

# A Lifetime Is a Promise to Keep

## Poems of Huang Xiang

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Translated and Introduced by  
Michelle Yeh

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Send correspondence and manuscripts to  
Katherine Lawn Chouta, Managing Editor  
Institute of East Asian Studies  
1995 University Avenue, Suite 510H  
Berkeley, CA 94720-2318 USA  
[ieaseditor@berkeley.edu](mailto:ieaseditor@berkeley.edu)





INSTITUTE OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES  
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INTRODUCED AND TRANSLATED BY  
Michelle Yeh

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Send correspondence and manuscripts to

Katherine Lawn Chouta, Managing Editor  
Institute of East Asian Studies  
2223 Fulton Street, 6th Floor  
Berkeley, CA 94720-2318  
ieaseditor@berkeley.edu

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# A Chronology of Huang Xiang

- 1941 born on December 26 in Wugang County, Hunan Province. Father Huang Xianming was a Japanese-educated general in the Nationalist Party (Guomindang) executed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) shortly after 1949. Mother Gui Xue-shan, who graduated from the Chinese Department of Fudan University, was the second wife.
- 1946 entered primary school in Guidong. As was the custom, Huang had been raised by his paternal grandparents. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, the family was labeled a "landlord family," and its lands and other properties were confiscated.
- 1950 charged with attempting to "poison the poor peasants" after discovering a dead fish in a well in the village. Huang was bound, paraded through town, and incarcerated. He was released after chemical analysis failed to detect any poison in the fish.
- 1951 family informed that Huang's father had been executed in a prison camp near Beijing. He was probably taken captive in Manchuria in 1948.
- 1952 throughout elementary school not allowed to participate in extracurricular activities. Instead, Huang was assigned to clean toilets at school. He was denied entrance to middle school; discovered his father's hidden library of books in Chinese, English, and Japanese, as well as his father's notebooks, and became a voracious reader of Chinese and world literature, philosophy, political economy, religion, and arts.
- 1956 moved to Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou Province, with his uncle and worked in factories.

- 1958 published two poems, written in the sanctified folksong style with politically correct contents, in the journal *Mountain Flowers*. He was invited to the Guizhou Literary Writing Workshop and became the youngest member of the Guizhou Branch of the Chinese Writers Association.
- 1959–1962 left factory without permission and took the train to Da Qaidam (or Chaidamu) Basin in Qinghai Province. He was arrested for “trying to cross the border and defect to the enemy” and “engaging in counterrevolutionary activities” and put in a labor reform camp, then returned to Guiyang, where he was sentenced to three years of labor reform. He was expelled from the Writers Association. While working at Sanjiang near Guiyang, he wrote “Singing Solo” and “The Great Wall.” The first poem was reported by a coworker, and Huang was denounced in public.
- 1963 ran away from Sanjiang and traveled north by train. He returned to Guiyang and found work as a coal miner. While working on a tea farm in Meitan, Huang and coworkers formed a literary discussion group.
- 1964 married Ai Youjun, with whom he later had two sons and a daughter.
- 1966 was persecuted again as a “counterrevolutionary” when the Cultural Revolution broke out. While working at a textile mill, Huang befriended the poets Li Jiahua and Wu Lixian (pen name Ya Mo).
- 1968 formed the underground “salon” Wild Duck in Guiyang at Ya Mo’s family compound.
- 1970 incarcerated at his work unit during a political campaign. A son dies after being denied treatment at the local hospital. Huang was committed to an insane asylum for a short time.
- 1971 birth of a daughter.
- 1977 was accused of corrupting youth for lending books of literature to a young woman.
- 1978 on October 10 arrived by train at Beijing with three friends (Li Jiahua, Fang Jiahua, Mo Jian’gang). They founded the Enlightenment Society and on October 11 posted the inaugural issue of the underground journal *Enlightenment*, which contained Huang’s long poem *Song of Torch*, near Wangfujing Boulevard. Huang

