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## **Virus as Hermeneutic: From Gu Cheng to Xie Ye**

Nick Admussen

### **Introduction**

Heather Inwood's monograph *Verse Going Viral* contains a fascinating story of the circulation of a poem after the earthquake in Wenchuan 汶川, China, in 2008: the poem, titled "Haizi, kuai zhuajin mama de shou" 孩子,快抓紧妈妈的手 ("Child, Quickly Grab Hold of Mama's Hand"), was shared by text message, read aloud on television, set to music, and recited at live events (Inwood 2014: 170–76). Written as a dialogue between a child fatally pinned under earthquake rubble and a mother trying to soothe him, reproduction of the poem performed many different kinds of work: it triggered catharsis, it signaled empathy with victims, it provided a soundtrack for images of nationalist solidarity with the Sichuanese, and it encouraged disaster relief fundraising. As the poem circulated, readers shaped it to accomplish

that work more adeptly. The multimedia circulation and transformation of poetry is one of the many ways in which what a poem is becomes what a poem does—how a text performs politics, and how the self-expression of the poet becomes a way for readers to express themselves by reproducing the poem. The concept of the virus blurs old boundaries between elite culture and popular culture, cultural production and cultural consumption, and presents new challenges for the scholar: contagion does not obey extant rules of authority. Using the virus as a hermeneutic metaphor, this essay reconsiders the poet Gu Cheng (顾城) by asking what work his poetry and biography does in China today. By reading through the viral rhizome, the essay discovers that reproducers use texts by and about Gu to fulfill self-aggrandizing, patriarchal fantasies, and in so doing elide or erase the experiences of Gu's victims. Because scholarship itself unavoidably participates in rhizomatic motion, the essay opposes the contemporary tenor of Gu's popular reception by reintroducing the writings of his wife and victim Xie Ye (谢烨), and closes by reflecting on the opportunities and responsibilities scholars encounter when they reproduce texts.

The word *viral* is a descriptor of texts that is swiftly becoming unfashionably ubiquitous and ideologically transparent. In common contexts, a text goes viral when readers reproduce it independently of payment or reward, when they use the text to represent themselves or speak their own ideas. Due in part to its affiliation with Richard Dawkins's idea of the meme as a cultural analog to the gene, however, critical use of the term has centered around contested or short-lived means of pseudo-scientific inquiry such as sociobiology and memetics.<sup>1</sup> Inwood, who uses the term as a touchstone for her monograph, pushes back against the biotic expectations the term creates: "The story of the meme does not describe the spread of a social infection; the word 'viral' is also misleading in this regard. . . . To put it even more simply, it is brains that are active, not memes" (Inwood 2014: 154, paraphrasing Burman 2012: 98). The truth of this statement—and it is true—has temporarily discouraged scholars from interacting with and understanding the composition, circulation, and recomposition of texts through the metaphor of the virus. I believe that hermeneutics often takes place through metaphor, and that many critical lenses operate with the logic of metaphor, from literary-historical periodization (Admussen 2010) to genre (2016). Metaphors

draw connections by attracting attention to similarities between different objects: they are always multiple, overlapping, and partial. As Adena Rosmarin (1986: 46–47) says, we learn equally from the aptness of a hermeneutic metaphor as we do from its limitations. All texts circulate: because any text can be called viral, and because no text will ever act exactly as a virus does, the appellation has no categorizing or predictive power. Its use simply requests that we interpret texts by asking how they are similar to, and different from, elements of physical viruses.

If the cultural virus is understood strictly as a metaphor—which Jeremy Burman (2012) has argued was Dawkins’s original intent when writing about the meme—then we can freely and flexibly imagine which qualities of the virus suit the specific, intermedia circulation of texts that we see so often in poetry, and also make hermeneutic sense out of Inwood’s and Burman’s criticisms of memetic thinking. Once all real physical contiguity between the biological and cultural virus is rejected, we can discover more meaningful elements of *unvirality* in texts and their movements, and investigate literary texts in new ways by understanding how the metaphor fails to interpret or describe them. The next section will describe three qualities of the virus: genetic deletion, signals of interiority, and rhizomatic motion. Later sections will use those qualities, as well as their limitations, to understand and ultimately act on the highly viral poetry and biography of Gu Cheng.

### **Constituting the Viral Metaphor**

The first quality of physical viruses that accurately describes texts in swift circulation is visible in the particular shape of the reproduction of the Sichuan earthquake poem. Seen from the perspective of cellular life, viruses are incomplete strands of DNA: they are completely inert when outside the host, and cannot reproduce or hold their own structure without access to a host. As “Child, Quickly Grab Hold of Mama’s Hand” became popular, its author was swiftly established as a twenty-four-year-old man from Shandong province named Su Shansheng 苏善生 (Pang 2008), who had written it by spending about ten minutes revising a poem he had written after the death of a girlfriend in 2005. The viral circulation of the poem,

however, deleted Su, for example, in its much-viewed introduction by the news anchor Luo Xin 骆新, who called it simply “a little poem written for the children who died in the Wenchuan earthquake” (为在汶川地震当中死去的孩子们而创作的小诗).<sup>2</sup> This omission seems to have allowed for the real, problematic author to be imaginatively replaced with an abstract and flexible “voice of the people” that more easily allowed those who reproduced and performed the poem to step into the roles of mother and child, associating the narrative more firmly with its host performers without the mediation of an interlocutor. The same observation explains why much viral material on the Internet today is either affiliated to no author or puts no importance on its authorship: viral texts strip away what is not experiential or participatory; they turn a layered and overdetermined experience into a smaller fragment that can fit inside other discourses.

