Change and Un-change: Bian Zhilin’s Struggles in the War Time, 1937-1958

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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2016

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the heterogeneous works of Bian Zhilin (1910-2000), a famous modern Chinese poet, during 1937-1958, a relatively understudied period of his career in the extant scholarship. In particular, I focus on his wartime poetry in the poetry collection *Letters of Comfort* (Weilaoxin ji 慰勞信集), his wartime novel *Mountains and Rivers* (Shanshan shuishui 山山水水), and his decision to burn the manuscript of the latter in the 1950s. In reading these texts closely, particularly the novel, within their literary and historical contexts, I demonstrate that this period is crucial in Bian Zhilin’s career as it bridges his prewar life and his post-1949 acclimation to the new socialist regime. More specific, I argue that the change and un-change paradox/dialectic, or the collision and collusion of maintaining inner autonomy and participating in historical transformation, underlie all of Bian’s works in the wartime. It is first shown in his Yan’an poetry, then fully manifested in the novel *Mountains and Rivers*, and further demonstrated in his post-
1949 literary pursuits. To reconcile the inner and outer orientations of self, Bian constructs a notion of “spiral movement,” which again plays with the dialectic of change and un-change, to restore the traditional harmony of self. An overview of Bian’s career and life since the war demonstrates that “spiral movement” acts not only as an instruction for Bian to write the novel, but also as his schematization of the world and a guiding principle of his life.

In so doing, I try to overthrow the commonly-held label of Bian Zhilin as merely a poet in current scholarship and reveal his multifaceted persona. I also argue against the popular view that the incomplete novel *Mountains and Rivers* was a waste of Bian Zhilin’s creative energy and a disruption in his poetic career, and unravel the complicated aesthetics, thought, and character of Bian manifested in the novel. Furthermore, through studying the case of Bian Zhilin, I discuss some larger issues in relation to Chinese modernity and intellectuals at a moment of particularly dehumanizing tendencies in modern Chinese history. With two consecutive wars—the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949), the period of 1937 to 1958 is a tumultuous and rapidly changing time in the history of Chinese modernity. As an intellectual at ease with both Chinese and Western culture, Bian’s struggles and transformations in this period provide us with a unique window to investigate important issues such as the interrelationship between social engagement and intellectual
independence, artistic autonomy and political demands, as well as tradition and modernity.
To my parents,

Zhang Shiying 張世英 and Kong Xiangshan 孔祥山
Acknowledgments

Many people have been of great help with this thesis. Nathaniel and Beilul read the first manuscript and gave me precious and creative edits and suggestions. My friends and family members: Litong, Dingding, Barry, Terry, Qiaoxu, as well as my parents, always warmed my heart with their unwavering support and friendship. I would also like to thank my professor at Fudan University, Zhang Xinying 張新穎, who first introduced me to Bian Zhilin’s novel *Mountains and Rivers* and its delicate beauty. I am very grateful to Prof. Marjorie Chan, Prof. Christopher Reed, and Knicely Debbie, who have helped me grow as a person and as a scholar by setting an amazing example. I am deeply grateful for Prof. Meow Hui Goh, who has not only introduced me to many inspiring works through the two-year study with her, and agreed to be my committee member, but also listened and encouraged me when I was at my lowest point. Above all, the person I am most indebted to is my advisor, Prof. Kirk Denton, who gave me full freedom to explore topics that intrigued me, and to develop my own project out of those academic wanderings. He carefully read every draft of this thesis and offered many insightful
comments which guided me to delve deeper into the topic and reached a better understanding of it. Without his invaluable help, I could not have finished this thesis.

Needless to say, all errors and deficiencies are my own responsibility.
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Introduction

The research for this thesis originated from a personal encounter with a long novel called *Mountains and Rivers (Shanshan Shuishui)* by Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 (1910-2000), who is known more as a poet than as a novelist. The discovery of this novel overturned my stereotyped image of Bian as solely a poet; reading the novel opened up to me the exquisite and complicated world of Bian’s aesthetic and life philosophy, causing me to believe that both the novel and the novelist require careful re-examination. Furthermore, the fact that in the early 1950s Bian himself burned the manuscript of the novel, after he had spent a full eight years (1941-1948) writing it (and translating it into English) amid two wars, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949), further triggered my interest in the novel and the novelist. Why would an author, after devoting himself and attaching great value to it, then destroy his own work? Why then did he write the novel? What were the circumstances and context of his creation and destruction of the novel? To answer these questions and better understand Bian Zhilin as a multifaceted intellectual, I undertook the current research.

Whereas previous studies have mainly focused on Bian’s poetry of the 1930s, this thesis focuses on the years 1937-1958, a decisive yet consistently overlooked period of war and
dislocation in Bian Zhilin’s life and career. During the war, Bian Zhilin constantly moved among different locales, first from Japanese-occupied Shanghai to the inland city Chengdu 成都 in 1937, then to the Communist base Yan’an 延安 in northwest China in 1938, to the “bastion of democracy”¹ in Kunming 昆明 in the southwest hinterland in 1940, and later on to Oxford University in England in 1947, and finally back to Beijing in 1949. Nevertheless, it was during this period that his lifelong intellectual quest began to surface, fully manifested in his novel *Mountains and Rivers*, and continued on after 1949 to influence his life in the new socialist era. Through all the tribulation and change, an undercurrent of continuity in Bian’s works and life always existed.

By looking at Bian Zhilin’s literary works of this time, including the poetry collection *Letters of Comfort* (Weilao xin ji 慰勞信集), the novel *Mountains and Rivers*,² and the destruction of the novel manuscript in the 1950s, I attempt to demonstrate a modern Chinese intellectual’s anxiety over the interrelationship between social engagement and intellectual independence, artistic autonomy and political demands, as well as tradition and modernity. I argue that Bian is constantly seeking to reconcile these seemingly contradictory dualities, that his entire literary oeuvre attests to his belief that these binaries are not diametrically antagonistic but can be and actually are interconnected and mutually reinforcing; that Bian strives, but always fails because of the changing demands of History, to achieve an organic

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¹ That is, the National Southwest Associated University, more often called by Chinese as Xinan lianda 西南聯大 or Lianda 聯大. For details about the institution and its wartime situations, see John Israel, *Lianda: A Chinese University in War and Revolution* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998).

² Although he burned the whole manuscript later on, seven chapters had been previously published in different periodicals and thus survive to this day. They can be found in *Bian Zhilin wenji*, see Bian Zhilin 卞之琳, *Bian Zhilin wenji 卞之琳文集* (Literary collections of Bian Zhilin; hereafter *BZWJ*) (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 1:262-375. See my analysis in chapter 3.
harmony between them.\textsuperscript{3} Therefore, readers may find Bian’s life and works full of ambiguities and ambivalence in terms of his attitudes toward issues such as war, political commitment, and the role of self in historical transformation. To some degree these ambiguities and ambivalences make my investigation more difficult, with the problems in question often so complicated as to defy easy explanation. But surely, no complicated life is easy to explain.

The current scholarship on Bian Zhilin focuses primarily on his role as a poet and has produced multiple meaningful works on the subject.\textsuperscript{4} However, identifying Bian as merely a poet ignores his multifaceted persona in the field of modern Chinese literature and his heterogeneous literary efforts, the most noticeable and significant of which is the creation of the novel Mountains and Rivers. Moreover, his literary efforts are closely tied to the sociohistorical context. Therefore, looking at Bian Zhilin’s works and experiences from 1937 to 1958 also provides us with a unique window into the larger cultural world at the time.

Interestingly, the amount of academic attention given to the novel seems to be inversely proportional to the amount of time and effort Bian Zhilin spent writing it. I hope to fill in this scholarly gap with this thesis.

More specifically, I hope not only to add more facets to the prevailing image of Bian Zhilin as a poet, but also point out the underlying continuity/paradoxes of his literary career that the war forced to the surface. The examination of these paradoxes in his wartime works

\textsuperscript{3} I follow Kirk Denton, who capitalizes “History” in his discussion of the problematic self in modern Chinese literature. In his discussion, it designates a “Hegelian conception of the forward teleological movement of history.” See Kirk Denton, The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 6. My adoption of it bears the same meaning, and furthermore wants to emphasize the agency of history which is independent of individual will and can even engulf the latter.

\textsuperscript{4} See my literature review later.
also provides a clue for us to understand his ambiguous post-1949 embrace of the socialist state.

Mountains and Rivers in the War

When the second Sino-Japanese War (aka the Resistance War) broke out in July, 1937, Bian was driven into exile from the east coast of China to the great hinterland (da houfang 大後方), a fate shared by many of his contemporaries. In August 1938, after teaching at Sichuan University in Chengdu for a while, he went to Yan’an, the Communist base in the northwest, and then to the front lines, where he lived among the guerrillas for a year as a cultural worker in the army. For his friends, the move was at once unexpected and understandable. In their eyes, Bian Zhilin was by no measure an extroverted revolutionary, but rather a conservative and sometimes secretive introvert, who never expressed his passions and emotions openly. But the move was understandable given that Yan’an had become a “Mecca of youth,” a5 an attractive must-go place for idealist intellectuals and students who were intrigued by the idea of participating in historical and social transformations.6

Bian Zhilin’s Yan’an period yielded Letters of Comfort, a collection of poetry in the form of letters addressed to certain figures involved in the war. On the surface, in its new subject matter and style catering to the masses, it diverges tremendously from Bian’s prewar

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poetry, which was mostly individualistic and introspective in mode. However, the generic incongruity between poetry and letter, as well as the unstable deictic relationship between the poetic narrator and the populace, all suggest an underlying paradox of the poet caught in the wartime craze for “national resistance literature” (guofang wenxue 国防文学): the struggle to write popular patriotic poetry without sacrificing either aesthetic standards or intellectual independence. In 1939, instead of staying in Yan’an like many intellectuals who chose to go there, Bian Zhilin returned to the hinterland. The move, itself full of political implications, again surprised some intellectuals. As his own words showed, “Last summer when I left Chengdu . . . those who knew what I was like previously were surprised; when I returned to Sichuan, those who forgot what I was like previously were again suspicious…. But I am still who I am.”

On the one hand, something was indeed unchanged—for example, his concern with the larger nationalist cause and his insistence on intellectual autonomy. In fact, as my analysis will show, the collision and collusion of the inner-outer orientations of the self in Bian, the desire and anxiety of reconciling the two seemingly conflicting directions, underlie all of Bian’s works in the wartime, first anticipated in his Yan’an poetry, then reflected in the novel Mountains and Rivers, and further demonstrated in his literary practices in the new socialist state after 1949.

On the other hand, changes were already happening. In 1940, Bian Zhilin compiled all his poetry written before this time into a single collection, Poetic Grass in Ten Years

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7 Writers were called on to “use their pens to stir up the people, protect the fatherland, pulverize the invaders and win victory.” Quoted from David Der-wei Wang, Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 161. For a debate on this particular literature during the war, see chapter 5 in the same book.

8 BZWJ, 1:397.
(Shinian shicao 十年詩草). For the next ten years, he did not write or publish any poetry.

From 1941 to 1948, during the later years of the Resistance War and most of the Chinese Civil war, he focused almost exclusively on writing Mountains and Rivers.

In the novel, Bian expresses his belief in “spiral movement” (luoxuan de jinxing 螺旋的進行) as the law of the universe, a concept that is derived from his selective interpretation of various sources, most importantly the I Ching 易經 (The book of changes). From the latter half of the 1930s, Bian had great interest in the book, especially the verse “sheng sheng zhi wei yi” 生生之謂易 (life and growth is the meaning of “change”). Each forward step is achieved only after a breakthrough of the previous state; each new phase/self is a negation of the old phase/self. His construction of “spiral movement,” as a variation on the I Ching verse, plays with the dialectic of change and un-change. It posits that the whole universe, including nature and human life, moves ceaselessly forward in cycles. There is something unchanged and unchangeable among changes. For example, the cycle of the four seasons in nature is changeless, but each new season is different from the one that just passed.

Another I Ching verse Bian Zhilin likes to quote in Mountains and Rivers and in many other places is “The movement of heaven is full of power. Thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring” (tianxing jian, junzi yi ziqiang buxi 天行健,君子以自強不息). It suggests “the law of undulation,” which sees the nature of humanity as both eternal and


evolving, both inner- and outer oriented. As a parallel with the nature of heaven, there is an inward divinity in human nature and perfectibility through continuous self-cultivation. This essence is unchangeable and beyond the vicissitudes of historical changes. However, humans inhabit time, so their bodies, passions, and roles are in a process of continual change. Therefore, in human life, as in nature, there is also this same dialectic of change and unchange.

On a deeper level, the notion of “spiral movement” acts as Bian’s solution to the dilemma he encountered when serving the political demands of the war period, writing semi-propaganda poetry in Yan’an; it also responds to the “general epistemological problem that haunted modern Chinese intellectuals: how to be an autonomous individual and still participate in historical transformation.”¹¹ In his analysis of Hu Feng and Lu Ling’s critical and creative writings, Denton sees the modern self as torn between the opposing discourses of romantic individualism and revolutionary collectivism.¹² As my analysis in chapter three shows, Bian’s construction of the “spiral movement” and the relativistic worldview reflect his ideal in which self can keep constancy among changes and reach a harmony between his/her intellectual independence and social engagement. But more often than not, for Bian Zhilin, reality only allows for an oscillation between the two.

In the early 1950s, Bian Zhilin burned the whole manuscript of Mountains and Rivers, an act that marked his first step in accommodating to the new regime, though the genuineness of his ideological commitment to the socialist cause is ambivalent. Bian’s embrace of the new socialist state can be seen as the product of political pressure to conform, but we can

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¹² Ibid, 22.
also see it as a self-willed decision legitimized by his change/ un-change dialectic. To be more precise, the belief in “spiral movement” implies a recognition of the historical necessity of changing in time, which could also mean making peace with one’s times. In fact, as my discussion in chapter 4 shows, Bian’s “spiral movement” has many uncanny resonances with Maoism, and adding yet more ambiguities to Bian’s post-1949 activities.

After the burning of the manuscript, Bian planned to write another long novel. However, with political campaigns rolling out one after another, he did not get a chance and gave up the idea completely in 1955, the year when the Anti-Hu Feng campaign was launched and one year before Bian joined the CCP. However, he resumed his poetic career, writing some verses that are reminiscent of his Yan’an style poems, but with a more politicized tone and blatantly intelligible language in compliance with the Maoist discourse of writing about and for the “masses.” Ironically, these poems were criticized by readers as “implicit in tone” or “obscure.” In 1958, Bian stopped literary writing all together and invested himself fully in translating and in academic research. For over two decades, he did not create any literary works, but successfully transformed himself into a translator and scholar. The act of refraining from creative writing could be seen as yet another turn in his life; by withdrawing from the world of politically coerced artistic constraints, he was able to maintain a seemingly quiet independence.

The cutoff year of my study is 1958, the point in time when Bian stopped all kinds of creative writing after burning the novel’s manuscript. But it is not hard to conclude that the

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13 See Zhang Manyi, Bian Zhilin zhuyi yanjiu, 213.
14 For the details of the campaign and its influence on the landscape of contemporary Chinese culture, see Merle Goldman, Literary Dissent in Communist China (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), chapter 7.
15 See Zhang Manyi, Bian Zhilin zhuyi yanjiu, 113-117.
notion of “spiral movement” he emphasized in the novel, or the ideal of maintaining a harmony between inner autonomy and participating in historical transformation, exerted a lasting influence on his later life. An overview of Bian’s career and life since the war period shows that the desires/anxieties resulting from the confrontation of this ideal with historical realities also shaped his own life path into a spiral movement.

**Enlarge, Amend, and Deepen: A Literature Review**

As mentioned before, the novel *Mountains and Rivers* remains understudied in the existing scholarship on Bian Zhilin. To some degree, this is understandable because Bian burned the manuscript and only parts of it are extant. His role and achievement as a novelist is eclipsed by his earlier work as a poet, which gained him a fame beginning in the early 1930s. Moreover, the poems he wrote in and after the 1980s account for only a negligible portion of his complete poetry, pulling the academic focus further to his earlier poetry.

Generally speaking, there have been two waves of scholarly interest in Bian Zhilin. The first wave occurred in the 1930s and 1940s, which corresponds to his most productive poetic period. The main themes in this scholarship include the imagism in Bian’s poetry, his modernist style, his inclination to “intellectualize” (*zhihua* 智化), and the philosophical implications of his literary content. For example, Li Jianwu 李健吾 (1906-1982) first pointed out the modernity in Bian’s poetry; Li Guangtian 李廣田 (1906-1968), Bian’s friend and a poet himself, noticed Bian’s choice of “intellectual imagery” (*zhixing hua yixiang* 智性化思想); and Fei Ming 廢名 (1901-1967) praised Bian for his use of particular words and images,
poetic techniques revealing an influence not only from French Symbolism but also from traditional Chinese literature.\(^{16}\)

The second academic wave of Bian Zhilin study began in the 1980s and continues today. The scholars involved are more diverse, coming from both China and the West. Christine Liao’s Ph.D. dissertation *Bian Zhilin and Ai Qing: A Comparative Study of Selected Poems, with Reference to Focus and Lexical Cohesion*, is the first extensive English study of Bian Zhilin’s poetry. Under the framework of “minimal syntax”\(^{17}\) presented by Kao Yu-kung and Mei Tsu-lin in their analysis of Tang poetry, Christine Liao examines the contrasting syntactic and semantic features of Bian Zhilin’s and Ai Qing’s poems. Although Liao stresses that she is interested in a broader literary perspective rather than a narrower linguistic one in appreciating the two poets, her approach and main concern remain linguistic, geared toward revealing the mechanism behind the imagistic poems written by Bian Zhilin and prose poems by Ai Qing.

The first book-length monograph on Bian Zhilin’s poetry in English was Haft Lloyd’s *Pien Chih-lin: A Study in Modern Chinese Poetry*. It was the first attempt ever in the English world to “present a unified vision of this modern poet’s works and to chronicle his career in more than summary fashion.”\(^{18}\) Using a “chronological-biographical approach,” Haft

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\(^{16}\) Li Jianwu 李健吾, “Yumu ji” 魚目集 (The collection of Yumu), in *Juhua ji 咬華集 (Relishing Flowers)* (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1984), 113; originally published in *Dagong bao 大公報*, April 12, 1936.

\(^{17}\) Li Guangtian 李廣田, “Shi de yishu—lun Bian Zhilin de Shinian shicao” 詩的藝術—論卞之琳的《十年詩草》 (The art of poetry—a review of Bian Zhilin’s *Poetic Grass in Ten Years*), in *Shide yishu 詩的藝術 (The art of poetry)* (1943; reprint, Hong Kong: Huiwenge shudian, 1947), 64. Fei Ming 费明, “Shinian shicao” 《十年詩草》 (*Poetic Grass in Ten Years*), in *Lun xinshi ji qita 論新詩及其他 (Reviews of new poetry and others)* (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998), 153-169.


provides the first detailed English-language narrative of Bian’s life from his early childhood through late-1981. Haft is also the first person to notice Bian’s shift to being a translator-scholar after the 1950s, and he also sets Bian’s literary activities in the larger social and historical context.

In the Chinese world, much progress has also been made in the study of Bian Zhilin. Zhang Manyi’s remarkable work *Bian Zhilin zhuyi yanjiu* 卞之琳著譯研究 (Study in Bian Zhilin’s works and translations) stands as the first comprehensive and most influential study. Not only does it innovatively analyze Bian’s poetry, it also reviews Bian’s essays and translations, and the interplay among them. Most important, Zhang Manyi mentions, for the first time, the novel *Mountains and Rivers*. But her analysis of the novel is fragmentary and simplistic, and she fails to fully understand the significance and complexity of the novel. Furthermore, she views Bian’s writing of the novel as a waste of his creative energy and an unwelcome interruption in his poetic career. This negative attitude further obstructs her ability to grasp the hidden continuity of Bian Zhilin’s career and life as embodied in the novel.19

Zhang Manyi’s work inspired greatly her followers, such as Chen Bingying 陳丙瑩 and Liu Xiang’an 劉祥安. Chen Bingying’s *Bian Zhilin pingzhuan* 卞之琳評傳 (Critical biography of Bian Zhilin) explains in a more detailed manner the contents of each extant chapter of *Mountains and Rivers*, which he sees as the crystallization of Bian’s wartime experiences and writing skills.20 Furthermore, he mentions the influences of André Gide,

19 Zhang Manyi 張曼儀, *Bian Zhilin zhuyi yanjiu* 卞之琳著譯研究 (Studies on Bian Zhilin’s works and translations) (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1989), 84-90.
20 See Chen Bingying 陳丙瑩, *Bian Zhilin pingzhuan* 卞之琳評傳 (Critical biography of Bian Zhilin)
Henry James, and Christopher Isherwood on the thoughts and the form of the novel. Liu Xiang’an develops Chen’s argument by meticulously explaining how the “presiding intelligence” from Henry James is employed by Bian Zhilin in the shifting of narrative perspectives among and within each chapter, and how André Gide’s concept of “progress” is echoed in the novel.\(^21\)

Though Zhang, Chen, and Liu all treat *Mountains and Rivers*, and even recognize “spiral development” as the novel’s underlying theme, their discussions generally fall short of a comprehensive and systematic appreciation of the novel. Taking it as the random foray of a poet into fiction writing, they miss its unique significance to Bian’s oeuvre and to an understanding of the complexity of the author. Rarely do they put the meaning of the novel into the trajectory of Bian Zhilin’s lifelong intellectual quest. Nor do they connect it to the thundering historical background of the war, a crucial period in modern Chinese history.

My study diverges from and seeks to contribute to the current scholarship in the following several aspects, which can be summarized by three words: “enlarge, amend, and deepen.” First, it attempts to enlarge the scope of academic examination of Bian Zhilin’s literary career. The commonly-held identification of Bian Zhilin as a poet obfuscates his multifaceted persona, especially the twists and turns of his career as a novelist in a tumultuous time. In fact, Haft notices that Bian’s main literary effort in the 1940s was “working quietly on his novel,”\(^22\) but because his main focus is Bian’s poetry, the aspect of Bian as a novelist remains out of focus.

\(^{21}\) Liu Xiang’an 刘祥安, *Bian Zhilin: Zai hunluan zhong xunqiu zhixu 卞之琳：在混乱中寻求秩序 (Bian Zhilin, Seeking order in the chaos)* (Beijing: Wenjin chubanshe, 2007).

\(^{22}\) Lloyd Haft, *Pien Chih-lin: A Study in Modern Chinese Poetry*, 77.
Second, my study aims to amend some long held impressions of Bian Zhilin and thereby deepen our understanding of both the writer and his works. In his preface, Haft poses the two questions that triggered his study on Bian: “How was it possible for a man like Pien Chih-lin to adjust to the changed cultural conditions of life in the People’s Republic of China? How could a poet of uncompromisingly high esthetic standards continue to maintain himself through the political tumults, cultural purges, and mass movements of the period since 1949?” At the end of his book, Haft concludes that there is a “very deep and general motif of alienation-and-return,” with different kinds of variations, in Bian’s poetry. He further explains this as the recognized need for “human relatedness,” for “participation in a greater-than-individual reality which is specifically human.” The “alienation” resulting from broken human relationships or the separation from a greater-than-individual reality propels the subject to seek for a “return” to the larger totality, to the human collective. Haft does not elaborate on the point, which in my view comes very close to but still does not touch upon the core of the issue. He seems to emphasize the one-way flow from alienation to return, but does not see the bi-directional flow between the two, a more dynamic and complicated interrelationship between inherent metaphysical loneliness and the consequent empirical need for social interaction and communication. To be more specific, as Kirk Denton has suggested, modern Chinese intellectuals are often torn between the opposing directions of maintaining inner autonomy and participating in historical transformation. The two directions are not mechanically divergent but organically interconnected.

Furthermore, Haft does not connect this conclusion to the two questions he puts forward at the very beginning of his exploration. Nor does he answer explicitly the questions he

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23 Ibid, 1-2.
himself has posed and intended to answer with his monograph. Uncannily, with phrases like “changed cultural conditions” “uncompromisingly high esthetic standards,” these questions imply a change and un-change paradox/dialectic, which is the subject of this thesis. By pointing out the longtime concern of Bian Zhilin about the position of self in History, I hope to sharpen Haft’s argument and deepen our understanding of Bian’s wartime works and life.

