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Identity Politics in Online Chinese Poetry Groups

*The East is black, the sun is bad
China has given rise to a School of Rubbish
You're black I'm even blacker than you
You're bad I'm even badder than you*

*Born as a Rubbish person
I'll die as a Rubbish ghost
I am the School of Rubbish
The School of Rubbish is me*

*In this self-satisfied world
Being degenerate is fantastic worshipping the high is exhausting
Black is School bad is also School
Rubbish, School is even more School*

*I am totally School of Rubbish
The School of Rubbish is totally me
If you want me to quit the School of Rubbish
The only way would be for me to quit me*

Xu Xiangchou, Worshipping the High is Exhausting (崇高真累)¹

Written in May 2003 as part of "Xu Xiangchou's Trample on the People Series" (Xu 2006), this poem is at once iconoclastic in its opening adulteration of that famous paeanto Mao, "The East is Red", and defiant in its declaration of loyalty to the poet's cause. That cause being, apparently, not a political leader nor party, nor even the Chinese nation, but a rather dubiously named Internet poetry group. The metamorphosis of the East from red to black (a morally suspect color in the Chinese vocabulary) would seem an ominous portent of what is to come. All hail the rise of the School of Rubbish (垃圾派), whose members compete to "blacker" and "badder" than the next, who are happy to be "degenerate," exhausted with "worshipping the high", and intent on being card-carrying members of the School until their eventual deaths as Rubbish ghosts. As the final stanza shows, not only is Xu Xiangchou loyal to this cause, he is the cause, his very existence inexorably tied to that of the School: "if you want me to quit the School of Rubbish/The only way would be for me to quit me."

Despite or perhaps as a result of poems such as this, the School of Rubbish experienced a growth in numbers and a rapid rise to fame in Chinese poetry circles in the first few years following their conception on the Internet forum Beijing Review (北京评论)² in 2003. By the end of that year the group had a total of 28 members, and although internal disputes have resulted on two occasions in several deciding to jointly quit the school, it has continued to attract new poets and is still active and accepting members in 2008. This article seeks to investigate the reasons behind the strong identification with the school exhibited by School

¹ All translations in this article are the author's own.

² URL: <<http://my.clubhi.com/bbs/661473/>>.

of Rubbish poets through an analysis of their approach to online literary production and reception. In particular, it examines issues of identity as played out in the three-way relationship between poets, the poetry community, and their immediate context of activity. The association of identity politics with historically marginalized or socially oppressed groups is somewhat appropriate in this case, in so far as the School of Rubbish consists of poets who have been eschewed from participation in more conventional poetic channels, largely due largely to the extremely controversial nature of their writing. In this paper, however, it is less the intention to depict the school's struggle for recognition within a wider poetry scene, and more to focus on the implications of the poets' affinity with the poetry group. Referring to the notion of interpretive communities and the interpretive strategies that hold them together, the idea of group identity is built upon through examining the connections between the textual and metatextual output of the school, and considering how these connections may be influenced by the mode of production: the Internet, and online poetry forums (论坛 or BBS) in particular.

I shall begin by pointing to pseudonymity and the potential for multiple virtual identities as being among the more salient features of participation in an online environment, using School of Rubbish creator Lao Touzi (老头子) as an example. As the functioning of Internet poetry forums has been described elsewhere (Hockx 2005), I will keep technical explanation to a minimum. My analysis of the School of Rubbish falls into two sections. The first introduces the central poetics or interpretive strategies of the group and an early selection of poems produced by the school. The second looks at two examples of wannabe School of Rubbish poets attempting to join the group by posting their poetry on the school's main forum, *Beijing Review*. I conclude by suggesting that the approach to community membership demonstrated by the school is essential to understanding the overall functioning of the contemporary Chinese poetry scene.

Multiple "I"s to the Singular "Us"

Much has been written on the themes of virtual personality and subjectivity in the context of the Internet (for example Turkle 1995, Landow 1997, Ouyang 2003). Possibilities of anonymity, pseudonymity, multiple on-screen identities, gender performance and even identity deception have proved enticing topics for those interested in the relationships between online behavior, literary practice and critical theory. Scholars of the Internet appear collectively swayed by certain theoretical deconstructions for which online communication seems to allow, such as what Sherry Turkle terms the "eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self" (Turtle 1995: 10). Differing theoretical approaches aside, it seems clear that the faceless anonymity intrinsic to online activity differs from "real life", face-to-face social interaction in that it puts identity construction directly into the hands of the individual concerned. Others' perceptions of one's identity, personality or self are governed almost entirely by how one chooses to portray oneself through various forms of technological mediation (digital text, images, sound and video recordings), and indeed how much one is inclined to reveal in the first instance. Furthermore, the level of overlap between this online, portrayed self and one's "real-life" identity can be as big or small as one likes.

Internet poets in Mainland China demonstrate a variety of approaches towards their online identity. At one end of the scale are those whose online identity wholly corresponds to their real life self, down to the use of their actual name (真实性名) and verifiable statements of

profession, background and place of residence. At the other end are those poets who participate solely under the guise of a fictional web-name or ID (网名), and whose geographic whereabouts, IP address and legal name might only be accessible to forum moderators. The choice to operate under a pseudonym can in many cases be explained by the desire to reduce traceability, especially in cases when a politically sensitive or risqué style of writing could compromise the real-life situation of the poet.

