

Научная статья

УДК 82-1; 821.581; 811.581

DOI 10.25205/1818-7919-2022-21-4-104-113

## Probing the Boundaries: Language Exploration in Contemporary Chinese Poetry

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### Abstract

The paper focuses on describing different language techniques exploited in contemporary Chinese poetry of both “intellectual” (*zhishifenzi*) and “popular” (*minjian*) camps. Six works are analyzed in-depth to show the textual mechanics behind contemporary poets’ paratexts and their linguistic exploration. Both the “intellectuals” and “popular” poets share a vision of poetic text as a “sublimation” of the ordinary, however in actual practice they rely on the notion of a deviant textual substance that constitutes the very core of the poetic. Their pursuit for metalinguistic reflection leads contemporary poets to a fusion type of text blending the linguistic phenomena of traditional Chinese verse and Western modernism’s linguistic experimentation. They borrow traditional techniques such as parallelism, elliptical constructions, and nontrivial semantic links created through language phonographics to create connections with classical images and the tradition of 20th century Chinese “new poetry” while simultaneously accommodating Western ideas about language.

### Keywords

avant-garde poetry, Chinese language, experimental poetry, Han Bo, Hei Dachun, Ouyang Jianghe, parallelism, poetic function, Yang Xiaobin, Yi Sha, Yin Lichuan, Xuanyuan Shike, Zhang Zao

### Acknowledgements

The research was carried out with the financial support of the Russian Science Foundation (project no. 19-18-00429 “Language mechanisms of accommodation of cultural systems in various types of discourse of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries”) at the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences

### For citation

Dreyzis Yu. A. Probing the Boundaries: Language Exploration in Contemporary Chinese Poetry. *Vestnik NSU. Series: History and Philology*, 2022, vol. 21, no. 4: Oriental Studies, pp. 104–113. (in Russ.) DOI 10.25205/1818-7919-2022-21-4-104-113

## Поверяя границы: исследование возможностей языка в современной китайской поэзии

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### Аннотация

Изучение возможностей языка составляет одну из главных задач, которые ставит перед собой современная поэзия. Статья посвящена описанию различных языковых механизмов, используемых для решения этой задачи в новейшей китайской поэзии представителями как «интеллектуалистского» (*чжishi fānyǔ*), так и «на-

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ISSN 1818-7919

Вестник НГУ. Серия: История, филология. 2022. Т. 21, № 4: Востоковедение. С. 104–113

Vestnik NSU. Series: History and Philology, 2022, vol. 21, no. 4: Oriental Studies, pp. 104–113

родного» (*миньцзянь*) лагерей. Цель исследования – показать условность критического разделения на «интеллектуалов» и «народников», опирающихся на сходные установки при решении проблемы соотношения языка обыденного и поэтического. Для этого в статье проводится анализ шести произведений разных авторов (И Ша, Инь Личуань, Сюаньюань Шикэ, Хань Бо, Чжан Цзао, Ян Сяобинь), направленный на выявление конкретных лингвистических техник, которые задействуются при конструировании стихотворного текста. И «интеллектуаль», и «народники» разделяют общее восприятие поэтического языка как «сублимации» языка обыденного, но в своей творческой практике они полагаются на идею девиантной природы поэтического высказывания, напрямую связанной с поэтической функцией языка по Якобсону. Общее стремление к металингвистической рефлексии подводит современных поэтов к совмещению языковых особенностей традиционного китайского стиха и лингвистических экспериментов западного модернизма. Они заимствуют традиционные методы, такие как параллелизм, эллиптические конструкции и нетривиальные семантические связи, создаваемые с помощью фонографики, для создания соотнесённости с классическими образами и традициями китайской «новой поэзии» XX века, эксплуатируя при этом методы западноевропейского авангарда. Одновременно можно заметить полное напряжения, который существует между реальной языковой практикой современной китайской поэзии и тем идеализированным образом языковой реальности стиха, ориентированной на точное воспроизведение в нём разговорной речи (в реальности, безусловно, насыщенной девиациями разного рода, в том числе имеющими диалектную природу), который проецируется в теоретических и критических работах самих авторов.

