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# Living an Emperor's Life, Dying a Nobel Death

## Li Hongwei's Novel *The King* and *Lyric Poetry* as a Journey Through the History of Chinese Poetry\*\*

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**Abstract:** The present paper discusses Li Hongwei's novel *The King and Lyric Poetry* (2017). The novel tells the story of the suicide of the last Nobel Prize laureate in the future history of literature, Chinese poet Yuwen Wanghu. Following the detective thread of the book, the essay reconstructs utopian and dystopian semi-virtual landscapes of the mid-21st century China which feed into two different models of lyricism: the poet as a knight errant who seeks inspiration far from modern civilization and the poet as a lonely warrior against (technological) tyranny. In the final scene, the two landscapes blur and the antithetical forces that infuse them: lyricism (Yuwen) and power/knowledge (the King) merge into what may be seen as their dialectical synthesis to be fulfilled by the novel's third protagonist – Yuwen's young friend, Li Pulei.

Mobilizing various contexts, including the suicides of famous mainland-Chinese poets, important poetry polemics, and intertexts ranging from classical Chinese literary theory through to *Truman Show* and *Matrix*, I argue that the novel mirrors the development of poetry discourse in the PRC with its various myths, conflicts, complexes, and ambitions. I also show how this discourse, shaped for a long time largely by the so-called Third Generation poets born in the 1950s and 1960s, translates into the

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situation of the poets who belong to a younger generation (“post-70”) represented by Li Hongwei among others, and what (self-)expectations, challenges, and limitations they face in their writing.

**Keywords:** *The King and Lyric Poetry*, contemporary Chinese poetry, poetry discourse, the post-70 generation, dialectics

## Królewskie życie, noblowska śmierć Powieść Li Hongweia *Król i poezja liryczna* jako podróż przez historię poezji chińskiej

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł analizuje powieść Li Hongweia *Król i poezja liryczna* (2017) w kontekście historii poezji chińskiej od starożytności po czasy współczesne. Motywem przewodnim powieści, której akcja dzieje się w 2050 roku, jest nieoficjalne śledztwo w sprawie samobójczej śmierci ostatniego laureata Literackiej Nagrody Nobla, chińskiego poety Yuwen Wanghu. Podążając śladami bibliotekarza Li Puleia, który przejmując rolę detektywa, rekonstruuje utopijne i dystopijne, na poły wirtualne krajobrazy Chin z niedalekiej przyszłości oraz powiązane z nimi archetypy poety, które nakładają się na siebie w biografii Yuwena: poeta jako błędny rycerz poszukujący natchnienia z dala od współczesnej cywilizacji oraz poeta jako samotny wojownik przeciw (technologicznej) tyranii. W ostatniej scenie te dwa krajobrazy łączą się ze sobą, zanika też granica pomiędzy antytetycznymi siłami, które utrzymywały je we względnej stabilności: lirycyzmem (uosabianym przez Yuwena) i władzą/wiedzą (uosabianymi przez Króla).

Przywołując różne konteksty – w tym m.in. samobójstwa znanych chińskich poetów, kluczowe polemiki literackie oraz źródła, na które powołuje się narrator, począwszy od klasycznej teorii literatury w Chinach po *Truman Show* i *Matrix* – staram się pokazać, jak powieść na różnych poziomach odzwierciedla rozwój dyskursu poetyckiego w ChRL, jego mity, konflikty, kompleksy i ambicje. Zastanawiam się również, jak ów dyskurs, przez długi czas kształtowany głównie przez poetów tzw. Trzeciej Generacji, urodzonych w latach pięćdziesiątych i sześćdziesiątych, przekłada się na sytuację autorów należących do młodszego pokolenia („roczników siedemdziesiątych”) reprezentowanego między innymi przez Li Hongweia oraz jakim oczekiwaniom, wyzwaniom i ograniczeniom muszą oni sprostać na swojej literackiej ścieżce.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Król i poezja liryczna*, współczesna poezja chińska, dyskurs poetycki, roczniki siedemdziesiąte, dialektyka

## Introduction: Content and Context

**T**he year 2050. Poet Yuwen Wanghu 宇文往户, the last Nobel Prize laureate in the future history of literature, commits suicide on the eve of the award ceremony. Before taking his life, he sends a mysterious e-mail to his friend Li Pulei 黎普雷: “Cutting off. Take care” (*Jiu ci duanjue. Baozhong* 就此断绝。保重). In the language of the Empire portrayed in

Li Hongwei's 李宏伟 *The King and Lyric Poetry* (Chin. *Guowang yu shuqingshi* 国王与抒情诗, 2017), "cutoff" (*duanjue* 断绝) means a withdrawal from the Community of Consciousness (*yishi gongtongti* 意识共同体). This monstrous network, along with crystals of consciousness (*yishi jingti* 意识晶体) and mobile souls (*yidong linghun* 移动灵魂), constitute the three core technological developments on which the Empire's social structure is based. Li Pulei embarks on a journey through physical, virtual, and literary landscapes of the mid-21st century China to investigate the reason of Yuwen's death.

On the narrative plane, from the very beginning all clues lead to the King, the technocratic ruler of Chinese virtual space, a pure embodiment of power/knowledge, who indeed did significantly contribute to Yuwen's dramatic decision. Yet, to understand the complex interconnections between the two characters, as Li Pulei's investigation develops, the reader must constantly take detours through different dimensions of cultural reality accompanied by spirits of contemporary Chinese poet-suicides, following intertextual traces and self-suggestive associations, some of which result in intriguing discoveries, whereas others lead one into intellectual cul-de-sacs. Li Hongwei (b. 1978) – poet and fiction writer with an academic background in philosophy – tests the reader's erudition at every step. His sources range from the ancient Chinese dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* 说文解字 (lit. 'Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters') to Isaac Asimov's science-fiction (SF) novels and from Plato's *Republic* to *Matrix*, with various literary-philosophical polemics in the background.

As far as the composition and the theme are concerned, the novel is located at the intersection of three genres: SF, metaliterary fiction, and detective novels. Intergeneric experiments involving the first two conventions – that is, largely SF works with writers, including poets, as protagonists – in Chinese literature had been successfully attempted earlier for example by Liu Cixin 刘慈欣; his novella *Poetry Cloud* (Chin. *Shi Yun* 诗云), a tale of Li Bai 李白 (701–762) in times of quantum computing, comes as the closest association. Interesting resonances with Li's work can also be found in Xia Jia's 夏笳 short story *Night Journey of the Dragon-Horse* (Chin. *Long-ma yexing* 龙马夜行) whose plot develops around the most famous Chinese poet suicide Haizi's 海子 (1964–1989) romantic-heroic long poem *Homeland, or With a Dream for a Horse* (Chin. *Zuguo huo yi meng wei ma* 祖国或以梦为马). The attempt at connecting detective threads with meta-literary narrative of the life of an author, in its turn, makes me think in the first place about Paul Auster's (anti)detective fiction, such as *The New York Trilogy*. Its first part, *The City of Glass*, starts from a mysterious night phone call received by Daniel Quinn, the author of several popular novels. Thus, the protagonist becomes drawn into a hopeless, probably made-up, mission to protect an eccentric writer Peter Stillman from the expected attack by his father Peter Stillman senior, from whom the would-be victim inherited a peculiar, misanthropic literary genius. Instead of attacking his son, however, old Stillman takes his own life, of which Quinn learns accidentally only two and a half months later, and just several hours after giving up his grotesque investigation. Like Quinn, Li Pulei, too, eventually realizes that he was slyly manipulated – although without hostile intention – jointly by the two men whom he believed to be mutual enemies, and who in the end prove to be just two incarnations of the same human desire of divinity and immortality. Yet, contrary to Quinn, a typical postmodern hero who becomes literally deconstructed in the course of the narrative (he loses weight, money, and property, and finally disappears after several nights spent in the abandoned house of Stillman junior, leaving only his red notebook on the floor), Li Pulei, a character

constructed in a Romantic-modernist way, succeeds and is offered the position of the emperor of virtual reality. Another thing that connects *The King and Lyric Poetry* with Auster's fiction is the ghostly presence of the author in the novel. The night phone call in the American novelist's work was addressed to "detective Paul Auster", whose mission Quinn decides to take up when the caller for the third time misdials the number and begs him for help; later on, he pays a visit to the "real" Paul Auster who turns out to be a writer, and it is also he who in the final scene finds Quinn's notebook on the floor. Li Hongwei never appears in the fictional world of his novel but it should be safe to tentatively observe that Li Pulei, the amateur detective who is faced with the challenge of the reassessment of the literary and political history of his country to date and expected to steer it on the right track, may indeed be considered the avatar of the author; this hypothesis will be substantiated in the following sections, as we explore the resonance between Li Pulei's understanding of lyricism and the literary-critical discourse surrounding the poetry of Li Hongwei's generation in China.

