

Writing Uncreated for the World: Zhu Zhu and Contemporary Chinese Poetry

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Abstract:

This paper mainly expounds Zhu Zhu's poems written before 2000, and analyzes their idiosyncrasies and style. During his more than ten years of poetry writing, Zhu Zhu has developed a fine poetic language and a restrained, minimalist style, through transforming the tradition of modern poetry between China and foreign countries and dealing with complex socio-cultural contexts and his personal experiences since the 1990s. It shows the remarkable uniqueness he has achieved in the contemporary Chinese poetry field.

Keywords: Zhu Zhu, poetry, language, words & things

For a time Zhu Zhu was deeply affected by a maxim of the French critic Jean Pierre Richard: "An idea is not as important as an *idée fixe*."¹ This is the point that this author wishes to enter Zhu Zhu's poetry and its relations to the world, or the chain of associations triggered by this aphorism can guide our reading toward the unique explorations conducted by the poet in his art of "un-creation." For Zhu Zhu, meaningful poetry emerges from a secluded state in which words are measured out guardedly. This characteristic can be found throughout the intricate linguistic structure of his poems, much like his own self-effacement and reclusiveness on the margin of our superficial, noisy poetry scene. Such is the fate of modern poetry: its verses will never open themselves into a larger space until the process Seamus Heaney called "digging" or "dowsing" has gone into them.

1 Jean Pierre Richard. *Poésie et profondeur* (Seuil, 1955). Cf. Georges Paulet. *Critical Consciousness*. Tr. GuoHong'an. Nanchang: Baihuazhou wenyi Press, 1993. p. 198.

1. “Poetry Is the Theme of Poetry”

Zhu Zhu’s poetry writing began during his period of residence in Shanghai, while he was still a student at an institute of law and government. At that time, an uproarious and powerful poetry movement was beginning to subside. The lingering impact of that movement, in which edifying and destructive qualities were mingled, reverberated through the writing of the subsequent group of poets, and many of their texts make reference to this. The movement’s successors needed to exert tremendous force to piece something together from that grab-bag of linguistic fragments they were left with. As a poet who grew up during the 1990s (his writing spanned that whole decade), what Zhu Zhu faced was not just the massive tradition of modern poetry, both from the East and West; he also found himself situated in the hugely jumbled poetics of that period. All the cultural, poetic perplexities and crises of the 20th Century and particularly the preceding decade constituted a background to poetry writing of Zhu Zhu’s generation. Whether consciously or not, when poets of that era entered the territory of poetry, they had to undergo a bout of self-questioning: Will I be able to sustain my writing? How should I begin, and how will I carry on later? For poets of that era, what they had to bear up under was not merely external reality but also poetry itself. Herein, the quest for “novelty” would perhaps serve as a driving force for poetry writing, but a more fundamental driving force would have to come from within.

In a long poem that was widely praised but to some extent argued over—“Portrait of a Middle-Aged Poet” (1995)—Zhu Zhu depicted (or one should say, “exposed”) the awkward situation of a poet who faced that era of rapid change. The sense of unworthiness that weighed on such a “middle-aged poet” was applicable to the circumstances of many.

The morning star burns all through the night,
During this “Spring and Autumn,” this “Warring States,”
A generation, in its slow coming of age,
Grows weak, perhaps harboring no hope,
Lacking clear marks to recognize each other,
Lacking symbols to weigh each other’s qualities,
Their seething talent congeals at the century’s end,
With thoughts drained of warmth they face the days.

Rather than saying that this poem tacitly conveys their mood of rebellion against fate, one should say that it allegorically evokes the “trench warfare” of language it-

self, with which poets of that period were occupied. Poetry seemed to be a locus of “termite-infested hollowness and gloom, not worthy of being watched over, which shared a common root with external reality and thus lacked capacity to offer solace. There was no spiritual, subjective force of sufficient power to hold up its patch of sky.”² This was what Zhu Zhu said later when he explained the basis for this poem: “I chose a particular type of person, or one could say I chose a particular angle, to give a perspective on the actual artistic setting.”³ Through its many-angled narrative, the poem discretely pulled aside a curtain to convey Zhu Zhu’s musings on the recent past of modern poetry in China, along with his penetrating views on its prospects. For example, “New poetry, inasmuch as it can be called a tradition, is like a starry sky reflected in a pool, an embedded image which takes on richness only after being filled in by memory and imagination...It lacks a genuine image of an individual, or one could say that its ‘individual image’ is not complete: it is woven together out of works by various poets.”⁴ This is one of Zhu Zhu’s insightful assessments of modern poetry in Chinese.

To use Zhu Zhu’s own words, while writing “Portrait of a Middle-Aged Poet,” he was still at the first stage of his poetry writing, and his poems still exuded the air of his youthful period. Although his personal style was becoming apparent, it still needed to be strengthened and reinforced. Defining a poet’s personal style is like fine-polishing a sculpture to bring out the clarity of its conception. Against the background of his “first stage writings” in general, the emergence of this poem was remarkable, as we will see below. Instead of lyrical outpourings it used coarsely heterogeneous phrasing, and its bluntly pointed diction marked a change from the homogenous smoothness that had been the rule. It was as if a slow-rolling current had suddenly given way to rapid eddies, seamlessly transitioning to a turbulent pattern. It is worth noting that in the passage quoted above, the rhyme “-ang” appears with no sign of effort in alternate lines. This kind of open tone is fairly rare in Zhu Zhu’s poems because his poems generally tend toward a restrained, subdued tone. Despite the above-mentioned thematic elements which are dominant in this poem, I am in favor of assigning it to a category defined by Schlegel: “Not only is it a poem,

2 Zhu Zhu. “Anne Kao, or the Fate of a Poem” (An Gao furen, huo yishou shi de mingyun). (unpublished, 2002).

3 Ling Yue. “The Bridge of Words—An Interview with Zhu Zhu” (Ciyu zhi qiao—Zhu Zhu fangtan lu). in *Vertigo* (Yunxuan). Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi Press, 2000. p. 205.

4 Zang Di, Zhu Zhu. et al. “A New Look at China’s New Poetry Tradition,” (Chong shi zhongguo xinshi chuantong) in *Yangtze River Poetry Magazine* (*Yangzijiang shi kan*). No. 1, 2003.

it is a poem about poetry.”⁵This is because it does not only reflect upon history as it played out within poetry, it also broods upon the art of poetry itself. Its stepwise, line-by-line development deals with “poetry as the theme of poetry”—a proposition he would echo in later poems like “A Higher Aim” (1998). As I will show in the discussion below, this proposition possesses seminal implications within the conceptual universe of modern Chinese poetry.

If we say that “Portrait of a Middle-Aged Poet” contemplates the reality of contemporary Chinese poetry, then in his long poem “Crusoe” (2001), Zhu Zhu draws on the situation of a solitary artist (an elder-generation painter who lived reclusively in Paris) to ponder Chinese poetry’s predicament of modernity within a larger sphere:

Flying on an airplane to San Francisco, I thought,
With the Pacific Ocean as my witness,
From now on I want to paint better, but unfortunately
I never painted another painting.

This is not just about the problem of artistic (poetic) creation itself, for it also touches on the problem of relations between the artistic self and the Other. In terms of contemporary Sinophonic poetry, it involves the hot-button issue of ethnic identity and globalization in poetry. Clearly, Zhu Zhu intended, through his parody on the Western literary classic *Robinson Crusoe*, to respond to this unavoidable issue. In fact, his deconstructive revision of the classic text amounts to an affirmation of selfhood by a modern poet, and an effective strategy for conveying his concept of art. In the same way, one critic made this remark on Derek Walcott’s revision of Defoe’s book: “Through reversal of perspective, such works give rise to a different way of reading reality than in the past.”⁶ Although “Crusoe” appropriated a character from a Western text, it turned out to be an ironic account of the artistic (poetic) scene within China: “By now I am remnant sand in an hourglass, keeping track of outdated time. / By now I am a shadow of nothingness, / Or maybe the servant.”

What “Portrait of a Middle-Aged Poet” had to say about the poetry scene, or about the fixed destiny of poetry, was to be echoed and amplified as consummate

5 Friedrich Schlegel. *Athenaeums Fragmente*. Tr. Li Bojie. Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1996. pp. 95-96.

6 Elleke Boehmer. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Tr. Sheng Ning, Han Minzhong. Shenyang, Oxford: Liaoning jiaoyu Press & Oxford University Press, 1998. p. 235.

allegory a few years later in Zhu Zhu's "Lamp-Moth" (2000). This poem recasts an image of the poet in a time of rapid change, but here metamorphosis has sheathed him in chitin like a Kafkaesque insect, relegated by time's heartless passing to the space within a dark crypt, in which he desiccates and crumbles through boundless years of expectation, having become "an ink-rubbing in the shape of a man." In "Portrait of a Middle-Aged Poet," "he is shrunken, / A ceaseless migrant through seasons / Losing delicacy and grace, so many would-have-been versions, / Beginning with disgust, / Dredging warmth out of icy rationality, / Striking nimble blows, nimble percussion, / His clumsy frame pressed close to a desk-top, / Pushing himself to erect a fortress, using language." This sense of helplessness later succumbs to despair in "Lamp-Moth":

...Those things I would not have thought of taking first
Will keep me company
Those emblems of love and accursedness.

