

Bi Feiyu's Voice

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In Bi Feiyu's stories there is a certain desire that is easy to see but rarely fully understood: the implied author calls on all of us to attend to him, to listen to what he has to say. He seems to emphasize that in his world, it's difficult—nearly impossible, even—for anyone to speak out without being utterly neglected.

Of course, every writer has this desire, which contains, deep within, the impulse towards both self-affirmation and the affirmation of others. The impulse is satisfied through writing, which in turn holds out hope to gain the attention of the reader. The writer then waits anxiously to see if these hopes will come to fruition. Every writer is a child, hoping for attention and praise from his or her parents.

But in this, too, Bi Feiyu is a special case.

Bi Feiyu isn't, in truth, a writer who lends himself to translation. Bi Feiyu in any other language is simplified to about half what he is in Chinese, while for readers of

Chinese he leaves a deep impression. What we discern so clearly is his voice—the Bi Feiyu voice.

Of course, many writers form their own voices. Sometimes, this voice becomes a path we all know, a path leading to certain views of the world. In China, among the writers who have managed to continue writing since the golden age of the 1980s, the secret to a long-lasting career has been the development of a voice that transcends the purely personal to become a contribution more generally used—frequently abused—in the Chinese language.

As far as the writer is concerned, this is both great fortune and great misfortune. The writer has exerted influence on his or her language, but is also dissolved into the vast ocean of that language. The causes and repercussions of this fortune/misfortune are beyond our scope here. Bi Feiyu is not a writer of the 1980s, but rather one of the few writers to have kept up a successful career begun in the 1990s. If he has not had

the good fortune of exerting his influence on the language, this is as much the result of a conscious choice made on his part as it is of the trends of the day—at the very least, he has tried to avoid the misfortune of dissolution of his voice into the general language. Even in terms of the art of fiction, Bi’s language is unique, unlikely to dissolve quickly. His voice is incommensurable with his fictional world. Mo Yan(莫言), Su Tong(苏童), and Yu Hua(余华), who are more familiar to the Western readers, invest all of their voice into the worlds they create, while with Bi Feiyu, voice and world have a more complicated relationship.

Reading Mo Yan, you would believe that the voice is a product of its world. Even though it is rich in character, clear and potent, often surprising and even aggressive, still, you know that it is this voice that supplies the essential character of its world, and that it is what Mo Yan intends and what he has decided to give you.

Whereas reading Bi Feiyu, you will no doubt feel that his voice expresses his world while striving for self-expression. In other words, Bi Feiyu’s language and the world formed of that language are in a relationship of opposition and competition.

That Bi’s language is superior, all agree. Whether in closeness of observation, attention to detail, poetic quality, complexity, or incisiveness, Bi Feiyu is outstanding among contemporary Chinese fiction writers. But our evaluation of fiction generally risks becoming constrained by considerations of human interest, as if this were ever completely separable from language. The easiest crime for critics to commit is to take “meaning” as something that can be stripped off, put in order, and paraphrased. This is like forcing us to believe that a person will have a more genuine life after leaving behind their fleshly body; in terms of meaning, most critics firmly believe the “soul is indestructible.” So when we encounter a fiction writer with good language, it’s hard to avoid a Puritan skepticism: isn’t this writer’s “good” prose guilty of enjoying itself, of showing off, of what in traditional Chinese literary theory was called “harming the meaning for the sake of rhetoric?”

Certainly we can detect in Bi Feiyu a determined and forthright habit of voice; he must have his say, and always with power, wisdom and beauty. We imagine him writing as if with his eyes fixed on a single object. Whether in the literary salon or out in the countryside, he always displays a ferocious enthusiasm for language.

Mo Yan has a similar *modus operandi*, though his language is not at all like Bi Feiyu’s. Bi Feiyu has never concealed his admiration for Mo Yan, even amidst

the polite silence that reigns over modern Chinese fiction writers. When we consider that Mo Yan is a writer who grew up in the north of China, while Bi Feiyu was born and bred in the south, this seems even more extraordinary. In the complex world of the Chinese language, the relationship between the richly diverse dialects and the Northern-based Mandarin that everyone must use for writing is a complicated issue in the politics of language. Southern writers being so few, and so often unable to use the spoken language of their childhoods to write, they must forge a literary language unrelated to their bodies, their original voices. This is what Yu Hua has done; Su Tong, as well. But Bi Feiyu is unusual in sticking to Mandarin, which gives him little choice but to abandon his native dialect. Of course, readers familiar with his native place of Xinghua can still detect subtle elements of a Xinghua voice. But Bi writes vernacular, colloquial Chinese, not scholarly, written Chinese. His works is comprised of “words” (*hua*) that ring with voice, of narration that has “meat” (*rou*).

