

Dancing in Memory and Wandering in the winter night: Comparing Two Modes of Exile in Bai Xianyong's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Exile in Bai Xianyong's *Taipei People* reflects varied emotional and historical conditions rather than a single experience of displacement. This study compares "The Last Night of Taipan Chin" and "Winter Night" through three dimensions: narrative style, spatial setting and the representation of history. The analysis shows that the former presents an exile shaped by memory and reflective nostalgia, where identity is sustained through recollection, while the latter depicts a more inward and existential condition marked by the collapse of ideals and a sense of disorientation. These differences reveal distinct modes of exile shaped by historical change, highlighting how different conditions give rise to varied psychological experiences of exile and offering a more nuanced understanding of exile in modern Chinese literature.

KEYWORDS

Modern Chinese literature; Exile; Nostalgia; *Taipei People*

1 Introduction

Bai Xianyong (1937-) is one of the most significant figures in contemporary Chinese and even world literature, recognized for his ability to integrate traditional and modern narrative techniques, complemented by his clear and deliberately restrained use of language (Li 2025, 1). Widely regarded as his most extensively studied short-story collection, *Taipei People* (Bai 1971) presents a gallery of Chinese mainland *émigrés* who came to Taiwan in 1949 in the wake of the Chinese Civil War (Wu 2022, 1). Through its portrayal of a series of vividly drawn Mainlanders, the collection shows how those who were displaced by war and historical forces seek new meanings of existence in Taipei. It can be said that *Taipei People* is a concentrated embodiment of Bai's artistic techniques and a crystallization of his profound reflections on contemporary issues (Zhuo 2024, 6).

In English-language scholarship, theoretical discussions on nostalgia, exile and memory have become well established, providing a solid analytical framework for interpreting Bai's works. Boym distinguishes between "restorative nostalgia" and "reflective nostalgia", arguing that modern forms of nostalgia often entail a self-aware return to a past that can no longer be fully recovered (2001, 41-56). Clifford's formulation of "diasporas" likewise underscores the continual oscillation and instability experienced by diasporic subjects as they move between an imagined homeland and the realities of their present locality (1994, 302-308). Said observes that exile is not only a concrete condition produced by historical rupture and forced displacement, but also a psychological state of isolation and spiritual alienation (2000, 173-186).

Recent scholarship on *Taipei People* has largely focused on themes such as nostalgia and urban space. Huang (2022) argues that the characters in the book are largely trapped in nostalgia to the extent that they are unable to recognize or engage with their present and future in Taiwan. Xu points out that characters in Bai's works maintain their cultural identity through idealized memories of the old homeland, which becomes a space of spiritual belonging (2024, 65). Overall, current scholarship often views *Taipei People* through the lenses of nostalgic memory and diasporic identity. However, there is still a lack of in depth comparative research on the different forms of exile depicted in the characters of exiles in *Taipei People*.

Against this background, this essay examines the "The Last Night of Taipan Chin" and "Winter Night" from *Taipei People* to compare the different forms of exile embodied by their protagonists. Said's discussion of the dual dimensions of exile provides an important conceptual starting point for this study (2000, 173-186). On this basis, the essay contrasts the nostalgic and memory-oriented exile in "The Last Night of Taipan Chin" with the more existential mode of spiritual exile in "Winter Night", analysing both texts through the lenses of narrative style, urban setting and the representation of history. Through these three perspectives, this essay seeks to offer further insight into how Bai Xianyong depicts different forms of exile in his fiction.

2 Narrative Style in the Shaping of Exile

Different narrative styles influence how characters are psychologically portrayed and how exile is represented. In *Taipei*

People, "The Last Night of Taipan Chin" and "Winter Night" adopt different narrative styles that illuminate two contrasting forms of exile in Bai's work. The two stories differ markedly in their narrative structures, one is organized around memory, the other around dialogue.