In this essay, I invite the reader for an expedition in the footsteps of Li Pulei, first through the spacious grasslands of a pastoral utopia, then through the dark labyrinths of a hypermodern dystopia, to finally reach the place where the two landscapes blur and the traveler enters a realm of disembodied consciousness(es) without any spatiotemporal or intertextual coordinates to face the most essential questions and choices. On the way, I will try to unpack some of the encountered images, discussing their possible literary-historical, metaphorical, metaphysical, and sometimes political implications.

Parallel to Li Pulei's, I will be carrying out my own literary-critical investigation of Yuwen Wanghu's case in the extratextual world, asking not why the King but rather why Li Hongwei, the author, made the fictitious poet kill himself, and why after winning the Nobel Prize, among other things. For all the minute intricacies of the plot and inspiring philosophical enquiry into the future of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful, to borrow with a slight temporal adjustment the title of the famous treatise of Edmund Burke, in terms of its treatment of poetry, the book is very conventional. In its conceptual design, we can easily identify certain fixed patterns, motifs, myths, sentiments, and complexes that haunt contemporary Chinese poetry. One could expect that Li will want to somehow compromise or deconstruct them, but this does not happen. Instead, after the effective 200-plus-pages literary-philosophical odyssey, in the last several chapters he returns to the safe harbor of dialectics, which, however, has apparently lost its history-propelling potential and hampers the development of new ideas instead of fostering it.

## More than poetry

Before we begin our journey, let me offer some details about the circumstances of the book's publication and reception, as these interestingly feed back into the (mainland-Chinese) interpretations of the novel's narrative at the inter- and metatextual level, strengthening one specific aspect of the narrative and neglecting many other semantic levels, which I will subsequently try to reconstruct.

*The King and Lyric Poetry* appeared in bookstores in May 2017 – arguably the most eventful month in Chinese poetry since the today almost legendary April 1999, when the

emotional nationwide polemic between Intellectual poets (*zhishi fenzi shiren* 知识分子诗人) and Popular poets (*minjian shiren* 民间诗人) found its culmination during the poetry conference in the Panfeng Hotel in Beijing<sup>1</sup>. One week after Li's book came out, China's literary scene witnessed the debut of a robot called Xiao Bing 小冰, whose poetry collection *The Sun Has Lost Its Glass Windows* (Chin. *Yangguang shi le bolichuang* 阳光失了玻璃窗) sparked heated discussions on the role and place of verse in modern China. This time, however, the frontline did not run between the two camps of Chinese poets, which temporarily reunited against what they saw as the emerging common danger that is artificial intelligence (AI) poetry, but between poets and, roughly, the rest of the world with IT engineers in the lead. Loved by a mass audience, Xiao Bing's poetry was dismissed by poets as mere language play lacking true emotion and divine inspiration. Established authors representing different factions, including Yu Jian 于坚 (of his role in the novel more will be said soon) and Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河, raised against the quite unsophisticated work of the robot their most sophisticated metaphysical arguments<sup>2</sup>. Their comments tell as much of Xiao Bing's poetry as of the commentators themselves, confirming how deeply (Chinese) poetry is enmeshed in existential projects: any polemic on poetry almost automatically turns into a polemic on the condition of the world and humankind at large.

The debate sparked by the emergence of Xiao Bing was of course not the first clash between poetry and technology in China. Doubts about the impact of civilizational development on the condition of national verse have been regularly raised at least since the early 2000s, when the earliest online poetry communities were established. Nevertheless, the advent of the robot poet constituted an incentive to rethink the problem at a deeper level. While former discussions had focused mostly on the quality of writing in times of massification and commercialization of poetry production prompted by the Internet, this time the very ontology of poetic text and the status and agency of the (human) author begged to be thoroughly addressed<sup>3</sup>.

Released at such a sensitive moment, Li Hongwei's novel was very well received among poets, novelists, and critics in both genres, acquiring an almost prophetic status. Yu Jian, Ma Yuan 马原, Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, Qiu Huadong 邱华栋, and Xie Youshun 谢有顺 wrote enthusiastic recommendations featured in the publisher's description of the book<sup>4</sup>. Yue Wen 岳雯, one of the rising stars of literary criticism, winner of the Gold Award for Stars of People's Literature (*Zijin-renmin wenxue zhi xing* 紫金·人民文学之星) for young critics and the author of the monograph on lyricism in modern fiction *Lyrical Tension: Four Chinese Novelists of the Early 1980s* (Chin. *Shuqing de zhangli: 20 shiji 80 niandai chuqi de si wei xiaoshuojia* 抒情的张力: 20世纪80年代初期的四位小说家, 2017), in the earliest scholarly paper discussing *The King and Lyric Poetry* interpreted the novel in the context of what she called a "serious crisis" of literature, caused, among other things, by the rapid development of technology considered as a dehumanizing factor. She counted Li among "lyrical fundamentalists" ( *yuanjiaozhizhuyizhe* 原教旨主义者) and his book among "defenses

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of the polemic, see: van Crevel 2008: ch12.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of Xiao Bing's literary activity, its reception, and social-political implications, see Krenz 2020a, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the role of Internet and new media in the development of contemporary Chinese poetry see in English: Inwood 2014, Hockx 2015.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Xinhua 2017.

of poetry”, invoking the so titled essays by Elizabethan poet Philip Sidney and Romantic poet Percy Shelley (Yue 2017).

Li Hongwei himself warns against such simple interpretations, explaining that the novel’s title is not intended as a “binary opposition” that could be morally valorized in terms of good ( $\approx$  poetry) and evil ( $\approx$  power/knowledge). Rather, he claims, it reflects the inextricable entanglement of two forces that co-shape every individual life. He also emphasizes that what he meant by “lyric poetry” is actually not poetry at all but represents some kind of existential reality (Sohu 2017).

This latter postulate urges us to look back, together with Li Pulei, into the origins of lyrical tradition in China, before the ancient formula “*shi yan zhi* 诗言志” (‘poetry expresses mind’) – one of the many bones of contention between authors involved in the numerous 20th-century disputes – confined lyricism to the domain of poetry on the one hand, and doomed poetry to lyricism, as critics of lyrical tradition claim, on the other. While this existential perspective may appear particularly promising to the novel’s interpreters, for it allows them to indulge in abstract philosophical discussions, it also contains certain risks, further contracting the already relatively small distance between life and writing in Chinese poetry discourse. This proximity between the lived and the written and the emphasis on the specifically understood authenticity of poetic expression should arguably be blamed for the questionably glorious tradition of poetic suicides in China among other things. In his verse Li Hongwei appears to be very critical of this cultural phenomenon, as exemplified by his probably best known poem “Sir, Please Stand Up and Die Again” (Chin. *Xiansheng, qing zhan qilai zai si yi ci* 先生，请站起来再死一次), where he whimsically dispenses poets with the duty to die for poetry as we watch and judge, and put stamps on the death certificates of those who passed (away):

Sir. And you in the third row, close to the aisle  
 please stand up. Yeah, to tie a tie is always fine  
 please die again. Yeah, exactly, right now, here  
 in front of us. No, don’t worry about those over there  
 please die again, for us to see  
 [...]  
 OK, sir. You can sit down. Yes, please  
 brush the dust off your clothes, drink a glass  
 Yeah, a dead too needs to recover from shock. You’re right  
 please take it, this is a certificate of this death. Already stamped,  
 this time you can safely die and wait for the next call (Li Hongwei 2018)<sup>5</sup>.

Although in *The King and Lyric Poetry* this criticism is not explicitly voiced, the author is clearly preoccupied with finding an alternative for this problematic understanding of poethood, equipping his avatar, Li Pulei, in overwhelming self-awareness and the awareness of the complexity of the force field in which he is thrown. Whether the dialectical lyrical life,

<sup>5</sup> All translations from Chinese are mine. I only include original phrasing for citations from classical texts, for key terms, neologisms, and phrases whose translation is particularly problematic. Pinyin transliteration (without tone markers) is provided for single words, characters, and phrases that are discussed at a metalinguistic level at their first appearance in the paper. Otherwise, I use an English translation with Chinese characters included in parentheses.

in the sense ascribed by Li Hongwei to lyricism in the novel, that is defined in the dynamic relationship to kingship (power/knowledge), is indeed the most desirable remedy for the detrimental impact of Romantic paradigm and whether dialectics indeed constitutes the best way out of the simplistic dualism is of course another thing, and I will ponder these questions in the final part of the essay.

