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## The making of Chinese poetry of the nineties

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### Citation

Yang, L. Y. (2022, May 18). *The making of Chinese poetry of the nineties*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3304138>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Chapter Two

### After the Polemic: Poetry of the Nineties as Far as the Eye Can See

[Addendum, December 2022: An early version of this chapter was published in Chinese in 臺北大學中文學報 (Journal of Chinese Literature of National Taipei University) no. 26 (2019): 169-211. This was substantially revised when rendered in English for inclusion in this dissertation.]

#### I. Prologue

The Popular-Intellectual Polemic withered out in 2000. At that moment, neither Cheng Guangwei's proposition, supported by the Intellectual camp, nor Yu Jian's proposition, mobilizing the Popular camp, appears to have secured a decisive win in monopolizing the discourse on poetry written in the 1990s. As explained in chapter One, Cheng's and Yu's respective propositions are mutually exclusive; so this undecided confrontation should compel scholars to assess the merits of both notions when they turn to poetry written in the 1990s. So, what do 21<sup>st</sup>-century publications say about Cheng's and Yu's respective propositions of Poetry of the Nineties and about poetry written in the 1990s? This question drives the present chapter.

From now on, for better interpreting the position of the two propositions of Poetry of the Nineties in the discourse on poetry written in the 1990s, I will be adopting Cheng's use of the actual expression "Poetry of the Nineties" only where this is necessary for direct reference. Elsewhere, I will be referring to the texts and the authors in question as "N-Poetry" (and "N-poets" and "N-critics") with "N" for the Nineties. This will avoid confusion between "Poetry of the Nineties" and poetry written in the 1990s as distinguished earlier, and create some distance from Yu's appropriation of Cheng's words. Also, I will abbreviate Yu's "Popular Standpoint and (Popular) Writing," to simply the "Popular Standpoint" (the reason for this simplification is provided below), and refer to its contributors as Popular poets and Popular critics.

Remarkably, not all of the scholars in question actually position their own research in the discourse. Especially the authors of journal articles tend to use "the 1990s" as a self-evident frame with which to hold their arguments together, without really reflecting on the contestations that were highlighted in the Polemic. What is more, they then mostly proceed to draw on statements made by the N-poets, leading to fairly one-sided representations of what is in fact a multifaceted discourse. Why this is the case is a question that will be addressed in later chapters.

Here, we turn to a number of scholars who *do* actually position themselves in regard to poetry written in the 1990s. Different from the authors of the journal articles, they are the authors of poetry-focused literary histories and other, more thematically defined, book-length monographs, four of the former and three of the latter. In chronological order, they are Cheng Guangwei's *History of China's Contemporary Poetry* (2003); Hong Zicheng and Liu Denghan's *History of Contemporary Chinese New Poetry (Revised Edition)* (2005; since Liu focuses on Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, and Hong is the author of the chapters on China, I will refer to this as Hong's history from here on); Wei Tianwu's *Contradiction and Evolution in New Poetry's Pursuit of Modernity: A Study of Poetics in the Nineties* (2006); Zeng Fangrong's *Reconsideration and Reconstruction: Criticism of Poetry Written in the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (2007); Wang Changzhong's *Expanding Synthesis: A Study of Poetry Writing in the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (2010); Zhang Taozhou's introduction to the *Compendium of Chinese New Poetry (Volume 8, 1989-2000)* (2010); and *A Survey History of Chinese Poetry: Contemporary Volume* (2012) edited by Wu Sijing. While Cheng, Hong, Zhang, and Wu all make "poetry of the 1990s" an entry in their histories, Wei, Zeng, and Wang dedicate their monographs to particular themes related to China's 1990s poetry scene. Some of these authors take their cue from the Polemic and then explain and legitimize their views on poetry written in the 1990s accordingly. Others proceed from the internal logic of their own critical writing rather than from the Polemic as an "outside" starting point. Both sets of material are bound to tell us more about the 21<sup>st</sup>-century scholarly discourse on poetry written in the 1990s.

Before we delve into these studies, two more texts deserve mention. They are Cheng Guangwei's and Yu Jian's respective propositions – N-Poetry and the Popular Standpoint – in Cheng's introduction to *A Portrait of Years Gone By: Literature of the Nineties, Poetry Volume* and Yu's prefatory essay to the *1998 Yearbook of China's New Poetry*. These constituted the opening shots of the Polemic. But there are other reasons for the inclusion of Cheng's and Yu's respective propositions here. As noted above, Cheng's *History* is the first study of poetry written in the 1990s that appeared after the Polemic; but his position as a literary historian is potentially compromised because as a literary critic, he is also an actor in the Polemic, as the author of the essay that triggered the debate.

Something similar holds for Hong Zicheng, the author of the 2005 history who is also one of the two editors-in-chief of the *Literature of the Nineties* 九十年代文学书系 series that includes Cheng's *Portrait* as its poetry volume. In addition to the poetry volume compiled by Cheng, this series includes other volumes on mainstream fiction, avant-garde fiction, fiction by women authors, essays by writers, and essays by academics. Each volume has a different editor. How do the earlier voices of Cheng-the-critic and Hong-the-critic relate to those of Cheng-the-historian and Hong-the-historian? As it turns out, they sound much the same. Intriguingly, researchers to date have raised hardly any issue concerning Cheng's and Hong's negotiation of the notion of poetry written in the 1990s in their historical narratives. And not only Cheng and Hong but also the other scholars mentioned above show a strong inclination to accept Cheng's views as offered in *Portrait* as something like a foundational framework for poetry written in the 1990s. Hence, we need to look into this – and, at the same time, into Yu Jian's "opposite" proposition.

## II. 1990s Models: N-Poetry and the Popular Standpoint

Strictly speaking, neither Cheng's N-Poetry nor Yu's Popular Standpoint is a well-founded proposition that can truly capture poetry written in the 1990s. During the Polemic, each proposition claimed to be a meaningful designation of this poetry, to the exclusion of the other one. But if both turn out to be unconvincing, that does not automatically mean that the combination of the two is any more useful. Rather, the Polemic reflects that the one-sidedness of both propositions and their insufficient anchorage in 1990s socio-cultural context lead to their failure to monopolize the discourse. Intriguingly, the scholarly authors under scrutiny here barely say a word about these problems. In what follows, I first look into Cheng's and Yu's propositions and then into the aforementioned poetry histories and thematic monographs.

### N-Poetry

Cheng's proposition on poetry written in the 1990s is the starting point of the debate. He draws on unofficial poetry journals to put on display what he considers to be the defining poetical trend of the decade. As a self-identified poet-turned-critic since 1986,<sup>1</sup> Cheng

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<sup>1</sup>Cheng 1998: Introduction 1.

draws on his personal recollection to attest a difference between poetry written in the 1980s and the 1990s. And, according to Cheng, the unofficial journals *Tendency* and its successor, *The Southern Poetry Review*, headed by poets Xi Chuan and Chen Dongdong, support his position. With passion and admiration, Cheng comments:

在我看来，这个同仁杂诗成了“秩序”与“责任”的象征，正像彼得堡之于俄罗斯文化精神，海德格尔、雅斯贝尔斯之于二战后德国知识界普遍的沮丧、混乱一样，它无疑成了一盏照亮泥泞的中国诗歌的明灯。<sup>2</sup>

From my point of view, this soulmate journal [a common designation of unofficial journals] symbolizes “order” and “responsibility.” It is comparable with St Petersburg relation to the Russian cultural spirit, or Heidegger and Jasper’s relation to the overwhelming dispiritedness and disorder of German intellectuals after World War II. It doubtless becomes a beacon to illuminate our muddled Chinese poetry.

By comparing these two unofficial journals to a bright light that leads the way for China’s poetry, Cheng avers that *Tendency* and the *Review* have taken over the importance role played by their predecessors, the famous journals *Today* (1978-1980), *Them* (from 1985), and *Not-Not* (from 1986), whose appearance constituted a watershed in Chinese literary history. Having thus set the stage, Cheng goes on to identify fifteen of *Tendency’s* and the *Review’s* contributors, including Ouyang Jianghe, Wang Jiaxin, Cheng Dongdong, Xi Chuan, Sun Wenbo, and Zang Di, and calls their achievements the fundamentals of poetry written in the 1990s, placing this in the bigger context of what is known as avant-garde poetry.<sup>3</sup>

However, as explained in chapter One, most of Cheng’s favorite poets writing in the 1990s – in other words, most of those whom I call N-poets – had launched their careers in avant-garde poetry much earlier, in the 1980s. Some had contributed to *Obscure Poetry* in the early years of the decade, and most were contributors to *Third Generation Poetry*,

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<sup>2</sup> Cheng 1998: Introduction 2.

