The Forgotten Critical Realism: Reification of Desire in Mu Cao's Poetry

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> Mu Cao's language is direct and sharp. It is full of anger resulting from struggles at the bottom of Chinese society. Meanwhile, it embodies a sense of transgressive pleasure in penetrating the social reality. Mu Cao's poetry reminds us of the forgotten nineteenth century, and the forgotten literary form of critical realism.
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> Chen Zhongyi, literary critic, in *Selected Poems of Mu Cao*

This chapter interrogates the impact of and resistance to neoliberalism in Chinese queer culture via a discussion of the Chinese queer poet Mu Cao and his poetry.[1] Adopting a cultural studies approach to literature, I examine the social practice of literary production and dissemination through my participant observation of a literary event in China, in tandem with a textual analysis of Mu Cao poems. In doing so, I explore the complex relationship between neoliberalism, queer subject formation, and poetry production in postsocialist China.

The 'Live Scene' of Poetry Reading in Beijing

I was doing fieldwork on gay identity and community in Beijing in the summer of 2012, when a gay activist friend of mine asked me to join him in a queer poetry reading event. He also announced that it was a free event and the poet was a 'working-class queer'. The friend certainly knew how to advertise the event to me: gay, poetry and working class form an interesting configuration in the post-millennium Beijing. Ever since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1997 and its depathologisation in 2001, there was no shortage of Lesbian,

[1] Mu Cao is the pen name of Su Xianghui.

queer community events in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, most of which were film screenings, sporting events, as well as dinners, clubbing and parties: that is, more activities centred on fun and entertainment. There was also a proliferation of queer individuals 'coming out' to the public, most of whom were young professionals from middle-class backgrounds. After all, in a predominantly middle-class and urban queer culture in Beijing, who wants to be labelled as 'working-class'? And in an age of the Internet, who still reads and writes poems? Whence my intense interest.

In her work on modern poetry and new media in China, Heather Inwood (2014) highlights the importance of the 'live scene' (*xianchang*) in contemporary China's cultural production. In the new millennium, China's cultural workers (*wenhua gongzuo zhe*), including poets, writers and filmmakers, have been increasingly active in meeting the public. They attend poetry readings, book launches, literary festivals and art exhibitions; they appear in Communist Party conferences, business dinners, on public television and participate in online chats. Some of them become 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci 1971) who address social concerns in public; some become media celebrities who possess considerable cultural, economic and even political capital; some turn themselves into 'cultural entrepreneurs' who busy themselves with selling cultural products to a growing number of middle-class consumers. What they all have in common is a refusal to sit in an isolated study and produce 'art for art's sake'. Instead they have a strong commitment to praxis: literature is no longer seen as something sacred and distant from life, and something that solely expresses individual sentiment whilst pursuing artistic perfection; it is connected to the society and relevant to ordinary people's lives. It has acquired political and commercial values in the context of China's rise to the status of a global power and the boom of the creative industries all over the world. Participating in the 'live scene' and making poetry socially relevant is therefore a politically and ideologically complex practice.

The poetry reading event took place at the Dongjen Book Club, a cultural centre situated in an old-style courtyard in downtown Beijing. It was not surprising that a queer poetry reading event should take place here. The book club is home to a grassroots NGO dedicated to the rights of ethnic minorities and marginalised social groups. The queer community webcast 'Queer Comrades' (*tongzhi yi fanren*) had leased an office space in the courtyard and Li Dan,

director of the book club, was also an organiser of the Beijing Queer Film Festival. The event was one of the public education programmes jointly organised by the Bianbian Reading Group (a queer reading group) and the Dongjen Book Club.

Even though the organisers had prepared more than thirty chairs, less than ten people showed up for the event: most of them were in their twenties and thirties, and they looked like university students and young professionals. Most of them had got the information from the group emails sent by the Beijing LGBT Centre and the Dongjen Book Club, and some from the queer community blogs or online chat groups or by word of mouth. Nobody seemed surprised at the low turnout of participants for the event: most queer people in urban China were busy enjoying all the conveniences and opportunities that the market economy and the social media bring to them in imagining a transnational and cosmopolitan sexual citizenship. Neither 'poetry' nor 'working class' in the event publicity sounded appealing to the popular taste.

