New poetics in China

A review of experimental Chinese literature

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A new study of modern Chinese poetry has been published that deserves the attention of linguists working in both the applied and theoretical fields. The focus of the book is experimental and avant-garde literature, and as such it raises questions that are different than the ones we are accustomed to considering in the field of poetics. This review essay considers proposals for understanding poetic ability and sensibility from the point of view of applications of cognitive science.

Keywords: poetics, experimental literature, Chinese character, music, poetry, Russian Formalists

Students of linguistics will find that this collection of essays by T. K. Lee (2015) will serve them as a provocative introduction to Chinese avant-garde poetry. But more importantly, the theoretical proposals presented for consideration stand as an important contribution to the field of poetics as a whole, in particular how the author addresses ongoing questions in the study of poetry as a discourse ability of universal access across all human cultures. For our field, these are empirical questions in the scientific study of poetic language (which includes the context of its composition, performance and perception). In the humanities, many of these questions are the same, and others are complementary, and as such should be of interest to researchers as well. Precisely because the linguistic study of poetry tends to set aside avant-garde examples so as to concentrate work on the conventional, unmarked, genres (for good reason, actually), this book will help us, as we look forward, to formulate our working hypotheses more inclusively. This latter task of hypothesis formulation, accounting for the "exceptional cases," cannot be postponed forever. In highly readable expository style, the descriptions and analyses will be accessible to readers new to the study of literature. A first glance at the Table of Contents might give the impression that the topics are foreign, but such is mainly outward appearance — the author of this review is not from the field of literary studies.

From ethnographic fieldwork to philology and then to cognitive science approaches to the study of poetry, scholars have trained their lens almost exclusively on the traditional forms, even focusing special attention on the primitive and archaic epochs. The search for indirect evidence from pre-literate history is one example, coupled with the sampling of verse forms from present day non-literate poets. The motivation for such a bias harbors no disdain whatsoever for the modern literary movements, but rather is based on the objective of achieving a better understanding of essential and foundational principles. The reason for this is the idea that seminal principles of poetic sensibility are universal and constitutive of human nature, that they are part of our biological endowment. If this claim can be shown to be viable as a theory (it may not be), the initial evidence in its favor will come from the study of poetic ability as it is typically manifested in everyday life. We should be able to demonstrate this ability among linguistically competent individuals in the most diverse cross-section of cultures (ultimately, in all human cultures without exception). The starting point for this search is the study of conventional art forms, representative of the traditional literary practices and the popular culture of language communities. No formal education in literacy, music theory or any other art form can be a prerequisite for acquiring the relevant elemental cognitive principles. And in the end ("in the beginning," rather), they must have emerged in human culture from the earliest periods of our evolution as a species. If this approach to the study of verbal art is correct, then poetry is not the product of literacy or any other technology of language use, nor even of civilization. From this point of view, then, pre-literate poetry of the oral tradition is primary, written poetry (and all other subsequent technological extensions), secondary. What follows in the present review might appear to be at odds with this view; but as we will see the questions at hand are more complex.

Chapter 1 introduces the central concepts starting with observations by Sontag (1961) from her own introduction to *Against Interpretation*. Framing the discussion, the concluding Chapter 6 references Roman Jakobson on an observation along similar lines. According to Sontag, where "interpreters" have led us down the wrong path is in taking the sensory experience of art for granted to then proceed to seek out the meaning and content, (indeed "the latent content — beneath" and the "true meaning"), leaving behind the object of art, its forms and defining patterns, as accessory. The artistic merit of the great works of art, what separates them from prosaic exposition, what distinguishes them, cannot reside in their content, what they are "about." Otherwise creative writing becomes "the literary equivalent of program music" (1961:11).[1]

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1. The attempt of program music to convey a meaningful content, an event structure or coherent narrative even, has been the subject of a fruitful controversy. To this debate, Kandinsky