<sup>3</sup> Cheng 1998: Introduction 1-2.

which rose to prominence in the mid-1980s. Accordingly, Cheng's designation of them is more of a renewal, or a reaffirmation, of their avant-garde status in the 1990s than the actual identification or "discovery" of such status in the 1990s.

Cheng's foregrounding of avant-garde poetry does not automatically make his argument problematic, but his approach is shaky. For one thing, his line-up lacks variety. Since Cheng describes the *Review* as the successor of *Tendency*, one is easily led to see *Tendency* and the *Review* to be the same journal, albeit with different names and formats – and it appears implausible that the potential of China's poetry in the 1990s can be encapsulated in a single journal. For another, *Tendency* and the *Review* hardly "cover" the 1990s even in a chronological sense. *Tendency* was launched in late 1988<sup>4</sup> and the *Review* published its last issue in late 1993.<sup>5</sup> The limited time span they cover does not diminish their importance per se, but it disqualifies them as (exclusively) representative for the entire decade, which is what Cheng makes them out to be. What is more, Cheng weaves his personal relationship with the contributors of *Tendency* and the *Review* into his introduction to *Portrait*. Such connections are used by Cheng not only to contextualize the recollections at the beginning of the essay, but also to build the profiles of the ten N-poets whom he calls "creative and inspirational."<sup>6</sup> In all, Cheng's partisan designation of poetry written in the 1990s looks like the appropriation of the full decade for the poetry of his preference.

Cheng paints a contrast between orthodox poetics on the one hand, and Obscure Poetry, Third Generation Poetry, and N-Poetry, on the other (the latter three would come under the avant-garde). He works with three categories. One category accommodates poetry that is inseparable from orthodox, state-sanctioned poetics. Its examples are not just orthodox poetry itself but also Obscure Poetry. Cheng's inclusion of Obscure Poetry is based on the public impression it made by its head-on clashes with orthodox poetics. As such, he notes Obscure Poetry's dependence on orthodox poetics to make itself visible – by resisting orthodoxy.

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<sup>4</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 253.

<sup>5</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 251, footnote 4.

<sup>6</sup> Cheng 1998: Introduction 8.

The second category is assigned to Third Generation Poetry, for its dismissal of orthodox poetics not by defying it but by operating in a different discourse altogether. Cheng notes additionally that Third Generation poets' employment of colloquial language may help this poetry maintain a distance from orthodox poetics, but he writes that this linguistic inclination also leads it to drift into vulgarization, which he says detracts from its independence. In Cheng's opinion, both *Obscure Poetry's* combative attitude and Third Generation Poetry's dismissive attitude vis-à-vis orthodoxy are obsolete.<sup>7</sup>

The third category is defined by Cheng as a rectification of these two attitudes toward orthodox poetics, as N-Poetry is given the honor of offering an alternative. Cheng specifies that N-Poetry transcends binary thinking and rises above the either-or choice of affiliation with or rejection of both orthodox poetics and vernacular values. In this sense, Cheng appraises N-Poetry's resistance to collective representations and notes its establishment of a new level of political independence for contemporary Chinese poetry; and he validates N-Poetry as Individual Writing. Cheng draws not only *Obscure Poetry* and Third Generation Poetry but also orthodox poetics in for this discursive move, which makes it an endeavor that legitimizes N-poetics not only within in the genealogy of contemporary avant-garde poetry but also in the literary history of the PRC at large.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, in Cheng's narrative, Individual Writing is a key concept for N-poetics. In his view, the attributes of Individual Writing as described above flow from this poetry's other characteristics, namely Intellectual Writing, Narrativity and its opposition to "pure poetry." Essentially, Intellectual Writing stresses the reflexivity represented in poetry composed by individual intellectuals, and Narrativity underlies the expansion of poetry's capacity to represent the multiple layers of everyday life in an idiosyncratic yet coherent manner. These two features synergize. While reflexivity is what the individual intellectuals try to capture with poetry, this is supported by Narrativity's expansion in poetry's style and content. In addition, Cheng further describes N-Poetry's rectification of its avant-garde predecessors through what he calls its opposition to "Pure Poetry" in *Obscure Poetry* and Third Generation Poetry. Their so-called "pure-ness" is meant to signal their subordination to uniform, collective representation and positioning, in contrast to N-

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<sup>7</sup> Cheng 1998: Introduction 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> Cheng 1998: Introduction 16-18.

Poetry's embrace of the multidimensionality of everyday life – where past and present socio-political conditions are lived and relived, interpreted and reinterpreted, constructed and reconstructed. Ultimately, Individual Writing is more than a declaration of the N-poets' political stance. It is also an encapsulation of N-Poetry's artistic aspirations.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Popular Standpoint**

Yu Jian calls N-Poetry “Intellectual Writing” and N-poets “Intellectuals” throughout his proposition of the Popular Standpoint. This is easy to understand in light of Cheng's argument, which Yu refutes. Yu's substitution of Cheng's terminology by his own appears to be a logical choice that frees the notion of poetry written in the 1990s from Cheng's appropriation and allows Yu and others to partake in the debate. However, this intervention is one of only very few convincing moments in Yu's proposition.

Like Cheng, Yu opens his proposition with a personal recollection. But this time, the recollection is constructed so as to write N-Poetry *out* of the genealogy of avant-garde poetry. Yu, a prominent Third Generation poet recognized by his contribution to the unofficial journal *Them*, first outlines the significance of avant-garde poetry for 1980s and 1990s Chinese literature. He then avers that this significance is ruined by Intellectual Writing. Instead of focusing on the reflexivity that Cheng calls a key feature of N-Poetry, he highlights the Intellectuals' privilege, challenging Intellectual Writing's independence from orthodox poetics and accusing the poets in question of relying on Western-language resources 西方语言资源.<sup>10</sup> Yu opines that Intellectual Writing is not only “foreign” to Chinese poetry, but also a betrayal of the avant-garde.<sup>11</sup> Thus, he casts doubt on their independence from domestic (political) and foreign (literary) authorities. Yu's criticism of the Intellectuals and Intellectual Writing becomes the foundation for his reinterpretation of the essence of Individual Writing.

Yu protests that:

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<sup>9</sup> Cheng 1998: Introduction 2-8 and 17.

<sup>10</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 2, 7, and 16.

<sup>11</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 1-3 and 16-17.



个人写作是从语言的自觉开始的，第三代诗歌通过语言在五十年代以来第一次建立了真正的个人写作。<sup>12</sup>

Individual Writing begins with the awareness of language. Third Generation Poetry, through [its particular use of] language, has for the first time since the 1950s established authentic Individual Writing.

From Yu's perspective, Individual Writing has been around for a much longer time than Cheng claims, as it was initiated by Third Generation poets as early as the mid-1980s. According to Yu, the Third Generation poets' command of colloquial language plays a critical role in this regard. Yu draws an analogy between 1980s colloquial language with the vernacular language 白话 that was promoted in the May Fourth Movement of 1919 by Hu Shi 胡适 and others. According to Yu, while the vernacular language made New Poetry possible, colloquial language for the first time liberates New Poetry from the constraints of the Standard Language 普通话 that has been promoted and advanced by the authorities since the establishment of the PRC, and used to promote orthodox poetics. By highlighting the importance of language usage in the history of both New Poetry and Third Generation Poetry, Yu asserts that Third Generation Poetry is a direct descendant of (firmly canonized) May Fourth literature. And in Yu's eyes, this makes it capable of establishing independence from politically sanctioned, orthodox poetics and finding poetry in everyday life – specifically as a result of 1980s Third Generation poets' mastery of the intrinsic, day-to-day, and humane facets of this colloquial language. This is a very different vision of Individual Writing than Cheng's.<sup>13</sup>

Yu presents his views as a logical narrative, but his comparison of Third Generation Poetry to New Poetry hinges on his elimination of the background of the May Fourth Movement – and in fact, it is confusing. In the context of the May Fourth Movement, the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century activists' promotion of vernacular language was part of a grand political strategy of nation-building. Moreover, this campaign was closely associated with Western

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<sup>12</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 4.

