

# The Tension in the Poetry of Malaysian-Chinese Poet Zhou Ruotao

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**Abstract** Beside China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, the development of the Malaysian Chinese Literature is the most vigorous among the other. The Malaysian Chinese literature becomes remarkable due to the outstanding performance of the travel writers living in Taiwan, but in the era of globalization, there are also many up-and-coming non-travel writers, which one of them is Zhou Ruotao. Zhou's poetry are dramatic, some of which are typical ones. When the reality becomes a virtual stage and dramas are staged every day, Zhou's poetry turns out to be an emotional, intellectual, history-carrying, reality-interpreting and image-shaping virtual space (stage). Zhou's poetry also reveals social phenomena like the Malaysian political grimace, the costs of corruption, negligence of the historical ruins and undone justice that seem to be common in developing countries. The poet's writing allows us to see the tension in the dramatic poetry, not making common occurrence equivalence to insensitive. This article aims to discuss how the Malaysian young poet, Zhou's first collection of poetry *The Secret Songs* constructs a world full of dramatic properties and tension.

**Key words** Zhou Ruotao; *The Secret Songs*; Malaysian political grimace; dramatic property; tension in poetry

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## Introduction

Beside China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, Chinese education in Malaysia is the most

perfect<sup>1</sup>, and Malaysian Chinese literature which began in the year 1919 has the most vigorous development and is considered as the representation of overseas Chinese literature. It can be seen through the performance of Malaysian Chinese travel writers living in Taiwan. In the second half of the 1970s, the Malaysian Chinese travel writers living in Taiwan Li Yongping, Shang Wanyun and Zhang Guixing gained their fame and status in the local literature field after winning literary awards from two Taiwan broadsheet newspapers. During the year 1977 to 1987, Shang Wanyun and Li Yongping later joined by Pan Yutong and Zhang Guixing, four of them had won a total of 13 Taiwan literary awards in just ten years, 12 of which are fiction awards from broadsheet newspapers. Their achievements serve as pioneers for travel writers to develop in the Taiwan literature field. The third generation of travel writers in Taiwan who did miracles in literary awards are Lin Xinqian, Huang Jinshu, Zhong Yiwen, Chen Dawei and Xin Jinshun. In year 1987 to 2009, four writers received a total of 11 literary awards from two broadsheet newspapers and dozens of other public literature awards in ten years. Four of them are influential and well-known in creative writing and academia. After the year 2000, Li Yongping and Zhang Guixing again showed their exuberant creative writing ability and won several top-ten book awards in a row which then further enhanced travel writers' prestige in the Taiwan literature field<sup>1</sup>.

However, in the era of globalization where there is advanced internet and circulation of books, the conversation between China, Hong Kong and Taiwan literature, world literature, and Malaysian Chinese literature is increasingly frequent. Many Malaysian Chinese writers who are not living in Taiwan such as Li Zhishu, Lv Yutao, Chen Zhihong, and Zhou Ruotao have also performed remarkably, as they have won prizes in some literary awards at home and abroad. Among those, Zhou Ruotao's poetry is quite spectacular, in addition to Taiwan China Times literary awards, he also won two domestic renowned literary awards, Hua Zhong Literary Awards and Hai Ou Literary Awards. As the third or fourth generation of the Malaysian Chinese born in the year 1977, Zhou Ruotao started to concern about the present and future of Malaysia through his poetry writing in his secondary school period. His achievement is outstanding and successful as his works are published in poetry periodicals both at home and abroad. The famous poet Fu Chengde wrote in the foreword of *The Secret Songs*:

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1 As of March 2017, there are 1294 Chinese primary schools, 60 independent Chinese secondary schools, 78 restructured Chinese secondary schools, as well as departments of Chinese studies in 3 government universities and 3 private universities. National secondary schools normally have Chinese language classes, 3 periods of class weekly.

