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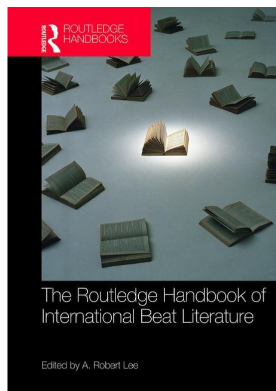

The Routledge Handbook of International Beat Literature

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The Beats on China and Chinese "Beats"

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315210278-23
Benjamin J. Heal
Published online on: 16 May 2018

How to cite :- Benjamin J. Heal. 16 May 2018, *The Beats on China and Chinese "Beats" from:* The Routledge Handbook of International Beat Literature Routledge
Accessed on: 21 Jan 2019
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315210278-23

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23

THE BEATS ON CHINA AND CHINESE "BEATS"

Cross Cultural Influences, Impact and Legacy

Benjamin J. Heal

The increasing importance of the Sinosphere (the wider East-Asian cultural sphere, as dominated by China) on global politics and economics in the early twenty-first century has led to a reevaluation of Chinese culture in transnational contexts. Following this trend this essay will explore the way Chinese writers and writers of the Chinese diaspora have re-appropriated the themes and styles of Beat literature and reinterpreted a Beat ethos in Chinese contexts, or independently developed a "Beat" sensibility since the emergence of the Beat Generation in the 1950s. In a transatlantic context Paul Giles remarks, "mythic versions of American identity in the middle of the twentieth century arose partly through narratives of dislocation and alterity." (Giles 2002: 1). A similar, yet subtle, exchange of mythic versions of both American and Chinese identity also evolved through narratives of "dislocation and alterity," which this essay will explore through the examination of Chinese writers and poets such as Bei Dao (1949–), Wang Shuo (1958–) and Mian Mian (1970–) alongside Taiwanese writers and writers of the Chinese diaspora such as Qiu Miaojin (1969–1995), Maxine Hong Kingston (1940–) and Guo Xiaolu (1973–), who can arguably be given the label "Chinese Beats." Despite the relative vagueness of the "Beat" literature label, it is representative of a certain construction of American national identity out of this sense of "dislocation and alterity," and despite its transnational influences the movement is unquestionably "American" in origin. Yet as Jimmy Fazzino states, "the Beat generation is not only what we would now recognize as a transnational literary movement par excellence but is thoroughly worlded" (Fazzino 2016: 4). It is the nature of this newly constructed "world Beat" identity, as interpreted and reframed in Chinese contexts, that is also the focus of this study.

The Beat Generation writers of the 1950s and 60s forged a new cultural sensibility through new, experimental, and spontaneous literary forms. They attempt to capture their desire to experience physicality and the natural world through travel and lifestyle experimentation in their works, and by doing so created a countercultural movement and literary sensibility that continues to inspire cultural production across the globe. The blending of Western and non-Western cultures is foregrounded in much of the scholarship on the Beats which, according to Nancy Grace and Jennie Skerl, includes "Buddhism, pan-cultural hallucinogenic practices, and European surrealism and romanticism." (Grace and Skerl 2012: 1). This breadth reveals the Beats' magpie-like approach to cultural appropriation, with the aforementioned elements championed in their works, yet the direct impact of Chinese culture on Beat literature, while clearly evident from the pidgin English ending of William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (2003 [1959]), "No Glot, C'lom Fliday," through to Allen Ginsberg's not particularly well-documented trip to China, nevertheless maintains a shadowy, nebulous and mythic presence (Burroughs 2003 [1959]: 151, 96). While Ginsberg spent three months teaching

and touring China in 1984, Gary Snyder is likely the Beat writer with the most prolonged interest in and knowledge of China (Sanders 2000: 165–166). His ecological philosophy is informed by East-Asian history, and he played a key role as translator of works of Chinese poetry; there is even a Center for Gary Snyder Studies at Hunan University (Tsai 2012). While in China Ginsberg was impressed by his students' knowledge of his and Jack Kerouac's work, and this knowledge reveals an extant influence, part of a transnational exchange and contextual reinterpretation, that began in the mid-twentieth century and continues to this day. The importance of this relationship with a mythic "East" in Beat writing, and the subsequent trans-pacific interpretation of Beat writing in Chinese contexts will also be explored.