<sup>13</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 3-5 and 10-14.

influences and the political situation of the time.<sup>14</sup> As such, New Poetry would arguably have more similarities to Cheng's N-Poetry as portrayed by Yu – that is, a servant to politics and (overly) reliant on Western-language resources. In other words, Yu twists his May Fourth predecessors' choice of vernacular language so as to create an untenable parallel with what he sees as the political independence of 1980s colloquial language, and the Popular Standpoint's ability to reflect apolitical everyday life.

Yu's discussion of the political connotations of colloquial language is less than meticulous. On top of that, he notes that not every user of colloquial language can achieve the kind of political independence he approves of – in other words, Individual Writing as he sees it (as distinct from Cheng's views). This is reflected by Yu's stress on individual poets' genius and originality in their manipulation of language.<sup>15</sup> In other words, colloquial language does not in itself automatically lead to communicating values that are different from those fostered by the Standard Language. This makes sense, but it does not become explicit in Yu's proposition. Yu pays scant attention to making poets' subjectivity an organic element of the theory of how colloquial language enables his preferred variety of Individual Writing. After all, notions such as genius and originality, or wisdom and divinity, tell us little in this regard. Moreover, he offers no clear refutation of Cheng Guangwei's concerns over the effect of vulgarization that Cheng believes colloquial language might have on this poetry.

Yu then turns to unofficial journals to build the argument for Individual Writing as he sees it. Like Cheng Guangwei, Yu brings the near-legendary *Today* to the table – but in a very different way. Yu praises the independent spirit represented by the poetry published in *Today* but expresses concerns over what he sees as the political nature of this unofficial journal.<sup>16</sup> In his discussion of *Them* and *Not-Not*, together with other mid-1980s unofficial journals that contributed to Third Generation Poetry,<sup>17</sup> he argues that *Them* – with which he himself was affiliated – best represents independence from orthodox poetics, in terms of not only its contributors' command of colloquial language but also the journal's

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<sup>14</sup> Lee 1973.

<sup>15</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 7.

<sup>16</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 9.

<sup>17</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 3-6.

dissociation from the authorities.<sup>18</sup> Despite his different assessment of *Today* and *Them*, Yu stresses that both journals contributed to establishing the independent spirit which is carried forward by poets of the 1990s.<sup>19</sup> Yu labels this independent spirit as “the Popular Standpoint and [Popular] Writing”.<sup>20</sup> And he announces that “the meaning of the Popular lies in the quality of independence” 民间的意思就是一种独立的品质。<sup>21</sup> It turns out that “independence” is a keyword for Yu to thread together *Today*, *Them*, Individual Writing, and the Popular Standpoint and Popular Writing – and, of course, his vision of poetry written in the 1990s, as a counterbid to Cheng’s.

Yu’s inclusion of *Today* in this thread is peculiar. While an independent spirit is portrayed as essential to the Popular Standpoint and Popular Writing, Yu’s disapproval of the political nature of the unofficial journal *Today* is a direct challenge to this formula. This flaw can be further exposed by what Maghiel van Crevel highlights as the ambiguity in Yu’s usage of the term “Popular,” which blurs the boundary between its institutional and aesthetic meanings.<sup>22</sup> In other words, Yu may distinguish the Popular *standpoint* from Popular *writing*, but this differentiation is ineffective when it comes to actual poetry criticism. Accordingly, Yu’s ambivalent evaluation of *Today* suggests his simultaneous approval of *Today* poetry’s aesthetics and disapproval of the journal’s institutional associations.

Nevertheless, this distinction between the institutional Popular *standpoint* and aesthetic Popular *writing* and Yu’s disapproval of the institution that was *Today* coupled with his approval of its aesthetics weaken his entire proposition. For if the poetry in *Today* was politically independent it can be threaded together with the Popular Standpoint and Popular Writing; and this suggests that it can also be threaded together with Third Generation Poetry – which Yu has previously portrayed as unique in its political independence but which now turns out to be not so unique after all. Consequentially, political independence turns out not to be the exclusive domain of colloquial language. Yu’s writing sometimes appears confused about the institutional and aesthetic senses of the

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<sup>18</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 3-5 and 9-10.

<sup>19</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 6.

<sup>20</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 6.

<sup>21</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 9.

<sup>22</sup> Van Crevel 2008: 408-409.

Popular. This explains the impenetrability – or indeed the incomprehensibility – of some key passages in his essay. Remarkably, for this reason, the present study sidesteps the discussion on the connection between Yu’s proposition of the Popular Standpoint 民间立场 (*Minjian Lichang*) and the other interpretation of the term 民间 (*Minjian*), such as Chen Sihe’s 陈思和 framework of *Minjian* or the original form of “unofficial journal” that is 民间刊物 *Minjian Kanwu*.<sup>23</sup>

During and after the Polemic, many use the term “Popular Writing” 民间写作 to refer to Yu’s proposition on poetry written in the 1990s, but Yu himself does not use this in his prefatory essay to the *1998 Yearbook*. By contrast, the “Popular Standpoint” 民间立场 appears several times, by itself. Yu mostly associates it with his discussion of *Them*. He associates the Popular Standpoint with not only his praise of the unofficial journal *Them* but also its contributors and their poetry. In other words, Yu not only allows the said confusion of two senses of the Popular to shape his praise of *Them* but also subsumes what might be categorized as Popular Writing under the Popular Standpoint. In all, it is difficult if not impossible to distinguish the two, and the “Popular Standpoint” appears to be the most fitting abbreviation of Yu’s vision of poetry written in the 1990s.

This becomes even clearer when the publication of the *1998 Yearbook* is taken into consideration. As the medium that brings Yu’s proposition to public attention, the blurb on the front cover of the *Yearbook* states “In art, we uphold and carry on: the authentic, eternal Popular Standpoint” 艺术上我们秉承：真正的永恒的民间立场.<sup>24</sup> This shows that the editors position this poetry anthology as representing the values associated with the Popular Standpoint.

Incidentally, Yu and his fellow members of the Popular camp hardly address the problematic nature of their terminology and their claims during the Polemic. Yu’s interventions remain impenetrable (this will be discussed in detail in chapter Three). This is another justification for abbreviating the “Popular Standpoint and Writing” to the “Popular Standpoint” – except, of course, in literal quotations and in negotiations with those who use Popular Writing to refer to Yu’s proposition.

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<sup>23</sup> Indeed, 民间 means different things in these contexts, for details see: Zhou 2007: 36, footnote 1; Van Crevel 2008: 408–409; 2007: 1–15; Chen 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Yang 1999: Front Cover.

Yu's essay, then, has multiple problems. However, in contributing to our understanding of poetry written in the 1990s, certain aspects of his proposition remain valid. See, for instance, his list of Popular poets, which he gleans from unofficial journals published in the 1990s. Although he mentions only three unofficial journals in passing (*Poetry Reference* 《诗参考》 and *Tropic of Cancer* 《北回归线》 and the United States-based *First Line* 一行),<sup>25</sup> this list appears no less valid than the list of N-poets that Cheng gleans from *Tendency* and the *Review* – even if Yu's list is as partisan as Cheng's. Besides, unlike Cheng's list of N-poets that consists almost entirely of poets who made their names in the 1980s, Yu's list of Popular poets has more new faces that emerge on the poetry scene in the 1990s: for example, Yi Sha, Hou Ma, and Xu Jiang.

### Similarity in Opposites

Although Cheng's and Yu's viewpoints are obviously in conflict, they display some notable similarities. First there is their invocation of 1980s avant-garde poetry – each in their own way – in making their case about poetry written in the 1990s. Second, both authors stress the importance of (political) independence, and elaborate on this through the notion of Individual Writing. This notion appears to be central (albeit in different manifestations) to both Cheng's vision of N-Poetry and Yu's vision of the Popular Standpoint. Third, both Cheng and Yu cite everyday life as an inspiration for their preferred types of poetry. Cheng links everyday life to Narrativity, Yu links it to colloquial language (quite aside from the question of how Narrativity and colloquial language might relate to individual poetic style). Similarities such as these have been noted by researchers such as Maghiel van Crevel,<sup>26</sup> Dian Li,<sup>27</sup> and Chan Tah-Wei,<sup>28</sup> but it is important to contextualize them for the present chapter's review of scholarship published after the Polemic, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Conversely, the most marked discrepancy between N-poetics and Popular poetics appears to lie in what Cheng sees as reflexivity, meaning an inclusive but critical attitude toward orthodox poetics, captured in the notion of Intellectual Writing. Yu disagrees with this, and instead highlights what he sees as the Intellectuals' abuse of their privilege and

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<sup>25</sup> Yang 1999: Prefatory Essay 6.

