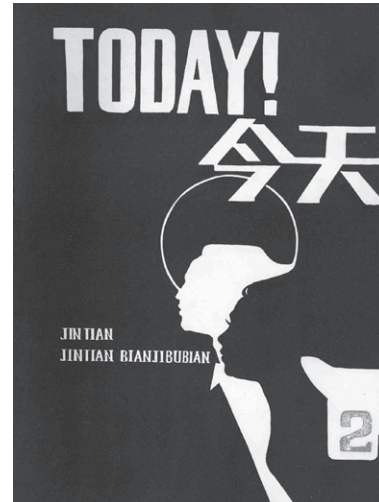


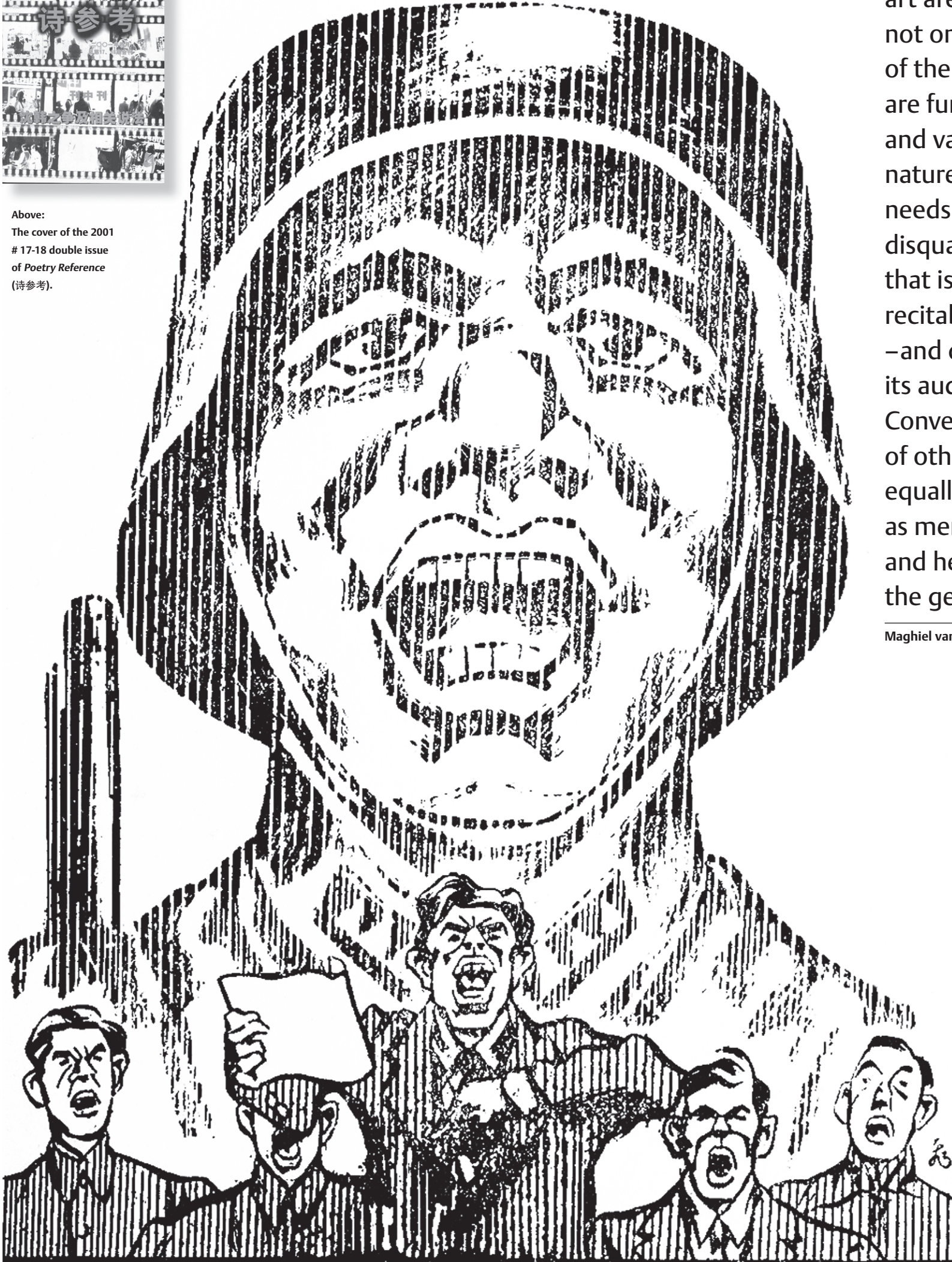
The sound of modern Chinese poetry



Right:
Cover of unofficial
Chinese poetry
journal *Today* # 2,
from 1979.

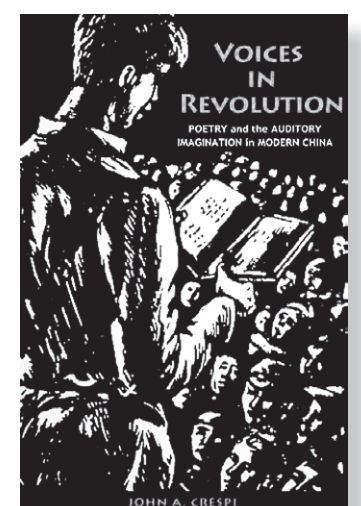


Above:
The cover of the 2001
17-18 double issue
of *Poetry Reference*
(诗参考).



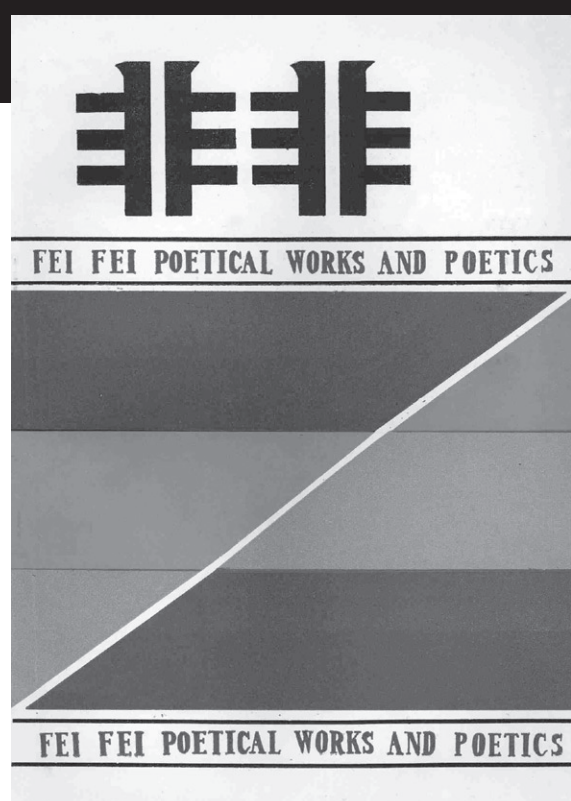
'Poets,' writes Zang Kejia in the late 1930s, *'Open your throats, / Aside from spirited singing of songs of war, / Your poetry shall be dumb silence.'* Zang's exhortation of his fellow poets in war-torn China highlights a perennial issue in discourse on cultural expression: literature and art are functional categories, not ontological ones, and many of their countless definitions are fundamentally normative and value-judgemental in nature. For his part, Zang needs but four brief lines to disqualify any and all poetry that is not 'sung' – meaning, recitable, and actually recited – and doesn't aspire to propel its audience into action. Conversely, poets and readers of other persuasions might equally dismiss Zang's poetry as mere political propaganda, and hence unworthy of the genre.

Maghiel van Crevel



Left:
Cover image from
China Poetry Forum,
20 April 1938.

