CHAPTER FOUR

EXILE:
YANG LIAN, WANG JIAXIN AND BEI DAO

Exile and its manifestations in literature are of all times and places. Examples from Chinese literary history include the archetypal exile-cum-poet Qu Yuan, banished to the countryside of Chu in antiquity, and large-scale wartime migration from the mainland to Taiwan in the 1940s. For the People’s Republic of China, the government’s crackdown on the 1989 Protest Movement dramatically heightened the relevance of literatures of exile (流亡) and related categories such as banishment, diaspora, and wandering or drifting overseas through foreign lands (放逐、流放; 流散、离散; 漂流、漂泊; 海外、异乡), with a prominent role for poets.¹

When the tanks rolled into Tiananmen Square, Yang Lian (1955), one of the authors studied below, had been away from China for almost a year, on visits to Australia and New Zealand. Bei Dao (1949), who features most prominently in this chapter, was in Germany on what should have been a longish trip taking him to a conference in the United States followed by several months in Northwest Europe. Duoduo’s story is comparable to Yang’s and Bei Dao’s, although he left China after June Fourth, on one of the last planes out of Beijing before the airport was shut down under martial law. His departure on what turned out to be a momentous day in modern Chinese history had been arranged months earlier, following invitations to the Rotterdam Poetry International festival and a conference at the London School of Oriental and African Studies. He had planned to travel in Europe afterward, for a few months at the most. As Yang, Bei Dao and Duoduo joined in the international outrage over violence in the

¹ Images of Qu Yuan as embodying dissent and eccentricity and hence exile in the broadest sense, inclined if not bound to express itself in literature, remain influential to this day; Schneider 1980, Leys 1978: xix, Yeh 1991a: ch 2, 1996a and 2005. In addition to the material used in the present chapter, scholarship and other writing on exiled poets from the PRC includes Lee (Gregory) 1993b, Li Xia 1999, Hawkes 2007, Huang Yibing 2007a and 2007b, and Porter 2007.
Figure 4.1. Yang Lian, 2004 (photograph by Song Zuifa)
name of law and order in their native land—Duoduo as one of the first witnesses of the mayhem in Beijing to arrive in the West—all three became enmeshed in an uncontrollable media discourse that tended to portray them as exiled political dissidents rather than poets. Contrary to plan, they ended up staying abroad. Other mainland-Chinese poets had moved to foreign countries from the mid-1980s onward, including Zhang Zhen, Yan Li, Zhang Zao, Jiang He, Beiling and Gu Cheng, in roughly chronological order. I cite Yang Lian, Bei Dao and Duoduo as examples because they were overtaken by the events at home while journeying abroad. Partly as a result, they enjoyed—or suffered—high visibility as exiles. Each traveled widely and lived in various countries before settling in the UK, the USA and the Netherlands respectively, and later making the occasional short-term visit to China, now as holders of foreign citizenship. Duoduo eventually returned to live in China in 2004.

During the cultural purge after June Fourth and later in the 1990s, yet more poets went on long sojourns or settled abroad, most if not all in Western countries. Wang Jiaxin (1957), the third poet discussed in this chapter, lived in the UK in 1992-1993. Others include Jingbute, Xue Di, Hu Dong, Song Lin, Zhai Yongming, Ouyang Jianghe, Huang Xiang, Meng Lang and Xiao Kaiyu: again, in roughly chronological order, from soon after the massacre until the turn of the century. Several had had their brushes with the Chinese authorities, with experiences ranging from intrusive surveillance to imprisonment. If this was usually on account of political protest or intellectual and cultural activism that were incompatible with state-sanctioned orthodoxy, that is not to say they were all “dissidents” who happened to write poetry, an infelicitous description of the sort that has often been applied to Bei Dao and others. For their subsistence many Chinese poets abroad have relied on adoption by cultural and academic networks, as writers in residence and sometimes as teachers. Such support has been motivated by their post-June-Fourth status as exiles among other things. I second Haun Saussy’s rebuttal of Zhang Xudong’s disparagement of the integrity of institutions outside China that have supported them, and of their poetry, as noted in chapter One. Zhang shows little regard for the development of their art over the years.²

Figure 4.2. Wang Jiaxin, 1992 (photograph by Pieter Vandermeer)
The presence of poets in mainland-Chinese exile literature is visible in the 1990 revival of *Today* outside China, with its editors scattered across continents. The new *Today* emerged in response to June Fourth and contributors were initially envisaged as mainland-Chinese authors abroad, but the journal soon cast its net wider. Smuggled into China from day one, in the early 1990s it counted as blacklisted material. While the journal has since become less dangerous or even “sensitive” (敏感) to have in one’s possession, postal delivery inside China remains erratic. Like the old *Today*, it carries fiction, drama and criticism as well as poetry, but many of its associates are poets—editor-in-chief Bei Dao, for one—and it continues to be primarily identified with poetry. Two other foreign-based journals with PRC roots and centrally featuring poetry are Yan Li’s New York-based *First Line*（一行, since 1987), and Beiling’s *Tendency*（倾向, 1993-2000). Both journals dissociate themselves from orthodox PRC-domestic discourse, and Beiling and Meng Lang have emphatically linked *Tendency* to underground and unofficial writing inside China, and made it part of their (personal) exile narratives. Yet, neither journal has the (perceived) exilic-literary identity of the new *Today*.3

The notion of exile is as common in popular and scholarly discourse as it is complicated. Does exile presuppose physical displacement, or is it a “homeless” state of mind that can befall one “at home” as well as elsewhere—or, an actively sought-after distance from centers of power and authority and from collective identities? If exile presupposes physical displacement, must this come about as a consequence of political persecution or coercion, economic need, danger? Is the exile’s habitat always forced upon them, as the lesser of two evils at best? Is exile always involuntary or should we make room for what Robert Edwards calls the overlay of compulsion and will? Are exile and happiness mutually exclusive? Is exile always terrible to experience, in the words of Edward Said, or can it become comfortable, perhaps even turn into a preferred mode of existence? Does exile have creative potential—might it even be, in whatever form, a prerequisite for originality? Bringing in literature gives rise to additional issues, some

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Figure 4.3. Bei Dao, 1988 (photograph by Pieter Vandermeer)
of them analogous to those surrounding categories such as women’s literature, as David Bevan remarks. Do writers in exile automatically produce exile literature? Can one write exile literature inside one’s native land? How do audiences fit into definitions of exile literature? What about literary content and form?

Paul Tabori points out that the question is who does the defining. This point holds for exile and exile literature alike, all the more so since conceptualizations of exile have grown in scope and currency over the past several decades. In this light, we should work less than ever toward closure or generalization, and instead reflect on definitional choices and their potential for inclusiveness; and emphasize the possibility of reading for exile rather than essentializing texts or authors.4

My argument starts from the observation that Yang Lian, Wang Jiaxin and Bei Dao have been called poets in exile or explicitly associated with the status of exile, by others and by themselves. This has mostly happened in popular and scholarly texts published outside China. If the term rarely occurs inside China, this is at least partly because it has at times been “sensitive” or politically incorrect by orthodox standards and must often fall victim to (self-)censorship, except when used sarcastically.5 Below, in section 1, I take a closer look at Yang’s, Wang’s and Bei Dao’s exile designations, using a theoretical framework proposed by John Glad. In section 2 I read for exile in their poetry. Exile and diaspora have obvious interfaces, but my analysis doesn’t aspire to contribute to diaspora studies of Chinese literature or Chineseness as constituting ethnic or cultural identity. Following William Safran and Tom Cheesman and Marie Gillespie, I take diaspora as having

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5 The term 流亡 ‘exile’ doesn’t appear in Keywords in Contemporary Chinese Literature (中国当代文学关键词), a book whose editors are known for their receptiveness to new trends (Hong & Meng 2002). It is also conspicuous by its absence in Zhao Xun 2002 (on Wang Jiaxin) and Yang Siping 2004: 238-249 (on Bei Dao, with the chapter heading referring to his post-1989 career as 去国 ‘leaving the motherland’). Personal communication by several poets and critics working in PRC poetry scenes and comments in Zhao (Henry) 1997a: 116 (or 1997b: 133) and Bei Dao & Tang 2003: 164 also point to the “sensitivity” of 流亡 ‘exile’, and its vulnerability to censorship. These things fluctuate: Yiping 2003, Zhang Hong 2003: 98-103 and Tang Xiaodu 2006 do speak of 流亡 ‘exile.’ Of course, 流亡 ‘exile’ is also in competition with other terms like 海外 ‘overseas’ and 流散 ‘diaspora,’ as in the 2003 Overseas Diaspora Literature Series (海外流散文学丛书) edited by Henry Zhao for the Hundred Flowers Literature & Art Press.
stronger connotations of social formation than exile. Diaspora is more about being in networks of others of similar origin, however comfortable or uncomfortable, powerful or powerless, who are living in two or more foreign regions; and exile is more about the individual’s not being in the homeland, and often fundamentally alone.6

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, for Yang, Wang and Bei Dao, I hope to clarify a label with loaded and controversial connotations. Outside China “exile” will frequently lend the poet an aura of heroic victimhood, whether they embrace this or reject it. Inside China, on the other hand, identifying with exile or being cited as having exile status abroad often provokes dismissive comments—not only or even primarily from orthodox quarters, but from within the avant-garde. The ingredients typically include the charge that the poet has sold out to foreign audiences and at the same time bamboozled them by claiming to be the victim of political persecution, arrogated the right to speak on behalf of all of China, lost touch with their mother tongue and so on; incidentally, such allegations have also been exchanged between poets abroad.7 Especially in the first few years after June Fourth and continuing until the late 1990s, a breakdown of communications between domestic and exile poetry scenes was perhaps inevitable for reasons both material and psychological, with members of each scene scoffing at texts and people in the other of whose situation they hadn’t necessarily kept abreast, until long-distance telephone and the Internet became widely available. To some extent, domestic and exile scenes have been competing for the stamp of authenticity and Bourdieuan legitimacy in present-day Chinese poetry. An interesting in-between case is that of Zhang Zhen, who left China on her own initiative in 1983 and later felt that some poets whose exile was linked to June Fourth perceived her as unauthentic in her capacity of Chinese poet abroad.8 This is one of many individual stories that complicate any simple inside-outside dichotomy.


