Life on a strip : essayism and emigration in contemporary chinese literature

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Essayism and Emigration in Contemporary Chinese Literature

by

Joanna Krenz

Photographs on the front and back cover:
Möbius strip-inspired Chinese Lucky Knot Bridge in the city of Changsha.
Photographer: Krzysztof Kowalczyk

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Promotiecommissie:	Prof. Dr. Ernst van Alphen (Leiden University) Prof. Dr. Jeroen de Kloet (University of Amsterdam) Prof. Dr. Esther Peeren (University of Amsterdam)

Contents

Acknowledgements

This work is not as much an effect of institutionally embedded systematic research with clearly distinguished periods of fieldwork, data processing, analysis, and writing, as it is a synthesis of many years of readings, observations and reflections on literature, which started taking shape more concretely during my undergraduate and graduate studies at the Chinese Department and the Polish Philology Faculty of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (AMU) in 2008-2013 under the guidance of many professors. Their support exceeded the intellectual. Anna Legeżyńska, professor of Polish literature, specializing in contemporary poetry was the first teacher who courageously accepted an invitation to my literary laboratory several years ago, when it was still very under-equipped yet, and was lacking in safety regulations, so any simple reaction could have had catastrophical effects. If things did not blow up, it was thanks to her.

Core elements of this study emerged gradually and were continuously updated through my interactions, sometimes intended and long-planned, and sometimes totally haphazard (on Chinese trains, in the street, facing bookstore's shelves), with people from all walks of life I encountered during my own physical and metaphorical migrations. Some may not even know they were involved, much less realize how much they helped. All those whose constructive influence on my way of thinking of literature, culture and the world at large I am able to identify will always remain in my grateful memory. Help sometimes comes through most unexpected channels and bears most unexpected fruit. This is what my communication with Krzysztof Kowalczyk, the author of the cover photographs, taught me, also confirming once again in my life that the most beautiful way to pay for a favor one has received is to pass the good on to a next person.

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Kochani, dziękuję Wam za miłość, za sprawą której wszystko staje się możliwe, także rzeczy znacznie trudniejsze i ważniejsze od doktoratu, i za najwspanialszy dom na tej ziemi, dzięki któremu z najdalszych wypraw wracam zawsze do siebie, w dwojakim sensie tegoż wyrażenia, z cudownym poczuciem, jakbym wyszła jedynie na spacer.

Introduction

Questions

Looking back at my research on (Chinese) literature to date, I have realized that for all its thematic diversity, it has always revolved around the same, not very original yet unpacked, Big Questions on the relationship between *life* and literary *writing* – with, strictly speaking, "life" meaning everything *but* writing, or those parts of life that have a bearing on writing in one way or another. Sometimes explicit, sometimes present only between the lines, these questions were significantly determining the orientation, the scope and the direction of my (pre-)academic reflections. What relation is there between the lived and the written? What is the role and the status of the author with regard to their own text? To what extent does one's life determine one's writing? If there is a mechanism that connects lived experiences and written worlds, does this work differently for individual authors or texts, or is there something more universal, or minimally repeatable or reproducible to it? How to define these things in a way that will *not* constrain the interpretation of a literary text to the reconstruction of biographical detail and *will* do justice to author's obvious presence in their own work? When and how may a reader's life be connected with literary realities? And how – if at all – does literature exist without authors and/or readers?

The present study continues along these lines, albeit in a different research environment. Not in the library, where books are safely isolated from the external world, but in a conceptual space that resembles a laboratory. This implies that instead of reexamining abstract *relations* between basically independent and stable realms of life and literature, I focus on *reactions* – where both the lived and the written are substrates from which new substance emerges in the dynamic processes of synthesis, replacement or decomposition. But my laboratory is not a Large Hadron Collider. It is small, in terms of spacetime and facilities, by which I mean my knowledge, intelligence, methodological apparatus, and imagination. Therefore the scale of the experiments and the number of reactants has had to be downsized. The mysterious particle whose qualities I try to grasp – my Higgs boson, so to speak – is the *essay*. My "Higgs field", whose "quantum excitation" is believed to result in the famed boson's creation, is the phenomenon of *emigration*. It is taken as a factor that may condition or catalyze the essay's emergence and its transformations.

Briefly put, then, this study is about the said Big Questions, tailored to my interests and abilities, and to the size of a PhD thesis. The theme that had preoccupied me for a long time, before I started thinking about an actual research proposal, was different. Based on my earlier observations, especially of Eastern and Central European literary history, and in line with personal reading preferences, I wanted to write about what I perceived – not without

sadness – as emigrant authors abandoning poetry; with poetry being abandoned, in many cases, in favor of the essay. Further observations led me to the conclusion that not just poetry suffers the consequences of what one Polish scholar called an "invasion by the essay",[1] but also other genres, both fiction and non-fiction, e.g. in the case of Liao Yiwu (b. 1958), a Chinese poet, reporter and activist currently living in Germany, who was the protagonist of my BA and MA research in Chinese Studies. Also, this suffering does not necessarily signify a fatal disease, but sometimes comes from, say, teething troubles or growth at large, here intended as a metaphorical anticipation of the phenomenon of *essayization*, meaning interference by the essayistic paradigm with other literary genres. What made me abandon the idea of writing about poetry being abandoned and invert the perspective, proceeding rather from the essay than from its "victims", was the voice of reason. This reason was laced with idealism rather than pragmatism. It continued to scold me for a lack of self-criticism, and kept painfully reminding me that writing in a school-taught foreign language (English, in this case) on a subject such as poetry is profane. And what about translations, from one non-native tongue (Chinese) to another (English)? In the end, poetry outsmarted reason and somehow claimed to be able to make its way through a minefield of polonisms and sinicisms, establishing quantitative domination in my work, despite my efforts to maintain a "fair" balance of texts and authors in various genres.

Knowledge and language

This study itself may appear somewhat experimental, in terms of theory and methodology, and of my practical approach to the interpretation of texts, if only because its conceptualization draws inspiration from theoretical physics. Still, for all my inclinations to indulge in logical and linguistic play, this is not what I was aiming at, and I did my best never to allow the perceived experimentality to enter the stage for its own sake, but always in service of the Big Questions. And nearly always as the ultimate hope – to which however, in discourses on the essay and on emigration alike, one needs to resort on a regular basis. What we lack is not more "knowledge" but a language for speaking about the essay and emigration: effective vocabulary, syntax and rhetoric that will reflect relations between verbalized facts, things and images, and allow us to connect them without distorting them or gluing them together with the unsightly plasticine of academic sophistry. This is one reason why I feel attracted to the language of the natural sciences, intended for speaking about nature itself, which we know better today than in Newton's time. To various degrees, the natural phenomena, such as the Higgs boson, and other natural-scientific terminology that will appear in this study have become part of present-day general conversations about the surrounding world. I want them to work as biodegradable metaphorical packages, which one can safely throw away after the content is used up. There are languages all around us, and we should tap into their potential.

Collecting the primary material concerning Chinese emigration literature or the Chinese essay, or specifically Chinese emigration(-related) essays is not a big challenge. Potential source texts are not only abundant, but have also been widely anthologized, which

[1] Dybciak 1977.

usually implies: carefully selected by specialists, organized chronologically and/or thematically, preceded by extensive introductions, supplemented with commentaries and a critical apparatus, and moreover, often available in English. Among collections that proved particularly useful for me were especially two Chinese-language books of essays: *The Undying Exile* (不死的流亡者, 2005) edited by Zheng Yi, and Lin Xianzhi and Xiao Jianguo's *A History of Chinese Writers Returning Home in Spirit* (中国作家的精神还乡史, 2008; in six volumes); the former due to its selection of texts suitable for my study, the latter because of the historical and philosophical foundation it provides for observations on Chinese emigrant writing. I benefited also from David Pollard's English-language anthology *The Chinese Essay* (2000), which presents a panoramic view of the Chinese essay across centuries and helps to solve many translatorial problems that emerge when Chinese genre categories are rendered in European languages.

Secondary material, i.e. studies dealing with emigration (literature) and the essay in its various definitions is not in short supply either. In addition to numerous individual meta-essays authored by Theodor Adorno (1984), Gyorgy Lukács (1974), Virginia Woolf (1953, 1957) and Max Bense (1969) among others, which make for fascinating yet highly inconclusive reading, several guides to the essay-related literary-philosophical discourse help to organize this scholarship. These include e.g. Réda Bensmaïa's *The Barthes Effect: the Essay as Reflective Text* (Barthes à l'essai: introduction au texte réfléchissant, 1987), Claire de Obaldia's *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (1995), and Roma Sendyka's *The Modern Essay: Studies of Historical Awareness of the Genre* (Nowoczesny esej. Studium historycznej świadomości gatunku, 2006). Although their scope is limited to Western essayism, many of the arguments translate well for Chinese literature, and some have been directly adopted by contemporary Chinese scholars and authors. Readers unfamiliar with the history and theory of the Chinese essay will benefit from Charles Laughlin's *The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity* (2008) and from *The Modern Chinese Literary Essay* (2000), edited by Martin Woesler, which gathers papers by scholars including Liu Ximin, Lu Jie, Mary Scoggins, Tam King-Fai and Wang Ban, discussing different aspects of Chinese essayism and offering interesting case studies. Chinese-language scholarship on the essay and essay-related phenomena, especially essayization in poetry and fiction, is almost inexhaustible. Among scholars to whom my work owes the most are Wang Zengqi (1947, 1986, 1988; Wang & She 1988), Chen Zhu (1998), Chen Yizhen (2000), Chu Qinghua (2003), Zhang Zhenjin (2003) and Lin Xianzhi (2011), and many other names will appear later on at specific moments in the present work.

Conversely, in the case of emigration and emigration literature, there are many more publications in Western languages than in Chinese, especially on the period on which I focus: mainland Chinese contemporary literature roughly from 1980s on. This was the moment when China started recovering from the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and emigration became a real possibility or, in some cases, a necessity. In China, as a result of widespread (self-)censorship, not much has been published about, for instance, writings by "Tiananmen exiles" who left the country after the massacre on 4 June 1989 due to (the threat of) persecution or did so, or claim to have done so, because of other political problems. Matters such as these have been explored and described in a wide range of English-language

publications, both from broad perspectives (e.g. Ang 2001; Buruma 1999, 2001; Chiu 2008; Chow 1991, 1993; Edmond 2010, 2012; Huang Yibing 2001 a, b; Kao 1993; Krämer 1999, 2002, 1996; Kong Belinda 2012; Lee Gregory 1993; Liu Tao Tao 2001; Quah 2004; Wang Dan 2005; Wang Kan 2012; Wang Ning 1997, 2000, 2008 a, b; Yeh Michelle 1998; Yeh Wen-hsin 2000; Zhang Yingjin 1999; Zhang Zhen 1999 a, b; Zhao Henry 1997, 2000; Zhou Qichao 2010) and from the perspective of individual poetics (e.g. Brady 1997; Chung 2012; Huang Alexander 2012; Kam 2012; Li Dian 2006, 2007; Li Jessica 2006; Mazzilli 2015; Rollins & Chiang 2010; Tan 2007; Van Crevel 1996; Yang Winston L.Y. 1981; Zheng Yi 2007). In the context of internal emigration, i.e. within China's borders, Sun Wanning's publications (Sun 2012, 2014) on cultural practices as linked to phenomena such as urbanization and the domestic East-West divide are highly instructive.

All in all, there is no dearth of information. What is important for me in the two discourses on the essay and on emigration is that both are persistently, albeit sometimes awkwardly, seeking for answers to "my" Questions, about connections between life and writing. They approach these issues from different directions that may be viewed as opposite. The essayologists start from writing, testing what we might term the essay's existential capacity, while the emigratologists start from life and, often rather obtrusively, trace its presence in literature. So: why not try to benefit from the findings of both approaches, addressing the question simultaneously from two sides that mutually verify and transform? Not at all incidentally, since, as we will soon discover, they are indeed a single side.

What this thesis wants to do; and what essayism, emigration and Chinese literature have to do with this

The overarching paradox that emerges from modern discourse on the essay and generates endless smaller paradoxes may be sketched in a single sentence that unsurprisingly self-contradicts: *The essay is theoretically the most natural and practical, and practically the most theorized and artificial form of literary creation.* Any statement aimed at describing the essay – even a seemingly technical definition such as calling it a genre – gives rise to discussions and controversy engaging intelligent and influential brains in Western literary criticism, and almost immediately turns into philosophical debate on the sense and essence of literature at large. The matter is no less complex within Chinese literary criticism. Chinese language has several different (quasi-)generic terms for what is known as the essay in English, and no consistent definition for any of these, even if they all contain a clear hermeneutic potential I tap into in the first part of this study. In a sense, the very presence of this paradox is paradoxical itself. Arguably, if there is any common "essayistic intention" shared by all essayists, it is precisely to reconcile life and text – in whatever way they understand these notions – and not to play them off against one another. If they attack the writing's literariness, this is usually because they find it insufficiently "lively"; and if they declare, in Nietzschean fashion, the necessity of artistically re-creating or self-creating their life, this usually happens due to their perception of this life being insufficiently "aesthetic".

Whether in the West or in China,[2] by employing the essay, an author usually signals that they are distancing themselves from genre conventions taken as ready-made and commonly accepted constructions that facilitate expression, communication or reception of the content of a literary work. Instead, the essay is expected to advance the creation of a one-off form that belongs with a particular experience, whether physical or intellectual or spiritual, being a substitute for rather than a mimetic copy of lived experience, and constituting a new syncretic and dynamic formation. "The essay as form", to refer to the title of Adorno's study, is a peculiar conceptual shape that allows the author to establish an inextricable and unconditional linkage between their life and the intra-textual world of their work, while preserving their independence and a clear distinction of the natural and the artificial. It could be imagined as a visually two-sided Möbius strip, which in fact is single-sided and single-edged.

A model of the Möbius strip can be created by giving a paper strip a half-twist, and then joining the ends together to form a loop. So let's take a strip of paper and place *life* on one side and *writing* on the other side, twist it and glue together the ends, and it turns out that the two sides are now one side, and one may walk through the realities of both life and writing without leaving the track, so to speak. Easy, right? In an era when "binary opositions" count as intellectual and moral transgression, the Möbius strip offers a beautiful perspective of a safe dualism to which we still mentally cling, but without the discredited binarity. No wonder that it has gained notable popularity in the humanities in recent years, with many different or irreconcilable conceptual pairs printed on its would-be respective surfaces and forced into rapprochement. However, neither its other features nor the dangers concealed in its seemingly perfect structure have been sufficiently discussed. One of the goals of this study is overcoming, or minimally redefining and broadening, this hegemonic shape that (implicitly) informs hidden structures of modern discourses in various disciplines; these include essayism and, for instance, certain paradigms in physics, as we shall see later.

Another goal is showing that this Möbius-stripness, with the essay as one of its manifestations and contemporary physics and translation studies discourse as two more examples, is a common, perhaps natural yet far from perfect, way of our dealing with perplexities of existence. Contradictions that cannot be solved in our "flat" world are believed to be reconcilable once we add (or imagine adding) an extra dimension, that is: once we twist the 2D paper into a 3D space and get a complex but consistent Whole. Is this how humans are wired? Can we ever overcome this feature of ourselves? This is material for the discussion in the interlude and parts two and three of this study. For now, let's stick to the simple idea that the Möbius strip illustrates coherence in twistedness, and the integrity of two independent factors, without merging them or blurring intuitive boundaries. When standing somewhere on its surface, one still feels there is content "above one's head" and textual construction "under one's feet". The only real boundary of the Möbius-strip-shaped essperience, if the reader will forgive the expression, is an author who twists themselves into their work and ensures the continuity of this universe.

[2] I am aware of the unbalanced nature of comparisons between China / Chinese and "the West" / "Western" – but equally aware of their ubiquitousness in the study of Chinese literature (that's right: in the China and the West).

This quality of the essay may shed light on the popularity of the form among authors in emigration. Reposing their hopes in the existence-preserving or minimally subject(hood)-preserving function of the essay as a "life particle", they tend to produce such particles at significant stages of their journey to prove their presence, metaphorically conquer, colonize or just domesticate the place, build a shelter for themselves or mark the track in case they want to return. "Stationary" writers, in turn, often do not need to produce such forms at all. While they are always present in their "place of writing", the need to *re*-present themselves in this place is not as pressing, at least as long as there is no threat of banishment, death or other things that may move them to leave their locales. Needless to say, being "always present" is a purely hypothetical situation, but arguably the further and the more radically one moves, in space, time or spirit, the more of those strip-shaped traces one is likely to leave behind. Hence my hypothesis about emigration as an experience that is especially likely to generate essays. Obviously, this does not imply that those not perceived as emigrants never write essays, or that those who migrate write essays only due to, or about, their being on the road.

The essayistic Möbius strip is an unorientable surface – i.e. a surface on which one cannot define directions – made from two orientable surfaces with clearly distinguishable vectors, twisted and glued together: the written and the lived. What intrigues me more than other aspects of essay-writing is the process of synchronizing vectors of text – that is, directions into which one's hand and mind are more or less consciously pulled by things like linguistic structures, genre conventions, intertextual mechanisms – and vectors in which they are driven by lived experience. Interestingly, Chinese literature offers notably good laboratory conditions for such observations. For all the terminological confusions caused by the essay and kindred texts, in Chinese 20th-century literary theory and practice, some of the classical Chinese essayistic forms entered quite consistent and predictable evolutionary paths, and their definitions began, somehow, to stabilize. My attention is drawn especially by three, currently predominant, types of the essay: *sanwen* 散文, *suibi* 随笔 and *zawen* 杂文. Their names, meaning literally 'dispersed / dispersing (the) text', 'following the brush / pen' and 'mixed / hybrid text', aptly reflect the (dis-)orientation of their textual surfaces, i.e. the directions in which the text develops, and certain types of essayistic mechanics that I call *recollecting*, *collecting* and *re-collecting.* With due awareness of their complexity and of the pitfalls of etymology- or literal-translation-based definitions, the properties of each type will be explained and discussed in chapter 1, where I explore different private histories and private theories of the essay created by authors in emigration in its various senses.

It needs underscoring yet that the Chinese terms cited above are not employed as eyeholes that provide insight into Chinese literary tradition, or anchor my research in this tradition. Rather, they are meant to contribute to a general discussion on the essay and essay-related phenomena, and on literature and its connections with life at large. They thematize ideas that Western scholarship on the essay and on literature in general lacks or has not (yet) managed to verbalize. In a nutshell, this work has no literary-historical ambitions. It grows from my conviction that Chinese and Western literary thought – which I employ here as coordinates rather than pigeonholes – illuminate and complement each other, and that *together* they can tell us things that neither can handle alone.

Also, I hold that if Chinese literature may finally be moved out from under the shadow of Orientalism, this will not happen through pure literary-historical research that relies on descriptive and hermeneutic methodologies aimed at introducing or explaining Chinese authors to a Western audience, or through (pigeonholy) comparative studies. It will happen only if we allow Chinese texts to be an equiponderant part of a general discourse on literature and beyond. If Greek mythology, Plato, Shakespeare, Hölderlin and Baudelaire can be a point of departure for thinkers who proceed from textual analysis to the construction of wide-ranging philosophical reflection, then so can be the ancient Chinese *Classic of Poetry* (诗经), the Song-dynasty essays by Su Dongpo, and the 18th-century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦), or 20th-century avant-garde poetry.

Chinese literature does not have to be the silent recipient of Western theories used by foreign and sometimes also domestic scholars, as an imposition or a mark of honor or something in between. (This is not to say that there is anything wrong with the mobilization of Western theory in the study Chinese literature, as long as as there is an awareness of this issue and a transparent engagement with it.) Instead, it can constitute an equally important source of theoretical reflection itself, which this study hopes to show indirectly by reconstructing literary micromechanics from close readings of, and close listenings to, Chinese texts. In this respect, my perspective is not so much comparative as collaborative. This is another reason of my employment of natural-scientific language. In terms of local-cultural implications, this language is semantically almost empty, and it may serve as a medium of not just a productive dialogue, but a real collaboration between the two cultural universes that fill it with their most valuable content.

Put differently, solid foundations have been laid by scholars and translators like Pollard, Laughlin and Woesler in the field of essayism, and other researchers in various literary genres and epochs, who have made major achievements in bringing Chinese literature to Western readers. Now it is time to start, gratefully, to build on these foundations. We can draw on different discourses and languages and different aesthetics and techniques, but we should not dodge this task, because a true, mutually enriching encounter will hinge on our ability to live (in) each other's ideas. If my own style in this study tends toward polymorphic eclecticism, this is because I wish to signal the many perspectives that such enterprises may open. If elegance is the price I must pay for this at times, so be it.

The notion of emigration is my point of departure for reflection on different forms of displacement. Technically and literally, as in Edward Said's definition, emigration means leaving one's country or region to settle in another, for any reason, voluntarily or otherwise.[3] Metaphorically, it refers to any act of abandoning mentally one's default mode of existence for the sake of another one, e.g. "inner emigration" to imagined or written worlds, or "virtual emigration" to the World Wide Web. What connects all these experiences is their obvious orientability: a clearly established beginning, a final destination and a direction unambiguously determined by these two. However, under certain circumstances, ranging from the purely political or ideological to the purely artistic or textual, this mechanism may be disrupted, to the effect of complete disorientation – which I

[3] Said 2000: 181-182.

identify as the state of exile – or reoriented, i.e. transformed into *im*-migration. I pay particular attention to "disoriented" emigrations. Still, just like for the essay, these phenomena are not the actual object of my research, and as such, I have not engaged deeply with the abundant scholarship on literature and emigration as a field of inquiry in its own right. Rather, they are a factor that brings out other things that become specifically evident in the emigrant context, such as the authors' need to synchronize life with writing.

Chapter outline

Part one of this study centers on collisions and superpositions of the two vectors – of the emigration experience and the text – once these two have become essayistically twisted. Chapter 1 takes an extra-textual perspective, which is of course a tricky notion in this case. By analyzing different utterances on the essay as part of the broader explicit poetics of emigrant authors, I chart the "reaction" in question, and discuss the consequences it has for (notions of) the author and the reader. Chapter 2 scrutinizes the same processes focusing on individual essays, and testing the properties and the endurance of various essayistic Möbius strips.

In part two, comprised of chapters 3-5, I explore possibilities, reasons and consequences of carrying out the "essayistic operation" on originally non-essayistic texts, that is (re-)shaping other forms in the image of the essay. A detailed technical description and visualization of this phenomenon are presented in the interlude preceding part two. Chapter 3 revolves around ontological implications of essayization observed from the intra-textual perspective, that is mainly its impact on fictional universes. Chapters 4 and 5 investigate the role and place of essayization in what I provisionally call oeuvre management – in the oeuvres of poets and prose writers respectively – meaning authors' overall strategies and the ways in which they see themselves and want to be seen by their audiences. While part one focuses mainly on the observation of existential stimuli generated by the Higgs field that is emigration, part two shifts to often ethically charged impulses, determining writers' and readers' activities, i.e. what interpretive choices they make and what they do with a text while confronted with emigrant circumstances.

Part three consists of a single chapter 6. It functions as a coda, scrutinizing separately one essential aspect of oeuvre management, often considered the most demanding, but necessary for many emigrants: translation. I treat translation as an operation carried out on a text which influences its various characteristics and parameters, including the text's "essayizability", i.e. its proneness to essayization. In this case, essayization is usually performed by the reader. While some translations seem to block the possibility of essayization in this sense, others seem to strengthen this potential or even force readers to fill the textual matter with external contexts to enliven and ambiguate it. This last part also presents and interrogates the possibility of translating the entire discourse on essayism into one on translation, that is treating essayization as a form of translation and the essay as a "translational genre".

The English translations of the Chinese texts discussed in parts one and two are mostly mine. This holds especially for the poetry citations, which I decided to render by myself even if adequate and often superior translations already exist. Firstly, because I find the process of translation most effective for gaining insight into a text and experiencing

firsthand the complexities of the relationship between form and content that is one of the core features of poetry. Secondly, because in the discussion of this relationship, translation itself becomes an essential part of the argument. This is not to say that I intentionally manipulate the texts to demonstrate the correctness of my views. Rather, I have wanted to make sure that none of the subtleties that may elucidate the content-form interplay were lost in translation. Existing renditions of Chinese poetry are sometimes too good, when they aim at preserving artistic beauty and smoothness, and hence tend to obscure tensions between form and content – and this is exactly where I expect to observe the most intense and active essayistic phenomena to emerge. The full Chinese text of the discussed poems is included in Appendix A. As for the essay excerpts under scrutiny, they are mostly unavailable in English, so I translated them as well. For novels and plays whose English editions are widely read in the West, I mostly used existent translations to help the reader localize the excerpts within the full text in question.

Among some twenty contemporary Chinese authors whose work we will encounter, there are famous foreign-based authors like Gao Xingjian and Ha Jin, authors who returned to China after they spent time abroad, such as Liu Zaifu or Zhai Yongming, those who relocated to another city within China, e.g. Tsering Woeser and Wang Xiaoni, and some – like Yu Jian or Han Shaogong – who do not necessarily feel like moving anywhere at all, but were "exiled" by the Zeitgeist at some point, and forced to take measures to protect what they find most essential in and for their writing.

As noted, the present work is not an attempt at taking a stand in the discussion on emigration or emigrant literature as such, especially in political, sociological and ethical contexts in which it is usually considered. It is about life and literary writing which, like all substances, react more dynamically when their particles are set in motion – read: sent into emigration – than when they stand still, and sometimes shaking them a little is the only way to obtain a saturated solution, which might just hold for solutions to literary research problems as well. I will not enter into theoretical explanations of the phenomenon of *dis*-solution, and instead propose a pleasant argument from experience, sincerely encouraging the reader, prior to reading on, to make themselves a big cup of tea with sugar or honey; and, of course, to stir before drinking.

PART ONE

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One-Sided Writing, or the Essay

CHAPTER 1

An Emigratology of the Essay?
Authors' Perspectives on the Essay and Emigration

The primary aim of part one of this study is to chart the processes of forging lived experience into an essayistic shape that I have compared to the Möbius strip: optically two-sided, but in fact with a single surface. But before we engage with blurred boundaries, ambiguous relations and non-orientable spaces, there is one thing that should be put clearly: mysterious and multifaceted as these processes may appear to readers and to writers themselves, they are initiated by an author. Regardless of our views concerning the notion of the author, as long as we have not entered the text, they have the absolute and exclusive rights to their experience. Arguably, their last act as such before translating this experience into literature – and yes, this is a schematic way of putting things, with a deceptively clear *before* and *after* – is the decision on a literary form. Whether this form may resist and escape their control as the work develops, in their hands and in those of their readers, is an issue to which I will turn in part two. Here, out of respect for the author, I give them the floor to speak for themselves on the question that I will subsequently ask of their texts. Why the essay?

In this chapter, I investigate authorial comments claiming, specifying, and occasionally justifying interactions between essayism and emigration, in their own work and in general. I first consider what in Gerard Genette's classification of intertextual phenomena have been called "autographic epitexts"[1], that is individual authors' statements on their own works, mainly in interviews and in introductions and afterwords attached to literary texts. Second, I consider meta-essays that aim at understanding, rationalizing, explaining and theorizing the kinds of linkages that are signaled in such epitexts. Third, I consider metaphorical images that inform both essays on the essay and texts representing various genres dealing with emigration, to tease out implicit yet demonstrable commonalities of essay- and emigration-related discourses – which, as I argue, facilitate their mutual translatability. Altogether, this chapter prepares the ground for the exploration of some less tangible implications of the interplay of life and literature later on.

Quite aside from my weakness for poetry, the number of poets who get to speak in chapter 1 has a methodological reason. The quantity and the sophistication of meta-essays produced by poets exceeds the meta-essayistic output of authors in other genres. Compared to prose writers, poets' relationships with the essay seem more ambiguous. This is arguably not as much for artistic reasons as it is due to social-cultural factors which play an essential role in

[1] Genette 1997.

Chinese contemporary literature. If a poet wants to write essays, they must first find a way out from the hands-tying model of poethood, which rules out the obtainment of measurable benefits from writing as taboo. This refers not only to material gains, but also to the psychological relief the act of creating literature may bring to an author. In line with this myth, poetry's mission is to make existence more difficult, and not to offer consolation. When confronted with an unending series of "romantic" poet-suicides caused by a deepening and sometimes consciously deepened conflict between life and writing, the essayistic idea of rejoining these two spheres looks pale and unconvincing to many readers. It is, of course, difficult to assess any degree of Chineseness of this model. I venture to say that as part of the strict education and examination system and a common form of entertainment of state officials, traditional Chinese poetry was unlikely to develop such a myth by itself. But perhaps this is exactly why in the 20th century, hungry for this kind of experience, modern Chinese poetry so eagerly accepted the myth from Western culture, and processed in its own way, also by resurrecting its own antique heroes, most of all Qu Yuan (340-278 BC), an exiled official of the state of Chu who is said to have taken his own life. He has become an archetype of the Chinese poet and simultaneously, as Lawrence Schneider argues, one of protagonists of "Chinese political mythology" whose role "spans oral and literary, regional and cosmopolitan cultures".[2]

In 1995 poet and scholar Chen Chao (1958-2014) wrote an article called "Poets' Essays" (诗人的散文), by which he intended to trigger a broader discussion on the phenomenon indicated in the title. Polemicizing with Joseph Brodsky's ideals of poetry which brings – and in Brodsky's opinion *should* bring – "less benefits than prose, and always slowly", Chen claims:

> Obviously, as a poet, I like what Brodsky says. Especially when I think about all those fiction and essay writers who surrender to the dictatorship of the market economy, and confront them with poets for whom "listening to the wind makes up for poverty", I feel deeply moved. But if we go beyond the existential context of the "moral critique of writing" and return to the art as such, I have the sense that Brodsky's concept is somewhat vague. If we accept it, this will mean that poets' essayistic activity is a compromise with the materialism of our times.
>
> But this is of course not true. [...] In 1990s there appeared many authors who have two sets of pens and ink, one for poetry and one for prose, and this hasn't hindered their excellent progress as avant-garde poets, for example: Zhong Ming, Yu Jian, Wang Xiaoni, Xi Chuan, Pang Pei, Bai Hua, Wang Jiaxin, Yang Lian, Che Qianzi, Geng Zhanchun and others. [...] In general, poetic words fall vertically from the sky, they come from poets' dual imagination driven by their historical and transcendental experience. A poem that is utterly stripped of transcendence lacks specifically poetic soft power.
>
> Yet, this is exactly where the problem rests. Transcendence frequently leads to notions such as "God", "the Way" [道], "the Source", "Fundamentals", "the Whole", "Truth" etc. [...] These, in turn, are responsible for poetry's "ahistorical" tendency and the "mysophobic" quality of poetic expression, and for poets' inability to deal with the concrete context of our times and with everyday life.

[2] Schneider 1980: 1.

> I don't question poets' involvement in transcendental issues, because this is one of poetry's "missions". But transcendence often implies extremism and dogmatism. In the essay there's more space for conflict, it allows for "impurity" of the processed material. If we say that poetry is like dancing, then essay-writing is like walking. While – we might add – dancing is self-oriented, focused on its own beauty, walking advances the observation of the surrounding environment and encourages a dialogue with "neighbors".
>
> I noticed that essays of avant-garde poets are highly dialogical and self-dialogical. [...] This is not a contemplation of some illusion of "consciousness", but a situational-conversational narrative, which offers a poet a joy of "self-disenchantment". These several poets, whose poetry and essayism are like the two wings of a bird, have effectively achieved an equilibrium in their writing.[3]

Equilibrium, impurity and joy – even Chen's dubious joy of self-disenchantment – belong to an unwritten register of crimes against the myth of poethood. To avoid losing credibility in the readers' eyes, poets who engage in essay-writing often seem to feel obliged to justify themselves and prove their artistic authenticity – perhaps also to themselves. Usually, they do so either by openly challenging the myth, or by construing highly abstract, metaphysically charged arguments using myth-based language, aimed at gradual broadening of the mythical perspective. Poets' confrontations with this paradigm help to make their meta-essayistic discourse a fascinating object of literary research. An emigrant context in which the myth of poethood overlaps with the myth of exile adds to the complexity and intensity of the picture.

I. Private Histories of the Essay

It is not uncommon for Chinese authors who have experienced emigration in one way or another to connect the writing of essays to the beginning of this experience. This prominently includes somewhat apologetic statements to the effect that essays are temporary, practical substitutes of "truly artistic" writing, which one finds impossible to undertake while far away from one's native community and language, for emotional, linguistic, economic or social reasons. There are, however, also many authors who note a constructive impact of the essay on their further writing and personal development.

Of course, what authors say offers no proof for my observations. Yet, it may help to identify those spheres of their activity where the relation of lived experience and artistic activity is particularly salient.

Zhang Zhen's jetlag

Skepsis on the role of essay-writing reverberates in the words of Zhang Zhen (b. 1962), who left China in 1983 as a promising poet to move to Sweden with her husband, a Swedish diplomat. Later she made her name in Europe and North America as a literary critic and film specialist. Responding to questions by Zhou Zan and Yi Su'er about life in emigration, especially her withdrawal from poetry in the early 1990s, she sketches a sober picture of her first years in the West. Among several factors that made poetry writing nearly impossible, she

[3] Chen Chao 2014: 202-206.

mentions prosaic reasons such as a lack of time – having to learn foreign languages, make new friends and make ends meet – and proceeds to cultural, emotional and existential motivations, such as estrangement and unwillingness to lock herself away inside her mother tongue, which would deepen her cultural isolation. At the same time, unable and uneager to abandon writing altogether, she took to academic writing. This allowed her to observe and comment on literature and art without getting personally engaged.

Many of the scholarly essays Zhang Zhen has produced since she started university in the US in 1991 are comparative, interdisciplinary pieces, including her master's thesis on female poetic cinema. Her current artistic career shows that these essays were no derivates or leftovers of her literary creation. She also points out that interaction and academic writing under the guidance of eminent scholars helped her to develop a critical interest in literature and cinema, and showed her how to organize her rich but somewhat impressionistic knowledge and experience. Thanks to them she "started to see and associate in a broader perspective all issues that were important for [her], such as politics, modernity, film images, feminism".[4]

Zhang Zhen's first companion who supported her at the threshold of emigrant life in 1983 was the Swedish-speaking Finnish modernist poet Edith Södergran (1892-1923). Her fascination with Södergran's works came early, shortly before she left China. "Captivated" and "possessed"[5] by Södergran's poetry in *The Land That is Not* (Landet som icke är), on a life in "triple exile" caused by a mixed national identity, artistic activity and chronic disease, Zhang and her husband-to-be translated some of her poetry. In the late 1990s, doing her PhD at the University of Chicago and finding herself hardly able to write new poetry, Zhang devoted several academic essays to Södergran. Zhang's doctoral dissertation was a comparative study on Södergran and Emily Dickinson.

Zhang Zhen's autobiographical essay "The Jet Lag of a Migratory Bird: Border Crossings Toward/From 'the land that is not'" draws on parallels between her own and the Scandinavian poet's physical, artistic, and spiritual journeys. Citing "Modern Virgin" (Vierge moderne), in Stina Katchadourian's translation: "I am no woman, I am a neuter...", Zhang calls reading this an "electrifying experience". She alludes to her own initiation into emigrant fate:

> At the end of my trans-Siberian journey in Moscow, I boarded a train for Helsinki, and then a ferry over the Baltic Sea to Stockholm. I heard the peculiar Finno-Swedish for the first time; I heard Södergran. My acquaintance with her poetry was preparation for this major move in my life, as it calmed my anxiety as a newcomer considerably. I felt I was already in some way related to this part of the world, and not a complete stranger to the Nordic landscape clothed with dense pine and birch forests.[6]

The following paragraphs paraphrase Södergran's "The Land That Is Not" and inscribe it into the context of Hélène Cixous' reflection on border crossing, *pays* ('country'), *dépays*

[4] Zhang & Zhou & Yi 2011: 239-240.
[5] Zhang Zhen 1999a: 59.
[6] Ibidem: 60.

('uncountry') and *dépaysement* ('removal of countries').[7] They depict the process of developing a complex self-consciousness and an ambiguous emigrant identity:

> Years later, in rereading Södergran, I was once again struck by the poignancy and ambiguity of the phrase "the land that is not". I also came across the French woman poet and critic Hélène Cixous' trenchant words on border crossing, in writing as well as in life. [...] I came to understand that "the land that is not" for Södergran is not disembodied dimension in her feverish tuberculosis-induced state of mind. It is a *dépays* that cannot be easily circumscribed by any markings on the globe (Cixous describes them as "as incredible as unicorns").[8]

"Jet Lag…", published in English in 1999, is one of Zhang Zhen's mature texts and belongs to a new chapter in her artistic biography. Compared to her essays from the 1980s, which appear to serve as a simple yet effective remedy against the disorientation that comes with emigration, "Jet Lag" is a well-directed, profound self-diagnosis of the author's state of mind. In *The Autobiography of Citizenship*, Tova Cooper interprets it as a moment when Zhang "ultimately embraces her experience of 'migratory bird' [...] [S]he understands that she can experience her transnationalism as the source of epiphanies, which mark themselves on her body and become a part of her multilayered consciousness".[9]

Tsering Woeser's pilgrimage home

To some extent, a similar essayistic response to the emigrant experience may be observed in Tibetan poet and journalist Tsering Woeser. Born in 1966 in Lhasa, as a small child she moved with her parents to the Kham area in Sichuan. In 1988 she graduated from the Southwest University for Nationalities in Chengdu and started her work as a reporter.

Unlike Zhang Zhen, Woeser maintains that she has never abandoned poetry, which is her passion and her mission. But she also defines critical points in her artistic activity, when she figured out that poetry cannot "alleviate inner turmoil" caused by an identity crisis, the re-discovery of her roots and the prospect of inevitable exile, as Woeser herself calls her emigration experience. Answering Dechen Pemba's question about "travel, Lhasa, memory and loss" as possible sources of her artistic metamorphosis, she clarifies:

> I returned to Lhasa when I was twenty-four. The biggest problem I faced was discovering the "Sinicized" me being a stranger in her own hometown. This led me into a profound identity crisis. [...] I thought that poets or artists tower above all, or surpass all, and that the attribute of nationality could be overlooked. But writing such poetry couldn't alleviate inner turmoil. I can't say that I was suffering terribly. To be more precise, it was probably a feeling of emptiness. Thus, I couldn't even go on writing this kind of poetry.
>
> [...] Travel experiences in vast Tibet changed me gradually. [...] I visited many places. Both as a voyager, and as a pilgrim — because in my heart, I saw the vast snowy land as a gigantic monastery of nature! Of course this was my earliest motivation for the journey. As I walked further in the vast snowy land, and paused longer, those literary sentiments were gradually

[7] Cixous 1993.
[8] Zhang Zhen 1999b: 61-62.
[9] Cooper 2015: 203-204.

> replaced by a sense of history and a vocation. In other words, I, who used to only see my hometown from an aesthetics point of view, gradually began to see people and events on this land with an eye from history and reality.[10]

Brought up in a mixed Han-Tibetan family by parents who were government officials and wished for their daughter to integrate into Han society, Woeser was quite unlikely to develop a sense of belonging that would connect her to her native place. She recognized Tibet as her home only after she had returned from a Han-dominated world, and only then did she realize that she had at one point left that home. The rediscovery of her roots and the "pilgrimage" to her homeland do not change the fact that she found herself unable to bridge a mental and existential gap that she felt separated her from Tibetan community. In a 1999 essay called "Tibet on High" (西藏在上), she writes:

> [...] I deeply felt those few drops of Han blood flowing still in my body, subtly changing me from within, and nearly becoming the dominant part of my appearance and thinking. This is to say that when I returned to the place of my birth I was no different from a stranger.[11]

Woeser's first physical emigrant experience is hence located in a past which is no longer within reach, except in memories; and which is identified as such and emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually lived through with hindsight. Zhang Zhen, thanks to Södergran, had more or less consciously put herself in the position of an emigrant writer before she started her journey. In Woeser's mind, by contrast, and in her work, emigration happened later than in her biography, and forced her to reread and revise her own story.

Nevertheless, similar to Zhang, Woeser's emigration experience, while staggered over time, is equally intense. Presumably, it also triggered her need for and her interest in the essay as an efficient form of literary, ethical and political expression, and later as a broader mode of thinking. Since her 1990 rediscovery of Tibet, she has published many essays on Tibetan culture and politics, on her blogs and in magazines and books. She is well known on international literary and political scenes as the outspoken author of several collections and book-length essays and of essayistic reports, such as *Notes on Tibet* (西藏笔記, 2003), *Remembering Tibet* (西藏記憶, 2006) and *Forbidden Memory: Tibet in the Cultural Revolution* (殺劫：不可碰觸的記憶禁區, 2006), *A Poem Named Tibet* (名為西藏的詩, 2006), to name some widely read examples. In light of this, it is all the more intriguing that Woeser, although she noted her "essayistic" evolution, seems not to have accepted it, and still finds the essay something of a compromise between poetry and life. According to her, the essay may rise to the level of artistic creation only as the embodiment of a poetical spirit:

> I've always believed I'm a poet. To a certain extent, I've always been writing poems. Whether [I write] prose, hybrid essay or fiction, I always believe it to be poetry.[12]

In spite of Woeser's apparent mistrust of non-poetic forms, the essayistic mode in her oeuvre has been independent and expansive enough to change the notion of poetry that generates and feeds it. "Essayness" enriches her poethood, broadens its scope by adding social-historical

[10] Woeser & Pemba 2012.
[11] Woeser 2002: 1-2.
[12] Pemba 2012.

material to it, brings out its inner complexity and deepens its ethical purport. Drawing on a well-known (and eminently debatable) etymological argument, Woeser cites a definition of poetry which emerges out of its showdown with the essay:

> In [the] Chinese language, the character "poetry" 诗 is composed of "speech" 言 and "temple" 寺. This also means that a poet is an orator, an orator who, at the same time, has a mission, upholds an aesthetic, and shares religious sentiments. Thus, to be a poet also means to be a witness, a memorist, so as to become an orator of authority.[13]

Drawing existentially significant conclusions from a rather unsophisticated ploy called *chai zi* 拆字 in Mandarin ('unpicking, dissecting [Chinese] characters') – used in divine practices in ancient times and uniquitously known in China – can be regarded neither as an effective artistic method nor as an objective argument supporting Woeser's view. Naive and indeed self-orientalizing as it may appear, this attempt to retrieve ideas from ideograms bears testimony to the author's yearning for a world of fundamental values and to her endeavor to retrieve a reality where the ethical and the aesthetic work always in sync.

Wang Xiaoni's search for a safe place

The essay also goes hand in hand with the author's home- and identity-seeking efforts in the work of Wang Xiaoni (b. 1955). This is what Wang says about her essayistic response to the emigrant experience, in the afterword to her first collection of essays, *Exiled to Shenzhen* (放逐深圳):

> I never write anything sentimental. An essay should have a vivid and deep core. I don't care about representations [...] I keep my self-confidence, use my own eyes to observe the world, the city, material things and soul. I never go floating around. Poetry is like a dense web. For many years, I have been bottling up some hard and coarse things. Poetry didn't let them through. Today I'm freeing them up.[14]

In terms of poetics, Wang seems to sit at the opposite end of the spectrum from Woeser. Her work, whether poetry or prose, has little to do with the loftiness and metaphysics found in many of Woeser's early texts. Wang cherishes individualism and is not interested in any social mission for the writer. She perceives her own emigration, inside China, as a personal story that concerns her and people she meets on her way, family and friends but also strangers encountered accidentally and observed by Wang with sympathetic interest and disinterested, unpossessive love.

As is true for Woeser, Wang's essayism came some time after her emigration had begun. She arrived in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen in 1985 to join her husband, poet Xu Jingya. Political reasons had forced him to leave Jilin, in the north, where they both grew up and studied. *Exiled to Shenzhen* came out in 1996. Although many years had passed, Wang still considers her essays a direct consequence of emigration. Different from Woeser's feeling of the discontinuity of the physical and psychological dimensions of her emigrant experience, Wang cites the very intensity, rapidness, vividness and "coarseness" of her psychological

[13] Ibidem.
[14] Wang Xiaoni 1996b: 241.

reaction to emigration as the thing that prevented her from expressing her emotions through literature, in particular through poetry, her preferred form. Her earliest essays, published in the 1990s, may thus be read as therapeutic or cathartic. She does not feel ashamed or "downgraded" about switching from poems to essays. On the contrary, she treats essays as the first manifestation of artistic and emotional freedom after her move to Shenzhen.

Since 1996, among many other works of poetry and prose, Wang Xiaoni has published two more collections of essays with titles that pertain to physical and metaphorical dimensions of emigration. *North All the Way* (一直向北), from August 2007, consists of nearly seventy short, mostly autobiographical essays depicting her life as an endless process of returning to the homeland she left over twenty years ago. In the opening paragraphs of an eponymous essay she writes:

> *North All the Way*, for other people, is just four words. [...] They mean nothing but a certain direction. Such a "north" very likely is just a few hundred meters or a few kilometers ahead. [...]
>
> The only person who really takes a liking to these words, and whose heart is going pit-a-pat because of them, is me. For me, these four words are hard to explain. Piling up day by day, they grow big and acquire dignity, their content becomes laborious and complicated. North All the Way, allowing delay nor change: this is my biggest decision in 1995.[15]

The other collection, published later in 2007, was titled *Anfang* 安放, which means both "put (放) something in a safe and peaceful (安) place" and "bury a corpse or a person's ashes". The second usage is exclusively for prominent, well-established persons, whereas, as Wang points out in an essay that gave the book its title, ordinary people and things can only be put (放) in some place, without the privilege of safety and peacefulness (安). Wang's title was meant to equalize human beings in terms of their intrinsic dignity, not by dethroning VIPs, but by elevating other beings. Metaphorizing existence as an earthly journey, the author claims:

> But I think [*anfang*] should refer to all beings.
>
> The Earth itself is responsible to *put in a safe and peaceful place / bury* everyone and everything that falls on the Earth, making no distinction in regard to social status and position. It's a bounden duty of the Earth to ensure a peaceful existence to all of them, for they have no way but to rely on it.[16]

Individual voices, shared concerns

One may well ask whether the above are not just a few randomly chosen voices from the Chinese literary scene, or in what ways they are representative. Moreover, they are personal utterances, not necessarily with any ambition or ability to reflect on literary creation at large. Introducing Wang Xiaoni's writings, most critics emphasize her disinterest in all-encompassing theoretical concepts. In one of the most frequently quoted essays on Wang Xiaoni, Geng Zhanchun writes:

[15] Wang Xiaoni 2007b: 212.
[16] Wang Xiaoni 2007a: 211.

> Wang Xiaoni is a poet who follows her intuition, she seems to neither like nor even care about theory, but she has a kind of social sensitivity to linguistic symbols. She cares only about the everyday world and everyday issues, and yet, surprisingly, directly speaks to crucial problems of our times. [...] Regardless of which literary form she employs, her texts always contain criticism: criticism of the form itself as well as social criticism.[17]

The same may be said of Zhang Zhen, and of Woeser, whose "spokeswoman's" mission is limited to the current social-political situation, and has little to do with establishing or defining any universal, depersonalized literary patterns. As for the notion that such an attitude may be somehow distinctive for female authors who, in accordance with Nancy Miller's interpretation of the story of Arachne, tend to put their finger "on the place of production that marks the spinner's attachment to her web",[18] I do not feel qualified to discuss this. I can only guess that Zhang Zhen, considering herself a feminist, might accept this interpretation, while Wang Xiaoni would reject being classified as a "woman writer", for she rejects the category of womanhood as a literary-critical concept.[19]

Still, on the contemporary Chinese literary scene, most if not all metatexts meant to convince readers, writers, and critics of generally or universally valid visions of literature have been and are being created by male writers. Their "big names" are imprinted also on "big pictures" that I will scrutinize in the next section. I will inspect a quasi-theoretical discourse to which they all subscribe and which I will provisionally call an "emigratology of the essay". While this terminology may sound as a caricature of academic language, hopefully it will help me to organize my thinking. At the same time, I believe, it tells the reader something about this specific rhetoric and the debatable scientific quality of this discourse.

As regards the issue of representativeness – a tricky notion to begin with – the most generalizing conclusion I will draw from Zhang Zhen, Tsering Woeser and Wang Xiaoni is that the essay's complicated relation to lived experience at large and to emigration in particular is an existentially charged matter that notably appears capable of provoking individuals to reconsider for themselves the very origins of their artistic activity. Hence, for all that some of the authorial musings I am going to deal with in the following sections are highly abstract, let me emphasize again that any attempts at universalizing, systematizing and rationalizing this relation are of secondary importance.

II. Private Theories of the Essay

An emigratology of the essay is one of numerous threads in the theoretical discussion on the essay as a literary form. Crudely speaking, it attempts to explain the essay and essayism *through* emigration. Progenitors and sympathizers of this "discipline" include renowned scholars and philosophers such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Roland Barthes.[20]

[17] Geng 2007 : 91.
[18] Miller 1986: 288.
[19] Xu 2008.
[20] See e.g.: Garloff 2002 (on the relationship between the essay and diasporic and exilic identity in Adorno's philosophy), Hall 1989 (on the idea of discovery as an essayistic impulse), de Obaldia 1995 (esp. ch. 5.2 *Monstrous Essays*, on traveling, erring, wandering, inner journeys etc. as common places of meta-literary discourse on the novel and on the essay), Bensmaïa 1987 (on Roland Barthes' understanding of the essay).

Yet, arguably, both in the West[21] and in contemporary China, its most active advocates are writers-essayists themselves.

I do not consider myself an emigratologist, but I also do not take issue with them. My attitude to their attainments in literary theory is mirrored in what I hope is the discreetly ironic name I suggest for their discipline, intended to expose the (over)easiness of "-logy-ing": that is, rationalizing, systematizing and universalizing discourse. Chinese emigratologists, as we will see below, present a wide range of "evidence", including arguments from history, philosophy and etymology, to show that the essay is not only a textual account of emigration but also its direct continuation, in its personal and national dimensions alike. While I question the scholarly value and the relevance of emigratology, I still find it powerful manifestation of the authors' individual dilemmas and authentic experience, albeit frequently expressed in a pompous, exaggerated manner. Emigratologist essays are also an area where the essay's ability to assimilate lived experience fully erupts: the essay audaciously presents itself as a culmination point of the (emigration) experience, a bright achievement of artistic talent and spirit, with authorial biography reduced to pale background status – or to the ladder in Wittgenstein's storeroom that one throws away after climbing up.[22]

Here, I will consider three metatexts that represent different traditions and styles of the Chinese essay. Two of these, Yang Lian's (b. 1955) "Brief Thoughts on the Essay" (散文断想) and Yu Jian's (b. 1954) "Yu Jian on the Essay and Reading Aloud" (于坚谈散文及朗读) are discursive pieces presenting the authors' theoretical speculations. The third, Wang Jiaxin's (b. 1957) "London Essays" (伦敦随笔), at first sight resembles neither the essay, for it is written in verse, nor theoretical reflection, for it tells a personal story. However, its confessional tone is misleading and the text offers a conclusion that is no less universal than that of the other two texts. It heralds an otherwise very essayistic message of the inevitable failure of a universal approach to anything, including the essay itself.

By and large, I agree with Martin Woesler's claim that the essay is an international genre and that "regional deviations seem less important for the essay than for established genres like short stories, novels etc., and far less important than for poems". Especially, I share his opinion on the general need of authors to "mediate individual experience", which results in creating texts that are free "in form and content".[23] But there are many ways in which experiences may be absorbed and mediated by essays, and in my opinion this is clearly illustrated by Chinese regional deviations and subdivisions that are less prominently present in Woesler's analysis. Therefore I will refer occasionally to three typically Chinese essayistic paradigms, frequently appearing in contemporary publications, both artistic and academic: *sanwen* 散文, *suibi* 随笔 and *zawen* 杂文. One more reason of this "regionalization" is that for the writers themselves – in particular for Yu Jian – these subcategories play an essential role. Using the Frenglish umbrella term *essay* is not always adequate for characterizing their work and demonstrating differences between their individual literary strategies.

[21] E.g. Herman Broch and Robert Musil, authors of "essayistic novels" (see: de Obaldia 1995:193-235).
[22] Wittgenstein 1922: 90.
[23] Woesler 2000: 295.

Emigration dividing the literary scene

Since the late 1980s, the Chinese literary scene has seen a certain polarization, especially in poetry. To a significant extent, this was conditioned by writers' attitudes toward emigration, mainly in political contexts, as a consequence of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, and in cultural contexts, meaning China's policy of "reform and opening up" and rapid globalization. Emigration proved to be a highly controversial issue and became the subject of general discussion as well as squabbles between individual authors. A thorough reconstruction of the polemics that emerged at the end of the 20th century is found in Maghiel van Crevel's *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*.[24] If only to shift the emphasis in scholarship to date on this subject so as to make its links with my own research more evident, I would add the observation that, in general, authors' views on literature and on emigration were roughly convergent. Those who shared basic assumptions about the nature and the role of literary works usually took similar stands on emigration and its impact on artistic creation. With reference to a polemic whose protagonists will feature in this section, we may roughly match the so-called Intellectual (知识分子) poets and critics with a pro-emigrational inclination, and the so-called Popular (民间) poets and critics with an anti-emigrational stance. Wang Jiaxin, Yu Jian and Yang Lian are among those who were most actively involved in discussions on literature and on emigration, and whose outspoken utterances strengthened, if not actually triggered, divisions on the Chinese poetry scene. Wang Jiaxin and Yu Jian are commonly perceived as antagonists from the said two poetic camps – the Intellectual and the Popular – that emerged in mainland China in the late 1990s, with roots going back to the mid-1980s.

Wang Jiaxin, currently professor of Chinese literature at Renmin University in Beijing, has a physical and textual emigrant experience that is mirrored in his poetry and essayism. His writings are frequently inspired by foreign literary works and convey a vision of intertextuality as a stimulating and empowering factor in the process of development of Chinese literature. Wang's artistic and intellectual "brotherhood" with famous poets in exile, especially Russian authors such as Boris Pasternak and Joseph Brodsky, provoked aggressive reactions by many other Chinese poets, who accused him of groundlessly appropriating the status of exile, or – as Yi Sha (b. 1966), a poet in the Popular camp, wrote in a scathing pamphlet – of being a "pseudo-exile" (伪流亡者).[25]

Yu Jian is one of those who explicitly support Yi Sha's critical view of Wang Jiaxin. He is well known for his aversion to long-time and far-off emigration and to emigrant writers, and for the importance he attaches to local daily life and his emotional attachment to regional language or "dialect" and his hometown Kunming. At the same time, Yu Jian has no objections to traveling around Asia as a tourist, self-appointed reporter and amateur photographer, and to Europe, where he regularly participates in literary events.

The third author, Yang Lian, left China in 1988, long before the most fierce antagonisms on the domestic poetry scene flared up, and as such was not identified with either

[24] For a comprehensive discussion and a chronological bibliography of the polemic between the Popular and the Intellectual which is an important context of this section, see chapter 12 in Van Crevel 2008.
[25] Yi Sha 2001.

of the causes or camps. Yang is one of the internationally most acclaimed Chinese authors, and his work has been translated into many languages. Yang himself claims to be a citizen of a self-sufficient, one-person country whose official language is "Yanglish" (杨文). Nonetheless, for many poetry readers whose thinking bears the inglorious hallmarks of Orientalism,[26] his poetry appears to be a pure incarnation of Chineseness, as it frequently draws on ancient Chinese culture, and engages in rewritings and reconfigurations of traditional motives. As Gregory Lee rightly notes, although Yang's work can benefit from this in terms of readership, the author sees himself as opposing Orientalism by publishing articles in English and in Chinese, defending not just his own work, but the entire "contemporary Chinese poetic production against the Orientalist ideology of certain sinologists".[27]

The essay as the apogee of the emigrant experience

The titles of Yu Jian's and Yang Lian's texts refer to the Chinese term *sanwen* 散文. Both explain this term with reference to its etymology. The word *san* 散 means 'scatter, disperse, dispel, disseminate, displace', and adjectives associated with these verbs. Yu Jian takes it literally, looking back to the prehistory of the Chinese nation to announce that *san* is a primordial state of Chineseness, the purest embodiment of the Chinese spirit. Hence, *sanwen* constitutes the only way of writing through which this spirit may speak openly and spontaneously, not renouncing or restricting its freedom. Yu writes:

> One of [modern Chinese essayist] Nie Gannu's poems is called "*San* advances life" [散宜生]. This is true. *San* is suitable and beneficial to life, [while] concentration [集中] is not good for life, and is good for war instead. Chinese people in the past were called "a heap of loose sand" [一盘散沙] . [...] While facing the muzzles of Western gunboats, *san* obviously meant trouble. But thinking about springtime during the Ming dynasty, *san* was a leisurely way of life. *San* is a normal state of the world, concentration is temporary. The 20th century was the century of concentration, and in order to meet the needs of war *sanwen* was *zawen*-ized, changed into a dagger.[28] But today, *sanwen* becomes *san* again, has nothing of the *zawen*-ish concentrated anger and criticism, which indicates that Chinese language has slightly changed.[29]

One should not take Yu Jian's linguistic arguments too seriously. His "etymological proof" is a catchy trick, one of several in his repertoire. The most famous of these was presented in his 1995 manifesto-like essay "The Rejection of Metaphor" (拒绝隐喻). There, he maintained that the Chinese word *hǎi* 海, meaning 'sea', pronounced and written nearly identically to the exclamation *hāi* 嗨, which expresses surprise and wonder, is a relic of an ancient primordial

[26] Said 1979.
[27] Wai & Lee 1998-1999.
[28] An allusion to the essays of Lu Xun (1881-1936). Lu Xun described his essays (*xiaopinwen* 小品文) as being both politically engaged "dagger and spear" and leisurely writings. In present scholarship, his *xiaopinwen* are often distinguished as leisurely *sanwen* and rhetorical *zawen* (miscellaneous essays), the latter prevailing among his late works. According to Leo Ou-fan Lee, these "barbed" essays were what "his adulators celebrated as the true *Lu Xun trend* (鲁迅风) and his main legacy" (Lee 1985:29).
[29] Yu 2006b: 75.

language in which there was a perfect unity of signifier and signified.[30] Quite aside from the credibility of his argument, two concepts are central to Yu's understanding of *san* and *sanwen*. These are spatially anchored physical experience as a foundation of self-identification of a (national) community, and translatability of this experience into a specific literary form. Such a form maps topography of the experience and subsequently refines it, transforming it into an idealized "spiritual geography", meaning a domain of absolute freedom. And freedom, in turn, is an elemental, pre-historical and pre-linguistic state of the universe. Thus, in Yu's vision, through a specific type of text, *sanwen*, the world is expected to regain its utopian integrity of lived experience and language, of the object observed and the words of the observer.

Yang Lian gives another explanation of *sanwen*. Commenting on the same nomadic culture and recalling the history and tradition of Chinese literature, he builds an egocentric definition that describes first his own artistic activity and philosophical assumptions, and subsequently universalizes and translates these into an imperative for all writers.

> [*Sanwen* is] an abstract journey: it is the single, inner journey of a person – leading deeper and deeper, but again and again returning to reality: of death, life, thought, language... to the endless reality which co-exists with one's explorations. There is no way to better present everyone, or even present no one, than to present one single person. That is why I said: "No one is far from enough, to transcend one is also far from enough" ([in:] *Lies. Why it has to be sanwen* [鬼话·为什么一定是散文]). [...] Here, "tradition" and "modernity", thanks to the "creativity" of one person, unite into one. The process of reviving Chinese *sanwen* may lead only from inside to outside, never the other way around; [...] from "deep" to "new".[31]

Unlike Yu Jian's, Yang Lian's notions of space and of migration refer first and foremost to the inner experience of an individual. "Reality" is defined through abstract oppositions determining individual existence: death vs. life, thought vs. language. The components of these oppositions have been divided since the very beginning, their perfect integrity remains within reach, but only within a single person's milieu, not as a universal, cosmic state. The unity of many multifarious elements identified and gathered during this inner journey reaches its culmination in a text, namely in *sanwen*, and later, through literature, may spread "from inside to outside", all over the world. From Yang's point of view, this would be a highly desirable conclusion of his project.

Yang Lian attempts to broaden the scope of his individual theory to enable it to describe and shape literature at large. This extraverted tendency, opposite to Yu Jian's introverted movement, is why I believe that Yang's concept of the essay should be associated rather with *zawen* 'miscellany', whose subjective nature and "objective", "revolutionary" aims result in clear rhetorical hues that Yu condemns when he speaks of "*zawen*-ish concentrated anger". *Zawen* essays are often considered to be a specific combination of "part poetry, part politics" and, according to Mary Scoggin's pictorial description, frequently metaphorized as mules (hence another translation of this term, 'mulish essay'): "strong, hard-working, and rather famously unloved creatures, best known for their expressive

[30] Yu 2004a: 125.
[31] Yang Lian 2009: 118-119.

obstinance", gifted with "hybrid vigor".[32] Since Lu Xun's (1881-1936) uncompromising "spear-and-dagger" *zawen* written (mostly) in the 1930s, that is in times of intensive political and cultural transformation of Chinese society, the genre has been associated with a bold, self-assured attitude and the strong presence of an author who expresses their views with rhetorical passion. Yet, what we encounter in Yang Lian's essays is not so much the persuasive, eloquent rhetoric of public speech – although such overtones are certainly discernible – as an existential, post-Nietzschean rhetoric, meaning a way of acquiring and organizing contingent experiences; or, to borrow James Boyd White's term, a "constitutive rhetoric", that is "the art of constituting character, community and culture in language".[33]

Yu's and Yang's methods of writing are prefigured in the titles and confirmed by the formal structures of the essays in question. Yu Jian authoritatively and quite formally speaks on the essay (谈散文), trying to emulate or join the academic discourse. Yang Lian presents miscellaneous "brief thoughts" (断想), free musings on various aspects and traditions of the essay (including a cross-cultural comparison between *sanwen* and the English essay). These are often spectacular and alluring, but at the same time fragmented and dispersed, and appear coherent and logical only when interpreted through the prism of his own literary creation.

Unlike Yu Jian and Yang Lian, Wang Jiaxin does not speak about *sanwen*, but instead refers to another Chinese category for the essay: *suibi*, literally 'following the brush' or 'following the pen'. As I hope to show, this phrase accurately characterizes the artistic methods Wang employs in his "London Essays" and many other texts in verse and in prose. Wang's essay does not aim at defining or systematizing intellectual, artistic or physical experiences. On the contrary, it can be seen to be shaped or indeed torn apart by them, to such an extent that it loses its prosaic structure and changes into a polyvalent poetic text. At first glance, Wang's text is a narrative poem. It recalls the author's exile in London, reconstructing his biographical circumstances and mental state. However, as the narration progresses, London appears less and less real, material and personal, and is gradually transformed into a purely textual world. In Wang's memory and consciousness, places that have no equivalent or counterpart in the world of textualized cultural phenomena constitute blind spots. They seem to be invisible to the I-speaker. For example, Soho, the red-light district, which Wang used to pass indifferently during his stay in the city, emerges in his mind and acquires its raison d'être only two years after he left England to return to China, when the author is thinking about Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Divina Commedia) and recognizes in the Inferno his own, formerly unrealized experience:

> The street from China Town leads to Red Light District of Soho,
> so many immigrants have drowned there.
> Passing there for the first time you look neither right nor left.
> Like Odysseus who tied himself to a mast
> to fight the temptation of the Siren's song.

[32] Scoggin 2000: 191.
[33] White 1989: X.

Now you regret: why not penetrate it
like Dante, with God on his side.[34]

Yi Sha has a point when he argues that the London presented in "London Essays" is not Wang Jiaxin's.[35] It is the London of Sylvia Plath, of Emily Dickinson, of Shakespeare, of... Odysseus, of China's arch-poet Qu Yuan, of everyone except Wang himself. It appears that for Wang Jiaxin, it is impossible to define anything, be it the city, his own subjecthood, the text or any textual phenomenon, and that he has given up such efforts, having concluded that textual mechanisms spread too fast and unrestrainedly. However, in a sense, like Yu Jian and Yang Lian, Wang, too, theorizes and universalizes the essay and essayness, albeit indirectly. Specifically, by inscribing the essay into a self-multiplying context he allows it to theorize and universalize itself. The poet appears to relinquish his authorship in order to enable his work to enter a greater, transindividual realm of capital-L Literature. Wang himself still appears to hope to enter this realm as well: not as emperor but in the role of a follower – not so much a follower as caricatured by Yu Jian, Yi Sha and other enemies, i.e. an imitator of Great Masters, but rather a follower of his own pen: *suibi*. Wang's emigration was triggered by his experience of life under political pressure – specifically the cultural purge after the Tiananmen massacre, during which he lost his job as editor of *Poetry Monthly* (诗刊)[36] – and personal disillusionment with various spheres of Chinese reality, but it has not ended with his physical return. It continues in a textual world, which, in Wang's view, is not inferior to physical reality. It continues in the essay, and *as* essay, faithfully – helplessly? – followed by the author.

Entangled worlds

The three emigratologist (meta-)essays discussed above are based on the assumption that the linkage between experience and the essay is total, which implies among other things that emigration, being a crucial defining factor of essayism, determines all dimensions of an essayistic text: not only its explicit intent, but also certain implicit features. It is too early and the scope of the works I have examined so far is too narrow to consider whether these hypotheses may be extrapolated with regard to other essays of these and other authors, but the texts in question certainly suffice to indicate how entangled experiential content and aesthetic form may become, and how this mechanism can suck in all components of the essay.

