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

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3 Shizhi: “Believe in the Future”

3.1 Introduction

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

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

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

¹⁵⁴ Shizhi 1998: 151.

¹⁵⁵ Shizhi 1998: 152-153.

¹⁵⁶ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: ch 2.

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁵⁷ Shizhi 1998

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁶¹ Hong Zicheng 2002: ch 5.

¹⁶² Shizhi 1988.

¹⁶³ Duoduo 1988.

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁶⁶ Liu Hong 2006.

¹⁶⁷ Li Xianyu 1998.

¹⁶⁸ van Crevel 1996: 32.

¹⁶⁹ Lindner 2015

¹⁷⁰ Li-hua Ying 2009:170.

¹⁷¹ Zhang Qinghua 2001, Cui Weiping 1994.

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

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

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

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

¹⁷² Lindner 2015

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

¹⁷⁴ Shizhi 2016, Lin Mang & Zhai Hanle 2006.

¹⁷⁵ Liu Jia 2005.

3.2 Family Education

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

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

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

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

¹⁷⁶ Shizhi 1998: 151-153.

¹⁷⁷ Shizhi 1998: 151.

¹⁷⁸ Shizhi 2016

¹⁷⁹ Guo Yunxuan & Li Qingchen 1950.

¹⁸⁰ Shizhi & Yangzi 2001

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

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

3.3 School Education

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

¹⁸¹ Shzhi 1998: 170.

¹⁸² Shizhi & Quanzi 2006: 120.

3.3.1 Elementary School (1954-1960)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3.2 Secondary School (1961-1966)

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

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

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

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

¹⁸⁴ Shizhi 2016

¹⁸⁵ Liu Jia 2005: 11-13.

¹⁸⁶ Shizhi & Quanzi 2006.

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

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

¹⁸⁷ Liu Jia 2005.

3.4 Mentor education

3.4.1 He Qifang

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

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

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

¹⁸⁸ McDougall 1999: 274

¹⁸⁹ Cui Qinglei 2016.

¹⁹⁰ Huo Junming 2005

¹⁹¹ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: 71.

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

3.4.1.1 Modern Metrics

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

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

¹⁹² Shizhi 2016

¹⁹³ Cui Weiping 1994

¹⁹⁴ Shizhi 2011 &2012b: 22-23.

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

3.4.1.2 Vladimir Mayakovsky

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

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

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

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

¹⁹⁵ Zhai Xiaochun 2011, ch 3.

¹⁹⁶ Shizhi & Yangzi 2001

¹⁹⁷ He Qifang 2000: 245-252.

¹⁹⁸ Ji Jingying 2013: 28.

¹⁹⁹ Shizhi 2016, Cui Weiping 1994

3.4.2 He Jingzhi and Ke Yan

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

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

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

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

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

²⁰⁰ Hong Zicheng 2007: 87-88

²⁰¹ Shizhi 2016

²⁰² Cui Weiping 1994, He Zhongming 2008

²⁰³ Shizhi & Yangzi 2001.

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

3.5 Poetic Identity: Political Lyricism

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

3.5.1 Some Changes to Political Lyricism

3.5.1.1 «Fish Trilogy» (1967-1968)

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

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

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

²⁰⁵ Shizhi 2016

²⁰⁶ Yeh 1991a, Chen Chao 2007a

²⁰⁷ Shizhi 2012a: 173-174.

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

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

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

| | |
|---|----------------|
| From a lit cigarette, a dream of the future rises | 燃起的香烟中飘出过未来的幻梦 |
| The blue cloud is the dawn of hope once | 蓝色的烟雾是挣扎过希望的黎明 |
| struggled for | |

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

²⁰⁸ Liu Yangdong 2005: 291-313

²⁰⁹ Shizhi 2012a: 26-27

²¹⁰ Shizhi 2012a: 28-29

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

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

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

我已在欢乐之中沉醉，
但是为了心灵的安宁，
我还要干了这一杯，
喝尽你那一片痴情。

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹¹ Shizhi 2012a: 20-21

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹² Li Runxia (ed), 2006: 16-24

²¹³ Shizhi 1994, Shizhi 2012c

²¹⁴ Shizhi 1994: 104.

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

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

| | |
|---|----------|
| Sing for the brightness of the sunshine | 歌唱阳光的明朗 |
| Sing for the freedom of the blue sky | 歌唱蓝天的自由 |
| Sing for the turbulent ocean | 歌唱动荡的海洋里 |
| There is one fearless ship's bow | 一只无畏的船头 |
| Untie the rope of sentimentality | 解开情感的缆绳 |
| Depart from the port of mother's love | 告别母爱的港口 |
| Ask from life | 要向人生索取 |
| Never beg destiny | 不向命运乞求 |
| The red flag is the sail | 红旗就是船帆 |
| The red sun is the sailor | 太阳就是舵手 |
| Please put my words | 请把我的话儿 |
| In your minds forever | 永远记在心头 |

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

²¹⁵ Shizhi 2000

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

²¹⁷ Shizhi 2016

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—一阵阵告别的声浪，
就要卷走车站；
北京在我的脚下，
已经缓缓地移动。

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

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

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

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

²¹⁸ Shizhi 2012a: 32-33.

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

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

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

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

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

²²⁰ Shizhi 2016

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

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

3.5.2 Standard Political Lyricism

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

²²¹ Shizhi & Yangzi 2001.

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

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

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

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

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

²²² Zhang Lijia 2002: 107-108.

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

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

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

3.5.2.1 A Series of Political Lyricism (1969 to 1973)

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

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

²²³ Liao Yiwu (ed). 1999: 76.

²²⁴ Shizhi & Yangzi 2001.

²²⁵ Huo Junming 2017; 84

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

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

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

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

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

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

²²⁶ Shizhi 2000

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

²²⁸ Shizhi 2000

The poem ends with a forceful stanza:²²⁹

| | |
|---|------------|
| We will devote our warm blood and life | 我们将用热血和生命 |
| To keep the flag a fresh red | 永葆这旗帜青春的火红 |
| We will leave for the following generations | 我们将给后来人留下 |
| Songs that live up to our great times | 无愧于伟大时代的歌声 |

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

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

3.5.2.2 «An Anhui Maid in Beijing» (1986)

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

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

²²⁹ Shizhi 2000

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

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

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

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

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

²³⁰ Shizhi 2012a: 67

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

3.6 Concluding Remarks

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

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

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