

Long-distance call

Chelsea Shover

Wang Ping, author of seven books and a collection of personal essays coming out next year, says she became a writer by accident.

'I just walked into the wrong classroom and bumped into this writing class, and I stayed and I started writing. It was coincidence, but there is no coincidence; I feel that deep in my heart I always wanted to write.'

Wang was born in Shanghai and grew up on a small island in the East China Sea. The Cultural Revolution postponed her formal education although she kept reading.

'I just read whatever books I could find at that time,' she says. Wang traded whatever she could for reading material and her passion for the printed word got her into trouble with her parents. 'I got a lot of beatings.'

As soon as she was able, Wang continued her education, at the Hangzhou Foreign Language School. In 1980, she took the college entrance exam and earned a place at Peking University, where she studied English.

It was in the United States, during graduate studies at Long Island University, that Wang chanced upon the poetry class that kick-started her career.

'I was curious enough to sit down, even though it was the wrong class. [In] the second class, everyone wrote. I wrote my first story and everyone really liked it and, [after] the second story, the teacher said I should start writing a novel. And that just made me realise [what it was] I wanted to do all the time.'

Her first book, a collection of short stories - called *American Visa* - was published in 1994.

In 1989, Wang's professor introduced her to 'beat' poet Allen Ginsberg, who needed a translator. A few years later, she began writing poetry of her own. 'Even though I'm writing mostly in prose right now, I'm very interested in writing poetry,' she says. 'Writing a novel you have to work every day but poetry [comes in spurts]. Sometimes I read other people's work to get a rhythm, sometimes I walk and meditate. Sometimes I dream, sometimes it just pours out of me.'

'I write a lot about China, a lot about New York, immigration issues, women's issues,' she says. Her dissertation on footbinding was published as the cultural study *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China*.

In the creative writing workshops she teaches at Macalester College, in her hometown of Saint Paul, Minnesota, Wang tells her students that 'first of all they must have a story to tell, then the voice will come'. For her own inspiration, she refers to Chinese philosophy and often draws upon memories for material for her writings. 'I use my personal experiences as a springboard,' she explains, 'and once I jump off, then [it's a] free world.'
