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From Misty Rebellion to Diasporic Authenticity: Language, Exile, and Nativeness in Bei Dao's Poetry

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Abstract: Bei Dao's poetic career unfolds in two distinct phases: the Misty Poetry period and his overseas creative phase. During the Misty era, his rebellious poetics, infused with a pioneering aesthetic consciousness, captured the aesthetic identity of an entire generation. In the wandering period, his later works as an exile poet are marked by linguistic exile—a defining feature of his diasporic writing. Despite living abroad, Bei Dao continued to create in the Chinese language, and his mother tongue, cultural roots, and sense of nativeness remained inseparable from his art. His poetic practice continues to offer new possibilities for the evolution of the modern Chinese language and poetry, bridging cultural displacement with enduring creative authenticity.

Keywords: Bei Dao; Misty Poetry; Linguistic Exile; Sense of Nativeness

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标题：从朦胧反叛到离散真实：北岛诗歌中的语言，漂泊和本土意识

摘要：北岛的诗歌创作生涯分为两个鲜明的阶段：朦胧诗时期和海外书写时期。在朦胧诗时期写作阶段，北岛以他的反叛诗学与先锋审美意识凝聚了一代人的审美认同；而国外写作时期的北岛则是作为流亡诗人进行创作，语词的漂泊成为这一阶段北岛诗歌新的特征。尽管身处异质语境，北岛仍坚持用汉语写作，母语根基、文化血脉和本土意识始终与诗人的艺术生命相生相伴。北岛的诗歌创作实践持续为现代汉语及现代汉诗发展提供新的可能，在文化位移中维系着诗艺创造的真实性。

关键词：北岛；朦胧诗；语词漂泊；本土意识

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Emerging in the late 1970s as a critical voice against social reality, the Misty Poetry movement gradually receded by the late 1980s, having served as a “historical witness” due to China’s economic reforms and rapid development. Though short-lived as a literary phenomenon, this movement profoundly reshaped the trajectory of contemporary Chinese poetry.

Bei Dao stands as one of the few canonical figures of the Misty Poetry school and remains a rare case of literary canonization in post-1970s Chinese literature. His historical position in the New Poetry Tide presents a unique duality: On one hand, the shifting historical context since the 1990s has rendered his Misty Poetry creations increasingly distant and estranged, transforming them into symbolic relics of their era. On the other hand, his global writing career, which began in the 1990s, has established him as a part of contemporary global discourse. As one of the few internationally recognized Chinese poets maintaining active literary production, Bei Dao has pioneered new possibilities for cross-linguistic writing and Sinophone poetic creation in our globalized age.

1. The Misty Poetry Period: New Aesthetic of Poetic Rebellion

As a poet, Bei Dao demonstrated early manifestations of political rebelliousness in his literary works. The initial draft of his seminal poem, *The Answer*, was completed as early as March 15, 1973 (Liu, 2001), when China was still enduring prevailing social constraints under the shadow of the Cultural Transformation (1966-1976). This work remarkably predated its era as a clarion call of awakening, showcasing the poet’s defiant interrogation of the hypocrisy of reality:

Listen to me, world,
I-do-not-believe!
If a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet
Then I am number one thousand and one.
(Bei, 1986, p.25)¹

This groundbreaking composition, now recognized as Bei Dao's signature work, exemplifies the distinctive characteristics of his early poetry through its synthesis of political rebellion and social idealism. Bonnie S. McDougall even argues that *The Answer* remains "the most iconic and indispensable" among Bei Dao's early politically explicit oeuvre (McDougall, 1985, p.233). However, in interviews during his global writing phase, Bei Dao expressed critical reservations about his early politically charged works like *The Answer*, characterizing such rebellious poetry as inherently violent - "echoes of what we opposed," contending that "rebellion harbors danger; you risk becoming more and more like your enemy" (2015, p.37). While Bei Dao's self-criticism merits consideration, it inadvertently overlooks the poetic significance of his early works. Precisely through transforming political dissent into poetic form, Bei Dao achieved a more enduring rebellion through artistry and poetry. This poetic rebellion, distinct from and ultimately more powerful than mere political resistance, introduced aesthetic consciousness to modern Chinese poetry.