Third, on a larger scale, this study seeks to problematize the dominant model of wartime literary history, which divides wartime China into three distinct and fixed areas: the Nationalist-controlled area or the “great rear area” (da houfang 大後方), the Japanese-occupied region (lunxian qu 游陷區), and the “liberated region” (jiefang qu 解放區) controlled dominantly by the CCP. In this model, the literary landscape is shaped mechanically into three corresponding types. In fact, neither the regional divide nor the corresponding literary differentiation were so stark. First, the borders of the three regions were blurry and constantly shifting with the development of the war. Economic, cultural, and ideological exchanges among the three regions occurred all the time through public or private avenues. Second, this standardized writing of literary history usually presents a

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There are some scholars who start to break away with this conventional mapping of wartime culture. For example, Fitzgerald thinks that Chinese modernism is heterogeneous and fragmenting, see Carolyn FitzGerald, Fragmenting Modernisms: Chinese Wartime Literature, Art, and Film, 1937-49 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).


26 That the CCP have established many contact points within Nationalist- and Japanese controlled areas is a well-known fact in history. An example of the mutual ideological infiltration among different areas can be found in Patricia Stranahan, Underground: The Shanghai Communist Party and the Politics of Survival, 1927-1937 (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).
clear-cut model of national salvation versus individualism, with the ultimate subservience of
the latter to the former in Mao’s republic. It blinds us to the dynamic and complicated
interrelationship between the two discourses, as shown in the case of Bian.

The works and movements of Bian Zhilin from 1937 to 1958 work against this
monolithic and oversimplified schematization of wartime culture. When he was staying
among the guerrillas on the frontline and in Yan’an, he created poems not only in accordance
to CCP’s dictates but also paying tribute to the leader of the Nationalist Party, the
Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek.27 When he came back to the Nationalist-controlled area
from Yan’an, he included in Mountains and Rivers his personal experiences in Yan’an with
the revolutionary collective. While he always struggled for artistic sophistication and
intellectual independence in creation, his writing was never without concern for the cause of
national salvation and the awareness of a larger social collective. But the way he chose to
interfere with society and participate in historical reformation diverged from the wartime
mainstream craze for “national resistance literature.”

Outline of the Chapters

A close reading of the novel Mountains and Rivers occupies a central position in this
thesis because it provides an entry point for us to unravel the complicated aesthetics, thought,
and character of Bian as he continuously changed his persona during his lifetime. But it is
first necessary to have some basic background information on Bian Zhilin’s life and poetics
in his prewar poetry. Chapter 1 thus draws an outline for the biographical and poetical

27 “Gei weiyuanzhang” 給委員長 (To the Generalissimo), in BZWJ, 1:100.
aspects of Bian Zhilin and also paves the way for my later discussion on his philosophy of change and un-change. As I show, the war both brought about dislocation to Bian’s life and inspired him; it drove him into exile and enlarged the scope of his aesthetic experiences; it provided him with creative materials while it also disrupted his creative process. His prewar poems feature a poetics of disjunction and depersonalization, which links with an underlying relativistic worldview and a quest for the meaning of existence. All the techniques, tropes, and themes in his prewar poetry reoccur and further develop in his wartime literary works, especially the novel *Mountains and Rivers.*

Chapter 2 concerns Bian’s Yan’an period, with a focus on his poetry in *Letters of Comfort.* I examine in particular the formal incongruities between poetry and the letter form, and a shifting deictic relationship between the poetic voice and the populace he addresses. I argue that they reflect on a deeper level the dilemma between participating in historical transformation and maintaining intellectual autonomy. It is a question Bian seeks to answer with the novel *Mountains and Rivers,* which is a distillation and crystallization of his life experiences and a contemplation on the previous dilemma in writing his wartime poetry.

Chapter 3, therefore, gives a close reading of the seven published chapters of the novel, the only ones extant after Bian’s book burning. The novel is a manifestation of the change and unchanged dialectic on various levels and in particular shows Bian’s obsession with the idea of “spiral movement” as the ultimate reality. The idea reveal Bian’s desire of restoring the ancient harmony between self and society embodied in the wisdom of *I Ching* verses. However, his ideal is not without the inner tensions inherent within the traditional scheme he borrows.
In chapter 4, I discuss the possible reasons for Bian Zhilin’s decision to burn the manuscript of *Mountains and Rivers* and its symbolic and political implications in connection with the historical background of the 1950s. I argue that the destruction of the novel was on a symbolic level a kind of self-immolation, an eradication of the socially responsible liberal who had been seeking a middle-road between rightist and leftist ideologies. Rising from the ashes was a new poetic and political subjectivity, producing patriotic poems in accordance with the Maoist agenda and a seemingly smooth acclimatization to the new socialist republic. However, I argue that this transformation was not a complete and radical departure from his previous longstanding stance as an autonomous writer; rather, it is actually a culmination of his longtime search for a creative engagement with history and historical change, for a restoration of the traditional harmony between internal autonomy and the external world.

**Conclusion**

The study of Bian Zhilin’s works in the period 1937-1958 captures a specific and special moment in the history of Chinese modernity, when both China’s sovereignty and its people were severely tested by the war. In Bian’s laborious efforts to reconcile the subjective and the objective, we see an intellectual’s aesthetic response, with all its delicacy and ambiguities, to the war; we also see an intellectual who strives to resolve the problematic of self, a shadow looming over Chinese modernity from at least the May Fourth period. More profoundly, it also showcases an intellectual who tries to answer the fundamentally metaphysical dilemma of humanity, which always yearns for freedom within repressions and connectedness within alienation.
Chapter 1: Bian Zhilin: In and Out of the War

In this chapter, I describe in broad strokes Bian Zhilin’s life from his childhood to the moment he burned the manuscript of *Mountains and Rivers*. I then briefly discuss his prewar poetics through some typical examples of his prewar poems, which are generally acknowledged as the highest achievement of his career as a poet. As I show, the war brought about dislocation as well as inspiration to Bian Zhilin, driving him into exile while at the same time enlarging the scope of his aesthetic experiences, providing him with new creative materials, and meanwhile shaking up his normal creative process. His prewar poems feature a poetics of disjunction and depersonalization, which links with an underlying relativist worldview and a quest for the meaning of existence. As my analysis in the next chapters shows, all the techniques, tropes, and themes in his prewar poetry recur and are further developed in his wartime literary works, especially in the novel *Mountains and Rivers*, which is a crystallization of his longtime search for a balance between independence and social responsibility.

War: Dislocation and Inspiration
Bian Zhlin was born into a modest gentry family in Haimen county 海門, Jiangsu 江蘇 Province in 1910. In his writings, he is rather reticent about his family background and childhood. Only in a few reminiscences written in his elder years does he mention his hometown and family, though usually in general terms. His father sat for the civil examination several times but failed and eventually became the owner of a dye house inherited from his grandfather. But the family fortunes were already in decline by his father’s generation. These modest origins, eclipsed in comparison with those of his contemporaries like Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書 and Zhang Ailing 張愛玲, whose families were famous for either their scholar-gentry predecessors or political connections, perhaps contributed to Bian Zhilin’s secretive, reserved, and sometimes deviant personality, qualities that are also inscribed into the complexity and opacity of his poetry.

From early in his life, Bian received training in traditional Chinese texts. Some of his children’s primers included Qianjia shi 千家詩, Mencius 孟子, Zuozhuan 左傳, and Song lyrics.\(^28\) The curriculum shifted to vernacular Chinese and modern subjects like modern science and English when he was in middle school. He was admitted into the Peking University’s Department of English in 1929 to study English and French literature. His interests included various works in Romanticism, Symbolism, post-Symbolism, and later, Modernism. He befriended He Qifang 何其芳 (1912-1977) and Li Guangtian 李廣田 (1906-1968), who were both students at Peking University at the time. He also met Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897-1931), who was a professor in English poetry. With Xu’s help, some of Bian’s poems were published even before his graduation from university. After graduation in 1933,

he managed to make a living by translating Western literature for several presses and institutions. Although he had traveled some, the range of his activities were mainly limited to the east coast of China, particularly around Beijing and his hometown. In 1936, he published a poetry anthology titled *Hanyuan ji* 漢園集 (The Han Garden Collection) together with He Qifang and Li Guangtian. The collection included some of his most acclaimed poems and won Bian a position in the field of modern Chinese poetry.

When the second Sino-Japanese War broke out in July 1937, Bian was in a mountain temple in Zhejiang Province 浙江 with his novelist friend Lu Fen 蘆焚 (1910-1988). The two had rented a house there because they needed quietude and isolation to concentrate on their projects: Bian was translating two novels by the French writer André Gide (1869-1951), *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (The Counterfeiters) and *La Porte Etroite* (Strait Is the Gate); Lu was developing a recently conceived novel. Because of their isolation, they did not hear the news of the battle in Shanghai on August 13 until several days later.

Upon learning the news, they immediately packed up to leave for Shanghai, just as waves of refugees were fleeing the city. In Shanghai, they stayed at the famous literary critic and playwright Li Jianwu’s 李健吾 (1906-1982) house in the French Concession, which was relatively safe from Japanese invasion at the time. Bian finished his translation of *La Porte Etroite* there and then joined the exodus to the inland, first to Hankou 漢口, then to Chengdu 成都. At the invitation of his friend Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 (1897-1986), the Dean

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29 Pseudonym for Wang Changjian 王長簡, changed to Shi Tuo 師陀 after 1946.
30 For a first-person record of their journey, see Lu Fen 蘆焚, *Shanghai Shouzha* 上海手札 (Shanghai Letters) (Shanghai: Wenhua shenghuo chubanshe, 1944).
of Humanities at Sichuan University, Bian was hired as an English professor in October 1937. He Qifang also came to teach in Chengdu at the beginning of 1938.

In response to the city’s political “backwardness,” especially the ignorance among the populace to the great need for solidarity and serious work for the war effort, Bian Zhilin and He Qifang launched a biweekly magazine Gongzuo 工作 (work) in the spring of 1938. The aim was to “publicize the War of Resistance and uphold social justice.” The magazine carried He Qifang’s famous poem “Chengdu, Let Me Shake You Awake!” (Chengdu, rangwo ba ni yaoxing 成都，讓我把你搖醒), which signaled the poet’s transformation, both poetic and political. In the poem, he laments the state of Chengdu as “Rome in its decline and fall,” “stuffed with filth, putrefaction, and iniquity.” As the circulation of Gongzuo began to boom, He Qifang started to think about going to Yan’an, the Communist base in the northwest and the “Mecca of the young,” and asked Sha Ding 沙汀 (1904-1992) to make the arrangements. Sha Ding had joined the Communist Party a decade earlier; now teaching at Sichuan University and a colleague of Bian, he served as a liaison official between the Party headquarters in Yan’an and local areas in Sichuan.

He Qifang strongly encouraged Bian Zhilin to go with him to Yan’an, and Bian agreed. On August 14, 1938, Bian Zhilin, He Qifang, and Sha Ding took a bus from Chengdu and headed north to Yan’an. The news must have shocked some of his closest friends. For example, Chen Shih-Hsiang 陳世驥 (1912–1971), Bian’s friend at Peking University,

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31 For the details surrounding the establishment of the magazine, see “He Qifang yu Gongzuo 何其芳與《工作》(He Qifang and Work), in BZWJ, 2:284-90.
32 See Bonnie S. McDougall, Paths in Dreams: Selected Prose and Poetry of Ho Ch’i-fang, 15-28; and David Der-wei Wang, The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis, chapter 3.
33 For the English translation, see Bonnie S. McDougall, Paths in Dreams: Selected Prose and Poetry of Ho Ch’i-fang, 175. The original is in HQQJ 1:328
34 Bonnie McDougall, Paths in Dreams: Selected Prose and Poetry of Ho Ch’i-fang, 24.
described his mixed feelings of surprise and understanding after learning about Bian’s bold and daring move:

Of all the strange things on earth to those who know him, the strangest is to see Pien Chih-lin [Bian Zhilin] …in the war time. His short stature, his light weight which makes him look no more substantial than a shadow, his grayish eyes behind a pair of almost semiglobal convex glasses, his faint voice and dreamy expression which evoke a feeling of the remotest clouds, his whole appearance and being and the faery kind of melody in his poetry all together give the impression that he must be the last one in the world who could stand a single blast of the raging tempest of this war. Yet there he emerges, a poet of the war time, and a very good one, worthy of the name.35

After arriving in Yan’an, Bian Zhilin and He Qifang would travel on to the enemy front as army correspondents and live among the guerrillas.

As we can see, the war disrupted Bian Zhilin’s peaceful life and threw him into an exilic existence in which he drifted among various cities. At the same time, however, it broadened his horizons and familiarized him with diverse life experiences and the various lifestyles in different regions of China, now politically divided by the war. Bian’s case might be seen in light of the famous verse of the Qing poet and historian Zhao Yi 趙翼—“The misery of the state leads to the emergence of great poets” (guojia buxin shijia xin 國家不幸詩家幸) —which suggests that hope is born out of despair. If we take “poet” in its broadest sense to mean a man of belle-lettres, the war not only made its way directly into the subject matter of Bian’s wartime poetry, which is the focus of my examination in chapter 2, but also catalyzed his transformation from a poet to a novelist.

35 Chen Shih-Hsiang, "A Poet in Our War Time," Asia (New York), 42.7 (August 1942), 479. The text was in English.
Writing fiction was a long-held goal in Bian’s life, bearing its earliest fruits in 1929 when he published his first novella “Deep is the Night” (Ye zheng shen 夜正深), which reads much like Lu Xun’s “Tomorrow” (Mingtian 明天). Interestingly, the novella was published much earlier than the poems for which he would become well known. His stay in Yan’an re-fueled his fictional imagination, and from 1938 to 1941 he turned out four more novellas. Bian referred to them as “apprentice works,” indicating that they were a sort of practice in preparation for a coming “master work.”

In the summer of 1939, whereas He Qifang decided to stay in Yan’an and dedicate himself to Communist Party propaganda work, Bian Zhilin returned to Sichuan University. Then, from 1940 to 1947, he taught English and translation in the Department of Foreign Literatures in the National Southwest Associated University (aka LianDa) in Kunming.

Bian started to spend most of his spare time during these years writing *Mountains and Rivers*. At the same time, as a farewell gesture to his poetic career, he compiled and published all of his poems in a single collection called *Poetic Grass of Ten Years* (Shinian shicao 十年詩草). Bian did not write another line of poetry until 1950, in the radically new environment of the socialist state. Viewing his works as “grass,” again reminiscent of the name of Lu Xun’s prose poem anthology *Wild Grass* (Yecao 野草), reflects Bian’s humble attitude toward his poetic achievements and thereof perhaps hints at a larger ambition for his later literary practice, the first and biggest fruit of which is *Mountains and Rivers*.

The novel is based on Bian’s personal experiences during the war and tells a story of the activities and lives of Chinese intellectuals in the midst of war. I present a close reading of

36 The title of the collection was “Duanpian xiaoshuo xizuo” 短篇小說習作, namely, student works of short novels. See *BZWJ*, 1:179.
the novel—or more precisely the few parts of it that are extant—in chapter 3. Bian first finished the Chinese manuscript of the novel in the autumn of 1943 and then, foreseeing that it may not get published under the increasingly severe censorship imposed by the Nationalists (or Guomindang, hereafter GMD), spent another five years on translating it into English. He hoped to publish it first in the West, following the lead of Lin Yutang 林語堂, who had been successful since the 1930s in publishing his works in English. In 1944 and 1946, he offered two new courses to LianDa students: “Henry James” and “The Art of the Novel.” The latter was an introductory class on the theories of creative writing by E. M. Forster, Edwin Muir, and Percy Lubbock. The classes were a direct crystallization of his own theoretical explorations and practical experiments in writing a novel. In 1947, Bian received a scholarship from the British Council that allowed him to travel to and do research in England. Apart from being a visiting scholar at Oxford University, most of his time there was invested in carrying on the English translation as well as polishing the original Chinese version of *Mountains and Rivers*.

In the winter of 1948, after hearing the news of the Huai-Hai Campaign, a decisive battle on the eve of the Communist takeover of mainland China, Bian Zhilin left England immediately and boarded a boat to China. He first arrived in Hong Kong and after a short sojourn there returned to Beijing in January, 1949. Since the outbreak of the Resistance War, which had driven him into exile, this was his first return to the city where he had studied and worked for eight years in his youth. Although the city was physically intact, politically and ideologically it was going through an earthshattering change. The new regime imposed a

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totalitarian control over writers and artists—in the new socialist rhetoric, “cultural workers”—enjoining them to write about and for workers, peasants, and soldiers, who were the main components of “the masses.” Political campaigns targeting nonleftist writers and artists would follow, one after another, over the next three decades, driving tens of thousands to madness, suicide, or silence. Many chose to relinquish their liberal intellectual stances, at least on the outside, and adapt to the new regime.

Sometime near the beginning of the socialist era, Bian Zhilin burned the manuscript of *Mountains and Rivers*. The possible reasons for this act and its symbolic and political implications are the focus of my discussion in chapter 4. At the same time, he started to write poems again, though now, of course, in a style prescribed by the dictates of mass literature. Unfortunately, his new poetry, though “impeccable” in political and ideological content and linguistically intelligible, was castigated, ironically, for being implicit in tone and obscure in language. He received the same criticism for his next two attempts at writing socialist poetry, even as he dutifully continued to write poetry for the masses. Then, in 1958, without any explanation, his poetic creation came to a halt, a lull lasting over two decades. At this time, he transformed himself again into a translator and scholar of Western literature; for the rest of his life, he would be best known for his translation and introduction of Shakespeare and Western poetry. Revising or rewriting *Mountains and Rivers* was never again on his agenda. As such, *Mountains and Rivers* stands as a kind of testament to Bian’s life as an individual and to the history of modern Chinese literature more generally; its creation and then its destruction represent the tortuous path of an intellectual and a nation in their grappling with modernity.
Bian Zhilin’s Poetics: Disjunction and Depersonalization

A discussion of his poetics is necessary here for an appreciation of his later wartime works, including *Mountains and Rivers*, which are my principal focus in this thesis. Bian Zhilin’s poetics have been the focus of many studies, several of which are original and well argued. Therefore, I only highlight some of the dominant characteristics of his poetics and try to keep my discussion as concise as possible.

Bian’s poetry, especially that before the war, demonstrates a unique style that is described, by Lloyd Haft, as not easily “accessible to analysis.” It is a product of the mutual interaction of the influences of Chinese and Western traditions. Haft suggests that Bian adopts Symbolist and post-Symbolist trends in Western poetry, on the one hand, and some concepts from Chinese Buddhism and Daoism, on the other. Michelle Yeh in her succinct yet incisive study points out the complicated intertextuality of Modernist poetics and Chinese traditions in Bian’s poetry written between 1930 and 1937. She also perceptively argues that the poet’s receptivity to Western influence could be based on his traditional Chinese background, especially Daoist-Buddhist thought. Taking a different approach, Jiang Ruoshui 江弱水 attempts to exhaustively tease out each thread in the intricate web of cross-cultural influences that marks Bian’s poetry. He presents a catalogue of writers and intellectuals who influence Bian and whose styles he integrated into his own poetry. For

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41 Ibid.
example, on the Western side, there are the French Symbolist poet Paul Valéry, the
Modernist writers T. S. Eliot and André Gide, among others. On the Chinese side, there are
traditional Chinese lyricists such as Wen Tingyun 温庭筠, Jiang Kui 姜夔, and Li Shangyin
李商隱, whose lyrics and poems are notoriously obscure. It is not coincidental that some
critics also find some of Bian’s poetry difficult to understand, even to the point of being
“unapproachable.”

Among all the characteristics of Bian’s poetics, the most distinct and defining are
disjunction and depersonalization. The former is manifested in his inclination to juxtapose
disconnected images; the latter in the deliberate alienation between the author and the poetic
subject(s). For example, in the following poem,

Several Individuals 幾個人

The hawker calls, “Bingtang hulu!”
叫賣的喊一聲“冰糖葫蘆”
Swallowing a mouthful of dust he seems not to mind at all;
吃了一口灰像渾不在乎;
The man with a bird cage in hand gazes at the white pigeons in the sky,
提鳥籠的望著天上的白鴿,
And strolls casually over the sandy creek.
自在的腳步踩過了沙河,
As a young man meditates on the deserted street.
當一個年輕人在荒街上沈思。
A carrot peddler idly toys with his little knife, whetted gleamingly sharp.
賣蘿蔔的空揮著磨亮的小刀,
A load of carrots smiles their silly smiles in the setting sun,
一擔紅蘿蔔在夕陽裏傻笑,
As a young man meditates on the deserted street.

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43 Lloyd Haft, Pien Chih-lin: A Study in Modern Chinese Poetry, 37.
45 A traditional Chinese snack with sugar-coated haws strung on a bamboo stick. It allegedly originated in Beijing.
The whole poem is structured around the juxtaposition of the disjunctive activities of “several individuals”: the hawker, the man with a bird cage, the carrot peddler, the young man, etc. The quick and short succession of images creates a panoramic scene of the “deserted street,” a microcosm of the lower-class society in 1930s China. The street is deserted, implying a gloomy socioeconomic environment. The hawker who “swallows a mouthful of dust” and the carrot peddler who “idly toys with his little knife,” suggests the hardship of making a living on the deserted street and affirms and adds to the bleakness of the scene. These peddlers, who are sweating for their survival, form a contrast with the man who “strolls casually” with a bird cage, a typical symbol of the culture of leisure in Beijing. The disparity between these two groups signifies the obvious social divisions at the time.

If we stop only here, we may feel that socioeconomic concern is the main theme of the poem, which, like a snapshot, displays various lives across different social strata. However, starting from line 9, the poem reaches a deeper level of meaning through another set of juxtapositions. The subjects are no longer people with a specific job or in a tangible social status, but are generalized as “some.” These are people of different ages, in different stages of life, and in different states. But they also coexist as a part of the immense, all-inclusive
universe with its multiplicities of realities. The juxtaposition of these myriad lives touches on a more universal and metaphysical theme of the meaning of existence. A downbeat tone is created through the words and images of “sighing,” “dream talking,” “white hair,” and “setting sun,” which echo with the bleak scene of the deserted street. In this sense, the deserted street, as the general backdrop for the entire poem, much like the T. S. Eliot’s “wasteland,” symbolizes not only the gloomy social economy but also the grim, dreary situation of human existence as a whole in the wake of modernity.

Of particular note is the figure of a brooding young man, whose image is repeated throughout the poem, rhetorically and thematically tying together as well as demarcating the disparate images in the poem. His position is intriguingly ambiguous. Does he take himself as part of the multitude on the deserted street? What is the relationship between the poet and the young man? Are they one and the same, or not? One interpretation could be that all the activities are the object of the gaze of the young man, who stands on the street but outside the sphere of the immediate experience and contemplates the deeper meaning of life. All the images then are seen through his eyes, and his perception is the same as that of the poetic narrator. But the relationship between Bian and the young man could be no more than equivocal. If we accept that they are actually one—that is, Bian himself is the young man—then it reflects Bian Zhilin’s recognition of his own identity as an alienated and transcendent observer of the ordinary people and the external world. We could also see the young man as one of the poetic subjects under Bian’s gaze, his pensive and reflexive image forming a sharp contrast with the other figures, who seem to live an unexamined life. Bian Zhilin, as the poetic narrator, further accentuates the different existential attitudes by constantly shifting his
attention back to the young man through the repeated line “a young man meditates on the deserted street.”

The poetics of depersonalization reflects the tension between the poet and the external reality represented. However obscure the relationship among the author, the poetic narrator, and the young man is in the above poem, there clearly exists a distance, intentional or unintentional, between the observer and the observed, the subjective analysis and the objective world. No matter if it is Bian’s self-alienation from his poetic subjects or the young man’s meditation over the ordinary people on the deserted street, a sense of alienation from the external reality and an effort to grasp the deeper meaning beneath the multifarious surface phenomena pervades the poem.

