

# Silence in Songs

Chinese Roses  
English Garden

X. Z. Shao/蕭興政



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English Garden**

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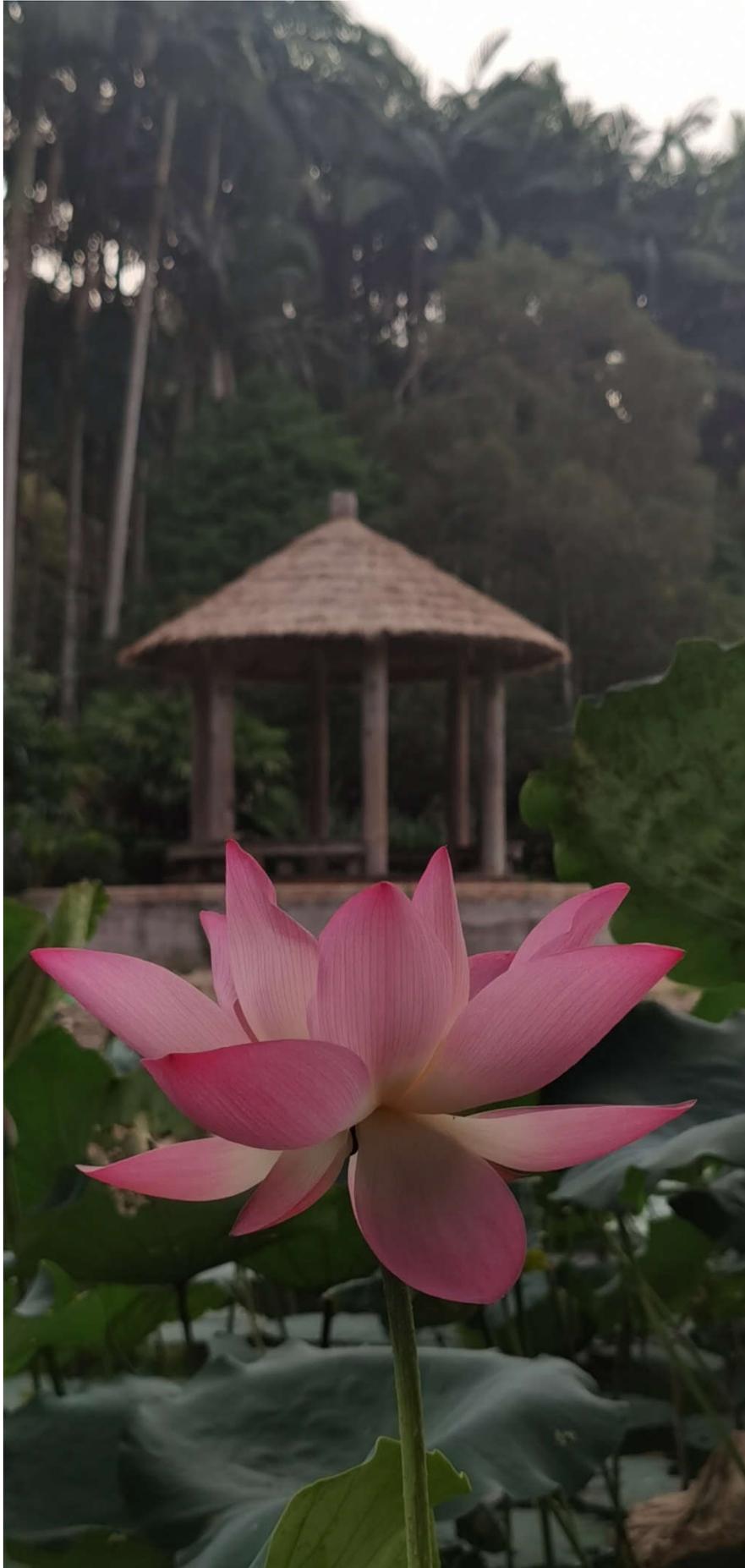
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Portrait of X. Z. Shao/蕭興政

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## Contents

Preface .....	13
Early Poems.....	25
To a girl from the USA .....	27
Let's weave a web .....	30
An online exchange of wit.....	32
To Gu Cheng.....	33
Reading Whitman under a banyan.....	35
A pond of lotuses .....	37
Violence without my consciousness .....	38
Sadness in seeing a child grow up .....	39
A giggling tree .....	40
A moment of leisure .....	40
Why do you wear black? .....	41
In Memoriam: Maningning Miclat .....	43
A Vision.....	45
The Lake Songs .....	47
A surreal encounter.....	49
The first sight of the swans.....	50
If only I could.....	52
Complain, or not.....	54
Lovers' Lake.....	56
A poetic portrait of Xi Shi .....	58
I am the ancient Indian prince .....	60
A moment for regret .....	62
<i>The Book of Poetry</i> .....	63
Maiden Zhaojun Wang .....	65
Wait, until the day is dawned.....	69
The dreaming water .....	70
Modern Van Gogh .....	71
A moment of ennui-I.....	73
The fire for poet moths .....	74
A moment of restlessness .....	76
Thinking of her .....	78
The Lake Songs' Muse .....	80
Drown in the music .....	81
The cotton trees in blossom .....	82
A moment of ennui-II .....	83
A bouquet of flowers .....	84
Behind the façade .....	86
Joking with W. B. Yeats.....	88
Beggars at a finest temple.....	89
Questioning a holy man.....	91

An agonizing obsession .....	92
Buddha and Einstein.....	93
A long cold winter .....	95
A Noah's Ark in the air.....	97
A future me? .....	98
The Invisible Hand .....	99
Mark Hilton .....	101
The whole ocean in a drop.....	103
Poems 2014 .....	105
A shadow .....	107
A dead person .....	108
A caged bird.....	108
In a barren land.....	109
This will pass.....	110
I write in secret .....	110
Our monkey selves .....	111
Write, my friends.....	112
A heart on fire within.....	113
A foggy night.....	114
A peacock's show .....	115
A literary immortality? .....	116
A lakeside banyan at the Lovers' Valley.....	118
Science or myth .....	119
The boundary of compassion.....	120
<i>The Classic of Poetry</i> .....	122
Metamorphoses of Poetry.....	124
Cormorants .....	126
Pomegranates.....	127
A setting sun .....	128
Paolo and Francesca .....	129
A ritual of a music .....	130
The two gifts taken.....	132
A heinous design.....	134
The chorus at dawn.....	136
To live well is to die well.....	137
A rainbow, an unusual symbol.....	139
A poet's routine.....	140
Harmless greed .....	142
Revaluating love .....	143
No room for fantasy.....	145
The Child is father of the Man.....	146
Nietzsche .....	148
A fantasy.....	149
Poems 2015 .....	151

Narcissists and their pools .....	153
A nightmare, .....	155
A preening beauty in the campus.....	158
The stuff that dreams are made of .....	160
May it be a Voice .....	162
A Tribute to J. R. R. Tolkien .....	163
Flowers and poets .....	165
English,.....	167
A dream .....	168
<i>Musings in the Valley</i> .....	170
Her daily bread .....	172
An illusion .....	173
A mind calm and settled .....	174
The Music.....	175
Two great Ways .....	178
Maybe or maybe not.....	179
May your journey end in peace .....	181
No easy match for Nietzsche .....	182
Hallucinations.....	183
A snare .....	185
If my whims had wings .....	186
What keeps a heart beat? .....	187
Baudelaire.....	189
A mental chatting in English .....	191
Searching for a precious book .....	195
An ode to Chinese language, .....	197
A tiny insect.....	201
A feather in the wind.....	202
The meaning of life.....	203
Impermanence .....	204
A Chan case.....	207
A pair of brackets.....	209
Be a tiny fire or a leaf.....	210
Maiden Xi Shi.....	211
A purple green bird.....	213
Slow down your paces.....	214
My kind .....	215
Sea creatures and the sea .....	216
A Prayer.....	217
A winter foreboding.....	219
A Lamentation.....	221
You are the richest.....	223
The last journey .....	224
An excavated grave .....	225

A world for a mystical bird.....	226
Poems 2016 .....	227
A single thread.....	229
March is the loneliest.....	230
How to burn in the rain.....	231
A distraction.....	233
Sinking into a nightmare.....	235
Ego.....	237
I love you,.....	238
Reduction.....	239
A dream .....	240
May you launch out your boat,.....	241
A grim reality .....	243
The sacred music .....	244
A realistic record of my dream .....	246
Yes, I'm a poet .....	249
Yang Liping.....	252
A thread-waisted wasp.....	256
Bipolarized .....	258
A taste of Eden .....	260
Dismantle yourself.....	261
Poems 2017 .....	263
True love.....	265
Under your spell .....	266
An age-old yearning .....	268
You cannot be killed.....	270
Booby traps are everywhere .....	271
Listening to audio reading of Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey by the lake .....	273
Mystical love .....	275
The same Jewel within .....	277
The source wisdom of all sages.....	279
Soak me all over .....	280
An internal dance and feast within .....	281
She is not yours .....	282
Young lovers at the pavilion.....	284
Be mindful of your breaths.....	286
The last voice.....	288
A temptation .....	290
A life overwhelmed .....	291
Return to innocence.....	293
The eyes on a picture .....	294
A bamboo tower .....	295
Two bipolar moods.....	297
Search for the Shore without a shore.....	299

One eternal embrace .....	300
In Love .....	301
In the recess of my mind.....	302
Poems 2018 & 2019 .....	303
My real kinsmen .....	305
Two confidants .....	307
Creative Writing .....	309
A reverie .....	310
Under your misty dome .....	312
Moan for me, not for Keats .....	313
An inner new planet.....	314
A garden for you to dance .....	315
A ruin vs. an organic garden.....	316
Who am I? .....	318
Don't want to crawl on earth.....	320
Making me a preserver .....	321
At your presence.....	322
Monuments vs fancies .....	323
A Few Ancient Chinese Poems Translated by X. Z. Shao.....	325
A poem made in seven steps.....	327
Seeing Yuan Er off on an envoy mission to Anxi .....	328
An Invitation to Wine .....	329
Wang Zhaojun, Two Poems .....	331
Appendix .....	333
My Life in China .....	335



## Preface

I am Chinese, and teach English at Xiamen University, in the city of Xiamen, formally Amoy, in Fujian province, southern China. The two major programs I teach are *Poetry Reading & Creative Writing* and *Media English Listening*. I have lived in China since I was born in 1964, with almost no experience of living abroad, except for four months as a visiting scholar at Ateneo de Manila University in Philippines and a 40-day summer program at the University of Westminster in London. I am a bilingual poet in English and Chinese, acquiring English somewhat as my second mother tongue. Imagine a native American or a British person living in his or her native land with only a few-month's experience in a Chinese-speaking country, gradually training his or her mind to function in Chinese, and eventually coming up with a collection of poetry in Chinese which may make sense to Chinese-speaking readers in China and around the world. That's my life, and besides, I had a very humble beginning which is scarcely adequate for me to aspire to such an endeavour.

You might not have expected to see this. Were it not for the pandemic of the coronavirus, I would be writing more poems to complete my second collection in Chinese, instead of gathering together my poems in English. My plan was to write more in English next spring and summer, and then consider editing. As everyone's plans are upset, so are mine. Writing poems in Chinese which lean towards mystical romantic in tone is not possible for me now, and venting my anger in the whirlpool, in which any detachment is difficult, is something I want to avoid, so I have no choice, but to make this collection one year ahead of my schedule. I would like you to consider this as an experiment in my practice of a foreign tongue, rather than my "poetry". It may be necessary for you to know some vignettes of my life which led me to such a fancy in English in an absolutely Chinese speaking environment. A question, I myself am constantly asking, is this possible? Accidently I stepped on a path to make all my life an experiment, answering to a call which is only clear

to me decades after the first sign was signaled to me.

Looking back, my life can be roughly divided into four phases:

- a) from my birth in 1964 in a remote mountainous village in Fujian province to 1980 when I passed the national examination for higher education and was accepted by the Shanghai Institute of Electric Power.
- b) from 1980 to 1993 during which I struggled to become a MA student and earned my master degree in public finance at Xiamen University, and later gave up my dream of further study in finance at a US university.
- c) from 1993 to 2004, a period when I decided to read only books in English, and to acquire information only through English media.
- d) from 2004 up to now, during which I experimented in writing poems both in English and Chinese and translated two books of poetry from English to Chinese. My collection in Chinese *Musings in the Valley* and my translation of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* were published.

In writing this preface, I set out to recount some major events in my life, for how I can expect my readers to understand such a wild fancy, without giving them some clues. My reminiscences dragged on, until it became almost a short autobiography of a few-dozen pages in a small font with single space typing, so I gathered it up and created an appendix. You may refer to it for a glimpse into a Chinese life which is not a typical pursuit in China, but the general background of contemporary China against which the tremendous changes have been unfolding is depicted.

The 1980s is a formative decade of my youth, a period of China's awaking from its immediately destructive past, and entering into a full flowering renaissance of her literature, philosophy, economic and political reform. Poets and poetry assumed almost divine positions for a nation where all spiritual paths were laid in ruin.

I was not fated to be able to join the chorus of resonating voices of new China, due to my extremely inadequate education. While a fledgling poet trying desperately to vent my raw passion in my primitive Chinese, the tide abruptly turned. When a number of major poets committed suicide, or died of heart attacks, or left China just within a few years, I felt writing poems in Chinese would no longer make any sense. But I found myself, as a stubborn person, refusing to alter my course, and ended up seeking refuge in English and continued my poetic dream in a distant Western culture built only upon letters and words which I had adopted as my own.

The long journey to learn how to write poems in English which might make some sense to native English speakers postponed my becoming a poet with visible end-products. I only wrote my first poem that made some sense ever in 1995 at an age of 31, and it was in English. I started to translate the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* and Laurence Hope *India's Love Lyrics* in 2004 when I was 40. My first bundle of poems in Chinese came out when I was 42 in 2006, except maybe one written earlier in 1997. The year when I considered myself as a poet being able to write in English was 2010, then aged 46. My first collection in Chinese *Musings in the Valley* 《幽谷迷思》 came out via a Taiwan publishing house in 2018, when I was 54. And last year a few months before the pandemic broke out, I saw my translation of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* published.

I am now an old new bilingual poet, and yet a fledgling poet eager to essay his wings, with a passion not yet showing any sign of diminishing. But I am also a spiritually mature poet over all these years of traversing through the terrains of different cultures and faiths. I no longer worship Poetry or Art as my goddess, catering to her coquettish whims and ending up as a distraught brooder of dreams or committing suicide as her sacrificed lamb. If I were guaranteed to have a long-lasting reputation as a poet but had to exchange it with my life and be doomed to die with reluctance and a muddled head scaring to hell about my finality, I would give up my poet's mantle right away

and take a path which offers a chance for a complete understanding of life. Of course, a poet's ego comes into play from time to time, and even now the drive to work hard to establish myself visibly as a poet sometimes makes me restless. Eventually, I will overcome it and treat writing poems only as keeping a diary of a seeker on his way to see through the camouflage of life and death, material world and ego.

Over the years, of course I read as much I could books of philosophy, religion, poetry and novels in English, with a special attention paid to British and American poets to help cultivate my skill, but eventually I found myself influenced more by my own tradition and Eastern mystic tradition in general, particularly Indian devotional poetry to divine beings, and later, the powerful ancient Persian Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi and the Lebanese American poet Kahlil Gibran.

I used to speculate deeply about the difference between the Indian poetry of the Bhakti movement and Chinese poetry, trying to find a missing link between them. The Indian poetry is largely inspired by various gods and goddesses, while Chinese poetry centers on the human world and nature. The sharp contrast always fascinates me. The language used is also different. The Indian poets are usually good story tellers and do not shy away from sentimental and long narrative language in their epics. They often become drunk with love for gods and goddesses. The strong passion is similar with that of the *Song of Songs* in the *Old Testament*. In their epic poems, they usually use long chapters to describe the detail of wars and the strategies of running a nation. Nature is not a place for them to escape to from the unbearable struggle of the human world, rather, it is the garden of gods and goddesses, while in China, apart from some poems praising Chinese ancestors and appealing to the benevolence of Heaven, poetry basically deals with human relationship. Following the tradition of *The Book of Poetry*, Chinese poets gradually developed various types of poems, such as poems about departure from friends, a lonely woman, an official who loses the favour of his emperor, a hermit who hides from the human world, and poems of nature, etc.. The use of

language is usually extremely precise and compact. Long narrative poems are rare. Chinese poets are experts at employing the natural imagery. Apart from some poems of Chan Buddhism (禪宗), Chinese poetry seldom deal with the spiritual aspect of life, certainly very rarely with the passion for gods and goddesses.

Since ancient times, Chinese people have never been keen on speculation about gods and goddesses; rather, they have attached an importance to establishing a society ruled by moral laws. This-worldliness has always been more important to Chinese than other-worldliness. Chinese society is bound by strong family values emphasizing ancestor worship. Ancient society in pre-Qin Dynasty revealed in *The Book of Poetry*, is a network of kingdoms of families under a central kingdom of one most powerful family. The concept of Heaven is never separated from the political power of the ruling family. Heaven is never filled with gods and goddesses which are anchors of uncertain lives for ordinary people.

Instead of spiritual yearning, Chinese poets sometimes complain or praise their rulers, write about wars, but these are real wars with tribes or small kingdoms bordering the kingdom, unlike the theme of the *Mahabharata* which portrays a war between incarnated gods and incarnated devils. They sometimes lament about the tragic love affairs and convey a sense of separation when friends or loved ones depart, even take a deserted woman as the speaker of a poem. They write about escaping the suffocating hierarchy of a Chinese society and seeking refuge in nature. The Daoist nature is never lack of spiritual power, but it is intended to achieve a balance of mind and immortality through physical and mental disciplines without appealing to the creation gods. When you read Tao Yuanming (陶淵明) of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420), you will long for his ideal of rural life and his complete unity with nature. When you read Li Bai of the high Tang Dynasty, you will feel that he is a god of wine and poetry. Ancient Chinese seem to be able to live with poetry, an exquisite use of words. Their passion for poetry is similar to the Indian passion for their gods and goddesses. As for the language, Chinese poets are most

economical in using their words derived from natural objects. Their rhythms are always agreeable and they only write under an impulse of inspiration.

One genre of Chinese poetry which has been loved and practiced by poets throughout history is the poetry of Chan (or Zen) Buddhists and hermit Daoists. A moment of loss of one's self or ego in mingling with a natural scene or with just a flower is recorded with a direct presentation of the object, while the speaker is in awe and in a forgetful state of mind. This experience of return to Dao or Nirvana is better achieved without using words, so the words are used to hint at the silence and the union with ultimate. For instance, there are two lines by Wang Wei, a famous Buddhist poet of Tang Dynasty, "On the desert, a lone column of smoke rises up; Over the long river, the setting sun is round." These imposing natural wonders put the speaker into a state of loss, thereby achieving a complete union with the mysterious source which underlies everything.

The Chan meditative state is similar to the state of complete union with God which the Indian poets and Rumi often yearned to achieve. In the eastern mystic tradition, the ultimate Source or Dao or Nirvana has no center, no divine personality, which cannot be put to words, therefore, when you return to It, you are a drop of water disappearing in the ocean. You cannot use a language of spiritual and physical love to devote yourself to the Source, because It is simply placeless, timeless and formless. If you have a god or goddess to unite with, then, all kinds of human languages of love can be used to utter loneliness of separation, intense yearning and ecstasy in a divine union. If I make a divine personification of the Source, or the Dao, or Nirvana, I may use the same language of spiritual and physical love in pursuing the union with the Ultimate Reality in Chinese language. When the wordless Source is gathered into the Center by personification, you have a target to shoot all kind arrows of love at. In a Chinese poetic context, devotional poetry can be created, hiding the path to enlightenment in it, expressing yearning the reflections of the Moon for the Moon. Poetry is not only an art of language for a

poetic ego to have a full display, but also a language of testimony to express a spectrum of feelings on the path to a place where poetic ego is eliminated. Poetry should be a byproduct of one seeking for an awakening from all phenomenal existences, rather than a lantern enclosing a poet's ego, no matter how wonderful it maybe, set afloat the river of Time, dreaming of nonexistent immortality.

On April 19, 2015, I wrote something as below:

If you want to be preserved in your poems, the whole spectrum of your experiences needs to be recorded. What often surfaces in your mind is usually proper material for a poem, whether it is as trifle as an insect or a daily chore. Do not hesitate to write a poem good or bad. A bad poem is better than nothing. A good poem is a spirit distilled from fermenting raw materials, bad poems.

A good poem is often inspired by a muse. A poet is a lyre on which his muse plays her tune. One hand cannot create applause. A poet has at most half the copyright over his inspired poems. Devotional poems like Rumi's cannot be written without his "god in the flesh", actually Rumi signed his poems with the name of his god as author. A poet can also be inspired by an impersonal force, nature or Dao, rather than a muse or a god, and it creates calm and Chan style poems which are typical of Chinese. Without an interaction with a force of some sorts, a poet's mind is locked in a prison.

Refuse to be intimidated by any established poets dead or alive, ancient or modern, for they were or are troubled as you are by the same dilemmas of life, the same paralysis of inferiority, the same struggle to keep their torches alight. Each epoch presses on the hearts that are most sensitive and induces responses, therefore, all eras are right eras for poetry, all kind of woods can be the source of flames.

Obviously, even just a few years ago, I possessed more of a conventional poet's mindset, frantic and eager to plunge into an emotional whirlpool of poetry. Some of my poems in this collection retain traces of this philosophy. But during these few years, I conjured up a new idea of writing poems. It had only become clearer in shape

with my experiments in Chinese. I was keen to try my hand this year in Chinese and next year in English when the coronavirus turned all minds to speculate on death and a chaotic world, and I found my poetic spark was dampened. My plan is thwarted and I am not sure when my poetic fountain will gush again, but I still want to expound my new idea, which sounds less of a poet's, and more of a humdrum spiritual seeker's. I want to eliminate the ultimate irritation of a life as a human being, i. e. the constant trouble of death, through training my mind to achieve an awareness akin to Buddha's, while I still have masses of poetry, flocks and flocks of birds of fancy flying in my inner sky.

My logic is not complex, let me put it in a simple way.

Last year, I saw a video clip posted on my WeChat group by a member. A grown-up Chinese girl adopted by an American family since her extreme minority was talking to her biological parents and siblings via Sky, with tears on her face and in a sobbing voice all in English. Compared with her farmer parents and Chinese siblings, she was polished and well-dressed, healthy and confident, an average American. I was hit hard by such an incident, pondering if she had been raised in her own Chinese family, she would be another person, another completely different ego. Obviously, a person's ego is a product of his or her environment. I further assume if she had a million cloned copies adapted in different places to various religious and cultural backgrounds, there would have been a million egos out of exactly the same physical body. So an ego is only a video in one's video camera, i.e. consciousness or Buddhi nature, recorded and keeps inside. There are infinite versions as the circumstances for one to grow up are infinite, as the same moon has infinite reflections if the water surfaces are infinite. Ego is a movie kept within a video camera, i.e. consciousness or awareness. It is only a mirage, a reflection, not real.

My another observation is more scientific, that is Albert Einstein's equation  $E=MC^2$ . He had a curiosity to establish the relationship between matter and light. Energy within radioactive metal

is released to create atomic bombs. The European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) has successfully performed an experiment to collide two lead ions cycling through a huge and long underground close-circuit tunnel in opposite directions at nearly the speed of light, and returned matter to light with infinitely smaller cloud energy which scientists cannot even describe in words.

I see it as a proof of Buddha's famous pronouncement in the *Heart Sutra*, "Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. That which is form is emptiness, that which is emptiness is form." Suddenly, the whole material universe is afloat and can be seen as a sea of constantly shifting forms interchangeable with emptiness. This emptiness should be understood as a mysterious source beyond words, not simply as nothingness. It is not a nihilistic nature of everything, nihilistic nature of life. It is simply a statement of Buddha who sees through all things with his awakened eyes. All material things are impermanent, and are constantly shifting. There is neither meaning nor meaningless, just simply fact. Those who concern themselves with meaning in life will rack his or her head without finding it, while those who are mired in despair or nihilism will suffer a nightmare he or she embraces as reality while unwilling to wake up.

Imagine that beside a mirage in a desert, there is a huge mirror, and in the mirror there is a reflection as huge as the mirage. The mirage is the physical world, the mirror is your Buddhi nature, awareness, which is beyond words, none dual, neither the mirage nor its reflection (i. e. neither physical world, nor ego), and the reflection is ego. Therefore, in existence, if you pursue material things, the mirage's reflection in the mirror is trying to embrace the mirage and taking it as a possession. Is there anything so ridiculous? If you are afraid of death, you are like a reflection of the moon in a pool of water worrying about its disappearance while the full moon is hanging in the sky.

In this vein of thinking, although the logic is clear and extremely easy to trace, some may still hold that "ego" is rocklike and real, some may accept it and start to worry, "Should I behave like a reflection of

a mirage? If my ego surfaces and I have all kind of human desires, does it mean that I am without hope?” For the former, he or she may have to drift for a while before pondering deep this “ego thing”. For the later, there is one line in Chapter One of *Laozi* (or *Tao De Jing*) which may help to ease the worry, “So when free from desires, you realize the mystery, when desires arise, you see the manifestations. ”

There are moments when you meditate and truly see that a mirage’s reflection cannot own the mirage, and you are quite certain that a universal camera within you, having taken a video which you name as “I”, and you know that a real universal Moon is hanging in the sky, and you are only a reflection of It on a pool of water, then you will see the greatest mystery of everything that exists, that all other beings or nonbeings are actually the real Moon’s different reflections, or the nameless Video Camera’s different videos which It has taken and kept. All are different reflections of the same Source. Is there anything that is animate or inanimate which lacks kinship with you? Realizing this mystery is liberation or enlightenment.

There are moments when desires arise in you, and you return to your familiar ego, and you see the messy and fantastic aspects of the human world. True understanding seems to depart from you, and you have empathy with all human conditions and natural phenomena. Do not try to escape from such a returning to your old “ego”, let it be there, even if it is a mirage, it is not for you to eliminate it. The only thing you need to do is to have an awareness that your ego is in play. You should have the Third Eye inside you watching your ego, like the Moon watching its reflection rippling on a water surface, doing all kind of grimaces, or the universal Video Camera watching your video playing, or the Actor constantly aware of his or her role as a clown or a king. While seeing all manifestations of human dramas and the whole nature, remember the Observer, and you will be a tree amid a storm with a remembrance that allow you to be calm down and still when it is over.

Such is liberation, and such should be a journey that everyone should embark on. Whether you keep a diary or not is not that

important. You can keep your diary in multiple ways, but if you prefer to keep it in a form of poetry, be sure not to let your poetic ego sink in the collective quagmire that is the human world. You have a far bigger fish to fry than creating the persona of a poet, no matter how big it is and how well it is able to survive the time of human measure.

I used to imagine that if a dewdrop has mingled with the sea, is it able to continue its old way of shining in the morning light or seeing butterflies among the flowers and fearing about its own disappearance? Whether words make any sense if I am within the Union with all? They are not indispensable, but it is fine for you to assume the old ego and reenact all kind of emotional storms that are similar to ordinary human ones, with an awareness that it is only a reflection of the Moon dancing on a lake-water under the clear sky, and that you are a river yearning for the ocean as your final destination. All songs come from the Silence like storms from the usual quiet sea, but each song returns or leads to the Silence when a storm subsides in the sea.

My poems below were not all written while I had a full awareness. My poetic ego suffers in time of the pandemic as every ego on earth does, but I see something the same within each one of us and within all in nature, the Source which sustains us. And my best songs have yet to come out of the Silence with their every note sounding out within the hidden core of the Silence.

Finally, my special thanks and gratitude go to my old friend Dana Wilde living in Maine of the United States, for his understanding and encouragement throughout our almost two decades of email correspondence since we met at Xiamen University in 2001, and Tony Kline, a British poet and translator, who admires the truly Daoist life, takes me as his peer, and share his views with me which is always inspiring.

X. Z. Shao/蕭興政

Written in the summer of 2020



# Early Poems



## **To a girl from the USA**

You walk around the campus, naturally—  
like a breeze from the west. Lonely  
you may be, with no one to understand your voice.  
You smile at the trees, the grass and the flowers,  
But they all remain silent, without motion—  
The East is always silent and shy.

From childhood you harbored a dream.  
Was it a fairy story you'd been told,  
Or the haunting memory of a previous life?  
You came to China, alone, for something lost.  
But the men who once knew you have long gone.  
And your familiar buildings were torn down.

Tired of cowboys' pretence to be men,  
Pop singers' madness, noisy campaigns for president,  
And the freedom to keep guns, you may need a rest.  
Fed up with busy streets, modern machines  
Luxurious life, and cold sophisticated minds,  
You may need a land of innocence and peace.

Go the East, where a poet used to roll downhill  
Like a lamb, where recluses were said  
To live in high mountains close to heaven,  
Where philosophical kings governed humanely

Nature and mankind went hand in hand in harmony  
Where the lives of all creatures had the same meaning.

The East is such an alluring dream!

I, an even greater dreamer over many lives,  
Said the same prayer, hoping for that land of wonder.  
Come, here I am, a speechless man with a long, long  
tale to tell. Like the blind singer walking  
Among the ruins, I stand among empty mountains,  
Overwhelmed by thunder and deadly silence,

Meaningless to tell, unable to sing,  
Until you came in sight, bouncing and smiling,  
As if a spring overflowed into the dry valley.  
You seem to me a girl finding, in your own way,  
Relics of a glorious East, or herbs or flowers,  
Or even just the dust here, to cure your men's fever.

But, as I know too well, there is no more magic here.

There is no more wisdom than your carefree eyes;  
No more happy excursion than your buoyant steps;  
No more music in nature than the flow of your voice.  
No more tranquility than your peaceful smile.  
And as you walked along you threw little rocks  
Into silent and deadly lakes, you met many eyes

that admired what they'd never enjoyed.  
As a hermit, self-exiled in a land of sickness,  
I dream once more of where I used to be.  
Here you come: Is there any good news you bring?  
Maybe not. Maybe your carefree bearing is the message,  
You walk through the campus, dancing and singing.  
And you throw what you've gathered into the wind.  
May, 1995

This poem was published on *English Today*, ET70, Volume 18 Number 2, April 2002, a quarterly journal run by Cambridge University Press.

## **Let's weave a web**

A tiny creature in a random crowd of countless beings,  
who should I presume myself to be? Hanging in  
a space timeless and boundless, within a blink,  
will I perish or will I melt into the sound of OM?

Lives come and go. How real I feel your face  
with a smile, an image that reminds me of  
a spectacular sunrise, a late spring evening  
when the fragrance of the earth is wafting in the air  
in its early pregnancy. I almost count on you  
for an explanation for the toil of my racking brain.

Yes, it seems you were a permanent home and a destination  
for a wisdom seeker infatuated with a riddle,  
a mess of knots tempting the brave and unsettled minds  
since the very beginning. Yet, you are the same as illusions  
materialized in a pebble or in any substance.

We both are not real. Will we mingle with each other  
as light or energy does, with our consciousness  
expanding to every corner of the universe?  
And I still feel I am I; you still feel you are you.

If death is a dreamless nonexistence,  
why should we hang on in life?

Are you contented if I invite you to float on with me  
with no assurance of where we are heading for,  
with no confirmation about what will turn up next?

So many records have been made in human history,  
a little pile is enough for you to spend yourself.  
So many curious things have been created,  
I often wonder if I were the only survivor  
in a global holocaust which eliminated all civilizations,  
would I be able to recreate iron to make a bar?

Music, poetry, newly-born babies and flowers,  
books, mountains, plants and animals,  
everything could be a source of joy.  
Yet, we enjoy them for what, to spend ourselves with ease,  
or to make a happy excursion to a termination  
where “to be, or not to be” is not a question?

How could we be otherwise? So don't ask why.  
To love, to learn, to build and to enjoy,  
if these are the best things that life can offer,  
let's weave a web then and entangle you and me within.

Dec16, 2001

## **An online exchange of wit**

My response in the second stanza to the first by someone called Lisa

I am a night spirit,  
flying into your dream.  
When the sun rises,  
I will disappear as the wind,  
leaving you in your sunshine.

My mind is your universe,  
my time is not an arrow,  
but an all-engulfing ball.  
You'll never disappear  
just wander in my world  
Early morning February 7, 2002

## To Gu Cheng

A leading figure in the Chinese poetry movement known as “The Obscure Poetry” flourished in 1980s in China. He committed suicide in New Zealand in 1995 after the abrupt turn of tide in China in 1989.

So detached,  
Your eyes make me nervous,  
a window to the unknown,  
tugging my timid soul in,  
where thunder talks with rainbows,  
shapes parade with flowers on hands.

Northern pasture may  
still be quiet as always.  
Greatly disturbed,  
you must be still there,  
figuring out a puzzle,  
with your hands under your head,  
lying, blue heaven above.  
The sunny green land  
cannot bring out your smile,  
in spite of its luster in the breeze.

Sometimes, you roam and sing  
without a purpose or meaning.  
In your wildest dream,  
tigers, wolves and angels  
come together, all elements dance.  
You are flying with a vein open,

drawing in the sky a picture  
full of red, random ribbons.

April 18, 2002

## **Reading Whitman under a banyan**

Autumn, September's rain,  
you made the earth fresh and sweet  
and my garden green as Eden.

For days long, you've been teasing  
and playing with people in it,  
falling from the sky overcast,  
then unveiling the sun to beam its eyes,  
then covering it again and you were there.

Under a huge banyan tree,  
I sat with my mind relaxed and aware,  
heard Whitman sing, birds chant,  
and saw a young man boast among his peers,  
a girl pass by with her sun umbrella,  
and a bold-headed master practice Taiji.

Rain, coming again out of nowhere,  
peppered the lake as if it were boiling.  
People were hastening their steps,  
a guy sitting next to me was puzzled,  
and my Eden was quickly deserted.

Only me, under a huge banyan tree,  
enjoyed the risk of being soaked.

Raindrops drizzling through the canopy  
pattered on my book of the songs of self.  
It was only rain, let my worry rest,  
let the world boil, it could be fun.

Before the tree was fully saturated,  
the rain subsided in an abrupt way  
and I didn't even get wet.

My Whitman was still singing  
and the sun came out beaming.

Morning September 15 2002

## **A pond of lotuses**

In contrast to a traditional Chinese image of lotuses for their “purity out of dirty mud, but not sullied by it.”

Look, those lotuses in blossom,  
how they put on their shows with grace,  
women in love with their hearts wide open.

Look, those round leaves surround their queens,  
a green smile spreading with secrets.

Look, those fishes and turtles underneath,  
in the wood of lotus stems rooted in mud,  
they play hide-and-seek.

Spring, 2003

## **Violence without my consciousness**

A dry leaf was in my hand  
while I sat in lotus position,  
meditated, mesmerized and lost,  
yet, I could hear ants crawl,  
earthworms turn under earth.

My consciousness was in the air  
while my hands, legs, head,  
all parts of my body disappeared.

When I collected myself,  
I found the leaf in my hand  
was torn bit by bit into shreds.

September 20, 2003

## **Sadness in seeing a child grow up**

When I'm taking a picture  
of my son or videotaping him,  
I feel the time is ticking away  
and the moments fly into the past.