<sup>26</sup> Van Crevel 2008: 442–443.

<sup>27</sup> Lupke 2008: 190–191.

<sup>28</sup> Chan 2009: 90–91.

their compliance with domestic (political) and foreign (literary) authorities. For Cheng, reflexivity is what makes political independence possible, and is compromised by colloquialization; for Yu, political independence can only be achieved through colloquial language. But as regards the central notion of independence, both Cheng's and Yu's arguments are marred by a failure to define more clearly the orthodox poetics from which they distinguish the avant-garde. Hence, what it is that N-Poetry and the Popular Standpoint claim to be independent from appears ambiguous and abstract. In addition, they fail to take into account socio-cultural change in China from the 1980s to the 1990s, which undisputably had a big impact on orthodox poetics. Hong Zicheng has pointed out that these changes were significant.<sup>29</sup> In all, orthodox poetics is not a stable category across the 1980s and the 1990s, and this weakens both Cheng's and Yu's writing on the avant-garde.

### III. Literary Histories from 2003 and 2005

Neither Cheng Guangwei nor Yu Jian presents the big picture of the development of poetry in the 1990s. As it turns out, the first two literary histories after the Polemic suffer from the same problem of limited horizons, an effect that is exacerbated by the fact that both essentially align themselves with the perspective taken by Cheng. They were authored by Cheng Guangwei himself and by Hong Zicheng.

#### **Cheng Guangwei's *History of China's Contemporary Poetry***

Cheng's 2003 *History of China's Contemporary Poetry* is the first literary history that extends to the 1990s. Cheng's chapter on the 1990s is divided into three sections: "Overview of Poetry of the 1990,"<sup>30</sup> "Historical Process: From the 1980s to the 1990s,"<sup>31</sup> and "Other Poetic Phenomena."<sup>32</sup> Cheng uses a discussion of the Polemic to conclude the "Overview,"<sup>33</sup> noting that the Polemic was partly triggered by his compilation of *Portrait*.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Cheng recognizes that the publication of the 1998 *Yearbook* protests against the

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<sup>29</sup> Cheng 1998: Overall Introduction 1.

<sup>30</sup> Cheng 2003: 339–358.

<sup>31</sup> Cheng 2003: 359–374.

<sup>32</sup> Cheng 2003: 375–384.

<sup>33</sup> Cheng 2003: 352–357.

<sup>34</sup> Cheng 2003: 353.

“poetic order of the 1990s” imposed by his own *Portrait*.<sup>35</sup> Cheng’s narrative shows he understands the criticism of *Portrait* as one-sided, and he understands that the Polemic is a contestation for the monopolization of the discourse on poetry written in the 1990s. However, throughout the chapter on the 1990s, Cheng brings only two Popular poets, Yu Jian and Yi Sha, into the spotlight – and he marginalizes them by doing so in the section on “Other Phenomena”.<sup>36</sup> Cheng spends but one page on them and establishes no connection between their poetics and the Popular Standpoint.

Cheng does provide clues to such a connection elsewhere in his *History*, but one has to look hard: Yu’s list of Popular poets is included in the subsection that describes the Polemic.<sup>37</sup> This subsection is also where the *1998 Yearbook* has its first appearance in Cheng’s *History*, together with *Portrait*. Intriguingly, Cheng does not include his own list of N-poets in this subsection (or anywhere else in his book). He gives more space to *the 1998 Yearbook* than *Portrait* in this section on the Polemic.

However, such unequal exposure does not signal a change of mind on Cheng’s part. Indeed, it obscures the association between the poetry that Cheng championed as a literary critic in *Portrait* and the poetry he now showcases as a literary historian. Specifically, in “Overview,” Cheng extensively discusses the N-poetics he first highlighted in the introduction to *Portrait* and recapitulates them as poetics with a tendency for intricacy 复杂 and synthesis 综合.<sup>38</sup> In addition, in the “Process” section of the chapter, Cheng introduces the idea of Middle-Age Writing 中年写作 and associates this with N-poets to capture works by poets who started their avant-garde careers in the 1980s and whom he associates with either reflexivity or Narrativity in their writing of the 1990s.<sup>39</sup> Even in “Other Phenomena,” where Cheng spends half of this section on introducing the unofficial journals of the 1990s, the handful of journals he highlights mostly have N-poets among their contributors. The other half of “Other Phenomena” is where Cheng accommodates Yu Jian, Yi Sha, and others of whom he considers:

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<sup>35</sup> Cheng 2003: 353.

<sup>36</sup> Cheng 2003: 379–380.

<sup>37</sup> Cheng 2003: 353.

<sup>38</sup> Cheng 2003: 343–357.

<sup>39</sup> Cheng 2003: 360.

在我们所说“90年代诗歌”之外，也有一些成名于80年代的诗人仍然在坚持自己的艺术努力，并有新作奉献给诗坛。<sup>40</sup>

Outside what we call “Poetry of the 1990s,” some poets who rose to fame in the 1980s continued to persist in their artistic endeavors and contributed new works to the poetry scene.

Here, Cheng makes it explicit that not every poem published in the decade of the 1990s can be counted as “poetry of the 1990s”. Those who are not seen by Cheng as writing N-Poetry are categorized as the exceptions to “poetry of the 1990s.” This statement reflects that Cheng again shuts off the notion of “poetry of the 1990s” to others than the N-poets. But this time, he does so as a literary historian, using this position to foreground N-Poetry and provide more detailed documentation on the N-poets’ trajectories in the 1990s than in *Portrait*.

Cheng leaves another clue to his use of “poetry of the 1990s” in his account of the Polemic. This is embedded in the full title of *Portrait* as given by Cheng. The title Cheng gives in *History* is *A Portrait of Years Gone By: Poetry of the 90s* 岁月的遗照——90年代诗歌,<sup>41</sup> but the latter part of this title, “poetry of the 90s,” is not to be found on either the cover or the copyright page of the original *Portrait*. On the copyright page, this lists only *A Portrait of Years Gone By*. Presumably, the subtitle given by Cheng is derived from the additional description on *Portrait*’s title page, above the book title, which says “Book Series on Literature of the Nineties, Poetry Volume” 九十年代文学书系·诗歌卷. Be that as it may, Cheng gives an inaccurate title of his own *Portrait* in his *History*, and one that reinforces his appropriation of the decade of the 1990s for poetry of his personal preference. He does something similar in his bibliography, where *Portrait* appears under yet another name, now as *A Portrait of Years Gone By: A Collection of Poetry of the Nineties* 岁月的遗照——九十年代诗歌选.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Cheng 2003: 379.

<sup>41</sup> Cheng 1998: 352.

<sup>42</sup> Cheng 2003: 358.



Cheng's linkage of "poetry of the 90s/Nineties" to *Portrait* directs attention to another expression in his *History* that also translates as "poetry of the 1990s" but is phrased differently in Chinese. While associating the Chinese phrase "90年代诗歌" with *Portrait*, Cheng calls the chapter on the 1990s "90年代<sup>的</sup>诗歌."<sup>43</sup> The subordinating particle 的 (highlighted in the previous sentence) is a new addition. The addition of this particle is unlikely to be a typo or a printing error, because the particle is also found in the chapter titles "50-70年代<sup>的</sup>诗歌",<sup>44</sup> meaning poetry of the 1950s-1970s, and "80年代<sup>的</sup>诗歌",<sup>45</sup> meaning poetry of the 1980s. In purely linguistic terms, the addition of the particle would reinforce the impression that what is at issue is simply a chronological category, rather than a literary-critical one. This observation is supported by the fact that while Cheng's *History* hardly gives any recognition to others than the N-poets and other poetics than N-poetics in the "Overview" and "Process" sections, it makes room in the "Other" section for authors whom Cheng does not classify as writing N-Poetry. Cheng's seemingly inclusive attitude would have made "Poetry of the 90s/90年代诗歌", without the particle, an illogical chapter title. The addition of the particle turns out to be a logical solution for adding a semblance of objectivity to Cheng's account of the 1990s, without affecting the structure of his representation of poetry written in the 1990s.