A combination of one or more pseudonymous online identities with an intentionally provocative approach to writing can significantly increase the perceived popularity (人气) or symbolic capital of a writer, with ambiguity surrounding a poet's true identity adding to an air of mystique or a carefully manipulated sense of inaccessibility. One poet who knows the benefit of this is the creator and central figurehead of the School of Rubbish, Lao Touzi (老头子, literally "Old Man"). For two years after establishing the school in March 2003, Lao Touzi was an enigmatic figure, closely guarding the secret of his "true" identity and thus invoking much speculation as to who he really was. One result was that he found himself the frequent target of impersonation, to such an extent that in late 2003 one *Beijing Review* forum member even suggested holding open elections for the "post" of "Old Man." Resident poetry critic Zhang Jiayan called Lao Touzi's identity "an unbreakable riddle" (Lao Xiang 2003), and another poet suggested that perhaps he did not really exist at all.

Pidan (皮旦, a homophone of 皮蛋, thousand year-old egg) was the second poet to join the School of Rubbish, on March 18th 2003. He occasionally uses the alternative web-name Lao Tian (老天), is co-forum moderator of *Beijing Review*, editor of the School of Rubbish Webzine, and responsible for writing such important School of Rubbish texts as "On the School of Rubbish as a Movement" (Pidan 2003a) and the "School of Rubbish Synopsis" (Pidan 2003b). According to the group's official records, a third poet, Zhi Feng, joined the School of Rubbish on March 22nd 2003. Compared with Lao Touzi and Pidán, he kept a low profile, adopting a humble and self-effacing tone in his communications, and primarily spending his time engaging in poetic discussion on *Beijing Review* and contributing poetry to the group's webzine.

In March 2005, on the second anniversary of the School of Rubbish and the poetry forum *Beijing Review*, Lao Touzi ended speculation surrounding the person behind his web-name by posting a statement online admitting that he, Pidán and Zhi Feng were in fact one and the same person (Pidán 2005a). He explained that Zhi Feng is his real name, Lao Touzi the original name he used for posting theoretical writings, and Pidán his preferred web-name for poetry authorship and forum participation. He explained, *using the web-name "Lao Touzi" was originally meant to facilitate the writing of poetry criticism online. The only more complicated reason I could possibly give was that I had truly hoped to become a hidden [隐身] or virtual [虚拟] writer. Of course, I have now realized the difficulty of all of this.*

Although here and elsewhere the poet seems to express a genuine (if now disillusioned) faith in the power of virtual identity on the Internet,³ the general consensus amongst other School of Rubbish members and observers was that Lao Touzi had in fact been playing a tactical game, employing shrewd strategies of self-mythologizing and self-idolizing, and in doing so turning his ID into a symbol rather than a person or persona (Pidán and Li 2005b).

³ He has also stated that he sees the "virtuality" of the Internet as a powerful weapon in the fight against the "hypocrisy" (虚伪性) which he believes runs throughout Chinese history and culture. See Pidán 2003c.

Such image manipulation could be understood in light of the commodification of contemporary poethood (van Crevel 2005a), informed by China's increasingly powerful celebrity discourse, and boosted in this case by the relative liberties and flexibilities of anonymous online interaction. The example of Lao Touzi/Pidan/Zhi Feng also vividly demonstrates how the potential for multiple online identities can be exploited by both the individual poet and the poetry group to aid reputation building and the creation of communal myths: Lao Touzi's split personality is, in many ways, a key symbol in the creation and continued existence of the School of Rubbish. Pseudonymity itself may not be new to literature, having been practiced in print culture for centuries. What may be more unique to communication in online poetry forums, however, is the way it allows poets to maintain frequent contact (not just annually, monthly or weekly, but daily, hourly and instant) and thereby achieve a high level of intimacy with their readers and with other poets, often whilst preserving almost absolute anonymity as regards their offline existence. The Internet presents its participants with the opportunity to create for themselves new identities as poets, as literary thinkers and even as community leaders, opportunities that, due to practical limitations such as educational background, geographical location or social status, may not have been possible through more conventional channels.

Interpretive Communities

Pseudonymity and multiple personae allowed Lao Touzi to establish a poetry group, promote an unconventional style of poetic writing with no fear of personal backlash, then join it twice under different names, before distilling and expounding upon his own poetic views and putting them immediately into practice. This he did by both selecting and publicizing poetry of an appropriate style, and by writing such poetry himself under his other two pseudonyms.

In the section that follows I consider the School of Rubbish in light of Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities, looking at textual manifestations of communities on the poetry forum *Beijing Review*. Fish proposes that similarities and differences in textual interpretation can be explained by the existence of communities of individuals who share predispositions or habits and conventions of textual understanding – what he terms interpretive strategies. For example, readers of a more religious predisposition are more likely to read religious symbolism into texts where others might see none; those with a conservative attitude towards poetry may well perceive as nonsense what others view as a brilliant avant-garde work. The concept of the interpretive community not only functions as an explanation for the commonality of interpretation among different readers who belong to the same community and disagreement amongst readers who belong to different communities (Fish 1980: 15), it also accounts for the ability of individuals to employ different strategies at different times or under differing conditions, and thus “make” different texts from the same work – they simultaneously belong to different communities.

