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The making of Chinese poetry of the nineties

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Summary

The late 1990s saw the emergence on the Chinese poetry scene of a phenomenon called “Poetry of the Nineties” (九十年代诗歌). This happened before the decade in question had reached its end. Different from what one might expect, the expression does not denote a simple calendar chronology – as in poetry written in the 1990s – but instead points to a literary-critical category, and more specifically to a particular poetics and a network of associated authors and critics. This discrepancy of calendar chronology and literary criticism offers a point of entry into a pivotal moment in critical discourse on contemporary Chinese poetry. Pivotal as it may be, this moment has remained underresearched to date, especially as regards its history, which goes back to the 1980s, and as regards its consequences, which continue to affect scholarship today. The present study addresses this blind spot by asking: What does “Poetry of the Nineties” signify, to whom, and to what effect? It engages with this question by investigating how poetry written in the 1990s is represented in 21st-century Chinese scholarship, and how this representation can be explained.

The aforesaid pivotal moment is known as the Popular-Intellectual Polemic (sometimes also referred to as the Panfeng Polemic), which happened in 1998-2000. The Polemic was and remains a controversial event in literary history. But controversiality is not the only reason for this study to investigate the notion of “Poetry of the Nineties”. The status of the Polemic’s leading participants is another. Many members of the rival camps of the Polemic – the Popular camp and the Intellectual camp – had earned their epithet of “avant-garde” (先锋) poets as early as the mid-1980s. Then, the notion of the avant-garde entered poetry in the People’s Republic of China in new ways, to categorize those who were active outside the official, state-sanctioned poetry scene. As such, that the authors in question were involved in the contestation over “Poetry of the Nineties” makes the Polemic the first of the many polemics on poetry in the history of the PRC that had avant-garde poets and critics as its driving force, rather than state-sanctioned authors and critics, and that saw these avant-garde authors engaged in fundamental conflict among themselves. The contentions they submitted during the Polemic enable us to observe their strategies for shaping critical discourse, ostensibly on poetry written in the 1990s, but really focusing

on a particular poetics and doing so before the decade had even reached its end, as noted above.

This study aims to bring the contestation over “Poetry of the Nineties” back to attention, over two decades after the Polemic. It does so because of the intrinsic interest of the notion of “Poetry of the Nineties”, its motivation, and its discursive effect; but also, and equally important, because 21st-century critical discourse on poetry written in the 1990s (in the calendar sense and across various poetics) has effectively been monopolized by the legacy of the Intellectual camp. The Intellectual camp’s success in this respect is directly reflected in scholarship in the 21st century, rendering the Popular camp more or less invisible. This is intriguing, because the Polemic itself showed that neither the Intellectual camp’s nor the Popular camp’s poetical vision of the 1990s was sufficient for an accurate representation of the poetry that was actually written in the 1990s. Strikingly, the Popular camp was the louder and more aggressive of the two camps, but they lost out in the end. By contrast, the Intellectual camp’s legacy has quietly succeeded in monopolizing critical discourse over the last two decades.

This study’s approach builds on the availability of a set of materials that enable us not just to chart the representations of contemporary poetry that are at play here, but also to trace their origins. These materials come in three types: (partisan) poetry anthologies, (partisan) compilations of critical discourse, and research monographs. In terms of both literary history and literary criticism, this material shows that it is crucial that we consider the 1998-2000 Popular-Intellectual Polemic in conjunction with the decade leading up to it, from the late 1980s – and with the decade that follows, up to the early 2010s.

Chapter One provides the historical and discursive context for the Polemic. With attention to the tension between literary circles and the political authorities in the PRC, this chapter revisits the emergence of 1980s avant-garde poetry.

Chapter Two shifts the focus to the notion of “Poetry of the Nineties” that lies at the heart of this study. In practical terms, to show that this study’s proposal to re-read the Polemic is not reinventing the wheel, the analysis works its way back in time, from 21st-century scholarship to the contentions published during the Polemic on which said scholarship draws. Thus, this study works first on the research monographs published in

the decades following the Polemic, and then retraces this scholarship to a set of critical essays featured in partisan anthologies of poetry and/or literary criticism published during the Polemic, in 1998-2000. Thus, chapter Two interrogates the soundness of 21st-century scholarship on poetry written in the 1990s.

Chapter Three and chapter Four explore how it is that the Popular camp has exerted so little influence on subsequent scholarship, even though it was the louder and the more aggressive of the two camps. Chapter Three re-engages with the critical writing published during the Polemic by the members of the Popular and Intellectual camps. Chapter Four looks back on critical writing published in the years leading up to the Polemic that was drawn on by Popular and Intellectual authors alike in order to substantiate their competing visions of “Poetry of the Nineties”.

Chapter Three and Four study a set of approximately eighty critical essays in order to understand the Popular camp’s invisibility and the Intellectual camp’s dominance in 21st-century discourse on poetry written in the 1990s. These essays show that the members of the Popular camp were more interested in attacking the Intellectual camp’s views than in defending their own – or, indeed, in even systematically establishing their own. By contrast, not only did the Intellectual camp effectively refute the Popular attacks, it also effectively dismantled the views put forward by the Popular camp, inasmuch as these presented a coherent discourse to begin with. Moreover, 21st-century scholarship turns out to paint a picture of poetry written in the 1990s that is severely limited by the “instructions” offered to it by the proponents of the Intellectual camp. Some of them, not incidentally, contribute directly to this scholarship themselves, conflating their roles as poets, critics, and scholars.

In all, this study offers a close reading of literary criticism, which matters just as much as close readings of creative work. As such, it presents a thoroughly source-based analysis of “Poetry of the Nineties,” as a key concept in critical discourse whose incomplete and lopsided treatment in previous scholarship has distorted literary history to date. This study helps address this situation and contributes to a balanced, comprehensive understanding of critical discourse on poetry in contemporary China.

