

Resonance and Reception: The Appeal of Yehuda Amichai's Poetry in China through the Lens of Zhongyong and Beynayim

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Abstract: This essay will first show the relatively high popularity of Yehuda Amichai's poetry in China and then try to explore the crucial variable that facilitates this popularity. In doing so, the essay will prove the idea that Zhongyong is a fundamental feature of Chinese poetry and that this cultural preference extends to foreign poetry as well. This essay then argues that poetry, which embodies the principle of Zhongyong, namely Doctrine of the Mean, is likely to find a receptive audience in China, and that the thematic and stylistic elements in Amichai's poetry, which was designated as beynayim (in-between-ness) resonate with Chinese readers due to their intrinsic similarities to Zhongyong, the traditional Chinese poetic values. In doing so, this essay suggests that Amichai's poetry, characterized by its harmonious qualities similar to Zhongyong, indeed has the potential to become quite popular in China.

1. Introduction

Having ancient roots in Chinese culture, poetry occupies a central role in both the Chinese national curriculum and the cultural fabric of contemporary Chinese society. While classical Chinese poetry continues to hold dominance, foreign literary influences have gradually made inroads into China through translation and cultural exchange. Particularly, the introduction of Hebrew poetry to China peaked in the 1990s with the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between China and Israel. This period marked the beginning of a growing interest in Hebrew literary works among Chinese readers, and this interest in Hebrew poetry appreciation persists till today.^[1]

Among the Israeli poets who have captured the attention of the Chinese audience, Y. Amichai stands out. His poetry, which delves into universal themes such as love, war, and existentialism,^[2] resonates with Chinese readers through its innovative language and the philosophical concept of beynayim.^[3] Amichai's work has not only entered the Chinese literary market but has also achieved significant recognition, positioning him as one of the most prominent and celebrated figures in contemporary Israeli poetry within China. His popularity and acclaim have surpassed that of many of his contemporaries, making him a distinguished voice in the ongoing cultural exchange between China and Israel. This article quantifies the popularity of Y. Amichai's poetry in China and figures out the potential reason for the popularity.

2. Quantifying the Reception of Y. Amichai in China

To quantify the reception of Y. Amichai's poetry in China, we can look at Douban Reading, the largest book review website in China,^[4] using views and ratings as indicators of literary popularity. As of March 2024, while the second most popular Jewish writer, Abraham B. Yehoshua, has 264 subscribers on Douban,^[5] Y. Amichai surpasses him with a significantly higher number of 637 subscribers.^[6] This indicates his esteemed status among Israeli writers in terms of literature reception in China.

Moreover, the average ratings of Amichai's poetry works far exceed the overall average level on Douban.com. Based on their publication dates and respective ratings, the books "Song of Jerusalem" (1993, 8.8/45 ratings), "Selected Poems of Yehuda Amichai" (2002, 9.0/602 ratings), "Open Closed Open" (2007, 8.9/739 ratings), "The Noise That Stopped the World" (2016, 8.1/159 ratings), and "The Last Speaker" (2023, 9.2/112 ratings) collectively constitutes an average rating of 8.8.^[7] In contrast, the average rating on Douban for books published after 1993 is only 7.462.^[8] This substantial difference reflects the high appreciation Chinese readers have for Y. Amichai's poetry.

The evidence of both significant subscriber numbers and exceptionally high ratings underscores Y. Amichai's relative popularity and the recognition of his poetic prowess among Chinese readers.

3. Reason for the Popularity of Y. Amichai's Poetry in China

This essay seeks to demonstrate that the deep connection between Y. Amichai's poetic philosophy and Chinese mainstream philosophy is a significant factor contributing to the popularity of Amichai's poems in China.

