

# The Eye Listens: Looking and Worlding in Song Lin's Poetry in Exile

Zhang Taozhou (Capital Normal University)

Translated by Li Dong (The University of Bonn)

## Abstract:

As a main proponent of “City Poetry” in the 1980s, Song Lin’s poetic works, after he went abroad in the early 1990s, have become largely unknown. Through dialogues with himself and focus on writing itself, Song Lin has turned exile into a kind of wandering in his poetry. As Song Lin wandered further, a new poetics of “looking” came into being that helped him explore possibilities of writing in a foreign land. He proposed “the house of rhymes is the old garden of memory,” in which the multitudes of memory can find their shapes in the building blocks of meter and rhyme, thus integrating elements of “listening” into the poetics of “looking.” To realize his own poetic ambitions, Song Lin advocates for “digging at the roots of words,” thus setting his sight on the origin of Chinese civilization.

**Key words:** Song Lin’s poetry, memory, looking, listening, classic

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The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a large group of Chinese poets move to Europe and North America for various reasons. They continued to write, more prolifically in some cases. The body of poems they produced in the ensuing two decades have not only enriched the scene of contemporary Chinese poetry but also have animated the conversation about the place of Chinese literature in the formation of World Literature such as is the case with Bei Dao’s poems and their English translations.<sup>1</sup> Song Lin belongs to this group of Chinese poets. He left China in the early 1990s. For the next ten years or so before his eventual return to China, Song Lin lived in Paris, Singapore and several South American cities with his French-diplomat wife and became a more prolific writer than he was in China.

1 van Crevel, Maghiel. *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*. Leiden & Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2008, pp. 137-188.

It was during these times Song Lin emerged as a major Chinese poet of our times. How the context of exile with its promises and limitations has shaped Song Lin's writing and his poetics will be the subject of this paper. Of particular interest to us is the process of one's conception of worlding while away from one's home country.

In 1994, Song Lin wrote a birthday poem based on a photograph of himself. In the poem, he closely and reflectively scrutinizes himself as if seen in a mirror:

tenderness of a daydreamer revealed between eyebrows  
that refract light of a delicate heart  
his sight calmly falls upon a place.  
slightly high cheekbones yet an upright nose,  
in the shadows of his cheeks burns the passion of a southerner.

obsession in the eyes and also doubts,  
forgiving as he has seen suffering,  
before beauty, he narrows his eyes into a smile.  
forehead held high before the powerful,  
the curve of his mouth makes up with anybody anytime.

the lush tree of life, autumn is coming,  
wind blows homesickness into falling leaves.  
this face on the palm can feel itself,  
yet becomes unfamiliar in the mirror.  
and this mouth will sing lines of verse before turning to dust.

—Song Lin “A Self-inscribed Portrait at the Age of Thirty-five”

This is the only time that a “self-portrait” has ever appeared in Song Lin's poetry career. Without a doubt, the act of self-examination in the mirror is an important one; it is a way of knowing oneself and the world, as well as showing the course of poetic thinking that encompasses Song's life experience and poetic craft.

By the time of this poem, Song Lin had already gone abroad for many years. The age of thirty-five corresponds to what Dante said about “midway upon the journey of our life.” As the main author of “City Poetry” in the 1980s and a great component of the “legend” on the banks of the Liwa River in Shanghai, when he found himself in a foreign land and reflected upon life's vicissitudes and his own struggles, (“forgiving as he has seen suffering”), mixed feelings spilled forth: despite “the lush tree of life,” “autumn is coming, / wind blows homesickness into

falling leaves,” and with “obsession” and “doubts,” the poet will continue to “sing” the lines of verse that spring forth continuously. Since the start of his writing career, he has been a firm believer in the Mallarmesque alchemist of words.

## 1. Wandering and the Poetics of “Looking”

It is unknown whether the aforementioned “self-portrait” in the poem, “a self-inscribed portrait at the age of thirty-five,” was printed on the front page of the collection *Foyer*.<sup>2</sup> However, from the facial features of eyebrow, nose, cheeks, eyes, lips and so forth, we cannot help but think of a Western poet—Rainer Maria Rilke. How the two of them resemble each other in their elegance and spirit! Although Song Lin himself once said, “The graceful verse of Keats has been a goal in my writing, in particular, his passion, which has an inescapable affecting appeal,”<sup>3</sup> in terms of style and personal disposition, he shares more with the respectable German language poet Rilke: calm, gentle, bookish, with a dream-like elegance, the enduring enthusiasm for mysterious things and acts (such as the practice of divination) in poetry and in life, wandering experiences in many a foreign country, the beautiful and delicate wording and the sensuous and gentle touch in poetry, as well as the exploration of themes of love, beauty, loneliness, existence, etc.

Song Lin never hides his affection for and allegiance with Rilke. In an interview, he particularly mentioned the spiritual influence of Rilke:

“We are, above all, eternal spectators / looking upon, never from, the place itself”—this line from Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* tells of a wandering soul. This most spiritual poet in history paints a self-portrait of his back turned toward the distance for a premonition of his destiny and for readers who share similar disposition. [...] In Paris, Rilke was my guide, who knew around which street corner I would get lost and ghostly waited for me behind hand.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed this connects the two poets and touches upon the unpredictable nature of destiny and the uncertainties of a poetic life. This was perhaps in early 1990s, shortly after Song Lin arrived in Paris and tried to find his way around through

2 Song Lin. *Foyer*. Taiyuan: Beiyue Literature & Art Publishing House, 2000.

3 Potato Brothers. “Blue Bird of Poetry on the Path of Return—Interview with Song Lin”. *Chinese Poets*. Issue 4, 2004.

4 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

reading Rilke's poetry. Before his departure, he had written a swansong series called "death and praise," an elegy for the bygone era: although he keeps the impassioned tone of the 1980s, he discards, in the "Free Sonnets" dedicated to his lover, the overly exaggerated declarative style unique to that era, and instead, takes on a meditative narrative, which would become an important feature in his overseas poems.

