Meanings Between the Opposites: 
The Function of Paradox in Bei Dao’s Poetry

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Abstract
Bei Dao’s hermitic style of poetry has been baffling his critics ever since he started writing. While his earlier “Misty” poetry met with strong resistance from official Chinese critics, his continuing insistence on fragment syntax and disjointed imagery while writing in exile has earned him a few detractors in the west. Does Bei Dao resist reading? Can one make sense of his poetry? Is there such a thing as “intentional non-sense”? These are some of the questions that the paper tries to answer. With a careful reading of his selected poems, I will show how Bei Dao privileges ambiguity and uncertainty by forcing seemingly unrelated or opposing things or ideas together and thus creating abundant eye-catching paradoxical images. These unending paradoxes, whose power comes from an imaginative reordering of things and events, form a key aspect of Bei Dao’s poetics.

Keywords: paradox, conflict, split-imagery, re-veiling.

Poetic language is the language of paradox. —Cleanth Brooks

Paradox exists in order to reject such divisions as those which exist between “thought” and “language,” between “thought” and “feeling,” between “logic” and “rhetoric,” between “logic,” “rhetoric,” and “poetics,” and between all of these and “experience”. Its paradox, form and content, subject and object are one, conflated, as the ultimate instance of the unity of being. —Rosalie Colie

Readability has been a loud complaint against Bei Dao’s (b. 1949) poetry throughout his career. The label of “Misty Poet” is his legacy left in China and continues to define him while abroad. In recent times, there has been a growing number of critics—for reasons that are very different from his official Chinese

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1 Brooks, 1947 : 3.
2 Colie, 1966 : 519-520.
critics in earlier times have expressed frustration with Bei Dao’s poetry: how his enigmatic style, fractured syntax and disjunctive imagery have conspired to resist reading even by expert readers. For example, Michael Duke, an esteemed scholar of contemporary Chinese literature, has declared that Bei Dao’s poetry “as a whole did not make any sense.”6 The Taiwanese writer-critic Lee Kuei-shien offers a similar reaction: “...the more I read the less sense he makes to me. The knots of so many contradictions are beyond unraveling, and the more I try to interpret, the greater the apparent disarray.” If the “sense” that the two critics wish to make is a traditional thematic unity and interpretative certainty, Bei Dao’s poetry is bound to cause disappointment. The impression that Bei Dao is not committed to “meaning,” the essay will argue, is because he is committed to paradox. If paradox produce meanings at all, they are always multiple, undifferentiated, and indeterminate. The unending display of paradoxes, whose power comes from an imaginative reordering of things and events, forms a key aspect of Bei Dao’s poetic world.

Through the Prism of Paradox

Paradox, as commonly understood, is a play on logic; it first invokes contradictions, and then subverts them by the power of reason to finally dissolve them altogether. In the end, logic survives a serious challenge but ultimately prevails. At least this is how two contemporary rhetoricians, Jeanne Fahenstock and Marie Secor, characterize the strategy of paradox in literary criticism. Identified as one of the six fundamental tropes in rhetoric, the paradox tropos is used by critics to “show how contradictory elements can be unified via creative interpretation.” If “all good literature commonly expresses a paradoxical view of life” and “the techniques of literature are in themselves interestingly paradoxical,” as Harvey Birenbaum writes in his joyful book The Happy Critic,7 then we would have to consider finding and solving paradoxes a centerpiece in the puzzle of literary interpretation. Obviously, this proposal, which is of great interest to my reading of Bei Dao, is premised on the belief that all paradoxes are solvable and it is from the process of such a solution that meanings are derived. The question is what constitutes the solution of a paradox. Does it function to negate or reaffirm the paradox that it helps to explain?

