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How the caged bird sings: Educational background and poetic identity of China's obscure poets

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4 Bei Dao: "The Wanderer Holding a Poppy"

4.1 Introduction

Bei Dao is one of the most prominent and widely translated poets on the contemporary Chinese poetry scene. He was born in Beijing in August 1949, the year when the PRC was founded.[232] He has used various pennames. When publishing poetry and essays, he has mostly used Bei Dao ("northern island"), which was given to him by Mang Ke, his friend and co-founder of the journal *Today*. When publishing fiction in unofficial journals, he has used the penname Shi Mo (石默, "silent as a stone") and Ai Shan (艾珊, homophone for "[I] love Shan", signifying his love for his younger sister, who was drowned when trying to save someone else from drowning in 1976). Some of his fiction was published in official journals; in these cases he used his original name, Zhao Zhenkai. He also had a nickname, *Lao Mutou* (老木头, "old wood"), indicating he is silent and stubborn in his friends' eyes.[233]

Bei Dao is widely considered a voice of dissent, in regard to a series of political events in mainland China: the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen incident in 1976, the Movement to Eliminate Spiritual Pollution and the Protest Movement in spring 1989 which ended in violent suppression in June of that year, remembered as June Fourth (六四). He was at a literary conference in Berlin when the 1989 crackdown happened, and was denied entry into mainland China and effectively exiled ever since. When he tried to return to Beijing in 1994, he was interrogated at the airport and his entry was refused. Only in 2002 was he allowed by the authorities to revisit mainland China for a short time, and his opportunities for visiting China have since remained limited and tightly circumscribed, although he has been able to move

[232] Another saying is that Bei Dao was born in October, see Bei Dao 2010b: 171
[233] Bei Dao 1983: 1

somewhat more freely since 2006. And he chose to reside in Hong Kong since 2007.[234]

Bei Dao was popular among readers in mainland China, but from them he also faced the biggest challenges. In 1984, he was voted as one of the ten most popular poets in a nationwide poll run by the authoritative poetry journal *The Stars* (星星). But during his trip to Sichuan, where he would be awarded the prize, he was challenged by poets from Sichuan. His readers at the scene expressed their disappointment in his latest poem «Daydream» (白日梦), which made the atmosphere awkwardly tense.[235] Later, the Third-Generation poets explicitly attacked him with a slogan “Down with Bei Dao”(打倒北岛), and mocked the characteristics of Obscure poetry.[236] Such a slogan echoes political slogans such as “Down with imperialism!”(打倒帝国主义) and sounds offensive.

Scholarship is inclined to divide Bei Dao’s poems into a pre-1989 (pre-exile) and post-1989 (exile) period, considering that Bei Dao’s forced exile from 1989 has had great and direct influence on his writings.[237]

Bei Dao’s early writings display some similarity with establishment poetry in its “style of grandiosity and sloganizing”, in the words of Li Dian.[238] His early poems feature “early sentimentality, youthful defiance of arbitrary authority, tributes to love and friendship, and a steadily deepening pessimism”, as Bonnie McDougall writes in the preface to Bei Dao’s translated anthology in 1991.[239]

As for Bei Dao’s later poems, Yang Lanyi holds that the theme of exile becomes salient.[240] His later poems as a whole become more introverted and introspective, and more abstract and fragmented. His poetry becomes “hermetic and self-contained”, as Ronald Janssen writes.[241] As noted by Jiang Ruoshui, his irregular structure, fractured syntax and highly abstract imagery often resist interpretation.[242]

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[234] http://www.bjnews.com.cn/culture/2020/01/17/675791.html
[235] Xiao Quan 2006: 16
[236] Cheng Weidong 1987
[237] Chen Chao 2007b: 91
[238] Li Dian 2007
[239] Bei Dao 1991: preface Xii
[240] Yang 2010: ch 4 & 5
[241] Jessen 2001
[242] Jiang Ruoshui 1997

Bei Dao is the most widely translated contemporary Chinese poet in the English language. Nearly all of his poems have been translated into English, and they have been compiled into several anthologies. *Notes from the City of the Sun* and *The August Sleepwalker* translated by Bonnie S. McDougall, collect Bei Dao's poems written from 1970 to 1986. *Old Snow* translated by Bonnie S. McDougall and Chen Maiping, collects poems from late 1988 to early 1990. *Forms of Distance* translated by David Hinton, *Landscape over Zero* translated by David Hinton and Yanbing Chen, and *Unlock* translated by Eliot Weinberger and Iona Man-Cheong, collect Bei Dao's later works. *The Rose of Time* edited by Eliot Weinberger, contains selected translations from several preceding anthologies and adds some new poems translated by Eliot Weinberger and Iona Man-Cheong. *Endure* translated by Clayton Eshleman and Lucas Klein, offers some new translations of the poems selected from the anthologies above.[243]

Bei Dao's collection of essays *City Gate, Open Up* is autobiographical, covering topics such as experiences in primary school and secondary school, interesting events of living in Beijing as a child and his memories of his father.[244] Another collection of essays, *The Book of Failure* (失败之书), which records the author's life events from 1989 to 1993, also reflects on experiences in primary and secondary school.[245]

4.2 School Education

Bei Dao attended Hongshan Temple primary school (弘善寺小学, not a religious school, but a school located in a temple), Beijing No. 13 junior high school (北京十三中) and Beijing No. 4 senior high school (北京四中). Because of the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, he dropped out of school when he was in the second year of senior high school, at the age of 17.

[243] Bei Dao 1983, 1988, 1991, 1996, 2009, 2000a, 2010a
[244] Bei Dao 2010b
[245] Bei Dao 2004: preface, written by Bei Dao

4.2.1 Chinese Lessons

From Bei Dao’s reflection on his first literary engagement, we can conclude that two persons, his teacher of the subject Chinese Language and Literature in primary school, and the famous writer Gao Shiqi (高士其, 1905-1988) play an important role.

