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Asymptotic Freedom: Child-Authored Poetry from China

Abstract

Child-authored poetry is one of the most remarkable and fascinating phenomena in the contemporary Chinese poetry world. However, for all its immense popularity among Chinese readers and attractiveness for professional, adult poets, due to its unclear ontological status and lack of well-proven methodological tools that would be easily applicable to it, it has thus far remained beyond the scope of literary-critical and scholarly interests. The present paper offers a broad panoramic view of Chinese children's poetry through six case studies of individual young authors and collective initiatives aimed at the artistic activation of certain groups of children, discussing the educational and social significance of children's poetry writing, its complicated reception patterns, as well as its entanglement with various literary-political discourses. Subsequently, the study delves into the aesthetic, conceptual, and philosophical aspects of children's works. The final part analyses the essential theoretical-philosophical questions that child-authored verse asks with regard to poetry at large, prompting us to rethink notions such as authorship or "poeticness" and the definition of poetry per se. The author proposes the metaphor of asymptotic freedom to illustrate how marginal phenomena of questionable status contribute to maintaining the distinctness and coherence of the field of poetry as a whole.

Keywords: Chinese poetry, child-authored poetry, poetry education, poetry therapy, asymptotic freedom, definitions of poetry



Introduction: Songs of Innocence and Songs of Genius¹

写诗有点像拍蚊子
 有时候我一不小心
 就按死了一只
 有时候
 我拼命地拍打
 却怎么也打不到它
 我觉得写诗
 就是这样

Writing poetry is like swatting mosquitoes
 Sometimes I smash one
 by accident
 Sometimes
 I swat and swat
 And can't reach it
 I think writing poetry
 is just like this —²

So reads the definition of poetry formulated by seven-year-old Li Yurong 李雨融 (b. 2010) in a poem that opens the 2017 anthology *Poetry Written by Children (Haizimen de shi 孩子们的诗)*, edited by Guo Mai 果麦 and featuring works of over sixty authors from three to thirteen years of age. With the catchy motto, “Dear Child You Were Born a Poet” (*Qin'ai de haizi, ni shi tiansheng de shiren 亲爱的孩子你是天生的诗人*), on the cover, which is also occasionally treated as the volume's subtitle, the anthology gathers the crème de la crème of children's poetry that has already massively circulated on the Chinese internet and in social media for around two decades, attracting the growing attention of popular and specialist audiences alike. The beginnings of this increased interest in the phenomenon of children's writing date back to the early 2000s, which witnessed the release of an individual collection of the then thirteen-year-old Chen Ang 陈昂 (b. 1992), titled *The End of the World (Tianya 天崖, 2003)*. This was followed by more publications and artistic activities on the part of the young author, who was enthusiastically hailed

¹ The paper is part of the research project *The World Re-Versed: New Phenomena in Chinese Poetry as a Challenge and Inspiration to Literary Studies* funded by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA) within the Bekker 2019 program.

² Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Haizimen de shi (Qin'ai de haizi, ni shi tiansheng de shiren) 孩子们的诗 (亲爱的孩子, 你是天生的诗人)* [Poetry Written by Children (Dear Child, You Were Born a Poet)], Hangzhou 杭州 2017, Kindle edition. Poetry translations used in the paper, unless otherwise indicated, come from the author and are preceded by originals in Chinese characters. Published translations by other people are not accompanied by originals. For excerpts from critical texts in Chinese, I only include English translations, with crucial terms followed by Chinese originals with transliteration in parentheses.

as the “Poetry Prince” (*Shige wangzi* 诗歌王子), including a substantial contribution to the so-called “earthquake poetry” (*dizhen shige* 地震诗歌) that became highly popular after the natural disaster that hit Sichuan in 2008. Since then, the internet has seen the emergence of a good dozen or so other “princes” and “princesses”, some of them still of pre-school age, and, thus, technically, not even capable of *writing* poetry – their creations are simply jotted down by parents happy to assume the role of “poetry secretaries” (*shige mishu* 诗歌秘书), in the words of Jiang Puyuan 姜普元, the father of the now widely recognized Jiang sisters, Xinhe 馨贺 (b. 2003) and Erman 二嫚 (b. 2007), who started their adventures with poetry at the ages of one year, seven months and two years, five months, respectively.³

Readers across the world might not be unfamiliar with the phenomenon of child-authored poetry, as demonstrated, for instance, by the huge number of literary contests for young poets available online and dozens of academic papers discussing the advantages of poetry writing in school classes.⁴ There are also examples of spectacular early careers, the most famous one being Arthur Rimbaud, and more recently, also in France, Minou Drouet, whose poetry sparked enthusiasm as well as a controversy dubbed a “literary Dreyfus Affair” in the mid-1950s. It involved the mainstream media and drew attention from such diverse celebrities as Jean Cocteau – who was reportedly Minou’s greatest fan – and Pope Pius XII, who invited her for a private audience. Eventually, to dispel the doubts of her many naysayers, Drouet was even put to the test and asked to write a poem on the spot in order to prove that her work (and prodigious talent) was genuinely her own.⁵ Still, the scale and dynamism of this phenomenon in China, a country that is widely believed to be suppressing children’s creativity at every step with its ossified education system, may appear surprising to the Western reader. Yet, suffice it to scan the initial pages of the 2017 anthology to be sure that its young contributors are not only highly creative but endowed with astonishing self-awareness as human beings and meta-literary awareness as poets, as epitomised by the above-cited poem, which unceremoniously tackles a question – “what is poetry?” – that many adult authors struggle with and some do not even dare to raise.

³ Qiu Junfeng 邱峻峰 and Zeng Qi 曾琦, ‘Zhuanfang 00 hou shiren Jiang Erman: Ruguo wo yizhi dou bu gaibian, yihou hui shi ge ‘juying’ 专访00后诗人姜二嫚: 如果我一直都不改变, 以后就会是个“巨婴” [Interviewing the Post-2000 Poet Jiang Erman: If I Don’t Change, in the Future I Will Turn into a ‘Giant Infant’], *Sina News* 22 May 2020, Viewed 22 May 2022, <http://k.sina.com.cn/article_6105713761_16bedcc6102000ptkd.html?wm=3049_0032>.

⁴ See, e.g.: George Kamberelis, ‘Genre Development and Learning: Children Writing Stories, Science Reports, and Poems’, *Research in the Teaching of English* 33/4 (1999), pp. 403–460; Janine L. Certo, ‘Cold Plums and the Old Men in the Water: Let Children Read and Write “Great” Poetry’, *The Reading Teacher* 58/3 (2004), pp. 266–271; Janine L. Certo, ‘Poetic Language, Interdiscursivity and Intertextuality in Fifth Graders’ Poetry: An Interpretive Study’, *Journal of Literacy Research* 47/1 (2015), pp. 49–82; Anne Haas Dyson, ‘Staying in the (Curricular) Lines: Practice Constraints and Possibilities in Childhood Writing’, *Written Communication* 1/1 (2008), pp. 119–159.

⁵ For an interesting account of Minou Drouet’s life, see online: Richard Gottlieb, ‘Minou Drouet by Richard Gottlieb’, *John Shaplin Blog*, 30 March 2012, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<http://johnshaplin.blogspot.com/2012/03/minou-drouet-by-richard-gottlieb.html>>

At the same time, of course, one should be careful not to succumb too recklessly to the wave of enthusiasm actively stimulated by publishers and media, which skillfully operate upon sentiments and stereotypes in an attempt to recreate and monetise one or another version of the archetypal myth of childhood. Among the interpretational frameworks in which the general discussion of childhood (in) poetry tends to develop, one can distinguish two particularly salient and abiding modes, which I tentatively call “songs of innocence” and “songs of genius”.

The former term is of course borrowed from William Blake’s famous poem cycle, in which innocence is conventionally contrasted with experience, and the figure of a child is connected with characteristics such as purity, unconstrained freedom, and happy unawareness of evil; it is perceived as an unblemished noble savage who has not yet been affected by culture, social etiquette, hierarchies, and biases. However, interpretations along the lines of the “songs of innocence” model, while uncritically glorifying children’s work, do little justice to the complexity and diversity of their inner worlds. To illustrate the insufficiency of this approach, let’s juxtapose Blake’s archetypal child sitting on a cloud and asking for a sweet song about a Lamb, for example, with the poem *A Lamb on Snow* (*Xue di shang de yang* 雪地上的羊) by Jiang Xinhe written when the author was eleven, which shows how deeply conscious children are of the cruelty of the world, how they try to deal with it, and that they are capable of identifying their own psychological mechanisms (in this case, a self-defence against overwhelming grief and pity), as if reflecting on themselves from outside.

《雪地上的羊》

奶奶家大门口的雪地上
总是拴着一只羊
每天
我都跑去喂它些菜叶
有时它突然胖了
有时它突然瘦了
有时它突然高了
有时它突然矮了
有时它突然大了
有时它突然小了
其实它并不是同一只羊
只是我把它当成同一只羊来喂
而且我尽量不去看旁边那个肉铺
以减少内心的悲伤⁶

⁶ Jiang Xinhe 姜馨贺 and Jiang Erman 姜二嫚, *Deng ba heiye tang le yi ge dong* 灯把黑夜烫了一个洞 [A Lamp Burnt a Hole in the Night], Nanchang 南昌 2018, p. 8.

A Lamb on Snow

On snow in front of grandma's door
 A lamb is always tied
 Every day
 I run to feed it leaves
 Sometimes it suddenly gets fat
 Sometimes suddenly gets thin
 Sometimes suddenly gets tall
 Sometimes suddenly gets short
 Sometimes suddenly gets big
 Sometimes suddenly gets small
 In fact, it's not the same lamb
 It's just that I take it for the same lamb
 And I refuse to look at the butcher's nearby
 To alleviate my inner pain

Or, on the other hand, one may read Blake alongside Tietou's 铁头 (b. 2006) poem, *Wheat* (*Maizi* 麦子), dated 2015. The then nine-year-old author is very straightforward about his desire to eat wheat, which the adults treat as a sacred thing, instead of showing love for every living thing, as we might stereotypically expect from children:

《麦子》

高速路上
 麦子与我擦身而过
 姥姥对麦子有友情，难以忘记
 我对麦子没有感情，没细看过它们
 唯一的友情是
 吃它⁷

Wheat

On the expressway
 wheat and I brush past each other
 grandma has friendly feelings toward wheat, always cherishes the memory of it
 I have no feelings toward wheat at all, haven't even seen it closely
 my only friendly feeling is
 to eat it

⁷ Quoted in: Li Xiangrong 李相蓉 and Li Xin 李馨, '9 sui nantong xie shi zouhong: mama shi xiao jianmao zongshi nianzhe wo' 9岁男童写诗走红: 妈妈是小贱猫 总是粘着我 [A 9-year-old Boy Who Writes Poetry Goes Viral: Mum Is a Little Absject Cat Always Sticks to Me], *Tengxun xinwen* 腾讯新闻 [Tencent News], 29 October 2015, Viewed 22 May 2022, <https://news.qq.com/a/20151029/004846.htm?pgv_ref=aio2015&ptlang=2052>.

Incidentally, the motif of wheat in modern Chinese poetry is closely associated with the Romantic vision of poethood that haunts contemporary literature; it makes one think immediately about Haizi 海子 (1964–1989), also known as the “wheat poet” (*maizi shiren* 麦子诗人), one of the most tragic figures in the history of Chinese New Poetry (*xin shi* 新诗), whose suicide at age 25 has been among its most powerful mythogenic narratives. Tietou, probably unwittingly, deconstructs this myth in a way almost as spectacular as the famous desecrator, Yi Sha 伊沙 (b. 1966), who in his manifesto-poem, *Starve the Poets* (*E si shiren* 饿死诗人), quoted below in Simon Patton and Tao Naikan’s translation, declares blatantly:

You, poets, have eaten your fill
 Vast fields of wheat
 filled your bellies with their savour
 The city’s greatest spongers
 then turned themselves into glorious farmers of verse
 Wheat in the name of the sunlight, the rain
 I call on you to starve them,
 starve those fuckin’ poets:
 You can start with me first
 a sidekick polluting this earth with ink
 bastard of the art-world⁸

As we will see in the following sections, Tietou, who debuted at six years of age with the collection *Willow Is a Little Stinking Brat* (*Liushu shi ge chou xiaozi* 柳树是个臭小子, 2015), published by the prestigious Tsinghua University Press, has much more in common with Yi Sha than this single poem, and his take on topics such as desire or female sexuality certainly do not fit neatly into the topos of innocence. Incidentally, Yi Sha has been one of the most outspoken advocates for poetry written by children among adult poets,⁹ which is not surprising given his general artistic interest in things that favour unbridled human nature over civilised human culture. The unpolished diamonds of child-authored poems are certainly a valuable finding for him, and he does not hesitate to include them in the various anthologies he edits, among them his most ambitious: *Canon of the New Century* (*Xin shiji shidian* 新世纪诗典). Moreover, the idea of the democratisation of poetry as an innate instinct, as expressed in the formula “child, you were born a poet”, is conceivably not far from his own understanding of what poetry is and should be (like).

At the other extreme of the spectrum of the literary-critical reception of children’s writing, sits the concept of “songs of genius”, an informal search for an inspired, godlike poet who will grow to become a great master or, more likely, another tragic hero like

⁸ Yi Sha 伊沙, ‘Starve the Poets’, in: Simon Patton and Tao Naikan (eds.), *Starve the Poets!: Selected Poems*, Bloodaxe Books, Tarsset UK 2008, p. 26.

⁹ See, e.g., an account of a book promotion event in which Yi Sha participated: Viewed 22 May 2022, <https://qd.ifeng.com/a/20190104/7143570_0.shtml>.

Haizi; the latter, on that note, is believed to have been an exceptionally talented child, memorizing long passages from literature and propaganda texts before even turning ten, and entering the prestigious Peking University at fifteen to study law. Another model might be the “fairy-tale poet”, Gu Cheng 顾城 (1956–1991), whose name, as well as the early poems written in the first decade of his life, are particularly frequently invoked in discussions on children’s works. Gu Cheng’s story – which ended with the murder of his own wife, Xie Ye 谢烨, followed by the poet’s suicide in exile – is sometimes also cited as a warning to parents and critics alike against succumbing to the blind cult of genius and neglecting other aspects of the personal and intellectual development of the youth.

Fortunately, most parents appear to be free of such unreasonable ambitions and emphasise that their children are “ordinary kids” whose innate imaginations they, as adults, try to keep as unconstrained as possible without trying to push them too far ahead of themselves. They tend to approach children’s creativity in the spirit of the so-called *suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育, of which more will be said later in this essay, rather than that of unhealthy stardom. Moreover, one should also point out that a child genius is often a “retroactive” phenomenon, meaning that traits of divine talent are sought in the juvenilia of outstanding mature or late poets whose legendary status these traits are meant to confirm. Conversely, hailing a young author as an unprecedented talent too early carries a large risk of error and thus undermining one’s own authority as a critic, so commentators tend to remain quite cautious in their assessment of children’s artistic potential. This is illustrated by the case of Gu Cheng, whose first attempts at poetry writing acquired new meanings and a greater value in the eyes of critics only when reread in the context of his entire life and death, alongside his adult oeuvre. Such searches for the earliest manifestations of an author’s greatness are also not uncommon in the West, where one example is the anthology *First Lines: Poems Written in Youth from Herbert to Heaney* (1988), edited by Jon Stallworthy, which collects the earliest available poems of fifty-eight of the most prominent English-language authors.

As an interesting exception, on the “prospective” rather than “retrospective” side, in section two of the first part of the present paper, we will consider the hesitant development of a professional literary-critical discourse around the poetry of Gao Can 高璨 by pursuing a quick preview of essays by poets and scholars including Yu Jian 于坚, Wang Jiabin 王家新, Liang Xiaobin 梁小斌, Xie Mian 谢冕, Zhou Guoping 周国平, Cao Wenxuan 曹文轩, Zhang Qinghua 张清华, and others collected in the volume *The Literary Gao Can* (*Wenxue de Gao Can* 文学的高璨), published in 2009, when the author was still in her mid-teens. In this rare volume, we can observe another interesting occurrence, which is specific to the reception of child-authored writing: the contributors’ patronising tendencies – consciously or unconsciously – to “mold” Gao’s poetry and Gao herself according to their preferred model and ethos of poetry. As a result, the book constitutes a very clear reflection of the most important literary-critical discussions on the “adult” poetry scene in the first decade of the 21st century.

The paper is divided into two main parts. In the first part, I will offer six case studies that will allow me to reconstruct various discourses in which the phenomenon of child-

authored verse has been entangled, how its interpretations are located at different points in the conceptual space stretched between “songs of innocence” and “songs of genius”, and how different functions are ascribed to this poetry in different environments, ranging from the therapeutic to the educational to the purely aesthetic and even to the literary-political. In the second, text-focused portion of this paper, I will shift perspectives and attempt to consider the natural and cultural worlds from the perspective of the child-authored poems; I will concentrate on three pervasive themes: (1) nature, (2) self-identification in society, and (3) meta-literary and meta-linguistic awareness. We will observe, among other things, how the work of young poets actively interacts with – as opposed to being passively drawn into – the texts and contexts of general literary and cultural discourse in and outside China. Equipped with these observations, in the end, I will return to the conundrum that opens this essay: “what is poetry?”. Asked at a different angle and from a different position – from the margins, the “grey zone” where “poeticness” can be easily cast in doubt by various mainstream paradigms of the genre – this question acquires a different dimension and encourages a different type of response than those to which we are accustomed in mainstream (adult) poetry and scholarship. In my attempt to offer an answer to this question, I will avail myself of the notion of “asymptotic freedom” borrowed from physics to describe the dynamism of the fascinating peripheries of poetry and their complex relationships to its spectral centre.

I. Child-Authored Poetry as a Cultural Phenomenon

For all their richness and variety, most child-authored poems, especially those written by the youngest poets, have one common feature: they grow directly from – although they do not always constitute a direct reflection of – the child’s observations of its surrounding reality, which is to say from everyday experience, or sensual perception. Being so deeply rooted in a child’s psychological reality, regardless of their perceived artistic quality or originality – which vary within a single oeuvre and across different authors’ output alike – these poems require a particularly sensitive and responsible approach on the part of their adult readers. Whether we like it or not, and however exceptional the young author’s talent and abilities are, the trajectory of her or his personal and artistic development is hugely shaped by adults. Moreover, children who turn out to excel in something and gain recognition early on are often drawn into a particularly complex network of interactions and influences, being collectively “brought up” by many, often self-appointed, experts who wish to contribute to their futures and become the (co-)fathers or (co-)mothers of their expected success. Finally, we must recall that the way in which child-authored poems circulate in cultural space is largely decided by older participants of the cultural discourse.

Below, I select six radically different examples of children’s writing to discuss various more and less desirable aspects and mechanisms that determine child-authored poetry’s presence and functioning in the world. Four of the case studies (sections 1–4) engage

with individual authors, and the two other concern initiatives addressed to broader groups and communities: namely, the experimental Beijing Dayu Middle School Branch School (Beijing Dayu Zhongxue Fenxiao 北京大峪中学分校), which introduced the concept of “education through poetry” by developing poetry classes and creative workshops taught by renowned poets (especially Zhou Sese 周瑟瑟, known as the “godfather” of post-millennial poets), primarily in big cities across the country (section 5); and (section 6) Kang Yu’s 康瑜 initiative “Poetry Is Light” (*Shi guang shige* 是光诗歌), with its expressive promotional motto, “children who can write poetry don’t smash windows” (*Hui xie shi de haizi bu za boli* 会写诗的孩子不砸玻璃), which since 2016 has already reached around 70,000 pupils in the rural and mountainous areas of the country and has attracted the attention of media and prominent sponsors. Although each of these examples deserves an elaborated discussion and could become the subject of a separate paper, here, I will keep my account as concise as possible in order to give more attention to the young poets’ works, which will be extensively discussed in the second part of the study.

