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The making of Chinese poetry of the nineties

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Chapter Four

Before the Polemic: N-Poetry Activism, with no Popular Standpoint in Sight

I. Prologue

In this light, other portions of the *1998 Yearbook* and the *1999 Yearbook* than those discussed in chapter Three become intriguing. I am referring here to the sections called “Poetry Theory” in these volumes, which were produced by the Popular camp. If these were endeavors to provide theoretical support for the Popular Standpoint, they failed to materialize in the 21st-century studies discussed in chapter Two, which the Popular Standpoint is basically invisible. How can this be?

Here, extending the view backwards to the years preceding the Polemic may be required – and needless to say, any N-Poetry equivalents to the “Poetry Theory” sections in the *1998 Yearbook* and the *1999 Yearbook* should also be taken into consideration. This takes us to “Section Two” of Wang Jiaxin and Sun Wenbo’s *Memorandum*. According to the volume’s preface, the two themes of this anthology are the Polemic and poetry written in the 1990s; and notably, the essays in “Section Two” were mostly published *before* the Polemic.

Reference to Cheng Guangwei’s *Portrait*, which triggered the Polemic, is still needed in this chapter as well. As remarked in the preface to this study, in response to the poetry-anthology-with-an-introduction that is *Portrait*, the *1998 Yearbook* included not just poetry but also critical essays; and this leads us to see Wang and Sun’s *Memorandum* as a supplement to *Portrait* and the *1999 Yearbook* as a supplement to the *1998 Yearbook*. But there is more. An equally important factor here is the status of the editors. Yu Jian, whose prefatory essay is a key piece in the *1998 Yearbook*, is a poet-critic; but Cheng Guangwei is a “regular” critic. This can put Cheng at a discursive disadvantage in a traditional, enduring hierarchy of creative writers over critics. Therefore, as *Memorandum* is compiled by poet-critics Wang and Sun, they can be seen as coming to Cheng’s rescue in upholding N-poetics. For effectively measuring the critical writing’s impact on subsequent scholarship, the contributors to the “Poetry Theory” sections and “Section Two” are also anchored in this hierarchy. As the authors’ and editors’ status in the said hierarchy co-

determines the impact of their critical writing, the original propositions of N-Poetry and the Popular Standpoint are fitting starting points for identifying the poet-critics for each camp. Hence, we will be revisiting Cheng's introduction to *Portrait* and Yu's prefatory essay to the *1998 Yearbook*.

In addition to the above point, material included in *Memorandum* and the *1999 Yearbook* should also be taken into consideration: specifically, Yang Ke's work notes on the *Yearbooks*, Xie Youshun's introduction to the *1999 Yearbook* and Chen Jun's "An Outline of Some of the Poetical Vocabulary of the 1990s" in *Memorandum*. This will give us a good sense of who count as poet-critics and regular critics respectively, for each of the two camps.

After the identification of poet-critics as distinct from regular critics, we move on to an examination of their critical writing. Remarkably, the first and original appearances of these essays are not crucial in this study. And how well such proponents' vision negotiates either designation of poetry written in the 1990s matters to either proposition's distinguishability in the critical discourse on poetry written the 1990s, and therefore is what this study concerns. The examination shows N-poets were much more active than Popular poets in this respect. Importantly, the discussion reveals that the essays in "Section Two" of *Memorandum* see the establishment of a what may be termed a closed value system created by the N-poets since the early 1990s; I will explain this notion below. In contrast, nothing of the sort is found in the "Poetry Theory" sections in the *Yearbooks*. In fact, in the "Poetry Theory" sections, the Popular Standpoint is hardly mentioned at all.

The above points highlight important differences between the two camps and their precursors in regard to critical discourse. This should give 21st-century poetry scholars and critics working on the 1990s pause and encourage them to revisit what is now an unjustly one-sided picture, as argued in chapter Two.

II. Poets with Dual Roles

As shown in chapter Three, not only critics produce critical writing in the Polemic, but poets do so as well. Some poets even take on the role of editor and compile volumes that amount to book-length contentions. The most representative examples are Yu Jian's, Wang Jiabin's, and Sun Wenbo's active participation in the Polemic, with Yu on one side

and Wang and Sun on the other. Their activities highlight the role that the poets themselves play in the critical designation of poetry written in the 1990s. And crucially, some Popular poets and N-poets had begun to express themselves in this manner long *before* the Polemic. In the following, I draw on the *Yearbooks*, *Portrait*, and *Memorandum* to show that not only during the Polemic, but also before the Polemic, starting in the early 1990s, the N-poets were much more effective than their Popular counterparts in assuming the role of literary critics.

Cheng Guangwei's list of N-poets and Yu Jian's list of Popular poets have been offered previously but are mentioned below again, because their status as such is essential for our identification of the relevant poet-critics in each camp; the same thing holds for several other such enumerations that will appear in the following pages. This is inevitable if we want to get to the heart of the matter, in order to counterbalance the superficial treatment that the subject matter has received to date. I ask the reader to bear with me on this point.

Poet-Critics in the Popular Camp

Oddly, Yu's list of Popular poets does not really align with other textual representations of the Popular Standpoint. In his prefatory essay to the *1998 Yearbook*, Yu portrays himself as a 1980s poet-predecessor of the Popular Standpoint of the 1990s. As such, his status as a poet-critic emerges in that he is the author of what is clearly a critically-programmatic essay and identifies the poets associated with the Popular Standpoint. These are Bei Dao, Duoduo, Chang Yao, Lü De'an, Zhai Yongming, Zhu Wen, Yi Sha, A Jian, Lu Yang, Du Malan, Hou Ma, Xu Jiang, Zhong Dao, Yang Jian, and Lu Xixi.¹ Among these poets, Lü De'an and Zhai Yongming count as N-poets in Cheng Guangwei's book. (Zhai is the only female included in both Yu's and Cheng's designation of poets of the 1990s; this is evidence of what is mentioned in Preface as the near-complete absence of "other" voices in the critical discourse on poetry written in the 1990s.) Remarkably, Yu does not identify himself as a Popular poet. This is strange in that his primary identity, according himself and to others, is doubtless that of a poet, *and* he champions the Popular Standpoint, relying heavily on his own knowledge and experience as a poet; key notions therein are the

¹Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 5.

importance of colloquial language,² an independent spirit,³ and finding poetry in everyday life.⁴ At any rate, it is safe to assume that he implicitly includes himself among the Popular poets.

Yang Ke's editorial work note in the *1998 Yearbook* does not resolve the issues arising from Yu's status as a poet-critic. Yang calls attention to the poets that are featured in the first part of the anthology, and some of these are not mentioned in Yu's prefatory essay: e.g. Li Mingpeng, Bei Cun, Zhang Zhihao, Tang Danhong, Zhu Zhu, Sang Ke, Ji Shaofei, Jiang Cheng, and Fei Ya.⁵ Notably, Sang Ke is identified as an N-poet in Chen Jun's "Outline", which we will discuss below; and Yu Jian's six poems in the *1998 Yearbook* are not included in the yearbook's first part. Indeed, Yang's work note only reaffirms Yu's self-portrayal as one of the Third Generation poets who helped establish the Popular Standpoint, together with Han Dong (whose poetry is also not included in the yearbook's first part).⁶ Incidentally, in Yu's essay, Han is granted the same status as Yu himself, as a 1980s poet-*predecessor* of the Popular Standpoint of the 1990s – but not as a Popular poet in so many words.

So, can Xie Youshun's preface to the *1999 Yearbook* fix this confusing situation? Xie positions the *1999 Yearbook* as a continuation of the *1998 Yearbook* in terms of resistance to Cheng's designation of N-Poetry.⁷ Also, the essence of Yu's prefatory essay to the *1998 Yearbook* is woven into Xie's preface. The most noticeable difference is their identification of Popular poets. Xie now recognizes Yu's and Han Dong's importance as poets,⁸ in company with other, newly identified Popular poets, namely Song Xiaoxian 宋晓贤, Shen Haobo, Li Hongqi 李红旗, Duo Yu 朵渔, Wu Ang 巫昂, Sheng Xing 盛兴, Lü Yue 吕约, Shi Bin 世宾, and Ya Shi 哑石.⁹ Xie's recognition of Yu enables Yu to be identified as a Popular poet-critic. As Xie further quotes Han's essay in the preface,¹⁰ Han has his status as a Popular poet-critic solidified. Although Xie does not reveal his source for this move,

² Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 3-9.

³ Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 8-10.

⁴ Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 10-14.

⁵ Yang 2000: 519.

⁶ Yang 1999: 518-519.

⁷ Yang 2000: Preface 1-4.

⁸ Yang 2000: Preface 9.

⁹ Yang 2000: Preface 4-7.

¹⁰ Yang 2000: Preface 10-11.

presumably, Xie refers here to Han's essay "On the Popular" 论民间,¹¹ which is included in the 1999 *Yearbook's* "Poetry Theory" section.¹² Xie also cites several poems to illustrate his position, but actual quotations from the critical writings of Popular poet-critics are rare – witness, for instance, the glaring absence of references to Yu Jian's prefatory essay to the 1998 *Yearbook*, which is a foundational text (quite aside from the various questions it raises). Accordingly, a very small number of Popular poet-critics or regular critics emerge from Xie's preface. Also, neither Yu's nor Xie's discussion of Popular poet-critics or regular critics provides many concrete clues to their work.

The number of Popular poet-critics slightly rises if Yu's and Xie's lists of Popular poets are read in parallel with the authors featured in the "Poetry Theory" sections of the *Yearbooks*. There is no overlap between the 1998 and 1999 editions. The 1998 *Yearbook* has essays by Shen Qi, Xie Youshun, Shao Jian 邵建, Sun Shaozhen, Li Qingguo 李青果, Jian Ning 简宁, Wen Yuanhui 温远辉, Yu Jian, Duoduo, Han Shishan 韩石山, Wu Yiqin 吴义勤, Yuan Baoguo 原宝国, and Wang Yuechuan 王岳川. Among the other authors, Duoduo is the only whom Yu Jian also designates as the poet of the Popular Standpoint. The 1999 *Yearbook* has essays by Hu Yan 胡彦, Huang Canran, Zhang Ning 张柠, Cui Weiping and Xi Mi 奚密 (Michelle Yeh), Han Dong, Shen Haobo, Xie Mian, Shen Qi, Chen Zhongyi 陈仲义, and Wang Guangming 王光明. From this list, in addition to Han Dong, two other poet-critics emerge. One is Shen Haobo. Shen is discussed by Xie in his preface to the 1999 *Yearbook*. The other is Huang Canran, whose case is tricky: Xie approvingly cites a line from Huang's poem "Du Fu" 杜甫,¹³ but the editorial board of the 1999 *Yearbook* assigns "Du Fu" and another poem by Huang to the section spared for "newest works by Hong Kongese and Taiwanese poets" 港台诗人的最新诗作.¹⁴ To make things more complex, Huang is among those identified by Cheng Guangwei as an N-poet.¹⁵ Below, I will review Huang's essay in the 1999 *Yearbook* to determine his position in the Polemic. At any rate, we may for now tentatively count Huang as a Popular poet-critic.

¹¹ Yang 2000: 465.

¹² Yang 2000: 464–478.

¹³ Yang 2000: Preface 7.

¹⁴ Yang 2000: 655.

¹⁵ Cheng 1998: Introduction 2.

