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

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This study has researched the interaction between educational background and poetic identity in a generation of Chinese authors known as the Obscure poets. As noted in chapter one, the poets, their parents, and China-based researchers have often felt that creative writing is unrelated or negatively related to school education. However, a new understanding of two concepts enables us to take a different perspective. First, Ivan Illich's idea of deschooling helps to redefine the concept of educational background. Second, Michelle Yeh's and Maghiel van Crevel's scholarship has advanced a truly localized redefinition of the concept of poetic identity for contemporary Chinese poetry, which offers a springboard for my investigation of the complexity of the interaction between educational background and poetic identity for the poets under scrutiny here. There is definitely a relation here, and it is not just, or even primarily, a negative relation.

Within the field of modern Chinese poetry, the Obscure poets learned from the tradition of left-wing literature on the one hand and from that of modernist literature on the other (the latter included foreign literature in Chinese translation but also "home-grown" Chinese modernist writing, and the two are closely intertwined). This took shape through four types of education they received: school education, family education, peer education and mentor education.

Chapter two argues that school education, family education and mentor education helped the Obscure poets to become familiar with Political Lyricism (as part of the left-wing tradition) and to practice this type of writing from an early age. With the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution and the interruption of school education in 1966, peer education came to play an important role, causing the poets to reconsider their engagement with Political Lyricism. We see them in a gradual retreat from Political Lyricism, with Genzi and Duoduo as prominent cases in point. While they certainly borrowed elements of Political Lyricism (particular metaphors and sometimes a particular tone of voice), they combined such elements with what they learned from the modernist tradition.

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In chapters three to six, I have presented four case studies, on Shizhi, Bei Dao, Gu Cheng and Wang Xiaoni. In general, the case studies bear out the findings of chapter two. Moreover, it becomes clear that the aforesaid various types of education are directly reflected in the poets' shared and individual poetic identities.

The four poets form a spectrum with regard to the distance they created between themselves and Political Lyricism. Shizhi is the closest to Political Lyricism, while Wang Xiaoni is the farthest from it. Bei Dao and Gu Cheng move in the middle, with variations depending on the period in which they were writing. But in all, Political Lyricism continues to constitute a major component of their writing. This observation and especially its concrete substantiation from textual evidence constitute an important addition to scholarship to date.

To highlight some of the discoveries made in this research, Shizhi blurs singular and plural noun forms in both his poetry and poetics, which signals the influence of collectivism. Bei Dao employs the image of the poppy flower, which was standard textbook material at the time, with his use of the image to express different meanings perfectly illustrating the complexity of the relation of education to poetic identity. Gu Cheng composes many political allegories, in which he employs the imagery of Political Lyricism while simultaneously mocking the hypocrisy of politics. And, in what we might sum up as a negative influence, Wang Xiaoni explores the significance of home through down-to-earth reflection, almost as if she consciously set her sights on places that were out of bounds in Political Lyricism.

The differences in the four types of education the poets received help to understand their positions on the spectrum. First, in regard to family education, there are notable differences in the occupations of the poets' parents. Shizhi's mother was the principal of his primary school. Bei Dao's father was an official working in one of the political parties allowed to coexist (albeit largely ceremonially) with the CCP and later at the Central Institute of Socialism. Gu Cheng's father was an establishment poet in the People's Liberation Army. Wang Xiaoni's parents were police officers. Second, there are differences in the poets' performance during their respective school educations. Shizhi and Bei Dao pursued excellence in schools for cadres' children, while Gu Cheng and Wang Xiaoni were relative outsiders to their school environments, whether by circumstance or by choice, or both. Third, we can see differences in the private mentors recognized by each of the poets. We see the

influences of He Qifang on Shizhi, and of Shizhi on Bei Dao. And in Gu Cheng's case, his father doubled as his mentor. Fourth, with regard to peer education, we see the differences between the "underground" salons held by the Rusticated Youths during the Cultural Revolution in the case of Shizhi and Bei Dao on the one hand, and the college students' literary societies after the Cultural Revolution in the case of Wang Xiaoni, on the other.

In all, while I obviously do not claim that educational background is the only factor shaping poetic identity, I am satisfied that it is demonstrably an important factor; and at this point I would like to turn to possibilities for further research that can build on a similar approach. One such possibility is suggested directly by the discussion in this study: from the analysis, Wang Xiaoni emerges as a transitional figure, and this highlights the need for new research that extends the framework of the relationship between educational background and poetic identity beyond the generation I have studied here. This would entail a comparison between the Obscure poets and the poets of the Third Generation, a slightly younger cohort whose experience at once overlapped with the Obscure poets and radically differed from it. Below, I would like to outline some of the issues that could come into play here.

