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

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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.
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> 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.
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> 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".
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> 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.
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> [...] 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.

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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

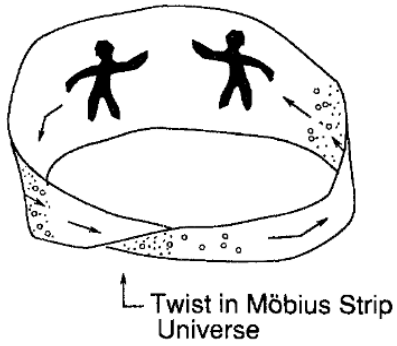
[50] Rorty 1989: 96.

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.