When Wang Anyi was only one year old, she moved to Shanghai with her mother, the novelist Bu Ziyuan. Today, Wang Anyi herself is, arguably, the most influential writer of Shanghai and her stories consistently use the city as a backdrop. Yet in a recent public interview, Wang Anyi confessed that she ‘doesn’t feel Shanghai’; though she added, ‘but, neither can I say that I’m not Shanghaiish, because if I’m not, then where am I from?’

Ms Wang sits on the stage, wearing an ankle-length skirt and a long shawl draped around her shoulders. Her brightly eyes scan the audience with curiosity. Sitting up straight, hair pinned back, feet placed firmly on the ground, hands clasped neatly on her knees, she exudes both a distinguished writer and a down-to-earth peasant woman, an intriguing paradox that she shares with several other mainland Chinese intellectuals.

It is not difficult to picture Ms Wang 40 years ago, when most ‘urban youths’ were sent to the countryside for ‘re-education’ — I still consider it an important turning point in my writing: from the houses, the cars, the people, but the people remain nameless. Although there is something quite funny about it: even though my mother was furious and kept nagging about how this family would possibly be less than 50 per cent intelligible for speakers of Mandarin, the national standard language).”

‘My relations with Shanghai are tense’

An interview with Wang Anyi

Although my work from before the 1990s does not itself limit itself to the countryside, the city did indeed play a role in it; it was always in the background of the plot. At that time, my work focused on the characters, their emotions, and how they grew in the story. Shanghai is the place where I live and I think people are usually not so conscious of their own living environment. So that’s probably also the reason that when I wrote stories set in Shanghai, I didn’t really reflect on the place where the characters where living. Since the 1990s, though my work still focuses on rural and urban experiences, the city become more concrete, and sometimes even the main character of a story. For example, in my short story ‘The Street’, the street itself is actually only the character and forms the whole plot; I describe the houses, the cars, the people, but the people remain nameless. Although I am very critical of this story – I think it is rather boring – I still consider it an important turning point in my writing: from now on Shanghai became an important subject in my work.

After each question, Wang Anyi vigorously keeps on talking until the interviewer interrupts her for the next. She is small, quick-witted, and sharp, at times appearing to think out loud and continue until the interviewer interrupts her for the next. She is open, without objectivity is relative, of course, since it’s overruled by my own passions and I like to watch other people’s lives. I’m not a reader but a spectator, observing the lives of others and even the most trivial things. When young people aspire to become a writer ask for advice, I always tell them that the main talent of a writer is to observe.

A talent that Wang Anyi attributes particularly to women: not only because they ‘have a great capacity for strong emotions’ as ‘emotional beings’, but also, again, because of their ‘outsider’s position’. Note

Wang Anyi’s most influential novel, Song of Everlasting Sorrow, a story that follows the adventures of a Shanghai woman from when she participated in a Miss Shanghai contest in the 1940s until her tragic death in the 1980s. The English translation carries the subtitle ‘A Novel of Shanghai’, revealing that it is actually the history of Shanghai that is being portrayed through the life story of the protagonist, a woman of course:

‘I don’t dare to say that the protagonist Wang Qiyao represents the city, because if I would say that, readers might point out qualities that are missing. But I did try to keep many characteristics of the protagonist resonant with the city. For example, Wang Qiyao is from a common background, born in a common family, which is just like Shanghai. In China, Shanghai is a relatively mature society consisting of an urban middle class that barely inherited anything from the past, but had to start from scratch, on its own and without being too ambitious. So the city and its people take it one step at a time. What I like about Wang Qiyao, and what is also true for the city, is that although she is very pretty and tender, she is a strong woman at heart. She doesn’t care about her duties according to the social norms, but pursues things despised by contemporary values, which is why she is always defeated. But of course, Shanghai is a much stronger women and it is developing into a negativity. So, I can’t say Wang Qiyao is a representative of Shanghai, then she is like Boston key on the wall of an old Shanghai building: a beautiful decoration of the city.”

Lena Scheden