A man in his late thirties walked in with a rucksack. He was slim, clean shaven and had short hair. Both his clothes and the rucksack looked plain and out of fashion. The organiser greeted him and took him to the front of the room. He took out a pile of books from his rucksack and put them on the desk. He did not chat with anyone, perhaps indicating an introverted personality. From the way he was dressed and how he behaved, people might have guessed that he probably came from the countryside or a small town, displaying as he did a type of *habitus* easily noticeable in the urban and fashion-conscious queer communities in Beijing.

The organiser welcomed the audience for attending the event and introduced the poet briefly. The poet was known as Mu Cao (literally 'grass on the grave')—hardly a cheerful pen name, indeed one that is even slightly disturbing in a folk culture that seems obsessed with auspiciousness and good fortune. The organiser described his poetry as 'a rare and authentic voice' from the working-class queer community. This way of framing was interesting, as Beijing's queer movement had been criticised for being urban, middle-class, and consumption-oriented. The local queer community thus needed an exemplar from a different class background to showcase the diversity and inclusiveness of the community. Would Mu Cao be able to bear the heavy burden of representing the diversity of the community? Would

he be able to speak for himself when he was spoken of and for in the context of China's emerging queer social movements?

Narrating the Homosexual Subject

After thanking the organiser for the introduction, Mu Cao picked up a book from the desk in front of him and started reading one of his poems. He read slowly, in standard Mandarin with a northern accent, a poem called 'A Brother Walking on My Right Side':

When the sun rose
A brother was walking on my right
He was younger than me
His shoes were covered with the fragrance of rape flowers
He hurried on with his journey
My face was covered in his shadow

Mu Cao made a pause and took a glance at the audience after finishing the first stanza. The audience seemed interested enough, and this encouraged him to continue:

The sweat on my forehead became ice-cold
The crow's feet on my eyes were expanding
I smiled at him
Our conversation was as sad as flowers from the Chinese scholar tree
I knew he wouldn't stop
I knew I wouldn't stop

When the sun went down
The brother was walking on my right side
He was probably thinking of a brother as nice as me
When he hurried on with his journey
He was covered in my shadow (Mu Cao 2009: 22)

By the time he finished reading the poem, my interest had been aroused. I liked his poems: they were simple but very expressive. The short poem narrates a brief encounter between two men heading to different destinations and with their shadows overlapping each other for a moment. The poem captures a fleeting memory and conveys a subtle homosocial and homoerotic feeling. I was not a frequent reader of modern poetry and was at times daunted by the abstract language and imagery used by many modern poets. Mu Cao's poems, however, struck a chord in me and I could see that other members of the audience were touched too.

Without much explanation of the background information, Mu Cao moved on to a few other poems, some of which were more explicitly homoerotic. A poem, titled ‘Xihaizi Park’ depicts a gay cruising scene:

Where there are parks in China
There are homosexuals’ footsteps
This is a tiny park in a small country town
There are no flowers but stones and trees
They say that all men there are horny
Not far from the public toilets
They stroll, gaze, sigh, and feel melancholic
They stay still, release their energies and then go back to their loneliness
I am like you; I am like him
All of us have been abandoned by life

Where there are dark corners in China
There are groans from these marginalised people (Mu Cao 2009: 136)

The cruising scene was familiar to many queer people in China, but few had put it in words, and in such a poetic form. Public cruising had become an unspeakable trauma in urban China’s queer communities: people knew about it, but few felt comfortable enough to talk about it. The middle-class members of Beijing’s queer communities had tried to dissociate themselves from the cruising scenes in public spaces and from the once criminalised and pathologised homosexual identity. The poem reminded people of the continuing existence of the marginalised and stigmatised homosexual subject at the bottom of the contemporary China’s social hierarchy and in increasingly gentrified gay communities in urban China.