Second, in an approach that is akin to that laid out in the previous chapter, I hope that my readings of poems by Yang, Wang and Bei Dao help counter the dominance of biography and historiography in the reception of poetry written in exile. If much (Western) scholarship politicizes poetry from the PRC, this is understandable in light of the Chinese government’s active involvement in cultural matters, and justified as long as the argument is based on evidence and methodologically sound. By contrast, popular media and non-specialist audiences often simply display overwhelming interest in the poet’s personal history, which becomes a political history in that it is automatically taken to be the product of institutionalized repression. This involves a prejudice that does no justice to the subtleties of the literary text and is boosted in press releases and blurbs by foreign publishers, who know that suffering sells better than symbolism. Yang Lian says of this:9

For Westerners, if a Chinese writer writes in China, he must be “underground”; if he lives abroad, he must be an “exile.” If a Chinese poet is introduced to a Western audience, as soon as the word dissident is mentioned, the audience immediately relaxes—the poet’s opponents have guaranteed that the poems must be good.

Other examples occur in Bei Dao’s bilingual poetry collections. David Hinton, translator of *Forms of Distance* (1994), begins his introduction thus: “Bei Dao is by now well known as the most prominent literary voice in China’s political opposition.” The blurb on the back cover of *Unlock* (2000) starts in similar fashion:10

Bei Dao, the internationally acclaimed Chinese poet, has been the poetic conscience of the dissident movements in his country for over twenty years. He has been in exile since the Tiananmen massacre of 1989.

Bei Dao’s is a literary voice, what it says is often poetic, and his oeuvre contains texts that may justifiably be called political, although they are hardly fit for policy-making or, for that matter, appreciation beyond the high-cultural niche in which the avant-garde finds itself—but to make these qualities mere attributes of his alleged primary status as activist is to turn things on their head. It also disregards Bei Dao’s literary track record over the last three decades, and what he has said about his role as a poet. The order of things is as follows. First, he is a poet.

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Second, this has occasionally enabled him—and perhaps, following a traditional Chinese poetics, made him feel obliged—to remonstrate with the rulers of his native land.\footnote{For the traditional Chinese poet’s “solemn duty” of remonstration, see Idema & Haft 1997: 48; for the continued impact of traditional views of literature on PRC writers, see Link 2000: ch 3.}

As for my focus on Yang, Wang and Bei Dao, we will return to this in section 2. There are of course other poets from the PRC to whose life and work the present inquiry could have extended. Duoduo, for instance, is generally recognized as having had exile status during his fifteen years abroad, and Wang Jiaxin isn’t the only one whose exile status is open to debate. But on Duoduo and exile, I have written elsewhere; and Wang’s case is interesting precisely because it is controversial.\footnote{Van Crevel 1996: ch 4 and 221-234.}

1. **Poets in Exile**

Even though they have visited China since their effective displacement in 1989, Yang Lian and especially Bei Dao are clearly poets in exile. As for Wang Jiaxin, there is a case to be made for viewing his sojourn in England as a period of exile too.\footnote{Biographical and bibliographical detail draws on Yang’s, Wang’s and Bei Dao’s publications (including “chronicles” 年表, interviews and prose writings such as Yang Lian 1998b and Bei Dao 1998 and 2004) and those of their commentators, and on personal communication over the years.}

For these claims, I base myself on John Glad’s model of writing *literature in exile*, which sidesteps some of the less objectifiable aspects of *exile literature*. The editor of a volume of essays by starkly different voices that somehow hang together, Glad defines *literature in exile* as literary creation outside the boundaries of one’s native land, taking the writer’s physical displacement as his point of departure. Glad’s approach is akin to that adopted by John Spalek and Robert Bell, who specifically assess how the physical exile experience affects the writer’s style and means of expression—with Adrienne Ash’s contribution arguing forcefully against prejudiced views of poetry as less suited to the negotiation of exile than fiction. Examples of research on modern Chinese literature with a similar outlook to Glad’s and Spalek and Bell’s
are Oliver Krämer’s work on writers publishing in the new Today and Lawrence Wang-chi Wong’s study of Wen Yiduo in the USA.\textsuperscript{14}

In its turn, we might define \textit{exile literature} as foregrounding the experience or the notion of exile, regardless of its author’s whereabouts at the time of writing and their biography at large. Accordingly, section 2 of the present chapter examines issues that Glad’s model doesn’t initially highlight. These include literary content and form, and a vision of exile as the (modern) poet’s fundamental state of mind—and as such the stuff that modern poetry is made of to begin with. But let’s first consider Glad’s dimensions for literature in exile.

\textit{i. Circumstance}

Certainly up to the mid-1980s, Yang Lian’s work was controversial inside China. A recent claim that makes him co-founder of the old \textit{Today} is inaccurate, but he did contribute to the journal’s last two issues in 1980.\textsuperscript{15} Yang has since counted as a core author of the Obscure Poetry that was central to politically charged debates on the arts over the next few years. He was among those targeted by the 1983-1984 government campaign to Eliminate Spiritual Pollution and experienced trouble publishing his work in 1984.\textsuperscript{16} Following trips to Hong Kong and Europe in 1986, he left China together with his wife Yo Yo in August 1988, for a six-month visit to Australia, whence they moved on to New Zealand. As the Protest Movement took shape in Beijing and other cities in China, Yang publicly voiced his support for the student demonstrators. When, in the early days of June 1989, the massacre made headlines around the world, Yang and Gu Cheng published an impassioned indictment of the Chinese government, in a pamphlet entitled \textit{Words of Mourning} (悼辞). Subsequently, Yang remained active to denounce the suppression of the Protest Movement. Inside China, later in 1989 collections of his poetry and essays were still formally published, but their circulation was withheld or severely limited. The essay collection is difficult to pinpoint as the censor’s trigger, since it

\textsuperscript{15} On the back covers of Yang Lian 1999 and 2002b. Yang’s work appeared in Today under the pen name Fei Sha.
\textsuperscript{16} On Yang Lian’s and Bei Dao’s problems during the campaign, see Edmond 2006: 115 and McDougall 1993: 81-82.
was banned as part of a multiple-author book series called *Toward the Future* (走向未来) that was terminated in its entirety. As for Yang’s poetry collection, a number of copies did actually reach their readers and made it into domestic and foreign libraries. In any case, there is every reason to believe that at the time he was on a censorial blacklist of sorts. The fact that such lists are difficult to obtain, verify or evaluate doesn’t make their existence any less real.\(^{17}\) Had Yang gone back to China in the first few years after June Fourth, he could have expected problems with the authorities and would have been unable to write and publish without their interference. He first returned for a visit late in 1993, with New Zealand citizenship, and has since regularly gone back. He has said that toward the end of 1989, the trouble surrounding the publication of his two books and a failed attempt to renew his Chinese passport made him realize that his original intention to travel and return had to be superseded by a decision to live in exile and view the People’s Republic as a foreign country unless it should see political change.\(^ {18}\)

Has Yang Lian perceived and presented himself as an exile? As noted by Krämer, at one point in the early 1990s Yang resented the Chinese term 流亡 ‘exile’ and preferred 漂泊 ‘wandering.’\(^ {19}\) He has, however, continued to use both terms, and the Chinese part of his website speaks of his literary career in exile (流亡生涯). Presumably in consultation with his translators, he has stuck with *exile* in English and its cognates in other European languages. This may be because of its currency in general usage, or, in Barmé’s words, the “bankability of packaged dissent.” Examples include numerous newspaper and journal publications, the English part of Yang’s website and the title of a dialogue he originally conducted with Gao Xingjian in 1993. The dialogue appeared in German and Italian in 2001 as *What Has Exile Brought Us?* (Was hat uns das Exil gebracht?) and *The Bread of the Exile: Chinese Literature before and after Tiananmen* (Il pane dell’esilio: La letteratura cinese prima e dopo Tienanmen), and was excerpted in English for *Index on Censorship* in 2002, as “The Language of Exile: When Pain Turns to Gain.” Interestingly, its 1994 domestic publication in Chi-


\(^{18}\) For *Words of Mourning*, see Yang Lian 1990: 41-42. Mabel Lee’s translation is entitled “In Memory of the Dead” (3-4). Yang Lian 1989a and 1989b are the books whose circulation was withheld or limited.

\(^{19}\) Krämer 1999: 168. Krämer translates 漂泊 as *floating*.
Chinese is called “What Have We Gained from Wandering?” (漂泊使我们获得了什么?) and has 漂泊 ‘wandering’ and 流浪 ‘roaming’ in the main text, but on Yang Lian’s website, a later reference to the Chinese title has 流亡 ‘exile’ instead. In sum, Yang has frequently referred to his circumstances as exile in the popular, concrete sense of banishment. Indeed, biographical fact is occasionally obscured by an exile label that expands as time goes by—not just forward, but backward as well. The blurb on his 2002 bilingual collection Yi claims: “His work was banned in China in 1983, and he has since lived in exile as a citizen of New Zealand.” This is, quite simply, misleading. Of course, authors and translators are not necessarily responsible for blurbs in their final form.20

On a final note concerning his self-perception and self-presentation, Yang Lian has used the word 流亡 ‘exile’ in poems written after June Fourth—and in semi-fictional prose, such as the powerful “Ghost-speak” (鬼话, conventionally meaning ‘lies’). So have Bei Dao and Wang Jiaxin. In section 2, we will consider the relation of literary text and authorial biography in this respect.21

Bei Dao’s relationship with the authorities was tense from the start of his literary career in the late 1970s, when he was editor-in-chief of the old Today, outside the confines of state-sanctioned literature. A few years on, like Yang Lian, he was among those individually attacked by orthodox critics during the campaign against Spiritual Pollution, and was banned from publishing well into 1984. In the mid-1980s Bei Dao became China’s best-known modern poet, making several trips abroad and living in the UK as writer in residence at Durham University in 1987-1988. In February 1989 he drew up a public petition to the National People’s Congress and the Communist Party Central Committee on behalf of 33 intellectuals and artists, in which he expressed support for Fang Lizhi’s open letter to Deng Xiaoping requesting amnesty for political prisoners. When, later that month, government security personnel prevented Fang from attending a dinner hosted in Beijing by USA president George Bush, Bei Dao spoke...


up again, this time by himself, urging China’s rulers to get used to “hearing different, even discordant, voices.” Over the next months he was harassed by the police and came under the credible threat of arrest. It may well have been only because of the emergence of the Protest Movement in April and the media attention that came with it that his mid-1989 trip to the USA and Europe could go through. During the Protest Movement students publicly cited Bei Dao’s poetry. After June Fourth, like Duoduo and Yang Lian, he found himself on foreign soil and took part in public protests against the Chinese government’s brutal action. Had he gone back to China, he would have got in serious political trouble.

From this point onward Bei Dao’s work was thoroughly banned from domestic publication. In 1991, for instance, the entire print run of Wang Bin’s *Critical Anthology of China’s New Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (二十世纪中国新诗鉴赏辞典) was confiscated when the books were about to reach the bookstores, with only a couple of copies slipping through into private libraries, the reason being that this tome of a book, some 1500 pages long and featuring 443 authors, contained six short poems by Bei Dao. The fact that all had been previously anthologized any number of times makes the incident a poignant illustration of the retroactive workings of ideological assessment and censorship. When a new version of Wang’s original project appeared in 1998, Bei Dao’s poetry had been duly removed.

