

**“Stratified” Literary Reconstruction of Beijing: A Study of the Poem Cycles *City* and
*Ghosts Entering the City***

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Abstract

The poem cycles *City* and *Ghosts Entering the City* are among the most significant yet highly obscure works of Gu Cheng’s later career. This paper examines Gu Cheng from the perspective of “Beijing” while attempting to analyze these poem cycles within a historical framework. It traces the isomorphic relationship between Gu Cheng’s psychological structure and Beijing city, affirms the role of the “ghost” persona in excavating Beijing’s stratified cultural memory, reveals Gu Cheng’s connection to “compound culture,” and, in the context of changing times, argues that these poem cycles hold commemorative significance, serving as the voice of “ghostly spokespersons.”

Keywords: Gu Cheng, Beijing, *City*, *Ghosts Entering the City*

Although Gu Cheng (1956–1993) was a Beijing poet, his reputation for “spiritual romanticism” (Bi & Fan, 1988) rarely evokes associations with Beijing. Throughout his long writing career, Gu Cheng produced few works explicitly tied to a “Beijing” consciousness. However, his two most important works from the final two years of his life, *Ghosts Entering the City* and *City*, are

unmistakably connected to Beijing. Examining Gu Cheng through the lens of “Beijing” opens new perspectives in both Gu Cheng studies and “Beijing studies.”

Beijing was Gu Cheng’s birthplace. Before leaving mainland China in 1987, he primarily lived in Beijing. As Lao She wrote in *Four Generations Under One Roof*, “People born into a certain culture may not know what that culture is, like fish in water, unable to leap out to see what kind of water it is.” After leaving China, the distance from Beijing allowed Gu Cheng to objectify the city, transforming it into a subject of his writing. Between 1991 and 1993, he composed the poem cycles *City* and *Ghosts Entering the City*. The *City* cycle comprises 52 short poems, the earliest written in April 1991 and the latest in March 1993. Forty-five of these poems are titled after Beijing place names, such as “Zhonghua Gate,” “Temple of Heaven,” “Donghua Gate,” “Wu Gate,” “Desheng Gate,” “Liulichang,” “Zhongguancun,” “Beijing Library,” “Houhai,” and “Zizhuyuan.” The other cycle, *Ghosts Entering the City*, consists of nine sections, beginning with a cross-shaped prologue, followed by seven sections depicting the lives of ghosts from Monday to Sunday, and concluding with a section titled “Qingming Festival.”

As a literary experience, “Beijing” has been extensively represented in novels, essays, and dramas: from the “Beijing-flavored novels” of Lao She, Deng Youmei, and Liu Xinwu, to Wang Shuo’s “new Beijing-flavored novels,” and the “Beijing drifter novels” of Qiu Huadong and Xu Zechen; from Zhou Zuoren’s *Beijing’s Snacks*, Yu Dafu’s *Autumn in the Old Capital*, to Xiao Qian’s *Miscellaneous Memories of Beijing City*; from Cao Yu’s *Beijingers* to Lao She’s *Dragon Beard Ditch* and *Teahouse*. Despite Beijing likely hosting the largest number of poets in China, poetry about “Beijing” is scarce. This may be because Beijing’s image has been “obscured and stereotyped by layers of experiential descriptions accumulated over time” (Zhao, 2002), making it challenging to

incorporate into poetry, which prioritizes innovation. Even Bei Dao, a Beijing-born poet, adopted a prose style when recalling Beijing (Bei, 2010). Against this backdrop, *City* and *Ghosts Entering the City* stand out as rare modern Chinese literary works that deeply portray Beijing through poetry.

Continuing the obscure style of Gu Cheng's later works, such as *World of Hymns* and *Mercury*, the opacity of *City* and *Ghosts Entering the City* surpasses them. Their extreme personalization, fragmentation, leaps, and collage-like structure form a linguistic labyrinth that deters readers. Despite more than two decades since Gu Cheng's passing, interpretations of these poem cycles remain an enigma. This paper delves into Gu Cheng's connection with Beijing, exploring the poetic landscape to uncover the kind of literary imagination of Beijing he invented, thereby providing a spiritual topography for understanding both Gu Cheng and "literary Beijing."

