

CAI Tianxin

**I write poetry because I am curious
I write essays because I have questions**

When I was 15, I entered the University of Shandong as a student of Mathematics. Shandong is where Confucius was born. I was born in Huangyan, a county of Zhejiang Province on the coast of southeast China, 1,000 miles away from Shandong Province, and I spent my young life in 7 villages. My family, like most at that time, didn't even own a bicycle.

My mother was a primary and middle school teacher. My father was a "Rightist," which means he was considered an enemy of Communism and the People. He worked on a farm on the other side of our county. Partly for political reasons, my father and mother had separated, the day I was conceived might be the last day they made love (that is how I describe their relationship in my first autobiography *Little Memory—My Childhood in Mao's Time*). In my adolescence, I often worked in the field, and even the mathematics textbooks were full of political slogans and quotations from Chairman Mao.

However, I was lucky that I was able to study at all. My elder brother Weiming was in his first year of middle school when the Cultural Revolution started. All the schools and universities closed. He went to farm in northeastern China, in a remote village which was five days away by bus and train. It was a decade before he could come back home.

I studied Mathematics partly because my father, who studied History, thought that the hard sciences were less political than the social sciences, and thus safer. My father died of stomach cancer when I was a sophomore. He never knew that his youngest son finally became a poet and a writer as well as a mathematician.

I wrote my first poem when I was 20, and at that time I was a graduate student in Number Theory at Shandong University. On New Year's Eve 1984, I was walking back to my dormitory at midnight after watching the New Year's celebrations on TV at a professor's home. Suddenly, a beautiful girl rushed out from beneath the canopy of a tree and embraced me, her face pressed against my chest. Then, she looked up, and realizing she'd mistaken me for her boyfriend, she withdrew with disappointment. I'd never been so close with a young girl before. I couldn't sleep that night. The next morning, I wrote the moment, and my roommate who loved literature told me, "This is a poem!" That is my first poem: "A Girl Under the Street Lamp." (I revisit this story in my second autobiography, *My University*, published by the second-largest publishing house in China.) I never stopped writing. I write poetry because I am curious, I write essays because I have questions.

To live in the "special society," especially after 1990, we in China are more or less isolated, not only

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in ideology, but also in language. China is an old, strong, huge, stubborn, complex and rich country. Though we don't have the complete freedom to write down our thoughts or publish our works, we can think freely and communicate with close friends (carefully, since unlucky things still happen).

I saw the slow crowded green train for the first time on my way to university, now the bullet trains are everywhere. The work I do with both my mathematics and my writing has allowed me to travel to every province in China and to over 100 countries, more than any other Chinese writer in history. Each time, I return to China without hesitation, since I write in Chinese. I think if you write in your mother tongue, it means that you have inherited the greatest tradition—I have inherited classical Chinese poetry: among the great classical poets of my tradition are Li Po, Du Fu, Bai Juyi, Wang Wei, Tao Qian.

So, when I consider “creating in full view,” my view is not only global view, but also a cross-disciplinary one. Our civilization has developed based on modern knowledge and tradition, but there is an important third source which has often been largely neglected: interdisciplinary inference and intercultural exchange. That is my interest as an essayist. My focus is frequently on the interplay between Science and the Humanities, in particular the common ground shared by mathematics, poetry, art, and daily life. We, as writers and creators, need to have an accurate understanding of what we express in all areas to have some original and innovative ideas.

I will end by sharing a quote from my article entitled “Mathematicians and Poets” (translated into at least 7 languages and published):

Both mathematics and poetry are products of imagination. For a pure mathematician, his or her materials are like lacework, leaves on a tree, a patch of grass or the light and shade on a person's face.

Mathematics is like a true language which not only records and expresses ideas and the process of thinking, but also creates itself through poets and writers. It could be said that mathematics and poetry are the freest intellectual activity.

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