Bei Dao gratefully considers Dong Jingbo (董静波), his teacher of Chinese in primary school, as his first editor and publisher, because his essay were usually scored high and were publicly read in class as excellent examples.[246]

It is interesting to notice that the imagery of amber appearing in a textbook for primary school recurs in Bei Dao’s poetry. As researches show, “Chinese legend declares that a dead tiger’s heart reappears in time fossilized into amber (琥珀), in reality the fossilized resin of pine trees. Not only does amber, with its caramel colors, share a resemblance to what a fossilized tiger’s heart might look like, it also shares a homophone with the word ‘tiger’ (虎). Hence, amber is understood to embody and symbolize courage. But amber is also revered because of its association with pine trees and hence longevity.”[247]

There is an article entitled “Amber” (琥珀) in a primary school textbook published in 1961.[248] This article is adapted from a book *Oola Boola’s Wonder Book* (translated into Chinese as 乌拉波拉故事), which was written by the German scientist Bruno H. Bürgel in 1932 and translated by Gu Junzheng (顾均正).[249] In this article, an archaeologist tells a story of how a piece of amber was formed: a fly was hunting around a pine tree, when it was hit by a drop of resin. The fly kept struggling, but the resin kept dropping. At the end, the fly was wrapped in resin all around. As time passed by, the resin hardened and turned into brownish gold. It formed a piece of amber, as a type of fossil containing mysterious remnants from history.

[246] Bei Dao 2004: preface, written by Bei Dao
[247] Welch 2012: entry AMBER. See also Eberhard 2006, entry AMBER.
[248] People’s Education Press 1961: 39.
[249] Bürgel 1954

Bei Dao often employs the metaphor by comparing amber to history, such as in the ninth stanza from his long poem «Daydream» written in the early 1980s. In McDougall's translation:[250]

For many years	多少年
Many rivers dried up	多少河流干涸
Exposing what was hidden	露出那隐秘的部分
It is an empty, bare museum	这是座空荡荡的博物馆
Whoever places himself within it	谁置身其中
May regard himself as an exhibit	谁就会自以为是展品
To be gazed at by invisible glances	被无形的目光注视
Just like an insect asleep for a thousand years	如同一颗琥珀爆炸后
Released by the amber's explosion	飞出的沉睡千年的小虫

In a poem called «Random Thoughts» (随想), the image of amber is used to refer to the "east". As the poet puts it, in McDougall's translation:[251]

In this piece of amber the east	东方，这块琥珀里
Was a vaguely looming bank	是一片苍茫的岸

Amber as a symbol of history is further explored in the poem « Perfect» (完整). In this poem, a philosophy of history is delivered: protagonists in historical events, who were once rivals, make peace with one another at the end. In Hinton and Chen's translation:[252]

A perfect flame in amber	琥珀里完整的火焰
War's guests	战争的客人们
Gather around it keeping warm	围着它取暖

[250] Bei Dao 1988: 131
[251] Bei Dao 1988: 90
[252] Bei Dao 1996: 10-11

As alternatives to the image of amber, the images of wax and mica are also found in Bei Dao’s poems. For example, the poem «Wax» (蜡), in Eshleman and Klein’s translation:[253]

The wax of puberty	青春期的蜡
Buried deep behind the lock of memory	深藏在记忆的锁内
...	……
The lit candle wax	被点燃的蜡烛
Dazzles like the sky-changing	晕眩得像改变天空的
Toll upon roll of a bell	一阵阵钟声
This moment’s only silence	此刻唯一的沉默

These three poems deliver a similar message in which the image of amber with its beautiful colors is surrounded by other creations of the natural world; and used by the poet as a symbol of a national history and a personal history. Amber embeds and preserves precious and subtle players in history, but history cannot be fully known or grasped by later generations.

4.2.2 Gao Shiqi

Other than Dong Jingbo, Gao Shiqi was mentioned several times when Bei Dao recounted his primary school. Bei Dao wrote his first poem in the fourth grade in primary school under the inspiration of Gao Shiqi. In Bei Dao’s words:[254]

> It was a collation of several poems which came from *the People’s Daily*. They were filled with big words and phrases, such as “the wheels of history are rolling forward,” “the lapdogs of imperialism,” “a mantis trying to stop a chariot” [to overrate oneself and attempt something impossible], “the future of communism”… I am afraid that I might have been under the influence of Gao Shiqi’s concept of time.

[253] Bei Dao 2010b: 102-103
[254] Bei Dao 2010b: 117

Bei Dao also mentioned reciting Gao Shiqi's Political Lyricism «The Song of Time» (时间之歌) , and describes such reciting as "dramatic reading", in Ted Huters and Feng-ying Ming's translation:[255]

> I can remember the athletic field enveloped in dust, with the entire student body gathered around and the teachers supervising. I stood on the brick platform, raising my voice: O, time / time, which sweeps by.

In Gao Shiqi's official introduction as a member of the Writers Association, he was portrayed to be the most famous and respectable scientist, a disabled but optimistic person inspired by the history of the CCP, and an industrious writer who composed scientific essays and poetry with elementary and secondary students as intended readers.[256] In the 1950s, he mainly published his works in *People's Daily* (人民日报). From 1956 to 1962, when Bei Dao attended primary school, Gao Shiqi published several works of Political Lyricism. One of his poems is entitled «Farewell to 1958» (送别 1958), which employs political metaphors and slogans, such as "the East Wind prevails over the West Wind" (东风压倒了西风), "a new era in history" (历史新的纪元), and "the noblest ideal" (最崇高的理想).[257] He also published a poem called «Uncle Time» (时间伯伯) in the journal *People's Literature* (人民文学) in 1955. This poem calls on the students to seize the moment to achieve the goal of building a socialist-communist country.[258]

As the materials cited above show, Bei Dao's memory is inaccurate when it comes to the title of Gao's poem. However, it is reasonable to assume that Bei Dao composed his early Political Lyricism under the influence of Gao Shiqi, and with the encouragements from teacher Dong Jingbo.

[255] Bei Dao 2000b: 249
[256] Chinese Writers Association (ed). 1957: 297-328
[257] Gao Shiqi 1958
[258] Gao Shiqi 1955

4.2.3 Extra-Curriculum Activity

Bei Dao’s willingness to get involved in revolution had been cultivated while at school, and reached its peak when he was a senior high school student.