The poetry reading was followed by a Q&A, where the poet answered a few questions from the audience. From his replies I was able to piece together a biography of him. Born in the countryside in Henan province in 1974, he had no formal secondary school qualifications. He has been a farmer, a dustman, a porter, a hotel cleaner, a kitchen hand, a barber, a storekeeper, a flea market vendor and a web editor. He has done various odd jobs to make a living. At the time of the reading I heard, he was working as a boiler attendant in a factory in a Beijing suburb. His daily job involved feeding the hot water boiler with fossil fuels and supplying hot water to the workers in the factory. He writes poems and novels in his spare

time and saves money to have them published. He has self-funded a few poetry anthologies and novels.[2] Some of his poems have been translated into foreign languages. He is not, and probably cannot become, a member of the Chinese Writers' Association, a state-funded literary establishment. He remains obscure outside of Beijing's queer communities. It is unlikely that he will receive any public funding for the publication of his books. Most of his books are sold on occasions such as poetry reading events or through online sales. In a country where homosexuality is still a social taboo, the events he can attend and the publicity he can get is very limited.

I thanked him and bought a few books from him. We did not exchange many words. He was shy and introvert, and I did not know what to say to him except thanks. This was one of the strangest encounters I have experienced in Beijing's queer communities. It reminded me of the situation of queer culture in China: however much queer people in urban China imagine themselves to be global citizens with transnational sexual citizenship, the stigmatised homosexual subject continues to frequent the public spaces after dark and fight for survival. Neoliberalism in China has produced diverse types of queer subjects, and not every one of them has the same right to public spaces and public recognition.

In my discussion of the queer culture in Shanghai (Bao 2012), I described three types of queer subjects: the homosexual or stigmatised sexual subject who occupies the lower strata of the Chinese society; the gay subject or *tongzhi*, the middle-class subject who subscribes to gay identity politics and 'gay lifestyle'; and the 'queer' subject who benefits the most from transnational mobility and elite knowledge economy. They occupy distinct types of urban spaces: public parks and cruising grounds, local queer community centres, and 'pink' commercial venues such as gay bars and clubs. The boundaries between the three types, among many others, of same-sex subjectivity are not clear-cut, and the various types of queer

[2] Mu Cao's publications include poetry collections *The Age of Transsexuals* and *The Bible of Sunflower*, novels *Outcast* and *The Lake for Outcasts*, and collections of short stories *Says An Old Man* and *A Hundred Lan Yu's Screams*. Some poems have been translated into Dutch, English, French, Japanese and Slovenian. One of his poetry anthologies, *Selected Poems of Mu Cao*, is bilingual, translated into English by Yang Zongze. His novel *Outcast* (*Qi'er*) has been translated into English by Scott Meyers, titled *In the Face of Death We Are Equal* (Seagull Books, 2019). Excerpts of the novel can be accessed from the *Words without Borders* website http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/june-2016-the-queer-issue-vii-outcast-mu-cao-scott-e-myers (accessed 1 January 2019) and some translated poems can be accessed from the *Pen America* website: https://pen.org/two-poems-mu-cao/ (accessed 1 January 2019). See van Crevel (2017) and Ming (2017) for an account of the contemporary Chinese poetry scene of which Mu Cao plays a part.

urban spaces often converge with each other. However, it is the intersectionality of sexuality with class, among other categories such as geographical differences, urban-rural divide, regionalism and transnationalism, that structures marked differences in sexual subjectivity. The Dongjen Book Club that I described in the last section was predominantly frequented by middle-class gay and queer subjects, who consider going to the book club a lifestyle choice and a performative act of affiliation with transnational queer politics. The disruption of the space by a working-class homosexual subject such as Mu Cao and his poems depicting homosexual lives thus came as a shock for many listeners at the reading.

Life of a Poet in Postsocialist China

The stratification of China's queer communities was largely a result of China's adoption of neoliberalism in the postsocialist era since 1978, marked by nationwide waves of de-collectivisation and privatisation of public sectors, in tandem with the commercialisation of public culture. Poetry, China's oldest literary form, was not spared from the nationwide drive of privatisation. China prides itself on being a 'nation of poetry' (*shi de guodu*) and its earliest classical poetry anthology dates back to the first millennium BCE (Knight 2012: 29). For over one thousand years in ancient Chinese history, poetry was part of the imperial exam system and, as a result, China was ruled by poet-cum-officials. Being able to compose and appreciate classical poetry marked a well-educated person and an enlightened government. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as imperial Chinese dynasties were replaced by a modern nation state, classical poetry slowly gave way to modern poetry written in an unrhymed vernacular language. Literature was used by the Chinese Communist Party during the socialist era for pedagogical purposes and as part of the proletarian revolutionary hegemony. Although 'critical realism' (*pipan xianshi zhuyi*) was widely considered to be the privileged form of literary style at the time, even the then Chinese leader Mao Zedong composed rhymed classical poems to express his national concerns and personal ambitions. In the postsocialist era (1979 to present), diverse forms of literary styles and aesthetics emerged with China's government-led 'reform and opening up' policy. Poetry informed by modernist and postmodern aesthetics has flourished.

