



UNIVERSITÀ DI NAPOLI  
**L'ORIENTALE**

**DOTTORATO IN ASIA AFRICA E MEDITERRANEO**  
Schema per redazione progetto di ricerca dottorato

**PhD PROGRAMME IN ASIAN, AFRICAN AND MEDITERRANEAN STUDIES**  
Form for presentation of Research Project

1 - Titolo del Progetto di Ricerca/Title of Research Project

Poetry from China, Poetry from the World: The Chinese Exile Poetry Scene after June 4<sup>th</sup>

2 - Settore scientifico-disciplinare a cui si riferisce il progetto/ Academic discipline to which your project is related

L-OR/21 Chinese Literature

3 - Abstract del progetto/Project abstract 5000 caratteri – 5000 characters

The focus for my doctoral research would be the Chinese exile poetry scene – a term by which I mean, with van Crevel, “poets, poetry and their circumstances, including critics and other readers” (2008, 6) – which gradually originated outside the People’s Republic of China in the 1980s, and then gained unprecedented visibility after June Fourth, mainly as a consequence of the exile of poets such as Bei Dao 北岛, Yang Lian 杨炼 and Duoduo 多多. These three, among others, went on to be considered the best-known Chinese poets internationally (van Crevel 2008).

I plan to try and document the workings and the history of the exile poetry scene since the 1980s up until today, drawing suggestions from Sinophone Studies, Cultural Studies as well as from the notion of literary field introduced by Pierre Bourdieu and then re-articulated, among others, by Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 (2003; see also Fumian 2009). I would put forward that the exile poetry scene can be best conceptualised as a polycentric structure, with each centre related to the others and to the domestic poetry scene in the PRC. Such a model for the exile poetry scene builds on a basis provided by Sinophone Studies and its attempt to question the idea of “Chineseness” in and outside the PRC, challenging the latter’s position as the only real centre for the production of Chinese literature and culture. Through the conceptualisation of the exile poetry scene as a polycentric matrix, my project would cast off the daunting dichotomy between centre and periphery, *nei* 内 and *wai* 外. Some major centres I have identified so far include New Zealand, where Yang Lian and Gu Cheng spent the beginning of their life abroad; the United States, home of the new *Today* since the 1990s and of at least two other poetry journals (*Tendency* from 1993 to 2000 and *First Line*, which is still being published today); and Europe, where poets such as Yang Lian, Duoduo, Wang Jiaxin and Jingbutu now live and work. All centres are legitimate producers of Sinophone poetry (according to an inclusive approach which follows up on David Wang’s work), and they interact with each other in ways that haven’t been researched so far.

My research would aim at tracing the historical development of different centres, but also at documenting their internal dynamics, networks and established practices and the interchanges and interactions among different centres and between them and the poetry scene in the PRC. In order to do so, I would look at poetry as a form of cultural production resulting from a network of social relations: to understand what such relations are and how they shape the exile poetry scene would, in fact, be the ultimate goal of my research. While looking at poetry “beyond texts” in a way much like that of Heather Inwood (2014), who also adopts a Cultural Studies approach, I would mainly draw on suggestions offered by the notion of literary field. To conceptualise the literary field as a site defined by power relationships and by constant struggles among different actors would enable me to grasp the logic behind the everyday social practices which characterise the exile poetry scene, both on a microscopical (i.e: within the single centres scattered all over the world) and on a macroscopical level (that is to say, in making sense of how different centres relate to each other). In other words, the notion of literary field would provide a suitable theoretical framework for understanding and making sense of the everyday workings of the poetry scene and of the relations between its actors, on all the levels my analysis would encompass.

The link between context (an umbrella term with which I refer to everything I’ve mentioned so far in terms of social practices and power relationships within the exile poetry scene) and text (to be intended here in its most literal meaning, as “written text”) lies in the idea of exile. When it comes to exile, there are (so far) two authors whose trajectories strike me as most interesting: Yang Lian – for two main reasons: his life abroad spans across multiple centres, namely New Zealand and the UK; and he has kept an interesting correspondence with Gao Xingjian 高行健, who’s also an exile, though not a poet – and Meng Lang 孟浪, whose poetry has undergone a significant degree of change after he moved abroad. On the one hand, exile came to be a recurring theme in the poetry of authors who, like Yang and Meng, found themselves unable or unwilling to live in China after June 4<sup>th</sup> for political reasons; while on the other hand it constitutes a disruptive element for the poets’ life and, at the same time, a condition with which poets have had to come to terms, not only on a personal and intimate level but also in a much more practical sense: I am interested in examining how being an exile reshapes the way individual authors handle their struggle for what Bourdieu would define as different forms of capital (mainly symbolic and economic). Tying together text and context, my project would contribute to our understanding of contemporary poetry written in Chinese as a cultural phenomenon – which is nothing but straightforward, and even more so because it flourishes all over the world.