For Song Lin, Paris means the true beginning of exile, though before that he had already been exposed to the "potential threat"<sup>5</sup> of exile. However, "exile" is not just a label for Song Lin; rather, it attains the characteristics of travel due to his "constant migration" between lands and countries: "from a city to another city, traveling has provided for me more empirical materials that refresh the writing, often, it is until you leave the city can you describe it, the geological displacement marks the coordinates of a personal poetic map that displays a complex and retrograde tendency."<sup>6</sup> Song Lin attempts through his writing to reinvent the connotation of "exile," and to reconstruct how the theme of exile enters poetry. In reference to the Rilke lines "we are, above all, eternal spectators / looking upon, never from, the place itself." Song Lin adds his own reflections: "Leaving means not here, in other words, from leaving to leaving, but never from here to there."<sup>7</sup> For Song Lin, exile brings out the insights of "from leaving to leaving" and the relationship between here and there. Like Rilke, Song Lin made his "home across four seas" for a long while and coincidentally, the image of the juggler<sup>8</sup> in the fifth poem in Rilke's "Duino Elegies" also appears quite frequently in Song Lin's poems: in his poem "Portrait I: Street Performer," he paints a picture of a female street performer as a "post-modernist goddess just born" and "displaying the tranquil beauty of the god-given

5 Song Lin once wrote: "In terms of the relationship between exile and the destiny of poets: when the identity of the first poet in Chinese history was established, at the same time, the theme of exile had been a constant, or in other words, the theme of exile has chosen poets. From the first lyric poet Qu Yuan until our century, not in a statistical sense, but as some sort of continuation of a spiritual life, no generation of Chinese poets could avoid the potential threat of exile." (Song Lin. "Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui's Eleven Questions". *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.)

6 Cf. "Being Carefree is Salvation, not the Other Way Around—Interviews with Song Lin". *Poetry Monthly*. <http://www.poetrylife.com>, Issue 5, 2008.

7 Song Lin. "Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui's Eleven Questions". *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

8 It is said that Rilke's image of the juggler was inspired by Picasso's painting "Family of Jugglers" as well as by his acute observation of street jugglers during his time in Paris. This image also appears in Rilke's "The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge" and his essay "The Juggler." (Cf. Liu Haoming. "Foreword" in *Duino Elegie*. Shenyang: Liaoning Education Press, 2005. P. 49-50.)

body.” He gives her an “enthusiastic” look. Whereas in fragments and farewell songs, we see a scene like this—“puppeteers dressed in flashy clown clothes”: “happiness his red nose, innocence his poverty”; or in the series poem “Prism, Paris,” he notices “the street painter of May”; or in “walking down Montmartre,” he pays attention to “an old man fumbling in the garbage,” whose empty glance “could destroy the world.”

To a large extent, the street performer, the garbage collector, the flaneur on-the-go, the melancholic “foreigner” or “noctambulist” (in “Insomnia”) could be seen as varying portraits of Song Lin himself living in a foreign country. We can trace his “on the road” state of life in his poems: “a man walks in the immense city in the dead of night” (“Notes from Letters”), “a night of wandering, in this strange city” (“En Route”); or the lonesome silhouette of “floating”:

on the twelve identical bridges,  
not a single one without endless streams of traffic.

evening bell tolls, birds retrieve their shadows,  
steeple fade into a grey sky.

eyes in a daze, last leaves in wind  
keep trembling, not knowing where to fall

a spurt of feelings of the divided self,  
as if you stood on every one of the twelve bridges.

—“Metaphor of the Floating Life”

For a long time after leaving China, writing had become for Song Lin a way of overcoming the speechlessness that came with loneliness: “facing the threat larger than unemployment—speechlessness [...] the stifling spatial displacement is beyond imagination. The loneliness of a floating life, the habit of talking to spirits in solitude, could these things help construct the foundation of a pyramid in the vast interior, perhaps an insistent belief?”<sup>9</sup> Or a kind of self-help and therapy: “if you cannot bear the loneliness that comes with living overseas, then perhaps writing would fall into a greater emptiness. Strangely enough, loneliness also nourishes writing that sets out to overcome the sheer speechlessness. In this way,

9 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

writing becomes self-help or therapy.”<sup>10</sup> The writing of resistance brings out a major theme in Song Lin’s poetry, namely, from loneliness of the self to the greater “homesickness” of humanity. Needless to say, with monologues and attention to writing, Song Lin turns exile into wandering: “the enthused thoughts follow writing by the water / alas, where is the home of words?” (“The Wanderer in Prague”). Perhaps wandering lessens the anxiety that is part and parcel of exile. Song Lin’s poetry thus opens up to greater emphasis on the meaning of the world and being.

