

from China Journal

FRED WAH

Aug 13/96 1:45 Vancouver Airport

Bored-ing!

The flow back into China and black hair. That visage, not of me but of that little blood part of me—does it matter which part—quarter, quantity. The customs agent, a young Vancouver Chinese-Canadian guy: "I was expecting someone Chinese—but you shouldn't assume" he reminds himself when he sees me. Without such minor complications (reminders) of identity, expectations, appearance, what would that be like? Do George Bowering and Vic Coleman ever wonder about themselves in that way, ever test or question their skin or names against a norm of races?

960814 8pm

I'm met at airport by Chinese Ministry of Culture person, Zhang Min. She gets me to hotel and helps change some money. We have tea in my room and she explains that Xi Chuan has agreed to interpret and help me meet poets I've mentioned in proposal. After some phone calls she says she can't reach him. He calls after she's gone, his English is fairly good; he suggests we get together in morning.

Trying to jump the jet-lag. Nice room on 11th flr of Beijing hotel, posh. Just went for walk up Wangfujing. I strained to find the familiar; construction, McDonald's, many department stores, rumbling changes since I was here in '81. And cars, cars, cars. But still lots of bicycles. You can buy just about anything. I buy some bottled water, beer, and instant noodles.

960815 9:30am

Nice walk this morning from hotel looking for street food breakfast and find it over on Dongsì Beidajie where I have a *very* greasy bean paste ball (at least recognizable from home) and a kind of rolled pancake filled with rice noodles and vegetables—excellent. I have two of them for 5 yuan (about \$1). I'm silent, no language, so I just point and gesture. Nice now that the Chinese are used to foreigners and there's very little gawking to contend with. In fact, I'm now the one doing most of the gawking. Self-conscious gaze and cameraing the scene.

Waiting for Xi Chuan to show up at my hotel room to yak about possibilities in Beijing—whom to meet, how to handle the city, etc. Questions to ask him about the containment and present construction of Chinese poetic language.

We talk for awhile in the room, drink tea, feel one another out about poetry, until I realize he's a smoker and I suggest we go out for tea and/or

lunch. Very hot and humid as we walk up east side of Wangfujing Dajie looking for place to eat. He finds us a little place and he orders noodles with egg and I noodles with beef. We talk about Yu Jian and many other poets, general sense of poetry in China. He mentions Yu Jian's "Zero Document" (Yu Jian gives me a copy of *File Zero*, a collection of postcard images and poems, later in Kunming), a long poem that he thinks is important but with which he doesn't necessarily agree.

Wonderful walk back to hotel talking about "culture," which he thinks is too split between high and low. We make arrangements for tomorrow when he will take me to his school area—Academy of Arts where he teaches English—out near airport, late afternoon.

Tonight I go back to Dongsu Beidajie. Seems to be a better food street. I find a pretty good restaurant—tofu with cilantro, plate of eggplant, potatoes green peppers, rice, beer—25 y. (little over \$4) plus nice young waiter from Harbin who speaks English and is happy to try it out on me. Harbin, northern, cuisine. I didn't try the dumplings with ginger. All the food's greasy but very tasty.

Leans over and down to his noodles and slurps.

Lift my bowl to my lips, sip.

Brings his face down to the bowl on the table, tilts it slightly, and shovels and slurps the noodles and liquid into his mouth with noise, fullness, fillness.

We eye each other, watch our eating.

Same noodles.

Little beggar boys out with their mothers on the street at night use the kowtow jab hello hello money, pick at my arms, legs, step in the way, hey money, money. No. Now here, too.

She's sexy street corner in her tight long white dress and slithers all over him, no shirt, crew cut, tight tummy, long white cigarette between teeth, they flash themselves out in the crowd as flashy whitenesses, hot and testy Beijing night.

I walk along Chang'an Jie towards Tiananmen and I guess I set up more of a difference than usual, wearing my Dorfman Crusher felt hat. A guy on a bench lets out a really strong smile, almost laugh, so that I smile right back at him but walking away feel bad about doing that, proving back to him my own place of potency, white, now I am white and act it out in the face/smile of this guy who's just noticed difference and let it out, his own, same social place, there, on a bench, the heat and humidity tarmac throughout the city over us, heads testing the difference.

Questions for Xi Chuan:

—why pseudonym? (Liu Juen is real name)

—what/who would you include in an anthology of contemporary poetry?

—who is important to you in the Chinese language?

—Hong Kong-Taiwanese poets?

which of Wang Ping's writers are women? (River City)
are you at all interested in borrowing forms (ghazal, utaniki, etc.) from other cultures?

do you adopt older Chinese forms?

deconstruction or construction of the holy, the cult-ish, the ideal, the Michelle Yeh.

does poetry have anything to do with social change?