Bei Dao was deeply attracted to the honor of being a member of the Young Pioneers and being one of those selected to perform the flag-raising ceremony. As Bei Dao recounted:[259]

> After I joined the Young Pioneers, I only got to the rank of vice-team leader (with one stroke on the armband). This was almost a kind of humiliation; even my younger brother became a squad leader (two strokes on the armband). Luckily, I was selected to be the drummer, which made me overjoyed.

Beijing No. 4 middle school was famous for being a place gathering the offspring of the political leaders. Liu Yuan (刘源), the son of Liu Shaoqi (刘少奇), the former President of the PRC, was one of the students at the time. Before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, Bei Dao had already sensed the coming of the Revolution from his classmates’ reactions:[260]

> During the class breaks, my classmates were discussing matters in a grand and engaged manner, such as revolutionary ideals and the (related) moments of their (revolutionary) deaths. It seemed as if everybody was about to face the final test. In private I made up my own slogan for the moment before I would sacrifice myself, rehearsing it again and again. Imagining this, the place I pictured would have to be surrounded by green pines. I even put my fingers between the door and its frame, closing the door more and more tightly, to the point where the pain in my fingers caused me to break a sweat.

When the Cultural Revolution broke out, Bei Dao was shocked to discover that his classmates were gathering together wearing Red Guards attire and riding well-

[259] Bei Dao 2010b: 23
[260] Bei Dao 2010b: 134

made bicycles. As Bei Dao described, he was not a member of Youth League at that time, and his family's class origin was not good, meaning that it was not of the kind favoured by the political authorities. He hoped that he could become one of the politically privileged group, but failed. However, when he happened to find a well-made bicycle with nobody in the vicinity, he rode the bicycle in the revolutionary crowd, no longer feeling that he was an outsider. He made up the illusion that he was a main character in the movement.[261]

When his classmates or senior schoolfellows actively participated in the Red Guards Movement, Bei Dao also got himself involved in the movement by participating in the Mass Exchange of Revolutionary Experiences (大串联), which was encouraged by the government to travel across the country for free.[262] He made a wooden box which could hold Mao Zedong's works. One sentence was written on the box by Bei Dao with red paint, "Remember Chairman Mao's words in mind, melt them in blood, and put them into practice" (把毛主席的话印在脑子里, 溶化在血液中, 落实在行动上).[263]

He was eager for revolution, and to show his loyalty to Chairman Mao: at the time, this meant that he was eager to break down the hierarchy in his school, in which he was not among the politically privileged group Also, as a teenager, he wanted to get away from routine education, and from mathematics, which he found a difficult subject.

However actively involved Bei Dao was in the revolution under Mao's call, he rejected violence. When he witnessed a violent interrogation of a thief by a Red Guard, he felt it crude and did not agree that was the proper penalty for theft.[264]

4.3 Family Education

Bei Dao's father Zhao Jinian (赵济年) was the vice-president of the Publicity Department of the China Association for Promoting Democracy (one of eight non-Communist political parties in mainland China) in the 1950s, academic affairs

[261] Bei Dao 2010b: 136-137
[262] Kwok-sing Li 1994: 35-36
[263] Bei Dao 2010b: 163
[264] Bei Dao2010b: 143-145

officer of the Central Institute of Socialism in the 1960s and 70s, and also the head of the Chinese People Insurance Company in the 1980s.[265]

Bei Dao’s mother Sun Meili (孙美利) was a nurse, and was born in a Shanghai family with a strong Christian background in 1921. Her Christan background is mentioned in an essay written by Bei Dao’s younger brother Zhao Zhenxian (赵振先) in a blog run by one of Sun’s family members, and in some essays in remembrance of Bei Dao’s father.[266] Also, as the blog indicates, many of Sun’s family members were Christians. However, Bei Dao mentioned neither his mother’s religious belief nor her influence on him in regard to Christianity. This is probably because in mainland China, under ideological constraints and in a complex political situation, Christians were generally not inclined to discuss their religions in public from the early 1950s until the early 1980s (today, Christianity is coming under increasing pressure again).[267]

Bei Dao disagreed with his father on two issues, which are related to his poetry writing. Bei Dao was forced to recite the classical Chinese poetry under the command of his father, but could not sympathize with the leisurely and carefree life attitude delivered in these poems. As Bei Dao writes in the poem «Asking the Sky» (问天), in Hinton’s translation:[268]

Tonight a confusion of rain	今夜雨零乱
Fresh breezes leaf through the book	清风翻书
Dictionaries swell with implication	字典旁敲侧击
Forcing me into submission	逼我就范
Memorizing ancient poems as a child	从小背古诗
I couldn’t see what they meant	不得要领
And stood at the abyss of explication	阐释的深渊旁
For punishment	我被罚站

[265] Bei Dao 2010b: 178, 185, 194

[266] http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_a4a370780101m69i.html, Du Xiu 2014; and an article entitled “Respectable, Amiable and True Nature”(可敬可亲真性情) published in http://www.cmdrt.com/News/DI/2011-01-28/2107.html. The author is unknown.

[267] Zhao Tian’en & Zhuang Wanfang 1997

[268] Bei Dao 1994: 60-61

Further, Bei Dao did not gain the approval of his father when he wrote his early poem «Hello, Baihua Mountain» (你好，百花山) in 1972. In this poem, Bei Dao opposes the Maoist monopoly on particular images such as the sun (sunlight). In McDougall's translation:[269]

Along the path in the primordial wood	沿着原始森林的小路，
Green sunlight flows through the slits	绿色的阳光在缝隙里流窜。
A russet hawk interprets into bird cries	一只红褐色的苍鹰，
The mountain's tale of terror	用鸟语翻译这山中恐怖的谣传。

When he showed the manuscript to his father, his father was shocked by the line "Green sunlight flows through the slits". Right before Bei Dao's writing of this poem, his father was rusticated to the countryside, and he was very cautious when it came to the issue of politics.[270] In his father's view, Bei Dao might be seen as committing a crime. First of all, Bei Dao did not eulogize the sun or the sunlight, which was conventionally viewed as a metaphor for Mao Zedong at the time. Secondly, Bei Dao did not employ the conventionally approved words to describe either the sun or the sunlight. Instead of using the word "red", Bei Dao used "green". Instead of eulogizing Chairman Mao's victory, Bei Dao used the verb "flees".[271] Bei Dao's father ordered him to burn this poem. Conflicts between father and son happened quite often afterwards.[272]

4.4 Learning Webs

After Bei Dao dropped out of school in 1966, he benefited from his own learning web, which was constituted by his peers such as Shizhi, foreign literature in Chinese translation, and his mentor Feng Yidai (冯亦代, 1913-2005).

