

# “Poets, What Can We Do?” Pandemic Poetry in China’s Mobilization against COVID-19

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## Abstract

The present paper investigates poetry written in China on the theme of the COVID-19 pandemic following the outbreak in January 2020, considered both as a social phenomenon and as literary texts. The analysis is primarily interested in considering the impact of the pandemic on poetry’s interaction with social reality. In order to do so, the essay follows two trajectories. Firstly, it explores the public role performed by poets in the nationwide popular mobilization that sustained the party-state’s effort to curb the epidemic, with a strong emphasis on poetry as a social practice, specifically in a time of crisis, as outlined by both the state and the authors themselves. Secondly, a close reading of selected texts shows the heterogeneity of standpoints adopted by poets in their individual understandings of their role during China’s anti-COVID mobilization effort, especially in relation with the “master narrative” advanced by the state. The paper demonstrates that the final configuration of China’s pandemic poetry was made possible by Chinese poetry’s long-standing tradition of social responsibility, and that the transgression of boundaries between the official and unofficial poetry scenes, and “amateur” and “professional” authors, was instrumental to promote poets’ public engagement.

**Keywords:** contemporary Chinese poetry, pandemic poetry, China Writers Association, grassroots poetry, COVID-19

## »Pesniki, kaj lahko naredimo?«: pandemska poezija v času mobilizacije proti COVID-19 na Kitajskem

### Izvleček

Članek raziskuje poezijo, napisano na Kitajskem na temo pandemije COVID-19, po izbruhu januarja 2020, ki velja tako za družbeni pojav kot za literarna besedila. Analiza se prvenstveno ukvarja s preučevanjem vpliva pandemije na povezavo poezije z družbeno realnostjo. Izvedli smo jo po dveh poteh. Prvič, raziskuje javno vlogo pesnikov pri vsedrjavni ljudski mobilizaciji, ki je podprla prizadevanja partije, da bi zajezila epidemijo, z močnim poudarkom na poeziji kot družbeni praksi, zlasti v času krize, kot so jo orisali avtorji in država. Drugič, natančno branje izbranih besedil kaže na heterogenost stališč, ki so jih pesniki prevzeli pri individualnem razumevanju svoje vloge med kitajskimi

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prizadevanji za mobilizacijo proti COVID-19, zlasti v zvezi z »glavno pripovedjo«, ki jo je predstavila država. Članek dokazuje, da je dokončno oblikovanje kitajske pandemične poezije omogočila dolgoletna tradicija kitajske poezije kot družbene odgovornosti in da je prestop meja med uradnimi in neuradnimi pesniškimi prizori ter »ljubitelskimi« in »profesionalnimi« avtorji bistveno pripomogel k spodbuditi javnega udejstvovanja pesnikov.

**Ključne besede:** sodobna kitajska poezija, pandemična poezija, kitajska pisateljska zveza, ljudska poezija, COVID-19

## COVID-19 and Literature: Too Early to Tell?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a strong impact on the production of literature. There appears to be no consensus, however, whether writers and poets have a role to play in the ongoing crisis, or should instead wait for the privileged position awarded by temporal distance. As early as in February 2020, in an address to students of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, the renowned Chinese novelist Yan Lianke 阎连科 claimed that literature can function as a source of alternative viewpoints while a crisis unfolds, providing a precious archive to preserve the memory of the past in a future that will be buried under the applauses for the victors (Yan 2020). Others disagree with this view, and the American writer Olen Steinhauer uses T. S. Eliot's maxim about poetry as "an escape from emotion" to note that perhaps it would be better to write about trauma once it is past (Steinhauer 2020). In contrast, the Jordanian poet Hisham Bustami argues that it is precisely in the middle of a crisis that the work of the writer or artist becomes yet more relevant (Bustami 2020).

"Local" practice can supply some answers to this global question. The context of the People's Republic of China is particularly prolific in this respect, and lockdown/quarantine diaries are the most visible aspect of this fecundity. Such diaries have proliferated since the very outbreak of the epidemic, and particularly following the lockdown imposed on Wuhan on January 23, 2020. Fang Fang's 方方 *Wuhan Diary* is the most impressive and well-known example, which has really turned literature into a "forum for national expression" in the media (Fang 2020, 212), as hoped for by its author. But it is only the tip of the iceberg. Countless diaries have been produced by people coming from different walks of life, many of whom had never written anything before (Bao 2020; 2022; Yang 2021). In sum, while the societies of East and Southeast Asia appear to have responded rapidly and efficiently to the outbreak of COVID-19—even if this

came at the cost of draconian measures—the same would seem to have occurred on the literary field.

The present paper provides an analysis of poetry written in China after the beginning of the pandemic. Compared to diaries, poetry has been less noticed or studied. This paper has no ambition to offer a comprehensive survey of the phenomenon, which will surely benefit from more temporally distanced research in the future. However, the existing sources allow for a rigorous discussion on how the historical contingences of the pandemic and the Chinese state's response have impacted the interaction of poetry and poets with society. My endeavour here is therefore twofold: on the one hand, I am interested in the poet as a social figure, in investigating how various players expected poets to respond to the call to nationwide mobilization against the virus, and the ways they actually responded. On the other hand, I will scrutinize a select body of these poems, chronologically located before summer 2020 (that is, in the peaking period of COVID-19 in mainland China), to discuss how this was translated into texts. Overall, the snapshot offered here addresses some long-standing issues in China's poetry scene, namely the existing dynamics between official and unofficial contexts, specialist and non-specialist authorship, art and society, with a special focus on the porousness of the boundaries that separate them.

Methodologically, the paper benefits from a mixture of sociology of literature, close reading of texts, and discourse analysis by putting authors and texts under scrutiny against the backdrop of the Chinese party-state's "master narrative" on the epidemic. As for terminology, *pandemic poetry* seems the best-fitting option, and is also favoured for its terminological resonance with the "quake poetry" that emerged after the Sichuan earthquake of 2008 (Inwood 2011a), another striking example of poetry's direct interaction with society.<sup>1</sup>

## The Poet and the Establishment: A Never-Ending Story

Pandemic poetry was engendered by a historical contingency fraught with political implications. On the one hand, it cannot be separated from the level of public discourse around COVID-19 as determined by the master narrative of the party-state (see the following section); on the other hand, it was actively promoted by cultural institutions, a fact that calls into question poets' relationship with the establishment and the kind of public role they are expected to perform.

1 I borrow "pandemic poetry" from Michel Hockx, who used it in his lecture to the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Chicago on "The Regulations of Literature in Xi Jinping's China", on 16 February 2021.

