

**Ghosts in the City**  
**The Auckland Exile of Yang Lian and Gu Cheng**

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At the time of the events of June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989 in Beijing's Tiananmen Square two controversial Chinese poets, Yang Lian and Gu Cheng, found themselves in Auckland, New Zealand. While both had taken advantage of a relaxation of the political environment in China during the latter half of the 1980s to travel abroad, their subsequent lives came to be defined by these events as political exile. Both poets remained based in Auckland until 1993 but the circumstances of their exile, their relationship to their place of exile and its expression in their poetry are in marked contrast to one another. This paper explores this contrast through a close reading of two landmark poems in which both poets use the motif of the ghost to evoke their exilic state.

Yang Lian and Gu Cheng were both members of the "Today" (*Jintian*) group of avant-garde poets who emerged after the end of the cultural revolution in the late seventies. The name given to this poetry by the establishment was *menglong* which is often translated as "misty," suggesting the difficulty such work presented to the socialist realist literary establishment. Other ways of rendering the term include "obscure" or "ambiguist." The group's experimentation with the defamiliarisation or dislocation of language from conventional social usage articulated their political dissidence. As cultural life in China underwent a gradual if erratic process of liberalisation during the nineteen eighties, invitations came to travel abroad. Yang Lian and his wife Yoyo left China for Australia in August 1988 and went on to Auckland at the invitation of the then professor of Chinese at Auckland University, John Minford. Gu Cheng and his wife Xie Ye left Beijing with some urgency in 1987 and went first to Europe and Hong Kong before arriving in Auckland in 1988. Gu Cheng sought a place of refuge away from all social and political engagement, having suffered a great deal during the various ideological campaigns of the 1980s. Yang Lian's departure and overseas travel were more ambiguous, but there is no doubt that the events of June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989 forced political exile upon him. He played a prominent and highly public role in post June 4<sup>th</sup> protests, both in Auckland, and in Wellington outside the Chinese Embassy. Both poets featured prominently in a festival of events

called China: The Survivors<sup>1</sup> that took place on the campus of the University of Auckland and included the dedication of a stone memorial to those who had died.<sup>2</sup> These events served to politicise the circumstances under which the two poets were to remain in Auckland. Both lived in straightened circumstances in Auckland. Yang Lian and Yoyo lived in a first floor flat in a dilapidated old lodging house in Grafton Road. Its threadbare carpet, rotten banisters and plastic buckets to catch the leaks when it rained are mentioned in Yang's prose piece "Ghost Talk." Gu Cheng, Xie Ye and their young son were even more impoverished, living in an old bach on Waiheke Island in the Hauraki Gulf off the Auckland coast. Pieces of the ceiling periodically fell down and there were large cracks in the walls, but for Gu Cheng this was a place he believed he could be himself.<sup>3</sup>

The Dead in Exile<sup>4</sup>  
by Yang Lian

this street is not real the footsteps are not  
as always the moon slowly rises  
and falls though the light is not real  
pale yellow skeletons knock against the ground  
cobblestones<sup>5</sup> close to transparent

the night has decomposed into suffocating silence  
even hatred has weakened  
under the coffins warm earth  
like forgetfulness spitting pips out  
spits us out

doesn't being born of death  
require the red stamp of a birthmark  
in the earth of mother's belly the child  
twists like a clumsy lizard  
swims into a river of darkness  
makes dooms day a birth day

thanks to homesickness thanks  
each collective act of adultery in the mother's belly  
blood escapes from one body to another  
becomes water dead water

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<sup>1</sup> Held on 17th September 1989 and featuring a range of both New Zealand and Chinese artists and poets.

<sup>2</sup> See Chung, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See Minford, 1998, 265.

<sup>4</sup> This is a reworking of Brian Holton's translation in Yang 1994, 41-45.

<sup>5</sup> Cobblestones are literally "goose egg stones"

the smallest body  
is buried in the final tomorrow  
in the moonlight the egg looks white from a distance

we too can only look from a far distance  
watching us shadows that roam for a lifetime  
this street is lengthened by the shadows of the dead  
the womb has no address  
in the mirror names drown one by one  
on the wall a head is strangled by a picture frame  
the brain excised like a tumour  
still alive howls  
watches beyond flimsy memory, beyond yellow earth  
a face blurs day by day  
all landscapes are an inverted image

no one can break out of the prison of lies  
no one knows who the dead are  
when the sun bursts open sleeves  
utterly empty  
everywhere is a foreign land  
in death there is no home to go back to

so a line of poetry laden with corpses drifts away  
so it drifts away  
the rainstorm on the decomposing leaves  
continues to roar  
lie in the grave and roam  
the pupils of the dead are white as snow  
full of invisible stars  
flesh is white as snow stained with blood inside  
crawl from the filthiest tunnels of the mother's body  
slide screaming towards hell  
every morning  
die more deeply

the day is not real but day after day  
we leave ourselves further and further behind

