

The book cover features a dark grey background. Two large, overlapping, irregular shapes with a textured, paper-like appearance are centered. A horizontal dotted line is positioned above the larger, right-hand shape. The title '15 Chinese Silences' is written in a black, elegant script font, with '15' being significantly larger than the other words. A thin black diagonal line starts from the bottom of the '15' and extends towards the right, passing behind the author's name.

*15 Chinese  
Silences*

Timothy Yu

poems

Tinfish Retro Series No. 12

*A b o u t t h e P o e t*

Timothy Yu is the author of the poetry collection *Journey to the West*, winner of the Vincent Chin Memorial Chapbook Prize from Kundiman, and of a scholarly book, *Race and the Avant-Garde*, which won the Book Award in Literary Studies from the Association for Asian American Studies. His poetry has appeared in *Kartika Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *West Wind Review*, and *SHAMPOO*. He teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   1*

*after Billy Collins, "Grave"*

What do you think of this poem  
I asked the tomb of my unknown grandfather  
with its livid quiet marble.

A Chinese silence fell.  
It dropped from a glowering tree  
to perch on my shoulder.

We looked at each other.  
It would have been hard for a stranger  
to tell one of us from the other.

We both looked like monks or scholars  
or like piles of drowned bones  
laid softly on the loamy earth.

My grandfather said nothing.  
His Chinese silence coiled its tail  
into the shape of a long-lobed ear,

one of the one hundred American signs  
for anxious virility.  
Then the silence fell

into a cardboard box full of other silences.  
Like blind puppies they squirmed  
and snuffled for their mother.

OK, I made that last part up.  
But you must admit it was a fabulous metaphor.  
No? Oh, now I see

you are just as Chinese  
as all the other silences—  
the Silence of the Heavily Armed Gunboat,

or the Silence of the Drunken Mariner,  
or my grandfather's silence, like the Liberty Bell,  
only cracked right through.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   2*

*after Billy Collins,*

*"Old Man Eating Alone in a Chinese Restaurant"*

I have resisted the temptation  
to write a poem about an old man  
eating alone at the unwiped counter  
of an American restaurant.

The man's credit card has been declined.  
He pats his pockets for change.  
He finds nothing but an unread copy  
of *A Coney Island of the Mind*.

I pass over in silence  
the way the bacon smells like bacon  
and heart disease here at Ed's  
and how cold are the stares of the patrons.

The book, as it turns out, is actually  
by Billy Collins. I open it  
and find that it is a Chinese menu  
of twice-cooked escalating horrors.

Which reminds me to mention the Chinese silence  
that is slanting through the fogged-up windows  
and falling through the skylight, quieting  
the empty register and filthy tabletops,

as well as the curled black hair on the chest  
of the cook in the bloody apron,  
the one who turns his back on me  
to hand a tuna melt to the shamed old man.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   3*

*after Billy Collins, "Reading an Anthology of Chinese  
Poems of the Sung Dynasty..."*

It seems this poet has nothing  
up his empty sleeve  
but a deck of Chinese flash cards,  
each providing the first line  
that makes an eye wet or dry,  
shut or open, knee-deep in nature  
or floating in a vat of wine.

Maybe he is choking on something he meant to swallow.  
Maybe atomic fallout is blanketing New York.

"Viewing Penises Adjacent to Lotus Flowers  
on a Sunday Afternoon" is one of his best-known works.  
"Dipping My Finger in Tepid Tea"  
is another one, but it's no  
"Pagodas Keep Me Awake All Night."

And he takes the mother-loving apple pie with  
"I Rode the Subway on a Sweaty Night  
Carrying a Porcelain Vase.

It Was Very Sad and Seemed to Be Saying  
Fill Me with Cruelty, or with One of Your Poems.”

When he pushed against the bamboo turnstile  
it didn't play “Wichita Vortex Sutra,”  
“Me So Horny,” or whatever.  
It just lay there like a doormat.

So “I Walked Out on My Loving Wife  
to the Sound of Temple Cash Registers”  
is a wire brush kissing my lips.

And “Ten Days of Dysentery Have Kept Us Apart”  
is a houseboy knocking his head on the floor  
of a room where a poet with thinning hair  
is sitting on a yoga mat with a bottle of Scotch  
muttering something about China and nuclear wind,  
about currency and hormone deficiencies.

