



Sinophone verses from lyrical (e)scapes: an account of poetics and poïesis in distress

by Simona Gallo

ABSTRACT: The initial outburst of the pandemic, in early 2020, forced China and the rest of the world into seclusion, anxiety, social alienation. In the Sinosphere, a human response to the aporia of isolation is the lyrical production, a prosperous literary activity through which the individual gives shape to a collective consciousness.

The present paper examines a collection of Sinophone verses sprung from the Covid-19 threat and dismay, as a psychic necessity to re-organize the perception of the outer world. Specifically, it studies a body of fifty-two poems composed by twelve lyrical Sinophone voices, published in Chinese in a spring number of the respected literary journal *Jintian* 今天. This investigation primarily focuses on the cultural, aesthetic, and psychological value of a lyrical polyphony embodied by unchained Sinophone voices, which sing against the background of a common predicament. In parallel, it reads the collection as a collective memory and a cultural repository, engendered by a narrative projection of experience: to that end, it combines a narratological approach with the observation of certain lyrical features of a “poetics of distress”.

KEY WORDS: Sinophone poetry; Covid-19 pandemic; distress; collective consciousness; cultural repository



WHAT POETRY IS, WHAT POETRY DOES

诗的定义
在瘟疫挨门逐户
灭门绝户的白色恐怖中
人努力辨认自己细小的声音
(2020.2.16)
"Definition of Poetry"
In the white terror of
Plague annihilating people door by door
Humans try to recognize their own tiny voices
(February 16, 2020)

With this three-line poem, created and self-translated in the United States at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic,¹ Mai Mang 麦芒² (pen name of Huang Yibing) provides an intriguing outlook on the age-old dilemma of "what is poetry". This concise yet dense verse powerfully sketches a compound picture of its ontology: first, poetry is the shelter as well as the guiding light amidst the turmoil; second, poetry is primarily a voice of the individual, but ultimately a human (and thus, intrinsically collective) experience. In addition, this poem artfully abstracts the theoretic foundation and the field of investigation of the present study, which aims at looking into the description of pandemic disquiet through a Sinophone lyrical polyphony.

As a matter of fact, the urge to seek refuge in the aesthetic realm turns out to be a natural impulse in a time of crisis—a moment when creating becomes a therapeutic, cathartic act that helps one process the multifarious psychological events (Turner). As scientific research has indeed proved that writing encourages the reorganization of inner thoughts and can reduce emotional anguish (Baikie and Wilhelm), it is far from surprising that a time of crisis is also documented in journals and described by poetry, two of the most effective patterns for rewording memories, distress, and perceptual consciousness of external events. In this respect, it should be reminded that what is best related to the re-interpretation of the human experience and to the recoding of meanings is the semiotic practice of narration (White 1).

¹ One of the "four poems" created for the cycle "Corona Conversations—East and West" organized by the Cuny forum of The City University of New York.

² A respected scholar and critic, who also established himself as a poet in the 1980s. He was born and educated in China, and he graduated and received his Ph.D. in Chinese Literature from Beijing University. At the beginning of the 1990s, he moved to the United States and in 2001 he obtained his second Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of California. He is currently Associate Professor of Chinese and Curator of the Chu-Griffis Asian Art Collection at Connecticut College, and a bilingual contemporary poet.



To that end, the Covid-19 pandemic is no different. China has witnessed the mushrooming of diaristic records together with a flourishing production of lyrical accounts, stemming from casual as well as professional writers. As Federico Picerni reminds us, the well-known Fang Fang's 方方 Wuhan Diary is only one among the myriad of "pandemic products", whereas what he has christened "pandemic poetry" (124-25) occupies a prominent position and hence deserves scientific attention.

