

Featured Author  
Yi Sha

# Yi Sha

## Running His Race in the “Ninth Lane”

*Heather Inwood*

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*In this introduction to the work of Yi Sha, sinologist Heather Inwood (who also translated the section) offers CLT readers access to the often-polarizing issues that are at stake in the world of contemporary Chinese poetry. Inwood reveals how Yi Sha, as one of the most influential proponents of the so-called lower-body school, raised the stakes for Chinese poets by fundamentally questioning the value of poetry in modern China and the role that poets play in addressing the full breadth of contemporary lived experience. Readers of CLT may recall earlier essays on “body-writing” that explored novels like Wei Hui’s Shanghai Baby and Mian Mian’s Candy, which do not shy away from the “lower body” topics of casual sex and the related hot-button issue of drug use. Yi Sha is a representative of lower-body poets, however, as Inwood outlines in her introduction, and his work has further transformed these ideas into a poetics that not only enriches poetic diction with heretofore taboo language and topics, but also refocuses the lyric upon the forgotten lives of common people.*

Yi Sha 伊沙 is the pen name of the poet and author Wu Wenjian 吴文健, who was born in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, a few days after the start of the Cultural Revolution in May 1966, before his family moved to Xi'an when he was two. A graduate of Beijing Normal University, he now teaches in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Xi'an Foreign Languages University. Yi Sha is a larger-than-life presence on the contemporary Chinese poetry scene, a poet whose writings and outspoken personality attract followers and foes in equal measure but are rarely easy to ignore; he has been variously described as—or has declared himself to be—China's preeminent postmodern poet, the Chinese Allen Ginsberg, the "greatest avant-garde in China," and the architect of a new language of contemporary poetry known as "post-colloquial writing" (*hou kouyu xiezu* 后口语写作). Now in the fourth decade of his literary career, Yi Sha's publications include numerous collections of poetry in Chinese, several works of fiction, a collection of poetry in English translation, and the epic poem "Tang." He has played a prominent role in many of China's poetic movements and polemics of the last three decades, including as a vocal spokesperson of the "popular standpoint" (*minjian lichang* 民间立场) in the battle of words against the "intellectual writing" (*zhishifenzi xiezu* 知识分子写作) poets that peaked around 1998–2001, and he has been a conspicuous target of attack during ongoing debates about the value of colloquial poetry.

Although his profession as a writer and a college professor makes Yi Sha an intellectual in his own right, his sympathies lie firmly with the less advantaged people of China, as can be seen from the poems included in this section (indeed, the dichotomy that has developed in contemporary poetry discourse between intellectuals and the "popular" or folk is a false one, given China's long intellectual tradition of showing concern for the common people in literature). His poetry is predominantly narrative in style, relating with brevity and wit the kinds of everyday stories and detailed observations that are left out of most public records of contemporary life. As Tang Xin reports, the characters in his poems include criminals, prostitutes, traitors, punks, and drunks; no person or topic is omitted for being too lowly or crass. Maghiel van Crevel suggests that a quality of rejectiveness can be detected in Yi Sha's poetic attitude of "cynicism, disbelief, negation, demystification, desecration, deconstruction, aggression, and destruction,"<sup>1</sup> but readers could equally see the stories he tells as evidence of a more receptive or broadminded approach to poetry and its capacity to accommodate humanity in all shapes and sizes.

Sometimes the contents of Yi Sha's poems are enhanced by his imagination, as is the case with the

destitute migrant workers Pigtail and Little Bao, the protagonists of "China's Lower Rungs"; other times his poems appear more closely tied to reality and to personal experience. Although readers are often reminded to be careful about confusing the biographical figure of the poet with the speaker in his or her poems, with Yi Sha it seems relatively safe to assume that it is his own

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voice and thoughts we are hearing. This is especially true when he brings his experience of contemporary poethood directly into the narrative, as in "Newspaper Seller," where we hear about the poet's love of soccer and his leisurely lifestyle as a "man of letters"; in "China's Lower Rungs" when he refers to himself as "this people's poet"; as well as in "Zhang Changshi, Your Nanny," when we are reminded that the author teaches in a foreign languages college.

Lived experience in Yi Sha's poetry can be both intensely private, as when the narrator takes his son to be circumcised ("Taking My Son to His Circumcision Ceremony") or accompanies his wife to the hospital for a possible mastectomy ("Spring's Breast Cancer Disaster"), and is a product of collective historical consciousness, whether that be Hong Kong's return to mainland China, life under the shadow of SARS, various Chinese national holidays, memories of the Cultural Revolution, or the misadventures of American politicians. The picture we get of the poet's inner world is not always flattering, as when he goes through almost every possible voyeuristic response to the September 11 terrorist attacks in the space of ten short seconds before realizing, with the slightest hint of remorse, that his sister is at that very moment living in New York ("9/11 Psychological Report"), or when he admits to giving money to a beggar only to look good in front of an attractive woman ("Collusion").<sup>2</sup> Such admissions can sound outrageous when contained within poetry, but their impact lies partly in the shared knowledge that he is far from alone in his fallibilities.

The self-promoting, or some might say egotistical, overtones of his metatextual writings are set off by the more confessional and self-effacing nature of his poetry: Yi Sha is never afraid to make fun of himself in verse,

and in shining a spotlight on his imperfections draws attention to the many hypocrisies and ironies of human behavior and contemporary social life. In “An Email I Never Sent to G.” he describes himself as “a grotty, unregulated, substandard poet / in love / with this grotty, unregulated, substandard Motherland of ours”;<sup>3</sup> in “Kongtong Mountain,” the classic Chinese poetic trope of ascending a mountain is subverted to switch the expected effect from a lofty aesthetic appreciation for the natural world—“going up / the mountain appears half-hidden in thick mist / coming down / the mountain is laid bare in bright sunlight”—to one of bodily self-satisfaction, as the poet’s recent weight loss meant that he was able to climb the mountain by foot for the first time in many years. (At a poetry event in Changsha in 2006, Yi Sha’s newly svelte physique was a popular topic of discussion, and he has spoken on many occasions of how proud he is of his achievements in this area, having managed to lose around fifty-five pounds in the space of a year.)

“Body-writing” (*shenti xiezu* 身体写作), usually understood as writing literature about the body or relating to the world through bodily experiences, is a thematic vein that runs through much of Yi Sha’s poetic oeuvre. Long before Shen Haobo and friends established the “lower body” (*xiabanshen* 下半身) poetry group in 2000, Yi Sha was writing poetry that deals with the functions of the lower half of the body in a direct and unabashed way. In his iconic 1988 poem “Crossing the Yellow River,” the poet confesses to having been “having a pee” while his train passed over the symbolic life source of Chinese civilization, and in a short poem entitled “Confessions,” he admits with a certain amount of pride to having squashed a pair of flies “in the act of making love.”

