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How the caged bird sings: Educational background and poetic identity of China's obscure poets

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HOW THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

Educational Background and Poetic
Identity
of China's Obscure Poets

Jinhua Wu

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How the Caged Bird Sings:
Educational Background and Poetic Identity
of China's Obscure Poets

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To Lingzhe, Jan-Peter and Avery

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Last, I would like to say something to myself. You are brave to hang in there and never give up. Goed Gedaan!

Conventions and a note on online sources

Chinese characters are provided at first mention of personal and institutional names, important terms, and the titles of literary works. In transcribing personal names, I follow the Chinese custom to place family names before given names. I list life years for well-known poets. I use the Hanyu Pinyin 汉语拼音 system of Romanization, adding tone marks only where this is necessary for the analysis. Poems titles are marked by double angular brackets « . . . ».

All internet pages cited were last accessed in October 2019.

1 Introduction

1.1 Central Questions

This research aims to study the dynamic interaction between education and poetic identity in contemporary China, with a reference to a specific literary-generational group known as the Obscure poets (朦胧诗人) that came to the fore in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. They are usually taken to include Bei Dao (北岛, b. 1949), Shu Ting (舒婷, b. 1952), Gu Cheng (顾城, 1956-1993), Jiang He (江河, b. 1949), and Yang Lian (杨炼, b. 1955). Others who can reasonably be associated with Obscure poetry, but who were only recognized as such in the late 1990s, include Shizhi (食指, b. 1948), Mang Ke (芒克, b. 1950), Duoduo (多多, b. 1951), Genzi (根子, b. 1951), Wang Xiaoni (王小妮, b. 1955).

My interest in this topic started with my observation of a growing general dissatisfaction with courses in Chinese language and literature in mainland China, in primary and secondary education alike. Together with mathematics and English language, the Chinese language course is at the center of formal schooling. Two writers, Han Han (韩寒) and Mo Yan (莫言), were frequently mentioned as examples of the negative effect of the course. In 1999, Han Han, who failed at least seven subjects (including Chinese language and literature) in senior high school, won the first prize in the First New Concept Composition Contest held by the prestigious literary journal *Sprouts* (萌芽). In 2012, Mo Yan, who dropped out of school at the age of ten, won the Nobel Prize for literature. Conversely, it has been a prevailing idea that “successful” schooling in China has directly or indirectly killed creativity and produced many unimaginative minds. The higher one’s academic degree, so to speak, the smaller one’s chance to become a successful writer.¹

¹ He Minyi 2001, Xiong Bingqi 2012, Tang Xiaomin 2013, Sheng Hong, “Mo Yan is a Fish that Slipped Through the Net” (莫言是条漏网之鱼), <http://unirule.cloud/index.php?c=article&id=993>

But what if a poet's education was interrupted and/or limited? Most of the Obscure poets did not complete their secondary education, because of the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命, 1966-1976). From an *educational* perspective, their experience is unique. Born around 1949, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded, most of the Obscure poets came from privileged or elite families in Beijing. It could be argued, therefore, that they experienced some of the greatest and most dramatic social and political transformations of the newly-founded socialist country. In general, they were all fundamentally influenced by the educational reforms initiated by Mao Zedong (毛泽东). The educational reforms of the early 1960s aimed to "break all institutional barriers between school and society", replacing classroom-centered schooling with a work-study program.² This situation of deschooling was aggravated when most if not all schools fell into chaos, and many were closed for varying periods of time during the Cultural Revolution. As a result, most of those who would later become known as the Obscure poets had very limited access to school education; only a few of them completed secondary school, and only Wang Xiaoni attended university.

While the Obscure poets' school education is special, their poetic identity is clearly distinguished in Chinese modern poetic history. From a *literary* perspective, the Obscure poets are considered to have contributed in various ways to the building of a new poetic tradition that has gained recognition not only in mainland China but also worldwide. Their works have been widely translated and discussed.

As I reviewed scholarship on literature and on education and read through the related primary sources, I developed these central research questions:

- How are the Obscure poets' educational backgrounds reflected in their poetic identities?
- How do these respective identities relate to the socio-cultural developments in mainland China from the 1950s to the 1990s?

The Obscure poets have played a trailblazing role in a movement that has far-reaching consequences in literary and cultural history, and this study hopes to do

² Cheng & Manning 2003

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justice to this role in an original and innovative manner. In addition to expanding specialist knowledge of the authors and texts under scrutiny, this will contribute to the study of literature and the study of education in particular. Furthermore, this study is expected to make a fresh contribution to the ongoing debate about courses on Chinese language and literature that first moved me to undertake this project.

1.2 Background

1.2.1 Two Traditions

Before reporting on the actual research, I will briefly introduce the history of modern Chinese poetry in mainland China, which is different from that in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau. Since the New Culture Movement (新文化运动) in the early 1920s, written modern (vernacular) Chinese became the standard style of writing throughout China, in place of Classical Chinese. Looking back at the history of modern Chinese poetry, also known as New Poetry (新诗), schematically speaking, it has formed two traditions. One is that of left-wing literature, which became dominant after 1949, claiming that literature should serve the masses (mainly referring to the proletariat; the petty bourgeoisie was added later), thereby serving the revolution. The other tradition is Chinese modernist literature, which was repressed but still existed after 1949, insisting on the autonomy of literature as something that is primarily for, and of, the individual. These two traditions are not mutually exclusive, and can be engaged with alongside one another by individuals and groups. The Obscure poets, who generally started to write poetry in the early 1970s, also engaged with both of these traditions.

The formation of two traditions is related to the continual wars that meant the end of Chinese imperial history. These wars include the *Xinhai* Revolution (1911), the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the civil war lasting from 1947 to 1949 between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The *Xinhai* Revolution was led by the Chinese Nationalist Party, which overthrew the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) and created the Republic of China (1911-1949). After the victory against the Chinese National Party in 1949, the CCP

legitimized itself as the leading party in the PRC, with members appointed in most key positions in the central and local governments.

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed poetry societies in bloom: the Chinese Literary Association (文学研究会, 1921-1932), the Creation Society (创造社, 1921-1930), the Crescent Moon Society (新月社, 1923-1933), the Yusi Society (语丝社, 1924-1930) et cetera.³ Many of these poets had the chance to study abroad and were keen on translating non-Chinese literature into Chinese. They founded self-funded journals and published their works there. These diverse literary trends explored how an individual poet could situate him/herself in the context of war through his/her poetry, how they envisioned the relationship between the individual and the masses, and what rhetorical devices should be employed. These literary trends coexisted until the late 1940s.

The situation greatly changed after 1949, when the process of literary production came to be controlled by the central government and the CCP, and China saw the emergence of an “official” (官方) literary establishment that was institutionalized (most visibly so in the China Writers Association) and politically sanctioned. Poets were categorized by a clear dichotomy, as being part of the revolutionary front, in contradistinction to the bourgeois front. “Front” (阵线) was used as a metaphorical military indication, comparing the field of literature with a battlefield, e.g. in Zang Kejia’s (臧克家, 1905-2004) article “An Outline of the Development of New Poetry Since May Fourth” (“五四”以来新诗发展的一个轮廓), published in 1955, and the *Anthology of China’s New Poetry, 1919-1949* (中国新诗选 1919-1949), edited by Zang and published in 1956.⁴ Zang Kejia’s authoritative classification reappeared in later documents concerning modern Chinese poetry until 1976, when Mao Zedong died and the Cultural Revolution ended. Poets who were said never to emphasize individual feelings and to write only for the masses, for example Guo Moruo (郭沫若, 1892-1978), Jiang Guangci (蒋光慈, 1901-1931), Yinfu (殷夫, 1909-1931) and Zang Kejia himself, were labeled as fighting on the revolutionary front. Those who were said to emphasize individual feelings, for example Hu Shi

³ Denton & Hockx (eds). 2008

⁴ Zang Kejia 1955a & 1955b & 1956

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(胡适, 1891-1962), Xu Zhimo (徐志摩, 1897-1931), Li Jinfa (李金发, 1900-1976) and Dai Wangshu (戴望舒, 1905-1950), were labeled as being on the bourgeois front. This distinction came with a political assessment: “revolutionary” writing was considered as fitting for establishment literature or the “mainstream”, and “bourgeois” writing was considered a counter-current.

1.2.1.1 The Left-Wing Literature

The Left-wing literary tradition officially started by the founding of the League of the Left-wing Writers (中国左翼作家联盟) in 1930. The Left-wing literature was remolded in the Communist capital Yan'an, and turned into the Literature of Workers, Peasants and Soldiers (工农兵文学) in the 1940s. After the CCP gained political authority, it gradually turned into the dominant literature nationwide from the 1950s to the 1980s. In terms of poetry, a type of poetry known as Political Lyricism (政治抒情诗) was the mainstream.

The League of the Left-wing Writers was founded in Shanghai, initiated by the CCP. It intended to promote poetry that supported the Communist revolution, “standing on the battle line of the proletariat’s struggle for emancipation”, and “assisting and engaging in the birth of proletarian art”. Members were called upon to “pay attention to the large number of subjects from the realities of Chinese social life”, with special attention to subjects related directly to revolutionary objectives. Poetry should “observe and describe from the proletarian standpoint and outlook”, and “be simple and understandable to the workers and peasants. When necessary, dialects can be used”.⁵

These writing guides were elaborated and set as a policy by Mao Zedong, as indicated by his “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” (在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话) in 1942.⁶ In later years and decades, official literary policy in mainland China mostly originated from the Talks. While the details of literary policy changed through the years, the principles of the subordination of literature

⁵ Lee 1986: 428

⁶ McDougall 1980

and art to political ideology, and of literature and art as instruments to serve the masses, remained.

Through a process of integration (一体化), a notion initially proposed by scholar Hong Zicheng 洪子诚, Political Lyricism consolidated its dominance from 1949 to 1976. “Integration” here really means coordination, indicating how writing, publication, distribution, reading, and criticism were organically built and interlinked, under the control of the government and the CCP. Notably, writers and critics were made members of the China Writers Association (中国作家协会) at the national and provincial levels. Journals, publishers, post offices (which played a key role in the dissemination of literary journals) and bookstores were transformed into state-owned institutions. Furthermore, the term here rendered as “integration” also means “making the same”, indicating how one style of literature became dominant and the only one approved by authorities, with multiple trends in styles, tastes, and thoughts being eliminated. The process of integration was complicated and time-consuming. Because it was continuous and contentious, diverse literary visions influenced each other, while at the same time opposing one another.⁷

The Chinese “work units” (单位) system, which is an institution holding sway over important aspects of individual lives, is crucial in the process of integration. The First Five-Year Plan began in 1953, and planned economy was practiced in mainland China until 1977. Many large-scale social transformations were implemented from the 1950s to the 1970s. Since the 1950s, manpower belonged to a work unit, under the control of the CCP. There were no privately owned companies, and self-employed professionals.⁸ Furthermore, the system influenced each individual significantly, in the sense that the work units not only provided employment, wages, housing, public catering, child care (including education) and other material benefits for urban residents; it also managed and regulated the daily life of employees beyond work. For instance, one had to ask permission from his/her work unit for many things, ranging from travel to marriage and pregnancy.⁹

⁷ Hong Zicheng 2002: 137-218

⁸ Yang Xiaomin & Zhou Yihu 1999: 77-79

⁹ Bray 2005

1.2 Background

From 1949 to the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the Writers Association was the only work unit for writers. The rule for the Writers Association, as summarized by Hong Zicheng reads:¹⁰

The bylaws of the Writers' Association indicate that it is a "mass group voluntarily formed from China's authors," but, during this period (1949-1966), it was not purely an organization of such a nature. It was a coordinator and guarantor of an author's creative activities, artistic exchanges, and legitimate rights and interests, but its more important functions were to exercise political and artistic leadership and control of a writer's literary activities, and to guarantee that literary norms were implemented. The "validity" of the association was, on one hand, admittedly based on the famous writers and theoreticians among its leadership, but, on the other, it was also bestowed by political power.

During this period, writers were fairly well paid. Apart from this economic advantage, established writers were granted political posts or titles, on the condition that they worked in strict accordance with literary policy. Deviation and challenge to the literary policy would result in expulsion from the Writers Association, which meant the loss of the right to publish, a reduction in salary, or even the loss of one's job, and political punishment such as being rusticated to work in a factory or a farm, or reform through labor.¹¹

Under these conditions, Political Lyricism was promoted as the dominant literary style. It was envisioned as an ode to the newly-born People's Republic, and to the CCP, political leaders, heroic martyrs and the masses. Political Lyricism was the mainstream poetry style in the PRC until the end of the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, Political Lyricism became a combination of direct citation of political slogans and pure leader worship.

There were two sources of influence on Political Lyricism. One was the Chinese romantic style in New Poetry, referring to "the poetry of the League of the Left-Wing Writers in the 1930s", poetry that was meant to stir up people during the

¹⁰ Hong Zicheng 2007: 27

¹¹ Hong Zicheng 2007: 40, Hong Zicheng & Liu Denghan 2005: ch 6

Second Sino-Japanese War, and “the grandiose, advocacy vein like the works of Guo Moruo” in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The other influence was “from western nineteenth century romantic poets, as well as, and especially, the work of the revolutionary poets of the Soviet Union.” Byron, Shelley, Petöfi, and Mickiewicz were introduced as poets who were “resolved to resist and [whose] purpose laid in action” and had a deep and lasting influence on Chinese poets. Among the Soviet revolutionary poets, Vladimir Mayakovsky was highlighted as a direct example.¹²

Highly politicized themes, expressing the poets’ opinions on contemporary political events or trends of thought in society is the most prominent feature of Political Lyricism. The lyrical I speaks as a member and on behalf of the masses, which was possible given that there was a monolithic presentation of historical events approved by political orthodoxy, without room for multiple voices, perspectives and personal feelings. The narrative is basically a eulogy to highlight the development of the socialist country and the advantages of socialism over capitalism. To further illustrate the role the poets play, I quote from Hong Zicheng:¹³

From the 1930s on, this “proletarian poet” [Mayakovsky] held an important position in China’s left-wing poetry circles, and was even more highly appraised after 1949. China’s contemporary poets were most fascinated by one aspect of his writing: he “acted in unison with his class on all battle fronts,” “directly participated in struggle during the course of events” and “placed himself at the center of events,” he had a “majestic boldness of vision,” and a “power and voice like a bomb, like fire, like a flood, like steel.” And it was precisely due to these basic points that China’s contemporary poets believed him to be a “beloved comrade and advisor,” and his poetry was termed “arrows and banners inserted into the road.”

Political Lyricism wraps abstract political thoughts and feverish political enthusiasm into a series of symbolic imagery, which were taken from nature and

¹² Hong Zicheng 2007: 86

¹³ Hong Zicheng 2007: 86

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icons related to Chinese modern revolutionary movements. Symbolic imagery may come from nature such as the sun, the Big Dipper, dark clouds, ocean waves and so on. Also, they may originate from icons located in specific places such as Yan'an and Beijing. Yan'an was the center of the Chinese Communist revolution from 1935 to 1947, and Beijing has been the capital city since the founding of the PRC in 1949. In Political Lyricism, Baota Mountain in Yan'an, and Tian'anmen Square and the Monument to the People's Heroes in Beijing serve as a symbol of the glorious revolutionary history of China.¹⁴

As for the form of Political Lyricism, it is generally marked by long poems featuring a great deal of parallelism, distinct rhythms and sonorous sounds. Vladimir Mayakovsky's "staircase form" (lines progress step-like down the page) is often borrowed in PRC Political Lyricism. This form also notably recalls parallelism and antithesis common to classical Chinese poetry.¹⁵

Such an "agit-prop type of poetry" was also accompanied by "a mass fervor for poetry recitations."¹⁶ To elaborate, as early as the Second Sino-Japanese War, a great number of poetry recitations were organized. As Zhu Ziqing (朱自清, 1898-1948) puts it, poetry recitation is well suited to wartime. Such poetry is for the masses, to express what people love, hate, need and hope for. Not only attitudes are delivered in these poems, also actions are motivated. To recite Political Lyricism in schools and factories was also popular during the 1960s and the 1970s.¹⁷ He Jingzhi's (贺敬之, b. 1924) «Ode to Lei Feng» (雷锋之歌) and Guo Xiaochuan's (郭小川, 1919-1976) «The Green Curtain of Tall Crops» (青纱帐) for example, reached new heights of popularity.

Political Lyricism was canonized in textbooks and intensively taught in schools until the end of the Cultural Revolution. He Qifang (何其芳, 1912-1977), Guo Xiaochuan and He Jingzhi were considered major poets. Canonized works include He Qifang's «How Vast Our Life Is» (生活是多么广阔) and «Our Greatest

¹⁴ Helen Wang 2008: Glossary

¹⁵ Rong Guangqi 2002, Hong Zicheng 2007: 85-87

¹⁶ Hong Zicheng 2007: 87

¹⁷ Hong Zicheng 2005: 102

Festival» (我们最伟大的节日), He Jingzhi's «Return to Yan'an» (回延安), and Guo Xiaochuan's aforesaid «The Green Curtain of Tall Crops».¹⁸

The Obscure poets engaged with the Left-wing literature tradition by learning from textbooks and later visiting the poets who were good at composing Political Lyricism, who mainly lived in Beijing. This has been insufficiently recognized in scholarship to date, and I will return to this point later.

1.2.1.2 Chinese Modernist Literature

The history of the Chinese modernist tradition is very interesting, since it has been an experimental field for Chinese poets (in most cases, for translators as well) in the 20th and 21st centuries. They have the opportunity to engage with classical Chinese literature tradition, which has a history of approximately 2500 years, and with foreign literatures from around the world. The Chinese modernist tradition was arguably started by the publication of Li Jinfa's poetry collection *Drizzle* (微雨) in 1925.¹⁹ Scholarship considers Li to be the first to translate French Symbolist poetry and apply French Symbolism in his poetry. His knowledge of French was limited and according to some scholars, his use of the modern vernacular Chinese that was emerging as a medium for literary expression was not invariably felicitous.²⁰ Dai Wangshu, Bian Zhili (卞之琳, 1900-2010), Wen Yiduo (闻一多, 1899-1946), He Qifang, Feng Zhi (冯至, 1905-1993), Ji Xian (纪弦, 1913-2013), Nan Xing (南星, 1910-1986), Wu Xinghua (吴兴华, 1921-1966), and the members of the Nine Leaves School (九叶派) and of the July Poetry School (七月诗派) were other remarkable poets in the Chinese modernist tradition. The Nine Leaves School refers to the nine poets publishing their works in journals *Poetry Creation* (诗创造) and *Chinese Modern Poetry* (中国新诗), including Cao Xinzhi (曹辛之, 1917-1995), Xin Di (辛笛, 1912-2004), Chen Jingrong (陈敬容, 1917-1989), Zheng Min (郑敏, b. 1920), Tang Qi (唐祈, 1920-1990), Tang Shi (唐湜, 1920-2005), Du Yunxie (杜

¹⁸ For He Qifang's selected poems, see People's Education Press 1950: 127-129 and People's Education Press 1964: 7-14. For He Jingzhi's, see People's Education Press 1958: 2-5. For Guo Xiaochuan's, see People's Education Press 1960: 120.

¹⁹ Li Jinfa 1925

²⁰ Li Yi 2011

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运燮, 1915-2002), Mu Dan (穆旦, 1918-1977) and Yuan Kejia (袁可嘉, 1921-2008). The July Poetry School refers to the poets publishing in journals *July* (七月) and *Hope* (希望), including Hu Feng (胡风, 1902-1985), Peng Yanjiao (彭燕郊, 1920-2008), Zeng Zhuo (曾卓, 1922-2002) and so on.²¹

The Obscure poets learned from the tradition of Left-wing literature on the one hand and from that of modernist literature on the other. The material that inspired them in the latter prominently included foreign modernist literature in Chinese translation but also “home-grown” Chinese modernist writing from the 1920s to the 1940s (which itself displayed the influence of foreign modernism as well).²² From 1949 to 1976, the Obscure poets were not directly influenced by foreign or “Western” modernist poetry in the original, since they could barely read English or Russian, not to mention French or German. They did read, and were influenced by, foreign modernist poetry in Chinese translation. As I will show in chapter two, they barely received education in foreign languages at school or from their parents or peers from 1949 to 1976. Foreign language education was closely tied to the national relationship between China and the Soviet Union. From 1949 to 1962, Russian was the main foreign language taught in the secondary and tertiary levels. But none of the Obscure poets attended secondary schools during this period. From 1962 to 1966, when the Sino-Soviet relationship deteriorated, English instead of Russian became the favored foreign language. However, there were no sufficient English teaching resources, with a severe shortage of qualified English teachers. From 1966 to 1976, education generally stagnated nationwide.²³

Arguably, in the eyes of the Obscure poets, some of the “homegrown” Chinese modernist poets were more important as translators than as poets in their own right. Examples include Dai Wangshu, who translated the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca; and Chen Jingrong, who translated the French poet Charles Baudelaire.²⁴ Chen Jingrong was among those Chinese modernist poets who did not turn to

²¹ Wang Zuoliang 1983, Hong Zicheng 2005: 11-12

²² On modernism and Chinese poetry, see Manfredi and Lupke 2019 (part I of this volume is most directly relevant to the present discussion).

²³ Zhang Dongbo 2012

²⁴ On the complex and fascinating relationship of author and translator in the case of Chen Jingrong, see Meng 2019.

Political Lyricism after the founding of the PRC and “disappeared” from 1949 to 1976, meaning that very few books on literary history mention these poets or their poetry; nor were their works published in multiple-author poetry anthologies in this period.²⁵ Chen became an editor of *World Literature* (世界文学) and shifted her focus from publishing her own poetry to translating foreign poetry. She finally managed to publish her own poetry again as late as the mid-1980s, as a member of the literary society that was retroactively named the Nine Leaves School, mentioned above.²⁶

Some of the Chinese modernist poets, such as He Qifang and Ai Qing (艾青, 1910-1996), embraced Political Lyricism and were assigned official positions after 1949. Ai Qing gave up his pursuit of presenting subjective emotions, thoughts and imaginations in poetry, and tried to contribute to Political Lyricism. However, after he had published three poetry collections he was labeled a “rightist” – mostly because of earlier work – and was rusticated to the countryside in 1956, and would effectively be in domestic exile for the next twenty years. It was not until 1980 that Ai Qing could publish again. When the Obscure poets were accused of engaging with the modernist tradition in the Obscure Poetry Controversy (朦胧诗论争), Ai Qing was also one of their critics, which greatly disappointed the Obscure poets.²⁷

It is uncertain whether the Obscure poets gained access to the works of the Chinese modernist poets published before 1949. In the memoirs of the Obscure poets based in Beijing, they seldom mention any of the relevant publications. However, Shu Ting, an Obscure poet based in Fujian province, has mentioned that she was deeply attracted to He Qifang’s early works such as «Prophecy» (预言, 1931) when rusticated to the countryside in 1970s.²⁸

1.2.2 The Generation of the Obscure Poets

After briefly reviewing the two traditions in New Poetry and the way the Obscure poets engaged with these, we move on to an introduction of Obscure poetry itself.

²⁵ Hong Zicheng 2007: 34, 317

²⁶ Tamburello 2015

²⁷ Li Runxia 2005

²⁸ Shu Ting 1999: 301

1.2 Background

The Chinese term *Menglongshi* (朦胧诗) has been translated as Poetry of Shadows, Opaque Poetry, Obscure Poetry or Misty Poetry.²⁹ I follow Maghiel van Crevel in choosing “Obscure” as the English translation.³⁰

Obscure poetry developed in several stages from underground to public, with many influential poets quitting their writing along the way. The stages, as traced in scholarship, are generally considered to be underground writing (1969-1978), the first public appearance in the unofficial journal *Today* (今天, 1978-1980), wide dissemination but being targeted in the Obscure Poetry Controversy and the Movement to Eliminate Spiritual Pollution (清除精神污染, 1983-1984), canonization by the authorities (1985-1986), and diverse reforms brought by individual poets (1978-now).³¹ Below I will discuss these stages briefly with reference to recent scholarship, and then move on to discuss some points that remain the subject of ongoing debate.

1.2.2.1 Underground

The practice of underground writing is rooted in conditions related to the shared family background of the Obscure poets. They were generally, but not all, born in intellectual families in Beijing, the capital city of the PRC since 1949. Exceptions include Shu Ting, who was born and grew up in Fujian Province, in the south of China and Wang Xiaoni from Jilin Province in the north of China. Yang Lian was born in Switzerland where his parents were in the diplomatic service, and returned to Beijing when he was six years old. Shizhi was born in Shandong Province, northern China, and relocated to Beijing with his family when he was five years old. Noticeably and importantly, the Obscure poets’ parents generally ranked high in the hierarchy of the work units system. Before the market-led economic reforms in the late 1970s and the 1980s, the homes and schools of children were closely linked to the occupations of the parents. Therefore, there was a direct correlation between a child’s family background and the kind of school education the child received.

²⁹ Yeh 1992: 379

³⁰ van Crevel 1996:73, note 14

³¹ van Crevel 1996, Wang Shiqiang 2009, Zhang Zhiguo 2009

These poets all attended compulsory schooling. Before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, they received a school education similar to that in the Soviet Union in the Stalin era and in France in the Napoleon era. The similarities lie in aspects such as a “state-run educational system with all the educational resources held by government”, “standardization of the curriculum, with textbooks and exams applied nationwide”, and “cultivating people to contribute to the development of the country”.³² Moreover, most of the Obscure poets attended the Cadre Children Schools (干部子弟学校), which has received insufficient attention in scholarship.

When the ten-year-long national turmoil of the Cultural Revolution started in 1966, the tertiary and secondary school students formed paramilitary units known as the “Red Guards” (红卫兵) while the primary school students formed the “Little Red Guards” (红小兵). Mao Zedong called on the students to safeguard their socialist career from the alleged capitalists, which included most of the teachers and probably parents of the Red Guards. The idea that “revolution is no crime, rebellion is justified” (革命无罪, 造反有理) was steadily implanted. In the name of revolution, brutal violence and persecution were perpetrated by the Red Guards against various authority figures. Teachers were sent to labor camps for “remolding” or humiliated for their alleged crimes in public places under the supervision of their former students. The Red Guards also engaged in the ransacking of private homes and public places in the name of smashing the “Four Olds” (破四旧), i.e. old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits, which were said to be incompatible with a revolutionary career. Untold damage was caused by these frenzied youths.³³

In the cases of the Obscure poets, Shizhi and Bei Dao were deeply involved in the Red Guards Movement. Shizhi and his friends were busy composing a stage drama with the Red Guards as heroic protagonists; Bei Dao travelled around with his friends, spotting those who might be capitalists. Mang Ke and Gu Cheng were

³² Hayhoe 1996: ch3, Yang Dongping 2003: ch4

³³ MacFarquhar & Fairbank (eds).1991: 542-549

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said to have stayed away from the Red Guards Movement; the involvement of other Obscure poets is unclear.³⁴

The Red Guards Movement paused in 1967 under the instruction of Mao, when (gun) violence was reported to the central authorities. Students were requested to “return to the classroom to engage in revolution” (复课闹革命) for a short time. The *Sayings of Chairman Mao Zedong* (毛主席语录), also known as the Little Red Book, and the “Three Constantly Read Articles” (老三篇, early political essays written by Mao Zedong) became “textbooks” in schools.³⁵ However, on 21st December 1968, Mao issued a directive to educated urban youths to be rusticated to mountainous areas or farming villages on a large scale, which is known as the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement (上山下乡运动). These urban youths were called Rusticated Youths (知识青年).³⁶

Among the Obscure poets, Shizhi was rusticated to Shanxi province, in western China. Mang Ke, Genzi, and Duoduo, who were former classmates in Beijing No. 13 middle school, were rusticated to Baiyangdian, a town in the vicinity of Beijing. Bei Dao was the eldest child in his family, so he was exempted from rustication. He became a factory worker on the outskirts of Beijing, and visited Baiyangdian on several occasions, with Jiang He and others.

While the Obscure poets were either rusticated to the countryside or stayed in Beijing as workers, their parents were either locked up in “cowsheds” (牛棚), meaning unofficial, makeshift, locally controlled prisons; or mobilized to participate in manual labor and ideological reeducation under bad conditions. The latter was named May 7th Cadre Schools (五七干校) after Mao’s Directive of May 7th, 1966. After 1971, they were gradually allowed back to Beijing.³⁷

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed the birth of Obscure poetry, composed by Rusticated Youths mainly from Baiyangdian. Due to its location, in the vicinity of Beijing, Rusticated Youths there were able to go back to Beijing on a regular

³⁴ Chen Chao 2007a, Kwok-sing Li 1994:35-36, Mang Ke & Wang Shiqiang 2010, Gu Cheng 2005a:3-28

³⁵ Helen Wang 2008: Glossary

³⁶ Bonnin 2013

³⁷ Guo, Song & Zhou 2006: 190

basis. Nearly all the sources concerning Rusticated Youths in Baiyangdian indicate that these young people, unlike those rusticated to other places, spent quite some time in Beijing. Excuses included escaping the cold winter in Baiyangdian, regular leave on weekends, and sick-leave for (faked) illness.³⁸ This provided them with extensive access to the book collections of their parents (the so-called Yellow-Cover books [黄皮书] in particular; more on this below) and it gave them the chance to form “salons” (沙龙), informal groups to discuss literature and art together with others in their peer group. They exchanged their works by copying down each other’s works by hand or memorizing them. One of the most accomplished Obscure poets, Genzi, is said to have written eight poems from 1970 to 1973, before he quit writing. Regrettably only three of them, «The Month of March and the End» (三月与末日), «Baiyangdian» (白洋淀) and «To Life» (致生活) survive today.³⁹

From 1973 onward, the relocations of previous years appeared to have been reversed: the work units were back in business, and the educational system resumed at all levels (but not at full efficiency, the tertiary level was especially slow).⁴⁰ Many of the budding poets quit writing poetry. They were back to school (Tian Xiaoqing 田晓青, b. 1953), or worked as high school teachers (Lin Mang 林莽, b. 1949), musicians (Genzi), painters and other occupations. Although political tension still continued, it did diminish. Still, Genzi’s poetry was investigated by the police, which may have influenced his decision to quit writing.⁴¹

1.2.2.2 Public

In December 1978, Bei Dao and Mang Ke founded the unofficial journal *Today* (今天), which published nine issues in total. “Unofficial” means that it was not registered as approved by the authorities. And “publish” in this case comes close to meaning “announce, making public”, as distinct from official, institutional publications.⁴² In December 1980, *Today* was shut down and its assets confiscated

³⁸ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: ch 4

³⁹ Xu Haoyuan 2009, Li Runxia 2006: 136-157

⁴⁰ Robinson 1974

⁴¹ Wang Shiqiang 2009: index

⁴² van Crevel 2007.

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by the authorities. Another three issues were published later under the alternative editorial name of *Today Literature Research Society* (今天文学研究会). Among these twelve issues, two were exclusively for fiction; ten published both poetry and fiction.

Today established its literary influence through nationwide distribution, monthly forums usually set in Zhao Nan's (赵南) home to discuss and select from unpublished manuscripts, poetry recital parties in Yuyuantan Park, and the Star Painting Exhibitions (星星画展), which were initiated by Huang Rui (黄锐), art editor of *Today*, in the National Art Museum of China.⁴³

If we go by the frequency of their works published in *Today*, poets formed a kind of hierarchy, which may indicate a kind of literary ranking proposed by the editors. (Notably, the later canonization of Obscure poetry in official journals shows a very different hierarchy.) Bei Dao's and Mang Ke's works appeared in every issue of *Today*. Shizhi and Jiang He appeared in six out of ten issues. In second place, Shu Ting, Fang Han (方含, b. 1947) and Tian Xiaoqing (under the penname of Xiaoqing) appeared in four out of ten issues. Yang Lian (under the penname Fei Sha 飞沙), Gu Cheng (under the penname Gucheng 古城) and Duoduo (under the penname Bai Ye 白夜) appeared in three issues. Works of Cai Qijiao (蔡其矫, under the penname Qiaojia 乔加, b. 1918) and another ten poets appear once or twice.

As Obscure poetry emerged in public as a new poetry trend, critics and scholars representing the politically sanctioned literary establishment participated in the Obscure Poetry Controversy, the first nationwide discussion on Obscure poetry and New Poetry more broadly after the end of the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁴ This Controversy did not focus only on the pros and cons of Obscure poetry, but also on the arguments proposed by three critics Xie Mian (谢冕), Sun Shaozhen (孙绍振) and Xu Jingya (徐敬亚, b. 1949). They all use the expression "risings" (崛起). to support the Obscure poetry in their article titles.⁴⁵

⁴³ Liang Yan 2010: 50-55

⁴⁴ Pollard 1985, Chen Xiaomei 1991, Li Runxia 2005, Palandri 1984, Chen 1991, Yeh 1992a

⁴⁵ Xie Mian 1980, Sun Shaozhen 1981, Xu Jingya 1983

Most of those who participated in the Controversy saw Obscure poetry in two ways. Fang Bing (方冰, 1914-1997) is an example. In his article (1980), he distinguishes “implicit” (含蓄) from “opaque” (晦涩). He praises Gu Cheng’s «One Generation» (一代人) for its implicitness, reviving one of the significant elements of the classical tradition in Chinese poetry, but criticizes what he perceives as the opacity in Gu Cheng’s «Arcs» (弧线) and «Far and Near» (远和近).⁴⁶

As Xie, Sun and Xu argue, Obscure poetry was a new and diverse trend of poetry and its poetics deviated from the dominant Political Lyricism. It showed a return of humanity which had disappeared in the Cultural Revolution, and drew on the modernist tradition to explore psychological truths. Establishment critics and senior poets such as Zang Kejia, Ke Yan (柯岩, 1929-2011), Ai Qing, Cheng Daixi (程代熙, 1927-1999) and Zheng Bonong (郑伯农, b. 1937) disagreed with Xie, Sun and Xu, interpreting the arguments of the three as a negation of Chinese poetry from 1949 to 1976 and an overvaluation of the Obscure poetry which treated “Western” modernist poetry as primary resource.

The Obscure Poetry Controversy ended with the abovementioned political campaign titled the Movement to Eradicate Spiritual Pollution, which lasted from 1983 to 1984. Literary critics including the authors of “the Three Risings”, and leading Obscure poets were criticized for advocating Western values and worldviews.⁴⁷ This allegedly promoted modernism and individualism, which were said to deviate from socialist literature. Yang Lian was accused of using openly sexual descriptions in his poem «Norlang» (诺日朗).

Later, the Fourth National Congress of the Writers Association, held in late December 1984 and early January 1985, “definitively but not explicitly” repudiated the Movement to Eradicate Spiritual Pollution, and supported the Obscure poets. As a sign, Shu Ting, who was targeted in the Movement, was elected as a new council member of the Writers Association.⁴⁸

Bei Dao, Shu Ting, Gu Cheng, Yang Lian, and Jiang He were canonized as the main five Obscure poets after being the focus of the Controversy, the Movement to

⁴⁶ Fang Bing 1980

⁴⁷ Hong 2007:264

⁴⁸ McDougall 1988: 47-48

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Eliminate Spiritual Pollution and the National Congress. Statistics from the *Duxiu* database (读秀学术搜索), which provides the full text of books, journals, newspapers and dissertations published after 1949, show that these poets got valuable chances to publish their works in top journals, and also appeared in official journals many times (their numbers of publication varying from Jiang He's 42 times to Gu Cheng's 176 times) in the period of 1980-1989. In 1986, their joint anthology *Selected Poems by Five Poets* (五人诗选) was published by China Writers Publishing House, the state-owned publishing house affiliated with the Writers Association.⁴⁹ In comparison, Mang Ke officially published his poetry only eight times in the 1980s; Duoduo officially published his poetry seven times and fiction five times; and Shizhi and Genzi did so only once. Well known in the unofficial circuit, these poets received little official attention in the 1980s, but became famous in the late 1990s.

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Due to the scarcity of materials on the lives of the Obscure poets, until the early 1980s Western scholarship of modern Chinese poetry embraced the idea that Obscure Poetry originated “in a literary vacuum, with the poets’ personal lives as its sole source.”⁵⁰ The idea changed when materials such as the poets’ memoirs, those edited by Liao Yiwu (廖亦武, b. 1948) and Liu He (刘禾) among the most cited examples, became available in various forms in the late 1980s and the 1990s.⁵¹ Scholarship to date tends to highlight that the individuals in question had (limited) access to translated modernist literature within a small circle of budding poets, emphasizing the fact that their formal schooling was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution, a phenomenon to which I will refer as “deschooling” below. However, the way in which this situation relates to the formation of Obscure poetry raises new questions.

Few substantial discussions on the relationship between educational background and poetic identity are found in scholarship, except for some sections in articles

⁴⁹ Bei Dao 1986

⁵⁰ van Crevel 1996: 35.

⁵¹ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999 and Liu He 2001

where educational background is simply – and debatably – equated to formal schooling. The phenomenon of the interrupted school education received by the Obscure poets was noted by senior poets Ai Qing and Gong Liu (公刘, 1927-2003) in the Obscure Poetry Controversy, and used as a reason to explain why the Obscure poets needed guidance. Scholar Li Li (李黎) holds that the Obscure poets express in their poetry the gap between what they were taught in school and what happened to them in reality.

As claimed by Ai Qing, the generation of the Obscure poets experienced neither warfare nor full schooling, but they managed to read some books when the Cultural Revolution broke out, without selection or other guidance by teachers. Besides, they witnessed the tragedies that happened to their family members. These resulted in hostility towards their surroundings, all-encompassing negation and a tendency to overvalue themselves, which were reflected in Obscure poetry. The same holds for Gong Liu's criticism on Gu Cheng's poetry in the Controversy. Gong Liu shows his worries about the "illusion" and "morbidity" in Gu Cheng's mind, as he read it from Gu's poems.⁵² In a response to Ai Qing's article, Li Li states that the Obscure poets had been receiving education about revolutionary ideals and revolutionary tradition since they were born. Therefore, they believed what awaited them was a smooth road ahead and a bright future. In the Cultural Revolution, they participated in the Red Guards movement, and did many naive and foolish things in the name of justice. When they came to realize what happened, many chose to reflect on this and to explore ways to express what they felt in poetry.⁵³

In my understanding of the state of the field, the lack of scholarship that relates educational experience with poetic identity in research may result from a lack of in-depth investigation into the newly-emerged materials related to the Obscure poets. Furthermore, some researchers' unfamiliarity with the educational system in mainland China or mainland social institutions in a broad sense play a role. Therefore a comprehensive framework of discussing the relationship between educational background and poetic identity has not been proposed yet.

⁵² Gong Liu 1979, Ai Qing 1981

⁵³ Li Li 1981

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Notably, for instance, differences between Obscure poetry and Political Lyricism are emphasized without an adequate discussion of their similarities. Newly published works by the Obscure poets, which may enrich the discussion on the multi-faceted nature of Obscure poetry, have not been examined in the ongoing academic discussion so far. These new resources include Gu Cheng's collected poetry, essays, interviews and novels, Bei Dao's autobiographical essays, and Wang Xiaoni's essays.⁵⁴

When it comes to the educational background of the Obscure poets, scholars often only focus on the school education they received before the Cultural Revolution, and tend to discuss this school education without attention to the important points that the Obscure poets attended the Cadre Children Schools, which were unique nationwide. Besides, probably due to the limited awareness among scholars of the school textbooks used by the Obscure poets, the way in which Political Lyricism was taught in school has hardly been examined. Also, and crucially, scholarship up to now ignores other types of education that occurred alongside (the lack of) school education.

Therefore, it is an urgent task to include such materials in the discussion of Chinese literary and cultural history, since they provide important clues as to how school education, family education, peer education, and mentor education may have impacted on the forming of Obscure Poetry (I will discuss these concepts below). Furthermore, it is important to conduct a thorough analysis of this particular circumstance with an eye to a fascinating "complicity" in the relationship between Obscure Poetry and Political Lyricism.

1.3.1 The Double-Sided Nature of Obscure Poetry

The Obscure poets tried to get rid of the straitjacket of politics, rejected politically formulaic poetry, and set great store by individual self-expression. Much of Obscure poetry is characterized by a lyrical tone (somber, fantastic, and heroic), dense imagery, figurative language and a skeptic and nihilist tone.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Gu Cheng 2005a & 2006a & 2006b & 2007 & 2010, Wang Xiaoni 2006, Bei Dao 2010b

⁵⁵ Tang Xiaodu 1992, preface to a poetry anthology he edited, Yeh 1996

Obscure poetry is generally seen as a rebellion against Political Lyricism. The shift of focus from the masses to the individual is widely discussed as an aspect of this rebellion. Articles by Tang Xiaodu (唐晓渡) and by Michelle Yeh started the discussion by pointing out the awakening of the individual as a special feature of Obscure poetry.⁵⁶ Tang considers the awakening self as the one distinguishing him/herself from the masses, enjoying the freedom to think, to feel and express his/her individuality. Yeh notices the recurrent images of silence in Obscure poetry. The poets break the silence to find his/her voice, to awaken the repressed self. Furthermore, poets often adopt a child's perspective to view the world, employ imagery describing children, and reminisce about their own childhood. This attitude reveals a refusal of the adult world, which is full of political struggles, and a return to Chinese cultural identity.

When approaching the canonized works of the Obscure poets, the awakening of the self is presented in great diversity. Given that various interpretations of the same poem have tended to be fairly consistent, here I refer to Hong Zicheng's literary history to introduce these poems. Shu Ting's «To the Oak Tree» (致橡树) is read as the awakening of a female, showing awareness of gender differences and pursuing of an equal and supportive intimate relationship. Yang Lian's «Wide Goose Pagoda» (大雁塔) and Jiang He's «The Monument» (纪念碑) portray an individual with an “epic” consciousness, bearing the whole country and its long history in mind. Gu Cheng's «A Generation» and Bei Dao's «The Answer» (回答) show an individual in a search for truth and doubting what the authorities promote.⁵⁷

A key observation here is that scholarship to date has mostly focused on the *difference* between Obscure Poetry and Political Lyricism; but it has insufficiently focused on *similarities* with Political Lyricism, or the presence of elements of Political Lyricism within Obscure Poetry.

Wang Yao's article (王尧) discusses at length the phenomenon of “Double Shizhi” (两个食指), which indicates the contradiction between the opposition against Political Lyricism in Shizhi's works, and the fact that at the same time he

⁵⁶ Preface to Tang Xiaodu & Wang Jiaxin 1987, written by Tang Xiaodu. Yeh 1991a.

⁵⁷ Hong Zicheng 2007: 341-349

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was also writing Political Lyricism himself.⁵⁸ I submit that this phenomenon is not unique, and will be proved to have been more widespread as more materials are published and studied.