 In fact, attention to the object of art, "the text as *artifact*," is the central theme underlying this most recent study of experimental Chinese poetry. Understanding its "materiality" includes the design and performative aspects, in particular modes of expression that are visual and non-verbal (pp. 4–5). Readers will also have noticed that Tong King Lee has now introduced a new line of argument, one that we may not want to accept just yet. But first, it is necessary to return to the citation of *Against Interpretation*. Long before, the Russian Formalists, together with their Futurist colleagues, worked on this very same problem. Their objective also was to understand the distinguishing properties, what made poetry distinct (from prose, from face-to-face conversation, and the recipe for tamales), the quality of "literariness." During the short time of their development during the 1920s as a school of the scientific study of literature they made some limited but important progress on the different research questions of this problem. Years later, Jakobson (1960) asked again: "What is the empirical linguistic criterion of the poetic function? In particular, what is the indispensable feature inherent in any piece of poetry?" (1960: 358). For this line of inquiry, the term "measure of sequences" was introduced: "Measure of sequences is a device which, outside of the poetic function, finds no application in language. Only in poetry with its regular reiteration of equivalent units is the time of speech flow experienced, as it is…with musical time" (1960: 358). The young Russian students of verbal art pointed out at the same time that the poetic function, while it is specific to poetry, participates in a range of other discourses to one degree or another. Traditional narrative, oratory and ceremonial speech are well-known examples. Continuing along this line of argument, reiterative *figure of sound* could be proposed as "the constitutive principle of verse" (1960: 359), what in reality is an example of a more general feature of verbal art, that of *parallelism* (1960: 368). Octavio Paz picked up on this theory in *El Arco y la Lira* (1956) in his extensive discussion of sound pattern in poetry and its relationship to musical pattern. The connection for him went much deeper than simple inclusion of both poetry and music under the larger category of temporal

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(1977[1914]) pointed to music as an alternative model for the visual arts, how artists needed to liberate their work from a preoccupation "with the reproduction of natural forms":

> How miserably music fails when attempting to express material appearances is proved by the affected absurdity of programme music…[In] serious music such attempts are merely warning against any imitation of nature…The *Stimmung* of nature can be imparted by every art, not however, by imitation, but by the artistic divination of its inner spirit (Kandinsky 1977[1914]: 20).

Both Sontag and the author of *Experimental Chinese Literature* address this problem in their reflections on the question of what are the essential qualities of literature that makes it art, a problem that we can now see has been shared by both musicology and the study of the visual arts.

art. Paz saw the beginnings of a convergence in our understanding of this link, interested as he was at the time in the signs of a renaissance of oral poetry. More recently, investigators working within the intersection of linguistics and musicology have recovered this line of analysis to propose (taking the liberty of naming it) the poetry-as-music hypothesis (Lerdahl 2003; Jackendoff and Lerdahl 2006).

Returning for a moment to the early 20th Century, perhaps with a "constitutive principle of verse" in mind, Jakobson's co-worker Boris Ejxenbaum emphasized the need to establish a branch of poetics integrated entirely with linguistic science (1971[1926]). With this goal as a priority for both him and his co-workers, he argued for a systematic study of the sonorous properties of poetry, the reiterative "figures of sound." Recall that the goal of Tong King Lee also is to concentrate our attention upon the object of art itself, its "materiality" and "the text as artifact." So let us consider the first two examples from experimental Chinese literature to see where the different approaches to poetics might coincide and where they might diverge.

The first case study is an analysis of the project *Pink Noise* by avant-garde poet Hsia Yü that calls upon the resource of cross-language interface in a systematic application of machine translation. Our interest in experiments of this kind is primarily what they suggest about larger theoretical problems of language use in a specific domain: the literary use of language — "fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself" (Lee 2015: 1). This is the objective that animates the poet in Chapter 2: the work's formal properties rather than its thematic content (2015: 22). The procedure that Hsia Yü implements consists in generating bilingual poems by harvesting random English text from the internet, passing the strings through a Chinese translation program in cycles, thirty-three in all, to produce parallel sets. The poet intervenes throughout the process to form (by "selection" and "concatenation") the actual verses, analogous to the way one might filter white noise. The theoretical problem is from Barthes (1977): in what sense can the author be displaced, his or her authority dissipated? This was a question I tried to frame in more general terms, and from a different point of view, as *decontextualization*, in regard to the controversy surrounding the poems of Araki Yasusada:[2] how should context be accounted for on a case-by-case basis as opposed to the currently popular approach that elevates contextual factors to a deterministic and totalizing influence in expression and understanding? In cognitive science readers recognize the question as the interaction between top-down (contextual) and bottom-up factors. Another way of posing the question is: what aspects of context are actually relevant in expression and understanding (to be asked case-by-case because it's not a simple question)? In literature, we could say that author

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2. See Motokiyu et al. (1997).

identity (e.g., the author's biography) is part of the context. As such, Barthes' idea is partially compatible with the proposal from Sontag; that we also consider how the language itself speaks, in Hsia Yü's words, search for the "absolute liberation of language" (Lee 2015: 35). From this point of view the merit of experiments such as *Pink Noise* is that they push the discussion of the role of context and frame of reference to its limit, where the non-communicative aspects of expression come to the foreground.

