Cosima Bruno (SOAS University of London)

Animal Talk. The Sentient and the Sensible in Contemporary Chinese Poetry

Abstract

Through analogical association and differentiation, the practice of the human-nonhuman animal correlative in poetry can shed light on the relationship between the physical environment and figurative language. Can the animal in poetry take the mediating role of weaving the human into nature, or does it remind us that humans are "natural-born cyborgs" (Clark 2003) and forever set apart from nonhuman animals? This essay explores a number of contemporary Chinese poems' engagement with nonhuman animals to better understand how figurative thinking links the sentient to the sensible, even when it points to an epistemological gap between human and nonhuman animals. Recuperating the Chinese contemporary debate around the slogan "poetry puts body into words" 诗言体 (Yu 2001), my principal aim is to explore the intersectional space between the concepts of 'body' and 'knowledge,' answering the questions: What is knowable? How does the body know? How does poetry know?

Keywords: animal, epistemology, Chinese language, sensuous poetics, body and language

The Chinese Character and Nature

One principal aim of this paper is to explore the intersectional space between the concepts of 'body' and 'knowledge'. The major questions orienting me in this study on the relationship between the sentient and sensible in contemporary Chinese poetry are: what is knowable? How does the body know? How does poetry know? Is it through practice, perception, language?

These questions have been the focus of attention of philosophers and poets for centuries, often intersecting with theories on the Chinese language, which branch out in two main diverging directions. The Chinese writing system, unlike the writing systems of alphabetical languages, has attracted much interest but also misunderstanding as a sort of universal language that can restore the lost connection between word and world. Conversely, there has also been an argument

(e. g. Hegel,[1] Ong,[2] Yu), according to which the graphic nature of the Chinese character further separates language from orality, thus increasing its distance from the world.[3]

What I need to highlight here is a notion of the Chinese character that intersected with European philosophical traditions for which language was fundamentally detached from "objective reality", and the "ideograph" could offer the perfect (or worst) link to eliminate such distance. The underlying assumption in such a prolonged debate is that reality and nature (including animals but excluding humans) is on the other side of language.

For many a European thinker of the seventeenth century, China was "a land without a notion of artifice."[4] As a matter of fact, China was rather involved in a concept of *wen* (letters) that distinguishes yet does not separate humans and their language from the rest of nature. In fact, as eloquently explained by Zhang Longxi, writing and literature are not "a human invention to imitate nature, but are part of nature, of the natural cosmos itself".[5] The poet "creates" the aesthetic pattern of *wen* not through mimesis but by revealing those patterns that have always been present in nature. Human-made literature, culture, or civilization

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1 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004).

2 Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982).

3 Because of space restrictions, I will not overview these two arguments here. I only refer to useful literature on the subject. The historical trajectory of the European "hallucination" of the Chinese characters is efficiently summed up in Edward McDonald, "'Humanistic Spirit or Scientism?': Conflicting Ideologies in Chinese Language Reform," *Historie, Epistémologie, Langage* 24, no. 2 (2002): 51–74. McDonald includes Francis Bacon's (1605), Champollion (1822), Ezra Pound, via Fenellosa, (1919), Creel (1936), and Derrida, via Gernet (1967). To this list we can add Leibniz, John Wilkins, Borges, Lakoff and Foucault. See also Han-Liang Chang, *Hallucinating the Other: Derridean Fantasies of Chinese Script.* Working Paper 4 (Milwaukee: The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1988).

4 For Leibniz – a great admirer of the pictorial nature of the characters – the Chinese script "speaks to the eyes." He proposed to compile an illustrated universal dictionary which would include words to be accompanied by pictures: A little picture of an ibex would be more readily understood than a long description of the animal. Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understandings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 253–54. Another example is provided by a 1687 manuscript entitled *Digressio de Sinarum Literis* [sic!], which explained the Chinese characters in naturalistic terms, using symbols portraying birds and fish. Knud Lundbaek, *The Tradition of the Chinese Script* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1988). It is also worth mentioning that, at the end of the 19th century, in contraposition with the fetish for the Chinese characters, there was a sustained effort from Chinese modern intellectuals, including renowned figures such as Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879–1942), Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), Qian Xuantong 钱玄同 (1887–1939), and Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (1899–1935), to get rid of the Chinese characters, as these were held responsible for the hindered modernization of China, under what Mullaney defines the "alphabet imperialism." Thomas S. Mullaney, *The Chinese Typewriter: A History* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2018).

