

Beyond the Horizon, Within the Native Tongue: The Chinese Essence in Bei Dao's Linguistic Exile

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Abstract

The fate of the poet and the fate of the poetry are intertwined. Since 1989, Bei Dao has wandered abroad, and the poet's state of in-between displacement has made the exile of language a defining poetic characteristic of his poetry during this period. And the memories, emotions, narratives, and imaginations carried by the Chinese language have also left an indelible aesthetic mark on Bei Dao's poetry. Thus, in his overseas creative phase, Bei Dao's poetic landscape may lie beyond the horizon, yet it remains rooted forever within his native Chinese tongue. This paper will explore how Bei Dao's "in-between" existence abroad fosters an imagined homeland through his overseas writing, thereby preserving and redefining a "Chinese essence" within his work in this period. For Bei Dao, exile is paradoxically what enables a deeper engagement with the native tongue, transforming it into a measure for understanding the relationship between self and world.

Keywords: Bei Dao, exile, language, Chinese essence

1. Introduction

In the history of Chinese literature since the 1970s, Bei Dao stands as one of the few writers to have been canonized (Wu, 2010, p. 3). His canonization is not only because the era of the Misty Poetry Movement, to which Bei Dao belongs, has gradually receded into the swiftly changing historical context, giving it a sense of remoteness; but also because of Bei Dao's departure overseas, which has caused his presence to fade in the eyes of Chinese readers, leading to the rapid canonization of his works and his becoming a symbol of an era.

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Since 1989, Bei Dao has lived abroad, having moved 15 times and resided in seven countries in Europe and the Americas (Bei, 2004, p. 2). Due to this unique wandering experience, some scholars in Taiwan have attached the label of “political exile” to Bei Dao’s poetry and poetics (Yang, 2010, p. 93). However, this view is undoubtedly narrow, as it amplifies external political factors while overlooking Bei Dao’s own aesthetic pursuits. In his own words, a purely political poet’s work can only emit a monotonous sound (Bei, 2004, p. 287). Yet, the tone of Bei Dao’s poetry is complex and profound. Zhang Zao, one of the leading figures of Chinese avant-garde poetry, argues that while the exile of Bei Dao that began in 1989 has external political reasons, the fundamental driving force lies in the aesthetic self-regulation within his poetics: “Exile, to some extent, is a self-imposed banishment, a choice made with professional considerations. Its aesthetic goal is to trace dialogue, emptiness, strangeness, openness, and solitude, internalizing them into literary qualities” (Bei, 1999, pp. 9–10). Therefore, Bei Dao’s move abroad was not merely a response to external circumstances, but a self-determined choice driven by his literary and aesthetic pursuits. The Western modernist poetic movements, such as Imagism, Symbolism, Futurism, and Surrealism, had a significant impact on Bei Dao’s generation of Chinese poets. The characteristics of modernism, including rebellion, originality, and various experimental techniques, also influenced the creation of New Chinese Poetry (Li, 2024, pp. 129–133). Therefore, from a poetic perspective, Bei Dao’s exile abroad can be seen as an aesthetic rebellion rather than a political one, representing an aesthetic experiment in his further exploration of modern Chinese poetry.

Generally, critics divide Bei Dao’s works into two periods: the domestic period and the overseas period. A large portion of Bei Dao’s poetry was created abroad. It can be said that his poetry was born in China, yet it matured in Europe and America. One of the major features of Bei Dao’s overseas work is the sense of linguistic exile, which means the language is fragmented, disjointed, and even illogical. This feature of the poetic language and form is also

widely believed to be influenced by Western modernist poetics. Many scholars have thus initiated discussions on the “Chineseness” of his poetry during this period, and some even propose that Bei Dao’s poetry should be regarded as world poetry rather than merely Chinese poetry (Yang, 2010, pp. 136–137). However, this perspective neglects the significant role of the Chinese language within Bei Dao’s context of exile. For Bei Dao, language is not merely a carrier of culture, ethnicity, and memory; it must fundamentally transcend the realities of communication and aesthetics, allowing him to recognize the boundaries of existence. In Said’s discourse (2000), exile in the twentieth century is not just a historical phenomenon but a deeply personal experience that resonates with each of us (p. 68). Bei Dao uses Chinese to feel and write about his personal experience, confronting the existential plight of individual exile. The exile of language is also the poet’s own exile; it is both the poet’s anchor and his reliance. The fate of the poet and the fate of language are intertwined. When the Chinese language continues to carry the memories and landscapes of his homeland in poetry, it becomes the poet’s vessel for measuring the world and resisting the forces of exile.