In Fish's hypothesis, the communities that share interpretive strategies are rather elusive and difficult to define. They can “grow larger and decline” – alignments are not necessarily permanent, but are always there. Access to community membership is no easy affair, as it is impossible to give an outsider a set of definitions to enable entry into the community, as “a system of intelligibility cannot be reduced to a list of the things it renders intelligible” (Fish 1980: 304). Likewise, if membership is achieved, it is equally difficult to prove, with the only evidence being “fellowship”, or a “nod of recognition from someone in the same

community” (Fish 1980: 173). This is because all acts of communication – even those that appear to suggest community membership – are subject to interpretation, and thus definite conclusions are hard to draw.

As we shall see, the elusiveness of interpretive communities formed and expressed on the Internet is open to some debate; nonetheless Fish's theory is helpful on several levels in understanding the functioning of the Chinese contemporary poetry scene. On the broadest level, contemporary writers of modern poetry (新诗 or 现代诗, as opposed to classical-style poetry 古体诗) can be seen as belonging to a wider interpretive community which views vernacular, free-verse poetry as a valid means of literary expression, and is not alarmed by ambiguity of meaning or unconventional use of language. This community could then be roughly divided into those who write state-approved verse that often upholds the current ideological guidelines of the CCP, and those whose writing is unashamedly individual, non-utilitarian and experimental, with the latter generally being classed – primarily for ideological and aesthetic reasons – as the contemporary avant-garde or unofficial poetry scene. Within this avant-garde are found smaller interpretive communities with their own understandings on the nature of poetic writing, linguistic style, thematic content, and so on. Individual poetry groups such as the School of Rubbish can be understood as one of these more defined interpretive communities, whose strategies for the reading and writing of poetic texts are distilled into specific poetic views and articulated in a variety of metatexts – anything they write *about* poetry, including slogans, manifestos, poetry criticism and theoretical essays.⁴

How to be Rubbish

The School of Rubbish is typical of Internet-based avant-garde poetry groups in that it demonstrates an organized, almost hierarchical structure within its ranks, is able to name with certainty the date of conception and major events that mark its development, and possesses a large volume of metatextual writings. The earliest and symbolically most important of these were all penned by Lao Touzi, of which the very first were his Poetry Epistles (Lao Touzi 2003a), posted on Beijing Review on March 15, 2003: this date was to become the official birthday of the school. They consist of a series of short commentaries on poets whose writings correspond to his own poetic views, the nature of which he explains in the course of discussing their work. Interspersed throughout are statements pronouncing the establishment and basic poetics of the School of Rubbish, which later form the basis of another text, the “School of Rubbish Manifesto” (Lao Touzi 2003b).

The *Epistles* commence with a declaration written in a quasi-classical, humorous style, explaining the potential benefits of participating on his forum:

Using Beijing Review as his headquarters, Lao Touzi will now come forward and play the lute. If you can stand it, then let me play; if you really can't stand it, then it's ok if you block [封] me or kick [踢]⁵ me on Beijing Review.

⁴ Van Crevel explains that “metatext simply means what people have to say *about* poetry, and denotes a discourse that includes one person's inability to name a single contemporary poet to someone else's ambitious, learned genealogy of the entire poetry scene – and, of course, the poets' own verse-external poetics”; see van Crevel 2005b: 2.

⁵ This character *ti* 踢 (kick) is separated by one tone from the word *ti* 提 (bump), and is used as short-hand on forums to express the opposite meaning – strong disapproval.

To play the lute you need to have a score. Personally, I really don't know the score [一点谱儿也没有]. So, Beijing Review has to lend me the score. Everything Lao Touzi relies upon when writing these poetry epistles is on Beijing Review. No matter who you are, as long as you come forward, there will be the possibility I will take you and use you as my score. If I play out of tune then shout; if it makes you happy, then shout; if I'm careless and hurt you, then shout too.

This functions as an open invitation for interested poets to get involved in poetry writing on *Beijing Review*, with the tempting possibility of being noticed and studied from by the forum's creator and main moderator. The name of the poetry school created to uphold the poetic values promoted in these *Epistles* is not mentioned until the fourth section, which analyses a poem by Fa Qing (法清)⁶ entitled "I Caught a Big Fish."

Finish eating the fish, and turn it into faeces – this type of rubbish can only be transformed by going through the anus. If people who write this kind of poetry wanted to form a school, then that school would be the School of Rubbish. The USA has the Beat Generation [垮掉派, literally "Collapsed School"] whose representative figure is Allen Ginsburg. After it has collapsed where does it go? The answer, of course, is rubbish. Therefore, if the Beat Generation walked a beat further forward it would become the School of Rubbish. If modernist poetry is to develop according to plan, it should have a School of Rubbish. Moreover, logically speaking, to compare the modernist School of Rubbish with the Beat Generation should be like comparing the philosophies of dialectical materialism and naïve materialism. In other words, the modernist poetry of the School of Rubbish should be one level higher than the Beat Generation.

Here, Lao Touzi sets out the theoretical foundations and his personal ambitions for the School of Rubbish, complete with a rather idiosyncratic interpretation of Beat Generation poetics. This is likely owing to the mis-translation in Chinese of the word "beat", in which the adjective meaning "tired" or "worn out" becomes the past-tense verb "collapsed," but it nonetheless serves to position the School of Rubbish firmly on the side of the avant-garde, and alludes to sub-cultural tendencies. This position is further underlined through his use of explicit biological terms, effectively an endorsement of writing bodily functions into poetry. The desire to do one better than Beat Generation poets and make an important contribution to the larger goals of modernist poetry – not just Chinese modernist poetry – makes Lao Touzi's Rubbish Poetry an ambitious proposition.

