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Beyond Binaries: Rereading Yang Lian's “Norlang” and “Banpo”*

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This article reconsiders two important texts from the first half of the 1980s by the Chinese poet Yang Lian 楊煉. The first of these is “*Nuorilang*” 諾日朗 (Norlang). The second is “*Banpo*” 半坡. “Norlang” and “Banpo” have played important roles in the interpretation of post-Mao Chinese poetry in relation to the ideological assumptions of the time. Scholars have singled out these two poems as exemplary of two characteristics of Chinese intellectual discourse in the 1980s. On the one hand, it has been said that

“Norlang” represents a kind of subjectivity that is extremely masculine, and that this masculine subjectivity reflects in the poetic medium the modern drive to dominate nature through scientific and technological advancement. It has also been said that the cultural appropriation evident in “Norlang” reflects Han nationalism. On the other hand, it has been claimed that the use of traditional themes and the focus on what was considered a preeminent center of original Han Chinese culture in the poem “Banpo” reflects the desire of Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s to return to tradition and to recover “a lost immanent social value.” This article challenges these interpretations of “Norlang” and “Banpo.” It argues, instead, that in “Norlang” and “Banpo” Yang sought to oppose the simplistic binaries of the debate that was taking place when he wrote the two poems. In “Norlang” and “Banpo,” he counters these binaries through more dynamic, interactive representations of subjectivity and of the relationships between masculinity and femininity, nature and humanity, tradition and modernity.

153

Yang was one of a number of experimental poets who came to prominence as contributors to the independent literary magazine *Jintian* 今天 (*Today*).¹ The magazine was first published in Beijing in December 1978 at the time of the Democracy Wall. Although Yang had previously written poetry, it was only in August of 1979 that he began to write in an experimental style. Around this time, he joined the *Today* group of writers with the help of an introduction from the poet Gu Cheng 顧城.²

The large public gatherings associated with *Today* magazine and other

1 This article follows Michelle Yeh's definition of “experimental poetry” in the Chinese context as poetry that “embodies a conscious departure from the official Communist ideology and a vigorous search for an alternative discourse beyond the pale of the dominant discourse” (1992: 379).

2 According to Mabel Lee, Yang was introduced to the *Today* group by Gu Cheng and in August 1979 began to write so-called modernist poems (1990: 9). “Modernist” here can be taken as synonymous with “experimental” in the sense defined in note 1. According to Stephen C. Soong and John Minford, Yang began writing poetry in 1976 (1984: 69). The nature of Yang's pre-1979 poems is not known, because none of these early poems have ever been published.

more politically orientated groups were not tolerated for long. Registration was made compulsory for magazines such as *Today*, and this was used as a pretext to close down the publication in 1980, although it did reappear under a new name. Despite these set backs, experimental poetry first appeared in official poetry magazines such as *Shikan* 詩刊 (*Poetry*). Between 1979 and 1984, the increasing prominence of the *Today* poets and other writers of experimental poetry caused a fierce debate about their poetry in the official media. During this debate, the new experimental poetry of Yang and his fellow poets acquired the initially derogatory name *Menglong shi* 朦朧詩 (Obscure Poetry).³

The debate over Obscure Poetry was closely intertwined with the broader debates over artistic modernism and economic modernization that were taking place in China in the early 1980s. The debate over artistic modernism was widespread, involving criticism of newly published translations of Western modernist texts as well as Chinese literature and art, but it was particularly sharp in relation to Obscure Poetry.⁴ As Maghiel van Crevel points out, despite ostensibly appearing to be a literary debate, the debate over Obscure Poetry was less about poetry and more about politics.⁵ This was not only true in the case of articles that attacked Obscure Poetry as a form of bourgeois liberalism. The most important critical proponents of Obscure Poetry amongst literary critics in China in the early 1980s, Xie Mian 謝冕, Sun Shaozhen 孫紹振 and Xu Jingya 徐敬亞, all advocated the new poetry for being modernizing, open to foreign ideas

154

3 For an outline of the origins and development of Obscure Poetry see Maghiel van Crevel's excellent account (1996: 21-76). See also Yeh (2003). This article follows van Crevel's reasoning in using "Obscure Poetry," instead of the more common "Misty Poetry," to translate the Chinese *menglong shi* (1996: 73). For a detailed account of repression and relaxation in official literary policy see He Yuhuai 1992.