1. Chen Ang Superstar

Chen Ang is not among the earliest-debuting (in terms of age, not chronology) and probably not among the most outstanding among child poets, but, arguably, he is the one who most significantly contributed to the lowering of the unofficial age threshold for active participation in poetry life, at the same time contributing to the development of a certain stereotypical paradigm of reception from which this poetry still has not entirely freed itself. Born in 1992, Chen claims to have started learning poetry and taken interest in writing at the age of five. When he was ten, his poetry started to appear in various magazines and journals, and several years later, he published the book *The End of the World* (*Tianya* 天崖, 2003), which brought him some, if still modest, recognition among literary audiences across the country. As a high school student, in 2008, after the Tangshan earthquake, he participated in a summer camp for earthquake orphans, where he was invited to write a “thematic poem” for the activity. This is how he produced one of his earliest “red” (in Chinese, meaning popular and widely searched online) poems, *An Orphan Draws Her Mum in Snow* (*Gu’er zai xuedi li hua mama* 孤儿在雪地里画妈妈), which recalls a scene witnessed by the author. The poem is a good illustration of the general style and emotional temperature of Chen’s verses, as well as his consistently upheld artistic credo that poetry should record the surrounding world:

《孤儿在雪地里画妈妈》

雪是来自天堂的姑娘
她带着一个母亲的思念与幻想
此时大地上的一个孤儿
穿着单薄的衣裳在雪地里张望

她用干枯的枝丫刻画母亲的脸庞
 一笔一划的描绘和想象
 她脱下自己的衣服给母亲披上
 脱下自己的鞋子蜷缩在母亲身旁
 她怕把母亲弄脏
 全然忘记了大雪的寒凉¹⁰

An Orphan Draws Her Mum in Snow

Snow is a girl who descended from heaven
 she carries thoughts and illusions of a mother
 At the same time on earth an orphan
 thinly clad looks around on snow-covered ground
 and with a dry twig draws her mother's face
 contours and imaginations emerge stroke by stroke
 she takes off her clothes and puts them on her mother
 takes off her shoes and curls up by mother's side
 afraid of making her mother dirty
 she forgets the freezing coldness of snow

The same year, Chen Ang was officially “crowned” as Poetry Prince. Receiving a prize from the hands of the chairman of the Chinese Poetry Society (*Zhongguo Shige Xuehui* 中国诗歌学会), Lei Shuyan 雷抒雁, who has since become a great advocate and unofficial promotor of his poetry, he was addressed in the following way:

This young man approaching his eighteenth birthday has such a great and sincere love for poetry. His little and refreshing poems contain a huge wisdom. They bring peaceful sleep to the sleepless, awakening to those who sleep peacefully, impulse for action to the awakened. He is a prince in the kingdom of poetry. Exquisite, noble, and bright as he is, we believe Poetry Prince Chen Ang will open a new tomorrow in Chinese New Poetry. We just need to wait, and we are looking forward!¹¹

Following Lei, several other authors and critics pinned their hopes on Chen as the future of Chinese poetry and expressed their expectations in the most gilded terms,

¹⁰ Chen Ang 陈昂, ‘Gu’er zai xuedi li hua mama’ 孤儿在雪地里画妈妈 [An Orphan Draws Mum on Snow], Baidu [2008], Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://baike.baidu.com/item/孤儿在雪地里画妈妈>>.

¹¹ Lin Xinrong 林新荣, *Shige wangzi Chen Ang* 诗歌王子陈昂 [Poetry Prince Chen Ang], Beijing 北京 2017. [Chen Ang’s bio; no page number].

comparing him, for example, to Li Bai 李白,¹² Haizi, and Wang Guozhen 汪国真, and hailing the young “prince” as “a spark of Chinese poetry that remained on earth”.¹³

Exalted hopes and expectations aside, it is probably Chen Ang himself who most aptly and frankly captures the secret of his growing popularity – that is, not as a Lu Xun-style revolutionary, who brings enlightenment by all means and opens others’ eyes by force, but rather by offering comfort and consolation to ordinary people among whom he counts himself:

I am an ordinary person, so I’m capable of writing poems that will be liked by ordinary people. Real poetry is not written for others to read but is revealed in the process of inner Bodhicitta. The most direct manifestation of this condition is that everybody who sees a poem created in this way feels comfortable.¹⁴

After a quick look at which of his poems, and when, have attracted the greatest interest as measured by “clicks” (a hugely problematic but not uncommon way of measuring the value of poetry on the Chinese internet), we can see that his statement is not groundless.¹⁵ Among his most-clicked works are those that speak in a very innocent manner of love (*The Day When the Sky Is Filled With Snow* [*Man tian fei xue de rizi* 漫天飞雪的日子]), the role of the mother in one’s life (*Mother Is a Bodhisattva Sent Us by Buddha* [*Mama shi fo anpai zai women shen bian de Pusa* 妈妈是佛安排在我们身边的菩萨]), or the importance of being appreciative of what one has (*If You Live, Live at Ease* [*Yao huo jiu huo de xiaosa*, 要活就活得潇洒]). Statistics for the year 2016 show that his works were most intensely searched for around Mother’s Day in May.¹⁶ On the web, one can also come across a letter from his mum published around that time. Referring to herself as a “simple village woman”, she admonishes her son for his lack of persistence and patience and reminds him to work hard because talent and inspiration are not enough to succeed or even survive.¹⁷

Several of Chen Ang’s poems have also been included in school textbooks and many of his aphoristic, neat-and-tidy, but rarely genuinely revealing phrases have been used as topics for the essay section of the general high school final examination, the so-called *gaokao* 高考.¹⁸ He has been unofficially assigned, and consciously accepted, the role of a “good child” who may constitute an example to follow and is ready to

¹² Ibidem, p. 32.

¹³ See e.g. Li Yan 李燕 and Guo Xiangyu 郭翔宇. *Chen Ang shi Zhongguo shige liu zai renjian de huozong* 陈昂是中国诗歌留在人间的火种 [Chen Ang Is a Spark of Poetry That Remained in the Human World], *Sohu* 18 May 2015, Viewed 22 May 2022, <https://www.sohu.com/a/15474394_187691>.

¹⁴ Lin Xinrong 林新荣, *Shige wangzi Chen Ang* 诗歌王子陈昂, p. 36.

¹⁵ For detailed statistics, see: ibidem, p. 29.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 20.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 72.

¹⁸ A list of the aphorisms used for the *gaokao* is available in: ibidem, pp. 50–51.

offer others a helpful hand or word at any time, hence the educational value of the “Chen Ang phenomenon” (*Chen Ang xianxiang* 陈昂现象). His “biography” – which in fact constitutes a collection of screenshots of various online articles supplemented with a selection of poems and aphorisms – compiled by Lin Xinrong 林欣荣 in 2016, when Chen was twenty-four, is another testimony to his peculiar position as a “favourite” (*chong'er* 宠儿) of Chinese New Poetry, as he was called first by Hong Zhu 洪烛 in the introduction to the poetry collection *The Day When the Sky Is Filled with Snow* (*Mantian fei xue de rizi* 漫天飞雪的日子) from 2016.¹⁹ Illustrated with Chen’s schoolboy photos and the infantile drawings that accompany some of his verses, the book paints the image of a Chinese Peter Pan who refuses (and is refused) to grow up. For many twenty-somethings, this would be a rather embarrassing publication, but Chen does not seem to mind it and instead appears to have willingly embraced the role he is expected to play. Moreover, as a loyal child of his homeland, along with New Poetry, he also writes classical-style verse whose rules he learnt at school, which makes him a paragon of virtue in the eyes of many: a well-educated modern young man who has not severed his connections to tradition.

One may ask whether this is all a calculated strategy. Perhaps, but I am far from passing judgments here, and an ex-cathedra discussion without even knowing the author personally seems to me as irrelevant for this paper as it is inappropriate. In any event, his specific career path certainly proved profitable and Chen’s popularity has been turned into both material and immaterial social capital by various institutions. He has become the face of many campaigns and the Red Cross ambassador, among other things. In 2016, he was invited as a special guest to the hugely popular nationwide classical poetry show, *China Poetry Congress* (中国诗词大会) broadcast by CCTV,²⁰ in which people representing all walks of life compete in their knowledge of the poetry canon. With millions of purchased copies of his poetry collections and additional sources of commercial income, Chen is also considered one of the richest authors born in the 1990s, another questionable but widely applied measure of artistic success.

At the same time that Chen Ang’s poetry generates tremendous interest among media, social, and educational institutions, it has encountered disproportionately little interest on the part of established literary critics and scholars. Chen has received some significant poetry awards, including Wen Yiduo Poetry Prize, and, since 2012, he has been a member of the “adult” Poetry Society; he even established his own poetry movement, the “spring grass poetry school” (*chun cao shipai* 春草诗派), which was joined by a number of authors across China. However, his work does not seem to have much to offer to professional poetry readers, so to say. To make matters clear, I am far from claiming that intensity

¹⁹ Hong Zhu 洪烛, ‘Cheng Ang: Zhongguo ‘Bai nian xinshi’ de chong’er (dai xu)’ 陈昂: 中国“百年新诗”的宠儿(代序) [Chen Ang: The Favorite of Chinese ‘100 Years of New Poetry’ (In Lieu of Introduction)], in: Chen Ang 陈昂 *Mantian fei xue de rizi* 漫天飞雪的日子 [The Day in Which the Sky Was Filled with Snow], Beijing 北京 2016, digital edition, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://yuedu.baidu.com/ebook/e6db01c8f6ec4afe04a1b0717fd5360cba1a8df5?pn=1>>.

²⁰ Lin Xinrong 林欣荣, *Shige wangzi Chen Ang* 诗歌王子陈昂, p. 33.

of critical-academic discussion constitutes an ultimate confirmation of author's talent or achievements, and if Chen's ambition is indeed to be a "poet of the people" (*renmin shiren* 人民诗人) – another label that has stuck to him – it is all well and good, and he certainly has noble predecessors, including some of the most highly regarded poets of all time, such as Walt Whitman. Still, quality professional discourse and regular feedback from various readers usually constitute a crucial element of the author's healthy growth and his evolution as a poet, which is unlikely to occur if he continues to be approvingly patted on the head as the good child of his parents and of the Chinese nation. There is nothing wrong with Chen's desire to remain part of popular culture, but I am afraid this culture alone can barely offer enough space and incentives for his further development. How long will he be able to capitalise on the image of the Poetry Prince without moving forward? Besides, the fan-idol relationship between him and his audiences does not strike one as the most desirable mode of poetry reception but rather as another problematic model of poethood and a manifestation of its unhealthy cult.

2. Gao Can – a Brilliant Daughter of Many Fathers

The case of Gao Can is, in many ways, opposite to that of Chen Ang. Three years Chen's junior, Gao, for all her exceptional productivity, has never engaged in, nor has she been drawn into, any pursuit of literary stardom. At the same time, for many years, her work raised great curiosity among professional readers. In contrast to Chen's "biography" which consists of internet screenshots, a volume devoted to Gao's poetry, edited in 2009 by Huang Hai 黄海, makes the impression of a solid, professionally prepared work. Compiled of 47 articles written by established participants of Chinese cultural discourse, this elegant hardcover collection, released by an academic press, at first glance bears all traits of a regular "adult" literary-critical publication. At the same time, unsurprisingly, it also contains a lot of moralising and other things that usually do not take place in the adult literary discourse. For example, critic Xie Mian 谢冕, in one of the earliest critical texts on the young poet, probably published originally in 2005, takes a notably patronising approach, and, after an emotional eulogy to Gao Can's "moving" poetry, her imagination, and her natural sensibility to the surrounding world, he urges Gao (and her parents) not to engage in poetry at the cost of school education, which is crucially important for her future. In the end, he addresses the author with a familiar rhetorical question: "Do you agree with my opinion, little friend?"²¹ In another segment of the contributions, we can observe exactly the same trend as in the feedback from Chen's audiences, although wrapped in a different rhetoric: namely, the yearning for, and the desire to identify, the archetypal child who speaks the language of pure poetry, and in some cases a disappointment when the commentators observe that the child starts to grow up or grows up in the "wrong" way, meaning one that is not in line with their expectations concerning children's development and/or their preferred paradigm of poetry writing. This is the case, for example, in an otherwise very

²¹ Huang Hai 黄海 (ed.), *Wenxue de Gao Can* 文学的高璨 [Literary Gao Can], Xi'an 西安 2009, p. 7.

insightful essay by Li Xing 李星, who points out the “unavoidable decrease in quality” in Gao’s more mature poems, written roughly since 2006, considering them overthought and lacking in the lightness and natural harmony that was characteristic of her earliest works, which he identified with a Buddhist sensibility.²²

To what extent poets and critics project their visions of poetry on Gao Can’s work and on children’s writing in general, is probably best illustrated by a comparison of essays written by Yu Jian and by Wang Jiabin, broadly known as representatives of two opposing factions on the Chinese poetry scene: Popular Poetry (*minjian shige* 民间诗歌) and Intellectual Poetry (*zhishifenzi shige* 知识分子诗歌). Yu Jian speaks of his fascination with the “poetry garden” (*shige huayuan* 诗歌花园) created by Gao Can, which is not available to adult authors, including himself: “In fact, there’s no garden around me, the garden is but a distant memory to me”.²³ It is a paradise from which he has been exiled by rapid civilisational development that has gradually eroded the spiritual dimension of the world. Invoking Li Bai and the centuries-long classical poetry tradition, he sees Gao Can as a continuator of the great legacy of ancient verse written in a communion with “Mr Nature” (*Ziran xiansheng* 自然先生), “the eternal traditional master” and “the source of the poet’s imagination”. Gao is compared to “the goddesses of the primordial era” and counted among “young girls” who “have taken care of the gardens for the world”. This garden is not a mimetic image but largely a product of unconstrained and “surreal” fantasy, which offers an asylum and “salvation for our civilisation in which it can survive”.²⁴ In many of his literary-theoretical essays of the time, Yu declared a general mistrust of modernity and often expressed his nostalgia for a pre-cultural world and a primordial language intact with random dissemination of signs without reference. He consistently underscores elements that resonate with this conception in Gao’s work, considering her, and children poets at large, allies in this utopian mission to bring poetry back to its natural roots.

Wang Jiabin, conversely, at the very beginning of his essay cites Rilke’s sophisticated dictums on poetry to justify his general mistrust of what is often seen as natural talent; he emphasises the importance of carefully processed lived experience and warns against the pitfalls that await those who “start writing too early”.²⁵ Self-awareness and cultural awareness are the key to artistic success. To his surprise, he claims, for all his initial skepticism regarding the putative genius of Gao Can, he has managed to identify these crucial traits in her work.

In Gao Can’s poems, I sense not only the freshness and loveliness specific of a young girl poet but also a precocious poetic heart. I have observed the author’s control over the language and technique that is rarely seen at this age and a constantly growing and maturing poetic sensibility.²⁶

²² Ibidem, p. 59.

²³ Ibidem, p. 142.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 142–143.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 226.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 227.

He also invokes Blake as a pretext to trace the process of Gao's cultural qualifications and her poetry's transformation from "songs of innocence" to "songs of experience", an evolution that he – contrary to Yu Jian – believes to be the most vital and desirable outcome. His "intellectualist" advice to Gao, which is complemented by another quote from Rilke, urges the necessity of transcending one's school habits and reliance on superficial impressions. He wishes it to become a motto for all young authors:

However, as a "poetry veteran" who has been wandering the roads of poetry for many years, I still have something to say to Gao Can. Namely, I hope she will keep reading/studying (*du shu* 读书) a lot, but at the same time will not forget to liberate herself from the literary influences she has been exposed to, especially so-called "aestheticism".²⁷

Other contributors draw attention to yet different aspects of Gao Can's work. Huang Lihai, a former member of "Lower Body Poetry" (*xiabanshen shige* 下半身诗歌) school who at the time was in his early thirties, speaks in his characteristically personal and empathetic way – straightforwardly, without reservations – to express his admiration for Gao Can, who started writing poetry at an age at which he himself could not even read.²⁸ In the spirit of his democratic conception of poetry, he argues that poetry's essence is a vivid and sensitive soul that can inhabit a body regardless of its age and other social and biological categories. In another example, Cao Wenxuan, a famous fairy-tale writer, focuses on the fairy-tale-like elements of Gao's poetry, including her sensitivity to beauty, which often goes hand-in-hand with a moral sensibility and openness to the sacred, as in Plato's triad, which binds together truth, goodness, and beauty. Philosopher Zhou Guoping, in his turn, devotes several pages to demonstrating Gao's conceptual complexity and her meta-literary and meta-linguistic awareness. His observations to a large extent resonate with those made in his book *Niuniu: Notes of a Father* (*Niuniu: yi ge fuqin de zhaji* 妞妞: 一个父亲的札记), which he published several years earlier and dedicated to his daughter Niuniu 妞妞, who died from cancer at only eighteen months old. The book was controversial, due to Zhou's questionable decision not to seek medical treatment for his daughter's disease, arguing that even if she recovered, she would be left blind and thus have a hard life in Chinese society, in which people with disabilities are still hugely discriminated against. Yet it contains many precious and deeply moving – if at times apparently idealised – accounts of the child's earliest encounters with the world and the word that testify to her innate wisdom.

All in all, even if we can observe certain biases and preconceptions in their interpretations of Gao Can, most commentators tend to be very tactful and carefully weigh their words, often admitting to their own uncertainty about how to approach this kind of writing. An essay by Zhang Qinghua, quite astonishingly, epitomises this point. In his

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 230.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 192.

piece *Like Peach Blossom, or a Natural Gouache* (*Wanru taohua, huo ziran de shufenhua* 宛如桃花, 或自然的水粉画), which closes the volume, Zhang, who is an established poetry critic and scholar – one of those who usually *know* what to think and command an authoritative status – offers a comprehensive processual and intertextual analysis of Gao Can’s poetry. This seemingly “adult-academic” essay, however, is densely intertwined with explicitly verbalised doubts and caveats regarding the critic’s own approach. The author draws an extensive comparison between Gao Can and Gu Cheng, arguing that, in Gao’s work, one can witness the maturation not only of the poet but also of Chinese poetry language at large. Interpreting her probably best known poem, *A Mirror and a Dog* (*Jingzi he gou* 镜子和狗), to which I will return in the second part of my study, he sets out to discuss ontology and the philosophy of the Other, only to begin the next section with a reflection that his considerations are perhaps too “grave” and “after all, this poetry was written by a child” and not by a professional philosopher, after which he goes on recreate the child-specific traits of her poetic landscape.²⁹ Having failed to find a satisfactory method, he ends with two noteworthy postulates. First, one should not lower one’s standards of critical assessment for Gao Can based on her young age and should expect from her no less than from older poets, as an acknowledgment of, and matter of respect for, her talent and skills. Second, and more importantly, we should not preach about but rather *discuss* poetry with young poets in order to prepare them to travel their own individual paths rather than follow closely in the footsteps of older generations:

Even with very young poets, we should first equally and calmly discuss poetry, and not try to guide or admonish them. Because on the bumpy and fascinating path of poetry, one cannot rely on any guide; it has to be walked and experienced firsthand through one’s life and writing.³⁰

3. The Jiang Sisters and the Question of Poetic En-mind-ment

Zhang Qinghua’s postulates are beautifully put in practice by Jiang Puyuan, the father of the most famous siblings of the post-millennial generation: Jiang Xinhe and Jiang Erman. Mr Jiang, who calls himself his daughters’ “poetry secretary”, assumed a role similar to that of Zhou Guoping, who deemed himself “a greedy collector of words”, fascinated with the linguistic discoveries of his daughter Niuniu and later his second daughter Jiujiu 啾啾. As mentioned previously, he decided to turn these experiences into books, claiming that the most important thing in the process of language acquisition is not that adults teach children how to speak but that children help adults return to the source of language and thus purify language itself. He writes:

²⁹ Ibidem, pp. 252–253.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 254.