1.3.2 Before the Cultural Revolution: The Localized Educational System in Beijing

Scholarship has widely discussed the special nature of the school education that the generation of the Obscure poets received. It is generally agreed that political socialization (the process by which people acquire political values) was very prominent in primary and secondary schools of mainland China after 1949, as pointed out by Anita Chan, Xing Lin, Julia Kwong and Gao Yinggen.⁵⁹ Scholars find their information from interviews, studies of syllabuses and content analysis of textbooks. In their findings, they conclude that students were indoctrinated to take for granted that daily life should be under the control of politics. They were taught to distinguish people into two groups based on their political views: the proletariat and the capitalists. They were taught to love and follow political leaders (Mao Zedong in particular) and moral models, who were portrayed as altruistic heroes with a full-hearted devotion to the socialist country and the revolution. Furthermore, they were taught to hate and always keep an eye on the eternal enemies, the capitalists, who were depicted as hypocritical demons conspiring to overthrow the socialist country. Capitalists were seen as the origin of spiritual pollution spreading values that were not compatible with a socialist country. The students were persuaded to serve the country at the expenses of their personal needs, such as intimate relationships with parents, even sacrificing their lives.

Scant attention has been paid on the localized educational system in Beijing city from 1949 to 1966, except for a chapter in an anthology edited by Yang Dongping (杨东平), a news report by Fang Kecheng (方可成) which was banned after its publication, and a paper by Zhang Fang (张放).⁶⁰ I find their studies are applicable

⁵⁸ Wang Yao 2000

⁵⁹ Chan 1985, Xing Lin 1991, Kwong 1985, Gao Yinggen 1988

⁶⁰ Yang Dongping 1994: ch 5, Fang Kecheng 2011. My personal communication with Fang Kecheng on 21st April, 2016. Zhang Fang 2016

here. Although the Obscure poets have not been forthcoming about this, they were in fact enrolled in Cadre Children Schools.

According to their findings, Cadre Children Schools were originally set up in revolutionary bases such as Yan'an and Xibaipo, aiming to take care of these children so that their parents could devote themselves to the revolution without distraction. These schools were also built to train qualified revolutionary successors. This model was maintained in Beijing after the founding of the PRC in 1949. Take No. 101 Middle School and August 1st School for example: these schools excelled in high-quality teachers and a comprehensive care system. In 1955, the specialty and superiority of these schools was undermined by the authorities, because they were in contradiction with the principle that “education should open its doors to workers and peasants” (教育向工农开门). Ever since, these schools enrolled children of the cadres who led in the wars, together with the children of the cadres who were intellectuals, and the children from peasant families who did well at school. The number of these schools was slightly increased, with rich educational resources assigned to them.

Such a blind spot in scholarship on education would appear to be related to the traditional perception that education was standardized nationwide from 1949 to 1966. Probably it is closely related to a well-known but rarely publicly discussed fact that Beijing, as the capital of the PRC, was the place where high-ranking officials held special rights. Although the idea of equality was promoted by the authorities, social stratification through the work units system and the related welfare system had been in existence since 1949.⁶¹ In mainland China from 1949 to 1976, Chinese people were inclined to intentionally undermine differences among one another in discourse, especially in the early years. For example, it was common for a high-ranking official and his/her live-in nanny to address each other as “comrade” (同志), or as family members. The situation changed in 1964, when Mao made remarks on training revolutionary successors. Family background became gradually an issue that could be publicly discussed. Children of cadres became a desirable identity in both practice and in discourse, and was held in high honor in

⁶¹ Yang Kuisong 2007

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the Red Guards Movement during the Cultural Revolution.⁶² In Deng Xiaoping's regime, starting from 1978, differences brought by social stratification were off the table again, but they resurfaced around 1986 when economic reform was frustrated as inflation struck nationwide. It became clear that there existed a widening gap between rich and poor, and that high-ranking officials holding special rights benefited more than expected from the reforms.⁶³

Probably because of the reasons mentioned above, it has not been explicitly pointed out in scholarship and by the Obscure poets themselves that their family backgrounds entailed far more than privileged access to translated modernist literature. Privileges included enrolment in Cadre Children Schools which had rich resources, better living conditions in certain specified *dayuan* (大院, enclosed living compounds, not unlike today's gated communities), and privileged career development. Privileged career development here refers to the principle that "children get their parents' jobs" (子女顶替就业) and "guaranteed job assignments" (包分配) applicable in the system of work units.⁶⁴ What's more, as pointed out in memoirs by peers of the Obscure poets, it was cultivated through education -- as manifest in their stories about education from family members and peers in addition to school education -- that the children of cadres carried a great responsibility for the future of the country, since they would be its future masters.⁶⁵

1.3.3 During the Cultural Revolution: Deschooling

It has been widely discussed in scholarship whether the Obscure poets' limited access to books during the Cultural Revolution played any role in the writing of Obscure Poetry. As noted previously, materials such as the poets' memoirs, those edited by Liao Yiwu and Liu He among the most cited examples, have become available in various forms in the late 1980s and the 1990s.⁶⁶ From these memoirs, scholars noticed the phenomenon of the secret, underground reading of translated modernist literature, better known as the "Yellow-Cover Books", in the

⁶² Yin Minzhi 2014

⁶³ Baum 1996: ch 5-10

⁶⁴ Wang Aiyun 2009

⁶⁵ Xu Hong 2011

⁶⁶ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999 and Liu He 2001

abovementioned “salons”. The Yellow-Cover Books were non-Chinese literary works, translated between 1961 and 1966, many from the Soviet Union. Their circulation had been originally intended to remain restricted to high-level cadre circles, e.g. parents of the Obscure poets.⁶⁷ Lists of books that were read can be traced based on the above-mentioned memoirs and an important publication entitled *National Comprehensive Catalogue of Publications for Internal Distribution 1949-1986* (全国内部发行图书总目 1949-1986).⁶⁸ While the Obscure poets managed to read these books in the early 1970s, most Chinese writers would not lay eyes on them until the 1980s.⁶⁹

As an initial attempt, Michelle Yeh considers that Gu Cheng’s work in 1971 may have been inspired by the Spanish modernist poet García Lorca.⁷⁰ This claim is problematic, because Gu Cheng did not get access to Lorca’s work until Bei Dao’s recommendation someday between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, as verified by both Bei Dao and Gu Cheng.⁷¹

Chen Xiaomei points out that both Obscure poets and their critics often “misunderstood” western modernism as “self-expressive”. Through the strategy of close reading, Chen discovers the influence of both realism and romanticism of western origin in Obscure poetry.⁷²

Wang Shiqiang (王士强) discovers that the inclination of romanticizing the past is present in these memoirs. Through interviews with friends of the Obscure poets, he finds out that “the format of the salon” does not really fit the clandestine, scattered gatherings of the Obscure poets during the Cultural Revolution. These did not take place at regular intervals. The members were not fixed and they actually were not always familiar with one another.⁷³

Maghiel van Crevel points out that reading in a chaotic and fragmentary manner opened up new vistas. Not limited to literature, these youngsters appreciated

⁶⁷ Archival Library of Chinese Publications 1988, van Crevel 1996, Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999, Shen Zhanyun 2007

⁶⁸ Duke 1985; Chen Xiaomei 1991; van Crevel 1996: ch 2.

⁶⁹ Hong Zicheng 2005: 11

⁷⁰ Yeh 1991a

⁷¹ Gu Cheng 2005:322, Bei Dao 2004b

⁷² Chen Xiaomei 1991

⁷³ Wang Shiqiang 2009: ch 1-2

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modernist literature, music and drawings together. Doubting the validity of looking for evidence of “origins” and “influences” between works from different nations, van Crevel brings up the issue of combination of Maospeak (毛文体) and Translation Style (翻译体) in Obscure poetry, but he does not elaborate this point.⁷⁴ Maospeak favors “political lingo, ideologically heavy abstractions and the grand gesture”.⁷⁵ The so-called Translation Style is, in Bei Dao’s words, “neither Chinese as known so far, nor a foreign language, but something in between.”⁷⁶

I find that scholarship to date has failed to distinguish between the fiction and poetry the Obscure poets read, to pay adequate attention to the life and personal circumstances of each poet, and to sort out what influences the poets experienced individually. By delving into these issues, some questions may be raised: is looking at the influence of translated modernist works sufficient to explain the multi-faceted nature and hybridity of Obscure poetry, or is something missing from that analysis? Was Obscure poetry decisively shaped by the influence of books or by the influence of peers, or by both and/or other factors? Is there any framework that could include these related issues?

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1.4.1 Key Concepts

With regard to the particular situation of the Obscure poets, I have constructed an analytical model. In this model, what I call *educational background* is constituted by the following points, which I will elaborate below:

- Family education
- School education
 - o Curriculum (subjects, textbooks, pedagogy)
 - o Extra-curriculum

⁷⁴ van Crevel 1996: 42-46,78

⁷⁵ van Crevel 2008: 5

⁷⁶ van Crevel 1996: 36

- Hidden curriculum
- “Learning webs” (as theorized by Ivan Illich), categorized by teacher types:
 - Mentor Education
 - Peer education

In his radical contribution *Deschooling Society* (1971), Ivan Illich adopts a critical attitude towards the American educational system after the Second World War. He defines “school” as “the age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum”.⁷⁷ He is unsatisfied with the monopoly of schools and the central role of teachers in the course of learning. He considers schooling costly and ineffective, especially for economically disadvantaged students. As he argues:⁷⁸

The institutionalization of values leads inevitably to physical pollution, social polarization, and psychological impotence: three dimensions in a process of global degradation and modernized misery.

As an alternative to the school system, Illich proposes a model of “learning webs”, through which the individual has the freedom to learn the skills s/he wishes from anyone s/he trusts without regard to place and time. Furthermore, he proposes to match teacher and student by computer:⁷⁹

The operation of a peer-matching network would be simple. The user would identify himself by name and address and describe the activity for which he sought a peer. A computer would send him back the names and addresses of all those who had inserted the same description. It is amazing that such a simple utility has never been used on a broad scale for publicly valued activity. A complement to the computer could be a network of bulletin boards and classified newspaper ads, listing the activities for which the computer could not produce a match. No names would have to be given. Interested readers would then introduce their names into the

⁷⁷ Illich 1971: 25-26.

⁷⁸ Illich 1971: 1

⁷⁹ Illich 1971: 93

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system. A publicly supported peer-match network might be the only way to guarantee the right of free assembly and to train people in the exercise of this most fundamental civic activity.

This provocative book brought Ivan Illich to public attention. While getting support from some scholars for his negation of the importance of school education (alternatively referred to as “formal education” in the literature), he was also seen as an anarchist intellectual, and criticized for his ideas which failed to establish a step-by-step guide for transforming one of the most important institutions in the world. His proposal was considered radical, unpractical, and utopian. To most readers, it is far from clear how a process of deschooling could take place.⁸⁰

Be that as it may, without glossing over the fundamentally different situation in the PRC, Illich’s proposal applies to a considerable extent to the situation in mainland China in the 1960s and 1970s, especially given the Obscure poets’ limited exposure to school education. The reasons Illich gives for a revolution in school system are close to (but not identical with) those Mao Zedong gave for an educational revolution, which lasted from 1960 to 1976, as will be elaborated in chapter two. To some extent, Mao put the idea of deschooling into practice, which started from a work-study program (1960 to 1966) and reached its summit in the nationwide disruption of schools during the Cultural Revolution. However, different from the idea of computer matching between teacher and student as proposed by Illich, what happened in mainland China in the case of the Obscure poets, were unofficial matches based on family background.

I adjust and develop Illich’s idea of “learning webs”, and sort out two salient aspects: peer education and mentor education (that is, education by private mentors). By reading through biographical materials, I have sorted out basic information on the Obscure poets’ family backgrounds, which includes their parents’ occupations, work units, the places they lived, and the schools they attended.

I use “peer education” in a broad sense, not limited to the usual definition as a method of health promotion adopted by organizations such as UNICEF. Equality,

⁸⁰ Zaldívar 2011, Illich 1973

trust and the role of both teacher and student are three characteristics I use in this analysis.⁸¹

Peer education is a teaching or co-teaching relationship between people who are in some way equals. That equality can be defined by age, gender, geography (people from the same neighbourhood, or the same village), income, racial or ethnic group, culture, background, disability... anything that people might have in common... Peer education is based on the assumption that learners are often likely to relate to and trust others in their own circumstances more than professionals whose experience might be entirely different from theirs. The education relationship thus needs to be one of equals, not one in which the teacher holds the authority and gives out bits of knowledge or approval as she sees fit...Peer tutoring is now conceived as a situation where everyone involved is both teacher and learner.

Mentor education refers to the tutoring on poetry by acknowledged senior Chinese poets to the Obscure poets. Shizhi and his mentor He Qifang and Shu Ting and her mentor Cai Qijiao are cases in point. It also refers to the personal perception of certain authors as one's teachers (even though one has never met them in person), after intensive reading of their works. Gu Cheng's relationship to Jean-Henri Fabre and Duoduo's to Marina Tsvetayeva are cases in point.

Important aspects of school education are the concepts of the "curriculum" and "hidden curriculum", as defined by John Scott and Gordon Marshall:⁸²

In education, the hidden curriculum refers to the way in which cultural values and attitudes (such as obedience to authority, punctuality, and delayed gratification) are transmitted, through the structure of teaching and the organization of schools. This is different from the manifest or formal curriculum that is subject-based or topic-based.

⁸¹ <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/improving-services/peer-education/main>

⁸² Scott & Marshall (eds). 2014: 305

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Extra-curriculum here refers to activities of political socialization. In the PRC, this included things like the weekly flag-raising ceremony, and the routine activities of the Youth Pioneers and the Communist Youth League. The Communist Youth League (for youth aged 14-28) and the Young Pioneers (for children below 14) are reserve forces for the CCP. More details will be provided in case study of Shizhi and Bei Dao.

When discussing the concept of *poetic identity*, I emphasize the “metatextual” aspect, as noted by Michelle Yeh and expressly formulated by Maghiel van Crevel, and pay special attention to the Obscure poets’ discourse on poetry and poethood.⁸³ The framework of *context-text-metatext* is used by van Crevel in his 2008 *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*. *Context* means “poetry’s social, political and cultural surroundings”, *text* means “poetry, on the page and in recitation”, and *metatext* means “discourse on poetry”.⁸⁴

In this study, then, what I have called *poetic identity* is constituted by:

- discourse on poetry and poethood
- thematics
- persona
- style (language usage: registers, grammaticality, originality)
- imagery
- form

Notably, the elements that constitute “educational background” can have different weight in different periods, and this is also the case for “poetic identity”.

Considering the nature of the topic and the variety of the resources, I will adopt a mixed methods approach: case studies, textual analysis and fieldwork.

⁸³ Yeh 1992a: preface; Yeh 1996; van Crevel 2008: Ch 1.

⁸⁴ van Crevel 2008: 1

1.4.2 Case Studies

Case studies are one of my research methods, given that the Obscure poets vary in some aspects of educational background and poetic identity, although they are institutionally and aesthetically linked.

I will conduct four case studies, of Shizhi, Bei Dao, Gu Cheng and Wang Xiaoni. The poets are chosen based on variations in education and poetic identity, and gender balance (which is admittedly still skewed; here, it bears reiteration that the modern Chinese poetry is very much a male-dominated enterprise).⁸⁵ They operate at different distances from Political Lyricism. They have also been chosen because their poetry, poetics, and reflection on education are comparatively well-documented.

There is one more important reason that I choose these four poets. Bei Dao and Gu Cheng are well-acknowledged Obscure poets, but it could be argued that Shizhi and Wang Xiaoni should not be labeled Obscure poets. Several scholars consider Shizhi a precursor to the Obscure poets rather than one of the core group, and Wang Xiaoni as also or only belonging to the so-called Third-Generation (第三代) of poets in the PRC. The opinions depend on which perspective is adopted, in terms of age, literary debut, and poetical characteristics.⁸⁶ I agree that Shizhi and Wang Xiaoni show great differences compared to the others. Still, I include them in the Obscure poets, precisely because they clearly demonstrate traditionally-ignored characteristics of Obscure poetry. Political Lyricism, the Obscure poetry, and the Third-Generation poetry are successive mainstream literary trends, which are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, the latter two groups of poets are fond of promoting their novelty by demonstrating their differences from previous literary tradition in their manifestos (a phenomenon that is of course by no means uniquely Chinese). As I will show in the case studies, Shizhi, just like Bei Dao and Gu Cheng, has an intimate connection with Political Lyricism. And Wang Xiaoni shares similarities with others in her reflection on Political Lyricism and her own poetry.

⁸⁵ van Crevel 2017, pars. 13–18.

⁸⁶ On Shizhi, see Cheng Guangwei 2005, Chen Chao 2007a; On Wang Xiaoni, see Chen Nina 2010: ch3.

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1.4.3 Textual Analysis

Resources I use include official documents, poetry collections, memoirs, interviews, and textbooks. Most of the materials are published in the forms of journal articles or books, and a few are posts on internet forums.

As a general principle, I prefer to use books published in Hong Kong and Taiwan to those from the PRC where possible. The reason for this is that books published in Mainland China are likely to have been (self-) censored. In Li Zhangbin's (李章斌) discovery, the secondary materials published in different places sometimes show substantial differences, which obviously affects research. *The Lamp-Bearing Messenger* (持灯的使者) edited by Liu He is a collection of memoirs by poets related to *Today*, first published in Hong Kong in 2001 and later in mainland China in 2009. The PRC edition deletes some parts of the version published in Hong Kong. These deletions include the *Today* group's involvement in the Beijing Spring (北京之春), the name of a period with a comparably relaxed political atmosphere during 1978 and 1979, which is considered politically sensitive by the editors of the PRC version.⁸⁷

Unless otherwise specified, English translations of poems cited are taken from the collections mentioned in each case study. Where I use existing translations (occasionally slightly amended, in order to ensure clarity of the analysis), I identify the translator. Where no translator is identified, translations are mine.

1.4.3.1 Memoirs and Interviews

Generally speaking, I have gathered information on the Obscure Poet's educational backgrounds and their explicit poetics mainly from their memoirs and sometimes from interviews. Here I use memoirs in a broad sense, not only referring to a biography or historical accounts based on personal knowledge and observation, but also to essays more broadly that shed light on the author's vision of their own experience. Unlike the Third-Generation poets, it is not common for the Obscure

⁸⁷ Li Zhangbin 2010

poets (except for Yang Lian) to write essays exclusively dedicated to poetics.⁸⁸ Therefore, from memoirs and interviews, I try to find out case by case how individual poets perceive their role as a poet, what role their poetry plays in addressing the public, and which historical events and circumstances impacted their poetry.

As mentioned before, perhaps in order to conceal their privileged status as children of cadres, the Obscure poets have not been forthcoming about their educational backgrounds. However, relevant materials can be found in memoirs of the poets' siblings, fellow students from the same schools, and acquaintances. Memoirs of siblings offer insights into the family education the poets received. Many of their fellow students and acquaintances would rise to prominence in various fields, the arts in particular, and published personal stories featuring the Obscure poets as children and adolescents. These materials enrich the accounts provided by the poets themselves, and I have found no significant contradictions between these two bodies of source material.

1.4.3.2 Textbooks

As for school textbooks from the 1950s to the 1960s, I benefit greatly from the private collections of a supportive high school teacher, Alex Lin, as well as my own.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact volume of each textbook the poets used and were inspired by, since there is no accurate information about this in any resource yet. When I argue that Bei Dao is inspired by imageries used in certain textbooks, I use his close friend Qi Jian's (齐简) memoir as a reference.⁸⁹ Qi states that she was deeply touched by the story of poppies in one primary school textbook, and she perceives a similar usage of this story in Bei Dao's poems.

1.4.3.3 Poetry and Poetics

For poetry, I use the anthology *A Banished God of Poetry* (被放逐的诗神) edited by Li Runxia (李润霞), and the oeuvres of individual poets. Li's anthology collects

⁸⁸ Yang Lian 1998 & 2003

⁸⁹ Qi Jian 1994

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the early works of the Obscure poets, marks when poems were written, and states clearly the changes when the poems were published in different versions.⁹⁰

Occasionally, I pay attention to the approximate time of writing of the poems, making it clear whether these poems were composed in or after the Cultural Revolution, which may result in different judgments on the literary accomplishments of individual poets. For example, the poem «Mad Dog» (疯狗) by Shizhi was actually created in 1978, after the end of the Cultural Revolution. But when it was firstly published in *Today*, Editor Bei Dao changed 1978 to 1974 for two reasons. One reason is that *Today*'s original publishing principle was to publish works written during the Cultural Revolution. The change enabled the poem to fit this principle. The other reason was consideration of security. Since the poem addresses the disrespect for human rights when the extremist Maoist faction known as the Gang of Four was effectively in power, it was safer to date it to 1974. By 1978, Deng Xiaoping was making a political comeback. This fabrication led to a debatable judgement of Shizhi as an avant-garde poet reflecting on the Cultural Revolution, and to a problematic link between Shizhi's break-up with his girlfriend and his disappointments mentioned in this poem. Many historiographies and papers followed this reconstruction without question.⁹¹

I conduct an analysis of poetic texts by situating them in historical and social contexts. I adopt this method because it helps to reveal the complexity of Obscure poetry, and to delineate the literary achievement of each poet. To illustrate my point, I use Michelle Yeh's 1991 article as an example. It is an early and important article in English scholarship that introduces Obscure poetry, yet some points in it are open to debate. When discussing the recurrent image of silence in Obscure poetry, Yeh refers to «Trilogy of a Fish» (鱼儿三部曲) by Shizhi and «I Hear a Sound» (我听到一种声音) by Jiang He. Yeh interprets the silence as a sign of despair and anger, out of which the poet searches and reconstructs the private self.⁹² I agree with Yeh's argument in the case of Jiang He, but Shizhi seems to be a different case. If we take the biographies of both poets and the contexts of both poems into account, as I will

⁹⁰ Li Runxia 2006

⁹¹ Li Runxia 2001

⁹² Yeh 1991a

show in the case study of Shizhi, Shizhi expresses his despair and anger when being prevented from being in touch with Mao Zedong.

Further, I consciously equate the historical person of the poet, the speaker and the protagonist. I do so because in my observation, the Obscure poets are inclined to speak in the first person singular in both their poetry and essays, and events from their biographies frequently match their statements in poetry and their essays. In this respect there is a clear consistency between their biographies, poetry and essays. This observation is especially salient in the cases of Shizhi and Wang Xiaoni, but I believe this approach is justified for Bei Dao and Gu Cheng as well. It is additionally justified in light of what may be summarized as the tradition of biographical reading in Chinese literature, and of each poet's own commentary over the years.

In most cases, I choose poems speaking in the first singular persona (I am of course aware that my choices reaffirms the observation on the first person made in the previous paragraph). Occasionally, I choose those in the first person plural and with an omniscient point of view. I also pay special attention to texts containing education-related words such as “education” (教育), “teacher” (老师), “primary school” (小学), “classroom” (教室), “teaching” (教), and “study abroad” (留学). Gu Cheng offers many such poems. I also attempt to analyse a series of poems written in different periods by individual poets, employing the same imagery, to see how the educational background is reflected in the imagery. To give one example, in Bei Dao's case, I choose three of his poems that employ the imagery of poppy, to show this development. These poems are a direct reflection of the story of a heroic figure named Danko in the textbook and a reflection on what education has managed to deliver.

1.4.4 Fieldwork

The second method I have used is fieldwork, since my work is also very much part of the sociology of culture. I adopt this method, because most of the Obscure poets are still active in literary circles; some are active in educational circles as well. They are guest teachers at universities, as well as parents who are keenly concerned about the education of their children, quite possibly in response to their own disruptive experiences. The focus of my fieldwork is to conduct participant observation in

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lectures, conferences and private gatherings. I inquire into the topic of poethood – the poet’s status and what it means to be a poet – since this relates to behaviour and explicit positions taken by the Obscure poets, and to their opinions on educational topics. In addition to participant observation, I also conduct interviews with the poets and their acquaintances in various ways: face-to-face, via telephone, email, and Wechat. I was lucky to be introduced to several poets by various scholars of modern Chinese poetry.

1.5 Structure and Argument

This study consists of seven chapters. The present chapter has introduced the research topic, including a discussion of the relationship between education and creative writing; a literature review of scholarship to date on the Obscure poets; the theoretical framework that draws on Ivan Illich’s notion of deschooling among other things; and a discussion of my methods.

Chapter two discusses the mainland-Chinese educational system in broad strokes, and then zooms in on the complicated educational backgrounds of the Obscure poets.

Chapters three to six present case studies of four renowned poets: Shizhi, Bei Dao, Gu Cheng, and Wang Xiaoni. These chapters analyse how the educational background of each poet is reflected in their poetic identity.

Chapter seven summarizes my main findings and reflects on the questions raised in the process. Also, I offer a comparison between the Obscure poets and the Third-Generation poets, who came to the fore starting from the mid-1980s. Their educational backgrounds and poetic identities are radically different from those of the Obscure poets. Many attended university, and by coupling this with the way they distanced themselves from Obscure poetry, we see a more diverse educational background and poetic identity in this group than in the Obscure poets. It is my hope that this comparison will offer a starting point for future research.

2 From Future Masters to High School Dropouts: The Obscure Poets' Educational Trajectories

The present chapter highlights some salient issues in school education in mainland China from the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, i.e. the period when the Obscure poets were children and adolescents. It then outlines some general points about their school education, their family education and the learning webs of which they were a part, before concluding with a section on their engagement with Political Lyricism as well as poetic innovation. This will prepare the ground for the individual case studies in chapters three to six, which engage in greater detail with the various ways in which the educational background of several of the Obscure poets is reflected in their poetic identity.

Toward the end of this chapter, I turn to early works written by several of the Obscure poets that clearly show something the poets have barely acknowledged to date, namely the influence of the Political Lyricism that they would become famous for rebelling against.

2.1 School Education in the PRC from 1949 to 1966

The development of the formal school education system in mainland China in the Mao era are generally divided into three phases: 1949 to 1958, 1958 to 1966, and 1966 to 1976.⁹³ This division is closely related to Sino-Soviet relations. The direct influence of the Soviet education system in the PRC from 1949 to 1958 has been well studied. These studies show that Soviet influence could be found in the centralization of the formal school system, the expansion of public education, standardization of curriculum, textbooks and teacher-centered pedagogical approaches, the appearance of single-gender schools, and the formation of students'

⁹³ Wang Xiufang 2003: introduction

2.1 School Education in the PRC from 1949 to 1966

political organizations.⁹⁴ Subsequently, as previously noted, educational reform conducted in China in the late 1950s and the early 1960s aimed to “break all institutional barriers between school and society”, in order to replace classroom-centered schooling with work-study programs. This situation was aggravated when the schools fell into chaos during the Cultural Revolution. The outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 basically brought school education in rural areas to a halt – making peer education and mentor education all the more important.

When the Communist Party came to power in 1949, it transformed all private property into state-owned property. Starting with the transformation of land ownership, this transformation was essentially completed by 1956.⁹⁵ Nearly all private education was eliminated in mainland China in the Mao era. The public school system under the control of the Communist Party was highly politicized, in order to cultivate the “Socialist New Human Being” (社会主义新人).

The hidden curriculum drew on binary oppositions: China vs. the west, the new socialist society vs. the old feudal society and the dying capitalist society, and the Communist Party vs. the Nationalist Party. The generic narrative was roughly as follows: the Chinese masses lived miserably, suffering from the oppression of foreign imperialism, indigenous feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism, and the Nationalist Party. The members of the Communist Party took the lead in the battle against these oppressors, set the masses free and built the socialist cause. The future was bright, but the process was going to be long and full of difficulties, because the remaining enemies (capitalists and revisionists) would try to destroy the socialist cause.

As such, education aimed, to “raise students’ socialist consciousness, nurture their enthusiasm for Communist ideals, and foster obedience to the Party and Chairman Mao”. To elaborate, school education aimed to “urge students to give up individualism and submit their personal ambitions to the collective Communist cause”, to “teach students to love Chairman Mao, the great Communist Party of China, the wise, courageous, and diligent Chinese people, the glorious People’s Liberation Army, the superior socialist system”, and to “denounce the decadence

⁹⁴ Kwong 1979: ch. 5; Jing Lin 1991: ch. 3; Cheng and Manning 2003.

⁹⁵ Kwong 1988:23

and rottenness of the capitalist system and reject any liberal influences”.⁹⁶ These principles appeared in official educational documents and were put into practice in reality, such as curriculum design, pedagogy, textbooks, and extra-curricular activities.

As for the curriculum, I will especially focus on the subjects of language and literature, because of their direct relevance to the issue of poetic identity. In curriculum design for primary and secondary schools alike, “[Chinese] Language and Literature” (语文) was designated one of the core subjects, and took up to nearly 50% of all courses, according to the 1952 Provisional Regulations for Primary Schools, which was the first official document used to standardize teaching in primary schools after the founding of the PRC.⁹⁷ By 1961, English was listed as a course in tertiary education, and was taught in eleven Foreign Language Schools nationwide, but it was not available to primary and secondary students.⁹⁸ Most students, including the (future) Obscure poets, could only read foreign literature in Chinese translation and it was only after the end of the Cultural Revolution that this situation would gradually change.

In September 1950, the Press General Administration of the Central People's Government had announced that all textbooks for primary and secondary schools must be supplied from the center. Successive sets of textbooks were compiled and published by the People's Education Publishing House in 1951, 1956, 1961 and 1963. In the period from August 1958 to June 1959, exceptionally, local governments were allowed to compile textbooks according to local needs, but this policy was quickly reversed.⁹⁹

There is no evidence to exactly show to which sets of textbooks the Obscure poets were exposed. However, since the principles of standardization and centralization were applied, there are clear similarities across the successive sets of textbooks. Research to date has focused on how the Chinese Language and Literature textbooks helped to shape the political values of the students, as pointed out by Julia Kwong, “textbooks bear the strong imprint of the political cultures of

⁹⁶ Jing Lin 1991: 82-83

⁹⁷ http://www.gzzxws.gov.cn/gzws/gzws/ml/32/200808/t20080816_1140_2.htm.

⁹⁸ Lam 2005: ch. 3

⁹⁹ http://m.pep.com.cn/gyrj/ryy/nd/201011/t20101103_944845.shtml

2.1 School Education in the PRC from 1949 to 1966

the societies producing them, and offer an interesting source in the study of a society's political culture ... They form an integral and important aspect of educating the young, providing them with values fundamental to the society's political structures and cultures.”¹⁰⁰ But so far, scholarship has hardly touched upon the role the textbooks played in the students' literary formation yet; needless to say, one's literary formation and the shaping of one's political values are closely related.¹⁰¹

As mentioned before, the subject “Chinese Language and Literature” was the most important subject in school, since the students spent 50% of school time to study it intensively. Most of the poems in the textbooks would count as modern poetry and more specifically Political Lyricism, while classical Chinese poems were rarely selected. As mentioned in chapter one, Political Lyricism in the textbooks included works written by unknown authors as well as canonized works by famous poets. It is noticeable that textbooks in particular were a primary source for the Obscure poets to become familiar with Political Lyricism.

To give an example of Political Lyricism written by an unknown author, volume 8 of *Chinese Language and Literature Textbooks for Junior Primary Schools* 《初级小学课本·语文》 starts with a text entitled “The People Sing in Praise of Chairman Mao” (人民歌颂毛主席), which includes three poems.¹⁰² The first one pictures Mao's superpowers. When he points to a mountain, the mountain is full of trees. When he draws a line on a map, a roadway and a railway appear. The second poem asserts that every word in Mao's writing is true, and that his every sentence is effective. He has great influence in the world, and the sky, earth, mountains and rivers follow his orders. The last poem shows the unity and, most importantly, the conformity of the Chinese people. Every flower is attached to the same vine (as a metaphor for the Communist Party), and all people sing in the same key to show their gratitude to the Communist Party for its kindness.

Stories of heroes were also found in textbooks, which deliver a “hero complex” through vivid plots. Examples of such heroes include revolutionary martyrs such as

¹⁰⁰ Kwong 1985

¹⁰¹ Kwong 1985, Xing Kebin 2001

¹⁰² People's Education Press 1958: 1.

Fang Zhimin (方志敏) and Liu Hulan (刘胡兰), who show their steadfastness and calmness while suffering “physical depredation and psychological torture”, and heroes such as Luo Shengjiao (罗盛教), who displayed qualities such as collectivism and altruism before his sacrifice for saving a boy from icy water.¹⁰³ These stories selected in textbooks could be read as a miniature version of the Red Classics, which include revolutionary historical fictions composed under the calling of creating heroic characters. The Second Congress of Representatives of National Literature and Arts Workers was convened in Beijing in 1953, and decided that the creation of heroic characters as models became the main task for literature and arts, in order to motivate readers to fight against the remaining enemies (capitalists and revisionists) who were supposed to be trying to destroy the socialist cause.¹⁰⁴ The hero complex and the metaphors taken from the textbooks appear in Obscure poetry, as I will show in later in this chapter and the case study of Bei Dao.

As for extra-curricular activities, here this refers to activities relating to the League of Young Pioneers and the Communist Youth League. As I mentioned in chapter one -- and this point will return in the case studies of Shizhi and Bei Dao -- joining organizations such as the League of Young Pioneers and the Communist Youth League was a necessary step for earning one's qualification to be in the troops of the communist revolutionary cause. Only those performing well in school had the chance to be elected to join these organizations. Once one was in, the higher position one reached in these organizations, the more chances one would get in work units system in the future. Being selected to a member of Guard of honour and brass band in the weekly flag-raising ceremony was another way to show one's privileged political status. The weekly flag-raising ceremony has been a long tradition taking place not only in Tiananmen Square but in primary and secondary schools as well. The march of Guard of honour and the band open the ceremony. In schools, only students with excellent performances in politics and study are qualified and selected.

¹⁰³ People's Education Press 1958: 50-54, 58-60, and 60-63.

¹⁰⁴ Qizhi 2010: 194

2.1 School Education in the PRC from 1949 to 1966

As such, memberships in these political organizations and being selected to perform in weekly political events were a treasurable political identity to most of the Obscure poets, as indicated in their memoirs.¹⁰⁵

2.1.1 School Education of the Obscure Poets

After discussing school education in PRC from 1949 to 1966 in general, from perspectives of hidden curriculum, curriculum (with the subject of Chinese at the center) and extra-curriculum activities, I will highlight some points of the specialities of the school education the Obscure poets received.

As visible in memoirs by the Obscure poets, they experienced an interrupted school education because of the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Shizhi, Bei Dao and Jiang He were the only three to attend senior high school. Mang Ke, Duoduo, Genzi and Shu Ting completed junior high school only, while Yang Lian and Gu Cheng did not finish primary school. Wang Xiaoni is the only one among the Obscure poets who received tertiary education, but this was after the end of Cultural Revolution, in the years from 1978 to 1982.

What is not clear from their memoirs is that in fact, most of the Obscure poets attended the Cadre Children Schools located in west of Beijing, aiming for children of cadres of level ministries or equivalents. (I have not been able to establish which school Jiang He attended).¹⁰⁶ When the plan economy was in force in mainland China from 1949 to 1976, job ranking in the work units system was closely linked with the schools one's children can attend and the allocation of living space (house size, location, and so on).

To elaborate aforementioned points in chapter one, Cadre Children Schools originated from the nurseries and specialized schools founded in Yan'an in the early 1950s. Characteristics of these schools include the privileged, elite family backgrounds of the students, the special status of the principals (often the wives of political leaders, in a telling division along gender lines), and staff duties combining teaching with substitute parenting for parents who were often away on official duties.

¹⁰⁵ Bei Dao 2010b: 23-24, Zhang Lijia 2002: 107-108.

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.douban.com/note/195456139/>, an article named "Analysis of Hierarchy of the Primary Schools in Beijing" (京城小学阶层分析).

In 1956, a report on closing the Cadre Children Schools was issued by the Educational Ministry, to lessen the difference between these specialized schools and common schools. As a result, the names of some of the Cadre Children Schools changed, their funding was reduced, and students whose parents were not cadres were able to enroll as well. However, differences between these specialized schools and common schools continue to exist today.¹⁰⁷

The Cadre Children Schools which the Obscure poets attended were equipped with advanced educational facilities, and were assigned excellent teachers. Such observations can be found in Shu Ting's and Xu Chengbei's memoirs. Shu Ting attended school in No. 1 Xiamen Middle School (厦门一中). Xu Chengbei was a fellow student of Genzi, Duoduo and Mang Ke in Beijing No. 3 Middle School (北京三中).¹⁰⁸ And there were additional luxuries, such as a school bus for taking students home on the weekend, as in the case of the First Mechanic Ministry Cadres' Children School (第一机械工业部职工子弟小学), which Shizhi attended.

As clearly documented, the Cadre Children Schools were (once) keen on participating in political events. Zhu Jiaming, a fellow student of Bei Dao, described Beijing No. 13 Junior High School (北京十三中) as a place with a strong emphasis on family background and political consciousness, and notes that most of his classmates showed a strong interest in politics and a sense of superiority.¹⁰⁹ The same was the case in Beijing No. 4 Senior High School (北京四中), as recalled by Bei Dao in his autobiography *City Gate, Open Up* (城门开).¹¹⁰ Mang Ke was among the first group of graduates of the National Development and Reform Commission Cadre Children School (国家计委子弟小学), whose name was later changed to the China-Cuba Friendship Primary School (中古友谊小学). He was taught Cuban songs, to better understand the friendship between the two countries, both of which professed to being ruled by the proletariat.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Fang Kecheng 2014, Zhang Fang 2016

¹⁰⁸ Shu Ting 2010, Xu Chengbei 2007

¹⁰⁹ Zhu Jiaming 2013: 19

¹¹⁰ Bei Dao 2010b

¹¹¹ Mang Ke's interview with Sang Mei 桑眉. See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4cc34a9d0100k41z.html

2.1 School Education in the PRC from 1949 to 1966

The cadres' children strongly felt that they were meant to become the future masters of the country, and it was hardly surprising that they did, in the light of the history of the schools and their place in the formation of a political elite. The idea of them being a political elite in the making with a responsibility to match was delivered in common schools as well: students in common schools were taught that they, as children of members of the proletariat, would run the country in the future. But the cadres' children were clearly privileged in education, as in other spheres of life such as housing, healthcare and so on. Moreover, they were actually on a trajectory that was designed for delivering them to allocated leading positions in the work units system.¹¹²

As appears from various poets' memoirs, although their school education was interrupted, it was effective.¹¹³ Looking back, most of the Obscure poets were positive towards what school education they did receive. They tried their best to do well at school and to succeed in general – with Gu Cheng as a notable exception, to be discussed in chapter five. In all, it appears that they became familiar with Political Lyricism in a natural manner, inasmuch as this was part of their compulsory schooling.

2.2 The Obscure Poets' Family Education

In "Family Literacy in China", Cynthia Leung and Yongmei Li point out that many studies have noted that family background and the home environment are as significant for children's literary development as school education. Focusing on family education in China after 1976, Leung and Li look into issues such as literary activities undertaken, reading materials held at home and the parents' socio-economic status and educational levels.¹¹⁴ The present study complements this research by examining the influence of family education on the children that would later become the Obscure poets.

Most of these children were born in intellectual elite families located in Beijing, with the exception of Wang Xiaoni whose parents were both police officers in

¹¹² Mi Hedu 2016

¹¹³ Shu Ting 1997a: 149-150, Bei Dao 2010b

¹¹⁴ Leung & Ruan 2012: ch. 12

Northeast China, and Shu Ting who was born in Fujian in Southeast China. It is noticeable that these parents, although job titles varied, were often entrusted with political posts or titles, ranking in levels of ministries or equivalents in the work units system.

Some of their parents were writers, such as Genzi's father Yue Ye (岳野, b. 1920), Shizhi's father Guo Yunxuan (郭云轩, birth year unknown) and Gu Cheng's father and mother, Gu Gong (顾工, b. 1928) and Hu Huiling (胡惠玲, birth year unknown). Yang Lian's father Yang Qinghua (杨清华, birth year unknown) was a diplomat (they were stationed in Switzerland when Yang Lian was born), and later a professor in Foreign Literature at Tianjin Foreign Studies University. Duoduo's father, whose name I have not encountered in my source material, was an economic analyst in the Ministry of State Planning Commission. Shizhi's mother Shi Weiyuan (时维元, birth year unknown) was the principal of the First Mechanic Ministry Cadre Children School, which Shizhi himself attended.¹¹⁵

In Gu Cheng's case, the education he received from his father, the army poet Gu Gong, played a decisive role in his trajectory to becoming a poet. In other cases, parental education does not appear to have been quite as decisive, but it deserves attention nonetheless, in its respective individual contexts.

On the whole, to the Obscure poets, family education was fundamentally consistent with school education, although family education might well have occasionally qualified or diminished the poets' faith in what they learned in school on particular issues. Take Mang Ke as an example. The reality that his father's status changed from that of a cadre to that of an alleged counter-revolutionary at one point, and his father's silence over this change, eroded Mang Ke's faith in devoting himself to the revolutionary cause and more generally playing by the rules of orthodoxy.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, school education made up the bulk of their education, certainly in quantitative terms, and crucially, one can make no easy assumptions about intimacy between children and their parents in the Mao era, a point I will explain below.

¹¹⁵ Shizhi & Quanzi 2006, Bei Dao 2010b, Rae Yang 1997

¹¹⁶ Mang Ke & Wang Shiqiang 2010

2.2 The Obscure Poets' Family Education

The status of the parents in the work units system related directly to levels of material privilege, and this is relevant to my argument. In his research on pre-1966 China, Zang Xiaowei points out that families in the middle and upper class and the lower class had different child-raising practices. In his definition, the upper class refers to cadres of grades 1-17, college teachers of grades 1-9, and their equivalents in other wage-graded systems. The monthly salary of the upper class was equal to \$135-\$560, while the middle class received \$120-\$80. The lower class are workers of grade 1-5, cadres of grades 18-30, and their equivalents in other wage-graded systems. Their monthly wage was equal to \$20-\$70.¹¹⁷ Children of the middle and upper class had access to radios, newspapers and books, which were luxury items that were out of reach to children of lower class families. Children in the middle and upper class, then, often retained a strong interest in literature as adults.¹¹⁸ Most of the Obscure poets were born and raised in families in the middle and upper class.

From 1949 to 1966, the aforementioned lack of intimacy between parents and children was significant. This is often described in memoirs, such as those of Wang Xiaoni, Rae Yang (Yang Lian's elder sister), Shu Ting, Gu Cheng and so on.¹¹⁹ Children were cared for on weekdays in Cadre Schools, and otherwise often by their grandmothers and nannies. The grandmothers and nannies (an indicator of privileged family background) appeared to have enjoyed an intimate relationship with the children. Shu Ting's grandmother and Yang Lian's nanny are a case in point.¹²⁰

There are three reasons for this. Firstly, both parents were called on to work full time and to put work above family. Since the founding of the PRC and during the years leading up to it, the Communist Party had encouraged women to "hold up half of the sky" (妇女能顶半边天), in Mao's famous dictum. Following women in the Soviet Union, the Chinese women were encouraged to get educated and work independently outside the home. They were supposed by orthodox ideology to contribute as much as the men in building up the country – even though in reality this hardly eroded traditional, male-centered assumptions according to which the

¹¹⁷ Zang 2000: 46

¹¹⁸ Zang 2000: 52-53

¹¹⁹ Wang 2006: 140, Shu Ting 2007b: 26-29, Rae Yang 1997, Gu Cheng 2005a: 5-6

¹²⁰ Shu Ting 2007b: 26-29, Rae Yang 1997: ch. 2

wife was always going to take on much more in terms of care and home duties than the husband, putting women in a double bind, famously indicted by Ding Ling as early as 1942.¹²¹

Secondly, as related to the first point, orthodox political discourse from 1949 until the 1980s considered personal intimacy, such as love for children and love between husbands and wives, incompatible with collectivism, which demanded the full devotion of a person to the construction of New China. The sacrifice of personal feelings and emotions was praised, and the deepest intimacy experienced by the individual was supposed to be reserved for the Party.¹²²

Moreover, there were two extended periods when many families were torn apart by political campaigns, and parents and children were forced to live away from one another. As a precursor to the Cultural Revolution, Mao launched the Socialist Education Movement (1962-1966), in which the primary emphasis was on restoring ideological purity. Intellectuals, especially those working in the humanities (broadly defined), were sent to the countryside to participate in manual labor, to remove their “bourgeois” elements.¹²³ And during the Cultural Revolution, most of the Obscure poets’ parents were targeted, forced to be away from home and rusticated to be reeducated in remote areas.