The particular way in which this genetic deletion enables the viral circulation of the earthquake poem indicates a second quality of physical viruses that will be useful for the study of Gu Cheng’s poetry and biography. That is the specific design of the exterior of the viral envelope, which covers the viruses in receptors that signal the interiority of the virus to its host body, and lacks all markers that might signal the virus as an alien visitor. This is a key mechanism both in the viability of physical viruses and in the ability of viral texts to embody the thoughts and feelings of the people who read them. By far, the most common epithet used to appreciate the Sichuan earthquake poem online is *ganren* 感人 or “emotionally moving,” an adjective created from the verb-object binome “feel” and “person.” This is a common construction for words in modern Chinese, but it nonetheless demonstrates the transitivity between feelings, people, and texts: the poem’s audiences say “I was touched by this poem” by saying “this poem makes people feel things.” When one wants to have the feeling, one reproduces the text, which then engenders the feeling in other readers. There are other reasons an individual might reproduce a particular text, but the desire to reproduce a feeling is a deeply common motive for viral reproduction, whether that feeling is shock, amusement, or, in this case, mourning.

The term *ganren* assumes that a text’s impact on people is the same for all people under consideration, rather than specific to certain hosts, and this assumption is a tool for diverse acts of interpellation. Texts circulate

most swiftly when they contain subtle or overt indications that they are in-group, and viral texts as a group can be seen to delineate cultural borders. For example, “Child, Quickly Grab Hold” is nearly always read and sung in standard Mandarin, even though a realist performance of the piece would perhaps make more sense when read in Sichuan dialect, or at least in Sichuan-accented Mandarin. This reinforces, largely unconsciously, that the text is oriented toward the viewer of earthquake coverage, rather than toward the victims of the earthquake; these differences compress into an implicit “us” that eases viral circulation, giving the host a sense of identification with the voice of the text. In metaphoric terms, the immune system works by both recognizing friendly markers and guarding against markers that indicate foreignness. The immune system is trained to identify specific targets, like dangerous bacteria or viruses; in culture, viral immunities can include gender identities, sexualities, ideologies, languages, and much more. This process of defense against the markers of alterity is one of the many ways that popular culture reproduces and supports hegemony.

A third metaphoric quality of the virus that will be useful when examining the circulation of Gu Cheng’s work and life is the way in which viruses transmit genetic data not simply between organisms but between disparate lineages and species. Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 10) write:

Under certain conditions, a virus can connect to germ cells and transmit itself as the cellular gene of a complex species; moreover, it can take flight, move it into the cells of an entirely different species, but not without bringing with it “genetic information” from the first host. . . . Evolutionary schemas would no longer follow models of evolutionary descent going from the least to the most differentiated, but instead a rhizome . . . jumping from one already differentiated line to another. . . . We form a rhizome with our viruses, or rather, our viruses cause us to form a rhizome with other animals.

This is good news for the intercultural critic—it can help us understand why we feel driven to apply non-Chinese concepts to the work of Gu Cheng, why we are driven to bring his work into English, and how non-Chinese thinking about culture circulates back into China—but their ideas are more broadly useful for any reader or scholar who is interested in antigenealogical

cultural transformation.<sup>3</sup> When Su Shansheng's amateur poem was taken up by official PRC media, it wasn't because they were affiliated or had core ideologies in common. It was instead the reaching outward of the root system that is the rhizome: by visualizing different root structures exchanging and internalizing viral material, Deleuze and Guattari produce a metaphoric model for the kind of unpredictable cross-community movements that readers encounter on a regular basis.

One power of the viral metaphor, then, is that it provides a model to think through the transfer of information between disparate communities. Poetry has always gone viral, from the authorless, endlessly reproduced, and repeatedly reinterpreted poems of the *Classic of Poetry* to the famous competition between Tang poets over whose verses would be most often put to music as performances at a wine shop.<sup>4</sup> And as is true in poetic cultures worldwide, the poems that move virally can easily cross media barriers between the oral, the printed, the filmic, and the digital. In the PRC, there is one poet whose work and life story circulates and mutates vastly more than those of most others: Gu Cheng, who committed suicide in 1993 and whose work "One Generation" 一代人 has been passed among disparate communities for over thirty years. The following section will reread the poem through the metaphor of the virus.

### "One Generation"

Gu Cheng's poem "Yi dai ren" 一代人 ("One Generation") was written in 1979 and first published in *Xingxing* 星星 (*Stars*) magazine in 1980. It is quite short:

The dark night gave me dark eyes,  
but I use them to search for light.

黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛，  
我却用它寻找光明。<sup>5</sup>

Even before considering the real circulation of the poem in China today, the poem can be read quite reasonably through the three qualities of the viral metaphor as discussed above. Because viruses are incomplete cells, with much of their genetic code broken off or deleted, the metaphor draws atten-

tion to the way in which “One Generation” is compressed, small, and frictionless. A key quality of this deletion is the way that the poem represents its audience as a group—claiming to be the words and feelings of an entire generation—without specifying or particularizing them in any way outside the internal, psychological, and tonal. Seated in front of the text with no context, one would be able to apply it to many individuals in many generations. The poem simultaneously says to the reader “I describe you”—signals its interiority to the generation that serves as its potential host—and lacks alien specifics that might trigger an immune reaction. In this limited sense, the poem has the appeal of a good *ganren* pop song, which carries recognizable but vague emotion that can speak to the lives of an extremely large and diverse group of listeners.

Read in its context, however, it seems clear that the poem also served a role as a communication between rhizomes. Coming immediately at the end of the Cultural Revolution era, during which brightness, goodness, and truth were almost exclusively depicted as coming from Mao Zedong and radical communism, the poem inverts the image of Mao as the sun, painting recent history as a “dark night” and then valorizing the trauma that the dark night brought. Gu Cheng and his father suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution, but the poem does not criticize its perpetrators. “One Generation” instead accepts the trauma of the Mao period as a transformative, even constitutive experience. The deletion of specifics in the poem therefore serves a very particular role: unlike other works of literature criticizing the Mao period, “One Generation” could have as much meaning in the lives of the victims of the Cultural Revolution as it did for its perpetrators. It treats the Cultural Revolution not as a change in the power balance between revolutionaries and rightists, but as a set of individual experiences.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, it translates the punishments both dealt and received during the period into transcendental tools placed under the control of the liberated self, and combines discourses of guilt and responsibility that were sequentially separate in other 1980s accounts of the Cultural Revolution.