- gave impromptu speeches and recited poems to large crowds. In November he took a second trip to paste big-character posters in Tiananmen Square demanding reevaluations of Chairman Mao and the Cultural Revolution; he made a third trip on January 1, 1979, posting articles advocating human rights and democracy, and more trips in February and March. Four issues of *Enlightenment* were posted in Beijing on these trips.
- 1979 arrested with the others associated with the Enlightenment Society during the crackdown on the democracy movement and sentenced to labor reform in Guiyang. Huang was released in late 1980. "God of Fire: A Symphonic Poem" was published in Taiwan; his work and contribution to the Beijing Spring began to receive attention outside China.
- 1980 birth of a son. Huang founded the underground literary journal *The Rising Generation* with Zhang Jiayan and Wu Qiulin, two students from the Chinese Department of Guizhou University.
- 1981 fifteen poems under the title "My Sonata" slated for publication in *Flower Stream Monthly*. The authorities withdrew them and fired the chief editor of the journal.
- 1983 met Zhang Ling, a freshman in the Chinese Department at Guizhou University, in May. They fell in love.
- 1984 Zhang expelled from Guizhou University and jailed for refusing to incriminate Huang as a rapist. He was jailed from June to December.
- 1985 divorced Ai Youjun in January and obtained custody of their son. Zhang adopted the pen name Qiuxiao Yulan (Autumn Stream and Orchid in Rain).
- 1986 founded the poetry club Galaxy of Chinese Poetry with Ya Mo, Wang Qiang, Huang Xiangrong, and Zhang Ling. Huang went to Beijing to attend the first literary festival sponsored by Beijing University; the panel devoted to Huang's work was canceled under political pressure. Huang gave readings at Beijing University, Beijing Normal University, People's University, Central Arts Academy, and Lu Xun Art Academy.
- 1987–1990 sentenced to three years of labor reform for publishing *Galaxy of Chinese Poetry* and giving speeches at six Beijing universities. Zhang Ling took care of Huang's son by hand-washing laundry for pay; after his release they lived in the country outside Guiyang.

- 1992 married Zhang.
- 1993 went abroad for the first time when invited to attend the annual conference of the International Bibliographical Center of Cambridge (United Kingdom) at Harvard University.
- 1994 nominated by Human Rights in China for the Hellman-Hammett Prize, which he received.
- 1995 book of poetry published by the prestigious Writers Press in Beijing. The book was confiscated and banned before it could be circulated. Huang and his wife filed a lawsuit for being deprived of freedom of speech and freedom of publication, and they called for a reversal of the verdicts against those who participated in the democracy movement in spring 1989. They were arrested and detained on the night of June 3.
- 1996 moved from Guiyang to Mount Lu in Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province.
- 1997 with Zhang Ling, left China for the United States because of constant harassment by the police. They first lived in New York; from 1998 to 2004, they lived in New Jersey, where Zhang found jobs to support them.
- 1999 Independent Spirit Award given to *Well-founded Fear*, a documentary film about Huang and other immigrants. It was also nominated for the Truer Than Fiction Award.
- 2003 Japanese translation of Huang's poetry published in a volume.
- 2004 *A Bilingual Edition of Poetry out of Communist China by Huang Xiang*, translated by Andrew G. Emerson, published by Edwin Mellen Press.
- 2004 writer-in-residence in Pittsburgh, October 2004–October 2006; Mayor Tom Murphy declared November 21 "Huang Xiang Day." Under the auspices of City of Asylum/Pittsburgh, Huang lived in Pittsburgh until August 2007. His "Dream Nest," a text-based artwork on the facade of a house, is now a Pittsburgh landmark and the inspiration for City of Asylum/Pittsburgh's "house publication" project. Since 2004 Huang has given numerous readings and calligraphy exhibitions in the United States, Sweden, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan.
- 2005 performed with jazz musician Oliver Lake at the Jazz Poetry

Concert in Pittsburgh and again in 2006. Huang's calligraphy was exhibited at "WordArt" at University Galleries on Sycamore and other venues in Cincinnati; he created a series of installation artworks called "Desire Freedom" with Jack Campbell in multimedia (calligraphy, wood sculpture, paper sculpture).

