A MASSIVELY SINGLE NUMBER

庞大 的 单 数

Edited by
Yang Lian

Translated by
Brian Holton

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What is China now? This is a question the world is asking, and China is also asking. We ask because there are too many complications, and the answers are usually contradictory: Cold War ideology, the cultural collision between East and West, globalised commercial profit, the historical or the totally anti-historical… all are right, and all are also wrong, and it would seem that, if one is chosen at random then one ‘China’ will be visible, but seen from a different angle, it will become something quite different. ‘China’ in the end is like a fiction which anyone is free to invent, and which fits any explanation. No-one, however, can convince everyone else that it is exactly this. In the past thirty years, this vast colossus has grown out of the poverty and ideological insanity of the Cultural Revolution to global investment and the total cynicism of our own day, in a series of dizzying and dazzling pirouettes. What exactly is China?

The Artsbj.com International Chinese Poetry Prize was set up on 15 July 2012, with the original intention of simply opening up a space for poetry amid the hurly-burly of roaring commerce, using the private culture website of poet and artist Yang Ermin. Given the possibilities of the internet, any poem by any poet at all could be submitted. No-one could have predicted the astonishing result: poems came flooding in from day one until, by the deadline date of 15 July 2013, the competition website had received more than 800,000 poems, with at least 10% of them of quite high quality. More impressive still, we ‘senior poets’ who had been writing for years, in most cases had never heard the poets’ names. From the information sent with the poems we could deduce that among them were artists, cultural workers, teachers, street hawkers, ordinary city-dwellers, school and university students, even soldiers and police officers, but what struck us most forcibly,
more striking than even the poems by migrant workers, was that this is the most representative, the vastest of secret communities, which, at over 200 million people, is itself the size of one of the world’s largest countries. Yet it is a deathly silent one. In the term migrant worker, the sign and symbol of China’s entry into globalisation, is condensed an entire history. Its implication is that, with the villages which have put destitution behind them, the cold, hard, and unfamiliar cities, the work for eye-wateringly low wages, 200 million minds are being tormented on an immense scale by being forced into exile by their ‘Motherland’. The migrant worker poet Guo Jinniu wrote in his *Going Home on Paper*, which won the prize for a first collection,

> Our Motherland, it organized me a Temporary Residence Permit.  
> Our Motherland, it accepted the Temporary Residence Fee  
> I handed over.

A ‘Motherland’, but one that will only grant Temporary Residence if a fee is paid. The misery of the migrant worker lies in the hardships they can never escape.

> Oh god. It’s a raid to check Temporary Residence Permits.  
> Northerner Sister Li, someone standing in the south with pyjamas undone  
> Northerner Sister Li, carrying a broken chrysanthemum  
> Northerner Sister Li, hanging from a banyan tree  
> Lightly. Almost as if her flesh and blood weighed nothing at all.

The flesh and blood of 200 million people and it weighs nothing at all: this is how human loneliness and the loneliness of existence are such a
'massive single number'! At the same time, please note that these are the qualities good poetry demands: distinctive feeling, depth of experience, clarity of expression, grace in rhythm and music; the delicate voice of Guo Jinniu (or perhaps almost every generically-named Sister Li, too) in the effortless poetic image he chose: Lightly. Almost as if opens our eyes to that hidden and silent ocean beneath the rolling waves, making every faint sigh resonate in our ears more than any number of emotional slogans could. This is the cry of the underclass, but more importantly, here stands a poet with unique ideas and a unique artistic character. What is ‘China’? How could there be any other China than the one that Chinese people think and dream in their hearts? One good poem is the precise embodiment of the flesh and blood, the human heart and mind of China now. That, transcending any and all jargon, points directly toward lived reality itself.

