



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Wu, J.

Citation

Wu, J. (2021, January 5). *How the caged bird sings: Educational background and poetic identity of China's obscure poets*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/139042>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/139042>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/139042> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Wu, J.

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

Issue Date: 2021-01-05

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

5.1 Introduction

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

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

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

黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛
我却用它来寻找光明

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

³¹¹ Gu Cheng 2005b: 3

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

5.1 Introduction

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

I’m a sorrowful child
Never grown up

我是一个悲哀的孩子，
始终没有长大

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

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

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

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

³¹⁴ Gu Cheng 1995: 238

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

³¹⁶ Kubin 1999, Huang Yibing 2007

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

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

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

³¹⁷ Gu Xiang 1994: 96-119

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

³¹⁹ Gu Cheng 1993a

³²⁰ Wen Xin 1994.

³²¹ Gu Cheng and Xie Ye 1993b.

5.1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

³²² Yeh 1995, van Crevel 2008: ch 3.

³²³ Gu Cheng 1995 & 2010.

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

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

5.2 School Education

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

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

³²⁵ Gu Cheng 1990 & 2005b & 2005c

³²⁶ Li Xia (ed). 1999

³²⁷ Gu Cheng 2005a: 3-28, 166-171

³²⁸ Yeh 1991a, McDougall 1985

5.2.1 Sickness and Anxiety

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

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

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

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

³³⁰ Gu Cheng 2005a: 21

³³¹ Gu Cheng 2005a: 21

³³² Gu Cheng 2005a: 35

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

5.2.2 Isolation from Others

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

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

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

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

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

³³⁵ Gu Cheng 2005a: 11

³³⁶ Gu Cheng 2007: 311

³³⁷ Gu Cheng 2007: 86

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

³³⁹ Mi Heduo 2016

5.2 School Education

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

5.2.3 Failing Subjects

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

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

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

³⁴⁰ Gu Cheng 2006b: 22

³⁴¹ Gu Cheng 2006a: 275

³⁴² Gu Cheng 2006a: 23

³⁴³ Gu Cheng 2006b: 32

³⁴⁴ Gu Cheng 2006b: 56

³⁴⁵ Gu Cheng 2006b: 107

³⁴⁶ Gu Cheng 2006b: 107

³⁴⁷ Kubin1999: 21

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

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

5.3 Family Education

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

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

³⁴⁸ Gu Cheng 2006a: 24

³⁴⁹ Gu Cheng 2007: 18-19, 44

³⁵⁰ Li Xia (ed) 1999: 405.

³⁵¹ Gu Cheng 2005a: 5-6

³⁵² Gu Gong 1989 and Gu Cheng 2005: 83

³⁵³ Gu Gong 1989.

5.3 Family Education

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁵⁵ Personal correspondence, 13 August 2014.

³⁵⁶ Gu Cheng 2005c:153

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

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

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

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

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

³⁵⁷ Gu Cheng 2005a: 118–124

³⁵⁸ Gu Gong 1985, Gu Gong 2005.

³⁵⁹ Gu Cheng 2005a: 88

³⁶⁰ Hu Huilin 1990.

5.3 Family Education

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

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

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

5.4 Poetic Identity: Mixed Styles

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

³⁶¹ Gu Gong 1980.

³⁶² Gu Gong 1982

³⁶³ Gu Cheng 2005a: 118 – 124.

³⁶⁴ Kubin1999: 21.

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

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

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

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

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

5.4.1 The Transformation of Political Lyricism

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

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

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

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

And then,
One fine morning

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

于是
在一天早晨

³⁶⁵ Barnstone (ed). 1993: 76-82

Gu Cheng: "Everything Bulin Wailed Was a Slogan"

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

你们用糙树叶
擦亮了
皮带的铜扣，走了

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.4 Poetic Identity: Mixed Styles

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

世界抖落
就像白额雁
每天留在营地的羽毛

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

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

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

5.4.2 Political Allegory

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

5.4.2.1 Personification

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁶⁶ Gu Cheng 2005b: 36-37

5.4 Poetic Identity: Mixed Styles

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

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

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

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

5.4.2.2 Homonyms

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

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

First: Robbery

President Excellence excellence excellence

Ordered: Attack

Therefore the smoke billowed

A large team of horses, artillery

Fire flashed on the cigarettes

Tableware targeted the cakes

Fighting happened in the baskets

The old hen flew into the bushes

Then: "Report"

A soldier was caught

Just a soldier, who was going

To sell onions in the market

Stand at attention! A soldier

一、劫

杰杰杰总统

说：进攻

于是浓烟滚滚

大马队，炮兵

火光在烟卷上闪动

餐具在蛋糕上瞄准

肉搏在菜筐里进行

老母鸡飞入树丛

于是：“报告”

捉住一个小兵

是小兵，正要去

集上卖葱

立正！一个小兵

Second: Triumph

The army of Excellence Imperial

Caught a soldier

What sort of news was this

It is a must to modify, to clarify

President Excellence put the teeth of the wild boar

On the shoulders of the soldier

"Stand at attention!" stopping eating cakes

Command 0.06 was issued

"Special promotion for

You, a soldier, to be

Colonial General

Morning Glory Park Leader

Rakes-shop Shareholder

My worst enemy

二、捷

杰帝国的大军

捉住了一个小兵

算什么新闻

必须修改，澄清

总统把野猪牙

放在小兵肩上

“立——正！”停止吃点心

发出零点零六号命令

“特提升

你——小兵，为

殖民地将军

牵牛花公园统领

犁耙店股东——

我最大的敌人

Third: Celebration

So, the next day

Cloudless

三、节

于是，第二天

万里无云

³⁶⁷ Gu Cheng 2010: 178

5.4 Poetic Identity: Mixed Styles

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

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

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

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

5.5 Poetic Identity: A Reflection on School Education

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

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

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

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

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

³⁶⁸ Gu Cheng 1995: 853

³⁶⁹ Gu Cheng 1995: 788

5.5 Poetic Identity: A Reflection on School Education

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

在一个紧张的夜晚
土地具有了弹性
人和人拉开了距离
我被弹入高空

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

后来有一滴露水
结束了我的飞行
它把我悄悄粘住
在一片绿影之中

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

闪烁闪烁的小蜂
不断把露水偷饮
我洗去了许多观念
来报答森林的收容

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

粉蝶展开翅页
教我读上边的译文
不同长短的光弦
发出各种单音

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

这是一种语言
用来表达疑问
我开始回想家里
那盏寂寞的小灯

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

终于有一条小路
把我领回都城
社会经过一番手术
似乎恢复了面容

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

我没有说话
到处都传来我的声音
渐渐收拢的人群
在讨论明天的事情

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

他们都很年轻
并不是来自森林
盐和擦伤告诉我
他们来自海面和地层

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

5.5.1 Strangers

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

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

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

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

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

³⁷⁰ Gu Cheng 2005c: 48

³⁷¹ Li Xia (ed). 1999: preface, xv.

5.5 Poetic Identity: A Reflection on School Education

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

5.5.2 In the Face of Death

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

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

在这宽大明亮的世界上
人们走来走去
他们围绕着自己
像一匹匹马
围绕着木桩

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

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

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

³⁷³ Gu Cheng 1995: 303

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

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

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

³⁷⁴ Gu Cheng 1995: 415

5.5 Poetic Identity: A Reflection on School Education

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.6 Concluding Remarks

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

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

³⁷⁵ Gu Cheng 2005c: 146

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