

**“Time and again I hear the youths mutter”:
Hybrid Traditions of Reception in Haizi’s To Sappho**

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Abstract: This article examines the contemporary poet Haizi’s response to a hybrid Chinese and Western tradition of mediating Sappho in his short poem *To Sappho*, and pays particular attention to the routes of transmission and translation through which Haizi encountered the Greek poet. For Haizi, Sappho comes to represent an elusive lyric ideal as he strives for affective poetic language in the wake of the Cultural Revolution’s impact on Chinese literature. Echoing and reconfiguring imagery from her available poetry and biography, Haizi domesticates Sappho into his symbolic, rural landscape of poetry, thereby creating a paradigm to contemplate his own poetic identity and legacy.

Keywords: Contemporary Chinese Poetry, Haizi, Reception, Sappho.

Around 1986, a young Chinese poet’s encounter with Sappho was recorded in his own poem:

给萨福¹

1 美丽如同花园的女诗人们
相互热爱，坐在谷仓中
用一只嘴唇摘取另一只嘴唇

我听见青年中时时传言道：萨福

5 一只失群的
钥匙下的绿鹅
一样的名字。盖住
我的杯子

10 托斯卡尔的美丽的
女儿
草药和黎明的
女儿
执杯者的女儿

你野花

¹ Text from Haizi 2009: 138.

15 的名字
就像蓝色冰块上
淡蓝色的清水溢出

20 萨福萨福
红色的云缠在头上
嘴唇染红了每一片飞过的鸟儿
你散着身体香味的
鞋带被风吹断
在泥土里

25 谷色中的嚶嚶之声
萨福萨福
亲我一下

你装饰额角的诗歌何其甘美
你凋零的棺木像一盘美丽的
棋局

To Sappho²

1 Beautiful as the garden itself are the poetesses
Loving each other, sitting in the grain barn
Plucking a pair of lips with another pair

Time and again I hear the youths mutter: Sappho

5 Separated from its flock
a green goose under a key
—a name like that. It covers
my cup

10 The beautiful daughter of Toscar
The daughter of herb and dawn
The daughter of cupbearers

Your wildflower
name
As if upon blue ice
15 The pale clarity of water overflows

² All translations from Chinese are mine.

Sappho Sappho
Head swathed in red clouds
Lips staining red every patch of birds flown by
Bearing the fragrance of your body
20 your shoelaces blown by the wind breaks
in the soil

In the barn a low muttering
Sappho Sappho
Give me a kiss

25 Your poems adorning the brows
—how nectarous they are
Your withered coffin is as if a beautiful
chess game

The name of this poet was Zha Haisheng. Born and raised in a small rural village in East China to a farming family, Zha was known for his love of books from an early age. In 1979, two years after the reinstatement of university entrance examinations post-Cultural Revolution, fifteen-year-old Zha was admitted by the prestigious Peking University to study law.³ As a student and later as a lecturer of law after graduation, Zha increasingly dedicated his time to writing poetry under the pen name Haizi, and immersed himself in the heightened spirit of literary production that characterized Chinese universities at the time. In his seven years of poetic production prior to his death in 1989, he composed more than 200 short poems and 7 long poems, comprising 800,000 words.

Haizi composed *To Sappho* in 1986 alongside a series of works dedicated to admired artists who inspired him and whose works informed a theoretical, classicizing turn in his poetry.⁴ In many of these poems, Haizi immediately treats the dedicatees as close, tangible, and even as a part of himself. His intellectual connection with these artists and their works frequently manifests in his poetry as somatic, visceral interactions: for example, he embodies

³ Implemented in 1952, the Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges is the annual undergraduate admission exam through which the vast majority of students gain entry to universities in China. During the tumultuous Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), universities were either closed or operating under limited capacity, only enrolling students selected by a committee rather than through academic evaluation. The Examination was experimentally resumed in 1977, and formally re-established in 1978. The first few Examinations saw a great number of examinees following the eleven-year suspension, and this new generation of university students played a key role in the “culture fever (wenhua re 文化热)” and “aesthetics fever (meixue re 美学热)” of the eighties, where large-scale literary production and debates about the succession of cultural traditions permeated all levels of society. For a detailed discussion of the Chinese literary scene after the devastating impact of the Cultural Revolution, see Hong 2007, particularly Part II.

⁴ See Haizi 2009: 1027. In his poetry, Haizi often takes scenes from agricultural work and his personal, lived experience as points of departure, and distills them into dreamlike imagery imbued with symbolic significance. Around 1986, as Haizi professes in a series of essays titled “diaries” such as the one cited here, he increasingly reflects upon a wide range of philosophers and poets in formulating his way of life as well as his poetics.