### **Hong Zicheng's *History of Contemporary Chinese New Poetry* (Revised Edition)**

The issue of the newly added subordinate particle also appears in Hong Zicheng's 2005 *History of Contemporary Chinese New Poetry (Revised Edition)*. The particle appears in a chapter called "Poetry of the 1990s"; notably, this chapter opens with a section with the same name, but without the particle.<sup>46</sup> However, unlike Cheng, Hong does in fact address the issue. (Cheng's appropriation of "the 1990s" caused various commentators to pay attention to the term, and Hong is a case in point.) He initially claims that the expression without the particle simply refers to calendar chronology;<sup>47</sup> but toward the end of the

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<sup>43</sup> Cheng 2003: 367.

<sup>44</sup> Cheng 2003: 1.

<sup>45</sup> Cheng 2003: 171.

<sup>46</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 242.

<sup>47</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 242.

chapter, in a discussion of the Polemic, he starts putting the expression in quotation marks. This indicates that he is aware of Cheng Guangwei and Yu Jian's rivalling attempts to monopolize the discourse on poetry written in the 1990s, but it leads to an inconsistency in his own terminology in his *History*.

A similar ambivalence appears in Hong's justification of having a chapter on the 1990s. Specifically, this concerns Hong's consideration of the relation between poetry written in the 1980s and poetry written in the 1990s. On the one hand, he observes important differences between the two. On the other hand, he also emphasizes the kinship between them. Hong opines that the poetics of Obscure Poetry (from the late 1970s and the early 1980s) and of Third Generation Poetry (from mid-1980s onward) constitute the sources of the evolution of poetry written in the 1990s, when China experienced rapid change, with marketization at its core. Hong makes explicit his awareness of the debates among poets and critics on whether the relation between poetry written in the 1980s and poetry written in the 1990s is one of mere continuation or of fundamental transformation, but does not take a definitive position on this himself. This sits uneasily with the implications of his decision to devote a separate chapter to the 1990s (aside from literary historians' predilection to think in well-rounded decades).<sup>48</sup>

On this point, Hong's approach appears similar to that taken by Cheng Guangwei in his introduction to *Portrait* and that taken by Yu Jian in his prefatory essay to the *1998 Yearbook*. All three make 1980s avant-garde poetics their point of reference for the unfolding of poetry written in the 1990s. Also, like Cheng and Yu, Hong draws on the unofficial journals to substantiate his argument. And he does little to elucidate the vague image of orthodox poetics that is the Other of the avant-garde: like Cheng and Yu, Hong does not engage with the undisputable effect that profound socio-cultural change in the 1990s had on orthodox poetics.

As for the unofficial journals, Hong draws on these more extensively than both Cheng (who mentions *Tendency* and *The Southern Review*) and Yu (who mentions *Poetry Reference*, *Tropic of Cancer*, and the US-based *First Line* in passing). Hong discusses not only *Tendency*, *The Southern Poetry Review* and *Tropic of Cancer* but also four more

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<sup>48</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 245–248.

journals (*Against* 反对, *Image Puzzle* 象罔, *Battlefront* 阵地, and *Discovery* 发现), along with a category comprising poets that are not in association with any particular journal. Moreover, he stresses that those listed under the same journals should not necessarily be considered as groups or as having a uniform poetics.<sup>49</sup> In all, Hong clearly uses the unofficial journals as cues for “placing” poets he finds noteworthy. In other words, he uses a less hierarchical and compartmentalized structure and a wider sample than Cheng and Yu to present his views on poetry written in the 1990s.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, Hong’s sources and structure reaffirm the dominant presence of the N-poets. Most of the journals he cites have N-poets as their initiators or key contributors. More generally, N-poets’ trajectories take up a considerable portion of Hong’s historical narrative of the 1990s; and this allows him to trace what are presented as the distinctive features of N-poetics (Intellectual Writing, Middle-Age Writing, Narrativity, Individual Writing, etc.) back to these authors, such as the ascription of Intellectual Writing to Xi Chuan and Chen Dongdong, of Middle-Age Writing to Xiao Kaiyu, of Narrativity to Sun Wenbo and Individual Writing to Zang Di.<sup>51</sup> Although the category of N-Poetry is not explicitly present in Hong’s historical narrative of the 1990s, it essentially remains intact below the surface. Hong’s historical narrative is seemingly built on calendar chronology, but his actual argumentation reaffirms “poetry of the 1990s” as a literary-critical category – in other words, as Cheng’s N-Poetry.

In addition to N-Poetry’s dominant presence in the 1990s, Hong’s narrative shows a weak presence of the Popular poets. Indeed, Popular poets appear inconsequential not only as regards the unofficial journals but also in other ways, for example in Hong’s category for poets who are not associated with any particular journal. It is not that Hong leaves out all Popular poets from his discussion. He does mention Yang Jian, for instance, but does not follow Yu Jian in referring to Yang as a Popular poet.<sup>52</sup> Hong stresses the critical role that everyday life plays in Yang’s poetry – but as discussed above, everyday life is not a feature that distinguishes the Popular Standpoint from N-Poetry. As for Yu Jian

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<sup>49</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 250.

<sup>50</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 250–280.

<sup>51</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 250–273.

<sup>52</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 278–279.

himself, Hong notes elsewhere in his chapter on the 1990s that Yu Jian is one of several influential poets who developed their styles in the 1980s, contributed to Third Generation Poetry, and remain influential in the 1990s.<sup>53</sup> However, Hong does not actually discuss Yu Jian's poetry here, citing reasons of space. Specifically,

在 90 年代继续“活跃”，写出重要作品，且对诗界保持重要影响的一些诗人，因为在前此的章节中已经涉及，这里将不再辟出专门章节。<sup>54</sup>

As regards a number of poets who continued to be “active” in the 1990s, wrote important works, and remained highly influential on the poetry scene, because they have been covered in the previous chapters, no special sections [on their work] will be laid out here.

Hong provides a list of the poets thus excluded in a footnote, with Yu among them.<sup>55</sup>

Hong's exclusion of Yu in the history of the 1990s appears peculiar if we compare it with his depiction of Xi Chuan, one of the initiators of *Tendency* and *The Southern Poetry Review*. Hong lists Xi Chuan and Yu in the same breath when giving examples of influential poets of the 1990s whose careers began in the 1980s and who contributed to Third Generation Poetry.<sup>56</sup> This reflects that he considers Xi Chuan and Yu comparable in terms of influence in both decades (and this is a point on which there is widespread consensus). However, this does not result in equal treatment of Xi Chuan and Yu in Hong's historical narrative. While Hong includes a discussion of Xi Chuan in his chapter on the 1990s and identifies Xi Chuan as one of the contributors to Intellectual Writing,<sup>57</sup> Yu Jian is situated in the chapter on the mid- and late 1980s<sup>58</sup> and receives no attention for his participation in the discourse on poetry written in the 1990s; in light of widespread recognition of Yu as one of the most original and successful voices in this period, this is

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<sup>53</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 248.

<sup>54</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 250.

<sup>55</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 250, footnote 2.

<sup>56</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 248.

<sup>57</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 250–252.

<sup>58</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 219–221.

remarkable, to say the least. It is certainly so if we consider that Hong writes that from the 1980s to the 1990s, the change in Xi Chuan's poetry "was not as dramatic as the author imagined" 并不是如作者想象的那么大;<sup>59</sup> and likewise, "From the 1980s to the 1990s, Yu Jian's writing did not undergo discernibly 'transformative', 'rupturing' changes." 80年代至90年代,于坚的写作并未发生明显的“转型”、“断裂”的变化。<sup>60</sup> Notably, Cheng Guangwei had voiced similar opinions on the development of Xi Chuang's and Yu Jian's poetry over time in his 2003 *History*. There, he states that "Overall, distinct 'phases' in Xi Chuan's creative works are not at all clear-cut." 总体地看,创作的“分期”在西川身上是不明显的。<sup>61</sup> On Yu Jian, he comments that "his views on poetry basically underwent no discernible changes" 诗歌观基本没有发生明显的变化。<sup>62</sup> If a constancy in Yu Jian's poetry only earns him a place in Hong's and Cheng's accounts of the mid- and late 1980s, why should Xi Chuan, whose work is credited with the same constancy, be given a place in the 1990s?