#### 4 - Stato dell’arte/State of the art 5000 caratteri – 5000 characters

My research would contribute to the understanding of how Chinese poetry works as a complex and layered site of cultural production. Political as well as social turmoil have run throughout Chinese history since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the influence of politics has contributed greatly to the shaping of the looks of the Chinese poetry scene. Since 1978, with the publication of the first issue of the poetry journal *Today* (*Jintian* 今天) and the emergence of the so called “underground poetry” above ground, the (only apparently) monolithic poetry scene has exploded into a plethora of trends, schools, and movements, all of which (despite different theoretical guidelines and divergences as to what poetry should be, and as to what being a poet should mean) shared a more or less established set of social practices which characterised the poetry scene itself as a site of cultural production. Such practices and the workings of the Chinese poetry scene have been documented by previous research: as a matter of fact, several cutting-edge studies have been carried out on the PRC poetry scene. Maghiel van Crevel has produced two lengthy volumes (1996 and 2008) which document the history and dynamics of the Chinese poetry scene since the 1950s, as well as a long essay consisting of notes on the workings of such poetry scene based on his fieldwork (2017). The poetry scene has also been researched, in its institutional and social entanglements, by Claudia

Pozzana (2010) who, along with Alessandro Russo, has taken on the task of translating contemporary Chinese poetry into Italian, too (1996). Within the body of research on the PRC poetry scene, Michael Day's work is remarkable as it operates on a regional level, dealing with avant-garde poetry from Sichuan during the 80s. The productive *trait d'union* between poetry and society is the object of Heather Inwood's work, which problematises the perceived marginalisation of poetry within Chinese culture at large (2014) and focuses on the struggle over the role of the poet vis-a-vis society (2011). Michelle Yeh, though primarily interested in the aesthetic features of experimental poetry, also published on the latter's uneasy relationship with politics as well as on the pseudo-religious vibe avant-garde poetry has to it (1992 and 1996). Some great research work has also been done on prominent authors living in exile: Li Dian has produced a monograph on Bei Dao (2006), Jacob Edmond has published both on Bei Dao and Yang Lian (2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2006 and 2012), Cosima Bruno has published an illuminating work on the reading of Yang Lian's poetry through translation (2012) and Chee Lay Tan significantly discusses the three poets together (2015). There is, however, a gap in existing scholarship when it comes to the exile poetry scene (which gained visibility after June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989) "as a whole", or as a social phenomenon and as a site of cultural production: most of the research on the exile poetry scene has focused on the authors' individual trajectories and primarily on texts, with – to my knowledge – no attempts at describing how such scene has developed in the last three decades and how it works in terms of social practices related to cultural production. This has been done for the domestic poetry scene, and this is what I would try to do.

As hinted at before, my project would draw on Sinophone Studies. The concept of the Sinophone has been put forward by Shu-mei Shih at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Shi 2021, 312), following up on a research trend initiated by Ien Ang as far back as 1998 (Ang 2003) which questions the idea of a monolithic China as the standard for "Chineseness". Shih has conceptualised Sinophone through several contributions: *Sinophone Studies: a Critical Reader*, co-edited with Chien-hsin Tsai and Biran Bernards (2013) is perhaps the most comprehensive overview on the matter, since it contains contributions from multiple scholars (who do not necessarily share the same degree of enthusiasm about Sinophone Studies) along with Shih 2007, although she has elaborated on the topic in articles as well (2011). David Wang's approach to Sinophone studies is different as it sees all literature written in Chinese as a whole and organic body, thus mitigating Shih's critical attitude towards mainland China (Shih, Tsai and Bernards 2013) through the notion of post-loyalism. All the approaches within Sinophone Studies, while providing a useful framework for looking at literature written in Chinese as a whole, do not take exile literature into account, mainly dealing with writings by people who migrated because of economic rather than political reasons and by their descendants. My research would also be an attempt at bringing exile literature as yet another form of *wenxue* written in Chinese outside the PRC into the equation of Sinophone Studies. This effort would result in further expanding the scope of Sinophone Studies, which would then be one step closer to really looking at *all* literature written in Chinese with an inclusive approach.