Van Gogh,⁵ ventriloquizes Mozart,⁶ and in one long poem even presents himself as violently beaten up by a club-wielding Henry David Thoreau.⁷ In contrast, this poem *To Sappho* shows Haizi repeatedly reframing Sappho's image, name, and poetry, as he contemplates and searches for the elusive poetess. In this paper, I situate Haizi's engagement with Sappho within the literary landscape of Chinese Sapphic transmission and recent Chinese literary history more broadly, thus filling a scholarly gap.⁸ Against this background, I will explore the ways in which Haizi negotiates his own poetic identity through constructing an image of "Sappho," one that clearly interacts with prior Chinese translations, but departs from this tradition in embracing her queer identity.

Looking at Haizi's poem, one finds many elements reminiscent of the Lesbian poet—the garden and flowers, herbs and dawn, cool waters and cupbearers, and above all her poetic circle and same-sex love. Sappho, however, inhabits an ambiguous space between the real and the poetic world among familiar imagery. While Haizi treats the sound of her name as something close and tangible enough to "cover [his] cup," he also transplants her into an imagined "grain barn" (谷仓, 2) and above the "soil" (泥土), both key terms in his work. Haizi, who is now referred to as "the poet of wheat" in popular culture, often anchors his identity and ideals to a highly symbolic rural poetic landscape. In this charming yet fabricated "order and homeland that exists outside of time,"⁹ the grain barn and the soil are entwined with life, love, and death. This imagery is most clearly elucidated in his theoretical essay titled "The Barn," where Haizi constructs a metaphorical, almost primeval terrain centered around a barn that is theorized as the container of all human consciousness, experience, and fate. The grain barn simultaneously "traps [Haizi] as a prisoner" as a subject that demands attention, and "cannot be reached,"¹⁰ a tension that he elsewhere also applies to women.¹¹ Sappho and her companions thus sit at the intersection of all these ideas in

⁵ Haizi 2009: 4, "阿尔的太阳——给我的瘦哥哥" [The sun of Arles—for my thin brother]. Haizi applies the same imagery to Van Gogh as he does to himself: fire, the wheatfield, the love of harvest, etc. In another poem, "死亡之诗 (之二: 采摘葵花)" [The poem of death (two: picking sunflowers)], sunflowers bloom on the body of the first-person narrator as he simultaneously seems to die and live on in Van Gogh-esque imagery.

⁶ Haizi 2009: 175, "莫扎特在《安魂曲》中说" [Mozart says in *Requiem*].

⁷ In Haizi 2009: 166, "梭罗这人有脑子" [This guy Thoreau has a brain], the narrator says, "梭罗手头没有别的 / 抓住了一根棒木 / 那木棍揍了我 / 狠狠揍了我 / 像春天揍了我" [Thoreau has nothing else in his hands / but a wooden club / that wooden club beat me up / it beat me up heavily / it beat me up like the season of spring].

⁸ Liu 2012 provides the most comprehensive overview of Sappho's well-known translations into Chinese, alongside insightful comments on the trends within Chinese studies of Sappho, but does not touch on the historical context of their translation. Tian 2003 raises Sappho's Chinese reception history at different points in her edition of Sappho that includes translation, commentary, and analysis. Chen 2021 introduces major Sappho translations in 20th century China, with special focus on Zhou Zuoren. Chen references several lines of Haizi's *To Sappho* in relation to the issue of Sapphic sexuality in her Chinese and Japanese transmission.

⁹ Zhao 2011: 150. "海子虚构的"家园", 在某种程度上建立了一种"时间之外"的秩序....." Also see Haizi 2009: 704-8, "家园" [Homeland], in his epic poem "太阳·七部书" [The Sun: Seven Books].

¹⁰ Haizi 2009: 1147-1150. "我被囚禁在谷仓.....谷仓不可到达。"

¹¹ Haizi 2009: 1030-1033, "日记 1987 年 11 月 14 日" [Diary (14 November 1987)]. In this essay, Haizi speaks of the topics and themes he'd like his poetry to cover, including women he has met, about whom he writes, "她们是白天的边界之外的异境, 是异国的群山, 是别的民族的山河, 是天堂的美丽灯盏一般挂下的果实, 那样的可望而不可即。" [They are the other realm beyond the edges of daylight, the mountain

Haizi’s poetic barn, nebulously embodying an eternal yet unattainable state of being. The framing as an unreachable ideal similarly characterizes Haizi’s only other mention of Sappho in a 1986 diary entry that details his turn to classical material as inspiration for a new, pure, and superior lyric language. In Chinese, lyric poetry is called 抒情诗, literally “poetry that expresses emotions,” and Haizi believes that such an expression ought to be spontaneous and intuitive, driven by experience and passion. He calls lyric poetry “the kingly throne in the depths of a lake,”¹² and says:

As I walk from the contemporary and modern to the classical, I follow the truth of the stream. There, lyric is still in a clear, unclouded state, the self-examination of the watery crown. With Sappho, the throne in the water never tilts. Your shepherd leans on the doorstep. The terracotta jar draws down water between the rocks.¹³

In Haizi’s poetic landscape, then, the name of Sappho stands in for the height of lyric in the use of language and imagery. It also stands for a time in which lyric could be supreme. Haizi is able to see both of these things but cannot yet reach them. Haizi’s strong desire to achieve the command of poetic language he senses in Sappho, and to inhabit her ideal poetic space, is evident in his sudden shift from the third person to the second person when referring to Sappho (line 12). By summoning her and the world of her poetry into his contemporary one, Haizi seems to be seeking a possibility for his future in her enigmatically hallowed past. As much as I’d like to agree with this sentiment of Sappho’s supremacy, this does raise a question: among all the lyric poets that the last 2500 years have produced, and among all the writers Haizi heartily lauded, why was Sappho of such a singular, unmatched appeal to Haizi? To answer this question, it is necessary to first step away from the poem and consider the context of its composition.

