

**The Mystery of the Lost Chinese Poem
or
Why Internet Searches Are Not Enough**

By George Ledin Jr¹

While visiting China, a prominent Cuban poet, Félix Pita Rodríguez² [FPR], penned a poem extolling the social progress of Fangua Lane, a real, but mostly metaphorical, neighborhood in China's largest city, Shanghai.

The short³ poem was modestly titled "On Fangua⁴ Lane", an ode to the emerging new society as exemplified by this new village in the experimental district of Zhabei in post-liberation Shanghai. What used to be a slum turned into a residential enclave characterized by colorful-roofed apartment blocks.

The editors of Jiefang Ribao⁵ had the poem translated (from Spanish to Chinese) and published it on page 4 of the November 13, 1963, issue of the newspaper.

Between the remnants of the Great Leap Forward⁶ and the beginnings of the Cultural Revolution⁷, China was undergoing profound social and structural changes. And FPR, who started his literary career as an avant-gardist, bohemian poet, spent much of his youth joining revolutionary causes in Spain (against Franco) and in his native Cuba (against Batista). Thus annealed, FPR embraced social poetry as his domain. He especially dedicated himself to describing, poetically, the plight of the people of Vietnam during the mid-20-th century turmoil in Southeast Asia.

FPR's odes to Vietnam saw the light of day in their original Spanish and in various translations. "On Fangua Lane", on the other hand, seems to exist only in its Chinese translation. The Spanish original may be lost. If not lost, it may be residing in some archive in Shanghai, or in a box of unpublished manuscripts, somewhere in La Habana, Cuba.

Historians are used to sleuthing. Obtaining verifiable sources is difficult; original documents may be unavailable.

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²(18 February 1909 – 19 October 1990)

³Fewer than a dozen-and-a-half lines.

⁴A "fangua" is a pumpkin. "Lane" could be area, path, quarter, road, street, way, district, neighborhood, region, or sector. "Fangua Lane" may have begun in Spanish as "Vecindario (o Barrio) de las Calabazas".

⁵Liberation Daily

⁶Approximately between 1958 and 1961.

⁷Approximately between 1966 and 1971.

With computer searching methods some of the detective work has eased up, at least superficially so. Search engines depend on databases that can be parsed and queried digitally. Whatever is not in these databases is unreachable. Great strides have been made thanks to the Internet, and online techniques are useful tools, but their help is always limited. Relying solely on Google to find anything is a lazy habit, often leading to the belief that if it is not found by Google it does not exist.

Widely distributed expertise, sometimes referred to as "crowdsourcing", has been helpful throughout the centuries. More recently, one of the earliest artificial intelligence approaches to gathering knowledge in internal medicine, MYCIN⁸, illustrates how what is known by master practitioners in the field can become a useful depository for the exchange of ideas within the collective of professionals in that field.

No specialist exists who is the font of all that is known in his or her specialty. How many Spanish language and literature departments exist in U.S. universities? In these departments, how many have faculty with mastery of Caribbean literature? Of Cuban literature? Of 20-th century Cuban literature? How many Chinese scholars are there who are versed in Spanish literature? In Cuban literature? In Cuban authors who wrote poems about China?

FPR's "Chinese Poem" is a mystery. Perhaps it was condemned to becoming a mystery for reasons that cannot be ascertained, such as the Chinese editors keeping the original Spanish version after it was translated. (Photocopying machines were rare and expensive in 1963.) Or FPR, returning to Cuba with a facsimile, mislaid it. Or the Cuban publishers, expecting FPR to write additional paeans to China, while the poet was busy with other projects, ultimately scotched what was a long-shelved and eventually forgotten product.

Maybe it became a mystery upon the author's death. In literature, music, and art, the number of posthumously discovered works is legion. FPR's estate may harbor his "Chinese Poem" and other literary creations of his. Finding the poem, however, cannot be done telechirically – someone has to inventory FPR's works wherever they may be found, and be physically present there to do so.

⁸An early (1970s) expert system developed at Stanford University.

Doing so sounds easy but very often is not. FPR's "Chinese Poem" is a case study in how, despite strong efforts and advanced technological approaches, searches cannot be guaranteed to succeed.

The search for FPR's "Chinese Poem" began, like most searches, online. The results were predictable and unhelpful. FPR's biography popped up with no reference to the Fangua Lane poem. Fangua Lane showed up with no reference to FPR. Considering the great likelihood that FPR's poems had not been digitally scanned, the only way to check if the poem had been included in compendia of his poems was to manually inspect FPR's publications.