Chapter 3 considers the exploitation by Chen Li of the graphic resources of cyberspace coupled with the strategy of codeswitching, the combining of scripts (Chinese morpho-syllabic and *kanji*, phonetic writing from Taiwan, and Latin-alphabetic) and other translingual devices. Readers curious about the use of this kind of hybrid text in creative writing should consult the related study by Takashi and Wilkerson (2000) on a special extension of the orthographic system *furigana* as a bilingual literary technique. In the review of Chen Li's work the concept of intersemiotic translation (introduced in Chapter 1) finds the first clearly illustrative examples, one in particular of interest to us: the use for aesthetic purpose of iconicity (where it presents itself) in Chinese characters, and then the use of sound symbolism and visual-typographical patterns in text (which had no original iconic feature to start with) to suggest new meanings. In these examples Chinese characters, *zhuyin* phonetic characters, and the Latin alphabet combine to manipulate the processing of text, as in puns. Consider the interesting discussion of a similar device in the poetic form *kyoka* (Takanashi 2007). In this instance, digital technology[3] projects the semiotic crossover into multimedia imagery. In this instance the audio transposition provides a musical rendition (Lee 2015: 89–92). It's important to emphasize that all and every kind of participation of the human voice in this genre of avant-garde poetry is (must be) musical in some way.[4] Recall the mention of this proposed relationship in regard to the poetry-as-music hypothesis[5] of Lerdahl and Jackendoff.

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3. Long before the invention of the first printing press, the writing tool itself was the first technology of the spoken word (Ong 1982). Digitization brought the next revolution. Literature was transformed each time.

4. Consider the performances of "Gliding Exercises" by Lily Chen:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZavFBD4Wkf0 and "A War Symphony" by Chen Li: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZjj5y-7e9Q. Note that "musical" does not imply (respectively, in these examples) that the piece be tonal or that it even be based on a pitch space (as in a scale) of any kind.

5. A further elaboration of the poetry-as-music hypothesis takes up speculation on the origins and evolution of poetry/music. It proposes a common ancestral emergence in the human voice

But as we can take notice in these examples and in the book's guiding thread, our attention is called throughout to *written* forms, visual language and its *graphic* qualities, and to the interface with *visual* art, what the "linguistic perspective" put forward above would view as "secondary." As an aside, it is important to point out that this perspective, which I happen to favor, is far from a consensus view in the field, perhaps even being a minority view in a number of sub-disciplines. In this regard, one of the themes of the book, that of contesting the "hegemony of the verbal," presents a challenge to the view of poetics (that part of it from the cognitive science approach) that I have summarized. In addition, avant-garde poetry questions the "standard view" of the hierarchy, the one that holds up the verbal, viewed as "higher-order," over the non-verbal; that the image be subordinated to the word. The challenge does indeed pose a problem for the standard view if such a hierarchical relation is important to maintain. On another plane, and this is important, it poses an opportunity for us to make more precise what is meant by "primary" and "secondary" when thinking about the oral-written distinctions mentioned earlier.