Let us consider this classical tale, a tale that is the locus classicus of the word “paradox” in the Chinese language and known to every educated Chinese person. Once upon a time a blacksmith comes to the marketplace to sell the weapons he has made. Holding up a spear, he declares to the assembled crowd: “This is the sharpest spear you will ever find. It will pierce through any shield.” Then he lifts a shield and says, “This is the sturdiest shield in the world. Nothing can pierce it.” Someone in the crowd asks, “What if I use your spear to pierce your shield?” The blacksmith cannot muster an answer. Needless to say, this tale meets the requirements of paradox in any culture, but what is the solution to the hapless blacksmith’s contradictory claims? A pragmatic person might say, let us test the spears against the shields as suggested by the speculator and we can do it hundreds of times so that we will reach a statistical truth as to which is more powerful. This approach fits the billing of “creative interpretation” advocated by Fahenstock and Secor, which may indeed resolve the blacksmith’s contradictions. The Chinese reader throughout history, on the other hand, has shown little interest in such scientific method. He identifies with the wise speculator but is content to let the blacksmith keep his puzzle. He embraces the paradox as a whole and takes no sides in the power of the spear or the shield, for the meanings of the paradox lies precisely in the symbiotic relationship between the spear and the shield: there is no absolute power when comparing the two, and the function of one depends upon the other, like yin and yang, like everything else in the world.

It is little wonder that the blacksmith’s dilemma has become an all-time favorite in the Chinese collective memory. The cosmic view that is derived from a proper reading of the paradox is now a familiar one to those who have studied Chinese culture: everything has its opposite and the world is full of contradictions; change happens constantly to alter the constitution of the opposites but never annihilates one or the other. The name of this cosmic view is, of course, Taoism in the tradition of Lao-Zhuang. Note I said a “proper” reading is needed to arrive at a Taoist understanding of the paradox. By that I mean a reading not of analysis or science but of embodiment and conviction, in which one takes the role of an aesthetician but not a logician, for an aesthetician is a connoisseur of paradox and a logician its detractor.

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4 Lee, 2001, 5: 19: 2
5 Fahenstock and Secor, 1991: 76-96.
7 The Chinese word, I am referring to here is maodun, which some would argue is an equivalent to “contradiction,” but not to “paradox.” Instead, they may propose fushu to be a better translation of “paradox.” However, such views are not supported by major Chinese dictionaries I have consulted. Fushu is a neologism invented in the 20th century to specifically refer to Russell’s Paradox and has no wide use beyond mathematics. To say paradox as a mode of thinking did not exist in pre-20th century China because of a 20th century interpretation of an ancient word is needlessly self-limiting.
Shu Ting and Bei Dao spearheaded the rise of the Misty Poetry (Meng longshi) in China and they, together with Gu Cheng, have become the embodiment of this poetic movement. Chinese readers cherished Shu Ting’s whispering words of love, friendship and understanding as much as they did Bei Dao’s emphatic statements of rebellion and skepticism. However, there is a fundamental difference between these two poets’ approaches to poetry, and particularly between their respective ways of constructing images and metaphors from which meanings are produced and revealed. To illustrate this difference, I will do a comparative reading below of Shu Ting’s “Assembly Line” (Liushuixian) and Bei Dao’s “Advertising” (Guanggao). “Assembly Line” is one of Shu Ting’s most widely anthologized works and has been hailed as a “milestone” by the German Sinologist Wolfgang Kubin for its skilled use of language and modernist sensibility.

“Assembly Line”
On the assembly line of Time
Nights huddle together
We come down from the Factory assembly lines
And join the assembly line going home
Overhead
An assembly line of stars trails across the sky
By our side
A young tree looks dazed on its assembly line
The stars must be tired
Thousands of years have passed
Their journey never changes
The young trees are ill
Dust and monotony deprive them
Of grain and color
I can feel it all
Because we beat to the same rhythm
But strangely
The only thing I do not feel
Is my own existence
As though the woods and stars

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How much of this collective memory is alive with Bei Dao? It is always risky to guess one individual’s scope of reception to his culture, but one should not underestimate the power of “cultural sedimentation” as the famous contemporary Chinese philosopher Li Zehou has admonished us. “Writing is a way to keep a secret,” Bei Dao declares, using his favorite form of sentence-structure-statement,8 and this is one of the many Bei Dao speaks that have taken his audiences by surprise. There is no easy way to argue away the contradictions apparent in the statement. All writers want to be read and Bei Dao is no exception. Writing is always a public act because the language one uses is in the public domain. In theory at least, there is no writing that cannot be deciphered and to use writing to keep one’s secret then is at best a self-delusional act. Still, it would be futile to argue logically against Bei Dao because he has already precluded the power of logic in his revelation about writing and the self. The key word here is “secret,” a loaded signifier of cosmic dimensions that points to the mosaic of his inner contradictions-contradictions which are not for him to keep but for him to share and which can only be expressed in writing paradoxically. A paradox begets another paradox, which may be the best way to describe Bei Dao’s view of writing.