Gu Cheng and Wang Xiaoni, for instance, strongly felt the absence of their parents from their lives, as contrasted with the intimacy of moments such as the child being sick and the mother telling a story to comfort them; in most cases, it appears that mothers feature more prominently in memories such as this than fathers.¹²⁴ Yang Lian states that his actual writing started when his mother passed away in 1976, when he could no longer write to her to talk about his feelings. Instead, he chose to write poetry.¹²⁵ In fact, there are several cases where the Obscure poets have mentioned in their memoirs that their fathers opposed their children’s choice of writing poetry, since they felt that writing might put one in harm’s way and in conflict with the state. In several cases, this led to strained relations for a while,

¹²¹ Ding Ling 1989

¹²² Evans 1997: 6, 19

¹²³ Baum & Teiwes 1968

¹²⁴ Gu Cheng 2007: 311, Wang Xiaoni 2006: 140

¹²⁵ Lu Chuhan 2015

2.2 The Obscure Poets' Family Education

since the child was disinclined to heed the father's warnings. Mang Ke, Bei Dao and Wang Xiaoni are cases in point.¹²⁶

Both the parent(s) and the child engaged in literary writing in some cases. While there is the occasional similarity in their writing, this does not warrant speaking of direct influence from parents on children in forming the child's poetic identity. For example, Genzi is considered an outstanding and notably original poet, who was very close to Mang Ke and Duoduo. Genzi shares similarities with his father Yue Ye in their presentation of multi-faceted personal feelings and their exploration of humanity. Yue Ye was a script writer and later chief of the literature department at Beijing Film Studio. One of Yue Ye's famous works, the drama *A Share of Weal and Woe* (同甘共苦), first published in 1956, was among the first to touch upon the theme of personal feelings in family life and to explore the complexity of the human experience. It became popular on stage and gave rise to heated discussion, and was subjected to official criticism because it was seen to propagate capitalist views of humanity.¹²⁷

2.3 Learning Webs

As teenagers, the Obscure poets felt "lost" and "had doubts" regarding to the change from a future master of the country to a person without a job. Bei Dao's feelings were shared with many others:¹²⁸

"To repeat a Chinese slogan," he [Bei Dao] began, "'One was born under the Red Flag and grew up under the Red Flag.' From my childhood onward, right up to the Cultural Revolution, there were never any doubts in my mind because we grew up under the Communist system. So with our education—at school and at home—it was taken for granted we lived in the best of all possible societies. No doubts about Communism, the Party, or the system itself."..."The greatest turning point for me came during the Cultural Revolution when I was sixteen, with the call for youth

¹²⁶ Mang Ke & Wang Shiqiang 2010, Bei Dao 2010b: 191, Wang Xiaoni 2012a: 140-141, Wang Xiaoni 2006: 302

¹²⁷ Hong Zicheng 2007: 189

¹²⁸ <https://agnionline.bu.edu/interview/reclaiming-the-word-a-conversation-with-bei-dao>"

to go down to the countryside and participate in production. Up until that point, I had received the best possible education. In a sense we were at the top of society. All of a sudden, we saw the bottom of society, the reality of most people's lives, and it was a complete contradiction to everything I had experienced before.

As their memoirs clearly state, the Obscure poets and other members of their peer group (such as in the salons) felt weary about politics and turned to literature and arts that is different from what they learned from school education and family education. They felt the political language they had mastered was not suited to expressing their true and rich emotions in that period.¹²⁹

Since the Obscure poets generally lacked parental guidance in the period from 1966 to 1974, when the schools had been shut down during the Cultural Revolution, they turned to learning webs to make up for this and find something to hold on to. As mentioned in chapter one, learning webs, in Illich's definition, are ways through which an individual has the freedom to learn the skills s/he wishes from anyone s/he trusts, independently of place and time.¹³⁰ Learning webs mainly refers to peer education and mentor education. These two types of education are related, since the occupations of the parents determined where the children lived and which schools they attended, and this determined whether the Obscure poets got to know their mentors in person or through other ways, for example through the underground reading circuits that emerged around the so-called Yellow-Cover Books.

2.3.1 Peer Education

As introduced in chapter one already, peer education is an important mechanism for sharing information within groups of young people and for influencing individual knowledge, beliefs or behaviours. This especially occurs in relation to information on health and well-being, but it is not limited to these spheres of life.¹³¹ Here I apply this concept to literary production, to see how the Obscure poets and their peers influenced one another in poetry writing in the period from 1966 to 1974, against

¹²⁹ Wang Shiqiang 2009: 117-247

¹³⁰ Illich 1973: ch 6

¹³¹ Topping 2005

2.3 Learning Webs

the background of a lack of parental guidance and a formal school education system that had come to a halt. The term “peer” refers to a network constituted of classmates from primary and secondary schools and neighbours in the living compounds. These people were generally born in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In addition, tangentially, peer can also refer to protagonists of a similar age (i.e. in their twenties) from the Yellow-Cover Books, as the peer group of the Obscure poets clearly experienced moments of intense identification with these protagonists, and their reading of the Yellow-Cover Books was, more generally, a formative experience.

Such peer education took the form of intermittent, “underground” gatherings. To understand why these informal gatherings were formed and why these youngsters were fascinated by these books and eventually how peer education influenced the writings of the Obscure poets, it is necessary to take their formal schooling and family education into account.

Relationships in peer education frequently take the form of (alternative) teacher-student relations, in which one person more or less structurally takes on the role of the teacher and the other takes on the role of the student. In the environment of the Obscure poets, this also played out in matters regarding the availability of books and other cultural material. Given that books were rare, while the number of readers was large, books were quickly read and exchanged in high frequency. This was known as “chasing books” (跑书).¹³² Thus new ways of reading were born. For instance, Xu Haoyuan (徐浩渊) recalled that she loved to hear Genzi retelling a movie he had seen. Xu found Genzi very adept at painting a vivid picture of the events for his audience. Later, she discovered that Genzi actually interpreted what he read from movie scripts without having seen the movie.¹³³

To learn from each other and to share knowledge of books and writings was one of the reasons for the gatherings. Another reason was that these gatherings broke down the gender limitations of the school system. Notably, the Cadre Children Schools at the secondary level mostly had only female students or only male students. In Beijing, No. 13 junior middle school (attended by Mang Ke, Duoduo and Genzi), No. 3 junior middle school, and No. 4 senior middle school (attended

¹³² van Crevel 1996: 35, 41

¹³³ Xu Haoyuan 2009

by Bei Dao) were all male-only.¹³⁴ Writing poetry became a way to impress girls/boys. As mentioned in memoirs by several witnesses, Duoduo and Genzi competed in singing and writing poetry in a pursuit of Lu Shuangqin (鲁双芹), who was the hostess of a popular salon in the living compound of the Ministry of Railways.¹³⁵ However, the gatherings came to an end partly because of the complex female-male relationships among the members and the problems this entailed.¹³⁶

One of the books in question, *Ninety-Three* by Victor Hugo, shows a contest between humanity and class hatred (the proletariat vs. the capitalists), with humanity as the winner, as Shu Ting and Shizhi recall. In *Ninety-Three*, a counterrevolutionary leader named Languedoc sacrifices himself to be taken as a prisoner and to be hanged by the French republican army, in order to save the lives of three children. His act deeply touches the commander of the republican army, Gouane, who later sets Languedoc free, takes his place in the prison and is hanged the next day. Shizhi and Shu Ting were surprised at the choices of these two leaders, and were impressed by the line: "Although the revolution might be entirely correct, above it is humanism, which is even more correct." For those who had received an exclusively political-oriented education, such books provided a new perspective to reconsider what they were taught in school.¹³⁷

J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Vasily Aksyonov's *A Ticket to the Stars* – in Chinese translation, of course – are frequently mentioned by the Obscure poets and their counterparts.¹³⁸ Wondering about life and searching for a new life are shared themes in these books. The mixed feelings of confusion, freedom, loneliness and uncertainty discussed in these books were shared by the Obscure poets and their peers. These Chinese youngsters, as discussed before, were supposed to be future masters of the country, after their graduation from school, but the termination of the Red Guards movement and then the rustication movement derailed them from their fixed trajectories. They relied on one another in new circumstances, without teachers, parents or a clear prospect of future

¹³⁴ http://www.sohu.com/a/5190448_113042

¹³⁵ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: 190, 198, 220 & 233

¹³⁶ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: 220 & 233

¹³⁷ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: 300

¹³⁸ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: 4-16

2.3 Learning Webs

jobs. Besides, what happened to them and their parents stimulated them to question what they had learned in school and from their parents.

Here I take Mang Ke as an example. When recollecting in the early 2000s his reading of *On the Road*, Mang Ke stated that he read this book around 1973 with other youths, including Bei Dao and Duoduo. He could not remember the detailed plot of this novel, but could still feel the excitement of reading the novel 30 years ago.¹³⁹ When rusticated to the countryside, away from their parents, no one was in charge of supervising these youngsters. They felt the freedom to go anywhere they wanted, and hoped to flee Beijing, where the central power was located (even though later, they kept going back to it at every opportunity when life in the countryside turned out to be hard). They admired the carefree attitude and sense of adventure in Kerouac's protagonists Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty. Inspired by them, Mang Ke and his friend Peng Gang famously went on a road trip from Beijing with no set destination at one point.¹⁴⁰

It is noticeable that the Obscure poets picked up new behaviours after the protagonists in these books, such as drinking alcohol, smoking, and premarital sex, which were taboo in their school and family education.¹⁴¹ According to the memoir of Zhou Duo (周舵) about Duoduo, Duoduo was the best friend of Zhou Tuo, but Zhou failed to understand why Duoduo changed so dramatically. In Zhou's description, Duoduo's life fell into a mess as his physical and mental health were ruined. Their friendship ended when Duoduo was thrown out of Zhou's house, because Zhou thought his friend got crazy when he was totally drunk.¹⁴²

In conclusion, this pursuit of novelty is an important feature of the peer education that the Obscure poets received. Peer education, as discussed above, was closely related to their growth as an individual, and it was frequently incompatible with what had been expected in school and family education. As such, it makes sense that these things were reflected in their literary style. Therefore, I argue, peer education constitutes an important influence on their poetic identity.

¹³⁹ Shi Jianfeng 2007

¹⁴⁰ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: 183-187

¹⁴¹ Liu Yangdong 2005: 291-313

¹⁴² Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: 212-215

2.3.2 Mentor education

The role that mentors played for some of the Obscure poets was similar to that of private teachers in rich families in ancient China, for instance in one-to-one conversation on topics related to poetry. Different from ancient China, however, the poets chose their mentors by themselves through books or in person. Duoduo and Marina Tsvetayeva and Shizhi and He Qifang are two cases in point, the former a relationship through books and the latter one of a relationship in person; needless to say, I do not mean to suggest that these two types of relationship worked in exactly the same way.¹⁴³ At any rate, the influence of these mentors varied and affected various things, including poetic technique as well as images of poethood. I will discuss mentor education in regard to different poets in the following chapters.

2.4 Two Sides of a Poetic Identity

2.4.1 Political Lyricism in Early Works

As mentioned in chapter one, Political Lyricism was the mainstream poetry style in the PRC until the end of the Cultural Revolution. It features highly politicized themes, a persona speaking as a member of and on behalf of the masses, a lyrical tone, parallelism, ideologically fixed metaphors, distinct rhythms, sonorous sounds and happy endings. From the analysis above, it can safely be inferred that the Obscure poets were familiar with Political Lyricism and learned how to write in such a style, given that school education made it possible for them to learn Political Lyricism in a natural way, and provided fertile soil for the seeds of Political Lyricism to grow.

Political Lyricism is, in fact, common in the early works of the Obscure poets, even though this is something they have hardly acknowledged. There is every reason to believe that the Obscure poets were deeply familiar with Political Lyricism, and it is only natural that this would have affected their own poetic production. It has been noted in scholarship that quite a few of Shizhi's works and poems such as Bei Dao's «The Answer», Jiang He's «Motherland, O Motherland» (祖国啊, 祖

¹⁴³ van Crevel 1996: 238-240

2.4 Two Sides of a Poetic Identity

国) and «The Monument» (纪念碑), Yang Lian's «Wild Goose Pagoda» (大雁塔) and Shu Ting's «O Motherland, Dear Motherland» (祖国啊, 我亲爱的祖国) can be categorized as Political Lyricism or variants of Political Lyricism.¹⁴⁴ In addition, I would submit that the influence of Political Lyricism is clearly visible in Gu Cheng's works; and works that may safely be called Political Lyricism composed by other Obscure poets has been excerpted in memoirs by, or interviews with, their close friends. For example, Shu Ting wrote «Toward the Magnificent Goal of Communism» (奔向共产主义壮丽目标) and «Factory Avenue Filled with Sunshine» (厂区大道阳光洒), as noted in Chen Zhiming's (陈志明) collection of their correspondence.¹⁴⁵ What's more, as indicated by an interview of Wang Shiqiang with Song Haiquan (宋海泉, birth year unknown), a close friend of Duoduo, Duoduo experienced a dramatic change in personality and poetry, from a well-behaved and obedient child to an “evil” maverick. Song also mentioned that Duoduo's more establishment-inclined side in his early writing was only known to his close friends.¹⁴⁶

Below I will refer to Shizhi's debut «Ocean Trilogy» (1967), very much written in the style of Political Lyricism, as an example. The poem employs a set of orthodox political metaphors, which can be seen in other revolutionary products such as poetry, songs and badges.¹⁴⁷ In this poem, Shizhi compares Mao Zedong to the Big Dipper, the revolutionary career to the stormy ocean, and the Red Guards to a boat sailing on the ocean. In Jonathan Stalling's translation of one excerpt of «Ocean Trilogy»:¹⁴⁸

A graying old man hurries to send him off
Sunken eyes glimmering with tears
“My child, never stop moving forward

Keep your eyes on the Big Dipper”

一位霜发老人匆匆赶来送行
深陷的眼眶里热泪晶莹
“孩子啊, 要把握住前进的方向
必须双眼不离北斗星”

¹⁴⁴ For Bei Dao, see van Crevel 2008: 89, Edmond 2012: ch. 4, Fu Yuanfeng 2013, Li Qin 2015. For Jiang He, see Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: 294

¹⁴⁵ Chen Zhiming 2014

¹⁴⁶ Wang Shiqiang 2009: 220, 225

¹⁴⁷ Helen Wang 2008: glossary.

¹⁴⁸ Shizhi 2011: 4-9.

From Future Masters to High School Dropouts: The Obscure Poets' Educational Trajectories

...
Tonight the infinite sky is only dimly lit by stars
Gales ignite beacons across the ocean of fate
Its sail lowered, the boat is an unbridled
warhorse
Courageously lifting its bloody mane

.....
这夜，深远的夜空星光黯淡
狂风在命运的海洋里燃起狼烟
落了帆的小船是一匹狂癫的战
马
扬起的头颈上带着鲜血和勇敢

Later in this poem, Shizhi clearly uses the ways to display hatred and love as he was taught at school. In Stalling's translation:¹⁴⁹

Forget it! A drunk leaning against the table
Life's road is never a smooth one

算了吧！酒桌旁的醉汉
生活的道路从来就不平坦

"Life's pleasures are but money squandered
Courage can always be exchanged for a feast"
Shameless
The greed-contorted face of a money
worshipper

“生活的欢乐就是挥霍金钱
勇气将能换来丰富的酒宴”
可耻
一副拜金者贪婪的嘴脸

There are those who spend their days with the
God of Love
Young lovers walking down grass-covered
paths
No longer yearn for the joy of the storm
But lose themselves in the warmth of their
immediate families

也有人在和爱神一起消磨时间
草掩的荒径走过年轻的伙伴
他们不再渴望暴风雨的欢乐
而只沉湎于小家庭的温暖

Here a clear attitude to life is displayed. Money, alcohol and family warmth, which can be categorized as personal pleasures, are viewed as incompatible with revolution, which emphasize collectivism and the disregard of personal feelings.

Besides, I would like to mention a change of title in this poetry. The third part of «Ocean Trilogy» was originally titled «To My Red Guard Comrades-in-Arms» (献给红卫兵战友), but was changed to «To My Friends» (给朋友们) when it was published in different anthologies. The usage of “comrades-in-arms” in the original title is in line with the military-inflected public discourse at that time (struggles, battles, attack, defense), and indicates the poet's involvement with the Red Guards

¹⁴⁹ Shizhi 2012a : 5

2.4 Two Sides of a Poetic Identity

movement. This is invisible in the new title.¹⁵⁰ There is no indication as to who was responsible for the change. In this poem, Shizhi speaks in a lyrical tone, addressing his Red Guard comrades and speaking on behalf of his peers in declaring their ambitions to the world.

2.4.2 Traces of Political Lyricism in Later Works

It is interesting to note that for most of the Obscure poets, elements of Political Lyricism also continue to appear in the more individualistic poetry they began to write later in the “underground” circuits during the Cultural Revolution, even though this was in many ways intended as a strong dissociation from Political Lyricism. Here is Genzi’s «Baiyangdian» (白洋淀) in Nick Admussen’s translation, as a clear example:¹⁵¹

I’ve been wounded, and not lightly
The mast has been severed by thunderbolt
I’m like a sail
Collapsed on a sandbank blazed by the sun.
I came up from the turbulent bay
But dried out and became brittle
All of my fluid —
Brains, bile, gastric acids
All was used as blood, left behind in the mouth of
the bay,
It drained away until not a drop remains, I figure
That atop the peak of each ocean wave, there
should
Float two or three blooms of red poppies, right?
There are none.

我伤得不轻
桅杆被雷砍断
我像帆一样
瘫倒在炽亮的阳光的沙岸
我从汹涌的海上来
却干枯得发脆
我全部的水份——
脑浆，胆汁，胃液
一律充当了血，留在海口
流得一点不剩了。我估计
每一道海浪的顶上，都应当
漂着两三朵红罂粟吧？
没有。

The red poppy is a symbol of heroic sacrifice; it is filled with dangers, but is beautiful and attractive. This usage could be traced back to the article “Why the Flowers of Poppies are Red” (罂粟为什么开红花), which prominently features in a

¹⁵⁰ Li Hengjiu 1997 & 2000.

¹⁵¹ Admussen 2010

textbook used in primary schools.¹⁵² In this story, the abovementioned mythical hero Danko tries to lead the oppressed slaves to fight against the landlords for freedom and the ownership of land. The landlord throws him in prison, tortures him, threatens him with death and lures him with promises of a high position and great wealth. No matter what the landlord does, Danko still insists on leading the oppressed to fight. In the end, he suffers a severe beating. He walks on, bleeding until he dies, and red poppies grow wherever he walks. Ever since, poppy flowers are red, indicating that the oppressed are still remembering their hero. Danko's story was influential among the generation of Obscure poets. Not only Genzi, but Bei Dao also employs this usage in some of his poems. A Guizhou-based poet Ya Mo (哑默, b. 1942-) – not associated with the Obscure poets but in fact a precursor of sorts – positions himself as Danko in his poem «If I am...» (如果我是……). And Shu Ting also considers Danko as “a symbol of two generations” in an essay.¹⁵³

In Genzi's poem, the speaker looks desperate, since he is fully devoted and believes that his sacrifice will be glorified and remembered, but the last line shows everything is in vain. It is not at all far-fetched to read this as a reflection on the frustrations felt by the poet himself and his fellows as privileged cadres' children whose lives had been derailed in many ways by the Cultural Revolution. The poet employs writing that is similar to Political Lyricism and then makes a dramatic turn to show his disappointment, towards what he once believed, based on his previous education.

If we read this excerpt against Shizhi's excerpt of «Ocean Trilogy», the poems seem like two (very different) sides of the same coin: both Shizhi and Genzi were familiar with Political Lyricism, and this would have been typical for their entire peer group and generation. The two poems employ similar metaphors: the sail, the sun (which would certainly have been read as symbolizing Mao Zedong at the time) and blood (the poppies). In Shizhi's poem, the sail is ambitious, privileged and devoted. In comparison, Genzi shows the sail as stranded, wounded and abandoned.

¹⁵² People's Education Press 1959: 71-75

¹⁵³ Shu Ting 1997a: 209, Ming Di's introduction to Ya Mo, see https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/aboutus_page/29986/Ya-Mo/nl/tile

2.4 Two Sides of a Poetic Identity

Other Obscure poets also borrowed elements of Political Lyricism, at the same time as exploring what is absent in Political Lyricism to create a new space for their own budding poetry as this took shape during these turbulent years. This is where what the Obscure poets learned from peer education and mentor education could contradict what they learned in their school and family education, and motivated them to write about their pursuit of individual love, their uncertainty about the future, and their suspicions towards politics. Their innovations took shape in different, individual trajectories, as I will show in detail in the following chapters.

2.5 Concluding Remarks

As the generation born around the founding of the PRC in 1949, the Obscure poets have a unique educational background. The combination of school education, family education and learning webs (including peer education and mentor education) directly influenced the production of Obscure poetry. In generally, these different kinds of educations are correlated with one another, but also may contradict each another.

Their political-oriented school education was achieved through a set curriculum, with fixed subjects, pedagogy, textbooks and extra-curricular activities. Textbooks in particular were a primary source for the Obscure poets to become familiar with Political Lyricism. The focus of school education was to cultivate the political consciousness of students. Unique for the peer group of the Obscure poets, they attended Cadre Children Schools, which cultivated a strong sense in them of being able to become the future masters of the country.

The family education received by the Obscure poets was fundamentally consistent with the school education, although on some occasions there were differences or contradictions, which could be exacerbated by a lack of intimacy in the relationship between parents and children. At the same time, the harsh treatment of their parents in the Socialist Education Movement and the Cultural Revolution may have diminished the ideological values of the Obscure poets as these had been cultivated in schools.

With the exception of Gu Cheng, family education did not decisively impact the Obscure poets' writing. Nevertheless, their family backgrounds provided the

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necessary conditions for the production of Obscure poetry, an important reason being that family background determined what kind of school education, peer education and mentor education the poets received.

School education and family education familiarized the Obscure poets with Political Lyricism in a “natural” manner, while peer education and mentor education enabled the Obscure poets to reconsider the merits of Political Lyricism and adopt a new literary style. However, elements of Political Lyricism remained present in their work, even if the poets themselves have not tended to recognize this.

When school education and family education were absent, peer education and mentor education took over. Peer education, to an extent, was in opposition to school education. It challenged school restrictions by questioning black-and-white political thinking and by promoting behavior that ran counter to the norms instilled in the students in school and family education. As such, peer education created new experiences and feelings that motivated the poets to innovate.

3 Shizhi: “Believe in the Future”

3.1 Introduction

Shizhi, whose original name is Guo Lusheng (郭路生), has a dramatic life trajectory, which is intertwined with his poetic writing. He was born in the winter of 1948, in a military march during the Chinese Civil War between the CCP and the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT). His parents were then members of the CCP army. The story goes that it took two days for his mother to find a mobile field hospital, and that’s why she named her son Lusheng, “born on the road”.¹⁵⁴

Shizhi is the oldest among the Obscure poets and stayed in schools the longest. When the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, he was 18 and in his last year of senior high school. After a forced dropout, together with his peers, he became a member of the Red Guards from 1966 to 1967, was rusticated to a Shanxi farming village from 1968 to 1970, and then worked in a factory for a short period. In 1971 he joined the army and left it in 1973.¹⁵⁵

Shizhi was productive in writing poems in his twenties. He made his name with two famous poems, «This is Beijing at 4:08» (这是四点零八分的北京) and «Believe in the Future» (相信未来), which are mentioned very often by the Rusticated Youths in their memoirs.¹⁵⁶ These two poems circulated widely in the form of handwritten copies or oral versions, since they could not be formally published, as almost all journals were closed down during the Cultural Revolution. As memoirs of the Rusticated Youths make clear, «This is Beijing at 4:08» was seen to vividly depict the speaker’s inner reluctance to say goodbye to his mother and the city of Beijing (or the city of one’s birth at large), feelings which were commonly shared by many other Rusticated Youths. «Believe in the Future» was read to confidently console the rusticated youths that what they did at that moment

¹⁵⁴ Shizhi 1998: 151.

¹⁵⁵ Shizhi 1998: 152-153.

¹⁵⁶ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: ch 2.

was right; they would receive “warm, objective, and fair judgment” in the future, even though there is no explanation in this poem why what awaits them is a bright future.

However, Shizhi’s optimism as delivered in his poems did not materialize for himself. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1973 and spent two years in Beijing No. 3 Hospital. He still went to hospital at irregular intervals in the late 1980s. After his divorce in the early 1980s and the death of his mother - with whom he had moved back in - in 1989, he stayed in the Beijing No. 3 Welfare House in a desolated area outside the city of Beijing. A Welfare House is designed to provide basic care for orphans, the aged, and mentally and physically disabled persons. When this Welfare House was first built, Shizhi was among the first residents, and participated in the construction of this House to a great extent.¹⁵⁷

Shizhi’s writing career had been at a low ebb since 1973. He did no more than one or two poems from 1973 to 1976. When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, his work had only rarely been published. His poetry was hardly found in official journals in the 1980s, with the exception of publications of the two poems mentioned above, under his original name of Guo Lusheng.¹⁵⁸

It was not until 1993 that Shizhi’s revival in the literary scene emerged. This was marked by a much greater public visibility of the “myth” surrounding his person that had earlier developed within a small in-crowd. This revival is presented in one journal, two collections of his poetry, one collection of memoirs by his friends and numerous journal reports.¹⁵⁹ It owes to the endeavors by his close acquaintances in Beijing, mainly Lin Mang and Hei Dachun (黑大春, b. 1960).

Lin Mang, editor of the highly-regarded journal *Poetry Exploration* (诗探索), hosted a special column dedicated to Shizhi in the second issue in 1994 and the first issue in 1998. Notes on writing by Shizhi and an introductory piece by Lin Mang were published in 1994, and two academic articles by Li Xianyu (李宪瑜) and Lin

¹⁵⁷ Shizhi 1998

¹⁵⁸ Both poems were published in *Poetry Periodical*, 1981-1: 10; the former under the title “My Last Beijing” (我的最后的北京).

¹⁵⁹ Journal reportages include Hong Zhu 1998, Shizhi & Yangzi 2001, Zhang Yu 2001, Zhang Jie 2006.

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Mang in 1998.¹⁶⁰ Li Xianyu describes Shizhi as a poet of “Obscure Poetry’s small tradition”, which highlights his influence on the other obscure poets. Furthermore, Lin Mang also recommended Shizhi to become a member of the Writers Association. Back in the 1980s and the early 1990s, the Association was influential in the literary field, since it was a guarantee of regular publications and fixed incomes. It was generally highly regarded to become a member, although attitudes might differ among poets.¹⁶¹

Lijiang publishing house published a first collection of Shizhi’s poems in 1988 (containing several typos).¹⁶² Later, Hei Dachun published a joint poetry anthology with Shizhi in 1993. This collection arranges Shizhi’s poems in a particular order, being perceivably separated into two parts, constructing an image of an indomitable poet experiencing the Cultural Revolution on one hand, and his frustration in the mental hospital in later years, on the other. Lin Mang wrote an emotional preface to the anthology in which he makes a sharp contrast between Shizhi’s poetic greatness – meaning his own accomplishment and his influence on others – on the one hand, and his miserable life, including his stay in the Welfare House, on the other.

More and more positive remarks on Shizhi and his poetry also emerged from poets and critics. Duoduo highlights Shizhi as the first and only poet, who filled the gap in poetry during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁶³ Yang Jian (杨健) and Song Haiquan consider Shizhi is full of enthusiasm to go against the orthodox ideology during the Cultural Revolution and restores the dignity of the individual and the independence of poetry.¹⁶⁴ Tang Xiaodu, Cui Weiping (崔卫平), Zhang Qinghua (张清华), Cheng Guangwei (程光伟) and Chen Chao (陈超) portray the poet as one who bravely underwent a mental crisis.¹⁶⁵

The revival of Shizhi’s poetic work was a turning point in his life. His current wife Zhai Hanle (翟寒乐) got to know him by reading an article in the newspaper. She was touched by both his poetry and his life story. She visited him frequently in

¹⁶⁰ *Poetry Exploration* 1994-2: 92-103, 104-105; *Poetry Exploration* 1998-1: 53-64, 65-72, 73-87.

¹⁶¹ Hong Zicheng 2002: ch 5.

¹⁶² Shizhi 1988.

¹⁶³ Duoduo 1988.

¹⁶⁴ Yang Jian 1993: ch 3. Song Haiquan 1994.

¹⁶⁵ Tang Xiaodu 1993, Cui Weiping 1994, Zhang Qinghua 2001, Chen Chao 2007a.

the Welfare House, bringing food and books. She also succeeded in arranging a place for him to live in 2002. After spending twelve years in the Welfare House, the poet had a home again.¹⁶⁶

Shizhi is generally considered to be different from other Obscure poetry, because his poetry is not hard to follow. Shizhi's language is generally viewed as straightforward, neither obscure nor linguistically experimental, as in the case of other Obscure Poets. Li Xianyu considers that Shizhi uses a great amount of linking words and phrases, such as "at this moment" (这时), "all of a sudden" (突然), "however" (但是), "at last" (终于) and "because" (因为). In such a way, the logic between sentences and lines in Shizhi's poetry is clear, rather than obscure.¹⁶⁷ Maghiel van Crevel points out the possibility that extra-literary reasons may play a role in Shizhi's association with the Obscure Poets. One reason is that Shizhi's poetry may be viewed as "the main breeding ground" to a few of the Obscure poets, although "artistic affinity between Guo [Shizhi] and his successors is hard to prove".¹⁶⁸ Another reason may lie in the endeavors by his close acquaintances in Beijing.

Madness is an important perspective to approach Shizhi's life and his poetry in scholarship. It is still an open question whether or not Shizhi is clinically insane.¹⁶⁹ As Shizhi himself puts it, "Since I wear the hat of being insane, I can do whatever I want to: to be absolutely independent in thought and spirit, like a heavenly horse travelling at its own speed and direction without any restraint, all because I am insane."¹⁷⁰ Zhang Qinghua believes Shizhi has "never truly been clinically insane in the same way as a person who suffers from a genuine pathology". Instead, his poetic discourse "displays a sober, sharp, profound and insightful thought process, much like the witty speech spoken by Hamlet in his melancholy". Zhang's opinion was shared by other scholars, such as Cui Weiping.¹⁷¹ Birgit Lindner holds that Shizhi (together with other poet Wen Jie), "have written poetry that courageously

¹⁶⁶ Liu Hong 2006.

¹⁶⁷ Li Xianyu 1998.

¹⁶⁸ van Crevel 1996: 32.

¹⁶⁹ Lindner 2015

¹⁷⁰ Li-hua Ying 2009:170.

¹⁷¹ Zhang Qinghua 2001, Cui Weiping 1994.

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represents their suffering and have become metaphors unto themselves: metaphors of discord within themselves, of a sharpened identity struggle, and of the vulnerability of health, body, and mind.”¹⁷²

Shizhi’s poetic identity demands further investigation. His poetry, interviews and essays contain subtle and previously ignored details, offering an interesting perspective on the complicated relationship between individual and society. Based on what has been done in previous scholarship on Shizhi, together with the materials that emerged in Shizhi’s revival, I hope to shed light on the complexity of his works by taking his educational background into consideration. It is also interesting to notice the influence of education, which imprints Political Lyricism in his poetry. Collectivism, patriotism and revolutionary zeal are significant values, as discussed in chapter two and in this chapter, and can be clearly traced in his poetry. Even though at one point he questioned certain aspects of these values, he embraces them in most of his work.

There are six editions of individual collections of Shizhi’s works published up to now. I rely on three of them. A collection from 1998 contains a list of Shizhi’s works (published and unpublished) and a detailed biography compiled by Lin Mang. A collection from 2006 is the most comprehensive. The most recent publication appeared in 2012, and is the only bilingual Chinese-English edition, with translations by Jonathan Stalling.¹⁷³

In my discussion of Shizhi’s educational background, I rely on a memoir by Shizhi named “The Evening Wind Blows like a Light Brush Stroke” (晚风吹散成淡写轻描), and on the detailed biographical notes compiled by Lin Mang and Zhai Hanle.¹⁷⁴ Liu Jia’s (刘佳) thesis published in 2005 also serves as an informative resource, offering more details on Shizhi’s educational history and his personal feelings.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Lindner 2015

¹⁷³ Shizhi 1988 & 1993 & 1998 & 2000 & 2006 & 2012a.

¹⁷⁴ Shizhi 2016, Lin Mang & Zhai Hanle 2006.

¹⁷⁵ Liu Jia 2005.

3.2 Family Education

Shizhi's mother Shi Weiyan was born into a relatively affluent family. She got a chance to receive education in school, which was quite rare for women at that time. Later she worked as a teacher in a primary school around 1940, and as a librarian around 1950. And in 1953, she became the principal of the Beijing Elementary School affiliated to the First Ministry of Machinery, A Cadre Children School that Shizhi attended.¹⁷⁶

Shizhi's father Guo Yunxuan was born into a military family. His two brothers died in the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War. Guo Yunxuan was called up to join the military in 1939 when he was 15, and then became a member of the literary federation of the Shanxi-Shandong-Henan Base Area, which was the supporting area for the core area Yan'an during the Wars.¹⁷⁷ Shizhi once mentioned that under the education from his parents, he composed several poems dedicated to his above-mentioned uncles, martyrs who sacrificed when fighting against the enemy. He was deeply touched by their bravery.¹⁷⁸

From 1953 Guo Yunxuan worked in the First Mechanic Ministry. It is not clear what kind of literary works Shizhi's father composed. The only article under his name found in the *Duxiu* Database is a piece of a report published in 1950, describing a high school located in Pingyuan city. The organization of the high school was reported to enthusiastically learn from the Soviet Union model.¹⁷⁹

In interviews and memoirs, Shizhi talked about his mother on some occasions, but seldom mentioned his father. As Shizhi recounted, his literary awakening started with his mother's teaching of traditional Chinese poetry. She began to read these classic poems to him when he was around three years old. Later, when he was studying in primary school, then he began to feel impressed with the beauty of these poems.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Shizhi 1998: 151-153.

¹⁷⁷ Shizhi 1998: 151.

¹⁷⁸ Shizhi 2016

¹⁷⁹ Guo Yunxuan & Li Qingchen 1950.

¹⁸⁰ Shizhi & Yangzi 2001

3.2 Family Education

Shizhi shows his respect for his mother, through his penname. He began to use the penname in 1978, in remembrance of the influence that his mother and teachers had on him. Shizhi's own interpretation of the name differs strongly from the prevailing one. Remarkably, during Shizhi's revival, his penname was interpreted in a different way. Lin Mang spoke on behalf of Shizhi, stating that "[He] thinks being a poet in China means facing invisible pressure both in writing and living, but such pressure cannot hurt a poet who has a healthy personality when he's being pointed at behind his back. Therefore, he uses Shizhi [literally "index finger"] as his penname, to express his own rebellion and self-mockery." This opinion was accepted by scholars for quite a long time.¹⁸¹

However, Shizhi explained that his penname should be understood as the son of his mother and the student of his teachers. Mandarin has many homonyms and near-homonyms (the latter include many words whose only difference lies in their tone). The three Chinese characters *shí* 食, *shí* 时 and *shī* 师 are an example of this. *shí* 食 is the first character of the penname. *shí* 时 is the family name of Shizhi's mother. And *shī* 师 is an abbreviation of 老师 ("teacher"). The second character of his penname, *zhǐ* 指, is pronounced similarly to the character *zǐ* 子, here meaning "child" or "student". According to this explanation, Shizhi chose such a penname because he considered both his mother and his teachers as models that he should learn from. His mother "was an old revolutionary commander who participated in the anti-Japanese war. She behaves in an honest and sincere way". His teachers "set examples for him in personality and handling issues", and "gave instructions on reading and writing".¹⁸²

3.3 School Education

Shizhi received school education the longest of all the Obscure Poets. As I will show below, the traces of school education are very clear in his poetic identity.

¹⁸¹ Shizhi 1998: 170.

¹⁸² Shizhi & Quanzi 2006: 120.

3.3.1 Elementary School (1954-1960)

From 1954 to 1959, Shizhi received his elementary school education in the school where his mother was the principal. There is no clear evidence to show that Shizhi received special treatment because of his mother, but it is clear that Shizhi attended a Cadre Children School.

In the detailed biographical notes in Shizhi’s 1998 collection, Lin Mang provides some hints to Shizhi’s educational environment in elementary school. With the help of these, I found an online forum called “Old Peking Website” (老北京网) which enables the alumni of Beijing schools to connect with one another. The forum also provides a space for the citizens of Beijing to discuss the history and culture of the city. On the forum I encountered a thread called “Is there anybody who knows about the Elementary School for Children of the Cadres in The First Mechanic Ministry in the 1950s and 1960s?” (有知道五十年代-六十年代的北京一机部子弟小学的吗?)¹⁸³ Commenters shared and compared their memories about the changes the school had gone through. From the information I gained by reading the posts, together with what Lin Mang stated in the note mentioned above, I can make some general points about this school.

Firstly, the primary school Shizhi attended indicates the high social status of his parents. The Elementary School affiliated to the First Mechanic Ministry (一机部附属小学) was originally named the Elementary School for Children of the Cadres in The First Mechanic Ministry (第一机械工业部职工子弟小学), founded in 1955 and disbanded in 1969. Many of the parents of these students were relocated to work for the First Mechanic Ministry from abroad or placed outside Beijing. They were high-ranking employees who enjoyed good remuneration and facilities. Since the PRC’s first five-year plan (1953-1957) and second five-year plan (1958-1962) aimed to build a strong country, these parents were called upon to devote themselves to achieve the great mission as soon as possible. As a social welfare service, their children were taken good care of in the affiliated school.

Secondly, the overall environment for the students was excellent. The students enjoyed tuition waivers and living stipends. The school was located in East Beijing,

¹⁸³ <http://www.obj.cc/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=12614>

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while living quarters for the members of the First Mechanic Ministry work unit were located in West Beijing. The students resided on the campus during workdays and returned home to spend weekends with their family, commuting by special buses. Extra staff was hired to take care of the students' daily needs. Abundant resources were provided for the students to develop their physical, musical, and literary skills, which ranked the school highest of all the Beijing primary schools.

Thirdly, the school put emphasis on cultivating students with a sense of collective honor, a sense of obeying conventions, and a sense of integrity.

3.3.2 Secondary School (1961-1966)

From 1961 to 1964 Shizhi was a junior high school student in the Beijing No. 56 School (北京第五十六中学). He was one of the top students in the class. However, he did not score high enough in the entrance exam to attend any of the key high schools, which was a severe blow to his confidence. He chose to study in a cram school for one year. His stay in the cram school was unpleasant, because the teacher considered him to be a revisionist who reads foreign literature. The conflicts turned out to be severe and led Shizhi to submit an application to deregister from the Communist Youth League and to attempt to commit suicide.¹⁸⁴

Shizhi took the entrance exam for a second time, and at last got the chance to enrol in the senior high school department of the Beijing No. 56 School. When he was about to take the entrance exam to colleges in 1966, the Cultural Revolution broke out. This is the point where Shizhi's school education ended.¹⁸⁵

In retrospect of his school education, it shows that Shizhi embraced what had been taught in schools:¹⁸⁶

Because of the education my generation and I received, especially since I received "special care" from a young age in school, *my generation has a strong sense of commitment*. We will forever be the solid underground foundation of the building, the "soldiers" under the command of my

¹⁸⁴ Shizhi 2016

¹⁸⁵ Liu Jia 2005: 11-13.

¹⁸⁶ Shizhi & Quanzi 2006.

“mentors”. *One more point I’d like to elucidate is that missions should be passed down from one generation to another. Your generation should train yourselves to be tougher, you should have grand ambitions, embrace the spirit of sacrifice. The burden of this would rest on your shoulders.* This mission of “transforming China” should be undertaken by generations of “the Foolish Old Man who tried to move the mountains”. [This refers to a parable, especially popular during the Mao-era, denoting the indefatigable spirit needed for a near-impossible task that nonetheless should be undertaken.] Now for the question when I became acutely aware of this commitment. When I vividly felt and saw the strong loyalty and extreme toughness of my mentors’ combined with the stimulation and instructions of my mentors, I gradually became aware of it. [Emphasis added]

We can also find the influence of family education in Shizhi’s behavior as a Red Guard. Shizhi became a Red Guard from 1966 to 1967, and then a Rusticated Youth in 1968. The Red Guards, as discussed in chapter two, were students who formed paramilitary units to follow Mao Zedong’s call to combat the allegedly revisionist authorities. The Movement spread nationwide from 1966 to 1968. Notably, Shizhi went against the prevailing trend of judging people by their blood relationships. He did not look down upon his fellows with an allegedly bad family background. He also stayed away from the physical violence that was done to many teachers and other authority figures during the Cultural Revolution. Instead he turned to writing, often in praise of government policy. He was productive as a poet during this period, creating both short poems and long poems. He also participated in composing a stage play, «A Page in the Book of History» (历史的一页). The play presents the scenes when Chairman Mao Zedong met with the Red Guards and the activities of the Red Guards which occurred in 1966.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Liu Jia 2005.

3.4 Mentor education

3.4.1 He Qifang

Shizhi's private mentor He Qifang played an important role in forming Shizhi's poetic identity, as was acknowledged by Shizhi and evidenced by the interactions between the two.

He Qifang visited Yan'an and joined the CCP in 1938, "the rigours of wartime life under the discipline of the Communist Party both exhilarated and depressed him".¹⁸⁸ There is a change of his poetry, being visible in the comparison between his first collection *Prophecy* published in 1945 (预言, after an eponymous poem published in 1931) and the second collection *Night Songs and Songs of Day* (夜歌和白天的歌) published in 1952.¹⁸⁹ After the founding of the PRC in 1949, he was appointed director of the Institute of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, secretary-general of the Writers Association and chief editor of the journal *Literary Criticism* (文学评论). While he was not as productive as other stars of Political Lyricism such as He Jingzhi and Guo Xiaochuan, he focused on building a theoretical foundation for modern Chinese poetry through attention to prosodic schemes and stanza forms, so as to retain or minimally recall the musical beauty of classical Chinese. During the Cultural Revolution, he was forced to leave his positions.¹⁹⁰

Early in 1967, Shizhi got to know He Jingjie (何京颀), one of He Qifang's daughters, and had a chance to pay a visit to He's house. As recounted by He Jingjie, in Shizhi's first visit, her father offered his opinions on the stage play «A Page in the Book of History» Shizhi was working on, and the poems Shizhi had composed. Afterwards, Shizhi visited He Qifang quite often.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ McDougall 1999: 274

¹⁸⁹ Cui Qinglei 2016.