China's entry into global capitalism from the early 1980s was accompanied by the gradual privatisation of literary institutions and the commercialisation of literature. Literature lost its

‘aura’ (Benjamin 1969: 221) in a commercialised society. As popular novels slowly secured a market among middle-class readers, poetry increasingly lost its readership and was pushed to further marginalisation. China’s attainment of membership in the World Trade Organisation in 2001 marked the Chinese government’s full endorsement of neoliberal economic policies and ideologies. This was followed by the boom of the ‘creative industries’ (*chuangyi chanye*) or ‘cultural industries’ (*wenhua chanye*) in order to transform China’s economy from an agricultural and industrial economy to an information-driven and service-oriented economy. This transition has also meant that ‘culture’, which used to be associated with the ‘essence’ of the ‘national spirit’ (as in the notion of ‘Chinese culture’) or the source of education and entertainment guided by a vanguard party and produced for the ordinary people (as in the case of ‘working-class culture’), has become a commodity to be given an economic value and to be produced, sold and exchanged *en masse*.

In the wave of the nation-wide privatisation and commercialisation of culture, poetry has not remained unaffected. Many poets lost their full-time employment at public cultural institutions such as writers’ associations, journal editorial offices, publishing houses, or government bureaus. They must now work part-time or freelance. Some poets take advantage of their cultural and social capitals to gain fame, money and even political power. Many poets frequently appear at business dinners, state banquets and media events; they contribute their verses generously to business anniversary celebrations and real estate development projects. Mu Cao’s dream to become a poet started at this time when poetry became a commodity in the market economy and poets became ‘cultural entrepreneurs’.

Living in a society where ‘group after group of poets are busy/ planning culture brands.’ (Mu Cao 2009: 236), Mu Cao was disillusioned with China’s intellectual and literary scenes:

Poetry editors are busy with getting promotions

People’s spokesmen are preparing for the civil servant examinations

Investors, publishers, and directors are laundering money

There are also large numbers of

celebrities without feelings

and intellectuals without intelligence

Am I a dream walker?

Why can't I find a home in Beijing? (Mu Cao 2012)

The publication of Mu Cao's poetry collections was mostly self-funded. Because of his obscurity and the homoerotic nature of his poems, rejection of his book manuscript was common. In a poem titled 'On the Train', Mu Cao describes his feelings of sadness and despair after his poetry manuscript met with rejection from a publisher. A stanza of the poem also makes references to his pen name Mu Cao ('grass on the grave'):

I hold in arms my unpublished poetry anthology
as if I was holding my own unburied cremation urn
I cannot wait to see my grave covered with green grass and flowers
Yet my self-pity doesn't make me feel more relieved (Mu Cao 2009: 26)

He describes himself as a 'sleepwalker' who obstinately clings to his dreams:

Oftentimes

I don't ask much from life

I don't even need a lamp

I can walk in the darkness

All roads lead to my dream

Oftentimes

I don't ask much from life

I don't even need a bed (Mu Cao 2009: 62)

In writing about dreams, he paints a picture of a developing society from the perspective of an ordinary Chinese living at the bottom of society:

I dreamed of becoming a farmer

I wanted to plant wheat and cotton with my own sweat

But when I thought about natural disasters
and the numerous taxes levied on farmers
I stopped dreaming

I dreamed of becoming a worker
I wanted to create wealth with my brain and hands

But when I thought of ruthless exploitations from the factory bosses
along with unemployment or long overdue backpay
I stopped dreaming
…

I dreamed of being an honest and hardworking person

But I was too poor, and I had nothing to my name

How could I stop dreaming?