Bei Dao’s family was torn asunder in the years after June Fourth. In 1989 his wife, the painter Shao Fei, and their daughter Tiantian were kept from boarding a plane at Beijing Capital Airport that would have taken them toward reunion. In the following years Shao Fei and Tiantian were never granted exit visas at the same time. In November 1994 Bei Dao’s effective banishment by the Chinese government was confirmed when he flew to Beijing from the USA but was stopped at the border and summarily deported. Between 2001 and 2005, he was allowed a number of short-term visits—the first when his father was critically ill—on condition of keeping a low profile and only leaving

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22 On a series of such petitions and similar activities in the first months of 1989, see Barmé & Jaivin 1992: 23-30.
Beijing for domestic travel with official permits. In «For Bei Dao» (给北岛, 2004), Shizhi recalls one such visit:

At parting, when you turned and walked away from me
a gust of wind lifted your coat up high
taking you along to drift through foreign lands
unceasing worry made me set pen to paper that night

In 2005 the authorities suspended the intermittent permission they had given Bei Dao to visit China and restore something of a “real” domestic presence. On the level of a single individual, this illustrates the PRC authorities’ tactics of alternate release (放) and restraint (收) in their exercise of political control, lucidly analyzed for the realm of literature by Perry Link. Bei Dao’s conditional right of entry was suspended after he refused to comply with demands for ideological submission and politically correct behavior, as measured by the Communist Party’s position on issues such as June Fourth and, more generally, human rights.

As for Bei Dao’s self-perception and his public presentation, whereas he appears less committed to maintaining a strong media presence than Yang Lian, and has—like Yang—often vented his frustration at the politicization of his poetry that the word exile almost invariably entails, he has also referred to himself as a poet in exile ever since June Fourth. Barely a month after the massacre, in an interview with Suizi Zhang-Kubin, he outlined the future of PRC literature in three compartments: official, underground and exile. When invited to write an autobiographical essay for the Amsterdam cultural center De Balie in 1990, he called it “An Exile Looking Back” (一个流亡者的回顾). There are many more such examples.

The circumstances of Wang Jiaxin’s sojourn abroad are less clear-cut than those of Yang Lian or Bei Dao. Wang appeared on the heels of the early Obscure poets featured in Today that include Bei Dao and Yang Lian. He counts as one of the most senior of a younger generation—or, depending on historical and critical perspectives, as a junior associate of the Today poets, with whom he established contact early on, during his student days in Wuhan. In the second half of the 1980s,

26 Shizhi 2006: 221-222.
having moved to Beijing, Wang was an editor at the influential *Poetry Monthly* and a respected poet in his own right. Both in the *Poetry* offices and in important anthologies like *Selected Contemporary Experimental Chinese Poems* (中国当代实验诗选, 1987), which he co-edited with Tang Xiaodu, he played an instrumental role in publishing younger avant-garde authors. After June Fourth, when the authorities tightened their grip on education, the media and cultural life, the *Poetry* editorial board was reshuffled, and in 1990 Wang lost his job. Positive motivations aside—a wish to see the world beyond China’s borders, as Yang Lian and Bei Dao had done in the 1980s—Wang’s two-year stay in England in 1992-1993 may well be viewed as the result of a conscious decision to lie low during a time of intense political repression, when finding new, meaningful employment after having left *Poetry* would have been exceedingly difficult. He began planning to leave the country and in fact left it before there was any hint of the relative political relaxation that arrived in mid-1992, three long years after June Fourth.

Wang Jiaxin hasn’t presented his time in England as an instance of exile forced upon him by the Chinese authorities. Yet, several avant-garde poets inside China—Shen Haobo, Yi Sha, Xu Jiang, Song Xiaoxian, Tang Xin—have mounted scathing attacks on him for making unjust claims to exile status, summed up in Yi’s words as Wang’s “pseudo-exile” (伪流亡). The explanation may lie in their resentment of Wang’s habit of citing near-exclusively foreign greats as kindred souls in literature, coupled with his self-assigned “fate of exile” in a 1994 poetical statement, and this description of himself in the preface to a 1997 collection of his poetry:

> Always on the road. Always running, then held up again without recourse or hope; always get to the end only to find that it is but a beginning; always take to the road inside one’s words, but forever without a home to return to; always between native soil and foreign lands.

The book’s title, *Moving Cliffs* (游动悬崖), alludes to the rocks called the Wanderers in Homer’s *Odyssey*, one of the dangers on the long way home of Odysseus, an archetypal exile in Western literary traditions. A couple of pages on, Wang cites an adage saying that “when you finally come home, you will be a stranger” to explain his feelings upon

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returning to China early in 1994. Also, ‘exile’ frequently occurs in the poetry he wrote during his time abroad and in earlier poems such as his 1990 homage to Pasternak. The pseudo-exile charge, however, is part of larger diatribes by Shen, Yi Sha and company delivered during the 1998-2000 Popular-Intellectual Polemic, with Wang as the favorite Intellectual target of Popular hellraisers.30

ii. Place of Publication

Glad’s second question is whether the writer publishes in the home country, legally or clandestinely, or with foreign publishers. As noted, two of Yang Lian’s books were banned or had their circulation impeded in China in 1989; the new Today, to which he has contributed from the start, was clandestine when taken into China, especially in the early years; also, as pointed out by Jacob Edmond, Yang has continued to publish in the domestic, unofficial circuit, which is not clandestine but stands in fluctuating opposition to the official publishing world and censorship. In 1991, however, an official, joint production of Yang’s long poem Yi (伊) and a commentary by Yufeng was published by the Hunan Literature & Art Press in Changsha, and in 1998 and 2003 the Shanghai Literature & Art Press put out surveys of his oeuvre to date. Edmond sees the 1998 publication as signaling Yang’s “reengagement with the official Chinese literary market” after June Fourth. In China, “provincial” publishers and other cultural institutions are less susceptible to political strictures than those in Beijing. Edmond argues that also in the capital, increased acceptability of Yang’s work in the PRC had already been visible in a 1994 collection of essays by him and Yo Yo, published by the Central Editions & Translations Press. Another Chinese-language collection by Yang appeared in the same year with the Taiwan Modern Poetry Press in Taipei, but for present purposes this counts as a publication abroad. Over the years, in several countries and languages outside China, Yang has built up a long list of journal and book publications of his poetry in translation, some also containing the Chinese originals.31

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Bei Dao’s publishing record is similar to Yang’s, although his work has been censored more harshly inside China. Early in 2003, following journal publication of some of his short prose, survey anthologies of Bei Dao’s poetry by the South Sea Press and the Hundred Flowers in Literature & Art Press marked the end of a fourteen-year domestic publication ban, albeit with several instances of (self-)censorship. The opportunity was not lost on scholars and critics, who began publishing the commentaries on his poetry that had been out of bounds since June Fourth. The presentation of Bei Dao’s two new books, published in Haikou and Changchun, was extremely cautious. Aside from the actual poetry, in the glaring absence of prefatory essays by one respected critic or another that would have accompanied the work of this one of China’s greatest poets under different circumstances, all they contain is minimalist blurbs on the inside cover noting the author’s residence abroad and his earlier book publications. In the meantime an impressive series of journal publications and books of Bei Dao’s poetry had appeared with major publishers outside China, both in Chinese, in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and in other countries and languages. Like Yang Lian’s foreign publications, some of these books are bilingual. In fact, while Bei Dao had published an unofficial collection as early as 1978, his first official book had also been a bilingual edition, edited and translated by Bonnie McDougall and published in the USA in 1983.32

Wang Jiaxin’s (official) publication record inside China shows a relatively quiet spell in 1992-1993, when he was living abroad, but his work was not banned, nor has it ever counted as particularly “sensitive” in comparison to other avant-garde poetry. In the fall of 1993, the Southern Poetry Review (南方诗志), an unofficial journal out of Shanghai, carried a special feature on his work; so did the official, scholarly journal Poetry Exploration in 1994, after Wang had returned. Outside China, in addition to foreign-language publications in journals and multiple-author anthologies, the Wellsweep Press brought out a bilingual computer disk containing a selection of Wang’s poetry with English translations by John Cayley, and sound recordings of Wang’s recitation of the Chinese texts.33

iii. Intended Primary Readers

Before anything else, we should note that none of the three poets ever switched to writing in a foreign language, in poetry or other genres. Their intended primary readers, then, would be readers of Chinese and probably those “back home,” in Glad’s words: that is, in mainland China. They have also published in other sinophone settings, and geopolitical boundaries such as those between the PRC and Taiwan shouldn’t automatically determine literary classification. Yet, everything from the poetic texture of Bei Dao’s, Yang Lian’s and Wang Jiaxin’s work to its reception shows their locus of belonging to be the PRC avant-garde and its readers, regardless of the censor’s success in denying them access to what we may call their native readership. Also, Wang didn’t have the exposure outside China that would have warranted realistic hopes for a foreign primary audience. In Bei Dao’s and Yang Lian’s case, such hopes are less outlandish.

In a 1990 review of *The August Sleepwalker*, a 1988 collection of Bei Dao’s poetry in English translation, Stephen Owen contemplated the possibility of the poet writing with translation in mind, and using “fungible” words to facilitate their future foreign renditions. *The August Sleepwalker* led William Jenner to opine that the contemporary Chinese language is unfit for writing poetry. Suffice it here to note that Owen’s review displays a vision of the creative writing of both originals and translations that is difficult to comprehend, especially coming from the supremely accomplished translator that he is himself. As for Jenner’s claim, any informed look at contemporary Chinese poetry will show that it is hard to take this seriously, just like his simplistic vision of (Chinese) poetry’s (un)translatability. Then again, sweeping statements like Jenner’s are something of a genre unto themselves. Another example, which ironically complements Jenner’s assertion, is the early Bei Dao’s contention that the formal requirements of Chinese ancient-style poetry “make it hard to express anything more complex than nostalgia or the parting of friends.”