5 Longxi Zhang, "What is *Wen* and Why is It Made so Terribly Strange?," *College Literature* 23, no. 1 (1996): 24.

remain grounded in nature. According to such postulates, Chinese writing does not simply represent the natural but first and foremost the factuality of *wen* actually overcomes the distinction between nature and culture.[6] This is confirmed by the Chinese myth of Cang Jie 仓颉, chronicler at the court of the legendary Huang Di 黄帝, or Yellow Emperor, who, sometime between 2697 and 2597 BC, after having studied the celestial bodies, their formations, nature, and in particular the traces of birds' and animals' footprints, embarked in the invention of the Chinese characters.

These views however mostly pertained to an understanding of *wen* in primitive Chinese society, which had the privilege of a "marvelous original contact and communication with the animal and plant worlds," whereas "language as we now use it, poetical or otherwise, often belies these magical conceptions".[7] In Daoist philosophy, in fact, humans can grasp the totality of things only by "deverbalizing", *wu yan* 无言 the world.[8] This is why much of Daoist literature aims at showing the relativity of perspectives, often inverting the role between the sentient human and the sensed animal.

Yu Jian and the Idea that 'Poetry Puts Body into Words'

Fast forwarding several centuries, we find that the issues and notions are still under discussion in the contemporary artistic and literary spheres. By manipulating the famous classical lyricism phrase *shi yan zhi* 诗言志 (poetry puts mind into words), the poet, essayist, photographer, film director, editor, and academic Yu Jian 于坚 (b. 1954) forged the phrase *shi yan ti* 诗言体 (poetry puts body into words)[9] to convey his vision of a kind of poetry writing that is of the body, sensuous, situated, evolving directly from the world:

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6 Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, "Genes, Memes, and the Chinese Concept of *Wen:* toward a nature/culture model of Genetics," *Philosophy East & West* 60, no. 2 (April 2010): 167–86.

7 Wai-lim Yip 叶维廉. "Wuyan duhua: Daojia meixue lunyao" 无言独化：道家美学论要 [Deverbalize and Self-transform] (1979), in Wai-lim Yip, *Cong Xianxiang dao biaoxian* 从现象到表现, 203–27. Taibei: Dongda guoshu gongsi, 1994. Translated into English as "Language and the Real-Life Worlds", in Wai-lim Yip, *Diffusion of Distances. Dialogues between Chinese and Western Poetics*, 64. Berkeley, Oxford: University of California Press, 1993.

8 Ibid., 66.

9 In *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, The Nature of Language*, Scott Knickerbocker defines a "sensuous poetics" as "the process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature." Like Yu Jian's poetic project, Knickerbocker talks about environmental poetry that attempts to return to the world, and the world to language. Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, The Nature of Language* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 2.

In the beginning things were named orally. […] the first man who saw the sea sighed: see![10] […] A sound indicated a tree. That sound simply was that tree. *Tree!* What that sound said was: there is this tree. It didn't say *imposing*, *magnificent*, *grown up*, *luxuriant*, *straight…* or other metaphors of the kind. In our time, it has become difficult for a poet to say *tree*, which is already a metaphorical screen. If one says *big tree*, the first recipient understands it as the male reproductive organ. The second thinks the speaker is suggesting shelter, the third thinks he means a place to perch […] the n-recipient, according to the degree of industrialization of the time, takes tree as the symbol for nature […] the signifier and the signified have become separated.[11]

As we can evince from this excerpt, for Yu, years, if not centuries, of expressing individuality and focusing on the mind made poetry "a bodiless language play."[12] He sees such a trend as a direct outcome of the transition from oral to literate cultures, which dulled human sensory perception and severed the connection between humans and the living world. World and word are thus conceived in dichotomy, as the original and its (bad) translation.[13]

Yu's argument is in dialogue with many ecocritical poets around the world who purport that writing and even language, being anthropocentric manifestations, are in opposition to the nonhuman world, and therefore should be treated with suspicion. Physical reality, they say, should instead be favoured, as it should a language that gives access to it, without dominating and destroying it with abstraction.[14] And yet, Charles Bernstein, for example, states: "Sounds is language's flesh […] In sounding language we ground ourselves as sentient, material beings, obtruding into the world with the same obdurate thingness as rocks or soil or flesh."[15] Such a poetics of presence and immediacy indicates

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10 The original pun has *hǎi* 海 (sea) and *hāi* 嗨 (an exclamation similar to *oh!*).