Bei Dao's rebellious poetics is first reflected in language, expanding the possibilities of Chinese literary expression while demonstrating profound influences from Western modernist poetry. In *The Rose of Time*, Bei Dao recounts, in a prose style, his reading experiences of a series of major 20th-century Western poets, such as Lorca, Mandelstam, Rilke, and others, interwoven with his critical analysis of poetry. The work explores how Western poetry resonated with his own era and, through the medium of translation, inspired modernist writing in China during the 1980s (Bei, 2014). Bei Dao views poetry as "the capture of subconsciousness and momentary perceptions", and he employs techniques like "metaphor, symbolism, synesthesia, altering perspectives and spatial relationships, and disrupting temporal and spatial order" in his works, showing the impact of French Surrealism and American modern poetry (Lao, 1985, p.2). His poem *The Bell* exemplifies this experimental approach:

The bell tolls deep into autumn's hinterland
skirts scatter and fall on the trees
attempting to please the heavens
(Bei, 1991, p.3)

In this stanza, Bei Dao transforms the intangible tolling of bells into tangible imagery and make the acoustic journey of bell more animating and vivid. The bells ringing from high towers materialize as inverted figures

¹All English translations of the poems from the 1986 edition of *Bei Dao's Selected Poems*(《北岛诗选》) cited in this essay are done by authors of this essay.

plunge headfirst, their gravitational fall driving the sound downward into the earth. This vivid depiction situates the echos of bells within a three-dimensional space, intensifying their layered resonance and spatial vastness. In the subsequent stanzas, Bei Dao further amplifies the bell's time essence by dismantling temporal coherence

time's curtain
opened by the silent bellringer
disintegrates, adrift in the sky

the days strike, one endlessly after the other

(Bei, 1991, p.3)

Here, time transcends its linear progression, becoming suspended within a multidimensional space shattered by the bell's toll. Through this approach, Bei Dao illuminates the bell's symbolic essence as a marker of temporal passage, where the sound itself becomes incarnate time.

Bei Dao's spatial techniques in poetry demonstrate a profound mastery of Surrealist art. The distinctive spatial forms he constructs, whether dreamlike realms of imagery, absurdist parallel dimensions, or chaotic, warped spaces, all possess striking visual impact and vivid cinematic quality. These innovations introduced fresh aesthetic effects and expanded creative possibilities for Chinese poetry. The recurring motif of virtual spaces in Bei Dao's poetics simultaneously embodies the rebellious psyche of his generation: a psychological resistance that manifests as withdrawal from reality and a collective yearning for an imaginary utopia.

Another crucial significance of Bei Dao's rebellious poetics lies in the reawakening of aesthetic subjectivity and consciousness, liberating suppressed poetry from passive reflection to active creation. In his poem *Declaration*, Bei Dao asserts: "*I am no hero / In an age without heroes / I just want to be a man*" (1986, p.78). This declaration powerfully articulates a humanist awakening, embodying the philosophy of humanism through poetic aesthetics and shaping the aesthetic identity of an entire generation. Though the poem employs the singular "I," this pronoun transcends individuality to become a microcosm of awakened youth, amplifying a collective voice. Simultaneously, Bei Dao's poetry frequently employs the plural pronoun "we," as seen in *Away We Go*: "*We haven't lost our memories / Let's look for a lake for living souls*" (1986, p.27), and in *Heading Toward Winter*: "*Heading toward winter / We weren't born for / A mystical prophecy*" (1986, p.195). Here, the collective "we" serves as a shared identifier for an awakened generation. Though Bei Dao has framed his rebellion as personal in interviews, he acknowledges that resistance defined his contemporaries (Bei, 2015, p.87). His poetry, however, transcends individual experience to amplify a communal spirit of defiance. This interplay between singular and plural voices creates an aesthetic tension, forging a vivid poetic representation of collective agency, which is a rebellion both intimate and universal.

Bei Dao's poetry in the Misty Period embodies a new aesthetic consciousness in its writing techniques. The lyrical protagonist presented to readers in his poetry simultaneously functions as an aesthetic subject,

which serves as a self-aware entity engaging with beauty and meaning. This deliberate cultivation of aesthetic depth within his Misty poetry constitutes a vital factor in the enduring resonance and eventual canonization of his work. In the preface to Bei Dao's *The Rose of Time*¹, the poet Bai Hua praises Bei Dao as "an interpreter and chronicler of an era," noting that Bei Dao's poetry and critical writings capture and preserve the eternal memory of an epoch for his readers (2005, p.7). Bei Dao's poetic rebellion transcends mere political and emotional expression to create an artistic dialogue where new aesthetic conceptions and aesthetic subjects coalesce, securing their place in literary history.

