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'My Relations with Shanghai are Tense': An Interview with Wang Anyi Scheen, L.M.

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‘My relations with Shanghai are tense’

An interview with Wang Anyi

When Wang Anyi was only one year old, she moved to Shanghai with her mother, the novelist Ru Zhijuan. Today, Wang Anyi herself is, arguably, the most influential writer of Shanghai and her stories consistently use the city as a backdrop. Yet in a recent public interview, Wang Anyi confessed that she ‘doesn’t feel Shanghainese’, though she added, ‘but, neither can I say that I’m not Shanghainese, because if I’m not, then where am I from?’

Ms Wang sits on the stage, wearing an ankle-length skirt and a long shawl draped around her shoulders. Her lively eyes scan the audience with curiosity. Sitting up straight, hair pinned back, feet placed firmly on the ground, hands clenched into fists on her knees, she exudes the air both of a distinguished writer and of a down-to-earth peasant woman; an intriguing paradox that she shares with several other mainland Chinese intellectuals.

It is not difficult to picture Ms Wang 40 years ago, when most ‘urban youths’ were sent to the countryside for ‘re-education by the peasants’; a young girl with rosy cheeks and braided hair, most likely wearing unisex cotton-padded clothes while singing revolutionary songs to the rising sun and chairman Mao. In particular, her early works deal with these experiences during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), after which she started writing stories that belonged to the so-called ‘roots-seeking literature’: rural fiction that explored traditional Chinese customs and values still present in the countryside. However, since the 1990s her work has turned increasingly towards the main subject of this interview: the city of Shanghai. Explaining this shift in her work, Wang says:

Although my work from before the 1990s does not limit itself to the countryside, the city did indeed play a vague role; it was always in the background of the plot. At that time, my work focused on the characters, their emotions, and how they grow in the story. Shanghai is the place where I live and I think people are usually not so conscious of their own living environment. So that’s probably also the reason that when I wrote stories set in Shanghai, I didn’t really reflect on the place where the characters were living. Since the 1990s, though my work still focused on both rural and urban experiences, the city became more concrete, and sometimes even the main character of a story. For example, in my short story ‘The Street’, the street itself is actually the only character and forms the whole plot; I describe the houses, the cars, the people, but the people remain nameless. Although I am very critical of this story – I think it is rather boring – I still consider it an important turning point in my writing: from now on Shanghai became an important subject in my work.

After each question, Wang Anyi vigorously keeps on talking until the interviewer interrupts her for the next. She is open, quick-witted, and sharp, at times appearing to think out loud and she never loses her sense of humour. Holding the audience spell-bound, Ms Wang recounts her childhood search for belonging in a society that disparagingly labelled her as ‘new Shanghainese’:

When my mother and I arrived in Shanghai, we moved into an apartment with a local Shanghai family living above us. They criticised our family for many things: our home was too sparsely furnished, we lived too simply and we couldn’t speak Shanghainese. They were constantly lecturing us and passing judgment. So when I befriended the daughter of this family, my mother was furious and kept nagging about how this family would turn me into an ordinary person. My mother moved in both literary and military circles, so her values were in conflict with those of the local Shanghainese. What I’m trying to explain is that there is a difference between the ‘local’ and the ‘new’ Shanghainese. Although there is something quite funny about it: even though my mother had a strong aversion to the locals’ criticisms, she actually admired them as well. I think my mother and I were both intrigued by our neighbours’ lifestyle. They would visit places that were particularly popular with local Shanghainese, like the Chenghuang Temple and the Great World Entertainment Centre. Our way of life was completely different and going to the cinema was the only fun thing I did with my mother. So from a very young age I have always felt I don’t fit in with the local Shanghai lifestyle.

Wang Anyi’s childhood experiences not only marked her life but also planted the seeds of her ambivalent relationship with Shanghai:

Although I’m living in this city, we don’t blend like milk and water. Sometimes I feel like I’m a spectator watching the city from a distance. Maybe it’s precisely because of this feeling that I can have an objective view of Shanghai. Although this objectivity is relative, of course, since it’s overruled by my own experiences: I have been living here since I was one year old,

my friends and classmates were all Shanghainese, and our family has moved around town. I guess I have a very tense relation with this city: I feel distant and close to it at the same time. I don’t like the city, but I have no choice but to like it. My relationship with Shanghai is probably best expressed by the Chinese idiom ‘the bones are broken, but the muscles still hold them together’.

The most important obstacle between Wang Anyi and the city appears to be the local language. Several times, Ms Wang brings up the consequences of her ongoing struggle to master Shanghainese (a northern Wu dialect that is less than 50 per cent intelligible for speakers of Mandarin, the national standard language):

Since I couldn’t speak Shanghainese as a child, I was always very nervous when I had to say something in public and afraid people wouldn’t have the patience to listen to me. So in the end, I would usually just give up the right to speak and, in order to compensate for that, mainly talk to myself. For me, writing is just like talking to myself: the process of writing begins when I feel like I’m talking too much to myself, then I just have to write it down until it becomes a novel.