11 Jian Yu, 于坚. *Zongpi shouji* 棕皮手记 [Brown Cover Journal] (Guangzhou: Dongfang chuban zhongxin, 1997), 239; 241.

12 Jian Yu, 于坚, *Yu Jian ji* 于坚集 [Yu Jian: Works] (Kunming: Yunnan renmin, 2004), 84.

13 Simon Patton states that for Yu Jian "translation inevitably dismembers poetry, the body or 'bearing' of a text being virtually impossible to replicate in another language." Simon Patton, "Yu Jian," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography. Chinese Poets Since 1949*, vol. 387, eds. Christopher Lupke and Thomas E. Moran, 284. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2020.

14 Philosophically, however, Yu's rejection of metaphor could point to two different directions. As the locus of a meaning breakdown, metaphor for Yu thwarts understanding, and further separates language from reality, or humans from their environment. But if we consider tradition and language as a process, metaphor might as well be seen as a way of preserving freedom of meaning, and supporting relativity of point of view, against autocratic, or idealistic, attitudes toward language. For a fascinating novel on the conundrum of the metaphor, see Li Hongwei 李宏伟, *Guowang yu shuqingshi* 国王与抒情诗 [The King and Lyric Poetry] (Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe, 2017). A thoughtful discussion of this novel is found in Joanna Krenz, "Living an Emperor's Life, Dying a Nobel Death. Li Hongwei's Novel *The King and Lyric Poetry* as a Journey through the History of Chinese Poetry," *Litteraria Copernicana* 2, no. 38 (2021): 57–82.

15 Charles Bernstein, ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 21.

a tension between the conceptual and the perceptual, symbolism and imagism. It leans towards those theories of poetry of "pure experience," through orality and sound.

The point that I am trying to make by using Charles Bernstein, a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet, as example, is that for Bernstein the voice is able to extend poetry beyond the written or alphabetical signifier. Such a move may be seen as contesting and resolving the presumed inimical relationship between the critical inquiry of ecopoetry and the experimental practices of "language" poetry.[16] It might be that for some Language poets language is part of nature or nature is partially constituted through language (as purported by Scigaj and Knickerbocker). Either way, Bernstein's 'sounding word' does share the ecopoetic vision of the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception.[17]

Conceptually, however, the poetic project that puts sound at its centre is not so far away from those theories of visual poetry, as advocated through the debate of "thinking in characters."[18] Although both advocates for the orality or visuality of language recognise that a deep human engagement with the world has been severed, they both argue that perception is the link that connects us to the world.[19] Thus the visual and the oral aesthetics of the Chinese characters as a poetic means

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16 This same argument is in my view explicitly made through the ethical engagement of language poets such as Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten, among others, and their elaboration with the notion of the "expanded field of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E."

17 See Charles Bernstein, ed., *Pitch of Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), part 1. Incidentally, Bernstein also participated in the influential journal *Ecopoetics* (2004–2005). In all fairness, two contrasting arguments – one in support and one against Bernstein's participation in ecopoetics – must be recognized. For an example of supporters, see Timothy Morton, "Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology," *Oxford Literary Review.* 1, no. 32 (2010): 1–17. For an example of refuters, see John Shoptaw, "Why Ecopoetics?," *Poetry*, (January 2016), https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70299/why-ecopoetry.