Guo Jinniu is only one of the poets who submitted a contribution. The first year of the Artsbj.com International Chinese Poetry Prize was like a year-long internet poetry festival. For every page of good poetry posted, below the line there were often as many as twenty to thirty pages of comments, judging, debating, and judging and debating again, multiplying night and day, with posted comments outnumbering poems by who knows how many times. Here, the poets were not divided into famous and unknown, for the only distinction was between differing ideals. Perhaps it couldn’t be called democratic (because the jury was to make the final choice), but it absolutely could be described as the most open of competitions. The jury assessing the shortlisted works gave participants the opportunity for yet more heated debate, and even the final awards didn’t put an end to the discussion. Suddenly unknown poets were able to engage in direct exchanges with poets they had only seen in print before, which was exciting, of course. But what moved and
excited me more was this: after the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, when I was first forced into exile and then actively drifted round the world, though I had kept in touch with the consanguinity of the Chinese language in my creative work, it had been an experience very different to this one. In face to face exchanges with so many Chinese poets on a daily, even hourly, basis, I felt the pulse of the world that they were touching. They taught me that underclass is not a brand, but a way of thinking. That voiceless world urges me to review my own reality in this era of globalisation. So when I was asked to write a preface for Guo Jinniu’s *Going Home on Paper*, I had no choice but to say, “From the perspective of our own existence, which of us is not a migrant worker?”

In the name of the Artsbj.com International Chinese Poetry Prize, the word International is of great significance, intending as it does to establish the idea that in our globalised plight, individual exchanges between poets can transcend the direct limitations of language. My astonishment at the sighs of every Sister Li was transmitted far and fast. In June 2013, the Rotterdam Poetry International, the world’s largest poetry festival, chose contemporary Chinese poetry as its theme for the year, so we set up the Rotterdam-Artsbj.com International Simultaneous Chinese Poetry Festival, beginning with the Syrian poet Adonis as chief among the international poets in Rotterdam, and who knows how many Chinese poets and readers at their computers. On 14th June, they logged on from 3 pm to 6 pm European time, for video readings, conversations, questions and answers; after an in-depth poetry exchange lasting three hours, I asked about the number of hits we had had, and to my surprise, it was an astronomical one: 6.75 million! On the morning of the second day, it reached 14 million, and in two weeks, we had had 32 million hits! Poetry had not sunk to the level of yesterday’s bin-liner,
but, on the contrary, its seismic wave was still growing. The effect was seen equally in the media at home and abroad: Germany’s Süddeutsche Zeitung took the lead with a full-page article reporting the competition and an in-depth interview with Guo Jinniu; this article was reprinted in the Swiss Neue Zürcher Zeitung, among others. Then one by one the media in the UK, Germany, Holland, the USA, Taiwan and Hong Kong took up the story, as poetry’s sonar broadcast to the world sound waves from the bottom of China’s ocean! On 3rd October 2013 at the prize-giving ceremony held in Beijing University, when Antonia Byatt, Director of Literature at Arts Council England, and Bas Kwakman, Director of the Rotterdam Poetry International, were invited to give the prizes in person to the migrant-worker poets, the poetic consanguinity of the international and the underclass immediately connected across the abyss that had separated them in the past. The significance of this is the same as my calling contemporary Chinese poetry a series of Thought-Art Projects, as both gather together history, reality, culture, and language with all their particular resources and powers, to create an individual awareness through poetry. Thought-Art implies a refusal of oversimplification, for spiritual depth must always be corroborated by artistic depth; Project implies a refusal to repeat or duplicate, because China’s contemporary cultural transformation must be endlessly deepening. In the final analysis, ‘China’ is created precisely in the arduous and glorious epic that is each person’s life.

This English-language selection of prize-winning work may be seen as an abbreviation of this Thought-Art Project. Its documentary section includes the announcement of the principles, the framework, the process and the final judgments of the Artsbj.com International Chinese Poetry Prize, as well as the Judges’ Comments on the work of seven of the prize-winners. The poems I have chosen to be representative of the prize-
winners’ work. Among them are Cao Shu’s philosophy, Liao Hui’s grace, the hidden anguish of Zang Di, the unswerving power of Yu Jian, the storm-surge of Qi Ye, Zhong Shuo’s eeriness, Guo Jinniu’s deft agility – each joining, with their own tone and timbre, the coordinated voices of the Judges’ Comments individually written by the seven senior poets on the jury, so that reading this book will be like hearing fourteen Chinese poets sing in harmony. But I have to admit that the numbers of poems chosen are not evenly distributed among the authors, as the length I devote to the migrant worker poet Guo Jinniu is more than that devoted to others, and the reason is that his work is of double significance, both for contemporary China’s current predicament, and for the creativity of Chinese contemporary poetry. I ought to say that his contribution is also of significance in relation to globalization. As I say in my Judge’s Comments,

“Guo Jinniu used to work at the well-known Foxconn Technology Group’s factory. After the thirteenth suicide from a high window in protest at degrading treatment by Foxconn, he was sent to install anti-jump mesh. But how fine a mesh will prevent the common fate of the innumerable millions of migrant workers in China? This is why he writes poetry.”