## Mapping the poetry universe

The first two clues Li Pulei gets at the beginning of his investigation come from Yuwen Wanghu's sister, Yuwen Ran 宇文然, who passes on to him an enigmatic question from her late brother: "How is it possible that common people don't die?" (*fanren ruhe bu si?* 凡人如何不死?), and a schematic draft of his Nobel lecture which contains references to five sources: *Shuowen jiezi*, the first Chinese etymological dictionary from the 2nd century BC; *Shijing* 诗经 (lit. 'Classic of Poetry'), the earliest Chinese anthology of poetry; ancient poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340–278 BC); contemporary poet Yu Jian; and Isaac Asimov's novel *The Gods Themselves*. This draft – although Li Pulei cannot know it yet – is in fact a precise map of his upcoming physical and philosophical journey.

The draft begins with two character-based definitions from the *Shuowen jiezi*: *shi* 诗, commonly translated as "poetry", and the more problematic *zhi* 志, on whose meaning and possible translations copious papers have been written, but the consensus has not been, and may never be, reached. The many propositions include: 'earnest thought' (Legge 1971), 'the heart's intent' (Liu 1975), 'what is intently on the mind' (Owen 1982); in various publications one can also encounter simply 'will', 'intention', or 'ideal'; finally, it may be taken as one's worldviews or opinions that under given social-political circumstances can only be expressed indirectly through poetry. Here, I use "mind" for brevity, meaning what Owen paraphrased as 'what is intently on the mind', as this seems to most accurately reflect Li Hongwei's understanding and usage of the term. Yuwen Wanghu explains *zhi* 志 through another character from the *Shuowen jiezi*: *yi* 意, rendered variously as 'intention', 'idea', 'desire', 'meaning', 'opinion', among which "intention" arguably works best in the context of the vision of lyrical poetry conveyed by the novel. Altogether, the first paragraph of Yuwen's draft reads:

"*Shi, zhi ye. Cong yan, si sheng.*" "*Zhi, yi ye. Cong xin, zhi sheng.*"  
"诗，志也。从言，寺声。" "志，意也。从心，之声。"

"Poetry (*shi* 诗) means mind (*zhi* 志). [The character consists of:] the semantic component *yan* 言 ('language'), the phonetic component *si* 寺 ('temple')."

"Mind (*zhi* 志) means intention (*yi* 意). [The character consists of:] the semantic component *xin* 心 (meaning in Chinese both heart and mind) and is pronounced like the character *zhi* 之."

Subsequently, Yuwen unpacks the two definitions:

The above is the definition of "poetry" (*shi* 诗) and its paraphrase (*shiyi* 释义) "mind" (*zhi* 志) from the *Shuowen Jiezi*. Putting aside a discussion of vocalization, for Chinese people mind

(*zhi* 志) from beginning to end determines poetry. And mind itself is born from intention (*yi* 意). “Poetry expresses mind” (*shi yan zhi* 诗言志) is not a mere theory (*bu shi yi jia zhi yan* 不是一家之言).

After the etymological discussion, the following four points appear in the poet’s notes:

1. “Poetry (*shi* 诗) means mind (*zhi* 志). [The character consists of:] the semantic component *yan* 言 (‘language’), the phonetic component *si* 寺 (‘temple’)”. “Mind (Chin. *zhi* 志) means intention (*yi* 意). [The character consists of:] the semantic component *xin* 心 (‘heart/mind’)”. Before the *Shuowen jiezi*.
2. Poet’s intention (*yi* 意) and mind (*zhi* 志). One book: *Shijing*, two names: Qu Yuan, Yu Jian.
3. Lyric (*shuqing* 抒情). One and many (*yi yu duo* 一与多). Chant (*yinchang* 吟唱) and submission (*shunfu* 顺服).
4. Future heart/mind (*weilai zhi xin* 未来之心). Asimov, *The Gods Themselves: Odeen*, Dua, Tritt – possibility of metaphor (*yinyu de keneng* 隐喻的可能). (p. 61–62)<sup>6</sup>

In a nutshell, it can be said that the draft constitutes Yuwen Wanghu’s interpretation of the conceptual history of (Chinese) poetry from the perspective of the evolution of lyrical subject. The conflict between the King and the poet is an echo of the decisive breakthrough which happened long ago between the stages marked as 1 and 2 in Yuwen’s piece. Before language was codified (“before the *Shuowen jiezi*”) and words explained, poetry had already existed as a natural expression of mind (*zhi* 志), albeit not individual mind (this is only mentioned in point 3 of Yuwen’s draft) as understood by the contemporaries but as some greater collective mind of community, as part of oral tradition and of everyday life of the people: “poetry expresses mind (*shi yan zhi* 诗言志) is not a mere theory”. With the emergence of script and the codification of language, the process of individuation begun. Poetry started to express the “poet’s intention and mind” (stage 2 in the draft); a seed of lyricism was sown. More importantly, according to a view shared by the book’s three protagonists, together with lyricism, death entered the history of humankind. When humanity existed as a collective organism, one that was perfectly synchronized with the Universe, or – as Zhuangzi 庄子 has it – with the Way (*Dao* 道), death was not an issue. It started to matter with the emergence of individual consciousness and the simultaneous gradual fragmentation of the image of the world; in Zhuangzi’s words, “those who discriminate fail to see”, the role of the sage is to embrace the “ten thousand things” in their primary unity<sup>7</sup>. *The Shijing* invoked in point 2 is presumably meant to serve as the epitome of pre-lyrical collective poetry not haunted by the specter of mortality. Qu Yuan, in his turn, is the first individual poet known by name – it is also on him that the emergence of lyricism in China, on the one hand, and the romantic paradigm of poet-suicide, on the other, are fathered. Finally, contemporary author Yu Jian, to whose work I will return more extensively later, is one of most

<sup>6</sup> All citations from the book come from the edition: Li Hongwei 2017. Page numbers are indicated in parentheses.

<sup>7</sup> Zhuangzi 2013: 72, transl. Burton Watson. I thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing in the association with *Zhuangzi*.



vocal critics of the tradition that grew out of Qu's legacy and an advocate of bringing poetry back to its pre-lyrical condition.

The greatest ambition of the King is not power/knowledge itself but immortality which, he conceives, can be achieved through it. Before making his name in the world of IT, he was a respected literature professor of the most prestigious university in the country. He had studied history in China and philosophy in England and had done his PhD in literature in the US. He was considered a great authority in the humanities. He abandoned his academic career at the age of 36 to launch a company called Imperial Culture (*Diguo wenhua* 帝国文化). Li Pulei used to work in his company for some time as an editor and was one of the boss's favorites, but he quit when he realized that the company's projects started to "resemble the nightmarish Matrix" (p. 94) and he took up a job at the National Library instead.

Imperial Culture became famous for its mobile phone application "Emperor Penguin" (EP) which allowed for communication only between strangers. Whenever any private, individual connection between two people was established, they were automatically thrown out from the chat. The application "produced a feeling of collectiveness based on the elimination of otherness; everybody in the group felt unique, while at the same time enjoying conversations with people who were like her/himself" (p. 81). The product proved to be a tremendous success and its creator was hailed as the King of virtual space.

The Community of Consciousness was the King's second big undertaking. Based on the observations of the functioning of "Emperor Penguin", the Community was created with the use of the most advanced technologies as an attempt to turn the history of humanity back to the moment before individuality, language, lyricism, and death appeared on earth, and thus make his dream of immortality come true. Li Pulei in one of his analytic monologues, inscribes this project into the Biblical myth of Babel:

How is it possible that common people don't die? Unless they dissolve like a drop of water in an ocean – these words of Deng Ken reverberated in Li Pulei's mind every now and then, stimulating his excitement. What if, through language, one could melt all individual consciousnesses into one collective consciousness. And through collective consciousness, retrieve the pre-Babelian state on earth, and unite the entire humankind in one language, in one script. [...] The aim [of the Community of Consciousness] is to achieve the unity of humankind through script/language. Then, common people (*fanren* 凡人) will be all people (*suoyou de ren* 所有的人), and all people are obviously eternal, all people naturally don't die (p. 171).

