

**‘It’s A Lot Bigger Than In The Photographs’
Poetry Festival In Huang Shan, China, 16 – 21 October, 2007**

- Murray Edmond

On Huang Shan, Yellow Mountain, there is a rock shaped like a writing brush, with an ancient pine tree perched on its tip; the rock is called Li Bai’s pen. Before I left for Huang Shan and the meeting of English language and Mandarin language poets held there from 16 – 21 October 2007, Renee Liang said to me: ‘Huang Shan is the home of drunken poets, but don’t think you’ll be alone when you get up to watch the dawn rise over the pine-dotted stone peaks poking through the mist – 300 others will be elbowing you out of the way for their view.’ (As it happened, American poet Arthur Sze and English Arts Council representative Kate Griffin were the only ones with me as the sun finally cleared the mountain – it was a slow dawn and the crowds had dispersed to the hotel for breakfast.)

The hotel on the mountain is supplied by human labour carrying in food and linen and carrying it out. There is access from two gondola lifts and then a half hour walk to the hotel. At another construction site on the mountain, I saw a man and woman carrying bags of cement in on their shoulders, staggering under the dead weight. Other bearers carried people who could not walk (or had paid for the privilege of being carried) up and down the precipitous pathways of the mountain in bamboo chairs rigged to bamboo poles – two staggering men per chair. The Pamirs Poetry Festival company (12 poets, two interpreters, a couple of critics and an organiser) stayed one night on the mountain (where the poets began a mutual translation exercise) and next day walked for nearly seven hours up and down the stone and concrete paths which snake round and over the perpendicular landscape. Again we were not alone: I began to estimate that something close to the population of New

Zealand must be spread out over the many kilometres of track. I heard Korean voices and French voices, but most visitors were Chinese (different accents and different languages our interpreters confirmed), moving often in tour parties, each party with uniformly coloured hats with a guide in front carrying a mini-PA system. Raucous electronic voices flowed past all day. To visit Huang Shan is likely to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

The dominant pine on the mountain is *Pinus taiwanensis*. The Taiwan Pine. As a traditional image in Chinese painting and poetry, pines can be read as ‘strong, brave, and eternal’ to quote Deng Mingyan, who was part of the Festival and is writing a doctoral thesis on Nietzsche. She helped me with my translation of Zang Di’s poem about pine cones, the title of which I chose to render as ‘A Charm About Things’ and which another translator had chosen to call ‘A Poem on Things’ – but Zang Di was not happy with that translation by Jeanne Hong Zhang¹ and asked that it be translated again. Here’s what I came up with, working with Zang Di and Deng Mingyan and Shao Xueping (one of our two official interpreters):

Zang Di, A Charm About Things

On a windowsill, three pine cones.

The size of each
is almost the same.

But they vary from dark to light.

Each cone is larger than my closed fist,
in fact, not less than twice as big.
But I do not feel embarrassed. Already I see
my fist is a pagoda shaped like a cone.

The darkest is the one
which fell from the tree this year –
I hesitate in deciding when the two lighter ones fell,
but I know the colour of these two is not lighter than ash-gray time.

And I know that squirrels

have been inspired by such lightness
to make their own small fur coats.
The secret recipe of lightness remains unrevealed.

Each pine cone possesses its own source,
yet a small part of each origin
holds its mystery. Same thing with poetry.
Yet poetry won't be suffocated by this problem.

I am writing poetry, secretly in love
with the clear structure of the cones.
It asks me to take it to where I picked them up.
It asks to be placed on top of the Red Pine.

When he decided to break China's isolationist foreign policy in 1972, leading to Nixon's visit to China, Mao chose the *Pinus taiwanensis* pine as a rallying symbol, but renamed it (because of its Taiwanese associations?) as 'Welcome Guest Pine.' In a charming confluence of sound, Welcome Guest Pine in Mandarin sounds like the transliteration of 'Nixon.' *Pinus taiwanensis* exudes an organic acid which mixes with water and dissolves the rock on which it grows on Huang Shan, allowing the tree to create for itself new soil from bare rock.