In this connection, street performers and garbage collectors are metaphorical representations of the condition of poets in modern life. This idea finds its origin in Baudelaire. According to Walter Benjamin, Baudelaire invented a new literary genre, in which “Baudelaire associated himself with the image of garbage collectors carefully fumbling through the garbage pile” and became an exaggerated metaphor for the poets’ writing process. “Poets are similar to garbage collectors in the sense that both do what they do in a lonesome manner when the city inhabitants are deep in their sleep, even their postures are similar.”<sup>11</sup> Touted as “the capital of the nineteenth century” by Benjamin, the city of Paris and its brilliant cityscape have inspired many a great poet, such as Baudelaire, Rilke and Apollinaire. Paris not only established the image of the poet but also cultivated a new style of writing, and Benjamin goes on: “Poets snatch their trophies from the specter-like mass, which consist of words, fragments, sentences on the bleak streets.”<sup>12</sup> Song Lin’s series “Prism, Paris” seems to find itself intertwined in the mist of the Parisian cityscape. This series weaves in “homesick” whispers (“homesickness by the water blows wrinkles of the moon,” “in the vast foreign land,” “everything has fallen homesick”) as well as his thoughts on writing: “when we say, poetry is the excess of the world / which means in the increase, there is decrease / like an orange in the orchard of reality / plump, spurting fragrance, the ultimate measure / takes place of process” (Number 5); “night chill as water, under a lamp cover / a poem leans onto eternal incompleteness: / like a blue u.f.o. / emitting strange and extremely strong light / resisting the name we gave it” (Number 13); “I write some poems, quite inappropriately, / unavoidably to fall heavily / what i need is to slow down in my sprint / to salvage songs in the deep recovery” (Number 14). These dialectical statements all point to the condition of poetry in a foreign land. In another poem

10 Potato Brothers. “Blue Bird of Poetry on the Path of Return—Interview with Song Lin”. *Chinese Poets*. Issue 4, 2004.

11 Benjamin, Walter. *A Lyric Poet in an Era of High Capitalism*. Tr. Zhang Xudong. Wei Wensheng. Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1989. P. 98-99.

12 Benjamin, Walter. *A Lyric Poet in an Era of High Capitalism*. Tr. Zhang Xudong. Wei Wensheng. Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1989. P. 98-99.



“circus,” Song Lin borrows from Baudelaire and compares poetry writing to a circus performance: “this is craft, wings of poetry, / not more than the body / or the clumsy movement of the body. / but in the ultimate effort, they look alike.”

It is worth mentioning that Song Lin posits a concept of looking as worlding and writing in “Prism, Paris” (Number 10) as he talks about the image of the poet and the nature of writing:

after all you are a witness—looking  
is the best way to enter the world  
because the world that has lost its connectedness  
needs you, now faster, now braver,  
to make up a new landscape on your own  
looking is change. the invisible  
becomes the body that foresees the unsettling invasion  
and the unchangeable law of metabolism of the talented  
the heart moved by eternity

Here, the “looking” that comes with “wandering” marks the limit of poetry writing. Like Baudelaire’s “watching” (an effective method of how “poets snatch their trophies from the specter-like mass, which consists of words, fragments, sentences on the bleak streets.”), which also reminds us of Starobinski’s “aesthetics of gazing.”<sup>13</sup> In Song Lin’s poetry, “looking” is not only a habit and posture in the process of “wandering,” but also a way of making phrases and sentences. This “afternoon wanderer” (“Afternoon Encounter”) is also a quiet and gentle observer, whose “writing goes across many ‘unknown terrains’ of the interior and is understated, self-referential and homeless.”<sup>14</sup> He wanders and is “in deep thoughts” (“Autumn Promenade”), but more often he “views” (“Three Poems on View”) and “perceives” (“Perception by the Autumn Forest”): “eventful autumn tall trees use the blind eyes of scars to perceive” (“Songs of Finding Water”); “no one sees how

13 Jean Starobinski is a famous Swiss literary critic, a representative of the Geneva School, whose “aesthetics of gazing” was first published in the collection *The Living Eye*; for him, gazing “is a act of retrieving and storing,” “it is not satisfied by what is given, it waits for the quiet stasis within movements and rushes toward the littlest trembling of a face in repose, it wants to get close to the face behind the mask, or tries to experience the seductive vertigo that comes with that kind of depth, in order to re-capture the elusive changes of light and shadows on the water.” (*Poppaea’s Veil*. Tr. Guo Hong’an, Social Science Documents Press, 1995; Guo Hong’an. “The Metaphor of Gaze”. *Foreign Literature Review*, Issue 4, 2005).

