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

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6 Wang Xiaoni: “Starting Anew as a Poet”

6.1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

³⁷⁸ Wang Xiaoni 2012b.

³⁷⁹ Yao Jiahua (ed). 1989: 9-13.

³⁸⁰ Li Zhensheng 1996, Day 2005

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

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

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

³⁸¹ Poetry Journal 1980-2.

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

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

6.1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

³⁸⁵ Jeanne Hong Zhang 2004: 33.

³⁸⁶ Li Zhen 1996.

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

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

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

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

6.2 Family Education

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

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

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

³⁸⁹ Wang Xiaoni 1997, 2006 and 2011.

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

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

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

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

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

³⁹⁰ Wang Xiaoni 2012: 140-141

³⁹¹ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 302.

³⁹² Wang Xiaoni 2006: 310-312.

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

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

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

6.3 School Education

6.3.1 Primary and Secondary Education

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

³⁹³ Wang Xiaoni 2001: 26.

³⁹⁴ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 188-191.

³⁹⁵ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 140.

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

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

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

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

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

³⁹⁶ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 367-368.

³⁹⁷ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 385-396.

6.3.2 Tertiary Education

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

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

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

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

³⁹⁸ Hayhoe 2006: Ch 3.

³⁹⁹ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 149.

⁴⁰⁰ Wang Xiaoni 2012 and Xu Jingya 1996.

⁴⁰¹ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 278.

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

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

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

⁴⁰² Wang Xiaoni 1996.

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

⁴⁰⁴ Yang Xuewei 2001: 3 – 7.

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

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

⁴⁰⁷ Sun Shaozhen 2001.

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

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

6.4 Poetic Identity: Starting Anew as a Poet

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

6.4.1 Reflection on Political Lyricism: Rejection of Political Metaphor

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

⁴⁰⁸ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 342-350.

⁴⁰⁹ van Crevel 2008: 13-14

⁴¹⁰ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 131.

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

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

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

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

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

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

沿着长长的走廊
我，走下去……

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

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

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

⁴¹¹ Wang Xiaoni 2012b: 65.

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

终于, 我冲下楼梯,
推开门,
奔走在春天的阳光里.....

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

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

Wang's style here is similar to that of the Third Generation poets in that they often dwell on particular objects (in this case the sunlight) at length rather than stack up private or symbolist imagery, and that they describe their personal feelings in interaction with the object in question. She is not alone in rejecting metaphor. Yu Jian (于坚 b. 1954), a prominent Third Generation poet, claims to "retreat from metaphor" (从隐喻撤退) in 1997:⁴¹²

"Poetry is a language game that exterminates metaphor ... Poetry is the dissection of language ... To reject metaphor is to reject the metaphor hegemony of our mother tongue, to reject the dominant discourse. Rejecting the metaphor system it imposes, the poet should write from inside a position of questioning and resisting the mother tongue's heaven-granted powers. Writing is the disposal and elimination of metaphor trash ..."

⁴¹² Cited in van Crevel 2008: 375.

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Wang does not advocate the same things as Yu Jian, and does not explicitly indicate the meaning of rejecting political metaphor. Regarding language usage, she puts it in a plain way. In Simon Patton's translation:⁴¹³

“These days, my standard for deciding what is good writing is getting simpler. I have to see whether the writer is “waddling with words” [拽文] or “playing” with his readers [玩人] and I read to see whether he or she has any intention, whether he or she has the wherewithal, to show me anything real. [...] I have always argued for poetry's naturalness and accessibility: to contain a large number of things within the most ordinary language is the basic skill for a poet.”

6.4.2 Reflection on Obscure Poetry: Rejection of Heroism

Wang's way of dealing with the Cultural Revolution shows how she constructs her own poetic identity by clarifying her understandings of Obscure poetry with which she is often associated herself.

In the late 1970s, China saw the emergence of the aforementioned literary trend called Literature of the Wounded, which reflected on the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. This began with Liu Xinwu's (刘心武) short story “Class Counselor” (班主任) in November 1977, and of Lu Xinhua's (卢新华) “The Wounded” (伤痕) in 1978.⁴¹⁴ In Lu's story, a young girl named Xiaohua was forced to denounce her mother who was labeled a traitor under the Gang of Four. For years, Xiaohua suffered from a ruined career and a forced separation from her lover, because she was the daughter of a “traitor”. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, Xiaohua's mother was rehabilitated. But Xiaohua failed to reunite with her mother before her mother passed away.