¹⁹⁰ Huo Junming 2005

¹⁹¹ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: 71.

In my reading, Shizhi established a mentor-student relationship with He Qifang. Before he began to learn from He Qifang in private, Shizhi was already a fan of traditional Chinese poems that his mother had taught him, the poems selected in *Literary Criticism* and He Qifang’s Political Lyricism in textbooks for primary and secondary schools.¹⁹² He was impressed by the lasting charm of these poems, but he could not clearly tell the poetic devices in a theoretical way. To Shizhi, He Qifang was the one who led him to the right path of writing poetry, and to understand the beauty of poetry from the perspectives of meter, rhyme and “taste” (韵味). Further, He Qifang had reviewed Shizhi’s poems in detail, to provide guidance in writings.

3.4.1.1 Modern Metrics

He Qifang gave lectures on the history of modern Chinese poetry to Shizhi, and on how modern metrics were born and developed as well. To help Shizhi gain a better understanding, He Qifang referred poetry writing as music composing. Both arts are featured with beats and rhymes. Besides, He Qifang gave detailed tips on how to employ metrics.¹⁹³ Shizhi paraphrased what He Qifang taught into the following points. Firstly, there should be four lines in one stanza. Secondly, there should be an identifiable number of beats in every line. Thirdly, end rhymes should be employed in the first, second and last lines, or in the second and last lines. Finally, attention should be paid to the balance between level and oblique tones (平仄), which are characteristics for classical Chinese rhythmic poetry.¹⁹⁴

He Qifang’s teachings in “modern metrical poetry” (现代格律诗) are later presented in Shizhi’s poetry. Concretely, Shizhi writes in a regular form, with four-line stanzas and end rhyme. Shizhi designs identical beats within the lines of the same stanza, although the number of beats for each stanza may differ. Zhai Xiaochun (翟晓春) has conducted a statistic research on the rhymes Shizhi employed in his 144 poems written from 1965 to 2009 and selected in his anthology. Zhai discovers that Shizhi employs one rhyme from the beginning to the end in 141 poems. 109 poems out of these 141 end with the rhyme called the “open-mouth

¹⁹² Shizhi 2016

¹⁹³ Cui Weiping 1994

¹⁹⁴ Shizhi 2011 & 2012b: 22-23.

3.4 Mentor education

finals” (开口呼), which begin with a non-high vowel, such as “ang”, “ong”, “eng”, “ai”, “an” and “ao”. As Zhai claims, these open-mouth finals are ideal not only for the transmission of sounds, but also for the expression of enthusiastic lyricism.¹⁹⁵

3.4.1.2 Vladimir Mayakovsky

Besides familiarizing Shizhi with the knowledge of meter and rhyme, He Qifang also discussed Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky’s poetry with Shizhi at length. As Shizhi stated, he copied down and imitated Vladimir Mayakovsky’s poems in his early age, though he could not fully understand his poems.¹⁹⁶

Vladimir Mayakovsky’s “staircase form” is often borrowed in PRC Political Lyricism. When communicating with Shizhi, He Qifang mentioned Mayakovsky frequently and referred to him as a master. There is no material available to show how He Qifang communicated with Shizhi when reviewing Mayakovsky’s poems, but we can get a clue from He Qifang’s own article on Mayakovsky and Shizhi’s reaction towards this issue.

In the article in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the birth of Mayakovsky, He Qifang concludes that the main characteristic of Mayakovsky’s poetry is revolutionary enthusiasm at its highest. In Mayakovsky’s fulfilling life, he devoted himself to writing in praise of a revolutionary career, which in turn inspires others greatly.¹⁹⁷ As Shizhi states, Mayakovsky’s works impressed him with the high spirit, boldness and vitality. It is quite different from He Qifang’s early works such as «Prophecy», which are characterized by delicacy and sensibility.¹⁹⁸

It is reasonable to argue that Shizhi combined Mayakovsky and He Qifang’s styles when rewriting his «Believe in the Future». According to Shizhi, his mood would alternate between pessimism and optimism, and he made some adjustments to make room for embedding his worries and frustrations in the final version.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Zhai Xiaochun 2011, ch 3.

¹⁹⁶ Shizhi & Yangzi 2001

¹⁹⁷ He Qifang 2000: 245-252.

¹⁹⁸ Ji Jingying 2013: 28.

¹⁹⁹ Shizhi 2016, Cui Weiping 1994

3.4.2 He Jingzhi and Ke Yan

Shizhi also received some poetic instructions from the couple He Jingzhi and Ke Yan.

He Jingzhi’s debut was a co-authored libretto to the opera *The White-Haired Girl* (白毛女) in 1945, following Mao’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” in 1942. After the founding of the PRC, he was given important posts such as Minister of Culture and deputy head of the Propaganda Department of the CCP. His writing of Political Lyricism was continuous and influential, including «Back to Yan’an» (回延安), «Sing Heartily» (放声歌唱), «Ode to the San Men Gorge» (三门峡之歌), «Ode to the Beauty of Guilin’s Landscape» (桂林山水之歌) and «Ode to Lei Feng» (雷锋之歌). His Political Lyricism features a folk ballad form, exclamatory lines and the revision of individual poems to better suit the political situation at the time.²⁰⁰

Shizhi got to read and was keen on Ke Yan’s poetry with children as potential readers when he was a primary student, and got to read He Jingzhi’s Political Lyricism from textbooks for high school students.²⁰¹

When reviewing Shizhi’s poems, He Jingzhi considered them opaque, and therefore advised Shizhi to use a simple and clear style, which he saw as typical of Folk Songs (民歌, a ditty-like genre associated with plain language and simple, clear, formal characteristics in terms of rhyme and meter, and stanza length).²⁰² Under the suggestion of He Jingzhi, Shizhi studied folk songs from the locals in Shanxi Province, where he was rusticated, and recited the folk songs collected in books. As we can see in some collections, Shizhi composed quite a few folk songs from 1969 to 1973.²⁰³

There is no material available to recount Shizhi and Ke Yan’s conversations. But we can still get some clues in hindsight. Ke Yan was famous for writing Political Lyricism and poems for kids. During the Obscure Poetry Controversy (discussed in

²⁰⁰ Hong Zicheng 2007: 87-88

²⁰¹ Shizhi 2016

²⁰² Cui Weiping 1994, He Zhongming 2008

²⁰³ Shizhi & Yangzi 2001.

3.4 Mentor education

chapter one), she was among those who criticized Obscure poetry severely.²⁰⁴ Meanwhile, she was an editor of *Poetry Journal* (诗刊) in the 1980s, and invited Shizhi to publish his poems in *Poetry Journal* several times.²⁰⁵

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It is clear to see a circle of style transition from standard Political Lyricism, to a deviation from Political Lyricism, and then a return to Political Lyricism in Shizhi's writings. We can see a battle between collectivism and individualism, the struggle between delivering his true feelings in his poetry and concealing his feelings to compose standard Political Lyricism, in order to be acknowledged by the authorities.

3.5.1 Some Changes to Political Lyricism

3.5.1.1 «Fish Trilogy» (1967-1968)

«Fish Trilogy» (鱼儿三部曲) is a suite of poems that are open to different interpretations. Scholars including Michelle Yeh and Chen Chao interpret the poem as portraying an awakened individual trying to go against the unified discourse.²⁰⁶ However, if we take a closer look at the metaphors that are often used in the Political Lyricism, the usage of both singular and plural forms, and the attitude towards the Red Guards Movement portrayed in this suite of poems, we see clear traces of Political Lyricism. If we probe into one particular excerpt of this suite, and view this in the context of two other poems composed at approximately the same time, it would be safe to say that this suite of poems constitutes an original contribution to Political Lyricism.

«Fish Trilogy» was written when the Red Guards Movement suffered a setback. Shizhi's statement in retrospect of the Red Guards Movement may help to understand this suite of poems, in Stalling's translation:²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ <http://en.people.cn/90882/7675833.htm>. 1 Hong Zicheng 2007: 340

²⁰⁵ Shizhi 2016

²⁰⁶ Yeh 1991a, Chen Chao 2007a

²⁰⁷ Shizhi 2012a: 173-174.

"When the Cultural Revolution started in 1966, like many young students I lost any semblance of reason and normalcy. Only a heart cultivated by literature since childhood enabled me to object to or, in situations where objecting was impossible, avoid getting caught up in the most extreme inhuman acts. By the end of that year, the Red Guards had been disbanded, and the once-conceited small suns had become counterrevolutionaries. The young middle school students who had been Red Guards soon rejected all forms of social activism and turned their attention to drinking, smoking, losing themselves in infatuations, or reading, thinking or debating other topics. This was my generation. The enormous psychological collapse generated by these historical circumstances combined with a poetic mind led me to write more than ten poems during that period. The dominant theme of the time was the feeling of being disoriented and confused but unwilling to sink into obscurity."

Under such circumstances, we see passages in Shizhi's poems that are different from "standard" Political Lyricism and, notably, give room to the expression of personal feelings.

As mentioned in chapter two, it is noticeable that the Obscure poets picked up new behaviours in the 1960s and the 1970s, such as drinking alcohol, smoking, and premarital sex, which were taboos in their school and family education.²⁰⁸ Smoking and drinking also appear in Shizhi's poems, to show his feeling of being disoriented and confused. In Shizhi's «Smoke» (烟, 1968), as translated by Stalling:²⁰⁹

From a lit cigarette, a dream of the future rises
The blue cloud is the dawn of hope once
struggled for

燃起的香烟中飘出过未来的幻梦
蓝色的烟雾是挣扎过希望的黎明

And Shizhi's «Wine» (酒, 1968) connects wine with his eager for personal love, which he considers incompatible with revolution in his «Ocean Trilogy», which I discussed at length in chapter two. «Wine», as translated by Stalling:²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Liu Yangdong 2005: 291-313

²⁰⁹ Shizhi 2012a: 26-27

²¹⁰ Shizhi 2012a: 28-29

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As if brewed from blood, a fire-red wine
Overflows a euphoric glass with fervor
The glass trembles in my mind
As your beautiful eyes appear upon the sloshing
wine

I am drunk with joy
But for the peace of my soul
I will finish this off
Drinking down all of your passion

火红的酒浆仿佛是热血酿成，
欢乐的酒杯是盛满疯狂的热情。
如今，酒杯在我手中颤栗，
波动中仍有你一丝美丽的眼睛。

我已在欢乐之中沉醉，
但是为了心灵的安宁，
我还要干了这一杯，
喝尽你那片痴情。

Aside from these two poems, we can also find a rare excerpt in «Fish Trilogy» that can be seen as a daring expression of his doubts towards the fanaticism of the Red Guards Movement, or as an inner monologue of an awakened individual who is searching and reconstructing his own voice. In Stalling's translation:²¹¹

Hearing the sun's questions
The fish opens its baffled eyes
It attempts to shake its numb tail
A pair of fins gently patting its breast

“Sunshine of freedom, please tell me the truth
Is this the spring of hope?
Is there inedible bait lying off the shore?
Are there any traces of returning geese in the
sky?

Silence, silence, awful silence
It can't throw even the faintest echo
...
Vigilance urges the fish directly forward
Infatuated with the sun's glow
It wants to cast the sun's radiance down across
The vague road of its future...

鱼儿听到阳光的询问，
睁开了迷惘失神的眼睛，
试着摇动麻木的尾翼，
双鳍不时拍拂着前胸

“自由的阳光，真实地告诉我，
这可是希望的春天来临？
岸边可放下难吃的鱼饵？
天空可已有归雁的行踪？”

沉默呵，沉默，可怕的沉默，
得不到一丝一毫的回声。
.....
警觉催促它立即前行，
但鱼儿痴恋这一线光明，
它还想借助这缕阳光，
看清楚自己渺茫的前程.....

We see Shizhi's innovation to Political Lyricism above, and it is noticeable that the poet compares himself to a fish, Mao Zedong as the sun, and other political

²¹¹ Shizhi 2012a: 20-21

leaders an as icy layer above a river, which prevents the contacts between the fish and the sun. But he did not appear to fundamentally question either the justification of this movement or the vision of Mao, who had initiated the Red Guards Movement.

Besides, it is interesting to notice that Shizhi (together with the editors probably) does not intend to distinguish a usage of singular and plural forms in the poem «Fish Trilogy». When it was published in *Today* in 1979, it was titled «Trilogy of a Shoal of Fish» (鱼群三部曲), but the word “A fish” (鱼儿) instead of “a shoal of fish” (鱼群) appears throughout the poem.²¹² When it was included in later anthologies, this title was changed to «Trilogy of a Fish» (鱼儿三部曲). Besides, Shizhi provides information on writing this poem in two different articles, one lists the title as «Trilogy of a Shoal of Fish» while the other has «Trilogy of a Fish».²¹³ In one of the articles, Shizhi indicates that “a fish” actually refers to “we” and he unconsciously equated “I” with “we”. Just like “I” and “we” are identified in Political Lyricism, Shizhi equals “A fish” and “A Shoal of Fish”.²¹⁴

“Because the Red Guard Movement suffered a setback, we were all depressed. What I saw reminded me of how *a fish* (meaning: *we ourselves*) lead a life under the ice without the sunshine.” [Emphasis added]

Nevertheless, Shizhi emphasizes that he loves Chairman Mao, the Party and the Country, even though he felt frustrated, pessimistic and doubtful for a while. We can find the same logic presented in his «Believe in the Future».

3.5.1.2 «This is Beijing at 4:08» (1968)

Starting in 1968, the Rusticated Youths were sent to the countryside in great numbers. In December 1968 it came Shizhi’s turn to be rusticated to the countryside in Shanxi Province.

In 1968 he wrote several poems with the theme of farewell. These poems can be divided into two sets according to their tones and imagery. The first set includes

²¹² Li Runxia (ed), 2006: 16-24

²¹³ Shizhi 1994, Shizhi 2012c

²¹⁴ Shizhi 1994: 104.

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«When You Depart» (在你出发的时候) and «Seeing off a Comrade-in-Arms from the Great Northern Wasteland» (送去北大荒的战友). The second set includes «Farewell from the Platform on a Winter's Night» (冬夜月台送别), «It Would Be Best to Simply Forget Her» (还是干脆忘掉她吧), and «This is Beijing at 4:08».

By comparing the two sets of poems, it is clear that Shizhi had to suppress his personal feelings and become wholly devoted to a revolutionary career. The former set is typical Political Lyricism. The tone is positive, bright and euphoric; the language is plain and straightforward. The poem «When You Depart», with a didactic tone, serves as an example.²¹⁵

Sing for the brightness of the sunshine
Sing for the freedom of the blue sky
Sing for the turbulent ocean
There is one fearless ship's bow

歌唱阳光的明朗
歌唱蓝天的自由
歌唱动荡的海洋里
一只无畏的船头

Untie the rope of sentimentality
Depart from the port of mother's love
Ask from life
Never beg destiny

解开情感的缆绳
告别母爱的港口
要向人生索取
不向命运乞求

The red flag is the sail
The red sun is the sailor
Please put my words
In your minds forever

红旗就是船帆
太阳就是舵手
请把我的话儿
永远记在心头

In contrast, the second set of poems reveals the sadness because of parting with one's mother or lover. «This is Beijing at 4:08» is the most famous one, delivering the sorrow of departing and the struggle between yearning for the joy of the revolutionary career and losing oneself in the warmth of a lover.²¹⁶ As Shizhi recounted, different from seeing his friend off and writing «Seeing off a Comrade-in-Arms from the Great Northern Wasteland» (送去北大荒的战友), when it came to the moment he was rusticated, the feeling was very complicated.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Shizhi 2000

²¹⁶ Paraphrase of two lines in Shizhi's «To My Friends».

²¹⁷ Shizhi 2016

This poem captures the exact moment when the train is about to depart from Beijing. In Stalling's translation:²¹⁸

This is Beijing at 4:08
An ocean of hands waving
This is Beijing at 4:08
A grand train whistle lasting

Beijing station's towering edifice
Convulses without warning
Shaken, I look out the windows
Not knowing what's going on

My heart shudders in pain; it must be
My mother's sewing needle runs me through
At this moment my heart transforms into a
kite
Tethered to her hands

So tight it may snap
I have to stick my head out the train window
Up till now, till this very moment,
I begin to understand what has happened

—A fit of parting shouts
Is about to sweep away the train station
Beijing still underfoot
Slowly begins to drift away

Once more I wave to Beijing
And I want to grab her by the collar
And shout to her
Remember me, Mother Beijing!

I've grasped something at last
No matter whose hand it is—I'll never let go
For this is my Beijing
This is my last Beijing

这是四点零八分的北京，
一片手的海洋翻动；
这是四点零八分的北京，
一声雄伟的汽笛长鸣。

北京车站高大的建筑，
突然一阵剧烈的抖动。
我双眼吃惊地望着窗外，
不知发生了什么事情。

我的心骤然一阵疼痛，一定是
妈妈缀扣子的针线穿透了心胸。
这时，我的心变成了一只风筝，
风筝的线绳就在妈妈手中。

线绳绷得太紧了，就要扯断了，
我不得不把头探出车厢的窗棂。
直到这时，直到这时候，
我才明白发生了什么事情。

——阵阵告别的声浪，
就要卷走车站；
北京在我的脚下，
已经缓缓地移动。

我再次向北京挥动手臂，
想一把抓住他的衣领，
然后对她大声地叫喊：
永远记着我，妈妈啊，北京！

终于抓住了什么东西，
管他是谁的手，不能松，
因为这是我的北京，
这是我的最后的北京。

²¹⁸ Shizhi 2012a: 32-33.

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The poet starts with a metaphor to show the massive scene, which is quite similar to the scene of the founding of the PRC depicted in one of the primary school textbooks.²¹⁹ Considering the context in this stanza, hand-waving here is more likely to be positively interpreted as wishes to have a pleasant journey, rather than as an expression of sadness at the departure. And then the poet uses “grand” (雄伟) and “lasting” (长鸣) to describe the whistling, indicating that an extraordinary journey will soon start.

There is another version of the first stanza, with “shrill” (尖厉) in place of “grand” (雄伟). The tone in this version is quite sad and unsettled. According to Shizhi, “grand” fit the atmosphere at that moment, but “shrill” revealed what he thought. When he read this poem in public, he would occasionally replace it with “heartbroken” (心碎).²²⁰

In the following four stanzas, the poet switches from the outside world bustling with noise and excitement to his inner world, where he suddenly feels pain. The convulsion caused by the start of the train shocks the poet into realizing that the connection between him and his mother is about to be cut off. The third stanza refers back to an ancient Chinese poem «A Traveller’s Song» (游子吟) by Meng Jiao (孟郊), a poet of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE). In «A Traveller’s Song», the mother’s love is visualized as her sewing of the traveler’s clothes thread by thread against time. The young poet comes to realize that he is about to start a fresh journey without familiar companions. This reference could be an example to show Shizhi’s love of ancient Chinese poems inspired by his mother. Significantly, this stanza is a delicate expression of personal feelings, which was absent in Political Lyricism.

In the last two stanzas, the poet switches back to the outside world. He waves hands to “Beijing”, and “loudly shouts” to her: “Please remember me, Mother Beijing!” The personalization of the city takes place in an association with his family members (his mother as representative) and with the people in the country (Beijing as the capital city).

²¹⁹ People’s Education Press 1955: 1-4.

²²⁰ Shizhi 2016

As shown above, collectivism, patriotism and revolutionary zeal are rooted in Shizhi’s mind, which is reflected in his poetic identity. All in all, the fearlessness in the first set of farewell poems disappears in the second set. Intertwined with the excitement of beginning a new journey and the devotion to the revolutionary career, the poem shows the subtle emotional changes of a youth in his early twenties: the feelings of hesitation, shock, and longing for family love. However, these presentation of delicate personal feelings are not found in the later poems. This “natural” embrace of a calling became dominant. As found in an interview by Yangzi (杨子) in 2001. Shizhi told the interviewer about his positive views on rustication to the countryside:²²¹

“Thank you! I’d love to talk about this question. *This experience has enriched my entire life.* Others may not understand me. I take issues with the Literature of the Wounded [伤痕文学, a literary trend emerging in the late 1970s in Mainland China that reflected on the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, also known as Scar Literature]. *You only spent so few years in the countryside; you’re only upset by a few years of unhappiness, then you cried out, and complained about unfairness.* The peasants have to suffer from adverse circumstances generation after generation. Where can they make a complaint? Why not put what we learn to practice, to change the fate of the peasants, to change the situation of the countryside’s reality? The change in the countryside is the real change of China. China is a big country [the word used here refers to a big rural area]. The city would be great only when the countryside develops, so that the whole country goes in a positive circle.” [Emphasis added]

3.5.2 Standard Political Lyricism

Although Shizhi made some innovative changes to Political Lyricism, he returned to a more conventional approach after 1969. To understand Shizhi’s choice, it may help if we refer to Zhang Lijia’s interview with Shizhi’s father, He Jingjie’s

²²¹ Shizhi & Yangzi 2001.

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recollection of Shizhi's reaction, Shizhi's 2016 autobiography and Yangzi's interview with Shizhi.

When interviewed by Zhang Lijia in 2002, Shizhi explains his understanding of the relationship between occupation, political identity and poetic achievement. Perhaps because he desired to turn himself into an establishment poet, starting from 1969 Shizhi worked as a farmer (rusticated in the countryside), factory worker and then served in the People's Liberation Army. All these occupations being considered as suitable for proletarians. But his pursuit of a political identity seemed to frustrate him a lot. Most materials do not go further than linking his diagnosed schizophrenia to his failure of becoming a Party member. However, Zhang Lijia's paper reveals some details, which point to another connection:²²²

Guo's [Shizhi's] father suspects that life in the army was made even more intolerable for his son because of the black mark in his personal file. He says: "The political instructor of his company told me he was a 'pink' poet – not 'red' enough to be a Party member."

Discharged early, Guo returned to Beijing and began the lowest period of his life. Most of his friends were trapped in either the countryside or the army. He shut himself in his room, ate little, and chain-smoked day and night. "I just felt totally lost and miserable," he recalls. Then one day his father noticed that he had drawn a picture of a man holding a long knife to his neck. "We began to worry he was going to commit suicide, so finally we took him to a mental hospital." Guo's father sometimes blames himself for not noticing his son's symptoms earlier, but more often he blames China's repressive society for his son's condition. "He always tried hard at school, down in the countryside, and in the army. But he simply could not get anywhere!" he says.

In Shizhi's memoir published in 2016, he mentioned his political identity frequently. Only those who can join the Party could be eligible to become a "red poet" (红色诗人). But he had been labeled as "problem student" (问题学生), "pink poet" (粉红色诗人) and "grey poet" (灰色诗人) for his poetry and his reviews on

²²² Zhang Lijia 2002: 107-108.

certain literary works, which was considered unfair by himself. In He Jingjie’s memory, in 1968 Shizhi’s popular poem «Believe in the Future» was interpreted as a denial of the present, since the poet claims to believe in the future. It was also said that Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s wife and the top leader in charge of arts and literature during the Cultural Revolution, labeled Shizhi as “grey poet”. Shizhi was very depressed and got drunk. He said repeatedly that he loved Chairman Mao and the country.²²³

As Yangzi’s interview with He Qifang in 2001 suggests, far from resisting Political Lyricism, Shizhi took the publication of Political Lyricism as a necessary path to become a poet. Furthermore, he considered it is natural for him to compose Political Lyricism, since he believed in what he wrote and wrote these poems with sincere feelings.²²⁴

Therefore, we see Shizhi traveling a circle in writing poetry: early, conventional Political Lyricism such as «Ocean Trilogy» in 1967, non-mainstream Political Lyricism such as «Fish Trilogy» and «This is Beijing at 4:08» in 1968, and his later Political Lyricism composed from 1969 to the 1980s, which was more conventional again. Political Lyricism’s expectations of a poet would never quite leave Shizhi: decades later, in 2018, they are reflected in his disparaging remarks on a new voice in Chinese poetry, as we will see below.

3.5.2.1 A Series of Political Lyricism (1969 to 1973)

From 1969 to 1973, Shizhi composed thirteen poems. Two of them, «Paper Cut for Window Decoration» (窗花) and «New Love Song in Antiphonal Style» (新情歌对唱) could be categorized as folk songs, the rest as Political Lyricism.²²⁵ As discussed above, Shizhi tried to compose folk songs with the encouragement of He Jingzhi.

The Political Lyricism by Shizhi, partly addressed to his fellow Rusticated Youths, include «Waiting for Reunion» (等待重逢), «To My Friends» (给朋友) and «Our Generation» (我们这一代). These poems demonstrate his loyalty to the

²²³ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: 76.

²²⁴ Shizhi & Yangzi 2001.

²²⁵ Huo Junming 2017; 84

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Party and the country, by expressing the wish to sacrifice himself for a revolutionary career, devotion to the collective hatred towards the enemy and love towards the people, and belief in the future.

«Our Generation» is the most detailed in showing aforementioned topics. The first four stanzas function as a prelude of the protagonist's growing up, following Mao's instruction and being rusticated to the countryside for reeducation. The ensuing three stanzas express other things, namely contempt for enemies and humility vis-à-vis the people. The other stanzas are clichés that repeat political slogans.²²⁶

Devote all our muscles, bones, skin and flesh	用我们全身的筋骨和皮肉
Forged as stainless screws	铸造一颗不生锈的螺丝钉
Linked together as a railway to victory	联结起通向胜利的钢轨
For the smooth moving of this era's train	让时代的列车一路通行

These lines are a paraphrase of the adage that “A person to the great cause of revolution is as a screw to a machine”, taken from the published diary of Lei Feng, one of several mythical national model citizens praised in propaganda since the 1960s.²²⁷

The next stanza is another paraphrase of the sentence that “In a word, while the prospects are bright, the road [leading to our goal] has twists and turns,” which was said by Mao Zedong when negotiating with the representatives of the Nationalist Party in Chongqing in 1945.²²⁸

Ah, the road twists and turns	啊，道路曲折——
Our visions are firm	我们目光坚定
Because our generation	因为我们这一代
Already sees clearly	已经完全看清——
 The flag of Mao Zedong	 毛泽东的旗帜
Is a symbol	正在标志着
The third mileage of	共产主义道路

²²⁶ Shizhi 2000

²²⁷ <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64104/158494/9520860.html>

²²⁸ Shizhi 2000

The poem ends with a forceful stanza:²²⁹

We will devote our warm blood and life
To keep the flag a fresh red
We will leave for the following generations
Songs that live up to our great times

我们将用热血和生命
永葆这旗帜青春的火红
我们将给后来人留下
无愧于伟大时代的歌声

Words such as "fresh blood" (鲜血) or "warm blood" (热血) appear in all three poems. The phrase "warm blood" comes from revolutionary discourse: communists were painted as sacrificing themselves for the revolutionary career by "shedding blood" (抛头颅, 撒热血). Bleeding for the revolutionary career was seen as worthy and preciously honorable.

Among these Political Lyricism poems, works such as «Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge: To the Working Class» (南京长江大桥——写给工人阶级), «Yangjiachuan: To the Female Youth Who Contributed to the Constructions of Dazhai County» (杨家川——写给为建设大寨县贡献力量的女青年) address workers, peasants and soldiers, who constitute the proletariat. The prevailing image of them as expressed in the poems is stereotypical: tough when facing difficulties, loyal to the Party and the country, being proud to get involved in a revolutionary career.

3.5.2.2 «An Anhui Maid in Beijing» (1986)

When the Mao era ended in 1976 and the Deng Xiaoping era began in 1978, there were not many changes in Shizhi's poetry. His reluctance to accept a stable and peaceful life, his longing for the revolutionary life and his care for social justice could still be perceived in his poetry written in the 1980s.

Shizhi wrote a series of poems in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, however, most of these poems are not included in any of his collections, with only the titles listed in the chronology attached in the 1998 collection. From the titles, we get to know these poems depicting persons including common soldiers and generals,

²²⁹ Shizhi 2000

3.5 Poetic Identity: Political Lyricism

peasants who migrate to the cities in search of work, national model workers promoted by the central government, and many others. «An Anhui Maid in Beijing» (北京的安徽女佣) is the only exception.

In this poem the poet employs a serious tone to tell a story of the humble woman, who had a miserable life in her hometown in Anhui before coming to work as a maid in Beijing. Her hometown was so poor that the people could not even afford to buy sweet potatoes. Her child died of starvation. Furthermore, she was illiterate. In the poet's telling, this woman was a victim of the adverse environment in the countryside. Instead of complaining, however, she was self-contained, hard-working and kind-hearted. At the end of the poem, the poet is moved and hopes to call on the youths to learn from the Anhui maid, and to devote themselves to the construction of our country.

The poem was written in 1979, when so-called Literature of the Wounded became the mainstream in the mainland Chinese literary scene. When stories about cruelty and injustice during the Cultural Revolution that had happened to ordinary people were told in great numbers, Shizhi chose to tell a story about the “ordinary life” of a woman from a rural background instead. He cared for the poor and seriously called for a reform in the countryside to help the people there. As a Red Guard as well as a Rusticated Youth, the Cultural Revolution deprived Shizhi of the opportunity to go to college, or to further advance his intellectual development in ways that would have enriched his writing. However, he chose not to complain or reflect on the Cultural Revolution. Prevailing public discourse at the time and his own recollections might lead one to speculate he might have felt that the suffering it brought would enrich his life. These four lines in «Love Life» (热爱生命) are a good example to support this point. In Stalling's translation:²³⁰

I have made my decision---let pain be the weight
Yes, I am certain---let my life be the scale
I will weigh life's value
To let my descendants follow my example: love life

我下决心: 用痛苦来做砝码,
我有信心: 以人生去做天秤。
我要称出一个人生命的价值,
要后代以我为榜样: 热爱生命。

²³⁰ Shizhi 2012a: 67

Also, it is noticeable that Shizhi insists on taking the country’s future into account and speaking for the masses, so that one can live up to the expectation of a poet. In 2018, Shizhi sharply criticized researchers and critics who promote Yu Xiuhua’s (余秀华, b. 1976) poetry. In Shizhi’s view, as a poet born in rural China, all Yu does is dream of drinking coffee, reading books and chatting, instead of paying attention to the hard life of the farmers. This is not acceptable to Shizhi.²³¹

3.6 Concluding Remarks

In this case study, I have analyzed Shizhi’s usage of singular and plural nouns in poetry and essays, his conscious pursuit of a metrical pattern and his emphasis on his political identity. So far I have concluded that the traces of school education, which promoted Political Lyricism and emphasized the values of collectivism and nationalism, can be clearly seen in his poetic identity. His family education prevented him from extreme activism in the Red Guard Movement. Unlike many others, he displayed no violent behavior vis-à-vis his teachers or other authority figures, and enriched his poetry by drawing on classical Chinese poems he learned from his mother. Aside from the influence of school education and family education, we can see the influence of mentor education provided by He Qifang.

We see Shizhi traveling a circle, from standard Political Lyricism to a deviation from Political Lyricism and then back to Political Lyricism. In these poems, we can discern him struggling with the choice between collectivism and individualism, between orthodoxy and public recognition or a more underground status. Overall, as a male poet born in Beijing, Shizhi clearly and insistently shows his orthodoxy-inclined side in his poetic identity.

²³¹ <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2018/0207/c404033-29810476.html>

4 Bei Dao: “The Wanderer Holding a Poppy”

4.1 Introduction

Bei Dao is one of the most prominent and widely translated poets on the contemporary Chinese poetry scene. He was born in Beijing in August 1949, the year when the PRC was founded.²³² He has used various pennames. When publishing poetry and essays, he has mostly used Bei Dao (“northern island”), which was given to him by Mang Ke, his friend and co-founder of the journal *Today*. When publishing fiction in unofficial journals, he has used the penname Shi Mo (石默, “silent as a stone”) and Ai Shan (艾珊, homophone for “[I] love Shan”, signifying his love for his younger sister, who was drowned when trying to save someone else from drowning in 1976). Some of his fiction was published in official journals; in these cases he used his original name, Zhao Zhenkai. He also had a nickname, *Lao Mutou* (老木头, “old wood”), indicating he is silent and stubborn in his friends’ eyes.²³³

Bei Dao is widely considered a voice of dissent, in regard to a series of political events in mainland China: the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen incident in 1976, the Movement to Eliminate Spiritual Pollution and the Protest Movement in spring 1989 which ended in violent suppression in June of that year, remembered as June Fourth (六四). He was at a literary conference in Berlin when the 1989 crackdown happened, and was denied entry into mainland China and effectively exiled ever since. When he tried to return to Beijing in 1994, he was interrogated at the airport and his entry was refused. Only in 2002 was he allowed by the authorities to revisit mainland China for a short time, and his opportunities for visiting China have since remained limited and tightly circumscribed, although he has been able to move

²³² Another saying is that Bei Dao was born in October, see Bei Dao 2010b: 171

²³³ Bei Dao 1983: 1

somewhat more freely since 2006. And he chose to reside in Hong Kong since 2007.²³⁴

Bei Dao was popular among readers in mainland China, but from then he also faced the biggest challenges. In 1984, he was voted as one of the ten most popular poets in a nationwide poll run by the authoritative poetry journal *The Stars* (星星). But during his trip to Sichuan, where he would be awarded the prize, he was challenged by poets from Sichuan. His readers at the scene expressed their disappointment in his latest poem «Daydream» (白日梦), which made the atmosphere awkwardly tense.²³⁵ Later, the Third-Generation poets explicitly attacked him with a slogan “Down with Bei Dao”(打倒北岛), and mocked the characteristics of Obscure poetry.²³⁶ Such a slogan echoes political slogans such as “Down with imperialism!”(打倒帝国主义) and sounds offensive.

Scholarship is inclined to divide Bei Dao’s poems into a pre-1989 (pre-exile) and post-1989 (exile) period, considering that Bei Dao’s forced exile from 1989 has had great and direct influence on his writings.²³⁷

Bei Dao’s early writings display some similarity with establishment poetry in its “style of grandiosity and sloganizing”, in the words of Li Dian.²³⁸ His early poems feature “early sentimentality, youthful defiance of arbitrary authority, tributes to love and friendship, and a steadily deepening pessimism”, as Bonnie McDougall writes in the preface to Bei Dao’s translated anthology in 1991.²³⁹

As for Bei Dao’s later poems, Yang Lanyi holds that the theme of exile becomes salient.²⁴⁰ His later poems as a whole become more introverted and introspective, and more abstract and fragmented. His poetry becomes “hermetic and self-contained”, as Ronald Janssen writes.²⁴¹ As noted by Jiang Ruoshui, his irregular structure, fractured syntax and highly abstract imagery often resist interpretation.²⁴²

²³⁴ <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/culture/2020/01/17/675791.html>

²³⁵ Xiao Quan 2006: 16

²³⁶ Cheng Weidong 1987

²³⁷ Chen Chao 2007b: 91

²³⁸ Li Dian 2007

²³⁹ Bei Dao 1991: preface Xii

²⁴⁰ Yang 2010: ch 4 & 5

²⁴¹ Jessen 2001

²⁴² Jiang Ruoshui 1997

4.1 Introduction

Bei Dao is the most widely translated contemporary Chinese poet in the English language. Nearly all of his poems have been translated into English, and they have been compiled into several anthologies. *Notes from the City of the Sun* and *The August Sleepwalker* translated by Bonnie S. McDougall, collect Bei Dao's poems written from 1970 to 1986. *Old Snow* translated by Bonnie S. McDougall and Chen Maiping, collects poems from late 1988 to early 1990. *Forms of Distance* translated by David Hinton, *Landscape over Zero* translated by David Hinton and Yanbing Chen, and *Unlock* translated by Eliot Weinberger and Iona Man-Cheong, collect Bei Dao's later works. *The Rose of Time* edited by Eliot Weinberger, contains selected translations from several preceding anthologies and adds some new poems translated by Eliot Weinberger and Iona Man-Cheong. *Endure* translated by Clayton Eshleman and Lucas Klein, offers some new translations of the poems selected from the anthologies above.²⁴³

Bei Dao's collection of essays *City Gate, Open Up* is autobiographical, covering topics such as experiences in primary school and secondary school, interesting events of living in Beijing as a child and his memories of his father.²⁴⁴ Another collection of essays, *The Book of Failure* (失败之书), which records the author's life events from 1989 to 1993, also reflects on experiences in primary and secondary school.²⁴⁵

4.2 School Education

Bei Dao attended Hongshan Temple primary school (弘善寺小学, not a religious school, but a school located in a temple), Beijing No. 13 junior high school (北京十三中) and Beijing No. 4 senior high school (北京四中). Because of the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, he dropped out of school when he was in the second year of senior high school, at the age of 17.

²⁴³ Bei Dao 1983, 1988, 1991, 1996, 2009, 2000a, 2010a

²⁴⁴ Bei Dao 2010b

²⁴⁵ Bei Dao 2004: preface, written by Bei Dao

4.2.1 Chinese Lessons

From Bei Dao’s reflection on his first literary engagement, we can conclude that two persons, his teacher of the subject Chinese Language and Literature in primary school, and the famous writer Gao Shiqi (高士其, 1905-1988) play an important role.

Bei Dao gratefully considers Dong Jingbo (董静波), his teacher of Chinese in primary school, as his first editor and publisher, because his essay were usually scored high and were publicly read in class as excellent examples.²⁴⁶

It is interesting to notice that the imagery of amber appearing in a textbook for primary school recurs in Bei Dao’s poetry. As researches show, “Chinese legend declares that a dead tiger’s heart reappears in time fossilized into amber (琥珀), in reality the fossilized resin of pine trees. Not only does amber, with its caramel colors, share a resemblance to what a fossilized tiger’s heart might look like, it also shares a homophone with the word ‘tiger’ (虎). Hence, amber is understood to embody and symbolize courage. But amber is also revered because of its association with pine trees and hence longevity.”²⁴⁷

There is an article entitled “Amber” (琥珀) in a primary school textbook published in 1961.²⁴⁸ This article is adapted from a book *Oola Boola’s Wonder Book* (translated into Chinese as 乌拉波拉故事), which was written by the German scientist Bruno H. Bürgel in 1932 and translated by Gu Junzheng (顾均正).²⁴⁹ In this article, an archaeologist tells a story of how a piece of amber was formed: a fly was hunting around a pine tree, when it was hit by a drop of resin. The fly kept struggling, but the resin kept dropping. At the end, the fly was wrapped in resin all around. As time passed by, the resin hardened and turned into brownish gold. It formed a piece of amber, as a type of fossil containing mysterious remnants from history.

²⁴⁶ Bei Dao 2004: preface, written by Bei Dao

²⁴⁷ Welch 2012: entry AMBER. See also Eberhard 2006, entry AMBER.

²⁴⁸ People’s Education Press 1961: 39.

²⁴⁹ Bürgel 1954

4.2 School Education

Bei Dao often employs the metaphor by comparing amber to history, such as in the ninth stanza from his long poem «Daydream» written in the early 1980s. In McDougall's translation:²⁵⁰

For many years	多少年
Many rivers dried up	多少河流干涸
Exposing what was hidden	露出那隐秘的部分
It is an empty, bare museum	这是座空荡荡的博物馆
Whoever places himself within it	谁置身其中
May regard himself as an exhibit	谁就会自以为是展品
To be gazed at by invisible glances	被无形的目光注视
Just like an insect asleep for a thousand years	如同一颗琥珀爆炸后
Released by the amber's explosion	飞出的沉睡千年的小虫

In a poem called «Random Thoughts» (随想), the image of amber is used to refer to the “east”. As the poet puts it, in McDougall's translation:²⁵¹

In this piece of amber the east	东方，这块琥珀里
Was a vaguely looming bank	是一片苍茫的岸

Amber as a symbol of history is further explored in the poem « Perfect» (完整). In this poem, a philosophy of history is delivered: protagonists in historical events, who were once rivals, make peace with one another at the end. In Hinton and Chen's translation:²⁵²

A perfect flame in amber	琥珀里完整的火焰
War's guests	战争的客人们
Gather around it keeping warm	围着它取暖

²⁵⁰ Bei Dao 1988: 131

²⁵¹ Bei Dao 1988: 90

²⁵² Bei Dao 1996: 10-11

As alternatives to the image of amber, the images of wax and mica are also found in Bei Dao’s poems. For example, the poem «Wax» (蜡), in Eshleman and Klein’s translation:²⁵³

The wax of puberty	青春期的蜡
Buried deep behind the lock of memory	深藏在记忆的锁内
...	
The lit candle wax	被点燃的蜡烛
Dazzles like the sky-changing	晕眩得像改变天空的
Toll upon roll of a bell	一阵阵钟声
This moment’s only silence	此刻唯一的沉默

These three poems deliver a similar message in which the image of amber with its beautiful colors is surrounded by other creations of the natural world; and used by the poet as a symbol of a national history and a personal history. Amber embeds and preserves precious and subtle players in history, but history cannot be fully known or grasped by later generations.

4.2.2 Gao Shiqi

Other than Dong Jingbo, Gao Shiqi was mentioned several times when Bei Dao recounted his primary school. Bei Dao wrote his first poem in the fourth grade in primary school under the inspiration of Gao Shiqi. In Bei Dao’s words:²⁵⁴

It was a collation of several poems which came from *the People’s Daily*. They were filled with big words and phrases, such as “the wheels of history are rolling forward,” “the lapdogs of imperialism,” “a mantis trying to stop a chariot” [to overrate oneself and attempt something impossible], “the future of communism”... I am afraid that I might have been under the influence of Gao Shiqi’s concept of time.

²⁵³ Bei Dao 2010b: 102-103

²⁵⁴ Bei Dao 2010b: 117

4.2 School Education

Bei Dao also mentioned reciting Gao Shiqi's Political Lyricism «The Song of Time» (时间之歌), and describes such reciting as “dramatic reading”, in Ted Huters and Feng-ying Ming's translation:²⁵⁵

I can remember the athletic field enveloped in dust, with the entire student body gathered around and the teachers supervising. I stood on the brick platform, raising my voice: O, time / time, which sweeps by.

In Gao Shiqi's official introduction as a member of the Writers Association, he was portrayed to be the most famous and respectable scientist, a disabled but optimistic person inspired by the history of the CCP, and an industrious writer who composed scientific essays and poetry with elementary and secondary students as intended readers.²⁵⁶ In the 1950s, he mainly published his works in *People's Daily* (人民日报). From 1956 to 1962, when Bei Dao attended primary school, Gao Shiqi published several works of Political Lyricism. One of his poems is entitled «Farewell to 1958» (送别 1958), which employs political metaphors and slogans, such as “the East Wind prevails over the West Wind” (东风压倒了西风), “a new era in history” (历史新的纪元), and “the noblest ideal” (最崇高的理想).²⁵⁷ He also published a poem called «Uncle Time» (时间伯伯) in the journal *People's Literature* (人民文学) in 1955. This poem calls on the students to seize the moment to achieve the goal of building a socialist-communist country.²⁵⁸

As the materials cited above show, Bei Dao's memory is inaccurate when it comes to the title of Gao's poem. However, it is reasonable to assume that Bei Dao composed his early Political Lyricism under the influence of Gao Shiqi, and with the encouragements from teacher Dong Jingbo.