- 2006 *City of Asylum: An OnQ Special Edition*, produced by WQED, the PBS station in Pittsburgh. It won the Silver Telly Award. Huang taught Chinese poetry in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Pittsburgh.
- 2007 performed with Oliver Lake at the American PEN festival "World Voices" in New York; exhibited calligraphy in Nashville with a documentary film *A Moment of Eternity: The Art and Expression of Chinese Poetry and Calligraphy*; awarded the Hellman-Hammett Prize for the second time.
- 2007 moved to New Jersey in August with Zhang.
- 2008 moved to Flushing, New York, with Zhang. Huang visited China for the first time since he had left in 1997.

# Another Kind of Vastness: An Introduction to Huang Xiang's Poetry

One of the earliest extant poems by Huang Xiang is “Singing Solo” (p. 3). Situated within a system that glorified the collective and repressed the individual, the title itself implies dissent. The three syllables with which the poem begins—“Who am I”—not only embody self-awakening, which is the impetus behind all literature and philosophy, but also defy the official ideology that has deprived the poet of the freedom of expression. Self-identity is suggested in the three subsequent images in the poem: waterfall, poem, and song. Each of these images presents a paradox. Like a waterfall, he has an irrepressible life force, but at the same time he is a “lonely ghost.” He is a poem that nobody reads. He sings, yet his only audience is silence.

The word “solo” (*du*) in the title of the poem is a pun—it denotes both “alone” and “unique” in Chinese. Although the solitary singer is isolated from the world and finds no audience, he remains fiercely individualistic. Unfortunately for Huang Xiang, this was to be the story of his life for the next thirty-five years. Fortunately for us, he has created an oeuvre of great artistic originality and historical significance.

From a historical point of view, “Singing Solo” is one of the earliest underground poems under Communist rule. It predates the literary “salons” that cropped up during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), such as the Sun Column, founded by Zhang Langlang (b. 1943) and other young writers and artists in Beijing in 1966, and the Wild Duck, founded by Huang Xiang and Ya Mo (b. 1942) in Guiyang and active from the 1960s through the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> It even predates the X Poetry Club formed by

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1. For the underground poetry scene during the Cultural Revolution, see Maghiel Van Crevel, *Language Shattered: Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Duoduo* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, Leiden University, 1996), pp. 21–34; Michelle Yeh, “Light a Lamp in a Rock: Experimental Poetry in Contemporary China,” *Modern China* 18, no. 4 (Oct. 1992): 379–409. I have not found English-language material on Guo Shiyang and the X Poetry Club. I include a brief

Guo Shiyong (1942–1968) and his friends in Beijing in February 1963, and the discussion group of Huang Xiang and his friends Xiong Qingtang, Zhu Yan, and Su Xiaoyi in Meitan, Guizhou Province.<sup>2</sup>

From a literary point of view, the significance of “Singing Solo” lies not only in its theme but also in its language. A free verse clearly distinguished from the “political lyric” that was then the norm, the poem employs a highly irregular form, uses no rhyme, and sports no sing-song rhythm. The single word “poem” in line four is visually prominent; it gives the simplest, most affirmative answer to the question about the self with which the poem begins.

