



THE POETICAL OTHER IN  
A NEW WORLD  
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To work at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin is delightful. The year has passed so quickly, and looking back to 2012/13, I want to say this has been one of the best years in my life and my writings. “The best” based on what I have gained from my writings and my activities, which can be divided into the following six sections, and again, linked together to point to the subject of “The Poetic Other in a New World”, the theme I set up for my works at Wiko at the beginning of this year. I do hope the following report will show their quality separately but their depth collectively. After all, the awareness of individuality actively creates “the poetic other”, which is so necessary for a “New World”.

The six sections based on the six fields of my works are:

- I. Poetry Writing
- II. Essay Writing
- III. Translations
- IV. Editing
- V. Events
- VI. The Colloquium

## I. Poetry Writing

I have written 12 poems during the year. They are among the works I like the most so far. There are two interesting points here:

a) The inspiration of Berlin. The city has always been a stage of history, including my own experiences. I was here for the first time in 1991 when I was a DAAD Fellow; the memory of the Tiananmen Massacre was clear and the fall of the Berlin Wall was so moving. And then, I am here again but the world has meanwhile experienced 9/11; Iraqi wars; so-called globalization; and cynicism everywhere ... historical understanding mixed up with personal passion became layers inside of these new poems such as “The Address of Berlin”, “The Anniversary of Snow”, “U1: New Platform Songs from the Jade Terrace”, “One Person’s City, Age of Sky ...”. They deepened my spiritual journey that I called “Watching Ourselves Set Sail”, the title of my colloquium in Wiko that I gave on the 4th of June 2013 (the 24th anniversary of the Tiananmen Massacre).

b) The equally important point is the maturing of my own literary qualities; 20 intervening years made my writing very different from in 1991, the forms of my new poems are all exquisitely designed; many of them could be called “Neoclassical” style; the visual images deeply meet the specially arranged rhymes and rhythms, in order to meet the poetic meanings. For example, in “Grandmother’s Boat”, the endings of the six lines in the first stanza in turn are rhymed in the following stanzas; the poem builds up an internal memory to form the theme of memory of history. “U1: New Platform Songs from the Jade Terrace” brought the Berlin’s underground line 1, which runs very close to my home, to meet “New Songs from the Jade Terrace”, one of the best-known anthologies of classical Chinese poems that is so important for constructing classical poetry forms. Here, three rhymed lines per stanza (nine stanzas in total) made a Berliner journey, not to elsewhere but into the depth of poetry, broken through the limits of cultures and times.

Both of the above examples met the challenges of both the contemporary living situation and the classical poems that, so well known for their extremely exquisite forms, thus almost became a nightmare for contemporary Chinese poets. Based on this, I want to call my new poems “experimental” because of their “Neoclassical” ideas. They showed the latest step of the modern transformation of Chinese cultural tradition, the main theme of Chinese thinking in the whole of the 20th century. Finally, what has matured is not only the poems, but also my awareness of myself as a fully developed, individual poet.

## II. Essay Writing

I wrote five long essays during my year in Wiko. They are:

“The Political in the Poetic”, an essay based on my work translating a poem written by an Uighur poet in exile, which showed me how his poem profoundly questioned Islamic culture. I then linked his thought with Chinese introspection on our history and tradition after the Cultural Revolution. I found that there are no conflicts between these individual thinkers at all or between the Uighur and Chinese cultures, which are commonly said to have strong conflicts. The energy of questioners, not just of others, but also of ourselves, brought our understanding together and strengthened global individual exchanges in the 21st century. The essay was written to address the extremely complex political situation worldwide from a deeper point of view, poetry, and to find a key to open the always rusty doors. The essay has been translated into German, English, and French and published by the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen based in Berlin in *Kulturen verbinden – Der ifa-Newsletter* 3/2013.

“I, Lan Ling Xiao Xiao Sheng”, a long essay on the well-known classical Chinese novel *Jin Ping Mei* (The Plum in the Golden Vase), the most mysterious classical literature that shocked all readers with its rampant pornography, therefore, it was called one of the most extraordinary books since it was first printed in 1617. The other and even stranger matter is that there is simply no evidence of who the author was. In my essay, I studied the details of the novel, especially the aforementioned pornographic activities of some main figures in a selected chapter (the seventh chapter), to show that the author did not write them in thoughtless fun, but deliberately composed them to plumb the figures’ psychological depth as they fight for their survival in the family (society), which is full of cruel competition. Following this line, I showed why there are no good figures in the book; their ugly actions were the “epitaxial” growth of their internal natures. If we pay attention to them, we can discover the inner nature of humanity. The power of the novel develops from the classical Chinese craft of detailed description, resembling Dostoevsky’s powerful dissection of psychology. “Jin Ping Mei” must be called the first modern novel written in Chinese! It is also a very original novel, because it almost cut out all realistic background by simply selecting the two main characters from another classical Chinese novel and developing their story to become a totally different book, finally including all realities and all times through nothing but literature. So it was also the first novel written about the philosophy

of fiction! Based on this, I couldn't help but believe that the author deliberately deleted all traces of his life. The pen name "Xiao Xiao Sheng" means "a person laughs and laughs again (at you)", confirming this conjecture. My essay tried to continue this "tradition" by speaking in the first person. I composed this essay almost as a fiction; the necessity here is that I did not talk solely about the past, but also about reality by rewriting the history and tradition. This is one of the most important themes of my project "the poetic other" at Wiko. The essay was already published by *Shu Cheng*, one of the well-known literary magazines in China, in March 2013.