²⁵⁵ Bei Dao 2000b: 249

²⁵⁶ Chinese Writers Association (ed). 1957: 297-328

²⁵⁷ Gao Shiqi 1958

²⁵⁸ Gao Shiqi 1955

4.2.3 Extra-Curriculum Activity

Bei Dao’s willingness to get involved in revolution had been cultivated while at school, and reached its peak when he was a senior high school student.

Bei Dao was deeply attracted to the honor of being a member of the Young Pioneers and being one of those selected to perform the flag-raising ceremony. As Bei Dao recounted:²⁵⁹

After I joined the Young Pioneers, I only got to the rank of vice-team leader (with one stroke on the armband). This was almost a kind of humiliation; even my younger brother became a squad leader (two strokes on the armband). Luckily, I was selected to be the drummer, which made me overjoyed.

Beijing No. 4 middle school was famous for being a place gathering the offspring of the political leaders. Liu Yuan (刘源), the son of Liu Shaoqi (刘少奇), the former President of the PRC, was one of the students at the time. Before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, Bei Dao had already sensed the coming of the Revolution from his classmates’ reactions.²⁶⁰

During the class breaks, my classmates were discussing matters in a grand and engaged manner, such as revolutionary ideals and the (related) moments of their (revolutionary) deaths. It seemed as if everybody was about to face the final test. In private I made up my own slogan for the moment before I would sacrifice myself, rehearsing it again and again. Imagining this, the place I pictured would have to be surrounded by green pines. I even put my fingers between the door and its frame, closing the door more and more tightly, to the point where the pain in my fingers caused me to break a sweat.

When the Cultural Revolution broke out, Bei Dao was shocked to discover that his classmates were gathering together wearing Red Guards attire and riding well-

²⁵⁹ Bei Dao 2010b: 23

²⁶⁰ Bei Dao 2010b: 134

4.2 School Education

made bicycles. As Bei Dao described, he was not a member of Youth League at that time, and his family's class origin was not good, meaning that it was not of the kind favoured by the political authorities. He hoped that he could become one of the politically privileged group, but failed. However, when he happened to find a well-made bicycle with nobody in the vicinity, he rode the bicycle in the revolutionary crowd, no longer feeling that he was an outsider. He made up the illusion that he was a main character in the movement.²⁶¹

When his classmates or senior schoolfellows actively participated in the Red Guards Movement, Bei Dao also got himself involved in the movement by participating in the Mass Exchange of Revolutionary Experiences (大串联), which was encouraged by the government to travel across the country for free.²⁶² He made a wooden box which could hold Mao Zedong's works. One sentence was written on the box by Bei Dao with red paint, "Remember Chairman Mao's words in mind, melt them in blood, and put them into practice" (把毛主席的话印在脑子里, 溶化在血液中, 落实在行动上).²⁶³

He was eager for revolution, and to show his loyalty to Chairman Mao: at the time, this meant that he was eager to break down the hierarchy in his school, in which he was not among the politically privileged group. Also, as a teenager, he wanted to get away from routine education, and from mathematics, which he found a difficult subject.

However actively involved Bei Dao was in the revolution under Mao's call, he rejected violence. When he witnessed a violent interrogation of a thief by a Red Guard, he felt it crude and did not agree that was the proper penalty for theft.²⁶⁴

4.3 Family Education

Bei Dao's father Zhao Jinian (赵济年) was the vice-president of the Publicity Department of the China Association for Promoting Democracy (one of eight non-Communist political parties in mainland China) in the 1950s, academic affairs

²⁶¹ Bei Dao 2010b: 136-137

²⁶² Kwok-sing Li 1994: 35-36

²⁶³ Bei Dao 2010b: 163

²⁶⁴ Bei Dao 2010b: 143-145

officer of the Central Institute of Socialism in the 1960s and 70s, and also the head of the Chinese People Insurance Company in the 1980s.²⁶⁵

Bei Dao's mother Sun Meili (孙美利) was a nurse, and was born in a Shanghai family with a strong Christian background in 1921. Her Christian background is mentioned in an essay written by Bei Dao's younger brother Zhao Zhenxian (赵振先) in a blog run by one of Sun's family members, and in some essays in remembrance of Bei Dao's father.²⁶⁶ Also, as the blog indicates, many of Sun's family members were Christians. However, Bei Dao mentioned neither his mother's religious belief nor her influence on him in regard to Christianity. This is probably because in mainland China, under ideological constraints and in a complex political situation, Christians were generally not inclined to discuss their religions in public from the early 1950s until the early 1980s (today, Christianity is coming under increasing pressure again).²⁶⁷

Bei Dao disagreed with his father on two issues, which are related to his poetry writing. Bei Dao was forced to recite the classical Chinese poetry under the command of his father, but could not sympathize with the leisurely and carefree life attitude delivered in these poems. As Bei Dao writes in the poem «Asking the Sky» (问天), in Hinton's translation:²⁶⁸

Tonight a confusion of rain
Fresh breezes leaf through the book
Dictionaries swell with implication
Forcing me into submission

今夜雨零乱
清风翻书
字典旁敲侧击
逼我就范

Memorizing ancient poems as a child
I couldn't see what they meant
And stood at the abyss of explication
For punishment

从小背古诗
不得要领
阐释的深渊旁
我被罚站

²⁶⁵ Bei Dao 2010b: 178, 185, 194

²⁶⁶ http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_a4a370780101m69i.html, Du Xiu 2014; and an article entitled "Respectable, Amiable and True Nature" (可敬可亲真性情) published in <http://www.cmdrt.com/News/DI/2011-01-28/2107.html>. The author is unknown.

²⁶⁷ Zhao Tian'en & Zhuang Wanfang 1997

²⁶⁸ Bei Dao 1994: 60-61

4.3 Family Education

Further, Bei Dao did not gain the approval of his father when he wrote his early poem «Hello, Baihua Mountain» (你好，百花山) in 1972. In this poem, Bei Dao opposes the Maoist monopoly on particular images such as the sun (sunlight). In McDougall's translation:²⁶⁹

Along the path in the primordial wood
Green sunlight flows through the slits
A russet hawk interprets into bird cries
The mountain's tale of terror

沿着原始森林的小路，
绿色的阳光在缝隙里流窜。
一只红褐色的苍鹰，
用鸟语翻译这山中恐怖的谣传。

When he showed the manuscript to his father, his father was shocked by the line “Green sunlight flows through the slits”. Right before Bei Dao's writing of this poem, his father was rusticated to the countryside, and he was very cautious when it came to the issue of politics.²⁷⁰ In his father's view, Bei Dao might be seen as committing a crime. First of all, Bei Dao did not eulogize the sun or the sunlight, which was conventionally viewed as a metaphor for Mao Zedong at the time. Secondly, Bei Dao did not employ the conventionally approved words to describe either the sun or the sunlight. Instead of using the word “red”, Bei Dao used “green”. Instead of eulogizing Chairman Mao's victory, Bei Dao used the verb “flees”.²⁷¹ Bei Dao's father ordered him to burn this poem. Conflicts between father and son happened quite often afterwards.²⁷²

4.4 Learning Webs

After Bei Dao dropped out of school in 1966, he benefited from his own learning web, which was constituted by his peers such as Shizhi, foreign literature in Chinese translation, and his mentor Feng Yidai (冯亦代, 1913-2005).

²⁶⁹ Bei Dao 1988: 19

²⁷⁰ Bei Dao 2010b: 191

²⁷¹ Bei Dao 2010b: 191

²⁷² Bei Dao 2010b: 191-193

4.4.1 Shizhi

Bei Dao has acknowledged Shizhi's poems as an inspiration for him to write modern Chinese poetry, while writing ancient Chinese poetry was more popular at that time. It was Shizhi who triggered Bei Dao to write modern poetry. Some day in 1970, Bei Dao happened to hear Shizhi's poems, such as «When We Depart» (当我们出发的时候) and «Destiny» (命运), recited by a friend. He was deeply touched by the feelings of loss and distress presented in these poems.²⁷³ Nevertheless, while Shizhi is a steady believer in the future, Bei Dao changed to doubt and shout out "I-Do-Not-Believe!"(我……不……相……信!), one of Bei Dao's most famous line of poetry and cited in high frequency by others.

4.4.2 Lorca via Dai Wangshu

As mentioned in chapter two, Bei Dao also drew on the underground reading practices among the children of high-ranking officials. As Bei Dao described it, these secret readings "not only opened new vistas for spiritual refuge but exemplified a style that was radically different from the official Socialist Realism."²⁷⁴ Dai Wangshu's translation of Federico García Lorca as an influential work is mentioned frequently by the Obscure poets. Below are excerpts from Lorca's «Sleepwalkers' Ballad» (梦游人谣 [Romance sonámbulo]), in John Frederick Nims's and Dai Wangshu's translations:²⁷⁵

Green it's your green I love.
Green of the wind. Green branches.
The ship far out at sea.
The horse above on the mountain.
Shadows dark at her waist,
she's dreaming there on her terrace,
green of her cheek, green hair,
with eyes like chilly silver.
Green it's your green I love.
Under that moon of the gypsies

绿啊，我多么爱你这绿色。
绿的风，绿的树枝。
船在海上，
马在山中。
影子裹住她的腰，
她在露台上做梦。
绿的肌肉，绿的头发，
还有银子般沁凉的眼睛。
绿啊，我多么爱你这绿色。
在吉卜赛人的月亮下，

²⁷³ Bei Dao 2000b: 251

²⁷⁴ Bei Dao & Gleichmann 1996: 388

²⁷⁵ Nims 1990: 265, Dai Wangshu 2014: 236

4.4 Learning Webs

things are looking at her
but she can't return their glances.

一切东西都看着她，
而她却看不见它们。

Green symbolizes something the writer dreams of but never actually owns, before the departure from the girl, caused by war. Lorca's influence is demonstrated by the imitations of the usage of green. Bei Dao described, in Huang Yibing's translation:²⁷⁶

I first read *Selected Poems of Lorca* in Dai Wangshu's translation in the early 1970s. The great book-banning campaign only deepened our spiritual thirst and hunger. When *Selected Poems of Lorca* passed through our hands hurriedly, it made quite a stir. Lorca's shadow once loomed over the underground poetry scene in Beijing. There was Lorca's echo in Fang Han (Sun Kang)'s poetry; as for Mang Ke's long-lost poem "Green within Green," its title was obviously derived from "Sleepwalker's Ballad"; in the early 1980s, I introduced Lorca to Gu Cheng, so his poetry was also tinted with Lorca's color.

We can find similar usage in at least thirteen poems written by Bei Dao. «Hello, Baihua Mountain», mentioned above, is a case in point. Other poems include «In my Transparent Sadness» (在我透明的忧伤中), «Life and Roads» (日子与道路) and «Cold Hope» (冷酷的希望).

4.4.3 Feng Yidai

The acknowledged translator Feng Yidai and his wife Zheng Anna (郑安娜), who lived in the same compound as Bei Dao's family and were old friends of Bei Dao's father, acted as mentors for Bei Dao from the early 1970s to the early 1980s. Bei Dao's father introduced his son to Feng, in hope that Bei Dao would learn English from Feng. As recounted by Bei Dao, after being forced to drop out of school, he loved to visit Feng. Bei Dao liked to discuss detailed questions about translation from English to Chinese with Feng. Furthermore, he was attracted by the works of foreign literature collected in Feng's house. After the Cultural Revolution, Bei Dao

²⁷⁶ Huang Yibing 2008

benefited from the translation “workshops” organized by Feng in translating William Somerset Maugham’s fiction, in which the participants were invited to offer feedback on Feng’s translation. Also, at the suggestion of Feng, Bei Dao enrolled in and finally passed the qualification exam for translators, which provided job opportunities for Bei Dao in the magazine-publishing world. Furthermore, Feng also proposed the alternative English name *The Moment* for the journal *Today* (and in fact the very first issue of the journal carried this English caption on its cover). Although Bei Dao did not stick with Feng’s suggestion in the long run, he could still recall the moment of their conversation after 28 years.²⁷⁷

4.5 Poetic Identity: Christianity

It is not common to find symbols from Christianity in works of the Obscure Poets, except for Bei Dao and Shu Ting. In Bei Dao’s case, perhaps there is a connection with the fact that his mother was a Christian.

The original version of Bei Dao’s «The Answer» is a simple and “mechanical” example to support the argument above. The first stanza originally goes as follows, building on McDougall’s translation:²⁷⁸

Debasement is the mirror armour of the base,
Nobility the epitaph of the noble.
In such a crazy world,
—— This is the sacred text.

卑鄙是卑鄙者的护心镜，
高尚是高尚人的墓志铭。
在这疯狂的世界里，
——这就是圣经。

The last two lines were deleted and do not appear in the version in which the poem has become widely known. “圣经” in the last line could also be rendered as “the Bible”, but here the term (which literally means “Sacred Classic”) is perhaps best read in a more generic sense, as referring to (the principles emanating from) a sacred text. This seems likely in light of the preceding lines.

A more direct example to show the influence of Christianity on Bei Dao is a poem entitled «Faith» (信仰), from the poetry sequence «Notes from the City of the

²⁷⁷<http://mjlsh.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/Book.aspx?cid=4&tid=1354>

²⁷⁸ Bei Dao 1988: 33

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Sun» (太阳城札记). This poetry sequence includes several short poems, each of two or three lines only. In McDougall's translation:²⁷⁹

A flock of sheep spills into a green ditch	羊群溢出绿色的洼地
The shepherd boy pipes his monotonous tune	牧童吹起单调的短笛

Combining the title and the poem's body text, «Faith» may well be read as a reference to the Bible, in the images of sheep and the shepherd.

Similar examples can also be found in «Resume» (履历), «About Eternity» (关于永恒), and «Subway Station» (地铁站). In the beginning of «Resume», in McDougall's translation:²⁸⁰

Once I goosestepped across the square	我曾正步走过广场
My head shaved bare	剃光脑袋
The better to seek the sun	为了更好地寻找太阳
But in that season of madness	却在疯狂的季节里
Seeing the cold-faced goats on the other side	转了向，隔着栅栏
Of the fence I changed direction	会见那些表情冷漠的山羊
When I saw my ideals	直到从盐碱地似的
On blank paper like saline-alkaline soil	白纸上看到理想

In Political Lyricism, the square (often associated with the Square of Heavenly Peace in Beijing) is a common symbol of active participation in the revolution, and the sun is a symbol of Mao Zedong. The first three lines suggest that the poet was an enthusiastic follower of Mao. The following lines can be read as referring to the Bible. From the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*:²⁸¹

The nature of the goat lent itself to symbolism, but in comparison to sheep imagery, the number of metaphorical references in the Bible is limited. Goats are destructive to cultivated areas, and with their beetling brow and thrust-out lower lip they could easily represent power and belligerence... Their overbearing temper and aggressiveness

²⁷⁹ Bei Dao 1983: 37

²⁸⁰ Bei Dao 1988: 87

²⁸¹ Freedman 1992

required the shepherd to keep close watch over the flocks so that the sheep would not be harmed.

Here, "goat" may read as referring to the Red Guards who engaged in the ransacking of private homes and public places in the name of smashing "old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits". As previously discussed, Bei Dao's opinion towards Mao and the Cultural Revolution changed when he witnessed the widespread violence. Lines 5 and 6 could then be seen as alluding to his conscious distancing and separation from the Red Guards in hindsight.

The "narrow gate" is another image that may be connected with Christianity. In the Chinese context, "narrow gate and narrow window" (窄门窄户) is an idiom that means a family is poor. But the Christian "narrow gate" has a different meaning. It occurs in the *Gospel of Matthew* 7: 13-14:

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Bei Dao directly borrows the metaphor of the narrow gate from the Bible in his poem «Another Legend» (另一种传说). In McDougall's translation:²⁸²

Dead heroes are forgotten
They are lonely, they
Pass through a sea of faces
Their anger can only light
The cigarette in a man's hand
Even with the help of a ladder
They can no longer predict anything
Each weather vane goes its own way
Only when they huddle
At the foot of their hollow statues
Do they realize the depth of despair
They always come and go at night
Suddenly illuminated by a single lamp

死去的英雄被人遗忘
他们寂寞，他们
在人海里穿行
他们的愤怒只能点燃
一支男人手中的烟
借助梯子
他们再也不能预言什么
风向标各行其是
当他们蜷缩在
各自空心的雕像的脚下
才知道绝望的容量
他们时常在夜间出没
突然被孤灯照亮

²⁸² Bei Dao 1988: 105

4.5 Poetic Identity: Christianity

But difficult to distinguish nonetheless
Like faces pressed against frosted glass

却难以辨认
如同紧贴在毛玻璃上的脸

Finally, they slip through the narrow gate
Covered over with dust
Taking charge of the solitary key

最终，他们溜进窄门
沾满灰尘
掌管那孤独的钥匙

This poem describes the undesirable destiny of a hero, forgotten and ignored by the masses. But the text suggests that such a hero is one of the few people that will find truth.

4.6 Poetic Identity: A Variant of Political Lyricism

4.6.1 Early Political Lyricism

As mentioned before, Bei Dao composed his early Political Lyricism in the early 1960s under the influence of Gao Shiqi and his teacher Dong Jingbo. In the early 1970s, he continued to compose Political Lyricism, for example «Because We Are Still Young» (因为我们还年轻). Bei Dao chose not to keep the manuscripts of poems such as this, which obviously indicates his (retrospective) dissatisfaction towards to them. However, we can gather more information about «Because We Are Still Young» from Bing Xin's (冰心) poem «Because We Are Still Young: In Reply to a Young Friend» (因为我们还年轻——答一位年轻朋友).

Bing Xin was a famous Chinese writer, and she was once the boss of Bei Dao's father in the Publicity Department of the China Association for Promoting Democracy. Bei Dao paid a visit to Bing Xin and presented her with «Because We Are Still Young» in 1972. Bing Xin's poem in reply is a typical example of Political Lyricism that pledges elderly citizens' dedication to the party: the elderly, just like the young, should continue to worship the great leader Chairman Mao faithfully and devote themselves to the construction of the socialist country.²⁸³ As Bei Dao recounts, «Because We Are Still Young» is intended to go against the nihilistic and

²⁸³ Wang Binggen 2015: 344-346

decadent thoughts held by his generation. This poem is characterized by "didacticism, especially with regard to morality" (道德说教).²⁸⁴

Besides, it has been noted in scholarship that Bei Dao's early works such as «The Answer» are close to Political Lyricism.²⁸⁵ One textbook for university students whose major is not Chinese literature and language, even calls it "excellent Political Lyricism".²⁸⁶ Characteristics of Political Lyricism, such as the overt political content, a lyrical tone and a persona speaking for/to the masses, can be found in «The Answer». In McDougall's translation:²⁸⁷

I came into this world
Bringing only paper, rope, a shadow,
To proclaim before the judgment
The voice that has been judged:

我来到这个世界上，
只带着纸、绳索和身影，
为了在审判前，
宣读那些被判决的声音。

Let me tell you, world,
I-Do-Not-Believe!
If a thousand challengers lie beneath your
feet,
Count me as number one thousand and one.

告诉你吧，世界
我……不……相……信！
纵使你脚下有一千名挑战者，
那就把我算作第一千零一名。

If the sea is destined to breach the dikes
Let all the brackish water pour into my heart;

……
如果海洋注定要决堤，
就让所有的苦水都注入我心中，

If the land is destined to rise
Let humanity choose a peak for existence
again.

如果陆地注定要上升，
就让人类重新选择生存的峰顶。

Furthermore, some (but not all) stanzas in the poem «Rainy Night» (雨夜) are typical Political Lyricism. In Mc Dougall's translation:²⁸⁸

Even if tomorrow morning

即使明天早上

²⁸⁴ Bei Dao & Liu Zichao 2009

²⁸⁵ van Crevel 2008: 89, Edmond 2012: ch 4, Fu Yuanfeng 2013, Li Qin 2015

²⁸⁶ Zhang Zhifu 2013: 165

²⁸⁷ Bei Dao 1988: 33

²⁸⁸ Bei Dao 1983: 47

4.6 Poetic Identity: A Variant of Political Lyricism

The muzzle and the bleeding sun
Make me surrender freedom, youth and pen
I will never surrender this evening
I will never surrender you
Let walls stop up my mouth
Let iron bars divide my sky

枪口和血淋淋的太阳
让我交出青春、自由和笔
我也决不会交出这个夜晚
我决不会交出你
让墙壁堵住我的嘴唇吧
让铁条分割我的天空吧

4.6.2 A Change of Usage of Textbook Metaphor: Poppy

As mentioned in chapter one, symbolic images originated from nature are often employed in Political Lyricism. The plum blossom and the green pine are common symbols in political lyricism. The poppy, firstly appearing as a key symbolic image in an article in a textbook, is used by Bei Dao in several poems.²⁸⁹

Zhu Zhu's research on the historical usage of the poppy in Chinese literature shows that from the Tang dynasty until the Ming dynasty, the poppy had been associated with beauty. Things changed when it was connected with opium in the Qing dynasty, and it has counted as a symbol of evil ever since.²⁹⁰

As discussed in chapter two, one of the elementary textbooks I reviewed contains an article "Why the Flowers of Poppies are Red" (罂粟为什么开红花), which tells the story of Danko.²⁹¹ Similar to the metaphorical meaning of poppy used in the textbook, Bei Dao employs this symbolic image in several of his early poems. One example is «Let's Go» (走吧), which is addressed to his friend Lu Huanxing (陆焕兴). In McDougall's translation:²⁹²

Let's go—
Fallen leaves blow into deep valleys
But the song has no home to return to.

走吧，
落叶吹进深谷，
歌声却没有归宿。

Let's go—
Moonlight on the ice
Has spilled beyond the river bed.

走吧，
冰上的月光，
已从河床上溢出。

²⁸⁹ People's Education Press 1959

²⁹⁰ Zhu Zhu 2019

²⁹¹ People's Education Press 1959: 71-75

²⁹² Bei Dao 1988: 34

Bei Dao: "The Wanderer Holding a Poppy"

Let's go—
Eyes gaze at the same patch of sky
Hearts strike the twilight drum.

走吧，
眼睛望着同一片天空，
心敲着暮色的鼓。

Let's go—
We have not lost our memories
We shall search for life's pool.

走吧，
我们没有失去记忆，
我们去寻找生命的湖。

Let's go—
The road, the road
Is covered with a drift of scarlet poppies.

走吧，
路呵路，
飘满了红罂粟。

"The road covered with a drift of scarlet poppies" echoes the reality that Bei Dao and Lu Huanxing courted danger for the good cause when they tried to promote the unofficial journal *Today* by pasting it on the Democracy Wall. The emotion in this poem is not one of sadness, but rather one of excitement when facing danger, similar to that delivered in the textbook.

Another example is «An End or a Beginning» (结束或开始), in which Bei Dao transforms the poppy story from the textbook. Although Bei Dao does not use the metaphor of poppies, he keeps the thread of the story: when a martyr sacrifices, his/her blood would dye the plant red. In McDougall's translation:²⁹³

If fresh blood could make you fertile
The ripened fruit
On tomorrow's branches
Would bear my colour

如果鲜血会使你肥沃
明天的枝头上
成熟的果实
会留下我的颜色

The imagery of poppy is still seen in Bei Dao's later poem «Poppy Night» (罂粟夜), written in the late 1990s, but the poem as a whole delivers something different. Below are excerpts in Weinberger and Man-Cheong's translation:²⁹⁴

Switching on the starlit sky

打开满天星光

²⁹³ Bei Dao 1988: 64

²⁹⁴ Bei Dao 2000: 83 & 85

4.6 Poetic Identity: A Variant of Political Lyricism

The wanderer holding a poppy
Searches for the shadows that will replace him
A theater is locked
In the municipal vault

...

I stand in for that wanderer
Returning from hunger
Turning on the light, the milk's gone bad
I only recognize a single joy
Love at two year's old

...

I know tomorrow morning
The repairman will wait in the doorway
Then take the scenery with him
At opening time he'll replace me
Walking into his book

流浪者手持罂粟
寻找替换他的影子
这城市的保险箱
锁着一个剧场

.....

我替换那流浪者
从饥饿中归来
开灯，牛奶变质
我认出这唯一欢乐
两岁时的爱情

.....

我知道明天早上
修理工将等在门口
带来他的风景
在开门时替代我
走进书中

In this poem, there are three kinds of persons: a wanderer holding a poppy, the speaker suffering from hunger, and a repairman.

In the first stanza, the wanderer holding a poppy looks for a shadow to replace himself. It could be read that as a hero-like revolutionary wishes to pass down his revolutionary ideal to another. Both wanderer and shadow can be read as followers of Mao, leaving their immediate family to fight for a revolution. While the stars shine (not the sun), the theatre stops operating, which could be understood as a revolution: a national drama comes an end.

In the second stanza, the wanderer comes home and discovers that he has forgotten to take care of his daily needs for a long time. That is where the speaker starts to find himself back.

In the last stanza, the speaker turns to a repairman, a common person with a regular job. As such, this poem can be read as a response to the end of the revolution, in which the people left the “square” (广场, as a symbol of an active participation in the revolutions) for a “work position” or one’s job (岗位, as a symbol of reorienting away from political revolution). A change “from the square to one’s job” (从广场到岗位), was proposed by Chen Sihe 陈思和 as a metaphor to sum up

intellectual and cultural trends in the 1990s, and is widely acceptable and cited in Chinese scholarship.²⁹⁵

In the same vein, the poem called «Sower» (播种者) could also be interpreted as saying goodbye to the revolutionary fever, which helps to elaborate my point above. In Eshleman and Klein's translation:²⁹⁶

A sower walks into the hall
it's war out there, he says
you are wallowing in vapidty
shirking your duty to warn of the danger
I am come in the name of the fields
it's war out there

I leave the hall
all around scenes of the harvest
I start to design the war
to perform death
the crops I torch
flare up like wolf signals

one thought is driving me crazy
he is sowing seeds onto marble

一个播种者走进大厅
外面是战争，他说
而你沉湎于空虚
放弃警示危险的责任
我以田野的名义
外面是战争

我走出大厅
四周一片丰收的景象
我开始设计战争
表演死亡
被我点燃的庄稼
狼烟般升起

一个念头让我发疯：
他正在大理石上播种

4.7 Poetic Identity: Revolt against Political Lyricism

Bei Dao's revolt against Political Lyricism originates in the fact that he himself is deeply familiar with Political Lyricism. His revolt is characterized by his reflection on language, exploration on the various forms of the self and reflection on poethood.

²⁹⁵ Chen Sihe 1996: 6-11

²⁹⁶ Bei Dao 2010a: 65

4.7 Poetic Identity: Revolt against Political Lyricism

4.7.1 Language

In hindsight, Bei Dao considers that the Political Lyricism that he used to read in *the People's Daily* was filled with big words and phrases. And Bei Dao is unsatisfied with his early start as a writer (poet) imitating Political Lyricism.²⁹⁷

That was a time of using words at random. We composed our articles
by copying from everywhere, and especially copied the ostentatious and
hollow adjectives.

Further, Bei Dao retrospects on the influence of political powers on the usage of language and the function of language in reshaping people's life. For example, in the poem «The Morning's Story» (早晨的故事), in McDougall and Chen's translation.²⁹⁸

A word has abolished another word	一个词消灭了另一个词
A book has issued orders	一本书下令
To burn another book	烧掉了另一本书
A morning established by the violence of language	语言的暴力建立的早晨
Has changed the morning	改变了早晨
Of people's coughing	人们的咳嗽声

The poem «Keywords» (关键词) is one of Bei Dao's few poems reflecting on the fixed connections between signifier and signified in the Mao era. In this poem, Bei Dao doubts the knowledge he had in the Mao era and ponders on its imperceptible influence. The first and second stanzas read, in Eshleman and Klein's translation.²⁹⁹

My shadow is dangerous	我的影子很危险
The performer employed by the sun	这受雇于太阳的艺人
Delivers final knowledge	带来的最后的知识
Which is empty	是空的

²⁹⁷ Bei Dao 2010a: 116

²⁹⁸ Bei Dao 1991: 26-27

²⁹⁹ Bei Dao 2010a: 105

That is the dark nature
Of the termite's work
The footsteps through the air
Of the smallest child of violence

那是蛀虫工作的
黑暗属性
暴力的最小的孩子
空中的足音

In the first stanza, a deep sense of disappointment is expressed. "My shadow", an indicator of the speaker himself, is employed by the sun, which can be interpreted as the metaphor of Mao and has a negative connotation. The speaker is a dependent individual, and has empty (invalid) knowledge. Emptiness, the speaker continues to write in the second stanza, is the nature of the termite's work. Then the speaker compares the termite's work to "the smallest child of violence" and to "footsteps in the air", a lasting sound. As a whole, the stanza could be interpreted as telling a story about a human being, being transformed bit by bit, so that he/she loses his/her personality. The end product is inhuman, dependent and obedient, in strict accordance with political ideology. The transformation is invisible but lasting.

4.7.2 Poethood

The poet in Political Lyricism serves as "the bugle and the drummer of the era" (时代的号角和鼓手) to "sing an inspiring eulogy in a great march to build a socialist country". And in the same vein, poet sings as a warrior (战士) marching on.³⁰⁰ In Political Lyricism, the poet speak as "I", but this equals a "we"; or addresses a "you", singing an ode to political leaders or heroic characters. Differently, in Bei Dao's poetry, I see a clear change from a persona of tragic hero and a precocious child on the one hand to a person retired from this position, on the other.

As discussed previously in relation to Bei Dao's «The Answer», «Declaration» (宣告), and several other poems composed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he presents a tragic-heroic image of poethood which reflects his hero complex learned from school education. The persona in these poems speaks directly to the readers, as we can clearly read from the titles and the contents. However, the persona of a precocious child and a man retired from his position is introverted and introspective.

³⁰⁰ Hong Zicheng 2005: 41,

4.7 Poetic Identity: Revolt against Political Lyricism

In a series of poems composed in the middle and late 1980s, it is interesting to notice the discrepancy between how the poet looks and what he thinks inside his mind. He may wear an adult/senior's look, but he is childish in his mind. For example, «Portrait of a Young Poet» (青年诗人的肖像), which can be read as a self-portrait, in McDougall's translation:³⁰¹

The inspiration drawn from your sleeve	那从袖口拽出的灵感
Is never-ending; you	没完没了, 你
Pass day and night through strung-out lines and	日夜穿行在长长的句子和
Lanes; you	胡同里, 你
Were old when you were born	生下来就老了
Even though ambition grows as ever	尽管雄心照旧沿着
Around the edges of you baldness	秃顶的边缘生长
Taking out your false teeth, you	摘下假牙, 你
Look even more childish	更象个孩子

As shown in «Daydream II» in McDougall's translation,³⁰² he may look fearless when participating in the revolution, just like an airplane going to depart from the airport in stormy days. But he feels lost and helpless.

Storms, we are	风暴, 我们是
Children lost in an airport	迷失在航空港里的儿童
Wanting to burst into tears	总想大哭一场

Above I have cited a stanza from «Resume» in the discussion of influence of Christianity on Bei Dao. Here I cite another stanza from this poem, in McDougall's translation:³⁰³

I bent my spine	我弓起了脊背
Believing I had found the only	自以为找到了表达真理的
Way to express the truth, like	唯一方式, 如同
A baked fish dreaming of the sea	烘烤着的鱼梦见海洋
Long live...! I shouted only once, damn it	万岁! 我只他妈喊了一声

³⁰¹ Bei Dao 1988: 94

³⁰² Bei Dao 1988: 127-128

³⁰³ Bei Dao 1988: 87

Then sprouted a beard

胡子就长出来了

He may bend his spine as if bowing to a leader, and show his loyalty by shouting out the popular political slogans, such as "long live (Chairman Mao)", in accordance with others. As Bei Dao puts ironically, "like a baked fish dreaming of the sea", participating in politics and becoming an adult is like a daydream, that could not actually protect oneself from internal crisis.

Bei Dao's retrospection may help to deepen the understanding of his above poems. In hindsight, in a comparison with his daughter's generation, Bei Dao considered his generation "were driven mad by lofty ambitions; our personalities were twisted into abnormal configurations with a serious tendency for violence. It is absurd to think of us actually saving a nation and its people when we did so poorly in saving ourselves."³⁰⁴

Considering the changes taken place in mainland China in the 1990s, Zhu Dake (朱大可) proposed the popular metaphor of "from the gallows to a swing" (从绞架到秋千), to refer to his observation that that poets changed from victimized heroes in the 1980s to "awkward discourse players" in the 1990s.³⁰⁵ Bei Dao was also aware of this change, and puts this change in a self-mocking way, in Hutters & Ming's translation:³⁰⁶

All this stemmed from a peculiar juncture of time — the blank period between the collapse of ideology and the advent of the tide of commercialism. Poets had put on a series of false masks: those of savior, warrior, pastor, rock star, all of which were reflected in a strange mirror compounded of extreme pressure and high temperature. And we came close to mistaking those images for our true selves. Very shortly, however, we were to be inundated in the commercial tide, which swept away the masks, shattered the mirrors, and insured that this mistake would never happen again.

³⁰⁴ Bei Dao 2000b: 198.

³⁰⁵ Zhu Dake 1991

³⁰⁶ Bei Dao 2000b: 254

4.7 Poetic Identity: Revolt against Political Lyricism

Being rejected and attacked by the Third-Generation poets in the late 1980s and denied entry into mainland China after 1989, Bei Dao felt it hard to accept the change from being an idolized poet in China to someone wandering abroad. This feeling emerges in some of his lines, such as “someone the country’s discharged” (一个被国家辞退的人), and “I am the identity you deny/lamp switched off in the heart” (我是被你否认的身份/从心里关掉的灯).³⁰⁷ He also compared himself as a retiree, as stated in the poem «Post» (岗位), in Weinberger and Man-Cheong’s translation.³⁰⁸

An elk heading for the pit-trap
Power, the fir tree said, struggle

一只麋鹿走向陷阱
权力，枞树说，斗争

Cherishing the same secret
My hair turned white
Retiring, going backwards
Leaving my post

怀着同一秘密
我头发白了
退休---倒退着
离开我的岗位

Only one step back
No, ten whole years
My era behind me
Suddenly beating on a bass drum

只退了一步
不，整整十年
我的时代在背后
突然敲响大鼓

In this poem, the post indicates a job as a poet that bears responsibility to write for/to the masses, which was expected of a poet, as a hero and enlightener under the calling of Mao, in order to contribute to socialism and the country. Bei Dao used the word “failure” (失败) to name his collection of essay published in 2006, and this may be read as a reference to failing to meet this expectation. In the preface to *The Book of Failure*, Bei Dao states that he tries to become a common person rather than a heroic poet who enjoyed popularity, learning to live his own life in a foreign land.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ A line from «Creation» (创造). Bei Dao 1996: 8-9, A line from «Untitled» (无题). Bei Dao 1996: 92-93

³⁰⁸ Bei Dao 2000: 24-25

³⁰⁹ Bei Dao 2004: preface, written by Bei Dao

The poet compares himself with a lonely wolf, in the third stanza of the poem «Keywords» (关键词), in Eshleman and Klein's translation:³¹⁰

The keyword, my shadow,
Hammers the iron inside dreams
Stepping to the rhythms
A lone wolf walks in

关键词，我的影子
锤打着梦中之铁
踏着那节奏
一只孤狼走进

The dusk undefeated by anyone
The egret that writes on the water
A life a day a sentence

无人失败的黄昏
鹭鸶在水上书写
一生一天一个句子

The shadow, with the rhythms of hammering iron in dreams, turns into a lone wolf (a land animal) and an egret (an animal in the air and in water). As an old Chinese saying goes, "there are three kinds of bitterness in one's life: sailing a boat, hammering the iron and grinding the soybean" (人生有三苦, 打铁, 撑船, 磨豆腐). Hammering iron consumes time and energy, indicating the bitter nature of the work. Here the poet compares hammering iron with poetry writing.

A lonely wolf is generally considered as an old wolf left behind or excluded from its group. It is considered useless for its group and is left behind to die alone. It also indicates someone's inclination to do things by themselves, to not work with others, to not be part of a community. An egret, in the Chinese context, symbolizes an old man because they both have white heads, as old people's hair turns grey or white. It also symbolizes a leisurely style of living, since the egret stands still most of the time.

In the last three lines, the poet seems to make peace with "failure". In all, the poem exudes relief and joy of self-rescue from being a dependent, obedient shadow.

4.8 Concluding Remarks

Bei Dao's early writings of Political Lyricism reflect his school education, which provided him with his first literary engagement and a long-term cultivation of "revolutionary fever". Sources of such influences include the establishment writer

³¹⁰ Bei Dao 2010a: 105

4.8 Concluding Remarks

Gao Shiqi, Bei Dao's Chinese teacher Dong Jingbo, textbooks, organizations such as the League of Young Pioneers and the Communist Youth League, extra-curricular readings and so on.

School education also lies at the root of Bei Dao's use of the metaphors of the poppy and amber, which he took from textbooks. The poppy symbolizes the sacrifice of one's life and one's personal needs for the revolutionary cause, as in the poems «Let's go», «An End or a Beginning» and «Poppy Night». The poet embraces revolutionary fever in the first two poems, which can be seen as variants on Political Lyricism. The last poem shows the poet's distance from revolutionary fever, indicating the need to take care of his personal needs, which have been ignored for too long. Amber (with mica and wax as alternatives) symbolizes history, as in «Daydream», «Random Thoughts», «Perfect», «Wax» and «Accomplices». These poems show Bei Dao's perception of history: an enemy could turn into a friend. Strictly speaking, these poems are not "regular" Political Lyricism, but rather an adjusted variety of Political Lyricism.

Bei Dao's use of the metaphors of sheep and the shepherd and the narrow gate indicate an influence from Christianity, presumably through the faith of his mother mother, in an instance of family education.

Notably, Bei Dao's highly visible revolt against Political Lyricism comes from a condition in which he himself is deeply familiar with Political Lyricism. In developing his own position on language and poetry he explores different forms of the self, sorting out the relationship between the self and the collective, and between the self and the society. In all, Bei Dao's relationship to Political Lyricism turns out to be ambivalent and complicated, subverting easy assumptions of a clean break between Mao-era Political Lyricism and early Reform-era Obscure poetry.

5 Gu Cheng: “Everything Bulin Wailed Was a Slogan”

5.1 Introduction

Gu Cheng was born in Beijing in 1956. Both his parents were involved in literature. He became a man of letters too, being one of the most important poets of his time, but also a controversial figure. Debates surrounding him are still hot today. Even though he died in at the age of twenty-seven, he was very productive, with some poems still being cited frequently and some, in my view, being underestimated or unjustly going unnoticed.

Among the Obscure poets, he was the youngest and the least formally educated, as he dropped out of school at age thirteen already; he also stood out for his fascinating poetic accomplishments. Together with other Obscure poets, Gu Cheng offers a symbolic, more or less apolitical and highly individualistic literary vision to readers, who were accustomed to the explicit, political and didactic literary paradigm according to the doctrines set down by Mao Zedong since 1942 and borne out in Political Lyricism. In 1979, one of Gu Cheng’s most famous poems, «A Generation», simple and short, became popular. It is considered a declaration of the younger generation who grew up in the Cultural Revolution, showing the steady and optimistic attitude of the youth, and their wariness of the ideology the authorities try to impose upon them. In Joseph R. Allen’s translation:³¹¹

Even with these dark eyes, a gift of the dark night
I go to seek the shining light

黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛
我却用它来寻找光明

Besides the shared identity with other Obscure poets, Gu Cheng is characterized as a “fairytale poet” (童话诗人), a description first used by Shu Ting.³¹² The title

³¹¹ Gu Cheng 2005b: 3

³¹² See the preface to Gu Cheng & Shu Ting 1982.

5.1 Introduction

“fairytale poet” recurs in later commentaries by scholars and editors and has several meanings. It refers to the persona of an innocent child, and the frequent image of a lonely child wandering in a fairy land away from reality in Gu Cheng’s poetry, «I Am an Obstinate Child» (我是一个任性的孩子) and «Curriculum Vitae» (简历) being two famous examples.³¹³ In «Curriculum Vitae», he writes:³¹⁴

I’m a sorrowful child
Never grown up

我是一个悲哀的孩子，
始终没有长大

The title “fairytale poet” also applies to his personality in the eyes of his acquaintances, portraying a child-like person who requires the care of others and who dwells in his own illusions, incompatible with the common knowledge of the earthly world.³¹⁵ But there may be a further reason for calling him “fairytale poet”, which has received less attention. Gu Cheng published quite a few fairytales in the form of poetry, which is unique among the Obscure poets.

However, as noticed by some scholars, the epithet does not always fit Gu Cheng. Huang Yibing points out that the persona of an innocent child as presented in his early poems is replaced by a complicated ghost-like alien in his later poems.³¹⁶ As I will show in this chapter, it is one-sided to refer to Gu Cheng as “fairytale poet”, as this overshadows the complexity of his personality and poetry.

Other than being widely known as a fairytale poet, Gu Cheng is also known as a murderer. He shocked the public by killing his wife Xie Ye (谢烨) and subsequently committing suicide on Oct. 8th 1993, leaving their five-year-old son Samuel behind. The tragedy happened on Waiheke Island in New Zealand, where Gu Cheng and his wife had relocated in 1988. There was no witness to this tragedy. Gu Cheng’s elder sister Gu Xiang (顾乡) was the only one who saw the couple in their last minutes. According to her memoir, she did not witness the crime, but Gu Cheng said to her: “I am going to die, don’t stop me” (我现在去死，别拦我), and “I have hurt Xie Ye”

³¹³ Wu Sijing & Li Jianhua 1984, Yeh 1991a, Zhang Jichong 1999, Patton 1999 & 2001.

³¹⁴ Gu Cheng 1995: 238

³¹⁵ Wu Sijing & Li Jianhua 1984, Wang Yansheng 1995, Goran Malmqvist 1999 (preface to Li Xia 1999), Galik 2001, Yang Ke 2007.