The explicit association of the King's enterprise with one of the foundational myths of Western philosophy may appear surprising, given that in the novel, literary-historical reflection is in general expressed in the language specific for the Chinese traditional theory of poetry and placed in a local cultural context. This is in line with a view shared by many comparatists who hold that Chinese and Western poetry have radically different origins: Chinese poetry originates in expressive, subjective lyricism, while Western poetry originates in descriptive, objectivized mimetism<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, it is also important to remember that the "lyricization of China" (*Zhongguo de shuqinghua* 中国的抒情化), in David Wang Der-wei's 王德伟 phrase, is a phenomenon that actually took place as late as in the first half

<sup>8</sup> Sun 2006, cf. Gu 2005, Zhang 2012: ch1.

of the 20th century, as part of Chinese poetry's search for a new identity and was inspired largely by Western poetry or retroactively influenced by the Western reception of Chinese classical poetry, the most famous case being Ezra Pound's work. It was in this encounter with Western Romantic and Modernist lyricism that many Chinese authors started to rediscover the long neglected lyrical source of Chinese poetry, which for centuries was trapped in what they saw as ossified formalism. *Shi yan zhi* 诗言志 ('poetry expresses [subjective] mind'), the formula recorded first in the *Zuozhuan* 左传 (The Commentary of Zuo) and *Shangshu* 尚书 (The Book of Documents), was extensively discussed by figures such as Zhou Zuoren 周作人 and Wen Yiduo 闻一多. Others, including Shen Congwen 沈从文, Lu Xun 鲁迅, Feng Zhi 冯至, Liang Zongdai 梁宗岱, and Bian Zhilin 卞之琳, mobilized other important traditional notions, such as *xing* 兴 (translated variously as: 'evocation', 'energy', 'inspiration', 'excitement', 'emotion', etc.) and *yuan* 怨 ('complaint', 'resentment') from the ancient treatise *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龙 (Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons). In many cases, in their explorations they availed themselves of Western literary theories and described their findings using Western categories. Liang Zongdai, for instance, wrote on *xing* 兴 as of the counterpart of the Symbolist notion of the symbol<sup>9</sup>. Traditional Chinese and modernist Western discourse merged to such a degree that in the methodological awareness of contemporary authors they generally function as one broad notion of lyricism. As we can already see from the draft, Yuwen Wanghu, too, is a hybrid character who reflects general cultural and literary-theoretical awareness of modern Chinese poets, although it is difficult to assess to what extent this hybridity was part of Li Hongwei's strategy of constructing the literary reality, and to what extent it mirrors author's own inherently syncretic thinking in which the coexistence of Western and Chinese elements is hardly ever consciously problematized.

The poet shares the King's dream of immortality, but he believes that eternal life can be achieved only by means of individual effort. The great community he too expects to emerge as a result of the development of information technologies should be a community whose main goal is to provide an optimal environment for individual growth. Yuwen Wanghu is younger by 20 years than the King and, as Li Pulei manages to establish with the help of two policemen, he was a student at another top university in China when the King was starting his career in IT. They became acquainted through Yuwen's teacher. Yuwen joined the Empire Company, and it was he who first put forward the ideal of great unity, which inspired the King. Together, they published a book series EP Classics meant to popularize great ancient epics of different nations and ethnic groups, including Maya Indians and the Chinese ethnic minority Yi 彝, which testifies to their common interest in the earliest forms of poetry as a community-building force and integral part of everyday social life. Yet, in unclear circumstances, their ways parted. The King continued his efforts to turn back history, and Yuwen Wanghu, choosing a lonely "chant" over "submission" (cf. point 3 in the draft), went ahead toward individual immortality through lyric poetry as in Horace's famous "Ode 3.30": *Exegi monumentum aere perennius [...] non omnis moriar* [I have created a monument more lasting than bronze [...] I will not wholly die], until he discovered a devastating

<sup>9</sup> This paragraph draws on Wang 2018: 3–65, which offers a comprehensive account of the discussion on lyricism in early 20th-century China, including its local and global inspirations. See also: Wang 2015, Daruvala 2000 (esp. ch3, on Zhou Zuoren), Li Dian 2019 (on Wen Yiduo).

truth: that from the moment they parted, his life and his career were entirely controlled by the King. He realizes this when shortly before the award ceremony he receives a letter with a draft of the Nobel lecture the King wrote for him twenty years earlier. The King's draft, dated with the year 2029, overlaps with his own notes.

Taking up Li Pulei's Biblical association, one can say that the King and the poet both struggle with the legacy of Babel. The King tries to invalidate the long centuries of humanity's existence in geographical and linguistic dispersion and recreate the pre-Babellian community. The poet, conversely, acknowledges this legacy, but wants to overcome it, transforming the small brick of his individual language into a new, stronger and higher tower. Finally, however, both end up, in Lu Yan's 鲁艳 words, as all "human beings sitting at the feet of Babel and looking up [into the sky]" (Lu 2018: 143). Ironically, the King dies an individual death, and the poet finds himself living a deindividualized life. Toward the end of the book, Li Pulei meets both of them, reconciled in their technologically supported afterlife by the common experience of failure, to learn all the intricacies of their mutual relationships and hear their request that he, Pulei, become the new king. This brings us to point 4 in the Nobel draft, on which I will elaborate later, that is Asimov's characters, sometimes referred to as "immature Gods": Odeen, "the Rational" – represented by the King; Dua, "the Emotional" – represented by Yuwen; and Tritt, "the Parental" – Li Pulei.

Nevertheless, at the point where we left him at the beginning of this section, with Yuwen Ran at his side and the Nobel lecture draft in his hands, Li Pulei has no clue of all of this. To be ready for this final confrontation, he must experience firsthand the history of lyrical poetry with all its traps and paradoxes accumulated in Yuwen Wanghu's biography which he tries to reconstruct from the scattered pieces of information and moderately helpful hints provided by Yuwen.

## A funeral in utopia

The first thread Li Pulei follows is Yuwen Wanghu's opus magnum for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize – a magnificent epos *Knight Dada* (Chin. *Dada qishi* 鞑鞑骑士). This long poem is a story of a young man from a remote rural area who leaves his girlfriend to attend a university in the capital city. They depart on the bank of a river which turns out to be the River of Time. When the protagonist crosses the bridge, he finds himself in war-torn imperial China seven centuries back. He is captured by an army, imprisoned, and finally taught the art of war. Knight Dada – for this is how people call the mysterious time traveler – forges a brilliant military career, but he cannot forget the woman he once abandoned. He sets out on a return journey into the future with the flow of the River of Time to find her. But he does not know where to get out on the river bank. Wherever he sets foot on dry land, he always misses the correct place in time by some years. Finally, when Dada reaches the year 2100, the river disappears, and he is left alone among people from the future like a castaway from another era. He does not find his girlfriend, but instead meets her granddaughter Huaxun 华寻. One day, they decide to visit the place where Huaxun's grandma and Dada lived together, called Indefinite City (*Buding cheng* 不定城). When the Knight

sees the place ruined and abandoned, he collapses and takes his life, leaving precise instructions about his funeral rituals, which Huaxun faithfully follows.

Might this be the story of Yuwen Wanghu?, wonders Li Pulei as he accompanies Yuwen Ran first to the crematory and later to Yuwen's hometown on vast grasslands to participate in the funeral ceremony, which the poet, like Knight Dada, planned in detail. Li's journey is like a journey in time. The community to which Yuwen's family belongs is almost untouched with technological development. It resembles early societies from utopian narratives, without written history and culture, cultivating their local rituals and oral poetry, chanted in a language that Li Pulei does not understand. In light of Yuwen's draft, one can venture that this is the perfectly harmonious society of the Golden Age of Confucian utopia whose legacy Confucius believed to be preserved in the *Shijing*. A society to which there is no return. Once you disconnect from it, you will never be part of it again. Once you develop your own language, you will never understand the ancient chant. The only way to end this existential exile is suicide, as in the funeral song of Huaxun in Knight Dada:

Ah, Knight, please burn away together with the roses  
 your silhouette like a lightning, your horse's hooves like spring thunders  
 you passed the reap of time and were granted the blessing of grasslands  
 Whenever I recall your face, you will come with the mountain winds  
 their whistle will raise you from the ashes  
 you will get onto the horseback again and gallop across the earth (p. 30).

The presence of Qu Yuan in the draft is thus not difficult to explain. The ancient poet in exile and author of the elegiac long poem, *Lisao* 离骚<sup>10</sup>, who ended his life by throwing himself into the river Miluo, as mentioned earlier, is the archetype of the lyric poet in China. Dada's and Yuwen's stories echo his dramatic fates. A less obvious thing is the appearance of Yu Jian whom Yuwen enigmatically paired with Qu.

To shed some light on it, we need to return to the Chinese poetry scene of the late 20th century and the dispute known as the Intellectual-Popular polemic. In this polemic, the said two attributes of the lyrical poet, exile and suicide, were among the most sensitive flashpoints. Popular poets, represented by Yu Jian among others, perceived them as a sort of foundational myths of the Intellectual camp. In the eyes of the Popular faction, Intellectuals were self-imposed inheritors of Obscure poets (*menglong shiren* 朦胧诗人) many of whom found themselves in exile as a consequence of the massacre on Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989, including Bei Dao 北岛, Yang Lian 杨炼, Duoduo 多多, on the one hand, and Haizi, a talented young poet, who took his life just two months before the fateful June Fourth, on the other. In his rhetorical crusade against Intellectuals, Yu Jian assiduously traced the roots of their, as he saw it, misguided attitudes back to the earliest tradition of Chinese lyrical poetry. To him, the lyrical misinterpretation of *shi yan zhi* 诗言志 ('poetry expresses mind') was one of the greatest misunderstandings in literary history. Self-indulging in expressing individuality, he believed, led to the degeneration of poetry. Also, the sole focus on mind "made poetry turn into a bodiless language play" (Yu 2004: 84). In a nutshell, poetry should not be a communication with oneself but a communication with, and of, the world.