To see the world through the prism of paradox is clearly evident in Bei Dao’s following remarks: “There are many principles in the world, and many of these principles contradict each other. Tolerance for the existence of another’s principle is the basis for your own existence.”9 It is interesting to note that Bei Dao uses the word “principles” without rendering a value judgment, yet they “contradict” one another, as do the spear and the shield. Tolerance, a non-principle acting like the highest principle of all, is the distance that keeps the contradictions in check, or in other words, a Taoist belief that prevents the spear and the shield from testing each other for the absolute domination of one over another. One wonders how Bei Dao could have translated the Chinese blacksmith’s tale so well-in spirit and literally, if we remember that “contradict” is the Chinese word for “paradox.”

It may be time now for us to follow Bei Dao into his poetry where he has kept his secrets to share with us. In the following readings of Bei Dao’s poems, I will try to describe the poet’s construction of meanings between opposites and his reliance on split imagery, both strategies of paradox that are as much about the revelation as about the re-veiling of a skeptical mind.

8 Janssen, 2002: 268.
10 Kubin, 1993: 35.
Instead of providing a central image to guide our reading, Bei Dao bom-
bards us with a host of images, of which some are realistic, some surreal, some
fantastic and none is privileged over another. What is most baffling is the lack of
logical transition from image to image, line to line and stanza to stanza. As a
result, each image seems to exist as an isolated fragment or in Roland Barthes’s
phrase, “un signe sans fond”—a free-standing sign. If one looks carefully, how-
ever, one will be rewarded with an interesting discovery: Bei Dao’s images are a
collection of paradoxes, of which some are direct paradoxical pairs, some call for
their implicit opposites and almost all depend on contrast and contradiction for
life and vigor. In the first stanza, we have lilacs versus “lilacs stamping their feet”
(un-flower-like act, in anger perhaps), doves versus human, and “price reduc-
tion” versus “the thunder of gold.” In the second stanza, we have freedom ver-
sus camping and pain versus “shadows of marriage.” In the final stanza, we have
dictator versus election and “kitchen smoke” (sign of happy family life) versus
war. We can further reshuffle the imagery around and subsume them under one
giant paradox of peace versus war. For the former, we have lilacs, doves, the
human dream, freedom, election, kitchen smoke, and flower shop, and for the
latter, stamping thunder of gold, dictator and war.

What do these paradoxes try to convey? First of all, Bei Dao’s impression of the
modern world is a place of cacophony and confusion, in which things hap-
pen for reasons that are often contradictory to themselves. Through the prism of
paradox, however, one could see how these things are a mere function of adver-
tising, the omnipotent and omnipresent sign of modernity that mediates our
sense of the self and our relations to each other and the world. Advertising, Bei
Dao seems to imply, creates our freedom of choice but also presents a mockery
of freedom itself and that he is, as the saying goes, “pouring the baby
out with the bath water.” Rather, he is abandoning the ontological discourse of
existence, but can connect with trees and stars, can only be explained in tran-
scendental terms. In this way, the “assembly line” can be called a symbol of
Romantic duality or what T. S. Eliot describes as “an objective correlative,”
through which Shu Ting’s unequivocal belief in the human spirit and the idea of
freedom is powerfully conveyed and confirmed.

Bei Dao’s poem “Advertising” also deals with the theme of freedom, or
the lack of it in modern world, and here is the full text:

Ililacs in the silk-cloth of dawn stamp their feet
as doves read the human dream aloud
in this climate of king-size price reductions
we hear the thunder of gold

freedom advances, camping in each step
a cat’s eye dilates night’s anguish
until it’s a huge tire

shadows of marriage make an emergency turn
a dictator freshly elected by the newspapers
wavers warm greetings from a crack though the city
kitchen smoke begging for war rises into solar
heights, now’s the time a flower shop opens.

