

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Traveling with Marco Polo: Selected Excerpts

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6vk6w6zz>

Journal

Chinese Literature Today, 10(2)

ISSN

2151-4399

Authors

Xue, Y

Hu, Y

Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.1080/21514399.2021.1990681

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed



Featured Author

Xue Yiwei

Traveling with Marco Polo

Selected Excerpts

Xue Yiwei

Translated by Hu Ying

Published in 2012, Chinese writer Xue Yiwei's *Traveling with Marco Polo* is a creative collection that dialogues with *Invisible Cities* by the postmodern Italian writer Italo Calvino. While Calvino imagines a young Marco Polo describing the fantastic sights of fifty-five cities to an aging Kublai Khan, Xue Yiwei joins the conversation and gives meticulous explication of each one of Calvino's cities. The following excerpts were translated from the Chinese version of *Traveling with Marco Polo* by Hu Ying.

Gratitude toward the Evening: The First City

Where is *there*? Kublai doesn't know. Or perhaps Marco Polo doesn't want him to know. The young Venetian merchant began his narration from the point of "leaving there." This may not have been a calculated beginning, but a careful reader would understand the bitterness of such a beginning. For a narration about a city, it yet begins at departure rather than arrival, a point of departure that apparently did not even leave any trace of itself. At the least, "there" is the closest destination, or it may even have been an originating point. But in order to set off, in order to have a neat and orderly narration, this point of departure lost its own particular features and became a hollow adverb.

"Leaving there and proceeding for three days towards the east, you reach Diomira," thus begins Marco Polo's narration.¹ Is he trying to lead the aging but still ambitious Khan to the future or to the past? As far as the eye can see, Diomira presents a glorious and stunning metropolis: waves of "silver domes, bronze statues of all the gods, streets paved with lead, a crystal theater, a golden cock that crows each morning on a tower . . ." With all these sights, the city opens its arms to the traveler from far away. But this traveler is not moved. For they represent nothing but the glamorous surface of the city, with which he is already familiar, for he has been treated to similarly glamorous surfaces by other cities. Any city could have treated him to similarly glamorous surface. Such superficial welcome cannot touch the traveler's guarded heart.

To this traveler, what is unique and ultimately beautiful about Diomira is that it evokes envy in him. It is a September evening that allows him to appreciate the city's uniqueness and ultimate beauty. This September evening has three features: first, "the days are growing shorter," an evening of waxing *yin* and waning *yang*. Second, "the multicoloured lamps are lighted all at once at the doors of the food stalls," an evening of lively business. The last and the most spectacular feature is that "from a terrace," a woman's voice cries out with joy. This is an evening of love-making and pleasure. It is this last feature in the September evening that awakens the traveler's envy, as it opens up to him an "invisible" city. His envy catches him by surprise and baffles him because it is not felt toward others but toward memory, more precisely, toward others' memory. Thus, Diomira, the first city in *Invisible Cities*, is the first city associated with memory.

Of course, this is hardly the first September evening the traveler has ever entered, but it is the first time in a September evening that he enters this city. Or rather, it is the first time in such a city that he enters a September evening. His observation of waxing and waning, his attention to pleasure and his sensitivity to a woman's cry, all these are signs of his age. No doubt he is filled with

gratitude toward the evening that touches his heart. And yet, this gratitude is but a flash in the pan. Before he could respond, the traveler is kidnapped by "the ultimate beauty" that moves him so deeply to the darkest corner of the soul: he is tortured by envy. It is a desolate and proud sort of envy: he envies those "who now *believe* they have once before lived an evening identical to this and who *think* they were happy" like him. That is to say, he is envious of the beliefs and thoughts of those people, envious of their "memory," their memory of the past and happiness.

The kidnapped traveler has only wanted to establish a one-to-one relationship with this alluring evening, or the alluring city in the alluring evening. He wanted this to be his first experience of such an evening; even more than that, he wanted this to be the first time that such an evening has been experienced in this way. What he cannot tolerate, between him and such an evening and in this city, is the intrusion of a third party: the sort of experience preserved from memory. Without a question, this is an unfair demand on others as much as on himself, an unfair demand on the past as much as on the present, even on the future. Thus, memory is transformed into the enemy of life. The only ally the traveler can rely on is painful envy in order to fend off this vicious enemy. What he doesn't seem to know is that, from the beginning of civilization, his one and only ally has long formed a tight alliance with his enemy.

