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The making of Chinese poetry of the nineties

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Preface

I. Questions

This is a study of critical discourse on poetry in the People's Republic of China (PRC). More specifically it is about the notion of 90年代诗歌 / 九十年代诗歌, which translates as "Poetry of the 90s/Nineties." Unless otherwise stated, "China" and "Chinese" normally refer to mainland China in this study.

According to Maghiel van Crevel, the so-called Popular-Intellectual polemic on poetry in 1998-2000 reveals that "[T]he contested notion of Poetry of the Nineties as a critical rather than a chronological category [...] was among the issues that triggered the [...] Polemic."¹ This is to say that the notion of Poetry of the Nineties does not simply refer to poetic production of various styles in China in the final decade of the 20th century. Instead, it refers to a particular, contested poetics. And it is as such that it became a site of rivalry between the "Popular" and "Intellectual" camps in what has come to be known as the Popular-Intellectual Polemic (sometimes also referred to as the Panfeng Polemic), in 1998-2000.

The Popular-Intellectual Polemic was but one of myriad sites for the exchange of ideas on poetry in contemporary China. Indeed, in the PRC there is what one might call a history of polemics that "regulate" poetry, with or without government policy. Two earlier examples took place in the late 1950s, on poetic form, and the early 1980s, on "Obscure" poetry. But the Popular-Intellectual Polemic is rather different from these two. Many members of both camps earned their titles of "avant-garde" 先锋 poets in the mid-1980s, when the term entered poetry in new ways, to categorize those who were active outside the official, state-sanctioned poetry scene. In that case, their participation in the contestation over Poetry of the Nineties makes the Polemic the first of the many polemics on poetry in the history of the PRC that had avant-garde poets, rather than state-sanctioned authors and critics, as its driving force. The contentions submitted by these avant-garde during the Polemic then constitute a site for this study also to observe on their strategies for shaping the critical discourse on poetry written in the 1990s before this decade reached its end.

¹ Van Crevel 2006: 125; 2008: 83.

This study's overarching question, then, concerns the literary-critical category of Poetry of the Nineties. I submit that even though this is a widely identified notion, it has been insufficiently interrogated in previous scholarship, especially in Chinese but also in English; and that this omission has kept us from attaining a balanced understanding of contemporary poetry in China.

Hence, this study asks: What does "Poetry of the Nineties" signify, to whom, and to what effect? I engage with this question by investigating how poetry *written in the 1990s* – as defined by calendar chronology, not poetics – is represented in 21st-century Chinese scholarship, and how this representation can be explained.

This approach builds on the availability of a set of materials that enable us not just to chart this representation but also to trace its origins: (partisan) poetry anthologies, (partisan) compilations of critical discourse, and research monographs. Scholarship to date has not recognized the significance of these materials in their interconnectedness, the discursive patterns and trends they display, and the implications of these patterns. In terms of both literary history and literary criticism, this material shows that it is crucial that we consider the 1998-2000 Popular-Intellectual Polemic in conjunction with, roughly, the decade leading up to it (from the late 1980s) *and* the decade that follows (up to the early 2010s).

I propose to foreground the literary-critical category of Poetry of the Nineties in a close reading of the aforesaid set of materials, with the poetry anthologies and the compilations of critical discourse as an entry point to assess the ways in which the research monographs represent the contemporary Chinese poetry scene. Doing so shows that throughout the entire period on which this study reflects, the Intellectual camp, as the more cohesive and articulate of the two groups, succeeded in monopolizing the critical discourse on poetry written in the 1990s, even though the Popular camp is known as the louder and more aggressive group; and that the Intellectual camp's quiet success in monopolizing the discourse is directly reflected in scholarship in the 21st century, rendering the Popular camp more or less invisible.

In a nutshell, it appears that 21st-century scholarship paints a picture of poetry written in the 1990s that is severely limited by the "instructions" offered to it by the proponents of

the Intellectual camp – some of whom, not incidentally, contribute directly to this scholarship themselves, conflating their roles as poets, critics, and scholars. This study wants to enable the adjustment of this picture.