Zhou's temperament is like an herbivorous animal, but there are hidden sharp teeth in the mouth, bizarre undercurrent in the brain. The colour of his poetry is not displayed at the appearance the words, sometimes through slow appreciation, like a bird watching a snail crawling, and it eventually submerged into the densely shaded world. (4)

However, there was still no scholarly study done on such an outstanding Malaysian Chinese poet. Most of the scholarly research are focused on travel writers living in Taiwan; of non-travel writers, the academic community trended their attention towards Li Zhishu and Lv Yutao. Therefore, conducting a study on Zhou Ruotao's poetry is a significant groundbreaking work. This study will discuss Zhou Ruotao's first collection of poetry *The Secret Songs*, about how he constructs a world of dramatic properties and full of tension through his poetry.

### 1. The Acts in *The Secret Songs*

In fact, the poets' inquiries of reality are the possibilities being in the realities — the possibilities of the present, the possibilities on the scene, the possibilities of aesthetics, and the possibilities of arts. It is because human realistic is also a stage in a sense — a stage where discourses converge. The world is in discourse, and the practice of discourses is increasingly important in three main human practices (the other are material practice and spiritual practice). In this virtual stage of world, Zhou Ruotao's modern poetry includes dramatic masterpieces. A poetry's dramatic property makes it compact, deep and rich in tension. Originally, the term tension is not a concept of poetics, but is more for physics. Tracing the principals of it, "tension" is from Tate (1938) in his book *Tension in Poetry*. Chen Guoqiu cited Tate's (2005) philosophy:

He first named a type of poetry that is dependent on sentimentality which arouses readers' hidden emotion, and he thought these poetry cannot be analysed because the denotation or extension of the language within them is often disrespected; Tate considers this as the common problem of the nineteenth century poets, that they believed that precise language was dedicated to scientists, and the poets was contented to be retreating in the emotional world. The other type of poetry has very clear logical order, the metaphysical poetry. If these type of poetry is not properly written and the original language connotation or intension is forgotten, it may go against the reader's experience

and cause absurd effects. Hence, Tate believes that the ideal poetry is that the outer meaning goes furthest against the inner meaning, without hindering but complement each other. He calls this meaning of poetry as tension, which is the suffixes of extension and ‘intension.’ (70)

When the reality becomes a virtual stage and dramas are staged every day, a poet’s poetry turns out to be an emotional, intellectual, history-carrying, reality-interpreting and image-shaping virtual space (stage). Malaysia is a developing country, but the system is inadequate and the accountability mechanism is imperfect. *The Great Decline of Malaysia* (2016) which discusses the corruption in the country in accordance with a government company’s fraud, has found a rousing echo among the readers. In Malaysia, there often are corrupt officials who face accusations and charges by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), but no one can say for sure how many of the ‘corruption big fish’ are still on the loose. The situation where corruption has caused a huge disparity in wealth and poverty and that people who are poor continue to suffer has drawn the poets to envisage. In Zhou’s (2011) poem *In The Country Where The Bad Luck Comes*, he recounts:

At a night when bad luck came along, and nothing could be done  
 In a cottage, women and children were dreaming in their light sleep  
 Aroma of bread that belonged to no one  
 Death that belonged to no one  
 The two scents inseparably mixed, then covered people who were awake  
 We were still chasing ourselves in the square where pigeon droppings solidified  
 Passing through innumerable vanishing stone tablets and bronze statues  
 Unable to find the bouquet that was misplaced in the previous lives  
 Now the wife shrank in the cottage, another misplace  
 The face covered in a curtain of wrinkles and thin bones  
 Wrinkles and thin bones that belonged to no one  
 Unrecognizable, therefore intolerable (50)

The ‘conflict’ of language in the poem is clearly seen through “aroma of bread” and “death,” and “dreaming” and “awake.” It implies civilians in poverty who are on the chopping block to politicians day and night. Whereas “vanishing stone tablets and bronze statues” implies that the historical heroes can no longer protect the starving and suffering people in the modern times. Thus, “wrinkles” and “thin bones” that represent the vicissitudes seem to be an eyesore in this country, and therefore

“intolerable.” The miserable people have to spread their hands out, in prayers and begging we stay wordless or in the country when all the doom eventually unite magically with us. Prayer and begging toward god and mankind (leader or the powerful) respectively, both involve human dignity and lowliness, and also reveals the people’s powerlessness when the people have nowhere to turn for help. The entire poem inclines more toward tension in emotion than tension in language.

