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An Introduction to Duoduo's Work

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Correspondence with Philip Fried, editor of *The Manhattan Review*, 17 May 1991
Including 'Introduction to Duoduo's Work' with translations of the poems 'Winter's Day' and
'Solicitude'

Philip Fried,
Editor,
The Manhattan Review,
440 Riverside Drive,
New York, NY 10027

17th May 1991

Dear Philip,

Thank you for your letter of 29th April.

As for the poem "Solicitude", I'm afraid that I perhaps failed to send you the second half of the poem with the date, 1986, appended. My apologies. The poem in its entirety, and revised, is appended. I hope you don't mind but I should still prefer you not to use "Long Life".

In "Northern Earth", line 16, "countenance" is a verb relating to "Forbears". In "In England", line 3, there should not be a comma after "bowed"; the ambiguity of the English replicates the ambiguity in Chinese. Speaking of ambiguity, having looked again at "Winter's Day" to answer your query, line 9 would be better cast as "prayers, from the heart rise", and the last line "gust" should read "burst"; I attach a revised version. In "Crossing the Sea", there should be a comma after "boat" in line 7, and "relatives" may or may not be the subject of "breathe", the comma in line 8 represents a pause and again allows of ambiguity.

This will be the first English publication of "Winter's Day", "Crossing the Sea", and "They". The latter three poems and "In England" appeared in recent issues of the Chinese-language literary magazine *Jintian* (English subtitle *Today*) published out of Stockholm, Sweden. "In England" will, as I mentioned appear in the forthcoming British Penguin anthology. "Sea", "Solicitude", "Northern Earth" and "September" all appeared in *Looking Out From Death* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989).

I attach a "Suggested introduction" which you may find too long. I hope not, but I'd be willing to cut it. The introduction is followed by contributors' notes.

Best wishes,

Gregory Lee

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[A suggested introduction]

Duoduo during the many years before his exile in the West was a maverick, outlandish and contradictory person. At times sociable, at others anti-social, he often revealed the common signs of depression and alienation common to modern city life. But to Duoduo the poet such alienation and loneliness revealed itself as exile of the mind; a sort of internal exile. His mind was often full of the mythical universe of foreign Modernist poets -- Baudelaire, Sylvia Plath, Marina Tsvetayeva -- he mapped his own travels in a foreign poetic West of the mind.

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late 1970s and 1980s. As a mode of writing, particularly in poetry it challenged and continues to challenge the socialist realism advocated by the state. The state literary establishment attacked such poetry as "misty" or obscure, pointing to its difficult imagery and ambiguity; an ambiguity maintained by Duoduo to this day by means such as quirky punctuation or lack of punctuation altogether; poets were attempting to deconstruct and reconstruct a language they saw as violated by Maoist rhetoric. In fact, many poets took the official description "misty" as a mark of success and welcomed the epithet. Such writing of resistance has continued from the Democracy Wall period of the late 1970s through the Peking Massacre of June 4th 1989 and beyond.

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The exile, certainly in relation to the place of exile, to the country of exile, is at least initially, and perhaps forever, an outsider, an alien. See, for instance, Duoduo's poem "In England" in which seems to be the land of exile. And yet this poem ultimately is about home, about not England, but China, and about also that common exile sentiment: guilt. Another later poem by Duoduo locates the poetic voice squarely in the West but only as the site of the exile's reflection on what is perhaps the tragedy of China's politicized youth. But as the title of the poem, "They", which could also be translated "Them", underlines, "they" appear to be very much the non-"I", they are others to the subject, the "I" and the "I"'s generation. But is not the final historical complicity of the "I"'s generation with "Them" reached in the final couplet, with "made death preserve intact/their hackneyed use of our experience"?

In China, I saw Duoduo often lonely, frustrated, enraged even by his isolation. It was only in the year or two before June 4th 1989 that he was beginning to be accepted and published by the liberalizing literary establishment and by the anti-establishment too. Obligated to do a hack writing job by day that sapped his energies he was a reporter on the *Peasants' Daily*, having to cycle an hour each way down Peking's Avenue of Eternal Peace to work and back his strength and release lay in his defiant difference, his salvation in his poetry.

