XIAOBING TANG

The Ocular Turn, Misty Poetry, and a Postrevolutionary Imagination
Rereading “The Answer” by Bei Dao

ABSTRACT “The Answer,” a poem by Bei Dao first published in 1978, marks the emergence of a defiant voice in contemporary Chinese poetry and asserts skepticism as the political stance of a young generation in post-Cultural Revolution China. It also heralds a historic transition from an era of sonic agitation to an aesthetics based on visual perception and contemplation. This rereading of Bei Dao’s canonical poem and other related texts goes back to the late 1970s, when the political implications of the human senses were firmly grasped and heatedly debated. The author shows that an ocular turn occurs in “The Answer” and drives the aesthetic as well as political pursuits of a new generation of poets. He further argues that, in a moment still enthralled with a revolutionary sonic culture, Misty poetry disavowed aural excitement and was part of the reconditioning of the human senses in preparation for a postrevolutionary order and sensibility.

KEYWORDS Bei Dao, Misty poetry, vision, sonic agitation, sensory order

Long regarded as a canonical literary text that, on its first publication in December 1978, marked the emergence of a defiant voice and asserted skepticism as the political stance of a young generation in post-Cultural Revolution China, “The Answer” continues to resonate with poetry readers today, even though by the mid-1980s some younger poets had already vowed to “pass Bei Dao” and rejected the poetics, or a noble heroics of commitment and self-sacrifice, that the author of “The Answer” had come to embody. As Xu Jingya, one of the most outspoken advocates for what was to be labeled as Misty poetry, proudly claimed in 1980, “The Answer” by Bei Dao “is the voice and image of an entire new generation of Chinese”! Noting that it is the most famous among the poet’s early and explicitly political poems, Bonnie S. McDougall, the first English translator of Bei Dao, was ready to predict in 1985 that “no future anthology of revolutionary or protest poetry would be complete without at least one of these powerful statements of resistance.”

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By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, when the poet himself expressed in a published interview embarrassment about this very poem, Bei Dao renewed attention not only to the moment of its creation but also to its subsequent reception. The canonical status accorded to “The Answer,” observed the much respected critic and poet Chen Chao 陳超 in 2006, is largely based on a collective misreading, through which common readers as well as establishment commentators have endowed Bei Dao’s early poetry with “too much single-minded social criticism.” The resulting image of the poet, lamented the critic, is that of a socially committed “moral crusader.” Chen’s interest in rescuing Bei Dao from a narrowly political reading has been shared by many. Yet in a more recent reconsideration of the poem, literary scholar Zhang Taozhou 張桃洲 questions such efforts to “depoliticize” Bei Dao and to recast the poet as fundamentally dedicated to aesthetics or pure poetry. The paradigm-setting impact of “The Answer” in the early 1980s and beyond, Zhang reminds us, owed much to the poet’s embrace of humanism and the Enlightenment discourse in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. He credits Misty poetry, with “The Answer” as one of its first and most representative works, for having interjected an energetic political aesthetics of protest and, through such intervention, garnered for poetry “the role of an eager vanguard in transformative intellectual and cultural movements.” Poetry at the time may have been raw and stark, but it was capable of “cutting into the nerve center of social reality with a piercing sound and force,” thereby stimulating new passion and imagination.

In his 2016 essay that defends a politicality very much in the same terms as the poem itself, Zhang Taozhou also suggests that we need to investigate further an “ideology of form” in this groundbreaking poetic text. He calls attention to certain formal qualities that imbue “The Answer” with a defiant heroism: the evocation of an open and expansive vision, a resolute declarative mood, orderly lines and stanzas, and “a sonority clearly at the heart of the poem” 聲音無疑佔據了詩的核心位置. By sonority Zhang refers to the catchy rhyme scheme and a forceful sound effect. Yet he regards it as a largely hollow resonance, with a high pitch that undercut any possible depth or potency. Both drawn to and uncomfortable with the evocation of an aural imagination, the critic reveals the limits of a formal analysis or, rather, his own ideological ambivalence, as he seems eager to celebrate as well as to contain the vigorous voice emitting from the poem. This ambivalence is not at all external to “The Answer” either, because the poem is about more than a piercing sound or voice. Central to it, as Zhang reminds us, is also an open and expansive vision, or eyes that recognize and register new horizons.

The historic “answer” given in Bei Dao’s canonical poem is more than what the poem explicitly states or what is directly made audible. In addition to the emphatic and throaty “I do not believe” at the center of the poem, a turning point is also introduced by the poet that, evoking a much broader horizon of meaning and a different system of knowledge, redirects that skeptical voice and foregrounds
an all-comprehending vision. My reading of the “The Answer” and other related poems therefore offers a narrative of a historic reordering of the senses; it takes us back to the transitional moment following the Cultural Revolution, where the political implications of the human senses were firmly grasped and heatedly debated over. I hope that it also becomes clear in the process why Misty poetry is integral to a postrevolutionary sensorium that began to emerge in the early 1980s and that remains as the norm today.

The Voice of Defiance

By the time it was published in the premier flagship journal *Shikan* 詩刊 (Poetry; organ of the national China Association of Writers) in March 1979, “The Answer” had undergone a long process of germination and circulation. Its appearance in *Shikan* was technically a republication, since a few months earlier the poem had already appeared, along with three other poems by Bei Dao, in the inaugural issue of *Jintian* 今天 (Today, or The Moment, the English title given on its cover), a literary journal that Bei Dao and a group of like-minded young people launched in December 1978 as their contribution to the rising Democracy Wall movement in Beijing.

