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New Dynamics: Chinese Women's Poetry Enacted

The article offers a preliminary investigation of the phenomenon of female-authored 'poetry theater' (*shige juchang*)¹ in the People's Republic of China. It discusses cross-genre explorations by a group of female poets, theater directors and artists who are all associated with the movement of 'women's poetry' (*nüxing shige*) that emerged in the 1980s in China. The discussion focuses on two performances based on female-authored poems, "Riding a Roller Coaster Flying Toward the Future" (2011) and "Roaming the Fuchun Mountains with Huang Gongwang" (2016), which resulted from the joint efforts of four women: the poet Zhai Yongming, the poet-scholar Zhou Zan, and the theater directors Cao Kefei and Chen Si'an. Their avant-garde experiments with poetical theater document the different ways in which poetry is being translated into images, sounds, or bodily movements on stage. The paper argues that poetic exploration of writing and reciting practices has gained new momentum from emerging intermedial, visual-verbal experiments. Furthermore, it claims that interest in 'poetry theater' is also driven by the search for new forms of cross-genre stage performances that could be different from the previously politicized or commercialized ones.

Keywords: Chinese poetry, women's poetry, intermediality, avant-garde theatre, performance art

¹ 'Poetry theater' is a concept that is not precisely defined. All female writers and artists discussed in this essay refer to the term when discussing their experiments with mixing various genres on stage. In a recent interview in the journal "Shanghai Yishu Pinglun" 《上海艺术评论》 (2020) the poet Zhou Zan emphasized the impact of Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of 'postdramatic theater' on her understanding of 'poetry theatre.'

A number of newer publications on contemporary Chinese poetry emphasize phenomena such as visuality,² musicalization and performativity,³ and the ‘life scene’ approach.⁴ Similarly, more recent companions to Chinese literature acknowledge Chinese poets’ strong interest in disseminating poetry using different media – for example, the Internet.⁵ “Verse going viral”⁶ represents only one of the many aesthetic currents present in the phenomenon of intentional and spontaneous actualizations of poetry in the digital age. These developments encompass intermediality in the broad sense, or the crossing of media borders by poetical texts that are, for example, inscribed on paintings, adapted for the stage as performances, shared across cyberspace or appropriated by the advertising industry. At the same time, conventional modes of literary expression and communication persist; traditional publishing houses in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) continue selling prestigious poetry anthologies and the alternative ‘unofficial’ (*fei guanfang* 非官方) poetry scene distributes a large number of independent journals. Despite the origin of these unofficial publications in the underground literature of the Maoist era (1949-1976), they must not be automatically identified with political dissidence today. They represent much more the rising tide of vivid, do-it-yourself forms of cultural production by independent authors who prefer crowdfunding and online publishing to courting cultural gatekeepers.⁷

This paper aims to shed light on one aspect of contemporary poetry in China – its presence in (mainly independent) theaters and artistic spaces. It discusses cross-genre exploration by a group of female poets, theater directors, and artists who are all associated with the movement of ‘women’s poetry’ (*nüxing shige* 女性诗歌) in the PRC. Even though the discussion is limited to performances based on female-authored texts, the examples chosen represent some general trends within Chinese-language poetry, regardless of the gender of the author. Following a short introduction to the status of ‘women’s poetry’ within the Chinese poetry scene, the article provides an overview of collaborations between poets, theater directors and visual artists which have, so far, resulted in the production of several performances based on female-authored poetry that were staged across the PRC and Taiwan. The closing section of the paper sketches out the main differences and commonalities in the theatrical visions by authors

² Manfredi (2014).

³ Crevel (2003, 2008).

⁴ Inwood (2014).

⁵ Denton (2016); Wang (2017).

⁶ Inwood (2014).

⁷ Terms such as ‘underground’ (地下 *dixia*), ‘unofficial’ (非官方 *fei guanfang*), ‘independent’ (独立 *duli*) or ‘popular’ (民间 *minjian*) must be understood within the context of Chinese history. In the broadest sense all these attributes point to texts created outside of mainstream (orthodox) cultural production and state-sponsored institutions. They do not exclude industrial or private financial sponsorship, be it local or foreign.

engaged in these productions in an effort to illuminate their understandings of the multimedia phenomenon of 'poetry theater' (*shige juchang* 诗歌剧场).

The 'Women's Poetry' Movement in China

In premodern China, writing poetry was not an exclusively male domain and with regard to numbers alone, "no nation has produced more women poets than China."⁸ Nevertheless, scholars emphasize that women poets remained bound by literary conventions and, no less important, moral constraints. As a consequence, the large majority of women writers occupied positions on the peripheries of the literary canon.⁹ Female participation in the vast literary conversation was contested and, in contrast to men for whom literary skills often paved the way to official careers, women's voices remained confined in the inner quarters. The situation changed in the late Qing dynasty and modern period, when the reformist' critique of the position of women in China helped to amplify the voices of female authors. Popularization of ideas of women's liberation and education finally led to the emergence of a whole group of female writers who enjoyed unprecedented public visibility. Among them were the poets Bing Xin 冰心 (1900-1999), Lin Huiyin 林徽因 (1904-1955), Chen Jingrong 陈敬容 (1917-1989), and Zheng Min 郑敏 (1920-).

The situation of female authors changed again under the rule of Mao Zedong (1949-1976).¹⁰ The collective as the agent of emancipation replaced the individual of the Republican era and the recently discovered female gendered self had to subordinate herself to the socialist women's movement that was orchestrated top-down by the ruling Communist Party. In this ideological environment women poets ceased writing and publishing. Some of them chose translation or study of foreign literature (Zheng Min), others kept their writing private (Lin Zi 林子).¹¹ The Maoist subsumption of feminist thought and literature to politics explains why the notion of *nüxing shige*, most commonly translated into English as 'women's poetry,' emerged in the PRC as a critical term only in the latter half of the 1980s. The concept surfaced in 1986 in reaction to the debut of a young poet, Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (1955-). Literary critics¹² argue that Zhai's early writing should be regarded as the point of origin of a gender-aware female voice

⁸ Chang (2002: 21).

⁹ For more on marginalization of female-authored poetry see Yeh (1992), Chang / Saussy (1999). On moral constraints and women's writing in China see Mann (1997: 76-120) and Larson (1998: 44-83).

¹⁰ The same could be said about all poets and writers, regardless of gender. For a short discussion of PRC's orthodox poetry in the 1950s and 1960s see Crevel (1996: 16-20).

¹¹ For a brief summary of the history of modern female-authored poetry in China see Zhang (2004: 30-34).