2.The Wandering Poet and Linguistic Exile

In the late 1980s, Bei Dao relocated abroad, embarking on his global creative period. He subsequently resided and wrote in multiple European and American countries, engaging with eminent international poets such as Tomas Tranströmer (1931-2015), Gary Snyder (1930-), Gennady Aygi (1934-2006), and Eliot Weinberger (1949-). Actively participating in poetry readings and festivals, he gained widespread acclaim among global audiences, culminating in a Nobel Prize in Literature nomination in 2014. While these achievements manifest his status as a cosmopolitan poet, Bei Dao's own description, "*I am a wanderer with no fixed abode*" (2015, p.17), shows that he is more like an "exile poet" in a wandering period.

The 20th century witnessed the mass displacement of intellectuals and writers, driven by anti-Semitic world wars, ideological conflicts, and the Cold War's global divisions. These forces created countless exiles. As poet Czeslaw Milosz observed, exile became the distinctive agony of the 20th century (2013). After leaving China, Bei Dao joined this exodus of displaced intellectuals. Unlike many exiles, however, his displacement extended beyond geography: his Chinese-language poetry itself became a form of wandering. Bei Dao carried his mother tongue into exile, and this dual exile, both physical and creative, profoundly shaped his poetics. Themes of displacement permeated his poetry, with linguistic exile emerging as a defining feature of his later works. In the manifesto of *Original: Chinese Language-Poetry Group*, a collective of Chinese experimental poets declares: "When the poet's consciousness shifts to language, this is in fact the preparatory stage of modern artistic experiment" (Prynne, 1994, p.98). This resonates profoundly with the defining traits of Bei Dao's poetic practice during his exile. His exploration of written characters alone emerges as a striking hallmark of the modernity and avant-garde innovation in his poetry from this period.

Bei Dao's intense focus on and experimentation with language during this time are vividly embodied in the recurrent motif of the exile of language that permeates his verses. In *He Opens Wide A Third Eye...*, he writes: "*The exile of words has begun*" (1991, p.25), signifying language breaking free from its original context to drift rootlessly. In *Reading*, he writes: "*A changing word/ in its dance/ seeks its root*" (1991, p.36). In this poem, Bei Dao probes the roots of the word, which implicitly becomes a deeper probe into the self as a wandering poet. In *February*, he further explores this theme:

¹All translations from Chinese into English of *The Rose of Time* (《时间的玫瑰》) cited in this essay were completed by the author of this essay.

Night approaching perfection

I float amid languages

...

As I and my poems

Sink together

(Bei, 1996, p.19)

Here, the poet appears detached from the external world, seeking refuge in the realm of words. Both the poet and his poetry become fellow wanderers and their destinies intertwined. Thus, Bei Dao's poetry transcends mere imitation of life; it evolves into a reality shaped by language itself, where words no longer simply reflect existence but actively construct new poetic truths through their migratory journey. In his essay *My Beijing*, Bei Dao himself also underscores this capacity of language to reshape reality. He writes: "I would use the written word to rebuild another city, rebuild my Beijing; I would use my Beijing to refute the Beijing of today", a statement that positions literary creation as a potent method to resist external circumstances (2010/2017). Perhaps by chronicling the exile of language in his poetry, Bei Dao resists his nomadic existence in his own poetic way: he tries to construct his own artistic poetic world to counteract his rootless wandering real life.

From a structural perspective, the linguistic exile in Bei Dao's poetry has led to fragmented writing and disjointed imagery. Compared to his Misty Poetry period, this linguistic wandering grants his exile-era works greater flexibility in language use. However, such creative freedom often reduces poetic contexts to semantic play dominated by linguistic logic, sacrificing the cohesive unity of earlier works. During the Misty phase, Bei Dao's imagery maintained a structural integrity rooted in his rebellious stance and ideological coherence, collectively sketching the aesthetic identity of an entire generation. In contrast, his exile poetry becomes characterized by uncertainty and fragmentation, as seen in *Perfect*—a poem where language itself becomes both the subject and medium of dislocation:

at the end of a perfect day

those simple people looking for love

left scars on twilight

there must be a perfect sleep

in which angels tend certain

blossoming privileges

when the perfect crime happens

clocks will be on time

trains will start moving

a perfect flame in amber
war's guests
gather around it keeping warm

stage hushed, perfect moon rising
the pharmacist is preparing
a total poison of time
(Bei, 1996, p.11)

The poem *Perfect* explores themes of perfect wholeness through its title, yet paradoxically reveals essential incompleteness through its fragmented imagery. Each stanza isolates a specific detail like simple people, the sleep, the train, the warm flame, the moon, and the pharmacist, which presented as self-contained vignettes. However, this meticulous focus on “perfected” fragments ultimately constructs a disjointed totality, where the absence of internal cohesion and logical association leaves the text adrift in linguistic wandering. Words, liberated yet exiled, resist synthesis into a unified landscape, aligning it with the fragmented currents of Western postmodern poetry. Here, Bei Dao’s linguistic displacement transforms poetic form into what Fredric Jameson called “postmodern fragmentation” (2005, p.121), just like a mirror of existential rupture, in which perfection sought through shards, wholeness defined by its absence.