Historically, poetry in China has always had a close and complicated relationship with political power. This even predates the historical establishment of the figure of the poet as author. Many works contained in the *Shijing* 诗经 (*Book of Songs*), the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry (eleventh to seventh century BCE), probably originate from folk, or actually peasant, poems and songs, that were later superimposed with official commentaries to reconnect them to moral orthodoxy (Granet 1982). Institutional(ized) poetry was progressively given the role of providing moral instruction, and eventually ossified in strict conventions and endless repetition of the classics. No clear lines separated poets and the officialdom, with reclusion and seclusion often becoming viable choices to protect or achieve creative autonomy. In 1905, the abolishment of the Imperial examination system, where poetry was a criterion for the selection of the bureaucracy, compelled poets to reposition themselves in relation to society (Yeh 1991, Ch. 1). While several poets and schools of that period favoured a divorce from politics to dedicate themselves exclusively to writing, many others did not relinquish their social commitment, playing an important role in the proletarian (1920s), left-wing (1930s), anti-Japanese national defence and liberated areas (1940s) literary configurations. Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art", delivered in 1942, declared the primacy of politics over art in creative writing: poets were first encouraged and then required to partake in the political struggles of the time, and mandated to come from the grassroots or to accept re-education from the masses of workers and peasants to remould their class viewpoints.<sup>2</sup> The basic guidelines for cultural policy in the People's Republic of China from its foundation in 1949 until Mao's death in 1976, modelled after the "Talks", again gave poetry a didactic function under bureaucratic control. The Reform and Opening Up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) policy inaugurated in 1978 and the liberalization of the publishing industry in the 1990s once again pushed the poets to the margins and generated new controversies about their social role (Inwood 2011b).

Alongside the establishment flourished a vast scene of unofficial poetry, initially written and distributed underground, then, starting from the late 1970s, allowed to publish with relative freedom outside state-controlled editorial mechanisms. Unofficial poetry, closely studied by Maghiel van Crevel (2008; 2017a), presents a rich and vibrant environment, where the meanings of "avant-garde" (*xianfeng* 先

2 Against the common assumption that 1949–1976 "official" poetry was devoid of any aesthetic value, the peculiar artistic phenomena from the period, above all worker-peasant-soldier poetry (*gong-nongbing shige* 工农兵诗歌), entailed several issues around poets' relation with society; at the least, these authors managed to draw inspiration from "things and places in which their predecessors had discovered no stimulus" (Lin 1972, 241).

锋) versus official senses of aesthetic value are constantly disputed and challenged as new actors burst on the scene and try to make sense of the possibilities there. Generally speaking, unofficial poetry has continued to explore the potentialities of language beyond established conventions and jargons, ventured across thematic boundaries, and experimented wildly with style and form. Far from marginal, it is in this creative area that “everybody that is anybody in contemporary poetry from the PRC first published and developed their voice” (van Crevel 2008, 6).

Under such historical circumstances, scholars divide the contemporary field of poetic production in China along two scenes: the official, or *guanfang* 官方, and the unofficial, or *minjian* 民间. For Michelle Yeh (1996, 51–52), the official scene “comprises publications—newspapers, literary journals, poetry magazines, books of poetry—funded, edited, and published by the state at various administrative levels (e.g., central, provincial, city)”. By contrast, the unofficial refers to “that part of contemporary poetry that operates on its own initiative, outside the publishing business as formally administered by the state” (van Crevel 2008, 7). Of course, the burgeoning Internet scene has immensely expanded the means at the disposal of poets who write outside official circuits (Hockx 2015), creating what Yeh (2007, 34) calls a “Borderless Republic of Poetry”. However, the “institutional” side of things does not exhaust the plurality of dichotomies that one can draw when discussing poets’ relationship with the state, the publishing industry, and the art. The Chinese word itself, *minjian*, implies several different aspects, aptly summarized by Sebastian Veg (2019, 7–8):

Its literal meaning is “among the people”, [and it is characterized by] a combination, to different degrees, of three characteristics of people or institutions: independence from state income (self-funded), lack of approval by the state system (unofficial), and a low social marker (nonelite or grassroots).<sup>3</sup>

All these traits, however, do not necessarily overlap in the realm of poetry production. The separation between official and unofficial works for what concerns primarily the institutional side (journals, associations, and environments where

3 Notably, *minjian* can mean other things as well in the context of contemporary Chinese poetry. In 1998–2000, the word became entrenched in a polemic between a *Zhishifenzi* 知识分子 (Intellectual) writing that favoured lyricism, abstraction, and distance from the mundane, and a *Minjian* (Popular) standpoint, more interested in the quotidian, with a plain and often colloquial language. The polemic has been widely discussed (Inwood 2014, Ch. 1; Liang 2020; van Crevel 2008, Ch. 12; Yeh 2007), particularly highlighting its importance in forging, or rather systematizing, aesthetic sensibilities (van Crevel 2008, Ch. 1), and, again, for what concerns poets’ self-consciousness in constructing their own identity *vis-à-vis* canon formation (Kunze 2012, 145).

poetry is produced, published, circulated, discussed), and also, as a consequence, questions of hegemonic and counterhegemonic (or hybrid, for that matter) aesthetics, language, style. Yet, on the level of poets themselves as creative individualities other lines can be drawn, which are not automatically juxtaposed with the official/unofficial dichotomy: we can differentiate, for example, between professional (*zhuanye* 专业) and amateur (*feizhuanye* 非专业 or *yeyu* 业余), establishment and avant-garde, elite (*jingying* 精英) and grassroots (*caogen* 草根) or low-rung (*diceng* 底层). Terminology is tricky, and while taxonomizing is helpful to get a hold of real processes, poets in practice tend to operate across these boundaries, not only within them. Most of the early unofficial and avant-garde poets active since the late 1970s used to be amateurs who would share their works in self-run journals, often under the note "for internal exchange" (*neibu jiaoliu* 内部交流), although several were later able to publish with prestigious outlets and publishing houses, questioning their continued status as "unofficial" or "non-elite" (cf. the case study on Yang Lian 杨炼 in Edmond 2006). However, a well-established ("elite") author may have an interest in maintaining a simultaneous presence in unofficial journals, just like a non-specialist author can be welcome in important official venues, often after being "discovered" by influential patrons.

Pandemic poetry is precisely a case where different dimensions interpenetrate each other, both in terms of discourse and authorial identity. For the purposes of this paper, I will therefore move along two levels—the institutional and the individual. I will mainly refer to the official and unofficial as an overarching distinction involving institutions and spaces, but I will then distinguish between specialist and non-specialist for what concerns poets as persons and *personas*, and thus the image they present to the world. More specifically, exploring how the relationship between official publications and non-specialist authors has been rearticulated in the framework of pandemic poetry facilitates a discussion on how poets' social responsibility was encouraged and given visibility by state cultural institutions. As result of the historical vicissitudes in 20th-century Chinese poetry outlined above, the question about the poet's responsibility towards social, political, and public actualities is still open. As noted by Heather Inwood (2011b, 50),

For many poets, a widely experienced sense of responsibility stems from both a common investment in the scene of contemporary poetry and from a deep-rooted belief in the importance of the poet as a public intellectual who has a duty to Chinese society despite—or perhaps because of—poetry's widely acknowledged marginalisation within mainstream culture.

In pandemic poetry, this responsibility materializes at least in two ways: we have poems that deal with the pandemic as a theme, but we also have poets who participate in the anti-epidemic effort as distinct sociocultural figures. For this reason, it is necessary to look not only at texts, but also at how cultural institutions and unofficial publications alike developed their discourse around individual poets' participation in the anti-epidemic effort, often highlighting their trait as non-specialists, i.e. as poets on the ground.