LYRICAL (E)SCAPES: BODY AND MIND OF THE RESEARCH

Although not disregarding the relevance of the prose memoir, the present paper focuses on the poetic accounts, intended as the embodiedness of a subjective experientiality in reaction to the unsettling encounter with a global plague. Specifically, it observes a body of poetry composed in Chinese during the first months of 2020 and selected by the spring issue (n. 125) of the "new" *Jintian* 今天 / *Today*,³ defined as a legacy of "the first underground literary journal in Maoist China", as well as the major storefront for experimental and avant-garde poetry in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and a "sanctuary for a freedom of expression" (Yeh, "Light" 380). Re-born outside of China in 1990 (ten years after the repression of the government) the "new" *Jintian* 今天 / *Today* (hereinafter *Jintian*) can no longer be considered an unofficial publication (Van Crevel, "Unofficial" 29-30), but preserves its vital features as its editorial board still consists of liberal-minded poets.⁴ The following lines excerpted from Bei Dao's 北岛⁵ iconic poem *Xuangao* 宣告 (Declaration, 1980?) might in this connection remind us of the journal's "ethical manifesto":

³ Founded in 1978 by Bei Dao 北岛 (b. 1949) and Mang Ke 芒克 (b. 1951), the Beijing-based *Jintian* was the first underground literary journal in Maoist China. Its appearance coincided with "the outburst of vitality in poetry, and became "the major source of inspiration" and a privileged target of criticism" (Yeh "Lamp"; "Cult" 51). At the time, *Jintian* was the fountainhead of *Menglongshi* 朦胧诗 (Obscure Poetry or Misty poetry), of avantgarde experimental poetry, as well as a landmark for Chinese literary history. It was closed by the authorities only two years later, but in re-established outside China after June Fourth by Bei Dao and other driving forces, hence becoming "a thing of not just the past but the future, [...] especially in the first few years, with an appreciable if contested measure of literary-exilic identity" (Van Crevel, "Unofficial" 29-30). *Jintian's* current webpage (<https://www.jintian.net/>) offers open-access versions of all the volumes issued since 2003.

⁴ Such as the prominent poetic voices of Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 (1956), who is currently *Jintian's* president, Han Dong 韩东 (1961), Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (1956), and the exiled poets Yang Lian 杨炼 (1955), Wang Jiaxin 王家新 and, of course, Bei Dao, who contributed to reviving the journal *Jintian* from Sweden, as a forum for Chinese writers abroad, serving as chief editor.

⁵ Former co-founder of *Jintian* and the current chief editor, Bei Dao (pen name of Zhao Zhenkai 赵振开) was indeed one of the first to reassert "the individuality of poet in poetry" (Yeh, "Cult" 60-61), and he is now one of the most acclaimed and influential Sinophone poets: his work has been translated into more than thirty languages. Banned from China as a literary and political dissident after the Tiananmen Square facts, during which he was in Berlin, he became an exiled voice from Europe and an American



我并不是英雄
 在没有英雄的年代里，
 我只想做一个人。 [...] ⁶
 I am no hero.
 In an age without heroes,
 I just want to be a human being ⁷

The declared rejection of the official role of the poet and the independence of the journal from Mainland China, ergo from the official (*guanfang* 官方) establishment, is indeed a key factor as it theoretically discharges its literature from any role within the institutional power. On that account, it concedes us to leave aside the sociopolitical aspects of the responsibility of the poets during the pandemic, which have already been competently discussed by Picerni in his essay about “pandemic poetry”. And accordingly, it allows for a closer observation of poetry as a literary phenomenon driven by historical and psychological forces. As a typical human manifestation: this is even truer for China, where “poetry occupies a hallowed position” (Lupke 1). In this respect, it may be worth reminding that in the post-Mao era, a proper “cult of poetry”,⁸ as named by Michelle Yeh (“Cult”), took hold and the poetic practice captivated variegated audiences and channels, including unofficial journals, websites, and blogs.

