

Out of the  
Howling Storm

The New  
Chinese Poetry

EDITED BY

Tony Barnstone



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For

W I L L I S   B A R N S T O N E

and

S A R A H   H A N D L E R ,

best friends and

companions in China

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The introduction appeared in an earlier form in *The Centennial Review* (Vol. 36, No. 1, Winter 1992), and some parts of it appeared in *Nimrod* (Vol. 29, No. 2, Spring/Summer 1986) in an article entitled "Everyone is Writing." A version of "Translation as Forgery" appeared in *Poetry Flash* (No. 239, February 1993). Some of these poems have appeared before, sometimes in earlier versions, in the following literary journals: *American Poetry Review*: Mang Ke, "Darling," "To Children," "Yesterday and Today"; *Beloit Poetry Review*: Duo Duo, "When People Rise from Cheese, Statement #1"; *The Literary Review*: Chou Ping, "Ways of Looking at a Poet," Tang Yaping, "Black Night," "Black Swamp," "Black Nightgown," "Black Cave," Zhang Zhen, "A Desire," "The New," "Abortion"; *Nimrod*: Shu Ting, "Dream of an Island," Bei Ling, "I Don't Need This"; *Representations*: Mang Ke, "Ape Herd," Gu Cheng, "Who'd Have Thought?," "Discovery," "Bulin Met Bandit," "Bulin Is Dead, It Seems"; *AGNI*: Ha Jin, "Marching Toward Martyrdom."

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## Comments from the Editor

IN "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin laments the loss of the original work of art's "aura" as it passes through the machine and comes out the other end multiplied. When "The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art" it is somehow diminished by this act of photographic reproduction. Life becomes *Life* magazine. The live performance of musicians, playing off the energy and emotions of their audience, becomes a mass-reproduced "live album" in which the audience is only ficticiously present, as in the canned laugh track on a television sitcom.

Some tendentious aspects of Benjamin's argument may seem dated today (are the movies really fascist in nature?), but at the heart of the essay is a questioning of where we find *value* in art, a question that remains of particular interest in postmodern culture, and pertinent to the act of translation itself. Is it possible, as Benjamin says, that the very nature of reality is warped and diminished by the act of reproduction, that somehow reality itself becomes a forgery? I think of a scene I saw some years back in a movie by Santa Cruz video artist Chip Lord, in which he is cruising into Los Angeles and meditating on the serene California landscapes he is driving through. All these locations, with the value that they derive simply by being where they are, have been fodder for generations of location scouts who turn them into movie sets, until in driving past them you catch ghost images of countless movies, seeing not reality but, as Chip Lord says, "image after image after image," until all that is left of reality is an afterimage. Is translation necessarily just such an afterimage?

"[W]hat is really jeopardized" by reproduction, according to Benjamin, "is the authority of the object." Art's esthetic value is of course not equal

to its monetary value, but, like gold or diamonds, it derives much of its value from its uniqueness. Dollars physically represent to us the abstract concept of value, and, until the decline of bimetallism in the United States, this value was guaranteed by the citizen's right to freely exchange them for their equivalent in gold. What Fort Knox filled with genius can guarantee the reader that the translation is a fair exchange for gold? Alexander the Great first came up with the practice of stamping his face on coins of the realm. Money has power so long as the face on the coin guarantees the coin is good. But what guarantees that it can be freely exchanged for coin of another realm? Later, Roman emperors took to defacing statuary depicting the faces of their predecessors, replacing the old heads with their own likenesses. The translator's task is the opposite; we efface our presence as assiduously as master forgers trying not to get caught.

Since the erosion of the gold standard in the United States, the value of currency is much more closely linked to the size of the sum total of all printed currency. If you print too much currency, you get inflation. Similarly, master printmakers make a point of defacing or destroying their templates after making a limited edition so as to maintain, if not a uniqueness, at least a limited hemorrhaging of the works' value through reproduction. The signature at the bottom of the work, like that of the Treasurer and the Secretary of the Treasury on the dollar bill, indicates that it is an *authorized* reproduction, not a forgery. I might offer to trade you a photocopy of a hundred dollar bill for your real one—after all, they look the same—but, chances are, you'd turn me down.

