



**HOW  
TO  
BE  
A  
POET  
IN  
CHINA**

**Part I**

**MAY YONGBO**

HOW TO BE A POET IN CHINA

Part I

By Ma Yongbo

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Editor's Note: Due to the Neo-Mimeo Editions format, Ma Yongbo's long lyrical lines often bump into the right margin and are therefore shown as indented.

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Neo-Mimeo Editions

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## HOW TO BE A POET IN CHINA

Those poets who publish frequently,  
treading government offices like their  
own homes

Those poets who publish books endlessly,  
waving iridescent water-sprays

Those poets stepping off one stage onto  
another,

wearing floral coats, feigning solemnity

Those poets winning awards quietly,  
bestowing prizes upon one another

Those lonely poets pulling down their hats,  
flashing through crowds

then vanishing like revolutionaries

Those poets who speak rarely,  
their voices rusty from long silence—  
like mourners pushing open palace gates  
where gods have long departed

Those poets surfacing from the ocean  
of creation,

breathing briefly, raising solitary spouts—  
giant whales

Those occasional poets

WINTER RETURNS TO THE VILLAGE WITH FEWER PEOPLE  
TO PAINT A RIVER

Winter, don't stay too long in the village,  
you must find a way to add a river to it,  
only then can you find a way out. The road  
always melts and freezes again, between each  
snowfall,

and if nothing happens, the snow  
will fill the sky, turning into clouds.

The wet, frantic hens can claim that the only  
perfection in the world  
is the melting between each snowfall.

The melting road always stretches toward  
the direction of a river,  
but in the end, it always disappears halfway.  
After the moon rises, sometimes winter's things  
feel like spring.

Suspicion makes you thin, but you can believe  
in something, even believe  
that river really reached places you've never  
been.

When one day's cooking smoke solidifies in the  
gray,

you can watch yourself disappear again, letting  
that river  
become the boundary between two unnamed  
countries.

## MID-SHOT

Poetry is the boundary where strangers meet,  
smelling the obscene traces of snails.

They have no form, yet they are not ghosts,  
not the mumbling metaphors of the whole night,  
caressing

the place where an obituary or prescription was  
torn out of a newspaper.

The conjoined twins of love poems and elegies  
govern together,  
using poetic uncertainty to resist the tyranny  
of certainty,  
this like that, that like this.

A princess would be better off saying nothing  
to the frog,  
between her thighs, the rust belt, smoke  
curling.

Measure a country by train, holding a paper  
mirror,  
correcting each other's ignorance with time.  
On the roof of a bungalow, using an abacus,  
taking off sheep's skin gloves inside out.

A thinker, even sitting on the roof, is unseen,  
unless he throws tiles, fishhooks, and faded  
hydrangeas into the crowd.

He chooses stones from the field to take home,  
perhaps he should have moved the stones onto  
the roof sooner,  
before the flood of revolution surrounded him.

No matter which road you take, you'll meet the  
same people,  
they sit in a cart no one drives, wearing  
colorful clothes, faces powdered, noisy, on  
their way to the next village market,  
strictly obeying the stars' commands  
—enough stupor,  
enough stones, whether from the roof or the  
grave.

AFTER LONG LABOR COMES EVEN LONGER LABOR

After the long labor,

he emerged from the shadowy cave,

like a bear awakening from hibernation,

his vision blurred, still somewhat clumsy.

Facing the crowd that suddenly surged out of

nothingness,

his awkwardness made his increasingly calloused

hands seem redundant.

Evening was startling, but what startled him

more

was the world, like a stone worn thinner and

thinner,

suspending above his head—his forged weapons

were useless.

So, he swiftly returned to his darkness,

in the furious solitude,

pinching a spark, flickering like a heartbeat.

## THE ICED WINDOW

"You are real, you are not  
the product of your own imagination."

Snowflakes whisper around my head,  
turning my hair whiter still.

I wish it would eventually become transparent,  
not this impenetrable, monotonous white.

For many days, I am wondering if I existed,  
for many days, everything outside of me seems  
real.

Snowflakes, like fragments I breathe out,  
surround me,  
like cargo that lingers after a shipwreck,  
circling an empty center.

So I write a few words,  
like the small and large coins of childhood,  
gluing them to the thin ice on the window  
glass,  
then watching them slowly slide down,  
finally landing on the hard stone windowsill.  
Those tiny clinking sounds  
are the only things I can trust.

## COLUMBUS' CAT

It's not just the sea, not just the sails and  
the stars,  
and the glint of the ocean's endless curves—  
but a cat lying as the waves rolled beneath,  
a creature of both home and journey,  
with eyes that saw nothing but endless blue,  
its paws tracing the brilliance of ancient  
myths.

It's not just the man with the compass,  
who first felt the weight of fate,  
it was the cat, the quiet hunter of  
moonbeams,  
who dreamed of shores unseen.

For the cat, no continent to claim,  
no flag to raise,  
only the fleeting whispers of humans'  
only the promise of endless blue,  
as it nestled in the white grains of the stars.

YOU PUT DOWN YOUR PEN, GAZING AT THE GARDEN

You write poems in a diamond-shaped study

bright windows everywhere, wilderness

stretching inward

like an unfurling scroll of landscape painting

revealing various details inch by inch

Even a plump bee comes visiting

baffled by your window full of daylight

you lay down the pen, briefly savoring its

despair

then gently push the window open, set it free

Sometimes it happens, so you forget yourself

forget what you were writing moments ago

staring blankly at the garden, wind and trees

while the trail is trodden by deer

becomes clearer as grass grows taller

You hope to see some pairs of furry ears

pricking up

listening for movements in your room

so you might listen to each other for a long

time

forgetting poetry, abandoning all thought

Spring passes just like this  
like that troop of shy deer from past years  
now with a few paler fawns added  
curiously dawdling. When you finally notice  
only grass ripples and silence after the wind  
blows

THE WHEAT IN CENTRAL PLAINS IS RIPE

The wheat in Central Plains is ripe, short and  
with yellowish stalks

in every field stand lonely graves

each grave clings to a small green tree

like desperate children, fearing to be uprooted  
by howling winds

beneath, ancestors like wheat bran cling to  
fragile roots, swaying

The wheat in Central Plains is ripe, parched  
this year

next year's hope is dim; people's faces share  
the same sallow hue

Yellow dust rises from the northern loess  
plateau

blocked by the Qinling Mountains in the south,  
it lingers in the sky

forming clouds, sparse raindrops of muddy  
yellow fall

repainting the wind chimes on the eaves of Big  
and Small Wild Goose Pagodas

On the horizon, a team of wheat harvesters'  
shadow puppets, thin as paper

dragged by the horizon, they drift away,  
vanishing without a trace

The wheat in Central Plains is ripe, at night  
someone always stands long in the field with a  
lantern

crushing an ear of wheat in reddened palms  
tasting the aroma of lean, hard grains and  
yellow earth

then, leaning against ancestral graves  
counting stars as sparse as hope in the sky

Poet Ma Yongbo was born in 1964 in Heilongjiang Province, China. As a poet, he is representative of Chinese avant-garde poetry. He is also a leading scholar in Anglo-American postmodernist poetry. Since 1986 Ma has published over eighty original works and translations. He is a professor in the Faculty of Arts and Literature, Nanjing University of Science and Technology. His studies center around Chinese and Western modern poetics, post-modern literature, and eco-criticism.