The object of this research coincides with the special section *Chun zhi ji: Gengzi yishi zhuanji* 春之祭——庚子疫诗专辑 (Rite of Spring: a collection of a *gengzi*-year⁹ pandemic poetry), composed by twelve lyrical voices and fifty-two works, indexed as follows:

| | | | |
|------|----|-------|---------------------------------|
| 邹波 | 七首 | p. 4 | (Zou Bo, 7 poems) ¹⁰ |
| 欧阳江河 | 两首 | p. 21 | (Ouyang Jianghe, 2 poems) |
| 李建春 | 六首 | p. 25 | (Li Jianchun, 6 poems) |
| 梁小曼 | 两首 | p. 31 | (Liang Xiaoman, 2 poems) |

naturalized citizen in 2009. He now resides in Hong Kong, where he also teaches Humanities at the Chinese University.

⁶ Originally published in 1986, in *Bei Dao shixuan* 北岛诗选 (Selected Poems by Bei Dao), and now available on *Jintian's* official website.

⁷ As Lupke observes, “Whereas contemporary poetry in Hong Kong and Taiwan evolved in a manner reasonably clear of unwanted political attention, in mainland China poetry was pressed into the service of the state” (1).

⁸ By “cult of poetry”, Michelle Yeh refers to “the phenomenon and the concomitant discourse in the 1980s and the 1990s that bestows poetry with religious significance and cultivates the image of the poet as the high priest of poetry”. Therefore, it denotes a sort of “religious poetics that is based on the worship of poetry and that inspires a religious-like devotion among poets” (Yeh, “Cult” 52-53).

⁹ A “*gengzi* 庚子 year” in the lunar calendar indicates a thirty-seventh year in the sexagenary cycle, thus implicitly 2020 (from 25 January 2020 to 11 February 2021). Remarkably, according to the traditional Chinese cosmology of the classic *Santian zhengfa jing* 三天正法经, a *gengzi* year is when “both propitious and unpropitious signs will appear”, as underlined by Stephen R. Bokenkamp and Peter S. Nickerson (396).

¹⁰ The translations in brackets are mine.



| | | | |
|-----|----|-------|--------------------------|
| 蓝蓝 | 两首 | p. 33 | (Lan Lan, 2 poems) |
| 张执浩 | 九首 | p. 37 | (Zhang Zhihao, 9 poems) |
| 翟永明 | 五首 | p. 46 | (Zhai Yongming, 5 poems) |
| 陈东东 | 一首 | p. 56 | (Chen Dongdong, 1 poem) |
| 宋明炜 | 五首 | p. 59 | (Song Mingwei, 5 poem) |
| 王家新 | 五首 | p. 71 | (Wang Jiaxin, 5 poems) |
| 宋子江 | 一首 | p. 76 | (Song Zijiang, 1 poem) |
| 廖伟棠 | 六首 | p. 79 | (Liu Waitong, 6 poems) |

Another rationale for the adoption of this specific group of texts deals with the calibre of the contributors, namely professional intellectuals, authors, and translators of the “Sinosphere”¹¹ who seem to share an unfettered literary vein. In addition, the selection offers a substantial degree of heterogeneity, as it collects works written between February and April from three sociocultural milieus, namely Wuhan, China outside of Wuhan, and outside of China, thereby bestowing a rather prismatic representation of the contingency from diverse (lyrical) landscapes.

The present paper intends to introduce this body of poems (“Rite of Spring”, simply referred to as *Jintian*) as a cultural repository performing as historical record, in that the meaningful picture of the psychic displacement can be read as a choral narrative of the COVID pandemic distress. In my approach, I call upon the theoretical framework outlined by the narratologist Monika Fludernik, who in her cognitive narratological structure explains that “many lyric texts—though they do not tell a story—purvey hints of experientiality¹² in the intermittent evocation of a specific human consciousness embodied in a specific time and place” (“Natural” 259).¹³ She describes narrativity as a quality attributed to the text by the reader rather than intrinsic to the text itself (*Introduction* 109), also suggesting that narrativization is brought forth by the hermeneutical process (*Towards*).

Bearing in mind that the postulate of poetry and narrative as two different entities has been widely demystified, I will read my corpus as a narrativized lyrical scape by scrutinizing three momentous constituents: milieus, characters, and events-related consciousness.

¹¹ A complex concept and subject matter currently debated among scholars, and closely investigated by Cambria Sinophone World Series, headed by Professor Victor H. Mair.