Diomira, why do you have to be on the path of the traveler?

The "Shortest" City: The Second City

Note that the adjective for the city in the title is not a mistake. It is Isidora, the second city that Calvino presents in *Invisible Cities*. The city is erected on 119 words in the original Italian version (contractions not counted separately). The material for its reconstruction in the authoritative English translation is equally sparing, just 131 words. Among the fifty-five cities populating the fictional collection, Isidora is thus the shortest. All fifty-five cities contain feminine names, the products of Calvino's imagination, or rather, the products of Marco Polo's imagination, as imagined by Calvino. As Marco Polo offers up his imagination to Kublai Khan with his scintillating language, it rouses powerful desire and despair in the aging but still ambitious Khan, who listens with his heart.

At the outset, this "shortest" city presents a battle between time and desire. The first sentence tells us: "When a man rides a long time through wild regions, he feels the desire for a city" (8). Desire blunts the edge of exhaustion brought on by time. In the grip of desire, the man first thinks of the city's novel appearance: "a city where the buildings have spiral staircases encrusted with spiral seashells." His thought then turns to the city's pleasing products: "the perfect telescopes and violins."

He then thinks of the city's irresistible attraction: "where a foreigner hesitating between two women always encounters a third." Finally, he thinks of the city's way of life, the quick succession of gladness to sadness: "where cockfights degenerate into bloody brawls among the betters," where pleasure somehow always ends in extreme violence.

These are the exhausted traveler's thoughts when he desires such a city. When he enters Isidora, these are indeed what he sees: spiral staircases and spiral seashells, the perfect telescopes and violins, the limitless third woman, and the bloody brawlers. Without a question, Isidora is the city he desires.

Let's suppose this city is the beloved that the traveler has been cherishing in the depth of his soul. He dreams of her, longs for her, searches for her. In the end, he finally reaches her. His life journey may thus be described as having a happy ending, for on the surface, its end point is a gain rather than a loss.

Unfortunately, Marco Polo immediately recognizes his loss in the gain. There is a cruel difference between the city a man reaches and the city he longs for: "The dreamed-of city contained him as a young man; he arrives at Isidora in his old age." This is the difference determined by time. In the battle between time and desire, time wins in the end.

Since this city is grouped with the cities associated with memory, Marco Polo must then tie it together with desire: "In the square there is the wall where the old men sit and watch the young go by." The exhausted traveler knows where he belongs. Thus, he sits with the old men, and this is when "desires are already memories." With this sad discovery about desire Marco Polo ends his description of this city. Just like that, in despair, melancholic memory closes the city gate of Isidora.

We of course can continue to imagine how our traveler spends his first night in the embrace of this city, (that is to say, in the embrace of his "lover"). This is a night he has imagined many times over. One possible scenario is that he asks memory to bring him back to the point of his departure, so that he may repeat his painful journey one more time shrouded in the sentimental darkness. He will experience his last desire in this experience, a desire for memory. In this last journey of desire, the city tenderly holds his memory, while at the same time, his memory tenderly holds the city. In this last journey of desire, his

... if you were to abandon language that is tied to "the arrow of time," if you were actually to arrive at the heart of the city that has no connection with time (also the center point of all the canals), you would discover an invisible city and "your desires waken all at once and surround you."

memory becomes the entire city, and the city occupies the whole of his memory.

The Power of Desire: The Fifth City

Entering the second city associated with desire, Marco Polo does not hide the key word. Still, the first things he talks about are the city's eye-catching sights: the "concentric canals" on the ground and kites scattered in the sky. Then, he moves on to the fine agate wares that can "profitably be bought there," and the pheasant "cooked over seasoned cherry wood and sprinkled with much sweet marjoram." Finally, he comes to those women "bathing in the pool of a garden and who sometimes invite the stranger

to chase them in the water" or bathe with them under the moonlight (12).

If Kublai Khan neglected to notice that Marco Polo used a definite article in front of "stranger" rather than an indefinite article, he might have already mentally disrobed himself from his dragon gown and entered the fairyland created by language. That definite article clearly stole the listener's chance of participation. Who's that lucky stranger? ... Another function of the definite article is to refer to a category, that is to say, perhaps it means *all* strangers here. If so, the question is still more mysterious: Why do the women invite the stranger or perhaps *only* strangers to bathe with them?

