

# **Writing the Otherness of Nature: Chinese Misty Poetry and the Alternative Modernist Practice**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Nature always serves as a form of resistance to communist state discourse in contemporary Chinese arts and literature. This paper examines how Misty Poetry constructs a new form of subjectivity through its historical depiction of the natural world. The works of Yang Lian are closely read in terms of their different treatment of natural objects in comparison to the Western modernist poetics. With a strong root-searching inclination, Yang's poems attempt to find a way back to the untamed rudeness of nature that can revitalize the national culture. However, natural being is never a positive entity but can only be retroactively constructed by the searching subject itself.

## **KEY WORDS**

Nature  
Yang Lian

Misty poetry  
alternative modernity



Misty Poetry from mainland China is always a writing of nature. We can consider the "of" as either a subjective genitive—a poetry contains an abundant imagery of natural objects and its source of imagination is closely linked to the theme of nature—or an objective genitive—nature is unceasingly being written, rewritten, reconstructed and redefined in the poetic work. This is the fundamental ambiguity in the relationship of Misty Poetry toward nature. Is nature a thing-in-itself? Or is it an object constituted by the perceiving subject?

In Communist China, nature is an entity to be dominated by the human will. Mao Zedong always said that human determination can triumph over Heaven. His political movement and economic reform, like the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s, were carried out in defiance of the natural law. This presumptuous vision of man's complete domination over nature merely proves that all man can do is to disrupt the order of nature. Nature, in many classical Chinese literary texts, always represents an alternative space of purity and innocence that is distanced from the fall of everyday life caused by corrupted politics, moral degeneration and social repression. For many Misty poets, lost ideals can only be found in the remote past. They also consider nature a realm where individual freedom, communal harmony, true sense of humanity and peace of mind can be sought again during and after the violent and unjust decade of the social and psychological turmoil.

Nature and the ideal past, in a way, are interchangeable in Misty Poetry. But unlike the depiction of a past which is more imagined than remembered, the Misty poets, when writing about nature, tend to put more emphasis on the objective existence of nature. Probably,

thanks to the nationwide policy of Mao to send the “educated youth” (zhiqing) to the countryside in order to let them learn from the peasants during the Cultural Revolution, the Misty poets who were primarily born and grew up in the cities had a precious chance to live in the rural areas and to develop a very personal and immediate experience of the reality of country life. Moreover, the Communist government during the Cultural Revolution granted special permission to the Red Guards to travel free all over the country for establishing their revolutionary ties (chuanlian) with other different groups and making pilgrimages to Beijing to give salute to Mao. Thus the younger generation of China could have the rare chance to travel to every corner of the nation in that specific time period.

These experiences and empirical understandings of leaving one's hometown, travelling to various areas and staying in the countryside provided a special ground for the Misty poets and their generation to write about the natural world. Without any doubt, nature in Misty Poetry is extensively idealized.<sup>1</sup> But nature in their works is always more than an idea or ideal. No matter how hard the poets try to idealize nature as their utopia, their nature always subverts, in one way or the other, their attempts to universalize it into fixed ideas. The poets may succeed in projecting some positive ideal images onto nature, but the ontological meaning of nature remains hidden. There is always an intrinsic or hidden “otherness” that blocks the complete idealization of nature in Misty Poetry. This “otherness” resists any simple attempts of abstraction and conceptualization.

Many critics observe that contemporary Chinese arts, especially the films of the “Fifth Generation” directors, are characterized with their obsessive representations of natural scenery often in a terse and minimal way. This focus on the silence and muteness of nature—a technique that is more manageable in visual language than in literal one—has been interpreted as a form of political critique against the Communist regime.<sup>2</sup> Rey Chow points out in her book on contemporary Chinese cinema that:

Nature in these films signifies a deliberate *emptying* that,

when placed in the context of contemporary events, wrests apparatuses of representation from the kind of rhetorical coercion that typifies communist state discourse. In their cryptic largeness and their stubborn silence, these images are signs of a protest against the unimpeded mediatizing of human sensuous activity toward the concreteness and rigidity of political platitudes and party doctrine. Their elusive quality brings the "China picture" of the Cultural Revolution into crisis.<sup>3</sup>

Chow also argues that the muteness of nature in these films is implicative of the futility of Chinese modernity project: "In spite of the 'earth-moving' efforts of human revolutions, these films seem to say, human life, especially in the 'backward' rural areas, remains pathetically subjugated to the vast permanence of the land and the stubborn tenacity of its forces" (40). The natural landscape in these Chinese films is always visually presented as the nonpresentable. The still landscape shot designates a meaning that can be grasped as a political critique of society but, simultaneously, the landscape also defies all references to any meaning. It appears by not directly appearing in any concrete frame of reference. Its meaning is always simply underway. The natural landscape is already there but is not yet a meaningful discourse. This pre-meaningful presence of nature speaks about nothing, other than indicating itself, its own taking place. In the following, I would like to contemplate more on this issue of the withholding of meaning in the presence of nature.

### **Nature as Experience**

Nature in contemporary Chinese cinema is seen in its grandeur, simplicity, tranquility and unfamiliarity. Its appearance cannot be facilely translated into any unified meaning or explicit idea. The deliberate emptying out of specific meaning in the depiction of nature is either comprehended by critics as a manifestation of the traditional Daoist aesthetic principles<sup>4</sup> or interpreted as a symbolic form of re-

sistance against the dominant political culture of the status quo. However, what remains unthought in this "emptiness" of natural scenery is the concept of nature as a mode of pure being or as a void presence as such. Nature has long been reflected as a sign that speaks about something (a signifier of the "nationalization" of cinematic art or a symbolic critique of the contemporary social), but it has not yet been thought as a void or as its nakedness as such. It is generally held that whatever is described can signify. This would not find any exception in the landscape description in contemporary Chinese arts. The empty portrayal of nature is already a symbolization of nature itself. Hence, when nature appears in the realm of language—whether a visual or verbal one—it always already signifies something.