## Mobilization and the Master Narrative

Pandemic poetry can be understood only if placed in its discursive context. COVID-19 became a high-level emergency in China on January 20, and Wuhan was put under lockdown on the 23rd. The hallmark of the party-state's response to the crisis was a nationwide mobilization of the people. In fact, mobilization is nothing new in the Chinese (or South/East Asian) context. Kristen E. Looney (2019, 41–42) describes mobilization as a mode of policy implementation based on “any effort to activate and involve a population in the pursuit of certain goals”. Mobilizations have been instrumental to state campaigns for national development during the second half of the 20th century, to the point that they almost became immaterial institutions. As for China's anti-epidemic mobilization, its specific features have recently been analysed by a number of papers, with specific focuses on data tracking, community lockdown and community-based organizations (Mei 2020), or on the ability to mobilize resources through the People's Liberation Army and the state-owned enterprise sector (He, Shi, and Liu 2020). Wang Hui 汪晖 stressed the role of mobilization at the community level to connect the dimensions of “family, work unit and individuals” with the authorities in a vertical way, going so far as to suggest, in Gramscian terms, that it may “re-ignit[e] the agency and active role of the People, and once again compe[l] unity between the People and the ‘Modern Prince’” (Wang 2020, 237–38)—the Modern Prince being the Communist Party of China.

An extremely relevant part in the anti-COVID mobilization has been its discursive component; to wit, the role played by the state-promoted narrative. Scholars have investigated this hegemonic narrative from several perspectives (Molter and DiResta 2020, Qiaoan and Gallelli 2021, Xie and Zhou 2021), and also with respect to its external implications, especially in the propaganda conflict with the United States (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021). Domestic and external discourses are clearly dependent on each other here, all based upon the instrumental control of the storytelling. The rhetorical strategy deployed domestically by the Chinese party-state has concentrated in particular on a martial language (Gallelli 2020).

In fact, the “sweeping war narrative” put forward by institutions and official media has contributed to the nationwide mobilization on the level of emotions, “appealing to citizens for behavioral compliance with coercive measures” and “penetrat[ing] into the entire society” well beyond mere “social rhetoric or metaphor by political leaders” (He, Shi, and Liu 2000, 251–52). Such a narrative is centred around the concept of the People’s War (*renmin zhanzheng* 人民战争), which, as pointed out by Wang Hui (2020, 236), is not merely a military concept but a political category. Summoning the People’s War has been instrumental to both shape warlike imagery, with the whole people mobilized as one huge army, and evoking the cultural legacy of the Chinese Revolution as well as the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945), originally considered the first actualizations of the People’s War.<sup>4</sup> In the vocabulary underpinned by such a belligerent framework, medical personnel have been framed as “warriors clad in white” (*baiyi zhanshi* 白衣战士) on the frontline (*diyixian* 第一线) in the fight against an “invisible enemy” (*kanbujian de diren* 看不见的敌人), under the personal leadership of the CPC and General Secretary *cum* State President Xi Jinping 习近平. But overall, the function of the *People’s War* lies in *mobilizing* a plurality of forces: party organizations as the backbone, health-care staff and scientific experts as the main force, and the whole people united as one as the rear-guard (*Renmin ribao* 2020a, 1).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the virus has also been presented as a natural calamity (*zainan* 灾难) or a demon (*mogui* 魔鬼). Even more so after the initial mismanagement of the crisis on the part of the authorities and the case of Li Wenliang 李文亮, one of the first whistle-blowers harassed by the Wuhan police (Li subsequently died of COVID-19), the importance of this narrative clearly goes beyond the anti-epidemic campaign: it rather reasserts the governing capability and the legitimacy of the party-state, and aims at consolidating the people’s trust in it (Wu and Huang 2020). There is no need for further explanation, then, on why hegemony over the narrative is paramount.

## Poets Mobilized: Poetry to Resist COVID-19

In China, pandemic poetry generally goes by the name of *kangyi shige* 抗疫诗歌, literally “resist-epidemic-poetry”. Encompassing everything that has been written

4 The very construction of the term *kangyi* 抗疫, literally “resist the epidemic”, while nothing exceptional according to the formal standards of the modern Chinese language, also evokes *kangri* 抗日, “resist the Japanese”, and therefore it appears in line with the People’s War-related belligerent language employed by the state response.

5 While not strictly academic, it is worth reminding that a common joke about quarantine measures told by people in China in the early months of 2020 was that everyone would give their contribution to the motherland by sleeping all day.



with the COVID-19 epidemic as a subject, pandemic poetry, published mainly online, has grown into a vast phenomenon with considerable visibility since the very early months of 2020. That is hardly surprising, considering that pandemic poetry is precisely one of those cases where “differences between who is or is not on the ‘poetry scene’ can be put aside in the interest of a greater cause” and poetry “is far from immune to [...] the political mobilization of grassroots culture” (Inwood 2014, 158), also thanks to the peculiarly public participation of/in China’s poetic tradition. Inevitably, a kind of poetry marked by high social significance and participation is haunted by suspicions about its aesthetic quality. In the case at hand, such concerns are typified by the young writer Zong Cheng’s 宗城 statement, published in the journal of poetic theory *Xingxing* 星星 (*Stars*), that most pandemic poetry only voices its authors’ “frivolous laments” (*qingbo de gankai* 轻薄的感慨) with no attention to artistic polish (Zong 2020, 13). He also acknowledges that its “true significance” (*zhenzheng yiyi* 真正意义) is to be found in it becoming “a whole-people campaign” (*quanmin yundong* 全民运动) that asserts poetry’s “[promoting] equality” (*shige de pingdeng* 诗歌的平等) and its “warm, sincere strength” (*wennuan chengzhi de lilian* 温暖诚挚的力量) (ibid., 14). The assumption that poetry has transgressed its own boundaries to become an instrument of the whole people, also at the expense of formal refinement, is actually consistent with the wider mobilization of the arts in the service of the anti-epidemic effort.<sup>6</sup> In turn, the arts’ public engagement directed by the state appears shaped by the legacy of Mao’s aforementioned “Yan’an Talks”, but also carries a much older heritage that goes back to the Confucian mandate to the arts to serve the purposes of moral edification.

Early examples of pandemic poetry were actively promoted (and presumably commissioned) by *Shikan* 诗刊 (*Poetry*), China’s most important poetry journal under the aegis of the China Writers Association, the official body of literary

6 On February 26, 2020, *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 (*People’s Daily*), the central organ of the CPC, published a collection of aphorisms and messages written by famous Chinese writers and poets under the headline “On the Same Boat, A Wall of Will” (*Tongzhou gongji, zhongzhi chengcheng* 同舟共济 众志成城), to express the “active participation of the world of literature” (文学界积极行动) in the “smokeless war” (没有硝烟的战争) against the virus, and as “a tribute to the boundlessly heroic medical personnel” and “an encouragement to the vast ranks of party members and cadres and the broad masses on the frontlines of the struggle” (向英勇无畏的医务工作者致敬, 为奋战在一线的广大党员、干部、群众加油鼓劲) (*Renmin ribao* 2020b). Classical poetry has also been used in the context of international cooperation from China (Xi 2020). In this respect, it is worth remembering that *Shikan* published a collection of classical “Italian” poetry (that actually included Latin authors, too) on March 10, 2020 in solidarity with Italy’s nationwide lockdown. Crates of masks and other supplies shipped to Italy from China also carried a saying attributed to the Roman philosopher Seneca: “We are waves of the same sea, leaves of the same tree, flowers of the same garden.”

bureaucracy. *Shikan* published two different series of pandemic poetry on its *gong-zhonghao* 公众号, or "public account", on the popular social media app WeChat. The first series was titled *Yi shi kang yi* 以诗抗疫 (*Combat the Epidemic with Poetry*) and ran three instalments on 27, 29, and 30 January 2020. The series carried no paratext, but the subtitle clearly set its orientation: *Wuhan shiren zai fengcheng qijian* 武汉诗人在封城期间 (*Wuhan Poets during the Lockdown*). In other words, it purported to publish the works of poets who found themselves in the quarantined city, accompanied by pictures of Wuhan and some propaganda posters. The timing alone is surprising, considering that the lockdown was enforced only four days earlier the start of the series; it is therefore conceivable that the journal's editorial board, or the Writers Association at local or central level, asked poets to produce something as soon as possible.