14 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

a cliff rises up, / headlands, its lonesome border” (“Watching the Obsidian Cliffs From the Salt Shores”); “the sea gazing people, / gazing for gazing’s sake, / the shape of trestle in his memory / similar to bird wings and starlight” (“The Trestle That Reaches Into the Sea”); “if you are an angel, / do you always gaze from the top of the dome, / and say that sorrow is a craft (“Circus”). “Perception” or “gazing” is the “structure” of Song Lin’s way of viewing things during his journeys, which also serves as a starting point for his poetry. It is in this way that he can absorb “the landscape seen from an eagle’s eye” (“The Landscape Seen From an Eagle’s Eye”). All these demonstrate Song Lin’s sensitivity to “light” in his writing, through which he establishes a genealogy of “light”: “water’s light pressing the retinal” (“Bodensee”), “light shifts to the transformation of clouds and shadows” (*Fragments and Farewell Songs*), “vertigo in the nerves of light” (“Little Tunes in Jiangyin”), “light runs after light, the science of refraction / the cornea reflects the ghost in the water” (“Short Day”), “without knowing, the trumpet in the park / like a beam of light that squeezes into curtains” (“Hand-drawn Christmas Card”), “light saunters in the clouds and on treetops, some light filtered by glass windows (Foyer), “impressions of light. yes, light of the key / the pendulum light on the inside of a water tank / eyes closed and the feeling of being pushed forward slowly” (“The Kiss of The Bund”). “Light” solidifies the rich surface of the world and the multi-layered atlas of the heart and dissolves into writerly intuitions, which is a prominent feature of Song Lin’s poetics of “looking.”

Based on this poetics of “looking,” Song Lin explores the possibility of writing overseas: “living abroad and using the mother tongue is not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the experience of exile strengthens the longing for home. Between cultures, poets gain a double-vision [...] To keep some aesthetic distance from the home environment does not hurt individual composition and instead, brings out more possibilities for Chinese language writing.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, when he writes about “homesickness” during exile, he tries to “reconsider the sullen homesickness” (“Perception by the Autumn Forest”) and depict “the heart-shaped homesick matter” (“Guest Writing”). In such poems as “Roof of the Early Years,” “Mingjiang Visit” and in particular, the collection *Fragments and Farewell Songs*<sup>16</sup>, “homesickness” is

15 Potato Brothers. “Blue Bird of Poetry on the Path of Return—Interview with Song Lin”. *Chinese Poets*. Issue 4, 2004.

16 So far, this collection that was published Chinese-French en face by the French publisher MEET in 2006 has not been widely reviewed and recognized but is in fact a cogent long poem or a long series of poems, which weave reality and legend, old and new, foreign and home, the present and memory into a powerful whole. This collection exposes the mystery and strangeness of what “home” is all about.



not simplistically treated as a disease but is transformed into an inspiration to search for the origin and to explore the root of culture and memory. Moreover, Song Lin also touches upon the deeper meaning of “homesickness,” which points to a faraway place, representing the unavoidable absence and the inevitable disappearance: “every bench has a forever absentee” (“Benches in the Park”), “brilliant” clouds like a “brief kaleidoscope of a magic life” (“Tell the Clouds”). In the end, “homesickness” connects with the theme of death in his poems, “foreign land, utopia and deceased home are intertwined into a grey area, where writing has never exhibited such ambiguity.”<sup>17</sup> Once overseas, many of his poems are contemplations on death (for instance, “this recent departure is already death” in “Mingjiang Visit,” “in the shadow of utopia and death / the windmill slants” in “Prism, Paris,” “for a moment I think of the terseness of death” in “Perception by the Autumn Forest” etc.), which correlates to his experience overseas and continues in the series “Death and Praise” that was completed before he left China, echoing the sighs of death in Rilke’s poetry: “Death, its back to us, it is the sideline of life that light can never reach. We exist in the two infinite worlds of living and death and must do our best to absorb the nutrients from both worlds.”<sup>18</sup> From his reflective “looking” and his contemplation on death in the solitude overseas, Song Lin puts in new elements in his poetry writing: “elegiac reminiscence, the looking forward in melancholia, the hesitation between leaving and staying, the intertwining love and death—when these elements find their right words, a new and more complex lyric will emerge.”<sup>19</sup>

## 2. “The house of rhymes is the old garden of memory”

When the Polish poet Milosz talked about poet as a “career,” he said: “If we take flying above earth as a metaphor for the career of poets, then it is not hard to notice that there is a paradox even in times when it is not difficult for poets to avoid falling into historical traps. How could we stay above earth, meanwhile looking at it closely? But on the off-balance scale, when distance is introduced by the flow of time, some kind of balance can still be achieved. ‘Looking’ means not only placing it before the eyes, but also storing it in memory. ‘To see and describe’ could also

17 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

18 Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Thus Spoke Rilke*. Ed. Lin Yu. Beijing: China Friendship Publishing House, 1993, p.103.

19 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

mean to reconstruct in the imagination.”<sup>20</sup> Utilizing this theory to examine Song Lin’s poetry and his ideas on poetry, perhaps we could understand better his poetics of “looking” and the characteristics of his poetry.

To some extent, Song Lin’s overseas writing could be considered a kind of writing that turns toward memory. In fact, he’s rather clear on this: “The exiled do not have a present country. In the state of spiritual suspension, what they have is the fragmented reminiscence of the home country in the past. ‘Now’ is picked clean and we see the typical behavior of the exiled in a foreign land, namely, ‘a wandering ghost’.”<sup>21</sup> The same idea is expressed poetically in a short poem “untitled”:

a stranger walks past the river bank  
reminiscence turns him into a ghost

In a foreign country, Song Lin is like someone “crushed by memory,” yet cannot resist the temptation of “the urn of memory” (*Fragments and Farewell Songs*). Memory has become the main, if not the only, source of writing. Writing cannot but rely on memory and its reconstruction of memory to reflect the present reality. When “the needle of memory crosses rheumatism” (“Benches in the Park”), he “longs to see the invisible” “out of sight” (Foyer). Unconsciously, memory becomes existence and solves his trouble of “homelessness.” According to Song Lin, “looking” is “the best way of entering the world,” which means through “looking,” he connects with the world. In the process of “looking,” events make their way into short-term memory and once he opens up or “depicts,” everything that has to do with home and family will be retrieved from short-term memory and go into his writing. In the end, this kind of writing provides its own epistemology, which is about the origination of poetry: “Poetry is the will and the holding of it.” “What poetry holds is the memory of words that is passed onto collective memory by way of personal memory.”<sup>22</sup> In Song Lin’s poetry, memory is a necessity, the foundation of writing.

