

The Division and Reconciliation of the Self: Perspectives on the Poetry of Haizi and Zhang Zao

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Abstract: The existential quandary encapsulated in the phrase-"my inquiry into myself, my debate with myself, my loss of myself, my encounter with myself"-not only reflects the solitary plight of the modern individual but has also become a central theme in modern Chinese poetry. The works of Haizi and Zhang Zao present divergent responses of the "I" confronting both itself and the external world. Haizi's oeuvre manifests a sustained schism within the subjective self; whether through the modernist renunciation of classical elements in his creative trajectory or the inward turn toward self-annihilation near his life's end, the binary oppositions within his work remain locked in a state of unresolved tension. In contrast, Zhang Zao, to a certain extent, embraces the classical poetic ideal of the "fusion of self and object," guided by a worldview reminiscent of a cosmos that embraces all things-an attitude governed by comprehension and all-forgiving love.

Keywords: Haizi, Zhang Zao, Classical Poetry, Modern Chinese Poetry, Self.

1. Introduction

"The self I long wrestle with, I would rather be me"-since ancient times, Chinese literati have engaged in the exploration of self-formation, a pursuit that modern poetry also exhibits in its inclination towards expressing the self. "My inquiry into myself, my debate with myself, my loss of myself, my encounter with myself" constitutes not merely the modern individual's solitary predicament but has also emerged as a significant theme in modernist Chinese poetry. On one hand, the theme of self-awareness leads poets to a profound recognition of their individual existence; on the other, it prompts a shift from pure introspection towards the external world and the relationship between the two. The poetry of Haizi and Zhang Zao exemplifies different choices made by the "I" when confronting both itself and the external realm.

2. The Schismatic Tendency in Haizi's Poetry

Haizi's poetic corpus is generally divided into two categories: lyrical short poems and his "epic" or "grand poetry." His early short poems are characterized by simplicity, fluidity, and abundant imagination, yet they increasingly reveal an irresolvable, painful tragic destiny. He gradually abandoned the "maternal, aqueous love" in his poetry, turning instead towards a "paternal, fiery vengeance"-yet his axe was not swung at others, but "towards himself" .[1]

Interpretations of his poem "Ten Haizis" range from the poetic to speculation about the poet's potential schizophrenia. A single poetic subject splits into eleven "Haizis." Ten of these Haizis form a collective, symbolic of wholeness; they resurrect, traversing the boundary between the living and the dead. It is precisely outside this group that the eleventh emerges-an outlier from the start, "savage and sorrowful," devoid of accompanying light, yet he is the true protagonist, "Haizi." He resists the pulls and shouts of the ten through silence, lets spring pass him by, dwells in the cold villages of winter, observes people sustaining and reproducing themselves, and finally voices his doubt about the dawn-a question that, once posed, remains inherently unanswerable.

"In the distance, there is nothing but remoteness," and "further places are even lonelier"-Haizi's own answers hint at nihilism, suggesting that both "dawn" and "distance" are ultimately devoid of meaning.

By creating ten objectified versions of himself, the poet first establishes a subjective distance between "I" and "myself" for objective depiction, effectively "splitting" the poetic subject. This act inevitably induces pain, thereby intensifying the awareness of self-division. One aspect strives upwards to affirm the divinity of the self, while another descends to chastise the darker facets of human nature. It is difficult not to see in this a process of profound self-scrutiny and self-criticism by Haizi.

Furthermore, a contradiction arises between the literal meaning of images and their poetic significance. Here, spring is transformed into the world's cruelest word-slowly awakening after winter, its diluted spring light penetrating the cold atmosphere-a symbol of hope in other contexts. Yet, it is this very spring that witnesses the true Haizi's demise, clinging to prolonged slumber for its resemblance to death. The deepest fissure in Haizi's poetic world, however, lies between the classical and the modern. Any aspiring modern Chinese poet desires to take up the brush of the ancients and proclaim the arrival of poetry for our era, yet a clean break often proves impossible.

Pragmatically, modern poetry is nearly "invisible" in Chinese language education, both in compulsory and high school curricula. Dutch sinologist Michel Hockx observed, in discussions with Chinese students about modern poetry, that "the vast majority of Chinese readers cannot establish respect for modern Chinese poetry" .[2] These readers seem naturally averse to linguistic structures, preferring to grasp implied meanings. Compared to their European counterparts, who show greater interest in textual and conceptual aspects, Asian students tend to focus on the "message" conveyed by the poet. A common refrain suggests that within China's five-thousand-year context, modern Chinese poetry is often deemed incomprehensible, or that it simply cannot rival the preceding jewels of classical poetry. While contemporary educational practices contribute to this phenomenon, attributing it solely to such factors is reductive. The emphasis on classical poetry

in domestic language education likely stems not only from ideological or nationalist imperatives but also from deeply entrenched and stable aesthetic preferences.

In his "Poetics: An Outline," Haizi explicitly states, "I detest the literati temperament of Eastern poets," justifying this by comparing Tao Yuanming and Thoreau in reclusive contexts. He argues that Tao prioritized literati refinement, whereas Thoreau concerned himself with life and existence itself—a contrast revealing Haizi's distinct bias.