The Isomorphic Relationship Between Gu Cheng and Beijing City

My heart,

is a small city

—Gu Cheng, "I Am a Small City," 1979

Gu Cheng's sister is named Gu Xiang. The city-rural binary is a fundamental condition of China's modernization process, and Gu Cheng's poetry is often interpreted within this framework: Gu Cheng resists industrial civilization from the perspective of agrarian civilization. This is evident in both his poetry and statements. In his 1980 poem *Résumé*, he wrote: "Along a / whitening road, I enter / a city full of gears / ... / In a haze of indifference / I continue telling green stories" (Gu, 2005a). In a 1984 dialogue with Wang Weiming, he stated: "I believe that in my poetry, the city will disappear, and what will ultimately appear is a pasture" (Gu, 2006a). Yet, how do we explain

that in his late works, which he valued most, the city not only persists but becomes a central image? While this could be attributed to homesickness, someone averse to cities could entirely avoid using the city as a starting point for nostalgic writing.

To address this, we must clarify the different meanings of “city” for Gu Cheng. The term “city” (*cheng*) in his work has two senses: (1) the modern metropolis, often referred to as “city” (*cheng-shi*); (2) a walled architectural city, typically denoted by the single character *cheng*. The second sense corresponds to ancient Chinese cities, primarily serving “protection”: “Chinese cities were mainly administrative and cultural symbols, with little distinction between city and countryside. The interests of people inside and outside the city walls were aligned, not divided by the walls. In theory, Chinese cities were meant to protect the people. The *Shuowen* states: ‘A city is to hold the people’” (Chen, 1983). While expressing aversion to modern cities, Gu Cheng also used “city” in this second sense, as in the poem *I Am a Small City*. In *Ballad of Little Spring* (April 1982), he elaborates:

I am a prince

My heart is my kingdom

Oh! Kingdom, oh! My kingdom

I will stand on the battlements

Turning the metal cannon

Gu Cheng repeatedly described his ideal kingdom as a walled fortress. This ideal reflects a childhood marked by acute insecurity. Recollections from Gu Cheng and his family recount terrifying experiences: seeing a corpse in a river at a young age, witnessing violence outside his window,

and curling up in fear like a snail (Gu, 1993). His upbringing involved at least three layers of “city demolition”: (1) the physical environment, with the prolonged demolition of Beijing’s old city walls; (2) real life, with his family’s home raided and his relocation to the countryside, dismantling the protective barrier of home; (3) linguistically, the renaming campaigns during the early Cultural Revolution that altered street and place names. Gu Cheng once said: “My so-called fairy tales were not entirely born from a natural state. In fact, they stemmed from the fear caused by the Cultural Revolution. The feeling of ‘the way of heaven is ruthless’ was not only felt on the desolate plains but also in Beijing; my sense of loneliness was stronger in Beijing than on the plains” (Gu, 2005b). This is corroborated by his early poetry:

Poplar Tree

I lost an arm

And opened one eye

The Origin of Stars and Moon

The branches wanted to tear the sky apart,

But only poked a few tiny holes,

Letting through the light from beyond,

People call them the moon and stars.

Poplar Tree was written at age 8, and *The Origin of Stars and Moon* at age 12. Readers often marvel at the precocious imagination, but easily overlook the “traumatic experience” embedded in these lines. Whether “loss” or “tearing,” these images stem from a cruel, harmful experience. The pure, silver-like songs of Gu Cheng’s early poetry arise from a rejection of these traumas; the purer

his songs, the harsher the reality they reflect. This tense, antagonistic life structure runs through his entire life. His tragedy can be metaphorically described as “attacking the city—defending the city.” He spent his life building a fortress to protect a fragile, sensitive heart. After the tragedy of 1993, a publication aptly titled *Gu Cheng Abandons the City* captured this metaphor.

This psychological longing for a “city” had a real-world counterpart in the Beijing of Gu Cheng’s childhood. During his early years, Beijing was still an agrarian city with walls, quiet alleys, courtyard houses, and military compounds, fitting Yu Dafu’s description of a “pastoral city with the form of a city but the scenery of the countryside” (Yu, 1935). The Beijing Gu Cheng dreamed of abroad was this childhood city: “I dream of returning to Beijing almost every night, but it’s the Beijing of my childhood, with walls, battlements, and gates. I climb the walls and see a city that has been quiet for centuries” (Gu, 2006b).