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sense of the self and our relations to each other and the world. Advertising, Bei
Dao seems to imply, creates our freedom of choice but also presents a mockery
of it at the same time. Despite the poem’s overall satirical tone, one should be
careful not to assume that Bei Dao is taking an uncompromising position against
the notion of freedom itself and that he is, as the saying goes, “pouring the baby
out with the bath water.” Rather, he is abandoning the ontological discourse of
freedom and is highly skeptical about its value in an absolute form. The meaning
of freedom, Bei Dao seems to be saying, must be found in its opposites in ima-
gic and linguistic terms. In other words, in the realm of paradox.

In this connection, the difference between Shu Ting and Bei Dao is clear-

11 “Advertising,” in Bei Dao, 1994:11. In David Hinton’s original translation, the first line of
the second stanza was translated as “advancing freedom consolidates its gains step-by-step,” which I
believe is a mistranslation because “ying” is left out. I have added it back in to facilitate my discus-
sion of the poem.

12 Barthes, 1953: 70.
ly more than that of a Romantic and a Skeptic even though they both have an expressive concern with individuality and freedom; the difference is fundamentally manifest in their respective approach to poetic language. Shui Ting’s “assembly line” is a symbol of duality, a sign that points to itself and its transcendental signified simultaneously. The symbol remains a central storage for meaning and significance for Shui Ting. Symbolism, however, is all but dead in Bei Dao. He is only interested in things, a myriad of things that are happening in the real and in the imaginary that all have paradoxes writ large on them, as if Bei Dao is revising William Carlos Williams’s famous statement “No idea but in things” to the effect “No ideas but in things that are paradoxical.” Meanings do not come symbolically and metaphorically, but reside in the very juxtaposition of these thing-images. “Thought,” the theorist of Imagism T. E. Hulme wrote, “is the joining together of new analogies, and so inspiration is a matter of accidentally seen analogy or unlooked-for resemblance.” For Bei Dao, that “analogy” is paradox and “inspiration” is to experience its unsolvable contradiction.

Not all of Bei Dao’s poems exhibit such an elaborate display of paradoxical images as does “Advertising,” but the idea of paradox abounds in Bei Dao’s poetry and it shows up in various forms, some screaming for attention, some veiled in mystery. The poem “Transparency” [Toumingdu] is another good example of Bei Dao’s paradox at work; not much by means of paradoxical imagery but by the paradoxical tension in lineation. Here is the whole poem:

The mirror’s erudition
-transformation
visitors
make the homeland more desolate
and yet my asides
like the foreheads of night watchmen
begin to shine
three birds transfigure
the sky’s melancholy

Structurally, the poem plays the game of “Opposite.” The title says “Transparency,” but every line of the poem says opacity. The mirror does not simply reflect but transforms its objects, implying things are not what they appear to be; in this case it is the speaker who is having contrarian emotional responses to familiar external stimuli: the visit of his countrymen does not bring joy but makes the homeland “even more desolate.” At this supposedly happy occasion, the speaker feels like an outsider: he has nothing to offer to the conversation and hangs on to his “asides” to express his sense of aging and loneliness in the well-chosen image of “night watchmen.” A night watchman relies on his sense of duty and his belief in the worthiness of the things he is watching to carry on his unending fight against the darkness of the night. But what happens to the night watchman if the duty remains but things under his watch have decayed with age? A “desolate” homeland has confirmed the speaker’s worst fear, a fear that is as incommunicable as a night watchman’s self-doubt. The last stanza, one of Bei Dao’s familiar axiomatic couplet, is a calculated play on the paradox of change and constancy. On the surface, it rehearses, aesthetically, the principle of synthesis between man and nature and the power of perception in reordering the objective world, reminding one of the Southern Dynasty [Nan chao] (420-589) poet Wang Ji’s famous couplet: “The trill of cicadas makes the wood quieter, / the chirp of birds renders the mountain more serene” (“Entering Ruoye Brook” [Ru ruo ye xi]) and Wallace Stevens’s imaginative landscape: “I placed a jar in Tennessee, /.../The wilderness rose up to it, / And sprawled around, no longer wild” (“Anecdote of the Jar”). Bei Dao has Wang Ji’s implied subjectivity but he reins in Wallace Steven’s blatant interventionism. The key word in Bei Dao’s snapshot of nature’s customary offerings is “transfigure,” which announces the presence of the speaker who redefines the relationships between the three birds and the sky. Note the three birds did not make the sky more melancholy as Wang Ji would say, nor did they cause the sky’s melancholy, as would be the case with Wallace Stevens. They merely “transfigure” the sky’s melancholy that is already there. What did they transfigure then? The melancholy’s composition or its intensity? One can only wonder, without ever getting a clear answer. Not that it matters whether or not one can reach a measure of certainty more than that of a Romantic and a Skeptic even though they both have an expressive concern with individuality and freedom; the difference is fundamentally manifest in their respective approach to poetic language. Shui Ting’s “assembly line” is a symbol of duality, a sign that points to itself and its transcendental signified simultaneously. The symbol remains a central storage for meaning and significance for Shui Ting. Symbolism, however, is all but dead in Bei Dao. He is only interested in things, a myriad of things that are happening in the real and in the imaginary that all have paradoxes writ large on them, as if Bei Dao is revising William Carlos Williams’s famous statement “No idea but in things” to the effect “No ideas but in things that are paradoxical.” Meanings do not come symbolically and metaphorically, but reside in the very juxtaposition of these thing-images. “Thought,” the theorist of Imagism T. E. Hulme wrote, “is the joining together of new analogies, and so inspiration is a matter of accidentally seen analogy or unlooked-for resemblance.” For Bei Dao, that “analogy” is paradox and “inspiration” is to experience its unsolvable contradiction.

