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

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CHAPTER 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When the author goes out in the reader's shoes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elsewhere he avails himself of inverted proportionality:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Local Accent

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Fall

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II. Coffee and Truth in Zhai Yongming's Poetry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At the threshold

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Switching generic codes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Borrowing dimensions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[70] Lessing 1984