¹² Tang (1987); Zhou (2014).

in contemporary Chinese poetry.¹³ Accordingly, ‘women’s poetry’ must not be confused with the entire corpus of Chinese-language female-authored poetry, but rather, the term *nüxing shige* applies to female-authored poetry from the PRC written from a distinctly gendered point of view and often offering a feminist critique of social power relations. In general, authors associated with the trend explore how gender experience can be translated into writing. More specifically, today’s scholars emphasize two key characteristics of the movement. First, they argue that the concept of ‘women’s poetry’ should be approached from a historical perspective as the literary phenomenon that mirrored but also shaped the language of the post-Maoist female intellectuals as they turned to a feminism of gender difference.¹⁴ This academic and literary trend emerged as a critical reaction to the imposition of socialist gender sameness by the state under Mao Zedong. Second, but equally important, scholars argue that attention should be paid to the socio-cultural context of ‘women’s poetry’ as a “discourse” that involves “authors, readers, critics, publishers, and relevant government bodies.”¹⁵

In 1986, when Zhai Yongming’s first poems appeared in print, the recourse to gendered, individual experience was perceived by numerous female authors and intellectuals as a self-empowering strategy that would help women to distance themselves from the predominant androcentric worldview and masculine language. Many women from Zhai’s generation felt increasingly alienated from the iconic revolutionary view on gender, nor could they relate in a positive way to pre-revolutionary, traditional representations of femininity. Texts from the so-called ‘golden age’ of ‘women’s poetry’ (1986-1989) document their search for a language of their own. Many of female poets who were active in the 1980s were inspired by modernist confessional poetry and they often explored private spaces and the female body as a new site of empowerment.¹⁶ Cui Weiping 崔卫平, the editor of the first collection of female-authored poetry to be published in the PRC in 1993, wrote in her preface to the volume that “flash” was the last resort for women poets in their search for a language of their own, because they had “no other place to go.”¹⁷ In the late 1980s this new poetics of the female body allowed women’s writing to gain momentum and sent a strong message against patriarchal constraints. For example, in Zhai’s early poem

¹³ It is important to note that the generation of female poets who came of age during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), including Zhai Yongming, was not really familiar with the writings of their predecessors from the Republican period. The main reason behind this rupture in the trajectory of modernist poetry in Chinese language was of a political nature. Generations of writers who grew up under Mao had only, if at all, a very limited knowledge of the feminine and cosmopolitan voices that were an important part of the Chinese-language literary modernity.

¹⁴ Zhang (2003); Chen et al. (2019).

¹⁵ Zhang (2004).

¹⁶ Ibid., 59-69.

¹⁷ Cui (1993: 7).

series, phenomena such as menstruation and childbearing, followed by the decay of flesh and death, figure prominently as representations of experiences through which women confront the materiality of their bodies in the most direct way.¹⁸ In her early works, Zhai most often depicts the female body as constituted of the flows and pulsations of blood and water.¹⁹

The entanglement of 'women's poetry' with gendered body experience, together with the introspective focus of the discourse, prompted largely reductionist and essentializing readings by critics, who often neglected original features of individual poetic languages and in their interpretations reduced texts associated with 'women's poetry' to a set of clichés.²⁰ Such dismissive readings had a negative impact; by the end of 1980s, the first wave of budding poetical feminism in China came to a close. In contrast to other informal groupings associated with contemporary Chinese avant-garde poetry,²¹ the first wave of 'women's poetry' did not produce a representative poetry journal or generate a collective identity as an informal group. Additionally, many poets associated with the trend viewed the notion of 'women's poetry' as much more of a curse than a blessing. To some, the abandonment of the label seemed the only way to rescue their writings from critics who had increasingly scrutinized their works through the lens of a fixed set of images and metaphors.

Given the lack of identification with the label on the part of the poets associated with it, it is not surprising that nearly another ten years passed before the 'women's poetry' movement gained new momentum. At the same time, the 1990s saw tectonic shifts within the poetry scene: the deconstruction of the 1980s "cult of poetry,"²² the exile of some established poets for political reasons, and the emergence of the first online discussion forums dedicated to poetry.²³ Amidst these changes, the notion of 'women's poetry' surfaced again in the latter half of the 1990s – this time, however, in a more organized form. In the late 1990s, young scholars of Chinese literature and poets rooted in informal poetry groups active in Beijing decided that more space was needed for a systematic exploration of 'women's poetry' and writing. The ongoing post-socialist transformation engendered a diversification of the cultural landscape that, together with the rise of feminist scholarship, formed the sociocultural background

¹⁸ In the decade of the 1980s, Zhai completed three poem series that may be regarded as documenting the consolidation of her female consciousness: "Women" ("Nüren" 《女人》, 1984), "Jing'an Village" ("Jing'an Zhuang" 《静安庄》, 1985) and "The Patterns of Death" ("Siwang de tu'an" 《死亡的图案》, 1987).

¹⁹ On blood and childbirth in the series "Women," see Zhang (2004: 92-98).

²⁰ The critical questioning of the relationship between female bodily experience and literary creativity is not limited to the Chinese-language context. For more, see Gill (2007: 111-137).

²¹ For an introduction to avant-garde poetry in China, see the first chapter in Crevel (2008).

²² Yeh (1996).

²³ Day (2008).

against which the reemergence of ‘women’s poetry’ took place. Zhou Zan 周瓚 (1968-), then a doctoral student in Chinese literature and today a poet and scholar, became the main driving force behind the inception of an unofficial journal focused exclusively on the discourse of ‘women’s poetry.’ Zhou was able to win Zhai Yongming’s substantial support for the idea of an informal publication devoted to women’s poetry as well as gender-aware theory and translation. From the beginning, Zhai served as a coeditor of the journal and to date she has remained the most prominent regular contributor of poems. In May 1998, the editors distributed a few hundred copies of the first issue of the journal in Beijing, mainly around the Peking University campus. The journal, which in 2018 celebrated its twentieth anniversary, was named “Yi 翼” (“Wings”).

The editorial team of the journal is a good example of creative cooperation across generational and genre boundaries: its third and youngest member, next to Zhai Yongming and Zhou Zan, is the poet, novelist, and theater director Chen Si’an 陈思安 (1986-), who is also the driving force behind the journal’s venture into the realms of social media and the Internet. Today, the editorial team of “Wings” does much of its publishing online, and they even maintain a website (www.wingwomenpress.com), which describes their enterprise as an independent women’s press. Besides e-publishing and open access publishing, the Internet provides a space for the instant exchange of opinions; the one-thousand-plus followers of “Wings” occasionally leave comments on the journal’s social media account on the popular platform WeChat. New media have helped independent publishers of ‘women’s poetry’ to move beyond the circle of a few hundred friends in their local environment and become part of virtual world literature. In addition to embracing the possibilities inherent in new technologies, poets associated with “Wings” have been experimenting with the performative and dramatic qualities of poetry.

This short introduction to the discourse of ‘women’s poetry’ makes it clear that, since its inception thirty years ago, the subgenre has been reinvented. In particular, the emergence of the journal “Wings” attracted younger female authors, because it provided a platform for publishing and discussing female-authored poetry independently of critical trends in the literary mainstream. Nevertheless, because Zhai Yongming and Zhou Zan are among the most well-known contemporary poets in the PRC, ‘women’s poetry’ cannot be described as simply residing on the margins of the masculine literary field. When tackling issues of marginalization and prominence of respective authors and genres in the PRC, one should not only inquire into the impact of gender but first ask about the place of modern free verse poetry in sinophone communities and cultures. The popularity of other literary and visual genres is not the only challenge modern poetry faces; readers typically perceive contemporary poetry as inferior to traditional verse

written in classical Chinese.²⁴ From the perspective of gender, it is important to recognize that the traditional poetic canon was almost exclusively male. Thus, although China is often referred to as a ‘nation of poetry’ (*shi guo* 诗国), there is no doubt that the notion points to the long-standing classical tradition of male literati poetry, expressing little pride in the hundred-year-old genre of vernacular poetry.²⁵ The “online revival of classical-style poetry writing”²⁶ bespeaks the endurance of the classical canon and, at the same time, the lack of a ‘natural’ link between modern technology and literary modernity. The Internet has influenced neo-classical and avant-garde poetry alike, and contemporary poets actively pursue more open modes of practicing poetry that can reach beyond written text. Particularly since the turn of the century, Chinese poets have actively explored intermedial connections among different artistic genres. The creative undertakings discussed in the following sections exemplify poets’ search for an updated poetics that resonates with audiences surrounded by omnipresent image-based and interactive media.