I have no dispute with this argument. But language does not always signify, especially when it reaches its limit. The nature that contemporary Chinese arts manifest is precisely the edge at which language arrives. Language endeavors to contain a nature it is not able to contain. What results from this failed attempt is a discourse that wanders off from meaning and a language that loses its conventional bearing. When words fail to hook up with things, nature is laid bare as an empty being. That the language which describes the landscape cannot carry out its job of producing meaning, it follows that the object it denotes resides in the absence of a signifying discourse. In other words, nature emerges outside of the certainty of meaning and the territory of representation. It articulates itself in a void or rift in language or in a nothingness beyond meaning.

In its revealing moments, Misty Poetry gives voice to the barrenness of nature as a pure empty being unintentionally. It is "unintentional" because the Misty poets do want to signify nature, although in the process of signification the natural objects presented in their poems defy such a demand. Unlike Western modernist poetry which is always characterized as a self-referential poetry or a poetry that states nothing but itself, Misty Poetry demands itself to say something other than itself, because of its self-appointed heroic mission to society. Its value and its existence largely depend on this desire to communicate, even though there have been tremendous difficulties in

communication when the poetry first emerges.<sup>5</sup> But, on the other hand, the uniqueness of Misty Poetry is located in a space of interiority. It is an interiority in which the consciousness of the self builds its foundation. The reminiscence of the ideal past has served as such an inner space for the Misty poets to constitute the poetic self. In the same manner, nature is seen by the Chinese Misty poets as another interiority for the emergence of subjectivity. However, the presence of nature always hides itself from signification and this withdrawal ramshackles the foundation of the self.

What we often find in the works of Misty poets is either the prosopopoeia of nature or a nature portrayed in terms of primeval mythologies and primitive rituals. These are the ways to retrieve nature from its hiddenness and to give voice to a nature which is non-responsive to human want. For Yang Lian, who has also been regarded as one of the pioneers of the "Root-searching School" (*xungen pai*), the retrieval of nature's meaning is identical to a retrieval of "raw experiences" that cannot be immediately translated to any form of knowledge. These "raw experiences," which are closely associated with natural landscape, are the "primal scenes" that the generation of the Cultural Revolution have gone through and are not yet able to understand. Thus, the unarticulated or ineffable experience is placed side by side with the muteness and nonpresentability of the natural world in contemporary Chinese cinema and also in Misty Poetry. Repeatedly, they attempt to present the unspeakable, and depict the silent nature in order to recapitulate their inscrutable experience.

For Misty poets like Yang Lian, nature designates the place where true and pure experience can be taken hold of in opposition to the levelled and denatured kinds. Different from the contemporary Chinese cinema that stresses the directness of sensory presentations of landscape and rural life, Misty Poetry represents nature in a relatively more indirect manner because of the specificity of language. For instance, in Yang Lian's poetry, the mode of presenting nature is intermingled with his reflective rewriting of histories and fables. Apparently, Yang looks for a compatibility between the retrieval of the meaning of nature and the search for a Logos from history and

mythology that would give him the origin of Chinese culture. This conjunctive articulation of nature and history can also be considered as a means to rescue the increasingly vanishing experiences in the changing society of contemporary China. When memory of the past is partially denied and excluded by a new social milieu, it is always accompanied by an atrophy of experience. The new culture violently represses libidinal drives and primitive instincts which are the major components of the experiences of the tribal people. The common endeavor to preserve and reproduce experiences may reveal the "conservative" nature of the Misty Poetry movement, even though it has always been celebrated as a manifestation of violent changes in the cultural and aesthetic landscapes of Mainland China.

"Experience," writes Benjamin, "is indeed a thing of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life" (*In der Tat ist die Erfahrung eine Sache der Tradition im kollektiven wie im privaten Leben*).<sup>6</sup> This "thing" of the public and the private past, Benjamin continues, is never concrete and cannot be fixated by memory, because it is a confluence of often-not-conscious data in memory. Etymologically speaking, the word "experience" (*ex-per-ientia*) means "coming-from and going-through."<sup>7</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe proposes to call experience "the traversing of a danger" (*la traversée d'un danger*).<sup>8</sup> In this sense, experience is always a process of becoming that cannot be anchored by a pure concept. The Chinese word for experience, "jingyan," also suggests a sense of passing through, undergoing, as well as testing, experimenting and checking. It is something that can only be undergone but is difficult to grasp in totality. It is more an unstable becoming than a fixed being.

According to Agamben, modern science makes experience the locus or the pathway of knowledge. But he adds, "to do this [modern science] must begin to recast experience and rethink intelligence, first of all expropriating their different subjects and replacing them with a single new subject."<sup>9</sup> This new subject that conjoins knowledge and experience is the human cogito or consciousness. However, the invention of the subject of consciousness does not necessarily ensure a smooth and easy translation of individual experience to pure knowl-

edge. Without any doubt, experience is still something singular and transitory, which can either be transformed into knowledge or can resist the transformation as such. The totality of experience, hence, is always beyond intelligence, even though partial experiences are presented in consciousness.

The attempt to grasp the naked experience, by re-establishing the human relationship to nature and reiterating lost meanings from traditional fables, is evident in Yang Lian's works. He sees poetry as the conjunction of the entirety of human experience and culture from which the ancient spirit and the identity of an oriental race can be redefined in the modern world. Yang was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, but it was after the Cultural Revolution that he began travelling to the hinterland and the sources of Chinese civilization that he considered as an important way to increase his understanding of the vast country.<sup>10</sup> In this well-articulated passage, Séan Golden and John Minford have summed up the poetic style and the creative path of Yang and the Root-searching writers in general:

[Yang's] poetry is built from a wide variety of elements: geological and geographical formations, fossil remains, the prehistoric Neolithic culture and the Banpo site and its artifacts; Chinese cosmogony and the symbolic systems contained in classic texts such as the *Book of Changes* and the *Songs of the South*; philosophical and religious concepts such as yin and yang, meditation and enlightenment; the Wild Goose Pagoda at Xi'an, the grottoes of Dunhuang and other traditional landmarks; Tibetan gods and rituals, and other ethnic non-Han cultures; struggle on a historical and political scale, as well as the everyday struggle of peasant farmers and boatmen; Nature, human love; and, above all, the role of the poet as bard, shaman, and seer.