Many such stories of personal tragedy caused by the Cultural Revolution were published.⁴¹⁵ These stories reveal the physical and mental wounds left by this ten-

⁴¹³ Wang Xiaoni 1997: preface. The translation is from <https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poet/974/Wang-Xiaoni/nl/nocache>

⁴¹⁴ People's Literature, 1977-11; Literary Confluence Daily, 11 August 1978.

⁴¹⁵ Hong Zicheng 2007:294.

year disaster, raising questions on the legitimacy of the government and the Party. While the Deng Xiaoping leadership advocated embracing the "new era", clear limits continued to be set on Literature of the Wounded's reflection on the Cultural Revolution, with reference to an official discourse than ran along these lines: the common people are the victims of this disaster, which was caused not by the Party but by the Gang of Four, and of "fundamental contradictions in contemporary Chinese society and the long-standing practices of 'feudalism' in the national culture and psychology."⁴¹⁶

Significantly, the Obscure poetry has been associated with Literature of the Wounded, which is still open to discussion.⁴¹⁷ But there is widespread agreement that the Obscure poets are inclined to position themselves as tragic heroes who underwent the Cultural Revolution and reveals their traumas in their (early) poetry. In comparison to the Third Generation poets, they have been called otherworldly, pretentious and heroic.⁴¹⁸ Different from what the Obscure poets experienced, the Third Generation poets did not experience "revolution". They rarely deal with the theme of the Cultural Revolution in their works.

Wang Xiaoni develops her own way of dealing with the Cultural Revolution. Generally speaking, Wang's poetry employs the first person singular, speaking of her personal feelings towards daily life. When it comes to the theme of reflection on the Cultural Revolution, she chooses to remain uninvolved, through the genre of fiction rather than poetry. In her novel *Forty Miles Around* (方圆四十里), she employs the third person singular and speaks as an outsider. She attempts to adopt an objective narrative perspective to tell the complicated stories of the Rusticated Youths in a calm tone. She hopes to show that during the Cultural Revolution, as she states, "those who experienced this underwent both bitterness and happiness, they were harmed, and harmed others as well."⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁶ Hong Zicheng 2007: 296.

⁴¹⁷ Zhang Yesong supports this argument in the conference "The Individual and Society in Modern Chinese Literature" held in Macau in 2007. Bei Dao strongly goes against it. Zhang's argument is further stated in Zhang Yesong 2008.

⁴¹⁸ Cheng Weidong 1987.

⁴¹⁹ Wang Xiaoni 2003: preface

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Out of this consideration, she positions the Rusticated Youths as neither victims nor heroes. That probably explains why she refuses to speak in a lyrical tone as a heroic subject in poetry, as some Obscure poets do, especially in their early work, Bei Dao's «The Answer» being a famous example.

Wang refuses to write in the persona of a hero, or in a lyrical tone. First, she does not consider this an obligation of the poet. Poets are not cultural heroes. A poet is just a normal citizen, the same as others. He/she is not obligated or entitled to lecture the masses. Second, she refuses to believe that the masses need to be rescued by the heroes. She feels that lecturing the masses and being surrounded and admired by the masses are risky things: blind worship is dangerous, whether this is for a political leader such as Mao or for a poet who is viewed as a hero. As she clearly states in «Don't Tell Others What You Think» (不要把你所想的告诉别人), in Shi & O'Connell's translation:⁴²⁰

The crowd bobs like stupid birds.
Your face
approaches the red curtain.
In your eyes the world grows wholly glorious.
But I tell you
Glory
is one of the deepest pits

人群傻鸟般雀跃
你的脸
渐渐接近了红色的帷幕。
世界被你注视得全面辉煌。
可我告诉你
辉煌
是一种最深的洞。

When so many hands dance and chirp for you
the hall's a withered garden,
in the breath of your words tottering, rustling.
Remember what I said.
Inside my white pages
I see at once
Your eyes gray as a hare's in a snowfield.