The trauma of finding himself in an alien environment where all that he holds dear has become meaningless is reiterated in a number of poems written during the period following the massacre. This poem appears in a cycle of poems on this theme with which it also shares its title. Central to this poem is the conceptualisation of exile as a

living death. Life is so completely defamiliarised that it is as if the exiled poet is dead. Yet paradoxically he is still living in a place so strange that it seems unreal. The statement “is / are not real” (the plural is not marked in Chinese) is repeated three times in the first stanza, but its almost aggressive certainty opens up a greater uncertainty and a need for affirmation. Reference to the street, the footsteps and the moonlight evokes the unremarkable reality of an evening walk whose reality is strengthened by the habitual “as always.” Yet it is simultaneously undermined, making it both real and unreal. This ambiguity entraps the implied walker who can only “be real” if the footsteps are real. But an affirmation of the reality of existence can only occur externally and there is no one else to offer reassurance. This idea is developed in a prose piece entitled “City of one person” where the whole city of Auckland is envisaged as a city where there is only one person and consequently where all existence is problematic:

The city of extinct volcanoes, sea and stone is really there. Feeling for them is like feeling for your own face. But as you feel for them, they are lost. The stone you were grasping in your hand is gone. Whether you lock yourself up in your room or walk the streets, it is all the same: both you and this city are nothing more than a mirage in outline, empty of substance.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the first three lines of the poem capture an essential dilemma of exile whereby at the same time as it is necessary to follow the rhythms of a quotidian normality, every aspect of that normality is existentially problematic. If the evening walk is unreal, then all existence undergoes a ghostly transformation heralded by the “pale yellow skeletons,” where footsteps become the sound of clanking bones, and cobblestones, whose very name enacts a transformation, potentially lose their solidity.

The poem continues to consider the process whereby the exilic ghost is reborn after the death of exile by entering the putrefaction of the grave. This encompasses everything; even the night itself is in a state of decomposition and strong emotions like hatred also weaken. Death is the ultimate state of forgetfulness where all emotion is annulled. The link between forgetfulness and exilic death is all the more poignant. Only through the act of remembering can the exile reanimate his former life, but more fearful is death by being forgotten.

Although you tighten your grip, the face begins to melt from the instant you must “remember,” trickling away drop by drop. The harder you try to remember yesterday, the more thoroughly you lose today. In fact they are just different types of death: death from remembering is the same as death from forgetting.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Yang 2006, 90.

<sup>7</sup> “Ghost Talk”, Yang 2006, 77.

Far from being a place where seeds are nurtured to new life, the earth spits “us” out in an unceremonious birthing. Spitting out pips is not the planting of new seeds but the evacuation of detritus. This process is a transmogrification of the hallowed miracle of birth.<sup>8</sup> The child becomes a reptile, but without its reptilian agility, and the birth canal takes on hellish proportions. The exile is the offspring of the act of homesickness which is envisaged as an illicit sexual union. Memory and longing become a sullied life force in the form not of blood but of dead water.

However the process of exilic rebirth is not assured, relying as it does on the fickleness of memory which is constantly undermined by time and distance. Time can bury the potential exilic life before it has come into being, an unhatched egg—the perpetual process of transformation evoked by the linguistic link between the egg and the cobblestones from the first stanza. Whatever the exile does he looks from a distance, whether he looks at the past in an act of memory or whether he observes the new environment from which he is detached and alienated. His existence depends upon observation by others, the enjambment implying distance. The split line “watching us                    shadows that roam for a lifetime” opens up the possibility that both “we” and those watching us might be nothing more than shadows that roam for a lifetime, increasing still further the tenuity of this ghostly existence and confronting the exile with the interminable present of an endless street. If the process of exilic rebirth is not achieved then the potential exilic life remains unborn in an unlocatable womb. The locatedness implied by the word “address” is a state that is out of the exile’s reach. Looking in the mirror becomes another failed attempt to affirm existence. Names which distinguish us as individuals simply drown there. A head in a picture frame suggests a portrait or a photograph. Such an image captures its subject in a moment in the past making them less than alive as time passes. This recalls a line from the prose piece “Ghost Talk”: “All you remember is that dead face, with its unchanging expression, always the same, so frighteningly young.”<sup>9</sup> There is a transformative link between looking into the mirror and a head in a picture frame, allowing the portrait to be potentially both a remembered other or the exile himself, who becomes a remembered other if those he remembers remember him. The notion of being slowly strangled while looking in the mirror is further developed in the prose piece “The Book of Crying and Forgetting”: “You look in the mirror and you’re outside the window where everyday you are strangled a little tighter, so tight that you can’t see yourself anymore.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed the scenario seems to centre on the exilic persona himself, the agony of whose alienation cannot be rationalised by the brain. In this state of exilic death he is both brain-dead and yet painfully alive. Memory is too flimsy to provide a meaning for this existence; all bonds with the yellow earth of China have been broken, thus the identity contained within the face of the individual becomes less and less distinct and the environment a surreal image. “The face fades

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<sup>8</sup> For more on transmogrification in Yang Lian’s exilic poetics see Chung 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Yang 2006, 77.

<sup>10</sup> Yang 2006, 73.

into the far distance, its features grow increasingly hazy, revealing the contours of a tract of yellow earth.”<sup>11</sup>

Whereas much of Yang Lian’s Auckland work makes use of singular pronouns so that the lyric subject either simply speaks as a lone voice or addresses itself, through its use of the plural pronoun “we” throughout a greater sense of community is made possible in this poem. There are a number of possibilities as to who the plural pronoun might include: Yang Lian and his wife Yoyo, other exiled friends, all exiles, or, as the next stanza hints, perhaps the dead of the massacre. Among the poetic works written after June 1989 there is a small cycle of poems entitled “Behind the Lies” which makes specific reference to the massacre. The two lines “no one can break out of the prison of lies / no one knows who the dead are” enable this link to be made, yet other readings are also possible. “The prison of lies” suggests the unreliability of language, both his own, the tool of his trade, now that the poet has been wrested from his familiar linguistic environment, and the incomprehensible new linguistic environment with which he is daily confronted. Furthermore in the state of exile explored in this poem in which quotidian normality is simultaneously phantasmagorically surreal, no one can distinguish the exilic dead. Perhaps this is why the poem asks if those “born of death” should be specially identified in stanza three.