I know I'm happy with him now,  
but I feel sad that a click of  
his smile is a butterfly  
flying backward in Time's tunnel.

I know we will look at it again  
when our smiles fill the garden,  
while chrysanthemums blossom.

October. 10, 2003

### **A giggling tree**

A wind blew my hairs loose  
as I walked by a glistening lake.  
I tossed my head to make them straight,  
when a flutter was startling me,  
a thousand leaves falling from a giggling tree,  
like the wings in the sky over an island of birds.  
Countless tiny boats were sailing on the lake  
while more leaves were dancing off the tree.

Morning, October 23, 2003

### **A moment of leisure**

A bird is chirping in the distance.  
Two girls are sitting behind me back to back.  
A banyan is lowering its boughs to smell the grass,  
While a breeze is bathing my skin with its breath.

Morning, October 23, 2003

## **Why do you wear black?**

Love is dead.

Treading in the field,  
with hyacinths on her hair,  
chilled by the wind, she sneezed.  
Malnourished,  
with almost no immunity,  
she had always been pale and thin,  
and her breasts had yet to fully develop.

Don't be sad.

Those weaklings have little chance.  
Nature does know how to select.  
Those who are gone, let them be.  
Hope remains a jailed bird in your bosom.

Be sure,  
when next such a delicate life has her first cry,  
take her away from the foul air,  
do not expose her to the shouting  
and crowding in the street,  
be careful with the water underground,  
it's all arsenic,  
do not put her on the ground  
for the earth is absorbing wastes,  
do not let a bird alight on her shoulder,

a stare may cause her a nightmare.  
do not...

Sir, with what you said,  
I understand and feel much better.  
Maybe I should have taken her  
somewhere else, to Mars or even further.

Early Morning, November 24, 2003

## **In Memoriam: Maningning Miclat**

An established Pilipino woman painter and poet,  
born in Beijing in 1972, committed suicide in Manila in 2000

I am almost glad you have departed.

The rainy season is upon us, drip-dropping endlessly,  
Cold and wet, damping every spark of fires.

A long dead snake hangs around the boughs of a tree,  
A half green half dry tree, where yellow flowers  
Last blossomed, pleasing to eyes and disturbing souls.

You used to live in a roaring city  
Where there are so many spider nets,  
Where scavengers fly while people drive.  
You loved various colors of bougainvillea,  
Flamboyant trees in flower and the scent of earth  
Under the rain-trees after a shower of the dry season.

Built on a poppy hill, etherized by the fragrances  
Your garden was dyed in tropical hues,  
Scarlet, purple, yellow and deep blue.  
Time and again, you returned to it.  
A trouble paradise or the cave of Calypso?  
I wish you were the fairy nymph returning to her oblivion.

You were a jewel on the palms that held you,  
Staggering in the Forbidden City and the ruin of the Imperial Palace.  
The storm in China did not infiltrate hatred into your soil.

You painted bamboos and pine trees on Chinese rice paper,  
And wrote out your love in the ancient characters for the land  
Old in tales, your flesh and soul, from which you had later  
to tear away.

Being transplanted, you learnt to love your land of origin.  
You saw your past being wrapped up in a hard nut.  
The hands that reached you were forced to withdraw;  
The hearts that opened to you were ordered shut.  
You were alone in an island where you decorated your cave  
of Calypso,  
The cave beyond the reach of filthy trash, where eternity promised.

You are still around, making soliloquies,  
And yet you are fondling the land you discarded,  
Where live your parents, sister and friends enriched by the colors  
You brought from the other shore where you live in tune with  
rhythms of the sea,  
Tranquil and satisfied. There will be tidings from this land of  
wars, idiots and vanity.  
If a warrior is stranded there, nurse him back to life, and he will not  
long for his Ithaca.

From evening to midnight, December 13, 2005

This poem was published on *English Today*, ET86, Volume 22 Number 2, April  
2006, a quarterly journal run by Cambridge University Press.

## **A Vision**

I surely will meet you there, so immense and boundless.  
We are intimate, though we have no forms to kiss and embrace.  
Nothing can ever be lost or need to be completed.

There is only light. I find no image of my Lord,  
no smiling face I visualized through the veil of my tears,  
no silhouette of the white Himalayas against the blue sky,  
no prayer flags flying in the cool high-altitude wind,  
no army of working ants dismantling a colossal deserted ship,  
no sophisticated calculations in a marketplace or a show-off  
in a palace.

There is only a feeling of putting my way-worn feet in a stream,  
a moment of the high plateau's serenity flashing in my brain,  
a pressing on my palm of a woman's soft hand while we dance,  
or a voice of a native minstrel vibrating my heart strings.

I forget about my Lord, unaware of his boat lying empty at a ferry  
on a rainy day.

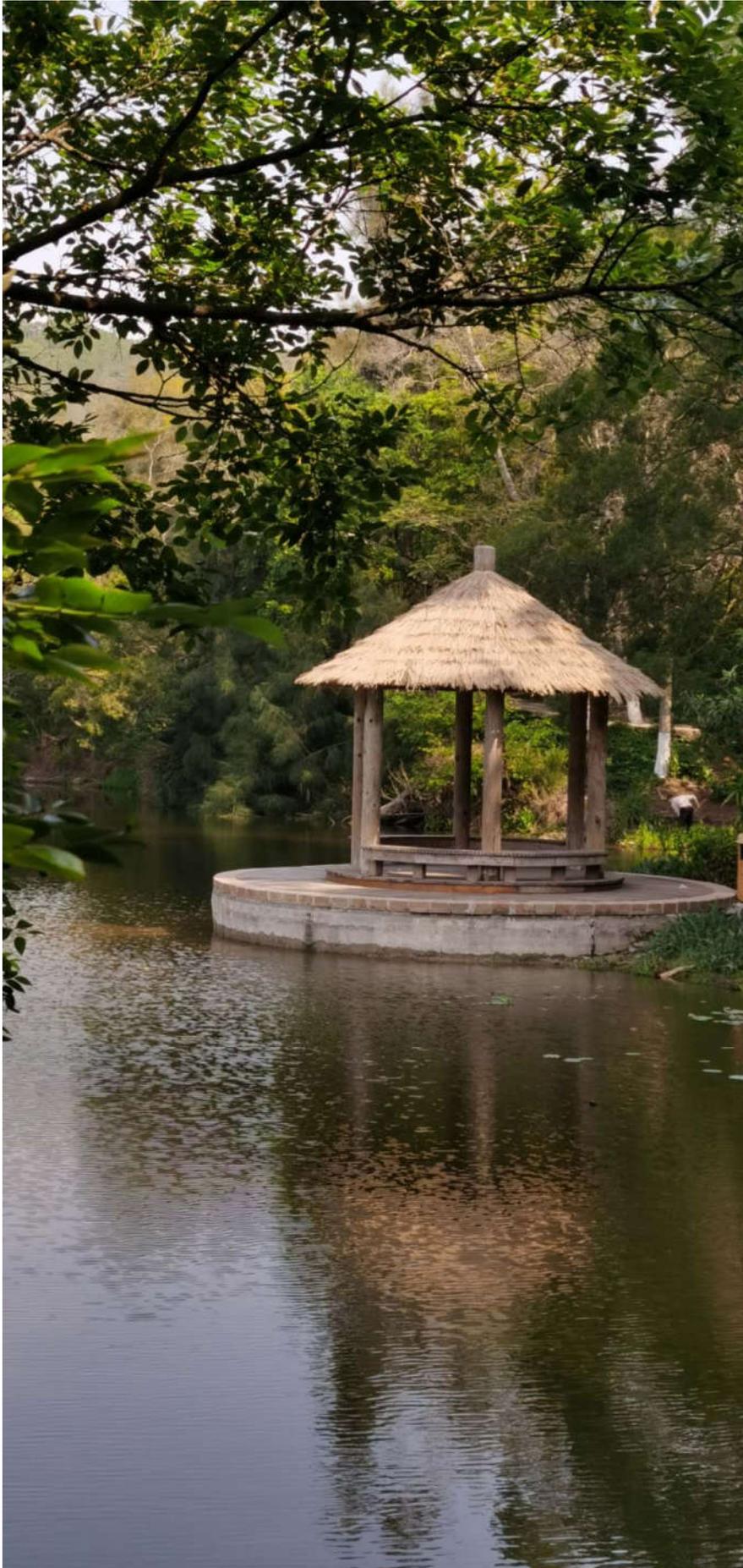
I forget about you, unconscious of your gloomy face facing a lake  
on a foggy night,

yet, in this awesome immensity, all are in one and a whole,  
in absence of my eyes, ears, nose, mouth and hands.

Autumn, 2006



# **The Lake Songs**



## **A surreal encounter**

Without a reason,  
you brought tears to my eyes.  
You are a new horizon dawning  
while I reach a mountain top.  
My past burden seems lightened.  
I can go astride the crests of the landscape.

Light shining ahead,  
is that the love radiating from your eyes  
or your heart manifesting all-embracing care?  
Like a fire burning, yet it cools my seared skin,  
like water engulfing, yet it shields me from my haunting dreams.

My whole being turns alive.  
My past vignettes play a movie in my mind.  
What on earth have I been doing?  
In this vast ocean of my native land,  
I chose to stay in an imaginary island of a strange tongue.

Suddenly, when you come, all those make sense.  
I am here to open the door and show you around, my friend.

Late at night, September 21, 2010

## **The first sight of the swans**

Weariness is a garment of the dawn.

When hearts are drunk,  
intoxicated by gossips,  
preoccupied with gains,  
then morning chorus of birds,  
hues in the sky,  
what are those for?

Callousness put all senses to sleep.

There is no place deserved a visit,  
when Mount Lu frequented by my poets  
is littered with garbage,  
and invokes horrors of the modern intrigues.

When the warm hands offering tea,  
guileless smiles beaming for guests,  
are replaced by an urge to sell their trinkets

There is no beauty of the lake  
I walk by, day by day,  
meticulously well kept,  
neat path, carpet lawn,  
a stone bridge links to a man-made islet,  
and buildings stand by,  
like soldiers paying a salute.  
Yet, nothing is right,

when people roaming round it altered their minds.

All of a sudden,

seven black swans were brought to the lake.

I thought it were just another trick  
to add a flavor to the affected place.

Until one night, the moonshine simmered

I saw vaguely the swans with their heads  
holding high in the distance.

How could they be swans?

They were the mid-autumn night spirits,  
the soul of the lake.

I was shocked back to my normal senses,  
stood still and lingered on.

Maybe tomorrow, I should take a new look at the dawn

And maybe, I should start my journey to see the world around

Morning, October 1, 2010

## **If only I could...**

If only I could walk here by this lake,  
with your hand round my arm,  
listen to crickets sing,  
and see butterflies flutter their wings,  
and weeds of various kinds hang  
by the water to look at their faces.

If only I could sit with you on this stone chair  
and watch an elder practice Taiji  
on the opposite shore in containment,  
a fisherman hold his fish pole  
in utter concentration,  
and ants line up to work for their queen.

If only I could live among trees  
with a hut built just for you and me,  
I would grow vegetables  
and cultivate millet and rice for food.  
I would pick up wildflowers to please your eyes  
and your face would mirror a radiant smile.

If only I could ponder with you,  
we would lose ourselves in an ineffable state  
where you and I mingled in one  
and everything existed formless.

When a swimmer intruded into our solitude,  
we would open our eyes and smile  
and see an egret spread its wings under the azure sky.

Morning, October 2, 2010, by the lake

## **Complain, or not**

Complain, or not,  
the world is always ruled  
by those who work for immediate gain.  
They have no secret places to be,  
only this earthly shore,  
with ample lot to grasp,  
and fames beckoning them like coquettish women.

Then, Li Bai  
why did you ask them to step aside to make room for you?  
You were blossoms of lotuses drinking sunlight,  
while those swam under water had games of their own.  
When you sang, the stars above held their breath,  
and when you danced with wine on your hand,  
the moon could not contain herself by keeping aloof.

Why did you grieve for your uselessness?  
Why did you aspire to achieve a great deed for your lord,  
then return to mountains and lakes by sweeping aside the reward?  
You rode a boat with your hair loose,  
while an admiring courtesan sang you a song.  
The sound of her zither vibrated the glistening water,  
and the night was mesmerized and drunk.

Only lofty mountains were your pairs.

You praised their craggy towering figures  
looking down upon the tumultuous clouds.  
Leaving a trail of climbers behind,  
you reached the top and heard the roosters of heaven sing.  
The only one on the mythical peak,  
you were in awe of what you saw,  
while what you saw was in awe of your presence

Wherever you trod,  
songs accompanied your steps.  
Why was there so much incessant singing of your incompleteness?  
Were you not sure that your voice  
was that very voice of the world beyond,  
and your name and songs have thundered in every ear ever since?  
So why did you feel distressed about your unworthiness?  
Why not just steal more celestial sapphires for the earth,  
while leave daily cares to the less-fortunate,  
your earthly fellowmen unaware of the sights and sounds above.

Morning, October 2, 2010

## Lovers' Lake

There is a place called Lovers' Lake  
whick I hesitate to bring you to,  
less you might be reduced to a spirit  
frequenting the crystal water and shady woods,  
roaming with love in bewilderment.

The chorus of summer birds and crickets  
would stupefy you and create a sight within you.  
You were turned to a statue.  
The wind would spread your senses into the air,  
and your body would be unable to hold them back.

You would enter the honey hearts of all blossoms  
as you assumed the colors of every plant.  
You were embraced by your love without shape  
and your every atom cried in ecstasy.  
You splashed the water in utter madness  
and you rode on the wings of a gliding egret.

A neat path would lead you to a palace in the air  
where banyans nodded to you at the lion-guarded gate.  
You stepped in on the cotton-like cloud.  
A stream sang half way down a hill,  
winding its way and pouring to a lake.  
Your lover was in one of a thousand towers

scattering among layer and layer of the misty forest.

You lost in a place where dead trees lay across,  
cried to escape and saw guards bar your way.

You wielded your arms in the darkness and hit mine,  
then gathered and recollected yourself

and saw you and me sit on a rock face to face.

You were breathing fast and smiling

and then held me close to you wordless and perplexed.

Afternoon, October 3, 2010

## **A poetic portrait of Xi Shi**

Xi Shi was the first of the four ancient beauties of China

I dreamed about the ancient land  
where kingdoms vied for dominance.  
An image developed in a grassy slope  
which makes every heart ache for love.

She held her skirt and ran wild  
and threw herself down under a maple tree.  
In her hand were some bamboo slips;  
she read them and was possessed by ecstasies.  
She rolled around, propped up her head  
and pondered with a mysterious smile.

Her waist was tender,  
her upper part bore ripen fruits,  
her hip lay like a hill's graceful curve.  
It was said when she glanced,  
a city would fall;  
a kingdom would be brought low  
when she glanced again.

She enamored an arrogant king;  
a nation of wealth was for her to squander,  
yet, her heart was never tamed.  
Who knew what was written on the slips?

When the city was in flame  
and the king's head was hung in the marketplace,  
was she killed by an arrow piercing her chest  
or, attaining immortality as her beauty does,  
does she still ride on a boat in a mystical lake with her love?

Morning, October 4, 2010

## **I am the ancient Indian prince**

I have finally found a place to pine and die,  
to pine with love, to die in peace,  
to sit still in a cave  
and let ivies climb my torso and limbs.  
I am the ancient Indian prince.

A bonfire burns like amber in my consciousness,  
and waves lap the shore sounding like a mantra,  
expanding further and further.  
Close your eyes with me  
we are roaming in a wider and wider sea.

I fetch the water from the lake by day  
and see the wild chrysanthemums' yellow smiles,  
hibiscuses in blossom, graceful women.  
I am not ready to extinguish my fire,  
nature and you stoke me with fuel abundant.

Come tomorrow, my shepherdess,  
to graze your sheep in the lake valley  
and prepare for me a bowl of milk porridge.  
I will have a bath in the water springing deep beneath,  
my Ganges pouring to me from a nameless shore.

Hover with me, the spirit of my passion,

my last obstacle entangled me in this wonder.  
Don't you see, my boat is waiting for you,  
the cave is our cave, the lake is our lake,  
from now and here on, we are one and one with all.

Morning, October 5, 2010

## **A moment for regret**

A big fish took the bait.  
The fisherman sprang up  
like a statue turning alive all of a sudden.  
He rolled up the fish line,  
while the carp twisted and splashed in the water.

His fellow fishermen were quick to his aid.  
The passers-by gathered.  
They held their breathes  
to see it being pulled closer.  
A little net with a handle was lowered to contain it.  
They all laughed and had a happy moment.

I, sitting opposite the narrow water,  
was amused too at first sight,  
but my heart quickly turned for the fish.  
What a huge difference  
the past minute had made.

I would have had the clock turned back for you,  
if I could, my fish,  
a stout, colorful and innocent carp,  
being brought out of water  
amid stares and laughter.

Afternoon, October 24, 2010

## *The Book of Poetry*

If you enjoy *The Book of Poetry*  
anointed by Confucius' hand,  
then you have set foot on my cultivated land  
where the wind is my hoe  
the rain is my fertilizer  
and the sunshine is my gardener's loving care.  
Bees sing a drowsy tune  
on top of the yearning flowers.

I will take you to a river bank  
where lads and maidens sing and dance.  
They tease each other  
and peonies are their token of love.  
A pair of youths thread their way into the forest,  
while a red bird flies ahead of them under the ancient trees.

When the season ends,  
all return to their huts far and near.  
Some are happy, some are not,  
some are thwarted by their parents,  
still some are separated by their ruler.  
They sometimes shed tears of toil and loss of love,  
but their tears are music  
like the hot air spiraling up  
from the rhino-horn teacup in your hand,  
while you meander in my mazy garden,

a flower queen in blossom.

Evening, November 1, 2010

## **Maiden Zhaojun Wang**

A court lady of the Han Dynasty (BCE 208-8 CE) who was sent to marry the nomadic tribal leader to settle the border war, and is considered to have been one of the four most beautiful women of the ancient China.

Han of China was mighty and vast,  
but never was her border in peace with nomadic tribes.  
Their unifying chief of San-yu launched numerous skirmishes,  
leaving bodies scattered, and villages burned,  
and screaming Han women on their horse backs.  
Han's founding Emperor himself  
once stepped in the quagmire.  
The seesaw battles had never ended,  
until a court lady was chosen to marry San-yu.  
She was none other than Maiden Zhaojun Wang.

Legend has it she had no money  
to bribe the court portrait painter.  
The Emperor had no time to check out in person.  
He had to rely on portraits to prevent the beauties departing.  
Zhaojun was chosen to meet San-yu's demand  
simply because her portrait was badly painted.  
When San-yu came to pick her up,  
he brought the best furs as gifts.  
His horses were strong and high  
and his retinue warriors rode on them with honor and pride.  
Han court held a lavish farewell ceremony.  
The Emperor himself was said to help her mount the horse,

and it was at that moment he set his eyes on Lady Wang.  
She turned out to be the most precious thing in all his domain.  
He wanted to kick the ground, and his anger burned hot in his heart.  
He would have the portrait painter's throat cut a thousand times.

All his love and sympathy made no avail.  
Zhaojun had to depart with a sea of sorrows,  
the sorrows have, since then, lingered on and on,  
and will perhaps, until the last humans end their songs.  
She had to tread mountainous terrains for months.  
Only the moon cast an eye of care on her every night.  
The wind dried up her tears, leaving a trace on her powdered face.  
As the Han palace fell further and further behind,  
she trod closer and closer to the nomadic sandstorm land.

She lived in an elaborate yurt,  
a strange place compared to the carved and painted imperial house.  
When she was first offered milk, lamb, beef and liquor to drink,  
she could not take a thing as they smelt strong.  
San-yu already had many wives,  
but she was the most curious object in his hand.  
The snow white Han court lady,  
with manners detailed in every step and every word,  
was the fancy of his passion and the secret of his pride.  
Every night, she sent her complaint to her parents through the moon,  
and every year, she expected swans to come from the southern sky.  
O, endless sky, endless glassy land and sand,

do you know the endless sorrow of Lady Wang,  
in a land of a strange tongue without a written word,  
without a soul nearby who could read her mind?

When San-yu died,  
she had to marry San-yu's son and heir,  
which was too much for a Confucian lady of Han.  
She managed to send a message to the court of Han,  
demanding them to buy her back with the empire's treasures.  
The answer was, "when in Rome, do as the Roman does."  
so she had to bear children for her husband's son.  
Little has been recorded about her since,  
only one thing is certain, her beauty faded  
and her yearning bones were buried and lost in the sand.

While men fought exhaustive wars,  
only a woman's womb made peace.  
Yet, she was lucky in many ways.  
Some conjectured she might have remained a virgin  
and pined away in the Han court  
like thousands of the insignificant beauties.  
Her life induced so much sympathy and speculation  
that she has become the beauty most alive in Chinese memories.  
When Li Lai wrote about how she cried as she mounted the saddle,  
her romanticized image breaks every heart.  
Countless poets have shed a river of tears.  
I have shed mine.

I wish I would carry her sorrow down to the sea  
where eternal murmurs would soothe her heart to peace.

Morning, November 3, 2010

## **Wait, until the day is dawned**

In the enchanting summer night  
when the wind is mild and stars are high  
and the sweet air makes you too drunk to stand,  
then set up and stoke a fire by the beach, my friends.  
Dance around it and burn with the flame,  
invite Dionysus to your camp,  
distil wine from plump fruit  
pleasant to eyes, difficult to keep.  
Late in life, dreams will fly in your dotting minds.

In the long pitch-dark winter night  
when you are encompassed by lonesome sights  
your loudest scream from your deepest throat cannot penetrate,  
then set up and stoke a fire in the forest, my friends.  
Huddle around it and invent stories,  
scare the ghosts away from the haunted place.  
Let the bonfire shine on the deepest grove  
lurking with beasts, sizzling with snakes,  
until the spring rewards your endurance with a wreath.

Afternoon, November 13, 2010

## **The dreaming water**

The water of a spring is pent up  
by the wall of a well.

Touch it, it is so pure.

Drink it, it is so sweet.

So still, it cannot flow.

It doesn't gush.

It has no pulses.

No, all those are wrong.

It is the same water everywhere.

Only,

it is sinking into the longest and the most violent dream  
in which the thickest wall is breached.

Evening, November 21, 2010

## Modern Van Gogh

With bold steps and a dreamy face,  
Van Gogh walked to his sea of yellow wheat.  
With a sky of flowers in my mind,  
I am drawn to my lake of love.  
My kit is much simpler,  
a pen, some pieces of blank paper,  
a book and a bottle of water.

I will not eat the yellow paint;  
I will not be shabby with stains;  
I will not cut off my ear without my Gauguin by.  
Rather I am Paris eager to take his Helen back.  
I stand on a cliff, urged to jump off by a voice in the wind.  
With no longing for home,  
my Calypso is mesmerizing me with her charm.  
Standing by the bank of a river,  
My nymph is beckoning me amid the water.

I will have no yellow wheat curling up like burning suns,  
no sunflowers like yearning from an explosive heart,  
but I will have lotuses soothing me to oblivion,  
and a boat drifting in a sea of uncertainty,  
a star luring me and raising me up.  
When I touch it with my hand,  
I will vanish without a trace

and all will start over again.

Early night, November 21, 2010

## **A moment of ennui-I**

Sometimes, it seems  
there was no blood coursing your veins,  
no bird-chants could remind you  
of the joy and surprise of being alive.  
The lake water was deadly still;  
the sun wore a forced smile  
and its light had no heat,  
numbing you into a deeper and deeper mist.

Surrounded by the green hills,  
you mock their showiness.  
Are you blue,  
or brewing blues out of the blue?

The sea is ebbing at its lowest,  
you have no choice.  
Don't try to reason,  
just remain there  
and cherish the moment of your lifelessness.  
Let the summer to the winter sink;  
Its bareness is the herald of the spring.

Afternoon, November 24, 2010

## **The fire for poet moths**

When I read historical records of China,  
I often put aside the book and ponder.  
Few poets led a life of comfort.  
I see only recluses and wanderers,  
the Empire's prisoners,  
or like poet Ji Kang,  
who requested to play his beloved instrument  
before his head was chopped off.  
Some were consumed by rivers,  
either willingly or by accident.

The venerable Tao Qian  
bowed out of the political scene.  
He would rather grow his own rice,  
and record his simple life,  
than to be a foot servant of the tumultuous time.

There is so much to gain being practical,  
so much to lose trying to be a poet,  
then why has there been so much insistence?  
For they all knew,  
those pressed ahead for gain  
also bore considerable risks,  
the biggest being their names erased by Time.

To escape oblivion, one must create,  
yet, any act of creation must be fueled  
with the creator's life.

What a fair tradeoff!

If you want your name to float in the air for long  
you must bear what Hamlet complains  
and learn to sing and sing well your swansongs.

Morning, November 26, 2010

## **A moment of restlessness**

One hundred years is only a lightening flash.

I see only living dead

and I am one of them.

Such a notion is so offensive

that a prince would not

be content with his life.

I know you are offended too,

So how should we lead our lives

with only a short span wrapped up

in eternal sleeps on both ends?

Are you, my friends,

far richer and more powerful than me,

becoming somber and modest on this thought?

Are you, my unfortunate folks,

far more invisible and insignificant than me,

elated with this thought

that death is a leveler

and your life is a flash

of a firefly, the same with everyone else's?

How should I cope with

the existence which is not my choice?

I timidly hide myself in my poetic lines

so that I may survive a little longer.

But my friends who have no such  
a hallucination is far braver.  
They enjoy life while they can;  
they don't want their wine  
soured by too much brewing,  
but I am not so sure of their ways too.  
What lies behind the merrymaking,  
maybe just a skeleton dangling in the wind.

Is there a way out?  
With no God,  
I was taught to let things go,  
to let my belongings go,  
to let the obsession with myself go,  
and to drift in the air like a feather.

The highest thing one can achieve  
is neither the tallest building one has built  
nor the most awesome power one has wielded,  
but a way of seeing every existence as Buddha sees,  
interdependently arising without its intrinsic self.  
Amitabha,  
hand down your boat for me on this tumultuous sea.

Afternoon, December 1, 2010

## **Thinking of her**

At the distant end of the phone line  
came a voice that would send  
a thrill down your spine.

She was a melancholy girl  
living in a city, a sea of neon light.  
She had to appear to be bright  
among the cool and calculated minds.

At times she fooled around with friends  
in busy streets and carousing bars.  
She would rather lock herself home  
with a Buddhist chanting on and on.

Both innocent and experienced,  
no snapshots could capture  
her moments of various blossoms.

She had suitors with fortunes  
lining up for her in patience.  
Yet, her mind seemed  
hovering over the moonlit water,  
searching for a nameless sailor  
bewildered on the chilly sea,  
yearning to grow a seagull's wings.

Years roll on and on  
until you have only the phantom of her youth.  
She may vanquish or grow old in an alien land.  
She is Wordsworth's Lucy  
and Yeats' Maud Gonne.

Evening, December 2, 2010

## **The Lake Songs' Muse**

She set foot on Chinese soil  
with her heart a garden of love.  
Her eyes beamed with her inner light  
which she attributed to sky and sky beyond.

Her smile was a kinsman's smile,  
and her curiosity was that of a drifter  
returning from the sea of forgetfulness.  
Much had changed.  
Time had turned the seabed into mulberry orchard.

She felt honored and warm  
palm leaves were lain down on the road as she walked.  
She triggered a poet's reminiscence of the ancient bard.  
For her his hand of vision had reached and picked up stars.  
He made her a cloak decked with all he had gathered.

Did she have a haunting dream  
that she was called and she was missed?  
Did she know she was held closer as she drifted further?  
Did she know this was a place of her birth?  
Hundreds or even thousands of years before,  
she had trodden on this very same earth

Morning, December 4, 2010

## **Drown in the music**

All fell silent,  
only the chanting,  
or rather, the vapor of tears  
still wafting down the tunnel  
to a maze of a deep forest.

A flock of bats flew in darkness  
where all converged,  
all impulses, yearnings and despairs.  
A thick layer of leaves  
decayed in the dense moisture.

There were so many signs of lives,  
so many yearnings for rebirth.  
The damp air was the fluid in a pregnant womb  
mingling with the endless prayers,  
the very chanting that melted and regenerated.

Drowned in the music,  
her eyes closed,  
her mind was drawn to a vista  
where a new life was being fermented.

Night, December 10, 2010

## **The cotton trees in blossom**

Under the cotton trees,  
the carpet lawn is strewn  
with their scarlet flowers.

Up over their leafless canopies,  
crimson buds and blossoms  
are burning flames.

Where is there so much blood  
bursting out of their veins?  
How can their barren branches,  
without a single leaf,  
sprout coral yearnings out of nowhere?  
Even the pale twigs taking  
their backseats are dyed red.

If you are pacing underneath,  
can you bear the red  
on the ground against the green,  
the red above, violent and wild?  
You'd better quicken your steps,  
or you would be lured to linger on and on  
until your heart were set on fire.

Night, December 10, 2010

## **A moment of ennui-II**

Empty, numb, lost,  
neither happy nor sad,  
only a moment of serenity,  
like a quiver tree standing  
among the barren rocks in southern Africa.

Are you alive?  
Yes, beneath the supreme tranquility,  
you are also an ocean surging in darkness  
with primordial water teeming with possibilities,  
or countless stem cells  
reproducing to take shapes,  
an engulfing longing  
that aches, yet soothes,  
a statue absorbing within itself.

Looking from inside,  
you are a colossal magnetic field  
directing filings with a magic wand.  
You see in your own sea  
the bubbles emerge out of breaking waves.  
Nature and human labyrinth  
is a cluster of shifting scenes in your dream,  
or just a finely-embroidered nightgown you wear while you sleep

Afternoon, December 17, 2010

## **A bouquet of flowers**

In a quiet winter afternoon  
when cozy sunlight made mild  
the chilliness of the breeze.  
A couple of lovers embraced  
in the pavilion by the lake,  
And two wild ducks ran darting on the water  
like flat pebbles skimming on the surface.

Palms trees waved in drowsiness,  
heightening the solitude with their murmurs.  
There was nothing else  
to disturb the spread of water.  
Still green to every eye was the southern hill,  
with its rich vegetations.

I had lingered on for long,  
so I arose and strolled my way home.  
What a nice pattern of leaves,  
seven pieces out of a single stalk!  
What a heartache beauty of the five-petal flowers,  
red purple spots dotted the roadsides with smiles!

I observed and pondered as I walked,  
until my heart sank, my bones chilled,  
when all a sudden I saw

three bouquets of yellow and white flowers  
wrapped up with yellow ribbons against yellow paper,  
with their stalks dipping in the water,  
laid facing the lake center by the shore.

Afternoon, December 22, 2010

## **Behind the façade**

Tell me not,  
you have consumers to serve,  
or public interests to protect,  
or a flock to herd,  
or youngsters to teach.

Tear down those masks.  
I only love you when you dream,  
for in your dream  
mountain flies;  
all melts in light;  
you travel in a tunnel as a bullet flies;  
naked women walk in the street  
without looking at each other's eyes;  
your body intertwines with your nameless love's;  
crocodiles pop up from a marshy swamp;  
demons are aroused to laden  
your true self with guilt.

The world cannot stand truth.  
If it could we would be all naked in the wild.  
Taking nature as being inferior,  
we build and live in our cages,  
and learn the impossible tricks to be civilized,  
even the most honest poets have to

meticulously guard their trade  
by trying to be nice.

So keep your dreams watertight  
deep under the sea,  
for if they leak  
you are bound to be impeached.

Morning, December 23, 2010

## **Joking with W. B. Yeats**

A right woman, a muse  
you and I both dream of,  
seems indispensable  
when our good poems are forged,  
sandalwoods stoked into a kiln  
to harden and give textures  
to Chinese imperial porcelains,  
but she is not out there for you to die for,  
for even your heart bleeds years on end,  
she still paints her face and laughs, unconcerned.

Afternoon, December 23, 2010

## **Beggars at a finest temple**

At the gate of Nanpu Buddhist temple  
next to an exquisite university campus  
where compassion and knowledge  
are supposed to pool,  
gathered a huge collection of beggars  
or rather, a museum of unfortunate forms.

Some missed one hand or leg.  
Those with both legs lost had to lie down.  
One without both upper limbs  
practiced Chinese calligraphy with his mouth.  
One with a right-angle humpback knelt,  
still another in shabby clothes sat  
with a dirty baby he adopted or picked up.  
Those who were able to walk  
accosted every passerby for a coin.

Don't mistake this for an underworld-  
instead, they begged in the sea of fortune.  
Look at busy gentlemen in suits with briefcases,  
the powdered ladies with handbags in a hurry,  
and the laughing carefree college students.

Pilgrims and tourists come and go.  
The monks' morning chant floated from

the most frequented temple in the South  
where stone pagodas rise to the sky,  
and the decked structures and statues dazzle you eyes.

A tower crane was busily transforming the road  
shared by the temple and university  
into a magnificent avenue  
with a multilayer underground parking lot.  
In the neon-lit massage shops,  
the newly-rich are spoiled by their windfall profits.

Ordinary people lead a life of comfort.  
The southern Fujianese do have a reputation for generosity,  
and they give more than people elsewhere do in China.  
Look at the temple doves gather to peck the scattered grains.  
In the same way the beggars assembled in the scenic spot,  
like tombstones erected in an elaborate churchyard  
where perplexed souls cling to eternity.

Noon, December 24, 2010

## Questioning a holy man

A heart can be light as a cloud  
or laden with trash,  
smelling, disorganized  
in a dumping ground.

Is a sentient being born with privileges  
or a speck blown by a whirlwind into existence?

A hermit drank the water of the melting snow  
on a peak he had trekked a thousand miles to.

Is his a lonely heart  
that has tasted the bitterness of humanity,  
that has bowed off the stage  
through an exit of obscurity,  
or a shining jewel, free from all the dirt,  
that answers his every whim,  
quenches his every thirst,  
and illuminates his solitary path in darkness?

Could he in his state of bliss  
tell me why I set foot on this earth in the first place?  
Why my heart sometimes blows up a hot air bloom,  
sometimes bursts like the Shuttle burning out in the sky?  
His light steps come in tandem with his telling beads.  
Are they the echoes of the celestial dance,  
or an anesthesia to the anguish that has bothered him much?

Afternoon, December 30, 2010

## **An agonizing obsession**

Could I bear the tyranny of Time  
when I would see It carve the linden bark  
on her face of an autumn full moon  
that had once been mirrored in all rivers and eyes?

Could I swallow the jeer and insult,  
when I would see her walk, stooping,  
in the wood that used to be the haunt of our youth?  
She once stood on a boat in the pool  
created by a waterfall, with her body in bikini,  
smooth as a mermaid glittering in the sun.

Could I surmise my own demise,  
when these very hands emanated musk  
by touching that very skin of hers  
which was the temple of all loves  
that sheltered me from all searing heats?

How could I let age spots encroach on  
my own hands sanctified by that only divine?  
Before they grow unsteady, they should gild  
on the flying wheels of Time, with my craft,  
her enchanting image that has thrilled the stars.

Morning and noon, January 2, 2011

## **Buddha and Einstein**

Buddha says:

Form is none other than emptiness;

Emptiness is none other than form.