18 Under the name of "thinking in characters," I refer to a prolonged theoretical re-examination of the poetics of the Chinese character that was carried out since the early 1990s by artists and poets. The focus of the "thinking in characters" debate was the association of the Chinese character with an aesthetics of perception, or "pure experience" in the Chan Buddhist poetic tradition, or in the Fenellosa-Pound elaboration. Some of the main features of such an aesthetics included breaking down linearity, omission of conjunctions and other coherence markers, and creation of psychological (rather than semantic) connections, through montage techniques. In the eyes of the "thinking in characters" artists and poets, the Chinese characters almost constitute an ideal world language that can achieve a deeper integration with the external object. Cf. several articles published in the poetry journal *Shitan suo* 诗探索 [Poetry Exploration] 2 (1996): 8–25; 3 (1996): 37–56; 4 (1996): 72–86; 1 (1997): 46–66; 2 (1997): 37–67; 3 (1997): 45–56; 4 (1997): 86–103; 2 (1998): 83–94; 4 (1998): 52–55; 1 (1999): 129–33; 2–4 (2000): 81–88; 2–3 (2002): 44–88; 1 (2003): 47–63; 1 (2004): 66–70. Cf. also Wai-lim Yip, "Wuyan duhua," 203–27, and Cosima Bruno, "Words by the Look: Issues in Translating Chinese Visual Poetry," in *China and Its Others: Knowledge Transfer and Representations of China and the West*, ed. James St. Andre (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 245–76.

19 It is worth reminding that conventional ecopoetics displays a dominance of imagistic and perceptual techniques.

are united by the perceptual, the body. Whereas the senses of individuals in oral communities ceaselessly converge in their synaesthetic encounter with animals, plants, humans, and landscape, the sensory experience of individuals in literate societies allows them to participate in an exclusively human discourse, since humans' movement from oral to written communication has altered not only communication styles, but also the very modes of perception (Abram, Clark).[20]

Animal Talk

In light of the theoretical propositions sketched above, I would like to examine now some of the textual strategies emerging from contemporary Chinese poets' musing on animals, both to investigate at a practical level the outlined arguments and to explore how poetry can encourage reconnection and engagement with the living world beside humans. I have selected poems featuring animals by Yu Jian, Zang Di 臧棣 (b. 1964), Mu Cao 墓草 (b. 1974), and Hsia Yü 夏宇 (b. 1956), with the purpose of studying the ways figurative thinking links the sentient to the sensible, even when it points to an epistemological gap between human and nonhuman animals.[21]

Yu Jian's poem "Goldfish" 金鱼 reiterates his views on metaphor and its alleged distancing from the living world:

> A goldfish can be described in terms of other objects capable of motion
> because motion and motion are similar
> […]
> But these motions are all dry a goldfish might die in such a narrative
> […]
> So the narrative goldfish might have no relation with the goldfish itself you may set out from this word
> and reach destinations in which in real life it would die
> […]

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20 David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Random House. 1996); Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborg: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). This brings to mind the (unresolved) dispute between *i colori* (the colours) and *la parola scritta* (the written word) as narrated by Italo Calvino in a short dialogue in which the voice is asked to sound them both. Italo Calvino, "La parola scritta, i colori e la voce", in Italo Calvino, *Romanzi e racconti*, vol. 3, 416–17. Milano: Mondadori, 1994.

21 For John Berger figurative language originates from humans' relationship with animals, a chiastic relationship of simultaneous difference and inseparability. Not only did "language itself [begin] with metaphor," as Berger states paraphrasing Rousseau, but also the "first subject matter for painting was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood. Prior to that […] the first metaphor was animal." John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?* (London: Penguin, 2009), 261.

> And it can still have more descriptions that is why when we see this little body
> we must call it goldfish then, just like a goldfish, it will manifest itself as an image in an
> aquarium filled with clean tank-water
> […]
> I can also assume that this sound is effective *goldfish*
> It is just another living animal sharing the drawing room with me[22]

Observing the accumulation of metaphorical associations, Yu Jian's poems present a clear statement of a poetics that returns to naming, orally. In the line "I can also assume that this sound is effective *goldfish*", italics aim at conveying an original that is given in pinyin transliteration, rather than in characters, so as to highlight the sound of the word over the visual character. The aurality of the word for goldfish seems to finally confirm its existence as any other living being on earth, at the same level as a human being. Thus poetry's renaming is able to minimize metaphorical language and to re-connect things to words, world to language. As he further elaborates in an interview:

> […] I'd like to talk about the elephant in relation to reality. […] There is a street in Kunming called Xiang Yan Street, literally meaning "Elephant Eye Street," this is because traveling merchants from Burma and Laos used to ride elephants to Kunming and fasten the elephants on that street. […] My home is close to the zoo, where I can see elephants. The elephant is a very important animal in my life, not just an idea. […] When I traveled along Mekong River, I saw a lot of them, too.[23] […] On the oracle bones, the inscription of the word [xiang] means infinity, so enormous that it has no ends. Though this concept of infinity is an abstract one, in Chinese it has to be embodied in something concrete, in this case, the animal elephant. […] So far I have written eleven poems on elephants. […] It is like the story of blind men touching the elephant, getting a little part every time, but it is all these little parts that lead to something huge behind.[24]

Yu claims his *shi yan ti* poetics allows him to explore the animal, bit by bit, poem by poem, like tiny pieces of a huge puzzle, which might never be completed, but that nonetheless produces knowledge. For him, first comes his sensuous experience, and then the idea.

