

Book Review

**Maghiel van Crevel: Language Shattered:
Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Duoduo.
(Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1996)**

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In the tortuous history of mainland Chinese literature since 1949, it is likely that the sudden appearance in December 1978 of the unofficial journal *Today* (今天) marked the beginnings of a literature relatively free of Mao's severely utilitarian dictates. Although *Today* did not last long, the young writers who gathered around the journal would quickly gain fame as the Obscure or Misty (朦朧) poets: Bei Dao (北島), Shu Ting (舒婷), Gu Cheng (古城), Yang Lian (楊煉), Jiang He (江河), Mang Ke (芒克) and, somewhat later and more tangentially, Duoduo (多多). Despite the fierce controversy that flared over their poetry during the early 1980s, their status as the standard bearers for a new post-Maoist literature among the younger generation of writers was assured, and their work even began appearing in the major official journals. In the mid-80s there was a belated but remarkable outburst of new fiction, which would quickly dominate the attention of readers of contemporary Chinese literature both inside and outside China, as is evidenced by the numerous translations of contemporary mainland fiction that have appeared over the past half dozen years or so. Nonetheless, it was the Misty poets who made the initial seminal breakthrough that opened up possibilities not only for the new poetry but for the new fiction as well--indeed, a number of the most experimental and successful of the young fiction writers began as poets (e.g. Su Tong 蘇童).

Aside from the fact that poetry's appeal is always more limited than that of fiction, there are serious problems in presenting contemporary Chinese poetry to a Western readership. Especially in translation, when Western readers are offered the early Obscure poems that caused such a fuss, they are likely to see rather derivative-looking works, an immature modernism, often marred by sentimentality and tendentiousness. This is hardly surprising given the restricted circumstances out of which this early poetry was written, during and immediately after the Cultural Revolution, but

such a recognition does not solve the problem of how the foreign reader is to appreciate contemporary Chinese poetry. Without pretending to offer any definite answers, I would like to consider this question as I discuss Maghiel van Crevel's *Language Shattered*, which is, as far as I am aware, the first scholarly book in English entirely dedicated to contemporary Chinese poetry.

Van Crevel's study is divided into two unequal halves: the first hundred pages offer a history of mainland poetry since 1949 with emphasis on the origins and development of the Obscure poets; and the following almost 200 pages are a detailed examination of selected poems by Duoduo from throughout his career, beginning in the early 70s through to as recently as 1994. This book was originally written as a dissertation and consequently there is an unevenness one might expect. However, this volume represents a considerable scholarly effort in a complicated and rather little explored field outside of China and so is an important contribution, even though I will be somewhat harsh on its shortcomings.

One of the salutary arguments running throughout van Crevel's study is his "crusade" against the politicization of contemporary Chinese poets by well-meaning Western translators and critics. Particularly in the wake of June Fourth 1989, the temptation to package contemporary mainland poetry as dissident literature has been difficult to resist, and the consequence is a kind of voyeuristic self-congratulatory attitude as the Western translator/editor/reader indulges in a vicarious "concern" for the sufferings of foreign peoples under authoritarianism, or at least of harassed poets. This is not altogether to be deplored, and when, for example, a selection of Obscure poetry is set within a more informative context, such as Geremie Barmé and John Minford's hefty gathering of dissident documents in *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (1987), much can be learned. Nonetheless, the result is too often a condescending attitude toward the poetry's aesthetic qualities. This is evident in two selected translations of Misty poetry most readily available to American readers, *A Splintered Mirror: Chinese Poetry from the Democracy Movement* (1991) edited and translated by Donald Finkel and *Out of the Howling Storm: The New Chinese Poetry* (1993) edited by Tony Barnstone. As van Crevel points out, the translations are often shoddy, not simply a matter of taking creative liberties à la Ezra Pound, but an inadequate respect for the originals so that the translators feel the need to jazz them up or make them more "poetic." The subtitle to the former volume would suggest to most Western readers that

the poems have some relation to the demonstrations of 1989, although in fact all the poems were written many years earlier. Similarly, Barnstone indulges in a lengthy introduction, almost a third of the entire anthology, full of factual errors and justifying the political emphasis of his selection. One of the ironies is that the editors' political emphasis often leads to choosing poems that formally and rhetorically are most similar to the sort of poetry promoted by the regime that purportedly is being protested against.

The most valuable contribution of van Crevel's book is his survey in Part I of mainland poetry since 1949, which in particular offers some fascinating detail about the roots of Obscure poetry during the Cultural Revolution and its underground existence until the publication of *Today*. Previously much of this information was anecdotal and fragmentary, and van Crevel has done an exemplary job in bringing the pieces together, sifting out what is unreliable, and adding original information based on his own fieldwork to give us at least a preliminary picture of a more vital underground poetry scene during the Cultural Revolution than most of us would have imagined possible. At the same time van Crevel is well aware of the precariousness of trying to make such a historical reconstruction when so much of the documentation is lost or inaccessible and memories of such turbulent times unreliable. Following the model established by *Today*, virtually all post-Maoist poetry of note has initially appeared in "underground" magazines and anthologies. Depending on the political winds, these unofficial publications are more or less tolerated if they do not attract too much attention, are usually of limited print runs, and distributed by and among the poets themselves. Dozens, probably hundreds of such publications began appearing throughout China during the 1980s, and consequently the task of tracking down and keeping up with the numbers of often difficult of access works makes the job of putting together a balanced and comprehensive picture of recent Chinese poetry on the mainland a well-nigh impossible task at this time. Van Crevel's briefer description of the younger poets who followed the Obscure poets—referred to as the Newborn poets—is in large part a rather disappointing summary of relevant articles by Michelle Yeh.¹ While acknowledging the flurry of activity across China, van Crevel nonetheless tends to limit himself to the Beijing scene, and his previous detail about the Obscure poets is lacking on these younger poets. There seems little sense of the development of the Newborn poetry, and no awareness whatsoever of the more radically experimental