The story reveals how Wang Anyi continuously relates her position as a ‘new Shanghainese’ to her writing profession, reminding us of the best-selling author Chen Danyan (often grouped with Wang Anyi and Cheng Naishan for their ‘nostalgic novels’ on Shanghai), who also moved to the city as a young child and frequently emphasises how her ‘outsider’s perspective,’ as she puts it in an interview, ‘helped her to detect many subtle things ignored and taken for granted by local Shanghainese’. It is precisely this distance that turns them into good observers, as Ms Wang modestly explains:

I haven’t experienced much, so most of my stories come from my imagination. Actually, you can call me a little boring or a coward with regard to life, but I do have passions and I like to watch other people’s lives. I’m not a reader but a spectator, observing the lives of others and even the most trivial things. When young people aspiring to become a writer ask for advice, I always tell them that the main talent of a writer is to observe.

A talent that Wang Anyi attributes particularly to women: not only because they ‘have a great capacity for strong emotions’ as ‘emotional beings’, but also, again, because of their ‘outsider’s position’:

Male authors mainly write about major events in society. Even when they write about personal feelings, it is always related to those issues. Works by female authors have their own characteristics: we prefer to write about daily life. Why do people like Zhang Ailing [Eileen Chang] so much? I think it’s because she writes about the common people. This is why I personally prefer to read works by female authors. Even in the most boring stories you can still take pleasure in their great ability for description; they portray details that only women notice. Maybe it’s even because society has been male-dominated for such a long time, and we women have been kept outside, that we have had the opportunity for self-searching.

As soon as the gender issue comes up, Ms Wang’s eyes light up and her voice becomes excited. While passionately

championing women’s writing, Wang Anyi is also very critical. Straightening her back, she ventures:

If we talk about women’s rights today, I believe we have accomplished a lot. However, I do feel that when we look at it from the perspective of the emotions, we are still quite primitive: it’s like we women are not fully evolved, as if we’re still dragging a tail, a tail of emotions. When a woman is the protagonist of a story, she is mostly completely independent, she has everything, she can do anything, and yet she is still yearning for love, searching for true love. So actually, not much has changed in this perspective. We are still living in the age of Jane Austen, we’re still not so developed and still predominantly looking for a good marriage.

The evening ends with a question from the audience about Wang Anyi’s most influential novel, *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, a story that follows the adventures of a Shanghai woman from when she participated in a Miss Shanghai contest in the 1940s until her tragic death in the 1980s. The English translation carries the subtitle ‘A Novel of Shanghai’, revealing that it is actually the history of Shanghai that is being portrayed through the life story of the protagonist, a woman of course:

I don’t dare to say that the protagonist Wang Qiyao represents the city, because if I would say that, readers might point out qualities that are missing. But I did try to keep many characteristics of the protagonist resonant with the city. For example, Wang Qiyao is from a common background, born in a common family, which is just like Shanghai. In China, Shanghai is a relatively mature society consisting of an urban middle class that barely inherited anything from the past, but had to start from scratch, on its own and without being too ambitious. So the city and its people take it one step at a time. What I like about Wang Qiyao, and what is also true for the city, is that although she is very pretty and tender, she is a strong woman at heart. She doesn’t care about her duties according to the social norms, but pursues things despised by contemporary values, which is why she is always defeated. But of course, Shanghai is a much stronger woman and it is developing into a megacity. So, if I can’t say Wang Qiyao is a representative of Shanghai, then she is like Boston ivy on the wall of an old Shanghai building: a beautiful decoration of the city.

Lena Scheen

Note

Wang Anyi (b.1954) is the author of numerous volumes of essays, short stories, and novels, which are gaining her increasing recognition around the world, ranging from China’s highest literary honour, the Mao Dun Prize (for *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*), to the Los Angeles Times Book of the Year Award (for which *Baotown* was a finalist). Currently Ms Wang is the Chairperson of the Shanghai Writers’ Association, and a professor of Chinese literature at Fudan University.

This interview took place during ‘Shanghai Week’, a festival organised by the city of Rotterdam in honour of the 30th anniversary of the Shanghai-Rotterdam sister city relationship and the Shanghai World Expo 2010. If you are interested in the full interview, please contact the author. With thanks to Nan Su (Dutch Sino Business Promotions) for her kind help with the translation.



From left to right: Nan Su, Wang Anyi, Lena Scheen, Jana Beranova (Rotterdam poet). The picture above the podium shows the Shanghai lane houses. Photo: Eric Chen.