We might take a step further and see the ambiguous image of the brooding young man as an allegorical figure of a modern poet, who in his/her search for the meaning of existence is paradoxically estranged from external reality. It uncannily anticipates Bian’s later literary efforts, which can be summarized as a lifelong quest for a meaningful and, ideally, harmonious relationship with the outside world.

The sense of alienation and the coexistence of multiple realities, achieved and heightened by the fluid concatenation of disjunctive images, attest to the influences of Symbolism and Modernism, but they also connect to the Daoist and Buddhist teachings of the arbitrary and transitory nature of all human perspectives and experiences, as Michelle Yeh has pointed out. These techniques and themes are further developed in the novel Mountains and Rivers, which foregrounds a relativistic worldview. As my analysis in chapter 3 shows, the defining relativism in the novel as well as Bian’s life philosophy is rightly born

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46 Michelle Yeh, Modern Chinese Poetry: Theory and Practice Since 1917, 122.
out of Bian’s selective receptivity and creative assimilation of Chinese and Western literary and philosophical traditions.

It is no wonder that a major theme of Bian’s prewar poetry is relativism as a principle of the phenomenal world. For example, in his most famous poem “Fragment” (Duanzhang 断章):

You are standing on the bridge enjoying the scenery; 你站在橋上看風景，
The sightseer is watching you from the balcony. 看風景的人在樓上看你。

The bright moon adorns your window; 明月裝飾了你的窗子，
You adorn someone else’s dream.你裝飾了別人的夢。
October 1935 10 月 (1935 年)47

The poem, comprising only four lines, is quite short, but as always, full of connotations. It deals mainly with the relativity of human perspectives. The positions of subject and object are not fixed and static but can be interchangeable. A person looking at scenery could also be a part of the scenery others are watching at the same time. While one is the subject in the scene where the moon adorns one’s window, he/she could also be the object being dreamed by others.

The same relativistic worldview is also demonstrated in the following poem:

Casting 投

Solitary on the hillside, 獨自在山坡上，
I see you, Child, 小孩兒，我見你
Singing as you stroll, 一邊走一邊唱，
Weary of all else, casually 全都厭了，隨地
Pick up a stone from the ground 撿一塊小石頭
And cast it into the valley. 向山谷中一投。

47 All the following translations of poetry, essays, and fictional passages are my own, unless otherwise noted.
Someone might，说不定有人，
Child, once for a whim, 小孩兒，曾把你
(with neither love nor hate), （也不愛也不憎）
Pick you up 很好玩的撿起，
And like a stone 像一塊小石頭
Cast you into this earthly world. 向塵世一投。
1930-1931 1930-1931 年

A man is cast into the world like a stone by a metaphysically prior and larger being. The poem, structured again by a pair of relativistic perspectives, further touches upon the theme of man’s place in the universe and the relativity of his fortuitous existence.48

Conclusion

All the major themes and techniques of Bian Zhilin’s prewar poetry will appear again in the novel Mountains and Rivers. In a similar way, the relativistic worldview in the novel is rightly born out of Bian’s selective receptivity and creative assimilation of the Chinese and Western traditions. It also informs his ambivalent attitude towards many large issues like war, intellectual independence, and political commitment. As we can see later on in my analysis, what he seeks and upholds is a middle way between extremes as a response to a constantly changing world.

If the relatively peaceful 1930s allowed the poet the luxury of being spiritually lost in confusion and futile meditation, the Second Sino-Japanese War immediately threw him into physical exile, making his intellectual quest for a union with the external world a very real and poignant necessity.

48 A more detailed analysis of the two poems can be found in Michelle Yeh, Modern Chinese Poetry: Theory and Practice Since 1917, 122-124.
Chapter 2: Yan’an Poetry and Its Dilemma

In this chapter, I discuss Bian Zhilin’s wartime poetry conceived during his stay in Yan’an. A close look at his wartime poetry is necessary and important because the creation of the novel *Mountains and Rivers* to some extent is a response to the dilemma Bian confronted in writing the poetry. The twenty poems he wrote at the time were later published into a single collection called *Letters of Comfort* (Weilao xin ji 慰勞信集, hereafter *Letters*) in Kunming 1940. They were intended to be letters of consolation to people participating in various forms of service on the war front. A comparison between these poems and his prewar poems reveals some striking changes that make *Letters* not very different from the wartime mainstream of propaganda poetry. However, through examining the formal incongruities of the texts, as both letters and poems, and the fluid narrator altering among “I,” “you,” and “we,” I argue that Bian was struggling with the dilemma between assuming the new mission of a propagandist and maintaining the identity of a serious writer. His attempts to engage in the revolution as an active agent of history through poetry is finally deconstructed by the poetry itself.

Journey to Yan’an
Bian Zhilin was one of those writers who went to Yan’an, the Communist base in the northwest China, at its burgeoning stage during the early years of the war. The famous female writer Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904-1986), for example, went there in 1936 and became a cadre and leading activist. Xiao Jun 蕭軍 (1907-1988), Xiao Hong 蕭紅 (1911-1942), and Ai Qing 艾青 (1910-1996) arrived in January 1938. On August 14, 1938, Bian took a bus from Chengdu in the southwest hinterland and headed north with two colleagues from Sichuan University—He Qifang 何其芳 and Sha Ding 沙汀 (1904-1992).

Trekking to Yan’an was a growing fashion at the time, especially among young people and revolutionary intellectuals. The town soon rose to be the “Mecca of the young,” as Bonnie McDougall refers to it. After the United Front was hammered out between the GMD and the Communists later that year, the Communists could set up contact points and working stations in the Nationalists-controlled interior for party propaganda and mobilization. Young students, writers, and artists in the GMD territories were encouraged to visit Yan’an. This trend was further fueled by the All-China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists (Zhongguo quanguo wenyijie kangdi xiehui 中國全國文藝界抗敵協會, aka wenxie 文協) founded on March, 27, 1938. Launching a series of campaigns under the slogan “Literature

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49 For a description of the historical Yan’an and how a control of political discourse grew into shape there, see David Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao’s Republic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), chapter 6 and 7.
50 The three reached Xi’an by bus in the north after an arduous journey (Edgar Snow went the same way as they did, and recorded the hazards along the road) in *Scorched Earth*. They switched to an express train and finally arrived at Yan’an on August 31rd by a bus that was transporting a group of Eighth Route Army soldiers.
to the countryside! Literature joins the army!”; they instigated a craze among writers and artists to go to the frontlines to witness and write about the war.

Yan’an opened new schools to absorb and assimilate the newcomers. By mid 1938, several major schools had been established: the Anti-Japanese Resistance Military University (aka KangDa抗大), the North Shaanxi Public School (Shaanbei gongxue 陝北公學), and the Lu Xun Academy of Arts (aka LuYi 魯藝). The last was newly founded in April with the purpose of training cultural workers and cadres for the party. With the continuous influx of young students and intellectuals, the academy soon resembled a sizable university.

According to statistics, from 1937 to 1939, there were 20,124 students registered at KangDa, 12,535 of whom were from areas outside of Yan’an.53

While many of the “pilgrims” were passionate for or at least sympathetic to the revolutionary cause and the grand vision of China’s future delineated by the Communists, some were simply curious about the base areas and the guerrilla war. Bian Zhilin was one of the latter group. In his own words, the main purpose of his going to Yan’an was “to obtain some knowledge” (wei de xiang zhidao 為的想知道).54

Among the three, He Qifang was the most enthusiastic about the trip,55 and he would later undergo the most dramatic change from an individualist to a socialist cum party bureaucrat.56 Sha Ding, who had joined the Communist Party a decade earlier, acted as the

53 Li Zhimin 李志民, Geming ronglu 革命熔爐 (The melting pot of revolution) (Beijing:Zhongyang dangshi ziliao chubanshe, 1985), 29-56.
54 Preface to The 772nd regiment in the T’ai Hang Mountain Area, BZWJ, 1: 397.
55 Bian Zhilin wrote in an article that it was He Qifang’s initiative to visit Yan’an and it was He who encouraged him to accompany him. BZWJ, 2:290.
56 The transformation is so rapid to the degree that Bonnie McDougall feels it is difficult to reconcile the two phases of He Qifang’s life in one context. See Bonnie McDougall, Paths in Dreams: Selected Prose and Poetry of Ho Ch’i-fang, 28.
liaison between the group and Party headquarters. Another difference between Bian Zhilin and his companions is that at the very beginning Bian only intended to stay in Yan’an temporarily and then return to the interior when he felt the time was right.

Yan’an, a revolutionary simulacrum, amazed the three with its bustling streets and vitality. As He Qifang describes it in “I Sing of Yan’an” (Wo gechang Yan’an 我歌唱延安), “the town gate of Yenan [Yan’an] stands open all day long, and all day long young people from every direction enter through this gate, bearing their luggage and fiery hopes.” His “singing” eventually turns into a paean of praise: “An atmosphere of freedom. An atmosphere of tolerance. An atmosphere of joy….all day long we work, we smile, and we sing.” Like his friend, Bian Zhilin was also touched immediately as he entered the town gate by the scene of “many young men and women going in and out and singing freely as they walk along.” He was particularly moved by the kind of religious piety these young people had shown in coming to Yan’an, some by bus, but more on foot: “Countless young men and women, passionate for the War of Resistance, adhering to justice and seeking truth, now are shouldering their luggage and trudging over hill and dale along the road with enthusiasm and vigor.”

Bian Zhilin and his friends only stayed in Yan’an for a short while. Their original and ultimate plan was to visit the frontline. The plan received approval from Mao Zedong in a personal meeting in September, as the CCP was organizing artists and writers into literature

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57 David Apter and Tony Saich, Revolutionary Discourse in Mao’s Republic, 141.
58 He Qifang, “I Sing of Yanan,” in Bonnie McDougall, Paths in Dreams: Selected Prose and Poetry of Ho Ch’i-fang, 147.
59 Ibid, 148, 152.
60 Ibid.
61 BZWJ, 2:111.
and arts corps (wenyi gongzuotuan 文藝工作團) and sending them to visit guerrilla bases. The principle function of these corps was to engage in propaganda work and mobilize the army and the populace at the front for the CCP. For example, the Northwest Front Service Corps (Xibei zhandi fuwutuan 西北戰地服務團) led by Ding Ling performed patriotic dramas, composed and taught war-theme songs, and printed anti-Japanese slogans wherever they went.\(^{62}\)

The following months were charged with excitement and busy preparations for the journey to the front. The three changed into the uniform of the Eighth Route Army, lived in a cave home (yaodong 窪洞), and attended lectures in the Party universities. Bian Zhilin learned how to ride a horse. He also read *On Protracted War* (Lun chijiu zhan 論持久戰) by Mao Zedong and *The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (*Bolsheviks*) (Liangong dangshi 聯共黨史), a history textbook on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Finally, on November 12, 1938, Bian Zhilin set out to the front as a member of a literature and arts corps. The group went to the southwest of Shanxi province, an area bordering Hebei to the east and Henan to the south. It is frequently referred to as Jin dongnan 晋东南 (the southeast of Shanxi) in Bian’s works (Jin is the classical name for Shanxi).

Seven days later, He Qifang and Sha Ding went northeast to Hebei province with the 120th Division under the command of He Long 賀龍 (1896-1969). There He Qifang would bid farewell to his former self—that “lonely adult who indulged himself in reminiscence of

childhood and legends”—and turn his pen to patriotic poetry and essays. Sha Ding, completely spellbound by the charm of He Long, would devote most of his time to writing a biography of the charismatic leader.

Bian Zhilin lived with the 772th regiment 七七二團, a branch of the 129th Division of the Eighth Route Army led by Chen Geng 陳賡 (1903-1961), for most of his time at the front. After Taiyuan fell to the Japanese in the winter of 1937, the enemy occupied the major cities and railroads. The Communists in the mountainous countryside took the strategy of guerrilla warfare, which avoided direct, head-on confrontation with the enemy. It required the regiment to be constantly on the march, usually in search of a strategic point of attack, sometimes to shelter from enemy attack. To avoid air bombing and also to ambush the enemy in surprise attacks, most of the marching had to be done at night. Walking an entire night for sixty miles was not uncommon for the army.

Writing about the masses and writing for the masses by this time had become a mainstream in the wartime literary scene.⁶³ The situation in Yan’an and other Communist areas was somewhat more complicated. “Masses,” to use Mao Zedong’s categories, consisted of peasants, workers, and soldiers who were bound together through the ingenious leadership of the Communist Party. It became a Party directive to write a certain kind of literature, of which the “Chinese masses are fond,” after Mao Zedong’s speech “The Position of the Chinese Communist Party in the National Struggle” (Zhongguo gongchandang zai minzu zhanzhengzhong de diwei 中國共產黨在民族戰爭中的地位) in 1938. In doing so, “foreign-slanted pedantry and obscurantism must be abolished, hollow and abstract clichés must be

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discouraged, and dogmatism must be arrested” to finally achieve a “fresh and vivid Chinese style and manner.”

Mao’s speech inaugurated a debate on “national forms.” While there were different attitudes toward the use of national forms in literary works, the term was interpreted by Mao’s cultural apparatchiks as literature that abandons all Western influences and promotes indigenous literary and art forms such as folklore, storytelling, *yangge* (rice sprout songs), etc.

Mao’s exhortation spawned a crop of literature catering to the taste of the less educated strata of society. It collectively featured a marked degree of colloquialism in language and the awakened masses as a heroic force in the war in content. Representative works include poems by Ai Qing and fiction by Zhao Shuli 趙樹理 (1906-1970). Many writers, especially those coming to Yan’an from other areas, devoted themselves to propaganda for the war effort such that their works from this time are dramatically different from that of previous stages in their lives.

But this transformation should not be taken as an easy one or without anxiety or qualms, at least for Bian Zhilin.

**Letters of Comfort: A Dilemma**

The poetry in *Letters of Comfort* signals a new development in Bian Zhilin’s poetics. First, the subject matter in these twenty poems shifts from the previously thoughtful, introspective, and individualistic “I” to an individual or collective others addressed as “you”

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66 He Qifang is a typical example. See Bonnie McDougall, *Paths in Dreams: Selected Prose and Poetry of Ho Ch'i-fang*.
(both single and plural) and “we.” This can be easily seen in the titles of these poems. For example, “To One Who Has Robbed the Enemy of His Horse” (Gei yiwei duo ma de yongshi 給一位奪馬的勇士) is written to a soldier who in the face of a rain of bullets goes to the enemy side and robs a horse. “To a Peasant Who ‘Scorched Earth’ and Deserted His House” (Gei shixing kongshiqingye de nonming 給實行空室清野的農民) describes a peasant who scorches earth to wipe out anything that can be in the service of the coming enemy. “To The Young Pioneers in the Northwest” (Gei xibei de qingnian kaihuangzhe 給西北的青年開荒者) is written to young people who cultivate wasteland in the Communist border regions.67 “To All the Weary Laborers” (Gei yiqie laokuzhe 給一切勞苦者) is to the collective of people fighting in various forms of war service. A noteworthy point is that these people and their feats are not fabricated from Bian’s imagination, but are “real people and events” (zhenren zhenshi 真人真事).68 They signal a growing awareness of a larger social collective and a move away from lyrical, romantic individualism to revolutionary realism. In Bian Zhilin’s own words, he is now “facing the vast masses of people and writing in a nationwide fever about state affairs and big events.”69

Second, the tone and style of Letters are no longer the dreamlike and metaphysical quality of his earlier poems, but has shifted to the uplifting and lucid, with a larger proportion

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67 As the war ground on, the economy in the base areas was in decline. Severe destitution began to take its toll towards the end of 1939. To meet the pressing needs of waging guerilla wars as well as daily life, the Communists launched large-scale production campaigns. People were mobilized to “farm as long as they fight.” (一邊打仗一邊生產) The northwest China, where Communists bases are located, is mountainous and mostly sterile, “a wasteland” in real sense. Therefore, the activity of farming is termed vividly as “squeezing fat out of a deserted and barren land.” See Tetsuya Kataoka, Resistance and Revolution in China: The Communists and the Second United Front (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 234. Also James Mulvenon, Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise and Fall of the Chinese Military-business Complex, 1978-1998 (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 25-26.
68 BZWJ, 2:452
69 “Preface to Prefect to A Historical Record of the Carving of Insects” 《雕蟲紀歷》自序, in BZWJ, 2:451.
of colloquial words and free verse forms. This change resulted from and is concomitant with the aforementioned historical exigency of “facing the vast masses of people.” To better mobilize the masses, most of whom lacked education, most patriotic poetry makes use of a simple and colloquial language. For example, Tian Jian’s 田間 (1916—1985) wartime poetry usually comprises short phrases, not full sentences, not only easier for readers to understand and memorize, but also creating a fast-paced, uplifting aural cadence.⁷⁰

Easily understandable, or in Haft’s words, “overly blunt in its obviously of implication,”⁷¹ is a distinct characteristic running through all twenty of the poems in Letters. Obviously Bian Zhilin was making a conscious effort to write his poems in a way that could be intelligible to a less educated, but broad readership. A glance at the titles of each poem suffices to illustrate this: “To a Peasant Who ‘Scorched Earth’ and Deserted His House,” “To a Woman Who Broke the Bicycle” (to prevent a young man from running away before the enemy) (Gei yiwei ciche de guiang 給一位刺車的姑娘), “To a Prostitute Who ‘Offered Gold’ for War Funds” (Gei yiwei xianjing de maixiaozhe 給一位獻金的賣笑者),⁷² etc.

The subject matter of the nameless collective instead of an individualistic “I” and the high percentage of simple language make Letters very close, at least on the surface, to wartime mainstream literature about guerrilla warfare or Communist revolution.⁷³ They signify the author’s tacit recognition of the mission a poet is expected to accomplish as

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⁷⁰ For example, “Poster Poems for the Street,” a piece written by Tian Jian reads “Break up the Enemy’s Railroad! / This evening—/ That is the time/ We go/ To destroy the railroad of the foe!/ Bravely/ Pull up more/ Nails!/ Break up several more/ Rails!/ They assure us/ That the man who holds the red light/ Will not report us tonight. See Mary Katharine Willmott and Yu Teh-chi, “The War in Chinese Poetry,” in Asia (New York), 43.7 (July 1943), 432.
⁷¹ Lloyd Haft, Pien Chih-lin: A Study in Modern Chinese Poetry, 66
⁷² This poem was deducted from the collection when reprinted in 1979.
⁷³ C. T. Hsia, A History of Modern Chinese Fiction, 306
he/she assumes the role of propagandist in the guerilla base, where real fighting is everywhere.

For us to better see the differences between Bian’s wartime poetry and his prewar poetry, I present a detailed comparison between two poems, the first one from 1930 and the second one written in 1939, two years after the beginning of the war:

The Record\textsuperscript{74}  \hspace{1cm} 記錄

Now it is once again time when the lamps are lit. 現在又到了燈亮的時候，
I drink a mouthful of drowsiness in the street, 我喝了一口街上的朦朧，
Yet seem to be awakened; stretching, 倒像清醒了，伸一個懶腰，
Shaking off a heavy load of daydreams. 挲脫了怪沈重的白日夢。

From afar comes the cry, “Evening Paper!” 從遠處送來了一聲“晚報！”
I am startled, footsteps in disarray, 我吃了一驚，移亂了腳步，
And throw up a crumpled scrap of paper: 丢了開一片皺折的白紙；
Off with you, record of my entire day! 去吧，我這一整天的記錄！

1930                          1930年

To The Young Pioneers in the Northwest\textsuperscript{75}  \hspace{1cm} 給西北的青年開荒者

You have arranged a rendezvous with the rising sun: 你們與朝陽約會——
Let’s meet on the hilltop three miles from here. 十裏外山頂上相見。
Piercing through the lingering night a troop of hoes, 穿出殘夜的锄頭隊
Racing to be the first to greet the dawn. 爭光明一齊登先。

Squeezing fat out of a deserted and barren land, 荒瘠裏要擠出膏腴，
You demand that the yellow earth produce grains. 你們向黄土地要糧食。With their
winter clothes of blackened grass torn open 翻開了暗草的冬衣，
One thousand mountains all change their color. 一千個山頭都變色。

You arrange the individual colors and lines of each crop 把莊稼個別的姿容
Into the over-all design of the fields. 排入田疇的圖案，
You observe nature’s ways to enrich nature 你們將用了人工

\textsuperscript{74} Translation is my own. The original text is in \textit{BZWJ}, 1:34.
\textsuperscript{75} Translation from Kai-yu Hsu, slightly modified. See Hsu Kai-yu, \textit{Twentieth Century Chinese Poetry, An Anthology}, 159-160.
With the fullest force man can muster.

To let you taste a bit of sweetness in the midst of hardships 讓你們苦中嘗嘗甜
The earth yields flavorful grassroots, yah! 土裏有甘草根，真好！
All hands, once so tender, have grown calloused，嫩手也生了硬繭，
When they hold the other hands, girls might scream. 一拉手，女孩子會直叫。

No need to worry that the hoe is too primitive，不怕鋤頭太原始，
Step by step it will open up a tomorrow. 一步步開出明天。
You face the real and the present, and 你們面向現實，
“Hope” thus acquires many smiling faces. “希望”有那麼多笑臉！
November 27 (1939) 11月27日（1939年）

The differences between the two poems are obvious in three aspects. First, the poetic subject in “The Record” is the narrative “I,” presumably the author himself, whereas that of the second poem is the plural “you,” a group of youths farming in the base area as a contribution to the war effort. Not only do the poetic foci diverge, the spiritual outlooks of these poetic subjects are also different. In the first poem, “I” lingers alone in the street in a dreamlike manner until the night, a time again for dreaming. However, the young pioneers in the second poem are brimming with vitality, getting up early from dreams to face “the real and the present”—reclaiming the wasteland in northwest China.

Second, though both of the poems are lucid in language, the second is less metaphysical and instead characterized by linguistic straightforwardness and indexical concreteness. The first poem plays with the symbolic paradox of day/dreaming and night/sobriety. In the real world, night is the time for dreaming and the day is for staying awake. However, in Bian’s poem, the objective, normal sequence is subverted. The lightened street lamps at night wake “me” up from daydreams. The contrast between the dreamlike state in daytime and the nocturnal sobriety questions the nature of literary imagination as well as the truth of reality:
The awake and bustling world in the day may be no more real than a dream in the eyes of a poet. The cry of a newspapers vendor symbolizes the incursion of the outside world into the previously self-contained interiority of the subject. The incursion wakes him fully up—it breaks the illusion and forces him to face reality. It also disrupts the rhythm of his footsteps, which perhaps symbolize the ordinary pace of his life. The first stanza of the poem thus indicates the ambiguity of literary representation: on the one hand, it is sharp in its perception of the illusiveness and of the outside world; on the other hand, it encloses the subject in an imaginative world separated from reality.

The second stanza of the first poem further demonstrates the paradox of literary representation and creation. At the end of the second stanza, it turns out that what drags the subject into the dreamlike state is the activity of recording his daytime. It is the practice of writing itself, the act of literary creation, that should yield meanings from the meaningless haze of life but that pulls the poet instead into an unrealistic and dreamy state. At last the poet decides to discard his literary work and return to the real world, which reveals the subject’s doubt about the truth and redeeming power of literary representation.

This metaphysical layer is missing in the second poem, which is straightforward and even “blunt” in its meaning. In the first poem, a sense of alienation, distance, and meaninglessness, typical themes of modernist literature and evocative of Baudelaire’s observations of the streets of Paris, underlie the lines. In the second poem, the young pioneers, their reclaiming activities and the rising sun, represent, in almost clichéd fashion, new life, vitality, and hope. The “one thousand mountains” and “many smiling faces” at the end of the poem, while a metaphor for hope, obviously signify collective human force and its
transformative power. All in all, the poem is simple and lucid, without the paradoxes or metaphysical inquiries of the first poem.

Third, connected with the second point, the relationship between the subject and reality is intriguingly different in the two poems. This can be best explained through the contrasting roles the image of night plays in them. Whereas the coming of night blurs the boundary between dreaming and reality in the first poem, it is dispelled and “pierced through” by the rising sun in the second poem, marking the beginning of a brand new day. The liminal and drowsy state in the first poem is replaced by a brisk and light-hearted mood, displayed by a series of vigorous upward movements, such as racing to the hilltop, tearing open the grass, arranging crops into different designs. Whereas reality in the former poem is an elusive and illusory entity, constantly threatening the wholeness of the poet’s subjective interiority, in the latter poem it is clear before one’s eyes and malleable in one’s hands: the hoe is primitive, the land is barren, the labor is strenuous, but a bright future is foreseeable with the hardships overcome. The external world is thus conquered, transformed, and befriended. Whereas the meaning of life, mediated by artistic representation, is dubious and opaque in the former, in the latter it is finally found in physical labor, through which human souls as well as nature itself can be illuminated.