Unlike elements such as word choice, poetic style, and rhyme schemes—which are immediately perceptible and draw readers in—the underlying philosophical alignment plays a more subtle, yet equally vital, role in creating a deep resonance with the audience. Zhang (2017) proposes that the concept of the "embodied mind"—which includes an individual's preconceptions and personal philosophy—can "trigger more aesthetic enjoyment" and foster a deeper connection between readers from different cultural backgrounds and the poet.^[9] Given that personal perceptions and philosophies are profoundly shaped by one's cultural environment,^[10] an alignment in philosophical outlook between the themes in a poem and the core values of a culture can significantly enhance the appreciation and enjoyment of that poetry by readers from that culture.

This "philosophical outlook" factor provides a compelling explanation for the reception of Amichai's poetry in China. This essay argues that there is a philosophical congruence between the concept that is referred to as "beynayim" (in-betweenness) in Y. Amichai's work and the Chinese philosophical principle of Zhongyong, or the "Doctrine of the Mean," which is foundational to Chinese mainstream culture and literature.

To illustrate this connection, we must first explore the definition of Zhongyong and its significance in Chinese poetry. The philosophy of Zhongyong emphasizes moderation, balance, and the pursuit of harmony between extremes—core themes that are prominently featured in many Chinese poetic traditions. As one of the Four Books of Confucianism, Zhongyong has shaped Chinese thought and literature for centuries.^[11] The most esteemed poets in Chinese history, such as Du Fu and Li Bai, often explore the balanced perspective between the extremes of life, with their works deeply reflecting the principles of harmony and equilibrium embodied by Zhongyong philosophy.^[12]

For instance, Li Bai's famous poem "Drinking Alone in the Moonlight (Yuexiaduzhuo)" shows the Zhongyong philosophy.

"Amongst the flowers I am alone with my pot of wine drinking by myself; then lifting my cup I asked the moon to drink with me, its reflection and mine in the wine cup, just the three of us;"^[13]

In these lines, there's a delicate balance between opposites—Yin and Yang. The solitary moon

(Yin) contrasts with the lively wine (Yang), and the poet finds harmony in his solitude, embodying the balance that Zhongyong promotes.^[14] Another example of Zhongyong in Chinese poetry can be found in Du Fu's poem "Spring View" (Chunwang):

"The nation is broken, though mountains and rivers remain.

In cities in the spring, the grass and trees grow deeply."^[15]

In these lines, Du Fu contrasts the destruction of human conflict with the enduring presence of nature. The broken nation represents chaos and suffering, while the persistent mountains and rivers symbolize stability and continuity. This juxtaposition highlights the balance between human turmoil and natural resilience, reflecting the Zhongyong principle of finding harmony amidst extremes.

Thus, we can conclude that the Zhongyong philosophy is deeply embedded in the Chinese cultural mindset, and that the dominant poetry in China often contains themes reflective of Zhongyong.

Next, we explore the definition of beynayim and its constant presence in Amichai's poems. Beynayim (in-betweenness) refers to the state of being situated between two points, concepts, or conditions. It implies a middle ground or intermediary position, whether in physical space, emotions, or abstract ideas. Kronfeld claims this concept is the central philosophy in Amichai's literary creation and the key to understanding and resonating with his poems. Amichai used this concept to express the liminal spaces and states of being that exist between defined categories, such as between joy and sorrow, peace and conflict, or life and death.

This is illustrated in the poem "The Two of Us Together and Each of Us Alone," cited by Kronfeld (2016) in her research on Y. Amichai. In the poem, Yehuda Amichai writes, "Just the two of us at love before the warring camps. It still may be possible to change it all. The two of us together and each of us alone." This line encapsulates the delicate balance between unity and individuality, a central theme in the poem. Kronfeld suggests that the poem, grounded in the principle of beynayim, achieves harmony between "memory and forgetting, self and other, hope and danger, God and human being," and "ultimately poetry and non-poetry."^[16]