The Democracy Wall movement acquired its name because, from late 1978 through much of 1979, citizens and groups from Beijing and other parts of the country put up and shared “big-character posters” 大字報 (dazibao) on a long brick wall in the Xidan district of the capital city. Topics of such publicly displayed posters, often anonymous or pseudonymous, would range from calls for democracy and political reforms, criticisms of past and present policies, and philosophical and theoretical debates to specific demands for redress of personal abuses suffered during the Cultural Revolution and beyond. A major boost for this spontaneous and unregulated public forum came in November 1978, when the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Party (CCP) reversed an earlier verdict on the April 5 Incident of 1976, declaring the action of millions of people gathering in Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1976 to mourn, through poetry, posters, and wreaths, the death of Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (1898–1976) and to express their discontent as justifiably “revolutionary” rather than “counterrevolutionary,” as the incident had been denounced before. An apt sign of the profound realignments as well as possibilities on the political scene at the time, this reversal encouraged many participants in the Tiananmen movement of spring 1976 to continue their demands for change and democracy, readily resorting to familiar means that were now endorsed as legitimate and legitimately revolutionary. The events in Tiananmen in spring 1976 were also remembered as the Tiananmen poetry movement, as poetry, mostly in traditional style, emerged as a preferred form of public expression. One of the hundreds of thousands of close observers of the goings-on in Tiananmen Square in spring 1976 was Bei Dao, who two years
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later felt ready and eager to contribute his voice to the hopeful and increasingly vociferous Democracy Wall movement.

On December 22, 1978, Bei Dao and two fellow contributors posted sheets of the first issue of *Jintian* on the Democracy Wall.7 Foregoing any formal registration or permit, the mimeographed and manually assembled literary journal was one of many such self-initiated or unauthorized publications that mushroomed in a moment of agitated anticipation. It was a deeply agitating transitional period, as various claims were made, but new norms and practices were not yet in place, and the boundaries between the sayable and the unsayable, between the acceptable and the unacceptable, and between the political and the literary were continually shifting and far from clear or settled. Given the uncertainty, the decision to publicize *Jintian* on the Democracy Wall was a courageous one. It bespeaks a faith in the political relevance of literary expressions; it also underscores the continuity between this moment and the Tiananmen poetry movement of 1976, which in turn had its origin in the widespread big-character poster practice of the Cultural Revolution era and even before.

Coincidentally, the day before the three young men posted the first issue of *Jintian* as part of an open forum on the Democracy Wall, the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP had concluded its Third Plenary Session. Delegates to the historic meeting resolved to put an end to policies of the Mao era and declared that the party was to shift its focus from class struggle to economic reforms and modernization efforts. Within days, on January 1, 1979, the People’s Republic of China and the United States established formal diplomatic relations, nominally ending a geopolitical confrontation of the Cold War era and setting in motion a round of economic globalization that would result in China becoming the second largest economy, after only the United States, by the second decade of the twenty-first century.

That “The Answer,” having first appeared in an unauthorized and big-character-poster-style or, to use a more loaded term, underground publication (although there was hardly anything clandestine about distributing or publicizing it), went on to be reissued within months in the most prestigious poetry journal in the nation is one measure of the liberating impact of swift changes at the time. It also attests to the galvanizing intellectual energy unleashed by a far-reaching discussion that had recently asserted practice and experience alone, rather than orthodoxy or convention, as the criterion for establishing what may be accepted as truth. Its second publication in the March 1979 issue of *Shikan* brought Bei Dao’s poem to hundreds of thousands of readers across the nation, especially to university campuses where the first post–Cultural Revolution class of students had recently arrived. One of the eager college readers of poetry in a different part of the county was the aspiring poet and literary critic Xu Jingya, who would regard “The Answer” as the very first published poem that heralded a refreshing
“modern tendency” (or, more precisely, a modernist aesthetic, given Xu’s frame of reference) in the tradition of new-style Chinese poetry that began in the early twentieth century.8

Not surprisingly, the practice of official publications reprinting edgy contents from an unofficial journal did not last. By October 1980 the authorities would order Jintian to discontinue on the grounds of technicality. Such developments were part of broader efforts by the CCP and the state to install a new order while moving away from policies and practices that, in the age of revolution, had justified and instigated mass mobilization. (Big-character posters as a form of Cultural Revolution–style mass democracy were outlawed in September 1980.) Social order, stability, and harmony were to become policy objectives. Institutions were to be established and strengthened, crises and conflicts to be managed and contained, and what was legal and legitimate to be codified. In hindsight, this was the moment when the CCP restarted its long and rocky process of transitioning from a revolutionary party to a governing party. Such a transition meant adopting pragmatic, flexible policies in fostering a market economy and systematically shifting the modus operandi of the party from mass political mobilization to prosaic social management. This historic transition would profoundly transform Chinese society and culture by the turn of the twenty-first century.

The rapid and momentous transformation in Chinese society since the late 1970s, when an emergent reform consensus in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution led the country to embrace developmentalism and neoliberal globalization, is an inescapable backdrop to a literary text such as “The Answer.” A text that calls for a new departure and justifies it with evocations of a determinedly global imaginary, the poem reasons for and adds a resolute voice to the cause of reforms. Moreover, it presents a new sensory order as integral to the transition to a postrevolutionary culture and imagination.

To read “The Answer” merely as an expression of political opposition, or to celebrate it as part of a dissident underground, is to subscribe to what I have described elsewhere as a “dissidence hypothesis,” a deeply entrenched ideological assumption from the Cold War era that is simply incapable of addressing the complexity of the Cultural Revolution or the revolutionary legacy of modern China.9 This hypothesis is at work in certain readings of “The Answer” and, more generally, in assessments of Misty poetry. As one critic observes, Bei Dao has enjoyed much attention in the West because he is mostly regarded as a political poet, whose voice is what a Western reader will choose to listen for. The same critic also acknowledges that Bei Dao’s poetry is very much a form of political intervention and played an important role in fomenting resistance and opposition in political life.10 There is no question that Bei Dao wrote and published “The Answer” as a political statement, but we ought to recognize that the underlying vision is more
expansive than the liberalist assumption of individual against society, or freedom against oppression. The politics articulated here can hardly be reduced to that of a political dissident, a dubious title that Bei Dao himself would learn to reject over the years as well. On the contrary, the poem presents a profoundly affirmative vision that was to be embraced as mainstream value and aspiration in Chinese society.