2. Beyond The Horizon: Bei Dao’s In-betweenness in Exile

Since Bei Dao’s creation abroad, critics have struggled to fully place him within the cultural context of contemporary Chinese poetry. At the same time, they rarely discuss Bei Dao’s creative consciousness of “not being in China.” As a result, Bei Dao can only be discussed in a vacuum that is neither in China nor beyond it (Yang, 2010, p. 136). This phenomenon mirrors Bei Dao’s own state of displacement. Like many displaced writers of the twentieth century, Bei Dao faces the dilemma of the “enigma of arrival.” On one hand, Bei Dao has left his homeland, and through his travels and wanderings, the vast world map unfolds before his eyes. He has met poets and writers from around the globe. As Bei Dao himself wrote in his book (2004), had he not been later displaced, he would not have become friends with Allen Ginsberg, whom he had only briefly encountered in China. On the other hand, he believes

that “exile is a journey through the void, a journey without an endpoint” (Bei, 2004, p. 5). Bei Dao can never truly assimilate into the foreign land. As he wrote in his essay reflecting on Allen Ginsberg, when Allen invited him into a club, the cultural differences prevented him from convincing himself to enter (2004, p. 12). At the end of his essay, *The Foreigner Mike*, Bei Dao’s dialogue with his friend Mike further highlights his state of being in a foreign land, yet unable to truly settle down:

I suddenly asked, “Don’t you want to move back to the United States?”

“No, this is no longer my home. I have no home, just like you.” He laughed (Bei, 2004, p. 104).

Although Bei Dao had a place to stay in the United States and had previously invited Mike to “sit at his house,” here he emphasizes, like Mike, that he too is a homeless foreigner in the United States. In an interview about his travel experiences, Bei Dao stated, “After traveling for a long time, many people no longer belong to a specific nation or culture, becoming identity-less. These people have distanced themselves from both themselves and other languages and cultures, living in the in-between space” (2004, p. 297).

Bei Dao’s view of home and exile aligns closely with Edward Said’s description of the displaced person in *Reflections on Exile* (2000). In contrast to the rooted and legitimate inhabitant, the exile is, as Said puts it, “neither here nor there, but rather in between things” (p. 99). John MacLeod further interprets the tense space of “in-between” as a place of immense creativity and possibility. According to MacLeod, living in this space exposes the pain of not having a sense of belonging, but it simultaneously releases possibilities: it forces immigrants to transform the static notion of “root” into “route” thinking, reshaping dynamic experiences and memories along different cultural paths (2010, pp. 144–146).

Bei Dao’s period of exile is similarly situated in an “in-between” state, and the poetry he produced during this time reflects a dynamic shift toward “route” thinking. *Old Snow*, a

collection of Bei Dao's poetry compiled by Bonnie S. McDougall, serves as an example of this dynamic path of creative writing. The collection includes eight poems written during Bei Dao's journey in 1989, traveling from Germany through Norway and Sweden. In these poems, walking, wandering, and movement become the central motifs. These works can even be considered products of Bei Dao along the way:

The city is migrating

Hotels large and small are ranged on the tracks

The tourists' straw hats revolve

Someone shoots at them

I adjust my time

So as to pass through my life

The bees in swarms

Pursue the itinerant drifting gardens

The singer and the blind man

Agitate the night sky with their twofold glory (Bei, 1991, p. 15)

In this poem titled *Along the Way*, wandering and migration are the central themes, and the imagery of wandering is fragmented and pieced together: migrating cities, moving tourists, drifting bees, street performers, and so on. All of these images are interconnected through the poet's "time adjustment," suggesting that the poet may have witnessed these fragmented scenes during his journey, and these unrelated pieces have been arranged and connected in the poetry through the poet's memories along the way.

Bei Dao believes that exile is a prose context, one that can be captured with discrete words that document the process of displacement, while poetry cannot sketch continuous

connections in exile and can only provide highlights (2004, p. 3). This is why fragmented writing and the presentation of scattered landscapes have become prominent features of Bei Dao's poetry during his overseas creative phase. This is not a mere imitation of Western modernist poetry techniques, but a result of the external environment of exile. The poet's exile ultimately transforms into the exile of language in his poetry.