In "Lamp-Moth," the reader's attention is drawn to light gradients and color blocs against the dim background. Darkness sets off flecks of light on burial objects, just as empty space offsets the futility of the moth's strivings toward the lamp. Patches of color are evoked by phrases like "torch's flame," "glaze" and "moss-green water," but this only deepens the crypt's deathly stillness. As I understand it, the story line for this poem was a supposed incident based on evidence showing that it may have actually happened: the last member of a gang of grave robbers, having handed out all the portable valuables, was sealed inside the tomb by his accomplices. A thousand years later, when light shone into the tomb once more, he had wasted away to a heap of bones.⁷ As for the image of a flame-seeking moth, it is an artistic transmutation of this tale. Here again, a concrete object is re-imagined as a point of view. Possessing the lightness of paper yet fearsomely intent, the "lamp-moth," as it flutters about in an indefinite expanse, is likened by Zhu Zhu to the protracted journey of poetry writing:

7 Though they are different thematically, this reminds me of the gruesome "Bog Queen," "Grauballe Man," and "Punishment" written by Seamus Heaney after viewing naturally preserved ancient corpses. Incidentally, it is interesting to read "Lamp-Moth" side-by-side with the short poem "Ceramic Figurine" (1998). The "figurine" was likewise forgotten under the ground, but its eventual fate was quite different from that of the moth. "I had gone into the earth, / But someone dug me up."

Of course I know it is myself,

I must break away

From existing as this phantom.

The simile is suddenly placed within an observer's perceptions, and this act of observation causes the syntactical flow to take a turn (from "I" to "he"), lightly tossing the narrative subject off to the side:

A lamp-moth,

Heading toward a subterranean glow,

En route to death, tallying up

The vileness of its companions

And a subterranean eclipse.

The dark crypt into which the "lamp-moth" plunges is structured by the metaphorical symptomatology of poetry writing. The "dark crypt" belongs to the second stage of writing. Once the poet has passed through the first style-defining phase, the dark crypt awaits as an ordeal to be passed through. Also, this is a trial from which he is fated never to return. For any poet, entering the dark crypt is a test of his wit and endurance. The buoyancy of the "lamp-moth" is fragile. "Giants in the history of writing never give you the slightest chance to let up. Hour by hour you must struggle for your freedom."⁸ Case studies in the history of poetry have proven to us that the "dark crypt" has swallowed up a great many talented poets and writers!

Yet the moment we apply this premise to decode the connotation of "Lamp-Moth," we end up causing the whole poem to crumble into dust. As cautionary notes to himself, of a sort, "Portrait" and "Lamp-Moth" consider poetry writing (or the poetry scene) as the theme of poetry in two respects, the first being the surface meaning. Here I only wish to state that Zhu Zhu writes in full cognizance of what is involved. He is intuitively aware of the predicament that writing can land someone in, and such awareness requires an in-depth historical sense. From another angle, "poetry as the theme of poetry" clearly implies that poetry must eventually return to itself. Even the grandest themes should never be allowed to do harm to poetry.

8 Zhu Zhu. "Awning—On Style and on Those Who Stop Writing" (Zheyangpeng—guanyu fengge he tingzhi xiezuo de ren). *Vertigo* (Yunxuan). Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi Press, 2000. p. 146.

Zhu Zhu's textual edifice depends on the meshing of lexical and syntactic details. Their completeness does not yield to analysis: they must be integrated into the complete structure and be given full play before they can live and breathe. Only thus can the "lamp-moth" exhibit both tremulous lightness and intentness within its sequestered realm.

2. "Language as a Discovery"

According to some people's impression of Zhu Zhu, he fits the classic type of the south-of-the-Yangtze poet. The reason may be his personal temperament, or that his poems may deal with so-called southland settings. For instance, Bai Hua made this observation, in a passage of his memoirs about the famous southern city of Yangzhou: "Along those weathered avenues, in secluded temple groves or in the recesses of old courtyards, one seems to sense the lingering charm of past dreams... embowered in canopies of living green, and here I am reminded of Zhu Zhu, a poet born in Yangzhou and educated in Shanghai. The aestheticism of his finely spun lines seems to hold a remnant image of Yangzhou."⁹ Such a characterization cannot be rejected out of hand, but it does little justice to the poet's uniqueness.

Even though Zhu Zhu has always endeavored to define a style for himself, I prefer to think of him as a poet who eschews style. If what Zhu Zhu calls the "first stage" is the period in which a poet lays a stylistic foundation, then in his case the first stage culminated in a collection titled *Salt on Withered Grass* (2002), wherein he firmly established his own style. This process took approximately ten years (if we do not count his earlier juvenilia). Zhu Zhu's poetry was distinguished from that of his contemporaries by its precise and rigorous formal shape, its restrained exactitude of expression, and its tightly wrought, solid rhythms—if such things can be embraced under the term style. Based on this collection and especially his early pieces like "Small Town Saxophone," "Phantom," "Themes of Summer in Nanjing," and "Stone City," one could easily get the idea that Zhu Zhu is a stylistic poet. In fact, more often than not he warily stays away from stylistic writing: "Some people, from when they first start writing, are very sensitive about style, and their lineage is overly obvious. If they don't solve this problem in the manner of a genius, which would have to be an extreme solution, then at some point they will start parodying themselves." Thus the truth about style is that "only when one wants to change something about oneself

9 Bai Hua. *A Lyrical Poet of the Mao Zedong Era* (Zuobian: Mao Zedong shidai de shuqing shiren). *Tibet Literature* (Xizang wenxue). Vol. 5, 1996.

does one become fascinated with ‘style.’”¹⁰ Perhaps style is totally necessary, but in Zhu Zhu’s first phase, throughout the formative period of his style, delicate changes (modulations and enhancements) were underway all the time:

I am forever a still-uncreated man
Making no unwarranted assumptions.

I eat stones. I write poems.

—“Assumptions” (1994)

Salt on Withered Grass was not Zhu Zhu’s first poetry collection, but its publication marked a stopping point in this phase of ceaseless change. He felt “an almost physical severance from his previous writing.” Prior to that, when his yearly self-published booklets had reached a certain thickness, he published *Cruising to Another Planet* in 1994. In this collection, poems like “Prelude” and “Summer and Other Seasons” still bear the stamp of his youthful taste for dazzling effects, like the surrealist painting on the cover. Yet, when it came time to publish *Salt on Withered Grass*, over half the poems from *Cruising to Another Planet* were left out (having clearly been subjected to some strict criterion).¹¹ From *Cruising to Another Planet* to *Salt on Withered Grass*, we get an idea of a constant process of weeding out in Zhu Zhu’s poetic thinking and practice. This was an ongoing process of defining a style, but it was also a process of resisting and breaking away from style.

Up to today, modern Chinese poetry has a hard time ridding itself of two chronic ailments: one is the pursuit of grandiosity and one is an overindulgence in passion. The first is seen in the way poetry takes on burdens beyond its own capacity, often leading to hollowness of diction. The latter is seen in the way poets use words impulsively just to vent their emotions, leading to otiosity and semantic excess. The former has been corrected somewhat by the “individual writing” of the past few years, but the latter has not been curbed and may even be exacerbated by passing fashions. Both of these flaws have to do with the poet’s mistaken self-valuation: he either overvalues or belittles his position and possible significance. Such misunderstanding hinders the poet’s realization of poetry’s inherent nature, to the point that

10 Zhu Zhu. “Awning—On Style and on Those Who Stop Writing”(Zheyangpeng—guanyu fengge he tingzhi xiezuo de ren). *Vertigo* (Yunxuan). Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi Press, 2000. p. 144.

11 Such rigor is also embodied in Zhu Zhu’s process of revising poems. According to my observation, he never shows a poem to anyone lightly, and he never submits a poem for publication unless he is sure it is finalized.

he cannot give thought to where poetry's secret possibilities might lie within the sphere of Sinopnonic writing. I am of the opinion that Zhu Zhu's poetry has delved down to the hidden nerve center of modern poetry. I concur with what Cai Tianxin wrote in his presenter's remarks for the Anne Kao Poetry Prize: "Zhu Zhu's main contribution to contemporary poetry lies in the poetic vision of his works, which are neither used to release pent-up emotion nor devised for purposes of critique."¹²

Indeed, "language as a discovery" constitutes the core of Zhu Zhu's poetry, and one could say that this is what makes Zhu Zhu's first phase remarkable. In fact, such concern for language carries on an idea of poetics that comes down to us from Baudelaire. (In the words of Paul Valéry, "Poetry possesses the resolve to change the function of language.") This has always been one of the centers of gravity of modern poetry. Each generation of modern poets has sought a breakthrough in language. However, some possessed an attitude toward language that over-relied on its self-sufficiency, treating poetry as no more than an intransitive lexical game. Another group of poets took expressiveness of language as a matter of course, supposing that poetry writing can exploit simple correspondences between words and feelings. Alternately, the surface smoothness or splendor of language becomes an aim pursued by some poets. Undoubtedly the notion of "language as discovery" can renew one's awareness of poetic language. "Discovery" implies awakening of a certain potential in language, to show that writing can touch upon the zone of utmost aliveness in language, bringing about a re-creation of the language medium. At the same time, this is also re-structuring of a person's psychic world in a way that can leave the reader amazed.