Beat Literature in China

The context of post-1949 Communist China in terms of literary production and criticism can appear bewildering to a Western reader. Initially critical theory and explication of government policy was difficult to discern from the "adjudication" of the value of literary works and their writers to the cause of the revolution. There is some irony in the fact that the Beats, while being profoundly anti-status quo and rejecting many of the norms and values of the United States of the 1950s, failed to herald the Communist advances in Europe and China, and ironically became a paradigm case of the decadence of American society that could be used as anti-Western, anti-capitalist propaganda by Party officials in China. (Wen 2005: 59). The alterity that existed between the United States and China could in effect be bypassed by the narratives of dislocation and transnationalism of Beat literature. It is true that President Richard Nixon brought China somewhat out of the cold with his visit in 1972, but this was during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when publishing Beat inspired literature would have been virtually impossible, and certainly dangerous. Contemporary writers in China continue to have a particularly difficult time managing the relationship between literature and politics, as Hong Zicheng states, "The intimate relationship between politics and literature and the tense circumstances under which it was handled, constrained and regulated the contents of what was written and modes of expression." (Hong 2007: 271). Moreover, as Wen Chu-an notes, the Beats only gained limited acknowledgement from the Chinese media, again in negative terms, during the 1950s:

> [T]he Reference News (an official daily newspaper published by Xinhua News Agency, which was affiliated with the government's propaganda department) used the Chinese phrase "kua diao yi dai" to describe the Beats. However, "kua diao" is a derogatory term suggesting "good for nothing, decadent, rotten, degenerate, depraved, corrupted"; if personalized, the term is associated with English words such as "gangster, swindler, hustler, criminal."
>
> Wen 2005: 58–59

In this sense then the Beats were doubly marginal, not widely considered serious literature in the United States, while considered decadent, degenerate literature in China. An abridged copy of *On the Road* (1957) was published in China in 1962 as part of the restricted grey-cover book series. These were intended to highlight the decadence of Western imperialism, and were only supposed to be accessible to Communist officials. Eventually the restricted books were secretly redistributed to members of the Red Guard and young intellectuals who were experiencing hardship in the countryside as part of the re-education program instigated during the Cultural Revolution. The effect was profound with young readers experiencing in *On the Road* and "Howl" (1956) a new form of free expression and alternative visions of the West. The readers could identify with these rebellious, outsider Americans, entirely free and uninhibited in their literary expression, who felt repressed by the McCarthyism and increasing social conformity during Dwight Eisenhower's Presidency (1953–1961) (Wen 2005: 59).

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The Beats on China

Representations of China in Beat texts, and the interaction of Beat writers with China reveals a significant aspect of Beat sensibility. Proto-Beat interaction with China is largely confined to Kenneth Rexroth's collections of translations, particularly *One Hundred Poems From the Chinese* (1956), which had a major impact on his own poetics (Klein 2004) and the work of Ginsberg and Kerouac. Burroughs uses representations of the Chinese to develop a sense of both dislocation and alterity. Rejecting the literary and cultural traditions that reinforced stereotypes such as Sax Rohmer's "insidious" Dr. Fu Manchu, and pidgin English speaking, relentlessly humble and traditional Charlie Chan, the initial encounters presented in his works are not as a traveler entering China, or as an American encountering members of the Chinese community at home, but intriguingly through the representation of Chinese characters in a third-space: Mexico. Burroughs's first reference to the Chinese occurs in the final section of *Junky*, protagonist Lee enters Mexico City and remarks, "My first night in town I walked down Delores Street and saw a group of Chinese Junkies standing in front of an Exquisito Chop Suey joint. Chinamen are hard to make. They will only do business with another Chinaman." (2003 [1953]: 92). This sense of the Chinese diaspora consisting of closed communities, and the stereotype of the inscrutable Chinaman, particularly in the context of American expatriation, works metaphorically in many of Burroughs's textual explorations into multiple layers of Otherness, out-siderness, dislocation, and border or frontier spaces of transgression. Burroughs also had an ongoing interest in pictographic language systems such as Mayan pictograms and Egyptian hieroglyphs and, as David Ingram notes, he was particularly fascinated by Chinese writing because of its "non-linearity of structure and its imagistic concreteness." (Ingram 1996: 99). Burroughs even supported the Cultural Revolution (1969). The final phrase of *Naked Lunch* is the pidgin English delivery of the line "No glot, C'lom Fliday," that apes the use of pidgin English in racist jokes, but by being separated from a joke shows a hybridized language of infinite deferment, pointing to a diaspora of increasing power, and potential enemy within, thus recalling the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Burroughs, 2003 [1959]: 196). It is clear that this is not the "too-easy identification with the Other or elision of cultural difference altogether" that Fazzino sees as a danger of Beat writing, manifested in Kerouac's construction of an essentialized "worldwide fellahin" (fellahin can be translated as "peasant"), as a form of what Brian Edwards terms the "orientalist trap" of identification with and romanticization of the "Other" (Edwards 2005: 164; Fazzino 2016: 10; Kerouac 2007: 381, 400, 3). Rather, it is pointing to and focusing in on the political and social differences and reasons for them, of particular importance to Burroughs's project of breaking down notions of alterity: essentialized us/them, either/or identities.