The year 1986 not only marked Haizi’s turn to the classical, but it was also a turning point in the Chinese transmission of Sappho, when two new translations of the Greek poet started to be undertaken. One is by Luo Luo, who was the first to produce a complete Chinese edition of Sappho’s poetry based on Mary Barnard’s 1958 English translation;¹⁴ and the other is by Shui Jianfu, who was the first to translate a selection from the original Greek text.¹⁵ In Haizi’s time, however, the most accessible text of Sappho is a 1979 anthology of world literature that includes a selection of Greek poetry. The anthology is largely neglected in studies of Sappho’s Chinese reception,¹⁶ and is heavily reliant upon prior Chinese interpretations of Sappho. I would like to take a look at these early, formative stages of

ranges of foreign lands, the landscapes of different nations, the fruits hanging like the beautiful lights of paradise, in sight but so inaccessible].

¹² Haizi 2009: 1027-28, “日记 1986 年 8 月” [Diary (August 1986)]: “湖泊深处, 抒情就是, 王的座位。”

¹³ *ibid.*“(2) 古典: 当我从当代、现代走向古典时, 我是遵循泉水的原理或真理的。在那里, 抒情还处于一种清澈的状态, 处于水中王冠的自我审视。在萨福那里, 水中王位不会倾斜。你的牧羊人斜靠门厅而立。岩间陶瓶牵下水来。”

¹⁴ Luo 1989. The translation is based on Mary Barnard, *Sappho: A New Translation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958.

¹⁵ Shui 1988. Shui’s collection of ancient Greek poetry includes thirteen poems by Sappho.

¹⁶ Liu 2012 and Chen 2021 both relegate this edition to the footnotes.

Sappho's introduction in China that led to our period of the 80s, before examining the anthology's intertexts with such traditions and Haizi's poem *To Sappho*.

In Ellen Greene's edited volume *Re-Reading Sappho*, she writes that "the history of Sappho imitations, translations, and scholarship is a history of images and perceptions, fictions and fantasies."¹⁷ The century of Sapphic transmission in China since 1902 is no different.¹⁸ The earliest introductions to Sappho often looked to her English tradition as a basis, and brought to the Chinese audience a "Victorian Sappho" that Yopie Prins has identified and deconstructed in her 1999 book.¹⁹ In this period, an obsession with the poet's life produced ever lengthening accounts of her biography, and constructed an image of Sappho as the paradigmatic Victorian-esque poetess.²⁰ Her poetry became her biography, which in turn helped editors fill the gaps in her fragments with "plausible" names and narratives, consequently giving rise to many "facts" about Sappho's life that endure to this day. Sappho's transmission in China is a practice in the reception of this highly mediated rendition of Sappho, as the Victorian aesthetic judgement of Sappho overwhelmingly informed which of her poems and versions of her biographies were chosen for Chinese translation.

Of the earliest Sappho enthusiasts and translators in China, the most influential were Shao Xunmei and Zhou Zuoren. Both men were among the wave of Chinese students that sought education abroad in the early 1900s, many of whom later returned to China to become the driving force behind twentieth century Chinese publishing, translation, and literary criticism. The former, Shao Xunmei, was himself a modernist poet. He professes to have been "stunned by [Sappho]'s divine charm" when he saw the so-called "Sappho" fresco in Naples in 1925,²¹ which led him to seek out Sappho's poetry through the Cambridge scholar and Sappho editor J. M. Edmonds.²² It is worth noting that Edmonds' Loeb edition of Sappho featured what David Campbell later called "excessive eagerness to fill the gaps",²³ the traces of which show up in Shao's own works. Shao launched his poetic career by both passionately imitating Sappho and treating the poet as a highly eroticized subject of his poetry. He

¹⁷ Ellen Greene ed., *Re-Reading Sappho*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. 3.

¹⁸ The first appearance of her name is in Liang Qichao's translation of Byron's "The Isles of Greece." As Chen 2021 points out, lamenting Greece became a substitute for lamenting China in the eyes of Chinese intellectuals witnessing the tragedies in their country at the turn of the twentieth century.

¹⁹ Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 1999.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ The fresco is National Archaeological Museum of Naples, no. 9084. The chances of it being Sappho is miniscule, and this identification is no longer accepted by scholars.