Since not every library has FPR's literary works, inter-library loan requests were dispatched to those libraries that housed at least one of his books. This process lasted a month and involved fewer than a hundred libraries in the U.S. Most of the books received from different libraries were copies of the same books⁹. And the poem did not appear in any of them. Not every library responded to the inter-library request, of course, which could mean that there are other collections of FPR's poems besides the nine cited.

For purposes of due diligence, a Library of Congress [LOC] search revealed no new volumes that had not been viewed before. The LOC search, however, corroborated the nature and possible maximum number of holdings expected to be found in large libraries elsewhere.

A consultation with reference librarians brought up a potentially promising possibility¹⁰ worth exploring – contacting

⁹"Las crónicas – Poesía bajo consigna", Ediciones La Tertulia, La Habana, 1961.
"Las noches", Ediciones La Tertulia, La Habana, 1964.
"Poemas y cuentos", Bolsilibros Unión, La Habana, 1965.
"Viet Nam – Notas de un diario", UNEAC, La Habana, 1968.
"Historia tan natural", Ediciones Unión, La Habana, 1971.
"El autor y su obra: Félix Pita Rodríguez", Dirección Nacional de Educación General, La Habana, 1973.
"Tarot de la poesía", UNEAC, La Habana, 1976.
"Poesía", Editorial Letras Cubanas, La Habana, 1978.
"Antología de la Poesía Cósmica de Félix Pita Rodríguez", Frente de Afirmación Hispanista, A.C., México, 1999.

¹⁰It also brought up the tantalizing possibility of a conclusive, successful search. Unfortunately, the ultimately pertinent search direction did not seem as relevant so early on. Megan Kinney, the reference librarian extraordinaire, was so frustratingly close:

organizations in Miami or more generally in Florida to determine if someone knew the whereabouts of the poem. Although there are many Cubans in Miami and Florida, whether they had any knowledge of or interest in FPR was uncertain, given past and current political sentiments of the expatriates. Despite inadequate budgets and insufficient staffing, librarians were generous with their help¹¹. Nevertheless, responses to questions were

Okay—have spent another hour on it this morning with no luck :(First, I tried searching for a book in Chinese that might have the poem, so at least I could have someone I know who speaks Chinese/Mandarin read the titles and see if they were relevant. If they sounded relevant, I thought we might be able to order one through ILL, and then again, get someone who speaks Chinese/Mandarin to go through the book with me to see if the Chinese version had some context with it in the book – such as an acknowledgement to some publication or place that Felix Pita Rodríguez published the poem in Spanish. My friend thinks [this](#) means "Hands of the Chinese People," and it does have Felix Pita listed as an author, but I am not sure enough that this is what we are looking for. I am also not sure when my friend would have time to look over this item again with me to see if it provides any context for the Spanish version of this poem. Then I took the English translation you have and ran it through a Spanish translation software. I speak a little Spanish, and have better luck finding Spanish language items when I search for keywords in Spanish (instead of English). I tried lots of Spanish phrases that are in the poem to see if the entire text would come up, but again, no luck.

¹¹A typically considerate email message came from María R. Estorino Dooling, Chair of the Cuban Heritage Collection of the University of Miami Libraries: "[Hemos buscado la poesía en la antología de su obra publicada por Editoriales Letras Cubanas en 1978, y no la encontramos. Parece que viajó a la China en el mismo 1963, pero en los libros que publicó en esa época no aparece. Me apena no poder darle una respuesta más positiva. Es posible que con una investigación más detallada se pueda encontrar, pero no tenemos el personal para profundizar la búsqueda. Atentamente, María.](#)" (We looked for the poem in the anthology of his work published by Editoriales Letras Cubanas in 1978, and did not find it. It looks like he indeed traveled to China in 1963, but among books that he published during those times [the poem] does not appear. I regret not being able to give you a more positive response. It is possible that by conducting a more detailed investigation, the poem could be found, but we don't have the personnel to deepen the search. Sincerely, María.) This pessimism was echoed by Meiyolet Méndez, the librarian of the Cuban Heritage Collection, who emailed "[He buscado en varios lugares \(el índice de Granma, poemarios de Félix Pita, etc.\) y no he podido encontrarlo. Siento no tener mejores noticias.](#)" (I searched in various places (the Granma index, poetry collections of Félix Pita, etc.) and was not able to find it. I regret not having better news. Mei.)

usually brief and underwhelming, and this initially promising route turned out to be a dead end.

Next on the ever-hopeful agenda were Spanish-literature university departments with expertise in Cuban authors.