Right:
The cover of the
1986 opening issue
of the unofficial
Chinese poetry
journal *Not-Not*.



Crespi, John. 2009.

Voices in Revolution: Poetry and the Auditory Imagination in Modern China.
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. x + 229 pages.
ISBN 978 0 8248 3365 7.

In *Voices in Revolution: Poetry and the Auditory Imagination in Modern China*, John Crespi shows that in China, for most of the 20th century the issue of recitation and that of goal-oriented, paraphraseable content were inseparable. Discussions of recitation were almost invariably linked up with the question of what the poetry in question wanted to accomplish, not just for its own sake, but in society at large. More broadly, especially in the socio-historical context of modern Chinese literature, Crespi's investigation of the acoustics of poetry provides a framework for revisiting the distinction of aesthetic and communicative functions of literature and art, specifically of poetry—and hence, of poetry's very definition and that definition's local determinants.

Crespi demonstrates that in modern China, minimally up until the end of the Mao era, the trope of *voice* and the actual *voicing* of poetry generated a turbulent discursive space for profoundly politicised literary activism. His study is thoroughly researched, as regards both the source material and the disciplinary theory he brings to bear on it (Charles Bernstein, Paul Zumthor and others). Crespi duly notes that studying sound is difficult in light of its ephemeral nature; and that even recordings—which hardly exist for his data to begin with—will not reproduce the moment of the poem's original performance in full. Methodologically, then, his monograph is a study of the poetic voice inasmuch as the latter appears as poetic subject matter, and inasmuch as it can be *imagined* to sound in recitation, on the basis of the *written* texts that are privileged in most scholarship on literature. In addition, he draws heavily on a wide variety of discourse on the poetic voice and recitation, from polemical theorising by poets and critics in the 1920s and 1930s to the meticulous instructions offered by a 1975 recitation primer.

Voices in Revolution is analytically strong and well written—if occasionally a little dense, with a proclivity toward accumulating abstractions. It is exemplary in its economy of words. Just under two hundred pages long, it lays no claim to complete coverage of poetry recitation in modern China. Instead, it offers an extended, coherent essay that leaves the reader with much captivating literary-historical fact, and a stimulating perspective on an area of cultural production that has remained under-researched to date. As such, it is an important contribution to the field of modern Chinese literature and culture at large.

Cultural modernisers: the communicative vs. the aesthetic

In his opening chapter, Crespi focuses on the transition from empire to nation, and the concomitant shift in the relative weight of written and spoken language in elite cultural discourse. For empire, he turns to the Great Preface to the ancient *Book of Songs*, and to the long-dominant notion of the script and canonical texts in the classical, written language as constituting and preserving the institutions of empire, and indeed of Chineseness. For the nation, he draws on Lu Xun's 1908 essay 'The Power of Mara Poetry.' Here, the poet's voice articulates what Crespi calls a 'national interiority' which locates the origins of poetry in 'a spontaneous, emotional, sincere, expressive human interior' (p.25) and is identified with both the modern individual and the modern nation.

He goes on to discuss late 1910s and early 1920s essays by Qian Xuantong, Hu Shi, Zhou Zuoren, and Yu Pingbo, which help relocate linguistic authority in the popular national subject. Crucially, the analysis shows how the thinking of these internationally-minded cultural modernisers, which was clearly influenced by the global trend of 19th century Romantic-nationalist thought, remained compatible with Chinese-traditional poetics, in its ultimately political perspective on language and literature.