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original translation is as follows:

The mirror’s erudition
-transforms
its visitors
the homeland becomes even more desolate
and yet my monologues
like the forehead of night watchmen
begin to shine
three birds transfigure
the night’s melancholy
titude, for the meaning of “transfigure” in Bei Dao’s couplet does not at all have the linguistic transparency as defined in a dictionary: it changes the sky’s melancholy in the sense it maintains the constancy of this melancholy in the speaker’s mind.

We may be in a better position now to understand Bei Dao’s declared “battle with language.” If we say that Bei Dao is a skeptic at heart, his skepticism would certainly extend to the idea of language as a transparent medium for poetry, an idea that the Imagist movement already assaulted many years ago. Like the Imagists, Bei Dao sees language merely as reflecting the encounter of imagination with things, and even for that, language in its conventional form cannot fully capture the full flavor of imagination. Thus Bei Dao’s construction of “things” through imagery must surpass their defined referentiality to reality and must account for the infinite possibilities of imagination. It is not surprising then that paradox becomes a central strategy in Bei Dao’s search for a new poetic language because paradox with its facetious play with the conventions of language and its boundless re-pairing of linguistic signs provides a perfect space for Bei Dao to make “images dash against each other” in order to “stimulate the imagination of the readers.” It is to the question of how paradox motivates Bei Dao’s image-construction that we now turn.

Split Imagery

Reading the contemporary American poet John Ashbery, Dana Gioia, echoing many a critic, offers the following impression:

One never remembers ideas from an Ashbery poem, one recalls the tones and textures. If ideas are dealt with at all, they are present only as faint echoes heard remotely in some turn of phrase. Ideas in Ashbery are like the melodies in some jazz improvisation where the musicians have left out the original tune to avoid paying royalties.

I would venture to say that this is not an unfamiliar feeling for Bei Dao’s readers. The precise reason that we feel ideas in Bei Dao’s poetry always slip through our fingers, however, may be quite different from that of Ashbery. Ashbery often floats his poems with realistic, rich and amusing details from modern life, but they do not form a sense of unity and offer no clues as to why they are there to compose Ashbery’s poetic landscape, a landscape in which “ways of happening” is far more interesting to Ashbery than “reasons of happening.” The ending of Ashbery’s famous poem “Two Scenes” captures well his suspicion of subliminal ideas in poetry: “Terrific units are on an old man / In the blue shadow of some paint cans / As laughing cadets say, ‘In the evening / Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is.’” Ashbery is a master of the false summation,” the critic David Shapiro thus summarizes for us, “the illogical conclusion couched in the jargon of logic...” and one who relishes “an extravagance of connection that leads one nowhere...” Bei Dao shares Ashbery’s disregard for logic and the discourse of rationality but demonstrates a less contemptuous attitude towards ideas themselves. In fact, ideas inspire Bei Dao in the sense that he is always ready to challenge their received values and interpretations. This is not to say that Bei Dao is interested in expressing ideas in abstract and absolute terms, nor does he care for an alternative-privileging one idea over the other. Rather, he couches both the idea and the challenge of it in his unique image-construction or what I would like to call split imagery. It is through the strategy of split imagery that Bei Dao can engage ideas and yet avoid didacticism, and refresh his sense of conviction while maintaining a heavy dose of skepticism, revealing a dialectic mind that is fascinated with the world’s complexity and contradictions.

