

The Poetry of Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡

Selections: 1986-2002

Tang Xiaodu is a poetry critic and poet, born in 1954 in Yizheng, Jiangsu Province. After graduating from Nanjing University in 1981, early the following year he began work as an editor at *Poetry Monthly* 诗刊 in Beijing. Over the next 15 years in that post, Tang met China's most prominent poets, both official and unofficial, and became well-known as a promoter of the unofficial avant-garde in official circles through his officially published critical essays and poetry anthologies. The first of these anthologies, co-edited with fellow *Poetry* editor and poet Wang Jiabin, was entitled *A Selection of Contemporary Chinese Experimental Poetry* 中国当代实验诗选 and appeared in 1987. Tang has been a frequent guest at poetry conferences and festivals in the west since the mid-1990s.

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The Thirteenth Floor of This Building
(本楼第十三层)

The Warning¹ (诫)

I move onto the thirteenth floor of this building
Not sure if I should be happy or sad
Of course I'm glad to be above it all
But also wonder if this number
Truly masks some type of ill luck

Somebody warns to install a doubly secure lock
Somebody markets a two-buck cat eye they'll fit in a trice
Solicitous guests spinning tops
None knowing my castle keep's a hundred yards high, has walls within walls

Only looking down off the balcony am I really anxious
A white carrier pigeon
Endlessly gliding in the murk beneath my feet
Where does this gentle bird actually come from
I turn to enter the room
But the door
Slams shut before me

¹ In the Chinese, an end-rhyme of -ang, -iang, and -uang is used in the 2nd, 3rd, and 5th lines of stanza one, the 2nd and 4th lines of stanza two, and the 1st, 3rd, 4th, and 7th lines of stanza three. It also appears as internal rhyme on six occasions.

A Rose of Death (死亡玫瑰)

A nameless archer lies low in the skin
 A painstakingly calculated madness rages like a fire
 Red arrows, a cruel swarm of bees
 The five fingers quiver, and the rose
 Blooms on the flank of the tiger's mouth²
 Emerging as an endless stream

Petal masks petal
 As footprint pigeonholes footprint
 A thorn, a forgotten cry for help
 The throbbing gyrations of the borders of leaves
 Expose a sweet-smelling secret
 The roots of time sink ever deeper, until
 They grip tight a piece of flesh rotten as mire. But

Dali's child is long gone
 The ocean in a conch
 Has long been unable to tell between the sky and a mottling corpse
 The majestic mask of death is smothered in rouge
 Rose rose, will your intensely toxic inflammation
 Leave me to the ashes
 Or the flames?

² The Chinese term for the flesh between the thumb and index finger of the hand.

Frontal Eminence (额角)**#1**

Who does it present itself to? This lavish precipice
For who? A large flock of white nest-lorn gulls
Drop and fly up. Who will collect
All the little feathers? Like brushing off
Bread crumbs on the breast of a blazer

Observe the world through the compound eye of a fly
The vertical one is me
The dark side the bright side all a constant temperature
On what do I base conjecture
Whether the contact point is admittance or denial

Finally there's a clear sky. Finally the two acrylic wings
Are woven into the cotton-padded lining
The tepid cup irons flat a final wrinkle
Splashes out the handy dregs of tea
And my heels are raring to give it a go

#2³

Dusk like a net, confinement raises a final ray of watery light
 My hand strokes
 Startled fish
 Down. Up

Reed catkins soundlessly flutter down
 But the rushes still wear a seasonal garb
 “It’s really beautiful!”
 Whose voice shrill and coarse
 The flash of a diamond knife. The glass is unblemished
 Like before, to be branded with the deepest wound

Do your best to handle a current of icy cold
 The sound of oars is remote. Tonight where
 Will this little boat moor?
 My hand gropes. But

In the air abruptly collides with another
 All at sea gripping tightly. And an uncertain loosening
 Not a sound is heard when you lose at love

³ In the Chinese an end-rhyme of –uang, –ang, and –iang appears in the 1st and 4th lines of stanza 1, the 2nd, 3rd, and 6th lines of stanza 2, the 1st and 3rd lines of stanza 3, and the 1st and 3rd lines of stanza 4.

Keep Your Composure⁴ (不动声色)

Just this way sit alone by the window and keep your composure
 Watch how two fingers of flickering light
 Whimsically alter dark clouds

Dark clouds and light heads

Suddenly a wall of the sound of water
 Agitated masts in a gale
 Craving the caress of a black reef

Blood flows in a downpour. Waves of footsteps fore and aft
 Cries for help rise and fall
 In whose pupils rose the first sail
 And yet another
 Cataract eyes medicate the national head wound
 And ensure where hands fall illness is excised

I coldly spit out Eliot's butt
 The sound of the tide frostily spews me out
 On a bleak seashore
 A hermit crab gloomily stands watch
 Is it still concerned over
 The secret gestation
 Of a pearl in the grit

⁴ In the Chinese an end-rhyme of -u appears in the 2nd and 3rd lines of stanza 1, at the end of single line of stanza 2, in the 3rd line of stanza 3, in the 1st, 2nd, and 6th lines of stanza 4, and in the 4th and 7th lines of stanza 5.