He has at the same time created his own personal symbolic system based on a series of leitmotifs associated with death, solitude, eros, the sun and the earth, the sea, the



mountains, and the loess plateau.<sup>11</sup>

The ambition of Yang is to synthesize the feelings the poet experiences toward nature and toward the historical traditions in order to produce a distinguished national poetry—a poetry which is grounded on the national landscape and can incarnate the spirit of the land. What is involved here is not a single issue of how a poetry handles the imagery of natural objects, but a series of entwined problems, including the longing for a unity with nature, the use of historical heritage and the construction of national as well as individual identity, which have been reopened and accentuated by contemporary Chinese poetry. As I have mentioned earlier, for Agamben, it is in the substantive subject of consciousness that the union of knowledge and experience takes place. In Yang Lian's works, the task of apprehending the wholeness of experience, on the contrary, provides the ground for the constitution of the subject. The emergence of this new self in his *Misty Poetry* depends on the rediscovery and reconceptualization of experiences, not vice versa. Since experience is not something that can be easily held on to, the subject of consciousness derived from such an unstable ground is inevitably in the state of fickleness and fluctuation. Hence, the emphasis on the unity between nature and history in Yang is always nothing but a front for the barrenness and fragility of this national and individual subjectivity.

The individual experience (to be more accurate, the experience of a modern Chinese subject) described in Yang's poetry is explicitly associated with nature. Nature becomes a "world" for the experience to take place as well as a space to record and inscribe reference ineffable experiences of history, especially when the official historiography tends to present a very filtered experience of the social collectivity. For Yang and, for the Root-searching School, it is the poetic or literary language itself that is capable of saying and reporting these experiences authentically. In other words, the language of poetry is supposed to have the ability to turn nature into a world of historical recording or inscription. Yang believes in an affinity between language and nature because he does not share the idea of the great divi-

sion between nature and culture.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, he thinks that human language itself is a priori an integral part of nature instead of something outside it. Nature and the human experience articulated by language are never two irreconcilable or incommensurable dimensions. Man is always a "natural" as well as "historical" being. Nature is by no means a separated realm from human history. One can only make sense of the unspeakable experiences of human beings by referring to nature. And nature manifests itself in the essence of man that only language can help present. For Yang and for many Chinese poets, nature is never a mute, permanent and meaningless organism. This vision of nature, Yang insists, is strictly oriental or Chinese.

Given that Yang's perspective on nature is "national," a Western example may help further demonstrate the difference or the gap that Yang wants to uphold. In a statement that is commonly found in the interpretations of the relationship between poetic language and natural object, de Man writes:

By calling them *natural* objects, we mean that their origin is determined by nothing but their own being. Their becoming coincides at all times with the mode of their origination: it is as flowers that their history is what it is, totally defined by their identity. There is no wavering in the status of their existence: existence and essence coincide in them all times. Unlike words, which originate like something else ("like flowers"), flowers originate like themselves: they are literally what they are, definable without the assistance of metaphor. It would follow then, since the intent of the poetic word is to originate like the flower, that it strives to banish all metaphor, to become entirely literal . . . [Natural entities] originate out of a being which does not differ from them in essence but contains the totality of their individual manifestations within itself. All particular flowers can at all times establish an immediate identity with an original Flower, of which they are as many particular emanations.<sup>13</sup>

For de Man, the individual manifestation of all particular natural objects is overdetermined by the origin of Nature. In this way, Nature comes to designate the supreme cause of all natural things. It is the ground or essence that manifests everywhere in such a way that every natural object must be represented as its consequence. This origination is not a becoming that involves any temporal change, but is simply a timeless hierarchical order. Apparently, de Man's thinking is quite different from Yang's view of nature. Instead of being disjointed from the human symbolic realm, nature has a strong affinity with man, and is as changing and as dynamic as human history. For de Man, poetry always attempts to imitate nature by banishing the metaphor and by becoming as literal as it is. But for Yang, the poetic word is able to re-present this synthesis of nature and history. And metaphor is not a substitute for something missing but rather it confirms the presence of natural being.

However, there is also another mode of thinking about nature and poetry, which is different from de Man's imitation theory and is subtly associated with Yang's idea of the integral relation between nature and history. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger understands the work of art—primarily poetry (*Dichtung*) for him—as the instigation of a strife or a rift (*Riss*) between world and earth. What he means by the world is an opening for a people in their search for destiny in the historical path. The earth, however, refers to the primal but undisclosable (*unerschliessbare*) materiality that can provide shelter and dwelling ground to the historical man. They are essentially different from each other but are never separated. In Heidegger's own words, "the world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through world."<sup>14</sup> World and earth may temporarily be translated into history and nature.<sup>15</sup> Hence, nature and history are opposed to one another, but their opposition is also the common ground that binds them together.

For Heidegger, poetry opens up a world, but at the same time, it also struggles to withdraw from the world into the earth from which it emerges. To understand it in terms of the nature-history dichotomy, we find that poetry discloses a new and intelligible meaning for the

historical project, whereas its thrust is to draw back from the signifying system and to return to the darkness of universe. Poetry opens up an intricate struggle between the clearing of the world and the concealment of the earth. In this double movement of unconcealment and withdrawal, truth can come forth and the being of all things can bring itself to radiant self-manifestation. But this condition for the self-manifestation of the being of entities is not man-made and cannot be produced by poetry. Poetry is only capable of opening up and letting the rift between world and earth be. The poet, according to Heidegger, is not able to construe the truth or consciously represent the ontological presentness of things. The true ontological being of things in poetry can never manifest in an unalloyed presence but only in "a presence sheltered in absence."<sup>16</sup>

Heidegger's understanding of poetry and its relation to nature and historical sense seems to have an affinity with the traditional Daoist-Buddhist philosophy and aesthetic which advocate the self-presentness of all things and the negation of the subject of representational consciousness. Even though Yang always stresses the existence of Daoist ideas in his works, he never gives up the human will to produce and represent, and the attempt to elevate contemporary Chinese poetry to a higher level of self-awareness. Adopting the concepts from the classic *Book of Changes*, Yang Lian attempts to create in his epic-form poem "Yi" a well wrought structure that can define the principle of changes in nature and also posit an observing self that attests to the changes.