#### Ключевые слова

авангардная поэзия, китайский язык, И Ша, Инь Личуань, Оуян Цзянхэ, параллелизм, поэтическая функция, Сюаньюань Шикэ, Хань Бо, Хэй Дачунь, Чжан Цзао, экспериментальная поэзия, Ян Сяобинь

#### Благодарности

Исследование выполнено при финансовой поддержке РФФ в рамках научного проекта № 19-18-00429 «Языковые механизмы аккомодации культурных систем в различных видах дискурса XX и XXI вв.» в Институте языкознания РАН

#### Для цитирования

Дрейзис Ю. А. Поверяя границы: исследование возможностей языка в современной китайской поэзии // Вестник НГУ. Серия: История, филология. 2022. Т. 21, № 4: Востоковедение. С. 104–113. DOI 10.25205/1818-7919-2022-21-4-104-113

## Introduction

The exploration of the capacities of language has become one of the focal points in the great literary experiment of contemporary Chinese verse. This stems partly from the gradual increase in the degree of poetic “philologism” around the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: exemplary philological poetry aspires to compress and consolidate its aesthetic and informational structures through multidimensional relationships with other texts<sup>1</sup>. A new type of poetic text was created largely by 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-gardists and requires a different reading of the verse itself: the reader is made to partake in the poet’s creativity. “New poetics” culminates in the concept of the “open work” as explored by Umberto Eco [1989], emphasizing suggestiveness as a deliberate move to “open” the work and allow the addressee to respond.

This paper contributes to earlier studies by focusing on the Chinese poetic reinterpretation of avant-garde operating modes. In contemporary Chinese poetry, the avant-garde becomes intertwined with the traditional, which itself originally nurtured the Western avant-garde [Xie, 1999, p. 4–6]. This study offers a unique perspective on Chinese verse by looking at how different ways of thinking about language are deployed in poetic texts and paratexts<sup>2</sup>, and thus putting purely linguistic observations in a broader cultural context. It also provides a multi-layered analysis of the phenomenon of language-oriented poetry, drawing on different poets’ perspectives and discourses. Their texts are the foundation of an ongoing debate about whether contemporary Chinese verse is

<sup>1</sup> Natalya Fateeva [2001] has explored this process in contemporary Russian poetry, however the same traits can be observed in poetry from the USA, United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, India and Kurdistan – it is an “acceleration in literary historicity”, to borrow an expression from Ronald Silliman [Williams, 2011, p. 3]. This has been accompanied by a greater appreciation of the linguistic density of the poem as strata of competing timeframes and languages [Ibid., p. 139].

<sup>2</sup> In this article, paratext refers to the essay-manifestos, theoretical and critical works, notes, prefaces, and, most importantly, interviews that accompany works.

becoming more consciously language-oriented and less content-driven [McGann, 2007, p. xi]. Writing about the momentum of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and the impact of French deconstruction, Jerome McGann states that philosophy's linguistic turn "made the scene of writing itself the source and end and test of the art of critical thinking" [Ibid.]. In the field of contemporary Chinese poetry, this becomes consciously and unconsciously mingled with modes of thinking about poetics as a certain philosophy of poetic language.

What remains somewhat overlooked by Chinese poets theorizing on poetry<sup>3</sup> is the fact that in relation to ordinary forms of speech, poetic discourse possesses quite deviant properties, since it takes on quite unusual conditions of communication (no addressee, autocommunication, cleft or ectopic reference, etc.). While according to neopositivist approaches to language any utterance requires verification (otherwise it doesn't make sense), poetic utterances *do* make sense despite being mostly unverifiable. This fact allows us to ignore deviations that become part of a new "poetic" norm. In contemporary linguistic-poetics, irregularities and deformations are considered typical patterns of poetic discourse [Levin, 2015, p. 225]. Much of what is perceived as an anomaly in relation to the "normal" world, "natural language," and narration "rules," acts as the norm for the conceptual, linguistic, and narrative organization of poetic discourse. Here, Chinese authors present a striking paradox: while making extensive use of thematic selection (foregrounding) as a deliberate distortion of language components [Leech, 2013, p. 31–33], they seem to ignore the complex nature of the relationship between standard language and poetic language in their paratext. What is set aside are the deviant properties of the poetic that originate from its pursuit for metalinguistic reflection and its irrelevance as a source for verifiable textual constructions that could serve as exemplary models.