As a result, five presumed Popular poet-critics emerge from the two editions of the *Yearbooks*. They are Yu Jian, Han Dong, Duoduo, Shen Haobo, and Huang Canran. But this list of names raises questions. Aside from the complexity of Huang's case, it would also be hard to say to what extent Duoduo's and Shen Haobo's critical writing should count as "Popular". I will elaborate on this below.

N-Poet-Critics

As a regular critic, Cheng Guangwei's position may be lower than Yu Jian's in the hierarchy of writers over critics; but Cheng invokes N-poets' observations for his proposition of N-Poetry. This strategy allows Cheng to turn the tables on Yu and direct attention to these poets' ability in terms of critical writing. This is later reaffirmed in Wang and Sun's *Memorandum*.

For identifying poets associated with N-Poetry, Cheng Guangwei's *Portrait* is the obvious place to start. Cheng highlights fifteen poets in his introduction: Ouyang Jianghe, Zhang Shuguang, Wang Jiaxin, Chen Dongdong, Bai Hua, Xi Chuan, Zhai Yongming, (Xiao) Kaiyu, Sun Wenbo, Zhang Zao, Huang Canran, Zhong Ming, Lü De'an, Zang Di, and Wang Ai. He calls these a beacon that gave direction to poetry writing in the 1990s, and sees the fifteen poets listed above as torchbearers who fostered the development of poetry in the final decade of the 20th century.¹⁶

As mentioned in chapter Three, Cheng's proposition of N-Poetry features four central concepts: Intellectual Writing, opposition to so-called pure poetry, Narrativity, and Individual Writing.¹⁷ Besides, clearly, these four concepts do not originate with Cheng; they had been around for several years before the publication of *Portrait*, and what he does is to pull them together toward the notion of N-Poetry as a critical rather than a chronological category. To explain the concept of Intellectual Writing, Cheng draws on essays by Ouyang Jianghe and Xi Chuan;¹⁸ to explain the notion of opposition to pure poetry, he cites an interview with Wang Jiaxin and an essay by Zang Di and quotes Xi Chuan, Zhong Ming and Xiao Kaiyu;¹⁹ on Narrativity, while Cheng claims a contribution to the development of

¹⁶ Cheng 1998: Introduction 2.

¹⁷ Cheng 1998: Introduction 2-8 and 16-20.

¹⁸ Cheng 1998: Introduction 3.

¹⁹ Cheng 1998: Introduction 4-6.

this concept for himself, he also notes that Xiao Kaiyu, Sun Wenbo, Zang Di, and Xi Chuan are his predecessors in this respect;²⁰ and finally, he uses the concept of Individual Writing to pull the other three together. Closing with a general observation about how N-Poetry can be seen as the Individual Writing of the 1990s, Cheng does not claim credit for introducing Individual Writing for himself or anyone else.²¹

Cheng refines his argument for Individual Writing in his *A History of China's Contemporary Poetry*. While this was published in 2003, several years after the Polemic, much of the material presented by Cheng in *History* is already there in Wang and Sun's 2000 *Memorandum*, specifically in Chen Jun's "Outline," to which we now turn, and which, in the spirit of the volume as a whole, displays a clear N-Poetry bias. Of particular relevance here are Chen's discussions of Ouyang Jianghe, Wang Jiabin, Sun Wenbo, and Xiao Kaiyu.²² Just like Cheng Guangwei, Chen primarily draws on the opinions of poet-critics affiliated with N-Poetry, as distinct from regular critics.

As such, Chen does not explain Individual Writing in his own words. Rather, he links together passages from essays by Ouyang, Wang, Sun, and Xiao. This approach hardly offers a very sophisticated explanation of Individual Writing. However, for identifying contributors to the notion of N-Poetry, Chen's approach is informative in that it shows the crucial role played by poet-critics as authors of critical discourse. Chen is explicit about this, for instance by specifying in the main text the exact titles of the essays on which he draws.²³

Chen also applies this strategy to elaborate on what he considers to be other distinctive features of poetry written in the 1990s, sometimes providing lists of practitioners and comments for smaller segments of the discussion. He covers three of Cheng Guangwei's four central concepts for poetry written in the 1990s: Individual Writing, Intellectual Writing, and Narrativity (he does not discuss the opposition to pure poetry). In addition, he discusses Middle-Age Writing, the Chinese discursive field, the Chinese experience, ironic consciousness and a comedic spirit 反讽意识和喜剧精神, dramatization 戏剧化, intertextual writing, trans-genre writing 跨文体写作, and the genre of the elegy 挽歌体. He

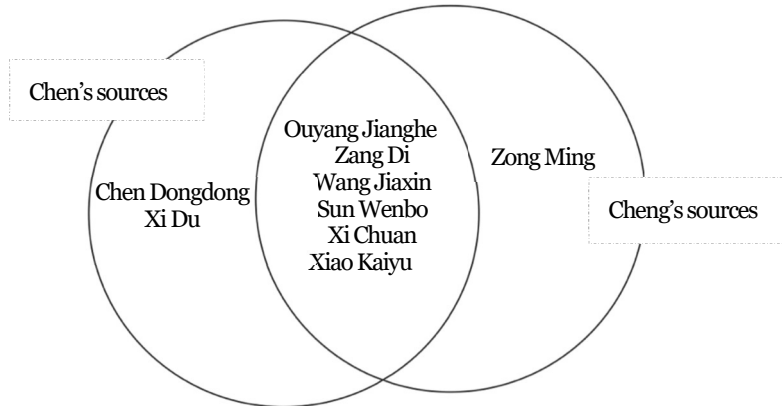
²⁰ Cheng 1998: Introduction 6-8.

²¹ Cheng 1998: Introduction 16-20.

²² Wang and Sun 2000: 396-398.

²³ Wang and Sun 2000: 396-398.

identifies these concepts in essays by Ouyang Jianghe, Xi Chuan, Chen Dongdong, Wang Jiaxin, Sun Wenbo, Xiao Kaiyu, Zang Di, and Xi Du.²⁴ Except Xi Du, everyone on this list is designated by Cheng Guangwei as N-poets. Many of them are also Cheng's points of reference for the four central concepts of N-Poetry:



Nevertheless, Xi Du is not a stranger to N-Poetry. Chen Jun's list of N-poets largely overlaps with Cheng Guangwei's, but Chen adds several new faces. These include Xi Du, Ma Yongbo 马永波, Zhu Zhu, Sang Ke, Hu Xudong 胡续冬, and Jiang Tao.²⁵ Again, many of these authors are also mobilized in Wang and Sun's *Memorandum* for their critical essays. Essays by Xi Du, Hu Xudong, and Jiang Tao in "Section Two" of *Memorandum* (first published in 1997-1998) discuss Narrativity, Intellectual Writing, and Individual Writing. While these three authors were not among those called N-poets by Cheng Guangwei, they "earned" this label later, during the Polemic.

Incidentally, different from editors Wang and Sun's policy of rendering representatives of the Popular Standpoint invisible, Chen Jun does mention Yu Jian, but only in connection with trans-genre writing.²⁶ He surrounds Yu with several N-poets: Wang Jiaxin, Xi Chuan, Xiao Kaiyu, Chen Dongdong, and Zhai Yongming.²⁷ Yu Jian only gets a single mention, unlike the N-poets, whom Chen Jun references throughout his "Outline"

²⁴ Wang and Sun 2000: 395–404.

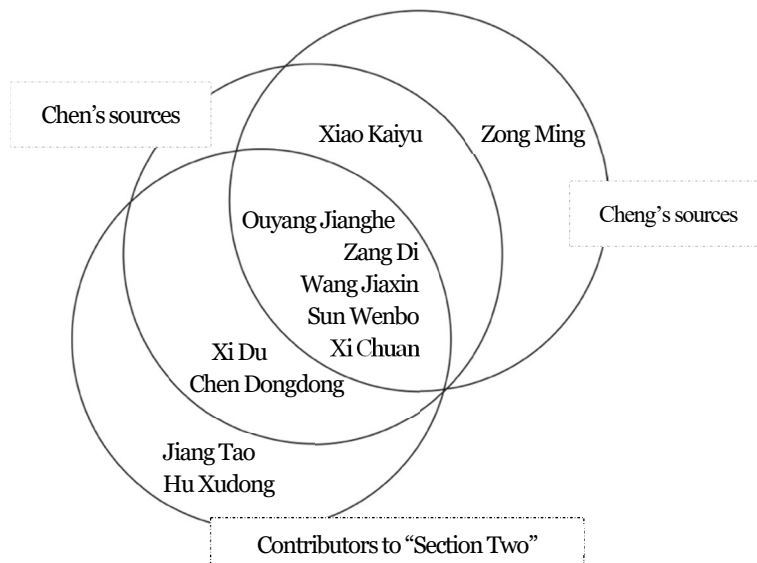
²⁵ Wang and Sun 2000: 400.

²⁶ Wang and Sun 2000: 404.

²⁷ Wang and Sun 2000: 404.

in connection with other topics, such as Individual Writing, the Chinese experience, and the Chinese discursive field. If mentioning Yu Jian can be read as an admission by Chen Jun that Yu and his proposition are significant, it is not very generous – which is unsurprising in light of the aforesaid N-Poetry bias that permeates *Memorandum* at every level.

In addition to the explanation of N-Poetry and N-poetics, *Memorandum* also gives N-poet-critics plenty of room to dwell on the relationship between poetry and the social reality of the decade of the 1990s in China. Approximately half of “Section Two” is taken up by their work. Specifically, nine N-poet-critics – Ouyang Jianghe, Zang Di, Xi Chuan, Cheng Dongdong, Sun Wenbo, Wang Jiaxin, Hu Xudong, Jiang Tao, and Xi Du – each contribute at least one essay to the section.²⁸ Many on this list now look familiar:



Irrespective of the variety of issues that are in fact addressed in these essays, by compiling them into “Section Two,” they are implicitly presented as contemplations on the emergence of N-Poetry.

²⁸ Wang and Sun 2000: 169–361.

At this point, it is clear that critical essays by N-poet-critics are fundamental to the construction of the notion of N-Poetry – and, of N-poetics. Before the publication of Cheng Guangwei's *Portrait* and his designation of N-Poetry, these poet-critics had already made themselves heard on (their opposition to) pure poetry, Intellectual Writing, Narrativity, and Individual Writing. Moreover, the other features Chen Jun lists in his "Outline" had also featured in various critical essays, long before *Portrait* appeared. This is clear from bibliographical detail offered in the "Annals of Poetry of the 90s" 90年代诗歌纪事, also included in *Memorandum* and composed by Wang Jiaxin under the pseudonym Zi An 子岸 (previously published in the journal *Mountain Flower* 山花).²⁹ Thus, the editors of *Memorandum* lay out the trajectories of these poet-critics as these had taken shape prior to the Polemic and prior to Cheng's designation of them as N-poets. This shows how pervasive their opinions had been in the years leading up the Polemic.

Notably, by regularly referring to these authors of N-poetics as *poets* in the main text, Chen Jun distinguishes them from (regular) critics. He explicitly dwells on the category of critics as people who are primarily seen as producers of critical discourse (even if they have some published poetry to their name, which is common in China). Chen identifies, for instance, Cheng Guangwei and Geng Zhanchun as critics and spells out (through direct citation) their contribution to the notions of Intellectual Writing, Individual Writing, and/or Narrativity.³⁰ When explaining Individual Writing, Chen also makes passing reference to Tang Xiaodu and Wang Guangming, neither of whom is identified as an N-poet by either Cheng Guangwei or Chen Jun.³¹ As a result, only four regular N-critics emerge from Chen's "Outline," while Chen identifies eight N-poet-critics. Thus, in terms of the establishment of N-Poetry, the impact of the regular critics is limited.