He explained his distinctive, towering hat to foreign audiences: “It’s my fortress, the easiest fortress to build” (Gu, 2006c). In another lecture, he said: “Wearing a hat feels safe, like living at home while traveling the world; sometimes I say it’s like Beijing’s city walls, which were completely demolished after I left Beijing at age 12” (Gu, 2006d). He also stated: “‘City’ is Beijing city, and it’s my name. My full name, Gu Cheng, means ‘watching a city.’ When I wrote *City*, I was watching Beijing” (Gu, 2006e). These statements confirm that Gu Cheng’s psychological fortress overlapped with the Beijing of his childhood. Earlier evidence comes from 1979, when he first published poems in *Today* magazine under the pen name “Gucheng” (Ancient City).

In this walled Beijing, Gu Cheng valued the sense of security, stability, and shelter it provided. His deep-seated desire for a sanctuary was isomorphic with this childhood Beijing. However, in the rapid modernization movement, this Beijing was constantly eroding. First came the decades-long

demolition of Beijing's city walls during Gu Cheng's childhood, followed by the Cultural Revolution's destruction and rewriting of the ancient city's appearance, then the restlessness and renewal of the reform era, with rising skyscrapers altering Beijing's skyline. By the 1990s, Beijing's marketization transformed it into a global metropolis, accompanied by drastic changes in interpersonal relationships, social ethics, and cultural atmosphere. These changes targeted both "Beijing city" and "Gu Cheng's city." While in Beijing, Gu Cheng directly experienced these shifts; abroad, he perceived them indirectly through media and, more intimately, through his emotional life, which threatened the "fortress" he was building on New Zealand's Waiheke Island. In 1990, he invited Ying'er, a girl he fell in love with in 1986, to the island, only to find her transformed into "a stranger from the city" (Gu, 1993a). This woman, with whom he had made a life-and-death pact in the purity of the 1980s, represented, by July 1990, a worldly value system that threatened his spiritual kingdom. This threat later proved fatal. The writing of *City* and *Ghosts Entering the City* coincided with a crisis in Gu Cheng's personal life and the era when Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the "end of history." Both large-scale historical shifts and personal dilemmas delivered devastating blows to "Gu Cheng's city." As he put it: "I feel that three years ago, I died and became a ghost. Every time I dream, I return to Beijing, standing on the street, not knowing where to go, but not too anxious, because I'm already dead" (Gu & Xie, 1993b).

City and *Ghosts Entering the City* are a startled response to these external stimuli, a concentrated reply, and an act of self-repair and defense. The poet repairs both the Beijing of his childhood and his inner city, viewing it as a "homecoming":

"City" is Beijing city, and it's my name. My full name, Gu Cheng, means 'watching a city.' When I wrote *City*, I was watching Beijing. I was watching as a ghost, so I

saw things that have disappeared from history. A street was once a river, a house was once a bridge; the dead are still alive, but they faintly recall things after death. I want to restore this vanished Beijing in my poetry. That is my homecoming (Gu, 2006f).

Reading the titles in *City* evokes familiarity, as most place names remain in use. Yet the poems' content induces bewilderment, as there is no "obvious or inevitable connection" between titles and texts (as cited in Mai, 2008). They are mostly fragments of personal memory, marked by action and fleeting moments. Place names are stable, nodes of overlapping memories, and intersections of past and present experiences. The *City* cycle is filled with tension between the reliability of place names and the ephemerality of experience. The poet seems to wrestle with public memory for interpretive control over place names, filling them with private memories. For example, in "Zhongguancun," memories are juxtaposed:

When I found the key, I wrote a book
On the fifth floor, page fifty-two, I read

Science Pictorial

Scoop some fruit
Watch the surging sea
Ice in the cabinet
(I can only assume you stole it)

Such writing redefines "Zhongguancun." It is neither the historical village nor the high-tech hub known since the 1980s; it belongs to one person's childhood moments: finding a key, climbing stairs, reading *Science Pictorial*, eating iced fruit. The best way to possess or preserve a place

name is to rewrite it with private, instantaneous memories. For the memory's owner, a place name's greatest value is to remind them of unique life moments. Gu Cheng thus reclaims his Beijing from public narratives and urban transformations, a Beijing impervious to political shifts or city remodeling. This approach aligns with the 1990s poetry trend of "personalizing history."