Bai's fiction pays particular attention to portraying characters from diverse social backgrounds, especially the muted sorrow carried by women during the changes of the times (Lau 1984, 410; Ouyang 1975, 79; Wang 2024, 1). The "The Last Night of Taipan Chin" stands as one of the most representative examples of his writing on women. This work refers to Jin Yaoli's last night as a taxi dancer, it is also a starting point for her to bid farewell to the past life and enter another life. Through the last night, Bai Xianying presented readers with the love, heartbreak and bitterness of a taxi dancer who has spent years working in the dance hall, shaping the image of a taxi dancer from the social margins, a woman unafraid to love or resent. This story centers on Jin Yaoli's recollections, although the plot unfolds within the confined time and space of the nightclub's final evening, the narrative moves continually between past and present. Details such as the lighting of the dance floor or the scent of perfume function not only as spatial markers but also as triggers for memory, giving the text a rhythm shaped by temporal shifts. This story does not unfold her twenty-year career as a taxi dancer in a linear chronology. Instead, it threads past events through the protagonist's consciousness and recollection within the span of "the final night", allowing personal memory to replace conventional expository background (Huang 2018, 65; Qin 2018, 40). Through this mode of narration, readers come to sense her emotions oscillating between the splendor of old Shanghai and the helpless of her present destiny by entering her remembrances.

By contrast, "Winter Night" is conveyed almost entirely through an extended dialogue between Yu Qinlei and Wu Zhuguo. The story is set on a cold, rainy night, when Professor Wu visits his friend Yu Qinlei after completing an academic lecture. They discuss current affairs and reminisce about the past. The narration offers minimal interior reflection and refrains from theatrical language. Instead, it adopts a restrained tone to depict the characters' retrospection on political upheaval, the loss of a friend and the rupture of personal aspirations. As Feng (2024) argues, "Winter Night" does not build its narrative along a linear timeline. Instead, it advances through dialogue that calls up recollected moments, inviting readers into the protagonists' past through their conversation (2024, 44). The story progresses not by the order of events, but by the memory points surfaced in their exchange. In this dialogue-centered structure, emotion speaks in an understated way, the quieter and more even their voices, the more readers sense the collapse of their ideals, along with their quiet loss and resignation toward a present they can no longer change. Their exile is thus not defined by geography, nor by nostalgic immersion, but by a more existential mode of spiritual exile, a condition of having lost all bearings, rather than having lost a homeland. For these characters, exile is not about leaving a place, but an inner state defined by losing direction and feeling that there is no clear way out.

A parallel reading of the two works shows how Bai Xianying employs distinct narrative modes to express different forms of exile. "The Last Night of Taipan Chin" places memory, flashback and sensory detail at the center of the narration, enable readers to experience the exile through the characters' inner thoughts, and let Jin Yaoli's memories serve as the gateway to understanding the traumas of the era. By contrast, "Winter Night" conveys the protagonists' self-reflection through dialogue, using pauses and silence in conversation to reveal the breakdown of their intellectual ideals. The contrast in narrative form ultimately produces two different modes of exile, one that sustains subjectivity through memory and return to the past, and one that exposes the widening gap between conviction and reality through calm narration.

3 Spatial Setting as an Expression of Exile

Bai Xianying is a writer who is deeply conscious of time and space (Lau 1975, 38). In the two stories, the dance hall where Jin Yaoli works and the home of Yu Qinlei are not merely the physical locations in which the plots unfold, but spaces that project the characters' inner states. As Joyce and Christine contend, the space characters perceive most directly becomes a fitting site for emotional experience and expression (2004, 523). Through the depiction of the dance hall and Yu's home, we can see how Bai Xianying turns place into a metaphor for the characters' emotions, allowing setting itself to become part of varied forms of exile. These descriptions of setting also align with Lefebvre's proposition that space is socially produced and also shapes the lived experience of the subjects within it (1991, 92-99).