Consider, for example, the idea of freedom, an idea that motivates much of Bei Dao’s writing, particularly in his pre-exile days. In those times the desire for freedom figured prominently in his famous cry “I do not believe” and his earnest plea to “just want to be a man,” a man of dignity and fulfillment without the fear of political consequences. Exile has afforded Bei Dao his much-coveted sense of freedom, yet having this experience of freedom in abundance, Bei Dao starts to question the very meaning of freedom itself. The poem “Advertising” begins with the impossibly cryptic lines from the poem “Corridor” [Zoulang]: “the world’s agent of freedom / entered me into their giant computer: / an alien voice sneaking into the dictionary / a dissident / perhaps a form of distance from the world.” If exile did indeed change Bei Dao’s perspective on freedom, it is not the cause of his skepticism, which, as I have pointed out, was already present in his early poetry. Indeed, one finds this couplet from “Conspirators” [Zongmazhe] written probably in the late 1970s: “Freedom is no more than / the distance between the hunter and the hunted.” Is this a realistic notion or revelation or both? One can bear

17 For a good summary of Imagist ideas about language. See Larrainy, 1980:30-50, 65-85.
18 “On Poetry” In Bei Dao.

19 Bei Dao, 1994.
20 Bei Dao, 1999.
responses are structurally conditioned by Bei Dao's split images. That is to say, the difference between split images and other kinds of images is a structural property rather than a matter of reading competency.

To illustrate this difference, let us now look at three imagistic poems.

First, "River Snow" [jiangxue] by the Tang poet, Liu Zongyuan (773-869):

From a thousand hills, bird flights have vanished;
On ten thousand paths, human traces wiped out:
Lone boat, an old man in straw cape and hat,
Fishing alone in the cold river snow.\(^{24}\)

What catches our imagination, first of all, is the image of the old man fishing alone in the snow-covered river, an image that Liu Zongyuan has constructed with enriching details and amazing vibrancy. It is, as it is now known to us all, a painting by words. It is also a "painting" of remarkable harmony and consistency, for every detail is necessary to support the centrality of the image of the lone old man and there is no element present that could have challenged the structural unity of this image. The image then stands for what it is to the eye-a piece of objective reality with all its charm and grandeur on display, and our reading of it hinges on a measure of identifying with the old man whose total immersion with his environment corresponds with our own vision of an ideal relationship between man and nature. It may be safe to say that, despite its unique composition, Liu Zongyuan's image is essentially a public construction that participates in a communal reconfirmation of the Taoist aesthetics and philosophy of life. The poem is a perfect example of what the critic Chang Chung-yuan describes as the ideal reader-poet relationship: "The reader is directly confronted with the objective reality which the poet originally faced. The subjectivity of the reader and the objective reality in the poem interfere without obstruction and distortion from the interference of the poet."\(^{36}\)

But what if "the objective reality which the poet originally faced" itself is less transparent? Or better yet, the thing that the poet sees through his mind's eyes does not agree with the rules of the objective reality? The image would