As Jakobson noted, this discrepancy stems from accentuating the primacy of the poetic function [Jakobson, 1960]. Whereas practical language is a means of ordinary, quotidian communication, poetic language becomes significant as an aesthetic phenomenon. Language is no longer a means of describing or transmitting facts, thoughts, and emotions, but rather becomes the object and purpose of the poem. We see it in the works of the so-called "popular" (民间 *minjian*) poets and their opponents – the "intellectuals" (知识分子 *zhishifenzi*). Both perceive poetic language as a sublimation of the language of everyday communication.

An extensive description of the popular-intellectual polemic can be found both in *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* [Van Crevel, 2008, p. 399–459] and in Li Dian's [Li, 2008] article on poetic debate in contemporary China, so it seems unnecessary to provide it here. Therefore, this study will dwell only on the issues that are bound with poetic language perception sticking to Li Dian's usage of the term *minjian* as one that lacks an equivalent English term and thus, strictly speaking, cannot be substituted with the "popular".

The quest for a new philosophy of the poetic word in contemporary Chinese poetry is twofold. It must accommodate Western notions of language and simultaneously reinterpret the classical tradition (it is quite revealing that Yang Li 杨黎 (b. 1962) describes Martin Heidegger, Ferdinand de Saussure, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Gongsun Long 公孙龙, a representative of the ancient Chinese "School of Names", as part of the same lineage<sup>4</sup>). The confluence of these two traditions happens both among authors gravitating towards *minjian* poetry and among "intellectuals". Yang Lian 杨炼 (b. 1955) writes about this as "a *creative connection* between contemporary and classical poetic aesthetics" [Yang, 2010, p. 286].

<sup>3</sup> As can be observed in a series of 50 interviews with contemporary Chinese poets conducted by the author in 2015–2019. The interviews were translated into Russian and later published on the Russian-language blog VerseVagrant, aka *Shi jianghu* ([www.versevagrant.com](http://www.versevagrant.com)) and are fully accessible on the website.

<sup>4</sup> Yang Li. Vse sushchee est' stikh. Interv'y u s Yan Li (Everything is Poetry. An Interview with Yang Li). *stikho(t)vor'e* blog (VerseVagrant), 2015. URL: <https://versevagrant.com/2015/09/15/всё-сущее-есть-стих-интервью-с-ян-ли> (accessed 22.11.2018) (in Russ.).

### Exploring Language in “Intellectual” Poetic Practice

The “intellectuals” – including Zang Di 臧棣 (b. 1964), Xi Chuan 西川 (b. 1963), Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 (b. 1956), Xiao Kaiyu 萧开愚 (b. 1960), Chen Dongdong 陈东东 (b. 1961), Sun Wenbo 孙文波 (b. 1959), and others – embark on a medley of linguistic experiments in an effort to expose the independent nature of language. They emphasize contradictions between common usage and nonce expressions by using language units that are transformed, deformed, and scrutinized through the prism of metalinguistic reflection. Much effort is put into restoring the potential of language by using words that have fallen out of usage or have had their meanings change. The originality of author’s text is achieved, among other things, through an increase in the status of a particular element vis-à-vis colloquial speech. Thus, the author juxtaposes poetic and practical language.

