

Mind, mayhem and money

Van Crevel, Maghiel. 2008.
Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem, and Money.
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The poets of mainland China have been far busier writing and wrangling over their work during the past 20 or so years than scholars from beyond China have been in analysing it. While research on this body of poetry has begun to fill out in recent years, no single piece of scholarship makes a contribution equal to that of Maghiel van Crevel's *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*. This is an ambitious book. Its 13 chapters move from an extensive introduction on through a dozen 'case studies' that cover, in roughly chronological order, the work of about 11 important poets. Where the individual chapters provide focused, meticulously detailed considerations of poetry and discourse on poetry, the book as a whole presents a timely overview of the development of Chinese avant-garde poetry since the mid-1980s.

Distinctly individual voices

Mind does many things. Perhaps its most important goal is to explode reductive understandings of contemporary mainland Chinese avant-garde poetry. Too much is missed, van Crevel argues in his extensive first chapter, when critics and even poets themselves superimpose sociopolitical context, linear development narratives, biographism, or catch-all labelling of trends and camps on top of the inherent complexity of poetic texts. Instead, he invites readers to take this poetry on its own terms through the practice of close reading. Only careful attention to questions of poetic form and content, van Crevel insists, can bring forth the distinctly individual voices within the clamour of puffery and polemic that many of these poets tend to discharge so effusively.

Except for the chapter on Yu Jian, which hews to a focused and perceptive explication of Yu's poetry, chapters two through eight affirm the distinctiveness of the individual poetic voice against certain biases of accepted critical wisdom. The bleak beauty of Han Dong's poetry, for instance, is ill-served by its categorisation as merely a 'post-Misty' intervention. Readers of Haizi's poetry must look beyond the impact of his suicide to get the most from his intense, idealistic poems. The literary sophisticated Xi Chuan is something more than the grand saviour of pure poetry in the age of economic reform. And, contra his commentators, Sun Wenbo's poetry owes as much to formal poetic qualities as to 'narrativistic' content. Other chapters compare quite different poets under a shared theme. Chapter

Four gathers the poetries of Yang Lian, Wang Jiaxin, and Bei Dao together under the problematic of exile, while Chapter Six speculates on the evasive nature of prose-poetry while comparing Yu Jian, standard-bearer of the 'popular' (*minjian*) camp, and Xi Chuan, recognised as the consummate 'intellectual' (*zhishifenzi*) poet. The back five chapters of the book move from poetry itself into more meta-poetic concerns. Chapter nine examines a self-conscious poetic movement: the in-your-face Lower Body (*xiabanshen*) poetry that emerged around 2000 and its two best-known practitioners, Yin Lichuan and Shen Haobo. Chapters ten and eleven speculate on constructions of poethood by taking on the meta-poetic writings of first Xi Chuan and then the pairing of Yu Jian and Han Dong. The book's final two chapters offer, in turn, a meticulous reconstruction and analysis of the rancorous popular-intellectual polemic that raged for several years after 1998, and a relatively brief coda whose introduction of Beijing-based poet-musician-critic Yan Jun opens the way toward exploring interfaces between poetry, music, and other artistic forms.

'The Elevated and the Earthly'

Singly and in concert, all these chapters highlight the rich and vibrant texture of poetry, personalities, and disputation that constitute the Chinese poetic *avant-garde*. But while giving the poets their due, *Mind* also allows certain conceptual frameworks to grow out of its detailed analyses. The most prominent - but in fact least important - of these frameworks is the literary-historical narrative suggested by the book's title, *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*. *Mind* refers to the cultural-intellectual fever of the 1980s, mayhem to the far-reaching disruption of June 4, 1989, and money, of course, to the ascendance of the economic imperative in the 1990s and beyond. However, given van Crevel's refusal to reduce poetic development to any neat linear sequence, such periodisation ends up tangential to other unifying schemes, making the title something of a red herring. The book's true contribution lies in its sifting out of conceptual categories immanent to the *avant-garde* poetic field itself. The first of these is the aesthetic dichotomy of the Elevated and the Earthly, which according to van Crevel describes not fixed, reified oppositions, but 'coordinates in a multidimensional body of texts.' What this means is that China's poets and critics tend to comprehend themselves in terms of pairings such as heroic vs. quotidian, sacred vs. realist, Westernised vs. indigenous, and intellectual vs. popular. While these categories function synchronically at any particular moment, there is also a narrative here: over the past several decades, van Crevel notes, *avant-garde* poetry has gravitated toward the Earthly end of this scale.

'Poethood'

The other major conceptual category, which van Crevel calls 'poethood,' in fact unifies the poetic *avant-garde* across the manufactured splits between the Elevated and the Earthly. Poethood refers to all these poets' intense and persistent concern that who they are and what they do ought to be regarded as an essential, unique, and authoritative element of culture and society. The idea of poethood, van Crevel insists, has donned many guises, but cuts across the historical lineage of the post-Mao *avant-garde* all the way from the canonised sententiousness of some Misty poets, to the acrimonious debates at the turn of the last century, to the foul-mouthed insurgency of the Lower Body's angry youth.

If *Mind's* discoveries add much to current scholarship on China's contemporary *avant-garde* poetry, its shortcomings may be taken as points of departure for renewed critical perspectives. For instance, the book directs much of its critique at apparent deficiencies in Chinese critical discourse on contemporary poetry. In addition to over-reliance on biographism, content bias, and the imposition of ready-made categories, van Crevel also points to a general shortage of reader-oriented critical discourse, and even an apparent dearth of what he calls 'close writing' - that is, poems able to support sustained, sophisticated interpretation. Chinese poets and critics are certainly not the only ones guilty of such malfeasances. But what if, instead of the implied prescriptive approach undertaken in *Mind*, these tendencies, too, were understood as inherent to the values and dynamics of the local literary field? Such a shift in perspective would build naturally upon the immanent categories van Crevel uncovers in the book and might carry further his observations on topics like these poets' constant and intense interest in constructing the field of contemporary *avant-garde* poetry. It might also force revision of the book's rather traditional close readings of poetry - an area where uneven rigour and a sometimes stiff division between 'content' and 'form' frustrates expectations as often as it satisfies them. That said, the book's concluding chapter on Yan Jun, with its promise to explore the interfaces of poetry and performance media, seems to suggest just such a change in course, from focusing inward on the poetic text itself toward poetry's opening outward into the world. Given the prolific inventiveness van Crevel demonstrates in *Mind*, we may not have long to wait before seeing the results of just such a project.

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Shen Haobo, 2006.
Photographer
unidentified.



Yan Jun, 2007.
Photograph by
Qiaoqiao.



Yin Lichuan, 2004.
Photograph by
Martin de Haan.



Haizi, late 1980s.
Photographer
unidentified.

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