The Third Generation poets are a large, loose-knit group. As many scholars have pointed out, they are far from a homogeneous group, and display a great deal of experiment and diversity.⁴⁴⁸ In the late 1990s, for instance, a deep-seated divergence in poetic styles flared up during a polemic on so-called Popular Writing and so-called Intellectual Writing; after the name of the conference venue where the polemic exploded, this is remembered as the Panfeng Polemic (盘峰论争).⁴⁴⁹ Examples of prominent names generally considered to belong to the Third Generation include Yu Jian, Zhai Yongming (翟永明, b. 1955), Ouyang Jianghe (欧阳江河, b. 1956), Song Lin (宋琳, b. 1959), Han Dong (韩东, b. 1961), Lu Yimin (陆忆敏, b. 1962), Tang Yaping (唐亚平, b. 1962), Li Yawei (李亚伟, b. 1963), Wang Yin (王寅, b. 1962), Xi Chuan, Haizi and several others.

From an *educational* point of view, the background of the Third Generation is unique. The Third Generation poets are generally about ten years younger than the

⁴⁴⁸ Hong Zicheng 2005:207-210

⁴⁴⁹ van Crevel 2008: ch 12; Zhou Han 2011, Tang Qiaoqiao 2014: ch 2

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Obscure poets, and were part of a generation that benefited from the re-opening of tertiary education to the public in 1977, after the Cultural Revolution had come to a close. A striking difference in educational experience with the Obscure poets is that the latter generally had limited exposure to school education, with some seeing even their secondary school interrupted during the Cultural Revolution, and only Wang Xiaoni attending university. By contrast, many of the Third Generation poets had fully-fledged secondary and tertiary educations, and quite a few of them specialized in Chinese and foreign literature. Another difference lies in their family background. While most of the Obscure poets were born in Beijing to parents who were high-ranking cadres, most of the Third Generation poets were born not in the cultural and political center that is Beijing but elsewhere in the country, with their parents at various levels in terms of social hierarchy and status.

During the Cultural Revolution, at the same time as major disruptions to tertiary and (elite) secondary education, enrolment levels in primary and secondary schools grew phenomenally, in an attempt by the authorities to abolish elitism and to benefit the broad masses of peasants and workers, with “a practical curriculum oriented toward production, and intensive political education pervading the whole program”.⁴⁵⁰ Meanwhile, tertiary education enrolment dropped dramatically. The entrance examination for tertiary education had been discontinued in 1967; entrance was now based on recommendation. Political criteria became dominant, and high school graduates had to have work experience before they could be recommended. These students are traditionally called Worker-Peasant-Soldier students (工农兵学员).⁴⁵¹

The entrance examination for tertiary education was restored in 1977, with applicants varying in age. Four years later, starting in 1981, it was stipulated that all applicants to college must be fresh graduates from senior high school. University students enrolled in late 1970s and early 1980s were listed at the cadre level in the work unit system. Their privileges included tuition exemptions, stipends and future job assignments, without any consideration of the job market.⁴⁵² This situation

⁴⁵⁰ Hayhoe 1996:95

⁴⁵¹ Hayhoe 1996:95-96

⁴⁵² Yang Dongping 2003: ch6

gradually changed after a decision by the CPC Central Committee on the Educational System Reform in 1985, and was ended in 1994.⁴⁵³

From a *literary* perspective, the Third Generation poets were institutionally and aesthetically related inasmuch as they all claimed to be different from the Obscure poets, and distanced themselves from Obscure poetry (much like the Obscure poets had distanced themselves from Political Lyricism, in a typical pattern of innovation-through-rupture in literature and art). Scholars have done abundant research on the comparison between the Obscure poetry and the Third Generation poetry, and pointed out that the Obscure poetry usually employs intense lyricism, dense figurative imagery and political metaphors, while the Third Generation poetry is frequently characterized by a narrative mode, the theme of down-to-earth daily life, colloquial language and a low-key, matter-of-fact tone.⁴⁵⁴

In 1982, the concept of the Third Generation poets was proposed by students of various colleges in Sichuan, based on the logic that they had a strong feeling that this was a new generation, born after the Cultural Revolution with different experiences than the former poets, and therefore they would write freshly new poetry. (That they presented themselves as a “third” generation was with reference to a “first” generation of authors during the first decade of the PRC and the Obscure poets as a “second” generation.).⁴⁵⁵

From the early 1980s to the early 1990s, the Third Generation poets produced provocative manifestos like the “anti-sublime” (反崇高), “destroy the image” (消灭意象), “from obscurity to reality” (从朦胧走向现实), “Bye-bye, Bei Dao and Shu Ting” (别了, 北岛舒婷) and others. Meanwhile, famous Third Generation poems included various different styles, such as in Han Dong’s «Of the Wide Goose Pagoda» (有关大雁塔) (minimalist, philosophical and sarcastic), Yu Jian’s «No. 6 Shangyi Street» (尚义街六号) (colloquial, quotidian, clownish, and nostalgic), Li Yawei’s «Tough Man» (硬汉) (scandalizing, transgressive) and Zhai Yongming’s sequence «Woman» (女人) (intensely personal, physical yet elusive, feminist). After 1984, experimental poetry societies and unofficial poetry journals

