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

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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.