We will illustrate it with several examples, most of them dating back to the late 1990s and early 2000s and representing ideas about the function of poetic language at the most recent stage of their evolution. A vivid example is the poetry of Yang Xiaobin 杨小滨 (b. 1963), who experiments with the grammar of gender. Normally, gender is not expressed in standard Chinese, even though there is a model of prefix derivation that allows specifying gender in animate nouns. Yang creates a whole cycle of poems that is interspersed with numerous “feminine” derivatives marking inanimate objects. “She-bank monogatari” (女银行物语 *Niuyinhang wuyu*, 2011) exemplifies this approach:

Paper money flirting, wrinkling their waists, demanding:  
do roll us into an afterglow.  
Stories rearranging their hymens, while the stock market  
reveals its soles, kicking out a pure white gleam.  
Inside the pure white gleam there is a vast expanse of whiteness,  
but will there be a heartthrob falling from the clouds?  
A she-ingot answers with a smile: let’s  
use a pocketful of ding dong as my pin number.  
The pin locks up the womb, with savings  
growing into the youngest cub. There’s no credit card  
to turn on the she-ATM.  
She curls her lip: let me finish my money laundering before bed.  
Dozing off on some decimal point, she-economy  
matures into a bride, her wedding night  
hidden beneath a red paper envelope. She mourns:  
pile me up into a stack of impenetrable paper<sup>5</sup>.

纸币嗲兮兮，皱起腰说  
把我卷成晚霞吧。  
故事被翻红浪，股市  
露出脚底，踢出白花花。  
白花花里有白茫茫，  
云端会掉下万人迷吗？  
女元宝笑答：那就用  
口袋的叮当声给我当密码吧。  
密码把子宫锁住，储蓄  
长成老胎儿。没有一张卡  
可以打开女提款机。  
她撇嘴：让我洗完钱睡吧。  
睡在小数点边上，女经济  
出落成新娘，在红包底下  
藏好初夜。她发愁：  
把我叠成捅不破的纸吧。

[Yang, 2011, p. 80]

<sup>5</sup> All English translations are made by the author unless otherwise specified.

The poem references a she-ingot (女元宝 *nü yuanbao*), she-ATM (女提款机 *nü tikuanji*), and even a she-economy (女经济 *nü jingji*). These new lexemes are designed to generate new meanings that were previously unavailable. An erotic air emanates not only from the poem's anatomic detail, but also from its suggestive connotations, like the use of 白花花 *baihuahua* ("gleaming white"), which is often used as an epithet for silver coins. The poem's 花花 *huahua* is closely linked to the myriad temptations of the human world. Double meanings are interspersed throughout the text, adding a new dimension to many of its structural patterns. The she-ATM is there to be "turned on" by its presumably male user before going into "sleep" mode; she begs to be refashioned and become impregnable to any "penetration". The paradoxical logic of these linguistic neoplasms is further intensified by placing them in a colloquial phrase.

The use of nonce words and impossible lexical combinations can also be observed in a substantial portion of Ouyang Jianghe's "intellectual" writing, including early works exemplified by "Glass Factory" (玻璃工厂 *Boli gongchang*, 1987). The idea of subverting text that codifies a word in language is an extremely important aspect of Ouyang's verse and of experimental poetry more broadly. In his early poem "Handgun" (手枪 *Shouqiang*, 1988), Ouyang splits contemporary Chinese words into their constituent parts, pointing out the resemblance of his experiment to the traditional mantic practice of 拆字法 *chai zifa* (fortunetelling by analyzing the components of a Chinese character). This kind of wordplay emphasizes the difficulty of translating the poem's title: the rather banal word "pistol" takes shape in the text of the poem, becoming the binomen "hand + gun"<sup>6</sup>. Wordplay touches upon all layers of language; it not only manipulates linguistic fossils and set phrases, but also experiments with poetic graphics, as in "Wild Hare" (野兔 *Ye tu*, 2009) by Han Bo 韩博 (b. 1973):

Some gather grasses, some gather up heavens.  
Both grasses and heavens are lent by a bank,  
the young and vigorous make light of years lost, those past one's prime cherish  
bygone brilliance.  
A wild hare takes the place of countless others,  
gnawing, lowering, and raising his head with another kind of banality,  
all accounts are a mess, stiff stalks stifling like a chaotic cloudlessness,  
speechlessness uniting all things in one.