3.Sense of Nativeness and Chinese Obsession

The term “sense of nativeness” refers to the historical and cultural traditions shaping an author’s upbringing. In cross-cultural exchanges, we must recognize how this rootedness influences creative expression. However, such influence does not imply cultural isolation; instead, it fosters mutual growth through dialogue between traditions (Ou, 1988).

In his early essays, Bei Dao rejects the notion of a “cultural root,” asserting that diverse cultural influences have shaped him since his youth. Yet during his exile, he describes Chinese as “the only luggage I carry” (2017, p.89), framing his mother tongue as the solitary companion of his diasporic creativity. However, language itself is inextricably rooted in history and lived reality. The vitality of language derives from the cultural contexts that nurture it. Despite his claims of detachment, Bei Dao cannot truly sever ties with his existential matrix, including the motherland, society, culture, and language that formed him. “The only luggage” proves insufficient to erase the embedded cultural DNA of Chinese language. Whether acknowledged or not, his poetic practice remains profoundly shaped by this sense of nativeness, revealing how creative expression inevitably bears the imprints of its origins, even in exile.

Bei Dao’s profound connection to the Chinese language fundamentally embodies his sense of nativeness. This extends beyond the mere act of writing in Chinese; it signifies his deep-rooted identification with and spiritual allegiance to the language. His relationship with the Chinese transcends utility and becomes a cultural lifeline, anchoring his identity and creative vision. Even during his global wanderings, when his mother tongue

often felt suspended in displacement, he maintained writing in Chinese. Bei Dao once stated, “Chinese is the identity of my poetry; it cannot be abandoned” (2015, p.79). For him, the Chinese language serves as the vessel of his poetry, the proof of his identity as a poet, and a source of self-affirmation. When addressing the question of whether modern Chinese poetry has broken from tradition, he reaffirmed the role of Chinese writing in cultural continuity: “In my view, Chinese poetry evolves endlessly, but as long as it uses Chinese characters, all its ‘genetic codes’ remain embedded within” (2015, p.144). Thus, despite his immersion in Western poetic influences and foreign linguistic contexts, Chinese and its poetic tradition remain the roots of his creative work. His enduring emotional bond with the Chinese language and its poetry persists as both an artistic anchor and a testament to his cultural lineage.

In his essay “*Notes for a General Article on Chinese Poetry*,” Ernest Fenollosa argues that the chief value of travel, and of studying history and alien literature, that it lifts the veil of our own, necessarily narrow, local, and radical consciousness, and reveals to us over and over a broader human horizon (Fenollosa & Pound, 2008). Similarly, in the introduction to his work, Yunte Huang reflects that it was only when he became a true “traveler” that the concept of the native “I” crystallized within him (2002). These arguments illustrate how individuals undergoing exile undergo a process of renegotiating their self-identity, ultimately leading to a rediscovery of the native “I”. This reawakening of a sense of nativeness is also evident in Bei Dao’s experiences during his exile. In *The Rose of Time*, Bei Dao recalls how his encounter with Western modernist literature initially led him to mistakenly believe that modernism must inherently oppose tradition. It was only after living abroad that he revised this view, gaining a renewed appreciation for tradition. He cites the influence of the American Imagist movement, only later realizing that it was the literary tradition of classical Chinese poetry that had indirectly shaped his creative practice. He writes, “Tradition is like the call of bloodline; it is something you suddenly grasp at a certain moment in life..... The emphasis on imagery and poetic realm in classical Chinese poetry ultimately became our inheritance” (2005, p.109). In his later works, Bei Dao further engages with the tradition of Chinese poetry through the deliberate use of imagery in his verses.