无数手向你舞噪时
会场是败园
在你的风里颓响飘摇。
想到我的提醒了吗。
穿透我的白纸
就能看见
你那雪原灰兔的眼睛。

Unforgivable those people
hovering near you
entwining you.
From your live essence
they crave

不能原谅那些人
萦绕住你
盘缠住你。
他们想从你集聚的
奕奕神态里

⁴²⁰ <http://pangolinhouse.com/issues/summerfall-2013/>.

their own salvation.

得到活着的挽救。

Don't get any closer.

不要走过去。

Don't step to the rostrum.

不要走近讲坛。

Don't tell others what you think.

不要把你所想的告诉别人。

Language says nothing.

语言什么也不能表达。

I grip your hand,

拉紧你的手

speak into it:

在你的手里我说:

beyond ourselves

除了我俩

no one hears another.

没人想听别人的话。

Let me keep you close,

由我珍藏你

sheering off from glory together

一起绕开光荣

Walking silent

无声地

past the frigid crowd.

走过正在冻结的人群。

But all around, waiting

但是, 那是谁的声音

to attack, whose voice.

正从空中袭来。

A similar rejection of the poet performing as a cultural hero is found in poems like «I'd rather Not Know Anyone I Don't» (不认识的不想再认识了). In Shi & O'Connell's translation:⁴²¹

From now on, I'd rather not know anyone I don't,

到今天还不认识的人

But simply respect them from afar.

就远远地敬着他。

After thirty years, my friends

三十年中

are enough, and my enemies.

我的朋友和敌人都足够了。

Passersby come in clumps,

行人一缕缕地经过

hearts transparent in their pockets,

揣着简单明白的感情。

From east to west

向东向西

all innocent.

他们都是无辜。

I've set the future aside,

我要留出我的今后。

loving them intently

以我的方式

my own way.

专心地去爱他们。

⁴²¹ <http://pangolinhouse.com/issues/summerfall-2013/>.

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Looking everywhere, no one sees me,
never catching my expression.

Not? born to be alone, they're fated,
Going one way or another.

Someone pulls his own heart out,
so true, so naïve
tossed to the crowd

From now on
all sublime vessels are empty.
Like me, adrift.
Like my life's
second half.

谁也不注视我。
行人不会看一眼我的表情
望着四面八方。

他们生来
就不是单独的一个
注定向东向西地走。

一个人掏出自己的心
扔进人群
实在太真实太幼稚

从今以后
崇高的容器都空着。
比如我
比如我荡来荡去的
后一半生命。

A similar sense is found in «I've Run into Deceit» (我撞上了欺骗), which is the seventh part of the suite entitled «Seeing a Friend» (看望朋友):⁴²²

Someone beside the bed, chin resting on arms, says
You are more beautiful than you used to be
The people outside love you more than before

...
What I really want to say is that
what people like best
is to crowd up close
to gawk at your bleeding wounds.

有人伏在床头说
你比过去更要美
外面的人都更加爱你。

.....
我真正想说
的是人们最喜欢
近距离地
围观流血的伤口。

Wang also rejects any notion to do with the poet's ability or obligation to speak on behalf of others. As she states:⁴²³

“Suffering reaches me like floods. It is impossible for a person to be a high stony mountain. One has to follow the deadly water, to float. Whether or not this can be called suffering is a purely individual matter. Never can

⁴²² Wang Xiaoni 2017:

⁴²³ Wang Xiaoni 2001: 185.

anybody suffer for the sake of others. Idealistic roles of rescuing others and suffering on behalf of the masses are created in so-called religious stories. When Jesus was walking toward his crucifixion, he still calmly claimed that others could benefit from his agony. I don't believe in this kind of claim. It is impossible for someone to save themselves, so how can one enjoy the luxury of saving others?"

Here, we can see Wang's ideas on individualism, linked with a rejection of heroism. She considers that no one can represent others, or be represented by others. Everyone has the right to speak on his/her own, to voice his/her own opinion. Importantly, this hints at her way of dealing with the Cultural Revolution. First, people's feelings about the Cultural Revolution differ a great deal, and to summarize it as suffering is a simplification. Second, that people experienced the Cultural Revolution does not entitle them to hero status, and this holds for poets just like it holds for everyone else.