These representations and interests had an impact on the younger Beat writers, who by being largely based in an American city with a large Chinese immigrant population, San Francisco, came into contact with Chinese daily. A "fat Chinese poet by the name of Anton" is mentioned in the John Clellon Holmes novel *Go* (1997 [1952]:100), and numerous references to the Chinese occur across Kerouac's oeuvre. Kerouac dedicated his novel *The Dharma Bums* (1958) to the ninth-century Chinese poet Han-shan at the request of Gary Snyder, whose Buddhist practice and interest in Han-shan influenced Kerouac's novel. Snyder's Buddhism led him to a broader interest in East-Asian religion, philosophy, and poetry, and he translated some of Han-shan's works for a 1958 edition of *Evergreen Review* (Snyder 1958). The influence was profound, as Snyder states:

> I tried writing poems of tough, simple, short words, with the complexity far beneath the surface texture. In part the line was influenced by the five- and seven-character line Chinese poems I'd been reading, which work like sharp blows on the mind.
>
> Allen 1960: 420–421

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In *The Dharma Bums* the character Japhy Rider (based on Snyder) describes Han-shan to Ray Smith (Kerouac) as "a Chinese scholar who got sick of the big city and took off to hide in the mountains […] a poet, a mountain man, a Buddhist dedicated to the principle of meditation." (Kerouac 2006 [1960]: 21–22). This anti-urban focus of Han-shan had a profound effect on Beat writing, despite there existing an element of projection to the association, marking the shift from the densely urban, Dashiell Hammett inspired *And the Hippos were Boiled in their Tanks* (written 1945, published 2008) to the outward looking, lyrical, pastoral focus of Kerouac's later work. Han-shan, his friend and fellow monk Shih-te, and their master Feng-kan are portrayed in several sources as "poor but happy recluses, bordering on the crazy, who constantly do and say nonsensical things, gaily clapping, laughing, singing and dancing when they are misunderstood" (Henricks 1990: 6). When compared to this passage from *On the Road* it is clear why Kerouac felt an affinity: "the only people that interest me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing" (2007 [1957]: 113). Han-shan is therefore a touchstone poet as influence on the outlook of nascent Beat Generation, and Chinese culture hangs over the work of the Beats as a source of comfort from a position of dislocation and a source of their own mythologizing.

Chinese "Beats"

After the horrors of the Cultural Revolution a new generation of poets emerged in China. This "Second-Generation," also known as the "Misty" (*menglong shi*, sometimes also translated as "obscure") poets, so called because of their reaction to the Cultural Revolution, was to produce abstract poetry denounced as "hazy" (Chen 2005: 822–823). Their works eschew the didacticism of earlier social realist poetry, with their self-expressionism, the element that most closely aligns them to the Beat literature, considered most controversial. Such individualism was seen to betray the social responsibilities of intellectuals (Qiu 2005: 556). Subject to censorship, several were exiled after the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. A significant member of this group is Bei Dao, an acquaintance of Ginsberg, who continues to write dissident poetry having lived in exile since 1987. A review of a Hong Kong exhibition of Bei Dao's photography underlines the direct Beat influence, "Bei Dao himself admits, his mentor for photography is fellow poet and late American Allen Ginsberg, whose influences can be readily identified by visitors familiar with the Beat generation pioneer." (Zhang 2012). Gu Cheng, a core member of the Misty poets, achieved notoriety for murdering his wife with an axe while living in New Zealand, echoing William Burroughs's infamous killing of his wife while in Mexico. Western influences are central to their work, as Yang Xiaobin notes:

> [The Misty poets were] avid readers during the cultural revolution of so-called "yellow-cover books" […] such as Jean-Paul Sartre, J. D. Salinger, Jack Kerouac, Ilya Ehrenburg, Samuel Beckett, and Albert Camus, —and "grey-cover books", series of translated Western literature […]. Evident influences on the misty and post-misty poets include Charles Baudelaire, Paul Valéry, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Boris Pasternak, Osip Mandelstam, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, and John Ashbury.
>
> Yang 2011: 214

The status of these yellow- and grey-cover books appears to mark them out as somehow dangerous, and ironically therefore attractive to young, potentially dissident, intellectuals. By attempting to control these books the Chinese authorities have successfully replicated what brought the texts of the Beat Generation to prominence in the first place—censorship, an issue which continues to affect the development of Chinese literature.