¹² The concept “experientiality” is described as a literary phenomenon reflecting a “cognitive schema of embodiedness that relates to human existence and human concerns” (*Towards* 9)

¹³ Another worthy aspect of Fludernik’s cognitive narratological framework is the idea of “narrativity qua experientiality without the necessity of any actantial groundwork” (*Towards* 9), in other words, “there can therefore be narratives without plot, but there cannot be any narratives without a human (anthropomorphic) experiencer of some sort at some narrative level” (*Towards* 9-10).



THE MILIEUX: BETWEEN REAL AND IMAGINED SURROUNDINGS

The traditional categories of time and space materialize throughout the corpus in their concrete and envisaged dimensions, which often appear entwined and are sometimes even indiscernible. First, it is worth highlighting that some paratextual notes help locate the verses in a tangible location¹⁴ and timeframe. Many poems, in fact, close with a date, be it a conventional reference or an allusion to the Chinese lunar calendar, as in the following instances:

于正月十九 (*Jintian 27*)
On the 19th day of the first month (of the lunar year)¹⁵

于正月廿四 (*Jintian 28*)
On the 24th day of the first month (of the lunar year)

In a few cases, a simultaneous reference to both these perspectives occurs:

于正月十四，2020.2.7 (*Jintian 26*)
On the 14th day of the first lunar month

Even more compelling is the transfer to a figurative level, where the “first month of the lunar year” shifts from a statement to a synecdoche, like in the following lines by Song Mingwei 宋明炜:

二月还没开始，已经骤然结束
刻骨寒冷的诗意融化在风中 (*Jintian 59*)
February, not yet begun, has abruptly ended
Ice-cold poetry melting in the wind

February is then associated with fleeting and loss, the epitome of misery as suggested by Wang Jiaxin 王家新 in the following poem:

“二月。墨水足够用来痛哭。”
帕斯捷尔纳克的这句诗，
这几天不断被人引用； (*Jintian 71*)
“February. Get ink, shed tears.”
A line by Pasternak
unceasingly quoted these days

¹⁴ Such as *Yu Duolunduo* 于多伦多, “from Toronto” (*Jintian 19*).

¹⁵ Unless otherwise specified, the translations are mine, I am thus fully responsible for any poor translating choice.



Quite frequently, this stage converges with a pale glimmering of spring, given the fact that, according to the Chinese tradition, the first lunar year inaugurates the spring season (*Chunjie* 春節). Such natural rebirth feels deeply contradictory in the fact of such mournful surroundings, as depicted by the line below:

新草已掙脫枯草迎到鞋面，而无欣喜可言。(Jintian 27)
fresh grass has sprung out over the withered to greet the instep, miserably.

In this connection, two basic attitudes take place: either the hopeful longing for a return to life or a nihilistic portrait of an unsympathetic *other*.¹⁶ A meaningful example is offered by Li Jianchun's 李建春 poem *Zaochun: dao Li Wenliang* 早春——悼李文亮医生 (*Jintian* 25):

早春
——悼李文亮医生
我抑住悲惜，
尽量延长察看这早春寒林的时间。
昨夜九点多至凌晨二点的震动，祈祷，呼吁，
在钟万山之灵秀的一片竹林中悬挂。
[...]
也有灰喜鹊、麻雀的吵叫，黄鹂细弱兴奋，
从荆棘丛中窥见晨白。
农人开门吐痰，他们与这片丘陵一样荒凉。
远山浅淡迷蒙，边线需要分辨。
樟树、桂树茂盛的本性，不如松树的针叶珍贵，
松树的皴皮
龙鳞片片，难以言述的民族气质。(Jintian 25)
“The Early Spring: Elegy for Dr. Li Wenliang”
I held back my sorrowful pity,
tried hard to lengthen my observation of the cold woods in the early spring.
The stimulation, the prayers, the appeals from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. last night,
hovered over a small bamboo grove in divinely spirited mountains.
[...]
There were also twitters of azure-winged magpies, quarrels of sparrows, and
faint but agitated throats of orioles, who glimpsed the morning-whites from the thorn-bush.
Farmers opened their gates and spat outside, as desolate as these hills.
One needed to look hard to tell the lines of misty hills in distance.
The luxuriant nature of Camphor tree and sweet Osmanthus was less revered as that of pine
trees,
barks rugged,
resembling dragon scales, a disposition of a people that has lost their language.¹⁷