work being done. There is an urgent need for research on and translations of these quite diverse younger poets, a number of whom have produced some of the most interesting Chinese poetry of the past several decades.

The second part of the book, a lengthy analysis of Duoduo's poetry, suffers rather more than the first from a lack of editing and would have benefited from some rigorous pruning. The introductory chapter describing and justifying the approach used in analyzing the poems could have been dropped altogether, as it evidences little consciousness of recent debates on the study of modern Chinese literature and the role of critical theory. In fact, van Crevel's approach to the poetry is the most conservatively imaginable: thematic close readings which infrequently get much beyond the descriptive. What we have is a chronological running commentary on representative poems grouped into thematic units. This is not to say that van Crevel is an insensitive reader of the poetry, but he tends to impose self-defeating limitations on himself that seriously debilitate much of his analysis. For example, in a section discussing Duoduo's early poems concerned with romantic love, van Crevel is not able to do much more than describe the poems in question, which offered to the Western reader are unlikely to convince anyone that these are very significant poems. Van Crevel fails to offer a rhetorical analysis that would situate these poems so as to allow us to understand what they respond to, the sort of love poetry against which Duoduo's are to be understood. Earlier in his study, van Crevel had pointed out the repression and externalization of romantic love during the Communist era, which intensified during the Cultural Revolution: "Intimacy of feelings was . . . transplanted from the private to the public sphere" (15). When the Misty poets burst onto the scene in the late 1970s, personal expression was clearly one of their most striking features and explains their enormous popularity among the younger generation, most obviously in the case of Shu Ting. Within such a context, Duoduo's love poems, or in most cases his anti-love poems, could be understood by a Western reader as something more than mediocre works of rather self-indulgent cynicism. Again, in a section on the theme of exile, van Crevel describes poems expressing feelings of alienation and homelessness, but there is not even passing mention of this motif's persistence throughout the long tradition of Chinese poetry and how Duoduo's versions continue and/or alter it. Although he is reluctant to develop the idea, van Crevel does make the excellent point that Duoduo's later poetry is part of a substantial body of work by Chinese poets in exile, which is developing its own characteristics dis-

tinct from that being written in China.

While I agree with van Crevel's effort to avoid reductive politicizing of Duoduo's and other contemporary Chinese poetry, there is a serious fault line between the two main parts of his book so that the examination of Duoduo's work is excessively decontextualized. Van Crevel's failure to situate the language of the poems is all the more surprising in that he is quite perceptive in fleshing out the rhetorical stakes in the final chapter dealing with the reception of Duoduo's poetry both in China and abroad. But in the effort to universalize Duoduo's work, its complex linguistic specificity gets lost and with it the reason why a Western reader should find this poetry of particular interest. The themes around which van Crevel organizes his study—love, exile, relations between people and with nature, the limits of language—are, in and of themselves, the most banal imaginable. How is it that Duoduo deals with these perennial themes in an original and interesting manner? It is as if van Crevel is content to do careful spade work, looking closely at a good many poems, but leaving it to others to devise a connecting thesis or coherent approach to the corpus of Duoduo's poetry. This would require some consideration of the discursive field(s) within which Duoduo is working, how he situates himself *via-à-vis* contemporary and traditional Chinese poetic discourse, in relation to Western literature, how he conceives of the task of the poet and so on. On this latter point, van Crevel does discuss Duoduo's changing conception of the poet in a section on the "Limits of Language": from the early tragic heroic image of the poet so typical of much Misty poetry to a more radically skeptical view that sees language as unreliable. Yet here too the analysis is limited to the descriptive level, and there is disappointing little consideration of how Duoduo's increasing distrust of language actually affects his poetic practice. Van Crevel finds this skepticism stated in the poems, but then if language is unreliable what is the status of such statements themselves? How does this skepticism affect his use of language and forms? Twentieth Century Chinese literature has often suffered from being reductively read as little more than symptomatic documents of modern China's difficult and ideologically saturated history. But the answer is not to try to separate out the works' politics and Chineseness altogether. Contemporary Chinese poetry is the product of a complex dialogue between its linguistic and cultural specificity and its awareness of and aspiration to be recognized as world literature.

Notes

¹ See Michelle Yeh, *Light a Lamp in a Rock*; also a more recent article by Yeh on Post-Obscure poetry: *The 'Cult of Poetry' in Contemporary China*.

Works Cited

- Yeh, Michelle. "Light a Lamp in a Rock: Experimental Poetry in Contemporary China," *Modern China* 18.4 (1992): 379-409.
- . "The 'Cult of Poetry' in Contemporary China," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55.1 (1996): 51-80.