For a child, every newly grasped word is alive. Words that have been tainted with the touch of adults' hands, which squeezed everything out of them, when passed through the little mouth of a child are genuinely resurrected and again release the pure light of life.³¹

Likewise, Jiang Puyuan was struck by the accuracy and insightfulness of his daughter Xinhe's observations and linguistic creations when she was only one year and seven months old, and he began writing them down, gradually instilling in the girl a sense of "poeticness", such that she very quickly became aware of the aesthetic value of her phrases and intuitively recognized moments of "inspiration", as distinguished from the stream of functional everyday speech. At two years and five months old, Xinhe's little sister, Erman, who had thus far mostly observed Xinhe and her dad, suddenly announced that she, too, had "inspiration" and demanded that her father jot her poem down. As the girls were growing up and learnt to write Chinese characters, they launched a family poetry group on WeChat, in which Xinhe and Erman have been posting their creations and discussing them between themselves and with their father, who actively comments on their works yet without interfering in their content. Even if he tried to do so, the girls would not listen, he says, refuting the accusations of some netizens that he writes the poetry for his daughters. At most, he claims, they would allow him to correct miswritten characters.³² On the internet, one can also come across his poems posted alongside those of Xinhe and Erman in the form of a poetic conversation among family, usually recalling moments spent together.³³

Since the respective beginnings of their poetic adventures, each girl has already written several hundred poems. They have published two co-authored poetry collections: *A Lamb on Snow* (*Xue di shang de yang* 雪地上的羊) and *Lamp Burnt a Hole in Dark Night* (*Deng ba heiye tang le yi ge dong* 灯把黑夜烫了一个洞), with the titles borrowed from Xinhe's and Erman's representative works, respectively. In 2020, the younger sister had her solo debut with the book *Jiang Erman's Poetry* (*Jiang Erman de shi* 姜二嫚的诗), containing 140 short poems. They have also been awarded many local- and national-level poetry prizes, and their works have been printed in numerous literary journals such as *Poetry Magazine* (*Shikann* 诗刊), *Stars* (*Xingxing* 星星), and *Poetry Tide* (*Shichao* 诗潮), as well as anthologies, including: *Best of Chinese Poetry* (*Zhongguo shige paihangbang* 中国诗歌排行榜), *The Yearbook of Chinese Avant-Garde Poetry* (*Zhongguo xianfeng*

³¹ Zhou Guoping 周国平, *Niuniu: Yi ge fuqin de zhaji* 妞妞: 一个父亲的札记 [Niuniu: Notes of a Father], *Kannu* 看怒 20 April 2012, digital edition, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://www.kanunu8.com/book3/7577/index.html>>, chapter 9.

³² Meng Zhu Jiaoying 萌主教育经, 'Ta: 2 sui xie shi, 7 sui chengming, 13 sui chushu, fuqin de jiaoyu linian que zaodao zhiyi' 她: 2岁写诗, 7岁成名, 13岁出书, 父亲的教育理念却遭到质疑 [Her: Writes Poetry at 2, Becomes Famous at 7, Publishes a Book at 13, but Her Father's Approach to Education Raises Questions], *Tengxun xinwen* 腾讯新闻 [Tencent News] 2020, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://xw.qq.com/cmsid/20200716A0BYEK00>>.

³³ See, e.g.: Viewed 22 May 2022, <https://www.sohu.com/a/354139931_99899218; https://www.sohu.com/a/257024537_99899218>.

shige nianjian 中国先锋诗歌年鉴), *The Yearbook of Chinese Spoken-Language Poetry* (*Zhongguo kouyu shi nianjian* 中国口语诗年鉴), *Canon of the New Century* (*Xin shiji shidian* 新世纪诗典), *Selected Poems of Chinese Avant-Garde Women Poets* (*Zhongguo nüshiren xianfeng shixuan* 中国女诗人先锋诗选), *Chinese Poetry Geography: Selected Poems by Post-00 Authors* (*Zhongguo shige dili: ling ling hou jiu ren shixuan* 中国诗歌地理: 00后九人诗选). They often write together and perform together. Endowed with mutually opposite temperaments, subtle and tactful Xinhe and lively, straightforward Erman constitute a perfectly balanced pair who appear from time to time on TV shows and their own poetry video channel. The latter is part of the WeChat profile they established when they were nine and thirteen years old and is called AA Candy (*AA tang* AA 糖); on it, they animate the poetry of post-millennial authors and discuss poems that drew their attention, by famous and not-so-famous poets. One can, for example, view their passionate and not uncritical conversation on Gu Cheng's early poem, *The Origins of the Moon and Stars* (*Xingyue de youlai* 星月的由来) and the poem *Dog* (*Gou* 狗) by Japanese author Misuzu Kaneko (1903–1930), as well as works from the “adult” avant-garde, such as those of Shen Haobo 沈浩波 or He Xiaozhu 何小竹.³⁴

Just like Chen Ang's and Gao Can's poetry careers, the case of the Jiang sisters provokes many specific questions, the most perplexing of which is the one concerning poetic authorship and what I will provisionally call poetic “ensoulment”, which is to say the moment from which one is considered a poet based on their linguistic sensibility observed by others, in contradistinction to poetic “en-mind-ment”, which is the moment of acquiring awareness of the poetic quality of one's linguistic activity and the beginning of a conscious pursuit of poeticness. Recalling the earliest poetic miniatures jotted down by Jiang Puyuan, it is impossible not to ask: who is their author? Is it the girl who first accidentally – as if smashing a mosquito with a random movement of her hand – produced an astonishingly astute sentence, or the sensitive father who immediately recognized its aesthetic potential and gave it a poetic form? Even if this only means dividing it into lines – which always complicates relationships between words and adds semantic tensions – perhaps most crucially, it is the father who *called* it poetry, drawing it into a discursive space infused with complex forces whose vectors are co-determined by the phenomena of intertextuality, cultural affinities and hierarchies, and many other factors that allow the modest phrases picked up by the loving father to acquire a new contextual sense.

There are many authors who identify themselves as poets, and are identified as such, and who draw inspiration from, or directly invoke, phrases overheard from various others who are not aware of the poetic potential of their speech. Sometimes, the poet's only contribution is framing them as “poetry”. Usually no one questions the “poeticness” of such an “overheard poem”, nor its authorship. It is as if one's generally recognized poethood itself were the source of the poetic quality and that the hands of (someone recognized

³⁴ The videos can also be watched on Tencent platform: Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://v.qq.com/x/page/i0339c5bfev.html>>; <<https://v.qq.com/x/page/x0351cutwao.html>>; <<https://v.qq.com/x/page/z0338fxjk2t.html>>; <<https://v.qq.com/x/page/d03313kmw04.html>>.

as) a poet miraculously turned everything they touch into poetry, like the mythological Midas who turned everything into gold. Unlike parent-poets who “hijack” their children’s linguistic discoveries to fuel their own production, however, Jiang Puyuan decided to withdraw from the beginning and leave the entire “copyright” to his daughters, supporting their literary development from behind the scenes. Crucially, he also helped them develop the awareness of this “copyright” and both the privileges and the responsibilities that attend it. In fact, it might be said that Erman, who surprised her dad with the bold declaration that she, too, had experienced an “inspiration”, was from her very first line a full-blown author, conscious of her artistic agency and subjectivity. Not only poetically “ensouled” but also “enminded”. This certainly helped her assume the role of the tacit leader of her generation early on, before even turning ten. On the TV show *Don’t Leave After School* (*Fang xue bu zou* 放学不走), hosted by CCTV superstar Sa Beining 撒贝宁, she states with confidence: “writing poetry doesn’t mean you have to take a pen and paper and [physically] write”. Rather, she implies, it is a matter of imagination and the ability to express one’s own perception of various phenomena – a perception that is much more complicated in children than adults assume when they ask their kids to read naïve poems about “Granny Moon” (*Yueliang Popo* 月亮婆婆), “Sister Wind” (*Feng jiejie* 风姐姐), and the blinking stars (*zhayan de xingxing* 眨眼的星星) from school textbooks.³⁵

The Jiang Sisters seem to be free of the Peter Pan syndrome we saw in Chen Ang. In one of their numerous interviews, Erman notes that if she does not grow up, she will become a “giant infant” (*ju ying* 巨婴), which she definitely does not want.³⁶ On the other hand, they do not struggle to get ahead of themselves – nor are they pushed to do so by their parents – and, although in many ways they can be perceived as more mature and intellectually more independent than their coevals, they certainly do not rush to adopt an “adult” point of view and writing style. As Sa Beining rightly noted with regard to Erman’s work: “In her poems, you will not find an attempt to pretend to the tone of the adult, they perfectly reflect her age”.³⁷ Although the girls sometimes speak of “inspiration”, they also seem unaffected by the Romantic myth of inspired, lofty poethood as embodied by ingenious individuals. They treat writing as a passion rather than mission. Erman says she does not want to be a professional poet but a businesswoman who continues

³⁵ The episode hosting Jiang Erman is available online at: Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DieBxSzriA8>>.

³⁶ Qiu Junfeng 邱峻峰 and Zeng Qi 曾琦, ‘Zhuanfang 00hou shiren Jiang Erman: ruguo wo yizhi bu gaibian, yihou jiu hui shi ge ‘juying’ 专访00后诗人姜二嫚: 如果我一直都不改变, 以后就会是个“巨婴” [Interviewing the Post-00 Poet Jiang Erman: If I Don’t Change, I Will Become a ‘Giant Infant’], *Hongxing xinwen* 红星新闻, 22 May 2020, Viewed 22 May 2022, <https://k.sina.cn/article_6105713761_16bedcc6102000tkd.html?from=news&subch=onews>.

³⁷ Jing Cheng 荆承, ‘Yu Xiuhua, Sa Beijing qingqing tuijie, 13 sui de Jiang Erman xie de shi you name shen?’ 于秀华撒贝宁倾情推介, 13岁的姜二嫚写的诗有那么神吗? [Is the Poetry of the 13-year-old Jiang Erman so Sincerely Recommended by Yu Xiuhua and Sa Beining Really That Amazing?], *Tengxun wang* 腾讯新闻 [Tencent News] 14 August 2020, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20200814A0MCOX00>>.

to create poetry at her leisure, and she adds that her elder sister has already started her own business, although she does not disclose any details.³⁸

Naturally, the popularity of the Jiang sisters, and their idyllic accounts of their family life, in poetry and interviews alike, have raised curiosity among their audiences about the key to their success, which – the readers accurately assumed – must lie in their mother and father’s wise approach to parenting. Xinhe and Erman’s parents indeed provided their daughters with an excellent environment to learn about the world, as well as to develop their sensibilities, imaginations, and independent characters. The netizens were intrigued to hear that the older sister, Xinhe, almost did not attend school, to which she found it difficult to adapt. The parents agreed that she could stay at home and absorb knowledge from an ambitious literature curriculum instead of the infantile excerpts adapted for textbooks, which she could not bear as a child who was raised on masterpieces. Erman proved to be much more sociable and enjoyed the time spent in kindergarten with other children, so she has followed a more standard educational path.

The parents’ decision not to send the older girl to school obviously provoked debates among the Chinese people, for whom the topic of education has long been one of the most important and emotion-raising social issues. Suffice it to recall the boom of how-to-bring-up-a-future-American-university-student books that followed the publication of *Harvard Girl Liu Yiting: A Character Training Record* (*Hafu nühai Liu Yiting: suzhi peiyang jishi* 哈佛女孩刘亦婷: 素质培养纪实) in 2000. In it, Yiting’s parents offer a detailed account of how they managed to ensure their daughter’s comprehensive intellectual and personal development in spite of the ossified public education system; this reignited the still tremendously heated discussion of *suzhi jiaoyu* (education for quality) which postulates discarding examination-oriented teaching in favor of developing critical thinking and problem solving based on a solid axiological foundation. The debate occasionally resurfaces in the discussion of the Jiang sisters too. Needless to say, to most parents, the perspective of bringing up a future poet is much less attractive than bringing up a future student at an American university... Even those who nurture their children’s poetic skills rarely wish for them to undertake a career in poetry, treating verse writing more as a way to preserve the child’s imagination and protect it from the detrimental impact of a soulless modern lifestyle. One example of such a mother will be discussed in the next section.

4. Tietou the Scandalist?

Tietou (lit. ‘Iron Head’) is the pseudonym of Liang Shengjie 梁胜杰, a poet known for his exceptionally early book debut and the moral scandal his works provoked on the internet. His story is to a large extent similar to that of the Jiang sisters. He was born in a well-educated family, both of his parents are journalists, and his mother Li Guijie 李桂杰 herself writes and publishes poetry. It is to her that Tietou owes his passion for writing.

³⁸ Qiu Junfeng 邱峻峰 and Zeng Qi 曾琦, ‘Zhuanfang 00hou shiren...’ 专访00后诗人... [Interviewing the Post-00 Poet].

There are certain discrepancies in how Tietou and his mum remember the beginnings of his career. Li Guijie recalls that when she observed her son's linguistic creativity, she began jotting down his poetic sentences in a noncommittal way and then later actively encouraged him to write, hoping that, in the future, it would be a therapeutic escape for him from the tedium and burden of everyday life.³⁹ Although he is just an "average student" who struggled with many classes, unlike most parents who shuttle their children from one private tutor to another – a practice recently significantly limited by the government – Li did not want Tietou to take extracurricular lessons, and, instead, she allowed him to spend more time at home on reading and writing. She thought his literary achievements would give him awareness of his own value and confidence in his relationships with friends.⁴⁰

At six years old, Tietou wrote his first poem, *The Colors of Dream* (*Meng de yanse* 梦的颜色), which Li Guijie posted on a microblog account she had launched for him. Three years later, Tsinghua University Press published his poetry collection *Willow Is a Little Stinking Brat* (*Liushu shi ge chou xiaozhi* 柳树是个臭小子). Tietou, on the other hand, claims that during his first three years as a poet, his mother "pushed" (*bi* 逼) him to write, and it was only at the age of nine that he discovered he really liked poetry:

Before, I was very unenthusiastic about poetry writing. Mum always pushed me to write because she thought I had talent, and she wanted me to write more. But at the time, I didn't understand Mum's intention and didn't listen to her. Still, I kept writing due to her persistence. And so, pushed by Mum until I was nine, I suddenly came to like writing poetry. Some of my poems were published, and I was interviewed by *Legal Daily* (*Fazhi ribao* 法治日报). I was very happy to see my works in print. Now, poetry has become a part of me, I love writing.⁴¹

At any rate, the "pushing" certainly was not coercive or devoid of love, and Tietou knew how to intelligently defend himself. When his mother asked him one day whether he felt she was putting pressure on him, he reportedly replied: "I write when I want to write. When you push me, I will just counter-attack you with a poem".⁴²

³⁹ Huashangbao 华商报, "Liushu shi ge chouxiaozi..." Beijing 9 sui nanhai tongmengshi zonghong' 《'柳树是个臭小子.....' 北京9岁男童萌诗走红》 ['Willow Is a Little Stinking Brat...' Early Poetry of a 9-year-old Boy from Beijing Is Going Viral], *Ifeng wang* 凤凰网 [Ifeng News], 30 October 2015, Viewed 22 May 2022, <http://inews.ifeng.com/yidian/46050463/news.shtml?ch=ref_zbs_ydzc_news>.

⁴⁰ Fangzheng Xitong 方正系统, '9 sui shiren xie yuwang, xianfeng haishi qingse' 9岁诗人写欲望, 先锋还是情色? [A 9-year-old Poet Writes on Desire: Avant-garde or Pornography?], *Di yi caijing ribao* 第一财经日报 [First Financial Daily] 6 November 2015, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://www.yicai.com/news/4708058.html>>.

⁴¹ 19 lou 19楼, 'Tietou aiqing shige duopian shangxi, shiji Liushu shi ge xiaochouzi' 《铁头爱情诗歌多篇赏析, 诗集柳树是个臭小子》 [Appreciations of Tietou's Love Poetry, the Collection Willow Is a Little Stinking Brat], *Chinastor*, 30 October 2015, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<http://www.chinastor.com/hotnews/10301KL2015.html>>.

⁴² Ibidem.

When Tietou “counter-attacks”, he indeed does not mince words, causing consternation among his adult audiences. Among his works, we find a poem in which he compares his mother to a “little abject cat” (*xiao jian mao* 小贱猫), “because she complies with all criteria to be a little abject cat” (因为她符合一只贱猫的所有标准), or a poem titled *Love* (*Aiqing* 爱情) in which he declares that “there’s no love between me and grandma / she’s really too old / there’s no love between me and mum / I only like her breasts” (我和姥姥没有爱情/她实在太老 / 我和妈妈没有爱情 / 我只是喜欢她的奶子),⁴³ which recalls another poem from the Lower Body poetry school, namely Shen Haobo’s *A Handful of Tit* (*Yi ba hao ru* 一把好乳). His mother apparently does not take to heart what one might perceive as the early-stage male chauvinism of her son, claiming that we should allow children to freely express their minds in their own unique way.

On 11 October 2015, Li Guijie posted Tietou’s new poem *Desire* (*Yuwang* 欲望) on Weibo, which provoked a discussion about the boundaries between the avant-garde and eroticism – and, of course, about the principles of ethical childrearing.

《欲望》

每个人都有自己的欲望
啃骨头时候有种欲望
是我像一只狗那样疯狂

跟妈妈亲吻
欲望就变成婴儿
说永远不要长大

飞机在黑中飞行
欲望就是虫子
要逃脱被踩或者被打

欲望无处不在⁴⁴

Desire

Everybody has desires
biting a bone I feel a desire
that makes me
frenzy like a dog

⁴³ Quoted in: Fangzheng Xitong 方正系统, ‘9 sui shiren xie yuwang...’ 9岁诗人写欲望...