¹⁶ See, for instance, Zou Bo's poem *Lichun fugong* 立春复工 (Beginning of Spring: back to work), p. 13, and Zhang Zhihao's *Erduo neng kanjian de* 耳朵能看见的 (What ears can see), p. 43.

¹⁷ Translated by Yan Zhou.



The natural environment stands then as a major locus of representation and symbolic narrative itself, as it functions as an allegoric transposition of the circumstances. Nonetheless, other lyrical settings locate the experiences: some of them perform as desired atmospheres of relief, such as a place of memory and a faraway home, but also a chimerical haven of rest and serenity, as depicted by Zhang Zhihao's 张执浩 poem *Jielai de shi* 借来的诗 (Borrowed poetry).

借你的单车去东湖转一转
那里也有樱花开在樱园 (*Jintian* 42)
Riding your bike around the East Lake in Wuhan
Around the cherry blossoms in Cherry Blossom Park

In parallel, the latitude of the scenery is extended to visible places, such as hospitals and graveyards (*Jintian* 10, 12, 33) as well as places hidden from sight, e.g., hell (*diyu* 地狱), also sometimes referred to as the underworld (*Jintian* 83), "Hades", or the land of the "Styx" (*Jintian* 32, 50). Another relevant arena highlighted by poetry is the human body as a dynamic site of life, a vivacious succession of happenings dominated by the relentless flow of time, even by the ferocious action of the disease. The body is then pictured as a beset area, like the besieged city of Wuhan, recalled and represented by most of the poets, among whom I quote the woman poet Lan Lan, from *Gengzi nian wuyin yue ji* 庚子年戊寅月记 (Records of *wuyin* month¹⁸ of *gengzi* year):

城市，成为弥漫消毒水气味的
医院和殡仪馆，大街空无一人 (*Jintian* 33)
The city, transformed into hospitals and funeral homes.
Pervasive smell of sanitizer. Not a soul in sight.

The "infected" city of Wuhan (*ganran de chengshi* 感染的城市) is indeed not only pictured as a crucial coordinate, but also as a character, and a metonymy:

W 城的口 怎么说才好？
它现在紧紧闭上 放在以前
它可大张着 准备吞进万物 (*Jintian* 47)
And what to say about W's mouth?
Now sealed, on to the past
Now wide open, prepared to devour everything

As we read in the above-quoted lines from "W 城的阴影" (W-city shadow), a poem by Zhai Yongming 翟永明, Wuhan (that is W 城, the "W-city") is transfigured into a lively anthropomorphized agent playing an active role. This is also the case with a number of other elements, discussed hereinafter.

¹⁸ That is, the first solar month of a *gengzi* lunar year.



THE CHARACTERS: AGENTS AND TROPES

Amidst a rich corollary of (what I here conventionally name) “characters”, we could identify the two categories of “heroes” and “anti-heroes”, to use familiar language, or the victims and the oppressors, flanked by dispassionate arbiters. Quite predictably, the enemy par excellence is the virus, portrayed by Zhai Yongming as a devious behemoth (*jiaohua* 狡猾; *jushou* 巨兽) and an unmerciful, blind executioner:

病毒不辨地理，不分贵贱，无差异杀人 (*Jintian* 53)

The virus does not differentiate between areas, between the rich and the poor. It kills indiscriminately.

It is also pictured as a vicious and sly creature, aided by unsuspected accomplices, including bats, evil birds, and omens of death. In Liang Xiaoman’s 梁小曼 words:

是无数的蝙蝠冲入
巨浪涌向悬崖的滑壁
被黑色之翅运送海平面
颤动的浮光掠影
[...]