Eventually, Hong explains the gist of the Popular Standpoint in the last section of his chapter on poetry written in the 1990s, where he discusses the Polemic and, tellingly, begins to set the expression "poetry of the 1990s" in quotation marks. Hong is compelled to mention the Popular Standpoint there, as it plays a critical role in this poetical debate. Nevertheless, he hardly even specifies Yu Jian's position in the Popular camp. He relegates Yu to the footnotes, amid information on critical essays that oppose Cheng's designation of N-Poetry and constitute the Popular camp's feeding ground in the Polemic. <sup>63</sup> Members of the Popular Standpoint that Hong does mention in the main text are Yi Sha, Shen Haobo, Hou Ma, and Xu Jiang; Yu Jian's absence here is hard to explain. And, of these four, only Yi Sha's poetry receives any commentary to speak of.<sup>64</sup> Hong also gives little space to the Intellectual camp and their contentions and relegates most information of the Intellectual camp's contentions to the footnotes; but the crucial difference is that throughout the rest

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<sup>59</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 253.

<sup>60</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 221.

<sup>61</sup> Cheng 2003: 367.

<sup>62</sup> Cheng 2003: 341.

<sup>63</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 282–284.

<sup>64</sup> Hong and Liu 2005: 284.

of the chapter, N-poetics take center stage, implying that the Popular Standpoint is barely relevant to the development of poetry in the years preceding the Polemic.

#### **IV. Thematic Monographs and More Histories, 2006–2012**

The partiality of Cheng Guangwei's and Hong Zicheng's historical narratives returns in subsequent, thematically defined monographs by other authors or editors and in later literary-historical works: Wei Tianwu, Zeng Fangrong, Wang Changzhong (thematic), Zhang Taozhou and Wu Sijing (literary-historical). Like Cheng and Hong, the authors are literary scholars; but different from Cheng and Hong, they were not involved in launching N-Poetry in the way that Cheng and Hong were in the late 1990s, as anthologizer-critic and series editor respectively. As such, these authors are presumably less personally involved with, or indeed personally attached to, N-Poetry; all the same, N-poets' and N-poetics' clearly appeal to them. While they all draw on the Polemic, their fairly uncritical embrace of N-Poetry and the discourse surrounding it renders the Popular Standpoint increasingly less visible in discourse on poetry written in the 1990s.

#### **Wei Tianwu's *Contradiction and Evolution***

In the introduction to Wei Tianwu's *Contradiction and Evolution in New Poetry's Pursuit of Modernity: A Study of Poetics in the Nineties* (2006), he claims to view the notion of "poetry of the 1990s" as a chronological category, and intends to draw on literary-critical essays in order to explicate poetical developments in this decade.<sup>65</sup> However, Wei devotes almost all his attention to concepts taken from N-poetics. In six chapters, he discusses so-called Pure Poetry, Intellectual Writing, Middle-Age Writing, Individual Writing, Narrativity, and Zheng Min's 郑敏 criticism. Zheng is a deeply respected woman poet who came to prominence in the 1940s and took a highly critical view of early 21<sup>st</sup>-century developments in poetry. It is remarkable that Wei chooses to discuss Zheng's criticism but not Popular poetics, which would seem to be clearly more immediately relevant. As a matter of fact, Wei says of Zheng's criticism that it appreciates neither N-Poetry nor the

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<sup>65</sup> Wei 2006: 19.

Popular Standpoint,<sup>66</sup> which makes the meager presence of the latter in his own discussion all the more conspicuous.

Wei does not dedicate a chapter to the Popular Standpoint in itself,<sup>67</sup> but he does discuss it in the chapter of Intellectual Writing – and makes clear he believes that the Popular Standpoint should not count as “poetry of the 1990s.” He takes issue with the validity of Popular Writing as a designation of (important components of) poetry written in the 1990s:

民间写作，是出于论争的需要而被虚拟的一个对立方，难以视为九十年代诗歌理论的新动向。前已分析，他们的基本诗歌主张已经包容在知识分子写作观念中；另外，他们坚持自己是在第三代诗歌的“伟大传统”中前行，而且，他们将“坚持独立精神和自由创造的品质”这一切文学艺术都要追求的理想境界当作“民间立场”独有的做法，已消解了“民间立场”这一命名的意义。<sup>68</sup>

Popular Writing is an opposing position fabricated out of the need for one [generated by] the Polemic and can hardly been seen as a new trend in the theory of poetry written in the 1990s. As analyzed above, the essence of their poetics is contained within the concept of Intellectual Writing. Besides, they insist that they move forward within the “great tradition” of Third Generation Poetry. Moreover, they take “persisting in the spirit of independence and the trait of unrestricted ingenuity,” an ideal state that should be relentlessly pursued by all literature and art, as an approach that is exclusive to “the Popular Standpoint”. This makes “the Popular Standpoint” a meaningless designation.

Based on the Popular camp’s portrayal of Popular Writing’s historical anchorage in 1980s Third Generation Poetry, Wei argues that Popular Writing is not new to the 1990s. This observation leads him to conclude that the proposition of the Popular Standpoint is established merely as ammunition for the Polemic. He also considers the Popular camp’s

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<sup>66</sup> Wei 2006: 98, footnote 1.

<sup>67</sup> Wei 2006: 50–51.

<sup>68</sup> Wei 2006: 50.

designation as an appropriation of universal values now claimed to be exclusive to “the Popular Standpoint”, which renders them meaningless.

Wei’s reasoning is only convincing at first glance. If the Popular camp exudes a sense of exclusiveness in their designation of the Popular Standpoint and Wei sees this as an act of appropriation, the same thing should hold for N-poetics and the N-poets; for instance, as regards the notions of Individual Writing, Intellectual Writing, Narrativity, and the opposition of Pure Poetry,<sup>69</sup> all of which were construed so as to be “owned” by N-Poetry – in Cheng Guangwei’s and Hong Zicheng’s historical narratives, whose influence consequently shines through Wei’s study. If Wei had been consistent, this act of appropriation on the part of the N-poets should have nullified any substantive contribution by them to the development of poetry written in the 1990s, just like he says this holds for the Popular camp and *their* key notions and values.

Wei calls Popular Writing outdated. Remarkably, he spends several pages building up to this claim by arguing that Popular Writing can in fact be subsumed under Intellectual Writing,<sup>70</sup> which is why he situates his discussion of it in the chapter on Intellectual Writing. But if Popular Writing is really a 1980s thing – which would appear to be Wei’s position, since he says it is essentially an outgrowth of Third Generation Poetry and hence irrelevant to the development of poetry in the 1990s – then how can it be subsumed under Intellectual Writing, which Wei considers to be a 1990s phenomenon? Conversely, Wei’s reasoning could lead to the conclusion that Intellectual Writing is a thing of the 1980s just as much as the Popular Standpoint. In fact, since Wei (like Cheng Guangwei) portrays the entwinement between Intellectual Writing, Individual Writing, Narrativity, and Middle-Age Writing,<sup>71</sup> his subsumption of Popular Writing under Intellectual Writing should suggest that N-Poetry is no different from Third Generation Poetry.

### **Zeng Fangrong’s *Reconsideration and Reconstruction***

Zeng Fangrong’s *Reconsideration and Reconstruction: Criticism of Poetry of the 90s in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (2007) is divided into two parts. The first is Zeng’s reflection on the

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<sup>69</sup> For details about Pure Poetry, see: Wei 2006: 21–38.

<sup>70</sup> Wei 2006: 40–47.

<sup>71</sup> Wei 2006: 50, 66, and 73.



development of poetry written in the 1990s. In the second part, building on the first, Zeng offers guidance for the improvement of poetry in future years. In light of the focus of the present research, we focus here on the first part.

Similar to Wei Tianwu, Zeng asserts in the introduction to this study that he uses the notion of “poetry of the 1990s” as a chronological concept. As background to this viewpoint he describes how the notion changed over time, along lines with which the reader is familiar by now: he observes that during the 1990s, the notion gradually shifts from a reference to calendar chronology to an indication of aesthetic preference, in an act of appropriation by many poets and critics, most prominently Cheng Guangwei and Yu Jian. Zeng suggests that the Polemic obscures this shift from view and believes that a purely chronological approach will give a clearer view of the development of poetry in the 1990s and help him avoid the partisanship that marks the Polemic and its unhappy consequences for critical discourse.<sup>72</sup>

However, Zeng’s organization of his study paints a 1990s poetry scene that is not very different from that presented by Cheng Guangwei. Zeng considers Individual-ized Writing 个人化写作 and Narrativity as features shared across different poetry groups of the 1990s;<sup>73</sup> he appears to use the notions of Individualized Writing and Individual Writing more or less interchangeably. Zeng defines that Individualized Writing as follows:

诗人对现实生活的介入方式与对题材处理策略的重大调整，是诗人以独立身份从个人立场出发，对生命处境与生活体验的一种话语方式和表达姿态。它是一种强调个人话语权力与个体自由生存状态的反映，突出了个人独立的声音、语感、风格和个体间话语差异的一种新的写作形式。<sup>74</sup>

An important adjustment of the poets’ engagement with real life and their strategy for dealing with particular subject matter is constituted by the fact that, using an independent status, the poet proceeds from their individual standpoint, it is a discursive style and a posture for expression. It is a new way of writing that reflects

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<sup>72</sup> Zeng 2007: Introduction 1-12.

