風骨，具體而言則是指詩人應秉持使命感與責任心。古語雲："詩者，天地之心。"詩人作為"天地之心"的創造者本應懷有"天地之心"。但當下很多詩人都沉溺于寫"小我"的日常瑣碎、雞毛蒜皮，缺少大情懷大境界，更有甚者為出版、發表、出名或賺取眼球、點擊量、關注度，批量生產媚俗之作，究其原因就在於缺乏作為詩人的使命感與責任心。
>
> (Luo 2019, 14)

As long as tradition is absorbed in its natural, homely rhythm and in commonsense quantities, it performs its edifying function. However, when the consumption and reproduction of tradition in society are artificially stimulated or suddenly interrupted by political forces, they lead to pathology. The works of many dagong poets are not free of the detrimental effects of such external (de)regulation of cultural metabolism, mixing degenerated national sentiments, the artificially boosted "cultural self-confidence" (to use Xi Jinping's slogan), with imagery borrowed from classical verse that results in an

awkwardly pathetic outcome. Let me, however, refrain from opening the Pandora's box of examples here, for it would only obscure more subtle and constructive cases of interference between classical and dagong verses, to which we will now turn.

2. Structural resonances and wave propagation

The conception of boneness could hardly be considered specific to Chinese classical culture. A similar imperative of self-restraint is apparent in Western antiquity as well. Zbigniew Herbert beautifully captured it in his poem "Why the Classics" (Dlaczego klasycy), where he invokes Thucydides' scanty, unemotional records of the most dramatic moments of his sea travel, a paragon of discipline and moderate diction. The poem ends with a warning addressed to modern authors:

> if art for its subject
> will have a broken jar
> a small broken soul
> with a great self-pity
>
> what will remain after us
> will be like lovers' weeping
> in a small dirty hotel
> when wall-paper dawns
>
> *Translated by Peter Dale Scott and Czesław Milosz*
> (Herbert 1998)

However, in the Western variant of the decorum principle, lyrical poetry was, from the start, exempted from this imperative and reserved for topics that did not require a universalist perspective. Lyric poems could be frivolous, obscure, hermetic, emotional, dreamy, intimate, teary, quirky, and, to a greater or lesser extent, basically inaccessible or unattractive to the general audience. In contrast, the burden of conveying collective identity narratives and values was distributed mainly between the two other major genres: epic and drama. In Chinese (or, more precisely, Han) culture, the genre of the epic, translated into Chinese as *shishi* 史詩 (lit. "historical poetry"), has not developed at all, whereas early drama was a much more performative than literary phenomenon; thus, it is understood explicitly that lyrical poetry—referred to as *shuqingshi* 抒情詩 (lit. "poetry that expresses emotions")—functioned as a universal code of communication across the vast territories of the country and the primary medium of collective memory. This resulted in the emergence of the notion of "poetry-history" or "poetry as history," *shishi* 詩史, which consists of the exact same characters as the Chinese word for epic but in a different order and therefore standing in a different syntactic and semantic relationship to each other. It is history that is poetic (lyrical) and not poetry that is historical; in other words, historical narrative is a dynamic function, a constantly updated net product of poetic/lyrical factors, and not the other way

around: the poetic (epic) narrative paradigm developed in the service of a historical master narrative. The notion of *shishi* 詩史 was first discussed by Tang-dynasty theorist Meng Qi 孟棨 and remains a valid research topic in Chinese and Western academia alike, with particularly revealing English-language contributions made by Stephen Owen and Wang Der-wei.[12]

The oldest lyrical poems in the Chinese language were anonymous and circulated in multiple variants that became partly unified and codified with the compilation of the first written anthology, the *Shijing*. This collection has since generated discussions on origin, originality, and authorship that in Western discourse has mainly revolved around epics and their collective or semi-legendary authors (e.g., Homer or, later and (in)famously, Ossian). Only relatively late did Chinese lyrical poems start taking a more personal shape. The motifs from the reservoir of cultural imagery were consciously reconfigured, recontextualised, and subordinated to particular artistic conceptions by poets whose names have been preserved to the present day, starting with Qu Yuan. A certain degree of liberty had always been permitted—otherwise, poetry would not have progressed—but the texts, however inventive, generally had to remain decodable using the accessible interpretative tools; the demo versions of these tools, so to speak, were available to everybody, while more advanced applications were religiously mastered by intellectuals preparing for traditional imperial examinations. As Haosheng Yang noted, "classical-style poetry evokes a deep sense of empathy with the audience's shared cultural experience. This is the psychological ground upon which classical-style poetry has been built" (Yang 2016, 28).

In premodern Europe, influenced by Greek antiquity, lyrical poetry was frequently meant to challenge, provoke, impress, or surprise readers. In contrast, shared beliefs and values were transmitted chiefly through storytelling in epics and dramas that were usually centred on big questions of humankind and easily recognisable archetypal motifs such as the world's creation, the battle between good and evil, war, the journey, and so on. Throughout the centuries, it has often been the case that the lyrical force in poetry purposely countered and dismantled what it saw as the tyranny of the epic element that even today still fuels Western grand narratives. Chinese poetry, contrariwise, born in lyrical dispersion, has shown a noticeable, if vague and not perfectly consistent, tendency toward consolidation into a strong, culturally distinct whole, prompted by a centralised education system and ever more efficient communication within the borders of the empire, yet without serious attempts at forced unification of poetic language and style. Instead, authors and their more and less professional readers would rely on the pervasive "lyricized consciousness of time" that naturally "traverses historical temporalities and reveals the cosmic magnitude of the poetic mind," as Wang Der-wei put it in his groundbreaking monograph *The Lyrical in Epic Time* (2015), recapitulating a prominent philosophy of lyricism developed by Chen Shih-hsiang 陳世驤 (1912–1971) (Wang 2015, 15). Early modern reformers of Chinese literature, as Wang convincingly demonstrates, understood the importance of lyricism as a kind of safety buffer against the emerging totalising historiosophies of nationalism, communism, and foreign liberalism. Although their definition of lyrical poetry from very early on started evolving toward grandiose Western Romantic conceptions of lyricism, they seem not to have considered an epic revolution a rational way to connect or compete with the West.