²² Shao records his obsession with Sappho in the preface to his poetic collection, *Twenty-Five Poems* [诗二十五首]. He speaks of how the "divine charm" of the fresco "Sappho" led him to seek out his poetry, which he found comparable in form to some ancient Chinese poetry. "一张壁画的残片使我惊异于希腊女诗人莎莉的神丽, 辗转觅到了一部她的全诗的英译; 又从她的诗格里, 猜想到许多地方有和中国旧体诗形似处" [A fragmented fresco stunned me with the divine charm of the Greek poetess Sappho, then led me to seek out a complete English translation of her poetry; then, from her poetic form and meter, I conjectured there are many similarities with old forms of Chinese poetry].

²³ See David A. Campbell 1992 in *Greek Lyric, Volume I: Sappho and Alcaeus* (LCL 142).

incorporated the Sapphic stanza into his own Chinese verses and published several articles with mentions of Sappho’s poems and brief accounts of her popular biography.²⁴

Meanwhile, Zhou Zuoren, an influential essayist, translator, and lifelong admirer of ancient Greek culture, began his efforts to introduce Sappho from 1914. He wrote multiple pieces on Sappho for widely circulated Chinese publications, each containing translations of a few poems, short introduction of Sappho and her poetic style, and commentaries on his approach to translation.²⁵ His primary source of Sappho’s poetry was the 1907 fourth reprint of Henry Wharton’s incredibly successful book, *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation*, initially published in 1885. In this edition, Wharton not only provides a detailed introduction to Sappho through extrapolative biographical readings of her poetry, but he also follows each poem and his prose translation with poetic renditions by English writers, with more “popular” poems such Sappho 31 filling up to eight pages of various translations and derivative works, thus making the literary taste of the time visually clear.

Shao Xunmei and Zhou Zuoren’s selective renderings of Sappho were largely informed by such sources in translation that they utilized, and capture within them the already palimpsestic history of transmission. Shao and Zhou’s early piecemeal translations were then solidified into something of a small “canonical” selection of both poetry and biography that was translated, adapted, and reinterpreted again and again, both from other languages into Chinese, and Chinese further into another writer or translator’s Chinese. This early stage of Sappho’s introduction to China culminated in Zhou Zuoren’s publication of *The Greek Poetess Sappho* in 1951. The book is a mixture of Zhou’s commentary and selective translations of Arthur Weigall’s 328-page biography of Sappho,²⁶ with small additions from C. R. Haines and, once again, Henry Wharton.²⁷ Weigall’s hefty edition presents extensive biographical readings of Sappho’s poetry, supplemented with lengthy, narrativized and sensationalized descriptions of Lesbos’ and Mytilene’s customs, natural surroundings, and notably, agricultural production. Zhou’s book attempts to breach the cultural distance between the two lands by bringing in Chinese comparanda for unfamiliar ancient Greek dates and customs, and, as the first Chinese book dedicated to a single Greek poet, it likely had a significant role in establishing Sappho as the model of a Greek lyric poet to the Chinese audience.

Publication of Sappho ebbed during the Maoist era, but the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “Reform and Opening-up” in 1978 ushered in a new era for Chinese literature. As a response to the dry, monotonous, and “unnaturally transparent” language that resulted from political pressure and propagandistic purpose during the Cultural Revolution,²⁸ translators took up a wide variety of foreign

²⁴ See Yuan 2014 for a detailed examination of Shao’s entanglements with Sappho in his own poetic career. See also Chen 2021 and Liu 2012.

²⁵ Liu 2012: 116-120.

²⁶ Weigall 1932.

²⁷ As recounted in the preface to his book, Zhou Zuoren owned the 1907 reprint of Wharton’s book, as well as C. R. Haines 1926: *Sappho: The Poems and Fragments*.

²⁸ Zheng 1993. Zheng’s incisive, influential essay theorizes three “ruptures and changes” in the modern history of the Chinese language. The first one is the Vernacular Movement in the 1920s, which she argues often “rudely cast aside all classical literature”; the second one started in the 50s and culminated in the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976, when political pressure and propagandistic purpose stripped the language of variety and substance, rendering it “unnaturally transparent”, dry, and uncreative. The third one came

literature, and writers were eager to experiment with their use of language. This is the context in which poetry was revitalized by the writers that emerged from the underground poetic circles of the previous decade. This is also the environment that produced the most accessible translation of Sappho during Haizi's time, which came in the form of a short biography and nine poems collected in volume one of *Selected Foreign Literary Works*, edited by Zhou Xuliang and published in 1979. As Haizi started university, the four-volume set entered many university libraries as a supplementary textbook for world literature courses.