In my reading, Wang here addresses "the marginality of poetry" highlighted by Michelle Yeh and, and "the cult of poethood" highlighted by Maghiel van Crevel in his reflection on Yeh's notion of the cult of poetry.⁴²⁴ Both of the above points suggest that Wang rejects the hero complex, thus showing her advocacy of individualism, which can also be found in her other poems.

The "marginality" of contemporary Chinese poetry, highlighted by Yeh, shows "the departure of poetry from the central position it once occupied in Chinese society and implies, at the same time, its newly gained distance from the center, which has made possible a truly critical dialogue with that center."⁴²⁵ What Yeh calls "the cult of poetry" among poets in contemporary China refers to "the phenomenon and the concomitant discourse in the 1980s and the 1990s that bestows poetry with religious significance and cultivates the image of the poet as the high priest of poetry". To a certain extent, this is a response to the marginality of poetry in society at large. Yeh also points out that female poets seldom participate in the

⁴²⁴ Yeh 1992a: preface, Yeh 1996, van Crevel 2008: Ch 1.

⁴²⁵ Yeh 1992a: xxiii.

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discourse of the cult of poetry, and Wang Xiaoni's behavior in the public realm fits this pattern.⁴²⁶

Further to the concept of "cult of poetry", van Crevel points out that there is also a "cult of poethood", among the Obscure poets and the Third Generation poets, and across the Elevated and the Earthly aesthetics that emerged ever more clearly in the 1990s.⁴²⁷ As van Crevel notes, the early Obscure poetry "sustains tragic-heroic images of poethood that have traveled with modern Chinese poetry since its inception, drawing on the Qu Yuan lore and its modern transformations as well as European high Romanticism."⁴²⁸ The Third Generation poets in the Earthly camp dismantle the traditional vision of poethood, but still treasure the poet's visibility in society. As for the poets in the Elevated camp, for them, "the special status of the poet has always been among the tenets of their poetics."⁴²⁹

Notably, Wang Xiaoni actively resists the cult of poetry and poethood. She constructs her own poetic identity by being marginalized, and adjusting her expectations of poetry and poethood. Arguably, Wang's resistance to the cult of poetry and poethood derives from her family education and her tertiary school education. As discussed above, her father kept reminding her of the uselessness of poetry. He kept persuading her to learn something practical, like accounting. On another occasion, her father's illness shook Wang's belief in being a poet. When she sat at his bedside, what she felt she needed was the medical tools to cure him, rather than poetry. In a sense, Wang's adjustment of her positioning as a poet was driven by the contrast between the high-culture fever brought along by the tertiary education she received in the 1980s, and the indifference towards poetry held by large parts of the general readership in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

College students were fond of writing poetry in the 1980s, and the cult of poetry is obviously linked to the phenomenon of high-culture fever. College students as well as poets were considered cultural heroes in the 1980s. Xi Chuan (西川, b. 1963), an important poet of the Third Generation and a leading voice in the Elevated camp,

⁴²⁶ Yeh 1996.

⁴²⁷ van Crevel 2008: ch 1 (pp15-16, 37-38, 45-46), 3, 5, 10, 11 and 12

⁴²⁸ van Crevel 2008: 16.

⁴²⁹ van Crevel 2008: 37-38.

reflects on this phenomenon in his article “Lunatics, Liars, Fools” (疯子·骗子·傻子), in which he describes how as a poet, he was worshiped by a large scale of persons.⁴³⁰

Wang Xiaoni happened to choose Shenzhen as her living place, which is an unlikely place for the cult of poetry, and the general readership’s indifference would have been even more palpable in Shenzhen, one of the Special Economic Zones selected by Deng Xiaoping and associated with capitalism and materialism, than in the environments Wang had known in the North, i.e. schools and university campuses in Jilin. Wang writes that when she relocated to Shenzhen, she could feel this. As it happens, her retrospective feelings about high-culture fever and her adjusted vision of poetry and the poet turn out to fit what Shenzhen citizens think. The citizens in this highly commercialized city displayed an undisguised dislike of poetry and poets. They don’t think there’s anything special about poets.⁴³¹

In Shenzhen, Wang Xiaoni is fond of two places, her home and the supermarket, where she can enjoy the freedom and the simple relationship with other persons. As she interprets, in the supermarket, what she needs to connect with other person is the moment she pays for the products. She offers money and the staff offers products. It is, she says, the most simple and pleasant relationship.⁴³²