Even without the constraint of this definite article, the wings of his listener's imagination are clipped, because Marco Polo immediately denigrates what he has just spoken about. He declares that all these visible things fail to show "the city's true essence," because in any description of Anastasia the city, the lineup of words can only be linear, flowing in the same direction as time itself. And thus, the desires that are awakened by words can only appear successively, one by one, the earlier awakened desires inevitably stifled or supplanted by desires that come later. That is to say, the description of this city cannot retain all of the desires in their entirety. This is the limit of language, not the limit of the city. Because if you were to abandon language that is tied to "the arrow of time," if you were actually to arrive at the heart of the city that has no connection with time (also the center point of all the canals), you would discover an invisible city and "your desires waken all at once and surround you." At this point, the relationship between language and the city

it tries to describe is simplified into the correspondence between a line and a circle; more precisely, it becomes the correspondence between time and space: the desires that are continuously lost in time can be seen all at once in space.

The city finally becomes whole as desire becomes whole. Residents of the city thus also become members of a collective. But every member must obey the collective even if residing at the heart of the city. The demand for submission is *the* power of this second city associated with desire. Once again, Marco Polo uses a definite article. This time, the article that delimits power can only be definite. Thus, the unrelenting demand for submission becomes the only power of Anastasia. In this situation, the absolute submission to the collective becomes the only way for an individual to preserve himself. In the face of such all-encompassing power, perhaps Kublai should reevaluate what he thought was his own absolute position.

Marco Polo does not give Kublai enough time to integrate theory with praxis. His narrative is meant for general edification rather than as practical “political lessons” such as Mencius gave to Marquis Hui of Wei. Deftly he avoids talking about royal power. Instead, using the second person, he addresses his listener as if he were a craftsman. The power of desire is thus rendered as an aesthetic logic: “Your labor which gives form to desire takes from desire its form.” If we imagine the product of the craftsman’s labor as the great beauty Xishi, and imagine desire itself as a lover’s appreciation of her beauty, then the power of desire has clearly been discovered in the Chinese language a long time ago, and more vividly so.

Realizing that desire itself has already determined the sum total that an individual is willing to pay for it, Marco Polo leads his listener to the last staircase towards

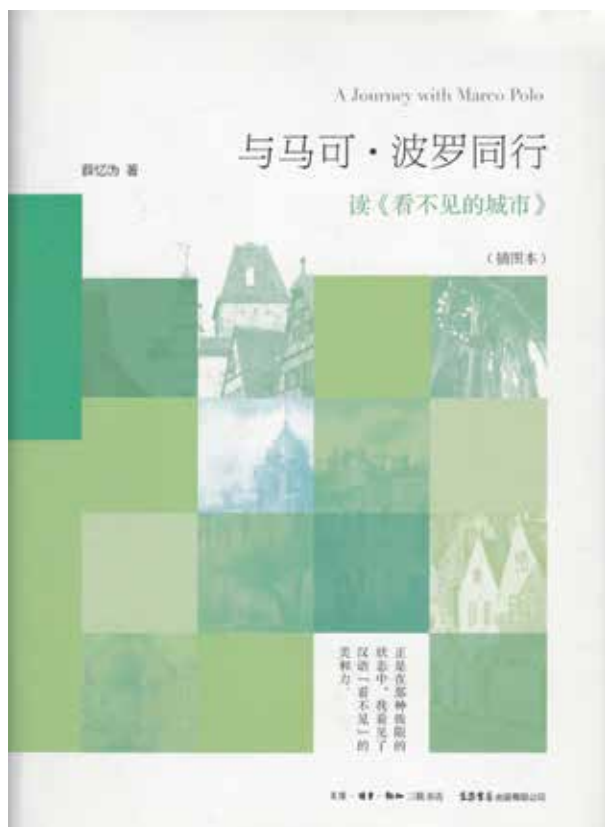
the altar for the city associated with desire. He is certain that the man in front of him with his supreme power will kneel down on that staircase, because he is sure that only by becoming the slave of Anastasia could one enjoy this city as a whole.