<sup>73</sup> Zeng 2007: 15, 24, and 45-46.

<sup>74</sup> Zeng 2007: 25-26.

the emphasis on an individual's discursive power and state of living freely and foregrounds an individual's unique voice, feel for language, style, and the differences in the command of language between individuals.

In other words, Individualized Writing is realized when poets represent their life circumstances and experiences in poetry with an independent status and from a personal point of view, an observation that echoes Cheng's and Yu Jian's emphasis on (political) independence in Individual Writing. Also, Zeng stresses the importance of poets' individuality for achieving such independence, manifest in things such as the poetic voice, the author's feel for language, and their style. This statement recalls Cheng and Yu's disagreement on the issue, but Zeng does not delve into it more deeply, instead discussing the matter in vague terms.<sup>75</sup> This allows him to stay away from the contestation between the Popular camp and the Intellectual camp. At the same time, Zeng foregrounds the notion of Narrativity, a cornerstone of N-poetics; thus, he implicitly sides with N-Poetry.

Zeng identifies three representative trends to build his picture of poetry written in the 1990s: Intellectual Writing, Popular Writing, and Women's poetry, and describes contributors to all three as practitioners of Individual(ized) Writing and Narrativity.<sup>76</sup> Thus, Individual(ized) Writing and Narrativity come to overarch and govern all three trends, including poetry by N-poets such as Wang Jiabin, Sun Wenbo, and Xi Chuan, Popular poets such as Yu Jian, Han Dong, and Yi Sha, and women poets such as Wang Xiaoni, Zhai Yongming, and Yi Lei 伊蕾. In light of critical discourse to date, this is untenable, not to say chaotic. Zeng does not explain how he arrives at this homogenizing view. He does not acknowledge the marked differences between Cheng Guangwei's and Yu Jian's perspectives on Individual Writing, discussed above. Nor does he elucidate the position of Women's poetry. This category barely appears in Cheng's and Yu's propositions; conversely, earlier contributors to critical discourse on Women's poetry such as Zhai Yongming, Tang Yaping 唐亚平, and Yi Lei have hardly engaged with the notion of Individual Writing. Thus, Women's poetry appears in Zeng's narrative with a glaring lack of context. Something similar holds for his discussion of Narrativity. Possibly, Zeng's

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<sup>75</sup> Zeng 2007: 22–26.

<sup>76</sup> Zeng 2007: 12–16, 28–41, 53–66, and 128–147.

positioning of individual poets in relation to these various labels could in fact work well, as long as he provided evidence and substantiated his proposals, but this he fails to do.

As such, Zeng's analysis does not engage with the relation between N-Poetry and the Popular Standpoint. In fact, the way Zeng deploys the various key notions in the debate renders Yu Jian's attempts to distinguish the Popular Standpoint from N-Poetry futile; and, prior to that, it leaves little room for N-Poetry to be a meaningful part of the landscape of poetry written in the 1990s to begin with. However, it is by using key elements from the collision of N-Poetry and the Popular Standpoint – especially Individual(ized) Writing and Narrativity – that Zeng builds his representation of poetry written in the 1990s. This affects the very foundations of his discussion, also and especially as regards his attempt to squeeze Women's poetry into a mold formed by poetical notions that are shorn of their discursive history.

To make matters worse, Zeng's discussion of examples of Individual(ized) Writing and Narrativity are marred by terminological confusion. Zeng declares that Individual(ized) Writing is not the same thing as writing that reflects individual character 个性 or style 风格, nor is it a synonym of privatized writing 私人化写作.<sup>77</sup> But at the same time, in practice, he comments on Han Dong's "Caresses" 抚摸 that:

这就是典型的“个人写作”，绝对的生活写实，绝对的个人体验，对现实生活的自然临摹、镜像式的显现，完全拒绝生活的诗意化。而这种写作态度，并非一二位诗人的出格与创新，而是一群诗人共同的审美追求……生活在他们的笔下全被庸俗化与琐屑化，甚至色情化。<sup>78</sup>

This is typical “Individual Writing,” an absolutely realistic portrayal of life, an absolutely personal experience, a true copy or mirror-like presentation of real life, an absolute rejection of the poeticization of life. Nevertheless, this attitude toward writing is not one or two poets' unconventionality and innovation. It is a group of poets' shared pursuit of aesthetics... Life, in their writing, is completely vulgarized and trivialized, even pornified.

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<sup>77</sup> Zeng 2007: 25.

<sup>78</sup> Zeng 2007: 13.

In chapter Two of Zeng's study, he offers the above-mentioned definition of "Individualized Writing" (emphasis added); but in the above quotation, in chapter One, Zeng calls Han's "Caresses" representative of "Individual Writing." This is an example of Zeng's problematic, interchanging use of Individualized Writing and Individual Writing. At any rate, Zeng appears to have difficulty in finding examples of Individual(ized) Writing, and what he sees as typical does not appear to be representative of his own definition. This discrepancy becomes more glaring in his further elaboration triggered by "Caresses," where he writes:

我们的诗人对平淡无意义的生活琐事的太多关注；对无聊的生活细节的过份热衷；对宏大事件的疏离拒绝；对大众集体意识与情感的漠视嘲讽……特别是臃肿拖沓的叙事策略，混沌迷离的文本内容，对自我隐私的喋喋不休，对现实生活的漠不关心，对无任何美学价值的生活细节的津津乐道……必然导致诗性的缺失，甚至沦为非诗。<sup>79</sup>

Our poets' excessive attention to tedious and meaningless trivia, their unrestricted enthusiasm for boring details about life, their indifferent rejection of grand events, their ironic perspective on the masses' collective consciousness and feelings... Especially their bloated and dragging narrative strategies, the chaotic and disoriented contents of their texts, their endless talk of personal privacy, their carelessness in the face of real life, their enthusiastic prattle about the details about a life that lacks all aesthetic values...[All this] inevitably leads to a lack of poetic quality, [with their poetry] sinking to [the status of] non-poetry.

Here, Zeng compares what he sees as typical Individual Writing to non-poetry. It turns out that Zhen indeed has difficulty in substantiating his definition of Individual Writing with representative examples. A similar situation occurs in his comments on examples of Narrativity. While asserting that Narrativity – which is as elusive in Zeng's discourse as in

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<sup>79</sup>Zeng 2007: 13.

that of other commentators – is different from narrative poetry, his readings of the poetry in question appear somewhat obsessively focused on finding the actual narrative in the texts under scrutiny, with narrative in the conventional sense, i.e. the telling of a story; this often also involves dialogue and plot.<sup>80</sup> In all, aside from the conceptual confusion outlined above, Zeng’s analysis is marred by a frequent mismatch between the concepts in question and the examples he mobilizes to illustrate them.

### **Wang Changzhong’s *Expanding Synthesis***

Like Wei Tianwu’s and Zeng Fangrong’s books, Wang Changzhong’s *Expanding Synthesis: A Research on Poetry Writing in the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (2010) opens with a discussion on his use of the notion of “poetry of the 1990s”. Similar to Zeng, Wang observes that many, including Cheng Guangwei and Yu Jian, have appropriated this for their favorite poets and poetry.<sup>81</sup> In regard to the various, rivalling attempts to monopolize the discourse on poetry written in the 1990s, Wang emphasizes that he does not intend to provide an exhaustive, comprehensive discussion. Instead, he specifies that his study is dedicated to poetry written in the 1990s that is marked synthesis 综合性<sup>82</sup> – a quality that happens to be noted by Cheng Guangwei in his *History*. Wang writes:

第三代诗（新生代诗）尽管已经是所谓“后现代主义”了，但不管是从文本事实，还是从理论主张来看，都与综合性沾不上多少边。自“中国新诗派”以来，综合性诗歌写作，或诗歌写作的综合性，是在 20 世纪 90 年代的现代汉诗界才被正式明确提出并付诸诗歌话语实践了的；也可以说，具有综合特质的诗歌，或者关于诗歌写作综合性的诗学，只有到了 20 世纪 90 年代才又出场于中国诗界。<sup>83</sup>

Although Third Generation Poetry (Newborn Generation Poetry) already counts as so-called “Post-Modernism,” in terms of either the actual texts or theoretical propositions, it has nothing to do with synthesis. Since the initiation of the

<sup>80</sup> Examples, see: Zeng 2007: 58, 61–64, and 67.