³¹⁶ Kubin 1999, Huang Yibing 2007

(我把谢烨给打啦). Shocked after hearing these words, she rushed out and then found out Xie Ye was lying on the ground seriously hurt, with an axe lying close by. Gu Cheng hanged himself from a tree after he had spoken to Gu Xiang. Xie Ye was taken to hospital by a helicopter ambulance but she could not be saved.³¹⁷

Fictional details were added in by the media. Anecdotes were dug out to explain the tragedy. Anecdotes appeared such as Gu Cheng suffering from brain damage since early life, Gu Cheng's mother-in-law suspecting that he suffered from mental illness, Gu Cheng killing his wife and his son in fear that his son would take away his wife's love for him, Gu Cheng killing hundreds of chickens not long before killing his wife, et cetera.³¹⁸ Furthermore Gu Cheng's script of the novel *Ying'er* (英儿), written in a first-person narrative, which was published after his death, has been treated as his autobiography and used to explain the mysterious killing.³¹⁹ With the novel as a reference, Gu Cheng has been pictured as a person hoping to be the prince of the “Kingdom of Daughters” (女儿国), surrounded by women in a pleasure garden isolated from the world. (The “Kingdom of Daughters” is a fictional setting in Cao Xueqin's 曹雪芹 *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦) and Wu Cheng'en's 吴承恩 *Journey to the West* (西游记), two of the so-called Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature). But his lover Ying'er, who is equated with the character Li Ying in *Ying'er* is said to have left Gu Cheng abruptly not long before the tragedy occurred. Xie Ye, who is equated with Lei in the novel, is said to have asked for a divorce with Gu Cheng. And, so the story goes, when his “Kingdom of Daughters” collapsed, Gu Cheng launched a disastrous revenge.³²⁰ Not only the biographical anecdotes and Gu Cheng's novels, but also his poems are linked with death. His poems relating to the theme of death (indeed, there are many) have been cited to interpret what many see as his death complex.³²¹

The tragedy became part of a significant phenomenon in China often referred to as “the death of the poet”, with Haizi (海子, 1964-1989) being a precursor (he

³¹⁷ Gu Xiang 1994: 96-119

³¹⁸ Mai Tong & Xiaomin 1994, Xiao Xialin 1994, Jiang Xi & Wan Xiang 1995

³¹⁹ Gu Cheng 1993a

³²⁰ Wen Xin 1994.

³²¹ Gu Cheng and Xie Ye 1993b.

5.1 Introduction

committed suicide in 1989), followed by Luo Yihe (骆一禾, 1961-1989), Ge Mai (戈麦, 1967-1989) and many others in subsequent years and decades. In Gu Cheng's case, a crime and a suicide color his poems in that it would have been hard for many of his readers to block out the tragedy on Waiheke Island.³²²

Gu Cheng was a truly accomplished and controversial poet, and there are many perspectives from which to approach his poetry and poetics. In this chapter, I will shed light on his personality and poetry by taking a close look at his school education and family education, which have not been adequately studied to date. I argue that although he did not receive full school education, he benefited from family education, learning how to write poetry from his father Gu Gong, an establishment poet in the People's Liberation Army. Not unlike Bei Dao's situation, Gu Cheng's later revolt against Political Lyricism arguably was a result of his deep familiarity with it. In Gucheng's poetry, he clearly shows his resistance and suspicion towards politics. Even though he went to school for only a short period, he also reflected on his school education now and then in his poetry.

Gu Cheng's poetry and poetics are well-documented in Chinese. Now that his oeuvre has been published, the complexity of Gu Cheng's works, which has not been fully revealed by previous scholarship, has become noticeable. There are two editions of his poetic oeuvre, the earlier edited by his father Gu Gong, and the latest and the most comprehensive up to now edited by his sister Gu Xiang.³²³ The latter one includes nearly 2,000 poems, including brief lyrics as well as traditional and modern poems (including Political Lyricism and fable-like political allegories). In this edition, Gu Xiang has attached notes on some specific poems.

A four-volume collection of Gu Cheng's essays, lectures and interviews have been edited by Jiang Xiaomin (江晓敏) and Gu Xiang. Jiang Xiaomin also runs a website called "Gu Cheng's City" (顾城之城, the name of the website puns on the fact that the Cheng in Gu Cheng means "city" or "city wall"), posting articles written by and related to Gu Cheng.³²⁴

³²² Yeh 1995, van Crevel 2008: ch 3.

³²³ Gu Cheng 1995 & 2010.

³²⁴ <http://www.gucheng.net/index.htm>.

Three English collections of Gu Cheng’s works have been published up to now. The first collection was jointly translated by Sean Golden and Chu Chiyu, the latter two translated respectively by Joseph R. Allen and Aaron Crippen.³²⁵ Furthermore, an edited volume in English including reviews, memoirs and essays on Gu Cheng has been compiled by Li Xia.³²⁶

5.2 School Education

From Gu Cheng’s memoir, fiction and poetry, it is clear that Gu Cheng’s school education was quite short and intermittent. Gu Cheng changed primary schools three times from 1963 to 1966, was forced to drop out because of the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in August 1966 and resumed his irregular schooling one year after, in Oct 1967. His schooling ended when his whole family was rusticated to a remote village in Shandong Province in 1969.³²⁷

While Gu Cheng made great efforts to get himself accustomed to the school system, he still suffered from anxiety because of frequent sickness, difficulties in communicating with teachers and fellow students, and failing most of his subjects. He felt relieved when reading the Chinese translation of Jean-Henri Fabre’s *Book of Insects* (昆虫记, [*Souvenirs entomologiques*]) and dwelling in nature “talking” to the insects. As Yeh and McDougall have remarked, nature imagery in Obscure poetry serves as a way to show rejection of the adult’s world (politics, money) and to reinterpret Chinese traditional culture. As McDougall puts it when interpreting Bei Dao’s poems, “nature offers a refuge for the oppressed and the weary.”³²⁸ To add a new dimension to Yeh and McDougall’s argument, I would surmise that Gu Cheng’s affinity with nature also originated from his anxiety and his frustration of being not recognized by others during school days. It significantly relates to his personal health status and his introvert personality, which made him special among kids studying in schools affiliated with the People’s Liberation Army General Political Department and living in an army compound.

³²⁵ Gu Cheng 1990 & 2005b & 2005c

³²⁶ Li Xia (ed). 1999

³²⁷ Gu Cheng 2005a: 3-28, 166-171

³²⁸ Yeh 1991a, McDougall 1985

5.2.1 Sickness and Anxiety

Gu Cheng's parents worked in different work units, and lived separately in two living compounds. Therefore, he attended boarding schools (for kindergarten and primary level) which were affiliated with the People's Liberation Army General Political Department, and lived with one of his parents in the weekend.³²⁹ In 1963, he lived with his mother, when he started his first year in a suburban primary school in Beijing. When his mother was sent to Shanxi Province for the Four Clean-Ups Movement, which is also known as the Socialist Education Movement (1963-1966), he moved to live with his father, and in second grade was transferred to an urban primary school near his father's working unit.³³⁰

Gu Cheng was frequently ill. This situation changed a bit after his tonsillectomy.³³¹ He mentioned several times in various interviews that, since he was five years old he had been afraid of death. When he got sick and stayed in his dormitory or his own house alone, according to his recollections, he noticed that the surroundings were white, a color traditionally associated with mourning in Chinese culture. What occupied his mind at that moment was that life was short and that everybody would certainly die. He felt helpless since he could not stop time flying.³³²

In his memoir, Gu Cheng mentioned his mother's company during his sickness became his happiest time. However, since his parents were busy with work, he had to face illness and his fear of death alone most of the time. It was Fabre's book on insects that helped him come to understand that human life, just like insects, finally and inevitably ends in death; and that even though death is inevitable, every insect still strives to live.³³³

³²⁹ Gu Cheng 2006a: 5-9, Gu Cheng 2006b: 84

³³⁰ Gu Cheng 2005a: 21

³³¹ Gu Cheng 2005a: 21

³³² Gu Cheng 2005a: 35

³³³ Gu Cheng 2006b: 22, Gu Cheng 2005a: 35-36

5.2.2 Isolation from Others

Gu Cheng had difficulty in being understood by others. Isolation and loneliness are prevalent in his memoir of school days. He would call himself “the little mute boy”, searching for his own voice, as in Lorca’s poem.³³⁴

Before attending primary school, as Gu Cheng says, he needed his sister to “translate” for him when he desperately tried to express himself. He experienced similar difficulty when he was a primary school student. He was once so excited that he recited a poem in front of his classmates, but all of them laughed at him for his uncontrollable and unreasonable over-excitement. Gu Cheng described it as a traumatic experience, and became quite silent since then.³³⁵

Notably, Gu Cheng appeared disinclined to spend time with boys at this early age. He was inclined to play with girls instead. He would have liked to join his sister and other girls in playing games. But these girls reminded Gu Cheng that he was a boy and ran away from him, which made him felt treated unfairly. He wrote to his mother about this, pouring out his grievance.³³⁶ Gu Cheng was extremely uncomfortable of the snappish male students among his classmates. He cried when he felt that he was wrongly treated, because while he sat quietly in class and the other naughty boys disobeyed rules, the teacher asked all the boys to leave the classroom.³³⁷ He felt scared when he realized he was a boy and that he would be become a man around the age of fourteen, because he considered males to be ugly and dumb.³³⁸

Based on Gu Cheng’s recollections, it is not hard to imagine his loneliness among a group of children living in military compounds (部队子弟) before and during the Cultural Revolution, who have been well known for their machismo. As clearly stated by Mi Hedu (米鹤都), the ties between the CCP and military have always been close. Children living in compounds, and in military compounds especially, put collectivism first.³³⁹

³³⁴ Gu Cheng 2005a: 192, Lorca 2005 :55

³³⁵ Gu Cheng 2005a: 11

³³⁶ Gu Cheng 2007: 311

³³⁷ Gu Cheng 2007: 86

³³⁸ Gu Cheng 2006b: 61, Gu Cheng 2007: 179

³³⁹ Mi Hedu 2016

5.2 School Education

Under such a circumstance, when reading Fabre's insect stories, Gu found the story of the cicadas fascinating. The cicadas, as Gu recounts the story, write their songs under the dark soil. They expect that one day they can sing on the trees. However, the cicadas are deaf and cannot hear what they sing.³⁴⁰ Although he does not make it explicit, the cicadas story, which he often refers to, can easily be seen to reveal a wish to be heard by others.

5.2.3 Failing Subjects

Gu Cheng was bad at nearly all subjects. He knew that if he continued to study in the fourth grade, he would be detained for failing.³⁴¹ He could not follow the teacher in mathematics, it became a big challenge to him hand in his homework.³⁴² He even caught a fever when he needed to take exams.³⁴³

He also performed badly in the subject of Chinese language and literature, especially in dictation quizzes. Usually he could remember only one part of the Chinese character, but forgot the rest.³⁴⁴ While he was away from school, as he stated, he taught himself by reading the two volumes of *Sea of Words* (辞海), one of the large Chinese dictionaries.³⁴⁵ He checked this dictionary to study entries related to insects, in which he was interested.³⁴⁶ It is not clear what the effect was of this kind of self-study. It was said that later, Xie Ye took care of proofreading Gu Cheng's poems, since Gu Cheng made mistakes when using Chinese characters.³⁴⁷

Gu Cheng tried hard in school before 1966 but he refused political-oriented lessons after 1966. When the Cultural Revolution broke out in the summer of 1966, he was about to start in the fourth grade, but schools stopped operating and only resumed at irregular intervals from October 1967. The facilities in the classrooms were badly damaged and fights among his classmates broke out at times. The

³⁴⁰ Gu Cheng 2006b: 22

³⁴¹ Gu Cheng 2006a: 275

³⁴² Gu Cheng 2006a: 23

³⁴³ Gu Cheng 2006b: 32

³⁴⁴ Gu Cheng 2006b: 56

³⁴⁵ Gu Cheng 2006b: 107

³⁴⁶ Gu Cheng 2006b: 107

³⁴⁷ Kubin1999: 21

lessons changed to be intensively politically oriented. He showed his resistance to these changes in school by escaping to wander in nature.³⁴⁸

In all, we can see that Gu Cheng felt inferior because of his bad performance in school. Nevertheless, he tried to comfort himself through finding reasons for his bad performances. In his fictional story called «Stigmatized Youth» (劣等生), the protagonist imagines he is sitting relaxed in the classroom, with neither his classmates who once bullied him, nor the teachers who graded his assignments. A common view would have it that a bad student is a failure, a “loser”, and should be excluded from school. But Gu Cheng calls for his readers to consider the possibility that this loser may see different things from those taught at school, and have the ability to explore a unique and unprecedented way of living.³⁴⁹

5.3 Family Education

Little is known about Gu Cheng’s mother, Hu Huiling, but she is known to have been an editor, script writer and film critic.³⁵⁰ As with other Obscure Poets in their childhood, Gu Cheng was also separated from his mother and cherished every moment they were together. Since Gu Cheng studied in boarding schools, he was separated from his mother during weekdays. The happiest times for him were the days when he got sick, since his mother would stay with him and tell fairytales.³⁵¹

Gu Cheng’s father Gu Gong was an establishment poet in the People’s Liberation Army.³⁵² His works include poetry, novels, reports and film scripts, which function as a part of the government-sanctioned grand historical narrative. His poetry fits within Political Lyricism. As Gu Gong’s autobiography shows, he once held hopes of being a movie star, when he joined a troupe in Shanghai. Unexpectedly, the troupe turned out to be an underground branch of the Communist Party. Thus he was introduced to the Communist Party and became an establishment poet.³⁵³

³⁴⁸ Gu Cheng 2006a: 24

³⁴⁹ Gu Cheng 2007: 18-19, 44

³⁵⁰ Li Xia (ed) 1999: 405.

³⁵¹ Gu Cheng 2005a: 5-6

³⁵² Gu Gong 1989 and Gu Cheng 2005: 83

³⁵³ Gu Gong 1989.

5.3 Family Education

The father's influence on the son is clear from several types of evidences: the son's statements, observations by their acquaintances, and most importantly, the similarities in some of their works. All this can be seen in Gu Cheng's Political Lyricism, traditional Chinese poems and allegories, which constitute a large part of his oeuvre and have previously been ignored in scholarship.

In Gu Cheng's statements, he confirms the influence of his father. He holds that since his father was a poet, he himself was keen on poetry and would choose to be a poet in the end. He read nearly all of his father's poems and was impressed with his father's usage of words. Furthermore, he is touched by the optimistic attitude present in his father's poems, especially when they underwent the difficult period of being rusticated to a remote village.³⁵⁴

According to Professor Wu Sijing, one of their acquaintances, there is a teacher-student relationship between father and son. Prof. Wu mentioned that he became aware of the influence of the father on the son from another celebrated Obscure poet, Jiang He, and Prof. Wu finds this convincing. Prof. Wu paraphrases what Jiang He said as follows: the father was very strict with the son. The father would randomly pick an entry in a dictionary, and ask his son to compose a poem with it. Prof. Wu compares this way of training with the one mentioned in Li Yi's (李沂) *Autumn Star Pavilion Remarks on Poetry* (秋星阁诗话), which indicates that since practice makes perfect, it is necessary for beginners to compose a poem each day.³⁵⁵

When the Cultural Revolution broke out, Gu Cheng became a swineherd in a remote countryside, instead of being a Red Guard and Rusticated Youth as other Obscure poets were. There, especially from 1969 onward, he had abundant time and ample opportunity to learn creative writing from his father, as this was also the only choice he had in the circumstances. In 1974, Gu Cheng and his family returned to Beijing.

When Gu Cheng and his family arrived in the village for the first time, they were surprised at its poverty. As stated by Gu Cheng, in Crippen's translation:³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Gu Cheng's interview with Suizi, see Gu Cheng 2005a

³⁵⁵ Personal correspondence, 13 August 2014.

³⁵⁶ Gu Cheng 2005c:153

“Our first night in the countryside was miserable: things scattered in the courtyard, on the road; the whole family stretched out on a mud-brick bed; everything completely still, black. It seemed like the world would never come back into being. We started learning to consider the earliest world invented by humanity — water, fire, light...”

It was in these circumstances that Gu Cheng learnt to recite his father’s poems and imitated the Political Lyricism that his father was so well versed in. They composed traditional Chinese poems in pairs, which feature regular meter and fixed line length. Furthermore, Gu Cheng wrote a series of Political Lyricist poems, such as «Setting Off» (起步), «Farewell» (告别) and «Suzhou» (苏州), and dedicated them to his father.³⁵⁷

Gu Cheng’s writing of allegories was also influenced by his father. Gu Gong published quite a few fairytales (mixed with fables and allegories) in magazines such as *Children Literature* (儿童文学) in the 1980s and a collection of these stories in 2005.³⁵⁸ In Gu Cheng’s recollection, his father was good at telling stories filled with plot twists, but these stories lacked poetic meaning.³⁵⁹ Hu Huiling recounts that Gu Cheng and his sister Gu Xiang were attracted to their father’s fairytales in their childhood. The father would improvise dramatic stories, with characters including his two children as well as fairies and animals. He would speak in a vivid tone and sing along with the storyline. In his stories, the moral was embodied in the plot, the triumph of good over evil generally being a moral lesson.³⁶⁰

We see a teacher-student relation between the father and the son in the 1960s and 1970s, and Gu Cheng’s respect for his teacher/father. Later, however, tensions between the father and the son become visible.

In the 1980s, the father publicly criticized his son’s work, but also defended his son against criticism by others, in the context of the aforesaid controversy over Obscure poetry. In his essay “Two Generations” (两代人) published in 1980, Gu Gong states that some of Gu Cheng’s poems presented a puzzle to him, the gloomy

³⁵⁷ Gu Cheng 2005a: 118–124

³⁵⁸ Gu Gong 1985, Gu Gong 2005.

³⁵⁹ Gu Cheng 2005a: 88

³⁶⁰ Hu Huilin 1990.

5.3 Family Education

nature of these poems being the main reason. He points out that he had to try hard to understand his son's negative thoughts towards his socialist country and the future. And he took it as his responsibility to guide his son back toward the right direction.³⁶¹ But in his response to criticism of Gu Cheng's poetry made by critic Gong Liu in 1982, Gu Gong supported his son by adjusting his previous point. He claimed that his son's negative thoughts were quite general among the younger generation, based on the feedback his son received from his peers. He also admitted that he was inspired by reading his son's works, and would like to write poetry together with his son.³⁶²

In his interview with Suizi Zhang-Kubin in 1992, Gu Cheng states three differences between his father and himself. First, his father is an optimist and a believer in progress. He would record happy things and forget about all the unhappiness. Gu Cheng considers himself opposite to his father in this. Secondly, his father writes with society and the masses in mind, while Gu Cheng prefers to write to explore the complexity of "self". Thirdly, his father takes it as an honor to be a poet, but Gu Cheng doubts this.³⁶³ All in all, that Gu Cheng doubted elements which are essential to Political Lyricism.

Little is known as how father and the son settled these disagreements or if they ever tried to begin with. However, Wolfgang Kubin, one of Gu Cheng's translators and a close friend, suggests that Gu Cheng was subject to censorship by his father. His father made "major editorial changes to the texts". Gu Cheng had issues with this and teased his father on some occasions.³⁶⁴ But Kubin does not provide detailed examples to elaborate this point.

5.4 Poetic Identity: Mixed Styles

From his 2010 anthology, it appears that Gu Cheng mostly composed Political Lyricism from 1971 to 1982, traditional Chinese poetry from 1969 to 1987, and allegories from 1971 to 1984. I consider the years 1971 and 1979 to be two

³⁶¹ Gu Gong 1980.

³⁶² Gu Gong 1982

³⁶³ Gu Cheng 2005a: 118 – 124.

³⁶⁴ Kubin1999: 21.

milestones in Gu Cheng’s trajectory of becoming an accomplished poet. Further to the discussion of family education Gu Cheng received, I note that in 1971, Gu Cheng as an apprentice under the instruction of his father/teacher, composed different styles of poems. In this year, Gu Cheng composed his first Political Lyricist poem, «Boundless Spring» (无限春天). Immature as it is, we can still observe that it is written as a folk song and ends with a joyful and hopeful attitude towards life and the future.

Gu Cheng also composed «Nameless Flowers» (无名的小花) in 1971, and published it in a small newspaper five years later. This is considered the debut of Gu Cheng as an Obscure poet. In «Nameless Flowers», he creatively uses the metaphor of comparing wild flowers to his own poems that haven’t reached the public. The tone is sentimental. A similar style can be found in poems such as «Illusions and Dreams» (幻想与梦) and «Windmill» (风车), which emphasize his endless disappointment in being rusticated to and trapped in the remote countryside.

Gu Cheng also composed his first allegory, «Crazy Pirates» (疯狂的海盗), in 1971. In this poem, several pirates sail their boat in an illusion of holding swords to make time stop, poking holes in the sky, and putting their flag in every corner of the world. However, they also destroy their boat with the swords. At the end, the boat sinks while the pirates are celebrating their imaginary victory. In my reading, the poem mocks the crazy behavior of the Red Guards.

Starting from 1979, his writing clearly matures, and he begins to form his own style and widen the distance between himself and his father. In 1979, he wrote the famous, epigraphic «A Generation», discussed above. He also wrote «Ending» (结束), which was criticized by his father in the aforementioned essay in 1980. My reading of Gu Cheng’s other poems composing after 1979 will follow soon.

Gu Cheng composed traditional Chinese poems every year from 1969 to 1987 except for 1971. Most of these traditional Chinese poems are set in the background of Chinese historical events; protagonists include such as the archetypal statesman-poet Qu Yuan (屈原) and political leaders such as Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) and Zhou Enlai (周恩来).

5.4.1 The Transformation of Political Lyricism

Unlike his father, who was a steady advocate of Political Lyricism, Gu Cheng gradually went against Political Lyricism. While still borrowing elements of Political Lyricism, he clearly showed his resistance to and suspicion of politics.

The poem suite «Forever Parted: Graveyard» (永别了，墓地) written in 1982, is an indication of Gu Cheng's transformation of Political Lyricism. He still refers to the metaphors traditionally used in Political Lyricism, but uses them with negative connotations. Here I cite the fourth and the fifth poems from this suite for discussion.

The first to third poems depict the poet arriving at the graveyard and his intimate connection with the Red Guards buried in the graveyard. From the fourth poem onward, the poet employs a different narrative than the orthodox one. In his narrative, the Red Guards were cultivated to hate instead of love, a cynical turnaround of what was supposed to be a political movement with an idealistic appeal. They never questioned the sun, which, as noted, was a conventional metaphor for Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution. In Tony Barnstone's translation:³⁶⁵

You lived among the peaks.
You lived behind walls.
Every day you went the way you *should* go,
Away from the sea you'd never seen.
You never knew love,
Never dreamed of another continent,
Only
In a fog
saw *evils* afloat;
Down the middle of every desk,
Ran
The "battle line" of the chess game in chalk.
.....

And then,
One fine morning

你们在高山中生活
在墙中生活
每天走必须的路
从没有见过海洋
你们不知道爱
不知道另一片大陆
只知道
在缄默的雾中
浮动着“罪恶”
为此，每张课桌中央
都有一道
粉笔画出的界河

于是
在一天早晨

³⁶⁵ Barnstone (ed). 1993: 76-82

Gu Cheng: "Everything Bulin Wailed Was a Slogan"

With a handful of dry leaves
The bronze buttons on your leather coat
And you polished bright departed.

你们用糙树叶
擦亮了
皮带的铜扣，走了

Everybody knew
It was the Sun
Who led you,
To the tune of a marching song,
Off to Paradise.
Later, halfway
There you tired,
Tripped over a bed
Whose frame was inlaid with stars and bullet holes
It had seemed to you a game, a game to play
A game where you could always start all over.

谁都知道
是太阳把你们
领走的
乘着几支进行曲
去寻找天国
后来，在半路上
你们累了
被一张床绊倒
床头镶着弹洞和星星
你们好像是参加了一场游戏
一切还可以重新开始

In the next, fifth poem in the suite, the poet questions the way in which Deng Xiaoping's regime reflects upon the Cultural Revolution – or rather, fails to reflect on it.

Don't question the sun.
It wouldn't take responsibility for yesterday
Yesterday belongs to
Another star,
The sun has burned away in the fearsome fire of hope
Today's shrine
holds carefully selected potted plants
and perfect silence,
Solemn and quiet
Like an iceberg afloat on a warm current.

不要追问太阳
它无法对昨天负责
昨天属于
另一颗恒星
它已在可怕的热望中烧尽
如今神殿上
只有精选的盆花
和一片寂静
静穆得
像白冰山在暖流中航行

When will the raucous bazaar,
Together with the repaired swiveling chair
Start to move again
Carrying the dancing and
The silent young,
Carrying the toothless infants and the toothless old.
Maybe there are always a few lives
Destined to be

什么时候，闹市
同修复的旋椅
又开始转动
载着舞蹈的和
沉默的青年
载着缺牙的幼儿和老人
也许总有一些生命
注定要被

5.4 Poetic Identity: Mixed Styles

Shed by the world.
Like the white cranes
Feathers found every day at the camp site.

世界抖落
就像白额雁
每天留在营地的羽毛

Tangerine, and pale green,
Sweet and bitter
The lights are on
In the fog-soaked dusk
Time heals
Let's go home.
And write out another copy of life.
I haven't forgotten
I'll walk carefully past the graves.
The empty eggshell of the moon
will wait there
For the birds that have left to return

橘红的，淡青的
甘甜和苦涩的
灯，亮了
在饱含水分的暮色里
时间恢复了生机
回家吧
去复写生活
我还没忘
小心地绕过墓台边
空蛋壳似的月亮
它将在这里等待
离去的幼鸟归来

After the Cultural Revolution, starting with the Deng Xiaping era, the stories of the Red Guards and the Rusticated Youths were mostly covered up and forgotten. The government's role in launching the Cultural Revolution was whitewashed. The mistakes were blamed on the Gang of Four rather than on Mao Zedong. The poet doubts the blindly optimistic attitude held by the common people under Deng's regime. This may well have resulted in, or minimally contributed to, his rejection of Political Lyricism.

5.4.2 Political Allegory

Gu Cheng composed a series of political allegories, which is unique among the Obscure poets. This writing addresses the hypocrisy of politics, with powerholders such as kings and gods as protagonists that are portrayed in funny, original ways, subverting the notion of eulogy for political leaders that is so central to Political Lyricism.

5.4.2.1 Personification

Like most of the other political allegories, Gu Cheng likes to personalize animals. In the suite *Bulin* (布林), Gu Cheng shows his sarcastic attitude towards

bureaucracy by personalized animals and a character that is incompatible with the school system or work unit system. Politics to him is a frivolous and playful game. In Allen's translation:³⁶⁶

When Bulin was born
The spiders were holding a conference
A dangerous party. In mid-air
The songs sounded awful.
Bulin wailed
And everything he wailed was a slogan.
Blast it! Hymns were never that loud...
And then he smiled
A smile just the right size,
Really just like a president running for re-election
So mama horse thought he was fully grown
In one stride he stepped out of his cradle
Took a sheepskin
For a briefcase
Wrapped up a pile of
Highly confidential nappies
And began to work in the Ministry

No parties
There
The ministerial Striking Committee
Was holding elections
Cigarette papers crowded with names
They were packed tight, they all made faces
Now Bulin arrived
He stepped right out of the stable and into the
conference hall,
As solemn as a slab of black marble.
He stood still, pointing one finger
A brass bugle encircled his finger,
He said: *BREAD*
Crow. Crow. All the crows fell on the table
"Yes, indeed,

布林生下来时
蜘蛛正在开会
那是危险的舞会，在半空中
乐曲也不好听
布林哭了
哭出的全是口号
糟糕！赞美诗可没那么响亮
接着他又笑了
笑得极合尺寸
像一个真正的竞选总统
于是，母马认为他长大了
他一迈步就跨出了摇篮
用一张干羊皮
作了公文包
里面包着一大堆
高度机密的尿布
他开始到政府大厦去上班

在那里
可没有舞会
部长级罢工委员会
正在进行选举
在香烟纸上写满名字
写满了，就做个鬼脸
这时布林来了
从马棚走进会议大厅
严肃得像一块黑色大理石
他站住，伸出一个手指
上边绕着铜喇叭的线圈
他说：面包
哇哇，所有乌鸦都落在桌上
“是的，面包

³⁶⁶ Gu Cheng 2005b: 36-37

5.4 Poetic Identity: Mixed Styles

Bread is essential to the pride of our race.
Essential, do you understand?
No eggs added. Long live bread!
Down with dirty cake-making plots!"
Everyone and every leaf
Applauded.
They played recordings off in the distance
To bring thins to a pitch
Some sort of smile was drawn in ink
On the snout of every esteemed pig.

这是民族必备的骄傲
必须，明白了吗？
不能加鸡蛋，面包万岁！
打倒一切做蛋糕的阴谋！”
所有的人和树叶
都鼓掌了
为了加强感动
在遥远的地方还放了录音
每位猪的嘴上
都用钢笔画出了一种微笑

This poem recalls Bei Dao's poetry about a child bearing lofty ambitions, as discussed in chapter four. As Bei Dao writes, "Long live...! I shouted only once, damn it / Then sprouted a beard." Gu Cheng's poem also indicates that as long as you shout a slogan and learn to applaud and smile at the right time, you will be considered qualified for taking part in politics. And when attending meetings, what Bulin - who is still wearing nappies - needs to do is make a speech to a group of serious adults and repeat slogans. "Long live bread" is of course a reference to slogans such as "long live Chairman Mao". "Down with dirty cake making plots" similarly transforms slogans such as "down with the imperialist conspiracies" (打倒帝国主义的阴谋).

Animals and human beings are equally positioned. Bulin is born in a stable and grows up in the care of a horse. In the conference, crows, pigs, tree leaves, and humans applaud Bulin's speech. In the last two lines, the Chinese nominal quantifier used before the pigs is 位, which is normally used to designate human beings exclusively. Personification makes the poem multidimensional: politics is ubiquitous, and human beings lack rationality.

5.4.2.2 Homonyms

Gu Cheng likes to exchange single characters with other, homophone Chinese characters in his interviews, such as 人民大会堂 (the Great Hall of the People) and 人民大烩汤 (the People's Mixed Soup), 诡计多端 (crafty) and 鬼计多端 (full of ghost-like ideas). In his poem «President Excellence's Military Accomplishments»

(杰总统的武功), we can also see how homonyms plays a role in making a piece of allegory outstanding:³⁶⁷

First: Robbery

President Excellence excellence excellence

Ordered: Attack

Therefore the smoke billowed

A large team of horses, artillery

Fire flashed on the cigarettes

Tableware targeted the cakes

Fighting happened in the baskets

The old hen flew into the bushes

Then: "Report"

A soldier was caught

Just a soldier, who was going

To sell onions in the market

Stand at attention! A soldier

Second: Triumph

The army of Excellence Imperial

Caught a soldier

What sort of news was this

It is a must to modify, to clarify

President Excellence put the teeth of the wild boar

On the shoulders of the soldier

"Stand at attention!" stopping eating cakes

Command 0.06 was issued

"Special promotion for

You, a soldier, to be

Colonial General

Morning Glory Park Leader

Rakes-shop Shareholder

My worst enemy

Third: Celebration

So, the next day

Cloudless

一、劫

杰杰杰总统

说: 进攻

于是浓烟滚滚

大马队, 炮兵

火光在烟卷上闪动

餐具在蛋糕上瞄准

肉搏在菜筐里进行

老母鸡飞入树丛

于是: "报告"

捉住一个小兵

是小兵, 正要去

集上卖葱

立正! 一个小兵

二、捷

杰帝国的大军

捉住了一个小兵

算什么新闻

必须修改, 澄清

总统把野猪牙

放在小兵肩上

"立——正!" 停止吃点心

发出零点零六号命令

"特提升

你——小兵, 为

殖民地将军

牵牛花公园统领

犁耙店股东——

我最大的敌人

三、节

于是, 第二天

万里无云

³⁶⁷ Gu Cheng 2010: 178

5.4 Poetic Identity: Mixed Styles

Stood under Arc de Triomphe were
Guests of various countries, all reaching out
To the cold drinks
“Here they come! Music”
Drums were pounding, brown
Dogs were flying the kites
An extra in red was wrapped with the onion
The new national anthem began to broadcast
“Glory, empire, military
Our president is mighty
Capture, enemy, general
Or marshal, or commander

凯旋门下站着
各国来宾，都把手
伸到冷饮附近
“来了——奏乐”
鼓声冬冬，棕色的
小狗拉着风筝
红色的号外包着大葱
新国歌开始播送：
“光荣、帝国、军人
我们的总统无所不能
捉住、敌人、将军
或者元帅、或者司令”

In Chinese, the four characters 杰 (excellence), 劫 (robbery), 捷 (triumph), and 节 (celebration) are homonyms. Gu Cheng uses the first character as the name of the protagonist, and other three as sub-titles of each part.

The first part of the poem presents a violent contrast: President Excellence orders a large-scale attack, but only catches a single soldier. Lines 5-8 and 12 indicate the attack is not on the battlefield, thus disturbing the life of the common people. The second part also presents a contrast: on the surface, president Excellence successfully positioned the attack as a triumph by granting ridiculous official titles to the soldier, but it is obvious that one can hardly call it a real triumph. The third part further mocks the hypocrisy in politics. In the celebration, the guests show no interest in the triumph, but only in the drinks. The extra edition of the newspaper brags about the military accomplishments of President Excellence. In Chinese, 武功 in the title can be translated as either “military accomplishment” or “martial arts”. Its pronunciation is close to 无功, meaning “without any accomplishment”. Overall, through the sophisticated use of homonyms, the poet mocks the nuisance, hypocrisy and ridiculousness of politics.

5.5 Poetic Identity: A Reflection on School Education

Although Gu Cheng’s time in school was short and intermittent, he reflects on his school education in several of his poems. These poems capture specific moments and seem somehow monotonous. These poems include «Bulin» (布林), «Studying

Abroad» (留学), «Warm Days» (暖天) and «Going to School» (上学) from the suite «Liquid Mercury» (水银), and «Primary School» (小学) from the suite «Eulogy World» (颂歌世界).

«Warm Days» depicts a common scene, which includes his classmate (always a female student, without any description of her appearance), a teacher (always boring), a big tree and a stone tablet in the courtyard outside his classroom. A similar setting is found in the first three stanzas of «Going to School»:³⁶⁸

When attending school	上学的时候
Eating grapes	又吃葡萄
Spitting seeds	又吐籽
Not following the rules	不是按规定
Spitting outside	吐在外边
Seeing the girl again	又见女生
Carrying her bag	背书包
Turning to the stairs	转楼梯
Entering the classroom	进教室
Can't sit in front of the classroom as ordered	不能按规定坐在前边
That's an event in the afternoon	这是下午的事
A terrible teacher	一个糟糕老师
Drawing those hairs	画那些头发
He knows how to draw to the middle	他会画到中间
He likes to start from the eyebrows	他喜欢从眉心画起
Sitting on the ground at the age of 20	二十岁坐在地上
The age of a tree stump	一个树根年龄
He likes drawing the afternoon's	他喜欢画下午
Shadow	的阴影
Showing the other half to others	露出一半给人看见

Gu Cheng clearly formed an idea of learning from nature rather than in the classroom, which is visible in «Studying Abroad» (留学):³⁶⁹

³⁶⁸ Gu Cheng 1995: 853

³⁶⁹ Gu Cheng 1995: 788

5.5 Poetic Identity: A Reflection on School Education

In a night filled with tension
The land becomes elastic
People are mutually distancing
I am bounced into the sky

在一个紧张的夜晚
土地具有了弹性
人和人拉开了距离
我被弹入高空

Later, a drop of dew
Ends my flight
It sticks to me quietly
In a green shadow

后来有一滴露水
结束了我的飞行
它把我悄悄粘住
在一片绿影之中

A twinkling bee
Continues to steal the dew
Many of my ideas are washed out
To repay the forest for the accommodation

闪烁闪烁的小蜂
不断把露水偷饮
我洗去了许多观念
来报答森林的收容

A butterfly expands its wings
Teaches me how to read the translations there
Light strings of different lengths
Makes all kinds of single sound

粉蝶展开翅页
教我读上边的译文
不同长短的光弦
发出各种单音

It is a language
Used to express doubts
I begin to recall my house
That lonely lamp

这是一种语言
用来表达疑问
我开始回想家里
那盏寂寞的小灯

Finally there is a path
Leading me back to the city
The society undergoes surgery
It appears to get back to its original face

终于有一条小路
把我领回都城
社会经过一番手术
似乎恢复了面容

I do not speak
My voices come from all directions
The crowd is gathering gradually
Discussing matters of the future

我没有说话
到处都传来我的声音
渐渐收拢的人群
在讨论明天的事情

They are young
Not from the forest
Salt and bruises tell me
They come from the sea and the land

他们都很年轻
并不是来自森林
盐和擦伤告诉我
他们来自海面和地层

Creatures in nature act in the role of teachers. These teachers refresh Gu Cheng’s thoughts and teach him how to speak a language, which can be used to voice his doubts, but is incompatible with the language used by “normal” people.

5.5.1 Strangers

As mentioned before, Gu Cheng felt isolated from his classmates at primary school. The experiences of rustication and the Cultural Revolution intensified his inclination to be away from others. This is significantly reflected in his poetry.

In Gu Cheng’s poems, human beings often lack efficient communication. «Far and Near» (远和近) is a famous case in point. In Crippen’s translation:³⁷⁰

You	你
Look at me	一会看我
Then look at the clouds	一会看云
I feel	我觉得
When you look at me you’re far away	你看我时很远
When you look at the clouds you’re near	你看云时很近

Furthermore, conventional language is considered by the poet to be unfit for communication. In a response to Göran Malmqvist’s complaint of difficulty in understanding his later collections, such as *Liquid Mercury* (named after an eponymous suite of poems), Gu Cheng explains that “with his collection he wished to demonstrate that language was incapable of serving as a means of communication between human beings”.³⁷¹

Gu Cheng’s preference of the company of women over that of men can also be seen in his poetry, in which boys and men are rarely protagonists. In poetics, he represents girlhood as “clean, unrestrained and arbitrary” (清洁, 自在, 独断), “quiet” (安静) and “fresh” (新鲜). That is, according to him, where beauty lies. This

³⁷⁰ Gu Cheng 2005c: 48

³⁷¹ Li Xia (ed). 1999: preface, xv.

5.5 Poetic Identity: A Reflection on School Education

girlhood can be found in the female characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which is mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. Every female character in this novel is different in personality, but they are linked by their girlhood qualities. On the contrary, boyhood, according to Gu Cheng, is dirty (脏), flustered (慌乱) and furious (愤怒). This is because it lacks something important and must find it back, which results in vulnerable aggressiveness.³⁷²

5.5.2 In the Face of Death

In light of the above discussion of Gu Cheng's school education and family education, one might surmise that the fear of death never left him. This was intensified when the Cultural Revolution broke out. This looming fear of death is reflected in his poetry, as death is a common theme and is discussed in depth. In some poems, Gu Cheng employs the third-person narrative, to separate himself from the rest of the world and to display the unnoticed cruelty of death in a calm tone. «In This Wide and Bright World» (在这宽大明亮的世界上) is one of the examples:³⁷³

In this wide and bright world
People walk around
Surrounding themselves
Like a horde of horses
Surrounding the stake

在这宽大明亮的世界上
人们走来走去
他们围绕着自己
像一匹匹马
围绕着木桩

In this wide and bright world
On occasion, we see dandelions dancing
No one tells them
All the lives heated by the sun
Will not go far away
Far away from the coming night
Death is a careful harvester
Who will not lose a single ear of barley

在这宽大明亮的世界上
偶尔，也有蒲公英飞舞
没有谁告诉他们
被太阳晒热的所有生命
都不能远去
远离即将来临的黑夜
死亡是位细心的收获者
不会丢下一穗大麦

³⁷² Gu Cheng 2006b: 171, Gu Cheng 2005b: 44

³⁷³ Gu Cheng 1995: 303

In some poems, Gu Cheng employs the first-person singular, performing a monologue. In his early poems, he joyfully says goodbye to the earthly world, in an attempt to avoid the arrival of death. «I am Leaving» (我要走啦) is an example.³⁷⁴

Farewell to the lighthouse on its night watch	告别守夜的灯塔
Thanks, I am leaving!	谢谢，我要走啦
I want to take away all the stars	我要带走全部的星星
Dread no more for the loss	再不为丢失担忧害怕
Farewell to the thick fence	告别粗大的篱笆
Yes I am leaving!	是的，我要走啦
The story of stealing apples you've heard	你听见的偷苹果的故事
Please don't tell the crow in the temple	请不要告诉庙里的乌鸦
Finally, farewell to the river sands	最后，告别河边的细沙
Good morning, I am leaving!	早安，我要走啦
No one really lay down one's life here	没有谁真在这里长眠不醒
To wait for the Cross to blossom	去等待十字架生根开花
I am leaving, leaving!	我要走啦，走啦
Walking toward the green hazy on the horizon	走向绿雾蒙蒙的天涯
Go! How is it that I've come to your window again	走哇！怎么又走到你的窗前
On the window hangs the handkerchief, our signpost	窗口垂着相约的手帕
No! It is not me, no	不！这不是我，不是
You should blame that brown pony	有罪的是褐色小马
It did not understand last night's terrible oath	它没看懂昨夜可怕的誓言
And has taken me back to your house	把我又带到你家

Death, to the poet, arrives at night. In an escape from death, the poet chooses to leave the earthly world during daytime, taking with him the stars (which symbolize the beauty of nature) and the apples (which symbolize food). However, he stays,

³⁷⁴ Gu Cheng 1995: 415

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because of his love for a woman. He does not seem to be quite sure about his feeling about love, but he feels that love can overcome his fear of death.

In his later poems, dealing with the theme of death in the first-person singular, his tone becomes extremely calm. Take «Grave Bed» (墓床) as an example. In Crippen's translation:³⁷⁵

I know death approaches - it's not tragic
My hopes are at peace in a forest of pines
Overlooking the ocean from a distance like a pond
Afternoon sunlight keeping me mottled company

我知道永逝的来临并不悲伤
松林中安放着我的愿望
下边有海，远看象水池
一点点跟着我的是下午的阳光

A man's time is up and man's world goes on
I must rest in the middle
A passer-by says the branches droop
A passer-by says the branches are growing

人时已尽，人世很长
我在中间应当休息
走过的人说树枝低了
走过的人说树枝在长

In this poem, Gu Cheng suggests that death is entirely acceptable, as part of a natural world in which the one can move between human being and other life forms.

5.6 Concluding Remarks

For both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons, Gu Cheng dropped out of school at age thirteen. During his time at school, he was not keen and performed badly in the exams. He was also isolated from his classmates, especially from his male fellow students. He taught himself through reading Jean-Henri Fabre's *Book of Insects* in Chinese translation. In addition to this autodidactic element in his learning of the Chinese language, this may have also helped him reorient in what he experienced as a strange, unwelcoming human world and handle his anxiety.

Unique among the Obscure poets, Gu Cheng reflects on his school education in some of his poems, directly addressing his personal experience. Unlike in his interviews and fictional stories, he does not go into details in his poetry regarding his primary school. A feeling of sorrow is hinted at, but the reader cannot put the finger on the poet's exact feelings about school.

³⁷⁵ Gu Cheng 2005c: 146

When rusticated to the countryside in 1969, Gu Cheng embarked on an exclusive and intensive family education “program” when he learned how to write from his father, who was an establishment poet in the People’s Liberation Army and a staunch advocate of Political Lyricism. Gu Cheng’s later revolt against his father in poetry emerged from the fact that he himself was deeply familiar with Political Lyricism (not unlike Bei Dao’s situation). Father and son ultimately undertook diverse and sometimes contrasting aesthetic pursuits and held starkly different opinions on poetics. In a transformation of Political Lyricism, Gu Cheng clearly shows his resistance and suspicion towards politics in some of his poems, by using metaphors well known in Political Lyricism but in unconventional ways. He also composed political allegories that mock the hypocrisy of politics in a humorous way.

