



Biography of Yun Wang

Poet and cosmologist Yun Wang grew up in rural southwest China. She began writing poetry when she was 12, and majored in Physics at Tsinghua University when she was 16. She is the author of three poetry books (*The Book of Mirrors*, Winner of the 26th White Pine Press Book Prize, 2021; *The Book of Totality*, Salmon Poetry Press, 2015; and *The Book of Jade*, Winner of the 15th Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize, Story Line Press, 2002), two poetry chapbooks (*Horse by the Mountain Stream*, Word Palace Press, 2016; *The Carp*, Bull Thistle Press, 1994), and a book of poetry translation (*Dreaming of Fallen Blossoms: Tune Poems of Su Dong-Po*, White Pine Press, 2019). Wang's poems have been published in numerous literary journals, including *The Kenyon Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Salamander Magazine*, *Green Mountains Review*, and *International Quarterly*. Her translations of classical Chinese poetry have been published in *The Kenyon Review Online*, *Poetry Canada Review*, *Willow Springs*, *Connotation Press*, and elsewhere. Wang is a cosmologist at California Institute of Technology, currently focused on developing space missions to explore the Universe.

Reviews of *The Book of Mirrors* (Winner of the 26th White Pine Press Book Prize, 2021):

- *"Her poems are not only beautiful, but astounding in their richness of information, news, glimpses, and inklings from more dimensions of world and mind than I can account for. Each poem is a potent nexus of imagination, memory, and piercing analysis. Yun Wang is a seer."*
—Li-Young Lee
- *"In Yun Wang's *The Book of Mirrors*, 'a silver portal opens to the hidden garden' of a fragrant universe. Myths, tales, and lyrical excavations reveal passageways that traverse inner and outer spaces humming with desire. Her collection is a generous invitation: each poem is a threshold to a world within a world."*
—Jennifer Kwon Dobbs, judge
- *"Reading through *The Book of Mirrors* by Yun Wang, I find myself marveling again and again at her facility with the poetic image. Across poems ranging in theme from feminism, dreams, literary figures, motherhood, and the universe, Wang's use of the image is nothing short of illuminating while also being instructive."*
— José Angel Araguz, "The Friday Influence" Poetry Blog

Reviews of *Dreaming of Fallen Blossoms: Tune Poems of Su Dong-Po* (White Pine Press, 2019):

- *"The poems gathered here are tender and graceful in their attention to the natural world, poignant in their understanding of human lives, clear and yet mysterious in their allusiveness. This bilingual edition with valuable notes about each poem will be a treasure both to English speakers and to Chinese speakers."*
—Alicia Ostriker
- *"These translations from the poetry of the great Sung Dynasty master achieve the impossible: they are fine poems in English that are also accurate in the 'carrying over' of the songs, language to language, culture from culture, that is, indeed, translation. I welcome this book with enthusiasm, admiration, and boundless gratitude."*
—Sam Hamill

- *"Poet-physicist-scholar Yun Wang has changed forever the way the Western world will regard Chinese poetry with her translation of Su Dong-Po's tune poems in a collection titled "Dreaming of Fallen Blossoms". This illuminating work is destined to be a major contribution to world literature."*

—Kevin McLaughlin, in *Better Than Starbucks* magazine

Reviews of *The Book of Totality* (Salmon Poetry Press, 2015):

- *"Yun Wang's poems span ages and cultures to form a unifying vision. With striking, precise images and a strong narrative sense, she presents a cosmos, one for which we should all be grateful."* — Sam Hamill
- *"Physicist-poet Yun Wang's superb second collection gives us both intricacy and the cosmos writ large. Wrenching stories of her family's oppression during the Cultural Revolution are woven together with invocations to the poets Li Bai and Su Dong Po, to Star Trek and to Mahler. Along the way, we travel with the poet through the galaxy, confront the time-space continuum, and spend time with a cat who may be a cousin to Schrödinger's. "We curve in the curved space," the poet tells us, and indeed *The Book of Totality* offers us a universe vivid and liquid, through tales both wrenching and joyous."* — Janet McAdams
- *"Yun Wang combines her physics knowledge with poetry to create this collection full of gorgeous descriptions and deep understanding of the universe. The poems blend her family's cultural history, particularly that of China, with imagery of stars, space, and galaxies to form a timeless lyricism that plumbs the depths of the human psyche."* — World Literature Today

Reviews of *The Book of Jade* (Winner of the 15th Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize, Story Line Press, 2002):