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Ginsberg visited China in 1984, during the comparatively liberal Deng Xiaoping era (1978–1989), with a delegation of American writers, including Snyder and Maxine Hong Kingston, as part of a cultural exchange. After the conference Ginsberg stayed on for a month, writing and lecturing (and publishing his work) at Heibei University Foreign Languages department, Baoding (Morgan 1996: 4). This period inspired the poems in the *White Shroud* (1986) collection, including *I Love Old Whitman So*, *One Morning I Took a Walk in China*, and *Reading Bai Juiyi* (Wen 2005: 59). While in China Ginsberg met Ai Qing (1910–1996), a central member of the "First-Generation" poets that were active before the Cultural Revolution (Chen 2005: 822–823). Ai's son is the well-known dissident artist Ai Weiwei, who spent time with Ginsberg while both were living in New York (Osnos 2010). During this period Ginsberg also had a close Chinese companion, Jack Shuai Shu, who Ginsberg had met while in China and sponsored so he could study and live with him in New York (Morgan 2008: 434). Ai Weiwei (1957–), who has lived in the United States both as an expatriate and in exile, can be seen as bridging Beat inflected writers of the diaspora, such as Chinese-Americans Frank Chin (1940–) and Kingston, with the "First-Generation" poets. Ai Weiwei and the post-Tiananmen generation of writers defiantly rejected the Misty poets' apparent Modernist elitism by exploring Western postmodern ideas in their work (Hong 2007: 271).

The Modernist and avant-garde aesthetic was also taken up by other schools of writing in China. The "root-searching" (*xun gen*) writers, such as Nobel Prize for Literature winner Mo Yan (1955–), reacted against the social realist texts they were exposed to during the Cultural Revolution, and developed a magical realist form influenced by South American novels such as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Yet such writers, despite their shared tendency to seek out "roots" of their identity, bear little comparison with the writing of the Beat Generation, and they do not claim to be influenced by them. Dissident poet Liao Yiwu (1958–), on the contrary, does claim his dissidence to be the direct result of Beat Generation influence at around the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre, "I admired the American Beat generation, their spirit and their actions. I was 'on the road'. All through China, in dozens of cities, millions of protesters marched on the roads." (Liao 2014). His poem "Massacre" (composed June 4, 1989), written just prior to the Tiananmen massacre, is as much a cry of anguish as "Howl":

> Shoot through their skulls! Scorch them! Let their juice burst out. Let their souls burst out. Squirt it on the traffic bridges, on the tower, on the railings! Let it splatter on the road! Shoot it into the sky and make stars! The stars are running away! The stars are growing legs, running away! Heaven and earth turning around. All humanity wearing shiny hats. Shiny, shiny steel helmets. An army group storming out of the moon! Shoot! Strafe! Shoot! This is great! People and stars falling together. Running together. Don't know each other. Chase them into the clouds! Chase them until the earth opens, shoot and shoot into their flesh! Make another hole for the soul! Another hole for the stars!
>
> Liao 2014

Writer, poet, and painter Ma Jian (1953–) was a photojournalist in Beijing and member of dissident art and poetry groups. His novel *Red Dust* tracks his three-year journey of self discovery, which started as a result of state surveillance of his activities, and as Annie Wang states, it is "[h]onest, raw and insightful, this edgy and unsettling meditation is the Chinese equivalent of the Beat generation's American voyage of discovery, *On the Road*." (A. Wang 2001). Now living as an expatriate in the UK, Ma was at the time of writing *Red Dust* a long haired, denim wearing Chinese variant of Kerouac, and at 30 was at a personal low, unable to see his daughter and sensing his painting was no good. His journey is essentially a Buddhist pilgrimage which mirrors *On the Road* in its capturing of landscape and people, but is far starker and untrammeled in its harshness given the differences between 1950s America and 1980s China, and it points directly to Ma's sense of dislocation which led to his relocation to the UK.