In October 1978 Huang Xiang, Li Jiahua, Fang Jiahua, and Mo Jianguang traveled from Guiyang to the capital for the first time. Arriving on the tenth, they posted the inaugural issue of the underground journal *Enlightenment* on a wall in downtown Beijing. Huang also recited his long poem “God of Fire: A Symphonic Poem” to the large crowd that had gathered spontaneously. The wall on which *Enlightenment* was posted soon came to be known as the Democracy Wall. From October 1978 to April 1981, the Democracy Wall witnessed a golden age of underground journals, such as *Exploration*, in which the essay “The Fifth Modernization—Democracy and Other Things,” by Wei Jingsheng (b. 1950), was published; *April Fifth Forum*, founded by Liu Qing (b. 1946), Yang Jing, Xu Wenli, and Zhao Nan; *League of Human Rights*, in which “A Manifesto of Human Rights in China,” by its founder Ren Wandong (b. 1944), was published; the purely literary journal *Today*, founded by Bei Dao (b. 1949) and Mang Ke (b. 1950); *Thaw* by Li Jiahua; and *Beijing Spring* by Hu Ping (b. 1947) and Wang Juntao (b. 1958). The name of the last journal has come to designate this hopeful period, which came to an abrupt end with the arrests, under the order of Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), of some of the editors and writers.

The same day *Enlightenment* appeared in Beijing, Huang wrote “I” (p. 11) on the spur of the moment. The three couplets present three images of incremental somberness and power. The human voice cannot be muffled, the brilliance of a shattered diamond cannot be covered up, and life cannot be eradicated. The violence implied in the images

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discussion in chapter 7 of *Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, 2 vols., ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

2. For Huang Xiang’s activities in the 1960s and 1970s, see Andrew G. Emerson, “Poet’s Life, Hero’s Life,” in *A Bilingual Edition of Poetry out of Communist China* by Huang Xiang, trans. Andrew G. Emerson (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 2004), pp. 1–37.

# Poems

# 獨唱

我是誰  
我是瀑布的孤魂  
一首永久離群索居的  
詩  
我的漂泊的歌聲是夢的  
游蹤  
我的唯一的聽眾  
是沉寂

## *Singing Solo*

*Who am I  
I am the lonely ghost of a waterfall  
A poem  
Living apart from the crowd forever  
My drifting song follows an itinerant  
Dream  
My only audience  
Silence*

1962

## Notes to the Poems

### *“Poets of the East”*

Qu Yuan (c. 340–278 BCE) was a minister in the Kingdom of Chu during the Warring States period. Slandered by evil courtiers, he was banished by the king to the hinterlands in the south. Unable to convince the king of his innocence and loyalty, he threw himself into the Miluo River. To protect his body from being eaten by the fish, the local people threw *zongzi*—boiled rice wrapped in bamboo leaves—into the water to feed the fish. During exile, Qu Yuan wrote rhapsodic poetry influenced by local shamanism. He is generally considered the father of Chinese poetry.

Ruan Ji (210–263) is one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, a group of intellectuals who rejected convention and embraced Daoist philosophy. A heavy drinker, Ruan wandered around in a carriage every day; he instructed the servant who accompanied him to bury him at the spot where he (quite literally) dropped dead.

One of the most beloved poets of China, Tao Yuanming (365–427) resigned from a government post to live the simple life of a farmer-recluse. He is famous for his love of wine and the chrysanthemum flower.