Chinese Poetry and the Crossing of Boundaries

From a historical perspective, the crossing of genre boundaries is nothing new in Chinese poetry. The golden age of Chinese poetry, the Tang dynasty (618-907), has, indeed, been described as a “dynamically mobile world of multimedia performances.”²⁷ The Chinese writing system is the ultimate root of poetry’s entanglement with visuality; the most obvious expression of this is found in the art of calligraphy.²⁸ Closely related to calligraphy and painting, but ranked as superior by the elites of the time, classical poetry was regarded as the most refined art and one of the most prestigious forms of writing.

Literature could be also created in and transmitted by different media, as a prominent example from the female tradition in Chinese poetry, Su Hui’s 苏蕙 fourth-century palindrome “Picture of the Turning Sphere” (“Xuanji tu” 《璇玑图》), demonstrates. Su’s palindrome of 841 characters is a cross-genre masterpiece of writing and embroidery, as she originally stitched her composition out of extracts of classical poems in brocade.²⁹ This historical double act of writing and stitching a piece of art, which defied conventional reading habits and concur-

²⁴ For more on marginalization of modern poetry and the continuing presence of classical poetry, as well as the prevalence of the “male gaze” in the Chinese poetry scene, see Crevel (2017).

²⁵ Yeh (2008: 13-16).

²⁶ Hockx (2015: 190).

²⁷ Tian (2017: 28).

²⁸ Manfredi (2014).

²⁹ Idema / Grant (2004: 127-131).

rently dissolved the boundaries between elite culture and handicraft, has much in common with current-day literary experiments.

Furthermore, poetry's relationship to sound and performative bodily movements is also pertinent to understanding the meanings attached to the genre in China. One of the best-known of ancient poetics, the "Great Preface" (first century BC) to the canonical "Book of Poetry" ("Shijing" 《诗经》), delivers not only the first authoritative definition of poetry but also describes a "spatialization of poetic process"³⁰ that involves gesticulation and vocalization. Throughout the ages, features inherent to musical forms (odes, songs, etc.), with which the genre had originally been associated, determined the structure of the poetic line. Rigid rules, which applied to rhyme, fixed tone sequences, and rhythm, were important formal characteristics of traditional poetry.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, modernist poetry began to challenge these rules altogether, countering the well-established reading habits of the educated public. Modern poets have introduced their own ways of experimenting with crossing genre boundaries. Perhaps the most well-known examples of such experiments in sinophone poetry, combining visual and aural effects, come from the Taiwanese concrete poetry movement, which began in the 1930s,³¹ and more recent 'sound poetry.'³² In the PRC, on the other hand, the perception of poetic soundscapes has been influenced by the affiliation of recitation with patriotic literary activities during the War of Resistance (1937-1945) and mainstream Mao-era culture.³³

Avant-Garde Poetry and Theater

The history of experiments with bringing poetry to the theater in the PRC goes back to the early 1990s. In the short history of the genre, the most influential production remains the groundbreaking performance "File Zero" ("Ling dang'an" 《零档案》) by the avant-garde director Mou Sen 牟森 (1963-) from the year 1994. He created this play, based on a long poem by Yu Jian 于坚 (1954-), for an art festival in Brussels.³⁴ At the beginning of the 1990s, Mou not only began to question the significance of the dramatic text for theatrical performance but also granted more agency to actors, who became co-authors of their lines, which were based on the poetic text but also supplemented by their per-

³⁰ Owen (1992: 41-42).

³¹ Yeh (2008: 21-24).

³² Bruno (2017).

³³ Crespi (2009).

³⁴ For a detailed discussion of Yu Jian's poem, see Crevel (2008: 223-46). Mou Sen's theater experiments are discussed, for example, in Huot (1999: 198-215); and Erin B. Mee, Kevin J. Wetmore, and Siyuan Liu (2014: 120-22).

sonal memories. Mou preferred to work with performers who were not professionally trained, but the majority of these amateurs were not strangers to the creative industries; among them were, for example, film directors, authors, and professional dancers.

In terms of the commercial success and popularization of experimental theater among educated urban audiences, the laurels belong to Meng Jinghui 孟京辉 (1965-), who has become a household name not only in China but also abroad.³⁵ Meng first ventured into the field of poetry in 2006, when he based his work “Flowers in the Mirror, Moon on the Water” (“Jing hua shui yue” 《镜花水月》) on two series of poems by the contemporary poet Xi Chuan 西川 (1963-). The original poetic text played a secondary, inspirational role in the completed production, which bore some of the trademark features of Meng’s theatrical method: heavily made-up actors recited verses in a studied manner, the stage design emanated coldness and distance, and the play focused on the search for love among middle-class urbanites.³⁶ Xi Chuan’s texts were merely vehicles for setting into motion Meng’s theatrical machine with all its signature elements. In contrast to Mou’s earliest experiment, Meng did not forego storytelling in his plays; rather, he formulated his own plot before rearranging his poetic sources into dramatic texts.

Two Performances Based on ‘Women’s Poetry’

The two examples from the previous section are important for mapping the very brief history of contemporary avant-garde poetry’s presence on theatrical stages, and also for identifying the main features of this emerging hybrid genre. Certainly, they make it clear that the initial performance based on ‘women’s poetry,’ in 2009 was breaking new ground. On the one hand, it could be located on the already existing trajectory of experimental theater, much closer to Mou Sen’s tradition than Meng’s professional avant-gardism; nevertheless, all previous attempts at bringing poetry to the stage had involved prominent male voices from the poetical avant-garde – an unintended result of the predominance of the male perspective in poetry and the performing arts.

Thus, a theater performance based on ‘women’s poetry’ that promotes a distinct female, or feminist, vision was something quite new. Although this novelty makes no claims about the artistic quality of these performances, they nevertheless created an unprecedented opportunity to reclaim the stage as a forum for women’s voices. Consequently, they altered the contours of the discussion of female literary authority and, furthermore, broadened it with questions regarding

³⁵ A detailed discussion of Meng Jinghui’s theater may be found in part 2 of Rossella Ferrari’s “Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre in Contemporary China” (2013). Since his first guest performance in Berlin in 1993, Meng has presented other plays in the German-speaking theater world.

³⁶ Rossella Ferrari discusses the play in detail in Li Ruru (2016: 123-40).

directorial power. Moreover, due to its focus on gendered body experiences, ‘women’s poetry’ seemed a suitable departure point in the search for a more physical presence of poetry on the stage than that of the already well-established, rather narrative and voice-oriented format of poetry recitals. It can ultimately be said that the first theater experiments of director Cao Kefei 曹克非 and “Wings” coeditor Zhou Zan helped ‘women’s poetry’ to transgress the exclusive space of an unofficial journal and installed the subgenre within the actual space of the theater stage. The latter space is less independent of intrusions by the state and market; nevertheless, it allows for reach beyond a close circle of friends.

By 2019, three independent theater productions based on ‘women’s poetry’ were performed in the PRC.³⁷ The first two were directed by Cao Kefei and staged for the first time in 2009 and 2010, respectively; the most recent was staged in 2016 by Chen Si’an, co-editor of “Wings.” The following sections discuss Cao’s second production and the only performance directed by Chen. Works by these two directors exemplify two different approaches to poetry theater and propose different answers to questions of the translatability of poetry into staged performances. Cao creates a physical impressionist theater, whereas Chen’s cross-genre experiments focus on text and the dramatic form.