The above observations do not require the viral metaphor in order to become visible; they are accessible through a combination of close reading and contextual analysis. By examining the real viral peregrinations of the poem through contemporary culture, though, much else about the poem



is made legible, and instead of simply learning about the moment of the poem's composition and first reception, reading reproductions can show us an arc of the poem's work that changes over time. In August 2016, a precise search for the whole first line of the poem on search engine Baidu 百度 returned 894,000 hits, whereas a search for the first line of Bei Dao 北岛's seminal poem "Da an" 回答 ("The Answer") returned 136,000 hits. What is even more telling is that a search for the whole of "One Generation" returns 131,000 hits. This is an admittedly crude form of evidence, but it bears up what seems to be true from qualitative examination of the search results: both poems are important, often-cited parts of the poetic tradition, appearing on educational and poetry websites, but the Gu Cheng poem is additionally being reproduced on blogs, Weibo 微博 posts, magazine and news articles, and many more venues. When it is reproduced in this way, it is disproportionately *just the first line* of the poem. What looks like the smallest possible unit of poetry—the couplet—is in fact two concepts that are separable, and differentially viral.

When the second line of the poem is deleted, and as the consciousness of the historical situation of the early 1980s recedes, the first line is freed to do an even broader variety of work. It appears as the title of a taxi driver's memoir, originally a web series, now in print: *Heiye geile wo heise de yanjing: Ting dige jiang gushi* 黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛: 听的哥讲故事 (*The Dark Night Gave Me Dark Eyes: Hear a Cabbie Tell Stories*) (Ma 2008). The memoir emphasizes the difficulty and poverty of the job, foregrounding the first half of the poem to argue that his hard-fought experience has made him special, and changing the concept of the second line to insinuate that he has already found useful truths. Even when it is not quoted, the second line of "One Generation" is often not severed completely but replaced with some other content, like an advertisement for a travel agency ("The dark night gave me dark eyes, I use them to see the world"), an introduction to a series of lamps for a design blog ("The dark night gave me dark eyes, but these seven lamps let me enjoy what's silky smooth"), or an image forum post full of images of women in black outfits ("The dark night gave me dark eyes, so I flatter them with dark clothes!").<sup>7</sup> The separability of the two halves of the poem deepens our understanding of what produced the cross-rhizomatic power of the poem in the first place: the second line, with

its appeal to hope, is not so dissimilar from the forward-looking, optimistic closure of much official Dengist literature. From the perspective of readers looking to express themselves through the reproduction of a piece of art, the sentiments of the second half of the poem can be easily found elsewhere. But the prospect of having grown dark eyes makes people feel something (*ganren*)—when the calligrapher Li Zhangang 李占钢 makes an artwork of the text of “One Generation,” he makes the phrase “dark eyes” enormous, almost bigger than the rest of the poem (Manfredi 2014: 211). It is the story of individual transformation appearing in the first half, as represented by that image, that appeals most powerfully to the text’s new hosts, and that they express by reproducing the phrase.

Both sincere and satirical uses of “One Generation” reveal that one of its core pleasures today is a type of aggrandizement of the individual. The poem encourages the dream that trauma can make us special or unearthly, the sense that sufferers become unlike all others, that they have some additional internal resource.<sup>8</sup> When taken from its historical context and reproduced without the title, this can be generalizable to anyone who has gone through the “dark night,” romanticizing trauma and distress in many circumstances. The cabdriver Ma Luxia 马路虾 uses the sense of gravity that the original poem brings in order to set a serious tone for his discussion of his job, and the spread of the aura of this feeling of importance is exactly what satirical versions of the poem puncture. The possibility that one would go through the dark night of trauma and end up with useless eyes, or venal ones, is both difficult to stomach and highly likely; it is in the explosive dismissal of the fantasy that we see its sincere appeal. That appeal has real worth: the dream of empowered uniqueness is easily used as a lever to sell products, revealing the poem as potentially libidinal and wish fulfilling. By asking what is accomplished and revealed by genetic deletion, the viral metaphor helps readers understand what feelings drive reproduction of the poem, and what work the poem does when it is reproduced: “One Generation” claims power and insight on behalf of the speaker (or the viral re-speaker) of the poem.

There is another reason, however, that the two halves of the poem are so eminently separable. Gu Cheng’s “One Generation” is made into a much darker, more foreboding piece by being affiliated with the poet’s life story.

It must be difficult for initiated readers to claim that they are “searching for light” in a way that matches the original poem, considering the intense virality of both faithful and mutated stories of the poet’s murder of his wife Xie Ye 谢烨 in 1993. That biographical context—circulated alongside Gu Cheng’s poetry in some cases, and separated or altered in others—has undergone its own viral movement, and understanding the transformations of his biography will be necessary to truly study Gu Cheng’s poetry as it is experienced by its audiences.

### Deleting Xie Ye

Here is a straightforward account of the end of Gu Cheng’s life as described by Anne-Marie Brady (1997: 128), a scholar who studied with him in New Zealand between 1989 and 1993: “On 8 October 1993, on Waiheke Island in Auckland harbor, New Zealand, Gu Cheng (1956–1993), one of the most well-known of China’s ‘misty’ (*menglong*) poets attacked his wife Xie Ye (1958–1993) with an axe and then hung himself. Xie Ye died of loss of blood on the plane taking her to hospital, Gu Cheng died in his sister’s arms after she cut him down from the tree he hung himself from.”