It is this transcendental principle of changes that renders possible the unity of man and nature. The instability of human condition finds its echo in the dynamic diversity of the natural world. In other words, Yang's poem is assumed to be a staging of the reconciliation between history and nature. It synthesizes a totality grounded on vicissitude, impermanence and insubstantiality. However, all these instabilities in nature and history are synthesized by a perceiving subject that resists changes. The subject is the only unchangeable entity among all changes. This position of subject in Yang's poetry constitutes a significant difference from both the Daoist and the Heideg-

gerian understandings. This unchangeable ego is easily found in his work "Yi" which is composed of four books. Each book consists of sixteen cantos. The total number of the sixty-four cantos parallels to the sixty-four symbols of the Eight Diagrams (*bagua*) in the *Book of Changes*. The symbols are used by the ancient people to perceive nature and to comprehend changes brought by the natural forces. By transplanting the frame of the classic book to his lyrical work, Yang seeks to revive the idea of "unity among changes" and appropriates it to revitalize the declining Chinese culture.

Despite his denial of any separation between nature and history, Yang has to admit implicitly that there must be some point where history has alienated from nature, yet man did lose his intimacy with the natural becoming: otherwise he does not need to invoke this traditional idea of unity in order to rejuvenate the submerging national spirit. The job of stitching back the crack between nature and culture falls upon the poetic subject of consciousness. This subject can resist changes brought by the dynamic movement of nature because its transcendental job is to synthesize and perceive all changes. However, at a different level, since the existence of this subject is primarily based on experience which is not immune from change and corruption, the transcendental unity evoked in this structure can never be laid on a solid ground. In a way, the reader of Yang's poetry is never certain whether it is nature that changes or moves by itself, or the vacillating subject of experience which swings the nature it observes into a constant modulation. However, no Misty poets want to acknowledge the incertitude and instability of this new-born subject. Instead, the poets merely confer this subject unconditionally upon the autonomy as a form of romantic deceit for the emergence of new values.

"Yi" is by and large an evocation of national spirit through the voice of a poetic self, both by rescuing the past from oblivion and restoring it to life and by refurbishing the tradition concerning heroic figures in history. Yang never hides his intention that he always wants to speak for the Chinese people and for his own time, even though he also insists on the uniqueness of his poet's identity. He declares repeatedly that a poet's mission is to represent his people "who have

been humiliated and suppressed, and who have been striving for emancipation, yearning to bring this great revolution to their minds. I will never forget to sing as a member of my nation. But before that, I will sing as an individual."<sup>17</sup> So in his poetic world of changes and impermanence, a self-enclosed subjectivity or an autonomous poetic voice is immanently grounded by a subjective will. This free, autotelic voice solely belongs to the poet who is an observing self—the seer—of the natural and historical permutations. To a certain extent, Yang endeavors to build up a purely subjective consciousness in the space of difference, diversity and change. Yet, such a seemingly autonomous voice is always constructed exclusively at the expense of the hidden side of its intangibility and insubstantiality.

In the second book of "Yi," "In Symmetry with Death," Yang deals with the dramatic actions in the past through the portrayals of several prominent historical and mythological figures in Chinese tradition. Although the cantos are the narrations of the heroic adventures and events, they are always homogenized by a monological autonomy achieved by the single voice of the poet. The multiple voices and the dialogic exchanges among characters that are often found in epic can hardly be seen here. The external events portrayed in the poem do not reveal the traces of another separate voices. Rather, the representation of these events only affirms the monological form of the lyrical subject. The past is reiterated according to the desire of the autotelic mind. This nostalgic feeling, which coincides with the desire for the unity with nature, is always a sheer product of poetic consciousness. In "Earth. The Third. She: Wu Zetian" of "In Symmetry With Death," Yang writes about the Empress of Tang Dynasty, Wu Zetian, and her tomb:

To stretch the hands in this earth To touch the nostrils, the  
mouth, the sexual organs  
The broken neck, the swollen feet  
To stretch hands in earth to touch death

...

She predominated the mountain with her dignity that could  
 command hundreds of flowers  
 The bloody tragedy has transformed  
 Her breasts situated in north were facing south, facing all  
 constellations and the colorful nymphs

She coiled up her long hair in the fog into a vast forest  
 Without a road to return, her name that stood high above  
 was wordless  
 Militancy and geomancy looked at each other without ex-  
 changing a word:  
 Coming and going  
 I will not return

More than thousands of the stone statues lined up  
 indifferently  
 More than thousands setting suns screamed voice-  
 lessly  
 To indulge in a yellow body to live and die  
 To touch Earth  
 Who was struggling behind the mirror  
 To touch Hardened blood  
 The twelve palaces were dug as deep as twelve black  
 holes

The eternal distance was underneath the claw of the stone  
 beast, there found a nature's mystery  
 The wilderness was transplanted in the stone's hole  
 The old woman curled up herself in the blanket, her vagina  
 was withered like a paper  
 The wordless tablet smiled faintly in the darkness of hun-  
 dreds and thousands years, shedding its skin<sup>18</sup>

By resorting to some historical fragments of Empress Wu, the  
 poem is basically a depiction of her mausoleum, which is located in

Xi'an, the capital of Tang Dynasty. The tomb is covered by a mountain which is likened to a naked woman lying on the loess. Yang briefly comments that this poem is about the rites of funeral. He seems to suggest that this traditional human ritual is essentially adapted to the order of nature, because man can correspond to nature and become part of it with the experience of death (being buried in the earth). No matter how powerful the person is in the human world or how unwilling s/he is in confrontation with death, s/he has to submit to the natural law of mortality. But the heroes or the kings can always make their names last after death by means of their heroic actions in history or, simply, by building huge mausoleums for themselves. With the luxurious burial rituals, the ancient heroes dreamed of preserving their past as an eternal present and of becoming as everlasting as nature itself.