II. Materials and Methods

From a wider set of primary materials covered in my research, including many stand-alone journal articles, eleven book publications provide a solid foundation for my argument. I selected these books on the basis of their engagement with the contested notion of Poetry of the Nineties. They include four partisan anthologies of poetry and/or literary criticism that were published during the 1998-2000 Polemic; and seven research monographs published in later years. I draw on these seven research monographs to show that scholarship to date has been strangely partisan to the views of the Intellectual camp, rendering the Popular camp almost invisible. I draw on the four anthologies to explain how this situation has emerged.

There is more research on poetry written in the 1990s in addition to the said book-length publications. Many journal articles also deal with this subject. However, only the research monographs provide opportunities for substantial reflection on the Intellectual camp's dominance and the Popular camp's invisibility in the discourse. While the authors of the research monographs are aware of the complex and potentially problematic nature of the notion of Poetry of the Nineties and sometimes make this awareness explicit, one is struck by their near-total reliance on the Intellectual camp's views and their blindness to and/or avoidance of the Popular camp's perspective. To my amazement, this happens time and again throughout the research monographs in questions, suggesting a pattern of reproduction of what is in fact a deeply problematic narrative. That I prioritize the research monographs does not detract from the value of the journal articles per se, which contain many insights that are similar to those put forward in the monographs. On balance, however, the genre of the research monograph, with its room for contextualization and extended argumentation, presents the best material for addressing my central question.

For a better understanding of the research monographs, I initially delved into studies that focus on the Polemic for clues to the essence of the notion of Poetry of the Nineties

and the discourse spawned by this notion. I assumed this would be useful because the notion of Poetry of the Nineties was one of the triggers of the Polemic.

My assumption was not borne out. Studies that focus on the Polemic hardly look into the starkly different impact of the Popular camp and the Intellectual camp on 21st-century discourse on poetry written in the 1990s. They ardently invoke various frameworks to analyze the workings and the impact of the Polemic, including Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the literary field,² Harold Bloom's influence theory,³ the social-cultural context of the Post-Mao era at large,⁴ and indeed (occasionally) ancient Chinese literary traditions.⁵ But in their mostly linear presentations of the Polemic, the authors pay insufficient attention to its breeding ground and its roots in the local critical discourse of recent years. As a result, I realized that I was looking at a gap in the discourse.

This realization motivates me to formulate my own explanation for the relation between the notion of Poetry of the Nineties on the one hand, and the body of texts that we may sum up as poetry written in the calendar decade of the 1990s, on the other. The sheer diversity within this body of texts is illustrated by the distance between the Popular and Intellectual camps' respective views of Poetry of the Nineties among other things, and this is key to my approach.

The previous researchers' silence on the entanglement between Poetry of the Nineties and the Polemic leads me to Van Crevel's chronological bibliography of the Polemic,⁶ that lays claim to a reasonable degree of completeness. This bibliography provides as many as 120 entries that allow a realistic view of the discursive dynamics of the Polemic. Clearly, the authors of the 21st-century research monographs under scrutiny in this study must each rely on a selection of these entries to establish their understanding of Poetry of the Nineties. My analysis of each of the monographs retraces important aspects of their claims to key entries on the list.

The key entries thus identified in this study are the said four partisan books: one anthology of poetry, one anthology of critical writing, and two anthologies of poetry and

² Tang 2014: 41–98.

³ Chan 2005; 2009: 3–92.

⁴ Zhou 2007: 1–120; 2013.

⁵ Lupke 2008: 185–200; Van Crevel 2008: 399–458.

⁶ Van Crevel 2008: 451–458.

critical writing. The first two shore up the Intellectual camp's position, and the latter two do so for the Popular camp. Each camp's materials consist of a manifesto in combination with a large number of poems and a vast amount of critical writing. This combination is essential to the emergence of their competing visions of Poetry of the Nineties. However, the actual poetry itself plays a negligible role in the Polemic and the discursive dynamic happened near-exclusively through critical essays; and accordingly, I focus on the manifestos and the critical writing rather than the poetry that the Polemic was ostensibly about. Notably, there is frequent overlap between the poets recognized in the manifestos, the authors of the critical writing, and the editors and editorial board members of the anthologies. A traditional, enduring hierarchy of literary authors over literary critics comes into play here, where a poet's words on poetry carry more weight than a critic's; and this should be part and parcel of 21st-century scholarship on the issues and the period in question.