Novelist Wang Shuo, who emerged in the late 1980s and became associated with *liumang* or *pizi* (hooligan) culture, was described by critic and Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo as presenting a, "Chinese mutant form of the 'absurdists', 'Dadaists', 'black humorists' and 'beat generation'" (Liu 1986 quoted in Barme 1999: 97). Other mainland critics have also directly linked Wang's work to that of the Beat Generation (Xue 1993 quoted in Barme 1992: 42). Wang's work, perhaps more than that of any other Chinese writer in this essay, reflects the core values of Kerouac's *On the Road*. During the Cultural Revolution Wang's parents were sent away from Beijing, leaving Wang to grow up in a military compound with similar children. In some ways he was less adversely affected by the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution than others, as certain young people of privilege in the compounds (often Red Army children), with whom Wang could associate, were able to enjoy freedoms others were not. As Howard Yuen Fung Choy states, "they had no chance to participate in history. Lacking experience, all this disillusioned generation of China remembers is playing for thrills." (Choy 2008: 164). The hooligan protagonists Wang presents, both anti-hero and hero, act instinctually, and reflect Kerouac's Dean Moriarty, the embodiment of (American) Beat values, a destructive, primal yet reforming force of renewal. Works such as *Playing For Thrills* (1989) capture some of the spontaneity of Kerouac's work by incorporating a view of "low" culture and colorful slang phrases such as "blowing the ox pussy" (S. Wang 1997: 24). Wang has also tasted both critical and financial success, with Stephen King gushingly describing *Playing For Thrills* as, "[t]he most brilliantly entertaining hardboiled novel of the '90s…call it China noir. If you can imagine Raymond Chandler crossed with Bruce Lee that gives you the flavor. Most ultimately cool" (S. Wang 1997). Wang is remarkably successful, as Yusheng Yao states:

> [more than] 10 million copies of his books have been sold, and most of his twenty-odd stories and novels have been made into movies or television miniseries. Wang is adept at manipulating the growing market of popular culture: he openly admits that he writes for television and film to gain fame and fortune.
>
> Yao 2004: 432

Wang's vision of the hooligan and hooligan culture also has much in common with Kerouac's manifestation of Beat as connoting "beatitude and beatific," except the hooligan has the Chinese twist of productivity and success (1961):

> All the motivating forces of reform and openness come from hooligans. It is the hooligans who do business, build factories, and open shops. It is their craziness that prompts the society to run … Take a look, all those who have really succeeded, who have already become rich, are all hooligans.
>
> Quoted in Gao 1993: 217 in Huang 2007: 67

Geremie Barme sees this, in terms which resonate with the often professed apolitical nature of the Beats, as "a shorthand for certain urban attitudes that are quintessentially expressed not in the tones of overt dissent but more in the creations of a sardonic popular culture" (Barme 1992: 23). This is one of the likely reasons Wang's books have not been banned.

A more balanced, yet equally subtle, form of resistance is demonstrated in the work of Wang Xiabo (1952–1997), who like Ginsberg and Burroughs utilizes sex and sexuality in his work. Most readings regard him as critical of Maoist ideology through a subtle critique of the state and the promotion of liberal lifestyles, but this is a little simplistic. Again the impact of foreign literature was significant on Wang's writing, particularly Margerite Duras' *The Lovers* (Lin 2005). Sex is a great power leveler for Wang, particularly in his award-winning novella *The Golden Age* (X. Wang 2007).

The post-socialist generation of writers, emerging after Deng Xiaoping's death in 1997, also utilize sex, and document the new lifestyles Deng's open-door policy has enabled. These include the female "Beauty writers" (*meinü zuojia*), such as Mian Mian and Zhou Wei Hui (1973–), who

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emerged in the late 1990s producing works that depict sex and casual drug use, directly referencing the Beat Generation writers. Their writing style has been described as "body writing" (*shenti xiezuo*) or "writing of the unconventional" (*linglei wenxue*) due to their focus on the body and body functions, sexuality and unconventional relationships and lifestyles (Schaffer and Song 2014: 77).

Wei Hui's hugely successful semi-autobiographical *Shanghai Baby* (1999) was published the year before *Candy*, with Wei Hui also being compared with Kerouac, "she is a searcher, a female Kerouac on a road of her own devising." (Wilson 2001). Each chapter features an epigraph, and included are quotations attributed to Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg. I have been unable to locate the source of the Burroughs quotation, and suspect it is not a Burroughs quotation at all: "Don't come and bother me. Don't knock at the door, and don't write." (Zhou 2001: 61). Wei Hui's use of Beat writers follows the pattern of superficiality that is the course of the rest of the novel's content, with numerous scattershot references to Western popular culture in the context of the increasing consumerism of contemporaneous Shanghai.

Mian Mian's novel *Candy* (2000) in contrast presents a nihilist vision of drug use and sexuality that bears comparison to Burroughs's early work in *And the Hippos were Boiled in their Tanks* (1945, published 2008), *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict* (1953, hereafter referred to as *Junky*) and *Queer* (1953, published 1985). Mian Mian's unflinching account cuts across Burroughs's matter-of-fact first person account of addiction in *Junky*, and his tragic third-person, fragmented novella *Queer*, with its story of an unrequited gay sexual relationship. *Candy* similarly presents an increasingly fragmented narrative of the breakdown of protagonist Hong, and her descent into heroin and alcohol addiction and several failed sexual relationships, albeit from a Chinese, heterosexual female perspective in the 1990s rather than the queer, American male of the 1950s. Yet the similarities are striking, particularly the way national and international events overshadow both texts. The beginnings of the Cold War are key to the sense of an increasingly repressive state structure in Burroughs's work and Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956), while the post-Tiananmen crack-down and an overwhelming sense of anomie informs *Candy*.