5 – Bibliografia/Bibliography 5000 caratteri – 5000 characters

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6 - Descrizione del progetto/Description of the Project 15.000 caratteri 15000 characters

## CURRICULUM: PHILOLOGY-LINGUISTICS-LITERATURE

### Topic and research questions

The 1980s were a pivotal decade for Chinese poetry. Experimental poetry of the new kind which had developed underground throughout the 1960s and 1970s finally came above ground with the publication of the first issue of the poetry journal *Today (Jintian 今天)* in 1978. From one campaign to the other, political and social tension kept growing throughout the whole decade, until it came to a burst with the Tiananmen incident on June 4th, 1989. Although poets such as Bei Dao 北島, Yang Lian 杨炼 and Duoduo 多多 had already been invited to take part in poetry seminars and conferences abroad during the years prior to 1989 – thus already coming into contact with a poetry scene different than the one within the PRC, it was after June 4th that they decided not to go back to China, at least for a while. Their exile – it doesn't matter whether forced upon them or willingly accepted: in both cases, it resulted from political reasons – gave unprecedented visibility to the scene of poetry written in Chinese from outside the PRC.

During the research I carried out at Leiden University on Bei Dao and Yang Lian, I realised that such exile poets have only ever been researched as individuals, members of the poetry scene within the PRC who happened to write from abroad, and not as part of a bigger, wider poetry scene which includes any kind of poetry written in Chinese all over the world, be it coming from the PRC, from Sinophone communities of migrants and their descendants, or from exiles. My idea for this project, therefore, would be that of documenting how the exile poetry scene developed from 1989 until today and of understanding what are the social (and power) relations between its actors. Such relations are crucial because texts – poems, in this case – come to light within the environment defined by the social relations themselves, and can therefore be considered as a product of the network of relations and power struggles which we refer to as the 'poetry scene'. My idea would be to describe the scene of poetry written in Chinese as a polycentric matrix with the PRC as one centre among others, which include New Zealand – where Yang Lian and Gu Cheng 顾城 lived and worked for some time, the US and different countries in Europe (such as the U.K., the Netherlands and Denmark).

In pursuing this general and ultimate goal, I would specifically look at exile as a decisive factor both on a textual – as a theme running through the verses of poets who can't go back to their native land or refuse to do so – and on a contextual level, as a disruptive element in poets' life and as a condition which forces authors to reconsider their positioning within the poetry scene.

My project would move from the following set of questions, articulated into two main questions, each coming with its own subquestion:

Question 1: How has the Chinese exile poetry scene developed since the 1980s, and how does it work today as a site of cultural production – i.e: what are the networks of people, practices and interchanges shaping the exile poetry scene? How do they operate?

Subquestion 1: Within a polycentric matrix, how have different centres of the exile poetry scene originated and developed through time? How do they interact with each other and, in turn, with the poetry scene in the PRC?

Question 2: Exile has been a feature distinctive to the life of Chinese poets writing away from their native land: how has exile been rendered in oeuvre of some of these poets through the years?

Subquestion 2: How has exile operated in forcing exile poets to reconsider their positions within the poetry scene and the way they handle their own struggle for obtaining different forms of capital?

The theoretical framework and the methods I intend to use to answer said questions are outlined below.

### Theoretical framework

I take poetry as the object for my research and – drawing suggestions from Heather Inwood’s work, which also borrows some insights from the field of Cultural studies – consider poetry as form of cultural production and, therefore, as a phenomenon which goes beyond the textual dimension. Poetry must then be considered as underpinned by “the coming together of different kinds of context and circumstance that include discourses, everyday life practices and regimes of power” (Inwood 2014, 6). In other words, I would first and foremost look at poetry as a cultural phenomenon of which texts, as crucial and fascinating as they can be, only represent a fraction. Moving from such a premise, my project would both incorporate texts and go beyond them by looking at the context in which they are produced, in an attempt at documenting the practices and relations through which texts come alive.

I would build my analysis and description of the exile poetry scene on a combination of suggestions taken from Pierre Bourdieu’s model of the literary field – bearing in mind that from dealing with the Chinese context come some specificities and features that weren’t there in Bourdieu’s original theorisation, but have been pointed out by scholars such as Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 (2003) and Marco Fumian (2009) – and from Sinophone studies, especially from the work done by David Der-wei Wang.