If we take into account the essays in "Section Two" of *Memorandum*, the list of N-critics expands, including more contributors who are not themselves poets and count as regular critics: for example Chen Chao, Xie Mian, Hong Zicheng, and Li Zhensheng 李振声.³² There is, as such, something of a discrepancy between Chen's "Outline" and the picture

²⁹ Van Crevel 2008: 440; Yi Sha 2011: 62–63.

³⁰ Wang and Sun 2000: 396, 397, and 400.

³¹ Wang and Sun 2000: 397.

³² Wang and Sun 2000: 169–361.

painted by Wang and Sun as editors of the volume of which his essay is part. That Xie Mian and Wang Guangming are also contributors to the “Poetry Theory” section in the 1999 *Yearbook* does not change the dominance of N-poet-critics,³³ which is reflected in the number of authors involved and the significance ascribed to their ideas, the level of detail at which these are discussed, and so on.

Jointly, on the N-side of things, *Portrait* and *Memorandum* feature no fewer than ten poet-critics, and the synergy between them makes for a stark contrast with the scattered Popular efforts in the 1998 *Yearbook* and the 1999 *Yearbook*. Crucially, this situation gives N-Poetry a better chance of appearing on the radar of the 21st-century scholars who turn to survey-like compilations such as the books discussed here in order to explore poetry written in the 1990s.

III. The N-Poets’ Argumentation

Of course, the number of poet-critics involved with the Popular Standpoint and N-Poetry respectively does not automatically make either proposition more or less convincing. Content evaluation of the critical writing on poetry written in the 1990s should play a key role in validating both propositions. In the following, I will first look into critical writing affiliated with N-Poetry, in “Section Two” of *Memorandum*.

Inner Logic

As shown above, the editors of *Memorandum* use Wang Jiixin’s “Annals” to exhibit N-poet’s endeavors in critical writing in the early and mid-1990s, before they were designated as N-poets in 1998 by Cheng Guangwei, in the run-up to the Polemic. Also, “Section Two” of *Memorandum* offers the N-poets another platform. The earliest essay in “Section Two” was originally published in 1993, and at least one essay by an N-poet is included for each subsequent year until 1998, with a larger number of essays in 1997 and 1998. Thus, *Memorandum* follows a chronological approach to N-poets’ reflections on writing poetry in the 1990s and N-critics’ reflections on this poetry. My discussion does not rigidly follow this chronology but rather arranges the essays in a manner that highlights their

³³ Yang 2000: 489–495 and 511–514.

interconnectedness and hence the potential synergy and impact of their joint inclusion in *Memorandum*.

“Section Two” of *Memorandum* starts out with a groundbreaking essay by N-poet Ouyang Jianghe, first published in 1993, and this is also where my discussion begins. I then discuss nine other essays published between 1994 and 1998 in order to bring out the logic of their joint constitution of a discernible N-poetics toward the end of the decade.

Ouyang Jianghe’s “After 1989”

Ouyang articulates the title of his essay carefully: “Writing Poetry inside China After 1989: Indigenous Disposition, the Mark of Middle Age and Being an Intellectual (Excerpt)” ‘89 后国内诗歌写作：本土气质、中年特征与知识分子身份（节选）.³⁴ As “After 1989” captures time, space, and (implied) agents, the subtitle fine-tunes these perspectives by refining time as middle age for the authors and as the period after the violent suppression of the 1989 Protest Movement remembered as June Fourth; space as indigeneness; and the agent’s status or identity as the intellectual. This title reflects that Ouyang is not afraid of capturing a complex phenomenon, such as writing poetry in the 1990s, on his own terms. Also, he is not afraid of doing so as early as 1993. Besides, Ouyang sets restrictions on the interpretation of his terminology by stating in the opening of this essay that these terms have no strict theoretical definitions and his use of them is to avoid fitting his discussion into well-developed theoretical frameworks such as modernism and post-modernism.³⁵ The terms Ouyang specifies here include Intellectual Writing, Middle-Age Writing, indigenous style 本土风格, and indigenous disposition. According to Ouyang, these terms enable his discussion of poetry to be closer to the actual situation on the ground. In other words, Ouyang does not want his critical writing to be pigeonholed into categories used in preceding critical discourse.

Ouyang’s opening remark would have been bound to draw the attention of those who support the preceding critical discourse as well as those who are fed up with it. Later, Ouyang’s claim to having initiated Intellectual Writing, along with *Tendency* editors Xi Chuan and Chen Dongdong,³⁶ suggests that his contribution is an insider’s account on

³⁴ Wang and Sun 2000: 181–200.

³⁵ Wang and Sun 2000: 181.

³⁶ Wang and Sun 2000: 184.

writing poetry inside China after 1989. Ouyang indeed makes his insider's perspective visible in the text. Concrete information follows later in the article, but the insider's perspective is palpable in the first paragraph of the main text. When explaining the periodization of "after 1989," Ouyang says:

对我们这一代诗人的写作来说，1989年并非从头开始，但似乎比从头开始还要困难。一个主要的结果是，在我们已经写出和正在写的作品之间产生了一种深刻的中断。诗歌写作的某个阶段已大致结束了。许多作品失效了。³⁷

For writing by poets from our generation, the year 1989 didn't just mean starting over: it would seem that it was even more difficult than starting over. One of the primary outcomes is that there is a profound rupture between what we've written earlier and what we are writing now. Here, roughly, ends a phase in the writing of poetry. Many works lose their effectiveness.

These words do not make explicit why "after 1989" matters, likely because June Fourth is a politically sensitive topic in China (even today, and certainly in 1993). Rather, Ouyang puts the stress on the changes in the writing of poets from "our" generation before "1989" – an often-used metonymy for June Fourth – and after that fateful historical moment. Ouyang's use of "our" and "we" indicates that he is among this generation of poets, and he assumes a position of speaking on their behalf. In the rest of the essay, Ouyang maintains this position. This is reflected in the many sentences that Ouyang starts with "I," "we," or "poets," to elaborate on how the three features noted in the title are represented at the levels of both the text and the author. Ouyang's stress on "after 1989" raises curiosity about "before 1989." However, after drawing a comparison between the social contexts of the early 1980s, the late 1980s, and the early 1990s,³⁸ he hardly looks back to the 1980s. Ouyang spends most of his essay reasoning that in the early 1990s, changes were unavoidable, in poetry as in society.

³⁷ Wang and Sun 2000: 182.

³⁸ Wang and Sun 2000: 183.

In line with his unwillingness to use well-developed theoretical frameworks, Ouyang mentions no regular critics who reside inside China. Instead, he turns to his fellow poet-critics for support, and to foreign thinkers. Specifically, Ouyang notes critical writing by those he considers “representative” poets for the era, namely Xi Chuan, Chen Dongdong, Xiao Kaiyu, Sun Wenbo, Zhang Shuguang, and Zhong Ming. Also, he mentions poems by Wang Jiabin, Xiao Kaiyu, Sun Wenbo, Zhai Yongming, Bai Hua, and himself. All these poets are later identified by Cheng Guangwei as N-poets in *Portrait*. On the other hand, Ouyang finds further support from many foreign thinkers, writers, and artists: George Orwell, Roland Barthes, Murray Krieger, Vladimir Nabokov, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michelangelo Antonioni, Joseph Brodsky, Czesław Miłosz, Umberto Eco, Horace, Ezra Pound, Václav Havel, William Butler Yeats, Rainer Maria Rilke, Osip Mandelstam, Michel Foucault, András Schiff, and Martin Heidegger. Intriguingly, in an essay that means to point to the direction for the future of Chinese poetry after 1989, Ouyang lets foreign thinkers outnumber Chinese thinkers.

The ratio of foreign thinkers and Chinese poet-critics is not the only issue here. Another issue is the lack of textual detail in the invocation of these many names, Chinese and foreign. As regards the essays and poetry by his fellow poets, Ouyang rarely quotes the poetry at any length or engages in substantial textual analysis. Mostly, he cites author names and poem or essay titles and provides nutshell characterizations. In other words, he does little more than affirming the recognition of his fellow poets and poet-critics and himself. As for foreign writers and thinkers, Ouyang sprinkles his essay with their names, but without developing any connections between their writings and Chinese poetry in its local context – except for his personal experience and views. Besides, this representation of his experience is often too fragmented to carry much weight beyond his individual situation. In other words, he works almost purely from his own experience and foreign sources, not from contemporary Chinese (“indigenous”) critical discourse. As such, while all these citations and quotations may create a fascinating first impression for “After 1989,” a close reading disappoints.

However, the other contributors to “Section Two” of *Memorandum* seem not to register disappointment. No fewer than ten of the twenty essays in “Section Two” of

Memorandum cite Ouyang's essay. Although each addresses different facets of poetry written in the 1990s, they all find ways to connect their viewpoints to Ouyang's. In this sense, "After 1989" is doubtless a key text for the discourse leading up to the notion of N-Poetry in the years preceding the Polemic.

A Dialogue between Ouyang Jianghe, Chen Chao, and Tang Xiaodu

Ouyang Jianghe's disparagement of the status quo in Chinese criticism becomes more explicit in another entry in "Section Two," titled "Dialogue: Chinese-style 'Postmodern' Theories and Other Things (Excerpt)" 对话：中国式的“后现代”理论及其他（节选），first published in 1995.³⁹ This piece is a transcript of a conversation among poet-critic Ouyang and regular critics Chen Chao and Tang Xiaodu. As is common for the genre, the conversation is of the meandering kind and contains a lot of first-person statements. The speakers' skepticism about other Chinese literary critics is palpable.⁴⁰ In their view, other critics misinterpret and misunderstand, and therefore misuse, the concept of the postmodern. At one point, they compare these critics to hairdressers who abuse their power to impose an outmoded and inappropriate style.⁴¹ They feel that other critics should draw on the notions of Individual Writing and Intellectual Writing instead.

Tang Xiaodu's and Chen Chao's own essays in "Section Two" certainly do so. In Tang's essay, titled "Several Issues Concerning the Avant-Garde Poetry of the 1990s (Excerpt)" 90年代先锋诗的几个问题（节选），⁴² a clear trace of Ouyang's "After 1989" can be found. "Several Issues" was first published in 1998 and is in the first person. Tang approvingly quotes the paragraph I have translated above from Ouyang's "After 1989," highlighting the notion of "profound rupture"⁴³ to support his argument for differentiating the avant-garde poetry of the 1990s from that of the 1980s. Tang also cites three poems by Ouyang Jianghe as evidence for the transformation of this poetry from one decade to the next. As the notion of what is called "avant-garde" poetry in contemporary China lies outside the present study, Tang's detailed discussion of this transformation is not examined here. However, no

³⁹ Wang and Sun 2000: 230–240.

⁴⁰ Wang and Sun 2000: 236–239.

⁴¹ Wang and Sun 2000: 236–237.

⁴² Wang and Sun 2000: 330–344.