Each camp as represented in the anthologies that are partisan to it provides me with approximately forty critical essays. Hence, I have seven research monographs and approximately eighty critical essays on my plate. My central method for researching this material is close reading, which is no less useful (and exciting) for literary criticism than for literature itself. The technique of close reading allows me to concentrate on the various representations of the poetry in question and the force field that surrounds it and retrace this to the critics' perspective, which governs their selection and arrangement of the relevant information. My findings in this regard reaffirm the sense of urgency I feel for an update of the picture of the critical discourse on poetry written in the 1990s. In practical terms, to show that my proposal for a re-reading of the Polemic is not reinventing the wheel, I have opted for working my way back from the 21st-century research monographs to the critical essays featured in the four anthologies published during the Polemic, in 1998-2000. Subsequently, with the help of the essays, I trace the origins of 21st-century scholars' troubled negotiation of the notion of Poetry of the Nineties back to where I believe their origins lie, in the 1980s.

III. Outline of This Study's Chapters

Chapter One

My questions about 21st-century scholarship's representation of poetry written in the 1990s initially led me back to the Polemic to find answers. But the more I delved into the critical writing in the four books published during the Polemic, the more I sensed that the 21st-century scholars in question insufficiently engaged with the notion of “avant-garde” poetry (in PRC usage) as an important backdrop to the debate. Therefore, I dedicate my first core chapter to the history of avant-garde poetry in the PRC, which acquired huge importance in critical discourse in the mid-1980s. I contextualize my representation of the history of avant-garde poetry within the history of New Poetry 新诗 from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to 2000, when the Popular-Intellectual Polemic fizzled out. With attention to the tension between men / women of letters at large and the authorities in the PRC, I interpret the dawn of avant-garde poetry.

Chapter Two

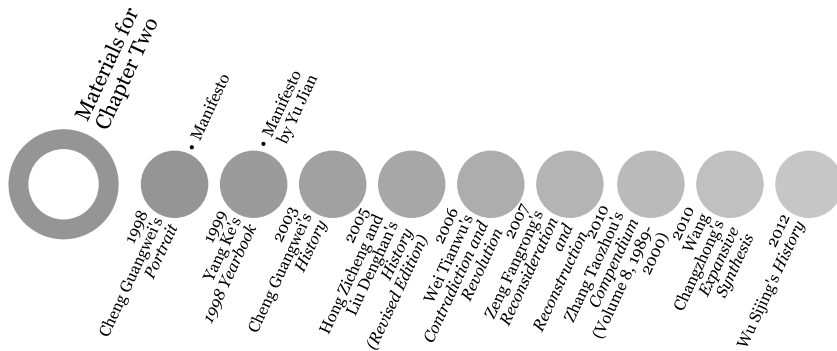
While the year 2000 serves as the end point of my survey of the history of New Poetry in the PRC, poetry has continued to generate polemics, as pointed out by Tang Qiaoqiao and Heather Inwood among others.⁷ However, my focus is on 21st-century scholars' representation of poetry written in the 1990s, and it is to this particular period that I turn in chapter Two. I read the above-mentioned seven research monographs in chronological order. They are: Cheng Guangwei's 程光伟 *History of China's Contemporary Poetry* 中国当代诗歌史 (2003), Hong Zicheng 洪子诚 and Liu Denghan's 刘登翰 *History of Contemporary Chinese New Poetry (Revised Edition)* 中国当代新诗史(修订版) (2005), Wei Tianwu's 魏天无 *Contradictions and Evolution in the New Poetry's Pursuit of Modernity: A Study of Poetics in the Nineties* 新诗现代性追求的矛盾与演进：九十年代诗论研究 (2006), Zeng Fangrong's 曾方荣 *Reconsideration and Reconstruction: Criticism of Poetry of the 90s in the 20th Century* 反思与重构：20世纪90年代诗歌的批评 (2007), Wang Changzhong's 王昌忠 *Expansive Synthesis: A Study of Poetry of the 90s in the 20th Century* 扩散的综合性——20世纪90年代诗歌写作研究 (2010), Zhang

⁷ Inwood 2011; Tang 2014.

Taozhou's 张桃洲 introduction to his compilation of the *Compendium of Chinese New Poetry (Volume 8, 1989-2000)* 中国新诗总系：第8卷(作品1989-2000) (2010), and *A Survey History of Chinese Poetry: Contemporary Volume* 中国诗歌通史：当代卷 (2012), edited by Wu Sijing 吴思敬.

