Bei Dao 北島 (1949—)

Bei Dao, the pseudonym of Zhao Zhenkai 趙振開, is the leading poet of the Misty school (*Menglong pai* 朦朧派), which emerged from the Democracy Movement in China in the late 1970s. Experimenting with poetic language and form, Bei Dao cultivated a style of free verse with elusive imagery and elliptic syntax and structure that marked the development of modern poetry in post-1949 China. Following the 1989 killing of pro-democracy protestors in and around Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, Bei Dao lived in involuntary exile in Europe and the United States for a number of years. Since 2007 he has lived in Hong Kong.

Born in Beijing in 1949, Bei Dao graduated from one of China’s top secondary schools, but his formal education was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). After a brief political involvement in the Red Guard Movement, he was “re-educated” as a construction worker from 1969 to 1980. He started writing poetry in 1970 and self-published his first poetry collection, *Mosheng de haitan* 陌生的海灘 (*The Unfamiliar Beach*) in 1978. The same year, Bei Dao and Mang Ke 芒克 founded the underground literary journal *Jintian 今天* (*Today*) in Beijing. *Jintian* became the publishing venue for a new generation of poets, including the Misty Poets, until it was banned in 1980. Bei Dao also writes short stories and essays. His most significant novella, “Bo Dong 波動” (“The Wave”), first circulated in handwritten form in 1974, and was published in 1979.

Written as a reflection on the 1976 Tiananmen Incident, a massive outpouring of resentment against the Chinese leadership, Bei Dao’s most wildly translated and read poem, “Huida 回答” (“The Answer”), articulates his political dissent; the poem reappeared on posters during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Bei Dao’s involvement in the petition for the release of pre-democratic movement leader Wei Jingshen 魏京生and his popularity during the 1989 protests led to his two-decades-long involuntary exile in Norway, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, France, and the United States. After thirteen years in exile, he returned to China for his father’s funeral in 2001.

*The August Sleepwalker* (1990, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall), a complete translation of Bei Dao’s poems in *Bei Dao shixuan* 北島詩選(*Bei Dao’s Collected Poems*), provides a whole range of Bei Dao’s work written between 1970 and 1986. Breaking from the tradition of classical Chinese poetry, Bei Dao’s poems adopt a style of form and language that produces a series of imagery with no logical association and no direct reference to its own context, allowing both sensible and symbolic readings. In 1990 the American sinologist Stephen Owen critiqued Bei Dao’s poems for abandoning Chinese historical and linguistic specificity in favor of an international, modernist, translatese, spawning a series of debates on the effects of the internationalization of literary markets on literature, and on the place of authenticity and Chineseness in scholarship and criticism.

Bei Dao continues to write poetry and publish. The English translation *At the Sky's* Edge (2001, by David Hinton), is a bilingual collection of Bei Dao’s published works, *Forms of Distance* (1994) and *Landscape Over Zero* (1996), written between 1991 and 1996. In the Chinese collection of essays *Shijian de meigui*時間的玫瑰 (The Rose of Time) (2005), Bei Dao engages a stylistic and fruitful conversation with nine twentieth-century Western poets such as Federico Garcia Lorca, Paul Celan, and Boris Leonidovich Pasternak, by sketching their lives and translating their poems with his reading and comment. In addition to poetry, Bei Dao also writes essays to articulate his experience as a writer and as a dissident. *Lan fangzi* 藍房子 (Blue House) (2000), an English collection of essays translated by Ted Huters and Fengying Ming, accounts for Bei Dao’s encounters and friendship with poets overseas and in China and sketches his life in exile. A memoir, *Chengmen kai* 城門開 (City Gates Open) (2010), narrates and recalls the city of Beijing as it exists in Bei Dao’s memory. Scattered with quotations from his father’s diary and his mother’s remembrance, the book traces and narrates Bei Dao’s experience of growing up in Beijing during the Three Years of Great Chinese Famine and the Cultural Revolution. His most recent work in English, *Shijian de meigui*時間的玫瑰 (The Rose of Time) (2010), which includes fifteen new poems as well as selections of Bei Dao’s poems written over the last four decades, reflects on the themes he developed over his career and articulates his aesthetics of poetic language and writing. Bei Dao’s poems, having been translated into more than thirty languages, not only provide a taste of contemporary Chinese poetry, but also proffer a glimpse of how modern Chinese poetry is circulated and read in the world.

**Chronology of Selected Works:**

Poetry Collections

*Notes from the City of the Sun: Poems by Bei Dao* (1983)

*The August Sleepwalker* (1990)

*Old Snow* (1991)

*Forms of Distance* (1994)

*Landscape Over Zero* (1996)

*Unlock* (2000)

*At the Sky's Edge* (2001)

*The Rose of Time: New and Selected Poems* (2010)

Short Story Collection

波動 *Bo dong* (*Waves*)(1985)

Non-Fiction Books

藍房子 *Lan fangzi* (*Blue House*) (2000)

失敗之書 *Shibai zhi shu* (*The Book of Failure*) (2004)

午夜之門 *Wuye zhi men* (*Midnight’s Gate*) (2005)

時間的玫瑰 *Shijian de meigui* (*Rose of Time*) (2005)

青燈 *Qing deng* (*Cyan-blue Light*) (2008)

城門開 *Chengmen kai* (*City Gates Open*) (2010)

古老的敵意 *Gulao di diyi* (*Old Hostility*) (2012)

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