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

when kissing with mum
 desire turns into an infant
 that says it will never grow up

when a plane flies through darkness
 desire is a worm
 tries to avoid being stepped on or smashed
 desperately pushes forward
 desire is everywhere⁴⁵

Whereas poets were generally very enthusiastic about this and the two other aforementioned poems – Zhou Sese even included *Love* in his anthology of the best poetry of 2014 (*2014 Zhongguo shige paihangbang* 2014中国诗歌排行榜) – netizens expressed their concerns about the texts’ literary value and ethical message (or lack thereof), and even about the author’s mental health. Criticism fell on the head of his mother as well, who was accused of consciously provoking the controversy around Tietou. She commented on these charges in her article in *Global Times* (*Huanqiu shibao* 环球时报) in 2014, in which she assured concerned parties that Tietou wrote everything on his own and that it was just the product of his individual perception of the world.⁴⁶ One year later, in an interview for *First Financial Daily* (*Di yi caijing ribao* 第一财经日报), she repeated her statement, adding that his poetry simply “goes beyond most adults” expectations with regard to children⁴⁷ and that children do not naturally ingratiate themselves to adults. Adults, too, she said, should respect children, their individuality, and their observations. Children actively process various impulses that come to them from the external world and that are much richer and more diverse than those of their parents’ generation. Li writes: “when I heard it, I felt as if I instantly shrunk, because when I was nine-, ten-years old, I would have never pronounced such a word. Today, media develop in a different way, and one should never underestimate children’s receptivity to information”.⁴⁸

Among Tietou’s advocates, the renowned critic Qin Xiaoyu 秦晓宇 made a case similar to Zhou Guoping in *Niuniu* by claiming that children are actually teachers to adults who have already lost their pure hearts; that what adults see as eroticism or pornography, in the hands of the child, is pure and innocent, as in Confucius’ assessment of the *Shijing* 诗经: “the three hundred poems [from the *Shijing*] can be summarized in one sentence: there is no evil in thought” (诗三百一言以蔽之, 思无邪). Qin also invokes Du Fu 杜甫:

⁴⁵ Chongqing Shangbao 重庆商报, ‘Jiu sui dadan shiju jingdai wangyou: mama hen jian wo hen ai ta’ 九岁男孩大胆诗句惊呆网友: 妈妈很贱 我很爱她 [Bold Poetry of a 9-year-old Child Shocks Netizens: Mum Is a Bitch I Love Her Very Much], *Sougou Xinwen* 搜狗新闻 [Sohu News] 30 October 2015, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<http://news.sohu.com/20151030/n424655228.shtml>>.

⁴⁶ Li Guijie 李桂杰, ‘Qing zunzhong haizi de biaodafangshi’ 请尊重孩子的表达方式 [Please Respect Children’s Ways of Expression], *Huanqiu wang* 环球网 [Global Net], 29 October 2015, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJQZoW>>.

⁴⁷ Fangzheng Xitong 方正系统, ‘9 sui shiren xie yuwang...’ 9岁诗人写欲望...

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

“I won’t put aside the pen until I disquiet people with my words” (语不惊人死不休).⁴⁹ Admittedly, it would be difficult to find more respected authorities in Chinese culture than Confucius and Du Fu to polemicise with Qin; on the other hand, one may, of course, have some reservations about both the pedagogical and epistemological value of making such far-reaching connections between a nine-year-old boy and ancient sages, a problem to which I will address more attention in my final section.

Tietou’s poetry would probably be a fascinating case for Freud and his followers, who, very likely, would not share the same concerns as the netizens. Asked for an assessment of Tietou’s works, an anonymous psychoanalyst from Shanghai Shikong Psychological Counseling, points out that images such as “breasts” or “love” are very positive manifestations of a child’s early maturity. They should not be interpreted in a sexual context but as the young author’s observations of how “his mother expresses her love for him through her body”.⁵⁰

At any rate, it will certainly be interesting to observe how Tietou’s carnal sensibility and his astonishingly concrete imagination evolve in the future – through poetry and otherwise. He certainly has an eye for “fleshy” detail – which might be a trait inherited from his journalist parents – and he once declared that he was going to follow in their footsteps and become a journalist, too. What attracts him to this job in particular is the prospect of interviewing various interesting people. For this, however, he might need to learn to express himself a bit more diplomatically...

5. Poetry vs. System: Zhou Sese and Poetry Education

Not all children were lucky to be born into “poetic” families – many, as we shall see in the next section, were unlucky to be born into clearly “un-poetic” ones – but all children, claim the proponents of mass poetry education, have a poetic soul that waits for a Socratic “midwife” to draw it into the world and out from the mouth or onto the paper. Among the most active champions of this idea in China is the avant-garde poet Zhou Sese, who is known, among other things, as the author of the concept of *kaqiuzhuyi* (卡丘主义, or “culture-ism”; from the phonetic translation of the English “culture”) and the prime mover of the *kaqiu* poetry faction and its eponymous journal. Since 2013, Zhou has regularly published young children’s texts in yearbooks of national poetry edited by him; he has also been participating in numerous events promoting their works, writing reviews and introductions for their individual collections, giving lectures on poetry to children (as well as on raising a child-poet to their parents), and organising poetry workshops, in Beijing and Shenzhen, among other cities. As teaching materials, he often uses works written by his young audience’s peers, including the Jiang sisters or Tietou, or participants of the “Poetry

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

Is Light” project, which will be discussed in the next section.⁵¹ Some poems written by children at his workshops are available online.⁵²

Zhou Sese’s fascination with children’s poetic output is in line with his general views on poetics, which gradually crystallised in the various manifestos of *kaqiu zhuyi*. In *Fundamental Postulates of Kaqiu zhuyi* (卡丘主义基本观点), he offers the following definition:

Kaqiu zhuyi [...] emphasizes a “physiological reaction” to real life and discovers new possibilities of life. *Kaqiu zhuyi* is real writing that tackles “physiological phenomena in human society”. [...] [A] representative of *kaqiu zhuyi* plays in the middle of seriousness and warns through play. It is not mysticism, and it is not realism. A middle-class *kaqiu*-ist doesn’t treat *kaqiu zhuyi* as a postmodern mode of consumption but as a postmodern way of thinking, perhaps even a way of solving problems. The “psychology of exposure and liberation” present in Zhou Sese’s works has already helped many readers free themselves of this predicament. Solving problems through literature is the ideal of *kaqiu zhuyi*; *kaqiu zhuyi* is also “a mature blog”, one of the characteristics of new literature.

Kaqiu zhuyi claims that “boredom” and “ignorance” constitute the most fundamental condition of humankind and that their detrimental impact on the human mind can only be overcome through deliberate [exposure to] the “interesting” and through “cognition”. Thus, they can reach “the other shore of *Kaqiu*”, experience “the joy of *kaqiu*”, become “people endowed with the spirit of *kaqiu*”. [...] This is *kaqiu zhuyi*. It is because it doesn’t believe in truth that it puts so much emphasis on approximating the truth.⁵³

Children are paragons of *kaqiu*-ness, thus described. They are naturally curious about everything. They absorb the world unconditionally – almost physiologically, as if through their skin. They are fully exposed to its impact without any protective layers,

⁵¹ See e.g.: Huang Yingle 黄颖乐, ‘Zhuming shiren Zhou Sese dailing haizi gei fumu xie yi shou shi’ 著名诗人周瑟瑟带领孩子给父母写一首诗 [Famous Poet Zhou Sese Supervises Children to Write a Poem for Parents], *Shenzhen Baodo* 深晚报道 (Shenzhen Evening News) 19 January 2021, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<http://shenzhen.news.163.com/21/0119/11/G0N0R46004178D6R.html>>; Pu Wei 蒲苇, ‘Guannian yu xiangxiang: zhuming shiren Zhou Sese de shige qimengke’ zai Lüliang juban’ 《‘观察与想象: 著名诗人周瑟瑟的诗歌启蒙课’在吕梁举办》 [‘Observation and Imagination: Famous Poet Zhou Sese’s Poetry Initiation Class’ Took Place in Lüliang], Zhou Sese’s blog, 25 May 2019, Viewed 22 May 2022, <http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_3f2059670102y8v9.html>; Xin Hunan Kehuduan 新湖南客户端, ‘Hainei cunzhi ji, tianya bi ling. Zhou Sese chuandi shanqu shige shengyin’ 海内存知己, 天涯若比邻. 周瑟瑟传递山区诗歌声音 [Close in Spirit Although Far Away: Zhou Sese Spreads the Voice of Poetry from the Mountain Areas], Hunan ribao 湖南日报 [Hunan Daily], 6 May 2021, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://m.voc.com.cn/wxhn/article/202105/202105061019152663.html>>.

⁵² See e.g. Pu Wei 蒲苇, ‘Guannian yu xiangxiang...’ [‘Observation and Imagination...’].

⁵³ Zhou Sese 周瑟瑟, ‘Kaqiu zhuyi jiben guandian’ 卡丘主义基本观点 [Basic Conceptions of Kaqiu-ism], *Poemlife* 2006, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://www.poemlife.com/index.php?mod=showart&id=33149&str=1592>>.

and, on the other hand, are capable of pitilessly exposing its absurdities, as in the tale of “The Emperor’s New Clothes”. In short, they enjoy the greatest freedom of mind and imagination. Li Feijun 李飞骏, a member of the group, puts it very clearly in *Kaquiuzhuyi’s Literary Right to Speak* (*Kaquiuzhuyi de wenxue huayuquan* 卡丘主义的文学话语权):

A *kaqiu*-ist believes: *kaqiu* should preserve its virginity and always resemble a child. It should strive to become “very innocent”, strive for forgiveness from the external world. *Kaqui* should be excited about the return to childhood; *kaqiu* itself has the colours of fairy-tales and purity; *kaqiu* likes to be like a child; *kaqiu* likes self-mockery and criticism, and it can be both bashful and self-confident; it has the courage of painful self-reflection. But toward everything that is outside *kaqiu*, *kaqiu* is introverted. In fact, there is no inside and outside, up and down, left and right in *kaqiu*.⁵⁴

In sum, we may say that, on the one hand, the *kaqiu*-ist should learn from children; on the other hand, those children whose childhood has been less *kaqiu* as a result, for example, of an unfavourable family situation or of unreasonable social expectations, can be therapeutically “healed” through poetry education, which has the power to unlock their blocked potential. This is the aim of Zhou Sese’s activities, which are addressed to children and their parents who feel overwhelmed by the public education system in which, if poetry appears at all, there is only space for classical verse, with its rigid formal rules, and no space for free creation. If Jiang Erman, Tietou, and other little poets were asked to write a poem at their high school exams, they would “feel like fish in water” (如鱼得水), he says.⁵⁵ But this is of course a rather distant prospect, at least on a larger scale.

In addition to various poetry events, in order to help young readers make up for what schools neglect, Zhou Sese compiled a five-volume anthology *Read a Good Poem Before Saying Good Night to Your Child* (*Du shou hao shi, zai he haizi shuo wan’an* 读首好诗，再和孩子说晚安), for which he selected poems by Chinese and foreign authors that, he believes, are accessible to children but, on the other hand, do not underestimate their intelligence and sensibility. In the introduction to the volume *Dream and Faith* (*Mengxiang yu xinnian* 梦想与信念), Zhou reemphasises that “the real poetry is the child itself”: all its thoughts, words, facial expressions, and movements are poems, and the role of the parents (and educational institutions) is to guide the child to write all of this down before it becomes irretrievably lost. He declares: “Those who prevent children

⁵⁴ Li Feijun 李飞骏, ‘Kaqui zhuyi de wenxue huayuquan’ 卡丘主义的文学话语权 [Kaqui zhuyi’s Literary Right to Speak], *Li Feijun’s blog*, 2 July 2007, <http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_46bb42c4010009ex.html>.

⁵⁵ Zhou Sese 周瑟瑟, ‘Jiang Erman zhe xie xiaoshiren canjia gaokao xie shi zhe yi xiang’ 姜二嫚这些小诗人参加高考写诗这一项 [If Jiang Erman and Other Young Poets Could Write Poetry on High School Examination], *Zikao wuyou xuexi wang* 自考无忧学习网 [Pass on Your Own Without Stress Learning Net], 30 October 2020, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://www.zk51.org/yuer/509115.html>>.

from writing poetry are losers in their life, and totally un-poetic people”.⁵⁶ Poetry writing, he explains, allows one to preserve the “utterly innocent heart” (*chizi zhi xin* 赤子之心), develop the faculties of imagination and observation, reduce pressure and anxiety, and nourish healthy self-confidence.

Zhou’s declared desire to learn from children “the logic of poetry, the curiosity about new things, the yearning for the unknown world”⁵⁷ is not just an empty slogan. Rather, it is arguably one of crucial factors that led him to the redefinition of his own writing and the abandonment of *kaqiuzhuyi* in 2015 in favor of a poetics that is even more directly engaged with the surrounding world, which he termed “fieldwork research” (*tianye diaocha* 田野调查), as if in an academic (anthropological) sense but stripped of the formidable theoretical-methodological apparatus. This new mode of writing allows him to simultaneously embrace phenomena as distant as, on the one hand, the ancient temples that he contemplates while on expeditions with a poetry group he established and, on the other hand, modern artificial intelligence technologies. When, in 2017, the Chinese poetry scene witnessed the book debut of the AI poet, Xiao Bing, Zhou was one of few authors who defended Xiao Bing’s work; he also uses it sometimes in his poetry classes for children who are more open to such novelties. Awarded the 2019 Chinese Contemporary Poetry Award (*Zhongguo Dangdai Shige Jiang* 中国当代诗歌奖), in his acceptance speech, Zhou summed up his artistic program as follows:

In recent years, I have practiced poetry writing using the “fieldwork research” method. This did not necessarily allow me to ultimately sort the relationship between poetry and contemporary life but, what is more important, it helped me solve many problems in my own writing. Starting from the New Poetry movement, through Obscure Poetry, Third Generation, Intellectual writing, and Popular spoken-language writing, Chinese verse has formed a great tradition of poetic language. This tradition is our heritage, but it is also our predicament.

I want to escape this predicament, to set out in search of an unknown experience of contemporary poetry. This is the reason behind my concepts of “fieldwork research” and “writing that moves outdoors” (走向户外的写作). I am currently putting these ideas in practice, and, thanks to them, constantly gather new writing experiences, discover unknown things in this world. The mystery of human language exists. Poetic experience is always fresh. At every single moment, new, unprecedented sensations await us. My poetic postulates are all incorporated in my writing, in my contemporary poetry civilisation, which increasingly approximates “poetic anthropology”.

⁵⁶ Zhou Sese 周瑟瑟 (ed.), *Du shou hao shi, zai gei haizi shuo wan'an: mengxiang yu xinnian* 读首好诗, 再和孩子说晚安: 梦想与信念 [Read a Good Poem Before Saying Goodnight to a Child: Dreams and Faith], Beijing 北京 2018, introduction.

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

I believe that contemporary poetry is free poetry; [this implies] freedom of language, freedom of rhythm, freedom of imagination, a child-like freedom. But we have closed ourselves in a cage of words for too long, and we have enjoyed this cage, gradually losing our sensitivity to language; in the end, we no longer know what free language even is. In the eyes of many contemporary poets, this predicament turned into a paradise.⁵⁸

Whether Zhou Sese is successful in putting his postulates into literary practice and whether his own poetry indeed benefits from them is of course another question, and we should avoid rushing to judgment without detailed textual analysis of his works, which is beyond the scope of the present study. Regardless, however, his efforts to stimulate the discourse of poetry in China and his disinterested search for, and promotion of, new talents are certainly worth our attention.

One of the most intriguing initiatives to which Zhou Sese contributed took place on 26 October 2020, at the primary school affiliated with the Beijing Dayu Middle School Branch School, which invited him for an impromptu poetry writing event for its pupils.⁵⁹ This peculiar workshop, which, in the photographs available online, resembles an outdoor PE class more than a poetry workshop, was part of the official launch of the Little Valley Poetry Club (*Xiao Shangu Shishe* 小山谷诗社). The initiative, addressed to the youngest students, is an introduction to the intense poetry training at the next stage of education at Beijing Dayu Middle School, an experimental institution that ten years earlier had been granted the appellation “Special Poetry School” (*Shige tese xuexiao* 诗歌特色学校) by the Beijing Writers Association in the presence of high-ranked Party officials in appreciation of its excellent long-time efforts to promote this important element of Chinese cultural heritage.

Poetry education at the school is accomplished in three main ways: (1) regular poetry classes in the curriculum and greater focus on analysing poetic works during “standard” Chinese lessons; (2) activities such as guest lectures and poetry readings by established poets, trips to the countryside in search of inspiration, and visits to historically important places where students can experience firsthand the greatness of China and its culture; (3) the organisation of poetry events, performances, and competitions on the occasion of various traditional and national festivals: Yuanxiao, Qingming, Duanwu, Zhongqiu, China’s National Day, Mao Zedong’s birthday, and other anniversaries. Gradually, the school is

⁵⁸ Zhou Sese 周瑟瑟, ‘Wode xiezui shi dui ‘dangdai’ de chuli’ 我的写作是对“当代”的处理 [My Poetry Writing Is Handling the Contemporary], *Zhou Sese’s blog*, 10 October 2019, Viewed 22 May 2022, <http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_3f2059670102yiv7.html>.

⁵⁹ See e.g. Fu Caiyun 付彩云, ‘Dakai haizi shige xiangxiang siwei. Shiren Zhou Sese dailing ‘Xiaoshangu’ shishe xuesheng xianchang xie shi’ 打开孩子诗歌想象思维。诗人周瑟瑟带领“小山谷”诗社学生现场写诗 [Mobilize Children’s Imaginative Thinking: Poet Zhou Sese Supervises Students from the Little Valley Society to Write Poetry on the Spot], *Zhongguo zuojia wang* 中国作家网 [China Poetry Net], 29 October 2020, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2020/1027/c403994-31908405.html>>. An elaborate account of this event was available at the following address in mid-May 2021: <<https://www.163.com/dy/article/FQ1Q6IHB052192H5.html>>. The website disappeared toward the end of the month.

also integrating poetry-related content into other classes in the students' curriculum. Poems by famous Chinese and foreign authors hang along the walls of the school corridors. In addition, as a form of motivation and appreciation, every year an anthology of students' poems is published, as well as occasional individual collections by outstanding young authors. Teachers, too, are encouraged to try their hand at writing, which creates a sense of community between students and their mentors.⁶⁰

Needless to say, the idea of "poetry schools" cannot but cause mixed feelings among poetry readers and practitioners. On the one hand, it may sound like a paradise on earth, where one breathes in the perfume of words according to rarified prosody, absorbing what is best in the world through verse. On the other hand, as one blissfully inhales the poetic atmosphere, a question arises as to what else one might absorb from air that is anything but clean and in which various other "substances" may be insidiously present. Especially in totalitarian countries, poetry education can easily be manipulated in such a way that it turns into a gradual ideological tool. It is not difficult to guess what kind of verse is performed, for instance, on Mao's birthday or the anniversary of the proclamation of the PRC. But even if we put such suspicions aside, there still exists another risk: namely, "hyperventilation" in those who take in too much and too greedily and may thus lose touch with the reality. Or another: "oxidative stress" in young people whose minds may feel overwhelmed by the omnipresence of poetry and its intrusion into every cell of their body in a way they do not manage to process. As with everything else, poetry (education) can be overdone or mismanaged, and its expected miraculous effect on young people may turn into its opposite, especially in the case of systemic initiatives addressed to large groups of children, in which it is difficult to closely monitor every individual and adjust form and content to their specific abilities, needs, and interests.