In "Jews in the Land of Israel," Amichai delves into themes of identity and memory, artfully exploring the relationship between the past and the present through the lens of beynayim, which fundamentally shapes his poetic expression.^[17] This underlying philosophy is evident right from the poem's opening lines:

"We forget where we came from. Our Jewish names from the Exile give us away, bring back the memory of flower and fruit, medieval cities, metals, knights who turned to stone, roses, spices whose scent drifted away, precious stones, lots of red, handicrafts long gone from the world (the hands are gone too)."^[18]

Here, the reference to "Jewish names from the Exile" highlights a persistent, visceral link to ancestral roots, bridging distinct historical epochs to contemporary experiences. Amichai summons the imagery of a lost era—flowers, fruits, medieval settings, and extinct crafts—each evoking the enduring presence of the past in the present. The poignant remark, "the hands are gone too," underscores the transient nature of human endeavor, yet the names and memories persist, capturing the harmony between extremes, which is the essence of beynayim.

Amichai's poetry, by embodying the tension between the past and present, invites the reader to navigate and feel the community's collective struggles and transitions. This exploration mirrors the perennial flux between tradition and modernity, engaging readers in a reflective journey that resonates with the contemplative works of classical Chinese poets. Thus, "beynayim" is not just a theme but the philosophical core of Amichai's work, emphasizing the balance and interplay of historical continuity and change.

In fact, Y. Amichai's poetic philosophy, beynayim, and Chinese culture's mainstream philosophy and poems, "Zhongyong," are closely interconnected.

"Zhongyong," as a philosophy, primarily emphasizes achieving balance by avoiding extremes. Li,

Andersen, Hallin (2019) suggest in their research that "Zhongyong" helps people take the good from the bad to discover smarter solutions and make more informed decisions with better outcomes.^[19] This concept can be directly linked to the idea of in-betweenness. According to research by Chen and Miller (2011), in-betweenness is central to decision-making that considers diverse perspectives, leading to sustainable outcomes by balancing competing demands and avoiding extreme positions.^[20] This alignment shows the practical advantages of both "Zhongyong" and "beynayim" in making more informed and balanced decisions.

Moreover, cultural mediation heavily relies on the concept of in-betweenness. Chung, L. C. and Toomey's research (1999) highlights that individuals who adopt an intercultural stance are better equipped to manage cultural differences,^[21] fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. This perspective underscores a key point: harmony among human beings, as advocated by "Zhongyong," can be achieved by finding common ground rather than gravitating toward extremes in diverse cultural contexts.

In conflict resolution, the concept of in-betweenness plays a crucial role in mediating between opposing sides. Chen and Starosta (2005) demonstrate that adopting a middle path enhances the effectiveness of conflict resolution by balancing assertiveness with empathy.^[22] This approach aligns with Zhongyong's promotion of harmony and avoidance of extremes. By finding a middle path, conflicting parties can reach mutually beneficial agreements or maintain harmonious relationships.

In this context, the notion of in-betweenness, or beynayim, encapsulates the essence of "Zhongyong," advocating for maintaining balance between opposing forces to achieve harmony.

4. Conclusion

This essay has shown that the resonance between Chinese philosophical principles and the themes in Y. Amichai's poetry significantly contributes to its reception in the Chinese market, supporting the argument that Amichai's poetry not only enjoys popularity in China but is also poised for continued acclaim.

The significance of this essay lies in its ability to highlight the profound impact of cultural resonance on literary reception. By examining the philosophical underpinnings that align Y. Amichai's poetry with Chinese thought, we gain a richer appreciation of how literature can transcend cultural boundaries and foster mutual understanding. This study not only celebrates the existing acclaim of Y. Amichai's work in China but also sets the stage for future scholarly endeavors. As the reception of Y. Amichai's poetry in China serves as a vital case study in the broader context of cultural exchange between two ancient civilizations, researchers can build on this foundation to explore other literary works that may similarly resonate across cultures, thereby contributing to a more interconnected and empathetic global literary community.

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