Bodily descriptions in contemporary Chinese poetry are often thought to serve as a foil to intellectual matters of the mind, an idea to which Yi Sha is not as resolutely opposed as many poets and critics might assume; in fact, they themselves are far more likely to roil him with what he perceives as their frequent lack of honesty or sincerity. As his 2005 poem “Common People” alludes, Yi Sha is keen to keep himself in check, not allowing his intellectual profession to deter him from his responsibility toward China’s working classes and everyday realities: “This is a fact / Having read too much of the rubbish written by gurus / I can get a little up myself / and need to be reminded of my place.”<sup>4</sup> A similar outlook is on display in “I Have Something to Say,” his series of manifestos included in this special section,<sup>5</sup> when he declares, “I don’t even especially hate ‘whoring while declaring one’s chastity’; what I can’t stand is talking chastity with the chaste and talking whoring with whores while using pile

upon pile of grand theories!” Lying, in other words, is not necessarily an evil in itself, as long as you don’t try to make excuses for it through pretentious intellectualizing.

Given his populist bent and deconstructive eye for the scenes, events, and ideologies that surround him, it is no surprise that Yi Sha has been a major source of inspiration for China’s next generation of avant-garde poets born in the 1970s and ‘80s; Van Crevel describes him as “something of a patron saint”<sup>6</sup> to poets associated first with the lower body group and more recently with the Internet-based “low poetry movement” (*di shige yundong* 低诗歌运动) and “school of rubbish” (*laji pai* 垃圾派).<sup>7</sup> The term “colloquial” has been somewhat overused in descriptions of contemporary Chinese poetry and certainly does not do justice to Yi Sha’s distinctive way with words and the biting wit and sarcasm with which he approaches his documentations and deconstructions of everyday life. By Yi Sha’s admission, not all colloquial poems are “good enough to hold to the microscope.” He maintains that there is an important distinction between pre-colloquial and post-colloquial writing. While the former is indiscriminate in its use of words and subject matter, the latter is more linguistically and psychologically mediated and thus more refined, pure gold, silver, and steel rather than saliva spat out at will, or as Tang Xin puts it, “everyday language at its most resplendent peak.” In other words: Yi Sha doesn’t just put down whichever words first pop into his head, but aims for specific poetic effects and pays careful attention to the sounds and structures of his poems. Thus, while he concedes that critics of contemporary Chinese poetry are not entirely misplaced in their recent claims that poetry is “the art of splitting lines,” he is anxious to point out that they fail to acknowledge the innate talent and “feel for language” (*yugan* 语感) required to split lines in the best way possible and choose the best combination of words to fill each line. Linguistic simplicity can be deceptive; as Yi Sha proclaims, “Only when complicated can one dare to be simple; only when abundant can one dare to be transparent; only when physically healthy can one dare to be naked!”<sup>8</sup>

Throughout his writing career Yi Sha has been repeatedly obliged to defend his choices of subject matter and use of colloquial language against members of the general public and professional critics. One particularly emphatic commentator is the writer Meng Yifei 梦亦非, who has accused him of “squandering language under the disguise of short lines” and of mistaking a true “popular standpoint” for a “provincial standpoint” (*waisheng lichang* 外省立场).<sup>9</sup> In general, criticisms of Yi Sha’s poetry are so passionate and profuse they could constitute a field of study in their own right; the speed with which Yi Sha returns rhetorical fire has only

heightened the disapproval aimed at him. The online appearance of his epic poem “Tang” in 2002 brought fresh controversy. Poets and critics were split in two as to how to respond to this audacious rewriting of China’s most canonical poetry anthology, the *Three Hundred Tang Poems*.

The print version of this poem, published in 2004 at over two hundred pages in length, includes six pieces of criticism by Yi Sha’s closest poet friends (including Shen Haobo 沈浩波, Yu Jian 于坚, Xu Jiang 徐江, and Tang Xin 唐欣), who are full of admiration for this bold experiment in bridging the historical divide and communing with his literary ancestors in a both reverential and highly brazen manner. Yi Sha takes the original Tang poems as his starting point, but often goes off on a tangent and ends up with a poem that bears only the faintest resemblance to the original. In places he even incorporates recent Internet slang (like “I *fu* 服 you,” or “you win!”), which could be seen as a travesty or a triumph depending on one’s personal tastes. Less sympathetic readers wasted no time in tearing Yi Sha’s efforts apart; one poet described “Tang” as “terribly mediocre, nothing more than a shoddy attempt at commenting on Tang poetry”;<sup>10</sup> poetry critic Chen Zhongyi 陈仲义 conducted a detailed analysis of the entire poem, leading him to point to various shortcomings such as oversimplifying and distorting the original poetic intentions of such hallowed greats as Li Bai 李白, Wang Wei 王维, and Du Fu 杜甫.<sup>11</sup> Knowing Yi Sha, however, such criticisms can do little to deter him from his goals, and are more likely to end up strengthening his sense of individual worth. One of the most striking characteristics of his approach to poetry is the way he simultaneously revels in others’ distaste yet remains single-mindedly absorbed with the need to forge a place for himself in literary history. As he sees it, being controversial is not a hindrance to achieving historical longevity but rather a sign that he is on the right track: “Writing well is a crime! I am a criminal! Poetry circles are a humanitarian disaster zone scattered with the scum of humanity!”<sup>12</sup>

In part in order to secure his future reputation, Yi Sha throws himself into his literary activities with seemingly boundless energy. He is a strong proponent of the discourse of “live scenes” (*xianchang* 现场) of poetry activity, referring to the physical sites and media in which poetry is produced and circulated in the present, as well as the basis of documentation and evaluation for the purposes of literary history. He was among the first wave of Chinese poets to realize the benefits to be had in participating in poetry activity online, contributing on a daily (and sometimes hourly) basis to a wide variety of Internet forums, blogs, and microblogs since the late 1990s, and once declaring the Internet to be “the primary

live scene for contemporary poets’ daily existence and the open circulation of contemporary poetry.”<sup>13</sup> He is equally active in print publication and at face-to-face poetry events, and is an accomplished performer of his own poetry. Since January 2010 he has been organizing the Chang’an Poetry Festival (Chang’an shigejie 长安

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诗歌节), a series of informal gatherings of Xi’an-based and visiting writers that revolves around talking freely about poetry, sharing recent publications, drinking large quantities of beer, and reciting each other’s poems until everyone’s throats are hoarse. When I attended one such gathering in April 2010, Yi Sha treated the British members of his audience to a reading of his 100-stanza poem “Blue Lamp” (“Lan deng” 蓝灯, a phonetic play on the name of the city of London), dedicated to his friend and translator Simon Patton, which continued for the best part of an hour and revealed an impressive level of poetry recitation stamina.