[269] Bei Dao 1988: 19
[270] Bei Dao 2010b: 191
[271] Bei Dao 2010b: 191
[272] Bei Dao 2010b: 191-193

4.4.1 Shizhi

Bei Dao has acknowledged Shizhi’s poems as an inspiration for him to write modern Chinese poetry, while writing ancient Chinese poetry was more popular at that time. It was Shizhi who triggered Bei Dao to write modern poetry. Some day in 1970, Bei Dao happened to hear Shizhi’s poems, such as «When We Depart» (当我们出发的时候) and «Destiny» (命运), recited by a friend. He was deeply touched by the feelings of loss and distress presented in these poems.[273] Nevertheless, while Shizhi is a steady believer in the future, Bei Dao changed to doubt and shout out “I-Do-Not-Believe!”(我……不……相……信！), one of Bei Dao’s most famous line of poetry and cited in high frequency by others.

4.4.2 Lorca via Dai Wangshu

As mentioned in chapter two, Bei Dao also drew on the underground reading practices among the children of high-ranking officials. As Bei Dao described it, these secret readings “not only opened new vistas for spiritual refuge but exemplified a style that was radically different from the official Socialist Realism.”[274] Dai Wangshu’s translation of Federico García Lorca as an influential work is mentioned frequently by the Obscure poets. Below are excerpts from Lorca’s «Sleepwalkers’ Ballad» (梦游人谣 [Romance sonámbulo]), in John Frederick Nims’s and Dai Wangshu’s translations:[275]

Green it’s your green I love.	绿啊，我多么爱你这绿色。
Green of the wind. Green branches.	绿的风，绿的树枝。
The ship far out at sea.	船在海上，
The horse above on the mountain.	马在山中。
Shadows dark at her waist,	影子裹住她的腰，
she's dreaming there on her terrace,	她在露台上做梦。
green of her cheek, green hair,	绿的肌肉，绿的头发，
with eyes like chilly silver.	还有银子般沁凉的眼睛。
Green it's your green I love.	绿啊，我多么爱你这绿色。
Under that moon of the gypsies	在吉卜赛人的月亮下，

[273] Bei Dao 2000b: 251
[274] Bei Dao & Gleichmann 1996: 388
[275] Nims 1990: 265, Dai Wangshu 2014: 236

things are looking at her	一切东西都看着她，
but she can't return their glances.	而她却看不见它们。

Green symbolizes something the writer dreams of but never actually owns, before the departure from the girl, caused by war. Lorca's influence is demonstrated by the imitations of the usage of green. Bei Dao described, in Huang Yibing's translation:[276]

> I first read *Selected Poems of Lorca* in Dai Wangshu's translation in the early 1970s. The great book-banning campaign only deepened our spiritual thirst and hunger. When *Selected Poems of Lorca* passed through our hands hurriedly, it made quite a stir. Lorca's shadow once loomed over the underground poetry scene in Beijing. There was Lorca's echo in Fang Han (Sun Kang)'s poetry; as for Mang Ke's long-lost poem "Green within Green," its title was obviously derived from "Sleepwalker's Ballad"; in the early 1980s, I introduced Lorca to Gu Cheng, so his poetry was also tinted with Lorca's color.

We can find similar usage in at least thirteen poems written by Bei Dao. «Hello, Baihua Mountain», mentioned above, is a case in point. Other poems include «In my Transparent Sadness» (在我透明的忧伤中), «Life and Roads» (日子与道路) and «Cold Hope» (冷酷的希望).

4.4.3 Feng Yidai

The acknowledged translator Feng Yidai and his wife Zheng Anna (郑安娜), who lived in the same compound as Bei Dao's family and were old friends of Bei Dao's father, acted as mentors for Bei Dao from the early 1970s to the early 1980s. Bei Dao's father introduced his son to Feng, in hope that Bei Dao would learn English from Feng. As recounted by Bei Dao, after being forced to drop out of school, he loved to visit Feng. Bei Dao liked to discuss detailed questions about translation from English to Chinese with Feng. Furthermore, he was attracted by the works of foreign literature collected in Feng's house. After the Cultural Revolution, Bei Dao

[276] Huang Yibing 2008

benefited from the translation “workshops” organized by Feng in translating William Somerset Maugham’s fiction, in which the participants were invited to offer feedback on Feng’s translation. Also, at the suggestion of Feng, Bei Dao enrolled in and finally passed the qualification exam for translators, which provided job opportunities for Bei Dao in the magazine-publishing world. Furthermore, Feng also proposed the alternative English name *The Moment* for the journal *Today* (and in fact the very first issue of the journal carried this English caption on its cover). Although Bei Dao did not stick with Feng’s suggestion in the long run, he could still recall the moment of their conversation after 28 years.[277]

4.5 Poetic Identity: Christianity

It is not common to find symbols from Christianity in works of the Obscure Poets, except for Bei Dao and Shu Ting. In Bei Dao’s case, perhaps there is a connection with the fact that his mother was a Christian.

The original version of Bei Dao’s «The Answer» is a simple and “mechanical” example to support the argument above. The first stanza originally goes as follows, building on McDougall’s translation:[278]

Debasement is the mirror armour of the base,	卑鄙是卑鄙者的护心镜，
Nobility the epitaph of the noble.	高尚是高尚人的墓志铭。
In such a crazy world,	在这疯狂的世界里，
—— This is the sacred text.	——这就是圣经。

The last two lines were deleted and do not appear in the version in which the poem has become widely known. “圣经” in the last line could also be rendered as “the Bible”, but here the term (which literally means “Sacred Classic”) is perhas best read in a more generic sense, as referring to (the principles emanating from) a sacred text. This seems likely in light of the preceding lines.