To a Persian Cat⁵ (致一只波斯猫) 1987

A ray of white light in a midnight portico
 As if god pays a late visit
 Noiselessly steals in, softer than the velvet of night
 Each step bearing a lotus, I smell
 The faint scent of orchids floating in the air

Dark blue eyes cut across elegance and poise
 The shadowy crossing of a body with no head
 Toward a homeland of golden rape
 The glimmer of a secretive flame fans out
 And a starry sky surges in
 Shaking light down on a frost-covered earth

The arrival and return of the same sole
 Traces of a rainy season, steady the slush fermenting in the night
 North to south an indistinct broom sweeps weakly past
 A day at winter's end in '86
 I slip into your bright shadow
 Like a monarch dethroned in a blink

⁵ In the Chinese an end-rhyme of -uang, -ang, and -iang appears in the 1st, 2nd, and 5th lines of stanza 1, in the 3rd and 6th lines of stanza 2, and the 1st, 2nd, and 6th lines of stanza 3.

A Mirror⁶ (镜) 1988
 -- for my child

A mirror hangs on a wall
 We are suspended in it
 Downy laughter repeatedly brushes by
 --- "This is papa"
 And the finger of a lily peeks into the bright hollow

The finger of the lily comes out of the bright hollow
 --- "This is papa"
 A laugh of quicksilver is repeatedly plated in the heart
 The mirror slips into the wall
 And we fly into space

⁶ In the Chinese an end-rhyme of -ong appears in the 2nd and 5th lines of stanza 1, and the 1st and 5th lines of stanza 2.

Untitled (无题) 1992

When the sky brightens
Nothing will leave a trace behind
Like a wind
That unwittingly stops in a blizzard

Flowers will strip off gay attire
Leaves curl up again
Once more fish stick close to rocks
And the pillar of quicksilver returns to a previous gradation
Like a self-composed widow
Watching over her remnants of chastity

But you will get up in a panic
Send troops sweeping over the land across a river to besiege a city
Aroused Brutal Rigid
Like Plath's black leather boot
All along styling yourself a king
Trampling the face in the mirror
Entirely into coal dust

Lastly it's your own face
You suddenly shout the heart hurts
Swoon Incessantly vomit
And calmly throw yourself to the ground
To become a blank piece of paper

Untitled⁷ (无题) 1992

Furious willows tear spring up into cotton batting
 And roses howl. Ashes spew out new meaning
 Of course flames might die in midair
 But before they fell to earth
 Who said to you, I'm going to leave!

I'm going to leave.....
 But where can I go?
 To dance on a knife blade
 My feet were long ago covered in blood
 White blood. Pure white blood
 Yogic practice teaches me to leap
 But I cannot get up to the sky, or down to earth

This is sin!
 The sin of a previous life dug out as a trap
 Whoever gives in sinks ever deeper
 By reason of blamelessness and exceptional cruelty
 Black quartz must crack a smile for the iron hammer
 I've said, my sin is grave

This is the only reality. All else a lie
 But a real lie moves a person more than an iron hammer
 See, it births lotuses at every step, swirling so brilliantly
 As if dreamily suspended in the air
 Stamp feet, sigh, and scratch your head
 Like a clown between acts
 With the loudly laughing audience
 Jeer yourself ---

Yes, this is true sin
 An unadmittable sin!
 Who can guess the distance from a rose to a knife blade?
 Dance in the ashes

I'm going nowhere!

⁷ In the Chinese, this poem features a complicated end-rhyme scheme and the repetition of the same character, or a homophone, and the end of lines for musical effect.

An Ancient River Valley (古河道) Nov. 1988

-- on the same subject as a poem by Ma Yuguang 马宇光

A grieving sky an azure mother
Naked like this we stick to you
Grilled. Burnt. Hovering. Plummeting
A dream made strange by water and fire. An unalterable result

Innumerable faces facing the same face
Each faithfully adhering to a noble reticence higher than light
The river valley of death hides the gunshot of time
Mother, we live like this amid water and fire

Untitled⁸ (无题) May 1989

-- on the same subject as a poem by Xue Mingde 薛明德

As the price is as high as this
I'm powerless to finally make an appearance

That red, the scorched righteous blood of maiden years
The white is brains that once seethed beneath a rocky formation
The green, you like to call the symbol of life
The blue it's said expresses the shared illusions of humankind
Now they all helplessly entrust to each other
Solitary perilous planets. Sinking clouds
The burst fishing nets of an ocean of giant stones

All that remains are the multiplying layers of moss on a cross
--- Yes, you once carried it
But at this moment
Who is with it keeping a silent watch

As the price is as high as this
I don't need to finally make an appearance

⁸ In the Chinese, an end-rhyme of -ang and -iang appears in the 1st and 2nd lines of stanza 1, in the 2nd, 4th, and 7th lines of stanza 2, in the 4th line of stanza 3, and in the both lines of stanza 4.

Hedge Roses in May (五月的蔷薇) 4 May 2002

Of course, this is a secret ---
How can lingering vines
From out of a thorny bush
Catch hold of spring

Yet not know how to open
Just furtively gripping to oneself
The savings of an entire winter
Holding back till blood vessels go blue

The winter jasmine and the cherry blossom
Then peach and apricot
Ardor cut down and compressed again
Eventually has the indifference of a snowflake

Slow. It must be slow!
Restraint eases the burden of restraint
In this world there cannot be an obsolete fragrance
See the tiny fists shaking in the wind

--- My flowering season, a million blooms
A cluster bomb that concurrently ignites in a flash