Hong mentions Ginsberg in particular with reference to "Howl":

> We'd grown up on movies from the Soviet Union and North Korea, but now we listened to music from England and sat in our kitchens eating instant noodles, wondering if we had AIDS. We smoked marijuana from Xinjiang, popped three-*yuan*-a-bottle pills, and once we got high, we could listen to punk rock and tell ourselves it was a rave. What did we care? We were sick of waiting. Sometimes if we waited around long enough there would be some E for us, and you couldn't waste free drugs. After eating E, I felt euphoric, and it reminded me of a line from *Howl*. But that doesn't mean that Allen Ginsberg and I have anything in common, much less that I understand him.
>
> Mian 2003: 230–231

Hong acknowledges the relevance of Beat culture in the moment, while highlighting the clear disconnect and alterity between American and Chinese culture, with their sense of dislocation underlined by the contrast between Soviet movies and English music. Earlier in the novel Hong's boyfriend uses lines from Ginsberg's poem "Kaddish" for a song, adapting and converting the generational rebellion of the refrain "Get married Allen don't take drugs" for the contemporary generation of young Chinese (Mian 2003: 90). Hong may not understand or have anything in common with Ginsberg, but the Beat Generation values of rebellion and free expression are easily identifiable to her generation and are expressed by Mian Mian in *Candy*.

It should be noted that drug intoxication in China has a long history marked by transnational exchange. "Five-minerals powder" (*wushisan*) has been used as a psychoactive substance since the third century, and there is a long and bloody history of opium use, deliberately stimulated by Western imperial powers. The subsequent use of coolie labor to build the transpacific railroad in part led to

a route for opium to infiltrate American culture. So it is clear that the recreational use of drugs is no new phenomenon in China, though the documentation of it in Beat literature appears to have stimulated Mian Mian's novel.

Both *Candy* and *Shanghai Baby* were banned (with copies of the latter publically burned), a dubious honor they share with Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, banned in Boston in 1962 (Bosmajian 2006: 178; Goodman 1981; Lu 2008: 167). Emerging at the same time as the controversy surrounding the Beauty writers was the "Lower Body" (*xiaban shen*) poets, particularly Yin Lichuan and Shen Haobo. Deliberately provocative, with the term "lower body" believed by some critics to refer to genitals, these poets caused something of a sensation among the Chinese avant-garde. Yin Lichuan's *Why Not Make It Feel Even Better* is scandalous to contemporaneous Chinese society in its public, detailed description of sexuality, particularly as its author is a woman:

> ah a little higher a little lower a little to the left a little to the right
> this isn't making love this is hammering nails
> oh a little faster a little slower a little looser a little tighter
> this isn't making love this is anti-porn campaigning or tying your shoes
> ooh a little more a little less a little lighter a little heavier
> this isn't making love this is massage writing poetry washing your hair your feet
> why not make it feel even better huh make it feel even better
> a little gentler a little ruder a little more Intellectual a little more Popular
> why not make it feel even better
>
> Quoted in Van Crevel 2008: 29

Alongside the frank depiction of sexuality is the reflection of the negative aspects of urban life in China, and as Maghiel van Crevel states:

> [Lower Body poetry] showcases their alternative lifestyles, which are informed by a bitter-cheerful feeling of No Future, paradoxically coupled to the sense that for the happy few in China's big cities, everything is possible.
>
> Van Crevel 2008: 308–309

These are all features which resonate with aspects of Beat literature and lifestyle.

London based novelist and filmmaker Guo Xiaolu makes a direct reference to Ginsberg in her 2014 novel *I am China*. In the novel one of the protagonists, the punk poet Mu, simply changes the word America in Ginsberg's long poem "America" to "China":

> China I've given you all and now I'm nothing.
> China two dollars and twenty-seven cents
> I can't stand my own mind.
> China when will we end the human war?
> Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
> I don't feel good don't bother me.
> I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.
> China when will you be angelic?
> When will you take off your clothes?
> When will you look at yourself through the grave?
> When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?
> China why are your libraries full of tears?
> China when will you send your eggs to India?
>
> Guo 2015: 129–130

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The title of the book comes from the same, from the line of the poem "It occurs to me that I am America." (Ginsberg 1996: 63,). This representation of the alterity Guo perceives between America and China directly uses Beat literature as a fulcrum. Her 2014 article "Reading Howl in China" marks the impact Beat literature had on both her formative years and on her brother as a student protesting the state in Tiananmen. She states that when she first read Ginsberg's "Howl" in 1988:

> I was a skinny 15-year-old girl who had lived all her life in a southern Chinese province surrounded by stubborn bamboo mountains.[…] I repeated the three adjectives: *starving, hysterical, naked*. Beside me was my brother, who had read the whole poem already. So I asked him: 'starving and naked, are Americans like our hungry and poor peasants without clothes to wear?' He answered me dismissively: 'Are you stupid, or what? America is the richest place in the whole world! The poem's about spiritual poverty.' He strode off to his room with a newly obtained copy of *On the Road*.
>
> Guo 2014

While Guo's article can be accused of overstating the impact of Beat literature on the Tiananmen protests, it clearly looms large in her consciousness, and she underlines the distinction between the rebelliousness and countercultural thrust of the Beats and the "Wealthy Socialism" she perceives in contemporary Chinese youth culture:

> [M]y parents hoped we could be apolitical […]. But how could children who had grown up reading Ginsberg's *Howl* be indifferent to politics? That was how we were then. Yet as the years passed, we wore out our young and shiny dreams. The Beijing Film Academy […] began teaching 'How to Become Spielberg' and 'Building a Chinese Hollywood'.
>
> Guo 2014

Guo appears to be arguing that the influence of the Beat Generation on the artists growing up in the late 1980s was profound, yet after the Tiananmen massacre and the rapidly improving economic situation in China political dissent in the arts was subsumed by a desire to simply emulate American film institutions while bypassing substantive intellectual content, in a rush towards commercialization and the kind of spiritual poverty that the Beats largely strived against.

Other exponents of China's literary scene with links to the Beats include the award winning poet and scholar Xi Chuan (1963–), who claims the Beat Generation to be an inspiration after seeing Ginsberg recite William Blake's *The Tyger*, with harmonium, when he was in China in 1984 (Xi 2013). Yan Jun (1973–) fuses music and poetry, recalling Ginsberg's use of the harmonium and Kerouac and ruth weiss's experiments with jazz (Knight 1996: 243). His "three-dimensional" poetry performances, incorporating both video-collage and soundscapes, are also reminiscent of Burroughs and Gysin's performances in Paris and London as part of the cut-up project, incorporating readings, sound and projection (Herman 1973). As Van Crevel states, Yan Jun's prose poem "*Against All Organized Deception* (2000) […] brings to mind an unlikely combination of intertexts: works by Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs as well as by Xi Chuan" (Van Crevel 2008: 467). There are certainly shared elements between Ginsberg and Yan Jun's work of a commitment to ethics, socio-political critique and anarchism, mixed with the paranoia and resistance to power of Burroughs.

The translocation of Nationalist China to Taiwan in 1949, and the victory of the Communists, was in part attributed to successful propaganda, therefore the atmosphere for writers in post-1949 Taiwan was at least as repressive as it was on the mainland. There are therefore few clear links with Western forms and Beat influence during the long period of martial law (1949–87). After the end of martial law in 1987 several libertarian and countercultural writers emerged, notably Pai Hsien-yung (1937–) and Qiu Miaojin. Qiu's queer sensibility and expatriate sensibility bears comparison with the Beats, particularly with her frankness in describing her experiences and sense of dislocation, particularly

during the final year of her life while living in Paris, which ended with her suicide, captured in her novel *Last Words From Montmartre* (2014 [1996]). Her work frequently cites her European and Japanese influences, which include Andre Gide and Jean Genet. Her style, which Fran Martin describes as, "mingling cerebral, experimental language use, psychological realism, biting social critique through allegory, and a surrealist effect deriving from the use of arrestingly unusual metaphors," and particularly her treatment of homosexuality through problematized tropes of effeminate/butch personas recalls Burroughs's treatment of the subject in *Junky* and *Queer* (Martin 2006: 177; Russell 2001). Chinese born Pai Hsien-yung's roman à clef *Crystal Boys* (1983) was one of the first queer novels in Chinese, and because of its frank treatment of homosexuality it is central in queer discourse in Taiwan (Liou 2003).