That is to say, only when one becomes the slave of love could he enjoy love in its entirety and only when one becomes the slave of beauty could he enjoy beauty in its entirety. The supreme ruler and the debased craftsman reach a spiritual equality as a result of their shared desire: in order to enjoy desire in its entirety, they willingly become its slaves, from which they will gain the utmost satisfaction.

Memory’s Tragedy: The Seventh City

This is the first time, in Marco Polo’s narratives of cities connected to memory, that he resorts to memory’s arch enemy. Talking about Zora, the fourth city connected to memory, Marco Polo mentions “forgetting”: once in the first sentence, and then again, in the last. Thus, Zora is a city that begins with forgetting and ends with forgetting. Actually, forgetting is negated at the outset. According to Marco Polo, once seen, “no one . . . can forget” Zora (15). Memory thus shows up as the victor as it liberates the city from the constraint of space and delivers it to the infinity of time. And yet, surprisingly, Zora does not possess an especially unusual appearance nor does it offer particularly unique products. How, then, could memory win out?

The secret is in the layout, or more precisely, the exact pattern of its layout. The city is like a carefully arranged musical score “where not a note can be altered or displaced.” The memory of the city does not change as it follows the exact order: behind the barber’s awning is that striking copper clock; the Turkish bath is next to



Cover of *A Journey with Marco Polo*.

the café at the corner; and then there is the alleyway that leads to the harbor . . . That is to say, there is no difference or gap between the city and the memory of it. This kind of memory can only be acquired by deadly rote learning, and does not respond to any interference: personal charm or emotional upheavals do not have any effect on the memory. Nobody can insert into this sort of memory any scandal, or a bit of romantic gossip, or even a moment of true love. In essence, this memory is a collective or blind submission, a contract, dogma or religious belief.

The exact layout of the city determines the basic design of its memory. Marco Polo compares it to a honeycomb. The honeycomb, however, reflects only the visible part of this basic design, outside of which there is still more content that needs memory. He notices that to remember the invisible contents, Zora tolerates some degree of freedom. Even though the locations of the visible places in the city cannot be changed, a person has the choice or ability to link a particular place to historical knowledge of the city. That is to say, based on their own needs and likes, different people may store different kinds of "knowledge" in the honeycomb, such as information of a celebrity, historical statistics, categories of virtue, and parts of speech. At this point, memory is no longer like oracular truth but becomes a kind of secular entertainment or intelligent game. The visible Zora

can only enter memory along "one path" whereas the invisible Zora enters memory along a myriad of different paths, as many as there are people.

And yet, this relative freedom does not change the fundamental truth about Zora's memory, for it only records facts and knowledge based on facts. It is an entirely mechanical process, having been cut off from any connection to desire. Thus, when Marco Polo concludes coolly: "So the world's most learned men are those who have memorized Zora," he might also be poking fun at learnedness, academicians, and the world they inhabit.

The satire segues nicely to his next move: to negate the negation. Realizing that visiting Zora is in vain and feeling desperate toward a memory cut off from desire, Marco Polo sets out to negate what he has previously negated about memory in the opening sentence. He tells the curious monarch, "In order to be more easily remembered," the city "is forced to remain motionless and always the same" and has thus become lifeless, "disintegrated, disappeared. The earth has forgotten her." This last sentence confirms forgotten, thus announcing the final defeat of memory in Zora.

This city that begins as one that no one "can forget," on account of its adherence to tradition and exacting memory, is finally defeated by the arch enemy "forgetting" and becomes a victim of memory. In this way, memory is routed by itself, just like in a classical tragedy.

The Expert's Silence: The Eleventh City

This time, the traveler is invited to another city associated with memory. In addition to normal sightseeing, the traveler is saddled with a very sensitive task: he is invited to survey a bunch of old postcards. On these postcards, he will see the pastoral past of this city (or perhaps all cities): on the site of the current bus station, the postcard has preserved a rooster; where there is now an overhead highway, the postcard shows an open-air concert hall; where there is now a munitions factory, on the postcard, two young ladies leisurely chat under white parasols . . . (30). These sights preserved by the postcards constitute the past that the city prides itself on, a past that the city feels nostalgic about.