The opening two lines of “The Answer,” arguably among the best-known lines in contemporary Chinese poetry, establish a solemn voice of judgment that indicts the present as having perverted basic human values and beliefs. This voice enjoins us to look upward and recognize the absurdity of a situation where a glamorous surface no longer conceals what it is meant to gloss over:

Debasement is the password of the base,  
Nobility the epitaph of the noble.  
Look, afloat in the gilded sky above  
Are twisted shadows of the dead.

This skyward gaze, while enabling a critical distance from the goings-on in a confused and corrupted world, extends our view onto a much broader horizon and introduces a global imaginary that renders the present moment as parochial, subjecting it to inquiry, even interrogation. Hence the second stanza:

The Ice Age is over now,  
Why is there ice everywhere?  
The Cape of Good Hope has been discovered,  
Why do a thousand sails contest the Dead Sea?

The questions posed here suggest queries from a contemplative subject regarding the world from an elevated position. It is as if the owner of the skyward gaze, ascending midair, turns his gaze back earthward, only to see the world as shockingly nonsensical and different than what one has every reason to expect. Questions rising from such a commanding view are about time and space, about history and geography on a global scale. They point to many frustrating contradictions between expectation and reality, and yet to such questions there are no ready answers. Nonetheless, this revealing perspective and the knowledge that comes with it give the contemplative subject a sense of purpose; they propel him to reenter the world and to issue with confidence his challenge to the existing order, to declare a defiant “I—do—not—believe!” in the face of a fraudulent world.

The third stanza, therefore, switches to a narration by the challenger about his action and determination.
I came into this world Bring only paper, rope, a shadow, To proclaim before the judgment The voice that has been judged

我來到這個世界上，只帶著紙、繩索和身影，為了在審判之前，宣讀那些被判決的聲音。

Emerging from this self-narration is the image of an individual prepared for martyrdom, for whom the act of speaking up against the powers that be is a mission and a pledge. More specifically, his overriding commitment is to relaying and amplifying a defiant voice bound to be drowned out by the establishment. Yet, this “voice that has been judged,” which the challenger is determined to relay publicly (xuandu 宣讀, literally to “read aloud”), may well not be his own but may belong to another individual, a group, or an entire generation. Voice here is grasped as an object, even an agent, that, just as it may be condemned, can also be set free, extended, and thrust forward; it is an entity with its own force, independent of the challenger. The voice is the message, and the challenger is its transmitter or broadcaster rather than its originator or owner. In a poem that Bei Dao first drafted in 1975 and did not publish until the ninth issue of Jintian in November 1980, this understanding of “I” as a spokesperson, or a stand-in, for a voice that must be kept alive is given a concrete historical reference.

Here I stand
Replacing another, who has been murdered
So that each time the sun rises
A heavy shadow, like a road
Shall run across our land.

Here I stand
我，站在這裡
Replacing another, who has been murdered
代替另一個被殺害的人
So that each time the sun rises
為了每當太陽升起
A heavy shadow, like a road
讓沉重的影子像道路
Shall run across our land.

This absent other, silenced by murder, is identified as Yu Luoke 遇羅克 (1942–70), a victim of political factionalism and extremism during the Cultural Revolution.¹³

In the following three stanzas of “The Answer,” we hear a combative voice speaking through the challenger. This is the most vocal part of the poem, as the text explicitly demands that we read it as a series of loud statements or, rather, as the recording of a voice that was once alive and compelling but has since been silenced. The challenger, prior to delivering the statements, makes clear his mission is to proclaim them publicly so they can be heard. The sonority at the heart of the poem, which has received much critical acclaim, is therefore deeper than is made possible through a defiant tone, rhythmic lines, or unequivocal pronouncements. It stems from the mode of reading that, prescribed within the poem, stipulates we activate our aural imagination and hear an urgent but firm voice rising from the text and reaching from afar. The voice must be imagined as a traversing object that may be invisible but cannot be stopped.
The voice that resonates in this part of the poem begins as a voice of dissent and resolute opposition to the existing order of the world, expressing profound skepticism toward conventional beliefs and values. Yet it is not a shrill or nihilistic voice, in spite of the series of statements that emphatically begin with “I do not believe.” Nor is it self-centered and individualistic. On the contrary, it is a voice of conviction and heroism, belonging to a visionary at odds with reality but ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of a better world. As Hong Zicheng 洪子誠, an influential literary critic and historian, points out, the at once heroic and tormented figure of an “awakened individual” is central to Bei Dao’s poetry from this period. This awakened individual faces the dual task of critiquing and denouncing reality, on the one hand, and seeking collective as well as individual rejuvenation, on the other. In other words, for the voice to have broad validity and appeal, it must express hope and welcome change as it rejects the world as such. The sixth stanza of the poem is where the voice of skepticism acquires new dimensions, setting in motion an upward movement as the voice itself gradually lifts into the distance: “If the continent is destined to rise, /Let humanity choose once again a summit for its existence” 如果陸地注定要上升，/就讓人類重新選擇生存的峰頂.

With this vision of tectonic shifts forcing humanity to claim new heights, “The Answer” comes to its final stanza, where the initial skyward gaze returns and the voice of the challenger recedes. Vision once again becomes the dominant mode of establishing a relationship, but the contemplative subject beholds a different scene. The sky above, once gilded and teeming with bent dead bodies, is now open and clear, full of stars and revelations:

A new conjuncture and glistening stars
Adorn the unobstructed sky:
They are the pictographs from five thousand years,
They are the attentive eyes of future generations.