6. Poetry of the Left-Behind: Kang Yu's Work at the Grassroots

The above example of poetry education, however, represents just one pole of Chinese social reality. Dayu Middle School is a prestigious institution for "little emperors" and "empresses" from the capital city, who are locked in a tight but generally safe cage of parental protection and the strict rules of educational system; for them, poetry writing is like opening the cage door just a crack to let the air of freedom in. On the other pole of Chinese reality, there are millions of children who lead their existence on the margins of the system, often beyond the sight and interest of their parents, or without parents at all, children for whom their unlimited freedom is but a synonym for solitude and abandonment. They live in impoverished villages located mostly in the central and western provinces, which economically lag far behind the rapidly developing south-eastern regions. Attracted by the vague promise of decent salaries, people of reproductive age

⁶⁰ Liu Jianan 刘嘉楠 and Xiong Xu 熊旭, 'Beijing shi Dayu Zhongxue Fenxiao: yi shi yu ren, yi shi yang de' 北京市大峪中学分校: 以诗育人, 以诗养德 [Beijing City Dayu Branch School: Poetry for Education, Poetry for Morality], *Beijing Zaochen Wang* 北京晨报网 [Beijing Morning News Net] 19 October 2017, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<http://edu.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1019/c1053-29596028.html>>.

migrate to rich metropolises to work in humiliating conditions, leaving their children behind, with grandparents or in makeshift village dormitories attached to underfunded and underequipped schools that frequently lack qualified staff. The task of bridging the educational gap and reducing inequalities between rural and industrial areas rests largely on the shoulders of the thousands of *zhijiao* 支教 (“[those who] support education”): volunteer teachers trained at renowned universities who decide to move, usually for a year or two, to the countryside in order to support local schools. Many are fresh graduates who take a gap year between their bachelor’s and master’s studies and, with their heads full of idealistic enthusiasm, wish to make a noble use of their newly obtained knowledge.

Such was the case of Kang Yu 康瑜, the founder of the project “Poetry Is Light” dedicated to children in rural and mountainous areas of China, who, in 2015, after receiving her BA degree in Chinese from Renmin University in Beijing, decided to join the ranks of the volunteers, in order to, as she put it, “help more children escape the mountains”.⁶¹ Soon, however, she realized that these kids were not really “waiting for [her], eyes wide open and hungry for knowledge”; instead, she had to deal with little troublemakers who did not like teachers and were generally not used to, and clearly not fond of, the company of adults. Boys would jump over the schoolyard wall to escape classes, and one very young girl became pregnant and got married before completing the first stage of her education. So, Kang confesses, “I pinned my hopes on the students in the front rows because only they had a chance to be admitted by a middle school and change their fates”. What prompted her to change her mind, was a conversation with the headmaster who made her aware that the future of the village and the county will not be shaped by those who leave and pursue a better life in the city but by those who stay, and, therefore, it is actually they who should receive greater attention. And that is how it all began: from one conversation and one eureka moment on a rainy day, when her pupils kept staring through the windows instead of listening to their teacher. Kang Yu, knowing that there was no point in shoveling conventional knowledge into their heads while they were distracted, took the children out of the classroom to hear and feel the rain and proposed that they write poems about this experience. The idea caught on and the feedback astounded the teacher. Children whose minds seemed impossible to access suddenly opened up to her – though not without initial shyness, which she managed to break by encouraging them to adopt pen names (“the adjective describing your current mood plus the thing you have just eaten”) to make them feel more comfortable. Not all of them, however, required anonymity. Kang remembers how a quiet girl in the last row called her over and handed her the following poem – perhaps inspired by Gu Cheng’s *I Am a Willful Child* (*Wo shi yi ge renxing de haizi* 我是一个任性的孩子) – which could not but have moved any committed teacher to tears:

⁶¹ All information and quotes in this paragraph come from: Kang Yu 康瑜, ‘Jiao xiangcun haizi xie shi, bu shi weile peiyang shiren’ 教乡村孩子写诗, 不是为了培养诗人 [Teaching Poetry to Children from Rural Areas Isn’t Aimed at Raising Poets], *Zhongguo cishan wang* 中国慈善网 [China Charity] 4 September 2019, Viewed 22 May 2022, <http://m.cnshan.org/home/news_detail?id=21272>.

我是个自私的孩子
我希望雨后的太阳只照射在我一个人的身上
温暖我

我是个自私的孩子
我希望世界上有个角落都能在我伤心时空着
安慰我

我是个自私的孩子
我希望妈妈的爱
属于我

I am a selfish child
I wish the sun after rain only shone on me
warmed me

I am a selfish child
I wish a corner of this world emptied when I'm sad
to comfort me

I am a selfish child
I wish mum's love
belonged to me⁶²

Thus, poetry writing became integral part of Kang Yu's classes for the rest of her two-year stay in the village, tightening her bonds with the children. And it followed her later back to Beijing. Let me quote at length a passage from her essay in which she describes the chain of events that led to the establishment of the "Poetry Is Light" foundation:

I left that little mountain village and started preparing to apply for the master's program. On the Teacher's Day when I was no longer a teacher, I received a letter written by a girl called Ling Hua 玲花. She told me she had never mentioned her father before. Her father, as it turned out, was in prison, and she and her three sisters were living only with their mother. From early childhood, she had been bullied, people had reminded her that she'd had no father, and she had never resisted. Last year, she received the second prize in a big poetry competition. Other people didn't believe the poem was written by her and accused her of plagiarism. This was the first time she protested. She said that she had taken the opinion

⁶² Ibidem.

written by the teacher, shown it to others and told them that the poem had been written by her, and the teacher's praise had been addressed to her. In the letter, she also included a little poem:

*People in heaven are lighting a fire
People on earth are making vows.*

In the end, she added the following sentence: 'Teacher Kang, I hope more children will find a self in poetry, as I did.'

This year, on 7 August, Ling Hua sent me a message: "Teacher, I was admitted to the best middle school in the county town". Her mum will continue supporting her education.

[...]

From that Teacher's Day to the establishment of "Poetry Is Light", less than one month passed. I didn't hesitate much. I decided to commit myself to this undertaking not because there was a big chance of success but because I discovered a need and an answer. So I couldn't pretend that I hadn't seen it.⁶³

Today (as of March 2022), according to the statistics published on the official website of the project www.shiguang.org.cn, already 68,000 students, 823 schools, and 902 local teachers in several provinces, including Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and Henan, have become beneficiaries of the initiative that grew from this one spark. The foundation launched by Kang Yu in 2017 accepts dozens of new applications annually from both village schools asking for support and from volunteers who wish to offer their energy and experience to work with children and their teachers, instructing the latter on how to provide well-designed materials for use during regular Chinese lessons and extracurricular poetry classes alike. Additionally, "Poetry Is Light" organizes other events, including concerts, contests, and poetry seminars (*yantaohui* 研讨会) to which well-known Chinese poets are invited. A frequent guest at these seminars is Duo Yu 朵渔, the Yunnan-born, Tianjin-based poet, scholar, and editor of the journal *Live Scenes of Poetry* (*Shige xianchang* 诗歌现场), who was associated in the early 2000s with the Lower Body poetry movement. In 2019, in Hunan, he was accompanied by the famous poet couple Wang Xiaoni 王小妮 and Xu Jingya 徐敬亚. The seminars usually consist of poets giving talks, a vivid Q&A session, and a mini-workshop during which the students have an opportunity to write on their own poems and get professional feedback from the guests. Accounts of these events are available on the website, as are selected poems created by pupils and numerous stories and memories recorded by volunteers and local teachers that confirm the importance of the project.

⁶³ Ibidem.

A collection of the participants' poems was also published as the book *Little Poets in Big Mountains* (*Da shan li de xiao shiren* 大山里的小诗人), released in May 2020 by Jiangsu Fenghuang Wenyi Chubanshe, edited by Guo Mai. The book contains scans of the poems handwritten by children, some of which are accompanied by brief comments by their authors explaining the circumstances in which they were created. It is also beautifully illustrated by thirty-one artists selected from the five hundred volunteers who responded to the call posted online by "Poetry Is Light", including Chinese and foreign, as well as professional and amateur authors alike.⁶⁴

The foundation is supported by prominent commercial partners such as Starbucks and Xiaomi, as well as media outlets, including Beijing Weishi, Jiangsu Weishi, *China Daily*, and others. Between 9 December 2019 and 4 January 2020, one of the Starbucks cafés in Guangzhou hosted a free exhibition of child-authored poetry and illustrations from the book.⁶⁵ Who knows, given that Guangzhou is home to one of the most numerous populations of rural migrant workers, perhaps the parents of some of authors were among the visitors. And perhaps they, too, write poetry.

From a literary-sociological point of view, the poetry of "little poets in big mountains" is a phenomenon complimentary to the so-called *dagong shige* 打工诗歌, that is, the poetry of migrant workers, which has been widely researched in the recent years in Chinese and foreign academia. On the content level, it shows the same problem of displacement from one's native land – but in reverse, from the perspective of children who were left behind in their villages. One could sometimes even pair these poems and arrange them like a deeply touching poetic correspondence between migrant worker parents and their left-behind children.

They also raise similar questions, including the most frequently asked: is it even poetry or perhaps just therapy or a community-strengthening social practice? Kang Yu herself consistently emphasises that her mission is not to turn all children into poets but to shape their sensibility and offer them tools to cope with their emotions and experiences in a way that is not (self-)destructive. In the introduction to the book, she says:

Poetry classes are not intended to produce poets but to tell children: you need to have a passion for exploring, retain an emotional sensibility, develop the ability to feel happiness and to write out the pain. Even anger can be alleviated through a poem.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Dashan li de xiaoshiren* 大山里的小诗人 [Little Poets in Big Mountains], Shanghai 上海 2020, Digital edition, pp. 297–298.

⁶⁵ Xinlang Guangdong 新浪广东, "Yong yi bei kafei de shiguang ganshou weiwen 'Weiwen shishuazhan' 用一杯咖啡的时光感受微温 "微温诗画展"助力乡村公益 [Over a Cup of Coffee Experience "Lukewarm Poetry and Painting" Exhibition and Support the Countryside], *Sina Guangdong*, 13 December 2019, Viewed 12 May 2023, <<http://gd.sina.com.cn/news/gy/qygy/2019-12-13/detail-iijnzhfz5583855.shtml>>.

⁶⁶ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Dashan li de xiaoshiren* 大山里的小诗人 [Little Poets in Big Mountains], pp. 7–8.

Elsewhere, she adds: “I hope these children, even if they never leave the big mountains, will discover the light that is in their hands”.⁶⁷

Although certainly not all of their poems will immediately strike us as masterpieces, and, in terms of the writing technique and the richness of vocabulary, they often are no match for either professionally authored adult verses or even those written by their better educated peers from big cities, one also encounters true pearls among them; their artistic value testifies to these young authors’ unique feel for language, imagination, and sensation. Some of these will be discussed below, along with poems from other anthologies and individual collections of child authors, in an attempt to outline the broadest possible thematic and aesthetic scope of poetry written by children and to both find and clear a place for it in general literary discourse.

II. The Placebo Effect? Child-Authored Poetry as Poetry

The history of literature knows countless definitions of poetry, ranging from the maximally inclusive to the maximally exclusive, and from the metaphorical or aphoristic to the intensely dry and technical. According to many of these definitions, it would be difficult to find room for a great deal of child-authored poetry, especially when framed from the beginning as a practice expected to perform certain educational, therapeutic, or social functions; such a functional framing makes it easy to downplay this poetry as either (merely) utilitarian or as a simple stream-of-consciousness exercise that has been randomly distributed into lines.

It is not my intention to polemicise with skeptical voices in order to argue that this phenomenon certainly *is* poetry or, in particular, *good* poetry. Instead, I wish to draw attention to an obvious but oft neglected observation that, in my opinion, adds an important dimension to the discussion of “poeticness” and functionality. It is that “poeticness” *precedes the function*, or, put differently, any functionality is, in this case, ultimately *a function derived from being “poetic”*. This is only further corroborated by its counterpart: a poetry without function, which of course also exists and has been historically championed as poetry in its “purest” form. In either case, the “poeticness” – however we may struggle to define it – comes first. Briefly put, if child-authored poetry (or broader: *dagong* poetry,⁶⁸ or, say, prisoners’ poetry, or any other kind of poetry that is primarily meant to serve a specifically non-artistic goal) is somehow functional, this is largely exactly because it is *poetry* and not because it is, for example, a nice intellectual exercise or a psychophysical workout that consists in chopping sentences up into pieces. It, conceivably, does not work in the same way as journal writing, the therapeutic power

⁶⁷ Xinlang Guangdong 新浪广东, ‘Yong yi bei kafei de shiguang...’ 用一杯咖啡的时光...

⁶⁸ I discuss the relevance of poetry in migrant workers’ lives in the context of their literary dialogues with tradition in another paper written within the current project titled *Playing with Liquid Fire: Reading Chinese Dagong Verse Through Classical Poetry Tradition and Vice Versa*, forthcoming in *The Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* vol. 4 (2023).

of which lies in that it allows one to form one's experiences into a coherent narrative and thus see them in a different light and/or take a healthy distance from them. It is also not like fiction writing, which may offer escape into an alternative reality. In the case of poetry, the very awareness of the genre already has, to a certain extent, a therapeutic effect, regardless of the quantity and quality of one's output. It strikes me that the field of "poetry therapy", which has been dynamically developing in the West – in particular, thanks to the efforts of Nicholas Mazza, whose *Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice* (first published in 2003, latest edition in 2022) became the bible of the movement – has thus far almost neglected this *socio-poetological* aspect, focusing almost exclusively on the psychological specificity and emotional capacity of individual poetic narratives. However, it is also true that the said socio-poetological factors are much less salient in the contemporary Western context than they are in Chinese culture, where the art of verse is still broadly celebrated as something unambiguously ennobling, which is barely the case in the (purportedly) rational and pragmatic transatlantic societies in which the poet's position, with rare exceptions, is not even remotely enviable.

In other words, what is crucial is the conviction that one is writing *poetry*, that is inscribes one's experience into a universal space that is perceived as something imbued with value and connection to an intergenerational and intercultural community; a realm that welcomes what is most precious and often most intimate in oneself. Many children (and other groups of "non-professional" authors) appreciate this specificity in their own way: they have the sense that they are doing, or aspiring to do, is something that has been introduced to them as "special", as the most sacred literary form; this allows them to look at their everyday reality from a different perspective, and, in a way, to elevate it and add meaning to it. It also gives them self-confidence. Needless to say, this may well be a sort of psychological placebo effect that does not testify to the "poeticness" of the object (the poems themselves) and at best to the authors' strong *belief* that what they are writing is poetry. But if the same "placebo" begins to exercise its impact on more "authoritative" voices – those who are familiar with literary theory, history, and philosophy, like Zhou Sese, Wang Xiaoni, Xu Jingya, Duo Yu, and others – the status of the phenomenon begins to change. These readers are well aware that what they reach for in a child-authored poem may be just a sugar tablet of sorts and not "real poetry", but they still perceive its strong effect on themselves – that is, "placebo" or not, it functions as (what is commonly identified as) poetry, and they actively seek it out and circulate it in order to benefit the health of the national literature. This alone suggests that it cannot be simply disregarded and, at the very least, begs closer investigation and consideration.

With this in mind, in what follows below, I propose a sort of self-experiment: I will "test" child-authored poems on myself in order to observe how they behave within my own, admittedly foreign, readerly ecosystem, under the action of various contextual and intertextual factors to which I will expose them. Filtering them through my own unavoidably subjective but – as much as possible – nonpartial imagination, knowledge, and theoretical tools, I will also from time to time provisionally simulate their circulation in world literary discourse by inscribing them into various literary trends and poetological

discussions in order to see how they interact with a broader cultural environment. Although this is certainly not enough to answer the essentialist questions of what poetry is and which texts may be counted in it, based on my observations of how various works operate and are disseminated in different circumstances, I hope to draw some tentative general conclusions about poems written by children and, subsequently, about poetry at large. Therein, I will adopt the method that I find most rewarding in research that has to deal with a great variety of texts, which is to single out three general and frequently recurring themes in child-authored texts and build my analysis around them.

1. Nature and Its Laws

The single most powerful source of inspiration for Chinese child-poets is nature. This holds for children raised in the city as well as those who grow up in the countryside, and, arguably, it has a double provenance: the natural and the cultural. On the one hand, most children, regardless of their background, seem to be instinctively attracted to, curious about, and usually ready to empathise with everything that contains the element of life: a feature that, for example, entertainment industry extensively monetises, creating animal cartoon heroes in productions like *Hello Kitty*, *Peppa Pig*, or *Paw Patrol*. On the other hand, from the earliest stages of their education, they are exposed to poetry addressed primarily to nature – it comes mostly from the classical verse that they memorise since kindergarten, but there are other sources as well.

In conceptual terms, the simplest form of child-authored nature poetry is snapshots of landscapes or natural phenomena, often more or less the length of a haiku. Poems of this kind are like a linguistic photograph: one has to carefully adjust the focus, set the frame for the panoramic image, or zoom in on a particular object to make it stand out from the background. An example of such a poem is ten-year-old Huang Kun's 黄坤 *Starry River* (*Xing he* 星河) from *Little Poets in Big Mountains*, consisting of four almost regular lines, 10–12 characters each:

黑色的夜晚星星在闪烁
我在河边无忧无虑地散步
当我回头看看身边的河水时
只见无数的星星在河里流动⁶⁹

Black night stars twinkling
I'm walking carefreely along the riverbank
When I turn my head to look at the water
All I see are countless stars floating on the river

⁶⁹ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Dashan li de xiaoshiren* 大山里的小诗人 [Little Poets in Big Mountains], Shanghai 上海 2020, Digital edition, p. 90.

Simple as it is, the poem subtly, as in ancient Chinese paintings, captures the vastness of the starry sky, which not only surrounds the earthly, human world but also cuts into the earth under one's feet, reminding us of its unswerving existence at every step. Some will consider this awareness formidable and intrusive, while others will find metaphysical comfort. Huang Kun, stoically – or Daoistically – ends the poem exactly where it should end, leaving space for the reader's own meditation, with a rarely asked and intimate question hanging in the air: what would you do if you suddenly found yourself on the shore of the sky?

Another unique example of a poetic “photograph” that inspires contemplation is the two-line poem by Jiang Erman, written when she was seven, which later became the title of the Jiang sisters' collection:

Light burnt a hole
in black night⁷⁰

A seemingly common phenomenon captured from a radically new perspective leaves us with an ambiguous image that makes us wonder: does (bad) light (or lamp, as the word 灯 may be alternatively interpreted) harm (good) darkness, making a painful wound on its body, or is, perhaps, the “hole” rather like the famous rabbit hole from *Alice in Wonderland* – a portal to a fascinating, otherworldly reality. At the mention of holes in the sky, adults would probably first think of black holes rather than “bright holes”, but the child's association opens a totally different and tremendously inspiring perspective.

Such self-restraint, however, is relatively rare in children's poems. More often than not, the presence of the observer is active, and the filter of the individual imagination is the lens through which the world enters a poem. Thus, descriptions abound in all sorts of comparisons. Some are of course very conventional; many, for example, revolve around food: the moon as a cookie or clouds as cotton candy are among the most common. But there are also much more original, idiomatic associations. For instance, in *Dawn (Liming 黎明)* from *Poetry Written by Children* (2017), Yi Haibei 易海贝 (12 y.o.) likens dawn to the zipper that opens the sleeping bag of the night.⁷¹ In *Beginning of Summer (Lixia 立夏)* from *Little Poets in Big Mountains*, Xia Xinyi 夏欣怡 (9 y.o.) notices the analogy between the frequently changing weather in early summer and the intertwined wool threads in the hands of her knitting grandmother,⁷² and Liu Miaoting 刘妙婷 (11 y.o.) sees a waterfall as a white-haired giant.⁷³ Gao Can, in her turn, offers a beautiful image of autumn as a match from which fire spreads across the earth, and everything turns orange.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Jiang Xinhe 姜馨贺 and Jiang Erman 姜二嫚, *Deng ba heiye... 灯把黑夜...* [A Lamp Burnt a Hole...], p. 3.