A more direct example to show the influence of Christianity on Bei Dao is a poem entitled «Faith» (信仰), from the poetry sequence «Notes from the City of the

[277]http://mjlsh.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/Book.aspx?cid=4&tid=1354
[278] Bei Dao 1988: 33

Sun» (太阳城札记). This poetry sequence includes several short poems, each of two or three lines only. In McDougall's translation:[279]

A flock of sheep spills into a green ditch	羊群溢出绿色的洼地
The shepherd boy pipes his monotonous tune	牧童吹起单调的短笛

Combining the title and the poem's body text, «Faith» may well be read as a reference to the Bible, in the images of sheep and the shepherd.

Similar examples can also be found in «Resume» (履历), «About Eternity» (关于永恒), and «Subway Station» (地铁车站). In the beginning of «Resume», in McDougall's translation:[280]

Once I goosestepped across the square	我曾正步走过广场
My head shaved bare	剃光脑袋
The better to seek the sun	为了更好地寻找太阳
But in that season of madness	却在疯狂的季节里
Seeing the cold-faced goats on the other side	转了向，隔着栅栏
Of the fence I changed direction	会见那些表情冷漠的山羊
When I saw my ideals	直到从盐碱地似的
On blank paper like saline-alkaline soil	白纸上看到理想

In Political Lyricism, the square (often associated with the Square of Heavenly Peace in Beijing) is a common symbol of active participation in the revolution, and the sun is a symbol of Mao Zedong. The first three lines suggest that the poet was an enthusiastic follower of Mao. The following lines can be read as referrring to the Bible. From the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*:[281]

> The nature of the goat lent itself to symbolism, but in comparison to sheep imagery, the number of metaphorical references in the Bible is limited. Goats are destructive to cultivated areas, and with their beetling brow and thrust-out lower lip they could easily represent power and belligerence…Their overbearing temper and aggressiveness

[279] Bei Dao 1983: 37
[280] Bei Dao 1988: 87
[281] Freedman 1992

> required the shepherd to keep close watch over the flocks so that the sheep would not be harmed.

Here, “goat” may read as referring to the Red Guards who engaged in the ransacking of private homes and public places in the name of smashing “old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits”. As previously discussed, Bei Dao’s opinion towards Mao and the Cultural Revolution changed when he witnessed the widespread violence. Lines 5 and 6 could then be seen as alluding to his conscious distancing and separation from the Red Guards in hindsight.

The “narrow gate” is another image that may be connected with Christianity. In the Chinese context, “narrow gate and narrow window” (窄门窄户) is an idiom that means a family is poor. But the Christian “narrow gate” has a different meaning. It occurs in the *Gospel of Matthew* 7: 13-14:

> “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

Bei Dao directly borrows the metaphor of the narrow gate from the Bible in his poem «Another Legend» (另一种传说). In McDougall’s translation:[282]

Dead heroes are forgotten	死去的英雄被人遗忘
They are lonely, they	他们寂寞，他们
Pass through a sea of faces	在人海里穿行
Their anger can only light	他们的愤怒只能点燃
The cigarette in a man’s hand	一支男人手中的烟
Even with the help of a ladder	借助梯子
They can no longer predict anything	他们再也不能预言什么
Each weather vane goes its own way	风向标各行其是
Only when they huddle	当他们蜷缩在
At the foot of their hollow statues	各自空心的雕像的脚下
Do they realize the depth of despair	才知道绝望的容量
They always come and go at night	他们时常在夜间出没
Suddenly illuminated by a single lamp	突然被孤灯照亮

[282] Bei Dao 1988: 105

But difficult to distinguish nonetheless	却难以辨认
Like faces pressed against frosted glass	如同紧贴在毛玻璃上的脸
Finally, they slip through the narrow gate	最终，他们溜进窄门
Covered over with dust	沾满灰尘
Taking charge of the solitary key	掌管那孤独的钥匙

This poem describes the undesirable destiny of a hero, forgotten and ignored by the masses. But the text suggests that such a hero is one of the few people that will find truth.

4.6 Poetic Identity: A Variant of Political Lyricism

4.6.1 Early Political Lyricism

As mentioned before, Bei Dao composed his early Political Lyricism in the early 1960s under the influence of Gao Shiqi and his teacher Dong Jingbo. In the early 1970s, he continued to compose Political Lyricism, for example «Because We Are Still Young» (因为我们还年轻). Bei Dao chose not to keep the manuscripts of poems such as this, which obviously indicates his (retrospective) dissatisfaction towards to them. However, we can gather more information about «Because We Are Still Young» from Bing Xin's (冰心) poem «Because We Are Still Young: In Reply to a Young Friend» (因为我们还年轻——答一位年轻朋友).

Bing Xin was a famous Chinese writer, and she was once the boss of Bei Dao's father in the Publicity Department of the China Association for Promoting Democracy. Bei Dao paid a visit to Bing Xin and presented her with «Because We Are Still Young» in 1972. Bing Xin's poem in reply is a typical example of Political Lyricism that pledges elderly citizens' dedication to the party: the elderly, just like the young, should continue to worship the great leader Chairman Mao faithfully and devote themselves to the construction of the socialist country.[283] As Bei Dao recounts, «Because We Are Still Young» is intended to go against the nihilistic and

[283] Wang Binggen 2015: 344-346

decadent thoughts held by his generation. This poem is characterized by “didacticism, especially with regard to morality” (道德说教).[284]

Besides, it has been noted in scholarship that Bei Dao’s early works such as «The Answer» are close to Political Lyricism.[285] One textbook for university students whose major is not Chinese literature and language, even calls it “excellent Political Lyricism”.[286] Characteristics of Political Lyricism, such as the overt political content, a lyrical tone and a persona speaking for/to the masses, can be found in «The Answer». In McDougall’s translation:[287]

I came into this world	我来到这个世界上，
Bringing only paper, rope, a shadow,	只带着纸、绳索和身影，
To proclaim before the judgment	为了在审判前，
The voice that has been judged:	宣读那些被判决的声音。
Let me tell you, world,	告诉你吧，世界
I-Do-Not-Believe!	我……不……相……信！
If a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet,	纵使你脚下有一千名挑战者，
Count me as number one thousand and one.	那就把我算作第一千零一名。
	……
If the sea is destined to breach the dikes	如果海洋注定要决堤，
Let all the brackish water pour into my heart;	就让所有的苦水都注入我心中，
If the land is destined to rise	如果陆地注定要上升，
Let humanity choose a peak for existence again.	就让人类重新选择生存的峰顶。