In literature there is no original to be reproduced, there is only the text, which is designed to be a reproduction—as if no handpainted Mona Lisa were on display in the Louvre and Da Vinci's masterpiece existed only in cheap postcard reproductions for sale in the museum shop. The "Uniqueness and permanance" that Benjamin celebrates don't lie in ink on the page; the very nature of "text" is that "transitoriness and reproducibility" that he abhors. Certainly if I owned one of the hand-printed and hand-inked editions of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* I would have in my hands a valuable object of art, and chances are that the experience of reading it would seem more valuable than the experience of reading a copy of the admirable Trianon Press color reproduction, but this is itself an anomaly, based on the momentary marriage of art and literature. The text itself is transcendental, briefly inhabiting editions of the work. It may suffer typesetter errors and editorial changes, yet these do not essentially change the work of genius, because that genius lies in the organs, the nervous system, the neural net of *language* itself, not in the par-



ticular tattoos marking a particular book's paper skin. Thus, in translation, in spite of the fact that the original has no physical presence, one must worry again about "authority," about the signature of the author's style and vision that may be fatally lost in the transformation from language to language. Even though literary texts have no physical original, translation, that long-despised activity, is as much a forgery as the dollar bill you run off on the printing press in your basement. The question then becomes how to make an *inspired* forgery, like artist J. S. G. Boggs, who draws his own hundred dollar bills with colored ink and pencils, runs off limited editions on color photocopy machines and then has remarkable success in spending his forgeries, by convincing waiters, shop owners, even his landlord, to exchange their services for his currency at the written "value."

In literature, somehow, we have always been in a postmodern world in which the central value exchange is not my fur for your pound of meat, or even my fur for your paper money, but always paper for paper, words for words, abstraction for abstraction. The world, abstracted into language, is written into a poem which you read and abstract to fit your own experience. In translation in particular the exchange of one abstract value for another is central to the process—is the process itself. Yet in this process, something is considered to be lost—the way with each successive generation of cassette tape reproduction the ratio of "hiss" to original sound goes up. Unlike the work in translation, the work of art in the original language is thought of as unique and permanent. Thus the great works of literature must be translated again for every generation, for those who cannot read them in the original.

In translation the achievement of the author is already filtered through another language and, what is worse, another mind. In spite of literature's transcendental nature, we come back to Benjamin's aura, to the loss of "presence." I have found this to be a particular issue in editing and translating these poems, many of them political in nature. How to bring them to the other side intact, these little worlds urged into being by specific campaigns, such as Mao's Cultural Revolution campaign against romance in literature and the mass media, or by pervasive propaganda metaphors that have no meaning in the United States, such as the once widespread comparison of the masses to fields of sunflowers whose heads follow the sun (Mao Zedong) across the sky? Ideally the poem should be "present" to us even if the esthetic, political, and cultural contexts out of which it grew are absent, but sometimes this just isn't so. In these cases I do my best to provide such contexts with limited notes and a long introduction. I don't like attaching notes to poems; I believe that even in translation a

poem should stand on its own as an esthetic entity, but sometimes it can't be helped. The note is to the poem as the voice of the pundit is to the raw images of students at Tiananmen Square.

Even the political events at Tiananmen Square, many of them filmed "live," could not have had such global impact if such an act of translation had not occurred. The 1989 Democracy Movement in China was the first armchair revolution, in which millions watched worldwide as the unarmed students faced off against tanks and soldiers, armed only with idealism and hope, giving the lie to the popular song's refrain, "The revolution will not be televised." Certainly the students would have been crushed long before they were had it not been for the presence of this international audience, and for the fact that these great events were captured on video camera, converted into digital codes, and transmitted to your home, where they were reinterpreted by the pixels of your television screen. The poems you read in this book have traveled from Tiananmen Square to your living room through a similar act of translation, and necessarily they have changed into another life in their journey into the underworld of language and back. They are changed even by my attaching these comments to them, as, when "things fall apart," the nature and velocity of history's gyre is determined by the spin doctors and talking heads. And yet, as in the case of the video cameras at Tiananmen, I think some value lies in the activity.