Prior to my reading of these seven studies, in order to demonstrate concretely the Intellectual camp's monopolization of the discourse on poetry written in the 1990s, I discuss two texts that arguably function as the respective manifestos of the Intellectual and Popular camps, published in two of the four anthologies published during the Polemic. The Intellectual manifesto is Cheng Guangwei's introduction to his compilation of *A Portrait of Years Gone By: Literature of the Nineties, Poetry Volume*, 岁月的遗照：九十年代文学书系·诗歌卷 (1998), in the first book series that embraces the category of "literature of the 1990s." The Popular manifesto is Yu Jian's 于坚 prefatory essay to the *1998 Yearbook of China's New Poetry* 1998 中国新诗年鉴 (1999), with Yang Ke 杨克 as its chief editor. With 21st-century scholars' troubled negotiation of Poetry of the Nineties in mind, I interpret not just the structure of the two manifestos but also the conflict between them. This helps to identify the flaws in 21st-century scholarship on poetry written in the 1990s. This approach further allows me to break the silence maintained by the scholars in question on Cheng Guangwei's dual role as both an anthologist and critic whose positioning triggered the Polemic and a literary historian of the period in question.

After all, I draw on nine of the eleven foundational book publications to form my argument:



Chapter Three

In chapter Three, beyond both camps' manifestos in *Portrait* and the *1998 Yearbook*, I look into the critical writing included in the other two anthologies published during the Polemic. These are *Chinese Poetry: Memorandum for the Nineties* 中国诗歌：九十年代备忘录 (2000), an anthology of critical essays edited by Wang Jiaxin 王家新 and Sun Wenbo 孙文波, and the *1999 Yearbook of China's New Poetry* 1999 中国新诗年鉴 (2000), with Yang Ke as chief editor (just like the *1998 Yearbook*).

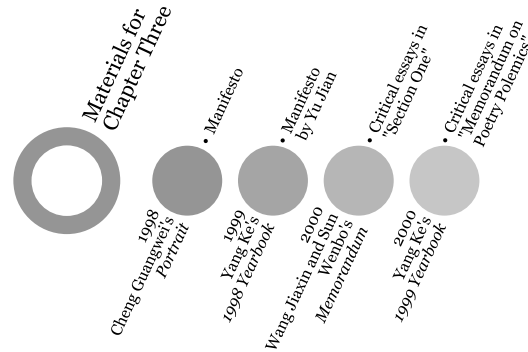
On the Popular side of things, in addition to Yang Ke's role, the continuity between the 1998 and 1999 *Yearbooks* is also clear from the composition of their editorial board; and more importantly, in the message delivered in an introduction to the *1999 Yearbook* written by Xie Youshun 谢有顺. Also, both *Yearbooks* are poetry anthologies that include critical writing in what are called "Poetry Theory" 诗歌理论 sections. Moreover, to document the Polemic, the *1999 Yearbook* provides an appendix called "Appendix One: A Memorandum on Poetry Polemics" 附录一：诗歌争论备忘录. The 22 critical essays in this appendix are what I prioritize in this chapter.

On the Intellectual side of things, the association between *Portrait* and *Memorandum* is less obvious but still clearly detectable. Aside from his introduction, Cheng Guangwei includes no other critical writing in *Portrait*. Hence, the subsequent publication of *Memorandum*, an edited volume of critical essays, gains in importance. Editors Wang Jiaxin and Sun Wenbo select 38 essays that are spread across two sections. In the preface, Wang Jiaxin says that *Memorandum* is dedicated to discussions of Poetry of the Nineties / poetry written in the 1990s; here, the Chinese phrasing 九十年代诗歌 that is at the heart of the present study can be read both ways. He also writes that it is on "a polemic on poetry that is unfolding right now" 一场正在展开的诗歌论争; he is of course referring to what is now known as the Popular-Intellectual Polemic.⁸ Essays published during the Polemic are collected in "Section One", on which I focus in this chapter ("Section Two" contains essays on the 1990s more broadly). But while Yu Jian had put forward his manifesto in the *1998 Yearbook* a year before, and participated very vocally in the Polemic ever since, Wang and Sun conspicuously exclude Yu's writing and writing by other members of the Popular camp.

⁸ Wang and Sun 2000: Prefatory Essay 1.