In "The Last Night of Taipan Chin", the dance hall's lights, the mirrors of the dressing room and the arrangement of the dance floor together form a semi-enclosed theatrical space, positioning Jin Yaoli as a performer making her final appearance. This space is not naturally given, but deliberately arranged and designed. The setting itself carries a sense of "performance", allowing the dance hall to hold two roles at once. It is a setting where Jin Yaoli releases her emotions, and also a space that feels like a cage. It is where she is watched, praised and consumed, and also where she grows older and brings her career as a taxi dancer to its end. At the same time, the dance hall also carries a strong sense of imitation. The dance hall of Taipei and Shanghai are not drastically different in form, but they can never truly equal the Shanghai that lives in Jin Yaoli's memory, especially the glittering world of the Paramount. It was precisely within this gap that was close

but never replaceable that the dance hall became the concrete symbol of her exile. She cannot return to the past itself, but can only settle into a space that looks the same. This also resonates with Boym's idea of reflective nostalgia, in which space becomes a mirror for memory and emotion, rather than a faithful reconstruction of the past, as readers attend more to the feelings and personal texture of remembrance than to historical accuracy (2001, 49-55). The dance hall setting, through subtle details, shows that Jin Yaoli's exile leans more toward nostalgia and memory.

In contrast to the glimmer of the dance hall, the natural environment and the living space of Yu Qinlei in "Winter Night" are dim, damp and disorderly. At the opening of the story, the winter rain of Taipei, the torn oilpaper umbrella and the labyrinthine alleys together present a bleak urban scene. Space here does not attempt to recreate a past world, but instead depicts the weather and streets as they are, giving the characters an inescapable sense of the present reality and reflecting the harsh conditions surrounding them. The room in which the dialogue takes place is also described as "borken and decayed", filled with books that are "frayed and moldy" everywhere, precisely reflecting the reality where the characters were unable to return to the past and hardly achieve true stability and tranquility in Taiwan (Bai 2000, 386-388). In this story, space is not merely the living environment of the characters, it is also the manifestation of their mental states. Wu Zhuoguo and Yu Qinlei's discussions about past ideals, their reminiscences of the past and their sense of helplessness in the present all took place in this space devoid of hope. The environment was also reinforcing their sense of helplessness and confusion. Through the description of the winter night's natural environment and Yu's living space, Bai Xianying reflects that the exile of the two characters resembles a more existential form of spiritual exile.

To sum up, the setting in Bai's fiction functions as an additional vessel for emotion. The dance hall and the shabby room on a cold, rainy night are not passive backgrounds, but sites through which readers come to understand character and circumstance. Jin Yaoli's final night in the dance hall is still bound to her memories of old Shanghai, while in "Winter Night", the two protagonists sit in a narrow, damp and book-filled room, facing a present shaped by the collapse of their ideals. Bai's treatment of setting does not seek to underline where exile happens in physical terms, but how it is internally experienced, expressed and perceived through lived space. It is precisely this spatial difference that endows the exile experiences of the characters in his works with richer and more authentic emotional sources.

4 Historical Representation in the Experience of Exile

In "The Last Night of Taipan Chin" and "Winter Night", the characters all migrate from mainland China to Taipei, but the narratives display different modes of representation of history. In the former, the past is continually evoked through emotional recollection and fragments of personal lived experience; in the latter, history surfaces through hesitation, pauses, self-doubt and the unsaid within dialogue, conveying a sense of inexpressible loss after the collapse of ideals. This contrast does not serve as a direct cause of their differing forms of exile, but rather reveals how the protagonists revisit their past, locate themselves and negotiate identity, with narrative style and urban setting jointly shaping two markedly different states of lived exile. In "The Last Night of Taipan Chin", history does not enter the text through explicit political events, but is embedded in Jin Yaoli's recollections and the changes in her body. The prosperity and fall of Shanghai, the transformation of ballroom culture and the specific historical background of their migration are never directly stated, but they form the background of her life, carried forward as part of her memory's trajectory. As a taxi dancer, the history she perceives is not a national narrative, but the question of who she once was, anchored in youth, beauty and moments when she felt loved. The way she perceives history is not through political reflection, but through the fading halo of her career and the signs of aging in her body, a gradual realization that the former "self" no longer exists. On her, history becomes private and emotionally charged, absorbed into sensation and mood rather than presented as external events. Her exile is therefore not merely a geographical departure, but a rupture in her life where her self-worth was shattered. It was a result of historical changes that could not be reversed.