6 Wang Xiaoni: “Starting Anew as a Poet”

6.1 Introduction

Wang Xiaoni was born in 1955, in Changchun city, Jilin province. She is a relatively low-profile writer, only mentioned in most histories of modern Chinese literature in Chinese and English.³⁷⁶ However, she enjoys a steady readership in China.³⁷⁷ She mainly works as a freelance essayist, poet and novelist. She was a guest teacher lecturing to bachelor students on Chinese literature at Hainan University from 2005, but quit on her own initiative in 2011.³⁷⁸

Wang is traditionally labelled as one of the Obscure poets because of her age and the early date of her literary debut.³⁷⁹ However, this classification is open to debate. From the perspectives of gender and educational background, Wang is different from most of the Obscure poets. Only two of the Obscure poets are women, the other being Shu Ting – and Wang is the only one with a full-fledged tertiary education. Arguably, as regards poetic identity, Wang actually shares more similarities with the Third-Generation poets, most of whom are roughly a decade younger than the Obscure poets.³⁸⁰

Wang’s engagements with both the Obscure poets and the Third Generation poets mainly emerged through her college classmate and then husband Xu Jingya. As a critic, Xu made important contributions in support of the Obscure poetry, as discussed earlier, and later to the Third Generation poetry. In July and August 1980, Wang and Xu, then students at Jilin University, were invited to attend the first Young Poets Symposium (青春诗会), organized by the *Poetry Journal*. As such,

³⁷⁶ Take the well-acknowledged ones for example, Hong Zicheng & Liu Denghan 2005 and Yeh 2011.

³⁷⁷ The survey is based on my field work research in December 2013, Beijing.

³⁷⁸ Wang Xiaoni 2012b.

³⁷⁹ Yao Jiahua (ed). 1989: 9-13.

³⁸⁰ Li Zhensheng 1996, Day 2005

they had the opportunity to publish in its special issue.³⁸¹ Gu Cheng, Shu Ting and Jiang He, who were later commonly acknowledged as the Obscure poets, were also among the invitees. While these young poets received praise for their plea for individualism, they were also severely criticized for the same reason.

Wang Xiaoni's name hardly came up in the Obscure Poetry Controversy, discussed in chapter one; this was presumably because her poetry was less "difficult" than that of the other Obscure Poets, and her tone was comparably positive. By contrast, Xu Jingya was a main target in the Controversy, for his support of the Obscure poets.³⁸² In the ensuing political campaign against "spiritual pollution", Xu was accused of catering to capitalist countries because he supported modernism, which was claimed to be a product of capitalism. In 1984, he was forced to submit a "self-criticism" (自我检讨) to the *People's Daily* and to resign from his position as an editor of a local journal called *Can Hua* (参花) in North China. Later that year, he chose to move to the city Shenzhen in South China. Under these circumstances, Wang also left her job as an editor of the Changchun Film Studio's General Editing Department, and moved to Shenzhen to be with Xu.

In Shenzhen, Xu Jingya became an editor of a local newspaper called *Shenzhen Youth Newspaper* (深圳青年报), which was known for accommodating all kinds of new ideas. In 1986, together with Jiang Shiyuan (姜诗元, b.1956) an editor of *Poetry News* (诗歌报), Xu developed a publication project known as the "Grand Exhibition of Modernist Poetry Groups on China's Poetry Scene, 1986" (中国诗坛'86 现代诗群体大展). The Third Generation poets were invited to position themselves as groups, and publish their poems and manifestos. Wang helped to spread the word of the Exhibition, but unlike many other Third-Generation poets, she did not form or join a group, nor put forth any manifesto. Later on, Wang would position herself as an outsider, when the Third Generation poets were divided into the Intellectual (知识分子) and Popular (民间) camps, during a protracted polemic in the late 1990s.³⁸³

³⁸¹ Poetry Journal 1980-2.

³⁸² Yao Jiahua (ed). 1989: 9-13, 106-114, 247-285.

³⁸³ For more information about the Polemic, see Li Dian 2007 and van Crevel 2008: ch 12.

6.1 Introduction

As an independent poet practicing her ideas on individuality, Wang Xiaoni does not actively participate in poetic groups, nor is she keen on the hyperactive networking that characterizes the contemporary Chinese poetry scene.³⁸⁴ Her relative distance from poetic movements and events are appreciated by scholars, who agree that she stands out for her individualistic writings. Jeanne Hong Zhang's (张晓红) monograph is one of few English-language academic publications to discuss Wang's works. Zhang notes that in an allusion to Virginia Woolf's «A Room of One's Own», Wang's «It Would Be Good to Become a Craftsperson» (应该成为一个制造者) explores a space for female poets to “retain their individuality and autonomy”.³⁸⁵ In Chinese-language scholarship, Li Zhen (李震) points out that in Wang's poems there is neither a clear rebelliousness against male chauvinism, nor a clear build-up of the “mysteries of femininity”. Instead, Li writes, Wang shows a pure, modest and light-hearted world to the readers through her acute senses and accurate language, which Li calls the unique privilege of female writers.³⁸⁶ Zhang Guangxin (张光昕) discusses how Wang increases the dimensions of daily life themes, especially housework, in her poetry.³⁸⁷

While the relationship between Wang Xiaoni's gender and her poetic identity has been noted by the above scholars, the relationship between her educational background and her poetic identity has not been previously investigated. Also, Wang's essays, which reflect on the educational system at length and can contribute to our reading of her poetic identity – not just as manifest in her writings, but also her identity as a poet – have remained understudied to date.

Below, I hope to show how Wang's educational background is reflected in her poetic identity. To put it schematically, her poems diverge from the Political Lyricism that was part of the school education curriculum. Her poetics on individualism, visible in topics such as the relationship between the individual and the collective, and the interactions between human beings, is shown to be connected with her primary and secondary school education. Her poetics on intellectualism

³⁸⁴ On the Chinese poetry scene, see van Crevel 2017.

³⁸⁵ Jeanne Hong Zhang 2004: 33.

³⁸⁶ Li Zhen 1996.

³⁸⁷ Zhang Guoxin 2013. For other scholarship on Wang Xiaoni's poetry, see Huang Lin 2000 and Luo Zhenya 2009.

and her advocacy of “starting anew as a poet” are shown to derive from her tertiary school education and the education she received from her father. Finally, her emphasis on the significance of home is shown to derive from the education she received from her mother.

Up to now, Diana Shi & George O’Connell, Eleanor Goodman, Michael Day and Simon Patton have translated Wang’s poetry into English.³⁸⁸ For Wang’s Chinese publications, I mainly use *Wrapped inside My Paper Is My Fire* (我的纸里包着我的火). This includes poems from 1980 to 1996, with biographical notes compiled by Xu Jingya and some of Wang’s writing on poetics as appendices.³⁸⁹

In the analysis that follows, I mainly rely on five important essays in which she discusses her views on education and poethood extensively: “The Carpenter to the Blacksmith” (木匠致铁匠), “Dad” (爸爸), “Who Is Sent to Suffer” (派什么人去受难), “Starting Anew as a Poet” (重新做一个诗人) and “Handing over Our Child” (把孩子交出去), from which I establish my view of Wang’s thinking on poetry and on education. I will also refer to her *Classroom Notes* (上课记). I realize that this often presents Wang’s vision of herself, but I find her story compatible with the picture that emerges from other materials and the general background.

6.2 Family Education

Both of Wang Xiaoni’s parents worked as police officers and had done so ever since 1948. Based on how she speaks of her parents in her essays mentioned above, traces of their influence on her poetic identity can be found in the following aspects.

Wang’s father was very cautious and habitually made his daughter aware of the dangerous nature of politics and of the rules of (self-) censorship. He used to forbid his daughter to send out any manuscripts, for fear that she would be punished for publishing something that was inappropriate in the eyes of the authorities. She was

³⁸⁸ For Diana Shi & George O’Connell’s translation published in *Pangolin House* (Summer/Fall 2013), see: <http://pangolinhouse.com/issues/summerfall-2013/>. For Michael Day’s translation, see: <http://michaelmartinday.blogspot.nl/2008/01/wang-xiaoni-poetry-translations.html>. For Eleanor Goodman’s translation, see Wang Xiaoni 2014. For the translated poems and poetics shown on the official site of Poetry International Rotterdam, see <http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/974>.

³⁸⁹ Wang Xiaoni 1997, 2006 and 2011.

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also forbidden to keep a diary, for the similar reason. Whenever her father had to talk to her in a public space, he would lower his voice and check whether there were others nearby.³⁹⁰

Wang's exposure to the Obscure Poetry Controversy through Xu Jingya intensified her father's worries. Although this remains implicit in her essays on this issue, there are clues that some of Xu's or Wang's friends might have reported Xu to the authorities, which contributed to Xu's severe punishment. After Xu and Wang had settled in Shenzhen, her father was still haunted by the fear that his daughter might end up in prison for what she had written. When, toward the end of his life, he was terribly ill and mentally unstable, he muttered that he would find out who had intended to publish his daughter's work in a plot to punish her.³⁹¹

It might be partly because of the influence of her father that Wang describes herself as a restrained and prudent person, and cautious in trusting others. Her inclination to keep her distance from others may also be related to her educational background, especially family education.

Aside from alerting his daughter to the dangers of writing, including poetry, Wang's father was also suspicious about the functions of poetry. He had equipped his daughter with practical skills which he hoped would ensure her a better life in the future. When she was around ten years old, he taught her basic skills such as how to ride a bicycle, use a sewing machine, light a gas stove, and mend a pair of socks. In her twenties, he sent her to learn how to play certain musical instrument from a musician in a Chinese Orchestra, which was then a work unit whose workers were employed by the nation and entitled to enjoy social welfare. As late as the 1990s, he tried to persuade his daughter to learn accounting, which would enable her earn more money than writing poetry.³⁹²

Even though her father was not so supportive of her occupation, Wang insisted on being a writer. However, her father's illness made her doubt the meaning of being a poet. Her father suffered from illness and passed away in 1996. This had a great influence on her, and, as she writes, made her see the limits of the power of poetry.

³⁹⁰ Wang Xiaoni 2012: 140-141

³⁹¹ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 302.

³⁹² Wang Xiaoni 2006: 310-312.

Sitting next to her dying father, she realized that being a poet did not make her an almighty hero who could save people, and prevent the final arrival of death on her family members. Naïve as this may sound, she realized that she had harbored a romantic vision of poethood.³⁹³

As for her mother, Wang mentioned her on two occasions. One is an intense essay entitled “The First Time We Held a Feast” (第一次吃酒席).³⁹⁴ She portrays her parents as people with integrity, who educated her to the idea that there was no need to bribe officials as long as one played by the rules. But when she was rusticated to the countryside in 1974, and it mattered a great deal where she would be sent, her parents had to compromise their principles, and treated the officials who were in charge of managing the Rusticated Youths to a lavish dinner. No matter how nervous and uncomfortable her mother was, she managed to keep calm and secure a comparatively comfortable life for her daughter by bribing the officials with this expensive feast.

Another recollection of Wang’s mother appears in an article discussing the education Wang’s generation received. As discussed in chapter two, since the founding of the PRC, women had been encouraged to work and contribute to the development of the nation in the same way as men. As Wang recounts, her mother was busy working and couldn’t spare much time with her children.³⁹⁵ This formed Wang’s opinion that what mattered to her own son was a qualified mother who could spend time with him and prepare three meals on time, regardless of her professional occupation.

6.3 School Education

6.3.1 Primary and Secondary Education

Due to the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, Wang received incomplete primary school and middle school education. She compares the Cultural Revolution to a sword hacking her educational experience to pieces.

³⁹³ Wang Xiaoni 2001: 26.

³⁹⁴ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 188-191.

³⁹⁵ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 140.

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In 1969, Wang was rusticated with her family to Nong'an County, on the outskirts of Changchun city, and began attending the only secondary school there. She cannot remember much of what happened during her family's stay there. What she can remember is that she could feel hostility from teachers and students, and the living circumstances were backward. She recalls an incident in which she and her brother were heavily bitten by fleas, and got badly infected. She felt terribly ill and her throat was inflamed. Due to a shortage of proper drugs, the inflammation finally led to damage to her heart.³⁹⁶ Until recently, she has been suffering from occasional heart trouble.

In February 1972, she returned home with her parents and resumed her studies in the No. 3 high school in Changchun. In 1974, before she finished her studies, she was relocated to the countryside again as a Rusticated Youth to a place called Jiutai. The next year, she was reassigned to work as an editor at a Rusticated Youth newspaper.

While Wang did not receive complete primary and secondary education due to the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, she appreciates the freedom she paradoxically enjoyed, especially when she compares her time at primary and secondary schools with her son Huaisha's.

In "Handing over Our Child", she states her sadness about the disciplined and unified training her son received in school.³⁹⁷ Born in 1982, Huaisha received his primary school education in late 1980s and the 1990s. He was requested to be the same as other students, in a very hierarchical relation to their teachers. He would also become upset when talking about how the teachers would scold the students who failed to keep up with the others. And he would view the students who were praised by the teachers as models, and try to emulate them.

Unlike her son, Wang was not lectured by teachers, nor advised to read canonized literary works. She feels lucky that even though her generation didn't receive a complete school education, they did have the chance to work on becoming independent persons.

³⁹⁶ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 367-368.

³⁹⁷ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 385-396.

6.3.2 Tertiary Education

Wang Xiaoni benefited from the recovery of the institution of the National College Entrance Exam after the end of the Cultural Revolution. The Exam had been abolished in 1967, and had been replaced by a new admission policy of recommending workers, peasants and soldiers to college, without the need to take any exams. The recommendation was mainly based on political criteria such as politically favorable class background, and all the candidates were requested to have work experience. When the exam was resumed in 1977, Wang passed and enrolled in the Chinese Language and Literature Department of Jilin University in the spring of 1978, as one of the first cohort of college students after the Cultural Revolution.³⁹⁸

As Wang recounts, there were eighty classmates in her undergraduate program. Their age varied from 16 to 33. Some were still child-like and some already had children themselves. They spent four years together, and were full of ambition.³⁹⁹ The wide age range among college students ended in 1982, when the college students began to be recruited from “normal” age groups again.

Wang Xiaoni did not gain what she expected from the curriculum at Jilin University. Wang expected advocacy of individuality and equality from her teachers in college, but in her experience, teachers kept simply repeating the textbooks, and failed to meet her expectation. Wang sometimes skipped class, considering some of the teachers old-fashioned and pedantic. She also had issues with the textbooks, which she finished reading very quickly. Xu Jingya described her as a girl always ducking her head to escape from the blathering teacher up on the dais.⁴⁰⁰ As Wang recounted, she spent most of her time in her dormitory devouring literary books such as Romain Rolland’s *Jean-Christophe* and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward*.⁴⁰¹

Rather, Wang was impressed with the peer education she received from a poetic society called “To Verbalize Emotion” (言志). As mentioned in the case study of

³⁹⁸ Hayhoe 2006: Ch 3.

³⁹⁹ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 149.

⁴⁰⁰ Wang Xiaoni 2012 and Xu Jingya 1996.

⁴⁰¹ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 278.

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Bei Dao, the prevailing atmosphere in the late 1970s and 1980s was characterized by a “high-culture fever” (文化热), which peaked in the mid-1980s.⁴⁰² While “the illiteracy rate of China stood at 35.6 percent in 1982, a total of 230 million people, or roughly the same number of illiterates China had had back in 1964”, “knowledge workers” were held in high regard, and college students were considered to have been “favored by heaven” (天之骄子).⁴⁰³ They paid no tuition fees and received living stipends. Together with the official cadres, they were granted the privilege of free medical care.⁴⁰⁴ High hopes towards the newly-arrived Deng era were held among students nationwide.⁴⁰⁵ Wang was among the ones to express this in their poetry. During their college life, Xu Jingya, Wang Xiaoni, Liu Xiaobo (刘晓波) and four other friends formed a poetic society and published an unofficial journal entitled *Innocent Hearts* (赤子心). “Poetry Verbalizes Emotion” (诗言志) is a canonized aphorism on the essential characteristics of traditional Chinese poetry. Emotion here refers to the poet’s experience in broad sense.⁴⁰⁶ In a memorial article on the first anniversary of their journal, Xu and his friends state, “walking through the bitter winter, they survived the dark nights”. “In the college campus, they wept in joy ... cursed the bitter winter and the dark nights. They voiced their complicated emotions, and breathed in the freshness.”

Under these circumstances, Wang also felt that she had a responsibility to enlighten “the masses”. In the first national Young Poets Symposium in 1980, Wang advocated that due to unbalanced cultural-economic developments in China, there were two kinds of people: the intellectuals had already awakened, metaphorically speaking, but others had not. The awakened ones should enlighten the others.⁴⁰⁷

In hindsight, Wang Xiaoni’s vision gradually changed after she graduated from college. She casts doubt on the the concepts of “classmates” (同学), “compatriots”

⁴⁰² Wang Xiaoni 1996.

⁴⁰³ Tiedao Zhang, paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, Literacy for Life

⁴⁰⁴ Yang Xuewei 2001: 3 – 7.

⁴⁰⁵ For more information on this issue, see memoirs written by experiencers collected in La Jiadu 2003.

⁴⁰⁶ Owen 1992: 26-28. van Crevel 2008: ch 1 and p 354.

⁴⁰⁷ Sun Shaozhen 2001.

(同胞, literally “of the same womb”) and “comrades” (同志, literally “of the same intent”). Reacting to the notion of *tóng* 同 “sameness, togetherness”, which occurs in all three terms, she considers that everybody is an independent individual with diverse beliefs and pursuits. Thus, she asserts, there is no need for institutionalized networks or even private daily communications.⁴⁰⁸

One explanation of this change may lie in the change in the zeitgeist, which may be summarized as one from “mind” to “money”. Mind “refers to the upbeat atmosphere during the Reform era until the summer of 1989.” Money “refers to the China of the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, where, as economic whistleblower He Qinglian writes, ‘the championing of money as a value’ has reached unprecedented heights.”⁴⁰⁹ Wang clearly senses the change from mind to money through the connections with some of her classmates. Wang prefers to “walk alone” in her spiritual pursuit, and wants no truck with those friends who are after material wealth and building networks.⁴¹⁰

6.4 Poetic Identity: Starting Anew as a Poet

Wang reflects on Political Lyricism and the Obscure poetry not only in her poetry, but also in her recollections of her own son’s educational experience and her experience as a teacher herself.

6.4.1 Reflection on Political Lyricism: Rejection of Political Metaphor

As discussed in chapters one and two, Political Lyricism had become the mainstream style propagated by the literary establishment in the 1950s and 1960s, and underwent several stages of developments through time. Political Lyricism was canonized in textbooks and intensively taught in schools until the end of the Cultural Revolution.

⁴⁰⁸ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 342-350.

⁴⁰⁹ van Crevel 2008: 13-14

⁴¹⁰ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 131.

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No Political Lyricism is found in Wang Xiaoni's work. Presumably, while her father forbade her to send out any of her manuscripts during the Cultural Revolution, she must have kept any early texts to herself; and it is equally important that she herself wasn't keen on Political Lyricism and was critical of it. Notably, she doesn't call Political Lyricism by its name, but refers to it as "the style of 1960s and 1970s".⁴¹¹ She describes it as a combination of hollow lyricism, grandiloquent language, grand narratives, and a lack of personal feelings.

Wang's early poems «Two Impressions» (印象二首), including «I Felt the Sunlight» (我感到了阳光) and «The Whistling Wind» (风在响) could be read as examples of rejecting Political Lyricism, political metaphors in particular. Here I choose «I Felt the Sunlight» as an example, and use a translation published by the Rotterdam Poetry International festival, translated by an unknown Chinese translator together with Simon Patton:

Along the long, long corridor
I go on walking . . .

—Before me there are dazzling windows,
on either side, walls reflecting the light.
The sunlight and I,
I'm standing with the sunlight.

—Now I remember how intense that sunlight
is!
So warm it stops me from taking another step,
so bright I hold my breath.
The light of the whole universe converges here.

—I'm unaware of the existence of anything
else.
There is only me, leaning on sunlight,
still for a full ten seconds.
Sometimes, ten seconds is longer than
a quarter of a century.

沿着长长的走廊
我，走下去……

——呵，迎面是刺眼的窗子，
两边是反光的墙壁。
阳光，我。
我和阳光站在一起！

——呵，阳光原是这样强烈！
暖得让人凝住了脚步，
亮得让人憋住了呼吸。
全宇宙的人都在这里集聚。

——我不知道还有什么存在。
只有我，靠着阳光。
站了十秒钟。
十秒，有时会长于
一个世纪的四分之一！

⁴¹¹ Wang Xiaoni 2012b: 65.

Finally, I dash down the stairs,
push open the door,
and run in the spring sunlight . . .

终于，我冲下楼梯，
推开门，
奔走在春天的阳光里……

In the Mao era, as noted above, the sun and sunlight were increasingly used as conventional metaphors for Mao Zedong. Strikingly, Wang's use of sunlight is different from this conventional usage. The poet's encounter with the sunlight is accidental, and she is surprised at and reminded of the intensity of the sunlight. Something deep in her mind seems to be awakened. The poem foregrounds a focused personal feeling towards nature.

Something similar is found in «The Whistling Wind». In Political Lyricism, the wind was traditionally used as a metaphor for national or regional political entities or forces. As such, the East wind was used to refer to China, and to socialism, and the West wind to refer to western countries, and to capitalism. Wang ignores this traditionally metaphorical meaning.

Wang's style here is similar to that of the Third Generation poets in that they often dwell on particular objects (in this case the sunlight) at length rather than stack up private or symbolist imagery, and that they describe their personal feelings in interaction with the object in question. She is not alone in rejecting metaphor. Yu Jian (于坚 b. 1954), a prominent Third Generation poet, claims to "retreat from metaphor" (从隐喻撤退) in 1997:⁴¹²

"Poetry is a language game that exterminates metaphor ... Poetry is the dissection of language ... To reject metaphor is to reject the metaphor hegemony of our mother tongue, to reject the dominant discourse. Rejecting the metaphor system it imposes, the poet should write from inside a position of questioning and resisting the mother tongue's heaven-granted powers. Writing is the disposal and elimination of metaphor trash ..."

⁴¹² Cited in van Crevel 2008: 375.

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Wang does not advocate the same things as Yu Jian, and does not explicitly indicate the meaning of rejecting political metaphor. Regarding language usage, she puts it in a plain way. In Simon Patton's translation:⁴¹³

“These days, my standard for deciding what is good writing is getting simpler. I have to see whether the writer is “waddling with words” [拽文] or “playing” with his readers [玩人] and I read to see whether he or she has any intention, whether he or she has the wherewithal, to show me anything real. [...] I have always argued for poetry's naturalness and accessibility: to contain a large number of things within the most ordinary language is the basic skill for a poet.”

6.4.2 Reflection on Obscure Poetry: Rejection of Heroism

Wang's way of dealing with the Cultural Revolution shows how she constructs her own poetic identity by clarifying her understandings of Obscure poetry with which she is often associated herself.

In the late 1970s, China saw the emergence of the aforementioned literary trend called Literature of the Wounded, which reflected on the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. This began with Liu Xinwu's (刘心武) short story “Class Counselor” (班主任) in November 1977, and of Lu Xinhua's (卢新华) “The Wounded” (伤痕) in 1978.⁴¹⁴ In Lu's story, a young girl named Xiaohua was forced to denounce her mother who was labeled a traitor under the Gang of Four. For years, Xiaohua suffered from a ruined career and a forced separation from her lover, because she was the daughter of a “traitor”. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, Xiaohua's mother was rehabilitated. But Xiaohua failed to reunite with her mother before her mother passed away.

Many such stories of personal tragedy caused by the Cultural Revolution were published.⁴¹⁵ These stories reveal the physical and mental wounds left by this ten-

⁴¹³ Wang Xiaoni 1997: preface. The translation is from <https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poet/974/Wang-Xiaoni/nl/nocache>

⁴¹⁴ People's Literature, 1977-11; Literary Confluence Daily, 11 August 1978.

⁴¹⁵ Hong Zicheng 2007:294.

year disaster, raising questions on the legitimacy of the government and the Party. While the Deng Xiaoping leadership advocated embracing the "new era", clear limits continued to be set on Literature of the Wounded's reflection on the Cultural Revolution, with reference to an official discourse than ran along these lines: the common people are the victims of this disaster, which was caused not by the Party but by the Gang of Four, and of "fundamental contradictions in contemporary Chinese society and the long-standing practices of 'feudalism' in the national culture and psychology."⁴¹⁶

Significantly, the Obscure poetry has been associated with Literature of the Wounded, which is still open to discussion.⁴¹⁷ But there is widespread agreement that the Obscure poets are inclined to position themselves as tragic heroes who underwent the Cultural Revolution and reveals their traumas in their (early) poetry. In comparison to the Third Generation poets, they have been called otherworldly, pretentious and heroic.⁴¹⁸ Different from what the Obscure poets experienced, the Third Generation poets did not experience "revolution". They rarely deal with the theme of the Cultural Revolution in their works.

Wang Xiaoni develops her own way of dealing with the Cultural Revolution. Generally speaking, Wang's poetry employs the first person singular, speaking of her personal feelings towards daily life. When it comes to the theme of reflection on the Cultural Revolution, she chooses to remain uninvolved, through the genre of fiction rather than poetry. In her novel *Forty Miles Around* (方圆四十里), she employs the third person singular and speaks as an outsider. She attempts to adopt an objective narrative perspective to tell the complicated stories of the Rusticated Youths in a calm tone. She hopes to show that during the Cultural Revolution, as she states, "those who experienced this underwent both bitterness and happiness, they were harmed, and harmed others as well."⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁶ Hong Zicheng 2007: 296.

⁴¹⁷ Zhang Yesong supports this argument in the conference "The Individual and Society in Modern Chinese Literature" held in Macau in 2007. Bei Dao strongly goes against it. Zhang's argument is further stated in Zhang Yesong 2008.

⁴¹⁸ Cheng Weidong 1987.

⁴¹⁹ Wang Xiaoni 2003: preface

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Out of this consideration, she positions the Rusticated Youths as neither victims nor heroes. That probably explains why she refuses to speak in a lyrical tone as a heroic subject in poetry, as some Obscure poets do, especially in their early work, Bei Dao's «The Answer» being a famous example.

Wang refuses to write in the persona of a hero, or in a lyrical tone. First, she does not consider this an obligation of the poet. Poets are not cultural heroes. A poet is just a normal citizen, the same as others. He/she is not obligated or entitled to lecture the masses. Second, she refuses to believe that the masses need to be rescued by the heroes. She feels that lecturing the masses and being surrounded and admired by the masses are risky things: blind worship is dangerous, whether this is for a political leader such as Mao or for a poet who is viewed as a hero. As she clearly states in «Don't Tell Others What You Think» (不要把你所想的告诉别人), in Shi & O'Connell's translation:⁴²⁰

The crowd bobs like stupid birds.
Your face
approaches the red curtain.
In your eyes the world grows wholly glorious.
But I tell you
Glory
is one of the deepest pits

人群傻鸟般雀跃
你的脸
渐渐接近了红色的帷幕。
世界被你注视得全面辉煌。
可我告诉你
辉煌
是一种最深的洞。

When so many hands dance and chirp for you
the hall's a withered garden,
in the breath of your words tottering, rustling.
Remember what I said.
Inside my white pages
I see at once
Your eyes gray as a hare's in a snowfield.

无数手向你舞噪时
会场是败园
在你的风里颓响飘摇。
想到我的提醒了吗。
穿透我的白纸
就能看见
你那雪原灰兔的眼睛。

Unforgivable those people
hovering near you
entwining you.
From your live essence
they crave

不能原谅那些人
萦绕住你
盘缠住你。
他们想从你集聚的
奕奕神态里

⁴²⁰ <http://pangolinhouse.com/issues/summerfall-2013/>.

their own salvation.

得到活着的挽救。

Don't get any closer.

不要走过去。

Don't step to the rostrum.

不要走近讲坛。

Don't tell others what you think.

不要把你所想的告诉别人。

Language says nothing.

语言什么也不能表达。

I grip your hand,

拉紧你的手

speak into it:

在你的手里我说:

beyond ourselves

除了我俩

no one hears another.

没人想听别人的话。

Let me keep you close,

由我珍藏你

sheering off from glory together

一起绕开光荣

Walking silent

无声地

past the frigid crowd.

走过正在冻结的人群。

But all around, waiting

但是, 那是谁的声音

to attack, whose voice.

正从空中袭来。

A similar rejection of the poet performing as a cultural hero is found in poems like «I'd rather Not Know Anyone I Don't» (不认识的不想再认识了). In Shi & O'Connell's translation:⁴²¹

From now on, I'd rather not know anyone I don't,

到今天还不认识的人

But simply respect them from afar.

就远远地敬着他。

After thirty years, my friends

三十年中

are enough, and my enemies.

我的朋友和敌人都足够了。

Passersby come in clumps,

行人一缕缕地经过

hearts transparent in their pockets,

揣着简单明白的感情。

From east to west

向东向西

all innocent.

他们都是无辜。

I've set the future aside,

我要留出我的今后。

loving them intently

以我的方式

my own way.

专心地去爱他们。

⁴²¹ <http://pangolinhouse.com/issues/summerfall-2013/>.

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Looking everywhere, no one sees me,
never catching my expression.

Not? born to be alone, they're fated,
Going one way or another.

Someone pulls his own heart out,
so true, so naïve
tossed to the crowd

From now on
all sublime vessels are empty.
Like me, adrift.
Like my life's
second half.

谁也不注视我。
行人不会看一眼我的表情
望着四面八方。

他们生来
就不是单独的一个
注定向东向西地走。

一个人掏出自己的心
扔进人群
实在太真实太幼稚

从今以后
崇高的容器都空着。
比如我
比如我荡来荡去的
后一半生命。

A similar sense is found in «I've Run into Deceit» (我撞上了欺骗), which is the seventh part of the suite entitled «Seeing a Friend» (看望朋友):⁴²²

Someone beside the bed, chin resting on arms, says
You are more beautiful than you used to be
The people outside love you more than before

...
What I really want to say is that
what people like best
is to crowd up close
to gawk at your bleeding wounds.

有人伏在床头说
你比过去更要美
外面的人都更加爱你。

.....
我真正想说
是人们最喜欢
近距离地
围观流血的伤口。

Wang also rejects any notion to do with the poet's ability or obligation to speak on behalf of others. As she states:⁴²³

“Suffering reaches me like floods. It is impossible for a person to be a high stony mountain. One has to follow the deadly water, to float. Whether or not this can be called suffering is a purely individual matter. Never can

⁴²² Wang Xiaoni 2017:

⁴²³ Wang Xiaoni 2001: 185.

anybody suffer for the sake of others. Idealistic roles of rescuing others and suffering on behalf of the masses are created in so-called religious stories. When Jesus was walking toward his crucifixion, he still calmly claimed that others could benefit from his agony. I don't believe in this kind of claim. It is impossible for someone to save themselves, so how can one enjoy the luxury of saving others?"

Here, we can see Wang's ideas on individualism, linked with a rejection of heroism. She considers that no one can represent others, or be represented by others. Everyone has the right to speak on his/her own, to voice his/her own opinion. Importantly, this hints at her way of dealing with the Cultural Revolution. First, people's feelings about the Cultural Revolution differ a great deal, and to summarize it as suffering is a simplification. Second, that people experienced the Cultural Revolution does not entitle them to hero status, and this holds for poets just like it holds for everyone else.

In my reading, Wang here addresses "the marginality of poetry" highlighted by Michelle Yeh and, and "the cult of poethood" highlighted by Maghiel van Crevel in his reflection on Yeh's notion of the cult of poetry.⁴²⁴ Both of the above points suggest that Wang rejects the hero complex, thus showing her advocacy of individualism, which can also be found in her other poems.

The "marginality" of contemporary Chinese poetry, highlighted by Yeh, shows "the departure of poetry from the central position it once occupied in Chinese society and implies, at the same time, its newly gained distance from the center, which has made possible a truly critical dialogue with that center."⁴²⁵ What Yeh calls "the cult of poetry" among poets in contemporary China refers to "the phenomenon and the concomitant discourse in the 1980s and the 1990s that bestows poetry with religious significance and cultivates the image of the poet as the high priest of poetry". To a certain extent, this is a response to the marginality of poetry in society at large. Yeh also points out that female poets seldom participate in the

⁴²⁴ Yeh 1992a: preface, Yeh 1996, van Crevel 2008: Ch 1.

⁴²⁵ Yeh 1992a: xxiii.

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discourse of the cult of poetry, and Wang Xiaoni's behavior in the public realm fits this pattern.⁴²⁶

Further to the concept of "cult of poetry", van Crevel points out that there is also a "cult of poethood", among the Obscure poets and the Third Generation poets, and across the Elevated and the Earthly aesthetics that emerged ever more clearly in the 1990s.⁴²⁷ As van Crevel notes, the early Obscure poetry "sustains tragic-heroic images of poethood that have traveled with modern Chinese poetry since its inception, drawing on the Qu Yuan lore and its modern transformations as well as European high Romanticism."⁴²⁸ The Third Generation poets in the Earthly camp dismantle the traditional vision of poethood, but still treasure the poet's visibility in society. As for the poets in the Elevated camp, for them, "the special status of the poet has always been among the tenets of their poetics."⁴²⁹

Notably, Wang Xiaoni actively resists the cult of poetry and poethood. She constructs her own poetic identity by being marginalized, and adjusting her expectations of poetry and poethood. Arguably, Wang's resistance to the cult of poetry and poethood derives from her family education and her tertiary school education. As discussed above, her father kept reminding her of the uselessness of poetry. He kept persuading her to learn something practical, like accounting. On another occasion, her father's illness shook Wang's belief in being a poet. When she sat at his bedside, what she felt she needed was the medical tools to cure him, rather than poetry. In a sense, Wang's adjustment of her positioning as a poet was driven by the contrast between the high-culture fever brought along by the tertiary education she received in the 1980s, and the indifference towards poetry held by large parts of the general readership in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

College students were fond of writing poetry in the 1980s, and the cult of poetry is obviously linked to the phenomenon of high-culture fever. College students as well as poets were considered cultural heroes in the 1980s. Xi Chuan (西川, b. 1963), an important poet of the Third Generation and a leading voice in the Elevated camp,

⁴²⁶ Yeh 1996.

⁴²⁷ van Crevel 2008: ch 1 (pp15-16, 37-38, 45-46), 3, 5, 10, 11 and 12

⁴²⁸ van Crevel 2008: 16.

⁴²⁹ van Crevel 2008: 37-38.

reflects on this phenomenon in his article “Lunatics, Liars, Fools” (疯子·骗子·傻子), in which he describes how as a poet, he was worshiped by a large scale of persons.⁴³⁰

Wang Xiaoni happened to choose Shenzhen as her living place, which is an unlikely place for the cult of poetry, and the general readership’s indifference would have been even more palpable in Shenzhen, one of the Special Economic Zones selected by Deng Xiaoping and associated with capitalism and materialism, than in the environments Wang had known in the North, i.e. schools and university campuses in Jilin. Wang writes that when she relocated to Shenzhen, she could feel this. As it happens, her retrospective feelings about high-culture fever and her adjusted vision of poetry and the poet turn out to fit what Shenzhen citizens think. The citizens in this highly commercialized city displayed an undisguised dislike of poetry and poets. They don’t think there’s anything special about poets.⁴³¹

In Shenzhen, Wang Xiaoni is fond of two places, her home and the supermarket, where she can enjoy the freedom and the simple relationship with other persons. As she interprets, in the supermarket, what she needs to connect with other person is the moment she pays for the products. She offers money and the staff offers products. It is, she says, the most simple and pleasant relationship.⁴³²

6.4.3 Personal Poetic Identity: The Meaning of Home

Further to the discussion above, Wang Xiaoni’s idea of what it means to be a poet has kept changing. When she was a colleague student in the early 1980s, she felt that she had a responsibility to enlighten others, and this should be reflected in her work. However, as she states in her 2001 collection *How Come the World is so Vast* (世界何以辽阔), starting from 1994, she gradually rejected this kind of writing.⁴³³ She proposed an influential proposition called “starting anew as a poet” (重新做一个诗人) first in her eponymous essay in 1996, and then her eponymous suite of poems including «Working» (工作) and «Clear» (晴朗) in 1997. Wang Xiaoni is not the

⁴³⁰ For the Chinese original of this article, see Xi Chuan 2006: 183-192.

⁴³¹ Wang Xiaoni 2002: 52.

⁴³² Wang Xiaoni 2006

⁴³³ Wang Xiaoni 2001: preface.

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only one to reconsider the relationship between a poet and his/her readers. Critic Tang Xiaodu then proposed to start anew as a reader, and Xu Jingya proposed to start anew as a critic.⁴³⁴

Wang Xiaoni unfolds her proposition “starting anew as a poet” in two layers: Firstly, as discussed above, she considers being a poet is not an occupation. Writing poetry is one of private hobbies, or a way of thinking.⁴³⁵ Second, “in this city I / silently serve as a poet.” (我在这城里/无声地做一个诗人), “I let my significance / happen only at home.” (我让我的意义/只发生在我的家里).

Wang Xiaoni is a poet that explores the meaning of home in depth, as a way to reflect on Political Lyricism. As discussed in chapter two, researches have shown that from 1949 to 1966 in textbooks, political loyalty and love drowned out the theme of familial loyalty and love, especially in the personality cult built around Mao Zedong. The notion of “immediate family” had gradually disappeared from poetry after the founding of the PRC, and acquired negative connotations especially in the Cultural Revolution. This is reflected in Shizhi’s poetry, as discussed in chapter three. Not only Political Lyricism, but also Obscure poetry in general, barely touch upon the notion of “immediate family”.

6.4.3.1 Personal Interests

After graduation in 1982, Wang Xiaoni was allocated to work as an editor in the General Editing Department of the Changchun Film Production Factory. In the Factory, she was uncomfortable with the required full-time attendance. In her description, she kept watching the clock, hoping to end the hell-like office hours and hurry home as soon as possible.⁴³⁶ Triggered by Xu Jingya’s misfortune during the campaign to Eliminate Spirit Pollution, Wang resigned and followed Xu to Shenzhen. She found a job in Shenzhen and a few years later, turned to full-time motherhood.

⁴³⁴ Wang Xiaoni 1996&1997, Tang Xiaodu 1997 and Xu Jingya 2004.

⁴³⁵ Wang Xiaoni 2012a

⁴³⁶ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 373.

By all accounts, including her own, Wang Xiaoni fits traditional expectations of a woman in Chinese culture, to be a virtuous wife and a good mother (贤妻良母).⁴³⁷ Wang and Xu are generally viewed as a model couple in literary circles, and their son Huaisha is an outstanding graduate of Peking University.⁴³⁸

Wang says in her essays that she highly values her family and her home, a sentiment not commonly voiced by contemporary Chinese poets. To her, being a poet and public appreciation of her work are irrelevant to being a mother and a wife. Her understanding of being a good mother is that she can take care of the housework, spend time with her child, and enjoy herself.

Here let us briefly consider reflections on this issue by the only other female Obscure poet, Shu Ting. Shu Ting says that after getting married, she changed from believing in literature to believing in her husband and her child.⁴³⁹ But different from Wang, Shu Ting considers housework as a burden which distracts her from writing poetry.⁴⁴⁰ In contrast, Wang writes that she finds happiness in grocery shopping and hurrying home to cook delicious meals for her family.⁴⁴¹

If we go by her own account, one possible explanation of Wang’s attitude vis-à-vis home and family is that they derive from the family education she received, in that she learned from the fact that her mother’s devotion to work in her childhood made her feel a lack of love.

6.4.3.2 A Retreat from the Outside World

Home, to Wang Xiaoni, is not only a place for family love, but also a place to hide from the chaos of the outside world.

The images of a wounded bird and windows appear frequently in Wang’s poems, especially in the mid-1980s. Because of Xu Jingya’s situation in the campaign against “spiritual pollution”, his family had been under great pressure in the early 1980s, as Xu was accused of denouncing and trying to overthrow the socialist motherland by praising capitalist countries and capitalist art. Xu was even referred

⁴³⁷ Mow & Tao & Zheng (eds.) 2004: Part I.

⁴³⁸ Xu Jingya 1996 and Sun Shaozhen 2001.

⁴³⁹ Shu Ting 2007a: 60.

⁴⁴⁰ Shu Ting 2007a: 40.

⁴⁴¹ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 236.

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to as a “gravedigger” rather than a “torch-bearer” of the PRC by one political leader.⁴⁴²

In poems such as «Rumors» (谣传), «Love» (爱情) and «Wholeness» (完整), Wang compares herself to a bird with giant wings.⁴⁴³ External pressure forces it to draw its wings in and make them a shelter for its nest. This metaphor can be seen to stand for the determination of strengthening oneself to protect one’s family from external danger. As for the image of the window, this frequently appears: rumors are beating on the windows, and the shadows of slanderers are cast upon the windows. Windows are a last shield of defense for the protagonist / speaker / poet to repel intrusive forces from the outside world, and consolidate her original individuality.

These poems describe unsettled tensions. Adversarial relationships exist between the poet and her one-time friends, between her self-portrait and others’ judgments of her, between good and evil. These adversarial relationships are notably present in a poem called «I’m Sure Someone’s Climbed onto the Sundeck and Is Deliberately Tampering with me in the Dark» (定有人攀上阳台，蓄意暗中篡改我). In Day’s translation:⁴⁴⁴

I have just hung out my bed sheet,
and someone hammers on the floor,
calling yellow water’s running down!
I go specially to take another look,
my bed sheet
is purest blue.

我刚刚挂出我的床单，
有人敲打楼板，
说什么黄水流下去！
我又专门看了一次，
我的床单
是最纯正的颜色。

I lean on the strong light,
I shouldn’t have gone to sleep,
after I wake up in a daze,
all the pages from the book in my hand fall,
after the order of pages has been jumbled
it is surprisingly dirty.

我靠在强光里，
本不该入睡，
胡里胡涂醒来之后，
手上的书全部落页，
它在纷乱页码之后，
竟然污冲透顶。

⁴⁴² Wang Xiaoni 2004: 46.

⁴⁴³ For the Chinese originals of these three poems, see Wang Xiaoni 1997: 41-42, 42-44, 49-51.

⁴⁴⁴ <http://michaelmartinday.blogspot.nl/2008/01/wang-xiaoni-poetry-translations.html>

I say, to this nonentity
I'm a dire and calamitous person,
he says: This is
the last pick, he squeaks
like a mouse
begging my pardon.

我对这乌有者说，
我是灾难深重的人，
他说：这是
最后人选，
他叫声如鼠
求我宽容。

From thenceforward,
I stop often on the sundeck,
conversing with this tamperer,
learning of many other
world affairs,
nowhere is there a door onto this sundeck,
and this continuing dialogue,
makes me unbearably happy.