The generation of Asian-American writers which emerged in the 1970s and 80s, in contrast with the 'root searching' writers, engaged with both Chinese identity and similar themes as the Beat Generation writers. Frank Chin's work deals with the crisis of Chinese-American masculinity while celebrating outsidedness, and seeking forms of escape through constant mobility. Maxine Hong Kingston, who had a well-publicized spat with Chin regarding the use of Chinese stereotypes, published *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* in 1989, which directly references and engages with the legacy of the Beat Generation. The protagonist, Wittman Ah Sing, is presented as a Chinese-American "beatnik," living in San Francisco in the mid-1960s. Struggling to reconcile with the legacy of Kerouac, he re-articulates the "Beat mythos" in broader terms, demonstrating Kingston's s deeply ambivalent alliance with the Beats. Fazzino has incorporated Kingston into a "post-Beat" canon, which "signifies both rupture and continuity with regard to the Beat canon," and points to contemporary writers whose work explores politics, the use of language, and the natural world in ways that reference and engage with the tactics and traditions of what he terms "worlded" Beat writing (Fazzino 2016: 30). Despite this championing of a worlded sense of Beat and post-Beat writing Fazzino does not take the Beat canon far beyond the "imagined" border of the United States. The purpose of this chapter has been to explore Beat affinities beyond this border.

Concluding Remarks

This excursus could only really scratch the surface of the hoard of Chinese writings which resonate and engage with the Beat Generation, though it points to areas for further research and close reading comparisons. There are further comparisons, such as the shared influences of Surrealism and Absurdist Theater on Nobel Prize winner Gao Xinjiang (1940–), and the influence of Bob Dylan on influential rock musician Cui Jian (1961–) which deserve exploration. Web based poetry groups in China, a fascinating area for research in itself, have also engaged with the Beat Generation, with the "School of Rubbish" noting:

> The USA had the Beat Generation, whose representative figure was Allen Ginsberg. After it was beat what became of it? The answer, of course, is rubbish. Therefore, if the Beat Generation had walked a beat further forward it would have become the School of Rubbish.
>
> Inwood 2014: 60

The intention of this chapter has been to introduce Beat conceptions and representations of China and texts by Chinese writers that bear comparison with Beat literature, and to show that through narratives of alterity and dislocation a post-national, "world Beat" literature emerges. These elements are key in this conception of "world Beat," because a comparison between the American Beat literary "canon," essentially the works of Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac, and Chinese literature is fraught with problems. The clearest is the difference of language, with the translation of Mandarin's pictographic, multi-meaning characters from a novel or poem into an adequate approximation in English already a huge problem. If a Chinese writer states that a Beat text is an influence it is likely that the

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text they are referring to is also a translation, and many of these were produced in unauthorized versions, likely containing many errors. I have seen this first hand having obtained Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* in Chinese simplified Mandarin and Taiwanese traditional Mandarin versions. The opening line is "I could feel the heat closing in," with "heat" a slang term for police or police informers. This point is missed in the simplified version, with the word "heat" simply translated as the Chinese character for hot. The traditional version makes it clear that there exists a slang meaning in the original language (Burroughs 2009[1959]; 2013[1959]). This problematic of influence, translation and connectivity between cultures is captured succinctly by poet Xiao Kaiyu's (1960–) *A Letter from Allen Ginsberg*. As Yang Xiaobin states, "it is not simply a translation of Ginsberg into the Chinese context, but a re-translation of the (imagined) Ginsberg's translation of Chinese culture back into Chinese." (Yang 2011: 239). This highlights a fundamental problem, the likely loss of meaning across languages, of the comparative approach. But this is not insurmountable, and the Beats are unique as a literary movement in their embrace of travel and understanding of different cultures, with Ginsberg's trip to China a particular facilitator of interest in Beat literature in China. In that sense the writers who claim the Beats inspired them are referring more to the Beat ethos, lifestyle, and resistance to the conformity that was required by the repressive American society of the 1950s, than their particular literary style and poetics.

Jimmy Fazzino rightly points to Asian-American analyses of Beat literature, such as Timothy Yu's insightful reading of "Howl," which he regards as:

> [A]n inspiration and model for self-determination among a burgeoning Asian American avant-garde [which] also speaks to the growing interest in Beat Generation writing from China to North Africa: not as something to be imported wholesale as consumable "counterculture" but as something to be used—to be manipulated and deterritorialized in ways that are meaningful within local contexts and histories the world over.
>
> Fazzino 2016: 71

Such manipulations can be seen in the works of Ma Jian and Mian Mian, but the influence and "deterritorialization" is less tangible in works that nevertheless bear a resemblance to Beat, or certainly to Fazzino's conception of "post-Beat" (2016: 192–198). Despite language differences and other restrictions, it is evident that, as Grace and Skerl state, Beat writers "participate in a global circulation of a poetics that is also a form of dissent" (2012: 11). Beat scholarship is developing in China, as scholars acknowledge the transnational effects of Beat literature, as demonstrated by the 2004 "Beat Meets East" conference, and the Center for Gary Snyder Studies. A truly post-national understanding of Beat or "post-Beat" is therefore in development.

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