6.4.3 Personal Poetic Identity: The Meaning of Home

Further to the discussion above, Wang Xiaoni’s idea of what it means to be a poet has kept changing. When she was a colleague student in the early 1980s, she felt that she had a responsibility to enlighten others, and this should be reflected in her work. However, as she states in her 2001 collection *How Come the World is so Vast* (世界何以辽阔), starting from 1994, she gradually rejected this kind of writing.⁴³³ She proposed an influential proposition called “starting anew as a poet” (重新做一个诗人) first in her eponymous essay in 1996, and then her eponymous suite of poems including «Working» (工作) and «Clear» (晴朗) in 1997. Wang Xiaoni is not the

⁴³⁰ For the Chinese original of this article, see Xi Chuan 2006: 183-192.

⁴³¹ Wang Xiaoni 2002: 52.

⁴³² Wang Xiaoni 2006

⁴³³ Wang Xiaoni 2001: preface.

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only one to reconsider the relationship between a poet and his/her readers. Critic Tang Xiaodu then proposed to start anew as a reader, and Xu Jingya proposed to start anew as a critic.⁴³⁴

Wang Xiaoni unfolds her proposition “starting anew as a poet” in two layers: Firstly, as discussed above, she considers being a poet is not an occupation. Writing poetry is one of private hobbies, or a way of thinking.⁴³⁵ Second, “in this city I / silently serve as a poet.” (我在这城里/无声地做一个诗人), “I let my significance / happen only at home.” (我让我的意义/只发生在我的家里).

Wang Xiaoni is a poet that explores the meaning of home in depth, as a way to reflect on Political Lyricism. As discussed in chapter two, researches have shown that from 1949 to 1966 in textbooks, political loyalty and love drowned out the theme of familial loyalty and love, especially in the personality cult built around Mao Zedong. The notion of “immediate family” had gradually disappeared from poetry after the founding of the PRC, and acquired negative connotations especially in the Cultural Revolution. This is reflected in Shizhi’s poetry, as discussed in chapter three. Not only Political Lyricism, but also Obscure poetry in general, barely touch upon the notion of “immediate family”.

6.4.3.1 Personal Interests

After graduation in 1982, Wang Xiaoni was allocated to work as an editor in the General Editing Department of the Changchun Film Production Factory. In the Factory, she was uncomfortable with the required full-time attendance. In her description, she kept watching the clock, hoping to end the hell-like office hours and hurry home as soon as possible.⁴³⁶ Triggered by Xu Jingya’s misfortune during the campaign to Eliminate Spirit Pollution, Wang resigned and followed Xu to Shenzhen. She found a job in Shenzhen and a few years later, turned to full-time motherhood.

⁴³⁴ Wang Xiaoni 1996&1997, Tang Xiaodu 1997 and Xu Jingya 2004.

⁴³⁵ Wang Xiaoni 2012a

⁴³⁶ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 373.

By all accounts, including her own, Wang Xiaoni fits traditional expectations of a woman in Chinese culture, to be a virtuous wife and a good mother (贤妻良母).⁴³⁷ Wang and Xu are generally viewed as a model couple in literary circles, and their son Huaisha is an outstanding graduate of Peking University.⁴³⁸

Wang says in her essays that she highly values her family and her home, a sentiment not commonly voiced by contemporary Chinese poets. To her, being a poet and public appreciation of her work are irrelevant to being a mother and a wife. Her understanding of being a good mother is that she can take care of the housework, spend time with her child, and enjoy herself.

Here let us briefly consider reflections on this issue by the only other female Obscure poet, Shu Ting. Shu Ting says that after getting married, she changed from believing in literature to believing in her husband and her child.⁴³⁹ But different from Wang, Shu Ting considers housework as a burden which distracts her from writing poetry.⁴⁴⁰ In contrast, Wang writes that she finds happiness in grocery shopping and hurrying home to cook delicious meals for her family.⁴⁴¹

If we go by her own account, one possible explanation of Wang’s attitude vis-à-vis home and family is that they derive from the family education she received, in that she learned from the fact that her mother’s devotion to work in her childhood made her feel a lack of love.