*Shikan* started a second series on February 18, titled *Zhandou zai yiqing diyixian de shirenmen* 战斗在疫情第一线的诗人们 (*Poets Fighting on the Frontlines of the Epidemic*). This second series ran through February and March. The preface to the first post specified that published authors were poets committed in various ways to the "frontlines" of the anti-epidemic effort—having positions in command centres (*zhihuibu* 指挥部), emergency clinics and hospitals, or serving on duty in quarantined areas. The definition was therefore fairly elastic, giving a sense of how poets from different walks of life were taking part in the effort. Interestingly, the February 18 inaugural post carried poems that had been published before the epidemic, and therefore the focus was, again, on the poet's public role in that exceptional moment, not strictly on new production or coherent subject matter. Later instalments reversed the trend and ran original poems that addressed the epidemic. This notwithstanding, the poets' public role continued to be highlighted. Each author's name was accompanied by a note on the epidemic-related job they were performing, and by pictures of them on duty, as opposed to the *Yi shi kang yi* series that only added generic pictures of cityscapes.

Some of the poems published on *Shikan's* blog were later printed in the multiple-author collection *Kang "yi" zhi ge* 抗“疫”之歌 (*Odes of the Anti-"Epidemic" War*), published in March 2020 by Zuoja chubanshe, the publishing house affiliated with the Writers Association. The book was presented as a collection of 65 pieces by as many authors from different occupations:

Medical staff, police officers, writers, teachers, journalists, public servants, retired personnel, laid-off workers—authors' different occupations have conferred their works a plurality of points of view, and have made manifest the strength and determination displayed in the moment of crisis by the whole people, united as one to combat the virus.

医护人员、警察、作家、教师、媒体记者、公务员、离退休人员、下岗职工等，作者不同的职业赋予了作品不同的视角，彰显了危急时刻，万众一心全民抗疫的气势与决心。(Zhongguo zuojia wang 2020)

Once again, then, what was stressed was the poets' participation in the markedly collective effort.<sup>7</sup> The table of contents divided the poems into two sections, titled "Geshi he wei shi er zuo" 歌诗合为事而作 (Odes and Poems are Written for the Sake of Events) and "Wenzhang he wei shi er zhu" 文章合为时而著 (Literature is Written for the Sake of Times), two parts of a phrase by the Tang poet Bai Juyi 白居易. This classic reference not only insisted on poets' active involvement in the affairs of society, but also reconnected to the political nature of poetry in Imperial times. In fact, although they were all published in a very official dimension, these poets could hardly be dismissed as all belonging to the establishment, regardless of the fact that some of them actually held positions within the Writers Association. Heavy paratextual intervention was there precisely to show that the majority of these poets were non-professional, in what was clearly a mobilization of grassroots creative and cultural resources.

Besides context and paratext, textual analysis offers further insight. "Shiren" 诗人 (Poets) by Liu Yishan 刘益善, a poet from Hubei and former vice-chair of the provincial branch of the Writers Association, is perhaps what we may expect from state-sponsored pandemic poetry. After a programmatic couple of questions in the opening stanza, "Poets, what should we do? / What can we do?" (诗人, 我们该做什么? / 我们能够做什么?), the poem continues:

For those who have been hit  
Pray, and wish them  
To resist with all their might, to rise up again soon  
And enjoy the sun and breeze of spring with us

For warriors clad in white on the field night and day  
Scornful of danger and ready to sacrifice  
We write a poem of profound emotion  
To offer them the salute and tribute we nurture in our hearts

7 The collective principle is also highlighted in another printed anthology, which precedes *Kang "yi" zhi ge*, namely *Ling yi zhong chiyuan de jiti xingdong—2020 nian Zhongguo kangyi zuijizhan shixuan* 另一种驰援的集体行动—2020年中国抗疫阻击战诗选 (*Another Kind of Collective Rescue Action: A Selection of Poems From China's War to Stop the Virus*, 2020), edited by the poet Liang Ping 梁平.

To soldiers who have rushed to our aid from a thousand *li*  
 To teams of doctors from everywhere who have  
 Left their dear ones and renounced to their rest, to anyone  
 Who donated goods and money, we write a long poem  
 To celebrate their merit and altruism

What else can we do?  
 We can wear a mask  
 Drink a lot, wash our hands,  
 Stay home, not go out  
 We are with the rest of China!

我们给被袭击的人们  
 祝福祈祷，愿他们  
 顽强抵抗，早日站起来  
 和我们一起享受春风阳光

我们给不畏危险与牺牲  
 日夜战斗在疫区的白衣战士  
 写一首深情的歌  
 献上我们心中的问候与敬意

我们给奔驰千里来援的军人  
 我们给告别家人放弃休息的  
 各地医疗队，给各行各业  
 捐物捐钱的人们，写一首长诗  
 歌颂他们的奉献和无私

我们还能做什么？  
 我们还能做的就是戴口罩  
 多喝水，勤洗手  
 坚守家中不出门  
 我们就是与中国在一起！（Liu 2020）

The style of this poem is blandly prosaic, especially in the last stanza, with somewhat of a wooden translation of the government's slogans into poetry. These characteristics appear justified if considered in the context of the traditional pedagogic role assigned to poetry, condensed in the traditional precept "Literature as a

Vehicle of the Way” (*wen yi zai dao* 文以载道). Mimetically transmitting the slogans of the government can also be understood as Liu Yishan’s effort to exalt his own role as part of the mobilization, simply repeating its master narrative.

