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

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[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

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[2] Cheng & Manning 2003

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

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[3] Denton & Hockx (eds). 2008
[4] Zang Kejia 1955a & 1955b & 1956

(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

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[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, humanpower 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]

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[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 Lyricsm 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

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[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 expecially, the work of the revolutionary poets of the Soviet Union." Byron, Shelley, Petofi, 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

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[12] Hong Zicheng 2007: 86
[13] Hong Zicheng 2007: 86

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

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[14] Helen Wang 2008: Glossary
[15] Rong Guangqi2002, 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

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[18] For He Qifang' 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

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

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[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.

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[25] Hong Zicheng 2007: 34, 317
[26] Tamburello 2015
[27] Li Runxia 2005
[28] Shu Ting 1999: 301

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.

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[29] Yeh 1992: 379
[30] van Crevel 1996:73, note 14
[31] van Crevel 1996, Wang Shiqiang 2009, Zhang Zhiguo2009

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

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[32] Hayhoe 1996: ch3, Yang Dongping 2003: ch4
[33] MacFarquhar & Fairbank (eds).1991: 542-549

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

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[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

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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.

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]

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[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

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[46] Fang Bing 1980
[47] Hong 2007:264
[48] McDougall 1988: 47-48

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.

1.3   Literature Review

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

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[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.

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[52] Gong Liu 1979, Ai Qing 1981
[53] Li Li 1981

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]

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[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

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[56] Preface to Tang Xiaodu& Wang Jiaxin 1987, written by Tang Xiaodu. Yeh 1991a.
[57] Hong Zicheng 2007: 341-349

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

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[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

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[61] Yang Kuisong 2007

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

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[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

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[67] Archival Library of Chinese Publications 1988, van Crevel 1996, Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999, Shen Zhanyun2007

[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

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?

1.4   Theory and Methodology

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

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[74] van Crevel 1996: 42-46,78
[75] van Crevel 2008: 5
[76] van Crevel 1996: 36

- o Hidden curriculum
- "Learning webs" (as theorized by Ivan Illich), categorized by teacher types:
  - o Mentor Education
  - o 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

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[77] Illich 1971: 25-26.
[78] Illich 1971: 1
[79] Illich 1971: 93

> 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,

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[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.

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[81] http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/improving-services/peer-education/main
[82] Scott & Marshall (eds). 2014: 305

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.

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[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 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.

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[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.

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

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[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

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[88] Yang Lian 1998 & 2003
[89] Qi Jian 1994

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

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[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

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 themelves 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.