Should we wish to consider the possibility that Bei Dao and other Chinese poets really write for foreign audiences or in an inherently unpoetic language, with reference to Glad’s model it is worth noting that this ordeal is apparently unconnected to their whereabouts, for

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The August Sleepwalker is largely a product of Bei Dao’s pre-exile years. This still holds if we take his 1987-1988 sojourn in the UK as a time of pre-1989 exile, even though at the time, he hadn’t been literally banished from China. Bei Dao has recounted his initial euphoria at the “golden years” of 1985-1986 for literature and art in the PRC, and cited disappointment and weariness at Hu Yaobang’s fall from power and yet another curtailment of cultural liberalization early in 1987 as one of the reasons for his first long stint abroad.35

iv-v. The Way of Life and the Language of the Host Country

Glad’s fourth and fifth dimensions compare the way of life and the language of the host country to those of the country of origin. For ways of life, Glad offers a scale from roughly comparable (Germany to Scandinavia) to significantly different (Hungary to Austria) to radically different (USSR to USA) to overwhelmingly different (Somalia to France). In this scheme of things, for all three poets, the ways of life of their host country or successive host countries would be radically different from China; and the language, overwhelmingly different. This makes their decision to continue to write in Chinese more or less self-evident, especially since they had had limited exposure to foreign languages before leaving China.36

vi. Repatriation

Glad calls repatriation the most emotional dimension, and asks whether the writer accepts or rejects it, if it is available to them to begin with.

For Wang Jiaxin, repatriation was indeed an available option, if not the only one. Considerations of livelihood, political status and immigration procedures combined, it is impossible to say if he could have continued to live in the UK or elsewhere outside China. Also, Wang

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35 On the arguably exilic nature of Bei Dao’s time in the UK, see Bei Dao 1990: 77.
36 After some early work in Chinese, Li Li has primarily written in Swedish, and only recently translated some of his poetry into Chinese. He is, however, an émigré rather than an exilé (Krämer 1999: 167). Li is not well known as a poet in China. Cf note 46.
had planned to live abroad for an extended period but not indefinitely, which makes his “acceptance” of repatriation a moot point.

Not so for Yang Lian and Bei Dao, as the above discussion of their circumstances shows. Since 1993 Yang has visited China freely, albeit on a foreign passport. Other such “foreigners” have been denied entry to their country of origin—Bei Dao, for example—and the 1998 and 2003 publications of something very close to a collected works would seem to imply the possibility, however uncertain or qualified, of Yang going back to continue his literary career in his native land. Without condoning any degree of censorship, I note that textual differences of Yang’s 1998 domestic survey anthology with his publications abroad that point to (self)-censorship are limited to things like the removal of massacre (大屠杀) from the title of one poem, of the year nineteen eighty nine (一九八九年) from that of another—incidentally, this phrase does occur in the title of a published poem series by Ouyang Jianghe—and of the prose poem «The Square», full of direct references to June Fourth, in its entirety.37 Many foreigners are now living in China, and many of those previously in exile have returned, whether as Chinese or as foreign citizens, including Duoduo. Yang Lian has, however, rejected repatriation on political grounds, stating that he doesn’t wish to be part of China under its current political system and this system’s current implementation. Whether his exile could be called “enforced” as late as 1999, as on the cover of his bilingual English-Chinese collection Where the Sea Stands Still, is open to debate. None of these considerations cast doubt on Yang’s exile status per se.

Bei Dao’s 1994 deportation from the Beijing airport made him what Glad calls a “true exile,” in that repatriation hasn’t been an option, regardless of whether he would want to resettle in China. True enough, 2003 saw the domestic publication of two rich collections of his poetry, but the conditional nature and the recent revocation of his right of entry belie any assumption that the authorities have developed a tolerance for his presence and his writings. Witness, for instance, his otherwise inexplicable exclusion from the Selected Poetry by Famous Contemporary Chinese Poets series mentioned in chapter Three.

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How does the sixth dimension qualify the writer’s exile status? Arguably, the most exilic situation occurs when a writer is banished and wants to repatriate but is barred from doing so by the authorities in the country of origin. The other dimensions can be seen to work in similar ways. The stronger the tension between the desire to belong to a—geographic, ethnic, cultural, linguistic—community of origin or “home” on the one hand, and the impediments to such belonging on the other, the greater the multi-dimensional distance and the farther into exile one travels, in the figurative as well as the literal sense. The operative notion is that of distance. As long as one experiences “here” and now as meaning away from “there” and then, the predicament of distance will only end if “there” should somehow fade or disappear. Seen thus, the relative poignancy of exile is a function of the enduring relevance of “there,” meaning a place where one is no longer. Hence, the frequent association of exile with nostalgia. According to this interpretation of Glad’s dimensions, the farthest one can travel into exile would be by being forced to leave one’s native land for a deeply different, “alien” host country and barred from returning; and continuing to write in one’s native language but being unable to publish in the community of origin. The utter loneliness of this situation—as an abstraction, aside from the writer’s individual experience—is wrapped up in the fact that the actual, foreign audience is not the one the writer primarily wants to address.

Shades of Exile

In sum, Yang Lian’s and especially Bei Dao’s status as poets in exile is more than a transient label or a mere blip in literary or media discourse. One can see why Li Dian calls Bei Dao “the face of contemporary Chinese poetry in exile,” and why the blurb on Yang Lian’s Li says that the author “stands with Bei Dao and others as one of the major living Chinese exiled poets.”

The complexity of exile makes assessing the “true” nature, the “authenticity” or the “legitimacy” of individual cases a tricky business, not made any easier by the phenomenon of groups or individuals engaging in the strategic packaging of dissent and, more generally, privileged

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38 Li Dian 2006: 37, Yang Lian 2002b. According to Li, Bei Dao has managed to make a living in this capacity, and is the only Chinese poet in exile to have done so.
types of marginality and victimhood. Still, without taking recourse to romantic hierarchies of tragedy, freedom, adversity, heroism and so on, one observes that Wang Jiaxin’s story is less exilic, because his time away from China was shorter than Bei Dao’s or Yang’s and his work was never attacked by domestic orthodox critics. Then again, the sequence of events that led to his sojourn in the UK—June Fourth and the subsequent cultural purge—and the vast differences between China and England as well as his personal account of his time abroad justify his designation as a poet in exile for the years 1992-1993. Especially for Wang, we need to bear in mind what Tabori calls the dynamic nature of exile, including the possibility of its termination, and hence its hindsight description as temporary.

If I consider Bei Dao’s, Yang’s and Wang’s designation as poets in exile justified, and proceed to read for exile in their poetry, this is not in order to claim ultimate or exclusive validity for the exile label as “capturing” the poets or their work, but rather to adopt one possible, significant perspective.

2. Exile in Poetry

The original motivation of this chapter lies in my desire to write about Bei Dao’s work. Accordingly, while I only discuss a small number of his poems, my treatment of his poetry is more elaborate than that of Yang Lian and Wang Jiaxin. A look at Yang and Wang, however, is worthwhile not just because of the quality of their writing, but also because their coordinates and those of Bei Dao overlap. All three are avant-garde poets from the PRC in exile after June Fourth and most of the poetry cited below is from the early 1990s. How do its authors differ in their negotiation of the exile factor? For all the damage it may do to individual lives, crudely summarized as an all-pervading sense of loss—of “home” in the broadest possible sense, of the self, indeed of life itself—the experience of exile has powerful creative potential, as many of those living it and their commentators have observed.

40 Li Dian classifies Wang as such, calling him one of Bei Dao’s fellow poets in exile (2006: 30-31). Li’s implied, similar categorization of Shu Ting is less convincing. Tabori 1972: 34.
Tabori’s central thesis, for instance, is that throughout history exiles have made important, lasting contributions to their host countries in a range of fields, including literature and art. If Said, in “Reflections on Exile,” is at pains to debunk glorifications of exile and stresses its mutilations instead, he too recognizes its creative potential. He focuses on the individual, lived experience of exile rather than its literary manifestation, extending his vision to the millions of displaced people who are not famous poets, artists, scientists, dissidents, activists and so on—not enough, though, to pacify Ian Buruma’s critique of the devaluation of exile by postcolonial theory. More germane to the present discussion, Said does note the major role exiles have played in modern cultural production; and here Buruma concurs with him. Joseph Brodsky, without glossing over exile’s horrors, points out that it can stimulate the writing process, paradoxically intensifying one’s experience of the native language from whose primary habitat one is removed. Bevan, echoing Said’s terminology, shows that mutilation and invigoration co-occur within single individuals. Similarly, according to Eugene Eoyang, dépaysement—in the sense of disorientation—is both a calamity and an opportunity. Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances, edited by Susan Suleiman, and Creativity in Exile, edited by Michael Hanne, constitute major contributions to the discussion. The former came out of a 1996 special issue of Poetics Today that expressly asks whether exile is a spur to creativity. The essays in Exile and Creativity offer a resounding yes, centrally featuring the unique benefit of distance after separation from one’s origins. Contributor Svetlana Boym concludes that “estrangement is a survival kit,” and “[exile] is not just a misfortune—it is also a cultural luxury.” Hanne’s volume shows how the notion of exile has expanded since the Second World War and the Cold War, and now encompasses ever-growing numbers of nameless refugees and displaced people as well as the high-profile intellectual experience; and how the expression of creativity in exile avails itself of a range of different media, in addition to (literary) language.42

Practitioners and critics of PRC literature, too, have remarked on exile as a positively productive force. To be sure, they lament the ordeal of the individual and remark on specific problems encountered by writers in exile from the PRC and other places ruled by culturally intolerant, authoritarian regimes, which Edward Brown outlines succinctly in the context of Soviet-Russian literature. In addition to removal from the habitat of one’s native language, such problems include the sudden absence of champions of government-sanctioned orthodoxy as safely despicable antagonists; the commodification, commercialization and mediatization of literature in the West, as forces that disfigure new-found freedom of expression; and the dissipation of one’s social significance as a writer. For poets exiled from the PRC, all three points were of higher relevance in the years around June Fourth than later on, when high culture in mainland China was increasingly subjected to the interrelated forces of marketization and social marginalization.43

In the face of such adversity, however, authors such as Gao Xingjian, Yang Lian and Bei Dao note that exile has advanced their creative manipulation of language and jolted their writing into new territory. Scholars including Cheng Guangwei, Wolfgang Kubin, Yang Xiaobin, Leo Ou-fan Lee, Yiping, Zhang Zao and Li Dian have shown that the exile experience has enriched PRC literature and Chinese literature at large.44

Whether speakers and protagonists in the poems under scrutiny should be identified with their historical authors is not my primary concern—but while I try not to let author biographies dictate my readings, it would be a forced exercise in formalism to block out their occasional, compelling coincidence. This informs the use of male personal pronouns in the following pages.

Yang Lian

There is no dearth of commentaries on Yang Lian’s poetry. In addition to insightful introductions and afterwords by his translators, Yang Xiaobin, Lin Xingqian, Jacob Edmond, Hilary Chung, Tang Xiaodu

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and Tan Chee-Lay are among those who dwell on exile and related notions in their research on Yang Lian.45

Of two bilingual books of poetry Yang published in 1990, in Mabel Lee’s translation, one is called The Dead in Exile. It contains poems written before Yang left China in 1988 as well as texts that explicitly respond to June Fourth. The violence of that historical moment jumps out at the reader, in an idiom easily recognized as an extension and indeed an intensification of Yang’s earlier work.