从此，我常常停在阳台上，
同篡改者对话，
得以知道这世上
许多别的事情，
这阳台四处无门，
而绵绵对话，
使我乐不可支。

The long title echoes the adversarial relationships mentioned above. The first stanza illustrates this through a quarrel with the neighbors. Characteristically, Wang makes her point through domestic-related things. In the second stanza, she finds that the printed book she holds is surprisingly jumbled and dirty after she takes an unplanned nap. This stanza could be read as referring to a misreading of her work or of literary works she treasures. Under these circumstances, she talks to “the nonentity” and “the tamperer”. Rather than keeping a hostile attitude found in earlier poems, she seems to see through these adversarial relationships, and learn to live with them. In the last stanza, she takes the tampering as a joke. An attitude of confidence and generousness is delivered in this poem, emerging from the home as a safe shelter in a hostile world.

«Lots of Children» (许许多多的孩子), the tenth part of the poem suite «Seeing a Friend», portrays home as a place finally providing people with the opportunity to pick up memories and refresh their lives, after they are worn out in the outside world. The poem is simple but touching:⁴⁴⁵

When we are sitting face to face in silence
I hear

在我们默默相对的时候
我听见

⁴⁴⁵ Wang Xiaoni 2017

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the heater talk.
Water and fire
in the zigzag throat-like tunnels
chatting lively.
You too hear
that this is not the language of materials.

They are our children.
beneath our knees
innumerable
hot, fluent lives.

...
They are our children
each one tightly holding on to the next.
At this moment
they are right in this house
standing around the bed, chatting away.
Hand in hand.
I can see
brightness returning to your face.

That is a distant place, after us.

This world, playing with pain
it is truly blind, deaf, and dumb.

暖气在谈话。
水和火
在弯曲如喉的管道里
活泼地交谈。
你也听到了
那绝不是物质们的语言。

那是我们的孩子。
我们膝盖以下
无数的
炎热流畅的生命。

.....
那是我们的孩子
一个拉紧了一个。
现在
他们就在这间屋子里
围着睡床热烈地交谈。
手搭着手。
我看见
鲜艳又回到你的脸上。

那是我们之后的遥远。

这个玩弄着疼痛的世界
它真是又盲又聋又哑。

6.4.3.3 A Focus on Common Things in Daily Life

Cabbage, potatoes, pears and other food, which are considered as the common things in daily life, feature in Wang Xiaoni's poems. In «At the Sight of Potatoes» (看到土豆) for example, potatoes, a common food in Northeast China, come to stand for homesickness. In Goodman's translation:⁴⁴⁶

Seeing a basket of potatoes
I was as thrilled as if I'd encountered a ghost.
So thrilled I turned into
a hotheaded northeasterner.

看到一筐土豆
心里跟撞上鬼魂一样高兴。
高兴成了一个
头脑发热的东北人。

⁴⁴⁶ <http://www.pcn.org/poetry/selected-poems-wang-xiaoni>

I wanted to stare into their eyes
to find out all they'd been through.
But then unreasonable emotion
attacked me head-on.
A timid superficial light
fell layer by layer.

我要紧盯着它们的五官
把发生过的事情找出来。
偏偏是那种昂贵的感情
迎面拦截我。
偏偏是那种不敢深看的光
一层层降临。

All the precise threads in my body broke.

我身上严密的缝线都断了。

I wanted to stop right away
stop myself completely.
And bum a cigarette off an addict
his last cigarette.

想马上停下来
把我自己整个停下来。
向烟瘾大的人要一支烟
要他最后的一支烟。

Nothing can attack you
like a basket of potatoes.

没有什么打击
能超过一筐土豆的打击。

Return to the past
would be like walking all the way to Jupiter.
But today
I saw a basket of potatoes.
And all at once I was stepping
on Jupiter's burning rings.

回到过去
等于凭双脚漂流到木星。
可是今天
我偏偏会见了土豆。
我一下子踩到了
木星着了火的光环。

At first, the poet is excited at the sight of the potatoes. Living in the southern city of Shenzhen, she misses her "home" diet. Then she is shocked by intense homesickness when she tries to explore and recount the past story about her hometown. She describes the homesickness as a treasurable feeling and a blinding light, which will gradually break all of the threads (I have replaced Goodman's "suture" with "threads"). Because of the excitement and shock, the poet needs to calm down by smoking a cigarette. The nostalgic mood of the poem recalls the ancient Chinese poem «A Traveller's Song» (游子吟) by the aforementioned Tang poet Meng Jiao. In «A Traveller's Song», the mother's love is visualized as her sewing of the traveler's clothes thread by thread.

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The poem «Working» is another example to show how Wang attaches importance to daily food in her poetry. In Goodman's translation:⁴⁴⁷

At the shortest end of the century
the earth is bouncing
humans busy themselves like monkeys between
trees.

在一个世纪最短的末尾
大地弹跳着
人类忙得像树间的猴子。

But my two hands
lie idle in China's air.
The tabletop and the wind
are both pure white paper.
I let my significance
happen only at home.

而我的两只手
闲置在中国的空中。
桌面和风
都是质地纯白的好纸。
我让我的意义
只发生在我的家里。

Rinsing white rice
the rice starch drips like milk onto my page.
To be reborn the gourds extend their fingers
and cry out in fear.
Outside, the sunlight cuts with a knife
heaven's cold heavy snow.

淘洗白米的时候
米浆像奶滴在我的纸上。
瓜类为新生出手指
而惊叫。
窗外，阳光带着刀伤
天堂走慢冷雪。

Each day from morning to night
the door is shut tight.
I hang the sun at the angle I need it
some people say, in this town
lives a person who doesn't work.

每天从走到晚
紧闭家门。
把太阳悬在我需要的角度
有人说，这城里
住了一个不工作的人。

Fastened to the walls
between two small pieces of glass the world
self-combusts.
The taciturn butterflies flutter everywhere
the universe unknowingly leaks its secrets.
I foretell the tiniest signs of trouble
without eyes.
Without hands.
Without ears.

关紧四壁
世界在两小片玻璃之间自燃。

沉默的蝴蝶四处翻飞
万物在不知不觉中泄露。
我预知四周最微小的风吹草动
不用眼睛。
不用手。
不用耳朵。

⁴⁴⁷ <http://www.pen.org/poetry/selected-poems-wang-xiaoni>

Each day I write only a few words
like a knife
cutting into the gush of a tangerine's finely
woven juice.
Let layer upon layer of blue light
enter into a world that's never been described.
No one sees my light
finely woven strand by strand like silk.
In this city I
silently serve as a poet.

每天只写几个字
像刀
划开桔子细密喷涌的汁水。
让一层层蓝光
进入从未描述的世界。
没人看见我
一缕缕细密如丝的光。
我在这城里
无声地做一个诗人。

A contrast emerges between the two living styles described in the first two stanzas. In the first, Wang uses the techniques of personification to describe the extremely busy world. Her comparison of human beings to monkeys sends out a warning that human beings are losing their humanity. Against the background stated in the first stanza, she shows her distinct living style: idleness.

Working at home, she "foretells the tiniest signs of trouble". She explores the meanings behind the rarely noticed daily food: white rice, gourds and oranges. These subjects shed light on "a world that's never been described", different from the busy world outside.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

Wang Xiaoni received incomplete school education before and during the Cultural Revolution, and was rusticated to the countryside. In this sense, she shared the same educational background with most of the Obscure poets. However, unlike most of them, she had the opportunity to go to university just after the National College Entrance Exam was resumed. Also, unlike most of the Obscure poets, her parents were neither literati nor intellectuals. They did not make any effort to cultivate her to be a poet, and in fact opposed her choice of being a poet. Later, her father's death pushed her to adjust her vision of poetry and of being a poet. Her mother's devotion to work resulted in her absence from the family, and this pushed Wang to ponder the balance between her own work and her role as a mother and spouse. In addition, she did not have a poetry mentor like some of the other Obscure poets (e.g. in the way that He Qifang was a mentor to Shizhi).

6.5 Concluding Remarks

Wang had a unique chance to compare her own educational experience with that of her son, and that of her students in Hainan University, and explicitly reflected on this in her written work. She voiced her worries about the negative effects of values of collectiveness, group dependence and materialism on her son and her students.

As such, Wang Xiaoni's educational experience is reflected in her poetic identity in two ways. First, Wang shows her rejection of Political Lyricism, which most Obscure poets learned from schools and private mentors: she published nothing that is even remotely related to Political Lyricism. Wang shows her rejection of Political Lyricism by writing in plain, direct and precise language, and avoiding political metaphors. Second, she proposes to "start anew as a poet". She explores the significance of home in down-to-earth reflection on this "mundane" subject matter, which had been absent from Chinese literature for many years. She addresses the phenomena of the "marginality" of poetry, the cult of poetry, and the cult of poethood, critically reflecting on traditional expectations of poets. Poets were once expected to be almighty heroes, who should speak for the masses and be admired by them, especially in the 1980s. The same expectation of poets used to apply to the first cohort of college students, including Wang. But she gradually realized that a poet who is also an independent individual, can and should speak for herself/himself only.

7 Conclusion

This study has researched the interaction between educational background and poetic identity in a generation of Chinese authors known as the Obscure poets. As noted in chapter one, the poets, their parents, and China-based researchers have often felt that creative writing is unrelated or negatively related to school education. However, a new understanding of two concepts enables us to take a different perspective. First, Ivan Illich's idea of deschooling helps to redefine the concept of educational background. Second, Michelle Yeh's and Maghiel van Crevel's scholarship has advanced a truly localized redefinition of the concept of poetic identity for contemporary Chinese poetry, which offers a springboard for my investigation of the complexity of the interaction between educational background and poetic identity for the poets under scrutiny here. There is definitely a relation here, and it is not just, or even primarily, a negative relation.

Within the field of modern Chinese poetry, the Obscure poets learned from the tradition of left-wing literature on the one hand and from that of modernist literature on the other (the latter included foreign literature in Chinese translation but also "home-grown" Chinese modernist writing, and the two are closely intertwined). This took shape through four types of education they received: school education, family education, peer education and mentor education.

Chapter two argues that school education, family education and mentor education helped the Obscure poets to become familiar with Political Lyricism (as part of the left-wing tradition) and to practice this type of writing from an early age. With the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution and the interruption of school education in 1966, peer education came to play an important role, causing the poets to reconsider their engagement with Political Lyricism. We see them in a gradual retreat from Political Lyricism, with Genzi and Duoduo as prominent cases in point. While they certainly borrowed elements of Political Lyricism (particular metaphors and sometimes a particular tone of voice), they combined such elements with what they learned from the modernist tradition.

Conclusion

In chapters three to six, I have presented four case studies, on Shizhi, Bei Dao, Gu Cheng and Wang Xiaoni. In general, the case studies bear out the findings of chapter two. Moreover, it becomes clear that the aforesaid various types of education are directly reflected in the poets' shared and individual poetic identities.

The four poets form a spectrum with regard to the distance they created between themselves and Political Lyricism. Shizhi is the closest to Political Lyricism, while Wang Xiaoni is the farthest from it. Bei Dao and Gu Cheng move in the middle, with variations depending on the period in which they were writing. But in all, Political Lyricism continues to constitute a major component of their writing. This observation and especially its concrete substantiation from textual evidence constitute an important addition to scholarship to date.

To highlight some of the discoveries made in this research, Shizhi blurs singular and plural noun forms in both his poetry and poetics, which signals the influence of collectivism. Bei Dao employs the image of the poppy flower, which was standard textbook material at the time, with his use of the image to express different meanings perfectly illustrating the complexity of the relation of education to poetic identity. Gu Cheng composes many political allegories, in which he employs the imagery of Political Lyricism while simultaneously mocking the hypocrisy of politics. And, in what we might sum up as a negative influence, Wang Xiaoni explores the significance of home through down-to-earth reflection, almost as if she consciously set her sights on places that were out of bounds in Political Lyricism.

The differences in the four types of education the poets received help to understand their positions on the spectrum. First, in regard to family education, there are notable differences in the occupations of the poets' parents. Shizhi's mother was the principal of his primary school. Bei Dao's father was an official working in one of the political parties allowed to coexist (albeit largely ceremonially) with the CCP and later at the Central Institute of Socialism. Gu Cheng's father was an establishment poet in the People's Liberation Army. Wang Xiaoni's parents were police officers. Second, there are differences in the poets' performance during their respective school educations. Shizhi and Bei Dao pursued excellence in schools for cadres' children, while Gu Cheng and Wang Xiaoni were relative outsiders to their school environments, whether by circumstance or by choice, or both. Third, we can see differences in the private mentors recognized by each of the poets. We see the

influences of He Qifang on Shizhi, and of Shizhi on Bei Dao. And in Gu Cheng's case, his father doubled as his mentor. Fourth, with regard to peer education, we see the differences between the "underground" salons held by the Rusticated Youths during the Cultural Revolution in the case of Shizhi and Bei Dao on the one hand, and the college students' literary societies after the Cultural Revolution in the case of Wang Xiaoni, on the other.

In all, while I obviously do not claim that educational background is the only factor shaping poetic identity, I am satisfied that it is demonstrably an important factor; and at this point I would like to turn to possibilities for further research that can build on a similar approach. One such possibility is suggested directly by the discussion in this study: from the analysis, Wang Xiaoni emerges as a transitional figure, and this highlights the need for new research that extends the framework of the relationship between educational background and poetic identity beyond the generation I have studied here. This would entail a comparison between the Obscure poets and the poets of the Third Generation, a slightly younger cohort whose experience at once overlapped with the Obscure poets and radically differed from it. Below, I would like to outline some of the issues that could come into play here.

The Third Generation poets are a large, loose-knit group. As many scholars have pointed out, they are far from a homogeneous group, and display a great deal of experiment and diversity.⁴⁴⁸ In the late 1990s, for instance, a deep-seated divergence in poetic styles flared up during a polemic on so-called Popular Writing and so-called Intellectual Writing; after the name of the conference venue where the polemic exploded, this is remembered as the Panfeng Polemic (盘峰论争).⁴⁴⁹ Examples of prominent names generally considered to belong to the Third Generation include Yu Jian, Zhai Yongming (翟永明, b. 1955), Ouyang Jianghe (欧阳江河, b. 1956), Song Lin (宋琳, b. 1959), Han Dong (韩东, b. 1961), Lu Yimin (陆忆敏, b. 1962), Tang Yaping (唐亚平, b. 1962), Li Yawei (李亚伟, b. 1963), Wang Yin (王寅, b. 1962), Xi Chuan, Haizi and several others.

From an *educational* point of view, the background of the Third Generation is unique. The Third Generation poets are generally about ten years younger than the

⁴⁴⁸ Hong Zicheng 2005:207-210

⁴⁴⁹ van Crevel 2008: ch 12; Zhou Han 2011, Tang Qiaoqiao 2014: ch 2

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Obscure poets, and were part of a generation that benefited from the re-opening of tertiary education to the public in 1977, after the Cultural Revolution had come to a close. A striking difference in educational experience with the Obscure poets is that the latter generally had limited exposure to school education, with some seeing even their secondary school interrupted during the Cultural Revolution, and only Wang Xiaoni attending university. By contrast, many of the Third Generation poets had fully-fledged secondary and tertiary educations, and quite a few of them specialized in Chinese and foreign literature. Another difference lies in their family background. While most of the Obscure poets were born in Beijing to parents who were high-ranking cadres, most of the Third Generation poets were born not in the cultural and political center that is Beijing but elsewhere in the country, with their parents at various levels in terms of social hierarchy and status.

During the Cultural Revolution, at the same time as major disruptions to tertiary and (elite) secondary education, enrolment levels in primary and secondary schools grew phenomenally, in an attempt by the authorities to abolish elitism and to benefit the broad masses of peasants and workers, with “a practical curriculum oriented toward production, and intensive political education pervading the whole program”.⁴⁵⁰ Meanwhile, tertiary education enrolment dropped dramatically. The entrance examination for tertiary education had been discontinued in 1967; entrance was now based on recommendation. Political criteria became dominant, and high school graduates had to have work experience before they could be recommended. These students are traditionally called Worker-Peasant-Soldier students (工农兵学员).⁴⁵¹

The entrance examination for tertiary education was restored in 1977, with applicants varying in age. Four years later, starting in 1981, it was stipulated that all applicants to college must be fresh graduates from senior high school. University students enrolled in late 1970s and early 1980s were listed at the cadre level in the work unit system. Their privileges included tuition exemptions, stipends and future job assignments, without any consideration of the job market.⁴⁵² This situation

⁴⁵⁰ Hayhoe 1996:95

⁴⁵¹ Hayhoe 1996:95-96

⁴⁵² Yang Dongping 2003: ch6

gradually changed after a decision by the CPC Central Committee on the Educational System Reform in 1985, and was ended in 1994.⁴⁵³

From a *literary* perspective, the Third Generation poets were institutionally and aesthetically related inasmuch as they all claimed to be different from the Obscure poets, and distanced themselves from Obscure poetry (much like the Obscure poets had distanced themselves from Political Lyricism, in a typical pattern of innovation-through-rupture in literature and art). Scholars have done abundant research on the comparison between the Obscure poetry and the Third Generation poetry, and pointed out that the Obscure poetry usually employs intense lyricism, dense figurative imagery and political metaphors, while the Third Generation poetry is frequently characterized by a narrative mode, the theme of down-to-earth daily life, colloquial language and a low-key, matter-of-fact tone.⁴⁵⁴

In 1982, the concept of the Third Generation poets was proposed by students of various colleges in Sichuan, based on the logic that they had a strong feeling that this was a new generation, born after the Cultural Revolution with different experiences than the former poets, and therefore they would write freshly new poetry. (That they presented themselves as a “third” generation was with reference to a “first” generation of authors during the first decade of the PRC and the Obscure poets as a “second” generation.).⁴⁵⁵

From the early 1980s to the early 1990s, the Third Generation poets produced provocative manifestos like the “anti-sublime” (反崇高), “destroy the image” (消灭意象), “from obscurity to reality” (从朦胧走向现实), “Bye-bye, Bei Dao and Shu Ting” (别了, 北岛舒婷) and others. Meanwhile, famous Third Generation poems included various different styles, such as in Han Dong’s «Of the Wide Goose Pagoda» (有关大雁塔) (minimalist, philosophical and sarcastic), Yu Jian’s «No. 6 Shangyi Street» (尚义街六号) (colloquial, quotidian, clownish, and nostalgic), Li Yawei’s «Tough Man» (硬汉) (scandalizing, transgressive) and Zhai Yongming’s sequence «Woman» (女人) (intensely personal, physical yet elusive, feminist). After 1984, experimental poetry societies and unofficial poetry journals

⁴⁵³ Li & Zheng & Yu (eds.): ch 3

⁴⁵⁴ Yeh 1992b, Tang Xiaodu 1992

⁴⁵⁵ Day 2005

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mushroomed nationwide. Well-known poetry societies include “Them” (他们) in Nanjing, “At Sea” (海上) in Shanghai, and many groups in Sichuan, such as “New Traditionalism” (新传统主义), “Wholism” (整体主义), “Not-Not-ism” (非非) and “Macho Men-ism” (莽汉主义).⁴⁵⁶

Although, as noted above, the Third Generation poets share certain similarities in the fact that many attended university and their distancing from the Obscure poetry, we see a more diverse educational background and poetic identity in this group than in the Obscure poets. Let me illustrate this by looking at Xi Chuan, Li Yawei and Zhai Yongming.

Xi Chuan was born in Xuzhou in 1963 but the family moved to Beijing when he was a young child. He studied in the primary and secondary departments of the affiliated school of Beijing Foreign University. This was a school for cadres’ children, specially designed for cultivating future diplomats, and was one of the few schools that continued its operations during the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁵⁷ Afterwards, he became a student in the English Language and Literature department in Peking University. Unlike the Obscure poets, and like some of his fellow the Third Generation poets, he has an outstanding command of a foreign language (English, in his case); and his oeuvre contains many poetic essays as well as large amounts of poetry.

Xi Chuan’s poetry is characterized by its rich erudition in the realm of the humanities (history, literature, art, philosophy), delivered in a mostly lyrical tone that is at once serious and playful.⁴⁵⁸

Li Yawei was born in Chongqing in 1963. He studied in the Chinese language and literature department in Nanchong Normal College, but shows aggressive resistance to school education in both his writings (with the poem «The Chinese Department» [中文系] as a typical example) and his behavior. He was a “problem student” in college: instead of attending classes, he drank, womanized and engaged

⁴⁵⁶ Hong Zicheng 2007: ch 12

⁴⁵⁷ Xi Chuan 2006b

⁴⁵⁸ Hong Zicheng 2007: 359-360, van Crevel 2008: ch 5 & 10

in gang fights. He almost failed to graduate, something that is rare in Chinese tertiary education, and certainly was so at the time.⁴⁵⁹

Li Yawei's poetry, as a typical example of the Sichuan school of the "Macho Men", is characterized by "mocking, dissolute images of speakers in their poetry, the use of casual colloquial language, and the destruction of the exquisite and the sublime".⁴⁶⁰

Zhai Yongming was born in Chengdu in 1955. Since her parents worked in the army and often travelled, Zhai was adopted by a family in Guizhou, who were her parents' colleagues. She was raised in the care of her adoptive grandmother. After her adoptive grandmother died, she moved back to Chengdu at the age of nine. In her interviews and essays, she has not talked much about her childhood and little is known about her primary and middle school period. She spent two years in the countryside as a Rusticated Youth from 1974 to 1976, and was enrolled as a major of laser technology in the College of Electronic Science and Technology in 1977, as one of the last Worker-Peasant-Soldier students. After graduation, she was assigned to work in the Institute of Arms Industry Bureau. However, she had no interest at all in her major nor her job.⁴⁶¹

As for her poetry, Zhai Yongming has written about her pain in the tension with her parents, her surroundings and the traditional expectations of women, and she expresses a complex female experience in her poetry, playing a groundbreaking role in creating space for womanhood and feminism on the Chinese poetry scene, even if this remains an uphill battle. With her poetry sequence «Woman» written and unofficially published in the early 1980s and officially published in 1986, and her famous exploration of what she called "night consciousness" as characterizing her poetics, *Women's Poetry* (女性诗歌) became an important part of the Third Generation poetry.⁴⁶²

So far, there are a lot of studies in scholarship on the characteristics of the Third Generation poetry as a whole, and case studies of individual Third Generation

⁴⁵⁹ <https://www.poemlife.com/index.php?mod=libshow&id=545>

⁴⁶⁰ Hong Zicheng 2007:355, Day 2005: ch 4

⁴⁶¹ Zhai Yongming 2004 & 2018

⁴⁶² Hong Zicheng 2007: 360-361, Jeanne Hong Zhang 2004

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poets.⁴⁶³ Also, several studies focus on the overall developments of the Third Generation Poetry from the perspective of literary history.⁴⁶⁴ However, scholarship has hardly taken the educational background of the Third Generation poets into account, and its difference with their famous predecessors, the Obscure poets. Only Hong Zicheng mentions that the Third Generation poetry started from so-called campus poetry (校园诗歌), with universities thus becoming the breeding ground for the Third Generation poetry. However, he does not elaborate this point.⁴⁶⁵

If we apply the same analytical framework used in this study to the Third Generation poets, similar central questions arise:

- How are the Third Generation poets' educational backgrounds reflected in their poetic identities?

And from there, we could ask:

- Are the differences in educational backgrounds of the Obscure poets and the Third Generation poets generalizably reflected in their respective poetic identities at the level of literary generations?

This would help to develop Hong's argument and see the whole picture more clearly. Notably, for the Third Generation, the education they received at university should then encompass not only school education but also peer education and mentor education.

In regard to mentor education, as many memoirs of the Third Generation poets clearly state, the Obscure poets who published in *Today* served as their mentors when they read this "underground", unofficial journal during their early years in the universities.⁴⁶⁶ Consequently, early poems published in official journals in the early 1980s by the Third Generation poets display clear similarities with the Obscure poetry, however loudly the Third Generation were to bid farewell to their

⁴⁶³ Yeh 1991a,1992;Li Zhensheng1996; Zhang Qinghua 1997a

⁴⁶⁴ Liu Bo 2012

⁴⁶⁵ Hong Zicheng 2005:204

⁴⁶⁶ Bai Hua2001:ch3, La 2003:258, Han Dong 2011

predecessors just a few years later. Han Dong's «Untitled: To Zhang Zhixin» (无题·献给张志新) and Zhai Yongming's «I Am» (我是) are two examples. Also, it is interesting to note that poems such as these were published in official journals, while a few years, later, in the mid-1980s, it was in *un*-official journals that the Third Generation poets began to publish their more experimental poems, distancing themselves from the Obscure poets.⁴⁶⁷

In regard to tertiary education, Chen Pingyuan's (陈平原) linkage of influential university lectures with literary trends suggests an idea that is useful here. Chen's studies focus on leaders of the New Culture Movement such as Hu Shi, Zhou Zuoren (周作人), Lu Xun (鲁迅) and Wu Mei (吴梅), who were also teachers in Peking University in the late 1910s and early 1920s. By looking into syllabi, handouts, monographs and interactions between teachers and students during lectures, Chen shows how university lectures contributed to carrying the New Culture Movement forward.⁴⁶⁸ If Chen's analytical framework is applied to Chinese universities in the 1980s, this could yield interesting results, because there are at least four categories of teachers holding different poetic views that demand attention here, and this is merely the result of my initial explorations, so the list may well be much longer.

- The “Returned poets” (归来诗人), referring to poets who began to publish their works again in the late 1970s after a sometimes decades-long absence, when the political climate stifled their voices.
 - Those working in Chinese departments: Gong Mu is a case in point, having been branded a “right-wing” poet during the anti-rightist campaign in the 1950s but rehabilitated and eventually the director of the Chinese department at Jilin University in the 1980s.
 - Those working in foreign language and literature departments: Zheng Min, mentioned in chapter one, is one example.
- The Third Generation poets who were at one point university lecturers themselves, Song Lin and Han Dong being two examples.

⁴⁶⁷ van Crevel 2007

⁴⁶⁸ Chen Pingyuan 2011: ch 1,2 and 4.

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- Scholars in the Chinese department of Peking University including Xie Mian and Sun Shaozhen (Sun worked in PKU in the 1960s and relocated to Fujian Normal University in 1973), who were advocates of Obscure poetry. Together with these two colleagues/ alumni, Hong Zicheng was working on a nationwide textbook of contemporary Chinese literary history in the 1980s. They had earlier compiled such a textbook in the late 1950s.

In regard to the Third Generation's peer education, an important role would have been played by the aforesaid on-campus literary societies that more or less had the approval of the authorities. A quick review of the materials I have found so far shows, for instance, that Song Lin was a lecturer in the Chinese department of East China Normal University, but also a key figure in dormitory salons for years. It would be interesting to compare his discourse and his activities on official and unofficial occasions.

A detailed study of the various elements that constitute the educational background of the Third Generation poets may help to improve the understanding of their poetic identity in their poetry and poetics. This will show considerable differences between the Obscure poets and the Third Generation poets. But one argument remains the same: literary traditions pass from one generation to another through various kinds of education. The complexity of the relationship between education and creative writing has often been reduced, overlooked and misconstrued, and new literary generations tend to proclaim their fundamental difference from their predecessors, as if they start in a vacuum—but the role of education remains a core perspective for our understanding of literature and of cultural traditions at large.

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Summary

This thesis studies the interaction between educational background and poetic identity in contemporary China, with reference to a literary-generational group known as the Obscure poets that came to the fore in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They are usually taken to include Bei Dao, Shu Ting, Gu Cheng, Jiang He, and Yang Lian. Others who are associated with Obscure poetry but were only recognized as such in the late 1990s include Shizhi, Mang Ke, Duoduo, Genzi, and Wang Xiaoni.

Chapter one shows that while the poets, their parents, and China-based researchers have often seen creative writing as unrelated or negatively related to school education, two concepts enable us to take a different perspective. First, Ivan Illich's idea of deschooling helps to redefine the concept of educational background. Second, Michelle Yeh's and Maghiel van Crevel's scholarship has advanced a truly localized redefinition of the concept of poetic identity for contemporary China. This offers a springboard for my investigation of the complex interaction between educational background and poetic identity for the authors under scrutiny. There is definitely a relation here, and it is not just, or even primarily, a negative relation. Within the field of modern Chinese poetry, the Obscure poets learned from the tradition of left-wing literature on the one hand and from that of modernist literature on the other (the latter prominently included foreign literature in Chinese translation but also "home-grown" Chinese modernist writing, and the two are closely intertwined). This process took shape through four types of education: school education, family education, peer education and mentor education.

Chapter two argues that school education, family education and mentor education familiarized the Obscure poets with Political Lyricism (as part of the left-wing tradition) and moved them to practice this type of writing from an early age. With the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution and the interruption of school education in 1966, peer education came to play an important role, causing the poets to reconsider their engagement with Political Lyricism. We see them in a gradual retreat from Political Lyricism, with Genzi and Duoduo as cases in point. While they certainly borrowed elements of Political Lyricism (such as metaphors and

sometimes a particular tone of voice), they combined such elements with what they learned from the modernist tradition.

Chapter three is a case study of Shizhi. The traces of school education, which promoted Political Lyricism and emphasized the values of collectivism and nationalism, can be clearly seen in his poetic identity. His family education kept him from extreme activism in the Red Guard Movement. Unlike many others, he displayed no violent behavior vis-à-vis his teachers or other authority figures, and enriched his writing by drawing on classical Chinese poems he learned from his mother. Aside from the influence of school education and family education, we can see the influence of mentor education that was provided by the older poet He Qifang. We see Shizhi traveling a circle, away from standard Political Lyricism to a deviant form and then back. In these poems, we see him struggling with the choice between collectivism and individualism, between orthodoxy-and-public-recognition and a more underground status.

Chapter four is a case study of Bei Dao. Political Lyricist aspects of Bei Dao's early writings reflect his school education, which led to his first engagement with literature and his cultivation of "revolutionary fever". School education also lies at the root of his use of the metaphors of the poppy and amber, which he took from textbooks. His use of the metaphors of sheep, the shepherd and the narrow gate indicate an influence from Christianity, presumably through the faith of his mother, in an instance of family education. Notably, Bei Dao's later revolt against Political Lyricism originates in his early, deep familiarity with it. In developing his position on language and poetry he explores different forms of the self, sorting out the relationship between the self and the collective, and between the self and the society. In all, Bei Dao's relationship to Political Lyricism turns out to be ambivalent and complicated, subverting easy assumptions of a clean break between Mao-era Political Lyricism and early Reform-era Obscure poetry.

Chapter five is a case study of Gu Cheng. During his brief exposure to school education, Gu was not keen and performed badly. He was also isolated from his classmates, especially from his male fellow students. Unique among the Obscure poets, Gu reflects on his school education in some of his poems, directly addressing his personal experience. A feeling of sorrow is hinted at, but the reader cannot put the finger on the poet's feelings about school. When rusticated to the countryside

(like many other urban youths) in 1969, Gu Cheng embarked on an exclusive, intensive family education “program” when he learned to write poetry from his father Gu Gong, an establishment poet in the People’s Liberation Army and a staunch advocate of Political Lyricism. Similar to Bei Dao’s situation, Gu Cheng’s later poetic revolt against his father originated from his deep familiarity with Political Lyricism. Ultimately, father and son undertook diverse, sometimes contrasting aesthetic pursuits and held starkly different opinions on poetics. In a transformation of Political Lyricism, Gu Cheng shows his resistance and suspicion towards politics, by using standard Political Lyricism metaphors in unconventional ways. He also composed political allegories that mock the hypocrisy of politics.

Chapter six is a case study of Wang Xiaoni. Unlike the other Obscure poets, she had the opportunity to go to university, and her parents were neither literati nor intellectuals. They did not encourage her to be a poet, and in fact discouraged her. Her mother’s devotion to work rendered her absent from the family, and this pushed Wang to ponder the balance between her own work and her role as a mother and spouse. As such, Wang Xiaoni’s educational experience is reflected in her poetic identity in two ways. First, Wang shows her rejection of Political Lyricism by writing in plain, direct and precise language, and avoiding political metaphors. Second, she proposes to “start anew as a poet”. She explores the significance of home in down-to-earth reflection on this “mundane” subject matter, which had been absent from Chinese literature for many years. She critically addresses the “marginality” of poetry, the cult of poetry, and the cult of poethood in contemporary China, as well as traditional visions of poethood.

Chapter seven summarizes my main findings and reflects on the questions raised in the process. In addition, I offer a comparison between the Obscure poets and the Third-Generation poets, who came to the fore starting from the mid-1980s. Their educational backgrounds and poetic identities are radically different from those of the Obscure poets. Many attended university, and by coupling this with the way they distanced themselves from Obscure poetry, we see a more diverse educational background and poetic identity in this group than in the Obscure poets. It is my hope that this comparison will offer a starting point for future research.

Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt de interactie van onderwijs-achtergrond en poëtische identiteit in het hedendaagse China, met verwijzing naar een literair-generationele groep genaamd de Duistere dichters die furore maakte in de late jaren 1970s en de vroege jaren 1980. Als leden van die groep gelden meestal Bei Dao, Shu Ting, Gu Cheng, Jiang Je en Yang Lian. Anderen die ermee worden geassocieerd maar pas in de late jaren 1990 erkenning kregen zijn Shizhi, Mang Ke, Duoduo, Genzi en Wang Xiaoni.

Hoofdstuk 1 laat zien dat hoewel de dichters, hun ouders en onderzoekers in China hun creatieve werk vaak zien als ongerelateerd of negatief gerelateerd aan schoolonderwijs, twee begrippen een ander perspectief mogelijk maken. Ten eerste helpt Ivan Illich's idee van ontscholen (*deschooling*) om het concept onderwijsachtergrond te herdefiniëren. Ten tweede leidt het onderzoek van Michelle Yeh en Maghiel van Crevel tot een werkelijk gelocaliseerde herdefinitie van het concept poëtische identiteit voor het hedendaagse China. Dit biedt een springplank voor mijn onderzoek van de complexe interactie van onderwijsachtergrond en poëtische identiteit voor de auteurs in kwestie. Deze dingen houden zonder meer verband, en dat is niet alleen of zelfs maar primair een negatief verband. Binnen het veld van de moderne Chinese poëzie leerden de Duistere dichters enerzijds van de traditie van linkse literatuur en anderzijds van modernistische literatuur (die veel buitenlandse literatuur in vertaling omvatte maar ook “zelfgemaakte” Chinees-modernistische teksten, en die beide zijn innig verstrengeld). Dit proces vond plaats via vier vormen van onderwijs: schoolonderwijs, onderwijs vanuit de familie, onderwijs door gelijken (*peer education*) en onderwijs door persoonlijke mentoren.

Hoofdstuk 2 betoogt dat schoolonderwijs, familieonderwijs en mentoronderwijs de Duistere dichters bekend maakten met Politieke Lyriek (als onderdeel van de linkse traditie) en hen ertoe bewoog om al op jonge leeftijd op die manier te schrijven. Na de uitbraak van de Culturele Revolutie en de onderbreking van schoolonderwijs in 1966 kreeg het onderwijs door gelijken een grote rol, en deed hen hun betrokkenheid bij de Politieke Lyriek heroverwegen. We zien hoe ze zich

daaruit geleidelijk terugtrekken, met Genzi en Duoduo als duidelijke voorbeelden. Al leenden ze zeker elementen van de Politieke Lyriek (zoals bepaalde metaforen en soms een bepaalde toon), ze combineerden die met wat ze leerden van de modernistische traditie.

Hoofdstuk 3 richt zich op Shizhi. De sporen van het schoolonderwijs, dat Politieke Lyriek bepleitte en de waarden van collectivisme en nationalisme benadrukte, zijn duidelijk zichtbaar in zijn poëtische identiteit. Zijn familieonderwijs weerhield hem van extreem activisme in de Beweging van de Rode Gardisten. In tegenstelling tot vele anderen vertoonde hij geen gewelddadig gedrag jegens zijn leraren of andere gezagsfiguren, en verrijkte zijn werk door te putten uit klassiek-Chinese gedichten die hij van zijn moeder leerde. Naast de invloed van school- en familieonderwijs zien we de invloed van het mentoronderwijs dat hij kreeg van de oudere dichter He Qifang. We zien Shizhi rondgaan in een cirkel, weg van de Politieke Lyriek naar een afwijkende vorm daarvan en dan er weer naar terug. In deze gedichten zien we hem worstelen met de keuze tussen collectivisme en individualisme, tussen orthodoxie-en-publieke-erkenning en een meer ondergrondse status.

Hoofdstuk 4 richt zich op Bei Dao. Politiek-Lyrische aspecten van Bei Dao's vroege werk weerspiegelen zijn schoolonderwijs, dat hem in contact bracht met de literatuur en hem aanzette tot het cultiveren van "de koorts van de revolutie". Het schoolonderwijs ligt ook ten grondslag aan zijn inzet van de metaforen van de klaproos en de barnsteen, die hij overnam uit schoolboeken. Zijn gebruik van de metaforen van het schaap, de herder en de nauwe poort wijst op een Christelijke invloed, vermoedelijk via het geloof van zijn moeder en aldus via familieonderwijs. Vermelding verdient dat Bei Dao's latere verzet tegen de Politieke Lyriek voortkomt uit zijn vroege, diepe bekendheid ermee. Bij de ontwikkeling van zijn standpunten over taal en poëzie verkent hij verschillende vormen van het zelf en pluist het verband uit tussen zelf en collectief en tussen zelf en samenleving. Alles bij elkaar blijkt Bei Dao's verhouding tot de Politieke Lyriek ambivalent en gecompliceerd. Dit ondergraaft simpele aannames over een duidelijke breuk tussen de Politieke Lyriek uit de Mao-tijd en de Duistere poëzie uit het begin van de Hervormingen.

Hoofdstuk 5 richt zich op Gu Cheng. Tijdens zijn korte blootstelling aan het schoolonderwijs was Gu niet toegewijd en behaalde slechte resultaten. Hij stond geïsoleerd van zijn klasgenoten, vooral de andere jongens. Als enige van de Duistere dichters reflecteert Gu in zijn gedichten op het schoolonderwijs en benoemt hij zijn persoonlijke ervaring. Er is de suggestie van verdriet, maar de lezer kan de vinger niet leggen op de gevoelens van de dichter over school. Toen hij in 1969 naar het platteland gestuurd werd (net als vele andere stedelijke jongelingen) begon Gu Cheng aan een exclusief en intensief familieonderwijs-“programma”, toen hij poëzie leerde schrijven van zijn vader Gu Gong, een dichter die werkte bij het Volksbevrijdingsleger en een krachtig voorstander van de Politieke Lyriek. Net als in het geval van Bei Dao vloeit Gu Chengs latere rebellie tegen zijn vader voort uit zijn diepe bekendheid met de Politieke Lyriek. Uiteindelijk streefden vader en zoon uiteenlopende en soms tegengestelde esthetica na en hadden ze een zeer verschillende mening over poëtica. In een transformatie van de Politieke Lyriek toont Gu Cheng verzet en argwaan tegen de politiek, door standaardmetaforen uit de Politieke Lyriek op ongebruikelijke wijze te gebruiken. Hij schreef ook politieke allegorieën die de spot drijven met de hypocrisie van de politiek.

Hoofdstuk 6 richt zich op Wang Xiaoni. Anders dan de andere Duistere dichters kreeg zij de kans om te studeren, en haar ouders waren literaten noch intellectuelen. Ze moedigden haar niet aan om dichter te worden; in feite ontmoedigden ze haar. Haar moeders toewijding aan haar werk maakten haar een afwezige in het gezin en dit zette Wang ertoe aan om het evenwicht tussen haar eigen werk en haar rol als moeder en echtgenoot te overdenken. Wangs poëtische identiteit weerspiegelt haar onderwijservaring op twee manieren. Ten eerste toont ze haar afwijzing van de Politieke Lyriek door te schrijven in eenvoudige, directe en precieze taal, en politieke metaforen te vermijden. Ten tweede stelt ze voor “als dichter opnieuw te beginnen”. Ze verkent de betekenis van het thuis via nuchtere reflectie op dit “gewone” onderwerp, dat jarenlang had ontbroken in de Chinese literatuur. Ze stelt zich kritisch op tegenover de “marginaliteit” van de poëzie, de cultus van de poëzie en de cultus van het dichterschap in het hedendaagse China, en tegenover traditionele beelden van het dichterschap.

Hoofdstuk 7 vat mijn bevindingen samen en bespreekt vragen die de eerdere hoofdstukken hebben opgeroepen. Bovendien bied ik een vergelijking van de

Samenvatting

Duistere dichters en de dichter van de Derde Generatie, die furore maakten vanaf het midden van de jaren 1980. Hun onderwijsachtergrond en poëtische identiteit verschillen radicaal van die van de Duistere dichters. Velen van hen hebben gestudeerd, en als we dit combineren met de manier waarop ze afstand namen van de Duistere poëzie zien we een meer diverse onderwijsachtergrond en poëtische identiteit in deze groep dan bij de Duistere dichters. Ik hoop dat deze vergelijking een beginpunt biedt voor toekomstig onderzoek.

Curriculum Vitae

Wu Jinhua was born in 1985 in Zhanjiang, China. In 2004, she began her training in Chinese Language and Literature at Nanjing University. During her studies, she spent half a year in Hongkong Baptist University as an exchange student. After obtaining the BA degree at Nanjing University, she continued her studies at Beijing Normal University, where she obtained her Master's degree in Chinese Language and Literature in 2011. She was subsequently admitted as a PhD candidate at the Leiden University Institute for Area Studies (LIAS) on a Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) scholarship. During her studies, she published several articles in Chinese and several English-Chinese translations of academic papers. She currently works as a rights agent for children's books.

HOW THE CAGED BIRD SING

Educational Background and Poetic Identity of China's Obscure Poets

By Jinhua Wu

Propositions

1. The complexity of the relation between education and creative writing has received insufficient attention in scholarship. [*This thesis*]
2. School and family education facilitated the Obscure poets' familiarity with Political Lyricism. Peer and mentor education destabilized Political Lyricism's hold over them by exposing them to other types of writing. [*This thesis*]
3. Similarities between Obscure poetry and Political Lyricism are as significant as their differences. [*This thesis*]
4. Wang Xiaoni's proposal to "start anew as a poet" by exploring the significance of the "mundane" subject matter of *home* is especially noteworthy in the context of the PRC poetry scene, which continues to suffer from an overabundance of heroism and grand gestures. [*This thesis*]
5. Ivan Illich's idea of deschooling takes on new significance when coupled with the localized redefinition of poetic identity in the PRC suggested by Michelle Yeh and Maghiel van Crevel. [*The field*]
6. Rapid canonization and iconicization of a literary trend can make us blind to new insights, even when important new material becomes available. [*The field*]
7. The digitization of source material is a blessing, but digital methods in the study of literature are much less suitable to poetry than to prose. [*The field*]

8. Censorship and self-censorship in Chinese literature make interviews with authors an indispensable supplement to textual analysis of this literature. [*The field*]
9. For describing and controlling our encounter with the Corona virus, war metaphors are misleading. That many politicians fail to protect vulnerable groups from the virus makes this all the more tragic. [*Topic of choice*]