In this volume, Homer and Sappho were selected as the only two examples of ancient Greek poetry, respectively representing epic and lyric, a choice that sees influence from the essays of Zhou Zuoren discussed above. Zhou Xuliang's two-paragraph introduction of "Sappho, the ancient Greek lyric poet" includes her wealthy background, political exile, the fictive tradition about her love for Phaon and alleged suicide, the scarce survival of her prolific oeuvre, and the extremely high regard for her poetry among other ancient Greek authors. "Sappho's lyric poetry," Zhou writes, "primarily takes love as a theme; her style is unembellished and natural, her emotions true and intense."²⁹ Zhou Xuliang selects nine poems for translation, eight of which have featured regularly in earlier introductions of Sappho and were the core of what I have previously dubbed the small Chinese "canonical selection" of her poems. Approximately half of the chosen pieces highlight imageries of nature, and half are focused on love and longing.³⁰

The first intertext between Haizi's *To Sappho* and Zhou Xuliang's edition is the shared transliteration of Sappho's name as 萨福 *sà fú*, which has since become standard. Prior to this edition, each translator of Sappho chose different Chinese characters for her name, yielding at least six versions.³¹ A further examination reveals that Zhou Xuliang's translation of Sappho's poetry was primarily, if not solely, reliant upon the Wharton edition, which was also a major source for Zhou Zuoren. Starting from Wharton's English, Zhou Xuliang further re-interpreted and altered Wharton's many editorial choices as he translated with careful consideration of both Greek meter and Chinese rhyme scheme. The resulting language flows well musically and is poetic yet easy to read. Some quirks of Zhou Xuliang's edition especially seem to have echoes in Haizi's poem *To Sappho*. For example, in the first poem of the selection he combines Sappho 105a and b, following Wharton's edition.³² Building upon an earlier version by the translator Zhu Xiang, Zhou presents the poem as follows:

organically after Deng Xiaoping's policy of "Reform and Opening-up" in 1978/1979, when a wide variety of literature entered China and people were eager to experiment with new forms and write without constraints.

²⁹ Zhou Xuliang 1979: 34. "萨福的抒情诗歌，多半以恋爱为主题，风格朴素自然，情感真挚强烈。"

³⁰ The selected poems are: third stanza of 2, 31, 34, 55, 96, 102, 104a, 105a and b, 168b.

³¹ Liang Qichao 1902: 撒芷波 (*sā zhǐ bō*, a confounding transliteration that I believe resulted from a mistaken reading of the Japanese サッフオ [*Saffo*], which appears in Liang's source material. He misread the geminate consonant marker ツ as っ [*tsu*]); Shao Xunmei 1927: 莎蕪 (*shā fú*), two characters that have plant connotations and read as quite feminine; Zhou Zuoren 1914, 1925, 1951: 萨复 (*sà fù*), 萨普福 (*sà pǔ fú*), 萨波 (*sà bō*), Zhou's approach aims more for the accuracy of sound; Yang Yixian 1932/1995: 沙浮 (*shā fú*), though likely not intentional, Yang's "Sappho" uses two characters that could be taken together to mean "floating sand." See Liu 2012 for Shao, Zhou, and Yang's transliterations of Sappho's name.

³² Wharton's edition renders the two segments into one poem:

οἶον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ἐρεύθεται ἄκρω ἐπ' ὕσδω,

一个少女³³

好比苹果蜜甜的，高高的转红在树梢，
向了天转红——奇怪摘果的拿她忘掉——
不，是没有摘，到今天才有人去拾到。

好比野生的风信子茂盛在山岭上，
在牧人们往来的脚下她受损受伤，
一直到紫色的花儿在泥土里灭亡。

One Maiden

Like an apple honey-sweet, turns red high up in the boughs,
turns red towards the sky—strange the pluckers forgot her—
no, just unplucked, none picked her up til today.

Like a wild hyacinth flourishing on the hills,
she who the passing foot of shepherds wound and hurt,
until the purple flower perishes in the soil.

From its language to the use of the dashes in the second line, this in turn appears specifically influenced by the English translation of D. G. Rossetti, included in the Wharton edition.³⁴ The translation emphasizes the redness of the fruit up high, and presents a more extreme end of the purple flower than any other Chinese translation to date. In comparison, the section from lines 16-21 of Haizi's *To Sappho* has a curiously equivalent progression of imagery: the invocation of Sappho is followed by a repetition of redness, both the red cloud on her head and her lips staining red the birds. Just like the purple flower that “perishes in the soil,” Sappho's shoelaces “break in the soil” in Haizi's poem. Both use the Chinese phrase “在泥土里,” a construction that appears only once among Haizi's myriad mentions of this

ἄκρον ἐπ' ἀκροτάτῳ, λελάθοντο δὲ μαλοδρόπῃς
οὐ μὰν ἐκλελάθοντ', ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐδύναντ' ἐπίκεσθαι.
οἶαν τὰν ὑάκινθον ἐν ὥρεσι ποίμενες ἄνδρες
πόσσι καταστείβοισι, χάμαι δέ τε πόρφυρον ἄνθος . . .

³³ Zhou 1979: 34. The translator is noted as Zhu Xiang.

³⁴ D. G. Rossetti's translation runs as follows (note the punctuation, added title, and the expansion of the second “stanza” into three lines partly for the appearance of completion despite the Greek having only two lines extant):

One Girl

I

Like the sweet apple which reddens upon the topmost bough,
Atop on the topmost twig,—which the pluckers forgot, somehow,—
Forgot it not, nay, but got it not, for none could get it till now.

