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

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Cover Page



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Summary

This thesis studies the interaction between educational background and poetic identity in contemporary China, with reference to a literary-generational group known as the Obscure poets that came to the fore in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They are usually taken to include Bei Dao, Shu Ting, Gu Cheng, Jiang He, and Yang Lian. Others who are associated with Obscure poetry but were only recognized as such in the late 1990s include Shizhi, Mang Ke, Duoduo, Genzi, and Wang Xiaoni.

Chapter one shows that while the poets, their parents, and China-based researchers have often see creative writing as unrelated or negatively related to school education, two concepts enable 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 China. This offers a springboard for my investigation of the complex interaction between educational background and poetic identity for the authors under scrutiny. 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 prominently included foreign literature in Chinese translation but also "home-grown" Chinese modernist writing, and the two are closely intertwined). This process took shape through four types of education: school education, family education, peer education and mentor education.

Chapter two argues that school education, family education and mentor education familiarized the Obscure poets with Political Lyricism (as part of the left-wing tradition) and moved them 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 cases in point. While they certainly borrowed elements of Political Lyricism (such as metaphors and

sometimes a particular tone of voice), they combined such elements with what they learned from the modernist tradition.

Chapter three is a case study of Shizhi. The traces of school education, which promoted Political Lyricism and emphasized the values of collectivism and nationalism, can be clearly seen in his poetic identity. His family education kept him from extreme activism in the Red Guard Movement. Unlike many others, he displayed no violent behavior vis-à-vis his teachers or other authority figures, and enriched his writing by drawing on classical Chinese poems he learned from his mother. Aside from the influence of school education and family education, we can see the influence of mentor education that was provided by the older poet He Qifang. We see Shizhi traveling a circle, away from standard Political Lyricism to a deviant form and then back. In these poems, we see him struggling with the choice between collectivism and individualism, between orthodoxy-and-public-recognition and a more underground status.

Chapter four is a case study of Bei Dao. Political Lyricist aspects of Bei Dao's early writings reflect his school education, which led to his first engagement with literature and his cultivation of "revolutionary fever". School education also lies at the root of his use of the metaphors of the poppy and amber, which he took from textbooks. His use of the metaphors of sheep, the shepherd and the narrow gate indicate an influence from Christianity, presumably through the faith of his mother, in an instance of family education. Notably, Bei Dao's later revolt against Political Lyricism originates in his early, deep familiarity with it. In developing his position on language and poetry he explores different forms of the self, sorting out the relationship between the self and the collective, and between the self and the society. In all, Bei Dao's relationship to Political Lyricism turns out to be ambivalent and complicated, subverting easy assumptions of a clean break between Mao-era Political Lyricism and early Reform-era Obscure poetry.

Chapter five is a case study of Gu Cheng. During his brief exposure to school education, Gu was not keen and performed badly. He was also isolated from his classmates, especially from his male fellow students. Unique among the Obscure poets, Gu reflects on his school education in some of his poems, directly addressing his personal experience. A feeling of sorrow is hinted at, but the reader cannot put the finger on the poet's feelings about school. When rusticated to the countryside

Summary

(like many other urban youths) in 1969, Gu Cheng embarked on an exclusive, intensive family education “program” when he learned to write poetry from his father Gu Gong, an establishment poet in the People’s Liberation Army and a staunch advocate of Political Lyricism. Similar to Bei Dao’s situation, Gu Cheng’s later poetic revolt against his father originated from his deep familiarity with Political Lyricism. Ultimately, father and son undertook diverse, sometimes contrasting aesthetic pursuits and held starkly different opinions on poetics. In a transformation of Political Lyricism, Gu Cheng shows his resistance and suspicion towards politics, by using standard Political Lyricism metaphors in unconventional ways. He also composed political allegories that mock the hypocrisy of politics.

Chapter six is a case study of Wang Xiaoni. Unlike the other Obscure poets, she had the opportunity to go to university, and her parents were neither literati nor intellectuals. They did not encourage her to be a poet, and in fact discouraged her. Her mother’s devotion to work rendered her absent from the family, and this pushed Wang to ponder the balance between her own work and her role as a mother and spouse. As such, Wang Xiaoni’s educational experience is reflected in her poetic identity in two ways. First, 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 critically addresses the “marginality” of poetry, the cult of poetry, and the cult of poethood in contemporary China, as well as traditional visions of poethood.

Chapter seven summarizes my main findings and reflects on the questions raised in the process. In addition, I offer a comparison between the Obscure poets and the Third-Generation poets, who came to the fore starting from the mid-1980s. Their educational backgrounds and poetic identities are radically different from those of the Obscure poets. Many attended university, and by coupling this with the way they distanced themselves from Obscure poetry, we see a more diverse educational background and poetic identity in this group than in the Obscure poets. It is my hope that this comparison will offer a starting point for future research.