The implied scenario which the poem has sustained up to this point is that of the sleepless exile wandering the unfamiliar streets at night like a ghost. At this moment in the poem the sun bursts in, but far from banishing the nightmarish preoccupations of the night, their horrors are simply confirmed in the clear light of day. Not only is the foreignness of the land in which the exile finds himself clearly illuminated, but so is the more fearful realisation that the place that once was home is now equally foreign and inaccessible. Since exile is another form of death, whether his poetry is about the massacre or about exile, it will contain corpses. However, this poetry is irrelevant and incomprehensible in the land of exile and banned in the land that was once home. Thus it drifts away. Without recognition for his poetry, the poet is as good as dead, lying in the grave. The pupils of this corpse are white like the egg, recalling the abortive process of exilic rebirth and restating its horror. Yet in this recapitulation of the grotesque transformation of birth, the corpse becomes the body of the mother, thus associating the creative process itself with the same abortive process.

Explorations of abortive creativity of the poet abound in Yang’s Auckland work. The following excerpt from “Ghost Talk” has particular resonance with the images in this poem: “In the empty void you and your poetry carry on this incestuous reproduction. Without conceiving you give birth to a brood of hideous creatures addicted to unclean blood.”<sup>12</sup> The two associated processes mutually inform one another such that every morning both the poet and his poetry “die more deeply.” In the final couplet the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Yang 2006, 79.

repetition of “day” underscores the interminability of the exilic present in whose tenuous reality the exile is cut further and further adrift.

For Yang Lian confronting the trauma of exile in Auckland meant not only confronting the alienating environment of Auckland city with its dead volcanoes, incomprehensible street signs and unfamiliar intimacy with the sea, but developing a new relationship with the language of poetry such that home and identity came to be located in language itself. In this way the experience of exile became embedded within his poetics. Yang Lian has changed his self designation three times, each time reconfiguring his relationship to language. Firstly, pre exile, a poet of China, emphasizing the blood relationship between his early work and his native land; secondly a poet writing in Chinese, exploring the specific limitations and possibilities of Chineseness among languages; more recently he defines himself as a poet writing in “Yanglish,” a designation which recognises that his poems are foreign even to Chinese speakers. He notes that they cannot even be “translated” into everyday Chinese.<sup>13</sup> With such a reconciliation, he has sustained a successful international career as a poet and has been based in London since 1993. He writes “It is my desire that my writings in exile should be a journey in two directions, one that takes me further and further away from my native land and at the same time closer and closer to my native language.”<sup>14</sup>

Whereas Yang Lian was politically alienated from the Chinese regime, he had no intention of severing all contact with China. This is one reason why the initial experience of enforced exile was so devastating and momentous for him. By contrast Gu Cheng’s exile was a search for a place that he could call home and be himself. He found what he was looking for when he bought an old bach on a small hillside plot on Waiheke Island.

[...] the Communist Party has destroyed the very fabric of life “with nature” [...] We have moved away from traditional life and the natural ethos, and we thrash around frantically like fish out of water. [...] In order to find a piece of land of my own, a home among the trees, I came to New Zealand. Not far from Auckland I found the place I needed. It is a piece of primeval forest, and on it stands a broken down old house. Not many people live on the island – some of them are Europeans, some of them are Maori. And on those parts of the island where there are no people there are sheep [...] I have spent 20 years preparing for this. Now at last I have made the leap, left behind that wretched world and come to the place where I wanted to be. Now my life can begin.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Yang 2002, 9. It is no accident that this later collection of poems is published under the title *Notes of a blissful ghost*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>15</sup> Unpublished notes cited in Minford 1998, 265.

Gu Cheng and Xie Ye worked with the land, moving stones, building a terrace and a wall, and inscribing the landscape. He gave Waiheke Island the Chinese name *Jiliudao*, “the isle of fast-flowing waters.” They were extraordinarily poor, earning barely enough to keep themselves by selling spring rolls in the weekly local market.

Whereas Yang Lian confronted head on the unfamiliarity of the Auckland environment and the incomprehensibility of the language which surrounded him, Gu Cheng refused to engage in any meaningful way with the language or the people of his chosen domicile. Yet this was merely a perpetuation of the way Gu Cheng had lived his life for many years. His life as a poet was already a deeply personal kind of exile which involved an intense relationship with language itself and an ambivalent relationship to interaction with the outside world. Xie Ye was his intermediary. She recorded and typed up his oeuvre, she dealt with all the practicalities of everyday life and sacrificed her own literary talent all to enable Gu Cheng to concentrate on higher things. Removal to New Zealand simply intensified these arrangements. At the same time Gu Cheng needed to play to an audience, needed to be at the center of his world. He had deliberately created a particular look for himself: a grey cadre suit, long since out of style in China and hats like squat chimneys made out of trouser legs. In one explanation, the hats were a fortress (the “cheng” of his name means both city, fortress and wall) to protect his thoughts.<sup>16</sup> In any event they were a statement of separation and difference from his surroundings, but with the need for them to be there so that the statement could be made.