⁴³ Wang and Sun 2000: 331.

matter how Tang conceptualizes the avant-garde poetry of the 1990s, his inclination toward what would later be called N-Poetry is clear. This shows in his identification of Individual Writing as an avant-garde feature and his association of it with Narrativity, dramatization, and Middle-Age Writing – all these things are features initiated by N-poets and associated with N-Poetry, as noted above in my discussion of Chen Jun’s “Outline.” Unlike Chen Jun, Tang does not clarify the origins of these concepts, but he elaborates the idea with the help of essays by Zang Di, Xi Chuan, and Xiao Kaiyu. These three authors are also identified as avant-garde poets by Tang, in company with Ouyang Jianghe, Wang Jiaxin, Zhou Lunyou, Meng Lang 孟浪, Chen Chao, Zhai Yongming, Wang Yin, Sun Wenbo, Chen Dongdong, Yu Jian, Wang Xiaoni, and Zhang Shuguang. Yu Jian’s appearance in this list may come as a surprise, but as his poetry is incorporated as an example of Narrativity, his presence does not destabilize Tang’s argument – which, just like Ouyang’s “After 1989,” would later feed into the designation of N-Poetry. This also holds for other poets who are less directly associated with N-Poetry.

Tang also adds more terminology to facilitate his elaboration on N-poetics. Not aspiring to provide a precise definition of Individual Writing, Tang asks the readers to pay attention to “traces” 踪迹 and “projections” 投影 of Individual Writing, such as Ideological Writing 意识形态写作, Collective Writing 集体写作, imitation of Western modernist poetry 对西方现代诗的仿写, Writing for the Masses 大众写作, Market Writing 市场写作, and especially Adolescent Writing 青春期写作 – without, however, providing any explanation.⁴⁴ It is as though Individual Writing, allegedly the essence of poetry-writing in the 1990s, cannot be defined but only be approached indirectly – by other concepts, which remain undefined themselves. This discursive strategy makes Tang’s disapproval of other literary critics intriguing. Speaking in general terms and without naming names, Tang criticizes what he sees as their ignorance of the subtlety, depth, and weight of poetry written in the 1990s – which in this case clearly means the kind of poetry that would later be called N-Poetry, and implies validation of his own writings on this poetry.⁴⁵ If the profundity of Individual Writing is meant to be established by the mobilization of other

⁴⁴ Wang and Sun 2000: 335.

⁴⁵ Wang and Sun 2000: 338–343.

undefined terms, then Tang certainly succeeds, but the discussion does not advance terminological clarity.

Just like Ouyang Jianghe and Tang Xiaodu speaking in the first person in their reflection on changes in poetry writing between the 1980s and the 1990s, Chen Chao does the same in “Three Trends in Current Poetry” 当前诗歌的三个走向, first published in 1997.⁴⁶ (Chen is identified as an avant-garde poet by Tang in “Several Issues” but primarily counts as a critic.) The poets Chen takes as examples are Xi Chuan, Wang Jiaxin, Zheng Danyi, Sun Wenbo, Xiao Kaiyu, Zhang Shuguang, Liu Xiang 刘翔, and Zang Di. Most of them appear in Ouyang’s “After 1989” and would later be designated as N-poets in Cheng Guangwei’s *Portrait*. However, Chen cites no essays by N-poet-critics and uses other terms than we have encountered so far to capture what he calls the three trends in the 1990s: the sublimation of morality, novelization, and changes in poetic structure. Again, no definitions or elaborations are provided. What is provided is a description of how these features operate in the works by the poets in question. So on top of the various types of “writing” offered by Tang, three more labels are added.

It is almost as if what would later be called N-Poetry becomes a site of projection that can accommodate various narratives whose kinship remains superficial and unexplained – which raises the question of what it is that pulls these things together? The notion of a closed value system created by N-poet-critics, which is explained below, may help put this question into perspective.

In all, as represented in “Section Two” of *Memorandum*, by criticizing other critics in one essay and by explicating the first-person observations in the others, Ouyang Jianghe, Tang Xiaodu, and Chen Chao create an impression that N-poet-critics and N-critics are the only ones that matter to critical discourse.

Zang Di’s “Post-Obscure Poetry”

In “Three Trends,” Chen Chao also mentions the two critics of the younger generation that he admires. One is Liu Xiang, a name that is seldomly associated with N-Poetry. The other is Zang Di. Zang’s essay, “Post-Obscure Poetry: Poetry for the Sake of Writing”,⁴⁷ was first

⁴⁶ Wang and Sun 2000: 311–315.

⁴⁷ Wang and Sun 2000: 201–217.

published in 1994; here, it is abridged.⁴⁸ Unlike Ouyang Jianghe, who highlights the differences between poetry before and after 1989 in the title of his essay, Zang buries his differentiation in the subtext. Zang divides the development of Post-Obscure Poetry into two phases, these being Third Generation Poetry (1984-1988) and early 1990s Individual Writing. Further, he rationalizes that Individual Writing is a refinement of Obscure Poetry (from the early 1980s) and of Third Generation Poetry.⁴⁹ To support his rationale, Zang Di also makes reference to Ouyang's "After 1989," a 1993 interview with Wang Jiabin conducted by Chen Dongdong and Huang Canran,⁵⁰ and a 1994 essay by Chen Dongdong.⁵¹ Whereas Ouyang makes the observation in "After 1989" that many poems from the 1980s have lost their effectiveness in the 1990s but does not elaborate on this alleged ineffectiveness, Zang Di looks into Obscure Poetry and Third Generation Poetry as 1980s predecessors of Individual Writing, and defends the effectiveness of Individual Writing by highlighting its differences with both.

Like Ouyang, Zang approaches this transformation from a highly personal and first-person perspective, in statements that start with "I," "we," or "the Post-Obscure poets", among whom he counts himself. Taking an insider's perspective, Zang presents the thinking behind Individual Writing as a kind of contemplation that makes poetry more artistic, more authentic, more down to earth, and therefore more effective in terms of its relevance to Chinese society than its 1980s predecessors.⁵² When discussing Individual Writing, Zang has the following poets in mind: Chen Dongdong, Ouyang Jianghe, Wang Jiabin, Bai Hua, Xiao Kaiyu, and Zhai Yongming.⁵³ Nearly all are on Cheng Guangwei's list of N-poets. However, Zang cites or analyzes none of their poems.

Aside from his fellow poets and poet-critics, Zang mentions a single regular critic, Xu Jingya, a major voice in the upsurge of avant-garde poetry in the 1980s.⁵⁴ As the predecessors of Individual Writing, Obscure Poetry and Third Generation Poetry, are both

⁴⁸ Wang and Sun 2000: 216.

⁴⁹ Wang and Sun 2000: 202.

⁵⁰ Yi Sha 2011: 55.

⁵¹ Wang and Sun 2000: 208, and 216 note 11.

⁵² Wang and Sun 2000: 203–210.

⁵³ Wang and Sun 2000: 205, 208, 209, and 211.

⁵⁴ Wang and Sun 2000: 202 & 216, note 2. More on the connection between the upsurge of avant-garde poetry and Xu Jingya, see chapter One of this study.

important subjects in that upsurge, Zang's mention of Xu further underlines his argument in regard to Individual Writing's genealogy as avant-garde poetry. Zang does not clearly argue for this genealogy of Individual Writing, but Tang's "Several Issues" can be seen as a positive response to this clue left by Zang.

Also, by noting Xu Jingya's usage of the term "modern poetry" and its relation to an alleged international consensus about this term, i.e. that it refers to a tradition in poetry that is widely seen as having originated with Charles Baudelaire, Zang implies an association of Individual Writing with the emergence of internationally canonized modernist literature.⁵⁵ After Ouyang's sprinkling of foreign thinkers' names in "After 1989," Zang's "Post-Obscure Poetry" asks its readers to think of N-poets' Individual Writing in the context of an international critical discourse. Thus, Zang locates Individual Writing not only in the history of contemporary Chinese poetry but also amid contemporary poetry worldwide.

Wang Jiixin's "Beyond Interpretation"

And Zang is not alone in this. Other N-poets also evaluate their poetry in an international framework. A key example is Wang Jiixin's 1997 essay, titled "Beyond Interpretation: A Discourse Analysis of Contemporary Poetics" 阐释之外：当代诗学的一种话语分析。⁵⁶ However, Wang (also) deals with another contemporary issue related to the perennial question of Chinese-foreign literary relations. Specifically, in the beginning of his essay, he poses a question to sinologists about their positionality and perspectives when commenting on Chinese literature. According to Wang, some sinologists basically have no idea of Chinese social realities, as the palpable context of the poetry on which they pronounce. Over the years, he argues, they have mostly focused on poetry with clear connotations of political resistance and overlooked the Chineseness in poetry that is produced by Individual Writing.⁵⁷ Otherwise, like the authors discussed above, Wang uses the notion of Individual Writing without providing any explanation. While there are, according to Wang, also sinologists who are capable of empathizing with the actual development of Chinese poetry and offer non-political interpretations, they may still

⁵⁵ Wang and Sun 2000: 216, note 3.

⁵⁶ Wang and Sun 2000: 278–288.

⁵⁷ Wang and Sun 2000: 278.

misread the elements that contribute to the Chineseness of this poetry; this lies “outside” the reach of their interpretation, because they are readers but not writers of Chinese poetry and have different cultural backgrounds.⁵⁸ In this regard, Wang feels the need to provide his own discourse analysis of contemporary poetics – speaking from his own experience of being a Chinese poet writing within China’s historical, social, and political contexts.

After the opening paragraphs, Wang moves on to explaining how poetry written in the contemporary should be read, or more specifically, how Individual Writing represents Chineseness and how it should be sustained in the domestic and international discursive field of contemporary poetry. To some degree, the sinologists appear to be instrumental for Wang in that they enable him to develop a voice that claims authority because it draws on “international” sources, so as to link the ever-contested notion of Chineseness to Individual Writing. Again, by criticizing regular critics, Wang, a self-identified representative poet of the 1990s,⁵⁹ refuses to fit his discussion into a well-developed theoretical framework. He presents, rather, a subjective observation of the 1990s poetry scene.

While making no mention of domestic regular critics, Wang draws supports from his fellow poet-critics. Like Zang Di, he tends to explain the artistry of Individual Writing – by invoking intentions and motivations behind his own poetry and that of his fellow poets. For clarification, he draws on essays by Xiao Kaiyu and Zang Di, a personal conversation with Sun Wenbo, and the intention behind his own poem “Ballad of Varykino ” 瓦雷金诺叙事曲.⁶⁰ Remarkably, the conversation with Sun Wenbo is about the Chinese discursive field, but Wang spends less than two lines to explain this idea, and does not acknowledge what is in fact a quotation from Sun Wenbo.⁶¹ Wang merely uses the idea to assert the importance of poetry’s discursive engagement with the conditions of Chinese society, a society that he calls globally unique.⁶² This rationale also underpins his opinions on Chinese poets in exile. In Wang’s opinion, Chinese poets in exile can only rely on their

⁵⁸ Wang and Sun 2000: 278–280.

⁵⁹ Details about this are provided in the following paragraphs.

⁶⁰ Wang and Sun 2000: 280, 283–285.

⁶¹ Wang and Sun 2000: 285.