[12] See Wang's reconstruction of the discussion in Wang 2015, 9–10.

However, roughly since the end of the Cultural Revolution, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the trend of authoritative consolidation of the lyrical into the epic has notably accelerated and begun to materialise, sometimes in hugely problematic ways. Authors who identified the absence of the epic genre and, more broadly, the epic consciousness as the cause of the putative weakness of Chinese culture in its confrontation with the West have been undertaking good-faith experimental attempts to create a national epic as a solid scaffolding for cultural identity. The best-known case is Haizi 海子 with his monumental but never completed epic *Taiyang* 太陽 (*The Sun*), which was supposed to ensure him a place among the "kings" (*wang* 王) of poetry such as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe. Their work, he believed, was anchored in the primordial collective consciousness of the nation before the individuation, and thus also significant emasculation, of subjective (or lyrical) consciousness began. Influenced on the one hand by Western Romantic and modernist philosophy and on the other by the roots-seeking trend among the Chinese literary avant-garde of the 1970s and 1980s, Haizi pushed the "macroscopic imagery" and "sublime figure" to the point where the "'epic' representational system" (cf. Wang 2015, xii) could not but collapse under its own weight. A fascinating case among living authors is Yin Xiaoyuan 殷曉媛, founder of the Encyclopedic Poetry School (*Baike shipai* 百科詩派), who considers herself the first female epicist. Her obscure speculative works combine imagery borrowed from different disciplines, particularly the natural sciences, with ancient myths and beliefs, and are explicitly meant to structurally revolutionise Chinese and world poetry. There has also been a growing interest in epics created by ethnic minorities, regularly appropriated to serve the dominant mainstream (read Han-centric) narrative of nationhood.[13] In recent years, the word "epic" most frequently returns in a metaphorical sense, in Xi Jinping's political rhetoric, to refer to the last century in China's history, since the establishment of the CCP, as a "grand epic poem" (*huihong de shishi* 恢宏的史詩) of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people (*Zhongguo minzu weida fuxing* 中國民族偉大復興), and "literary workers" (*wenxue gongzuozhe* 文學工作者) are encouraged to give it a textual form, expressing the official identity narrative in works that will be comparable to the most accomplished Western epics (Zhang Pengyu 2021). But, again, all these efforts do not seem to have any rooting in the Chinese poetry tradition and could hardly be aligned with the ontological mode that has prevailed in it for millennia. They constitute attempts to redefine the trajectory of the development of Chinese culture, remoulding Chineseness according to a particular vision of the author and creating a strong alternative pattern of literary expression that will legitimise these claims. In this regard—that is, the faithfulness to the lyrical paradigm of poetry(-as-)history as opposed to the epic paradigm of poetry-for-history or history-through-poetry—I venture that dagong verse is one of the most unstrained and unconstrained consistent continuations of Chinese literary tradition. In workers' poems, its burning undercurrents move closer to the surface than in most contemporary poetry productions and sometimes indeed break the thin, still-fresh layer of modern language spreading freely in workers' writings and beyond.

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[13] See, for instance, *Zhongguo shishi* 中国史诗 (*Chinese Epic*, 2017), edited by Renqindaoji'er 仁钦道吉尔 and Lang Ying 郎樱, which includes the content and discussion of three epic poems of national minorities: Tibetan, Kazakh, and Mongolian. The *Baidu* 百度 encyclopedia explains the term *Zhongguo shishi* 中国史诗 as a "collective word for three big epic poems of national minorities" (https://baike.baidu.com/item/中国史诗/11047269).

Before substantiating my thesis and analysing the texts of individual authors, let me illustrate the above distinction between the (Western) epic-toward-the-lyrical and the (Chinese) lyrical-toward-the-epic ontological modes of poetry, using the example of the major theme of migration, and simultaneously looking at this theme of migration (of particular importance to dagong poetry) from a new, lyrical angle. Keywords such as "journey", "way", and "travel" make many European poetry readers think primarily of Homer's *The Odyssey* and the protagonist's transformative journey home after the Trojan War, which significantly influenced the symbolism of travel in the Hellenic and post-Hellenic world, including in Latin literature, for the millennia that ensued. The same foundational topos, which in Europe was developed in the form of the master narrative conveyed by an epic poem offering a universal proto-metaphor for various individual experiences of displacement— including space travel, to recall the famous novels by Arthur C. Clarke and the Stanley Kubrick film *2001: A Space Odyssey*—is broken down in classical Chinese poetry into myriad parts of dispersed lyrical voices that narrate this experience from different contrapuntal perspectives, creating a polyphonous but surprisingly well-orchestrated and equally, if not more, pervasive whole. They constitute a *sui generis* accumulative, hypertextual epic, an open-ended, multimodal Odyssey that begins to emerge in vague form from the loosely interconnected texts when one looks at Chinese lyrical tradition from a certain distance.

Two perspectives on Chinese lyrical poetry

Staying for a while in the Clarke/Kubrick climate, the rough trajectory of the development of Chinese poetry from the lyrical toward the epical is presented compellingly by Li Hongwei in his 2017 sci-fi novel *Guowang yu shuqingshi*, which problematises certain tendencies in contemporary verse by extrapolating them into a near future: to the year 2050, when Chinese poetry fulfills its longtime ambitions to seamlessly "connect with the West" (*jiegui* 接軌). Its leading representative, Yuwen Wanghu 宇文往戶, is awarded the Nobel Prize, which certifies, among other things, his successfully conforming to the Western mode of literary production and reception. I have analysed the novel in detail elsewhere (Krenz 2021), but let me offer a summary, focusing on one of the many threads which is relevant to the present study, namely the role of the epic.