"Nichts ernst nehmen", a long essay on cynicism. This essay met the very situation that "the poetic other" faces now. Again, China was a starting point, after its disabled economic reform, the pure material desire and the commercial waves sweeping across the whole country and almost everyone, from the secret police to small street businesspeople, from Nobel Prize-winning official writers to university professors, and even so-called underground writers shared this same way of thinking; everything, including recycled Cold War slogans, are used for commercial aims. And again, in the new world that China is part of, the West faces an even more contradictory situation today. After the Cold War, political ideas became extremely poor, social ideals became almost empty, and commercial interests force people to say anything without meaning it. The split between words and meanings proves the depth of our spiritual crisis, a crisis much deeper than that of the economy. The huge confusion in value standards made a vacuum of the values and led directly to a cynical attitude toward life. This is a new and ancient nightmare. The timeless cannot coexist with and destroyed any imagination of linear evolution, but poetry is very familiar with it and has dealt with it since the beginning of history. We know the only difference here is that this situation is no longer limited to a single culture. The world is "a common reality" jointly made by multicultural systems. Thus, again, poetry has proved itself an active opposition refusing any kind of controls, whether political or commercial; but keeping the passion of questioners, poets challenge themselves alive; the passion is the energy to keep our culture alive. Poetry is building up a global tradition of aesthetic personal resistance in this era of globalization. The essay was translated into German and was published in *Lettre Internationale* (100th issue) in March 2013.

"The Third Shore", an introduction for the anthology of the same title of Chinese-English poets' translations. This essay developed the ideas of the profound exchanges arising

through mutual translation between international poets, in this case especially between Chinese and English, as a specially designed project that has been ongoing for about ten years. This project focuses on poetry, but the true aim is to create a real spiritual meeting between different cultures in the economically linked global world, to prevent globalization from remaining solely on a shallow and commercial level. I made a summary of five past projects of Chinese-English poets' translations and introduced a discussion of the way poets translated each other, a difficult but exciting, complex but lightning-sharp endeavor. This was a layer-by-layer journey to gain the understanding of the originals, then to "grow another tree" from the very root of original experiences in the target language. Finally, this work is totally different from a translator's job, which spans a bridge at the edges of two languages; this is more a tunnel linking the central depths of different cultures: a model of the individuals' exchanges in our time. The title of "The Third Shore" is based on Walter Benjamin's characterizing translation as "The Third Language". He pointed out that translation has to challenge both languages and create an exciting third. Translation has been called "the biggest language in the world today": it should also be the deepest one. The essay has been translated into English, and the anthology has been published bilingually in China and the UK in 2013.

"The Artistic Mature Held up by Tai Hang Mountains", a long art criticism essay on the thought and paintings of Yang Ermin, a well-known contemporary Chinese artist. This essay deals especially with the theme of tradition and modernity in Chinese arts by comparing Japanese and Chinese arts in the 20th century. Yang Ermin's works are extremely conceptual; he introduces a brand new system of colors into the ancient Chinese water-ink landscape painting tradition that for many years trended to calligraphy-like black and white. My essay deals with the artistic reviews of his works and as well as comparing his works with the long and often failed modern transformation of Chinese arts in the past, to discover how his way of thinking is fundamentally different from that of others. In particular, how did he arrive at a clear idea of bringing modernity and technology together and then keeping the journey together always, while others just follow fashion, then give it up when social conditions change? My essay is about far more than paintings, but through paintings it discusses the modern transformation of classical Chinese culture, the theme haunting all Chinese intellectuals for nearly a century. What's meant by "modern"? How shall we make it? Why must we keep an awareness of "tradition"? And how can we prove that our modern thinking is functional in the multicultural world?

This study aimed to build up the contexts for contemporary Chinese poets and artists, as well as for the global cultural world. The essay has been accepted and will be published by *Du Shu*, the best-known literary magazine in China, in its July 2013 issue.

### III. Poetry Translations

Apart from my own writings of poetry and essays, I have also been translating during my year at Wiko. As I described above, translation is a foundational step of my understanding of and exchanges with foreign cultures. I have translated a total of eleven poems from Uighur, English, and German into Chinese, and together with English and German poets, I translated six of my own poems into English and German. We documented all of our discussions throughout this process, and the results will be very valuable for further developments. All my new translations in Chinese have been published, and my own poems in English translation have been published, too. Before leaving Wiko, I plan to start another translation project with Kelly Askew on the poems of Abdilatif, the well-known Zambian poet. We will start with his special dialect and move via Swahili (step one) and English (step two) into Chinese (step three) and finally into an invented Chinese dialect (step four); this will be a great, exciting exchange between two cultures that are very far apart, but whose fates have some deep similarities.