Once on Waiheke Island, this need to remain at the center of his universe had to be enacted within the domestic sphere. Gu Cheng’s personal myths derive much from the classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. He had long fantasized of himself as a modern version of the central character Jia Baoyu surrounded by a community of beautiful women.<sup>17</sup> Indeed his own fantasy was to create a “kingdom of girls” whose adoration would be centred on him. So it was that Gu Cheng and Xie Ye arranged for Li Ying (Ying’er), Gu Cheng’s second muse to join them in Waiheke where Gu Cheng would live out this fantasy with his two wives. The kingdom inevitably became riven with jealousies. Gu Cheng was jealous of Xie Ye’s attentions to their young son to such an extent that arrangements were made for him to live with a neighbour. Gu Cheng was jealous of closeness between Xie Ye and Li Ying which might shut him out. Xie Ye resented Li Ying although her presence enabled Xie Ye to maintain a relationship with her son.

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<sup>16</sup> Brady 1997, 4-5. During the months before he and Xie Ye moved to Waiheke Island, they lived in a building in Auckland known colloquially as “the Castle.” But he also understood it, resonantly and in keeping with the etymology of the Chinese character in question, as his wall, behind which he was safe. One of his earliest memories was of being involved in shifting bricks from the dismantled city walls of Peking. Private correspondence with Duncan Campbell, 22 December 2011.

<sup>17</sup> See Gálik 1995.

The destruction of the kingdom was heralded by an invitation to spend a year in Berlin on a cultural exchange scholarship in 1992. Gu Cheng and Xie Ye were to go, but the son was to remain behind, much to Xie Ye's distress. Li Ying was to await the couple's return. During the year Gu Cheng learned of Li Ying's elopement with a New Zealander from Waiheke. In his despair at the loss of Li Ying, Gu Cheng became suicidal and he started to write the confessional memoir *Ying'er* as an outlet for his pain. Not long after beginning the book he discovered that Xie Ye was having an affair with a friend of his in Berlin and was thinking of leaving him. This sent him into further depths of despair and loss. "The minute Lei [Xie Ye] leaves me, then death has come for me."<sup>18</sup>

The following poem was written at this time of crisis in Berlin in 1992.

Ghosts enter the city<sup>19</sup>

the ghost  
of zero hour  
walks with extreme care  
fears it will slip and fall head over heels\*  
turn into  
a person

(Monday)

ghosts are good people  
they sleep                      awaken  
check the notices                      swim  
standing so tall at the water's edge  
swim into a flake of gold under the ground  
turn fish              turn somersaults\*              blow into a wine bottle that has wept  
they like to look at the things up above  
in a single move grasp hold of the golden  
leaves

ghosts sometimes read: "after all they have known each other all along"  
afterwards put their hands under the document  
"this old rose at the water's edge"

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<sup>18</sup> Gu & Lei 1995, 89.

<sup>19</sup> This is my own translation. See also "Ghosts: heading for the city" translated by Chen Yanbing and John Rosenwald in Zhao & Cayley 1996, 189-194. The Chinese text appeared in the April 1993 issue of the overseas Chinese journal *Today (Jintian)* and is also included in Gu Cheng 1995, 843-851. The asterisks mark a series of linguistic metamorphoses which dramatise the precariousness of existence. See below.

with one voice they disgorge a large cloud of smoke  
close to evening people say  
“time to be heading home now”  
all their way hazy with lamp and shadow  
the ghosts do not speak all the way the wind blows  
it says on the bus stop eat grass face turns blue  
a gust of wind makes the fog reel\*

(Tuesday)

with closed eyes  
the ghost can see people with open eyes  
they can no longer be seen

a laughing kite  
sometimes sees it in a dream  
now along the veranda railing  
it tumbles down the ghost comes down with care  
the corridor is full of the laughing giggling

kite

“half for the others half for you”  
he opens out clothing  
looks inside no one opens out another  
there is a short blue skirt  
“the sick sala immersed in water”  
fifth room’s mander  
he is startled

he sees a big red fish looking at him  
the fish is ill it says on the sign  
the fish slowly slaps his hot palm from one side

(Wednesday)

on Wednesday enter the city<sup>20</sup>  
the ghost thinks for a long time  
stamps on its own shadow

with a thud

the ghost discovers it has torn a large hole in itself  
puffed rice flows straight down  
adults five cents      small children three cents  
anyone smaller two cents

the ghost hurriedly squats down to mend its own clothes  
and mends the road too

with a thud      a large hole is torn in the people too

the sound of song surges straight up  
never again hear news of Spring Vista<sup>21</sup>

demonstrations erupt everywhere  
the prince starts gathering up his winter clothes  
you stand on the bridge

where the cars move the trains stop

“the definition of yearningism is  
I’ve wanted to fight for a long time”

small child

throw bottles in all directions

(Thursday)

the ghost examines      a ball point pen  
winds flowers round  
three cents for a blossom to open

the ball point pen has wound round some adults  
ties them up      rolls\* a ball  
eats them up

she changes her name without leaving a trace  
the ball point pen eats up a word      writes another

surname      unmarried

first name      plump lips

volcano cold      from the north

just using those lips to jabber away won’t do  
one person disgorges one person      whoever is taller speaks

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<sup>20</sup> Can also mean: “Wednesday enters the city.”