Raised Eyes and a New Aesthetic
The vast, star-studded sky at the end of “The Answer” inspires in the contemplative subject a similarly sublime feeling that a young philosopher, at just about the same age as Bei Dao was in 1978, expressed in 1915 in the war-torn Europe: “Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths—ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars.”

For the stargazer in Bei Dao’s poem, the boundless sky above offers an all-encompassing perspective that is reassuring as it is humbling. The paths he seeks therein are trajectories that, in revealing to him and his times where the present comes from and what lies ahead, will give him a clearer sense of collective identity, even destiny. He sees history laid out as a sprawling volume, written in
a strange and yet familiar language, waiting to be deciphered and understood. The future, by contrast, is recognized as an earnest gaze that traverses time and space to compel those inhabiting the present moment, in turn, to recognize their own existence and accountability in a greatly extended horizon. This exchange of gazes with the “eyes of future generations” at the end of the poem brings forth a historical consciousness on a much broader scale and affirms the necessity of vision in extending our imagination beyond the present.

Yet more immediately, for many of Bei Dao’s contemporaries, this turn to the “eyes of future generations” would bring to mind a poem that they had committed to memory and recited on numerous occasions in the past decade. By all accounts, “Believe in the Future” 相信未来 (Xiangxin weilai) was the most cherished poem among a generation of high school students from Beijing who passionately took part in the Cultural Revolution in 1966–67 only to find themselves dispatched to the countryside for settlement and reeducation in 1968. (Bei Dao was not among the millions of “sent-down youth,” but many of his friends were.) Written by the aspiring poet Guo Lusheng 郭路生 (pen name Shi Zhi 食指, 1948–) at the height of the “Up to the Mountain, Down to the Countryside” campaign, the poem frankly acknowledges despair and setbacks but urges young friends to have faith in the future and embrace life against all odds.

Many years later, Bei Dao would recount his first encounter with Guo Lusheng’s poems, in particular the poem “Believe in the Future” on a spring day in 1970. He would even attribute his desire to write a different kind of poetry to that moment. On that balmy spring day, young Bei Dao (then known as Zhao Zhenkai 趙振開) went to the Summer Palace west of Beijing for an outing with two of his best friends. There, standing on a rowboat, one friend began reciting poetic lines from memory:

As spider webs mercilessly seal off my stovetop 當蜘蛛網無情地查封了我的爐台
As smoldering cinders sigh over the sorrows of poverty 當灰燼的餘燼嘆息著貧困的悲哀
I still insist on spreading out the hopeless cinders 我依然固執地舖平失望的灰燼
And write with beautiful snowflakes: believe in the future. 用美麗的雪花寫下：相信未來

Feeling an intimate emotional chord suddenly struck, Bei Dao inquired about the author and realized how remote and empty the so-called revolutionary poetry that he used to chant, accessible and resounding as it may have been, actually was. “The 1970s began for me on that poetry-like spring day. . . . Poems by Guo Lusheng were so different. They opened an unexpected window in my life.”18
It is therefore not at all surprising that the second issue of Jintian, published in February 1979, should have carried three poems by Guo Lusheng, under his well-known pen name, Shi Zhi. This was the first appearance of “Believe in the Future,” a poem that had kept many young men and women hopeful in difficult times, in mimeographic print rather than circulated as a manuscript. Jintian would go on to publish five more of Shi Zhi’s poems, all but one written in 1968, including the much cherished “This Is Beijing at 4:08.”

Separated by a decade with regard to their respective initial moments of impact, “Believe in the Future” and “The Answer” are distinct in terms of tone, diction, sentiment, and message. Yet the two poems are uncannily similar in some formal terms: both have seven stanzas, and each stanza contains four lines. In his poem, Shi Zhi maintains a more rigorous rhyme scheme and addresses the reader or listener as a friend. In the first three stanzas, the speaker or the “I” expresses his steadfast belief in the future regardless of what life may throw his way. At the center of the poem, in the fourth stanza, the poet explains why this belief:

I firmly believe in the future because I 之所以堅定地相信未來
I believe in the eyes of future generations— 我相信未來人們的眼睛——
Their eyelashes will brush aside the dust of history 她有撥開歷史風塵的睫毛
Their pupils will see through the annals of time. 她有着透歲月篇章的瞳孔

Here the eyes of future generations are not equated or compared to stars, but, just like the stars that appear at the end of “The Answer,” they are a source of illumination. They inspire awe because their distant luminosity serves as a reminder that human history may either be a dusty burden or a mysterious volume to be deciphered. In both poems, a similar moment of imagining future humanity gazing back at the present opens up a sublime temporal as well as spatial horizon. It is a moment predicated on the speaking subject also being a seeing subject that is susceptible to the interpellative force of a gaze directed at him.

This pivotal moment of gaining an uplifting, Olympian perspective from gazing at the stars reminds us of yet another well-known modern Chinese poem that is explicitly titled “Looking at the Starry Sky.” Written in 1959 by Guo Xiaochuan 郭小川 (1919–76), one of the acclaimed lyrical poets of socialist New China, the long poem is a reflection on the poet’s effort to reconcile existential anxiety, caused by awareness of an impersonal universe of infinity, with concrete pursuits in the human world. At one point, the poet sighs over how rarely he has a chance to look up and appreciate the vast peacefulness of a starry night. Yet, upon turning to look at the bustling construction activities at the heart of Beijing, he realizes his earlier melancholy is misguided, because “Just now it
was I looking at the stars / Not the stars looking at me” 剛才是我望星空/而不是星空向我了望. By denying the stars an anthropomorphic capacity to look back, he feels that he should be proud as a seeing human subject, empowered to change and reshape the objective world. In terms of an expressive voice and literary sensibility, I would suggest, Shi Zhi is closer to Guo Xiaochuan than to Bei Dao.