The "discovery" of language is an arduous journey. In a conversation among friends, Zhu Zhu once remarked, "You cannot say that I have not undergone hardships. I have frequently been plunged into hardships because of language. One faces a tremendous ordeal in poetry, namely the problem of how to put words together."¹³

12 Cai Tianxin. "A Lion Slashed by Teeth of Mutual Strife" (Yitou shizi de xianghu siyao). *Mountain Flowers* (Shanhua). Vol. 3, 2002.

13 On another occasion, Zhu Zhu described his "hardship of words" as follows: "In order to finish a poem, I would hide in my studio like a mole, or sitting on a night train while other people's heads were hanging down on their chests, I would be consumed by the anxiety of 'having something to say' but not yet finding suitable words for it. I would shudder because I continually got it wrong. The sounds that I could not utter seemed to gnaw away at things I passed on my journey—landscapes, cities, ocean views and even beautiful women. I believed that someday I would set those sounds down in writing, and then I could breathe easily in this world. Then I would be understood by others." Cf. Wang Jifang. "Poetry Can Give Me Dignity, Courage and Pity—An Interview with Zhu Zhu" (Shige hui daigei wo zizun, yongqi he lianmin—Zhu Zhu fangtan lu). *Fault Lines: Fin-de-siecle Literary Incidents* (Duanlie: shijimo de wenxueshigu). Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi Press, 2000. p. 148.

Like Francois Villon, the eccentric medieval poet of whom he wrote, Zhu Zhu was beset by the “thirst” and “bitter chill” of language:

In the protracted winter
A wolf goes searching for the forest of language.
—“I Am Francois Villon” (1998)

By wittily parodying the life-events of that French poet, Zhu Zhu conveys the catastrophic experiences one undergoes while searching for language to finish a poem—perplexity, melancholy and perhaps wild elation. These are the “hardships of language” that he spoke of, because the advent of inspiration comes at the cost of a tireless quest. “This sky full of snow is my uncanny itch.” “The sum of past events inflates outward.” “The mimetic storm makes howling noises.” From these odd lines themselves we can see the re-creation of language, which fits with Valéry’s heartfelt exclamation over Villon: “Masterful lines come out in quick succession, and each line is a new discovery worthy of being called a rediscovery of the classical.”¹⁴

Another meaning of “language as discovery” for Zhu Zhu is “to write crystal-line poems” or “being capable of an extramundane gaze” (“A Higher Aim”). This refers to coalescence of language into the kind of physicality and inner texture that is unique to poetry. If we draw a distinction between the “crystalline” and the “flame-like”,¹⁵ Zhu Zhu’s poems undoubtedly belong to the former school. Italo Calvino wrote that “a crystal is a model of perfection, possessing precise facets and the ability to refract light.” Here it should be pointed out that we should not understand “crystalline poems” and “extramundane gaze” in the ordinary sense, for the poem implicitly negates the conventional meaning of such phrases. It would be more fitting to say that “extramundane gaze” implies a change in the function of language (however, I doubt that Zhu Zhu would give too much credence to romantic notions of the poet as “seer”). The image of crystallinity indicates poetic language’s trait of being open to the light. Poetry is tempered and delicately polished until it becomes a means of recollecting language’s special features of prosody, chromatic tone, and poise:

Language, the tail of language
Rife with the peacock’s ringing cries.
—“The Strand” (1994)

14 Paul Valéry. *Variétés*. Tr. Duan Yinghong. Tianjin: Baihua wenyi Press, 2002. p. 18.

15 Italo Calvino. *Memos for the Literature of the Next Millennium*. Tr. Yang Deyou. Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu Press, 1997. p. 49.

Here a highly mobile state is conferred upon “language” (not just the language written into the poem, but the language in which the poem is written). Its dynamic, radiant properties are brought to the fore in poetry. Yet corresponding to this we also read:

Writing, writing

Listening to sand sink towards darkness...

—“Unutterable Afternoon” (1992)

Suggesting a palpable and frangible texture, along with time’s inner stillness and fluidity, his phrase “sand sinking towards darkness” reminds me of another metaphor used by Zhu Zhu for the corporality of poetic language, namely the title of his poetry book, *Salt on Withered Grass*. These two phrases have equivalent force: both make dual use of metaphor and visual effect to convey the genuine implications of poetry writing. The sprinkling of poetic fragments across the body of language is likened to “salt on withered grass.” This not only conveys an aesthetic taste leaning toward refinement, it also embodies a value orientation tending toward inwardness and aloofness. In terms of lines of development in modern Chinese poetry, Zhu Zhu’s language consummately embodies the function of delicate depiction. To a certain extent he reaches the ideal level that poets since Mu Mutian in the 1920s have longed for but have been powerless to attain:

I like to weave poems from shreds of tobacco and copper filaments. Poems should combine the beauties of shape and music. The melodic waves they strike on a person’s nerves are partly visible and partly invisible, partly palpable and partly impalpable. The world of poetry is found in a voice that is partly perceptible and partly imperceptible, as if reaching us through thick mist, like a faint beam wavering yet holding steady as day wanes, a sentiment that can be confided yet cannot really be confided.¹⁶

This is surely an attempt to communicate the amazing richness of modern Sino-phonetic writing.

3. “Spreading Wings Where the Damage Is Least”

Due to his rare sensitivity to language, and due to his many-year residence on

16 Mu Mutian. “Discourses on Poetry” (Tan shi). *Creative Monthly* (Chuangzao Yuekan). Vol. 1, No. 1, 1926.

the outskirts of a city south of the Yangtze, Zhu Zhu's poems convey strong feelings for light, sounds, and rhythms of nature. These attributes of the natural setting, these timeless "storms of lyricism and sublimation," stirred him to respond in language all his own.

Being "an observer limited by experience" sensitized him to capturing the light and shade of his natural setting:

...The balcony at this moment seems shrunken
Into the dappling of winter light.

—"Impromptu" (1994)

Cloud shadows brush the foothills
Like shade of trees on passers-by.

—"Mantuoluo River" (1995)

His lines are filled with an abundance of light: "Ah, thorny bright sunlight / Dipped in poison purple ink" ("Autumn"). His images of light come in abundant variety: "A night of snow rests on branch tips / Sunlight gives it the look of gorgeous lilies." ("A Dream Lion Slashed by Teeth of Mutual Strife"). With help from the natural magic of sunlight, the observer endows various objects with form: "Leaves falling in sunlight are like black-colored threads"; "A gray tone slowly creeps into the sunlight" ("Hurricane"). It also lets him trace the growth, disappearance, and transformations of various things: "Night sucks out the light saved within corrugated curves of birch trunks." ("Spongy Ground"); "Moonlight bends low; / Sucks out the substance of clamshells in water" ("In Agate Eyes"). Of course, mutable light exhibits its properties along particular pathways: "Light on glass is not a return / But an arrival" ("Days in Company with a Swedish Friend"). More often, the variations appear in light itself: "Narrowing tips of light-beams outside the courtyard / Look like palisades" ("Father's Memoirs"), or perhaps it assumes a hallucinatory guise: "An angel grinds dust, birds and a street scene / Into a light-beam that shines into the depths" ("Angel"). What is more, the changes and contrasts in light intensity can induce shifts of perception in the observer:

Only beneath the sun is there such a rose,
A rose that you suspect of being brocade,
Only thus could there be such a butterfly
Spreading wings where the damage is least.

—"Fluttering" (1998)

In the above-quoted poem, there are other similar lines: “Sunbeams shear the wool from our bodies.” Due to sun shining on them, a “rose” and a “butterfly” (suggesting metaphors for language) become two corresponding images. The relations of light to objects, as well as light-triggered modifications of objects themselves, are reinforced by all sorts of skillful metaphors that deserve comparison to the works of “impressionist masters.” “Falling leaves are like black-colored threads” or “narrowed tips of light-beams are like palisades”—I cannot think of alternate wording that could more fittingly express the swift descent of leaves in sunlight or the changing appearance of sunbeams in late afternoon. Perhaps these effects are brought about by what people call synesthesia, which enlivens the energy channels of language. “Sunlight” is a somewhat overused word, but through the graces of synesthesia it gives off bold scintillations. At times in the eyes of this observer we meet with this kind of vista: “Sunlight. The sunlight / Is like a living work of architecture...an opera house” (“One Who Trembles”), in which intimate space and sound are absorbed into the light. In many circumstances, sunlight exerts a filtering effect, dimming one portion that sleeps outside the observer’s field of vision, while illuminating objects that enter the observer’s linguistic field, making them yield up their inherent secrets: “Glaring rays on the hillside / Like phantoms of summer, doing their utmost / To drive the summer away” (“Phantoms”). Sometimes light rays may even pass through the observer’s body and consciousness. One obvious example is “Slowed-Down Beat,” in which transformations of light lead to a progression of color tones from yellow through green and white to blue. Clearly this is a reflection of shifting inner states:

...Or perhaps it is blue—
It is a blue bus. Then another bus
Drives by, and the human traffic of the southland
Covers it up like blue lawn grass.

