

Analyzing Bei Dao's late poetry based on the expressions of exile

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Abstract. Bei Dao and the Misty Poetry group are defining events in world literary history, not only because of their early politically opposing compositions but also because of their progress in poetry abroad. Bei Dao experienced a harsh wander, and his poetry guidelines turned to personal and depoliticized. However, the research proportion of Bei Dao's later compositions is decreasing today, and many researchers and readers only summarize the invariable aspects of Bei Dao's whole poetry span or interpret his later compositions with political ideas. This research mainly focuses on one aspect of Bei Dao's later compositions, the unique expression of foreignness, homesickness, and loneliness, by collecting and analyzing a few poems Bei Dao wrote during his exile period. Consequently, this research excavates Bei Dao's special recognition in his poems during his exile. He records his pointless, painful, and homesick feelings amid his unstable exile life. Besides, Bei Dao expresses many realizations, for example the unstoppable journey, identity separation, and the distance from the world. Moreover, the author raises a new concept, "native language aphasia", to describe his identity separation through the deprivation of the native language.

1 Introduction

Bei Dao is one of the most famous poets of the 20th century. He is one of the representations and founders of the style of misty poetry. The most conspicuous feature of the misty poetry is the application of misty metaphor. The misty metaphor is expressed from the symbol to obscure the articulate meaning [1]. The academic circle has divided Dao's writing span into two stages by the year 1989 because after this year, Bei Dao started an exile from China due to political issues, and his writing style changed as well. Bei Dao started to make his composition depoliticization during his exile, turning the composition from a public announcement to the personal discourse. After experiencing a change in language, culture, and living environment [1], he stated that he and other resisters truly tipped the dominance of official discourse, whereas they were just performing as attendants. In other words, they could only fight but did not know how to dream [2]. Therefore, his late compositions turn to personalize and are filled with imagery, ambivalence, and defamiliarization. The change can be discovered from the comparison between Bei Dao's two self-selected poems collection, Lv Li: Selected Poems 1972-1988 and Zai Tian Ya: Selected Poems 1989-2008. The

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declarative writing style, which is extensively applied in his early composition *The Answer and Declaration*, had almost disappeared in *Zai Tian Ya: Selected Poems 1989-2008*. Critic Du Shu Ying remarked: "Many of his later compositions are too cryptic and obscure for the general public, and readers who have not been exposed to Bei Dao's poems at all may find them "unintelligible" or even puzzling." [3]

A large proportion of researchers focus on his early compositions, such as *The Answer*, whereas Bei Dao denies his early poems in some aspects [2]. Recent research has been engaged in gathering and analyzing an overview of Bei Dao's entire composing career, which has shown that: "The ideological vein running through Bei Dao's poetry is the poetic implication formed by the three-dimensional integration of humanitarianism, heroism, and rationalism" [4]. Additionally, some researchers have participated in the generalization of Bei Dao's use of imagery. These studies emphasize Bei Dao's sceptical character but neglect his other emotional expressions. They indicate that Bei Dao's application of imagery is humanistic, subversive, and introspective [5]. Truly, Bei Dao's composing style has some invariable features, yet to date, there has been very little discussion about his later compositions. Only a few researchers and his friends focus on Bei Dao's later compositions, concentrating on his use of imagery to explore his foreignness, such as metal, rose, and window. Some researchers and readers persist in relating political issues to Bei Dao's later compositions, like Bill Ashcroft. However, Bei Dao's friend, the critic and poet Zhang Zao, asserts that a narrow political focus will lead to a deviation from the essence of exile poetry and contemporary avant-garde poetry in general [6].

A special focus on Bei Dao's later poems is important for understanding his ongoing literary concepts and guidelines. Bei Dao's later compositions manifest his unique style of imagery writing which is a great treasure of literature. Besides, interpreting Bei Dao's later poems without political issues can emphasize and clarify the expressions in his later compositions. Thus, concentrating on Bei Dao's later compositions can enhance the understanding of Bei Dao's unique writing style and benefit the recognition of his personality. This essay will mainly focus on several poems written by Bei Dao during his later composing span to excavate Bei Dao's convert emotional expression, especially loneliness and homesickness in these poems.

2 Recognize the wander

2.1 External appearances of the wander

Bei Dao experienced a seven-country, fifteen-settle places wander before the year 1995. This constant and quick pace wander results in Bei Dao's composing style which focuses on foreignness, loneliness, and homesickness. As his feet stood on the foreign land, loneliness and a sense of distance emerged in Bei Dao's mind [1]. The distance from the native land is elicited because of the lack of the native culture and the real distance from the homeland. Therefore, any emergence of the Chinese culture could elicit his foreignness, homesickness, and loneliness.