一个人拾草，一个人拾取天空。  
草或天空贷自银行，  
少壮轻年月，迟暮惜光辉。  
一只野兔，替代无数只，  
咀嚼俯仰有别的陈腐，  
账目不清，硬梗梗若浑沦一物的无云<sup>7</sup>。

The three characters opening the final line's last syntagm share graphic elements designed to indicate the reading of the character. However, it is worth noting that due to phonetic changes, the first character is read quite differently from the next two symbols, thus creating an imitation of the traditional tautophone. The main features of a typical tautophone are its polyphony and uncertainty of meaning. For example, the tautophone 愁愁 *chou-chou* "sorrowful-sorrowful" can transmit a wide range of human feelings by denoting different phenomena in the natural world. Han Bo aims to recreate this effect using a different technique.

In his famous poem "In the Mirror", Zhang Zao 张枣 (1962–2010) also exploits creative wordplay with homograms built on the similarity of characters' readings and graphics (*Jing Zhong* 镜中,

<sup>6</sup> *Admussen N.* Disassembling the Handgun. Review of *Doubled Shadows*, by Ouyang Jianghe. *Boston Review*, December 15, 2004. URL: <http://bostonreview.net/blog/nick-admussen-disassembling-handgun-chinese-poetry-ouyang> (accessed 22.12.2019) (in Eng.).

<sup>7</sup> Han Bo 韩博. Han Bo de shi [韩博的诗] Poems by Han Bo. *Shi lin*, 2010. URL: <http://www.xzbu.com/5/view-1784126.htm>. (accessed 24.06.2021) (in Chin.).

1984). The graphic form of the character 梅 *mei* (“meihua plum”) stresses its correlation with 悔 *hui* (“regret”), thus creating a kind of trope that reminds one of the 兴 *xing* (“evocation” or “stimulus”) associated with the *Classic of Poetry*. Commentators have interpreted *xing* as borrowing an exterior object to lead the reader or listener to the event that will be described in the next line; it is a prelude, a proem, a general poetic introduction [Wang, 1992, p. 81]. Using iterative constructions that allude to the *Classic of Poetry*, 词 *ci* literary songs, and 曲 *qu* arias, Zhang Zao bestows upon his oeuvre an unquestionable musical quality despite rejecting any rhythmometrical organization (rhyme, isosyllabic structure, regular stanzas, etc.). A similar effect is present in the works of Hei Dachun 黑大春 (b. 1960). Even though his texts are difficult to understand orally (because of the homophony of language and the complexity of his poetic phrases), as Qin Xiaoyu notes, they have a melody similar to that of traditional *ci* balladry [Qin, 2012, p. 69]. For example, Hei Dachun’s poem “Beans” (豆 *Dou*, 1995) clearly falls into two quatrains, as is customary in the 小令 *xiaoling* format, a type of *ci*. The even lines end in rhyme, and all the rhymes are in level tones (平声 *pingsheng*), which is preferable in traditional 律诗 *lüshi*. Furthermore, the first phonetic word of each quatrain also rhymes with the line endings. All this reinforces the atmosphere of nostalgia that runs throughout the poem.

### Exploring Language in “Popular” Poetic Practice

Strategies employed by *minjian* authors lie on the other side of the spectrum, though they also demonstrate manipulations of the “neutrality” of language. Yin Lichuan’s 尹丽川 (b. 1973) poem “Mom” (妈妈 *Mama*, 2000), for example, deploys several deliberately ungrammatical sentences intended to violate the standard word order:

when I was 13 I used to ask  
 what are *you* living for. looking at you go to college  
 I also went to college, mom  
 what *else* are you living for. your eyes are still wide open  
 we haven’t talked quite a while. a woman  
 how can she be another woman  
 ‘s mom. with the same body  
 I ought to do the things you haven’t done, mom