<sup>21</sup> Chen and Rosenwald translate this as Spring Goddess. Zhao and Caley 1996, 191.





		notices	
the ghost does not turn into a person		notice seven	the ghost
		plays piano	relaxes
ghost			ghost
without belief or meaning	writes a letter		turns on the light
without love or hate			eyes
ghost			at once
no father no mother			open
no children no grandchildren			
ghost			
not dead	not alive	not crazy	
	not stupid	the raindrops that just fell	
		he gathers in a bowl and with one look	
		he knows they are eyes that just blinked	
the ghost swims underwater			
		dripping wet	

conclusion

it is only on the diving platform that the ghost tumbles and falls head over heels\*

This poem is intimately linked with Gu Cheng's mythopoetic<sup>25</sup> memoir, *Ying'er*, completed in Berlin in June 1993 which gives an account of his life on Waiheke Island in the company of Li Ying and Xie Ye. Excerpts from the poem are quoted as epigraphs at various points in the text. This enables a reading of the poem that draws on resonances in the memoir. The title of the poem makes reference to Gu Cheng's name. The given name Cheng means city or fortress. Whereas Yang Lian envisioned exile as a ghostly existence, wandering in a city of one person, Gu Cheng's ghosts are deep within the city of his inner self. The ghost (*gui* 鬼) of the title can be both singular or plural; in the first stanza the ghost is marked as single while in (Monday) it is plural becoming both the city and the ghosts that enter it. There are a number of references to being taken by the devil (*mogui* 魔鬼)<sup>26</sup> or being possessed by ghosts at the beginning of *Ying'er* in the context of Gu Cheng's discovery of Ying'er's disappearance. "I was avoiding something as if I was possessed by ghosts."<sup>27</sup> In addition the compound translated as "enter the city" is a common word meaning to "go to town" in the sense of going shopping and the like. Wishing to cut himself off from the world, Gu Cheng is very critical of Xie Ye's and Ying's enjoyment of a cup of coffee in the small township on the island when they went to the market.<sup>28</sup> Going to

<sup>25</sup> This is Marián Gálík's descriptor. See his postscript to the Li Xia's English translation of *Ying'er*, 285.

<sup>26</sup> Eg Gu & Lei 1993b, 22; Gu & Lei 1995, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Gu & Lei 1993b, 37; Gu & Lei 1995, 28.

<sup>28</sup> Gu & Lei, 1995, 21. "You drink coffee. Contemptible!"

town in Auckland was a much rarer event.<sup>29</sup> Now Gu Cheng himself has “entered the city” of Berlin becoming ever more desperate to return to his beloved island. “That is my home, where my life belongs, the place I love.”<sup>30</sup> Thus the title engages further ramifications as a state of anguish at being forced to engage with the world. Elsewhere in *Ying'er* Gu Cheng’s house and land on Waiheke are referred to as his city.<sup>31</sup> After her departure this place becomes haunted with memories. Furthermore she had allowed the hated foreigner (also referred to as ghosts in Chinese) with whom she eloped into “his city.” Further possible readings of the ghosts emerge as the poem unfolds.

The first stanza of the poem is used as an epigraph to Part I of *Ying'er*, which is entitled “Ying’er has disappeared.” The ghost of zero hour has reached the end of its time and can only walk slowly and carefully for fear of “slipping and falling” and becoming human. The implications of becoming human seem to be both to face mortality and community. Becoming human is not a desired outcome for the ghost who in the final section “does not want to slip and fall.” The entire poem dramatises the precariousness of this existence. As it progresses through its week of time, the phrase “slip and fall” undergoes several metamorphoses by means of somersaulting and struggling so that it has become “slipping and struggling” by the last line.<sup>32</sup>

In (Monday) the ghost is not only plural but has effortlessly become benevolently human, countering or responding to the fear. These ghosts as “good people” enter the “city” of the poet’s thoughts or memories. Indeed images in this section of the poem have distinct resonances with fondly remembered episodes described in the memoirs. The phrase “at the water’s edge” recalls the accounts of Gu Cheng’s first encounter with Ying at a writers’ conference in China. “We got to know each other at the water’s edge.”<sup>33</sup> A treasure is unearthed, past weeping is trumpeted away and the moment is associated with a central motif which undergoes several transformations in the poem, namely water, swimming and fish. The second part of (Monday) is defined by the two lines of quoted speech. The second with its mention of “home” pulls the focus to Waiheke. Gu Cheng and Ying were reunited by his and Xie Ye’s support of her application for a visa. The first quotation explains and justifies this reunion. They are reunited by the documentation–visas and passports, and the significant moment “at the water’s edge” is savoured and embellished with “this old rose.” The rose connects to a second reminiscence of Gu’s first meeting with Ying: “At the meeting that day, you spoke only for five minutes. We were all baffled. No one knew what you were talking about. ‘The hands can pick roses, but not their fragrance. It is only in spring that you have flowers in your hands all the time.’ But Ying’er said she

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<sup>29</sup> 雷很少进城。 “Lei [Xie Ye] rarely went to town.” Gu & Lei 1993, 299.

<sup>30</sup> Gu & Lei 1995, 149.

<sup>31</sup> Gu & Lei 1995, 224. “G’s city is not as grand as imagined.”

<sup>32</sup> These linguistic metamorphoses are marked with an asterisk in the text of the poem.