- *"This is an unforgettable book. Wang employs a strange and strangely disturbing, invented form, something between a psalm and a prose poem. In clipped paragraphs, she conducts us through narratives that start as stories and end in dreamlike images. This device could, in less assured hands, become dull with repetition. Instead, the poet sharpens the details in each piece to almost unbearable points. Although the autobiographical and historical facts that underpin the book are themselves striking and often tragic--Wang, born in China, saw and heard of numbing human cruelties--the overall effect is to exalt the human capacity to survive, and even to love, despite circumstances. Winner of the Nicholas Roerich poetry prize, this book and this poet deserve great attention."* —Patricia Monaghan in *Booklist*
- *"Yun Wang has written a wonderful, rich and exotic book that is in itself a cosmology of the human condition."* —Ai
- *"This is an extraordinary book, a book of breathtaking delicacy, phantasmagoric inventiveness, exquisite beauty and fragrance, physics and astrophysics, moments of eroticism, cats, fish, infants, and the tragic horrors of deliberate famine, greed, and ignorant brutality during the Cultural Revolution - all in verses as tender as petals. Yun Wang is a rising star in American poetry."* —Alicia Ostriker
- *"Yun Wang employs the heart of a poet and the mind of a scientist to plot the hidden meanings in experiences both personal and universal, horrifying and beautiful."* —Oklahoma Center for the Book

The Carp

My father was the school principal. The day I was born, he caught a twenty pound carp. He gave it to the school kitchen. All the teachers and boarding students tasted it.

Waves of mountains surrounded us. I grew up yearning for the ocean. Smoke arose from green mountains to form clouds each morning. My father named me Cloud.

When a son was born to Confucius, the king of Lu sent over a carp as present. Confucius named his son Carp.

The wise say a carp leaping over the dragon gate is a very lucky sign. My father says he named me Cloud because I was born in the year of the dragon: there are always clouds following a dragon. Confucius' son died an early death. My father has only three daughters.

When I was three, I wandered all over the campus. A stray cat in a haunted town. My mother says I passed the room where my father was imprisoned. He whispered to me, hid a message in my little pocket. It was his will that I should grow up a strong woman, and find justice for him.

They caught me. My father was beaten to near death. Some of them were students, whose parents were peasants. Some of them were teachers, who used to be his best friends. They had tasted the carp.

It has been recorded that Confucius could not tell the difference between millet and wheat, and was thus mocked by a peasant. This peasant became a big hero, representing the wisdom of the people, thousands of years after Confucius' death.

My father still goes fishing, the only thing that seems to calm him. The mountains are sleeping waves. My father catches very small fish. My mother eats them. My friends laugh at me, when I tell them that once upon a time, my father caught a carp weighing twenty pounds.

(From *The Book of Jade* by Yun Wang)

The Parable of Love

A man traps a bird.
He complains of her sad, listless notes.
She wraps herself in her blue wings.

She appears dead.
He buries her in a glossy white box.

He drives a car at night
with the lights off.
He climbs into the white box
to ask her one more question.

(From *The Book of Jade* by Yun Wang)

Susan's Cat

When light is withdrawn from the sky
it is shut within the cat's eyes

His black fur shapes the air
His pupils grow into round lamps

The cat hears

A rustle of faded silk
A body ten thousand miles away
across the ocean and beneath mountains
in a shroud woven of gold medallions

In the cradle the baby sleeps
Her breath a fresh sweetness

The cat ponders in the dark
It has licked the baby's head all over
brushed the hair on her forehead
into seven black columns

(From *The Book of Jade* by Yun Wang)

Conception

The unnamed flowers close dead tight. Rain erases a collage of footprints.
They wait for ten or twenty years to shed their seeds.

Within a lead sarcophagus, men in Mylar suits search for the missing
nuclear fuel that could feed a second chain reaction.

And the aliens, said to be small and with egg-size dark eyes, could be conducting
biological experiments.

The fire comes. The flowers open again, glow slowly into ashes.
Seeds remain. There will be little parachutes.

(From *The Book of Totality* by Yun Wang)

Futurescape

Thunder of applause
followed by rain on the desert.
A single yellow flower
opens from a cactus palm.

A child sleeps.
Oars navigate an opal sea.

The Sun will die in five billion years.
Ten million spaceships will depart
from its white dwarf corpse.

A kiss sparks
beneath a canopy of cherry blossoms.
Electricity of one thousand faces
carved in breathing stone
rushes from Notre Dame.

Protons will decay.
The Universe will dissipate
back into a sea
of space-time foam.