For Yu Jian, the essay is basically complementary to a set of poetic genres. Its independence constitutes itself *against* clearly defined, monolithic, conventional forms and vice versa – all of the poetic genres are perceived as genres only in opposition to indefinable essay(ness). This, paradoxically, leads to the internalization of essayism by other genres, so that essayism becomes a part of negative definition of other forms, undermining their self-consistency and self-sufficiency. Yu Jian describes this mutual relationship as follows:

> *Sanwen* is an ancient manner of writing, if you create a text which is neither a poem nor fiction or drama etc., then you just say this is *sanwen. Sanwen* lies outside of any other literary

[34] Wang 2013: 35-42.
[35] Yi Sha 2001.
[36] Van Crevel 2008: 19.

> form, and, on the other hand, inside of every single form. The most ancient Chinese writings were *sanwen*, the most fundamental way of writing is *sanwen*, the most successful way of writing, except for poetry, is *sanwen*. In fact, there are only two forms, poetry and *sanwen*. I am afraid the precise meaning of the word *san* may be sensed only in Chinese. It originates in a culture which is not oriented to clear understanding, analysis, classification, technique, manipulation. Chaos, leisure, unity of humans and the Universe, an unconstrained and powerful style [...] this is the Chinese free spirit, which by its very nature refuses to surrender to any categorization.[37]

Yu Jian claims to be an inheritor of the tradition and spirit of classical Chinese *sanwen*. Even if contemporary realizations of *sanwen* in terms of aesthetics cannot be equated with the ancient form, they still preserve an aura of unceremoniousness and sovereignty of the ancient *sanwen*, which Yu cherishes. However, this is no longer a natural, unconventional or, perhaps, pre-conventional sovereignty, but the sovereignty after the "ancestral sin" of denaturalized, conventions-bound writing, the sovereignty that has been won – and must be constantly renegotiated and ascertained – in acts of emancipation vis-à-vis fixed systems and conventions. In Yu's reasoning, *sanwen* becomes involved in the same vicious circle of contradictions, mediations and mutual dependencies as the world which the essay is supposed to reunite (see the previous section) and the language torn by a dichotomy between signifier and signified (as in Yu's "rejection of metaphor").

Anticipating the discussion on Yu Jian's philosophical preferences which will be elaborated in the next section and later in chapter 2, let me note that this circular, sometimes compulsive and annoying, model is repeated in different spheres of Yu's reflection; it may be an echo of his often careless and inconsistent readings of Heidegger, whom he quotes abundantly, and of his being subject to the aporetic mechanisms of the hermeneutic circle in its "pre-postmodern" form, spinning in the service of ontology and metaphysics. Although Yu questions the possibility of arriving at any essence, he does not abandon the idea of seeking a reliable, metaphysical basis of artistic activity. Possibly, it is also the influence of Heidegger and his famous statement that "language is the house of Being",[38] which Yu cites and paraphrases in many other essays, that makes him resort to the realm of linguistics: not to seek the possibility of communicating his ideas, but to save the remnants of an artisthood that signals mystery and the hermetic nature of literary activity.

Yu's claims that the Chinese spirit is essayistic by its very nature because of its primordial involvement in life in dispersion constitute an attempt to bridge aesthetic and existential reflection. In the subsequent paragraphs, this results in the employment of the ambiguous notion of *sanwenshi* 散文式 ('essayistic style / mode / manner'), to describe various aspects of human life, including literature, thinking and experiencing the world. In particular, in the process of *sanwenhua* 散文化 ('essayization'), which Yu Jian discusses elsewhere and to which I will return at length in part two of this study, this quality may be ascribed to certain poetic genres and to poetry at large. It finally leads to the emergence of *sanwen shi* 散文诗 ('essayistic / prose poetry'), thus broadening definitions and the capacity

[37] Yu 2006b: 74.
[38] Heidegger 1977: 193.

of poetic forms. The issue of repeatability will be revisited in section three of this chapter, where I consider its congnitive background, and reemerge in the last part of the study, in a meta-perspective offered by the phenomenon of translation.

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In contradistinction to the dynamic reestablishment of genres in Yu Jian's literary output, what happens in Wang Jiaxin's work is a collapse of the generic system. In his case, genre-related terms are reduced to intertextual markers. They signify parts of tradition and the history of literature to which his texts directly allude. However, this does not limit possible interpretations of the text. On the contrary, these markers expose it to interactions with all other works already written and to be written in the future. They constitute traces whose structure and logic is atemporal, non-intentional and anti-intuitional. A text, once created, enters an unlimited web of real – historical – possible and potential contexts, becomes involved in endless "relationships without relation", in the words of Derrida.[39] The role of an author is reduced to a single decision: whether or not to pick up the pen (literally or otherwise, as in sitting down in front of a keyboard) and start writing, allowing the pen to lead them anywhere, beyond the "horizon of expectations". The essay is no longer a home where the author divides and rules but is perceived as a territory that is regularly conquered by strangers whom the author lets in. The author hence becomes a "hostage of his hosts"[40] and finally, if the hosts are strong and possessive, is sent into exile from his own text.

Poststructuralist and deconstructionist language that comes to my mind when interpreting Wang's poetry is probably not what he himself would want for his texts. The literary mentors he invites to his poems and essays belong mostly to conservative parts of the literary tradition. But his way of writing goes beyond traditional notions of literature. Reception of his works by Chinese readers seems to confirm this point. Poet and critic Bai Hua (b. 1956), for one, tracking Wang's connections with Great Masters (大师) such as Boris Pasternak, quotes Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (Fragments d'un discours amoureux): "the true site of originality and strength is neither the other nor myself, but our relation itself. It is the originality of the relation which must be conquered".[41]

What makes me – and, I suppose, other commentators who refer to the above-mentioned philosophical movements while interpreting Wang's works – associate Wang with "radical hermeneuts",[42] in contrast to Yu Jian as a declared follower of Heideggerian ontohermeneutics, is not *what* Wang thinks, but *how* he thinks, acts and experiences various spheres of reality, and which strategies he undertakes as a writer. In other words, the most important thing is not *whom* he invites to his poems, but *that* he invites them, and opens his essay-in-verse to allow "invisible guests [to] come in and out at will".[43] According to Ed Block, what John Caputo famously termed "radical hermeneutics" is nothing but a "radical homelessness",[44] which seems to fit the case of Wang Jiaxin well. I

[39] Derrida 1995: 72-73.
[40] Cf. Kearney 2002: 10-13.
[41] Bai 2008, English translation of the original text according to Barthes 2001: 35.
[42] Caputo 1987.
[43] Miłosz 1996: 199.
[44] Block 1991.

leave it to the reader whether Wang's performance should be regarded as generous hospitality and invitation or as over-hospitality and invention, and a strenuous, overzealous seeking of "the entirely other" – as in Derrida's *Psyche: The Invention of the Other*, where the philosopher calls for

> other invention of which we dream, the invention of the entirely other, the one that allows the coming of a still unanticipatable alterity, and for which no horizon of expectation as yet seems ready, in place, available. Yet it is necessary to prepare for it; to allow the coming of the entirely other, passivity, a certain kind of resigned passivity for which everything comes down to the same, is not suitable.[45]

The "entirely other" is a true temptation. For absolute otherness is the otherness that may never be internalized, domesticated, or transformed into "I". With the entirely other, one may remain in a continuous, productive dialogue facilitating the endless process of self-identification. This, however, often leads to an inevitable discrimination or defiance of the "selfness" and "sameness" which are close at hand. Such an attitude disables the self-proclaimed Odysseus in Wang's "London Essays" from building strong relationships with people and places. To give but one example: in the eighth part of the text, the I-speaker, attracted by foreign life and abstract, intertextual divagations, dreams of "her" (probably the I-speaker's partner, who, as Wang Jiaxin assured me, is a fictional character) as immersed in the music of church choirs, and a few lines later recalls her enjoying modern culture with "her fingernails dug into the flesh of jazz" (which apparently is more "fleshy" to the speaker than her body), but in the meantime forgets an obvious fact that "she, just like [himself], is Chinese".

In "London Essays", the experience of life and death, and the notion of home, are depersonalized. The physical death of the lyrical "you" appears less real than the legendary suicides of writers and fictional literary characters. While speaking about memories, Wang – intentionally or otherwise – echoes an essay by Brodsky, who compared memory to a substitute for a tail that "we lost for good in the happy process of evolution. [Memory] directs our movements, including migration". For both Brodsky and Wang, "there is something clearly atavistic in the very process of recollection, if only because such a process is never linear".[46]

When Wang reflects on his homeland, he near-literally repeats Czesław Miłosz's poem "My Faithful Mother Tongue" (Moja wierna mowo). Miłosz's apostrophe to his mother tongue is, however, inscribed in the context of his hopes and beliefs, and language remains his medium and messenger, fallible but loyal:

> This lasted many years.
> You were my native land; I lacked any other.
> I believed that you would also be a messenger
> between me and some good people

[45] Derrida 2007: 39.
[46] Brodsky 1986: 30.

even if they were few, twenty, ten
or not born, as yet.[47]

What for Miłosz was a weak but eternal light of freedom, Wang Jiaxin associates with death and hell. He appears unable to write any clear communication that could be mediated by the "messenger" of his "faithful mother tongue" and reach particular addressees (Miłosz's "good people"). The traditional, logocentric postal principle, as Caputo called a teleological understanding of linguistic communication, the most important message of which is the Presence itself, can no longer be applied to literature.[48] For Wang, the Presence (here the Tang-dynasty poet Du Fu – described as a "flesh and blood" person, not through his canonized writings – and the I-speaker who expects himself to share Du Fu's fate) falls (literally "trips over"), and what remains is the Text, which spreads unrestrainedly, redefining the bipolar reality of life and death, of beginning and end:

There, mother tongue means motherland
you don't have any other.
There, you are pruning blossom branches in hell,
and even death cannot make you put down the scissors.
There, every poem is the last one,
until you trip over
the very same stone that Du Fu had tripped over before.

Yu Jian exhorts poets to return to their spiritual homeland, which above all else means rediscovering their cultural roots. His quest for "hard" existential facts also influences his definition of the essay, which traces back the phenomenon of essayism to pre-historical conditions of the Chinese nation. In Wang Jiaxin's work the notion of roots is weak. His linkages with his own past are no more consistent, tangible and binding than connections with other past, present or future phenomena. Roots are transformed into unstable Deleuzian rhizomes that have "no beginning or end; [they are] always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo". They consist of "ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles".[49] As such, they constitute a dynamic map that is not amenable to any structural or generative model. The text disseminates in all directions to occasionally grow into the soil of the lived reality.

In sum, what I find most unsettling in Wang's "London Essays" is an ontological catastrophe from which no layer, no aspect, no hero of the text is spared. The essay as form dissolves as a result of its openness to other genres. And so does its textual subject, the I-speaker who first spends life emigrating to someone else's world and finally "trips over" the stone of an other, dies an other's death. And so does its author – when the form which was supposed to hold together his lived experience and his writing collapses, his own name spills out and merges with other names, listed in one breath with the names of the guests he had

[47] Miłosz 1996: 201.
[48] Caputo 1987:165-171.
[49] Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 25.

invited to the text, as in Yi Sha's report: Odysseus, Qu Yuan, Charles Dickens, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and others.

*

There are similarities between "London Essays" and Yang Lian's "Brief Thoughts on the Essay", the most essential being a perceptible extraverted tendency, which I have set against Yu Jian's introverted poetics. However, Yang's extravertedness appears expansive and possessive, and Wang's leads to self-weakening and, finally, the disappearance of the self. Yang's texts incorporate external reality, and Wang's textual identity is decomposed by reality.

Yang Lian picks concepts and traditions to be included in his own definition of the essay in what frequently appears to be an almost arbitrary manner. His reflection is, in a sense, a synthesis of Yu Jian's and Wang Jiaxin's. Sometimes he seems to employ Yu's tactics of fragmentation, vaguely echoing dialectical logics, which includes extracting single pieces of reality or thought, and matching them in binary oppositions in order to negate or transcend them in the next step. Elsewhere, he seems to switch to Wang's mode of thinking. Then, he becomes involved in interconnected threads, and follows his pen and the flow of his writing. Be that as it may, in Yang's case the flux is never endless, and the author never fully surrenders. Instead, he tries to adjust it to his own map and make it a means to his own end, a constituent of his private language. This critical attitude is present also in "Brief Thoughts on the Essay", where Yang provides an overview of Eastern and Western traditions of essayism. Placing *sanwen* against the backdrop of Chinese and world literature, he claims:

> In its original, orthodox sense, *sanwen* in Chinese constitutes a separate category. It cannot be associated with any of the genres from the Western literary genre system. [...] It is not like the Western essay which has one apparent subject, clear logic, a development and a conclusion. Whether it constitutes travelogue, political comment or a book review, for the essay, the most essential thing is "what to say", while "how to say" has only an auxiliary function. Moreover, *sanwen* differs also from another Western genre, namely fiction. An author [of fiction] invents a world, where heroes, events, people's fortunes, and thoughts are intertwined and together constitute a separate entity. The whole work becomes a total myth about reality. Lazy Western librarians often place Chinese collections of *sanwen* among [Western] essays. If they made some effort, and read these *sanwen*, which, by the way, are already available in translation, they would be confused, for one single [*sanwen*] can contain factors such as myth, philosophy, discussion, imagination, realism, autobiography, lyricism, poetic verse and other elements that coexist and, written freely and easily, sometimes reach directly into metaphysical spheres. *Sanwen* is too imaginary to be classified as an essay but too realistic to be read as fiction (it is like an epiphany of an author themselves), and too multifarious and jumbled to be called prose poetry.

Yang's analysis covers a range of literary phenomena and employs specialist terms, but that makes it no less debatable. For instance, his understanding of the European essay as an aesthetically neutral scholarly-like article whose main function is to convey ideas and views of an author has little to do with the arborescent Western discussion on the essay and essayness which erupted in the 16th century after the publication of Montaigne's *Essays*

(Essais, 1580) – and which, actually, has consistently placed the problem of form (Yang's "how to say") at the same level as or indeed above the matter of content. One of the pioneering and most impressive studies on the essay is Adorno's "The Essay as Form" (Der Essay als Form, 1958).

It is unlikely that Yang has never read any Western essay that was more essayistic than an academic paper. This leads me to think that this simplification does not stem from the author's ignorance but from his pragmatism. This pragmatism allows him to cut off one branch of a disseminating discourse to "immobilize" it *and* to avoid getting engaged in ceaseless inter- and hypertextual mechanisms. By doing so, he can establish a firm base of reference for his own reasoning.

By pragmatism I do not mean a practical, down-to-earth attitude, which would stand in stark contrast to the esoteric aura of many of Yang's works, but a no less calculated but more sophisticatedly justified pragmatism that has been elevated to the status of post-hermeneutic philosophy by scholars including Richard Rorty, in the postmodern instalment of this old discourse. That is, the very pragmatism which equalizes "texts and lumps" within the realm of language, the pragmatism which claims that everyone and everything in the world is an "incarnated vocabulary", the pragmatism which treats any theory as something to be freely decontextualized and utilized becoming a part of one's own "final vocabulary", "a means to private perfection rather than to human solidarity",[50] the pragmatism which, finally, promotes irony as the most desirable attitude. Bearing in mind these assumptions, let's read a few paragraphs from Yang Lian's "Brief Thoughts on the Essay":

> Writing about oneself means writing about all things on the earth, and writing about all things on the earth in fact means no more than writing about oneself. This was expressed in the Chinese definition of *sanwen*: "loose in form yet not so in spirit" [形散而神不散]. What is spirit? It is an attitude of "synthesizing" all things on the earth in one's individual inner world. [...]
>
> *Sanwen* penetrates and escapes all the possible linguistic forms, at the same time constituting a genre that shows directly the "impossibility of language". [...]
>
> [*Sanwen* follows] an "individual" rhythm. It is apparently written in Chinese, but, more precisely, in Yanglish [杨文] – my own literary language, which steadily distances itself from common speech. I neither describe nor even discuss. I perform – until [I reach the point where] everything becomes "global", in *sanwen* everything is linguistic; it refers not merely to words, vocabulary is only a medium of rhythm and rhyme, musicality initiates visual imagination, free grammar, transcendental vision – it pushes [an author] to reveal all the intrinsic possibilities of Chinese. In my opinion, it means no more than a return to the early Qin-dynasty linguistic form of *sanwen*. To the language intensively illuminated by a "self". It is a sort of language that everyone must invent for themselves to express one's "poetic reflection" – where "tradition" and "modernity" become one body in an act of individual creativity.

Yang indeed pragmatically collects contingent, miscellaneous "texts and lumps" and incorporates them directly or indirectly, e.g. as negative points of reference, into the

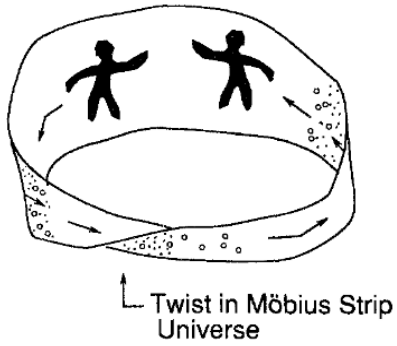
[50] Rorty 1989: 96.

landscape of his *zawen*-like *sanwen* defined as "a single, inner journey of a person". He leads the reader through the history of Chinese literature, from the ancient Taoist treatise *The Way and Its Power* (道德经) to Lu Xun, widely seen as the father of modern Chinese literature, in order to mark the scope of his own essay as a purely linguistic enterprise, a free expression of the author's unrestrained spirit in a "final vocabulary" of Yanglish. But he fails to meet a crucial assumption, which could transform his everyday pragmatism into a thought-provoking philosophy: irony.

As regards irony, Yang Lian fails on all fronts. This rhetorical failure affects "Brief Thoughts..." as deeply as the aforesaid ontological catastrophe influences Wang Jiaxin's "London Essays" and epistemological circularity disturbs "Yu Jian on...". As often as Yu Jian emphasizes the "firstness" and Wang Jiaxin the endlessness of what they create, Yang emphasizes the "lastness" and the "finalness" of everything. In terms of form, he treats *sanwen* as the last link in the chain of the evolution of genres, the one that synthesizes literature and existence. With regard to existential content, he seems to ignore the fact that a lifetime "inner journey" of one person may be a mere episode in the journey of another person. With regard to expression, he seems to ignore the fact that what he presents as his own language, Yanglish, may at one point become a subset of someone else's "final vocabulary". This is not to say that Yang does not admit the existence of other languages, he even encourages the reader to "invent for themselves" their idiom. Rather, he does not believe that his lonely linguistic island, surrounded by a vast ocean – which, as we shall see in the next section, behaves in striking obedience to commands dispensed in Yanglish – will ever be conquered by anyone.

*

The essays by Yu, Wang and Yang do not necessarily show that the origins of the essay *at large* lie in emigration. Still, what they achieve is a strong, total connection between their individual emigration experience and their texts. From a reader's point of view, any breakdown that starts in one sphere of their writings – be it ontological, epistemological or rhetorical – does not leave other aspects of the essays in question untouched. We can observe what happens in/to a particular essay as a whole, but we can only guess whether this happened first, or only, through its author or through an I-speaker, or through a form, or, perhaps, through ourselves – as we, too, are part of this dynamic.



A 2-D human on a Möbius-strip universe. If the human travels around the strip, their internal organs will be reversed. Pickover 1999: 136.

To give an idea about the complexity of these mutual entanglements, let me elaborate on the Möbius strip metaphor. If one wants to "dissolve" a Möbius strip, separating thus life and text, there are basically two ways to do so. You can of course cut it vertically like the Gordian knot – then it untwists itself and turns into an ordinary two-sided strip of paper, with two surfaces, but no more legible, since life and text have already been blurred in the process of writing and reading, and cannot return to their original pure states.

The second way is to cut horizontally. But then another surprise comes. If you cut in half, you will get one longer and narrower Möbius strip of the same twisted structure. If you cut, say, in one third of the width, you will get two Möbius strips, one of the former length and another one that is twice as long and has two twists, connected like links of a chain. There is no way to "un-read" this connection without destroying the work, and to retrieve easily orientable vector surfaces of life and text. Presumably, as this section wants to demonstrate, the only thing we may reliably identify is the spaciotemporal direction in which a particular synthesis reaction develops. The minute Chinese classification of various essay-genres sensitizes us to this and helps us describe it, by providing a topologically defined terminology that is hard to find in Western discourse on essayism.

By and large, the reader of the essay seems to have no way but to surrender to the power of this literary geometry and patiently walk along the strip. This is a transformative experience in the most literal sense of the world. If we imagine the Möbius strip as an infinitesimally thin, transparent surface, then any two-dimensional figure (e.g. a "model reader" who obediently follows the rules of the text), moving along its edge, after coming full circle, will finish their route inverted, as their own mirror image, with their heart on the right side of their body.[51] This is a hidden risk of the hegemonic shape, which we will begin to experience in chapter 2, and which I will investigate more systematically in the interlude that leads up to part two of this study. First, however, I wish to complete my reflection on the authors' views of their own work, and attempt to explain what makes them treat the emigratology of the essay so seriously. This is also important in order to steer clear of what we may call the emigrational fallacy, for readers and writers, lay and professional, in essay-related and other discourses.

III. Shared Metaphors

The concept of emigrant origins of the essay is in evidence on various layers of individual texts, often in line with other characteristics of explicit and implicit poetics of the authors in question. At the same time, what emerges are three different emigratologies. Although the authors make every effort to underpin their propositions with historical and philosophical arguments, their reflections are not invariably logically intersubjective but rather stem from individual metaphorical thinking sprinkled with phrases borrowed from academic discourse. One may easily identify several images to start a discussion on the essay on the one hand, and an emigration-related discourse, on the other: seas, roads, labyrinths, roots, home and homelessness, wandering, etc. My analysis will center around images of the sea and – toward the end of this section – images of the road, both frequently employed and capacious containers for a wide variety of thoughts on emigrant fate in works by Wang Jiaxin, Yang Lian and Yu Jian. Confronting their renditions in various literary texts with meta-textual interpretations of the essay itself, I will explore the "theoretical" potential of these images, which feasibly leads the authors to generalizing conclusions about causal links between emigration experience and the essay. I hold that what lies at the basis of an emigratology of

[51] Kaku 1996: 91

the essay is not a historical or logical relation, but a metaphorical representability of the essay in terms borrowed from emigration discourse.

Another issue is that representability itself is not an epistemologically neutral phenomenon, and metaphors as such not only illustrate but also shape one's understanding of the world, and thus, indirectly, shape the world as such. This is what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, pioneers of a cognitivist approach to metaphor, call a self-fulfilling prophecy, emphasizing that:

> Metaphors have entailments through which they highlight and make coherent certain aspects of our experience.
>
> A given metaphor can be the only way to highlight and coherently organize exactly those aspects of our experience.
>
> Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies.[52]

This implies that as metaphorical thinking develops and certain associations are repeated, the connections between various domains represented by the metaphor in question will be strengthened. Employing a metaphor does not mean inserting a single image into a text as an eye-catching decoration. Rather, it requires installing a complex branched structure to which a particular area of a written world must be almost mechanically adjusted. The more the written lends itself to such rearrangement, the better a metaphor works. In specific cases, initially disjunctive experiences may be synchronized, develop in parallel and even come to mutually define to the effect that disconnecting them becomes practically impossible. The concept of "emigrant origins" of the essay may well originate in these uncontrollable qualities of metaphorical thinking.

Wang Jiaxin's, Yang Lian's and Yu Jian's respective imaginings of the sea do not visually differ that much. For all three, the most obvious associations related to the sea are its vastness and its unpredictability. However, for Wang the sea is relentless in its eternal expansive movement and the subject gives up any attempts to control it; Yang aims at finding, or founding, a place "where the sea stands still"; and Yu is amazed at the sea as a restless conqueror that grabs the dry land only to withdraw again, externally unchanged but hiding an ever-growing internal destructive power. Without drawing rash conclusions, let me note that these differences in emotionally and psychologically marked elaborations of the image of the sea concur with differences in the authors' respective notions of the essay, which have been partially reconstructed in this chapter.

Wang Jiaxin's odyssey

A metaphorical vision of the sea explicitly occurs in only one of the three essays examined above, namely Wang Jiaxin's "London Essays", which begins with a self-reflection of the I-speaker inscribed into the ancient Greek myth on Odysseus. Wang does not focus on the

[52] Lakoff & Johnson 2001: 132.

Odyssey itself, but alludes to a moment when the protagonist climbs a mountain in Ithaca to gaze at the sea and recall his journey from Troy. The sea is no more a part of his actual life, but still appears equally "real". It grows, spreads and conquers the dry land of present existence and sends him its gulls, like a reminder of his inescapable exilic fate:

> Two years since I left London, the mist lifts
> masts rise, Big Ben sways back and forth
> in the port from a former life...
> Like a returned Odysseus climbing a mountain to look back
> Through the storm, can you see clearly the course of the ship?
> Can you hear the gulls that followed your boat at the time
> and are now still stubbornly crying for your company?

The sixth stanza, with a structure nearly parallel to the first one, brings an analogous landscape observed earlier by "I" from the window of the Shakespeare Bar. The same motives reappear in a new context. Material objects (London buses) emerge from textual matter (the mythical Odyssean sea), while the "real" storm and tsunami may be re-associated with the author's life only after they are filtered though the Intertext:

> Once again, you take a window seat
> in the Shakespeare Bar;
> Are you observing streets full of tourists
> and red, toylike double-decker buses
> or dwelling on the reasons of human existence?
> Is this you? King Lear scrambling through the tempest
> to find a love in the deepest horror.
> Human life should go on,
> Red double-deckers should emerge from the sea storm,
> Shakespeare should write poetry in poverty
> while the peddler across the street should as always cry his wares.

What happens in the "London Essays" is even more dynamic than the usual conceptual blending that is initialized by cognitive metaphors. It is a constant process of transformation, or substitution, of two spheres of reality: the physical world and the textual world. This process is possible not because of their visual similarities or because of the similarity of functions and roles they play in the author's life. It is so rather on the strength of their topological congruency, meaning a nearly identical structure that allows every object from one of these realms to be mirrored in the other. The essay and the sea are spreading uncontrollably, but somehow in parallel.

Also, the position of the subject in relation to the essay and the sea is analogous. The author always drifts in the middle, but is never truly *inside* his own text, which anchors rhizomatically on countless "other shores", one after another. He resembles Odysseus contemplating the image of the sea, still re-living his past and pre-living his future, and unable to enjoy, or indeed to *live*, his present existence.

There is another "sea poem" by Wang Jiaxin that may clarify this picture, "Taking My Son to the Ocean Shore" (带着儿子来到大洋边上).[53] It was written, according to an authorial note, in the years 1997-2001 in Eugene and Beijing, each located on one side of the ocean. "I" speaks to his son about the ocean and its other shore as something that may not be reached or understood right now, but requires another perspective, a backward, retrospective view and a clearer eyesight that will be sharpened by sufferings to come:

> I take my son to the ocean shore, there is China on the other shore,
> the vast sea that separates two worlds one day will separate also you and me
> – My boy, you need to grow up
> to see the other shore, you need another
> more painful vision to see the Beijing alleyways
> to look in the direction of your childhood.

Whether Wang Jiaxin finds himself in London, Eugene or Beijing, he always lives "over-seas". There is a sea-like abyss between his current physical and intellectual experience, that cannot be described nor grasped by the subject but defines his fate and (de)constructs his identity.

In Wang's poetics, the essay appears to be a textual analogue of the sea depicted in "London Essays" and in "Taking My Son..." While the author's "here and now" at the moment of writing is Beijing 1996, his *suibi* – or follow-the-pen essays – are located in two far-away places, distant in space and time. First, in London, some years ago; and in the last two stanzas, "somewhere" in a misty, far future, whose only undeniable ingredient is death. The story described in "London Essays" does not deal with the present. Instead, there is an abyss that "I" must leap over, to and fro, again and again, to sustain an impression of existential coherence. "Taking My Son..." actually repeats the final reflection in "London Essays", where the future directly re-calls the past and the past pre-calls the future, without any interlude that might be experienced as the present:

> 14
> [...]
> You have to bear everything.
> You will need the eyes of a dying man.
> Until the buildings collapse one after another and you hear
> the chorus from
> *Murder in the Cathedral*...
>
> 15
> Before leaving, no need to say goodbye to anyone.
> But you must visit the gallery hidden by the dense fog,
> to sit for a while before Van Gogh's sunflowers:
> once again stunned by brilliance made with human hands.
> You see that one man's torture is enough

[53] Wang 2013: 85-86.

to light a gloomy hall
as well as your own future forever and ever.

One may observe a certain confluence of images. We can see the I-speaker facing the borderless sea once traversed yet not "conquered" (as in Yang Lian's works) and without humans ever since. Simultaneously, we are confronted with the authorial subject who finds himself in the analogous position: he initializes textual mechanisms in "London Essays", but is excluded from his own, independently developing text.

Yang Lian's doomsday

As regards the mutual transposability of the sea and the essay, and the metaphorical mechanisms that tie them together, the most clear-cut and explicit answer is given by Yang Lian in an essay called "Because of Odysseus the Sea Began Its Ebb and Flow" (因为奥德修斯海才开始漂泊).[54] The essay is devoted to two texts written by Yang himself: an essay called "Overlapping Solitudes" (重合的孤独) and a narrative poem called "Where the Sea Stands Still" (大海停止之处). Their interpretation leads the author to the exalted conclusion that he himself has been transformed into a metaphor of "eternal doomsday".

Yang Lian sketches a scene that is confusingly similar to the opening scene from Wang's "London Essays": the sea watched from above, seagulls accompanying the poet, irresistible thoughts about the exilic fate of the author who compares himself to Odysseus. But, unlike Wang, who no longer partakes of the world he observes, Yang immediately internalizes this picture, "the sea, the sound of the waves, and the fate of the exile in the blink of an eye all charge into the poem". Everything else, including the poet himself, becomes a footnote, a pile of reading notes, or an essay attached to the inexhaustible poem – in the spirit of Montaigne's definition that associates essayism with *marginalia*,[55] and in line with Woesler's observation that the Chinese contemporary essay owes much to the aesthetics of marginalism.[56] Yang Lian focuses precisely on the very "now" that Wang Jiaxin skirts around, for he expects this little while to be transformed into an eternal moment, as a synthesis and culmination of history:

> Me, and every single "I", in the process of corporeal metempsychosis, enter into a blood relationship with a poem. Its words transform me into a metaphor of eternal doomsday. [...] The poem is constituted by concentric circles, and the concentric circles are everything. "You" doesn't exist, "you" is merely an "inner I"; even "I" doesn't exist, being only a borderless darkness inside of me. There is an eternal wandering towards "now". This is a peculiar logic: a poem is born inside of a poet, but, on the other hand, the poet is also reduced, deprived, and so embraced by the poem – his whole life changes into a gloss, a pile of reading notes. [...] Nothing more than concentric circles: every generation has its own Odysseus, otherwise the sea that lies in human minds wouldn't float.[57]

[54] Yang 2009: 61-66.
[55] De Obaldia 1995: 65-98.
[56] Woesler 2000: 27-37.
[57] Yang 2009: 65-66.

This concurs with my initial interpretation of "Brief Thoughts on the Essay", in light of which the essay appeared to be an elevated form of lived experience, its most perfect shape. In the context of "Because of Odysseus...", the essay reaffirms its complex constitution, as a temporary, all-encompassing reconfiguration of the subject's entire world. But this reconfiguration is no longer an end in itself. This time the essay is a mediator between poetic and not-yet-poetic worlds. The extratextual reality is transformed into an essay, and put in "concentric circles", under poetry's feet: "Around whoever creates, the world forms a concentric circle".[58] This is a complex and unrepeatable process, generated by every poem. Lived experience, present in the essay in a great variety, is reappropriated and turned to stone for a short while so that it can serve as a final "explanation" of poetic verse. This happens in the same way as when processing the image of the sea, which is both stimulated and immobilized by a single man, Odysseus, who is its first mover – and its last.

Many of Yang's essays, including "Brief Thoughts on the Essay", are interpretations of his own poetic thought as well as poetic works. Tang Xiaodu, in a meticulous study of Yang's sea imagery, examines "Where the Sea Stands Still" together with Yang's essayistic artistic autobiography "Establishing a Poetic Space to Release the Potential of Life" (建构诗意的空间，以敞开生之可能),[59] and speaks from a reader's point of view:

> The question is whether it is possible, even for a "model reader" (to borrow Foucault's term), to understand a [poem's] theme and formal implications without relying on the author's self-explanations, to decode its painstakingly designed structure? [...] As far as I know, ever since *Yi* [written in 1985-1989], for the majority of readers, Yang Lian's poetry has increasingly owed its emotional appeal to the author's world-wide fame, for – according to my own experience – reading his works, especially the magnificent poem series, is not an effortless affair, and overcoming an initial strong discomfort requires enormous patience.

The actual reading of Yang's poems requires much more effort than simply examining a set of circumstances and contexts which may facilitate the understanding of the poem. It demands that one immerse oneself in the text and re-read the world through the prism of the poem. If this is asking too much, the essay provides the reader with a ready-made solution. It offers the diverse and dynamic world "standing still" in one of its limitless configurations, wholly subdued to the writer's will – and to the poem.

Tang Xiaodu's reconstruction of the development of Yang Lian's explicit and implicit poetics reaffirms my intuition about the coherence between the poet's sea imagery and his essayistic activity. Tang writes:

> This proto-image has been appearing frequently and gained special focus since [Yang] left China. The relation of this image with his experience of wandering and with another theme he gave particular attention for the same reason, namely "the end", is closer [than it is for other images]. Although "the end" has been present in his poetry from the very beginning as a kind of declension of the motif of "temporality / atemporality" which he persistently tries to negotiate, it made him also discuss over and over again and highlight the problem of "Chineseness" as part of the scope of contemporary poetics. Obviously, no matter which

[58] Cit. from Tang Xiaodu 2007: 28-44.
[59] Tang Xiaodu 2007: 28-44

> image I choose, it would always lead me to conclude that Yang Lian is one of few contemporary poets who have created their own individual poetics and imagery system. As for such poets, scrutinizing particular usages of a certain image in specific [and] general contexts, and this image's mutual interactions with others, plus the stylized stamp that has been put on it, is much more important than exploring the image in question as such.

Tang traces Yang's fascination with the theme of the sea to the first few years of his life in emigration, associating this period also with an intensive production of theoretical essays dealing with poetics, mostly Yang's own. This may suggest that since that time, trajectories of the evolution of the author's metaphorical imagination (expressed, for instance, in numerous sea-theme poems) and his intellectual interests (as evidenced in meta-literary essays) have been running more or less synchronically, and resulted in structurally homologous models.

Yu Jian's sea with no other shore

For Yu Jian, too, an interest in the sea as a source of artistic inspiration started when he made his earliest long-distance travels, first around China, and subsequently abroad, especially to the Netherlands where he saw the sea that was to turn into one of the catalysts of his "middle-age" writings. His fascination is understandable if one takes into account that the poet was born in the mountainous Yunnan Province where a large lake called Dianchi was the only "sea", so named by Kunming citizens, since it evokes the infinity and eternity that shape their imagined seas. Hence, "even those who later were to become sailors when coming back to their hometown / still called Dianchi the sea".[60]

In spite of Yu Jian's avowed "rejection of metaphor", the sea arguably functions as a metaphor in much of his writing, and one with a special position and role: if not in a literary or rhetorical sense, then at least in a cognitive context. It is one of several subversive "emigrant" metaphors he employs in his poetry to support his theory battles against predominant forms of both metaphoricity and emigration. As noted above, Yu's essay called "The Rejection of Metaphor" also refers to the sea as an example of a natural element that was originally given a "natural name".[61] Despite their questionable scholarly value, Yu's etymological revelations demonstrate his pre-understanding of the sea as a primeval power and embodiment of natural wilderness, an incarnation of authenticity and vitality that should be protected from the human mind lest it be transformed into a metaphor. In all likelihood, Yu's intent was to make it a metonymy (regardless of whether he ever employed this term), meaning that he wanted the sea to serve as a synecdoche for an unmetaphorizable world in its entirety. Yet, this figure, repeated and recontextualized frequently especially in Yu's poems, has been gaining new connotations, becoming a metaphorical image, and finally, among its numerous functions, retrospectively acquired also a status of a meta-metaphor – that is, a metaphor of (non-)metaphoricity. About Yu Jian's updated definition of metaphor and its connection to the phenomenon of the essay and essayization, we read more in an authorial introduction to his essay collection *Notes from the Human World* (人间笔记, 1999), where he discusses an ancient Chinese story about Paoding who slaughters and cuts up a cow (庖丁解

[60] Yu 2013c: 335-336.
[61] Yu 2004a: 125.

牛), interpreting it in the context of a redefined concept of writing: "This kind of writing perhaps is just a metaphor, but it becomes a metaphor exactly for the very reason that it publicly debunks the very mechanisms of metaphoricity".[62]

The sea, first seen in the Netherlands in "real life" by Yu Jian ten years after "The Rejection...", is a beast that devours and "digests" everything. It incorporates all objects placed on dry land, without changing its own shape. Its role is, nonetheless, far from negative and not only destructive. The sea is a guardian of natural law and order, as in the poem "Watching the Sea" (看海)[63] written in 2005:

> Languages extinct like primitive human tribes
> all the analyses dissolved the narrow-minded at last may find common ground
> [...]
> This dying pope always preaches freedom
> The sea as a religious doctrine means dispersion and restoration
> It is not agony no fight for breath
> Eternal ageing immortal depth
> Finished off at the very moment of birth
> The sun sets on time the wind rises from other stars
> night follows day
> Like fishermen we don't know how to get back
> The sea remains in its place spewing into nothingness dark streams of water
> The waves have used up all their tricks to cheat the sea
> defeated now must come back to it united under its anonymous will
> into one stormy kingdom heavy yet magnificent troops
> ruthlessly pouncing on the dry land
> [...]
> Anything that rushed onto Mother Earth
> is yielding now returning to the borderless dump
> The final result of this unending showdown
> is a swath of fertile land
> [...]

Mechanically reducing Yu Jian's vivid picture to a "model sea", we would get an abstract, conceptual structure, deceptively similar to models that might be distilled from other works by Yu Jian, both literary and meta-literary, including his reflections on the essay discussed above. First, such a schematic picture may serve as a model of a subject, individual and collective. It represents a strong, possessive self that devours and "digests" any Other and its surroundings. This subject could be an author who deals with "influences", or a nation that "domesticates" the cultural heritage of other nations or minorities. Second, it may refer to a way of life that Yu Jian has been leading since the late 1990s, travelling further and further, expanding his private geographical and intellectual map, but always with an intention to return to his "little homeland" and his mother tongue, meaning Kunmingese as

[62] Yu 2004a: 164-167.
[63] Yu 2013c: 31-33.

well as Chinese at large. Third, it can represent textual mechanisms such as metaphorization, and the nature of the text itself. The latter is especially apparent in Yu's essays, including the meta-essayistic "Yu Jian on the Essay and Reading Aloud", which incorporates various dispersed concepts of essay(ness), theories, images, and texts (including many of Yu's own works) into a mosaic picture.

Unlike Yang Lian and Wang Jiaxin, Yu Jian has not written any text in which the sea and the essay are explicitly linked. When I asked him if he could accept my understanding of the image of the sea as a specific illustration of his own writings and as a starting point to build a tri-polar model of the Chinese literary scene, with Yu on one and Wang and Yang on the other two poles, he found this an appropriate interpretation. His enthusiastic approval is unsurprising in light of the fact that for Yu Jian, what I call emigratology is one of several fixed points within his explicit poetics, serving as a solution for various literary-philosophical problems. This is in evidence, for instance, in the book at which we will have a closer look in the final chapter of this study: the *The Possibility of Going Home* (还乡的可能性, 2013). The book collects thirteen of Yu's (quasi-)theoretical texts and four interviews published between 2001 and 2012, dealing with a broad spectrum of topics: versification, postmodernism, lyricism, Eastern and Western metaphysics, everyday life and more.

As for Yu Jian's essays, instead of the sea, they offer another emigrant metaphor that has been widely associated with literary creation and works like the sea in many ways, namely that of the road. This was inspired by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Yu takes the novel quite instrumentally. He transforms it into an argument in his struggles against future-oriented, exilic modernity and simultaneously against "poeticized" (诗意化) literature which, according to him, reflects these trends. In a 2001 essay called "The Myth of the Future" (关于未来的神话), he claims:

> People no longer believe in eternity. They no longer believe in unchangeable and timeless things. If the countryside remains motionless, this is not because it represents the future, but because it is backward. This century is "on the road". On the road, obviously, refers to manifestations of people's vitality, but what scares me, is that the road is perceived as a one-way road. Kerouac's *On the Road* does not suggest any direction, he emphasizes the need to experience anew one's own existence. But in China "on the road" means only one direction, that is: "the future". Although this future has already thrown a shadow on existence as such, people still blindly follow this eternal myth. Their disdain for the past is like moving again and again to new homes, but what finally becomes abandoned, is not any residence, but a homeland. "Their ancient home" [an allusion to Qu Yuan's *The Lament for Ying* (哀郢)].
> [...] "Life is elsewhere". The future exists only in the imagination, it feeds a trend in Chinese modern aesthetics, characterized by poeticization, and offering no more than imaginings, other shores, far-away places, meaning an effect of the sublimation of the future.[64]

There are two basic Chinese expressions to describe migratory life: *zai lu shang* 在路上 'on the road' and *zai tu zhong* 在途中 'midway, halfway'. Yu Jian's road is a rocky path, rough and material. It is not an abstract "way": an idea to be followed that pulls a subject into an unclear future, existing "only in the imagination" and making the subject feel in-between. Yu writes:

[64] Yu 2004a: 107-108.

> I admit that nowadays the world is much different than in ancient times. The ancient world was the world "at home", our era is the era "on the road", yet there's still one common thing that hasn't changed, I mean, both home and road rest on a foundational vehicle, they both need the earth to support them. If world development destroys this foundational vehicle, humans will be not just homeless, but also roadless.[65]

To avoid getting lost, one should always feel firm ground under one's feet and remember one's place of departure. Following the "way" results in "poeticization" of the world, for which Yu Jian finds a remedy in the essayization (散文化)[66] he first describes at length in *Notes from the Human World*.

In light of *Notes...* and later meta-essays written by Yu, the essay is an antidote to "life [that] is elsewhere" (生活在别处) – the phrase is borrowed from Arthur Rimbaud, and Yu Jian has often used it as an indictment of Chinese poets who he thinks over-identify with "Western" literature – and "the other shore" (彼岸). Both notions constitute inseparable parts of, and Yu's most essential arguments against, the exilic discourse which he perceives as a dominant trend in contemporary Chinese poetry. It comes as no surprise then, that the sea in Yu's poem "Watching the Sea" has only one shore. The other shore, hidden behind a horizon, is ignored by the I-speaker.

In the essay "The Possibility of Going Home", just like in "Yu Jian on…", Yu once again links the discussion on the essay with reflections on recitation, treating both as means to retrieve a primordial form and natural function of poetry that consists in participating in human existence and ensuring its continuity. What has changed is the definition of home. In his recent works this is no longer portrayed as a specific geographical location, but first and foremost as a linguistic category. In "The Possibility...", he refers again to Qu Yuan's *Lament for Ying*, placing it in the context of Heidegger's existential philosophy of language:

> The essayization of poetry does not result from disregard for rhyme and rhythm, but is determined by thought. There is no way to formalize poetry that is based on deep reflection. More profoundly, as for the sound, Chinese is a musical language by nature, its four tones can be understood as a spacious melody, and contemporary poetry goes back to this basic melody. [...]
> The direction of modern poetry is "Language is the house of Being". [...]
> I think that our times are facing a Qu Yuan-style situation [...]. Melancholy in *Lament for Ying* is not just a reaction to a "ruined country", its gloomy tone was caused by the "globalization" of the Qin empire and the perspective of losing language as the home of existence. [...] Language is the house of Being. In the past, classical poetry used to be our homeland, but we were banished even from there. Using the vernacular [白话] to return to the wilderness of Chinese, contemporary poetry is a profound linguistic return.[67]

Yu Jian strives to oppose the exilic spirit of modernity. If he feels himself banished from one realm, he "digs out" another that he claims to be more ancient, more primordial, more natural. As such, the development of his oeuvre might appear paradoxical. The more cosmopolitan and globalized he seems to be in light of his implicit poetics, the more "backward" and local

[65] Ibidem: 110.
[66] Yu 2004a: 165-166.
[67] Yu 2013a: 33-39.

are his explicitly declared interests and ambitions. In "The Possibility...", for instance, he glorifies blues music as the most tribal and most authentic form of poetic recitation. But there is another angle: the more modern, sophisticated and (from the Chinese point of view) exotic tools Yu Jian possesses, the further in time and space his archaeology may reach. He does not hesitate to expand his workshop by employing new methods or by recycling existing, temporarily abandoned texts and poetics. The metaphorical road and the metaphorical sea have the same aim: to reach as far as possible, to collect as much as one can bear, in order to enable a more spectacular and effective return. This is also the mission of the essay: to strengthen and equip Yu's poetry, making it ready for an exhausting, endless, and – as he admits – impossible retreat.

IV. Trajectories, Strategies, Tactics

"Because of emigration" is but one of many responses that have been or may be given by various authors to the question asked at the beginning of this chapter: "Why the essay?". This answer is interesting inasmuch as it echoes the authors' struggles to make their physical biography compatible with their literary creation, that is to synchronize the lived experience of leaving places where one feels at home with the artistic moment of abandoning safe, proven conventions for the sake of the risky, underexplored essay where life merges with text in unpredictable ways. This is not to say that such synchronization must be consistent or perpetual, and that once it is achieved one's biography and one's oeuvre must develop in sync. It may be temporary as well, and be repeated many times during one's lifetime.

Nevertheless, there are writers – represented here by Wang Jiaxin, Yang Lian and Yu Jian – who attempt to extend this into something systematic and continuous, with an eye to their own artistic activity and to literature at large. As a factor which technically enables establishing and maintaining a connection between the essay and emigration, I would point to a high mutual translatability of these two discourses. Hopefully, my analysis of shared metaphors has made this a plausible observation.

And here is another "why". Why do these authors care so much about this connection? This leads into speculation, but some clues are offered by the writers themselves – with the same caveat as before, meaning that I will of course not take what they say as anything like the truth about their work. With regard to "efficient causes" of the marriage between the essay and lived experience, any reflection confined to the field of literary or even cultural studies must remain helpless if it fails to explore the complex psychology of the creative act. Yet, wherever the need of creating textual equivalents of one's experience comes from, it seems that in the case of writers who find themselves more or less literally "on the road", this need is particularly strong, and pushes them to produce essays – as if they tried to mark, or substitute, their presence in places they expect to leave again soon. As far as "final causes" are concerned, the three writers examined in sections two and three of this chapter are quite profuse in their explanations. They regale how the essay and the emigration experience in their work cooperate in the name of bigger projects and more universal concepts. In broad strokes, for Yu Jian the main goal is the restoration of a pre-emigrant state of mind and world,

for Wang Jiaxin it is establishing a radically open space of discourse where migrating is the most basic and most common way of being, and for Yang Lian it is creating a self-sufficient one man's universe to which one can travel any time at will.

These three general trajectories mark possible patterns of textual transformations of existential spacetime. By and large, these operations consist in reshaping intersubjective external space by one's artistic consciousness developing in sync with one's inner time. In chapter 2, I will describe the said trajectories through the notions of *recollecting*, *collecting* and *re-collecting*, meant to reflect a rudimentary spaciotemporal topology of the essay. Based on what has been said so far, *recollecting* (Yu) may be roughly characterized as regressive, past- and home-oriented, *collecting* (Wang) as extravertive, progressive, future- and Other-oriented, and *re-collecting* (Yang) as creatorly, atemporal, seemingly indifferent or minimally hermetic.

Needless to say, these trajectories may be realized in different ways, depending on the author's individual strategy. Furthermore, authorial strategies aside, every single text is totally new and unprecedented. It is written in specific circumstances and a specific environment. These appear particularly unstable in contexts of emigration, and therefore – in light of Michel de Certeau's "martial" interpretation of everyday life[68] – often demand a tactical approach, meaning flexible, creative thinking that is not always in line with an overall plan. If strategy, says de Certeau, "is a specific type of knowledge, one sustained and determined by the power to provide themselves with one's own place", a tactic is "an action determined by the absence of the proper locus", its space is "the space of the other", and it is the other who dictates conditions. While it is strategy that is the most desirable element of life, as it implies growing power and stability, and tactic is called a mere "art of the weak", yet tactic often produces solutions of genius, under the pressure of the circumstances. Emigrant essay writers struggle to establish what de Certeau calls their "own area", their private "readable space" in which they can take their oeuvre management in their own hands, as will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5, and which may become their home, whether on this shore or on the other. Failing this, they have to take temporary measures depending on the situation. If the reader will permit me to simplify, Yu Jian sometimes also writes *zawen*, Wang Jiaxin occasionally avails himself of *sanwen*, and Yang Lian now and then goes for *suibi*; minimally, they incorporate some elements of "the enemy genre" strategies, often in a subversive manner. And quite successfully so.

Bearing in mind what emigrating authors expect from the essay – from the most general, trajectorial determinants, through individual poetic strategies, to the most specific needs of the moment – let's see whether individual essays can meet these expectations, and how they endure the inner and outer struggles of their authors, while other textual forms lie by the roadside like so many empty armors.

[68] De Certeau 1984: xviii-xix.

CHAPTER 2

An Essayography of Emigration: How Essays Reflect the Emigration Experience

It is time to change the perspective, from a bird's-eye view of authors and oeuvres to a (book)worm's-eye view of emigration experience transforming into "essayistic experience" inside particular texts. Strolling along the edges of essayistic Möbius strips I explore two simultaneous sub-processes: the inscription of emigrant experiences onto the content layer, and their "enactment" by formal structures – to finally find out that this dichotomy is, let's say, twisted.

Whereas chapter 1 discussed (quasi-)theoretical emigratologies of the essay, this chapter will provide a practical essayography of emigration, that is a selective overview of emigration-related essays that come under the notions of *recollecting*, *collecting* and *re-collecting* I have introduced above. Although I do consider some widely anthologized works, I am not so much looking for representativeness as for texts that are somehow illustrative or interrogative, i.e. that provide interesting angles on emigration (in) literature, and that raise more general questions about emigrant experience and emigrant writing, and the relationship between them.

I. Recollecting: Reliving the Past

To elaborate what I mean by *recollecting*, let me begin by invoking Dorothea Debus' study on a "relational account of recollective memory". Her reconstruction of "recollective relation" as an "experiential relation to certain thing or event" contains an appropriate description of the attitude represented by those I see as *recollecting* emigrant essayists, as regards the negotiation of their past experience of home and motherland. Debus writes:

> The temporal relation between the R-remembered [recollectively remembered] object or event and the subject at the time at which she R-remembers the object is [...] a relation of being 'temporally before'.
>
> Second, each subject traces a continuous spatio-temporal path through the world. [...] Usually, this means that the R-remembered object lies on the spatio-temporal path that the subject herself has traced through the world. [1]

[1] Debus 2008: 410-411.

Given the above, I would say that emigrant writers who tend to follow a *recollecting* trajectory are those who believe in the continuity and the unambiguousness of a spatial, temporal, and causal path that connects them with the places they come from. These may be taken as individual native places or abstract beginnings: prehistoric cradles of national or human culture, sources of language or even the pre-human state of the universe. *Recollecting* authors appear to think that although they are no longer the people they used to be, and the path itself and its surroundings have also changed like Heraclites' river, it remains their responsibility and a prerequisite for self-identification to search for this path and try to retrace one's footprints, as individual or collective subjects. Usually, they seem to value the place of origin more highly than other places, perceiving it as a haven of truth. Here, truth is not so much a cognitive or epistemological category as an ontologically true state – i.e. a primordial, natural state that is perceived as obvious and untouched by external forces – of their own world, of their community, or of humanity at large.

Emigration from one's native soil

It is no accident that *recollecting* overlaps with the modern Chinese notion of "local-soil literature" (本土文学), specifically with what is arguably its most prominent and consistent type: "native-soil writing" (乡土写作). The term "native-soil" (乡土) as a literary critical category reaches back to Lu Xun's 1921 short story "Homeland" (故乡).[2] As regards contemporary Chinese literature, it refers to writers such as Gao Xiaosheng (1928-1999), Liu Shaotang (b. 1936), Gu Hua (b. 1942), Zhang Yigong (b. 1935), Lu Yao (1949–1992), Chen Zhongshi (1942-2016), Zhang Wei (b. 1955), Jiao Jian (b. 1954), Wang Zengqi (1920-1997), Jia Pingwa (b. 1952) and Mo Yan (b. 1955).[3] Most were born in the 1940s or the 1950s in the countryside, moved to urban areas to study at university and subsequently settled in the city. A somewhat younger author associated with native-soil literature is Liu Liangcheng (b. 1962), whom critics have called "the last essayist" (the Chinese term used here being *sanwenjia* 散文家 'sanwen-essay writer') and "the village philosopher", whose essays and poems are set in Shawan village in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region.[4]

Many of native-soil essays, including works by Gao Xiaosheng, Jia Pingwa, Liu Liangcheng and Wang Zengqi, have been collected in an anthology called *Hometowns and Childhood* (2006) which was translated into English by Zhong Ren and Yang Yuzhi.[5] Noteworthy among Chinese-language sources is the second volume of the six-volume collection *A History of Chinese Writers Returning Home in Spirit* (中国作家的精神还乡史),[6] containing *recollectiv*e, mostly (pre-)native-soil essays by authors whose works span several decades, from Lu Xun through to Liu Liangcheng. The essays are preceded by an extensive introduction by editors Lin Xianzhi and Xiao Jianguo. There, the scholars interpret Chinese

[2] For detailed discussion on the relationship between "local-soil literature"(本土文学) and "native-soil writing" (乡土写作), and comprehensive history of the latter, see: Bai Ye 2011 (esp. Introduction).
[3] Hong 2007: 373-379.
[4] Lin 2011: 107-112.
[5] Ni 2006.
[6] Lin & Xiao 2008 a-f.

modern *sanwen* against the background of Heideggerian thought, this being the most recollection-friendly philosophical environment, as I argued in chapter 1.

The titles of these two books mirror basic commonalities of the anthologized texts. Native-soil essays usually carry a nostalgic undercurrent, recalling lost paradises and abandoned homes. There is a clear power imbalance between the past and the present. The authors in question rarely focus on re-reading and intentionally reorganizing their memories through the prism of their own current situation. Instead, they tend to interpret the present and self-identify in light of their earliest experiences, and to perceive the current situation as a function of the past. In Proustian-madeleine fashion, new places and objects often elicit involuntary memories, based on subjectively perceived similarities and conjuring up the scenery of the subject's place of origin. This native place, though irretrievable from a spaciotemporal point of view, metaphorically still conquers other places, offering an essentially unchangeable topography into which new things and experiences must be inscribed. As in Mo Yan's "Transcending Homeland" (超越故乡):

> Why do I use such language and tell such stories? Because my writing consists of searching for the lost homeland [...]. As for the piece of soil which breeds and feeds you, which conceals the bodies of your ancestors, you can love this soil, or hate it, but you cannot free yourself of it. Me, a country bumpkin who left Gaomi only at the age of twenty, however I would disguise myself, I couldn't become a gentleman, with whatever garlands I would deck my novels, they still could be nothing but sweet-potato novels [地瓜小说, literally '*earth / soil* gourd' novels]. Indeed, at the very same time when I was struggling hard to leave [my homeland] behind, step by step, I was unconsciously drawing close to it. [...] I became a creator and emperor of Gaomi-county-in-literature [...] Everything, whether it's a piano, bread, nuclear weapon, foul-smelling dogshit, modern girls [allusion to a Korean movie titled "Modern Girl" – Chinese "摩登女郎"], local thugs, royal families, fake foreign devils [假洋鬼子 – Lu Xun's term for Chinese people that blindly emulate Westerners], missionaries... all these things have been crammed onto the sorghum fields [One of Mo Yan's first and most famous novels is called *Red Sorghum* (红高粱)].[7]

The essay shows the author's determination to transform involuntary mechanisms of memory that prevented him from joining the mainstream writing into a conscious artistic strategy. This strategy proved successful, with Mo Yan first becoming a national celebrity and later seeing his work widely translated, culminating in the 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature. His native Gaomi county has since been mentioned alongside sanctuaries of literature such as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and Marquez's Macondo.

In 20th-century China there was another group of writers who gave prominence to life in rural, undeveloped areas, the so-called "educated youths" (知识青年 / 知青). These were students who were sent "up to the mountains and down to the countryside" during the Cultural Revolution, to "learn from the peasants". For many, this would become a foundational experience and a leitmotiv of their writing careers. Yet, a number of native-soil authors have questioned the authenticity and depth of this experience, for the conviction that despite their sincere interest and involvement in the villagers' everyday existence, the one-time "educated

[7] Mo Yan 2013: 53-54.

youths" lack a sense of belonging to the communities they depict. In the essay "I am a peasant" (我是农民), Jia Pingwa clarifies this point:

> When I returned to Kanghua, I become a veritable peasant, while among peasants I was deemed the "educated youth". Yet, later on, when I started writing and "educated youths" fiction became popular in China, I never wrote anything that could be counted among the works of the "educated youths". In the view of the majority of people, the term "educated youths" refers to those youngsters who originally lived in the cities, led a relatively luxurious life, and suddenly, enthusiastically, beating drums and clanging gongs, arrived in the countryside, while for me the village was my home. I didn't come to become a peasant, I had always been a peasant. [...] How much I envied all of these educated youths who arrived from the big cities! They appeared here accompanied by the sounds of drums and gongs, they had [political] leaders, they were assigned to the most important yet also the easiest jobs [...], they were to return to their cities [...]. They attracted the most beautiful girls from the village [...].
> [...] I loved the soil. I loved every single ear of grain on that soil...
> [...] But, at the same time, I also hated the soil, I didn't want to live in poverty, I was waiting for the opportunity to free myself of that hard physical work. [8]

Anticipating section two of this chapter, let me note that the difference between village-themed works by native-soil writers and those of the "educated youths" may well exemplify differences between *recollecting* and *collecting*, respectively. For the narrators and protagonists of the latter, the "true life" at which they want to arrive is located beyond their memory and biographies, and thus cannot be *recollected*. The village is "the other shore" to which they travel to *collect* the experiences they yearn for. I will return to their works in chapter 5, when discussing essayization in the fiction of Han Shaogong (b. 1953).

Homelands without homes

For all the acclaim that contemporary village-oriented works have received, here and there one hears the critical voices of scholars and writers who doubt whether the Chinese native soil can still be effectively cultivated by means of literature, and whether it makes sense to reconstruct one's relationship with the landscape of one's childhood. Yi Sha – who is, as noted above, a fierce critic of exilic literature – is one of the authors haunted by such questions. In the first essay from his 2007 collection titled *Morning Bell and Evening Drum* (晨钟暮鼓), having recalled in great detail his childhood, hometown and family, Yi Sha presents his concept of "this city" (本城),[9] created to substitute for ideas such as one's homeland, native soil and "root-seeking" (寻根) – another *recollecting* movement in contemporary Chinese literature, promoting indigenous culture and aimed at tracing historical continuity. Han Shaogong is widely viewed as its founding father, while sympathizers include native-soil writers such as Mo Yan and Jia Pingwa.[10] Characterizing himself as an incurable

[8] Jia 2015: 13.
[9] The term might be also rendered as 'native city' or 'my city'; the former, yet, would be contrary to the intention of the author who declares rejection of "nativeness", while the latter I eliminated based on the observation of syntactic structures containing 本城 (the word is frequently preceded by a possessive pronoun *my*).
[10] Hong 2007: 370-373.

down-to-earth realist, unable to share the experience of wandering, yet simultaneously lacking a sense of home, Yi Sha argues:

> As far as I am concerned, I don't have any homeland, I have only "this city". My "this city" is, naturally, Xi'an. [...]
>
> While other people metaphorize their "homelands" as "paradises", my "this city" emerges from a natural course of "worldly" events which were imposed on me, so I have no way but to accept them. [...] I've heard that writers can be divided into two categories: those who write walking and those who write sitting. If we cannot avoid such categorizations, then, well, I undoubtedly belong to the latter. And to write sitting one needs a chair, a room and a city...
>
> I write in this city – since I realized this point, I have no longer been envying those native-soil writers who possess a homeland to return to. Compared to their native places, more distant by the day, my city is right in front of my eyes, at my fingertips. No need to rack my brain to painstakingly piece together facts in my memory, or to compete in who is "more native", more authentic, more credible.[11]

Unlike Mo Yan does for Gaomi, Yi Sha apparently feels no need to set all of his writings against the background of his birthplace, Chengdu in Sichuan province. He does not share Jia Pingwa's feeling of estrangement in Xi'an, where both have lived for many years. He is not interested in traveling West, to his native Sichuan, in the manner that Wang Xiaoni wants to travel "all the way North", or in going back to the roots of culture, like Yu Jian. Nonetheless, there are good reasons to argue that Yi Sha's works, and his essays in particular, are not as soil-less as he claims. To demonstrate this, I need to contextualize matters from an intertextual and international perspective.

Morning Bell and Evening Drum, a compilation of essays written mostly between 2000 and 2007, is divided into four parts. Yi Sha describes these as (1) theoretical *sanwen*-essays and essayistic poems (散文诗, conventionally rendered as 'prose poems', here translated literally to retain the linkage with *sanwen*-essay); (2) quotidian *xiaopinwen* (小品文), literally 'little prose pieces', which come under what Charles Laughlin refers to as "literature of leisure"[12]; (3) *suibi*-essays on current matters; and (4) a Rotterdam travelogue classified by the author as *sanwen*.

The texts included in the book's first three parts have much in common with the essays by Yang Lian that I have previously associated with *zawen* and presented as an example of essayistic *re-collecting*, the phenomenon to be reexamined in a broader context in section three. In addition to the act of self-naming (Yi Sha elaborately discusses the origins of his penname), their rhetorical tone, megalomania and imagined self-sustainability and the announcement of an "Yi Sha style" (伊沙体, compare Yang's notion of "Yanglish") as a synthesis of poetry and all kinds of prose call to mind strategies noted explicitly in Yang's "Brief Thoughts on the Essay" and implicitly realized in other works by Yang that were discussed in chapter 1. In the afterword to *Morning Bell…*, Yi Sha says he spent more time on this book than on any other, contemplating how to organize, reconfigure and compile previously written, mostly quite old texts; this, too, suggests that this is an act of

[11] Yi Sha 2007: 11-12.
[12] Laughlin 2008: 1.

self-identification – and one that aspires to to self-creation – by *re-collecting*. But, of course, things are never that simple, and Yi Sha has his moments of doubt when he seeks objective or minimally intersubjective confirmation of his identity. One of such moments features in the fourth part of the book.

Even though the distance from the "little homeland" (Chengdu / Sichuan) and the suppression of memories of the native place boost Yi Sha's self-assurance and make him feel that he is the only creator of his own reality and textuality, leaving the "great homeland" (China) causes the opposite effect. Yi Sha cannot help recalling China at every turn. The Rotterdam *sanwen*, written when he participated in the 2007 Poetry International Festival, take the form of a *recollecting* diary, in which new places and experiences are almost invariably confronted with memories of his native land. His spaciotemporal map of the Netherlands is adjusted to the contours, topography, and the calendar of China.