On the surface, these changes make Bian Zhilin’s wartime poetry appear very much like the propaganda poems popular in the day. Yet beneath the facade, something ambiguous lurks. As Carolyn Fitzgerald and many other scholars on wartime culture have observed, writers and artists were not “necessarily successful in producing propaganda even when they
set out to do so.” At least two signs in *Letters* inform us of Bian’s struggle between the identity as a serious, objective writer and as a patriotic propagandist involved in the war.

First, the formal incongruity of the texts in *Letters* as both letters and poems. As we have already seen from the titles of these poems, they all bear the same structure of “to someone”; each letter is addressed to an individual or a group contributing in various ways to the war effort at the front. The composing of these poems was initially an immediate response to a campaign launched by the All-China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists to collect letters of comfort (*weilao xin* 慰勞信) to raise the morale of people. Most of the letters were written in the format of real letters and speak directly to the person(s) they were meant to be sent to. But Bian Zhilin is unique in that he wrote the letters in the form of poetry. In the winter of 1938, Bian Zhilin wrote the first two poems “To a Sharpshooter at the Front” (*Gei qianfang de shenqiangshou* 給前方的神槍手) and “To the Workers in the Airdrome” (*Gei xiuju jichang de gongren* 給修築機場的工人), and continued in the same form of poetry-letter for the remaining eighteen poems. Among the poets of his generation, he was the only one to engage in this kind of bold experiment.

The practice immediately gives the poems a bifurcated and paradoxical appearance. As letters, they are intended to be read by the people Bian addresses directly in the title with the personal pronoun “you,” such as a peasant, a sharpshooter, a group of youths, etc. But at the same time their poetic form and modernist style, reminiscent of his prewar poetry, lend them a quality that is not readily grasped by the masses and is perhaps more attuned to elite ears.

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Take, for example, “To All the Weary Laborers” (Gei yiqie laokuzhe 給一切勞苦者), which I quote in part below:

Ah! Just occasionally remembering several hands, 啊! 只偶然想起了幾只手,  
I was like pulling up a long chain, 我就像拉起了一串長鈴,  
One hand holding another, with no end, 一只牽一只，就沒有盡頭,  
Male and female, old and young, even backs of hands, 男女老少的，甚至於背面  
Hairy, with hoe, shovel, 多汗毛的，拿著鋤頭、鐵鍬、  
Gun barrel, needle and thread…ad infinitum. 槍桿、針線……以至於無限。  
Infinite number of faces, infinite kind of patterns! 無限的面孔，無限的花樣！  
Destroying roads and repairing roads, dismantling bridges and building bridges… 破路與修路，拆橋與造橋………  
Different directions in one direction!... 不同的方向裹同一個方向！……  
All weary laborers. For your hard work 一切勞苦者。為你們的辛苦  
I hold out meanings connected with affections. 我捧出意義連帶著感情。

The first stanza here is a lyrical reminiscence of “all the weary laborers,” through the synecdoche of hands. Bian Zhilin employs symbols and juxtaposition of discursive images, two techniques typical of the prewar Bian Zhilin, in his description of the multitude of laborers. Each different image of hands represents a different person with a different identity and background. The juxtaposition and concatenation of the hand images connect a heterogeneous multitude of people: male and female, old and young, who are holding hoe, shovel, gun barrel, needle and thread, ad infinitum, which anticipates the second stanza. The oxymoron of “different directions in one direction” in the second stanza indicates the essential unity underlying apparently disparate things. Although on the surface each individual is distinct, each exertion dissimilar, and although sometimes the actions described

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77 BZWJ, 1:109-110
are contrastive or opposite, such as destroying and repairing roads, they are integrated into the cardinal “one direction,” which one might interpret as fighting in solidarity for national sovereignty. Thus the poem creates a panoramic view of the Chinese fighting together in the war effort. The idea of the interconnectedness among seemingly disparate things resonates both with the Chinese tradition, especially Daoism, and with Western poetics, primarily Symbolism and Modernism.  

The sophisticated style and techniques of the poem reveal Bian Zhilin’s embedded view of poetry as art that requires a high level of craftsmanship not attainable by everyone. As Wang Pu 王璞 has pointed out, the technical refinement of his poetry places Bian Zhilin in an awkward situation among the soldiers because it reveals his self-conscious identity as a unique and independent poet, rather than simply a devoted propagandist.  

Bian Zhilin’s belief in poetry as a carefully constructed work of art also makes his poetry distinct among the deluge of wartime writings, most of which are crude propaganda and abstract expressions of patriotic feelings. It further implicates the anxieties and inner conflicts of the author about literature as a propaganda tool at the expense of artistic refinement.

Another sign of Bian’s identity struggle is the poetic subject’s unstable deictic relationship with the populace. The narrator is constantly drifting among different personal pronouns “I,” “you,” and “we,” indicating Bian’s grappling with his displacement and

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78 For a detailed discussion of this complicated cultural resonance, see Michelle Yeh, Modern Chinese Poetry: Theory and Practice Since 1917, chapter 5.

wavering among variant roles in wartime society. For example, in the quoted part of “To the People Who Lifted Rails” (Gei tai ganggui de qunzhong 給抬鋼軌的群眾) below:

We have to clean the earth with swords and guns, 我們得用刀槍把大地打掃。
Right, when the earth is cleared up, 是啊，大地都收拾清淨，
We will transform the weapons, 我們又再叫武器變形，
Pave on the ground vertically and horizontally more rails. 在地上縱橫多鋪些鋼軌。
We will perhaps meet each other on a train, 我們也許會在火車裏相會，
I will say to you: “You’ve gone through hardships!” 我就向你們道一聲 “辛苦！” 80

The narrator merges with the public in the collective voice “we” in the first four lines. Again, Bian does not describe directly the fighting with the Japanese enemy and the final victory, but instead uses metaphors. The “cleaning” with swords and guns indexes national salvation; the “cleared” earth represents recovered sovereignty. “We” are the people who lift up the rails in order to disrupt the train line under the enemy’s control, a common strategy in guerrilla warfare. 81 However, in the last two lines, where the author imagines a future scene on a train after victory, the connotation of “we” suddenly and subtly splits into “you” (plural) and I, which are distinct and separate from each other. The bifurcation not only bespeaks a distance between the poetic narrator and the collective others represented by “you,” but also implies a loss of belongingness and a potential power imbalance between the two parties. Altogether, the effects brought by the newly emerging “you” and “I” works against all the closeness and harmony suggested by the rhetoric of a unitary, monolithic “we.”

This unstable deictic relationship not only exists within a poem, if we enlarge our examination to look in between different poems, we will encounter the same fluidity in the

80 BZWJ, 1:93.
81 The same topic also appears in the previously cited poem of Tian Jian.
collection as a whole. In the poem “To All the Weary Laborers” I just cited, the narrator is a detached poet standing outside of the ensemble of “all laborers.” He is not a member of this collective, but an outsider, a distanced observer. Here’s another example, titled “To a General of an Army” (Gei yiwei jituanjun zongsiling 給一位集團軍總司令),

You won’t be shocked, and nothing happens:
你不會受驚的，也無大礙：
Only your leather coat, blanket, and cotton uniform were burned.
只燒了皮大衣、毯子、棉軍服
However, these are all you have,
然而這是你全部的長物，
No wonder your subordinates joke about providing “disaster relief.”
難怪你部下笑話著“救災”。

Please forgive our care which is overwhelmingly warmhearted—
請原諒愛護到過火的熱心—
We, the masses, would rather think like this,
我們，民眾，寧願意這樣想，
Look at how long the icicles are under your roof!
看你的簷頭的冰筍有多長！

The letter/poem is written to a general, whom the masses admire and care about in an “overwhelmingly warmhearted” way. An accidental fire caused by a match burns his “leather coat, blanket, and cotton uniform.” The damage is small but to the general who lives a simple and frugal life, it is a “disaster.” Here again, the narrator changes into and speaks as a member of the totality called “the masses” (minzhong 民眾).

The formal incongruity of the Letters as poems, and the shifting voices of the poetic narrator among “you,” “we,” and “I,” reveal Bian’s bifurcated appeals to both represent and promote, to poeticize and propagandize, an independent intellectual writing with artistic

82 BZWJ, 1:103.
autonomy and a propagandist penning Party doctrine. It reflects on a deep level his displacement by the war and his efforts to “negotiate a subject position”\textsuperscript{83} for himself among the rapid-shifting roles for intellectuals in the flux of nationalist discourse.

Intriguingly, Bian’s wartime poetry received contradictory reactions among critics, further demonstrating the awkward position of the poet and his identity struggles. While his friend Chen Shih-Hsiang describes the poetry as full of “poetic fancies” and “magic charm,”\textsuperscript{84} liberal critics like C.T. Hsia, who hold strict criteria for the independence of literature from politics, criticize his leftist turn.\textsuperscript{85} Ironically, the poet Mu Dan, who was Bian’s student, attacked him for not being representative enough of the age. Appearing in Da Gongbao 大公報 right after the publication of Letters of Comfort in 1940, Mu Dan’s article “Letters of Comfort, beginning from Fish Eyes” (Weilaoxin ji—cong yumu ji shuoqi 憲勞信集—從魚目集說起)\textsuperscript{86} remarks pungently that these poems are “a failure.”\textsuperscript{87} They are “too calm,” anemic in terms of “new lyricism.”\textsuperscript{88} “New lyricism” is what Mu Dan thinks contemporary Chinese poetry needs most to keep pace with the popular feelings of the day. “In order to create a grand harmony in spirit between poetry and this age, we need a ‘new lyricism.’”… It should fully represent the fighting China, fully represent her vitality, bitterness,
and merriment in the excitement of a new birth.” It should instill a “intense tempo, epic rhythm, and a blithe tone” (強烈的律動，洪大的節奏，歡快的調子) into the new poetry. An ideal example for Mu Dan is Ai Qing’s “The Bugler” (吹號者). In comparison, Bian Zhilin’s poems, though they also focus on the masses and on fighting, are too “witty” (jizhi 機智); they require too much “work of brain nerves” (naoshenjing de yunyong 腦神經的運用) and readers can be moved by them only after some hard thinking. Most critically, one cannot hear “the loud singing of the masses” (qunzhong de hongda de huanchang 群眾的洪大的歡唱) in the sophisticated, elite style.

Mu Dan’s criticism reflects the historical exigencies for a poet in wartime, which favored the patriotic model over the individualistic and rejected any poetry that is understated or restrained in its patriotic enthusiasm. The contradictory reception of Bian’s poetry also reveals the awkward dilemma a serious writer like Bian Zhilin faced in seeking to interact with history in a meaningful and creative way. By changing his subject matter and switching to an uplifting tone, he attempts to reconcile himself with the urgent needs of the immediate situation and to expand the boundaries of his poetic representation. However, the attempt to interact with history in a meaningful way only engenders a deep conflict between being at once an active agent of history and an objective observer.

Conclusion

89 Ibid, 54-55
90 Ibid.
91 An English translation can be found in Eugene Chen Eoyang, Peng Wenlan, and Marilyn Chin trans., Selected Poems of Ai Qing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 72-77.
92 Mu Dan 穆旦, Mu Dan shiwen ji, 2:56.
93 Ibid, 58.
Bian Zhilin’s wartime poetry reveals a paradox: the attempts to engage in the revolution as an active agent of history through poetry is finally deconstructed by poetry itself. In the *Letters*, Bian makes some breakthroughs by adopting techniques commonly seen in war propaganda, such as focusing on the ordinary people and using a highly intelligible, colloquial language. These breakthroughs reflect the poet’s attempt to engage in the war effort and participate in historical development. However, as a poet who insists on the autonomy of art and the independence of thought, he struggled with this new role. The struggle is embodied in the formal incongruity of the texts as both letters and poems, as well as the shifting deictic positions in respect to the masses. They reflect Bian’s efforts to grapple with his displacement in wartime society. In his attempt to synthesize his previously individualistic style and the demands of the nationalist cause, we see the struggle of a modern poet between his identity as an active agent of history and as an objective observer. The dilemma informs the later creation of the novel *Mountains and Rivers*, which is a crystallization of his longtime contemplation on the interrelationship between individual and society, intellectual independence and social engagement, as well as change and un-change.
Chapter 3: Mountains and Rivers: A Spiral Movement

In this chapter I examine Bian Zhilin’s wartime novel Mountains and Rivers as a manifestation of the change and unchanged dialectic. Through close reading of the novel, I argue that the notion of “spiral movement” Bian constructs is a response to his longtime concern, since at least the beginning of the war, with the role of self in the process of historical change. Bian tries to restore a lost harmony between inner autonomy and social engagement that he postulates to be a general, incontrovertible truth in traditional Chinese thought. Bian also tries to prove that artistic commitment does not necessarily imply or effect indifference to society. By tapping into the ancient wisdom of the I Ching, especially the verse “The movement of heaven is full of power. Thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring” (tianxin jian, junzi yi ziqiang buxi 天行健, 君子以自強不息), Bian seeks to arrive at new kind of answer for the Chinese people and humanity as a whole at a moment of particular dehumanizing tendencies. By propagating authenticity, perseverance, and independence, the novel acts as a counterdiscourse to both the leftist and rightist ideologies at a time when the use of culture to mobilize the masses had become the new cultural paradigm in China. On a deeper level, it is also an alternative to both the radical individualist discourse hailed by the May Fourth generation and the revolutionary
collectivism dictated by the CCP, both of which severed the potential for the individual to
link with the world.

Bian Zhilin spent eight years, from 1941 to 1948, writing the novel, and although he
burned the manuscript in the early 1950s, seven chapters had been previously published in
different periodicals and thus survive.94 Luckily, these chapters are from all four books of the
original full novel,95 with two chapters from book one, one from book two, three from book
three, and one from book four. As such, the extant chapters share connective tissue with each
other and provide some clues as to the overall plot line of the novel. However, the fact that
Bian Zhilin did not publish them in the original sequence indicates that each chapter is
somewhat self-contained and more or less representative of the theme of the whole novel.

In analyzing these seven chapters, I try to make clear some important points:

1. The whole design of the novel, from subject-matter, to structure, to style, shows Bian
Zhilin’s obsession with the notion of “spiral movement” (luoxuan de jingxing 螺旋的進行),
which takes ultimate reality as a process of ceaseless and cyclical changes and
transformations. Shaped by the dual forces of change and un-change, the spiral movement is
just a variation of the dialectic of the two in time. Derived from Bian’s interpretation of the I
Ching 易經 verses, “life and growth, or production and reproduction, is the meaning of

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94 The seventh chapter “Yanzi: ren” 雁字: 人 (The Line of Geese: human) was published on Wenzhen congkan
文陣叢刊 (Journal of literary field) in Chongqing, 1943. The sixth chapter “Hai yu paomo” 海與泡沫 (Sea and
foams) was published the same year in November in Guilin on Mingri wenyi 明日文藝 (Literature of
Tomorrow). The fourth chapter “Taolin: jihe hua” 桃林：幾何畫 (Peach-tree grove: geometric picture) was
published in Shanghai in September 1946 on Wenyi fuxing 文藝復興 (Renaissance), edited by Li Jianwu 李健
吾. The third and fifth chapters were published the same year in Shanghai by Guancha 観察 (Observe). The rest
two chapters were published in 1949 in Hong Kong on Xiaoshuo 小說 (Novels) by Zhou Erfu 周而復. See
BZWJ, 1:271. All the remaining chapters are included in the first volume of Bian Zhilin wenji. See BZWJ,
1:261-375.
95 From Bian’s own description in the preface. See BZWJ, 1:264.
change” (sheng sheng zhi wei yi 生生之謂易) and “The movement of heaven is full of power. Thus, the superior man makes himself strong and untiring,” the idea is central to both the I Ching and the novel.

2. Interrelated with the above idea, the novel foregrounds a relativistic worldview in which nothing, except for the Divine/Dao, in the phenomenal world is permanent and absolute; everything is relative and conditioned by change. This is best reflected in the novel’s rejection and transcendence of the binary opposites of the real and the reflected, tradition and modernity, as well as the past and the present.

3. If the relativistic worldview connects with the change aspect of the dialectic, the ideal state of reaching a traditional “unity of the divine and man” (tianren heyi 天人合一) advocated by Bian in the novel corresponds with the un-change aspect, or the Dao. The state reveals the innate divinity of the intellectual and the ability to transform society through the force of his/her cultivated will as actualizing that innate divinity. But as I argue later, the idea itself is not without inner tensions, which are expressed, perhaps unconsciously, through an ambiguous attitude toward the war and the masses in an all-encompassing changing world. Perhaps having perceived the inherent tension of his spiral ideal, Bian develops a theory of “gesture” in the novel. “Gesture” (zi 姿) stands for an ineffable quality in an artistic work through which the inner spirit and the authenticity of the author are revealed. It happens when the content and form are perfectly integrated, when the Dao is fully grasped and revealed in the moment of the integration. Therefore, the authenticity of the author in creation embodied by the “gesture” is endowed with a quality of eternity and can be
transmitted across the boundaries of time, space, and most of all, culture. It is the prescription 
Bian develops for himself, China, and all of humanity.

For the sake of the convenience of analysis, I refer to each chapter according to the order 
it appears in *Bian Zhilin wenji*. For example, the first chapter appearing in the *wenji* will be 
called “chapter one,” though it may not have been the original chapter one in the manuscript 
of the whole novel.

**Spiral Movement**

The novel, first and foremost, is a love story between two young intellectuals, Mei 
Lunnian 梅綸年 and Ji Weiyun 紀未雲, in the early war years from 1938 to 1941. Both were 
students in Peking University before the war. During the war, the male character, Lunnian, is 
driven in exile to the inland and teaches in Chengdu, Kunming, and other places. He also 
goes to the Communist base, Yan’an, and to the front lines as a member of a literary corps to 
experience the war firsthand. The woman, Weiyun, is adept at traditional Chinese painting 
and opera. She also passes through different places to make a living, almost following the 
footsteps of Lunnian, except for Yan’an. The general plotline is composed of their constant 
separations and sporadic reunions during their exile.

For anyone who is familiar with Bian Zhilin’s biography, it is obvious that the novel is a 
transcription of his own life experiences during the war. If we find a kindredship between 
Lunnian and Bian Zhilin himself, the prototype of Weiyun is Zhang Chonghe 張充和 (1914-
2015), Shen Congwen’s 沈從文 sister-in-law. Bian and Zhang first met in 1933 in Beijing 
through Shen Congwen. At that time Bian Zhilin was a recent graduate from Peking
University and Zhang Chonghe had just enrolled. Bian seemed to have had an immediate crush on Zhang. In 1936, he went to visit Zhang in her hometown of Suzhou in Jiangsu Province and stayed there for several days. The two went out on excursions to nearby sites together. It marked a high point in their relationship and also ignited Bian’s poetic passions.

In the following year, he wrote the majority of his best poems, which came to be published in a collection called Decoration (Zhuangshi ji), dedicated, of course, to Zhang Chonghe.

If not for the war, 1937 might just have been a prelude to another beautiful fairy tale with the prince and the princess living happily together. But the war dashed the dream, at least on Bian Zhilin’s side. Soon after the war broke out, Bian went to teach at Sichuan University in Chengdu. Zhang Chonghe came to Chengdu from Suzhou in 1938. Bian Zhilin went on to Yan’an shortly afterward. The two reunited for a short while in Kunming in 1940, when Bian began to teach at the National Southwest Associated University. After that, Zhang Chonghe found a job in Chongqing and left.

Bian Zhilin’s love for Zhang was publicly known among intellectuals at that time. In many different places, Bian referred to Zhang as his “girlfriend.” It is possible that the two had a close relationship for some time but then finally drifted apart, perhaps initiated by

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96 In an article, Bian Zhilin ascribed his northwest journey to the encouragement/ stimulation of his “girlfriend.” See BZWJ, 1: 212-213. Although we are not sure of the specific reason or details, it can be assumed that the Yan’an event may have something to do with his love affair.

97 Xia Ji’an 夏濟安 mentions several times in his diary of this failed love affair and Bian’s suffering from it. See Xia Ji’an 夏濟安, Xia Ji’an riji 夏濟安日記 (The Diary of Xia Ji’an) (Taipei: Shibao wenhua chuban shiye youxian gongsi, 1978), 8,19, 79. Sheng Congwen witnessed and wrote of the young poet’s pathos after Zhang Chonghe left for Chongqing in “Er hei” 二黑. In the essay he directly connects the conception and creation of the novel with the love affair between the two. See Su Wei 蘇蔚, Tianya wandi: ting Zhang Chonghe jiang gushi 天涯晚笛: 聽張充和講故事 (The end of the world and night flute: listen to Zhang Chonghe telling stories) (Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2013),95-104.

98 For example, BZWJ, 1:212-213.
Zhang, for reasons unknown. According to Zhang Chonghe and some of Bian’s close friends, the love was more of a unilateral, unrequited love on Bian Zhilin’s part. The real-life story ended with Zhang Chonghe marrying Hans Frankel (1916-2003), a German-American sinologist noted for his studies of traditional Chinese poetry and literature, in 1948, when Bian Zhilin was burying himself in finishing *Mountains and Rivers* in England. He had been invited as a visiting scholar to Oxford a year earlier. While the newlywed couple moved to the United States the following year, Bian Zhilin returned to Beijing, now hectically preparing for a brave new world.

Though it resembles an autobiography, I read the novel as fiction, which has at its core an imaginistic quality. In the novel, Lunnian and Weiyun are conceptualized respectively as the male and female embodiment of the ideal personality of an intellectual. Borrowing the voice of Liao Xuzhou 廖虛舟, their philosophy teacher in Peking University before the war and who has now fled to Wuhan, the author expresses his expectation of the two main characters:

“Please forgive me for taking advantage of my old age. I want to encourage you to make concerted efforts to realize your self-value and fulfill your position in eternity. I take you two as one of the manifestations of the Dao… ‘The movement of heaven is full of power,’ it bespeaks a continuous quest for perfection. (You see I am truly not a Buddhist. I am only using the ethereality of Buddhist thought to clear up the solidity of my Confucian mind.) Right, there is a moment of eternity within every minute of endeavors—a phase of crystallization enters into the next phase of crystallization. This is Dao. This is Progress.”

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100 *BZWJ*, 1: 275-276.
“The movement of heaven is full of power” comes from the Xiangzhuan 象傳 section of the I Ching, a seminal book of traditional Chinese thought. The book marks an integration of Confucian and Daoist teachings and exerted a great influence on Chinese cultural sensibility over the millennia.¹⁰¹ The verse is a commentary on the first hexagram, “Qian” 乾, whose image comprises a doubling of a primary trigram “Qian.”¹⁰² It signifies unlimited strength, firmness, creativity, and unrestricted power, and its cosmological symbol is heaven. The full text reads: “The movement of heaven is full of power. Thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring” (天行健, 君子以自強不息).

In the I Ching’s philosophical construction, the human world is parallel with the natural world, and both are subject to change. Change is the core of the whole book and represents the absolute principle of the cosmos. It penetrates all things and the constancy of change itself is, paradoxically, changeless.¹⁰³ Change is possible because of the inherent bipolarity of all things, like the complementarity and contradiction between yin 陰 and yang 阳.¹⁰⁴ As heaven moves ceaselessly, a junzi (superior man), who in the I Ching represents a morally firm and excellent person, should constantly be transformed in order to give actuality to the way of the universe—the Dao.¹⁰⁵ The movement inherent in the constant change symbolized

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¹⁰¹ Richard J. Smith, Fathoming the Cosmos and Ordering the World: The Yijing (I Ching, or Classic of Changes) and Its Evolution in China (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

¹⁰² Hexagrams with a doubling of a primary trigram are given the same name as the trigram. See Richard Wilhelm’s discussion of the doubling in Richard Wilhelm, Cary Baynes, The I Ching or Book of Changes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 373.