All early descriptions of the events surrounding that October 8 speculate, in some way, about the reasons these events took place, but none of them controvert the half-dozen facts above.<sup>9</sup> And yet today, when one searches for Gu Cheng on Baidu, the top social media results come from question-and-answer sites, indicating confusion unsolved by extant encyclopedias and biographical introductions. One particularly fascinating exchange occurred in 2014 on the Zhihu 知乎 service, when a user asked “why did Gu Cheng kill his wife?”<sup>10</sup> The answer, which as of this writing has nine thousand positive votes, doesn’t address the question as asked. It begins like this: “The fact that Gu Cheng murdered someone has been judged to be true, and there was an ethical determination made in the New Zealand court system as well. I don’t understand why there are now so many people trying to avoid this fact—are they trying to say that people of talent should take control over the lives of others? Let me repost something . . .”<sup>11</sup>

The respondent then pastes in a piece from *Shidai Zhoubao* 时代周报 (*Times Weekly*) criticizing other media outlets for “weakening” Gu Cheng’s

crime (Huang 2013) and a piece called “Mourning Xie Ye” 《哀谢烨》.<sup>12</sup> The exchange seems to have been triggered by a series of reinterpretations of the situation, both in the media and in the question-and-answer thread at Zhihu, that minimize Gu Cheng’s culpability, even to the point of claiming that it was not, in fact, a murder at all. One similar exchange at the Baidu Zhidao 百度知道 site (an answer to the question “what’s with Gu Cheng murdering his wife?”) posts his suicide letters, many of which blame Xie Ye and their housemate Li Ying 李英 for leaving him, then opines that Gu Cheng’s admission to his sister that he had hit Xie Ye with an axe was an attempt to save Xie’s life by provoking his sister to call an ambulance. It concludes, “I think Gu Cheng was a pretty good guy” (我觉得, 顾城, 挺好的).<sup>13</sup>

It is easy, while reading these paratexts, to simply echo Jean Baudrillard (1988: 167), reading them as “hyperreal . . . sheltered from . . . any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for . . . the simulated generation of difference.” The viral metaphor, however, draws our attention not to the relationship between the virus and its origins, but that between the virus and the host. Question-and-answer sites may be commodified simulations of knowledge, neither verifiable nor designed to be verified, but they do contain the experiences of readers, the facts of the interaction between Gu Cheng’s biography and the public. The viral metaphor makes us sensitive immediately to a genetic deletion in progress: readers are losing, over time, certain details of Gu Cheng’s life. The logic of the metaphor raises the possibility that the suppression of those details eases or improves the satisfying reproduction of the story.

A careful examination of the narratives available shows a clear pattern: what is not included in these contemporary viral stories of Gu Cheng’s life are facts, quotations, or details of his biography that come through his wife and victim, Xie Ye. As she had told several friends and acquaintances, Gu Cheng had tried to kill her once before, in Germany (Brady 1997: 132; Li 1999: 248). Wolfgang Kubin writes that she openly feared disobeying or escaping Gu because he had threatened to harm their son Samuel in retribution (Li 1999: 252), as he had done in the past. In work published before 2000, there is no lack of evidence and opinion in Chinese pointing to Gu Cheng’s guilt as seen from Xie Ye’s perspective: in 1994, for example, a magazine article pointed out that narratives focusing around a lover’s quar-

rel overlooked that Xie Ye was “not Gu Cheng’s object to own” and that the love between them was “unhealthy” because of Gu Cheng’s habit of restricting her activity, his “endless jealousy and physical abuse” (Yu 1994: 41–42). Li Ying’s 1995 book corroborates Xie Ye’s letters and statements involving Gu Cheng’s violence toward Samuel (Mai 1995: 141). These narratives were an important part of the discourse around Gu Cheng in the 1990s, and have slowly been excised from reproductions of his biography as it circulates from medium to medium, age to age.

The question for the epidemiologist is this: why does deleting Xie Ye make Gu’s story more appealing to audiences, and which of these texts are circulating most fluidly? By these standards, critical attention is drawn to an otherwise quite forgettable film: Casey Chan 陈丽英’s 1998 biopic *The Poet*, whose Chinese title, 顾城别恋, can be translated either as *Gu Cheng Says Goodbye to Love* or *Gu Cheng’s Other Love*. The film follows Gu Cheng from his boyhood in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, through his first encounters with Xie Ye and Li Ying, and their life together in New Zealand; it then records his final days. The tenor of the narrative is visible in the two different poster treatments that were used to publicize the movie: both have a still from the film showing Gu Cheng, walking alone in a broad field toward the lone tree from which he will hang himself. Atop that, in the sky above the horizon and the film’s title, one poster shows a huge headshot of Stephen Fung 冯德伦, who plays Gu Cheng, and the other shows Fung lying in a field underneath a nude Ayako Morino 森野文子, who plays Li Ying. As the film progresses, these two themes are inextricable: the genius and strangeness (represented by the hanging tree and the enormous, floating head) of Gu Cheng both enables and justifies his open sexual relationship with Li Ying during his marriage to Xie Ye.