The night before the Nobel Prize ceremony, the newly elected poet laureate commits suicide, having realised that all his literary career and his entire oeuvre—including his magnum opus titled *Dada qishi* 韃韃騎士 (*Knight Dada*), which skyrocketed him to fame—had been predesigned by the King. This latter is the technocratic ruler of the virtual Empire the citizens of which are connected to the so-called Community of Consciousness (*Yishi Gongtongti* 意識共同體) via "crystals of consciousness" (*yishi jingti* 意識晶體) voluntarily installed in their brains. Yuwen's young friend, librarian Li Pulei 黎普雷, who launches an investigation into the poet's death, makes an intuitive assumption that the protagonist of *Dada qishi*—an ancient Chinese Odysseus carried away by the River of Time (*Shijian zhi he* 時間之河) who desperately tries to return to his era and native village where his lover awaits him—is an alter ego of Yuwen himself. Thus, with a copy of *Dada qishi* and Yuwen's Nobel lecture draft in hand, the self-appointed detective embarks on a textual journey to the roots of Chinese culture. Examining the dozens of classics, individual poetics, and theoretical treatises listed in Yuwen's notes (including

the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 ancient dictionary, the *Shijing*, Qu Yuan, Yu Jian, and, surprisingly, Isaac Asimov), Li gradually reconstructs the primordial communitarian paradigm of Chinese poetry as an expression of the collective mind of prehistorical societies. This paradigm is embodied in the famously untranslatable phrase *shi yan zhi* 詩言志,[14] regarded as the core of the Chinese idea of the lyrical whose complex meaning and philosophical implications Pulei patiently decodes. Subsequently, in a way similar to Haizi in his theoretical essay *Shixue: yi fen tigang* 詩學：一份提綱 (*Poetics: A Draft*), Li goes on to analyse the individuation of the self: the gradual deconstruction of the collective mind in favour of individual subjectivities. Yuwen, like the knight errant of his epic, driven by Romantic nostalgia and utopian ideals, had tried to restore this paradigm and codify and perpetuate it in the form of a strong, authoritative narrative that approximated the construction of what Western literature knows as the epic, as a secure frame that will guarantee further free development of lyrical verse. At the same time, Li establishes that Yuwen had also tried to put the said paradigm into (social-political) practice and did so in a way that raised ethical questions. The investigation reveals that it was Yuwen's idea that had given rise to the Community of Consciousness in the first place. His former friend, the King, had readily taken up the concept, and Yuwen soon lost all control of the project, becoming its first victim. His monumental epic undertaking turned out to have marked not the rejuvenation but the slow death of Chinese poetry, and perhaps Chinese society as well.

There is no way, Li Hongwei suggests, to enforce unity in epic terms upon poetry that is essentially lyrical, and in fact, all epic enterprises, for all the good intentions of their authors, carry the seeds of totalitarianism. The epic narrative is bound to remain a vague and elusive common telos that, as time passes, harmonises vectors of different lyricisms in the cultural universe, —yet it should never be forcibly materialised. Once this happens, the universe collapses. Put differently, the epic is a moving horizon of the lyrical. Pinned down, fixed, and reinforced by concrete narrative, it turns into a fence, an insurmountable wall or barrier beyond which poetry can no longer develop unless a new cultural production paradigm is invented to resolve this dualism. This is, in Li Hongwei's book, a task for Li Pulei, a humble librarian with no experience in writing poetry, who, in the final scene of the novel, after the collapse of the old poetry universe, encounters both Yuwen Wanghu and the King, reconciled in their virtual afterlives, and is asked by them to take over the throne of the Empire. But, as we shall see, this is also a task to which one dagong poet tacitly aspires and not without some chance of success.

Li Hongwei's observations concur with the ontological model of the Chinese lyrical poetry tradition that emerges from Michael Hunter's monograph *The Poetics of Early Chinese Thought*, which demonstrates how the conditions of early Chinese society, in particular its highest strata—military officers and officials-cum-intellectuals—translates into its poetry, on both narrative and structural levels, in conceptual and metaphorical dimensions, and how deeply this phenomenon resonates in all premodern culture. Through an extensive analysis of texts from the *Shijing*, in their different variants and from different angles, Hunter models the peculiar kinetics displayed by the earliest Chinese anthologised poems and which presumably dates back further to the past and permeates the nascent

[14] For a discussion of the meaning and possible translations of this phrase, see, e.g., Owen 1982; Legge 1971; Liu 1975.

script culture.[15] The *Shijing*'s lyricism is, to a significant extent, shaped by the tension between the emotional attachment to one's native place and family that constantly pulls one back — which Hunter associates with "the obsession with a particular movement amid the symphony of motion: gui 歸, literally 'to return' or 'to go/come home'" (Hunter 2021, 24–25) — and the sense of obligation and loyalty toward the ruler and entire homeland that often implies the imperative of travelling great distances with the army or relocating to distant official posts. This tension generates the existential experience of *you* 憂 (anxiety), which plays an important role in the generally undesirable and always painful individuation of the subject from the community, so distant from the vision of active emancipation central to Western lyricism (ibidem).

The dynamic reflected in the *Shijing* also plays out in the second great anthology of Chinese verse, the *Chuci* 楚辭 (*The Verses of Chu*), which is usually read in opposition to its antecedent, as a rupture rather than a continuation of the tradition that emerges from the first collection. In many ways, *Chuci* follows essentially the same general pattern as the *Shijing*, with one crucial difference: the lyrical subject of the anthology's "flagship poem", *Lisao* 離騷 (Encountering Sorrow), commonly identified with Qu Yuan, in the end makes a choice — committing suicide — that would not be possible within the purely communitarian paradigm of the *Shijing* underlain by the assumption of the nobility of the ruler, which can no longer be upheld in the disenchanted world of the *Chuci*. This decision, however, can barely be considered a manifestation of his pride or moral superiority, as Qu's lore has it. Rather, he was a person who had exhausted all available paths of return and all available means of (self-)expression developed by the communitarian culture. In other words,

> [He] was a locus of thinking about the limits of the Shi worldview. What if, like Qu Yuan, a person can't fulfill his sincere desire to gui à la the Shi? What happens when return becomes impossible? [. . .] Are such figures obligated to cling to the center, as they do in the Shi? Do they have the power and moral license to leave? And if they do, what is the value of a life lived beyond the margins? Or is suicide the only answer?
>
> (Hunter 2021, 186–187)

In the *Lisao*, on his textual avatar, Qu Yuan tested all existing archetypal roles he might have potentially assumed, including a self-sufficient, aloof, and rebellious Hero, and failed in all. He died not *for* but *despite* poetry, which did not satisfy his existential needs, particularly the need to reconnect with the community as the foundation for self-identification. If there is still a spark of hope in him, then it is a belief in the reunion in a higher dimension of existence: return to the Source of everything, including the community itself. When ascending to heaven, the Hero still turns his head and looks back at what he is leaving behind. His secret wish becomes posthumously fulfilled: he is returned to the community through literature, and his ghost haunts it to the present day, co-shaping its ever more complex identity narratives.