What was the effect of these new imaginations of the poetic voice on poetry and poetical debate? In chapter 2, Crespi first discusses what he calls Hu Shi's contradiction. While Hu hoped that the New Poetry would be outward-looking, reflect on the national condition, and present societally grounded emotion, for the means to this end he referred to a 'natural' prosody which was inward-looking inasmuch as it posited a measure of self-orientation of the literary text. In the period between the literary revolution of the late 1910s and the beginning of the War of Resistance against Japan in 1937, this manifestation of the tense interaction of social engagement and poetic autonomy—which is ubiquitous in Chinese literary history—leads to a conceptualisation of poetry as an emotion-driven, primarily communicative discourse by 'populist' authors such as Chen Nanshi, Jiang Guangci, and Ren Jun; and as a primarily aesthetic enterprise by 'academic' authors like Xu Zhimo, Wen Yiduo, Zhu Guangqian and many others of the Beijing (Beiping) 'salon recitationists.' The latter generally theorised less but practiced more than their counterparts, so to speak, even if this remained an incrowd affair. Shen Congwen noted that the populists' professed aim of effective communication would in fact be advanced by some attention to aesthetics. But his deconstruction of an unhelpful binary opposition was to have little chance in wartime, when literary development was shaped by the urgently felt need for propaganda more than anything else.

Wartime poetry as propaganda

The next three chapters of *Voices in Revolution* examine wartime poetry recitation from complementary angles. In chapter 3, Crespi explains how the notion of 'recitation poetry' (*langsong shi*) that was emerging as a discrete literary category was fiercely contested, with Liu Qing sarcastically comparing it to 'performable drama' and 'edible food.' Crespi first considers a 1939 essay by Liang Zongdai, who harboured grave doubts about this poetry's potential for eliciting the 'mass effect and collective response' (p.71) that were its main goals, and stressed that these very goals would compromise the quality of a 'musicalized prose' (p.72)—as opposed to straightforward colloquial speech—that should be the hallmark of modern poetry in China and elsewhere. By contrast, proponents of recitation poetry energetically followed in the footsteps of populist authors of the preceding years, pretty much drowning out the aestheticist argument. They took their style to extremes, leading to poems such as the one by Zang Kejia that opens this review, with Gao Lan as one of the most prolific and least subtle among them. The imagination of the poetic voice in these texts is hardly very imaginative any longer: this is little more than belled-out pamphleteering—with, remarkably, much room for recitation, and the sounding of the poetic voice, as *subject matter* of the poetry itself. Yet, Crespi manages to reconstruct the recitation discourse in its historical context in such a way as to make one reconsider this dismissive assessment immediately upon formulating it, and to remind one of the need to take into account the aforementioned local determinants of any poetics. After an extensive discussion of wartime theorisation of recitation poetry by Xu Chi and Hong Shen, he makes the interesting observation that later war poems feature pessimistic images of the loss of voice and of the listening audience.

Much archival research must have gone into Crespi's reconstruction, in chapter 4, of the actual occurrence of poetry recitation during the war, in the areas of Guangzhou, Wuhan, Yan'an, Shanghai, Chongqing, Chengdu, and Guilin. Poets (including Pu Feng, Huang Ningying, Mu Mutian, Ke Zhongping, Jiang Xijin [aka Xi Jin], Guang Weiran, and of course Zang Kejia and Gao Lan), critics and organisers invested huge amounts of energy and agency in what Crespi calls the consolidation of recitation poetry as a genre. In terms of recognition and effectiveness in contributing to the war effort, however, the results were by and large disappointing: 'wartime poetry recitation was often an alienating rather than unifying or uplifting experience' (p.103). Highfalutin ideals and theories eroded against the exigencies of life in wartime—and, notably, against insufficient technique on the part of not a few of the reciters, many of whom let the efficacy of their performance suffer from emotional overkill. Also, for all the ideological desire of its advocates to connect with the common folk, the recitation of New Poetry was on the whole still something done by and for intellectuals. Yet, despite its many failures, wartime recitation efforts crucially helped

provide a launchpad for Communist-revolutionary poetry recitation in the Mao era. The discussion of wartime recitation ends with a brief sketch of Zhu Ziqing's late 1940s 'situational poetics' (chapter 5), which stresses the inseparability of the performed poem from the moment of performance. One phenomenon from the war years one might have wanted to learn more about in chapters 3 to 5 is that of 'street poetry' or 'street corner poetry' (*jietou shi*), which Crespi mentions only in passing.