This point calls for a brief digression. Significantly, it shows June Fourth and Yang’s ensuing exile functioning as catalysts of an individual track of poetic development that had started a decade earlier. Something similar holds for other mainland-Chinese authors, including Bei Dao and Wang Jiaxin, but also for broader trends in the intellectual and cultural sphere: disenchantment with government ideology and the attendant discourse, the ebbing of the high culture fever, and commercialization of the cultural realm at large. Arguably, then, June Fourth can be seen as an exceptionally powerful catalyst of the emergence of PRC exile literature itself—as one of several concurrent trajectories of cultural change—rather than its root cause. In addition to the poets mentioned earlier, practitioners of other genres had also settled abroad in the 1980s, under exilic circumstances. Two well-known examples are playwright-novelist Gao Xingjian and Liu Binyan, the doyen of PRC reportage literature.46 Knowledgeable about foreign literature and having come up against censorship in the early stages of his career—for “spiritual pollution,” like Bei Dao and Yang Lian—Gao declined to return to China while on a visit to France in 1987. A domestic ban on his work remains in force today. Liu’s exposure of corruption in the Communist Party and social abuses had put him through many ordeals inside China before his effective banishment


46 Authors of PRC provenance living abroad who write in other languages than Chinese (and had settled abroad when they started writing) such as Ha Jin, Dai Sijie and Li Li, are beyond the scope of the present inquiry. See also note 36.
to the US in 1988. His prestige in post-1989 PRC exile communities is evident from a collection of essays by several tens of writers and intellectuals, entitled *The Undying Exile* (*不死的流亡者*). This important book, edited by Zheng Yi, Su Wei, Wan Zhi and Huang Heqing, is dedicated to “big brother Binyan” on the occasion of his eightieth birthday in February 2005—in the nick of time, as Liu died in December. While *The Undying Exile* has June Fourth as its most conspicuous point of reference, the editors show that the history of PRC exile literature starts long before 1989. They leave room for various conceptualizations of exile and their earlier (Chinese) manifestations, including the domestic variety forced upon many PRC citizens during political upheaval such as that of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution.

But back to Yang Lian. In an atmosphere that is unrelentingly nightmarish, many of Yang’s poems from 1989-1990 present an astonishing, sometimes unmanageable density of images of bodily violence, death, mutilation and rot. They frequently feature the unborn or newborn child, conventionally a carrier of innocence and the promise of vitality, in ways that would count as perverse by everyday standards. These things have remained regular features of his work in later years—Simon Patton writes that Yang’s fascination with death makes his collection *Non-Person Singular* “monotonous with morbidity”\(^\text{47}\)—but in the aftermath of June Fourth, they relate directly to the massacre. Following a reprint of Yang and Gu Cheng’s *Words of Mourning*, which assumes preface-like qualities, several poems in the book’s opening sections engage with exile in outraged, sometimes bizarre scenes that cry out to be read as restagings of the carnage on and around Tiananmen Square. Examples include «To a Nine-Year Old Girl Murdered in the Massacre» (*给一个大屠杀中死去的九岁女孩*, 1989), «Bloodstains in Heaven» (*天堂的血迹*, 1989?), «Missing» (*失踪*, 1989?), «The Dead in Exile» (*流亡的死者*, 1990) and «The Year Nineteen Eighty-Nine» (*一九八九年*, 1990).

These poems speak a tormented language whose fury breathes an anxiety of powerlessness in the face of the horrors that had occurred in historical “reality.” They address the event that led to the status of exile for many mainland Chinese, rather than the state of exile itself. Perhaps a better way of putting it is that outrage over the event makes

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\(^{47}\) Patton 1995b.
it impossible to focus truly on the experience of exile: any realization of being “here” now irrepresibly mobilizes the memory of the massacre over “there.” If we consider its author’s individual situation, the distance increases and the anxiety of powerlessness widens in scope. Yang Lian’s experience of June Fourth, on another continent, thousands of miles away, was mediated by radio, TV, print media and probably the occasional live eyewitness account. As such it was fundamentally removed from a reality that was at the same time deeply confrontational. One surmises that the author must have experienced his activism in faraway foreign media and literary circuits as essentially different from “actual,” on-the-spot engagement with it all, from being “there.”

Notably, in itself, an analysis such as this—of the experience of exile in the author’s life, inasmuch as it is visible in the public domain—doesn’t suffice to explain exile poetry qua poetry, be it Yang Lian’s or someone else’s. Any account of the desperate, near-maniacal tone of Yang’s writing in the first half year or so following June Fourth should take cognizance of his individual style, which had been aggressively exuberant from the beginning, in both his poetry and his explicit poetics, and sometimes timid and megalomaniacal. His commentators differ on this point. Yang Xiaobin finds Yang Lian’s “grand diction” productive in that it harbors a tension between the text’s aspirations to the eternal or godly and its historical and human limitations. Lin Xingqian, whose analysis centers on *The Dead in Exile*, speaks of Yang’s occasional “hysteria” and notes that his “hot-blooded” style isn’t always conducive to the success of his work.48

But the opening sections of *The Dead in Exile* also contain a text called «The Book of Exile» (流亡之书), dated January 1990, that negotiates the exile factor in relatively quiet, reflective fashion:49

«The Book of Exile»

You are not here these strokes of the pen barely writ down when mad winds sweep them away emptiness like dead birds soars above your face

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49 Yang Lian 1990: 51 and 1998a: 310. The date of composition is only recorded in Lee’s English translation (Yang Lian 1990: 14). For Yang Lian and Bei Dao, whose work has appeared in (Taiwan, Hong Kong and PRC) Chinese-language as well as bilingual editions, I include reference to Chinese-English editions wherever possible.
funereal moon a severed hand
flips back your days
back to the page where you are absent
you write and all the while
you relish your deletion

Like anyone else’s voice
bones crushed and spat in a corner just like that
the hollow voice of water on water
entering breath just like that
entering a pear without looking at anyone else
floor covered in skulls and each of them you
grown old overnight between the lines
as your poetry travels the world in hiding

«The Book of Exile» sustains Yang Lian’s obsession with images of death and the body—diseased, violated, mutilated, killed—in the funereal moon and the severed hand in the first stanza, and the bones and skulls in the second. The poem doesn’t, however, explode with physical disintegration and destruction, and it is much more contemplative than Yang’s other poems. In addition, even though its author’s biography as part of recent Chinese history—or recent Chinese history as part of its author’s biography—may bring June Fourth to mind, this poem is not about June Fourth but about experiences of absence, disappearance, emptiness, insignificance, removal, loneliness, concealment and exile, as its title announces.

These things emerge in scenes that are part of an imagined, surrealized process of fruitless writing, throughout the first stanza and toward the end of the second. Also, in the first line of the second stanza, the voice, in a poem about writing, leads to association with recitation, but without the unique qualities normally ascribed to individual performance: like anyone else’s voice, instead. A vital—and, deadly—identification of you with the act of writing occurs. You is because you writes and vice versa, and the absence or disappearance of the one means incapacitation or termination of the other at this moment, in the “here” and now of exile (here . . . these strokes of the pen). The severed hand that flips back your days embodies an attempt to retrieve a past in which you was present, and the act of writing could still mean that strokes of the
pen would remain and not be swept away. But there is no way out of the “here” and now of exile, as you ends up back on the page where you are absent.

An alternative reading of the latter line is that the state of exile retrospectively disables or even annuls the past, with displacement disrupting a sense of continuity that might have been maintained had one still been “there,” but is exposed as an illusion by the physical distance from “there” to “here.” Thus, the past gains in importance at the same time as becoming out of reach and indeed questionable, not to say unreliable or deceptive. As a consequence, you grows old between the lines, or, as a literal translation might read, in the characters and between the lines, of a poetry that may travel the world but hides itself or is hidden, presumably from readers of other languages than its own—or from all readers. The ill-fated identification of you and writing, both in exile, expands on the identification of exile and writing.\textsuperscript{51} It is reinforced by the fact that the modern Chinese word 书 ‘book,’ echoed in 书写 ‘write’ in the penultimate line of the first stanza, means ‘to write’ in classical Chinese. This would generate an alternative translation of the poem’s title as «The Writing of Exile» or «Writing Exile», if only for academic purposes.

In the meantime, it turns out that Yang Lian has written exile with considerable success, as measured by his publication record. This leads me to propose what may be an unexpected reading for the final paragraph of «The Square» (广场), dated December 1989. «The Square» is a powerful prose poem, also included in the opening sections of The Dead in Exile. As noted, it is one of the few texts that were excluded from Yang’s later survey anthologies published in Shanghai. It starts like this:\textsuperscript{52}

\begin{quote}
In this your statement, you leave the month of June behind, and you leave that person behind.
\end{quote}

The word rendered as statement (交代材料) literally means ‘[written] material accounting for [one’s actions].’ Mabel Lee translates it as confession. While it is definitely part of a semantic set including words like检讨 and 自我批评 ‘self-criticism,’ and 自白(书) and 口供 ‘confes-\textsuperscript{51} Cf Lin Xingqian 2001.
\textsuperscript{52} Yang Lian 1990: 58. Again, the date is provided with Lee’s translation (Yang Lian 1990: 22-23).
sion,’ the interpretation of «The Square» as a confession is open to
debate. If we imagine the text as a document determining its author’s
treatment at the hands of the authorities, what it does is to help him
survive by denial. If there is anything to which it confesses indirectly,
this would have to be complicity with the perpetrators of the violence
in Tiananmen Square.

In «The Square», in the statement that is the poem, you systemati-
cally denies that June Fourth ever happened, describing the square as
empty and paradoxically noting in great physical detail how people
were not shot and did not die, to powerful effect. The poem’s final para-
graph reads:

*You replace the paper, and the screams go far away. Write yourself up as another,
and you will live. Writing stroke by stroke, you personally erase one month from
the years of your life. You are lighter than before, you feel empty inside. That
person has gone. Long before the square was covered in characters miswritten, it
had been torn to pieces. Shreds of paper flying, fluttering down. The locust trees
have always had white leaves.*

The most plausible interpretation makes you a resident of Beijing who
was in Tiananmen Square when the army opened fire; and, in or-
der to survive, is later forced to deny that there ever was a massacre,
thus betraying both the victims of the violence and that person, a for-
mer self that saw them being shot. The identification of you with the
act of writing, and the image of the past as (mis)written—in this case,
Tiananmen Square as an unspeakably or unwritably painful *lieu de
mémoire*—operate just like they do in «The Book of Exile», composed
barely a fortnight later.