<sup>33</sup> Gu & Lei 1993b, 141; also 266.

understood it instantly.”<sup>34</sup> This meeting of minds makes them “with one voice.” In *Ying'er* memories of the island are sometimes shrouded in smoke: “In the smoke there are our past days, there are days when we take a walk, days when we pick fruit, days when we wash clothes [...]”<sup>35</sup> They shroud these memories themselves. The reminiscence in *Ying'er* continues with Gu and Ying walking home in the evening twilight. The final lines of (Monday) seem to recall an earlier incident in Gu and Xie Ye’s life on the island when they were so poor that they resorted to eating wild herbs which made Xie Ye ill.<sup>36</sup> In the reminiscence Xie Ye meets Gu at the bus stop when he came home from work.<sup>37</sup> In the islands of the Hauraki Gulf, the weather is windy and very changeable.

In the first three lines of (Tuesday) the singular ghost returns to his anguished, unsteady present, differentiating the people seen in the imagination or in dreams from its own ghostly state. There are a number of reminiscences in *Ying'er* that place Ying on the veranda (or deck in New Zealand parlance) of the house on the island, the most significant probably being when Gu takes photos of Ying to advertise her services as a qigong masseuse. The New Zealand qigong practitioner with whom she works is the man with whom she later elopes.<sup>38</sup> Gu’s muse is transformed into a kite, an object which moves unpredictably and is difficult to catch, but still fills the house with girlish laughter. By contrast the ghost moves carefully—the unsteadiness of the present in which the incident is remembered intrudes into the dream. The direct articulation of the simple practicalities of a life previously shared are supplanted by further intrusions of the anguished present into the dream. Washing, drying and sorting clothes are tasks which assume a significant role in a household with few amenities. This task is transformed into that of seeking the absent owner of the short blue skirt. Ying enjoyed wearing short skirts.<sup>39</sup> At their first encounter she was wearing a blue dress.<sup>40</sup> Instead of “it” which is used to refer to the ghost, the pronoun “he” is used, maintaining a separation between the ghost and this male persona. The anguish of the failed search causes language to break down. (Monday)’s somersaulting fish is transformed into a salamander in a sick room, (suggesting that it is confined in a tank), which in turn transforms into an ailing fish which can only move clumsily. In *Ying'er* Gu Cheng describes his state of mind in Berlin: “The days are like a fish swimming to and fro, now cut off, left on shore and there is no returning. It may eat me up. I can’t

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<sup>34</sup> Gu & Lei 1995, 185.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

<sup>36</sup> Xie Ye, who was used as food taster as well as all her various other tasks, almost killed herself when they had harvested “wood ear” fungus (*muer* 木耳) from the trees that grew on their plot of land. Later, their son Samuel was named, in Chinese, Muer. Private correspondence with Duncan Campbell, 22 December 2011.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 211.

<sup>38</sup> Gu & Lei 1993b, 91-93.

<sup>39</sup> Gu & Lei 1995, 64.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

take the harsh memories. There is no way out. I am like a wandering spirit (*youhun* 游魂), floating everywhere.”<sup>41</sup>

(Wednesday) appears to enter the city of Berlin, a place of cars, trains and bridges<sup>42</sup> where the ghost thinks deeply and then harms itself. The rice that pours out is sold for small amounts of money. This is reminiscent of the way Gu Cheng presents his predicament in Berlin in *Ying'er*. Antagonistic to worldliness, he and Xie Ye only went there to raise sufficient money to complete the building work required to realise his “kingdom” on the island. By so doing, he is prostituting and destroying himself. Attempts at repair, both internal and external, reflect the self-sufficiency of life on the island but are a reworked version of the destructive lines above with the repetition of “with a thud,” the “large hole” which is “torn” in the “people” who link back to the “good people” of (Monday) and the transformation of “flows straight down” into “surges straight up.” In the first part of the memoir spring and the opening of flowers have intense associations with the passionate love affair with Ying which is described in intimate detail. A chapter entitled “I’m in love with you” has the following poetic fragment as its epigraph: “I didn’t know / Spring, not to be seen, only comes once. / All the flowers are opening up, everywhere.”<sup>43</sup> She was the embodiment of his springtime but there will never again be news of her. The stark realisation brings chaos. The prince of the kingdom of girls gathers up his winter clothes perhaps in readiness to depart, in the light of the following line. The seasons in Berlin and Waiheke are reversed—when it is winter in one place it is summer in the other. The main narrative of *Ying'er* addresses Xie Ye in the second person, you, while Ying is discussed in the third person, she. There are possible resonances of this usage in this poem, but the ghost or the prince could equally be addressing it / himself. Personal pronouns are scarce in this poem. There is no coherence of identity with the ghost, he, the prince and “I” differentiated by the use of directly quoted speech, all separate fragments. The philosophy of the frustrated lover is one of violence which is enacted by the child.

In (Thursday) the pen adds an additional ramification to the incoherence of identity since it is wielded by no specified hand. Yet it manipulates flowers, the symbol of the poet’s love and muse in an act of monetary exploitation which recalls the ghost’s own in (Wednesday). It also brings destruction to the adults, but playfully. The act of writing is destructive and self-consuming and enables “she” to disappear. The following section suggests the format of an identity card or a passport which enacts the change of name. It also raises the question of marriage which is developed in (Saturday). Identification is attempted by personality trait—garrulousness, which is suggestive of Ying’s chatty personality as depicted in the memoir, and a displaced volcano whose image plays further on the distance between the northern and southern

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<sup>41</sup> Gu & Lei 1993b, 238.

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. Gu & Lei, 1995, 77 or 149.