Yi Sha’s latest project has been playing out in real time on his blog and microblog pages since December 2011. Under the title “Retranslating the Classics” (“Jingdian chongyi” 经典重译), he and his wife, “Old G,” have been translating classic works of poetry from across the world by canonical writers such as Anna Akhmatova (with whom Yi Sha admits to sharing a special affinity), Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, Charles Bukowski, Tomas Tranströmer, and Allen Ginsberg. Their unconventional methodology involves consulting existing Chinese-language translations to create a new version written in Yi Sha’s inimitably colloquial style. Like much of his work, this looks to be contentious: Yi Sha recently announced on his microblog that they had translated fifty poems in the space of just ten days, and he has already drawn the ire of other poets and readers who accuse him of failing to understand the original poems and destroying their poetic flavor. As one Weibo user lamented, “Yi Sha has translated Yeats’s beautiful poetry into something truly ghastly, yet still claims his poems are better than the original—does he have no sense of shame?!”<sup>14</sup>



As usual, although the speaker in Yi Sha's poems is very much focused on being present in the here and now, his literary ambitions are more future-oriented and far-reaching. This reflects a predicament shared by many Chinese poets: How can they prove themselves as writers of poems that are focused on contemporary issues and rooted in current Chinese experience, yet avoid pandering to prevailing popular tastes? For Yi Sha, acceptance by his living peers is less important than finding a place for himself in a canon of contemporary world poetry that has yet to be formed. Nonetheless, to win literary accolades in the future it is inevitable that poets make their voices heard in the present and put on a public show for audiences at home and abroad, otherwise their efforts will go unheeded by the people and institutions that really matter. This is a challenge that Yi Sha clearly struggles with: "So what if you are accepted by the current era? Would that make you happy? My imagination doesn't run that far. I think you'd be little more than a giant panda, shipped around and put on display."

Being treated like a giant panda is near the bottom of Yi Sha's bucket list. In a 2007 poem entitled "Questions for Myself," he wonders aloud,

was the point of my lifetime struggle  
just to turn into a fellow like this  
and to be treated as a National Treasure  
...  
To grow as docile as a panda  
to the point of being loved by anyone who saw it  
To grow as chaste as a panda  
to the point of only mating twice a year  
Need I say: my answer was NO! (in English!).<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of what you think of his poems, it is hard not to admire Yi Sha's determination to maintain his avant-garde credentials by staying well ahead of those at the front. His career thus far has been a colorful example of how to root one's writings in life in the present, while running a race in the ninth lane toward an undetermined finishing line, or, to indulge in one of his favorite metaphors, partaking in an never-ending game of soccer in a fantasy league entirely of one's own construction. How future literary historians will judge his performance is yet to be seen, but it is evident from both his poetry and his reputation on the scene that Yi Sha has been busy following his own advice, pursuing honesty in his writing, and following fate's path to fame.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Maghiel van Crevel, "Rejective Poetry? Sound and Sense in Yi Sha," in *Text, Performance, and Gender in Chinese Literature and Music*, eds. Wilt Idema, Maghiel van Crevel, Tian Yuan Tan, and Michel Hockx (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 390.

<sup>2</sup> Yi Sha, *Starve the Poets!: Selected Poems*, trans. Simon Patton and Tao Naikan (Tarsset, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), 79.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>4</sup> Yi Sha, *Starve the Poets!*, 123.

<sup>5</sup> This issue, [PAGE XXX].

<sup>6</sup> Van Crevel, "Rejective Poetry?," 409.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the Low Poetry movement see Michael Day, "Online Avant-Garde Poetry in China Today," *New Perspectives on Contemporary Chinese Poetry*, ed. Christopher Lupke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 201–218, and Heather Inwood, "Identity Politics in Online Chinese Poetry Groups," *Berliner China-Heft/Chinese History and Society*, 34 (2008): 77–94.

<sup>8</sup> See Yi Sha, "I Have Something to Say," this issue, [PAGE XXX].

<sup>9</sup> Meng Yifei, "Kouyu shige: wuxiao de jingtai xiezuo" ("Colloquial Poetry: Ineffective Static Writing"), <http://www.xingushi.com/gushidaquan/14809.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Zheng Wenbin, "Pipan Yi Sha de 'Tang'" 批判伊沙的'唐' ("A Critique of Yi Sha's 'Tang'"), posted Dec. 21, 2005, <http://bbs.poemlife.com/thread-60382-1-1.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Chen Zhongyi, "Gujin shixin, heyi huwen jiaohui: ping Yi Sha 'Tang' de de yu shi" 古今诗心, 何以互问交汇: 评伊沙'唐'的得与失 ("Searching for the Intertextual Intersection of Ancient and Modern Poetic Hearts: Critiquing the Achievements and Failures of Yi Sha's 'Tang'"), accessed Feb. 24, 2012, <http://www.poemlife.com/revshow-18805-958.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> See Yi Sha, "I Have Something to Say," this issue, [PAGE XXX].

<sup>13</sup> Yi Sha, "Zuo da de 'Shi jianghu'" 做大的'诗江湖' ("Poetry Vagabonds Made Big"), posted Nov. 12, 2007, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_485dc33401000be3.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_485dc33401000be3.html).

<sup>14</sup> Xueyu zhuyin 雪域竹音, microblog entry, <http://www.weibo.com/1667952607/y3A0FzQye>, posted Feb. 2, 2012, accessed Feb. 10, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Yi Sha, *Starve the Poets!*, 137.

# Six Poems

Yi Sha

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When compared to Yi Sha's manifesto-like essay "I Have Something to Say," which so clearly illustrates the radical public persona of this controversial figure, his poetry may feel somewhat subdued. Yet each of his poems signals a forceful shift from a meditation on abstract, intellectual concerns to a focus on the gritty textures of society's "lower body." Yi Sha captures a political call to witness the full spectrum of life in modern China, but connects these lives to a fertility capable of rebirth. By way of the stories of others or his own confessional lyrics, Yi Sha creates apertures through which readers can glimpse the moral ambivalence and compromise that characterize both the "I" of modern poetry and the nation as a whole during a time of moral and existential uncertainty.

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## Zhang Changshi, Your Nanny

I teach in a foreign languages college  
of this you are well aware  
at the place where I work  
I never bow down to the other teachers  
of this you are also well aware  
but I once saluted an old nanny  
Zhang Changshi, famed throughout the school  
she is a true teacher  
in my eyes  
a peasant from Xiagui village, Lantian County, Shaanxi Province  
she was the mother of my colleague  
her greatest success lay in  
raising the son of an American expert  
for four years  
and naming him "dog's balls"  
when that blue-eyed golden-haired  
snotty-nosed kid  
left China with his mother  
his voice full of Shaanxi opera  
his face full of Chinese peasant-style  
honesty and cunning  
he was too cute for words

## 张常氏，你的保姆

我在一所外语学院任教  
这你是知道的  
我在我工作的地方  
从不向教授们低头  
这你也是知道的  
我曾向一位老保姆致敬  
闻名全校的张常氏  
在我眼里  
是一名真正的教授  
系陕西省蓝田县下归乡农民  
我一位同事的母亲  
她的成就是  
把一名美国专家的孩子  
带了四年  
并命名为狗蛋  
那个金发碧眼  
一把鼻涕的崽子  
随其母离开中国时  
满口地道秦腔  
满脸中国农民式的  
朴实与狡黠  
真是可爱极了

1998

## China's Lower Rungs

Pigtail arrives at the workers' tent as planned  
says, "Little Bao, got any smokes?"