The Mao era and beyond

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on Mao-era and post-Mao poetry recitation, respectively, and tell two fascinating tales. In the early 1960s poetry recitation finally makes it big, in live performance, related events such as competitions and children's rallies, and radio broadcasts. Crespi's central point in chapter 6 is that at this point, the genre's success inevitably draws attention to an inherent, highly problematic tension between the lyric and the dramatic: between what should be a genuine feeling of heartfelt revolutionary passion on the one hand, and the theatricality of tightly choreographed recitation, on the other. He argues that this tension undermines the notion of a totalised, monolithic structure of cultural production and reception, and that it helps qualify what remains of images of the Mao era as culturally barren and uninteresting. The powerful material he uses to illustrate the hybridity of what he calls 'calculated passions' (p.142) includes memoirs of professional actors tasked with the recitation of texts taken from the Socialist-Realist canon—such as He Jingzhi's 'Song of Lei Feng'—and a 1975 primer of poetry recitation that exemplifies the uneasy combination of an appeal to emotional authenticity with painstakingly detailed technical instructions.

The final leg of the journey takes the reader into the 21st century. Chapter 7 presents a discontinuity in Crespi's narrative: the politicisation of poetry that runs through China's cultural history from antiquity all the way to the Mao era is no longer prominently present. True enough, state-sponsored production of poetry along more or less Maoist-poetical lines continues, but as only one of many threads in a textscape that has become richly diversified, and in many ways depoliticised. At the same time, poetry recitation as part of (semi-)public life continues in present-day China, and is in fact experiencing something of a renaissance; in that sense, this case study is very much in place. Crespi begins by contrasting two recitals from 2005, one 'unofficial' or 'independent' and one 'official.' He proceeds to question any sharp ideological dividing lines between them, since they both come under the larger, overarching category of the 'event' (*huodong*), which has succeeded the Maoist 'mass campaign' (*yundong*) as an organising principle in (semi-)public life. Incidentally, in itself, their shared status as 'events' doesn't detract from considerable differences between today's unofficial and official Chinese poetry scenes, even as the boundaries are becoming blurred. Crespi submits that poetry recitation as 'event,' however unofficial or 'independent,' is very much part of the 'culture economy' (*wenhua jingji*, p.170ff), and thus of a bigger, largely state-engineered socio-historical picture. His description of his realisation of this point during his fieldwork, and the ensuing reflection on his work as a researcher, are a fitting conclusion to his book.

In closing

While Crespi is right in saying that the sounding voice in poetry deserves more attention, as most scholarship privileges the written text and what is perceived as paraphraseable content, his assertion of the auditory imagination as a new perspective is a little repetitive and sometimes over-insistent. Similarly, his claim that attention to sound in recitation by different generations of poets and theorists entailed a *de-privileging* of the visual is somewhat forced, and not invariably convincing. Also, there is the occasional risk of confusing two different dimensions in which the distinction if not the opposition of the auditory and the visual plays out: (1) as aspects of the poem's performance, where the auditory is foregrounded by reading out loud, and the visual by reading silently, and (2) as aspects of the poem's subject matter, especially its imagery. Finally, while Crespi's methodological negotiation of the difficulties of studying sound is fully legitimate, one would have hoped to hear—quite literally—more of recitation as it has flourished in recent years. Let's hope the author will continue to do fieldwork, and have a chance to make some of his recordings available online.

But these are minor criticisms of a major study. *Voices in Revolution* is a carefully crafted, solid, sophisticated and insightful book. In its attention to the auditory, and to some of the most politicised moments in modern Chinese poetry, it is a sterling contribution to the balance of various perspectives and approaches that scholarship requires.

Maghiel van Crevel
Leiden University
m.van.crevel@hum.leidenuniv.nl