Set off by contrasts of light, things of the world display a dappled appeal. Closely tied to this is the excellent discrimination displayed by Zhu Zhu among delicate variations of sound. Any sound will be found to be mingled with the breath of nature, but rapt attention is necessary to heed it, distinguish it, and tease out its unique melody. “Strummed like an instrument, the grove of trees has an inverted reflection”; “I have found my own string / Within the unmoving oak my hand rests on / Listening to my voice” (“In the Rain”). This is like the god Orpheus, honored by Rilke, whose song takes the form of a “tall tree” rising in a listener’s ear. Orpheus

stands, after all, for rare strains of music issuing from heaven. In our ordinary world, where things exist in murky chaos, the faculty of inspired hearing is a special gift that finds resonance and connection among all kinds of perceptions.

Tree leaves covered with chalky dust
Give off a sound like the murmur
Of a woman's silk garment

—“Beside the Ocean, You” (1997)

Here we find apt meshing and interchange between the visual and the auditory (as well as the smooth tactile caress of a silk garment). Together they form a marvelous synthesis of feeling which is detached from the background.

In terms of mental mechanism, fine discrimination of sound results not only from heightened concentration by auditory nerves, but also from outward extension of one's yearning to listen: “In the far-off world, someone distinguishes ever more sharply, / Someone digs up houses with a trowel of wind” (“Unutterable Afternoon”). Only by intentness and poise can one “hear sand sink into the darkness.” Of course such hearing is fundamentally hearing-through-language, or one could say it is an expansion of perception, or ultimately “perceptual expansion expressed through language.” However, as most people know, the shaping of phonetic effects is by no means a strong suit of the modern Chinese language. Chinese is not like Russian¹⁷ or French or other Western languages, all of which are characterized by auditory richness. Yet through acute analysis and incorporation of sound (along with the above-mentioned capturing of light), the properties of language will be changed. Within the linguistic texture of poetry, one will find that a secret listening device is built in, which can aurally capture such things as this: “Feelers of larkspur brushed by wind, tapping like knockers under the sky” (“Untitled”). In fact, this is a feeler sent out by language.

On this basis I think that Zhu Zhu's writing enriches contemporary Sinophonic poetry with a special kind of prosody, a “free-form fugue” that emerges by variation of recurrent strains—“after rainfall, autumn sets shadows of clouds moving.”

17 Poets draw on tonality of language to shape their own unique voice. For example, Akhmatova felt that Tsvetaeva's poems were “usually written by starting in the key of high C.” As Joseph Brodsky pointed out, “This was a characteristic of her voice. Her speech almost always started from the ‘other end’ of the normal octave; it began in the soprano range. Her voice possessed a keenness of sorrow sufficient to give one a feeling of continuous ascension.” Cf. Joseph Brodsky. *Child of Civilization (Wenming de haizi)*. Tr. Liu Wenfei. Beijing: Zhongyang bianyi Press, 1999. p. 14.

Of course such prosody is internal to the language itself, like a subterranean stream flowing through words, reminding one of “the sound wings make/ Coming together unhurriedly” (“Ancient Capital”), or like “the gray pall of a ballad” (“Portrait of a Middle-Aged Poet”). Through just the right degree of restraint, Zhu Zhu maintains evenness of semantic flow, lucidity of syntax, and a crisp yet tranquil tone:

Suddenly the sound of bells is heard
These chills, fragmentary chills
Drawing a nameless elation along with them.

—“Ancient Capital” (1991-1993)

To carry out reassembly and grafting of syntactic units by means of “linguistic photosynthesis” and synesthesia are important techniques for Zhu Zhu. The key is that an expression seems to gain new life through abrupt intermeshing or impact, causing lines to give off unexpected new meanings. The main result is that amazing metaphors are found sprinkled everywhere through his poems: “Amid ambient light gradually revealed by darkness/ Children in the middle of the street/ Are like flowers that forget to shout in amazement”; “The air outside the performance hall is a flock of birds wheeling up from a valley” (“Autumn Night”); “Opening wings where the damage is least” (“Fluttering”). . . In these acts of displacement, the firm material shell of certain phrases is stripped away, allowing their implications and functions to fit together in new ways. If we trace the origin of this technique in modern Chinese poetry, we can see it is a rational extension of what Zhu Ziqing summed up in the 1930s as “out-of-the-way metaphors,”¹⁸ but it is far richer and more highly textured.

Of course this “dislocation” is unlike the juxtaposition of images found in earlier poetry. The latter emphasizes similitude or homology between images; it stresses relatedness of images, whereas dislocation values the independence of an image and amplifies it into a “thought-realm,” which can be entered as a coherent *mis en scene*. “A person’s consciousness is a rainbow in his cornea, / Searching anxiously for oddments in the wilderness” (“A Person’s Consciousness Is a Flying Moth”). This is like these lines from “Conversation Is Always Bewildering”: “Though it may be

18 Zhu Ziqing defined “out-of-the-way metaphors” as follows: “It is to discover new connections between things, and to use the most economical language to organize these connections into a poem. What I mean by ‘economical language’ is to dispense with connecting words, letting the reader use his imagination to form bridges for himself.” Cf. Zhu Ziqing. *Miscellaneous Talks on New Poetry* (Xin shi zahua). Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1984. p. 8.

outmoded, / In my line of sight things are all related.” Displacement is sometimes expressed by dislocation of text and title in poems such as “Restrained, All-Too Restrained” and “Greece,” in which a normal understanding of the title gives us no understanding of the theme and no avenue into the space of a poem. This sets up a tense relation between title and text, but once the text is read through to the end, the veiled reference in the title is found to be borne out in the text. “In perfect clarity an axle is spinning, /And giving rise to unity.” Sometimes displacement comes across in the contrastive tension between stillness and movement (such as in “Stable”), or in elaboration that leaps and synthesizes (as in “Last Station”), while endowing the poem with an appealing suggestiveness.

Viewed from another aspect, displacement in a poem confers on it a surreal flavor or feel. A classic example is “Stone City,” which opens with these lines: “A letter from the Tang dynasty / Is delivered into my hands,” escorting the reader into a seemingly factual yet fantastic world. The shifts in scene between historical imagery (verses 2-4) and real observation (verse 5) are undoubtedly surreal due to the jarring contrast. The whole structure of “Summertime Roofs in Nanjing” unfolds by depiction of surreal details. One can raise countless examples of surreal imagery taking up parts of poems, such as the abrupt linking of “A halo cast off amid tufts of grass, / Meets with a repairman” (“Mantuoluo River”), or the jarring verb-object relations of “Like white fish of summer darting into a boulder” (“Piano Room”) or “Riding a bicycle, he goes across my fingers” (“Phantom”). Other examples are the fusing of perceptual categories in these lines: “Her ear is like a villa/ Asking for a kind of wine / It has never tasted” (“Woman with Earring”) and the witty inversion of private affairs and public context in this line: “His ironed pants, like the *Constitution*, leave nothing to criticize” (“Restrained, All-Too Restrained”). The imperious accuracy shown by such surreal displacements brings about remarkable effects, as in these lines:

...two kinds of life are used
To arrange one kind of life; two cities
Combine to make one city.
—“Slices of Life in the Past” (1993)

Such a rapid succession of displacements may be a cause of semantic obscurity, yet it has been important for forming Zhu Zhu’s poetic syntax, in which streamlining and intricacy are interwoven. This would seem to be a contradiction, for streamlining is marked by an inward retraction of force, a condensation done by

paring down of words and economy of sentence forms (such as “Writing, writing / Listening to sand sink towards darkness”); on the other hand, intricacy is brought about by aggregation and proliferation, marked by lushness and a tendency toward outward extension. Sometimes, in order to balance streamlining with intricacy, Zhu Zhu resorts to using recondite vocabulary and tough-to-crack sentence forms. Here we cannot avoid mentioning the infiltration of translated literature into Zhu Zhu’s poetry.¹⁹ By now it is unlikely that anyone would presume to negate the enrichment of modern Chinese language and literature by translation. There is no denying that emergence and enrichment of Sinophonic writing has been predicated upon openness to and absorption of various translated writings. Huang Canran remarked upon “the power of strangeness from translated works, which has struck sparks within the Chinese language,”²⁰ and this is a power that has functioned constructively all through the modern period. As for modern Chinese poetry, it has been the recipient of transformative influences—in terms of rhythm, tone and other aspects—throughout this process. Embodied in Zhu Zhu’s poems we see changes in poetic modes absorbed from translated literature, for example the use of passive constructions: “Like pulp of fruit left out in the sun / The southland has been made to undergo something, / The sun keeps the lingering image in its eye.” (“Prayer for a Heart”). Another example is the kind of image we find here: “When I love—yes—even on the wall I see / That serving maid smiles and paces forward” (“Lamp-Moth”). Another example is the liberal sprinkling of negatives in “Slices of Life in the Past.” Having been initiated by translations, this mode of writing will continue to expand the expressive range within modern Chinese.