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[15] I thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the fact that the *Shijing* is indeed not the first and certainly not the only source in which the motif of "return" featured prominently.

There are reasons to believe that the very notion of Dao 道 central to the Chinese cosmology, often translated as "the Way", at least in certain contexts, initially meant a way back or home, as Hunter suggests based on several excerpts from *Laozi* 老子. An interesting implication of such an understanding of the Way is, among other things, the perception of the human body as a medium of *gui* toward the s/Source of one's identity and any damage or mutilation of the body as an obstacle that disables the return. On the one hand, keeping one's body healthy and in one piece constitutes a crucial aspect of the critical virtue known as *xiao* 孝 (filial piety) in the Confucian tradition. On the other hand, all actions, including punishments, that affect the integrity of another person's body are considered particularly cruel and inhuman, as they make it impossible for them to return to the Home of being. In the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*), Sima Qian 司馬遷 quotes an edict issued by Emperor Wen, in which it is explicitly said that "punishment that extends to the severing of limbs and the carving of skin, for which there is no respite until death, is unjustifiably cruel and inimical to virtue" (ibidem, 128–129).

Dagong poetry as a continuation of the post-shi lyrical tradition

Taking a quick bird's-eye view of the dagong poetry scene, we can see how all these topics that shaped the poetics of *shi* verse and the successively accumulating lyrical tradition that crystallised around it resonate and become further complicated in the migrant workers' texts. While the authors discussed in part one of the essay remain, by and large, within the *shi* paradigm, in those to whom we will turn now, one can observe the gradual, initially inconspicuous, and rather involuntary, but deeply consequential shift toward the *ci* paradigm.

Homesickness is the most obvious of these shared *Shijing*-specific themes in both groups of poets, and it would be difficult to identify an author who has not written at least one poem in which nostalgia for their native place reverberates. In most of these poems, as in the *Shijing*, this nostalgia is countered by the sense of obligation. In some cases it stems from the loyalty to the father-ruler — that is, the president or the CCP — or a sense of participating in building the nation's glorious future and securing its position in the world. More often, however, it is an obligation toward the family the author has to support. Therefore, we might say, unlike in most early *shi*, home is the primary source of both centripetal and centrifugal forces in the dagong (uni)verse. And the main object of anxiety. Thus, the individuation of the subject (the "small I") from the community (the "big I") takes place within a relatively tight and internally tangled social and conceptual framework. Tensions that mark individual existence are not cushioned by great ideals on the one hand or by soothing natural landscapes (as in classical verse) on the other. Whereas in the *Shijing* and the traditional philosophical thought it influenced, the cosmic movement and dynamic of the individual life are described by the central metaphor of flowing water, as Hunter argues following Sarah Allan (ibidem, 137), in dagong poetry, they are often represented by the industrial image of the "flowing water line," a literal translation of *liushuixian* 流水線, meaning a conveyor belt or assembly line. The poetry of the floating population flows on the sourceless rivers of conveyor belts, as in Xu Lizhi's poem *Liushuixian shang de Bingmayong* 流水線上的兵馬俑 (Terracotta Army on the Assembly Line), where the author lists his coworkers as toy

warriors in the service of an anonymous tyrant compared, though indirectly, to the first emperor Qin Shihuang 秦始皇:

Along the line stands
Xia Qiu
Zhang Zifeng
Xiao Peng
Li Xiaoding
Tang Xiumeng
Lei Lanjiao
Xu Lizhi
Zhu Zhengwu
Pan Xia
Ran Xuemei
these workers who can't tell night from day
wearing
electrostatic clothes
electrostatic hats
electrostatic shoes
electrostatic gloves
electrostatic bracelets
all at the ready
silently awaiting their orders
when the bell rings
they're sent back to the Qin

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

(Qin Xiaoyu 2016, 196)

The dehumanising monotonous flow of these mechanical "rivers" has little to do with the soothing flow of water in nature. Also, it is regularly disturbed by accidents, including the most common one, fingers being cut off, as mentioned in passing in Zeng Jiqiang's poem and many other works.[16] In the context of the ancient sources cited by Hunter, this bodily mutilation is an obstacle on the way back, be it back to the undisturbed rhythm of family life or the cosmic order of things. Several authors, including Lizi 利子, who uses the phrase as a poem's title, invoke the well-known saying *shi zhi lian xin* 十指連心 in their works. The phrase literally means that ten fingers are connected to the

[16] For instance, Chi Moshu's 池沫树 *Duan zhi, mei you kusheng* 断指，没有哭声 (Finger Cut Off, No Crying) and *Jiejie, wei wo dagong zheng xuefei de shouzhi duan le* 姐姐，为我打工挣学费的手指断了 (A Finger That Worked to Earn My School Fees Was Cut Off, Sister) or Jizhishui's 寂之水 *Liu xue de shouzhi* 流血的手指 (Bleeding Finger), to list a few where a severed finger is a central motif.

heart/mind, that is, all parts and cells of the body are ruled by the heart/mind; in the idiomatic sense, however, it also signifies the close relationship between family members. When one finger is missing, it is as if the relationship with one's home were weakened, becoming somehow flawed, incomplete, and limiting the possibilities of *gui*.