Starting with the last question, in saying that written language and other graphic representations are secondary and derived does not imply that creative writing, followed by the other technological extensions, and scholarly inquiry focused on them, are any less compelling or interesting, much less "lower order" or subordinate. Aside from the almost trivially obvious point of departure that verbal (non-literate) poetry is (pre)historically primary, the idea behind isolating the category of primal verbal creation comes from a rather narrow and specific research problem. It was Jakobson's question: What are the defining linguistic and non-linguistic (and proto-linguistic) attributes of the mental structures that underlie poetic competence? If this is the only real sense of "primary" that's of any interest, then linguists have every reason to study the new trends in experimental poetry. But more importantly for the sake of this review, all parties can now consider the proposal of the primacy of non-literate poetry as compatible with their own position on broader questions (like the ones this book is about). Going back to the first issue, the standard view of a hierarchy of higher and lower order, linguists tend to show no interest in such a claim (for very good reason), no part of it bearing on the above-mentioned empirical questions. The current of work on poetic discourse that traces its roots back to the Russian Formalists, in fact, is one that should be among the most open to experimentation of the kind surveyed in this book. The reasons for this potential openness lie in the very themes that we are considering (if I understand them correctly): (1) Avant-garde forms raise the question of what qualities are fundamental in poetry, what is its "very nature and being." (2)

— See Han et al. (2011) for relevant findings — following a suggestion by Darwin (1981[1871]). The new reformulation then would be "poetry-as-*vocal*-music."

Whatever these essential qualities turn out to be, they cannot be about meaning itself, what the audience understands (the semantic content), or should understand, or how that meaning is interpreted for its benefit. Simply, there is no "understanding" of a poem's "message," in this sense, that the meaningful content of an instance of prosaic discourse cannot also communicate. (3) Experimentation, as exemplified so far in the first three chapters, is neutral in regard to "realist" concerns, in regard to which "flag is flying over the fortress."[6] Proceeding with our review, we can now ask again if there is a common ground here from which to better understand the contribution to poetics of the new literary movements of the 21st Century.

Writer Xu Bing continues the metalinguistic reflection on the graphic elements of the Chinese character from another vantage point, highlight of Chapter 4. In this case, the defamiliarization that the artist implements consists in the creation and manipulation of the pseudo-character, over four thousand exemplars. Expositions confront the public with a hoax (generating tension and even conflict),[7] achieved by the presentation of the meaningless writing applying a calligraphic execution of impressive artistry. Stroke patterns are recognizable but characters are illegal and illegible, even drawing condemnation, according to reports, for the deliberate distortion. The artist follows suit with a selection of the illegitimate characters from *A Book from the Sky* to create a hoax-dictionary with English entries equally uninterpretable despite first appearance. The presentation of Xu Bing is an analogy to the Russian Futurist experiment in unintelligible verse, the famous *zaum* poems: in both cases, stripping away from an artistic text, a hypothetical one, an entire component (semantics), thus brusquely violating the expectation of readers and listeners. The suppression of meaning leaves them with an essential or fundamental component intact (as selected or defined by the artist): respectively, the visual patterns of *A Book from the Sky* and the sound patterns of *zaum*. Quoting Vinograd (2011: 107): "[The] 'natural' relatively automatic, or unconscious process of reading and decoding is made laborious and strange," a concept originally introduced by Shklovsky (1965[1917]), later elaborated upon in Jakobson (1987: 378). Left with the irreducible core, this is the object of metalinguistic reflection in which both artist and audience are asked to engage. The idea might not be modern at all. Anthropologists have reported on a number of antecedents to these art forms of today, the total reduction of semantic content attested in pre-literate traditional

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6. Affirmation credited to Viktor Shklovsky.

7. "Hoax" in this sense is parallel to "lie" in the art of fiction: "La novela es…de una ética sui géneris, para la cual verdad y mentira son conceptos exclusivamente estéticos. [The novel is…of an ethics sui generis, for which truth and lie are exclusively aesthetic concepts.]" (Vargas Llosa 2009: 21).

poetry (Wirtz 2005). Ejxenbaum had mentioned this same historical precursor in the context of his discussion of *zaum* poetry.

Chapter 5 showcases projects that again exemplify the central theme of the book: understanding the process of *translational interaction* among the forms and platforms and language codes of poetic expression, then beyond, in the interface with artistic expression outside of poetry. The other dimension to take into account in this interaction is modality: visual, auditory and tactile/kinesthetic. Of the innovative cases reviewed, space limitation limits us to one of the representative examples, the mixed-media installation of Shen Bo-cheng. The experiment in transposition integrates all three modalities in two stages:

Visual language (ocular reading) → Braille (tactile reading) → Musical "transcription"