Stuff it boy scout

Your militaristic upper lip lisps tourism

The Imperial brick bridge

over conquered water

Grab it

looked at—and I look into space—avoid (contact!) (and right now I turn and find a young guy looking over my shoulder as I write this)

brasts usually small—under newer western fashions, tight dresses push out the falsies, cups.

he's riding a bike and wearing lace gloves.

noon—at lunch in sidestreet restaurant w/ Tsingtao beer and trying to order fruit & vegetables. The girl struggles with my English—and I feel guilty for only having that, imposing my lack.

the babies all seem to be boys and spoiled too.

Nice quiet restaurant (but w/ Muzak)—worth the extra few yuan.

Excellent lunch of vegetables (not too greasy), stir-fried lettuce, tofu w/ shallions, mushrooms, lots of garlic, rice (slightly unpolished).

inside bicycle stand—she's paid under yi yuan.

come out of the cafe, mushrooming

humid back into the hot day

movement neutral desert, hawk

into the gutter stray gob rice caught

throat pollution.

Sudden face

in face she's at me arms akimbo

flashing no-no and finger scolds

glance my eyes, distanced tongues

flour language backing up her book

crickets old citizen cadre street cop

ten yuan (ok finally understand)

condemned for spitting in Beijing

200817 Saturday Beijing 3:15

Last night went with Xi Chuan and Huaizhou Liu (her boyfriend is

skatoon poet Tim Lilburn who put me in touch with her and Xi Chuan)

Went to Xi Chuan's room at the Arts Academy in suburbs, toward airport.

Taxi 35 yuan each way. Sat around his apartment (one room, porch, bathroom w/ wall shower, small kitchen w/ washing machine, closet where he writes) one wall lined w/ books. He says village is dirty but he plans to use all that dirt in his writing. We talk mostly about my writing—he has questions—I think I talk too much, I should have the questions). I try to give them a sense of my context as “Chinese-Canadian” writer so I wax a little positionally.

Turns rural dark and 3 of us go out to local restaurant for fish (Huaizhou’s fave), chili tofu (Tim Lilburn’s fave), chicken and peanut, corn, lily shoots, flat peas, beer. Nice pecky meal—too much; Xi Chuan takes a doggy bag. We hurry a little heading home because Huaizhou has to catch subway in opposite direction. She and I agree to meet at 8 Sunday morning for trip out to countryside temple where she grew up.

Talk in taxi on the way back about lack of female poets; Xi Chuan a little at a loss to take that on. Huaizhou talked earlier about “political correctness.” Even she seems prepared to let it be.

All the dirt that fits—

Lost in the back alley of the living—taxi still pushes mind blur of traffic into pothole and bike body—Xi Chuan’s beast the minotaur—him lost in the dark stairwell—architecting his paradigm of dirt—no crows, finally the cicadas quiet down as the warm evening settles, cardgame on the doorstep of the hutong, dusk and the dust smoking against old bricks, earth grounds the heart.

Very relaxed morning—tea, noodles, bath, reading stuff Xi Chuan gave me last night. At eleven I start out along Jianguomen Daije to Friendship Store, old touchstone from earlier tourist days. Extremely hot and humid trip—and tiring. Takes me about an hour. Just about try Pizza Hut but the lineups too much. Baskin-Robbins next door has pizza slices for 7 yuan (about \$1.50) so that’s what I have, a Coke, and then head back, hunting a little for some bottled water along the way, shower, wash sweaty clothes. Now cooled down after a shower and a cold Beijing beer, waiting for Xi Chuan to come by to take me to meet the Beijing poets.

No. 50 Huang Tingzi Bar is in NW of city and is run by a poet friend of Xi Chuan’s, Jian Ning, also a filmmaker (“Chinese Moon,” “Black Eyes”). Others there are Mo Fei, Shu Cai, and another whose name I didn’t catch. Zhou Jingzi couldn’t make it but sends along, from himself and Mo Fei, a copy of a Spanish-published anthology of contemporary Chinese poetry (*Equivalences*) with both Spanish and English translations.

We sit outside on a patio in extreme (for me at least) heat. Beer and tea. I drink lots more beer than they do. They have wives and girlfriends there who seem to be at another table. Xi Chuan’s girlfriend brings a Brit who’s lived in Beijing for three years—so after evening’s conversation I get an

interesting take from her. She’s annoyed by their (particularly Mo Fei’s) dismissal of the Taiwan/Hong Kong writers. She thinks Beijingers are becoming too self-confident (and self-centered). Mo Fei is the most vocal of the group.