And yet, unlike in the ancient texts, in dagong poetry, no one is directly responsible for the mutilation. It is not self-mutilation nor the harsh punishment of an unfatherly ruler. The agency is diluted: the immediate culprit is a machine to which no moral guilt can be attributed. There is no human agent to be blamed, no one to aim one's anger at. Again, the subject finds themselves trapped in the dense net of tangled threads without beginning and end, suffocating within a gradually narrowing milieu that does not remotely resemble the vast sociomoral landscapes of which authors of *shi* and the ensuing classical works considered themselves to be an integral part. Instead, features of the *ci* poetics become evident. Let me invoke in this place two other contributors from the *Wode shipian* collection in whose work the problems of the migrant poet's subjectivity and identity are raised within this conceptual framework: Tian Xiaoyin and Chen Caifeng 陳才鋒.

Tian Xiaoyin, in his accounts of the migrant worker's fate, emphasises the relationship between the individual "small I" and the collective "big I," touching on the essential conflict that troubled the lyrical subjects of the *Chuci* after the exhaustion of the "homebound" paradigm of *shi*. Before abandoning his native village to begin his "rebellious" wanderings, he carefully designs the way back, using gravestones as milestones. In *Wo bu shi shiren, wo shi wuyue de panni* 我不是詩人，我是五月的叛逆 (I'm Not a Poet, I'm Just a Rebel in May), we read:

> I bend down slowly
> imitating the bent posture of my father tilling the earth
> but my grandfather bent down like this and never got back up
>
> That night the village was dark
> I stood on a peak and looked down on the castles
> then I hung my backpack on the crescent moon's point
> I sprinted the length of the village and the distance to the city
> counting backwards from my grandfather's grave
>
> *Translated by Eleanor Goodman*
> (Qin Xiaoyu 2016, 188)

Yet, soon after leaving his native place, he feels lost and confused, looking desperately at the shreds of poetic lines that were perhaps meant to form a spectacular epic one day but ended up as pitifully mutilated fragments.

> In May, I soldered my crumbling bones together
> in May I began to rebel
> the drawing board's color was mired in mud

hung on one edge was an unfinished line of poetry

Translated by Eleanor Goodman
(Qin Xiaoyu 2016, 188)

The poet himself feels torn apart and suspended between two identities: that of a farmer and that of a worker. In *Wo yong dingzi luosi xuanyi Zhongguo duanban*, he confesses:

In my imagination my two hands clutch the handle of a hoe
tilling the soil the way our forebears did
intimate with the dust, backs piously bent
then finding the time to go north
to Tiananmen, to see the country
feeling the heart, figuring the distance from the countryside to the palace
saying excitedly: I'm a true Chinese farmer

And so I ended up abandoned on the road
with thousands upon thousands of sickly people, the color of mud
when the wind changes direction, I slide through the days on wings
flying south

When the swallow's wings are burnt by electric welding
when the oriole's singing is cut short by the assembly line
when the ant's food is poisoned by coal gas
my eyes have already dimmed
the warmer the place the less love is there

Hah!
I'm not a Chinese worker, and I'm not a farmer
my status is that of a man held in suspense
doing an odd job here and there in the south
tightening screws, pounding nails
this is how we fail our poor children
this is the model of Chinese glory
I define myself as: a poet in suspense
I'm trying to pound nails and screws into the failings
I want to ask: China! Is your body hurting?

Translated by Eleanor Goodman
(Qin Xiaoyu 2016, 189)

Uncomfortably "held in suspense," Tian still tries to "think big" about the country that, as the media constantly remind him, needs his sweat and tears to grow in strength. And yet it somehow does not grow, at least not in the way he would imagine and want it to. Perhaps, instead of building a spacious home for their nation, they, the factory workers, inflict pain on their homeland's body, crucifying it with their nails. Maybe, with their well-meaning work, they are not fixing but preventing the nation from returning to the original Way and achieving balance and harmony.

In Chen Caifeng's poetry, the perspective of the "big I" is almost entirely effaced. The I-speaker finds himself trapped in the narrow space of workers' barracks. In *Liu dian* 留點 (Leave a Bit), Chen speaks of his love and obligation toward his family, two noble ideals that seem to stand in stark conflict with the reality of a modern worker. On the one hand, he wants to share time with his spouse and children, who hardly recognise their father when he comes home each year. On the other, he knows he must abandon them to ensure a decent future for them. He writes of himself as a person thrown as if into a parallel space-time virtually disconnected from the world he came from:

> A middle-aged man drifting far from home
> like a caged animal in the zoo, date of return far off
> often bending fingers to count, and measuring
> the time tied to the [clock's] second hand. I so wish I could bend my back and pick up
> moments detached from me by two thousand miles
>
> 一個游離在外的中年男人
> 如動物園的困獸，歸期遙遙
> 還經常拌著手指，數了，還數
> 綁在秒針上的時間。多想彎腰抬起
> 二千公里以外的時光
>
> (Qin & Wu 2015, 248)

He must cautiously distribute his rare spare time to retain that vestigial connection with all family members and have a place to return to when his wandering ends:

> the stubbornness extended into far distance makes a worker
> cut a long story short: leave a bit for children, leave a bit for the father
> and the remaining bit again divide into two:
> a little bit for the wife, a little bit for oneself
>
> 伸向遠方的倔強，讓一個打工仔
> 長話短說：留一點給孩子，留一點給父親
> 還有一點點，也分成兩點：

一點給愛人，一點給自己

(Qin & Wu 2015, 248)

The reality in which Chen is thrown instead is anything but homely. The factory where he works constitutes a dehumanised microcosm in which the passage of time is governed by the rhythm of the conveyor belt, which turns inorganic and organic (human bodies) matter into commodities and drains the factory of products and the workers of life. In *Shang yeban de ta* 上夜班的她 (She on the Night Shift), he compares this to a little river in a village—perhaps his own or her (the poem's protagonist's) native place—that seems to have turned against the people and empties the place, exhausting instead of nourishing it. Perhaps it, too, started to serve the Leviathan of the state and its carnivorous market.