<sup>43</sup> Gu & Lei 1995, 49; Gu & Lei 1993, 60.

hemispheres, Berlin and volcanic New Zealand. This chattiness, once so consuming, is no longer acceptable, nor the lips alluring. The one who was consumed is now disgorged. An insufficiently defined speaker articulates a further manipulation of the floral love symbol, controlling its mysterious timing. The exploitative “three cents” is linguistically linked to and readily transformed into “three minutes.” The insistent repetition (four times) of the phrase which means both “one person” and “alone” builds the image of loneliness and defensive retreat. The pen strokes of the written word are transformed into the strokes of a drawing and just as words consume one another, the drawing only takes away.<sup>44</sup> The obvious play on the fortress in Gu Cheng’s name is combined with sense of foreboding that “sitting in the castle of my imagination”<sup>45</sup> no longer offers secure refuge for the ghost fearful of the human world.

(Friday) begins with a revisiting of previous intimations of violence in which the ghost, he and the person are brought into tense proximity. “Push” (*tui*) is echoed by the ghost’s “retreat” (*tui*). The surreal transformation of the simple pancake, no longer part of any quotidian normality dramatises the precariousness of existence. The act of reading aloud becomes its own drama where the author takes centre stage, becoming transformed into an unwinnable game of chess. The impasse is articulated in syllables of sound taking expression beyond words.

[...] I said this was a dead game of Chinese chess. The chariot, the horse and the canon were all dead and it was checkmate at once. No more moves were possible except to fall back on the pawn in just two moves. This is exactly what I have been terrified of.<sup>46</sup>

The game itself becomes a “northern” landscape—the grapes give it a European flavour, but there are also grape vines in the plot on Waiheke<sup>47</sup>—and the epic descriptions take on the alternative reality of a film.

“He” and the ghost continue their close alternation in (Saturday) where the armies of the chessboard morph into the film scenario and “he” becomes the victim of the violence, recalling (Tuesday). “He” expresses the desire to be in control of the parodic popcorn revolution, just as Gu wishes to remain in control of his kingdom. So it is that the troops become wedding guests and the adversaries are transformed into the two parties in wedding negotiations, where “she” is the centre of attention. Red is the colour of revolutions and weddings and passion. The transformation is from green to red, army to wedding, bud to open flower. But the symbol of love is suspect, unexpectedly red. There are plum trees in the garden on the island also<sup>48</sup> but the extraordinary redness of the flowers suggests the native New Zealand pohutukawa tree: “The giant tree in flower is something I have heard him talk about quite a few

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<sup>44</sup> Gu Cheng drew prolifically. A selection of sketches is included in Gu & Lei 1993.

<sup>45</sup> Gu & Lei 1993b, 98.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 202. See also Gu & Lei 1995, 20: “This time you played the wrong game. A game of chess is played by two persons, not three.”

<sup>47</sup> Gu & Lei 1995, 224.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 225. Ying’s description of her own love for Gu Cheng is of “a big tree [which] has many flowers opening up.” See 50.

times. [...] Seen from a distance it is only a patch of red.”<sup>49</sup> Marriage is a theme that twists its way through *Ying'er*. The dedication of the book reads “You are both my wives; I have loved you both and I still do.”<sup>50</sup> Xie Ye and Gu Cheng consider divorce so that Ying might marry Gu in order to secure her Permanent Residence in New Zealand<sup>51</sup> and marriage to Ying remains a preoccupation tolerated by the long-suffering Xie Ye. “She [Ying] holds me tightly. I talk about our marriage.”<sup>52</sup> Changing nicknames means that real names remain unchanged. The unruly ball pen is an appropriate tool for this deception. Any notion of ceremonial is disrupted by thrown benches. What is needed are three people, the *ménage à trois*, to throw strings in the correct way so that (Tuesday)’s beautiful kite dream can be recreated. However, the scenario is self-consciously fabricated and dissolves into laughter and smoke.

The first two lines of (Sunday) are used as an epigraph to the Prologue of *Ying'er* which is written in the first person in the voice of a close friend who presents the memoir as if Gu Cheng were already dead.<sup>53</sup> This is the moment in the poem when “he” and the ghost merge as death is contemplated directly. Death, indeed suicide, is the central preoccupation of the memoir, as a release, an escape, a natural consequence of what has happened, a rejection of the world, a heroic act, and so on. For example in a chapter entitled “The New Testament” Gu Cheng presents himself as a Christ figure in conversation with God:

“This is your own affair?” I said: “Yes.” “You want to die of your own free will?” I said: “Yes.” “You yourself decide to be hostile to the world?” I said: “Yes.” “Is this the cross you carried yourself?” I said: “No one helps me to kill myself, except God.”<sup>54</sup>

In (Sunday) death is a realm of beauty, shimmering light and safety, the happy-ever-after of the silver screen, but the weight of its contemplation is crushingly burdensome. Contained within the line “People who have died are beautiful women” is the tragically prophetic implication that a beautiful woman or women might need to die also. “Hazy with lamp and shadow” revisits the idyllic dreams or memories of (Tuesday) in which Gu Cheng’s “city” however envisioned might extend without end except that “she” does not share this vision. Thus the city is destroyed, even the air trembles, and the ghost is extremely clear. This line is used as the epigraph to the “Epilogue” in the English translation of *Ying'er* where the narrative voice reverts back to that of the “Prologue,” and this narrative persona revisits Waiheke Island after Gu Cheng’s demise.<sup>55</sup> “He is hardly human. He is hardly a man! I thought.”<sup>56</sup> In the

<sup>49</sup> Gu & Lei 1995, 226.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, title page.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 139. See also 50 “[...] my heart said ‘This is my wife.’”