The desire of the hero to unify with nature in death, however, is questioned in the poem. The reconciliation of the hero and nature will never occur because the hero always strives to become the equal of the gods and is never willing to subordinate to the order of nature. This unwillingness to yield to nature is intensified by the depiction of Empress Wu's clinging to eternal life in the human world. The general feminization of nature (the metaphor of "mother nature" or "mother of earth" and the identification of landscape as woman's body) is ironized by the "female" resistance to return to the original unity. Empress Wu was one of the few women who could successfully fight her way to reach the highest power and to rule the country in Chinese patriarchal history. Because she was a woman and occupied the highest position in her regime, there are many controversies concerning her in the traditional historiographies. But like other historical figures, she was also afraid of losing, after death, her name and the things she strived for in her lifetime. To build a magnificent tomb for herself was the way to preserve her glory and to hold on to her possessions. Yet, the founding of such a grand tomb always implies a double meaning. On the one hand, it elevates the deceased to the status of a demi-god, and defies the ultimate limit of death and the cycle of life that ordinary people have to undergo. On the other hand, the existence



of the grand tomb is a mute acceptance of the inevitability of the natural law and is a constant reminder of the form of death.

Earth would not have become a tomb unless at the outset the Empress ordered the architects to conceptualize its shape and its appearance. An idea of what the natural landscape will become hence must be perceived in advance. The tomb which is built to stand in harmony with nature is a fabrication of a transcendental idea of what nature should be like. What is revealing in the poem is that it discloses the futile attempts of the ancient heroes to grasp nature as a permanent being rather than a becoming. Yang ends the poem by saying:

To overturn a piece of tidy rock  
There isn't anything. (32)

If a tomb is a form of desire to dominate nature, then how do we understand the power relation between Yang's poem and nature? He always claims that his poetry is an "intellectual space" (*zhili de kongjian*)<sup>19</sup> that embodies history and nature. In this sense, his poetry can be understood as another form of man-made world or another grand tomb that imposes upon nature.

Even though Yang has a dynamic concept of nature and a strong belief that the meaning-endowment of human history is the integral part of nature, the world in his poem is always a sheer creation of the mind, rather than a realm that unfolds the genesis and corruption of the natural things. It is a created world that only reflects the subjectivity of the poet himself. What is asserted is the poetic self that at first seems to function as a witness to the whole process of becoming. Yet the poetic consciousness cannot help acknowledge its own existence and imprint its own will on the things it encounters. It comments on the natural becoming, seeks to grasp its causality and its completion, and then finally turns the process into a hermetically sealed world. It is a world in which we merely meet the poetic subjectivity as an observer-turned-creator dominating the natural world. The retrieval of experience, of changes and impermanence from

nature is only conceived as the insurmountable condition of the emergence of the subjectivity.

Every attempt to express the inscrutable experience hidden in nature is accompanied by a desire to comprehend the meaning of nature and a strong urge to grasp the dispersed experiences as a whole under the will of a consciousness. There is a radical contradiction that pertains to Yang's project: any demand to construct a subject that captures the sense of change only entails a dissolution of the perpetual becoming into a human will. When language is able to articulate the meaning of nature, nature is no longer nature in itself but only a man-made entity at the disposal of language. Sometimes Yang seems to be too eager to "resolve" this contradiction by making a strong presence of the ego in his works. In "Golden Tree," the second poem of the series "Norlang," he stamps every natural being with his own trait of subjectivity:

I am god of the waterfall, I am god of the snowclad mountains  
 Tall, strong, lord of the new moon  
 I become the leader of all rivers  
 Birds settle in my bosom  
 Dense forests cover  
     The small path to the secret pond  
 My unfettered instincts are like a herd of young bucks  
 Lust like March  
 Gathering the power of a tumult

I am a golden tree  
 A tree that reaps gold  
 Passionate lure comes from an abyss  
 I ignore the warnings of the timid all about  
 Until my waves fill it

Wandering women, women sparking on the water's surface  
 Which one is the only woman forcing me to drink

My gaze conquers the night  
Twelve trumpets conquer the guava-flower wind  
Wherever I go, there are no shadows  
Every strawberry I touch becomes a brilliant star  
    Rising in the center of the world  
Possessing all of you, I, the real man<sup>20</sup>

“Norlang” means male god in Tibetan and it is also the name of a snow-capped mountain in Szechuan. Although Yang may attempt to retrieve a primitive virility from nature, the anthropomorphic description of the natural objects gives us a strong sense of the triumph of human will over the earth. The celebration of masculine vigor of the natural force only corresponds to and even reinforces the male chauvinism and domination in our society. However, the poem suggests, virility can never be achieved without the conquest and possession of the feminized nature. The male god cannot become substantialized (to be a real man) without the mastery and possession of the pliable natural beings. That the consciousness asserts its priority over nature and turns all natural objects into a reproduction of its will reveals that the dominated nature is the ineluctable aspect of the constitution of human mind. The superiority of the consciousness is built upon its derivative and dependent relation to nature. In other words, the conquerability and malleability of nature precisely becomes the ground for the certainty of the subject formation.

As I discussed earlier, in Misty Poetry, nature is always projected as an ideal place detached from the oppressive reality and social corruption. The poets see in nature an asylum from the social injustice and cruelty, or a space where innocence and happiness can still be found. However, their personal experiences in the rural areas complicate the simple idealization of nature. Nature is not necessarily benevolent to human beings. The exile who lives in the countryside undergoes a lot of hardships, struggles and sufferings. S/he must know that the harmonious relationship with nature is only a part of the multiple experiences that human beings share with their natural environment.

For Yang Lian as well as many writers of the Root-searching School, the violence and the barbarism of nature are more fascinating subject matters for their work. Nature in their work serves as a limit of human civilization, while at the same time, it is also the origin from which human culture grows and develops. In other words, nature is by no means a complete contrast of the human world. The phenomena of the history of civilization can always be originated from nature. The opposite of our symbolic world for Yang is not nature. It is around nature that the symbolic order of our human world is structured.