千万只蝙蝠飞起，一如剧烈的痛 (*Jintian* 31)

Innumerable bats rush in
tremendous waves towards the treacherous precipice
brought by black wings
flickering shadows
skimming over the surface of the sea
[...]

Countless bats rising, like a fierce pain

Once the infection has breached and infringed on the human bodies, no defence may be vigorous enough against this invader—as we read. The most common measures, namely isolation, social distancing, and sanitisation, force standoffish behaviour and engender a dreadful atmosphere since humanity is also restrained and hidden by a disposable sanitary shield. The mask acts indeed as a fence screening off words, expressions, feelings, “the smell of fear” (*Jintian* 53), and even the human identity. Underneath the mask (*kouzhao* 口罩, a word which occurs twenty times throughout the collection), everybody becomes nobody:

口罩的问题是：它遮蔽的面孔
比遮不住的天空还要广阔 (*Jintian* 23)

The problem with the mask: it covers a face
much wider than an undraped sky



[...] 在层层口罩后面
我和我周围的人，是被堵住嘴也失去脸的人 (*Jintian 34*)
Behind layers of masks
Me and the people around me, gagged humans who lost their face

The counterattack is performed by the “squad” of the finest warriors, globally recognized in the medical staff, the white-clothed impartial judges who embody the “paradox of creation” and the Charon of our times, as suggested by Lan Lan in *Zhongguo yisheng* 中国医生 (Chinese doctor), opening as follows:

中国医生 你好，科斯岛东亚的弟子
你好，希波克拉底蛇杖的接力人
你的双脚常在阴间的门槛外踟蹰
你的白色衣领有消毒液的肃静 (*Jintian 35*)
Dear Chinese doctor, disciple of Kos from East Asia
Dear guardian of the Rod of Asclepius
Your feet often wander outside the gates of the underworld
Your white collar bears the solemn silence of the antiseptic

The quintessential hero is, of course, personified by Doctor Li Wenliang 李文亮 (*Jintian 33*), “the foremost Savior who died first” (*jiuren de ren xian si le* 救人的人先死了), to whom several poets pay a lyrical tribute, including Li Jianchun, Liang Xiaoman, Zhang Zhihao and Zou Bo 邹波.

Between life and death also lies poetry, which is “the morning’s ear” (*Zaochen de erduo* 早晨的耳朵), root and route of humanity:

死神昨晚从我们中间带走了
一个人——这不是诗，因为
死者戴着口罩，死神戴上了面具
诗歌必须正视死者的五官 (*Jintian 5*)
Last night the god of death took from us
a person—This is not poetry, for
the deceased wore a facemask, death a mask
Poetry must confront the features of the dead

The dead, or better the “countless dead” (*wushu ge sizhe* 无数个死者, *Jintian 29*), who stay alive on the day dedicated to the dead, *Qingmingjie* 清明节 (*Jintian 55, 74-75*), are the victims of a harsh spring, as we read in Zhang Zhihao’s lines:

我可以牢记这个春天但
我记不住这个春天落下的
花瓣，太多的花瓣
白天落不完
晚上继续落



有时候我会站在树下
无限怜惜地望着她 (*Jintian 44*)
I can remember this spring, but
Of this spring I cannot remember the fallen
Petals, too many petals
Falling endlessly at day
Keep falling at night
At times I would stand under a tree
Look towards her with infinite pity

On Earth, the mourners can only rely on the memories (*Jintian 65*), face this cruel life, and endure as a sort of retaliation for surviving. Particularly striking is a quotation from Ovid, proposed by Liang Xiaoman:

你将与哀悼的人们为侣。
——奥维德 (*Jintian 32*)
“you will mourn for others, and enter sorrows”
- Ovid

Quite interestingly, “the sky” (*Tian 天*), and more commonly God (*Shangdi 上帝*), are pictured as unresponsive witnesses of a human tragedy, sometimes even ruthless and cold-blooded:

这是我们时代的钥匙
但天空根本也是无助 (*Jintian 16*)
Here is the key to our times
Yet, even the Sky is helpless

面具幻化你，卡珊德拉

无人听佢，神将训诫
失忆的子民，腐食的凶鸦
冥河咽喉已封锁，虚空境内
谁在哀泣失去的亲人
咬开这石榴，破雪淹没肺腑 (*Jintian 31*)
the mask transforms you, Cassandra

no one listens, God will rebuke
his forgetful people, ferocious ravens feeding on waste
the throat of the Styx has been strangled, who in the void
are mourning the loss of loved ones
bite into the pomegranate, mutilated snowflakes deluge the bottom of the heart

Pietà
四首哀歌和一支短曲
How comes it thus? Unfold, Celestial Guide,
And whether here the Race of man will end.
——Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Vol. 11 (*Jintian 59*)



[...] 你指示上帝遗忘的地图 (*Jintian 84*)
Pointing out God's forgotten map

Nature plays the same unrewarding role of implacable enforcer of fate: supporting life while assisting death.

暴力在空气中。生灭之地透明，沉静。 (*Jintian 40*)
Violence is in the air. The field of life and death is diaphanous, placid.

我并不责怪大自然无情，她也发怒，
但似乎太高调、不切事实。旻天疾威。¹⁹
如果旻天真的生气了，他应该有办法，
因为他朗照万物，把好人和坏人
藏在一幅山水画里面。 (*Jintian 27*)
I do not reproach Nature for being pitiless, she too is angry.
But no, this is pretentious, absurd. The firmament is just cruel.
If the Sky was angry, he would find a way,
As he shines over all the things, and conceals
The good and the bad inside a landscape painting.

死亡与自然
变换着面具来到农家小院。 (*Jintian 26*)
Death and nature
Changed masks, then reached the farmyard.

As one of the main characters, Death (*sishen* 死神) surfaces on many occasions and in different disguises: as an old woman with white hair or as a ground glass (*Jintian 28, 56*), she is pervasive. Then, she acts in silence, undisturbed:

这个早晨，死神悄悄降临人间 (*Jintian 66*)
This morning, Death furtively approached the mortal realm.

只有死神在收割灵魂，万物无声 (*Jintian 65*)
Only Death, harvesting souls. All things are soundless.

EVENTS AND RELATED CONSCIOUSNESS: THREADS OF (INNER) VISIONS

Death is perceived as a synesthetic experience, symbolized by the colour white, a solemn silence, a smell of antiseptic and an unfathomable void.

¹⁹ Quotation from the *Xiaoya* 小雅 (Minor Odes) of the *Shijing* 诗经 (Classic of Poetry).



白色最深处
是无法企及的未知
是天知道的密码 (*Jintian 55*)
The abyss of white
Is the unfathomable unknown
To which the Sky holds the key

But as a human event, death (*siwang* 死亡) is eventually collective.

今天以后，我们漫长地没有传记
一起学会了死亡 (*Jintian 8*)
After today, our life story ends forever
We have learnt to die together

Death also means darkness (*Jintian 9*), or absence of light (*Jintian 28*), which echoes a sense of being in the dark and, therefore, a sense of fear and suspicion (*Jintian 10, 33, 76*). This general feeling of mistrust is a symptom of frustration and anxiety induced on the one hand, by a condition of uncertainty and, on the other, by the antisocial dimension of seclusion.

有人不戴口罩引起恐慌
有人戴了口罩引起恐慌
急冻饺子塞满雪柜
可会找回家的温暖?
在狭屋里自我隔离
思念的亲人总在远方 (*Jintian 76*)
Someone without a mask spreads panic
Someone with a mask spreads panic
The fridge stuffed with frozen dumplings
Will we retrieve the warmth of home?
Quarantining in a tiny flat
The relatives we miss are always far away

But also:

终于实现了社交疏远
我看到空白之巨大—— (*Jintian 15*)
Finally achieved social alienation
I see the vastness of the void

Loneliness and silence (*Jintian 13, 40*) boost an epidemic alienation, a psychic condition of severe distress from which anger, melancholy and even suicidal thoughts are triggered (*Jintian 27*).