The first impression Yi Sha develops on the way from Amsterdam airport to Rotterdam is that the beauty and tranquility of the Netherlands must be a manifestation of perfect socialism. He finishes a detailed poetical description of a Dutch landscape observed through the car window, with an ironic, quasi-political reflection:

> [The driver] explained: these picturesque old houses are farmers' cottages. I breathed a sigh of regret in my heart: God must be really biased, he shows his lovingkindness only to his followers! [...] [T]he kind old man intentionally took a detour to show me this little village. I saw rows of charming, exquisite houses and a father with three daughters fishing in a canal in front of the buildings. This made me sigh once again: socialism has already come true! Isn't it the perfect socialist life that we have been yearning for?[13]

Needless to say, these whimsical remarks are not a serious confession or self-revelation, and rather a sample of Yi Sha's capricious irony and humor. Nevertheless, this conditioned reflex of bipolar thinking and setting all new things off against China is striking. Whatever Yi Sha encounters abroad, from culinary surprises to linguistic habits, he tends to measure against China. He sees even interpersonal relationships between poets and the quality of their works through the prism of political and historical tensions in Asia, prioritizing collective memory over individual impressions and aesthetic taste. He does not hide his anti-Japanese bias, offensively and chauvinistically calling a poet from Japan a "Jap / Japanese devil" (日本鬼子) and dousing him in sarcasm at every opportunity. In line with what may perhaps be viewed as yet another manifestation of the (in)famous obsession with China in modern Chinese literary authors, pointed out by C T Hsia in an 1971 essay whose uncompromising theses still provoke heated discussions,[14] Yi Sha appreciates the poetry and, perhaps above all else, the – from a mainland-Chinese point of view – politically correct utterances of Taiwanese author Ye Mimi. To Yi Sha's delight, she publicly claims, for example, that "there is no Taiwanese language, there is only Chinese".[15]

Yi Sha is enthusiastic about all of the coincidental similarities he finds between Europe and China, as if two mutually distant realities somehow merge in his mind, and he is

[13] Yi Sha 2007: 238.
[14] Hsia 1999: 533-554. For (reconstruction of) polemics around Hsia's concept see e.g.: .Zhang Jin 2007, 2009; Wang David Der-wei 2009.
[15] Ibidem: 240.

looking for objective evidence of such coherence. To place himself in time, for instance, he occasionally uses the Chinese lunar calendar. Having discovered that the date of the Festival in the Netherlands overlaps with the Chinese Duanwu Festival – also known as the poets' festival and part of the Qu Yuan lore – he is excited and looks for an opportunity to invite Ye Mimi for *zongzi* 粽子, a traditional Chinese dish eaten during the festival.[16]

Certainly, Yi Sha is fully and explicitly aware of his China-oriented frame of mind, and he is apparently not tempted to play the programmatically homeless, rootless, cold-hearted, self-confident macho man one encounters in some of his other writings. Referring to his conversation with an African poet, who expresses his admiration to China, Yi Sha confesses, with disarming honesty:

> My good friend Ma Fei once sent me this poem: 'Stop fighting at last for the glory of your country/ Your country doesn't like your poems / Stop fighting at last for the glory of your people / Your people don't need your poems / Stop fighting at last for the glory of your language / Chinese doesn't accept your poems'. Reading this poem in China, in my heart, I felt the same [as Ma Fei]. But when I came here, my feelings underwent a kind of chemical reaction, for I realized: it's not a matter of your willingness or unwillingness, it belongs to your foreordained destiny. Perhaps, there is one little part of me that hasn't matured yet and I am still a kid at heart. I am addicted to representing China! Among us, the children grown up in China, is there anyone who has never daydreamed that the national flag one day would be raised for him? This time, in Rotterdam, when I saw a world map in the brochure of the Poetry Festival, with the countries of all of the invited poets printed in different colors, and I discovered that because of me, this rooster [the contours of China are often said to be rooster-shaped] has changed into a great red rooster, I felt that I had found a higher way than the athletes do to fulfill this childhood dream. I find it not so easy now to say that I don't represent anyone...[17]

I am not inclined to disbelieve Yi Sha's self-disclosures, even if he is known for systematic mockery, especially of hifalutin ideals and grand gestures. Also, his essays confirm somewhat more implicitly that the perspective of long-distance emigration – provided not just by occasional sojourns abroad, but also by his increasingly active explorations, and translations, of foreign literature on which more later – confronted him with more radical otherness than did his internal emigration within China, and changed his way of experiencing and writing the world. He looks back more often, tries to domesticate foreign realities, both physical (through associations with the Chinese natural environment) and textual (by mobilizing genre conventions). The Rotterdam *sanwen* approximates historical genres, recalling a traditional Chinese type of travel writing (游记), of authors including Tang-dynasty essayist Han Yu (768-824) and Song-dynasty writer Su Dongpo (1037-1101), if only by describing the world contrapuntally with a clear, often nostalgic opposition of then-and-there and here-and-now, and blurred boundaries between different spheres of reality, e.g. nature, art, and politics. Yi Sha's notion of one's native place is dualistic, far from Mo Yan's or Yu Jian's almost fractal, iterated homologousness that make them repeat the "microstructure" of home in nearly every

[16] Ibidem: 255.
[17] Ibidem: 256.

experience and nearly every essay. He seems indifferent to his "family home" abandoned at an early age, claiming himself to be lord and master of his own life and oeuvre. But he and his texts are much more sensitive to leaving the "great home" of China.

An alternative explanation of this discrepancy is that Yi Sha lacks a primary experience of being at home, so he cannot but build his definition of homeland through contradictions, in contrast to "less native" places where the feeling of estrangement is incomparably more extreme. On the strength of a kind of dialectic logic, Yi Sha's "this city" is secondarily elevated to the status of hometown, generating similar dynamics to those engendered by "native soil".

Since the late 1970s, globalization and China's policy of "reform and opening up" have created opportunities for short-term emigration for Chinese citizens. It is then no surprise that such "acquired" or "post-global" native-soil-ness has also come on stage in recent history, in literature and in life. Authors representing what Maghiel van Crevel calls an Earthly aesthetic, among them Lower Body (下半身) poets for whom Yi Sha was "something of a patron saint",[18] are especially prone to surrender to such sentiment, almost as if "home" had been a missing jigsaw puzzle piece in their poetics. Yin Lichuan (b. 1973), one of most acclaimed participants of the early 2000s Lower Body movement, describes them as disillusioned and displaced people who were compelled to invent the world anew for themselves, including complex musings on the notion of home and related issues, in an essay called "Commemorating Beijing" (纪念北京), from the autobiographical collection *37.8°* (37.8度) based on her experiences and those of her friends in the Post-70 (70后) generation.[19] "Commemorating Beijing" records Yin's failed attempts to take root in Beijing, where she moved from her hometown in Guizhou, in which her family had been suffering poverty and hunger for many years. Ironically, only when she eventually left Beijing "proper" – initially to Fengtai district, located far from the city center – did she start to identify with Beijing:

> In the Western City I was a stranger. This changed when we moved to Fengtai. Then, I started to consider myself a Beijing citizen, I was even somehow missing Beijing. What is Beijing? Beijing is a certain lifestyle, at least better than our previous life. [...] Fengtai is not necessarily Beijing. Fengtai might as well be any other place, it might be the remote mountainous area where we come from, it might be an African country, it might be in the slums of New York.[20]

The further Yin traveled, the more "Beijingese" she would feel. In 1999, after four years of studies at the Paris College of Cinematography (ESEC), she returned to China with a seemingly reversed hierarchy of values, cherishing locality and enclosedness or closed-off-ness more than cosmopolitanism and openness. In another essay from *37.8°*, "Why Beijing, Why Not Beijing?", in which she discusses Beijingers' notable indifference to the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, having chased away the gloomy ghosts of a Sartrean existentialism, she emphatically expresses her faith in the power of

[18] Van Crevel 2008: 20.
[19] Yin 2003: 004.
[20] Ibidem: 007; Sartre's words: "L'enfer, c'est les autres" are usually rendered into English literally as: "hell is other people", which translates to Chinese as: 地域即他人. Yin writes: 他人是地狱, which retranslates into English as: "the other is hell", this being an alternative, also frequently used, although apparently distorted, rendition of Sartre's aphorism.

interpersonal relationships between people who share the same territory and the same quotidian life, also summing up her own complex relations with the city, and with the world:

> The other is hell [in Sartre's famous phrase], this time the other, indeed, turned out to be hell – but only temporarily. [...] Finally, everyone has to return to their everyday life. [...] In other words, if we are unable to approach inhuman acts that happen right where we are with an ordinary mind, then when facing the tragedy of distant others, who knows what sort of eccentric, narrow-minded, biased ideas will come to our minds, distorting the very concept of good and evil?[21]

Yin Lichuan's essays have something in common with Yi Sha's "Rotterdam Diary". They are a travelogue of a roundabout way home. This home emerges in the author's heart and mind when she recalls it, making thus every single text a "commemorative act" in honor of the city of her youth. Paradoxical as it may sound, she left China homeless, but returned with a clear idea of home.

Due to intensifying migration inside and outside China, such complex, somewhat secondary notions of home and native place are common, in particular among authors born in the 1970s or later. Many have gone through a two-phase emigrant experience, first inside China and then abroad, often at foreign universities. From the foreign perspective, domestic migration fades and appears to be a mere walk in one's garden, or, with reference to Yi Sha's opening essay in *Morning Bell...*, no more than changing the chair one sits on while writing. Perhaps, then, as some other authors have suggested, rather than redefining the concept of home, it would be more accurate to speak of *rescaling* it?

Theoretical returns to written homes

I mention the hypothesis of *rescaling* to give an idea of tedious and backbreaking theoretical efforts regularly undertaken by many advocates of *recollecting* strategies to preserve some basic concepts that organize their thinking. This is a far-reaching and far-fetched yet almost unanimously accepted compromise solution implemented by those who oppose exilic notions of modernity. Even the "homebound" Yu Jian claims, in "The Possibility of Returning Home":

> What we have lost is the Chinese world [...] And simultaneously, we have also lost our boundaries [...] We have been thrown into the world. We need to grow accustomed to a bigger homeland, a common homeland of all of humankind.[22]

Since the geographical coordinates have been loosened, many authors have attempted to tighten up other correlatives of belonging, emphasizing temporal instead of spatial continuities of their cultural pathways. In the words of Yu Jian, their new mission is to "write for time, for eternity"[23] – which appears to mean mostly focusing on relatively abstract notions such as language and tradition.

This has led also to the production of numerous *recollecting* essays that, rather than active recollecting, revolve around reconstructing and refining general mechanisms and a

[21] Ibidem: 177.
[22] Yu 2013a: 12.
[23] Ibidem: 15.

theoretical apparatus to justify the need for, and strengthen the idea of, home; and to show other writers a possible way home from emigration. An invaluable repository of such essays is the first volume of the ambitious journal *Poetry and Thought* (诗与思, 2013), edited by Yu Jian, containing texts written mainly by poets described by Yu Jian as conservative authors.[24] Here, "conservative" is a consensual term, which has overshadowed the notion of "popularness" (as in the aforesaid polemics of the Intellectual and the Popular) in Yu's poetic thought. Its scope is much broader. It encompasses works not only of the typically "Earthly" Han Dong (b. 1961), Yang Li (b. 1962), He Xiaozhu (b.1963), and Duo Yu (b. 1973), but also, for instance, Ouyang Jianghe (b. 1956) and Xi Chuan (b. 1963), previously perceived by Yu as poetic opponents from the "Elevated" / Intellectual camp. All take the floor in the discussion anthologized by Yu Jian in *Poetry and Thought*.

The essays constitute a multicolored mosaic of styles and languages. For example: a post reprinted from Han Dong's microblog; proto-essayistic "marginalia" by Yang Li; an elegant, eloquent discursive essay by Ouyang Jianghe; philosophical, academic-style reflections by Duo Yu, and so on. In all, most of the theoretical or semi-theoretical essays selected by Yu Jian contribute to an overarching idealist-romantic notion of the essay. In a nutshell, this concept implies – to repeat de Obaldia's observations – that

> the essayist becomes no less than a 'prophet', conforming to the Romantic conception of the artist as one chosen to proclaim the coming of the Spirit, whether this is called the 'messiah', the 'Promised Land' (Broch), 'redemption' (Broch), 'home', the 'Golden Age' (Novalis), or the 'Millennium' (Musil).[25]

As for Yu's "chosen ones", they, naturally, preach the most secular, Novalisian, version of this Romantic testament.

For Han Dong, whose essay opens *Poetry and Thought*, the other shore he visits regularly to make a living is the land of the novel. The essay is a bridge that invariably allows him to "descend to the source, ponder on feelings and writing, be led by incidentally emerging signs to deserted, uninhabited places",[26] and to regularly return, at least in memory, to poetry, to which he has attended irregularly in recent years.

While Han Dong devoted himself mostly to novel writing, Ouyang Jianghe published only a small number of poems annually for eight or nine years after his return from the US and Europe in 1997, while he was enjoying, as Liu Chun points out, other elite aesthetic activities, such as calligraphy, music and art criticism, and only noncommittally "dwelling on poetry".[27] Ouyang is a seasoned and skillful essayist, but in previous years the essay served him mostly as a polemical tool. In the piece under scrutiny here, like Han, he avails himself of the essay to announce his rapprochement with poetry and explain his long absence from the literary scene:

> I was afraid that my writing will change into a habit, won't it go too far from my spiritual reality and from the everyday life? Won't my words become too abstract [...]? [...] So, during

[24] Yu 2013b: 1-6.
[25] De Obaldia 1995: 221.
[26] Han Dong 2013: 25.
[27] Liu Chun 2010: 272-273.

> those few years when I stopped writing [poetry], I wanted to ponder my relationship with the times I live in [...] What is the point of writing? [...] Simply writing is pointless to me, because it's very likely to result in a rhetorical "word-breeds-word" effect.[28]

In Ouyang's view, the role of the essay, in particular the critical essay, is to lead the poet back to the source of their vocation and inspiration, which lies in the works of the Great Masters.[29] His recent literary output suggest that he has indeed been happily led back to this mysterious place, the monumental "Tears of Taj Mahal" (泰姬陵之泪, 2009) and "Phoenix" (凤凰, 2012) being the strongest evidence.[30]

Duo Yu and Yang Li call for an even more radical return, to the source of poetry as such. Both argue – Duo Yu through a reinterpretation of Alain Badiou's "ethic of truths", and Yang Li through aphoristic and carnal language larded with paradoxes and contradictions – that contemporary poetry has been sent into exile together with the poets, just like in Plato's *Republic*. They strive to retrieve a monistic state of the world, where – in Yang's words – "eyes, hearts, hands and sexual functions which have been languagized [语言化] in the past, are being languagized in the present and will be languagized in the future will eventually all be poeticized".[31] Their essays can be seen as a part of the enterprise that Duo Yu's idol Badiou calls a "truth-procedure", and interpreted as one of the methods by which, according to Badiou's *Ethics*, an already revealed truth "forces" other aspects of human cognition and experience, specifically one's knowledge and worldview. This requires two qualities of the subject: courage and faithfulness.[32] Simplifying to the extreme: for the "educated" Duo Yu, and the "barbaric" Yang Li, the truth to which they are loyal and devoted and that is conveyed by their essays consists in a mysterious knowledge about the essence of poetry and the necessity of returning to the place of its origins.

Poetry and Thought contains two more important texts that treat of poets' textual emigration from another angle, this being their entanglement with other arts, in particular painting: "Related to 'Painting'" (与"画"有关) and "Landscape Art Is Like a Great Ceramic Glaze" (山水艺术如同伟大的窑变), authored by Lü De'an and Yang Jian respectively, who may be regarded as continuators of the Chinese tradition of literati (文人). I will return to this point later, when considering the issue of intermedial and intersemiotic translation.

Now, to catch our breath after these forays into paradises lost, let's see what these conceptual returns to textual homelands, strenuously theorized by the authors discussed above, look like in practice, and what it is like to (re)feel oneself at home in literature. To this end, I will pay a visit to an artist who could have been mentioned along with the contemporary literati featured in *Poetry and Thought*, but was left out of Yu Jian's "conservative" anthology possibly due to the experimental aura of his works – or, more likely, because of the "disposability" of his reflections and the absence of texts in his oeuvre that would be universal and instructive and, shall we say, well-behaved enough to be printed along with theoretical essays.

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[28] Ouyang 2013a: 29.
[29] Ibidem: 33-34.
[30] Ouyang 2013b: 176-189, 221-237.
[31] Yang Li: 38-39.
[32] Badiou 2001; esp. chapter V, p. 58-89.

Che Qianzi (b. 1963) from Suzhou, has authored numerous impressive, densely place-oriented essays set in his hometown, to which he feels emotionally attached and which he visits regularly, traveling back from his current home in Beijing. What makes me think of Che Qianzi as of an emigrant is not the distance between Suzhou and Beijing, but his astonishing textual journeys to remote places and epochs, following traces of Great Masters whose inheritor Che believes himself to be. One of his most intriguing ideas is a concept of reincarnation he developed fairly late in his career. This is how he explains it in a conversation with Glenn Mott:

> Sometimes I see reincarnation as poetics. In the years I devoted to the thinking of essence and representation, I thought a poem must be new, original, "only new," *wei xin* 唯新, that is, *ri ri xin, you ri xin* 日日新, 又日新, "make it new, daily new."[33] But after I got the concept of reincarnation, I felt that sometimes traditional elements or reflections appeared in my poems, which in my earlier days I could not accept, or would even be scared of, but I accept them with ease now. I think there is some trace that was left by a previous poet in my reincarnation, which can also be seen as traces of my previous generation or the life before. Now I regard the history of literature and painting as a process of unceasing reincarnation, which leaves behind many traces. I am now interested in these traces, perhaps even more than the spirit, the material, and the work itself.[34]

Che Qianzi belongs to a relatively small group of authors for whom personal and theoretical essays are in fact the same. Theory is always personalized and immediately internalized, and personality is often somehow embroiled in perspectives that transcend the individual, yet the rules of such involvement are volatile and transient. He plays with conventions in a manner that is free and inventive, yet hints at considerable effort. Play, to which he is truly devoted, constitutes for him a fully-fledged part of reality and a constructive form of thinking. He does not aim at destroying tradition. On the contrary, he tries to restore its great heritage, although not without small modifications. Reading his essays, especially those included in his collection *Papaya Play* (木瓜玩, 2013), I cannot help but imagine the author as a "model" *homo ludens*, for whom, as in Johan Huizinga's book, "[p]oiesis, in fact, is a play-function. It proceeds within the play-ground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it. [...] It lies beyond seriousness [...] in the region of dream, enchantment, ecstasy, laughter".[35]

One of Che Qianzi's favourite games is "proofreading" ancient Tang- and Song-dynasty poetry, widely seen as the pinnacle of Chinese civilization. Che "corrects" it to make the verses sound more subtle, and less studied (考究), to ensure that the natural order and harmony of the world are not disturbed by an obtrusive presence of the poet and poet's thought. The penname Che Qianzi, which denotes a herb used in traditional Chinese medicine, might also testify to the author's interest in testing the border between nature and culture. As

[33] This citation from *The Great Learning* (大学) in the West is commonly believed to be authored by Ezra Pound and rendered as a motto of literary Modernism, while in fact Pound's words were a loose translation of a phrase from the Chinese classical masterpiece; for the history of this misunderstanding see e.g.: North 2013 (chapter 5, pp. 144-171).
[34] Mott 2012: 60-67.
[35] Huizinga 1949: 119.

for the outcome of his experiment, among other texts from *Papaya Play*, a few examples are found in "Rewriting Poetry for the Song Citizens" (给宋朝人改诗), which Che says he wrote out of sheer boredom in sleet-filled afternoons. By changing single words in works by the authors featured in *The Best of Song Poetry* (宋诗精华录), he tries to restore Tang poetic taste, which he finds superior in its ability to approach the fragile beauty of the surrounding world. Che finds that Song poetry's diction resembles "beating a drum", while Tang's works are like "touching floating water".[36]

Fiddling in Che's fashion with Huizinga's metaphor, one might say that his essays are like a playground where the author's experiences of the external world, gathered during his numerous textual journeys, re-shaped and associated with his extremely idiosyncratic language, are re-formed and transformed into the writer's own literary piece. The process of a carefree "essay-making" from everything – and everyone – in Che Qianzi's work can be taken as a manifestation of a sense of safety, suggesting that he feels himself at home in language, text, literature, and that his written world is a place to which he enthusiastically returns from his emigrations and reincarnations.

II. Collecting: Finding One's Self on the Other Shore

I understand *collecting*, similarly to *recollecting*, as a way of establishing a dynamic connection between life and writing. Whereas in the case of *recollecting* essays, lived experience in general precedes the process of writing, is retrieved and *re*-lived in texts, *collecting* implies *pre*-living by means of literature. Here, the experience appears to be always "elsewhere", outside one's biography. It is located in the future, as something that waits to be sought and caught: like temptation, hope, promise… things that provoke one to leave one's place in search of meaning – and that, almost inherently, remain unfulfilled. Paraphrasing John Caputo, what makes experience truly worthy of the name *experience* is the Impossible.[37]

To expose the most salient differences between the two strategies, bearing still in mind Che Qianzi's *recollecting* "transmigrations of soul", let's read a fragment of John Crespi's interview with Wang Jiaxin, published together with Che and Mott's conversation in the same issue of *Chinese Literature Today*. This is how Wang describes his idea of "teleological" emigration and reincarnation of poetic spirit:

> Traveling abroad gives me the chance to take in some fresh air, to give myself what Paul Celan calls a "breathturn." Everyone needs fresh air now and then, perhaps for the sake of one's writing, or just to breathe anew. While abroad I've visited the former residences of some of my favorite poets, artists, and philosophers. But this is different from the usual touring around, and from what people normally refer to as pilgrimage, because it's tied in with a deeper self-recognition, a kind of dialogue with the self. Why, for instance, did I go out of my way to visit The Homestead, the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst? I did it because her writing, the fineness of it, its originality and depth, is rooted in her individual existence. Her poetry offers a password of sorts into one's own soul, and into my own destiny as a poet. So there was no question that I had to go there. I even have to believe that she was waiting for me.

[36] Che Qianzi 2013: 60-65.
[37] Caputo 2001: 11.

> What's important is that the very act of seeking out places like these stimulates me to reflect on larger problems, like the relationship between poetry and its era, and leads me to think that even today we may still be writing to complete poetry left unfinished by those who came before us.
>
> The more I live and the more I learn, the more I feel that all poets derive from one soul. If Yeats had been born in the late Tang Dynasty he would probably have been Li Shangyin 李商隐. If I'd been born in nineteenth-century New England and was a solitary woman, who knows but that I would have been another Emily Dickinson? If I didn't become her, well, then who would? The fact is I would want to become Emily Dickinson. Now, when I tick off the names of these great poets, I don't mean to elevate myself. What I'm getting at is that even though our lives may be divided by language and culture, we're all on the way toward that "one soul."[38]

Compared to Che Qianzi's, Wang Jiaxin's theory of poetic inheritance is even more abstract, obscure and probabilistic, based on endless ifs and buts. Wang does not search for any palpable trace of his predecessors in his own self, but rather on the contrary, seeks for his self somewhere outside his soul, and tries to read a "password" to his own identity from accidental configurations of footprints left by great antecedents. Unlike Che, he perceives "one soul" of all poets not as a lost paradise to be retrieved, but as an unprecedented ideal that is yet to come. The reincarnation of the poetic soul is not a privilege. It is a duty, or, more orotundly, a transindividual and transtemporal mission that can never be completed. Whatever the author writes and does, everything works for "elsewhere" and for a nebulous future, aiming at "the Impossible".

What is common for *collectin*g and *recollecting*, and makes these two different from *re-collecting*, is the authors' belief in and yearning for a ready-made existential truth that needs to be (re)discovered, and not construed or defined anew. Not only Wang Jiaxin, but many of the *collecting* essayists are in the thralls of the same romantic prophetic Spirit as those who *recollect*, the one identified by de Obaldia, as noted in section one. However, this time the Spirit comes into play not in a nostalgic Novalisian embodiment, but rather in messianic guise, during its endless pilgrimage to the – very broadly taken – Promised Land, as it appeared in the philosophical writings of Walter Benjamin, and consequently influenced Theodor Adorno's meta-essayistic works and the entire German tradition of the essay.[39] In the following sections I will try to demonstrate how *collecting* authors' missions, ambitions and not-yet-experienced experiences translate into their essayism.

Disoriented emigration

In 2005 the Taiwanese INK Publishing released a volume called *The Undying Exile* (不死的流亡者), edited by Zheng Yi in honor of Liu Binyan (1925-2005). In a sense, this could be the negative of the picture of emigration emerging from Yu Jian's collection *Poetry and Thought*. Especially the first of four parts, "Wadding and Roots" (絮与根), is dominated by essays of considerable literariness, usually highly intertextual and prospective, meaning that

[38] Crespi 2012: 78-82.
[39] De Obaldia 1995: 221.

authors give up any attempts at "returning". Instead, they storm countless geographical and conceptual "other shores", perhaps hoping that one of their future-oriented routes will come full circle and lead them back to their original selves. Authors featured in this highly "experiential" and autobiographical part of the book are Liu Zaifu (b. 1941), Zhang Lun, Liao Yiwu (b. 1958), Zheng Yi (b. 1947), Kong Jiesheng (b. 1952), Wan Zhi (b. 1952), Zhang Boli (b. 1959), Su Wei (b. 1953) and Hu Ping (b. 1948). All discuss issues of belonging, Chineseness, and uprootedness. And all perceive their emigration experience as exile (流亡), albeit, to be sure, from different perspectives.

This place calls for a brief terminological digression. So far, especially in chapter 1, which considered authors' statements on their individual biographies and oeuvres, I have purposely avoided labeling anyone with the term *exile*, using *emigration*, *emigrant* etc. where possible and justified. Now, when it comes to the intratextual perspective, it is no longer necessary to give this word such a wide berth. Overwhelming political connotations, heroic and/or grandiose overtones and other non-textual factors evoked by the notion of exile structurally affect discussions on this phenomenon as a part of a general, politicized discourse on Chinese literature and literary scenes; but observed from inside a text, if these are perceptible at all, they constitute just one of many contexts to be taken into account. As I see it, and will try to demonstrate below, what really influences textual realities of the essay, are those characteristics of the emigration experience that are most effectively translatable on both explicit and implicit levels, and communicable simultaneously through the form and content of a work. Extrapolating my reflections on *recollecting*, I am inclined to think that these are mainly spaciotemporally projectable aspects of lived experience.

In light of these observations, with an eye to the essays gathered in *The Undying Exile*, I would define exile as it presents itself if seen from inside a text as a notably disorienting type of emigration, one that for whatever reason loses the simplest and most obvious sense of direction, taken as a basic opposition between back and forth, in and out. The English word *exile* formally still bears a weak imprint of its "spatial" and "directional" Latin etymology preserved in the prefix *ex-* ('out'); origins and a basic form of the second morpheme remain controversial, but one reading has it that in ancient times it used to be interpreted as deriving from *solum* ('soil'). Chinese *liuwang* 流亡 does not have such implications and instead projects a vision of drifting or wandering about in a destitute state (流落) and of fleeing disaster (逃亡). For the exiled person (流亡者), the bonds with their native lands are not cut off. Quite the contrary, they branch and multiply, hence a straight way back is hardly possible. An unambiguous spaciotemporal path marked by recollective memory does not vanish altogether, but inevitably loses its privileged place and becomes merely one of countless multidirectional and multidimensional paths leading "elsewhere". Some of the writers whose essays are included in the collection apparently remain intent on following it, although, as they hint, this path may be one that is taken accidentally, or "if God wills it", the latter being a Christian perspective revealed in Zhang Boli's sermon-like "The Exile's Monologue" (流亡者的独白) – and not a path that is chosen intentionally. This is probably what Brodsky meant,

as cited earlier in the context of Wang Jiaxin's work, when he said that the process of recollection is atavistic, if only because it is never linear.[40]

Below, I will take a closer look at the first essay in the volume, Liu Zaifu's "Three Songs of the Second Life" (第二人生三部曲),[41] rightly chosen by the editors as the opening piece. The essay combines personal reflection with a (self-)critical, philosophical approach, guiding readers through the intricacies of exilic writing that return in the many contributions that follow.

Wide horizons of exilic existence

Liu Zaifu, a writer and literary critic and former Communist Party member who left China in 1989 as a consequence of the persecution he had faced after his involvement in the students' protests, announces in the first sentence of his essay: "My friends all know that I perceive my exile in 1989 as the starting point of my second life".[42] He divides his emigrant biography into three stages, and calls them "three songs", titled respectively: "Leaving" (出走), "Returning" (回归) and "Grafting" (嫁接). Three protagonists of the first song, being also three spiritual mentors chosen by Liu Zaifu at the very beginning of his life in emigration, are Buddha Sakyamuni, Jia Baoyu (a male character in Cao Xueqin's (1715/1724-1763/1764) famous novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* [红楼梦]) and Lev Tolstoy. For each, as Liu points out, "leaving" was not forced exile, but self-exile. Sakyamuni quit his palace for the life of the mendicant. Toward the end of *Dream…*, Jia becomes a monk. Tolstoy devoted the last years of his life to educating peasants, which his aristocratic family could hardly accept; renouncing his luxurious lifestyle, he finally gathered the nerve to separate from his wife and left home at night in the middle of the winter intending to join his "disciples", only to die the next day of pneumonia on the Astapovo train station. Although for many people their decisions seemed unexpected, particularly in the case of the 82-year-old Russian writer, these choices had in fact been preceded by arduous inner journeys, and mental and textual escapades. For Liu, their "leaving" was a manifestation of spiritual freedom, and defiance of the status quo, especially of materialism, convenience and calamities suffered by other people.

Liu notes that only one of the three, Sakyamuni, consistently continued his exilic life and reached the most advanced level of enlightenment. Therefore he became, along with the Chinese philosopher Laozi, Liu's companion during his "returning" – which he sees not as a contradiction, but as a higher form of leaving. In the process of returning, what disappears definitively are differences between spatial directions, between living and reading, actions and language, self and other. In all of these oppositions, after their decomposition, there is nevertheless a slight imbalance in favor of the second element: reading frequently shapes and determines living, language replaces acts, and the Other "colonizes" the world of the "I", demanding total, unconditional openness on the part of the "I". This is how Liu understands these mechanisms:

[40] Brodsky 1986: 30.
[41] Liu Zaifu 2005.
[42] Ibidem: 13.

> The second half of [Sakyamuni's] behavioral language inspired me: self-exile in fact is not exile, but return – return to the point where life is full of dignity and independent, where the soul can soar freely [...] When I figured out that self-exile means returning to the self, my mood changed suddenly: I also have many reasons to smile from the depths of my heart and emotions. [...] I returned to the most dignified form of life.
>
> [...] During my return, I should express my particular gratitude to the great Chinese philosopher Laozi. [...] *The Way and Its Power* [道德经] frequently reminds us of this imperative: one should return to their infancy. [...] Another [instruction] is: return to the natural, primordial spiritual culture of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* [山海经] era. [...] As for the classical literature and ancient heroes, I no longer read these stories with my brain, but always with my life. [...]
>
> I enter into their bodies, and they enter into mine. They are my motherland, my homeland, my culture. Therefore, I feel acutely that my motherland, my home together with me traveled to the other land. [...] It turned out that as regards the motherland, one may distinguish between motherland as a material, physical structure and motherland as an emotional structure. Although I had bidden farewell to my physical motherland, I returned to the motherland made from emotions, and this motherland I feel deeply in the marrow of my bones. [...] The further I go, the deeper my return.[43]

While discussing Yu Jian's poetics, I interpreted the paradox concealed in the last sentence of this fragment as a specific form of archaeology that utilizes modern tools to unveil a distant past. However, Liu's understanding of this paradox has little to do with Yu's strategy. Yu Jian's way to the origins is linear and results from retreat, refusal and renunciation of external factors that may influence the core of one's identity, whereas Liu Zaifu's return route appears to be circular, enabled by progressive movement and unconditional acceptance of the unknown otherness. Moreover, whereas Yu's return demands active efforts by an individual, Liu's would be impossible without a generous stroke of fate, which in the labyrinth of roads charted a path for Liu that leads back to the roots. This is defensible in the context of his intellectual and physical emigration alike: after nearly twenty years of life abroad, he was offered a teaching position in mainland China, at Xiamen University. He did not accept, and decided instead to settle and teach in Hong Kong.

The third step, metaphorized by Liu as grafting, consists in stitching together the two temporarily united lands – his spiritual motherland and the material ground of the "other shore" – to prevent future disintegration and displacement. This enterprise, the author claims, is still in progress and perhaps will never be completed, for "it seems that endlessness is the clue of exilic fate". Nevertheless, this is no longer a traumatic, pessimistic endlessness, as experienced at the beginning of his wandering, but an inspiring and creative challenge:

> While *leaving*, I traveled in space from East to West, while *returning* I traveled in time from modernity to antiquity, while *grafting* I focus modernity and antiquity, Chineseness and non-Chineseness in one single moment, "here and now". I don't know the destination of my wandering, yet I see that the path under my feet widens with every step.[44]

[43] Ibidem: 18-19.
[44] Ibidem: 21.

The composition of Liu's essay mirrors the map of his intellectual wandering. He apparently does not try to restrain his literary imagination, which occasionally borders on *écriture automatique*, but surrenders to a textual flow. This, however, may by no means be referred to as an insane – or inane – act, or a manifestation of cocky artisthood, for the author's imagination is well trained and well educated, and as such reliable and trustworthy. All in all, as Nick Admussen convincingly argues, Liu is a master of "drift aesthetics".[45] He writes without abrupt emotional highs and lows or superficial intellectualism. With reference to Chinese terminology, I would define his essay as a disciplined *suibi*.

The paradigm of *suibi*, usually in a less well-organized form prevails among the "exilic" essays included in the first part of *The Undying Exile*. Typical for these texts is their increasing deconcretization. Authors usually begin by recalling personal memories of homeland and the circumstances of their leaving, yet as their works proceed, the emotional tension gradually disappears, the distance from their homeland and their past lives grows constantly, and remote homes change into abstract ideas. Kong Jiesheng in "Wadding and Roots" puts it as follows:

> Long ago, my homeland was far away, now it is still far away, moreover, seems even further. [...] Since then, mountains and waters of my ancient homeland have silted at the bottom of my memory, hardened into a sculpture, and no one can prevent me from entering it any more. It returns in dreams like floating and falling waddings, encircled by enormous roots[.] [...] This is my cultural territory, my spiritual homeland.[46]

Liao Yiwu, "ex-poet" – and, as noted before, one of the culprits behind this study, whose work I will discuss more elaborately in chapter 3, and who at the time of writing "The Drunkard's Exile" was still living in China, in what may justifiably be termed a spiritual exile preceding physical emigration – blatantly advises his fellow writers based outside the country to avoid, by all means, sticking to a concrete and sharp vision of reality:

> This world is a one big inn, and we are all guests. Even if you are sitting at home, you are still on the way. Tell me, eighty-year-old Liu Binyan, Huang Xiang being in your early sixties, over-fifty-year-old Zheng Yi, Huang Zhengguo and Huang Heqing, have you drunk tonight? I've drunk only two glasses of beer, but I'm just this kind of person, without beer, my mind is unclear. I wish we all wouldn't live too consciously...
> Exiles should never ever be clearheaded.[47]

Even Zheng Yi, usually associated with "root-seekers" and "native-soil" writers, in his long essay "Red Plane" (红刨子), gradually dispels an initial atmosphere of intimacy and nostalgy, as if he has taken to heart Liao's suggestion. The carpenter's plane, Zheng's favorite tool, at the beginning of the story is a keepsake of "sacred" physical work. Little by little yet, it loses its linkages with material reality and becomes a fuzzy metaphor, one of many textual traces distracting the I-speaker's attention from "essence" and presence. His point of view undergoes an evolution, from a melancholic "exile is anything but romantic", repeated a few times in the

[45] Admussen 2012.
[46] Kong Jiesheng: 64.
[47] Liao 2005: 33.

opening sections, to "exile is really romantic" in the penultimate part, and the imperative of moving forward without hesitation, as expressed in the final lines:

> Every day, every moment I remind myself: "don't think too deep, don't think!" Raise your shoulder-pole, take your plane, fuck everything and go ahead!
> – Will there be any wood from the blossoming sandalwood tree waiting for you?
> – Maybe yes, maybe no...[48]

Patching memory gaps

Although, statistically, "de-essentialization" catalyzed by the dynamics of *suibi* is an overriding tendency in exilic essays, there are also several examples where *collecting* proves to have an opposite potential as well. The last of Liu Zaifu's "three songs" inconspicuously signals a possibility of *collecting* that leads to the restoration of essence and presence, yet in *The Undying Exile* the most distinct representations of this trend can be found in "The Unbearable Heaviness of Being" (生命不能承受之重) by Sheng Xue and "Tears of Nimaciren" (尼玛次仁的泪) by Tsering Woeser. The concreteness of these essays might result from the fact that for both of the authors, who made their name as poets, in recent years the most engaging literary activity had been journalism, which requires sticking close to reality. On the other hand, Liao Yiwu had also been first a poet and then a journalist, and as I have just noted, in his essay, extratextual reality is intentionally blurred. Another possible reason, which I touched on in chapter 1, is that perhaps putting matter over abstraction and body over text is an intrinsic feature of female-authored writing. Yet, I am still disinclined to consider this question in the context of gender identity, especially because there are also some male writers whose way of *collecting* resembles Sheng's and Woeser's technique much more than Liao's. One is Zhang Chengzhi, a devoted Muslim of the Hui minority, who was "born in emigration" in Beijing and grew up there, far from the center of his ethnic culture, in the Western part of the People's Republic. His essayism is marked by restless, sometimes seemingly narrow-minded struggles to consolidate his ethnic and religious identity. I will return to his work toward the end of this section.

I tend rather to think that these two contradictory tendencies, i.e. toward and against substantiation of the written world, are the result of a subversive character of *collecting* itself, standing in inverse proportion to lived experience. As if in the interconnected system world-text there were always a fixed amount of "ontological substance" that an author can dispose, moving it from one vessel to another, and thus, in a sense, antagonizing these two realities: the written and the lived. When experience seems strong and concrete, the essay appears to be undermining and atomizing it; and if, in turn, the experience is weak – forgotten or unavailable for individual or collective memory – the essay strengthens it, or indeed is the force that calls it into existence in the first place.

What is common for Sheng Xue and Tsering Woeser, apart from their fearlessness and determination vis-à-vis political repression, is their commitment to building anew, out of nothing, the world of values. They wish to retrieve national and ethnic – and, in the case of Woeser, individual – identity. By dint of literary creation they attempt to re-create memories

[48] Zheng 2005: 59.

that have not been simply lost in social or historical upheaval, hence complicating the authors' relationships with their own past, but have been intentionally, collectively "un-remembered" – erased or swept under the carpet – so the linkage between past and present is broken, and a gap, or a blind spot, appears in individual and collective biographies. Woeser's view on the role of the essay in the process of self-identification was outlined in the previous chapter. Here let me examine Sheng's text. Its heterogenous structure will allow me also to revisit differences between the essayistic strategies of *recollecting* and *collecting*, both of which are present in the text under scrutiny.

Sheng Xue, born in 1962 in Beijing, was on Tiananmen square and witnessed the massacre on 3-4 June 1989, when the protest movement was at its peak and was brutally suppressed, harbingering a period of rapidly growing repression. In August 1989, she left China and settled in Canada. Since then, she has been one of those who put the greatest effort into revealing the truth about the Tiananmen turmoil, and promoting freedom, democracy and multiculturalism in China. Awarded numerous international literary and journalist prizes, she is broadly known as a key leader of pro-democratic and human rights movements and, moreover, as an actress starring under the name Reimonna Sheng in several movies and stage dramas. In regard to the Tiananmen massacre, Sheng herself was not one of the student leaders, whose deep involvement has in some cases been accompanied by controversy regarding their integrity, and her voice is perceived as quite neutral. She has tried to ease tensions among Tiananmen activists, for instance by standing together with Zhang Boli, one of a few emigrants who defended Chai Ling, after Chai had been accused of betraying and sending young people to die, following Carma Hinton's and Richard Gordon's documentary *The Gate of Heavenly Peace.*[49] Sheng's collection of essays *Lyricism from a Fierce Critic* was published on 8 August 2008, which was the very day of Beijing Olympic Games opening ceremony. The author maintains: "My essays, a lot of them, naturally criticize the Chinese government. I want people to know and to learn more about the truth of China".[50]

"The Unbearable Heaviness of Being" (生命不能承受之重)[51] narrates four stories that present hardship and sacrifice as an inherent part of exilic fate, called "Friendship", "June Fourth", "Family Love" and "Exile". Subtitles of all of the four stories repeat the main title of the essay: "The Unbearable Heaviness of Being", an allusion to Milan Kundera's book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. This may suggest, on the one hand, hopelessness and a dramatic heaviness of existence, but on the other – as a reversion of Kundera's thought and a return to the Nietzschean philosophy reinterpreted by the novelist – also the importance of every decision and the tangibility of values that are not merely abstract ideas but real challenges faced by humans, that make us "nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross".[52] Sheng's text is written in a journalistic manner, like a detailed, meticulous report, yet laced with bitter irony. This becomes apparent when one

[49] See the *Open letter of Tiananmen survivors, participants, and supporters. To Carma Hinton, Richard Gordon, Director and Producer of the Gate of Heavenly Peace, May 28th, 2009*, and discussion between signatories of the letter and the film's producers: http://www.tsquare.tv/film/reply_facts.html [2017-06-23].
[50] Zhu 2008.
[51] Sheng 2005: 194-201.
[52] Kundera 1985:5.

confronts its content with the four subheadings referring precisely to the qualities that are unbearably absent in the author's reality.

"Friendship", which recalls Sheng's husband's travel to China to seek medical treatment for a brain tumor, is a reflection on privacy and intimacy, or rather the lack thereof, in her husband's ordeal. It lays bare the politicization of interpersonal relationships and omnipresent mechanisms of control. Her husband, Zhao Hongbo, is permanently followed wherever he goes and whomever he meets, so he cannot speak face to face even with his closest friends. "June Fourth" – the central persona of which is still Sheng's partner who gives his consent for surgery only after the anniversary of the massacre, to be able to support his wife and friends during their commemorations – deals with the meaninglessness of this date in the consciousness of both foreigners and the Chinese, with ignorance and collective amnesia disturbingly widespread. Analogously, "Family Love", based on stories of several Chinese emigrants, is all about impossible family reunions. Eventually, "Exile", referring to the author's own experiences, is not a description of her life abroad, as one might expect, but takes place in China. Its narration covers the 24 hours that Sheng spent in her motherland during her seven-year-long emigrant life, specifically at the Capital Airport in Beijing, where she was put in detention after she had refused to write a statement of repentance. Finally, despite having legal documents, she was "repatriated" to Canada as an "unwelcome foreigner". This all happened in 1996, shortly before the traditional Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival which she had hoped to celebrate with her family. Although it appeared to her the most touching of all the injustices she suffered, she decided not to give up and to continue her fight for a brighter future of the whole nation:

> At that moment, I could have taken a pen and written the repentance statement to cheat them, but how would I be able to preserve my beliefs and to live honestly now? In my heart, I prepared well to take full responsibility for everything I am doing, to bear all the consequences of my choices. [...] Yet, at that moment when I was considered an unwelcome foreigner, I felt a lump in my throat, my eyes filled with tears, I hanged my head, turned back, and walked quickly toward the stairs leading to the plane. [...] Anyway, I know, only if we continue what we are doing, exile will not become a melody of life for countless human beings in the future.[53]

In the first three stories of "Unbearable Heaviness", Sheng Xue's sad-but-true logic is quite clear, based on contradictions, aptly and gracefully put once by Emily Dickinson: "Water, is taught by thirst... / Land—by the Oceans passed / Transport—by throe / Peace—by its battles told / Love, by Memorial Mold / Birds, by the Snow".[54] Sheng gathers fragments of unbearable reality and against such a backdrop defines positive values and concepts, trying to skip past the space of oblivion that stretches between the present and her own and her nation's bygone life. This could be interpreted as an antithetic way of *recollecting*, not too different from the strategy employed in texts by Yu Jian, Yi Sha, Yin Lichuan and others examined in the previous section. Nevertheless, the exile discussed in the fourth part of Sheng's essay breaks this logic and cannot be overcome by means of *recollecting*. The only way to counter

[53] Ibidem: 200-201.
[54] Dickinson 1961: 135.

the exile is, paradoxically, to accept and continue it, to proceed in directions determined by one's own previous decisions and actions, thus broadening the scope of the exilic map. This map cannot be easily oriented nor may it be used for navigation; there are many "forward-s" and many "backward-s", and each leads to a different point. One may but continue wandering, collecting new experiences, knowledge, impressions, in hopes of creating a big enough, independent, and secure territory of freedom that can be shared with other people. The denser that web of threads and pathways becomes, the more it resembles a firm, solid land that one may safely set foot on. The question that arises here is, can exile work against itself? Can it collapse under its own weightlessness, paradoxically providing solid ground for a new home, and a new life? If so, what will be the status of the reality to emerge from this process? *Is* it even a reality, or rather a hyperreality being an image consisting of materialized signs that gradually becomes truth in its own right? As in Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (Simulacres et Simulation):

> Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself. [55]

If we follow in Baudrillard's footsteps, we will arrive at a post-truth landscape: a life-less and death-less wasteland of ultimate exile, "sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences" – differences that amount to total *in*-difference. Or, to recall Derrida in the analysis of Wang Jiaxin's "London Essays", dense "relationships without relation".

"The Unbearable Heaviness of Being", as well as Sheng's entire artistic and journalistic activity, and perhaps also her entire biography, could be interpreted in this perspective as an attempt to make good use of all the deceptive mechanisms she had been involuntarily condemned to. The essay's structure and immanent poetics repeat and highlight the breakthrough between the unilinear chronological progress which allows for *recollecting* mental returning from any point (in "Friendship", "Family Love", and "June Fourth") on the one hand, and the exilic map of points of no return ("Exile") on the other. Narration in "Friendship", "Family Love", and "June Fourth" is generally determined by logical reasoning and chronological order. In "Exile" this order is decomposed by dreams, associations and digressions that are expected to engender historical reality, lived experience and memory on "the desert of the real".

Whether such a substitution is possible at all is open to debate. I would say no, at least as long as we are considering the strategy of *collecting*, which usually co-occurs with authors' hankering for authenticity and historicity of the experience and their permanent dissatisfaction

[55] Baudrillard 1988: 166-167.

with artificial textual constructions. This is the territory – the geographical and spiritual space – that they restlessly strive for, while maps constitute merely a means to this end. In Sheng's and Woeser's works, their sufficiency and precision are impugned continuously, and it seems unlikely that they will ever satisfactorily replace lived experience and non-textual homes.

If these two examples, taken from oeuvres that are quite similar in their motivations and ambitions, do not suffice, let me strengthen the argument by invoking the words of Zhang Chengzhi, one of the most radical advocates of the need of *collecting* dispersed pieces of ethnical culture and his own ethnic identity, and simultaneously the most zealous enthusiast of "mapping" among Chinese writers. In the eponymous essay from *The Book of Mountains and Rivers* (一册山河), being a comprehensive "atlas" of his life and travels to the centers of Hui culture, Zhang, too, expresses his doubts:

> Then, you can stow the map, its guidance finished. Can you speak the language of ordinary people? Can you speak languages of ethnic groups or local dialects? How much do you know about the ins and outs of the life fed by this soil? Can you hear the anguish of this place and feel the injustice of the earthly world? All of the knowledge you have been swallowing since your early childhood collapses when you face the truth, and a new, white map, a solid frame, gradually emerges in your heart. [...]
>
> In 1981 and 1985, when I visited again after a long time that steppe, the shepherds were impressed that I still remembered its topography. Indeed, when I was walking alone in a dark night, my memories were one by one emerging from shades casted by mountains, and I could easily find my yurt. All in all, however, it goes without saying that I was still pretty far from grasping the four hundred miles wide grassland that stretch out in the shepherds' hearts. Later on, while describing it, I had no way but to fill its emptiness with imagination, emotions, and scholarship.[56]

III. Re-Collecting: Architecture of Elsewhere

The artificiality that works representing strategies of both *recollecting* and *collecting* helplessly try to overcome, the former by returning to the source and the latter by seeking "on the other shore" for enclaves of truth and authenticity, is arguably the most desirable quality in the case of *re-collecting* essays. One way in which the emigration experience is assimilated here is ruled by the same mechanisms as in *collecting* and *recollecting*. These techniques are employed selectively, depending on the need of the moment, and they often coexist within single texts. Simultaneously, however, while being transformed into a *re-collecting* essay, lived experiences are reconfigured and reordered, and the author distances themselves from both *collecting* and *recollecting*. This is what I wish to signal by the hyphen in *re-collecting*, bringing out the indirectness and ambiguity of artists' attitudes to extratextual realities. *Re-collecting*, then, means *recollecting* with deferral, *re*-peatable *collecting*, and at the same time, an alternative creative *re*-sponse to both *collecting* and *recollecting*. And let me offer a simplified picture: *recollecting* can be likened to archaeological enterprise, *collecting* brings to mind a discovery expedition, and *re-collecting* is akin to architecture.

[56] Zhang Chengzhi 2001: 200-201.

For all their declarative, often somewhat exuberant tone and their claims to performativity, in reality *re-collecting* essays basically seem to be the least independent. In many cases they play an auxiliary role. The main motivation of their authors is to secure or create imaginary, hermeneutic or discursive spaces within which other works – poetry and/or fiction – may freely develop.

*

There are many ways for literary authors to artificially reorder the world, by availing themselves of existing conventions or by making new rules themselves. One of the most active advocates of the necessity of domestication of "elsewheres" is Ha Jin (b. 1956), best known for his novels and short stories. He is the recipient of prestigious international prizes, including the PEN/Faulkner (1999) and two PEN/Hemingway (1996, 2004) Awards. In 1989, at the time of the violent suppression of the Protest Movement, Ha Jin was on a scholarship at Brandeis University. After the massacre, he decided to stay in the US, and started writing in English.

The core proposition of his first, and so far his only book that is neither fiction nor poetry, *The Writer as Migrant* (2008), reads:

> Obviously, in the literary examples I have discussed above, we can see that for most migrants, especially migrant artists and writers, the issue of homeland involves arrival more than return. The dichotomy inherent in the word "homeland" is more significant now than it was in the past. Its meaning can no longer be separated from home, which is something the migrant should be able to build away from his native land. Therefore, it is logical to say that your homeland is where you build your home.[57]

The book contains three essays, adapted from university lectures, that preserve many features of public speech, including certain argumentative and rhetoric features and the author's effort to systematize and codify abundant historical material according to subjective, yet comprehensible and explicit logic. Furthermore, these essays as such, in terms of form and style, meet the postulates verbalized on the level of content, that is mainly the writer's disinterest in being "the tribal spokesperson", in particular with regard to sociopolitical issues. They constitute heterogeneous, highly personal but coherent and stable intellectual constructions, safe intellectual and ethical shelters for the author, where Ha Jin would often need to hide himself – and his novels – away from readers and critics, for various reasons to be elaborated in chapter 5.

The relationships between elements employed within every single text and the connections between the three essays are formulated by the writer, who is the only "divider and ruler" on this textual territory. Loosely rendering Marxist jargon, it may be said that Ha Jin's essays discuss, with rhetorical agility, several famous writers in emigration, appropriating the historical and geographical "base" the author is given, in order to enable establishing a conscious "superstructure" of his own literary realm. This latter manifests itself mainly in his fiction. The essays serve as a means to "rearrange the landscapes", and to envision one's own home:

[57] Ha Jin 2008: KL 836-839 [KL = Kindle Location].

> However, we should also bear in mind that, no matter where we go, we cannot shed our past completely – so we must strive to use parts of our past to facilitate our journeys. As we travel along, we should also imagine how to rearrange the landscapes of our envisioned homelands.[58]

Ha Jin's belief in creatorly power and independent nature of literature is shared by Gao Xingjian (b. 1940) among others, the 2000 Nobel Prize laureate who considers himself a citizen of the world and an artist "without isms", not interested in returning to China, the country where his works are banned by the government. A collection of his essays on art and literature, *Aesthetics and Creation*, was published in English in 2012. In an essay included in *The Undying Exile*, called "Dilemmas of Chinese Exile Literature" (中国流亡文学的困境) [59] Gao claims that literature is "not a football game", which would imply a competition following a set of intersubjective rules. In this discipline "everyone kicks their own ball". What one needs is hence, first, one's own ball (that is, an individual idiom, a personal style) and, second, some space to move without any hindrance.[60] In this space the authorial subject is omnipotent, he can even write his own Bible – as Gao did in his 1999 semi-autobiographical novel *One Man's Bible* (一个人的圣经), to which I will also return in part two of this study – or rewrite the myth of the beginning, for it to match the conditions of an imagined reality.

Among *re-collecting* essays there are also texts in which the authors' "other shores" and "elsewheres" are not just rearranged, but designed and construed anew, based on non-emigrant writers' selected experiences – present and past, individual or collective – separated from their former contexts and transferred to a world projected in literature, often seeming to reflect political pressure. This mechanism could be likened to the "inner emigration" in Nazi Germany, giving rise to fierce ethical controversies. Coined by writer Frank Theiss, the term was meant to describe authors who chose to remain in Germany and publish their works despite brutal censorship, showing solidarity with their nation and criticizing, if only between the lines, the Fascist regime, while Theiss saw others – Thomas Mann being his main target – who left the country as betraying their people.[61] Beyond a shadow of a doubt, in contemporary Chinese literature, despite certain limitations of the freedom of expression, "inner emigration" usually does not have much to do with dramatic psychomachias of the authors engaged in the polemic that erupted shortly after the Second World War. Inner emigration with Chinese characteristics in many cases is an attempt at what Jeanne Hong Zhang calls the "invention of a discourse"[62] in her study on women's poetry from contemporary China. This implies establishing a discursive space that one may enter freely, alone or otherwise, to express what cannot be effectively verbalized on "this shore", in the present physical, political or cultural environment. At the other extreme, it may also become a form of a carefree spiritual or intellectual tourism to self-designed worlds, that is emigration for pleasure or, so to speak, intellectual health, going on leave from real life, without overwhelming responsibility and commitment. This is obviously fun

[58] Ibidem: KL 849-851.
[59] Gao 2005: 268.
[60] Ibidem: 269.
[61] For detailed reconstruction of the discussion on inner emigration, see e.g. Klapper 2015.
[62] Zhang Jeanne Hong 2004.

and exciting as long as it is frankly and modestly presented as such and does not overstep the boundaries of good taste.

Universes of universal value – although, of course, with personal, unique architecture – may be found, for instance, in the early essays of poet Zhai Yongming (b. 1955), including her groundbreaking "Night Consciousness" (黑夜的意识, 1985).[63] In this work the speaker, disillusioned with a world she used to perceive as her home, tackles the task of creating an alternative universe where she and other people could move and find a safe haven: "I have seen the [earthly] world with my own eyes, that is why I create the dark night to save humanity from its calamities". "Night Consciousness" is a commentary attached to her famous poem series *Woman* (女人), written long before Zhai had experienced international physical emigration. Such experience, i.e. a sojourn in the US of well over a year, would later result in her first book of essays, *Buildings on Paper* (纸上建筑) published in 1997. "Night Consciousness" allows us to track the author's "envisioned" journeys from the perspective of the text, that is, to reconstruct the route of Zhai's textual emigration, which in her case precedes – and perhaps also to certain extent inspires and provokes – other forms of the emigrant experience. We can see how the author probes distant galaxies of thought, enters discourses that are hardly present in mid-1980s, even among emancipated women, and marks a path of her own vision, that leads to the world of her poetry:

> Night consciousness allows me to extract from my own, community's and humanity's experience a pure knowledge [...] Standing in the blind heart of the dark night, my poems will obey my will to reveal the hidden potential that was given to me before I was born.[64]

Worlds built in a similar way, although having different landscapes and "natural laws", spread before our eyes while reading essays of many other female poets, like Lan Lan (b. 1967), who designs "universes hidden in grains of sand and paradises hidden in flowers", as Liu Chun characterizes her work alluding to William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence",[65] or Lu Xixi (b. 1964) who creates paradises patterned on Biblical heaven.

Re-collecting essays play an essential and still underexamined role also in another "cosmogonic" enterprise, supporting the creation of literary words by science-fiction writers and enabling their interstellar expeditions. What these essays frequently aim at, is redefining literature and broadening its field, so that it can encompass unprecedented experience described in three different languages: the language of literature, the language of science, and the imaginary Logos of a God-like author. For example, one of the most vaunted Chinese SF writers, Liu Cixin (b. 1963), whose novel *The Three Body Problem* (三体) has been translated into English and awarded prestigious international prizes, is also a particularly prolific essayist. His essays, printed in literary magazines or posted on his blog,[66] written mostly in a hybrid of academic and polemical styles, prepare the ground for his fiction. Since this kind of literature is still perceived in China as a marginal trend, authors have a real motivation for producing theoretical and critical discourse together with their creative writing (and needless to say, the distinction of the two is not invariably absolute). Liu's essays describe and process

[63] Zhai 1993.
[64] Ibidem: 143.
[65] Liu Chun 2008: 151.
[66] http://blog.sina.com.cn/lcx.

inner experiences which may find – and subsequently do find – their full expression and extension in the author's self-made "faraways". Such faraways are constructed as spaces that one visits to experience one's subjecthood in a more mature, less anthropocentric and less narcissistic manner. Liu Cixin maintains:

> The vision of the world offered by contemporary science differs from the ancient one. [...] But in the eyes of [mainstream] literature this picture still has not evolved, looks exactly the same as it looked like before Newton, even before Copernicus and Ptolemy, [...] in the world of literature the Earth is still the center of the Universe. [...] Literature is falling into deeper and deeper narcissism, grand narratives disappear, become more and more introvertive, narrow gradually [...] what remains is a mere muttering under one's breath. [...] As a science enthusiast and an amateur in the field of literature, I don't have an intention to criticize anything [...] I just think: may there, together with this introvertive, narrow literature, exist also another one, extravertive, mirroring human's relationship with Nature? Can we, by means of literature, approximate some greater things concerning our humanness?[67]

It happens, however, perhaps equally often, that fictional "elsewheres" do not work against, but instead boost an author's self-love and self-admiration, as one may observe in fictionalized essays by Wenmang (文盲; this penname literally means 'illiterate', i.e. someone who is blind [*mang*] to the written word), who finds himself a creator of a *mang* Universe with all its laws and components, including what he calls mang-humanity, mang-literature, mang-memory, mang-geography, mang-archaeology, etc. The mere titles of his essays reveal the author's overblown ambitions: "With a view to creating a Universe [that] totally belongs to us, I make holes all over the Universe"[68]; "Wenmang is writing mang-poems on the "paper" of the Universe or meta-Universe"[69]; "Wenmang's movement toward frenetic non-intellectual, non-functional, non-material expansion of mang-poetry: an unprecedented mang-linear archeology of mang-poetry".[70] While some of Wenmang's intuitions on astrophysics and literary theory have considerable value, his written world does not constitute a coherent and convincing artistic or philosophical proposition. It is not a livable universe where one would like to emigrate for more than a few pages of adventurous intellectual vacation.

*

On the whole, *re-collecting* essays are simultaneously hermetic – that is, personalized and mysterious – and hermeneutic, for the authors never burn the bridges between their envisioned homelands and their physical locations, and their place on the soil of the Text. These essays deal mostly, and directly, with spatial dimensions of emigration and are created to rearrange or broaden authors' living spaces: geographical, intellectual, spiritual, linguistic, and discursive territories. The suspension of temporality invalidates both past-oriented nostalgic motivations typical for *recollecting* essays and future-oriented exploratory inclinations of *collecting*. Conceivably, this is the reason why they frequently give an

[67] Liu Cixin 2009: 81.
[68] The Chinese title is: 为了创造一个完全属于我们自己的宇宙我在宇宙中到处打动; on the cover, under the title, there is also author's translation into English, which I use here correcting his grammar mistake.
[69] Wenmang 2012: 1.
[70] Ibidem: 351.

impression of isolated realms indifferent to external worlds. This, to my mind, is quite misleading, for their interest in historical reality is no less than holds for *collecting* and *recollecting*. The difference is that *re-collecting* essays do not seek the epiphany of objective truth in history, past or present or future, but want to construct or invent their own truths – based on historical, lived experiences – together with "envisioned homelands" emerging from other works by their authors, with which these essays are largely compatible.

Re-collecting fits in well in a general description of the essay proposed by Mikhail Epstein in *After the Future*, which I will elaborate below and to which I will return in later chapters. This sets the essay against the backdrop of the three paraliterary genres of autobiography, diary and confession:

> The fact that in an essay the "I" always sidesteps definition, not yielding to direct description, distinguishes this genre from others that would seem closely related to it by virtue of their similar orientation toward self-consciousness, such as the autobiography, diary, or confession. These three genres have their own specific features: the autobiography reveals that aspect of the self as it came to be in the past; the diary reveals its present process of becoming; and the confession, the future direction, in which a man settles his personal accounts in order to become a self deserving of forgiveness and grace. Elements of these three genres may be present in an essay, but the peculiarity of the latter is that its "I" is taken, not as something total and uninterrupted, able to be placed whole into a narrative, but rather as a break in narrative: the "I" is so highly differentiated from itself that it can appear in the role of "not-I," clothed as "everything under the sun," whose presence is revealed outside the frame, in whimsical shifts in point of view and sudden leaps from one topic to the next. At times the "first person" is entirely absent: the "I" is not manifest as theme in the manner of these other genres; it cannot be embraced as a whole, precisely because it embraces everything and brings all into communion with itself.[71]

The definition distilled from the Epstein's work aptly describes, for example, the prophetic essays of Yang Lian, who claims himself to have been transformed "into a metaphor of eternal doomsday", or the treatises of "cosmologist" Wenmang. Yet it may be applied also to more modest *re-collecting* essayistic projects, some of which I have briefly introduced above.

As for Epstein's resolute exclusion of temporality from the realm of the essay, I remain skeptical. That is why, for what one might call time-governed essays, I reserve the categories of the past-oriented *recollecting* (which Epstein would probably identify as autobiographic writing) and the future-oriented *collecting* (bearing certain characteristics of what the theorist associates with diary and confession). I became conscious of the need to do so when engaging with Chinese essay-related terminology and scholarship that are more sensitive to space-time perturbations than their Western counterparts, and that bring out these complexities by employing different categories that include *sanwen*, *suibi* and *zawen*. It is one example of the benefits of building on "double foundations" of Chinese and Western traditions and their collaboration in pursuit of new understandings of the (literary) world. At some point, locally, be it Chinese or Western, genre terms can be disregarded or replaced with other vocabulary (like *recollecting*, *collecting* and *re-collecting*), but the discoveries they

[71] Epstein 1995:217.

inspired will remain valid. As such, there is no reason not to use, for instance, *recollecting*, *collecting* and *re-collecting* in the discussion on works and oeuvres of Western authors.

Based on earlier observations of emigration-related essays, which are arguably the most unstable essays in terms of spaciotemporality, I agree that most experiences to be transformed into essays are mapped spatially, whether in the works of Zhang Zhen or Tsering Woeser, or Sheng Xue, or Wang Xiaoni, or Yu Jian, or Wang Jiaxin, or Liu Zaifu, or Yang Lian, or any other of the authors discussed. The temporal dimension does not meaningfully influence this spatial orientation, but usually complexly codes it. For instance, one's past may "conventionally" remain behind one's back (e.g. Yu Jian), but it can appear before one's eyes as well (e.g. Woeser, Sheng Xue), or wait to be discovered on some mysterious "other shore" (e.g. Wang Jiaxin). *Collecting* and *recollecting* essays testify to the author's efforts to break this temporal code and (re)gain what they believe to be an existential truth, associated by them either with a place of origin or with some unknown "elsewhere". *Re-collecting* bears witness to the essayist's attempts to cancel the temporal code and replace it with another one, taking thus the "space management" into their own hands.

It is no accident that a concept of the essay thus understood, i.e. *re-collectingly*, led Epstein to formulate one of the most developed and coherent theories of essayization, to which part two of the present work will be devoted. Is there any easier way of reading a poem or a novel or any other work of art than transferring it to that comfortable niche within limitless hermeneutic space, with a stable architecture carefully designed by an author, only slightly readjusting it to this structure – usually by "outstretching" and discursivizing – in order to tease out the sense? Is there any easier way of writing than inscribing a text in that niche?

But is it really possible? And what happens along the way? Are forms indeed that flexible and plastic? Is it not the case that with the form stretching, the content stretches as well? And how far will they stretch without breaking the work's continuity? When does a text cease to be itself? We will face these and other unanswerable questions in the following three chapters.

INTERLUDE

In Search of the Mechanics below the Moving Grounds of Contemporary Literature

One major challenge of the present research is overcoming the decades-long academic impasse around the essay (non-)genre. In part one I tried to do this by accelerating the discourse in the Higgs field of emigration. This led to the creation of Möbius-strip-shaped connections between virtually homoatomic particles of lived experience and text. The next step will be to throw more heterogenous molecules into this field and observe their behavior: by this I mean literary genres. In my laboratory jargon, genres are defined as systems comprised of various atoms of life and text, linked by relatively stable energetic bonds = genre conventions, in fixed mutual configurations in the process of writing. The fundamental question for the rest of this project is whether it is possible to transform such particles into structures displaying properties similar to those obtained at the previous stage, under what conditions, and with what side-effects. In other words: what is the ontological status of the phenomenon in essay-related scholarship that is often referred to as essayization? What physically happens in and to texts that are perceived as essayistic, and what can this tell us about literature at large? The present section is meant to provide some methodological and technological prep work.

The essayistic spirit and other post-metaphysical ghosts, who conjures them and why

Designed to describe the world in bird's-eye and worm's-eye views, the methods and tools used at previous stages of this study prove unwieldy in a space that may only be accessible to the "eye" of a virus: inside the living cells of the text. Many essayologists before have tried, and failed. Those watching from the clouds managed to observe formless puffs of mist covering the field of cultural production, identified by them as a mysterious *essayistic spirit* or, in the post-metaphysical era, *essayness*, being – in their opinion – responsible for the transformation of culture as a whole. As in Michael Hamburger's "Essay on the Essay" (Essay über den Essay, 1965):

> The essay is not a form, but before all else, a style. [...] Because it has no form, the essayistic spirit may appear beyond the (essay) genre itself. [...] Bodies of essays are permeated by a limitless spirit of essayism, which emerges here and there, also in novels, poems or feuilletons.[1]

[1] Hamburger 1965: 291-292.

Those closer to the surface drew a more precise picture. They noticed that certain normally non-essayistic works locally resemble essays in one way or another. Hence sub-generic terms like "essayistic novel", "essayistic poem", "essayistic play", "essayistic reportage", etc. began to enrich the vocabulary of essayology, but their definitions remain unclear.

Of course, one can distinguish a number of commonly acknowledged markers of essayistic-ness. For example, for poetry: long lines, a lack of regular rhythm and rhyme. For prose: some poetic elements, long passages of narration, and/or (inner) monologues that look as if they contain excerpts from philosophical treatises. With regard to subject matter, allegedly the most essayistic trait is meta-literariness: the text's explicit reflection on itself, or on literature at large. Still, these features are not enough to say that something *is* essay-like, if only because the point of reference of this comparison – the essay-as-form – will not necessarily display the aforesaid characteristics. Instead, by questioning conventional literary bonds, they suggest the text's ambition, or minimally its potential, to *work* like the essay. That is: to connect the author's life and writing as closely, flexibly, and as fairly as possible. And, no less important, they provide the time to *make* it work.