4 For a fine account of the debate over modernism, see Pollard 1985. See also Barne 1984. For the debate over artistic modernism as it extended throughout the 1980s, see the chapter "Mapping Aesthetic Modernism" in Jing Wang's book "High Culture Fever" (1996: 137-94).

5 For an account of the "Obscure Poetry" debate, see van Crevel 1996: 71-6.

and representative of the new era, in other words, for being ideologically correct. Xu, for example, in his famous essay “*Jueqi de shiqun*” 崛起的詩群 (translated as “A Volant Tribe of Bards”) argued that “the single most important characteristic of these poems is that they vibrate with the spirit of their times” (1984: 60).⁶ Similarly, as Jing Wang notes, Sun’s equally famous 1981 essay “*Xinde meixue yuanze zai jueqi*” 新的美學原則在崛起 (“A New Aesthetic Principle Is Abruptly Arising”) championed the new poetry’s “struggle against tradition.”⁷ As Wang points out, in relying on this rhetoric of progress, Sun’s “critical sensibility” remained “confined within and informed primarily by ideological considerations” (Wang 1996: 143). This blurring of the distinction between economic modernization and artistic and literary modernism was inherent to the politically charged discussions of the new poetry in the early 1980s. The hyperbolic rhetoric of progress used by supporters in such discussions was, in turn, part of the broader phenomenon of the Chinese elite’s creation of a “utopian discourse of enlightenment” that would reach its apex in the “high culture fever” of the mid-1980s (Wang 1996: 1-2).

155

The poets themselves were not averse to this epochal sense of their poetry. Despite sometimes claiming to write “pure poetry,” they exhibited a similar tendency to view Obscure Poetry as part of the historic transformation of Chinese society and not just as an artistic development. From the beginning, the editors of *Today* had stated that they and their young contemporaries were part of the progressive change of the “new epoch” in China. They claimed that to them had fallen “the task of reflecting that epoch in writing” (van Crevel 1996: 63-5). The association that the *Today* writers drew between epochal change and poetry in the editorials of the *Today* magazine was repeated and amplified in the subsequent Obscure Poetry debate. The result of these repeated

6 “Vibrate with the spirit of their times” is a translation of the phrase: “*pumian er lai de shidai qixi*” 撲面而來的時代氣息 (Xu 1989 [1983]: 249).

7 Sun’s exact phrase is “*quanwei he chuantong tiaozhan*” 權威和傳統挑戰 (challenge to authority and tradition) (Sun 1989 [1981]: 106-7).

associations and of the historical events in which the *Today* writers participated was that Obscure Poetry came to occupy an important symbolic space in interpretations of post-Mao Chinese intellectual discourse.

Given the important symbolic value of Obscure Poetry, it is not surprising that scholars have often interpreted the poetry of Yang from the early 1980s in relation to the changes that were taking place in Chinese society at the time. This article continues this approach, but instead of analyzing “Norlang” and “Banpo” as mere examples of the simplistic utopian nature of much of the intellectual discourse of the time, it is argued here that in these poems Yang sought to complicate the binary terms in which the debate over experimental poetry was being conducted.

“Norlang” and “Banpo” were written during and just after the height of the Obscure Poetry debate, between 1982 and 1984, and therefore they can plausibly be read as, in part, responses to that debate. Existing interpretations of these two poems exemplify to a striking degree the general tendency of scholars to interpret Obscure Poetry in relation to the social, political and economic changes of the post-Mao period and to view the new poetry as exemplary of broader tendencies in Chinese society. That is, these interpretations demonstrate the ongoing tendency to read Chinese poetry from this period in the simplistic ideological terms in which the debate surrounding it was conducted. It is, therefore, of particular interest to show that “Norlang” and “Banpo” oppose, rather than exemplify, simplistic conceptions of subjectivity, masculinity and femininity, nature and humanity, tradition and modernity.