Malaysia has long been a model of political stability in Southeast Asia, but it has changed after the 308 election in 2008. In the general election on March 8, 2008, The National Front Party which held the absolute majority has encountered an unprecedented defeat. Though The National Front has kept the ruling status, but it has lost two-thirds of the majority seats in Parliament and five state administrative rights, and was also defeated in the all by-elections after the general election. The regime of the ruling party seemed to be crumbling.<sup>1</sup> The poet is acutely aware of the paradoxical atmosphere of the domestic politics after the ‘transformation’, and he stood up bravely to speak up for the oppressed people. *Two Overcasts and Rains*, *If a Young Man Died* and *Beima Is Suffering for Visa* and etc. are poetry that care for the underprivileged people and are heart-thrilling through their extraordinary tension.

*If a Young Man Died* is a sensation of Teoh Beng Hock. Teoh was an assistant to a Selangor Malaysia Democratic Action Party (the national opposition/Selangor ruling party) state senator. It was a national sensation when he died of persecution on July 16, 2009 at the headquarter of MACC. His wedding could not be done while his fiancée was already pregnant. No MACC official has been penalized for the death of Teoh to this day and it has raised questions from many people. The poet wrote in a calm tone when telling the sequence of the incident:

He died in the city  
 A bright and clean building with filth  
 .....  
 But his dead body laid black and white  
 On creased and dumb newspapers  
 And we are still alive  
 His death was retold by every citizen  
 He was never a martyr in danger  
 (And the storm has already covered everyone)

1 See Xie Shujie (2011), *A Research on The Malaysian Political Situation after The 308 General Election*.

He worked quietly  
 Never got too noticeable  
 Not to mention in this way (45-47)

Due to the unstable regime of the ruling party, all kinds of invisible interference in rights are everywhere. Zhou wrote the poem with irony; “storm has already covered everyone” implies that a young man’s death is a sacrifice in turmoil of the times and the widespread comments are actually everyone’s self-protecting manifestation. Going into a poem through the poet’s experience and background is indeed an effective way of reading, however, the significance reflected in the excellent work often transcends ahead of its time. Tension exists in contrasting words (“filth” versus “bright and clean,” “never got too noticeable” versus “retold by every citizen,” “alive” versus “dead”), between abstract and figurative, and even between a concentrated imagery and the other imagery of the poetry. These words and imagery embedded the poet’s sincere emotion, thus can withstand rumination. It is visible that the mechanism of tensional language is both binary and beyond the binary mode, not simply the unity of opposites (the principal contradiction of dependency, struggle and transformation), but the interaction of the many factors in the structural relationships. The difference between ‘flesh-and-blood poetry’ and ‘words pile-up game’ depends on the play in emotion. It is evident that Zhou is familiar in this way, and he makes the poem exude unspeakable desolation and pathos.

## 2. Dramatic Poetry in *The Secret Songs*

Almost every poem in the third volume *The Ruins of Ancient Civilization* and the fourth volume *The Secret Songs* of the book *The Secret Songs* are distinct dramatic poems. There are two literal meanings for the term dramatic poem. One refers to a poem written in the style of a drama, and another meaning is writing a drama and enter a poem with the dramatic content. This article adopts the former meaning, which is based on Chen’s (1987) *Theory of Dramatic Poetry*. A dramatic poem is a poem which stands alone and composes of its dramatic properties independently in a piece. In fact, Chinese classic opera and poetry are closely related. There are many examples of conversation, integration and infiltration between the two in terms of origin, stylistic theory or text pattern, subject of the creation, etc., for instance, *Southeast the Peacock Flies* and *Snow in Midsummer*. Classical operas are basically poetical and some even call them dramatic poetry. Since the development of new poetry, the emergence of dramatic poetry has its own literary origin and is the demand of the times.