The thing to remember is that some forgeries are works of art. After all, Gabriel Garcia Marquez has said of Gregory Rabassa's English translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that it reads better than the original Spanish! I cannot give you the poem itself any more than I can give you the Mona Lisa. But what I have strived to do throughout in making difficult choices among alternate translations is to find a middle ground between those which are word for word cribs of the original but in which the reproduced words lose their aura, and those which attempt to write a poem in English but in which that subjective entity, the author's presence, is "lost in the translation." The author may be dead, as Foucault has said, but as I see it there is no reason to trample on the corpse.

Yet there is always the hope for the translator that, through concentration and dedication, she or he might come to the point where the dead author guides the pen across the page like an invisible spirit moving the pointer on a Ouija board. The "aura," finally, is what makes the poem live, though nations and revolutions die out. Will the spirit that moved millions in Tiananmen Square and across China speak again? I can't say, though I hope. Does the author's spirit speak to and through you in the poems collected here? In this question you have the final authority. T.B.

## B I O G R A P H I C A L   N O T E S

BEI DAO is the pen name of Zhao Zhenkai. He was born in 1949 in Beijing, and was a construction worker for some years during the Cultural Revolution. During the Peking Spring of 1979 he started the famous underground literary magazine *Jintian* (Today) and soon became the leading poet of the 1980s. With the new acceptance of Chinese Modernism and the thaw in official censorship that came in the middle 1980s, he gained mainstream acceptance, editing an official magazine and becoming a member of the Chinese Writers' Association. During the summer 1989 Democracy Movement he was overseas at a writer's conference and has elected to remain in exile from China. His work has been widely translated and anthologized, and two collections of his poetry, *The August Sleepwalker* (1988) and *Old Snow* (1991), are available from New Directions. His fiction has also appeared with New Directions. He has just left Norway to live in Denmark. A new collection of his poems, translated by Donald Finkel, is forthcoming from New Directions.

YANG LIAN, one of the original Misty poets, is currently living in New Zealand, teaching at the University of Auckland. Born in Beijing, he was sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, where he began to write poetry. His two books are *The Ritual Spirit* and *The Spirit in the Wilderness*.

SHU TING is the pen name of Gong Peiyu, who was born in 1952. She was the leading woman poet in China in the 1980s. A southeast Fujian native, she was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution before she graduated from junior high school. Then she worked in a cement factory and later a textile mill. In 1979 she published her first poem and in 1983 was asked to be a professional writer by the Writers' Association,

Fujian Branch, of which she now is the deputy chairperson. Her collections of poetry include *Brigantines* (1982) and *Selected Lyrics of Shu Ting and Gu Cheng* (1985). She won the National Poetry Award in 1981 and 1983.

JIANG HE is the pen name of Yu Youze, who was born in 1949 in Beijing. A high school graduate, he was a factory worker for some years. He is one of the most influential young poets of the 1980s, often mentioned along with Bei Dao, Shu Ting, Gu Cheng, and Yang Lian as one of the five leading poets of the time. He currently lives in New York City.

GU CHENG, son of the army veteran poet Gu Gong, was born in 1956 in Beijing. After elementary school, he went to the coast country in Shandong where he started writing poetry at a very early age. In a self-imposed exile after the Tiananmen Square massacre, he now lives in New Zealand. He has had poems published in many magazines and anthologies. He is co-author of *Selected Lyrics by Shu Ting and Gu Cheng* (1985) and of *Selected Poems of Bei Dao and Gu Cheng* (Switzerland, 1981); a collection of his selected poems has appeared in English, published by Renditions Paperbacks of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (1990).

DUO DUO is the pen name of Li Shizheng. He was born in Beijing in 1951. At the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution he was separated from his parents and sent to the countryside. He returned to Beijing in 1971, where he worked on short stories, poetry, and screenplays, and for some time was a reporter for *The Peasant Daily*. *Looking Out from Death: From the Cultural Revolution to Tiananmen Square*, a collection of his poems in English translation, appeared with Bloomsbury Press in 1989. He is currently living in Holland, teaching at the University of Leiden.