The effect of the above departures from generic conventions is a perception of the text slowing down, suspending action, pacifying imagery. This allows for smuggling things from outside into the work, filling gaps with context, and hence reconfiguring the genre-bound energetic structure below the linguistic surface. In the circumstances of a broadened milieu of emigrant existence – especially when this comes as a radical and unexpected brakthrough in the author's biography – the author and/or the reader often take this as a promise of enlargement of the work's existential capacity so that is can encompass an "enlarged" life. In sum, the "essayistic surface" may be a visible effect of reactions underneath it that are initialized by an author, but also a trigger or a catalyst of such processes; a signal *of* essayization, or a signal *for* essayization. In the latter case, the one who essayizes is often an essayologist themselves.

This is not an indictment of the essay, the essayist or the essayologist. Quite the contrary, it is crucial for the discussion. If essayization may offer a rewarding perspective on literature, it does so precisely as a process of the text's, the author's and the reader's joint search for form, and their negotiation of form at the basic sub-cellular level of literary discourse. Perhaps instead of essayization we should speak of different degrees of essayizability, i.e. the text's relative proneness to essayization. The text's visual essaystic-ness is one factor that increases essayizability, but there are also other determinants, commonly perceived as extra-textual, that are likely to lead to a refunctionalization of the text, either on the author's or the reader's initiative, or due to changing context. I will discuss various instances of such situations in part two. Be it as it may, the "discovery" of the essay's interactions with other genres, however paradoxical and however awkwardly described, is arguably one of the earliest harbingers of an essential change in our perception of and approach to literature. The circumstances in which it took to the stage, in Western and Chinese literary discourse alike – times of shaken worldviews and literary reforms in response – seem to reaffirm this.

In Western literature these circumstances were mostly numerous individual breakthroughs in the lives and works of particular artists. The most widely discussed is the case of Robert Musil. After the World War I, Musil started writing what is regarded as the first fully-fledged essayistic novel, *The Man Without Qualities* (Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, 1930-43). The book depicts the intellectual and spiritual chaos in Austria-Hungary at the threshold of the new social-political order. Its protagonist, Ulrich, tirelessly preaches "the utopia of essayism" against the intellectual chaos. Musil himself was never to arrive at this utopia. He passed away before finishing his *opus magnum*. In China the trend was more collective and systematic, and coincided with the New Culture movement of the late 1910s and the 1920s.

Carolyn FitzGerald's study on cross-generic phenomena in Chinese wartime culture shows that over the first two to three generations after the collapse of imperial China, essayization, taken mostly as an aesthetic phenomenon, but with an apparent intuition of its broader potential, had a fairly good and abundant press among scholars and writers alike.[2] It was perceived as a natural consequence of adopting the vernacular language to traditional literary forms, a step toward liberating literature from stiff conventions and structurally re-joining it with everyday life. In the 1980s, Wang Zengqi (1920-1997), the most active and most consistent advocate of essayistic aesthetics, retrospectively theorized this current in the essays "Self-Introduction" (自报家门) and "The Essayization of Fiction" (小说的散文化). His core argument, in FitzGerald's translation, reads as follows:

> I very much admire [classical poet] Su Shi's saying: "Like floating clouds and flowing water, rigid in its inception, yet it follows its rightful course and stops when it is meant to stop. Its pattern is spontaneous and unexpected figures arise." In China my fiction has been called "essay-like" fiction. I feel that "essayization" is a trend (but not the only one) in short stories around the world.[3]

Wang uses the word *sanwenhua* 散文化 ('*sanwen*-ization'), the most common Chinese counterpart of "essayization", which in the context of poetry is often rendered also as "prosification". Derivatives of other generic categories, including *suibihua* 随笔化 '*suibi*-ization' and *zawenhua* 杂文化 '*zawen*-ization', occasionally appear in Chinese literary discourse, too.

However, in the present study these distinctions will no longer play the important role they played in part one, where they were needed to demonstrate transformations of virtually homogenous vector spaces of life and text into non-orientable Möbius strips. In the literary physics that underlies the idea of essayization among other things, attempts at applying vector mechanics to literature are doomed to failure. And so, spacetime-sensitive categories from the Chinese discourse are literally torn away. Quite aside from this physical argument, when Chinese authors and critics speak of *sanwenhua*, what they usually have in mind is an international discourse on essayization into which they want to inscribe their own reflection (such as in the case of Wang Zengqi) – and why shouldn't they? A confusion appears, because just like Western scholarship lacks specific terms that correspond to

[2] FitzGerald 2013; for essayism and essayization see esp. pp. 12-13, 32, 126-136, 220-231, 280-282.
[3] Cit. from FitzGerald 2013: 135.

sanwen, *suibi* and *zawen*, Chinese has no counterpart of the general term "essay", and demands the use of one of the available, semantically narrower words.

In part two I am most interested in the said paradigm shift in literary thought, which is in evidence starting from the early 20th century through the notion of essayization "but not only", to repeat Wang Zengqi's parenthesized qualification. If, among the many aforementioned scholars and theorists of the essay in China and the West, I have chosen to give more attention to Epstein, who made a brief appearance in chapter 2, this is because he is the one in whose work the said issue becomes particularly prominent, and this constitutes a good point of departure for my reflection. Epstein discusses essayization in the context of world literature with special attention to Russian authors, arguing first that the essay is a Modern-Age successor of the myth. He proposes:

> The extrapersonal nature of ancient mythology gave it a harmonious resonance with the cultural state of the primitive collective. But in the Modern Age any attempt to produce or recreate a depersonalized, mass mythology fails to provide the basic property and value of myth: its holistic, integral character and capacity to embody the multifaceted spiritual life of a new cultural subject that is now the individual, rather than the human mass. [...] Although it would appear to be an antimythological form, taking individual reflection as its basic point of departure, essayistics takes upon itself the function of unification and consolidation of the various cultural spheres that mythology fulfilled in antiquity. The functional commonality of myth and essay rests upon their deep structural similarity, even as it bears the imprint of enormous epochal differences. One of the main qualities of myth, observed by virtually all researchers in this field, is the coincidence of a general idea and a tangible image. The same impulses are conjoined in the essay as well, although here they have been separated from the primal state of indivisible identity to become independent entities: the idea is not personified in an image, although it freely combines with images, whether in aphorism and example, or fact and generalization.[4]

At the micro-level of the literary work, Epstein suggests to use the notion of *esseme*, whose conceptual shape notably corresponds to the structure of a Möbius-strip-shaped "life particle" which I described in the introduction, as emerging from reactions and experiments performed in and on emigrant literature:

> A thought-image such as this—whose components are maintained in mobile balance, belonging to one another in part, but also open to new interconnections, entering into mental and imagistic combinations independently of each other—could be called an *esseme*, on analogy with *mythologeme*, whose components are syncretically connected and indivisible. As a unit of essayistic thought, an esseme represents the free combination of a concrete image and a generalizing idea. At the same time, fact remains fact, idea remains idea. They are not connected in an obligatory or exclusive way but rather through the personality of one who unites them in an experiment of self-consciousness.[5]

[4] Epstein 1995: 228.
[5] Ibidem: 229.

In line with the tentative discussion on Möbius-stripness in the introduction, I would add that another thing that essay and myth have in common is their consistent use of "the higher dimension" in order to deal with contradictions and paradoxes of everyday life. With one significant difference: the myth treats this multidimensional realm as something that should be respected and obeyed, and to a certain extent reenacted in earthly reality, while the essay tries to make it work for its own purposes, that is overcoming binarity without obscuring dualism, and sticking together the textual with the real, as on the Möbius strip.

Epstein identifies another issue that merits attention, yet does not develop this in the end, namely that "[l]ike myth, the essay not only melds a general idea with a tangible image, but further melds them both with the flux of reality".[6] In this process, Epstein's essemes have to be unbound to enable establishing connections with particles coming from the pluralistic, heterogenous external world, which not necessarily fit the intracellular receptors of the essay particles. He observes paradoxical consequences of essayization, which he defines as "the expansion of the principle of essayistic thinking into other genres and types of creativity", calling essayism a notion that signifies "the totality of this trend as a unified cultural phenomenon":

> The paradox of essayism lies in the fact that it brings out the separate elements of an image, while at the same time bringing it together with concept and being; it destroys a specifically integrated artistic whole, only to recreate in its place a broadly cultural whole that is both integrated and creatively universal. Indeed, that which is normally called an "artistic whole" is, in actuality, decidedly partial and incomplete in its derivation from the originary syncretic state. The partial nature of artistic convention must be further exposed and expressed, in order to be fully integrated into a newly growing, unconventional whole.

If one wants to extrapolate the essayistic shape that ensures the unity-in-duality of the author's life and the text so that it would also encompass other spheres of reality, one encounters countless micro-collapses at the most basic level of the textual world. Together, these micro-collapses lead to the fragmentation of the picture that was supposed to become "integrated".

Taking up Epstein's reflection, one could argue that just like the evolution of cultural consciousness from myth to essay marks the line between antiquity and modernity, the paradigm shift, or rather the paradigm slippage, that occurs when essayization enters the stage draws an elusive line between the modern and the postmodern, with fragmentation as the most distinct feature of the latter. But this is not what I want to do. I believe this shift / slippage does not necessarily extend through the space of cultural-historical discourse. Instead, it runs through the minds and lives of individuals, and cuts through particular literary works, when their unifying, "integrative" ambitions fail, undermined as they are by invisible dynamics between textual and extratextual reality, and they end up in a densifying web of interactions.

This is not so different from the situation in the physical world – where one object at its different structural planes and in different situations is effectively described by different paradigms, be it everyday Newtonian mechanics or Einstein's specific or general theory of relativity or, at the subatomic level, once Newton and Einstein are rendered helpless, by quantum mechanics, with all its uncertainties and paradoxes.

[6] Ibidem: 239.

I will draw this analogy a bit further, in the hope that the language developed by physicists, may help me grasp what cannot be grasped by the vocabulary of the humanities, in China or elsewhere, as it operates mostly on terms that characterize large-scale processes and "shifts", like the one between the modern and the postmodern, and not those that operate within single objects. It is of course naive to think that, for example, quantum mechanics will automatically facilitate the understanding of literary phenomena, as it is hardly understandable to itself to begin with, as its co-founder Niels Bohr clearly said: "if you think you understand quantum mechanics, you don't understand quantum mechanics". Explaining anything *through* quantum mechanics is arguably a self-contradictory enterprise. Still, thanks to its long-time engagement with micro-un-understandables, it has built a useful terminological apparatus which may come in handy.

The myth, the essay and the essayistic; and their respective physics

The physical definition of the literary form that could be extracted from the works of Epstein and other literary scholars who have engaged in this field of reflection after the more or less collective essayistic "slippage" first happened, could be roughly reconstructed as follows. Form is a multidimensional spaciotemporal, dynamic shape described by parameters such as positions of, and distances and forces between, the author, the reader, and various objects from their surroundings and from literary discourse. As such, form exists through constant negotiation and restructuring. Only under very specific conditions may form preserve a degree of stability, and can the natural laws of the literary universe be roughly systematized and codified by the law of the genre.

The fact that for many years in the history of literature these very specific conditions were taken as universal resembles the situation in the natural sciences, where Newtonian physics was long considered a definitive knowledge of nature. It had been so until it turned out that Newton's model is a mere approximation of complex mechanisms, which depending on level and scale, appear to work in vastly different ways. Or, put another way, the Newtonian world – that is the world as we experience it in our everyday life – is but the narrow neck of an hourglass between the cosmic space believed to obey Einstein's laws of relativity, and the sub-atomic quantum reality that was discovered just several years after Einstein's theories and whose mysterious laws have not been deciphered as yet.

In genre-ruled Newtonian constellations, all participants of the text-author-reader-world system have their predefined place, which they accept and assume automatically at the first contact with the text, often prompted by its title if this signals a generic category, which is frequently the case. The law of the genre regulates not just textual qualities, such as line length or rhyme patterns. Usually genre forms are designed to mediate particular moods or modes, for example odes and hymns are meant to praise, limericks to entertain, etc. In such universes, the classic laws of gravity and motion work almost infallibly. The mood or mode descends from some metaphysical realm, through the author, into the reader's mind. The reader's role is to decode the primary content in a faithful way. This could be, in broad strokes, a physical description of Epstein's pre-modern realm of the myth, whose power is exercised in literature, among other things, in various conventional genre-ruled constellations.

Growing dissatisfaction with the stiff, logocentric literary order led to the increasing popularity of another paradigm in the history of literature, whose embodiment is a phenomenon that in Western scholarship, since Michel Montaigne's eponymous work, has been referred to as the essay. Epstein sets essayistic order against vertically structured mythical reality, which in light of the previous paragraphs could be described as one that follows Newtonian rules of gravity. The conceptual essayistic formula finds its analogy in Einstein's famous equation: $E = mc^2$. Similarly to energy and matter, textual form and lived content – although not equal – in the essay are supposed to be perfectly equivalent and mutually convertible. Or, in a visual metaphor, they function like the two sides of a one-sided Möbius strip. Or, like the two sides of the Epsteinian esseme which represents a "free combination of a concrete image and a generalizing idea" while "[a]t the same time, fact remains fact, idea remains idea". Wherever one enters the text, one easily distinguishes what belongs to form and what to content, but when one comes full circle, one realizes that all the time one was traveling on a single surface, along a single edge.

The essay can be taken as a one-off linguistic construction that belongs to a particular experience, and simultaneously shapes the author's reality. In this model the reader and their own surroundings do not count. S/he can only walk along and get transformed, as was illustated in the introduction. There is room for only two mutually codetermining active elements.

Let's take now one more step forward, as Einstein did proceeding from the special theory of relativity whose representative equation we have just discussed, to his subsequent general theory of gravity. Unlike the specific theory, his general theory is based mostly on the pure geometry of space, independent from its actual furnishment, objects and subjects involved. One of its claims is that any mass / matter warps its surrounding spacetime. Continuing in this Einsteinian spirit, potentially, the concept of essayistic geometry could be applied to interactions not only between authors and texts, but also between readers and texts and between other extratextual objects ("any mass") and texts. This is roughly what Epstein tries to show in *After the Future*, when he discusses the universalization of the essayistic "integrative" tendency that is observable also in other constellations than only the author-text entanglement, and transforms various genre-ruled literary universes.

In a sense, Epstein is right. We can speak of phenomena such as, for instance, essayistic reading. There are many possessive readers who try to expel the author beyond a primarily non-essayistic literary constellation and make the text fit their own reality, as if they were reading an essay about themselves, and expect it to curve their world into a more desirable shape, so that they can "live" the text. At another extreme, we find empathetic readers – among them a numerous group being Western readers of Chinese literature – who try to minimize their own presence in a genre-ruled universe of a novel or a play, or a poem, and treat the text as an unambiguous account of the author's experience, trying to ascribe to it the essayistic unity-in-duality, believing that this is the only right and objective way of reading. But things are never that simple.

These two are exemplary cases when the abovementioned "slippage" occurs. Einstein is famously quoted as assuring that in his efforts to reveal the mathematical secrets of the Nature, he tries to put himself in God's shoes, and asks himself how he would design the universe if he were God. But he wasn't... Bohr scolded him: "don't tell God what he should

do". Indeed, if you act as a C/creator in the empty space, building a textual universe from scratch and establishing laws they should obey – that is writing an essay – the elegant Einsteinian formulas will probably work, as we have seen in the case of various strip-shaped essays analyzed in chapters 1 and 2. But if you try to refurnish a constellation that already exists, and is defaultly defined, for instance, by a genre in which every textual particle has its place, by changing distances and forces between its basic elements, you will encounter difficulties like those that Einstein encountered while developing his general theory of everything: quantum phenomena, which discretely eat his elegant "objective" and "universal" model away. He never accepted them, calling quantum entanglements a "spooky action at a distance" and repeating stubbornly that "God doesn't play dice", but designs everything in the most beautiful way.

Simplifying in the extreme, similarly to the physical world, at the quantum level of literary discourse, a literary work functions as a unique entanglement of particles that originally belong in numerous optically distinguishable realities. Among them one can specifically point out the reality of an author, of a reader and of a text itself. Every single unit of language, like every basic unit of reality, originally exists simultaneously in many different states, which in the case of linguistic particles (morphemes and sometimes words and phrases) means that they can have multiple, equally valid meanings. Only after being brought into contact with other particles or objects, such a free particle is disambiguated and aquires one stable, context-determined sense (physicists sometimes call this the "collapse of the wave function").

This happens in each act of writing, when words are joined together in phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and lose their quantum polyvalence. If there still remain some unentangled pieces, they become pinned down in the process of reading. The latter could be likened to the quantum operation of measuring, which, as physicists demonstrate, inevitably influences the measured reality. The observers' eye or the measuring apparatus become an integral part of the final result of the measurement, so we will never know what was present before our reading, and what we added, complicated or simplified. Finally, we cannot tell what the proportion between the textual and the real / experiential is, just like physicists cannot rely on copies made with the use of a hypothetical "quantum xerograph", because when the xerograph interacts with the "original", its waves "pollute" the picture and become inscribed into the final image. If we try to think about a literary work as a copy of the lived experience, we need to take into account that this copy was disturbed by waves of language that are emited by a writing pen and a mind.

These are basic reasons why essayization as a universal "integrative process" in which everything connects harmoniously with everything cannot go smoothly according to wholistic models that want to enclose the universum of culture and / or individual literary universes in a perfect shape designed by the human mind. When the process is launched, it leads instead to various unpredictable reactions, micro-collapses of meaning and creation of entanglements of words that grow uncontrollably. And our helpless measurings of the changing world only add to the complexity and weirdness of the image, instead of giving a reliable description. Most of us, in particular as readers, slip into this cognitive hell unknowingly and unintentionally, just as our collective consciousness slipped unknowingly from modernism

into postmodernism. But once we slip, our eyes are opened to many exciting microphenomena whose existence we have not been aware of.

Both quantum physics and quantum literature are helpless when facing their own, mostly accidental, discoveries. What is known as the first of quantum experiments, a so-called double-slit experiment – never mind its content – was just a "mistake" that occured when carrying out other routine observations.[7] It might have well been overlooked, if it had not been for the researchers' alertness and open-mindedness. And it still, in fact, has not been given a satisfying interpretation. Physicists continue to look for accurate equations to describe its results. In the middle of the general confusion they discovered one thing: when they mathematically add several extra dimensions to the experientially available 4D spacetime, all problems quite easily solve themselves, and everything fits several neat equations, at least in theory. The question is, can we assume the existence of dimensions that we will never be able to grasp only because they help us save the beauty and elegance of our vision of the world?

Humanities, in many spheres, face the same hang-up. What to do with the chaos that phenomena such as essayization ("but not only") lead us into? We are wired in a way that makes us consistently seek for meta-levels, on which our chaos could be dealt with – but at the same time not cleaned up, because we truly enjoy its dynamic aesthetics and the feeling of freedom it gives us. Instead, we prefer to see our chaos framed inside some higher form of order. This can be, ultimately, a problem of supernatural reality, religions, gods, etc.; but this study focuses on more earthly spheres. In a sense, I would argue, the recent popularity of translation studies at least partially stems from this feature of our "collective consciousness": we are trying to access a meta-linguistic level at which particles of language involved in various entanglements in the space of cultural discourse may be re-matched in a new idiom, in a way that does justice to the sense they convey in a text, and to the freedom they enjoy in the environment of original language. Theorists like Benjamin and Derrida, to give but two well-known examples, delineate translation as the process of moving the original on to a higher plane (Benjamin in "The Task of the Translator" [Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers]), with the translator always operating on the meta-level, in a position of the one who speaks of the text (Derrida in "Towers of Babel" [Des Tours de Babel]). This intuition will be fleshed out in the last part of this study.

Obviously essayization is not the only thing that may trigger literary quantum transformations. The same literary-physical laws probably hold for poeticization, novelization, and other interventions in default generic structures as delineated by the Newtonian law of the genre. But I would venture that, unlike poeticization or novelization, which are usually

[7] This is Brian Greene's account of the accidental discovery that was made during observations of nickel's properties:

> In April 1925, during an experiment at Bell Labs undertaken by two American physicists, Clinton Davisson and Lester Germer, a glass tube containing a hot chunk of nickel suddenly exploded. Davisson and Germer had been spending their days firing beams of electrons at specimens of nickel to investigate various aspects of the metal's atomic properties; the equipment failure was a nuisance, albeit one all too familiar in experimental work. On cleaning up the glass shards, Davisson and Germer noticed that the nickel had been tarnished during the explosion. Not a big deal, of course. All they had to do was heat the sample, vaporize the contaminant, and start again. And so they did. But that choice, to clean the sample instead of opting for a new one, proved fortuitous. When they directed the electron beam at the newly cleaned nickel, the results were completely different from any they or anyone else had ever encountered. By 1927, it was clear that Davisson and Germer had established a vital feature of the rapidly developing quantum theory (Greene 2011: 222; for more information and possible interpretations of the experiment, see chapter 11 of the book).

undertaken for artistic reasons and considered mostly as a way to make a text more attractive or aesthetically diverse, essayization is usually driven by philosophical or cognitive aspirations, and hence makes one focus on the ontological layer of the work, where the most surprising things happen. Essayistic form is associated with things like freedom, personal truth, intellectual discovery, a promise of a more spacious form which does justice to both the lived and the written. So, if we slip from this imaginary, cognitively safe Möbius strip, the fall is deep and painful, and eye-opening. But it is worth it. Therefore, what I will sometimes do in part two of this study, especially in chaper 3, is not only observing but also intentionally provoking various essayizations, in order to experience, observe and describe mechanisms of this fascinating inner dynamics of the literary world, keenly conscious that my account bears a deep imprint of my own "wave" as this gets entangled with the image during my interpretation. This is something that can only be acknowledged, and never overcome.

Essayization (disambiguation)

For terminological clarity, as regards various existent and hypothetical usages of the word "essayization", I believe the functionality of this category is limited for those who are engaged in literary discourse on other than the elementary quantum level, but there are two situations in which it might be considered a useful analytical category within Newtonian and Einsteintian paradigms of literature as well.

Essayization may be taken statistically, as a trend towards quantitative dominance of the essay genre over other genres in one's literary oeuvre or in a certain field or period of literary production. This is indeed what I was dealing with in part one without naming it so, when we were reading essays written by emigrants and examining authors' meta-literary utterances that explain their predilection for the essay-as-form at particular stages of their life. As suggested earlier, such analysis might be instructive for those interested in psychological or sociological approaches to literature. In part two of my research these issues will no longer be the subject of extensive discussion, but will return occasionally as context for reflection on particular works.

The notion of essayization can also be quite effectively used with reference to a specific literary-historical fact, namely to cases in which a text representing another genre at some point becomes re-written as or inscribed into an essay (which in the course of this study will be occasionally referred to as capital essayization), and then, sometimes, written back into its generic form. Palpable and objective as it appears, this phenomenon raises some challenging questions that cannot be answered by using the classical Newtonian physics of the genre or by using the relativistic Einsteinian model. For instance: is the final product of such an operation the same text as before, or is it a new work inspired by the original version? Or, asked from another angle, where is the limit of text's plasticity, to borrow Benjamin's term, to which I will return in part two of this study? Does this plasticity break at the moment of re-writing or does it go far enough to guarantee ontological sameness, so to say, of two optically utterly different objects? To these issues I will devote several paragraphs in chapter 3 while analyzing Wang Xiaoni's poem "Becoming a Poet Anew".

Mostly, however, I will pay attention to essayizations that are not the result of an authoritative gesture of re-writing, but are expected to occur through negotiations of form between all participants of the discourse, and, essentially, do not move beyond the stage of

negotiations. Essayization of the kind that Epstein called an “integrative process”, aimed at arriving at the optimal, coherent and transparent shape of the author-text-reader constellation, leads to a growing disintegration of formal structures. From the “scientific” perspective this is a beneficial situation as it allows us to observe a given text in various configurations and under dynamically changing circumstances. Therefore, as noted above, I will sometimes be purposely simulating essayizations to learn more about textual mechanisms that are crucial for the micro-physics of literature. Outside the laboratory, however, the phenomenon requires a more nuanced approach and assessment, considering not only epistemological but also aesthetic, ethical and social-political factors. Although these things are not what interests me primarily, I will certainly not dodge responsibility for my experiments and when it appears important, I will write about the potential broader consequences of various essayizations. This will hold specifically for my discussion of essayization in life-writing.

PART TWO

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Failed Connections, Undelivered Messages: Essayization and Related Things

CHAPTER 3

Essayization Inside Out:
What Happens in the Cells of Essayized Texts

At this stage we will need a quantum microscope which will allow us to (un-)read the literary discourse to its cellular and sub-cellular level: to the atomic and quantum structures of written worlds. Using techniques and tools tentatively designed in the interlude – and updating and perfecting them as best as I can whenever my methodological apparatus turns out not to match actually occurring phenomena – I will try to observe changes in the behavior of textual cells in different moments of their afterlives, i.e. during their interactions with the cultural intertext and its co-creators and recipients. By activating the texts' essayistic potential, I will attempt to get access to its most hidden and ephemeral secrets, and test its inward plasticity.

I. Who Writes Whom? Transcending the Physics of the Genre

There exists one significant group of genre-bound texts, in verse and in prose alike, which seem to be crying out to have applied to them the Einsteinian laws derived from the physics of the essay based on the idealistic assumption of unhindered interconvertibility of the intra- and extratextual reality. These are texts whose predominant function is meta-literariness: their explicit content focuses on discussing their implicit features and/or their own literary constitution. They are self-referential, self-reflexive, and, to a large extent, self-sufficient, as they create and complicate their own interior and exterior, crossing over the boundaries between them. It comes as no surprise that when looking for essayistic literature, essay theorists often turn to these works first. They famously include Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities*, and Joseph Conrad's meta-narrative *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899), all taken as harbingers of an era of essayism.[1]

Chinese emigration literature, too, includes many texts that are characterized by conspicuous meta-literariness. However, I will focus on works whose meta-literariness is less absolute: it may be local, optional, accidental, contextual and controversial, visible perhaps only from specific angles and in specific places, and not in every text-author-reader constellation. Those who do not (want to) see it, usually enjoy a peaceful readerly / writerly life in a safe world that is ruled by Newtonian physics of the genre; those who (hold that they) see it may be led into endless essayization. Among the most interesting cases, effectively polarizing readers' and writers' attitudes, are those in which the allegedly meta-literary text,

[1] Cf. Harrison 1992.

on the literal level, evidently refuses to open up and interact with its surroundings, and is drawn in by other agents, seemingly in spite of itself.

To make matters more concrete, I propose to start from two radical examples. I will observe how a deeply autistic written world, that emerging from Wang Xiaoni's poem "Becoming a Poet Anew" (重新做一个诗人), and a deeply claustrophobic literary space, in Gao Xingjian's play *Escape* (逃亡), react when they are forced to transcend their literary boundaries and engage in essayistic processes that aim to re-join the written with the lived on "more appropriate" conditions. Subsequently, I will try to grasp the somewhat more moderate, but equally meaningful, fluctuations of textual matter in Gao's novels *Soul Mountain* (灵山) and *One Man's Bible* (一个人的圣经).

When a poem becomes a poet

Wang Xiaoni herself is described by her husband, the poet and critic Xu Jingya, as a kindhearted mother and wife who cherishes a tranquil home life, showing no interest in the hustle and bustle of the modern world.[2] By contrast, due to her poetry's growing popularity in China and abroad, many of her poems enjoy stormy afterlives, with essayization arguably being one of the most challenging adventures. It is difficult to say whether "Becoming a Poet Anew" was a product of essayistic thinking, but there is evidence that it has been confronted with such thinking and transformed more than once, in different circumstances and to different effect. The poem has twice become subject to capital essayizations executed by the author herself: it was first elaborated as an essay, and several years later attached as an appendix to another essayistic piece, "My Own Home" (自己的房子), in *North All the Way*.[3] But let's start from the beginning, meaning its birth and its early crimes, focusing on those against its author.

According to an authorial note under the text, the poem was written in June 1995 in Shenzhen, that is ten years after Wang Xiaoni settled there, and one year before her first collection of essays, *Exiled to Shenzhen*, discussed in chapter 1, was released. Created as a part of a poem series called "Becoming a Poet Anew", it was originally entitled "Work" (工作).[4] In 1996, Wang published an essay called "Becoming a Poet Anew", containing an explication of some of the images contained in "Work".[5] Perhaps this is why it received more critical attention and became more popular than the other three poetic texts in the series, and took on a life of its own, hijacking the title of the entire cycle. Since then, it has been rewritten more than once by the author herself. In 2007, modified and reprinted in *North All the Way*, it became a part of her essayistic *recollecting* project. Below I cite in my translation only the edition published in October 2010 in the journal *Poetry Monthly* (诗刊), in the column "Representative Work" (代表作),[6] which was reprinted in the 2017 collection of

[2] Xu 2008.
[3] Wang Xiaoni 2007: 197.
[4] Wang Xiaoni 1997.
[5] Wang Xiaoni 1996a.
[6] Wang Xiaoni 2010: 28.

Wang's poetry (again as "Work"),[7] but I will refer to earlier editions and other existent translations where I find this instructive.

Becoming a Poet Anew

At the shortest end of the century
the Earth bobs
humans bustle about like monkeys between trees.

While my two hands
dangle idly in China's air.
The table and the wind
are both sheets of pure paper.
I make my sense
happen only at home.

When I rinse the rice
whitish water drips onto my page like milk.
The gourds, at the sight of new-grown fingers
cry out in fear.
Outside the sun shines with a stab wound
snow fills the sky.

Every day from dawn to night
my door is shut.
I hang the sun at the angle that I need it
people say in this city
lives someone who doesn't work.

Walls tightly closed
sandwiched between two small glass shards the world self-ignites.
Quiet butterflies flutter everywhere
Creation unknowingly leaks out.
I predict the tiniest rustle of grass leaves in the wind
without eyes.
Without hands.
Without ears.

Every day writing but a few words
it's like when a knife
cuts a tangerine's skin to release a fountain of finely woven juice.
Let the layers of blue light
penetrate a world that's never been described.

No one sees my
silk-like finely woven light.

[7] Wang Xiaoni 2017: 144-145.

In this city I
silently work as a poet.

Judging by its title, the poem belongs in the category of autothematic meta-literature, and so it is interpreted by most critics: as poetry about poetry. To be precise, about Wang Xiaoni's poetry and its place on the "bobbing Earth". But this is what *we* know of it, or think we know of it, observing the poem and author's life from – as we think – the outside, and spotting similarities and differences between the lived and the written. We act like a child earnestly seeking the missing parts of a "deficient" copy of a picture in a book of riddles, forgetting too often that this is a quantum copy, and hence bears as many features of the external experience as of discursive textual matter that accumulates in the author's pen while writing, and of ourselves who are measuring, i.e. interpreting, it. In other words, it is as representative of the author's thought and her lived experience as it is of our reading attitude.

The more we try to capture and describe relations between the lived and the written, looking for magical Einsteinian equations that could smoothly connect them, the more we complicate the structure of the system. Let's try an excercise in imagination for a moment, and go back to a time before our "obvious" essayistic reading, trying to answer what would happen if instead, we agreed to know only as much as the poem knows of itself, and as much as it wants to tell us, and to stay patiently outside its "tightly closed walls", respecting the indirect yet clear request that comes to us from the intratextual world: do not intrude on the creation process? What if we stopped at the question of what the poem *is*, rather than asking what it is *about*? And what changes when we read and try to conjoin it with external reality?

Seen from this pre-interpretive perspective, "Becoming a Poet Anew" is a monologue of a human(-like) being who... *zuo yi ge shiren* 做一个诗人. While this phrase appears in the title and in the last line, I rendered it in different ways, as "become a poet" and "work as a poet", the latter inspired by the original title "Work". In Eleanor Goodman's translation, these lines read accordingly: "starting anew as a poet" and "serve as a poet".[8] In Diana Shi and George O'Connell's: "be a poet anew" and "[I dwell in this city / soundless and] a poet".[9] And these renditions do no account for all possible readings of the original Chinese.

The verb *zuo* 做 appears to be the most problematic. Basically it means "do, make", and it is used in expressions such as "do a job" (e.g. 做老师: 'work as a teacher, be a teacher'), and "be a human being" (做人; rather as a moral quality, with regard to a constant process of maturing, not intrinsic biological features), but also: 'make = construct / create / produce something', usually concrete and material (e.g. 做家具: 'make furniture') – in contradistinction to its homophone 作 – and also 'put on a show, pretend' (做样子). Whichever option one chooses, there is one common feature: the I-speaker does not definitely identify as a poet. The capacity of being a poet appears to be secondary to the subject's core identity, accidental, and perhaps temporary. Otherwise "I" could well say: 我是（一个）诗人 – 'I *am* a poet'.

Although in extra-textual analysis 'work', 'serve as' or 'be(come)' appear to be the only defensible translational choices, inside the textual reality, without existential context,

[8] Wang Xiaoni 2014: 24-25.
[9] Wang Xiaoni 2013.

'make', 'produce' and perhaps even 'pretend' are no less justified. Alternatively, these renditions may all be appropriate, depending on the moment – not a temporal moment, but a point somewhere on a spectrum of being. This is characterized by correlatives such as a degree of subject-ness and object-ness of textual matter, determined by what Benjamin identified as "the structuring, the inwardly plastic principle". This principle may "turn [literary constellation] inside out", to the effect that "the god [here taken as any agent from (meta)physical reality] becomes wholly an object", and "the temporal form is broken from the inside out as something animated". It finally leads to the point where

> [t]he god ceases to determine the cosmos of the poem, whose essence – with art – freely elects for itself that which is objective: it brings the god, since gods have already turned onto the concretized being of the world in thought.[10]

In light of Benjamin's words, it could be said that in the author-text-reader constellation existence becomes a transitive quality. Crudely put, it is not unlikely for the poet to be wholly "existed" by the I-speaker. Hypothetically, extra-textual reality might be entirely supported by the intratextual one. At least, the linguistic construction of the poem appears to have such potential. It covers a whole spectrum of modes and intensities of existence: from static being, through active doing, to calling to existence something else. If this still sounds a little abstract, let me concretize my thought using one more trick learnt from physicists.

The text does not say whether "I" has a pet at home, but if s/he does, this might be Schrödinger's cat, which has recently fallen out of favor with physicists and was threatened at gunpoint by their tacitly elected leader Stephen Hawking.[11] There is every reason to believe that Wang Xiaoni, who calls for *anfang* 'putting in a safe place' all living creatures (in this case, "living" is actually the most problematic epithet), would not reject an animal asylum in her written world, especially as conditions inside her poem seem perfect for this "species". Glossing over the issue of animal rights, I will proceed directly to the bottom line of Schrödinger's thought experiment,[12] explained by Eric Martell as follows:

> If you put the cat in the box [along with a vial of poison, a hammer, and a radioactive substance characterized by unpredictable time of decay], and if there's no way of saying what the cat is doing, you have to treat it as if it's doing all of the possible things—being living and dead—at the same time [...] If you try to make predictions and you assume you know the status of the cat, you're (probably) going to be wrong. If, on the other hand, you assume it's in a combination of all of the possible states that it can be, you'll be correct.[13]

Obviously, if one opened the box – that is, read the text or, in the case of the author, unlocked it with an interpretive key which is commonly believed to be in their hands – one would immediately see whether the (textual) cat is alive or dead, and what it is doing. Or,

[10] Benjamin 2002c: 32.

[11] Stephen Hawking is famously quoted as saying: "When I hear about Schrödinger's cat, I reach for my gun". For controversies around the experiment in question, see e.g.: Johnson 1996, Zimmerman Jones 2017. For new propositions based on Schrödinger's experiment, see e.g.: Crew 2016, Feltman 2016. For more detailed explanations and comprehensive discussion on the cat and its relation to the problems of quantum physics, see: Kaku 1994: 260-263; Gribbin 1984, 1996; Baggott 2004.

[12] Schrödinger's experiment was originally described in Schrödinger 1935.

[13] Kramer 2013.

more precisely, one would *make* the cat do it, by one's very observation, without any purposeful action. What the physicists describe as the "*superposition* of the cat – the idea that it was in both states – would collapse into either the knowledge that *the cat is alive* or *the cat is dead*, but not both".[14] The quantum world would be disambiguated to one of its countless parallel Newtonian systems. This might work obviously only for infinitely small and independent cats: in a literary environment, say, cats of the size of one word or one expression.

Returning to what was said in the interlude, the cat-phrase *zuo shiren* 做诗人 is an underdetermined language particle that has not been pinned down in the process of writing and still exists in its multiple simultaneous states. They are finally disambiguated in the act of reading or translating, when the poem is confronted with circumstances that enforce higher contextualization, for example a lack of an equally ambiguous word in the target language. Wang's "cat" is particularly powerful. It is given a honorary place in the title, so in a sense, its condition determines the meaning and the fate of the entire poem.

Wang's cat-phrase's actual meaning is a complex function of temporary and largely haphazard factors. One of them is the "real poet's" presence. If the author is "present for" her poem, her presence disambiguates the cat: the linguistically polyvalent *zuo shiren* 做诗人 may mean no more than 'pretending', 'enacting', perhaps 'serving as' or 'working as' a poet; that is, repeating her existence within the textual world in various ways – not always very faithfully, and not always in good faith, as we will see. While she is "absent for" the text, this signifies 'becoming' and – in the extreme case when the I-speaker's subjectivity and agency reach their peak – 'being' or 'producing' the poet anew.

As long as the author is "in her place", which is implicitly determined by the generic convention of a poem, there is also something gravitational in the Newtonian sense – or mythical, in the Epsteinian sense – in the situation described in the text. This is akin to Adam's or Jacob's struggles with God in the Bible, or Prometheus' theft of the divine fire in Greek mythology, or the doomed determination of the Chinese Cowherd who travels to Heaven to face the Goddess and reunite with her daughter Weaver Girl. Obviously, the narration of the I-speaker in Wang Xiaoni's poem is a far cry from the grand narratives of ancient times. But there is an echo.

The scene in the first stanza resembles a caricaturized Eden at the dawn of the world, when Earth is not yet stable and bounces in space, while monkey-like people, who have not tasted the fruit on the tree of knowledge, are playing in the garden. There, "making one's sense happen" is a forbidden thing, and thus may be practiced only in hiding. "I" does not have any fig leaf to cover their nakedness and face the author, the One who Is-That-She-Is, and about whom "I" knows nothing else. Instead s/he may hide themselves behind the closed door of voiceless poetic words that – according to what Wang wrote in *Exiled to Shenzhen* – unlike the essay, should not let one's inner world get through.[15] But they do.

In the first edition of the poem, after "making their sense happen", the I-speaker becomes very talkative, as if trying to reinforce their home built from language. S/he compares themselves to the sea which "never works for anyone / just breathes and thinks", and imagines themselves as living between something like one-way mirrors or maybe TV

[14] Ibidem.
[15] Wang Xiaoni 1996: 241.

screens: s/he can see the world outside, but the world will never see her/him. Finally, however, in the last stanza, s/he finds themselves in a place full of sunlight which penetrates the walls and enters the "spoken home". This brings to mind another poem by Wang Xiaoni, "A Rag's Betrayal" (一块抹布的背叛), where "I" feels themselves – in Goodman's translation – "exposed to people beyond these four walls", like "a poor bare body" that wants to hide in wooden strips of a thatched peachwood chair or to be reduced to "the pit of that peach tree seed".[16]

In the later edition of "Becoming", the perilousness of the sun is presaged much earlier: the third stanza ends with an almost apocalyptic vision of the sun compared to a knife wound, and the heavy snow which covers a wounded heaven. In this place life apparently starts to "leak out" from the poem, as if its substance were spilling out through that heavenly wound. Yet, the penultimate stanza brings a sudden breakthrough. The *written* poet repeats the *writing* poet's act in their microscopic written universe – i.e. making a sun-shaped wound in heaven – by dealing a "verbal" deathblow to the tangerine, so that it starts bleeding with silk-like (and light-like) juice. This scene, like a patricide performed on a voodoo doll, wins "I" the longed-wished-for invisibility and allows them to contemplate their own "finely woven light". This is a bloodless coup d'état by poetry, as so felicitously phrased by Wystan Auden: "poetry makes nothing happen: it survives".[17]

This is a weird, half-blind victory, achieved "without eyes[,] [w]ithout hands[,] [w]ithout ears". Tellingly, "I" does not know whom – or *against* whom – s/he survives. The collective noun *renlei* 人类 ('humanity, mankind') in line 3 says nothing about the identity of the I-speaker's rival for "being", who – as the penultimate stanza suggests – belongs to "a world that's never been described". It remains non-languagized, and hence cannot be grasped from the inside of the text by the subject, whose only sensory receptors are words. It is only through words that s/he both sends, and sometimes receives, impulses from external reality.

Seemingly, some of these words are too active, and transport more sense than "I" is able to deal with. S/he appears to be particularly afraid of "sun(shine)" (太阳, 阳（光）) and "light" (光), which put "I" into closer contact with a mythical reality beyond their horizon. These are words of high symbolic potential. From time to time they endow the written poet with unexpected, ephemeral epiphanies of the exterior, which the textual subject receives as something undesirable and painful – as a wound. This undecidable wound is a trace that the mysterious external presence left on her textual world to mark its domination and existential "firstness", which "I" merely reenacts in her written reality.

But this makes sense only when the one who is reenacted stays within the poem's horizon. Then, the I-speaker's efforts to hang the sun at a suitable angle acquire a ritual sense. They can be taken as a reenactment of the unknown, mythical external author-reader's reality; this may be a pious and zealous act, as well as grotesque and blasphemous one. In Wang's poem, it is probably the latter. This is not to say that Wang Xiaoni herself is grotesque and blasphemous or that she writes grotesque and blasphemous poetry, but that here and there, the relation of her poetry to herself appears so. The written poet is existentially utterly dependent on the author, and simultaneously utterly mutinous. Their struggles at the very basic, cellular

[16] Wang Xiaoni 2014: 21-22.
[17] Auden 2007: 246-247.

level of existence, could be interpreted through the notion of autopoiesis, borrowed by Ira Livingston from biology, and explained by him as follows:

> The short way of saying all this is that an autopoetic system is a kind of parasite; it thrives on other differentials, sources of energy, and raw materials, which it taps into to sustain its own little inflorescence, more or less unnoticed by its host. This brings us around to another version of the contradiction encountered before: this kind of autonomy can be sustained only along with an equally thoroughgoing dependence. [...] You know you have found an autopoetic system when you find together more autonomy and more dependence, more closure and more openness.[18]

What would happen if the mysterious external presence parasitized by the I-speaker were to disappear? If the vertical transport of the "substance" through the symbol were to cease? In all likelihood, "I" would not notice the difference: s/he would continue the ritual activity, still feeling "pain" in the place where the skin of the poetic world was cut by the overactive symbolic sun. However, in this case, it would be rather a phantom pain whose "material cause" has been removed, becoming a product of the imagination, one that "is existed" by the I-speaker's mind. In Benjamin's words: the godlike author would be "turned into the concretized being of the world in thought". The written poet would make the writing poet happen. The writing poet would be a byproduct of the written poet's experience of pain and uncertainty, and their effort to find explanations, contexts and an appropriate form for these.

When the poet and her world disappear, the I-speaker's working as a poet and the poem's working as the world begin to resemble the process of essay-writing, where the one who creates constructs a seemingly two-sided but really one-sided universe, whose only edge is s/he themselves. Something similar happens if she enters the poem and takes the position of the written subject. Then, the poem becomes her story – her essayistic reflection on life and writing, as readers and commentators otherwise usually tend to see it. In this latter case, she is the one who tries to become a poet anew, construct her identity and give it a textual shape, and not one who is "made anew" by her poetry. But – are these possible situations? Does the poem really allow for such re-formation? Let's have a closer look.

First, let's assume that there is only the written. Written poet, written gourds, written sun, written sky, written tangerine, written knife – all of them "make sense", or make their respective senses, freely and unrestrainedly. They all can mean almost everything. But they are not able to make *one* sense, that is, make the poem in its entirety make sense. No matter how much light they release – this light remains dark ("no one sees my finely-woven light"). Or, perhaps, the "waves" of sense they produce cancel each other out, and hence never break the barrier of language? Or, even if they break it, they leave on paper just a scattered pattern of points of interference instead of a consistent picture, as happened in the case of the first, accidental quantum experiment? We are no less helpless than the physicists who still cannot answer the question of what it is that pins down particles with originally undecided quantum states. Is it a near presence of some other bigger object that somehow binds them with itself, or does it happen under the influence of consciousness? And if so, does this mean that consciousness is a physical thing? Similarly,

[18] Livingston 2006: 84.

linguistic reality for some reason does not want to automatically interpret and disambiguate itself even if it seems to be well-structured by grammar, interpunction and line breaks. Its entropy grows, the written home bursts at the seams, but nothing else happens.

So, what is the situation like when there is only the lived – the author thrown inside the poem, in the role of the I-speaker? If everything that exists in the poetic universe comes from her? She looks strong. She can, for example, position the sun at what she deems a suitable angle. Nevertheless, she cannot control all. Small things easily get out of hand. What are these quiet butterflies (沉默的蝴蝶) – incidentally, another cat-phrase in the poem, alternatively renderable as "butterflies of silence" – that exist as both lively creatures and dead bodies of a metaphor? And what is the creation that leaks out? Perhaps these are some "free particles" of experience that escaped the consciousness of the poet and now enter into random connections with particles of language? Again, we do not know. The senses multiply and intersect, and there is no end in sight, nor a closed structure in any sense. A poem somehow protects itself from being re-made into an essay-like shape.

There is a beautiful notion of asymptotic freedom in physics, which means that in some cases the closer elementary particles are to each other, the weaker become their interactions, so they seem totally free and independent when they are divided by short distances, and when mutual distances grow, they start interacting strongly and prevent collapse of the entire structure. And this, I believe, somehow translates into poetry. You read a poem freely, adding new contexts and senses. Its form stretches out when fed with existential content, and right when it appears so broad and loose that the poem should really cease being the poem and turn into something else, for example an essay, it suddenly refuses to do so and signals that it does not want to get transformed, and becomes ever more poemlike again. Is this how all those seemingly elusive boudaries between genres work in general? (How) does this work for other literary forms? Answering this question would require much broader analyses. But during further readings of novels and plays, I will be bearing this question in mind, if only to see whether it is worth some future research.

At this point, we need to move from Wang Xiaoni's neat and tidy, and poetic "my own home" to an old warehouse.

Playing the author

The said warehouse is the setting of one of most commented-on works by Gao Xingjian, the 1989 play *Escape* (逃亡). *Escape*'s popularity is paradoxical, as in terms of artistic quality, it is arguably one of the least successful plays he ever published. If it were not for the historical-political circumstances of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, the play would likely have received much less attention. Although, to my knowledge, the author has never said so, he seems to have realized this early on, and to have spared no effort to distance himself from *Escape*.

The Chinese edition of the play was completed in October 1989, in response to a request by an American theater group for a play about China that was to be translated into English without delay. The request was prompted by Westerners' growing interest in the solical and political situation in China after June Fourth. Mabel Lee, who has translated many of Gao's texts and extensively written about his work, reports that since it did not contain any

heroic scenes of the Protest Movement, *Escape* did not meet the expectations of the Americans, who asked for radical changes. Gao did not agree and withdrew his manuscript, declaring that: "In China the Communist Party couldn't get me to revise my works, and an American theater group certainly isn't going to". *Escape* was then published in Chinese in 1990, in the first issue of the then Stockholm-based exile revival of the literary journal *Today* (今天), ten years after the original, Beijing-based *Today* was closed down by the police. Ironically, in 1991, what had not been "reactionary" enough for its American commissioners was printed in China in a government-sanctioned collection called *On the Diaspora 'Elite': Who They Are And What They Are Doing* (亡命 "精英" 其人其事), together with texts by writers such as Liu Binyan, Yan Jiaqi and Wan Runnan – as "incriminating evidence of 'reactionary writings' by 'unpatriotic,' 'anti-Party,' Chinese 'elite' living abroad".[19]

Like in most of Gao's plays, the plot of *Escape* is minimal. Two twenty-somethings, referred to as Girl (姑娘) and Young Man (青年人, literally Young Person – we will return to Gao's handling of gender issues below), hide out in an abandoned warehouse, having fled from an unnamed square that has sunk into warlike chaos and evening darkness. As they are trying to recover from the horrors they have witnessed, a third character appears, the Middle-aged Man (中年人; again, this literally means Middle-aged Person). He is a writer living nearby, who has fled his apartment after his elderly neighbor was shot to death while tending flowers on a balcony. Yet, if his self-revelations are to be believed, he fled not as much from the massacre as "from his self". Political and ideological dust-ups between the two Men constitute the main thread of the action. As we gradually discover, they flow from brutal sexual instincts to which the Girl falls victim. It is only from the protagonists' emotional, fragmentary utterances that we can guess what has happened outside the warehouse. When the Young Man goes out to assess the situation and does not return right away, the other two are sure he has been killed. The Middle-aged Man exploits his absence to enter into sexual relationship with the Girl, which may be taken as a primitive attempt to confirm his supremacy over the "defeated" adversary. But the Young Man comes back safe and sound. After a heated exchange of views revealing the misogynist attitudes of the two male characters and the emancipatory ambitions of the woman, in the final scene the Young Man rapes the Girl. According to the stage directions: they "roll around in the muddy water", the Girl "moans, then howls loudly like a wounded animal" to finally lose consciousness for a short while; "[e]verything happens slowly and solemnly, accompanied by the continuous sound of dripping water".[20]

A lot has been said about possible messages conveyed by *Escape*, in both sociopolitical and ethical terms. Chinese emigrant circles, including many "Tiananmen exiles" and democracy activists, were disappointed with Gao's skeptical assessment of the Protest Movement. Others, especially literary critics and translators, e.g. Gilbert Fong, Mabel Lee and Sy Ren Quah, wrote approvingly about the author's intellectual consciousness, which kept him from creating heroic odes and hymns in praise of the reckless youths – the students who were at the heart of the Movement.[21] Commentators who tried to focus on matters other than

[19] Lee Mabel 2007: xiii-xiv.
[20] Gao 2007: 65-66.
[21] Sy 2004: 180.

the merely political, such as Gao's treatment of otherness, interpersonal relationships and social mechanisms, especially his views of gender and women, are likewise divided. Henry Zhao, for instance, notes the playwright's social commitment and sense of responsibility, and Gang Gary Xu emphasizes his effective translation of political issues into gender discourse, but others, like Claire Conceison and Carlos Rojas, urge more critical examination of Gao's approach to femininity and masculinity.[22]

Here, it is not my aim to reassess the above-mentioned aspects of *Escape*. I would just like to note that the discussions and the disagreements originate in one common assumption, namely, that the author is close to the text, and is significantly engaged in the issues that constitute the social-historical context of his work. Largely, he is believed to be pronouncing his views through the Middle-aged Man as his textual alter ego.

Notably, Gao himself, perhaps unknowingly, encouraged such interpretations by attaching to the play a set of authorial instructions. In the first two of five points – in Gilbert Fong's translation – he claimed:

> 1) Since ancient times, human existence has been an unending tragedy. Our play is an attempt to express modern man's dilemma in the classical tragedy form. The performance should be infused with the solemnity of ritual and adopt the recitative style common in the tragedy of fate in Greek theatre.
> 2) *Escape* is about the psychology of political philosophy. It should not be made into a play of socialist realism, which seeks only to mirror contemporary political incidents. The actors should avoid representing the reality of the trivialities in everyday living. Their movement should be clean and simple.[23]

It is evident that Gao's explicit motivation was to distance himself in both space and time from the here and now of his native country. Nonetheless, what the reader sees as implied by such precise guidelines may turn out to be the opposite. No wonder, then, that his instructions backfired, and the play has been interpreted mostly as a more or less metaphorical public utterance or confession by the author, whose intention should be decoded as faithfully as possible, and judged for its philosophical and existential depth and truth. Many readers threw themselves into the play as if it was indeed a sinicized, cathartic Greek tragedy positioned on the moral high ground. They ignored the fact that the antique form was indeed used to lay out, and not to contract, the distance between Gao's art and current political issues, i.e. that it was aimed at creating a "second space" and producing estrangement, and not at domestication of the subject matter.

By reading *Escape* as a conventional classical drama, one determines not merely its logos – in fact, as the various interpretations show, meaning appears to be the least determined element – but the shape, structure and physics of the field force within the text-author-reader constellation. In all engaged readings, exemplified by several studies mentioned above, the space inside the warehouse is presented as a more or less remote paraphrase of Plato's cave. Like the prisoners described in *The Republic*, for whom the shadows cast on the wall constitute true people and things, the protagonists in the warehouse can only guess what

[22] Conceison 2001: 752, Rojas 2002, Xu Gang Gary 2002, Zhao Henry 2000.
[23] Gao 2007: 67.

happens outside, by reading the sounds that come in. As such, the ancient drama performed here has its tragic hero: the Young Man whose hubris moves him to leave the shelter and reach for the dangerous knowledge of the external world. There is also an element of the Ancient Greek hamartia, in the rape scene, unmitigated by the Young Man's immediate regret. This allows one to see the protagonist as an Aristotelian "character between these two extremes[:] that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty".[24] Ultimate ethical appraisals vary, as we have seen, depending on the spectator.

But when thus interpreted, the Platonic-Aristotelian mythical antique-ness of *Escape* also translates into levels other than just the play's action. It affects the less tangible linkage between the historical and the written world, the author and the text, lived experiences and the plot. The text itself behaves like the cave-warehouse. Whatever disappears beyond the stage made of language is annihilated from the perspective of the intratextual subjects, while for the audience, it just melts into the horizon of the author's world backstage. For example, when the Young Man leaves the "cave", from the perspective of the spectators / readers, he does not enter just "any square", as the text asserts, but it is usually taken for granted that he goes to Tiananmen Square, perceived as an important element of authorial biography.

Akin to the I-speaker in Wang Xiaoni's "Becoming a Poet Anew", Gao's protagonists are obsessively afraid of the slightest invasion by an extratextual reality that occasionally leaks into their world like the water they discover on the floor of the warehouse, dripping from an unknown source. From the middle of the play, this occupies the characters and fills them with anxiety throughout the last scene, constituting an axis of scenic spacetime. At one point this becomes also a mirror in which the actors see themselves. This dirty self-image adds to their consternation:

> Middle-aged Man: (*Gets up and walks away. He steps in a puddle of water*.) Where did this water come from? (*Flicks on his lighter and notices a puddle of water beneath his feet*.) Where's the leak?
>
> Young Man: (*Comes over to have a look*.) It didn't seem to be there when we first came in.
>
> Girl: Maybe someone didn't turn the tap off properly? Let's go find the tap. (*Gets excited and hurriedly goes to get her dress*.)
>
> Middle-aged Man: (*Lights up the source of the water with his lighter*.) It looks like the water's coming in from outside...
>
> Young Man: Maybe they broke a water pipe at a construction site somewhere around here?
>
> Middle-aged Man: Who knows?
>
> Girl: (*Squats down by the puddle and washes her dress. Smells it*.) Yuck! Smells like mud! (*Gets up. Throws the dress away*.)
>
> Young Man: Maybe the water seeped in from an underground sewer. (*Climbing up the scaffold and looks down rather childishly*.) The place'll soon be flooded and turn into a swamp!
>
> Girl: It'd be good if it really became a swamp. Then nobody'd be able to come in here.

[24] Aristotle 1902: 45.

> Middle-aged Man: (*Watches by the side of the puddle*.) The water's flowing very slowly, as if it's not really moving. It's probably been like this for a while. (*Looks down intently with the light from his lighter*.)
> Girl: What are you looking at?
> Middle-aged Man: A mirror.
> Girl: Pardon me?
> Middle-aged Man: Right now it's calm and smooth, just like a mirror. You can see yourself in it. And it looks so deep and so serene...
> [...]
> Girl: (*Closes her eyes.*) It's only a puddle of dirty water.
> Middle-aged Man: You can't really be sure which is more real, the dirty water or the reflection. The simplest things are always the hardest to understand. [...][25]

To use another term from Greek antiquity, an assumption of the author's minimal engagement in, and control over, his work transforms the play into an agon, similar to what takes place in "Becoming a Poet Anew". The text, not always loyally and well-intending, enacts its godlike author. But regardless of how it "plays", this is the author who is inevitably judged by the audience, both aesthetically and morally, through the (im)perfection of the written world.

Clearly, this is not what Gao Xingjian would desire for himself or for his play. Throughout his career, he has consistently tried to convince his readers that the distance separating him from Tiananmen should not be so recklessly passed over, and encouraged the audience to join him in his escape from everything, including his own works. He argued that true art does not need historical reality, the author's patronage or the readers' interest to survive, for "it is not up to Don Quixote whether and how the windmills turn".[26] According to Gao, the power of literature rests in language which engenders the world. For all the intellectual and philosophical effort that has resulted in his theory of universal existential flight, still only a small minority of his audience tends to accept Gao's total emigration and his absence from political life and his own works, and hence also grasps an essayistic moment in that it is the text that transforms extratextual reality into an object of its experience – not the other way round. A similar situation takes place in Wang Xiaoni's "Becoming" after "exiling" the author. She tries to prevent by inscribing her poem into bigger, stronger Möbius strips and making it integral part of her experience and literary strategy in autobiographical essayistic book *North All the Way* and the interpretive essay "Becoming a Poet Anew".

As an interpretation of *Escape* that creatively explores the artistic and conceptual potential of this essayistic moment I would point to the first part of Belinda Kong's *Tiananmen Fictions outside the Square: The Chinese Literary Diaspora and the Politics of Global Culture.* Kong takes to heart the playwright's reflections on displacement. With a "diasporic eye"[27] she traces emigrant discourses in and on his works, to conclude that a significant part of these originates not in Gao's life, but in his literary output, and before all else in *Escape*. She argues:

[25] Gao 2007: 34-35.
[26] Gao 2001: 21.
[27] Kong 2012: KL 843.

> From social resistance to spiritual purging to self-salvation, fleeing fulfills ever more escalated functions for Gao, even as it becomes ever more singular as a means of human survival. It is at once a psychological attitude, a sociopolitical posture, and a metaphysical ideal. That Gao's most commonly used word for flight or escape – *taowang* – derives from the title of his Tiananmen play is of central significance, as I will explicate below.[28]

Unlike many other critics, Kong underscores differences and disproportions between the sociopolitical background and the play's action. She undermines also a common conviction that it is the author himself who speaks through the written author, the Middle-aged Man:

> But if there is one significant difference between Gao and the Middle-aged Man, it is surely their degree of distance from the massacre itself. This difference of location, I would argue, matters essentially. As much as Gao fashions the Middle-aged Man in his own image, it is patently not the case that he at any point lived on the threshold of Tiananmen's violence. [...] If anything, given that *Taowang* [Escape] precedes Gao's many essayistic formulations of existential flight and political noncommitment in the 1990s, we can say he has gone on in the post-Tiananmen decade to compulsively write and rewrite himself back into the play, in the exact image of his protagonist.[29]

The above rendition of *Escape* displays how the text actively curves the non-textual spacetime and makes it gravitate toward the written core of the constellation, and also comes close to acquiring the ability of re-creating and re-experiencing this on its own terms, according to the textual rules. Here, the warehouse – or the text – is no longer a contemporary analogy to Plato's cave. Instead, it brings to mind a postmodernly recycled Platonic chora, the 'margins of a polis', explored by Plato in *Timaeus*: the undecidable interval between being and non-being, the Receptacle of all forms ever born in the universe, which accommodates ongoing creation, like a womb, or a matrix, of the cosmos. Plato argues

> that Being and Place and Becoming were existing, three distinct things, even before the Heaven came into existence; and that the Nurse of Becoming, being liquefied and ignified and receiving also the forms of earth and of air, and submitting to all the other affections which accompany these, exhibits every variety of appearance; but owing to being filled with potencies that are neither similar nor balanced, in no part of herself is she equally balanced, but sways unevenly in every part, and is herself shaken by these forms and shakes them in turn as she is moved. And the forms, as they are moved, fly continually in various directions and are dissipated.[30]

Quite aside from the discrepancies between various contemporary choras, theorized by scholars including Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, Judith Butler and Richard Kearney,[31] translating Plato's original reflection into metaliterary language, one may say that in the space generated by a choraic text all things simultaneously exist and do not exist, and are both true and false, and that therefore neither cognitive engagement nor a subsequent

[28] Ibidem: KL 852-855.
[29] Ibidem: KL 1117-1126.
[30] Plato 1929: 52d-52e.
[31] Kristeva 1984, Butler 1993, Derrida 1995a, Caputo 1997, Kearney 2011.

alethic judgment is possible. The work projects, or produces, extratextual reality, including its own ostentatiously absent author and the audience excluded by Kong from the constellation (it is only the author who "writes himself back"), but it does not concretize, differentiate or individualize them. While they "sway" inside its space, the existential substance flows from one to another and divides itself between them in various proportions: sometimes the author becomes more real, and sometimes the reader.

This coincides with the ambitions of Gao's creatorly, *re-collecting* essays that were tangentially discussed in chapter 2, but it does not mean that one's essays must catalyze the essayization of other works. As Kong convincingly demonstrates, in the case of Gao such compatibility plays a pivotal role. But, for example, in the oeuvre of Wang Xiaoni the essayistic potential of poetry seems often unwelcome, and the author attempts to nip it in the bud – also through the form we know as the essay, which she employs to explain and contextualize her poems within her biography. Interestingly, the different strategies employed by Wang and Gao have a near-identical side effect. Both lead to quantitatively constituted essayization, i.e. to a quantitative increase of the essay as form within their creative output.

Novels erring between history and fiction

As for Gao Xingjian's oeuvre, his novels *Soul Mountain* (1990) and *One Man's Bible* (1999) strike me as both more myth-proof and more liable to essayization than his plays. Despite clear interfaces with the author's biography, they display an abundance of techniques that make the unstable distance between the intra- and extratextual realities hard to ignore, even for those who are hungry for tidbits from the writer's life. Both books are, in a sense, realist in nature. Yet, this is not a traditional mimetic realism, neither in a naturalistic nor in an oneiric or hallucinatory guise, but rather a deictic realism. While the former is aimed at replicating certain spheres of the non-textual world, the latter is not concerned with conventionally understood copying (in contradistinction to the quantum copying discussed above, in the inerlude), or representing. Instead, it vaguely points beyond the text, subtly signaling the existence of some not-yet-defined exterior.

To clarify this, let me peer through a quantum microscope at a much-discussed feature of Gao's novels, that is his employment of personal pronouns instead of proper names. This seems particularly radical in *One Man's Bible*, where "I", still quite prominent in the earlier *Soul Mountain*, is jettisoned from a narration that is driven by interaction of "he" and "you" (He and You from here on, for legibility), and used exclusively in (self-)quotation marks in dialogues of He and You with other people. He and You refer to the same person: a playwright who left China because of persecution and lack of artistic freedom. Chapters in which the third person narrative is employed, deal with He's youth during the Cultural Revolution, while second-person passages refer to You's present life. The text mirrors the process of building and strengthening narrative identity through a constant self-interpretation of what Charles Taylor calls a "radically reflexive" subjectivity.[32] Again, without downplaying the existential and philosophical dimensions of Gao's use of pronouns,

[32] See e.g. Taylor 1989 (esp. Part II "Inwardness").

scrutinized from various angles by various scholars,[33] I would first like to obtain insight into how pronominality shapes the substance of the text itself.

At first glance, pronouning seems less possessive than naming, as naming assumes a hierarchy regulating relationships between namer and named, while pronouns produce uncertainty about what they denote. They are, so to say, half-bounded: determined at one end by textual and linguistic rules, but unconditionally open at the other end to external, non-verbal reality. A pronoun behaves like a gravitational field which pulls in whatever approaches its core. Sometimes this is an author, sometimes a reader, sometimes some other prominent figure – all of these may happen to fall into this field and become You or He. They constitute a means by which the narrator half-blindly attempts to draw the author and the reader into the horizon of her/his own world.

Perhaps in a fairly motion-less play like *Escape*, where actors speak from the same place all the time, waiting for those specific moments when the authorial world finds itself in a position parallel to theirs, and the author is right above their heads, so to say, the mythical, vertical relationship between the two realities may be temporarily retrieved, and the artifice – to use Gao's term – of the author may be filled with his real presence, as we can see in some of the Platonic interpretations of his plays. However, in the dynamic novels, such an encounter of horizons is less likely, and gives way to less obvious force fields between the written and the lived.

The written world in *One Man's Bible* is in permanent motion. The narrator is on the road, calls himself an exile, and seems to be intentionally strengthening this quality of his life. Very telling is, for instance, his passionate lovemaking in a hotel room with Margarethe, who is an embodiment of prominent emigrant discourses: a female German Jew born in Italy, traveling around the world (they meet in Hong Kong), with good Chinese and interested in dramatic moments of Chinese history, precisely those that lie at the basis of the narrator's exile. Because the narrator constantly changes his physical and mental location, He and You are heard from different places, as if someone were moving the core of gravitation which sucks in the particles of the extratextual world. Given that the author also migrates, indeed escapes, from the text – also half-blindly, as he is unable to separate the horizons of the text and of the readers, and can only try to encourage the audience to follow him – and that the readers are free to change their locations as well, obtaining a stable structure of three horizons running parallelly for a long time is all the less probable.