“Riding a Roller Coaster Flying toward the Future”

In 2008, the independent theater group Ladybird Theater (Piaochong jushe 瓢虫剧社) was established in Beijing. The founding director, Cao Kefei, imagined it as a lively space beyond the limits of official theater production, and more specifically as an experimental stage on which artistic encounters that seek to transgress genre boundaries could take place. Distancing herself from the rather solemn official tone of theater art, she wrote in a short introduction published online: “It is the moment of our encounter! It is our celebration!”³⁸ Since its inception, Ladybird has stood outside of the local theater mainstream, primarily due to its unique focus on gender and poetry. In her own work as director, Cao has remained on the side of avant-garde art, which is highly intellectual and critical of the commercialization and marketization of cultural production. In 1998, in Cao’s first Beijing production,³⁹ she experimented with sound and vision in a way that inspired one critic to describe the performance as “a drama to be watched, and not

³⁷ In May 2020, Cao Kefei announced on WeChat that she had already begun with the dramatization of Zhai Yongming’s poetry series “Fourteen Plainsongs” (“Shisi shou sùgē” 《十四首素歌》).

³⁸ See the English text from the group’s space on the platform Douban: <https://site.douban.com/118044/> [20/08/2020].

³⁹ Cao Kefei studied German in Shanghai before she moved to Bern in Switzerland to study theater arts. Throughout the years she has become one of the important cultural brokers between the German-speaking and mainland Chinese theater worlds. In 2006, she was awarded the German-Chinese Friendship Award for her contribution to cultural exchange between the two countries.

to be listened to.”⁴⁰ That was the first expression of a theatrical aesthetic that would recur in later Ladybird stage appearances, which were also impressionistic, fragmented performances that foregrounded visual perception instead of a coherent dramatic narrative. In short, Cao's philosophy of theater is aptly summarized in an article from 2002, in which she states, “I have never liked telling stories on stage. Because it is not the right space to unfold stories, it is one open to a lyrical imaginary (*shiyi* 诗意) and physical form (*xingti* 形体).”⁴¹

In 2009, the Ladybird Theater staged the first play based on Chinese female-authored poetry. It was directed by Cao, Zhou Zan was responsible for the dramatization of poetical texts and Zhai Yongming oversaw the production. In keeping with the experimental spirit of the Ladybird Troupe, the play combined poetry, drama, performance, and contemporary dance with experimental music or noise art. Among the performers were trained dancers and professional artists but also amateurs – for example, the poet Zhou Zan, who permanently joined the group. That first performance delivered a testing ground for Cao and Zhou's ideas behind the maneuver of juxtaposing poetry and drama. In their own words, it “aimed at an exploration of the possibility of poetry converging with the stage.” The troupe searched for answers to questions such as “Is poetry only suitable for recitation? How can poetry find soul mates (*zhiyin* 知音) among other artistic fields? How do words and the body meet? How does poetry move?”⁴² The members of Ladybird Theater found the initial results of their first stage experiment with poetry-based performance encouraging. Their ongoing exploration of the new possibilities inherent to translating poetry into theater soon resulted in the staging of their second play, “Riding a Roller Coaster Flying Toward the Future” (“Chengzuo guoshanche fei xiang weilai” 《乘坐过山车飞向未来》), in 2010. It was first shown in southern China, in Chengdu⁴³ and Shenzhen, followed by a performance in Taipei.

The first step that Cao and Zhou undertook in the process of translation of ‘women's poetry’ into a theater performance was to identify some keywords that would be central to the play. The director took these keywords from the texts of

⁴⁰ Cao quoted in the anonymous “Overview of Plays Staged in 1998 by Chinese and Visiting Western Theater Groups” (“98 nian Zhong xi guoji xiju yaoqingzhan saomiao” 《'98 年中西国际戏剧邀请展扫描》), published in the journal “Xiju 戏剧” (“Drama”).

⁴¹ Wang (2002).

⁴² See the booklet titled “The Woman Attempting to Disrupt the Ritual” (“Qitu pohuai yishi de nüren” 《企图破坏仪式的女人》), which was produced by the Ladybird Theater for the performance of their first play in Beijing's Penghao Theater in 2010.

⁴³ In Chengdu, the play was performed on the evenings of June 11 and 12, 2011. I attended both performances. On the first evening, the troupe performed in the official space of the monumental Home of Arts and on the second evening, in the tiny courtyard of the bar-gallery “White Nights” which was established by the poet Zhai Yongming. The Ladybird troupe usually performs outside the formal setting of theater stages and the troupe is used to adjusting to different physical environments.

the poems she chose, and they helped her to establish a direct link between the stage performance and ‘women’s poetry.’ The keywords that the 2011 performances centered around were: ‘women’s poetry,’ ‘roller coaster,’ ‘verbs,’ and ‘dolls.’ Female-authored poetry by authors associated with the movement of ‘women’s poetry,’ whose texts had been published by the journal “Wings,” formed the only textual basis for the performance. These authors do not only write from a gendered, sometimes feminist, point of view but they are also known for a distinct poetics of the body that investigates the body’s relationship with gender and sexuality.⁴⁴ The abundance of powerful body metaphors in Chinese ‘women’s poetry’ of the 1980s has long defined the critical reception of the subgenre and, to date, many female poets perceive this identification as a valuable, even if sometimes troublesome, legacy. Today’s ‘women’s poetry’ proposes different textual strategies when dealing with the theme of embodiment. For instance, it has abandoned the narrow, introspective focus on individual emotions and instead investigates the sociolinguistic construction of gendered embodiments in the current world. Due to their focus on the ways in which femininity is individually or collectively enacted, these poems delivered a suitable departure point for Cao’s inquiry into the relationship between poetry, embodiment, and performance.

The second keyword, ‘roller coaster,’ as well as the title of the play, originate from a poem by Ma Yan 马雁 (1979-2010), who was born in Chengdu and also actively participated in the unofficial poetry scene in the city.⁴⁵ Even if the outline of the performance was adjusted each time that the troupe moved to the next location, one thing remained constant: Ma Yan’s poem provided the frame for the four different stage versions of the play. Cao Kefei also made this text the point of departure for rehearsing the project when she assigned it as an individual performance practice to all actors involved. The ride on the roller coaster from Ma’s poem not only became the central metaphor in the play, pointing to the perils of human existence in the contemporary world but equally defined its formal character as a collage of rapidly alternating images, some of which passed too quickly to be grasped by the audience:

⁴⁴ For more on ‘body poetics’ and ‘women’s poetry,’ see Chapter 3 and 4 in Zhang (2004).

⁴⁵ During her school years in Chengdu, Ma Yan became a member of the local poetry association, Lucky Troup, and she contributed to the group’s unofficial journal. She returned to Chengdu after she had completed her studies at Peking University. Her poetry was published in the fourth, fifth, and sixth issues of “Wings,” among other venues. Ma, who had already gained much praise for her literary talent, suffered from severe depression. She committed suicide by jumping from a building in Shanghai in December 2010. In 2012, Ma was commemorated by the editors of the journal “Jintian 今天” (“Today”), which published a special section dedicated to Ma Yan, with an essay by Zhou Zan and a poem by Zhai Yongming. This section also included photos from Ladybird’s performances in Chengdu, Shenzhen, and Taipei. See Jintian (2012: 106-93).

我们乘坐过山车飞向未来，
 他和我的手里各捏着一张票，
 那是飞向未来的小舢板，
 起伏的波浪是我无畏的想象力。
 乘坐我的想象力，他们尽情蹂躏
 这些无辜的女孩和男孩，
 这些无辜的小狗和小猫。
 在波浪之下，在波浪的下面
 一直匍匐着衰弱的故事人，
 他曾经是最伟大的创造者，
 匍匐在最下面的飞得最高。
 那些与我耳语者，个个聪明无比，
 他们说智慧来自痛苦，他们说：
 来，给你智慧之路。

[...]