The interpretive principles hinted at in this Epistle are further clarified in a later section, which contains of a culmination of Lao Touzi and Fa Qing's forum-based debate on the exact characteristics and definition of Rubbish Poetry. Here, Lao Touzi builds on his original suggestion of four principles ("return to the original, aim down, not soul, not flesh") to settle upon the following version of three sets of principles. They were to be known thereafter as the "Three Principles of the School of Rubbish" (垃圾派三原则), and still form the central theoretical precepts of the school.

The first principle: return to the original, aim down, not soul, not flesh;
[还原、向下; 非灵、非肉]

The second principle: separate and unified, contrary and common, no essence, no application;

⁶ Fa Qing was later to leave the School of Rubbish on May 18th of the same year, citing irrevocable differences with the group and its poetics. See Lao Touzi 2003c.

[离合、反常, 无体、无用;]

The third principle: crude, unrestrained, both dead and alive.

[粗糙、放浪, 方死、方生。]⁷

He proceeds to elaborate on some of these principles by explaining that "not soul" separates the School of Rubbish from the Chinese tradition of poets taking agricultural civilization as the background to their writing, whilst "not flesh" distinguishes it from the Lower Body school (下半身), who primarily write about sex. As he states, "no essence" and "no application" cannot be satisfactorily explained from the words alone, as the characters 体 (body or essence) and 用 (use or application) represent complex philosophical ideas from China's classical tradition.⁸ Although he does not explain the line "both dead and alive," poets might recognize it as a quote from Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi's text *On Leveling Things* (齐物论). According to Zhuangzi, life is death; birth marks the beginning of the end, and thus human existence is spent in constant contradiction between the two. Ultimately, this phrase emphasizes the transcendental nature of all things, which may form part of the philosophical grounding for the School's emphasis on the end result (waste, rubbish, decay) or futility of all human activity.

In an amended version of the Three Principles included in the prologue to *Poetry Epistle* no. 13, the "return to the original" (还原) of the first principle is replaced with "worship the low" (崇低) to take account of what was by that time considered the central poetic focus of the group. The phrase "worship the low" is created to directly oppose the phenomenon of "worshiping the high" (崇高, more commonly translated as lofty or sublime), which Xu Xiangchou finds so exhausting, and which is seen by many poets as one of the fatal weaknesses of much modern Chinese poetry. The School of Rubbish are by no means the first to emphasize contempt for this poetic tradition – "oppose the lofty" (反崇高) was a common battle cry amongst Third Generation poets in the 1980s, going hand in hand with a similar rejection of poetic heroicism (英雄主义).⁹ This position was epitomized in the poetics of poetry school "Not-Not" (非非), whose name is composed of the two epithets "not-sublime" (非崇高) and "not-rational" (非理性) (Day 2006).

In *Poetry Epistle* no. 10, written about Xu Xiangchou, Lao Touzi summarizes the importance of worshipping the low to the School of Rubbish (Lao Touzi 2003a):

China is a country that has pursued spiritual "loftiness" for several thousand years – how many people can do a complete turn around and "worship the low" instead of "worshiping the high"? The School of Rubbish is a school that advocates worshipping the low, Rubbish poetry is a type of poetry that advocates worshipping the low, Rubbish culture is a culture that advocates worshipping the low, Rubbish spirit is a spirit that advocates worshipping the low, and Rubbish philosophy is a philosophy that advocates worshipping the low.

Such principles – or interpretive strategies – are referred to again and again, not just in the writings of Lao Touzi, but also in the large volumes of metatext written by and about School of Rubbish poets. The doctrine of "worshipping the low" in particular forms a recurring theme in School of Rubbish poetry criticism, with different poets expressing varying

⁷ Lao Touzi asks readers to pay particular attention to this use of punctuation in the Chinese version.

⁸ As in the phrase "Chinese essence, Western application" (中体西用). The origins and evolution of this particular concept are discussed in Li 2003: 310-321.

⁹ Han Dong's poem *Youguan Dayanta* 有关大雁塔 ("Of Wild Goose Pagoda") is often cited as a powerful example of anti-loftiness and anti-heroics in Third Generation poetry writing. See Lovell 2002, and Qin 2007.

understandings of exactly what this represents, both in their prose writings and in their poetry. Although Lao Touzi has his own definite ideas on this point, he suggests in his *Poetry Epistles* that the finer details of the “Three Principles” would be most effectively clarified through writing in the form of poetry, open discussion and debate on *Beijing Review*, thus indicating a certain willingness to share interpretive authority with other members of the community.