6.4.3.2 A Retreat from the Outside World

Home, to Wang Xiaoni, is not only a place for family love, but also a place to hide from the chaos of the outside world.

The images of a wounded bird and windows appear frequently in Wang’s poems, especially in the mid-1980s. Because of Xu Jingya’s situation in the campaign against “spiritual pollution”, his family had been under great pressure in the early 1980s, as Xu was accused of denouncing and trying to overthrow the socialist motherland by praising capitalist countries and capitalist art. Xu was even referred

⁴³⁷ Mow & Tao & Zheng (eds.) 2004: Part I.

⁴³⁸ Xu Jingya 1996 and Sun Shaozhen 2001.

⁴³⁹ Shu Ting 2007a: 60.

⁴⁴⁰ Shu Ting 2007a: 40.

⁴⁴¹ Wang Xiaoni 2006: 236.

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to as a “gravedigger” rather than a “torch-bearer” of the PRC by one political leader.⁴⁴²

In poems such as «Rumors» (谣传), «Love» (爱情) and «Wholeness» (完整), Wang compares herself to a bird with giant wings.⁴⁴³ External pressure forces it to draw its wings in and make them a shelter for its nest. This metaphor can be seen to stand for the determination of strengthening oneself to protect one’s family from external danger. As for the image of the window, this frequently appears: rumors are beating on the windows, and the shadows of slanderers are cast upon the windows. Windows are a last shield of defense for the protagonist / speaker / poet to repel intrusive forces from the outside world, and consolidate her original individuality.

These poems describe unsettled tensions. Adversarial relationships exist between the poet and her one-time friends, between her self-portrait and others’ judgments of her, between good and evil. These adversarial relationships are notably present in a poem called «I’m Sure Someone’s Climbed onto the Sundeck and Is Deliberately Tampering with me in the Dark» (定有人攀上阳台，蓄意暗中篡改我). In Day’s translation:⁴⁴⁴

I have just hung out my bed sheet,
and someone hammers on the floor,
calling yellow water’s running down!
I go specially to take another look,
my bed sheet
is purest blue.

我刚刚挂出我的床单，
有人敲打楼板，
说什么黄水流下去！
我又专门看了一次，
我的床单
是最纯正的颜色。

I lean on the strong light,
I shouldn’t have gone to sleep,
after I wake up in a daze,
all the pages from the book in my hand fall,
after the order of pages has been jumbled
it is surprisingly dirty.

我靠在强光里，
本不该入睡，
胡里胡涂醒来之后，
手上的书全部落页，
它在纷乱页码之后，
竟然污冲透顶。

⁴⁴² Wang Xiaoni 2004: 46.

⁴⁴³ For the Chinese originals of these three poems, see Wang Xiaoni 1997: 41-42, 42-44, 49-51.

⁴⁴⁴ <http://michaelmartinday.blogspot.nl/2008/01/wang-xiaoni-poetry-translations.html>

I say, to this nonentity
I'm a dire and calamitous person,
he says: This is
the last pick, he squeaks
like a mouse
begging my pardon.

我对这乌有者说，
我是灾难深重的人，
他说：这是
最后人选，
他叫声如鼠
求我宽容。

From thenceforward,
I stop often on the sundeck,
conversing with this tamperer,
learning of many other
world affairs,
nowhere is there a door onto this sundeck,
and this continuing dialogue,
makes me unbearably happy.

从此，我常常停在阳台上，
同篡改者对话，
得以知道这世上
许多别的事情，
这阳台四处无门，
而绵绵对话，
使我乐不可支。

The long title echoes the adversarial relationships mentioned above. The first stanza illustrates this through a quarrel with the neighbors. Characteristically, Wang makes her point through domestic-related things. In the second stanza, she finds that the printed book she holds is surprisingly jumbled and dirty after she takes an unplanned nap. This stanza could be read as referring to a misreading of her work or of literary works she treasures. Under these circumstances, she talks to “the nonentity” and “the tamperer”. Rather than keeping a hostile attitude found in earlier poems, she seems to see through these adversarial relationships, and learn to live with them. In the last stanza, she takes the tampering as a joke. An attitude of confidence and generousness is delivered in this poem, emerging from the home as a safe shelter in a hostile world.