César A. Salgado, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, was intrigued by the prospect of solving the mystery: "Thanks for your fascinating query about FPR. I've been researching the translation history of Justo Rodríguez Santos's "La epopeya del Moncada" (1964) (which included Chinese, certainly important among the circuit of languages that Cuban writers of the Revolution were engaging at the time), so I'm very intrigued by Pita's reception in China (as well as Vietnam). I have a student who has been working on Cuba/Far East literary connections so I will consult her about this. I'll let you know if we find anything." Thus far, however, nothing was found.

Internet searches are "interpretative". The result of a search depends on how that search is framed, what importance may be attributed to auxiliary words and how the overall context adds to or subtracts from the probe.

FPR's poem was, after all, published, in China¹². Rutgers Spanish professor Liliana Sánchez suggested checking with Rutgers history professor Kathy López, whose expertise related to Chinese in Cuba. While it's improbable that the mystery of the lost poem has anything to do with Chinese laborers living and working in Cuba, if Cubans of Chinese descent did read FPR's poem, the mystery could take a significant detour and searches would quickly attain much greater complexity.

Princeton professor Rachel L. Price also pondered the merits of consulting with an expert on Chinese in Cuba¹³. Although Price

¹²The publication in 1963 in China of a poem by a Cuban poet should have been a newsworthy event in Cuba. But where would such a news item appear? Not in "Hoy", the pre-revolutionary daily. Nor in "Granma", the post-revolutionary daily that began printing in 1965. On Fangua Lane missed being mentioned in either newspaper.

¹³Lisa Yun, author of "The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba" (Temple University Press, 2008), and professor of English, and Asian and Asian American Studies at Binghamton University.

did not solve the mystery, she did offer an outstanding suggestion. "What an interesting question. I don't know the poem, but I can direct you to someone who might. Specifically among scholars of Cuban literature (not written in Chinese, as this poem was not), Víctor Fówler is an incomparable scholar of Cuban literature (and a Cuban poet) and might know more about the poem's history and its location in FPR's archives."

This suggestion had at least two implications. First, if FPR's poem can be found, who better to find it than Víctor Fówler Calzada, the current preeminent poet of Cuba¹⁴?

Second, should the original Spanish version of the poem remain unfound, who better than Víctor Fówler Calzada to restore (retranslate from Chinese to Spanish) the original?

These two implications meant that the three-month search for FPR's "Chinese Poem" was drawing to a close. A follow-up worldwide crowdsourcing effort revealed that the first volume of FPR's poetry, published in 1978 in Cuba, was also on the shelves of two libraries: Flinders University (Adelaide, Australia) and the Università Roma Tre (Rome, Italy). This volume was likely seen in previous inter-library loan requests, and since neither Flinders nor Roma Tre let their holdings circulate, the best that could be done – just in case – was to request the librarians to leaf through the book and, using clues, such as China, Shanghai, and Fangua, determine whether or not the poem was in that volume. It was not.

Meanwhile, a new inter-library loan request to UCLA yielded the most recently published¹⁵ book, in commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of FPR's birth. The book is a set of eulogies written by FPR's colleagues and friends, and a previously unpublished poem, written in 1954 and dedicated to his wife, Isabel Aida Rodríguez. This small¹⁶ book lists, on page 16, a selection of FPR's publications. It's not a complete list but it contains an intriguing item, previously not seen anywhere in all previous searches¹⁷.

¹⁴And influential member of UNEAC (Unión de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos).

¹⁵"Elogio de Félix Pita con un poema inédito de 1954", Colección sur, poesía (2009) ISBN: 978-959-302-023-7.

¹⁶A booklet of fewer than 45 pages.

¹⁷The book's Spanish title is "Manos del pueblo chino" (poesía). Editorial Casa del Autor, Pekin, China, 1964. ["The hands of the Chinese people" (poetry). Writer's House Publishers, Beijing, China, 1964.] It's another small book

The book, published in 1964 in Beijing, is a small collection of FPR's mid-life poetic output, a dozen and a half poems, all of which are in Chinese. This item gives rise to an intimately related mystery. Did FPR, after his Fangua Lane poem was translated and published in Shanghai, go to Beijing and write other poems that were likewise translated and published? Or did the Chinese, enchanted by his Shanghai poem (Fangua Lane), translated other poems of his and published them in this book? This question may be doomed to remain unanswered¹⁸. The alternative is to hope that UNEAC catalogued everything FPR wrote, whether it got published or not. Even if what got published was not in FPR's native language. Veremos!¹⁹

In an ideal world every search should culminate in a definitive fashion – either a successful result, the production of the item being sought, or proof of its nonexistence.

