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

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## Summary

Focusing on emigration discourse in Chinese contemporary literature, the present study proposes reflection on mechanisms that connect literary writing with what is usually perceived as extra-textual reality, that is the sphere of individual and collective lived experience. Through the prism of the evolution of (our approach to) literary genres, I try to observe “paradigm slippages” in literature, i.e. moments when a certain way of understanding and describing literature and its interactions with “the world” proves insufficient, and a new way to do so emerges.

However, instead of adopting a literary-historical perspective marked by breakthroughs in collective consciousness, like those between the ancient, the modern, and the postmodern, I concentrate on shifts that run through single literary works and are more effectively captured in the language of natural sciences. I argue that at different levels and in different circumstances, texts may be understandable and describable within different physics of literature: from genre-based “Newtonian” physics, to universalizing “Einsteinian” physics whose conceptual structures are reflected in the essay, to “quantum” physics whose microdynamic I observe when scrutinizing processes of essayization.

My thesis draws on both Western and Chinese literary thought. I am particularly interested in their respective discoveries concerning essayism and its role in culture, including its connections with various forms of physical or intellectual displacement, which were recognized early on in both literary traditions.

Part one of this study is a discussion of the mechanics of the essay genre as a specific entanglement of the textual and the lived. Chapter 1 investigates a quasi-discipline provisionally called “emigratology of the essay”, meaning a thread in meta-literary discussion on the essay that argues for the emigrant origins and/or the emigrant nature of the essay. It does so with attention to individual authors’ poetics and to more collective views of literature. For the former, author studies include Zhang Zhen, Tsering Woeser and Wang Xiaoni; for the latter, they include Yu Jian, Wang Jiaxin and Yang Lian.

Conversely, chapter 2 centers around the “essayography of emigration”, meaning textual representations of emigration in essays, with special attention to the ways in which emigrant experiences are spatiotemporally mapped in textual form, taken here as a temporary, three-dimensional shape of the text-author-reader constellation. The abstracted, ideal architecture of the essay is modeled as the Möbius strip: a non-orientable topological structure with two optically distinguishable surfaces – here: life and writing – that are twisted so that they are transformed into a single surface, a non-binary dualism. I explore the synchronization of text vectors – that is, directions into which authorial hands and authorial and readerly minds are pulled by things like linguistic structures, genre conventions, intertextual

mechanisms – and vectors in which these hands and minds are driven by lived experience. Chinese essay-related terminology brings out, and facilitates description of, these transformations, offering the minute, spatiotemporally structured (sub)genre categories of *sanwen*, *suibi* and *zawen*, whose hermeneutic potential I tap into. This allows me identify three types of essayistic mechanics that I call *recollecting*, *collecting* and *re-collecting*.

Part one is followed by an interlude, which begins by verifying the essayologists' claims that the essayistic spirit – or, in post-metaphysical terminology, essayness – remains active in culture beyond the form we know as the essay, and influences other literary genres and other spheres of culture. Distancing myself from the essayologists' statements, I argue that so-called essayization might be a rewarding meta-literary perspective only inasmuch as it provokes reconsideration of dynamic textual mechanisms that engage the text itself, its author and its readers, that is the simultaneous negotiation by these mechanisms of form at the sub-cellular, quantum level of the work. Intervention in textual microstructures triggers phenomena that cannot be approximated within traditional genre-based paradigms of literary studies. Therefore, in final sections of the interlude I provide some terminological and methodological backup for further reflection.

The notion of “quantum literature” is subsequently developed and evaluated in part two of this study. In chapter 3 I test its methods and tools experimentally through a detailed analysis of texts that represent different genres, by exposing them to various essayizations. Authors discussed in this chapter include Wang Xiaoni, Gao Xingjian, Liao Yiwu and Su Xiaokang. Chapters 4 and 5 explore possibilities for the author to take control of essayization reactions in their oeuvre and include them as a part of their overall literary strategy. I examine such methods of “oeuvre management” in the work of Bei Dao, Zhai Yongming, Ha Jin and Han Shaogong.

Part three, comprised of a single chapter 6, functions as a coda, gathering intuitions and hypotheses that have emerged in the process of writing the previous parts with an eye to future research. It reconsiders essayization from the meta-perspective provided by the phenomenon of translation, focusing on translation as a process of redistributing the essayistic potential of a text. Analyzing three different Chinese renditions of Paul Celan's “Deathfuge” (Todesfuge), I trace similarities between the respective translators' strategies with regard to essay-writing and their theoretical and practical approach to translation. In the last case study, on intermedial practices in Yu Jian's oeuvre, I discuss parallels between the essayistic and the translational, and possibilities for treating the essay as a translational genre. This leads to further questions about the mutual translatability of discourses, including the translatability of translation discourse itself.