Beside leading readers into seeing the play, Zhou's poetry also lead them into feeling the fantasy and tasting the philosophy of life, such as *The Ruins of the Ancient Civilization*:

About the decadent thought, you said, and its brilliant conclusion

.....

You entered the market against the wind, many transactions and messages were suspended

The hot stone tiles, the exhibited prisoners and slave girls were still not unshackled

I said, decay is more durable than death, more reliable

Then your eyes shone in the colour like mine

I was doubting, but you explained our religious relations

But the skin colours were obviously different, so did facial features, and you said it's a kind of degeneration

It made the crowd laughed together, and drew together closer

But water wasn't on the street, you said, though there were people who sell goldfish

Still against the wind, you led us to the beginning of the legend

All the sources that flowed through our brows and throats

Before entering the shrine, you remembered to take off your shoes

The face of was blurred, so you recognized the ancestor's rich forehead and lush facial hair

But I pointed at a stone pillar, and my fingers wilted and bent because of the force

But I still described the men and women who were copulating madly behind the stone pillar

The ancient well at the centre of the shrine, full of bodies of abandoned babies, might have the water you want

You look down for a good while, and the wind sobbed at the bottom of the fish tank

And then you said there wasn't a thing at the bottom of the well (74-76)

Mental elements like decay and brilliant, light and dark, gods and ordinary, carnival and degradation etc. have constituted the two entirely opposite upward and downward poles presented by the internal force schema of his poetry, and has formed a multi-level space structure, which the spiritual support of the 'ruins of

ancient civilization' has tended to decay in the end. The poet seems to be the decay-singing person who is standing at the centre of the time storm. Decay is the source of his creation, which he makes decay into magical, into a profound thinking of life. The poet has replaced the symbolism ends, one end is full of symbolism of the desire of classical ceremony and imagery: legend, ancestors, water and festivals; the other end is an indifferent world: ancient well, bodies of abandoned babies and dried up. The gap and the emergence of space between the two ends have obtained the circulated tension. You said there wasn't a thing at the bottom of the well implies that despite the glorious history of the time, in the panning of time, the man will end up with nothing. In Zhou's poetry especially this one with typical imagery, tension is virtually generated, and if it is recited with the music before storm comes or performed in a play, it will definitely let more people see the bleakness of you cannot keep anything and a Malaysia Chinese Poet's grace and bold imagination on the stage.

*The Ruins of Ancient Civilization* expresses the poet's writing intention: writing is a kind of representation for memory, history, ethnicity, and is even a discourse approach used to get involved in the intervention in historical interpretation as in Qiu (1997):

Seemingly, to recall history seems to be merely saving historical data, but these conflicts and vivid relationship of power struggle in historical memory reveals the latent political operation in historical writing: history is not only waiting for rescue, existing past that lest forgotten; history is the construction of present, capital for holding the future. (202)

In fact, the ruins of ancient civilization depicted by the poet is a supplement and recount to the insufficient 'ancient civilization' of the history in Malaysia.<sup>1</sup> When the official historical interpretation belongs to the authorities, the writing of folk history not only recalls for historical memory, but also constructs the discourse of the nation and ethnicity. As Bourdieu says, "Among the construction strategies, the most typical is retrospective reconstruction of the past, in order to meet the present needs" (442). When it comes to recalling historical memory, Crang's (2005) book *Cultural Geography* in metaphorizing 'landscape' is pretty interesting — "landscape as a palimpsest":

1 Malaysia's recent history curriculum textbooks are begun with the four hundred years of the Sultanate of Melaka. The history of the period of India for over a thousand years seems to be swept under the carpet. (See Lew's *The History of Malaysia*, 2017)