«Lots of Children» (许许多多的孩子), the tenth part of the poem suite «Seeing a Friend», portrays home as a place finally providing people with the opportunity to pick up memories and refresh their lives, after they are worn out in the outside world. The poem is simple but touching:⁴⁴⁵

When we are sitting face to face in silence
I hear

在我们默默相对的时候
我听见

⁴⁴⁵ Wang Xiaoni 2017

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the heater talk.
Water and fire
in the zigzag throat-like tunnels
chatting lively.
You too hear
that this is not the language of materials.

They are our children.
beneath our knees
innumerable
hot, fluent lives.

...
They are our children
each one tightly holding on to the next.
At this moment
they are right in this house
standing around the bed, chatting away.
Hand in hand.
I can see
brightness returning to your face.

That is a distant place, after us.

This world, playing with pain
it is truly blind, deaf, and dumb.

暖气在谈话。
水和火
在弯曲如喉的管道里
活泼地交谈。
你也听到了
那绝不是物质们的语言。

那是我们的孩子。
我们膝盖以下
无数的
炎热流畅的生命。

.....
那是我们的孩子
一个拉紧了一个。
现在
他们就在这间屋子里
围着睡床热烈地交谈。
手搭着手。
我看见
鲜艳又回到你的脸上。

那是我们之后的遥远。

这个玩弄着疼痛的世界
它真是又盲又聋又哑。

6.4.3.3 A Focus on Common Things in Daily Life

Cabbage, potatoes, pears and other food, which are considered as the common things in daily life, feature in Wang Xiaoni's poems. In «At the Sight of Potatoes» (看到土豆) for example, potatoes, a common food in Northeast China, come to stand for homesickness. In Goodman's translation:⁴⁴⁶

Seeing a basket of potatoes
I was as thrilled as if I'd encountered a ghost.
So thrilled I turned into
a hotheaded northeasterner.

看到一筐土豆
心里跟撞上鬼魂一样高兴。
高兴成了一个
头脑发热的东北人。

⁴⁴⁶ <http://www.pcn.org/poetry/selected-poems-wang-xiaoni>

I wanted to stare into their eyes
to find out all they'd been through.
But then unreasonable emotion
attacked me head-on.
A timid superficial light
fell layer by layer.

我要紧盯着它们的五官
把发生过的事情找出来。
偏偏是那种昂贵的感情
迎面拦截我。
偏偏是那种不敢深看的光
一层层降临。

All the precise threads in my body broke.

我身上严密的缝线都断了。

I wanted to stop right away
stop myself completely.
And bum a cigarette off an addict
his last cigarette.

想马上停下来
把我自己整个停下来。
向烟瘾大的人要一支烟
要他最后的一支烟。

Nothing can attack you
like a basket of potatoes.

没有什么打击
能超过一筐土豆的打击。

Return to the past
would be like walking all the way to Jupiter.
But today
I saw a basket of potatoes.
And all at once I was stepping
on Jupiter's burning rings.

回到过去
等于凭双脚漂流到木星。
可是今天
我偏偏会见了土豆。
我一下子踩到了
木星着了火的光环。

At first, the poet is excited at the sight of the potatoes. Living in the southern city of Shenzhen, she misses her "home" diet. Then she is shocked by intense homesickness when she tries to explore and recount the past story about her hometown. She describes the homesickness as a treasurable feeling and a blinding light, which will gradually break all of the threads (I have replaced Goodman's "suture" with "threads"). Because of the excitement and shock, the poet needs to calm down by smoking a cigarette. The nostalgic mood of the poem recalls the ancient Chinese poem «A Traveller's Song» (游子吟) by the aforementioned Tang poet Meng Jiao. In «A Traveller's Song», the mother's love is visualized as her sewing of the traveler's clothes thread by thread.

6.4 Poetic Identity: Starting Anew as a Poet

The poem «Working» is another example to show how Wang attaches importance to daily food in her poetry. In Goodman's translation:⁴⁴⁷

At the shortest end of the century
the earth is bouncing
humans busy themselves like monkeys between
trees.

在一个世纪最短的末尾
大地弹跳着
人类忙得像树间的猴子。

But my two hands
lie idle in China's air.
The tabletop and the wind
are both pure white paper.
I let my significance
happen only at home.