Initially, the Chinese-language poem undergoes a standard transcription to Braille code. In the second stage, a resemblance to the strip of the punched music box card prompts the artist to conceive of "transcribing" the orthographic (language) pattern to a musical pattern ("transcription" to be taken in a different sense than it normally is taken). At first glance, and first audition, the exposition might appear to observers as a clever parlor trick, the transfer to "music" seemingly devoid of any creative intervention on the part of the artist. The description of the method of poet Hsia Yü (Chapter 2) perhaps initially gave this impression as well. Two considerations, however, are in order: (1) the resulting musical pattern, readers can judge for themselves,[8] does not appear, impressionistically, as completely random, suggesting the participation of a musical/poetic hand in the creation of the music card and the devise itself — I stand corrected if this appreciation is erroneous. (2) As in all experimentation, it is entirely possible that the relevant data suggest an unexpected finding. Namely, that the translational passage from tactile language (Braille) to the musical encoding need not be purely mechanical, random, disconnected and incoherent; that in fact an authentic musical structure can be generated by this kind of *intersemiotic translation* (citing Jakobson in 2015: 10). Tong King Lee claims that:

> We thus have a unique case of "relay translation," where the Braille code acts as the "pivot language," connecting the source textual input with the target sonic output. The Chinese poem is, in effect, performed through the mediation of mechanical technology and intersemiotic translation. (2015: 138–139).

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8. Sample audio of poem transcribed to Braille text, then "transposed" onto a music card pattern:

   https://catherineshu.wordpress.com/2012/07/10/braille-song-shen-bo-chengs-read-art-at-eslite-xinyi/

The claim is entirely plausible based on the following proposed analysis. For a reader/listener competent in Braille literacy, the tactile processing of verse lines through the medium of this well known orthographic representation is perceived as poetry. What contributes to this perception could be the manner in which the Braille text is formatted (an aesthetic feature of written poetry in general), in addition to other poetic features in the language patterns themselves. Then, in the "relay translation" to the music box card the poet may deliberately and systematically encode these verse patterns. We don't know, but Shen Bo-cheng in fact might have contemplated this possibility (readers should recall here the hypothesis of Jackendoff and Lerdahl regarding the relationship between poetry and music). By this procedure, not the pitches themselves, but the rhythmic patterns of the poem are transferred to the musical passage (pitch space is not the feature that music shares with poetry anyway). The blind or sighted Braille reader would readily appreciate the transposition upon listening to the passage as he or she follows along in the text, or alternatively, the Braille reading (tactile channel) accompanied by the musical and the spoken Chinese-language versions (two auditory channels).

The book concludes in the sixth chapter with one of the long-standing topics of discussion regarding the poetry of East Asia: what aspects of literary creation are specific or peculiar to Chinese? Here the same question can asked about both the experimental and the non-experimental. The most famous approximation to this problem (mentioned in Chapter 3) is still Fenollosa and Pound's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium of Poetry*, recently re-issued (2008). What is clear from the failure of Fenollosa and Pound, at the time, to advance our understanding of Chinese literature <u>on this point</u> is that the question needs to be divided into three parts,[9] what is specific or peculiar in regard to: (1) the linguistic features of the Chinese language itself, (2) the emergence and development of a script unique in its attributes among the world's writing systems, and (3) the interaction of thousands of years between the language and the Chinese characters, between (1) and

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9. The misunderstanding of Fenollosa and Pound (perfectly comprehensible for the time of writing and despite their best intentions and great sensitivity and admiration, and profound knowledge, of Chinese literature) has in fact been appreciated over the years in a number of thoughtful commentaries (Liu 1966; Xie 1999). Nothing in my assessment here, expounded upon in detail elsewhere for interested readers, should be taken as denying the aesthetically productive consequences for Ezra Pound of his misperception of the character system (as allowing for a direct access to meaning, by-passing phonology, because it is "ideographic") or of the Chinese language — more compatible with "dramatic poetry," closer to the "natural order" (Fenollosa and Pound 2008: 48), and different from other "phonetic" tongues (2008: 51). There isn't anything incoherent in drawing aesthetic insight or motivation from an analysis, plausible on the surface, which turns out later to be incorrect.

(2). There is a fourth part that T. K. Lee introduces into the discussion, about the context of using the language and its writing system in creative writing today.