<sup>10</sup> The many alternative translations of the title include: "Encountering Sorrow", "Sorrow after Departing", "Sorrow at Parting". A comprehensive discussion on the meaning of the title can be found in Williams 2019.

As an alternative for “poetry expresses mind”, Yu proposed another definition: *shi yan ti* 诗言体, which translates as “poetry expresses body/presence”. This conveys a vision of poetry writing as growing directly from the objective reality and evolving with it (ibid.: 81–98). “Poetry is a verb” (*shi shi dongci* 诗是动词, lit. ‘movement word / word-that-moves’), as he famously claims elsewhere (ibid.: 130)<sup>11</sup>. Going one step further, especially in the context of Yu’s more recent meta-literary output and his artistic turn towards what he calls poetry’s shamanism, he may be considered a proponent of the verse’s return to the sphere of epiphanic ritual as part of everyday reality of early human communities. In his postulates of poetry’s reconnection with the stream of life, Yu also dismissed metaphor, to which he devoted one of his best known essays from the 1990s: “Reject Metaphor” (*jujue yinyu* 拒绝隐喻); this will be important for us soon in the context of the final conversation between the King, Yuwen Wanghu, and Li Pulei, anticipated in point 4 of Yuwen’s Nobel lecture draft, where the notion of metaphor reemerges.

Although Li Pulei is not exactly a poet, or at least not a practicing one, so to speak, his sensibility too was shaped by the kind of existential lyricism embodied by Yuwen and Dada. In the final scene, the King reminds him that several years earlier, when a woman named Du Xian 杜娴 left him, Pulei wrote “Twelve Pieces of Lyric in the Face of Death” (Chin. *Mi-anxiang siwang shi'er ci shuqing* 面向死亡十二次抒情). The essay is included as an appendix after the narrative part of the novel. It is composed of twelve semi-independent sections whose style and prose-poetic form might be compared to Yu Jian’s signature work “File 0” (Chin. *0 Dang'an* 0档案), but the content has little to do with Yu’s perspective on what poetry should (not) be. The twelve parts refer – as Li Hongwei puts it – to various “unusual ways of dying” (*feizhengchang siwang fangshi* 非正常死亡方式) of contemporary Chinese poets (Li [&] Shu 2017), whose identities the reader is expected to guess from scattered biographical facts and intertextual allusions. This dramatic riddle is not very difficult to solve given that “lists of unusual deaths of contemporary Chinese poets” (*Zhongguo dang-dai feizhengchang siwang shiren mingdan* 中国当代非正常死亡诗人名单) with some details of these deaths quite commonly circulate on Chinese online forums, usually starting from Kedou 蝌蚪 (1954–1987) or Haizi (1964–1989) and ending with Xu Lizhi 许立志 (1990–2014), Chen Chao 陈超 (1958–2014) or Wang Guozhen 汪国真 (1956–2015)<sup>12</sup>.

Needless to say, the author’s implicit assumption that the readers will identify poets by their deaths rather than by their works is problematic in many ways. Michelle Yeh (1995) and Maghiel van Crevel (2008: ch3) wrote extensively on various cultural, psychological, and ethical aspects of suicide as part of the social image of poethood in China, and how an author’s death translates back into the (mis)understanding of their work, turning it into what van Crevel in his discussion of Haizi called thanatography. Crudely put, with regard to poetry, Li Pulei at the beginning of the investigation represents average social awareness of lyricism as an “unusual way of dying” in a utopian landscape. This image will be gradually verified as he proceeds with the task but Li will never entirely free himself of this dubious ideal.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Maghiel van Crevel’s translation of “File 0” and the discussion on ‘words-that-name’ and ‘words that move’ in his “Translator’s Introduction” (van Crevel 2001).

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. [http://book.ifeng.com/psl/zjdt/200808/0805\\_3552\\_695894.shtml](http://book.ifeng.com/psl/zjdt/200808/0805_3552_695894.shtml), <https://www.zhihu.com/question/29889142/answer/45937358>, <https://bbs.lingyi.org/thread-374619-1-1.html>. Or insert “中国当代非正常死亡诗人名单” in Google Search or any other search engine.

## The dystopia of eternity

As Li Pulei tries to follow the love thread in Yuwen Wanghu's biography, suspecting that his suicide might have had a romantic motivation, namely the poet's unfulfilled love, he delves deeper and deeper into dark secrets of the Empire. The landscape of its semi-virtual reality is furnished with objects typical for antiutopian and dystopian narratives, including Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, or Czesław Miłosz's *Captive Mind*, this last being perhaps the most accurate association due to its focus on the fates of writers in a totalitarian system.

Just like in the stories of Miłosz's protagonists nicknamed Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta, who swallow the pills of Murti-Bing and thus are drawn into a tortuous romance with the communist state, Yuwen Wanghu's life is inextricably linked to the system. In the Empire, people do not swallow pills but have crystals of consciousness implanted in their brains instead. The operation is not compulsory, quite the contrary, most citizens eagerly subject themselves to it. It is an important initiation ceremony, a coming-of-age rite performed when a child reaches 12 years old. The Implantation Day (*zhiru ri* 植入日) is described in another appendix, which includes three individual stories of people who joined the Community of Consciousness in their early youth. Yuwen Wanghu was in fact one of the first users of the crystals. And their first victim.

This stage of Li Pulei's investigation overlaps with point 3 of Yuwen's Nobel lecture draft: "lyricism: one and many". This may be interpreted as referring to the complex relationship between an individual and community, or, alternatively, as the opposition of two visions of society: one based on depersonalized unity, and the other based on individualized plurality. As Li continues his survey, he sees the King as a dictator who wants to get total control over the homogenized society, and the poet as a lonely guard of independent thinking. Three standard motifs of dystopian narratives seem to confirm this picture: the dictator's control over citizens' lives, his gradual erasing of the language, and a great book burning.

In a no longer published magazine "Information" (Chin. *Xinxi* 信息), formerly edited by the King himself, Li Pulei comes across an interview with young Yuwen Wanghu conducted by a female journalist Qiao Yina 乔伊娜. He finds out that the woman died soon after that in a car accident and that Yuwen was traveling with her. When Li grows assured in his hypothesis that Qiao Yina might have been the poet's love and the true heroine of Knight Dada, the woman unexpectedly visits him and reveals the truth about the accident. Her death was feigned. It was only her avatar that was present on the spot. The real Qiao Yina was not even injured and after the accident she secretly left the Empire for Ireland. The King arranged her "death" to arouse lyrical sentiment in Yuwen Wanghu. The tragedy was expected to make him a great poet and won him the Nobel Prize the King had envisioned for him. It was an experiment by which the King wanted to prove that he could take control over individual biographies (manipulating romantic love) and over the history of literature (manipulating the Romantic paradigm), and subsequently over humankind at large.

Several hours later, at night, when Li Pulei still meditates on Yuwen's fate which he aptly likens to the *Truman Show*, a strange guest breaks into his house. The man introduces himself as hacker Alpha (*A'erfa* 阿尔法). Alpha discovered an algorithm by which the King

was gradually erasing “useless” words from people’s memories. The King believes that together with the words, their designates will disappear as well; then, the world will return to its pre-lyrical state, and death will no longer have dominion of it. The core idea was borrowed from Li Pulei’s old essay “The Blueprint and the Foundations of the Empire’s Future” (Chin. *Diguo weilai lantu yu genji* 帝国未来蓝图与根基) written to bring out the crucial role of preserving language in preserving the beautiful complexity and diversity of the world, but the King appropriated it for exactly the opposite goal.

In section three, I invoked in passing Yu Jian’s “Reject Metaphor” (Yu 2004: 125–136) as an important voice in the discussion on *shi yan zhi* 诗言志 (‘poetry expresses mind’), to which Yuwen Wanghu’s Nobel draft took us. In this essay, Yu postulates the necessity of returning to the utopian unity of the world and the word, which – as we learn from his other writings – is best preserved in spoken local dialects. Metaphor stretches the distance between signifier and signified and disrupts the direct flow of sense between matter and language, antagonizing them. Poetry should not metaphorize but “name” (*mingming* 命名) or “name anew” (*chongxin mingming* 重新命名<sup>13</sup>), that is rejoin objects and phenomena with language and retrieve a metonymical (*zhuanyu* 转喻) continuity and contiguity between them, insists Yu. Li Pulei’s “Blueprint” was built on similar assumptions. Its author believed that in order to protect signifieds, one has to protect their signifiers, that is names, because if the names are forgotten, automatically, their designates will be forgotten too. Like Yu Jian, Li Pulei was amazed by the local language used for rituals by Yuwen’s relatives on the remote grasslands. But Yuwen, based on his firsthand experience of the mechanisms of power/knowledge, was well aware that this is a way to nowhere. Seeing that metonymy is a double-edged sword, which in the hands of a dictator may turn into a destructive weapon, in the final point of his Nobel draft he reconsiders the “possibility of metaphor”. This implies disconnecting again the word and the world and allowing for dynamic interplay between them so that they never congeal into a totalitarian narrative. This is his last message for his imagined audience at the Stockholm Concert Hall and for Li Pulei, who is yet to understand it.