Being Rubbish

The first official collection of Rubbish Poetry selected to demonstrate these principles was posted by Lao Touzi on *Beijing Review* less than a week after he announced the founding of the school in his *Poetry Epistles*. The collection, entitled “Ten Representative Works and Commentary of China’s School of Rubbish Poetry” (Lao Touzi 2003b), consists of ten poems or poem series written by individual poets with a commentary by Lao Touzi at the end of each. This text represents, according to the first edition of the *School of Rubbish Webzine*, an important milestone in the formation of the school. The poems and poets included in the collection, in order of appearance, are: “Poet ‘i’ Answers Questions from a Reporter from the Southern Weekend” by i; “Mama” by Ding Mu (丁目 *ding mu*); “What Have I Seen? My Heart Aches So!” by Little Moon (小月亮 *xiao yueliang*); “Madman” by Zhi Feng; “Beast” by Hong Chenzi (红尘子 *hong chenzi*); “No.1 Arse-Wiper” by Pidan; “Life” by Training Piglets to Fly in the Sky (训练小猪天上飞 *shun-duan xiao zhu tianshang fei*); “Why Don’t You Just Get Rid Of Me” by Xu Xiangchou; “Quotations of Qu Qiubai” by Blue Butterfly Lilac (蓝蝴蝶紫丁香 *lan hudie zi ding xiang*); and “Not a Rhinoceros Nor a Tiger: Why Insist on Roaming the Wilderness?” by Guan Dangsheng (管党生 *guan dangsheng*).

As a set of texts these poems by no means represent a unified whole, demonstrating what appear at first to be divergent approaches towards the task of “Rubbish Poetry” writing. In general, however, most adopt a light-hearted, irreverent tone, are written in simple colloquial language and slang, and make frequent allusions to bodily functions, other famous poets and aspects of traditional Chinese culture, all features set to become hallmarks of School of Rubbish poetry writing. Lao Touzi’s application of the interpretive strategies outlined in his “Three Principles” can be observed both in his choice of poems and in the commentaries which accompany them. The following two are typical examples of the style of interpretation adopted in this collection:

Poem no.5: Beast (畜牲) by Hong Chenzi¹⁰

*The day this child was born
His head came out first
Then his hands and his feet came out
But the child’s cock was too long
When it was finally pulled out of his mother’s vagina
Everybody said this child is a beast*

Comments on Hong Chenzi’s “Beast”:

¹⁰ Hong Chenzi is one of the web-names of poet/critic Wang Feng 汪峰, the first group member after Lao Touzi to write theoretical criticism on School of Rubbish poetry.

This beast’s cock must be at least one or two times longer than his legs, otherwise it wouldn’t need to be pulled out; it must be a lot thicker than his legs too, otherwise it wouldn’t need to be pulled out either. The single character “pull” really makes the poem great! My God, just think about it, what on earth will this beast be able to do in the future? Firstly, he will inevitably be ostracized to a certain extent by his family, because he will bring shame upon them; secondly, even those who seek able-bodied men won’t want to seek him, because his disproportionate cock will have turned him into a totally useless piece of junk; furthermore, he is unlikely to get married, because he would need a suitable woman (at least as far as reproductive organs are concerned). I can guess that when this beast grows up the only thing for him is to join the School of Rubbish. The School of Rubbish is congenital; the Lower Body is doomed [垃圾派与生俱来, 下半身在劫难逃].

Apparently this poem does not contain sufficient literary technique to allow for a detailed discussion of poetics, but does point to some of the predominant concerns of Rubbish Poetry (bodily functions and farcical situations) and inspires Lao Touzi to draw a cutting comparison between the School of Rubbish and its poetic predecessors and competitors, the Lower Body school. Following his analogy, Hong Chenzi’s beast can be read as a metaphor for exaggerated sexual prowess gone awry, and the poem’s overall effect is to make a mockery of the Lower Body group and its fixation with sex and the reproductive organs, as demonstrated in many poems written from 2000 to 2003 by Shen Haobo 沈浩波, Yin Lichuan 尹丽川, Li Hongqi 李红旗, Sheng Xing 盛兴, Nan Ren 南人 and others.¹¹ Thus: the Lower Body group is “doomed”, just like the deformed child, but the School of Rubbish, in its acceptance of all that is twisted and useless, still has a future. Rubbish principles of “worship the low”, “crude” and “unrestrained” are clearly on display in this poem, presumably explaining why Lao Touzi included it in this poetry collection.

Poem no.11: “Life” (生活)

By Training Piglets to Fly in the Sky

Training piglets to fly in the sky

Commentary on Training Piglets to Fly in the Sky’s “Life”:

Is “training piglets to fly in the sky” simply the name of a School of Rubbish poet? I’ve noticed that many heavyweight School of Rubbish poets have written poems of this name, why might this be? I maintain that it is not just the name of a School of Rubbish poet but, more importantly, a way of life; that so many poets have taken it as the title of their poems is also because it is not simply the name of a School of Rubbish poet, but symbolises a way of life. This life, in the eyes of School of Rubbish poets, is most definitely an extremely important life. “Obscure” poet Bei Dao [北岛] once wrote a poem entitled “Life” which consisted of only one word: “net”. Times, after all, have progressed. If even piglets can fly up into the sky, then what can that net, seen as so oppressing by Bei Dao, really count for! From this we can see the School of Rubbish’s surpassing of the previous generation. Perhaps taking a poem only one line long as a representative work is rather risky, but Bei Dao’s “Life” was

¹¹ For an introduction to “Lower Body” writing and poetics see van Crevel 2003.

even shorter – only one character long: Gu Cheng's [顾城] "Black Eyes" was not long either.¹²

As Lao Touzi indicates, this short poem can be read as an alternative version of Bei Dao's canonical poem of the same name, and represents an attitude of jest on the part of the younger poet (born in 1982) towards both her poetic predecessors, and a poem which is often cited as a classic of the "Obscure poetry" (朦胧诗) era of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Like Bei Dao's single-word poem, the phrase "training piglets to fly in the sky" could possibly be read as an expression of the futility of life, but the imagery is more humorous than that of Bei Dao's poem, in which the "net" is usually taken as a metaphor for disillusionment or repression.¹³ "Net" (网) also takes on new connotations in the context of the Internet (网络).