A reader who can’t understand China will never be able to understand globalisation: and again, if you cannot see the globalised predicament clearly, then you will not be able to see the reality of China. Foxconn – the name of a nightmare factory. It means this: Chinese workers, Taiwanese bosses, Apple products. So is every Guo Jinniu held down in
the underclass by more than the power of China? They are much more an underclass held down by a global alliance for profit. The Chinese migrant workers standing at the assembly line with thousands and thousands of chips passing through their fingers, do they know how much plunder the profiteers get from the iPhone? These astronomical numbers won’t lead them astray, will they? They won’t lead us astray, will they? When the only ideology left for humanity is money, the only philosophy of life is selfishness, and the only attitude to this world is cynicism, WHO IS NOT A MIGRANT WORKER? Destitute and homeless, you have nowhere left to go.

This anthology should be seen as a dictionary of Chinese thinking: in it you can read reflections on many levels about the reality, the culture, and the literature of China. In the same way, it will serve as a dictionary of world thought, giving, from humanity’s complete spiritual crisis, an overview of the vitality of independent thinking in China. China and the world are in dialogue here. The Guo Jinnius don’t know the patrons and supporters of this English-language anthology, husband and wife Jenny and Rod Hall, but I’m sure they will be deeply grateful for their most generous help. This confirms the most beautiful side of a poet’s destiny: no matter how far apart we are in time or space, with one good poem we have been friends for years.

On 1 October 2014, the ‘National Day’ of the People’s Republic of China, when this preface was half-written, there came the dreadful news that another Foxconn migrant-worker poet, Xu Lizhi, had jumped to his death from a high building, at the age of only twenty-four. He had already written ‘Shop Floor Where My Life Ran Aground’, ‘I’m Standing Sleeping Like This’, and ‘I Think I Can Keep on Going’ –
I think I can keep on going
Until the sun blocks out the moon and stars
But he couldn’t keep on going; the night shift of life that is
So many days and nights
I’m standing sleeping like this makes it impossible for young lives to keep on going, until at last

The end has come, the time has come
The moment they lower my coffin into the grave
Oh, mother, I will soon return to your womb

On October 1, one poet stopped handing over his Temporary Residence Permit fee to his ‘Motherland’.

Yang Lian
Berlin
5 October 2014
POEMS WITH JUDGES’ COMMENTS
SECOND PRIZE POEMS
Cao Shu

草 树
Judge’s Comments

Cao Shu — ‘Rectifying Tower’

Cao Shu’s ‘Rectifying Tower’ borrows copiously from the basic chemical process of rectification, adopting the structure of the long poem to resemble the speciality he describes by poeticizing technical language and presenting it in an imagistic way. ‘Rectifying Tower’, a colossal image of an era, builds a structure that is a unique overview of contemporary society, history and culture. Cao Shu uses language here as a tool for the precise distillation of impurities in history and reality, distinguishing and restoring the essence of time and matter through language that is detailed, elaborate and free-flowing. The theme probes ancient and modern, involves life and death, transcends reality, and sustains poetic quality throughout. Its spiritual capaciousness, its versification, and its linguistic power, while grounded in the poets’ engineering background, are fully and maturely transformed and developed, and it can be rated doubly sublime in both its glorification of industry and the beauty of its inspiration. It brings to the writing of Chinese poetry today an extraordinary point of view and an idiosyncratic tone, and it amply demonstrates the writer’s quite exceptional capacity and potential, not to mention its expansive complexity and the poetic creativity of its relaxed handling of the poem’s disparate elements.

Zhai Yongming
Rectifying Tower

2.

The last stop is mutation: the liquid reaches a critical point or Someone reaches the limit. Vaporising, someone turns into a vengeful ghost, loitering among Earth’s plants Knocking on the door of history’s blank spaces Slowly restoring, under time’s condensation, its essence: human.