而我的两只手
闲置在中国的空中。
桌面和风
都是质地纯白的好纸。
我让我的意义
只发生在我的家里。

Rinsing white rice
the rice starch drips like milk onto my page.
To be reborn the gourds extend their fingers
and cry out in fear.
Outside, the sunlight cuts with a knife
heaven's cold heavy snow.

淘洗白米的时候
米浆像奶滴在我的纸上。
瓜类为新生出手指
而惊叫。
窗外，阳光带着刀伤
天堂走慢冷雪。

Each day from morning to night
the door is shut tight.
I hang the sun at the angle I need it
some people say, in this town
lives a person who doesn't work.

每天从走到晚
紧闭家门。
把太阳悬在我需要的角度
有人说，这城里
住了一个不工作的人。

Fastened to the walls
between two small pieces of glass the world
self-combusts.
The taciturn butterflies flutter everywhere
the universe unknowingly leaks its secrets.
I foretell the tiniest signs of trouble
without eyes.
Without hands.
Without ears.

关紧四壁
世界在两小片玻璃之间自燃。

沉默的蝴蝶四处翻飞
万物在不知不觉中泄露。
我预知四周最微小的风吹草动
不用眼睛。
不用手。
不用耳朵。

⁴⁴⁷ <http://www.pen.org/poetry/selected-poems-wang-xiaoni>

Each day I write only a few words
like a knife
cutting into the gush of a tangerine's finely
woven juice.
Let layer upon layer of blue light
enter into a world that's never been described.
No one sees my light
finely woven strand by strand like silk.
In this city I
silently serve as a poet.

每天只写几个字
像刀
划开桔子细密喷涌的汁水。
让一层层蓝光
进入从未描述的世界。
没人看见我
一缕缕细密如丝的光。
我在这城里
无声地做一个诗人。

A contrast emerges between the two living styles described in the first two stanzas. In the first, Wang uses the techniques of personification to describe the extremely busy world. Her comparison of human beings to monkeys sends out a warning that human beings are losing their humanity. Against the background stated in the first stanza, she shows her distinct living style: idleness.

Working at home, she "foretells the tiniest signs of trouble". She explores the meanings behind the rarely noticed daily food: white rice, gourds and oranges. These subjects shed light on "a world that's never been described", different from the busy world outside.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

Wang Xiaoni received incomplete school education before and during the Cultural Revolution, and was rusticated to the countryside. In this sense, she shared the same educational background with most of the Obscure poets. However, unlike most of them, she had the opportunity to go to university just after the National College Entrance Exam was resumed. Also, unlike most of the Obscure poets, her parents were neither literati nor intellectuals. They did not make any effort to cultivate her to be a poet, and in fact opposed her choice of being a poet. Later, her father's death pushed her to adjust her vision of poetry and of being a poet. Her mother's devotion to work resulted in her absence from the family, and this pushed Wang to ponder the balance between her own work and her role as a mother and spouse. In addition, she did not have a poetry mentor like some of the other Obscure poets (e.g. in the way that He Qifang was a mentor to Shizhi).

6.5 Concluding Remarks

Wang had a unique chance to compare her own educational experience with that of her son, and that of her students in Hainan University, and explicitly reflected on this in her written work. She voiced her worries about the negative effects of values of collectiveness, group dependence and materialism on her son and her students.

As such, Wang Xiaoni's educational experience is reflected in her poetic identity in two ways. First, Wang shows her rejection of Political Lyricism, which most Obscure poets learned from schools and private mentors: she published nothing that is even remotely related to Political Lyricism. Wang shows her rejection of Political Lyricism by writing in plain, direct and precise language, and avoiding political metaphors. Second, she proposes to "start anew as a poet". She explores the significance of home in down-to-earth reflection on this "mundane" subject matter, which had been absent from Chinese literature for many years. She addresses the phenomena of the "marginality" of poetry, the cult of poetry, and the cult of poethood, critically reflecting on traditional expectations of poets. Poets were once expected to be almighty heroes, who should speak for the masses and be admired by them, especially in the 1980s. The same expectation of poets used to apply to the first cohort of college students, including Wang. But she gradually realized that a poet who is also an independent individual, can and should speak for herself/himself only.