For the believer that Shi Zhi calls for, the eyes of future generations are no less than an article of faith. He turns to them in an effort to distance himself from present frustrations and senselessness, to be able to see the current situation in a different light. We may regard this calm speaker, who in the course of the poem will offer counsel and encouragement to young readers, as a more mature or resigned self of the panicked youth that cries out emotionally in “This Is Beijing at 4:08.” In this other poem, also from 1968, Shi Zhi depicts an overwhelming scene of tens of thousands of young people being sent off to the countryside at the Beijing train station, drowning in “an ocean of waving hands.” Suddenly,

Beijing Station’s towering edifice 北京車站高大的建築，
Convulses without warning 突然一陣劇烈的抖動。
Shaken, I look out the windows 我雙眼吃驚地望著窗外，
Not knowing what is happening. 不知發生了甚麼事情。21

This moment of panic, where the young man cannot believe what he is witnessing with his own eyes, leads to a desperate cry to his mother when he realizes “waves of parting shouts” are sweeping away the train station and the city of Beijing. By contrast, the first-person speaker in “Believe in the Future” no longer exclaims in panic. He resorts to writing, and with his faith firmly placed in the future, he will not be shocked by what he sees, hears, or encounters.

The first-person speaker in Bei Dao’s “The Answer,” as we have seen, displays a different political consciousness as well as position. The eyes of future generations for him not so much point to a matter of faith as designate a new condition of possibility. It is revealing, therefore, to note that the last stanza of the poem, where “A new conjuncture and shimmering stars” are brought into our view, is an addition that Bei Dao made to an earlier and less developed version that he drafted in 1973.22 A youthful and agitated voice saturates this earlier poem, titled “Let Me Tell You, World” 告訴你吧，世界 (Ga osù ni bā, shì jiè), and no transition to a broadened horizon takes place at its end.

In a different text, Bei Dao would directly relate this new condition of possibility to the act of seeing or a turn from sound to sight. This is the mission statement that he composed for the inaugural issue of Jintian, published in December 1978. Assuming the voice of the editorial collective, Bei Dao begins his address to the readers by celebrating the present moment as a historic turning point: “History has finally given us an opportunity, allowing us to sing aloud songs that have
been buried in the heart of our generation for a long decade, without being punished again by roaring thunder.” 歷史終於給了我們機會，使我們這代人能夠把埋藏在心中十年之久的歌放聲唱出來，而不致再遭到雷霆的處罰。23 He goes on to quote Marx at length in justifying the need for a rich and fulfilling intellectual life. After defining the dawning new era as a time that will affirm the significance of every human life and the value of free spirits, he relates the modernization project to the goal of reestablishing the position of the Chinese nation in the world of nations. This grand vision then leads to his discussion of the importance of seeing the world anew.

Today, raising our eyes once again, we no longer rest our sight only on a cultural legacy of thousands of years. We also begin to look laterally at the horizons surrounding us. Only then will we be able to grasp our own worth and rid ourselves of either silly arrogance or sorry self-denigration.

The conceptual movement underlying this text takes us from celebrating a newly gained freedom and opportunity to an imperative to see the world and ourselves differently. The movement is a political intervention not merely because it rejects an older form of politics and its attendant suppression of self-expression. More important, it embraces a new order of the senses that, in prioritizing vision, entails new forms of subjectivity as well as political engagement.

This movement toward vision, or more specifically to an ocular awareness and aesthetic, also undergirds the imaginative space of “The Answer,” although the process there is a more complex one. The transition from a resolute challenger to an awestruck stargazer in the poem introduces changing conceptions of the self as well as different expectations of poetry. (For this reason, we may say the addition of the final stanza to the 1973 version radically alters the poem by expanding it.) The poem demands us both to listen and to see, as it thematizes a public voice of protests before highlighting a new vision of possibility. The aural imagination and sonority at the heart of the poem evoke as well as embrace political activism, while the ocular turn at the end moves away from a sonic impact or immediacy.

At the specific historic moment, this ocular turn would become a central commitment of what was going to be labeled as Misty poetry, which, as commentators have long suggested, is an unfortunate misnomer. Apologists of Misty poetry have convincingly argued that the defining feature of such poetry is not a poverty of meaning or impenetrability but, rather, a new aesthetic pursuit that
defies existing poetic conventions or expectations. In his spirited defense of the rise of a new poetic sensibility as a historical necessity, Xu Jingya in 1983 asserted that poems by Bei Dao and his generation of young poets demonstrate a shift from an “aural art” 听觉艺术 (tingjue yishu) to a “visual art” 視觉艺术 (shijue yishu). This shift takes place because the young generation, according to Xu, no longer regards rhythmic beats, rhyme schemes, or other auditory effects as a defining characteristic of poetry. They rely much more on print culture and visual imagery or the intricate structure of a poem as they explore complex ideas and concepts through writing.25 As a “visual art,” poetry presumes a private and attentive individual reader, in contrast to the communal and responsive listening public that aurally oriented poetry seeks to engage.

Driving the often passionate defenses of Misty poetry in the early 1980s was the understanding that such poetry would hasten a necessary cultural transformation toward modernity. One dimension of this desired cultural transformation was to legitimize as well as naturalize the shift from mass mobilization to social management, from the excitement or agitation of a sonorous revolution to the pleasures of visual perception and quiet reflection, from the immediacy of sonic stimulation to an aesthetics that valorizes distance and mediation, even disengagement. Simply put, it was the transition to a postrevolutionary culture with its own sensory order or what Marshall McLuhan describes as “sense ratios” and “patterns of perception.”26

That Misty poetry had direct political implications was never a question to both its defenders and detractors, which explains why the controversy over it was such a heated one. The question was how to understand its politics. The much-vaulted “new aesthetic principle” of Misty poetry underscores the political nature of redistributing what may be perceived, of reconfiguring what is to be seen and heard.27 In a moment still enthralled with the sonic impact of a revolutionary culture, Misty poetry determinedly disavowed aural stimulation and turned to an imagination centered on vision, on individual perceptions and sensibilities. It was part of the reconditioning of the human senses for a postrevolutionary order in which sound would yield to sight as the primary means of social organization and communication.