⁶² Wang and Sun 2000: 286.

previous personal experiences living in the sociopolitical context of China to write poetry that can shine on the international stage.⁶³

In contrast to the exiles and the domestic contributors to Individual Writing, Wang finds fault with the so-called pure poetry of the late 1980s, citing Han Dong's 1988 essay "Three Secular Roles" 三个世俗角色 to question the feasibility of this poetics.⁶⁴ Wang suggests that in their desire for international renown, practitioners of so-called pure poetry willingly dissociated themselves from China's social context and strayed into a (spiritual, literary) vacuum. He believes this did not help Chinese poetry either domestically or internationally and that only those who transcend their personal experience and revive the relationship between poetry and society deserve the spotlight from literary critics worldwide. In support of his point, he points to poets Chen Dongdong, Sun Wenbo, Xi Chuan, Xiao Kaiyu, Zang Di, and Zhang Shuguang.⁶⁵ But he adds no more than a single poetry citation (from Chen Dongdong's "Comedy" 喜剧), without even citing one complete line.⁶⁶ Wang holds forth on poets' motivations and intentions for their writing to engage with Chinese society, stressing this point as if the actual poetry does not matter. Articulating 1990s Individual Writing as a rectification of the late 1980s "pure poetry" and hence deserving of international attention is Wang's perspective on the difference between the 1980s and the 1990s,⁶⁷ also highlighted by the essays by Ouyang Jianghe, Zang Di, Tang Xiaodu, and Chen Chao, discussed above.

Sun Wenbo's "Life: The Premise of Writing (Excerpt)"

In "Life: The Premise of Writing (Excerpt)" 生活：写作的前提（节选），⁶⁸ Sun Wenbo answers written questions posed by a moderator of the *Factory Director and Manager Daily* 厂长经理日报 in 1996. Like Wang Jiixin, Sun reveals a negative attitude toward sinologists. He insists that they know little about the discursive field of contemporary

⁶³ Wang and Sun 2000: 280.

⁶⁴ Wang and Sun 2000: 281.

⁶⁵ Wang and Sun 2000: 286.

⁶⁶ Wang and Sun 2000: 286.

⁶⁷ Wang and Sun 2000: 279–284.

⁶⁸ Wang and Sun 2000: 255–263.

Chinese poetry and therefore, they should not comment on it.⁶⁹ Sun's almost aggressive attitude is similar to how Wang starts his "Beyond Interpretation."

Aside from the discussion about contemporary Chinese poetry's situation in the international discursive field, the question posed by Sun's interviewer on the notion of Narrativity shows an outsider's reaction to this one among the N-poet-critics' chosen terms. The moderator appears to confuse Narrativity with narrative poetry 叙事诗 and connects Sun Wenbo's poems with narrative in fiction. In response to these associations, Sun Wenbo stresses that some poets, including himself, may have written poems that have a "narrative inclination" 叙事倾向 on the surface, but that these poems "share no similarity with narrative poems as we knew them" 和过去我们所看到的叙事诗没有一点共同的地方.⁷⁰ He also clarifies that "when in the process of writing these poems, I have never thought of providing a *story*" (emphasis added) 我个人在写作这些诗的过程中,从来没有想到要写出一个故事来.⁷¹ This reflects that Sun's usage of the notion of narrative inclination – or in Cheng Guangwei's rendition, Narrativity – deviates from the common sense of the term; and this makes it hard to follow for an outsider like Sun's interviewer. N-poet-critics and N-critics criticize those with other views and foreground their subjective experience, and their own literary-critical terminology creates confusion.

Terminological Obfuscation

Terminological obfuscation is also in evidence in Ouyang's idiosyncratic reflection on Middle-Age Writing; and Individual Writing and Intellectual Writing also fall victim to such obfuscation. Ouyang considers that Middle-Age Writing is "not about the issue of [middle] age but about issues of life, destiny, and the nature of work" 并非年龄问题,而是人生、命运、工作性质这类的问题,⁷² so in his thinking, Middle-Age Writing is not necessarily written by middle-aged poets. Similarly, in Zang Di's and Wang Jiaxin's essays, the label of Individual Writing is assigned to a specific group of poets, whose distinguishing features remain unclear; at any rate, Individual Writing is not produced by ordinary "individuals." As Ouyang also ties Individual Writing to Intellectual Writing by saying "the

⁶⁹ Wang and Sun 2000: 261.

⁷⁰ Wang and Sun 2000: 256–257.

⁷¹ Wang and Sun 2000: 259. Emphasis added.

⁷² Wang and Sun 2000: 184.

intellectual spirit revealed in poetry is always associated with the skeptical character of Individual Writing” 诗歌中的知识分子精神总是与具有怀疑特征的个人写作连在一起的,⁷³ the contributors to Individual Writing are granted an intellectual spirit – but not all individual poets with an intellectual spirit (in the generic sense, hence lowercase i-s in English) can be recognized as qualified contributors to Intellectual Writing. If we take a step back, what we see is that N-poet-critics gradually and collectively create a maze of fairly abstract and malleable terms for a particular kind of poetry and/or a particular group of poets they hold dear.

Inasmuch as N-poet-critics do elaborate these terms, this further exacerbates the terminological obfuscation. The notion of Individual Writing provides a good example. After Ouyang first discussed this, Zang Di draws on the development of China’s avant-garde poetry to contextualize Individual Writing, thus inserting Individual Writing into the historical development of contemporary Chinese poetry. When this terminology arrives in Wang Jiixin’s hands, “Chineseness” and “the Chinese discursive field” are added as further qualifications. As Zang draws on the history to only connote the avant-garde attributes of Individual Writing and Wang uses “Chineseness” and “the Chinese discursive field” like passing references, it appears that N-poet-critics are fond of appropriating common-sense terms for their own use without much in the way of explanation beyond offering up other terms; which go unexplained in their turn.

A key observation to make here is that in the end, the N-poet-critics’ terminology operates as little more than a kind of insiders’ jargon, an impression that is strengthened by the frequent “I” and “we” statements. As these tendencies are further accompanied by their criticism of regular critics, a closed value system for distinguishing *their* poetry written in the 1990s from 1980s poetry can be seen to emerge.

N-Poetry’s Inner Circle

Notably, in contrast to this terminological obfuscation, the corpus these terms refer to is remarkably precise. Although N-poet-critics rarely mention the actual names of anthologies or individual collections, several author names occur again and again. These include Chen Dongdong, Sun Wenbo, Xi Chuan, Xiao Kaiyu, Zang Di, Zhang Shuguang,

⁷³ Wang and Sun 2000: 184.

Wang Jiabin, Ouyang Jianghe, Bai Hua, Zhong Ming, and Zhai Yongming. And again, as noted before: all are identified as N-poets by Cheng Guangwei in *Portrait*, and most are among the essay contributors to *Memorandum*.⁷⁴ Thus, while N-poet-critics use insiders' jargon and make their critical writing inaccessible to outsiders, a modestly fluctuating, recurrent set of poet names helps to maintain the promise of coherence and unity.

N-poet-critics' emphasis on these recurrent names further prevents their closed value system from being overstretched by the regular critics, who adopt their terminology to depict the 1990s poetry scene in its entirety. A case in point is Tang Xiaodu's "Several Issues." Tang expands the scope of N-poetics by including other poets, such as Yu Jian, as its practitioners. This inclusion suggests the flexibility of N-poetics. However, Tang's association between Yu and Narrativity does not really explain either Yu's poetry or Narrativity – and more generally speaking, as N-poets are the initiators of a particular usage of the terms in question, their interpretations are fundamental to any elaboration. Thus, when inspired readers start from Tang's designation of Yu Jian's poetry and approach his work from the angle of Narrativity, they might well arrive at N-poet-critics' interpretations of the notion – and then *not* find Yu Jian. Vice versa, if some of these inspired readers look to Yu's poetry and poetics for a better understanding of Narrativity, they might end up confused or disappointed. Viewed thus, N-poet-critics' formulas for N-poetics might even embarrass their most devoted fans.

At the same time, the line-up of N-poet names can basically turn any critical writing into an elaboration of N-Poetry. "Three Trends" by Chen Chao is an example. Although Chen hardly draws on key notions in N-poetics, the poets he names are mostly N-poets, and the concepts Chen uses in discussing N-poets more or less automatically become a potential elaboration of N-poetics. The *Memorandum* editors' inclusion of his work attests to its potential in this sense. And quite aside from the terminology, the N-poets' names can still point readers to their critical writing on poetry written in the 1990s.

Thus, as readers take in the N-poets' critical writing, they have the N-poet-critics' closed value system unfolded in front of their eyes. This is highly effective for monopolizing the

⁷⁴ Bai Hua, Zhong Ming, and Zhai Yongming are not essay contributors, and Zhang Shuguang's contribution is in Section One, but it is also a piece explains his view on poetry written in the 1990s.

discourse on poetry written in the 1990s; and as I have shown, the process starts in the early years of the decade.

In addition, the effectiveness of such a closed value system begs the question: if not an actual *poetics*, then what is it that actually holds this group of poets together in the minds of the N-poet-critics? The answer to this question is not obvious from their writing. For what it is worth, we may find some clues if we look to their detractors, in the Popular camp. In Shen Haobo's essay "Let the Polemic Sink In," featured in the "Memorandum" section of the *1999 Yearbook* (and discussed in chapter Three), Shen observes that N-poets tend to gravitate toward the political centre, Beijing, and toward academia, and claims that these inclinations are opposite to many Popular poets' physical distance from the capital and what he sees as their non-conformism.⁷⁵ In all, the conspicuous lack of actual textual analysis and systematic analysis of individual poets' trajectories makes it difficult to pinpoint meaningful common poetic characteristics among the usual suspects eventually identified as N-poets; and it might lead one to think that personal allegiances and shared histories (such as publishing in particular journals) may matter a great deal after all.

Chen Dongdong's and Xi Chuan's Endorsement

In the critical writing that leads to the emergence of this closed value system, Chen Dongdong and Xi Chuan are the most frequently mentioned poets. The editors of *Memorandum* also include an essay by Chen Dongdong, titled "About Our Writing" 有关我们的写作,⁷⁶ first published in 1996, and two essays by Xi Chuan, titled "The 1990s and I" 1990年代与我 and "The Predicament of Writing and the Predicament of Criticism (Excerpt)" 写作处境与批评处境 (节选),⁷⁷ both first published in 1997. As highlighted in the titles, both Chen and Xi Chuan contemplate the relation of their writing to time from – again – the first-person perspective. Also, both Chen's "About Our Writing" and Xi Chuan's "The 1990s" stress the intent to bring everyday life into poetry-writing.⁷⁸ This recalls the essays by Ouyang Jianghe, Zang Di, Wang Jiixin, and Sun Wenbo discussed above. Additionally, when discussing the role of contemporary intellectuals in

⁷⁵ Yang 2000: 604–606.

⁷⁶ Wang and Sun 2000: 252–254.

⁷⁷ Wang and Sun 2000: 264–267.

⁷⁸ Wang and Sun 2000: 253–254 and 264–265.

“Predicament,” Xi Chuan expresses dissatisfaction with contemporary criticism. He believes that in the 1990s, poets are better at capturing the spirit of the times and an individual’s existence than professional critics.⁷⁹ This argument echoes Wang Jiabin, Ouyang Jianghe, Tang Xiaodu, and Chen Chao. Although Chen and Xi Chuan mention no specific poets in their essays and hence create no connection to the other N-poets’ critical writing, their positioning suffices to validate them as members of an inner circle of poets that speak the same language. Thus, Chen and Xi Chuan’s essays constitute clear endorsements of the other N-poet-critics.