“Memory is a kind of roaring.” (*Fragment s and Farewell songs*) For Song Lin, “looking” is the medium that connects the present with memory. He writes with a flourishing eloquence: “the need for medium creates poetry / sounds back and forth between the visible and the invisible / like the migration of sparrows. what

20 Miłosz, Czesław. *Double Vision: A Metaphor for a Poet’s Vocation*. Ed. Wang Jiaxin. *Thus Spoke Important 20th Century Foreign Poets*. Zhengzhou: Henan People’s Press, 1992.

21 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

22 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

is the faraway place? / shores of an early age—dream perceives it / a dirt house—grandma walks out from it” (“Prism, Paris”). The “faraway place” that “holds” the “homesickness” recalls a lot of memory and is soaked in the smell of articles and things from home. Even after leaving home for many years, the home in Song Lin’s memory still keeps its indescribable mystery: “at the end of the village a few cedars, which make us believe, the world protected by trees is large enough (*Fragments and Farewell Songs*). The overflowing of “the urn of memory” deepens the sense of overseas loneliness, which makes some of his poems seem as if pulled out of despair: “the wild imagination of the sea, from the abyss / melts and purifies a line of verse, / like ritual fire flying in the air,” “the cliffs under the dazzling sun make us think of / the origin of the heart of poetry generation after generation (“Watching the Obsidian Cliffs From the Salt Shores”). For the moment, the shocking landscape in his eyes is transformed into a scene in his life and constitutes a kind of metaphor for poetry writing (“origin” not just inspiration). Often as he “sees and describes” these landscapes, he does not limit himself to depictions of the landscapes and narratives; rather, his pen points out to poetry itself: “the river flows and flows not, like words, / flickering shadows, finally / envelope the named cliffs, and rush into / a waterfall of passion, breaking in the momentous sky” (“how to write this poem”). Through the mess of landscapes, he “searches, bends to pick up his lost keys, / picks up the kaleidoscope, early years, craft of the moment” (“Snow on the Postcard”).

Perhaps this is what is called “meta-poetry”—in poetry, the state of things correlates to the expansion of poetic thoughts and the process of words coalescing into poetry: “writing is a door, open to the fields” (“Q & A”). Through fabled landscapes, the characteristics or the magical parts of poetry are exposed: “a fish stuck in the net,” “which wriggles its waist, / and breaks free from the net, / like a rainbow, it flips drops of water toward the horizon,” “you, the survivor, whether it is you or the fisherman, / never has seen its lost scales” (“Poetry”); “perhaps this is poetry: fleeting shadow / the movement against fleeting” (“Advice to Young Poets”). The interest in meta-poetry shows Song Lin’s poetic awareness, for him “meta-poetry is the original poetry, the poetry of the heart, the poetry that knocks on the door of loneliness [...] Meta-poetry writing, in terms of epistemology, is a search for its own origin, whereas its methodology lies in establishing the correlatives. Meta-poetry is a difficult kind of poetry and through selection of obstacles and the attendant dismantlement, it comes closer, step by step, to the inevitable form culled from the random hand that throws the dice.”<sup>23</sup> He seems to believe that a poem shows the

23 Cf. “The Name of the Spirit—On Zhang Zao”. *Jintian*. Issue 2, 2010.

process of maturity and correlates to the growth of nature. The writer bears the responsibility of showing the correlation between words and things. Though poetry writing is indeed the natural blossoming of wild flowers, it still demands hard work and chiseling, which is the argument of the following lines:

with the meticulousness of the photographer in the dark room  
working until dawn. distracted face  
like a negative of quotidian experience

from the ambiguous medicinal drinks of memory, expose  
the whiteness of the day, and the blackness of the night  
from the old washes out the faraway childhood

—“Writingholic”

It is fair to say that meta-poetry is indicated in Song Lin’s poetic awareness: the selection of words, the chiseling of phrases, the attention to form, all of which have become a writing habit, as suggested in these lines: “A slender poet, then the poetry must be plump / understated, then the resonance rings far into the present and past” (“Three Commentaries on Poetry”). This comes as a self-reminder to pursue “crystal lines” (“Slowness”) and to capture “the slight trembling of water’s eyelids” (“An Imitation on Double Rhyme”), in the hope that the poetry achieves an understated and classically elegant style. However, for Song Lin, there is another more difficult layer to his craft, in consideration of his overseas existence: how to go beyond what Milosz said about “seeing and describing,” and, with the ethics of the witness and self-restraint, maintain an effective balance and improve the aesthetic purity of poetry, which could be summarized in one sentence: “The house of rhymes is the old garden of memory” (“Three Commentaries on Poetry”). “The house of rhymes” is the core. Obviously, he finds out about the common ground of “the house of rhymes” and “memory”: both are containers of sounds, emotions and experiences; the metaphor of “old garden” underscores the importance of “the house of rhyme” to “memory.” In a sense, perhaps Song Lin appreciates the variety and spaciousness of “garden,” and the historical weight of its being “old.” Thus, the statement “the house of rhymes is the old garden of memory” means that the various forms of memory find their shapes in the construction of rhymes by words, or more concretely:

[...] poetry, overflows from feeling,  
written upon events, not beyond reason

turns complaints into a fitting mockery  
uses words to describe the indescribable  
completes ideas to the measure of form

—“Three Commentaries on Poetry”

This “measure of form” demonstrates the uncompromising nature of Song Lin’s poetic craftsmanship.