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 217. The English translation follows the *Huayi chubanshe* edition of the Chinese text. In the *Zuojia chubanshe* edition the first part of the epilogue with this epigraph appears at the end of the first section of the book. The line from (Saturday) “the ghost / acts in a film again” is used as an epigraph to accompany a shorter version of the epilogue. See Gu & Lei 1993, 116 and 312.

<sup>56</sup> Gu & Lei 1995, 217.

memoir the “star-lit southern sky”<sup>57</sup> is associated with an evening walk home on the island whose description is reminiscent of the dreams of (Tuesday). In the poem it is part of the exquisite realm of death. In Berlin there is a poplar tree in the manicured cemetery<sup>58</sup> while in a photograph taken when Gu first met Ying she is leaning on a poplar tree.<sup>59</sup> These associations fade to transparency above the poet’s distinctive “chimney pot” hat.<sup>60</sup>

The final section of the poem returns to the unsteady scenario of its opening lines. The ghost appears to be tumbling through fragments of language and progressions of meaning that move vertically as well as horizontally on the page. The “conclusion” gives the precarious location of the ghost’s final fall as a diving board, reconnecting with all the metamorphoses of the swimming and fish imagery throughout the poem. In *Ying’er* there is an extended sequence of dreamlike swimming images, referring both to the sea and to the swimming pool, which dramatise Gu and Ying’s love-making in the house of the Maori woman Poko. “[...] I would dive down slightly and she would always cheer me on [...]”<sup>61</sup> But in the poem this is transformed into the anguished thrashing of repeated negatives: does not, without, no, not. In the Chinese version of the memoir this final section appears before the first part of the epilogue at the end of the first section of the book under the title “Ghosts enter the city and enter the city again” (鬼进城又进城) and the subtitle “How did you come to be here?”<sup>62</sup> The repetition in this title intensifies the distress and its question underscores its incomprehensibility. There are multiple possibilities as to who is being addressed: the ghost(s), the poet, either one of his wives, or none of these.

The “notices” refer back to the communal human activity of checking notices remembered in (Monday). Other quotidian human activities proceed vertically but are fragmented and unsustainable in this unstable predicament, perhaps akin to madness, but this is denied. The Chinese festival of the dead affirms the relationship between the living and the dead but the statement is adamant: “the ghost does not turn into a person.” The festival of the dead celebrates the relations of the living to the dead ancestors but these family relationships are eschewed. This leaves the ghost alone without meaning, or emotion, neither dead nor alive. The only thing alive and blinking are the raindrops gathered in a bowl.<sup>63</sup> Once gathered, raindrops become indistinguishable and merge into oneness but they continue to “blink” as each new drop is added. Immersion in the source of poetic inspiration contained in this diminutive watery space offers an alternative to slipping and falling, the consequence of which is to “turn into a person” as the ghost fears in the opening lines. But however

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 149.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 178

<sup>59</sup> Gu & Lei 1995, 183.

<sup>60</sup> See Gu & Lei 1993b, 11 where the hat is described.

<sup>61</sup> See *ibid*, 69-71 and Gu Lei 1995, 56-57.

<sup>62</sup> Gu & Lei 1993b, 115.

<sup>63</sup> Patton 1999, 201 discusses the way Gu Cheng writes of his discovery of the nature of poetry in the sudden revelation of a raindrop.

adamant the statement, the precariousness of existence is like overbalancing on a diving board, an inevitable process once set in motion.

On October 8<sup>th</sup> 1993, on Waiheke Island, shortly after returning from Germany, Gu Cheng fatally attacked his wife Xie Ye with a hatchet and then hung himself. The loss of Li Ying meant exile from paradise. The loss of Xie Ye meant total exile from life. Without his intermediary with life, his fortress hat not withstanding, there was no way to avoid slipping and falling.

The ghost motif is deeply embedded in both the poetry and the prose written by Yang Lian during his exile in Auckland. As a central facet of his exilic poetics it is predicated on the contemplation of the trauma of exile as a version of death, where existence can only continue in a transmogrified state of utter alienation. In this state every aspect of the unfamiliar exile environment not only has to be confronted, but this external confrontation becomes the catalyst for the most intense interior confrontation of every aspect of his function and existence as a poet. By contrast, Gu Cheng's poetic contemplation of ghosts relates to a state of mind and existence which kept the world at a distance both before and after physical exile in New Zealand. Indeed, in its benign incarnation, removed from almost all worldly intercourse on Waiheke Island, exile meant rebirth and fulfilment in an embrace of the natural environment of the island. While in Auckland Yang Lian wrote "everywhere is a foreign land / in death there is no home to go back to," in Berlin, doubly exiled, Gu Cheng wrote of Waiheke Island "That is my home, where my life belongs, the place I love." Unlike Yang Lian's motif which relies on the total alienation of the ghostly from the mortal world, Gu Cheng's tragedy lay in the necessary mingling of these worlds whereby ghosts enter the city. The poem explored above presents the desperate hope that even if the ghost does "slip and fall" he might continue to swim in an intermediate state between life and death. Tragically, in the end, the ghosts of his psychosis took possession of the city of his inner self, making Yang Lian's poetic vision an epitaph for his friend's exile.

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