The meeting of poets, under the title 2007 Pamirs Poetry Journey: The First Chinese English Poetry Festival brought together Chen Xianfa, Luo Ying, Wang Xiaoni, Yan Li, and Zang Di from China and Yang Lian from England with W.N.Herbert from Scotland, Robert Minhinnick from Wales, Odia Ofeimun from Nigeria, Pascale Petit from England, Arthur Sze from USA, and myself. The critic Tang Xiaodu was present throughout and the poet and essayist Xi Chuan came for just one day, but contributed a plenary address. This was a 'working' Festival with all present being active participants. The Festival was sponsored by the British Arts Council and the Pamirs Academy of Culture and Arts in Beijing, a cultural trust run by Luo Ying, who, as well as being a poet and graduate of Beijing University Literature Department is also a successful real estate businessman and mountaineer conquerer of Himalayan peaks. Luo Ying's biographical note in the book-sized publication which accompanied the Festival, claims that 'he longs . . . to be a

wandering lutenist'² – or perhaps that should be translated as 'he pines to be . . .'

Such extraordinary entrepreneurial patronage on behalf of poetry by someone who is also a participant seemed without precedent in the Western capitalist world. Luo Ying reminded me of a Polish entrepreneur and arts patron (and member of the Polish parliament until the 2007 election), Mr Palikot, who holds a doctoral degree in philosophy and owns a number of vodka factories, in one of which I saw a production of *Oedipus Rex* – the factory having its own theatre. In the space opened up by the collapse of communism – or its re-definition as capitalism without the democracy – a new kind of entrepreneur has at least a temporary reign. Luo Ying told us his latest book of poems will be about Chinese sexuality: 'The poet carnally desires poetry/ The city carnally desires the city,' he writes in Poem No 27 of his sequence 'Songs of Roaming in the City.'³ The hotel where we stayed for most of the Festival below Yellow Mountain itself, belonged to Luo Ying. The village where we held the first plenary session of the Festival was in the process of transformation into a cultural tourist site under Luo Ying's investment. We visited another tourist enterprise in development – the construction of a 'fake' Buddhist temple on an old real temple site. Presumably, once finished, the fake temple would be stocked with fake monks. The growth religion in Beijing is Catholicism, which has a semi-secret cult following among the middle classes who find in services held in apartments an outlet for low-level rebellion and input of spirituality.

The first plenary was conducted in an old calligraphy school building in Hongcun, the Song Dynasty Village Luo Ying is restoring, but which is in an extraordinarily good state of preservation. The session featured talks from Yang Lian and Xi Chuan. Temperamentally and philosophically Yang Lian and Xi Chuan present different kinds of poetic. Yang Lian is a true modernist proclaiming both the power of individual genius and the grand project, which his book-length poem *Yi*⁴ represents. Yang Lian's poetics can be summed up in his line 'one word sums up the world'.⁵ Xi Chuan is a post-modernist, distributor of fragments, rather than creator of wholes. As he said to me in Huang Shan, 'I love fakes.' His work is not as well-known outside China as Yang Lian's, but the piece below, 'Cards,' from 'Close Shots and Distant Views,' a collection of spurious definitions which Xi Chuan gave me in manuscript translated by Inara Cedrins and himself, gives some sense of his work:

The essence of inventing a game is to invent a set of rules

and to leave room for contingency in which to entertain the players. So far as playing cards is concerned, people actually play with the unknown, according to the rules. They are mysterious, the diamonds, hearts, spades and clover, and it is impossible that they stand for nothing. I guess those figures, the Caesar, Charlemagne, Alexander the Great, King David, Jacob's wife Rachel and the heroine Judith, do want to say something to the players. Each time when cards are shuffled again, history is again fabricated; and who dares to say that history is not a made-up story? Constant changes take place during the process of fabrication. Thus cards are also obtained to practise divination. Intellectuals take card-playing as the lowest game among games of intelligence, since it requires little intelligence and good luck is far more important. There are times when you win; your opponents do not praise the good work you have done, but the good luck you seem to have. That they are not convinced makes you unsatisfied. So you play again, and this time you might fall into the trough from the wave's crest. Isn't it the cards entertaining themselves by making vengeful mockery of the players?