Platforms for an Inner Logic

According to *Memorandum*, Xi Chuan’s “Predicament” was originally published in 1997 in a collection of scholarly essays titled *Academic Thought Review (Volume One)* 学术思想评论（第一辑）.⁸⁰ However, in this book, the essay is titled “The Predicament of Living and the Predicament of Writing” 生存处境与写作处境.⁸¹ Intriguingly, in its excerpted form in *Memorandum*, not only was its title changed, but it was expanded. Besides, in *Academic Thought Review*, Xi Chuan’s essay opens a section on poetry, preceding five other essays. The other contributors are Xiao Kaiyu, Ouyang Jianghe, Wang Jiabin, Tang Xiaodu, and Cheng Guangwei, all of whom are affiliated with N-Poetry.⁸² Tang’s essay is about May Fourth poetry, but the others either establish a connection with or directly concern poetry written in the 1990s. This shows that at this time, N-poet-critics and N-critics have some considerable visibility in academic discourse on poetry: crucially, without confining themselves to commenting on N-Poetry only, and also extending to other texts. *Academic Thought Review* is not the only example. Others are discussed below.

Academic Thought Review (Volume One)

Xi Chuan’s “Predicament” is not the only essay in *Memorandum* that comes from *Academic Thought Review*. The other is the opening essay of “Section Two” in *Memorandum*, which is Cheng Guangwei’s “N-Poetry / Poetry Written in the 1990s:

⁷⁹ Wang and Sun 2000: 224.

⁸⁰ Wang and Sun 2000: 229.

⁸¹ Zhao and He 1997: 180.

⁸² Zhao and He 1997: 200–272.

Naming in Another Sense” 九十年代诗歌：另一意义的命名。⁸³ According to the publishing record of this piece provided in *Memorandum*, editors Wang and Sun used a version that was published in 1997 in the literary journal *Mountain Flowers* 山花;⁸⁴ in this case, the two versions are almost identical.

Remarkably, in this essay Cheng recognizes Yu Jian as one of the poets who have made major contributions to the transformation of poetry from the 1980s to the 1990s. However, Yu is surrounded by N-poets Zhang Shuguang, Bai Hua, Xi Chuan, Zhai Yongming, Chen Dongdong, Sun Wenbo, Xiao Kaiyu, and Huang Canran; and his presence is thus somehow absorbed into N-poetics.⁸⁵ Besides, this is the only time that Yu appears in Cheng's essay, and he appears in a very isolated manner; this is just like his single appearance in Chen Jun's "Outline,"⁸⁶ discussed above. Cheng, like his fellow contributors to N-poetics, incorporates the essential three themes of N-Poetry: differentiating the 1990s from the 1980s,⁸⁷ criticizing other critics,⁸⁸ and identifying N-poets as the representatives of poetry written in the 1990s.⁸⁹ His essay looks like a rehearsal for his designation of N-Poetry in the introduction to *Portrait*.

The same themes can be detected in Xiao Kaiyu's contribution to *Academic Thought Review*, titled "Poetry of the Nineties: Ambition, Characteristic, and Sources" 九十年代诗歌：抱负、特征和资料。⁹⁰ His approach calls to mind Zang Di's approach in "Post-Obscure Poetry" but is less well organized. Additionally, Xiao makes a self-referential remark about his 1989 proposition of "Middle-Age Writing," bringing his 1980s idea back into the discussion of poetry written the 1990s.⁹¹

Similar self-references also feature in essays by Ouyang Jianghe and Wang Jiabin in *Academic Thought Review*. Ouyang's "The Sublimation of Contemporary Poetry and Its Limitations" 当代诗的升华及其限度 and Wang's "Orpheus Still Sings" 奥尔弗斯仍在歌唱

⁸³ Zhao and He 1997: 200–214.

⁸⁴ Wang and Sun 2000: 179.

⁸⁵ Zhao and He 1997: 210–213.

⁸⁶ Wang and Sun 2000: 404.

⁸⁷ Zhao and He 1997: 203.

⁸⁸ Zhao and He 1997: 213.

⁸⁹ Zhao and He 1997: 210.

⁹⁰ Zhao and He 1997: 215–234.

⁹¹ Zhao and He 1997: 226.

do not directly address the concept of N-Poetry/poetry written in the 1990s.⁹² However, the contours of the concept are in fact discernible. Ouyang Jianghe makes references to Individual Writing, unsurprisingly without explaining what this is.⁹³ Wang Jiabin expresses his affinity with the writings of Foucault and Yeats and how their works have refreshed his view on poetry. Regardless of the subject of Wang's essay, the intimate tone he adopts arguably turns it into a guided tour through his own poetics, and this holds for Ouyang as well. Again, the first-person perspective coupled with particular terminology feeds into an emergent N-poetics. This is evidenced by Hong Zicheng's mention of Wang's "Orpheus" in "On the Subject of Poetry Written in the 1990s" 关于 90 年代诗歌的话题 and Jiang Tao's mention of Ouyang Jianghe's "The Sublimation" in his "Contemporary Poetry in Narration" 叙述中的当代诗歌,⁹⁴ two pieces of critical writing that are also included in "Section Two" of *Memorandum*.

The Zhengzhou University Journal

Hong's contribution to "On the Subject of Poetry Written in the 1990s" comes from a written conversation or "brushtalk" (笔谈) published in early 1998 in the *Zhengzhou University Journal* 郑州大学学报. Three parts of this appear in "Section Two" of *Memorandum*, by Hong, Xie Mian, and Zang Di.⁹⁵ In the publication details, the editors note that in addition to Xie, Hong, and Zang, there were another six participants in the conversation: Cheng Guangwei, Ouyang Jianghe, Geng Zhanchun, Xi Du, Sun Wenbo, and Zhou Zan.⁹⁶ Clearly, N-poet-critics and N-critics constitute the overwhelming majority. If Zhou Zan is not a member of the core "line-up", minimally she is not considered an antagonist of N-Poetry, as she is a contributor to "Section One" of *Memorandum*.

Hong's, Xie's, and Zang's pieces show different attitudes toward poetry written in the 1990s. They exhibit Hong Zicheng's uneasiness, Xie Mian's disappointment, and Zang Di's confidence in regard to poetry written in the 1990s; of course, different from Hong and Xie – both highly regarded, senior professors of a much older generation – Zang is himself

⁹² Zhao and He 1997: 235–251 and 252–261.

⁹³ Zhao and He 1997: 236, 240, 245, and 247.

⁹⁴ Wang and Sun 2000: 244, 293, and 297.

⁹⁵ Wang and Sun 2000: 241–247.

⁹⁶ Wang and Sun 2000: 247.

among the authors of this poetry. Notably, he does not specify his relation with N-Poetry or mention any poets by name. Therefore, when read in isolation, his claim can be liberally interpreted. However, in the context of *Memorandum*, readers will readily identify the presence of N-Poetry in his remark. Unlike Zang, Xie Mian, one of the earliest to voice their support for Obscure Poetry in the early 1980s, is less than excited about the 1990s. He sees the end of the 1980s as the end of a bright page in the development of contemporary Chinese poetry.⁹⁷ He worries that the 1990s colloquialization 口语化, individualization 个人化, and privatization 私人性的 poetry will ruin the future of poetry.⁹⁸ However, Xie offers no examples of poetry or poets to support his argument, and his mention of colloquialization could allow N-poets to bypass the criticism, as this is not at all a feature they are normally associated with.

Whereas Xie comments on poetry, Hong comments on criticism, and he challenges Xie's views in certain respects. Hong points out that many weaknesses of the 1980s poetics have been addressed in essays about poetry by "earnest and serious poets" 严肃、郑重的诗人.⁹⁹ However, he feels that many critics have ignored this development and that their writing on the 1990s is not grounded in reliable sources. Although he does not identify these "earnest and serious poets," Hong urges his fellow critics to read reliable essays before they begin writing their criticism. These essays include Xi Chuan's "The Predicament," Ouyang Jianghe's "After 1989," Wang Jiaxin's "Orpheus" and "Beyond Interpretation", Chen Dongdong's "About Our Writing," Zang Di's "Post-Obscure Poetry," and Geng Zhanchun's "Change the World and Change Language" 改变世界与改变语言, all associated with N-Poetry.¹⁰⁰ This shows that Hong himself, as co-author of the first history of contemporary Chinese poetry,¹⁰¹ also relies on the essays he has singled out for praise in order to prepare himself for engaging with the subtlety, complexity, and depth of poetry written in the 1990s.¹⁰² As such, it would appear that *Memorandum* invokes Hong

⁹⁷ Wang and Sun 2000: 242.

⁹⁸ Wang and Sun 2000: 242–243.

⁹⁹ Wang and Sun 2000: 244.

¹⁰⁰ Wang and Sun 2000: 244.

¹⁰¹ Hong and Liu 1993.

¹⁰² Wang and Sun 2000: 245.

Zicheng's vast authority as a senior scholar both to highlight N-poet-critics' ability of writing literary criticism and to validate their own selection criteria for *Memorandum*.

The only essay mentioned by Hong that was not discussed above is Geng Zhanchun's. As for Geng, rather than "Change the World," *Memorandum* editors Wang and Sun selected another one of his essays, titled "An Inner Polemic about Poetics and Sociology" 一场诗学与社会学的内心争论.¹⁰³ Geng quotes extensively from Theodor Adorno to elaborate on his feelings about today's world and his state of mind; rarely does he mention Chinese thinkers or poets. However, the context of *Memorandum* still implicitly mobilizes him for supporting the cause. In Chen Jun's "Outline," Geng is recognized as an N-critic.¹⁰⁴ Also, Chen cites this essay by Geng to explain the entry called "ironic consciousness and a comic spirit," albeit without specifying the title of his essay.¹⁰⁵ Specifically, Geng indicates that the conflicts between his inner and outer worlds lead him to value what ironic intent and a comic spirit have given contemporary poetry, and how poets' critical thinking and imagination can contribute to individual life in present-day marketized Chinese society.¹⁰⁶ The inclusion of this essay of Geng's in *Memorandum* resonates with Hong Zicheng's identification of "reliable essays" by the contributors to N-poetics and supports Chen's "Outline." And with the help of Geng's essay, a connection between Individual Writing and ironic intent and a comic spirit is built. All this reflects the clever way in which Wang Jiaxin and Sun Wenbo have compiled their *Memorandum*.

The Peking University Graduate Student Journal

Another essay included in "Section Two" of *Memorandum*, Hu Xudong's "Between the 'Departed Spirit' and 'the Seller of Darkness – On the Intellectual-Individual Writing of Poetry in the 1990s' 在“亡灵”与“出卖黑暗的人”之间——关于 90 年代知识分子个人诗歌写作,"¹⁰⁷ points to another academic forum on poetry that is dominated by N-poet-critics. As with some of the other texts discussed here, the essay's publishing history matters. Hu's essay was originally published in a section on "Dialogue on Poetry Writing

¹⁰³ Wang and Sun 2000: 268–277.

¹⁰⁴ Wang and Sun 2000: 400.

¹⁰⁵ Wang and Sun 2000: 401.

¹⁰⁶ Wang and Sun 2000: 272–277.

¹⁰⁷ Wang and Sun 2000: 298–310.

in the 90s” 关于 90 年代诗歌写作的对话 in the *Peking University Graduate Students Journal* 北京大学研究生学刊, in 1997.¹⁰⁸ Notably, the same special column also features Jiang Tao, Ouyang Jianghe, Sun Wenbo, Zhou Zan, and Mu Qing 穆青, with N-poets and N-critics in the majority.