Unsurprisingly, the tropes of the hegemonic discourse abound in pandemic poetry. The language is often bombastic, and extols the deeds of doctors and nurses, sometimes also soldiers, with martial overtones, praising their fulfilment of duty (Xie and Zhou 2021). Two recurrent opposites are the aggression (*qin* 侵) of the virus and the response of the “order” (*mingling* 命令) issued by the authorities. Pronouns are conspicuously plural, with an abundance of We/Us (the mobilized, often in the rear) and several occurrences of You (to whom “We” present our ode), contributing to conveying an impression of unity and closed ranks. Images such as the spring breeze (*chunfeng* 春风) and flowers blossoming at the warmth of spring (*chunnuan huakai* 春暖花开) are evoked to present the coming season, which becomes a metaphor for the victory against the COVID-19, connecting with the temporal dimension of the anti-epidemic effort. The poems tend to grow stylistically and thematically more diverse when it comes to poets of the second series (i.e., those not living in Wuhan): other emotions, particularly homesickness, become more relevant, but always under the context of a military-like mobilization. Some poets escape the referential immediacy of much of pandemic poetry and delve deeper into more abstract themes, including life (threatened), marital and parental love (often separated), and the power of apparently insignificant moments and gestures (under the menace of death). Finally, a considerable amount of pandemic poetry is documentary, creating a sort of poetic reportage of life in hospital wards, night shifts, and so on.

Most pandemic poetry is message-based, it invests little energy in craft and style, and often repeats the same images, moods, and tones (which is nothing odd considering its historical context). Its function appears to be first of all operative, if not so much to stir the people’s fervour (considering the limited readership of poetry today), then more to show off poets’ commitment to mobilization. Art here is at the service of public safety, and to this end it forgoes or rather readapts its conventions. However, some poems are reinforced with ulterior elements, like cultural and historical references. In Xie Keqiang’s 谢克强 “*Shiyan*” 誓言 (Pledge), for instance, we read that “Norman Bethune’s blood / flows in our veins” (白求恩的血/流淌在我们的血管里; Xie 2020), thus creating a connection with the Canadian doctor who served with the Communist-controlled Eight Route Army during the Anti-Japanese Resistance and has since been exalted as a paragon of internationalist altruism in CPC annals (and another symbol of the People’s War). In a similar vein, Bai Lingyun’s 白凌云 “*Bu Suanzi*. *Taihang kangri jinianbei cunzhao*” 卜算子·太行抗日纪念碑存照 (Taihang Anti-Japanese Monument for Future Reference: To the Tune of Bu Suanzi) contains some interesting intertextual and historical elements:

Erect standing on the precipice, peaks are covered with snow. A million mountains, a million soldiers, the army haunts all night.

Lofty and towering narrating springs and autumns, bugle horns in the night of Pingxingguan. May strength have no rest until Loulan is breached, hearts like steel until death.

绝壁立森严，叠嶂苍岩雪。百万青山百万兵，将士同宵猎。

巍耸记春秋，号角平型夜。不破楼兰势不休，到死心如铁。(Bai 2020)

The reference to the Anti-Japanese Resistance is concretized through the mention of the Battle of Pingxingguan, a major victory for the Communist military against the invading Japanese army in September 1937, but it is also made poetically more powerful (and, in a way, more artistically legitimate) by citing, with a slightly different wording, a verse by Tang poet Wang Changling's 王昌龄 fourth "Congjunxing" 从军行 (The March of the Army): "May there be no return until Loulan is breached" (不破楼兰终不还), where the state of Loulan symbolically represented enemy nations beyond China's north-western frontier. In the tradition of classical Chinese poetry, the concrete enemy here, namely the virus, is only alluded at, behind references that aim at preserving the originals' (the War of Resistance, Wang Changling's poem) sense of tragic heroism. Bai himself is a political commissar in the People's Liberation Army and his poem was highly praised by the *Jiefangjun bao* 解放军报 (*Liberation Army Daily*), the military's news outlet (Zhang 2020).

## The Sound of the City's Silence

The theme of the city—the deserted, spectral city under lockdown—is also prevalent, both in as well as beyond Wuhan. Traversing, observing or reflecting on the pandemic-hit city becomes a sensorial experience, enacted by impressing the poet's mood on the surrounding urban landscape or environment, or through a mimetic relationship between authors/individuals and the city. Just like the city is empty, individuals are lonely; the quarantine not only closes down the city, but also separates individuals from its living spaces. Li Luping 李鲁平, for example, conveys a surreal sense of living in a ghost town in "Fengcheng de rizi" 封城的日子 (Lockdown Days): "No footprint remains on the streets, no fallen leaf / Not even the script written by a wheel" (道路上不存一只脚印，一片树叶/甚至一辆车轮写下的字迹; Li 2020). The choice of words compels the reader to conceive of the lockdown city as a text that remains unwritten or is actively unwritten by those who inhabit it. Along the same lines, the most interesting and provoking piece carried in the lockdown series is "Jinye de Wuhan shi anjing de" 今

夜的武汉是安静的 (Quiet is Wuhan Tonight), by Jian Nan 剑男, a well-known poet from Hubei. The poem is worth quoting in full:

Quiet is Wuhan tonight  
 Quiet the waters of the East Lake  
 Quiet the Yellow Crane Tower and the Cintai Theatre  
 Quiet the streets, the trees and the lights  
 Just like those who, after an incident,  
 Hands behind their back, reflect on themselves in the silence  
 From the top of buildings veiled by thin rain  
 The gaze slowly turns from Jiedaokou to the river  
 Like when I was slowly falling in love  
 With her sounds. She has known countless floods,  
 Wars, even plagues, naturally  
 Never was she perfect, just like now  
 The angels are busy, but someone's heart  
 Is frozen, as due to another virus  
 The price for this silence pains  
 But if I insisted asking who allowed  
 The virus to propagate, will then fly out  
 Bats, one after another from dark  
 Corners, and will they list  
 Our sins to us? All the cures, one by one,  
 Are being carried out in the quiet, and I almost seem to hear  
 The pulsing beats of this city's heart  
 In big Hankou and old Wuchang, in Caidan  
 And at Yinglu port, like countless  
 Hearts beating in unison, silent but powerful

今夜的武汉是安静的  
 东湖的水和长江的水是安静的  
 黄鹤楼和琴台是安静的  
 街道、树木和灯光也是安静的  
 就像一个人经历某事后  
 反剪着双手在静静地反思自己  
 我站在细雨朦朦的楼顶  
 目光缓慢地从街道口望向江边  
 就像我曾经缓慢地爱上  
 它的喧闹。它遭遇过无数洪水  
 战争、包括瘟疫，显然

它从来不是完美的，就像此刻  
 天使在忙碌，一些人的  
 心却结上了冰，像另一种病毒  
 这安静的代价令人伤悲  
 但如果我一直追问，是谁导致  
 病毒的蔓延，会不会有  
 一只又一只的蝙蝠迅速从黑暗  
 角落俯冲下来，并数落  
 我们的罪恶。一一所有的救治  
 正在无声地进行，在这  
 空旷的安静中，我似乎听见了  
 这座大城市怦然的心跳  
 在大汉口也在老武昌，在蔡甸  
 也在阳逻港，像无数的  
 心脏跳动在一起，默然而有力 (Jian 2020)

The poem is well-constructed, both in how it handles its subject matter and in formal craft. The poet imagines himself standing on the top of a building, enjoying a panoramic view of the city. De Certeau describes this as the voyeur's gaze, which puts the subject at a distance, and only allows for a "fiction of knowledge" from "this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more" (de Certeau 1984, 92). However, while de Certeau was criticizing an arrogant view from above that was alien to the concrete practices of lived urban space "on the ground", Jian Nan here makes use of a trope from classical Chinese poetry, which saw the poet ascending to a higher place to acquire a better view and reflect on the world. Structurally, the poem zooms in and out, in almost a cinematographic way, of the deeper city. It is a progressive movement from the material and concrete city, evoked through topographic elements and name-places, down into a darker subconscious (individual as well as social, by the way), and then back to the material.