I could now only dream of a spring night

When all the sad flowers were lit in the bright moonlight (Mu Cao 2009: 184)

Mu Cao's poems reveal the hard lives of the working-class people in China's reform era. Upon China's rise to a global economic power and the emergence of a middle-class, a lot of ordinary people, farmers and workers included, did not benefit from China's economic boom. They were pushed further into poverty and social margins. The 'Chinese dream', proposed by the Chinese president Xi Jinping, seemed very remote from many ordinary people's lives.

In an age when China pursues the glamourous 'Chinese dream' and when critical realism seems to belong to a bygone era, Mu Cao's use of the critical realist style and aesthetics

serves as a reminder of the precariousness of the ‘Chinese dream’, as well as the hard lives of millions of people who have been left behind by, and fallen victim to, the nation’s dream.

Reification of Desire in a Sweat Factory

Having worked in sweat factories himself, Mu Cao often depicts the harsh work conditions in China’s sweat factories in his poems. Besides disclosing the drudgery of the manual work under poor working conditions, Mu Cao gives the scene a ‘queer’ twist, as we can see from the following poem titled ‘Working in a Sweat Factory’:

This is a privately owned
Sweat factory
The boss keeps everybody’s ID cards and wages
Well-fed and well maintained
The boss relaxes for eighteen hours a day
while sixty dress making workers
busy themselves with never ending work

Male workers bend their back like starved dogs
Female workers have eyes as red as rabbits
They work and live together
The female workers’ hips often brush
the male workers’ thighs
but they don’t seem to have any sexual desire for each other

In the breakfast kitchen
The honest bachelor cook
busied himself with masturbation
He shot his load into the porridge pot
This was spotted by the boss
Instead of being fired
The cook got a pay rise (Mu Cao 2009:160)

By juxtaposing the boss’s comfortable way of life and the workers’ long hours of hard work, Mu Cao paints a picture of the class division of labour in the process of ‘accumulation of capital’ (Marx 1990: 762) in contemporary China. As studies of the garment factories in South China demonstrate, the exploitation of the workers’ surplus labour in these factories testifies to the cruelty of capitalism (Ngai 2005). Mu Cao is by no means the only poet to document the ruthless exploitations going on in these factories. Xu Lizhi, a poet who committed suicide at the age of 24 by jumping out of his dormitory window because he could

no longer endure the work pressures at the Foxconn factory, also wrote poems to disclose the harsh life in the global corporations' outsourced factories. In 2010 alone, the media reported 18 attempted suicides, resulting in 14 deaths, at the Foxconn factory; many more cases have gone unreported (Nao 2014). Both Mu Cao and Xu Lizhi launched a contemporary *j'accuse* against the unjust system of capitalist exploitation via their poems. Behind China's success story as 'the workshop of the world', in an epoch where 'made in China' is to be found at all corners of the earth, the human cost of the 'Chinese dream' has also been enormous.

Against the backdrop of the harsh working conditions in the sweat factories, Mu Cao also paints an odd picture of corporeality and carnality: male workers and female workers frequently have close physical contact with each other without being sexually aroused; the cook ejaculates into the porridge pot and gets an unexpected pay rise. This is a Rabelaisian world in which the profane and the carnivalesque parody the established social orders and cultural norms (Bakhtin 1965). The poem serves as a reminder of the absurdity of capitalism, and a strange call for social justice: bodily fluid would become food for the malnourished and grotesque bodies; and queer bodies would become 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) in the capitalist regime of bodily discipline. Mu Cao brings queer and 'perverse' pleasures into the drudgery of the factory life. The cook's unexpected pay rise further dramatises the unfairness of the capitalist system of work and pay.

The two sets of juxtapositions — the boss's high income and effortless way of life versus the workers' underpayment, delayed payment or even non-payment as the outcome of their hard work, as well as the workers' lack of sexual desire under the capitalist regime of corporeal discipline versus the cook's secret pleasure — denaturalise both capital and sex. They also remind us of the close relationship between capital and sex under capitalism. As Michel Foucault's (1990) history of sexuality demonstrates, sex and sexuality were turned into discourses under capitalism, and this happened in a modern age when bodies had to be trained and disciplined not only to meet the requirement of the capitalist production but to be exposed to diverse types of scientific gazes. Sex and sexuality are therefore far from natural. They are manifestations of 'a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body' (Foucault 1984: 83).