He doesn't notice as I enter here,  
pull up a barstool,  
contort my spine like his, in silence.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   4*

*after Billy Collins, "China"*

I am a cicada floating in a coffee cup  
on the desk of the Poet Laureate.

Grant proposals are being written.  
Many bottles of Napa wine are emptied.

But even when his nodding head  
strikes the desk like a bobbing Buddha's,

I lurk silently inside  
my mug, chipped by the teeth of Ezra Pound.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   5*

Q: How would you define poetry?

A: Some people think poetry should be like garbage. This is standard workshop advice: poetry should be ripe and fetid as the air we breathe. I don't believe that. I say, keep the garbage where it belongs, on barges stranded off the coast of New Jersey. It's not part of the way the poem emerges, after much squeezing and straining, in one warm and continuous movement. It is not part of the poem's \*\*\*\*.

Q: What was that word you used?

A: \*\*\*\*. It's a term used in Feng Shui, Tai Chi, anime, and the Kama Sutra. It is a Chinese silence that runs through all things. Poems that don't have it are like machines made out of words, rusty and neurotic and full of language. Then you take them into workshop and try to fix them by revising. The Chinese never revise anything. As a great Chinese poet said, "You just go on your nerve." Well, I assume that's what he would have said if he could speak. He was sitting on a toilet at the time.

Q: Um, okay. How would you describe the ideal poet?

A: A heavily armed U.S. Marine.

Q: Excuse me?

A: Well, think about the haiku. There's a little haiku I like that says, "The cherry tree blooms. / I sigh into my latte: / A box of puppies." Basically what that says is, "I was here." Or "Kilroy was here." Which is what American soldiers liked to write on stuff in Japan and Korea. And the only reason we know about the haiku is because Commodore Perry sailed to Japan and said, "I am here. With a lot of big guns."

Q: Anything else?

A: I'm very good at playing with my own tail.

Q: Do you have any advice for a young Asian American poet?

A: [silence]

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   6*

*after Billy Collins, "Despair"*

So much reserve and silence in our poetry.  
Our words bloom like quiet peonies  
looking at themselves in a covered mirror.

Our corpselike bodies cover the ground  
and moan in the opium pipe,  
yet our equanimity devours the air.

I wonder what my ancient Chinese predecessors  
would make of all this,  
these engineers and monkish masters?

Today, I hear your tinny voice blaring from the rooftops  
in praise of my reticence, and my thoughts turn  
to my honorable ancestors:

Fuk Yu, who gnashed Pacific rails  
between his eloquent teeth,  
and his great-grandson, glaring out from the Middle West,  
Yu No-Hu.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   7*

*after Billy Collins, "Liu Yung"*

This poet of the American century is so amiable.  
Commentators sigh on the radio  
and a stealth bomber passes overhead  
as he floats a model of the Titanic in his bathtub.

Now what if he approached life  
with the same Chinese silence that I do?  
No oompah-oompah from the podium,  
no punchline in the parable.

The bird closes its tedious eye.  
The cartoon clock stops the poet's mouth.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   8*

*after Billy Collins, "Hangover"*

If I were crowned Holy Roman Emperor this evening  
every poet who speaks of Chinese silence  
on National Public Radio  
would be forced to mutter the name of Ezra Pound

Ezra Pound Ezra Pound

then be required to read the complete works  
of Marianne Moore and write a dissertation  
titled "Superior People Never Make Long Visits":  
Silence and Chinoiserie in the Poetry of

Marianne Moore Marianne Moore"

after which the poet would be quizzed  
on Asian American poetry then executed by Zen  
regardless of how many times he begged  
for mercy calling upon the name of

Gary Snyder Gary Snyder

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   9*

*after Billy Collins, "Evening Alone"*

Flickering tanning lamp  
on white arms, bald white head,  
muzak from the ceiling speakers,  
and the prickle of air conditioning on his shoulders.

He turns his face to the bulb, closes his eyes  
and sees flesh folded  
over flesh,  
dew beaded on a pair of silent thighs,  
and in the distance, billowing smokestacks . . .

It must be the Bronx I am beholding  
on this freezing late spring morning—  
that gray plodding river of the East,  
jet contrails carving the sky,  
the cheers and bombers of the Bronx,  
apartment towers—now the wail of a siren.