The poem is, furthermore, an example of reflexivity in poetry, as the phrase "training piglets to fly in the sky" – whether or not one takes this as a metaphor for life in general – is the web-name of the author. Referring to poets by name is a form of meta-poetry, and draws attention to the poem's constructed-ness. This is amongst the favorite devices of School of Rubbish poets, and can serve several functions. In some instances it is a blatant means of showing disrespect towards poetry foes or already canonized poets, as is the case in many of Little Moon's poems. In "What Have I Seen? My Heart Aches So!" from this collection, the narrator expresses disappointment towards former poet heroes Yi Sha (伊沙) and Shen Haobo, finding more to commend in the poetry of Rubbish poet Guan Dangsheng. She sighs: "Those great poets in my eyes [...] How come they've turned into dog shit? How come they're so shameless and laughable?"

In other cases it can serve as a means of building up myths or creating a sense of intimacy within the group. Pidan's poem series "No.1 Arse-Wiper" (擦屁股的第一), also included in this collection, is a typical example of this, as it is set in a fictional village named after the poet, "Big Pi Village" (大皮庄), and features the poet himself as one of the main characters. The continued self-referencing in the poem helps blur the lines between fiction and reality as regards the facts surrounding Pidan (and thus Lao Touzi and Zhi Feng too): in his biographical introductions he even claims residence in "Big Pi Village". Blue Butterfly Lilac is another poet whose poetry frequently demonstrates meta-poetry characteristics – one poem of his written in February 2006 is entitled "Lao Touzi is King of Farts", in which he pokes fun at Lao Touzi and his attempts to become famous: "When Lao Touzi/had not yet become famous/he often said/if you want to be a poet/who is widely praised by all/the most reliable path/is mediocrity" (Blue Butterfly Lilac 2006).

Reflexivity or meta-poetry – whether demonstrated through name-calling, poetry about poetry or poetry written on the topic of the Internet – could also be considered a way of getting to grips with the materiality of the virtual world of the Internet: a form of engagement

¹² I presume he is referring here to the poem "This Generation" (一代人), which includes the words "black eyes" (黑色的眼睛). Yeh's translation is as follows: "Dark night has given me dark eyes/With which I search for light," in Yeh 1991: 82.

¹³ McDougall and Louie point out that this not in fact a poem at all but a single stanza in Bei Dao's longer poem "Notes from the City of the Sun" (太阳城札记). They explain that the common reading of the character "net" as "a condemnation of the lack of freedom in Chinese life and the despair of those caught in its toils" is in fact a "creative misunderstanding", but do not suggest an alternative interpretation; cf. McDougall and Louie 1997: 433-434.

with the medium (Glazier 2002: 23). In this sense, faceless acquaintances made through virtual interaction are turned into more concrete realities by writing them into poetry – the community effectively "materializes" itself through writing. More than anything else though, it functions as a strong affirmation of community membership, and is a technique that, as we shall see in the following section, has not escaped the attention of would-be School of Rubbish poets.

Rubbish Wannabes

Beijing Review is not just the main location where the School of Rubbish post and discuss their own poetry and poetic ideas, it is also the website of choice for aspiring or wannabe Rubbish poets to display their work and get speedy feedback from already established group members. It provides access, through a series of drop-down and tabbed links at the top of the page, to other websites which act as a depository for "best-of" selections of *Beijing Review* postings – including the original follow-up posts (跟贴), School of Rubbish poetry criticism, "canonized" collections of poetry such as the *Ten Representative Works*, and all previous editions of the *School of Rubbish Webzine*. By reading through these texts, poets who wish to join the group can learn about Rubbish poetics and put them into immediate effect in their own writings.

Among the many Rubbish wannabes who have attempted to gain access to the group by writing poetry in what they believe to be a Rubbish style is a person going by the name Zhou Jun (周军). On November 14th 2003 he or she posted the following poem on *Beijing Review*, accompanied by a follow-up post asking, "Would each friend see if I'm Rubbish or not?" (Zhou 2006).

In order to be rubbish I am rubbish (为了垃圾我垃圾)

*In order to take my seat I take my seat
in order to stand up I stand up
in order to stand up I take my seat
in order to take my seat I stand up*

*in order to die I die
in order to be born I am born
in order to be born I die
in order to die I am born*

The immediate response by someone using the web-name The Poet Believes (诗人认为) was "not very rubbish" (不太垃圾). Another poet, Thirst Quenching (解渴), replied a few hours later that the poem was "forced" (做作), and another (School of Rubbish poet, later to become Rubbish Movement member), Fan Si (凡斯), asked Zhou Jun "do you think all badly written poems are called Rubbish?" to which Shen Wu (神武) replied, "Old Fan, you fell into his trap, this is a famous poem used by this person to make fun of us". Although the last stanza of the poem does appear to have been copied from elsewhere,¹⁴ it is a fair

¹⁴ Internet searching of the last few lines reveals mention of similar song lyrics and perhaps a Hungarian poem.

assumption that Zhou Jun's request for feedback from established forum members was made in earnest.

