BOOK REVIEW

Fern von Geschichte und verheißungsvollen Tagen. Neoklassizistische Cyberlyrik im ChinaNetz und die Schreibweise des Lizilizilizi (2000–2020)

Frank Kraushaar

Bochum/Freiburg: projektverlag, 2022. 355 pp. ISBN: 9783897335608

Sara LANDA
Heidelberg University, Germany
sara.landa@zo.uni-heidelberg.de

Keywords: new old style poetry

關鍵詞： 舊體新詩

The difference between, or rather juxtaposition, of "world literature" and "global literature", claims Martin Kern (2017/18), is based on the former's emphasis on alterity, incommensurability, as opposed to the latter's tendency to decontextualise and integrate texts into fitting schemes of reception. Frank Kraushaar undertakes a bold attempt to bring closer to a German audience texts which at first sight may fit the traditional understanding of the untranslatable: contemporary Chinese classical-style internet poetry, with a special emphasis on Zeng Shaoli 曾少立 aka Lizilizilizi 李子梨子栗子. This type of poetry is deeply embedded in aesthetic traditions (with which it also breaks, in many regards, and quite radically) and dependent on intertextual networks; its language is imbued with numerous word-plays, shifts in linguistic registers, multiple phonetic correspondences and ambiguities hidden in the visual character composition. And finally, with a keen eye on the political contradictions and social tensions in society, it makes sometimes open, sometimes hidden, allusions to changes and challenges of today's society and the individual's searches within this transforming world.

The book has thus set itself quite a task, which it attempts to tackle by taking a variety of angles, offering, on the one hand, broad contextualisations and introductions into the history of classical-style poetry after the May Fourth movement, and the medial and sociological preconditions of Internet poetry communities and their stand vis-à-vis censorship, and, on the other hand, in-depth close readings of texts and translations which not only offer commentaries on difficult passages but also reflect on the process of translating itself and on the motivation behind different choices.

It is thus at the same time a contribution to the slowly growing scholarship on modern and contemporary classical-style poetry, an analysis of Internet poetry as a phenomenon worth attention due to sociological as well as aesthetical aspects (the latter plays a minor role in the groundbreaking work of Inwood [2016]), an introduction into the poetical worlds of Zeng Shaoli, and an essay on poetry translation and the limits and possibilities of transcultural hermeneutics.

Part I contains an introduction to the question of Chinese-German poetry translation and to the ambivalences of classical-style poetry in the 20th to 21st centuries. It makes a case for a radically wider understanding of "modern" Chinese poetry and its incorporation into translatory practice. The fact that most German translations of modern and contemporary poetry focus on writings in *baihua* is certainly limiting. The author was probably not aware of the few translatory attempts to engage with modern classical-style poetry (e.g. the poet Jürgen Theobaldy's deliberate attempts to integrate Lu Xun's classical-style poems into German debates on lyrical subjectivity and the tensions between closed and open forms in the 1980s). Yet it is correct that in particular contemporary classical-style poetry is hardly present in German anthologies of Chinese poetry, despite its high potential for aesthetic innovation and more free political commentary. The book thus continues in the vein of, e.g., Tian Xiaofei (2009), Wu Shengqing (2013), Jon von Kowallis (2006), Yang Haosheng (2016), and, with regard to contemporary poetry, Yang Zhiyi and Ma Dayong (2018) in questioning the outdatedness of classical-style writing techniques and exploring their potential to reflect on the turbulences and challenges of the last century. In doing so, it also points to a still understudied question, namely the relationship between migrant worker *dagong* 打工 literature ("battler literature" in Maghiel van Crevel's translation) and classical-style writing. Classical-style poetry is, as Kraushaar once again

demonstrates by offering samples of both official, "cadre-style" writings and avant-garde, unofficial poetry, a writing mode that could and can be used both as a propaganda tool to strengthen the CCP's power and as a means of generating free space for thinking. In the former case, it mainly draws on a large repertoire of passed-down imagery and forms; in the latter it transforms the classicist forms by deliberately playing with effects of alienation between the "outdated" and the contemporary. It thus becomes a highly self-reflexive way of writing that can critically comment on political constellations and power ambitions and generate sanctuaries largely beyond the grasp of censorship, as its highly allusive language is less easily accessible and the reading community is still small enough to be perceived as less of a threat to the party.

The next section, "Die Schreibweise des Lizi zwischen virtueller Subkultur und poltischem Gewissen" (Lizi's writing style between virtual subculture and political conscience), outlines Lizi's writing style against the backdrop of traditions of political commentary in poetry and the production and reception frameworks of cyberspace literature. Kraushaar stresses that the incessant threat of deletion is paradoxically the precondition for the greater possibilities of independent spaces in the Internet, of which poets such as Lizi make deliberate use. The internet also allows for a higher degree of dissociation of the biographical author from the textual persona of the poet. The observing I rather becomes the political consciousness of its time – in this regard following its precursor, the modern classicist Nie Gannu 聶紺弩. Lizi, like some other internet poets, never shies away from sensitive issues on which he comments with satire, sarcasm, wordplays, and ambivalent allusions.

