

The Poetry of Bai Hua 柏桦

Selections: 1981-1993

Bai Hua was born in 1956 in Chongqing in Southeast Sichuan. <An Expression> was one of his first and most famous poems, initially published in 1982 in *The Born-Again Forest* 次生林, an unofficial Sichuan poetry journal, and republished in other unofficial journals elsewhere in China and in several officially published anthologies in later years. He was also one of the editors of the Chongqing-based unofficial journals *Day By Day Make It New* 日日新 and *The Red Flag* 红旗. Bai's first officially published poetry collection appeared in 1988, and in 1996 his memoir *The Left Side – Lyric Poets of the Mao Zedong Era* 左边: 毛泽东时代的抒情诗人 was published as a series in an official literary journal in Tibet. He has written little poetry since 1994.

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An Expression [表达] October 1981

I want to express a mood
a white sentiment
This mood can't speak for itself
Neither can you feel its presence
But it exists
It comes from another celestial body
Only for this day, this night
does it come into this strange world

It's desolate yet beautiful
dragging a long shadow
but it can't find another shadow to speak with

If you say it's like a stone
cold and silent
I'll tell you it's a flower
The scent of this flower moves stealthily under the night sky
Only when you die
does it enter your plain of awareness

Music is incapable of carrying this mood
Dance can't express its form
You can not know the number of its hairs
and don't know why it is combed in this style

You love her, she doesn't love you
Your love began last year on the eve of spring
Why not this year at the dawn of winter?

I want to express a mood of the motion of cells
I want to ponder why they rebel against themselves
bringing to themselves odd stirrings and rage

I know that this mood is hard to express
like the night, why does it fall at this moment?
Why do she and I fall in love at this time?

Why do you die now?
I know that the flow of blood is soundless
Though tragic
this iron-paved earth will not be melted by it

The flow of water makes sound
The crackle of a tree makes sound
A snake wound around a frog makes sound
This sound presages what?
Does it mean to pass on a particular mood?
or express a philosophy contained within it?
or is it those sounds of crying
Those inexpressible wails
The sons and daughters of China have wept beneath the ancient walls
The true children of Christ have wept in Jerusalem
Tens of thousands have died at Hiroshima
the Japanese have wept
Those who died for a just cause, and the timid have also wept
But all of this is hard to understand

A white mood
an inexpressible sentiment
on this night
has already come into this world
beyond our vision
within our central nerve
it silently shrouds the entire universe
it won't die, neither will it leave us
in our hearts it goes on and on.....
It can't be calmed, can't be sensed and known
because we don't want to die

A Quiver [震顫] September 1982

The black night sleeps soundly here
Nothing can happen
In this entire room only the waves upon the piano speak softly like a song

When you face an empty, motionless doorway
you'll be alarmed, frightened, you'll suddenly lose confidence
you'll jump nimbly aside
curling up in a corner of the room
within a minute a thousand dark thoughts flash by

At the end of the corridor a young girl washes her snow-white skin
murmuring she pours out her heart to you
loneliness is the poet's empress
the sound perplexes him
shadows are already swaying in the window

The lonesome scents of the flower garden
blowing into your thin breast
you will suddenly open the curtains
and happily take a peek
at the vast increase of lights outside

The flames are still slowly falling
not a trace of wind here
the sound gradually disappears
you will suddenly think of the Tokyo philharmonic
at this moment it is busily performing
you think of Alexandria's vast summer nights
the boiling seawater erodes the blockhouses of antiquity
a golden-haired maiden of Rome
has arrived on the teetering coast
listening closely to the angry roar of the tiger in the depths of the thick forest
she still smiles serenely
waiting for your song, your bitter wail
on a winter night next year you will kill a wild beast with a pistol

Each evening you spend half the night in meditation
you can't imagine how large the flocking throngs of thoughts are
waltzes, snow-bright lamp lights
like a swarm of bees roiling in your head, the full-figure of white skin
the stranger who's turned his head toward you
an elegant rigid corpse

trains, black clouds and waves bearing down on you
you won't be able to bear it
you'll suddenly drop heavily on the couch
clutching at your chest you'll gasp, rage, worry or forget
you'll die for a night
After a long while you'll revive
the sound comes toward you again
very near, almost brushing up onto your face
it's breath and odor enter your body
surrounding you entirely
no matter what, you must die tonight
because she will be coming tomorrow
the dawn already passed on her distant seaside love-song