⁴⁵³ Li & Zheng & Yu (eds.): ch 3

⁴⁵⁴ Yeh 1992b, Tang Xiaodu 1992

⁴⁵⁵ Day 2005

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mushroomed nationwide. Well-known poetry societies include “Them” (他们) in Nanjing, “At Sea” (海上) in Shanghai, and many groups in Sichuan, such as “New Traditionalism” (新传统主义), “Wholism” (整体主义), “Not-Not-ism” (非非) and “Macho Men-ism” (莽汉主义).⁴⁵⁶

Although, as noted above, the Third Generation poets share certain similarities in the fact that many attended university and their distancing from the Obscure poetry, we see a more diverse educational background and poetic identity in this group than in the Obscure poets. Let me illustrate this by looking at Xi Chuan, Li Yawei and Zhai Yongming.

Xi Chuan was born in Xuzhou in 1963 but the family moved to Beijing when he was a young child. He studied in the primary and secondary departments of the affiliated school of Beijing Foreign University. This was a school for cadres’ children, specially designed for cultivating future diplomats, and was one of the few schools that continued its operations during the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁵⁷ Afterwards, he became a student in the English Language and Literature department in Peking University. Unlike the Obscure poets, and like some of his fellow the Third Generation poets, he has an outstanding command of a foreign language (English, in his case); and his oeuvre contains many poetic essays as well as large amounts of poetry.

Xi Chuan’s poetry is characterized by its rich erudition in the realm of the humanities (history, literature, art, philosophy), delivered in a mostly lyrical tone that is at once serious and playful.⁴⁵⁸

Li Yawei was born in Chongqing in 1963. He studied in the Chinese language and literature department in Nanchong Normal College, but shows aggressive resistance to school education in both his writings (with the poem «The Chinese Department» [中文系] as a typical example) and his behavior. He was a “problem student” in college: instead of attending classes, he drank, womanized and engaged

⁴⁵⁶ Hong Zicheng 2007: ch 12

⁴⁵⁷ Xi Chuan 2006b

⁴⁵⁸ Hong Zicheng 2007: 359-360, van Crevel 2008: ch 5 & 10

in gang fights. He almost failed to graduate, something that is rare in Chinese tertiary education, and certainly was so at the time.⁴⁵⁹

Li Yawei's poetry, as a typical example of the Sichuan school of the "Macho Men", is characterized by "mocking, dissolute images of speakers in their poetry, the use of casual colloquial language, and the destruction of the exquisite and the sublime".⁴⁶⁰

Zhai Yongming was born in Chengdu in 1955. Since her parents worked in the army and often travelled, Zhai was adopted by a family in Guizhou, who were her parents' colleagues. She was raised in the care of her adoptive grandmother. After her adoptive grandmother died, she moved back to Chengdu at the age of nine. In her interviews and essays, she has not talked much about her childhood and little is known about her primary and middle school period. She spent two years in the countryside as a Rusticated Youth from 1974 to 1976, and was enrolled as a major of laser technology in the College of Electronic Science and Technology in 1977, as one of the last Worker-Peasant-Soldier students. After graduation, she was assigned to work in the Institute of Arms Industry Bureau. However, she had no interest at all in her major nor her job.⁴⁶¹

As for her poetry, Zhai Yongming has written about her pain in the tension with her parents, her surroundings and the traditional expectations of women, and she expresses a complex female experience in her poetry, playing a groundbreaking role in creating space for womanhood and feminism on the Chinese poetry scene, even if this remains an uphill battle. With her poetry sequence «Woman» written and unofficially published in the early 1980s and officially published in 1986, and her famous exploration of what she called "night consciousness" as characterizing her poetics, *Women's Poetry* (女性诗歌) became an important part of the Third Generation poetry.⁴⁶²

So far, there are a lot of studies in scholarship on the characteristics of the Third Generation poetry as a whole, and case studies of individual Third Generation

⁴⁵⁹ <https://www.poemlife.com/index.php?mod=libshow&id=545>

⁴⁶⁰ Hong Zicheng 2007:355, Day 2005: ch 4

⁴⁶¹ Zhai Yongming 2004 & 2018

⁴⁶² Hong Zicheng 2007: 360-361, Jeanne Hong Zhang 2004

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poets.⁴⁶³ Also, several studies focus on the overall developments of the Third Generation Poetry from the perspective of literary history.⁴⁶⁴ However, scholarship has hardly taken the educational background of the Third Generation poets into account, and its difference with their famous predecessors, the Obscure poets. Only Hong Zicheng mentions that the Third Generation poetry started from so-called campus poetry (校园诗歌), with universities thus becoming the breeding ground for the Third Generation poetry. However, he does not elaborate this point.⁴⁶⁵

If we apply the same analytical framework used in this study to the Third Generation poets, similar central questions arise:

- How are the Third Generation poets' educational backgrounds reflected in their poetic identities?