At the same time, however, a pivotal moment in the final paragraph
invites an alternative reading. The sentence *Write yourself up as another,
and you will live* reverberates with Yang Lian’s biography, even if that
means cutting it off from its local context. By way of justification, the
image captures what happened to the poet precisely around the turn
of that fateful year, when the decision to stay abroad was forced upon
him.

Wang Jiaxin

The fatefulness of 1989 is palpably present when Zang Di, writing in
1994, shows how “the year 1989” both redirected and catalyzed Wang
Jiaxin’s poetry. As noted in previous chapters, textual and metatex-
tual discourse contain thinly veiled signals of censorship surrounding
representations of June Fourth, and the cataclysm of change from the
1980s to the 1990s with June Fourth at its center. Ouyang Jianghe’s
essay “Writing Poetry inside China after ’89: Indigenous Disposition,
the Marks of Middle Age and Being an Intellectual” (后国内诗歌
写作: 本土氣質，中年特徵與知識份子身份, 1993) is a conspicuous
example. This illustrates that censorship is a face-saving exercise
among other things: we all know that we all know, but we just cannot
say that we do. In addition to Zang, other critics who comment on
exile and related issues in Wang Jiaxin’s work are Cheng Guangwei,
Chen Chao and Zhao Xun. Since Wang is less well known than Yang
Lian and Bei Dao, especially outside China, I will provide some back-
ground before turning to the exile factor in his poetry.53

Without detracting from the avant-garde’s pluriformity, there are a
few crudely generalizable differences between Obscure Poetry on the
one hand and the work of many younger poets on the other, especially
those of Earthly inclination. One is that the rich, sometimes incom-
prehensible yet fascinating imagery found in the former—words that
flaunt their metaphoric potential—is absent from the latter. We have
seen, for instance, that the paucity of imagery in Han Dong is part
of a poetics of disbelief and demystification, with a self-styled aver-
sion to grand ontologies of poetry, and with much room for irony and
“trivial” realities of everyday life.

While Wang Jiaxin’s poetry displays little disbelief or irony, the
above generalization does apply. Some of his finest poems contain few
evident metaphors, if any. His overall presence on the poetry scene—
philosophically inclined, serious if not solemn, introverted yet ambiti-
tous—displays kinship with authors such as the early Xi Chuan and

53 Zang 1994; cf Zhang Hong 2003: 63-106, 135-139. Ouyang 1993a; while this
first appeared in the new Today, it quickly entered domestic circulation through cop-
ies of the journal that made their way into China, and was frequently reprinted in
domestic publications, recent examples including Wang Jiaxin & Sun 2000: 181-200
English translations are found in Tang Chao & Robinson 1992, Zhao (Henry) &
Cayley 1994 (under the pen name Zi An) and Wang Ping 1999. Other commentaries
and 1994 is found in Chen Chao 1999: 515-531.
Mo Fei. He has also been grouped together with Chen Dongdong and Ouyang Jianghe, as fellow Intellectual poets, and associated with 1990s Narrative (叙事) poets such as Zhang Shuguang, Sun Wenbo and Xiao Kaiyu, but he can in fact hardly be pigeonholed as belonging to any one group or trend in the avant-garde. Wang’s work was marked early on by its quiet, flowing tone and by its melancholy atmosphere. «Autumn in Europe» (欧罗巴的秋天, 1993) is a good example from his years in exile.54

«Autumn in Europe»

When autumn comes to Europe  
people holidaying on the seaside start going back  
with warm skies looking weary

When autumn comes to Europe  
amid the falling leaves adrift, there are those  
who sit in sorrow on a park bench reading this or that  
and there are those, on the streets of London or Paris  
who step in dogshit

There are those, at the thin hour of nightfall  
who are retrieved by Chopin’s Nocturnes, and there are those  
who go out to mail a letter that will never arrive  
there are those who register for the new term at the Chinese department  
and there are those, in the west wind suddenly rising  
whose words will rhyme with Shelley’s verse

When autumn comes to Europe  
there are birds that fly up, and fly off to southern lands  
and there are those who paint another journey in their hearts  
there are those who want to cry for no reason at all  
and there are those who return to that same old bar  
to wait for a miracle

Now together with autumn I set out  
and with the autumn winds I cross the English Channel  
because of the earth’s emptiness, and because of  
guitar music drifting through the subway entrance  
I become the last insomniac in Paris

when, across from the hotel, there lies a graveyard
in my homeland it’s raining, inside me....

This is entirely different from the exile factor in Yang Lian’s poems. And while representativeness is a tricky notion, «The Book of Exile» and «Autumn in Europe» are recognizably works by Yang and Wang, reminding us once again that exile will only make poetry in the hands of poets—and, therefore, will do so in varying ways. The difference between Yang and Wang is one of verisimilitude above all else. In Yang Lian, exile sets in motion a tense dynamic of the imagination. In Wang Jiaxin, on the other hand, it appears in basically “realist” scenes from the lives of outsiders and, more specifically, people experiencing a type of loneliness that is the direct result of being in a foreign country. They relate to their alien surroundings in ambivalent ways: from misery in everyday life—sorrow, dogshit, mailing a letter that will never arrive—to consolation in music and literature. Even if the speaker’s perspective is not automatically linked to its author’s biography or to the fact that the original is in Chinese, he is an outsider to Europe as a whole, not just London or Paris. The birds flying off to southern lands make the outsiders yearn to journey—home?—themselves. The view from the hotel room, surrogate home to the traveler, is that of a graveyard and by implication of a death on foreign soil, especially once we read the poem’s final line. There, the exile factor becomes an explicit exile marker, in in my homeland it’s raining, inside me. This recalls the closing stanzas of «The Rivers of Amsterdam» (阿姆斯特丹的河流), a famous poem by Duoduo, written late in 1989:55

after the autumn rain
that roof crawling with snails
– my homeland

slowly sailing by on the rivers of Amsterdam

In several other poems Wang Jiaxin wrote in England, the exile factor is similarly explicit or directly implied in related words such as 异国 ‘alien land,’ 哑语 ‘sign language’ but literally ‘the language of a mute,’ and 流亡 ‘exile’ itself. The first, short prose poem in the series

«Another Landscape» (另一种风景, 1993), called «England» (英格兰), begins and ends like this:

*England, empty, with no one there. Wherever you go, there’s only the sky for a companion . . . As it turns ever gloomier, it responds to the language of a mute, in the soul of an exile....*

Even more emphatic, becoming almost expository in nature, are these passages from «Prague» (布拉格, 1993)—this time echoing Duoduo’s «None» (没有, 1991):

*The exile carries his homeland on his body
there is no homeland, only dusk bursting from the wounds of the earth

*There is no homeland
the homeland has risen to the skies, taking its giant rocks with it
the homeland is but a momentary, painful flash
the homeland is above, higher and farther away
pressing down on you to the end of your days*

Another series of short prose poems called «Moving Cliffs» (游 动悬崖, 1993) includes a poem that repeats the final line of «Autumn in Europe»:

«Soil»

*When you’re homesick, it’s not in foggy London but in your homeland that it’s raining, inside you. It’s not the driving rain, it’s some kind of soil inside you that flows down heavy: it will almost make you fall over paralyzed, to touch death, and that lost earth....

This is the most helpless moment of your life: the soil is dragging you back. Who will you ask for help?—In that relentless driving rain, you sink deeper and deeper into the thing that makes you ever darker, and moves you ever further beyond redemption....*

«Soil» (泥土), again, contains explicit exile markers: homesick and homeland. At the same time it shows Wang Jiaxin tapping into the potential of the imagination, in the soil inside you that flows down heavy and is

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dragging you back. The image operates—and this is how the poem fits seamlessly into Wang’s oeuvre at large—not as something substituting for reality, but rather in natural conjunction with the “realist” scenes noted earlier. This happens in the oppositions of foggy London and the driving rain on the outside, and the homeland and the soil on the inside. The exile markers in the poem and its author’s biography turn 土土 ‘soil, clay, earth’ into an evocation of that other archetypal exile marker: 乡土 ‘native soil.’ «Soil» thus derives its quiet forcefulness from literary sophistication. That is, it does so from the suggestion of exile’s connotations, rather than their declaration.

Bei Dao

When avant-garde poetry from China first appeared in Western translation and scholarship in the early 1980s, Bei Dao occupied a central position, in line with his domestic prominence. To date, he is probably still the most widely translated modern Chinese poet, with Yang Lian a close second. As is true for Yang, Bei Dao’s translators have contributed much to the critical discourse on his work. Scholarly studies with attention to exile in Bei Dao’s poetry include essays by Jiangjiang, Wolfgang Kubin, Ouyang Jianghe, Michelle Yeh, Yang Xiaocin, Leo Ou-fan Lee, Lin Xingqian, Ronald Janssen, Yiping, Yang Lihua, Zhang Hong, Yang Siping, Zhang Zao and Tan Chee-Lay, and a book-length monograph by Li Dian.59 The majority find common ground in the observation that the exile experience has spurred Bei Dao’s development as a poet from a relatively public to a more subjectivized, interiorized voice that is profoundly aware of the powers of language beyond its “neutral” representation of historical realities.

Just like Wang Jiaxin’s, Bei Dao’s oeuvre contains both declarative and suggestive moments, and they make for very different types of poetry.60 The declarations are especially fit for satisfying what


60 Cf Li Dian 2006: 39.
I have called the audience’s overwhelming interest in the poet’s personal history. The poem becomes a metonym for its author, enabling straightforward empathy with a historical human being, rather than interpretation and appropriation of the text by the individual reader. Here, historical circumstance bolsters the lingering influence of an aspect of traditional Chinese poetics earlier summed up as reading the poet—and reaffirms that such strategies are not solely practiced by Chinese readers. Bei Dao’s declarations of exile can additionally be seen to offer relief from the (in)famous “difficulty” of his work.

These things help explain the frequency with which Bei Dao’s commentators cite and praise the more declarative of his poems. «Local Accent» (乡音), hailed by Leo Ou-fan Lee, Li Dian and others as a stellar example of exile poetry, is a case in point.61 Bei Dao doesn’t date his poems, but publication details suggest that it was written soon after his forced settlement abroad, in 1989 or 1990.62

«Local Accent»

I speak Chinese to the mirror
a park has its own winter
I put music on
in winter there are no flies
I make coffee, at my leisure
flies don’t know what your homeland is
I add some sugar
your homeland is your local accent
at the other end of the phone line
I can hear my fear

A local accent evokes the image of one’s (local, native) dialect or language marking one’s speech with a foreign accent, of making one a stranger, someone who is “here” but not “from here”—or, of one’s dialect or language, spoken in dialogue with a distant interlocutor, as a painful reminder of the “there” that is out of reach except by calling it on the phone, as a surrogate for physical presence.