Yang wrote “Norlang” in three weeks over the 1982-1983 New Year’s period; and the poem was published in 1983 in *Shanghai wenxue* 上海文學 (*Shanghai Literature*) (Yang 1983). The subsequent criticism of “Norlang”

8 For a general account of this criticism see Xiang Chuan 向川 1985. See also Yao Jiahua 姚家華 1989 and He Yuhuai 1992.

was one of the key events in the later aborted Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign.⁸ “Norlang” has played an especially significant role in interpretations of Chinese poetry and intellectual discourse from the early 1980s because of the controversy surrounding the publication of the poem, because of the subject matter of the poem and for reasons outlined above that made Obscure Poetry as a whole emblematic of the far reaching changes that were taking place in Chinese society at the time. “Norlang” has been interpreted as expressing a kind of subjectivity that is all dominating, masculine and nationalistic. The attitude toward nature and the dominant male “I” in “Norlang” have been seen as reflecting the revived desire in China for modernist economic and scientific advancement in the 1980s. One scholar has interpreted “Norlang” as expressing “the Enlightenment vision of man’s domination over nature” (Lo 1998: 113). Another has described the poem as giving “voice to Han male dominance” (Barmé 1999: 275).

“Norlang” is a long, dense poem. The discussion here will focus on the issue of subjectivity in the poem through an examination of the “I” and an assessment of the relationship between humanity and nature in the second section of the poem, which is entitled “Huangjin shu” 黃金樹 (“Golden Tree”). Some scholars have taken the representation of the “I” in this section as showing categorically the masculine, dominating subjectivity at work in the poem. Kwai-Cheung Lo, for example, has interpreted this section of “Norlang” as putting forward two propositions. The first is that “mastery and possession of pliable natural beings” is necessary to be a “real man.” The second is that “consciousness asserts its priority over nature and turns all natural objects into a reproduction of its will” (Lo 1998: 105). It is of particular interest, therefore, to assess to what extent an analysis of “Golden Tree” supports the interpretation that the poem “gives us a strong sense of the triumph of human will over the earth” (Lo 1998: 105).

At first glance this interpretation seems correct. “Golden Tree” begins by introducing the “I” to the poem. This “I” is then immediately identified

with a “god” (*shen* 神). At the end of the poem, the reader is also told that this “I” is “the true man.” But all is not so straightforward. The god is no normal male human, but is the god of a waterfall called Norlang in the Tibetan part of Sichuan Province. The god in the poem is also the god of a mountain with the same name. The name “Norlang” means “majestic sublimity,” or “male god” in Tibetan. Once all this is taken into account, the question of whether it is possible to interpret “Golden Tree” as a representation of humanity dominating nature is not so easy to answer. To address the question thoroughly, one needs to confront at least two interpretive issues. Firstly, one needs to analyze what kind of interaction takes place between the human and natural in “Golden Tree.” Secondly, one needs to address where the “I” stands in relation to the natural and human worlds in the poem.

To begin the analysis, here is the poem “Golden Tree”:⁹

我是瀑布神·我是雪山的神
高大·雄健·主宰新月
成為所有江河的唯一首領
雀鳥我胸前安家
濃郁的叢林遮蓋著

那通往秘密池塘的小徑
我的奔放像大群剛剛成年的牡鹿
慾望三月
聚集起騷動中的力量

我是黃金色的樹
收穫黃金的樹
熱情的挑逗來自深淵
豪不理睬周圍怯懦者的箴言
直到我的波濤把它充滿

158

9 The Chinese version of “Norlang” that appears here is taken from Yang’s collected poems 1982-1997, “*Dahai tingzhi zhi chu*” 大海停止之處 (“Where the Ocean Stands Still”) (Yang 1998: 59-72). The translation is in large part based on Alice Joyce and John Minford’s translation (Yang 1985c), but it has been modified for greater correspondence with the layout and literal meaning of the Chinese text as it appears in “Where the Ocean Stands Still.”