3. Imaginary Homeland: Bei Dao's Literary Self-Reconstruction in Exile

At the end of 2001, Bei Dao returned to his long-absent homeland, Beijing, to visit his seriously ill father. The rapidly changing city and the memories of his youth seemed worlds apart, leaving Bei Dao feeling estranged on this land. In his own hometown, he had become a foreigner. Bei Dao's book *City Gate, Open Up* (2017) was written in this context. In the preface, he writes, "I rebuild a city with words, rebuild my Beijing—using my Beijing to negate the Beijing of today" (p. 7). This aligns with the concept of the "imaginary homeland" introduced by John MacLeod: for a displaced person, homeland, in the long journey through time and space, has transformed from a static physical place into a memory imagined in the mind of the immigrant (2010, p. 148). Professor Michel Collot offers a deeper exploration of this idea, suggesting that literary creation is always a form of ego-geography, which is a literary representation of space that clearly exists within the construction of an imaginary world. Literary landscapes, he argues, are not geographical references, but rather a constructed form of imagination shaped by the subject's gaze (2021, p. 94).

In *City Gate, Open Up*, Bei Dao writes about the sounds, smells, and lights of old Beijing city, the dismantled siheyuan, the alleys, temples, and old neighbors and friends. He is, in essence, reconstructing a city that has already disappeared in history through memory and imagination. The ego-geography from the subject's perspective mirrors his psychological state. The reimagining of the "imaginary homeland" is Bei Dao's response to the insecurity and lack of belonging he feels. It is his way of using narrative, language, and memory to construct a new

identity landscape. As Said notes, exile is “the irreconcilable rift between man and his homeland,” evoking a sadness and loss that can only be expressed and healed through writing: “A writer’s calling, with its dream of handling and controlling the imaginary, serves as a response to the insecurity” (2000, p. 99). Bei Dao’s reconstruction of Beijing is also a reconstruction and affirmation of his identity after longtime exile; it was an inevitable choice for him after he left, as Bei Dao himself put it, “If distance and return are two ends of a road, the farther you go, the closer you get to childhood. It was this very initial drive that pushed me to the ends of the earth” (2007, p. 9).

Therefore, Bei Dao’s claim that Chinese is his only luggage is not entirely accurate because his memories and emotions tied to his homeland never truly left him. In the depths of a lonely Scandinavian night, he is still haunted by the soul of Beijing in his memory:

For only a second

A Peking key

Opens the door of a Scandinavian night,

Two bananas and an orange

Have recovered their original colour (Bei, 1991, p. 33)

In the lines, “Two bananas and an orange/ Have recovered their original colour,” colour carries a deeper meaning. The banana and orange, by returning to their original yellow color, also reflect the author’s skin colour and racial identity. Therefore, colour here represents the author’s identity of the other, and restoring the colour signifies a self-identity recognition. It’s not only the fruits that are restored to their original color, but the poet also regains his original colors and memories. In that moment, across the distance and isolation, the poet is transported back to his homeland, and the colour of his memories, his very essence, is recovered. Even though he’s in the Scandinavian night, his thoughts and emotions have transcended the lost time and space, and have gone back to his hometown in memory. On the way of wandering

and exile, Bei Dao never truly left his hometown in his heart and always keeps constructing this eternal imaginary homeland with poetry.

4. Within the Native Tongue: The Chinese Essence in Exile

Bei Dao has never abandoned writing in Chinese. In heterogeneous contexts, he continually explores the possibilities of writing Chinese poetry. When discussing Bei Dao's modernist poetic techniques and the influence of Western poetics, it is crucial not to overlook the Chinese essence of his poetry language: his authentic emotion and local experience.