«Local Accent» is a conspicuously constructed text. The original carries its mechanical repetition of the first-person singular pronoun through to the last of lines 1-3-5-7-9, and doesn’t have I in line 10—where the translation cannot do without it. A word-by-word translation of lines 9-10 reads I at the phone line’s other end / have now heard my fear. If unzipped, the poem’s two interlocking sequences in lines 1-3-5-7 and 2-4-6-8 fail to connect:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I speak Chinese to the mirror</th>
<th>a park has its own winter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I put music on</td>
<td>in winter there are no flies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I make coffee, at my leisure</td>
<td>flies don’t know what your homeland is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I add some sugar</td>
<td>your homeland is your local accent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Launched by the exile marker of speaking Chinese to the mirror, the first sequence acquires meaning beyond the inane description of a cozy household scene only by alternation and contrast with the second. For all the poem’s ingenuity—the repetition of I, for instance, may well be read as purposefully awkward—one wonders whether its effect is not diminished when the tension is explicitly resolved in lines 9-10, as the local accent takes center stage: at the other end of the phone line / I can hear my fear.

Something similar happens in the equally oft-quoted «He opens his third eye....» (他睁开第三只眼睛), written around the same time as «Local Accent», soon after June Fourth. The first two stanzas contain vintage Bei Dao imagery, strong enough to carry the none too concrete notion of freedom, which the poem calls the golden lid on one’s coffin, sealing the image of a he that is fixed in place aboard a ship, in an underwater cabin, like ballast. The poem ends on a solemn one-line stanza that reads

the word’s exile has begun

Not only has the compound word 流亡, meaning ‘(go into) exile’ or more literally ‘wander in escape,’ acquired somber connotations over time, the character 流 ‘flee into hiding, die, perish’ by itself posits a terrible vision of exile. While the potential of a new beginning also lends the ending to the poem a defiant tone, its declarative, explana-

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64 Lee (Leo Ou-fan) 1991: 212-213.
tory style affects the text’s vitality, if only in a poetics that privileges types of literature that show rather than tell—without any intention of downplaying the suffering of the historical person called Bei Dao. At any rate, the poem remains eminently capable of moving the reader, as a text that consciously inserts itself into a public discourse that includes the biography of its author. As McDougall notes, the poetry that Bei Dao wrote soon after June Fourth reflects “[his] grief at the time of the massacre, and his anguish as the separation from his family was prolonged.” 65 This recalls the desperate tone of Yang Lian’s work in late 1989 and early 1990, and Lin’s characterization of some of Yang’s poems as exuding hysteria. Lin’s analysis bespeaks an ultimate preference for Bei Dao’s exile poetry, on account of his success in balancing the Dionysian and Apollonian forces in his art, in the Nietzschean sense.

Bei Dao’s oeuvre after June Fourth contains more declarations of exile and of the forces that brought it upon him, especially in the early years. For some, it is likely (self-)censorship that excluded them from his 2003 domestic anthologies. An obvious example is «Mourning the Dead: For the Victims of June Fourth» (悼亡 — 为六·四受难者而作, 1989?): publication in China would trigger repressive action by the authorities until such time as the official government position on June Fourth is revisited.66 «Morning Story» (早晨的故事, 1990?) is another poem whose declarative hues invite citation. It is cited nearly as often as «Local Accent» and «He opens his third eye....». This is the first stanza:67

*One word exterminates another word*
*one book orders*
*the burning of another book*
*a morning erected on the violence of language*
*changes how, in the morning*
*people sound when they cough*

In the entire passage, the sound of coughing is the only image that leaves room for interpretation. One could, for instance, read the coughing as representing routines of daily life that are affected by

66 Bei Dao 1991: 10; not in 2003a or 2003b.
ideological terror. Zhang Hong broadly takes it as signaling political intention. In the rest of the poem, poetic imagery—as opposed to pamphletish diction—more or less holds its own. But the poem lays out its overall orientation in no uncertain terms when we read, in the second stanza:

*in obtuse crowds of people*
*the government finds its spokesman*

Yang Xiaobin cites «Morning Story» as highlighting a symbolic totalitarian discourse of dictatorial words, to illustrate Bei Dao’s reflection on the problematic of language as a means to narrate history.

Strictly speaking, the poem contains no exile markers. The reader has to invoke the author’s biography in order to make it exile literature—or, in the terms used in chapter Three, draw the boundaries of the text in such a way as to give the author some space inside them. Invoking the author’s biography is precisely what many of Bei Dao’s (foreign) readers would have done, after encountering it in *Old Snow*, his first (bilingual) collection of poetry after June Fourth. The book’s contents are divided into three parts called “Berlin,” “Oslo” and “Stockholm,” accurately advertised as “poignant reminders of the restless and rootless life of the exile” on its back cover.

(Self-)censorship thus appears to come into play for Bei Dao’s 2003 domestic anthologies when his poetry refers to June Fourth and the type of political repression that caused his exile, not for poems that foreground the experience of exile as such. «Poison» (毒药, 1992?) is an example of the latter, with strong declarative overtones.

«Poison»

*Tobacco holds its breath*

*The exile’s window aims at*
*wings set free from the depths of the ocean*
*winter music sails closer*
*like faded banners*

*It is yesterday’s wind, it is love*

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68 Zhang Hong 2003: 97.
70 Cf Patton 1995a: 142.
Remorse comes down like heavy snow
when a stone reveals the end
I cry here and now for what’s left of my life
Give me another name

I mask myself in misfortune
to block my mother tongue’s sun

In this chapter, when translating from the Chinese, I use mother tongue rather than native language or native tongue, because the Chinese 母语 literally means ‘mother language,’ and the signified of these various terms—one’s “own” language—is central to the exile experience.

In exile and my mother tongue, «Poison» has straightforward exile markers. Less explicitly, a sense of nostalgia runs through the poem, from the faded banners to yesterday’s wind—as the force propelling the wings and the music that are visible and audible through the exile’s window—to remorse and the notion of what’s left of my life. The asking for another name, the masking or disguising (伪装) of the self and the obstruction of the mother tongue bring to mind Yang Lian’s words: Write yourself up as another, and you will live.

It has often been noted that the physical exile of poets from the PRC who lived abroad at one time or another was preceded by a “spiritual” or “inner” or “internal” exile that was required for and reinforced by poethood inside China to begin with. Here, rather than what they actually wrote, the notion of poethood signifies what it meant to belong to the avant-garde in terms of social status. A few authors enjoyed exceptional popularity soon after the Cultural Revolution, for works that were readily interpretable as the expression of widespread socio-political grievances. Beyond that historical moment, however, outside a small if well-positioned audience, avant-garde poets have consistently been marginal and controversial figures—when measured against official cultural policy and popular taste, that is.

Inner exile, as an exilic retreat into the mind, is not specifically Chinese or exclusive to the modern era. Cicero, for instance, is one of those who have remarked that exile can occur without one’s being driven from a home. As regards inner exile in response to political...
repression, one is reminded of the “internal emigration” by intellectuals and writers in Nazi Germany, which Rosemarie Morewedge convincingly classifies as a “real” type of exile. More generally, many moments in poethood the world over have involved inner exile in the sense of self-assigned outsider status, as both cause and effect of the rejection of socio-cultural convention or political strictures. This is sometimes called “metaphorical exile,” in a neutral sense. Authors such as Boym, Buruma and Rudolphus Tieuwen put metaphorical exile and exile as metaphor to polemical use, to question an intellectual-cultural discourse that they see as trivializing “real” exile, that is: physical banishment. Inner or metaphorical exile can co-occur with physical displacement, but it can also happen at home. Beginning in Eastern and Western antiquity with authors such as Qu Yuan and Ovid, it has in fact been cited as a prerequisite for original art.73

Yang Lian, Wang Jiaxin and Bei Dao have all described exile as inherent in poetry. In a 1993 interview by post with Chen Dongdong and Huang Canran, during Wang’s time in England, he speaks of “a kind of ‘exile’ that started long ago, inside the words.” Brodsky’s depiction of exile as “an absolute perspective,” meaning “the condition at which all one is left with is oneself and one’s language, with nobody or nothing in between,” comes to mind when Bei Dao, in a conversation with Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg, calls exile “an extreme clarification of every poet’s situation.” Bei Dao argues that writing poetry always constitutes a challenge to the dominant language and culture; that the poet is hence never really at home anywhere; and that in this sense, poetry and exile are almost “synonymous concepts.” As for Yang Lian, whose “conception of poetry as an exilic art form” is underscored by Jacob Edmond and Hilary Chung, the title of his 2002 essay “In Search of Poetry as the Prototype of Exile” says it all. The central question recurs in the preface to Yang’s bilingual collection Notes of a Blissful Ghost, published in the same year: “When did this “self-exile” begin? What true poet who touches upon the true nature of poetry is not in spiritual exile?”74

There is no simple equation of poetry with exile. For one thing, not all (physical) exiles write poetry. Yet, the metatextual association of exile and poetry is clear, with exile as a state of mind that can contribute to poetry, or as an overarching framework for non-mainstream poethood in the PRC—and, for (modern) poethood at large. In Bei Dao’s case, in addition to these things, the expression of exile in the actual texts of his poetry has consistently been a feature of his art, starting long before his life in physical exile. To isolate inner exile from the writer’s experience in Spalek and Bell’s terms—that is, the experience of physical exile as a literary determinant—the first place to look would be in works written before the writer settles abroad. As it turns out, for the notion of (inner) exile, Bei Dao’s poetry from before June Fourth contains declarative moments too, just like his later work. One of the most straightforward occurs in «To the world....» (对于世界....). This poem’s inclusion in *The August Sleepwalker* helps explain some of Owen’s bafflement in his review:75

> **To the world**
> I am an eternal stranger
> I do not understand its language
> it does not understand my silence
> what we exchange
> is mere disdain
> as if meeting in a mirror

> **To myself**
> I am an eternal stranger
> I dread the darkness
> but use my body to obstruct
> that one and only lamp
> my shadow is my lover
> my heart the enemy

The text bears little commentary, inasmuch as it arguably is commentary itself—poetical or otherwise—and employs words such as *world,*

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stranger, language and disdain that remain unwieldy for want of imaginative usage. Considered alongside other poems by Bei Dao, early and late alike, it is immature. Yet, as an explicit poetical statement it reaffirms the significance of inner exile and outsider status as a state of mind, regardless of the author’s physical surroundings: say, a crowded city in his native land. Zhuang Rouyu speaks of self-estrangement (自我疏离感), Zhang Hong of separation from (隔膜) and opposition to (对立) both world and self.⁷⁶