Form is emptiness;

Emptiness is form.

Einstein says:

Mass is none other than energy;

Energy is none other than Mass;

Mass is energy,  $MC^2 = E$ ;

Energy is Mass,  $E = MC^2$ .

Than who am I?

Buddha answers:

You are neither form nor emptiness;

You are the Nirvana beyond words.

Einstein replies:

Energy condenses into mass;

Mass forms planets;

Planets evolve lives on them.

You are the cosmic consciousness trapped in mass,

A tiny part of cosmic dance.

All living organisms reveal the secret of life,

Bacteria, grasses and trees, insects and birds  
All have dreams as I have,  
When a flower puts up her show,  
is she not the same as a burgeoning woman  
having an erotic dream of procreation?

Am I the energy or the consciousness,  
which side is the coin itself, I insist?  
To this question, Einstein busies himself  
with watering the plants in his garden,  
while Buddha sits in silence for all eternity.

Composed at the small hours in bed, January 15, 2011

## **A long cold winter**

So cold, so long a winter,  
I feel like wanting to curse the force  
that I have no control of.  
It seems my feet  
were sucked in icy water,  
a mangrove's roots standing astride  
on the marshland  
to keep their trunk dry.

Chilly air encompasses me,  
numbing my nerves,  
as an early Alzheimer  
sets in to ravage my brain.  
There is no romance,  
or even an impulse to life.

In this barren permafrost,  
only the happy mound of ice  
nourished by the moisture beneath  
swell up and push each other,  
producing a cracking sound.

O, whispers of the spring,  
when will you come and turn into thunders,  
to break the cold silence

thick as a layer of iron  
cast with all ores from Australia.

Afternoon, February 18, 2011

## **A Noah's Ark in the air**

The heat scourges a parched land  
like a mummy dehydrated  
to preserve an eternal life,  
by sucking out the body fluid.  
You need a wand of Abram  
to create a spring,  
a shrine made of a few stone,  
or Moses' invocation  
to survive on the rain of manna.

In this sea of wealth,  
tidal waves surge to every brim,  
like souls in Noah's water,  
some hold on to floating logs,  
while the rest keep afloat,  
until the strength of their arms yields.

To keep dry, you need a Noah's ark,  
a Noah's ark in the air  
majestic, lofty with timbers  
and craftsmanship acquired from  
the widest land and the furthest past

Morning, February 19, 2011

## **A future me?**

There came an old man,  
walking alone by the lake,  
with a small radio  
in his unsteady hand.  
He emerged from the winding road  
among the green trees and groves,  
with an earphone plugged in his ears.  
His eyes seemed turning inwards.  
He was tall with age spots  
on his grey hands and face.  
I wondered what he was listening,  
as he was coming nearer.

On the opposite shore,  
the early spring swimmers  
shouted from cold before they jumped.  
A group of youths chuckled  
under the swaying palms.

I remained seated,  
listening to my MP3  
playing stuff of Greek mythologies.  
Drawing close to me,  
he fixed his eyes on me a while,  
then slowly passed me by

Afternoon, February 24, 2011

## **The Invisible Hand**

How shameless they are  
to bother me with all those  
blatant intentions for money,  
junk emails for products and tricks,  
phone calls for market surveys,  
advertisement prints  
distributed at my door and on streets.

When you have a try-on at a boutique,  
you are always made to feel good  
by the trained smiles and praises.  
Waiters serve you as slaves or servants,  
since you have the king in your pocket.  
Private transporters dragged you to their vehicle  
like picking up bank notes along the road.

A computer hooks me up,  
a car or plane takes me far and wide,  
I have no thanks for those,  
since they are brought out for profits.  
The only omnificent deity  
which outlives all others  
has driven things into the sky.

Good things do get done

as the Invisible Hand turns on.  
Electricity lights up my room  
holes were drilled under ground  
to get things to deck ladies' necks,  
but no matter how hard Adam Smith tried,  
it is impossible for his machine to produce  
the scarce commodity of love.

Afternoon, February 24, 2011

## **Mark Hilton**

A British Professor who has devoted a huge chunk of his life to English teaching in the city of Xiamen, Southern China, which he fell in love with.

O, to be in China!

Early in your home country,  
you began to long for her  
as the homesick Browning  
dreaming of his native flowers and birds.  
You must have had once a Chinese life,  
wandering astray to British Isles,  
with a craving for China visible on your face.

Now, here you have been for twenty years,  
twenty long summers and long winters;  
Your image of a tall Briton  
with a slightly upward-held head  
and a little protruded belly,  
talking with the locals in a resonant voice,  
has been seared into every mind.

In your class, never rest even during the break,  
you had a young man's spirit,  
though your hands were a little unsteady.  
Are you now British or Chinese?  
Alone in this city, you never reveal a crumb of loneliness.  
I am Chinese, and maybe once upon a time a Briton,  
and there is no border or secret between us.

Once in your class, I heard your voice tremble a bit,  
when, in introducing a Browning's poem, you read,  
"O, to be in England..."

June 26, 2013

## **The whole ocean in a drop**

You've never been alone,  
though you may think so,  
otherwise, cicadas would not sing,  
and myriad creatures in summer would not stir.

Every life is your life,  
every song is your song,  
each speck of dust under your feet is your kinsman,  
mountains and seas beyond find their ways into your veins,  
stars thousands of light years away produce echoes in your dreams.

Your smiles are camellias in blossom  
Your body movement is an extension of the primal dance.  
Wherever you go, I'll find you.  
Through the Sea of Light  
threading the pathless land with my eyes closed,  
I'll see you face to face in the pavilion.

July 1, 2013



# Poems 2014



## **It seems to be**

It seems to be  
a quarry of broken concrete,  
crooked steel beards  
pointing out in disorder.

You will live in time  
in it, a mansion  
echoing your soft whispers  
and your gaits in every mirror.

Feb 17, 2014

## **A shadow**

A shadow  
of a bamboo grove on a wall,  
a Jackson Pollock masterpiece.  
The moonlight paints without hands,  
while Jackson dances a monkey dance.

Feb 18, 2014

## **A dead person**

A dead person  
cannot argue or maim,  
but he must be somewhere  
grasping with his hands,  
shouting his throat dry,  
if in life,  
no opening would let him  
peep into a garden of roses.

Feb 18, 2014

## **A caged bird**

A caged bird  
in peace with itself  
finds it tough  
to converse with  
its fellow inmates  
who try to break  
the steel wires  
with their soft features and beaks.

Feb 18, 2014

## **In a barren land**

There is a time when dreams die,  
all wells for wayfarers have gone dry.

What isle could you fly to  
if pinions did grow from your arms?  
Could you fly hills and dales over  
where forests of arrows lay under?  
Could you hide in a den or a lion lair  
where all your peers were smothered?

There is only a river in your heart  
where a galaxy of lanterns float at night.  
Struck with the awe and comforted,  
you linger and tarry on the shore.  
O, light and launch a lantern homespun  
and join the journey to the fog-rising sea,  
leave behind, a burning lava-covered land,  
an unease even Buddha's mantras failed to mend.

Feb 18, 2014

## **This will pass**

Some note I took  
to remind me of a matter life or dead.  
In an altered time, altered mindset,  
I picked it up again  
and threw it into the dustbin.

Feb 18, 2014

## **I write in secret**

I write in secret.  
I don't want them to peep  
or else my whims may die.

After so many years  
searching in the filth,  
their eyes have become poisonous.

Avoid their hideous beams,  
a needle ready to pierce into a womb  
to still a healthy unborn child.

Feb 22, 2014

## **Our monkey selves**

My mind never registers  
a person I know well getting old,  
no matter how she/he put on  
a mask of an old tree bark.

Decades elapsed  
alter only our bodies,  
not our monkey selves.

That's why  
a Bahraini sculptor  
named his last work  
*"A Young Heart"*  
at the age of five scores  
and died a child.

Feb 20, 2014

## **Write, my friends**

If I could distill  
every whim and glint  
from my mind  
and install them in a robot,  
I would welcome euthanasia  
and wake up a thinking machine  
and happily discard the corpse  
as a defunct organ after a transplant.

Then, write, my friends,  
and reassemble yourself in letters.  
You will pace out of your dead body alive  
like the moon mirrored in every river and lake.

Feb 20, 2014

## **A heart on fire within**

A heart on fire within  
is hard to contain without.

It needs a wandering maiden  
dancing by the ancient River of Han,  
or a raincloud over the Mount Wu's crest  
where, legend says,  
a fairy queen enamored a king,

or, maybe, an excursion  
to an obscure peach-blossoming village  
through a crevice by accident,

where, eons have elapsed,  
a remnant of Chu's farmers  
know nothing of the First Emperor of Chin,  
let alone Han and its subsequent dynasties.

Feb 24, 2014

At the end of the Warring States' period (475 BCE-221 BCE) in ancient China, the state of Chu was defeated by Chin which subsequently unified China for the first time as a huge empire. Han is the dynasty which replaced Chin within less than two decades after its establishment, due to its extreme cruelty.

## **A foggy night**

You couldn't see far in the foggy night.  
The road was wet, the streetlights blurred,  
and the cotton tree tops buried in the air.

A girl with long hair walked slowly by,  
Two shades met mute and parted mute,  
then she thinned away into her own fate.

You heard your own step rise, step fall,  
and you touched your dew-wet face.

The lake was choked with watery smokes  
which turned the seven swans into ghosts.

Feb 26, 2014

## **A peacock's show**

On a belly-dance recruitment poster  
a smiling girl bursts out in flame.  
She seems forever happy  
with her belly shaking round and round.

“What makes her blossom so?”  
I conjure up a joy-killing question.

She seems offended, but still smiling,  
and steps off the wall whirling,  
fluttering her hands round my face,

“What makes you write, my sacred poet?  
Haven't you seen a peacock put on his show?”

Feb 26, 2014

## **A literary immortality?**

When I put down the book I read,  
*The Dreams of the Red Mansion*,  
I could not help pondering in silence,  
as the Chinese Han historian did,  
though different in nature.

I am only a walking dream  
while the protagonists in it are rock real.  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
Precious Jade, Black Jade,  
their sorrows and demeanors will never fade.

No marble or bronze will outlive  
his throng of creatures teeming in every mind,  
forming a portrait of a world old in tales.  
Cao Xueqin and his dreams will never die.

Then I may have questions to ask:  
“Can I spread my wings to touch the stars?  
“Or is the length of my lifespan merely  
“a white horse passing through a crevice of a wall,  
“a snap of fingers, or a waving of one’s hand?  
“Can I write myself a way into eternity,  
“to join Homer and his peers in Dante’s woods?”

This morning you met me in class talking about W. B. Yeats,  
that distant past you trod on your path alone at night.  
Fresh or fading, nice or disturbing, those are only dreams.  
Can you keep them for beyond one hundred years?  
Maybe you can with your pen, yet, mostly not,  
there is no literary immortality for all but a lucky few.

All lives come out of the Obscure,  
and go back into the Obscure  
all are the same, you and me, and also a leaf,  
and an infinitely small insect busy running  
on a page of my book I read under a tree.  
A shoot in spring will wither in autumn.  
Does it have an aspiration for eternity?

When you see waves you know there is an unfathomed sea;  
When you see lives you know there is a nameless womb.  
If you have a fear of mortality,  
ask a bubble how it feels when it breaks.  
If you have no mesh of lore to reason away your demise,  
then, ask a Hindu for an advice:  
Shakespeare's name on earth is only a blink of Vishnu's eyes.

March 3, 2014

## **A lakeside banyan at the Lovers' Valley**

A lakeside banyan,  
with its aerial roots dangling,  
is a guardian  
to the retreat I frequent.

Eager to see it take root,  
I picked up a rock  
and pressed the beard  
on the grassy ground,

but every time  
a visitor or a stroller  
swayed the root for fun.  
They took it from the soil,  
while I wanted it to stick.  
The game seemed to go on forever.

One day, I saw it hold at last.  
And now it has grown  
to be a supporting trunk  
as big as my arm.

March 5, 2014

## Science or myth

Light has weight  
and can be bent  
and condensed  
to make a rock,  
which sounds easier  
to comprehend,  
since the mushroom  
over Hiroshima was produced  
with only a handful of uranium.

But if you say  
the universe came to existence  
out of a big Bang  
from a point smaller than  
a billionth of a pinprick,  
I'd rather believe  
a mystical goose laid an egg  
that span and expanded out of hand.

March 6, 2014

## **The boundary of compassion**

A bird on the lawn  
walked with its beak back and forth.  
My palm could be its square.  
It had long white feathers  
mixed with dark-grey ones,  
lovely as my child newly-born.

Everywhere, I found  
such heartache cuteness.  
I remembered once  
my great uncle took me  
to grow soybean seedlings.  
When they sprouted out of soil,  
I spot a cluster of polar penguins.

No lives are not cute and priceless.  
As a child, I thought  
the leaf mustard must have felt hurt  
when I cut it down.  
Yet, lives build on lives,  
how cruel and helpless this world is,  
Jain, Buddhist and Jesus' loves  
extend to different spectrums of lives.

If I could survive without food and drink,

I would not pick up a leaf,  
let alone catch a fish.

But I have to eat and survive on other lives.

Where should the boundary of my compassion lie?

March 7, 2014

## *The Classic of Poetry*

An very ancient anthology of Chinese poetry believed to be compiled and edited by none other than Confucius (551 BEC-479 BCE) himself.

My new round of a ten-year  
self-imposed moratorium  
on reading in Chinese has begun,  
but I allow myself a minor exception  
by placing the Confucius-edited  
*Classic of Poetry* within my reach.

Words thousands years old  
are still fresh and in use today.  
Moments of joy back then,  
hearts pressed by human cruelties,  
seem still to be portions of lives now.

I see mulberry leaf-picking girls  
work and sing, giggle their way home.  
A maiden urges her love not to climb the wall,  
for fear of her parents and brother's eyes.  
A man meets a woman in the wild,  
makes love and feels contented.

A wife kicks her husband out of bed  
lest he may be late in a court service.  
An abandoned woman narrates  
her lament in plain touching words.

Youths gather by a riverbank, maybe,  
an encouragement for sex to boost births.

A petty servant overloaded  
grumbles about his helplessness.

A soldier marches to war in spring  
when willows are swaying in the breeze,  
only to return in winter  
when falling rain mixes with snowflakes.

An aristocrat bemoans the chaotic time,  
while hymns are sung to the royal forebears.

I love the book so very much,  
a time tunnel for me to go three millenniums back,  
to experience the ancient's sorrows and romances,  
and return with a sharp awareness  
that we have lost our innocence  
and created a much worse hopeless mess.

March 8, 2014

## **Metamorphoses of Poetry**

The airs from fifteen kingdoms,  
mild and sweet,  
blew to the South a cloud of tears.  
Qu Yuan drowned himself in the rain.  
Tao Qian brewed his wine  
and drank in his hermit hut.

Li Bai rode on his eagle  
flying by mountainsides.  
Du Fu, a refugee with a lute,  
sang for his fellows displaced.  
Li Shangyin walked under  
cherry blossoms in morning dews.

Rumi whirled in trance  
and ignited his longing into flames.  
Shakespeare housed his love  
in a crystal time capsule.  
Keats wandered in poppy land  
listening to his nightingales  
sing peace his pain.

Baudelaire kept a garden of wicked fleurs  
guarded by toads wet and cold.  
Eliot produced walnuts hard to crush

while Pound, a Medusa,  
turned whatever he spotted into rock.

And now mushrooms pop up everywhere,  
grow fast, die quick,  
infiltrating slimy murky fluid into the earth.  
I'd rather see in my dream,  
out of the desolate scene,  
a veiled woman walk in a sea of sands,  
or Gondor's King Aragorn's Queen  
pine away in the woods of Lothlorien.

March 9, 2014

## **Cormorants**

A painting by Wu Guanzhong

Willows crooked and twisted  
hang about a river.  
Cormorants stand on the ground below.  
Their beaks point up  
or comb their own hairs,  
their long necks and heads  
form various s-shapes  
in all possible ways.  
With their heavy black bodies,  
they seem content  
with enough fishes in their bellies.

March 11, 2014

## **Pomegranates**

A painting by Wu Guanzhong

Pomegranates  
on an obscured tree,  
as red and ripe as women.  
One bursts open  
and exposes its seeds  
in a crevice.  
It dawns on me  
all of a sudden  
why Solomon's poems  
to Sheba  
have such a power  
to enchant and ensnare.

March 17, 2014

## **A setting sun**

A painting by Wu Guanzhong

A setting sun  
dyed the clouds red  
behind a mountain  
with craggy rocks.  
Seagulls returning  
from a day's quest  
balance their wings  
like a twilight's  
flock of bats.  
Boats moored  
and clustered  
along the beach,  
while fishermen  
carried their catches  
to their uphill village.

March 17, 2014

## **Paolo and Francesca**

Paolo and Francesca  
are seen in  
Blake's whirlwind,  
Rodin's *Kiss*,  
and Rossetti's dreamy hues.

Thousands have joined them  
to moan for their fate,  
in social media and on stage.  
Dante in exile heard their story  
and put down just a few lines in his books.  
Why are there such endless repercussions?

Maybe due to their innocent love  
facilitated by a romantic book  
and a passion ended in  
their unnatural deaths.

Maybe, in every moaner's heart,  
there is a hidden impulse,  
just like theirs,  
ready to explode out of control.

March 17, 2014

## **A ritual of a music**

The music flowed  
and your tears sprang.  
Mountains within me  
have since echoed it  
for years on end.

Nothing makes me  
at this moment aware more  
of the paralysis of my words,  
only the sound has power  
to melt me into the air.

There may be sorrows in it  
that flows a Ganges of tears,  
but more the forest of mercy  
where unworthy souls seek refuge,  
or a vision of your sweet chamber  
which seals off all my senses  
with fragrances of a happy death.

I felt like kneeling down  
and putting my head on your lap again.  
I long now for your spring rain  
to soak all over me again.  
The incantation still has magic

to put me in your garden of tulips.

It always seems a soft spot  
inside me is intruded,  
when the ritual I perform  
is witnessed and overheard.

01:51 March 24, 2014

## **The two gifts taken**

I gave you a nice book  
with all blossoms of tulips,  
which I cherished as my gold.

He gave you a Mercedes-Benz  
which he got with profits  
from buying and selling,  
or from the most heinous way  
of maneuvering in politics.

I knew his gift was to him like sands,  
mine a token of my care.  
You took mine with politeness,  
and his with all your heart in exchange.

Since then,  
you have hailed the hilarity of your youth,  
saying however it may be spent  
you are still wasting it.

I wish you keep thinking that way,  
until the sands have fallen from your hands,  
and see the tulips in dews  
smile to you as always,  
maybe with an added secret,

if in that way you incline to interpret.

March 24,2014

## **A heinous design**

A ram went from his herd  
wandering in a lush valley.  
He is an envy of his peers,  
a headache for the shepherd.

Better he is dead  
than his making our docility  
more like timidity and ordinariness,  
most blame him like this in secret.

A few ewes may praise him  
for his guts and Odysseus's wild spirit.  
They bleat loud toward him,  
trying to call him back,  
or even show their love.

The solitary sheep does want a company,  
but he insists on a condition  
that a caller should split from the flock  
and become a roaming ewe.

Their mutual bleats go nowhere,  
since that for ewes is too much,  
and the herder perceives a threat  
and harbours a heinous design

that he is better completely lost  
or sacrificed right at the spot.

March 27, 2014

## **The chorus at dawn**

Birds sing at 5:30.  
one seems asking a question,  
another answers,  
still another with much coarse voice  
produces a cacophony  
at a longer interval.

Awake on bed,  
I am blessed  
with nature's innocence  
and its soul-bathing sounds.

But, if any crazy guy  
would sing at such an hour,  
despite her/his angel's voice,  
hymns to gods,  
I would go and knock at her/his door  
and turn my face sour.

March 29, 2014

## **To live well is to die well**

Most struggle to live well,  
but the more they try,  
the more they are enmeshed.  
I heard a whisper urge me to die well  
by summoning up all my strength.  
At first, I was offended  
and all my intuitions ran against it.

Soon, my wild horse was saddled  
and would have been like a Shadowfax  
carrying Gandalf across Rohan's Plain.  
To die well, you need a heroic heart  
and readiness to toil  
like Sam carrying his master,  
at the last, to the Mount Doom,  
and you should keep in mind  
your life is the lava-engulfed rocky top.

“Am I scared to die now?”  
Answer yes and it will take you  
to seek for medicines  
prescribed by healers far and wide  
and from the distant past.  
You may regret dying  
without a passionate love.

To seek for it without impairment,  
you need a most gentlemanly way,  
a knight armed not only with a sword,  
but with Apollo's gifts,  
and a heart purged off all dirt to cheat.

You may desire to live in abundance  
before darkness takes all over.  
To make a fortune without smearing your hands,  
you have to walk away from many trades.  
You have to be gifted and rich in luck.

To die well, you shouldn't grasp  
whatever is within the compass of your paws.  
Otherwise, if you struggle only to live well  
and lock Death in a dark cell of your mind,  
you will see the edifice you mercilessly erected  
tumble before or at the time when you expire.

March 30, 2014

## **A rainbow, an unusual symbol**

In reading Chinese ancient

*Classic of Songs*

I was amused and informed

that if there was an affair

going on in a village or a town

a rainbow would appear in the sky.

D. H. Lawrence wrote once

that a rainbow's two legs

arching up to meet each other

was a consummation of sex.

I am not sure whether

he had knowledge

of the Chinese book,

or just a coincidence

of the same observation,

millennia apart.

May 3, 2014

## **A poet's routine**

If there were an invisible being  
observing me on my routine  
in my private study,  
he would probably report  
his seeing a guy  
type in front of his computer,  
wear complex facial expressions,  
smile like an idiot and frown and ponder.

From time to time,  
his tongue would moisten his lips,  
his hands scrape his thin hair,  
sometimes, without doing anything,  
with his hand across on his chest  
and lean back on his armchair,  
and stare at his computer screen,  
or lie on his bed,  
assuming different positions,  
while an online radio or the storm-player  
blaring a foreign tongue to him.

Sometimes, he would sit on his sofa  
quietly observing the whole room  
particularly his shelves of books,  
occasionally cover his mouth

with his loose-held fist and stare  
like one desolate and lonesome.  
Often he would pace back and forth  
like a prisoner in his cell.

There were very few phone calls  
or visitors or errands needed to run,  
and he seemed observing a vow of silence  
as an initiate of a weird Celtic cult.  
Of course,  
there were other routines of his physical needs.

The report would well conclude  
that he had led a life of complete boredom.  
Well, that is the life of a poet—  
he puts nature and human world  
all songs and talks in his mind.  
Don't pay him any attention,  
just leave him alone  
and let him be a monkey  
grimacing and hallucinating all by himself.

May 3, 2014

## **Harmless greed**

It would be a sign of my enlightenment  
if I would give away my books  
and smash my computer,  
as Prospero does  
at the end of *The Tempest*.

It is not likely that I will ever do that.  
Mind, if not bound by material gains,  
must be bound by mental goods.  
I have been greedy in a way,  
an accusation made by my son,  
which I felt tongue-tied  
to give a ready reply.

Only much later, I said,  
Son, how about this:  
The thing I hanker for  
cannot be exhausted  
and what I have accumulated  
I can't wait to share it free,  
which is sharply different from  
the zero-sum game played  
by the multitude in marketplaces.

May 3-5, 2014

## Revaluating love

A mother swallow  
fed her chicks in the nest  
with a worm on her beak  
or even vomited more worms  
from her belly to do a mother's job.  
When the chicks' feathers grew long  
and their pinions were strong,  
they simply left and were lost in the bird colony.

Only human beings are moved by  
the love that is basically instinct  
calling it great, a rare commodity,  
and being burdened by it.  
We create words like  
“responsibility, ingratitude,  
unfilial”, thinking about repayment  
and expecting rewards  
as a business is conducted.  
Love between a woman  
and a man is even more so.

When two fishes were taken aground,  
the wonderful Zhuangzi wrote,  
they gasped and moistened  
each other with their saliva

to prolong their lives,  
which was far worse than  
their forgetting and losing  
each other in a river or an ocean.

May 6, 2014

## **No room for fantasy**

I admire Tolkien's Lothlorien  
If possible, I would like to create,  
in Chinese, an ancient wood  
populated by elves  
like Daoist immortals  
and Laozi as a wizard,  
but I can't,  
since Chinese are most down to earth.

They described every step on their way  
once they learned how to write,  
leaving nothing for fantasy.  
You have so much human intrigue,  
cruel purges that chill your bones,  
and so much worship of their ancestors  
to preserve their family lineages  
for fear of their being outcompeted,  
that even their dream are realistic.

If you insisted I should create a fancy world,  
you were putting a fish on a dry ground.

May 7, 2014

## **The Child is father of the Man**

I had been bothered by the Wordsworth's line  
like so many others, but it was no longer a riddle  
when I held my newly-born child in my arms.

I had been so human, a little too human,  
and this hailed humanity had almost done me in.

My child drew me back to the animal kingdom  
where there are no gods, no art, no rigid faces.

His smile in sleep made me ashamed of  
being conscious even in front of him.

He was with Dao, in Chan, a natural gift,  
while my job was to bring him down  
to learn insidious, dark human intrigues .

To survive in human ways, you have to  
dismantle a temple enshrined in a child.

What we are proud of as education  
is actually leading a monkey from its habitat  
to the city jungle of concrete buildings  
where it is forced to perform tricks to amuse.

Picking up a spot of sunshine on the floor,  
who would engross himself in doing that?  
That is far beyond a machine operating for gains.  
A mountain became a ruin fast

when an ore is found, and the ore  
needs to be burned and melted with woods  
cut down like hairs from a shaved head.

In Isengard where all trees are hewed,  
Orcs are manufactured to the Middle Earth.  
If the earth were populated with adults just like that,  
then, what man would make of man?  
Every child born to this earth, said Tagore of India,  
is a reminder that God has not forsaken the world.

Generations after generation of children  
bring adult world back from the verge of abyss.  
While their power of healing being diminished,  
our callous hearts are injected with drops of dews  
which are elixirs concocted by the Invisible Hands.  
We shed the hard and dry skin of a snake.

Aragorn having returned as the king leads his subjects  
bowing down to the childlike creature, Frodo,  
who is the only one capable of resisting the Ring.  
Then, parents of the wise world, should you  
also all kneel down to your infant children  
who have the only power to nourish you  
back to normality as your sustainers at their cost?

May 8, 2014

## Nietzsche

You can never feel ease  
and in peace with Nietzsche.  
He is a storm,  
laughing at your stagnant water.  
His is not a place to take shelter,  
but a place to face nature's full force,  
a volcano,  
a pounding of hailstones of unusual sizes.

Seek not to be comforted,  
seek to be purged yourself off the trash  
that has been stuck to you  
without even your slightest knowledge.

He is your ship on a tumultuous sea,  
heading nowhere in a whirlwind,  
but if you are lucky enough  
to disembark in one piece,  
you'll feel refreshed,  
inspired, and surprised,  
after the rocky and bumpy ride.

May 9, 2014

## **A fantasy**

Paddling into the distant past  
through the misty sea,  
where Hope had overextended her wings,  
I saw a shape form,  
sucking in moisture,  
getting more and more solid,  
and it turned into a woman,  
walking with all her glamour  
on the glittering wavelets.

An isle dipped behind her  
with seagull black wings  
hovering around a cluster of greens.  
As she stared into my eyes  
I felt warm and paralyzed  
and tears blurred my sight.  
Too long in my canoe,  
overjoyed by the encounter,  
I fell unconscious, trance-like,  
into her outstretching hands.

In a cave lit by a campfire,  
I startled up in her pale white arms.  
She calmed me down with a smile and a whisper.  
Her soft breasts heaved with love and curiosity

with her face perplexed and flush.  
She bid me tell her my land of origin  
and the lineage of my name.

I told her that too long on the sea  
they had faded in my memory  
like salmons escaped an outworn net.  
I would live obscure and die obscure  
without asking for anything more.  
I'd rather be her gardener  
and let my tales thin into the air.

November 19, 2014

# Poems 2015



## **Narcissists and their pools**

Walking down a road,  
riding on a metro train,  
attending a public gathering,  
sightseeing at a scenic spot  
or staying at home,  
you will see everywhere,  
everyone hold a mobile phone,  
holidaymakers, commuters, street walkers,  
restaurant frequenters, newly rich or sweetshop workers,  
your colleagues, students, your wife, sons and daughters.

Look at the one sitting beside you,  
he seems so calm, composed,  
so in complete control of his life  
while reading his mobile content  
on his way to God-knows where,  
and to what challenges him ahead.  
He seems to be a philosopher or an awakened one  
holding a universe in his hand.

Take a look at that girl tourist,  
she preens her way ahead, relaxed,  
with her mobile screen as a mirror,  
adjust her smile for a selfie,  
then make a monologue to her I-phone mic.

She is well-dressed, endowed with a perfect face,  
well-painted, a modern goddess in flesh.

What a place!

covering up a dump under a nice blanket,  
so eerily peaceful,  
with all narcissists hanging over their pools.

March 11, 2015

## **A nightmare,**

or a rehearsal journey to the underworld

On an inch-thick white matt,  
with a layer of dry rice stalk thrown on it,  
I slept in a corner of the disused anteroom  
of my childhood wooden house,  
weatherworn and gloomy,  
which was once used as a pigsty,  
a gathering place for mice.

I struggled to get up and fly  
and surface to my niche of books.  
Just as I was there with an awareness  
of being in a paralyzing dream,  
I slid back again to the dismal place.

I saw a strange woman, happy and young,  
fit and acrobatic, acting  
like cartoon Goofy trying  
to put on his skiing gear.  
I was weak and scared,  
badly in need of a company.  
At the opposite corner, all by herself,  
she seemed absorbing in her sport.

Then I saw an old medical friend  
coming back alive and robust again.

I had a thin awareness he had long been dead.  
His sunny smile and handsome look  
lift my heart up a bit but brought no warmth.

Then my sanguine mother smiled,  
talking like she was in her sixties  
instead of her senile eighties  
and told me she was just away for a while.  
“That was a long while, Mother.” I puzzled,  
without knowing she had long deceased.  
We had no further exchange of our longings,  
no sadness of separation.

Then, a door opened to a dark interior.  
Timidly stepping in, I was overwhelmed  
by even darker rooms of an abyss.  
My hair stood on end and a chill seized me,  
and I was ready to hold onto anyone  
or even a stalk for reassurance.

I struggled again to wake up into my cozy room.  
It seemed I was half-awake,  
heaved heavily and slightly calmed down.  
Never did I expect I sunk down again.  
This time, my wife was sleeping  
in a large bed with a sheet and quilt all white.

Since she didn't answer my call  
I went to sleep by her side.  
I was unexpectedly pushed aside in a friendly way  
due to her having two female friends  
crammed in the same bed.

Full awake, desolate and puzzled,  
I was never so forlorn before.  
I pondered long and long.  
Yes, that must be a necessary rehearsal.  
When my soul embarks on his journey of death  
will he be as lonely and timid and desolate?

It is not easy to have a sure control  
when vistas of your past flash back  
in distorted shapes all over again  
as your ship heads on at night  
on an unchartered indifferent sea  
amid mermaids singing without meaning to you.  
There may be beauties and stories, yet no comfort.

March 12, 2015

## **A preening beauty in the campus**

In a long gingham coat  
soft in texture, rich in colours,  
she was a spirit of spring.

Dark hair, straightly-snipped  
around her shoulders,  
she adjusted it for a selfie,  
facing her mobile screen.

Delicately made up,  
with a camellia smile,  
her perfect face  
absorbed in her sweet dream.

With mild paces,  
her high-heeled feet  
stepping on a paved ground,  
while cotton trees were in blossom,  
she snapped countless self-portraits.

The innocent breeze  
swelled up and swayed  
her robe-like heavenly coat.  
A passerby could not help  
but stand and observe

such a pluming in spring.

A long-tail bird flew from a tree  
circling around her in a ring,  
He seemed curious, just as me,  
about her origin, her next sojourn  
and to her what Time may bring.

March 23, 2015

## **The stuff that dreams are made of**

In the Maya of Time and Space,  
we are karma dust blown into shapes,  
and each speck of our flesh  
is proven to be a tiny spark.  
Time's arrow eternally flies;  
Space's balloon infinitely swells.

I have been bothered by "I"  
which Buddha counsels me  
to be just a mirror blurred  
by too many images it keeps within,  
and the objects it reflects  
are waves or bubbles while they break.

Einstein reached the ultimate;  
he saw nothing but light in light.  
Fear of my demise and horrors  
in what is so real as our world  
drove me away from the ant nest  
to speculate in a glade.

Now day is dawning and stars fade.  
In a dream within dreams,  
you and I are in fact linked to  
the same Source beyond words,

yet It permeates and underlies everything.

A drop of dew may disappear

but its content never ceases to exist.

A fish may pop up and dart under water,

but it must be somewhere in the sea.

By the shore, the setting sun glows

amid rosy clouds and seagull wings.

March 25, 2015

## **May it be a Voice**

May it be a Voice  
sings all hearts to peace,  
brings the wicked to innocence,  
mends the earth and heals the wounded.  
One step departure from the Unity you should be,  
you try to unfurl a standard on the hilltop of your own,  
you create a discord that will soon make you fall into an abyss.

A blind man can't lead,  
a turmoil of desires seethe,  
a cacophony drowns birds' songs,  
too many wanderers lose their way home.  
May a ray of light pierce into your cave's opening,  
may the light dance bring a revelry to your dismal place,  
may a chorus in tune with all instruments bring tears to your eyes.

A slave enthralled  
with an invisible bondage  
fights like a free man in a sea of pains  
while Sirens' voices lurk from a distant reef.  
May it dawn upon you that you are your own enslaver  
and all you've encountered is your enmeshed self in a dream.  
May it be a Song drowns your cry of fear in the calm morning sea.

March 28, 2015

## **A Tribute to J. R. R. Tolkien**

A withdrawn, pensive mind,  
a milk sea being churned,  
a source of all fanciful existence,  
there is no greater ecstasy  
than the divine secondary creation.

Moons and suns swing into the sky,  
mountains pop up,  
rivers carved meander,  
phoenixes fly, heroes march forth,  
all vicissitudes and vignettes  
of myriad creatures unfold.

There are beauties  
and striders of a royal lineage,  
elves and small people  
performing deeds  
that dazzle your eyes.

There is an origin of evil  
that upsets love and peace  
designed with best intents,  
and it bristles up tsunamis  
and pounds on human dwellings.

There are scenes  
which seem to be segments  
of my previous life  
in which love, trust, friendship,  
compassion and art  
are not eroded by dirty boons.

There are places so warm  
that they seem to be primal wombs  
or dream homes where I should be,  
but never exist.

March 28, 2015

## Flowers and poets

All flowers are sexy,  
yet most guileless and innocent.  
They are plants' sex organs.  
Like butterflies out of their cocoons,  
they enter into a frenzy of mating  
and die shortly afterward in content.

A rose bears her heart  
with her juicy redness,  
and her obvious intent  
to love or to be loved.

A chrysanthemum, a plain lady  
with common senses, wears a smile,  
nodding in the wind,  
an invitation to make friends.