She on the Night Shift

Twilight hanging on trees
she has to go to work again
assembly line in her hands
turns again and again

She says she's got used that
night is day, day is night
got used to standing at work:
see how it looks, wipe oil stains, clean the cloak, wrap up
Twelve hours non-stop
in her hands, as she turns around
products one by one
from unfinished into finished ones

Overdrawn body repeats the same moves exhausted
just like that. Box by box, pallet by pallet
taken by the appointed people. So much like a little river
emptying a village

上夜班的她

暮色掛樹
她又要上班了
流水線開始在她的手裡
一轉，再轉

她說習慣了
黑夜是白天，白天是黑夜
習慣了站立作業：
看外觀，擦油污，小披風，打包裝
十二小時不間斷的
一個個產品，在她手中
一翻身就成了成品

透支的身體，就這樣
重複著。一箱箱，以踏板一踏板
被固定的人拖走。多像故鄉的小河
把村莊抽空

(Qin & Wu 2015, 246)

In *Zai baichi deng xia* 在白熾燈下 (Under Fluorescent Lights), homesickness, the unfulfillable desire to return, and the pitiless dictatorship of the assembly line that sets the spheres of the concrete microcosm in malicious motion against the workers are all brought together. And, in the end, all are rendered negligible by what the ancients called *you*: an ethically charged notion of anxiety, a fear that testifies to one's sense of loyalty and responsibility.

The rotary files polished by burrs
follow a series of stiff motions
under the fluorescent lights, frantically
seeking out any possible happiness

The plastic molding machine grabs the assembly line by the throat
lets the light play the madman
one by one the dust's hands
ache, go numb, and even malfunctions

are negligible, unremarkable
in the factory, in the clamor of the machines, in the hidden places of light
one place buried under another

It's only the panic implanted into the body, again
oppressed by fear, admonishing oneself:
behind me is my child, my mother, my father

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

(Qin Xiaoyu 2016, 96)

Whereas in the works of poets such as Tian Xiaoyin or Chen Caifeng, for all their dramaticism, there still reverberates the vestigial hope of return and reunion with the community, both the small community of the family and the great community of the nation, which keeps them alive and active, it is also not difficult to find authors who seem to have lost that hope altogether or—less frequently—abandoned the desire to return. Of them, we could ask the same question Hunter asks about Qu Yuan: "Is suicide the only answer?". And if it sometimes really is, shall we allow it to remain the *final* answer?

On 1 October 2014, the day after Xu Lizhi's death, Zhou Qizao 周啟早, a fellow worker at Foxconn, wrote a homage—with emphasis on "hom(e)"—for Xu, titled *Jing wen jiu ling hou qinggong shiren Xu Lizhi zhuilou yougan* 驚聞 90 後青工詩人許立志墜樓有感 (published in English as *Upon Hearing the News of Xu Lizhi's Suicide*), in which we can see how important he considered it to complete his friend's earthly journey, to add its last stage: the return home and reconnection with the local community and the local soil. A stage, we shall add, that has never taken place in reality, for Xu's ashes were scattered in the sea by his brother, who could not transport the urn from Shenzhen to their native Jieyang 揭陽.

Upon Hearing the News of Xu Lizhi's Suicide

The loss of every life
Is the passing of another me
Another screw comes loose
Another migrant worker brother jumps
You die in place of me
And I keep writing in place of you
While I do so, screwing the screws tighter
Today is our nation's sixty-fifth birthday
We wish the country joyous celebrations
A twenty-four-year-old you stands in the grey picture frame, smiling ever so slightly
Autumn winds and autumn rain
A white-haired father, holding the black urn with your ashes, stumbles home.

— 1 October 2014

Translated by participants and friends of the Nao Project
(Nao 2014)

Two years earlier, another well-known hom(e)age was written by Guo Jinniu 郭金牛, titled *Zhi shang huan xiang* 紙上還鄉 (*Going Home on Paper*), following a series of thirteen consecutive suicides among Foxconn workers—at least one of whom, we can presume from the text, was a poet or writer—

which has quickly become one of the most celebrated dagong works. Guo, who was assigned the task of installing the guardrails to prevent further suicides, writes:

> My job is installing a suicide guardrail on the thirteenth floor,
> for a day's pay,
> I force a nail in clockwise bit by bit, as it struggles and resists in the darkness.
> The more force I use, the more dangerous it is.
> Rice and fish-fragrant lips, little dimples nourishing two drops of dew.
> She still worries.
> The garments of autumn
> are stripped off day by day.
> As for my friend who went home on paper, aside from the rice and your fiancée,
> few mention how in room 701 of this building
> you sat on a bunk
> eating Dongguan rice noodles.
>
> *Translated by Eleanor Goodman*
> (Qin Xiaoyu 2016, 39)

Unlike in many works from the Chinese mainstream avant-garde poetry scene, where paper is a space to create an alternative, independent reality, for dagong poets the role of paper is often, crucially, to send themselves or their fellow workers back to their place of origin, be it physical, mental, or spiritual. With exceptions, many probably have not heard of, or at least not reflected much on, modernism and postmodernism; even if they have, they would likely be mistrustful of the modern and postmodern celebration of homelessness and uprootedness as the desirable state of the poet's mind.

On the other hand, nothing could be further from their approach than cultural-philosophical postulates of the necessity of the collective search for roots in the spirit of epicised narratives proposed by avant-garde authors in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in prose and verse alike, to recall Haizi's grandiose project. Dagong poets' journeys to the beginnings are not temporal but ontological and imply a not entirely voluntary return to the bare roots (or bones) of human existence—to the fundamental issues that remain insufficiently addressed by contemporary culture, which has drowned them out with lavishness rather than settling them. Facing problems and questions similar to those faced by premodern authors, modern workers produce a similar pattern of responses. This is, presumably, only partly a matter of influence by great masters of the past and partly a consequence of specific unchanging mechanisms that independently underlie dagong poets' writing and their psychology. These mechanisms are triggered by analogous experiences of unbelonging and displacement, which have been virtually pushed out of the collective consciousness in the social-political discourse of recent decades. Whereas the roots-seeking movement, which often goes hand in hand with epic ambitions to fix those roots ("fix" in the sense of both repair or heal and pin down, stabilise, perpetuate, or codify), is an ideological initiative that seeks cultural/existential benefits from reversing the arrow of

time, dagong poetry wants to move forward, naturally inscribing itself in the multidimensional expansion of traditional lyricism and synchronising itself with its subcutaneous rhythm. Although this rhythm has been stifled during China's cultural and economic transformation of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, dagong poets persistently continue the lyrical tradition understood, in Wang Der-wei's words, "not as a great chain of being but as a succession of inventions, anti-inventions, and reinventions" (Wang 2015, xi).