II

Like the wild hyacinth flower which on the hills is found,
which the passing feet of the shepherds forever tear and wound,
Until the purple blossom is trodden into the ground.

symbolic substance.³⁵ Moreover, Zhou's edition, following Wharton, gives the title "A Maiden" (一个少女) to the two stanzas combined,³⁶ encouraging the readers to construct the image of a young woman, sweet, "unplucked," flourishing but cruelly trodden, even beyond what the body of the poem suggests. One wonders if such an evocative presentation colors Haizi's portrayal of Sappho. Given that Haizi's poetic dedication to Tolstoy reimagines the Russian author as the elderly peasant of his novels, this reimagining seems possible. There's also an entanglement between nature, poetic image, and poet in Haizi's vision of Sappho that echoes Zhou's explicitly gendered treatment of the fruit and flower simile: The Chinese translation chooses the feminine animate/human pronoun "她" (lines 2 and 5) in reference to the "sweet apple" and "hyacinth,"³⁷ whereas the English version by Rossetti utilizes "which" (lines 2, 5) and "it" (line 3). In Haizi's poem, personhood and natural imagery flow into one another as clouds encompass Sappho's head, as her red lips extend out towards the sky, and her scent finds its way into the land through fallen adornments of her body. Names and sounds gain materiality, becoming a lost goose or key (lines 1-2), or icy water (14-15) and wildflower (12), which coincides with "wild"ness of the hyacinth that is in Zhou's translation after Rossetti, though not present in the original Greek.

Zhou Xuliang's translation of Sappho 31, here titled "To the Beloved," also re-interprets parts of Wharton's prose translation. Much could be said for this rendition, but for the sake of the present argument, I'd like to draw attention to a couple of things that are emblematic of this process of mediated translation that shaped Haizi's poem. Wharton renders the fourth stanza in prose as "sweat pours down, and a trembling seizes all my body; I am paler than grass, and seem in my madness little better than one dead,"³⁸ while Zhou's version says "Cold sweat pours down all around; bouts of shivers / Run down my limbs, My visage / is paler than winter grass; in my eyes I see only death and madness."³⁹ The shared word of

³⁵ Other constructions expressing similar ideas are "在泥土中" and "在泥土上," respectively 2 and 5 occurrences.

³⁶ Wharton's edition also combines the two stanzas, but notes it is a combination and separates the two parts with the numbers "I" and "II." Zhou's edition, following Zhu Xiang's translation, does not give this indication and presents 105a + b as a single poem with two stanzas.

³⁷ Since the non-human pronoun 它, or even no pronoun in the case of line 5, would suffice, the use of the feminine pronoun reads as a conscientious poetic choice, especially since the translation otherwise follows that of Rossetti quite closely.

³⁸ Wharton's Greek is printed as follows:

...

ἀ δὲ μίδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
φαίνομαι [ἄλλα].

³⁹ "我周身淌着冷汗；一阵阵微颤
透过我的四肢；我的容颜
比冬天草儿还白；眼睛里只看见
死和发疯。" Zhou 1979: 36.

“madness,” which is present neither in the original ancient Greek nor in any other contemporary translations I could find, was inserted by Wharton possibly due to the resemblance of φαίνομαι to μάίνομαι. It could be simple poetic license, but it appears Zhou picked up this peculiarity, and further made the word “madness” along with “death” the direct objects of the transitive verb “see,” which turns Wharton’s introspective, and reflexive “seem” into an outward facing action. Zhou also introduces a theme of coldness through his use of “cold sweat” and “winter grass,” the former of which might be drawing upon the translation of Ambrose Philips in Wharton’s book, whose rendition of ὀππάτεσσι δ’ οὐδὲν ὄρημ’ as “over my dim eyes a darkness hung” also finds correspondence in Zhou’s “before my eyes a darkness.”

It seems to me that the vocabulary choices, omissions, misreadings, and poetic exaggerations Zhou’s edition makes create a version of Sappho and Sapphic poetry that—however incidental it might have been—maps easily onto Haizi’s poetic ideals and the language he uses to express them. In this particular instance of Sappho 31, the twice adapted verse yields the imagery of winter, and the notion of “seeing” the abstract concepts of death and madness, which finds resonance within Haizi’s works, especially those in the second half of his poetic career. In a poem titled “Dedication to the Night,” Haizi writes that “in the darkness of the barn the grains pile high / in the barn it is too dark, too quiet, too bountiful / also too desolate, in the bountiful harvest I see the eyes of [the god of] death.”⁴⁰ In the last poem the poet composed before his death, titled “Spring, Ten Haizis,” he characterizes himself, addressed both in the first and in the second person, as “the son of the dark night, immersed in winter, enamored of death / unable to pull away, in love with the cold and empty countryside,”⁴¹ which is a fitting summary of many of his most prevalent poetic motifs.