Spring [春天] April 1984

The little homesick moon disappears
a more secretive beauty and a man
and also that anxiety which I cherish
are fixed in place for the cutting edge of early morning's five o'clock knife
Someone's blood is returning
repeating the unreal sound of a bird

Before I could stop it, the dawn had already condescended
the edge of the divine edict thrust
forth -- the day, a sail, an apple tree
eyes beautiful as fine rain
the sun's attempts to enter water
or the memory of a fine grain of sand

The sharp crack of a rifle
a white poplar grows from the hollow of one's palm
the pure, secret decree passes down
the mountain valley
is set aflame by the sunlight
you begin to feel perplexed
and your noises startle the sleeping black-skinned girl

The angered rose is already pregnant
and clutches at the glove of the irritated soldier
walking out from a dream, gazing courageously from afar
cutting open the skin of the sublime
and along with the tree achieving your direction

You grow so fast
as quickly as a stone, a wave and a speeding train
a dark red Li Bai¹ comes up out of the wine
at this moment it's not your lips that drink
but another pair that drink you
that have drunk the Tang dynasty poetry of the South
and drunk the fiery red scream of the tiger

Your mouth is the wind, a cuckoo, the love of the sea
overflowing with elegant stupidity
The roar forms a transparent nipple

¹ Li Bai 李白(701-762 A.D.), also latinized as Li Po, flourished during the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.) and is one of China's most beloved poets.

and takes in its fill of the setting sun's second-thoughts
the heavy nose and the childhood sadness

You sob as soon as you see the door
at eight o'clock in the evening landforms will confine you
other fingertips provoke you too.
an event beneath your armpits becomes an untouchable dampness

This brutal dizziness will soon be over
a blue hair-ribbon and a butterfly knot cast down the final limits
a nest of snakes soars up like the crown of a tree
imparting the confidence of forgotten time

The stars hint at fate
the phosphorus and the cobblestones blow apart the years
blow apart the rolling thick hairs of the spiraling instant
at this moment, by a strange window, I utter my monologue
just as the scene thickens I fall silent

Girls are forever breaking free of their encirclement
Spring is pulling out
antiquity's drawbridge rises high
defeat at a distance

Precipice [悬崖] May, 1984

A city is one person
two cities, the one direction
the outskirts of loneliness wait soundlessly

A strange trip
timid but aimlessly pressing forward
to pay back for some old atmosphere
restraint is murdering time

An address has a death in it
don't climb up to the attic at night
that vague white neck
will turn its head toward you

At this moment if you make a poem
it's the same as building a sunken ship
a black tree
or a stretch of dyke on a rainy day

The exercise of restraint becomes unfathomable
a riddle of passage
the ears of a courtesan that can never be opened
the inexplicable departure of will power

Your organs wither suddenly
Li He² cries out in pain
the hand of the Tang will not return

² Li He 李贺(791-817 A.D.), also latinized as Li Ho, flourished as a poet during the Tang dynasty.

Afternoon [下午] August, 1985

An anxious silence
you can already feel
in the open pages of a piece of prose
in the sounds of a song curling along the beams
yes, I've taken note
but there's one more important point
someone who walked in and walked out

Before sleeping you're lost in thought
what is that useless mirror staring at
the apple that is about to be sliced open
or a shallow brown dream

You sleep soundly in the afternoon
and your disposition turns to alcohol
yes, I've observed it, all of this
including the shade of beauty in the curtain
your dreams are fording the river

This is the best time
but be careful, even though you're at ease
because danger won't speak
it's like a thing, an event
soft and gentle as someone's shadow
going in and out

Summer's Still Far Away [夏天还很远]

Day after day passes away
something approaches me in the dark
sit for awhile, walk a bit
see the leaves fall
see the sprinkling rain
see someone walk along the street, cross it
Summer's still far away