\(^{24}\) "Notes to the Rain" [Ti xue bian] in Bei Dao, 1999.
\(^{27}\) "Absent" [Quexi] in Bei Dao, 1994.
\(^{28}\) "Eastern Traveler" [Dongfang luxingzhe] in Bei Dao, 1994.
\(^{29}\) "Untitled - In the Plains of a Father's Imagination" [Zai fu qin ping tan de xing xiang zhong] in Bei Dao, 1996.
\(^{30}\) "Landscape Over Zero" [Ling du yi shang de feng jing] in Bei Dao, 1996.
\(^{33}\) I am very aware of the many confusing and contradictory theories of image in both Western and Chinese traditions, but a full account of them is beyond the scope of this paper. My discussion of Bei Dao is much informed by the Imagists, their theory and practice. Ezra Pound's
then put a much higher demand on the reader, as is the case with Ezra Pound’s famous poem “In a Station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in a crowd
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Much has been written about the poem’s importance in the Imagist movement, for it fully embodies Ezra Pound’s idea of the image: the image equates objective reality; it carries the poet’s direct and spontaneous emotions without the mediation of thought and rhetoric. For the Imagists, analogy is a celebrated principle for the construction of the image and Pound uses it here to the fullest extent. Even though in terms of poetics and language, Pound’s image is not so far apart from Liu Zongyuan’s, Pound’s analogical juxtaposition has proven a much bigger reading challenge for it has introduced elements of relational instability between objects not present in Liu Zongyuan’s poem. Pound’s simple analogical movement (simple in its structure at least) from “faces” to “apparition” opens up almost endless interpretations as to what exactly constitutes the similarities between these objects and why Pound put them together. Hugh Kenner’s well-known reading that the image is associated with Hades and that the faces detached from the crowd invoke the memory of Persephone26 (a daughter of Zeus and Demeter abducted by Pluto to reign with him over the underworld in the Greek mythology) is convincing but by no means exhaustive. For example, we can say the poem describes a realistic experience, as was confirmed by Pound’s own account,27 of observing strangers in a crowded place, “petals” conveying the feeling of beauty and “apparition” capturing of the sense of people quickly appearing and disappearing from one’s vision. Such interpretative indeterminacy has much to do with the analogical uncertainty inherent in Pound’s way of constructing images but has little to do with their linguistic structure. This is where Bei Dao’s split imagery differs from Imagism.

Bei Dao’s poem “Whetting” Modao28 is about the clash between the psyche and time, or to be exact, a conflicting emotional experience of time both as motion and as event, which is expressed through a series of split images. Here is the whole poem:

When I whet a knife with dawn’s faint light
I find the spine getting sharper

28 Bei Dao, 1981.

while the blade stays blunt
the sun flares
the crowds in the high street
are trees in huge shop windows
the silence roars
I see the stylus gliding
along the tree stump’s rings
towards the center

Whetting is an interesting choice of a poetic metaphor for the continuity of time, a metaphor that is readily understood in the Chinese context but that perhaps does not resonate well with Western readers. I suspect that few Western readers can imagine the whetting scene intended in the poem: a big kitchen knife is locked into a slow back-and-forth motion against an even bigger sandstone that may last for hours. For the Chinese reader at least, whetting communicates the virtues of patience and perseverance, which is another way to acknowledging our experience of time as an endless flow, much like what “dawn’s faint light” and the predictable dawn-after-dawn flaring of the sun would signify. Having established this Aristotelian notion of time as continuum, however, Bei Dao quickly destroys it by the use of the puzzling split image of the knife in question still with a “sharper spine” and a “blunt blade,” demonstrating the fallibility of whetting. This image of the knife being changed against time, or a Newtonian “event” that happens regardless of time’s infinite continuum if you will, accentuates the mystery of time to the speaker who may be having too much of it at hand.

The second stanza, on the other hand, gives us a better sense of the speaker’s continuing struggle with time’s seemingly conflicting properties. A contrarian search enables him to imagine a switch of places between the crowds and the trees, but it is unclear which is sound and which is silence. Maybe they are one and the same: “the silence roars.” This compact split image may not be original, for it has abundant intertextual precedents in Tang poetics and Chan Buddhism, but it emphatically occasions the speaker’s journey of consciousness along the matrix of psychological time. Psychological time and physical time seem to be colliding in the image of the gliding stylus at the end of the poem. When a stylus moves on a record, it moves through the passage of physical time toward the center, which is the end of its journey, the death of a song, but when a stylus glides “along the tree stump’s rings,” its journey can only be measured in psychological time and the center it moves into is the birth of the tree, the beginning of life. It would be futile for us to choose sides between the antitheti-

Dian Li
Meanings Between the Opposites


Bibliography

Glossary

Beida\nDao yang\nGong gao\nHeihe\nJuancheng\nLinghu yinhang de fengjing\nLi Zelou\nMenglongshi\nNan chao

Ru ruo ye xi\nShi Ting\nTongmouzhe\nTongminglu\nyang\nying\nZaiwoqin qinggan de xingxiang zhong

Shuming\nTa zhengkai disanzhi yangjing\nIen ji\nYij\nYuzhong biji\nZhouguine\nZoulang

40 Cardinal, 1974:45.