如果存在一个空间，漂浮着
 无数列过山车，痛苦的过山车⁴⁶

(2012)

We are riding on a roller coaster flying toward the future,
 his and my hand each clutching a ticket,
 that is a small sampan that flies into the future,
 the rolling wave is my fearless imagination.
 Riding my imagination, they can suffer to their hearts' content
 these innocent girls and boys,
 these innocent puppies and kittens.
 Under the waves, underneath the waves
 crawls a vulnerable storyteller,
 in the past he was the greatest inventor,
 [those] crawling on the bottom fly the highest,
 all is pain, everything is pain.
 Those who whisper in my ear, one smarter than another,
 They say wisdom comes with pain, they say:
 Come, here is the way of wisdom for you.

[...]

If this one space exists, drifting
 countless roller coasters, roller coasters of pain

The movements and emotions described in Ma Yan's poem, such as riding, crawling, suffering, are also linked to the next keyword, 'verbs.' It emphasizes the importance of motion in Cao Kefei's dramatic vision and also helps to construct a relation between poetic texts and bodily expressions. When rehearsing the play, Cao asked the performers to limit themselves exclusively to movements that occur as verbs in the poetic texts they had chosen. The actors were encouraged to pick out movements described in the poems and turn them into physical expressions of feeling, moods and emotions, again with their bodies.

⁴⁶ See Ma Yan: "Riding a Roller Coaster Flying toward the Future" ("Chengzuo guoshanche fei xiang weilai" 《乘坐过山车飞向未来》); Ma (2012: 135-36).

Later, Zhou Zan reflected in one of her essays on the importance of movement for turning poetry into a genuinely contemporary experience and, furthermore, for exploring its multiple meanings. Accordingly, the aim of their poetic theater was not to adequately represent a text on stage but to release the energy hidden in poems through individually embodied interpretations. Because there were no professional actors involved in Ladybird's productions, their performances would never be permanently fixed in an accomplished, perfected form; they would also change when someone else took over the role, or even if the same person was in a different mood on another day. According to Zhou Zan, no rupture exists between poetry and 'reality,' because neither of them can be experienced in a strictly 'objective' way. Furthermore, from the point of view of the history of the genre, individual bodily movements establish a new performance practice by which contemporary poetry can reach and interact with the social context; it is also a practice which, in contrast to recitation, is free from the historical and political overtones of the Maoist era.⁴⁷ According to articles published on Ladybird's Douban platform,⁴⁸ an enacted bodily poetics should know no limitations and should be able to transgress all closed spaces and borders.

The last keyword, 'dolls,' brings back the question of the role of a gendered perspective – profoundly present in all of the female-authored poems that inspired the play – in Ladybird's performance. In general, a doll is a common motif in women's poetry, be it Chinese-language or foreign. Furthermore, in the local context, the genealogy of the discourse of Chinese feminism inevitably evokes one association, namely that of Nora – the woman who fled from Ibsen's "doll's house."⁴⁹ The texts dramatized for "Riding a Roller Coaster" either mention dolls and puppetry explicitly – for example, Zhai Yongming's "Dolls" or, from the only foreign material in the play, "Five Poems for Dolls" by Margaret Atwood⁵⁰ – or implicitly, for instance by introducing the figure of a prostitute and evoking stereotypical associations of women as passive playthings.

The play engaged with Zhai's poem "Dolls" on multiple levels and the text is essential to deciphering the play, secondary only to Ma Yan's "Riding the Rollercoaster." The first stanza of Zhai's poem reads as follows:

⁴⁷ Zhou (2014: 25).

⁴⁸ See: <https://site.douban.com/118044/> [20/08/2020].

⁴⁹ On the Nora figure in China see Chang (2004).

⁵⁰ Zhou Zan's translation of a collection of Atwood's poems, "Eating Fire," was published in 2015 as "Chi huo" 《吃火》; works by Atwood have appeared regularly in "Wings" as well. In the same year, Zhou Zan dramatized some of Atwood's poems in a play, also called "Eating Fire," that was directed by Chen Si'an and performed that summer in two locations in Beijing.

当我厌倦了黑夜
 常常从梦里坐起 开口说话
 小小的玩偶闪着褐光
 我说话 带着一种不真切的口吻
 我说着一直想说的胡言乱语⁵¹

(2011)

Weary of the black night
 I often emerge from a dream to sit upright open my mouth and speak
 Little doll gleaming brown
 I talk but the words aren't making sense
 I say the crazy things I've always wanted to say⁵²

The dreamlike atmosphere of the poem was mirrored in the performance of the play. In Chengdu, the eerie feeling was reinforced by the natural humidity of the Sichuan summer evening in which the contours of the actors' silhouettes naturally dissolved. In addition, one of the few requisites on stage was a pair of big electric fans that blew air on the performers and contributed to their ghost-like appearances. The images on 'stage' alternated quickly, oscillating between dream visions and nightmares. The latter were adapted from the recurrent scenes of violence and suffering occurring in the poems dramatized for the play. The poetic texts were never recited but rather muttered, chanted, sometimes sung, or screamed in a fragmented, disjointed manner. As in Zhai's poem, the words did not necessarily make sense, but the stage appeared as a realm of freedom in which all hidden fears and 'crazy things' that one had always wanted to say could be shared.

When the troupe began rehearsing the play, the director asked all participants to think about – and, eventually, to bring along – the dolls that accompanied them in childhood. The keyword 'doll' introduced by Cao and Zhou was thus intended to evoke the performers' memories, and again, to enable them to transcend the individual poetic voice and put the text into motion on stage as a shared 'bodily memory.' Finally, one of the dolls that several of the performers mentioned, a Barbie, was chosen to appear in the play. The choice was symptomatic of the young age of the troupe members, whose childhood was contemporaneous with the economic and cultural opening toward the West and the ensuing influx of Western goods and popular aesthetics into Chinese cities. The choice of a Barbie also seems natural with regard to the groups' interest in images of female bodies and the meanings attached to them in the global mediascape – a theme that had already been at the core of Ladybird's first project, staged in the previous year. The Barbie doll first appeared in the play as an art installation, hanging above the performance space on a wire attached to a fishing rod. While the doll with its blond hair was clearly visible in the bright stage lights, the person holding the rod hid in darkness somewhere in the audience.

⁵¹ See Zhai Yongming, "Dolls" ("Wan'ou" 《玩偶》); Zhai 2011: 34).

⁵² English translation by Andrea Lingenfelter in Zhai (2011: 35).