A lotus stands in aloofness  
with an air of being a high-born,  
but she seems smiling in secret  
if you pay homage to her in worship.

A rhododendron blossom  
is most guileless and direct.  
She simply reveals her loneliness

and a need to be accompanied.

Most of them laugh and scream  
like cats' cries in spring.

But they are most lovely  
with purposes of their own.

They live like us, especially poets.  
A drive to self-preserve for eternity  
prompts a flower to bloom and a poet to sing.

March 29, 2015

**English,**

English,  
a strange tongue,  
while acquiring it,  
I felt like a fish  
choked on the sand.  
My body twisted  
and arched to reach  
the crystal sea palace.  
Now, a second nature,  
it is the very realm  
I've dreamed for.

I do not hate Chinese though,  
rather, I would love to live  
with ancient Tao Qian in his hut,  
drink his wine,  
share his toils,  
and lend my ears  
to every word he uttered,  
but Chinese at present,  
a blanket of smog  
over the chicken-shaped land,  
wherever you are,  
your nose is irritated.

April 16, 2015

## **A dream**

On a segment  
of a road of yellow earth  
winding up to a mountain  
where I gathered firewood  
while I was a child,  
I pulled over me a quilt  
in restlessness.

I made a call to my love,  
but I failed to get through  
after multiple tries,  
then I realized  
it was a long-disused  
old fashion mobile phone.  
I called her again  
with another device  
but it turned out  
to be the remote control  
for an air conditioner.

I remembered  
I was with her earlier  
at a bleak wooden house  
by a riverside.  
We seemed close

within a space of a few meters.

She engrossed herself

with her affairs,

occasionally smiled,

but did not heed my words.

April 17, 2015

## *Musings in the Valley*

My published collection of poetry in Chinese

My son,  
this is my tomb, my house  
my palace, my ark,  
my dome in the air,  
my castle on a mountaintop.  
Every year on the Tomb-sweeping Day  
no need to seek for me  
on the desolate hill among the dead.

My father has only his name  
left in my mind.  
His face is blurred  
and his tomb is less strong  
than marble and brass.

When I die,  
discard my body as you see fit.  
No sign of any sorts should be erected.  
You may come here once a year  
in the day when Chinese honor their dead,  
but I am not with them.

Read my poems and I am alive again.  
No offering of paper money burned for ghosts,  
foods, flowers or rituals of any sorts,

for why do you treat the living  
in the same way as others do their dead?

April 19, 2015

## **Her daily bread**

In the gathering darkness,  
a middle-aged woman  
was rummaging in a garbage bin  
by the campus lake mirroring  
night lights and moonshine  
for discarded plastic bottles  
she pressed flat to save space  
and put them into  
a big black plastic bag  
she carried on her back.

She then walked down  
a neatly-made ring road  
through a little round square,  
where tourists watched  
the swans and played by day,  
toward next garbage bin  
in the evening breeze,  
with only her obscure shadow  
following her to search  
for her daily bread.

April 24, 2015

## **An illusion**

A translation from one of my poems in Chinese.

From an opening,  
I saw the plants in your garden,  
mandragoras, mandrakes,  
henbanes and poppies.  
A puff of fragrance  
carried by a breeze  
lured me to roam in it.

You shut me out in time  
out of compassion  
to save me from being perplexed,  
but my soul had condensed into the night dews,  
dropping lightly on your leaves and petals.  
They would smile for a moment  
in the morning sun  
and then blend themselves  
into your sweet scents.

I had discarded my body  
to trace your essence  
which put me into such a frenzied trance.

Written February 21-23, 2009,

Translated, April 24, 2015

## **A mind calm and settled**

The violent rustling of leaves  
in a haunted wood,  
under an overcast sky,  
in an impending storm,  
is enough to make your hairs stand on end,  
but, the swaying trees,  
the timid strollers running away,  
the heaves of nature,  
the seriousness of the lake surface  
on which waterfowls  
are making their somersaults,  
are a rare scene  
for a mind calm and settled.

April 25, 2015

## **The Music**

If my poems had wings of your music,  
yours and mine would intertwine  
and echo around the mountains  
a story that were ours,  
a yearning that would flow  
a ribbon of a river or clouds.

Scatter me into the air,  
I don't want a body  
and a tongue of words.  
I want your invisible notes  
carrying my dust  
to the deepest space of your heart.

Oh, no, dust is too heavy  
I want to be light reaching  
wherever your songs are.  
I want to be one with you  
to fill the morning woods  
with the sorrows and ecstasies  
from a wanderer's strings.

April 25, 2015

**In expectation of you,**

In expectation of you,  
willows sprout in spring,  
birds converse at dawn,  
the pond teems with ripples  
stirred up by myriad fishes.

In expectation of you,  
lives full of suffering linger,  
desolate caverns open to light,  
the forest on fire looks forwards  
to gathering clouds.

In expectation of you,  
lyrics keep coming out,  
tunes form out of nowhere,  
statues are carved out  
with a rare feat.

In expectation of you,  
disheartened heads hold up,  
madhouses calm down,  
the seething gulfs of want  
are filled with gold abundant.

But you are not a god or goddess.

You are a sweet, caring spirit,  
with your soft hands of understanding,  
and your smiles of unwavering love.

April 26, 2015

## **Two great Ways**

The greatest sin  
is to have made Eve eat the Apple.

The greatest love  
is to urge Eve to put an apple back.

But to achieve the latter,  
a threat of the fire of hell  
and a sword barring her access to  
the Tree of Life simply doesn't work.

An ocean of compassion,  
most subtle, tireless persuasions,  
like the breeze's talks to a tree,  
have been tried, yet,  
without much guarantee of success.

April 27, 2015

## **Maybe or maybe not**

Twenty years has elapsed  
since I first taught English  
and doodled my first poem in it.  
White hairs on old heads now,  
back then, were black.

Time, you've killed far more than  
the worst lunatics in history,  
yet, we do not hate.  
You quarried youth  
out of a beauty's face,  
yet, she bore you no grudge.

With the soft killer by,  
acting all around the clock,  
we are toads put in the cool water  
on a live stove, trying to get used to  
the rising temperature.

The news of suicidal pilot  
crashing his plane into the Alps  
set my weak nerve on fire.  
The crew and passengers on board  
knew too well, in a hell of despair,  
where they would be a few minutes later.

We are all in that plane,  
only the remaining minutes  
are extended to the rest of our years.  
Our screams may not be so extreme,  
but we will have many rehearsals in our dreams.  
Arise now, escape from your house on fire,  
to search for the Garden of Peach Blossoms.  
Maybe an opening will lead you there, maybe not.  
April 30, 2015

## **May your journey end in peace**

In a maze of disturbing dreams,  
a most foul thing has been enshrined,  
a giant earthworm, to quench its thirst,  
pools and pools of blood have been shed.

Its violent turns threw rivers out of their courses,  
its vicious looks ambushed joyful birds,  
and its venom poisoned the earth.

Once a most heinous wind blew up  
and your city was blanketed in black,  
the sky was pushed down to the sea  
like a lid covering over a pot,  
all with wings were forced to swim.

But, you chose to launch out a ship  
with a sail made of frightened birds,  
flowers, and butterflies,  
to seek for the Isle beyond.

May your journey end in peace.  
May you wake up in a haven  
where your screams be hushed  
by a face beaming with mercy and love.

May 2, 2015

## **No easy match for Nietzsche**

Don't make a tirade  
against Nietzsche  
in his absence,  
like a kid trying  
to pull out the beards  
from the jaw of a sage,

or else a few words he uttered  
would strip you naked in public,  
or his sudden grasp  
on your inner thigh  
would make you scream and jump  
like a coiled spring abruptly turned loose.

May 2, 2015

## **Hallucinations**

Hallucinations,  
a pond for human fishes,  
without it,  
we would all be belly up on a parched land.

We were born for addiction  
to wine, to drug, to sex,  
to power and money,  
to all sorts of collections,  
to arts of all forms,  
about all, to gods of all imaginations.

One thing is sure, we cannot survive,  
facing the grim reality of endless toils.  
We need dreams to restore our minds  
burdened by our daily calculations.  
We need to go beyond  
the two ends of a tightrope of life.

Cities glittering at night are dreams,  
and it's now clear,  
rocks and mountains are dreams,  
countless balls hanging in the sky are dreams.  
All plants, crawling insects  
and us, a paragon of all, are dreams,

and the human history is  
a long dream made of billions of dreams.

For all who are dreaming and addicted,  
may you avoid a way of self-infliction,  
may you not be overwhelmed by your dreams,  
which may transform you to be a monster  
shattering and dismantling others' dreams.

You may make a castle perch on a mountaintop  
and decorate it with all your whims,  
but do it without shedding others' blood or torturing them,  
do it with the sheer wonder in your heart.

May 13, 2015

## **A snare**

A snare,  
your heart is a hare,  
wherever it ends up in,  
there is a snare.

Or it's a deer  
enmeshed in a huge net.  
When you feel most free,  
the net is being gathered.

May 15, 2015

## **If my whims had wings**

I am a coward admiring  
those who took lunatics' bullets  
and their lives gave out scents  
like nectars pouring out on Earth.

If my whims had wings,  
they would be knives of Justice  
flying and cutting the wicked.  
I wish I had talons of eagles  
bringing terrible gifts  
to comfort the most mistreated.

I am the unfortunate bard  
in Odysseus's hall in his absence,  
but I don't sing lofty songs,  
I sing my own weakness,  
I sing in sorrow to spoil their merrymaking,

I sing with hope to ease my hatred,  
I sing in expectation of a miracle  
that the thorns in my heart  
will one day be balms for the hurt.

May 15, 2015

## **What keeps a heart beat?**

What keeps a heart beat?

A camel plods on in searing heat,  
with hot sands burning its feet.

A bird jumps around  
tirelessly filling its belly,  
avoiding its predators.

A dragonfly transformed  
from its larva in the water,  
how many odds it has to overcome!

They do have moments  
of drinking water in an oasis,  
of singing at the top of its throat,  
of fluttering its transparent wings  
in the light penetrating the canopy.

They have no arts, religions  
philosophy and history  
to occupy their minds  
to kill time and to create meaning,

but they do have one string  
pulling them in common with us,

an erotic dream of being  
with the opposite sex,  
an automatic moving device  
installed within all of us.

An Apple fixed to a line  
hung down by the Beauty  
keeps every heart beat  
and props up all faltering feet.

May 16, 2015

## **Baudelaire**

Reading Baudelaire  
even in English,  
I feel like I'm walking on  
a street of perfumes,  
neon lights of all sorts  
beaming to my eyes.

Like a destitute rural child  
with a candy in his hand,  
he doesn't want to finish it fast.  
I never jump over a page,  
or count how many pages left.  
When I put it away,  
I save it for the time I need it most.

Out of the dumping ground  
of filth from human hearts,  
he was an artist making collages  
of masterpieces out of his picks.  
Don't think he is one of you  
brewing toxic drinks.  
Don't think he smears you  
by exposing a corner of your heart  
crawling with worms.

It is sweet to listen to  
songs sung with a dreamy face,  
but I prefer to be rocked and torn  
by a tumultuous voice  
uttered with a face dead serious.  
Sometimes it is cold and lifeless  
as if you were by a loved one  
with a terminal disease.  
Sometimes you have the Beauty of Ice  
beckoning you to your total destruction.

Going over the carefully-chosen words  
laden with shared symbols,  
and the cadence of mesmerizing lines,  
you feel the giant woman, the cat,  
the hair, the stone, the moon, the swan...  
are all transformed into stars  
in the blue night sky over Paris.

The beauty of despair may be yours,  
but never Baudelaire's,  
his, a heart full of reveries,  
a shining star with an eternal smile.

May 16, 2015

## **A mental chatting in English**

with my friend Dana Wilde of Maine, USA

In this no-man zone  
of once a stranger's tongue,  
an invisible island of Crusoe,  
among my fellow countrymen,  
I am the sole monarch  
ruling supreme, and the only subject  
catering to his ruler's every whim.

In perpetual solitude,  
I make soliloquies,  
think aloud and write in a language  
none other than yours,  
a voiceless zone, it seems,  
Ariel's tricks constantly in the wind.

I was born, live and survive  
in this ancient land  
with her unique writing kits  
and enchanting words  
which make me prostrate  
in awe to their aching glamour.  
They are milk to the lucky me  
incarnated here to be sated  
with endless yearnings and ecstasies.

I thought I would be one among them  
with mountains to trek,  
rivers to wade and course,  
hearing monkeys' screams  
and looking at the clouds  
capping the mountaintops  
by a steep riverbank  
where the fairy Queen is said  
to have met her worldly counterpart  
in secret plays of love,  
but I am not.

I survive in reveling  
with their souls wrapped up in words,  
dancing in the moonshine  
beaming to me from the old,  
their lore and tales,  
the very air sustaining me wherever I am.

My contemporaries  
are recovering from a collective madness  
inspired by the Lord of Delusion.  
Their hands are still dusty  
in their destruction of temples,  
in removing heads from Buddha's statues,  
their habits of vandalization  
sometimes return in a fit.

Despite being caught red-handed,  
they are unaware of their guilt and shame.

I can't speak to them,  
theirs is a version of simplified  
and contaminated language  
made coarse by the north wind  
and trivialized by their caged life  
plus the swelling-up pride of the newly-rich  
who gossip in buzzwords  
which make your skin pop up  
in gooseflesh when it is heard.

In tune with the ancient,  
in peace the modern  
in an invisible secluded zone,  
I gradually pick up your tongue, now mine.  
Traversing far and wide,  
it seems I were thousands of years old,  
yet, still young, still a baby  
acquiring a new tongue.  
I know what everyone talks,  
yet, I am among none of them.

This margin, an isle, a new planet,  
or a similar shady zone of Dante's purgatory  
where ancient men of letters converge,

has its first frontier settler.  
Maybe Sappho will come with her lyre,  
Keats with a sanguine smile,  
Tao Qian with his brew for years,  
Li Bai with a sword and a gourd,  
Rumi whirling with one palm up, one down,  
Baudelaire with his mask off,  
and my friend, Dana Wilde of Maine,  
is a frequenter long before them all,  
and the list will go on and on...  
I know that it will be a garden of songs.

May 17, 2015

## Searching for a precious book

In one go, I bought quite a few books,  
designed in the West, printed here in China,  
among them a book of floral drawings  
by a French court painter  
or someone else, I don't even remember.

I took a casual turning of the pages  
Which made my heart jump  
and my breath quicken up for its beauty,  
then I put it aside as a delicacy  
for my future eyes to feast.

Yesterday, after a few months,  
I thought about it again,  
but it was nowhere to be found.  
Rummaging all my shelves,  
going through book by book,  
once, twice, thrice,  
sure, I would be crazy without it.

As the evening mealtime  
of the canteen drew close,  
I couldn't eat the books  
that were crammed in my kitchen,  
and I was totally defeated.

To get out of the abyss,  
I filled up my belly  
and took a usual evening walk.

Today, I resumed my stupid search  
and almost missed my noon meal.  
A little irritation, a little heartache,  
I don't know how many times  
it will gnaw my heart in time to come,  
somewhat like a loss of love in a distant past.

May 19, 2015

## **An ode to Chinese language,**

The only language river flowing nonstop from extreme antiquity to modern days.

To translate  
a traditional Chinese poem  
into any other language  
is to smear it,  
to reshape a swan into a duck.

If you care about  
how my ancients did  
their language acrobatics,  
come,  
I will show you  
how each character  
finds its way from the wild  
to a turtle or a bison bone,  
to a cast bronze,  
to a bamboo or a wooden slip  
to a piece of silk or paper,  
its forms, from crude cuts  
traced back four millennia plus,  
to the script of Chin  
with smooth lines  
dancing like court girls  
unfurling their long sleeves,  
to Han's official style  
of willowy charm,

not to mention the regular script  
with strength and pride  
on which modern print Chinese bases,  
and the cursive style,  
to give you a hint of its power,  
Jackson Pollack may know a little.

With image characters  
combined with visual verbs  
without much use of pronouns,  
prepositions out the picture,  
adverbs and adjectives' functions  
all derived from picturesque nouns,  
never with such things as  
definite and indefinite articles,  
singular, plural and tenses,  
a cluster of a few lines  
will give you the wonder  
of Milton's lofty mind,  
Shakespeare's skill to enslave words,  
and a Romanticist being tortured  
by the Beauty and his mental storms.

In Li Bai,  
you will experience  
the sky and earth linked  
via the mountains he trekked.

you will see flowers, birds,  
clouds, rivers, the sun and moon...  
explode into wonders and his lament,  
and his voice can be so fine-tuned,  
his negative capacity is such  
he imagines himself  
to be his wife answering his own letter,  
which makes you swoon by the tender love,  
and his sympathy to a court beauty's  
marriage to a nomadic tribal head  
perpetuates her sorrows  
that still cuts and bites deep into your flesh.  
And his is only the extreme tip of an iceberg,  
literally, of the whole body of Chinese verses.

Don't expect narrative scenes  
similar to Homeric war,  
or a long discursive rendering,  
for how you can  
set your wildest horse run  
forever on earth and in the sky  
without its slacking or dropping dead.  
To Chinese eyes,  
lines without images are unpoetic.  
We have only lyrics  
that make your heart strings coil and loose,  
and you are forced to bounce,

and find it hard to keep your hands and feet still.

May 19, 2015

## **A tiny insect**

Crawling on a page of my book,  
an insect was so tiny,  
tinier than a pinpoint  
or a needle hole,  
I couldn't make out  
its eyes, ears, nose or mouth.  
Its moving body must have been  
supported by its busy running legs.

Why it existed and came here,  
I had no idea.  
I gathered it would die soon.  
Sometimes, I had patience  
to let one go. Sometimes not,  
I dusted the page with my hand  
and a trace of a thin yellow line  
of its crushed body dashed on the page.

I wondered some Force  
must have been observing me  
reading in Its wood  
and being puzzled in the same way  
I had been puzzled by the insect.

May 19, 2015

## **A feather in the wind**

A feather in the wind  
going up and down  
here and there  
at the end of the movie *Forrest Gump*,

if you can drive home  
that message and live accordingly,  
without any pretending,  
without a conscious trying,  
without a slight awareness  
of your being imitating it,

you will be able to know  
secrets of all hearts,  
languages of all beings  
animate or not,  
and wonders of all objects,  
from the burning sun  
to the dust under your feet.  
They all simply exist.

May 20, 2015

## **The meaning of life**

Life is such a thing  
no one can withhold from  
asking if it has a meaning.

Well, its meaning lies in  
that your mind is completely  
absence of the word “meaning”,  
and you even have no idea  
of “the absence of the word ‘meaning’”.

Look, a swan at the lake center,  
a moon under the water.

May 21, 2015

## Impermanence

Moon waxes and wanes  
veiled and unveiled by clouds.  
Surfaces of the Earth shift around,  
Which is, in Chinese idiom:  
The sea may turn into mulberry fields.  
An insect born in the morning  
may die in the evening.  
The polar star may move  
and constellations shift.  
Change, change,  
to things seemingly fixed,  
to things there for you to grasp,  
to things already yours.

A movie ends with a city  
shaking on the horizon of the sea,  
like a mirage in the Taklamakan,  
while on it a bowl of human ash  
is drifting up and down.  
You may have had your fair share  
of impermanence,  
yet you tend to suppress it  
as a hidden skeleton,  
the Death, in your closet,  
but you often hear

it dangling in your dreams,  
or even in your moment of ecstasy,  
though you fan it away like a gadfly.

How about be plain with it,  
open your senses  
to the autumn leaves  
yellowing and falling,  
to lava spewing up by a volcano,  
to buildings bulldozed down and rebuilt,  
to tides fluxing and ebbing,  
to winds moving around you,  
to the furniture and books  
and your cozy nest,  
which you take for real,  
but their every elements  
like those in your body  
are getting older every second  
towards their final dissolution,  
and to your old photos,  
to people around you,  
how a friend's face changes  
in a span of a few years,  
how many go, how many come.

To have a long look at the face  
of Impermanence,

to be aware of Time and Death,  
is not a joy-killer,  
it is a dance with changes  
you need to have,  
a mindset of letting-go,  
a process of reunion,  
to be in tune with everything,  
so that Time and Death  
will have nothing to do  
when they find out  
you have already danced,  
as they come to force you to learn,  
out of a tough love of a caring one.

May 21, 2015

## **A Chan case**

An English rendering

“Come, a hard nut  
for you to crack.”  
said the Master to his disciple,  
“A man raised a goose  
in a huge vase with its neck  
about the size of your fist.  
It soon grew to be  
a large goose in the vase’s belly,  
and the vase neck is too small  
for it to come out.  
Now, you need to get it out  
without breaking the vase,  
and the goose should be  
kept alive and intact.  
How can you bring it out?”

His disciple racked  
his brain for a solution---  
the vase, the goose,  
breaking the vase,  
killing the goose...  
He troubled his mind  
for a long time and stuck.

At that moment, a staff  
knocked on his head out of the blue,  
and a thunderbolt voice  
of his master exploded, “Out”.  
His mind blacked out all a sudden,  
then he was out and smiled.

May 21, 2015

## **A pair of brackets**

A deceased person,  
or a historical figure' name,  
when being mentioned  
in written words,  
is usually followed by  
a pair of brackets indicating  
his year of birth and death  
with a hyphen in between.

A person alive, when mentioned,  
has only his birth year  
followed by a hyphen  
with an open end in the pair.  
The short line seems  
waiting for the missing number  
to be filled in.

Once you were born,  
you were given, in your pair,  
a number, a hyphen  
with its quiet longing  
for a conclusion,  
sometimes with patience,  
sometimes without.

May 23, 2015

## **Be a tiny fire or a leaf**

A poet does not need  
a mind of T. S. Eliot.

A cave profound  
may resonate a sound,  
rumbling and a grumbling  
from an abyss,

but also, tiny fires kindled  
in the dark night  
light up the earth surface  
in a chorus of prayers,

and a humble leaf  
in the soft wind  
reveals the secret of the Sun  
and understands all voices  
sounded or unsounded  
to human ears.

July 2, 2015

## **Maiden Xi Shi**

A poetical fancy of the ancient beauty of China

She washed yarns in a brook,  
a Burne-Jones' nymph hanging  
over the *Mirror of Venus*.  
Flying birds forgot fluttering their wings,  
while carps thronged to kiss her hands.

Her sable tress cascaded over  
her humble flax-woven dress  
which barely contented  
her wavy shape, ripening breasts.

Her pale moonlight face  
radiated a smile that commanded  
bees to turn away from flowers.

Her songs of ancient tales,  
of joy or of sorrow, accorded with  
the crystal water flow.

Oh, do not take her away  
to the stagnant, muddy court.  
Do not powder her face  
and teach her skills to charm.

She was a temple of innocence.

For her, the sunset was golden,  
and the nearby hills were drunk.

July 2, 2015

## **A purple green bird**

A purple green bird  
perched on a lotus stalk,  
long-beaked,  
with its head,  
swift and mechanic,  
shifting up and down,  
left to right.

With many looks I took,  
I was busy drawing it.  
My sketch was half done  
when I saw only  
the curled stalk,  
barren in autumn,  
lowered and withdrew  
its head all to itself.

October 29, 2015

## **Slow down your paces**

A message

I posted on my social media  
was one minute old.

Taking another look,

I noticed it had been five.

The number soon became

one day, one month

and quickly one year ago,

like a bird flying to the past.

A friend I met and parted,

one day, one month, two months,

one year, two years...

and now he becomes very old.

Time, I know what you can do,

wait or slow down your paces,

until I'm an innocent child again.

November 13, 2015

## **My kind**

A bird alighting on  
the stone I seated,  
my heart fluttered.

I stretched my hand to her  
and she seemed ready to peck.  
She allowed me to follow her  
as she walked with  
her head back and forth.

I forgot she was not my kind.  
With one step too close,  
she soared into the air.

She had a belly to fill,  
courtship dances to please her  
and eggs to lay, chicks to raise.  
With a smile as a blessing,  
I saw her off to the wild.

I am in fact her kind  
in a strange appearance,  
but she can't reach  
my sky and see me fly.

November 14, 2015

## **Sea creatures and the sea**

Should human beings  
be compared to sea creatures,  
some are whales, some are sharks  
some are croakers or any other species.

What we know as “understanding”  
is a space shared by the same kind.  
What we know as “misunderstanding”  
is a conflict between different species.

They swarm and bump to each other,  
sometimes violently, sometimes in peace.  
Some tend to withdraw to themselves  
and use only sound as a device  
to keep in touch with their group.

They all believe they have a space  
to exist and wander around,  
but no matter how far they swim,  
wherever they reach,  
however they communicate,

they definitely can't tell  
what contains them and why they exist.

November 15, 2015

## **A Prayer**

An interpretation of my painter friend, Yu Jian's works  
for the Syrian child washed ashore to Greece, dead.  
Also, a prayer for countless aborted lives in their mothers' wombs.

The Hand of Healing is upon you.

Return, your intimidated soul,

death is only a sleep.

From this pavilion,

the blue sea is open for you.

Can you see my face washed by tears?

The queen with a floral crown on

is here by your side,

singing a lullaby,

sleep, sleep, my child,

tomorrow you'll arise

and essay your wings

with newly-fledged pinions.

My heart is cotton

wrapping you up and gives you warmth.

Stars are holding a vigil for you,

and my long hair wet with dew

is singing a prayer in the wind.

Sleep, sleep, no more journeys

you are forced to take,

you have arrived safe at my shore.

November 16, 2015

## **A winter foreboding**

Is this hot early winter  
a blessing or a foreboding?  
Hills are green, flowers variegated.  
Last evening the sky was blood red  
and a black cat was yawning listlessly.

Shorts are worn, air conditioners on,  
and in your private space,  
human clothes seem a redundancy,  
a thin sweat covers your skin  
like a plastic film, and your sticky hair  
makes your forehead irritated.

My friend spoke to me from  
the upper opposite side of the Earth  
where winter had started to bite  
like permafrost hardening the ground.

We live in a crazy time, crazy place  
where a finger can make the Globe spin.  
Fishes are belly up and foods are poisonous,  
and rivers are dammed like clotted veins.

At Paris center, bombing victims screamed,  
while the assailants wielded their scimitars.

There is only rock, but no water,  
and thunders seem roaring out of nowhere.

I can only dream that a drip-drop of peace,  
drip-drops of water make a desert a flower bed,  
and all hearts return to moderate humanity.

I am more desolate and despair to hear  
“Yes, we can.” or “To be great again.”

November 18, 2015

## **A Lamentation**

As I walk in this scarred land, I also walk in your heart.  
The Queen of All Wonders has become the Queen of Bereavement.  
With my hair loosen, face smeared and a black robe from head  
to toe,  
I moan for you, I kneel down scrapping the earth until my nails  
break for you,  
I cry as a woman in the ruin of Jerusalem did for you,  
and I enter into a trance to plead for you.

Time and again, I offered you bouquets of flowers,  
but you didn't want to take them, I put in place all my musicians  
and played a music that may touch the heart of Hades,  
but you didn't want to hear it, I received the Celestial Lake water  
with my long hair and directed it onto the Earth,  
but you made it unfit to drink, and I inspired sages and minstrels  
to uplift, chastise, amend, entertain and enlighten you,  
but you acted like a suitor in Odysseus' house,  
and I built havens that housed the guardian spirits of the earth,  
but you dismantled them like an idiot on the throne of a king.

It is you, you and still you, don't blame any others  
for having a greater share of the destruction than you.  
Look at what is happening under your feet,  
taste what you eat and smell the air your nose inhales,  
jump and swim in the water that is supposed to bring your joy,

and hear the voiceless screams of the killings that have been done,  
hundreds of millions of lives in nature, hidden or in front of you.

What catastrophic scenes of carnage,  
they could not have taken place without you;  
they are the real pictures of your heart.

If your heart is not a ruin and refuses all my decorations,  
then how can there be all those manifestations?

Discern the most heinous weakness inside you.

If the foulest beast within you is sitting on a splendid sedan chair,  
do you play a lesser evil by carrying it on your shoulder,  
or have the guts to refuse your servitude,  
to throw it into the chasm if the burden crushes you.

November 19, 2015

## **You are the richest**

I greet campus cleaners  
the way I greet my friends.  
I consider them rich and dignified  
as the richest on earth.

It sounds like a twister.  
How about this:  
a million bucks  
for one of your fingers,  
ten millions for your hand,  
and your head off  
for all the world's wealth.

If you don't want to take it  
Then, you are the richest.  
I see so many walk with all gold  
and cry and stretch their hands for more.

They label themselves  
as poor and inferior  
and prostrate in front of  
those who they consider  
as rich and superior.

November 22, 2015

## **The last journey**

A moth in my room,  
dead on a piece of paper,  
seemed so alive.

I dusted it into the air  
from my sixth-floor balcony.

It flew in the morning light,  
whirling downward,  
swirling in the wind,  
like a petal, hilarious and happy,  
under the magic gravity.

How beautiful and dignified!  
Its last journey towards eternity.

Morning, November 22, 2015

## **An excavated grave**

A roadside grave  
excavated ages ago,  
I know not when,  
with double-coffin vaults  
like two eyes,  
watches me walk  
in the darkness.

I know the dead  
cannot bother me more  
than the living,  
but still,  
every time I pass it,  
it seems the air  
is cooler and chiller.

November 27, 2015

## **A world for a mystical bird**

At the edge of a water,  
inverted tree canopies  
were in the inverted sky,  
with blue-grey, cotton clouds.

The breeze-wrinkled  
lake surface seemed smiling,  
two acacia leaves sailing,  
and the autumn cozy sun  
beckoning me from far below.

Under my feet,  
a world for a mystical bird,  
with dazzled eyes  
and a deluded mind,  
I was ready to essay my wings,  
hearing my fellow kinsmen loudly sing.

November 29, 2015

# Poems 2016



## **A single thread**

The Earth ball was hanging on  
a single thread woven with  
one simple question:

"My love, do you want a diamond,  
or a poem that is sure  
to make your perfect face  
shine in eternity like the Moon?"

"A diamond", said she. Then,  
the thread broke, the ball dropped  
and its scarred surface turned dusty,  
spinning ceaseless on a frenzy journey.

Morning, February 25, 2016

## **March is the loneliest**

March is the loneliest,  
the month with endless rain,  
bringing paralysis to my mind,  
sore throat, diarrhea to my body.

Wet fallen leaves rot fast,  
providing nutrients  
to the painful new lives.

At the noon of the 18th,  
clouds and clouds  
of an impending downpour  
made faces on the street surreal.

I am searching hard for hope  
in a gulf opening wide in my stomach,  
in a huge vortex in my mind sea.

I am stretching my hands to you,  
my love, and my inner calls  
resonate in the rain in darkness.

March 18, 2016

## **How to burn in the rain**

Drizzling spring, a season of dreams,  
in the wind, wanders my demonic love  
who taught me how to burn.

I was told, “when your feet are cold,  
“your mind is numb,  
“when fallen leaves are rotten in the forest,  
“then, I’m a lightning to your wet log.”

She brought me to a foggy lake,  
took off her shoes, walked on the water  
and danced her gossamer off her shoulders.

With her silk blouse sticking to her breasts,  
she sang her songs, her hair loose and wet.  
Her eyes were talking to me,  
her hands moving like fires licking my face.

She was aloof, she was near,  
whirling on the waves,  
a turbulent sea, a turbulent she.

Since then, I’ve never been depressed  
by the season that soaks every plant.  
I’ve long walked in the rain,

the sky overcast, all faces dreary,  
but I know how to burn and bath in flame.

March 23, 2016

## **A distraction**

On a bullet train,  
external scenes were flitting,  
internal loudspeaker blaring,  
via smart phones,  
businesses were conducted,  
and faces and body gestures  
were monkeys in the jungle.

I had no rest,  
so I gathered up my thoughts  
on a sleeping she opposite me,  
the only drop of peace.

She had a small mouth,  
a dreamy face like a lotus bud.  
Leaning on the window  
or on the table, her seated poses  
were the only prairie to my grazing horse.

She wore a pair of high black shoes,  
up to her knees, and her short skirt  
barely contained her upper legs.  
She sometime stirred,  
or sit straight to plume her hair.

She was quiet and her eyes talked  
while her eyelashes fluttering,  
a fountain of sparkling delight.

Her pale white hand held  
her smart phone against her black coat,  
and her face with a mystic smile  
invited chivalric care.

As my thought roaming wild,  
my journey came to an abrupt end,  
and I was forced to disembark.

March 29, 2016

## **Sinking into a nightmare**

A dim glow hangs over  
the bleak rainy evening sky,  
while on the wet ground,  
gathering darkness  
soaks every heart dares to aspire.  
I know you are dangling  
with me, my friends,  
among the shades,  
aimless, seeking a rebirth.

Worms eat our brains  
and holes are chiseled through our hearts.  
I hope it is only  
an episode of a long tortuous dream,  
that in the other realm,  
a pair of caring eyes  
are shining on my twisted face,  
her soft arms are holding me back  
from a fever of life and death.

It will all pass, my friends,  
and in an altered space,  
we will wake up from our nightmares,  
we will breathe in a grassy land  
dotted with blossoms and lambs,  
where children are on horsebacks,

while maidens sing among birds.

April 15, 2016

## **Ego**

Ego is a mirror  
which keeps the images  
of the objects it reflects.  
Can you make it normal,  
when an object is removed  
from the mirror,  
its image ceases to exist?

Those images  
lump themselves up in a bundle,  
hijack the mirror  
and become a mirage,  
with its hands stretching,  
with its hips swaying,  
yelling and dancing in the desert.

April 19, 2016

**I love you,**

I love you,  
even if you bit into my flesh,  
gnawed my heart with sick worms,  
and bored me with the volcanic ashes.

I love you,  
even if you fed me with poisons,  
bombarded my ears with your gibberish,  
and smothered my child with a cloth.

I love you,  
with milk and wonders of prairies,  
with the singings of brooks,  
with a dome I built in the air.

I love you,  
because you are so in need of cares,  
so hopeless a drifter in the current,  
so reduced and paralyzed by heinous designs.

I love you,  
with a hope you will awake from your slumber,  
long-disturbed in the sea of red,  
a blind shouter in the street.

April 21, 2016

## Reduction

26 letters,  
a set of building blocks,  
keys to the Western lock.

20 strokes,  
derived from the wild,  
a set of a painter's kit,  
a thread to the Chinese maze.

2 stones of black and white,  
Yin-yang of Chinese Weiqi,  
a game simulating all nature's tricks  
all men's strategies and intrigues.

Binary 0 and 1,  
a witch and a wizard  
walking on a land of ghosts,  
making Zhuang Zhou  
confuse himself as a butterfly.

But, to reach the silent realm of bliss,  
even 0 is too much.

You may chance entering it,  
if you wander far and wide  
in the endless sleepy mist.

April 21, 2016

## **A dream**

He chased you  
with a heart of roses,  
variegated, scent uncontainable.  
You knew you were being chased,  
turning back with dancing steps,  
with an inviting smile,  
a flirtatious look,  
bringing back a rare moment  
when everything seemed to be right.

2:30 pm May 13, 2016

**May you launch out your boat,**

May you launch out your boat,  
though the sea may turn monstrous,  
with you all alone and in tears.