Yang Lian and Xi Chuan were assigned the task of speaking about 'The aesthetical pressure of classical Chinese poetry forms and the possible contemporary breaking through.' Yang Lian said that 'the destiny of the Chinese language was in its writing system' and spoke of his attempts in *Yi* to create a new character, a kind of anti-character which defied the square box shape of most characters with its fluidity and circularity. Yang Lian's position was that the dynamic life of the classical tradition persisted, but that it also imposed on-going laws on the construction of even contemporary poetry. For him timelessness and totality are the space of writing – citing, as I had heard him do before, the lack of tense in Chinese verbs. Xi Chuan countered Yang Lian's position by saying that there never had been one totality called 'the classical.' He stressed that what is now called classical had been full of 'conflict and diversity and generation against generation.' He spoke of how the Song prose writer Han Yu had had to find his way out of Tang classicism. Then, going back to the Tang, he pointed out that Li Bai had been 'marginal' in his own time and that Du Fu wrote poetry in other than classical forms. He added that the cost of the success of Tang poetry was that the Tang produced no good thinkers or philosophers. Each reiterated their positions with Yang Lian emphasising the stability of the writing system and the 'eternal present moment of the character.' Xi Chuan argued that in China the 'rhetoric of tradition' had actually been used to support change, that the Tang had in fact been 'a revolution in poetry,' but that all renovation used a rhetoric

of the annihilation of difference. In China there had been two kinds of text: the classics and the annotations to the classics (the renovations).⁶

When general discussion began, Wang Xiaoni pointed out that this use of ‘the rhetoric of tradition’ meant that a continuing patriarchal system left no room for women poets still, despite Li Qingzhao’s triumph during the Song dynasty. I asked the question whether Yang Lian’s ‘New character’ ‘Yi’ might not be read as a version of Romanticism. The question of the arrival and distortion of Modernism into Chinese poetry and culture with the May 4th Movement began to be discussed. The May 4th Movement is the defining moment in modern Chinese history, when nationalism in the form of opposition to the betrayal over the Versailles settlement which gave the Shandong Peninsula to Japan, despite earlier promises (particularly from the USA), gave birth to a student protest movement which was anti-Confucian and to the New Culture Movement which saw the beginning of literature in vernacular Chinese.

After the morning plenary, poets split into two small groups for afternoon face to face meetings – as if from lecture to tutorial. These tutorials were mixed groupings of English and Mandarin poets. The two so-called ‘natural’ groups of poets at the Festival, English-writing and Mandarin-writing, were not of the same type, for reasons of history and politics. The Mandarin poets knew each other both personally and through their work and between, among and within them, it slowly became apparent, were various alliances and oppositions. The three poets from Great Britain knew each other and also knew Yang Lian, as I did. In fact Bill Herbert and Pascale Petit had both worked with Yang Lian on translations of his work and vice versa. But Arthur Sze, Odia Ofeimun and myself did not know each other nor the three from Great Britain, so there was really no coherence to the English language poets. I felt that if we had been together for another seven days, then alliances would have been formed outside the language groupings. But that is speculation beyond the event.

Yang Lian (b. 1955), Wang Xiaoni (b. 1955), and Yan Li (b. 1954) are all poets who came to prominence in association with the so-called ‘Misty’ Poets, though ‘Obscure’ is probably a better literary description, of whom Gu Cheng and Bei Dao are two of the most well-known representatives. From the vantage point of 2007, it is easy to see the differences between these poets. And one has to say that obscurity is not as obscure as it used to be, which is always the case with obscurity. Wang Xiaoni, from Northeast China but now teaching far south in Hainan, writes a poetry which realises an inner intensity: ‘I think good poetry comes with daring to, and being good

at, exposing the complex state of the human psyche with skill and relative accuracy.’⁷ Yan Li is also a painter, who spent some time in the USA but now lives in Shanghai. His work has an epigrammatic quality and the poem ‘Thanks for That’ which he had only just been given permission to publish after it was banned for some time, has more overt political engagement than Wang Xiaoni’s poetry: ‘The state has occupied all geographical surfaces/ I can only construct my inner world downward.’⁸ Yang Lian’s work is much better known to New Zealanders at least through Auckland University Press’s publication of *Unreal City: A Chinese Poet in Auckland* (ed. and trans Jacob Edmond and Hilary Chung) which collected Yang’s New Zealand poems from the period 1989 to 1993 when he lived in Auckland for lengths of time.