Toward a new paradigm?

Like classical poets, dagong poets genuinely mourn their detachment but, adding their personal grief to the ocean of poetic tears, they often seem to do it out of a sense of responsibility for the future rather than self-pity and past regrets (against which Herbert, recalling Thucydides, once warned artists). They intend to broaden the community's horizon, which tends to shrink continuously, throwing its "marginal elements" into oblivion. Yet, precisely, these "marginal elements" preserve the core experience of being human. This was the case, for instance, in Zeng Jiqiang's *Wo zheli jianda yi xie shige de gutou* discussed earlier, and it is also the case in Guo Jinniu's oeuvre. In the preface to Guo's collection, emphasising the universal message conveyed by his concepts of "home(town/land)" (*xiang* 鄉) or "lower strata" (*diceng* 底層), among other things, Yang Lian 楊煉 puts it as follows:

> Guo Jinniu's experience as a rural migrant worker would easily allow him to capitalise on this subject. The phrase "lower strata" (底層) alone is marketable enough. But what does "lower strata" mean? Who are representative of the "lower strata"? I have noticed that Guo Jinniu is very careful here. For him, "lower strata" isn't a label but an idea. Only those capable of drilling through their own circumstances and touching the foundation of existence can construct a "lower stratum". So, it's not a job but life itself that puts us all on the "lower stratum". Whether one is aware of this lower stratum and writes about it, with all its depth and width, depends on one's individual abilities. In *Zhi shang huan xiang*, there are many "intimate" sketches in which we can recognise pieces of Guo's bitter biography. This is, of course, outstanding. But what's even more difficult to achieve is how he "expands" this experience, how his mighty pen allows him to go beyond the clichés in which migrant workers' life is commonly spoken of, recreating his (their) profound and spacious world.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Guo Jinniu obviously vents his grievances, and he does so in a genuinely heart-piercing way. At the same time, however, the "lower strata" he writes of are not pitiful people begging for mercy. On the contrary, in his poems, we can see nobility, excellence, and love of—beauty! Outstanding poetic reflection, graceful rhythm, elegant phrases, and even originally crafted punctuation.
>
> [. . .]
>
> The core of *Zhi shang huan xiang* is the concept of *xiang* 鄉 (home [town/land]). On the earth that consists of "a lump of cement and another lump of cement," do we still have home

[towns/lands]? If "home" itself is homeless, can we still return "home"? If not, where else can we go? I must admit, *Zhi shang huan xiang* looks so familiar to me. Guo Jinniu's wandering in Guangdong, rural workers' wandering in China, [these are] pretty much the same as my roaming in the world! A female demon in his *Ye fang tu* 夜放圖 (*Night Map*) speaks in the words of my *Guihua* 鬼話 (*Lie*): "Every day is the end, and the end itself is endless." We should remember that the souls he writes of are caught in the labyrinth called "globalisation," where they're fumbling their way home.

郭金牛的農民工經歷，很容易讓他靠題材討巧。僅僅"底層"一詞，已經有了足夠賣點。但什麼是"底層"？誰代表"底層"？我注意到，郭金牛對此頗為警覺。對於他，"底層"不是商標，而是思想。誰能鑽透自身的處境，觸及存在之根，誰就能構建一個"底層"。所以，不是職業，而是生命，讓我們每個人都在底層。能否意識到這個底層，寫出這個底層，且寫出它的深與廣，則端看一個人的能力。在詩集《紙上還鄉》中，很多"逼近"的白描，讓我們認出郭金牛辛酸的自傳。這當然精彩。但更難的，他還能"拓展"那經驗，以筆力超出一般描寫農民工的套話，賦予他（他們）一個深刻包容的世界。

[. . .]

郭金牛當然訴苦，且訴得痛徹心肺。但同時，他寫出的"底層"，卻絕不卑賤乞憐，相反，從這些詩中，我們讀出了高貴，精彩，講究—美！獨絕的詩思、輕靈的節奏，豔冶的字句，甚至匠心獨運的標點

[. . .]

《紙上還鄉》的核心，在"鄉"字上。"一塊水泥加一塊水泥"（《羅組村往事》）的大地上，我們還有"鄉"麼？倘若連"鄉"本身也無家可歸，我們還得了"鄉"麼？還不了，何處去？我得承認，《紙上還鄉》如此似曾相識，郭金牛的廣東之漂、農民工們的中國之漂，和我自己的環球漂泊，處境何其貫通！他《夜放圖》中的女鬼，說著我的《鬼話》："每天都是盡頭，而盡頭本身又是無盡的"。我們得記住，他寫的那些鬼魂，是在一個叫做"全球化"的迷宮中，摸索自己的還鄉之路。

(Guo Jinniu 2014, 12–18)

Of course, dagong poetry is not a homogeneous phenomenon that could be sufficiently described by a handful of keywords like "lower strata" or "home(lessness)," just as migrant workers are not a "massive singular" (*pangda de danshu* 龐大的單數), to use the term coined by Guo to describe anonymous masses treated as a singular subject, or indeed object, mere plankton on which the Leviathan feeds. What may be said, however, is that it displays a high degree of connectivity, both internal mutual connectivity between contemporary dagong works (through motifs, images, shared experiences, concerns, goals, and so forth) and their cross-temporal connectivity to individual and

common pasts through a complex network of roots that still nourish them, as we saw in the first part of this essay, although they are becoming successively suppressed by thick concrete layers of modernity.