The film creates and crafts each of its female characters almost exclusively in regard to their utility in the life of Gu Cheng, and their desirability on screen. Xie Ye is the maternal and supportive influence: her first appearance in the film shows her watching with joy as a young mother in a train station nurses her infant. Later, she attends a reading of Gu Cheng’s in Germany, and after he finishes his poem she breaks the stunned silence of the German audience (which has received no translation of the poem) by bursting into happy applause. She is never shown composing poetry or the co-written

book *Ying'er* 英儿 (Gu and Lei 1993); she is only ever shown asking Gu Cheng for help completing poems, or typing as he dictates. Meanwhile, in Li Ying's first scene, she has gotten caught in the rain and has stripped off her clothes in Gu Cheng's house when he surprises her; on her first night in New Zealand, rather than reflecting her claim that she was forced to have sex with Gu Cheng, the film depicts her coquettishly asking Gu to bring her soap while she bathed. What was, by most accounts, an avant-garde and largely unscripted life led between three intellectuals with a complex set of ideological, historical, psychological, and economic problems is filmed as a classic struggle between virgin and whore. Xie Ye warms the heart by doting on her son Samuel while Li Ying fires the loins with her sexual adventurousness; the plot is driven by their competition for the attention of Gu Cheng, whose talent is the film's real prize.<sup>14</sup> The tragedy of the film is that Li Ying, unlike the steadfast Xie Ye, escaped instead of remaining in the tripolar relationship that Gu wanted.

The fact pattern of Gu Cheng's life presents an almost insurmountable problem to this narrative. Gu Cheng's relationships with women were consistently nonconsensual, codependent, and violent; his decisions to threaten harm toward his son, to chase Li Ying as she fled him, or to negotiate for extra time in his failing marriage to Xie Ye seem quite clearly to be as much about a passion for control as they are a failure to control passion. *Gu Cheng Says Goodbye To Love* fixes this conceptual problem by staying consistently inside Gu Cheng's subjectivity, painting him as deranged and fascinated by suicide. Xie Ye's death takes place in just under two minutes of screen time, during which Gu tells her "You'll never take him away" (你永远也不能带走他), baselessly insinuating that Gu's underlying motive was the fear of losing custody of his son. After the act is complete, Gu visibly shakes off the experience and the real climax of the film begins: his long lyric walk to the hanging tree, set to melodramatic orchestral music and accompanied by a dramatic reading of his poem "Mu chuang" 墓床 ("Grave Bed"), a peaceful and resigned piece, which starts "I know death approaches . . . it's not tragic" (Gu 2005: 146), as if a tragedy hadn't already taken place. This is the sharpest moment of the deletion of Xie Ye: the film chooses not to explain the murder or situate it in any reasonable context, but instead simply deemphasizes it. Putting a fine point on its allegiance to its own obsessions, over

the end credits the film plays a song by Kit Chan 陈洁仪 called “Ai liang ge ren” 爱两个人, or “Loving Two People.”

Watching *Gu Cheng Says Goodbye to Love*, it is all too clear why Xie Ye recedes into the background of the story. The film exemplifies Laura Mulvey’s classic 1975 essay on the male gaze in film: both the audience and Gu Cheng act as “obsessive voyeurs” (9) of Li Ying’s body, and “the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (11). We remain in Gu Cheng’s subjectivity, shattered as it is, and “the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (12). The appeal of the film—and the reason the final suicide is so artfully shot, the hanging tree almost triumphantly framed as a lifelong goal—is its fantasy of power. Power over women like Li Ying and Xie Ye coincides, not figuratively but literally, with Gu Cheng’s power over his own death. Michelle Yeh (1996: 63) typifies some readers of the life of Gu Cheng as seeing “in him a romantic genius beyond the laws of this world”: in addition to the transcendental “cult” quality of this attitude that she identifies, there is a strong propensity toward the libidinal. For those who identify with Gu Cheng—as unsteady and misunderstood, as traumatized by the Cultural Revolution, or simply as a heterosexual man with boundary-crossing desires—there is a dark liberation in watching him do essentially as he pleases at every turn, unruffled by economic, familial, and moral responsibilities.

The viral metaphor allows us to visualize the construction of this film as one that wrapped the contradictory and unclear facts of Gu Cheng’s life in an in-group appeal to male power and heterosexual satisfaction: patriarchy, in the guise of an immune system keyed to reject any foreign body containing female subjectivity, distinguishes between texts that profitably represent male selves and those that destabilize ideas of male identity and potency. Many details of Gu Cheng’s life counter the feeling of creativity and transcendental freedom that the film tries to create, such as his dependence on Xie Ye to complete basic daily tasks, or the fact that both Li Ying and Xie Ye were prevented from leaving him by his combination of pleading and threats of violence.<sup>15</sup> In order to make him a satisfying avatar, Gu cannot be depicted as a tormentor or a source of drudgery: Xie Ye, therefore, who

repeatedly spoke of abuse at the hands of Gu Cheng, has a bit of her story broken off with every retelling.

The multimedia motion of the story—from news reports to a series of tell-all books to a film—allows those who reproduce it to add visual, narrative, or conceptual material in a way that is deeply creative, but carries the authority of reproduction and translation. *Gu Cheng Says Goodbye to Love* is notable because its images and themes reappear in so many ensuing popular works on the poet. A retelling of his life in a documentary for a series called *Yishu chuanqi* 艺术传奇 (*Legends of Art*, Chen 2010) focuses on his poetry as an outpouring of a romanticized mental illness. Scenes from *Goodbye to Love*, standing in for documentary evidence, are cut through with his poems and drawings reproduced on a grainy, scratchy film stock that's used in horror movies. Both are accompanied by cartoonishly ominous music. The narrator closely tracks Gu Cheng's subjectivity, and also erases Xie Ye: he describes the intensity of Gu Cheng's love for her, and his extreme sensitivity to women, as factors that unhinged him. "Legends of Art" goes further than *Gu Cheng Says Goodbye to Love*, though, in remaking the factual record, asserting that there is no direct evidence that Gu Cheng murdered his wife, and cites the phone call to his sister after the axe attack as evidence that he wanted someone to get Xie Ye medical attention—the argument that allowed the Baidu Zhidao user to conclude that Gu Cheng was a "good guy." This new argument is supported by the concepts encoded in the imagery and cinematography of *Goodbye to Love*: Stephen Fung's half-insane, half-sympathetic rendition of Gu Cheng, the romance and beauty of the depiction of Waiheke Island, and the beaming, adoring faces of the film's female characters are all elements created for the feature film's retelling that are reproduced in television documentaries as if they are part of the original story.

