

HOW THE 'GARLIC CHIVES' GRIEVED: A SONG FOR CHINA'S THREE-CHILD POLICY

Annie Luman Ren

IT WAS ONLY FIVE years ago that the Communist Party of China abandoned its controversial one-child policy in favour of two children. Now, alarmed by the ageing population and declining birth rates in the People's Republic of China, the Party further relaxed its family planning measures on 31 May 2021, allowing couples to have up to three children.

Chinese netizens reacted to this new policy with a mixture of mockery and dismay. Among the posts on Weibo, a popular social media platform, was an untitled song written in the form a parody of a commentary on an eighteenth-century song from

the famous novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢 (also known as *The Story of the Stone* 石頭記). The post briefly became a sensation before being censored.

As a way of preserving this response to China's three-child policy, I include a full translation of the song here. But to understand its cultural significance, we first need to go back 3,000 years, to the 'Three-Hundred Songs'.

Legend has it that on the second month of each year, the king of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) would send royal scribes to all his vassal states to collect folk songs. This allowed him

to keep abreast of popular sentiment and any complaints his subjects might have about the governance of his feudal lords. Court musicians then reworked these songs so that the rhymes conformed to a standard dialect and could be performed for the king. Known as the 'mores' of the states (literally, 'wind' 風), they were preserved alongside songs performed during court ceremonies ('elegances' 雅) and state rituals ('eulogies' 頌). Even after the power of the Zhou had waned and its vassal states fought for domination, diplomats from those states customarily exchanged quotations from the songs before turning to business; those who failed to recognise an allusion from the songs were mocked.

Despite the lack of evidence, many believed it was Confucius (551–479 BCE) who selected and edited these songs from more than 3,000 to the received version of 305, known as the 'Three-Hundred Songs' 詩三百. Confucius saw his age as one of political turmoil and moral decay. For him, these songs were repositories of the cultural memory of the Zhou: a golden age in which peace and harmony prevailed. To speak in the diction of the songs was

to 'perform the memory of classical culture — a memory "transmitted not created"'.¹

Confucius was largely responsible for shaping the Chinese obsession with the past manifested through literary memory, a tradition that is very much alive today. As Geremie Barmé has observed, without knowledge of the Chinese literary tradition, contemporary scholars are often 'ill-equipped to understand, translate or engage with such daily essentials as online discussions, coded commentaries or sometimes even newspaper headlines'.²

In a commemorative essay, Barmé recalls his first Chinese lesson with the great Pierre Ryckmans (pen-name Simon Leys, 1935–2014) and how, under Ryckmans' instruction, each word opened the door to 'a mini-memory palace' where 'words, history, literature and philosophy freely intermingled'.³ The character *hao* 好, used in the simple greeting *ni hao* 你好, is made up of two elements: *nü* 女 ('woman', 'female', 'daughter') and *zi* 子 ('child', 'son', 'person'; an ancient suffix for 'a learned man'; 'seed'; 'copper coin' or 'small thing').⁴ It is also the first character in the *Hao liao ge* 好了歌 (literally, 'Hao-Liao Song'), which

is featured in the first chapter of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* — a work recommended as the starting point for ‘any understanding of Chinese psychology, culture, and society’.⁵

In the novel, the character Zhen Shiyin 甄士隱 (homonym for ‘true events concealed’) loses his home and all his possessions in a fire on the same night that his daughter is kidnapped. Bereft and forced to live at the mercy of his tight-fisted relatives, Zhen encounters a limping Taoist on the street, singing a song:

Men all know that salvation
should be won,
世人都曉神仙好，

But with ambition won’t have
done, have done.
唯有功名忘不了，

Where are the famous ones of
days gone by?
古今將相在何方，

In grassy graves they lie now,
every one.⁶
荒塚一堆草沒了。

The words *hao* (‘won’) and *liao* (‘done’) are repeated as end-rhymes through another three stanzas, urging listeners

to see beyond the illusion of earthly ‘reality’. Masterfully translated by David Hawkes as the ‘Won-Done Song’, the English translation further calls to mind these lines from Ecclesiastes (1:9): ‘What has been is what will be/ and has been done is what will be done/and there is nothing new under the sun.’⁷

In a flash of spiritual illumination, Zhen Shiyin composes a witty reply to the song before strolling off into the wide world with the lame Taoist. Two hundred years later, Zhen’s words can still be evoked by those who share his disillusionment with ‘reality’ — in this case, a version of reality enforced by the Party-State.

The untitled song about China’s three-child policy — a parody of Zhen’s commentary on the ‘Won-Done Song’ — is a powerful example of how the past (manifested through literary memory and allusion) is still used to describe experiences of the present. Like the ‘Three-Hundred Songs’, this parody successfully captures the voices of ordinary citizens, whose concerns and frustrations demand to be recorded and heard by those in power.

My translation closely follows the rhyme and metre used by Hawkes. I

have also broken the song into sections to explain its references.

I.

