

Struggle and Symbiosis: The Canonization of the Poet Haizi and Cultural Discourses in Contemporary China. By Rui Kunze. Bochum, Germany: Projekt Verlag, 2012. Pp. 340. €23.90.

This is a sophisticated, multifarious study of a major poet in contemporary China, the first full-length scholarly analysis to date, in English and quite possibly in any language. The author casts the objectives of her study in these questions: “What has brought Haizi [海子] into the pantheon of Chinese canon poets in the past two decades? What are the changes in the cultural and political discourses in China that have altered the criteria of literary canon selection? Why is Haizi’s poetry regarded as representative of the 1980s? What sort of cultural memory does this interpretation of representativeness intend to reconstruct? Why is such a reconstruction desired? What parts of Haizi’s poetry facilitate such a reconstruction? And, when do Haizi’s texts not support this reconstruction, given the complexity of and changes in his poetry?” (p. 13)

The methodology that the study employs is, according to the author, “cross-cultural translation”: “I shall delineate the translation processes of the contemporary cultural and literary discourses of modernism, world literature, *minjian*, epic, and divinity before examining their existence in Haizi’s poetic theory and practice” (p. 14). This claim is borne out by the fact that the listed concepts all originated in other, predominantly European, countries. Their introductions, receptions, and appropriations in China have unfolded over many decades, developed into important discourses in their own right, and exerted a significant impact on Chinese intellectual, political, and literary development. Each treated in a chapter, these concepts and discourses serve both as hermeneutic tools for understanding Haizi’s creative and theoretical work, and as explanations of the posthumous canonization of the poet. While Haizi’s *œuvre* is situated in the milieu of the dawning of the New Era, the dramatic rise of underground poetry (from Misty to Post-Misty poetry), and the Culture Fever in the pre-1989 period, his canonization is related to the tragic end to idealism and liberalism represented by “June Fourth” and the government’s subsequent self-legitimization through promotion of cultural nationalism. In 2001 Haizi was posthumously awarded a national prize; in 2003, “Haizi entered high school textbooks” (p. 59). His poetry has been widely anthologized, and a steady stream of essays and studies—both biographical and scholarly—has appeared in the past two decades.

Unlike the great majority of poets, Haizi is not only a subject of academic interest but has become a celebrity in contemporary China. His famous lines are used in real estate advertisements and cited in more than one contemporary film. Such popularity inevitably leads to over-simplification and even vulgarization of his work. Perhaps the only comparable case is Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897–1931) from an earlier era, whose popularity in the Chinese-speaking world throughout the twentieth century

has somewhat impeded rather than facilitated serious studies. One of the contributions the book makes is to rectify the situation and offer a deeper and more comprehensive reading of Haizi's poetry, including both his short lyrics and "epics." Besides the impressive coverage, the book examines the changes that Haizi's work underwent as it evolved from 1983 to 89, changes that are dramatic given how short his career was.¹

Ultimately, the central question to which the book proposes an answer is: What is responsible for the canonization of Haizi? Is it the intrinsic qualities and style of his work? Is it his tragic death, which coincided with the imminent demise of the democracy movement and the idealism that it embodied? Is it the poets and critics who have actively participated in the myth-making of Haizi as the poet-martyr in their disillusionment with, and implicit critique of, rampant commercialism and the concomitant marginalization of poetry in Chinese society? Is it the government that promotes cultural nationalism with its "homogenizing power" (p. 71) and finds a powerful, yet safe, emblem in Haizi? The study suggests that yes to all of these questions, which combine to paint the whole picture. Or, is it the whole picture?

Let's consider the issue of causality. Rather than seeing a direct correlation between the government's agenda and the canonization of Haizi in the twenty-first century, perhaps the under-emphasized link here is the growing influence and changing status of underground poetry since the 1980s. In the early 1980s, underground poetry already appeared fairly often in official journals, even while it was being attacked during government-launched political campaigns. It thrived in the second half of the decade, whose momentum did not abate even after 1989. In fact, in response to the tragedy of "June Fourth," there was a concerted effort among poets to re-examine the role and purpose of poetry. While some poets outgrew what they saw as "youthful writing" and entered the phase of "middle-aged writing," others made Haizi a major icon of the "cult of poetry" and imitated his recurrent themes and images. Viewed chronologically, the canonization of Haizi in the unofficial poetry world seems to predate that in the cultural establishment and the society at large.