The cigarette pack was stolen  
just like the 1964-style handgun on top of the tent

Little Bao sits on the bed  
one leg broken from the getaway

Little Bao wants to sell the gun  
then go to hospital to get his leg fixed

Pigtail won't let him  
"Little Bao, they'll have your head!"

Little Bao sobs  
harder and harder, "Look at the sorry state I'm in!"

He says, "I haven't eaten for two days  
and you want to leave me crippled forever?"

Pigtail starts to cry too  
wiping away tears he says, "Look at the sorry state we're in!"

Pigtail decides to help Little Bao sell the gun  
through his introduction the gun is sold to a Mr. Dong

This story marks the start of the December first Xi'an  
shooting tragedy that shook the whole country

on a night like that most people cared about the big picture  
I only cared about Pigtail and Little Bao

these hopeless kids of the lower rungs  
broke this people's poet's heart

## 中国底层

辫子应约来到工棚  
他说：“小保你有烟抽了？”

那盒烟也是偷来的  
和棚顶上一把六四式手枪

小保在床上坐着  
他的腿在干这件活儿逃跑时摔断了

小保想卖了那枪  
然后去医院把自己的断腿接上

辫子坚决不让  
“小保，这可是要掉脑袋的！”

小保哭了  
越哭越凶：“看我可怜的！”

他说：“我都两天没吃饭了  
你忍心让我腿一直断着？”

辫子也哭了  
他一抹眼泪：“看咱可怜的！”

辫子决定帮助小保卖枪  
经他介绍把枪卖给了一个姓董的

以上所述是震惊全国的  
西安12.1枪杀大案的开始

这样的夜晚别人都关心大案  
我只关心辫子和小保

这些来自中国底层无望的孩子  
让我这人民的诗人受不了

1999

## 9/11 Psychological Report

First second: open-mouthed in shock  
Second second: dumb as a wooden chicken  
Third second: half-disbelieving  
Fourth second: convinced and undoubting  
Fifth second: passively watching from afar  
Sixth second: taking joy in others' misfortune  
Seventh second: talking of revenge  
Eighth second: worshipping outlaws  
Ninth second: astounded by faith  
Tenth second: suddenly remembered  
my younger sister  
lives in New York  
I hurry to make  
a long-distance phone call  
it doesn't connect  
I rush to the computer  
go online  
and send an email  
as I type  
my fingers shake  
"Sister, sister,  
are you still alive?  
Your older brother is worried to death!"

## 9/11心理报告

第1秒钟目瞪口呆  
第2秒钟呆若木鸡  
第3秒钟将信将疑  
第4秒钟确信无疑  
第5秒钟隔岸观火  
第6秒钟幸灾乐祸  
第7秒钟口称复仇  
第8秒钟崇拜歹徒  
第9秒钟感叹信仰  
第10秒钟猛然记起  
我的胞妹  
就住在纽约  
急拨电话  
要国际长途  
未通  
扑向电脑  
上网  
发伊妹儿  
敲字  
手指发抖  
“妹子，妹子  
你还活着吗？  
老哥快要急死了！”

2001

## A Brief Record of Kongtong Mountain

The feeling of going up and the feeling of coming down  
are completely unlike—

going up  
the mountain appears half-hidden through thick mist

coming down  
the mountain is laid bare in bright sunlight

it's as if there are two mountains  
and I don't know which is more Kongtong

regardless which it is  
I'll love Kongtong just the same

because this mountain is  
the first in many years

that I have climbed  
on my own two legs

## 崆峒山小记

上去时和下来时的感觉  
是非常不同的——

上去的时候  
那山隐现在浓雾之中

下来的时候  
这山暴露在艳阳之下

像是两座山  
不知哪座更崆峒

不论哪一座  
我都爱着这崆峒

因为这是  
多年以来——

我用我的双脚  
踏上的头一座山

2006



### Taking My Son to His Circumcision Ceremony

The banana needs peeling  
the pee-pee needs to show its head  
my son needs to become a man  
as a father  
all I can do  
is take him to  
a hospital pure and holy as a church  
to carry out a dignified circumcision  
I ask my good friend,  
a respected physician, to lower himself  
to the menial level of a trainee  
make it conform to international standards  
show signs of globalization  
be Olympic-worthy  
make it a penis that can join the WTO  
(just like the one that showed up  
in those lewd photos a while ago)  
use momentary suffering  
to bring him a lifetime of happiness

### 带儿子去行割礼

香蕉该剥皮了  
牛牛该露头了  
儿子该成人了  
作为一名父亲  
我所能做的是  
把他带到此刻  
如教堂般圣洁的医院  
去行一次庄严的割礼  
请求自己的好友——  
一名主治医师屈尊下驾  
再干一把实习生的活儿  
割出一个符合国际标准  
具有全球化意味  
能够出席奥运会  
并加入WTO的漂亮阳具  
(就像前阵子  
艳照上所见的那具)  
用片刻的痛苦  
换取一生的幸福

2008

## The Old Newspaper Seller

The old newspaper seller sells papers from a stall downtown  
that's the newspaper stall closest to my home  
as a leisurely man of letters  
my hours of rest are followed to the T  
I write in the morning, nap at noon  
then during my afternoon stroll  
pay a visit to his newspaper stall  
and buy *The Week in Sports*  
recently when the World Cup was on  
I could never get hold of a copy  
after the umpteenth time I complained:  
"Sir, could you not take in more copies?"  
"More copies?" he replied,  
"What if I take in more copies but can't get rid of them?  
It'd be me who gets left in a jam!"  
The soccer fan part of my brain was triggered  
into offering what it thought was some shrewd advice:  
"Sir, do you watch soccer or not?  
If so you're in a good position to know  
if the night before one team springs a surprise  
the next day you can take in more copies  
when Spain and Germany lost a match  
wasn't it easier to sell the lot?"  
"True enough. Those few days my papers  
were gone by noon . . . but  
it's easy for *you* to say  
where have I got the time to watch soccer?  
Waking hours I'm stuck inside this steamer  
keeping watch all day  
I nearly get heatstroke it's that hot  
evenings I pack up my stall and head home  
eat dinner cooked by the missus  
take a shower then hit the sack  
before passing out like a dead mutt  
and you want *me* to watch the World Cup!"