Bats are a relevant presence here, especially because they do not make frequent appearances in the pandemic poetry under survey in this essay, despite their perceived role in spreading the virus.<sup>8</sup> Here, bats' symbolic association with the virus is

8 Two other occurrences of bats in the body of poems under survey here are far more predictable, as the animals are presented as "seal[ing] off the land" (给大地打上封条) in Xiong Youkun's 熊游坤 "Yi zhan shi de ming" 以战士的名 (In the Name of Warriors), or, with evident speciesism, as hellish beings in Li Jianchun's "Gaishang fengyin de cheng" 盖上封印的城 (A Seal On the City): "This is not the dusk of the gods, but the dusk of bats' vengeance / Infernal face, demonic wings, / Bony and skinny body, what's good to eat in them?" (不是众神的黄昏，是蝙蝠复仇的黄昏，/ 它长着地狱的脸，魔鬼的翅膀，/ 它瘦骨嶙峋的身子，有什么好吃的).



re-signified through their interaction with the narrator (and, metonymically, human beings). Bats are not presented as guilty, but instead they embody nature, reminding humans of their “sins”, reminiscent of David Quammen’s seminal *Spillover* (Quammen 2012). The descent into the urban subconscious is therefore also a descent into deeper truths of sociopolitical relevance. These lines divert the reader’s attention from the trope of the natural calamity towards human responsibility. This can be linked to debates around the Anthropocene and Capitalocene (Moore 2016), and particularly to the role played by the prevailing development model in disrupting environmental stability and facilitating the spread of epidemics. While the image of hearts beating in unison undoubtedly connects to the rhetoric of unity in mobilization, the power of silence, also reasserted in the final verse, purports a less “mobilized” and more contemplative function (opposed to the shouting of slogans and orders). The (global) trope of the silent city therefore acquires new meaningfulness, and, camouflaged behind an ostensible inadequacy of language, actually upholds the ability of poetry to open up new possibilities for thought.

Nevertheless, this by no means prevents a poet like Jian Nan from partaking in the highly publicized function of pandemic poets. “*Jinye de Wuhao shi anjing de*”, which was part of the very first batch of poems from locked-down Wuhan in the “*Yi shi kang yi*” series (January 2020), has had substantial success in official and unofficial contexts alike. Several clips of people reciting it can be found online, and it has also been republished on a number of other websites and blogs, up to its inclusion in the first volume of *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue xuanben* 中国当代文学选本 (*A Collection of Modern Chinese Literature*), edited by Wang Xinpeng 王昕朋 in late 2020. It was also recited by Xu Zechen 徐则臣, the recipient of China’s prestigious Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2019, on the occasion of an online reading hosted by the Writers Association on March 10, 2020.

Again, what mattered more was the poets’ engagement with their public responsibility, namely their part in the national anti-epidemic mobilization, rather than what they actually wrote (and textual analysis reveals multiple layers that go often beyond any mere repetition of slogans). In fact, while this is undeniably state poetry, given that the subject matter is mandated by state institutions such as the Writers Association and it explicitly serves the objectives of the government,<sup>9</sup> the element of top-down prescriptiveness should not be overestimated.

9 This stands in partial contrast to most of quake poetry from 2008, which was largely produced by netizens (also anonymously) and then appropriated by the media (Inwood 2014, 174–75). Conversely, it is reminiscent of how the establishment—specifically the party’s Central Propaganda/Publicity Department—explicitly called for works of prose and poetry that could document the events during the SARS epidemic of 2003 (Tamburello 2005, 1136).

Crucially, the operation in place here has the effect of clearing any distinction between specialist and non-specialist poets. The operation unfolds mainly by giving ample visibility to non-specialist poets in the markedly official environment of *Shikan*. Mobilizing and giving ample visibility to grassroots resources in the process appears therefore motivated by an intent to show the extension and pervasiveness of “your next-door” poets’ intervention in public affairs. Specialist and non-specialist poets appear to find common ground in accepting their social responsibility, with non-specialist authors being the “privileged” incarnation of poetry’s public role.

### Symbolic Evasion (Material Censorship?): A Nurse’s Poem

The case study I will introduce now is another interesting instance of the interaction between (non-specialist) poets and social responsibility promoted by the official side. Ruo Shuiyin 弱水吟, pen-name of Long Qiaoling 龙巧玲, is a hospital nurse in her native Gansu province, as well as a Writers Association member. After the epidemic’s outbreak, she volunteered to go to one of Wuhan’s makeshift (*fangcang* 方舱) emergency hospitals. *Shikan* published her poems on February 21 as part of the “*Poets Fighting on the Frontline*” series, covering the activities of fellow nurses, a driver who brings them food and equipment, night shifts, and a vision of the city (unchangeably silent). They were accompanied by a screenshot showing her giving a TV interview and leading a group of female medical employees. The picture included a subtitle of her stating she was a Communist Party member and repeating CPC keywords. So far, so good—her portrait was typically that of a mobilized grassroots poet.

In early February, Ruo Shuiyin also saw other four of her poems published in *Xiang zi wen ren* 向字问人 (Ask the Writing about the People), a public account on WeChat interested in the broader themes of literature and culture in general, under the attractive headline: *Wuhan fangcang yiyuan yi ge hushi de shi* 武汉方舱医院一个护士的诗 (*Poems by a Makeshift Hospital Nurse in Wuhan*). The poems can be read on the *China Digital Times* website (with Josh Rudolph’s English translation), which also claims that they have been deleted from WeChat, possibly due to censorship.<sup>10</sup> However, the poems, while seemingly no longer available on *Xiang*

10 *China Digital Times* published the poems under a slightly different headline than the original one, “Zhe wei Wuhan fangcang yiyuan nushi de shi, ling zanmei biande xiuchi” 这位武汉方舱医院护士的诗, 令赞美变得羞耻 (These Poems by a Wuhan Makeshift Hospital Nurse Turn Eulogy into Shame). A lexical element of explicit disharmony with the otherwise ubiquitous eulogy is added also by another WeChat blog, *Dangdai xianfeng wenxue* 当代先锋文学 (*Contemporary Avant-garde Literature*), which republished the poem on 20 February under the title “Suoyou de zanmeishi dou you zui” 所有的赞美诗都有罪 (Every Eulogy is Sinful).