Hu Xudong, Jiang Tao, and Xi Du

As Hu Xudong embeds “Intellectual-Individual Writing” in the title of his essay, it is unsurprising that N-poet-critics’ critical writing constitutes his main source.¹⁰⁹ At this point, this approach to poetry written in the 1990s looks conventional if not simply “normal”. The same thing holds for Jiang Tao’s and Xi Du’s respective contribution to “Section Two” in *Memorandum*, namely “Contemporary Poetry in Narration” and “Historical Consciousness and Poetry Writing in the 1990s” 历史意识与 90 年代诗歌写作.¹¹⁰ Hu and Xi Du also assert the regular critics’ inability to appreciate N-Poetry.¹¹¹ Different from Ouyang Jianghe, Zang Di, Wang Jiabin, Sun Wenbo, Chen Dongdong, and Xi Chuan, Hu, Jiang, and Xi Du adopt a third-person perspective, referring to N-poets as “they”. They also draw much less on personal experiences and feelings in elaborating their opinions. Neither do they position themselves as a contributor to the poetry they are discussing.

Notably, this shift in perspective and position suggest that N-Poetry is by now much more than an insiders’ thing, and the jargon has expanded beyond the inner circle.

Several Single-Author Poetry Collection Series

The final two essays featured in “Section Two” of *Memorandum* reveal the dominance of N-poets in not only academic discourse on poetry but also in multiple-author anthologies and several series of single-author collections published in 1997 and 1998. One of these essays is Cheng Guangwei’s introduction to *Portrait*. As mentioned in Preface, Cheng appropriates the chronological notion of “poetry of the 1990s” as a critical category for a group of poets who are referred to as N-poets in this research, and includes more poems

¹⁰⁸ Hu 1997.

¹⁰⁹ Wang and Sun 2000: 309–310.

¹¹⁰ Wang and Sun 2000: 289–297 and 324–329.

¹¹¹ Wang and Sun 2000: 307–308, 328–329.

by his favorite poets than by others in the anthology, thus asserting the dominance of N-Poetry.

The final essay in “Section Two” is the preface to the series of single-author poetry collections titled *Chinese Poetry of the 1990s* 90年代中国诗歌, written by the series’ chief editor, Hong Zicheng, who is also one of the editors of *Literature of the Nineties* series in which Cheng Guangwei’s *Portrait* appeared, and whose “brushtalk” contributions we have just reviewed. The *Chinese Poetry of the 1990s* series was published in 1998, a few months after the publication of *Portrait*, and consists of six single-author poetry collections, by Zhang Shuguang, Zhang Zao, Sun Wenbo, Zang Di, Xi Du, and Huang Canran¹¹² – again, all designated by Cheng as N-poets.

And this is not the only time that a full book series dedicated to poetry written in the 1990s is monopolized by N-Poetry. As Wang Jiabin’s “Annals” shows, the same thing happened with two other series of single-author poetry collections. The *Stand Fast in the Present Poetry Series* 坚守现在诗系 was published in early 1997, and is said by Wang to be the first poetry series that reflects the achievements of poetry written in the 1990s.¹¹³ It is in six volumes, by Xiao Kaiyu, Sun Wenbo, Xi Chuan, Ouyang Jianghe, Chen Dongdong, and Zhai Yongming.¹¹⁴ Another series appeared as *Self-Anthologies of Late Twentieth-Century Chinese Poets* 20世纪末中国诗人自选集, with books by Wang Jiabin, Ouyang Jianghe, Xi Chuan, and Chen Dongdong. Notably, Ouyang Jianghe, Xi Chuan, and Chen Dongdong contributed to both the *Stand Fast* and the *Self-Anthologies* series.

These three series have ambitious titles, but they run to only four or six volumes. The implication is clear: the message is that Chinese poetry of the late twentieth century can be represented by a small number of poets. Those who stand out in this context are poets Zhang Suguang, Zhang Zao, Sun Wenbo, Zang Di, Xi Du, Huang Canran, Xiao Kaiyu, Xi Chuan, Ouyang Jianghe, Chen Dongdong, Zhai Yongming, and Wang Jiabin, all N-poets. As such, Cheng Guangwei’s compilation of, and introduction to, *Portrait* can also be considered as a powerful reinforcement of an earlier message delivered by these poetry series.

¹¹² Wang and Sun 2000: 386.

¹¹³ Wang and Sun 2000: 381.

¹¹⁴ Wang and Sun 2000: 381.

This message can be interpreted further when read in parallel with the trajectories of N-poet-critics as outlined above. From this perspective, starting from the early 1990s, the N-poet-critics were arguably laying the ground for themselves and their fellow poets to be recognized as the *representative* poets of the decade (quite aside from the question of how consciously and deliberately this operation was undertaken). Of the twelve poets listed in the preceding paragraph, two-thirds are N-poet-critics. Throughout the 1990s, they not only published their poetry but also provided critical guidance on how to read their fellow N-poets' and their own poetry, monopolizing the discourse to a considerable degree. In this effort they were supported by academics and publishers alike.

IV. The Constrained Popular Proponents

Two essays of "Section Two" of *Memorandum* remain to be discussed. One is Li Zhensheng's "Returning to the Multiple Facets of Poetics" 回复诗性的众多向度,¹¹⁵ and the other is Wang Guangming's "The Poetry of Individual Commitment" 个体承担的诗歌.¹¹⁶ Both were published after the outbreak of the Polemic, in 1999. As the editors of *Memorandum* provide many N-poets' first-person observations to exhibit the establishment of N-Poetry in the years leading up to the Polemic, these two pieces might look like mere additions to the N-poets' critical writing. However, in regard to the development of the Popular Standpoint, to which we now return, Wang's "The Poetry" is noteworthy. This essay also appears in the "Poetry Theory" section in the *1999 Yearbook*, so one wonders if Wang's opinion can serve two contesting propositions in the Polemic.

The Untraceable Popular Standpoint

It turns out that Wang's opinion does not sustain both propositions, but the *Yearbooks'* editors, members of the Popular camp, have compromised. Indeed, in Wang's essay, the Popular Standpoint is not mentioned at all. Two-thirds of the essay is spent on discussing how Xi Chuan's poetry is unique for the 1980s and how Xi Chuan transforms his poetics in the 1990s in response to a changing Chinese society. Besides, Wang cites Xi Chuan's essay "The 1990s and I" and Zang Di's "Post-Obscure Poetry" to support his observation

¹¹⁵ Wang and Sun 2000: 316–323.

¹¹⁶ Wang and Sun 2000: 248–251.

of the distinctive features of Xi Chuan's poetry in the 1980s and 1990s. When such references and approach are considered, the appearance of "The Poetry" in *Memorandum* is predictable. In turn, this predictability makes its appearance in the "Poetry Theory" of the 1999 *Yearbook* intriguing. Wang does mention Yu Jian, but Yu is not considered under the Popular Standpoint but under the poetics proposed by N-poets. In other words, the proponents of the Popular Standpoint allow its leading proponent to be considered as a contributor to a rival poetics. If anything, the inclusion of Wang Guangming's essay in the 1999 *Yearbook* shows that the proponents of the Popular Standpoint are no match for the N-poets when it comes to discursive and editorial sophistication. This observation is further confirmed by the critical essays in the "Poetry Theory" sections of the two editions of the *Yearbooks* by the above-mentioned quasi-Popular poet-critics, namely Yu Jian, Han Dong, Duoduo, Shen Haobo, and Huang Canran.

Duoduo's Depiction of the 1970s Poetry Scene

Just like Wang Guangming's, most other essays in the "Poetry Theory" sections were published after 1998. One of the exceptions is Duoduo's "1972-1978: The Buried Chinese Poets" 1972-1978 被埋葬的中国诗人.¹¹⁷ It was first published in 1988¹¹⁸ and is the oldest publication in the two "Poetry Theory" sections. For the period named in the title, Duoduo reflects on underground poetry during the Cultural Revolution. Both the publication details and the title indicate that the essay cannot address the Popular Standpoint of the 1990s; as such, its inclusion strikes one as anachronistic. In fact, Duoduo's essay shows a considerable distance from the world of the 1990s and the Popular Standpoint. Why do the editors include this piece? The explanation may lie in Yu Jian's assertion that the underground poetry movement of the 1970s was a predecessor of the Popular Standpoint, which would make the inclusion of Duoduo's essay an implicit claim to his endorsement.

Huang Canran's Seeming Agreement

A closer association appears to exist between Huang Canran's "In the Shadow of Two Traditions" 在两大传统的阴影下 and Yu Jian's proposition of the Popular Standpoint, but still its inclusion makes Huang look like a poet-critic dragged in by the editors to support

¹¹⁷ Yang 1999: 469–474.

¹¹⁸ Hong and Liu 2005: 181.

their cause, just like Duoduo.¹¹⁹ The appearance in the “Poetry Theory” section of the *1999 Yearbook* appears to be the first time that Huang’s “In the Shadow” was actually published.¹²⁰ In this essay, Huang focuses on how contemporary poets compose their poetry, and the role in this process of influences from classical Chinese poetry and foreign modernist poetry in Chinese translation. Notably, Yu Jian in his proposition also pays attention to these sources of influence on contemporary Chinese poetry. Huang mentions the concepts of the Popular and Popular Poetry 民间诗歌, but he uses them only to explain the origin of classical Chinese poetry.¹²¹ Like Yu Jian, Huang also mentions the importance of vernacular language in the development of contemporary poetry.¹²² Whereas Yu associates the colloquial language with the vernacular language that was promoted by the proponents of the 1919 May Fourth Movement, Huang uses the association between vernacular language and May Fourth to bring in a discussion of the Chinese translation of foreign modernist poetry. Yu mobilizes vernacular language and the May Fourth Movement in the service of the Popular Standpoint, whereas Huang pays more attention to how contemporary poets can draw on not only classical Chinese poetry and modernist Chinese poetry but also Chinese translations of modernist poetry from overseas (high-level proficiency in foreign languages was still relatively rare at the time).¹²³ Huang’s essay and Yu’s proposition occasionally intersect, but they hardly say the same thing.

Huang observes an interrelation among poetry, social context, and creativity, and his observation echoes the propositions of both N-Poetry and the Popular Standpoint. However, Huang aligns himself with neither. He does not touch on the Popular Standpoint, N-Poetry, or poetry written in the 1990s. Moreover, he mentions no poets from either group. The editors of the *1999 Yearbook* may have valued the resemblance between Huang Canran’s “In the Shadows” and Yu Jian’s proposition of the Popular Standpoint, but Huang’s attitude as reflected in this essay suggests that he does not care about being designated as belonging to either party. The inclusion of his work in the *Yearbook* does not strengthen the Popular Standpoint.

¹¹⁹ Yang 2000: 414–437.

¹²⁰ Yang 2000: 650.

¹²¹ Yang 2000: 414–418.

¹²² Yang 2000: 418–423.

¹²³ Yang 2000: 423–434.

Shen Haobo's Indifference

The essay of Shen Haobo selected for inclusion in the *1999 Yearbook* further supports this hypothesis. Shen's essay, "Current Possibilities of Post-Colloquial Writing" 后口语写作在当下的可能性,¹²⁴ had not been published before, just like Huang Canran's "In the Shadows."¹²⁵ Although Shen says that new blood of colloquial writing "spreads among the Popular" 散落于民间各处,¹²⁶ he accommodates only what he calls post-colloquial writing of the 1990s. This is different from Yu Jian's identification of the colloquial language as a distinctive feature of the Popular Standpoint, and it can even be said to compete with it. What's more, Shen establishes only a weak connection between post-colloquial writing and the Popular Standpoint. That his essay was included in the *1999 Yearbook* suggests yet again that the editors have difficulty in finding contributions by poet-critics that actually support their cause.