There is an underlying, elemental engine shared between the deletions and additions that affect Gu Cheng's biography and those that speed the circulation of "One Generation." When Obscure poets represent individual human subjectivity after the attack on the Maoist mass subject, they do so in part by producing new subjectivities for the reader to adopt, identities that can virally cross the membrane between other and self. The way in which Gu Cheng's unexpurgated story demonstrates the excesses and limits of his



subjectivity fights the drive to believe in the uniqueness, value, and underlying power of the type of individual depicted in his art. The power to search for truth that the “dark eyes” of “One Generation” grant the individual is comparable to the fantasy of Gu Cheng’s power over poetry, over women, and over human mortality. The excised story of Xie Ye raises questions about what a subject does, or should do, with its freedom, and provokes a cognizance of the way in which unrestrained self-satisfaction either submits to group ethics or dismantles social systems. It is the deletion of these complex considerations that facilitates the reproduction and consumption of the remnant of the Gu Cheng story.

### **Brains, Not Memes**

The preceding shows some ways in which the viral metaphor can help analysts interpret and understand texts. By identifying the aggrandizement of the individual that is a key theme of Gu Cheng’s most famous verse, and relating it to patriarchal themes in his popular biography, this discussion hopefully prevents readers from reproducing those themes in the further circulations of “One Generation.” The work of the essay so far is a kind of inoculation: it is possible to identify with and share a feeling of self with a story about powerful “dark eyes” or a poet who breaks boundaries of monogamy, but many fewer people would identify with these words and stories if they were connected to stories of domestic abuse.

Hidden in the biotic language of the essay so far, though, is a form of inequity that requires a return to the core limitation of the viral metaphor in Inwood’s (2014: 154) terms: “it is brains that are active, not memes.” The metaphor compares a text to a pathogen and a reader to an infected cell; it contains no term for the agency of those who reproduce and transform viral media. The suppression of this brand of agency is especially problematic because “the current moment of media change is reaffirming the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture” (Jenkins 2006: 132). To dehumanize viral producers is to participate in a long tradition of silencing participants in popular culture. Stuart Hall (1998: 444) points out the way in which Marxist models of popular audiences as passive can, in certain cases, be deeply unsocialist. Ien Ang (1988: 184–85) outlines the real

and potential political differences between feminism and women, and the anxiety those conflicts produce. In categorizing or describing the people who make culture popular, critics replace the thoughts and feelings of a very large, very poorly understood group of makers with their own interpretation of popular ideology; they hide their own agency under claims to represent the worker, the woman, or, in this case, the viral reproducer. The patriarchy and aggrandizement in the viral circulation of Gu Cheng's life and work (and the satire they generate) are not natural or spontaneous occurrences: they are creative, partially accurate interpretations of preexisting texts that are undertaken by people both inside and outside cultural industries. By representing their undertaking as the work of subsentient cell structures, the viral metaphor claims substantial and obscured power for the critic, who becomes a kind of powerful scientist, able to analyze and conceptually constitute the social body.

The illusion of public passivity and scholarly agency implicit in the viral metaphor cannot be evaded by turning to the sociology or anthropology of viral creators. Although those undertakings have substantial merit, they also conceptualize readers and reproducers as objects of study. Further, commentary on a viral reproduction is rarely transformative. Once a reader chooses to reproduce a text—if and when inoculation fails—that reproduction cannot be undone or altered, the feeling has already been felt, the text has traveled on, and the *ganren* self-identification has already taken place. The transformed reproduction can now only serve as a node from which a new rhizomatic connection is formed. With regard to viral circulation, we are *never* critics; we are *only* makers. It is not strictly possible to discuss a viral text without first choosing to be infected by it: in popular culture, there is no test tube, no microscope.

Therefore, repudiating analytical distance is necessary to democratize and level the relationship between the brains that are active in viral reproduction and the brains that are active in the study of viral reproduction. The archive of viral texts strongly supports a sense of parity between scholars and other readers. People who encounter Gu Cheng's poetry twist and mock it; they select from or ignore the authoritative secondary literature that interprets it; they repeat debunked claims; they turn a fictional film into the basis for a putatively true documentary. This is a difference between

physical viruses, which have predictable symptoms and evolve so slowly that they can be treated, and the concept of the virus that accompanies the rhizome, which transforms with greater speed and drama. Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 9–10) write: “You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that re-stratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject—anything you like, from Oedipal resurgences to fascist concretions. . . . Good and bad are only the products of an active and temporary selection, which must be renewed.”

The price of the viral metaphor’s failure to see humans as more than either hosts or scientists, to understand that it is “brains that are active, not memes” (Inwood 2014: 154), is that it prevents adherents to the metaphor from understanding how immensely easy viral texts are to transform, so much so that it is impossible to reproduce them without transforming them in some way. The metaphor keeps scholars from understanding their individual role in producing and affecting viral and rhizomatic circulation, and it blinds us to our responsibility to renew the active and temporary selection of values. Just as the viral metaphor turns away from what a poem is and toward what it does, the limitations of the viral metaphor reveal scholarly interpretation of texts as a form of viral circulation, and as potential social action.

### **Deleting Gu Cheng**

The process of inoculation must come after, and respond to, the virus: in many cases, conspiracy theories or appealing metanarratives generate falsifiable “facts” faster than they can be debunked. In a context of viral circulation, subject to unpredictable change and mutation, scholarship’s strengths of authority and verifiability are of limited use. Nothing is deleted from a virus faster than evidence; what is happening when a viral text circulates is not two people coming to a consensus about a shared reality, but a text used to describe and participate in the identity of one individual being borrowed to participate in the life of another. Therefore, Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 11) advise active participation over inoculation: “Always follow the rhizome by rupture; lengthen, prolong, and relay the line of flight; make it vary, until

you have produced the most abstract and tortuous of lines of  $n$  dimensions and broken directions. Conjugate deterritorialized flows.”