⁷¹ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Haizimen de shi... 孩子们的诗* [Poetry Written by Children], Kindle edition.

⁷² Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Dashan li de xiaoshiren 大山里的小诗人* [Little Poets in Big Mountains], p. 137.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

⁷⁴ Quoted in: Huang Hai 黄海 (ed.), *Wenxue de Gao Can 文学的高璨* [Literary Gao Can], p. 29.

Not all of these associations, however, are purely visual or sensual. Many carry a heavy emotional load. Just like adult poets, children, too, intuitively tend to project their own experiences, feelings, and mental states on nature and landscapes by using metaphors of different degrees of sophistication. A particular abundance of such poems is, unsurprisingly, found in the *Little Poets in Big Mountains* anthology, in the literary output of children whose rhythm of life is still largely synchronised with nature. Below, I quote two of them: *What Is Happiness* (*Xingfu shi shenme* 幸福是什么) by Mu Sichang 慕思畅 (9 y.o.) and *A Little Tree and a Big Bird* (*Xiao shu he da niao* 小树和大鸟) by Cai Danyan 蔡丹艳 (9 y.o.), both accompanied by very personal comments written by their authors, referring to the absence of their parents, who left home to work in big cities.

《幸福是什么》

幸福是冬天过去
春天回来
爸爸妈妈转身离开
留下了冬天
只有他们
才能把春天
带回来⁷⁵

What Is Happiness

Happiness is when winter passes
and spring returns
When mum and dad leave
winter remains
only they
can bring
the spring back

《小树和大鸟》

我是一颗小树
妈妈是一只大鸟
大鸟飞去远方
小树慢慢长大
等大鸟回来了
小树给它一个家⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Dashan li de xiaoshiren* 大山里的小诗人 [Little Poets in Big Mountains], p. 26.

⁷⁶ Ibidem, pp. 30–31.

A Little Tree and a Big Bird

I am a little tree
 mum is a big bird
 the big bird has flown far away
 the little tree is growing day by day
 when the big bird returns
 the little tree will offer a home for her

At first glance, the first poem boils down to a rather conventional valorisation of seasons of the year, connecting spring to positive and winter to negative experiences, though it has its interesting layer, too. Note that the arrival of the parents actually means not a new period in the family life (summer and autumn are ignored in the author's concept) but turning time back, perhaps to relive the lost months rather than go forward with "black holes" of solitude that would remain in one's personal history, gradually evolving into unhealable traumas. The second poem strikes the reader as very pure and very mature at the same time. The lightness and gracefulness with which the author handles metaphors and the generous obviousness with which she offers a safe branch for her mother to perch, without a shadow of allegation or indictment, create the effect of perfect emotional balance and existential harmony. This harmony, however, even if the young author takes it for granted, is undermined by our, adults', awareness that this is not how the things should be, and that it is in fact a reversal of the default division of the roles in a family, with a prodigal mother and a loyal daughter awaiting her with ultimate patience and understanding.

Yet another commonly seen technique is the anthropomorphism of nature and granting it with active, intentional agency, which – much more often than in adult-authored poetry – goes hand in hand with a certain extent of naturalisation of the human, so that the boundaries between "I" and the world significantly blur. Tietou has several interesting poems of this kind to his name, including the oft-quoted one-line poem *I Want to Wash My Hands in Sunlight* (*Wo xiang dao yangguang xi xi shou* 我想到阳光里洗洗手) "pinned down" by his mum before he started consciously composing verses. In the poem, sunlight unexpectedly turns into a tangible, material thing that may cleanse physical dirt from human body. Another example is *Forgiveness* (*Yuanliang* 原谅), written when Tietou was eight, in which he attaches grave moral value to his act of innocent "vandalism" and reads natural phenomena as expressions of a certain intention or mood of the universe:

春天来了
 我去小溪边砸冰
 把春天砸得头破血流
 直淌眼泪

到了花开的时候
 它就把那些事儿忘了
 真正原谅了我⁷⁷

Spring arrived
 I went to the brook to smash the ice
 and smashed spring's head to the blood
 tears streamed out

When flowers stared blossoming
 it forgot that thing
 genuinely forgave me

An oral poem that made a particular impression on me is ascribed to three-year-old Li Tongyao 李彤遥 and is entitled *Eyemen* (*Yanjingren* 眼睛人). Preserved by Tongyao's parents, the text reads:

妈妈，你看星星
 它是眼睛人
 在传说中才有的，
 你没有听说过
 我是在一本书上看到的

让我再荡最后一次秋千好吗
 等星星来到我的心中
 秋千就会停下来

现在，我们可以一边走路
 一边在心里想着星星
 带星星回家
 白天的时候就把它放出来⁷⁸

Mum, look at the stars
 these are Eyemen
 they only exist in legends
 you haven't heard of them
 I've seen in one book

⁷⁷ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Haizimen de shi... 孩子们的诗* [Poetry Written by Children...], KL 63–67.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, KL 227–232.

Let me swing one more time, okay?
When the stars flow into my heart
the seesaw will stop

Now, we can walk
with stars in our hearts
return home carrying stars
we'll let them out when the day starts

The “self-evident” connection between the stars, the child’s heart, and the mechanics of the swing, which is expected to stop as soon as the heart fills with stars, is stunning. Likewise, the idea of thinking as literally (that is, physically) taking things to heart but without the “conqueror’s” impulse of taking them into possession – that is, to let them out after some time as if nothing happened – has a unique philosophical appeal.

The easily permeable boundary between the human and the nonhuman observed in children’s poems translates into suggestive quasi-hypotheses about, for example, the origins and constitution of one’s own body. Another short poem by a three-year-old comes to mind here, namely Yu Mengfan’s 于梦凡 *Sun and Eyes* (*Taiyang yu yanjing* 太阳与眼睛), which, incidentally, constitutes the negative of the famous two-line poem by Gu Cheng: “the black night gave me black eyes / but I use them to look for light” (黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛 / 我却用它寻找光明).⁷⁹ In Yu’s interpretation of the genesis of humankind, or at least genesis of the Chinese nation, the eyes are black not because they were “infected” by darkness but – we can infer – because they have received too much light, seen more wonders than the human mind can contain:

太阳晒我眼睛
把我眼睛晒黑⁸⁰

The sun shone on my eyes
it shone my eyes black

Some children, mostly older ones, approach the problem of humanity’s liminal existence as part of nature, the rupture in the natural order that we created, and the circulation of matter and energy in an even more straightforward way, as for instance ten-year-old Liu Zhongxiang 刘钟湘 does in *Why* (为什么) from *Little Poets in Big Mountains*:

雪是从哪里来?
冰是从哪里来?
谁是从哪里来?

⁷⁹ Gu Cheng 顾城, *Gu Cheng shi quanji* 顾城诗全集 [Collected Poetry by Gu Cheng], vol. 1, Nanjing 南京 2010, p. 283.

⁸⁰ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Haizimen de shi... 孩子们的诗* [Poetry Written by Children...], Kindle edition.

哦！
 是雪变成冰，
 冰变成水，
 水变成雪。
 可它们为什么不变成我？
 我变成它们呢？⁸¹

Where does snow come from?
 Where does ice come from?
 Who comes from where?
 Oh!
 It's snow that turns into ice,
 and ice turns into water,
 and water turns into snow.
 But why they don't turn into me?
 And I don't turn into them?

In general, children, regardless of their age, evince great creativity in investigating – or, more often, inventing – relationships, forces, and laws that infuse the universe, creating surprising connections between things, which makes me think of a poem by Wisława Szymborska, *A Little Girl Tugs the Tablecloth* (*Mała dziewczynka ściąga obrus*). It describes an “experiment” in which, from the perspective of a little girl, anything may happen: “Mr. Newton still has no say in this. / Let him look down from the heavens and wave his hands. / This experiment must be completed. / And it will” (trans. Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak).⁸²

Among the most effective poetic “scientific treatises” are children’s takes on the laws of optics and the physical qualities of light, as we have already observed in Jiang Erman’s *Hole*. Another well-known short poem of hers, written one year earlier, when she was six, also explores this theme, speculating about the materiality of light:

晚上
 我打着手电筒散步
 累了就拿它当拐杖
 我拄着一束光⁸³

In the evening
 I walk with a torch
 when I'm tired I use it as a walking stick
 I support myself on a beam of light

⁸¹ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Dashan li de xiaoshiren* 大山里的小诗人 [Little Poets in Big Mountains], p. 75.

⁸² Wisława Szymborska, *Map: Collected and Last Poems*, transl. Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak, Boston 2016, Kindle edition, p. 332.

⁸³ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Haizimen de shi...* 孩子们的诗 [Poetry Written by Children], Kindle edition.

What for the child author is perhaps just an attractive image whose philosophical potential she might intuitively feel but would hardly be able to formalise, to adult readers offers the temptation of a metaphorical interpretation. What is that light on which we can support ourselves to move forward? Some will think of the light of the reason, others will assume the presence of a metaphysical dimension – invisible spiritual forces that accompany us on our way. As in *Hole*, Jiang Erman captures an inspiring snapshot, and leaves us with it as she herself rushes to explore new territories.

Another refreshing perspective on human perception of physiological and mental phenomena can be found in Chen Kequan's 陈科全 (8 y.o.) *My Eyes* (*Wode yanjing* 我的眼睛):

我的眼睛很大很大
 装得下高山
 装得下大海
 装得下蓝天
 装得下整个世界

我的眼睛很小很小
 有时遇到心事
 就连两行泪
 也装不下⁸⁴

My eyes are so big so big
 they can contain high mountains
 they can contain wide oceans
 they can contain blue sky
 they can contain all the world

My eyes are so small so small
 when something weighs on mind
 sometimes they can't even contain
 two streams of tears

Here, the author himself takes the first step toward metaphorisation of his observation, aptly capturing the relativity of our perceived human power, which makes us conceitedly believe that we are able to embrace the entire physical world but melts into total helplessness as soon as we encounter an emotional problem. It takes the humility of a child to realise such a seemingly obvious truth and bring us back down to earth.

Needless to say, there are also much lighter, even humorous, texts that at first glance amount to nothing more than playful divagations and exercises in imagination that create, for instance, micro legends and myths of origin. But even these little stories in verse

⁸⁴ Ibidem, KL 180–183.

often leave one impressed by the plasticity of the authors' thinking and the naturalness with which they "switch" to and fro between different domains of reality. This is, for one, Rao Kunju's 饶堃钜 (10 y.o.) theory of the creation of the moon, as an accident of heavenly helter-skelter:

在夜里
 许多流星坐滑梯
 有些滑走了
 有些困住了
 就这样
 许多困住的星星挤呀挤
 慢慢地
 它们成了月亮⁸⁵

At night
 shooting stars
 crowded on a slide
 some managed to slide down
 others got stuck
 and thus
 squeezed on the slide
 they gradually
 turned into the Moon

And here is Huang Liu's 黄柳 (10 y.o.) semi-anthropomorphic vision of the Big Bang in *The Birth of the Universe* (*Yuzhou de dansheng* 宇宙的诞生):

宇宙像一个没有点着的烟花
 没人愿意给他一点火光
 他生气了 愤怒了
 把自己点燃了
 宇宙烟花爆炸了
 宇宙诞生了⁸⁶

The Universe was like an unfired firework
 there was no one to offer it a flame
 it got mad furious
 and fired itself
 the firework of the Universe exploded
 and thus the Universe was born

⁸⁵ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Dashan li de xiaoshiren* 大山里的小诗人 [Little Poets in Big Mountains], p. 54.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

At the same time, several young authors find it important to emphasise that the potential of anthropomorphism exhausts itself when it comes to ethics, whose laws have no power over nature. Nature is physical – and perhaps sometimes emotional in the physiological sense in which hormonal storms in humans are emotional – but it is located beyond the domain of good and evil because it lacks intentionality. It is also located beyond the notions of life and death and does not understand these notions because it functions in constantly renewable cycles in which one form of matter or energy becomes directly processed into another one. Xu Fei 徐菲 (12 y.o.) puts it beautifully when speaking about a volcano:

火山不分死与活
 它们静静地盘腿坐着
 只有烟斗起伏地吐着烟圈
 和火山轻轻的鼻息声

只有太生气了
 才会吐出一大口火焰与黑烟
 只是发泄
 它们并不知道会造成多大伤害

的确火山不分死与活
 只分两类
 脾气暴躁的与沉默寡言的⁸⁷

Volcanos don't distinguish between life and death
 only spit smoke rings like a swaying pipe
 and quiet snoring

Only when really furious
 do they spit mouthfuls of flames and dark smoke
 but even when they unleash their anger
 they don't know what big harms it will cause

Indeed, volcanos don't distinguish between life and death
 they only distinguish two moods
 explosive and taciturn

In a similar vein and style, Gao Can speaks of the wind in her poem *It's Not the Wind's Fault* (这不是风的错过), justifying the wind's "violence" toward autumn leaves:

⁸⁷ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Haizimen de shi... 孩子们的诗* [Poetry Written by Children...], Kindle edition.

一片树叶
 缓缓从树上飘落
 小兔子看见了
 怜惜地问
 “风姐姐，
 小叶子好好的
 何必将她吹落？”
 风沉思了
 只是说了声
 “对不起。”
 小树叶笑了
 像春光一样灿烂
 “我落后果实才能成熟
 我落后才能换来春！”
 风姐姐听了
 长长出了口气
 小树叶随着风的呼吸
 又一次高高飘起
 张开了双肩
 拥抱收获
 快乐！
 小白兔听见了树叶说
 “这不是风的错过”。⁸⁸

A leaf
 unhurriedly floated down from a tree
 a little hare having noticed this
 compassionately asked the wind
 “Sister Wind
 the little leaf was good
 why did you blow it down?”
 The wind was immersed in thoughts
 and whispered only
 “I’m sorry”.
 The little leaf smiled
 as bright as the spring sun
 “If I didn’t fall fruits would never ripen
 and spring couldn’t come!”
 When Sister Wind heard it
 she breathed with a great relief

⁸⁸ Quoted in: Huang Hai 黄海 (ed.), *Wenxue de Gao Can* 文学的高瓌 [Literary Gao Can], p. 38.

with her blow
 the little leaf was raised again
 opened widely its arms
 embraced life
 and joy!
 The little hare heard it say
 “This is not the wind’s fault”.

But Gao Can’s poems are not always so simple and lighthearted, and she seeks answers not just in fairy-tales but also in philosophy, to which the poem *The Second Lightning: Reading Nietzsche* (第二支闪电：读尼采) bears clear evidence. In the poem, Gao takes up the idea of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* as someone who is not only beyond good and evil but also beyond the laws of nature, like lightning that cuts through dark clouds to bring a radical awakening to those who remain slaves of their limited human condition.

《第二支闪电：读尼采》

空荡荡的桥梁下，有一个走动的人
 黑衣，手中握着金色的拐杖

人们将赞赏的目光别在小丑的钢丝上
 将憎恶的话语钉在阳光抽回的手上
 浮世中的人类
 不断将鞋上的灰尘，印在干净的土地上

黑衣人在浮世通往彼岸的桥下，说：
 “超人”

人们大笑，如笑一头站在红色皮球上的狮
 声音稍作变化，说：

“超人”

人们奇异地笑

如笑一个试图将雨伞挂在月牙尖钩上的人
 声音有所变化，说：

“超人”

人们的的笑骤然凝固，凋谢，转身离去
 如逃出噩梦的门
 凋谢的笑在地上堆积，如脏的雪水

黑衣人盼望一场暴雨的征兆
 浓密的乌云

他是乌云中劈出的第一支闪电
他盼望着第二支⁸⁹

The Second Lightning: Reading Nietzsche

Under a deserted bridge walks a man
dressed in black with a golden walking stick in his hand

The sigh that will one day be admired by people stuck at the clown's
steel wire
the speech that will one day be hated nailed on the withdrawn hand of
sunlight
humanity adrift
the dust from their shoes constantly leaving imprints on the clean earth

The man in black drifts toward the other end of the bridge on the opposite
shore, he says

“*Übermensch*”

people burst out laughing as if ridiculing a lion standing on a red ball
in a slightly different voice, he says:

“*Übermensch*”

people laugh surprised

as if ridiculing a person who tries to hang an umbrella on the hook of
the moon

In a slightly different voice, he says

“*Übermensch*”

people's laughter suddenly freezes, dies down, they turn their backs and
walk away

as if escaping through the gates of a nightmare

fallen petals of laughter pile up on the ground like dirty slush

The man in black awaits the omen of storm

thick black clouds

he is the first lightning that cuts the black clouds

he awaits the second lightning

Last but not least, children's mental and physical attachment to the world of nature often (although not always, as we have seen, for example, in Tietou's *Wheat*) results in great

⁸⁹ Quoted in Zhu Hong 朱鸿, 'Shaonü de xuanxue: shixing zhihui – du Gao Can de shiji *Di er zhi shandian*' 少女的玄学：诗性智慧——读高璨的诗集《第二支闪电》 [Metaphysics of a Teenage Girl: Poetic Wisdom – Reading Gao Can's Collection *The Second Lightning*], Zhu Hong's blog, 15 November 2010, Viewed 22 May 2022, <http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b08f1ba0100m6np.html>.

sensitivity and empathy toward every visible and invisible thing in the universe. In some young authors, this emotional identification with the nonhuman world is particularly strong and finds its outlet in poems that express profound care and, sometimes, helplessness in the face of the cruelty that animals and plants experience from humans. One example is the previously cited *Lamb* by Jiang Xinhe, which describes the regular slaughter of livestock in a seemingly plain but thought-provoking way. In a similarly “indifferent” manner, she describes the death of a dog called Hei Dan who belonged to the owner of a *jiaozi* dumpling bar.

《黑蛋》

有人告诉饺子馆老板
 你的狗死了
 他往锅里添了一瓢水
 走去看了一眼
 用脚踢了踢
 然后骑来三轮车
 把黑蛋往车上一扔
 走了
 黑蛋躺过的地上
 那块和它一样大小的水印
 眼看就要消失⁹⁰

Hei Dan

Someone told the owner of the *jiaozi* bar
 your dog is dead
 He added a ladle of water to the pot
 went out glanced over
 kicked something with his leg
 and jumped onto his tricycle
 threw Hei Dan inside
 and cycled away
 In the place where Hei Dan lay
 a wet stain left roughly of his size
 which will disappear in a while

Xinhe’s composure and control over the poetic form deserves the highest appreciation and is rarely seen among child or adult poets alike. Her little sister’s poetic temperament is very different. Rather than restraining her emotion and leaving ambiguous signs for the

⁹⁰ Jiang Xinhe 姜馨贺 and Jiang Erman 姜二嫚, *Deng ba heiye... 灯把黑夜...* [A Lamp Burnt a Hole...], p. 12.

reader to decode, the younger Jiang sister goes straight into ecological activism, raising a toast for animals with her “left hand representing myself / right hand representing all animals”, arguing that “the Earth belongs to everybody”.⁹¹

Huge reservoirs of compassion are also found in Gao Can’s work, which Li Xing 李星 associates with Buddhist philosophy, commenting, among other things, on her poem *Where Are the Dreams of the Wind* (*Feng de meng zai nali* 风的梦在哪里), which contains the following lines:

她渴望抱抱自己的梦
亲亲它，然后只能
悄悄躲进一个空螺壳
孤独中呼唤里⁹²

She would love to embrace her own dream
kiss it, and then she would have to
quietly slip into an empty spiral shell
in the call amidst the solitude

Li Xing argues that “the wind’s loneliness is anything but a ‘philosophy’ of the modern human; rather, it is a manifestation of the child’s compassion for the wind founded on her own life experience, an imaginary description of the fate of natural objects, a Buddhist epiphany (*chanwu* 禅悟) in the midst of solitude”.⁹³ Elsewhere, in her probably best known and most widely commented-upon poem, *A Mirror and a Dog*, Gao Can, in the same unobtrusive manner, describes the solitude of a guide dog after the death of the owner, which makes the poem reminiscent of Wisława Szymborska’s famous *Cat in an Empty Apartment* (*Kot w pustym mieszkaniu*). Gao writes:

导盲犬
在忙老人死了之后便被抛弃
街头独自流浪
有一天奄奄一息
看见一面镜子
里面有只
跟自己一样的狗
流浪

导盲犬上前舔了舔
感觉那只狗也在天添己
两只狗轻摇尾巴
一起躺下

⁹¹ Ibidem, p. 27.