The second day after Alpha’s visit, to explain what happened between the King and the poet that the two friends turned into enemies, Li Pulei decides to dig deeper into back issues of *Information* and poetry books the two protagonists edited together, published by a press called EP (Empire Penguin). But in the digital era where everything is available directly via crystals of consciousness, paper too has been rendered useless. To get *Information*, Li Pulei follows policeman Li Wei 李伟 to a place called Paper Crematory (*zhi zang chang* 纸葬厂), where the magazines along with thousands of books, journals, and paper documents are waiting to be thrown into flames. Dozens of silent men are working day and night putting the paper media into big furnaces that supply the country with energy. They are forbidden to talk. Li Wei explains that they are former professors who volunteered for this job out of their deep love for books. They are like parents who lost their children, he clarifies. When parents know that they cannot bring their child back to life, they want at least to bury their son or daughter with their own hands. This brings them some consolation.

At this point, the reader roughly familiar with antitotalitarian discourse in an Eastern and Central European context is tempted to treat the novel as allegorical criticism of the

<sup>13</sup> Cf. van Creveld 2008: 374–375.

Chinese authorities, perhaps interpreting the Empire's virtual reality as an allusion to the widely contested social credit system, and linking Yuwen's suicide to the lack of freedom and persecutions of artists in the totalitarian state. President Xi Jinping's 习近平 well-known predilection for poetry and its instrumental use in his political rhetoric make him a good candidate for a possible prototype of the King. Xi's famous predecessor, Mao Zedong 毛泽东, himself author of many romantic lyrical poems, who later almost destroyed poetry during the Cultural Revolution, is another possible candidate. The story of Yuwen Wanghu and Qiao Yina, in its turn, could be associated with the story of the communist poet Wen Jie 闻捷 told in a fictionalized form in the first novel published after the Cultural Revolution: Dai Houying's 戴厚英 *Death of a Poet* (Chin. *Shiren zhi si* 诗人之死)<sup>14</sup>. Dai, similarly to Qiao, recalls Wen from the perspective of a woman who first acted against the poet and later fell in love with him. During the 1968 campaign against "revisionism", Dai is assigned to investigate the case of Wen, but toward the end of the campaign she becomes sympathetic to him; eventually, they are sent to the same cadre school and apply to get married. Qiao agrees to participate in the King's experiment during which she becomes aware of her love for Yuwen, but it is already too late for this love to change anything in the King's total project. Just like Yuwen, from a loyal collaborator, she turns into a victim.

Li Pulei's reasoning, too, follows the dystopian clue. Moreover, in the materials stored in the Paper Crematory he finds shocking evidence that it was Yuwen Wanghu, and not the King, who designed the Empire with a similar intention: to build the "Great Unity of Information" (*xinxi datong* 信息大同), that is, realize the ancient Confucian ideal of the Great Unity (*datong* 大同) with the use of hypermodern tools. This unity, however, was imagined by him as a community of independent individuals who play out their singular intellectual and spiritual potential in an unlimited horizon of knowledge, and thus try to arrive at personal immortality. Just like Li Pulei's essay on language, Yuwen's ideal was hijacked by the King and turned into its opposite. It appears logical to Li Pulei that in such a case the King invented for Yuwen a sophisticated death to humiliate him, because he recognized in the poet his most dangerous enemy. But things are even more complex than that and soon the dystopian image of technocracy becomes overwritten with one more layer.

## Life as the Truman Show and death as a lyrical force

The Romantic paradigm of the poet as a knight errant, faithful lover, and lonely warrior against the oppressive system is undermined in the final scene. Shortly after leaving the Paper Crematory, Li Pulei learns about the King's death. He arranges an appointment with the King's secretary Deng Ken 邓肯 to confirm with her his recent findings. To his surprise, Deng takes him to the King's office where he meets the King and the poet – in their virtual, immaterial bodies, "sitting" at the table and waiting for him. They are presented

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed discussion of the biographical background of Dai's novel, see: Leung 2017: 64–68, Wang 2004: 236–237.



as pure consciousnesses retrieved from their crystals of consciousness, albeit not without some technical flaws. For example, Yuwen does not remember the car accident, because when it happened, he was still using the most primitive first-generation crystal, not entirely compatible with the most recent 3G technologies. Thus, the crucial event of his life remains inaccessible to himself, like Knight Dada's Indefinite City, constituting an indelible and undecidable trauma.

This closing scene was very likely inspired by two current scientific projects: the Genève-based project of human brain modelling called Blue Brain on the one hand, and Elon Musk's Neuralink, which is aimed at developing implantable interfaces for brain-machine communication, on the other. Incidentally, these two associations perhaps may also help explain the plot's timeline, as they are closely related to two very symbolic dates in scientific futurology. According to Ray Kurzweil, famous American inventor, futurist, and director of engineering in Google, in the year 2029 (i.e., the year of Yuwen's car accident) the reverse engineering of the human brain will be completed, brain implants will allow for users' total immersion in virtual reality, and computers will catch up with humans in intelligence. And in 2049 (i.e., the year before Yuwen's Nobel Prize), the amount of 1,000 US dollars will buy computing power equivalent to the combined capacity of all of humanity and foglets will be in use, that is nanorobots that can at any time produce any physical structure, including human bodies (Kurzweil 2006). All of these expected inventions raise ethical and philosophical questions which Li Hongwei tries to address if only tentatively and with an optimism that at times may seem to be bordering on naivety.

The King patiently explains the technical details of crystals of consciousness, the Community of Consciousness, and mobile souls. He also tells Li Pulei of his desire to achieve immortality and reveals the reasons that made him start erasing language, the way he planned Yuwen's career, and the role of Yuwen in the creation of the Empire. Yuwen Wanghu confirms everything except one point, where he firmly interrupts the King's narrative. Whereas the King finds his biographical experiment successful, the poet maintains that he managed to sabotage it. Suicide, he insists, was his own decision. Death was the strongest act of individual will against the total system. The last lyrical force that could allow him to break out of the cold reality of the cosmic Truman Show. But it is not only his own dignity and freedom that were at stake. He hoped that this lyrical force of death would be the thing that would lead Li Pulei through utopian and dystopian landscapes of the Empire to the place of their final conversation and would help him become a new king to guide the Empire onto a new, lyrical track:

I will not try to "reincarnate" my consciousness inside yours like the King [considered to attempt], but such a death [Yuwen's suicide] will make you forever remember Knight Dada, and will make its vast lyricism become a deep background of your consciousness (p. 230).

Commenting on the lyricism which finally prevails over Yuwen Wanghu's fascination with technological developments and the new perspectives on social interactions they open, Hong Zhigang 洪治纲 and Wang Zhenfeng 王振锋 (2018) construe Yuwen as a modernist figure modeled after Walter Benjamin's flaneur described in the philosopher's case study on Charles Baudelaire, "a lyric poet in the era of high capitalism". They argue:

On the one hand, these flâneurs safeguarded their individuality, abandoning themselves in personal freedom, defying the order of the modern city and its various constraints. On the other hand, they were utterly dependent on the uproarious masses, and desired to keep their privilege of external observers inside these masses. In the novel, Yuwen Wanghu is exactly this kind of character. On the one hand, he frequently switches on his “mobile soul” to wander in the Collective Consciousness, as a participant and observer of the era of information. On the other hand, he all the time sticks to the most “primitive” way of life; he uses a table from the Han dynasty, fired pottery, and books collected with a great effort from various places – like waste collectors in Benjamin’s essay, he collects “garbage” of the era of information: books and scriptures (Hong [ & ] Wang 2008: 46–47).

This is, I believe, good intuition, which brings out the apparent contradictions and tensions inscribed in Yuwen’s literary pursuit and his poetic escapes from the overwhelming hyperdeveloped landscape to his “primitive” rural paradise, but perhaps to get a more precise description of his attitude, we should go a little bit further following the path of the philosophy of the Frankfurt school, namely to the work of Theodor Adorno. To Benjamin, the ambiguous relationship between the poet and the masses serves the poet’s aesthetic goals, which is apparently not the case in Yuwen Wanghu’s story where ethical, existential, and political goals are at stake. The protagonist does not abandon his social engineering ambitions and wants to use the lyrical power of death to shape society of the era of information as its “unacknowledged legislator”, in Shelley’s famous phrase from the “Defence of Poetry”. He realizes that he cannot do this by himself, because he has “already lost [his] intuition of the Community of Consciousness, and the acute perception of the potential of crystals of consciousness” (p. 227), so he tries to achieve his goal through Li Pulei, whom he gives (literally) a hell of lyrical education. As in Adorno’s 1957 essay “Lyric Poetry and Society”, that which is the most lyrical is, paradoxically, also the most social in poetry, making poetry an indirect but surprisingly effective form of sociocybernetics.