Really fast, vanishing as soon as it's born
on an October night all that's good enters in
too beautiful, entirely unseen
a huge calm, like your clean cloth-shoes
by the bed, the past is dim, warm and gentle
like an old box
a faded letter
Summer's still far away

A chance encounter, you probably don't remember
it was a little cold outside
my left hand was tired
all the while it was secretly moving to the left
remote and thoroughgoing
that single silly thought of you
Summer's still far away

Never again, losing my temper or loving passionately at a touch
gather up the bad old habits
year after year depressed
the small bamboo building, a white shirt
are you in the prime of life?
it's rare to reach a resolution
Summer's still far away

Who [谁]

Names we can never know
vanish outside our bodies
the modesty in the stoop of someone's body
bit by bit is dying away
all this is so like a certain person

That somebody inside this dark thought
fallen leaves and sunlight are sprinkled behind him
is that you
or some other thing

During a strange encounter
I seem to have touched your finger
but I was thinking of other things then
shaking hands, conversation, agitation
this isn't enough
we should have forgotten it long ago
just like sleep and work that can't be avoided

Day and night seem cramped
I also think they're not enough
so many expressions are changing
but that someone vexes me

Just what is he
a gaunt face, an acute hatred
an abnormal grief glimmering exquisitely

The someone within this dark thought
probably appears on a dark staircase
suddenly turning on a flashlight, illuminating silence
he probably roams in a flower garden late at night
or fixes his eyes on a mirror, motionless

He speaks
he murmurs the name of a book
but this thing doesn't know him
you weep and yell
at something that enrages you or something from before

Or Something Else [或别的东西]

The nail suddenly breaks through at the edge of blackness
longing to fly, the pupil of the eye and the door
signal an impulse in some way
it might be a huge pore
a tuft of hairs standing on end
a piece of fine skin
or the warm sound of a typewriter
it might also be the blade edge of an inlaid dagger
a delicate raging flame
a suddenly vigorous sprig of camellia
or the dangerous degeneration of early summer

The delicate rose and the black cloud enter into the same breath
stretch to the moonlit balcony
and the juncture of the tree top
the unbounded corridors of your heartbeat
waiting for
kisses, hugs, to be strangled
a small, concealed snow-white hand
and the trembling apple delivered on the wind

The murdered shadow
becomes a gloomy sleeve-cuff
it sticks close to you
full of death's precious musk
it transforms into red lips
and adheres to you
the mossy atmosphere makes your nose dizzy, makes it droop

At this moment you slice open the night with solemnity
with your kneecap smash in memory
all of your enthusiastic confidence and timidity
turns to vapor
 a wave
 a season
 or tiger

Jonestown [琼斯敦]

The children can start
this night of revolution
night of the next life
night of the People's Temple
The rocking center of the storm
has already tired of those yet to die
and is anxious to carry us off in that direction

The enemy of our hallucinations
makes repeated assaults on us
our commune is like Stalingrad
the sky is full of a Nazi smell

The vortex of hot blood's moment has arrived
emotions are breaking through
fingers are being jabbed in
glue is thrown across all the classes
the patience of vain hopes does battle with reaction

Through spring until fall
sexual anxiety and disappointment spreads everywhere
bared teeth gnaw on unapproachable times
the yen for munitions in boy's chests explodes
the taboo on eccentricity rips and bites back our tears
See! the ravenous mob is already incensed

A girl is practicing suicide
due to her madness, her beautiful hair tending to get sharper and sharper
laid so tenderly across her helpless shoulders
it is a sign of her being seventeen
the only sign

And our spirits' symbol of first-love
that dazzling white father of ours
happy bullets score direct hits on his temples
his naive specter gushes still:
faith cures, "bushido"
the beautiful body of a coup d'etat

The mountain of corpses has already stopped the rehearsals
a loud voice in an unheard-of silence swears an oath:
pass through crisis

drill your thoughts
make a sincere sacrifice

Confronted by this white night, the concentrated betrayal of flesh
this last white night of humanity
I know that this is also my night of a painful bumper harvest