⁹² Quoted in Huang Hai 黄海 (ed.), *Wenxue de Gao Can* 文学的高璨 [Literary Gao Can], p. 47.

⁹³ Ibidem.

导盲犬挨着镜子里的狗
感觉另一个心脏跳动
另一种体温存在
直到不知不觉

镜子很温暖
她的心第一次跳动
第一次有人对她这么亲密
导盲犬和镜子
睡在这个城市的一个角落⁹⁴

A guide dog
abandoned after the old man passed away
wanders alone in the streets
one day on the verge of death
she saw a mirror
and in it there was
a dog like she
wandering

The guide dog stepped forward licked the mirror
and felt as if the other dog licked her too in return
the two dogs slightly waved their tails
and lay down together
The guide dog clinging to the dog in the mirror
senses the beat of a heart
the temperature of another body
until unbeknownst to her

the mirror warms up
her heart skips for the first time
for the first time someone was so close to her
the guide dog and the mirror
sleep in the corner of this city

In a corner of every city sleep a dog and a mirror, we might say by reading Gao Can's poem metaphorically as a universal story of abandonment, solitude, and living with illusions that bring temporary comfort; but it takes a tender, sensitive eye to notice them and a loving hand to offer them a warm home in the poetic word. Or at least a piece of warm clothing to help them survive winter, as in Meng Yuefeng's 蒙月烽 (10 y.o.) poem *Swallow* (Yanzi 燕子):

⁹⁴ Huang Hai 黄海 (ed.), *Wenxue de Gao Can* 文学的高璨 [Literary Gao Can], pp. 27–28.

燕子飞回来了
 带着它的剪刀
 我好想拥有它的剪刀啊
 我想做一件花衣裳送给它
 这样到了冬天
 燕子就可以留下来啦⁹⁵

The swallow returned
 with her scissors
 I'd love to use these scissors
 to make clothes for her
 then in winter
 she could stay

Every child grows up, in a sense, “bilingual”, parallelly absorbing two languages: the asemic, nonrepresentational language of nature⁹⁶ and the highly semanticised language of human society. Their respective grammars merge in the child’s mind such that it never speaks a pure language of nature or a pure language of society, and often – consciously or not – applies the “wrong” structures to reality. For example, it might feel comfortable to speak about family relationships by employing images and logic from the world of plants, or the other way around, which often produces astonishing artistic effects. Such cross-domain connections, identified by Lakoff and Johnson as the basic mechanism beyond metaphorisation, evince particular dynamism in children’s brains, which may perhaps be explained by a generally greater neuroplasticity in children than in adults, on the one hand, and children’s limited scientific knowledge, which “disproves” or hugely complicates such connections, on the other.

Also, as one grows up, one of the two languages – usually the language of society – gradually starts to dominate, and the other one is either abandoned or increasingly submitted to the structures of the dominant one; most often, “natural” vocabulary remains unaffected in one’s memory and even expands as one is gaining natural-scientific knowledge but is increasingly organised according to the conceptual syntax of the “societal” language and the paradigms of various discourses that shape this language. Re-learning natural (non)grammar at an older age requires active effort and determination, and children – while not necessarily its “native speakers” – remain its most accessible teachers, to whom many adults, including some poets, try to turn.

⁹⁵ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Dashan li de xiaoshiren* 大山里的小诗人 [Little Poets in Big Mountains], p. 165.

⁹⁶ The concept of asemic and nonrepresentational writing as a possible framework within which to approach the phenomenon of child-authored poetry, along with several other phenomena in contemporary poetry, will be elaborated on in a monograph I am currently working on. Here, let me tentatively signal this perspective by referring the reader to two inspiring publications: Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, Oakland 2013 and Peter Schwenger’s *Asemic: The Art of Writing*, Minneapolis 2019.

Having investigated how children's poetry handles the topic of nature, let's now see how it grapples with relationships in society and social identity, which "fallacies" it is particularly prone to in this area, and how (some of) these fallacies, like grains of sand that irritate the skin in one's shoe, may, when incubated in favourable conditions, be turned into poetic pearls.

2. The Human World and Its (F)laws

The complexity of the process of a child's self-identification against the social-cultural framework is perhaps best reflected in Jiang Xinhe's poem *I Used to Be an Undecided Person* (*Wo cengjing shi ge bu queding de ren* 我曾经是个不确定的人), which was written in 2017, when the author was already fourteen, but refers to her early childhood in a way that is nothing short of philosophical, albeit arguably unintentionally. It may be effectively read, for instance, in the context of Jacques Derrida's reflection upon the proper name as a construct located on the peripheries of language, belonging and not belonging to it at the same time, and for this very reason also untranslatable, which Derrida explains in *Towers of Babel* (*Des tours de Babel*), taking the example of the name Pierre (along with Babel and London).

Nevertheless, someone who speaks the language of Genesis could be attentive to the effect of the proper name in effacing the conceptual equivalent (like *pierre* [rock] in *Pierre* [Peter], and there are two absolutely heterogeneous values or functions); one would then be tempted to say *first* that a proper name, in the proper sense, does not properly belong to the language; it does not belong there, *although and because* its call makes the language possible (what would a language be without the possibility of calling by a proper name?); consequently it can properly inscribe itself in a language only by allowing itself to be translated therein, in other words, *interpreted* by its semantic equivalent: from this moment it can no longer be taken as proper name. [...] It is as if there were two words there, two homonyms one of which has the value of proper name and the other that of common noun: between the two, a translation which one can evaluate quite diversely.⁹⁷

In Xinhe's poem, however, the problem of naming is additionally entangled with another issue that is crucial for deconstructionists, that is, the relationship between script and sound, and the problem of logocentrism / phonocentrism, which, in the Chinese language, with its rich reservoirs of homophonous and near-homophonous graphemes,

⁹⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', (trans.) Joseph F. Graham, in: Joseph F. Graham (ed.) *Difference in Translation*, Ithaca and London 1985, pp. 172–173.

gains particular importance. And this is where Xinhe's inspiring "disagreement" with Derrida takes place. Let's read the poem in detail:

《我曾经是个不确定的人》

记得两岁时
我给自己取了个名字
叫王玉溪
也可能是王煜西
也可能是王裕希
也可能是王遇曦
也可能是别的
现在已经无法确定
因为我当时
还不识字
2017. 6. 26

I Used to Be an Undecided Person

I remember when I was two
I chose a name for myself
It was Wang Yuxi 王玉溪
Or perhaps Wang Yuxi 王煜西
Or perhaps Wang Yuxi 王裕希
Or perhaps Wang Yuxi 王遇曦
Or something yet different
Now it's already undecidable
because at the time
I didn't know how to write

Not knowing the rules of Chinese script, Xinhe chose for herself the nickname Wang Yuxi, probably attracted by its audial qualities and perhaps by some associations that these three syllables invoked in her, for example, a cartoon protagonist or a heroine from a fairy-tale who bore a homophonous name. Unlike Chinese parents who pick names for their children by taking into account both semantics and phonetics, she was unaware of the former aspect. The phonemes *yù* and *xī*, depending on graphemes to which they refer, may signify different things. For example, a "jade brook" 玉溪, "illuminating/-ed west" 煜西, "wealthy/rich/abundant scarce/hope" 裕希, or "encountering early morning sunlight" 遇曦. Not only do these two-character combinations differ semantically but they also belong in different spheres of human reality: brook and sunlight would suggest self-identification with nature (although "jade brook" makes one also think about a human conceptual matrix imposed on the world, which ascribes particular value or a symbolic

dimension to certain materials and objects), “west” would suggest an attempt to localise oneself in physical space (which, of course, is also secondarily furnished with cultural-political meanings), while the reference to abundance, richness, scarcity, or even “hope” in a more abstract interpretation of 希, throws us directly into humanmade world with its various forms of quantifiable material and immaterial social capital.

Disconnected from the graphemes of script, the phonemes *yù* and *xī* carry in themselves the potential of all these meanings without the burden of conveying any of them. Like a young child to whom all perspectives are still open, before they are fixed in place by a pen, they can become any of these things. As opposed to the Western philosophy of deconstruction, in which script acts as a “pharmakon” that actually triggers the process of endless dissemination and ambiguation toward perpetual undecidability, in Xinhe’s intuitive understanding, establishing a fixed connection between phoneme and grapheme does away with such undecidability and makes a phonetic structure congeal in a specific meaning just like the child’s identity finally congeals in one or another social mold. It resembles quantum physics, in which particles find themselves in an undecidable state before they are subject to the act of external measurement/observation that disambiguates them.

Finally, the last three lines of *I Used to Be an Undecided Person* prompt us to think about the limitations of one’s narrative memory, which is hugely dependent on one’s oral, and – as it turns out – also written language skills, and of the narrative self as a foundation of one’s self-identification. The answer to the question “what/who I really was” gets blurred and dissolves in fields of probability. This could, of course, be the free play of my own unbridled imagination, trained on extensive readings in modern physics, but the fact that Xinhe’s poem can inspire such play additionally testifies to its value as a literary text capable of traveling great intercultural and interpersonal distances. At the same time, this style of reading in ever bigger circles around the text is very much in the spirit of Jiang Xinhe’s verse, to recall but two poems structured according to this conceptual model: *When I Eat a Tangerine* (*Wo chi juzi de shihou* 我吃橘子的时候)⁹⁸ and *8 O’Clock* (*8 dian* 8 点).⁹⁹ The former poem draws the system of physical connections and associations in a “chain of beings” that gradually expands from a tangerine, at the perspective of the fruit’s petiole, through to its leaf, to the branch from which it grows out, to the tree, to the garden, to the vast wilderness. The latter poem identifies a similar expansive structure in social reality wherein the “contagious” question about the current time asked by a girl in the street spreads among passers-by and makes its way onto banners, assuming the size of a great mystery.

Another short but powerful poem that triggers a chain of associations and existential reflections is You Ruoxin’s 游若昕 (9 y.o.) *Dark Forest* (黑森林):

在大家的掌声中
一个人
走了进去

⁹⁸ Jiang Xinhe 姜馨贺 and Jiang Erman 姜二嫚, *Deng ba heiye... 灯把黑夜...* [A Lamp Burnt a Hole...], p. 94.

⁹⁹ Ibidem, p. 112.

不知过了
 几千年
 几万年
 这个人
 再也没有
 走出来¹⁰⁰

In the sounds of everybody's applause
 a person
 entered
 thousands
 or tens of thousands of years
 have passed
 no one knows
 and that person
 still hasn't
 emerged

Is it, one may ask, the dark forest of Dante, where the poet found himself in the middle of life to begin his timeless journey to the underworld to learn the ins and outs of human individual and collective psyche? Or, conversely, perhaps the darkness symbolises the moral decay or blind unawareness of a person who has been carried through life on a wave of applause – sincere or otherwise – that is drowned out in the end? As in Jiang Xinhe's work, we are left with a mystery – no more confident than a child who hesitantly tries to identify the complex motivations hidden behind seemingly obvious gestures, becoming increasingly aware of the falsity that underlies many of them and torn between the yearning for a tale of wonder and the fear of being misled by attractive appearances.

On the opposite conceptual pole from this sense of cosmic expansion, there are also – more numerous – “mind-narrowing” poems that require careful focus on a specific fragment of social reality, often the “I”-speaker's home or family, which is interestingly compared to an egg by Ye Beibei 叶贝贝 (14 y.o.) in the poem *Family* (家):

家是一个小小的蛋
 父亲是卵壳
 母亲是卵白
 而我
 就是那卵黄¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Haizimen de shi... 孩子们的诗* [Poetry Written by Children...], Kindle edition.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

Family is a tiny egg
 father is the egg's shell
 mother is the egg's white
 and I
 am the egg's yolk

In this family microcosmos, the child experiences the laws of both “natural” and “social” existence with great intensity but on a smaller scale; ideally, this happens in safe environment, inside the four walls of the family house, where it is protected by father and nurtured by mother. There, we may add, it also receives the “originals” of all the emotions, feelings, values, and concepts of which we only get “copies” later in life, as in Jiang Erman’s beautiful miniature *Original* (原创), a four-line poem that triggers reflection on things as fundamental as, for instance, certain archetypes (in the Jungian sense) ingrained in the human mind:

如果有谁对我说
 我爱你
 这绝对绝对不是原创
 原创在妈妈那里¹⁰²

If someone tells me
 I love you
 this certainly won't be the original
 the original is with mum

At home, however, one is also confronted with difficult truths, such as the inevitability and destructive power of time, whose impact one observes first in the bodies of one’s parents, experiencing the ephemerality of life in a vicarious, though obviously also very painful way, as many of the poetic micro-narratives offered by young authors testify. At some point, as children grow up, they too start to internalise time and experience it firsthand. This transition is visible in Gao Can’s poetry, in which we witness the author’s paradoxical “future nostalgia” for the childhood which has not even ended yet. This is exemplified in poems such as *Birthday Is Candles and Cake* (*Shengri shi lazhu he dangao* 生日是蜡烛和蛋糕)¹⁰³ wherein she speaks of “more and more yesterdays, less and less tomorrows” or in the suggestively titled *Floating Clouds of Childhood* (*Piaoguo tongnian de yun* 飘过童年的云).¹⁰⁴ Yet, her most compelling reflection on time is arguably the poem *Old Clock* (*Lao zhongbiao* 老钟表):

¹⁰² Jiang Xinhe 姜馨贺 and Jiang Erman 姜二嫚, *Deng ba heiye... 灯把黑夜... [A Lamp Burnt a Hole...]*, p. 91.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Huang Hai 黄海 (ed.), *Wenxue de Gao Can* 文学的高璨 [Literary Gao Can], p. 54.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

《老钟表》

钟表店里一只坏了的钟表
 被拆掉银色的齿轮
 桌上凌乱的躺着
 好像那些操劳一生的人
 终于有了一个喘息的机会
 却已经触摸到了自己的终点
 表壳依旧完好无损
 但他不忍看见
 洒落一旁的内心
 是怎样饱经风霜
 究竟承受过多少磨难
 就像伤了翅膀的鸟儿
 更渴望飞上蓝天
 已经没有了气力
 一堆钟表的零件洒落桌上
 似乎一地时光破碎的骨头
 让窗外的我
 看见了
 时光竟然也有憔悴、老去的时刻¹⁰⁵

Old Clock

In the clock shop there is an old clock
 dismantled silver gears
 lying disorderly on the table
 like people who have worked all their lives
 and finally got the opportunity to take a deep breath
 but instead have touched their own end
 the watchcase is still intact
 but he sadly notices
 the torn heart on the side
 weathered after the stormy life
 how many hardships it must have experienced
 like a bird with wounded wings
 which yearns even more to soar in the sky
 but has no vigour to raise
 a heap of clock parts piling on the table

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 85.

like bones of broken time
 allowed the me behind the window
 to see
 that time too at times withers and ages.

The clock's soul, hidden in its metal heart, is time itself. Time that, in Gao Can's poem, fell prey to its own sustained violence, finally cut a branch on which it itself sat, bit off a hand that fed it, spoiled the mechanism that had been setting it in motion. Or did it? Perhaps a solution to this irresolvable paradox lies in some higher dimension of existence, a higher authoritative and absolute Time that determines both the life of humans and the life of clocks and their temporal and temporary souls?

The Jiang sisters' and Gao Can's poems abound in images of idyllic family life filled with an atmosphere of acceptance and mutual support in which these young poets have been raised and their sensibilities and intellects shaped. In anthologies and individual collections of child authors there is, however, no dearth of "eggs" with cracked shells, shattered or even entirely scrambled ones. When even the smallest fissure appears in the outside covering, the unbridled element of wild, external time immediately bursts in, chaotically, without rhyme, reason, or rhythm. Days stretch endlessly or shrink to the size of an hour or less, as for instance in the poem *Time Is So Mean* (*Shijian zhen xiaoqi* 时间真小气) by Chen Yanzhen 陈妍蓁 (11 y.o.), which tells in simple, whimsical, but emotion-laced words of the disturbed perception of time that the author experiences in the absence of her brother who studies in Guangzhou:

时间真小气了
 哥哥从广州回来
 我和哥哥相处得好好的
 时间却走得很快
 哥哥回广州读书了
 时间却慢吞吞地走着
 不让哥哥回来
 时间真小气¹⁰⁶

Time is so mean
 when my big brother returns from Guangzhou
 and we're having fun together
 time goes so fast
 when brother goes to Guangzhou for studies
 time becomes so sluggish
 doesn't let brother come back
 time is really mean

¹⁰⁶ Lei Qingyi 雷清漪 (ed.), *Haizimen xie de shi* 孩子们写的诗 [Poetry Written by Children], Xi'an 西安 2018, p. 95.

But of course there are also much more disturbing forms of absence than one's sibling's pursuit of education, as I mentioned in the first part of this essay: that is, the permanent absence of parents who emigrated for work, divorced, or, most painfully, died.

The way young authors write about solitude and death is often surprisingly – and heart-wrenchingly – plain as regards the style, with a seemingly modest but usually unfulfillable silent wish: the yearning for normalcy, as Sun Jixu 孙继旭 puts it in *Life* (*Rensheng* 人生), which was included in *Little Poets in Big Mountains*:

人生像大海中搏击冯海的帆船
人生像自由的飞翔的海鸥
人生像在风浪中展翅高飞的海燕
但我觉得
人生普普通通就行了¹⁰⁷

Life is like a sailing boat struggling on the rough sea
life is like a freely flying seagull
life is like a storm petrel spreading its wings in the waves of the wind
but I think
it's fine if life is just ordinary

In *Little Poets in Big Mountains*, we encounter three poems in a row, all supplemented with autobiographical notes, that speak of the deaths of family members: Yu Jiang's 于姜 *In Dreams* (*Zai meng li* 在梦里), which describes life without the mother who “went to the world without suffering”, followed by Xie Qiufan's 谢秋凡 *Autumn and I* (*Qiu tian he wo* 秋天和我) and Su Yangxin's 粟杨欣 *Qingming* (*Qingming* 清明), which memorialise the authors' respective late grandfathers. Below, I invoke in full the second of these, which is also the shortest and most visual, in order to demonstrate the disturbed “cosomological” (as in cosmos + soma) rhythm that affects its description of both internal and external worlds:

《秋天和我》

秋天里的每一天
就像一个气球
满肚子的气
怎么也变不了风¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Dashan li de xiaoshiren* 大山里的小诗人 [Little Poets in Big Mountains], p. 148.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

Autumn and I

In Autumn every day
 resembles a balloon
 its stomach filled with air
 that can't be turned into wind

In the autobiographical postscript, the author explains that she does not have friends and does not want to talk to anybody about her grandfather's death, so the poem is most likely intended as a double metaphor, using the images of the balloon and of autumn for her own mental state. But there is also one more – conceivably unintended – layer in the text, namely a metapoetic one, which leads us toward the topic of the next section. The phrase *bian feng* 变风 (lit. “to change the wind” or “to change into the wind”) may be interpreted as a reference to classical poetry. *Bian feng*, when understood as a change in style rather than as a change in wind, signifies a category of the ancient songs from the *Shijing* – precisely those written in times of social turmoil that convey pure feelings, complex emotions, and deep social-political reflections. They are typically considered the most valuable part of the anthology. Qin Xiaoyu compared children's – and precisely, Tietou's – poetry to the *Shijing*: the pure, unblemished expression of primordial spirit of the community. Xie's poem problematises this statement, suggesting that certain experiences make it impossible for one to remain in a state of original innocence, regardless of one's age, education, or other factors.