Like many difficult searches, this one has a silver lining. It demonstrates that probing below the surface requires persistence, patience, and imagination because the tools for the examination and investigation of databases are still in their infancy. And we need databases of databases, a daunting organizational strategy once everything is digitized.

Us wanderers suspect that everything in life is a search. But it is not necessarily an online search. Not yet.

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado²⁰ proclaimed "Wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking."²¹

Ironically, borrowing from Machado, FPR may have anticipated that a search for the poem he wrote in Shanghai would turn out to be so challenging. He reminded his readers that finding is not as important as wandering, a poetic form of searching.²²

Nevertheless, the whole point of our three months of wandering-and-searching was to

– 65 pages. The title of the book was mentioned by Megan Kinney at an early stage of the search, making it seem like we had completed a circle. The translator is Zhào Jin Píng.

¹⁸The Fangua Lane poem, slightly edited, appears on pages 15-17.

¹⁹We'll see!

²⁰(26 July 1875 – 22 February 1939)

²¹"Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar."

²²"Lo importante no es hallar, lo que de veras importa, caminante, es el buscar." In "Tarot de la poesía", UNEAC, La Habana, first edition, March 1976, p.19.

find the original Spanish version of FPR's poem. Does it exist? Where is it? No matter how enlightening this search may have been, the unavoidable conclusion is that, alas, it failed.

And, unless someone gets ahold of all of FPR's writings, or someone produces the actual original, the mystery of the lost Chinese poem will remain a mystery.

One last-ditch attempt was tried. A letter was sent to Raul Castro, President of Cuba, asking him to contact FPR's widow. To date no reply has been received.

Oh yes, here is the English version, i.e.,
the English translation of the Chinese
translation of FPR's original Spanish
"Chinese Poem" – the source of all this
struggle:

In Fangua Lane
I saw the Chinese people
take a piece of the old days and bury it.
Those worn out hovels, covered in mud
Were the places where the Chinese people--
starving, destitute, and angry
sacrificed.

Sons and daughters of Fangua Lane
breasts filled with anger, thirsted for
Liberation

(the old houses) in the end were all
buried by Shanghai's workers
just as one would bury the rotting
remnants of the old days

A woman
narrates the conditions for workers in the
New Villages
Today she is a representative to the
People's Congress.
The leaders establish
her gaze upon tomorrow.

Acknowledgements

Denise Yuet-Shu Ho²³, for her thorough research, her translation (Chinese to English) of the poem, and providing the impetus to the search.

The search took three months and wittingly or indirectly involved more than a dozen people. Here we thank a few whose recommendations propelled the orienteering.

Dawnelle Ricciardi for her help with numerous interlibrary loan requests.

Megan Kinney for zeroing in on the one volume that mattered, an early step that went unexplored until one last interlibrary loan rediscovered it. In retrospect, FPR was hiding in plain sight – in a book published in Beijing fifty years ago – and the search for FPR's poem should have accomplished its purpose two months earlier.

Meiyolet Méndez and María R. Estorino Dooling for their detective work in checking the Cuban Heritage Collection's vast holdings at the University of Miami Libraries.

César A. Salgado, Liliana Sánchez, Kathy López, and other professors who showed interest in and lent their moral support to what looked like a futile quest.

Rachel L. Price for her enthusiastic referral to Víctor Fówler Calzada. And Víctor Fówler Calzada for further referrals to UNEAC and Sur.

Lynn Prime for her unorthodox and imaginative suggestions as to how to proceed when all approaches seemed to have been tried and exhausted.

Xiaodong Zhu for checking the Chinese versions of the poem.

And Roger Mamer for bravely trying to game the system, to repeatedly come up with clever questions for the search box, to force the search engine to overcome being stumped.

The search failed. Long live the search!

²³Assian Studies Faculty, Chinese University of Hong Kong, now at Yale University.

Executive Summary

A Cuban poet goes to China in 1963. A Shanghai newspaper publishes one of his poems. In 1964 a Beijing publishing house prints that poem and other poems of his in a small collection titled "The hands of the Chinese people."

The poem published in Shanghai and reprinted in Beijing was originally written in the Cuban poet's native Spanish language, then translated by someone into Chinese. This poem exists in its Chinese translation but apparently cannot be found in its original Spanish.

Fifty years have now passed. This is the story of the search for the original Spanish version of the poem. It involves more than a dozen expert librarians, Cuban poetry scholars, and Internet-savvy professionals.

Despite fast online search engines and sophisticated database methodologies, the failed search is an example of how difficult it still is to find anything that is not lying on the surface of the search space.