Standing at the opposite side of Yu Jian's poetic project is Zang Di's strategy of exploring reality, language and poetry metaphysically. Throughout the poems of his "Book Series," Zang deals with the animal and the biological world in general from the perspective of language and communication, continuously providing

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22 Jian Yu, *Yu Jian de shi* 于坚的诗 [Poems by Yu Jian] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000), 142.

23 See how elephants have been the object of attention in the article by Julia Hollingsworth and Zixu Wang, "Millions of People in China Can't Stop Watching a Pack of Wandering Elephants," *CNN*, June 11, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/09/china/elephants-china-yunnan-intl-hnk/index.html.

24 Jian Yu, Marjorie Perloff, and Guilian Hao, "Conversation with Poet Yu Jian," *Waiguo yuwen yanjiu* 外国语文研究 [Foreign Language and Literature Research] 24, no. 6 (2018): 23.

associations from different angles and levels. "Night Bird Series" 夜鸟丛书 can be read as an embodiment of the epistemological gap between humans and animals, and between their languages:

> I dreamt each time we're together, three people are there.
> You said, the other one is a bird.
> When I call your name, the bird calls as well.
> When you call my name, he's still calling.
> […]
> The calls imply something, but don't name names.
> His calls contain another vaster cry,
> a kind I thought couldn't exist outside of human screams.[25]

The poem reflects on the different mechanisms of communication of humans and animals. But there is some ambiguity in the identification of the subjects here: Is the bird an animal, or is it a facet of human nature. There is some overlap: the bird is referred to as a third person, whom the subject cannot fully understand, but can recognise that *he* is implying something. *He* does not name names (as humans do when using language); his call is linguistically competent even though he does not talk. *He* does not give any rational insight into the conceptual framework of the name, but his cry is a primitive, spontaneous, unreflective, ungrounded form of acting or reacting. And yet it is in this form that the poet finds a link between the bird and the human; it is the cry that resembles the human scream. Thus, nature and culture cannot fully integrate into each other's order, but they are still linked by some implication or sensation. The bird in the poem is there to sharpen human sensibility toward overlooked and mysterious aspects of being in the world. This is almost an animist poetics that gives the bird a spiritual essence, an aesthetic logic that challenges dichotomies by aesthetically expanding personhood beyond the individual, human, and physical subject, replacing it with a sort of (trans)subject, the more-than-human, more-than-physical, expansive personhood in lyric poetry. The persona merely observes, whereas the *you* seems to want to domesticate the bird, by calling it human. The persona, however, uses the qualifier "I thought," and makes a comparison. Mesmerized, he seems to maintain a difference from (yet also a connection with) the I and the bird. It is perhaps in this distinction where poetry abandons the descriptive mode and creates a dream language or spiritual realm, leaning towards the metaphysical, or transcendental. This makes Zang Di's personal relationship to the animal or the biological, which he understands as an opportunity to expand knowledge, acknowledge relativity of points of view, and ob-

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25 Di Zang 臧棣, "Ye niao congshu" 夜鸟丛书 [Night-bird Series], trans. Elenore Goldman, *Poetry International* 2017, https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/28594/auto/0/0/Zang-Di/NIGHT-BIRD-SERIES/en/nocache.

serve degrees of closeness between poetry and things. In "So Awesome Series" 就
这么牛丛书 we read:

> They say poetry is useless, and I don't refute it.
> […]
> Poetry does not exist in useful or useless,
> The poem is perpendicular to these photos, just like the rain last night
> Straight into the earth.[26]