By contrast, in "Winter Night", history takes a completely different form of presence. Wu Zhuoguo and Yu Qinlei come from the generation formed during the period when the May Fourth Movement was in full swing. However, on a cold night in Taipei, they looked back on the past in a tired manner. For them, history manifested as a silent burden weighing upon their bodies and minds. Wu Zhuguo describes himself as having "been a deserter broad for so many years" and admits that his writings were "empty talk, all of it" (Bai 2000, 405-407). When confronted in class by students who misconstrue the May Fourth Movement, he offers no defense and turns away in silence. Yu Qinlei likewise carries in his words and behavior an unspoken historical pressure. Once a passionate youth who dared to set fire, he now walks through the winter rain in wooden clogs, unsteady and limping. On his desk lies an unfinished Byron's *Collected Poems*, kept company by the popular novel *The Hermit Knight of Willow Lake*. He no longer speaks of Romantic ideals in class, and instead softens his stagnation with self-mocking remarks (Feng 2024, 47). Memories of ideals and courage only exist through silence in their present lives. Their silence is not simply avoidance, but an inward sorrow born of being unable to face the past, a quiet pain shaped by the pressure of history, echoed in the sound of rain.

This historical weight turns their exile into something more than emotional loss or physical wandering, shaping it as an

inward state of uncertainty, an existential mode of spiritual exile. They are compelled to remain in a social position where the past offers no continuity and the present grants no belonging. In this story, history becomes a persistent force pressing into personal life, one that prevents the protagonists from linking former ideals to current circumstance. Yu Qinlei, now living in Taiwan and devoted to English Romantic literature, realized that his romantic spirit had been eroded by reality. Meanwhile, teaching about the glorious Tang Dynasty of China in the United States, Wu Zhuguo finds himself unable to fill the void of guilt and emptiness within his heart. This contrast reflects the pursuit of spiritual homeland and the loss of cultural identity among overseas intellectuals. Despite being in different geographical locations, they are all spiritually adrift, unable to find an outlet.

On the level of representation of history, "The Last Night of Taipan Chin" presents history as emotional, centers on Jin Yaoli's personal experiences, whereas "Winter Night" renders history as a silent and persistent emotional burden shaped by the exhaustion of ideals. It is through this difference in historical representation that the works construct distinct forms of exile: the former marked by an emotional fading of selfhood, and the latter by a muted state of inner disorientation.

5 Conclusion

Exile is not limited to physical displacement. It also refers to the emotional and psychological pressure that individuals carry under the force of their times. The comparison of "The Last Night of Taipan Chin" and "Winter Night" shows two distinct and equally profound forms of exile. These differences do not simply arise from gender or social background. They are also shaped by the interaction of narrative style, urban setting and the representation of history in each text. In addition, the two stories also reveal the major orientations in Bai's fiction, particularly his steady focus on characters from different backgrounds and the quiet sadness carried by women during times of change. In the two works, it is not difficult to observe that he prefers to adopt the perspective of a marginal figure. This perspective also permeates his subsequent works, such as his important works *Crystal Boys* and *Lonely Seventeen* (Lin 2019, 638).

The diversity of exile depicted in Bai Xianyong works also makes *Taipei People* a complex portrayal of a group of exiles, showcasing the variety of the exile theme in modern Chinese literature. On this basis, future research can further examine the varied representations of exile in the fiction of Bai to gain clearer insight into the continuing resonance between historical trauma, identity loss and the protagonists' inward condition, while also tracing how the theme of exile might expand into new interpretive possibilities within the wider landscape of Chinese diasporic literature.

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