Notable here is the contradiction between the line or flow that can be followed and the broken direction of the deterritorialized rupture; this represents, perhaps, a deep ambivalence inside the theory of the rhizome about the presence or absence of viral history. The virus does not need to inherit its authority from its prior lineage; it requests the reproduction of an idea by its future hosts—and this request can be easily denied or perverted, as in the case of satire. Writing and reading through the metaphor of the virus shifts control from the territory of the writer to the decentralized, multiply conjugated community of reader-reproducers. As it does so, elements of authority (both in the sense of the role of the author, and the power of the person in charge) evaporate. For example, when Gu Cheng’s story is recreated across different media, in each case it expresses something about the moment of its production in the new medium, and never an authentic truth unanxiously traceable to the “original.”<sup>16</sup>

Thinking through the virus, then, instructs readers not only to make their own deletions, to “follow the rhizome by rupture,” but to consider the resultant texts not in terms of what they are or what they say, but what they can do and how they might echo in the future, their “line of flight.” Because the subjectivity of Xie Ye prevents the circulation of the patriarchal and self-aggrandizing qualities of Gu Cheng viruses, it seems clear that her story from her perspective is a natural source of contrary values, and that it is a potentially liberating “broken direction” from which to exit the work of Gu Cheng. Xie Ye’s creative work was published and circulated substantially during her lifetime, most notably in the *Selections of Obscure Poetry*, edited by Yan Yuejun 阎月君 (1986). It has been translated in the *Beloit Poetry Journal* (Xie 1988: 30–31) and as part of the English translation of the novel *Yinger*, which she cowrote with Gu Cheng (Gu and Lei: [1993] 1995). In the 1993 anthology *Grave Bed: Representative Overseas Works of Gu Cheng and Xie Ye* (Gu and Xie: 1993)—most of which is set aside for the poems, prose, and graphic art of Gu Cheng’s last years—Xie has a 96-page section of poetry and prose that is the most sustained extant record of her artistic voice.<sup>17</sup> In it, there is one piece in particular that powerfully interacts with the world *after* the death of Xie Ye. It is a memoir-story called “Games,” a

series of fifteen short fragments that recount the way that Xie thought and felt about her relationship to her husband.

Although Xie Ye sometimes took on the role of validating and justifying her lifestyle, “Games” is not a work of public relations. In her own words, the piece describes her wedding, and how she fantasized about walking straight by the registration building into some other future (341); it describes Gu Cheng naming himself “Khan” 可汗 and makes it clear that this was not entirely a joke (344); it lists rules he gave her to follow, like never waiting in line to buy food or never cooking vegetables and rice separately (345); it tells the heartbreaking story of a day that Gu succeeds in preventing Xie from attending school against his wishes, and the humiliating song he makes up about her once it’s clear she’s capitulated (347–48). To her contemporaries, the piece may have seemed like a list of eccentricities—it was never published during her lifetime—but after the events of 1993, it reads as an easily recognizable pattern of control and abuse. The prose wavers, as it recounts her more embattled moments, between an address to the audience and an address to the self, as when she tells herself on three consecutive pages to “just ignore him” (不理他) (345–47), or the passage in the penultimate section in which she says the phrase “we are happy” four times in the same sentence (351). This blurring of author and audience is the core of the viral relationship between text and host; by being written in part for and to herself, to read “Games” is to briefly find one’s self thinking from Xie’s position.

Xie Ye’s work, including “Games,” is different from the many texts of public mourning (like “Mourning Xie Ye,” mentioned above) that circulate on the Internet today. She rigorously emphasizes her consent to the relationship and her belief that its end would be dictated by a kind of fate—a game she chooses to play even though she cannot control its outcome. “Games” follows the seasons from spring to unavoidable winter, and ends like this: “Outside, the ivy’s leaves are falling one by one. Perhaps two leaves will fall at once, and that will be joyous as well, it will be our final game” (351). Xie is not ignorant of the violence in her relationship; she consents in her context for concrete reasons. Inhabiting her narrative draws the reader’s attention away from her as an object for judgment and toward the world in which she acted as a subject.

The reason for her conviction that she was trapped in her relationship

is clear in her chapters from the cowritten poem-novel *Ying'er*: they are addressed to her son Samuel and collectively titled “Ni jiao xiao mu'er” 你叫小木耳 (“Your Name Is Little Mu'er”). The section is a series of stories about young Samuel, about how hard it was for Xie to be separated from him after Gu Cheng insisted that he leave the house, and seems to be a clear attempt to leave him an account of her love for him. Much of the section is made up of reminiscences of his childhood, peppered through with direct messages. She writes, “In the face of such ugliness and suffering, my fragility is no different from yours. How I wish you didn't know such unbearable sadness in me. You have just turned three and we have nothing but each other” (Gu and Lei [1993] 1995: 239). The exception to her pattern of direct address to Samuel is the inclusion of a letter to Xie's friend Bridget, which gives a more explicit explanation of the situation, in adult terms: “Samuel's living with Poko is, to a large extent, forced and most probably permanent. I find it utterly impossible to accept this as a fact. But for the time being, I have no other way out. No one can help me. I am allowed to go see him” (254). Escaping without Samuel would leave him under the legal control of an unstable Gu Cheng; escaping with him would create custodial and financial chaos. Subjecting herself to Gu's violence was a hard bargain taken in part to make Samuel safe.