The Barbie, which became a marionette, evoked a lack of agency or freedom to decide for oneself, as well as ideological constraints and social control executed upon individuals, and the abuse and objectification of the other. In another sequence in the play, the doll returned, this time impersonated by one of the performers, dressed in a miniskirt and a platinum blond wig, who strode past in catwalk style while blowing kisses to the audience. Shortly afterward, other performers approached, encircled “Barbie,” and began hatefully pushing her around while the young woman, totally at their mercy and unable to escape the violent attacks, responded to the humiliation with verses from Cao Shuying’s 曹疏影 (1979-) poem, “Hey Girl, What Happened with Your Ocean?”:

它的海藻起了灰斑
 它的宝石有些发暗
 它的碎浪吞吞吐吐
 它的不贞被你一再盘问
 它想给自己换一个女妖
 它把各种调料往巨浪里倒
 它偷偷羡慕蓝色意外的
 它骂月亮她妈
 它说在公共厕所染上性病
 他夜里跑进厨房吃了好几块肉
 它把小鲸鱼撵上码头
 它的海水发烫
 它的泡沫摔碎了摔碎了⁵³

(2010)

its red algae stained grey
 its jewels tarnished
 its broken weaves humming and hawing
 its unfaithfulness interrogated by you time and again
 it wants to give itself a new enchantress
 it throws all kinds of spices into rising waves
 it secretly envies all that is not blue
 it calls names at the moon
 it says it has contracted a venereal disease in the latrine
 it ran into the kitchen at night and swallowed some chunks of meat
 it drives small whales out straight to the wharfs
 its seawater is boiling
 its foam smashed into pieces smashed into pieces

Violence, particularly gendered violence in contemporary societies – be it symbolic, in the form of normative body regimes, or realized in a scene of actual bodily terror – represents an important theme in both of Ladybird’s productions discussed here. In these performances, living and staying alive turn into acts of courage, which is what the last keyword, ‘roller coaster,’ hints at. The perfor-

⁵³ See Cao Shuying, “Hey Girl, What Happened with Your Ocean?” (“Guniang guniang ni de hai zenme le” 《姑娘姑娘你的海怎么了》). From the booklet “The Woman Attempting to Disrupt the Ritual,” 12.

mance pays homage to Ma Yan, who chose to disembark from the train, but it also wants to ask, as the booklet explains, “Why do people buy tickets, queue, and finally even enjoy the ride on a roller coaster?”

As with their first play, female-authored poetry formed the only textual basis for the performance, but this time Cao and Zhou pushed themselves and others to depart from the poetic texts to a greater extent than in the prior play in order to move further in exploring a visual poetics of embodiment. The inclusion of a short performance by the artist Li Xinmo 李心沫 (1976-) in the play marked the manifestation of this idea in its most extreme form, as written or spoken text was entirely abandoned and replaced by an improvised performance act inspired by Zhai Yongming's poem “Dolls,” as well as by the artist's personal experience.

Li Xinmo, who joined Ladybird for the first time in Chengdu, has continued to collaborate with the troupe. Li, who is a painter and calligrapher by training, shifted to performance art after the turn of the century and is one of the most courageous and outspoken feminist artists in the PRC today.⁵⁴ Her own works focus on female body experiences and issues related to body politics, interests which, next to her admiration for poetry, allowed her to connect instantly with Ladybird's philosophy. Li's performance pushed the troupe's exploration of bodily poetics beyond theater's reliance on spoken words. In Chengdu, she chose to perform an act inspired by Zhai Yongming's poem, during which she revisited her experiences of abortion. In silence, she tore strips of cloth from the plain white dress she was wearing and made dolls out of them – five in total, each one representing an aborted fetus. At some point, the lights turned red and Li started to crawl on the ground toward the chairs occupied by the audience, finally to disappear among people's legs.

⁵⁴ For an overview of her works, see Li's personal English-language website: <http://lixinmo.com> [20.08.2020].



Li Xinmo's performance. Photographs courtesy of the artist. © Li Xinmo⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Li repeated her performance in 2013 in Sweden. A short description with photographs is available on her website: <http://li-xinmo.com/works/performance/memory.html> [23/04/2018]. Her original performance in Chengdu is documented in a short film accessible via Ladybird's Douban platform: <https://site.douban.com/118044/widget/videos/3178623/video/107263/> [23/04/2019].

Li's stunning performance explored the idea of embodied poetics like any other scene in the play. It also brought Cao and Zhou's translation of poetry into motion in its most extreme form, as written or spoken text was entirely abandoned and replaced by an improvised performance act. The performance marked a formal extension of Ladybird's endeavor, but it remained closely related to themes that often appear in 'women's poetry,' such as motherhood, pregnancy, and coming-of-age. These themes figure prominently in 'women's poetry,' both as metaphors and as accounts of individual experiences that are embedded in the biographies of the poets.

The play concluded with a collective performance of Ma Yan's poem. All members of the troupe appeared on stage wearing different masks, some of which resembled animals, others more abstract. They stared steadily at the audience as they recited the poem in elevated, excited voices accompanied by contemporary electronic music. The scene was carnivalesque, and the performers oscillated between madness and joy as they brought the audience with them for a ride on the emotional roller coaster. Again, as in other scenes, no obvious mimetic relationship existed between the masks, music, vocal pitch and manner of recitation, and, finally, the text of Ma Yan's poem.

Arts critics and scholars have acknowledged Ladybird Theater's exploration of visual and performative qualities of 'women's poetry.' In 2014, Ladybird was asked for a video recording of their performance of "Riding on a Roller Coaster,"⁵⁶ and the group was invited by the Art Museum at the University of Toronto to participate in the exhibition "Through the Body: Lens-Based Works by Contemporary Chinese Women Artists."⁵⁷ The museum's website introduced the event as "the largest exhibition of lens-based work by contemporary Chinese women artists to be mounted outside China." Works were selected for their ability to shed light on the new gendered subject positionalities that have emerged in the course of the rapid socioeconomic changes in post-Mao China. The exhibition focused on photography and video art and was guided by the concept of *tishi*, which may be translated as "learning from bodily experience" or "embodied learning."⁵⁸

The Ladybird Theater was invited to the exhibition as performance artists who represent a distinct bodily aesthetics. Thus, it can be said that the ensemble has successfully realized some of their preliminary ideas and reflections concerning the

⁵⁶ A video clip showing fragments of the group's video that was exhibited in Toronto and which also features women's poetry in English translation is available from the platform Tudou: <http://video.tudou.com/v/XMjI3MTQ5NTk4NA==.html> [23/04/2019]. As in the case of the other clips from performances of "Riding the Roller Coaster," the fragments from poems on the screen do not correspond exactly to the sequences performed in the background.

⁵⁷ The exhibition took place from April 29 to June 28, 2014. See the exhibition website: <http://artmuseum.utoronto.ca/exhibition/body-lens-based-works-contemporary-chinese-women-artists/> [23/04/2019].

⁵⁸ Ibid.

possibilities of a poetic theater and an embodied poetics. Curators acknowledged the importance of the visual and performative dimensions in Ladybird's endeavor, alongside the female perspective implied in their plays. As stated above, this female perspective originated from the discourse of 'women's poetry,' with its particular emphasis on gendered embodiment. The various texts of the play – written and recited poems, images, performances, stage design, and music – were not simply translations of each other into the languages of different artistic disciplines; to a much greater degree they participated in a new web of meanings in which they either amplified or undermined each other, commented upon each other or searched for closeness to or distance from each other. Ladybird's performance, for which Zhou Zan proposed the name of 'poetry theater' (*shige juchang*), reached beyond texts and established itself as a sovereign aesthetic experience.

“Roaming the Fuchun Mountains with Huang Gongwang”

In 2012, Chen Si'an,⁵⁹ the youngest co-editor of “Wings,” read Zhai Yongming's new work in progress, the long poem “Roaming the Fuchun Mountains with Huang Gongwang” (“Sui Huang Gongwang you Fuchun Shan” 《随黄公望游富春山》) for the first time. In the same year, Chen began directing short theater works and poetry readings in independent theaters around Beijing. In 2013, Zhai Yongming finally completed the first draft of her poem, which consisted of twenty-six sections in total, and asked Zhou Zan and Chen Si'an to comment on her work. On that occasion, the idea of bringing Zhai's work to the stage came to Chen for the first time. In 2014, she began rehearsing a play based on the text and presented some fragments of it during the Fringe Festival in Beijing the same year. Zhai's poem was published the following year in its final version of thirty sections.⁶⁰ The reason behind the difference in length between the initial and final versions of the text can be found in the poet's incorporation of feedback gathered during the rehearsals of Chen's play. The added sections start with the verse line “They don't read any poetry the director says”:

他们都不读诗 导演说
他们都不读诗 但是
他们互相拉扯进诗歌内部
上天入地
胡乱抛出那些正待起飞的诗行⁶¹
(2015)

They don't read any poetry the director says
They don't read any poetry but

⁵⁹ Besides editing “Wings,” Chen is a novelist, poet, playwright and translator. For more information see her personal website, <http://www.chensi-an.com> [20/08/2020].