Younger poets Zang Di and Xi Chuan represent something of a reaction against the ‘Misty’ school. Often based in prose or seeking a plainer style, a ‘New Poetry Movement’ reacted against ‘obscurity’ while sustaining their own avant-gardism: ‘Now, twenty years on, the Obscure Poetry once attacked by the establishment for wanting to be non-political is dismissed by younger authors for being too political.’⁹ Van Crevel goes on to explain the circumstances which allow such a variety of styles and voices to exist while Misty poets such as Bei Dao and Yang Lian remain in exile: ‘Marginalization, however, has arguably benefited the avant-garde. Poetry recitals no longer draw the crowds of starved readers that came to listen in 1979 or 1980—but by and large, poetry is being left alone by political authorities, too. It is in that atmosphere that new, intensely personal voices have matured and made themselves heard.’

Robert Minhinnick and I spoke at the second ‘plenary’ session of the festival, but without the collaboration and internal coherence and debate of Yang Lian and Xi Chuan. It was a pleasure for us to deliver our presentations in a Ming Dynasty Family Hall in which Ang Lee shot some of the early scenes of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*. Our two separate and distinct talks did coincide over the question of threatened languages and their fate. Mandarin and English between them must constitute the world’s two leading languages – the one spoken by the largest number of people, the other mostly widely distributed as a lingua franca across the surface of the globe. Languages such as Maori and Welsh stand at the other extreme: tiny in their number of speakers, threatened by extinction, but both fighting politicised rearguard actions with notable success.

My own talk drew on Roman Jakobson's idea of the axes of language, the metaphoric axis of similarity and the metonymic axis of combination, in an analogical fashion. Mandarin and English are languages which tend towards a global dominance and therefore a homogenising of human languages. They are the two languages you will hear most often spoken on the streets of central Auckland. Analogically, Jakobson's idea of metaphor stresses its quality of similarity, of likeness, and therefore its verticality as an axis. Metaphors stack things in the same pile. Metonymy places things alongside each other on an axis of horizontality. The dream of one language and its consequent vision of human sameness and commonality has haunted modernist poetics. Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, a common reference point throughout the Festival, in their multi-lingual attempt to stack the shards and fragments of human culture in one mind, is certainly an excellent example of this, articulated in Pound's intention to 'write a paradise.'¹⁰ The dream of the realm of one language points towards something not yet known, the signs of language point to some better way or some greater knowledge which lies beyond, is therefore transcendent of language. The end-point of this search for a common language – a transcendental knowledge of pure understanding (Pound's 'the great ball of crystal'¹¹) – often turns out to be silence, whether Beckett's rigidly self-imposed silence, or Pound's admission of the failure of the dream: 'I cannot make it cohere.'¹² (Canto CXVI). If language does not disappear into silence or paradise or despair, then the alternative of a globalised sameness could be either perfected coercion and tyranny (as dystopic visions have warned) or the endless flatness of Debord's 'society of the spectacle.'¹³

In the horizontal axis of combination, the metonymic mode, no correspondence to a spiritual world is postulated and any 'transcendence' is horizontal, it is simply language itself. This realm is democratic and, in terms of Western philosophy, anti-Platonic. In this realm of combination, the word is the thing itself, language is its material (sound, writing). Could it be here that, analogically, the many languages, including those presently under threat (which I have been told by linguists constitute 90% of the world's languages) could co-exist? Yet this proposes a huge effort of altruistic will without economic rationalisation. Jakobson's axes are not mutually exclusive, but in fact parts of a whole - poetry works both metaphorically and metonymically, and big languages themselves rapidly break down into dialects and form new internal borders, as is evident in English now. As was

noted by Max Weinreich in 1945, specifically in reference to Yiddish, ‘A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.’ (Appropriately the actual origin of this statement remains uncertain, Weinreich pointing out he published it but did not coin it.¹⁴) The very terms Jakobson uses are in themselves ‘metaphors.’ One can see his metaphor as representing the ends of a continuum (metaphor) rather than two discrete and opposed forces (metaphor). In Jakobson’s thinking, poetry maps the axis of similarity onto the axis of combination.