流浪的女性，水面閃爍的女性
誰是那迫使我啜飲的唯一的女性

我的目光克制住夜
十二支長號克制住番石榴花的風
我來到的每個地方，沒有陰影
觸摸過的每顆草莓化作輝煌的星辰

在世界中央升起
佔有你們，我，真正的男人

I am god of the waterfall, I am god of the snow mountain

Great and powerful master of the new moon

I become leader of all rivers

The sparrow makes its nest in my breast

The dense grove conceals

The path to the secret pool

My passion like a great herd of bucks that have newly come of age

The spring moon of desire

Accumulates strength in the midst of tumult

I am a golden-colored tree

Gold-harvest tree

Fierce challenge arises from the abyss

Casts aside admonitions of timid bystanders

Until my great waves fill it to the brim

Roaming woman, a woman of a glistening surface of water

Who is she this woman that compels me to drink

My gaze holds back the night

Twelve horns hold back the pomegranate wind

Every place I come to is without shadow

Every strawberry touched becomes a bright star

In the centre of the world **d rising**

Possessing you [pl.], I the true man

In "Golden Tree" there is a contrast between male and female, light and dark. But the interaction between these and other opposites is not a one-way process. The spray from the waterfall, which has fallen into the pool, also rises up: "a fierce challenge arises from the abyss" (*reqing de taodou lai zi shenyuan* 熱情的挑逗來自深淵). Similarly, the water that the "I" is

compelled to drink is part of the natural scene of the waterfall, but, at the same time, the “I” is the god of the waterfall. The “I” is, therefore, both subservient to the power of nature, in being forced to drink from the waters, and is also in a position of power over those same waters. More than this, it is possible to interpret the golden tree as the waterfall caught in the rays of the setting sun. On this reading, instead of nature being dominated by human subjectivity, the human and natural worlds mix. The line “the sparrow makes its nest in my breast” (*Quenia wo xiong qian anjia* 雀鳥我胸前安家) also supports the view that the mountain and waterfall are the embodiment of the god and that this god has a close and symbiotic relationship with nature. Interaction between the human and natural also occurs between the woman and the natural surface of a pool of water. In the Chinese, this personification or naturalization is particularly clear in the character for “surface” (*mian* 面), which can also signify “face.” So the play on “face” and “surface” is more obvious than in English. This increases the play on “roaming” (*liulang* 流浪), which in Chinese is etymologically associated with water. These examples show that the relationship between human and natural features is interactive and non-dominating in the poem. At the semiotic level, therefore, there is dynamic interplay between humanity and nature in “Golden Tree,” rather than a relationship of simple domination.

If the interaction between humanity and nature is now clear in the poem, still the question of the place of the “I” in this interaction deserves further attention. The pronoun “I” has a particular significance in “Golden Tree.” Rather than fulfilling a conventional lyric function, the “I” is the god of the waterfall and the mountain of the same name. The “I”, then, in “Golden Tree” is part of nature. It is something beyond humanity. This interpretation is supported by Yang’s own explication of the “I” in “Golden Tree” as a representation of nature. He has written of aiming in “Norlang” to take the “bitter fruits of human life” and transform them into “blazing stars” (Yang 1985a: 162). Rather than expressing the domination of nature by man, as others have suggested, Yang intends the “I” to represent, in his

words, “the transcendent will and divinity of nature” (Yang 1985a: 162). This transcendence can be seen symbolically in the dispelling of shadows in *Golden Tree*. As it says in “*Golden Tree*”: “every place I come to is without shadow” (*wo lai dao de mei ge difang, meiyou yinying* 我來到的每個地方，沒有陰影). Transcendence can also be found in the transformation of “strawberries” (*caomei* 草莓) into “bright stars” (*huihuang de xingchen* 輝煌的星辰). Rather than representing the “conquest and possession” of nature by man, “*Golden Tree*” presents exactly the opposite kind of possession: nature is powerful and possesses humanity. It is true that “*Golden Tree*” associates masculinity with power, but this power is crucially the power of nature, as opposed to human power. This reverses the trope, so common in Western discourse, of feminized nature possessed by man.

The natural world pushes back the “pomegranate wind” (*shiliu hua de feng* 石榴花的風), which can be read, according to Yang’s statement, as a symbol for human suffering. That is, the pomegranate flower implies the pomegranate fruit. The fruit of the pomegranate is extremely bitter, as anyone who has tasted it will be aware. As was seen above, “bitter fruit” is the metaphor Yang uses to refer to human suffering in his explanatory piece “concerning Norlang.” Therefore, the “pomegranate wind” can be read as standing for human suffering. Also, Yang writes of the plural “you” as representing human suffering as opposed to divine nature (1985a: 161-2). At the same time, the opposition between humanity and nature is not represented in a simplistic way. The transcendent “I” is presented as a mixture of light and dark, male and female, humanity and nature. “*Golden Tree*,” then, can be read as an expression of nature, of humanity’s interaction with nature, and of the transcendence that results from this interaction, rather than as an expression of simple domination. In *Obscure Poetry*, as Michelle Yeh has shown, nature is “portrayed in a predominantly positive way and is often contrasted to negative social systems” (1991: 407). The representation of nature (the “I”) as powerful and humans (the plural “you”) as suffering in “*Golden Tree*” is thus in some respects typical of *Obscure Poetry*, in which poets look to nature for