*zi wen ren*, could still be found on several other WeChat public accounts in June 2021. Among these poems, “Qing bu yao darao wo” 请不要打扰我 (Don’t Disturb Me, Please) has attracted substantial interest, especially outside China, perhaps due to lines like the following:

Please allow me to take off my protective clothes and mark  
 To remove the flesh of my body from its armour  
 Let me trust my own health  
 Let me breathe undisturbed  
 Ah...  
 The slogans are yours  
 The praise is yours  
 The propaganda, the model workers, all yours  
 I am merely performing my duties  
 Acting on a healer’s conscience  
 Often, there’s no choice but to go to battle bare-chested

请容我脱下防护服和面罩  
 把我的肉身从铠甲抽离  
 让我靠一靠身体  
 让我平静呼吸  
 唉.....  
 口号是你们的  
 赞美是你们的  
 宣传、标兵，都是你们的  
 我只是在执行岗位职责  
 做一个医者良心的拯救  
 常常，不得已赤膊上阵 (Ruo [Wei] 2020, in Josh Rudolph’s translation)

These lines place the poem in a conflictual relation with the role demanded from medical personnel in the wake of the nationwide mobilization. What is contested here is clearly not the actual duty of doctors and nurses, but their discursive appropriation as “warriors clad in white”. Ruo Shuiyin was venting her anger against harassment from journalists, explicitly mentioned later in the poem. However, the words that have come out of her exasperation suggest a more general critique. After all, contesting the aforementioned discursive appropriation is the equivalent of rejecting an appropriation of medical personnel as elements “mobilized” to consolidate the party-state’s symbolic authority. Removing the armour and going into battle bare-chested deliberately employ the military imagery of the master narrative to explicitly disassemble

and dismiss it. Nudity, here, suggests precisely having removed the protective armour of state discourse.

The poem continues along the same lines by refusing applause and official decorations, and insisting that the author needs sleep and rest far more than praise from the media. Consistent with this de-eulogising intent, Ruo Shuiyin reveals that her ambition is far from heroic:

I just want to return home safe when the epidemic ends  
 Even if all that remains are my bones  
 I must bring myself home to my children and parents  
 只想疫情结束能安全回家/即使剩下一把骨头  
 也要把自己带回给儿女、  
 爹妈 (ibid.)

The poem concludes with the visually striking image of abandoned cell phones that belonged to victims of COVID-19: "The cell phones drifting about in the crematorium / Have their owners been found?" (火葬场那些流浪的手机/有没有找到主人) (ibid.). This last image probably refers to a photo that circulated on the Chinese internet in February 2020, one that was later revealed to be fake.

All considered, then, the poem—especially, but not exclusively, in its first part—is first and foremost an act of escape from an artificially-constructed subjecthood. The removal of the armour and the bare-chested warrior tend to validate this possible interpretation. Far from suggesting any dereliction of duty (she is doing her job, after all), the poet is nevertheless not conforming to the master narrative. Ruo Shuiyin's refusal of slogans, praise, and, above all, the heroic role superimposed on doctors and nurses appears as an evasion from the "institution of an identity", to put it in terms of Bourdieu, an act that "*signifies* to someone what his [*sic*] identity is[,] thus informing him in an authoritative manner of what he is and what he must be" (Bourdieu 1991, 120–21). In general, different samples of pandemic poetry, despite the very diverse approaches to form and content, can still be brought together by poets' willingness to participate in the anti-epidemic mobilization. In contrast, the case scrutinized here is difficult to reduce to any officially-sanctioned public role of non-specialist poets from the grassroots, and instead is this very role that is challenged.

### **Irony from the Margins: A Worker Poet**

The final case study will come from workers poetry, a fascinating phenomenon of massive proportions in the socio-literary landscape of contemporary China (cf.

Pozzana 2019; Sun 2012; van Creveld 2017b). Since most of the country's industrial and service workforce is made up of rural–urban migrants, workers poetry today largely means migrant-worker poetry (*dagong shige* 打工诗歌). Most migrant-worker poets, save for a limited number of successful individuals, are not specialists and publish online or in unofficial journals. What worker authors (not only poets) have written during and about the pandemic is interesting in many respects. One of these is the authors' being in their native rural areas to celebrate the Lunar New Year when the virus emerged, thus setting them apart from other, predominantly urban strains of pandemic poetry. Their return-to-work diaries (*fangong riji* 返工日记) also constitute an important addition to the genre of pandemic reportage, worthy of more scholarly attention.

Ni Zhou 逆舟 is one of these poets. Originally from a rural area in the south-central province of Hunan, he spends most of his year in Changsha, the provincial seat, as a construction worker. His poems have frequently appeared in an independent, unofficial journal called *Gongren shige* 工人诗歌 (*Workers Poetry*), edited by the “*Gongren shige lianmeng*” 工人诗歌联盟 (*Workers Poetry Alliance*). So far, the journal has brought out only three issues in 2007, 2009 and 2018, but it has lively online activity, publishing original poems, older Chinese workers poetry and foreign poetry in translation. The periodical belongs to the sea of unofficial poetry journals in China, generally self-published and self-funded.

Already present in the printed anthologies, a collection of Ni Zhou's pandemic-themed poems was published on the journal's WeChat public account on February 25, 2020, under the headline “Shenghuo bu keneng yongyuan anping” 生活不可能永远安平 (*Life Cannot Be Placid Forever*). With respect to the more serious and solemn language found in most pandemic poetry, Ni Zhou stands out for the sharp sarcasm and the flashes of humour found throughout his verses, together with a disavowal of grandiloquence and heroism. Doctors, in his verses, are no warriors clad in white, but simply people doing their job who have suddenly been drafted into an unexpected “military campaign” (*zhanyi* 战役), and whom the poet prays can go back to their families and ordinary lives. In several poems Ni Zhou avoids military terms to employ an intentionally simple lexicon, as in “Zhiwu” 职务 (*Professions*): “All those who live and work are human beings” (在生活的在工作的都是人). The choice of words expresses a return to a human and common dimension, less heroic and high-sounding: as the verse continues, “and employed persons are masses, people, humankind” (职业人是人群、人民、人类) (Ni 2020). The Chinese original is far more efficacious than the translation, because the three final words are actually compound words including the word *ren* 人, human, thus connecting with the above verse.

For Ni Zhou, the virus is an opportunity to rethink his own relationship with his home village, completely reversing a certain commonplace vision of it as backward, dull and remote. In sharp contrast, distance and uneventfulness become markers of positivity in “Wo shenghuo de xiaoshancun” 我生活的小山村 (My Small Mountain Village). The poem develops along a pattern consisting of listing all the catastrophic events that left the village basically unaffected despite their magnitude—floods in 1998, SARS in 2003, the major earthquake of 2008—followed by the laconic assertion that “Not in the small mountain village” (小山村没有), reinforced in later instances by adverbs like “also” (*ye* 也), “still” (*baishi* 还是) and “again” (*yiran* 依然). The reader is thus accompanied in this atmosphere of bucolic peace until the climax, where the quiet of distance from the events of the world, somewhat reminiscent of classic poets’ similar pictures of rural seclusion, appears fundamentally different from the quiet of the city haunted by the virus. The environment finally mixes up with a rediscovery of the native place’s significance for the self, discarding the previously held contempt for it:

For this remote and backward small mountain village  
 For the small mountain village I grumbled about,  
 sighed about, and detested  
 All of a sudden, I feel such a burning love  
 忽然，我对这个偏僻的、落后的小山村  
 抱怨过的、叹息过的、厌恶过的小山村  
 是多么的热爱 (Ni 2020)

Such a rearticulation of feelings towards the native countryside produced by forced residence there due to quarantine is present in other writings published by workers. *Gongren shige*, for example, published some recent works by another poet, Rao Jinhui 饶金辉, who also positioned himself as an observer of life slowly going by in the village, conjuring up animals, roads, quiet atmospheres suddenly disturbed by the noise made by neighbours, walls with disappearing signs of old slogans. In a similar vein, Ni Zhou also expresses the paranoid and frantic disinfection measures carried out daily despite the fact that there are no infections at the village (Rao and Ni 2020).<sup>11</sup>

11 A considerable amount of nonfiction has been written as well, and the *Jianjiao buluo* 尖椒部落 (*The Pepper Tribe*) blog in particular published several accounts during spring 2020 by female migrant workers stuck at home and struggling with a sudden loss of economic and gender independence. Delving deeper into this would lead us beyond the scope of this article. However, it is a compelling topic for future studies into grassroots testimonies of life during the epidemic.