Perhaps they appreciated the appeal of Shen Haobo's use of first-person statements to specify his advocacy for colloquial poetry and to criticize N-poet-critics and N-critics. And perhaps they agreed with Shen on how colloquial language reflects liveliness. However, according to Shen, the colloquial poetry that was developed by Yu Jian, Han Dong, and the other Third Generation poets in the 1980s was still an outcome of the pre-colloquial period 前口语时期.¹²⁷ Shen stresses Yu's contribution to the development of the post-colloquial writing of the 1990s – but post-colloquial writing is not part of Yu's proposition of the Popular Standpoint. Shen Haobo may somehow be seen to support the Popular Standpoint in spirit, but he emphasizes very different things from Yu.¹²⁸

Yu Jian's Undermining of the Popular Standpoint

Yu Jian's essay in the "Poetry Theory" section of the *1998 Yearbook* does not make things any better. The essay "The Hard and Soft of the Tongue of Poetry: On Two Different Directions in the Language of Contemporary Poetry" 诗歌之舌的硬与软——关于当代诗歌的两类语言向度¹²⁹ was published in early 1998 in the journal *Poetry Exploration* 诗探

¹²⁴ Yang 2000: 479–488.

¹²⁵ Yang 2000: 650.

¹²⁶ Yang 2000: 480.

¹²⁷ Yang 2000: 480.

¹²⁸ Yang 2000: 479–480.

¹²⁹ Yang 1999: 451–468.

索,¹³⁰ one month after the publication of *Portrait*. An earlier version of this essay was published in 1997, under the title “The Hard and Soft of the Tongue of Poetry : A Draft of Poetical Research On Two Different Directions in the Language of Contemporary Poetry” 诗歌之舌的硬与软——诗歌研究草案：关于当代诗歌的两类语言向度, in Yu Jian’s *Brown Notebook* 棕皮手记,¹³¹ a collection of essays written since the late 1980s. Yu advocates for what he calls the soft of the tongue of poetry, meaning colloquial language and its connotations, such as being non-governmental, non-ideological, intuitive, secular, lively, and authentic.¹³² Notably, Yu does not yet associate colloquial language and all its connotations with the Popular or the Popular Standpoint; this would only become central to the Popular Standpoint in early 1999. Throughout Yu’s 1998 essay, the term the “Popular” is rarely used, and there is not even a passing reference to “the Popular” and “the Popular Standpoint” as terms of literary criticism.

Yu’s “The Hard and the Soft” in many ways foreshadows his later proposition of the Popular Standpoint, but the inconsistency in terms and their connotations makes the argument less effective, and shows, in retrospect, the extent to which the creation of the Popular Standpoint was a *reactive* affair to push back against N-Poetry rather than an organic development. As such, inasmuch as the “Poetry Theory” section of the *1998 Yearbook* is meant to bolster the Popular Standpoint, even Yu’s own essay is arguably off-topic.

Terminology is not the only problem. For one thing, Yu Jian most often cites the 1980s to explain what he means by the soft of the tongue of poetry. He uses many poems from the 1980s to illustrate his observation of colloquial language, by Han Dong, Lü De’an, Zhai Yongming, Yang Li 杨黎, and Lu Yimin 陆忆敏.¹³³ The question of *when* this poetry happened does not necessarily undermine Yu’s observations of colloquial language in contemporary Chinese poetry at large, but it becomes problematic when considering his essay in light of the issues surrounding poetry written in the 1990s, and Yu does not anchor

¹³⁰ Wang and Sun 2000: 386.

¹³¹ Yu 1997: 137–151.

¹³² Yang 1999: 462–468.

¹³³ Yang 1999: 465 and 467.

his argument in this discourse. The essay's appearance in the *1998 Yearbook* keeps it visible, but no more than that.

Yu Jian also creates a contradiction within the *1998 Yearbook* by positioning Bei Dao differently in "The Hard and the Soft" and in his prefatory essay to the *1998 Yearbook*. As discussed before, especially in chapter Two, Yu in the prefatory essay relies on an unsubstantiated theory of colloquial language to claim the political independence of the Popular Standpoint. Besides, to elaborate such political independence, Yu ties poetry in the unofficial journal *Today* by Bei Dao, Duoduo, and others together with the Popular Standpoint; and as discussed in chapter Two, this implies that political independence is by no means the exclusive domain of colloquial language (which neither Bei Dao nor Duoduo can be said to employ in their work). This fundamental flaw in the proposition of the Popular Standpoint marks Yu's sudden, dramatic shift in attitude toward the poetry in *Today* between the publication of this 1998 essay on colloquial language and the prefatory essay to the *1998 Yearbook*. While in the prefatory essay, Yu identifies the political independence of Bei Dao's and others' poetry in *Today*, in the 1998 essay he associates the poetry and poetics of Bei Dao with Mao Zedong's literary ideology.¹³⁴ Incidentally, Yu also works the poetry and poetics of Ouyang Jianghe, Xi Chuan, and Wang Jiixin into this association. Between the covers of the *1998 Yearbook*, in terms of "literary politics," Bei Dao's poetry published in *Today* is moved from one end of the spectrum to the other. As Yu Jian is one of the leading proponents of the Popular Standpoint, this contradiction casts doubts not only on the validity of the Popular Standpoint but also on the proponents' strategy for supporting the Popular Standpoint in relevant, coherent, and effective ways.

A Shortage of Materials

All this might simply suggest that the *Yearbook* editors cannot afford to care about whether the selected essays can strengthen the Popular Standpoint. They may have had difficulty finding essays that were particularly relevant and had in fact appeared earlier, before the Polemic. And indeed, the record shows that few poets of the Popular Standpoint had been theoretically active and vocal before the Polemic, in regard to the issues surrounding poetry written in the 1990s or in regard to the developments in the 1980s. As

¹³⁴ Yang 1999: 451–462.

we have seen in chapter Three, this did not change after the outbreak of the Polemic. Few Popular voices bother giving full attention to theorizing the Popular Standpoint as a literary-critical category even during the Polemic.

Indeed, even Yu Jian's advocacy of the Popular Standpoint truly emerges only after the outbreak of the Polemic. Yu Jian's 1997 *Brown Notebook* explains this trajectory. Yu's *Brown Notebook* is also one of the titles in the *Poets' Essays Book Series* 诗人随想文丛, and Yu is the only poet of the Popular Standpoint to contribute to this series. By contrast, its editors, Zong Renfa 宗仁发 and Cen Jie 岑杰, include works by five N-poets: Xi Chuan, Chen Dongdong, Zhong Ming, Zhai Yongming, and Wang Jiabin.¹³⁵ Just like the N-poet-critics discussed above, Yu Jian does not hesitate to speak as "I" and "we" to frame his observations about the development of contemporary Chinese poetry and society as well as his reflection on a poet's responsibility to society. In several essays, Yu Jian also expresses his appreciation for foreign writers and thinkers. And occasionally, he explains how he interacts with and observes the world, providing a glimpse of his poetics. However, Yu Jian's essays hardly create connections between these ideas and the notion of the Popular Standpoint.

Notably, *Brown Notebook* scarcely mentions the Popular Standpoint. Yu occasionally provides observations on poetry written in the 1990s but does not organize them into a category called the Popular Standpoint. He may be the leading proponent of the Popular Standpoint in the Polemic, but it is unclear if before the Polemic, he had thought of it in this sense at all.

Han Dong's Expulsion of Yu Jian

Han Dong's "On the Popular," first published in late 1999 as the introduction to He Xiaozhu's 何小竹 compilation of *Selected Chinese Poems of 1999* 1999 中国诗年选, is perhaps the most relevant piece to the Popular Standpoint. Han Dong identifies several poets of the Popular Standpoint in this essay, but now, strangely, Yu Jian is not among them (allegedly, this may have been to do with a personal conflict between Han and Yu;¹³⁶ but this does not affect the argument made in these pages, which is based on textual

¹³⁵ Wang and Sun 2000: 383.

¹³⁶ Van Crevel 2008: 365–397.

analysis, and I mention it only to acknowledge Yu-and-Han's high-profile collision). Thus, the *Yearbook* editors selected an essay that discusses the Popular Standpoint but leaves out its leading proponent.

This reconfirms the impressions laid out above about the incoherence and the ineffectiveness of the construction of the Popular Standpoint. It does not necessarily mean that none of the essays discussed here can bolster the Popular Standpoint; but it does mean that after reading the twenty-three essays in the "Poetry Theory" sections provided by the proponents of the Popular Standpoint, readers can only find that the Popular Standpoint is a literary-critical category that has appeared abruptly and is not traceable to the preceding years. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the Popular Standpoint was only invented for the publication of the *1998 Yearbook*, in February 1999.

V. Conclusion

In the course of the 1990s, between the contentions put forward by the proponents of N-Poetry and the Popular Standpoint, N-poet-critics' continuous elaboration on N-poetics offers a striking contrast with the absence of anything like a critical discourse leading up to the Popular Standpoint. This helps to explain previous 21st-century scholars' near-disregard of the Popular Standpoint and their overwhelming engagement with N-Poetry. As they research poetry written in the 1990s, the Polemic is on all these scholars' minds, and their work is, perhaps understandably, powerfully drawn to the four books we have reviewed so extensively here, as landmark publications that are easy to associate with the Polemic. As a result, inasmuch as they accept the N-poet-critics' criticism of the "regular" critics and fail to discern N-Poetry's closed value system, 21st-century scholarship can easily be absorbed by, perhaps indeed coopted by, representations made by voices who themselves were very much party to the conflictious dynamic that is under scrutiny.

However, this is not the first time that the N-poets have dominated academic discourse, or minimally profoundly affected it in their own interests, whether or not consciously so. The N-poets' critical writing that was eventually compiled in "Section Two" of *Memorandum* was already widely accepted in Chinese academia when it first appeared in the mid-1990s, dominated the discussion at the time, and has wielded its influence ever since. Cheng Guangwei's designation of the N-poets constitutes a high point of the

influence of this system. It is in this light that Yu Jian's attack on the N-poets and Cheng's designation of them as such becomes meaningful. Yu's highly debatable and sometimes chaotic argumentation does not strengthen his case,¹³⁷ but his motivation in resisting the influence of N-Poetry props up his determination to enter the discourse, by sheer (discursive) force if need be. Indeed, a similar, reactive motivation appears to be a consistent thread that runs through most contentions of the Polemic by the proponents and sympathizers of the Popular Standpoint. Nevertheless, Yu-and-company's inability to produce coherent and convincing arguments in the Polemic undermines their own efforts and gives N-poet-critics yet another opportunity to put the rhetoric of the critical writing they have developed throughout the 1990s on full display.

In closing, then, the N-poets' dominance in the discourse on poetry written in the 1990s can be clearly explained – and, as a result, the ways in which they have been portrayed in research on this poetry. I hope my analysis will help future readers to avoid being sucked into the N-poet-critics' closed value system and to restore diversity and creativity in the representation of a period that was much richer and more pluriform than has been acknowledged in critical discourse to date. The Popular camp had a point; it's just that they didn't make it very effectively. If we can draw one lesson from the Polemic, it should be that a multidimensional perspective will bring us closer to a reliable understanding of contemporary Chinese poetry.

¹³⁷ For details, see chapter Three of this study.