借你的笔记下我说的：
“这不是生活，这是请命。” (Jintian 42)
Take note of these words:
“This is not living, it's begging”

要绞死一般，
要自杀一般
够着过去的好时光 (Jintian 14)
like hanging oneself,
like committing suicide,
while reaching for the good old days

Emotional stability is shattered by such tremendous adversity, repeatedly allegorized by the end of the world (*moshi* 末世).

末日降临，却没人能够救赎 (Jintian 62)
Judgment Day arrives, but no one can be redeemed

厕纸与亲情定量配给
让我们结伴练习末日 (Jintian 77)
Rationing affection and toilet paper
Let's practice the Apocalypse together

Confronted with this anguished catastrophe, the human being encounters the depth of fear (Jintian 51, 52, 54). This is when the vulnerability of despair brings him to quest for a religious belief and a God:

炎夏仍远？我将会再见到你吗？
有人登上狮子山呐喊
天地皆是绝望的回声 (Jintian 78)
Still far away, Summer? Will I see you again?
Someone climbed the Lion Rock: a shout
Earth and sky as the echo of despair

我想知道关于信仰的纪念碑在哪儿？它
是否大到足够安放一个诚实的灵魂
[...]
应从备受折磨的良心深处寻找真理或上帝 (Jintian 34)
I want to know where the monument to faith is, and if
it is big enough to host an honest soul
[...]
one must seek truth or God from the tortured, innermost conscience

But, finally, in Zhai Yongming's words,



荒诞故事的结尾只能是荒蛮 (Jintian 52)
The coda of the insane can only be untamed

POETICS AND *POÏESIS* IN DISTRESS: SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

In 2017, the French philosopher and sinologist Francois Jullien published his pamphlet *Dé-coïncidence. D'ou viennent l'art et l'existence* to share his reflections on our intellectual history and human existence. The focal point is the concept of “dé-coïncidence” (decoherence/incoherence) as a fundamental tool for understanding our times, namely a substantial divergence from what is deemed normal. Jullien then posits that this *écart* constitutes a proper element of human existence (better, “ex-istence”),²⁰ in that only when the human being deviates from the logic of adequation and withstands his marginalization he can find true freedom (33-42). In the aesthetic domain, which stands as the foremost field of Jullien’s thoughts, freedom emerges from the exile of the familiar and the breaking of symmetry. But how exactly is this in relation to what was discussed above?

I venture to consider “Rite of Spring”—a body of texts created through or for the aporia of isolation—a hiatus, namely a “dé-coïncidence” in its operational sense. In fact, as paradoxical as it might sound, it came to light as a rebuttal to a master narrative, without an ideological vocation or advocacy for social activism, in an effort to shape the aberration. It is a polyphony composed by scattered individualities that do not necessarily converge on a common agenda, except for the purpose of translating experience into an aesthetic account. The narrativity also lies in the historical value of what can be considered an aesthetic testament of the outburst of Covid-19, whereby readers can identify themselves and participate in the collective consciousness.

The poems of “Rite of Spring” finally remind us about the function of *poïesis*, which in Heidegger’s *Introduction to Metaphysics* is a “bringing forth”, a “bringing into appearance” (*hervorbringen*), and a “pro-duction” of sense. This body of poems indeed bestows visibility (*erscheinenlassen*) to a cultural-historical subjectivity conceived in an aporetic context; hence it discloses a narrative poetics of distress. Not, as suggested by Liang Xiaoman quoting Nietzsche (from the *Will to Power*, Section 822), in vain:

我们拥有艺术，因此不被真理毁灭
——尼采 (Jintian 31)
“We have art in order not to die of the truth”
- Nietzsche

²⁰ Jullien (16) underlines that “ex-isting” derives from the Latin word *ex-sistere*, which literally means “not partaking”, and then he suggests that “to exist” means avoiding the adequation, the adaptation.



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