As a beginning or as a basis, nature is an ontological fullness that endorses the meanings of the human symbolic realm. The corruption of society and the decline of culture are, for Yang, due to the fact that our affinity with the kernel of nature has been lost. To search for the cultural root is to reconnect with this natural hard core, which is not necessarily peaceful and harmonious but can be repelling, violent and barbaric. However, the abominable darkness of nature, if successfully retrieved, can help illuminate the problems of modern civilization, on the one hand, and can revive the intrinsic strength of the corrupted culture, on the other. The natural virility that Yang and many writers of Root-searching school adore is a sort of double bind. To call it up duplicates the social injustice and the sexual inequality that long exist in human society, whereas its retrieval may bring about a new rejuvenating force to the dying culture. The writer of Root-searching school is always both a realist and a romantic idealist. He is able to recognize and portray the violent aspect of nature and its link with the civil society, yet he also fantasizes it as the ultimate source for the innate power of human beings.

The difference between nature as a pure ontological being and nature as an object of description or of attribution of properties, however, is always ambiguous in the works of Yang Lian and the Root-searching writers. Nature is sometimes presented as a pure sublime being beyond the cluster of descriptions. But, sometimes nature in their works also gives us an opposite picture: it does not exist as an ontological positivity but only has a series of properties. The so-

called transcendence of the nature-in-itself can only be grasped in terms of a series of description of some material objects like earth, stones, flowers or river, and of mental entities like childhood, a myth or a lost time. The ontological being of nature is by and large a pure and empty form of thought. To present nature as it is only reveals the impossibility of presenting its being. The whole point is, in the works of Yang and many Root-searching writers, nature is always nothing but this impossibility of presentation. The subject of consciousness in Yang's poetry precisely correlates with the impossibility of nature-in-itself in the sense that the subject is also nothing but the failure of its symbolic representation.

### ***Nature in a Room***

In between the periods of writing "In Symmetry of Death" and "Living in Seclusion," the two cantos of the long poem "Yi," Yang Lian acquired a Hong Kong edition of Goya's last paintings. He was inspired by the grotesque images of Goya's works and began to write fifteen poems under the title "Scenery in a Room." The last of which is "Last Room in Goya's Life":

Finally This room moves faraway A dog  
Escapes down to the sand to drink soup To drink A skull  
soupspoon's  
Only liquid

In the end floats up transformed into a scenery of non-  
persons  
On a dark marsh Bushy forests slaughter the sky  
Birds in agony  
Lament their impotence in stirring the vast land

Bewitching maidens gather like a mass of limp flowers  
Presenting colorful genitals to mountain goats  
They dance in celebration Only dead fish have once lived

Eyeballs staring blank and dazed  
 Crumbling

No-one understands For this huge black pomegranate head  
 Bloated with the ears rotted off  
 How the silence heard levels out a whole lifetime  
 How time Becomes a house for changing mourning clothes  
 In the flesh is wood drying Cracking  
 Nailing the deaf on the wall  
 Arms and legs crawl Congealing into a net  
 The dead swim in file like fish through Nostril flaring in  
 fear

The last day follows closely after A length of wind-dried  
 marrow  
 Shaped like an arched bow  
 After bursts of whimpering Goes slack Mute

Now This wall overgrown with ears  
 No longer hears Tempest scattering candlelight into the  
 distance  
 This pen touches the blind spots spreading everywhere  
 Like many soundless mouths opening  
 Rocks swallowing loneliness  
 In deep places Like an abyss The entire world is  
 squandered  
 Until the room is crammed with unknown ghosts  
 Circling the bed in song Eternal in the instant of im-  
 pending death  
 —World When you cannot comprehend  
 Listen intently<sup>21</sup>

The natural scenery is displaced to an enclosed room. It is as if the openness and spaciousness of nature were suddenly shut down and our safe distance to observe nature was relentlessly taken away.

Instead of being sheltered by the distancing perspective, we are exposed to the vertiginous movement of nature as if we were left unprotected in a nightmare. It is the disturbing proximity of nature that disrupts the peace of the observing mind. The poem disjoins the familiar perspective of our spatial relationship to nature. The natural scenery no longer suggests a clearing but is surrounded by engulfing walls. Nature is contained and isolated. But the containment of nature in an isolated space only witnesses its withdrawal rather than its manifestation.

The recurring dead images, like skull, dead fish, ghosts and dismembered human body parts and organs, portray a picture of hellish wasteland which conveys a strong sense of decay and lack. Death has been singled out from nature and staged in the "house for changing mourning clothes." For the poet, life and death are no longer the dialectic moments of natural becoming. Death dominates the landscape when nature is cut off from the open space and confined to an enclosure. As the ultimate and extreme limit of the human desires and activities, death suspends and annihilates all connections with things and others in nature. In other words, death is the unsurpassable. It seals off all the possibilities of reaching out to the opening of the natural world. Living human beings suffocate in this enclosure as if they were sealed with wax in a package. Death that marks and enforces the closure and the separation is distinguished in the poem as the major obstacle which blocks our access to nature.

The call of nature can no longer be heard in such an enclosed world. The poet tries to assure us at the end: "When you cannot comprehend/Listen intently." But the power of hearing is already deprived. As Yang tells us, the wall overgrown with ears can no longer hear anything. Death is the wall that denies and prohibits our passage to the lively natural world. However, if death is the limit, it is also a departure or a journey that separates oneself from the familiar place and the everyday life, and transgresses the self to an unknown beyond, to a mythic event. Death seals our entry to the clearing of nature, but it opens up a world of nonbeing or nothing. We are aware from the earlier discussion that the nature in Yang's poetry is always already

bracketed by a man-made world—a world which is composed of words and dominated by a single lyrical voice. It is precisely the world of poetry brought into being by death, the utter exile from nature. In "Paper Bird," another poem of the series, Yang writes:

... Bird Fragile soaring in the afternoon flight

Desiccates its body on an invisible river bank

Sinks into the light A clever black whirlpool

Stretches its wings

Birth through the form of death is the only true birth<sup>22</sup>

Yang's paper bird is not a real bird. It becomes animated only by means of language which is a recording or an inscription of time, of history and of death. In other words, the birth of the poetic world is brought by a form of death which is language itself. The birth is a "true birth" precisely because it is not natural and contingent. Although language for Yang is always a part of nature, the use of language as a means to achieve the unity with nature only leads to a separation or an alienation. The impulse toward the natural union always collides with the demands of self-consciousness in Yang's poetry. There is never a real identification between the self-consciousness and the natural objects in his works. The subject never gives up the dignity of a seer in the natural world of vicissitude. Hence the self only observes and reflects upon the changes of the objects in nature but it does not identify with them or dissolve into the things.