All of his efforts to seek out resonance between melodies of language and the melodies of nature imply a certain conception of modern poetry on Zhu Zhu’s part: “Today, we need to recognize the effectiveness of design, just as we acknowledge the appeal of all poets who show originality. The blending of prior preparation with elements that come out during writing is what I call ‘design.’ It is the ongoing, ex-

19 Like the works of every outstanding modern poet in China, external influences on Zhu Zhu’s poetry are obvious. With great adeptness he has absorbed nutriment from poets like Stevens, Seferis, Montale, Borges, Transtroemer, Char and Brodsky, transforming them into a driving force for his own creative work.

20 Huang Canran. “The Modern Sensitivity in Translation of Poetry” (Yi shi zhong de xiandai mingan). *Necessary Angle* (Biyao de jiaodu). Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu Press, 2001. p. 162.

panding recurrence of patterns from your own psyche.”²¹ This is a poetics that fuses intellectual composition with impromptu inspiration, and thus perhaps it can help to amend the otiose, flaccid, piecemeal condition into which much contemporary Chinese poetry has fallen. Although one part of poetry writing comes from a person’s innate feeling for language, it is far from being a rhapsodic flight requiring no discipline or moderation, as some people might suppose.

4. “Death Has Its Own Inconstant Speed”

The search for novel modes of language is often tied to a particular spiritual orientation. In Zhu Zhu’s poems, blunt yet striking assemblages of words or syntactic forms are not just raw outpourings based on temperamental preference. Instead they trace motifs of experience based on contemplation of the world. Thus his words take on a deeply thoughtful tone: they are particular and immediate, yet at the same time they are far-reaching and weighty. One of the early poems that was retained in *Salt on Withered Grass*—showing his fondness for Borges—uses a personal, fanciful touch to render illusory figments of scenery, presenting a vast unstimulating space:

That was in the South. In a quiet freight yard the train
Came to a stop.
Nobody knew that was the last station. The passing months
Had thoroughly forgotten themselves.

—“Last Stop” (1990)

Of course duration is also important here. This poem appears to be describing a scene, yet it also conveys a mood or mental state: “Despair can only disappear, it can only be made silent, / And contained in silence. That which is / Manifests amid that which is not.” The basic key is somber, filled with the empty sense of being in a featureless setting. It is my opinion that this poem uses a wide-open space to hold the essence of writing up to view. Once “slumbering language” has been awakened, what refuge awaits his pen with its icy touch? If metaphysical discussions are valid, then writing is a way to oppose the ravages of time. If so, it can be used to ward off emptiness in reality, and in one’s inner world—

21 Zhu Zhu. “Awning—On Style and on Those Who Stop Writing”(Zheyangpeng—guanyu fengge he tingzhi xiezuo de ren). *Vertigo* (Yunxuan). Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi Press, 2000. p. 146. Elsewhere Zhu Zhu once remarked, “Even having entered the real writing process, constitutive relations among words are still unexpected, elusive, and beyond control.” This lends support to the above view.

...That which is
Manifests amid that which is not.

For Zhu Zhu, writing poetry indeed goes hand in hand with overcoming a sense of emptiness. Corresponding to the slightly halting tone of his enjambments, while writing he often feels “a sense of depletion upon first waking” (“Mantuoluo River”). The sense of emptiness is not only a hard-to-fend-off experience, it is also a way of looking at the world. “Once again my passing days are so hollow they can contain anything / My frailty is counteracted / It is being cursed, by an ice cube in a liquor glass, / Facing my image that burns in the mirror” (“Returning at Night”). It is the stubborn, ancient idea of “void,” simultaneously implying the void of space and time. Thus, its transcendent interpretation will necessarily imply compassion. He speaks of the glaring sun: “Weren’t you the patterns written in frost, delicate and fraught with human qualities?” (“Day in Autumn”) In the poetic fragments quoted above, the interfusion of light and shade indicates a boundary phase of writing. Once set in motion by inspiration, this becomes an ongoing state of quiet waiting, searching, and winnowing.

However, rather than attributing Zhu Zhu’s fosterage of this habitual practice to the city he lived in, I would rather attribute its source to the suburb where he habitually resided. The city provided his writing with a background of customs and sensibility, but the city’s outskirts gave him a space where he could engage in metaphysical contemplation. In a short essay, Zhu Zhu wrote: “The suburb...is not only a birthmark which the poet can recognize on the motherly body of the city, it is also an omen of estrangement and remoteness. It is a gap through which one goes missing, but also through which one can return. In fact the suburb is each city’s memory of itself.”²² In another piece, he directly states the significance of the suburb:

In writing the history of a city, perhaps we should apportion more pages to the transformations of its suburbs. As distinctness of different city districts is effaced (to the point that they overlap), the comparison of one suburb with another seems to take on increasing value. This discovery is likewise applicable to people.²³

22 Zhu Zhu. “Space as a Guiding Thread” (Zuwei xiansuo de kongjian). *Vertigo* (Yunxuan). Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi Press, 2000. p. 141.

23 Zhu Zhu. “Ten Nighttime Pathways—On Suburbs” (Yewan xiaojing de shitiao daolu—jiaoqu shi). *Vertigo* (Yunxuan). Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi Press, 2000. p. 47.

The elusive breath that wafts through Zhu Zhu's poetic works is indeed unique to the southern city where he resides—"An ancient capital, an unhurried rhythm." However, this elusive breath does not emanate directly from the city's body; rather, it comes from his own imaginary divergence from the objectified city. "In that big black / Spidery web, the dusk / In lonely darkness / Is gathering." ("Ancient Capital") Thereupon, Zhu Zhu attempts to use time-honored artistic tenets to rescue a vision of the city, even while it is losing coherence: "But for its sake you make restitution to the sun of debt / The sun over my crypt" ("Ceramic Figurine"). More often, he is standing in the suburb's wide-open, quiet expanse as he scrutinizes the city's teeming outlines: "Most arrogant of cities / You make me hear the din of coursing blood" ("Transit" II). The suburb is doubtless a unique place to stand, an invisible boundary where visions of the city are engendered and where they disappear. At the same time it is a two-way mirror: here the city's outlines meet with natural landscapes, counter-posing the modern and the traditional, mingling the empirical with the *a priori*.

Like the *flâneur* described by Baudelaire, Zhu Zhu's hours spent frequenting the shadowy, maze-like groves of suburbia doubtless give him many chances to reflect upon the city and to sort out his thoughts about it. The scenes of life he witnesses while returning home, sometimes as a "civil servant," stir a twinge of unutterable compassion: "Amid cursing and bustling / They are gradually reduced to silence—" ("Civil Servants"). At other times, as he strolls on a "road at the city's edge," the spiritual ferment lying hidden under that hazy distant view is like what he sums up in his essay "Standing Watch at the City's Edge":

Waterfowls skim past a gap in the city wall, and a silvery aureole of sunlight over a peak seems to flash asignal, quickly transmitting a rich beauty not caught by the naked eye.

These two aspects of the suburb stand in an intertextual relation, permeated by "a pre-existing influence within my body—namely our ancestors' melancholy and their sensitivity to dew-like impermanence—never despairing but soberly compassionate."²⁴ At the same time, it embraces concern for everyday life.

Pity engendered by a sense of emptiness can be traced back to Zhu Zhu's early piece "One Who Trembles": "For each living person / Penetrating light should only shine / Into his misfortune." In "Twilight in a Suburb of Yangzhou," written at about

24 Zhu Zhu. "Preface to *Vertigo*" (Yunxuan zixu). *Vertigo* (Yunxuan). Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi Press, 2000. p. 4.

the same time, even more sobering considerations of death underlie the pitying mood: “Let youthfulness concentrate on death, / That countenance ever quiet / Through all commotion, / That summons ever arriving through dimmest light.” The pitying mood is founded on a viewpoint that gives broader penetration and sublimation of emptiness, conveying the maturity of the poet’s intelligence. Yet a more rigorous poetic theme is what goes hand-in-hand with emptiness, namely death, because “The emptiness we looked upon lightly / Has swapped death for life” (“Transit” 1). In Zhu Zhu’s poetry, a sense of emptiness becomes the final refuge of death: “On all roads leading here / The dead are holding up banners that resemble thin ice. / Their gloomy armor carries off the last light from the sky” (“Transit” 2); “People want an ornamented, gnawed-upon and approved-of / Concrete pedestal, more than they want / An abstract, poetic, unmoving one of dark color” (“Plague”)—inasmuch a sense of emptiness is thought to be the source of death.