<sup>81</sup> Wang 2010: 9–13.

<sup>82</sup> Wang 2010: 21.

<sup>83</sup> Wang 2010: 24.

“Chinese New Poetry School” [an alternative name for the 1940s Nine Leaves School 九叶派], synthesizing poetry writing, or the synthesis of poetry writing, has not been formally submitted and put into practice in poetic language in the modern Chinese poetry scene until the 1990s. In other words, poetry that possesses the quality of synthesis, or poetics that concern the phenomenon of synthesis in poetry writing, only reemerged from China’s poetry scene in the 1990s.

Indeed, Wang claims that he does not use the term “synthesis” as a literary-critical category but uses it as a “descriptive” expression (even though this is a questionable distinction).<sup>84</sup> And, Wang dedicates the seven chapters of this study to seven facets of poetry written in the 1990s that he finds unique to the “synthesizing” representation of Chinese poetry. Specifically, to portray what he sees as constituting this unique feature, Wang puts poetry written in the 1990s into historical perspective and draws comparisons between the 1990s poets on the one hand and their predecessors of both ancient and modern times, on the other, in regard to attitudes toward individuality, dominant ideologies, and the art of poetic representation. Crucially, while Wang claims that the phenomenon of synthesis takes priority over any other trend in poetry in his study,<sup>85</sup> his examples of choice mostly fall into the category of N-poetics, such as Individual Writing, Intellectual Writing, and Narrativity. Moreover, Wang frequently draws on critical and poetical writings by N-poets such as Xi Chuan, Zang Di, and Wang Jiaxin, and rarely on those by critics and poets of Popular persuasion. Instead of explicitly setting N-poetics as the framework for his study of poetry written in the 1990s, like Wei Tianwu, Wang effectively repackages N-Poetry as a progressive force for the development of contemporary poetry.

Wang’s implicit foregrounding of N-poetics echoes Wei Tianwu’s study. However, the problem is further aggravated in Wang’s study because he barely pays attention to the Popular Standpoint at all. The reader will recall that according to Wei, Popular Writing can be subsumed under Intellectual Writing, and Intellectual Writing is entwined with the

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<sup>84</sup> Wang 2010: 38.

<sup>85</sup> Wang 2010: 21–22 and 214–219.

other features of N-poetic; for Wang's work, this would imply that the Popular Standpoint is just as capable of generating synthesis as N-Poetry, but it remains entirely absent from his line of vision.

**Zhang Taozhou's *Compendium of Chinese New Poetry (Volume 8, 1989-2000)***

Zhang Taozhou takes a similar approach to Wang's, in his *Compendium of Chinese New Poetry (Volume 8, 1989-2000)* (2010) – Zhang's contribution to a 2010 multiple-editor reference work. In his introduction to the volume on the period from 1989 to 2000, Zhang chooses neither the terminology of N-poetics nor that of Popular poetics to structure his discussion of poetry written in the 1990s. Yet, N-poetics implicitly remains a progressive force for the development of this poetry. Concretely, this is because Zhang allows N-poets' poetical statements to dominate the discussion.

Zhang's compilation calls to mind Cheng Guangwei's *Portrait*. However, unlike Cheng, Zhang neither confines himself to those associated with *Tendency* and *The Southern Poetry Review* nor introduces his personal relationship with N-poets. Instead, Zhang uses his essay to question and reconsider the poetical history of the 1990s, in light of the struggles over its discursive representation between the Popular camp and the Intellectual camp that erupted in the Polemic. Zhang describes his strategy as staying alert to poets' actual writings and ensuring that his frame of reference is suitable for them. Zhang's critical viewpoint shows the potential for expanding our horizons on poetry written in the 1990s.<sup>86</sup>

However, not unlike Wang Changzhong, Zhang's ambitions are offset by his over-reliance on discourse produced by the N-poets. Zhang cites many poets, including those associated with N-Poetry and with the Popular Standpoint but also those who fall in neither category. Nevertheless, he mostly draws on the statements by N-poets Ouyang Jianghe, Xi Chuan, Wang Jiabin, and Zang Di to set the tone for his observations or substantiate them. This does not automatically discredit his analysis, since in the discourse on poetry written in the 1990s, there is quite simply more N-poetic discourse available,

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<sup>86</sup> Zhang 2010: 10.

with Yu Jian and some of his fellow Popular poets fighting an uphill battle in this regard (an issue to which we will return in later chapters). However, Zhang's representation of poetry written in the 1990s organically hangs together on the basis of N-poetics. As such, it is in line with the other studies reviewed here, further continuing the trend first triggered by the publication of Cheng Guangwei's *Portrait*.

### **Zhang Liqun's narrative in Wu Sijing's *A Survey History of Chinese Poetry: Contemporary Volume***

Zhang Liqun's 张立群 historical narrative<sup>87</sup> of the 1990s as included in *A Survey History of Chinese Poetry: Contemporary Volume* (2012) 中国通史：当代卷, edited by Wu Sijing, reaffirms the continuity suggested by Zhang Taozhou's strategy as the editor of the *Compendium* volume. This observation stems from Zhang Liqun's emphasis on Individualized Writing and Narrativity as overarching features of poetry written in the 1990s,<sup>88</sup> also calling to mind Zeng Fangrong's study.

Indeed, Zhang Liqun's historical narrative is as unsound as Zeng Fangrong's. In Zhang's case, the crux of the issue is not so much a discrepancy between definitions and examples. Rather, a theoretical difficulty emerges as Zhang's portrayal of the entwinement between Individualized Writing and Narrativity is read together with the association he establishes between Individualized Writing and Popular Writing.<sup>89</sup> While Zhang also notes the strong connection between Popular Writing and colloquial language,<sup>90</sup> the said entwinement and association raise questions about the distinction between Narrativity and colloquial language. As Narrativity is presented as one of the two overarching features of poetry written in the 1990s in Zhang's historical narrative, this argumentative structure suggests the subsumption of colloquial language under Narrativity. This result conflicts with not only Cheng Guangwei's N-Poetry but also Yu Jian's Popular Standpoint. Zhang does not confine his discussion of Popular poets such as Yi Sha, Xu Jiang, Yang Ke, and Hou Ma to the context of the Polemic, and dedicates an entire section to them in their own

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<sup>87</sup> Wu 2012: 705.

<sup>88</sup> Wu 2012: 522–524.

<sup>89</sup> Wu 2012: 523–524 and 546–547.

<sup>90</sup> Wu 2012: 540–541.



right,<sup>91</sup> but his argumentative structure erases their poetical identity as a distinct component of discourse on poetry written in the 1990s. This inaccuracy, in turn, renders Zhang's entire historical narrative of the 1990s less convincing, where he claims that Individualized Writing is represented not only by proponents of Intellectual Writing Wang Jiaxin, Zang Di, and Sun Wenbo, but also by those who are not associated with either Popular Writing or Intellectual Writing, such as Zheng Danyi 郑单衣, Duo Yu 朵渔, and Liu Chun 刘春.

## V. Conclusion

Cheng Guangwei's position in *Portrait* is one-sided and offers an incomplete and arguably distorted vision of poetry written in the 1990s. However, the studies reviewed above show that the opposition generated by Cheng's position did not lead to its collapse. On the contrary, N-poetics occupies an absolutely dominant position in the years after the Polemic, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century; and Popular poetics fade from view, at best subsumed as a side show under N-poetics and at worst becoming invisible altogether. There are obvious problems with each of the studies reviewed here, but this overall trend runs through all of them.

A glaring problem across these studies is that they fail to truly engage with the nitty-gritty of the clash of Popular poetics and N-poetics during the Polemic. Hence, in the following chapter we move back in time from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to the years 1998-2000 and the Polemic itself, to do just that. This will be a key contribution to scholarship on the Polemic to date, which has by and large overlooked the crucial importance to both camps of the notion of "Poetry of the Nineties", the expression that lies at the heart of this study.

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<sup>91</sup> Wu 2012: 540-546.