Furthermore, some (but not all) stanzas in the poem «Rainy Night» (雨夜) are typical Political Lyricism. In Mc Dougall’s translation:[288]

Even if tomorrow morning	即使明天早上

[284] Bei Dao & Liu Zichao 2009
[285] van Crevel 2008: 89, Edmond 2012: ch 4, Fu Yuanfeng 2013, Li Qin 2015
[286] Zhang Zhifu 2013: 165
[287] Bei Dao 1988: 33
[288] Bei Dao 1983: 47

The muzzle and the bleeding sun	枪口和血淋淋的太阳
Make me surrender freedom, youth and pen	让我交出青春、自由和笔
I will never surrender this evening	我也决不会交出这个夜晚
I will never surrender you	我决不会交出你
Let walls stop up my mouth	让墙壁堵住我的嘴唇吧
Let iron bars divide my sky	让铁条分割我的天空吧

4.6.2 A Change of Usage of Textbook Metaphor: Poppy

As mentioned in chapter one, symbolic images originated from nature are often employed in Political Lyricism. The plum blossom and the green pine are common symbols in political lyricism. The poppy, firstly appearing as a key symbolic image in an article in a textbook, is used by Bei Dao in several poems.[289]

Zhu Zhu's research on the historical usage of the poppy in Chinese literature shows that from the Tang dynasty until the Ming dynasty, the poppy had was associated with beauty. Things changed when it was connected with opium in the Qing dynasty, and it has counted as a symbol of evil ever since.[290]

As discussed in chapter two, one of the elementary textbooks I reviewed contains an article "Why the Flowers of Poppies are Red" (罂粟为什么开红花), which tells the story of Danko.[291] Similar to the metaphorical meaning of poppy used in the textbook, Bei Dao employs this symbolic image in several of his early poems. One example is «Let's Go» (走吧), which is addressed to his friend Lu Huanxing (陆焕兴). In McDougall's translation:[292]

Let's go—	走吧，
Fallen leaves blow into deep valleys	落叶吹进深谷，
But the song has no home to return to.	歌声却没有归宿。
Let's go—	走吧，
Moonlight on the ice	冰上的月光，
Has spilled beyond the river bed.	已从河床上溢出。

[289] People's Education Press 1959
[290] Zhu Zhu 2019
[291] People's Education Press 1959: 71-75
[292] Bei Dao 1988: 34

Let’s go—	走吧，
Eyes gaze at the same patch of sky	眼睛望着同一片天空，
Hearts strike the twilight drum.	心敲着暮色的鼓。
Let’s go—	走吧，
We have not lost our memories	我们没有失去记忆，
We shall search for life’s pool.	我们去寻找生命的湖。
Let’s go—	走吧，
The road, the road	路呵路，
Is covered with a drift of scarlet poppies.	飘满了红罂粟。

“The road covered with a drift of scarlet poppies” echoes the reality that Bei Dao and Lu Huanxing courted danger for the good cause when they tried to promote the unofficial journal *Today* by pasting it on the Democracy Wall. The emotion in this poem is not one of sadness, but rather one of excitement when facing danger, similar to that delivered in the textbook.

Another example is «An End or a Beginning» (结束或开始), in which Bei Dao transforms the poppy story from the textbook. Although Bei Dao does not use the metaphor of poppies, he keeps the thread of the story: when a martyr sacrifices, his/her blood would dye the plant red. In McDougall’s translation:[293]

If fresh blood could make you fertile	如果鲜血会使你肥沃
The ripened fruit	明天的枝头上
On tomorrow’s branches	成熟的果实
Would bear my colour	会留下我的颜色

The imagery of poppy is still seen in Bei Dao’s later poem «Poppy Night» (罂粟夜), written in the late 1990s, but the poem as a whole delivers something different. Below are excerpts in Weinberger and Man-Cheong’s translation:[294]

Switching on the starlit sky	打开满天星光

[293] Bei Dao 1988: 64
[294] Bei Dao 2000: 83 & 85

The wanderer holding a poppy	流浪者手持罂粟
Searches for the shadows that will replace him	寻找替换他的影子
A theater is locked	这城市的保险箱
In the municipal vault	锁着一个剧场
…	……
I stand in for that wanderer	我替换那流浪者
Returning from hunger	从饥饿中归来
Turning on the light, the milk's gone bad	开灯，牛奶变质
I only recognize a single joy	我认出这唯一欢乐
Love at two year's old	两岁时的爱情
…	……
I know tomorrow morning	我知道明天早上
The repairman will wait in the doorway	修理工将等在门口
Then take the scenery with him	带来他的风景
At opening time he'll replace me	在开门时替代我
Walking into his book	走进书中

In this poem, there are three kinds of persons: a wanderer holding a poppy, the speaker suffering from hunger, and a repairman.

In the first stanza, the wanderer holding a poppy looks for a shadow to replace himself. It could be read that as a hero-like revolutionary wishes to pass down his revolutionary ideal to another. Both wanderer and shadow can be read as followers of Mao, leaving their immediate family to fight for a revolution. While the stars shine (not the sun), the theatre stops operating, which could be understood as a revolution: a national drama comes an end.

In the second stanza, the wanderer comes home and discovers that he has forgotten to take care of his daily needs for a long time. That is where the speaker starts to find himself back.

In the last stanza, the speaker turns to a repairman, a common person with a regular job. As such, this poem can be read as a response to the end of the revolution, in which the people left the "square" (广场, as a symbol of an active participation in the revolutions) for a "work position" or one's job (岗位, as a symbol of reorienting away from political revolution). A change "from the square to one's job" (从广场到岗位), was proposed by Chen Sihe 陈思和 as a metaphor to sum up

intellectual and cultural trends in the 1990s, and is widely acceptable and cited in Chinese scholarship.[295]

In the same vein, the poem called «Sower» (播种者) could also be interpreted as saying goodbye to the revolutionary fever, which helps to elaborate my point above. In Eshleman and Klein’s translation:[296]

A sower walks into the hall	一个播种者走进大厅
it’s war out there, he says	外面是战争，他说
you are wallowing in vapidity	而你沉湎于空虚
shirking your duty to warn of the danger	放弃警示危险的责任
I am come in the name of the fields	我以田野的名义
it’s war out there	外面是战争
I leave the hall	我走出大厅
all around scenes of the harvest	四周一片丰收的景象
I start to design the war	我开始设计战争
to perform death	表演死亡
the crops I torch	被我点燃的庄稼
flare up like wolf signals	狼烟般升起
one thought is driving me crazy	一个念头让我发疯：
he is sowing seeds onto marble	他正在大理石上播种

4.7 Poetic Identity: Revolt against Political Lyricism

Bei Dao’s revolt against Political Lyricism originates in the fact that he himself is deeply familiar with Political Lyricism. His revolt is characterized by his reflection on language, exploration on the various forms of the self and reflection on poethood.