In this poem, we can also see the ‘reification of desire’ (Floyd 2009) under capitalism. Reification, in the Marxist sense, refers to the ‘turning into things’ of social relations or those involved in them. Reification is a problem of the capitalist society obsessed with the commodity form (Lukács 1976). In the sweat factory, human beings are turned into objects in order to facilitate capital production. Human lives are evaluated in monetary forms and thus lose their complexity and vitality. Even bodily fluids such as sperm are given an economic value. Desires are far from spontaneous; they are constantly being conditioned, disciplined, and commodified under different regimes of governance.

Mu Cao’s poems also remind us of the performative and transformative power of writing. As J. L. Austin (1975) reminds us, language is not simply descriptive, and it does not merely ‘represent’ the ‘reality’; rather, it brings the social realities and identities into existence; moreover, it can be transformative insofar as it has the potential to change people’s lives and social realities. Mu Cao’s poetry participates in the regimes of desire as resistance. Poets such as Mu Cao and Xu Lizhi compose nationally and transnationally circulated poems. When these poems travel across national borders through translation, they create scriptural and libidinal economies that combine to critique the exploitation of the Global South by the transnational capitalism and the Global North.

It would be wrong to assume that Mu Cao only paints a pessimistic picture of the Chinese society. Judging from the cook’s secret pleasure, and seen from the poet’s ‘queer eye’, who can say that the disciplined bodies are not capable of resistance and rebellion, and that queer desires are not able to transgress and subvert the rigid regimes of capitalist alienation?

Conclusion

What do queer communities and identities in urban China, the life of a poet who struggles to make a living in Beijing, and migrant workers who work in China’s sweat factories have in common with each other? I suggest that they are all situated in the historical context of China’s departure from state socialism and the country’s entry into global neoliberal capitalism. They are all bodies, lives and desires located in the Global South but transformed by invisible forces of which individuals may be unaware and about which they can do very little. Neoliberalism is a global project: it originated in the Global North and was cooped and

reworked by the economics of the Global South in peculiar and specific ways. This is summarised succulently by Vijay Prashad as 'Neoliberalism with Southern Characteristics', i.e. 'with sales of commodities and low wages to workers accompanying a recycled surplus turnover as credit to the North, as the livelihood of its own citizens remain flat' (2012: 10). Indeed, many 'southern' and developing countries including China seem less concerned about enhancing social justices and improving ordinary people's lives; neoliberalism has thus benefitted the social elites in these countries in turning them into transnational desiring subjects. Gay identity in urban China is thus an intrinsically classed subject based on consumption, lifestyle, and middle-class distinction, and it threatens to marginalise and erase other types of queer existence.

Under the transforming forces of global neoliberalism, queer bodies and desires have been classified and stratified to correspond to the needs of different social classes; poetry becomes 'cultural brands' of 'cultural industries' and privileged 'cultural capital' possessed by an emerging group of the urban new rich; migrant workers' bodies and desires are disciplined and objectified in manufacturing factories, and bodily fluids can acquire commercial value in an unfair system of work and pay. Neoliberalism has transformed bodies, emotions and desires in commodified forms. Under these conditions, Mu Cao, a queer poet from a working-class background, articulates his concerns about social injustice and his resistance to the status quo. His voice, however, appears very weak in the consumerist and lifestyle oriented urban queer communities and a profit and fame driven literary scene.

Even though his life has often been commodified and politicised in a way of which he has no control, Mu Cao talks of leading a free and pure life as a poet:

Let me talk in my black mother tongue

If this is not possible

Let me rest in the black square characters

And I shall dissolve

in the transparent time

Let me die clean in the bright moonlight (Mu Cao 2009: 222)

This poem should be read as a protest to the reification of literature and the human body by neoliberal capitalism. By conjuring up the ‘pure’ existence of a poet, Mu Cao articulates his rebellion against the system of injustice and commercialisation. The lonely ‘grass on the grave’ seems to await, quietly and patiently, the arrival and the collective consciousness of the ‘grave diggers’ (Marx and Engels 1967) of neoliberal capitalism.