### IV. Editing

I edited four books during my year at Wiko.

- a) *The Third Shore: Chinese and English – Language Poetry in Mutual Translation*. This 240-page anthology includes about 30 poets from China, the UK, the USA, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. It has been published bilingually by Shearsman Books, United Kingdom and East China Normal University Press, China in 2013.
- b) *Watching Ourselves Set Sail* – A selection of my poems in Chinese: this 300-page selection has been published in 2013.
- c) *Questions about the Demon Taotie* – A collection of my recent poems together with selected representative works from the past. This ca. 400-page book will be published by Jiangsu People's Publishing House (forthcoming).

d) *A Midsummer Light's Nighthouse* – A collection of my translations of foreign poems: this 100-page book comprises my Chinese translations of twelve international poets. Each section includes a literary introduction about a poet, his poems, and their translation.

## V. Some Events

There are some events deeply linked with my creative writings that are deeply meaningful, and so I think including them here is important, for example:

a) Artsbj.com's International Chinese Poetry Prize:

I am the artistic director of the website of artsbj.com. We started this poetry prize in July 2012, and within a half year more than 50,000 poems flooded in. Many of them are very good poems, but they were written by poets we never heard of, which means that a huge hidden layer of Chinese society under the commercial surface has been unearthed. During the year 2012–13, I continue to engage in exchange with these poets online almost every day; I also went to China to hold the first meeting of the international committee in Yangzhou City / Nanjing City in April 2013 on the occasion of the Yangzhou / Nanjing International Poetry Festival. The meeting built up direct links between Chinese poets (many of whom still work as low-paid labor) and the international level of poetry; the poetry prize was a very important development and has already become a very special social, cultural, and literary phenomenon.

b) Yangzhou / Nanjing International Poetry Festival:

I was invited to be the co-director of the festival. Based on my experiences of how to make the best international exchanges among poets, as well as my understanding of the rapidly changing Chinese social and cultural situation, we designed the festival structure to move from internal exchanges to external exchanges, meaning from poets' translations (from classical and contemporary Chinese into English and German, on the one hand, and from English and German into Chinese, on the other hand) to poets' internal discussions (this time, the theme was "International and Local") and then staging public events to show the results of the poets' exchanges. The festival was greatly successful with this structure. Both poets and the audience responded that "every detail is based on the wonderful understanding of poetry"!

c) Poetry International Rotterdam:

Inspired by *Jade Ladder*, the anthology of contemporary Chinese poetry in English translation (published by Bloodaxe Books, UK, 2011) and the ArtsBeijing.com International Chinese Poetry Prize, the 44th Poetry International Festival Rotterdam, the world's biggest poetry festival, decided to make Chinese poetry the theme of its festival this year. Such a project on Chinese poetry has never been held before. For this reason, I provided the idea and organized an online "Synchronic International Poetry Festival" between Rotterdam and China at 3 p.m. (Central European Time) and 9 p.m. (Beijing time) on the 14th of June, with more than ten international poets on the Rotterdam side and a huge number of Chinese poets and people on the other side. We visited QQ.com (one of the biggest social media in China, resembling Facebook) to read, to discuss, and to respond to poems, with my hosting in Chinese and English. After the three hours of the event, QQ.com recorded 6.7 million visits! The number became 14 million by the next morning, and then 25 million in another week; in the meantime (as of the 28th of June), the site has had 32 million visitors! It is a hugely ground-breaking event, because its poetry is of very high quality as well! I do believe this opened up some profoundly important and new possibilities of cultural transformation and exchanges in the era of globalization, and I am very happy that it happened during my time at Wiko.

## VI. The Colloquium

Finally, the colloquium I gave at Wiko was also a ground-breaking event in my own literary life. It was a huge challenge for me, first, to summarize my own literary journey and what has happened in China's intellectual fields in the past thirty years, and second, to present it in my homemade English. But with the help of Wiko and the Fellows, as well as with the careful chosen title "Watching Ourselves Set Sail", which is based on the rich awareness of exile as a deep, shared point holding things together, I managed to make a clear presentation of my writings and provide a map of thinking in China at the same time. To be questioners is the main energy of both of these topics and this also provides a point in common between China and other cultures. The creative individuals are the poets today, and we respond to the world's situation together. The journey of "watching ourselves set sail" is timeless, and so let us continue "starting from the impossible".

I am deeply grateful that the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin provided the best possible working conditions for me, resulting in these extremely rich results of works. I must say



that, to my mind, the six sections above form “concentric circles”, which is also the title of my book-length poem *Konzentrische Kreise* published by Hanser Verlag in 2013. These six aspects are deeply linked to deepening the notion of “the poetic other” and open up many possibilities for the future. Based on this year of works, the concentric circles will expand more and more.