Sinophone studies were originally conceived as a way to demote the PRC as the only legitimate source of ‘Chineseness’, or as the only truly legitimate producer of Chinese culture, by exposing its hegemonic position vis-a-vis other communities all over the world wherein people speak and write in Chinese, whatever variety of language they might use (Shih 2011). The theoretical foundations of Sinophone studies, however, have been re-articulated by David Der-wei Wang (see Shih; Tsai and Bernards 2013 and Shi 2021) towards a more inclusive approach which, while still not granting the PRC a hegemonic position, moves away from Shih’s idea of the PRC as an antagonist force to Sinophone communities and regards it as ‘just’ another centre for the production of Chinese culture. I intend to follow up on Wang’s approach by conceptualising the exile poetry scene as a polycentric matrix made up by different centres of production of poetry written in Chinese. My matrix includes the PRC, as it is the place in which exiles have started writing poetry and, in some cases, a place where their works still get published; and other centres such as New Zealand, the US, the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands. I believe Wang’s approach to Chinese studies is, in its call for inclusiveness and tolerance, a suitable theoretical framework for situating exile poetry vis-a-vis other poetries written in Chinese all over the world, and my project would also represent a step forward in trying to fully realise the goal of Sinophone studies of decentralising and de-essentialising Chinese literature at large, and Chinese poetry specifically, by making it more a matter of language and less a matter of place.

Bourdieu conceptualised the literary field as a “structured site of relations as well as a dynamic competitive space” (Dubois; Emery; Sing 2000, 89) within which different actors hold different positions and struggle for obtaining different forms of capital: economic (quantifiable in terms of money and resources at one’s disposal); social (the formal or informal social relations any individual maintains); cultural (one’s knowledge and skills); and, perhaps most notably, symbolic (an individual’s recognition and prestige among other actors within the field). Bourdieu’s insights provide the ideal theoretical framework for making sense of the social practices, of the networks and of the power relationships defining the exile poetry scene: I believe the ‘empirical’ data, so to speak, that I hope to be collecting through my research and fieldwork could be classified, explained and given some degree of coherence by referring to Bourdieu’s model, which would therefore be a kind of ‘theoretical tool’ to be deployed both on a microscopical level – that is to say, for describing and documenting the social relations and struggles for obtaining capital among actors within single centres of the exile poetry scene – and on a macroscopical level, for observing how different centres relate to each other, the interchanges between them and how authors might take advantage of such interchanges and fluidity for their own agendas.

In my research, I intend exile as the condition for which “you can’t go back” (Glad 1990, ix). Such notion of exile, while in some cases not permanent (in fact, Yang Lian has been allowed to return to China for some time now) is, on the one hand, fundamental to my work on texts, as it is a condition which contributes to shaping the poetry of those who write away from their native land; and on the other hand, exile determines the authors’ position within the poetry scene and the strategies they put in place for obtaining different forms of capital. Through the process of researching the exile poetry scene, then, I would possibly have to rethink some features of Bourdieu’s model in light of the new evidence I might find on how exile contributes to the determination the authors’ positioning within the literary field.

## Methodology

I believe different questions call for different methods. In order to grasp how the exile poetry scene works I would rely on the extensive reading of its main literary journals and publications: so far, I have identified the new version of *Today*, published in the US since 1990, and two other poetry journals (*Tendency*, published from 1993 until 2000; and *First Line*, which is still being published), both also from the United States, but the list of course needs to be expanded. Among such primary sources, I would also include the Chinese academic output concerning the exile poetry scene, as I believe what Maghiel van Crevel (2008) calls ‘metatext’ to also be an important indicator of how sites of cultural productions work.

Besides carrying out extensive reading, I would rely on fieldwork, and specifically on conversations with poets themselves, editors, and literary critics. I’d like to hold such conversations personally, although contact through social media or email would also be a viable option. If possible, I would try and participate in poetry events (for instance poetry readings and seminars), both in the PRC and abroad. Such poetry events are held regularly within the PRC – an example would be the Conference on Schools in Chinese Avant-Garde Poetry (*Zhongguo xianfeng shige liupai dahui* 中国先锋诗歌流派大会) mentioned by van Crevel (2017); but some of them are organised in places other than the People’s Republic – as is the case for the Poetic Tightrope Walks, to be held in Zurich in September 2022 without any poet participating. Throughout the conversations I would hold and my attendance to poetry-related events and conferences, I would take notes and subsequently rearrange them into a coherent body of data, which would be the basis for my own claims and conclusions.

In addressing the text-related question (namely: how has exile been articulated in the oeuvre of exile poets?), I would perform a ‘reading-for-exile’, which consists of a close reading of texts in order to look at how exile has been poetically represented, and possibly at the ways some authors’



poetics has changed after they started experiencing the condition of exile. Choices, of course, need to be made: my idea would be that of selecting one author for each centre of the exile poetry scene, and to focus on their poetry for my textual analysis. Based on what I've read so far, I think the most interesting cases would be that of Yang Lian (whose trajectory spans from New Zealand to Europe), and Meng Lang, whose poetry took a decisive turn after the beginning of his life in the US. These remarks are, of course, tentative, and would be reconsidered upon further research.