May your island with smoke curling up  
from the roof of your love keep you on.

May you gain wisdom  
by docking at many unlikely lands,  
visiting bazaars of spices and perfumes,  
and temples with dancing girls  
around their inner shrines.

May the Star fix on you  
along your voyage of uncertainty.  
May all designs set up against you  
be the fire to your porcelains in the kiln.

Though, your boat may flounder,  
though, you may perish,  
though, you may have a bitter fight,  
you are a burning tree  
singing a song of flames to the sky.

A log rotten in rainy days  
is a choice you want to avert,

since every atom you are made of  
is light and cries to return to light,  
and your whole being is nothing  
but a cosmos itself in a grain of sand.

You deserve to gain what you have lost  
through your restless tries,  
endless quest on the high sea of life.

May 25-26, 2016

## **A grim reality**

How can you survive  
in a nation of vendors,  
scavengers, muddled heads,  
sex sellers and buyers,  
belly-protruders with their oily mouths  
and a standardized demeanor  
of a commanding sneer,  
financial cheaters, commercial ad liars,  
Mahjong gamblers, smart phone starers,  
TV revengers on Japanese,  
court soap operas' players,  
street pamphlet distributors,  
shopkeepers and their yellors...

I sit upright in bed  
in the depth of night for you,  
my friends, and my frowned brow  
keeps folded and my solemn look  
is the one's whose relentless prayer for  
the return of his lost child is not answered.

May 26, 2016

## **The sacred music**

In such a huge expanse,  
you are nowhere to be seen,  
yet, ever present like the music  
wrapping me up in a mist  
so thick it seems I were walking  
on a shore with an encompassing space  
of a thick fog, embracing me like a cocoon.

My mind is cloudy,  
my body is melting in your air,  
blending with your scent  
that turns my stinky pond  
to a pure water of ablutions for eternity.

I don't think there is any comfort  
other than this in which  
the searing heat is insulated  
from the land of desires  
with disarrayed tinkling cans  
piled up on the street  
and burning faces under the blazing sun.

Though I have lost you on the land  
where our chance of holding on to each other  
was like the fishes in a dry-up well,

I am with you whenever I turn  
the music on and I feel right again  
with tears and my sanity restored.

June 2, 2016

## **A realistic record of my dream**

With a great relief  
as a flower blooms,  
I walked among you,  
my loved ones and friends  
harboured deep inside my heart,  
at a party with people in black suits  
and evening dresses, conversing  
like those at an art gallery.

“Shao has just passed away,  
“and his funeral will be arranged  
“some time tomorrow.”  
My funeral? I was stunned at first  
and the news spread  
like the sweet air in the room,  
with only me perplexed,  
but in a perfect balance and rest.

Among the people,  
cups in their hands,  
charmed by the aroma in the air,  
I looked for my bosom friends  
and my sister who knew my every bone  
to check out if there was anything wrong,  
but they did not respond.

I patted on their shoulders  
but my seemingly physical body  
overlapped theirs like a wind  
passing through a rock.

I knew I was lost  
to their space and time,  
but it took me a while for it  
to settle in to my heart of festivity  
and to my all encompassing mind.  
Only after many tries in vain  
did a sadness of separation set in.  
I was dead without a fear of death,  
with only a yearning to inform  
all my friends that one's death  
would be only a lotus in blossom.

Yet, how was I able to get it across?  
Out of the ultimate compassion,  
I tried like a vulture  
swooping downward to its preys,  
trying to grasp them to the air,  
shaking them awake to their awareness,  
but the dream world wafted on  
like Gatsby's party  
where no one could feel me.

In a panic, not out of my fear,  
but out of their being ignorant of my cry,  
in an engulfing sorrow  
of separation without having imparted  
the pearl message as a gift,  
I rose and thinned into the air  
with ecstasy, leaving behind  
the place that trapped me in  
with all its charms, glamour and intrigues,  
with all those things seemingly up for grasp  
but in fact stuffs that dreams are made of,  
forgetting my last regret.

This is not intended to be a poem  
but a record of a real dream.

Dreamed, June 9, Recorded, June 17, 2016

## **Yes, I'm a poet**

In this predawn darkness,  
the cock has yet to crow.  
There's still room for me  
to pluck up my courage  
to declare that I am a poet,  
that I am a vehicle of light.

Such a vow has been  
on the tip of my tongue  
for almost a quarter century,  
yet, there has been a hesitation  
like an unfledged bird  
essaying among thorns.

Now, I am a lion,  
I don't want to be Peter  
who denied his discipleship  
after his Master was arrested.

June 18, 2016

## **A Parable**

A fair lady,  
most delicately brought up,  
then, a good wife,  
unfortunately,  
was raped by a thug  
in her very early pregnancy.

She tried to tear her body apart,  
to wring the dirty fluid dry  
out of her own flesh  
that was the texture of porcelains.

In vain, the baby was born a boy  
and she exposed him to the wood  
in her husband's absence.

She has self-tortured  
self-disdained afterward,  
without knowing  
the child was her own man's  
and was picked up and raised  
by a hermit in the wild.

One day, her suffering will end  
and her bitterness turn sweet,

when he returns to her  
with a close resemblance to his dad.

June 22, 2016

## Yang Liping

A goddess of dance in contemporary China

A quarter century ago  
when I first saw on TV  
someone dance like a peacock,  
I couldn't believe my eyes  
that I saw a real nymph.

I was made fun of as being ignorant  
or as pretending to be ignorant,  
and I was told she was  
none other than Lady Yang Liping,  
a goddess of dance, a real elf.

Her fans' comments on her  
gave me an impression  
that she had been idolized,  
an apple of all eyes nationwide,  
long before I even had a hint.

Since then I saw her  
on some big TV variety shows.  
Whenever she appeared  
she was able to still the air,  
to make her viewers' breathless  
with her fingers moving

like dropping rain or burning flame,

her head shifting like a bird's,  
her body twisting this way or that  
like patterns in a kaleidoscope,  
and her steps tapping on  
the ground like hailstones,  
dazzling your eyes,  
mesmerizing your mind.

Though I like bright stars,  
I am not a keen stargazer.  
For all those years,  
I did not follow reports  
about how she lived  
and what she'd been up to,  
until today I saw a post  
about her on social media  
that she will turn 60  
in two years' time,

and is living on an island,  
like a Calypso's cave  
unveiled to the human world,  
or Sappho's private space  
relocated across the sand of time  
from ancient Lesbos

to the mystical Chinese Southwest.

All those years, not aging much,  
she danced on stages or in the rain  
simulating peacocks, fire or wind.  
With a flower basket on her arm  
she walked among the boulders  
among a stream gurgling through  
her blossoming garden.

Against a tapestry  
surrounded by embroideries  
she read books among parrots,  
a modern Queen of Sheba  
or Cleopatra in her leisure.

Walking on the steps  
of a fine masonry work  
she fetched water from the lake.  
Sitting under the broad sky  
on the plateaus' flowering field,  
she meditated and prayed  
with a lamb in her arms.

She created hundreds of images  
on and off stages, glamorous as  
a polar night sky with aurora,

as a charity lady with a ragged kid,  
as an upper class woman  
in her bedroom of fancies,  
in an elaborately-woven folk garment,  
in the harvest field with ripen grains  
bending their stalks low,  
above all, she was a wild  
dancing peacock on stage.

Though Time may crumble mountains,  
these images are not likely to go away.  
All changes, I wish her well,  
in the vicissitude we all faces,  
that her ever-transforming spirit  
will create a phoenix  
soaring ever higher into the evening glow.

June 23, 2016

## **A thread-waisted wasp**

A flying insect in my room  
like a huge ant with wings.  
I took a snapshot and enlarged it.  
It has six slim legs,  
two protruding tentacles  
and a bottom part  
like a separate huge load  
connected to its main body  
via a barely-visible thin line.

My biologist friend told me  
it is a thread-waisted wasp.  
I opened my window  
many times for it to go,  
but it seems to prefer  
staying in my cool room  
than returning to  
the exterior baking heat.

For many days,  
I haven't seen it eat,  
drink, read or ever feel  
melancholy or bored.  
How nice it hangs on here!  
For how long, I'm not sure.

I have plenty of books,  
the statues I made,  
what a nice place to be a grave!

June 27, 2016

## **Bipolarized**

When I write a mail address  
here in China, I will write in order  
names of the country, the province or state,  
the city, the street, the house number  
then finally the name of addressee,  
but in the West, it is the other way round.

When I need to date some document,  
I begin with year, month and date,  
but in the West, it is the other way round.

When I write down my name,  
my family name will come first  
and then my given name,  
but in the west it is the other way round.

When a son is given his dad  
or his grandpa's name in the West,  
he will feel proud and honored,  
but here in China, he will be a laughingstock  
and considered to be the most  
unfilial and offensive,  
which should be avoided at all cost.

Top down versus grass root up

in politics, state control versus individualism,  
do not do unto others that you would not like  
them to do unto you, versus,  
do unto other that you would  
like them to do unto you,  
everything seems to be bipolar.  
How can I reconcile all these?

June 27, 2016

## **A taste of Eden**

On a path in the maze  
of learning and pretending,  
a mango dropped  
on the ground ahead of me.  
I picked it up and took it with me.

After being bored to my bone  
for a whole day with “knowledge”,  
upon my return back to my dorm,  
I peeled it and ate it  
and its sweetness lingered.

I thought it was a taste of Eden,  
when I knew not what toil was  
and my Eve was innocent.

July 17, 2016

## **Dismantle yourself**

I cherish the years while I'm still with you,  
as a rose cherishes her summer's lease  
when her tender and sweet ecstasy  
cannot be contained as dewdrops on her petals  
receiving the first dawning light.

I have long been silent like a statue  
in a dilapidated temple where festivals  
come and go without any offering of songs  
or sprigs of flowers, and birds chirping  
among reeds, raindrops on the broken roof,  
  
winds' howling through the ruined corridor,  
lightening and thunders, the snow heavy on the pines,  
monkeys' plays and bats' wings in the evening sky  
are the sounds easing its desolateness,  
and the molder of its visage and shape  
that are deprived of any gilded and ornate pomp.

I know how to remain isolated and intact  
when my flesh is chopped bit by bit for the vultures  
that are swooping down from the mountaintop  
with grandeur and alacrity for an exhilarating feast.

I know you are the one exactly like me, my friend,

and you are going through the pain that a stone  
may melt in tears, and you paralysis is as the one's  
whose tongue and hands are cut off and her brother  
was killed and thrown into a pit in the forest,  
and an inner heat is searing you at the core  
like every atom inside you has broken apart.

Do not be scared, my friend! How can you  
put things together without their being scattered  
and how can you be put together without facing  
the bluntness of Time's claws and Its unerring retinues.

To survive well, you need to dismantle yourself  
and scatter all you have into the air, so that  
you are able to assume all forms, to contain  
all stars, to talk with all voices out of the Silence.

July 20, 2016

# Poems 2017



## **True love**

A face glowing in true love is  
a secret fire that smiles in darkness,  
a rose, a gift for the season,  
a herald to a wild store of chances,  
an envy of all eyes,  
above all,  
it is a blessing to a world  
where things seem out of joint  
and passion means possession.

February 14, 2017

## **Under your spell**

Caught in your arresting look,  
how much I wanted to be under your spell  
and be paralyzed at noon under a tree  
in the dry season's heat.

I turned and twisted my body  
struggling to tell if I were led into a tunnel  
or grazing on your prairie like a lamb.

Your eyes would impregnate in me  
a whole spring of fruit trees  
that would lower their branches  
in summer's opulence and autumn's pride.

I would gush like a fountain at midnight  
with my voice and moisture  
that would thrill and nourish  
the slumbering mountains with ecstasies.

I believe you were mine  
once your stare was so long,  
your whole being was so tender,  
and you emanated sweetness like cherry bays.

The full Moon had risen above the sea

and the moonlit water swelled and fell in helplessness,  
paying homage to It in an ever rising tide.

March 12, 2017

## **An age-old yearning**

If the air is trembling  
in accord with your heart,  
a quake from the center  
vibrating fast and far,  
then you are in tune  
with flowers in blossom,  
with birds chirping at dawn,  
with leaves everywhere  
inhaling and exhaling  
like Chan practitioners.

The whole nature is in love  
and so you should be.

Your mind is dizzying  
as a dancer's who lets go  
all herself and becomes  
a feather in the wind.

Your heart is an all-engulfing net  
which contains all galaxies  
with all their minute  
and cosmic manifestations.

You have no self.

You are an age-old yearning  
to melt in the Unspeakable

which is a city with a gate  
that can be stormed into  
only by a battering-ram of love.

March 12, 2017

## **You cannot be killed**

When the hand of Death reaches you,  
do not feel that your sky is suddenly overcast,  
that the mountains you climb start to crumble,  
and that your spirit struggles in the sea of mist.  
Do not crawl and prostrate to Him  
and beg for a moment of reprieve.

Cut yourself off what belongs rightly to Him,  
and dance and sing in spite of Him that part  
inside of you that has wings beyond His reach.  
How can you expect being accompanied  
when you are travelling to a place of the living  
and lush spring amid those who are drawn elsewhere?

There may be moments that your head is downcast,  
that an arrow inside your flesh hurts so much  
in the battlefield of an overwhelming slaughter,  
and that your broken legs dip deep in blood,  
but you are alive, you cannot be killed,  
if what inside you is a pool of healing elixir.

March 14, 2017

## **Booby traps are everywhere**

You never know what shadow you may step in  
if you are not vigilant as one sitting under a tree  
with his inner senses as quick as a sharp knife.

Too many baits and snares are set in purpose  
to keep you in slumber and caged  
without even your slightest awareness.

You are a hypnotized one being led on a way  
like a toddler stumbling without its mother,  
while you seem to be quite sure of yourself.

Why so much shouting and so much waving of fists  
on the street, like bulls being herded for a special  
occasion to entertain their owner with their show?

There are more subtle manipulators beyond your  
capacity of detection, because you are born with a hunger  
to amass a mountain to put your flag on the top.

But you are only a dream. When you are in  
a grand mansion with chandeliers and cozy lights,  
or you, a victim of failure, crawl as a worm,

your butterfly self is turning in its nightmare

seeing your cries in a battlefield of endless intrigues,  
or you're dragging a maimed body begging for mercy.

You can't even escape the control of the rolling eyes  
of a beauty, let alone her wiles and her yawning desires.  
Booby traps and shadows are everywhere. Dreamer, awake.

March 21, 2017

## **Listening to audio reading of Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey by the lake**

I've never thought  
you would be here with me  
when I trekked alone  
for eons, endlessly alone,  
often with you in my mind,  
a whisper in the wind,  
a scene of divine green.

This morning,  
I heard your voice  
create a pleasure dome  
on top of my lake  
combined with yours.  
It seemed you were present,  
directing my grasses and woods  
sing a chorus of hymns.

That resonating sound  
vibrating in the air,  
rolling though the trees,  
rippling on the water,  
and trumpeting amid the hills,  
has restored my piety  
in a ruin of broken and dirty heaps  
where beasts are crazy for rotten meat.

So far away, so separated from me  
in the way of life and in time,  
yet I have traced your footsteps  
to the place we all belong.  
A soul setting somewhere  
must have his rising elsewhere.  
I believe part of you is in me  
and there are mysterious roots  
intertwining not only you and me  
but all the nature we love,  
all the humanity we share.

March 22, 2017

## **Mystical love**

There is no other realm  
for you to aspire to.  
You are in, and so am I,  
this only dreamy place,  
full of hues, songs of the wild  
and the bustle of human race.

In a right spirit,  
you are one of its flowers  
displaying your natural love,  
emanating your sweetness,  
without even your being aware  
that you are putting up a show  
in a burgeoning spring.

But often you are trapped  
within yourself and cut off  
your umbilical cord from  
the source that gave you life  
as a dewdrop from the ocean.  
Nothing is not other to you now,  
the Sun, the Moon, stars,  
and all things underneath.

We once were so mingled

that I couldn't even tell  
your body and mind from mine.  
When we talked, we used our eyes;  
When we desired each other,  
we were in the single wholeness  
that was there and then and everywhere.

Now, you are not with me,  
but I am still embracing you,  
trying to melt you down into me,  
but I embrace not only you alone,  
and my love for you is a longing  
that permeates every atom,  
and the yearning inside you  
is a hidden river yearning for the sea.

March 23, 2017

## **The same Jewel within**

Do not condition me  
to merely a stuffed mascot  
that puts up a puppet show  
for its maker and schemer.

I was not born in a carved block of land,  
a piece of the jigsaw with clear demarcations.  
I was not born to be dulled by any dogma  
that intends to herd me in one direction  
to the rugged and barren hill to graze.

I am a tiny manifestation of the misty Mother  
and I have all Her secret inside of me,  
and birds with their full-stretching wings,  
flowers revealing all their aching love,  
know full well that I am their brother and sister.

And rivers coursing their ways  
on the surface of all quarters of the Earth  
are coursing in my veins eons on end.  
And I am older and higher than  
the highest peak which you call Mt. Everest.  
And the stars with their light  
taking billions of years to reach my eyes  
know full well that I am not their stranger.

And you are always within my ken  
whether you are in acts of loving, caring,  
lying, stealing and killing, or in isolation.  
And I know you are exactly the same with me  
in every atom and understanding,  
a tiny manifestation as humble as me  
with the same Jewel within, smeared in obscurity.

March 25, 2017

## **The source wisdom of all sages**

There is nothing more  
I can impart to you  
than what nature whispers to you.

A leaf of grass never knows  
its humility or greatness,  
a rose in full blossom  
never claims to be a queen of her peers,  
the Sun who gives you life and light  
never demands you pay it  
homage or a bill for energy,  
the air which keeps you alive  
never makes you prostrate to it,  
and a volcano or an earthquake  
or a tsunami never says sorry  
when it cuts you down to the quick.

A sunglow, a rainbow, the Grand Canyon,  
the Ganges, the Yangtse or the Himalayas  
never claim they are awesome and magnificent.

You are them and they are you.

Be silent and just be,  
no sense of guilt or affectedness,  
the source wisdom of all sages.

March 28, 2017

## **Soak me all over**

In this silent valley,  
the still air in the overcast sky,  
the palms towering all around me,  
amid wild breathless groves and stones,  
in this solemn mansion  
of my extended body and mind,  
I closed my eyes and heard  
an unknown bird chime like a bell  
piercing through my inner cosmos.

Soon, a mild rain came as scattering sands.  
I let the raindrops tap on my head,  
on my jeans and my exposed skin,  
like those on giant Chinese banana leaves.  
The stilling sounds were those made  
with the wooden knocker in a temple.  
As the rain grew wilder,  
I was immune to its impact.  
I was a statue, absorbed all in itself.

Come what may, soak me all over,  
my fields were ready and please to receive.

April 1, 2017

## **An internal dance and feast within**

When you gazed in silence upon me,  
I was transformed in your ray.  
My body's atoms no longer held to  
each other, a crumbling mud effigy  
without its mystic sustaining root.  
I was scattered into the light and air,  
and wherever they were, I was.

With my wings overlapping yours,  
I permeated all constellations  
all at once, eons of light years beyond.  
With you, I was so huge and rich  
that all you had was mine and you  
opened your heart as my playground  
which was a net that held all fishes within.

Acting upon my whim, you would bring me  
to see what is inside a flower or a drop of water,  
a universe no less dramatic than  
a midnight sky teeming with blinking eyes.  
You are the mirror and I am a reflection.  
Let me forget not that your gaze upon me  
is not an narrow opening to your orchard,  
but an invitation to an eternal dance and a feast within.

April 2, 2017

## **She is not yours**

She is not yours,  
though you may plough  
all the surface of the Earth  
with a colossal bulldozer  
to find her a diamond like a light bulb,  
though you may pick up stars  
and string them on a necklace for her.

You cannot own her  
with your absolute power of a tyrant,  
with the largest denomination banknotes  
piled up in many a room of yours,  
for how you can own her,  
if her whims cannot be contained  
within galaxy and galaxy of space,

and her deepest anguish cannot be eased with  
things material and your flattering tongue,  
if she is a caged bird with all the sky  
in her dreams, longing to be amid her peers,  
if she is a stranded whale with the whole ocean  
singing and crying to admit her,  
or if she is a pool of still water  
you keep for your service, and yet,  
her origin is the snow on the mountaintop.

How can you own and keep her  
with your petty brain fettered in a muddy pond,  
a dancer with her feet moving among stars?

Unless you realize your full potential,  
you will have no chance to play with her.  
Unless you know that you are the whole ocean  
in a single drop, and that your all encompassing Self  
is overlapping hers, and that you get rid of your swinish idea  
of the ownership of a monkey using its urine  
to mark its domain in the wild,  
you will not learn how to dance with her  
without your footsteps and a music vibrating  
here and everywhere boundless and timeless  
where you have all ecstasies but no words.

April 13, 2017

## Young lovers at the pavilion

While I was engrossed in  
my reading at the pavilion  
I frequented at sunny noon,  
a couple of young lovers  
entered it without my notice.

I didn't take my eyes off my book  
and they made sure  
not to disturb my solitude.  
They refrained themselves  
in their lover's games,  
as two cats purr in their play.

I kept on reading  
but could not help overhearing  
their sweet and meaningless talk.  
The girl was lying on the bench  
with her head on the boy's lap,  
meowing her words like music.

And after a while, he carried his girl  
on his back, threatening to throw her  
into the lake, causing her sweet giggling.  
Nothing more beautiful and innocent,  
I did not envy them but admired them.

As they were leaving, I saw them off  
with a loving gaze which was a blessing  
I gave to all creatures in love in the effulgent spring.  
April 20, 2017

## **Be mindful of your breaths**

Be mindful of your breaths whenever you can,  
on a solitary walk, in a moment of despair  
when you feel that your life is an ebbing tide,  
in a moment of utter isolation and helplessness  
when you seem to be deserted in a terrain  
where sleepwalks the living dead of your kinsmen  
in gibberish tongues, or in a blessed mood  
when you see your beloved sleep with a smile.

Be mindful wherever you can, you are breathing  
with every living organism pulsing just like you,  
that, together, you are a universal pool of lives.  
You are not alone when all weeds, wild flowers  
worms under the earth, fowls in the air are breathing  
from the same source provided unasked.

Without the air in your lung just for a few seconds,  
you will find yourself gasping for it,  
then, why are you so ungrateful as to replace it  
in your mind with banknotes, with your preoccupations  
for fame, power and sex, without even a slightest trace of it?  
Your body is made of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen,  
and those building blocks of your edifice are channeled  
to you without any price or an air of presumption.

Since you were born, your umbilical cord  
to your sacred Mother has been your breaths.  
Be mindful of your breaths whenever, wherever you can,  
and you will be on a right path to a place  
where we all dance, you and I and she and he and it.  
Your concentration on your inhaling and exhaling in solitude  
is a gathering place of billions and billions like you in silent ecstasy.  
May 5, 2017

## **The last voice**

It's surreal in this silent spring  
that I'm still around, still sing to you  
as an innocent bird without its peers,  
breaking the silence of your dawn,  
in a place from where elves  
prone to dream have all departed,  
with torches in their hands  
passing through the secret forest  
as their masonries are being crumbling.

Though my voice may not  
awaken you from your slumber  
and the tears in my face  
may induce your laughter,  
while you're having fun like a frog  
in the warming water soon to boil,  
I still sing as the bard in Odysseus' house  
and warn as the seeress once did,  
whose premonitions were never heeded.

Though I am pushed around  
as an innocent among the brute  
and my skin is bruised, my blood oozed,  
I've never complained about the thorn crown  
placed on my head, intended to mock.

I've never taken it as sign of self-pity  
though my face is sometimes grim,  
my heart, dreary and weak,  
and my prayers remain unheard.

In the deepest and obscurest hall,  
my heart is bathed in songs  
and she can't help but take wings  
and flap like an albatross above an isle,  
though in fact, I am chained down  
in your place where a very act  
of singing is an embarrassment,  
and where phoenixes should not dance,  
and a rose's dream seems to be disturbing.

They've created a quagmire.  
Out of their weakness and in their madness  
they let out the fire to sear the earth  
just to disguise their inner barrenness  
and timidity. In a show of muscle,  
they are drunkards who fight  
in place of matadors to get attention.  
They're shouting in a ruin where my last voice  
is thinning to the air, my friend, hear, hear!

May 6, 2017

## **A temptation**

In you,  
a secret is kept,  
a ripened pomegranate  
has yet to open and bear its seeds.

I hold my breath and observe,  
and try hard to keep a distance  
between your full Moon  
and my water of the midnight sea,  
from your calm between heaves of a storm,  
and from your quiet and steady fire.

Stranger,  
in your silence and innocence,  
you crumble walls and set cities on fire.

May 10, 2017

## **A life overwhelmed**

A childhood of farming  
when I saw watermills,  
mortars, stone grinders,  
wooden winnowing machines,  
and the sweats on the faces  
of those who toiled with smiles.

A youth of learning  
when poets, novelists,  
philosophers and historians  
made every heart  
a blossoming flower  
and a sweetness in the air  
irritated those who were  
so got used to filth.

A prime in a material age  
when the sky for birds  
was reduced to a pot cover  
upon the boiling sea of fishes  
of all sizes where sharks  
and whales in their last frenzy  
of eating each other,  
of showing their prowess,  
were in their full play.

A middle age spent  
in a time dominated by hi-tech  
mobile devices, video games  
and the AI AlphaGo  
threatened the very concept  
of what is being human,  
and created talk  
of the final annihilation.

I am thousands-of-years old  
for I know even more  
through my reading and dreams,  
a stone age bard disoriented  
across the sand of time.  
Should I go on singing  
or keep silent and sink  
and allow the world to be  
quietly taken by an iron race?

June 4, 2017

## **Return to innocence**

Some place, somewhere,  
your eyes would see only  
truth and beauty,  
all you need to know,  
not those seafood, lofty buildings,  
fabulous decoration,  
fancy garments and dizzy land,  
provided with sweats and bloods.

I wish you would see  
the light dance on a blade of a leaf,  
a pebble under your bare foot,  
a star calling you from afar,  
and hear the wind whisper  
through your cavern  
and weatherworn landscape.

I wish your heart would grow  
tired of beasts in their  
feast on a newly-hunted,  
and your nose no longer  
stand the smell that stinks  
from corpses walking with grins,  
seemingly nice with heinous designs.

June 8, 2017

## **The eyes on a picture**

She knows the power of her eyes,  
the first twin lotuses in my pond.  
I had seen them every day and wait,  
until their first petal fell on the water,  
drifting on towards me, a pink elf sail,  
laden with her sweetness and grace,  
a Siren's song, my softly-killing poison.

June 8, 2017

## **A bamboo tower**

It looked so nice, a bamboo tower  
with short and long bamboo sections  
bound together with hemp ropes  
in four places from bottom to top.

They were the bamboo trunks  
cut down out of an overgrowing grove.  
So yellow, so tenderly yellow,  
full of life and texture,  
I could not but be drawn to them  
and took trouble to bring them home  
and created a yellow tower.

I thought its shining hue  
would always light up my room  
and it would greet me as a friend  
whenever I left and came back.

But just a few days later,  
each segment started to grow thinner  
and I had to tighten the ropes  
and soon its colour faded  
as a young man's skin encroached  
by aging spots day by day.

And now it stands like an old man

after its gradual shrinking  
and my many rounds of retightening.

June 9, 2017

## **Two bipolar moods**

I think of abandoning the world a lot  
when I see your face of callousness,  
your attitude of floating in the stream,  
your readiness to lie for a worldly boon  
without any hesitation, your girlie way  
of using dirty words without a blush,  
or a young man behaving like a breast-fed baby,  
your entanglement in Japanese cartoons,  
your social networking space showy of  
things that spoil your body and strangle  
your spirit, your ignorance to laugh at  
a sea of shaded angels on the streets on the days  
when they were neither hot nor rainy,  
and your brazen bravery to ignore the wise  
who you consider as fools, to follow fools  
who feed you with rubbish and dominate  
your body like keeping a pig in its sty.

I feel like embracing the world a lot  
when I see a new-born's smiling face  
and its mother's proud and caring look,  
a snail on a wet path at night or daytime,  
caterpillars hanging everywhere under trees  
like a jungle of acrobats, a lotus on the pond  
which looks holy, yet reveals her desire,

a wild mushroom bursting out of earth alone  
or huddling together with its peers  
on a thick layer of rotten fallen leaves,  
when I feel the sunbeam or raindrops  
on my face, the breeze rustling through  
or a storm patting on my windowpanes,  
and when a chance meeting with you  
on my rambling turns out to be  
an understanding that unites us and all  
beyond love and hatred like salt in the water.

June 23, 2017

## **Search for the Shore without a shore**

The fire in your heart  
may go out at any moment  
with a little sprinkle of water over it.  
You'd better get different kind of woods ready  
with a tinderbox and a flint within your reach.

Do not tell anybody  
that you have reached the bottom of life,  
for it is so tough for you to get there  
that even if you've burned yourself in a furnace  
you still have a hard core resist its fire like a diamond.

You can't lose yourself in a trance forever,  
so you need to get lost in many dreams  
and wake up and be left alone on many shores bewildered.  
May those things which you fancy for be many  
and your time of anguish separation without a dream is short.

May you enter your final rest  
without a regret of having not kindled your fire  
over and over to search for the Shore without a shore.

September 15, 2017

## **One eternal embrace**

I can feel you,  
no boundary off my reach.  
Wherever you play,  
on the beach,  
on the mountaintop,  
over sky and sky,  
you are on the radar screen of my mind,  
within my ken of a powerful telescope  
which leaves no galaxy untouched.

You seemed to be my own person  
at the very beginning and your eyes  
opened a window through which  
I saw my own boundless garden.  
I want to engulf you, and you me,  
a secret passage between us.  
You burn the same fire  
that lights up the sky within me,  
which is also yours.

At the bottomless bottom  
and the placeless place,  
you and me, in one eternal embrace.

September 23, 2017

## **In Love**

Wiping tears off your face,  
I used a sponge  
and you closed your eyes  
with a smile,  
while a sparrow looked  
at us through the window,  
and the etherized willow  
swayed in her dream.

October 6, 2017

## **In the recess of my mind**

A cozy room  
with the sunlight  
cast on the wall  
through my windowpanes,  
lighting up my books  
of a thousand hues,  
a smiling face  
with caring eyes  
in the recess of my mind,

I'd rather believe  
all my experiences are  
children's games in the wild,  
or if they've done complex  
and bloody tricks,  
I'd rather take them as  
having fun of strange sorts.  
Whatever I've done  
are a way winding to you.

With the sunlight and your smile,  
my little world cannot be otherwise.

November 14, 2017

# Poems 2018 & 2019



## **My real kinsmen**

My heart jumps however many times  
I see you, sailing on the water,  
drawing me into your elegant elf boats,  
prompting me fantasize hard about being your kinsman,  
the swan parents and their kids.

For years, I have envisioned this scene  
which sweetened my days in secret,  
eased the soreness of my feet long journeying  
on the shards of the human shore.

I know all should be as innocent as you are,  
but once they were touched by a design,  
they became an extension of the heart  
that harboured them, of the hands behind them.  
They make, achieve, and propagate  
but they may drain all into a pit.

I would identify myself more as one of you.  
Being thrilled by a tiding that baby swans  
were being hatched, I sang as a prophet  
auguring this rare drop of peace on my turbulent sea.

Now you are here with me, sweet babes,  
like a glow in a chilling night, untouched and careless.

My heart is thrilled by your every innocent play.

April 13, 2018

## **Two confidants**

It was much easier for me  
when you also had a severe cough  
and inquired into my situation  
like two confidants sharing a secret.

This prolonged cough kept us in the winter  
like two over-ripe gourds hanging on the vine,  
shivering in the cold, although the spring  
was plucking the strings to stir up  
an aroma of music in every heart.

Each passing day was a prison  
which housed my passion to create,  
a denizen of the sky with his wings tied.

I wondered about you, a blossoming face  
prevented from shining by a gauze mask.  
Were you desperate to break the door  
which barred you from the garden  
with birds up in the air and swans on the water?

Were you eager to be mad together with me  
on the hidden shore where waves were a-clamoring?  
Did you draw comfort from the one  
whose every wish to break free from this imprisonment

was also a wish for you to break loose your chain?

We are both free now in our respective gardens  
and our hellos and goodbyes mean much more.

April 23, 2018

## **Creative Writing**

One day, your PC is bound to shut down for good,  
be sure you are vigilant to make a copy of the files  
that are the wine you distilled  
from the grapes of your vineyard.

At the moment, it's still operational,  
be sure to stock in it all your fancies  
of your kind and of not your kind,  
be sure to build within it an invisible temple  
that fills all spectators with awe,

and be sure it is a gathering place of light  
from all stars billions of light-years beyond,  
a drop of water that contains all oceans,  
and a mother dream of all dreams  
built upon the binary numbers of 0 and 1.

If your PC has only dredges to annoy,  
why do you bother to copy the files?  
Just let it fall into an eternal sleep.

Morning, November 25, 2018

## **A reverie**

When you envision,  
in this encroaching chilliness,  
a heart extending its antennas  
like a thousand silk threads into your sky,

picking up your trembling joys and fragrances  
that are also aches and bitterness,  
emitting from a forest  
that you know not where within you,

you sit still like a lake  
with an inverted sky beneath its surface,  
filled with her dazzling glamour,  
a gathering place of all wonders,  
bringing about a paralysis  
of your body sliding deep  
into a sweet prison of dreams.

May you survive well in this season  
of the overwhelming darkness,  
with thoughts of her that would transform  
your every yearning into a bird.

May her steps in the garden of rosebushes  
send music unique to your ears.

May her thoughts of you become  
folding hands shielding you through the night.

December 24, 2018

## **Under your misty dome**

Let me shut the window,  
shut the noise outside.  
I will be only with you  
with you in my mind.

It has been long the years  
the years of numbing senses.  
With you departed my youth  
and gone is my flaming drive.

All those years long,  
you hid in a deepening myth.  
I could only touch you  
with my fancy and timid wings.

You lit up countless candles  
and started my life in dreams.  
My sap has not been drained dry,  
but filled my night trees with life.

My garden blossoms in your moisture,  
which makes me smile in secret.  
Though among people in broad daylight,  
I am secluded under your misty dome.

February 23, 2019

## **Moan for me, not for Keats**

I have so much energy now,  
living long enough for you to die twice,  
but my land is barren and dry,  
with its vegetation torn off like a skin.

My heart is sore, and aches for you,  
for your pining body and your hands  
trying to extend to the rich field to glean.  
The paralyzing agony has long gone  
and your name did stick to the water  
that meanders in every river.

It's time for me to moan,  
to moan my could-be long lifeless life,  
among rocks where there is no water  
and drip-drops are only in my dreams,  
among the dead that seem so alive  
yet they are stifled and mean to stifle.

You are forever around  
while I am holding hard to  
any sign that may come up with a spring  
to water a garden where your birds may sing.

February 23, 2019

## **An inner new planet**

Cold, cold, it's chilling cold.  
I can't cope with it alone  
in a frozen land of the frozen dead,  
with only desperate screams  
opening like the sharpest knife.  
Life is oozing out from my body  
as a newly-planted tree in spring  
that failed to survive the harsh curse.