Conversation starts around translation and they question Shabo Xie’s translation of my own stuff that I’ve handed out to them. We all seem to agree on the problem of transparency, particularly Shu Cai who reads and speaks French and has translated some Riverdy. They praise Xi Chuan’s translation of Borges.

Their response to my question about the lack of women writers is blank. Silence, quizzical side glances.

Heated discussion, briefly, about “Language poetry,” which they all seem to dislike. So they’re critical of Chang Ziquing’s and Huang Yunte’s translation and publication of Bernstein, Sherry, and Lazer. But I’m not sure they understand; they have a lot of questions about LP. The posturing by Mo Fei, and less so by the others, re their relationship to the outside, seems a little self-centered—though the connections with Shanghai and Yunan poets appear strong. I think they’re reacting to my surfacing of the Nanjing-Suzhou “so-called Language” poets and my own interest in the social and the diasporic. I can’t get any sense from them about ethnic writers.

But it’s a good evening and Xi Chuan is a very useful and generous interpreter. His own poetry seems an interesting mix of lyric sensibility (though he’s praised for not using “I”) and formal innovation. He’s also quite well read and thoughtful about writing.

Monday 960819 Beijing Hotel

Yesterday Huaizhou Liu took me out to the temple at Hairhou. She was born there and her parents spend the summer in a peasant’s house in the village. Her parents were academics and during the cultural revolution were sent out to Hairhou to teach in a small school (a buddhist temple converted by Red Guards) and be reeducated. The temple has been restored as a tourist attraction and Huaizhou and I wandered through it briefly only to discover that her first home had been demolished by the restoration. We sat in the shade under some trees and talked since my stomach felt a little tender and I didn’t have a lot of energy. We managed to get a taxi for the hour-long ride for 80 yuan—a bargain—so the trip was quite pleasant. We had a wonderful time in her parents’ yard; they basically live outdoors in this heat. Her mother cooked up fresh food from the garden—corn bread, weedy greens and garlic, tofu, cucumber and tomato. They had black eggs but I didn’t try them. She came back into town with us in a rickety but cheap taxi. Quite a good day.

for Huaizhou

mother's green
garlic

like your father
fist

family bodies sister
skin

inside that egg
100 years

outside distance
lime

fine ash, salt
and straw

Last night drinks and dinner-walk with my Canuck compadres, Roger Lee and Kai Chan (Lee Pui Ming tired out from their long flight).

Finally cooled off a little overnight from two days of intense heat and humidity. Today I meet with Chinese Writers Association people.

4 pm. Just back from meeting with Jin Jianfan, Ye Yanbin, Niu Baoguo, and one other, a critic, all representatives of the Chinese Writers Association (government approved). I received a lecture on the nature of Chinese poetry from Mr. Jin and an explanation from Mr. Ye on why the Misty poets and the Campus poets have not been successful—i.e., their poetry is hard to understand by the general reader. I cringe at the power of construction these people hold. As soon as I could I steered the conversation to the "Association," its response to Taiwan (good from Ye Yanbin) and Hong Kong, and other matters such as ethnic minority writers (they have a committee and have created a magazine only for "ethnic" writing) and women (10% of 5,000 members, but rising since 1949).

A disheartening meeting with power. I long for the open tongue of Xi Chuan. Tonight we have another official function; dinner with Ministry of Culture people.

960820

This is a stomach pausing.
Way up that street of potholes
on the other side of Behai Park
Madame Politics looped her jail term.

The cure for diarrhea is not food.
Take plenty of liquids
deflect attention to the word
read Urumqui.

Raining and, thankfully, a little cooler today. Huaizhou has kindly set up meeting with Wang Jiaying for the afternoon. He's a very confident writer and speaks knowingly about international writers. We go to tearoom south of Tiananmen. He talks of context and discourse, reads a little Foucault and Derrida. Uses "soul" a lot. Likes language poetry like T.S. Eliot. Ashbery rather than Ginsberg. His wife is doing comp. lit. PhD in Oregon; she's translated Atwood. Nice guy, a bit of an "internationalist," quite a record there. But he has a good sense about how writing works for him.

960821 Wednesday Beijing

cloisonne fish
in the restaurant

shell fish

for lunch

dao fu

rice w/ cold dish

of cucumber salad

slightly pickled

words silent

beyond the window

bike stand

pay for it

960822 Beijing—Nanjing

After nearly two-hour taxi ride through huge traffic jams to airport, a little anxious going through ticketing and security because of lack of directions, but I just flow the flow and I'm now on Shanghai Airlines flt 156. Unsure of what awaits me over next six days until I meet with Zhang Ziqing who I'm counting on to set up meetings with the "Originals" in Nanjing and Suzhou.

Good airplane lunch of rice, beans, meat, beer. ☺