⁶⁰ Zhai (2015).

⁶¹ See Zhai Yongming: “Roaming the Fuchun Mountains with Huang Gongwang” (“Sui Huang Gongwang you Fuchun Shan” 《随黄公望游富春山》); Zhai 2015: 64).

they drag each other into the space of the poem
 search heaven and earth
 and recklessly toss away verse that awaits to fly

Chen worked with young performers who lacked experience with reading modern poetry and who also occasionally complained about the obscure text with which they had to cope.⁶² However, the four additional sections of the final version of Zhai's poems go beyond a simple description of these difficulties. They dissolve the boundaries between the two texts, the poem and the performance, since they also reflect upon stage design, the multimediality of the play, and the role of the audience.

But even the first, shorter version of Zhai's poem is an intermedial work from the very outset in a way that brings back a vital Chinese poetic tradition. In the title of the poem, Zhai invokes the aesthetic tradition of 游 *you*, or the experiencing of landscape through imaginary or actual wandering. Her text is a landscape poem that documents the spiritual as well as physical journeys that the poet undertook through the scenery captured in Huang Gongwang's 黄公望 (1269-1354) famous painting of the Fuchun Mountains (completed between 1347 and 1350).⁶³ Chen adapted the liquid-like motion of *you* (roam, float, walk, saunter and swim) as a leading movement in her play. Throughout the performance, we see the dancers passing from one end of the stage to the other while they try to enter the scroll, which is represented by a plain elastic cloth. Whereas in the poem, the lyrical subject can only suggest her entering the painting through descriptions of the changing environment, on stage, her metamorphosis gains a visual, palpable dimension as dancers struggle with the cloth, and, finally, the performer who represents the poet becomes knotted by the scroll / cloth.

⁶² Personal conversation with Chen Si'an, Beijing 2016. In 2016, I participated in the rehearsals of the play. My discussion is also based on video recordings of the performances from that year.

⁶³ "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains" by Huang Gongwang is among the most influential artworks in Chinese history. The handscroll, the classic artistic medium of literati aesthetics, was inspired by the landscape of the Fuchun Mountains, south of the Yangtze River. On the history of the painting, see Cahill (1976: 111-12).



Stills from the 2016 video recording of the play, courtesy Chen Si'an. © Chen Si'an

Chen's main consideration when working on the dramatization of the poem was how to transcend the formula of poetry recitation, a well-established performance practice in the PRC, and, in doing so, transgress poetic as well as dramatic limitations in her play.⁶⁴ Accordingly, she did not follow the text of the poem closely. While the opening section of the play begins with the recitation of the first parts of Zhai's work, the next section departs from the text and starts to deconstruct the poem with the help of visual media. It begins with the projection of elements from Huang Gongwang's painting on a screen behind the stage. The images move fast, and, soon, brushstrokes turn into Chinese characters, white on black background, which initially add up to verse from Zhai's poem but only shortly thereafter begin to move in an erratic way. Some of them fall to the ground, others disappear, and, finally, the remains of the poetic landscape resemble ruins

⁶⁴ Chen / Fu (2017).

– a reminder of past glory. At the same time, in front of the screen, dancers move and recite fragments of the poem, but, following the progressive disintegration of verse, they also gradually fall into silence.

While the first act of the play focuses on the multimedia exploration of the visual dimension of the poetic text that had been inspired by a painting, the second and central act of the play experiments with various techniques of performance. Chen's cross-genre translation of poetry is based on performance practices that originate in Chinese dramatic tradition. These dramatic techniques are generally rooted in so-called 'prosimetric literature' (*shuochang wenxue* 说唱文学), or literally, 'literature that is both spoken and sung.'⁶⁵ This tradition goes back to the phenomenon of professional storytelling in premodern China, which, significantly, addressed illiterate or modestly literate audiences, while elites doted on the drama.⁶⁶ Thus, the popular art can be understood as representing the common, widespread 'little' tradition or even counterculture, as versus the 'great' tradition of the elites. According to the director's statement, she was particularly interested in the effects created by the clash of the highly sophisticated, elegant text of Zhai's poem with these popular modes of presentation. In the middle of the play, when two performers improvise a *xiangsheng* 相声 based on the poem, the comedic effects of this cross-genre transposition become most clear. *Xiangsheng*, the genre of comic cross-talk, has long provided "bawdy and often politically satirical entertainment in village marketplaces, city streets, teahouses, theaters."⁶⁷ The genre originates in the north of China and, not surprisingly, one of the actors adapts a heavy Beijing accent in this scene. This detail creates an additional tension between the play and the original text, which is written by a Southerner⁶⁸ and dedicated to the landscape of the Chinese south. The comic effect escalates when one of the actors recites fragments of the poem and his interlocutor pokes fun at him and his "impossible" story. Shortly thereafter, the history of the painting, which is also reiterated in the poem, is presented in the form of a shadow play, another subgenre traditionally favored by the illiterate masses. Here again, the audience occasionally bursts into laughter when the 'figures' (played by actual performers who hide themselves behind the cloth) begin to 'fight' for the scroll. The performed action is the sole source of amusement, however, since the matching poetic verse is not in any way funny. The following, closing scene contrasts with the middle scene in its focus on modern cosmopolitan performance genres, such as contemporary dance, electronic music and popular music. The performance ends with a repetition of the opening section of the poem, which was also recited at the beginning of the play:

⁶⁵ West (1986: 14).

⁶⁶ Idema (1986: 84).

⁶⁷ Rea (2015: 7).

⁶⁸ During the play we also hear the record of Zhai Yongming, the author of the poem, reading her work aloud in her heavy Sichuan accent.

从来没有生过、何来死？
 一直赤脚、何来袜？
 在天上迈步、何来地？
 在地上飞翔、何来道？
 五十年后我将变成谁？
 一百年后谁又变成我？
 撑筋拔骨的躯体置换了
 守住一口气 变成人生赝品⁶⁹
 (2015)

You have never lived, how do you die?
 A bare foot, how do you cover it?
 You walk in the sky, how do you come to earth?
 You hover on the ground, how do find your Way [*Dao*]?
 Who will I become in fifty years?
 Who will become me again in one hundred years?
 The body held up by muscles exchanges,
 holds on breaths it turns into a forgery of life

The reiteration of this fragment mirrors the circular experience of looking at a handscroll, in which the end does not necessarily represent a conclusion but, on the contrary, could be a new opening. This impression is also grounded by the content of these two stanzas – with their open-ended questions and allusions to the cycle of reincarnation.

In general, a landscape poem dedicated to a handscroll is already a multi-dimensional, intermedial work of art and, as such, is particularly suitable as a source of inspiration for visual performances. It is a textual representation of a visual representation, the Yuan dynasty scroll, which already provided its own visual narrative. And not least, the traditional way of viewing a handscroll⁷⁰ creates its own time-space and involves a sequence of actions, since the painting was unfurled portion by portion by a small group of connoisseurs whose eyes moved from one scene to the next. In her poem, Zhai Yongming proposes a modern equivalent of this aesthetic experience when she compares looking at a handscroll with watching a movie,⁷¹ and Chen Si'an recreated this experience for the stage. In some scenes, moving fragments from Huang Gongwang's painting were projected on the screen in the background of the stage; in others, the scroll itself was turned into a projection screen. Accordingly, as in traditional landscape painting in Huang's time, the painting did not simply represent the landscape in a mimetic way but was also understood to be the artist's medium of symbolic self-expression. The poet Zhai Yongming had already added new layers to the paint-

⁶⁹ See Zhai Yongming: "Roaming the Fuchun Mountains with Huang Gongwang." Zhai (2015: 4).