...  
 十三岁时我问  
 活着为什么你。看你上大学  
 我上了大学，妈妈  
 你活着为什么又。你的双眼还睁着  
 我们很久没说过话。一个女人  
 怎么会是另一个女人  
 的妈妈。带着相似的身体  
 我该做你没做的事么，妈妈  
 ...<sup>8</sup>

The right focus dislocation that marks the ungrammatical Chinese constructions is quite acceptable in southern topolects, in particular Cantonese, and even in standard Putonghua [Cheung, 2009, p. 197–232]. It is used to formalize an afterthought when the sentence has already been completed. The enjambment in the sixth line is also noteworthy: it makes the seventh line begin with an attributive particle (的 *de*), which normally cannot act as the first component of a statement. It forces the reader to return to the previous line and rethink it (“how can she be another woman’s” instead of “how can she be another woman”). It stretches the intonational pause between the sixth and seventh

<sup>8</sup> Yin Lichuan 尹丽川. Yin Lichuan shi xuan [尹丽川诗选] Yin Lichuan’s Selected Poems. *Zhonghua shi ku* [中华诗库] Chinese Poetry Database, 2000. URL: <http://www.shigeku.com/shiku/xs/yinlichuan.htm> (accessed 24.06.2021) (in Chin.)

lines, emphasizing the segmentation of the sentence. The author is, in short, trying to create the illusion of directly transcribing the colloquial.

We can also observe this technique in the work of Yi Sha 伊莎 (b. 1966), who tries to “tongue-tie” his poetic subject by actively using parcellation and lexical repetitions, and by completely abandoning punctuation. This all seems to be aimed at distorting a “normal” text:

let me too compose a lyric poem  
 in a sissy manner  
 let me write about that fearless winter plum  
 imagination is underdeveloped  
 so I've got to master observing things  
 swaddled in an overcoat exploring the outdoors  
 I discover: plum blossoms have unfolded on a tree  
 an improbably ugly old tree  
 that can't come into a poem so  
 a poet's plum  
 blooms in a vacuum  
 with a doubt most deep  
 in absorbed concentration I move on  
 I'm really just faking it too  
 coming to this sublime moment of my verse  
 like all other shameless poets  
 I stretch out my hand  
 plum o plum  
 spits in my face with its syphilitic poison

我也操着娘娘腔  
 写一首抒情诗啊  
 就写那冬天不要命的梅花吧  
 想象力不发达  
 就得学会观察  
 裹紧大衣到户外  
 我发现：梅花开在树上  
 丑陋不堪的老树  
 没法入诗 那么  
 诗人的梅  
 全开在空中  
 怀着深深的疑虑  
 闷头向前走  
 其实我也是装模作样  
 此诗已写到该升华的关头  
 象所有不要脸的诗人那样  
 我伸出了一只手  
 梅花 梅花  
 啐我一脸梅毒<sup>9</sup>

An unexpected pun appears in the final line of “Meihua: An Unsuccessful Lyric Poem” (梅花：一首失败的诗 *Meihua: yi shou shibai de shuqing shi*, 1993), which plays on the fact that the Chinese word for syphilis translates literally as “plum poison”<sup>10</sup>. Apart from this pun, however, Yi Sha’s poem is markedly devoid of any ornamentation. It aims to create a transparency of meaning where linguistic clumsiness seems intentional. The same technique can be observed in Yu Jian’s 于坚 “Flashcards” (便条集 *Biantiao ji*, 1996–1999), a series of short poetic sketches describing the

<sup>9</sup> Yi Sha 伊莎. Yi Sha shi xuan [伊莎诗选] Yi Sha’s Selected Poems. *Zhonghua shi ku* [中华诗库] Chinese Poetry Database, 2000. URL: <http://www.shigeku.org/xlib/lingshidao/xinshi/yisha.htm> (accessed 24.06.2021) (in Chin.)

