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

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## CHAPTER 2

### **An Essayography of Emigration: How Essays Reflect the Emigration Experience**

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

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

#### **I. Recollecting: Reliving the Past**

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

The temporal relation between the R-remembered [recollectively remembered] object or event and the subject at the time at which she R-remembers the object is [...] a relation of being 'temporally before'.

Second, each subject traces a continuous spatio-temporal path through the world. [...] Usually, this means that the R-remembered object lies on the spatio-temporal path that the subject herself has traced through the world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Debus 2008: 410-411.

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

### *Emigration from one's native soil*

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

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

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<sup>2</sup> For detailed discussion on the relationship between “local-soil literature”(本土文学) and “native-soil writing” (乡土写作), and comprehensive history of the latter, see: Bai Ye 2011 (esp. Introduction).

<sup>3</sup> Hong 2007: 373-379.

<sup>4</sup> Lin 2011: 107-112.

<sup>5</sup> Ni 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Lin & Xiao 2008 a-f.

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>7</sup> Mo Yan 2013: 53-54.

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

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

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

### *Homelands without homes*

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

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<sup>8</sup> Jia 2015: 13.

<sup>9</sup> The term might be also rendered as ‘native city’ or ‘my city’; the former, yet, would be contrary to the intention of the author who declares rejection of “nativeness”, while the latter I eliminated based on the observation of syntactic structures containing 本城 (the word is frequently preceded by a possessive pronoun *my*).

<sup>10</sup> Hong 2007: 370-373.

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

As far as I am concerned, I don't have any homeland, I have only "this city". My "this city" is, naturally, Xi'an. [...]

While other people metaphorize their "homelands" as "paradises", my "this city" emerges from a natural course of "worldly" events which were imposed on me, so I have no way but to accept them. [...] I've heard that writers can be divided into two categories: those who write walking and those who write sitting. If we cannot avoid such categorizations, then, well, I undoubtedly belong to the latter. And to write sitting one needs a chair, a room and a city...

I write in this city – since I realized this point, I have no longer been envying those native-soil writers who possess a homeland to return to. Compared to their native places, more distant by the day, my city is right in front of my eyes, at my fingertips. No need to rack my brain to painstakingly piece together facts in my memory, or to compete in who is "more native", more authentic, more credible.<sup>11</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>11</sup> Yi Sha 2007: 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Laughlin 2008: 1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>13</sup> Yi Sha 2007: 238.

<sup>14</sup> Hsia 1999: 533-554. For (reconstruction of) polemics around Hsia’s concept see e.g.: .Zhang Jin 2007, 2009; Wang David Der-wei 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem: 240.



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

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

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

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

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem: 255.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem: 256.

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>18</sup> Van Crevel 2008: 20.

<sup>19</sup> Yin 2003: 004.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem: 007; Sartre’s words: “L’enfer, c’est les autres” are usually rendered into English literally as: “hell is other people”, which translates to Chinese as: 地域即他人. Yin writes: 他人是地狱, which retranslates into English as: “the other is hell”, this being an alternative, also frequently used, although apparently distorted, rendition of Sartre’s aphorism.

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

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

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

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

#### *Theoretical returns to written homes*

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

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

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

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

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<sup>21</sup> Ibidem: 177.

<sup>22</sup> Yu 2013a: 12.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem: 15.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>24</sup> Yu 2013b: 1-6.

<sup>25</sup> De Obaldia 1995: 221.

<sup>26</sup> Han Dong 2013: 25.

<sup>27</sup> Liu Chun 2010: 272-273.

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>28</sup> Ouyang 2013a: 29.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem: 33-34.

<sup>30</sup> Ouyang 2013b: 176-189, 221-237.

<sup>31</sup> Yang Li: 38-39.

<sup>32</sup> Badiou 2001; esp. chapter V, p. 58-89.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>33</sup> This citation from *The Great Learning* (大学) in the West is commonly believed to be authored by Ezra Pound and rendered as a motto of literary Modernism, while in fact Pound’s words were a loose translation of a phrase from the Chinese classical masterpiece; for the history of this misunderstanding see e.g.: North 2013 (chapter 5, pp. 144-171).

<sup>34</sup> Mott 2012: 60-67.

<sup>35</sup> Huizinga 1949: 119.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>36</sup> Che Qianzi 2013: 60-65.

<sup>37</sup> Caputo 2001: 11.

What's important is that the very act of seeking out places like these stimulates me to reflect on larger problems, like the relationship between poetry and its era, and leads me to think that even today we may still be writing to complete poetry left unfinished by those who came before us.

The more I live and the more I learn, the more I feel that all poets derive from one soul. If Yeats had been born in the late Tang Dynasty he would probably have been Li Shangyin 李商隐. If I'd been born in nineteenth-century New England and was a solitary woman, who knows but that I would have been another Emily Dickinson? If I didn't become her, well, then who would? The fact is I would want to become Emily Dickinson. Now, when I tick off the names of these great poets, I don't mean to elevate myself. What I'm getting at is that even though our lives may be divided by language and culture, we're all on the way toward that "one soul."<sup>38</sup>

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

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

### *Disoriented emigration*

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

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<sup>38</sup> Crespi 2012: 78-82.