¹⁰³ “The paradox of change is that change contains within itself its own opposite meaning: fixedness or unchanging nature.” Jung Young Lee, Embracing Change: Postmodern Interpretations of the I Ching from a Christian Perspective (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1994), 44.

¹⁰⁴ For a better understanding, see Richard Wilhelm, Cary Baynes, The I Ching or Book of Changes, and Jung Young Lee, Embracing Change, chapter 2.

¹⁰⁵ As Lee has explained, The Dao or the Way is the ultimate principle of the changing process. It can be used interchangeably with change but is also the background of change. It can be regarded as nonbeing or void. Jung Young Lee, Embracing Change, 55.
by the “Qian” hexagram is cyclic, or spiral, such as the cyclic movement of the four seasons. Applied to the human world, “each step attained forthwith becomes a preparation for the next.” As Bian Zhilin says in an essay written right before the war, “The I of today is not the I of yesterday.” From this perspective, the novel can be seen as a Bildungsroman of the two main characters. The war and sufferings they experience in the war become an opportunity for and part of the process of self-cultivation with the aim of attaining moral perfection.

Under the influence of the war, they have each grown and matured in their own ways. Weiyun, who was previously a young girl living peacefully on the east coast, now has to face the cruel reality of war. Not only does she initially have to flee to different cities for survival, she also later must find a job to support her independent life. Lunnian, who was a young student in academic seclusion, now must take different jobs, including that of a front-line war reporter.

Stating that the story is merely about intellectuals, however, oversimplifies Bian Zhilin’s depictions of the plot, which is about “the involvement of intellectuals from various strata in the war, from the beginning to the New Fourth Army Incident, and their complicated responses to it, as well as the cycles and returns (huihuan wangfu 回環往復) of their thoughts and emotions.” The fact that all seven chapters are exclusively about intellectuals

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108 *BZWJ*, 1:123.
109 In the European tradition of Bildungsroman, the novels generally focus on a single character, not a pair of characters.
110 Ibid, 1:264. According to Bian Zhilin, the novel was conceived as a response to the New Fourth Army Incident, when the GMD army attacked the Communist army in the south of Anhui province at the beginning of 1941. The Incident marked the final dissolution of the United Front between the two parties and ushered in an
shows the author’s underlying dedication to an ideal different from the wartime mainstream of popular literature and the “worker-peasant-soldier literature” dictated by Mao Zedong in his “Yan’an Talks.”

Bian Zhilin’s work, exemplified by chapter one, indicates that the novel attempts to draw a panoramic picture of the intelligentsia’s experience during the war. It tells the story of the couple’s flight from Beijing after the city fell to the Japanese army in the summer of 1937 and how they are later detained by the enemy and pretend not to know each other in order to avoid arousing suspicions, struggling to look at each other indifferently under the enemy’s watchful eyes. Upon hearing the recounting of their ordeals, Weiyun feels lonely and wonders “if she had been there [with them], would anyone have been brave enough to dare to acknowledge” her as a friend?

The war becomes a touchstone of virtue for the intellectuals, effectively exposing personal hypocrisies. Far more than just a cause of death and destruction, the war offers an extreme context for delving into the subtler philosophical realms of anomic, alienation, the dissolution of traditional morality, the degradation of human hearts, and ultimately spiritual crisis. The war changed everything, heaven and earth shifted; as He Qifang wrote in a poem, 

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112 BZWJ, 1:282.
“we have already lost the innocence of the nineteenth century. We are men of the modern world. And I should talk about war.”

It is noteworthy that Bian Zhilin mentions “spiral movement” again in his depictions of the plot I just cited. The original Chinese is huihuan wangfu 回環往復, which literally means the cyclic movement of a spiral, or moving back and forth in spirals, echoing back to his idea of spiral movement at the beginning of the novel.

The same idea of spiral movement is also manifested in the structure of the novel. In the original complete version, the novel consists of four books, each set in four different cities: Wuhan, Chengdu, Yan’an, and Kunming. The story unfolds as Lunnian and Weiyun pass through these cities. Under the threat of war, Lunnian first flees to Wuhan, but by the time Weiyun arrives there, he has already moved on to Chengdu, where he works as a newspaper editor with some friends, doing war propaganda and also carrying on the enlightenment project of the New Culture Movement. When Weiyun comes to Chengdu to be with Lunnian, the latter has set out for Yan’an, pushing closer to the frontlines as a reporter working among the guerillas. The two finally reunite in Kunming, a city far removed from the theatre of war and that appears to resemble the distant academic world they were abruptly torn away from when the world changed so dramatically in 1937.

In the preface, Bian Zhilin remarks that the shifting of settings in the novel and the movements of the main characters therein “mark a spiral pattern.” Bian Zhilin’s words are too simple as an explanation, but his emphasis seems to be that a spiral pattern means changes and development. The setting changes from Wuhan to Yan’an, to Chengdu, and to

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Kunming, which corresponds to the spatio-temporal unfolding of the war in reality. In regards to time, shifts among different cities reflect the temporal development of the war. For example, Wuhan became the temporary capital city in 1938 as the Guomindang government evacuated Nanjing under Japanese attack. Before long the capital had to be moved to Chongqing as the Japanese invaded further inland along the Yangtze River. At the same time, the Communist Party was waging guerilla war with the Japanese in the Northwest and established several bases, among which Yan’an was the most famous and competed with Chongqing as the de facto wartime center. The National Southwest Associated University, where Bian Zhilin had been teaching since 1940, moved to Kunming in 1938. Its relatively free atmosphere earned it the reputation as the “bastion of democracy.” What kept changing were the geographic locations and political powers, but what remained unchanged was the tenacious, enduring struggle for national independence and freedom.

In terms of space, the four cities can be taken as a symbol of a disruptive China going through war. They echo with the “mountains and rivers” in the novel’s title. During their exile, both protagonists have seen the vast land of China, its “mountains and rivers,” a precious opportunity for better knowing their motherland. They arrive in Wuhan and Chengdu by water along the Yangzi River. Later on, Lunnian treks among the mountains around Yan’an in the northwest. As Liwen, a friend of the protagonists, says: “I always feel we should thank the war, and thank our lucky stars [xingyun 幸運]. As each of us went to a corner of such a vast land, then all of us together have been to every corner of it.”

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116 *BZWJ*, 1:324.
“mountains and rivers” in the title represent not only the different landforms of the fictional settings of the novel, but also symbolize the national space of China.

In the preface to the novel, Bian says that the title on the surface means “such a country” (ru ci Jiangshan 如此江山),\(^{117}\) which validates my foregoing interpretation. But he continues to say that the title also means, on a deeper, metaphysical level, the contradiction and unity (mao dun tong yi 矛盾统一) between mountain and water as opposites. As different forms of landscape, they are distinctly separate from each other while at the same time linked with each other through water circulation and other meteorological and ecological factors. In traditional Chinese landscape painting, water, air, and sky are all represented by emptiness. A river in the form of a long tract of emptiness often wends its way through a painting, connecting mountains near and far. Mountains and rivers in this sense are also connective.\(^{118}\)

The dialectic relationship between mountains and rivers immediately hints at the dialectic of change and un-change. In the symbolic world of traditional Chinese thought, mountains equal permanence and rivers impermanence. In an essay in 1946, Bian points out that even rivers are permanent in some way and connects it to the Dao:

> the purpose for humans on the earth is to testify to their inward divinity. This is of course a universal truth. What we need to ask is: what is this divinity about?... It is about movement (dong 動), which makes life into real life, and makes everything realize itself. ...The self-realization of water is in its ceaseless flow. When Confucius, standing by a running stream, said, “It flows away just like this, not ceasing day or night!” (shizhe rusi fu, bushe zhoye 逝者如斯夫，不捨昼夜), we do not have to read it negatively. ‘Flowing away’ is movement. And ‘the movement of heaven is full of power’ (tian xing

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\(^{117}\) *Ibid.*, 1:264  
\(^{118}\) See Francois Cheng’s analysis of the function of emptiness in traditional Chinese landscape painting, in Francois Cheng, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*.
`jian` (天行健) is a positive annotation [to this]. We would rather believe that the divinity in everything lies in its progress.  

While water is ceaselessly moving/changes, this ceaseless changing itself is changeless. In a similar manner, I argue later that while Bian is constantly changing in regards to his locations, his historical roles, and his attitudes towards politics, his subjectivity as an intellectual who is always trying to grasp the spirit of the Dao and be in the center of History is changeless. To put it simply, his constant changing is his un-change. It is this unchanged changing that parallels with the movement of Dao and helps to actualize the inward divinity of a `junzi`, the ideal figure of an intellectual.

Like mountains and rivers, the constant separation-reunion pattern in the movements of Lunnian and Weiyun also adheres to a spiral movement in a kind of double helix structure. In the preface, Bian Zhilin says that Lunnian’s return to Kunming later on results in Weiyun leaving, although in an unintentional way. He explains: “[Their movements are] always spiraling forward even at the end of the novel.” Only because a novel has to have an ending,” Bian Zhilin recalls, Lunnian dies in an air raid in the hinterland (`da houfang`)，and Weiyun, who “always wants to fly far and high,” falls into “an intangible spiritual snare.” What Bian Zhilin suggests is that the spiral movement is the absolute principle of a changing world, a manifestation and unfolding of ultimate reality, or rather, ultimate reality itself. The process of change never ends. If not for the structural requirements of the novel as a genre—

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119 “Translator’s preface to Christopher Isherwood’s Prater Violet” 克里斯托弗·衣修午德的《紫羅蘭姑娘》（初版譯者序） in BZWJ, 3:540-541.
120 BZWJ, 1:266.
that it have an ending—Lunnian and Weiyun’s lives and relationship would keep moving spirally forward, like the unending cyclical movement of reality itself.

In terms of its narrative and structure, the novel exhibits a modern style, highlighting a limited third-person narrating perspective and an emphasis on the interiority of characters in a manner similar to the Western modernist stream-of-consciousness narrative. The novel is a product of the creative fusion of various Eastern and Western literary techniques, among which the most obvious ones are from Henry James and André Gide.

Bian Zhilin read Henry James avidly in the 1940s, leading him to offer a new class called “Henry James” in 1943 at LianDa. In the preface to Mountains and Rivers, Bian directly attributes his narrative techniques to inspirations from Henry James, who is famous for his creative use of the limited third-person point of view and the dramatization of consciousness. In the Jamesian narrative, every scene confines itself to the interests of a central character, also called the “compositional center.” Bian’s novel is mainly told through the interior movements of the compositional center, providing readers access to his/her consciousness and psychological processes.

Of the seven chapters extant, the first three are told from Weiyun’s point of view, whereas the next three chapters are seen from Lunnian’s eyes. The final chapter, where the two reunite in Kunming, is told by an omniscient narrator, a conventional narrative perspective commonly used in realist novels. The shifting of “presiding intelligence” from

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121 Zhang Sijing, Sun Dunheng, Jiang Changren, Guoli xinan lianhe daxue shiliao san, jiaoxue keyan juan (Historical records of National Southwest Associated University, vol 3, teaching and researches) (Kunming: Yunnan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998), 269.
123 The term is used by Bian in his own account, which is alleged to be from Henry James. See BZWJ, 1:265.
one character to another and then to the omniscient narrator, in Bian’s own words, is also a “spiral return” (回复).\textsuperscript{124}

In the same text, Bian Zhilin discusses the history of narrative perspective in Western fiction. In his eyes, the development of narrative perspective also conforms to a spiral movement, which is the rule of the universe:

From the traditional omnipresent narrative with or without the author in the plot, and the first-person authorial narrative, to the Jamesian limited third-person narrative with a sophisticated representation of mental movements, to Proustian stream-of-consciousness with a first-person limited narrative, to Joycean stream-of-consciousness with third-person multiple perspectives, to various avant-garde skills in all kinds of later ‘new novels’ (nouveau roman), and then back to the omnipresent narration to create an “unreal” impression, this movement is like a spiral…[Like] the four seasons, this year’s are different from last year’s. This complies with the law of the development of all things, which can also be called the spiral movement.\textsuperscript{125}

Before the war, Bian Zhilin had translated some major works of André Gide, including the

*The Counterfeiters* (Les Faux-Monnayeurs, 1925), *Strait Is the Gate* (La Porte Étroite, 1909), and *The New Fruits of the Earth* (Les Nouvelles Nourritures, 1935), for which he wrote long prefaces. Like Henry James, André Gide’s fiction also features an emphasis on characters’ subjectivity and interiority. Ralph Freedman has called Gide one of the three major lyrical novelists of the twentieth century, together with Virginia Woolf and Hermann Hesse.\textsuperscript{126} In Freedman’s argument, the most prominent characteristic of a lyrical novel is the dominance of the psychological experiences of introspective characters. With its focus on Weiyun and

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid, 1:265.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, 1:265-66.
Lunnian’s interior experiences, *Mountains and Rivers* bears much affinity with the style of a lyric novel.

Although the French author is often considered controversial because of his sexuality (Gide was gay), in the 1930s he was quite popular in China because of his intellectual independence. As a distinguished writer sympathizing with the cause of communism, he was invited to tour the Soviet Union as a guest in 1936. He keenly perceived the hidden problems under the Potemkin veneer and became quite critical of Soviet communism after his return. This objective criticism of communism caused him to lose socialist friends, while at the same time won him many friends in China like Sheng Chenghua 盛澄華 (1912-1970), Li Guangtian 李廣田, etc. Many of his followers exalted his loyalty to critical thinking and his defense of artistic autonomy. There was even a “Gide fad” (*Jide re* 紀德熱) among Chinese intellectuals.128

André Gide also inspired Bian Zhilin’s idea of spiral movement.129 Gide is famous/notorious for his embrace of *inquietude* and constant change,130 his craving for novelty and surprise.131 But as Bian expresses in the preface to his translation of *The New Fruits of the Earth*, there is always something unchanged in his changes. In the following analysis, I show how Bian interprets the unchanged quality in Gide and how the resonance

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129 The influences of Gide on Bian are many. Due to the scope of this study, I do not discuss them here. For a short discussion of this topic, see Jiang Ruoshui 江弱水, *Bian Zhilin shiyi yanjiu*, 206-218.
130 *BZWJ*, 3:511
131 Alan Sheridan, *André Gide: A Life in the Present*. 69
Bian finds in Gide is more born of his background in traditional Chinese thoughts than of Western influences.

In sum, the notion of spiral movement is a general guide for Bian to compose the novel, manifested in almost every aspect of the novel such as subject matter, structure, plot development, and even styles. However, as a variation of the change and un-change dialectic, it is more than an aesthetic concept; it also connects with Bian’s relativistic worldview, as the dialectic relationship of mountains and rivers shows.

**A Relativistic Worldview**

The dialectic relationship of mountains and rivers shows that there is interconnectedness and unity between seemingly disparate or even opposite things, revealing Bian’s relativistic worldview. The worldview is further manifested in the aesthetics of fluidity, which involves mutual implications and interpenetrations between seemingly binaries of tradition and modernity, the real and the reflected, the past and the present. A good example is the notion of “emptiness.”

In chapter four, set in Yan’an during the spring of 1939, Lunnian, the “compositional center,” keenly observes the embodiment and function of emptiness in various forms of art. It starts with a conversation between Lunnian and three others, Yuanqing 亘青, Liwen 立文, and Ruobing 若冰. Yuanqing is a writer and has just returned with Lunnian from the frontline. Liwen, who appeared earlier in chapter one as a reporter in Wuhan, is now a journalist for a Communist newspaper. Ruobing is a student at the College for Women in Yan’an. On the invitation of Liwen, who is curious about Lunnian’s and Yuanqing’s
experiences among the guerillas on the frontlines, the four meet in a peach-tree grove. The peach-tree grove is like an open-air teahouse, with several tables and benches scattered among the trees. Two small houses at the far end provide tea and small snacks, such as Chinese dates.

At the beginning, Ruobing asks Liwen to order some water by shouting over to the servers in the two houses. This action immediately reminds Ruobing of a scene mentioned by Liwen from the popular folk performance of *The Water Margin*. In the scene, the burly character Wu Song demands in an almost threatening tone that the owner of the inn bring him “heroic” amounts of wine. Later, in his drunkenness, Wu continues on to Jingyang Mountain (Jingyang Gang 景陽岡), where, he kills a white tiger with his bare hands. Wu Song has become enshrined as a heroic figure in traditional Chinese literature. In this storytelling version of the tale, all the *empty* wine-jars in the inn begin to hum with his shouts.

“Emptiness is really useful,” muses Yuanqing, who immediately grasps the gist of Ruobing’s words, and explains them by citing a verse of Lao-tzu: “Wu zhi yiwei yong (無以為用). If the flute is not empty, it cannot be played.” The phrase “Wu zhi yiwei yong” is from chapter 11 in the *Daode Jing*:

Thirty spokes share a wheel’s hub; it is the center hole that makes it useful. Shape clay into a vessel; it is the space within it that makes it useful. Cut doors and windows for a room; it is the holes which make it useful. Therefore benefit comes from what is there; usefulness from what is not there.132

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The *Daode Jing* passage explicates the nature of emptiness, which is “at the very heart of all things’ substance and of their process of change.”

It enables all things to be usable and useful and thus to attain their complete fullness, like the holes of a flute and the inner space of a wine jar. Therefore, emptiness is not a negative and static void but a positive and dynamic substance, pregnant with possibilities. It is fundamentally complementary rather than contradictory to fullness, whose raison d’être is also derived from the former. This resonates with Bian Zhilin’s remark on the dramatic “emptiness” in Paul Fort’s poem “Henry III”: “The stillness [in Henry III] is pregnant with the possibilities of actions. Like Maeterlinck’s drama, emptiness contains more things than not-emptiness.”

The interconnection and transmutation between different art forms, through the function of “emptiness,” like that among novel, drama, and poetry, are further displayed in the free-floating thoughts of Lunnian.

Triggered by the *Daode jing* verse, Lunnian first thinks of the emptiness in the traditional Chinese painting he has looked at together with Weiyun and criticized for its scarcity of “emptiness.” He also remembers in a previous discussion about printing that they both agree the margins on the four sides of printed page are necessary and meaningful. They also like the space in modern Chinese poetry which, resembling the Western style, shapes a poem into individual lines and separate stanzas. Lunnian also recalls that he once talked about “great silence” after experiencing a lively and bustling scene somewhere; to him,

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“great silence” is obviously “emptiness applied to sound.” He also remembers a white silk handkerchief on which Weiyun has drawn a mountain and a river; it is the empty background that makes the whole landscape painting possible. Just at this moment, he overhears Ruobing use the word “suspense” and thinks that suspense in drama is no more than “emptiness” in theatrical form.

The shifting thoughts of Lunnian, progressing in a free-associational manner, remind us of Bian Zhilin’s poetry, which is characterized by a “poetics of discontinuity” that juxtaposes varying perspectives and seemingly disparate objects. Such a poetics can be traced back to the Daoist teaching of the arbitrariness of all perspectives and the immanence of meaning in an organic universe. It is also linked to the I Ching teaching of the immanence of the Dao and the relativity of all things. Conceived as a substance itself, emptiness in Daoism “is found within all things, at the very heart of their substance and of their process of change.” Sometimes translated as “nothing,” “nonbeing,” or “void,” emptiness has a close connection with the ultimate truth—the Way. The relation between the two prevails in the writings of Laozi and Zhuangzi. For example, chapter 16 in Daode Jing says: “I do my utmost to attain emptiness; I hold firmly to stillness. The myriad creatures all rise together, and I watch their return.” Zhuangzi claims that emptiness is the substance of Dao and the supreme state one should reach toward: “Limpidity, silence, emptiness, inaction—these are the level of Heaven

135 BZWJ, 1:321.
136 Michelle Yeh, Modern Chinese Poetry: Theory and Practice Since 1917, 122.
137 Ibid. For the mutual influence of the two thoughts, see Chen Guying 陳鼓應, Yizhuang yu daojia sixiang 易傳與道家思想 (Yizhuang and Daoism thoughts) (Beijing:Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian,1996).
138 François Cheng, Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting, 46.
and earth, the substance of the Way and its Virtue…. In emptiness, nonbeing, and limpidity, [the sage] joins with the Virtue of Heaven.”

In the above scene in which Lunnian ponders emptiness, the disparities among traditional Chinese painting, printing art, new Chinese poetry, Western poetry, and Western drama are outweighed by their interconnections. The mutual mediation between tradition and modernity, the past and the present, East and West, the real and the reflected render these binary opposites false and irrelevant. Like the relation between yin and yang, they are more complementary than contradictory. Furthermore, a universal mechanism, working in and through “emptiness,” underlies the diverse range of apparently different art forms and escapes spatial, temporal, and, most important, cultural boundaries. What in leftist discourse was construed as “Western” is reinscribed with a traditional as well as universal characteristic that rejects the Communist attempt to particularize Chinese tradition.

A kind of artistic autonomy and creative freedom arise from being at ease with both cultural systems and further links with the change and un-change dialectic in Bian’s life philosophy. In this way, Bian Zhilin has positioned himself at the significant center in the I Ching system. To create harmony, the central position (or the middle way) is the inner adaptation to outer opposites. It resonates both with Daoist intellectual independence and the Confucian Doctrine of the Mean (中庸). “When the mean or center is applied to personal life, it is the situation in which there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy. It is the

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state of harmony and equilibrium.” As the world moves in opposites, “by reaching such a position, a person no longer clings to one pole and assigns to the other a negative, opposite position.” Therefore, a person can remain unchanged while going through changes.

To apply it to the real world, this strategic central position resolves Bian’s longtime concern with the role of self in the process of historical change. His wartime poems in the collection *Letters of Comfort* are a failed attempt as not being able to reach a “state of harmony and equilibrium” between inner autonomy and social engagement. In those poems, he leans toward a leftist concern with the masses and in the process sacrifices a degree of intellectual autonomy, while at the same time trying to hold on to that autonomy, an irresolvable dilemma that stalled his poetic career and led to his desire to write a novel. As *Mountains and Rivers* unfolds, however, the same desire/anxiety of creatively engaging with the outer world while maintaining inner autonomy still lurks. If holding a central position (or middle way), a traditional harmony between the two orientations of self may well be reached. However, the traditional harmony itself is not without shadows, as manifested in Bian’s ambiguous attitude towards the masses and war in the novel.

**The Ambiguity of War and the Theory of Gesture**

As Kirk Denton has argued, a tension between an autonomous, assertive self and a self submissive to larger totalities designated as History, Masses, Nation always lie beneath the pursuit of modern Chinese intellectuals. By tapping into the *I Ching* verse, “The movement

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of heaven is full of power. Thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring,” Bian Zhilin is trying to save self from the inner/outer bifurcation emerging from and enhanced by opposing discourses since the May Fourth, and restore a traditionally harmonious interplay between inner self and outer world that could “empower self to participate in historical transformation.”

However, the paradox is that the traditional unity itself was haunted by its own tension throughout the millennia, as Denton has pointed out, drawing from Thomas Metzger’s analysis of the neo-Confucian view of self in the late imperial period. In Bian Zhilin’s novel, this paradox is embodied in his ambiguous attitude toward the masses. In chapter six, titled “Ocean and Foam” (Hai yu paomo 海與泡沫), Lunnian goes out with a group of cultural workers to reclaim wasteland, one of the many large-scale production campaigns launched in Yan’an. The whole chapter presents Lunnian’s stream of consciousness and is structured by two opposing metaphors—ocean and foam. Ocean stands for collective activity in the form of physical labor, which in Lunnian’s eyes is inclusive and integrative. But at the same time the “ocean” threatens to engulf the individual members. Foam refers to the floating thoughts of Lunnian and the conflicts between the group members. As foam is transient, these thoughts and conflicts are rhapsodic moments in the holistic movement of the collective ocean and finally disappear into it. The conflicts, displayed as the power struggle between two members in the Communist hierarchy, are brought to a temporary stop by the collective labor, which the two members join in together. As Lunnian

143 Kirk Denton, *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling*, 47. Denton names the two opposing discourses as romantic individualism and revolutionary collectivism, each emphasizing respectively the inner and the outer side of self.

thinks to himself when it comes to his turn to farm, “The ‘I’ in him is going to disappear into the ‘we’ of them.” Here it is interesting that Bian Zhilin uses the omnipresent narrator and makes direct judgment, an indicator of his own anxiety about the dubious consequences of submitting completely to the masses.