⁷⁰ Today, handscrolls decorate museum walls, and the modern way of exhibiting them does not differ from a conventional painting.

⁷¹ Zhai (2015: 6).

ing with her writing and Chen further enriched it with her own dramatic vision and stage design. Consequently, the three works of art – the painting, the poem, and the play – are palimpsests created out of different texts, genres, and genders. They share ambiguous and entangled identities: as images, calligraphic works, material objects, subjects, and extensions of the authors' selves and bodies.

Conclusion: Two Different 'Poetry Theaters' (shige juchang)

Cao Kefei directed "Riding a Roller Coaster Flying Toward the Future" in a way that is partially reminiscent of Mou Sen's experiments and her own early productions. As mentioned above, from the beginning of her career, Cao has been particularly interested in the visual and physical dimensions of theater performances. This has resulted in a dramatic investigation into the possibilities of bringing poetry to the stage – not in the usual manner of recitation but as a visualization of poetical images through the embodied presence of the performer in front of an audience. The 'text' of her play was a collage of poems that appeared in fragmented or disjointed form, or with verses rearranged, and, thus, the bodily movements of actors and props were equally important for making sense of it.⁷² The two leading metaphors of the spectacle – the roller coaster and the doll's crazy talk – were represented by the kaleidoscope of changing images and disarranged poems. In comparison to Chen's play, Cai's theatrical work was far less structured, physical, and associative.

Consequently, on the metatextual level this play was the Ladybird Theater's second attempt to investigate the relationship between poetry and gendered embodiment, and, furthermore, to search for a way in which poetry could indeed take material shape on stage. Chinese 'women's poetry' seemed particularly suited to this exercise due to its pronounced poetics of the body. Bringing poetry to the stage added a new spatial dimension to prior critical discussions: poetry was almost palpable when embodied by performers who were not simply reciting verses but becoming one with the text and, at the same time, releasing the text from its origin as an utterly individual and personal confession through interactions with other members of the group and the audience. This corporeal focus allows the linkage of Cao's theater with other independent ensembles that participate in the current little theater movement in the PRC and that stress the importance of

⁷² Cao emphasizes that she was influenced by traditional Chinese theater and thus prefers to use only a few props – simple, affordable objects that are in daily use and may be easily deciphered by the audience. In this respect her productions differ significantly from those of other avant-garde directors – for example, Meng Jinghui – who often create elaborate multimedia spectacles.

the physical body on stage. Typically, these troupes practice documentary, leftist theater that opposes all forms of commercialization of the human body.⁷³

Chen Si'an's dramatized version of Zhai Yongming's recent work differs from Ladybird Theater's performances in many respects. Her play was carefully structured and, in contrast to Cao's, rather text-guided and narrative. Accordingly, Chen was aware of the two pitfalls that she wanted to avoid: simply turning the poem into a modern spoken drama (*huaju* 话剧) or creating a poetry recital (*langsonghui* 朗诵会). These considerations were the departure point for Chen and Zhou Zan's investigation into the possibility of a different kind of poetry theater. Besides dramatic and lyric genre conventions and established practices of recitation, these two authors also have been questioning the ways in which poetry becomes part of the public space when it enters into theater.

Questions related to the manner of recitation and the process of staging are crucial for the inception of a poetry theater that would differ substantially from previously established aesthetic conventions and, consequently, could be considered a new art of performance. Not long ago, under the domination of the Maoist 'logic of the stage,' public recital of poetry became one means of mobilizing the audience with "revolutionary enthusiasm."⁷⁴ Thus, contemporary poetry theater will always need to define itself as separate from that popular practice of professional poetry recitation.⁷⁵ In addition, since the turn of the century, the PRC has experienced a largely commercially driven "recitation renaissance."⁷⁶ No wonder that recent publications on Chinese poetry pay so much attention to "face-to-face poetry events,"⁷⁷ by which, however, they mean any kind of recital, meeting, or slam that involves reading poetry aloud on stage in front of an audience but not poetry theater per se.

Zhou Zan is the first author who systematically explores the notion of poetry theater as an independent art form. Since her first publication on the topic, which was inspired by her cooperation with the Ladybird Theatre, Zhou has been struggling with the notion of intermediality (*kuajie* 跨界). The reason for her uneasiness with the concept is, according to Zhou, the fact that Chinese aesthetics were never much concerned with genre boundaries; only with the arrival of modernity have they become cognizant of such divisions. Thus, according to Zhou, the transgression of media boundaries is in itself unremarkable; more important ques-

⁷³ The most important examples of this trend are Wen Hui 文慧 and Wu Wenguang's 吴文光 Living Dance Studio (Shenghuo wudao 生活舞蹈) in Beijing and Zhao Chuan's 赵川 Grass Stage Theater (Caotai ban 草台班) in Shanghai. For more, see Huber / Zhao (2013).

⁷⁴ Crespi (2009: 142-67).

⁷⁵ When Chen Si'an's play was performed in Taiwan, one of the actors intentionally used this style of recitation. Again, the effect was humorous, as if he were telling a political joke.

⁷⁶ Crespi (2009: 172).

⁷⁷ Inwood (2014: 115).

tions concern the ways in which transgression takes place and for what reasons.⁷⁸ Similarly to director Cao Kefei, the poet Zhou pays attention to the physical body of the performer, who gives a materiality and a voice to “silent, sleeping”⁷⁹ verse. In her opinion, the poem primarily presents itself as a task for the performer, who has to work herself through every character, every verse, and every stanza in order to find the corresponding bodily expression.

Physicality is, according to Zhou, closely related to the discourse of *xianchang* 现场, which Inwood translates as “live scene”⁸⁰ – but a more literal translation of the term could be “on the spot” or “on site.” This expression can refer to what is actually happening on the spot (as in live broadcasting), and, with regard to poetry, it means an orientation toward places where life and poetry actually happen, as well as connoting a kind of raw, edgy authenticity. Zhou argues that, in the poetry theater, the poem first becomes attached to reality through the physical body of a performer, but, already in the next step, the performing collective creates an abstraction out of the poetic text.⁸¹ Cao’s directorial verb-oriented theater practice illustrates this process well: verbs from the poems become movements on stage and finally are translated into a collective stage language of its own. Furthermore, Zhou argues that, on stage, poetry not only materializes in an embodied form and thereby gains a visual dimension but also enters a space that is political and contested.⁸²

Among the three theater authors discussed here, Chen is the least interested in the performing body, but she pays the most attention to the performance space. Her aim is not to translate poetry for stage but to create a new work of art that depends equally on literary text and the theater space. What these three authors’ explorations of the concept of poetry theater have in common is their wish to bring poetry and theater out of the confines of their own separate generic languages.

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⁷⁸ Zhou / Shi Jia (2016).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Inwood (2014: 12-19).

⁸¹ Even though the discussion of poetry theatre in this paper is dedicated to performances based on ‘women’s poetry’ and Zhou Zan refers to these examples in her texts as well, her understanding of the concept is not limited to works by women authors or performers.

⁸² Zhou / Shi Jia (2016).

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