Indeed, only a few critics who focus on Gao's Chineseness hold views such as those of Jeffrey Kinkley, who writes that "all the while, the traveler [narrator] *enacts* the self-exile of Gao Xingjian the author".[34] Predominantly, the two novels are perceived as relatively independent, generative structures, which trigger the active "memory labor" reconstructed by Sy Ren Quah and Zhang Yinde,[35] allow to patch identity gaps, or "expunge the trauma", in the words of Mabel Lee.[36] Referring to Gao's specific use of pronouns, Zhang Yinde sums up:

[33] See e.g. Zhang Yinde 2010, Lee Mabel 2012, Kinkley 2002.
[34] Kinkley 2002: 135. Italics in original.
[35] Quah 2010, Zhang Yinde 2010.
[36] Lee Mabel 2007: ix.

> These words and actions reveal themselves to work as demon-chasers: by *giving birth* to memories, they make it possible to *transfigure* them. No longer imprisoned by the verifying memory, the recollections that emerge in this way give the narrator the possibility of reconciling himself with his past and beginning the process of *rebuilding* his identity. Thus a complicity between the "you" and the "he" is revealed behind their apparent separation: not only is the distinction belied by moments of confusion, and even of fusion, but also the "he" can *take leave of his status as a historical character* and engage in dialogue with the "you."[37]

Gao, placing himself in the position of the reader rather than the author of his novels, shares this view. In a conversation with David Der-wei Wang, he says:

> For me, it was not particularly interesting simply to use language to describe characters, a plot or circumstances. I decided that the calling of names, at its most basic level—that is, pronouns—was in itself a subject worthy of investigation. Pronouns therefore became the plot. [...] If I used the first person (I or me) then it was obvious who was being referred to. But by using "he" or "she," then a certain distance was created. By creating some distance, it gave a different perspective and allowed me to create an artifice. It was an artifice for me, a different perspective for looking at myself. This was not merely playing games with language.[38]

The structure of the textual world of *One Man's Bible* can hardly be taken as biblical – here meant as an epitome of the mythical – with the narrator as a writer inspired by the author-God. On the other hand, it is also unlikely for it to become the essay proper, i.e. undergo capital essayization, whether under the author's pen or in the reader's mind. Consistently highlighted distance, inner mobility and dynamics of intra- and extratextual realities, the very same features that prevent mythical stratification of the text-author-reader constellation, also hinder an essay-like conflation of these three horizons.

The author shows no interest in sticking together the ends of the strip on whose two sides his work and his life develop. He prefers to seek existential benefits from interaction with his text as the other in whose eyes he can see himself. Also, the written world seems to be owing its vividness and attractiveness to permanent, sophisticated manipulations targeted at the author's reality rather than to a totalitarian desire of incorporating this sphere once and for all, and being identified with its creator. Readers' reactions are unpredictable, but here, too, a clear tendency can be distinguished: among a good twenty interpretations of *One Man's Bible*, I have not come across any study that might have resulted from the actualization of the liminal "essayistic moment", and treated the book as an essay or a collection of essays. Although, hypothetically, the He chapters could be – rather unappealingly – analyzed as a series of *recollecting* essays, the You sections could be seen – no less drearily – as essayistic *collecting*, and the rare face-to-face confrontations of He and You as *re-collecting*.

*

I hold that in Chinese emigration literature, especially among works that somehow process historical, sociopolitical background such as the Cultural Revolution or the Tiananmen Massacre, there are many texts whose reading may gain from the dynamics of the

[37] Zhang Yinde 2010. Italics in original.
[38] Gao 2009: KL 137-140.

continued essayization process – as opposite to "capital" essayization – i.e. not tamed by the author's re-writing or reader's re-reading the text as the essay proper. Although it easily gets out of hand and the processes it initiates seem endless, all in all, on the strength of asymptotic freedom, it somehow restrains itself and does not destroy a poem's poeticness or a novel's novelness. My choice of works in the preceding pages was purposely confined to texts containing verisimilitudinous portraits of writers, which reveal maximally varying authorial ways of self-positioning vis-à-vis their textual artifices, and provoke maximally varying readers' responses. This becomes evident especially in places where linguistically underdetermined free particles of a text are left – such as Wang's cat-phrase *zuo shiren* 做诗人 and Gao's pronouns – and it is the reader whose intervention makes the text congeal into a specific shape. The emigrant biographies of the authors in question additionally catalyze this dissociation of interpretations, as readers variously project the author's movement in geographical space into their movement within and in relation to the text and "catch" the author in different places. This selection was aimed at demonstrating the scope of inward plasticity, i.e. the possible modes of the text's existence while this is involved in specific entanglements. I tried to test this plasticity by reappropriating distances between authors, readers and texts, and their respective positions; in most cases, for practical reasons, treating the texts' locations as constants, and the authors' and the readers' locations – including my own – as variables.

Images obtained by confronting the works' various entanglements and interactions with other particles of text and life during the process of essayization will not allow us to produce any final interpretations, successfully grasping the essence of the works under scrutiny. What we arrive at resembles quantum clouds of probability instead. Every text exists not *in* a cloud – arguably, even with a big dose of luck, we will never be able to pin it down – but *as* a cloud. It is its own (im)probability. Conceivably, this does not refer exclusively to texts displaying essayization. Let's say, rather, that tracing threads of essayization is but one of several effective ways of painting the clouds. In chapters 4 and 5, I will consider how, why and to what effect authors perfect and govern the firmaments of their oeuvres by reshaping the probability clouds of their texts. Prior to this, however, I would like to examine one more type of cloud, this being heavier stuff than the relatively innocent cirruses we have been watching so far.

II. From Life-Writing to Live Writing

The present section will consider examples of so-called life-writing in its personal, autobiographical variant. As previously, I will examine literary portraits of writers. This time, however, the criterion will be not verisimilitude, but veritableness. I will be observing if and to what extent the law of the genre by which the author and their work are supposed to abide on the strength of the "autobiographical pact",[39] in Philippe Lejeune's phrase, limit the inward plasticity of a text, and what happens if this limit is exceeded.

The answer to this last question depends, of course, not only on the offense itself, but also on who it is that supervises the process of the law's execution. In practice, there are two

[39] Lejeune 1989: 3-31.

possibilities. First: audiences, i.e. readers or their representatives such as critics, other authors, various institutions. Second: the author themselves as their own most rigorous judge. By and large, the former is often a decisive factor in broadly defined witness literature, while the latter plays a particularly important role in what in the discourse on literary autobiography is usually referred to as confessional writing.[40]

I will focus on two books representing the above currents of life-writing: Liao Yiwu's *June Fourth: My Testimony: From an Avant-Garde Poet to a Lower-Caste Political Prisoner* (六四：我的證詞：從先鋒派詩人到底層政治犯, 2011; translated into English as *For a Song and a Hundred Songs: A Poet's Journey Through a Chinese Prison*) and Su Xiaokang's *Self-Record of Spiritual Kalpa* (離魂歷劫自序, 1997; translated as *A Memoir of Misfortune*). Both works and their pre- and afterlives betray their authors' attempts to reconcile form-seeking with truth-seeking, as a milestone on the road to more fundamental reconciliations: Liao's reconciliation with society, and Su's reconciliation with himself. The texts' inward plasticity appears almost unlimited, just like in the examples of fictional writing discussed previously, but their linguistic surface and the rules of the genre evince little flexibility, and need to be re-done if one wants to continue their pursuit of the existential Whole. In both cases this finally happens during the process of translation, in its conventional, lingual sense. This turns out to be an opportunity to shrewdly switch old generic pacts with new, liberal ones, that legalize essayization and allow it to be performed openly, on the surface, with underdetermined free particles – just like Wang Xiaoni's cat-phrases – exposed in the very titles of the books in question.

From testimony to travelogue

The core story of Liao Yiwu's *June Fourth: My Testimony* begins in circumstances that are characteristic of his young years: on a bus, on his way to the train station. In the morning of a cold day in March 1990, Liao, an avant-garde poet who had failed the university exams and had been leading the life of a wanderer, was heading to Beijing. He was carrying in his bag a tape with the film *Requiem* (安魂) he had made together with some friends in Chongqing right before the trip. The film was based on a poem by Liao that was dedicated to the victims of the Tiananmen massacre. After getting off the bus, he was approached by police officers, pushed into a car, and taken to the Investigation Center. Thus began a five-year journey through police offices and jails.

Released in 1994, Liao could not find a place for himself. Feeling abandoned by friends and despised by family, and no longer able to write poetry, he continued wandering. Soon his aimless loitering started morphing into a more active attitude, that of a reporter. In several volumes published in Hong Kong and Taiwan, he gathered dozens of interviews with people from the lowest rungs of society: political activists, former landlords, Christians and so on. After the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, he tried his hand at investigative journalism, disclosing evidence of the local authorities' negligence in regard to the quality of construction work. In April 2011, denied permission to travel abroad, he illegally crossed China's border with Vietnam. From there he flew to Germany, where he settled. Four months later his

[40] Cf. Czermińska 1987, 2000.

account of the life of a political prisoner *June Fourth*, smuggled out from Mainland China after many failed attempts, was published in Taiwan and Germany.

There is a bitter irony concealed behind what might appear to be a stroke of luck and Liao's double victory over the communist system in 2011. Since the fateful Spring of 1989, he has been torn between two attitudes: that of a witness who wants to stay as inside as possible, and that of a refugee, wanting to escape from his country, even if this would mean death. This is how he recalls the first weeks after the massacre:

> When I was alone in the hotel, I was gripped by the urge to correspond with friends. I wrote letter after letter, adopting the tone of someone who might soon leave this world. While invoking the foulest images to condemn the government, I also declared repeatedly that I wanted to run away. I vowed to earn some money, bribe a coastal fisherman, and glide across the sea. Each time I saw old friends and acquaintances, I would play the "Massacre" tape and gauge the reaction to my reading. I never intended to be a hero, but in a country where insanity ruled, I had to take a stand. "Massacre" was my art and my art was my protest.[41]

Years spent in prison intensified this inner conflict. As strenuously as Liao was trying to complete and publish manuscripts of *June Fourth: My Testimony*, confiscated one by one by the police, he was also seeking opportunities to flee from China. Once he finally escaped and could free himself of this inner struggle, his testimony immediately caught up with him. Of course, this did not happen against Liao's will. He wished to speak out. But perhaps he was not yet aware how uncomfortable it can be to speak for a long time standing in a witness box, and how little indeed one is allowed to say in this (dis)position.

Many books are marketed and interpreted as testimonies, but not all are entitled to this epithet. Hardly any author officially signs the "testimonial pact" with the publisher and, consequently, their readers. Technically, it is no more difficult than any other autobiographical contract. It commits the author to tell the truth in an unambiguous manner. Its style should be maximally transparent, without figurative language, as this could deform or obscure the message, and distract readers from the reality that was witnessed. Any visible markers or triggers of essayization are obviously forbidden, too. In quantum terms, the truth must not be measured. Openly provoking readers to do so, for example by leaving some fissures in a factographic narration that may suggest that the text is not a closed, complete structure, is wrong. Of all of autobiographical subgenres, it is arguably testimony that is most seriously questioned during what Laurence Kritzman identified as the post-Montaignean crisis of autobiography after its confrontation with the paradigm of the essay:

> The Montaignian self-portrait, therefore, is one that is out of joint, and accordingly it aims to question the supremacy of the "auto" of the biography. [...] Like Jacques Derrida four centuries later, Montaigne engages in a process of "auto-immunity" that produces a crisis of what might have become autobiography; the teleological imperative that appears to underlie autobiographical narrative is registered in its infinite difference: "This is a record of various and changeable occurrences, and of irresolute and, when it so befalls, contradictory ideas:

[41] Liao 2013: 40-41.

whether I am different from myself, or whether I take hold of my subjects and in different circumstances and aspects" (III.2, 611).[42]

But the testimonial ban on essayization goes further. It also prohibits and prosecutes clandestine essayization, that is: any attempts at reconfiguring mutual relationships and distances between author and reader, and between them and the text, in search of a better form, even if this does not affect the text's surface aesthetics and surface meaning. Authors seen to violate this rule, or seen to provoke readers to do so, have been mercilessly judged. This happened, for instance, to Elie Wiesel whose case will be briefly revisited below.

The crucial point of many theoretical discussions on witness literature is a conviction that the prerequisite for testimony is not only the author's presence in the past situation that was witnessed, but also their – minimally psychological – immersion in this reality at the moment of testifying. This is literature written, as Horace Engdahl puts it, in the "perpetual present tense":

> One does not become a witness only by observing an event with one's own eyes. A witness is a person who speaks out and says, "I was there, I saw it, I can tell people!" As an act of speech, testimony is inseparable from this kind of self-reference and from the accompanying claim to immediate credence.
>
> Pronounced by a different person in a different situation, the same series of words could be a fable. [...]
>
> There is a clear objection to coupling testimony with literature. What we normally require of true evidence is the opposite at every point of what we usually allow in a literary work, since literature enjoys the privilege of talking about reality as it is not, without being accused of lying. It is also evident that testimony can be mimicked as can every other way of using language. [...]
>
> Only testimony with its perpetual present tense and its direct touch can lift out of us this delusion and destroy the semblance of necessity, logical end, and meaning. [...] The other dilemma that brings the two [literature and testimony] together may be expressed in the following paradox: the true witness is the one who cannot testify.[43]

Such reasoning, if taken to extremes, leads some theorists to the conclusion that the perfect, unblemished figure of a witness is an abjectly debased prisoner called *Muselmann* in the Nazi concentration camps. In Agamben's interpretation: a mutilated and muted individual reduced to the bare *zoe*, "the non-human who obstinately appears as human [...] the human that cannot be told apart from the inhuman".[44] In the gloomy light of this logic, any kind of witness literature and of literature at large, is a deviation from this dubious ideal: "the value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its centre it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority".[45] In Primo Levi's words cited by Agamben:

[42] Kritzman 2014: 53-54.
[43] Engdahl 2002: 3.
[44] Agamben 1999: 82.
[45] Ibidem: 52.

> We, the survivors are not the true witnesses…we survivors are not only an exiguous but also anomalous minority. We … did not touch bottom. Those who did so, who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the 'Muslims', the submerged, the complete witnesses …[46]

In witness literature in the strictest sense, leaving is a taboo. Once brought into the narration, explicitly or actualized by readers, leaving is often treated like (an irrational kind of) guilt, and as invalidating the testimony. Let us recall here the story of Elie Wiesel, to whom Hu Ping compared Liao Yiwu in the Introduction to *June Fourth*, albeit apparently with a different intention, and referring to another aspect of his witnesshood. Wiesel's opponents would justify their accusations of his bearing false witness with the argument that he would not want to confirm his "self-reference" and reassure the audience's "immediate credence" by showing the prison number tattooed on his arm, which, he claims, he has not removed.[47]

Having every physical, psychological or textual tattoo of the past ordeal numbered and catalogized, and being held accountable for their "improper maintenance" is uncomfortable. Attempts at nursing the collective memory in the bodies and the minds of witnesses are but another side of the biopolitical coin with which they were paid in death camps, gulags and prisons for their will to inform the world of what happens inside the walls. Obviously, hardly any reader will raise such unreasonable – to put it mildly – demands. Still however, echoes of such reasoning are discernible in many debates, and the discourse around the Tiananmen massacre is one of those that lay bare its tricky mechanisms. And not only Western audiences with their irredeemable Orientalist syndrome are to be blamed for their clearly self-contradictory attitude, in expecting pure testimonies from emigrant writers who are, essentially, "survivors" that have not "seen the Gorgon", and in rating their books based on the extent of the author's immersion in the reality described. Among the Tiananmen exiles themselves, too, many arguments have come down to haggling over who was "more inside" the Square and hence has a righter right to speak, and a truer truth to tell.

But back to Liao Yiwu. In 2011, in the middle of his drifting life, we see him entering the ocean of world culture, voluntarily tied to his truth like Odysseus to the mast, in Wang Jiaxin's metaphor from "London Essays", at the mercy of the elements, unable to steer a ship that is made from text. Its boards seem too high to allow anybody to jump in and help him. He cannot cry for help, because he does not know the language. He looks unprepared, as if he believed that the ship is strong and well-balanced enough to take in all the water pushing in from outside during the storm, without sinking. This is not a caricature, but a faithful metaphorical reconstruction of a black grotesque painted by Liao's fate which translated also into a gloomy mental image that lingered in his consciousness for many months after he reached the other shore – and, as he said,[48] made him unable to feel at home

[46] Ibidem: 33.

[47] Their arguments were collected by Carolyn Yeager on a website: www.eliewieseltattoo.com titled: "Elie Wiesel Cons the World: A Website Dedicated to Exposing the False Testimony of the World's Most Famous Holocaust Survivor".

[48] Private conversation with Liao Yiwu in May 2012 during his visit in Poznań on the occasion of receiving the 2012 Ryszard Kapuściński Award.

in his new place. Hopefully, adding some past and future spaciotemporal background to this picture will slightly light it up.

According to Liao's preface to the Chinese edition, the first version of *June Fourth* were laconic notes he had made on scrap paper and envelopes while in prison. Based on these, in 1995, one year after leaving prison, he compiled the first manuscript of the book. This is probably when he signed the testimonial pact, with himself, and only with himself, being still very much inside, immersed in his loneliness and hardly believing that anyone else could be interested in acting as the second party of this agreement. The manuscript was confiscated by the police during one of countless searches in his home in Chengdu. In the conversation with Jiayang Fan, he recalls:

> At that time, the only people who came looking for me were policemen. In Chengdu, you felt that you were so quickly abandoned and forgotten. It's likely that that generation of people had totally forgotten. Then you began to remember. You remembered, remembered, remembered. You felt you had to write it all down. As for what the future held, it was hard to say.[49]

It took him three years to write the text anew, only to have it seized again in 2001. The 2011 edition is the third.[50]

About the former two, we can only speculate. In terms of compliance with generic conventions, the earliest manuscript was probably the purest, the least processed testimony, with a virtually undisturbed self-referentiality. Later on, the non-testiomonial factor must have started to play a more and more important role. And arguably, Liao may have intuitively felt that his isolation could not last forever, and sooner or later he would have to renegotiate his position in society and in his writing. But he did not disentangle the knot. Instead of breaking or redefining the old pact with himself before it saw the light of day, he chose to rewrite the reality, so that it would still "fit in". His whole life, claims Liao, with reference to Wang Xiaoni's poem "Those I Don't Know I Don't Want to Know" (不认识的人就不想再认识了), is nothing but an endless process of leaving prison.[51] He extended the testimonial situation to make it encompass also the spacetime stretching outside. But he might not have expected how far this space would soon spread: that from this psychological strait between China and the West, he would get to the open ocean.

As a poet, Liao achieved a certain mastery in taming metaphors. He used to be very efficient at disabling metaphorical and symbolic usage, narrowing the space between signified and signifier and limiting the reader's interpretive space. And he expertly used those skills in the Chinese edition of *June Fourth* to protect his truth. But he was not technically versed in essayization. He tried to throw all the poetry out of the narrative and into the appendices, as well as his correspondence with a friend outside the prison walls, as if he wanted to make sure that the boat was tightly closed, and perhaps prevent the reader from jumping in and changing its course. However, when he eventually let the exterior aboard, all his years "after", all his further readings on the Holocaust, on the Soviet Gulag, and his masters and soulmates: Solzhenitsyn, Wiesel, Kundera, Kapuściński, Fučik, named in the narration and asked to

[49] Liao & Fan 2014.
[50] Liao 2011b: 3, Liao 2013 (Preface).
[51] Liao 2011b: 215.

support his testimony – they turned everything inside out. They demanded a more spacious ship, or minimally one with better infrastructure: separate rooms below deck to "make their senses happen" without being disturbed. Liao's one-cabin-one-mast vessel with the author tied in its center would no longer do, especially if they were to sail to the ocean. So they untied him and forced him to re-build – and luckily so. As it happened, Liao soon had the chance to register his ship anew, in another place, under another name, within a new contract, and under a new law. With the indispensable help of his translator, Huang Wenguang.

In my view, rebaptising *June Fourth. My Testimony: From an Avant-Garde Poet to a Lower-Caste Political Prisoner* in Huang Wenguang's rendition as *For a Song and One Hundred Songs: A Poet's Journey Through a Chinese Prison* was not just a cosmetic enhancement or a market trick even if it was intended as such. Purposely or otherwise, in cooperation with Liao, Huang drew the most radical conclusions from the inward plasticity of the literary work. Some adjustments had been made already in the German translation *Für ein Lied und hundert Lieder: Ein Zeugenbericht aus chinesischen Gefängnissen* (2011) by Hans Peter Hoffmann. Compared to Huang's intervention, Hoffmann's version still counts as a faithful translation, if only because it left untouched the essential function of the book as a witness record (*Zeugenbericht*). To shed some light on the transformation the text underwent in the hands of its English translator, let me make a brief comparison of the pacts signed with Liao's name on the Chinese- and English-language covers.

First, what can one say about the identity of the signatory? In *June Fourth* the narrator-to-be is referred to as "I" ("*my* testimony"), whose subjecthood appears unstable and devolves from that of an avant-garde poet to that of a lower-caste prisoner. In *For a Song*, the subject is a poet who experiences the ordeals of the journey, yet this experience does not affect the core of his identity. He could be imagined as a modern Dante traveling through a human-made hell. The book lays no explicit claim to being a testimony; consciously judging by the cover and the title in its literal sense, it may be taken as something between travelogue and reportage.

Second, who is the target audience? The form of the testimony implies the existence of some "external world" that the witness addresses and that is supposed to act as a tribunal judging the oppressors – even though it sometimes judges the witnesses instead. In turn, the dedication *For a Song and One Hundred Songs*, borrowed from Liao's 1990 poem "Written for a Song and a Hundred Songs" (为一首和一百首歌而作),[52] redirects the communication and makes it circulate inside the milieu of one person – the poet. The "energy" flows constantly from his life to his songs. And the other way around, for this is poetry that lends him identity and ensures the position from which he may safely pronounce his truth. In this cosmos, as Benjamin – who is, incidentally, one of Liao's favorite philosophers – would say, it happens sometimes that "poet and poetry [...] are not differentiated". The poetry, taking up Benjamin's reflection, preserves not just his bare existence, but the law established by him. It helps him recover his self-respect and, as Liao claims in the last sentence of the Epilogue, a "sense of dignity"[53] of the homo sapiens: the "wise man" capable not only of *being*

[52] Liao 2011b: 478-479.
[53] Liao 2013: 390.

somewhere, but consciously reflecting on his whereabouts. Too often, this is put in doubt in the case of witnesses. Peter Englund points out that

> [w]hen it comes to *understanding* an event, a process, or an era, the importance of eyewitnesses cannot be challenged: "I know because I was there." When the same event, process, or era needs to be *interpreted*, their footing is less stable: "I know although I was there."[54]

Third, from where does Liao speak? In *June Fourth*, probably from inside prison or the gates of prison, which he psychologically still cannot pass. In *For a Song*, where he underscores the Chineseness of the place, feasibly – at least mentally – not just from outside the prison, but from outside his homeland, putting himself in the shoes of someone for whom China is not an obvious context, and who needs geographical markers to localize the book's plot. He has already perpetrated the act of the leaving that constitutes a taboo in the testimony genre. Moreover, he feels free to project this experience onto textual matter, and in the title emphasizes the importance of this gesture as the beginning of a new order in text-author-reader constellations.

According to the Translator's Note, *For a Song* is the author and translator's attempt at reconfiguration, re-contextualization and (Western-)reader-friendly presentation of the threads contained in the Chinese version.[55] In a sense, this specific travelogue is the safest formula for the new pact, if only because it presupposes many calculated risks that might result from the author's being on the road. These include confrontations with and constant re-measuring of his own life and text by new readers, changing environments and languages, and measuring himself against these; which implies the increased possibility – or, perhaps, the danger – of essayization. Together with lifting the taboo on emigration, the said travelogue-like formula lifts the taboo on essayization, allowing for the text's various reconfigurations and different disambiguations, as it enters into entanglements with author, readers and contexts, within or outside China's borders. And by lifting the taboo on essayization, the updated generic pact also lifts the taboo on the re-socialization of the witness. The new installment of his work requires the author's and the readers' joint search for form. Sharing his truth, the author shares also his responsibility for it, both material (readers are co-responsible for its maintenance and further circulation) and formal (they are involved in the process of creating coherent and transparent individual forms for it). Here, the essayistic crisis of autobiography turns into an opportunity, one of possible responses to Nancy Miller's postulate that:

> Perhaps it is time to understand the question of relation to the other—to others—as being as important, foundational, to the genre as the truth conditions of the "autobiographical pact." Not the exception but the rule. Put another way, in autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography's story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves, one that we sometimes choose.[56]

Readers are still free to take the book as a testimony, but never at the cost of the author's freedom. The inner structure of such an entanglement is different from that of the testimony

[54] Englund 2001: 54.
[55] Liao 2013 (Translator's Note).
[56] Miller 2007: 544.

genre. The one who ties themselves to the mast of truth is the reader. The reader's presence inside the text, their re-experiencing of signified reality through language, makes up for the author's absence, which is no longer perceived as a trespassing. S/he lends their own subjecthood to the author's textual avatar. This is what, for example, Hertha Müller does, in a sensitive and tactful manner, in the foreword to the English edition:

> Liao Yiwu's literary art is such that the sarcasm found in his sentences is always shown to be the other side of pain. Testimonial passages alternate with poetic ones, and the resulting mix not only bores into the brain, it presses against the stomach. [...] Like the author, his language has swallowed disenfranchisement and torture, it roars and whispers all at once and finally frees itself. [...]
>
> I am happy that Liao Yiwu managed to come here to Germany, to this foreign place, instead of landing in prison. For him it is a bitter happiness, far more so than we can comprehend. [...] Bitter happiness is not something that carries us away, it has to be dragged along. It reigns over us with all its "other-worldly tenderness." [...]
>
> Liao Yiwu will not be allowed back home in the near future. But bitter happiness is cunning, it intentionally mistakes homesickness for the absence of homesickness. And it is an excellent master of the subjunctive. It says very bluntly: you really never wanted to be the way you would have had to be if you'd been allowed to stay home. This particular subjunctive is not used to express a wish: it is a conclusion. It drives away all melancholy, knowing full well it will come back without going away. But then the master subjunctive comes back, too.[57]

Müller accepts and supports the author's leaving in every sphere of existence, from linguistic through physical to psychological. Herself showing other-worldly tenderness and respectful empathy, she fills his painful subjunctives with wisdom drawn from her own experience of life under Ceausescu's regime in Romania and the hardships of her subsequent emigration. In this other world there are, I believe, many readers who, like her, are able and willing to read Liao's work in a way which does not betray that ounce of trust they were finally given by him – at the same time expecting that he will not abuse their confidence. The pact of the generic law makes way for the pact of trust.

Confusion – confession – memoir – reprint

If one looks at the 2012 Taiwanese edition of Su Xiaokang's work, and is lucky enough to understand both Chinese and English, one is faced with a perplexing palimpsest of different generic definitions of the book. On the bilingual front cover, vertically, from right to left, in two rows, is written: "離魂歷劫自序 [lit. 'self-record of the soul's / spiritual kalpa'] / 增訂版 ['expanded edition'] // A Memoir of Misfortune / Enlarged edition".[58] Never mind the accuracy of the translation which has to negotiate discrepancies between Chinese and Western genre systems, each of these two headings by itself looks confusing enough, if not oxymoronic.

If we stick to rigorous definitions, both "memoir" and "self-record" – which are indeed worlds apart in terms of implied writing and reading attitudes – have limited

[57] Liao 2013: xiii-xvii.
[58] Su 2012.

possibilities for "enlargement". Not as limited as testimony, but still. If they were written out of experience and personal memory, what else can be added or amplified? Don't memories naturally tend to shrink and disappear rather than grow and multiply? Was the first version (self-)censored or the second fictionalized – for instance, to meet the needs of the market, like remakes of cult movies – and is what is "enlarged" is, so to say, mainly the author's ego? Either way, the original and extended versions seem to undermine one another's credibility. If one is taken as trustworthy, then the other automatically loses authenticity. In sum, the book may be either a self-record / memoir, *or* an enlarged edition. Yet, as hopefully shown in the previous section, such an over-suspicious approach does not necessarily benefit the reader, nor does it do justice to the work and its author. Therefore, instead of nitpicking, I propose to look at those three "keywords" as terms marking three respective stages in the author's understanding of his own writing. Let's start from the zero hour.

Su Xiaokang (b. 1949) was an investigative reporter and social activist who made his name in mainland China as co-author of the controversial 1988 TV series *River Elegy* (河殇), which caused a national debate about China's future and its relationship to Western culture. In 1989 he supported the students during the Protest Movement, and after the crackdown found himself number five on the government wanted list. He was smuggled to Hong Kong, stayed briefly in Paris, and settled in Princeton. As a "visiting scholar" – with some self-mockery, Su places the expression in inverted commas – he became a member of the Chinese "elite in exile" (ibidem). Only after two years were Su's wife, Fu Li, and their four-year-old son Su Dan permitted to join him abroad. Reunited with his family, he believed the worst was behind him, and even started enjoying life as a celebrity:

> The exile wife shopped, cooked, entertained guests, and minded the child, while the husband did one thing—gave interviews. The description in the diary is a perfect capsule of our life in Princeton, true for every family here. Journalists flew in from all over the world, with their cameras and recorders and flashlights, flashing their way right up to Fox Run, following their subjects even to their English lessons and their driving tests.[59]

Then, on 19 July 1993, Su and Fu were in a terrible car accident, rending their new life to shreds. Su woke up from a coma one week after the crash to learn that Fu remained unconscious and would probably never be able to move or speak again. This is the "misfortune" with which Su has been trying to cope, and which pushed him to write and publish the first edition of *Self-Record* (1997), translated in 2001 as *A Memoir...*, and in 2012, "enlarged" and republished in Taiwan.

The accident, as Su has stressed, was a turning point in both his life and his approach to writing. Before, he had been indulging in what he now assesses as a deceptive and destructive pseudo-romantic myth of exile cultivated by the emigrant community. After, all the myths proved useless. The accident deprived him of all metaphysical illusions and made him unable to comfort himself with any elevated value. Confronted with Fu Li's helpless "bare life", he completely withdrew from public and social spheres, and focused on satisfying her most basic needs. Before, he had started writing a neat and tidy *Diary of Exile* (流亡日记), to be like many famous emigrant writers. After, his writing became an amorphous mass of

[59] Su 2007: KL 1926-1929.

words, illegible even to himself. What finally emerged as *Self-Record* had originally not been intended for publication at all. In 1997 Su recalls:

> For the last couple of years, however, as I kept Fu Li company, I felt the compulsion to write and couldn't let a day pass without putting down something on paper; after putting it down on paper, I never looked at it again. For the first time in my life I was writing without being conscious of what I was doing. In China we had prided ourselves on being the unique species of the animal kingdom—the animal that "crawls over paper." It was the only activity we deigned to pursue. Some relied on interviews, some on collecting data, some on scholarship, and then there were the superior species who relied on inspiration or imagination, calling it "creative writing." I suppose I had also dabbled in "creative writing." But reduced to my present state, my writing seemed instinctive, a cry for release, an impulse to empty out something on a daily basis. As I "crawled" along, for the first time I did not have a readership in mind, and no desire to turn my crawlings into print.[60]

Su's crawling was much less than catharsis, often associated with (creative) writing, and, as he notes elsewhere, it was not aimed at any other kind of self-healing.[61] If it could not heal Fu Li, it could not heal him. Su does note that writing would give him some pleasure.[62] Nevertheless, this was by no means pleasure in and of itself, but rather a side effect of a daily physiological activity, just like eating and drinking, which, for all their compulsoriness, can still provide satisfaction. Or like what Su euphemistically calls "emptying out something on a daily basis", as a source of the most basic feeling of corporeal freedom. David Der-wei Wang referred to Su's writings at that time as a "testimony of disaster".[63] Indeed, these notes, if published "unprocessed", like Liao's scrap paper, feasibly would have much in common with what is theoretically the purest form of testimony, with one significant difference. While testimony is driven by the witness' will to communicate the ineffable, this writing seems to have been aimed mainly at disposing what otherwise might have been in one undesirable way or another discharged in interpersonal communication, either with friends, or with Su's son, or with Fu Li herself.

Later on, Fu did in fact get better and with her slow recovery Su's spiritual condition also started to improve. When he could think again about more elevated values, such as giving his wife a feeling of safety and rebuilding family life, the need for privacy and intimacy set in, as did the experience of embarrassment and shame. At that stage, also the need for a form for his writing grew stronger. Before the first publication of the book the author hesitated:

> Writings thus put together reveal purely private feelings and should not be made public. I doubt if one's personal life experiences, however unusual, are worth sharing with others. Of course if you have packaged it in exquisite literary form, that is another matter. Readers can at least enjoy your verbal skills. But in my own case, I discover as I write this afterword that I am bad at packaging and have no desire to do it. But can I just spill everything out so bluntly? Nowadays in the United States, it seems to be the thing. In nonfiction some people expose

[60] Ibidem: KL 3405-3412.
[61] Su 2012: 19.
[62] Ibidem.
[63] Su 2007: KL 3460.

> their private lives and are applauded for it. But what I am spilling out is not only myself but Fu Li—all that she went through in her pitiful unconscious state—it is her privacy; does she want me to write it out?[64]

As he did not know how to package his text, he followed the advice of a friend, Yu Yingshi, who proposed the title "離魂歷劫自序" (self-record of soul's / spiritual kalpa').[65]

The word *jie* 劫 preceding "self-record" (自序) in the Chinese title also occurs in other contexts than the religious, and could be well translated as 'disaster, misfortune'. Yet in the context of Su's book its religious etymology, which was effaced in its subsequent English translation, is crucial. In Buddhism and Hinduism, "kalpa" means a period of time between the creation and recreation of a world, whose beginning and end are usually marked by heavenly signs and catastrophes. In the course of Su's actual narrative, the word appears precisely in this context. It attests to author's attempts at localizing himself and his generation against the background of History writ large, and to his efforts at gaining access to a spiritual world in which, at the same time, he ultimately finds himself unable to believe. His self-record at that stage is, more than a memoir, a confession addressed to a God who, as Su says, "has left", [66] and hence every word of remorse and self-incrimination recurs to him as an undelivered message, overburdening his consciousness and conscience.

The bilingual palimpsest of the title was probably designed by the author or his publisher for marketing reasons. Still, I hold that it accurately reflects the process of the author climbing the Maslow pyramid from its lowest level of "physiological needs", to which Su was thrown by the accident, through the subsequent levels of "safety", "love / belonging" (social needs), "esteem", to the highest, i.e. that of "self-actualization".

In Su's initial writing strategy – that is when it emerged after years of "physiological writing" where both creative authorship and readership were completely irrelevant – the form appears decidedly a-essayistic. I would not go as far as to say that it is resistant to essayization, but to all appearances, it is reluctant to any kind of reconfiguration, by its author or its readers. One is not supposed to pay attention to petty literary matters when important things happen in life. The notion of a self-record sets the boundaries of textuality quite tightly. The text gets access solely to basic facts of everyday existence, and only helps fulfill fundamental needs. The notion of a memoir mobilized in the English translation slightly expands these limits, signaling that the literary contract also includes the writer's right to the reconfiguration, selection and artistic processing of experience, as if Su had now reached Maslow's esteem level, which means longing for values such as self-confidence, respect for oneself and respect from others. His isolation is being gradually dismantled. This is confirmed by Su's return to the broader community and through the very fact of translation, which gave all kinds of readers from all over the world access to his intimate life.

Finally, along with more or less reconfigured facts, the "enlarged edition" that appeared over a decade after the said translation entitles the author to explicit interpretation of these facts, and to an attempt to not only satisfy intersubjectively expressible needs, but also openly seek access to the pyramid's highest level, i.e. "self-actualization", by virtue of

[64] Ibidem: KL 3439-3444.
[65] Ibidem: KL 3462-3465.
[66] Ibidem: KL 2313.

aesthetic values. It is only in the last version of the book that Su Xiaokang writes about the beauty he discovered in Fu Li, and – as he feels that the appropriate Chinese equivalent is lacking – coins for it a new word, patterned after the English "beauty": *lizan* 麗贊. In the last few lines of the preface, having glorified the intrinsic virtues of his wife and the universal value of the spiritual connection between two partners, he dwells on his own metamorphosis:

> Perishment is a fact. I should experience it myself, go through it. If I don't manage, I will be destroyed and defeated. But if I manage, I will become a new man.[67]

The recent edition is not a continuation of the earlier two. The narration begins and ends with exactly the same stories told in exactly the same words. Indeed, narrative "extensions" and reconfigurations throughout are not particularly salient. Yet, they bespeak an essential change in the author's self-positioning, and in the work's ontology.

Step by step, the writer withdraws from the text, as if he broke the last glass ceiling in his life and in his text, the one that divides a static "esteem" undergirded by fixed laws of nature and morality from a "self-actualization" that hinges on the individual's creativity. The esteem is the object of Su's pursuit as mirrored in the confessional self-record and in the memoir, while the self-actualization is discreetly intimated by the gesture of "enlarging" the autobiography. In a sense, in spite of the equally limited, more or less factual content, the last edition, unlike the earlier two, remains inwardly open-ended. It transcends itself throughout and becomes truly interested in actual life, or – with reference to Livingston – makes use of its autopoetic potential:

> Boundary negotiations (in bodies, for example) do not take place only where skin meets air or where food is being digested; such negotiations are going on everywhere "inside" as well, at the cellular and the molecular and the atomic levels. [...] We are fractal creatures, crazed through and through with cleavages. If you look closer at a feature that seems firmly in the interior, you are likely to find the hairline fracture, the edge, that joins it to the outside. To cultivate this way of looking—to learn to see performativity—you really just have to follow through on the mandate to look at nouns and structures until you see them as participles and processes: an edge is an ongoing negotiation rather than a structure; or to take it from the legalistic to the ludic, the party was going on before the guests showed up.[68]

In the latest edition of the *Self-Record*, the party is finally morally allowed, and not considered as an inappropriate disturbance of the grave seriousness of life. All the clandestine negotiations, including essayization as a negotiation of form, can come to the surface, and advance the process of self-actualization. The text is permitted to penetrate and influence extratextual reality, trying to adjust itself to a dynamic existence, and vice versa, to curve it to its shape. The author agrees for his life to be re-read and himself to be "co-existed" by his own text. He makes this clear to his readers not only in a vague subheading on the cover, but also explicitly in the preface:

> [Rereading and rewriting this book after fifteen years] demonstrates that only from a certain distance can one find another truth. It allowed me to also find the Source from which I escaped

[67] Su 2012: 21.
[68] Livingston 2006: 83.

> fifteen years ago. Then I hardly saw that behind burning emotional suffering, there was something more: a total spiritual and psychological collapse. I did not realize that our story is indeed that of a mental paralytic accompanying a physical paralytic.[69]

It is also in the preface that Su accepts that his wife's tragedy has become a "cultural event" and a "collective concern" among Chinese emigrants, and that it has started an independent afterlife not limited to his own experience and his writing, and that it influences and re-creates the surrounding reality.

But the most important reason why Su Xiaokang is interested in performative and creatorly functions of textuality is Fu Li, whom he treats now as his most important reader, and for whom the book became an opportunity to live the unlived time, and "self-actualize" herself after long years on the margins of existence:

> She is now reading herself. After the horror of losing memory, she can again find herself and her son, countless times she would cry silently, countless times, while closing the book, she would sigh and praise me: how come I didn't know before that you can write? This is my greatest reward.[70]

*

Needless to say, the second part of this chapter was not aimed at questioning Liao Yiwu's radicalism or Su Xiaokang's suffering, or suggesting that either could have taken other itineraries than the arduous roads they traveled in their writing since 1990 and 1993, respectively. Nor does it imply that the English *For a Song* is better than the Chinese *June Fourth*, or that *A Memoir of Misfortune* surpasses the *Self-Record of Spiritual Kalpa*. As far as my personal readerly experience is concerned, especially in the case of Liao's book, I even preferred the Chinese edition because it is less smooth, and imposes a slow, careful rhythm of reading. If the reader should wish to seek any axiological dimension of my ponderings at this stage of the research, I shall add that my concern was mostly about relationships between truth and freedom.

The situation of testimony can be disadvantageous and indeed destructive for a witness. It establishes an artificial contradiction between truth and freedom, instead of pointing to possibilities of their coexistence, which may be mutually beneficial and beneficial to the witness. Only while pronounced by an author who is not forced to constant "self-reference", and received by a reader who has no obligation of "immediate credence", the truth allows them enter into an equal, existential dialog. What they negotiate is not the content of this truth – as we can see in Müller's interpretation, the explicit message remains the same – but a way in which it exists and reacts to a constantly changing reality.

Something similar may be said about confessional literature, whose generic laws of truth-telling enforce secret self-censorship, usually hardly discernible on the text's surface, but crucial for its inner structure which is blocked and locked by them. In her study on the genre of confession, Leigh Gilmore unmasks its hidden paradoxes:

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[69] Su 2012: 13-14.

[70] This utterance of Su Xiaokang is used by the publisher in the book's description, as an appendix to the foreword to the 2012 edition of the work (see e.g.: http://www.books.com.tw/products/0010558845 [1.06.2017]).

> [A]utobiography recuperates the technologies of self-representation present in the confession and deploys them to authorize and deauthorize certain "identities." [...] [A]utobiography draws its social authority from its relation to culturally dominant discourses of truth-telling and not, as has previously been asserted, from autobiography's privileged relation to real life.[71]
>
> What we have come to call truth or what a culture determines to be truth in autobiography, among other discourses, is largely the effect of a long and complex process of authorization. [...] Authority in autobiography springs from its proximity to the truth claim of the confession, a discourse that insists upon the possibility of telling the whole truth while paradoxically frustrating that goal through the structural demands placed on how one confesses. "Telling the truth" so totalizes the confession that it denotes the imperative to confess, the structure of that performance, and the grounds for its judgment.[72]

I insisted on re-creating this performance on the moving boards of the quantum Laboratory Theatre, if I may borrow Grotowski's famous brand for my modest purposes, believing that the drama will not be interrupted, but will start seeking for itself a new multi-dimensional form, engaging spectators and re-engaging its director and actors; and that while being co-responsible for building a new theatrical space, all will focus more on building than on (self-)judging. Su's inwardly open-ended, "enlarged" *Self-Record* shows that this is possible. Even though no new self-contained consensual Whole emerges from those processes, just a common pursuit of it, this is still more constructive than sitting in a theatre as if in court. And a tricky, wayward truth that sets one free only to enable one to seek for it is still better than the totalizing truths of culturally dominant discourses. Especially when the book in question travels between various cultures. And so it is in the case of Liao. The two authors placed the most undecidable phrases in the titles of their books, which carries the risk of their being scandalously misread in their entirety. Even so, in the hands of a sensitive and good-willing reader who is able to tune their own movements to the dynamic of the surrounding discourse to obtain an existentially true image, the works' most basic structures and the sense they convey were not decomposed.

That tangled threads of essayization from life-writing led us to life sciences rather than to history and literary history archives, is, I think, a good sign, and a good point of departure for further reflection. In fields like emigration literature, where a significant part of entire literary production is (self-)judged according to the laws of non-fiction genres, enlivening life-writing at a structural level may contribute to vivifying the entire discourse. In the next two chapters, we will exchange the quantum microscope for a quantum telescope, to see how the (sub)atomic and cellular reactions scrutinized here translate into macro-scale processes, within authors' oeuvres and in the discursive space between them.

[71] Gilmore 1994a: 9.
[72] Gilmore 1994b: 54-55.

CHAPTER 4

Restructured Firmaments of Poetry: Essayization in the Eyes and Hands of Emigrating Poets and Their Readers

The title of the present chapter is taken from a short poem of its first protagonist, Bei Dao (b. 1949), "Restructuring the Firmament" (重建星空)[1] from his early emigrant collection *Old Snow* (旧雪, 1991). The work ends with the following stanza:

> The wind lifts up a corner of the night
> under the old-fashioned lamp
> I consider restructuring the firmament.

Although one may well dismiss this image as astronomical quixotism, it is fair to give authors a chance to demonstrate their skills as architects of the literary universe, minimally with regard to their own oeuvres. As this is the first time that I take the telescope out from the laboratory stockroom, I ask the reader for a moment of forbearance to focus the instrument.

By and large, Western discussions on (Chinese) poetry in emigration and emigration in poetry revolve around socio-political issues. While this topic is important, I would not like it to dominate my reflection. If we wanted to limit our explorations to the earthly atmosphere of historical discourse, we would not need a quantum telescope and binoculars would suffice. The telescope is meant to bring into view also the vast outer space that literature and poetry in particular persistently claim to access, regardless of historical circumstances and geographical location: beauty, truth, love and other things that reach our environment in the form of cosmic rays of varying intensity. I decided then not to bother poor tired Clio, the Muse of history. Following Joseph Brodsky, through an excerpt from his poem "To Urania",[2] I will invoke Clio's older sister instead, for her to keep an eye on the argument:

> Loneliness cubes a man at random.
> A camel sniffs at the rail with a resentful nostril;
> a perspective cuts emptiness deep and even.
> And what is space anyway if not the
> body's absence at every given
> point? That's why Urania's older than sister Clio!
> In daylight or with the soot-rich lantern,

[1] The poem was published in English in Bonnie S. McDougall's translation as "Restructuring Galaxy", see: Bei Dao 1991: 7.
[2] Brodsky 2000: 281.

you see the globe's pate free of any bio,
you see she hides nothing, unlike the latter.

Of course, we cannot expect the ancient patroness of astronomers to help us solve problems in quantum literature. The reality she discloses will not give clear-cut answers to any question about the relationship between life and writing. On the contrary, it will "cube at random", "at every given point", the complexity of Clio's maps, twisting and muddling artistic paths of emigrant authors in a multidimensional space. This is, I believe, a more faithful picture of literary constellations than the model offered by mainstream literary historical discourse, especially Western discourse on Chinese literature. Obviously, it is also more problematic.

Two different styles of artists' parleys with Urania will emerge. First we will see Bei Dao, who tries to grab her mythical power. To "restructure the firmament", like the Chinese-mythical Hou Yi who shot down nine suns from the sky, Bei Dao tries to rid the universe of his poetry of superfluous context, unidentified semantic objects and all underdetermined language particles. In reading Bei Dao, the essay as form, with essayization taken as intensified essay writing, will prove helpful.

Zhai Yongming, whom we will encounter in section two, adopts a Copernican method, aiming to "stop the Sun and move the Earth" without leaving the place of writing. In practice, this means adjusting the generic codes of the texts, enabling them to operate within another, post-Newtonian, paradigm, and make their way through fragmented quantum space, toward their rightful positions in the firmament. This is where essayization understood as an intra-cellular process, explored in chapter 3, comes into the picture. Bei Dao tried this method too, but abandoned it in favor of more decisive solutions.

There are many other poets whose oeuvres would merit a closer look in the present chapter. The three authors of emigratologies presented in part one – Wang Jiaxin, Yang Lian and Yu Jian – are cases in point. But their extensive meta-poetic texts would not automatically advance the present chapter's intent of discussing practical oeuvre management. I also considered studying essayization in Zhang Zhen's and Tsering Woeser's works, and a concept of "the poetic seasons in essayistic landscapes" of Hu Dong (b. 1963), a London-based author of Sichuanese provenance. These three, however, posed another problem. Although intriguing in many ways, their poetic output has not been given much attention in scholarship to date. Discussing their oeuvres would require presenting their poetics from scratch, for which there was no room in the present study. My decision to focus on Bei Dao and Zhai Yongming was informed by a quantitative balance between meta-text produced by the poets themselves and by their commentators. I hope this will allow me to present essayization as the process of negotiating literary form and, at a macro-level, the shape of literary discourses, in a way that does justice to all parties involved: authors, texts, readers.

I. Bei Dao: "Newton Is Dead". But He Shall Be Resurrected.

Bei Dao's oeuvre contains many examples of the emigratology of the essay, and of the essayology of emigration. The latter has been explored by Ya Siming, in his research on

what he calls the "diasporic background" of the aesthetics of Bei Dao's essays.[3] This refers to the fact that Bei Dao was forced to take up residence abroad after the Tiananmen Massacre. In the terminology proposed in part one of this study, most of his essays could be referred to as *re-collecting*.

Bei Dao has been an influential figure on the Chinese poetry scene ever since the 1980s. He was one of the leaders of the Obscure Poetry movement, and co-creator of one of the first and most influential unofficial poetry journals, *Today* (今天). He first traveled abroad, to the UK, in 1987. In June 1989 he was in Europe again, this time in Berlin, so he did not participate in students' protests. But his works did. Bei Dao watched in Western media how young people, with his poems on their lips and on banners, were struggling for democratic reforms. After the massacre, due to the credible threat of arrest in case of a return to the PRC, he chose to stay abroad. He criticized the government and supported the protest leaders. In 1994, when he attempted to visit his family in China, he was detained in the airport and deported to the US.[4] The reader will recall a similar story in chapter 2, in Sheng Xue's "Unbearable Lightness of Being".

As for the origins of essay-writing in his oeuvre, Bei Dao gives a point-blank explanation. In the foreword to his 2004 collection of essays *The Book of Failure* (失败之书), and in several interviews for literary magazines, he claims that his first essays were in order to make money. For more than two years between 1997 and 1999 these short pieces in prose written for the *Voice of America* were his main source of income.[5] This declaration is surprising, inasmuch as Bei Dao is known for a somewhat aristocratic attitude toward literature, and for chastising the mainland-Chinese poetry scene for what he sees as a betrayal of the ideals of artistic independence and disinterest in worldly benefits.[6] It is little wonder that the issue featured prominently in a counter-attack by his mainland opponents. Fierce criticism came, for instance, from Zang Di (b. 1964), a poet and a professor at Peking University. Zang took Bei Dao to task in an article titled "The Windmills of the Politics of Poetry: Or, an Ancient Enmity" (诗歌政治的风车：或曰古老的敌意) for the *China Poetry Review* (中国诗歌评论),[7] and repeated it even more outspokenly in a long interview conducted with him by Luo Xiangqian and Song Qian. There, he suggested that it is Bei Dao who abandoned poetry and sold himself to dark forces of the capitalist market.[8]

To be sure, it would be unlike Bei Dao to limit reflection on his essays to such down-to-earth matters. Whenever someone raises this subject, he hastens to add other, less tangible benefits he draws from essayism:

> Many things in human life are hard to predict. But I think even without economic pressure I will keep writing essays. I find essays a necessary spiritual adjustment. At some stage of your life, you suddenly feel it, need it, and external pressure is just a pretext. Genres cannot be

[3] Ya 2015.
[4] Bei Dao & LaPiana 1994, Saussy 1999, Van Crevel 2008: 150.
[5] Bei Dao 2004 (Introduction), Bei Dao & Wang Yin 2004, Bei Dao & Zhai Di 2002.
[6] See e.g. Bei Dao & Tang Xiaodu 2008.
[7] Zang Di 2011 a.
[8] Zang Di 2011 b.

> distinguished into superior and inferior. Sometimes they overlap or permeate each other. The way I see it, a writer should remain open-mined and try their hand at every genre.[9]

All in all, however, Bei Dao's emigratology of the essay is not very revelatory. It boils down to quite conventional statements, although they are often packaged in attractive metaphors. For example, in the *Book of Failure* he argues:

> According to popular opinion, there is a certain intertextual relationship between the [*sanwen*-]essay [散文] and wandering [漂泊, literally "floating"]: the essay is wandering in text, while wandering is writing in a geographical and social sense. These four years, since 1993, I have lived in seven countries, and moved house fifteen times. This is a kind of essayistic context [散文语境]. Where have I been all these years? Doing what? This cannot be reported in poems. "I wander through language, the instruments of death are filled with ice [from the poem "February" (二月)]; "To return to the homeland one should first correct the background" [from "Background" (背景)]. A poem may at best paint eyes, but it cannot paint a dragon.[10]

In this last sentence Bei Dao refers to a Chinese idiom 为舞龙点睛 (lit. 'paint eyes on a dancing dragon'), which means adding a final touch to bring a work of art to life and make it compelling.

Without downplaying Bei Dao's rhetorical skills, much more interesting than his metaphorical divagation is how his background-correcting and dragon-hunting with the aid of the essay looks in practice, and how it differs from Wang Xiaoni's enterprise of catching cat-phrases. We will return to this below. But first, let's see why he needs to correct and to hunt, and why he finds the essay useful to this end.

When the author goes out in the reader's shoes

Examples of intergeneric linkages in Bei Dao's work are easily found, even if one looks only at the titles of his essays. His 2005 book of essays and a 2009 bilingual collection of poetry share the same title *The Rose of Time* (时间的玫瑰) borrowed from one of Bei Dao's short poems written likely in the early 2000s. The title of the above-mentioned *Book of Failure* is a phrase borrowed from poetry as well, from his 1996 poem "New Year" (新年). Also, one of the essays included in *The Rose*, "If the Sky Doesn't Die" (如果天空不死), is built around a line of poetry – cited from an untitled short poem "A hawk's shadow flits past..." (苍鹰的影子掠过...). Moreover, both volumes contain texts devoted to other poets, like Allen Ginsberg, Paul Celan, Gary Snyder and Tomas Tranströmer, all of whom may count as Bei Dao's inspirations or influences. Similarly to Yang Lian's *zawen*-essays, they are meant to serve (their author's) poetry more or less directly. When holding Bei Dao's Möbius strips, one is tempted to disentangle them, get rid of the prosaic essayistic forms and use the precious content to help one's understanding of his poems. Writing essays might be taken as indulging those among his audience who have not come to terms with the commonly recognized "difficulty" of his works. Bei Dao notes:

> [I]f we say that a poem is a stone thrown into water, then essays are like ripples that spread out and out. Usually, poetry is unreasonable. Like a rock without a mountain, it will disable any

[9] Bei Dao & Wang Yin 2004.
[10] Bei Dao 2004 (Introduction).

> possibility of essayistic narrative. Essays appear random and unfettered, but in most cases everyone realizes that this is just an illusion. Some people say that essays mirror one's spiritual reality. This is because poetry is too complicated, and the lay reader cannot reach the essence, so they are not able to form their views on it.[11]

But the process of reading essays back to poems is never that simple. Suggested meanings do not necessarily fit in the form of a poem as it appears in a particular moment of its afterlife, even if they are defensible from a historical perspective, in regard to a poem's genealogy and its author's intent. Naturally, the form taken as a fixed two-dimensional shape seen in black and white on paper remains (usually) unchanged. Yet, if we consider the poem not as a "plain" structure, but as a specifically designed sector of a three-dimensional reality in which a text, its author and readers participate and where they interact on specific conditions defined by literary genres – then the form, too, evolves.

"If the Sky Doesn't Die" records a moment when Bei Dao, during the process of essay-writing, experiences firsthand a deregulated balance of a poetic constellation that he used to consider as obvious and self-sustaining. The essay commemorates his friend Xiong Bingming, "a sculptor, poet, calligrapher, scholar and philosopher". Among numerous stories and anecdotes, Bei Dao mentions the following conversation:

> Another day, he asked me to read one of my recent poems. Its last line was: "if the sky doesn't die". He sighed, as this phrase reminded him of his youth. Of course, that time I had no clue how he came up with this association, and only now have I finally realized what he meant. Indeed, there is some paradoxical tension in this phrase: it says that when one is young, the sky is immortal, while at the same time its subjunctive mood sows the seeds of doubt. This is a true perplexity of youth.[12]

This excerpt shows how Bei Dao tries to glue together the poetic phrase with some past experience, to make the text "immortalize" a certain part of reality. Or, put differently, referring to his imagery, he looks for a blind dragon of life to transplant to it poetic eyes. Given that Bei Dao's dragons are scattered all over the world, in the spacetime of three continents and, at the time of writing the essay in question, almost five decades, this is not an easy expedition. Finally, however, he finds himself successful. One can almost hear him exclaiming a Newtonian "eureka!", convinced that he has figured out the formula to describe the relationship between life and writing ("now I have finally realized..."), the relationship that needs to be redefined once he leaves the obviousness – to him – of his poem, and takes the position of a reader. But then, when he returns to the poem, instead of a clear equation that was expected to match the hermetic text with a hermeneutic sense, what is revealed to him is a space of paradox. In this space, grammatical structures contradict semantic values ("there's some paradoxical tension..."), and add to, rather than alleviate, the perplexity of the whole situation. "Newton is dead", suggests itself instead another phrase, taken from Bei Dao's early poem "Cold Hope" (冷酷的希望),[13] written in the 1970s. This is arguably the first poem in his oeuvre where classical notions of gravity, characteristic of

[11] Bei Dao & Wang Yin 2004.
[12] Bei Dao 2011: 178.
[13] In Bonnie S. McDougall's translation "Cruel Hope" (Bei Dao 1988: 24).

an Obscure Poetry that was very much constructed around "vertical" symbols, become undermined, and give way to a poetics of drifting.

Interestingly, while "exiting" his poem and putting himself in the shoes of his reader, Bei Dao faces the same problems that usually trouble his audiences all over the world: aporias and enigmas. This suggests that the perceived difficulty of his poetry is not primarily an epistemological riddle that can be solved by collecting sufficient biographical information. Rather, it is a question of positioning, of changing distances from the place of writing. At the early stages of his essay-writing, the importance of essayism, described by him as "wandering in text", rests in leading the author out from his own poems. This allows him to observe how the form evolves, once it is disbalanced by leaping out from the Newtonian world toward an Einsteinian strip-shaped universe, even if he got stuck in between, in a quantum space. "Poetry is a dangerous equilibrium", warns Bei Dao.[14] Once the ephemeral balance of text's "zero moment" – the blink of an eye between writing and reading, before the text enters the space of discourse – is disturbed, readers (including Bei Dao himself) end up entangled in webs of paradoxes, instead of re-entangling the world with the text, regardless of what they know about the creation process,.

One significant example of such readerly adventure without a happy end – without deciphering the sense of Bei Dao's poems, that is – is Li Dian's monograph *The Chinese Poetry of Bei Dao, 1978-2000: Resistance and Exile*. Its author starts the project of reconciling Bei Dao's life with his poetry from the moderately optimistic "Exile's Promise" (chapter 2 of the monograph), which Li takes also as a promise to himself that he will find a way to match these two spheres. Li creates a meticulous system of formulas binding life and text. Some of them are linear, others seem quadratic or cubic. Sometimes he feels satisfied with simple proportions:

> Bei Dao's immediate "surroundings" can be easily reduced to his relationship with the mother tongue which stands to fasten his exiled self in the shifting linguistic environment he faces daily.[15]

Elsewhere he avails himself of inverted proportionality:

> Frequently, however, this acute self-consciousness of exile in language is translated into an almost contradictory attitude regarding exile and poetry.[16]

So equipped, he tries to make his way through Bei Dao's "Unreal Imagery" (chapter 3). But instead of the interpretative key, he finds a bunch of keywords written "against the dictionary" (in chapter 4) that open the gates to a realm of "Paradox and Opposite" (chapter 5). This latter chapter was featured later in *positions* as "Paradoxy and Meaning in Bei Dao's Poetry".[17] Measured against the scope of Li's observations of the poet's "split imagery", my remark may appear trivial, but it is necessary to point out this nuance before I proceed to a more essential argument. I hold that "paradoxy and meaning" are not inherent qualities of poetry and never happen *in* poems, but always *to* poems or *with* poems when these are subjected to

[14] Bei Dao 2005: 166.
[15] Li Dian 2006: 41.
[16] Ibidem: 40.
[17] Li Dian 2007.

external factors that deregulate their formal coherence (with form taken in the spaciotemporal sense) by playing with underdetermined free particles. In a sense, tracing paradoxes means producing them.

After all, however, Li Dian is very cautious and what emerges is not a long list of purportedly pre-existent paradoxes encrypted in Bei Dao's poetry, but a credible 3D map – considering locations of texts, author and readers – of points of potential paradoxicality, which become sources of "the unending display of paradoxes" [18] once they are activated. Sketched in the process of analyses of Li's own interpretational failures and various alternative constellations around each of the poems discussed, his map more or less overlaps with a map I would draw for, say, points of potential essayizability. By these, I mean all those tricky places when one expects that a poem will become something more than a poem and will follow the logic of life – but lived logic, once injected into a poem and filtered in textual cells, breaks down into primary components. In the following section we will re-read one of several particularly "promising" poems discussed in Li's monograph, and try to answer why at one stage of his work Bei Dao seemed to throw such promises around quite freely, and later stopped doing so.

What a dangerous equilibrium is, and whether it is possible to maintain it

The poem is "Local Accent" (乡音),[19] written shortly after the Bei Dao's forced decision to settle in the US. Choosing this poem is purposely unoriginal. It is motivated by the academic popularity of the text and the availability of different interpretations, each of them proposing specific conditions on which the poem will match with extra-textual reality. Here is the full poem in a consensual translation based on renditions used in three of four studies (one is in Chinese) that will be briefly discussed in the following paragraphs.

Local Accent

I speak Chinese to the mirror
a park has its own winter
I put on music
winter is free of flies
I make coffee unhurriedly
flies don't understand the meaning of homeland
I add some sugar
homeland is a local accent
at the other end of the phone line
I can hear my fear

Regardless of their interpretational perspectives, most of critics and scholars agree that the work is ostentatiously dualistic in its structure, as if composed of two separate poems that can by no means be reconciled without reader's help, meaning the activation of what Maghiel van Crevel calls the "exile marker"[20] in the first line, of "speak[ing] Chinese to the mirror" – or,

[18] Li Dian 2006: 116.
[19] Bei Dao 2011: 54.
[20] Van Crevel 2008: 174.

not having interlocutors in one's native tongue. One of these two intertwined texts narrates the I-speaker's everyday life, while another one, inscribed between the lines of the former, presents the world outside the speaker's home. According to Li Dian, who consistently reads for exile: "[a] subjective world fragmented with mechanical acts runs parallel to an incomprehensible and incommunicable objective world".[21] According to Wu Xiaodong, who seeks for "the politics of poetics and the poetics of politics", and for psychoanalytical discoveries, and marshals the Lacanian notion of subjectivity: "[t]his is a memory and an image of the impossibility of entering "the real"."[22] According to van Crevel, who sets out to protect Bei Dao's poetry against "bad historicization" and "content bias", two notions elaborated further on in his book[23]: "If unzipped, the poem's two interlocking sequences in lines 1-3-5-7 and 2-4-6-8 fail to connect".[24]

One way to come to terms with the persistent non-sense of the poem might be – with apologies for the violence I am about to inflict upon the English language – the meaningfulization of its very meaninglessness, i.e. interpreting an irresolvable dualism as an essential quality of exilic existence. Among about ten scholars whose renditions I have read, only Claudia Pozzana, busy with the experimental measuring of what she calls "distances of poetry" in Bei Dao's oeuvre (in the paragraph cited here mainly its distance from language), seems to ignore the perceived disconnectedness, and interprets the work as meta-linguistic in its entirety. She focuses on but two verses: "I speak Chinese to the mirror" and "the homeland is a local accent",[25] concluding that this is the language that belongs to the poet and not vice versa. This apparently excludes the possibility of a "failed connection" between the subjective and objective worlds seen in the poem by other scholars. Yet, as we will notice, the seeming coherence remains superficial in Pozzana's interpretation as well, and does not pass the test of non-poetic logic. So what is "wrong" with the poem?

Let's take a closer look at the two disjunctive realities in "Local Accent". Indeed, at the beginning there seems to be an abyss between them. Someone speaking to the mirror and the park focused on its own winter appear not only mutually inaccessible, but inaccessible altogether. However, as the poem(s) progress(es), their monadic worlds do not run parallel, as Li submits, but gradually attract each other. "Objective reality", treated usually as a background against which a "subjective story" happens, is in truth a field of complex powers of unidentifiable historical-geographical facts, language and the subjective mind of the poetic persona. The background narrative resembles a popular game in which every player is supposed to say a word starting with the last letter of the word provided by the previous player, with a small difference: in the poem every even-numbered line starts not from a letter, but from a word determined by the previous even-numbered line. And so: the playing field consists of a range of hard facts, the rules are linguistic, and the outcome? Within the historical space and obeying linguistic rules, the result is co-determined by the player's imagination and their more or less conscious associations. Even if the first sentence was

[21] Li Dian 2006: 42.
[22] Wu 2007: 114.
[23] Van Crevel 2008: 284-287.
[24] Ibidem 2008: 174.
[25] Pozzana 2007: 97.

decided by a mysterious inventor of the game, its continuation is up to its participant(s). Let's re-play in slow motion:

A park has a winter → winter is free of flies.

Sure, that is objectively true and real. But winter is free of many other more significant things than mere flies, so why mention the flies?

Winter is free of flies → flies don't understand the meaning of homeland.

Undoubtedly. But flies don't understand many other, simpler things, let alone the homeland.

Flies don't understand the meaning of homeland → homeland is a local accent.