Like a land surveyor who eventually reaches the Castle, the traveler immediately understands the awkward situation: he is to measure the distance between the city's past and its present. And yet, he cannot employ the yardstick with which he's been trained professionally, nor can he call upon his refined cultural taste. To make a judgment on the distance, he could only rely on his worldliness. According to Marco Polo, if the traveler doesn't want to offend the residents of the city, he must sing the praises of Maurilia of the postcard, he must be fascinated by the Maurilia of the past. Since of course he

doesn't want to offend the residents of the city, his only way out is to change himself. That is to say, the traveler, as an expert, is invited to handle a sensitive task that he can only accomplish by relinquishing his expertise. When he passes his judgment, he will no longer be an independent appraiser but a spokesman whose words are not his own: he knows his conclusion must perfectly reflect the intent of those who invited him.

Even his regrets over the changes must also represent the interests of those who invited him. He must acknowledge that the visible prosperity of Maurilia the metropolis has lost the small town charm of the *invisible* Maurilia, even if he believes that the local residents at the time saw no charm whatsoever in their Maurilia; even if he is certain that if the town retained this previous appearance, it would have no charm whatsoever to its present-day residents; and even if he knows that it is in fact because of the formation of the new metropolis and disappearance of the old town that people could look back to the past with nostalgic sentiments, to discover the many charms that the old town did not possess. This is the charm of transformation, the charm of creation, the charm of time. Unfortunately, his belief, certainty and knowledge based on his expertise are completely unsuitable. This he knows clearly. He could only hide them surreptitiously in the cautiously phrased conditional clauses. He must replace his expertise with his worldliness, to use the expert's silence to go along with the nostalgia that the residents of the new city feel because of the postcards.

He must be careful. His extraordinarily wide experience makes it easy for him to see a still more complicated relationship between the new city and the old town. And yet, he cannot reveal this radical relationship to the residents of Maurilia. For the radical relationship is "no relationship." That is to say, between the cities that exist at the same place, bearing the same name, there might not be any connection at all: when the new city is founded, it does not know that an old city has died; when the old city was dying, it didn't know a new city was about to be born. There might not be any communication between the new city and the old city, even if there might be many similarities between their residents such as identical names, even identical faces and accents. This is when any comparison between the two cities is completely meaningless.

...between the cities
that exist at the same
place, bearing the
same name, there
might not be any
connection at all: when
the new city is founded,
it does not know that
an old city has died;
when the old city was
dying, it didn't know a
new city was about to
be born.

In Marco Polo's eyes, Maurilia might be just such a city. The invisible city represented by the postcards might not have been what Maurilia looked like before, but of a different city that happened to be called Maurilia, an utterly different city. In this radical situation, released from the hierarchical chain of time, the invisible city and the visible city become free and equal perceptually. Suddenly, memory loses the object it tries to retain, and has thus itself become deeply embarrassed. Perhaps it is for this reason, among the *Invisible Cities*, Maurilia is deemed the last city associated with memory.

The traveler does not reveal this radical possibility to the residents of Maurilia. He must be careful. No longer is he an appraiser, nor does he dare to be a savior. He does not awaken the city from its tender nostalgia for the past. He is but a spokesman, a spokesman who doesn't need his own voice. All he does is to use the expert's silence to gently leave room for a collective memory.

And yet, the residents of Maurilia might never detect the expert's silence as they revel in the acknowledgement from a traveler who's seen the world. They will no doubt take this acknowledgment as the voice of the expert, as the standard for their city. They will never want to know how the guest expert lost his own standard through a painful silence.

Revolution Forever: The Twenty-second City

Sophonria, the fourth "thin" city, is broken into two sharply contrasting halves: one half is made up of giant roller-coasters, spinning wooden horses, and other smaller entertainment structures, a well-equipped playground; the other half is made of marble and concrete, of real institutions like banks, factories, palaces, butcher shops, and schools (63). In other words, Sophronia is the combination of an unreal (and entertaining) world and a real (and professional) world.

The two worlds of Sophronia are stark opposites of each other not just in content and form but also in their respective longevity. From Marco Polo's narration, the listener soon realizes that one of the worlds is eternal while the other is short-lived. But Marco Polo's narration is controlled and strategic. He is not quick to give the answer: which half of the city is eternal, the apparently "thin" or fragile half (the illusory) or the apparently solid half (the real)?