Then, he was, superficially, the least "political" of poets -- not the professional careerist and would-be dissident poet or painter of which there were, and are, not a few. But suddenly after June 4th and his dramatic flight to London to read his poetry at the British Museum among other places -- a poetry reading tour arranged months before the political demonstrations in Peking began -- he became the European media's favourite "dissident poet". And his dissidence was often simplistically projected by the Western media as anti-Communist and pro-Western sentiment, as the desire for the Western liberal notion of freedom. For Duoduo isolation and loneliness were at the root of his impulse to write, but suddenly for a brief media moment, what his poetry *said*, the complex reflection of Chinese reality, a series of temperatures taken over a decade or more, didn't matter as such, it was but a symbol of dissidence that the Western media could neatly,

tidily equate with Soviet and East European dissidents/dissidence. So has the dream of the West turned sour? Certainly, he now feels a desperate need for his raw material, the reality that is

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China; a need that casts doubt on the contention that all Chinese poetry is now little more than World Poetry written for translation with bits of exotic, Chinese flavour thrown in for effect. Yet despite its seeming Western apparel, the experience of exile shows that, the poetry of the Chinese poet always was quintessentially Chinese. And Duoduo in exile continues to be quintessentially Chinese.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

GREGORY LEE, a British translator and writer on Chinese culture, is Assistant Professor of Modern Chinese Literature at the University of Chicago. He lived for a number of years in Peking. Among his books is *Dai Wangshu: The Life and Poetry of a Chinese Modernist*, published by Hong Kong's Chinese University Press in 1989. An anthology of contemporary Chinese poetry that he co-edited with Duoduo is to be published by Penguin.

DUODUO (b.1951) is a Chinese poet currently resident in Toronto. In 1988 he was awarded the *Today* poetry prize by the independent group of Peking poets associated with that unofficial magazine. Bloomsbury published his *Looking Out from Death* in 1989. He is co-editor with Gregory Lee of a forthcoming anthology of contemporary Chinese poetry to be published by Penguin.

WINTER'S DAY

The very last ray of the setting sun warms the spire
the stove fire in the church, has already died out
ah, time, time

I seek what I've lost
and what I've got, let go
done with words from a tombstone

I saunter amidst people
vast world, everlasting parents
prayers, from the heart rise

silence, and beyond sound
melt together with winter's exchange:
wind, is a lonely horse rider

clouds, are piled up laughing country brides
December's mystical palpitations
are just a burst of old recitals

1990

SOLICITUDE

Early morning, the sound of talking in the bird's stomach
startles the mother awake. Before awaking (on a bloody pillow
is drawn: how fields fall asleep)
the bird, a little thumb sticking out from a branch
singing a song like the wind
snatching away its beak.

The bird's head,
a little golden glistening chisel
its beak, a trowel-shaped ray of light
turns over lava hidden in the layers of earth
"Come let's plant together

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the world's solicitude!"

The bird sings with unbroken voice
studies a kernel with a stubborn head
wrapped inside is eternal hunger)
in this sixteen-year old bird face
two terrifying black eye sockets
are a pair of inverted binoculars
from which are shot pellet-like ungainly hunters
—— a crowd of swaying students
and written on their knapsacks: eternally lonely.

Inspecting the world through finger cracks, mother
at just this moment locks her hair in the cabinet
a flash of ugly lightning twists her face
(like the prospect of annual rings pondering in a tree trunk)
snow, shaking millions of hands
falling, on the snowy path
two lines of crooked footprints
left behind by ten frozen, tender toes.
A dwarf resembling a black overcoat
is walking through filthy fields annoying them to distraction...

Then, suddenly, from layers of walnuts
From a wheat field
I recognize my own inner mind:
a bloody, foolish torrent
a milky embrace
I drank down this morning
this morning, I came near.

1986