<sup>10</sup> It became known as “plum poison” because the ulcerations that appear on the skin in the disease’s first stage were thought to resemble plum blossoms.

quotidian. A more refined version of “colloquial” stylization can be found in the work of Xuanyuan Shike 轩辕轼轲 (b. 1971), who gravitates towards a new understanding of a synthesis of the *minjian* and the intellectual. His long, winding phrases are often structured with an eye to tradition, reinterpreted to fit contemporary poetic practice. Xuanyuan Shike borrows classical text structuring schemes and makes extensive use of parallel constructions that resemble the 对仗 *duizhang* parallelism of the *lüshi*. They serve to create a semantic whole out of images that might otherwise seem isolated, by exploiting the syntax, lexicality, graphics, and allusive potential of the language. Xuanyuan and other poets tend to use parallelism as a tool to mark the most important part of their poetic utterances, thus mirroring the traditional form in which the central part of a stanza is marked by two parallel lines. As contemporary verse assimilates European organizing principles, parallel parts shift to the most climactic moments of narration and can even appear in the closing lines of a poem. Xuanyuan’s “Bai Juyi” (白居易, 2010) makes noticeable use of parallel structures, intertwining them with puns and graphic resonance — an unexpected choice for a Lower Body School author:

let us sail West, without a chance of finding the nephew who wormed his way into  
a dugout<sup>11</sup>  
let us descend to hell, without a chance of encountering Dante, who has been  
repaid a hundredfold  
...  
下西洋，找不到钻进地洞的侄子  
下地狱，遇不到熬成婆的但丁  
...<sup>12</sup>

The number of characters in these two lines is almost identical, and the number of words matches exactly. The two-syllable word 地洞 *didong*, meaning “a dugout,” corresponds to the monosyllabic word “mother-in-law” in the bottom line, which is a part of the idiomatic expression 多年的媳妇熬成婆 *duo nian de xifu aocheng po*, or “who waits for a long time will be repaid a hundredfold” (literally “the daughter-in-law who has suffered patiently for many years will become a mother-in-law”). The lines are connected by a complete parallelism of syntactic structure, though the actant semantics do not correspond. In the first line, the qualifier is a predicate accompanied by a locative component, while in the second line, even if we decompose the idiom into its constituent parts, we see an explicit causative construction. The equivalence of the syntactic positions does not prevent them from performing different grammatical functions on a syntagmatic level. This form is not uncommon in classical *duizhang*-type parallelism. Andrew Plaks suggests naming this kind of “sylleptic” nexus a “pseudo-parallelism” or “crypto-parallelism” [Plaks, 1988, p. 56]. For Plaks, “crypto-parallelism” is an integral feature of the *duizhang* since it contributes to the creation of non-trivial semantic links among textual components by subtly playing with our perception and interpretation of their similarities and differences.

Xuanyuan Shike’s poem uses this structure in an attempt to bridge the cultural traditions and allusive potential of China and the West. Dante’s descent into hell is likened to the legendary travels of Zheng He, the subject of countless classical plays and a popular novel, “The Journey of Sanbao the Eunuch to the Western Ocean” (三宝太监西洋记通俗演义 *Sanbao taijian Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi*, preface 1597). Parallelism serves not only to provide a formal coherence to the text, but also creates its semantic cohesion; without it the poem would break up into a series of independent im-

<sup>11</sup> This phrase alludes to the famous travels of Zheng He 郑和, who made a series of voyages to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean from 1405–1433. According to historians, one of the reasons for these expeditions was Emperor Zhu Di’s 朱棣 desire to affirm his usurpation of the throne from his nephew. There were rumors that his nephew was alive and hiding somewhere in China or outside its borders [Wang, 1998, p. 320].