## 卖报翁

卖报翁，租亭卖报闹市中  
就在距我家最近的那座报亭  
身为一名貌似闲人的“坐家”  
我有我雷打不动的作息时间表  
上午写作、中午午觉  
待到下午出门散步时  
才会光顾他的报亭  
购买一张《体坛周报》  
值此世界杯期间  
我是屡屡买不着  
次数多了我便向其抱怨：  
“大爷，您老就不能多进几张么？”  
“多进？”他回答道：  
“多进几张可就卖不掉喽！  
亏的还不是我！”  
我球迷的一根筋被触碰了  
自以为聪明的给他支招：  
“大爷，您看不看球？  
您要是看球就好判断了  
头一晚若有冷门大爆  
第二天您就多进几张  
西班牙和德国输了球  
报纸是不是就好卖些？”  
“那倒是。那两天中午不到  
报纸就卖光了……可是  
你这是站着说话不腰疼  
我哪儿有闲心看球啊？  
白天呆在这个蒸笼里  
守上整整一天  
热得快要中暑  
晚上收摊回到家  
吃了老伴做的饭  
洗洗就睡了  
睡得跟死狗似的  
还看什么世界杯！”

2010

Translated by Heather Inwood

# I Have Something to Say

Yi Sha

---

*To call the work of this issue's featured writer controversial would not capture the scale of his polemical poetics and radical public image in China. With this essay readers will gain a strong sense of how he acquired his reputation as a poetic force to be reckoned with. While not as programmatic as manifestos penned by earlier twentieth-century iconoclasts like Hu Shi, Ezra Pound, or F. T. Marinetti, there is little denying the rhetorical vigor, heterodox style, and expressive force of Yi Sha's poetics.*

---

**S**ome people are destined to join ranks with the common people!

I don't even especially hate "whoring while declaring one's chastity"; what I can't stand is talking chastity with the chaste and talking whoring with whores while using pile upon pile of grand theories!

When Confucius was alive he was not a great master but a teacher. People in the Tang dynasty did not declare Li Bai 李白 a great master, although in Tibet they made a master of the playboy Tsangyang Gyatso 仓央嘉措, but that has nothing to do with poetry.

Your words grow out from your heart!

History is right before your eyes; what you see in front of you is history.

This person "laughs at the heavens when leaving the house, but is humble when going to court."

As for the fashionable word "refusal" (*ju jue* 拒绝), I have something to say to you all: "refusal" is not the same as putting on a show. How can those who have no plan speak of refusal? How can those who grab at things possibly hope to refuse?

In the Tang dynasty, only Du Fu 杜甫 truly understood Li Bai, and knew that he was a deity on a par with Qu Yuan 屈原! What was the High Tang? A dynasty that refused Li Bai and refused Du Fu!

So what if you are accepted by the current era? Would that make you happy? My imagination doesn't run that far. I think you'd be little more than a giant panda, shipped around and put on display.

I take the road less traveled, but my sword still points to the heart!

I am filled with increasing gratitude, but also a growing battle fever!

Poetry always was the "art of splitting lines"—so let Han Han's 韩寒 fans young and old think of it as the "art of the return key"! By coincidence they got it right! Congratulations, you answered correctly!

To that old headman who is going around satirizing the avant-garde, I say: I am the greatest avant-garde in

China! It is I who wish to fly the great flag of the avant-garde, and fight to the end against you old fogies!

I'm a natural born rock 'n' roller, generating electricity whenever I write.

The avant-garde is no chameleon!

Of course elite fighters would be great; if there aren't any then a few elite spirits will do; if there are none of those either that means god wishes for you to fight alone! China's hope lies in the fact that there will always be that final person—that heaven-sent one!

I don't need to rush to the front, as I was already well ahead of those at the front!

What is difficult? Writing well is difficult! Using poetic style to distinguish difficult from easy is a sign of weakness from those "knowledge-fans."<sup>1</sup>

Other people have a zillion fans, I just have a thousand pointing fingers!

Let's stick to my famous saying: "Talent is a gleaming thing!"—the ways of neither kings nor mutts will help. The question is: How can fools who only eat counterfeit foods recognize true talent?

Writing well is a crime! I am a criminal! Poetry circles are a humanitarian disaster zone scattered with the scum of humanity!

I don't believe in evolution, I believe in natural genius.

Unlike the neo-classicists, I'm a person with a home and a land!

Theodor W. Adorno famously said, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." His original intention was to denounce the crimes of fascism, but in China it has come to mean that writing poetry is a crime!

What wretched nation of poetry is that—it has long been dead! The nation of poetry is a nation of the past.

Take orders from the heart! Take orders from poetry!

Many years of experience have taught you that you'll find all the bad characteristics of poetry when watching China's national team play soccer!

The relationship between quantity and quality in writing is equivalent to the relationship between the

number of shots on goal, the number of shots on target, and the number of goals scored.

How come all the Romance countries (Latin America and the Romance countries of Europe) are so well versed in soccer's rules of play, and always win beautiful victories of talent and technique? I need to have a good think about this.

Around the time of the Sichuan earthquake, one piece of scum said I love to speak of my great love for the nation, but I dimly remember that my friends Qu Yuan, Du Fu, Lu You 韩寒, and Xin Qiji 辛弃疾 loved speaking of it too, as do my lovers Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva.

Let's do away with the false question of the era with a single statement: The relationship between form (how to write) and content (what to write) is not the same as that of skin and flesh, but of blood and flesh! I never consider the childish questions of how to write or what to write—or perhaps I should say that I never think about writing in this way. The hows are easy to copy, but what about the whats?

If it is not so good that you can feel it and good enough to hold up to the microscope, then poetry cannot truly be considered good.

Lu Xun 鲁迅 never said the phrase, "The more it belongs to the nation, the more it belongs to the world." If you don't believe me go check the *Complete Works of Lu Xun*. Lu Xun's way of thinking was broadly a doctrine of taking. A predilection for the stench of bound feet could not possibly belong to the world.

How can someone who thinks ill of the world have a good feeling toward writing?

Competent modern poetry must be written by competent modern people.

What is there to show off about in being critical? It is nothing but what should be expected in the subject of a modern poet's writings.

You ask me what it is I've been constructing? My answer is: poetry!

The new era has, if anything, strengthened the avant-garde essence and importance of my older works (this is something that only a true avant-garde poet can experience), from "The Nobel Prize in Literature: A Thank-You Speech for Eternity" (targeted at current cultural fashions) to "The Last Person of Chang'an" (targeted at cultural revivalism). I have the urge to say: I'm sorry, I'll continue walking ahead, you all take your time!

To hell with those of you who gawp at me, or your life will not be worth living!

All that you have can be put down in words; what we're struggling over are people, and the gap between them is getting bigger and bigger!

Refuse to be a frontrunner, and run your own race in the ninth lane!

When it comes to balancing and controlling the big and the small, no contemporary Chinese person does it better than me!

Simply having a soul is not enough. Talent, talent! The spiral of talent rises up!

"Incomparably pure" (*chun jie wu bi* 纯洁无比)—whoever uses these words to describe me has either not had a clear look at me, or has seen right through me!

As for poetry, the trick lies in taking the pure and the intoxicating and turning them into one.

This is an essential critical perspective: Even anti-lyrical poetry must be evaluated using the effects of lyricism, because poetry's essence is lyrical.

Poetry is more likely an egg born from chaos, not from the managerial thinking of a modern hen factory.

A person who writes good fiction must be honest. Poetry, on the other hand, requires more intelligence, or even cunning.