**From Sonic Agitation to Visual Search**

The transition or tension embedded in “The Answer” helps us see how the two series of Bei Dao’s early poems published in *Jintian* are related. On the one hand, we see a smaller group of poems charged with a heroic voice, such as “Everything” 一切 (Yiqie), “Declaration” 宣告 (Xuangao), and “An End or a Beginning” 結局或開始 (Jieju huo kaishi). Often in a resolute declarative mood, these poems present the same defiant voice of a hero dedicated to a cause. The majority of Bei Dao’s early poems, on the other hand, are in fact love poems. In contrast to the stern “voice of a thinker, agitator, and a humanist” against an unjust world,
which readers often associate with the image of Bei Dao as a poet, his love poems from this period, in the words of one reader, are colorful, tender, and heartwarming. Inhabiting a simple and intimate space of their own, young lovers in his poems are faithful to each other, their conversations private and whispery, and they experience the world through sight and touch much more than sound.

“Dusk: At Dingjiatan—For M and B” 黃昏:丁家灘——贈 M 和 B (Huanghun: Dingjiatan—Zeng M he B), published along with “The Answer” in the first issue of Jintian, is a good case in point. Describing a young couple wordlessly embracing each other as dusk falls, the poem concludes with their raised and expectant eyes:

Night closes in 夜已來臨，
Night, in front of two pairs of eyes 夜, 面對四隻眼睛。
Here is a small patch of clear sky 這是一小片晴空，
Here is dawn awaiting to rise. 這是等待上升的黎明。29

This last stanza, reminiscent of the movement at the end of “The Answer,” was singled out for praise in the first comprehensive review of poetry published in Jintian. The review by Xin Feng 辛鋒 (pen name of Zhao Zhenxian 趙振先, Bei Dao’s younger brother) appeared in the December 1979 issue of Jintian. Seeking to defend what he characterizes as a “highly innovative and unorthodox” poetry, Xin Feng argues that the young poets of Jintian, sensitive to a dramatic moment of cultural transition, are committed to creating a “spiritual beauty” 精神美 (jingshen mei), or an idealist aesthetic, to help the Chinese nation heal from a historic trauma, even though most of their poems were written during the hectic Cultural Revolution. As an example of poems that display such a restorative aesthetic, he turns to “Dusk: At Dingjiatan” and observes how in the final stanza human eyes are imagined to be a source of light in nature. The poem is beautiful and uplifting because it “satisfies the human need for a spiritual beauty beyond the world of reality.”30 With the belief that “spiritual beauty” has a positive social impact, the reviewer evidently regards the Jintian poets as engaged in a timely effort to bring together the art of the beautiful and the art of living, which, as we know, is the objective of an aesthetic education that the German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) advocated in response to the ramifications of the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. From this perspective, what we identify as an ocular awareness or aesthetic in Bei Dao’s poetry is far from a private affair or some inward turn. On the contrary, it has a transitive quality, as the purpose is not merely to express oneself but also to transform the way we perceive and relate to the world.

These two groups of poems by Bei Dao in the period from the late 1970s to the early 1980s therefore bespeak two divergent poetic discourses: one animated
by a public voice or exhortations, the other driven by an ocular turn and contemplation. If the first discourse is often associated with notions such as political engagement, social protest, or revolutionary passion, the second poetic commitment easily leads to values such as self-expression, artistic autonomy, depth, and pure literature.31 For Bei Dao writing in 1980, both undertakings were imperatives for a poet. “No one can offer a precise definition of what poetry is,” he ruminated. “Poetry has no boundaries; it may transcend time, space, and self. Yet poetry must begin with the self.” At the same time, he also believed that “a poet must be a soldier, courageous enough to put his name on a banner for the sake of all things valuable.”32 A year before, he had agonized over how far Jintian, as a literary journal, should be involved in the increasingly clamorous Democracy Wall movement. A bitter disagreement in the editorial group had led some members to quit for good.33 Following the split, the second issue of Jintian (February 1979) carried a public notice to clarify the journal’s mission. Dedicated to the development of Chinese literature and art, the notice stated, Jintian was nonetheless a mouthpiece of the young generation. As such, it “ought to sing the songs from people’s heart, assail darkness, and extol bright light.” More important, “in the face of contemporary social life as well as people’s spiritual life, it must issue a reverberating sound of justice”要面對今天的社會生活和人們心靈的空間發出正義的迴響.34

This brief statement reaffirmed a commitment that Bei Dao made in the inaugural issue of Jintian, which was to seize a historic opportunity and let the songs of his generation be heard. The idea or metaphor of singing heart-felt songs to “assail darkness and extol bright light” subscribes to the familiar image of a poet as public figure and social conscience. Its reassertion at that particular moment in Jintian suggests the enduring appeal of, or already a nostalgia for, poetry as public discourse and event. Yet the ethos of poems published in the journal, or what Bei Dao had described as “songs buried in the heart of our generation for a long decade,” was to become increasingly a conscious departure from such a poetic tradition or position. This departure, as we have seen, was rationalized by the call for a new global vision and was itself part of the gradual movement toward prioritizing visuality over aurality in the cultural production of meaning. It would result, in the words of a partisan reviewer, in a refreshing reorientation in poetics. Speaking on behalf of the Jintian poets, Hong Huang in late 1980 proposed to name their poetry simply “New Poetry” and suggested that, like Claude Debussy (1862–1918), who introduced nontraditional tonalities in classical music, “we have shifted focus from functionality to chromatic tonality, from auditory gratification to rich visual imagery.”35 (This description would find an echo in Xu Jingya’s endorsement of Misty poetry shifting from an aural art to a visual art.)