More importantly, while in «To the world....» itself, the literary expression of these things is far from subtle, it draws attention to a larger, quintessential thematic in Bei Dao’s best poems. This is a thematic of alienation, as an umbrella notion that covers categories like difference and otherness; distance, removal, and displacement; and absence, isolation and silence. Notably, Bei Dao’s negotiation of these things often involves images of spoken or written language. Without wishing to speculate on the writing process as it works for this particular poet, it is easy to see how this thematic, which takes shape in his work long before 1989, can incorporate the lived experience of physical exile, as recognized by Ronald Janssen and Zhang Hong. Bei Dao’s thematic of alienation manifests itself not only in more or less paraphraseable content but also in his style. If style is an intangible thing, let me clarify this point by contrasting Yang Lian’s exuberance with what one might call Bei Dao’s reticence. This is especially visible in his later writings. It is captured by the poet in his adage that “poetry is a way of keeping secrets” and by Yiping’s characterization of Bei Dao’s work as “the predicament of standing alone.”⁷⁷

To illustrate the thematic of alienation that runs through Bei Dao’s oeuvre, noted by McDougall as a feature signaling its development beyond the incipient stages,⁷⁸ let’s first turn to some early examples. «Spite makes a drop of water troubled....» (积怨使一滴水变得混浊) is one of Bei Dao’s untitled poems from the 1980s.⁷⁹

\[\text{Spite makes a drop of water troubled} \]
\[\text{I am tired—as the storm}\]

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⁷⁸ McDougall 1985: 245.
This poem contains a declarative exile marker in the banishment (放逐) of I. As an observation of textual fact, this is unchanged by its date of composition, before Bei Dao’s physical exile and, indeed, his banishment. The declaration of banishment is, however, an integral part of the body of the poem, and as such less overbearing than the concluding statements in «Local Accent» and «He opens his third eye....», whose position at the very end of the text can lead to closure of the interpretive process. Again, this is not to deny those two poems their power but to note the decisive impact of their concluding lines on the reading process.

Some unconstrained specimens of early Obscure Poetry generate a feeling of loose ends or unfinished ideas rather than productive ambiguity—but in the quick sequence of images in «Spite», the imagery coheres: storm, beach, sea, sun, reef. The alienation of the speaker is anchored, to stick with the poem’s vocabulary, in (written) language, embodied in the deafening book—just like Chinese spoken to the mirror, the word’s exile, the mother tongue’s sun, and the language of the world and silence (沉默, meaning silence as opposed to speech) in the poems cited earlier.

These are the opening lines of «Notes Taken in the Rain» (雨中纪事), a longer poem that may serve as another example of alienation in Bei Dao’s early work:80

When I awake, the window on the street
retains of glass
that perfect, peaceful pain
while slowly clearing in the rain
the morning reads my wrinkles

the book lies open on the table
rustling, just like
the sound that fire makes

«Notes» has the familiar elements of distance between the I and a world out there, on the street, and the speaker’s proximity to (written) language in the book. The first four lines of the final stanza also constitute a declarative moment of the type encountered above:

One who paints fruit on the earth
is doomed to go hungry
one who dwells among friends
is doomed to be lonely
tree roots show, outside of life and death
what the rain washes away
is the soil, is the grass
is the sound of lament

Just as in «Spite», however, the declaration of alienation—in this case of difference, rather than distance or absence—is embedded in the poem’s body, not attached as a conclusion. This softens the effect of closure.

We started from declarations of exile in Bei Dao’s later poems. Bearing in mind distinctions of physical and inner exile and some critical junctures in the poet’s biography, we then moved back in time to related textual moments in his earlier work. In so doing, we have situated his literary expression of exile within a larger thematic of alienation that is already present in the 1980s. To conclude, let’s return to Bei Dao’s later work for a discussion of two poems that also feature this thematic. Crucially, however, they do so in suggestive, not declarative, fashion. «Whet the Knife» (磨刀) was written late in 1989 or in 1990.\footnote{Bei Dao 1991: 46 and 2003: 111. The table of contents in Bei Dao 1995 confirms this estimation of the date of composition.}

«Whet the Knife»

By the glimmer of dawn, I whet the knife
and find that its back grows ever thinner
and its edge remains dull
as sunlight flashes
Out on the street, the crowd
is a forest on a giant billboard
as silence roars
I see the needle edge along
growth rings in a tree trunk
and slide toward the core

If we read for alienation, the image in the poem’s title or, more precisely, its elaboration in the first stanza, is grist to the mill: whetting the knife surrealistically leads to the opposite of its known effect. The description of the crowd that is out on the street as a forest on a giant billboard is central to the way the poem unfolds. Physically, it is hemmed in by parallel phrases that point to the blinding and deafening of sight and hearing: as sunlight flashes and as silence roars. This recalls the deafening book in «Notes Taken in the Rain», and the mother tongue’s sun as an unbearable blaze that needs to be blocked in «Poison». The equation of the crowd to a forest shows that the speaker is aware of his deviation from “normal” perception: aware, in other words, of seeing things differently from what they “really” are. The word rendered as billboard is 橱窗, ‘display window, showcase’ or ‘glass-fronted billboard.’ Positioned out on the street and with a glass surface it presents another echo of «Notes», emphasizing the distance between the speaker and the world around him, with a window in between. The poem’s title builds tension: whet the knife in order to do what? So does the image in the final three lines, as the phonograph’s needle travels back in time, from the outer growth rings to the inner. Once it reaches the core, the music will cease. In an instance of iconicity, this is where the poem ends.

«Whet the Knife» is literature in exile, in Glad’s definition, since it was written outside the author’s native land. For its qualification as exile literature—that is, as foregrounding the experience or the notion of exile—we would minimally need to bring in Bei Dao’s biography.

The final poem discussed in this chapter is «Borrowing Direction» (借来方向). In addition to its date of composition, likely in 1994 or 1995, some of its imagery leads to association with the physical exile factor, including the frequency of Bei Dao’s relocations and travels since 1989. This poem, however, qualifies as exile literature even if we draw the boundaries of the text as tightly as possible, regardless of any association with its author’s biography. The poem itself, in the strict
sense, can be seen to foreground exile as a specific category of alienation. To this reader, the fact that it does so by suggestion rather than declaration, less directly than some of the earlier examples, makes it one of the finest specimens of exile poetry from China.  

«Borrowing Direction»

A single fish has a life
full of holes
holes in flowing water oh froth
is what I speak

Borrowing direction
the drunk travels through his storied echoes
but the heart is a watchdog
forever facing the lyric core

Music underway
is shattered in an accident
skies cover
our emotional life from the other side

Borrowing direction
birds break out of my sleep for the trek
lightning strikes in everybody’s glass
he that speaks is without guilt

«Borrowing Direction» is a poetic reflection on difference, distance and absence, as component parts of alienation in Bei Dao’s work. In froth is what I speak, the speaker’s otherness—specifically, his inability to communicate with others—is foregrounded in the image of ineffectual or futile language, just like in the Chinese spoken to the mirror in «Local Accent», and the world and I failing to communicate through language in «To the world...». As for the poem’s title, twice repeated, a direction one borrows is not one’s own. It hints at removal from a locus of origin, and lack of control over one’s destination. Tang Xiaodu, in an interview with the poet, wonders whether the image represents an ironic, anti-ideological stand. Bei Dao affirms this by saying that a direction is temporary, like an assumption, as opposed to the unequivocal and definitive nature of ideology, which he calls

revolting. Both readings tie in with the sense of dislodgment in the subsequent image of a drunk who travels. A constant throughout his travels, however, is a (poet’s) heart watching over the lyric core; this echoes the core in «Whet the Knife», as a point from which music—or poetry—emanates and to which it returns. If we let the indirect exile marker of the travels evoke Bei Dao’s biography, the accident that shatters the music—or poetry—that is underway (行进中, literally ‘advancing’ or ‘in operation’) could lead one to think of June Fourth. The last thing this poem needs, however, is the reductionist force of such historical context. Its potential lies in the ability to address the experience of exile at large, not the forces that sent its author into physical exile. The final stanza offers a powerful, indirect exile marker in the time-honored image of the migratory birds that we also encounter in Wang Jiaxin’s work, and that Zhang Zhen invokes to sum up her border-crossing experience since the early 1980s. The birds rise from the speaker’s sleep—from his dreams?—as the embodiment of the urge both to leave and to return.83

The poem’s last line, he that speaks is without guilt (言者无罪), is a near-literal citation of a phrase from “The Great Preface” (大序) to the Book of Songs, one of the canonical sources of early Chinese poetics: 言之者无罪 ‘he that speaks it is without guilt,’ with it referring to admonitions of authority whose literary form gives them license to violate social taboo.84 In other words, according to a traditional Chinese poetics, the poet has the right to remonstrate with the ruler, as long as the remonstrations are well put. Of course, while he sees himself as a poet not a dissident, Bei Dao’s biography can be used or abused to interpret his poetry as political protest. One need only think of the founding of Today, his 1989 open letter requesting amnesty for political prisoners and his consistent refusal to let himself be silenced by the threat of political repercussions.85 Yet, again, «Borrowing Direction» can do without all that qua poetry. He that speaks is without guilt presents, above all, a reassertion of the (poet’s) right to speak his poetry, aside

84 See Owen 1992: 46. Owen renders the full string as When an admonition is given that is governed by patterning (wen), the one who speaks it has no culpability. My translation aims to bring out the intertextuality with Bei Dao’s poem.
85 Bei Dao 1990: 78.
from any socio-political message it may or may not bring—or, in the “other words” that poetry is, even if froth is what I speak.

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I have tried to clarify conceptualizations of exile: of poets, and in poetry. The narrowest variety has been that of the physical exile of Yang Lian, Wang Jiaxin and Bei Dao, three Chinese avant-garde poets after June Fourth. The broadest, that of exile as the (modern) poet’s state of mind or the stuff that (modern) poetry is made of. On a third level of engagement, I have focused on exile as it is foregrounded in actual texts written by the said three poets. For Bei Dao, this demonstrates that a central thematic of alienation that is present in his oeuvre from the early years facilitates incorporation of the exile factor. For all three, it shows that in any poetry that will hold its own, independent of historical contextualization, the order of things is incorporation of the exile factor in an individual poetics, not the other way around. This is not a new idea, and one could call it a specification of long-standing definitions of (modern) literature that grant pride of place to the text’s aesthetic qualities over effectiveness in conveying a paraphraseable message. But it bears textually argued reiteration, if only to balance biography and historiography’s penchant for turning art into documentation, with literature from China as an easy victim.