This memory-built city is a truly secure fortress, not only filled with personal memories but also protagonized by "ghosts," who "cannot die":

I found that a ghost's life is very different, with no overly exciting events. It loses its death, its sorrows, and fears, but also seems to lose all its hopes and love. In my dreams, I am a ghost, returning to China, seeing a world only I can see, so it's mine, which comforts me. In life, nothing belongs to me, not even myself, but as a ghost, I have something that's mine: the world I see as a ghost (Gu, 2006g).

The conclusion of *Ghosts Entering the City* describes ghosts as "without faith or loyalty, without love or hate, without parents or children, neither dead nor alive, neither mad nor foolish," emphasizing their stability and security (Gu, 2006h). At the time, Gu Cheng was interested in Zhuangzi's philosophy, particularly the "Discourse on Equalizing Things," which posits that "people can live or die" and "death does not exist." The images in his poetry are underpinned by this worldview.

Paradoxically, while this "ghostly city" is secure, it is also without exit, having "lost all hope and love." The city's other function, "confinement," thus emerges. This is a rootless city with no way out, where a frail soul drifts, seeking a way back: "Follow the water to return / A ticket costs ten cents" ("Houhai"). In reality, this city locks Gu Cheng in a sunless realm. The exploratory and breakout energy of his earlier poems, such as *Small Alley* and *One Generation*, is gone. This city is a projection of historical decline.

In his later poetry, Gu Cheng often signed with the single character “Cheng” (City). As noted, this refers not only to the architectural city but also to himself. Thus, *Ghosts Entering the City* can be read as “ghosts entering himself.” Indeed, *City* and *Ghosts Entering the City* are ghostly works, unafraid of ominous foreshadowing. Before his physical death, the poet had died multiple times in his texts. In Chinese poetry history, perhaps only Li He’s ghostly aura compares, and both poets met premature ends. This metaphorically points to another “small city”—the grave. Only in this city does one finally attain the sought-after security and belonging.

Excavating Beijing’s Stratified Memory: A Three-Dimensional “Literary Beijing”

Human history loves to distort,
I can only ask irrelevant ghosts;
After several underworld interviews,
I wrote the following poems.

—Gu Cheng, “Giant Gate,” March 1980

The previous section discussed the psychological motivations behind Gu Cheng’s writing of *City* and *Ghosts Entering the City* and the role of personal memories in these works. As a comprehensive artistic construct, these poem cycles are not merely a scattering of personal memories but unfold within the folds of history, the present, and the words themselves, reconstructing a mysterious, three-dimensional city. Walter Benjamin, discussing memory, said: “Memory must not proceed narratively, nor as a report, but in the strictest sense as epic and rhapsody. The shovel must reach every new place, and in old places, dig deeper” (Benjamin, 2001). Gu Cheng maximized poetry’s freedom, fully leveraging its ability to revive memory.

In a December 19, 1992, interview with Zhang Suizi, Gu Cheng said:

One can write ghost poetry without maintaining distance from ghosts, fully entering the ghost's state, excluding human vitality, writing as a ghost. This state brings one close to death. One can also write ghost poetry while keeping distance from ghosts, like watching a ghost story on TV, writing as a human, unharmed. As a ghost, I wrote poems like "Houhai" and "Zizhuyuan." As a human, I wrote the *Ghosts Entering the City* cycle (Gu, 2006i).

This statement distinguishes *Ghosts Entering the City* from *City*. Written in October 1992, while Gu Cheng was still composing parts of *City*, *Ghosts Entering the City* was written as a human, observing ghosts' lives like watching TV. It serves as an interlude or self-commentary within the *City* project, akin to an urn city near a gate, guarding the entrance. The cycle depicts a week in the ghosts' lives, with ghosts as protagonists, narrated externally. It is as if Gu Cheng steps out of the ghostly state, pointing at them: "Look at those ghosts." In *City*, the word "ghost" never appears, as it is the hidden riddle: the narrator is the ghost, and the poetic world is a ghostly realm.