[295] Chen Sihe 1996: 6-11
[296] Bei Dao 2010a: 65

4.7.1 Language

In hindsight, Bei Dao considers that the Political Lyricism that he used to read in *the People's Daily* was filled with big words and phrases. And Bei Dao is unsatisfied with his early start as a writer (poet) imitating Political Lyricism:[297]

> That was a time of using words at random. We composed our articles by copying from everywhere, and especially copied the ostentatious and hollow adjectives.

Further, Bei Dao retrospects on the influence of political powers on the usage of language and the function of language in reshaping people's life. For example, in the poem «The Morning's Story» (早晨的故事), in McDougall and Chen's translation:[298]

A word has abolished another word	一个词消灭了另一个词
A book has issued orders	一本书下令
To burn another book	烧掉了另一本书
A morning established by the violence of language	语言的暴力建立的早晨
Has changed the morning	改变了早晨
Of people's coughing	人们的咳嗽声

The poem «Keywords» (关键词) is one of Bei Dao's few poems reflecting on the fixed connections between signifier and signified in the Mao era. In this poem, Bei Dao doubts the knowledge he had in the Mao era and ponders on its imperceptible influence. The first and second stanzas read, in Eshleman and Klein's translation:[299]

My shadow is dangerous	我的影子很危险
The performer employed by the sun	这受雇于太阳的艺人
Delivers final knowledge	带来的最后的知识
Which is empty	是空的

[297] Bei Dao 2010a: 116
[298] Bei Dao 1991: 26-27
[299] Bei Dao 2010a: 105

That is the dark nature	那是蛀虫工作的
Of the termite’s work	黑暗属性
The footsteps through the air	暴力的最小的孩子
Of the smallest child of violence	空中的足音

In the first stanza, a deep sense of disappointment is expressed. “My shadow”, an indicator of the speaker himself, is employed by the sun, which can be interpreted as the metaphor of Mao and has a negative connotation. The speaker is a dependent individual, and has empty (invalid) knowledge. Emptiness, the speaker continues to write in the second stanza, is the nature of the termite’s work. Then the speaker compares the termite’s work to “the smallest child of violence” and to “footsteps in the air”, a lasting sound. As a whole, the stanza could be interpreted as telling a story about a human being, being transformed bit by bit, so that he/she loses his/her personality. The end product is inhuman, dependent and obedient, in strict accordance with political ideology. The transformation is invisible but lasting.

4.7.2 Poethood

The poet in Political Lyricism serves as “the bugle and the drummer of the era” (时代的号角和鼓手) to “sing an inspiring eulogy in a great march to build a socialist country”. And in the same vein, poet sings as a warrior (战士) marching on.[300] In Political Lyricism, the poet speak as “I”, but this equals a “we”; or addresses a “you”, singing an ode to political leaders or heroic characters. Differently, in Bei Dao’s poetry, I see a clear change from a persona of tragic hero and a precocious child on the one hand to a person retired from this position, on the other.

As discussed previously in relation to Bei Dao’s «The Answer», «Declaration» (宣告), and several other poems composed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he presents a tragic-heroic image of poethood which reflects his hero complex learned from school education. The persona in these poems speaks directly to the readers, as we can clearly read from the titles and the contents. However, the persona of a precocious child and a man retired from his position is introverted and introspective.

[300] Hong Zicheng 2005: 41,

In a series of poems composed in the middle and late 1980s, it is interesting to notice the discrepancy between how the poet looks and what he thinks inside his mind. He may wear an adult/senior's look, but he is childish in his mind. For example, «Portrait of a Young Poet» (青年诗人的肖像), which can be read as a self-portrait, in McDougall's translation:[301]

The inspiration drawn from your sleeve	那从袖口拽出的灵感
Is never-ending; you	没完没了，你
Pass day and night through strung-out lines and	日夜穿行在长长的句子和
Lanes; you	胡同里，你
Were old when you were born	生下来就老了
Even though ambition grows as ever	尽管雄心照旧沿着
Around the edges of you baldness	秃顶的边缘生长
Taking out your false teeth, you	摘下假牙，你
Look even more childish	更象个孩子

As shown in «Daydream II» in McDougall's translation,[302] he may look fearless when participating in the revolution, just like an airplane going to depart from the airport in stormy days. But he feels lost and helpless.

Storms, we are	风暴，我们是
Children lost in an airport	迷失在航空港里的儿童
Wanting to burst into tears	总想大哭一场

Above I have cited a stanza from «Resume» in the discussion of influence of Chrisitianity on Bei Dao. Here I cite another stanza from this poem, in McDougall's translation:[303]

I bent my spine	我弓起了脊背
Believing I had found the only	自以为找到了表达真理的
Way to express the truth, like	唯一方式，如同
A baked fish dreaming of the sea	烘烤着的鱼梦见海洋
Long live…! I shouted only once, damn it	万岁！我只他妈喊了一声

[301] Bei Dao 1988: 94
[302] Bei Dao 1988: 127-128
[303] Bei Dao 1988: 87

Then sprouted a beard	胡子就长出来了

He may bend his spine as if bowing to a leader, and show his loyalty by shouting out the popular political slogans, such as “long live (Chairman Mao)”, in accordance with others. As Bei Dao puts ironically, “like a baked fish dreaming of the sea”, participarting in politics and becoming an adult is like a daydream, that could not actually protect oneself from internal crisis.