A Beauty [美人]

I hear a solitary fish blaze red
a respectable street
the sound of bullets entering the firing chambers?
of course there's also a herd of horses trampling a curve into the air

The parade to the execution of beauty, you must salute me
death has already put a stop to the lot of you
and from deep in the hills is beginning to surge into the city

And from out of our flesh, some hues
some feigned seriousness and holiness
overwhelming our bodies

A faulty detonator is set in the belly of midnight
children search for decadence amidst edible things
as a matter of form young people step up to struggle

Whoever blows now
that person is fire
that person is convulsing the pulse of a blooming flower

These climbing organs, the ghosts on my fingernails
grow in alcohol
the rain knocks incessantly on our skulls

Hey! forest of the heart, the nitpicking weather
pushes up-close and reviews our tears
the clay of the times makes our bones

Throughout one entire autumn, Beauty
I bore witness
you drove out
our clean, rising hot blood
and sunk it under

Past Affairs [往事] October 1988

These innocent envoys, they wear
summer clothes in the way they usually do
and sit here, beside me
smiling
exposing a little of the shy breasts of old age to me

The journey that was once so ardent
all that unknowable weariness
stops in this strange moment
this well-intentioned, tear-jerking moment

So much bowing to be done in old age
standard speech, the local version (do you really need to?)
soft, sexy false teeth
a raging, fiery voice

I've pulled together my energies and seen
the cool breeze of middle age
it stirs the expression in those eyes that come upon
this heartsick sentiment
this candid kindness
this romantic literary affair belongs strictly to a past age

Hey! These innocent envoys
they're always moving
knocking softly on doors
breasts bursting with love and reverence
arriving in my life of too little experience

Summer. Ahh, Summer [夏天。呵，夏天] June, 1988

The summer, its blood has increased speed
this afternoon, patients cherish stones
the orders are repeated, and the repeated paralysis
This heat! Too hot. Can't take it!

Here stands this summertime she
swearing an oath, the shy she
I can't breathe, can't breathe
It's too hot in the left wing, a mindless kind of heat

Here unconventional poems, icy poems are performed
the street becomes soft, difficult
she puts in the white teeth of knowledge
the brilliance, the white, continuous white

Once she represented a silent people
exposed one breast
attempted dying

Take another look at her body, this swooning delicate body
lying among brittle yellow leaves
dispensed with, all on its own

Look again, she's opening fire on the park
firing on herself, on laughter

Look again, she's passing out flowers to everyone
whoever wants them gets them

Look again, a deserted playing field, the wide campus
and look at it again. Summer. Ahh, summer

Ten Nights **Ten Nights** [十夜 十夜] September, 1989

Ten nights, for ten nights consecutively
Autumn's been drawing near, leaves turning yellow
your teacher is wasting away
my books, my body
Hey, my, my, my
every hour of mine, every second
my stern left eye is throbbing in place of my heart

Ten nights, all that is weighty has gone to sleep
ten nights, after sex the panther and the green of spring
all of the South and the North asleep

Ten nights, the road is like a dictatorship keeping its watch on a distant place
for ten nights, the Young Pioneers have forgotten their ideals

For ten nights consecutively, I lay on my bed
for ten nights in a row, ten nights constricted the atrium to my heart

Ten nights, ten nights
ten nights remolded my looks
the women of the ten nights greeted my climaxes

Ten nights, ten nights
with a look of shame I arrived at your core
I let both hands fall and plead for your forgiveness

For ten evenings, I heard another kind of song
for ten evenings, I heard the trees
booming in the sky I name

Life [生活] September 30, 1990

Life, you're so broad, like a road
carrying the smell of political power rushing on to a place far-off

The far-off place, where the people of all nationalities sing
about a blue sky and a open square on the top of big lips and high-pitched voices

The square, where endless and dejected farmers are reared
over the four seasons, ferocious beasts and starvation loiter

Everything is far off, nothing is of any importance
life itself, death itself, enthusiasm of itself

Like a little orphaned son sitting alone on the earth
like an undernourished cloud, like oh ...