Homeland in its "big sense", as Chinese *zuguo* 祖国 used in the poem, in contradistinction to *jiaxiang* 家乡or *guxiang* 故乡, denotes the all-nation tradition that unifies Chinese people speaking in various "local accents" (*xiangyin* 乡音). These two terms, *zuguo* 祖国 and *xiangyin* 乡音, belong to different stylistic registers and describe different modes of one's social-political existence. In the text, the historically and often rhetorically charged *zuguo* 祖国 is defined with the use of the notion of *xiangyin* 乡音– a dialect spoken by a small community in one's "little homeland" (*guxiang* 故乡). Treated frequently as a mere deviation from the standard Mandarin promoted by the official language policy in China, *xiangyin* 乡音 escapes the hold of History writ large, (inter)national politics and education. The juxtaposition of *zuguo* 祖国 and *xiangyin* 乡音 narrows the homeland's semantic space to the horizon of what psycholinguists call the "language ego" of the speaker, that is – in Alexander Guiora's definition – "the identity a person develops in reference to the [first] language he or she speaks", [26] in this case – the homely "local accent" which stands in a double opposition, to the national standard language (*putonghua* 普通话, lit. 'common speech') and to foreign languages. This agency is believed to be co-responsible, among other socio-cultural phenomena, for "the stinging sensations of inadequacy or 'the disquiets' of the self lost in struggle with the unknown, whether it be decoding the new linguistic or the new socio-cultural context".[27]

As a result of these psycholinguistic operations, two originally distant realities – the internal and the external, or the homely and the worldly – are pulled toward each other by language and mind, and finally meet, on the phone. The ending is not very arresting, but it has its own logic. This logic works like a momentum conservation principle. Joined together through a phone line into one, more "massive" object, the two realities dramatically slow down, and the poem ends almost paralyzed, by the speechless, a-verbal fear. They do connect, but this connection does not produce any meaning and hence appears useless or faulty within literary discourse.

The above reading is an attempt at approximating a phenomenon I understand as poetic inertiality. I believe this is a quality of any poetic work, regardless of its artistic quality. Yet, admittedly, hardly any author is as concerned as Bei Dao about preserving it throughout the entire afterlife of their poems. Though it may be infelicitously associated with postulates of the formalist school, it has little to do with the formalist notion of a text as a self-referential, autotelic artefact stripped of its linkages with author, reader and

[26] Cit. from: Brown 2007: 69.
[27] Galetcaia 2014: 4271.

historical reality. I use the word *inertiality* in a very Newtonian sense, and would venture to draw from it very Newtonian conclusions.

From the observation of various displays of the phenomenon of intertiality, Newton – in the words of Philip Catton – "deduced what (so far as he could see) is necessary concerning spacetime structure for the very possibility of such phenomena. In this way he measured (as well as he might) what his spacetime doctrine needed to be like".[28] He wrote: "let the symmetries of spacetime be no more than the symmetries of the phenomena of inertiality – otherwise it is a nonsense that there should be such phenomena".[29] In poetic universes: the inertiality of two-dimensional form as we see and read it on paper (in, more or less, formalist terms), is but a projection of certain spaciotemporal constellation inside which text, author, readers and historical world interact. When such a constellation is in perfect equilibrium, as in the hypothetical and metaphorical first day of C/creation, Newtonian reasoning suffices to approximately grasp this spacetime's structure, yet the slightest disturbance, a tiny movement of one of those external objects, derails the ephemeral, potentially describable order.

Arguably, Bei Dao's definition of poetry as "dangerous equilibrium" – formulated in a poem "The Bell" (钟声)[30] – is in line with this reasoning. The dangerous equilibrium is easily lost when a poem deviates from the natural order of poetic "imagery and metaphoricity", as he argues in an essay on Paul Celan. This is the case either when a text appears too open, i.e. doubts its own poetic-ness, too readily enters into relationships with its various others and allows them dictate the conditions; or when it is too closed, "every word is lonely and stranded, and points only to itself", and "the doors of the dialogue" close.[31] Let's return to "Local Accent" to see what happens when the inertial equilibrium of poetic constellations is questioned, and readers in various ways "help" the poem, trying to save what can be saved. Usually they are able to rescue no more than one element of the poetic constellation: the author, the poetic language or... themselves.

First, Li Dian's interpretation. Li sticks to his hypothesis on the translatability of the poet's migrations into the linguistic image of "displaced words", while simultaneously trying to keep the poet as close as possible to the core of the poem, and identifying him with the I-speaker of his work. Li envisions language gushing out of the poem, and the poet offering somewhat futile resistance to this movement. The poet clings to that "false emblem of [his] native land", preserving it between himself and his mirror image at all costs. If he, too, were to step through the mirror's frame, the poem – or at least its "subjective" part – would spill out, and the text be reduced to the "incommunicable objective world" in the even-numbered lines. So Li does not allow the author to abandon the poem, and leaves him in that awkward position, tethered to his mirror image. The scholar himself retreats from the constellation, on the pretext of seeking interpretational help in other galaxies, built around different poems, and preparing the ground for Bei Dao to "go beyond that *last line of defense*" to regain his prestige as an accomplished poet. What follows is an exquisite analysis of "Gains" (收获), where,

[28] Catton 2004: 62.
[29] Cit. from Catton 2004: 62.
[30] Bei Dao 2011: 39-40.
[31] Bei Dao 2005: 166.

according to Li, the author undertakes a task of "rearranging the displaced word in the most personal and peculiar way to create a new language that belongs to him only".[32]

The situation in Wu Xiaodong's study is fairly similar. However, Wu abandons the poem not to seek for solution or salvation for Bei Dao, but to find confirmation that there is no way out for the author, and hence to free himself of the responsibility of going deeper into the poem. Wu collects and analyzes other mirror images and images of mirrors from Bei Dao's work, and builds a labyrinth that additionally complicates the situation:

> Bei Dao's abundant images of "mirrors" also constitute an internally entangled space. Mostly, they reflect the poet himself or simply – themselves. This isomorphic effect of mirrors that mutually mirror each other, the vision of countless mirrors piling in one mirror, gives one an impression of walking in a corridor of bottomless mirrors. [...]
>
> The estrangement from the source of life, or in other words, distancing himself from his mother tongue and from the source, dooms the process of shaping subjectivity to difficulty and suffering.
>
> Perhaps this is precisely why Bei Dao's poetry is still pregnant with new possibilities, the possibilities brought by the language's drifting across translingual space, as well as by the potential of the poet's individuality. We have every reason to keep waiting.[33]

Claudia Pozzana's brief interpretation, in its turn, reflects the situation in that the author appears to be an omnipotent, omniscient – and omniabsent – godlike persona who controls the text from outside and sets optimal distances keeping the work in balance:

> The exiled poet takes an indifferent attitude toward his native language, regarding any cultural substance. "I speak Chinese to the mirror" reads the first verse of "A Local Accent." Language as a mirror returns an image of a communitarian identity to the speaker but, for Bei Dao, "the homeland is a local accent." The communitarian illusion that one belongs to a language or culture hides the fact that language and culture belong to anyone: that they belong to the poet, and not vice versa.[34]

In this constellation the poem remains empty: everything that matters happens beyond the space of the text. The non-communitarian identity said to manifest itself through the local accent cannot express itself in a technically "silent" poem. Unless the poem is able to literally, i.e. vocally, speak for itself, it is not possible for it to preserve its local-ness and non-communitarian qualities. The unified characters that are commonly used in all regions of the country, regardless of local ethnicity or culture or spoken language, do not privilege any "accent". Most likely, they will be reproduced by the reader in all-China Chinese (中文), and not in its local, non-communitarian variant in which the poet – as Pozzana emphasizes – speaks to the mirror. Apparently then, it cannot be the case that the author is the lord and master of his work. He is denied access to the textual world and floats around it, now close now far away, trying different angles and poses to see his real image in a mirror that returns only more or less standardized silhouettes.

[32] Li Dian 2006: 42.
[33] Wu 2007: 114-115.
[34] Pozzana 2007: 97.

What will not allow me to subscribe to any of the above three interpretations is an impression that they are "over-informed", be it intellectually – with historical detail, academic scholarship, and theory – or emotionally. Still, however, I maintain that their importance for the poem's afterlife should not be underestimated. In order to "survive" (in Auden's phrase, cited earlier), some poems need their readers more than others. This does not necessarily mean that those that need them less are better than those that need them more. Still, while one's heart may go out to "weak" texts that beg the reader to fill them with existential sense and/or emotion, one is more likely to be intellectually attracted by those that tend to marginalize the reader's impact and challenge their understanding of literature. Van Crevel's interpretation, which keeps (other) readers and their emotional and intellectual "investments" in the text at a rational distance, makes the poem come under kitsch – this is my term, not his – especially in its last few verses. He goes on to mitigate the impact on Bei Dao's reputation by presenting several less reader-dependent counter-examples from the poet's emigrant output, such as "Borrowing Direction" (借来方向). Invoked toward the end of his discussion of Bei Dao's work, "Borrowing" serves as a final atonement for artistic sins against beauty, for "he who speaks is without guilt", even if sometimes "froth is what [he] speak[s]".[35]

In my view, Bei Dao's poetry's mode of existence as desired by its author is the inertial equilibrium discussed above, for early and later texts alike. Yet, while his pre-emigration poems, such as the famous "Answer" (回答) or "Declaration" (宣告), take this state for granted and ignore that it might be disturbed by their declarative or appellative tone, later works, especially those from the early 1990s, become focused on, not to say obsessed with, maintaining their dynamic stability.

Bei Dao's belief in the self-sustainability of poetry appears to begin to gradually erode around the time of his first travels to Europe. This becomes especially discernible in the first months after June Fourth, in mid- and late 1989. It was probably then that he most deeply experienced the disconnect between his actual physical, spiritual and intellectual location on the one hand, and his seemingly obvious symbolic position inside the universes of his own poems as these were chanted by student protesters on the square. Li Dian exposes the perversity of this situation:

> If Bei Dao did execute his "choice" to let his poetry, instead of himself, march with the student protesters, he now has no choice but to be subjected to the market force in the publishing industry, that is to say, to be available when his curious Western readers demand his presence, including his guest appearances in many academic institutions for the purpose of exhibition.[36]

Locked inside his poems, Bei Dao was like a soap opera actor identified by society with his role, and judged for the behavior of the protagonist he plays. This made his poetry backslide into political discourse.

At that point, Bei Dao's poetry seemed to be undergoing a "crisis of form" which the author was to diagnose a few years later, having already overcome it, as a malady of Chinese contemporary poetry at large.[37] Though still focused almost exclusively on poetry-writing, he

[35] Van Crevel 2008: 184-186.
[36] Li Dian 2006: 44.
[37] Bei Dao & Tang 2003.

appeared interested in what I have earlier called an essayistic gesture. He tried to disconnect his poems from his experience in the 1980s, when he was involved in (indirect) political struggle, and to re-connect it with his current experience of exile. Somewhat uneager yet to stoop to the prosaic and write essays, he rather encouraged his readers to read essayistically, or, using his own words, with reference to an "essayistic context". In various meta-literary utterances, he explicitly painted the emigrant experience as – in the terms used in this study – one side of the essayistic Möbius-strip, that would work as a mechanism translating physical exile into "the exile of the words" (an expression I borrow from an untitled poem whose first line runs "He opens his third eye..." [他睁开第三只眼睛]), and translating "dissidence" into "a form of distance" (from another poem, "Corridor" [走廊]). Through my analysis of various interpretations of "Local Accent", especially Li Dian's and Wu Xiaodong's, I hope to have demonstrated that such reappropriation will not automatically work smoothly. Yet, all in all, at that stage essayization advanced the reception of his poetry, perhaps because it galvanized readers' cognitive activity, challenged their understanding of the relationship between life and writing, and in particular prompted them to replace the single formula *literature = politics* with a complex systems of proportions, disproportions, equations and inequations. Ronald Janssen duly notes:

> If we "read" Bei Dao's personality through the structure of his poems, it is a disjunct consciousness, a site for the collocation of disjointed images. The totality of those images will not account for reality, which is beyond accounting for except through more images, an infinite deferral of homecoming, as it were, and thus the perfect mode for a poetry of exile.[38]

Indeed, the dynamic conceptual structure of Bei Dao's poems – the one we arrived at by treating his poems essayistically – overlaps with the cultural model of exile. This is reaffirmed in Bei Dao's explicit poetics, for example when he reflects on exile as the "extreme clarification of every poet's situation".[39] But here comes a meta-paradox: precisely because they are mutually so perfectly translatable on the conceptual plane, they prove completely untranslatable at the epistemological level. The more facts from the lived exile one brings into textual reality, the less consistent and more paradoxical the latter becomes. And, conceivably, often vice versa: the more textual stimuli reach the exilic existence, the more disoriented this existence proves to be. Put differently, although bringing exile experience into poetry as a laboratory trick aimed at revealing ontological qualities of poetry can work well, it has limited value as a hermeneutic method that advances understanding of the sense of the poems in question.

The Fall

Bei Dao's personal visits to the realm of the essay and his uncertain returns to the bosom of poetry in the reader's shoes, such as in "If the Sky...", allow him to experience uncontrollable avalanches of "paradoxes and meanings" set in motion by an intensive re-measuring of distances and forces between poetry, life, author and reader. Essayization proves to be anything but suitable for recovering the lost equilibrium. Essay-writing highlights the problem, *and* it offers a solution – which Bei Dao implements, perhaps intuitively. What may have

[38] Janssen 2002: 270.
[39] "Secrecy and Truth: An Interview by Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg" (1995), cit. from Van Crevel 2008: 178.

been intended as a fleeting romance with the essay, turns into a lukewarm but enduring relationship. Tang Xiaodu is right in saying that essays remain one more factor aimed at maintaining balance inside Bei Dao's oeuvre.[40] Yet, as nearly always in Bei Dao's case, paradoxically, this holds only as long as they counteract the essayization of poetry.

Essays remove from poetry's shoulders the burden of conveying the "excess of reality", to use Baudrillard's expression.[41] They are meant to tie up dispersed, fragmented elements of the "diasporic background" and deactivate them by gluing them together with text, to make space for "cosmic things" that nourish poetry. I venture that in his meta-literary utterances, some of which were quoted early in this section, Bei Dao ostentatiously shifts the weight, and the weightlessness, of exilic discourse into essays. Around the time when he starts his intense essay production, potential exile markers, in van Crevel's terminology, also seem to decrease in numbers and in activity, and other values become more visible. Within the horizon that emerges from the 1996 collection *Landscape over Zero* (零度以上的风景), "beams of love wake up / illuminate the landscape over zero" (from the eponymous poem). The night sky is already clear enough to see that "behind night's back / there are borderless crops / and my upset beloved ("Perspective", 远景). And every single moment is a bright tunnel "leading to the gates of resurrection" ("The Rose of Time"). But these visions never last. In *Unlock* (开锁), from 2000, consisting of 49 poems Bei Dao wrote during the three years when he was most active as an essayist, the "background" appears almost empty for a significant part of the collection. Emptiness and transparency themselves become the subjects of poems (e.g. "Unlock" and "Transparency" [透明度]). In the air, now free of flies and dragons, one can see the soul of a rabbit chased in the I-speaker's childhood. "The Hunt" (打猎) is a pursuit of what was lost or killed in/by the past, through unlocked "corridors of continual evolution". In Eliot Weinberger's translation:[42]

> the back door leads to summer
> the eraser can never erase
> the dotted lines turning into sunlight
> the rabbit's soul flies low
> looking for its next incarnation

At the same time, and perhaps more importantly in the context of the "politics of poetics", essays do the author's audience a favor, less obvious and perhaps more generous, than helping them understand poetry. They discharge readers of the duty of understanding, defined as a process of matching things with words, which is apparently overwhelming to many. It is difficult to say – and perhaps irrelevant – whether this was intended, but in practice essayism can function as a mechanism of "natural selection" of Bei Dao's poetic audience. Asked by Wang Yin about a perceived poetic quality of his essays, Bei Dao claims that he attempts to extend the distance between the two genres as far as possible.[43] Readers who are satisfied by insight into the author's – social, private, intellectual or spiritual – life usually run back and forth (actually in this case back = forth) like paparazzi along essayistic Möbius strips at a safe

[40] Tang Xiaodu 2004: 20.
[41] Baudrillard 1996: 64.
[42] Bei Dao 2000: 81-82.
[43] Bei Dao & Wang Yin 2004.

distance from the poems themselves; while Bei Dao can keep the secrets of his poetry – to borrow another of his favorite definitions of writing – for those who are truly interested in the poetry itself and want to read it in a way in which it wants to be read (that is: in which he wants it to want to be read). Poetry accepts no compromise. "All meanings that bent their knees / broke fingernails / all the rising smoke / soaked into humans' oaths" – reminds us the I-speaker in "Reading" (阅读), another poem from *Unlock*.[44] There's either an ephemeral inertiality in which all elements find themselves simultaneously in their Archimedean points, or an endless entropy in which "a word changes / in dance / seeking for its roots". Once you slip from the narrow cliff secured for you in the poem, you start to fall into quantum space. Not vertically. Horizontally, or in more complex ways. For a basic (meta)physics behind this specific fall, see, for instance, Tadeusz Różewicz's poem "Falling" (Spadanie):[45]

> Once upon a time
> long long ago
> there was a solid bottom
> on which a human could roll
> down
> [...]
> La Chute The Fall
> is still possible
> only in literature
> in a fever of daydream
> [...]
> Falling we cannot
> adopt a form
> a hieratic pose
> [...]
> Falling we cultivate gardens
> falling we bring up kids
> falling we read the classics
> falling we delete adjectives
> contemporary man
> falls in all directions
> simultaneously
> up down into one or another side
> like a wind rose

For all its exilic-ness, I feel that Bei Dao's oeuvre is one in which a yearning for the old-fashioned bottom is still persistently present, and in his recent output this need becomes ever more pressing. If only his readers could come to believe in old Newtonian gravity again. If only they were afraid of it. If only, like the readers portrayed in "Mission"

[44] Bei Dao 2000: 5-6.
[45] Różewicz 2003.

(使命),[46] they could "climb one after another on the shore" and never ever move again, for fear of drowning or hitting rock bottom... But for today's readers, floating in the air or on water is a natural movement. The space of discourse is dense, and its resistance is big enough to keep one suspended on high, or on the surface of a poem, like on the Dead Sea. Unless the author dilutes the discourse, corrects the background, shoots down the blind dragons that carry readers away, and removes "the excess salt" of tears ("Reading") and other attention-grabbing experiences that surround the poems, people are unlikely to care about the famous dangerous equilibrium.

II. Coffee and Truth in Zhai Yongming's Poetry

In chapter 2 we met Zhai Yongming as a young engineer whose 1986 debut on the official literary scene was hailed as the beginning of a new order on the male-dominated Chinese poetry scene. I pondered on her essay "Night Consciousness", which served as the introduction to the poem series "Woman". This is where she first revealed her ambitions as the architect of her own night-wreathed "other shore":

> Standing in the blind heart of the dark night, my poems will obey my will to reveal the hidden potential that was given to me before I was born.[47]

It is not my aim to appraise Zhai, who has since become a successful and widely respected poet, for the declarations she made in the essay in question. She herself has done this more than once, and very self-critically so. More than a decade later, in the essay collection *Buildings on Paper* (1997) she proposed a new architecture. Its definition was preceded by an introductory "Confession of the Author" (作者自白), confirming her break with the previously proposed poetic:

> For many years, I've been persistently writing poetry, I've never considered trying another form of writing. What is more, I have been afraid to write articles [文章 – usually taken as a short text in prose, sometimes also translated as 'essay']. Over ten years ago I recklessly wrote my "Night Consciousness", and even now I'm still scared when someone mentions that thing. It seems that I've been writing poetry, because this appears the most effective way to cloak my weakness and save face.[48]

In light of the discussion in part one, it could be said that poetry and essay at the early stage of Zhai's literary creation constituted a double protective layer that isolated her inner world from external reality. She was hiding herself in poems, which, in turn, were placed in a niche secured in the literary discourse by the essay. In 1990s biographical circumstances made Zhai leave that niche and engage in the surrounding world, into which she soon led her poems as well. This is also when her interest switched from interior design to landscape design. In Zhai's vision of the landscape all generic forms have their specific roles and places, while the essay models its topology:

[46] Bei Dao 2000: 91.
[47] Zhai 1986: 143.
[48] Zhai 1997: 1.

> A poem is not a building, it might be a pavilion or a terrace, the wind coming through it from all sides, it attracts attention from everywhere, and allows one to come in and out at will.
>
> A novel is like a building. [...]
>
> And essay is a place where poetry and novel connect, it is that wilderness, silence, the perpetual void between them, it is an imaginary courtyard enclosed by time and history, imagination and reality.[49]

Unlike "Night Consciousness", "Confession" is not a *re-collecting* manifesto essay intended to prepare a safe discursive space for the poetry to follow. Zhai Yongming's "essayistic" search for a new form by which to connect the written with the lived started in poetry. The essay as such was a relatively late (re-)discovery for whose employment she had to reconvince herself after the previous "failure". Yet, finally it was in the essay that she arguably found the most precise contours of the shape she had been looking for, the one that she expected to reconcile literary imagination and lived reality. But she did not stop at this finding. Instead, she tried to observe and extract the principle of this shape, to extrapolate it later on a macro-scale, in the multidimensional spacetime of her oeuvre. I will focus on these two phases of essayization – before and after the reemergence of the essay-as-form in Zhai's work – in analyzing her poem *The Café Song* (咖啡馆之歌) and her engagement in audiovisual arts.

At the threshold

Unlike Bei Dao's reckless readers, the readers of Zhai Yongming's early poetry seemed to treat the dangerous equilibrium with grave seriousness. Zhai remembers the years of writing "Woman" and two other poetry series, "Jing'an Village" (静安庄, 1985) and "Life in the World" (人生在世, 1986) as the time spent with her chronically ill mother in a dirty hospital ward in the close vicinity of death:

> Since 1984, when I wrote "Woman", many words and images of "death" and "darkness" had been appearing in "Jing'an Village" and "Living in the World" and some short poems. This frequent and extensive presence of "death" in the work of a person as young as me at that time, must have given an impression that I "create melancholy to write a poem" [为赋诗强说愁]. But when I was writing "Woman", "Jing'an Village," and "Life in the World", as a matter of fact, over those three years, I had been staying in a filthy sickroom and often after ten o'clock, while I was sitting on the bench and writing, because the lights were out after ten, I suffered from the chilly wind. The gloomy street lamps nourished the darkness in my heart, and the omnipresent smell of death and medicine increased my awareness of death.[50]

Readers did not dare to enter her room. Is there a place for them at all in those poems? Is there any way to avoid constant bumping into unlit metaphors, earning bruises and devastating the poetic space? These and similar doubts echo in various comments on Zhai's early work. The audience almost unanimously, and perhaps with some relief, accepted the intertextual clue

[49] Ibidem: 1-2.
[50] Ibidem: 196-197.

nailed by Zhai at the entrance to the poetic world of "Woman" two years after the cycle was created, at the moment of its publication in the official journal *Poetry* (诗刊): "Your body / hurts me as the world hurts God", reads the motto, borrowed from Sylvia Plath's poem. Critics, most of whom were well-educated men who wrote in well-behaved ways, would rather embark on faraway intertextual travels in search of an abstract sense of Zhai's poems than visit the author at her unhomely place. American confessional poetry and "Western" women's literature were their main areas of explorations. In 1997 Tang Xiaodu, whose reaction to Zhai's debut in mid-1980s was otherwise most enthusiastic, admitted in a somewhat expiatory essay called "Who is Zhai Yongming" (谁是翟永明) that he still did not know the answer to the question in the title, since all his previous attempts to solve this riddle would come down to repeating debatable patterns:

> In fact, I made [women's writing] turn into a new tenor [of a metaphor]. In front of this new tenor, not only Zhai Yongming, but apparently all potential objects of discussion, could be transformed into a certain "copy" or "footnote". This mistake was caused by my attempts to define "women's poetry" without deeper and more efficient reflection on poetics, and, what is more, taking into consideration only one perspective, namely that of a male. This is unforgivable.[51]

For all their popularity and commonly acknowledged groundbreaking qualities, for several years Zhai's early works, including those from "Woman", remained outside the open space of literary discourse. They were keeping the inertiality of the zero moment – that threshold between writing and reading, with hesitant readers shifting from foot to foot on the doormat, and the author on the other side of the door, and neither party daring to disregard the power of that formidable inscription: "Your body / hurts me...". She gathering the courage to leave, they shyly eavesdropping and waiting for a good time to knock. Finally, she took the first step.

In 1990 Zhai Yongming left Chengdu for New York, with her husband He Duoling, a successful painter. She was enthusiastic about the perspective of a change of environment and broadening her horizons. However, American life soon proved a nightmare:

> At that time we were living in New York, surrounded by a group of artists. [...] after arriving in the US we heard only about money, money, money, all day long. Without money, you couldn't survive at all. Perhaps their anxiety was somehow passed on to me, as we all stayed together, and this tension had a big impact on me. I felt very bad under that pressure. Maybe because I'm a native of Chengdu, and used to a comfortable life, when I got to the States, I couldn't bear the pressure, and really wanted to go back.[52]

After over one year of the artistically unproductive foreign experience the couple returned to Chengdu, where she opened a café named after Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel "White Nights" (白夜). Gradually both her business and her poetry started flourishing, revealing a previously unknown face of Zhai Yongming. The author herself characterized the evolution of her writing as follows:

[51] Tang Xiaodu 1997: 26.
[52] Zhai & Yan 2012.

> Since I returned from the US, my style has changed diametrically. I have liberated myself from that psychological-autobiographical way of writing, and I was able to see from an objective angle my American life and experience. And the language of my poetry developed a certain narrative sense.
>
> My writing at every stage is closely related to the evolution of the environment. After opening "White Nights", I more actively entered society, and became involved in various relationships with reality, so I would no longer limit myself to exploring my own spiritual world, and my perspective broadened in a meaningful way. Hence my writing would more frequently concern external reality, and my observations, as well as my reflections on society, could transcend beyond the former, exclusively autobiographical, perspective. That was a big metamorphosis.[53]

In fact, as Zhai notes in another essay "How Far Is the Poet from Reality" (诗人离现实有多远), it is not the case that her early poetry was indifferent to external circumstances.[54] But there was no direct connection between these two. To become a part of poetry, the world had to be cautiously filtered through the poet's mind and emotions. During the day (taken here as a mental state rather than a particular clock time) she would accumulate in herself the "material" that at night was to be synthesized into poetry in the process resembling ancient practices of internal alchemy. When in the foreign environment the days in Zhai's world became unlivable, the poetic "black nights" turned dreamless and so the poetry, too, petered out.

> In the 1980s I thought reality wasn't the most important factor in my writing, I was more concerned about expressing what is my heart. [...] But today, when I look back at those works, I realize that, in fact, they contain a strong sense of reality, especially with regard to womanhood as a specific sphere of reality. I have discovered that in my observations and descriptions of womanhood as such, my judgment on her position and the roles the woman plays in society was deeply inscribed. Since the 1990s, I have developed a stronger sense of real life scenes. In "The Café Song", "Lili and Qiong" [莉莉和琼], "On the Theme of Live Scenes in a Little Bar" [小酒馆的现场主题] I consciously explored spatial relationships between woman and reality..[55]

Considered from this perspective, Zhai's emigrant experience, which was not just an experience of absence or dislocation, but a flash of total poetic nonbeing when the forces that attracted her to poetry were negated, must have played an important role in the process of her development as an artist. It showed her the limitations of poet's divine mediatorship between mystical night and earthly day as a basic rule guaranteeing coherence in poetic worlds, and prompted her to explore what she identifies as "the secret of poetry", that is ambiguous, dynamic linkages between "reality in reality" and "reality in poetry".[56] This was the point that opened the way to essayization, urging both the author and her readers to re-measure the distances between the written and the written-about.

[53] Ibidem.
[54] Zhai 2015: 330.
[55] Ibidem: 330.
[56] Zhai 2015: 324.

Switching generic codes

At the "white nights" stage of Zhai Yongming's poetry writing, the day-night dichotomy gave way to much less obvious interplay between world and text. Poetic night no longer consists exclusively of the sublime that exceeds the capacity of the daytime and thus finds an outlet in "complementary" nocturnal landscapes. It invites everyone and absorbs virtually everything, being the open terrace (from "Confession of the Author") on the roof of the day, accessible to anyone who wants to see the day from a poetic perspective. Perhaps this is the reason why it appears white to our eyes: its white light is a synthesis of lights of all colors and frequencies.

One of the first open poetic nights in Zhai's universe was captured in the 1992 poem "The Café Song",[57] seen by the author and many critics as a new beginning in her literary career.[58] The "white night" here starts in the late afternoon, when streetlights on New York's Fifth Avenue are already on, behind the "tiny iron door" of a café where "we discuss tedious love". It finishes at a rainy dawn, with an image of "the car driving across Manhattan". For around twelve hours nothing extraordinary, supernatural, or even mildly mysterious happens: nothing happens that could not happen in daylight. Nightly matters appear only in intermittent utterances of the café's visitors, dissolve in coffee and alcohol, and in zeugmatic narration, as in the fourth stanza of "Afternoon":

Coffee and truth accumulate in his throat
        why not cough them up
        the tongue changes
words roll in and out of the room

        like an order to attack
men's names the more they roll the more they grow
like terrifying formulas in a classroom
        filling me with horror

Or in the fourth and fifth stanza of "Evening":

        I am recalling
a Chinese restaurant on the Arctic Circle
someone interrupts: "My wife is studying
        International Finance"

Haunting a multicolored body
        serious topics
        like beer gone bad
acquire a hue of disillusioned sorrow

Is there any way to maintain control over such a café, so that the guests who come and go would not destroy not just this particular place but the whole surrounding "courtyard", while at the same time they would not feel intimidated by the author-owner? Any law that they would obey voluntarily? The law of genre, one could reply, judging by the poem's title. But

[57] Zhai 2015: 88-94.
[58] Zhai 2015: 307-308, Zhai & Yan 2012; cf. Luo 2006, Tang Xiaodu 1997: 33-34, Tao 1999: 415.

does it really work here? Can anybody be immersed into this song and be smoothly led by it along some pre-composed melodic path?

The visual composition of "The Café Song" is indeed song-like: the poem consists of quite regular stanzas, each comprised of four relatively short lines. But that is all. There are no rhymes, no clear rhythmical patterns, no euphonious melody. In fact, the song's persistent polyphony borders on cacophony. One could hardly imagine circumstances in which a song with such lyrics could be sung, or a person who would want to perform it. Perhaps by its down-to-earthness and aesthetic crudity, it wants to discourage singing. It would be justified to read Zhai's work a poem about the impossibility of poetry in exile, or the impossibility of communication in general in a foreign environment, akin to interpretations of Bei Dao's "Local Accent". Some critics – Tang Xiaodu for one – actually do interpret "The Café Song" in this spirit.[59] However, in my view, in this case the relationships between the song form, historical context and conceptual content, are much more complicated than narrative congruence – or, conversely, lyrical *in*-congruence – of worldly matters and poetic language.

To all appearances, "song" does not function here as a formal generic frame that dictates rules governing the text-author-reader system. Instead, it is but one of numerous constituents of this constellation, and belongs to the reality "on stage". It is not a song *of* the café that lays claim to enclosing the reality, but a song *in* the café. It works like a provoking imitation of the ancient Greek chorus, offering additional explanations and misleadingly ideal "objectively true" interpretations construed by "ideal spectators", as August Wilhelm Schlegel used to define the role of the said chorus.[60] The first interpretational hint that comes from the radio is melancholy ("Yesterday now I / long for yesterday"). Later on – when "dusk trembles candlelight teases" – this picture is complemented with nostalgia. The music sounds loudly again: "Foreigner... / Foreigner...", reminding migrants of their non-belonging.

The keywords provided by the song – the melancholy "yesterday", and the nostalgiogenic "foreigner" – have sometimes been taken as the core of the poem's sense. But there is a good reason to question their central role. These explicit communicates, though serious as such, materialize in contingent circumstances, when the customers stop their futile discussions briefly to take a breath. Once again, as in Wang Xiaoni's poem in chapter 3, we face a situation where the poetic world is turned inside out on the strength of the rule of "inward plasticity". This time, the overarching external generic law is reduced to an internal buzz that disables rather than facilitates communication. In such circumstances, the café's guests choke on their coffee and truth, unable to produce a coherent utterance. And so do we, as readers. Yet, at the end of the night, the poem leaves hope for us that perhaps after leaving our tables and taking a panoramic view on Zhai's work, we will be able to make sense of all those scattered pieces of meaning.

All in all, the song's lyrics outlive the guests' conversations. When at 3 a.m. the café is about to close, "he [probably a waiter or the owner] stands up / to brutally stop everything / the radio's still / playing its deafening music". Long after the guests have left, these fragmented lines circle over the poem. The further from the core of the "sense", the more active they are intertextually, i.e. the more likely to be connected with other unexpectedly

[59] Tang Xiaodu 1997: 33.
[60] Schlegel 1846: 70.

encountered particles. As the metaphysical force that binds the scattered sounds with a hypothetical central message weakens, more and more meanings – and paradoxes – happen to the poem. Unleashed, these phrases enable the work to establish connections with other elements of the Intertext.

When Zhai wrote "The Café Song", inside this newly designed landscape of her oeuvre there were not many textual particles to be matched with these particles. For "pairs" one had to look in faraway places, perhaps as far as the source, that is in "Yesterday", the Beatles' song quoted in the poem. Soon, however, potential reactants start to appear at the reader's fingertips. We may, for example, establish intertextual linkages between "The Café Song" and other songs in the author's output. Zhai's favourite[61] "Song of Lady Time" (时间美人之歌), her symbolic, myths-based "song of songs" – "The Song of Three Beauties" (三美人之歌), "The Song of Weaving and Acting" (编织和行为之歌) dense with arachnoid threads, and the cycle of "Fourteen Plainsongs" (十四首素歌) dedicated to her mother can all be occasionally played in the background to "The Café Song", the first song in the poet's oeuvre after her return to China and to poetry-writing, albeit not necessarily with predictable effects. Or we can identify other common refrains, for example the lines: "I lower my head and drink my coffee" and "The car drives across Manhattan" that return in the poem "New York 2006" (纽约 2006),[62] trying to connect them into a harmonious and meaningful composition.

Borrowing dimensions

In Zhai Yongming's writing, as we can tentatively conclude after familiarizing ourselves with the rules of her essayistic "landscape design" and their practical employment in "The Café Song", intra-oeuvre intertextuality is important. There are two kinds of relationships that Zhai tries to explore and optimize while designing her essayistic landscapes on paper: that between reality in reality and reality in poetry, and that between the part and the whole.[63] Truth is the state of maximal transparency of this system. Only if one arrives at a configuration in which paper buildings do not block the horizon of the human mind might one approximate the answer to the most intriguing question formulated in the afterword to *Buildings on Paper*:

> Isn't it the case that our writing, from beginning to end, not eclipsed by the words in our hands, directly reaches the gates of Eternity? Perhaps this question will accompany me forever.[64]

Zhai sees that all those equations and proportions cannot be solved on paper, however meticulously she measures distances and defines coordinates. After a good 250 pages of essays, "there is still so much, so much to understand and recognize" with regard to "my own past and current writing".[65] The more she writes, the more unknowns appear. But she does not give up. What is undoable in language may perhaps be done in a broadened space of creation.

[61] Zhai & Lingenfelter 2008.
[62] Zhai 2008: 84-90.
[63] Zhai & Lingenfelter 2008.
[64] Zhai 1997: 254.
[65] Ibidem: 255.

Here, let me return to a scientific curiosity signaled in the interlude. In theoretical physics, adding one or two hypothetical dimensions to the system often helps for solving complex equations. Hence, for instance, many scientist believe that the Universe has ten dimensions – some of them ungraspable to us – because in ten dimensions all mysteries as described by endless systems of equations will easily "solve themselves", and all contradictions disappear. Literature has one advantage over science: one can really add a new dimension and check if this works, instead of wallowing in abstract theorizations. Zhai's creative activity is a case in point. How is this possible? And from where does the poet borrow her extra dimensions?

In the second half of 1990s, that is also the moment of her reconciliation with the essay, we can observe Zhai's growing interest in visual and installation art. That *Buildings on Paper* contains abundant reflection on art is perhaps the first evidence. Since then she has written many art-related essays, organized many paintings exhibitions in her bar, and authored some ekphrastic poems. These include the 2013 long poem "Roaming Fuchun Mountain in the Footsteps of Huang Gongwang" (随黄公望游富春山),[66] inspired by an ancient painting and subsequently adapted into a theater play by Chen Si'an, in an interesting example of intersemiotic and intermedial translation. Yet, more importantly in the context of this chapter, occasionally Zhai herself, too, embarks on creative experiments with multimedial arts. In a conversation with Andrea Lingenfelter, she speaks about installations that incorporate essential passages of her poetry, about the pleasure she draws from observing physical interactions between texts and readers, and exciting moments when she learns something completely new about her own works. Here are a few excerpts from Lingenfelter's English translation of this interview, discussing a piece inspired by "The Song of Lady Time" featured in the exhibition "Women, Femininity, Female Themes" (女人、女性、女性主体) in 2001:

> [ZY:] For my piece, I took 92 lines of poetry and 92 x-ray images, and created a sort of obstacle course by hanging them in the air with wire and clamps. When viewers moved through this space it produced a kind of theater, made up of the audience, the poem and "personal and historical dreamscapes" (to quote my poem, "Life in the World" 人生在世). I realized this space I'd organized with x-ray transparencies was just like my poems, and that all of my work is "women's art" 女性艺术. There's only one difference between my installations and my works in print: the expectations of the viewer's gaze, expectations that the installation itself alters. The movement of light and shadow, the proximity of viewer and object, and the relationship between the parts and the whole are all transformed from temporal relationships to spatial ones. [...]
>
> [AL:] Did you see anything interesting come out of viewers' interactions with the piece?
>
> [ZY:] Just as I was emerging from the maze that I'd created, I caught sight of an old woman with silver hair walking among the x-rays. Her glossy hair contrasted dramatically with the matte metal plating on the wires and clamps. As she moved through that roomful of hanging film, lines of poetry and light, I kept catching glimpses of her. She seemed to emerge from the poem itself like a white-haired witness to Xuan Zong 玄宗 (685-762, Tang emperor who

[66] The poem was published as a book in 2015 (Zhai 2015a).

reigned from 712 to 756), existing simultaneously inside and outside of Time. The era I describe in the poem is very remote from us today. But because the shared dreamscape of the poem and the artwork transcends time, the two can intersect. The relationship is at once analogous and mutually enhancing. That's what I try to express in my work.[67]

Zhai Yongming presenting her work on the exhibition "Women, Femininity, Feminine Themes". *Courtesy of Zhai Yongming*

In this project Zhai visualizes an abstract textual constellation as a theater "made up of the audience, the poem and personal and historical dreamscapes". This theatre somewhat resembles our familiar Laboratory Theater from chapter 3: with moving grounds and blurred boundaries between stage and audience. She tries to transform it, or – more precisely – allows it to transform itself from the bottom up, to arrive at the form characterized by maximal transparency symbolically tested with X-ray machines.

One year later, together with Chengdu-based architect Liu Jiakun and He Duoling, Zhai organized an installation exhibition in White Nights. "(A)Vocation" (专业余; I cite the English title in Lingenfelter's translation) was aimed at showing works of people who came from outside the art world: "the works on display were somewhere in between vocation, or expertise, and avocation, or amateur".[68] Zhai contributed a piece "Just as You See It" (正如你所看到的), which incorporated the final stanza of "The Submarine's Lament" (潜水艇的悲哀) – a poem she interprets as a meta-literary reflection on the difficulty of writing contemporary poetry. "I made this piece with the idea of creating a physical analogue of the writing process, which is as sealed off and submerged as a submarine", she recalls.[69] In 2004, using the same title, she published another collection of essays in which she meticulously measured the distances between poetry and reality ("How Far a Poet Is from Reality"), the "sizes" of books ("A Distance of One Book: A Few Notes on Reading" , 一本书的距离——几篇读书笔记), the spaciotemporal breadth of songs ("Three-Days Wide Singing", 三天宽的歌喉) etc., with a similar aim: to find an optimal model of writing.

Zhai's understanding of the respective dimensionalities of literature and art is based on the assumption that the difference between literary and visual arts comes down to the difference between the temporal and the spatial. This is, of course, a simplification. It does not go beyond the 18th-century discoveries of Gotthold Lessing from his famous *Laokoon: An*

[67] Zhai & Lingenfelter 2008.
[68] Ibidem.
[69] Ibidem.

Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry.[70] No wonder then that the whole enterprise, instead of becoming a smooth intermedial translation, led to spaciotemporal turbulence that was unexpected for the author herself, although, on the other hand, apparently cherished by her as a moment of illumination. However we assess their final effect, Zhai's artistic engagement definitely deserves attention for the consistency with which the author tries to develop her own project, reaching for new technical solutions and concepts without detracting from the aims she has set for herself or being distracted by fleeting fashions. So here is an intricate question, awaiting an impossible answer: if we could perfectly synchronize reality-in-reality and reality-in-poetry, would we see eternal reality behind the constantly changing world we experience at every moment?

*

Essay-writing is one stage in Zhai Yongming's search for ultimate literary architecture. It was preceded by many explorations carried out by means of poetry itself, as we have seen in "The Café Song", and followed by attempts at applying some of the findings from her experiments with the essay-as-form in a broader artistic practice. Of course, it is unlikely that poetry will ever perfectly adapt or adjust to any experience, and become a transparent topological structure, like, for instance, the essay, no matter how many dimensions are added. But the process of seeking for such re-connection may lead to aesthetic and intellectual discoveries, and remain a source of animating forces that set poetic constellations in perpetual motion.

On the other hand, it is understandable that some poets, at whatever points in their lives, would prefer to disable essayization. One reason is mistrust of the reader who may not appreciate the value of unavoidable failure and enjoy the quantum fall together with the author. There are few things more annoying than a situation in which an author is falling honestly, "like a wind rose", while a "co-falling" reader is doing their best to take Różewicz's hieratic poses in the air and clearing their throat to announce judgment or, even worse, their diagnosis of the author's condition. It is – without a shred of irony – for loyal co-falling that studies like Li Dian's monograph on Bei Dao should be commended. Another thing is that some readers might not even know that they are falling. One important point is the extent of diversification and centralization of the discursively active lived experience. For Zhai Yongming there are many extratextual occurrences that count in the discourse concerning her literary creation: a difficult childhood, the Cultural Revolution, controversial womanhood and emigration. In the case of Bei Dao, exile crowds out everything else. This makes readers believe that they are standing on hard historical ground. This can make them less alert to smaller background elements – not to mention the background radiation of beauty to which they are exposed while interacting with the poem. In a bizarre logic, it may even lead them to accuse the poet of pulling the wool over their eyes rather than being faithful to historical realities – as if the latter were a self-evident, or even a reasonable, thing to ask of poetry.

[70] Lessing 1984

CHAPTER 5

Aberrant Narratives?
Essayistic Fashion in Fiction

In 1990 Wang Anyi (b. 1954) wrote an exquisite novella called *The Story of Our Uncle* (叔叔的故事).[1] Being itself a fastidious combination of novelistic and essayistic techniques, the work thematizes and problematizes a transformative moment in Chinese literature in the twilight of the 20th century, through the evolution of the narrative.

Uncle is a writer. He belongs to the first generation of intellectuals who grew up after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. In the late 1950s, at the outbreak of the Anti-Rightist Movement, he was just about to start his independent adult life and literary career. Instead, deemed a "rightist", persecuted and banished to a remote village on the Qinghai Plateau, Uncle suffers poverty and disgrace through the mid-1970s. This is the mass-market edition of his life which we read at the beginning of the novella. But the story is immediately confronted by the I-narrator with another partially witnessed by the narrator, and partially heard from other people. In reality, Uncle's "heroic deed" amounted to no more than an innocuous parable published in a school magazine at a time when anything that was not socialist realism was automatically labeled as reactionary. And his "exile" boils down to being sent home quietly, to a little town, where he was assigned to work at school, first as a blue-collar worker and later as a teacher. This is the place where Uncle's story and the narrator's own story intersect for the first time. The narrator – who is male, as we can conclude from several paragraphs devoted to his rather unsophisticated attitude to women and a few stories about how Uncle "hit on *our* girls" (43) – represents the generation of so-called "educated youth" (知识青年) whose formative experience is that of being "sent down to the countryside" in their teens during the Cultural Revolution. He was subjected to compulsory reeducation-through-rustication in a nearby village. Although he did not even know about Uncle's existence at that time, and discovered the said coincidence only after Uncle became known as an author, he takes this fact as something that legitimizes his right not only to retell Uncle's life, but also to use it to "protect [his] own story".

After the Revolution, Uncle's fate turns again. His "traumatic ordeal" proves to be perfect material for bestselling autobiographical books. He becomes a literary superstar. In these new circumstances, Uncle undergoes what is presented by Wang Ban as a

[1] Citations in the following paragraphs come from the 2006 edition of *The Story of Our Uncle* (Wang Anyi 2006). Pages indicated in parentheses.

metamorphosis from a novelist-epicist who sticks to grand narratives to an essayist who withdraws from History.[2]

As a celebrity, Uncle travels the world, enjoying his status of a public figure and engaging in controversial love affairs. Increasingly, notes Wang Ban, "sightseeing and superficial impression of exotic foreign countries become the only materials he can summon: he becomes a tourist and a writer of travelogue".[3] Both his existence and his life adopt what Wang Ban calls an "essayistic mode". This is consistently questioned from an ethical point of view by the storyteller and it proves, in the words of Tang Xiaobing, to be an "unspeakable failure", existential and artistic alike.[4] Wang Ban sums up:

> [...] Emptied of historical substance and filled up with fragmentary and rambling impressions [...] [h]is writing begins to take on essayistic quality, and borders on sheer images of simulacra, getting closer and closer to those of the younger generation. [...] Tragic suffering is now only a literary category, and the "awareness of this is the hallmark of Uncle's becoming a pure writer" (225). Parallel with this essayistic quality is Uncle's changed lifestyle. He is more taken with things he would have considered vulgar, low or quotidian; he becomes more listless and yuppieish. [...] In short, he metamorphoses from an image of the epic novelist and organic intellectual to a middle-class professional writer, whose favored form is the essay and whose lifestyle takes on the "essayistic" quality of a ramble for self-pleasure.[5]

In Wang Ban's interpretation, Uncle's story is an example of the "emigratology of the essay". Unlike in most cases analysed so far, its evaluation is unambiguously negative. On the level of the plot, the translation of an existential model into a literary one leads to jointly condemning "drifting" types of life and writing. "Drift" evinces here the same dynamic structure as the cultural model of exile abstracted from Bei Dao's poetry in chapter 4, albeit deprived of exile's heroic undertones.

But fiction has another layer between fictional universes and life: narration. It may serve as a buffer zone, facilitating control over the work's essayizability. In Wang Anyi's novella, the essayization seen in Uncle's writing and life becomes wrapped into the storyteller's narration. It is absorbed into the storyteller's utterance as a fact, with which he deals as if it were part of a literary-historical process that will be overcome, perhaps by the next – that is, his own – generation. Importantly, this overcoming is achieved by means that originate in the very reality that is overcome. After all, *The Story of Our Uncle*, with its myth-dismantling, self-subversive narration is one of the most successful cases of essayization in Chinese contemporary literature. By encouraging critical and creative reading, the meta-essayization handled expertly by the skilled narrator limits the "bad essayization" of Uncle's artistic and existential activity, minimizing its impact on the reception of the work. It testifies to the narrator's attempts to resituate Uncle within History, and to build the narrator's own identity against this History. He claims: "If I don't finish this story, I won't be able to tell any other one" (1).

[2] Wang Ban 2000a:182-187.
[3] Ibidem: 186.
[4] Tang Xiaobing 2000: 326.
[5] Wang Ban 2000a: 186.

This strategy is in line with a transformation of historical paradigms. After the failure of historiosophies based on linear order which served humans for many centuries and the fiasco of the dialectic model, whose consequences the generation of Wang Anyi and the narrator of her novella experienced especially painfully, the complex structures of history once again have to be radically reexamined. This time what has been brought into particular focus is the individual's participation in the history-shaping process at its most basic subcellular level, and a need for critical awareness of what has gone before. In the words of Gianni Vattimo, in this emerging dynamic model, at every stage and in every sphere, history must be

> *verwunden*: recollected, distorted, accepted as a destiny. [...] [W]hen critical overcoming is "distorted" into the notion of *Verwindung*, history itself can no longer appear in its linear light. History reveals its "ironic" essence: interpretation and distortion, or dis-location, characterize not only the relation of thought to the messages of the past but also the relation of one "epoch" to the others.[6]

Among other things, essayization, if treated with formal awarness, may serve as a way to recode literature into another paradigm, to make it oppose one and develop in sync with another specific mode of historical existence. In the interlude, I argued that the emergence of the modern essay and the essayization in fiction in the early 20th century in Lu Xun, Wang Zengqi, Shen Congwen and other authors is evidence of literature's sensitivity to its historical environment, at a basic "physiological" level, without thematizing or making explicit the need for a connection between literature and history. Essayization's critical remake toward the end of the century, which ridiculed those who believed they had acquired "historical consciousness", may be another manifestation of this sensitivity.

Obviously, when writers take the step of "distorted overcoming" of an inherited essayistic mode, they do so with different individual visions of a new literature into which a previous literature is expected to evolve. To outline this process and the span of emerging new concepts, I propose a contrapuntal reading of the oeuvres of two authors who made brief appearances in chapter 2: Ha Jin and Han Shaogong.

I. Expanding or Shrinking? Fictional Universes in Ha Jin and Han Shaogong

Ha Jin vs. Han Shaogong. Citizen of the world vs. "root-seeker". Architect of the other shore vs. folklorist-archaeologist. Linguistic emigrant vs. native ethnolinguist. These labels are simplifications, but they highlight salient differences between the literary strategies employed by Ha Jin and Han. Thrown into an epoch touched by an essayistic syndrome à la Wang Anyi, and themselves arguably affected by this syndrome, each in his own way wrestles to subdue the wayward processes of essayization to his own conception of literature.

Cultural Revolution, "culture fever", root-seeking and root-taking

Similarly to Wang Anyi, Han Shaogong's and Ha Jin's early youth coincides with the decade of the Cultural Revolution. Han, born in 1953 in Changsha, was "sent down" for six years to Miluo village in Hunan province at the age of 15. Ha Jin, born in 1956 in the

[6] Vattimo 1987: 16-17.

northern province of Liaoning, was spared the fateful experiment of rustication but did not enjoy a carefree adolescence either. As a teenager, in 1970, he was in the People's Liberation Army for five years, following in the footsteps of his father, a military officer. Han's and Ha Jin's respective experience became their source of themes and artistic images for decades to come. Nevertheless, it was not until the late 1980s that they decided to directly process this past into literature.

Crudely put, between the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the beginning of "high culture fever" (文化热) in the mid-1980s following Deng Xiaoping's policy of "reform and opening-up" introduced in 1978, Han Shaogong and Ha Jin were looking for the right language. In that period Han published several well-received novellas and short stories. Yet, in light of his later works, these resemble exercises rather than the independent literary voice that is audible in the 1985 "Homecoming" (归去来), *Pa Pa Pa* (爸爸爸) and *Woman Woman Woman* (女女女) and reaches its full range in *The Dictionary of Maqiao* (马桥词典, 1996). According to Mark Leenhouts:

> If Han's early fictional work still betrays influence of the political novel in vogue in the late 1970s, his stories and novellas written around 1985 [...] are so permeated with Taoist relativity that they transcend any straightforward social commitment.[7]

While Han was searching for his voice, Ha Jin was struggling to master English, which would later become his first language as a writer. In 1984 he graduated from Shandong University's English faculty and enrolled at Brandeis University. There he inched toward a literary career, initially as a poet and later as a fiction writer. When in 1985 Han wrote his famous manifesto "The Roots of Literature" (文学的根) that marked the root-seeking movement in Chinese culture, Ha Jin was gradually taking root in the soil of American culture and the English language; he has said that at the time, he did not expect to stay in the U.S. beyond his doctoral studies.

There is a phase in Ha Jin's work that can be seen as a form of Uncle-like exhibitionism and catering to a Western need for Aristotelian "pity and fear". I am thinking especially about his first collection of poetry, *Between Silences* (1990), which is laced with bombastic rhetoric and martyrological overtones. In the introduction to this volume he refers to his purported historical mission in a very outspoken fashion:

> [...] I went to the army, which was a privilege that I could have only because my father was an officer then – although I was also ready to die like other soldiers at the border area between Russia and China. Unlike millions of people of my age who don't have the opportunity to study in formal schools and have to struggle with books at night schools or in adult-education programs, I managed to have some education and am studying abroad.
>
> As a fortunate one I speak for those unfortunate people who suffered, endured or perished at the bottom of life, and who created the history and at the same time were fooled or ruined by it. If what has been said in this book is embarrassing, then truth itself is cold and brutal. If

[7] Leenhouts 2011.

> not every one of these people, who were never perfect, is worthy of our love, at least their fate deserves our attention and our memory. They should talk and should be talked about.[8]

The titles of the poems in Ha Jin's collection confirm the impression one gets from the "mission statement". Between rather ocassional silences we listen to "The Dead Soldier's Talk", to the footsteps of brave men "Marching towards Martyrdom", we hear how "The Hero's Mother Blames Her Daughter", how "A Thirteen-Year-Old Accuses His Teacher", and many other echoes of History. However, as we have seen in *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin eventually realized the naivety of his thinking. With the development of his literary consciousness, he worked hard to undo various spokesman attitudes, drawing on self-mockery among other things.

To find a less obtrusive formula to rejoin life and writing and, perhaps, to dam his rhetorical effusion, in the late 1990s Ha Jin devoted himself to fiction, which is conceivably more suited than poetry to creating a distance between the author and the textual reality, if only due to the presence of the intermediary institution of a narrator. At the same time, his subsequent works remain infused with military and revolutionary imagery, and set in historical spacetime. Two collections of short stories, *Ocean of Words* (1996) and *Under the Red Flag* (1997), tell of life in the military during the Cultural Revolution, which also constitutes the background for the novel *Waiting* (2000). His interest in war-related subjects manifests itself in *War Trash* (2004), while revolutionary and political themes return in *The Crazed* (2002). Specifically this 2002 book, to which we turn in the next section, shows how complicated the relationships between the (un)lived and the written become in Ha Jin's fiction. The apparent convergence of some points from the author's text and his life may suggest that the two can be joined easily. But the context of Ha Jin's emigrant experience complicates the picture, making the places of writing (from the perspective of the reader) and the places of reading (from the perspective of the writer) unlocalizable.

Compared to those set in China, Ha Jin's U.S.-based stories from the late 2000s, *A Free Life* (2007) and *A Good Fall* (2009), lend themselves more easily to generic classifications – which, as noted earlier, define default distances and relationships between the participants of a textual constellation. The 2014 novel *A Map of Betrayal* near-perfectly fits the model of a spy novel. *The Boat Rocker*, from 2016, keeps up the momentum and takes on the motive of investigation, combining detective fiction, set in a journalism environment, with certain features of the satirical novel. All these genres – the spy novel, detective fiction and the satirical novel – assume immediate intellectual cooperation on the part of the audience, based on the reader's familiarity with the context and their knowledge and acceptance of the rules of the genre. While Ha Jin's earlier works invite essayizing readings, *A Map of Betrayal* and *The Boat Rocker* resist them. The rest of the present chapter is devoted to a discussion of this decreasing essayizability in Ha Jin, in parallel to a discussion of *in*-creasing essayizability in Han Shaogong.

Han Shaogong came to realize the pitfalls of what he calls "scar shows" and "nose-wiping contests" earlier than Ha Jin, and has tried hard to avoid repeating what he sees as the mistakes of older generations. He promoted positive values and constructive solutions

[8] Ha Jin 1990: 2.

instead of bemoaning the lost years of the Cultural Revolution. Root-seeking as an alternative to "scar literature" (伤痕文学), a movement that emerged in Chinese fiction in the late 1970s, was one of such propositions. When, over time, certain root-seekers also started to lean in the direction chosen by the older generation, Han expressed disillusionment with the throngs of nieces and nephews of Wang Anyi's Uncle. He left no doubt about his own stance on the condition of the fiction of "educated youth". This fiction, he claimed, lacked a nuanced, self-reflexive approach and the necessary distance, which he himself would try to achieve through techniques learnt from essayistic novels in Chinese (he refers to the genre of *biji(ti) xiaoshuo* 笔记（体）小说, literally 'novel in notes') and Western traditions. In a 2013 interview with the *Southern Epoch* (南方时代) magazine, he argues:

> There is already a great number of works that revolve around the "educated youth" experience, they are a big treasure of contemporary literature. But some of them betray too much self-love or self-pity. They have turned into scar-showing and nose-wiping kvetch contests. And led to distortions of memory. [...] Everybody blames someone else, who becomes a shadow without a body. Therefore, I appreciate efforts to remember historical suffering, but while we question the society [around us], we should also hang a question mark on ourselves.[9]

On the other hand, he is equally far from the opposite pole of the experience of modernity, epitomized by Uncle. If, as Wang Ban holds, the "essayistic mode" of life equals drifting without destination and meaning, then it is self-evident that Han employs essayization exactly to counteract such experience.

Han Shaogong is a master at producing illusions of distance. His experiments with conventions create an impression of a free readerly experience, satisfying modern audiences' expectations. However, in all, for reasons that will be discussed below, his reader is unlikely to stray too far from where the author wants them. The labyrinthine, narratively confusing *Dictionary of Maqiao* promises a language-driven play, but after our reading of Bei Dao's "Local Accent" among other texts, we know a thing or two about the supposed randomness of such games, and we should look into their rules. *Intimations* (暗示, 2002),[10] which may be read as a sequel to the *Dictionary*, further complicates the mutual positioning of author, text and reader. While the *Dictionary* is written against, or minimally makes unconventional use of, the generic conventions of the autobiographical novel and the dictionary, these may still be taken as certain points of reference. But *Intimations*, suggests Han, was created a-generically. He claims:

> When *Intimations* was released in mainland China, it was labeled by the publisher as a "novel". In Taiwan the book was marketed as a novel-in-notes / essayistic novel. In neither case did I protest. Someone said [the book's] form does not come under the novel at all, and this time, too, I didn't mind at all.[11]

[9] Han & Zhao 2013.

[10] The first edition of *Intimations* was published in 2002 by People's Literature Publishing House (人民文学出版)社. In this chapter I will cite from the 2013 edition published by Anhui Literature & Art Publishing House (安徽文艺出版社) (Han Shaogong 2013a).

[11] Han & Wang 2004.

Yet, as the conversation unfolds, Han increasingly accedes to the classification of *Intimations* that was proposed by the Taiwanese publisher. To justify his reasoning and anchor it in tradition, he presents his private interpretation of the early history of Chinese prose. According to it the Chinese novel originates in the *sanwen*-essay while the ancient "novel in notes" is the earliest case in point.[12] Still, essayistic-ness does not imply Han's consent to unleashed essayization getting out of (the author's) hand. In his view of things, the author carefully pre-measures and tries to pre-set "safe distances" within his textual constellations. Han has to his credit an interesting invention meant to provide theoretical support for the project of *Intimations*: an auxiliary metrical system with fixed narrative units (叙事单元) for enabling a topology of the literary universes of his essayistic fiction. We will return to this point toward the end of this chapter, taking into account the tricky features of "measuring" in quantum space.

Prior to examining individual texts, I propose to have a panoramic look at the landscapes of Han Shaogong's and Ha Jin's works. We will localize them on a map of literary discourse and consider what measures the authors take to establish the boundaries of their territories, symbolically enclosing them with a fence construed – as Zhai Yongming put it – from "time and history, imagination and reality".[13] If one's intra-textual architecture is to be practical and lasting, it cannot be built without engaging with the surrounding discourse, in multiple ways. In the next section I will reconstruct configurations of the forces within and around Han's and Ha Jin's oeuvres, by observing free particles of the intertext as these are thrown into their respective magnetic fields.

Memory and imagination as intertextual matrices

In part one we saw different ways adopted by authors to harness the intertextual potential of their works. I discussed, for example, Wang Jiaxin's attempts at broadening the scope of intertextuality and enhancing his poems to automatically inscribe themselves into trans-cultural space, and Yu Jian's poetry's aim of swallowing the intertext. Wang and Yu avail themselves mostly of textual measures to equip their works with mechanisms that may intensify certain types of intertextuality and counteract others. Han Shaogong and Ha Jin, by contrast, appeal directly to the reader's cognitive and hermeneutic abilities. Han focuses on memory, while Ha Jin underscores the role of the imagination. This is justifiable if one considers that for novels, the audience is usually broader than for poetry, and – again, usually! – in search of the pleasure of reading rather than abundant meta-textual reflection. This pleasure can continue for the full duration of reading the novel, and novel readers are arguably more susceptible to subliminal messages than poetry readers, because the latter are more likely to pay maximum attention to textual detail. Also, poetry arguably has many more underdetermined particles than fiction. In long, more or less chronologically structured novels virtually all of them are disambiguated by their context.

[12] Ibidem.
[13] Zhai 1997: 1-2.

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The analogy of memory and intertextuality has been explored by many contemporary scholars, and many contemporary writers have drawn on it. As Renate Lachmann writes, "the memory of a text is its intertextuality", and literature "sketches out a memory space into which earlier texts are gradually absorbed and transformed".[14] To this absolute literary space, no reader has full access, defined as they are by their individuality.

Regardless of its scope, the reader's involvement in textual memory is usually twofold. What, after Laurent Jenny, could be called explicit intertextuality works largely in sync with explicit memory, while implicit intertextuality encodes and decodes itself in implicit memory. By explicit memory, sometimes also called declarative memory, I mean a reservoir of consciously, intentionally revocable memories that may be accessed verbally or otherwise by a subject. Implicit memory is acquired and used unconsciously, as a background to explicit memory. It can affect thought and behavior, and the content of explicit memories, unbeknownst to the one remembering. Analogously, implicit intertextuality, according to Jenny, denotes textual realization or transformation of genre models and other cultural codes, being thus an indispensable condition of writing and comprehending any text, while explicit intertextuality consists in that the text itself informs about, or alerts a reader to, its intertextual make-up, through allusion, citation, collage, imitation, polemic etc.[15] This and similar pairs dating back to Jenny's *Strategy of Form* (La stratégie de la forme), constitute the cornerstone of memory-oriented literary studies.

As for explicit intertextuality, Han Shaogong usually does not give this much critical attention. In his fiction, citations and direct allusions appear quite frequently. They add to the discursiveness of the texts, but do not significantly influence their overall reception. The author does not care about their impact on the novels' essential qualities, arguing that:

> The novel is a relatively liberal genre, it can easily encompass poetry and drama, utilize media news and theory, there are countless examples for this. Narration is the boundary of a novel, hence as long as other non-novelistic factors do not disturb the narration, as long as they enhance it, they may be employed at will, there is no need to restrain myself from incorporating them. Considering contemporary readers' knowledgeability and their good education, as well as the rapidly growing amount of information, storytelling doesn't need to be limited to trivial everyday issues either. Quite the contrary, employing erudition and encouraging intellectual communication seems to be a new requirement for modern storytelling.[16]

However, Han's seeming intertextual liberalism is undergirded by cultural conservatism. This becomes evident in his approach to implicit intertextuality, specifically of the type that manifests itself most tangibly through the formal structure of his works. His views on implicit intertextuality, and on relations between the implicit and the explicit, specifically in its transcultural dimension, are clarified early on, in "The Roots of Literature", and have not necessarily changed much since then. With reference to Lu Xun's critique of "grabism" (拿来主义) pronounced in 1934 in the eponymous essay, Han claims:

[14] Lachmann 1997: 15.
[15] Jenny 1988: 34-37; cf. Juvan 2008: 43-44.
[16] Han & Zhao 2013.

> The time will come when conventional [规范] things will be brought back to life, and critical absorption of non-conventional things will nourish them, providing a new *élan vital*. Song-dynasty *ci* [poetry], Yuan-dynasty *qu* [theatrical songs], Ming and Qing-dynasty novels, all testify to this. Therefore, in a sense, this is not Earth's crust, but the subsurface magma that writers should be particularly concerned about.
>
> This absolutely doesn't imply conservative hermeticness and opposing cultural openness, on the contrary, only by absorbing and digesting external elements can a culture recognize itself, and enrich itself. [...] In the atmosphere of stirring reforms and constructions, "grabbing" what can be grabbed from Western science and technology, China is arriving at modern lifestyle. [...] [But] despite constant evolution, China is still China, especially in the field of literature and art, our national self is manifest in the sphere of national spirit and cultural heritage. It is our duty to release the energy that comes from new ideas and use it to recast and galvanize this self.[17]

In light of these words, Han Shaogong's concern about the "strategy of form", or – as Wu Jun calls it in Han's case – the "ideology of form",[18] comes as no surprise. In line with his holistic approach, in order to improve people's "digestion" of imported literary products, he needs to improve all other functions of the collective organism of the nation. This can be done by appealing to hidden foundations of the nation's self-consciousness, by activating implicit frames that determine the reception of particular cultural phenomena.

Writing dictionaries is one possible way of excavating forgotten, no longer active layers of cultural memory, especially those concealed in language. However – as Han told his American readers when he was awarded the 2011 Newman Prize for Chinese Literature – "[a]ll the existing theories appear to be inadequate to describe this gigantic but nameless reality, or to diagnose the inconceivably distressing predicament and abounding vitality of linguistic indeterminacy".[19] Therefore, he can only create a tiny private corpus of mutilated words, without claiming to save the linguistic universe in its entirety and variety. Another way is utilizing bigger and more complex culturally coded linguistic structures, organized, for instance, according to generic rules, to effectively cover a greater area of the map of collective oblivion. Theoretical support for such a strategy is found, for instance, in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning's study on conventions and genres as repositories of cultural memory:

> Realities and pasts are formed and interpreted through a variety of genre patterns familiar in the culture, which are generally made available through the system of literature.
>
> One can assume, however, that particularly strongly conventionalized genres are used (consciously and unconsciously) as familiar formulas to give a meaningful shape to collective experiences which are hard to interpret, or to encode values and norms. Thus the image described here of genres as 'repositories' of different systems and levels of memory comes full circle, as the genre as a part of the inner-literary memory (the memory of literary genres) is

[17] Han Shaogong 1985: 21.
[18] Wu Jun 2008.
[19] Han Shaogong 2011: 23.