Mean hovels and abandoned halls
Once filled with babies' calls.
陋室空堂, 當年育嬰場;

Bleak haunts where weeds and
willows scarcely thrive
Where school-districts parents
used to strive.
衰草枯楊, 曾為學區房。

Data from the 2020 census show China's population grew at its slowest rate since the 1950s during the past decade. In an effort to boost the birth rate, the government introduced a series of drastic measures to lower education costs, including cracking down on private tutoring companies and severing the tie between home ownership and access to education, thereby lowering the demand for 'school district houses'.⁸

II.

This body of mine is drained of all
vitality
Whilst my spine can no longer
support the future pillars of
society.

一身三高腫痛心髒病, 腰椎早撐不起脊梁。

Those who expound the joys
of having two children and the
merits of three
Even as they speak, my locks
grow white and my hairline
recedes

說什麼二胎好, 三孩香, 不見我頭頂
光, 鬢成霜?

Once, I could read, play video
games, and binge on TV shows
Now, three children and four
elders are all I know.

婚前追劇看書打遊戲, 婚後三兒四
老成天忙。

'Nine-nine-six'; 'Cooling-off
phase';

This is how life passes by.
996, 冷靜期, 死去活來屍骨涼。

At others' short lives I used to sigh
Not knowing that I, too, would
meet the same fate.

正嘆他人命不長, 哪知自己沒兩樣。

According to the *People's Daily* 人民日報, 96 percent of deaths of people between the ages of thirty and fifty in China are caused by heart attacks or strokes.⁹ Many have blamed the brutal '996' work culture for these sudden deaths. The 'cooling-off phase' refers



The one-child policy resulted in a huge gender imbalance

Source: Gauthier Delecroix, Flickr

to the provision in a 2020 law aiming to lower divorce rates. It requires couples filing for separation from the start of 2021 to undergo a month-long ‘cooling-off’ period before their request can be processed.¹⁰

III.

To the couple with a son,
Without a house and car, a wife
he'll have none.

生兒子，要房要車娶不起；

To the bride who met the ‘perfect
one’,
Perhaps your misery has just
begun.

擇佳婿，誰承望遇到一隻中山狼！

The one-child policy, which was in place for decades, resulted in a huge gender imbalance. In 2020, there were about 30 million more men than women of marriageable age looking for a partner.¹¹ This created extra financial pressure on the parents of sons to pay for the bride’s dowry and provide the newly-weds’ housing.¹² Although the competitive marriage market has increased women’s bargaining power, domestic violence and abuse remain a sombre reality for many women once they are married. China’s Domestic Violence Law of 2016 has proven to be largely ineffective, ‘creating barriers at every step, from evidence-gathering, to winning in court, to seeing protection orders properly enforced’.¹³

IV.

Those who complained of
overpopulation yesterday
Want to sow more seeds today.

可笑昨嫌人口多，今盼韭菜長；

But how the 'garlic chives'
grieved:

We have no money, no property
And no juice left to be squeezed!

奈何韭菜汁已盡，沒錢又沒房。

Garlic chives 韭菜 are commonly used in Chinese cooking. The 'Three-Hundred Songs' also mention a sacrificial ritual involving lamb and chives. Because chives are easy to grow and can be harvested many times, in contemporary slang the term has come to mean victims of phoney investment schemes who have been exploited multiple times or sacrificed on the altar of market capitalism. From 2018, many Chinese netizens began self-identifying as chives and referring to China as the 'Chive State' *jiu zhou* 韭州 — a pun on the ancient term 'nine states' 九州, meaning the nation. Exploitation or deception committed by any government, company or organisation against individuals is known as 'harvesting chives' 割韭菜.¹⁴

V.

In such commotion does the
world's theatre rage:
As each one leaves, another takes
the stage.

Why not just lie flat on the floor?
And be done for!

亂哄哄你方唱罷我登場，不如都來
就地躺。

Each of us with that poor girl may
compare

Who sews a wedding-gown for
another bride to wear.

甚荒唐，到頭來

都來為他人做嫁衣裳！

Most of the lines here are taken straight from Zhen Shiyin's philosophical contemplation. Although Zhen was an old man commenting on the vanity and meaninglessness of life, his words resonate with many young Chinese today who are trapped in 'involution' and non-stop competition, and only want to 'lie flat' (drop out and do nothing). The Party considers 'lying flat' shameful.¹⁵ Similarly, Marxist literary critics have condemned the nihilistic undertones of the 'Won-Don Song' as well as Zhen Shiyin's commentary.

VI.

This is why I say:

所以說:

Bewed you not, beget you not:
And hale old age shall be your lot!

不嫁不娶, 芳齡永繼;

莫生莫養; 仙壽恆昌.

These final words are inspired by the characters carved on a jade talisman wore by the novel's protagonist, Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉. Chinese talismans often contain writings, for the written script is thought to have magical power. This is another reminder of the importance of the literary tradition in Chinese thought.

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook: Contradiction*, edited by
Linda Jaivin and Esther Sunkyung Klein with Sharon Strange,
published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2022.05A