Let me quote the core passage from Adorno’s work, which, conceivably, is the source of the novel’s title. Li Hongwei never credits Adorno, he only mentions that as a student he stumbled somewhere on the formula “the king and lyric poetry” and it has since reverberated in his mind (Shanghai Zuoji Wang 2017). Still, the connection seems quite clear:

You may accuse me of so sublimating the relationship of lyric and society in this definition out of fear of a crude sociology that there is really nothing left of it; it is precisely what is not social in the lyric poem that is now to become its social aspect. You could call my attention to Gustav Doré’s caricature of the arch-reactionary deputy whose praise of the ancient régime culminated in the exclamation: “And to whom, gentlemen, do we owe the revolution of 1789 if not to Louis XVI!”. You could apply that to my view of lyric poetry and society: in my view, you could say, society plays the role of the executed king and the lyric the role of his opponents; but lyric poetry, you say, can no more be explained on the basis of society than the revolution can be made the achievement of the monarch it deposed and without whose inanities it might not have occurred at that time (Adorno 1991: 42).

Many things in the further conversation between the three protagonists suggest that in the end the dialectics that earlier in the novel swallowed the Romantic paradigm of poethood and the Enlightenment paradigm of kingship will be further destabilized, giving way to some postmodern play, like, for instance, in Auster’s fiction, or – to reach for an example

from Chinese literature – in various phantasmagoric investigations in Can Xue’s 残雪 novels inspired by Franz Kafka and Bruno Schulz among others. This would also be in line with Adorno’s vision of anti-systemic and anti-progressive “negative dialectics” which was one of the philosophies that paved the way for postmodernism in Europe. And in line with the intertextual suggestion in Yuwen’s draft, which leads to *The Gods Themselves*. In Asimov’s novel, triads consisting of the Rational, the Emotional, and the Parental do not aim at creating a new, better species in the next generation that would synchronize the Rational with the Emotional but rather at giving birth to an analogous triad (a perfect “family” consists of three adults and three children, each of different kind: the Rational, the Emotional, and the Parental) and strive to preserve the complex dynamic. Only after fulfilling this social responsibility, can they enter the higher level of existence and merge into a “hard one”, in contradistinction to “soft ones” to whom they belong now and whose life is entirely controlled by the class of “hard ones”. Thus, development is perceived as something personal, and not societal or historical; individuals evolve, whereas the social organism retains its dynamic constant, providing a relatively stable scaffolding for individual growth.

Nevertheless, nothing of this happens in Li Hongwei’s novel. Instead, Li Pulei’s thought takes twists and turns in an attempt to produce a neat synthesis, to continue in the jargon created by Hegel and criticized by Adorno, of the two antithetic figures: the King and the poet, and push their joint enterprise further, toward the next level of development. This attempt, unsurprisingly, fails and leads to the repetition of cultural history at the metalevel: that is, overcoming “meta-Enlightenment” paradigm (which contains explicit critique and awareness of the limitations of the enlightened mind but essentially operates according to the same general models and mechanisms) by “meta-Romantic” paradigm (which contains explicit critique and awareness of the limitations of the Romantic model but still cannot liberate itself from them). Let’s have a closer look at the conversation between the three protagonists.

From the very beginning of this peculiar confrontation, the relationship between the three characters is increasingly complicated. The King reveals his lyrical face when he speaks of the reason that he chose death rather than immortality for himself, although he could easily access technologies that could extend his life:

There is no particular reason for this. It cannot be sufficiently explained in rational terms. You can say that it is my personal eccentricity. All in all, everybody has their own oddity. It is a drop of Eastern mysticism in my blood (p. 219).

He also reveals the unlyrical face of Yuwen Wanghu, disclosing that the poet in fact provoked the biographical experiment of which he would later fall victim. The two had once bet: Yuwen had agreed that if the King would prove that he could control human fates, Yuwen would return to the Empire and become his successor. One thing he did not predict was that the King would want to prove this using himself, Yuwen, as an example. On top of that, the King acknowledges the importance of lyricism and considers lyrical intuition as the crucial characteristic of his potential successor. He is not looking for a person who will agree with him in everything. On the contrary, he needs an individual with strong character and clear views, even if these radically differ from his own. He speaks as if he already possessed the highest competence of God that allows him to come to terms with a logical

paradox – maintaining his own indivisible omnipotence without limiting the free will of his people:

[A thing that] cannot be falsified [as in the falsifiability theory] makes no sense. An empire that cannot accept an unexpected turn of events is not a real empire. A real king must embrace all uncertainties, all unpredictable challenges. Not everybody gets the opportunity to change the fates of the entire humankind (p. 224).

In a sense, the King appears to be less despotic than the poet, who still entertains his somewhat dictatorial if noble legislator dream.

Yet, after all of those revelations and complications, nothing actually changes. The conversation does not enter any new level. Instead, before his final choice, whether to accept the virtual “throne” or not, Li Pulei produces a eulogy to lyricism that pleases both the King and the poet.

I want to add a few words. Be it an individual, or humanity as a collective, when they become aware of their limited existence, and face it without fear, without flinching, ready to accept any possibility, and even if they fully realize its horrible consequences, they still don't abandon their attempts, and if they treat seriously any attempt and any insight, without imagining [reactions of] their [potential] audience, without reckless acting, without fluke mind, exhaustlessly – such an attitude toward the world, toward oneself, isn't it lyricism? Knight Dada traveled in time. He did not manage to find his beloved woman, but he became a famous warrior and when he heard the vocation of death, he did not shrink. Yuwen Wanghu was moving forward according to the draft; drawing enlightenment from the surrounding world, he wrote a poem, a poem given to him by life itself, even the King could not grab his hand and tell him how to write. He fell in love with Qiao Yina, who became his source of joy, grief, and despair. Even the King couldn't feel these feelings brought by time and taken away by time for him. When he saw an opportunity to die, he didn't try to dodge, simply took it. Such a behavior, such a life – isn't it what we call lyric poetry? (p. 233).

We do not know Li Pulei's decision. The narrative part of the novel ends with a countdown after which he should give a final answer. I submit that the novel would gain much from an even more open ending, that is without this pathetic peroration by Li Pulei, leaving the interpretation of the difficult liaisons between lyrical poetry and technologically supported power/knowledge to the reader without disambiguating them, which disambiguation, as suggested above, essentially boils down to the revival of the (meta-)Romantic paradigm as an antidote to the (meta-)Enlightenment paradigm. Still, literature is not an all request radio show, and it behooves one to assume that if the author wrote this passage and put it in such a strategic place, it was probably somehow important to him. We can of course only speculate why it was so. In the final section I propose one hypothesis that I find quite credible, not least because it resonates with the general situation and concerns on the Chinese poetry scene and, as the book's reception illustrates, with the expectations of its most demanding and sensitive audiences, namely poets and poetry critics.

## A dialectical turn?

From the early 20th century, for several decades poetry discourse in China was locked in dichotomous schemes: Chinese tradition vs. Western influence, classical vs. vernacular, official vs. unofficial, (politically and socially) engaged vs. disengaged, and finally, as a contamination of these oppositions, Intellectual vs. Popular. This is not an indictment. During the much less than 100 years between Xinhai Revolution (*Xinhai geming* 辛亥革命) in 1911–1912 and the end of the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent beginning of “reform and opening-up” (*Gaige kaifang* 改革开放) in 1978, to use a very rough timeframe, Chinese poetry reset itself or, indeed was reset by history, twice and each time it had to invent itself almost from scratch, with one more juncture of radical self-reassessment after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. It is, therefore, small wonder that critics (perhaps more than poets themselves, although in practice most critics were also poets and vice versa) in each of these junctures felt it necessary to define first the poles and outer boundaries, that is external contours that would allow to sketch a new map. It is only recently that the situation has apparently become stable enough to focus more on the interior and on the complex field forces shaping the vast territory between the extreme points. In the early 21st century, it has become almost a must for commentators to celebrate the dynamic tension between oppositions and discuss the authors’ (in)ability to embrace, and tap into, the potential of this tension. Thus, confrontational dichotomy turned into what we may call an intrasubjective dialectics, namely one which is internalized by an individual who absorbs relatively small but diverse threads of the grand narratives that have already been largely processed and domesticated by the predecessors.