A giant female spider is spinning a net  
in her cave to thwart Frodo's effort  
to destroy the Ring, and the forest  
is lurking with eerie poison air,  
harmful to greenery, destructive to roots.  
This inner coldness combined with the exterior's  
is a plague rendering me with no place to hide,  
only a graveyard yawning at my fading hope.

I have only one place to go,  
going million miles deep into my inner space,  
holding on hard to you that keeps my flame alive.  
We shall have a new planet  
where all lives are untouched by human designs,  
where I live as a bird, and you a nest.

February 24, 2019

## **A garden for you to dance**

I like the way you roamed wild,  
with a pair of sunglasses on a face  
that mirrored the prairie's purple sky.

I like the way you walked on the stage,  
with a confident melodious voice,  
singing a song that brought about  
a life that turned all agonies into ecstasies.

I love to keep a garden for you to dance,  
with your anklets sounding like smiling prayers,  
with your body twisting back and forth  
like an invitation to an everlasting exotic feast.

I am your invisible love,  
a misty womb to supply all you need,  
an all-encompassing fog to sweeten your flowers.  
I am the anonymous source of your life.

I am the sorrow that balances your joy,  
an anchor for your ship,  
a holder and the line for your kite.

February 24, 2019

## **A ruin vs. an organic garden**

I'll have a feast tonight,  
a roundtable treat with friends  
from the same town of my birth,  
so this afternoon, I'd better hurry  
to write, to make myself tired  
to my bones in the quarry of my art.

I'm afraid of such a prospect,  
not because I'm not grateful to  
my kind friend who has a high respect  
for a poet that has nothing to do with his business,

but because of the talks of the wide world  
that concerns all ghosts I want to avoid,  
their prying eyes for power,  
their fortunes stored in their houses,  
and hints for their sex adventures,

not to mention round and round of  
forcing each other to drink as a feat  
and chain and chain of cigarette smoke  
from their mouths of an eloquent speech.

I'd better work myself to dead,  
to gleam from my brain every flower,

to rid my today's ore off all possible worth,  
to balance myself in the evening's ruin  
with a rich and organic garden I keep in secret.

February 24, 2019

## Who am I?

When I was alone,  
counting ripples in my mind,  
and asking “who am I?”,  
I found only mental pictures of places I visited,  
books I read, people I care about,  
loves and scars carved inside,  
and stupid things I did, so vivid  
that they made me shiver with shame.

There is really nothing I can call “I”,  
only a yearning like all-encompassing sky,  
only a time-space that contains all hazy stars  
when galaxies and galaxies came into being,  
only an envelope that wraps up all  
when humans no longer walk on the shoreless shore.  
Which part of my body can I call “I”?  
Not even my skull with my brain tissue inside.

Then, in this wide world,  
why so much “I” suffer as a maiden  
who is annoyed by the tiding of the spring  
and sheds tears for flowers’ withering,  
why so much cares while “I” is only  
a sum of sounds and motion pictures within,  
and why so eager that I have so much yearnings for love,

eager to gain things that will leak as sands in my hands.

What's actually me is huge, tremendous,  
the same with yours, with everything's that popped up  
in silence, grew without any wondering for why,  
with things' that just be, without yelling for their beauty  
or hankering for their greatness and dominance.

I am a mirror of the universe that keeps the images it reflects,  
which it shouldn't, but can't help, I'm sure I'm  
an endless nothingness putting up a show on the endless sands.

March 4, 2019

## **Don't want to crawl on earth**

Eating is the most boring thing.  
If I could survive on air,  
why should I build my life upon lives?  
Fain would I be not to have a body  
and be absorbed in the elements.

I don't need to be proud for having  
limousines, bundles of cashes, and houses,  
things tied me down like a tiny big-belly ant  
who dreams big and wants to be a glutton.  
Why do I so limitless have to crawl on this earth?

I only want to be with you, like you  
with no body to be sustained on precious lives,  
but still around, transcending all barriers.  
When we embrace, our every invisible cell embraces;  
When we kiss, our billions of formless mouths kiss.

March 5, 2019

## **Making me a preserver**

I should thank for your making me a preserver,  
rather than curse you for all your insanities,  
your running through the jungle,  
destroying all flowers and silencing every bird.

In your visionless life,  
your cup with blood-red wine is destined to break,  
and the houses where you keep your great beauties,  
are heading for a sudden and dooming collapse.  
You indulge in all sort of wanton excesses,  
with a sword in your hand and a pit to engulf,  
putting up one man's show while you can.

Yes, as everyone is,  
I am miserable in your clearing of the forest,  
under pressure to abide by your rules of ants,  
to lay axes on trees and smother them in your kilns  
to produce charcoal for your furnaces.

And yet, you make me employ a greater vigour  
to keep alive birds in my heart singing all notes,  
waiting for the scar to heal, for your pit to be filled,  
hailing your sinking into oblivion with your Precious.

March 7, 2019

## **At your presence**

When you stood so near to me  
it seemed I got drunk and whirling,  
my tender Self going out roaming  
and an elixir oozing from my spring.

Far away from you,  
enclosed in a heavy mist,  
my room was cold and my heart wet,  
yet, I could not hold myself back,  
as a bay tree did in vain with its scent.

My numbing senses  
came to lick at your windowpanes  
while my hazy whispers tapped at your ears,  
my aerial hands fondled your face  
and my vision overlapped yours in a tight embrace.

You came to me as a Kama's messenger  
and at your presence my heart bloomed and quivered.

March 7, 2019

## **Monuments vs fancies**

You may have many houses,  
each inch of which was made soft like feathers.  
Your senses are numbed by the cozy fire,  
warm, yet, making you sink to a lethargy.

You may have power like a jackal,  
whose every tooth means to tear and to be feared.  
If you pretend to be benevolent and gentle,  
you will have men's standing ovations  
and women's eyes roll and their thighs melt.

You may have a flair to reshuffle the Earth  
by moving your chessmen on your board,  
with a secret smile or a roaring laughter,  
like an emperor lording supreme.

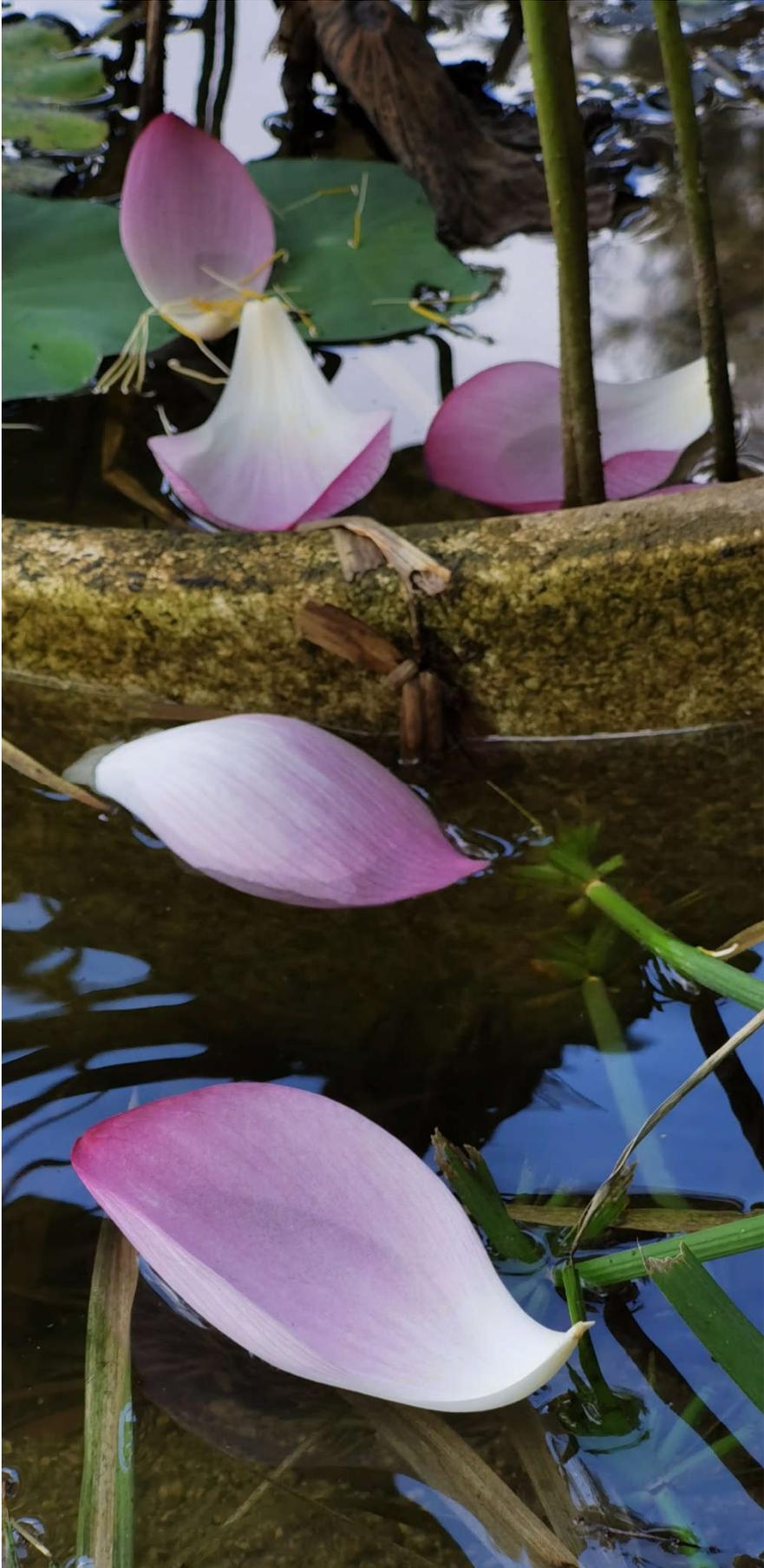
Being stubborn, I have only my dreams  
made of leaves from yellow to blue,  
of birds' talks at a forest conference,  
of fireflies and moonshines to blazing lights,  
of breezes to whirling winds on the sea,  
and of her love bites and helpless cries.

You have your monuments, I, fancies which are mine.  
Let's see whose are more resilient to the file of Time.

March 9, 2019



**A Few Ancient Chinese Poems**  
**Translated by X. Z. Shao**



## **A poem made in seven steps**

By Cao Zhi (192-232)

Cao Zhi was the second son of Cao Cao, the famous warlord of one of the Three Kingdoms (220-280) after the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) collapsed. Legend has it when Cao Zhi's elder brother Cao Pi assumed power as an emperor, he tried to find an excuse to kill him. Cao Pi ordered Cao Zhi to make a poem within just a seven-step's walk. If Cao Zhi failed, Cao Pi would kill him. Cao Zhi accomplished the task with the following poem which shamed his brother into renouncing the idea.

Boiling soybeans were heated with their stalks.

Soybeans sobbed in despair in the pot.

“We both grew from the very same root.

Why do you burn me in such an earnest?”

**Seeing Yuan Er off on an envoy mission to Anxi**

By Wang Wei (701-761)

Anxi, a Tang Dynasty's border administrative region.

In Wei Town, a morning shower settled the dust.

The willows are green, the guesthouse fresh.

Why don't we have more wine cup by cup,

For friends are few west of Yangguan Pass.

## **An Invitation to Wine**

By Li Bai (701-762)

Don't you see,  
The water of Yellow River burst out from the sky,  
Gushing one-way to the sea?

Don't you see,  
In front of a mirror,  
Your parents lament over their white hair,  
At dawn, sable tresses, by night, snow?

A moment of joy in life should be made most.  
Never should you toast to the Moon with an empty cup.  
Heaven putting us on earth must have a purpose.  
A fortune spent will soon be regained.

Cook a lamb, kill an ox, let's be merry making,  
And empty three hundred cups in a while.  
Master Ceng, Gentleman Danqiu,  
More wine, please, don't put down your cups.

Let me sing you a song,  
Please lend me an attentive ear.  
Bronze bells, drums and jades are nothing to be cherished.  
I'd rather get drunk and not to be awake.

All the wise men and sages of old have gone,  
Only the drinkers' names are left.  
Prince poet Cao Zhi once set up a banquet at Pingyue;  
He indulged in pleasure with thousands of casks.

Why does my host hint at lacking silver and gold?  
I will buy wine for us and toast to you all.  
Here is my variegated horse and fur coat worth thousands.  
Send your page out to swap them for wine.  
Together we will get rid of cares and worries ages-old.

## Wang Zhaojun, Two Poems

By Li Bai (701-762)

Han Dynasty (BCE 202-9 CE) had troubles with its northern nomadic tribes. The appeasement policy was carried out through marrying Han's court ladies and offering them expensive goods. Wang Zhaojun was one of the representatives of the ladies. Legend says, in choosing a lady for the marriage, the emperor made his decision by judging on portraits that were painted. He would not allow a very fair lady for the purpose. Unfortunately Zhaojun had no gold to bribe her painter to make her picture nice. As the result, she was painted ugly and was chosen. But she turned out to be the most beautiful of court ladies. Her fate has since been bemoaned by countless Chinese poets. Li Bai's poems for her are among the best on this theme.

### 1

The moon of Han and Chin,  
flowed a river of light on Zhaojun.  
Once she stepped on the road of the Jade Pass,  
Never would she return from the border land.  
Han's moon would still rise from the Eastern Sea,  
Zhaojun would not be here again after the marriage.  
Mt. Yanzhi was forever chilly with snow like flowers;  
The beauty would pine away and be buried in northern sand.  
She lacked gold to make her portrait properly painted;  
She died and left an evergreen tomb for all to lament.

### 2

Zhaojun grasped  
    the harness of jade,  
Mounting the horse

with a tearful face.

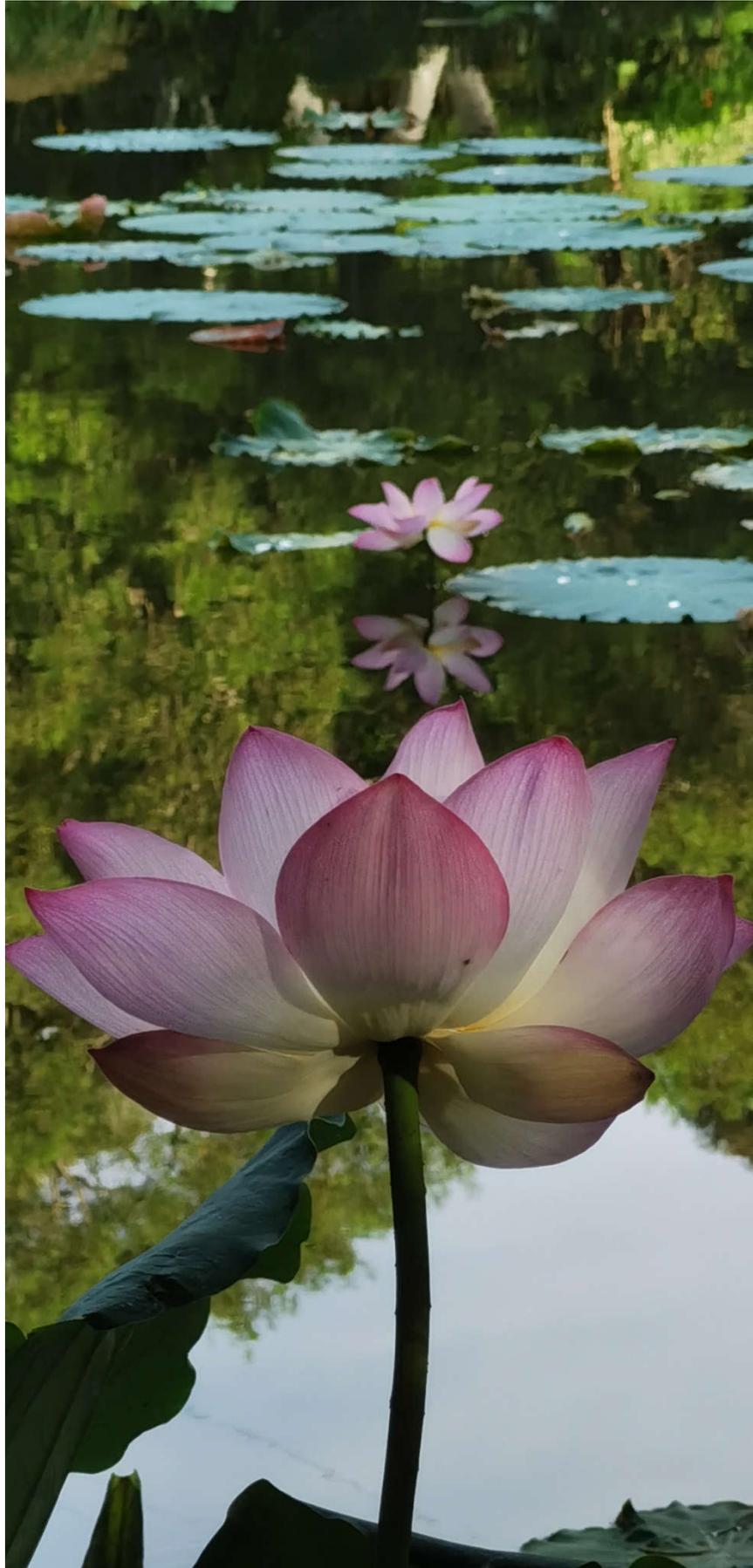
Today, a lady

in Han palace;

Tomorrow, a concubine

in the nomadic wild.

# Appendix



# **My Life in China**

Acquiring English as my second mother tongue

## **1. My family background**

Born in 1964 in a village of Mengyuan (萌源村) in a mountainous county of Zhouning (周寧縣), in the district of Ningde (寧德地區), in eastern Fujian province (福建省) of China, to a rural family that suffered the vicissitudes of modern changes in China, with a father age 47 and a mother age 40, I started my life three years after the Great Famine and two years before the Great Culture Revolution in China, without any awareness of the family's multiple siblings' deaths, an infanticide, an uncle's suicide, a sister's being given away and a handsome uncle's remaining bachelor for all his life due to the family's poverty, all which and much more had already taken place in my extended family before I was born. While I was less than three years old, one of my two elder brothers died at the age of 8 due to a fever without any medical treatment. Reaching the age of listening to stories, I heard more surreal family history told by my influential bachelor uncle, 56 years to my senior, often with tears in his eyes. In retrospect, my past is such a ruin that I don't even want to retrace it. In order that my struggle to write in English may be understood, more words are necessary, even if that means opening up my wound again.

My mother was a baby bride at around one-year-old taken from a nearby village intended to be my father's wife after her growing up. While playing to do needle work at an age of five, she accidentally pierced one of her eyes with a pair of scissors, which blinded the eye, and an otitis without any treatment at her tender age left her a lifelong hearing difficulty. As a result, she was given a nickname "Deafer". What's more, her only remaining member of her paternal family, her younger brother, died of tuberculosis by her side around 1962. In my memory, my mother had never been young, and was often verbally abused by my father. At times of quarrels, she would threaten suicide or go to cry at her brother's

tomb. She was completely illiterate throughout her life, and died at an age of 80 in 2006, having seen her children flourishing in business and learning.

My father was the youngest of four brothers and two sisters in his generation, with a hot temper and a compassionate attitude to serving the community. With a few years of old-fashion private education, he was the only person in the village who was able to help settle family disputes by writing contracts for quarreling sides to divide their property fairly. At the time, the village lands and rice fields were divided into twelve parts assigned to twelve groups, with each made up of a population of around 200 people. My father was the leader of one group, and through his tough leadership and personal dignity, he managed to control the urges to free-ride and the group produced enough agricultural products equally distributed among the ~~group~~ members for them to eke out a living. The practice went on until the hill lands and rice fields were divided into family plots in 1979.

As a head of the family, he seemed to care too much about the village's affairs at an expense of his family. When I was less than three, a common fever resulted in my brother's death. While in hallucination caused by the burning temperature, he was taken to the county's hospital and died there. Although my father seldom physically abused me, the way of his threatening to do so to stop my unreasonable demands on my mother, so many times in my early life, left me a slight traumatic experience. I never remembered him cuddling me or giving me a hug. My death wish for him which was almost an open secret ended only at my age of twelve when I started to understand his toughness to survive and his compassion towards the community. Together with destitute poverty, a wooden house full of rats and chicken stools on the earthen ground, I spent my childhood which is quite a memory, for instance, my mother's cutting of her hair for me to exchange for a penny or two to buy a candy, my feet suffering each winter for chilblains which left multiple big scars on my ankles, and so on.

But I do have some positive memories, I am fortunate to have an bachelor uncle, let me mention his name Foji Shao (蕭佛集), who was

old enough to be my grandfather. I played on his lap and shared some cakes I bought with his meager pocket money of a few dimes. He was one with almost Buddha's compassion and absolutely had not physical contact with any woman at all throughout his life. With less education than my father, he occasionally practiced calligraphy and was quite good at it, which influenced one of my cousins, his eldest brother's son, and later me. At the time of my birth, my cousin had already graduated from the prestigious Technology University of China for two years, which was quite something for a remote village at the time. My uncle was also my cousins' father figure in the family due to their father dying also of tuberculosis when they were at a tender age. He was born in 1911, and died in 1999 at an age of 88, a person with common sense who was able to give me a glimpse of what Chinese tradition was, when every sign of the tradition was thrown into a pit and people nationwide went crazy in frenzy after frenzy of destruction.

## 2. My primary education

I spent my primary education in my village school which was the former ancestral temple of my village of around 3000 people almost all with the same surname Shao, divested off all its statues, tablets with inscriptions, internal and external decorations. I basically committed Chairman Mao's quotation to my memory and learnt some arithmetic. I was favoured and loved by all teachers since I was good at doing whatever my teachers assigned, and I was the monitor of my grade and later a leader of little Red Guards, although I was physically weak at almost the bottom of my class of 50 students. I never assumed any authority and cooperated with teachers to report any misdemeanor of my classmates, even if it was my responsibility as a veteran student leader. I had not a crumb of urge for political power in my whole life, which I can only attribute to my father tyrannical behaviors.

I spent my childhood with my peers catching fish in the village's drains, fields and river, keeping silk worms and growing a mulberry tree for them, playing upon a pear tree which my father planted on a tiny dirty

plot of our backyard, and eating pear fruit in summers. The school was a nice place for me due to a little fame I gained there and being treated as an exemplary student. When I completed my study at the primary school level, I was supposed to go to a town level middle school for two years. I would say, unfortunately, my village elders including my father welcomed an initiative of the county level educational authorities' decision to establish a brand new middle school in the same ruined temple at my village which was a big one and only five kilometers from the county's capital town. As a result, I spent two more years in my village middle school with mostly unqualified teachers except maybe two. A disastrous consequence was clear when I graduated. From the whole class about 50, only I ended up being accepted by my country's top high school, three continued their study at the Third High School in a nearby town, and the rest dropped out to their own destinies of being a farmer or immediate ways of making a living.

It was in the beginning of my village middle school, or junior high, I experienced my first English class, then, 12. My father read newspapers and often talked with another one who was able to read too. They occasionally mentioned the United States, Britain among their fellow farmers who gathered around the stone-paved narrow street where all wooden houses squeezed together. I never connected those two countries with English. By then, government had a policy that a middle school should have English classes, but as a country boy, I had no concept of the world beyond several villages around me. I did use ABCD, or XYZ, those capital letters and their lower-case forms in my arithmetic classes, but I couldn't relate them in any way to a language spoken everywhere in the world.

An English teacher from the town-level third high school was invited to give us the first English class, and that was a moment of epiphany for me. All I remember is that he taught the class how to write ABCDEFG, capital and small letters, within four horizontal lines he drawn on the wooden blackboard. The capital letters should be of equal height and fallen within the first and third lines. The main body of the small letters should be kept within line 2 and 3. I had an exercise book for

English and I drew each letter on it like drawing a picture. I made them as perfect as possible since I loved “English” so much and was fond of drawing that I concentrated all my energy on them. It was at that moment of extreme concentration I saw a world open to me, and it seemed that a light was beaming to me and secluding me from my reality and leaving me only with mysterious world in the light. When I awakened from the class, I anticipated the one next week.

The second time, the teacher came. Whether he had a normal class or not, I can’t remember. All I remember is that his bicycle had a flat tyre and I borrowed an inflator for him, and he left and never showed up again. My two more years spent in my own village did not ruin me, thanks to a newly-graduated math teacher with a formal education. With the help of county level education authorities, my father together with other village elders raised money for a new building to replace the ruined ancestors’ temple as a new school. Upon my graduation, the project was completed and the primary and junior high were relocated, and the junior high only continued to exist for two more year before it was closed for good. The old site resumed its former function as our ancestors’ temple. It took years for its interior to be rebuilt and decorated again with tablets and their inscriptions of wisdom and veneration. During this process, my uncle played a paramount role of bringing out all original words of inscription as they were out of his memory. That was quite a feat.

### **3. My high school education**

When it was clear I was admitted by the top high school of the county, I also learned that the third high school where my English teacher came from only made one student from their junior high to the county’s top one. My performance was quite something and I was “a celebrity” in my village and maybe nearby ones, adding to my family reputation of producing scholars. Among the 40 top graduates who were accepted by the best senior high, my score was nearly at the bottom. What was a twist in my fate was that around nine middle school graduates with their scores higher enough for the top one, who were supposed to enter their

professional training to be teachers in some normal colleges, for some reason, returned back to the senior high. The class for “sharp students” was too crowded, a few students were reshuffled to the second best one, and I was among them. At 14 in 1978, I was furious and basically idled away my first year at the school. English was all Greek to me, I sat in the classroom and watched my teacher speak English with his eyes staring at the air instead of his students. English no longer interested me, and so too Chinese, due to a teacher who simply had no skill to explain ancient poems in an interesting modern Chinese.

My talent in math was spotted by my math teacher who asked me to be his assistant for his subject, and my math scores had never fallen to the second place in my class ever since. Meanwhile, my performance on subjects of physics and chemistry came to the top or near top in my class. At the time, the nationwide slogan for students was, if I may translate it this way, “Good at math-physics-chem, no fear everywhere under the sky.” In 1980, for the first time examinations for higher education included the subject of English which made of 30 points among the total points of 530, with other subject being Chinese, math, physics, chemistry and politics for students intended to study science, all 100 points respectively. I only got a score of 4.4 out of 30 in my English exam by a shot in the dark. It was this few points which kept me from being drowned. My Chinese was 49.5 out 100. Two subjects which used to be my weakest later gradually became the fields of my passion.

My senior high had four classes, but only students from the top two classes registered for the grand exams for higher education. On average, probably around 50% of all high school graduates nationwide took part on the exams. Only a lucky 4% among those who took the exams got their chances at college level. I was admitted by the Shanghai Institute of Electric Power. But before the admission letter was issued, I needed to have a physical check. With my cloth and shoes on, my weight was only 39 kilos at an age of 16. My teacher asked me to drink water from the hospital’s kitchen right away to make my weight over 40 kilos. And my height was only 1.58 meter. My physical development was greatly delayed due to my boarding life at the senior high, where, for two years, I

only ate rice and a few leaves of vegetable each meal. That's why after merely one semester in Shanghai, upon my returning home, my father on his errand to another place encountered me at my county's bus station and he was not able to recognize his own son suddenly added 10 cm to his height and put on more than 10 kilos to his weight.

#### **4. My college and early literary experience**

Shanghai was a wonderland for me, but I was disappointed when a college bus fetched me from the train station to the campus passing through streets with gray ordinary two-storey buildings alongside. The impact on me was felt only after I visited the Bund of the city a few days later. My major was the automatic control system for a power plant, and with my mind of science, I went through the three years' courses without much difficulty. My English continued to be poor but I managed to pass the subject which taught English of science. I struck up a great friendship with a classmate who was good at calligraphy and memorized quite a few classical Chinese poems. Since my childhood, I have had a habit of considering who is good at something as my teacher, whoever one is, younger or older than me. I actually regarded him as my teacher and he opened up my eyes to Chinese writers and poets of the first half of the twentieth century which was a period of Chinese cultural renaissance. I started to read some novels by them and some classical poetry for the purpose of finding materials for my calligraphy. I ended up reading the short stories by Feng Menglong (1574-1646) of Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). I started to have a vague concept of literature.

When I graduated in 1983 at an age of 19, my wish to be sent back to my home province was granted. Back then, there were no private businesses, so I ended up at the Fujian Electric Power Construction Company with its headquarter in Fuzhou, the capital city of the province. I was further sent to its subsidiary branch known as the Coal Power Plant Installation Company expending power producing capacity of an old coal power plant in a big county known as Yong-an in the central part of the province. My dream of an decent job was shattered, and it was there I

embarked on a long process of self-education without much awareness of my being in a period of another Chinese cultural renaissance.

Apart from what I mentioned above, I had no bigger Chinese cultural picture in my mind at the time, no three pillars of Chinese philosophy Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism and no classics of history and literature. My mind was a blank sheet for the western staff to feel in, like most of my contemporaries who started to see after their childhoods of being kept in the darkness. Everything related with humanity subjects would thrill me to the utmost, and there were magazines and books of all kinds which fascinated me with images and ideas of the Western world. I remembered my imitating a few drawings by Leonardo de Vinci, tending to minute details, my reading of German Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* multiple times which led to his life story and other works. As a college student at 18, while spending winter vacation in my hometown for the spring festival, I was invited to have a dinner by my cousin who was 23 years senior to me. I met a dazzling beautiful woman 6 years older than me who was my cousin's colleague and was engaged. I secretly fell in love with her from head to toe without any knowledge of things about sex. It was just a romantic fantasy. Goethe's *Werther* helped me vent my pent-up passion to the utmost, and I copied almost one-fourth of the book in a Chinese version in a diary. All of a sudden, it dawned on me what literature was about, and it mesmerized me.

Universities across China became the center of spreading ideas, and for the first time I heard of Arthur Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and his associates, and read their works. I remembered that I once sat on my dormitory's sandy cement floor, using my bed as a desk, while a worker roommate shared the same room with me. I sent around 20% of my meager \$30 monthly salary to my Shanghai classmate to buy books of whatever he saw fit for me, which went on for three years. As a result, I read British Romantic Movement's poets, mainly Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley, German Goethe and Schiller, Hungarian Petöfi Sándor, Russian Pushkin, Lermontov and Sergei Yesenin, and others. The first Asian Nobel Prized winner, the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore had a

great influence on me with his prize-winning work *Gitanjali* translated into Chinese from Tagore's own English version by an older generation's woman writer and poet Bing Xin, and his other works *Straying Birds*, *The Crescent Moon*, *Fireflies*, *The Gardener* and so on.

Meanwhile, a poetry movement known as "The Obscure Poetry" and a general literature movement, "The Scar Literature", were in full swing. Poets, novelists, philosophers were pop stars at the time, which contributed to the shaping of my world views and my career. Poetry literally became a substitute for religions, with the leading players attaining positions of sainthood, or spreading a voice across the awakening China like the Shelley's voice in his "*Ode to the West Wind*". I copied some of their poems with my hand, since their collections of poems were not available at the time. I behaved most like a poet back then with a long hair and ready to wear whatever was in. My impulse to write was such that I can only use madness to describe it judging by the diary I kept and "poems" I wrote at the time. As a student of science and being fed with almost only ideologically works in my childhood, my Chinese was not ready. During the whole 1980s, I didn't have much awareness of the importance of Chinese classical works, and spent almost no time on them. Like admirer of surfers, I stood by the shore watching the skilful ones at the tip of the waves, unable to try myself in any way due to my lack of skill, but the passion for poetry later kept me away from doing anything else, and I have kept the flame alive in a completely foreign tongue when the tide of poetry in China turned to its lowest.

With economic reform practice deepening and opening up China to the foreign influences, I had a keen awareness that English would become very important for anyone who wanted to communicate with a wider world. At twenty years of age in 1984, in an letter to my father, I wrote, "I want to internationalize myself." In 1981, the subject of English took up 50 points, and in the subsequent year 100 points, becoming as important as five other subjects. A nationwide enthusiasm for learning English was in the air. My personal lure to the language was stronger as I read more short stories by writers who were active before 1949, in which they often quoted lines directly in English from Byron, Shelley and

Wordsworth. English to me at the very beginning was associated with a romantic outlook. Although my understanding of British Romanticism was primitive, reading Chinese translations of William Wordsworth *The Solitary Reaper* and *The Daffodils* made me swoon in dreaming of reading their originals. English mesmerized me even more because of a rumour that the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote in English and won the Nobel Prize for literature as the first Asian, which, I learned later, was not true, as I became a translator of his works into Chinese myself two decades later.

### **5. My English learning and pursuing my graduate study**

I used all primitive ways to enhance my English until one important opportunity became available to me. My company needed to install a new power plant with imported Japanese designs and facilities by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, and it organized an English training of its young technical engineers to read design papers all in English. My mania in English was famous among my peers, and only by some maneuvering I ended up becoming a member of the English training program at Xiamen University in the second half of 1985. My English capacity probably just enough to understand VOA special English, and I envied a classmate from another branch of the head company who claimed to be able to understand VOA regular broadcasting. I worked very hard and got access to some new material of English learning. Right after the half a year's program, I started to think about applying for my graduate study in some field at Xiamen University.

In retrospect, my five years from my graduation in 1983 to the autumn of 1988 when I began my graduate program are like a hell. The first year, I worked together with workers doing manual work to gain the firsthand experience of installing a power plant's automatic control system. That was not congenial to my taste and dream at all, with an expectation to have my life like a Gipsy moving from place to place to install power plants. The college graduates were of the cream of the younger generation and were looked up to by average workers. We were

active in bringing about new fashion of learning ballroom dancing in primitive setting and promoting the company's cultural life. After around one year at the first construction site, I was recruited by my head company to teach a certain science course as they set up a technical professional school to train middle and high school graduates to be the workers for the company. I was lucky to be shielded from the manual works and the technical work which I resisted learning from the bottom of my heart, but one and a half later, I had to return to my company after I was asked to give away my position to a girl graduate from a famous university. Without even starting her job she tried to commit suicide by jumping from the fourth floor of the company's hotel, but survived with a severe injury on one leg. Life was brutal back then and an official working at my county government sector had written a letter to my company, negotiating my transfer to my home county, which was categorically denied.

My only way out of the hellish place was to take graduate study exams and applied for a study at certain field which was easy for me to pass the exams, rather than where my passion was. At the time my preferred fields were philosophy, which was unusual at the time, Chinese literature, and English literature, but I had no qualification for all those. My English was good enough to meet the requirement, I believed, and my math was so good that I did not even need to have a review in order to pass any test in it. I narrowed down my choice in the field of economics, and there was a friend who talked about his plan to apply for graduate study in public finance at Xiamen University under a famous professor. I did exactly that to apply for the project in the autumn of 1987, simply because the exams required math and of course English. The outcome was that I passed every individual courses, with a shortage of 3 points below the total score requirement. I failed with a huge regret at my first try. My second try was not approved by my company, and I did it secretly on my own. It was a success. Among 60 candidates who took the exams, only two top ones was chosen, but my company intended to deny my chance by not allowing me to leave. Only by my gruesome maneuvering and by sheer chance, I ended up at Xiamen University in the autumn of

1988. My narrow escape from the company would have enough material for a novel if I would recount it now. I had many nightmares about the five years during my first half year in the prestigious campus.