Most ironically, Lumnian constantly feels “healthy” during and after the farming, which is physically taxing and causes blisters and calluses on both his hands. Almost a masochist pleasure, it reveals the deeply latent while no less strong desire of Lumnian [and Bian Zhilin] to be at the center of historical transformation, even if they have to pay the heavy price of relinquishing their autonomy. Uncannily, it foreshadows Bian Zhilin’s embrace of socialism after 1949. As my analysis in the next chapter shows, his rapid turn from a non-partisan liberal to a socialist cultural worker was not a departure from his previous longstanding stance as an autonomous writer; rather, it was a culmination of his longtime creative engagement with history and historical change.

The same paradoxical feeling is also reflected in the ambiguous attitude towards war. In his response to Liwen’s inquiry about his front-line experiences, Yuanqing, a spiritual double of Lumnian, says, “To be honest, there is nothing special to talk about. We wanted to serve in the war effort, but it turned out that the war served us: it allowed Lumnian to stay in a small place and me to travel in several areas. All of these have worked nothing out but only given us more material to chat about.”

In Yuanqing’s words, the war is at once an all-encompassing historical force and an aesthetic object. As a ruthless historical force, it drives the writers into exile, dragging them to different places and forcing them to witness its destructive power. But it is at the same
time an aesthetic object, the focus of creative scrutiny and artistic manipulation. In casual chatting or artistic representation, the horrific meat grinder of the war is translated into an event in the imagination and in words. In the process, its destructive power is mitigated, even counteracted. Furthermore, it may even take on a positive effect as a generator of modern mobility. As Liwen says: “I always feel we should thank the war, and thank our lucky stars [xingyun 幸運]. As each of us went to a corner of such a vast land, then all of us together have been to every corner of it.” The mobility provided unprecedented opportunities for writers like Yuanqing and Lunnian to connect with the outer world and collect firsthand material for their creative works. Their optimism also meshes with a general sense, at least at the beginning of the war, of the possibilities for social and political transformation the war seemed to offer.

The writers and intellectuals in the novel—this could also be true of real writers and intellectuals in China at the time—are at once the participants in historical change and victims of it. Through their artistic works, they are able to contribute to the wartime effort and thus change the progression of History. The aesthetic lenses through which they view the war also encourage a transcendent selfhood beyond historical contingencies. Yet they are also victims of History, whose ruthless movement seems independent of individual will and could destroy their lives with a simple turn, which in the novel is shown in several scenes about Weiyun in chapter two.

Chapter two first demonstrates Weiyun’s aesthetic attitude toward the war. In the scene after an air battle, Liwen, a reporter for a local newspaper, invites Weiyun to go with some
journalists in search of a downed enemy plane in the countryside outside Wuhan. On the search, her companions photograph things and events, in an effort at journalistic documentation, but Weiyun perceives the event through an aesthetic lens. In her eyes, the whole activity is like a “springtime outing,” an unprecedented opportunity to enjoy the magnificent scenery of early spring in the countryside around Wuhan:

This is the first sunny day Weiyun has seen since she came to Hankou. After many cloudy days, the sun seems especially bright, and fully unfolds the early spring that has secretly snuck back. The field where the road passes through, flooded by rape blossoms, swells into a luminous golden sea, but the blue color soaking the clothes of the peasants who are walking here and there in the field forms a sharp contrast against the yellow ocean, causing it to shimmer even brighter. Several peasants who raise ducks are sitting on the roadside by their huge baskets and bamboo poles, which are all laid casually aside, and watching their ducklings. There are three to four hundred ducklings in total, all playfully swimming in the water of the paddy fields—a bay of fluffy and eye-pleasing yellow in movement…. The exchange of joyous calls among the ducklings in the paddy field sadly reminds Weiyun of a Zhuangzi verse, which she had always liked—“it would be much better if [the fish] could forget each other in the rivers and lakes.” At this moment, she feels more deeply the never-ending loneliness in these words.147

The scenery is peaceful and idyllic, void of any disturbance of war. The Zhuangzi quote, which describes the absence of companions, seems at first irrelevant and even contradictory to the scene. However, the two (scene and verse) have a deeper connection at the philosophical-aesthetic level. As Liu Jianmei has pointed out, “Zhuangzi’s philosophy, which stresses the homology of nature and human, individual spiritual freedom, the transcendence of gain and loss, and antialienation, conveys a truly artistic and aesthetic attitude toward life.”148 The free manner of the swimming ducklings in the picturesque countryside

147 BZWJ, 1:296-7. The Zhuangzi quote is from chapter six in the Inner Chapter of Zhuangzi. The English translation is from Burton Watson.  
undisturbed by the war embodies fully the essence of the Zhuangzi quote, which is about restoring an individual spiritual freedom by loosening social attachments, even to those who are close to us. The scene and the Zhuangzi quote express implicitly the yearnings for spiritual freedom and peace of Weiyun, whose life has been swept under by war.

However, Bian Zhilin, who is keenly aware of the naivete and frailty of a purely transcendent, aesthetic stance before an encompassing and inhumane war, adds the following scene: after the group finally finds the crashed airplane, they discover a Japanese pilot burned to death beneath it. As other people close in to examine the wreckage, Weiyun intentionally keeps her distance and instead sits under a tree. However, Bian Zhilin seems to deny her the luxury of this detachment by placing before her eyes two dogs fighting to consume part of the burned body. Though the narrative does not zoom in to describe the fight or the body in any detail, Weiyun is so overwhelmed by the scene that she passes out. Her reaction forms a sharp contrast with that of Liwen, who has become familiarized with the daily horror and cruelty of war; for instance, she speaks with ease about the limbs everywhere on the street after an air raid. Weiyun’s reaction also symbolizes the fragility of the Daoist aesthetic attitude in the face of History, whose bloody reality defies any attempts to keep a distance or to maintain a transcendent subject.

As a response to the inherent tension of his Weltanschauung based on the *I Ching* verse, Bian Zhilin develops a theory of “gesture” in the novel that places a high value on authenticity and the creative process. Lunnian first raises this idea when appraising a painting of Weiyun:
“The value of a nation in the world is its tradition. Our tradition is not the strokes of a painting, but perhaps is rightly the ‘gesture.’ Man dies, but ‘gesture’ does not. That Ezra Pound can grasp the spirit in ‘translating’ classical Chinese poetry precisely resides in his grasp of the gesture. [Compared with national forms] pure gesture may be easier to cross national boundaries.”

Although Ezra Pound’s translations of classical Chinese poetry are full of mistakes and are more re-creation than translation, they embody his keen perception of the traditional Chinese spirit and are therefore sometimes taken as the best English translations of Chinese poetry ever made. As Wai-lim Yip writes: “it seems clear that . . . even when he is given only the barest details, he is able to get into the central concerns of the original author by what we may perhaps call a kind of clairvoyance.”

In this context, “gesture” can be interpreted as an ineffable quality that conveys the spirit and the authenticity of the author and that can be transmitted across temporal, spatial, and cultural boundaries. Although his novel was written more than ten years before Richard Blackmur put forward the theory “language as gesture,” Bian Zhilin’s idea recalls that of Blackmur. In Blackmur’s argument, gesture is a movement captured or “arrested . . . at the moment of its greatest significance,” a moment when content and form perfectly merge. As a critical term, it is applicable to various art forms, such as architecture, music, dance, painting, and sculpture. In literature, as Chen Shih-hsiang has explained in his article on Blackmur’s theory, it represents the quality resulting from the perfect integration of the

149 BZWJ, 1:365.
author’s interior qing 情 and exterior literary forms (language, style, techniques, etc).\footnote{Chen Shih-hsiang 陳世驤, “Zi yu Gesture” 姿與 Gesture (Gesture and Gesture), in Chen Shih-hsiang wencun 陳世驤文存 (Collected essays of Chen Shih-hsiang), ed., Yang Mu 楊牧 (Taipei: Zhiwen chubanshe, 1972), 63-91.} Qing, as Cecile Chu-chin Sun defines it, “relates to the thoughts, feelings, memories, and the whole range of abstract and elusive human sentiments expressed in a poem.”\footnote{Cecile Chu-chin Sun, “Cultural Dimensions of Translation: The Case of Translating Classical Chinese Poetry into English,” Tamkang Review, Vol.XXXI, No. 4 -XXXII, No. 1 (Summer-Autumn, 2001): 59-97.} When it is in a seamless integration with the literary form, the two cannot be separated from each other and together form an organic wholeness. Such a work thus reaches the realm of what Wang Guowei 王國維 acclaims as the highest artistic world a traditional Chinese poem can exemplify—yi yu jing hun 意與境渾 (the total fusion of emotion and scene).\footnote{Wang Guowei 王國維, Renjian cihua 人間詞話 (Remarks on the song lyric and the human condition), Chen Hongxiang 陳鴻翔, ed. Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2002.} The idea is fundamentally paralleled by and reflected in the traditional notion of man-heaven unity that can be traced back to the I Ching.\footnote{Xiao Ying 肖鷹, “Yi yu jing hun: Yi jinglun de bainian yanbian you fansi” 意與境渾：意境論的百年演變與反思 (The total fusion of emotion and scene: the development of and reflection on yijinglun), in Wenyi yanjiu 文藝研究 (Literature Studies), 11(2015), 5-17.}

With a sense of what Lunnian means by “gesture” in the arts, we can now better understand his comments on Weiyun’s landscape painting: “You have truly merged into the emptiness, rather than encompassed or been encompassed by the emptiness. The person is not in the landscape, nor out of the landscape, but rather, is one with the landscape.”\footnote{BZWJ, 1:361. Traditional Chinese landscape paintings are mainly composed of images of mountains and waters. In Chinese, they are called shanshui hua 山水畫, literally, mountain-water painting.} As Francois Cheng has pointed out, in traditional landscape painting, without emptiness the whole picture would be impossible and incomprehensible.\footnote{Ibid.} Emptiness represents water and

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\footnote{Chen Shih-hsiang 陳世驤, “Zi yu Gesture” 姿與 Gesture (Gesture and Gesture), in Chen Shih-hsiang wencun 陳世驤文存 (Collected essays of Chen Shih-hsiang), ed., Yang Mu 楊牧 (Taipei: Zhiwen chubanshe, 1972), 63-91.}
\footnote{Wang Guowei 王國維, Renjian cihua 人間詞話 (Remarks on the song lyric and the human condition), Chen Hongxiang 陳鴻翔, ed. Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2002.}
\footnote{Xiao Ying 肖鷹, “Yi yu jing hun: Yi jinglun de bainian yanbian you fansi” 意與境渾：意境論的百年演變與反思 (The total fusion of emotion and scene: the development of and reflection on yijinglun), in Wenyi yanjiu 文藝研究 (Literature Studies), 11(2015), 5-17.}
\footnote{BZWJ, 1:361. Traditional Chinese landscape paintings are mainly composed of images of mountains and waters. In Chinese, they are called shanshui hua 山水畫, literally, mountain-water painting.}
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creates a background, and is also connected with the Dao.\textsuperscript{161} To be one with the emptiness equals being one with the painting, which means the whole work successfully reflects the author’s personality and spirit. It can be achieved through the arrangement of the position, size, and the light and shade of the emptiness in respect to other objects on the painting. In Lunnian’s view, “whether this little painting [of Weiyun] is rare is beside the point; its excellence fully lies in that it completely transmits Weiyun’s personality.”\textsuperscript{162} By the same token, he adds that “Chinese people of yore like to describe the beauty of personality through the beauty of nature.”\textsuperscript{163}

To better appreciate Lunnian’s laconic comment, Francois Cheng’s words are worth quoting at some length here:

The Chinese love to establish correspondences between the virtues of the things of nature and human virtues. For example, the status of chun-tzu (superior man) is accorded to orchids, bamboo, pines, and plum trees because of their respective virtues of grace, rigor, youth, and noble beauty. This is not a mere matter of naturalistic symbolism, for these correspondences aim at the communion through which man inverts the perspective of naturalistic symbolism by interiorizing the external world. The external world is not only “out there”; it is seen from the inside and becomes the expression of man himself—hence the importance placed on gestures and mutual relations in painting groups of mountains, trees, or rocks. In this context, to paint mountain and water is to paint the portrait of man—not so much his physical portrait (although this aspect is not absent) but more that of his mind and spirit: his rhythm, his gait and bearing, his torments, his contradictions, his fears, his peaceful or exuberant joy, his secret desires, his dream of the infinite, and so forth.\textsuperscript{164}

Just as Ezra Pound is “one” with the “spirit” of classical Chinese poems in his translations, Weiyuan is able to grasp and merge with Dao such that she is “one with the

\textsuperscript{161} See François Cheng, \textit{Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting}.
\textsuperscript{162} BZWJ, 1:361.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid, 362.
\textsuperscript{164} François Cheng, \textit{Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting}, 84.
landscape” in her painting. As Francois Cheng says in the above passage, “the external world is not only ‘out there’; it is seen from the inside and becomes the expression of man himself.”

Since art is the expression of one’s inner world, in particular the spirit of junzi, a natural corollary is that in order to create a high-quality work one should first cultivate oneself to be virtuous and morally sound. It is not a coincidence that Confucianism also attaches great importance to self-cultivation, because it is understood as the way to actualize one’s innate divinity through deepening understanding of the self and its relation to the external world.165 The traditional dialectic of inner self and outer world especially entails the cultivating of one’s sincerity or authenticity (cheng 誠) as a way to establish a meaningful linkage with the outer world and thereby to transform society. As the Doctrine of Mean states, “Sincerity is that whereby self-completion is effected, and its way is that by which man must direct himself. Sincerity is the end and beginning of things…. The possessor of sincerity does not merely accomplish the self-completion of himself. With this quality he completes other men and things also.”166

This is why Lunnian says that “to write a good hand one needs to cultivate oneself well; otherwise the gesture has no life.”167 This is also why he includes the nature-man unity in his appraisal of Weiyun’s painting: in its full manifestation of Weiyun’s spirit, the painting shows the sincere spontaneity and authenticity of the author.

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166 The Doctrine of Mean, chapter 25; in James Legge, trans., The Four Books (Taibei: Culture Book Co., 1979), 96-97.
167 BZWJ, 1:365.
Authenticity is also at the heart of the ethical implication of the *I Ching* verse through which Liao Xuzhou, near the beginning of the novel, expresses his expectations for the two main characters: “The movement of heaven is full of power. Thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring.” As man unifies in himself the virtues of heaven and the Way, it falls to him to bring them into fruition through his own self-fulfillment. Ceaseless self-cultivation is required for self-fulfillment, through which one can also take part in the transformative processes of the cosmos.\(^{168}\) The meaning is also inherent in the original image of the hexagram Qian 乾. The doubling of the trigrams Qian suggests that “one draws strength from within oneself, and that after each action a new one follows, without cease.”\(^{169}\)

The ceaseless efforts of self-cultivation, which links with the virtues of endurance and independence, is perhaps what Bian Zhilin means by “national spirit.” If one can strengthen oneself ceaselessly, one carries on the project with fortitude and inner autonomy. As the *I Ching* puts it: “wealth cannot make one decadent, poverty cannot move one, authority and force cannot suppress one.”\(^{170}\) Although Bian never makes it clear what the specific content of the national spirit is, we might see it as the spirit embodied in the *I Ching* verse he repeatedly quotes. After all, if the “gentlemen” (junzi), who are meant to lead the government in the Confucian tradition, really do as the *I Ching* verse preaches and ceaselessly carry on the mandate of self-transformation, the nation would, at least in theory, be transformed after the same manner. The national spirit in this sense is a parallel of the ideal selfhood Bian has constructed from the *I Ching* teaching and embodied by the main characters in the novel.


\(^{170}\) Thomas Cleary trans., *The Taoist I Ching*, 239.
Mountains and Rivers. Bian Zhilin is therefore not only trying to recreate an ideal selfhood in the novel, but also seeks a nationhood that is as enduring, vital, and independent as a junzi would be.

Again, Bian Zhilin applies the change/un-change dialectic to the relationship between national spirit and “national forms.” To him, national forms are always changing and conditioned by time and situation, while national spirit is unchangeable and can even transmit across temporal, spatial, and cultural boundaries. Taking storytelling art as an example; at the beginning of chapter four, just prior to the scene in the peach-tree grove discussed earlier, Bian sets up a debate on the art’s legitimacy as a national form. When Lunnian and Yuanqing pass by a table on their way to meet Ruobing and Liwen, they hear a young man asserting: “Right, the art of storytelling is also a national form of literature.” Another agrees, “That’s real literature, for example, when the storytellers tell the story of a young lady stepping out from her boudoir, they can spend a whole afternoon or night on just one step.”

However, the value of the art of storytelling is confronted eloquently by a young man who believes it is incompatible with the modern era: “For example, if a girl nowadays, not to mention our female comrades in the new society, want to meet their boyfriends downstairs, would she not come down within a single step? What else is there to talk about? If there is an elevator, she would come down in a moment. There would be no time for her even to think about it.” What’s more, he continues, with telephones, an urban girl can call her boyfriend to say good morning in a coquettish manner: “I am still in bed. I don’t know when I pushed back the comforter earlier….” His narration is interrupted by an angry voice: “Forget about it,
all the sexual consciousness of the bourgeoisie. In the new society, calling a person by phone, whether male or female, has only one purpose, ‘hey, it is nice outside, get up, and go to work!’” The young man withdraws into silence at the attack.

But the debate goes on until the first advocate of storytelling compromises: “New inventions and tools will only expand the uses of storytelling. For example, in the future everyone will have a portable radio. Won’t the effect of storytelling be multiplied?” Another voice disagrees, “At that time people will be better educated. Books can be broadcast on the radio; what use is there for storytelling?” “Right,” the young man who had been interrupted previously becomes excited again, “therefore, storytelling is only the product of a specific time. In the future, televisions will be everywhere. People will be able to watch movies without going out. Even cinemas will meet their ends, not to mention this kind of small teahouse in our national form!”

The plot reflects that storytelling as a type of national form “is only a product of a specific time.” As an indigenous art form, storytelling is unmistakably Chinese; however, it will become incompatible with new realities and the sensibilities of the dramatically changing modern world, precipitated by new technological media, such as the telephone, radio, and television. While it has its own charm as a traditional literary form, its value is conditioned and qualified by the special “environment” of a certain geographical region, a special product of the War of Resistance. In the same vein, one can deduce along this logical line that the CCP-promoted national forms, like storytelling, are “only the product of a specific time,” and will eventually fall out of fashion. The national spirit, however, can persevere.

171 BZWJ, 1:317-318.
Not only is the temporary value of national forms closely associated with Bian Zhilin’s relativistic worldview, the contrast between national spirit as an eternal quality and national forms as a historical and politicized construct acts as an implicit criticism and counterdisourse to the Maoist discourse of national forms. Although never joining the debate around this issue, Bian seems to voice his opinion through the novel: Just like the “gesture” in Weiyun’s painting and Ezra Pound’s English translation of traditional Chinese poetry, excellent art works should be able to convey the spirit of the author(s), which will in turn empower them against the ravages of time and the barriers of culture.

Like a distant echo, in a 1980s essay Bian Zhilin broaches this issue again and insists on the opinions first expressed in the novel. At the opening of the essay, titled “Xinshi yu xifang shi” 新詩與西方詩 (New Poetry and Western Poetry), Bian enumerates a multitude of literary and cultural forms that China has “borrowed” (nalai 拿來, a term Bian borrows from Lu Xun) from the West. These forms were originally Western, but after being used in and integrated with Chinese culture and Chinese people get more and more accustomed to them, they come to appear as more national than exotic:

Our country did not have spoken drama. Though we had poetry from the very beginning, writing new poetry in vernacular language and separate lines was introduced into our country from the West. We are all accustomed to these various literary forms and do not feel they are western. Forms and habits are not hard to change. Long gowns and mandarin jackets originally were not our national costume. Before the Qing dynasty, our popular clothes were wide robes and big sleeves. Neither was the Sun Yat-sen suit an item of national cultural heritage, but today we are already used to it. We also became accustomed to writing and printing from left to right within a few years and now do not see it as a non-national form…. So the most important (element) is national spirit.\(^\text{172}\)

\(^{172}\) *BZWJ*, 1:499
Again, the boundaries between so called “national” and “Western,” “tradition” and “modernity,” are not absolute and clear but relative and fluid, subject to the ultimate principle of constant change. Therefore, “the most important (element) is national spirit.”

Building an enduring, vital, and independent nationhood is crucially significant in face of the protracted war, which stagnated around 1941. Disillusionment and weariness permeated society. By calling forth the robustness of heaven and humanity in their ceaseless changing, Bian tried to reinvigorate the Chinese people in the war. Just as “poverty cannot move one, authority and force cannot suppress one,” the crucible of ordeals and sufferings also cannot destroy one; indeed, it can actually cultivate virtues, such as fortitude, self-strengthening, and independence. By resurrecting and reutilizing traditional Chinese wisdom, Bian is reminding his readers that the “energy reserves,” the living force to carry on through ordeals and trials, are inherent in Chinese culture; that under the monolithic and pejorative name of “tradition” denounced by the May Fourth generation, there is a treasure of resources that can be drawn from to face modern issues and that there is a need to re-evaluate this legacy from the past.

On a larger and more profound level, Bian’s recalling the spirits of perseverance, self-strengthening, and, in particular, authenticity, has to do with the bigger concern of saving humanity. When World War II started not long after the first one had ended, when the violence of the Japanese army in China redefined bestiality, in the dehumanizing tendencies of the historical moment when man could only expect fear and despair, Bian Zhilin reminded his readers that an inward divinity, which is unchangeable and beyond the vicissitudes of historical changes, dwells in human nature.
In an essay in 1946, Bian Zhilin points out that the purpose for humans on the earth is to testify to their inward divinity. This is of course a universal truth. What we need to ask is: what is this divinity about?... It is about movement (dong 動), which makes life into real life, and makes everything realize itself. …The self-realization of water is in its ceaseless flow. When Confucius, standing by a running stream, said, “It flows away just like this, not ceasing day or night!” (shizhe rusi fu, bushe zhouye 逝者如斯夫，不捨晝夜), we do not have to read it negatively. ‘Flowing away’ is movement. And ‘the movement of heaven is full of power’ (tianxing jian 天行健) is a positive annotation [to this]. We would rather believe that the divinity in everything lies in its progress.173

Not only is there an eternal dimension in human nature, it will also move unquestionably forward, like heaven. The belief in the perfectibility through self-effort embodied by “the movement of heaven is full of power, thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring,” bespeaks a deep faith in the progress of human civilization, which cannot be obstructed by any temporary turmoil and disruption. This optimistic view is different from Lu Xun, who holds pessimistically that History moves endlessly in vicious circles, falling back repeatedly to the same place where it started. Bian’s spiral movement adds a hopeful, unwavering direction in its cyclic yet forward movement. As Liao Xuzhou in the novel says, “Right, there is a moment of eternity within every minute of endeavors—a phase of crystallization enters into the next phase of crystallization. This is Dao. This is Progress.”