<sup>12</sup> Xuanyuan Shike 轩辕轼轲. “*Suo lin nang*”: *xiaoshi jiu shou* [“锁麟囊”小诗九首] “Qilin Purse”: Nine Short Poems. *Xuanyuan Shike de boke* [轩辕轼轲的博克] Xuanyuan Shike’s Blog, April 23, 2010. URL: [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_63ead5230100htfn.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_63ead5230100htfn.html) (accessed 24.06.2021) (in Chin.).

ages. The dethroned “nephew” descends into a hole in the ground, like the author of “Divine Comedy,” using a Chinese idiom to describe the uneasy relationships among relatives in a traditional family.

Finally, this contemporary *duizhang* plays gracefully with the form of the characters involved. In the word 侄子 *zhizi* (“nephew”) and in Dante’s name (但丁 *Danding*), the characters are juxtaposed by a parallelism containing the graphic element meaning “person, human.” Simultaneously, second components of these words – 子 *zi* and 丁 *ding* – can mean “son, child” and “adult man,” respectively. Thus, the parallelism allows the words to be compared and contrasted by pushing identity to a new level of abstraction.

Thus, parallelism helps us locate convergences between the *minjian* and highbrow authors. We see it frequently in the work of Ouyang Jianghe (“Strawberry” 草莓 *Caomei*, 1988, “Handgun,” “Phoenix” 凤凰 *Fenghuang*, 2012), but also in the work of Yu Jian (“Flashcards”), who professes quite a different poetic. Parallelism seems to be such a powerful and explicit mechanism of coherence in classical Chinese verse that its structure-forming functions cannot be ignored in contemporary poetic texts, too. Certainly, as Yury Lotman once noted, poetry in general presents a structure in which all elements are in a state of parallelism at distinct levels [Lotman, 1976, p. 88]. Chinese parallelism brings its own flavor to this structure.

According to Halliday and Hasan, grammatical parallelism is a *sine qua non* of internal cohesion, since it is a common feature not only in poetry, but also in many other types of discourse [Halliday, Hasan, 1976, p. 20]. Still, parallelism itself does not necessarily turn a sequence of sentences into a text. This becomes clear when we look at sequences of similarly structured sentences from language textbooks. Their function is to serve as an example of certain grammatical constructions, and they can be considered to be a coherent text perhaps only in the form of found poetry. In Chinese, with its lability of word units and relatively low morpheme per word ratio, parallelism sometimes becomes the basic means of transferring syntactic information and, consequently, cohesion. Contemporary Chinese, even taking into account an increase in the degree of agglutination, still adheres to textual mechanics of classical Chinese while making extensive use of its relics. In poetry, this feature is exposed because of poetry’s extreme sensitivity to language shifts and its intertextuality. This is the case not only in the Chinese tradition, but in contemporary verse in general. In Chinese poetic text, parallelism, supported by a plasticity of syntactic functions, saturates the semantic volume of each word, pushing the reader towards a complex interpretation of a multidimensional poetic utterance.

### Conclusion

Just as his ancestor was convinced of the idealness of literature as a medium, the contemporary Chinese poet views poetic language as the ultimate form of language. While contemporary “intellectual” and *minjian* poets have a shared vision of poetic verse as a “sublimation” of the ordinary, in practice they are increasingly aware that poetic language is itself a kind of deviation. It is a parade of abnormalities, even as it aspires to let the ordinary rule. And therein lies the paradox of contemporary Chinese verse: Chinese authors see themselves both as continuators of Chinese aesthetical and philosophical traditions as well as heirs of Western philosophy and Western modernism’s linguistic experimentation. They borrow traditional techniques such as parallelism, elliptical constructions, and nontrivial semantic links created through language phonographics to create connections with classical images and the tradition of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese “new poetry”. Experiments of this sort expand the capabilities of language and construct a type of text that relies on unconventional usage supported by mechanisms for ensuring the semantic cohesion of the text; it explores language boundaries and opens up Chinese poetry to the world.

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*The article was submitted on 25.06.2021;  
approved after review on 16.11.2021; accepted for publication on 31.01.2022  
Статья поступила в редакцию 25.06.2021;  
одобрена после рецензирования 16.11.2021; принята к публикации 31.01.2022*