<sup>39</sup> De Obaldia 1995: 221.



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

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

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

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

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

### *Wide horizons of exilic existence*

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

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

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<sup>40</sup> Brodsky 1986: 30.

<sup>41</sup> Liu Zaifu 2005.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*: 13.

The second half of [Sakyamuni's] behavioral language inspired me: self-exile in fact is not exile, but return – return to the point where life is full of dignity and independent, where the soul can soar freely [...] When I figured out that self-exile means returning to the self, my mood changed suddenly: I also have many reasons to smile from the depths of my heart and emotions. [...] I returned to the most dignified form of life.

[...] During my return, I should express my particular gratitude to the great Chinese philosopher Laozi. [...] *The Way and Its Power* [道德经] frequently reminds us of this imperative: one should return to their infancy. [...] Another [instruction] is: return to the natural, primordial spiritual culture of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* [山海经] era. [...] As for the classical literature and ancient heroes, I no longer read these stories with my brain, but always with my life. [...]

I enter into their bodies, and they enter into mine. They are my motherland, my homeland, my culture. Therefore, I feel acutely that my motherland, my home together with me traveled to the other land. [...] It turned out that as regards the motherland, one may distinguish between motherland as a material, physical structure and motherland as an emotional structure. Although I had bidden farewell to my physical motherland, I returned to the motherland made from emotions, and this motherland I feel deeply in the marrow of my bones. [...] The further I go, the deeper my return.<sup>43</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>43</sup> Ibidem: 18-19.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem: 21.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>45</sup> Admussen 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Kong Jiesheng: 64.

<sup>47</sup> Liao 2005: 33.

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

Every day, every moment I remind myself: “don’t think too deep, don’t think!” Raise your shoulder-pole, take your plane, fuck everything and go ahead!

– Will there be any wood from the blossoming sandalwood tree waiting for you?

– Maybe yes, maybe no...<sup>48</sup>

### *Patching memory gaps*

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

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

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

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<sup>48</sup> Zheng 2005: 59.

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

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

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

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<sup>49</sup> See the *Open letter of Tiananmen survivors, participants, and supporters. To Carma Hinton, Richard Gordon, Director and Producer of the Gate of Heavenly Peace, May 28th, 2009*, and discussion between signatories of the letter and the film's producers: [http://www.tsquare.tv/film/reply\\_facts.html](http://www.tsquare.tv/film/reply_facts.html) [2017-06-23].

<sup>50</sup> Zhu 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Sheng 2005: 194-201.

<sup>52</sup> Kundera 1985:5.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>53</sup> Ibidem: 200-201.

<sup>54</sup> Dickinson 1961: 135.

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>55</sup> Baudrillard 1988: 166-167.



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

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

Then, you can stow the map, its guidance finished. Can you speak the language of ordinary people? Can you speak languages of ethnic groups or local dialects? How much do you know about the ins and outs of the life fed by this soil? Can you hear the anguish of this place and feel the injustice of the earthly world? All of the knowledge you have been swallowing since your early childhood collapses when you face the truth, and a new, white map, a solid frame, gradually emerges in your heart. [...]

In 1981 and 1985, when I visited again after a long time that steppe, the shepherds were impressed that I still remembered its topography. Indeed, when I was walking alone in a dark night, my memories were one by one emerging from shades casted by mountains, and I could easily find my yurt. All in all, however, it goes without saying that I was still pretty far from grasping the four hundred miles wide grassland that stretch out in the shepherds’ hearts. Later on, while describing it, I had no way but to fill its emptiness with imagination, emotions, and scholarship.<sup>56</sup>

### III. Re-Collecting: Architecture of Elsewhere

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

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<sup>56</sup> Zhang Chengzhi 2001: 200-201.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>57</sup> Ha Jin 2008: KL 836-839 [KL = Kindle Location].

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

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

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

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<sup>58</sup> Ibidem: KL 849-851.

<sup>59</sup> Gao 2005: 268.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem: 269.

<sup>61</sup> For detailed reconstruction of the discussion on inner emigration, see e.g. Klapper 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Zhang Jeanne Hong 2004.

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>63</sup> Zhai 1993.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem: 143.

<sup>65</sup> Liu Chun 2008: 151.

<sup>66</sup> <http://blog.sina.com.cn/lcx>.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>67</sup> Liu Cixin 2009: 81.

<sup>68</sup> The Chinese title is: 为了创造一个完全属于我们自己的宇宙我在宇宙中到处打洞; on the cover, under the title, there is also author’s translation into English, which I use here correcting his grammar mistake.

<sup>69</sup> Wenmang 2012: 1.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*: 351.

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>71</sup> Epstein 1995:217.

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

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

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

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

