

The Poetics of Exile: the Cases of Shang Qin and Bei Dao

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“Exile” is a recurring theme in modernist poetry in both Taiwan and mainland China. For writers in these geographical locations, exile has come to mean leaving one’s homeland under duress, either by literal force or as one bad option among many. Though nostalgia, alienation, and marginalization are feelings evoked by exile, for many writers the relationship between exile and writing is far more complex and dialectical than mere struggle between anguish and transcendence, confinement and creativity. Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉 (b. 1937), who himself played an important role in Taiwan’s Modernist Movement, compared the modernist poetry of postwar Taiwan and China, suggesting that it was the shared sense of exile that had driven the poets to question and probe their own existence. This is because exile is not only a recurring motif in modernist literary works, but also the actual life experience of the genre’s writers. Major modernist poets such as Ji Xian 紀弦 (1913–2013), Luo Fu 洛夫 (1928–2018), Ya Xian 痲弦 (b. 1932), Zhang Mo 張默 (b. 1931), Yu Guangzhong 余光中 (1928–2017), and Shang Qin 商禽 (b. 1930) shared similar life stories of being forced to leave their mainland hometowns during the Chinese Civil War. In China, most of the Obscure poets spent their youth during the Cultural Revolution, and they were forced out of their homes and sent to remote areas. In the 1980s, after winning recognition from the public, many of the Obscure poets, including Bei Dao 北島 (b. 1949), Duo Duo 多多 (b. 1951), Gu Cheng 顧城 (b. 1956), and Yang Lian 楊煉 (b. 1955) found themselves in self-imposed exile abroad for different reasons.

Wai-lim Yip’s observation on the connection between exile and the creativity of modernist poets echoes Edward Said’s point of view. Said, in his essay “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginalians,” makes the point that exile is not only an actual condition derived from the social and political history of dislocation, but also a metaphorical condition in which the intellectuals never feel at home, are always restless, and may even unsettle others. To Said, such uneasiness is essential for intellectuals’ creativity. He gives exile positive meaning and asserts that exile is to “move away from the centralizing authorities towards the margins,” where one can be liberated from the conventional

and see things that are usually lost on others' minds.¹ In this sense, Said suggests that even if one is not in physical exile, it is still possible to think as a person in exile.

In this chapter, I investigate how the significant concept of exile is expressed in modernist poetry. By applying Edward Said's perspectives on exile as both an actual and metaphorical condition, I will focus on two modernist poets who both experienced physical exile—Shang Qin and Bei Dao, Taiwanese and Chinese respectively.² I will examine how the poets' descriptions of "exile" are not only the reflections of their own personal experiences caused by particular historical circumstances, but also serve as models to explore the universality of the human condition. Herein lies the poets' challenge to what poetry ought to be.

1 The Experiences of Exile: Shang Qin and the Dialectics of Existence

Born in 1930, in Sichuan Province of southwestern China, Shang Qin grew up in a tumultuous time of modern Chinese history. He joined the Guomindang (GMD) army at the age of fifteen, but deserted several times. While on the run, he roamed about in the southwest provinces of China and started collecting folk songs. Although he escaped from the army many times, he was always caught in the end and placed in captivity as punishment. Shang Qin's experience of repeated desertion and imprisonment in his early life is one he shared with many people who were forced to leave their homes during the Chinese Civil War. Shang Qin once said that, ironically, those who caught and imprisoned him ended up in exile as well.³ After losing control of the mainland to the Chinese Communists, the GMD fled to Taiwan with thousands of soldiers, among whom were Shang Qin and others who later became influential modernist poets. For those young servicemen, Taiwan, a tropical island, was no different from a foreign land.

Not long after landing in Taiwan, Shang Qin started writing poems for *Xiandai shi* 現代詩 (Modern poetry) founded and edited by Ji Xian. Unlike other modernist poets who began by writing patriotic poetry or received public recognition by winning poetry contests sponsored by government authorities, Shang Qin wrote poems that were nonconformist from the very beginning.

1 Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 63.

2 Shang Qin arrived in Taiwan at the age of twenty and resided there until his death. His poetic activities were mainly in Taiwan; therefore, this chapter treats him as a Taiwanese poet.

3 Shang Qin, *Meng huozhe liming ji qita*, 2.