In this case, why does Song Lin put so much emphasis on “the house of rhymes”? As is known to all, rhyming has an irreplaceable place in classical Chinese poetry. With the advent of New Poetry, the vernacular into poetic compositions and the liberation of poetic forms, “the house of rhymes” has been exiled in poetry. However, through the avocations and promotion by such poets and scholars as Zhao Yuanren, Wen Yiduo, Xu Zhimo and numerous others, New Poetry has seen some reconstitution of rhyme schemes. These poets and scholars try to overcome some innate disadvantage of modern Chinese and to give New Poetry a poetic form, whose beauty competes with that of Classical Poetry. They hope that New Poetry would be imbued with rhythmic benefits through reconstruction of certain poetic meters. There have been constructive proposals such as the theory of “three beauties” by Wen Yiduo, “lines separated by rhymes” by Lin Geng as well as “the design of intonation” by Zheng Min. Thus, it seems that Song Lin’s emphasis on “the house of rhymes,” besides its historical resonance, has its own meaning in recognizing the importance of rhyme and meter. Rather than saying “the house of rhymes” is a kind of rigid meter, it posits rhymes through a careful organization of words. It is important to point out that Song Lin’s concept of the house of rhymes, on the one hand, is a continuation of the classical tradition. On the other hand, it incorporates the poetics from Western Symbolists such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Rilke, Valéry, etc. To some extent, the latter influence is more important. Song Lin, who lived in France where Symbolism originated, of course knows its history and is influenced by it. His view of poetry as the “extreme sports” (as in “Circus”) of words can find its origin in the ideas (such as “pure poetry”) of Symbolist poets. Song Lin admires their effort to construct the house of rhymes<sup>24</sup> and their maintenance of rigorous “measure of form.” He uses the Symbolist rhymes to remake the “house of rhymes” in classical Chinese poetry and measures

24 Rhyme is a crucial element in Symbolist poetry. Poets such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Rilke, Valéry all agree on this. Valéry thinks, “Poetry uses the organs directly and sets the limit for songs. It is a precise and continuous exercise between visual and sonic forms and clear expressions,” p. 231, *Hundred Flowers Arts Press*, 2002.

his own poetry according to the finesse and subtlety of word choices.

Rhyme belongs to the sonic part of poetry, which includes breath, sounds, meter and so forth. The plan of “the house of rhymes as the old garden of memory” helps incorporate elements of “listening” into Song Lin’s poetics. In this way, the organ of “looking,” namely, the eye, not only “looks” at things, but also listens (as what Paul Claudel means by “the eye listens”<sup>25</sup>): “silent listening dissolves into rivers and mountains” (“Perception by the Autumn Forest”). “Listening” is so important that it should be a skill that writers should hone all their lives: “the past figures live on in another way / and talk to us in silent words, as if / in a mirror. the unheard sorrow! / and listening is at the root of what we can count on / mirror, the whole of paradoxes / to take in the opposites, to dissolve in itself” (“Prism, Paris”). Through “listening,” the relationship between people and things has become more magical:

now only the kettle sings alone,  
like a cricket in the kitchen calling another  
wild cricket. it is also calling my lips,  
to touch lightly, the warm fragrance of the snow-water tea.

—“The Kettle”

For Song Lin, “listening” first calls up the order of sounds (“Meter”), then constant self-warning of the measure and is finally transformed into “the measure of form” in poetic composition—stanzas, the balance and order<sup>26</sup> of lines, the restrained and calm tone, the relaxed and smooth rhythm, the gentle and elegant flair of classic aesthetics, the effect of which echoes through this stanza:

here and now, green leaves lush and bright,  
this moment stays on.  
feeling the breath and movement of the sea,  
all the boats quietly sail to eternity.

—“An Imitation of Double Rhyme”

25 “The Eye Listens” is the title of Paul Claudel’s collection of art criticism (Chinese title 《艺术之路》, translated by Luo Xinzhang, Beijing Yanshan Press, 2006). Claudel finds his ideas in Baudelaire’s “correspondences” and Rimbaud’s “dissoluteness of all senses,” which have inspired Deleuze. Here the author borrows Claudel’s term, but his definition of “synesthesia” differs slightly from Claudel’s. Refer to the Chinese introduction to *The Third Road of Deleuze—Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, translated by Dong Qiang, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2007.

26 Song Lin’s lines are measured; usually two to three syllable words per line and three to five lines per stanza.



Song Lin has realized that rhyme and meter in New Poetry is not the same as in classical poetry. Contemporary writing cannot and should not reproduce the treasured pattern of parallelism in pre-modern rhymed verse. His attempt in rhyme and meter lays “in the overall tendency to use a common language in poetry, to revitalize the original meaning of words through variation of meter and quick condensation, and to expand, in the new rapport, from monotonous meanings to a complex orchestration of the meanings of words.”<sup>27</sup> There is plenty of evidence to show that such an attempt is insistent and singular, as we turn to his unique attention to “the root of words” in the next section.