When Xu Jingya wrote in 1980 to share his first impressions of the poetry published in Jintian, he observed that the young poets were more interested in pursuing an ocular aesthetic than in a reverberating sound. Referring to its general
effect as sending forth an “extraordinary light,” Xu Jingya commented that much of the poetry in the journal demanded careful and repeated reading before one could make sense of it. Few of the poets resort to a singing or exclaiming mode, and most “opt for a calm and adagio pace, which agrees with their insights and dispassionate themes.”36 In his elaborate discussion of a new poetics, Xu Jingya used Bei Dao’s poem “Lost,” which had been derided as a typical impenetrable “misty poem,” as a successful example of how symbolism establishes unexpected connections and thereby renews our perceptions.37

Following a pigeon’s whistle
I searched for you
as the tall forest blocked off the sky
On the small path
a lost dandelion
led me to the blue-gray lake
in the gently rocking reflections
I found you
such unfathomably deep eyes.

Whether or not symbolism offers the most productive way to read this poem may be open to debate, but it is clear that the deep eyes at the end of the poem, wherever they are located, are at once a discovery and a destination. The poem as a whole serves to illustrate the reward of the ocular turn as well as a peaceful and mesmerizing environment.

The ontological as well as historical significance of the ocular turn is proclaimed with great poignancy in a poem by Gu Cheng 顧城 (1956–93) in 1980. First published in the poetry journal Xingxing 星星 (Stars), “A Generation” 一代人 (Yidai ren) presents a collective self-image of the poet and his contemporaries, who experienced the Cultural Revolution as teenagers. Hardly obscure or mystic, the two-line poem nonetheless has since been widely regarded as a manifesto of the Misty poetry generation. “Dark night has given me dark eyes / I use them to search for light” 黑夜給了我黑色的眼睛/我卻用它尋找光明.

Forthright and evocative as it is, the poem is however eerily soundless. Any agitating sound or voice is erased from both past legacy and present endeavor, and the purposeful search becomes a quiet, if also internalized, individual effort.39 In the specific historical context of the poem, this recasting of the recent past as “dark night” agreed with the growing consensus that the Cultural Revolution had been a senseless chaos, a consensus that in effect rendered inaudible an extraordinarily loud and vociferous era. A poem by Mang Ke 芒克 (1950–), published in Jintian (no. 3, April 1979), also contains “darkness” and “eyes” as its key elements. Yet it evokes a radically different scene of confrontation. The short poem reminds
us that what this generation of poets experienced during the Cultural Revolution was anything but a soundless or detached spectacle.

Your eyes are covered. 你的眼睛被遮住了
Your deep, angered voice 你低沉，憤怒的聲音，
repeatedly charges against the darkness: 在這陰森森的黑暗中衝撞：
Let me go! 放開我！

An even more disturbing scene from the height of the Cultural Revolution was captured by Duo Duo 多多 (1951–) in 1973, when he, like many high school graduates from Beijing, was settled in the rural Baiyangdian 白洋淀 surrounded by waterways and had just begun to write poems in a notebook. The scene described in an episode of his Old Narratives series recalls how sound was generated and experienced as chilling political violence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One political class has bled out</td>
<td>一個階級的血流盡了</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The archers of another class are still shooting</td>
<td>一個階級的箭手仍在發射</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From this pitch-black deserted city</td>
<td>在這座漆黑的空空的城市中</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once again comes the urgent drumming of red terror</td>
<td>又傳來紅色恐怖急促的敲擊聲……</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For his often innocent gaze upon the world and his belief in a paradise of beauty, Gu Cheng was endearingly known as a “fairy-tale poet,” whose poetic imagination was very much driven by an effort to escape from the cacophonous age that Duo Duo so memorably brings to us with “the urgent drumming of red terror.” As the son of a seasoned poet who had devoted his youth and talent to the Chinese revolution, Gu Cheng had nothing in common with his father when it came to poetic sensibility and language. “I am using my own eyes, human eyes, to see and to observe,” he told his father in a heated exchange. What particularly baffled and irritated his poet-father was a poem titled “Love Me, Ocean” 愛我吧，海 (Ai wo ba, hai), which Gu Cheng had published in 1980. His father, Gu Gong 顧工 (1928–), found the poem “all too depressing and terrifying” and wondered how the lucid and sonorous poetry of his own youth could have led to such dark lines in poems by his own child. A section that caught the father’s attention describes movements that may seem reminiscent of what we have come across in “The Answer” by Bei Dao:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My shadow</td>
<td>我的影子</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is twisted</td>
<td>被扭曲</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am surrounded by the continent</td>
<td>我被大陸所圍困</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Compared with “The Answer,” the voice in this 1980 poem by Gu Cheng is muffled and more passive, practically an object damaged by a monstrous external force. There is also a skyward gaze, but what the “freely extending” eyes discover above is not as complex or sublime a constellation of meaning as the stargazer in Bei Dao’s poem recognizes. Rather, looking above and beyond in Gu Cheng’s poem amounts to a flight of fantasy, a silent as well as private assertion of the desire to be left alone and freed from an injurious reality. Absent is not merely the vocal protestation at the heart of “The Answer” but also its keen sense of seeing a new turning point in shared history.

A Coda

“The Answer” is a transitional text. It actively engages two poetic discourses at a moment when one seems to be exhausted and the other appears fresh and energizing. It shows how the two discourses or poetic imaginations are related and, indeed, may complement each other to form a complex movement. The poem is also a profoundly historical as well as prophetic text. Its canonical status stems from the fact that it contains a succinct narrative of the origins of what we have come to call Misty poetry. It may be read as a Ur-Misty poem insofar as it explains the cause and necessity for Misty poetry’s alleged obscurity. Put differently, “The Answer” reveals the cultural logic underlying the ocular turn and the arrival of a postrevolutionary sensory order. It is a poem that demands to be read aloud, but it also opens up a universe where sound recedes and vision predominates. In short, the poem shows us how auditory excitement gives way to an awestruck, quiet visual inquiry and contemplation.