He wrote in the poem *EASTERN TRAVELER*: "Breakfast of toast butter jam/ and tea. I watch a fat pigeon outside the window" [7]. The first line breaks at the word "jam", which delays the acceptance and the reading articulation of the word "tea", showing an astonished feeling of the poet. As a Chinese, tea is highly combined with the poet's memory of the native land or culture even if tea had been popularized in the Western countries for a long time. Some living issues also trigger his wandering feelings. He is not only wandering from region to region but also his mentality is wandering. The unstable life experience causes his mind to strain. Bei Dao needs to bear the crisis by himself because of his lack of friends in the foreign

land. For example, he was supporting his daughter on his own when he was fired from the University of California, Davis. Bei Dao resignedly wrote: “Who’s up over the crack in day/singing [...]” [8]. It shows how embarrassed he was in the situation. Daily life is an event sequence, and when the crack appears, his daily life is unstable. Besides, crack means that daily life suffers from some destruction, which could be related to injury and pain. Therefore, the imagery “crack” indicates that Bei Dao’s daily life was tearing, containing pain and fragmentation.

2.2 The constancy of the wander

Bei Dao realizes that he cannot stop the wander, and he finds that his wander is pointlessness. Therefore, beyond the wander, a tired feeling arose. The author thinks that Bei Dao also expresses his realization of the unstoppable wander and pointless and tired feelings in the poem EASTERN TRAVELER [7].

The single line of stanza 6 shows his nervousness: Bei Dao lost his direction, and therefore, he can only climb on the aspiration of a stranger. In stanza 7, line 1, Bei Dao uses a bicycle racer’s facial expression, “grimacing”, to deliver his painful emotion. Then, in the second line, the poet states that this racer cannot stop and escape from the fierce current. Besides, the third line shows that this unstoppable race resembles “fingers playing piano”. A racer in a race or some fingers in a playing process cannot determine or withdraw from both two processes. These two lines indicate that the wander which he was immersing could not be suspended, and consequently, he found he was stuck in a torrent. The last stanza shows his sleepiness, which is a great tired. Nevertheless, he still needed to wait for a train; he was still on the way to his unstoppable journey. Moreover, the travel beyond the destination is a travel upon the travel because it is a journey that transcends the realistic form of the travel. Hence, even if Bei Dao settled in one place, the wander of his mentality is still unstoppable. This travel contains Bei Dao’s foreignness, the distance from his native land, and the turmoil of his life. This travel’s destination or its corridor could not be thoroughly determined by himself, just like a phone call to which nobody replies. This stanza intensifies his loss of direction. During this constant wander, Bei Dao could only sigh that he is tired because he could never obtain any interlude of his mentality and body.

3 Derivation from the absence of the native language

3.1 The absence of the native language and identity separation

Another engaging expression in Bei Dao’s later poem is the absence of the native language. The native language is a symbol of the native land, which definitely could arouse an individual’s homesickness. However, Bei Dao sniffs out an identity separation from the loss of the native language. From the year 1989 to the year 2010, he was only permitted to go back to China mainland 5 times. In foreign lands, without talking to himself, the only application of Chinese for Bei Dao was communication with some friends. Besides, the old memories were highly combined with the native language during the communication process. Zhong Wen, one of Bei Dao’s intimate friends, said that, for Bei Dao, the return to the native language, such as communicating with friends in Chinese, was often indulged in the drunkenness of loneliness [9]. This is an interval in which the poet could get rid of the native language aphasia. Chinese language is not only an inorganic conveyance or a tool but also bears relationships, memories, cultures, and even self-recognition for him. In an interview, Bei Dao said that: “I have always insisted on reciting poetry in Chinese and prose in English. Because Chinese is my poetic identity, and I can’t give it up.” [2]. In other words, the native

language is a part of his spirit. The lack of native language practice creates not only pure solitude but also feelings like pain, fear of loss, and the identification jolt for the poet. The author thinks that Bei Dao manifests these emotions in the poem *A LOCAL ACCENT* [10].

The first line creates a figure “I”, which could only communicate with a shadow or a reversed image of the “I” in Chinese. This indicates that “I” is lack of a talkable object. Talking to a mirror to practice and keep the sensitivity of the native language is an absurd scene that prominently emphasizes a kind of loneliness. Line 2 and line 4 seem like some practising sentences. These sentences are simple and weird, implying the author is sunk into an awkward situation where he is losing the proficiency of the native language. Line 3, line 5, and line 7 could be considered as the action of the character “I”, whereas the author inserts the practising sentences, line 2 and line 4, into the stanza. This is a kind of literary montage, creating two underway parts that converge at line 6 because the practising word “flies” encounters the homesickness symbol “native land”. Moreover, the convergence of the two scenes performs a polyphonic structure. Thus, the practising sound starts to contain the same feelings that the first line conveys and changes into a lyrical murmur to the figure “I” itself.