The mother tongue connects a person to the culture and identity of their homeland. In China, Bei Dao led the Misty Poetry movement, championing the spirit of the May Fourth Movement and defending the freedom of thought. After leaving the homeland, as he struggled for survival in exile, he could not help but seek emotional solace in the memories of his homeland. Even while living in a foreign land, his pen continued to criticize China. Chinese remained the native tongue that the poet could not relinquish. Bei Dao once stated, "Chinese is the identity of my poetry; it cannot be abandoned" (2015, p. 79). For him, the Chinese language is not only the vessel of his poetry but also the proof of his identity as a poet and a source of self-affirmation. This sentiment of longing and inner conflict towards his native language is clearly expressed in his poem *A 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 what's meant by a native land
I add a little sugar
a native land is a kind of local accent

I hear my fright

on the other end of a phone line (Bei, 1991, p. 51)

No matter how Bei Dao tries to escape, he cannot avoid the emotional ties his mother tongue has to him. Even in exile, his relationship with the Chinese language, simultaneously distant and intimate, often leads him into profound contemplation. Chen Chao, in his commentary on this poem, remarks that “Why did the poet choose the ‘fly’, an unbearable image, instead of a ‘neutral’ insect? This choice is intriguing. Its necessity lies in the fact that it more poignantly expresses the poet’s pain and anxiety. The poet is even less at ease than a fly” (2013, p. 176). This observation highlights that Bei Dao, when hearing his native language in a non-Chinese environment, experiences a painful sense of “homesickness” that exacerbates the emotional distance from his homeland. For him, this intensifies the ties to his roots and brings forth a deeper solitude. This poem is not just a nostalgic piece but also a meditation on cultural longing, even opening a door to another language, linking his past self to the present through language, and foreshadowing a future fear of being unable to fully grasp the language.

When Bei Dao lives abroad, he contemplates the distance between his mother tongue and his homeland. This reflection is, in fact, an exploration of his identity and existence, the oscillation between being Chinese and being a member of the diaspora, as well as a questioning of his emotional ties to his homeland and his historical disorientation. He follows a path of seeking cultural belonging, attempting to reconnect with the warmth of his homeland (Lu, 2019, p. 107). His attachment to and defense of the Chinese language prevent him from moving too far beyond China in his overseas creations. He finds a place for his poetry on the other side of the sea, and mother-tongue poetry becomes a bridge to his memories:

starts in the stream and stops at the source

diamond rain

is ruthlessly dissecting

the glass world

it opens the sluice, opens

a woman's lips

pricked on a man's arm

opens the book, the words have decomposed, the ruins have imperial integrity (Bei, 1991, p. 75)

As a cross-cultural hybrid, the Lige School declares in its manifesto a poetics of grounded modernity: one that embraces universal human sensibility while remaining anchored in specific experiential soil (Esmaeilirad, 2025, p. 20). For Bei Dao, whose poetic practice is also cross-cultural, his creative anchor lies in his mother tongue. As the bearer of language, Bei Dao's poetry is imbued with memories and emotions tied to his homeland. Through writing in his mother tongue, he rewrites the memory of his homeland and reflects on his identity in exile. His native language becomes the anchor in his boundless wandering. As Yunte Huang reflects, "it was only when he became a true 'traveler' that the concept of the native 'I' crystallized within him" (2002, p. 2). Bei Dao, in a drifting posture, examines the importance of poetry in life, that if it weren't for leaving, one could never approach the true homeland. The Chinese essence remains the anchor at the heart of his displacement and exile.

5. Conclusion

When Bei Dao recalls his journey of exile in his essays, he acknowledges the pain and solitude it brought, yet he also embraces the reflections and insights that this displacement has afforded him: "I must thank the years of wandering, for they have taken me away from the center, away from restlessness, allowing life to truly submerge. In the long nights of Scandinavia, I fell into despair time and again, silently praying that for this moment and for the next, to overcome the weakness within" (2004, p. 7). Displacement and exile become Bei Dao's redemption, and the importance of language in his poetry is once again brought to the forefront.

Exilic writing, on one hand, represents the poet's departure from his homeland and the reconstruction of his identity; on the other hand, it serves as a channel for the poet's soul, keeping him connected to his homeland. Recognizing this Chinese essence also carries implications beyond Bei Dao's individual case. For poets writing in languages that occupy a minority or marginalized position within world literature, the writing language itself becomes a critical site, not only of aesthetic choice, but also of cultural survival and self-definition. Bei Dao's exilic poetry demonstrates that the mother tongue, formed by a specific geography and history, can function as a form of homeland when the original place is no longer accessible. This insight invites scholars to attend more closely to the writing language of diasporic poets as a primary, rather than secondary, object of inquiry. For Bei Dao, the memories carried within the Chinese language, the small, fleeting details, become the keys and measures by which he gauges the vast world. They also serve as the most profound writing on his homeland, on the boundaries of his own existence, and on the world itself.

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