Like life, just stripping bamboo, destroying rice, killing pigs
like living, only in your sleep, squaring accounts in your sleep

Reality [现实] December 1990

This is gentle, not the rhetoric of gentleness
this is disgust, disgust itself

Hey! Reading, your prospects, the body's turn
all of it is slow

In the long night, reaping isn't done out of necessity
in the long night, speed should be omitted

And winter is probably spring
and Lu Xun probably Lin Yu-tang³

³ Lu Xun 鲁迅 and Lin Yu-tang 林玉堂 were writers who flourished prior to 1937 and Japan's invasion of China. Lu is held up as the supreme example of a “serious” writer, while Lin was considered to be his opposite number.

In Memory of Zhu Xiang [纪念朱湘]⁴ February, 1991

I noticed your form at a glance
a figure raving in the autumn wind
but so serene in a book

A solitary seemingly unintelligent drinker
a martyr of fathomless sensitivity
before dying he drinks another large cup
bows his body down and enters into that long, inevitable sleep

I know, since you were a child you've practiced the martyr's bearing
your green spring had its fill of roving through gossip
but your songs can only belong to heaven

Ach, why did this exemplar only come to light at death
and then leave us busy memorializing
busy talking, corresponding
busy with all that, up until 1989

⁴ Zhu Xiang was one of China's better modern poets prior to 1949.

Family [家人] February 1991

Life is eating at home
and someone opening his mouth
and saying: "I'm Goethe,
I don't eat."

His wife, sometimes hot sometimes cold
sits sadly beside him

What follows....
what follows is a toast to this Goethe business
one should show respect
there's an embarrassed P.E. teacher sitting here, too

Please don't ask me to eat again
please put a cork in it
act like a country hick who rushes to Beijing
to take up a career flogging buttons

His wife runs hot and cold
sitting sadly beside him

An Old Poet [老诗人] February 1991

Spring, March, the good feelings of fields and gardens
in another ten days, he'll be fifty

He says there's still a line of poetry torturing him
No, it's a word's nagging at him

His hair is wild, like the fatherland
again his corpulence agitates the tabletop

Literature, slack and undisciplined literature
the fatherland, he sees it as an after-hours patria

But he says:
because it's vulgar, literature should be restrained
for this reason the fatherland ought to export it

The Classic of Aging [衰老经] April 1991

Weary but not weary enough
I'm experiencing winter

Outside a room
the dull lights of the railroad, in the distance

A distant place, distant people vomit up green springs
and haul ropes around amusingly

Hey! I must thank you
I now know the times

But winter hasn't replaced brief summer days
but for all of three weeks I've been stuck in the collective

The Future [未来] December 1990

This roving thing should go back
loneliness has already hurt him

His unfortunate liver wallows among fish and pride
teary alcohol is added to his unfortunate youth

Hey! does this anger need to grow
haven't you already cursed enough people

Birds, beasts, flowers, trees, spring, summer, fall, winter
all astounded at the little madman

Reds redder, whites whiter
yellow on top of yellow, he's his own corpse to be

Ode to Life [生活颂] 1993

A cool June

I note down trivialities about "meaning":

First there is the news out of Germany:

"We're studying vending skills,
we'll start with Mercedes-Benz,
and hum some popular Taiwanese songs."

Impractical homesickness or ideas on the fatherland
I declare him a postage stamp from a distant land
He isn't the Trotsky of that far-off place!

Later someone from the publishing house comes (a fat guy)

wants me to photocopy Hongkong magazines:

"Deng Xiaoping Educates the Underworld"

"Deng Xiaoping Warns that the Problem is with Agriculture"

"Deng Xiaoping Talks about China-US Relations"

Must be quick about it, the book market's off-season has begun
he also talks about compiling a book, "Cultural Treasury of China"

Following this, an emergency in Anhui province:

the older brother of a poet has killed himself
naked from the waist down, surrounded by oqlers
he brings in a poet who works in the judicial branch
to clear-up the suicide issue
and his other older brother, a reporter
makes the rounds of the high-level departments for two months

