



THE CONFESSION OF AN OUTLAW  
ZHIYI YANG

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Zhiyi Yang is Professor of Sinology at Goethe University Frankfurt. She specializes in research on classical-style Chinese poetry and investigates related questions in aesthetics, philosophy, and memory. She received a Ph.D. in East Asian Studies from Princeton University in 2012 and is the author of a monograph *Dialectics of Spontaneity: The Aesthetics and Ethics of Su Shi (1037–1101) in Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). She has been working on modern Chinese classicist poetry in the last few years. During her residency at Wiko Berlin (2019–20), she completed a monograph *The Poetics of Memory: Wang Jingwei and China's Wartime Collaboration*. She loves dancing, yoga, and hiking. Culturally speaking, she considers herself Chinese, American, and European, though not necessarily in that order. – Address: Department of Sinology, Goethe University Frankfurt, Juridicum Raum 715, Senckenberganlage 31, 60325 Frankfurt/Main. E-mail: z.yang@em.uni-frankfurt.de.

It has been two months since I left Wiko. The familiar, *bürgerlich* humming of Frankfurt – Germany's miniature Manhattan am Main – quickly rubs off the thin coat of Berlin Cool that I arduously cultivated in the sprawling *Hauptstadt*, where wild boars run. Indeed, reintegration into my social fabric was so swift and smooth, it was as if I had never been away. Some of my acquaintances barely noted my absence, partially because the pandemic has created its own kind of amnesia by eviscerating and virtualizing community life. What keeps the memory of Wiko real is my own nostalgia: for the specks of sunshine cast through leafy red oaks fringing the hydrangea gardens, for the majestic swans floating through the dense duckweeds on Koenigssee, for the steps of children dribbling down the stairs of Villa Walther, and, of course, for the candlelight dinners rich with aroma, tipsiness, and wit. At least before the pandemic struck.

In a Chinese essay that I wrote earlier this year, I jokingly translated our Grunewald establishment into *lùlín*. Literally meaning “green woods,” in old Chinese romances it was a codename for where the band of outlaws congregated. The fellowship in the Berlin “Green Woods” consists similarly of academic outlaws (hereafter “Green Wooders”) coming from all the “rivers and lakes” of the Republic of Letters, yearning to break free from norms defining the institutionalized academic life: the tyrannical cycle of teaching, administration, publication, and funding applications; the dress code and performative speech acts befitting a professor, a post-doc, or a Principle Investigator; the joyless and tasteless lunch in front of desktops. And don’t be beguiled by the meek looks of the Green Wooders. These four-eyed creatures are in fact among the most ravenous predators in the food chain of (mostly) useless knowledge. If a Green Wooder studies bees, it’s not to increase honey production, but to hold in wonder their dreams. A Russian anthropologist talks to ghosts. A Bulgarian writer contemplates the space opera of insects.

I, too, am a Green Wooder. Here, I felt at home. It was as if I were back in grad school, when the wildest theories were encouraged, when I woke up and fell asleep thinking about my book, when the only distraction was meeting brilliant minds for lunches, when spontaneous conversations sparked insight and joy. My niche project was a monograph on the poetry and memory of Wang Zhaoming (1883–1944), better known by his sobriquet Jingwei, a modern Chinese politician who gained notoriety as the “arch-traitor of the nation” when he collaborated with Japan during World War II. It was an intensely engaging project, intellectually and emotionally. To Chinese and even to many Sinologists, his is a name that still raises eyebrows, if it does not trigger outrage. At Wiko, however, I found my work welcomed with open intellectual curiosity. I presented my project at the Tuesday Colloquium in October and have since received numerous constructive comments. Luca Giuliani’s remark on the kneeling statues with the Wang couple’s likeness as *Schandmale*, in particular, has helped me to conceptualize the last chapter of my book. A number of colleagues, including Efraín Kristal, Elena Esposito, Peng Guoxiang, Daniel Schönplüg, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, Thorsten Wilhelmy, and in particular Friederike Oursin generously donated their precious time to read my manuscript, thereby helping to enrich the concepts and improve the essay. Thanks to them, to the dedicated library staff, and to the inspiring fellowship of Green Wooders, I completed the manuscript in April. Its destiny is now in the almighty hands of the publisher! It is safe to say that, without Wiko, this book would not have been completed so fast and in any case would not have taken the same form.

Sadly, I did not manage to celebrate the completion of the project with my fellow Green Wooders. I was in Frankfurt, at home, when the whole planet screeched to a halt. In the history of Planet Earth, 2020 would probably not be remembered as the year when Yang Zhiyi completed her book, but rather for the triumphant conquest by a little virus hailing, alas, from my homeland and eventually joining the rarefied rank of world conquerors like Genghis Khan and the Spanish Flu, partly due to human hubris and mistakes. It is a humbling reminder that the collective intellectual prowess of humanity has not made our flesh less mortal. The virus has exposed the weaknesses of every social and political system with surgical precision. After Germany eventually emerged from what would perhaps be known as the “first wave,” I came back to Wiko at the end of May to enjoy the numbered days of summer in Berlin. But Wiko was no longer the same.

In a more upbeat tone: crisis creates community. The global pandemic binds people together through isolation. The Fellows of 2019 are now veterans of social distancing and virtual communication. May the memory of the virus bind us! In this way, in the deepest of our hearts, and despite the humming rhythm of academic institutionalization, we will remain forever outlaws in the Green Woods.

WISSENSCHAFTSKOLLEG ZU BERLIN    WALLOTSTRASSE 19    14193 BERLIN  
TELEFON +49 30 89001-0    FAX +49 30 89001-300    WWW.WIKO-BERLIN.DE