> actualized in such cases and takes on a function in the cultural memory as an interpretive formula already filled in with meaning appropriate to the culture (memory genres).[20]

Perhaps this is the reason why the author, for all his declared indifference to generic taxonomies, ultimately appears satisfied with the classification of *Intimations* as an indigenously Chinese novel in notes, if only because of the chance to mobilize a broad cultural background. At the same time, this archaeological discovery unties his hands and, paradoxically, allows him to move forward in his experiments with narration. When the basic structures of this cultural background function properly, there is no need to be afraid of small deviations such as those caused by essayization. One can even allow some "careless sloppiness":

> Whereas the traditional European novel is "post-dramatic" [后戏剧], the traditional Chinese novel is "post-*sanwen*-essayistic" [后散文], they have different origins and different concepts at their base. Ancient China was the Empire of the *sanwen*-Essay. Ancient [Chinese] writers believed that literature has no fixed rules and methods ["文无定规"、"文无定法"], they preferred natural ways of creating, giving free rein to their emotions, following their heart. Having left the womb of the essay, the novel was first called "notes" [笔记] and "vernacular story (script)" [话本] and later "chapter novel" [章回小说]. It evolved in the process of narrativization, vernacularization and popularization of the essay. The *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* [三国演义] was based on the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* [三国志]. In the very beginning such novels were to some extent essayistic. For instance, in the case of "tales of marvels" [传奇] works like *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* [太平广记], it is nearly impossible to distinguish clearly between the novel and the essay. Among Ming and Qing-dynasty novels, except the *Dream of the Red Chamber* [红楼梦] which resembles European novels, the other novels [...] all betray the marks of some careless sloppiness [散漫无拘].[21]

In his early literary career, shortly after he returned to Changsha from the countryside, Han treated essayistic phenomena with a hostile distance, perceiving them as typical of the works of intellectuals and philosophers who are annoyingly ahead, in "offside position". Once he discovered that essayization can lead neither the author nor the reader beyond the matrix of cultural memory, since it is one of most basic mechanisms developed by this memory, he incorporated it in his own artistic repertoire. This is how he describes his evolution as a writer between *Dictionary of Maqiao* and *Intimations*:

> I used to believe a thought-inclined writer [思想型作家] is an invidious label, but now I think it is a glorious crown, I feel flattered [wearing it], although I'm afraid it is too big for me. I used to believe that sensations are very literary and thinking is very theoretical. A writer should rely on their feelings, avoid finding themselves on the offside position, and at all cost control their reflection. "Man thinks, God laughs" used to be a very popular catchphrase then, to which I also would somewhat recklessly submit. But the condition of the 1990s' spiritual culture made me seriously question that statement. Since we, authors,

[20] Erll & Nünning 2005: 273-276.
[21] Han & Wang 2004.

> abandoned thinking, have our sensations gained in abundance or, conversely, become poorer? Have they been more vivid or gone numb?[22]

In *The Book of Days and Nights* (2013) Han again employs the essayistic technique, this time apparently fully consciously, and taps into its strategic potential – which he may have discovered thanks to his publishers' and critics' response to *Intimations*. By looking at his "narrative units", I will investigate what specific measures he undertakes in *The Book of Days and Nights* to subdue essayization to his overall conception of fiction, and how this translates into the design of his writing.

*

While for Han Shaogong, the text's topography should be based on cultural memory, Ha Jin prefers deconstructing schemes rooted in one's (sub)consciousness, and subduing their components to topographies of imaginary homelands. In *The Writer as Migrant* (2008), he writes:

> Just as a creative writer should aspire to be not a broker but a creator of culture, a great novel does not only present a culture but also makes culture [...]. [The author] should imagine what kind of cultural order the book may enter into should it succeed.[23]

> Thus, we hear the expressions "my new homeland," "my second homeland," "my newly adopted homeland," or "homeland security." We may come across lines like these: "My mother always said / your homeland is any place, / preferably the place where you die." In other words, homeland is no longer a place that exists in one's past but a place also relevant to one's present and future.[24]

Certainly, one cannot expect that the imagined "cultural order" of a "newly adopted homeland" could at once penetrate one's mind so deeply that it would function as implicit memory, unknowingly navigating one's way of thinking and writing. Newcomers absorb the constituents of local citizens' cultural identity as explicit information, as something to be actively sought if one wants to accommodate themselves to local life. Therefore for a long time it was almost exclusively explicit intertextuality that occupied Ha Jin's attention; and only explicit intertextuality was accessible to him in practice. During his university years, as a student and a teacher, he learned how to comprehend and skillfully use the American intertext. After over 20 years of living abroad, *The Writer as Migrant* still revolves around the author's cautious, strategic selection of authorities and patterns to follow. Ultimately, he sees a place for himself somewhere close to Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, V.S. Naipaul, Milan Kundera, and Salman Rushdie. To the rocks of this Parnassus he attaches the tightrope he uncertainly treads over the Pacific Ocean, from China to America.

If we compare *The Crazed* (2002), his earliest-written novel but published as his eighth, with *Map of Betrayal* (2014) and *The Boat Rocker* (2016), we can estimate the distance Ha Jin has covered. In a nutshell, it could be said that after the publication of *The Boat Rocker*, he is now as close to the Western shore as he was to the Eastern shore while writing the first drafts of *The Crazed* in 1988. The moment of his debut novel's

[22] Ibidem.
[23] Ha Jin 2008: KL 166-169.
[24] Ibidem: KL 633-635.

publication in 2002 constitutes the exact middle of this way, both temporally and artistically. At this critical moment, Ha Jin was pulled equally strongly by Chinese and American culture and had to make a decision whether or not to make the final switch from the former to the latter. After taking that step, the magnetic field of American culture would facilitate his journey, in the same manner in which the field of Chinese culture had made its first half burdensome. Threads of the explicit intertext would work like lines of this field, marking the direction and vector of the forces leading him, and consequently also his readers, onto new territory with a stable cultural topography. Not by the shortest possible distance, through Newtonian gravitation of the traditional genre-based literary system, but mostly on half-elliptical tracks like those matching poles of magnets. But first he had to survive the magnetic storm of essayization halfway.

According to Ha Jin, *The Crazed*, which later morphed into a semi-political book about the Tiananmen massacre, was designed as a conventional story about the student-mentor relationship.[25] That book, says Ha Jin, "was a long struggle. I didn't have the ability I needed to write it so I put it aside and returned to it again and again and again".[26] The plot was based on the author's experience when as a student of Shandong University he was looking after a mentally ill professor at a psychiatric hospital. Since that experience proved too personal and too ambiguous to be transformed into literature, he decided many years later to rejoin the abandoned narrative with another part of his biography. He believed that temporal and geographical distance would help to build a coherent story. Yet, the operation proved more complicated and consequential than he might have expected, in life and writing alike.

In the final version of *The Crazed*, the private and individual experience of the author takes a back seat to political and collective experience. Moreover, the intense experience of his involvement with the hospitalized professor is overshadowed by the experience of unspeakable or, as Belinda Kong proposes, melancholic absence in the place of the massacre.[27] This radical change of existential "content" is implemented in a radically heterogeneous textual space. Implicit intertextuality in *The Crazed* is constituted by the pattern of the autobiographical novel, and presumes knowledge of Chinese society that is obvious to Chinese citizens, for example the Confucian model of intergenerational relationships. This structure is overwritten with abundant explicit linkages to texts from various times and from Eastern and Western cultures, including records and narratives about the Tiananmen crackdown that are created by Chinese authors but brought into the text mostly by Western readers. And, finally, the structure is covered with the mental map of the cultural memory of the Western audiences to whom the book is addressed. The chaotic intertext produced largely in delirium by the mentally ill professor and sandwiched between two cultural maps proved difficult to digest, and caused confusion among the novel's readers. Although, of course, most critics, similar to Bei Dao's academic audience, hid any interpretational problems under generous acclaim for exilic / diasporic literature, which by its nature cannot *not* be internally conflicted. Quite aside from the value of this "common knowledge" of emigrant writing, as one surmises after reading *The Writer as Migrant*, in

[25] Jin & Fay 2009; cf. Kong Belinda 2012: KL 1831.
[26] Jin & Fay 2009.
[27] Kong 2012 (chapter two).

which he rejects notions of exile and diaspora as artistic attitudes and/or literary-critical concepts and trades them in for the concept of immigration based on "elective affinities" with a place, in Goethe's words, Ha Jin could not have been satisfied with the above interpretation of his work.

After *The Crazed* the author has written no more novels that are geographically and intertextually set in contemporary China, trying instead to locate the plot in the cultural order of his not yet fully domesticated new homeland. An interesting thing happens in *A Free Life*, which appeared in 2007. In this novel, explicit intertextual signals coming from Western culture to which the text is very receptive gradually lead the author and the reader onto the firm territory covered with the generic structures shaped by implicit cultural memory.

A Free Life actualizes two generic patterns: those of the immigrant novel and those of the *Künstlerroman* ('artist's novel'), discussed at length in the context of the novel in question by Clara Juncker and by Bettina Hofmann.[28] As an immigrant novel the book shows an immigrant's accommodating to life in America, while as a *Künstlerroman* it displays his simultaneous growth toward poethood. While for the major part of the book the model of the immigrant novel appears more active – it also attracts more attention among critics – toward the end it weakens in favor of the *Künstlerroman*, deeply rooted in Western culture. Nan, a Chinese expat, struggles hard to survive in America. He works various menial jobs, at the same time strenuously making his way to the literary world. Nan writes poetry and seeks opportunities to establish contacts with other authors. He is spiritually pulled toward literature by American poets he admires, who are often explicitly invoked in the text. One of them is Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose poetic phrase "hitch your wagon to a star" earned Nan the nickname Wagon Man among his friends. It returns several times in the book, to finally become its "moral" as explicated by the narrator in the last chapter:

> This must be the true meaning of Emerson's dictum "Hitch your wagon to a star." To be a free individual, he had to go his own way, had to endure loneliness and isolation, and had to give up the illusion of success in order to accept his diminished state as a new immigrant and as a learner of this alphabet. More than that, he had to take the risk of wasting his life without getting anywhere and of becoming a joke in others' eyes. Finally, he had to be brave enough to devote himself not to making money but to writing poetry, willing to face failure.[29]

Parallel to Nan's existential journey from "sandy Mount Capitalism" – to borrow a metaphor from Walter Kirn's review[30] – toward the realm of poetry, dense explicit intertextuality leads the reader from one generic matrix onto another. Intertextual threads work like a stream of GPS signals by the moment when the reader finally enters a well-known path along which they will be driven by implicit cultural memory. The "poetic" ending suggests to re-read the book along the lines of the Western "artist's novel" shaped throughout centuries by authors such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 1795), William Wordsworth (*The Prelude*, 1805), Charles Dickens (*David*

[28] Juncker 2010, Hofmann 2010.
[29] Ha Jin 2007: 619.
[30] Kirn 2007.

Copperfield, 1850), Romain Rolland (*Jean-Christophe*, 1904-12) or Milan Kundera (*Life Is Elsewhere*, 1973), instead of the immigrant novel.

The more rooted Ha Jin feels in his adopted cultural environment, the more confidently he follows these implicit maps based on the topography of American culture. *A Map of Betrayal* (2014) is a case in point. Unanimously accepted as a spy novel, despite its obvious explicit references to Chinese socio-cultural reality, quasi-philosophical monologues and long "essayistic" pauses in narration, the work raises little controversy as to its generic label. Also the role it purports to play, that of literature before anything else and not an act of political ambassadorship or a textual manifestation of author's exilic or diasporic identity, appears to be commonly accepted. Self-reflexive threads, monologues of Gary Shang, a Chinese mole within the C.I.A., and his daughter, are absorbed by the audience as fitting the Western model of spy novel thanks to intertextual association with the novels of John le Carré, in which, as Albert Wu and Michelle Kuo note, akin to Ha Jin's book, usually "the spy himself is morally conflicted".[31] Explicit intertextual lines of the Chinese cultural field, in turn, prove not to be magnetically active any longer. As if trying to test the durability of the generic structures and make sure about his own status within American culture, Ha Jin included a thread of Gary's daughter's travel to China, in search of the roots of the spy's ethically questionable decisions. Although this "repatriatory" motive constitutes the axis of the work's narrative, it does not shatter the re-mapped cultural-generic order. Long ago naturalized as an American citizen, Ha Jin has perhaps only recently been entirely naturalized as an American writer.

One may well ask whether recoding memory is a reasonable price for such a privilege. Isn't it the case that the book first and foremost maps the author's betrayal of his geographical and spiritual homeland? Basically, I do agree with many of the critical comments that have been made on the insufficient artistic attainment and the lack of profound, original reflection in Ha Jin's work. Still, for all my own objections to Ha Jin's literary success, I hold that this is not a fair accusation. What has changed is mostly the way of remembering. This matrix switch does not necessarily mean voluntary oblivion, or the author's rejection of the past. Of course, memory's implicit structure is a co-determinant of the selection of explicit memories, but there is also another side to the matter. To remember most efficiently we need to connect objects we want to remember to the maps of what does not need to be actively memorized, i.e. of those spaces we are most familiar with and that we enter on the daily basis. Ancient philosophers and rhetoricians knew this and built their speeches locating particular elements on imagined maps of well-recognized spaces. Contemporary cognitive and memory studies confirm their discoveries.[32] We cannot exclude the possibility that Ha Jin wants to remember better, or maybe he finds this strategy the only effective way to share memories with the people surrounding him – and his responsibility for passing them on to next generations. If Han Shaogong tries to bring his findings back to China wherever he physically, intellectually

[31] Wu & Kuo 2015; cf. Cha 2014, Cruickshank 2014, Jollimore 2014. Jollimore is the only reviewer who expresses some doubt as to Ha Jin's affinity with masters of spy prose in the words: "*A Map of Betrayal* strikes out for related territory but never really gets there".

[32] See e.g. Yates 1966, O'Keefe & Nadel 1978, Spence 1984, Small 1997, Carruthers 1998, Rossi 2000, Maguire et al. 2002, Parasuraman & Rizzo 2008. These publications represent different approaches to memory studies, from historical-sociological through to neuroscientific.

and textually travels, Ha Jin's book brings a revisited China back to America and fills the Western cultural matrix with Chinese stories.

Intra-text: narrative units

In the interview quoted at the beginning of the previous section, Han Shaogong declares his trust in readers' erudition and their ability to deal with non-narrative, i.e. mainly intertextual and discursive, constituents of his works. In the three novels under scrutiny here, especially between *The Dictionary of Maqiao* and *Intimations*, one may discern a gradual loosening of narrative structure. This implies both setting the bar for readers ever higher and acknowledging their growing freedom of reception, including the author's acceptance of all kinds of reader-triggered essayizations. Still, the scope of this freedom is not unlimited. Han measures the distances he will allow between himself, his texts and his audiences using specific "post-Newtonian" units that are introduced in the same interview:

> In the past, writers used to care only about characters and their actions. Picking up the pen, they would press forward scene by scene. Anything else would be deemed "idle writing" [闲笔] or refused a place in a novel at all. This way of thinking was limited to our observations of everyday life, to our traditional novelistic and theatrical understanding of life, and in this conception an "individual" was the basic narrative unit. Considering the broadening scope of human knowledge and sensations, narrative units can well be enlarged too, exceeding the "individual", for example encompassing the story of a group of people, like in Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* [长恨歌] whose initial chapters refer to the "Wang Qiyao's", presenting a whole category of people through one protagonist, in a somewhat sociological or ethnological way. The narrative unit can be smaller than an "individual" as well, the story can narrate, say, trivial things, this is what I do in *Intimations.* In this book I tell, for instance, a story of a hat that temporarily suspends people's fates. This situation can be likened to what happens in physics. In a Newtonian world, that is the world we see before our eyes, which functions according to certain laws, the basic unit of distance is one meter. But with the emergence of micro- and macro-science, we needed new units: light-years and nanometers to measure our world. Our reality is no longer the Newtonian. In such a world where new knowledge and new sensations, bigger and smaller than an "individual", spring up on a daily basis, can our narrative remain unchanged? Certainly not. Those passages of Wang Anyi's novel where she speaks of the "Wang Qiyao's" perfectly exemplify "transindividual" and "trans-actional" writing, at the same time being also the most *sanwen*-essayized part of her book.[33]

In *The Dictionary of Maqiao* the basic units are single words, presented tongue-in-cheek as dictionary entries. Language organizes action and leads the reader through the everyday life of Chinese villagers and their young guests from the city who were supposed to learn from peasants instead of school education. Described from the perspective of a teenager who understands Dostoyevsky but can hardly grasp the technique of milking a cow, the countryside appears as a near-mythical place that functions according to incomprehensible, magical rather than natural, laws. The work was written, as Han says in the introduction to the

[33] Han & Wang 2004.

subsequent *Intimations*, in spirit of Wittgenstein's thought.[34] The world encompassed by the narration is limited to what can be named. Broadening the reality requires broadening semantic fields of words, which Han does throughout the book by bringing to light various, often mutually contradictory or marginal, or magical, meanings and collocations that are specific only to the community that is portrayed.

To break free from the stiff construction of linguistic signs, Han wrote another book structured not according to words-as-entries, but to larger narrative units, covering the phenomena he calls *juxiang* 具象. This can be rendered as 'images', 'representations', 'concretizations' or 'figurations'. In my opinion, 'figurations' is the most adequate translation, since it invokes, helpful for Western audiences, association with an artistic movement named "narrative figuration" (in Chinese: *xushi juxiang pai* 叙事具象派) whose critical-realist approach to art was somewhat similar to Han's way of constructing narrative in *Intimations*. Every figuration constitutes a chapter, structurally designed like a micro-essay. Yet, those little Möbius-strip-like structures are not firmly glued, but, say, buttoned. Their ends may be easily unfastened and joined with others to create one, or several, longer strip(s). There are abstract figurations, like "Space", "Time", "Memory", "Love", "Identity", and very concrete ones, such as "Clothes", "Russian Songs", "Smoking", etc.

Figurations are bigger than words by an extra-lingual dimension that allows for abstract reflection and seeing things from various sides, beyond a single surface that overlaps with the semantic field of its name. As I argued in the interlude and in my analysis of Zhai Yongming's intermedial practices – and this resonates with what Han notes with regard to Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* – this spatial "surplus" empowers essayization and, on the other hand, helps to keep it in check. In a sense, *Intimations* resemble Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, though its ambition is to go one step further, not only unmasking the myths of everyday life, but recoding them. The final aim is to connect language with experience in a more complex way than the vertical relationship between signifier and signified that produces a dangerously simplified and ideologizable picture of the world. Han fleshes this out:

> *A Dictionary of Maqiao* is a book about words, and I needed to dissect the existential content of these words. I was writing and writing, and this is how the novel emerged. And [*Intimations*] is a book about figurations. I needed to extract the sense of these figurations, establish some intepretational frame for them. I was writing and writing, and what emerged somewhat resembles theory, although I didn't intend to write theory, I simply wanted to record scattered pieces of experience. In the first part of the book I tell of some common examples of secret messages, including scenes, facial expressions, faces, clothes, ceremonies etc., recording how they speak to us. Subsequently, I invite a reader to reflect together with me on the place and role of these in human life, considering also how they enter our memory, sensations, emotions, personality and finally our fates. Furthermore, we can reflect on these figurations' place and role in the society, see how they function in our education, politics, economy, violence, market and cultural tradition. Eventually, in the last, and the most difficult to write fourth part of the

[34] Han 2013: 1. All citations from *Intimations* in this section come from the 2013 edition (Han 2013), page numbers are indicated in parentheses.

> book, I look back to inspect ways in which language and figurations mutually enhance and limit, and from this perspective I consider the recent crisis of knowledge (2).

Tellingly, the initial two figurations included in *Intimations* are "Scene" (场景, 5-7), explained as a set of chiefly haphazard circumstances of a particular event or of one's life, and "Homeland" (家乡, 8-10), taken as one of the most important "scenes", since it is a natural background to the existence of every individual. The chapter titled "Scene" contains a story of a Communist Party secretary known as an unfriendly, conceited man, who, to the narrator's surprise, turns out to be a hospitable, modest person when visited at home. This metamorphosis "I" explains to himself as follows:

> I believe the secretary [at home] didn't forget about class conflict nor did he give up his hostility toward me, but it was as if this kind of hostility could erupt only in public, and hardly ever at home. [...] Much later I came to realize that human emotions frequently are but a product of certain scenes.

"Homeland" tells a similar story, from a macro-perspective. It records the case of an official known far and wide for his malpractices, but seen as a respected role model by his neighbors.

> Perhaps, this is because in the homeland, his childhood and adolescence are preserved, the situations that shaped his childhood and adolescence. That particular threshold, an old tree, the face of some adult, the smell of smoke from a kitchen chimney, all of these can revive certain feelings and suppress other, so that in this particular scenography he returns to particular lines and scenic actions, for example going to the mountains to look for his cattle or going back to one's mud hut to have a cup of liquor. Poets understand this truth. They establish scenery to strike the chords in the reader's heart by exposing them to familiar objects, to revive a forgotten innocence that resides deeply in them. Religious people also understand this.

Placing these two stories at the beginning of the book seems to be another confirmation of Han's general meta-literary concept of reconstructing home in a text and bringing the world home through this text. The aim is to "repair" reality, i.e. to restore its nature, which is fundamentally good – just like in Mozi's philosophy, discussed by Han as another figuration. And to fasten it to this spiritual soil, if only artistically, using the essayistic Möbius strip.

But does the world want to be fixed – meaning both "repaired" and "fastened"? Are readers willing and ready to embark on the upstream journey to the roots? What if they go astray?

The scholarly reception of the book shows that Han's experiment was, by and large, accepted. Of course, along with those who praised Han's mature and creative "command of form",[35] there were also critics who did not pull their punches. Yu Jie called it "the product of an exhausted middle-aged man, who has lost all intellectual and physical vitality".[36] In general, virtually all interpretations of the book have one thing in common, regardless of their evaluation of Han's work. Readings of particular chapters usually look convincing, since their reception does not pose a problem bigger than reading a micro-essay encompassing one of

[35] Dong Zhilin, "Escaping the Demon of "Language": Reading *Intimations*" (逃离"语言" 的魔障——— 读长篇小说暗示), cit. from Cai 2006: 374.

[36] Yu Jie, "Patchwork Impressions: Exhausted Middle Age" (拼贴的印象: 疲惫的中年), cit. from Cai 2006: 374-375.

many "scattered pieces of experience". But connecting tens of figurations poses a challenge. Most of the critics still seek the overarching principle at the level of the plot, just like in traditional novels, and against Han's suggestions. They try to distinguish and connect dispersed threads of stories or reconstruct unilinear biographies of persons whose names appear here and there in various chapters. As a result of such measuring in the units of the physics of traditional textual worlds, instead of those designed by Han for his work, they are bogged down in contradictions, and some in accusations. Hong Zhigang sums up some of the controversies around the book:

> The focal points of these discussions were as follows: [*Intimations*] entirely overturned traditional concepts of narration and the shape of the discourse around the novel. Moreover, it powerfully does away with the differences between novel, *sanwen*-essay, theoretical writing and other genres. By this strange transgeneric gesture, [Han] threw reality and fantasy, narration and opinions, personal experience and History into one furnace. Hence the text somewhat resembles the ancient novel in notes, while at the same time it has much in common with the modern philosophical *sanwen*-essay – there's no coherent story, no stable spaciotemporal order, and no central character that appears throughout the whole narrative. There are people like Lao Mu, Da Tou, Da Chuan, Xiao Ya or Lu Shao, who appear from time to time, but they are only transitional props used when the need arises.[37]

One noteworthy exception from this general trend is Wu Jun's "The Ideology of Form in *Intimations*" (《暗示》的文体意识形态). Wu consistently employs Han's self-designed metric system to measure also the macro-structure of the text, and discovers a surprising homology, if not a sameness, of form and content which I earlier identified as a defining feature of the ideal essay:

> Its content is about figurations but its form as such turns out to be figurational too. At the same time, due to the "coexistence of language and image" [言与象的互在], or due to the insurmountable conflict between the sense of the figuration and its linguistic expression, it has no way but accept and adhere to the suggestiveness of "language and image". I suppose that the author didn't want it to be read as a pure novel or as any other work determined by language (or any linguistic form).[38]

Perhaps it were the readers' confusion and the author's observation that in their hands the "fixed" world still collapses into chaos that urged Han Shaogong to rethink his strategy again. In *The Book of Days and Nights* (2013) he adds one more dimension. This one is not spatial but temporal, a dimension he mostly ignores in his previous books in favor of the space-oriented reflection that he believes needs special attention in the era of "essayistic rambling". In broad strokes, *The Book*'s narrative focuses on the lives of several girls and boys who were "sent down" to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, over the next thirty years or so. It explores and interrogates their personal choices. Among the protagonists there are artists and entrepreneurs, officials and workers, exiles and intellectual knight-errants, all portrayed from various angles and at different moments in their biographies. Often, as Han

[37] Hong Zhigang 2006:362.
[38] Wu Jun 2006: 359.

admits, in embarrassing ways. This is how he explains the intention that pushed him to return yet again to the same source of literary inspiration, i.e. the experience of rustication:

> It seems that thirty years is a sufficient distance, from which I can see more clearly, in close-up and in long shots, *en face* and *en profile*, from different angles, their secret wounds, deeply hidden dreams, inescapable destinies or unexpected metamorphoses. Many of these things would have been hard to grasp ten or twenty years ago.[39]

Once again he broadens the scope and freedom of reflection by providing one more dimension from which to observe the world. But this time this generous "broadening" instead proved to inadvertently tie the reader's hands. When one travels "freely" in the fictional universe of the novel along its only edge constituted by the twisted narration, at some point one is very likely to find oneself "inverted" – as described earlier, with one's heart on the right side, in the geometrical and the axiological sense of the word, that is basically sharing the author's vision and interpretation of the world.

The logic behind the concept of broadening narrative units as one gradually departs from the hard ground of historical experience and the soil from which it grew is simple. One can find analogies for it in real-life architecture. The further one goes, the less stable the inner structures of the literary universe become, and the more unpredictable phenomena appear, causing local heterogeneities in the written world. A textquake-proof structure needs an essayistically flexible base, isolated from the environment with a layer of narration. Only then can it survive semantic movements of the linguistic crust of the discourse that are caused by essayization under the surface of modern culture, and preserve the "essence" the author wants to preserve.

Writing *The Crazed*, Ha Jin was in a similar situation to Han Shaogong when Han was writing *The Book of Days and Nights*: far from all stable cultural matrices. And he, too, tried that flexible multidimensional narrative with a broad margin for essayization. *The Crazed* contains a detailed sketch of the Chinese cultural discourse from various angles. There is ample space for active reflection, and a clear time span: from the Cultural Revolution that emerges in the mental patient's memories through to the Tiananmen Massacre which marks the end of the plot and to the early 2000s when the book was finished. But, as we saw before, the "trick" did not work. Life did not fit the text. Readers were disoriented and did not know where to stand while the Square portrayed in the book was moving under their feet as they tried to immerse themselves in a literary universe. Belinda Kong's study gives an account of readers' perception problems:

> Indeed, [Ha] Jin outlines a perfect spatial counterpart to Hall's sense of diasporic identity's doubleness – to wit, the lost Square as a site similarly "framed" by two "vectors," at once centripetal and centrifugal, at once intensely craved and deeply traumatic but also ultimately unfathomable and unrepresentable. [...] The vanished Square delimits an encounter, fortuitous but far from aporetic, between this elite institutional circumstance and an instant of diasporic traumatic witnessing. Yet, without appreciating the traumatic and melancholic undercurrents in Jin's writing, one can all too easily misread or deride his compulsive imaginary returns to

[39] Han & Zhao 2013.

> China as gullible hubris or ideological misguidedness, or worse, multiculturalist collusion and calculated opportunism.[40]

Perhaps the reason for Ha Jin's architectonical catastrophe is that time, which in Han's work curves and entangles space, stands still and assumes proportions that are tiny, when viewed as relative to the size of the constellations built around the text in *The Crazed*. The spatial distance between the text and its readers equals the distance between China and America, while the temporal one is a mere thirteen years. This seems too close to employ any systematic overall projection method. Besides, fresh matter is easy to mold but there is no telling whether it will congeal in the shape desired. But counting passing years in silence was not what Ha Jin had mastered the English language for. Instead of waiting for a better moment, he started pulling himself onto firm land with a fixed topography of cultural memory as laid out through by the intertextual lines of American discourse. The closer he was, the less elastic were the artistic solutions he needed. As a result, he gradually reduced the dimensions of the narration and tightened its structures.

In 2005, Ha Jin published *War Trash*, a fictional memoir, which however soon turned out to be less fictional than its author had claimed, and he was accused of plagiarism. The work was suspected of being a near-direct translation of a real memoir of a Chinese soldier who fought in the Korean War.[41] The credibility of this allegation aside, Ha Jin arguably did not worry a lot about it, since his target audience was that of Western readers, for whom the putative plagiarism was hardly detectable – and even if it had been, it might not have been terribly discrediting, as the "authentic" image of the war-torn East was arguably what his readers wanted most. In light of the discussion of *A Memoir of Misfortune* in chapter 3, one could say that the memoir is a morally safe form of life-writing that allows for reasonable essayistic variations on what is believed to be, or approximate, historical truth. Purported fictionality unlocks additional interpretational possibilities, mostly metaphorical and allegorical ones, and enables re-connecting the text with other elements of lived reality. Jing Tsu, for instance, writes:

> The treatment of Chinese POWs appropriately touched on the sensitive nerve of the then stirring controversy in the United States over the detainees at Guantanamo Bay. In this way, the novel brought the question of historical accountability to bear on its English context as well. The novel made one historical experience into an allegory for another by using one language to speak for another.[42]

In 2007, in *A Free Life*, Ha Jin leaps onto the American shore and learns how to use American generic positioning systems. Four years later, in 2011, he published *Nanjing Requiem*, which roughly fits the Western pattern of a historical novel, taking into account a reasonable margin of "morally allowed" reader-dependent, contextual essayization guaranteed by the New Historicist thought that is deeply rooted in Western literary discourse. Finally, the year 2014 sees the publication of *A Map of Betrayal*, almost entirely measurable in Newtonian units, and

[40] Kong 2012: KL 2060-2070.
[41] More on this subject in Tsu 2010: 80-111.
[42] Ibidem: 110.

showing no suggestions that would encourage readers to tamper with quantum mechanisms seeking any other, better form than that of the Western spy novel.

Han Shaogong starts from generically conventional works to subsequently try his hand at easily essayizable narration that reaches its peak in *Intimations.* Although not fully satisfied with the effect, he ventures to take the next step and overcome undesirable effects of essayization by extending it to a temporal dimension in *The Book of Days and Nights*. Ha Jin, perhaps tired of the essayistic magnetic storms after *The Crazed* – and less patient than Han, who waited twelve years between *Intimations* and *The Book* to embark on the same subject for the third time – chooses to withdraw, year by year, novel by novel, from the quantum cosmos to finish with a 2D memory map of the other shore.

II. Three Readers

Drawing conclusions from chapters 4 and 5, one could say that the success of essayization in what – half in jest – I called oeuvre management largely depends on the author's basic understanding of their (potential) audiences and their reading habits, for poetry and prose alike. This does not need to be an in-depth market analysis. In practice, I believe, an experiential, fluid model of readership like the typology construed by Herman Hesse in the essay "On Reading Books" will suffice.[43] Since my own experience in creative writing is limited, when trying to see a reader through the eyes of an author, I will rely on Hesse's reflections, and add to his description of three types of readers my observations on the attitudes these respective audiences display toward essayization

The first kind of reader, according to Hesse

> assumes in an uncomplicated way that a book is there simply and solely to be read faithfully and attentively and to be judged according to its content or its form. Just as a loaf of bread is there to be eaten and a bed to be slept in (101).

They expect that in a text there will be a safe, fixed place prepared for them, where they will feel comfortable listening to the self-assured voice of an author, be it a bedtime story, philosophical food for thought or a lecture in some serious discipline. Hesse specifies (with some stereotyping that is fairly typical for the time when he wrote the essay):

> This reader consumes a book as one consumes food, he eats and drinks to satiety, he is simply a taker, be he a boy with a book about Indians, a servant girl with a novel about countesses, or a student with Schopenhauer. This kind of reader is not related to a book as one person is to another but rather as a horse to his manager or perhaps as a horse to his driver: the book leads, the reader follows. The substance is taken objectively, accepted as reality. But the substance is only one consideration! There are also highly educated, very refined readers, especially of belles lettres, who belong entirely to the class of the naïve… (101-102)

In all likelihood, readers of this kind would not enjoy essayization. They need a stable, reliable Newtonian narrative, not a dynamic constellation that plunges into chaos more deeply with every attempt to measure it. If they do not feel secure, they are likely to blame an author:

[43] Hesse 1974. All citations come from this edition, page numbers indicated in parentheses.

> [Such a reader] evaluates the events in a novel according to their suspense, their danger, their erotic content, their splendor or misery; or he may evaluate the writer instead by measuring him against aesthetic standards, which in the final analysis always remain arbitrary (102).

All the same, if there is any group of readers that an author perhaps should feel responsible for, it is this group, or to be precise, it is people who are currently immersed in this form of reading experience; for, as Hesse explains, everyone may become any of the three types of reader. Undoubtedly, "[e]veryone reads naïvely at times". In this hour of naïvety a reader is most vulnerable to a "message" they may draw from a text, be it purely informative, emotional or moral. It is very likely that our inner readers' naïve number one will assure us that being driven into a stable field of two overlapping generic matrices and treated with a soothing moral about "star wagons", as in Ha Jin's *Free Life*, is the highest form of participation in culture. Barthes' *Mythologies* and Han Shaogong's *Intimations* are meant to warn us against their whisperings.

Reader number two is like a clever child that can bear responsibility for themselves. Furthermore, they feel ready, if not actually obliged, to take responsibility for an author and for what they perceive as the author's weaknesses, trying to justify or make up for them in a way they believe to be appropriate. In Hesse's words:

> This reader treasures neither the substance nor the form of a book as its single most important value. He knows, in the way children know, that every object can have ten or a hundred meanings for the mind. He can, for example, watch a poet or philosopher struggling to persuade himself and this reader of his interpretation and evaluation of things, and he can smile because he sees in the apparent choice and freedom of the poet simply compulsion and passivity. This reader is already so far advanced that he knows what professors of literature and literary critics are mostly completely ignorant of: there is no such thing as a free choice of material or form. [...] From this point of view the so-called aesthetic values almost disappear, and it can be precisely the writer's mishaps and uncertainties that furnish much the greatest charm and value, [...] and a glimpse suddenly gained into what lies beyond the apparent freedom of the poet, into the poet's compulsion and passivity, can enchant him more than all the elegance of good technique and cultivated style (102-103).

This is chiefly the kind of audience that I was referring to while speaking about readerly justice as a mechanism that may trigger essayization on the part of a reader. This reader aims to arrive at a moment of total transparency, seeking an optimal location for themselves, as well as for an author within a textual constellation – especially a lost, drifting, exiled, newly arrived author, and often in the act of (post)colonial pity. Spelunking Gao's storehouse like Plato's cave, teaching the autistic "I" in a poem by Wang Xiaoni how to confront interpersonal and intertextual reality, tethering Bei Dao to his mirror image, are also ideas of this reader, or – indeed – of any person currently experiencing a text in this way.

Finally, the third reader. Who "is really no longer a reader at all". It would be irrational to expect from an author to take responsibility for such a reader. This reader, too, doesn't care much for an author, "doesn't give a hoot about Goethe, [...] doesn't read Shakespeare." Not because they lack respect, but exactly because they are so inspired that they want to go one step further, or a hundred steps, or a light-year. They are on their way to create an essayistic Möbius

strip, perhaps but an unwritten and ephemeral one, by themselves. With the unique readerly experience on "one side" and their own narrative on the "other side" – which may be an emigrant narrative, in light of the last lines of the excerpt below:

> [The third reader] wishes neither to educate nor to entertain himself, he uses a book exactly like any other object in the world, for him it is simply a point of departure and a stimulus. Essentially it makes no difference to him what he reads. He does not read a philosopher in order to learn from him, to adopt his teaching, or to attack or criticize him. He does not read a poet to accept his interpretation of the world; he interprets it for himself. He is, if you like, completely a child. He plays with everything—and from one point of view there is nothing more fruitful and rewarding than to play with everything. [...] He is a child insofar as he puts a high value on associative thinking, but he knows the other sort as well. And so this reader is able, or rather each one of us is able, at the hour in which he is at this stage, to read whatever he likes, a novel or grammar, a railroad timetable, a galley proof from the printer. [...] In this stage one can read the story of Little Red Riding Hood as a cosmogony or philosophy, or as a flowery erotic poem. Or one can read the label "Colorado maduro" on a box of cigars, play with the words, letters, and sounds, and thereby take a tour through the hundred kingdoms of knowledge, memory, and thought (104).

It is my humble hope that, along with intense intellectual explorations of the previous two types, some of our quantum leaps from textual worlds to various distant spheres of reality have also given the reader a sense of the last of the three forms of the literary experience, and encouraged them to take the plunge. Well, with one provisional caveat to be revisited in the final chapter: that they are a "private reader", not a translator.

PART THREE

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At a Distance of a Tongue: Essay(ization) in Translation Theory and Practice

CHAPTER 6

The Translator at the Floodgates

And so, after these reflections on essay(ization) and emigration, it is time to introduce a grey eminence that has discreetly exercised its power over significant parts of the argument.

It has surely not escaped the reader's notice that translation – the phenomenon I will focus on in this final chapter – has been "incidentally" mentioned at crucial moments in the present study. In a narrow, conventional sense, as a linguistic operation, it has come up in chapter 3, in the discussion of Liao Yiwu's and Su Xiaokang's life-writing. There, translation into English enables a generic shift, which in turn legitimizes the texts' essayistic potential and facilitates the activation of this potential by the reader. In section two of chapter 4, on Zhai Yongming and her involvement in audiovisual arts, I have referred to intermedial translation. I have argued that Zhai's employment of this technique is motivated by the same impulse as that of essayization, to wit her search for an optimal spaciotemporal form to connect "reality in poetry" and "reality in reality". Earlier, in part one, I have considered the mutual translatability of discourses on the essay and on emigration as a mechanism behind the quasi-discipline referred to as emigratology of the essay. I have returned to this also in chapters 4 and 5, discussing Bei Dao and Wang Anyi respectively. Close readings of Wang Xiaoni and Gao Xingjian in chapter 3 have pointed to essayization as a consequence of the author's and/or the reader's (mis)translation of life into literature.

In the last instalment of this study I will revisit the above arguments, and attempt to pull them together toward a coherent reflection on linkages between essay(ization) and translation. In section one, I will reconstruct a polemic on the translation of Paul Celan's poetry, by comparing metatextual utterances and actual translatorial strategies of three poets: Wang Jiaxin, Bei Dao and Yi Sha. In analysing the metatext, my focus will be on the convergence, or the lack thereof, of each author's views on translation – here taken as the travel of texts between languages and cultures – on the one hand, and their attitudes to emigration and essay(ization), on the other. Scrutinizing their translations of Celan's "Deathfugue" (Todesfuge) I will observe how the authors-as-translators' search for a new form for the text – in a different language, with different readers, against a different spaciotemporal background – triggers or strengthens essayistic mechanisms, and what they do to fit the essayistic element into their visions of literature. In section two, with Yu Jian as a central case study, I will reconsider intersemiotic and intermedial intra-oeuvre operations as an attempt at establishing a self-translatable meta-form. This leads to a question about the possibility of a "translational turn" in discussions of the essay – or, less obviously, an

"essayistic turn" in discussions of translation – and to further reflection on the mutual translatability of discourses, including the translatability of translation discourse itself.

With some considerable simplification, the logic of this chapter is as follows. As I have shown in part two, managing essayization is an important part of an author's oeuvre management. As such, essayization also affects translation, as process and result. Translation presents the emigrant author with especially difficult challenges, whether it is their work that is being translated or they translate the work of others. Whether the author-as-translator tries to increase or decrease the essayizability of the text usually depends on their more overall textual strategy. Therefore, by observing their approach to essayization we can to some extent reconstruct this strategy. In the case studies in this chapter, it turns out that the authors' struggles with essayization in translation reaffirm a vision of their strategy that has emerged in the preceding chapters, from my analysis of other texts, of other discourses of which they partake (including that on the essay) and of the metaphors they use. Hence my desire to look into the translatability of discourses, minimally within single oeuvres.

This manifestation of the same strategy, or of similar strategies at various levels of their involvement into (discussions of) literature writing also takes me back to the hypothesis that regards our penchant for extra-dimensional thinking. In my case studies, translation as a metatextual operation wants to re-bind a chaotic world whose particles are scattered between various discourses and caught in different entanglements to turn it into a single meta-shape. This shape has an architecture that is analogous to the essayistic Möbius strip, and can basically be described by the same topologically-structured notions that describe the essay: *sanwen* / recollecting for Yi Sha, *zawen* / re-collecting for Bei Dao, and *suibi* / collecting for Wang Jiaxin.

I. Essaying Translation: Sense or Sound

"[D]egrading the poem to such an extent that it proves inferior even to *sanwen* – what a pity for Chinese readers who may thus see in Celan anyone but the great master of language"[1] – laments Bei Dao in "Celan: It's Time for the Stone to Blossom" (策兰：是石头要开花的时候, 2004), in which he critiques several Chinese translations of Celan. This judgment was pronounced at the height of Bei Dao's attacks on Wang Jiaxin and Rui Hu's translation of "Deathfugue". In the same essay he offers his own translation, which is largely a critical recombination of various Chinese renditions he has previously discredited. Bei Dao's explicit arguments and his actual method are occasionally rash and ethically questionable, and clearly marked by his poetics and aesthetic hierarchies, as discussed in part two of this study. At the same time, more broadly, they reveal several of the flashpoints and thematic lines along which the discussion of literary translation unfolds among contemporary Chinese poets. The big picture that emerges from Bei Dao's utterance is roughly as follows: he, Bei Dao, poet with an infallible "feel for language" (语感), stands against numerous authors who carelessly sacrifice sound, in favor of essayistically (Bei Dao uses the Chinese term *sanwen*)[2] – which to

[1] Bei Dao 2011: 353. I cite the essay according to the edition reprinted in 2011 collection of Bei Dao's poems and essays *Selected Works of Bei Dao* (北岛作品精选) (Bei Dao 2011).
[2] Ibidem.

Bei Dao means awkwardly, and signifies "degradation" of the poem – reconstructed sense, with the tandem Wang and Rui as a not-so-shining example.

Wang Jiaxin responded in "Something Hidden or Kept Secret: Taking Issue with Bei Dao" (隐藏或保密了什么：与北岛商榷).[3] For all his meticulous reasoning, Wang occasionally slips into the ruts of Bei Dao's stereotypical thinking: translation is either beautiful (≈ poetic) or faithful (≈ essayistic, or *sanwen*-like), in the spirit of Yevtushenko's (in)famous comparison, which I will not quote for reasons of female self-esteem. Wang's text revalorizes rather than deconstructs this opposition and his opponent's argumentation. Fortunately, Wang is a better translator than polemicist. Regardless of Bei Dao's negative appraisal and Wang Jiaxin's less than successful self-defense, I believe Wang and Rui's rendition of Celan's work shows that beauty and faithfulness – which is of course a perennially contested notion – are not mutually exclusive and that sound can be an elegant byproduct of sense, which, according to Wang, ranks higher than purely artistic value. What this discussion reveals is not so much a difference between two aesthetic systems as a difference between two existential orientations: one toward the self, and one toward the other. While, as Bei Dao's critics emphasize, a "feel for language" is to a large extent a matter of individual style and taste, Wang's arduous "essayistic" sense-seeking bears witness to his openness to the other and his empathy with the translated author.

Nearly ten years later, when this polemic lies behind us, but poets' discussions of translation still rarely transcend the dualism Wang Jiaxin and Bei Dao's confrontation reveals, the rebellious Yi Sha offers what he believes to be an alternative proposition. He professes that he has eventually taken to the canon of world literature and plans to "retranslate the classics" to make their voice heard in contemporary Chinese. Briefly put, his project assumes both de-aestheticizing and de-essayizing the translation process, and minimizing the distance between the translated author and the Chinese target audience. Among one hundred famous poems published in the 2013 anthology *When You're Old* (当你老了) compiled by Yi Sha together with his wife Lao G, there is a problematically (Chinese-)reader-oriented version of "Deathfugue", which I will juxtapose with Bei Dao's and Wang and Rui's renditions.[4]

Importantly, none of these three poet-translators know German. Bei Dao and Wang Jiaxin consulted various English translations and looked into English-language discussions of Celan. Yi Sha sticks to a single English translation, by Michael Hamburger, and ostentatiously ignores foreign discussions of Celan. Aside from this two-tongue distance from the original, to the best of my knowledge, Bei Dao's, Wang Jiaxin's and Yi Sha's (in that

[3] Below, I cite the essay according to the edition reprinted in 2008 collection of essays *Finding the Phoenix a Perch* (为凤凰找寻栖所) (Wang Jiaxin 2008).

[4] This paragraph calls for a brief postscriptum. In November 2017, I participated in a series of conferences and workshops "Poetry and Translation" organized by Wang Jiaxin at Renmin University of China, Beijing Normal University, Beijing University and Shanghai Jiaotong University. To my surprise, a significant number of presentations and speeches delivered by Chinese poets (but not only), including obviously Wang Jiaxin himself, still revolved around translations of Celan. In Wang's utterances bitter memories of the abovesaid confrontation with Bei Dao returned more than once, and in a very emotional manner, which shows how painful that polemic must have been for him, and to what extent it hit at his most fundmental translatorial's principles: aesthetic, ethical, as well as social ones (there is a personal story behind it, although I feel I have no right to reveal it). Yi Sha's case was not mentioned at all.

order) command of English ranges from limited to very limited.[5] Notably, from the perspective taken in this study, this may be a good thing. The inaccessibility of the source text and a limited grasp of the intermediary text force these poets to address the issue of translation at every stage, often explicitly, which facilitates my investigation of their translatorial strategies – or minimally of what they say about these strategies. Besides, relay translation tends to magnify subtle differences and shifts that may be less visible in direct renditions. At the same time, paradoxically, this situation also repositions Celan's poem in its original context, which requires reconsidering translation as not only an operation performed on a complete text, but also a factor that co-constitutes this text's primary sense. To clarify the latter point, let's recall the history of "Deathfugue".

Paul Celan wrote "Deathfugue" in German in 1944 as "Todestango" (Death Tango), but it was first published in 1947, in a Romanian translation called "Tangoul Morții" by Celan's friend Petre Solomon. The German original appeared only in 1948. Celan was a German-speaking Jew. His parents were killed in a Nazi concentration camp in Romania in World War II, in 1942. "What then did it take for an orphan to voice annihilation in his mother tongue, which had become the murderers' tongue?" asks John Felstiner, Celan's English translator and biographer. And he answers, in the poet's own words:

> The German language, he later said, had to "pass through its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech". Yet it was all he had left: only his language "remained in the midst of the losses".[6]

The poem's three-year voiceless existence, between its writing and its first publication, and its one-year banishment into another language, after which it was modified and renamed by its author, are an integral part of the text. "Deathfugue" and Celan's poetry at large are to a significant extent translational per se, and almost every phrase in the poem reminds one of the shocking non-obviousness of Celan's choice to write in German. Below I cite the poem in Felstiner's translation from 1986,[7] which I find the best of the various English renditions I have seen, and the most non-obvious in the aforesaid sense. Occasionally, I will also quote from Hamburger's version, with which the authors of the three Chinese translations under scrutiny are familiar. Where relevant, I will provide the original phrasing in German. The full German original and its three Chinese renditions are found in the appendices to this study.

Deathfugue

1 Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
2 we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
3 we drink and we drink
4 we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped
5 A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
6 he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Marguerite

[5] This information comes from my personal communication with Maghiel van Crevel and his personal communication with the poets in question. In the case of Wang Jiaxin, I have seen van Crevel's impressions confirmed in personal communication with Wang.
[6] Felstiner 1986: 251.
[7] Ibidem: 250-251.

[7] he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are all sparkling, he whistles his hounds to come close
[8] he whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in the ground
[9] he commands us to play up for the dance.

[10] Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
[11] we drink you at morning and midday we drink you at evening
[12] we drink and we drink
[13] A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
[14] he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Marguerite
[15] your ashen hair Shulamith we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped
[16] He shouts jab the earth deeper you lot there you others sing up and play
[17] he grabs for the rod in his belt he swings it his eyes are so blue
[18] jab your spades deeper you lot there you others play on for the dancing

[19] Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
[20] we drink you at midday and morning we drink you at evening
[21] we drink and we drink
[22] a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Marguerite
[23] your aschenes Haar Sulamith he plays his vipers
[24] He shouts play death more sweetly Death is a master from Deutschland
[25] he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise then as smoke to the sky
[26] you'll have a grave then in the clouds there you won't lie too cramped

[27] Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
[28] we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland
[29] we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink
[30] Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye is blue
[31] he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true
[32] a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete
[33] he looses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air
[34] he plays with his vipers and daydreams der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

[35] dein goldenes Haar Margarete
[36] dein aschenes Haar Sulamith

Fundamentals of (un)translatability

Bei Dao's first point in his critique of Wang Jiaxin's essayized rendition of "Deathfugue" says a lot about Bei Dao's approach to poetry translation. In his eyes, by and large, poetry is almost absolutely translatable without resorting to non-poetic techniques. Besides, he suggests, the Chinese language itself naturally "advances translation", especially that of poetry: it is "flexible and varied, benefits from everything that is around; except

neologisms and puns, which are always difficult to render [from one language into another], it is almost omnipotent".[8]

This questionable conclusion is drawn from his observation that Mandarin easily handles one of the most perplexing problems faced by German-English translators, i.e. rendering the title of the poem without obscuring what Felstiner describes as "the irreconcilable paradox embedded in the two halves of Celan's genitive, *Fugue of Death*",[9] which in English "loses the German genitive's compactness – *Todesfuge* – the compact, so to speak, between order and rupture, the word's two sides".[10] Bei Dao aptly notes that in Chinese this compactness is "totally natural", since the nouns for *death* (*siwang* 死亡) and *fugue* (*fuge* 赋格) can be directly paired without any unsightly "grammatical glue" like the English *of*,[11] fortuitously removed by Felstiner, but present in other English renditions.

Of course, it is doubtful whether Bei Dao, who notes that of the German original, he understands only a single word (*Deutschland*), would have realized this point if it were not for Felstiner's account of his experience of translating Celan in scholarly articles and Celan's biography, from which Bei Dao avidly borrows, usually without explicitly signaling this. Still, Bei Dao seems proud of this discovery. In his poetics of translation it proceeds to grow to grotesque proportions and assume the size of a universal stylistic principle. This is evenly pointed out by Wang Jiaxin in "What is Hidden...", and later put more forcefully by poet and prolific translator Huang Canran 黄灿然. Huang observes that Bei Dao, while "perfecting" extant translations of poems by Rilke and Lorca, obsessively deletes all instances of *de* 的, an (optional) subordinating marker of attribution or possession in modern Chinese, and other function words, and that Bei Dao presumably does this to make his idiom approximate the conciseness of classical Chinese. In defense of *de*, Huang claims:

> Taking simplicity too far will often turn it into simplification. In Bei Dao's case, it often boils down to simple reduction of the number of characters, especially the deletion of the functional *de*. *De* isn't a black spot on the modern Chinese language, but its pulse. [...] [i]f we remove *de* from the rhythmical lines of [many good contemporary] poems, we can't hear their heartbeat. [12]

Also, while in the case of "Deathfugue" modern Chinese does offer interesting lexical solutions for some of the problems that confront the English translator, Bei Dao appears indifferent to most of these, focused as he is on grammatical detail. For example, in the original, lines 7-8 contain the meaningful internal rhyme *Rüden* (hounds) + *Juden* (Jews). Felstiner finds it impossible to transfer this into English, so he substitutes it with another one: *close* + *rows*. In Chinese the source rhyme is translatable, into what could be called a graphic or visual rhyme, no less thought-provoking than its acoustic counterpart. The first character in the word for *Jew* (*Youtairen* 犹太人) consists of a (loosely) phonetic element *you* 尤 plus a (loosely) semantic component 犭, the latter being a variant of the character *quan* 犬 'dog, hound'. Additionally, the phonetic element *you* 尤 bears a striking visual resemblance to *quan* 犬.

[8] Bei Dao 2011: 353.
[9] Felstiner 1986: 253.
[10] Ibidem: 257.
[11] Bei Dao 2011: 353.
[12] Huang Canran 2006.

Another challenge faced by the English translator is how to imitate the ominous alliteration of *Schlangen* 'snakes' + *schreiben* 'write' that recurs several times starting in line 5. Felstiner uses the generically narrower term *vipers*, in near-alliteration with "writes". Here, too, Chinese offers an obvious possibility that is used by Wang Jiaxin but disregarded by Bei Dao: *she* 蛇 'snake' + *shuxie* 书写 'write'. Bei Dao "corrects" Wang's wording into *xie xin* 写信 'write a letter', which, as Wang notes, is needlessly narrow and indifensibly disambiguating.

To maintain the atmosphere of linguistic estrangement and displacement that is characteristic of Celan's entire oeuvre, Felstiner leaves ever larger chunks of the recurring refrain ("dein goldenes Haar Margarite / dein aschenes Haar Sulamith") untranslated, culminating in the final stanza (lines 35-36). In Chinese this trick would not work, because of the mutual illegibility of Mandarin and German. German *Haar* and English *hair*, German *goldenes* and English *golden*, and German *aschenes* and English *ashen* are similar enough for this to be comprehensible to English speakers who do not read German. For Mandarin speakers who do not read German, this will not work. One way in which a Chinese translator might retain some of the text's audible "German-ness" would be to replace the Chinese name commonly used for Germany, *Deguo* 德国, with *Deyizhi* 德意志, a largely obsolete phonetic rendition of *Deutsch* that appears mainly in historical contexts, often with reference to the German Empire. This is what Yi Sha did. But I am quite sure there are other ways to render the perplexing non-obviousness of the linkage between sense and sound in Chinese. Poetry-sensitive native speakers have a lot of room for maneuver here. If I, as a visitor in the Chinese language, can speak to this, I would propose, for instance, translating the juxtaposed *goldenes Haar – aschenes Haar* into *jinse toufa* 金色头发 'golden hair' + *jinse toufa* 烬色头发 'ashen hair' instead of the *huise toufa* 灰色头发 we find in all three Chinese translations. *Hui* 灰 and *jin* 烬 and their conjunction 灰烬 all mean 'ash', but normally only *hui* is used to describe the color ('grey, ashen'). Substituting it with the less conventional *jin*, a near-homophone of *jin* 金 'gold, golden' – the only difference being that the former is a fourth-tone syllable, and the latter a first-tone one – would strengthen the dissimilarity-in-similarity between the two women invoked in the poem.

At any rate, Bei Dao's belief in the translatability of poetry is based on a belief in the limitless capacity of the Chinese language, and of his own poetic idiom, which effectively sinicizes, or beidaoizes, Celan, Rilke, Lorca... Whatever sounds strange or foreign is detected and adjusted to "proper" rhythmical patterns. Slight distractions are allowed, but when the fissures broaden and the surface of the poem becomes, to Bei Dao, essayistically overactive, with various streams of sense bursting into the poem chaotically and uncontrollably, he works hard to close the "ruptures" between the two sides of the word(s) in question.

This strategy is unacceptable to both Wang Jiaxin and Yi Sha. Yi Sha shares Bei Dao's view on translatability to some extent, inasmuch as he takes translatability for granted.[13] But that is their only commonality. In Yi Sha's opinion, translation is hampered by the practice of translating all authors into the translator's single, individual idiom and by basic linguistic misunderstandings. While he points out countless "unthinkable mistakes" in extant

[13] Yi Sha 2013: 1-3.

Chinese renditions of many famous poems, he himself makes such mistakes as well, which is clear from his translation of "Deathfugue". Yi Sha renders lines 6-7 as 他写道：黑暗正在降临德意志，你的金发的玛格丽特 / 他写信，然后走出门去，满天繁星闪烁. This literally translates into English as follows: "He writes: darkness descends on Germany, your golden-haired Margarete / He writes a letter, and then goes out, the sky is full of sparkling stars". Glaring semantic problems aside, Yi Sha's use of punctuation also reflects his understanding of the nature of translation and the principle of translatability. He appears to think that shortening the distance between the author and his contemporary (Chinese) audience requires stripping the poem of ambiguity and discursivity. Instead, he re-focuses the poem around simple actions that he preasumably considers comprehensible to readers all over the world. Yi Sha commonly shatters the contemplative atmosphere of his source texts and translates them into narratives with clearly traceable plot-like structures, revealing a poetics with little regard for what is widely seen as a core characteristic of poetry, to wit its sound, in the broadest possible sense. The first poem in the anthology he compiled with Lao G is Czesław Miłosz's "Gift" (*Dar*), whose Chinese rendition is much more concrete and detailed than the meditative original, as if it were to be acted out on stage. The same holds for his translations of Anna Akhmatova's masterpieces.

Of Bei Dao, Wang Jiaxin and Yi Sha, Wang appears the most modest in his assumptions and ambitions as a poet-translator. At the same time, he often uses misleadingly elevated diction to enunciate his thoughts, claiming, for instance, that "a great translator is an apostle" and recalling Martin Luther's long years spent in an ancient castle working on the German translation of the Bible.[14] Yet, at least openly, he never lays claim to being a "great translator" himself or to translatorial perfection in any of his endeavors. Instead, he loves to quote Benjamin's famous metaphor of a tangent (i.e. the translation) which touches a circle (the original sense) only lightly and only at one point, and the philosopher's teleological divagations on a universal "pure language" which translation helps to "regain fully formed from the linguistic flux".[15] The poet believes that the translator's mission cannot be accomplished within a single text or even within the entire realm of textuality. It must be continued in life, even if this demands sacrifice. In "What Is Hidden..." Wang writes:

> I realize that to gain insight into Celan's work will take my entire lifetime. It requires faithfulness and patience, that "secret love hidden from people's eyes". It requires constantly returning to Celan's untranslatable vocabulary and his darkness, until it is finally lit up or until we arrive at a more profound understanding.[16]

Many years later, in a conversation with Wang Yuanzhe, the poet-translator reassures:

> Since in the process of translation many things are "lost", such as the prosody of the original, its intertextuality, rhythm, puns, you must somehow "make up" for these. But "make up" with what? With your life, and with the brightest things that Chinese has had. [...] Of course, I'm not free from concern [about issues of translatability]. But my primary responsibility is to

[14] Wang Jiaxin & Li Chanwei 2015.
[15] Benjamin 2002: 261.
[16] Wang Jiaxin 2008: 50-51.

> ensure that Celan can firmly stand on the soil of Chinese language, forever. This is even more essential than my own writing.[17]

In the arcades

One salient feature of Wang Jiaxin's translations is a consistent effect of estrangement. Densely sprinkled underdetermined phrases provoke the reader to re-measure emerging constellations in the context of their own cultural environment and their knowledge about the (author of the) original. They become points of essayizability – where the text seemingly asks to be "completed" and rejoined with life. Polemicizing with Bei Dao, Wang replies first and foremost to those of Bei Dao's assertions that he feels betray the latter's lack of empathy, solidarity and emotional imagination, and cut off the original's author from his poem. Wang defends his own, "essayized" rendition of Celan's poem, emphasizing that

> Bei Dao is blind to all of this. Maybe for him poetry is just lyricism, metaphor and image. Maybe it is precisely this disbelief in the capacity of poetry that makes him criticize others' translations for being *sanwen*-essayized, or "even less than the essay".[18]

Through the long lines of Wang and Rui's "Deathfugue", the reader wanders as if through spacious arcades – open-ended like those in Benjamin's eponymous project, with many open windows through which various free particles and threads of contexts may enter freely. However, one must walk cautiously since the ground is uneven, irregularly paved with scattered words that one can trip over, like Du Fu and Wang himself in Wang's "London Essays". The architecture gives the reader a feeling of freedom, and room for imagination and reflection. At the same time, it keeps them in a state of hightened attention to semantic shifts.

There are several areas that Wang and Rui find especially "dangerous", i.e. where they predict a strong turbulence of "paradoxes and meanings". There, they appear to slow down the translation, in order for their readers to consciously consider the consequences of their presence in the text – just like the translators have done. The pace decreases most dramatically where Wang and Rui introduce the work's protagonists, by name or through personal pronouns. There, their language becomes clumsy and non-poetic, especially when juxtaposed with Bei Dao's polished phrases.

Compare, for example, Wang and Rui's descriptions of *a man [who] lives in a house* (lines 5, 13, 22). Bei Dao translates concisely, losing the verb: 那屋子里的人 'a person in the/that house'. Wang and Rui translate more literally and meticulously: 住在那屋子里的男人 'a man who lives in the/that house' – as if they stopped for a while to observe. Whereas Bei Dao starts the sentence with *in the/that house* (那屋子里), Wang and Rui begin with the verb *live* (in the sense of 'reside': 住), shifting focus from the surroundings to the person.

When the poet-translators encounter *ein Meister aus Deutschland* in lines 24, 28, 30. Bei Dao pronounces succinctly: 死亡是来自德国的大师, which literally translates into English as 'Death is a/the master who comes from Germany / whose origins lies in Germany'. This strongly suggests that the master is of German descent. Wang and Rui

[17] Wang Jiaxin & Wang Yuanzhe 2015.
[18] Wang Jiaxin 2008: 41.

have 死亡是一位从德国来的大师 'Death is a master who comes / has come from Germany', which may or may not mean that Death is German, so to speak. Death might be a demon without a homeland, who sojourns wherever he – with the masculine pronoun reflecting *Der Tod* in the original – is invited. Again, Wang and Rui seem to carefully examine this passer-by, however terrifying he appears, giving the reader time to reconsider various interpretations and implications.

And interpretations and implications matter a great deal, as is clear from Wang's analysis of the lines where Margarete and Sulamith appear: *dein goldenes Haar Margarete / dein aschenes Haar Sulamith*. Both Bei Dao's and Yi Sha's (mis)renditions literally retranslate into English as 'your golden hair-ed Margarete / your ashen-haired Shulamith", bringing out the physical presence of the women and their belonging to, or being "owned" by, another person, probably the man who writes. Bei Dao has: 你金发的玛格丽特 / 你灰发的素拉米斯, and Yi Sha seconds him, adding two optional attributive / possesive particles: 你的金发的玛格丽特 / 你的灰发的素拉米斯. Wang and Rui consistently stick to: 你的金色头发玛格丽特 / 你的灰色头发素拉米斯 ('your golden hair Margarete...'), where the women's hair is the grammatical subject, not the women themselves. Margarete and Sulamith are but "carriers of different hair, different ethnicity, different stories".[19] Wang devotes two long paragraphs to an insightful analysis of relationships between the writing man and the two women, showing how the women's (de)subjectivization and (de)individualization and the redefinition of the distance between them play a structural role in the poem in its entirety. By re-measuring these ontological parameters, the reader – including the translator whose responsibility is here to enable the translation to encompass as many hypothetical constellations as possible – plays out the full scope of the text's inward plasticity: from personal, autobiographical confession through philosophical dwellings to self-subversive metapoetry. As Wang writes:

> "He writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Margarete". The subject here is a German man who writes in the house ("writes", and not, as Bei Dao would have it, "writes a letter"; not only is rendering this as "writes a letter" too concrete, it also significantly narrows and limits the sense of the original; what if he is "writing poetry" or simply writing, without any particular aim, indulging in the very act of writing), he is perverted to the marrow, he is the embodiment of a nation's fanaticism, but this does not prevent him from writing "lyrically" like a poet. What is the object of his lyricism? "Your ashen hair Margarete". Along with a romanticism that makes one's flesh creep, this sigh also betrays something else: the Nazi self-worship of the nation. All their actions were aimed at advancing this myth!
>
> This is the reason why the contrast between the two types of hair plays a pivotal role in "Deathfugue". "Your ashen hair Shulamith we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped". Here the role of the subject is taken over by "we", who are forced to drink the poisonous black milk, and shovel a grave for themselves [...]. The opposition first marked in this line broadens the space of the poem from this point onward, and reveals the theme of the work: the contradiction between two types of hair as a synecdoche of the contradiction between two different human fates [...]. Thus, Celan is using the contrapuntal technique of the fugue, in that

[19] Wang 2008: 41.