The only poet to take this request seriously was Training Piglets to Fly in the Sky, who a few days later on November 20 posted in response her own interpretation of what constitutes Rubbish Poetry, entitled "Rubbish Poetry worships the low, the three standards of worshipping the low are [...]." In it she rearticulates the basic interpretive strategies of Rubbish Poetry as defined by Lao Touzi and summarizes by adding her own interpretation. This takes the form of another set of numbered slogans, reminiscent of CCP political policy: "one opposition, three disposals, and nine departures." Yang Chunguang (杨春光), an influential member of the School of Rubbish before his death in late 2005 and advocate of "Post-Political Writing" (后政治写作), clearly approved, stating that "this theory of Little Pig's is the most clear-headed theory in the School of Rubbish, I recommend that all Rubbish poets get to grips with it." Zhou Jun responded by asking, "Little Pig, have a look at my poem, is it School of Rubbish?" Training Piglets to Fly in the Sky did not answer this question, but what does follow is a series of posts from her and other poets asking that "personal abuse" (骂人的话) be deleted, suggesting that Zhou Jun (or someone else) had originally posted a further, presumably foul-mouthed reply which has now been deleted. Pidan's only intervention in all these exchanges is brief, promising to remove the offending post immediately.

We can presume from the responses to this poem that Zhou Jun's attempt to join the School of Rubbish had failed – although the same name can be found responding to other posts around the same time, it soon stops appearing in late 2003, and he or she is not listed as a member of the school. Although Zhou attempts to express a commitment to the school ("In order to be rubbish I am rubbish") and the last two lines ("in order to be born/I die/in order to die/I am born") could be said to echo the Daoist sentiments of the Rubbish principle of "both dead and alive", judging by the responses to this poem, the general consensus was that the poet had failed to meet the criteria for membership of the interpretive community – successful application of the school's interpretive strategies.

Other School of Rubbish hopefuls are even more deliberate in their attempts to join the school. On February 25 2006 a poet named A Feisty Pig (一头血气方刚的猪) posted a series of three poems and a personal manifesto on *Beijing Review* under the heading "Going against the tide: I announce that from now on I have officially joined the School of Rubbish, don't stop me!" (A Feisty Pig 2006). I have translated the first three items in full:

1. Going against the tide (倒行逆施)

*I walk upside down
in this upturned world
using my sordid arse
to catch that
rapidly falling shit
I use my arsehole
to eat it
past my anus, rectum, caecum, large intestine, small intestine
duodenum, stomachus pyloricus, stomachus cardiacus, oesophagus, pharynx and
larynx*

*turning that discarded shit
into food
finally pulling it out
from my throat and mouth
I will go and kiss
those precious arses
use my mouth
to take aim at
their glorious arseholes
take the food and
feed myself
mouthful by mouthful
when I do odd jobs
because I stand upside down
my penis
from beginning to end
points straight up at the sky*

2. My school of rubbish manifesto

Rubbish poets can't be bothered to hide their own opinions and intentions. They clearly state that their aims can only be achieved by using violence to overthrow the entire current poetry system. Let the world's poetry scene shake in the face of the Rubbish Revolution. What the School of Rubbish will lose in this revolution is only their shackles. What they gain will be the whole world.

Schools of Rubbish of the world, unite!

3. Rubbish imagery

*I worry myself to death
because there really is
too little rubbish imagery
where can I find things
with an ugly feeling?
I use my fingers to count
shit, faeces,
anus, arsehole
nostrils, maggots
periods, reproductive organs
bits and pieces on the human body
really are few and far between
God is truly unfair
giving us, the School of Rubbish,
such a tiny bit of imagery*

oh, I forgot
 the School of Rubbish doesn't believe in god
 annihilate god
 fuck him up the arse
 then god in his
 new mirror image
 will appear
 but it's still not enough
 what should I do
 I think so much I nearly lose hope
 then suddenly I broaden my mind
 and think of
 Rubbish teacher
 Comrade Pidan
 what a fantastic image
 strange that no one has used it
 as Rubbish poets
 we will never come across
 a stroke of genius
 more cool or more striking than
 "annihilate Pidan
 fuck Pidan up the arse"

The influences in these two poems are plain to see. It is almost as though the poet (whose choice of web-name is also typical of School of Rubbish pseudonyms) has taken all the archetypal features of School of Rubbish poetry, mixed them up together in his or her own poems, and then attempted to go one step further. The first, "Going Against the Tide," opens with a reference to a poem by Xu Xiangchou entitled "I Stand Upside Down," and uses the theme of physical and temporal inversion to describe a process of digestion reversed, thus allowing him to make copious references to characteristic "low" or "rubbish" symbols, as well as a list of the scientific terms for all the other organs food passes through during ingestion, digestion and egestion. It is hard to tell whether it is intended as parody or serious imitation.

The second poem, "Rubbish Imagery," is classic meta-poetry, describing in short lines, colloquial language and stream-of-consciousness the mental processes of an aspiring Rubbish poet as he or she tries to come up with an original School of Rubbish image to use in a poem. Again, the tone is flippant and tongue-in-cheek, and the concluding choice of imagery in particular – with its desecration of School of Rubbish figurehead Pidan – represents an attempt to break new taboos and thus embody the predominant Rubbish spirit of opposition and destruction, included in some earlier versions of the "Three Principles." Mentioning School of Rubbish members by name is also, as already discussed, the ultimate demonstration of community membership, and is usually practiced only by core members of the group. It implies a familiarity or intimacy with Pidan and thus with the group as a whole. The poet's personal manifesto, too, is characteristic of School of Rubbish slogans in its satire of communist revolutionary ideology: "Schools of Rubbish of the world, unite!"

