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FESTIVALS & EXCHANGES: Rich Readings with the Chinese

In 2015 I was invited to read at the inaugural Xu Zhimo International Poetry and Art Festival, founded and hosted by Alan Macfarlane, Emeritus Professor of Archaeology and Anthropology at King's College, Cambridge, and Wang Zilan, research fellow and Executive Director of Cam Rivers Projects and the Festival. It is dedicated to bringing together poets and artists from China, the UK and elsewhere. In the Chinese-speaking world, Xu Zhimo (1897-1931) is one of the best-loved of all modern Chinese poets, and school-children know by heart his famous poem 'Saying Goodbye to Cambridge Again'.¹

The following year I was involved in editing *The Xu Zhimo Poetry & Art Festival Anthology 2016*, and in October 2017 participated in the annual Xichang Silk Road International Poetry Week in Sichuan, having met its founder, Jidi Majia, at the Cambridge Xu Zhimo Festival in late July.

Jidi Majia was born in Sichuan in 1961 and belongs to the Yi-Nuosu ethnic minority. He is a representative figure among minority poets, and Vice President of the Secretariat of China Writers Association. His poetry is steeped in the history, mythology, folklore, customs and songs of his people and he draws crowds to his readings. At that time I was still co-editing *Long Poem Magazine* and invited Jidi Majia to submit two poems. As soon as I read them I realised we would need an accompanying essay in which Jidi's style and imagery could be expounded and contextualised, preferably by his translator, the American poet and Sinologist, Denis Mair. Professor Mair has lived and taught in China for over thirty years, and is a close friend of the poet. He has published essays in the States illuminating the layered imagery in Jidi's oeuvre, the spiritual and cultural significance of specific colours, the music, dance and animal rituals of the mountainous homeland of his youth. Mair was travelling at the time and we were unable to publish an essay or, as it turned out, a previously unpublished translation of the poems. An excerpt from the title poem of *Rhapsody in Black*² will give a flavour:

Ah black dream, may you soon engulf and dissolve me
 Let me vanish under your benign protection
 To become grassland and its herds
 To become a muntjac or a lark or a fine-scaled fish
 To become a firestone, to become a saddle
 To become a mouth harp or a *mabu* or a *kaxi-jjuhli*³

A major objective of the Silk Road International Poetry Week is to promote the outstanding work of the Yi Nuosu and introduce them to a wider international community of writers and artists, performing alongside major Chinese figures. Here I met Xiao Xiao. Born in Sichuan and of Han origin, Xiao Xiao handed me a copy of her seven-poem sequence 'Sad Songs from Another World'.⁴ I was, quite frankly, 'blown away'. Xiao Xiao was one of a small group of young migrant workers who began writing poetry in the early 90s, when millions of workers departed homelands to find employment in an economy developing as a free-market system, and started to write as a means of expressing the dangerous and dehumanising realities of their lives, alongside the yearning for their homelands. These poems preserve their memories of rural life and the spiritual culture of their motherlands, as well as bearing witness to the sufferings they endured. Here is the first stanza of the opening poem:

In the spring of that year, rumour and misfortune in bucket-loads
 A rainy season, erupting from the scars
 And going through everyone's skin, walks into March
 Into 1990, the mourning hall of brokenness and nostalgia (Mimicking the Spring)

Incorporated into the sequence title is the date: June 4th 1989 and, as one of the post-Tiananmen generation of poets, Xiao Xiao considers herself in the tradition of Misty Poets. Like her earlier contemporaries Yang Lian, Yang Ke, and Nobel-nominated Bei Dao, she will have had access to translations by an older generation of Chinese modernist poets: translations of Western avant-guard poets with leftist political credentials, such as Pablo Neruda, Lorca and Aragon. Their poems provided the young Chinese poets with an alternative model to those which they were supposed to be following.⁵

Indeed, when I asked Xiao Xiao if she could elucidate her own experience, she replied that she admired Neruda's anti-fascist works: 'scenes he described in his poem "The Dead in the Square" are surprisingly similar to our experiences in June 1989'. She went on to say that after 1989, Russian poetry of the Silver Age, such as the great poets Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva and Mandelstam also inspired and influenced her:

I can say that I had been composing my long poem 'Sad Songs From Another World' sentence by sentence while I was reading their poems on my way to Detention.⁶

Bei Dao, Yang Lian and Yang Ke drew an enthralled audience to the public readings in King's Garden during the 2016 Festival, and 'The Rose of Time' was one of several published in *The Xu Zhimo Poetry & Art Festival Anthology 2016*.

when the knife is bent in water
 you cross the bridge stepping on flute-songs
 to cry in the conspiracy is
 the rose of time (Bei Dao: excerpt from 'The Rose of Time')⁷

In April 2018, four of us from Cam Rivers Publishing travelled to Fuzhou in Jiangxi Province to meet our collaborative project partners in Fuzhou City, to witness (and later promote) their efforts to restore, preserve and celebrate the cultural legacies of their province. Fuzhou is one of an increasing number of cities to recognise the value in preserving their historical and cultural heritage for future generations. My brief was to gather material for travel essays about my experiences, specifically of the Tang Xianzu Memorial in Fuzhou, the Bai Xu Kiln in Nie Ancient Village located in Lichuan (Fuzhou) district, the ancient villages of Bamboo Bridge and Xianggu in Jinxi County, and the Caoshan Temple.

Tang Xianzu is China's greatest poet-dramatist and is Shakespeare's contemporary. In a 2016 collaboration between the two countries⁸, statues of the playwrights were ceremoniously unveiled in Fuzhou and in Stratford-upon-Avon. Adam Strickson, a poet and fellow in theatre and writing at the University of Leeds, who has studied the works of Tang and Shakespeare, explains in an article first published in the *China Daily*:

Both shared a love for mixing the low life or the bawdy with the sense of a tortuous moral journey of self-discovery. They also use dense and layered poetry to go beyond the surface, and the metaphor of the dream as a journey of confusion and enlightenment is central. I have

the sense both were involved in a religious quest for meaning, and that this revolves around an exploration of loss, grief and reconciliation in the family.⁹

On my return to Cambridge I began editing a series of migrant-worker anthologies featuring poetry, prose and short stories. My reading experience was intensified by having visited commercialised cities such as Chengdu, Guangdong, Shanghai and Fuzhou, as well as by seeing ancient villages and farming communities, and viewing the stunning beauty of Chinese landscape with its mountains, wetlands and bamboo forests.

While much of the prose looks back at rural living (with titles such as ‘Ironware and Countryside’, ‘The Revelation of Villages’, ‘Pause for an Orange’, ‘Plum-Blossom Source’, ‘A Country Lad’s Journey’, ‘A Brief History of Women Workers’ and ‘What Is Nostalgia?’) the poetry, by contrast, is mainly located in rapidly-expanding cities and speaks of brutalised lives and a searing yearning for homelands.¹⁰

The poet Zheng Xiaoqiong, for example, was born in Sichuan in 1980. After working as a nurse in a rural hospital, she moved to Guangdong province where she worked for several years in different factories including die-casting, toy manufacturing, and as a hole-punch operator in a hardware factory. In her poem ‘Living’, she gives a graphic picture of the mechanized life experienced on the production line:

My hands become part of the production line; my body turned into
a contracted object.

She doesn’t:

know how to protect a muted life
a life that loses the name and gender,

and poignant memories of ‘moonlight ... from Sichuan’ are ‘extinguished in the production lines seven days a week’.

Construction sites were hazardous and worker health and protection policies non-existent. Tang Buyu’s poem ‘Excavator’:

In the morning, the rain stopped
An excavator tore open the wet turf
You felt as if your body was being penetrated too.

Exhaustion, occupational sickness and death were endemic. Accidents at work caused nightmares — as in Mo Xiaoxian’s poem ‘Porter’:

Once, he carried a workmate who fell from the tower crane
The memory of splashed brain wakes him many nights.

Alongside distress and tragedy is a sense of impotence and shame at the workers’ own complicity in the system, as Shen Yu exemplifies in ‘Huge Machine’:

A sense of comedy and a glib tongue create nothing but machine slogans
Machines are the results of barbarousness and rely on prestige, especially order.