In my view the crux of the problem is not whether death appears in the poetry, but whether it has been integrated into what T.S. Eliot called “a larger body of experience” and furthermore has been poetically converted into an excavation of existence’s profundities. Fundamentally, what the thought of death brings should not be indulgent dissipation; rather, it should be restraint of excessive desires in the search for ultimate meaning. For Zhu Zhu, “Death has a drifting, inconstant speed” (“Twilight in a Suburb of Yangzhou”). It is surely not an offhand, now-and-then feeling; rather, it is a response to existence from right down in the marrow. The speed of death may be so fast that “As soon as I think of death I die” (“Woman Wearing an Earring”), or it may slow down to a long process of resisting the inevitable: “In the moon there is surely patience to make each day more beautiful, / Shining over us as we gradually tilt toward death” (“On the Lake”). Zhu Zhu’s treatment of death shows a rare sense of proportion. One way is to expel the past from one’s own body while taking the standpoint of the future, thus gaining insight into the whole process of death: “I rub the window glass, / Becoming the naked skin of death, two layers / Of lemon-yellow grow out/ From my body” (“Window”). The other way is the opposite, tracing the already-dead self as it glides through time to the origin point, gradually unfolding the awe-inspiring experience of primal union. Thus, it gives rise to what Duo Duo calls “looking from the direction of death.” Two obvious examples are “Lamp-Moth” and “Joint Burial.” As for the latter way, it has increasingly become Zhu Zhu’s own unique poetic mode. Zhu Zhu’s reason for handling death this way is like what Sylvia Plath said, “I cannot help but perform this terrible

little allegory once more, in order to get away from it.”²⁵ Yet when curious viewers go behind the curtain of the puppet show to look, they still cannot unravel the riddle of this skit.

However, it is undeniable that the poet, as he undertakes the painful “search for a nameless object in memory” (“Transit”1), has intense feelings of emptiness and death which are eventually resolved in the act of forging poetry itself:

The powerful wind
Has nuggets more wonderful than gold
Which will be given to a jeweler.
We need only wait in the cracks of hunger
For what should be accepted, what would be worth depicting.
—“Song of the Kitchen” (1998)

Here the poet once again strums out his melody of “poetry as the theme of poetry.” For a true work of poetry, the theme is not an external embellishment using words; rather, it is an internal part of the poem’s body. Not only does it enter into disciplining the poet’s psyche and character, it also enters into shaping the poem. Perhaps in the eye of an onlooker, poetry writing places itself at a distance from ordinary life, or may even run counter to it: “We are farthest away from an ambulance on the street / Or grave mounds on a foothill, / Like fondness for peonies embroidered on an apron / We love the colored motifs of history.” This would in fact be a deep-seated prejudice. As an unspoken rebuttal to such a prejudice, “poetry as the theme of poetry” actually carries out the archaic conception of embracing the “usefulness of the useless”: “With full composure we intend to spread salt across grass, / Sprinkle pepper into slumber.” Thereupon, the most common particulars of kitchen activity constitute veiled treatments of poetry writing itself.

Poetry writing itself—and here I am talking about the intrinsic process that achieves satisfactory expression—is already filled with moral sensibility. We might as well consider, first of all, how it touches upon the appropriate balance of luxury and thrift. As a poet’s wife exclaimed one day, “Writing poetry is a luxury that has no bounds.” Yet from another angle, it may be thriftiest of all in its use of words, and it may practice this in the spirit of an austere discipline. The moment you realize you are caught up in such a

25 This interpretation was given by the poetess Sylvia Plath during a BBC on-air reading of her poem “Daddy.”

paradox, how can you keep from trembling?²⁶

Those poets who “wait in the cracks of hunger” are indeed cognizant of “what should be accepted, what is worth carefully depicting.” Those “nuggets more wonderful than gold” they offer are “things that go on gleaming and give people comfort.”

5. “Nuggets More Wonderful Than Gold”

Can we thus say that Zhu Zhu is offering things—or more precisely a way of presenting things—so that people can better understand or recognize things? In poems with titles like “On the Stairway,” “Small Town Sax,” “The Strand” and “Slumber,” as well as “Figurine,” “Lamp-Moth” and “Imprint,” assorted things open themselves to manifest their connections with the world, with words and with meaning. Due to things being thrown open, language can assume more vivid forms. As Italo Calvino remarks, “Words tie together visible traces with unseen things, absent things and things desired or feared. Like a narrow bridge erected over an abyss in an emergency, properly used language lets us approach visible or invisible things in this world with steadiness, concentration and caution. At the same time they prompt us to heed the information that things (visible or not) impart to us by means other than language.”²⁷

As Rilke put it, a thing is a particular entity that holds experiences and memories of everyday life: “This thing, however lacking in value, incorporates your relations to the world; it leads you into the midst of things and people. By way of its existence, however you catch sight of it, and through its final destruction or mysterious disappearance, you will have passed through the phases of being human, at last gaining entrance to the deepest place, which is death.”²⁸ Heidegger’s explanation for this was that the original meaning of “thing” is “coalescence”: it aggregates heaven, earth, divinity and humanity, causing them to converge, exchange reflections and constitute a world together. The function of language is to affirm the existence of things, to restore the mysterious original nature of things—that is, the “thingness” that makes them things. What is more, the true value of art lies in disclosing the

26 Cf. Zhu Zhu. Mu Duo. “The Nightingale Has Sung Long Enough—Assorted Thinkers 8: Zhu Zhu” (Dujian de tiku yijing gou jiu le—zhuzi baijia 8: Zhu Zhu). <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/1723978/>

27 Italo Calvino. *Memos for the Literature of the Next Millennium*. Tr. Yang Deyou. Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu Press, 1997. p. 54.

28 Rainer Maria Rilke. *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. Tr. Zhang Li. Guangzhou: Huacheng Press, 1999. p. 163.

coalescence of heaven, earth, divinity and humanity in a thing, while at the same time maintaining the original state of art's materials.²⁹ That being so, the values of a poetic work will be found firstly in its endeavor to manifest the thingness of a thing richly. Secondly, in the course of utilizing words it does not cause words to lose something of themselves, but rather it should confirm words as what they are. Assessing Zhu Zhu's use of words this way, we will find that it fulfills this criterion quite well.

In Zhu Zhu's poems, things function as perspectives to structure a poem, which means that a thing is shown as a way of seeing the world. Substantively speaking, it is in silent, unspoken interchange with the world. This makes me think of Zhu Zhu's fondness for Walter Benjamin, whose saturnine temperament is similar to his own. Benjamin was given to weighty thoughts on things, and as Susan Sontag observed, "he was aware that the melancholic's relations with the world often transpire himself and things, rather than between himself and people. This is a true interchange which can reveal meanings. Precisely speaking, because the melancholic is constantly being pursued by death, they understand best of all how to read the world. Or one could say that this world only reveals itself to melancholics who scrutinize it minutely, while others have no such luck. The more lifeless an entity is, the more keenness and strength one's mind needs to penetrate it."³⁰ There is a power of stillness congealed in the interior of a thing. In Zhu Zhu's poems, complex views of things—the rich originality of his perspectives on them—correspond to the multiple dimensions of his relations to the world. This is the inner driving force for writing, referred to at the beginning of this essay, which concentrates the inner imperative of Zhu Zhu's poetry.

Yet, people's relations to things are often quite elusive in real life and especially in artistic creation. Hence our idealized notions of embracing things with words and our conventional ideas of naturalism are coming into question. What is more, we find that disconcerting gaps may appear between words and things, such that increasingly minute depictions give an increasing sense of unreality. "We view an object, facing it in isolation, and then we try to describe it for ourselves in the most objective, neutral way. Then it gradually takes over the whole setting. It enlarges until it crowds us and oppresses us; it enters our bodies and deprives us of our own positions, reducing us to a miserable state. Otherwise you have the entirely opposite

29 Cf. Martin Heidegger. "The Origin of a Work of Art". *Holzweg*. Tr. Sun Zhouxing. Shanghai: Shanghai Yiwu Press, 1997. p. 4.

30 Susan Sontag. "Prologue to *The Arcades*". Cf. Sun Bing. ed. *Walter Benjamin: Works and Profile* (Benyaming: zuopin yu huaxiang). Shanghai: Wenhui Press, 1999. p. 248.

phenomenon: We stare fixedly at the object, as if it were demonic; it may seem like something illusory or unreal that we have no way of understanding.”³¹ Eventually, the objectivity (or truthfulness) of words themselves come into doubt.

I feel that Zhu Zhu’s “Blue Smoke” (2001) is a valid instance of writing that probes the relations of words and things without taking a one-track approach. In the intersecting views of artist and model, “Blue Smoke” offers a poetics of seeing. The painter “keeps his eye on the canvas,” concerning himself with the model’s pose and bearing, plus the associations derived from them. At first the model takes a stiff view of things. She is forced to sit there in a daze. “A housefly tries to fly out through the glass; after a while it is nauseating to watch.” After that she “looks through the window behind the painter, where she can see the Bund.” Eventually, “she feels she need not/ Invest herself completely in her sitting posture, or perhaps / She could let it remain there empty.” She could even issue forth from “the outer shell of expression,” removing herself from where the portrait is being done, to look back on the painted image that originated from her. Of course the painter’s view and the model’s view on artistic veracity are not equivalent. She is puzzled as to why “the figure in the painting looks a bit like her, but not quite.” Yet something about it rings true:

That wisp of smoke tendrilling up from between her fingers
Really seems to be there, drifting in the air

Perhaps “Blue Smoke” comes close to Calvino’s understanding of Lucretius’ *De Rarum Naturae*: “It is a poem about invisible things and infinite, unpredictable possibilities—perhaps even about nothingness.”³² The wisp of blue smoke that the painter repeatedly tries to render is just such a “thing.” It has visible shape, color and motion, but due to its borderline perceptibility and semi-existence it also partakes of the invisible world: it is a thing hovering between being and nothingness. The painter “keeps trying to render it,” but it is hard to depict such a gossamer-like thing accurately. This plot element revealed at the end also reveals the dilemma faced by artistic creation in trying to convey the relation of words to things.