### 3. “The Insistent Digging at the Root of Words”

In contemporary Chinese poetry, Song Lin’s writing is somewhat an odd presence. Though in the 1980s he came onto the stage of the poetry scene as a member of “City Poetry,” he remained a marginalized figure throughout the 1990s. Writing in exile has not helped the situation either. As a result, his work has been known only to those in the inner circles of readers and critics until recently. For the past thirty years, Chinese poetry has seen rounds of experimentation under the headings of “avant-garde” or “modernism,” and a public antagonism between people who take different positions on those experimentations and debates. There is hardly a consensus as to where contemporary Chinese poetry is going. It is for these very reasons that we may reevaluate and appreciate Song Lin’s poetry and his poetics, which have been participating in the poetic debate from the margin.

As mentioned before, we can find traces of classical poetics in Song Lin’s take on poetry, yet the attention that he pays to it really comes from his contemplation as an outside observer and critic. The poet Zhu Zhu acutely points out that Song Lin’s overseas poetry “has the trace of traditional incantation that builds a few windows in the poetic form, from which he could glimpse the ancient country from abroad.”<sup>28</sup> This reflection keeps Song Lin from over-indulging in or blindly promoting the classics (there are many poets who do this), and instead, helps him cultivate a particular acumen, that is, a “double vision” that “anchors upon the whole culture” and “a bigger picture of the present and past,” or in other words, “through translation and to utilize Ji Cang’s words, name the outside world and at the same

27 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

28 Zhu Zhu. “Walks under Statues—for Song Lin”. *Vertigo*. Liberation Army Arts Press, 2000, p. 105.

time turn the outside world into a mirror, thus obtaining a world view that would help deepen the understanding of our own world.”<sup>29</sup> Following this train of thought, Song Lin goes around the superficial discussion on modernism and localism and digs into the “origin” of ancient Chinese culture and from theory to practice (often in the form of meta-poetry) explores those elements that might feed into his poetry writing.

For Song Lin, “contemporary poetry exhibits the avant-garde stance and over-emphasizes evanescent ‘innovation,’” yet it lacks gratitude to these perennial stuff of life and shows inappropriate enthusiasm toward the earth, nature, and ancient ways of life, not to speak of the intimate conversation with the inner gods and tributes to others.”<sup>30</sup> It is blind to separate “innovation” from “origin” or “tradition.” On the contrary, Song Lin pays his tribute to ancient traditions and finds sources of the imagination in mysterious fengshui, phenomena and rituals: “divination of the same mysterious compass, holding / gold, wood, water, fire, dirt of the origin / now, on my wide table appears / poetry, every line (like the house of rhymes) is true / but the music in divination has slept for a thousand years” (“On Discovery of Ancient Songs in the Book of Changes”). Here the “music” that “has slept for a thousand years” references something particular. In his view, “contemporary poets should learn from the ancient in order to make up for the lack in culture. They should also find inspiration in ancient art and realize how rich our heritage is and try to face the tradition in their writing.” “The past has never disappeared but condensed in historical memory. Rather than saying literature is a developmental movement, it is a circular one. Through the excavation of culture and archeology of words, we can repair historical memory, which could become the mission of contemporary literature.”<sup>31</sup> Song Lin firmly believes that “the dead live on in another way / and speak to us in silent words” (“Prism, Paris”). Sometimes he declares, “the classics have been distorted. in a distorted age / I just want to be a water-finding man” and asks further, “what kind of exploration / could lead to the lost undercurrent?” yet the response is a witch-like “prophecy”: “ ‘dear traveler, you should search beyond your sight / and in listening cull the power of the spell / you should know that the origin of a river is small / go upstream to meet neighboring running waters / the vicissitude of dream is the vicissitude of life / when the rainbow outshines the sky

29 “The Leading Circulation”, Introduction to Blank Etudes, *Poetry, Ten Years of Today Journal*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

30 “The Leading Circulation”, Introduction to Blank Etudes, *Poetry, Ten Years of Today Journal*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

31 Song Lin. “In response to French Journal Poésie”. *Poetry Monthly*. [http://: www.poemlife.com](http://www.poemlife.com), Issue 5, 2008.

above the big river” (“Songs of Finding Water”); what consoles him is this:

origin obscured, saying “no” to us  
yet there remains recognizable signs  
that scatter among secret lanes covered in wild flowers  
like dots of fireflies, like luo shu square  
to reproduce for the world the beauty of words  
—“Three Commentaries on Poetry”

In the poem “Borges’s imagination of china,” Song Lin uses the third person narrative and dialogue to show the imagination kindled by the Chinese Classics.