The last two lines echo the first line by presenting a familiar dual identity. The figure “I” has a visual reflection in the first line, but the dual identity in the last two lines resembles an identity separation of the figure “I”. To be specific, the figure “I” and “my” are identical in physics or bodily, whereas the fear emotion is delivered from a seemingly independent figure “my” to “I”. The separated part, the figure “my” which derived from the reflection in the first line, has been recognized by the figure “I” or the poet himself. This realization of the separation is reinforced by using two dual-ending imageries, “mirror” and “phone line”, because, at first, the imagery “mirror” separates the poet’s graphic image. This creates two antagonistic images because the reflective setting in this scene resembles a peering process: that reflected figure cannot talk but peers at the true being “I”. It is an introspective process for Bei Dao. The later imagery, “phone line” provides a communication medium that makes the two figures more resembling two vivid individuals. Identifying the other side of the phone line is not significant because whatever the other side is, the separation of the figure “I” has been completed. Hence, the poet separates and builds up a second identity. The hearing and delivering process of these two figures could be interpreted as the figure “I” finding a collection of memories, personality, and even language selection combined with the native land during the communication process with others. Chinese for Bei Dao is out of its soil in the foreign language surroundings. In the foreign lands, that native identity is separated and starts to drift. The poet fears losing his native identity losing proficiency in his native language, which contributes to his poetic identity.

3.2 “Native language aphasia”

This poem could be summarized as a self-revelation, in which Bei Dao found that he not only suffered from ordinary homesickness, or in other words, immersed in shallow symptoms such as old memories and objects, but also his identity was undermined through the deprivation of the native language. Moreover, a new form of loneliness, the “native language aphasia”, is manifested to readers, which especially contains the fear of losing native identity. In another poem, Bei Dao elaborates on the pain of the native language aphasia: “I float amid languages/ the brasses in death’s music/ full of ice” [8]. The brass instrument refers to the native language, and it is dead because of the loss of native soil. An instrument full of ice is also suggesting that this instrument cannot be played. In the original Chinese version, the last line’s meaning resembles freezing and growing ice crystals. Besides, the brass instrument resembles the human throat. Therefore, these lines could be interpreted as a human’s frozen throat being stung by ice. The pain of freezing and spiking prevents the poet from talking.

4 Distant from the world

However, exile means the permanent loss of one's home; exiles can no longer approach any tangible or intangible spiritual solace with peace and confidence [11]. Whether the recognition is derived from the native language or the images and memories of the native lands, the poet cannot genuinely catch them in the palm of his hand.

In the first stanza of the poem *RESTRUCTURING THE GALAXY* [10], Bei Dao acknowledges that his Chinese identification resembles living, but it has been separated and become a specimen. Line 4 raises a spectator who is suffering from the agony of watching. Bei Dao could only watch his separated part but could not touch it and fuse it to his being. The exiles do not belong to any country or culture, and, therefore, Bei Dao is in a corridor of two opposite cultures and dual identities: Chinese and foreign, refugee and settler. Besides, the position where he is between two doors also indicates that his unstoppable exile experience is just like running in a corridor. Bei Dao pointed out his true status in the same tiled poem, *CORRIDOR*: "an alien voice sneaking into the dictionary/ a dissident" [7]. He could not be genuinely accepted by the Western world because of the native culture and political issues. The word "alien voice" shows the difference between Bei Dao and Western society, and the word "dictionary" emphasizes that this utterance mainly focuses on culture. Bei Dao is obliged to become a person who is distant from the homeland as well as the world. It is not only because of the political issues and the native language aphasia but also because his true "homeland" had disappeared for a long time. In other words, exile is a painful return of the native that cannot genuinely be reached [11]. Bei Dao cannot find any remnant of Beijing that lies in his memory when he was permitted to return to his homeland. Therefore, Bei Dao is ever an exile, and his loneliness or homesickness is unique.

5 Conclusion

The author posits that Bei Dao's expressions of dissatisfaction with life and feelings of homesickness are merely the superficial manifestations of his existential wandering. Through introspection, he uncovers deeper sources of pain: the ceaseless wandering and its inherent futility. These sources are responsible for his sense of exhaustion. Furthermore, the lack of a native language, another compelling manifestation of his homesickness, is transformed into a novel form of solitude, "native language aphasia," through his writing and introspective endeavours. This new form of loneliness incites a sense of identity fragmentation in Bei Dao. Upon experiencing this fragmentation, he recognizes that the separated facets cannot be seamlessly reunited and that identity separation encompasses cultural and political dimensions. Consequently, Bei Dao is more apt to be seen as traversing a corridor that is remote from the world.

The later experience of Bei Dao provided new writing materials for him because Bei Dao tasted a deeper personal emotion from this period, especially foreignness, homesickness, and loneliness. Bei Dao does not obsess by the direct impact of these emotions and does not only moan about the superficial feelings of his wander. In contrast, he excavates them into essence and expresses different levels of these feelings in his poems.

The fashion of analyzing Bei Dao's poetry is decreasing after COVID-19, and the author hopes that this research could raise respect for the interpretation of Bei Dao's poetry without political issues. This research emphasizes Bei Dao's literal and personal expression, providing an important but neglected interpreting aspect for readers. However, this research does not collect and analyze a large number of poems, and some other emotional expressions and literary devices that lurk in Bei Dao's poems still need to be excavated.

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