However, the obstacles to attain the natural being should be understood as something intentionally planted rather than something spontaneously emerging on the way. It is the obstacles that make nature stand out as a thing-in-itself or as a full ontological being which is beyond the grasp of the human being. If nature, for the younger generation of Chinese artists, represents an inscrutable experience of their precious lost past, it can never be articulated or approached by a direct access. By using the straightforward approach to nature, one



would only see a mute and arbitrary automaton that fails to respond to human demands. The fullness of natural being and the wholeness of the inexpressible experience contained in it can be attained only by incessant detours, postponements and missed encounters. Therefore, the silence or nonresponsiveness of nature and the intangibility of fragmentary experience have to be elevated to the status of the sublime things: things that can only be presented as the nonpresentable.

The full manifestation of nature then has to coincide with its very own withdrawal. The obstacles are set in to render the natural being inaccessible as well as ontologically real and complete. Death, isolation and enclosure are the unfathomable obstacles blocking access to nature, yet they are also the necessary artifices that prohibit us to see the emptiness and the randomness of nature. Language, of course, is another artificial obstacle that prevents the attainment of natural being:

At thirty-two I have heard enough lies  
No more scenery can move into this room

...

Where you lock yourself  
Decides the site of the room Desolate echoes  
Recite the darkness  
To bury the only scenery in your heart the only

Lie<sup>23</sup>

Thirty-two was the age of the poet when he wrote this work. The specific self-referentiality reaffirms the supposition of the subject in the poem. The "I" is the inner space where lies come in, occupy and leave no room to the natural scenery. The interiority of the subject is identical to the closing space of the room. Lies, the artificial obstacle, block the subject's access to nature because its interior is already filled out. The subject is the one who is being told of lies, but is also the one who is able to tell that they are all lies. If a lie is a false statement deliberately presented as true in order to deceive and affect, then

the subject is not duped because, right at the beginning, he can recognize the lie as lie. If a lie is already recognized as a lie, can it still function as a lie? If a lie loses its function of creating illusion and blurring the truth, then why is the subject still blocked by the darkness of the lies and unable to attain the true being of nature?

The subject assumes a position at the beginning that he is not duped by lies. But his radical disbelief cannot save him from being trapped in the world of deception. He is fully possessed by lies—the artifices that intend to cheat—that he has no room for the arrival of natural being. The only scenery or reality in his interiority is lie. The subject knows that he is living in the order of a fundamental deception, and he still bears with this deceiving reality precisely because it is the only universe from which his subjectivity can emerge and survive. The subject of consciousness cannot be born in the drive toward nature. It only comes into being in the feigned, artificial ruins. In other words, the desire for the unity with nature is ultimately just a fantasy to fill out the imperfection of the subject's relation with lie, the artificial reality. The subject's conviction of the imperfection of his constructed world, however, sustains his fantasy of the possible correspondence with nature. The unattainability of nature precisely gives it a positive and substantial existence.

Lies then become necessary in the sense that they not only construct the interiority for the subject but also transform a mute nature that does not return the human call into a lively and innocent nature in itself. Although the ontological totality of nature is impossible to attain, its impossibility constitutes the very possibility of its full existence. The blockages or obstacles created by lies simultaneously posit nature as such and prohibit any unity with nature. This explains why the subject in Yang is always cut off from the unity of the natural world. Any attempt to re-enter the nature of unity by overcoming the obstacles of lies will only dissolve the subject position and turn the full being of nature into an exploded bubble.

Nature as the determining cause of the symbolic order of human history is, in fact, strictly presupposed by its effects. These effects happen only when human history does not work properly. The failure

of history gives rise to the idea that nature is the cause that can explain and resolve the decadence and regressiveness of the cultural field. In this sense, nature as the cause only acquires its consistent existence from the structural necessity of the crumble or failure of history. Thus, nature as the cause is always perceived from the effects of a stumbling history. Nature cannot assert its causal power in a straightforward way, but can only manifest itself in the guise of a disruptive intervention within the horizon of history. The so-called unity between nature and history in Yang's poetry emerges in the way that nature is always the "absent cause" of history. Nature is constructed retrospectively by the effects of history and history is built upon the non-substantiality of nature.

To a large extent, the subject in Yang's poetry is correlative to nature as cause. Nature is the cause of the subject not in the sense that it brings about the existence of the subject but, on the contrary, nature as cause does not exist before its effects and it is always missing in the signifying network of history. As such, the subject as a correlative emerges to fill out the missing cause of the symbolic realm. Hence, the subject is the only witness of the spectacular changes of the natural world and also the shaman who can retrieve the lost experience from nature. But the subject will not notice how the entire spectacle of nature is posited by him as the agency which confers meaning upon the contingency of his experience. By perceiving himself as a bystander or a reporter of the vicissitudinous nature, the subject constitutes its mysterious, transcendent character and creates the illusion that nature always addresses us and has a call on us.

Since 1949, what we find in the official documents and the orthodox literature of Communist China is the Enlightenment vision of man's domination over nature. Not only serving as a major resource and potential for human revolution, nature in these discourses also resembles culture in its highest form as it encompasses all the objective forces of the historical evolution. This domination over nature went even further during the Cultural Revolution. In order to give birth to something absolutely new and revolutionary, the cycle of generation and decadence in nature has to be destroyed. The outcome

of the Cultural Revolution is not merely a radical annihilation of tradition, but also a severe disruption of the natural balance that leads to a series of ecological crisis.<sup>24</sup> Misty Poetry is an endeavor to look for a path back to the natural balance from which the newly-emerged subject can draw its fundamental substantial support.