Poets born like Li Hongwei in the 1970s, that is the so-called post-70 (*70 hou* 后) generation, who entered the literary scene during, or shortly after, the last big polemic of the previous century, namely the polemic between Popular and Intellectual authors, are arguably the group most significantly influenced by this newly emergent dialectical discourse. They were, in a sense, expected to take the dialectical “step forward” in the development of poetry. Instead of entertaining the effective, clear-cut binary oppositions on which the older generation has been quite conveniently building, they were destined to silently struggle with dialectic tensions. As Zhang Qinghua 张清华 and Meng Fanhua 孟繁华 put it in their discussion of the relation between the Third Generation and the post-70 authors: “Apparently, peacefully and cautiously making one’s way into poetry world is to a certain degree dramatic too” (Zhang [&] Meng 2016: 22). In a similar spirit, Chen Zhongyi 陈仲义 describes the aesthetics of the post-70 poets as “the aesthetics of hesitation” (*youyu de meixue* 犹豫的美学) marked with an irresolvable conflict between constraint and liberation and between the anxiety of influence and the desire of succession (Chen 2008). The most vivid and precise account of their situation can be found in a famous essay by Huo Junming 霍俊明, a poet and critic born in the mid-1970s, who metaphorizes this hesitant aesthetic as the “poetics of the public square” (*guangchang shixue* 广场诗学). Comparing the representations of the square in the poetry of the post-70 authors and the older generation, especially in the works of Bei Dao and Ouyang Jianghe, Huo notes:

The public square of the post-70 poets is more interested in postindustrialism and in the urban context; it enquires into an awkward existence and spiritual experience of one generation. [...] Since the asceticism of the epoch of collectivism started to inevitably disintegrate, social trends have been increasingly shaped by commerce, money, material desire, utilitarianism. The “red” revolutionary education and traditional rural life instilled in them the spirit of sacrifice and pure ideals, but growing up in the ever more complicated social environment, they became a conscious but confused, idealistic but utilitarian, conservative but rebellious, silent but ostentatious generation (Huo 2011: 2).

Huo’s coeval He Guangshun 何光顺 seconds him:

Obviously, they still share the desire of classical poets or those representing the generations of the post-50 and post-60 to enter the history of literature, the anxiety of waiting, the unsettled consciousness of time, as well as the sense of mission and of their own prophetic role inherited from the ancient classics and traditional literati. At the same time, they also share the anxiety of competition and the anxiety of immersion in new media that is characteristic of the generations of the post-80 and post-90. Between the inherited historical mission and the anxieties of modernity, they have developed their own specific understanding of history. Their work extends as a bridge of communication or as a chasm of fracture between the ancient times and the modern and future time (He 2017: 42).

Echoes of this dialectical discourse reverberate in the academic interpretations of *The King and Lyric Poetry*, including Hong and Wang’s reading of Yuwen Wanghu’s story through the figure of flaneur, and in the many non-specialist reviews and comments by readers that circulate in virtual space. They are also present in Li Hongwei’s utterances about the book and his explanations of its dyadic title, and in the novel itself. In light of this, Li Pulei’s neat and tidy, idealistic final statement may seem all the more surprising, but we should take into account that this declaration does not concern his own role, which, Pulei feels, will be much more ambiguous than that of Yuwen Wanghu, if only because he will have to reconcile the contradictory elements within his own existential milieu. Yuwen and the King had each other as opponents to confront and thus clarify and reaffirm one’s own standpoint, while he, Pulei, is supposed to play out all these battles inside his own mind without any external point of reference. Even the Nobel Prize which had thus far been considered by many authors and readers a confirmation of one’s artistic success and a goal to pursue is ultimately abolished, in a tacit acknowledgment of the decay of intersubjective standards by which to assess a literary work or, in a more pessimistic interpretation, a tacit acknowledgment of the death of literature as such.

The Nobel Prize, on that note, has also been a point of contention among the Third Generation poets<sup>15</sup>, with some authors looking with admiration and perhaps silent hope in the direction of the Swedish Academy, while others ostentatiously turning their back at the “Western award”. This former attitude is usually associated with the Beijing-centered Intellectual camp, while this latter with the Popular faction, represented by Yu Jian, scattered across vast territories of *shi jianghu* 诗江湖 – which literally translates as “poetry rivers

<sup>15</sup> Julia Lovell’s book *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China’s Quest for Nobel Prize* (2006) offers an extensive discussion of China’s “Nobel Complex”, tracing its roots to the early 20th century and the circumstances of the country’s reentry into the international political, economic, and cultural realm.

and lakes” – as the unofficial literary scene is often referred to<sup>16</sup>. Awarding it to Yuwen who, judging by the themes and style of his writing, if he were not a fictitious character, would likely be among those troubadours of poetic rivers and lakes who programmatically ignore foreign honors, may be interpreted as another sign of the end of the era of dualisms.

Li Pulei, as we see him in the final scene of the book after the long lyrical journey in the footsteps of Yuwen Wanghu, represents a new type of post-heroic lyricist which replaced the Romantic model of a poet as a quixotic outcast who only has eyes for one ideal and is ready to die for it. He is an awkward giant of dialecticism who tries to hold the opposite forces in balance. Aware of the burden, “conscious and confused”, to borrow from Huo Junming’s essay on the post-70 poets, he hesitates before saying his last word.

Needless to say, this new model of poethood leaves much to be desired, and it is as convenient as it is simplistic. The younger generation in whose hands the afterlives of the older generation’s poetics have rested tends to romanticize the past, heroicizing but also conceptually simplifying it and presenting it as an era that naturally birthed distinct individualities with clear-cut choices to make in response to the events they witnessed. This is of course not a purely literary phenomenon, and it may be seen as a consequence of a broadly adopted intuitive historiosophy with its belief that the world inevitably evolves toward ever greater fragmentation and complexity and ever lesser innocence, a conviction that in the 19th century indirectly fed into the dogmas of social Darwinism, whose detrimental impact on Chinese culture is indisputable. Note how quickly Li Pulei comes to terms with all the intricacies of Yuwen’s and King’s biographies revealed during his investigations, disentangling them and bringing them down to an overconventionalized, sentimental pattern. As the past turns into a near-fairy-tale with a lucid message to modern humanity, the dialectical challenge of the present acquires a more dramatic dimension. This dramatic effect is strengthened in the end by the unfinished countdown. All of this resonates with another paradox nailed in Huo’s essay, that is his description of the generation of the post-70s as “silent but ostentatious”.

Again, there is nothing essentially wrong about it. Dialectics, especially negative dialectics as postulated by Adorno, may be constructive and artistically attractive. And it often works well in poetry. Still, nurturing in it for too long is not necessarily beneficial and may turn into a compulsive and unhealthy mental habit, making one unable to see and appreciate phenomena that do not fit its conceptual matrix which operates on an implicit assumption *tertium non datur*, as if the only available source of poetic material were the messy offshoots of the once polarized narratives, topics, and experiences inherited from one’s antecedents.

Interpreted as a map of the history of (Chinese) poetry, Yuwen Wanghu’s draft should perhaps be updated with one more point reflecting the most recent stage whose core paradigms have only started crystalizing themselves these years, partly shaped by the post-70 generation and partly by younger authors born in the 1980s and 1990s. To many of them writing is no longer a matter of consciously sustained and fueled dialectical conflict and/or (failed) dialectical synthesis but increasingly often one of productive symbiosis between poetry and other spheres of the modern reality which gives a promise of a significant transformation in poetry discourse through human poets’ interactions with non-human Others.

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<sup>16</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on the meaning and English translation of the term, see Maghiel van Crevel’s fieldwork essay, “Walk on the Wild Side” (2017).

These Others come from the realms as distant as, on the one hand, the world of nature which becomes inspiration for mind-blowing new ecopoetry, and, on the other hand, the domain of technology, including AI, whose mechanisms some authors try to experimentally incorporate in their work not just on the level of content but also as a poetic method that feeds into the very process of creation, enriching and diversifying textual constructions. These interactions give rise to many intriguing, unprecedented phenomena that await systematization and description. But, as Czesław Miłosz put it in *The World: A Naïve Poem*, “for today that would be too much, / I’ll tell the rest another time”<sup>17</sup>.

Li Hongwei’s novel offers a thought-provoking summation of how poetry’s and poets’ role in the world has been seen throughout the centuries in China. As such it prepares the ground for a more consistent reflection on another paradigm shift that is arguably occurring in (Chinese) poetry discourse and literary discourse at large as we speak. Likewise, the present essay hopes to provide a convenient point of departure for a broader research project focused on symbiotic processes in Chinese new poetry, questions they pose and inspirations they offer to poetry per se and to literary studies, especially as regards theoretical and methodological awareness of the discipline. A breathtaking sequel to *The King and Lyric Poetry* is being written before our eyes by (literary) life itself and witnessing it is both a priceless privilege and a titanic challenge for readers, critics, and scholars.

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<sup>17</sup> Miłosz 2005: 45, transl. Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass.



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