The same idea recurs in his wartime essays. For example, in the preface to his translation of André Gide’s The Return of the Prodigal Son (Le retour de l'enfant prodigue,1905),174 Bian describes the returned protagonists as “different from themselves in the previous stage,”

173 “Translator’s preface to Christopher Isherwood’s Prater Violet” 克里斯托弗・衣修午德的《紫羅蘭姑娘》（初版譯者序） in BZWJ, 3:540-541.
174 A short story based on the Biblical parable of the prodigal son.
but “sad and wise,” which “should be considered as a spiral progress (luoxuanshi de jinbu 螺旋式的進步).”¹⁷⁵ In the 1946 preface to his translation of André Gide’s Strait Is the Gate he says:

That every seemingly binary opposite, spirit and flesh, mind and object, beauty and goodness, collective and individual…are all interdependent, is the most natural truth; that past and future, consummation and development, mutually influence each other, is also a most natural truth. In the end it boils down to that cliché: “The movement of heaven is full of power. Thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring.” This is the most natural propensity of heaven and human. The “unity of the divine and man” should be a broad road, but the transgressions and wrongdoings of the human world gradually blocks it, leading to the today’s situation.¹⁷⁶

It is obvious from the above passages how Bian’s belief in the progress of human civilization has been greatly influenced by Gide, and how the former has grafted the latter’s Christian epistemology onto traditional Chinese culture. Assimilating Eastern and Western traditions, Bian finds that the anchorage for human civilization is not on the earth of this world, which is rife with destruction and despair, but in a transcendent and eternal heaven. He also expresses a deep-rooted faith in the continuation and progress of human culture not only as a historical fact but also as the unfolding of a transcendent reality. He points out the hope of cultural continuities not only to China bogged down in war but also to all humans trapped in the dehumanizing slough of despair. This helps to explain why he invested so much time and energy into translating the novel into English. Apart from concerns about GMD censorship, he was also interested in reaching a broader audience, both in the East and the West. It also

¹⁷⁵ “A translator’s preface to André Gide’s The Return of the Prodigal Son” 安德雷・紀德的《浪子回家集》（譯者序）in BZWJ, 3:488.
¹⁷⁶ BZWJ, 3:524.
helps us better understand his words in the preface to *Mountains and Rivers*, which sounds at first a little ambitious. He says the novel is going to be a "‘masterpiece,’ which, through the use of images, will assimilate past and present, and China and the West on the spiritual and cultural levels, to foster mutual understanding and save the ‘the morals of the time and the souls of the people.’”

To arrive at this end of saving humanity and the world, the approach Bian uses is neither the “subjective fighting spirit” proposed by Hu Feng nor the “primitive power” of the unconscious, as Lu Ling puts it, but the traditional value of sincerity. It reverberates with the traditional belief of Confucianism in the possibility to transform the world from within, which harks back to Bian’s belief in the inward divinity in human nature. As the *Doctrine of Mean* teaches, with sincerity, “there will be expression. As it is expressed, it will become conspicuous. As it becomes conspicuous, it will become clear. As it becomes clear, it will move others. As it moves others, it changes them. As it changes them, it transforms them.”

Again, this reminds us of Gide, who, according to Alan Sheridan, characteristically “sought to demonstrate that every great work of literature was both national and universal: ‘What could be more national than Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, Goethe, Ibsen, Dostoevsky? And what more generally human? And also more individual?’” It is the same authenticity that Bian finds and acclaims in Gide’s *The Fruits of the Earth* and *New Fruits of the Earth*.

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177 Ibid, 1:267. The original words are: "著一部‘大作’，用形象表現，在精神上、文化上，橫貫古今，橫貫東西，溝通暸解，挽救‘世道人心’。"


180 *BZWJ*, 3:513, 517.
It is also through authenticity that Bian achieves the balance of being at once individual and national. Through the novel, Bian proves that commitment to art does not necessarily imply indifference to society; that art for art’s sake is vital and viable to art for society’s sake.\textsuperscript{181} The mechanism behind this is the notion that an “authentic” work can have transformative power in society. This sounds like the “writing conveys the Way” (wen yi zaidao 文以載道) tradition of Confucian didacticism. But it more profoundly demonstrates Bian’s efforts to restore a link between the subject and the outer world, to recreate a selfhood that is at once autonomous from and submissive to sociohistorical forces, that is inner and outer-directed at the same time. This is his response to a longtime anxiety about harmonizing inner autonomy and social engagement. Whereas Hu Feng and Lu Ling reflect in their creative and critical writings almost unconsciously the tension between inner and outer worlds, romantic individualism versus revolutionary collectivism, Bian consciously tries to offer a solution to the predicament.

On a historical level, *Mountains and Rivers* is a counterdiscourse to both the leftist and rightist ideologies at a time when the use of culture to mobilize the masses became the new cultural paradigm in China.\textsuperscript{182} First, the novel is not about the workers, peasants, and soldiers,
“the masses”\textsuperscript{183} promoted by Mao Zedong in his 1942 “Yan’an Talks” about reforming bourgeois ideology; instead, it is exclusively about intellectuals. Second, Bian Zhilin’s aesthetics of fluidity, from his creative renderings of various Chinese and Western resources, reveal the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, East and West, and the real and the reflected to be false. In this sense, \textit{Mountains and Rivers} was as an alternative form of social intervention outside the wartime mainstream.

On a deeper level, Bian Zhilin’s complicated Weltanschauung, epitomized by the notion of spiral movement, was a counterdiscourse to both the radical individualist discourse hailed by the May Fourth generation and the revolutionary collectivism dictated by the CCP, both of which severed the potential for the individual to link with the world. This happens to coincide with the middle-ground teaching of the Doctrine of Mean, interconnected with the change/un-change dialectic in the \textit{I Ching}. Because the world is changing all the time, it is best to stand in central position so as to forge a healthy and harmonious relationship with the world.

However, as the war wore on, the nation-saving cause increasingly cast a shadow over the ideal dialectic of inner autonomy and social engagement, and a nation-building project based on a traditionally harmonious interplay of individual and collective. The destruction and disruption of the war not only eroded national sovereignty, it also inexorably tipped the scale toward the historical force of the collective, making turning to the left the only choice for conciliatory intellectuals like Bian Zhilin.

\textsuperscript{183}Chen Xiaomei, “Worker-peasant-soldier Literature.”

Conclusion

Bian Zhilin’s own life path throughout the war and up to 1949 mimics the *I Ching*'s spiral pattern. When he left Yan’an and returned to Chengdu in the summer of 1939, his action aroused many suspicions. Was he not up to the physical challenge? Did he find the political climate in the Communist base too ideologically rigid? To these Bian Zhilin replied: “Last summer when I left Chengdu . . . those who knew what I was like previously were surprised; when I returned to Sichuan, those who forgot what I was like previously were again suspicious…. I am still who I am. Neither have I changed my family name or my given name.”

Bian Zhilin is talking about his non-partisan position in the political realm. Even when he was at the Communist base in Yan’an and started writing semi-leftist poems, as I analyzed in the previous chapter, he did not submit himself completely to the party-sanctioned role of propagandist; though with some confusion, he tried to retain his stance as a serious, objective writer.

However, the firm assertion of an unchanged selfhood in 1939 on the surface contradicted by his own admission of change right before the war. In a 1936 essay titled “Chengzhang” 成長 (Growth), Bian cites a verse from *I Ching*'s Xici 系辭 section, “sheng sheng zhi wei yi” 生生之謂易 (life and growth, or production and reproduction, is the meaning of “change.”). He further explains the phrase with a metaphor: “grapes and apples

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184 *BZWJ*, 1:397.
185 *BZWJ*, 1:123.
186 *Yijing*, Xici A.5.6. in Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), *Zhouyi benyi* 周易本義 (Original meaning of the Zhou Yi) (Taibei: Hualian, 1978), 3:6a. The English translation is borrowed from Joseph A. Adler. See Joseph A. Adler,
die as fruits, but relive as wine.”

In his essay “Yu huashi houji” (Postscript to ‘Fish Fossil’) of the same year, he uses the verse again to describe the formation of a fish fossil: “when a fish becomes a fossil, the fish is not the previous fish, neither the fossil the previous fossil. This is also ‘sheng sheng zhi wei yi.’ A closer example: the I of yesterday is not the I of today.”

Here, he sanctions a selfhood that is developing and changing with time, which effects self-transcendence and social transformation.

The contradiction in these two expressions of “I” who remains unchanged while at the same time is changing all the time really does not exist if seen from the perspective of a “grasping” subject who seeks to be born again and again (shengsheng buxi 生生不息). This is what I meant earlier by Bian’s “constant changing is his un-change.” To negotiate a position for self in changing history, one has to grasp the spirit of the Dao and base his subjectivity on it. The change and un-change dialectic of Bian is also an incarnation of the main thrust of the I Ching, which sees ceaseless change and transformation as the ultimate principle of the universe. The spiral movement further affirms the necessity of historical and personal changes. This is also why Bian upholds the virtue of constant self-cultivation, because it is the way to fully grasp the Dao and actualize the inward divinity in a changing world.

To be sure, this ceaseless effort is also embodied in Bian Zhilin’s dedication to writing the novel. Spending more than eight years on it, first writing in Chinese and then translating it into English, against all odds in the shadow of war and exile, Bian Zhilin attached great


BZWJ, 1:123.

Ibid, the original Chinese is “往日之我已非今日之我.”
value to the creative process, just like his model Henry James. His travelling to England in 1947 in hopes of finishing the masterpiece is a “gesture” of that authenticity. Rather than a manifestation of being callous and blind to reality, it demonstrates his commitment to his role as a participant in historical transformation.

Change and un-change alternate and intersect with each other in a spiral movement, playing out a complicated yet poetic symphony in Bian Zhilin’s life throughout the war period and, as I argue in the next chapter, even into the PRC era. What changes are Bian Zhilin’s residences and his varied ways of engaging in the outer world at different points of time. He moved to different cities, tried different jobs, and made really bold poetic experiments, sometimes to the point of being misunderstood. However, what remains unchanged is a subjectivity that tries to grasp the Dao and to reach a state of authenticity, a desire to participate in historical transformation while at the same time maintaining autonomy, a cry for a selfhood that is at once aware of its social responsibility but not subject to manipulation by any external ideologies and political forces.

With the historical hindsight that China was soon to be engulfed in a political storm, his words “I am still who I am” look like the eulogy and elegy of a whole generation of Chinese intellectuals in their quest for modernity.

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Chapter 4: Burning the Manuscript: Another Spiral Movement

In this chapter, I discuss the possible reasons for Bian Zhilin to burn the manuscript of *Mountains and Rivers* and its symbolic and political implications in connection with the historical background of the 1950s. I argue that on the symbolic level the destruction of the novel was a kind of self-immolation, an eradication of the socially responsible liberal who had been seeking a middle-road between rightist and leftist ideologies. It marked the beginning of another spiral movement in Bian Zhilin’s life of active engagement with society and history. Rising from the ashes was a new poetic and political subjectivity, producing patriotic poems in accordance with the Maoist agenda and a seemingly smooth acclimatization to the new socialist republic. However, I argue that this transformation was not a complete and radical departure from his previous longstanding stance as an autonomous writer; rather, it is actually a culmination of his longtime search for a creative engagement with history and historical change, for a restoration of the traditional harmony between

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190 Bian Zhilin seems to have never made the time of the burning clear, only saying in the early 1950s. Xia Xiaoyu and Li Songrui have mentioned in their articles that it was in the year 1950 but do not give any reason for the deduction. See Xia Xiaoyu 夏小雨, “Zhi yu zhi de zuyin: Bian Zhilin Shanshan Shuishui de shuqing bianzhengfa” 詩語的足音：卞之琳山水水中的抒情辯證法 (Footsteps of moving and stopping: the lyrical dialectics of Bian Zhilin’s *Mountains and Rivers*), *Hanyuyan wenxue yanjiu* 漢語言文學研究 (Studies on Chinese Literature) 2 (2014): 121-131; Li Songrui 李鬆睿, “Shidai, geren, xiaoshuo: lun Bian Zhilin de Shanshan shuishui” 時代・個人・小說——論卞之琳的《山山水水》(Times, individual, and fiction: on Bian Zhilin’s *Mountains and Rivers*), *Beijing daxue yanjiusheng xuezhi* 北京大學研究生學志 (Graduate Journal of Peking University) 3(2010):46-58. Considering that Bian Zhilin became a member of the Communist Party in 1956, the burning action must have taken place before 1955. The burning, taken as a symbol, is full of political and historical implications, which I examine in the next chapter.
internal autonomy and the external world. This transformation is an ambiguous one, touching off a new tension between forced subordination to and sincere embrace of the Communist cause. The ambiguity and tension surrounding this new spiral movement culminated in 1958, when Bian Zhilin brought his poetic career to an anticlimactic halt.

Due to the scope of my study, the central focus of this chapter is on the burning of the manuscript, with the account of Bian’s poetic and political activities at the time sketched only in brief.\(^1\) His later activities are also mentioned, but the timeline of my main discussion ends in 1958.

**Returning to Beijing: Merge into the New Regime**

In 1947, Bian Zhilin won a British Council scholarship to travel to and do research in England, entering Oxford University as a visiting scholar that September. Most of his time in England was devoted to translating *Mountains and Rivers* into English, a project he started as soon as he finished the Chinese manuscript. A year later he moved to a nearby medieval village in the Cotswolds, living a life of semi-reclusion in order to focus on translating and on polishing the Chinese manuscript. Because of the lack of modern communication, he was cut off from the outside world and unaware that the CCP already had the game in their hands in the civil war with the GMD. When he finally heard the news about the Huai-Hai Campaign, a decisive battle in the eventual Communist victory that took place over the winter of 1948-1949, he felt “greatly shocked.”\(^2\) Coincidentally, his longtime “lover,” Zhang Chonghe married Hans Frankel around the same time (in November 1948). Bian left

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\(^1\) More detailed descriptions of his activities and poems during this time can be found in Lloyd Haft, *Pien Chih-lin: A Study in Modern Chinese Poetry*, chapter 5 and 6. Also see Chen Bingying, *Bian Zhilin pingzhuan*, chapter 5 and 6.

\(^2\) *BZWJ*, 1:270; 2:452.

Bian Zhilin’s strong reaction to the news of the Communist victory and the later burning of the manuscript reveal a crisis in Bian’s belief in the power of the creative process and self-cultivation to transform History. History had marched “forward” without he or his novel making any contribution to its movement, rendering his original plan, and perhaps all his efforts of the past decade, little more than a naïve dream. The victory seemed to validate the Maoist notion that the masses were the real driving force of History and that intellectual consciousness only drives one into isolation from the masses and into activities irrelevant to political reality.

In the preface to *Mountains and Rivers* written in 1982, Bian recollected in a self-deprecating tone, “In front of such grand feats, I was devoting myself to simply nothing but playing stupidly with my pen! I stopped writing instantly.”¹⁹³ In contrasting the self-absorption and alienation of a bourgeois intellectual with the awesome historic achievements of the masses, these words echo Bian’s earlier accommodation to the new regime in the 1950s. But the negative attitude towards his novel nevertheless contradicts his own deeds shortly after his return to China, before his socialist education. While he was staying in Hong Kong, at the time a temporary haven for intellectuals of various political commitments seeking shelter from the civil war, Bian Zhilin published two chapters of *Mountains and Rivers* in the monthly journal *Xiaoshuo* 小說 at the invitation of his friend, then the chief editor of the journal, Zhou Erfu 周而復 (1914-2004). Zhou was a Communist party member

¹⁹³ BZWJ, 1:270.
and had been dispatched to Hong Kong for the purpose of disseminating cultural propaganda. (At the time, Zhou was also editing another journal called *Beifang wencong*北方文叢, publishing articles and fiction produced from Communist-controlled areas in the north.) The two chapters Bian chose for publication in the leftist journal were the first two chapters of the extant chapters of the novel; they dealt exclusively with the theme of intellectuals and were written in a modernist, stream-of-consciousness narrative style. This went blatantly against the Party’s dictate of writing about and for the masses, the new official literary policy spawned from Mao Zedong’s “Yan’an Talks.”

The publication of the two chapters in a leftist journal indicates at least two points. First, Bian Zhilin, contrary to the self-deprecation expressed in the preface, actually valued his work and wanted to see it out in the public sphere. The self-denunciation of the preface was perhaps not sincere, and at least didn’t lead him to thoroughly repudiate his previous literary efforts. Second, it reveals that for a short while after his return from England, Bian Zhilin still believed in the magnanimity of the Communist Party toward nonleftist intellectuals, who like Bian Zhilin still had the right to write and publish work with a different political persuasion. In March, 1948, Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892-1978) published his famous (or notorious) article “Chi fandong wenyi’’斥反動文藝 (A refutation of counterrevolutionary literature) in the first issue of *Dazhong wenyi congkan* 大眾文藝叢刊 (Literature of the masses). In the article, he clearly demarcated the literary field with proletariat-centered, black-and-white criteria. As Jenny Huangfu describes it, “He [Guo Moruo] made the measure of good and evil clear-cut: the good support the People's Liberation Army, and the evil long

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for the continuation of the oppressive rule of the GMD. He saw no middle ground between these two forces: one either belongs to the people or works against them.” Many nonleftist writers, including those as famous as Shen Congwen, came under attack in this article. We are not sure whether Bian had read Guo Muoruo’s “electrifying” article, which “set the tone for later polemics,” before the publication of the two chapters. His activity exposed to some degree his insensitivity to the change of the political climate across the 1949 divide, and an optimistic vision of his future as a nonpartisan, liberal writer.

In March, 1949, Bian Zhilin finally returned to Beijing, the city where he first met and fell in love with Zhang Chonghe and had not seen since the beginning of the war. He experienced two jolts. First, Zhang Chonghe had left for the United States with her husband Hans Frankel two months earlier, marking an end to their decades old, but fruitless relationship. Second, the old capital city was hectically preparing to remold the intelligentsia into “cultural workers” for the new Communist machine. Like a prophetic omen of the (mis)fortune of many intellectuals in the coming decades, Shen Congwen attempted suicide on March 28, 1949. Although a failed attempt, the act uncannily foreshadowed the heavy price an intellectual would have to pay for asserting his or her freedom—the willful annihilation of self.

In July, 1949, Beijing held the first All-China Literary and Art Workers’ Representative Conference (Zhonghua quanguo wenxue yishu gongzuozhe daibiao dahui, hereafter the first
Wendaihui). Zhou Yang 周揚 (1908-89), then the deputy director of the Party’s Propaganda Department, made a report titled “Xin de renmin de wenyi” (Literature and art for a new people), which prescribed the “worker-peasant-soldier literature” as the most needed and only legitimate literature for the new era. A strong reminder of Guo Moruo’s black-and-white assertiveness, it also defined the “Yan’an Talks” as offering the only correct direction for the development of new literature; all other orientations and tendencies were “wrong.” The conference directly led to the establishment of the National Association of Literature and the Arts (Quanguo wenxue yishujie lianhehui) and the Writers’ Association (Zhongguo wenxue gongzuozhe xiehui), thus beginning an institutionalized control of writers and artists.

Bian Zhilin was quick enough to adopt and adjust to his newly assigned identity of “cultural worker.” In April, he was appointed professor of English literature in the Department of Western European Languages and Literature at Peking University, with Feng Zhi 馮至 (1905-1993) as the department chair. The two had many connections and were similar on various levels. Feng was Bian’s colleague at the National Southwest Associated University at Kunming during the Resistance War. He helped to collate Bian’s translation from French of Rainer Maria Rilke’s prose poem “Die Weise von Libe und Tod des Cornes Christoph Rilke” (The love and death of Cornet Christopher Rilke). Feng was inspired by the translation to write about Wu Zixu 伍子胥, a heroic figure in traditional Chinese history and folk tales. The idea came to fruition with the publication of his novel Wu Zixu in 1942.

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Moreover, Feng Zhi’s aesthetics and life philosophy of “Stirb und Werde” (Die and to become) also bears an affinity with Bian’s Weltanschauung of “ceaseless change.”

Like Feng Zhi, Bian Zhilin also seemed to have had an “unproblematic merge into the new state." In June, while Shen Congwen was excluded from it, Bian became a representative for the first Wendaihui, and afterward was selected as a member of the council of the Writers’ Association.

**Burning the Manuscript: Ambiguities and Ambivalences**

It was probably around this time that Bian burned the manuscript of *Mountains and Rivers.* In the following year, he started to produce poems in compliance with the political demands and the Maoist formula and in June 1956, he joined the Chinese Communist Party. The burning of the manuscript was not just a symbolic repudiation of his past political and intellectual views, it was also a gesture of cooperation to the Party and it ushered in a new phase of active social participation reminiscent of his time in Yan’an, yet another spiral movement in Bian’s life. Now he was turning from an alienation from the masses to an integration with them.

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201 In an essay in memory of Feng Zhi, Bian states clearly this affinity with Feng, see BZWJ, 2:102. Feng himself also acknowledges that Goethe’s thought helped him understand better the I Ching verse “The movement of heaven is full of power. Thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring” (tianxing jian, junzi yi ziqiang buxi 天行健,君子以自强不息). See Feng Zhi, “Lungede de huigu, shuoming yu bochong” 论歌德的回顾，说明，与补充 (“On Goethe”: review, clarification, and supplementar comments), in *Feng Zhi Quanji* 馮至全集 (Complete works of Feng Zhi) (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu cubanshe, 1999), 8:6.


203 In an essay, Bian Zhilin says it happened somewhere in the first half of the 1950s. It was for sure before 1956 because he became a CCP member that year. Considering Bian’s political engagement in 1949 and that he started composing new poetry in line with the prescribed proletarian literature in 1950, it is likely that he burned the manuscript between 1949 and 1950.
On the surface, the destruction of the manuscript would seem to be a forced relinquishing of his previous longstanding stance as an autonomous writer and an imposed declaration of his alliance with the new regime. However, it may also be seen as a continuity with his longtime search for a creative engagement with history and historical change. In fact, Bian Zhilin is ambivalent about the real reason for the (possibly) self-initiated burning of the manuscript, and that ambivalence is revealed in his own writings. In one place, Bian Zhilin attributes the reason to the “bankruptcy of his conciliationism” (tiaohelun de pochan 調和論的破產), though without any further clarification. But as my analysis in the previous chapter shows, the whole novel reveals Bian’s apolitical or even supra-political ideal of an alternative subjectivity and social intervention, a middle way that countered both the rightist and leftist ideologies. His obsession with the traditional “unity of the divine and man,” embodied in that I Ching verse, and his employment of an aesthetics of mutual mediation, all together expose this deep desire to reconcile the widening schism between self and external world that modernity had effected in China.

Obviously, this kind of conciliationism goes directly against the Party fiat. Modernist style and romantic individualism were labeled “bourgeois” inclinations and condemned by Zang Kejia 蕭乾 (1905-2004), a leader of the new poetry politics, in his Anthology of New Chinese Poetry 中国新詩選 (Zhongguo xinshi xuan) in 1950. Literary campaigns were brewing and liberal writers were under attack. In this context, Mountains and Rivers would constantly remind its author of its politically problematic hallmarks: dealing exclusively with

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204 Bian Zhilin, “Prefect to A Historical Record of the Carving of Insects,” in BZWJ, 2:452.
205 Which subverted binaries such as the East and the West, tradition and modernity, the real and the reflected.
206 Hong Zicheng, Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi, 56.
intellectuals, an outmoded and outlawed literary subject at the time; flaunting a modernist style; and smacking of romantic individualism, among other things. The burning would undoubtedly exculpate Bian from potential accusations and persecutions. Therefore, it was an act of self-protection through self-immolation. Whereas Shen Congwen attempted to assert his freedom negatively by removing himself altogether from the landscape of the new literary politics, Bian Zhilin destroyed a textual token of his self out of political pressure and fear of punishment.

However, in another place, Bian Zhilin says that the reason he burned the manuscript did not lie in “the fear of political problems, but rather in my own feeling that it did not measure up to the ‘worker-peasant-soldier literature’ policy at the time.” The remark immediately renders itself to be self-contradictory. The incompatibility with the “worker-peasant-soldier literature” policy was certainly politically troublesome and could lead to persecution. However, through these subtle words, Bian Zhilin seems to try to transfer the blame from the political climate to himself, as someone who was lagging behind the Zeitgeist. This at first could be seen as the traces of the internalization of the Maoist discourse of rectification centering around “public criticism” (piping 批評) and “self-criticism” (ziwo piping 自我批評). In the preface to *Mountains and Rivers* written decades later, he expressed further his deeply felt remorse: “I regret that I had wasted my time merely on writing about a group of intellectuals and some love stories in the stormy and violent war!”

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207 BZWJ, 2: 266. The original Chinese version is “倒不是害怕政治上有什麼問題，只因當時自嫌不符合主要寫工農兵的文藝政策.”
209 BZWJ, 1:270.
Nevertheless, in light of his “shock” after hearing about the Huai-Hai campaign in the winter of 1948, we should not deny a degree of sincerity in Bian’s self-denunciation. As discussed in the previous chapter, since the beginning of the war, Bian was seeking a harmonious relationship with the ceaselessly changing outside world, a creative link that could empower self to transform society while at the same time maintaining intellectual autonomy. The shock he experienced in 1948 was a mixture of surprise and excitement, but also an incarnation of the “bankruptcy” of his conciliationism, the disillusionment and disappointment of his well-planned salvation agenda. The nation he intended to save was to welcome its new birth with the help of the masses; the self he designed to save ended only in isolation and alienation. At the ends of both roads, there is dilemma.