Guo Jinniu's six-part long poem *Luozu cun wangshi* 羅組村往事 (The Past of Luozu Village), analysed by Yang Lian in his preface, offers a beautiful image that gathers many of these common threads and signals one potential trajectory of the development of dagong verse and perhaps of Chinese poetry at large. The I-speaker travels in time, like Li Pulei from Li Hongwei's novel, to the beginnings of Chinese civilisation to retell the history of the nation, dynasty by dynasty, through the prism of Luozu's fates. Sometimes sentimental, sometimes socio- and ecocritical, in part two—that is, the Tang era—the narrative takes a surprising turn: "I" escapes the order of history by jumping over a wall.

> Tang, a peony, passed through Northern Song, passed through the plateau northward from Qinling
> surrounded by an aristocratic aura she
> then passed through the moon of the Qin, the sky of the Han, eight hundred li at the very least from Southern Song
> southward
> Through (*jing* 經) Luozu Village.
> Through (*jing* 經) the streets, checkpoints, camouflages.
> Through (*jing* 經) temporary residence permit control.
> Through (*jing* 經) catching
>
> in Du Fu's poem, I jumped over a wall and ran away.
>
> 唐，一枝牡丹，過了北宋，過了秦川
> 她，一身貴氣
> 又過了秦時月，漢時天，至少過了八百里
> 南宋
> 以南。
> 經羅組村。
> 經街道，經卡點，經迷彩服。
> 經查暫住證。
> 經捉人
>
> 我在杜甫的詩中，逾牆走了。
>
> (Guo Jinniu 2014, 52)

Yang Lian reflects at length on the *jing* 經 character Guo uses anaphorically in four consecutive lines, which I tentatively translate above as "through." He points out its four parallel meanings that, notably, add up to a surprisingly complete ontology of poetry: (1) experience (as in *jingli* 經歷), which—

expanding on Yang's reflection—may stand for the existential dimension of writing; (2) passing by a particular place (*jingguo* 經過), which makes us think of the spatial propagation of poetry; (3) high frequency (*jingchang* 經常), which, in turn, draws our attention to poetry's temporal aspect but also the repeatability of specific (patterns of) actions and narratives; and finally (4) a book, especially a canonised classic, a cultural artifact that plays a paradigmatic function, for example, Yang proposes, the *Shijing* (Guo Jinniu 2014, 14–15). The limits of the *Shijing* are tested once again in Guo's poem by the cheeky author wrapped in the noble cloak made from poems of the Tang-dynasty poet-sage Du Fu. Guo's adieu, however, is not a tragic Qu Yuan-style adieu but a promise of an entirely new audacious proposition.

Approaching this poem as a Polish reader, I am reminded of another memorable jump by another remarkable worker: Lech Wałęsa famously jumped over the wall of the Gdańsk shipyard in August 1980 to initiate the workers' strike that would end with the fall of the Berlin Wall nine years later. Well, there's no telling... The unceremoniousness—unhindered by the programmatic self-doubt (or doubt in the self) and studied modesty of those baptised in the spirit of deconstructive postmodernism—with which many dagong poets reach for poetry as their work uniform or toolkit may perhaps seem sometimes crude, rough, or naive to elitists. But it is also genuinely energetic and possibly contagious. Suppose this unceremoniousness coincides with atypical sensitivity and (elusive as this category is) talent, whether supported or not by formal training or literary-historical education: what might result is someone like a "great master" (*dashi* 大師). That is, a persona—as I show elsewhere in my discussion on Czesław Miłosz and Ai Qing 艾青 (Krenz 2022, chap. 2)—whose lack contemporary Chinese poetry mourns, just as it mourns the absence of an epic. Someone to influence generations, dictate trends, create a new quality in Chinese literature, and, no less importantly, consolidate the dispersed hypertextual lyrical universe around themselves. From a sociocultural point of view, an iconic figure set against a "bony" background might even be, I daresay, better material for a "strong poet" in the Bloomian sense than those whose imagery was incubated in salons or libraries. But there is, of course, no rule. We should neither exclude nor fetishise this prospect, keeping our eyes and minds open to all new propositions.

Observing the unique covenant between classical and dagong poetry is fascinating. At first glance, they may seem as distant from each other as possible. I appreciate how some dagong authors tame the volcanoes through which the hot liquid fire of tradition may spew at any moment, flood their verse, and render it worthless from a literary-critical point of view. I like how they build houses over those volcanoes, dance around them, look into the craters, or even jump inside to hide; and how they sometimes attack the volcanoes, as Don Quixote did his windmills, with pens in their hands, unafraid of being ridiculed. I also sympathise with the more suspicious ones who approach the volcanoes with some distrust but still dare to touch them and take a hot, smoking lump home to examine and sculpt it. Dagong poets are remarkable readers and continuers of the classical tradition. They take original lava sculptures and create new shapes from them without obscuring their unique textures. One cannot fully understand many individual dagong poems without knowing the inner structure of the Chinese poetry tradition. At the same time, their work brings out the aesthetic, rhetorical, and energetic potential of this liquid fire, including qualities of which few were previously aware. Su Dongpo is the source

of Li Yongpu's poetry and vice versa. Du Fu helps Guo Jinniu express himself by offering capacious, well-proven images to contain his emotions. Guo Jinniu helps Du Fu express himself in modern language, escorting him through the great wall of classical syntax to the liberal international modern world. And so forth. A very Benjaminian image indeed: younger generations exercising their "weak messianic power" under the watchful eye of the Angel of History, bringing contingent redemption to preceding conditions and acquiring conditional metaphysical meaning for life in return.

> The past carries a secret index with it, by which it is referred to its resurrection. Are we not touched by the same breath of air which was among that which came before? is there not an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices to which we lend our ears today? have not the women, who[m] we court, sisters who[m] they do not recognize anymore? If so, then there is a secret protocol [*Verabredung*: also appointment] between the generations of the past and that of our own. For we have been expected upon this earth. For it has been given us to know, just like every generation before us, a *weak* messianic power, on which the past has a claim. This claim is not to be settled lightly.
>
> *Translated by Dennis Redmont*
>
> (Benjamin 1940)

What comes out of this covenant, time will tell. But there are many reasons to believe that it will be worth waiting for.

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