Halt is standstill. In the gunshot’s instant, all of everything Goes into standstill: red armbands and onlookers too. The executioner alone is like an out of control crotchet. The mountain range alone boils like the chorus of a world.

The duration of the halt is a space where time opens up Holding the morning bell and evening drum of every era. It is silent and still: the silence and stillness of distance. It is calm and quiet: the calm and quiet of desire. A breach in time is given to language by wings: The ocean cracks open, hazily uncovers the spine of the whale’s thunder.
5.

Circular tower plates, their frontiers not of iron but of the body
Extending in obedience to intuition.
Small as a lotus leaf, stitched with dewdrops and spider-web,
the overflying dragonfly
Brings the aeroplane’s roar.

Big as a public square: Tanks and cannon, in orderly goose-step,
planes
Fly overhead, from there I drown in
A sea of synthesis: coral faintly flickers.

Infinitely extending with the endless horizon: the setting sun
golden,
And forever strangely distant from me: near as Tibet or Xinjiang
But certainly not as near as distant Hunan and Hubei.

Level upon level of tower plates, fractured ladders,
Good to imagine, not to climb.
Extending further than the ladder, to heaven, to hell, parallel
and passable
The abyss between the skyscrapers.
And its structure is so simple and clear: a vertical array,
confined in a
Tall circular column.
It’s not the same as the morning elevator in the tower
Nor is it the same as the apple on the tree.
This is another kind of “universal gravitation”,
Submitting itself to an inner call. Halt, drop, arbitrary and accidental,
Maybe unwillingly entering another dimension,
A world of ghostly, flickering shapes: stripped to the waist, pants down leaping,
Singing in fetters, and the King of Hell, between iron door and iron door,
On the corridor above the iron cage, higher than dark mountains and white towers.

This is real “free fall”: from which level?
Ancient sounds. The newest sunrise. What is constructed by all this
Is a world by no means unfamiliar: kinder than the alleys we walk
Every day. In the stillness
Birds forever singing and warm whispers.

Old Du Fu comes closer, twirling his whiskers,
Muttering; Su Dongpo swaggers off on his bamboo crutch.
They are certainly not unfamiliar.
11.

The location of the final tower plate
Is like an abyss now. Facing the abyss
It climbs and drops, halts, climbs and drops.
Ruin after ruin emerges: broken grey tiles
End up like fish scales. The silent firebox smokes again.
Mawangdui’s low roof brackets broadcast maidservants’ laughter.
Machu Picchu’s deep valleys echo to Indian drumbeats.
The Great Wall’s broken rampart dodges Daughter Meng’s skirt and sleeves.
Cracks in Forbidden City bricks leak Empress Ci Xi’s coughing.
   One cough
And all our Divine Land’s plants trembled.

Climb and drop, halt, climb and drop
Distill, fill, distill.
Cast off Confucius’ coat. Lay down Marx’s quill.
Sit under the oak with old Zhuangzi: how come the giant roc
Can shoulder the whole blue sky?
Before enlightenment, ask Zen Patriarch Huineng how come
   after cleaning and cleaning the mirror, there’s always
Dust that can’t be wiped away?
This is the poetics of space, built of countless tower plates
Countless stages. On each stage there is a show.
Each fall is an unexpected appearance on the scene, bringing
Long drawn-out shock: the dialect groans of sex workers
Burn in sudden contact with dialect’s magnesium wires;
A man walks on the rostrum, bends backwards,
Falls into the ravine; ants encounter the elephant’s foot; the
whole room’s
Furtive whispers gatecrashed by semantic relevance;
Coercive hands, under unspoken rules, facing one single tick:
Handcuffs and iron locks, show the public honour of the rules;
A bird bursts through the window in darkness; fish fall into the net
As they gracefully leap from the water, it’s that final moment —
the moment
Accidental things become inevitable — the moment like an
exploding bomb,
Space disperses cordite smoke;
Like an orange violently smashed on glass, time
Splatters juices and its painful looks.

At this moment, that instant overhead trajectory is incomparably
real.
Its reality goes far beyond a long-term “all is as it should be”
Or the usual “I knew long ago”.