Ni Zhou's poetry also aims to convey the habits and voices of those quarantined in villages. So far, it is nothing special compared with the efforts of state pandemic poetry to be told from the grassroots. What makes Ni Zhou's case interesting is his vision of the ordinary people's experience as marked not by participation in mobilization or, at the very least, a staunch resistance in the face of the crisis, but rather by doubt, misinformation, and bewilderment. The question is quite delicate, for it touches the generally forgotten issue of the initial propagation of actual or alleged fake news in China following the outbreak. Irony is employed to play with rumours and fake news to create a fairly complex atmosphere in "Huoji shi zaoyaozhe" 伙计是造谣者 (Mates Spreading Rumours):

One mate said  
 That this novel coronavirus is a mutation from  
 Last year's swine fever, passed on to humans  
 Pigs also had a fever when they died  
 Another mate said that the virus is just venomous wind  
 Otherwise, they say  
 This virus would not have been able to come  
 Faster  
 Wilder  
 Than the cold wave  
  
 Please, forgive our stupidity  
 And forgive our ignorance  
 Because we truly can't understand  
 Why all this?

一个伙计说  
 这新冠肺炎病毒是去年猪瘟  
 变的，传到了人身上  
 猪死的时候，也是发烧  
 另一个说病毒就是毒风  
 他们说，不然  
 这病不会来得比寒潮  
 还快  
 还猛

请原谅我们的傻吧  
 也请原谅我们的愚昧  
 因为，我们实在想不明白  
 这是为什么？ (Ni 2020)

The rural poet here—or, to be more precise, the poet from the countryside—is visibly distant from the bard of mobilization extolling conscious participation in the common effort. The apparent self-victimization may sound like a justification of fake news, raising more than one eyebrow in what is often (and often improperly) called the “post-truth” age. Fake news was a sensitive matter in China from the very start of the epidemic. The situation was made even more complicated by the state’s tight control over the press, which made it harder to discern genuine journalism from unreliable reporting. The authorities’ early attempts at hiding the story and slow reactions have now been admitted, at least at the local level, which also generated a backlash against their non-transparency (Ran and Yan 2021). But Ni Zhou does not seem interested in discussing the accuracy of the rumours, much less in validating them. The dominant feature of the poem is rather the incredulity of ordinary people caught by surprise.

This interpretation is supported by textual analysis. While irony is the unifying pattern of the poem, the first stanza is not at all ironic, and its affirmative tone concedes a certain degree of seriousness to reported rumours. The second stanza wraps up the show and turns to the audience, clarifying that they are not reliable rumours while simultaneously asking for “forgiveness”, thus hiding a powerful statement behind an apparently self-deprecating one. It is indeed a way to come to terms with rumours as a product of mistrust, not just ignorance. Furthermore, the poet positions himself within this condition by using the plural pronoun: *We* are stupid, *We* are ignorant. Irony conveys not only bewilderment, but above all an implicit indictment of an insufficient degree of information sharing.

Objectively, Ni Zhou’s production muses about the possibilities of writing about the epidemic. His powerful irony is balanced by another poetic statement he makes: “facing the epidemic we cannot play tricks cannot play jokes” (我们面对疫情不能作假不能作戏). While his stylistic choices aim at bringing poetry closer to the level of the ordinary individual, that is hardly his peculiar trait, given that state-hosted pandemic poetry also prided itself on conveying the point of view of common citizens. His use of irony and sarcasm, however, are much less common. The way he pushes the “ordinary individual’s point of view” to the extreme, especially through his poetic refusal of grandiloquence when referring to medical personnel, also distances him from the majority (although he is certainly not alone, see Ruo Shuiyin for another example of this). Ni Zhou is not ridiculing the unfolding events nor merely documenting rumours or facts from an otherwise overlooked rural reality; he is instead offering one more possibility to look at the ambiguities below the unifying tunes of the master narrative.



To what extent is Ni Zhou's operation representative of a "workers pandemic poetry"? To put it simply, it is not. Workers are exposed to the "trickle-down" effect of the master narrative like everyone else, and many other instances of pandemic-themed poetry produced by individuals who are variously identified as "(migrant-)worker poets" replicate the base traits found in state-sponsored publications. That is true for style, as well. Resolve and doubt, solemnity and sarcasm are better understood as parts of a spectrum of possibility than components of opposing camps, and pandemic-themed poetry, both "official" and "unofficial" alike, tends to oscillate between them. More originality in workers' productions can be found in prose like the return-to-work diaries and stories from rural (or, rarely, urban) quarantine, but this investigation, as already mentioned, needs further research.

## Conclusions

Throughout this study, pandemic poetry has proven itself to be a valid case to investigate the social role of poetry and poets in China, especially at a time of crisis like that of the COVID-19 epidemic. Inevitably connected with the nationwide mobilization that marked the country's response to the crisis, and therefore subject to the language of the master narrative, pandemic poetry has also lent itself to an analysis focused on the dynamic relation between official and unofficial, and to the enlistment of non-specialist poetry. The variety of viewpoints taken under scrutiny reveals not only diverging ways of writing about such an extraordinary time. To connect with the title of this paper and Liu Yishan's poem from which it is extracted, it also exposes alternative visions of what the poet is expected to do in terms of their public role and responsibility, a question perhaps as old as "Chinese poetry" itself.

The distinction between specialist and non-specialist poets is a necessary premise to explain why the effort to show poetry's participation in social emergencies, both officially sanctioned and in unofficial spaces, was boosted by the fact that many of the authors were ordinary individuals (medical staff, service personnel, police officers, workers, etc.) who wrote poetry as amateurs. The raw fact alone that non-professional poets have been sought after or set out to participate in the mobilization is a clear demonstration of Inwood's assertion that "poetry in China continues to flourish as a social form, one that possesses great symbolic importance for the nation no matter who is doing the writing or critiquing" (Inwood 2015, 54).

*How* poets have actually acted in this context, handling the possibilities they found at their disposal, sheds more light on the inner workings of the field. While

the master narrative has shaped the discursive response of China's state system to the epidemic, creative singularities—the poets—have not responded with a unanimous voice, be it coerced or genuine, but have balanced their choices between integration, adaptation, negotiation, and evasion. This list is not exhaustive, but such options form an organic whole that has crossed the many institutional divides of the field of poetic production, including that of official versus unofficial. Once again, an "either or" approach proves to be unhelpful to explain the movements of the field. A dialectic method is needed to grasp how poetry behaves once it intervenes to fulfil its public responsibility—a duty it does not seem ready to shrug off.

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