consolation, strength and unity that are lacking in the human world.¹⁰ As the above reading has shown, however, Yang also complicates this approach to nature by foregrounding dynamic interactions between the human and the natural in “Golden Tree.” This interpretation is supported by Yang’s explication of “Norlang,” in which he explains the “I” and the plural “You” together create “a real human experience” (1985a: 162).

Yang wrote “Banpo” between July 1982 and June 1984. Part of the poem was published in 1985 in Yang’s first official book of poetry, “*Lihun*” 禮魂 (“Ritualization of the Soul”) (Yang 1985b), in which “Norlang” also appeared.¹¹ Like “Norlang,” “Banpo” is a historically important poem, in that it is exemplary of the Root-Searching School (*Xungen pai* 尋根派) of poetry. The emergence of this school represented an important development in Chinese poetry in the first half of the 1980s. Along with Jiang He 江河, Yang was the leading exponent of Root-Searching Poetry, which was characterized by an attempt “to redefine Chinese identity in the modern world” by creating “modern epics” that employed imagery and motifs from the Chinese tradition (Yeh 1992: 393-4).

162

Apart from its historical importance in a direct sense, “Banpo”

10 For examples of the representation of nature in *Obscure Poetry*, see Yeh (1991). As Yeh notes, Gu Cheng’s early work is particularly rich in childlike depictions of nature as a source of beauty and consolation (1991: 407). For an in-depth discussion of the representation of nature in Gu Cheng’s poetry and prose, see Li Xia (1999). Prior to Yeh’s article, Bonnie McDougall had also pointed out that nature “offers a refuge to the oppressed and weary” in the early work of the Obscure Poet Bei Dao 北島 (1985: 227). The representation of nature in “Norlang” might also be fruitfully compared to the work of the poet Duoduo 多多, some of whose poems from the mid-1980s resemble “Norlang” in that they represent nature as powerful and animate and, on occasion, employ a singular speaking subject who has both human and non-human properties (Crevel 1996: 195-221).

11 “Banpo” is a cycle of six poems. Parts 1, 3, 5 and 6 were published in “*Lihun*” (Yang 1985b). Prior to the official publication, Yang had already produced a mimeographed samizdat version of “*Lihun*” in 1984 that included the “Banpo” cycle in its entirety (Yang [1984]: 1-29). The dates of composition come from this samizdat version ([1984]: 29). The full cycle is most readily available in Yang 1998: 3-28.

also has symbolic importance because of the way in which the Root-Searching approach employed in the poem has been interpreted as expressing the prevailing attitude toward tradition in the discourse of Chinese artists and intellectuals in the 1980s. As “Banpo” is an even longer poem than “Norlang,” the discussion here will focus on the first section of the poem, entitled “*Shenhua*” 神話 (“Myth”), because it is this section that is most often cited. “Myth” has been singled out as exemplary of a tendency in Obscure Poetry and in Chinese intellectual discourse of the 1980s generally to valorise “the political illusions of searching for a lost, immanent social value” (Zhang 1997: 122). Yang’s Root-Searching Poetry in general and the poem “Myth” in particular have also been interpreted as attempts “to describe the ‘collective unconscious’ of the Chinese people” (Chen 1995: 92, and Chen 2002: 81).¹²

The use of Chinese mythology and historical references in “Banpo” certainly reflects the revival of interest in the Chinese tradition amongst intellectuals in China in the 1980s. To address whether this phenomenon, as it appears in “Banpo,” is really about “searching for a lost, immanent social value,” however, one needs to assess the relationship between history and modernity represented in the poem. In other words, does the poem represent an attempt to recapture a forgotten past, a lost Chinese unconscious, or is the relationship between tradition and modernity in “Banpo” more complex?