The heart of modern poetry is cold, and only romantic lyrical poetry blazes and burns.

I am honored that my poetry is worthy of the description "pure," and that I'm not the kind of person who messes around with good and bad, or gives up a fight as soon as it starts. I'm very clear on the difference between "rough" and "coarse." The Shanghai blood passed on to me from my mother has an extremely positive effect here. "Pre-colloquial" (or "stream-of-consciousness") is muddled saliva spat out at will; "post-colloquial" is pure gold, silver, and steel, all served up at once!

"Tone" corresponds to the "body," "feel for language" corresponds to the "text"—this is clearly one step further advanced.

Only when complicated can one dare to be simple; only when abundant can one dare to be transparent; only when physically healthy can one dare to be naked!

Some people always act as though they resent good things! This nation's culture is willing to die amidst mediocrity.

To my friends of good conscience I offer the following advice: Pursue honesty in your writings, and follow fate's path to fame.

*Translated by Heather Inwood*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: the term "knowledge-fans" is a play on the Chinese word "intellectual" (*zhishi fenzi* 知识分子), which literally translates as "knowledge elements"; here, Yi Sha replaces "elements" with its close homonym "fans" (*fensi* 粉丝 using this Internet slang word to poke fun at the poets associated with "intellectual writing."

# Poetry Can Challenge, Too

## A Few Thoughts on the Poetry of Yi Sha

*Tang Xin*

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*Chinese literary critic Tang Xin's essay argues that Yi Sha's poetry offers readers one of the most compelling responses to the unfathomable complexities of modern China. According to Tang Xin, the poet's early combination of plain, often vulgar, spoken language coupled with the use of pastiche, his keen eye for parody, and a documentary ethics have made him a poetic force to reckon with over the last two decades. Yet Tang Xin also exposes readers to some of the more unexpected turns the poet has taken over the last decade, including his epic poem "Tang," in which Yi Sha weaves his current poetic concerns into a broader cultural quilt of poetic vocabularies and themes inherited from Classical Chinese poetry and poetics, leading to what Tang Xin argues is a uniquely Chinese postmodern poetics that avoids common dichotomies to find a balance between cultural deconstruction and reconstruction.*

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In 1990, the twenty-four-year-old poet Yi Sha, then in the zodiac year of his birth, wrote a poem called "Starve the Poets." In its emphatic and disruptive style, the poem issued a direct challenge to and an attack upon the existing poetry order. As he declared, this was because poets' "light" "retellings" were lazy writings devoid of any artistic complexity or new discoveries. What's more, the stories of agriculture in their retellings were completely disconnected from the realities of life, full of confusion and paradoxes: "the city's greatest spongers / then turned themselves into glorious farmers of verse."<sup>1</sup> Thus, Yi Sha demands: "starve the poets!" With these words he anticipated and gave name to an era, for the poetry that was rooted in agricultural society and mostly written using a kind of illusory lyricism was soon to reach its expiration date. If poets didn't want to be starved to death they had no choice but to create a new space for themselves. Yi Sha's poem, which turned out to be a premonitory classic, also displayed his unique way with definitive statements and his self-identification as a "bastard of the arts," characteristics that were later to shape his individual fate as a poet.

### I

Even the titles of Yi Sha's poems have the ability to surprise us, indicating the challenging nature of his chosen subject matter. Stuttering, masters of divination, bastards, night wanderers, artificial limb factories, rapists, the impotent, condemned buildings, traitors, female prisoners, smokers, collectors of the dead, mortuaries, junk shops, Chinese punks, vegetarians, public baths, wet

markets, drunks, johns, eavesdroppers, friends' toilets: all these have found their way into his poetry. Of course, if judged according to unwritten literary standards, these interlopers would appear crass and suspicious, of improper origin and lowly status. They are the kinds of things that were rejected and refused by the old poetry order, unacknowledged and unacceptable, and thought to be completely lacking in poetic nature—or even anti-poetic in their nature. Yet this represents the phenomenology of Chinese poetry since the 1990s. That Yi Sha selects this kind of subject matter as his starting point shows just how unusual his vision and tastes truly are.

It might be hard to imagine why Yi Sha, born into a high-level intellectual family, himself a well-educated graduate of Beijing Normal University, felt moved to shake up the poetry scene and enrage his readers with such depictions of an unfamiliar world. Perhaps he realized that the marginalized, the alternative, and life itself were reason enough for existence, reasons that do not need defending. Compared to mainstream society with its ordered structures and stale, clichéd literary paradigms, the chaotic, rough and ready figures of the anonymous society that Yi Sha describes seem to possess a happy and vigorous wisdom that is more primeval, more natural, and more in touch with existence and with life. From them Yi Sha draws his enthusiasm for life, the essential element that underpins each poet's creative ambitions. They allow Yi Sha to discover the exuberance and healthy respect for life that reside within him. The choices suggest a quality of rebelliousness, of insurrection and revolution, as well as a dangerousness that is at once jarring to the ears and harsh upon the eyes, chaotic



and overbearing. On top of all this can be found a popular comedic side that is lively, bright, and carnivalesque in spirit. As Yi Sha himself once wrote, "I write what history cannot write." One could say that Yi Sha was an outstandingly sharp documenter and decoder within Chinese poetry of the 1990s.

What comes next is a version of the story about the ruffian and the nobleman that so often appears in histories of world culture and literature. For the nobleman who represents class, order, and vested interests, the ruffian, who comes charging forward with his teeth bared and claws extended, is profane and destructive, a veritable disaster. But what shocks and distresses the nobleman the most is the realization that his perfect elegance cannot sustain even a gentle blow from the ruffian, whose spirited, crude, reactionary works quickly find their way into the halls of literature, joining the ranks of new classics and traditions. This was once Byron and Ginsberg's experience, and it is Yi Sha's experience too. With irrepressible energy his non-poem poems quickly drew censure and criticism, but also attracted numerous followers and imitators, turning into an important poetry phenomenon that forever altered the internal structures, relationships, and artistic direction of avant-garde poetry.

## II

In her essay "The Conscience of Words," Susan Sontag writes, "The writer's first job is not to have opinions but to tell the truth . . . and refuse to be an accomplice of lies and misinformation. Literature is the house of nuance and contrariness against the voices of simplification."<sup>2</sup> This is precisely the mission of contemporary poets. New phenomena require a new, wiser penetrolgy, or, to put it differently, a poet's view of the world is also his epistemology. In this way, Yi Sha has brought to contemporary poetry a unique combination of humor, laughter, and fallacious strategies.