As a capital for over 850 years, Beijing's charm lies in its overlapping histories and cultural memories, sometimes visibly so. In his 1992 essay "City Walls," Gu Cheng recalled participating in wall demolition as a student: "All students walked the streets, pulling a city brick with a wire. Each student had one day a week, tasked with delivering four bricks." During this, an incident occurred: "For a few days, brick-pulling stopped. Classmates said they uncovered another gate inside, from the Yuan dynasty" (Gu, 2007). This memory is corroborated by public records (Wang, 2003). A Yuan dynasty gate encased in Ming dynasty walls symbolizes Beijing's stratified cultural memory and historical depth.

City Record, published in 2003, documents Beijing's post-liberation urban transformation. It includes digitally synthesized images of Chaoyang Gate, Fucheng Gate, and Yongding Gate, with modern streetscapes at the base and ghostly gate structures superimposed above, creating a visual shock, as if the ancient city's ghost lingers (Wang, 2003). A historically rich, constantly renewed place easily evokes ghostly associations. While the living see only their world, ghosts freely traverse, seeing Beijing's past and present. As Gu Cheng said: "I was watching as a ghost, so I saw things that have disappeared from history. A street was once a river, a house was once a bridge; the dead are still alive, but they faintly recall things after death" (Gu, 2006f).

Under the ghost's gaze, Beijing's historical traditions, the poet's childhood memories, and new society's imagery blend into a bizarre, hybrid atmosphere. For instance, in "Donghua Gate":

So many maids in the courtyard
Wanting to return, circling the railing
The unlucky thing is the glass
She bends to look in the mirror, the empress says
Her high school look is utterly annoying

Maids, railings, and empresses form the classical content of Donghua Gate, while "high school" enters the poet's youth, connected by the juxtaposition of "glass" and "mirror." Glass cancels the depth of the mirror, where a deep, ornate classical China resides, but glass flattens it. In this era, a maid or empress becomes a high school student. Consider "Desheng Gate" for a fuller sense of this shadow world:

Desheng Gate

Too much land, never good, all sides are earth

Sunk in the middle, only dig earth for houses

The dragon was originally a beauty

There are a hundred beds, visitors pick one

Returning, the lamp is lit

But God commands the dragon

All this is to wait for you to dress up

Look closely, there's someone else above

Made into a beauty •• until

Take you to see the small street behind, saying

Someone died here, they've grown older

Forever and ever

Still working, you surely haven't seen this place

Turn Grave

Feng You, how do you know her name

May 1991

Historically, Desheng Gate was the military gate for dispatching troops, dubbed the “Army Gate,” where Ming minister Yu Qian defeated the Oirats. Gu Cheng recalled working near Desheng Gate, sawing wood, and an elderly watchman being killed by a thief (?). The poem’s first line notes the gate’s former desolation; outside Desheng Gate was beyond Beijing. “Sunk in the middle, only dig earth for houses” implies grave-digging. Digging reveals “a hundred beds,” like an underground hotel or dormitory. As the saying goes, death is like a lamp going out, but a lit lamp suggests someone preparing to return. While dressing, “look closely, there’s someone else above,” as if in a multi-layered space. Then, “take you to see the small street behind,” explained by Gu Cheng:

In my dream, I truly returned to this street, seeing my old masters still working,
their hair a bit whiter. Someone said: the dead are still sawing there, aging further.
—“Someone died here, they’ve grown older.”

But below death is another death—you get my meaning? The dead person I knew
was dressing, taking me to see a place, but she said, another person died here. If a
dead person speaks of death, there may be another layer of death, where the dead are
“living” (?).

A dead person shows him other dead people working as if alive, depicting layered deaths and underground lives. “Turn” and “Grave” shift back to the living world, with a blurted question: “You, how do you know her name?” The name was learned in the underworld, but back in the living world, the memory of death is forgotten. “Feng” is a phonetic shift from “Grave,” referring to anyone.