By contrast, they include no fewer than three essays by Cheng Guangwei, one of which is Cheng's (abridged) introduction to *Portrait*.

Concisely, my focus is on these materials:



Chapter Three responds to Van Crevel's study of the Polemic in *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* (2008),⁹ which helped motivate the present research and led to many inspiring conversations with Van Crevel over the years; but I approach the material with a different intention. While Van Crevel draws on the critical essays to grasp the dynamics of the discourse on the avant-garde,¹⁰ I use them to elucidate discourse on poetry written in the 1990s and on the notion of the Poetry of the Nineties, and the literary-historical substantiation of this discourse.

About forty of the eighty critical essays put forward by both camps combined display immediate relevance to these issues, and crucially, my analysis shows that the members of the Popular camp are more interested in attacking the Intellectual camp's views than in defending their own views – or, indeed, in even systematically establishing these views. Conversely, the Intellectual camp not just effectively refutes the Popular attacks but also cleverly dismantles the Popular camp's own views, inasmuch as these present a coherent discourse to begin with.

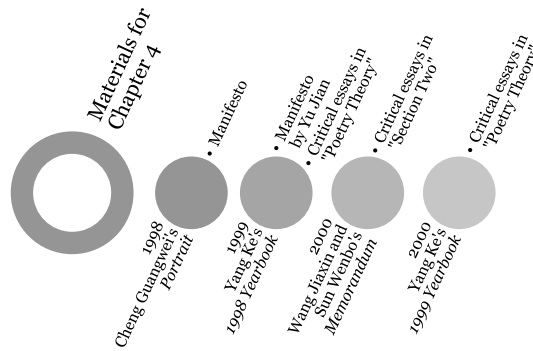
⁹ Van Crevel 2008: 399–450.

¹⁰ Van Crevel 2008: 400.

Additionally, I attach a visualization of relations between the various authors involved, in an appendix to chapter Three, because the material under scrutiny is a complex affair.

Chapter Four

In chapter Four, in order to listen to the full stories told by the proponents on both sides of the conflict, I ground on the two manifestos and delve into the critical essays included in the “Poetry Theory” sections of both *Yearbooks* and in “Section Two” of *Memorandum*:



Remarkably, *Memorandum* contains many contributions by *poet-critics* (as distinct from “regular” critics who are not primarily known as poets in their own right; I will drop the scare quotes from here on). This recalls the hierarchy of literary authors over literary critics mentioned above. I submit that the prominent presence of the poet-critics in *Memorandum* contributes to the credibility of the Intellectual camp in the eyes of the 21st-century scholars whose monographs are discussed in chapter Two, and to the inability of the Popular camp to leave their mark.

Ultimately, it turns out that the Intellectual camp does not need the Polemic to assume the dominance of their views in the discourse on poetry written in the 1990s. Arguably – and here lies a key result of my journey back from the 21st-century research monographs to their roots in the decade leading up to the Polemic – this task had been fulfilled much earlier, long before the label “Intellectual” was slapped on the authors in question.

IV. In Closing

As my research progressed, I increasingly realized that the discourse on poetry written in China in the 1990s – not just in scholarship but also in criticism and the compilation of anthologies – is filled with the voices of university-educated (and in some cases university-employed) male Han Chinese. This profile fits nearly all the authors of the texts under scrutiny: the 21st-century scholars whose monographs I take to task, Cheng Guangwei and Yu Jian as the authors of the respective manifestos, and the regular critics and poet-critics contributing essays to the *Yearbooks* and to *Memorandum*. This realization reminds me of Zhou Zan’s 周瓚 critique of patriarchal criticism of Women’s poetry in the PRC.¹¹ Zhou is disheartened by the negligence and self-righteousness exuding from such criticism. Now, I can relate.

The discourse on poetry written in the 1990s is marked by the near-complete absence of female voices and otherwise “other” voices (e.g. ethnic minorities, authors without access to higher education, etc.). Ironically and somewhat bitterly, this study reproduces this situation to a certain extent, as it focuses on male Han Chinese and often highly educated voices. Crucially, however, it does so in order to take issue with them, as a necessary condition for the future exploration of other perspectives.

¹¹ Zhou 2007: 121–174. The phenomena of male-dominance in China’s poetry scene is also observed by Yeh 1996; Van Crevel 2008; Inwood 2014; Van Crevel 2017b.