### In Actual Fact

The bourgeoisie  
have overthrown us with their  
sugar-coated  
bullets  
this is the theory  
in actual fact  
the proletariat  
are not easily duped  
kids  
We are crawling on  
a giant

sugar bullet  
eating  
the thick sugar coating  
finishing it  
all up  
before fleeing  
in all directions  
Then  
gazing from afar  
upon their naked bodies  
those infantile  
innocent bombs  
Listen to them roar<sup>3</sup>

Starting from a paradox and beginning with a mistake, Yi Sha's way of writing tells us, "I don't know what I believe in but I know what I don't believe in; I don't know what I approve of but I know what I oppose." Its advantage lies in seeming insubstantial while being profound and powerful; it could be compared to demolishing a grand building by targeting its smallest cracks; its wit makes light work of heavy tasks. Most of all, Yi Sha's poetry represents a comic style of critique based on the humorous logic of "destroying the worthless for others to see" (Lu Xun), a way of thinking that possesses a happiness and an incisiveness unfamiliar in poetry of the past. From here we find ourselves behind or off to the side of things, forced to observe them from the opposite direction or in reverse, realizing that the world is not as we knew it, nor as we'd imagined it to be. From here, humor is more than a perspective, a habit, or a phenomenology; it becomes a structure and an essential element in the object-world. Therefore, laughter lights up reality; laughter drowns out thunder; laughter throws open the doors to the world. Such a discovery had been covered up and repressed by preexisting systems of meaning, ensuring that it is on one level a subversion, a reversal, and a correction:

A drunk was vomiting in the city  
vomiting in the rich glow of the setting sun  
on a bridge on the city moat  
there was no end to it—He looked like  
he was singing at the top of his lungs  
. . .  
It occurred to me that everyone has their unique way  
of showing gratitude to life<sup>4</sup>

Yi Sha takes advantage of existing genres outside of poetry to engage in parody and find new meanings in the comical effects of intertextuality:

I won't turn it down I'm eager, of course

to accept this money made from the sale of dynamite  
I'll spend the whole lot on explosives<sup>5</sup>

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This is a gang of Christian farmers  
the seriousness of their problem lies in how  
heaven won't take  
and man won't eat  
the things that they grow<sup>6</sup>

We notice how Yi Sha's poeticism here is based on "hard" facts. It is a type of factual poeticism that neither translation nor paraphrasing can diminish or weaken. It seriously disrupts the internal order of our minds, shaking giant cracks in the solid earth beneath our feet and forcing us to exploit and explore an entirely different way of thinking that resides within each of us. One might call it dangerous, but it is also a free and liberated way of thinking.

### III

Unlike Third Generation poetry with its comparatively flat narrative tone, linear structures, objective descriptions, and "zero style" approach to language, Yi Sha's poetry flows with his own vital energies, his healthy individuality, and his playful principles. As a latecomer to Third Generation poetry he has synthesized its language, which forms the starting point and basis of his writings. He believes that poetry is also technique:

He said: your aim  
is to get the ball  
into the zone most dangerous to the opposition  
in the shortest time possible  
with a minimum of movement<sup>7</sup>

This can also be seen as one of his artistic principles. Out of an innate dislike or disregard for mediocrity, but also because he has "some natural talent for language," Yi Sha has spoken of Chinese as "a language that has been highly word-ified and acculturated," believing that "poets who hold ambitions for their mother tongue will try to change it, to drag it out from the quarry of words, and restore it to its original voice that flows like water."<sup>8</sup> His poems aim to produce an impact, thus revealing a unique sharpness, speed, and explosive force. In his famous poem "St-stammering, St-stuttering," he observes the difficulties of individual speech from the biological perspective of the stammer, experimenting with how to make the best of a bad bargain and fight

fire with fire. His language offers readers a new type of experience in its youthful sense of delight:

St-stammering, st-stuttering, my fate  
But there are n-no-no ghosts in my way  
L-l-look at me, I say  
There's only indifference on my face.<sup>9</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche once said that we shouldn't twist the way our thoughts enter our heads. Since *The Dawn of Day*, every chapter in every book he wrote was only a paragraph long, which, as has been explained, "is so that a thought should be uttered in a single breath; so that it should be caught the way it appeared as it sped toward the philosopher, swift and dancing."<sup>10</sup> Yi Sha's method is exactly the opposite of Nietzsche's. He speaks with a manner that seems at first glance to be crude, sloppy, and simple, but this impromptu colloquial language in fact constitutes the most direct, immediate, and lively kind of mother tongue. It possesses a forthright, blunt unruliness and a contemporary spirit in tune with the energies of the city. At the same time, the musicality of his language and the playfulness of his poetic structures, as well as the attention he pays to rhythms, circular patterns, and end-rhymes, are not techniques that anyone could imitate, nor do they leave any obvious trace. Yi Sha's poems, constituted of short, powerful sentences that are fierce and incisive yet leave much leeway and space for imagination, are not just written using everyday language, but using the experience of everyday language at its most resplendent peak. His poetry impacted 1990s poetry and made it more pleasurable, giving it a new lease on life. Indeed, a language so filled with charm and a poetic form so rich in creativity has the power to awaken the expressive desires of many potential poets.

Since the turn of the new century, Yi Sha, now middle-aged, has been demonstrating his "personal present tense" with a kind of professionalism rarely seen among those of his generation. The contents of his poems are more diverse, including material from memories, experiences, current situations, critiques of the times, and personal reflections; his emotions are more complicated, rich, and heavy; yet his forms are also more casual, light, and scattered. His recent works remind me of Lu Xun's prose writings in that they are rooted in specific circumstances and share specific wisdoms, cutting right to the point and hitting the nail on the head, his words becoming prophecy. He is rare among Chinese poets in the way he presents both a unique poetic style and a one-off image of poethood. Unlike those who admit to wearing a mask in their writings, he never feels the need to hide himself. This is his "Principle":

With me I carry spirit, faith, soul,  
thought, desire, perversion, malice, B.O.

They dwell as parasites in this house of me:  
It is my duty to treat them all even-handedly.<sup>11</sup>

Before him, no one else had demonstrated “The Way the Soul Looks” in such a manner before:

Have you seen the way my soul looks  
it doesn't look quite the same as me  
you've seen it a little like a pig  
but neither fish nor fowl  
have you felt it  
felt its muscles  
my soul has hairs  
growing out of big rough pores not shiny at all  
you keep feeling your way down  
and scream when you find it its  
brawny genitals.<sup>12</sup>

Once you've broken through the wall that divides the self, “truth will set you free” (“Famous Words Spoken in a Dream”). At this point, the way you write and the things you have to offer are turned into poetry that offers a soaring quality stemming from “a light boat having passed myriad mountains”<sup>13</sup> as well as from a deep sense of authenticity. Yi Sha's writings represent a unique voice among poetry of the new century, and open up new space for contemporary Chinese poetry.