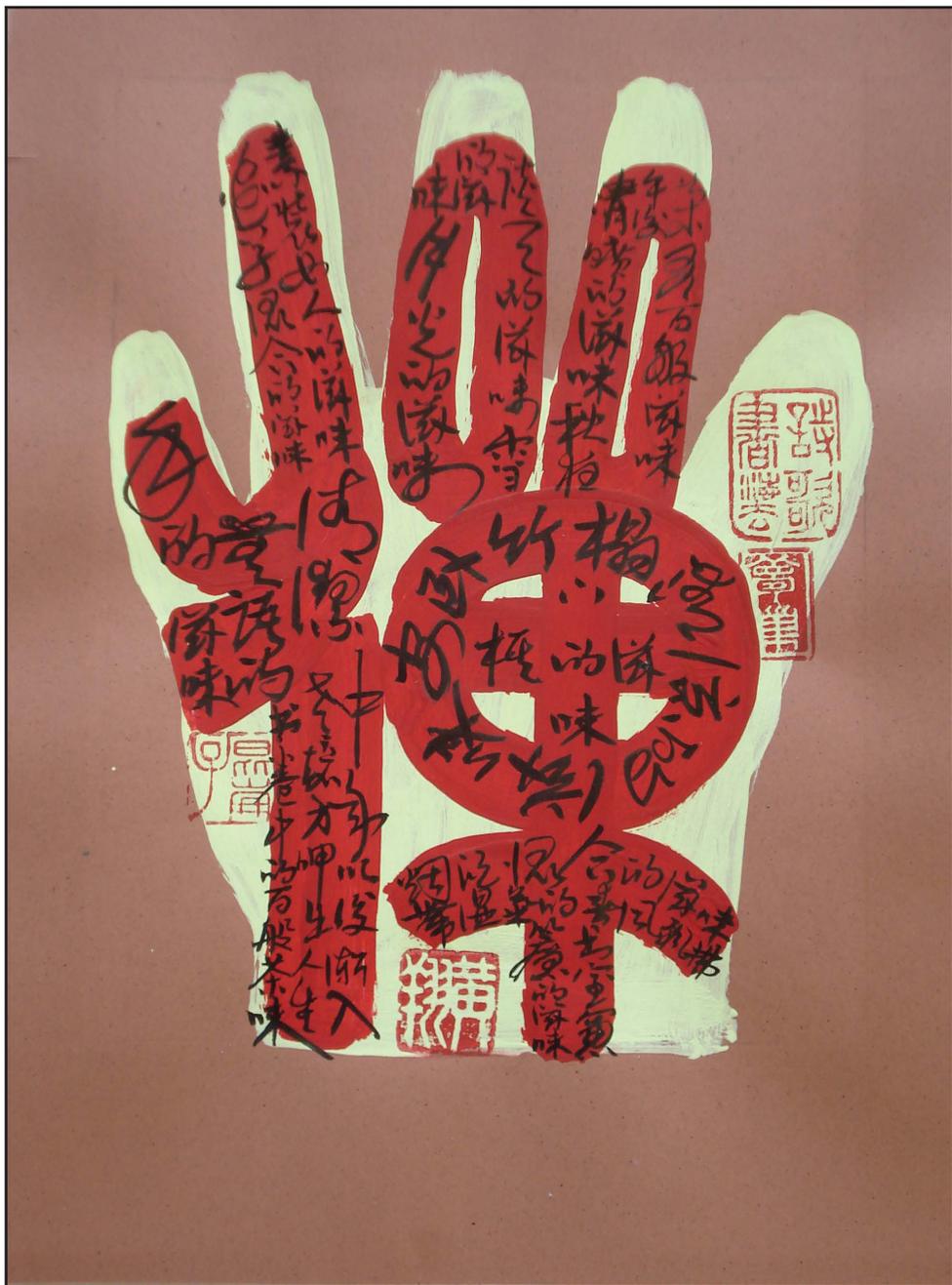
Wang Wei (699–761) is known for his monochrome landscape painting and nature poetry. He was a devout Buddhist in old age, and his poetry frequently employs Buddhist symbols.

Zheng Banqiao (1693–1765) is one of the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou in the early Qing Dynasty. He is best known for his paintings (especially of orchids and bamboo), poetry, and calligraphy.

### *“A Wandering Soul—In memory of Wang Ruowang, writer of conscience”*

Born in 1918, Wang Ruowang was a Chinese dissident writer who was imprisoned by the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) in the 1930s and twice by the Chinese Communist government. A member of the Chinese Communist Party since 1937, he was expelled in 1957, when he was labeled a “rightist,” and was jailed during the Cultural Revolution. He was “rehabilitated” in 1979 but was expelled again

in 1987 during the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization Campaign. For expressing his support for the students during the democracy movement of spring 1989, he was jailed again. He left China in 1992 and lived in New York City until he died of cancer in 2001. Two of his seven children flew from Shanghai to be at his bedside hours before his death.



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