The study of experimental literature that we are considering had a different purpose in Chapter 6 than that of contributing to the critique of *The Chinese Character as Medium of Poetry*. But the wide-ranging conclusion is in the same spirit, first on a narrower and more circumscribed point, and then on the broader controversy that was announced in Chapter 1, in the quote from *Against Interpretation*. Taking the broader controversy first, the culminating paragraphs of the concluding chapter echo Sontag's appeal for criticism to study what makes verbal art different from the editorial page of the morning paper, the literariness, of poetic and art narrative expression. The appeal was a recovery by her, in turn, of Jakobson, Ejxenbaum and Shklovsky's proposal for a study of the sensual properties of poetry as these are perceived in its material patterns and formal structures. The introductory chapter of *Experimental Chinese Literature* linked this approach to the bold counter proposal of the "vanguard writers" of today who have questioned the "dominant realist mode" of official cultural policy (2015: 2). Following up on this proposal in the final chapter:

> For a long time, the abiding concern of literary criticism has been with hermeneutics,…[Particularly] in the Chinese-language context [literary criticism] is lacking in conceptual tools with which we can fully appreciate the materiality of literature. Standard reference texts continue to propagate interpretation and meaning, at the expense of innovative forms…(2015: 167)

The narrower and more circumscribed point is in fact subsumed under the broader counter proposal of the young avant-garde writers. One way to read their initiative is as a universalist manifesto, which at the same time does not dismiss the national frame of reference, or even tradition. Looking back, we can see how Fenollosa and Pound took their notion of Chinese linguistic/cultural exceptionalism too far, neglecting to recognize universal and cross-cultural features. Between the exceptional and the universal is where some of the hardest problems both in science and in the humanities are still waiting for an open-minded dialogue. So to that end, another task of the "vanguard writers," according to Tong King Lee — citing Yeh (2008), is to draw even more freely from the international literary traditions and the influence from other cultures. Experimentation will signal a movement away from culture-centric restrictions and will embrace bilingual and cross-cultural transfer up to and including outright transgression (2015: 165). The question will then come up: what really is exceptional in an interesting and important way, and what isn't.

One candidate for the former was covered in Chapter 3 in the review of the work of poet Chen Li: the exceptional features of the writing system, shared by

the Japanese language, and to a much lesser degree today in Korea. Thus, an important research question in poetics revolves around the role played, aesthetically, by the semantic component (radical) of characters, when it occurs alone as an ideograph, in combination as part of the associative compound, and in the phono-semantic character. How does the processing of the radical, in reading, and in composition, present itself as a singular poetic resource (in comparison to the resources available to poetry written in an alphabetic script)? What unique artistic property might it possess because of the different access to meaning that it allows (even though phonology is not "by-passed" in decoding) and because of its special graphic complexity? The other question that the use of characters in verse poses is that of bilingual and cross-language interaction, treated at length in Chapters 2 and 3. In regard to crossing language boundaries, the historical roots in Chinese of Japanese poetry have been widely documented. What is the present day vestige of this cultural inheritance in Japan, and what possibilities can be explored for cross-language poetic interchange centered on the use of *kanji* in Japanese verse (even among Chinese and Japanese poets and readers who are not bilingual themselves)? Japanese verbal art, in turn, is exceptional in the highly productive use of hybrid scripts and alternate readings of the *kanji*.

Before reviewing Chapters 4 and 5, the question was asked about a common ground. I believe that it can be found in a shared interest in the domain of the interfaces. The terms used in the book were: translational processes and intersemiotic spaces. Focusing on interactivity between and among the different realms of the aesthetic genres makes the inquiry and the discussion more complicated, but in the end more rewarding. This may be where the most important contribution of the study of experimental poetry lies in relation to the topics we have covered. Again, the shared framework from which we are working is an interest in the structures and patterns of literary language. Readers will recall that the term for this was its "materiality."

The author's reply to conservative mainstream critics might be that the purported erosion of (Chinese) linguistic and cultural resonance in modern art is evidence of a coming of age. In the review of the radical *Pink Noise* project, one example comes to the forefront: "…[that] for the first time in contemporary 'Chinese' poetry, we are reading unreadable Chinese-language poems" (2015: 161). In literature, the problem for official cultural norms with the "unreadable" is not new in history. If control of the message is important, artists will be asked to continue to pay attention to content and interpretation, and it should not be surprising that this petition will continue to show impatience with their experimental forms and methods.

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