In the afternoon following the second plenary session, we met in two groups in the hotel grounds to read, question and discuss each other’s work. In a sustained tutorial one poem by each poet present was subjected to scrutiny. Arthur Sze’s poem ‘Ox-head Dot’ was one we looked at that afternoon. The title refers to one of the common kinds of mistakes beginning calligraphers make: ‘the eight defects when a beginning/ calligrapher has not bone to a stroke.’¹⁵ In the instant of ink applied to paper, the one moment you have to get it right, you must have ‘bone to a stroke,’ implying a sense of sureness of touch. Where then does chance, accident, enter the world? Does it exist at all? The poem at first proposes that indeed it is a cause and effect universe, without happy or unhappy chance: ‘bronze slivers from a gimbal nut/ jam the horizontal stabilizer to a jet,/ make it plunge into the Pacific Ocean’ (lines 9 – 11). Yet the poem turns round the idea of the deterministic universe by proposing a value for error: ‘yet, sometimes/ in the darkest space is a white fleck,/ ox-head dot.’ This image of the ox-head dot as a small beacon in the dark is multiplied when a match is struck to reveal ‘glowing moths loosed into air,’ a proliferation of seemingly arbitrary ox-head dots in constant motion.

Arthur Sze occupied an interesting position in the Festival. He was born and brought up in New York in a Mandarin-speaking house and studied classical Chinese at Berkeley. He said to me that when he arrived at the Festival he was picking up about 30% of what was being said in Mandarin, and by the end of the week this had increased to 50%. He was the one English-writing poet who had some substantial knowledge of Mandarin. His great uncle had been one of the Chinese representatives who had refused to sign the Paris Peace Treaty of 1919 because of the betrayals of Chinese interests to Japan. It was the student protests of that time which influenced the Chinese delegation’s decision to refuse to sign and which led to the May 4th Movement and its slogans of ‘struggle for sovereignty’ and ‘throw out the warlord traitors.’ At the time of the May 4th Movement there was no character with which to

write the concept of a 'Movement' of a political kind. I was told two stories at the Festival about the finding of this character. Yang Lian told me that activists wishing to publish a pamphlet stating their demands telegraphed Japan to ask which Chinese character they used for a political movement, since Japan had many political movements, and a reply was received the same afternoon. One of our interpreters, Wang Yan told me that the character was first used in an elegy printed in a newspaper which was written for those killed in May 4th Movement protests. Wang Yan also said to me that he thought China had never been so unified in its entire history as it was now and certainly what political slogans were on display (and these were comparatively modest and few) were totally nationalistic rather related to party politics or leadership. The twentieth century history of China, from the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and the May 4th Movement of 1919 to the present could be read as a bloody story of unification; its potential dread now, as with the *United States*, the sometime loss of that hard-won unity.

I was called away from the poetry tutorial in the hotel grounds to give an interview for an arts programme on Anhui Province television. Here the question was political: 'Why is modern poetry so incomprehensible to ordinary people?' Feeling that a silly question should be answered seriously, I said that I thought there were professors who had difficulty with it (I could have named a few!), but many ordinary working people greatly enjoyed modern poetry. The same question was raised again three days later, after our visit to the top of the mountain, when the poets and the English students of Huang Shan University had a face-to-face meeting with talks, readings and questions as well as small group discussions. The same question this time was asked by the local Party Secretary, who was present for the occasion. One could sense the ritual nature of this question.