The four bolded lines, like a dragon’s spine, thread the poem: “The dragon was originally a beauty, but God commands the dragon made into a beauty, until forever and ever.” These cryptic words,

from a dream, act like a charm (?). Reading them with adjacent lines yields new meanings, e.g., “they’ve grown older, forever and ever still working.” The spatial depth, narrative freedom, and natural language attitude are evident.

The title “Desheng Gate” is both a site of personal memory and a historical participant in the poetic world. Relationships between titles and content in *City* vary: (1) connections are hard to trace; (2) place names spark the poem, e.g., “Tiger Bridge” begins, “The tiger paces in the corridor,” tied to the name’s origin as a Ming dynasty tiger enclosure (?). (3) Place names function literally, e.g., “Ping’anli”:

I always hear the best sounds

The corridor’s lamp can be turned off

“Ping’anli” (Peace Lane) was Gu Cheng’s workplace dormitory. Its literal meaning contrasts with “the lamp can be turned off,” evoking unease. This activation of Chinese characters’ multiple functions, scattering like mercury, is a technique Gu Cheng pursued since *Mercury* (?). In “Zheyue Hutong” (Moon-Shading Alley): “Can’t all light fires, busy lighting lamps / Thread-based-ism, flashing into dense depths,” “Zheyue” suggests darkness, guiding the imagery, while “thread” (from “capital”) evokes “private” or “thought,” reflecting Beijing’s marketization’s complex impact on alley life. (4) Direct evocation of historical events, e.g., “Taiping Lake” references Lao She’s suicide, paralleled by Wang Zengqi’s *August Sun* (Gu, 2010).

Most poems in *City* are short, many just two lines, maximizing each word’s expressive function. These words’ tendrils grow in all directions, constructing a delicate, multi-layered imagined city. French writer Jean Cayrol, in his Beijing novel *René Leys*, envisioned an “underground city” with fortresses, turrets, and menacing horizontal wells (Xie, 1991). Gu Cheng built such a “city beneath

the city,” fixing dissolved elements into visible forms through words. As Maimang noted, “All this darkness and obscurity makes a work like *City* withstand repeated readings” (Mai, 2008).

“Revolutionary Beijing” Through the Lens of “Compound Culture”

I like revolution, not politics.

—Gu Cheng, *Philosophical Reflections*, p. 23 (Gu, 2012a)

Chen Pingyuan, in *Beijing Memory and Remembering Beijing*, notes: “As a noun, memory is an impression of past things retained in the mind; as a verb, it is to recall, cherish, or remember someone or something. . . . Turning ‘memory’ from a noun to a verb means a person, event, or city may gain new life” (Chen, 2008). What nouns did Gu Cheng revive? Extracting nouns and nominal phrases from *City* and *Ghosts Entering the City* yields:

Bicycle, green tablecloth, glass chess, drawer, grocery cooperative, corridor, school, bench, anti-Japan, hygiene, critique, factory, throwing bottles, bicycle, documents, ballpoint pen, hallway, Bayi Studio, program, chair, key, *Science Pictorial*, bicycle repair shop, copper nails, senior old man, team, unit, meal voucher, red flag song, Red Flag North Station, furnace ash, Chinese revolution, nails, engineer, flower offering, fluorescent lamp, corduroy, soldier, wire, military uniform, field office, scarf, blanket, train, Long March, reception room, bulletin, swimming, kite, railing, popcorn, parade, glass, general, red plum blossoms, marriage registration

These nouns collage a socialist-era Beijing, less familiar to younger readers than old Beijing. This highlights that Beijing’s losses include not only the ancient city and walls but also a unique socialist memory layer. Nostalgia for Beijing as a “socialist city” began with Wang Shuo’s 1991 novel *Fero-*

cious Animals, peaking with the 1995 film *In the Heat of the Sun* (directed by Jiang Wen, adapted from the novel). This timeline aligns with Gu Cheng's writing of *City* and *Ghosts Entering the City*. Gu Cheng expressed affinity for Wang Shuo and Cui Jian, and despite apparent differences, they shared childhood memories and spiritual resources as children of military compounds (?).

“Compound culture” has emerged as a research topic, contrasted with “alley culture,” to explain how military and government compounds reshaped Beijing's character with socialist China's establishment. The first generation built new China; their children became today's dominant class. In culture, this group produced figures like Wang Shuo, Jiang Wen, Cui Jian, Ye Daying, Ge You, and Chen Peisi (Zheng, 2013).