Another question worth considering is the role of the free market since the 1990s. Free market refers to more than just materialism or consumerism, which the book regards almost exclusively as a negative force that is partly responsible for the posthumous canonization of Haizi. The fact is that, from the 1990s on, despite strict state regulations on publication, there are increasing ways to bypass them through "second-stream" or even "third-stream" channels. These means have generated greater

¹ Xi Du 西渡 has pointed out the textual discrepancies in some of Haizi's poems. See his "Haizi shige de yiwen ji yishi" 海子詩歌的異文及佚詩 (Alternate Texts and Lost Poems of Haizi) in Xi Du, *Lingyun de weilai* 靈魂的未來 (The Future of the Soul) (Kaifeng 開封: Henan daxue chubanshe 河南大學出版社, 2009), pp. 183–92.

numbers and wider distributions of poetry-related publications, mostly self-financed by the poets. Another unintended consequence of free market is the considerable wealth that some poets have acquired; those who “plunged into the sea” of capitalism in the 1990s are now in a position to provide generous resources for poetry-related activities, such as poetry prizes, festivals, conferences, and publications. These privately funded activities have garnered a great deal of visibility for poetry in the public sphere even as the number of poetry readers has dropped. What I am suggesting then is that, as far as poetry is concerned, the free market is a double-edged sword wielding both positive and negative power.

The above observations also point to the blurring of the demarcation between official and unofficial poetry in the past two decades. The binary opposition between underground poetry and official poetry has ceased to exist; by the turn of the new century, “underground poetry” is no longer a valid category of analysis. Despite the lament of some poets over the marginalization of poetry *vis-à-vis* popular literature and consumer culture, the fact is that many poets not only publish in official venues, they win state prizes, attend official functions, work at state-run institutions and enterprises, such as universities and publishing houses. Just as one may see the poets as being co-opted by the establishment, so can one say that the establishment is being transformed by the poets.²

In other words, there are significant structural changes to the institution of literature (in this case, poetry) as a result of both internal and external forces in contemporary China. Is the relationship between the poet and the state today still a defining issue as it clearly was in the early 1980s, when underground poetry burst upon the scene and was catapulted into national prominence for its fresh expressions as well as controversies? Or has the mass media or popular culture replaced the state as the key player with whom poetry competes? I agree with the book’s main argument that there is a paradoxical relation of “struggle and symbiosis” between the power structure and the unofficial poetry scene. I wish to call attention to two issues. First, especially in view of the changes in China in the past two decades, perhaps a more mediated reading of “symbiosis” is in order. Second, the agency of the poet in particular, and the agency of unofficial poetry in general, needs to be acknowledged more explicitly and analyzed more fully. Just as there is a distinction between literary modernism and modernization, so Haizi’s intensely lyrical, primal, and mystical vision of rural China and the borderlands cannot be fully understood within the framework

² Evidence like this perhaps justifies the author’s claim that China is a “post-totalitarian country” (p. 68). One wonders, however, if the claim has broad validity when one considers the state’s tight ideological control of the public space, including cyberspace, in China and the number of arrests and persecutions of artists, reporters, and lawyers in recent years.

of the state-promulgated nationalist discourse. In the final analysis, poetry is worth writing and reading exactly because it is irreducible to any category, mode of writing, or discursive formation other than itself.

Overall, this is an excellent and provocative book. It goes far beyond a single-author study and should be read by all students and scholars of modern Chinese literature and culture. Contextually, it delves into the cultural milieu, literary history, and intellectual genealogy that have shaped Haizi's aesthetic leanings and creative choices. Textually, it offers fine readings of the representative poems of a major poet. The author ought to be congratulated on accomplishing the stated goals with such remarkable clarity and cogency.

MICHELLE YEH

University of California, Davis

Burning Money: The Material Spirit of the Chinese Lifeworld. By C. Fred Blake. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. Pp. ix + 276. \$52.00.

Believing in the possibility of direct communication with ancestors and gods, Chinese routinely burn specially made paper documents, objects, and currency in order to send them to recipients in the other world. This venerable practice has long been noted by foreign observers, and its articulated logic seems straightforward. Even the high gods can be addressed through burned written communications, and both personified supernatural powers and deceased relatives have human-like needs and desires that can be satisfied by the transformation and delivery, through fire, of paper counterparts of this-worldly valuables.

Anyone familiar with contemporary religion in a Chinese community has seen such practices. Scholars, like the practitioners themselves, have usually framed them as pragmatic and sensible, not needing elaborate explanation. General books on Chinese religion may mention examples of such transformations of paper through burning, but do not examine them in detail. Dard Hunter (1883–1966), the American expert on paper, did pioneering work in Chinese communities of China and Southeast Asia for his rare and remarkable 1937 book on *Chinese Ceremonial Paper*,¹ and Hou

¹ Dard Hunter, *Chinese Ceremonial Paper: A Monograph Relating to the Fabrication of Paper and Tin Foil and the Use of Paper in Chinese Rites and Religious Ceremonies* (Chillicothe, OH: Mountain House Press, 1937). Limited edition.