#### Tentative schedule

The project should be completed in three years' time.

#### Year 1

Semester 1: At this early stage, the main goal would be that of narrowing down the scope of my research. For my sociological analysis of the exile poetry scene, it would be ideal to identify two or three centres on which to conduct in-depth research. Once such centres are clearly identified, I would have to pick one author from each centre to work on. I plan on doing so by further researching secondary sources produced by scholars within the 'poetry crowd' of China studies.

Semester 2: By this stage, I hope to have identified the specific centres on which to work and the individual authors to include as case studies. At this point, the next step would require me to make contact with poets, critics and editors within the selected centres on the one hand; and on the other hand to start working on texts, carrying out a close reading of poems by the authors I picked. For pursuing both goals, I think it would be ideal for me to spend some time as a visiting scholar at Leiden University, since it is home to one of the largest collections of poetry journals from China.

#### Year 2

Semester 1: During the first half of the year, after writing the introductory chapters of my dissertation, I would conclude my work of text analysis and I will have collected enough material to write the chapters on the individual case studies. At this stage, I should also be able to carry out the extensive examination of the publications and academic output related to the centres I had previously chosen to focus on. The inspection of said material should provide me with a basis for preparing an outline or a set of questions for my conversations with the actors of the poetry scene.

Semester 2: This semester would be dedicated to fieldwork, that is to say, to talking to editors, critics and poets I had previously made contact with. When possible, it would be ideal for me to spend time abroad – be it in China or in the other centres I would be researching – and to talk to them in person, either through personal appointments or at the poetry events I mentioned above. If travelling should turn out to be impossible, I would hold those conversation through WeChat, email, or other social networks.

#### Year 3

Ideally, after completing my fieldwork, I would be left with almost one year for organising the notes I took during my fieldwork. I should have already completed the chapters related to individual case studies and the introductory sections, which means that I would have plenty of time to work on the missing chapters, which would all be based on my fieldwork notes. Upon completion of said chapters, I would finalise my thesis with a section dedicated to laying out my conclusion and possible avenues for further research on the topic.

7 - Risultati attesi e ricadute applicative/ Expected results and application effects (max 3000 caratteri/max 3000 characters)

A more thorough and well-rounded outlook on the scene of poetry written in Chinese (which of course includes poetry from the PRC and poetry from Sinophone communities scattered all over the world but also – and this is where my project fits in – poetry written by exiles) would be of great benefit to Chinese literary studies, which has so far largely failed to research the ways in which poets in exile and centres of production of poetry written in Chinese outside the PRC interrelate, as well as the set of social practices related to their cultural production. The exile poetry scene as a whole is simply too big a phenomenon to be overlooked (and to do so would mean to only see half of what's happening in the realm of poetry written in Chinese), and so are the ways in which the experience of exile shapes the poetry scene itself by contributing to the positioning of authors within it. The findings from my project would be important for opening up a path for Chinese literary studies to better grasp the historical development as well as the workings and dynamics of poetry production as it is today, and it would provide the field of sociology of culture with a case study on how cultural production works on a global level (with the chance of attempting a comparative analysis between the Chinese exile poetry scene and other perhaps similar cases, such as that of Brodskij, the Soviet poet in exile), and on how exile reconfigures the condition under which such production takes place. This is also a notably new perspective, since when it comes to Chinese poetry, exile has only ever been researched as a resurfacing theme in single authors' verses, with the exception of Jacob Edmond's work on Yang Lian (2006), and not in its influence in shaping the lookalikes of the poetry scene.

Besides fitting in on a remarkable gap in the research done so far by the “poetry crowd” (van Crevel 2008) in China studies, my project would also contribute to realising some of the goals of Sinophone studies by considering Chinese poetry written in exile as yet another manifestation of literature written in Chinese, and therefore situating it within the framework of Sinophone studies itself along with the writings from Sinophone communities everywhere. In so doing, my project would truly carry out Sinophone studies' agenda of critique of the PRC as the sole source of legitimate production of Chinese culture and – perhaps even more so – its call for an inclusive approach in looking at poetry written in Chinese as a whole, coherent body of literature whose legitimisation does not depend on its ‘place of birth’. My project would be another attempt at de-essentialising and decentralising Chinese poetry and at discarding any idea of contemporary Chinese poetry as limited to the PRC: it would look at contemporary Chinese poetry as poetry *from* China, written in Chinese but running across nations and continents, challenging borders and flourishing despite repressive measures and censorship implemented by nation-states. Poetry from China, but also from the world.

Matteo Garbelli