Xie Ye's texts can travel—they are neither the entire story nor the unimpeachable truth, but an element inside that truth that can be shaped to share. When they travel, they can serve not only as a humanizing and deobjectifying record of a victim of abuse but also remind us of the life's work that the violence ended: a caretaker for her husband, a conscientious objector to PRC policy in the 1980s, and the protector of a child in the face of a set of immovable legal and social structures that put them both in danger time and again. To reproduce her voice is to elucidate the ways in which Gu Cheng's self-love was not worth its cost; it is to criticize the deep injustice of her legal and economic situation; it is to highlight the persistent fact of domestic abuse and violence against women. This is because inside Xie Ye's corpus are stories capable of accomplishing *ganren*, like a mother in an earthquake. Readers can use her texts, like citizens watching the aftermath of a disaster, to signal our identification with its victims. Where the viral circulation of Gu Cheng's biography in its most common contemporary form

reifies his long-held belief that he mattered more than the women in his life, the circulation of Xie Ye's texts performs opposition to that belief.

The inhabitant of the *ren* in *ganren*, who reproduces a viral text on the strength of a feeling, is fundamentally different from traditional concepts of the role of the scholar. Viral reproduction is not, however, wholly different from scholarly praxis: any writer who has ever looked for a "hook" in an essay, or declined to study a text because it didn't "speak to them" has been doing scholarship in a way that can be described by the viral metaphor. Reactivating the metaphor encourages us to make these processes legible and explicit, such that scholars are allowed and expected to describe their own subject position as producers, as well as analysts; not outside the genomic rhizome, but an infectious branch of it; not creators of a chart of rhizomatic rupture, but a linear segment of its flow. The practice of scholarship may very well help supply rhizomatic lines in a cultural landscape dominated by rhizomatic ruptures: while viral reproduction in popular culture often erases the record of its own genetic deletions, scholarly viruses contain a record of their formation, the quoted and cited genome of their own preorigins. At heavy cost to their own circulability, they contain the raw materials for their own criticism, verification, validation, and mutation.

## Notes

- 1 One important exception is Bachner 2011, which interrogates descriptions of the Chinese script system as a dangerous virus. This essay will work at the level of the literary text rather than script technology, and sees the virus as less inherently threatening than Bachner's writers do, but the discussion here is meaningfully parallel to the discussion in her essay.
- 2 From live coverage on Dongfang weishi dianshitai 东方卫视电视台 (Dragon Television) on May 18, available on many streaming sites but in this case accessed at [v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XMjc5MzE1MzY=.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMjc5MzE1MzY=.html). Many versions of the poem have a subtitle "written for the victims of the Wenchuan earthquake," and some also identify the poem as coming "from the Internet" (转自网络).
- 3 For example, the virus is also ultimately a space for hope in 2011's *Junkware* by Thierry Bardin. Whether or not, as he claims, the DNA of the virus is made up of "junk code" (189), he ends by accepting that it is exactly the hybrid, viral junkiness of contemporary culture that is its promise for change, agency, and the construction of rhizomes (210–14).
- 4 The story appears in the Tang collection sometimes called *Tales of the Miraculous* (集异记).

- 5 My translation. Gu 2005: 3, translated by Joseph R. Allen, contains an alternate version: “Even with these dark eyes, a gift of the dark night / I go to seek the shining light.” Both my version and Allen’s make the “eyes” in the English translation plural (the Chinese insinuates it is singular with 它) and translate “black” as “dark,” thereby avoiding the English concept of the “black eye,” a valence of the image that isn’t present in the Chinese original.
- 6 For more on Gu Cheng’s construction of both the poetic “I” and the individual subject, see Lee 2014: 126–44. This is a feature of Obscure poetry more generally, as its early practitioners at Baiyangdian included both victims of the Cultural Revolution and Red Guards.
- 7 Respectively found at [www.shejipi.com/70285.html](http://www.shejipi.com/70285.html) (黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛 这 7 款灯饰却让我「尽享丝滑」), [www.ichuangye.com/article/683](http://www.ichuangye.com/article/683) (黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛,我用它去看世界), and [bbs.uuu9.com/thread-11690687-1-1.html](http://bbs.uuu9.com/thread-11690687-1-1.html) (黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛,我用一袭黑衣赞美它!).
- 8 See, e.g., Liu 1992: 79: “This ‘I’ of their generation must have a certain force inside.”
- 9 The other main firsthand accounts are written by Gu Cheng’s sister Gu Xiang 顾乡 (1994) and by Li Ying 李英 (Mai 1995), who lived on the island with Gu Cheng and Xie Ye. Many other treatments exist.
- 10 From the Zhihu 知乎 question-and-answer site, accessed at [www.zhihu.com/question/19872364](http://www.zhihu.com/question/19872364). In January 2015 this was the fourth link in the results list for a Baidu search of “顾城” and the seventh result at Google. These are subjective metrics, and search results can be personalized with the use of tracking data and cookies: the information is offered strictly to indicate the accessibility of these conversations to some readers.
- 11 Zhihu 知乎, [www.zhihu.com/question/19872364](http://www.zhihu.com/question/19872364).
- 12 Probably first posted at *hclub*: [www.hclub.info/bbs/viewtopic.php?p=2847479](http://www.hclub.info/bbs/viewtopic.php?p=2847479).
- 13 Accessed at [zhidao.baidu.com/question/306134596.html](http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/306134596.html). Gu Cheng’s four suicide notes are reprinted in Jiang 1995: 401–03, an otherwise unreliable account.
- 14 For example, the film reproduces “One Generation” by having Gu Cheng recite it while flirting with Xie Ye, early in their relationship.
- 15 These details are accessible in Brady 1997. For an account of Gu Cheng’s dependence on Xie Ye for daily needs, see Wolfgang Kubin in Li 1999: 21–34.
- 16 Bachner (2011: 222) says the viral model invites us to think of language as “impure, ever changing.”
- 17 *Grave Bed* is not, however, exclusively made up of things Xie Ye wrote after she left China: as is representative of the poor state of scholarship on her, it mixes work from many periods without comment.

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