The title “Banpo” immediately implies a search for origins. Banpo is the name of an archaeological site near Xi’an where evidence has been uncovered of a historical civilization that might be linked to the ancient myths of the Han people. Since the Neolithic village was uncovered in the 1950s, it has been a potent symbol of the ancient birth of Chinese culture. It is not surprising, therefore, that the poem has been interpreted as a search

12 While Chen does not explicitly mention “Myth,” in relation to Root-Searching poetry, she refers in general terms to the popularity of the myths of Hou Yi 后羿, kua Fu 夸父 and Nüwa 女媧, all of which are present in “Myth.”

for a lost original culture. As in “Norlang,” however, all is not so simple. A footnote at the beginning of “Myth” refers to the poet’s visit to Banpo, where he saw an ancient statue of the goddess *Nüwa* 女媧. The footnote gives the reader an awareness of the modern context in which the poem was written. Just as Banpo is a place where history and myth mingle, the real event of the poet’s visit to this place intertwines with the mythical world that he creates in the poem.

“Myth” presents an “I” that is a living statue, an embodiment of history and the mystical or spiritual aspects of ancient Chinese culture. The use of the “I” to represent a god recalls the same poetic approach as in “Norlang.” But while in “Norlang” this god was a natural spirit of the waterfall and mountain, the embodiment of the god in “Myth” is an object made by human hands, a statue. Thus, the spirit voice in “Myth” allows for interaction between contemporary and ancient figures, myth and reality, rather than between humanity and nature. This interaction is clear in the final stanza of “Myth”:¹³

164

我在萬年青一樣層層疊疊的歲月中期待著
眼睛從未離開沉入波濤的祖先的夕陽
又一次夢見那片蔚藍正從手上徐徐升起

I wait in the layers of ancient green time
My eyes have never left the ancestral sun setting deep in the waves
Once again I dream of that azure blue rising slowly directly from the hands

The “I” that is the focus of the final three-line stanza can be assumed to be the goddess *Nüwa*, rather than the poet figure. One can assume this because of the great age of this “I.” This “I” has waited “in the layers of ancient green time” (*zai wannian qing yiyang cengceng leilei de suiyue zhong* 在萬年青一樣層層疊疊的歲月中).

If this speaking “I” is a goddess, apparently reborn, however, there is

13 The Chinese version of “Banpo” that appears here is taken from Yang 1998: 3-28. The translation is my own.

a contradiction between the end of the poem, the “sun setting” (*xiyang* 夕陽), and the continuity of “once again” (*you yi ci* 又一次). This dialectic between “ancient” (*wannian* 萬年) and “green” (*qing* 青) takes place within these very words. In the Chinese, one could plausibly read this first line of the stanza differently, which would give the translation “ten thousand young” (*wan nianqing* 萬年青), instead of “ancient green.” In this line, then, ancient and youthful, death and birth combine.

In “Myth,” the fact that the “I” in part represents the ancient Chinese goddess *Nüwa* has several important implications. *Nüwa* created humanity and hence she indirectly created the poet who writes about her. Moreover, according to Chinese mythology, *Nüwa* created humankind out of the clay. At the same time, she appears as a stone statue in the poem. Her creation by human hands thus creates a paradox. Both the mythical figure and the poet make each other and share a commonality as makers and as those who are made out of earth. That is, the poet writes about *Nüwa* and so creates her in the poem. At the same time, *Nüwa* has made humankind, including the poet. Also, the embodiment of *Nüwa* is a stone statue, and humanity, according to Chinese mythology, was made out of clay. Therefore, both god and poet have been made out of earth in the world of the poem.

The line about “azure blue rising slowly directly from the hands” (*weilan zheng cong shou shang xuxu shengqi* 蔚藍正從手上徐徐升起) might also refer to another part of the *Nüwa* myth. According to Chinese mythology, *Nüwa* restored the sky to its rightful place, saving humanity from the apocalyptic event of the heavens crashing onto the earth. Reversing this process, the poet participates in recovering and renewing this traditional myth after the Cultural Revolution by writing about *Nüwa*.