And from there, we could ask:

- Are the differences in educational backgrounds of the Obscure poets and the Third Generation poets generalizably reflected in their respective poetic identities at the level of literary generations?

This would help to develop Hong's argument and see the whole picture more clearly. Notably, for the Third Generation, the education they received at university should then encompass not only school education but also peer education and mentor education.

In regard to mentor education, as many memoirs of the Third Generation poets clearly state, the Obscure poets who published in *Today* served as their mentors when they read this "underground", unofficial journal during their early years in the universities.⁴⁶⁶ Consequently, early poems published in official journals in the early 1980s by the Third Generation poets display clear similarities with the Obscure poetry, however loudly the Third Generation were to bid farewell to their

⁴⁶³ Yeh 1991a,1992;Li Zhensheng1996; Zhang Qinghua 1997a

⁴⁶⁴ Liu Bo 2012

⁴⁶⁵ Hong Zicheng 2005:204

⁴⁶⁶ Bai Hua2001:ch3, La 2003:258, Han Dong 2011

predecessors just a few years later. Han Dong's «Untitled: To Zhang Zhixin» (无题·献给张志新) and Zhai Yongming's «I Am» (我是) are two examples. Also, it is interesting to note that poems such as these were published in official journals, while a few years, later, in the mid-1980s, it was in *un*-official journals that the Third Generation poets began to publish their more experimental poems, distancing themselves from the Obscure poets.⁴⁶⁷

In regard to tertiary education, Chen Pingyuan's (陈平原) linkage of influential university lectures with literary trends suggests an idea that is useful here. Chen's studies focus on leaders of the New Culture Movement such as Hu Shi, Zhou Zuoren (周作人), Lu Xun (鲁迅) and Wu Mei (吴梅), who were also teachers in Peking University in the late 1910s and early 1920s. By looking into syllabi, handouts, monographs and interactions between teachers and students during lectures, Chen shows how university lectures contributed to carrying the New Culture Movement forward.⁴⁶⁸ If Chen's analytical framework is applied to Chinese universities in the 1980s, this could yield interesting results, because there are at least four categories of teachers holding different poetic views that demand attention here, and this is merely the result of my initial explorations, so the list may well be much longer.

- The “Returned poets” (归来诗人), referring to poets who began to publish their works again in the late 1970s after a sometimes decades-long absence, when the political climate stifled their voices.
 - Those working in Chinese departments: Gong Mu is a case in point, having been branded a “right-wing” poet during the anti-rightist campaign in the 1950s but rehabilitated and eventually the director of the Chinese department at Jilin University in the 1980s.
 - Those working in foreign language and literature departments: Zheng Min, mentioned in chapter one, is one example.
- The Third Generation poets who were at one point university lecturers themselves, Song Lin and Han Dong being two examples.

⁴⁶⁷ van Crevel 2007

⁴⁶⁸ Chen Pingyuan 2011: ch 1,2 and 4.

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- Scholars in the Chinese department of Peking University including Xie Mian and Sun Shaozhen (Sun worked in PKU in the 1960s and relocated to Fujian Normal University in 1973), who were advocates of Obscure poetry. Together with these two colleagues/ alumni, Hong Zicheng was working on a nationwide textbook of contemporary Chinese literary history in the 1980s. They had earlier compiled such a textbook in the late 1950s.

In regard to the Third Generation's peer education, an important role would have been played by the aforesaid on-campus literary societies that more or less had the approval of the authorities. A quick review of the materials I have found so far shows, for instance, that Song Lin was a lecturer in the Chinese department of East China Normal University, but also a key figure in dormitory salons for years. It would be interesting to compare his discourse and his activities on official and unofficial occasions.

A detailed study of the various elements that constitute the educational background of the Third Generation poets may help to improve the understanding of their poetic identity in their poetry and poetics. This will show considerable differences between the Obscure poets and the Third Generation poets. But one argument remains the same: literary traditions pass from one generation to another through various kinds of education. The complexity of the relationship between education and creative writing has often been reduced, overlooked and misconstrued, and new literary generations tend to proclaim their fundamental difference from their predecessors, as if they start in a vacuum—but the role of education remains a core perspective for our understanding of literature and of cultural traditions at large.