#### IV

Yi Sha once wrote in a short poem:

Why do others  
only see the brothel in me  
while you always manage to find  
the temple in my soul  
and even hear  
the ringing of its bells?<sup>14</sup>

In 2003 he revealed a different side by composing the epic poem “Tang,” a work worthy of comparison to the famous *Three Hundred Tang Poems* edited by the Retired Master of Hengtang. In it, Yi Sha traces his experiences and roots back to the Tang dynasty and to the Tang poetry of over a thousand years ago. Placed alongside his works of the current era, this poem embodies his broad vision and thinking, revealing the tension within his entire oeuvre

as well as a new generosity of spirit. Yi Sha's “Tang” was completed in the city known in the Tang dynasty as “Chang'an,” and during another zodiac year of birth (his thirty-sixth). One might say that its appearance was both unexpected (given the forward-driven progression of modernization and the process of globalization centered on the West) and logical (we should also look back and make sense of the past, otherwise looking forward and innovating would be impossible). It showed us tradition as well as the spread, growth, and transformation that has occurred to tradition, and revealed the contexts, origins, and inclusiveness of contemporary life. The poem also helped correct the inertia and mistakes of our own ways of thinking—indeed, who's to say that the voice of a postmodern poet isn't also that of a Tang poet, or, similarly, that a poet who is skilled in deconstructing can't also do a bit of construction?

Yi Sha is not at all restricted by Westerners' dichotomous ways of thinking. He pursues a form of interaction and exchange that is more harmonious and balanced, as well as happiness, mutual admiration, and merry-making that exist beyond the “anxiety of influence.”<sup>15</sup> In “Tang,” Yi Sha invites a whole series of poets to take part in a gathering of friends that is at once relaxed, familiar, and occasionally raucous. It is a gathering that spans generations in its blood ties and is unconcerned with differences in etiquette or customs, era or identity. This is the kind of gateway that most people are familiar with to the point of blindness, within which lies a great road that leads to the Tang dynasty, a path that connects us in body and voice. From here, Yi Sha begins his “dancing with tongues / cavorting with the multitude of spirits / communing with the soul of freedom.”<sup>16</sup>

Dialogues between poets are always exciting, especially when they are masters of their art and at the peak of their talents. What we see here is not just a discussion about poetic views, the poetic realm, or artistic technique, but also about life, ambition, and fate, which may have been the same thing all along. “You'll always end up meeting / someone you're dying to meet / that is because / you're dying to meet them.”<sup>17</sup> His poem suggests a

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brotherly love, a sense of “like father, like son.” Yet, as well as being extremely attentive toward and offering a fresh understanding of these poets of times past, there are also times when Yi Sha yanks the horse’s head around and gallops off in a different direction. Although the scene where “the sun comes rolling forth / the land a mass of crossroads” is the same as before, Yi Sha’s understanding of the poet’s fate has become more pessimistic and incisive, yet also more relaxed and resigned. This is, of course, a result of the times: “This is my *Book of Songs* / it leads me to this chosen path / to give it my all / yet leads me too to certain defeat.” “The great path is like the blue sky / I’d rather not go out.” Yi Sha’s interests and attention are especially focused on his poetic art, in thrall to the details of technique as he retraces, restores, and re-imagines the process of poetic creation. One might even say that this is where the poet’s rank becomes evident:

It was Wang Wei’s craftsmanship  
that made me believe in him  
I do not believe  
this is simply craftsmanship  
I must believe that the one who makes it the best  
is the one who says it the best.

Like the people of the Tang dynasty, Yi Sha likes to add “Chang’an” before each name, not just as a form of psychological persuasion but because he really feels it: “I was once knew so well / crisp dawns in Chang’an’s eastern district.” But he also adds in what the people of the Tang left out: “the air also swirls with / the scent of manure from the fields.” This is not just taking up where they left off, but writing in response to the Tang poets. Sometimes he directly quotes the original poems, other times he translates them into the modern vernacular; sometimes he expounds upon their meanings, other times he drifts further away, turning a corner and entering a blind alley; sometimes he’ll add his own comments and a touch of banter; other times he’ll simply start a new line and take it from the top. In this way, classical and modern Chinese, ancient airs and the current moment, the Tang dynasty and contemporary China collide with each other, give rise to each other, and show off to each other. If you add to that Yi Sha’s unique and irrepressibly playful disposition, his eye for comedy and excellent awareness of counterpoint, as readers we cannot help but experience a kind of excitement and enjoyment that is rarely found in poetry. Another important difference between Yi Sha’s poetry and Tang poetry is that much of the latter is said to strip things away to get at the pure essence of poetry, whereas Yi Sha takes in everything that he experiences in life and turns it into his main source of literary inspiration. As he put it, “I want to fill my ‘Tang’ with the winds of

my reality.” As an epic poem, the crystal-like structure of “Tang” also gives us a clue as to the nature of his poetry: It lets the individual parts shine, while lighting up the whole.

As Yi Sha is a poet who continues to bring us joyful surprises, we have no way nor need to predict his future, but we have reason to look forward with keen anticipation.

*Essay and poems (unless otherwise indicated)  
translated by Heather Inwood*

Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Yi Sha, *Starve the Poets!: Selected Poems*, trans. Simon Patton and Tao Naikan (Tarsset, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), 26.
- <sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Conscience of Words,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 2001.
- <sup>3</sup> Translated by Heather Inwood.
- <sup>4</sup> “The Grateful Drunk,” Yi Sha, *Starve the Poets!*, 60.
- <sup>5</sup> “The Nobel Prize in Literature: A Thank-you Speech for Eternity,” *Ibid.*, 39.
- <sup>6</sup> “A Report on Chinese Poetry,” translated by Heather Inwood.
- <sup>7</sup> “One-Touch Ball Contact,” Yi Sha, *Starve the Poets!*, 70.
- <sup>8</sup> Yi Sha, *Yi Sha shixuan 伊沙诗选 (Poetry by Yi Sha)*, (Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 2003), 6.
- <sup>9</sup> Yi Sha, *Starve the Poets!*, 33.
- <sup>10</sup> Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 148.
- <sup>11</sup> Yi Sha, *Starve the Poets!*, 77.
- <sup>12</sup> “The Way the Soul Looks,” translated by Heather Inwood.
- <sup>13</sup> This is a quote from Li Bai’s poem “Morning Departure from Baidi City” (editor’s translation): 朝辞白帝彩云间 We leave the city of Baidi at dawn under multi-colored clouds 千里江陵一日还 The city of Jiang Ling is 1000 li and we will make it in a day 两岸猿声啼不住 From both sides of the river, monkeys cry without end 轻舟已过万重山 From our light boat we have already passed ten thousand mountains
- <sup>14</sup> “This Poem Isn’t About a Pretty Female Friend or a Soulmate,” *Ibid.*, 87.
- <sup>15</sup> In classical Chinese poetics, a great deal of emphasis is placed on knowing and referencing and even reworking elements from earlier poems, indicating a very different relationship to mimicry, whereas in modern literature, an “anxiety of influence” (a phrase coined by Herald Bloom) points to a fear of being seen as derivative, un-creative, unoriginal, and even potentially a fraud.
- <sup>16</sup> Yi Sha, “Notes on the title of ‘Tang,’” *Tang 唐 (Tang)* (Australia: Huanxiang chubanshe, 2004), 1.
- <sup>17</sup> If not otherwise specified, this and all following quotations are taken from “Tang.”