Gu Cheng, son of the prominent military writer Gu Gong, grew up in this compound culture, a fact often overlooked. Tang Xiaodu remarked: “Most people, at a glance, assign him to a drama called ‘Misty Poetry,’ playing the ‘fairy-tale poet’” (Tang, 1994). This suggests Gu Cheng's “fairy-tale poet” image was a constructed narrative, obscuring his broader identity. Raised in a revolutionary cultural milieu, he wrote worker-peasant-soldier literature and identified as a communist, openly loving revolution but disliking politics (Gu, 2012a). He cited Fabre's *Insect Life*, Andersen's fairy tales, and Whitman's poetry as influences, but also read era-specific texts:

I was once a nationalist because I loved China; I even loved grand things. Then I read Lu Xun, who said everyone claims to be descendants of victors, royalty, but no one admits to being heirs of the defeated (?).

Reading Marx and Lenin made me believe I should first become a laborer (?).

Mao's influence on me surpassed all others (?).

Thus, some call Gu Cheng a “child of the republic” (Wang, 2010). This spiritual source explains

the cultural stance in the poem cycles: little nostalgia for the lost ancient Beijing, instead shaping a “city” dependency from a “childhood psychological archetype”; using old place names literally, dissolving and rewriting tradition. He did not aim to return to Lao She or Xiao Qian’s old Beijing but integrated Beijing into a new revolutionary everyday memory. As noted about “compound children”: “They left their birthplace young, before forming emotional ties. They lack their parents’ attachment to hometowns. Nor could second-generation migrants see ancient Beijing as home. Unlike Lao She, who felt one with Beiping, compound residents lacked such intimacy, their personal experiences not intersecting with the city’s history, missing that heartfelt love” (Zheng, 2013).

Wang Shuo described his spiritual roots: “My childhood and youth were steeped in revolutionary culture, later politicized, growing askew, a malformed fruit. But its racines lie in the May Fourth New Culture Movement’s rich soil. . . . My May Fourth is breaking with all tradition, reexamining everything deemed self-evident, doubting and critiquing what’s universally accepted, seeing the old and historically effective as shackles, obstacles to new life” (Wang, 2000). His embrace of “revolution” over “politics” mirrors Gu Cheng’s stance, and his spiritual lineage—Mao, revolutionary literature, left-wing literature, May Fourth radicals, Lu Xun—applies to Gu Cheng. This tradition shapes the unique value orientation of *City* and *Ghosts Entering the City*: neither indulging in old Beijing nostalgia like “Beijing-flavored literature” nor depicting Beijing as a rootless, alienated modern metropolis like “Beijing drifter literature,” but returning to a revolutionary Beijing memory, showcasing its enlightenment, resistance, and untamed spirit. For example, “Yuetansi North Street”:

The team was just here, still people

Later, no sound

Flowers like a big net

Swaying with departing shoes

This depicts a parade's dispersal or suppression, seen from the flowerbed, catching only fleeting shoes. Or "Xidan": "Let me see, the street will be twice / Once for anti-Japan / Once for hygiene." Xidan's significance is tied to two activities: anti-Japan protests and hygiene campaigns. "Hygiene" reflects scientific enlightenment, while "anti-Japan" has dual meanings: nationalist resistance and revolutionary rebellion, both May Fourth ideals. In "Xishi": "The law's knife is the court's key / The little dragon bed is killed." These two lines evoke a classic May Fourth literary scene: execution. Another poem, "Houhai," narrates a killing, an experience Gu Cheng found shocking (?). In the slaughter, someone tries to shield a girl but faces difficulties:

I put my hand under my clothes

I'm missing a knife

I don't believe we can leave like this

The knife is too short

I let you run ahead like the wind

The plot reveals the protector is the executioner, and the victim, disbelieving, jokes:

You show her the knife

Say, you're going to die

She laughs, says how many kids you have

This expresses severe self-reflection, akin to Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman*, where a potential victim has also eaten others. Gu Cheng articulated this at a discussion: "We must be cautious when condemning, as if we stand on justice's side, as if we are justice, and the condemned are entirely separate. Is that so? They do evil, we are just; they are base, we are noble. How are we so utterly different? Don't we seek the same interests? Why assume they're low and we're high?" (?). "Xinjiekou" expresses this more piercingly:

Killing is a lotus flower

Once killed, it's held in hand

The hand cannot be changed

This continues Lu Xun's medicalized view of social issues. Evil grows on the body, killer and killed are one. What courage, like a warrior severing his wrist, is needed to heal the nation's disease? "Revolution" ultimately means "revolutionizing oneself." This forms the sharpest part of *City*'s narrative, defined by enlightenment and revolutionary cognition.

Conclusion

Around the writing of *City*, Gu Cheng wrote other short poems named after Beijing places, such as "Dingling" (April 1991), "Military Museum" (May 1991), "Shuangyushu" (March 1993), and "Dengshikou" (April 1993), but excluded them from *City* (Gu, 2010). This indicates *City* was a curated selection. Written and compiled between March 1992 and March 1993 during Gu Cheng's residency in Berlin under a DAAD grant, the cycle was a key outcome of this period. Gu Cheng approached it with a workmanlike attitude, consulting books like *Beijing Alleys* and requesting Beijing maps from family (?). It was his most laborious project over two years.

City's 52 poems are not arranged chronologically. The poet likely designed their order, particularly the first and last poems. The first, "Zhonghua Gate," was the royal city's southern gate, called Daming Gate in the Ming, Daqing Gate in the Qing, and Zhonghua Gate in the Republic, known as the "national gate." After 1949, it was demolished in 1954 for Tiananmen Square's expansion, and Mao's Memorial Hall was built there in 1976 (?). Thus, "Zhonghua Gate" is both a symbolic entry and a site of historical commemoration.

The last poem, "Youqizuo," is a hutong near Di'anmen, recorded in *History of Chinese Alleys* as "Youqizuo Hutong," a Qing-era residence for palace varnish artisans (?). Gu Cheng's "Youqizuo" may be a colloquial error or, as he often claimed, a "correct mistake," evoking a memorial tablet or spirit seat, a substitute for the deceased to hold memories. The poem's content supports this, and the cycle's opening and closing thus both point to "commemoration." Zhonghua Gate is a public monument, while "Youqizuo" is private. In Gu Cheng's personal history, this hutong was significant, appearing twice in his autobiographical novel *Ying'er* (pp. 95, 236), as Ying'er's Beijing address and the site of their farewell before he and Xie Ye left China, where they professed love in her presence (Gu, 1993a). This marked the start of his personal crisis and the 1993 tragedy. The poem's content partly overlaps with *Ying'er*'s farewell scene, and its use as the cycle's conclusion carries deep intent, written after Ying'er left his "island kingdom."

Thus, *City* is a commemorative poem cycle. Gu Cheng used a letter to a friend as its preface:

I've only completed half of *City*, with many gates yet to repair. But I want to send it to you first. It may be a new *Dreams of West Lake*, I don't know. I just often sing a Vietnamese folk song: Oh, my poor homeland... (?).

Dreams of West Lake, by late Ming loyalist Zhang Dai, mourns the Ming-Qing transition. Gu

Cheng's analogy underscores the poem cycles' commemorative significance for a changing era. Written in Berlin amid the post-Cold War "end of history" and China's 1980s-to-1990s marketization shift, when "the poet's death" and "farewell to revolution" were proclaimed, the poems' ghosts are "historical ghosts." Even returning to today's Beijing, they would struggle to recognize old paths, wandering in memory's labyrinth.

These poems serve as spokespersons for ghosts, their laughter and voices frozen in lines like ice-bound fish, eternally gray-green. They offer secret codes guiding readers into hidden historical depths. Their avant-garde experimentalism suits Beijing's richness, inviting diverse interpretations. As ? notes, "Beyond architecture like courtyard houses, literature, memory, and imagination must be included to bring this city to life." Gu Cheng's poem cycles, with a poet's honesty and dedication, revive and preserve a historically rich, multifaceted city.

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Note: This article was first published in Chinese in *Studies in Modern Chinese Literature*, 2015, Issue 2.

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