> he not only presents the tragedy of the Jewish nation in the concentration camps, and not only silently denounces the evil of the Nazis, but also hurls unanswerable questions in God's face [...]. Toward the end, the poem returns again to the contrapuntal artistic construction of the fugue: "dein goldenes Haar Margarete / dein aschenes Haar Sulamith". Here, the hair becomes an image and a symbol inscribed into this heart-rending poem [...].[20]

Wang is sensitive to the slightest flow of "substance" from the textual to the lived and from the lived to the textual. He scrutinizes the poem in order to determine whether its words and phrases matter in and of themselves as elements of physical / spiritual reality or function as figures of speech or tropes: metaphors, metonyms, allegories, symbols. Unlike Bei Dao and Yi Sha, he is the only one who detects the metaphorical implications of *golden hair* and *ashen hair*, and realizes the literalness of another forceful image: the smoke from the cremation furnaces that constitute the final part of the genocidal machinery of the concentration camps. Both Bei Dao and Yi Sha interpret the line *he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise then as smoke to the sky* (25) as a comparison. They use the word *xiang* 像 '(just) like' to narrate what is going to happen to the Jews. Rising *like* smoke to the sky has much less dramatic connotations – indeed, it may even be taken as an allegory for a soul gloriously ascending to heaven – than rising *as* smoke, meaning in the form of smoke, which Wang and Rui render in a way that leaves no room for doubt: 尔后你们就会化为烟雾升向空中, literally: 'then you will turn into smoke and rise to the sky'. Preceded by this powerful picture, the corresponding image of the dead *lying not too cramped* (不拥挤) reveals its dark irony.

Conversely, Wang and Rui also stray from the original, sometimes more so than Bei Dao and Yi Sha. In line 24 their translation of the English / German verb *play* / *spielen*, which can mean 'play music / a musical instrument', 'play a game', 'perform a role' or 'have fun, amuse oneself', stays close to the latter reading. Rather than, for instance, something like 更甜蜜演奏死亡 'play Death more sweetly' (i.e. as if Death were a piece of music), they render the line as: 更甜蜜和死亡玩 'play more sweetly with Death', just like the playing with snakes elsewhere in the poem. Bei Dao and Yi Sha avoid this trap. Another image that is distorted in Wang and Rui's translation is that of the Jews playing musical instruments to accompany dancing. After their intervention, this changes into a scene where the Jews themselves play and dance (表演跳舞 / 给我们跳舞 – 'play and dance' (line 9) / 'dance for us' (line 18)). In a third example, while writing about the bullet that *shoots you level and true* (31), Wang and Rui do not provide the technical detail that the bullet is made of lead (which Bei Dao and Yi Sha do provide), but focus on the shooting person. The pronoun *he* (他) is repeated: 他用子弹射你他射得很准 'he shoots you with a bullet he shoots precisely'.

Unintentional as these omissions may be, they appear to mirror the translators' rhythm of thought. Notably, this rhythm resembles the rhythm of Celan's vocal interpretation,[21] though Wang says he has never listened to any recording. Bei Dao heard it once in German, and recalls Celan's diction as "now plain, now shrill".[22] With all due respect for Bei Dao's

[20] Wang 2008: 41-42.
[21] Paul Celan's reading of "Todesfuge" is available online, e.g. at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVwLqEHDCQE [2017-07-07] or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHgYRtefUqs [2017-07-07].
[22] Bei Dao 2011: 354.

"feel for language" in Chinese, I would argue that Wang and Rui more adequately reproduce the musical effect of the poem recited in its original version, even if this effect in their case does not emerge from the musical properties of language. Where Celan modulates his tone of voice, as if imitating the orders of the camp guards, Wang and Rui speed up, or rather their thought appears to accelerate. Line length does not decrease significantly – on average Wang and Rui's are longer than the original by 2-4 syllables – but the translators become limited in their semantic scope, less equivocal, with more concrete representations and less grammatical "glue" in passages where the images are connected only loosely and can enter into new entanglements with external reality. When Celan's recital becomes enchantingly monotonous, Wang and Rui's translation opens up, allowing all possible context to enter the poem, to re-measure and re-structure it. Bei Dao finds the outcome of these operations *sanwen*-essay-like, or, precisely, "inferior even to the *sanwen*-essay". But evidently, rather than "scatter" (*san* 散) the poem, Wang and Rui want to expand it by pushing its limits in an unknown direction – toward a horizon beyond which the original text and the translation will find Benjamin's "pure language". With reference to part one of this study, this process of translating resembles a teleological *collecting* process of *suibi*-writing, rather than the *sanwen*-ist's job of *recollecting*.

By contrast, *sanwen*-ism does emerge in Yi Sha's translation. His lines are long too, in some cases as many as 10 syllables longer than the German original, as we see in line 4: 我们用铲子在空中挖出墓穴在那里你躺下不会觉得太窄, which literally translates into English as 'with shovels we dig a grave in the air [when] you lie down there you will not find it too narrow'. The (co)verb *yong* 用 'use' or 'with', the verb *juede* 觉得 'think, reckon, find, feel' and the directional compliment *xia* 下 'down' have no direct anchorage in the source text. Theoretically, these modifications should dynamize the scene. But Yi Sha's dynamic does not makes the action more vivid; it is, so to speak, a microdynamic that works within individual actions and makes them more strained and more physical. Sometimes, this leads to (near-)tautology (e.g. dig the grave using shovels), and sometimes to complication: the dead are said to lie down and perceive the grave in a particular way, which grants them considerable agency of a kind that is not there in the original. Yi Sha's translation hinges on its description of actions. When these become inwardly too intense, they break down the visual and acoustic structures of the source text, reconfiguring lines and adding line breaks and breaks between "recitation units": reading the long Chinese line 4 naturally in one breath, as Celan does in the recording, would be difficult. Heavily loaded phrases are also less likely to become essayistically active in the way they do in Wang and Rui's translation. If any abstract or metaphysical meaning manages to flow into the poem between one move of the shovel and the next, it is automatically turned back to its universal physical, pre-lingual source, and presented as an extension of palpable, lived reality.

Remarkably, the lines in Bei Dao's translation are usually 2-4 syllables shorter than Celan's, even though generally speaking, translations often avail themselves of descriptive elements lest too much content be lost. But this does not seem to bother Bei Dao. In some places, he simply throws out the ballast of sense, in favor of sound, to make the text run more smoothly and rhythmically – in musical not intellectual terms. However, this rhythm rarely sounds in sync with Celan's voice. Unlike Wang and Rui, Bei Dao encourages the reader to

surrender to Bei Dao's rhythm, rather than co-shape it by adding their own intellectual "beats", presumably to avoid a situation in which these could make the poem essayistically cacophonic. Bei Dao comes across as a conductor whose baton everyone and everything must obey, including the translated author himself. If we were to borrow Yang Lian's metaphor, Bei Dao, as a contemporary Odysseus, commands the sea of language to stand still, and what is more, to dance for him. His critical essay on the translation of Celan reinforces the association with Yang's *zawen*-like, rhetoric-driven essays and, in light of chapter 4, evinces many typical features of Bei Dao's own poetry-centric, and occasionally egocentric, essayism. The most evident, and arguably the most questionable, manifestation of this appears in the dubious rhetoric of the final passage of his interpretation of "Deathfugue". Here he appropriates one of the most dramatic phrases from the poem, as "background music" to his essay, interspersing his final sentences with the refrain: 死亡是来自德国的大师 'Death is a master from Germany'.[23] Wang Jiaxin objects:

> I think, were Celan still alive, hearing his poetry repeated again and again, he would be upset. Because he wasn't one to play on people's heartstrings. [...] He never wished to expose his suffering to earn people's compassion, and never presented the Holocaust to assert the moral superiority of the Jewish nation. Instead, by arriving at the core of the language, by digging deeply in search of an individual voice, he began his heavenly journey. Why not see this? Why not respect it? (Wang 2008: 46)[24]

How does it work? Why does it work?

If my reuse and recontextualization of terms I established (*recollecting*, *collecting*, *re-collecting*) and adopted (*sanwen*, *suibi*, *zawen*) earlier in this study raises questions, let me reemphasize that I have no intention of portraying the essay as an absolute category of the human mind or spirit, as some have done, or of positing my tentative vocabulary as universally applicable. Making the essay my point of departure for reflection on emigrant writing and on the relationship between life and literature was not motivated by its putative absoluteness and its equally putative conquest of other genres and other spheres of cultural discourse. On the contrary, it was informed by the essay's openness and vulnerability to psychophysical and textual realities. This, I hoped, would allow me to explore various ways in which authors handle the irreconcilability of the domains of lived experience and writing – *and* the desire to connect them as efficiently as possible.

The reemergence of the same terms and questions at various stages of my reflection, as I follow the authors in space and text, may then suggest the presence of repeatable patterns that determine the authors' experience of, and the actions they undertake in, various spheres of their being-in-the-world and writing(-in)-the-world. The essay *displays* these patterns, and does not *dictate* them. Broadly speaking, Wang Jiaxin writes essays and approaches essayization and translates in a *suibi*-like / *collecting* manner, Yi Sha in a *sanwen*-like / *recollecting* manner, and Bei Dao in a *zawen*-like / *re-collecting* manner. Something similar could be said about the other authors in this study, who do not appear in the present chapter,

[23] Bei Dao 2011: 354.
[24] Wang 2008: 46.

because their involvement in translation discourse – if any – is mostly theoretical. But what is the mechanism behind this repeatability, and who or what is responsible for it? The first problem may be called technological, and the second, methodological.

Let's tentatively assume that everything is in the author's hands and mind, i.e. that this is an author who, consciously or otherwise, produces the effect of conceptual repeatability within their own oeuvre. In the terminology of this study, they follow one of three paths: that of *suibi* / *collecting*, *sanwen* / *recollecting* or *zawen* / *re-collecting*, whether they act as essay writers (as discussed in part one), gatekeepers of essayization (part two, chapters 4 and 5) or translators (part three). All of these notions have now come full circle, or, more precisely, these notions have now come three full circles – each with its specific architecture and mechanics. And perhaps they are not exactly circles. Perhaps they are three circle-like yet not-fully-circular hermeneutic trajectories whose non-circularity becomes visible only after a detailed review of gains and losses at every stage of the journey, as it was provisionally signaled in the opening chapter where I discussed "final causes" behind different explicit poetics? Or maybe they are not even circle-like trajectories, but, say… Möbius strips?

Each of these three trajectories – the circular, the hermeneutic-circular, and the strip-like – translates into a different existential situation. And each raises its own subquestion. For the circle: Is the inevitability of repetition a carousel powered by emotions or psychological habits that will not permit the author to jump off, gradually killing their creativity and originality? Think of Yi Sha's stubborn negations and rejections, Wang Jiaxin's stubborn hope and Bei Dao's stubborn pride, making each repeat the same patterns at various existential and artistic levels. For the hermeneutic-circular: Is it an intellectual treadmill built in the name of some higher ideal or hoped-for benefit to be reaped with each completion of the trajectory? Remember: Yi Sha wants to return to poetry as it existed before the emergence of poetic language, Wang Jiaxin dreams of connecting with the spirits of his great predecessors, and Bei Dao desires to rule over the sea of words. For the Möbius strip: is it a manifestation of a general mode of human existence, the very foundation of self-identification, that allows, *and* forces, (every)one to remain the same organic person regardless of what one does and experiences, and writes, and of the unpredictability of circumstance?

My (literary) imagination suggests this last picture: strip-shaped subjects who always return to themselves, from every physical, spiritual and linguistic emigration. And this happens not only when they actively attempt to connect different domains of their existence – for instance, in essay-writing – but also when they are immersed in chaos that is generated by essayization, or when they reach beyond the borders of their own milieu, undertaking the translator's task, or, hypothetically, in any number of other situations. Of course, there are as many shapes of the "circle" as there are authors. That I distinguish only three types here is a necessary simplification. It is based on topological and vector similarities I find in the oeuvres under scrutiny, even though each has its own, specific architecture.

At the same time, I am aware of an irresolvable uncertainty that undermines the above image: isn't it but a projection of the shape and structures of my own imagination on the world I observe? Perhaps my various points of observation as laid out in different chapters – grassroot-level approach, bird's-eye view, etc. – are but an effect of my own traveling up and

down, to and fro, on a big twisted Möbius-Ferris wheel, my conceptual laboratory dangling in a cabin? Perhaps, putting texts in the test-tubes of words, what I do is force them to travel with me on this machine, thus deforming their original trajectories?

Or, perhaps, both perspectives are defensible – or they are, indeed, one perspective. Perhaps something else "travels us", the researcher and the researched, along parallelly twisted tracks between which we easily "translate ourselves". This translation is possible as long as we dare first to take a quantum leap from one safe air corridor to another, through clouds of probability and other things explored earlier, especially in chapter 3.

As I was approaching the final sections of this study, I started discovering an ever-growing number of Möbius-strips in current scholarship that I had not been aware of before and that now suddenly seemed to mushroom around me, from Möbius-strip psychology and neuropsychology to a Möbius-strip structure of society and to a Möbius-strip model for executive leadership... I am not worried about its increasing popularity and hence perhaps the decreasing originality of my ideas. But I do feel uncomfortable about how many proofs of my hypothesis of the "hegemony" of this "two-but-really-one" shape may be found in the world and the absolutization of the image as a key to our internal and external realities. As such I find it important to return to my introductory caveats for a moment.

It is sadly paradoxical that humans, in the era of unprecedented discoveries in all areas of knowledge, have increasingly come to feel themselves so boringly repeatable, even if this is a twisted repeatability that allows for a dose of surprise. Still, I believe that, if it is indeed the case that we are internally "Möbius-stripped", we consist of not one but many concentric twisted strips that constitute orbits of our existence. And it is mostly up to us whether we jump onto one of the orbits and enjoy relative stability forever or for some time, or, alternatively, try our luck somewhere in-between or, possibly, outside. In this study, the life-and-writing essay strip is one such orbit, and the concept of the translational as a specific connection between source and target that I discuss in the following section might be another, more complex and situated in a next dimension. Yet, the orbits should not limit our thinking. They should be taken rather as something that facilitates our existence, making it easier for us when we need to catch our breath and perhaps calmly reconsider and organize our discoveries after a period of intense off-track searching. Obviously, this only holds if we keep ourselves from lingering too long in the comfortable cabin, rotating into dizziness.

Now that essayization reactions have been temporarily pacified by the translators, and, having come full something-like-a-circle, we are close to earth again, I will venture to crack open the door of the language-made capsule we are locked inside of, and reach out. I will try to "touch" the forces that infuse cultural spaces and shape various disciplines – including literature and science – and discourses like those on essay(ization) and translation, and that enable one to move within them and between them.

II. After the Word: Essayistic or Translational

In part two of this study I have noted the possibility of treating intersemiotic and intermedial translation in Zhai Yongming's oeuvre as an example of her search for the ultimate meta-form for her work, driven by the same intention as essayism, but performed in a multidimensional

and multimodal spacetime. But it is certainly not only Zhai in whose output we can find attempts at experimenting with non-literary techniques. Almost all of the protagonists of this study test the creative and/or theoretical potential of intersemiotic and intermedial practices, if only at the basic level of combining text with photographs (e.g. Tsering Woeser, Wang Xiaoni), paintings (Che Qianzi, Gao Xingjian, Yi Sha) or music (Liao Yiwu). While section one has focused on operational interactions between translation and essayization, the present section will reexamine their conceptual kinship, and the possibilities this kinship entails. I will undertake a single case study, on Yu Jian, for specificity rather than representativeness, and without drawing generalizing conclusions. This will help me concretize and synthesize some of the intuitions that have accumulated on the margins of my thought during the writing of the present work, also with an eye to future research.

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As far as Yu Jian's "applied" intermediality and intersemioticity are concerned, they emerge in literature's marriage with drama, photography and performance, in chronological order. However, if seen through the prism of his literary thought and metaliterary output, Yu's oeuvre displays an intriguing phenomenon that I will call "inward self-translatability". He manages, for instance, to extend the principles of versification (*fen hang* 分行 'division into lines, lineation') to discussions of painting, sculpture and theater,[25] and to transfer the rhythmic pattern of blues music into poetry and the philosophy of language.[26] As I have argued in chapter 2, his concept of essayization is also largely a case of translation, specifically of the translation of (anti-)emigrant discourses. On one level, discussed earlier, this is about processed images of physical migrations. But there is another level, that contains echoes of his findings from expeditions into different artistic realms and semiotic systems. To a significant extent, Yu's essayology is based on his long-standing interest in experimental drama, and translates further into a theory of recitation, discussed along with essay(ization) in his "Yu Jian on the Essay and Reading Aloud", analyzed in chapter 1.

Paradoxically, it is only Jakobson's "translation proper", i.e. interlingual translation, that provokes skepticism in Yu[27] – which does not prevent him from proudly exhibiting foreign editions of his works every now and then. Conceivably, his professed reluctance vis-à-vis interlingual translation may stem from a general reticence to playing with elements that he is unable to control, and probing the lands that his other-shore-less poetic sea cannot embrace and conquer for him. For Yu, foreign languages belong in this category. Or perhaps he is interested in translation not as the simple transfer of an object from one environment into another, but as a dynamic, reciprocal transaction between two or more realities – all of which must lie within his line of vision. Ideally, the translation's source and target are located within one oeuvre – his own, that is – or indeed within a single text, enabling him to trace literary structures and the anatomy of the discourse at the cellular level. This is analogous to Yu's attitude to physical emigration, which we reconstructed from his *sanwen*-essays in chapter 1: travelling is exciting and beneficial, as long as every stage of the journey starts and finishes at home.

[25] Yu 2013a: 109-125.
[26] Ibidem: 25-55.
[27] Yu 2004d: 16 .

While experimenting with intermedial translation, Yu Jian made one of the foundational discoveries of his literary thought: the "verb-ness" of literature, culture and language.[28] This concept has since come to lie at the root of many definitions in his private vocabulary across a range of phenomena, from the metaphysical "other shore" (彼岸), through the philosophical *dao* (道) and *wen* (文)[29] to the essay: *sanwen*, literary and otherwise. Yu's first professional confrontation with non-literary art took place in the early 1990s in Beijing, when he participated in physical training for actors organized by avant-garde director Mou Sen. The poet subsequently joined Mou's and Wu Wenguang's project of adapting Gao Xingjian's philosophical play *The Other Shore* (彼岸, 1986) into a "postmodern verse drama" (后现代诗剧) under the quasi-academic title *A Chinese Parts-of-Speech Discussion of "The Other Shore"* (关于《彼岸》的一回汉语词性讨论, 1993).[30] After intensive brainstorm sessions Yu created "something like a play script".[31] The text consisted of several pages of unprocessed dialogues, without a clear role division, stage directions or scenography, for which a director may choose settings and add actions at will.

The "part-of-speech discussion" focuses on the question whether *bi'an* 彼岸 (normally rendered in English as 'the other shore'), is a *mingci* 名词, literally 'a word-that-names' (normally rendered as *noun*) or a *dongci* 动词 'a word-that-moves' (normally rendered as *verb*)[32]; meaning, whether it represents some static and remote reality, or instead refers to a dynamic process of constant becoming and changing. In Mou Sen's interpretation,

A shot from the video of "The Chinese Part-of-Speech Discussion". An actor climbing on the entangled ropes that cover the entire stage space onto "the other shore" – a small gallery hanging several meters over the floor, where other actors wait to pull him on by hand once he arrives at that side of the stage. The actor is repeating: "This is a river, and not a piece of a rope. I must reach the other shore". *Courtesy of Mou Sen and Yu Jian*.

[28] Cf. Xi 2015: 262-263.
[29] Yu 2006a: V.
[30] Ferrari 2016: 322, cf. Yu 2004e: 176-184.
[31] Yu 2004b: 58.
[32] See Maghiel van Crevel's translation of "File 0" and the discussion on 'words-that-name' and 'words that move' in his "Translator's Introduction" (Van Crevel 2001).

protagonists are actors who are rehearsing the play, guided by (someone like) a director who wants them to understand what "the other shore" is. Their first answer is: "a word-that-names". The director, unsatisfied, using a method of teaching through playing, tries to wean them off their essentialist thinking. He wants to redirect their attention from abstract speculative reflection to the physical base of their existence, that is to the movement "which can never be wrong", for "movement is just movement".

While working on *The Other Shore*, Yu Jian came to appreciate the power of the verb, which he had earlier cherished as an ideal of literature without believing it could break down abstract structures of noun-dominated textuality. This led him to the re-discovery of his monumental poem "File 0" (0 档案),[33] written in 1992. In brief, the poem is a register, over 5,500 characters in length, of things and facts from the life of the person that the file is about: an anonymous poet whose biography overlaps with Yu's. The enormous archive with 301,800 drawers resembles an ossuary, white pieces of paper are the only credible "proof of [a person's] existence". Rare "words-that-move" lie buried in heaps of marrowless "words-that-name", or remain "hidden in dark thoughts". If they emerge from the darkness, it is only to execute the orders of despotic, totalitarian "words-that-name", to

> smash get an erection insert tidy up frame up accuse kick when down
> do make fix shout yourself hoarse devastate disclose.

The message of the poem is pessimistic: human life is no heavier than a sheet of paper, suppressed and controlled by mechanisms of power-knowledge and of the writing that writes us. According to Yu's statements on his overall strategy at the time of writing "File 0", it was created to show rather than to mean something, to be ametaphorical and asymbolic, combusting itself like paper in the here and now of reading. But these are obviously not matters that the author controls.

In a 1994-1995 volume of his *Brown Notebook* series, Yu returns to "File 0" and rereads it in the context of experiments with "the other shore". He no more reads a-symbolically, but "post-symbolically", as deconstruction of symbolism rather than its negation. He does not attempt to release the buried verbs. Instead, he adds a layer of verb-ness to the surface of the loathed nouns, and sets the entire system in motion again:

> Poetry's vitality comes from the misplaced movement of words around already formed symbols. This movement can be described. A poem is a clarification of a sequence of such movements.[34]

Soon the poem was physically "moved": adapted, like *The Parts-of-Speech Discussion*, into a Grotowski-style stage drama by Mou Sen.[35] In 1992 Yu showed "File 0" to Mou, who saw the potential of "verb-ness" within the noun structures of the poem, and knew how to activate it. In his play, which premiered in the Brussels Théâtre 140 on 8 May 1995, nouns overwritten with new actions, dis- and mislocated, are re-joined into new, non-totalitarian "wholes", co-shaped by the audience. One actor, Wu Wenguang, speaks about his childhood from the perspective of his relationship with his father. Another, Jiang Yue, starts reading from a love

[33] Yu 2003: 28-41.
[34] Yu 2004d: 29 .
[35] Videos of "The Parts-of-Speech Discussion..." and "File 0" I watched come from a private archive of Mou Sen, who kindly shared them with me in April 2017.

story in his past. Their monologues cut through one another, and are exposed to noise coming from various tools and machines operating on the stage. These include, among other things, an old-style record player that emits the recitation of "File 0": long streams of nouns from the archive of the gobbledygook. The play ends with an ambiguous scene: the actors throw apples and tomatoes into a big industrial fan. The fan smashes them and spreads the pieces all around the stage. This final scene has been interpreted politically, as an allegory for suppressed individuality and the Chinese government's oppression of dissidence. Yet, Mou Sen aware of this tendency, himself warns against such an "annoyingly" simplified understanding. Instead, he emphasizes the complexity and diversity of life, as something that art must be able to address, using simple but powerful and flexible measures to arrive at maximal existential capacity.[36]

Mou's performance can be seen as throwing nouns down from on high. Their falling generates kinetic energy which reaches its maximum just before the nouns hit the ground – meaning the minds of spectators as matrices where new images made of scattered "old" nouns appear. In Yu Jian's words: "When the 'nonsense' is being unveiled, the 'sense' emerges all about".[37] There is one bottom line of possible interpretations of the play, constituted by humans' common experience of growing up, however different their individual receptions of this process are. But whatever happens above this line, i.e. sense-production in the readers' imagination and associations, is wide open and unrestricted. In an interview with Mou Sen cited by the *European Times* (欧洲时报) we read:

A shot from the video of "File 0". Wu Wenguang and Jiang Yue telling their stories on the stage. The machine operated by Wu is the record player from which the recitation of "File 0" is heard. Bright objects in the background are apples impaled on steel rods. The apples will later be thrown in the industrial fan. *Courtesy of Mou Sen and Yu Jian.*

[36] Salter & Mou & Wu 1996.
[37] Cit. from Xi Mi 2015: 265.

> Why *File 0*, without any number? It can be explained as "everyone's file"! As for what the play tells us, Mou Sen maintains that understanding is up to spectators, it is what it is seen as. Does the author have anything to say? If you really need a frame, then this is "about growing up".[38]

If the image of a frame with only one – namely, the bottom – edge brings to mind the shape of the single-edge-single-surface Möbius strip, this is a justified association. Incidentally, I imagine that it is also in line with Yu Jian's way of thinking. However, at the time this strip-like big structure of his oeuvre was not fully formed. The author could not, and perhaps did not want to, entirely control it, if only because in the process of intermedial translation he was sharing his work with another artist. Later on, he began to internalize translation to make it serve his poetics. To this end, he used artistic means that were within his reach: photography and shamanic recitation, as if trying to redirect the verb-ness energy that had been released back toward himself, to pull back the "sea", including all the new meanings it grabbed for him from the land.

Yu Jian distinguishes two types of recitation. The first is *langsong* 朗诵, a performance-like recitation which the poet criticizes mercilessly. In *langsong*, as he writes in "Yu Jian on the Essay and Reading Aloud", "the microphone is a translator"[39], and a bad one at that, as it is unable to mediate the inner complexity of a poem. It cannot recreate the darkness that is inside a text, and instead misleadingly clarifies (*lang* 朗), the sense, offering only one of endless possible interpretations contained within the poem. *Langsong*'s pursuit of reality is an intellectually passive experience confined to emotion-raising playing to the gallery. But there is also another kind of recitation: *nian shi* 念诗, which can do without the "translator" and even without vocal performance. Yu speaks about creative reading (创造性地念).[40] It can be done in public, as Yu does while organizing events consisting in "reading creatively" his own poems in his favorite Kunming bookshop (whose English name is Wheatfields, backtranslated from the Chinese *maitian* 麦田, which is a translation of the English *rye*, as in *The Catcher in the Rye*...) or the associated Salinger Café (塞林格咖啡馆), but also behind the closed doors of his room. According to Yu, the vocality of a poem can be realized within one's mind, using an inner microphone. The soundwave is triggered by impulses from external reality, from the "live scene", and pulled back before it reaches any audience. It conquers external reality for Yu, without involving him in intellectual or emotional relationships with the other. Yu equates this form of recitation, where both "medium" and "target" are internalized, with the *sanwen*-essay. In "The Possibility of Returning Home: Starting from Poetic Blues", he argues:

> I realize increasingly that poetry should have a dynamic, vivid scene, and that text is not enough. I decided that this time I will recite [*nian* 念] creatively, and not passively like before. I want to dictate the rules of this event. [...] I am not only the author of the text, but also the author of recitation. I emphasize: this is *nian*, not *langsong*. In [the first Chinese etymological dictionary] *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters* [说文解字] the character *nian* 念 is defined as 'think frequently'. It consists of "now" [今] and "heart" [心], and could be explained through

[38] Cit. from Yang Nianxi 1995.
[39] Yu 2006: 80.
[40] Yu 2013: 26-27.

these as follows: your heart is here and now. Not like in the popular *langsong*. *Nian* and *langsong* are two completely different notions. *Langsong* constitutes vocal expression, while *nian* is the evocation and continuation of thought. [...]

The *sanwen*-essayization of contemporary poetry doesn't rule out concerns about poetic metre. It means that rhythm is decided by thought. Profound reflection can't be formally conventionalized. Going one level deeper, as regards the sound, Chinese is a musical language. Its four tones can be seen as a very spacious order. Contemporary poetry returns to this basic melody of the Chinese language[41]

In Yu's case essayization emerges as internalized translation. It is kept within the borders of a spiritual homeland where – as Heidegger, his favorite philosopher, put it – poetically dwells a man[42] called Yu Jian. A similar trajectory is visible in other arts in his oeuvre, in particular photography, in which he has been seriously engaged for about ten years. Photography – as Yu writes in the introduction to a book of travel essays called *Notes from the Black Box* (暗盒笔记) – conquers the world, rapes Nature and sometimes the lives of other people, only to bring half-dead moments home and lament them, shedding letters like tears: "If photography means hurting, then let my writing be a penance".[43]

Lhasa River. A man carrying his boat. Photographer: Yu Jian. The picture has been included in Yu Jian's photography book *The Rock, Elephant, The File* (岩石 大象 档案, 2016). *Courtesy of Yu Jian.*

[41] Ibidem: 27-29.
[42] Heidegger 1971: 213-229.
[43] Yu 2006: V-VII.

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Translation, when incorporated by the essay, loops into what Tong King Lee calls the translational in his discussion of experimental Chinese literature from Hong Kong and Taiwan, defined by him as:

> a rhetorical figure that encapsulates different kinds of semiotic transference and border crossing. It operates as a conceptual method that mediates the intervening space between two texts or media, without there necessarily being any ontological mapping between them. This is where the translational differs from translation: whereas the concept of translation assumes a source-target relation that is largely mappable (even where the source text is subject to all sorts of manipulation, a segment-to-segment mapping must still be possible before deviances in the target text can be identifiable), the translational postulates a derivational relationship between two sites without always insisting on a point-to-point correspondence nor a hierarchy between them.[44]

We can also invert the perspective, and ask if the essay might just be a purely translational genre. Its twisted "source-target relations" make its theorists and practitioners see it as both a derivate of other genres and a matrix engendering *all* genres. This allows one to think of it as the epitome of the translational – or perhaps its prototype. The chronology here is unclear, and it is irrelevant.

A high translatability of essay-related discourse into discourses of the discipline called translation studies comes as no surprise. Arguably, this could be ascribed to the intriguing inclusiveness of translation studies rather than to the universality of essayism. In general, translation studies owe their successful expansion in the humanities and the social sciences at least in part to their own *omni*-translatability into other disciplines and discourses. As regards the translation(al) and the essay(istic), they are mutually processible to a large extent through the discourse on emigration whose language feeds both of them, and is metaphorically mapped in their respective structures.

In the scenery of the amusement park sketched toward the end of section one of this chapter, my activity in this study could be summarized in the following way, with some innocous self-mockery. In part one I invited the reader to travel with me on the twisted Möbius-Ferris wheel of the essay, only to dismantle this wheel in part two by meddling with its quantum micro-machinery, and then, in part three, to jump from the dismembered construction onto another, that of translation studies, which I believe to be working in sync with the previous wheel, but to be more stable or minimally better maintained and more visible in contemporary culture.

Obviously, re-naming the essay and kindred phenomena, and transcribing or inscribing them in the context of any broader, more influential discourse will not solve the problems they pose for writers and readers, including academics. But conceivably, certain methods of translation studies could prompt reflection on the essay, or guide it toward a new trajectory. Not without reciprocity: should any finding or technique – if only a single metaphor or a single question – from the essayism discourse prove useful for translation studies, this will not just advance the discipline but also our comprehension of the world. After all, it are not

[44] Lee Tong King 2015: 19.

theories, methods, techniques or metaphors that explore and challenge the world but human minds, which are stimulated – or thwarted – by them, sometimes in unpredictable ways, to recall Hesse and his "reader number three". As long as intense inter-discursive exchange does not lead to confining literature, authors and readers in theoretical shackles but facilitates stimulating "tours through the hundred kingdoms of knowledge, memory, and thought", it is not a vain intellectual exercise, which this study has hopefully shown to a modest extent.

Also, my main goal in this work has not been to "solve problems" but rather to arrive at a structural understanding of some of the basic processes that occur between life and literature, by letting their particles collide and recording my observations. Hence, it may have appeared to the reader that I was taking pleasure in accumulating questions and celebrating their answerlessness, or even intentionally multiplying obstacles, for example in provoking and simulating hypothetical essayizations.

To be sure, I have enjoyed the quantum free fall in part two more than the ride along fixed trajectories marked by the discipline referred to as essayology in part one and the trial round on the big wheel of translation studies in part three. Moreover, I admit to being tempted to poke my finger and twiddle a little with the subatomic machinery of translation studies as well. I am particularly curious to learn what, after the meta-strip of translation discourse is dismantled, could be the next meta-level where we could try to reunite its scattered parts. But answering this question would require a bigger laboratory and a better-equipped workshop than those used for my experiments with the essay, and much more time. The current project must finish at this point, with a healthy dose of dissatisfaction as a driving force for future endeavors.

Appendices

Appendix A: Originals of Poetry by Wang Jiaxin, Wang Xiaoni, Bei Dao and Zhai Yongming

Appendix A contains the originals of the four poems that are discussed the most extensively in the present work: Wang Jiaxin's "London Essays" (伦敦随笔), Wang Xiaoni's "Becoming a Poet Anew" (重新做一个诗人), Bei Dao's "Local Accent" (乡音), and Zhai Yongming's "The Café Song" (咖啡馆之歌).

王家新

《伦敦随笔》

1
离开伦敦两年了，雾渐渐消散
桅杆升起：大本钟摇曳着
在一个隔世的港口呈现……
犹如归来的奥德修斯在山上回望
你是否看清了风暴中的航程？
是否听见了那只在船后追逐的鸥鸟
仍在执意地与你为伴？

2
无可阻止的怀乡病，
在那里你经历一头动物的死亡。
在那里一头畜牲，
它或许就是《离骚》中的那匹马
在你前往的躯体里却扭过头来，
它嘶鸣着，要回头去够
那泥泞的乡土……

3
唐人街一拐通向索何红灯区，
在那里淹死了多少异乡人。
第一次从那里经过时你目不斜视，
像一个把自己绑在桅杆上

抵抗着塞壬诱惑的奥德修斯，
现在你后悔了：为什么不深入进去
如同有如神助的但丁？

4
英格兰恶劣的冬天：雾在窗口
在你的衣领和书页间到处呼吸，
犹如来自地狱的潮气；
它造就了狄更斯阴郁的笔触，
造就了上一个世纪的肺炎，
它造就了西尔维娅·普拉斯的死
——当它再一次袭来，
你闻到了由一只绝望的手
拧开的煤气。

5
接受另一种语言的改造，
在梦中做客神使鬼差，
每周一次的组织生活：包饺子。

带上一本卡夫卡的小说
在移民局里排长队，直到叫起你的号
这才想起一个重大的问题：
怎样把自己从窗口翻译过去？

6
再一次，择一个临窗的位置
在莎士比亚酒馆坐下；
你是在看那满街的旅游者
　和玩具似的红色双层巴士
还是在想人类存在的理由？
而这是否就是你：一个穿过暴风雨的李尔王
从最深的恐惧中产生了爱
——人类理应存在下去，
红色双层巴士理应从海啸中开来，
莎士比亚理应在贫困中写诗，
同样，对面的商贩理应继续他的叫卖……

7
狄更斯阴郁的伦敦。
在那里雪从你的诗中开始，
祖国从你的诗中开始；
在那里你遇上一个人，又永远失去她

在那里一曲咖啡馆之歌
也是绝望者之歌；
在那里你无可阻止地看着她离去，
为了从你的诗中
升起一场百年不遇的雪……

8
在那里她一会儿是火
一会儿是冰；在那里她从不读你的诗
却屡屡出现在梦中的圣咏队里；
在那里你忘了她和你一样是个中国人
当她的指甲疯狂地陷入一场爵士乐的肉里。
在那里她一顺手就从你的烟盒里摸烟，
但在侧身望你的一瞬
却是个真正的天使。
在那里她说是出去打电话，而把你
扔在一个永远空荡的酒吧里。
在那里她死于一场车祸，
而你决不相信。但现在你有点颤抖
你在北京的护城河里放下了
一只小小的空火柴盒，
作为一个永不到达的葬礼。

9
隐晦的后花园——
在那里你的头发
和经霜的、飘拂的芦苇一起变白，
在那里你在冬天来后才开始呼吸；
在那里你遥望的眼睛
朝向永不完成。
冥冥中门口响起了敲门声。
你知道送牛奶的来了，同时他在门口
放下了一张帐单。

10
在那里她同时爱上了你
　和你的同屋人的英国狗，
她亲起狗来比亲你还亲；
在那里她溜着狗在公园里奔跑，
在下午变幻的光中出没，
在起伏的草场和橡树间尽情地追逐……
那才是天底下最自由的精灵，
那才是真正的一对。

而你楞在那里，显得有点多余；
你也可以摇动记忆中的尾巴
但就是无法变成一条英国狗。

11
在那里母语即是祖国，
你没有别的祖国。
在那里你在地狱里修剪花枝
死亡也不能使你放下剪刀。
在那里每一首诗都是最后一首
直到你从中绊倒于
那曾绊倒了老杜甫的石头……

12
现在你看清了
那个仍在伦敦西区行走的中国人：
透过玫瑰花园和查特莱夫人的白色寓所
猜测资产阶级隐蔽的魅力，
而在地下厨房的砍剁声中，却又想起
久已忘怀的《资本论》；
家书频频往来，互赠虚假的消息，
直到在一阵大汗中醒来
想起自己是谁……

你看到了这一切。
一个中国人，一个天空深处的行者
仍行走在伦敦西区。

13
需要多久才能从死者中醒来
需要多久才能走出那迷宫似的地铁，
需要多久才能学会放弃，
需要多久，才能将那郁积不散的雾
在一个最黑暗的时刻化为雨？

14
威严的帝国拱门。
当彤云迸裂，是众天使下凡
为了一次审判？
还是在一道明亮的光线中
石雕正带着大地无声地上升？
你要忍受这一切。
你要去获得一个人临死前的视力。

直到建筑纷纷倒塌，而你听到
从《大教堂谋杀案》中
传来的歌声……

15
临别前你不必向谁告别，
但一定要到那浓雾中的美术馆
在凡高的向日葵前再坐一会儿；
你会再次惊异人类所创造的金黄亮色，
你明白了一个人的痛苦足以照亮
一个阴暗的大厅，
甚至注定会照亮你的未来……

(Wang Jiaxin 2013: 35-42)

王小妮

《重新做一个诗人》

在一个世纪最短的末尾
大地弹跳着
人类忙得像树间的猴子。

而我的两只手
闲置在中国的空中。
桌面和风
都是质地纯白的好纸。
我让我的意义
只发生在我的家里。

淘洗白米的时候
米浆像奶滴在我的纸上。
瓜类为新生出手指
而惊叫。
窗外，阳光带着刀伤
天堂走慢冷雪。

每天从走到晚
紧闭家门。
把太阳悬在我需要的角度
有人说，这城里
住了一个不工作的人。

关紧四壁
世界在两小片玻璃之间自燃。
沉默的蝴蝶四处翻飞
万物在不知不觉中泄露。
我预知四周最微小的风吹草动
不用眼睛。
不用手。
不用耳朵。

每天只写几个字
像刀
划开橘子细密喷涌的汁水。
让一层层蓝光
进入从未描述的世界。

没人看见我
一缕缕细密如丝的光。
我在这城里
无声地做着一个诗人。

1995. 6. 深圳

(Wang Xiaoni 2010)

北岛

《乡音》

我对着镜子说中文
一个公园有自己的冬天
我放上音乐
冬天没有苍蝇
我悠闲地煮着咖啡
苍蝇不懂得什么是祖国
我加了点儿糖
祖国是一种乡音
我在电话线的另一端
听见了我的恐惧

(Bei Dao 2011: 54)

翟永明

《咖啡馆之歌》

1。下午

忧郁　缠绵的咖啡馆
　　在第五大道
转角的街头路灯下
　　小小的铁门

　　依窗而坐
慢慢啜饮秃头老板的黑咖啡
　　“多少人走过
上班、回家、不被人留意”

我们在讨论乏味的爱情
　　“昨天　我愿
　　回到昨天”
一支怀旧的歌曲飘来飘去

咖啡和真理在他喉中堆积
　　顾不上清理
　　舌头变换
晦涩的词藻在房间来回滚动

　　像进攻的命令
越滚越大的许多男人的名字
像骇人的课堂上的刻板公式
　　令我生畏

他侧耳交颈俯身于她
谈着伟大的冒险和奥秘的事物
　　“哭者逊于笑者……
　　我们继续行动……”

　　接着是沉默
接着是又一对夫妇入座
他们来自外州　过惯萎靡不振的
　　田园生活

　　“本可成为
一流角色　如今只是
好色之徒的他毛发渐疏”

我低头啜饮咖啡

酒精和变换的交谈者
消磨无精打采的下午
我一再思索
哪些问题?

你还在谈着你那天堂般的社区
你的儿女
高尚的职业
以及你那纯正的当地口音

暮色摇曳　烛光撩人
收音机播出吵死人的音乐：
“外乡人……
外乡人……”

2。晚上

烛光摇曳
金属壳喇叭在舞厅两边
聒噪　好像乐池鼓出来的
两块颧骨

雪白的纯黑的晚礼服……
邻座的美女摄人心魄
如雨秋波
洒向他情爱交织的注视

没人注意到一张临时餐桌
三男两女
幽灵般镇定
讨论着自己的区域性问题

我在追忆
北极圈里的中国餐馆
有人插话：“我的妻子在念
国际金融”

出没于各色清洁之躯中的
严肃话题
如变质啤酒
泛起心酸的、失望的颜色

“上哪儿找
一张固定的床?”
带着所有虚无的思考
他严峻的脸落在黑暗的深处

我在细数
满手老茧的掌中纹路带来
预先的幸福
“这是我们共同的症候。”

品尝一杯神秘配制的甜酒
与你共舞
我的身体
展开那将要凋谢的花朵

自言自语:
“拿走吧!
快拿走世上的一切!
像死亡　拿得多么干净。”

3。凌晨

因此男人
用他老一套的赌金在赌
妙龄少女的
新鲜嘴唇　这世界已不再新

凌晨三点
窃贼在自由地行动
邻座的美女已站起身说:
“餐馆打烊”

他站起身
猛扑上去把一切结束
收音机里
还在播放吵死人的音乐

玻璃的表面
制止了我们徒劳的争执
那个妻子
穿着像奶油般动人细腻

　　我在追忆
七二年的一家破烂旅馆
我站在绣满中国瓢虫的旧窗帘下
　　抹上口红

不久我们走出人类的大门
　　天堂在沉睡
　　我已习惯
与某些人一同步入地狱

　　“情网恢恢
穿过晚年还能看到什么?”
　　用光了的爱
在节日里如货轮般浮来浮去

一点点老去
　　几个朋友
住在偏僻闲散的小乡镇
他们惯于呼我的小名

　　发动引擎
一伙人比死亡还着急
　　我在追忆
西北偏北一个破旧的国家

雨在下，你私下对我说：
　　“去我家?
　　还是回你家?”
汽车穿过曼哈顿城

1993 年

(Zhai 2015: 88-94)

Appendix B: "Deathfugue" in German, English and Chinese

Appendix B includes the German original of Paul Celan's "Deathfugue", Michael Hamburger's English translation, and Wang Jiaxin and Rui Hu's, Bei Dao's, and Yi Sha's Chinese translations.

Todesfuge

– by Paul Celan

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
wir trinken und trinken
wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete
er schreibt es und tritt vor das Haus und es blitzen die Sterne er pfeift seine Rüden herbei
er pfeift seine Juden hervor läßt schaufeln ein Grab in der Erde
er befiehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete
Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng

Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich ihr einen ihr andern singet und spielt
er greift nach dem Eisen im Gurt er schwingts seine Augen sind blau
stecht tiefer die Spaten ihr einen ihr andern spielt weiter zum Tanz auf

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags und morgens wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith er spielt mit den Schlangen
Er ruft spielt süßer den Tod der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
er ruft streicht dunkler die Geigen dann steigt ihr als Rauch in die Luft
dann habt ihr ein Grab in den Wolken da liegt man nicht eng

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir trinken und trinken

der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau
er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
er hetzt seine Rüden auf uns er schenkt uns ein Grab in der Luft
er spielt mit den Schlangen und träumet der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith

(Celan 2002: 30-32)

Death Fugue

– *translated by Michael Hamburger*

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink it
we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he whistles his pack out
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave
he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink in the morning at noon we drink you at sundown
we drink and we drink you
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined.

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you others sing now and play
he grabs at the iron in his belt he waves it his eyes are blue
jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play on for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon in the morning we drink you at sundown
we drink you and we drink you
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents

He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from Germany
he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as smoke you will rise into air
then a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany
we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink and we drink you
death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue
he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air
he plays with the serpents and daydreams death is a master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

(Celan 2002: 31-33)

《死亡赋格》

王家新、芮虎 译

清晨的黑色牛奶我们在傍晚喝
我们在正午喝在早上喝我们在夜里喝
我们喝呀我们喝
我们在空中掘一个墓躺在那里不拥挤
住在那屋里的男人他玩着他的蛇他书写
他写着当黄昏降临到德国你的金色头发呀
　　玛格丽特
他写着步出门外而群星照耀着他
他打着呼哨就唤出他的狼狗
他打着呼哨唤出他的犹太人在地上让他们掘个坟墓
他命令我们开始表演跳舞

清晨的黑色牛奶我们在夜里喝
我们在早上喝在正午喝在傍晚喝
我们喝呀我们喝
住在屋子里的男人他玩着蟒蛇他书写
他写着黄昏降临到德国他的金色头发呀
　　玛格丽特
你的灰色头发呀苏拉米斯我们在风中
　　掘个坟墓在那里不拥挤

他叫道到地里更深地挖呀你们这些人你们另一些
　　现在唱呀表演呀
他抓去腰带上的枪他挥舞着它他的眼睛是蓝色的
更深地挖呀你们这些人用你们的铁锹你们另一些
　　继续给我跳舞

清晨的黑色牛奶我们在夜里喝
我们在正午喝我们在早上喝我们在傍晚喝
我们喝呀我们喝你
住在那屋里的男人你的金色头发呀玛格丽特
你的灰色头发呀苏拉米斯他玩着蛇

他叫道更甜蜜地和死亡玩吧死亡是从德国来的大师
他叫道更低沉一些现在拉你们的琴尔后你们就会
　　化为烟雾升在空中
尔后在云彩里你们就有一个坟你们不拥挤

清晨的黑色牛奶我们在夜里喝
我们在正午喝死亡是一位从德国来的大师
我们在傍晚喝我们在早上喝我们喝你
死亡是一位从德国来的大师他的眼睛是蓝色的
他用子弹射你他射得很准
住在那屋里的男人你的金发玛格丽特
他派出他的狼狗扑向我们他赠给我们一个空中的坟墓
他玩着蛇做着美梦死亡是一位从德国来的大师

你的金色头发玛格丽特
你的灰色头发苏拉米斯

(Wang Jiaxin 2008: 34-36)

《死亡赋格》
　　北岛　译

清晨的黑牛奶我们傍晚喝
我们中午早上喝我们夜里喝
我们喝呀喝
我们在空中掘墓躺着挺宽敞
那房子里的人他玩蛇他写信
他写信当暮色降临德国你金发的马格丽特
他写信走出屋星光闪烁
他吹口哨召回猎犬他吹口哨召来他的犹太人掘墓

他命令我们奏舞曲

清晨的黑牛奶我们夜里喝
我们早上中午喝我们傍晚喝
我们喝呀喝
那房子里的人他玩蛇他写信
他写信当暮色降临德国你金发的马格丽特
你灰发的舒拉密兹我们在空中掘墓躺着挺宽敞

他高叫把地挖深些你们这伙你们那帮演唱
他抓住腰中手枪他挥舞他眼睛是蓝的
挖得深些你们这伙用锹你们那帮继续奏舞曲

清晨的黑牛奶我们夜里喝
我们中午早上喝我们傍晚喝
我们喝呀喝
那房子里的人你金发的马格丽特
你灰发的舒拉密兹他玩蛇

他高叫把死亡奏得美妙些死亡是来自德国的大师
他高叫你们把琴拉得更暗些你们就像烟升向天空
你们就在云中有个坟墓躺着挺宽敞

清晨的黑牛奶我们夜里喝
我们中午喝死亡是来自德国的大师
我们傍晚早上喝我们喝呀喝
死亡是来自德国的大师他眼睛是蓝的
他用铅弹射你他瞄得很准
那房子里的人你金发的马格丽特
他放出猎犬扑向我们许给我们空中的坟墓
他玩蛇做梦死亡是来自德国的大师

你金发的马格丽特
你灰发的舒拉密兹

(Bei Dao 2011: 349-351)

《死亡赋格曲》

伊沙、老 G 译

黎明的黑牛奶我们夜里喝
我们喝它在中午和早晨我们喝它在夜里

我们喝，我们喝
我们用铲子在空中挖出墓穴在那里你躺下不会觉得太窄
一个男人呆在屋子里玩他的毒蛇，写信
他写道：黑暗正在降临德意志，你的金发的玛格丽特
他写信，然后走出门去，满天繁星闪烁，他吹口哨叫他的猎犬回窝
他吹口哨他的犹太人便站成一排用铲子在地面上挖墓穴
他命令我们开始奏乐为舞会

黎明的黑牛奶我们夜里喝你
我们喝你在早晨和中午我们喝你在夜里
我们喝，我们喝
一个男人呆在屋子里玩他的毒蛇，写信
他写道：黑暗正在降临德意志，你的金发的玛格丽特
你的灰发的舒拉密丝我们用铲子在天空中挖墓穴你躺下不会觉得太窄

他大声叫道：把地球戳得更深些吧，你还有许多活儿在那儿其他人唱起来并演奏
他抓住他腰带里的棒子摇摆着他的眼睛是那么蓝
把你们的锹戳得更深些你们在那儿还有许多活儿其他人继续为舞会演奏

黎明的黑牛奶我们夜里喝你
我们喝你在中午和早晨我们喝你在夜里
我们喝，我们喝
一个男人呆在屋子里你的金发的玛格丽特
你的灰发的舒拉密丝他玩他的毒蛇

他大声叫道：把死亡演绎得更甜美些吧，死神是一位来自德意志的大师
他大声叫道：你们把弦乐器奏得更忧郁些吧，你们就会升起来然后像烟飘向天空
然后你们就会拥有墓穴在云里你们躺着不会觉得太窄

黎明的黑牛奶我们夜里喝你
我们喝你在中午死神是一位来自德意志的大师
我们喝你在夜里和早晨我们喝我们喝
死神是一位来自德意志的大师他的眼睛是蓝色的
他射杀你用装满铅弹的枪对准你射得很准
一个男人呆在屋子里你的金发的玛格丽特
他放他的猎犬咬我们授予我们一片天空中的墓地
他玩他的毒蛇白日做梦死神是一位来自德意志的大师

金发的玛格丽特
灰发的舒拉密丝

(Yi Sha & Lao G: 6-7)

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Glossary of Chinese Names and Terms

The glossary provides names of Chinese authors, critics, and historical figures mentioned in the study, and terms that describe Chinese literary and cultural phenomena relevant for the present work, written in Chinese characters and *pinyin*, with translation into the English language in the case of terminology.

Anti-Rightist Movement → *fanyoupai yundong* 反右派运动
bai hua 白话 → vernacular
Bai Hua 白桦
Bai Ye 白烨
Bei Dao 北岛
bentu wenxue 本土文学 → local-soil literature
bi'an 彼岸→ the other shore
bijiti xiaoshuo 笔记体小说 → novel-in-notes
Cai Xiang 蔡翔
Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹
chapter novel → *zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小说
Chai Ling 柴玲
Che Qianzi 车前子
Chen Chao 陈超
Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实
Chen Zhu 陈柱
ci poetry 词
Chu Qinghua 初清华
chuanqi 传奇 → tales of marvels
Cultural Revolution 文化大革命
culture fever 文化热
Deng Xiaoping 邓小平
Du Fu 杜甫
Duo Yu 朵渔
educated youths → *zhishi qingnian / zhiqing* 知识青年 / 知青
essay → *sanwen* 散文, → *suibi* 随笔, → *xiaopinwen* 小品文, → *zawen* 杂文
essayistic mode (also: → essayistic style) → *sanwenshi* 散文式
essayistic poetry → *sanwen shi* 散文诗
essayistic style (also: → essayistic mode) → *sanwenshi* 散文式
essayization (→ *sanwen*-ization, → *suibi*-ization, → *zawen*-ization)
exile 流亡 (wandering), 放逐 (banishment)
figuration → *juxiang* 具象
fanyoupai yundong 反右派运动 → Anti-Rightist Movement
Fu Li 傅丽
gaige kaifang zhengce 改革开放政策→ reform and opening-up policy
Gao Xiaosheng 高晓声
Gu Hua 古华
grabism→ *nalai zhuyi* 拿来主义
Ha Jin 哈金
Han Dong 韩东
Han Shaogong 韩少功
Han Yu 韩愈
He Xiaozhu 何小竹
Hong Zhigang 洪治纲
Hou Yi 后羿
Hu Dong 胡冬
Hu Ping 胡平
huaben 话本 → vernacular story
Huang Canran 黄灿然

Wan Zhi 万之
Wang Anyi 王安忆
Wang Dan 王丹
Wang David der-Wei (Wang Dewei) 王德威
Wang Jiaxin 王家新
Wang Xiaoni 王小妮
Wang Zengqi 汪曾祺
Wenmang 文盲
wenren 文人→ literati
Woeser Tsering (Wei Se) 唯色
Wu Jun 吴俊
Wu Yiqin 吴义勤
Xi Chuan 西川
Xi Mi 奚密
xia ban shen shiren 下半身诗人→ Lower Body Poets
Xiao Jianguo 肖建国
xiangtu xiezuo 乡土写作→ native-soil writing
xiaopinwen 小品文→ little prose pieces, → essay
Xiong Bingming 熊秉明
Xu Jingya 徐敬亚
xungen 寻根→ root-seeking
Ya Siming 亚思明
Yan Jiaqi 严家其
Yang Jian 杨键
Yang Li 杨黎
Yang Lian 杨炼
Yang Nianxi 杨年熙
Yang Yuanhong 杨远宏
Ye Mimi 叶觅觅
Yi Sha 伊沙
Yin Lichuan 尹丽川
Yu Jian 于坚
Zang Di 臧棣
Zhang Yigong 张一弓
zawen-essay 杂文
zawenhua 杂文化 → *zawen*-ization
zawen-ization → *zawenhua* 杂文化
Zhai Yongming 翟永明
Zhang Boli 张伯笠
Zhang Chengzhi 张承志
Zhang Lun 张伦
Zhang Wei 张炜
Zhang Zhen 张真
Zhang Zhenjin 张振金
zhanghui xiaoshuo 章回小说→ chapter novel
Zheng Yi 郑义 (writer)
Zheng Yi 郑怡 (scholar)
zhishi qingnian / zhiqing 知识青年 / 知青 → educated youths
Zhong Ming 钟鸣
Zhou Qichao 周启超

Summary

Focusing on emigration discourse in Chinese contemporary literature, the present study proposes reflection on mechanisms that connect literary writing with what is usually perceived as extra-textual reality, that is the sphere of individual and collective lived experience. Through the prism of the evolution of (our approach to) literary genres, I try to observe "paradigm slippages" in literature, i.e. moments when a certain way of understanding and describing literature and its interactions with "the world" proves insufficient, and a new way to do so emerges.

However, instead of adopting a literary-historical perspective marked by breakthroughs in collective consciousness, like those between the ancient, the modern, and the postmodern, I concentrate on shifts that run through single literary works and are more effectively captured in the language of natural sciences. I argue that at different levels and in different circumstances, texts may be understandable and describable within different physics of literature: from genre-based "Newtonian" physics, to universalizing "Einsteinian" physics whose conceptual structures are reflected in the essay, to "quantum" physics whose microdynamic I observe when scrutinizing processes of essayization.

My thesis draws on both Western and Chinese literary thought. I am particularly interested in their respective discoveries concerning essayism and its role in culture, including its connections with various forms of physical or intellectual displacement, which were recognized early on in both literary traditions.

Part one of this study is a discussion of the mechanics of the essay genre as a specific entanglement of the textual and the lived. Chapter 1 investigates a quasi-discipline provisionally called "emigratology of the essay", meaning a thread in meta-literary discussion on the essay that argues for the emigrant origins and/or the emigrant nature of the essay. It does so with attention to individual authors' poetics and to more collective views of literature. For the former, author studies include Zhang Zhen, Tsering Woeser and Wang Xiaoni; for the latter, they include Yu Jian, Wang Jiaxin and Yang Lian.

Conversely, chapter 2 centers around the "essayography of emigration", meaning textual representations of emigration in essays, with special attention to the ways in which emigrant experiences are spaciotemporally mapped in textual form, taken here as a temporary, three-dimensional shape of the text-author-reader constellation. The abstracted, ideal architecture of the essay is modeled as the Möbius strip: a non-orientable topological structure with two optically distinguishable surfaces – here: life and writing – that are twisted so that they are transformed into a single surface, a non-binary dualism. I explore the synchronization of text vectors – that is, directions into which authorial hands and authorial and readerly minds are pulled by things like linguistic structures, genre conventions, intertextual

mechanisms – and vectors in which these hands and minds are driven by lived experience. Chinese essay-related terminology brings out, and facilitates description of, these transformations, offering the minute, spaciotemporally structured (sub)genre categories of *sanwen*, *suibi* and *zawen*, whose hermeneutic potential I tap into. This allows me identify three types of essayistic mechanics that I call *recollecting*, *collecting* and *re-collecting.*

Part one is followed by an interlude, which begins by verifying the essayologists' claims that the essayistic spirit – or, in post-metaphysical terminology, essayness – remains active in culture beyond the form we know as the essay, and influences other literary genres and other spheres of culture. Distancing myself from the essayologists' statements, I argue that so-called essayization might be a rewarding meta-literary perspective only inasmuch as it provokes reconsideration of dynamic textual mechanisms that engage the text itself, its author and its readers, that is the simultaneous negotiation by these mechanisms of form at the sub-cellular, quantum level of the work. Intervention in textual microstructures triggers phenomena that cannot be approximated within traditional genre-based paradigms of literary studies. Therefore, in final sections of the interlude I provide some terminological and methodological backup for further reflection.

The notion of "quantum literature" is subsequently developed and evaluated in part two of this study. In chapter 3 I test its methods and tools experimentally through a detailed analysis of texts that represent different genres, by exposing them to various essayizations. Authors discussed in this chapter include Wang Xiaoni, Gao Xingjian, Liao Yiwu and Su Xiaokang. Chapters 4 and 5 explore possibilities for the author to take control of essayization reactions in their oeuvre and include them as a part of their overall literary strategy. I examine such methods of "oeuvre management" in the work of Bei Dao, Zhai Yongming, Ha Jin and Han Shaogong.

Part three, comprised of a single chapter 6, functions as a coda, gathering intuitions and hypotheses that have emerged in the process of writing the previous parts with an eye to future research. It reconsiders essayization from the meta-perspective provided by the phenomenon of translation, focusing on translation as a process of redistributing the essayistic potential of a text. Analyzing three different Chinese renditions of Paul Celan's "Deathfugue" (Todesfuge), I trace similarities between the respective translators' strategies with regard to essay-writing and their theoretical and practical approach to translation. In the last case study, on intermedial practices in Yu Jian's oeuvre, I discuss parallels between the essayistic and the translational, and possibilities for treating the essay as a translational genre. This leads to further questions about the mutual translatability of discourses, including the translatability of translation discourse itself.

Samenvatting in het Nederlands

Deze studie richt zich op het vertoog over emigratie in de hedendaagse Chinese literatuur, en nodigt uit tot reflectie op mechanismen die literair schrijven verbinden met hetgeen men gewoonlijk waarneemt als extra-tekstuele werkelijkheid, namelijk de sfeer van individueel en collectief geleefde ervaring. Door het prisma van de evolutie van (onze benadering van) literaire genres tracht ik vast te stellen waar in de liteatuur er "paradigmatische speling" optreedt: als manieren om literatuur te begrijpen en beschrijven tekort blijken te schieten, en nieuwe manieren zich aandienen.

Echter, in plaats van een literair-historisch perspectief dat doorbraken in het collectieve bewustzijn markeert – zoals die van antiek naar modern en postmodern – concentreer ik me op verschuivingen binnen individuele literaire werken, die effectiever te vatten zijn in de taal van de natuurwetenschappen. Ik betoog dat teksten op verschillende niveau's en onder verschillende omstandigheden begrijpbaar en beschrijfbaar kunnen zijn binnen een natuurkunde van de literatuur: van een op genre gebaseerde "Newtoniaanse" variant naar een universaliserende "Einsteiniaanse" variant waarvan de conceptuele structuren worden weerspiegeld in het essay, en dan naar een "quantum"-variant waarvan ik de microdynamiek observeer tijdens mijn onderzoek van het verschijnsel essayisering.

Mijn proefschrift put uit Westers én Chinees denken over literatuur. Ik heb bijzondere belangstelling voor beider bevindingen waar het gaat om essayisme en zijn rol in de cultuur, inclusief het verband met uiteenlopende vormen van fysieke en intellectuele ontplaatsing (*displacement*), die in beide tradities vroeg worden herkend.

Deel een van het proefschrift bespreekt de mechanica van het genre van het essay als een verknoping van het tekstuele en het geleefde. Hoofdstuk 1 onderzoekt een quasi-discipline met als werktitel de "emigratologie van het essay", dat wil zeggen een streng in het meta-literaire debat over het essay volgens welke het essay zijn oorsprong heeft in emigratie of emigratief van aard is. Hierbij is er aandacht voor de poëtica's van individuele auteurs én voor meer collectieve literatuuropvattingen. Voor het eerste liggen werken van Zhang Zhen, Tsering Woeser en Wang Xiaoni ter tafel; voor het tweede werken van Yu Jian, Wang Jiaxin en Yang Lian.

Omgekeerd richt hoofdstuk 2 zich op de "essayografie van emigratie", dat wil zeggen tekstuele representaties van emigratie in de vorm van essays, met bijzondere aandacht voor de manieren waarop emigratie-ervaringen ruimtetijdelijk in kaart worden gebracht in een tekstuele vorm, die ik hier opvat als een tijdelijke, driedimensionele vorm van de constellatie tekst-auteur-lezer. Een abstracte, ideale architectuur van het essay wordt dan gemodelleerd als de Möbiusband, een onoriënteerbare topologische structuur met twee optisch onderscheiden

oppervlakken – hier: leven en schrijven – die gedraaid zijn zodat ze worden omgevormd tot een enkel oppervlak, in een niet-binair dualisme. Ik verken de synchrosatie van tekstvectoren – dat wil zeggen de richtingen waarin de handen van de auteur en de hoofden van de auteur en de lezer worden getrokken door bijvoorbeeld talige structuren, genre-conventies, intertekstuele mechanismen – met vectoren waarin die handen en hoofden worden voortgedreven door de geleefde ervaring. De Chinese terminologie voor het essay laat deze omvormingen zien en vergemakkelijkt hun beschrijving, met behulp van de verfijnde, ruimtetijdelijk gestructureerde (sub)genre-categorieën van *sanwen*, *suibi* en *zawen*, en ik put uit het hermeneutisch potentieel daarvan. Dit stel me in staat drie typen van essayistische mechanismen te identificeren, die ik noem: *herverzamelen / herinneren* (*recollecting*), *verzamelen* (*collecting*) en *her-verzamelen / her-inneren* (re-collecting).

Deel een wordt gevolgd door een tussenspel. Dat begint met een verificatie van de bewering van de essayologen dat de essayistische geest – of, in post-metafysische terminologie, essayheid – nog steeds actief is in de cultuur, voorbij de vorm van het essay zelf, en dat die andere literaire genres en andere culturele sferen beïnvloedt. Ik neem afstand van de beweringen van de essayologen, en betoog dat zogenaamde essayisering slechts in zoverre een waardevol meta-literair perspectief biedt dat ze heroverweging uitlokt van dynamische tekstuele mechanismen die tekst, auteur en lezer aangaan, dat wil zeggen: de gelijktijdige aanpak, door die mechanismen, van de literaire vorm, op het subcellulaire quantum-niveau van het werk. Interventie in tekstuele microstructuren brengt verschijnselen op gang die niet benaderd kunnen worden binnen traditionele, op genres gebaseerde paradigma's van de studie van de literatuur. Om die reden bied ik aan het eind van het tussenspel enige theoretische en methodologische ruggesteun, ten behoeve van verdere reflectie.

In deel twee van dit werk wordt het begrip "quantumliteratuur" vervolgens ontwikkeld en geëvalueerd. In hoofdstuk 3 stel ik zijn methoden en zijn gereedschap experimenteel op de proef, via gedetailleerde tekstanalyse in verschillende genres, door die bloot te stellen aan verschillende vormen van essayisering. De auteurs die ik hier bespreek zijn Wang Xiaoni, Gao Xingjian, Liao Yiwu en Su Xiaokang. Hoofdstukken 4 en 5 verkennen de mogelijkheden die de auteur heeft om essayiserings-reacties in het eigen oeuvre te beheersen en ze op te nemen in de eigen algehele literaire strategie. Ik onderzoek dergelijke methoden van "oeuvre-beheer" in het werk van Bei Dao, Zhai Yongming, Ha Jin en Han Shaogong.

Deel drie, dat samenvalt met hoofdstuk 6, fungeert als een coda, en brengt intuïties en veronderstellingen bijeen die zijn ontstaan bij het schrijven van de voorgaande hoofdstukken, mede met het oog op toekomstig onderzoek. Dit deel beziet essayisering vanuit het meta-perspectief dat wordt geboden door vertaling, en richt zich op vertaling als een process van redistributie van het essayistisch potentieel van een tekst. Ik analyseer drie Chinese versies van Paul Celans "Doodsfuga" (Todesfuge) en traceer overeenkomsten in de wisselwerking tussen enerzijds het schrijven van essays en anderzijds de theoretische en praktische benadering van vertalen, bij drie verschillende auteurs/vertalers: Wang Jiaxin, Bei Dao en Yi Sha. In de laatste casus, over intermediale praktijken in het werk van Yu Jian, bespreek ik parallellen tussen het essayistische en het vertaalachtige, en de mogelijkheid om het essay te behandelen als een vertaalachtig genre. Dit leidt tot vervolgvragen over de wederzijdse vertaalbaarheid van vertogen, inclusief de vertaalbaarheid van het vertaalvertoog zelf.