31 This statement was made by a participant in a symposium moderated by Michel Foucault. Cf. Du Xiaozhen. ed. *Works of Foucault (Fuke ji)*. Shanghai: Shanghai yuandong Press, 1998. p. 31.

32 Italo Calvino. *Memos for the Literature of the Next Millennium*. Tr. Yang Deyou. Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu Press, 1997. p. 6.

6. “My Pen Records and Searches for Form”

The center of gravity throughout *Salt on Withered Grass* mostly falls upon excavating the latent capability of words in themselves. The impact made by any of these poems mostly comes from the inherent power of words, since the luster, scent and texture of words are enshrined within the ambience that any given poem creates. However, once this collection was published, a latent change which Zhu Zhu had been anticipating began to emerge above ground. Certain determinants of change, lying in wait within his writing, finally triggered a shift which turned out to be a qualitative advance. As if a chrysalis were preparing to break open, a phase of writing in a “dark crypt” had to be undergone. An isolated, pain-wracked “lamp-moth” would gain new life, but how? Such were the circumstances in which a new masterpiece—“Qinghe County”—came to be written, even while the manuscript of *Salt on Withered Grass* was still in preparation at the publishing house. This was indeed a pivotal milestone of Zhu Zhu’s poetry writing, marking his arrival at a higher stage. In this process, the substance of his language was recast, accomplishing a change from crisp to supple.

“Qinghe County” was undoubtedly a new kind of writing for Zhu Zhu, or one could say it initiated a brand new direction in his writing. Of course, the emergence of this phase had an ample foundation. The substantive leap seen in “Qinghe County” was incubated from certain transformative elements that sparkled intermittently in *Salt on Withered Grass*. In fact, this new work combined sparks of change from many previous works and brought them to blazing intensity. Actually any poet carries forward elements (or patterns) from his early writing and tries to make something of them in his later writing. Implicit in this is a hidden pathway of transmission and derivation pertaining to poetics. One can see that in the complex context of the ‘90s, Chinese poetry had not given up its efforts toward renewal in poetics. Regrettably, a whole new round of experiments—“new narrative,” “transitivity,” “bodily writing”—was swallowed up in a faddish series of conceptual manifestos. What has always intrigued me is the question of which transformative elements, beyond ordinary categories of technique, can trigger innovation in poetry? How can those transformative elements be incorporated into new writing? Is there a lesson for modern Chinese poetry in this process of incorporation and how it was experienced by individuals?

A few signs of incipient transformation had appeared in poems of the early 1990s, but later certain tendencies took the fore. The above-mentioned poem “Window” and “Frivolous Family Tree,” from the suite “Small Town Baroque,” displayed a self-absorbed gaze in a state of separateness, a display rendered in leaping yet

distinct details. As for poems like “On the Lake” and “A Higher Aim,” they give an impression of settings and objects being clearer in outline, at least on the surface, letting up on the previous tautness of interlock among words. “Father’s Memoir” brought in a warm narrative tone, but this differed from the lyrical mode adhered to in the somewhat anecdotal works of his early period, because its pose of “recollection” put more emphasis on the ambience engendered by narrative. Especially worth mentioning are his more concentrated efforts at prose writing, starting in the mid-1990s, which influenced his mode of poetry writing. Prose offered a sinuous sentence form and a proficiency in something similar to stitch-work. What is more, the ease and loose expansiveness of prose was to prove helpful in his reshaping of poetic language.³³

The suite “Qinghe County,” composed of six independent poems, still bases its unfolding in the dimension of language. However, a shift has appeared here in language’s center of gravity and function. It has shifted from hammering out refined strings of words towards conveying the relations of language to experience on multiple levels. Fragmentary sentence forms based on horizontal connections among words have given way to holographic sentence forms that unfold vertically by probing from level to level. What follows from this is a gradual fadeout of the ringing clarity of a wordsmith’s handiwork, giving way to silken interlacing throughout. Thus in at least one sense “Qinghe County” can be considered to have paradigmatic significance, of a much-anticipated kind, as an “actionable text”: “It is not only an in-depth excavation of the potential of language, illustrating its ceaseless self-transcendence, but more importantly it is filled with experience beyond mere lyricism. What is more, it is capable of tapping into the reader’s own experience.”³⁴ It is a dual exploration of language and its relation to experience, which can help renew our picture of language and our recognition of the world.

On the surface, “Qinghe County” is a revision or rewriting of a familiar historical tale. Worth noting is that *Plum Flowers in a Golden Vase*—the long narrative work on which the poem is based—is itself a rewriting or elaboration of one segment from another long narrative work, thus setting up a particular mirroring relation among the three texts. This mirroring superimposes the three texts and shuttles in and out among their differing narrative modes—or one could say their linguistic

33 Evidence of this can be found in “Qinghe County” and other poems written in the same period, such as “Joint Burial,” “Lamp-Moth,” and “Blue Smoke.”

34 Cheng Guangwei. “Poetry of the Nineties: Naming by a Different Criterion” (Jiushi niandai shige: ling yi yiyi de mingming). Cf. Zhao Tingyang, He Zhaotian, eds. *Review of Scholarly Thought* (Xueshu sixiang pinglun). Shenyang: Liaoning University Press, 1997. Vol. 1, p. 210.

formulae for fictionalizing events. The result demonstrates the impressive plasticity of the Chinese language. In terms of language formulae, “Qinghe County” draws on the incipient “pre-modernity” in the two traditional works and develops it into a richly expressive modernity (among contemporary Chinese poems, there is nothing that can replace it). Clearly, rather than saying that “Qinghe County” revises or rewrites a historical tale, one should say that it is a restructuring of space-time by the poetic imagination. In the process of “re-fictionalizing” those tempestuous past events, it navigates the framework of received plot details and their conceptual logic with deconstructive flair. Bringing modern experience to bear, this poem transforms the inner texture of the classical language. At the same time, its structure is a response to contemporary explorations of long-poem structure. This is a paradigmatic instance of the recasting and self-transformation of Sinophonic writing.

In this essay I do not plan to discuss “Qinghe County’s” scenario as a “pseudo-verse-drama” (an appropriation of the verse drama form), even though the list of characters at the beginning and the speeches in first person make people think of a multi-act play. However, this piece’s way of drawing on theatrical form, especially in its outstanding use of personae, deserves to be anatomized. Whoever reads it may notice the thread through the main part (poems 2-6), which unfolds by self-accounts spoken in the first person. Each “I” (representing a different character), assumes a single image in speaking, but behind the speaker’s image lurk shadows of a few other characters. However, a key character who really should stand frontstage at some point, the woman Pan Jinlian, is never presented as an “I,” because she is only present as one of those shadows (spoken of as “her” in the poems “Libertine” and “Instructor Wu”). However, she is placed at the focal point where glaring looks from three important characters intersect,³⁵ so her features are illuminated by all three, making her face more distinct than that of any speaker. The way these characters overlap with underlying, shadowy figures constitutes another “mirroring” relation. By positing an “I,” a platform is set up for projecting these shadows, while functioning as a two-directional filter or colander.

What is more, positing the “I” makes the characters’ speeches have the ring of soliloquies, so they are recollections, but within that we hear confessions poured out into the void. Recollection equips each person with a particular dimension of vision,

35 The relationship of “her” (Pan Jinlian) to these three characters can be explored. These three characters are bound up with her fate, and they are emblematic of three aspects—birth, desire, and death. Thus they serve as a background to her whole biographical arc. However, in dealing with “her” relations to “them” (particularly Wu Song), Zhu Zhu deliberately maintains a complex ambiguity, causing all that happens to be unavoidable and yet completely random.

in which slices of the past are obviously selected by memory. In fact, recollection tailors a suitable speed of utterance, viewpoint and color-scheme for each person. (Especially unconventional is the speech of “Wu the Large,” who spins out half-serious jests in long-winded sentences of up to 27 syllables.) Thus there is no need to reiterate the ins-and-outs of plot adaptation. The important thing is that the whole story has been transformed into the material of language. In order to emphasize the luminous points in experience, language has to move back and forth along the steep, narrow road between reality and memory, setting off beacon fires for all to see.

Right from the beginning, recollection sets up an apparatus to enable the capturing of “scenes”:

We were intently concerned with his rapid dash
Like watching a daisy chain of camera angles...

Setting up this apparatus enables “our” assertive entry into a speech about “him” (Brother Hun), to take place. The setting up of this apparatus is highly important. The structure of “Qinghe County” holds together precisely because of occasional incursions by an underlying narrator, whom we might as well call the meta-narrator. (There is a similar presence in poems such as “Lamp-Moth”). The “meta-narrator” creates a duality in the protagonist, causing the attributes of “I” to hover between meta-narrator and speaker, so that the character is not only the one being written about but also the one writing. The “meta-narrator” helps to split the vector of narration, setting up tension between meta-narrative and the speaker’s soliloquy. Thus the latter takes on chromatic, polyphonic qualities. As Zhu Zhu remarked while addressing his use of the first person, “The use of ‘I’ in literature implies a bidirectional operation with single intent. The ripples one stirs up in the countenance of the Other have their source in the ‘I,’ whereupon one becomes more purely aware of oneself.”³⁶In the Prelude titled “Run Quickly, Brother Hun,” the speakers (“we”) ultimately shrink to the status of a still-life assemblage: “We are a teashop that bottles up all secrets, we are / Spectators who have no time to tell him the conclusion,” and with this they greet the protagonist’s appearance onstage.