The term palimpsest derives from medieval writing blocks. It refers to when an original inscription would be erased and another written over it, again and again. The earlier inscription were never fully erased so overtime the result was a composite — a palimpsest representing the sum of all the erasures and over-writings. Thus we might see an analogy with a culture inscribing itself on an area to suggest the landscape as the sum of erasures, accretions, anomalies and redundancies over time. (22)

The relationship between landscape and landscape-attaching texts which is adding to each other in writing is so subtle. Landscape destruction, erasure and reconstruction or rewriting is a kind of metaphor, when the landscape is incorporated into elements of time and remembered experience, and is not erasable thoroughly, and the so-called site and status of the place are absolutely not merely witnessed. Through familiarizing historical records, forefathers' dictation and etc., and relating site and status through imagination, the ruins of ancient civilization has different imaginary spaces in reader's mind.

Zhou has made a different attempt in his *Conjecture Gurus*, he tries to voice for the characters who are going to be or has already been eliminated by the times, and tries to leave historical memory in the tide of modernization, in the meantime gives records and interpretation to the forgotten marginalized characters. In the era of change, yogi, scripture translator, sword master and etc. who are the mediators that once connected the mystery power of the universe are facing great ecological transformation, have attracted the poet's attention.

As science and technology developed, the originally advantaged groups are exiled to the edge from the centred predominance, as the status they used to establish faced a transient deconstruction. The poet's writing retains their images, such as the sword master, "it is said that his sword was obtained from the corner pawn shop / later in an abbey on a mountain changed the sword to a horsetail whisk / wake up the next day the sword is still in scabbard / he wished to spend the rest of his life with the exquisite furnace / but collapsed in a loud crash with the thunder outside the mountain / the heaven and earth stripping / not wanting to shoot fire and water / all things are like a straw dog being abandoned in the wilderness / it is difficult to find the way back when he went down the mountain" (103), in the end, "his power in sword, got lighter and lighter / light as predestined to lost / light as still can't be played / created from hard work in the oven / ashes" (104). In a few words, the once extraordinary man of God unexpectedly turned into ashes in the

change of the times, and the residual sounds linger in people.

This series of Zhou's dramatic poetry is deeply affectionate in summoning the history and recalling the old friend, but it is also intellectual, calm in narration, and so it is strong in tension. There will be difficulty if these works are to be performed on stage, but it is likely to be a popular nostalgia series.

### 3. Effects of Dialogue in *The Secret Songs*

Zhou knows that the power of a poem depends on how it is expressed, and that what kind of thinking this expression is from. Many of his poems are good at using dialogue and creating dramatic effects. Some of these dialogues are like chat, some are poetic in the use of words, and each has different effects.

The dialogue in *The Circus Went By Kamunting* lead the readers into pondering the fate of the country:

Finally, we came to the wall, and urinated while standing in a row  
 A mad man beside claimed to be from 2020  
 Came back to collect the purebred hibiscus samples  
 After the end of the day he wanted to pin it on his lover's chest  
 We were so superstitious about years, we couldn't help asking:  
 Why not return to 1957, no, 1963?  
 Now, he said, it was the brightest and most red flower season  
 Perhaps, but we had to go to a musical  
 He said: this year, Europe launched a strong Hadron collider  
 Shenzhou VII went up the sky, the space was printed with Chinese shoes  
 But we were not lagging behind  
 The little black holes that the scientists had been hunting for are stranded here  
 He said: look out, high energy and high pressure made the space-time warped here  
 When the car swings, it will go back to 1969 or 1987 at any time  
 We put our thumbs up: rest assured, the Indian brother has a great driving skill  
 A quiver in the wall asked: where is my country in 2020?  
 He shook himself: this, we don't need to know for the moment (32-33)