3. Literary Self-Awareness: Language, Poetry, Tradition

Child-authored poems in many cases open fascinating fields of reflection that their authors are arguably not able to predict, making intuitive choices of words and images that are subsequently expanded upon by the imaginations and intertextual associations of their readers, especially when they get into the hands of seasoned participants in and commentators on literary life, such as poets and professional critics. At the same time, we certainly should not underestimate the young poets' self-awareness as authors, nor their awareness of poetic form and a cultural tradition with which they, too, actively and effectively experiment and play, although – understandably – to a generally lesser extent than those with university educations. The other side of the same coin is that they, too, are susceptible to convention and cliché. To claim that children exclusively possess original and refreshing observations, such as Li Yurong's definition of poetry as catching mosquitoes, is a naïve if noble and usually well-intentioned simplification. As everywhere, there is a lot of good and bad poetry.

In all the anthologies, individual collections, and online resources that have been available to me, I have encountered frequent intertextual allusions to Chinese mythology and ancient culture that recycle, among other things, the stories of Chang E 嫦娥, Zhinü 织女 (the Weaver Girl) and Niulang 牛郎 (the Cowherd), deploying metaphors from well-

known classical poetry or sophisticated idioms that originate in classical literature that children know from classroom. A special place among children's meta-poetic output is occupied by texts that display a sort of ironic meta-consciousness, on a higher or lower stage of development, for example Jiang Erman's *Classical Poem* (*Gushi* 古诗), which humorously defines the technique of "stylisation":

我把刚写的一首诗
放在太阳底下晒
想把它晒黄
像一首古诗
假装已经流传了几万年¹⁰⁹

I put a newly written poem
in the sun to expose it to light
for it to turn yellowish
like an ancient verse
that has been circulating for thousands of years.

Wang Jiaqi 王嘉淇, in turn, in the poem *It Said to It* (*Ta dui ta shuo* 它对它说), approximates what in adult writing would probably be classified as an attempt at language poetry – that is, poetry in which language itself constitutes the message rather than the medium and becomes subject to critical examination and grotesque manipulation. The author brings idioms down to their literal sense, cutting them off from their source and context, and treating them as putatively universal enlightened truths. These language truths serve as hilarious arguments in quarrels between various animals and (animalised) objects aimed at settling hierarchical relationships among Creation:

猴子对鸡说
你们鸡实在太没用了
看着我们猴子，多神气
为什么？因为有个词叫杀鸡儆猴

盒子对珠子说
谁说珍珠一定比木制的盒子贵
有没有听说过买椟还珠

鱼眼对珍珠说
你知道不知道咱俩是兄弟
为啥？
因为有个词叫鱼目混珠

¹⁰⁹ Jiang Xinhe 姜馨贺 and Jiang Erman 姜二嫚, *Deng ba heiye... 灯把黑夜... [A Lamp Burnt a Hole...]*, p. 35.

雷和风对人们说
谁说只有你们人会走
天气是不会动的
有没有听过雷厉风行¹¹⁰

A monkey said to a chicken
you chickens are really so useless
look at us monkeys how divine we are
Why? Because there is a saying kill a chicken to frighten a monkey

A box said to a pearl
who said that pearls must be more precious than a wooden box
haven't you heard of buying a casket and returning the pearl

A fish eye said to a pearl
do you know that we are brothers
Why?
Because there's a phrase to mix fish eyes with pearls

Thunder and wind said to humans
who said that only you can walk
and weather can't move
haven't you heard that thunders are severe and wind travels

Another poem that deserves a mention in this place is Liu Jiahua's 刘佳华 *Why Should We Use Measure Words in This Way?* (*Liangci weishenme yao zheyang yong* 量词为什么要这样用) from an exhibition in Starbucks. The author questions the obviousness of certain grammatical constructions in the Chinese language, precisely the pairings of measure words and nouns as in "one head of cow" meaning "one cow". By doing so, she calls into question not just particular language habits but a specific vision of the world that is reflected in them, especially the arbitrary order imposed on things by classifying them into fixed and at times even problematic categories.

《量词为什么要这样用》

量词为什么要这样用
一头牛
为什么不说
一张牛呢
一个人

¹¹⁰ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Dashan li de xiaoshiren* 大山里的小诗人 [Little Poets in Big Mountains], p. 277.

为什么不
一粒人呢
量词为什么要这样用呢¹¹¹

Why Should We Use Measure Words in This Way

Why should we use measure words in this way
one head of cow
and why not
one sheet of cow
one [universal measure word *ge*] person
and not
one grain of person
why should we use measure words in this way

Liu Jiahua's concept is not new in Chinese-language poetry; it resonates with many experimental poems of renowned Sinophone authors, especially outside the mainland-Chinese literary scene, in Taiwan and Hong Kong, as Lisa Lai-Ming Wong extensively demonstrates in her study "Measure Words Not for Measure: A Linguistic Experiment in Modern Chinese Poetry" (2019). Examples include Lei Ping-kwan 梁秉钧, Huai Yuan 淮遠, Luo Fu 罗夫, and others. Famous for this kind of language play is Xi Xi 西西; of her predilection for "misapplied" measure words and the translational problems her poetry poses, says Jennifer Feeley in an interview with Rebecca Sutton.¹¹² The fact that Liu Jiahua has had so many predecessors does not detract from her artistic independence and language sensibility; on the contrary, the company of such accomplished authors confirms the potential of her artistic explorations.

Children's metapoetic texts, just like those addressed to nature or social-cultural identity, display great diversity, testifying to the variety of their approaches to poetry writing and reading and prompting us to admit that there is no single, clear-cut category in which we could pigeonhole them as one homogenous phenomenon. In addition to the aforementioned poems, there are, among other things, a number of texts that construe poetry as an external, cosmic occurrence, an inherent characteristic of the natural world, a manifestation of its metaphysical essence, remotely echoing the legend of Cangjie 仓颉, the four-eyed inventor of Chinese script who is believed to have been inspired by imprints

¹¹¹ Yingxiao Pinpaiguan 营销品牌官, *Haizimen wei Xingbake xie de shi, bi Du Leisi hao duo le* 孩子们为星巴克写的诗, 比 杜蕾斯的好多了 [Poetry Written by Children for Starbucks Are So Much Better Than Du Leisi], *163.com*, 3 December 2019, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://www.163.com/dy/article/EVEI066E05149251.html>>.

¹¹² Rebecca Sutton, 'Art Talk with Literature Translation Fellow Jennifer Feeley', *National Endowment for the Arts* 13 September 2018, Viewed 22 May 2022, <<https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2018/art-talk-literature-translation-fellow-jenniferfeeley>>.

of animal hoofs on the ground.¹¹³ Zheng Xingyou 郑星佑 (12 y.o.), for one, speaks of an inspired night that wrote a poem by rearranging elements of the landscape:

《夜，写了一首诗》

夜，今晚诗性大发
他操起了无形的笔
蘸上了一丝云墨
以夜雨为背景
抹上了一道道树影
添上几滴猫语
加上几缕月色
晚风吹过，只见湖面
荡起几道波光¹¹⁴

Night Wrote a Poem

The night tonight felt the sudden urge to write poetry
he took an invisible pen
dipped it in cloud ink
for the background he chose night rain
on it he spread silhouettes of trees
added a few drips of felinespeak
and then several strands of moonlight
night wind flew past leaving only
little wrinkles on the lake surface

Xia Shengxiu 夏圣修 (10 y.o.), too, presents a vision of poetry composed from natural objects as such, rather than from their counterparts in language, but, in this case, the objects are rearranged by the human hand, namely, that of the speaker's father:

爸爸骑着小鸟采下了蓝天和白云
用蓝天白云池塘高山和大海
煮出了一大碗文字汤
里面有好多字
它们挤得不可开交
叫啊闹啊
爸爸将他们捞出来排好
这就成了爸爸的绝佳诗句¹¹⁵

¹¹³ I thank Nick Admussen for drawing my attention to this resonance.

¹¹⁴ Guo Mai 果麦 (ed.), *Haizimen de shi... 孩子们的诗* [Poetry Written by Children...], Kindle edition.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

Dad riding on a bird picked some sky and clouds
 and used sky clouds ponds mountains and seas
 to cook a big bowl of text soup
 with many words in it
 tightly squeezed and inseparable
 yelling crying
 dad dredged them out and placed in order
 they became dad's exquisite poetic phrases

In the beautifully subtle poem *Poetry Is Speaking* (诗, 在诉说) by Gao Can, for a change, poetry is like mythical spirits or nymphs that inhabit the surrounding world, and the poet's role is to listen to their voices and write them down:

开口说话
 你们在我诗的墙壁上
 尽情嬉戏玩耍
 不谢的玫瑰花
 不会因为你们投下的
 影子，而悲伤
 我的诗的花园，盛开的
 是永恒甜美的微笑
 [...]
 静静趴在黑夜的手心
 倾听
 诗，在诉说¹¹⁶

Open your mouths and speak
 you are enjoying yourselves playing to your hearts' content
 on the walls of my poem
 unfallen rose flowers
 won't grieve for
 your surrendered shadows
 the garden of my poetry and a widely open
 eternal sweet smile
 [...]
 quietly crawls on the palm of night
 listen
 poetry is speaking

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Huang Hai 黄海 (ed.), *Wenxue de Gao Can* 文学的高璨 [Literary Gao Can], p. 145.

For a considerable group of young authors, poetry is a physical or physiological activity and is closely connected to the body, as in Duoduo's short poem *Song* (*Ge* 歌), in which the speaker's belly is "filled with song" that wants to come out. The same motif is present in Zhang Xinxin's recipe for a poem in *How to Make Poetry* (*Shi zenme zuo* 诗怎么做), where we read the following instructions:

把脑汁用脑筋过滤一下
滤出灵感碎片
捏成一个小圆球

放到酒桶里
酿一下
吃掉
再从笔头
流出来¹¹⁷

Filter grey matter through brains
to obtain pieces of inspiration
knead them into little balls

put into wine barrels
brew for a while
swallow
then it will
flow out through the pen

Finally – as is particularly but not exclusively the case in the the Jiang sisters' work – we can often see poetry as social practice and a form of active leisure for maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships. Xinxin writes playfully, for example, about the punishments for poetry writing set by her parents:

《我们家的规律》

说脏话
每句罚款10元
吃饭时剩饭剩菜
每次罚款10元
边走路边用手机写诗
每首罚款10元
没收
这首诗¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Lei Qingyi 雷清漪 (ed.), *Haizimen xie de shi* 孩子们写的诗 [Poetry Written by Children], p. 112.

¹¹⁸ Jiang Xinxin 姜馨贺 and Jiang Erman 姜二嫚, *Deng ba heiye...* 灯把黑夜... [A Lamp Burnt a Hole...], p. 34.

Our Family Regulations

Swear words

fine 10 yuan for each

Leaving unfinished food on the plate

fine 10 yuan each time

Writing poetry on our phones when walking in the street

fine 10 yuan for each poem

and confiscation

of the poem in question

Erman – also with a wink – invites the reader to witness a scene from the girls' exceptionally poetic family life that evolves into an innocent form of *Schadenfreude* between siblings when her sister watches her struggle with language with some satisfaction:

我写了十几首诗

问姐姐

你不写吗

姐姐说

我有时候喜欢看别人

辛辛苦苦奋斗一夜¹¹⁹

Having written more than ten poems

I asked my sister

you're not writing?

My sister said

sometimes I like watching how other people

take great pains all night

All in all, it may strike one how frequently, and how astutely, child authors reflect on what is often considered a literary-theoretical, if not purely academic, problem: that is the meaning, role, and place of poetry, and – contrary to what many of their adult readers may expect – hardly ever simply immerse themselves in verse as if it were a natural environment. On the other hand, from a more general perspective, the high intensity of children's metaliterary output is quite symptomatic of authors of other marginal backgrounds who are (considered to be) entering the poetry world from the outside. Many of them try to somehow justify their presence and find a place for themselves or to celebrate or cement their newly acquired artistic identity. This is also true, for instance, for poetic avant-gardes that almost always come accompanied by explicit programmes and poem-manifestos, and often in groups to strengthen their clout. Those who, in one

¹¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 121.

way or another, make it to the – elusive and undefinable – “centre”, in their turn, do not need to worry that much about definitions (which is, of course, not to say that they do not reflect on their work). A (near-)blank-page or title-only poem, like, for one, Bei Dao’s 北島 broadly discussed *Life* (*Shenghuo* 生活), which consists of one character *wang* 网 (“net”), start to function as poetry based on the premise of the author’s poetic identity and their assumed poetic intention. As the discussion around them unveils, they acquire astonishingly rich contextual interpretations and significance even if they are, technically, empty, like John Cage’s *4’33”*.

There is a fascinating notion in modern physics that, I believe, offers an apt if counter-intuitive metaphor for many realities of the world, including poetry and, to a greater or lesser extent, other literary genres. Known as “asymptotic freedom”, it describes the behavior of particles whose mutual interactions, in certain fields, become asymptotically weaker at higher energies. The bigger the distance between particles, the stronger their mutual interaction, and/or their connection to the elusive center of the system, which makes it virtually impossible to part them. When they are tightly packed, however, they have no impact on one another whatsoever and behave almost like free bodies. Frank Wilczek, a co-discoverer of the phenomenon of asymptotic freedom in quantum chromodynamics, proposes a helpful image in his Nobel lecture:

In the case of screening, a source of influence – let us call it charge, understanding that it can represent something quite different from electric charge – induces a canceling cloud of virtual particles. From a large charge, at the center, you get a small observable influence far away. Antiscreening, or asymptotic freedom, implies instead that a charge of intrinsically small magnitude catalyses a cloud of virtual particles that enhances its power. I like to think of it as a thundercloud that grows thicker and thicker as you move away from the source.¹²⁰

Poetry as a genre may be seen as such an expanding thundercloud. Peripheral poetics located far from the mainstream often display incredible determination to stay “connected” to the cloud’s centre. This is not just a matter of authorial intention and the authors’ active effort to establish themselves as poets but a net product of many vectors of interaction in cultural space. On the one hand, for example, the perceived marginality of these poetics often attracts actors from the mainstream who enthusiastically engage in the newly emergent phenomena and, by the power of their authority, automatically pull them toward the centre; also, they frequently treat these interactions as validation of their own writing and something that helps bring out its crucial, programmatic aspects. For instance, the idea of naturalness and unconstrained curiosity about the world in Zhou

¹²⁰ Frank Wilczek, ‘Asymptotic Freedom: From Paradox to Paradigm. Lecture given in acceptance of the Nobel Prize, Dec. 2004’, MIT, Viewed 22 May 2022, <https://web.mit.edu/physics/people/faculty/docs/wilczek_nobel_lecture.pdf>, p. 6.

Sese's literary project or Yi Sha's pursuit of the democratisation of poetic production and consumption are both reaffirmed by the authors' involvement with child-authored verse, which is conventionally believed to abound in these qualities. On the other hand, readers – in particular professional readers such as academics and literary critics – looking for well-proven interpretational tools to deal with these peripheral phenomena, associate them with texts from the “interior” of the poetry field and establish points of contact, as, for instance, many contributors to the volume on Gao Can have done, and as I myself have done many times in the present essay by putting child-authored poems into dialogue with better known (often adult) poets who resonate in my readerly milieu, as catalysed by my personal sensibility. Obviously, not all children will continue writing poetry into adulthood. But the small number of those who do will probably soon be counted among those who set the standards for others: the closer to the (elusive) centre they move, the greater asymptotic freedom they will gain – that is, the freer they will be in their conceptualisations and actualisations of poetry, protected by their own gradually built authority and the aura of poethood thickening around them.

The conclusion is both disenchanting and inspiring. We cannot say with any certainty that what we refer to as child-authored poetry is indeed poetry or determine which of these texts should be counted as “real” poems and which, perhaps, should not. At the same time, we cannot say with any dose of certainty that it is *not* poetry, if only because, for virtually every argument for a poem's exclusion, a counter-argument can be found. Moreover, the growing tension between opposing views intensifies the constitutive dialectics of the poetry field, reinforcing its dynamic structure. By a paradoxical logic, the more something is not a poem, the more it is a poem. This is true not only for child-authored poetry but, conceivably, for many other emergent social-cultural phenomena: for instance, the writing of migrant workers or AI poetry, which solicit and challenge modern literary scholars, dodging definitions and classifications. These peripheral phenomena constitute a liminal area, a visually discernible if volatile external layer that keeps the field of poetry stable and makes it possible for observers to intuitively identify and name it, like the thundercloud from Wilczek's lecture, which, although made of gaseous vapor, still retains a perceptible contour. Put differently, if it weren't for the “problematic” of liminal phenomena, poetry would not be so thoroughly “problematised” in broader cultural discourse, and its distinctiveness as a genre would not be constantly reasserted and invigorated, even if it thereby remains ultimately undefined.

There is some potential to draw the asymptotic freedom metaphor further, invoking physicists' hypotheses regarding the nature of liminality in asymptotically free interactions, which they compare to the Cheshire Cat's smile – that is, an observable quality that may exist independently of its physical source – to explore the literary-theoretical significance of poetic peripheries in a more general dimension. This, however, is a task for a broader project in which other phenomena, mentioned here only in passing, can be thoroughly investigated and their conceptual connections with each other elaborated on more rigorous theoretical grounds. It is a project that, I hope, will take the form of a book in the not-so-distant future.

There is of course also potential to continue exploring child-author verse and further integrate it in general poetry discourse on its own specific terms, which, as I hope to have shown here, means anything but excessive leniency and indulgence toward the young poets. Rather, it requires synchronizing one's way of reading and thinking with children's linguistic, emotional, and intellectual sensibilities, for them to touch and stimulate our own imagination and reflection, which ultimately will probably take us much further than the authors might have assumed. I have offered a number of such "stimulated" readings revolving around three big themes: nature, society, and language and writing. But there is obviously much more to investigate and new material will certainly keep accumulating, since – for all the pessimistic prognoses of socio-technological dystopias that are reportedly bound to kill children's artistic interests and creative thinking – the youngest generation, be it in China or elsewhere, does not seem to be poetry-averse. On the contrary, although equipped with a different set of hard and soft skills and facing different challenges than children brought up in the 20th century, they remain not only receptive to poetic beauty but also capable of a genuine joy of writing and happy to share its – sometimes exotic for adults – fruits.

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