It is a vision that fills me with bile.  
I want nothing

more than to be anywhere  
other than his steamy Chinese poem  
grinding my teeth, scratching my sides,

the words slithering silently down my throat and gut,  
fogging my eyes,  
while in the Bronx,  
a light truck crosses the Throgs Neck Bridge,

and in a bar on the Jersey shore  
a young woman in a Lycra dress  
lifts a rum-filled cocktail  
to her swollen lips.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   1 0*

*after Billy Collins, "In the Room of a Thousand Miles"*

I hate writing about where I am.  
I happen to be sitting in a waiting room  
full of anthologies of translated Chinese poetry  
and no window.  
So I will write about the pink trees of China  
and their small, nervous puppies.  
I will pour myself  
a cup of Tab  
or Sierra Mist  
and write that it is rice wine.

My reader hands these poems back to me  
with a groan.  
She wants to drill a hole  
in my skull.  
She suggests I write some  
conceptualist orientalism  
or do a Google search  
for "ancient Chinese girls."  
I ignore her.  
Instead I return

to my vinyl chair.

I think about the furniture of the Chinese,  
their globular buttocks, their polluted cities.

I visualize a dragon swallowing San Francisco,  
gnawing the Golden Gate, choking on Coit Tower.

And then—don't tell anyone—

I smile into my diet cola

and in the manner of the ancient Chinese

pick up my dried-out pen

and tattoo on the skin of my palm

a character that means

“A journey of a thousand miles

is really, really long.”

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   1 1*

*after Billy Collins, "Drawing"*

Graffiti on the girders  
of a rusted bridge  
over a sewage channel,

tenements in the distance  
and in the foreground  
a burned-out car.

I turn the picture upside down.  
Now it looks Chinese,  
burrowing silently earthward.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   1 2*

*after Billy Collins, "Shoveling Snow with Buddha"*

On the airwaves of your local listener-supported public radio station  
he would never be caught dead doing such a thing,  
tossing his own words into a pile  
over his slumping shoulder,  
forming a knot  
of concentrated failure.

Glibness is more his speed, if that is the word  
for what he does, or does not do.

The setting is all wrong for him.  
In all his appearances, is the compensation not more than generous?  
Is this not evident in his smug expression,  
the smirk that forms the axis of the poetic universe?

But here we are, working our way through an anthology of  
Asian American poetry,  
one cliché at a time.  
We read poems about silent grandmothers in the kitchen.  
We smell the aromas of their wok-fired cooking.  
And with the turn of every page

we are lost to each other  
in these sudden clouds of our own meaning,  
these machine-gun bursts of solipsism.

This is so much better than the usual Orientalism,  
I say out loud, but he keeps on reading.  
This is true Asian American writing,  
where everyone is always “caught between cultures,”  
I say, but he ignores me.

He is gulping down these Asian American poems  
as if being Asian were the purpose of his existence,  
as if the sign of a perfect life were an ink-brush painting  
hanging from the rear-view mirror,  
blocking your view of the American road,  
tuning the radio to The Top 100 Chinese Silences.

All morning we read side by side,  
me with my commentary  
and he shushing me into silence,  
until the book is finished

and its pages lie discarded all around us;  
then, I hear him speak.

Is not each of these poems, he asks,  
itself a form of Chinese silence?

Actually, no, I reply, each is a testament  
to the noise of being Asian in America.  
To silence them would be to erase them  
into blank pages for your own projections.

Ah so, he says, shaking his bottle of White-Out  
and poisoning the wet brush over the poem,  
then spreading the pungent liquid over the page  
until the words are silenced.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   1 3*

*after Billy Collins,*

*"A Portrait of the Reader with a Bowl of Cereal"*

Every morning I sit across from him  
at the curio table,  
halogen lamps lighting all the bric-à-brac:  
curve of a knockoff Ming vase,  
a bowl of lychees—  
me in a scholar's gown or kimono,  
he inscrutable.

Most days, we are suspended  
in a deep Chinese silence.  
He stares straight through me,  
imagining his sailboat on the Yellow River  
with its steel-tipped masts  
drawing erotic graffiti in the inkbrush sky.

I offer him egg rolls,  
chicken fried rice,  
and cups of oolong tea,  
but he hides behind his copy  
of Ezra Pound's *Cathay*.

But some days I may notice  
a little door swinging open  
in his balding skull,  
revealing his dreams  
of brocade-clad maidens  
sliding down the china slope of his mind—

then I will lean forward,  
delicate fingers trembling,  
to trace a shriek of *Aiiiiieee!*  
on his folded gray matter  
as my words drip from his docile lips.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   1 4*

*after Billy Collins, "Silence"*

You have the right to remain silent.  
That is your job.  
A ball gag plugs your mouth,  
and the immigrant girl with her loud  
sewing machine has been deported.