Nevertheless, the art of poetry has evolved organically within this land. The connection between the classical and the modern remains inherently intimate. Despite a trend, initiated by Hu Shi's Experiments, to break with classical tradition, the shared heritage makes clear demarcation difficult. Modern Chinese poetry was largely born from vernacular language and Western influence—the former pertaining to linguistic form, the latter to structural techniques. A common feature of Chinese modernist poetry is its adoption of Western technical devices, while its symbolic thinking, imagery systems, and especially emotional constitution remain rooted in Eastern ethnic cultural traditions. Indeed, in spiritual temperament, a profound bloodline connects Chinese modernist poetry with its classical predecessor.[3]

This overarching context inevitably affects individual poets. Despite Haizi's preferential treatment of Western over Chinese culture, and his conviction that "this is the path of self-renewal for Chinese poetry," no modern poet can completely escape the influence—subtle or overt—of classical Chinese poetry. Even his early works reveal an immersion in the spirit and existential mode of classical poets, indicating Haizi's unavoidable placement within a cultural fissure. Tracing three poems from different periods reveals his progressive rupture from the classical.

"Asian Bronze," an early representative work, features significant imagery like "Asian bronze" and the figure "Qu Yuan." "Asian bronze" carries distinct geographical and ethnic connotations, defined in the poem as the ancestral burial ground and constituent of the sacred moonlight. The figure of "Qu Yuan" resembles a representation of classical culture's tragic end, where life draws infinitely close to nature, achieving an aesthetic that almost "beautifies" death. In "Jesus (Lamb of God)," the imagery of "bronze" and "lamb" can be seen as symbols of Chinese and Western cultural orientations, respectively, suggesting the pain of "splitting" inherent in cultural transition. If the former poem signifies the budding of change, "Embracing Qu Yuan" reads like an aquatic funeral for a past self. "The attraction Qu Yuan held for him was ultimately a descending force, while emotionally he gradually drew closer to a Christ-like personality and cultural type"[4-6], hinting at a possible transformation from the "Qu Yuan" image to the "Jesus" image.

Whether through the modernist forsaking of classicism during his creative journey or the inward turn towards self-destruction near his life's end, Haizi, amidst the division of his subjective self, sustains a state of seething contradiction between binary forces. Despite the collision, they never dissolve.

3. Dialogue through Perspectival Shifts in Zhang Zao's Work

For Zhang Zao, rather than embracing the self-destructive pleasure of "metamorphosis," it is preferable to seek the establishment of "dialogue" through the act of observation.

Confronting the Sino-Western dichotomy, Zhang Zao opts for a more harmonious engagement with both. From the perspective of poetic craft, classical poetry often employs techniques like "shifting scenery with each step" and the "fusion of self and object," emphasizing perspectival change and interconnectedness, which readily dissolve distance and immerse the reader. Modern poetry, conversely, often maintains clearer perspectival boundaries, distinguishing not only angles of viewing but also making the act of viewing itself visible.

Take Zhang Zao's "Butterfly Lovers" as an example. A third-person omniscient perspective enters the poem, observing the characters' words and actions. The "butterflies," representing the lovers' tragic end, "see" them; "he" sees "her" beautiful as a floral candle; "she" sees "his" blurred fate in the next life. Beyond the poem exists another viewpoint; within it reside three distinct perspectives. The reader clearly perceives these shifts and the conscious act of "seeing," even when the acting subject remains implicit, thus completing the observation through consciousness alone. This nesting of observation within observation highlights both the object viewed and the act itself, creating an opening for self-perception. Thereby, it transcends the limitations of the subject, refuses confinement by the monolithic individual, accepts the self being viewed, and achieves reconciliation with classicism.

This reconciled, sometimes even cosmic or historical, omniscient perspective—as seen in "The Swan"—opens the "I" wide, unreservedly revealing "my heart," liberating the self from modernist constraints and allowing it to unfold. It is precisely within this act of viewing that Zhang Zao seeks opportunities for responsive "dialogue" between subject and object, thereby alleviating the pain of division.

Zhang Zao's poetry also frequently features imagery related to "mirrors." The quintessential "In the Mirror" utilizes the mirror to facilitate self-observation. Although he once noted, "the mirror is more terrifying than loneliness: is the man in the bird? The bird in the man?"[5]—suggesting the complex, primal self discovered upon stepping outside oneself, generating ineffable solitude and pain.

The mirror reflects another space, opposing "I" against "I." "In the mirror" she might see her seated self, or perhaps her former selves swimming, climbing stairs, riding horses, feeling ashamed. The mirrored world facilitates the first meeting of I and myself, a dialogue across the glass surface, sparking conflict and fissures in the subject. However, when employing the "telescope of the gods," engaging in dialogue with the divine, with landscapes, pulling back the lens to gaze jointly into the abyss of existence, the "I" finds reason for self-reconciliation. The pain originates not from the self, but belongs to the world, and the fissure is mended.

Zhang Zao, to a considerable extent, accepts the classical poetic concept of the "fusion of self and object," guided by a life attitude akin to a cosmos that embraces all things—governed by understanding and all-forgiving love.

4. Conclusion

Haizi once listed names of "poetry princes." "The prince who never became king" embodies tragedy, whereas Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe ascended the throne—they were the fortunate ones. Haizi's own ideal was to become the king of the poetic realm, hence his later turn to writing "epics" and "grand poetry," attempting to connect human destiny through verse. Yet, like a "lonely stone" upon which "no king built his

throne", Haizi ultimately did not complete his subsequent works. He was undeniably radically divided. In contrast, whether in self-inquiry or the classical-modern debate, Zhang Zao adopted a far more temperate stance. Judging their relative merits is not the point; within the fissures of their time, both demonstrated unique modes of existence.

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