Whereas Haizi’s understanding of Sappho’s poetics appears to closely follow these highly mediated transmissions, his reaction to her sexuality is notably different. His emphatically positive framing of Sappho’s homosexuality is the first of its kind in published Chinese literature.⁴² Previous introducers of Sappho suppressed the traditions of her sexuality in various ways, most commonly through omission.⁴³ Zhou Xuliang’s 1979 book, discussed above, only mentions her alleged love for Phaon in the biography and subtly talks around the subject in the footnotes under Sappho 31 and 96.⁴⁴ Zhou Zuoren, who was the

⁴⁰ Haizi 2009: 548, “黑夜的献诗”：“..... 稻谷堆在黑暗的谷仓 / 谷仓中太黑暗，太寂静，太丰收 / 也太荒凉，我在丰收中看到了阎王的眼睛.....”

⁴¹ Haizi 2009: 540, “春天，十个海子”：“.....这是黑夜的儿子，沉浸于冬天，倾心死亡 / 不能自拔，热爱着空虚而寒冷的乡村.....”

⁴² Chen 2021: 483.

⁴³ Shao Xunmei, Zhou Xuliang, and later Yang Xianyi, Luo Luo, and Shui Jianfu all omit this aspect; her anecdotal relationship with Phaon often receives attention even though it is also frequently dismissed after mention.

⁴⁴ Under 31, Zhou’s succinct footnote explains the identity of the “you” and the “him.” Under 96, titled “A Lost Friend,” a lengthy footnote gives the popular “Sappho, school mistress” narrative reconstruction of the poem involving Sappho’s relationship with Atthis and Anactoria. What Zhou writes is not explicit, but could certainly be homoerotically construed: “据考证，阿狄斯是萨福的一个女学生。萨福起初不喜欢他，后来才发见她美，但是阿狄斯却喜欢了别人.....” [According to research, Atthis is one of Sappho’s female pupils. Sappho was not initially fond of her, and only later saw her beauty, but Atthis preferred someone else...] Zhou 1979: 37.

only one who did not shun a direct discussion of this tradition, comments in reference to Sappho 31 that “her relationships with her female companions were not necessarily that perverse (变态), and neither can we tell the whole story from a mere few lines...In any case this is a good poem... the other aspects we can disregard.”⁴⁵ His book briefly summarizes Weigall and Wharton’s discussion of the matter, and follows with his own conclusion, in which he brings in an ancient Chinese example to make the unfamiliar reception of Sappho’s sexuality more easily conceivable. He writes, “That it is said many women of Lesbos practice the vice of homosexuality, called “Sapphism,” is a rumor made especially malicious by the Medieval Christian church. A Chinese proverb states that it is considered a woman’s virtue to be ignorant...[like how] Song dynasty poetess Li Qingzhao enjoyed great fame in her time, but slander came out of nowhere...”⁴⁶ In Zhou Zuoren’s narrative, Sappho’s poetry is sublime separate from, or even *in spite of*, her sexuality. In fact, the complex tradition of Sappho’s queerness wasn’t treated until Tian Xiaofei’s 2003 book “*Sappho: The Making of a Western Literary Tradition*,” in which she examined how social norms and male desire suffocated female same-sex love in Chinese circulations of Sappho.⁴⁷ In Haizi’s poem, however, Sappho’s presence is introduced and then emphasized by her companions’ same-sex affections towards her, and her poetic identity is entangled in her sexuality, recalling Haizi’s construction of an idealized, beautiful poetic terrain elsewhere in his theoretical essays that featured “people lean[ing] in to kiss, regardless of gender.”⁴⁸ I do wonder if the “underground” circulation of Sappho alluded to in line 4 of Haizi’s poem, “Time and again I hear the youths mutter: Sappho,” was accompanied by discussions, maybe even acceptance, of her sexuality that have not survived in written records. Is it possible that the socially isolated poet, whose poetic aspirations “deviated” from the contemporary mainstream, felt some affinity for his ancient Greek precursor? For someone whose transmitted biography focuses on exile and loss of love, and whose poetry was variably stigmatized for its portrayal of “deviant” sexuality?

In his engagement with and idolization of Sappho, Haizi joined many contemporary Chinese poets in seeking a predecessor, a “soulmate” of sorts, in foreign literature.⁴⁹ Scholars have noted that after the violent break in Chinese language and literary history due to war and revolution, poets found a spiritual poetic lineage in the experience of suffering and the sense of alienation passed down in the works and biographies of foreign poetic “martyrs.”⁵⁰ In this very poem, we see Haizi placing Sappho as the source of such a lineage: before casting her as the daughter of herb, dawn, and cupbearer—all elements familiar to early Greek literature and Sappho’s works—Haizi finds her in “the beautiful daughter of Toscar,” which in turn reproduces a poetic line about a young woman mourning lost love that Henry David

⁴⁵ Zhou 1925. “.....女友的关系未必是那样变态的，我们也不能依据了几行诗来推测她们的事情。总之这既是一篇好诗，我们只要略为说明相关联的事，为之介绍，别的都可以不管了。”

⁴⁶ Zhou Zuoren 1951: 9-10. “后来更传说勒斯婆斯的女人多有同性爱的恶习，称作萨波党，这又由于中古基督教会的造成更是变本加厉的谣言了。中国俗语说女子无才便是德.....宋朝女诗人李清照有名当代，被无中生有的说.....” Zhou concludes regarding such traditions of biographical reception that “perhaps things of the same nature happen just about everywhere.” Li Qingzhao was arguably the most famous ancient Chinese poetess, and like Sappho, she is the only ancient poetess who is widely known in her culture.

