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

Wu, J.

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Author: Wu, J.

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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.

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...
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

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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

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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.