Bi decided to give up his own dialect, which is the choice faced by virtually all southern writers, but Bi also made the decision to infuse his writing with his voice while employing a contemporary rhetoric. He wants to have a relationship not only with the eyes of the reader, but with his or her mouth and ears, as well. He wants a relationship with the reader’s body.

Let us examine this issue from another

perspective. Underneath the strong, witty, dazzling surface of the voice lurks a timid child, fearful of the world. They say many raconteurs are this way, bursting with eloquence among a crowd, but unable to go onstage without their knees shaking. Such a performer is extremely sensitive to the reactions of his or her audience, watching carefully for every gesture and every slight change, because the performer actually fears the madding crowd. It is in fact this fear which forges the performer’s powers of observation. Bi Feiyu has a fondness for such timid children, but many times he is one himself. His fears, though, produce not only a trembling in the legs; they also make him step up to the plate.

Compared to Mo Yan, Yu Hua or Su Tong, Bi Feiyu has the greater propensity to speak truth to power. He is more sensitive to the experience of the flesh. He is a “dynamicist,” an expert on the human species, with an instinctive interest and intuitive grasp of how power, will, domination, submission, fear and even cold calculation are found in every corner of our lives. Mo Yan inhabits the very largest scale, and so is inattentive to the feelings of wee little creatures that don’t even exist on the scale of his world. Little creatures, in his writing, simply become big creatures. Yu Hua has more facility with abstractness. Like Su Tong, his experience of modernity makes him view the world from top to bottom, holistically. But Bi Feiyu would say that

there is no truth transcendent of experience. Truth is not something metaphysical, but always already existing, permeating the space between our language and our faces, in the daily intercourse of people with other people.

It's hard to say whether Bi Feiyu likes the world he sees—rarely does one write about the world because one likes it. Bi Feiyu writes about the world's weakest, the people who most want to become strong, or who think falsely that they are strong, as well as those who try to hide from the strong. Characters in Bi Feiyu's fiction always have a strong sense for what is real.

They are not characters from fables or myths, because there is about them a robust mundanity. At the same time, they all have their dreams, though they don't know they are dreams. They don't understand how their desires and actions form meaning in the world. Their author has not tamed them or possessed them, and they do not know he holds their fate in his pen. Like naughty, playful little animals, they come out at night, acting with instinctive alertness. Bi Feiyu's stories are always active with exciting movement. Characters prove with action that they are alive.

And so, Bi Feiyu tells them their stories. The main listeners for his narrator's voice are the characters themselves, to whom he explains the circumstances of their own lives with dignity and solemnity, though perhaps also with some degree of revelry. The implied author is like a self-satisfied fortune-teller, speaking with a clarity and incisiveness that exceeds the standards of everyday life, and makes the listener believe that this is their very fortune.

The fortune teller himself takes consolation from his voice. He speaks of what he himself fears. The greatest pleasure for a fortune teller in this world is to ignore his own fortune and uncover someone else's. He frequently becomes conscious that in this world of practicality and self-knowledge lurk ominous, irrational, and inarticulate forces. In any unhappy family, fear and isolation may forge a new Kafka, but may also forge a "politician," by which we mean an observer of human nature imbued with dexterity and acuity, one who cares and yet capable of remaining coldly objective.

Bi Feiyu's voice is absolutely necessary and indispensable to him. At times, Bi allows it to become an almost independent element of his stories. The conceit of the fortune teller aside, there is perhaps another reason: deep inside, he's just like his characters. He feels so unsafe, he has to clutch the microphone tightly to himself, as if for him to hold the power of speech is the only hope for this world, as if his voice alone could redeem

people caught up in chaos, as if only voice could call to wakefulness all the blindly moving bodies. Voice itself takes on meaning in his stories and so becomes imbued with all the complexities of the human condition.

All this originates deep from Bi Feiyu's own experience and from there reaches

towards the untold common experience of the Chinese people. As someone of his generation, I often feel that both conflicts and the aesthetic sensibility of his work are highly historical in nature—they come out of the history of the individual, but also out of the larger historical context.

Nearly every Bi Feiyu story features a sort of historical precision, reflecting the temporal spirit of the age. He attempts to understand his characters through the change that has occurred in the last few decades, since the advent of the modern era, in the lives and experience of the Chinese people.

Many Chinese writers are like this, but Bi Feiyu is a particularly big history buff, taking a scholar's interest in the subject. History, to Bi, is not a set of facts and figures that establishes certainty, but rather an unsolved riddle, waiting for explanation, and evidence. Among his lofty goals as a story writer, one must be the fervent desire for a historical insight that combines experience and philosophy.

And this ambition gives him still another working principle: he must sustain his voice, this voice possessed of subjectivity and even a physical body. This voice faces the booming thunder always annihilating us and accepts the trials, the forging.

Translated by Jesse Field