MANG KE is the pen name of Jiang Shiwei. He was born in 1951 and is one of the best known younger poets of China. With Bei Dao he was co-editor of *Jintian* (Today), an underground literary journal that appeared in the "Beijing Spring" of 1979 and that the government closed down in 1980. He spent the Cultural Revolution, like so many others, in internal exile in the countryside, and then returned to Beijing. Unlike Bei Dao, his work was never officially recognized and has appeared in China substantially in underground mimeographed copies, or *samizdat*, to borrow a Russian term, though some poems have appeared in official magazines. His poems in translation have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Representations*, and *Nimrod*.

CHOU PING was born in Changsha City, Hunan Province, in 1957. He writes poetry both in Chinese and in English, and his poetry and translations of Chinese poetry into English have appeared in such American journals as the *Literary Review* and *Nimrod*. In 1983 he studied English language and literature in the Advanced Teachers' Training Program at Beijing Foreign Language University, where he studied poetry with Willis Barnstone. After that he taught at Xiangtang Teachers' College, Hunan Province, until fall 1991, when he enrolled in the Ph.D. program in English at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana.

XI CHUAN is a poet, translator, and a graduate of the English Literature program at Beijing University. His book of poems, *The Chinese Rose*, was published in 1991. He is working as an editor for *Globe Magazine* of the Xinhua News Agency. His poetry and his translations of Chinese poetry into English have appeared in *Nimrod* as well as a number of Chinese journals and anthologies. He was awarded the October Prize for literature by the *October Bimonthly*, one of the top Chinese literary magazines. In 1988 with some friends he started an unofficial poetry magazine named *Tendency*, which the Security Bureau closed down in 1992. Now he is co-editing another unofficial nationwide poetry magazine called *Modern Han Poetry*. His translations of the poetry of Ezra Pound and of Jorge Luis Borges have been published in Chinese magazines.

ZHANG ZHEN is a Shanghai native. After studying journalism at Fudan University, where she was involved with the Poetry Society, she emigrated to Sweden with her husband in 1983 and studied languages and filmmaking there. From 1985 to 1988, returning to China, she lived and worked in Beijing (at a foreign news bureau), where she was active in the literary and artistic scene. In the following three years she lived and studied in Japan, and is currently a graduate student in Comparative Literature at the University of Iowa. She started writing poetry in 1980, and more recently has translated poems from Swedish and English into Chinese. She is a regular contributor to *Jintian* (Today), the newly revived (and now foreign-based) Chinese language literary journal that was so important in the Beijing Spring of 1979 and that serves now as a prime forum for overseas Chinese writers.

TANG YAPING, born in 1962 in Sichuan, graduated from Sichuan University as a philosophy major in 1983. She is currently working as an editor at the Guizhou television station in the Southwest of China.

FEI YE, translator of Osip Mandelstam and other Russian poets into Chinese, comes from Heilungjian Province in Northeastern China. After trouble with the Chinese authorities he emigrated to Berkeley, California, to live with his wife, and founded the organization Chinese Writers in Exile. He is currently serving a five-year sentence in California for assault.

BEI LING, or Huang Bei Ling, is a graduate of Beijing University. He is one of the younger generation who took their esthetic cue from the Misty (*menglong*) school of poets. He recently emigrated to the United States, where he is currently poet-in-residence at Brown University. During the Beijing Spring of 1979 he was involved in the Democracy movement as a reporter for *Spring of Beijing*, an underground political magazine, and as an editor of *China Human Rights*, an underground magazine. He has edited two collections of contemporary Chinese poetry, published underground in 1984 and 1985, and is currently working on a personal memoir (titled *Underground*) of the activities of the Chinese intellectuals and artists who participated in the Democracy Wall movement in China. His work was first published in underground literary journals in China in 1979, especially in *Jintian* (Today), and a number of his poems in translation have appeared in *Nimrod* and in *New Tide: Contemporary Chinese Poetry*, a Canadian publication. His poetry collection *Today and Tomorrow* was published in China in 1988.

HA JIN was born in 1956 in Liaoning. The son of an army officer, he entered the People's Army early in the Cultural Revolution at a time when the schools were closed, worked as a telegraph operator for some time, then went back to school, earning a B.A. and an M.A. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Brandeis University in English and American literature. His book of poems, *Between Silences: A Voice from China*, appeared with the University of Chicago Press in 1990. He has also won a Pushcart Prize for his fiction.

OUT OF THE  
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