With the letter of admission in my pocket and the clearance from my company, I visited my hometown to see my father who was getting increasing feeble from a terminal disease of tuberculosis. He listened to my story with patience and shaking his head to express his sympathy over the incredible pains that I had experienced. He was the only person who believed in my capacity of passing the exams. But my success meant I would have no income for three years, with my farmer brother having his own family of three sons to take care of, my family's financial picture looked grim. My father died with a body weight less than 30 kilos, the following year during my second semester at Xiamen University on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1989, at the time of Chinese students' movement at the Tiananmen Square. He picked up a habit of smoking through people offering cigarette over cigarette to him due to his helping villagers to settle their disputes within my village and in adjacent villages. In his prime, he used to carry loads of salt with a shoulder pole from a place more than 30 km from our county for merely 20 cent of a silver yuan a time. As a result, he ended up with a body hunched, which further reduced his height to around 1.55 meter. Although as a child I had a death wish for him up to my age of 12, and his neglects and miscalculations resulted in a few family tragedies, at his dead bed at an age of 70, me not yet 25, I had forgiven him and had a great respect for the man who had a steel will to weather through countless hardships and a heart to serve. He died with black hair, a perfect eyesight and other body parts functioning well, except his lung. Like a man with a young mind, he was reluctant to leave, although he was not afraid of death. I was not mature enough to cope with his death, and that was the hardest moment in my life.

## **6. Master of art in economics**

I enjoyed my new campus life tremendously with burgeoning of new ideas and an impending change in the air. We had a lot of ballroom

dancing with primitive sound devices in open sport fields or at the top of a building with girl and boy students at both undergraduate and graduate level full of innocence. The second semester witnessed an increasing students' demand for a fundamental political reform nationwide. At the height of the movement and one month after my father's passing away, I met a girl visiting Xiamen University from my home county with a family background of a local government official and a medical profession, who I ended up entering into a marriage with at the end of that year. The student movement was reported for months throughout the world, it ended in a tragedy with a sudden shift in China's direction. With tears in my eyes, it seemed I was able to foresee the future, but a new chance was open for me which helped to steer my boat in a new direction.

In the aftermath of the movement, the relationship China and the US was at its lowest point. The Sino-US Economic Training Center at Fudan University sponsored by the Ford Foundation, training elite students from Chinese prestigious universities, decided to continue, in order not to sever all cultural ties between the two countries. It started to recruit graduate students majored in economics from prominent Chinese universities as usual, but in a hurry, without demanding formal exams. I was one of the four from Xiamen University picked for the program, and I ended up at Fudan University, Shanghai, in the autumn of 1989.

It was a further eye-opening experience for me. The Ford Foundation purchased textbooks and invited US professors for the program with around 30 participants. For the whole year, everything was done in English. Among the subjects taught were micro- and macroeconomics, finance and banking, city and labor economics, etc.. I worked and played with all my passion, but even at the time, I read Bertrand Russell's *The History of Western Philosophy* in Chinese version with a great concentration and joy. My interest in poetry and literature in general was further developed during my MA program in economics. I sometimes yelled Shakespeare Hamlet's lines in Chinese at my dorm, and my reading expended to original English versions of the US and world history. I started to use radio to listen to VOA broadcasting in English, without a full understanding, but I persisted, and it turned out to have a

significant impact upon my future life. In the aftermath of the movement, the tide had turned from the cultural renaissance to material development in China, but my interest in literature intensified and started venturing into its new territory in English.

The lingering influence of the Fudan's year was my friendship with one of my teachers by the name of Charles W. Hultman, a retired professor of finance and banking from the University of Kentucky. I visited him at his guesthouse lodging with my fellows classmates from Xiamen University. I mentioned the name of Christ by pronouncing the "i" as the short vowel i, and he corrected me without revealing any surprise to embarrass me. Then, he asked, "do you know Confucius?" I said no, because I never heard the name in English before. Then, he reminded me that he was the famous teacher in ancient China, and I answered with a definite yes. He was curious whether I had read his book, i.e. *The Analects of Confucius*. The answer was no, that was a moment that I really felt embarrassed. I was reminded by a US professor of my own cultural origin. It was not only me who was ignorant of the Chinese heritage. The entire two generations were cut off from any access to the very texts which had shaped their vital values.

The program ended in the summer of 1990, and I soon began my correspondence with Charles, which still goes on today. Writing a letter in English was not easy for me then, and it was expensive to send it by air and took a while to reach him. The first book I received from him was *The Bible* in modern Chinese version. While reading it, particularly the *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and *Kings* and *Song of Solomon*, the four Gospels, I was shocked to the very core by this new horizon opening up to me. Together with a video of the famous movie about Jesus' life, I was nourished by the words and the parables by Jesus. I also read Confucius' *Analects*, which made me wonder how he was able to come up with a behavior rulebook which Chinese even 2500 years later still follow. I was surprised I had been so Confucian without knowing the origin of my value system. The revelation from two books opened me to both Western and Chinese traditions. I was aware that I needed to develop a bird's-eye view of the world.

## **7. Teaching at the Department of Public Finance and Banking**

Upon my graduation in the summer of 1991, I had no worry about a job prospect, because an MA graduate in economics was rare and welcome by universities and by private and government sectors alike, at the beginning of China's spectacular economic growth, but I had a paramount goal in my mind, that was, like so many others, I wanted to earn an MA degree in the field of finance from a university in the United States. The public finance department of Fujian provincial government sought for a graduate to work for them, a ticket that would open a door for me to enter Chinese officialdom which was a dreamland for all Chinese families. I was not a material for it, probably because of my upbringing that made me hesitate to associate with people I didn't like, and had no will to control at all. Working in a government sector meant you had to create a network with top officials and friends in order to be promoted. I did not shy away from private business sectors or start my own business though. In fact, I applied for a job to be an accountant at Xiamen Holiday Inn Hotel which was a foreign business. As they were about to accept me, but due to my lacking any knowledge of accounting, I hesitated and gave it up at the last moment. My department of public finance asked me to stay, and I became a teacher with a single object in mind to apply for a further study at a US university.

The whole 1992 saw me busy with taking TOEFL and GRE tests, and filling application forms for three US universities. Charles sent many books of finance, accounting and math, and even sent TOEFL and GRE centers processing fees to forward my scores to the universities I applied for. My TOEFL score was 600 which was good enough, but GRE score was only less than 1700. For a Chinese student to get a scholarship usually needed 2000 plus. I ended up with a letter from the University of Iowa, promising to admit me only after I had financial guarantee. By 1993, it was clear that I had to plan my future here in China.

My first year as a teacher went well, because I taught two subjects I liked. One was macroeconomics which I taught by directly printing part

of Paul Samuelson's textbook for my students and guided them through it in English. I was supposed to teach in Chinese, and it was a rare undertaking with my inadequate English, but anyway, no one interfered with my job. Another was Business English which was left to me by a trainee of the same Fudan center one year earlier than me, who succeeded in his application to be admitted by a US university, where I failed. The theory of free market prices leading to efficient allocation of resources had made it very clear that the planned economy would fail, but a lot of topics like stock market and privatizing the housing market were still taboos, and I constantly felt that I had to self-censor in order not to step on the redline of what I could not do or say. When I was asked to teach what they called International Taxation, I had to accept it because it was a subject I was supposed to have an expertise with, but in fact, I knew nothing about it. I needed to learn while I taught it. My passion for poetry refused to go and I got a pirated version of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* from a local bookstore with a hidden section. Meanwhile, Charles sent me books of *The Literature of England* and many others. I found a new soil to continue my dream. My job became increasingly a torture to me.

Two prominent poets had committed suicide, one in 1989, another in 1993. Chinese literary people had waken from not-too-long a dream of the 1980s. All birds suddenly faced a new reality of being encouraged to "swim in the sea", literally a prominent slogan at the time. The word "poet" once had so much prestige and honor attached had quietly acquired a connotation of "being out of touch with reality, or unable to survive well". Poets were driven out from the hall of fame to the streets where ordinary people could make fun of them. Be careful with someone who called you a poet, the caller simply meant to ridicule you with a muddled head flying in the air. If I had had only Chinese, I would definitely not have kept my flame of poetry alive. I would have ended up tolerating my profession clumsily to make a living with a far greater mean of survival. In 1993, I made a decision that I would only read books in English, no reading in Chinese at all, not even newspaper. It turned out this process continued until 2004.

## **8. My restless mind and desperate approach to acquire English**

The Chinese economy at the time was still primitive. In 1991, my salary was around \$70 per month, with additional income from my department, I was able to help providing for my mother and uncle, and started a family with my wife who came to work at the university's hospital, thanks to my university's policy to help its employees' spouses to work in the same city. It looked as though I had at last settled down with a decent job and a beautiful wife, but deep down, I was most restless at the time as I was approaching 30. In the summer of, maybe, 1994, I travelled to Guangzhou and later to Shanghai by sea, and knocked at the door of a professor of philosophy at Fudan University, to inquire about how I should prepare for a PhD postgraduate study in the field with him as my supervisor. I was told to read Feuerbach and Hegel which I found too much for me. Meanwhile, ideological and major value differences between me my wife surfaced. She seemed to be comfortable with the situation she lived in and assumed mainstream values of pursuing material wellbeing without worrying about serious problems in life which troubled a seeker like me to the upmost. I had a much bigger fish to fry in my life. The whole spectrum of questions which had bothered thinkers throughout history and across the world had also bothered me, and I felt strongly that I had a voice to utter since so many fell silent, so many were deprived off any awareness of trying to live fully by their circumstances. Eventually, even poetry made way to an ultimate quest that I boiled down from all other quests: is there a way out of human dilemmas from my own individual perspective?

At the beginning of my moratorium on using Chinese in reading, I felt frustrated with my inadequate understanding of books or any texts in English. Fragmentation of messages I got and much more time spent in reading a page in English than in Chinese made me long to return to the smiling Chinese characters which are in my blood. One thing eased my anxiety with English, that is, English for me at the very beginning meant English literature. As I worked through the books Charles sent me, albeit

slow, the messages and beauty conveyed by writers and poets gave me a great comfort and gratification. I slowly worked through the whole Bible, and even some Shakespeare's plays which I understood so well in Chinese. After the initial years, I felt quite at ease with books in English. Meanwhile, my radio listening went on. Early 1990s seems to be not so distant a past, but communication was primitive in comparison with the situation now. I used a shortwave radio, carefully tuned in for a clear voice of the VOA English broadcasting which was the major source for English learners in China to polish their English. A person by a radio, that was an epithet I gave myself for fun. I even started to dream that I was campaigning in support of George W. Bush Sr. with so much American life beaming through radio signal to me. Different spaces and cultures started to be transcended. If the barrier of language could be broken through, and a person was able to go back and forth between two rich soils at the most fundamental level, the result would be a miracle. I had vague awareness of my value and gave myself a credit.

My approach toward acquiring my English in China where an alphabetical language is so alien was developed from an observation of my learning the Shanghai dialect, and a baby's experience with its tongue. At 16 in Shanghai, I found myself living in a student dormitory with four Shanghai classmates and four none-Shanghai ones including myself. Local Shanghainese were proud of their dialect and didn't bother to speak Mandarin at all while they could. Within three months, all none-Shanghai students were able to joint their night chats on bed, since they were all eloquent and enjoyed talking on almost all subjects. Within half a year, I managed to speak the local dialect with some accent. At the end of my graduation, I was regarded as a local by local people judging by the way of my speaking their dialect, of which I could not understand a word at the very beginning. The same thing happens in learning any foreign language, what you need to do is merely finding a way of exposure to the language. Maybe, what you need to do a little more with a foreign language instead of a dialect is to acquire some vocabulary, but even that may not be necessary, if you only learn how to speak. A baby experiences being able to talk about many things before they learn to write, and

Homer's epics had circulated orally for a long time before they were put down in words, both cases show that a spoken language can be independent of its written one.

Another observation to prove my point is illiterate people like my mother, she spoke only my local dialect without being able to write her name. Simply by peppering your ears with sounds of English and grazing your eyes like lambs on grassy land of English text, English will eventually become a functioning language like your mother tongue. I now know too well that my whole life is an experiment of living here in China, while acquiring English as my second mother tongue, living in the heart cores of the two great civilizations at same time. I must have a most serious commitment and a spirit to venture deep into my homeland and an alien land. If you stood outside them you would never learn. I have lived in this city of Xiamen for 32 years, and apart from a few words of calling names, I understand almost nothing of local Minnan dialect, a very famous dialect of southern Fujian province which is also a common dialect in Taiwan, partly because I only need to speak Mandarin in my environment, partly because local people tend to communicate with nonlocals in Mandarin.

## **9. Working at the Department of Foreign Languages and my first poem in English**

My reading in English kept my passion in literature alive. Maybe, after all, I could still continue on the path I had trodden all those years without knowing a light had been guiding me ahead. I imagined the Department of Foreign Languages at my university must have many courses about literature, poetry, plays or novels, so in early 1995, I bluntly went to the department dean's home with my wife, to ask if she would allow me to sit in on some programs of literature which may help me. My conversation with her in English surprised her and she praised me that my English was good enough to teach at her department. I asked her if I applied to teach at her department, whether she would accept me or not. The answer was yes, I gathered there must be some element of

joking in it, but I was an teacher of business English already and she had some practical purpose of opening a course of business English for English majors.

I applied for a transfer at once and was granted after an exhortation from the dean of my department cautioning me not to take the stupid action. My swift action took the dean of the Department of Foreign Languages by surprise and she organized an interview for me with other decision makers of the department, and I was accepted. There were several reasons for this exceptional thing to happen. An MA degree was still very strong and business English was badly needed for English majors, the majority of whom were supposed to work in business sectors. A PhD academic background for one to be a teacher at a university in China was not demanded at the time. Besides, English teaching even at the college level were more to do with improving students' skills in reading, writing, listening, rather than with literature and ideas. I remembered I presented to my new dean with an essay on *Confucianism in Modern China* in English which I wrote after I had read *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* by Professor Fen Youlan of Beijing University. She pointed some grammar errors without saying much. Anyway, I have been very grateful to her. Although my action maybe perceived by most a stark stupidity, my innermost logic was clear and I fully embraced all consequences with a positive mindset. A lion's lair or not, I walked into it like a toddler stumbling while smiling. I started to realize all dreams of my youth, philosophy, Chinese literature, English, or maybe art, religions, politics and economics all combined together. I was doing what I liked the most.

Soon after I worked in my new place, I was invited to serve as one of three judges in an English speech contest organized by the students' union. I sat next to a young American female teacher and I got to know her. We later visited my painter friend at Gulangyu where my friend even painted her portrait. On the way there and back, she told me she admired China a lot, and was bothered by American life of gun culture, noise campaigns and religious fundamentalism, for example, her boyfriend told her if she didn't believe in God, she would end up in hell. She also

noticed that the Chinese did not value and know their tradition much, and she had an awareness that her country was not a bad place after all, with so many in China regarded the United States as their dreamland. Those words shocked me as I seemed myself living in a ruin with a yearning for a remote place of another brand new civilization that surfaced in my mind like a place of my previous life.

Suddenly, I felt I was put into a trance, and with an intention to impress her, I used Buddhist concept of reincarnation and summoned up all my strength and energy to write a poem in English, entitled *To JJ*, later, *To a girl from the UAS*. I went with my hand-copied poem to visit her at the guesthouse for foreign teachers, presenting it to her with other two American young women in her room. Like unprepared, shy Paris of the Trojan prince in an island facing three goddesses, my first reaction was to escape and hide myself right away. After a reading with an intense curiosity, she asked me to sign my name on it, saying a poet should sign his work. I left in a hurry without ever knowing her comment on my poem. I knew it could be a poem with some poignancy but I had no way to know it, and it stayed with me until a miracle happened seven years later. Before my transfer to my new department, I had always had a vague idea that I would publish something on an English journal or a newspaper, but I dare not reveal it to anyone even to my closest friends.

### **10. A new father and my wide exposure to English media and literature**

My son was born later that year, and life pressed on in a new territory with me working very hard without much feeling the burden and with an elated spirit. Feeling the pain of my own upbringing, I spent a lot of time with my son guiding him to right behavior with patience. I would definitely not abuse my son physically or verbally in any way. Not being able to read a book with concentration with him by my side, I bought a good radio from Hong Kong with the help of a friend visiting there. From then on, I was seen for almost five years with a son by my side and a radio on hand. Later in 1997, a teacher who taught Selected Foreign

Radios Listening retired after working well over his retirement age, I volunteered myself to continue his program. ~~whose name~~ I subsequently changed its name to Media English Listening, and at the same time, I gave up teaching Business English for good. I reshuffled the program, used the latest news contents and soon involved my students in discussion and imitating news reading like a radio or TV anchor.

My department building installed a satellite disc, which enabled me to watch CNN for the first time. That was a hilarious experience. Whenever I got time I sat in front of the TV, day and at night, often taking my baby son on a bicycle to my office and got back at around 9 o'clock in the evening. I watched Diana and John F. Kennedy Jr.'s deaths unfolded, and the following year, the war against Yugoslavia launched live in front of my eyes, and my son's, who uttered the word "Belgrade" as if he had known the place well. A technician helped me to hook up my cassette recorder with the TV, so I was able to record countless audio materials, such as George W. Bush Jr. and Al Gore's campaign and its aftermath of the legal process. In early October 1999, a monstrous typhoon hit Xiamen, and the satellite disc on top of my department building was blown off. It was never installed again.

My experience with BBC TV program happened much earlier in 1992 when Xiamen University cable TV network allowed very home to hook up with the university's cable TV center to receive it. I knew it would be soon cut off, so I ended up sitting in front of BBC whenever I was available, with my wife being frustrated without her programs to watch. Half a year later, it was cut off and satellite dishes were banned except for special purposes.

In the summer of 2001, a few months after I had finished decoration of my newly-purchased housing unit a few kilometers off-campus and moved in, I simply walked out of the family and divorced when my wife and my son had a place to stay, after our different and irreconcilable life views had frustrated me for years. My great concern was my son's education and the negative impact of the scenario on him. Since then, I spent every weekend with my son and he later turned out to be a well-read person, and helped me return to Chinese classics.

Once I worked at the English department, it dawned upon me that I would be all on my own if I wanted to pursue poetry and literature in English. I sat in as many classes as possible offered by British and American teachers with two other fellow teachers who understood me and were eager to learn. I absorbed their teachings like a sponge, knowing that no matter how hard I tried, English still eluded me as a mean of literary expression it being not in any way like my mother tongue, besides, I would also face the potential mistrust of my colleagues if I was not really good, lacking any academic credential. I knew I had once again given myself a tight rope of life to walk on. For example, I was advised to sit in the grammar teacher's class, and given a chance to teach English as a second foreign language for students majored in Russian, who knew no English at all. I immediately got rid of the old-fashion textbook with ideological slogans in English in it, which angered the director of the Russian session. One of the deputy deans who later became my friend and gave me support inspected my class and gave me a thumbs-up.

I went through the New Concept English compiled by a British educator, which is very popular in China, as textbooks from Book One to Book Three with my Russian majors for two years. The result was both good for me and them. I got rid of major grammar problems, while some of them ventured to take standard Band Four test for all sophomores throughout China's universities, and one passed the test. I have been prone to take excessive risks as if a light has been guiding me ahead at the other end of the tunnel. The English letters I drew at my village junior high beaming light to my eyes may be a hint that I had an earlier life experience of a world behind those letters.

## **11. A mysterious experience and my first poem in English published**

My early life was harsh, while my life on campus was calm and uneventful on the surface, but actually I did exactly what Nietzsche advises: to move your house to the edge of a volcano. I had one experience which I have no explanation for except to attribute it to some mysterious helping force. One day during my four months at my new

cozy house, I lay on my new sofa, listening to my new VCD player play a CD disc by a woman violinist accompanied by a pianist, known as the Secret Garden. Later I checked it out. It is an Irish-Norwegian duo playing New Instrumental Music, also understood by some as Neo-classical music. It features the Irish violinist Fionnuala Sherry and the Norwegian composer/pianist Rolf Løvland. I had had a longtime stomach problem since my college years, and the medicine bottles were still on the tea table. I even did a gastroscopy which afflicted me and made me vomit. With the CD on, gradually I felt a bubble air swelling like a ping-pong ball, maybe a little smaller, move within my body, around the area of my belly button. When the first CD ended, I replaced it with the second one and lay back in the same position. The same thing continued until the music ended. In the process I knew that my stomach problem would be gone forever, and it was. Since then, my stomach could digest iron if I could eat it. I had a difficult and an interesting challenge ahead and I was “helped” in a way beyond any explanation.

Back to the campus, I was once again free and life had prepared for me a great surprise which may seem insignificant for others, but meant my long solitary walk in a mental alien land ended up with real assistance from friends coming afar from the very place I dreamed of. At the end of 2001, with a great fanfare, my department invited a Tom McArthur, the editor of *English Today*, a Cambridge University Press’ quarterly journal, tracking the development of, what he calls, varieties of English across the world, also the editor of *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, to give a series of lectures to the faculties and students of my department. I attended his second lecture with my first poem in English *To a girl from the USA* in my pocket, curious to see how he might respond to it. At the end of his lecture, I showed it to him and he read with a great attention and enthusiasm. I quietly awaited for his judgment. To my surprise, he asked me, “Do you know any other people around you who use English as a recreation?”. If I am not wrong, that is a direct quote. I said no, and he asked me further, “Are there one hundred people in China doing the same thing as you do?” with a tone of great eagerness and curiosity. I told him I had no idea about that. And I heard an announcement that put me in

a trance almost, “How about we publish it?” I was almost “swoon to death”, let me borrowed Keats words. I also presented him with an essay entitled *Picking up a spot of sunshine* about my baby son’s innocent action before he was able to walk. He promised me to read it later. On the third lecture, he was enthusiastic in mentioning his accidental discovery of me, looking in his pocket for my poem to show to the audience, but unfortunately, he was not able to find it in a hurry. He asked me to write a brief introduction to my life. Soon after he returned to Britain, I received his edited pages for print, which included his editor note, the brief account of my life, the poem and the first half of the essay due to the space limit. They appeared on the April’s issue in 2002 and in his editor’s note he had an expectation of me by saying “he may represent a shape of things to come.” I felt honored by it, but I knew the way would be long and the possibility was slim.

## **12. Meeting Dana Wilde from Maine, the USA**

In December 2000, I met Dana Wilde, a visiting Fulbright scholar working at Fudan University, who happened to have a lecture tour to Xiamen University other places. He gave me an impression of a modest, calm and more eastern inner-withdrawn person. I happened to attend his lecture and I remembered at the end of his lecture I bluntly invited him to visit my new cozy housing unit which I was proud of at the time, and it was normal for my colleagues who would like to come to see its decor at the very beginning of China’s opening up its housing market. He told me he was busy and we parted without knowing we would meet and became a lifelong friend to each other.

At the beginning of the autumn semester in 2001, I was happy to know that Dana Wilde would continue his second half year as a Fulbright scholar to work at my department to take the place of a previous visiting American-Chinese female Fulbright scholar whose husband was a retired professor of philosophy and volunteered himself to teach a program of philosophy in which I was a student. The old gentleman was very fond of me as a keen learner of everything and I even asked him to give a lecture

on Confucianism in which Chinese people had just shown a renewed interest. I guessed Dana would live at the same room they lived after they left. That was why I made the September 11's call to Dana, which seared to his memory.

I was then a divorced man living in a rented house not far from my ex-wife and my son. As usually, I kept my VOA on and towards 9 o'clock, I heard the report of the first plane crash into the one tower of the World Trade Center. I had just learned of the twin towers shortly ago by watching a documentary about them. I felt my heart explode with the news and could not constrain myself from telling somebody, so I telephoned my son who at five had known enough for me to chat things with as a friend. We both had TV antennas which enabled us to watch Taiwan TV channels, so he watched it live, but he did not remind me to watch the TV and I continued to follow the new with my radio. The report speculated it as "an accident" at the very beginning, but soon the second tower was hit. Then, there was no doubt that America was under attack. When I heard two tower's complete collapse, I telephoned the guesthouse room to inform Dana in hysteria and he was shocked and told me he would check it up with his laptop. By the way, the name Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan was in my mind as the event was unfolding, before even President Bush hinted about him.

The new semester Dana offered a course of poetry for graduate students and I joined them as a keenest student, maybe, having a small class in his guesthouse room. His son Jack three years older than my son was with him. My understanding of poetry in English than was primitive. I had a vague memory he introduced W. B. Yeats poem *Leda and the Swan*, but not any others. I found it quite difficult for me to respond to some of his questions. Among the students there was a teacher from a nearby city who received training at my department, by the name of Huang Renda, with whom Dana practiced Tai-ji, and we became friends. Huang was almost a hermit Chinese who refused to use email or any social media devices. Dana witnessed my encounter with Tom McArthur and upon knowing the chance of the poem's publication, I sought for the first time Dana's advice for smoothing out my writing, but it turned out

Tom preferred my poem with some flaws, for instance, he kept the word “speakless” which I intended to be “speechless”. My friendship with Dana Wilde has since grown and continued and it is now almost twenty years. Without him, it is sure that my life would be more suffocating and my dream for practicing creative writing in English would frustrate me even more. If there were an intervention in my life, Dana and Tom were definitely mysterious light blazing my path.

### **13. As a visiting scholar to Ateneo de Manila University and the second in English about Maningning Miclat published**

At the end of 2002, Philippine Ateneo de Manila University offered a chance for a visiting scholar from Xiamen University. I knew it was the least contested chance, but I applied for it at a crucial time when I would have been better to stay put. I was in Manila at the very beginning of 2003, finding myself in the summer when I was supposed to winter in Xiamen. I was mesmerized by a library with all books in English, started photocopying book after book to bring them back home. I was asked by Tom McArthur whether I was able to write an essay on English learning and teaching in China. I wrote an article about my own experience with the title “*Practicing My English in China, a very personal story*” , about 5000 words in two weeks. After Dana read it with some language advice and sent it back to me, I presented the long article to Tom, which he published in his journal more than two and a half years later in October 2005.

One thing is worth of mentioning of my Manila experience. I picked out a book of trilingual poems from a bookshelf of the Department of Chinese which hosted me. I thought it was someone like me writing poems both in English and Chinese. I didn’t pay a close notice to the title on the cover with a young woman’s picture and I put it back. That was at the beginning of my visit, and towards the end of my stay at the end of April. I was in the department and picked out the book again. The director of the department was by my side and saw it. She told me with a sigh of pity and said that the book was by a daughter of his close friend, a

poet and an established painter who was born in China in 1972 and grew up there and returned to Philippine with her parents and a younger sister in 1986 after the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos' government. She wrote poems in three languages Chinese, Tagalog and English, and became an art teacher at the University of Manila. In the year 2000, she committed suicide by jumping down from seventh floor of a building on Easter Day. I took a clear look at the cover and saw the young woman in yellow Philippine half-sleeve shirt, with a title *A Voice from the Underworld*, by Maningning Micalat. I later knew she was named Ma Ningning in Chinese. I borrowed the book and read it in the library for two hours with tears flowing down my face and almost choked with uncontrolled sobs. I returned with the book and told my host my response to it and left, with an eerie notion that I would surely meet the family of the girl.

The following day I received a phone call from her father and he asked me if I would like to visit his home that evening. My host told him of my reaction to her daughter's poems and he would like me to join their family together with one of her close friends coming back from Brazil to remember her at the Easter Eve, April 19 that year. I saw a few of her paintings and listened to her friend every word about her. She gave no reason of her death, only saying that her friend had told her that she could not get over something mysterious. The next day they would visit her tomb. I dare not intrude into their private grief and I left after the dinner by promising them that I may write a poem to remember her.

I flew back to Xiamen with a heavy luggage amid the war against Iraq and at the height of the SARS scare in early May. Soon after I came back, I visited a website created by her family and Manila's societies of art and literature to honor her, and downloaded everything available there including the pictures of her paintings, the pictures of her life, a few of her poems in Chinese and English, as the material for the poem I wanted so strongly to write, but it refused to come until it visited me one evening and night almost two and half years later. The record shows it was written from evening to midnight December 13, 2005, and I gave it a title *In Memoriam: Maningning Micalat*. I sensed it was not a bad one and I sent it to Dana right after it was finished. The second day I got Dana's

enthusiastic comment on it and I sent it right away to Tom for a possible publication in his journal. He printed it in April, 2006's issue of *English Today*.

#### **14. A romantic encounter**

In the autumn of 2004, more than three years after my divorce, after a period of restlessness in my attempt to find true love, I met online a girl working in the booming Chinese real estate sector which was about to skyrocket. I hated to mention our brief encounter, but it signified a turning point of my life. Our twenty days of exchanging messages and a few phone calls resulted in her onboard a flight to Xiamen to meet me. I saw at the airport a superbly-dressed lady of medium height and I as usual wore an oversize T-shirt, not even new. I sensed her hesitation at first sight but it was soon over in the taxi after she heard my voice in conversation. Our four days together for the first time gave me a taste of true romance, and it flashed back multiple times inspiring me to write quite a few poems in Yeats' style both in English and Chinese.

We walked through a prosperous street just outside the campus gate adjacent the Buddhist temple, with all kind of shops and boutiques. We wandered into a CD store and I picked a CD with Hindu religious images as cover, which, I now know, are Krishna and Radha. I played it on my computer's CD-ROM and we listened in silence, and a moment later, I saw tears flow down her face. That was a mysterious moment which indicated an underlining connection that brought us together. Hindu spiritual heritage opened to me through Tagore's poems and my later significant reading. At the time, the music simply drew me in and I felt we were mingled beyond anything physical. I has always been very reluctant to share the album's name with anyone, but now I think I should reveal it. It is called *Devotion* by Rasa, a New Age singing combination of American soloist Kim Waters and Hans Christian, a German cellist. Kim Waters chants in Hindi or Sanskrit devotional songs to praise Indian gods and goddess. The first song of the album is Gopinatha, which, I now know, is a song dedicated to Lord Krishna, the Lord of the Gopis. It was

that song which produced chemistry between us.

We parted with her talking about our settling down with me purchase a housing unit here in Xiamen and her buying a car. The talk continued a few times over telephone and she told her friends and mother about her encounter in Xiamen, which was categorically put down by all of them. On one occasion, she was trying to find right T-shirt for me and was made fun of by her friends. I knew instinctively that we had no future but I grieved over the rare blossoming and going of my life rose. She later met an Australian guy and settled down.

Chinese had awakened up from 1980s' dream of political reform and spiritual and cultural renewal. From 1990 on, the sky being closed like a pot cover on the pot, birds were encouraged to swim in the sea, literally, there was a slogan "going down to the sea" which in Chinese means xiahai, a figurative way of saying "go to marketplaces". Material lure proved to be a much better elixir than poetry, philosophy and novels and other arts, and everyone had a chance and Chinese were proved to be most hungry spirits ready to engulf everything material. The frenzy unfolded and I witnessed the housing price rocket from around 4,000 yuan per square meter to 40,000 within ten years. As an MA in economics, I was fully aware of the trend and hinted at borrowing money from a rich close relative and was politely rejected and one close friend even offered me to use all his savings to buy a unit soon after I divorced. With so many western things in my mind, I felt ashamed of burdening my friends, so I did not accept it.

### **15. Academic pressures and my creative writing program**

I stood by watching the Chinese economic growth miracle unfold in front of me, with myself no housing unit, no car, divorced, no ambition for the government and business sectors, and to most people's horror, I gave up climbing up the academic ladder which would ruin me as a poet if I had done so. There are certain publication requirements. Domestic journals are categorized into several levels from the top to bottom according to their prestige and credential, and you are required to publish

a few theses on certain levels of those journals according to the position of professor or vice professor you want to apply for, the writing language is Chinese even if you teach English. Cambridge's *English Today* is not on their list. Despite my writings were in English and almost no one had done this before, my publications were rejected as being not academic writing on their named journals. Besides, even if I obeyed their rules, I had to take and pass a second foreign language exam such as French or Japanese to qualify for a higher academic position. So I decided to give up and followed the way where my passion led to, come what may.

And around 2005 as Chinese educational system produced more and more PhD graduates, all major universities started to recruit new teachers only with a PhD academic background, while urging their existing none PhD faculties to earn a PhD as soon as possible. Otherwise, they were threatened to be kicked out, but there is a line drawn on July 1, 1964. If you were born before that day, you don't need a PhD to continue to be a teacher, those were born after that required a PhD. I was born less than two months after that, so I was supposed to get a PhD. Those policies were not carried out stringently, and besides as time proceed to 2010, I was edging towards 50, and what I had been doing would sooner result in something, which I firmly believed.

I opened a new program of Poetry Reading and Creative Writing in autumn semester 2003, soon after my first poem in English was published. My understanding of American and British poetry was primitive and I had not practiced much creative writing myself, not because I was lazy, but because writing in English that made sense at the time for me was like dragging at my hair to lift myself up into the air. My students were not sophisticated at all in this regard either. With tests oriented towards English education and with teachers know only some grammar rules without speaking proper English themselves in their primary and secondary educations, poetry is an area completely new to them, even for a college student majored in English. English education focuses more on training their speaking, reading, listening and writing without dealing much with poetry and literature in general.

Most of my students in recent years did not even know Robert

Frost's *Stopping by the Wood on a Snowy Evening*, Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*, or Wordsworth's *Daffodils* before they came to my class, so guiding them through some poems I know well would be beneficial to them although not much to do with creative writing. I must admit that my teaching was boring at the time and the course was open to seniors in their first semester of their last year in the campus with all kind of job ideas in their minds. My teaching carried on for five years until my department director abruptly canceled the program without even a consultation with me, later he explained that some other teachers needed to open more programs to fulfill their job load requirements and I had too large a share. Although I was a little angry, it was a relief for me and I determined not to start such a useless program again.

In 2013, teachers were required to cut short their programs which lasted for two semesters to only one semester and they were urged to open more courses. My new director urged me to open the old program in earnestness which I accepted passively, but I was much more sophisticated at the time and had written at least a bundle of poems in English and read more books about poetry understanding and poetic devices. The first years was difficult since I had to prepare materials for my class for sophomores English majors and a summer program for every student in the campus who was able to opt in. It has been a success and my class has always been full.

## **16. My translation of Tagore's *Gitanjali***

I had trip to Shanghai in the second half of 2003, during which I purchased several expensive imported books, *Rabindranath Tagore, The Myriad-minded Man*, *Norton Anthology of Poetry* the fourth edition and *An Anthology of Chinese Literature* by Norton. I left out *The Norton Shakespeare* which was 350 yuan roughly one-fourth of my monthly salary, and I regretted for it for eons until I hit upon an idea to purchase it online last years for 500 yuan, one thirtieth of my monthly income. I provided the number just to indicate how much China has changed over these years. The book about Tagore has opened a new horizon for me.

Although Tagore's reputation in the West has risen like a literary storm and then fallen, but he has always been popular here since he was introduced to China by a famous woman translator Bing Xin. His popularity here is somewhat like Persian Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi in the United States. As early as 1988, my first year as a graduate student, I checked up some books to have a glimpse of the origin of his poetry which led me to some segments of translation of the Hindu epics *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and Kalidasa's *The Cloud-Messenger*, and a Chinese version of a book of commentary on his life and works by an Indian author. In my early youth, I copied by hand some poems in Chinese translation from his *Gitanjali* and his other works, which I almost read by heart as an expression of my secret unrequited loves. I read the new book about him in English version with great interest and eagerness, and I knew for the first time he had been misunderstood in China, and I would definitely translate it myself. At the opening of 2004, I found a website which allowed me to download a lot of e-books, hundreds of, some of them are about Indian spiritual heritage including many collections of Tagore poetry in English translation, among them Tagore's own translation of *Gitanjali* which made him the first Nobel prize laureate in literature in Asia. All conditions were set for me to use Chinese again in writing and reading.