So tell us about the mind of China.  
We want to hear the silent blooming of its cherry blossoms,  
the quiet unfastening of its gowns,  
its songs of soy sauce  
and tiny bound feet.

Its trains have been blown up by dynamite,  
its factories bombed into silence.  
Its mewling puppies have been smothered  
and its gods are suffocating inside specimen jars.  
Shanghai has been evacuated

and each inhabitant issued an edition of Gary Snyder.  
So tell us about your ancestors,  
your grandfather in his bamboo cage,

your grandmother drowned in the well.  
Let's hear about the unmoving clouds, the stunted trees.

Read the poem we have placed in front of you.  
The Pacific has been drained,  
and even Ezra Pound  
has burst from his grave,  
his moldering hand poised to translate what you do not say.

*C h i n e s e   S i l e n c e   N o .   1 5*

*after Billy Collins, "Bonsai"*

All it takes is him to throw a room  
totally out of whack.

As he looks out the window  
it turns into a bamboo screen

that shows him stark naked  
floating in a distant rice paddy.

Up close, he almost looks Chinese,  
everything cut down to size.

But when he steps back to the doorway,  
he is American again, dilated and bloated.

The top button of his discarded dress shirt  
is the turning wheel

of a steamboat thrashing the Yangtze River,  
and his coffee cup a well

to catch the desires  
than moisten his tightened mouth.

He even makes the weather Chinese,  
his gray hair spinning in a typhoon gust

that blows silence  
through the puppies of the Bronx.

The Whitestone Bridge bends eastward  
like a bonsai tree

and he climbs its sagging supports,  
holding on for dear life

as it folds inward like his belly's flesh  
and his tiny whale dives beneath the waves.

If only he could plunge his body  
into a warm and silent Chinese ditch,

instead of being trapped in the Lexington Avenue subway tunnel  
for the next one thousand years.

## *N o t e s*

These poems are part of an ongoing project called *100 Chinese Silences*. They were begun in response to Billy Collins's poem "Grave." The speaker of the poem describes the "one hundred kinds of silence / according to the Chinese belief," but then admits at the end of the poem that these Chinese silences were something he had "just made up." I took it upon myself to write these 100 Chinese silences.

Chinese Silences Nos. 1, 8, and 14 have appeared in *Mantis*.  
Chinese Silence No. 6 appeared in *Kartika Review*.

Most of the poems by Billy Collins referenced above  
can be found online:

"Grave": <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/09/grave/7608/>

"Old Man Eating Alone in a Chinese Restaurant": <http://www.poetenladen.de/billy-collins-lyrik4.htm>

"Reading an Anthology of Chinese Poems of the Sung Dynasty...": <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/29783>

"China": <http://www.versedaily.org/2007/china.shtml>

“Despair”: <http://www.panhala.net/Archive/Despair.html>  
“Liu Yung”: <http://literaryaward.nashvillepubliclibrary.org/?p=121>  
“Hangover”: <http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/programs/2009/08/15/scripts/collins.shtml>  
“Evening Alone”: [hotelamerika.net/pastissues/v2n1/collins.pdf](http://hotelamerika.net/pastissues/v2n1/collins.pdf)  
“In the Room of a Thousand Miles”: <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/jan/16/books/bk-54431>  
“Drawing”: <http://halfpennythoughts.blogspot.com/2007/04/drawing-billy-collins.html>  
“Shoveling Snow with Buddha”: <http://poemhunter.com/poem/shoveling-snow-with-buddha/>  
“Portrait of the Reader with a Bowl of Cereal”:  
<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2001/03/04>  
“Silence”: [http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/billy\\_collins/poems/11334](http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/billy_collins/poems/11334)

15 CHINESE SILENCES.

Number twelve of the Tinfish Retro Series. Written by Timothy Yu.  
Published by Tinfish Press. Copyright © 2012. All rights reserved.  
Printed at Obun Hawaii. Designed by Eric Butler, ericbutler555@gmail.com.

TINFISH PRESS

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47-728 Hui Kelu Street #9  
Kāneʻohe, HI 96744

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www.tinfishpress.com

This concludes the Retro Chapbook Series; we hope you enjoyed it.  
Keep an eye out for future experiments.

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