What he lets on is the reason for the short life. That one half cannot last is because there are always revolutions there: at the end of every period of peace, the residents always make a clean break with the past. They not only knock down all the buildings in their half of the city, they even destroy their foundations, and clear away all the rubble and haul it to the other half of the city.

The short-lived half is therefore the invisible half of Sophronia. The periods of its peaceable existence are nearly meaningless while its violent destructions are spectacular and make up the great events of history. Still more important, in addition to occupying people's memory, the violent destruction also molds the way people live their lives. Here, revolution for the sake of construction is replaced by ever-lasting revolution, and revolution itself becomes an end rather than the means.

One day a year, workers come and remove the piles of rubble from the short-lived Sophronia. This spectacular day condenses the city's history. From the rubble, Marco Polo's listener figures out that the destroyed Sophronia is the real half: churches, hospitals, monuments, refineries, these structures sometimes become ruins overnight. That is to say, often enough, Sophronia's superstructure and base turn into ruins overnight. It is a shocking revolution, a revolution in between one revolution and another. It interrupts not just one generation's lives but the entire history. It eliminates from the culture of Sophronia the rationality of construction, wisdom, sincerity and patience.

And the illusory world is Sophronia's eternal half, the visible Sophronia. Using this eternal half, Marco Polo tries to reveal to his listener another secret of human civilization: that our lives depend on entertainment. Entertainment is an essential need of human life; if not a direct biological need, then at least the closest thing to it. Sophronia's eternal and illusory world represents this need.

Interestingly enough, there is an extremely complex relationship between entertainment and revolution. Entertainment is at once revolution's deadly enemy and its soulmate. To use a vulgar analogy, entertainment and revolution are like a couple who spend day and night together, yet dreaming their separate dreams. Entertainment is often the first casualty of revolution, and yet revolution is all the time inventing its own entertainment, and through these inventions, spreading revolutionary ideas and influences. Entertainment contaminates and pokes fun at revolution; but revolution might just be the highest form of entertainment. Unlike revolution, entertainment doesn't give a damn about that sharply phrased prime question posed by Mao Zedong in an influential article: "who is our enemy, and who is our friend"? The prime question for entertainment is how to widely and deeply

move the masses, how to transform enemy into friend, which happens to be an important strategy for revolution as well. The success of both revolution and entertainment depends on a solid base among the masses.

It shows careful planning and arrangement that the city is split into revolution and entertainment, two neighboring and opposing halves. But the relationship between revolution and entertainment is too great a topic to leave to the descendants of the ancient heroes who "know only to shoot the eagles with their great arrows."² They should be properly left to the contemplation of those "au courant" today.

The apparently "thin" or fragile half of the city made of pipes and cables is in fact more solid than the half made of the seemingly more solid marble and concrete. This is the lesson Sophronia teaches Marco Polo. But Marco Polo's thoughts do not stop here. Even though entertainment is a necessary condition for life, it is not a sufficient one. A life with just entertainment is not enough. Life also needs real fights and struggles. In the long term, the thin or fragile half is indeed fragile, for it cannot exist on its own. It longs for another spouse with whom to spend day and night together while dreaming different dreams. Unhappily, it counts the days and anxiously awaits the caravan that comes through the desert that will bring the construction material to rebuild its real half on the vacant lot of the old world.

And yet it knows only too well that what will be constructed will serve as the target of the next revolution. After a period of peace, revolutionary fervor will sweep through the city once again and a new revolution will arrive as if by appointment. Sophronia's history will continue in this deadly cycle. Its "short-lived" half determines the eternal life style of the city's residents.

Hu Ying is a professor of modern Chinese literature at UC Irvine. Her publications include *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China* (Stanford, 2000) and *Burying Autumn: Poetry, Friendship and Loss* (Harvard, 2015). She has translated classical and modern literature, from Chinese and from English, in poetry, prose, fiction, and literary theory, by well-known and obscure writers.

Notes:

1 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1974), 7. All further references to *Invisible Cities* refer to this edition and appear in-text with page numbers.

2 A reference to Mao Zedong's poem "Snow: To the Tune of 'Spring in a Pleasure Garden.'" The poem was composed in 1936 and first appeared in the Chongqing newspaper *Xin min-bao wankan*, Nov. 14, 1945.