Bei Dao’s retrospection may help to deepen the understanding of his above poems. In hindsight, in a comparison with his daughter’s generation, Bei Dao considered his generation “were driven mad by lofty ambitions; our personalities were twisted into abnormal configurations with a serious tendency for violence. It is absurd to think of us actually saving a nation and its people when we did so poorly in saving ourselves.”[304]

Considering the changes taken place in mainland China in the 1990s, Zhu Dake (朱大可) proposed the popular metaphor of “from the gallows to a swing” (从绞架到秋千), to refer to his observation that that poets changed from victimized heroes in the 1980s to “awkward discourse players” in the 1990s.[305] Bei Dao was also aware of this change, and puts this change in a self-mocking way, in Huters & Ming’s translation:[306]

> All this stemmed from a peculiar juncture of time — the blank period between the collapse of ideology and the advent of the tide of commercialism. Poets had put on a series of false masks: those of savior, warrior, pastor, rock star, all of which were reflected in a strange mirror compounded of extreme pressure and high temperature. And we came close to mistaking those images for our true selves. Very shortly, however, we were to be inundated in the commercial tide, which swept away the masks, shattered the mirrors, and insured that this mistake would never happen again.

[304] Bei Dao 2000b: 198.
[305] Zhu Dake 1991
[306] Bei Dao 2000b: 254

Being rejected and attacked by the Third-Generation poets in the late 1980s and denied entry into mainland China after 1989, Bei Dao felt it hard to accept the change from being an idolized poet in China to someone wandering abroad. This feeling emerges in some of his lines, such as “someone the country’s discharged” (一个被国家辞退的人), and “I am the identity you deny/lamp switched off in the heart” (我是被你否认的身份/从心里关掉的灯).[307] He also compared himself as a retiree, as stated in the poem «Post» (岗位), in Weinberger and Man-Cheong’s translation:[308]

An elk heading for the pit-trap	一只麋鹿走向陷阱
Power, the fir tree said, struggle	权力，枞树说，斗争
Cherishing the same secret	怀着同一秘密
My hair turned white	我头发白了
Retiring, going backwards	退休----倒退着
Leaving my post	离开我的岗位
Only one step back	只退了一步
No, ten whole years	不，整整十年
My era behind me	我的时代在背后
Suddenly beating on a bass drum	突然敲响大鼓

In this poem, the post indicates a job as a poet that bears responsibility to write for/to the masses, which was expected of a poet, as a hero and enlightener under the calling of Mao, in order to contribute to socialism and the country. Bei Dao used the word “failture” (失败) to name his collection of essay published in 2006, and this may be read as a reference to failing to meet this expectation. In the preface to *The Book of Failure*, Bei Dao states that he tries to become a common person rather than a heroic poet who enjoyed popularity, learning to live his own life in a foreign land.[309]

[307] A line from «Creation» (创造). Bei Dao 1996: 8-9,A line from «Untitled» (无题). Bei Dao 1996: 92-93

[308] Bei Dao 2000: 24-25

[309] Bei Dao 2004: preface, written by Bei Dao

The poet compares himself with a lonely wolf, in the third stanza of the poem «Keywords» (关键词), in Eshleman and Klein’s translation:[310]

The keyword, my shadow,	关键词，我的影子
Hammers the iron inside dreams	锤打着梦中之铁
Stepping to the rhythms	踏着那节奏
A lone wolf walks in	一只孤狼走进
The dusk undefeated by anyone	无人失败的黄昏
The egret that writes on the water	鹭鸶在水上书写
A life a day a sentence	一生一天一个句子

The shadow, with the rhythms of hammering iron in dreams, turns into a lone wolf (a land animal) and an egret (an animal in the air and in water). As an old Chinese saying goes, “there are three kinds of bitterness in one’s life: sailing a boat, hammering the iron and grinding the soybean” (人生有三苦, 打铁, 撑船, 磨豆腐). Hammering iron consumes time and energy, indicating the bitter nature of the work. Here the poet compares hammering iron with poetry writing.

A lonely wolf is generally considered as an old wolf left behind or excluded from its group. It is considered useless for its group and is left behind to die alone. It also indicates someone’s inclination to do things by themselves, to not work with others, to not be part of a community. An egret, in the Chinese context, symbolizes an old man because they both have white heads, as old people’s hair turns grey or white. It also symbolizes a leisurely style of living, since the egret stands still most of the time.

In the last three lines, the poet seems to make peace with “failure”. In all, the poem exudes relief and joy of self-rescue from being a dependent, obedient shadow.

4.8 Concluding Remarks

Bei Dao’s early writings of Political Lyricism reflect his school education, which provided him with his first literary engagement and a long-term cultivation of “revolutionary fever”. Sources of such influences include the establishment writer

[310] Bei Dao 2010a: 105

Gao Shiqi, Bei Dao's Chinese teacher Dong Jingbo, textbooks, organizations such as the League of Young Pioneers and the Communist Youth League, extra-curricular readings and so on.

School education also lies at the root of Bei Dao's use of the metaphors of the poppy and amber, which he took from textbooks. The poppy symbolizes the sacrifice of one's life and one's personal needs for the revolutionary cause, as in the poems «Let's go», «An End or a Beginning» and «Poppy Night». The poet embraces revolutionary fever in the first two poems, which can be seen as variants on Political Lyricism. The last poem shows the poet's distance from revolutionary fever, indicating the need to take care of his personal needs, which have been ignored for too long. Amber (with mica and wax as alternatives) symbolizes history, as in «Daydream», «Random Thoughts», «Perfect», «Wax» and «Accomplices». These poems show Bei Dao's perception of history: an ememy could turn into a friend. Strictly speaking, these poems are not "regular" Political Lyricism, but rather an adjusted variety of Political Lyricism.

Bei Dao's use of the metaphors of sheep and the shepherd and the narrow gate indicate an influence from Christianity, presumably through the faith of his mother mother, in an instance of family education.

Notably, Bei Dao's highly visible revolt against Political Lyricism comes from a condition in which he himself is deeply familiar with Political Lyricism. In developing his own position on language and poetry he explores different forms of the self, sorting out the relationship between the self and the collective, and between the self and the society. In all, Bei Dao's relationship to Political Lyricism turns out to be ambivalent and complicated, subverting easy assumptions of a clean break between Mao-era Political Lyricism and early Reform-era Obscure poetry.