There's also a great pile of realities

listening to music and fitting-out the apartment, false tears and sex
drink to get fat and get rid of the dull and the withered
mass competitions are boring
cheat people with love, especially for money
some people specialize in talking dirty
some specialize in smiling at all you say

There're still some things (within the scope of daily lessons)

women all go for dogs
children all throw mud on walls
every morning an old geezer shouts:
"The eight elders are all shameless" (in Shandong dialect)
and my slovenly friend is busy with pesticides

even says he'll be receiving a large gift of cash this year

A cool June passes like this
my life's "meaning" rolls on into July

Song of Cotton [棉花之歌] 1993

Day follows day, so many tomorrows
life gathers into a factory
cotton flourishing, strand upon strand

The workers sing of cotton
the workers purchase cotton
they don't sell out on cotton

Great quantities of cotton, cash cotton, love cotton
all gather into a ballade of middle age
the cymbals and drums of collectivism
the Silent Night of the flesh
the joy of every household

Cotton is the song of the people's livelihood
cotton doesn't lose sleep
cotton is the mother of autarky
when the coastal cities raise their wings
cotton abandons the sea and goes continental

Jolly, laughing cotton has come
jolly, laughing three-meals-a-day have come
the jolly, laughing working class has come

Day follows day, so many tomorrows
life gathers into a factory
cotton flourishing, strand upon strand

Bai Hua: A Chinese Lyricist

“I believe that the rhythms of a poem, like those of life, are formed naturally in [the rhythms of our] breathing. Once a poem forms a particular atmosphere, the written word blurs and dissolves into a flavor or a sound. At that moment the poem attempts a fortuitous transcendence, and, on the strength of this, approaches the natural and the pure. However, even the greatest poem rarely achieves this purity, and, therefore, the joy that it brings us is limited [and gives rise] to regret. In this sense, poetry can not be written, but only the forms that we employ in circumstances under which we are left without other alternatives.”⁵

Enigmatic?

Trite?

Although Bai Hua may have very little to say that is new (like most of the rest of us most of the time), I have always been impressed by his way of restating the familiar in unfamiliar ways. His poetry, his unique brand of lyricism features cognitive angles and perspectives that are regularly askew. Sometimes it is deliberately executed as in <An Expression>, the poem which brought Bai Hua's name to the attention of China's poetry lovers, and in which he addresses the inadequacies of language, the difficulties of being lyrical when so much that we feel is inexpressible. And, yet, lyrical is what Bai Hua undoubtedly is, even if his lyrics are those of inadequacy and uncertainty as he searches incessantly for those fortuitous linguistic moments in which he can find and produce emotive purity and naturalness. For Bai Hua, poetry is a search for the words to express the ineffable, the same search that the Chinese language has known as poetry for 3,000 years -- a fact the Bai is all too aware of.

Bai Hua was born on January 21, 1956, in Chongqing on the banks of the Yangtse River in Sichuan province. Bai is one of a very small number of younger Chinese poets who can speak a language other than Chinese. In 1981, he graduated from the Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute and has been an English teacher at various universities and institutes in China since that time.

During the few days I have spent in Bai Hua's company in Nanjing, he left me with a very deep impression of a poet so wrapped up in poetry, both his own and others', that at times his unbridled enthusiasm was embarrassing. Despite his avowed war with words, a war he admits can never be won, he seems to never tire of the fight and comes to the world with the innocence and naivety of a child. While he is not ignorant of the world -- as is clearly indicated by such poems as <Jonestown>, <Life>, <In Memory of Zhu Xiang>, <Ode to Life> and <Song of Cotton> -- it is specific circumstances and their incumbent lyrical possibilities which motivate his poetry and provide the reader with a key to an understanding of it.

While these translations faithfully recreate the physical form and structure of Bai's poetry in terms of stanza length and so on, what is lost is the tonal musicality within lines, between lines and between stanzas, a characteristic that has always been a hallmark of Bai's poetry. He is one of the few 'younger' Chinese poets to still make use of rhyme on a more-or-less regular basis. Assonance, consonance, tonal grouping, meter -- anything that might lend to that

⁵ 中国当代实验诗选 [A Selection of Contemporary Chinese Experimental Poetry], Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡 & Wang Jiabin 王家新 ed., Shenyang 沈阳: 春风文艺出版社 [Spring Wind Literature and Arts Press], 1987: 117.