The sharp turn—with hardly a moment of hesitation, made by Bian Zhilin to embrace the Communist cause could be an effort to break out of the dilemma and the existential crisis arising from his inability to fulfill his literary pursuits. In an unlikely manner, it is also a direct product and a culmination of his longtime creative engagement with history and historical change.

In this sense, we find another spiritual commonality between Feng Zhi and Bian Zhilin. Examining the former’s transition in 1949 from a liberal writer to a Party stalwart, Wang Xiaojue digs beneath the apparent disparities between the two positions and finds a hidden thread connecting them: “How to reconcile the relationship between the solitary poetic subject and the outside world and how to achieve spiritual transformation and self-fulfillment through aesthetic means are at the core of Feng Zhi’s poetic world.”\(^{210}\) The same concern

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also beset Bian Zhilin, but whereas Feng derived his inspirations from the poetics and philosophy of Rilke and Goethe, Bian looked to the ancient wisdom in traditional Chinese thought, especially the *I Ching*, for his guiding light.

In that light, real humanity means a process of constant self-transformation that is contingent on a dynamic and fruitful relationship with the external world. To live out the maxim of “*tian xing jian*” would require that one base selfhood on a continued interaction with things in the universe, including adjusting to a new political regime. Therefore, Bian’s post-1949 turn could be induced by not so much a genuine faith in the idea of the power of the people and the promise of Communist cause as an inner, deep belief in the necessity of change in time.

More cannily, there are some resonances between Maoism and Bian’s intellectual ideal. In the preface to *A Historical Record of the Carving of Insects*, Bian Zhilin uses the term “depersonalization” (*fei gerenhua* 非個人化) to summarize his pre-war poetics and life experiences. What Bian means by depersonalization is an aesthetic distance from the immediate experiences and flux of emotions. As T.S. Eliot says in his famous essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which Bian has translated in 1934,

… the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions…. the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways.\(^{211}\)

Bian’s spiritual mentor, André Gide, also has a similar saying: “the victory of a person is relinquishing his personality” (geren de shengli zaiyu gexing de fangqi 個人的勝利在於個性的放棄). In a poem in 1937 called “The Dressing Table” (Zhuangtai 化臺), Bian writes “The meaning of decoration is to lose oneself.” (zhuangshi de yiyi zaiyu shique ziji 裝飾的意義在於失卻自己). The word “decoration” reminds us of his Decoration (Zhuangshi ji 裝飾集), a collection of love poems dedicated to Zhang Chonghe. In the collection, he seems to always distance himself from his object of desire and avoid direct expression of the innermost emotions, even when they are at their most intense. He thus calls himself, tongue in cheek, “a cold-blooded animal” (lengxue dongwu 冷血動物). He thinks the failure of his love affair with Zhang Chonghe was due to his reserved nature, epitomized by the depersonalized tendency in his own love poems.

It’s important to note that Bian’s depersonalization is different from the “anti-individualism” (非個人主義) promoted by some leftists in the late 1920s and 1930s who advocated submitting individualism to collectivism. For example, Jiang Guangci 蒋光慈 (1901-1931) wrote: “Revolutionary literature must be an anti-individualist literature (非個人主義的文學), its heroes must be the masses, not individuals; it must be directed not toward

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212 Zhang Ruomin 張若名, Ji De de taidu 紀德的態度 (The attitudes of Gide) (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian, 1997), 19. For Gide, this self-denial has its own Christian origin and implications. For a better understanding between the balance between relinquishing self in order to be the real self, please refer to C.S. Lewis: “Other vices may sometimes bring people together: you may find good fellowship and jokes and friendliness among drunken people or unchaste people. But Pride always means enmity—it is enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God…. And He and you are two things of such a kind that if you really get into any kind of touch with Him you will, in fact, be humble-delightedly humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of all the silly nonsense about your own dignity which has made you restless and unhappy all your life.” See C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity and the Screwtape Letters, Complete in One Volume, chapter 8.

213 BZWJ, 2:444.
individualism, but toward collectivism… The duty of revolutionary literature is to show in this life struggle the power of the masses, to instill into people collective tendencies.”

That said, we can see how depersonalization could well develop into anti-individualism. The relinquishing of personality in a modernist practice is uncannily resounded in Mao Zedong’s exhortation for intellectuals to relinquish their self-identity as petit-bourgeois and sublimate themselves to the revolutionary cause of the masses. Furthermore, the interrelations between change and un-change, self and History also find an echo in the materialist dialectics of the Marxism and Leninism sinicized by Mao. Last but not least, Bian’s belief in progress also echoes the Maoist definition of a teleological movement of History with the ultimate victory of the masses and the eradication of class.

The ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding Bian’s ideological commitment to Communism is further demonstrated in his self-appraisal of his new poems of the 1950s. In 1950, as a response to the Korean war, Bian Zhilin wrote 22 poems in a month that were later published into a single collection called Fan yige langtou (Cross a wave). After land reform started in 1950 and 1951, he was sent to villages in Zhejiang and Jiangsu for socialist education. During his stay in the countryside, he was poring over volumes of Mao, Lenin, and Stalin and wrote five poems about land reform. In 1958, Bian participated in construction work at the Ming Tombs Reservoir (Ming shisan ling 明十三陵) near Beijing for one day and wrote six poems about the activity.

During the 1950s, Bian was also considering writing another long novel, to be called Yinian siji 一年四季 (Four seasons in a year). It would be about “the relationship between

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the individual and the collective.” The content is telling: even at the peak of his socialist acculturation, Bian was still concerned about the relationship between individual and collective, interiority and exteriority, and the projected title of the novel—the cycle of the four seasons—again reminds us of the cyclic movement of the universe, the fundamental and central idea of the novel *Mountains and Rivers* and Bian’s intellectual quest. However, because of intensifying political campaigns and his increasingly stretched schedule, the plan for the novel was never realized. *Mountains and Rivers* remained his only novelistic venture, though by this point he had likely already burned it.

All of Bian’s 1950s poems were written in compliance with the needs of the CCP and bore some resemblance to his poems in *Letters of Comfort.* Both collections were direct responses to historical events—socialist construction for the former, and the war for the latter; they utilize a simple language that could be intelligible to the proletariat; they also take the masses as the main subject. However, compared with *Letters,* the 1950s poems are more like political hymns and crude propaganda advocating the promises of socialism and exalting the power and virtue of the masses. The language and style are coarse and unrefined. They pale in comparison to Bian’s prewar poetry. The poem “Night March” (Yexing 夜行), which Bian thought had some authenticity because he had experienced marching at night in Yan’an, is typical.

To prevent your house 為了你的房子
To prevent my house 為了我的房子
To prevent everyone’s house 為了大家的房子

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216 *BZWJ,* 2:558.
From leaking moonlight and stars, 你得漏星漏月
You have been marching here, 你也跑到這裏
I have been marching here, 我也跑到這裏
All have been marching here, 大家都跑到這裏
To shoulder moonlight and stars, 甘願來披星戴月！
Vigilant for your homeland, 當心你的家鄉
Vigilant for my homeland, 當心我的家鄉
Vigilant for everyone’s homeland, 當心大家的家鄉
We act as moonlight and stars; 我們來做星做月;
You are making tomorrow remember 你叫明早晨忘不了
You are making tomorrow remember 我叫明早晨忘不了
You are making tomorrow remember 大家叫明早晨忘不了
A nightful of moonlight and stars. 一夜的明星亮月

(Nov. 29, 1950)²¹⁷

In Bian’s own evaluation of these poems, there is an ambivalence about them: at once the product of political assignment and something he is sincerely excited about. In more than one place, he refers to them as “duties” (renwu 任务) and does not hide his disgust toward them. For example, in the preface to A Historical Record of the Carving of Insects, he says the poems are “for the most part vehement to the point of coarseness, popular to the point of vulgarity, and so easily understood as to leave no food for thought. Now those days are gone. Those poems fulfilled their duty and then disappeared in a flash.”²¹⁸ In another retrospective essay, he says that was expressing his noble patriotism and sense of justice through “vulgar shouting and invectives.” What he wrote can be defined, at best, as “fulfilling a task.” Now (decades later) he finds them hardly readable, and does not even want to hear them mentioned.²¹⁹ At the same time, however, he also emphasizes frequently that these poems were produced with authenticity, with a heartfelt excitement. Just a few lines before his

²¹⁷ Original in BZWJ, 1:145. English translation was made by Bian himself and cited from Lloyd Haft, Pien Chih-lin: A Study in Modern Chinese Poetry, 80-1.
²¹⁸ “Prefect to A Historical Record of the Carving of Insects,” in BZWJ, 2:453.
²¹⁹ BZWJ, 2:265. 558.
denunciation of the poems, he says he “firmly believed in the mission of serving socialism, and willingly and self-consciously wrote for the masses.” He also remarks that his three bursts of poetic creation in the first seventeen years of the PRC era were “a sincere compliance with the times,” sincere to the point of “almost forgetting myself.”

The contradictory attitude toward these poems is most clearly revealed in a 1951 essay in which Bian Zhilin says that his Korean poems were both “political assignments” and “artistic creations.” Although it is a piece of self-criticism, it resonates with his longstanding desire to reconcile the two orientations, in Bian’s own words, “of responding to the call and being spontaneous, of expressing emotions (yanzhi 言志) and carrying the Way (zaidao 戟道).”

Ironically, readers at the time considered these poems, which Bian himself despised for being blatantly intelligible, too elusive and complex. His Korean poems were described as “needlessly obscure.” In response to the criticism, Bian wrote an article to defend himself, but it was never accepted for publication. His poems about land reform were criticized for being “understated or implicit in tone.” The Ming Tomb Reservoir poems were censured for being “abstract and implausible” in their imagery and lacking clear sympathy for “the people.”

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220 Ibid, 1:453.
221 Ibid, 2:218.
223 See Zhang Manyi, Bian Zhilin zhu yi yan jiu, 114.
224 See Zhang Manyi, Bian Zhilin zhu yi yan jiu, 113-117.
Conclusion

The poetic and political efforts Bian Zhilin made in accommodating to the new regime and the criticism his poems drew from readers all together exposed the embarrassing position of Bian Zhilin in that volatile political climate in the post-1949 China. Even the willingness to seek “union” with the masses would seem to be dubious for the totalitarian authority, who is always skeptical of the authenticity of intellectuals, whatever their political persuasions.226

In 1958, after the attacks on his Ming Tomb Reservoir poems, Bian put his poetic career on hold and became a full-time translator and scholar of English literature. For over two decades, he did not write any poems. The move is like an anticlimax that brings an end to his poetic career. It also adds one more layer of ambivalence to his pre-1958 attitude toward the Communist cause. If he full-heartedly endorsed the cause, why did he stop writing those poems, which were more politically correct than his earlier poems? If not, then his pre-1958 embrace of Communism could be nothing but a strategy for survival.

Yet the halting of his poetry writing could also symbolize another turn in the spiral movement of his life, which, in my view, is an intimate incarnation of the I-Ching teaching of ceaseless changing. Withdrawing into the relative quiet and semi-reclusive world of translation and academic research, Bian Zhilin was able, like Shen Congwen, who after his suicide attempt stopped writing fiction and went on to engage in research on traditional Chinese clothing, to construct a new self.

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226 This is testified by the fact that the boundary between the elite insiders and the underprivileged outsiders were shifting all the time, as Jenny Hangfu has shown in the cases of Sheng Congwen and Xiao Qian: “Stereotypes of an utterly coercive party machine and hapless intellectuals dissolve: collaborators could be dissidents, and the weak and vulnerable sometimes worked as connivers and accusers.” In Jenny Huangfu, “Roads to Salvation: Shen Congwen, Xiao Qian, and the Problem of Non-Communist Celebrity Writers, 1948-1957,” 42.
Conclusion

It is not enough, of course, to look only at Bian Zhilin’s poetry, or the aesthetic aspect of his works, to answer the questions Haft poses for himself at the beginning of his study: “How was it possible for a man like Pien Chih-lin to adjust to the changed cultural conditions of life in the People’s Republic of China? How could a poet of uncompromisingly high esthetic standards continue to maintain himself through the political turmoils, cultural purges, and mass movements of the period since 1949?” In other words, understanding how Bian Zhilin survived the upheavals of his time requires a more careful, systematic examination of his works within their historical and literary context. This has been the focus of my thesis.

My study has examined Bian’s works and life in the period of 1937-1958, with a focus on the novel *Mountains and Rivers*. The discussion of his wartime poetry helps us understand his dilemma as a poet who upholds artistic autonomy: writing propaganda poetry while maintaining a stance as an objective observer in the crowd. Writing the novel, on a certain level, is a response to this same dilemma.

In particular, Bian develops the concept of “spiral movement” to explain the dynamic yet harmonious interplay between the inner and outer orientations of self; it is an answer to his

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lifelong quest: the desire to restore a traditional unity of inner self and outer world. It is a hidden continuity lurking through his heterogeneous works and over different periods of life. It restores the “unity of the divine and man” in traditional Chinese thought, which empowers self to transform society. By writing the novel, Bian tells us that through creating an authentic and artistically excellent work, one can reconcile the dual orientations of self as being both autonomous and socially engaged, individual and national.

However, Bian’s later decisions to burn the novel and give up creative writing ironically indicate that a conciliatory vision of one’s position in history is increasingly difficult in totalitarian cultural politics. This is why he often mentions the “bankruptcy of his conciliationism” when recalling the self-initiated burning of the manuscript. Knowing the content and style of the novel, one is not surprised that he burned it at the beginning of the new socialist regime, which went great lengths to subdue non-leftist writers. We also recognize the ambiguities surrounding Bian’s post-1949 embrace of the socialist cause, which seems at once a strategy of survival and a genuinely felt emotion.

The period of 1937 to 1958 is thus a crucially important phase in Bian Zhilin’s career, bridging his prewar life and his post-1949 transformation. At the same time, it is also a tumultuous and rapidly changing time, when two consecutive wars brought to China disruption, devastation, desperation, and, paradoxically, new hope. Studying the individual case of Bian Zhilin’s struggles and transformations in this period also provides us with a window to investigate some larger issues in regards to Chinese modernity and intellectuals in times of crisis.
One such issue is how to reconcile the dual nature of self, a question that has haunted Chinese intellectuals since the beginning of Chinese modernity—a “problematic of self,” as Kirk Denton has called it. To be more specific, modern Chinese intellectuals are always “torn between equally powerful desires for self-assertion and autonomy and reintegration with some powerful cosmological other now designated Nation, Revolution, the Masses, or History.”²² Kirk Denton, *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling*, 263.

Bian’s construction of spiral movements is also an effort to reconcile the inner/outer tension emerging from and enhanced by modern Chinese cultural and intellectual discourses since the May Fourth. By emphasizing the change/un-change dialectic in the *I Ching*, he suggests that autonomous self-assertion and outward social engagement are not diametrically antagonistic, but are organically interconnected with and mutually reinforcing each other in traditional Chinese wisdom.

In his quest for a reconciliations between the two orientations of self, Bian Zhilin is different from many modern writers in a crucial way. Rather than appropriating Western thought, though he may unconsciously write under their influences, he draws heavily from the fountainhead of traditional Chinese thought, such as that in the *I Ching*. In his re-embrace of Chinese tradition, he diverges from the May Fourth generation, who hold a totalistic iconoclasm toward tradition. In both his poetry and the novel, Bian displays an aesthetics of fluidity that creatively assimilates the traditional and the modern, East and West; he breaks the conventional binary model of tradition/China and modernity/West. He suggests that tradition is a rich legacy in need of rediscovery and reevaluation; and tradition and modernity are not incompatible but are closely intertwined.

²² Kirk Denton, *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling*, 263.
The vitality, endurance, and autonomy he rediscovers in that *I Ching* verse, “The movement of heaven is full of power. Thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring”, project Bian’s hope for China and for humanity as they grapple with disillusionment and weariness during periods of devastating wars. The novel is thus also a response to the dehumanizing effects of that historical moment when Bian feels increasingly alienated and disillusioned. The parallel between man and heaven reflects his deep-rooted faith in the continuation and progress of human culture not only as a historical fact but also as the unfolding of a transcendent reality.

The reason that Bian is able to survive through the “political turmoils, cultural purges, and mass movements of the period since 1949” is perhaps because of his notion of spiral movement. Its significance to Bian cannot be emphasized enough, not only as an instruction to compose the novel *Mountains and Rivers*, but also a schematization of the world and a principle to guide his life. Acknowledging the inevitability and necessity of change, the concept allows Bian some flexibility in his transformations. I do not mean to suggest that Bian is an opportunist, because in his conceptualization, change is an expression of Dao. Among the changes, there is always the constant subject trying to “grasp” and be one with the Dao in order to be at the center of History. Therefore, the dialectic of change and un-change, the interplay of social engagement and inner autonomy, constitute Bian’s undulating, up-and-down life. There were times when he wrote semi- and crude propaganda poems, and other times when he devoted himself to an apolitical novel. Therefore, my dissection of Bian’s conceptualization of spiral movement also answers Haft’s two questions posed at the beginning of this conclusion.
In her review of Haft’s book on Bian Zhilin, Bonnie McDougall mentions the obvious reasons that poet Bian Zhilin has been unjustly neglected:

“Bian's life is of little obvious political or historical significance: he was neither persecuted in any spectacular way nor did he occupy prominent positions of power or influence. The greater and more characteristic part of his work contains little social documentation and does not encourage extra-literary quarrying.”

McDougall’s words expose a bias of modern scholarship, at least of modern Chinese literature, which tends to chase after big figures and prominent phenomena. Bian Zhilin’s case shows that the reasons why a person winds up being “of little obvious political or historical significance” is in itself important and intriguing for literary study, especially in the context of the dramatic history of modern China. For Bian, the relatively peaceful life he led under the socialist regime does not mean that he didn’t experience inner conflicts, unspoken ambivalences, and hidden sacrifices; the apparently smooth transition into socialism might have been built on the ashes of an immolated selfhood and an unfulfilled dream.

Furthermore, the study of Bian is important not only for enhancing our understanding of the individual writer, but also of the whole genealogy of Chinese modernity. His deep desire to be at the center of historical transformation has been a latent wish for modern Chinese intellectuals through millennia-long Confucian tradition. Bian’s dilemma surrounding the duality of self was the same dilemma many writers and intellectuals grappled within the war.

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229 Bonnie McDougall, review of Pien Chih-lin: A Study in Modern Chinese Poetry, by Lloyd Haft, Modern Chinese Literature 1, No. 2 (Spring 1985), 269-270.
230 Many names were wiped out from the literary history by the CCP since the anti-Hu Feng campaign and did not come into public sphere again until in the 1980s. They are still many waiting to be discovered today.
His aesthetic and ideological fluidity is emblematic of the tumultuous and rapidly-changing time in China’s modern history which intermingles modernity and tradition, the Chinese and the Western, realities and fantasies, aesthetics and politics, and hope and disillusionment.

Moreover, the current scholarship on Bian Zhilin as a poet is also in need of reappraisal. Bian is not only neglected as a poet, but also neglected as a multifaceted writer. By close-reading the novel, I attempt to overthrow the misconception of Bian as merely a poet. It also serves as a starting point to unravel the complicated world of Bian as an intellectual at ease with both Chinese and Western culture.

It is ironic that decades of Bian Zhilin’s efforts as a novelist finally aborted, not in the second Sino-Japanese War or the Chinese civil war, but in the new politics of chaos after the victory was clinched. It is a pity that what we have today is only an incomplete version of Mountains and Rivers, with many chapters irretrievably lost. However, in light of the maxim that emptiness is useful (無之以為用), which Bian himself liked to quote, the missing chapters can be seen as the emptiness within the narrative space of the novel which leaves its readers in suspense and allows them to fill in the space with their own thoughts. In a larger sense, the incomplete novel serves also as a symbol of the dramatic and violent period of time in the history of wartime and revolutionary China.

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231 For example, Bian’s friends He Qifang and Feng Zhi. Some other examples can be found in Carolyn FitzGerald, Fragmenting Modernisms: Chinese Wartime Literature, Art, and Film, 1937-49.

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Glossary

Ai Qing 艾青
Bian Zhilin 卞之琳
Bian Zhilin zhuyi yanjiu 卞之琳著譯研究
Bian Zhilin pingzhuan 卞之琳評傳
Chen Bingying 陳丙瑩
Shen Congwen 沈從文
Chengdu 成都
Chengdu, rangwo ba ni yaoxing 成都，讓我把你搖醒
Chen Geng 陳赓
cheng 誠
Chengzhang 成長
Chi fandong wenyi 斥反動文藝
Da Gongbao 大公報
da houfang 大後方
Dazhong wenyi congkan 大眾文藝叢刊
Ding Ling 丁玲
dong 動
Duanzhang 斷章
Fan yige langtou 翻一個浪頭
fei gerenhua 非個人化
Fei Ming 廢名
Feng Zhi 馮至
geren de shengli zaiyu gexing de fangqi 個人的勝利在於個性的放棄
Gei qianfang de shenqiangshou 給前方的神槍手
Gei shixing kongshiqingye de nonming 給實行空室清野的農民

Haimen 海門

Gei tai ganggui de qunzhong 給抬鋼軌的群眾

Hankou 漢口

Gei xibei de qingnian kaizhuangzhe 給西北的青年開荒者

Hanyuan ji 漢園集

Gei xiuzhu jichang de gongren 給修築機場的工人

He Long 賀龍

Gei yiqie laokuzhe 給一切勞苦者

He Qifang 何其芳

Gei yiwei ciche de guniang 給一位刺車的姑娘

Huihuan wangfu 回環往復

Gei yiwei duo ma de yongshi 給一位奪馬的勇士

I Ching 易經

Gei yiwei jitianjun zongsiling 給一位集團軍總司令

Ji Weiyun 紀未勻

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Jin dongnan 晉东南

Jingyang Gang 景陽岡

KangDa 抗大

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Kunming 昆明  Mingtian 明天
lengxue dongwu 冷血動物 nalai 拿來
Li Guangtian 李廣田 naoshenjing de yunyong 腦神經的運用
Li Jianwu 李健吾 piping 批評
Li Shangyin 李商隱 Qian 乾
Liwen 立文 Qianjia shi 千家詩
Liangong dangshi 聯共黨史 Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書
Liao Xuzhou 廖虛舟 qing 情
Lin Yutang 林語堂 qunzhong de hongda de huanchang 群眾的洪大的歡唱
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Lu Fen 芦焚 Ruobing 若冰
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tianren heyi 天人合一

tianxing jian, junzi yi ziqiang buxi 天行健，

君子以自強不息

tiaohelun de pochan 調和論的破產

Wang Guowei 王國維

Wang Pu 王璞

wei de xiang zhidao 為的想知道

weilao xin 慰勞信

Wei laoxin ji 慰勞信集

Wei laoxin ji—cong yumu ji shuoqi 慰勞信集—從魚目集說起

Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠

wenxie 文協

wenyi gongzuotuan 文藝工作團

Wo gechang Yan’an 我歌唱延安

Wuhan 武漢

Wu zhi yiwei yong 無之以為用

Wu Zixu 伍子胥

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zaidao 哉道
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Zhang Chonghe 張充和
Zhang Manyi 張曼儀
Zhao Shuli 趙樹理
Zhao Yi 趙翼
zhenren zhenshi 真人真事
zhihua 智化
zhixing hua yixiang 智性化思想
Zhongguo gongchandang zai minzu 中國共產黨在
zhanzhengzhong de diwei 民族戰爭中的地位
Zhongguo quanguo wenyijie kangdi xiehui 中國全國文藝界抗敵協會
Zhongguo xinshi xuan 中国新詩選
Zhou Yang 周揚
Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛
Zhuangshi ji 裝飾集
zhuangshi de yiyi zaiyu shique ziji 裝飾的意義在於失卻自己
Zhuangtai 妝臺
zi 姿
ziwo piping 自我批評
 Zuozhuan 左傳