A Feisty Pig was more successful than Zhou Jun in his or her declaration of allegiance to the School of Rubbish – all eight of the individual responses to this post were positive. Amongst other replies, Blue Butterfly Lilac responded with "Ha ha! I support you;" the First Review (第一评论) commented "no one's stopping you;" Pidan, unperturbed by the violence he had been subjected to in the poem, simply posted "greetings, A Feisty Pig;" and School of Rubbish poet ufo spelt out the general consensus by announcing "I agree: you are now a member of the School of Rubbish!" The whole thread has been moved to the Information Archives section of *Beijing Review*, an honor reserved for poetry, criticism and theory deemed to be of importance to the school as a whole.

The manner in which the poet's affiliation to the School of Rubbish is confirmed by other poets indicates that for these Internet-based poetry groups, membership of the interpretive community is something much more tangible, expressible and perhaps less open to interpretation than it seems in Stanley Fish's theory. Moreover, although in this case the interpretive principles and strategies followed by the group were largely settled upon by one individual (Lao Touzi), when it comes to poetry criticism and decision-making regarding admission to the school, interpretive authority is shared by all approved members of the community.

Conclusion

Xu Xiangchou has made the following assertion regarding the nature of the School of Rubbish (Xu 2003a):

The "School of Rubbish" are several brothers and mates with basically unanimous artistic tendencies who have ended up together in order to facilitate communication and learning from each other. However, the "School of Rubbish" is an open school of poetic art, and can take in new members at any time – you only need to be willing to explore with us, and to have already written works with Rubbish tendencies.

This statement encapsulates the nature of the interpretive community as described by Stanley Fish and epitomized by the School of Rubbish, describing how individuals are drawn together by shared poetic "tendencies" or interpretive strategies, and confirming that community membership is ultimately demonstrated and validated through writing rather than just reading (Fish 1980: 13). Where the School of Rubbish differs from Fish's description of interpretive communities is the way in which these strategies are not only spelled out in manifestos, slogans and theoretical essays, but also actively demonstrated in a number of texts that include both poetry and commentary. This means that those interested in joining the school have ample opportunity to clarify their understanding of Rubbish principles, and more importantly, to put them into practice through participating in Internet forums. Community membership, in other words, often forms the motive behind the application of certain interpretive principles to poetic texts: poets write in a Rubbish style *in order to identify as* a Rubbish poet. Furthermore, mechanisms are clearly in place for the confirmation of community membership – rather than Fish's elusive "nod of recognition", would-be community members have their interpretive efforts picked to pieces by current members, and if they are successful (like A Feisty Pig) are openly declared to be so.

The importance of the immediate context of this poetic activity – poetry forums – deserves highlighting here. The sheer accessibility of information on the Internet, as well as the speed, ease, anonymity and immediacy of online communication, have significant implica-

tions for the development of Chinese poetry and the discourse that surrounds it. In this paper the focus has been on the close connections between poetic text and metatext observable in online forums, and not on any formal distinctions of poetry produced online: the texts examined here could equally easily be reproduced in print form, and do not exploit the Internet's potential for technical experimentation (for example multimedia poetry and hypertext writing, discussed in Glazier 2002). Nonetheless, whilst aided in part by a typically close relationship between poetry discourse and poetry practice in modern and contemporary China, one could easily argue that the Internet as mode of production (Barmé and Davies 2004: 76) has had and continues to have an effect on literary practice in an online environment, not least in drawing attention to increasingly strong ties between text and metatext, and the enhanced community-forming possibilities that they provide.

The focus of this paper has been less on the efforts of the School of Rubbish to be accepted within a larger poetry scene, and more on issues of community identity observable within the poetry group itself: an internalizing, rather than an externalizing perspective. This is at odds with most investigations of identity politics, which usually seek to raise the consciousness of a certain social group and position it within a larger framework by means of demarcation based on social experience, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or other differentiating factors. A similar approach could be adopted in the study of poetry groups, especially those like the School of Rubbish which are relatively marginalized both in terms of the numbers of poets who identify with the group's poetics (28 members by the end of 2003 certainly did not reflect universal acceptance of their principles within wider poetry circles) and the frequently negative reactions their poetic views and writings attract from other, non-Rubbish poets and critics.

A study of the group's interaction with other poets and rival groups would likely be rewarding as regards their attitudes towards other schools of poetry, and how their own poetic identities might be in part shaped in relation or in opposition to this Other.¹⁵ Indeed, the current live scene (现场) of contemporary Chinese poetry is to a large extent defined by its divisiveness, by frequent poetry polemics, and by each poet or group of poets' awareness of their own standpoint(s) (立场) within this scene (Jiang 2003: 556-558). In this paper it has been my thesis that for online poetry groups such as the School of Rubbish, association with the Self of the poetry school, and the expression of this through regular writing and interaction on designated poetry forums, is the key factor in the formation of their poetic identity. Ultimately, this points to the predicament of so many culturally minded Chinese netizens, at once liberated by the Internet's defense of creative individualism and the possibilities this allows, and yet still inextricably bound by the overriding desire to belong.

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¹⁵ Members of the School of Rubbish, for example, have participated in extended online debates with poets associated with the Lower Body school, especially Shen Haobo. See, for example, Xu 2003b.

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