

# The Poetry of Jidi Majia

## Jidi Majia: An Outstanding Product of World Multiculturalism By Tomas Venclova

For hundreds and thousands of years, Chinese literature has developed in its own unique way, almost wholly isolated from Western tradition. The reasons for this include geographical isolation (of which the Great Wall is an emblem), a unique social structure and, perhaps most importantly, the unique features of its ideographic writing system. Viewed from another perspective, Chinese culture has exerted an often-decisive influence on other Far-Eastern cultures. Among the remarkable fruits that emerged from China's ancient literary canon was classical lyrical poetry. Chinese people take pride in such poets as Qu Yuan, Tao Yuanming, Li Bai and Du Fu, all of whom belong in the front rank of world poets such as Homer, Horace and Petrarch. Yet prior to the 18th century, classical Chinese literature was virtually unknown in the Western world.

In the 19th and especially in the 20th centuries, the Far East underwent large-scale opening to the West. People in America and Europe took a strong interest in the Far East, and the reverse was also true. Poetry from the Far East began influencing the world's modern literature. At the same time, currents from Europe, America, Russia and even Poland permeated Chinese culture, although this was sometimes delayed. What interfered with this process, aside from huge disparities between cultures, was the complex and difficult road of development which China traveled and continues to travel. Today we are still weathering the turbulent currents of interpenetration between East and West. We can find proof of this fact in Jidi Majia's creative works. He is one of China's foremost contemporary poets, and he is one of the most renowned cultural figures in China today.

.As a poet, Jidi Majia stands out from the crowd, even though his poems were forged by the widespread cultural currents of our new world era. He writes in Chinese, but he belongs to the 8-million-strong Yi ethnic group, otherwise known as the Nuosu, who live in mountain areas not far from Vietnam and Thailand. Thus we can say that there is an additional layer of distance between this poet and our culture. Even so, European readers can readily understand his poems.

The Yi People speak a language which belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese language family, and they have an independently developed writing system. Their culture preserves archaic elements related to animistic beliefs. Even now the Yi People put their trust in shamans (which they call bimos). Bimos preside over weddings, cremations and ceremonies of childbirth. They make offerings to deities of mountains, trees, boulders and the four elements of earth, air, fire and water. The Yi language and writing system is now being taught in schools, but this has not always been the case. Like every minority group, the Yi People have been made to feel that their identity and existence are under threat.

Jidi Majia's mentor was China's eminent poet Ai Qing (who was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution). In his youth Jidi Majia pored over works of China's classical and twentieth century literature, as well as Western literature. Yet his heart has remained tied to his own ethnic group—to that primal world view handed down by the Yi Minority which, being unknown to the world's major populations, holds an appealing novelty. Jidi Majia earnestly sympathizes with every ethnic group whose fate is beset by difficulties. His poems are extremely expressive, free-wheeling and rich in metaphor. In his frequently hyperbolic language and his "roots-seeking" orientation, he has an affinity with post-modernist currents.

Jidi Majia is strongly attached to use of folkloric elements, in a way that approaches magical realism. His

writings are informed by the poetic practice of Africa, Europe and America. Readers will readily notice a strong stylistic connection to Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz and poets of the "Negritude" school. In his works we can also trace a literary connection with eastern European poets, from Czesław Miłosz to Desanka Maksimović. He links up these Western sources with Chinese and Far Eastern tradition, especially with ageless myths and legends of the Yi People, to achieve wondrous and unexpected effects.

For readers who endeavor to understand the era we live in, Jidi Majia's poems offer food for thought which will surely strike a chord of shared feeling.

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