Zang Di's poems confirm the relativity and multiplicity of knowledge. The
photographs have their apparent objectivity; poetry has its own rules, and it can
question and perhaps also challenge reality, revealing different aspects that
mimesis and objectivity obscure. Thus, poetry enters in contact with other en-
tities. Zang Di's poems do not use natural things for the purpose of expressing the
secrets and habitual images of nature. It does not rely on the similarity of things.
In contrast, he relies more on language itself to widen the distance between the
body and the linguistic metaphor. As Geng Zhanchun 耿占春 said: "His meta-
phors often do not overlap words and objects but constitute semantic deviations.
It seems that poetry almost exists in this distance between words and objects."[27]

In Zang Di's poem, the bird is not describing an aspect of a physically imag-
ined reality, but rather is a mysterious site of thought. The image of the bird, with
its language, creates an intangible realm of the linguistically unfamiliar, more
than external reality, something that does not resolve.

In Mu Cao's poem "A Masturbating Monkey" 手淫猴子,[28] animal resem-
blance to the human is employed ironically:

> In a zoo
> […]
> A young monkey
> Is masturbating like human's "shooting at the plane"
>
> At the moment of orgasm
> No one knows
> Its sexual dream –
> Does an amorous and beautiful female monkey

26 Di Zang, "Jiu zheme niu congshu" 就这么牛丛书 [So Awesome Series]. In Di Zang, *Huigen
    congshu* 慧根丛书 [The roots of wisdom series] (Chongqing: Chongqing daxue chubanshe,
    2011), 91.
27 Zhanchun Geng 耿占春, *Shiqu xiangzheng de shijie* 失去象征的世界 [The World without
    Symbols] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2008), 241.
28 Mu Cao 墓草, "Shouyin de houzi" 手淫猴子 (A masturbating monkey), trans. Yang Zongze,
    in Mu Cao, *Mu Cao shixuan* 幕草诗选 (Selected poems by Mu Cao), 98–99. Chongqing:
    Huanqiu wenhua chubanshe, 2009.

Appear in a cage
Or in the mountain forest[29]

The comparison precisely foregrounds the epistemological gap between the human and the nonhuman, while also providing a critique of anthropocentric tendencies that apply the human point of view to animals. Nevertheless, the use of anthropomorphic language grants the monkey subjectivity and thereby enables a change of perspectives and perhaps even observation of the "animal mind." Mu Cao's poem concerns itself with the body, literally. It does not undermine the realism of language, and accepts what can be observed, even when recognising the possibility of another order of reality. Mu thus conveys specificity to the animal and to the human: by investing passion and moral feeling, the poet however admits the diversity of the animal and its language to the human body. The trope of the monkey becomes one of doubleness, oscillating and substituting between animal and human.

Hsia Yü's 夏宇 piece "His Works and Him" 牠和牠的作品 was first shown at the Taipei Contemporary Art Museum in 2008, as part of the exhibition titled *Cross It Out, Cross It Out, Cross It Out*, which included poems by her fellow poets Ling Yü, Hong Hong, and Yung Man-Han. The visual poem was then collected in issue nine of the journal *Xianzai shi* 现在诗 (Poetry Now) 2012. Hsia's poem uses a Chinese translation of Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* as its interface: Derrida's text is crossed out and photographed in combination with images of a dog in the process of chewing up an armchair. Thus, Hsia crossed out Derrida's text, while the dog – as the mythological Celestial Hound who devours heaven and earth – crossed out Hsia's armchair (fig. 1). In the excerpt shown here, we read the translation into Chinese of the following passage from Derrida:

> I must once more return to the malaise of this scene. I ask for your forbearance. I will do all I can to prevent its being presented as a primal scene: this deranged theatrics of the wholly other that they call animal, for example, a cat, when it looks at me naked, at the instant when I introduce myself, present myself to it-or, earlier, at that strange moment when, before the event, before even wanting it or knowing it myself.[30]

In an interview published in *Asymptote*, Hsia comments: "my watching over him (without intervening) was completely indulgent, even *loving*." The poet then explains: "Because this person herself had mistakenly thought that, in this world where mankind is the lone sentient being, animals have no words to explain

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29 Ibid.
30 Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I am," trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2002), 380.
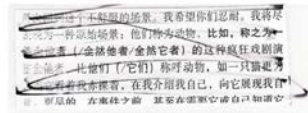
Fig. 1. Hsia Yü's Dog. © Hsia Yü

themselves, I respected the speechlessness of animals and, consequently, I remained speechless."[31]

Hsia Yü takes up Derrida's project by giving it a visual extension. This extension does not subtract Derrida's text from its propositions: by remediating it, "His Work and Him" simply endows it with a new functionality, one that the photographization of the text allows it to display. By showing the disruptive and creative energy that comes from the animal, this poem shows that the unconscious language of the dog is at the opposite of writing and writing's constraints of rationality.