This poem takes the form of a dialogue by question and answer, and there are message between the lines. The years in the dialogue are actually symbolic, such as "2020" which has appeared twice is actually the "Vision 2020" proposed by former prime minister Tun Dr. Mahathir, "1957" which is the year Malaysia

obtained independence, “1963” which is the founding year of Malaysia (Singapore, East Malaysia Sarawak and Sabah officially joined, but Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965), “1969” is the year the May 13 race riots incident happened, “1987” is the year when rumours about the recurrence of race riots and the people are disquieted ..... back to the “1957” or “1963,” pointed out the degradation of the development of Malaysia, and it can also be interpreted as the grieving for the early years of the nation when all ethnic groups worked together and served together regardless of skin colour. Through the race riots incident in 1969 and race riots rumours which disquieted the people, it can be seen that the ethnical relationships in Malaysia are taken by hands of some schemers.

The series of years, in fact, is a prelude to “The little black holes that the scientists had been hunting for are stranded here.” The Black Hole Theory is the research focus of the scientist Stephen Hawking, he and a group of astronomers discovered some region with strong gravity but no visible celestial object through long-term observation, and called them as black holes. Therefore, “here” refers to “Kamunting,” a political offender’s detention centre. The Internal Security Act has caused a lot of political workers and dissidents who fought for ethnic rights or the people’s equity to be drawn out by gravitational strong small black hole, and some may be ‘drawn out’ for decades. Thus, when every country is looking for excellence in science and technology, Malaysia’s small black hole has become a strong contrast, a bitter joke, and that the question “where is my country in 2020” has no answer.

The poetry *The Dialogue Between The Eagle and The Fish*, *The Dialogue Between The Wind and The Stone*, *The Story* and etc. have dialogues through poetic language, and reflect some thought-provoking philosophies. This is a good attempt by Zhou. In forming tension in poetry, the poet’s skill is so profound that he takes both the denotative meaning and connotative meaning of the poetry into account, as Li (1979) said:

Tension is in the focus of all the quality of poetry, and it shows its great presence and function by ‘shuttling’ in the complex network of relationships. Although we have no reason to put these interwoven relationships into a kind of simple and essential ‘dominant’, because the poetry’s success depends on the combined effect of the variety of relationships, but even if it ‘simply’ sets out from the language of the poetry, we can also find that tension extends in all directions like an octopus’s tentacles. The core of the structure of the relationship is: it must be composed of two or more resistance forces; the

meaning relationship formed by multi-reflectional space; a harmonious order formed by inharmonious elements; a whole of the combination of multifarious dissimilar elements. In the contrasting tension, it seeks for harmony in diversity; in the case of 'error', it seeks for 'truth'; poetry is no longer a straight line, but a multi-dimensional building... (85)

From Li's analysis, the many factors which constitute the tension can be seen: contrast, conflict, contradiction, mutual exclusion, resistance, heterogeneous, complementary and etc., they mutually restrict and create each other, are contrary, but are complementary and are accompanying each other. By closely reading the dialogue in Zhou's poetry, Li's claim is confirmed, that it is like the multi-dimensional building, each surface is splendid.

#### 4. Conclusion

Zhou knows how to establish his own words and deal with his emotion, so the artistic conception of his poetry prospect is rich in tragic tension. The poet is observant of the national affairs and humane subjects, and he is in a country where bad luck accompanies and absurdity are common. Driven by a tragic sense, he integrates different elements to voice for himself and the people, and presents "all the reality and illusion, ugly and holy love and hate / all the myths and history and gossip and prophecy, none is left out" in *The Death Are Yet to Come* (81).

Zhou's poetry reaches social phenomena like the Malaysia political grimace, the costs of corruption, negligence of the historical ruins and undone justice that seem to be common in developing countries. The poet's writing allows us to see the tension in dramatic poetry, makes 'common occurrence' not equivalent to insensitive. The poet is good at establishing perceptual and intellectuality, as pointed out by Ji (1970 4), "'new' poetry is 'new', because of one significant feature, that is, the product of rationality and intellectuality. It is namely the 'emotional escape'." The tension shown in Zhou's poetry shows us the hope that the Malaysia poetic circle is reaching out to the world.

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