Zhu Ziqing takes this further in 'The Law of Machines':

When I said this, I didn't know that I was becoming a machine
And that what I said was not me but the machine talking.

Other poems reflect the stark distinction between the city melting-pot and the desolate empty village. Yang Ke's 'Railway Station' for example:

Here the stomach of the metropolis absorbs the new and purges the old.
A shepherd who wants to get rich ... begins to taste the loneliness of crowds.

By contrast, Chunchao's hometown village in 'The Fact Is':

A mountain, a village
A bottle of spirits, a window lit up by a candle ...
These may be all a villager's life is about.

As the decade progressed and private enterprise became more dominant, people in state-run industries vanished into the world of an underclass. They were 'stabbed by their dreams' as Chen Huiling writes in her short poem 'Disappearing' about a middle-aged worker and the general scene of desolation:

The elevator descends, the colleague who lost his job
disappears in front of the building.
The leaves on the ground ... decaying like his career
and the declining industry.

Many poets remember lonely childhoods when parents left them with relatives and when generation gaps became gulfs: 'Mum, the place where dad was headed for was as far off as the word Father' (Meng Hui, 'Snow in 1992'). In another poem, 'Inland Immigrants', Meng laments that his own young daughter won't know what snow is and that she will learn a different dialect to his as she grows into the new future.

In 'Break', by An Lianquan, the chicken eggs his grandmother carried in a jar for many miles to sell them for his school bus fare, become a metaphor for life. The old house where they once lived together:

like an abandoned eggshell after hatching,
which is silent and vulnerable
like life itself, that always starts with an egg.

I will conclude with a poem by Yu Yan, which he read in its original Chinese at the 2018 Xu Zhimo Poetry and Art Festival in August. Yu was born in Chongqing in 1967 and was a representative poet for college students through the 1980s. After Tiananmen he stopped writing, only resuming in 2014. He was one of the 2016 Poets of the Year in *Chengdu Commercial News* and was awarded The Grand Poet of the Year in the first Caotang Poet Award ceremony.

The Sky Is An Enormous Cemetery ¹¹

Translated from the Chinese by Linda Sheen and Lu Wenyan

The earth is too crowded

A grave is around one square metre
 Can a free soul be placed
 Let us bury the dead in the sky
 Let the smoke send them off into the high clouds
 To the hometown of rain and sunshine
 There it is vast and bright
 No snakes or rats to disturb
 No heavy metal to permeate them
 No wind to carry long lies and deceits
 Up there, one can sleep in peace for ten thousand years
 Those kin remain on the earth
 Each time they look up
 It is a tribute

Footnotes

¹ *XU ZHIMO Selected Poems*, Oleander Press, 2012

² *Rhapsody in Black* by Jidi Majia, translated by Denis Mair, CLT Books, University of Oklahoma Press, 2014

³ Musical instruments instruments used by the Yi Nuosu

⁴ 'Sad Songs From Another World', first published unabridged in *Long Poem Magazine*, Issue 19 May 2018

⁵ My thanks to Alistair Noon for pointing me to Eliot Weinberger's 'A Note on the Translation' in Bei Dao's *Unlock*, Anvil Press Poetry 2006

⁶ I would like to thank my friend Shuai Ping for her tireless help as translator and mediator with this and

other work since I had the good fortune of meeting and working with her in Sichuan, 2017.

⁷ Bei Dao's 'The Rose of Time' published in *The Xu Zhimo Poetry & Art Festival Anthology 2016*, Cam Rivers Press

⁸ 'The idea of commemorating Tang and Shakespeare through the year came from a speech by President

Xi Jinping, who, during his visit to Britain in October last year, called on both countries to jointly "celebrate the legacy of these two literary giants to promote interpersonal exchanges and deepen mutual understanding". *China Daily*, 17 July 2017

⁹ First published in *China Daily* and subsequently in *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 April 2016

¹⁰ All the quotes are taken from *An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Workers' Poetry*, forthcoming from Cam

Rivers Press, 2018

¹¹ Yu Yan's 'The Sky Is An Enormous Cemetery' is published in *The Cambridge Xu Zhimo Poetry & Art*

Festival 2018, Cam Rivers Publishing, 2018