Part III, entitled "Dinglichkeit und Unschärfe" (Materiality and Blurring), delves deeper into Lizi's poetics through the translation and in-depth analysis of several poems, and also makes use of information on the contexts and genesis of various works as given by Lizi in his correspondence with the author. Lizi's language on the one hand stresses the tangible sensuality of things by ridding it of the symbolic ossifications of tradition; on the other hand it deliberately plays with the alienation effects of the alterity of classical form as an irritation in the contemporary world, and the detached subjectivity of the commenting persona – Kraushaar characterises the subjectivity in Lizi's poems as a broken "subjectivity of distance" (p. 233). Lizi succeeds in creating effects of puzzlement by having the expectations of classicist form and elements of the classical idiom overlap with radically profane vocabulary.

The last part, "Anthologischer Abspann" (Anthological closing remarks), offers a number of sample translations with short commentaries, mainly of very recent poems dealing with tensions and contradictions in Chinese society and politics, including a series of pandemic poems in reaction to the Wuhan lockdown and the repression against Li Wenliang 李文亮.

Frank Kraushaar's monograph is not an easy and certainly not a quick read, but all the more worthwhile in its deliberate attempts to uphold the obstacles, alienations, and tensions in the work of one of the most creative and interesting contemporary poets. At the same time, it offers the reader a number of bridges providing a gradual approach to this kind of poetry. A mere selected commented edition of Lizi's works would have left many readers at a loss as to how to approach this kind of poetry, since

the field of recent classical-style poetry remains, despite growing scholarly attention, understudied, not to mention the lack of translations. By integrating translation work and analyses from different angles, the book allows readers to get a glimpse into the multiple intertextual entanglements and the complex contextualisation of unofficial classical-style internet poetry. Despite its challenging character, the book is thus written not only for experts, but will hopefully be appreciated by a larger audience.

The most intriguing aspect is the translations themselves, together with the reflections on the translation process. Kraushaar attempts to grasp the tension between expectations of formal regularities and alienating archaisms on the one hand, and shifts towards colloquial registers and intricate neologisms on the other. The translations include some ingenious highlights, such as the translation of the phrase 飯醉, *fanzui*, literally "eating and getting drunk [while engaging in critical discussions]" but homophonous to 犯罪, "committing a crime", with the German "Versbrechen", which hints at "Verbrechen" ("crime"), but literally means "breaking verses", and can point towards deliberate destruction of verse, flexible bending, or expressing something in a clumsy manner (as in the German "radebrechen"), while also pointing towards "Versprechen", namely "promise". Like the Chinese original with its allusive language and ambiguities, the German translations thus open up numerous phonetic and semantic interferences that comment on contemporary politics, but mainly create freedom for thinking.

Only slightly irritating is a certain negligence in matters of copy-editing when it comes to more formal questions (e.g. wrong word divisions, incomplete titles in the bibliography, and little attention paid to the index), but not the language and style of the book itself which is precise, well-reflected, and at the same time accessible to a broader audience.

All in all, the book certainly furthers a world-literary dialogue in the sense of Martin Kern's definition, and scholarship in a deliberate trans-cultural sense, becoming, in the words of the author, a "phenomenon of distances, a vacuum for mirages" ("zum Phänomen der Distanzen, zum Vakuum für Luftspiegelungen" p. 70).

Bibliography

Inwood, Heather. 2016. *Verse Going Viral. China's New Media Scenes*. Seattle/London: Univ. of Washington Press.

Kern, Martin. 2017/18. "Ends and Beginnings of World Literature". *Poetica* 49: 1–31.

Lu, Xun. 1983. *Kein Ort zum Schreiben. Gesammelte Gedichte*, Egbert Baqué/Jürgen Theobaldy (ed. And transl.). Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowolt.

Tian, Xiaofei. 2009. "Muffled Dialect Spoken by Green Fruits: An Alternative History of Modern Chinese Poetry". *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21/1: 1–44.

von Kowallis, Jon Eugene. 2006. *The Subtle Revolution. Poets of the 'Old Schools' during Late Qing and Early Republican China.* Berkeley, CA: Inst. of East Asian Studies.

Wu, Shengqing. 2013. *Modern Archaics. Continuity and Innovation in the Chinese Lyric Tradition, 1900–1937.* Cambridge/London: Harvard University Asia Center.

Yang, Haosheng. 2016. *A Modernity Set to a Pre-Modern Tune. Classical-Style Poetry of Modern Chinese Writers.* Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Yang, Zhiyi and Ma Dayong. 2018. "Classicism 2.0: The Vitality of Classicist Poetry Online in Contemporary China". *Frontiers of Literary Studies* 12/3: 526–557.