Memory invariably leaves the marks of intense experience on the chopping block of language. For instance, in the memory of Xi Menqing (“The Libertine”),

36 Cf. Zhu Zhu, Mu Duo. “The Nightingale Has Sung Long Enough—Assorted Thinkers 8: Zhu Zhu” (Dujian de tiku yijing gou jiu le—zhuzi baijia 8: Zhu Zhu). <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/1723978/>

the so-called “rain” that is like “a poultice of licorice-root absorbed into the skin” once stirred his lurid imaginings: “Rain seems to take you far away, / The rainbow brought by rain envelopes two or more cities”; “Rain spreads in huge dimensions, like material you can never measure.” As a stimulus which intertwines with the perceiver, rain is a conductor which can induce delirious “inspiration.” It pours from the sky’s expanse, across his sense organs with their remembered lust that was “recklessly spent”: “It spatters down from the eaves like words of that cloistered soul / Who taught me mnemonic verses for emptily spending my life.” As for the recollections of “Wu the Large,” the idea of “strength” gives raw energy to his imaginings and fantasies. Between “strength” and body there is an entanglement that characterizes his awareness of existence, which is a riddle to be unraveled like the motion of washing a window: “As she washes a window she finds that transparency is impossible, / Yet semi-transparency is a trap. / She often reaches toward the outside surface to wipe a splotch, / But the splotch is like a knot of perplexity that comes from her hand.” Yet he finally discovers that the “strength” that supports everything is nothing but “emptiness, a very big emptiness,” whereupon his life-force dodges into “a net wherein the mesh and perforations are all moving at once.”

At the same time, recollection tries to retain the jumbled feel of experience in its original state, letting all details and recessive tendencies appear in plain sight. Language is involved in the cherishing and retention and reevaluation of experience, letting it be genuine and palpable. Behind the image of Wu Song the hero (“Instructor Wu”) is someone caught between two horns of a dilemma. One side is “Her body is a potful of sweet sap, / It flexes like wires that have power / To draw me in and swallow me”; “My sense of sight tightens like a band around my head / Not letting me perceive anything else. / A huge temptation/ Is welling upwards.” On the other side is “There is warmth for me in the fence of blood ties/ Standing mottled in grass-green silence.” Caught in this impasse, he feels “disoriented, tied-down and unclean,” like someone “under house arrest in an ancient myth of confinement.” Emptiness and fear constitute the whole core of his experience. “The tiger I killed bare-handed was a projection.” Language captures this dawning sense of illusion as it flashes by, exposing the shadowy bottom layer of his humanity. Similar to the vulnerability of this tough guy, Old Lady Wang has a physique like a dried leaf (“Curio Box”), but it too catches her up in a fictive tug-of-war between tenderness and aloofness: “This body that is fed up with life / Is still giving off bubbles, and each one / Is bigger and rounder than the last.” That curio box in which her withered youth is sealed away is actually a hidden focal point, fashioned from greed and ill intentions:

That'd be quite a spree, but I choose a low temperature to stay alive
A tacky way to stick around,
I choose a long dry season and a dim teashop.

I want to become
The oldest thing,
Hunkering down,
Not like a tornado* but like a wind under a door,*
I keep away from any destructive fate.

(The Chinese word for tornado literally means “swirling dragon wind”;
the expression “wind under a door” refers to private household routines.—
Translator)

Later, memory lifts the lid on shadows that were lurking in experience, throwing them open holographically: “The eastern capital is like a cliff-face / But Qinghe County is worse, an engulfing abyss, / Each residence is an above-ground coffin / All jumbled together, and the dwellers / Live as if they had fallen once from a great height, / Screams from their mouths immediately settle like sediment” (“Credibility”). These nightmarish scenes assault the retinas of one who has fallen from favor. This county, which dominates the whole suite of poems, displays its true features through the speaker’s sideways, terrified glances: more than being a hollow, unsavory place of refuge, it is also a mute stage where the vagaries of gender, wealth and worth play out their illusory dramas. The themes of these dramas are rooted in depths of human nature, exhibiting the common blights of existence. The boundary line of Qinghe County can be extended straight up to the present day. Not only does it show a phantasmal image of a nationality, it constitutes an archetypal picture of the here-and-now world. Its commonplace feel shows that regardless of how human affairs may vary, change does not happen to the collective consciousness precipitated onto the bottom of human nature. It is just such a prolonged passage through collective consciousness that softens the sharp edges of language, making it supple yet tough as whipcord: “The sharp tip of the inkbrush / Touches down with knifelike hardness.” The vast resources and toughness of language give the writer an ability to “think like a filament.” “Within a ball of yarn, / It is intoxicated with the pursuit of a sentence, / As it writes a footnote to emptiness” (“Joint Burial”). In this way a dialogue on any feasible theme can be established.

It is my opinion that in this forever unredeemed locale called Qinghe County, aside from the lowliness and cruelty that people are capable of, one can sense an

underlying current of *yin* attributes and matriarchy. Whether in the form of the “her” upon whom all looks converge (Pan Jinlian), or of Old Lady Wang who “sidled about through the whole county” (viewed by others as a “handed-down black box” and “living fossil”), or of the “uterus” Broker Chen tried to ward off and lived in fear of, all of these embody the strong suction of this culture of *yin*, matriarchal qualities. “Until my voice hits a babyish pitch, and at last / As if I have gone off to sleep, all my underground traces will be gone.” Mixed into the underlying *yin* current of matriarchy, one finds quite a bit of ill will and perversity, in the underbelly of an old civilization where too many dark things sank out of sight. Thus, a discrete critique of chronic, passed-down maladies strikes me as the underlying focus of this work.

Interestingly, due to an inborn Oedipus complex, the attitude Zhu Zhu expresses on many fronts is one of nostalgia for matriarchy and its implications. Thus, the critique carried out in “Qinghe County” embodies a genuine quality of inwardness. Corresponding to this is his rejection of the opposite pole in the *yin-yang* relation, namely the patriarchy. If Terry Eagleton was right in his application of Freud’s theories,³⁷ and if patriarchy is a personification of political rule and state power, then the Oedipal complex shows its face within just such a dichotomy. However, when the dominant coloring of the patriarchy begins to weaken objectively, then another direction of thinking will be stirred up in the minds of those who resisted the patriarchy. This becomes an emotive capacity to contemplate reality intently and to respond earnestly at any moment. Here I would like to point out a piece that fits with this theme, a work that took two years in the writing: *Leather Trunk—Dedicated to My Father* (1999-2001). If we say that “Qinghe County” conveyed a critique of his people’s civilization that embraces nostalgia and repulsion, then *Leather Trunk*—adopting a mini-epic form—tries to display circumstances and features of reality in China during the second half of the 20th century. Both woven out of elastic language, these two pieces form a complementary pair that triggers cogitations on civilization and reality. “A leather trunk... / Never opened before my eyes / With its rigid shell / Heavy as a tombstone, dry under a sheet of ice.” The background of sound (“After half a century, at last its volume was turned to the lowest setting”) offset by visual revelation (“Again he slept, and his head nodded against my chest”) seem to interweave into an unspoken quartet. The end of this poem is as follows:

37 Terry Eagleton. *Politics, Philosophy and Desire in History*. Tr. Ma Hailiang. Beijing: China Academy of Social Sciences Press, 1999. p. 145.

Opening the trunk is like opening a vacuum,

I sob over this vacuum of love,

Aside from it, all other forms of love are empty constructs.

The sense of void which is evoked by the “vacuum of love” manifests a crucial feature of reality as an “empty construct,” which amounts to the only choice one is left with. In fact this is the paradoxical fate which an ancient nationality cannot escape in the transition to modern society. The “vacuum of love” is evoked by a leather trunk that has undergone the ravages of passing time. Once again we are reminded of the vivid nature of words vis-à-vis things in Zhu Zhu’s poetry. As he made plain in “Gold Clasp” (I am reluctant to grow distant from you, love and fear, / But I have enough strength already) or in “Father’s Memoirs” (My pen records and seeks a form / And it tracks every one of its changes), the vacuum of love is ultimately the only reality one can resort to. Thus one’s overcoming of emptiness and death ultimately transforms to a paean for love: “Love is the only wellspring that can be trusted; it is immoral lightness...Only love is the rhythm that truly enlivens someone. Anything can be a motive, but only love catches you up in the beat that drives true passion and power of fancy.” What is more, “the nightingale has sung its tearful song long enough. For the sake of its suffering we should invent an open-hearted song turned toward blessings and brightness.”³⁸ Undoubtedly, this is the voice of language itself:

Behind all language families, the shared source of words is silence

And in that stillness is a voice,

To which we hold the copyright.

—“Signal · Collaborative Translation” (2003)

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