"particular atmosphere", to the "flavor and sound" that Bai seeks to recreate with his words is brought into play.

Instead of following Bai's enigmatic credo, with which I opened these remarks, with equally ambiguous comments of my own, let us turn to the work itself for enlightenment of sorts. I may be doing Bai Hua no favors by opening this collection of poems with <An Expression>. For, while this poem may be his best known work, it may be the most flawed and immature work of those I have selected. I have translated the poem in its original form and have also offered a suggestion for an alternative conclusion to the poem. Written as the poem is in 1981, it can be seen as a response to the poetry of that time, a poetry which was not yet free of the political shackles that required explicit social engagement. What begins as a highly personal expression of a sentiment (which at the same time is universalized through the pronouns you, she and I) is suddenly (and, I think, unnecessarily) wrenched into the realm of hackneyed imagery and the cant of politics [the last two stanzas]. The revised conclusion offered on the following page is, I believe, faithful to the poem's first six stanzas and provides a satisfying unity. Perhaps Bai was still not sure of the validity of personal expression in 1981, when he wrote this poem. Perhaps he was also not sure of his audience's ability to process and comprehend lyrical ambiguity rooted in purely sensory experience (though this poem also employs more obvious symbolism than his later poetry).

Much of Bai's earlier poetry is concerned with the various difficulties of poetic expression. The theme of lyrical inadequacy is continually plumbed, and Bai mercilessly throws himself into the shadow of the Tang dynasty, the acknowledged period of Chinese poetic excellence, when he conjures up images of poets such as Li Bai [<Spring>] and Li He [<Precipice>], and collateral imagery [such as, "a stretch of dyke", "drawbridge" and so on]. Both these poems end in the poet's painful defeat -- he hasn't the words to challenge the excellence of past lyricism.

The poem <Jonestown>, inspired by the November 18, 1978, collective suicide of 914 Americans in Guyana, South America, appears to mark a turning point of sorts for Bai Hua. Here, as the final lines of the poem announce, Bai has taken his inspiration from an actual event. Occasional poetry, poetry based in events either past or present the details of which inspire emotions that lead to a poetic response, comes to play a greater role. In this sense, Bai's poetry becomes less abstract and more accessible to readers who are now better able to sense more completely the emotions of the poet. In general, his poems are shorter, images are more compact and intense. Clearly, Bai no longer doubts his own abilities and no longer questions the limits of lyrical expression. And, just as obviously, readers are better able to locate the poet and his vision, or lyric impulse, and retrieve their own experience of the poem.

For reasons that can only be based on differing and restrictive aesthetic tastes, very little of Bai Hua's poetry has found its way into communist party-controlled, establishment literary journals. However, he has been prominently featured as a contributor to numerous "samizdat" poetry journals over the past ten years (1985-1995), and is well represented in the handful of good poetry anthologies that have been published during times of political-cultural relaxation in 1986, 1989 and 1993. Although he has been invited to attend international poetry conferences, Bai has never received permission to do so -- it is unclear as to the reason why, for he is neither an "underground" poetry activist nor overtly political.

In recent months Bai has published a number of essays related to his own experience of other Chinese poets of previous generations and his own generation. While Bai's writing has been of an exceptionally high quality, it appears that he is one of an increasing number of poets who

have turned away from writing poetry to writing about themselves and poetry. For some, this has become a matter of economic survival in a world where poetry simply does not pay and Chinese poets can no longer afford the bohemian lifestyle many were still able to enjoy up until 1990. In many cases, the poets and poetry that have been lost as a result of the social chaos and economic readjustment in China today will not be missed. Bai Hua, however, does not belong to this category. His unique voice will be sorely missed if he also is flattened beneath China's ominous political-economic steamroller and the vapid, CCP-controlled "spiritual civilization" that accompanies it.