⁴⁷ See also Chen 2021: 483.

⁴⁸ Haizi 2009: 1147-1150, “The Barn.” “探头亲吻。不分男女。”

⁴⁹ Zhao 2011: 65.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

Thoreau quotes as he ponders loneliness and personhood.⁵¹ As Haizi embraced the lyric “I” in defiance of the Cultural Revolution’s collective “we,” and announced that the “true” lyric poet has to be “first a lover, then a poet,”⁵² he encountered Sappho. The Sappho he met was not only presented through her most passionate and inwardly-turned poetry and biography, but was moreover applauded and heroized for them. Haizi, then, legitimizes his particular poetic ideals by echoing Sappho’s language and integrating her into his own contemporary Chinese poetic landscape just as countless Western poets through the ages have done, thus participating in a tradition of which he may not even have been fully aware. The idiosyncrasy of Haizi’s Sappho experience was likely also informed by the dearth of available Chinese materials, further filtered down from two millennia of fragmentation, reconstruction, and cross-cultural reception. This curtailed and curated Sappho does not give Haizi a plain answer in his search of “pure” lyric language, but, through a tantalizing glimpse, opens up a world of lyric possibilities that he voyeuristically reaches for.⁵³ By closing *To Sappho* with “your withered coffin is as if a beautiful / chess game (26-7),” Haizi indeed seems to hint at the puzzling nature of Sappho’s fragmentary legacy, but in “chess game” we might also see an open-endedness, an invitation for a willing reader to join in constructing its meaning.

Haizi would not live to see the publication of the new Sappho editions that were underway in 1986. In the spring of 1989, he laid himself on a stretch of railway tracks near Shanhaiguan and died under an oncoming train. Largely unknown outside of poetic circles in his lifetime, Haizi became an overnight sensation upon his death, and numerous biographies sprang up alongside his extensive oeuvre in publication.⁵⁴ Different aspects of his characterization as a mythologized “poetic martyr,” both of passionate ideals and of lonesome desperation, variously steer interpretations and applications of his poetry.⁵⁵ Haizi’s brief but fervent poetic career, haltingly ended by his “timely” death prior to the social upheavals of 1989, aided in the public construction of him as a paradigmatic poet and image of “the 80s,” an era and a symbol that occupies an unattainable place in the modern

⁵¹ From chapter 5 of Thoreau, *Walden*. The line is taken from James Macpherson’s “translation” of a purported Scottish epic titled *Fingal* by one Ossian: “Mourning untimely consumes the sad; / Few are their days in the land of the living, / Beautiful daughter of Toscar.” Macpherson’s epic is widely acclaimed for its high literary merit and influenced many contemporary writers, although the current scholarly consensus is that Macpherson was the sole composer of the epic he claimed to have discovered. There is, I dare say, something poetic about Haizi using this circuitously transmitted line to characterize his Sappho.

⁵² Haizi 2009: 1027-28. “我是说，你首先是恋人，其次是诗人。”

⁵³ In discussing “the Classical” in lyric poetry, where Haizi considers Sappho’s eminence unshakable, he frequently calls for a return of focus to language itself, and expresses frustration over the state of language in his own works and in contemporary Chinese poetry at large. See Haizi 2009: 1027-28.

⁵⁴ Haizi’s initial launch to fame owes much to the commemorative essays published by his then much more well-known poet friends such as Luo Yihe, who gave his poetry high praise and offered insight into the circumstances leading up to his suicide. See Jin 2012 for a succinct summary of the publication history of Haizi’s works and biographies as well as scholarship on Haizi following his death. Zhao 2011 discusses representative works in detail throughout her book.

⁵⁵ In high school textbooks and political slogans, his most widely cited poem “面朝大海，春暖花开” [Facing the Sea, Spring Flowers Bloom] exemplifies “healthy and positive attitude towards life”; in countless seaside real estate advertisements, the titular one-liner evokes an enviable middle-class lifestyle; in most of recent scholarship, however, the poem’s overtly bright imagery belies a deep despair towards the future.

Chinese literary imagination.⁵⁶ For many looking back through layers of nostalgia and cultural mediation, Haizi has come to embody a time of pure pursuits and open possibilities, not dissimilar to what Sappho represented in Haizi's own poetics.

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⁵⁶ For in depth discussions of this complex era in Chinese literary history and Haizi's place in it, see, for example, Hong 2007 and Zhao 2011. Zhao offers a good bibliography on the phenomenon of nostalgia towards "the 80s" prevalent in generations of Chinese people and analyzes the historical contingency of Haizi's exceptional posthumous fortune.

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