As the goddess of marriage, *Nüwa* symbolizes unity between male and female. The title of this poem itself enacts this dialectic relationship between a male human poet and the statue of a female goddess. The Chinese title of the section, “*shenhua*,” means “Myth,” the human story that creates the gods, but its two characters literally mean “the speech of the

god or goddess" (*shen hua* 神話). This is something like "god spell becoming "gospel" in English. Read both as one word and as two separate words, the title makes the speech oscillate between the human speech of mythology and poetry and the divine speech of the gods. In this border realm of the poem, the boundary between myth and reality is uncertain and dynamic.

The dialectic themes that Yang creates by drawing on historical and mythical material in "Banpo" are, for Yang, general characteristics of human existence, rather than being particularly related to an idealized past. In "Myth," tradition is used to create something new out of this dialectic, rather than to recover something old. Moreover, the theme of interaction between tradition and modernity is based on the reality of Yang's personal experience. For example, he has written about his experience in a small village near Beijing during the Cultural Revolution. There he observed the custom of burying the dead with their heads facing west. Subsequently, he discovered that the same tradition was in operation over six thousand years earlier in Banpo Village (Yang 1997: 152). Rather than reading Yang's poetry as a search for a lost past, then, it seems better to understand his Root-Searching work as an attempt to recognize the reality of the modern world, which includes the influence of tradition. In "Banpo," Yang seeks to build a semiotic alternative to the continuation or rejection of the Chinese tradition. He does so through the creation of something new out of the dynamic synthesis of yesterday and today. As the above readings have shown, both "Norlang" and "Banpo" can be read as complex explorations of subjectivity, masculinity and femininity, nature and humanity, tradition and modernity. The poems can be interpreted as expressing a more complex kind of subjectivity and a more dynamic attitude toward these binaries than has sometimes been supposed. Moreover, the interpretations presented here point toward dynamic interactions between the two poems, interactions that add a further layer of complexity to these already multifaceted poems.

In "Norlang," the interactions between the human and natural, and

the feminine and masculine are dynamic. The masculinity that Lo criticizes in “Norlang” is not a simple example of the masculine domination of nature. The poem integrates aspects of masculinity and femininity and, most importantly, the masculine “I” is an embodiment of nature rather than being human, reversing the trope of man dominating a feminized natural world. Furthermore, the centrality of the female goddess in “Banpo” shows that Yang’s poetics do not rely on a central, dominating masculine subjectivity. In “Myth,” Yang clearly aims to create a dynamic interaction between the male poet-creator and the female goddess-creator *Nüwa*, who herself symbolizes unity between men and women. Together these two interactive representations of the masculine and the feminine can be read as creating an inter-poem dialectic. Because Yang genders the deity figures differently in “Golden Tree” and “Myth,” he creates a further layer of dynamic interaction between the poems, an interaction in which neither masculine nor feminine can be said to dominate. Like the dynamic between masculine and feminine, the interaction between tradition and modernity is present in both “Norlang” and “Banpo.” In both poems Yang uses traditional myths to create strikingly modern poetry. Significantly, however, the two poems refer to different traditions. Yang uses Tibetan tradition and mythology in “Norlang” and Han tradition and mythology in “Banpo.” Thus, as with the feminine-masculine dialectic, in addition to the internal dynamics of tradition and modernity in each poem, there is the dynamic interaction of different traditions between the two poems, in which neither Han nor non-Han tradition can be said to be privileged as subject matter.

The representation of subjectivity in terms of the lyric “I” is complex in both “Norlang” and “Banpo.” Neither poem uses the first-person pronoun in the standard lyric manner. That is, the “I” in both “Golden Tree” from “Norlang” and “Myth” from “Banpo” is best interpreted as referring to nonhuman deities, rather than to the poet or a poet-like lyric persona. In this way, Yang creates tension in the poems between the implicit “I” of the poet and the explicit “I” of the deity. Because of this

tension, each poem represents subjectivity as dynamic with neither the “I” of the poet nor the “I” of the deity entirely dominating. Taken together and individually, “Norlang” and “Banpo” can be seen as resisting the binary oppositions of the debate that was taking place when Yang wrote “Norlang” and Banpo,” oppositions that continue to influence the assessment of his poetry and of Obscure Poetry generally. The poems can be read as statements on the interaction between feminine and masculine, humanity and nature, tradition and modernity, and as conscious exemplifications of this interaction.

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