Child, you are the guide
in my journey. I climb on
the boat of your laughter.

(From *The Book of Totality* by Yun Wang)

Dark Energy

Mayan nobles sometimes marched their children
on winding paths up snow mountains.
They would dig a square room, light a fire
leave the children with jugs of elixir
prepared by the priests.

The children sang softly, drank, slept
never woke.
The gods did not come.

The universe is mostly empty.
Space expands. Galaxies drift away
from each other at accelerated speeds.

Perhaps only the priests
led the children on their last journey.
If the gods had been watching, they would have
knocked the cups from the little hands
carried the children into their beryllium chariot
beamed the priests into the ice-hidden tomb ---
at least for a few hours.

Child, look for others
in the Milky Way's outskirts.
Someday you will return my ashes
to the stars. You will ponder
pathways to other universes.

(From *The Book of Totality* by Yun Wang)

dié liàn huā

蝶恋花

chūn jǐng

春景

huā tuì cán hóng qīng xìng xiǎo

花褪残红青杏小

yàn zǐ fēi shí

燕子飞时

lǜ shuǐ rén jiā rào

绿水人家绕

zhī shàng liǔ mián chuī yòu shǎo

枝上柳绵吹又少

tiān yá hé chù wú fāng cǎo

天涯何处无芳草

qiáng lǐ qiū qiān qiáng wài dào

墙里秋千墙外道

qiáng wài xíng rén

墙外行人

qiáng lǐ jiā rén xiào

墙里佳人笑

xiào jiàn bù wén shēng jiàn xiāo

笑渐不闻声渐消

duō qíng què bèi wú qíng nǎo

多情却被无情恼

To the Tune of “Butterfly and Flowers”

Spring

Blossoms fade in withered red and apricots are tiny
Swallows appear in the sky
Green water swirls around houses
Willow catkins peel off branches in the wind
Where at the sky's edge does fragrant grass not thrive

Behind the wall is a swing beyond the wall is a trail
Beyond the wall a traveler passes
Behind the wall a girl laughs
The laughter wanes and the sound dies away
The heart is undone by the heartless

(From *Dreaming of Fallen Blossoms: Tune Poems of Su Dong-Po*, by Yun Wang)

Immortality

My father washed his only shirt at night
dried it by the fire in a haunted house
by a white river in the mountains
He pours osmanthus black tea
into blue porcelain cups in my dreams
five years after his death

My mother gazed at Venus at dawn
as she cleaned chamber pots
for wealthy classmates
She bought me a diamond ring
a few months before she died
She had wanted one all her life

I watch peonies of white clouds
bloom in the Maya blue sky
contemplate the filaments of galaxies
and the voids they frame
The Universe expands
My son promises to build me a spaceship

(From *The Book of Mirrors* by Yun Wang)

The Burren

The cream pony gallops towards me
on the way to the hilltop cemetery

A thousand years of gravestones surround
black bones of a forgotten church

Dogs bark and someone rustles in the grass
Beyond the sunlit landscape the sea grays

* * *

Waves crash into cliffs and bloom
hundreds of feet into the air

Unnamed wildflowers whisper my name
My heart freezes on the deserted trail

Vertical cliffs wall up the sea
A vast bowl stretches into the horizon

No ship on the horizon no one waits for me
I saw it all in the pony's green eyes

* * *

The village hugs a river cascade
dropping hundreds of bolts of silk

Along the forest canopy's crack
a little stream reflects fuchsia foxgloves

A tree daisy watches with ten thousand eyes
My swan dream turns into a butterfly

Heed not the call from the sea
Cliff-hung wildflowers cup moonlight

(From *The Book of Mirrors* by Yun Wang)

The Butterfly

The day after I buried my father's ashes on a mountain, a giant black swallowtail languidly glided over camellias. My father was old Wang. The first Wang, a dashing teenage prince, died in 547 BC. Thirty years later, the ailing king dreamed the prince descended on a white crane, playing the sheng.

I dreamed of the future, where a man stands trial for loneliness. I defend him, noting that, in my own time, so long ago, loneliness was the human condition. In another dream, I consort with an intimate stranger. He holds my hands, gazes into my eyes, in a valley of towering statues ringed by turquoise mountains.

Legend made the prince immortal. He ascended in moon-glow from a mountain-top, his white robe dancing the wind. The butterfly was Zhuang Zi dreaming this world. Or my father, returning with dark wings embossed with silver and emerald.

Moonlight fills me through shut eyelids. I melt into the lucid stream.

(From *The Book of Mirrors* by Yun Wang)