These “origins” perhaps embody the deeper connotations of Song Lin’s “memory.” In poetics, they preserve a precious heritage: “Ancient poetics, in terms of Tao and Art, content and form, rhythm and syntax and numerous other aspects has set a theoretical foundation, which turns the Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, Confucius and Meng-tzu, Zen Buddhism ideas and ideals into a mold that serves as a mirror reflecting the world.”<sup>32</sup> The foundation of this “mold” is language—a poet’s native language, more specifically the “Chineseness”: “In the development of Chinese New Poetry, ‘modernism’ is perhaps the most important concept. We must think hard on this and come up with another important concept: ‘Chineseness.’”<sup>33</sup> If we dig into the “Chineseness,” there is the “Poeticness,” acumen of the native language: “to truly display the poeticness and Chineseness of poetry, with emphasis on historical and regional awareness and a renewed sense of rediscovery of the native language.”<sup>34</sup> “The Chineseness has long been incorporated into the shapes of the Chinese characters when our ancestors created the language.”<sup>35</sup> “The exploration of the relationship between the present reality, modernism and the identity of Chinese poets would inevitably lead to a metaphysical one about the origin of the civilization—if possible, all the way to the early history of characters.”<sup>36</sup>

If we put this awareness into the context of Song Lin’s overseas writing,

32 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

33 Potato Brothers. “Blue Bird of Poetry on the Path of Return—Interview with Song Lin”. *Chinese Poets*. Issue 4, 2004.

34 Cf. “Being carefree is salvation, not the other way around—interviews with Song Lin”. *Poetry Monthly*. [http://: www.poemlife.com](http://www.poemlife.com), Issue 5, 2008.

35 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

36 “The Leading Circulation”, Introduction to Blank Etudes. *Poetry, Ten Years of Today Journal*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

perhaps we could understand better his seeming obsession with “the root of words” in the Chinese language. Just as the poet Brodsky once said, “exile is an event of language: he has been pushed away from the native language and he gives in to this native language. In the beginning, the native language could be said to be his sword, then it became his shield, his airtight cabin. The private and intimate relationship with language in exile has become destiny—even before all this, it has become an obsession or a responsibility.”<sup>37</sup> Song Lin has a lot to say on this: “Between poets and their native language, it is blood relation, a relation of pre-selection. Before the native language, every poet is a latecomer. To write in the native language means to convey the personal effort of holding cultural and historical memory. Only the great poets could bring new energy to the ancient native language or to complete the mission of transitioning from an old end to a new beginning. To witness in the native language, to go beyond personal suffering, to put in new effort to save her ruined reputation.”<sup>38</sup> In *Fragments and Farewell Songs*, he said:

and on the baked and crisp tongues  
words, like rivers through  
many a reunion, and finally reach the open  
quietude, under larva-clumps of forgetting.  
wherever you are, the pale fire of the native language  
will shine as you fall asleep, and accompany you,  
to approach an iceberg on the frozen soil.

Language is the vehicle of memory. Wherever he is, he takes with him “the pale fire of the native language.” He metaphorizes the work of the poet: “our work sometimes resembles that of a groundhog. We dig and dig into the root of words until the sweet spring of meaning spurts out.”<sup>39</sup> “The root of words” is in fact the “root” of memory, the “root” of culture, or in other words, “the origin” of a civilization.

In recent years, Song Lin’s poetry and poetics have attracted many more readers. His “return” dazzles the poetry scene. Song Lin has made known his concerns with the apparent disregard of the classical in contemporary Chinese poetry. In the poem “In the Tribes of the Haudenosaunee People,” he conveys his reservations through

37 Brodsky. “The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh”. *Children of Civilization*. Tr. Liu Wenfei et al. Central Translation and Editorial Press, 1999. P. 59.

38 Cf. “The Surviving Eye and the Mutable Key—On Reading the Poetry of Paul Celan”. *Foreign Literature*, Issue 6, 2008.

39 Potato Brothers. “Blue Bird of Poetry on the Path of Return—Interview with Song Lin”. *Chinese Poets*. Issue 4, 2004.

the mouth of a patriarch of a tribe: “your words are broken, unclear, / which have never coalesced into a whole, / the exacting sea, unlike a fleet of ships, / sail firmly, move in balance... / said words go with the waves, / like a coin thrown in air, rootless.” The fact that he hopes to resolve the problem of “rootlessness” is the path in search of “root”—“constant digging at the root of words.” Of course, Song Lin’s “return” to “root” does not lead to the rigidity of an ancient language; rather, upon return, he hopes for innovation, “to take in foreign stuff into the interior world of poetry, for more pressure and tension in the language.”<sup>40</sup>

From a certain historical perspective, Chinese New Poetry is different from Classical Poetry in many fundamental ways and for good reasons. Chinese New Poetry seems to have taken shape in an “anxious” style (to borrow from the poet Jiang Tao), with frequent conflicts between the inner and outer worlds. In terms of form, the lineation and structure of New Poetry are constrained by sound-sense construction of words and the fixed units of sentences, the latter of which contributes to the proliferation of complex monosyllabic words and long sentences which often result in an attendant clutter. Such a linguistic limitation imposes obstacles to the beauty of form as well as prevents a more balanced organization of lines. It is not difficult to imagine the ambitious pursuit of “the house of rhymes” concept and “the measure of form” in Song Lin’s poetics. Their birth at the moments of writing between cultures notwithstanding, their impact will continue to be felt in the writing of Song Lin and other poets in contemporary Chinese poetry.

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### Author Profile:

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Zhang Taozhou, Ph.D. of Literature; Professor of the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Capital Normal University; Research interests: Chinese contemporary poetry and modern culture. Email: zhangtz@cnu.edu.cn

Li Dong, MFA in Literary Arts; Lecturer of Chinese Language and Translation at the University of Bonn in Germany; Research Interests: American, Chinese, French and German Literature as well as Creative Writing. Email: dong\_li@alumni.brown.edu