Thus, while Yu Jian advocates "poetry puts the body into words," Hsia's project concentrates on the very physicality of language. Taking words from existent texts, and mixing media, she presents her readers with a physical refraction of reality. In fact, Hsia Yü talks of experiencing a feeling of "word-incarnation." She described the words, language and verses as "physical," "close to a skin sensation," such as itching, sticky, pain, etc., as if she could actually feel

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31 Yü Hsia et al., "Cross It Out, Cross it Out, Cross it Out. Erasurist Poetry from Taiwan's *Poetry Now*," interview by Dylan Suher and Rachel Hui-Yu Tang, *Asymptote*, April 2012. https://www.asymptotejournal.com/visual/hsia-yu-et-al-cross-it-out-cross-it-out-cross-it-outerasurist-poetry-from-taiwans-poetry-now/.

the texture of the word.[32] In its static visual quality, the poem nevertheless transmits energy. It communicates by expressive, though not just linguistic, means. It conveys a mode of experience to which human language is normally closed.

Conclusion

Writing this paper from a context in which a pandemic has considerably severed physical human interaction while exponentially increasing the use of technologies, the poetics of presence and of the body discussed by these poets has acquired a whole new significance.

I have mentioned two diverging ways in which the Chinese language has been understood through centuries and how these have resonated in a number of poetic projects that put perception at their centre. What does the animal represent in such poetics? How is it portrayed and how can poetry allow us (if at all) to engage with entities that do not speak our language?

While there is an unbridgeable gap (or deep chasm) separating humans from the minds of animals, there is also a form of communication that we share with animal creatures, namely expressive communication which is apt to present a "synchronic middle ground" poised between two poles. It is a common practice, for example, to attribute to animals sensations and feelings (hunger, thirst, fatigue, agitation, pain, and pleasure). As indicated by Merleau-Ponty, humans are in constant dialogue with the natural world, forever affecting and being affected by it and all of the entities within it. This reciprocal relationship is based on the sensuous world, which perceives and initiates communication, just as humans do.

These poems seem to affirm that there is a plurality of non-scientific and scientific forms of knowing and/or understanding. Being in language allows the poet to observe and think with emotional engagement, provoking unforeseen insights.

Of course, reading and writing are not the same as feeling sensations on the body, like the sun or the rain on the skin. If I describe my encounter with an elephant in the jungle, the reader will know a part of the reality expressed in my description, even though she would have never seen an elephant. This knowledge may not be the same as actually seeing the elephant, because the knowledge of the body contains too detailed information – temperature, a certain chromatic scale, the foliage around, smell, sounds, etc. All poetry can do is provide a special

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32 Hsia Yü 夏宇 and Wan Xuting 万胥亭, "Bi tan" 笔谈 [Talking of Writing], in Hsia Yü, *Fuyushu* 腹语术 [Ventriloquy], 4th ed. (Taipei: Hsia Yü chuban, 2010), 105.

avenue to human imagination, symbolic expressions, and connection with the world.

The boundaries between the human and nonhuman animals have often been porous in Chinese poetry. What these texts express and preserve is not merely a point of view or a particular truth. It is a way of knowing, a certain disposition or way of being in the world. It is an openness to certain kinds of experience and to certain dimensions of reality. These poems attempt to embody the incommunicable experience, a way of inhabiting the world, with at its centre the experiential quality of a sensible body.

Thus, this paper proposes to work towards a common definition of the knowing body across philosophy and poetry, beyond the outdated binary of visuality/orality-literacy, and the suspicion bestowed on language, writing and reading outlined in the beginning of this paper. In its place, following the postcritical account of literature suggested by scholars such as Rita Felski[33] and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,[34] we can recognise the significance of the ways of seeing and knowing the world allowed by the poetic text.

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33 Rita Felski, "Context Stinks," *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 573–91.
34 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Perfomativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

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