For Yang Lian and the Root-searching School, to return to the balance of nature means not only to go back to an eternal circular movement of generation and decay in accordance with natural order. They also attempt to find a way back to the untamed rudeness of nature that can help explain the perturbation of social life and revitalize the declining culture. But, as I argued earlier, the total being of nature does not exist as a positive entity. Its ontological status can only be retroactively constructed by the searching subject itself. This attempt to grasp nature as a substantial whole seems doomed since the status of nature is always ambiguous and it eludes a totalizing seizure. The frustration of this failed totalizing attempt is already evident in "Scenery in a Room." However, what is paradoxical is that the wholeness of nature is nothing but the failed attempts to search for this totality. Nature in its true sense precisely coincides with the search toward its fullness.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michelle Yeh states that "[n]ature in Misty Poetry is portrayed in a predominantly positive way and is often contrasted to negative social systems. Nature promises freedom from inhibition imposed by society." See her "Nature's Child and the Frustrated Urbanite: Expressions of the Self in Contemporary Chinese Poetry," *World Literature Today* 65.3 (1991): 407. While agreeing with her, I also think that nature in Misty Poetry is something more than just a "positive" portrayal.

<sup>2</sup> The discussions on the symbolic implications of natural landscape and country life in China's Fifth Generation cinema are numerous. For instance, Geoffrey O'Brien writes that "[o]ut of imposed

muteness came a film language consisting of splendid images seen in isolation—an empty sky, a river basin, a weather-roughened face, a ceremonial procession—hemmed in by a strained terseness. . . . Nothing, it appeared, could be more challenging in the wake of the Cultural Revolution than sharply defined pictures devoid of any obvious didactic purpose, surrounded by silence and open to multiple interpretation.” Cf. “Blazing Passions,” *The New York Review of Books* 39. 15, 24 September 1992: 38.

<sup>3</sup> Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995) 40. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the articles anthologized in *Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan*, ed. Linda C. Ehrlich and David Desser (Austin: U of Texas P, 1994). They argue that the striking visual styles of many contemporary Chinese films are inspired by Daoist aesthetics and traditional brush-painting techniques, for example, their use of “multiple perspectives, relative flatness, use of blank spaces, elastic framing, lack of *chiaroscuro* and sculptural shading, and emphasis on expressive, calligraphic contour lines” (41).

<sup>5</sup> For the full account on the controversy of Misty Poetry in mainland China, reader can consult *Menglongshi lunzhengji* [The anthology of misty poetry controversy], ed. Yao Jiahua (Beijing: Xueyuan, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973) 159; translation modified.

<sup>7</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron, (London: Verso, 1993) 33.

<sup>8</sup> Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La poésie comme expérience* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986) 30. For an abridged translation of the book, see “Poetry as Experience,” *Substance* 60 (1989): 22-29, trans. Roxanne Lapidus. Lacoue-Labarthe quotes Roger Munier to explore the meaning of experience: “*Experience* comes from the Latin *experiri*, to undergo. The radical is *periri*, that we find again in *pericu-*

*lum*, peril—danger. The Indo-European root is PER, to which is attached the idea of *traversing* and, secondarily, *enduring a trial*. In Greek, numerous derivatives indicate a traversing, a passage: *peirô*, to cross; *pera*, beyond . . . in Old High German, *faran*, from which come *fahren*, to transport, and *führen*, to drive. Is it necessary to add *Er-fahrung*, experience, or is the word closer to the second sense of PER—trial, in Old High German *fara*, danger, which had given us *Gefahr*, danger, and *gefährden*, to endanger? . . . The idea of experience as a *traversing* is difficult to separate, at the etymological level, from that of *risk*. Experience is from its beginning, and no doubt fundamentally, a putting of one's self in danger" (emphases in the original, 29).

<sup>9</sup> *Infancy and History* 19.

<sup>10</sup> For the biographical details, see Mabel Lee, "Introduction: The Philosophy of the Self and Yang Lian," in Yang Lian, *Masks and Crocodile: A Contemporary Chinese Poet and His Poetry* (Sydney: U of Sydney East Asian series, 1990) 9-36.

<sup>11</sup> Séan Golden and John Minford, "Yang Lian and the Chinese Tradition," *Worlds Apart: Recent Chinese Writing and Its Audiences*, ed. Howard Goldblatt (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1990) 119.

<sup>12</sup> Yang Lian and Fredric Jameson, "Zhongguo xiandai zhuyi shige yu xifang houxiandai zhuyi wenhua piping (duihua)" [Chinese modernist poetry and Western postmodernist cultural criticism (a dialogue)], *Zhongguo dangdai wenhua yishi* [Contemporary Chinese cultural consciousness], ed. Gan Yang, trans. Zhang Xudong (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1989) 222-31.

<sup>13</sup> Paul de Man, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 4. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>14</sup> "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 49.

<sup>15</sup> In a brief comment on "The Origin of the Work of Art," Fredric Jameson translates Heidegger's two terms into some concise and familiar words: ". . . what [Heidegger] calls World and Earth: what I will rewrite in terms of the dimensions of History and the so-

cial project on the one hand, and of Nature or matter on the other—ranging from geographical or ecological constraint all the way to the individual body.” Cf. “Baudelaire as Modernist and Postmodernist,” *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 250.

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, “Language,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, 199.

<sup>17</sup> “Wode xuanyan” [My Manifesto], *Fujian wenxue* [Fujian literature] 1 (1981): 60-1. English translation quoted from Golden and Minford 125.

<sup>18</sup> *Taiyang yu ren* [Sun and man] (Changsha: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 1991) 31-2.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Yang Lian, “Zhili de kongjian” [The intellectual space], *Qingnian shiren tan shi* [Young poets on poetry], ed. Lao Mu (Beijing: Beijing daxue wusi wenxueshe, 1985) 75-80.

<sup>20</sup> “Huangjin shu” [Golden tree], *Xinshichao shiji* [Anthologies of new wave poetry], vol. 1, ed. Lao Mu (Beijing: Weiminghu, 1985) 340-1. English translation by Mabel Lee with modification.

<sup>21</sup> *Huang* [Yellow] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1989) 42.

<sup>22</sup> “Zhiniao” [Paper Bird], *Huang* 36.

<sup>23</sup> “Fangjianli de fengjing” [Scenery in a room], *Huang* 33-4. English translation by Mabel Lee.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, He Bochuan, *China on the Edge: The Crisis of Ecology and Development* (San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals, 1991).