I was never so sad with a romantic brooding over a distant girl in my dream which was real yet evasive. Like a Pre-Raphaelite painting of Dante Gabriel Rossetti later I got to know and love so much, she was a woman surfaced from my wildest dream, who awakened me to my poet identity. I suddenly had tears in my eyes and saw clearly how I was guided by a mysterious light all those years and walked through thorns which I had taken as roses. My melancholy and a churn of all emotions did not lead to create but to translate. I translated *Gitanjali* to ease my pain and to forget my yearning for her. When I finished its translation at the end of the year, I found among my downloads an e-book *India's Love Lyrics* by Laurence Hope, who was a British woman poet lived with her military husband in India. Adela Florence Nicolson was her real name and she committed suicide in October 1904 at the age of 39 after her

husband died of a surgery. All I knew was that she is not widely read any more but her poems were made into famous songs which are still sung by opera singers. My English was just enough to understand her poems and every single one of her poems expressed the exotic, wistful, hopeless love ending usually in profound sorrow or death. I translated them one by one with tears in my eyes and sent to her via emails, and within half a year, I reached the end. I printed it out and sent a copy to her without knowing anything about how she felt about it. Earlier, I sent her the CD after I was able to copy all the music in my computer. After that, I found myself drifting by my own with a dawning I was destined to be a bilingual poet. I did not write right after that in Chinese or in English though.

### **17. Seeking the literary root of my own tradition**

With the translations, I ended my ten years of refraining from using Chinese in reading and in writing except maybe one poem in Chinese in 1997. My Chinese needed to be further improved if I wanted to renew my passion for writing poems in Chinese. When I started to know English I found out that Chinese pin-yin system was similar with English phonetic one, and grammar rules were quite alike in many ways. Later, I knew that modern Chinese were Latinized in its phonetic system and grammar rules, creating adjectives, adverbs by adding “的”, “地” and “得” to the end of nouns respectively. Friends pointed out my version of Chinese had a trace of westernized Chinese after my many years of immersion in English. Another important push for me to read more classics in Chinese was by then my son was ten years old, and his reading of Chinese classics first in modern Chinese and then in their original texts revealed my ignorance about Chinese ancient world, its history and literature. I gave him first the modern Chinese translation of *The Records of Historians* (Shiji or 史记), two thick volumes, and he read it a few times, showing his great interest in it almost in ecstasy and involving me in discussion of it regardless of my ignorance of the detail of the book. Then, I bought the original text in classical Chinese and he told me at the age of nine that he understood it.

I felt it was a high time for me to look into my Chinese ancient

world seriously, otherwise, I would be a laughingstock of my own child. Although by then, I had gone through basic texts of Confucianism, Daoism, and some Buddhism, I did not read crucial ancient classics of history and literature, a phenomenon that would shock people living outside China. But here in China, for two generations, they were deprived of any access to their own classics in their education when the books were burned and Confucius himself was denounced in most sordid terms. It was perfectly normal for ordinary educated people ended up without touching those books in their entire life. In recent China, primary and secondary educations have some segments of the ancient texts in students' textbooks, but nothing beyond that even at their college level, apart from those who majored in Chinese literature and philosophy.

The first book I read in its entirety was *Shi Ji* or *The Records of Historians*. It was written and compiled by famous Sima Qian (BCE 145-BCE 90) and his historian father. It was completed at the height of Han Dynasty which replaced the short-lived first unified empire of Qin or Chin. The unified China badly needed a systemic narrative as common memory and Sima Qian and his historian family achieved this monumental task. His language was so sincere, concise, objective while praising righteousness and denouncing depravity, rhythmic and comprehensive in conveying his keen observance of the more ancient world previous to him. I felt I was only then a real Chinese hooked up to my ancient past. I read it several times, of course, also as a way for me to get more used to classical Chinese.

The second book I embraced was *Shi Jing*, *The Classic of Poetry*, or *The Book of Poetry* which commonly accepted to be edited by Confucius himself. No one in China can escape spotting some segments of it, but like most Chinese, it seemed to be written in codified Chinese characters which needed deciphering instead of reading. I bought a modern translation with the original texts and embarked on a lengthy "decoding" process line by line. I was more ecstatic than Keats upon his reading of Chapman's Homer, after knowing the meaning and cadence of the ancient poetic devices and language. I listened to audio rendering of all the poems several times and marked pronunciations of characters new to

me. I further purchased more expertise's expounding of the book, reading the interpretations from the different sources cited by the author.

For the first time, It was dawned on me that the book had served as a source of reference in conversations between emperors and their subjects and among all literary gentlemen since its coming into being down to the time of the Republic of China. It was almost forgotten since 1949. The renewed interest in it in recent decades is encouraging. I spent more than eight months on the single book which brought me to the ancient world with its human dramas so akin to the modern one, but with more innocence. I felt for the first time I had an origin and deeply rooted. Compared with the British Romantic Movement which revolutionized poetry subject matters and the use of language, Chinese poetry in the very beginning had favored the common rural life and their words to write about their sorrows and joys "that has been, and may be again." I have a poem entitled "*The Classic of Poetry*" in this collection which may offer readers a glimpse of its content. It has become part of my inner makeup and its influence will continue to be reflected in my future writing both in English and Chinese. One's self is a like pool of water, and when fresh water is added, its content changes. My pool of water is not stagnant and it has been enriched constantly not only by Chinese sources but by ones flowing in through English as it became more natural to me.

A few more Chinese ancient literature classics needed to be mentioned are *Chu-ci* 楚辭 or *The Lyric of Chu* attributed to Qu Yuan 屈原 (BCE 340-BCE 278) of Kingdom of Chu in the Warring States period (BCE 475-BCE 221), *Zhao Ming Wen Xuan* 昭明文選, or *Anthology of Literature by Prince Zhao Ming*, edited under auspices of Prince Xiao Tong 蕭統 (with a posthumous title Zhao Ming, meaning, brilliant and bright) of the Liang Dynasty (502-557) within a more general period known as the Southern Dynasties, and *The Analytical Dictionary of Characters* 說文解字, by Xu Shen 許慎 (58-147) from the Eastern Han Dynasty. Casual reading of them for a few times enabled me to see some high peaks of ancient literature and knowledge of Chinese writing system, enhanced by the modern discovery of extreme ancient characters carved on the turtle bones and bison bones

for divinity purpose in Shang Dynasty (BCE 1600-BCE 1046) and Zhou Dynasty (BCE 1046-BCE 256). With those stuff in my mind, the poetry of Tang Dynasty (618-907) and Song Dynasty (960-1297) became much easier. My interior makeup as a Chinese was more or less in place.

### **18. Writing poems in Chinese while further polishing my English through English media**

From 2006 to 2008, I fell in and out of love twice and started to write poems in Chinese regularly in 2007, without much inspired by a muse though, except maybe some “recollections in tranquility” of the encounter with the Shanghai girl. I started to post my poems in Chinese online, which drew the Party Secretary of my college (upgraded from the original Department of Foreign Languages) to visit me and talk about poetry. I felt honored and safe with the understanding of the most powerful boss, but he was soon transferred to another more important position. Meanwhile, requirement for publications and pressure for either climbing up the academic ladder or leaving increased, young teachers in the university worried about their positions, but my age and my confidence in my being able to make some books sooner or later kept me on the track of my own choosing. Colleagues knew well that I had published in the Cambridge journal several times and my students loved my classes.

My relentless listening to English media continued. There was a software known as TVAnt enabled me to watch CNN, BBC, Bloomberg News and other English TV channels. Once again, I was aware of its being taken off soon, so I watched different channels whenever I had time, so much so, sometimes my eyes hurt, my ears humming and my head dizzy. I watched the whole process of Barrack Obama throwing his hat into the ring and his becoming the first black President of the United States. His first speech made me aware that Hilary Clinton would have a tough fight ahead. Those American political dramas witnessed in my own room here in China in a foreign language that was almost my own was surreal and a unique experience that the distance had disappeared

and the rest of the world had become my backyard. In 2009, the software was banned and I was not able to log on since.

I soon found BBC homepage which allowed me to listen to BBC live. I made quick link on my computer screen, and a British lady later told me that she often listened to BBC Radio 4 instead of BBC World Service. I logged on Radio 4 quite often since then and I got a little more polished. In 2010s, over a decade, from finding it much more difficult than American VOA or CNN, with me frustrated by a panel discussing daily hot topics in their native English, BBC had become an English media that I was increasingly comfortable with. I started to use BBC new material instead of VOA's for my Media English Listening class in the autumn semester of 2005, with one of the 5-minute news summaries at the beginning of each o'clock of the BBC World Service. Apart from that, at the beginning of each week's classes, one half of the class around 10 to 12 students were asked to read a news story like a BBC news anchor does, and I had to discuss about each one of them. The real latest events were being discussed in a classroom which was sometimes like a simulated international political conference.

My friend Dana Wilde of Maine witnessed my tremendous progress in my proficiency in English during those years. Our emails back and forth are the evidence of my evolution from a ferocious learner with some language flaws to one writing with increasing confidence. But a poem which I considered as good still came far and wide in between. Imagining in English and writing in it to produce a piece of art with words proved to be beyond my immediate reach, but I knew it would soon come. I wrote to Dana that I was expecting a moment of explosion, a sudden dawn on me that I would express myself in English with ease the overflowing of my passion. With more and more dreams in which I spoke English and remembered the contents after my waking up, I knew English had increasingly become a functioning language of my unconscious mind. It was more and more internalized within me and on the process to become my second mother tongue.

In one extreme situation, I seemed to see my old radio on my tea

table with its antenna broken by my baby son and replaced with a copper wire broadcast news in English about the Tibetan tourism. When I fully woke up I remembered some exact wording of the news content and tried to find my radio, but it was nowhere to be found, it was only a dream. I told my students to practice only two things, listen and read without even a minimum understanding, and other skills of speaking, thinking and writing would naturally develop all by their own. Thinking and speaking were most difficult, but they could be achieved. Eliminating flaws in my speaking is a monumental endeavor. There may still be some years away before the needed words and their subtle uses popped up my mind right away like a native speaker. I believe I will see the light.

### **19. The first taste as a poet writing in English**

In the spring of 2010, another lake within the campus was developed into a place where faculty, staff and students could take a walk or read their books. When I saw workers build a pavilion and a ring road along the lake was closed up, my heart suddenly lifted up and I knew my connection with it and the wealth it may bring to me. It was a reservoir years ago to provide the campus with water supply before 1980. When I was a graduate student living in a building nearby, it was already dubbed as “Lovers’ Valley”, but it was still a wild place with only a grassy path trodden out by a shepherd and his flock for years. I only traced through the wild track there for a few time then. In 2007, the university had already built a broad road for vehicles passing by through the lakeside, and a road was built by paving slates along the lake, but it did not found a loop, so if you went in, you would get out from another place. I was thrilled already at the time, but the road was soon closed because tourists had to pass through students’ dormitory buildings to get out. The new project was funded by 1983’s graduates majored in finance and banking, and they changed the official name of the lake, but “Lovers’ Valley” was preferred by most. I have begun my romance with it ever since even without a lover.

It didn't prompt me to write straight away until October. I occasionally dropped by in the evening at the campus English Corner where students and English teachers foreign and domestic gathered to speak English. One evening, I was chatting in a group with young foreign woman at the center, and the conversation soon became one between her and me with the rest listening. She was extremely white and beautiful and looked like a mature woman of 24. She was British born in London with an Irish mother and an Iranian father, catering to my impression of a Celtic look. A tall Chinese guy was trying to impress her and asked earnestly for her phone number. Our conversation soon turned to religious topic and she seemed very fond of listening to my talking about Daoism and Chan (Zen Buddhism) and [the](#) Indian spiritual tradition which I knew quite a lot by then. Her intense curiosity made me feel strange, before I left she asked for my phone number first and said she would visit me the day after. Of course, I wanted to have her contact too, but this was quite an unusual thing. I was happy with her promise, but speculated there must be a special purpose in her mind.

The following day in the afternoon, she came to visit my place with a foreign young man. Actually, she was only eighteen and lived in Xiamen among a group of Bahá'ís. Obviously, she came to talk with me about her all-inclusive new spiritual practice, with some pamphlets in Chinese about very basic teaching of its founder. I had just read a book in English entitled *Religions of the World* in which her religion was introduced. Besides, in this regard, I was a jack of all trades. I never rejected any great way and its teaching, but I never entered into any one, including Buddhism, to assume a complete set of a particular narrative and reject all others outright. All spiritual traditions have at its root messages which are revealed to human beings living in different times and places of the world by the Unnamable Source. In this regard, I quite agreed with their opinions, but a brand new all-embracing religion seemed to be redundant.

With the lake as my backyard and the encounter with the Bahá'í girl ready to read my poems, I started to write a few poems within a

week or so. She read them with positive comments and was surprised that a Chinese aspired to do such a thing. She asked if we could study together again and I told her if she would like to come alone and chat about poetry or whatever subjects, that would be ok, but not any kind of “group study”. In 2001, not long after my divorce, I was bothered by a Korean guy, very friendly, to help me with the Bible study, and eventually I had to tell him not to come with politeness. She ended up not coming and I continued to write for about two months and picked up several poems which seemed to be readable, and grouped them together as the Lake Songs.

## **20. My mysterious experience with books**

Meanwhile, my horizon continued to expand with a forty-day study with a group of my colleagues at the University of Westminster in London. I explored London and particularly the British Museum, and made a tour to the Edinburgh and a one-day stop at the Lake District where I paid homage to my beloved poet William Wordsworth. I also visited Cambridge and Oxford with my fellow teachers. The sojourn in London broadened my horizon, and for the first time it brought me to a close contact with a world that was only in my imagination.

In summer of 2010, I saw a young man selling books in English at a bookstand in front of shopping center just opposite the campus’ west gate. I saw quite a few books of poetry, novels, art, architecture, interior design, children’s books. I knew at once that he was a person of great help in my life. He used to be a book binder working at book producing factory in Shenzhen before he started his book business. He told me the majority of international books were produced by Chinese printing houses by agreement with publishers in the West. As a result, some books with quality problem simply leaked to domestic markets and sometimes books were produced in a larger quantity than the contracts specified with publishers and the rest were sold in domestic markets. I began to purchase books from him which continued for five years, the total number must have exceeded two thousand, with 70 to 60 percent

off. I bought everything I had an interest in, including even books of fashion, hats, tattoos, graffiti, interior decorations, modern architecture, sculpture, not to mention books concerning my deeper interests. I regarded him as someone coming to give me books I needed, sent by a mysterious power. My ferocious purchases lasted for five years when I found he was forced to close his stand and transformed his business to be an online one selling only children's books.

My relation with books has been a sort of an interesting one. In 1984, I had a habit of doing sketching based on art books with Leonardo da Vinci's pictures. I bought a book in Chinese of *A World History of Art* in a very poor printing quality and paper. I fancied owning a similar book produced in the west in English. My dream came true twelve years later when I saw the imported book with the same title at an famous private art bookstore. I bought it at a cost of 322 yuan amounting to one third of my monthly salary at the time without a second thought. Later I also bought Van Gogh and Picasso's imported art books at tremendous prices. Although I read Greek mythology in Chinese quite early in mid 1980s, and I heard of Homer's epics, but my Shanghai classmate never bought the books for me with my mentioning of them several times. I was given an original English version of Homer's *Odyssey* by a American teacher in 1995 or 1996. I read it directly in English version translated by Robert Fitzgerald with quite a good understanding. I borrowed and read the *Iliad of Homer* at the same time, and I acquired my own copy of it when I was a visiting scholar in the Philippines.

In 2004, a colleague followed my foot steps for the same program to the Philippines, I asked her to make a copy of philosophy of India for me, an important book I forgot to copy when I myself was there, which she did, and the book was by German professor Heinrich Zimmer who, before he died, entrusted his manuscript to Joseph Campbell, an American famous scholar of comparative study of mythologies across the world. The book *Philosophies of India* which I read several time greatly enhanced my understanding of Indian Brahmanism and its reform movement Buddhism, putting my understanding of Buddhism in India's religious context. Upon hearing that a full Chinese translation of Hindu

great epic *Mahabharata* was published in 2005, I bought a copy of six-volume books and read them with my son in 2007. We also read *Ramayana's* storyline. Since then India has not been a strange territory with her multiple gods and goddesses. I felt elated with a good translation of *Bhagavad-Gita*, a tiny segment embedded within *Mahabharata*, which helped me find some fundamental answers to the questions about human dilemmas.

## **21. Jelaluddin Rumi, the great ancient Sufi poet, enters my view and a greater expansion of my resources through a friend**

In 2007, while listening to the BBC, I heard the name of Rumi for the first time. The UN dedicated the year to celebrating the eight hundredth anniversary of his birth, with scholars across the world coming together at a symposium to discuss his poetry. I was shocked by the news, wondering about who was this poet even greater than Shakespeare or Li Bai. I checked his name according to the pronunciation online and found out that Jelaluddin Rumi was Persian Sufi poet born on September 30<sup>th</sup> 1207, the originator of the famous Sufi dervish dance and a poet of spiritual union which embodies the greatest love of human beings for the mystical source, and of human beings with each other. I knew nothing about his American translator Coleman Barks at the time. I only yearned for his writing, but nowhere to be found.

In 2010, I met a friend at the bookstand by the name of Wim who was also a ferocious reader of western culture both in English and French. Wim had studied math in China and computer science in Paris, France and was considering to apply for a PhD program for Shakespeare study in the Great Britain, a guy with a quick wit and a great resource. I asked him if he was able to get some PDFs of Rumi's books from his European friends, he forwarded me five in just a few days' time. I had the PDFs printed in book forms, among them *Mystical Poems of Rumi* first introduced by Cambridge University's Persian and Arabic scholar Reynold Alleyne Nicholson and A. J. Arberry, and my reading of which produced a paradigm shift of my original concept about poetry. I asked

for more and my friend simply gave me website through which his friend download the PDFs in France. I downloaded all books that I could find of Rumi, printed and read them with eagerness. The website has been my dream garden ever since.

This interesting phenomenon of me dreaming to own a book, and its coming, continued. It took shorter and shorter time for me to wait. I was once enamored by the Pre-Raphaelite art, and wished to buy a book of it from the bookstand, and I soon found it. Once I told the book vendor that I would like him to get some art books of Andy Warhol for me, and I actually wrote the artist name on a note to him. He forgot about it without a slight trace in his mind at once. Around two weeks later, I found three books by Andy Warhol from his stand. He knew nothing about them and sold them to me at very low prices. With the bookstand gone, now the website has become a source of my instant reach to get most books I set my mind on.

Wim's plan to study Shakespeare in Britain had led him to acquire Shakespeare's works. He asked me if I needed videos of all Shakespeare's plays dramatized by BBC with subtitles. I felt hilarious with the offer, copied them and watched all of them within around one and a half months. I had read most of Shakespeare's plays in Chinese during my graduate period, but studied only a few originals in foreign teachers' classes. I spent a lot of time on Hamlet both in English and Chinese, and I knew a few others quite well, but I never dared to go through all the plays in English even once. When I watched all the videos with subtitles, I was thrilled to find that they were not as difficult as I expected. Two years later I watched all of them in the summer again and I planned to watch them even more times.

Wim also gave me the seeds to download a few hundred lecture courses with each different in length from 12 to even 84 episodes. I listened to as many of them as possible, though casually, but a deeper mystery of civilization portrayed in English had opened to me. Years of listening in English had made my ears refined enough to get audio information without much difficulty, and I became increasingly dependent on my ears to understand books which my eyes were supposed

to do.

I also happened to have downloaded audio books of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy narrated by Robert Inglis. Listening and careful listening and reading of those novels led me to download Tolkien's biography and *The Silmarillion* and its audio reading. Around one year of my Tolkien's study opened me up to a world of fantasy woven by one great mind with all its wonders. The secondary creation a man or a women was able to do shocked and humbled me. Listening to Jane Austin's seven audio novels within less than two months also expanded my horizon and made me feel that I was not a stranger outside the English-speaking world. I was ready to make a deeper dialogue with the West from the wonderful East where I was born, and had walked solitarily all my life to understand both sides. I have become a bridge between two sides with different narratives of their respective human conditions. Language barrier is so hard to break that a superficial romance or fancy for each other from one side will lead to nowhere. Maybe, I can make a best use the rest of my life to show each side the very best of the other. I feel that I am a thousand years' old. What a life!

## **22. Material-oriented China and my settling down again**

China was a different place with far different people from those of my youth. In retrospect, my formative age was a period when China had just wakened up from a long nightmare, and people started to reflect what went wrong. The result was a flourishing of their spirits and their expectation of an ever brighter future and their confidence of fixing the political and cultural problems. But a dynamic nation's balance development of both material and spiritual well-being was transformed into only the material one. China was a person jumping with one leg with another leg ~~cut off~~ bound. I envisioned at my age of 25 a China where power and money control how people think and behave in coming years. The reality is far worse than the one I imagined three decades ago. They have been educated to appreciate only money and political power. The

title “poet” has been transformed from a crown on the head of a fairy prince to mud thrown on your face to indicate that you are in the air, unpractical and useless. My English proficiency, a teacher’s position and a nationwide frenzy in learning English shielded me and allowed me to continue my way.

My English poetry reading and creative writing program attracts students not because they have poetry in their minds, but because it offers helps to polish them in the foreign language in which even a grandpa or a granny in a Beijing alley would surprise you with his or her weird version. If I offered a poetry course in Chinese, I believe I would be a teacher in an empty classroom. According to a professor at National Sun Yat-sen University who organized the first symposium in China on creative writing in English in China by Chinese and none Chinese, I was the first Chinese teacher she knew to offer such a program as early as 2003. My passion on poetry has been kept alive in English.

I have seen very close relative and friends who made their great fortunes of millions of dollars, or hundreds of millions of yuan, and my relatives who are in need of help, a nation of hungry ghosts for money with many resorted to Ponzi schemes and reducing those they seduced to ruin. I have experienced a girlfriend who knew my every situation and threw herself into my arms after secretly fancied me for a year. She simply left me after a year with me, demanding I should have a housing unit and a million. The second one claimed that she loved poetry and urged me to write with earnest and she left me citing an age gap which she knew from her day one with me. By the way, one square meter in Xiamen’s real estate market is over \$5,000 now, and young people just keep their mouths shut and stare into their mobile phone screens to post things I don’t know what on their social networking accounts, with a butchered Chinese language, sometimes even referring to human sexual parts outright by college female students.

In 2011 at an age over 46, I felt an urgent need to settle down and have a family again. I would have had nothing to keep my head up among practical people, had I not been nourished by a dream like Coleridge’s dome I built in the air. I had given up pursuing power, money, a housing

unit, a car, even academic position which I was pressurized to climb, but I was complete within and what I regarded as valuable in life I had achieved. My son was 16 years old and had become a well-read person of my equal in many respects. I told him that I would find a wife in three months and he laughed at me jokingly.

A friend reminded me of a marriage site and I registered an account and logged on. It was at an early period of such a modern way of connecting potential marriage seekers together, and women I contacted there were mostly honest. After a few trials with local women without success, I met a beautiful divorced woman at an age of 32 living in Shenzhen. I thought she was not for me, but she was person from countryside in Jiangxi province and had gone through many ordeals herself, besides, she was a frenzy reader of novels, having watched hundreds of movies and a plan to visit many places. She was not scared by my condition and my age. And we settled down less than a month after our first encounter online. My son was shocked to the very foundation when I broke out the news to him. I now have a seven-year-old daughter who was fond of drawing and she has already had her own art show at a famous Xiamen bookstore.

### **23. Putting on a poet's mantle and my first publication**

Since 2007, I have been writing both in English and Chinese. By 2015, my struggle to become a bilingual poet was known as a matter of fact, and such a tenacious pursuit had become my personal trademark. With me growing more confident, I also witnessed more acceptance, maybe, just a speculation on my own part. I was invited by a friend who managed a lecture forum in the university library, to give a reading of my poem in English. I lumped together all my poems which I considered as good enough for a debut, more than enough for two readings. There were around 60 people in the audience which was huge compared to audiences in other lectures at the same site, but I thought it was a small one then. At the opening of the lecture, I made a declaration that from then on I would accept a role as a poet. Regardless what people may think of me with the

label, I declared myself to be a disciple of Poetry before the dawn in darkness and the cock had not yet crowed three times. I felt liberated and began to complete my life process of individualization, to bring out the best within me and make it visible, and the dome visible only by myself in the air would gradually reveal itself.

In 2014, I encountered Tony Kline, a British poet and translator. While searching online for English translation of the ancient Roman poet Ovid's works, I accidentally stepped into his wonderful website and discovered not only Ovid, but a wide range of translations from famous poets and philosophers of European languages and even Chinese Daoist text of *Laozi*, or *Dao De Jing*. I also found his in-depth introduction to the wonderful period of Chinese poets of high Tang Dynasty in English, which gave me bird-eye view of my own poetry tradition from a perspective of an English poet. I contacted him right away and got a swift response. We share a common outlook towards poetry and are very committed to pass the torch of poetry on. He treated me as his peer and gave me encouragements. He is more Daoist a poet than any poet I know here in China.

By 2016, I did not know how to use WeChat, a social networking tool that you were not able to escape in China now if you were not an recluse. Soon I was a skillful user and created my own, what was called, private public account to publish my writing and pictures for my account followers and my WeChat friends to see, more convenient than a blog that I had tried earlier. As more poems in Chinese coming, it seemed that I had only just realized, if I failed to establish myself as a poet in Chinese to a larger audience in China, my poems in English whether good or not, however many I produced, would never receive any attention even if I spent my own money to get them published here in China. Subsequently, my priority shifted to writing in Chinese. I pressed ahead my writing in Chinese in the first half year of 2017 and 2018. I usually write very little in autumn and winter, a bad habit I hope to overcome.

By the summer of 2018, after my writing period had passed that year, I started to edit my poems in Chinese from 2007 up to then together to make them ready for publication, although I had no idea which publishing

house would do it for me. The only poem I included in it before 2007 is a poem entitled *The Love Song of the March* written in 1997, about a hopeless passion. I edited my first book very creatively into eight sections reminding readers of the Eight Diagrams of the ancient *Book of Change*, each with a grouping title hinting the content of the section. I knew for sure nowhere would even consider my draft for publication. I contacted one through an email and a phone call. The person of contact got it without even bothering to give me a feedback. A collection of poetry from one without a penny to his name was garbage to them, even with my offering to cover some of the publication cost. I then tried a very famous publishing house of a university through a friend teaching there, and he found a way to forward my sample draft via his friend to a woman poet editor working for the very same publishing house. She seemed quite like it, but in a few days I received an email of a polite rejection citing the similar reason. I was frustrated by an expectation of having no chance for publication forever, with only one hope that whatever I wished would sooner or later become a reality judging by my previous experience with books. I put the thing aside and prepared for my wife and daughter's visit from another city.

While they were at the campus for a few days, I brought them to visit a woman painter by the name of Yu Jian who I met two decades ago and had only resumed our contact for two years by then. I had a very high opinion of her works of unique psychic depth and unconscious turmoil surfacing from her dreams. Without my daughter, a potential artist, I would not have made a visit so soon. Our chat led to my mentioning of my draft, and to my surprise she told me that she had a former girl student working at an art publishing house in Taipei, Taiwan. She would allow me to use her pictures in the book for free if the book could be published in Taiwan. I was very happy and grateful for my friend.

No sooner after the visit, her student Chen Yaoji, an editor at the Taiwan Changge Art Dissemination Company Ltd, added me through WeChat. She initially promised to help me to contact some big publishing houses there, since her company had published only art books of painting and Chinese calligraphy. Then she told me if I needed her to ask her boss,

the publisher first. Mr. Wu Fang, the publisher, instructed her to inform me to send him five poems I considered the best. I ended up sending him 10 with Yu Jian's paintings. He was impressed by my poems with romantic mysticism undertone and surprised that such kind of poems were possible to come out in mainland China. Within one month a contract was signed with me sharing the cost equally with the company in August, and by November the same year, five hundred copies a perfect book of mine beyond my wildest imagination had reached me. The title of the book is 《幽谷迷思》, *Yu Gu Mi Si* in Chinese pin-yin, *Musings in the Valley* in English. I told them "I can't breathe upon seeing those copies", which was soon quoted by the publisher as the poetic praise of the book.

The publisher and me both had no illusion that the book would be a commercial success. He wrote in his postscript for the book that despite a book of poetry would be a publisher's poison, he decided to publish my book the moment he read my sample poems. Taiwan had a small population, book exportation to mainland China could be very difficult, and adding insult to injury, reading a book of poetry was simply not an option for most readers who had other priorities and were flooded with digital cheap alternatives. But we both believe that a kind of poetry which hints in every ways for its readers to return and mingle with their mystical origin should be brought to the light, and I have every reason to believe that its visibility will increase in a foreseeable future. I felt relaxed that some of my most finest ruminations of my innermost self were downloaded and multiplied in exquisite copies made with great passion and love by its editors, designers and publisher. The connection and the bound between us expanded to more friends that I had within Taiwan which preserves a great deal of Chinese culture that is unfortunately impaired beyond recognition in the mainland.

#### **24. My translation of Tagore's *Gitanjali* published and my latest adventure**

With the publication of *Musings in the Valley*, I gained a little

visibility. An online friend introduced me to an editor of Guomai, an emerging publishing company with its full name being Guomai Culture & Media Corporation Ltd. She contacted me for a possible publication of my translation of Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, but we ended up settling down on the publication of my years-old translation of Tagore's *Gitanjali*. The arrangement of its going public was not attractive to me though, but the result is such a nice book that it surpasses beyond my wildest fancy. The woman editor, Miss Niu Changhong, was so serious and loved my translation so much, that she was ready to spare no effort to make it a perfect one. By sheer accident, she found an American painter Mark W. McGinnis who had painted small-size pictures based on each of 103 poems from Tagore's *Gitanjali*. All those pictures looked so Indian that there was no doubt in my mind that he must be an Indian, but I was wrong. He is an artist and writer located in Boise, Idaho. He was a professor of art for 30 years at Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota. The final product is a hardcover version with a superb Chinese translation and 103 of McGinnis' wonderful pictures. I later found out Mark painted pictures inspired by all the spiritual traditions of the world.

In the immediate aftermath of its coming out, it attracted Tareq Zahir, an Indian and a reporter working for China Daily, the only nationwide English newspaper in China. An interview with me and later another with Guomai resulted in an article on the book published in the issue of February 4, 2020 of the newspaper. My version is going to be a very strong one among the existing 17 Chinese versions of the book. Although the enthusiasm for Tagore in the West has subsided, he is the best-selling poet here in China, tantamount to Jalal al-Din Rumi and Kahlil Gibran in the United States. It heralds my future more ambitious undertaking as a translator.

My story with Kahlil Gibran is also worthy of a brief mention. I heard the name Gibran in Chinese quite early in my life, but I had only a vague impression that he was a Lebanese poet, not knowing that he lived in the United States for most of his life and also wrote in English. I may have heard of Bin Xin's China translation of *The Prophet*, the same

female translator of Tagore's books, but somehow I did not pay any attention to the Chinese version, until 2015 or so when I bought an English version of Gibran's works from the bookstand I mentioned, which opened up a new horizon for me. The cover has such words on it "Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet and the Art of Peace, the New Illustrated Edition of Kahlil Gibran's Timeless Wisdom", by Duncan Braid Publisher, London. Such a finely-bound and superbly-designed book is a rare treasure for me. Without reading it, I smelled its fragrance and felt a light radiate from the text, photos of divine nature and Persian and Islamic paintings. When I read it, a light was radiating out of the top of my head, and almost a divine voice was prophesying on earth. I knew for sure that I would translate it sometime down the road.

I began translation of it when my Chinese collection *Musings in the Valley* was taking shape as a book in August, 2018, when an accidental encounter with some commentary on the book prompted me to do it sooner than later. When I had finished translating it, I tried to read Bin Xin's version and found that I could not proceed it since it has so much wrong rendering of the book. It also dawned on me why Kahlil Gibran's jewel had been hidden away from my eyes for so long. Curiosity about the poet led me to download books of his biography. Multiple source books enabled me to write an introduction to his life and commentary of my own on *The Prophet* in Chinese. Altogether, I spent almost a year for the little book ready to be introduced in China in a brand new way. What next is seeking for its publication.

Kahlil Gibran was a mystic and an intensively spiritual poet, singing with an arrow in his heart. I will not delve into his life and works here, a wound that would gush out life-giving water, refreshing and unsettling. Together with Rabindranath Tagore and Jalal al-Din Rumi, poetry for me is no longer an art of language to make the ego of its originator last longer, but a diary for a seeker on his or her way to a potential full awakening from all human dilemmas. Poetry is light shining out from its writer who is seeking or has found the light within. Poetry is not a capricious goddess of art who lures her worshipers to destruction as the Sirens did to their hallucinated sailors. Better not to focus on one flower

and forget your journey, better to enjoy all views along your journey to the Garden which is a source of all beauties, where even the word silence makes too much noise.

I had an ambitious plan of completing my second collection in Chinese this year, and add more better poems in English to my possible collection in English next year, but then the coronavirus crisis broke out early this year and consumes the world like a wildfire, I have lost any appetite of creative writing both in English and in Chinese. While editing immature collection of my poems in English, my mind was cloudy about what I should do next, and gradually I realized that I should alter my plan for the coming years. I started to translate *Mystical Poems of Rumi* from Cambridge University's Persian and Arabic scholar Reynold Alleyne Nicholson and A. J. Arberry's English version into Chinese. Within around a month, I have translated almost 100 poems into their draft Chinese versions. I feel that Rumi has invited me into his garden with all sorts of exotic spiritual plants and blossoms.

I chose to translate from A. J. Arberry's translation rather than popular Coleman Barks' rewriting of Rumi's poetry, because Arberry's line to line rendering of Rumi's poems from ancient Persian brings me closer to authentic Rumi with his life experiences, social context, imageries that were unique to his time, and above all, his religious messages of Sufi Islam which emphasizes the personal union with God or the Ultimate Source. Chinese is a good language for poetry because each character of its modern form has its root connection with nature, it has no complex tenses of the past, the present and the future, it uses almost no propositions and no definite or indefinite articles, its adjectives and adverbs are often made of characters of natural images, and in more traditional way of writing, pronouns as subjects are usually hidden. I am confident that I can bring out Rumi in Chinese in a manner truer to his inner vision and the outer social context in his day. From Tagore to Gibran and to Rumi, it is a spiritual path from yearning to a complete union, from words of all allusions for the real Moon, to a complete Silence when a water drop is in the Sea. Everything swells up from the Silence, display itself, and returns to It, so does my poetry. From the

Silence comes the greatest songs hinting their Source, in the same way as storms swirl up for the calm sea and return to it.