In this respect, the recurring imagery of homesickness throughout his poetry effectively reflects Bei Dao’s persistent sense of nativeness. His verses frequently invoke themes of homeland, mother tongue, nostalgia, and longing, which prove that his native land remains an irreplaceable spiritual anchor for the wandering exile. Bei Dao was born in Beijing and spent the first half of his life there. His experiences and memories of Beijing profoundly influenced, if not guided, his writing. This explains why he persistently focuses on reconstructing his remembered old Beijing through recollections of light, scents, and sounds in his book *City Gate, Open Up*, attempting to “rebuild my Beijing” through words on the map of a modernized metropolis. In the preface “*My Beijing*,” he writes: “If escape and return are the two ends of a road, walking even farther means drawing closer to childhood; and it’s precisely this primary force that pushes me toward the edge of the sea and sky” (2010/2017, p.7). Though physically exiled outward, Bei Dao’s inner world drew closer to his remembered homeland through this journey of displacement. This lingering attachment to Beijing manifests not only in his autobiographical essays but also permeates the poetry of his exile period. In *For Only A Second*, when Bei Dao gazed at the beautiful night view in Northern Europe, he couldn’t help but think of

where he came from: “*For a second/ a Peking Key/opens the door of a Scandinavian night*” (1991, p.34). Bei Dao embodies himself through the metaphorical imagery of “a Peking key” in the lines. The symbolic key-and-door motif suggests that while countless perspectives may exist behind the door, only the key, which represents his Beijing-born identity can unlock its truths. Even when encountering foreign nightscapes during exile, his capacity to perceive and interpret these experiences remains rooted in the worldview and empathy cultivated through his formative years in Beijing. This key, steeped in childhood memories and urban textures, becomes his poetic compass—an irreducible cultural lens through which all landscapes, familiar or foreign, are filtered and understood. In *Bright Mirror*, he writes:

In the midnight hour of wine
The flame of truth grows wild
A place for looking back
Who has no home
Why do windows loom so high?
(Bei, 1996, p.29)

Here, the poet’s suppressed emotions toward his homeland erupt in a drunken lament. The line “*Who has no home*” poses an ironic self-questioning, masking the exile’s profound yearning for a distant place of belonging. The towering windows, both unreachable and oppressive, mirror the psychological barriers faced by those severed from their roots. Through such imagery, Bei Dao transforms personal longing into a universal meditation on displacement, grounding his exile experience in the shared language of cultural memory. In his poem *My Country*, Bei Dao expresses more complex feelings towards his motherland:

Moonlight spreads a varnish
over the rough winter
under the cracks in the floorboards
sea water surges restlessly
and now I bid farewell
to what I’ve stored
- your dignity and honour
(Bei, 1991, p.73)

In this stanza, the poet bids farewell to his homeland. Winter, an imagery frequently employed in Bei Dao’s earlier works to symbolize the harsh social realities of the 1960s-70s, here merges with moonlight, which serves as a traditional Chinese poetic motif for nostalgia. Yet in this poem, the moonlight now illuminates this rough winter, cloaking it in an ethereal glow. This juxtaposition suggests that after years of exile, homesickness has overshadowed the rebellious sentiments of memory. However, like ceaseless ocean waves,

the poet's wandering cannot be halted. He can only part with his homeland once more in verse, channeling intricate emotions toward the homeland through his verses, ceaselessly to express a blend of unresolved longing, lingering attachment, and the quiet acceptance of perpetual displacement.

Whether during his Misty Poetry period or his evolving overseas writing phase, Bei Dao has secured an irreverent historical position in modern Chinese literature. Through a poetic journey interwoven with political resistance and aesthetic innovation, he introduced new dimensions of aesthetic consciousness to modern Chinese poetry, shaping the artistic ethos of an era. In his diasporic Chinese writing, he demonstrated unprecedented possibilities for cross-cultural literary reinvention while reconstructing his identity: he is a Chinese poet who was in perpetual exile yet had an eternally rooted sense of nativeness.

Though Bei Dao's rebellious poetics may seem distant in today's context, his contributions remain vital. His avant-garde spirit and literary ethos, as articulated in his letter to readers, continue to resonate: "*Today* magazine inaugurated a new literary era, driven by the unbridled energy of youthful rebellion. It is a very force that sustains its enduring legacy. As editors, we hope *Today* will forever preserve this youthful spirit, inspiring generations of literature-loving youth" (2015, p.186). In his overseas writing period, he centers the Chinese language itself, further probing its potential as a poetic medium while preserving creative authenticity within diasporic writing. In an era of transformative shifts in modern Chinese poetry, Bei Dao's artistic vision transcends temporal boundaries. His works still offer fresh perspectives for younger generations to interrogate the self and the world while laying fertile ground for future possibilities in Chinese poetic expression.

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