In fact modern difficult poetry is thriving in China, but, as elsewhere, seldom attracts the attention it did during the 'gung-ho banner-waving, collectivist Ismism of the 1980s' as Maghiel van Crevel puts it in his essay 'The Horror of Being Ignored and the Pleasure of Being Left Alone: Notes on the Chinese Poetry Scene.'¹⁶ The suppression in 1989 has long since been transcended by a rampant commercialisation of culture in urban life in which poetry has not been able to compete. Since the Misty/Obscure poets of the 1980s there have been movements defined by such 'popular genealogical catchwords as . . . "Post-Obscure," "Third Generation," "Fourth Generation," [and] "Post-70",'¹⁷ not to mention a growing Women's Poetry scene,

initiated by the writing of Zhai Yongming, but now proliferating into an abundance of styles. But poetry itself has been confined and the title of Maghiel van Crevel's essay which I have quoted from above poses the difficult question for present-day Chinese poets and poetry: which is preferable, 'the horror of being ignored' or 'the pleasure of being left alone'?

The Pamirs Poetry Journey provided the pleasure of being left alone: poets together with poets. It eschewed the performance and appearance aspect of most festivals for the meeting over work and ideas. In this it was like the 2006 Bluff Festival and the 2005 Fugacity gathering in Christchurch held by the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre. Important to the construction of this event was the generous presence of critic Tang Xiaodu, editor, professor, researcher and poet himself, who has devoted the past 30 years to the study and understanding of contemporary Chinese poetry. The Pamirs Festival was a small event, but perhaps the long-term impact of such a festival might be greater than that provided by the parade of performers at occasions such as 'writers' weeks' at big festivals. As we approached Yellow Mountain itself, soaring in our tiny gondola over the gigantic valleys and sheer, bare rock faces, Pascale Petit looked down (and up) at the landscape which so evoked Chinese painting, and exclaimed: 'It's a lot bigger than in the photographs.' And so it was.

Notes:

¹ Jeanne Hong Zhang's translation of Zang Di's poem was printed on p. 125 of the book which was published in conjunction with the Festival: *2007 Pamirs Poetry Journey: The First Chinese-English Poetry Festival (2007 Session)* (Beijing: Pamirs Academy of Culture and Arts, 2007). This 140 page book contained poems by all the participating poets.

² *Pamirs Poetry Journey*, p. 85.

³ *Pamirs Poetry Journey*, p. 89.

⁴ Yang Lian, *Yi*, trans. Mabel Lee (Kobenhavn/Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2002).

⁵ *Masks and Crocodiles*, trans. Mabel Lee (Sydney: U of Sydney, 1990), p. 112.

⁶ The quotations I am using here are from my verbatim notes taken down from the interpreter at the time.

⁷ Wang Xiaoni's statement, first published in *Fujian Literature* in 1981 can be found on her site in 'China – Poetry International Web' at:

http://china.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw/cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=974

⁸ *Pamirs Poetry Journal*, p. 105. Trans. Denis Mair.

⁹ Maghiel van Crevel, 'Matter Over Mind – On Xi Chuan's Poetry'

www.thedrunkenboat.com/poetrypage17.html

¹⁰ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1986), p.802.

¹¹ Pound, p. 795.

¹² Pound, p. 796.

¹³ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_language_is_a_dialect_with_an_army_and_navy

¹⁵ *Pamirs Poetry Journey*, p.67.

¹⁶ <http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/pubs/vancrevel.html>

¹⁷ *ibid.*



Plenary session in Family Hall in Nanping Village, setting for filming of scenes in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*.



Tutorial session, Zhong Cheng Mountain Villa. Left to right: Zang Di, Pascale Petit (partly obscured), Murray Edmond, Shao Xueping (interpreter), Yan Li, Arthur Sze, Yang Lian.



Poets on Huang Shan. Left to right standing: Odia Ofeimun, William Herbert, Robert Minhinnick, photographer from Beijing, Shao Xueping (interpreter), Yang Lian, Murray Edmond, Wang Xiaoni, Zang Di, Pascale Petit, Zhao Si (organiser), Tang Xiaodu (critic and poet), Kate Griffin (British Arts Council), Arthur Sze. Left to right in front: Yan Li, Wang Yan (interpreter). Photo: Yan Li.



Murray Edmond on Huang Shan. Photo: Yan Li.