In a 2002 interview conducted in Boston, Bei Dao, in exile for over a decade, stated unambiguously that he now held a mostly negative view of “The Answer” and similar early works of his. “In a sense, they echo official discourse. Our writing back then was intimately related to revolutionary poetry. It was often high-pitched, lots of big words, with a proclivity to a violence of language.” He went on to say that over the years he had been reflecting on this heritage and trying hard to free himself of its haunting influence.

The “revolutionary poetry” that Bei Dao refers to here is indeed loud and often high pitched, as such poetry was written under the condition of war and
revolution, against a vastly different soundscape and explicitly for the purpose of addressing and mobilizing a public audience. It is revolutionary poetry created for a profoundly revolutionary vision and social movement, rather than merely for a revolution in literary or artistic forms. Indeed, the production of a communally audible, sonorous, and reverberating poetry has been the goal of generations of modern Chinese poets, one of whom, as mentioned above, is Gu Cheng’s father, Gu Gong. This is too vital and complex a tradition to do it justice here. Suffice it to say, to grasp fully the consequences of the revolutionary age in modern China, we must hear and recognize its attendant sonic culture and auditory reach.

A different soundscape presented itself to Bei Dao during those often solitary days of exile in Europe and America. Removed from a familiar sonic culture both temporally and spatially, he began to experience a new relationship to his own voice and other people’s voices. Against this backdrop, literary critic Wu Xiaodong argues that a “subject in the mirror” has been the driving force, ever since early Bei Dao, in the poet’s search for depth and interiority. Such a Lacanian reading highlights the ocular turn and a subsequent contemplative gaze upon the world, but it does not fully register the transgressive power of aurality in Bei Dao’s poetic imagination.

In fact, the exile years have brought Bei Dao a new understanding of the impact of sound and auditory memory. In his 1996 collection *Landscape over Zero* 零度以上的風景 (Lingdu yishang de fengjing), we still see the density in images and evocativeness characteristic of Bei Dao’s poetry, and we understand the present is different from the moment that generated “The Answer,” when the challenger would be proud of his voice and committed to projecting it afar. A wintry landscape now keeps unfamiliar voices and an aural nostalgia under the surface. In the poem “Another” 另一個 (Ling yi ge), the return of the repressed takes the form of an unexpected scream from an unnamed individual. The sonic eruption at the end, lonely and uncontrollable, serves no purpose other than to disrupt a fragile domestic calm and, perhaps, to mourn the “wind of history” blowing in the outlandish distance.

This idle table in winter times
with a view of flickering lights
memory repeatedly looks back
unfettered archers in a foreign land
listen to the blowing wind of history
some have long gone anonymous
or have been kept by us
below the horizon
but another one among us
suddenly bursts out crying.

這閒置冬天的桌子
看燈火明滅
記憶幾度回首
自由射手們在他鄉
聽歷史的風聲
某些人早已匿名
或被我們阻攔在
地平線以下
而另一個在我們之間
突然嚎啕大哭

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Notes
5 Ibid., 16.
6 For a detailed study of the Tiananmen poetry movement, see Chu, *Xin shiqi wenxue changyu yanjiu*.
8 Xu, *Jueqi de shiqun*, 47.
10 Dong, “Guangchang’ de yinyu xushi yu zhengzhi touzhi,” 54.
11 For accounts of Bei Dao’s resistance to being labeled as a dissident writer or poet in America, see Li O., “Ji qin you shu de juli gan,” 12; and D. Li, *Chinese Poetry of Bei Dao*, 5–6.
12 McDougall, *Bei Dao*, 33, with modifications. The following quotes of the poem are from McDougall’s translation.
14 For an insightful discussion of nihilistic tendencies in the late 1970s, see Huang, “Xin shiqi wenxue qiyuan jieduan de xuwu.”
16 Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 29. Lukács continues: “Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own . . . Thus each action of the soul becomes meaningful and rounded in this duality: complete in meaning—in sense—and complete for the senses.”
17 Shi Zhi, *Winter Sun*, 41; translation modified.
19 Some scholars have noted the connection between these two texts. See, e.g., Yi, “Lun ‘Menglongshi’ fasheng de lishi jidian”; and Klein, “Poems from Underground.”
21 Shi Zhi, *Winter Sun*, 33; translation modified.
22 See Qi, “Shi de wangshi.”
23 Bei Dao, “Zhi duzhe,” 1.
24 Ibid., 2.
27 For Jacques Rancière, “politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals.” Rancière, *Aesthetics*, 24–25.
28 See Wang Q., “Lengse shijie you guangliang.”
McDougall, Bei Dao, 62; translation modified.

Wang Guan identifies two styles in early Bei Dao: One “speaks to the world,” the other “to oneself.” Wang G., “Bei Dao shige de liangzhong fengge.”

McDougall, Bei Dao, 67; translation modified.

For a productive critique of the poem, see Wu and Tao, “Chuanyue dangdai jingdian,” 113–16.

Provoked by Gu Cheng's novel ideas and yet eager to understand his own child, Gu Gong read the poem with patience and began to wonder: “Isn't it here the case where an audible ‘voice’ is transformed into a visible, tactile ‘scrape’? Is this a symbolic suggestion of something?” See Gu, “Liangdai ren,” 51.

For two relevant studies, see Crespi, Voices in Revolution; and Tang, “Buxi de zhenchan.” See Wu, “Bei Dao shige zhong de jingxiang zhuti.”

Bei Dao, The Rose of Time, 132–33; translation modified.

References


