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Where You End and I Begin: Notes on Subjectivity and Ethics in the Translation of Poetry

Andrea Lingenfelter

The practice of translation and the poems it yields allow me to continue to explore the questions that first brought me to poetry, Chinese poetry, and the Chinese language, in that order. What are the limits of language, and what can the experience of learning another language, especially one not related to one's mother tongue, tell us about this question? And what do we learn when we translate between unrelated languages, in this case from Chinese to English? More specifically, what can translation teach us about poetry and poetics? To what extent is a lyric constellation portable, and to what extent is it embedded in a particular culture or language? How much of a foreign syntax can be replicated before things break down? What is the role of sound in a translation?

This paper will explore questions such as the above by discussing examples taken from poems by three poets whose work I have translated: the Taiwanese poet Yang Mu 楊牧 (b. 1940) and the mainland-Chinese poets Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (b. 1955) and Wang Yin 王寅 (b. 1962). I have known each of these poets personally for many years, which has given me additional insight into their poetry—seeing where they live and work, spending time in conversation with them in the cities they call home, and so on. All of this fosters what we might call educated intuition.

Translation is dialogue, interactive criticism, analysis by analogue. It is also highly individual. Although it has long been part of my practice to subsume myself in a poem, to don the mask of

whoever I am translating, this paper will also focus on my own subjectivity, which is to say my experience of the work and my response to it in the form of translation, as process and result alike. At the same time, that subjective experience remains rooted in the substance of the source text. Destabilizing rigid and limiting notions of the “original” is a good thing, but maintaining an active awareness of the source text is an ethical imperative for me. I’ll make a further claim: a translator must always be asking themselves “where you end and I begin” and vice versa, especially if the translator writes poetry of their own. As poets, we each have our tics and proclivities. We have preferences, comfortable idioms, and habitual voices. Knowing where the boundaries lie becomes essential if we are to translate ethically. Our capacity for empathy enables us to be sensitive translators, but we are limited by our own knowledge, experience, and predilections. Translation will always be a delicate balance, occupying a liminal space where conservation and reinvention overlap.

Mindfulness around the boundaries between source and self is of vital importance to translation. This past spring, inspired by readings I’d assigned for the first two class meetings, I came up with a translation exercise for my students at the University of San Francisco that could allow them to learn about this distinction experientially. The readings were: “Contemporary Faces of the River Merchant’s Wife” by Tammy Ho Lai-ming (2017); “The Life of Creative Translation” by Gary Snyder (2012); “Translating Chinese Poetry with a Forked Tongue” by S-C Kevin Tsai (2008); and Eliot Weinberger and Octavio Paz’s *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* (2016). All of these authors are poets; two, Ho and Tsai, have doctorates and are completely bilingual. Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, whose first language is Cantonese, writes and publishes poetry in English. Her “Contemporary Faces” is a discussion of several responses to—or, as I have come to designate them, riffs on—Ezra Pound’s liberal translation of Li Bai’s “The Ballad of Chang’an” 長干行. Ho’s approach is refreshing in the way that it embraces such free responses, which I have long appreciated and yet found hard to square with my own sense of what constitutes translation per se. If a riff is good poetry, we need to make a place for it, but I would be loath to call it a translation. As a high school student of creative

writing, I was enchanted by Rexroth's versions of classical Chinese poetry and Japanese haiku—so much so that I decided then to study either Chinese or Japanese when I got to college—but I don't consider them translations per se, as they depart dramatically from their sources in ways that say more about Rexroth's poetics than about the poetics of their sources.

While Ho's presentation of these diverse responses helped me clarify my thinking about free responses, S-C Kevin Tsai's essay is a case study of how to translate formal poetry from Chinese to English. Tsai respects the poetics of his sources, which are heavily dependent on rhyme and meter. He's also a good poet, and he devises creative solutions to the problems posed by different forms without losing sight of content. This might involve interventions such as changing the number of lines and the meter, but his rationales are well thought out and persuasive. Trained academics, Ho and Tsai offer a profound grasp of their sources coupled with the confidence not to be overly literal.

Despite its title, Gary Snyder's lecture makes a case for understanding and honoring the poetics of one's source texts.¹ As a young man, he studied Chinese at UC Berkeley, where he developed a deep respect for the poetics of the source text. In the case of Tang poetry, this encompasses both rhyme and end-stopped lines. Snyder expresses strong sentiments about the importance of following the Tang poets' approach to lineation and argues forcefully against enjambment as a sort of willful disregard for the source text. The issue of rhyme is one he tackles by employing slant rhymes and assonance. He does take creative license at times, in one example introducing modern metonyms in place of Tang versions that would be incomprehensible to readers today. Whatever the reader might make of these substitutions, Snyder offers them in service of what he sees as the intended effect on a piece's original audience. In his own work, Snyder uses enjambment freely ("run on lines," as he calls them), and he is not a rhyme poet. This demonstrates that a poet

1 Snyder opens with a disclaimer, explaining that the title of the lecture is at odds with his views on translation. He'd been asked to provide a title far in advance and "The Life of Creative Translation" was what had popped into his head at the time.

with a fully developed voice and literary identity can still transcend their own ego when it comes to poetics.

I included Weinberger and Paz's book because it offers many different approaches to the same poem. My students, critical thinkers and highly proficient in both Chinese and English, found much to talk about and plenty to disagree with in the editors' accompanying notes. That in itself was valuable.

Out of all of this grew a translation exercise. I asked students to approach the same poem (a Tang *jueju* by Wang Bo 王勃 [650–676]) in three different ways: translate for content, but still as a poem; translate for form (pick a rhyme scheme, create or borrow a form); and write a response poem (riff) in which the student-translators may either translate the source poem liberally, transpose it to contemporary times, or find some other way to address the material. The first version demonstrates comprehension; the second requires that the translator analyze and think about prosody and form; and the third encourages personal expression. When students come at the poem from these different angles, they gain a sense of the boundaries and appreciate the differences. They may discover a preference for one approach or another, but if they go on to do more translations, they will do so conscious of what they're doing.

The issue of poetics has been central to my practice as a translator. When translating a poem, I always proceed from my sense of the author's poetics. What makes their poetry tick? Practically speaking, this means I try to understand the purpose behind a writer's lineation, prosody, register, imagery and so on—and which of these they care most about. If I identify strongly with the poets I translate, it's probably because I came to Chinese poetry through my own writing of poetry. My approach to reading literature, be it poetry, fiction, or non-fiction, has always been to put myself in the author's shoes and try to understand what they are doing, but from the inside out. This principle also underlies my work as a translator.

Intuition has a role to play here, although it's helpful to be able to explain your thinking if called upon to do so—which I have been. Although a translator has a responsibility to an author, their primary relationship is with the text. I trust the author to get their meaning across in the poem. I trust that the poem is as the author wishes it to be. I prefer to not to bedevil the writers I translate with too many

questions—and before asking them any questions at all, I consult native speakers who are not the author to see how things land with them. (Sometimes they're as perplexed as I am.)² If, after a series of drafts, I reread a passage and am still not happy with a certain word or phrase—because it doesn't sound right in English or the meaning is like a bead of mercury, skittering around, refusing to come to rest—I approach the author. As a rule, my queries are specific. What guided a particular word choice? Which way would they like the deck to fall when a term is ambiguous and the ambiguity cannot be preserved in the target language? That said, in the main, I shape the English poem based on my reading of the source text and not on active authorial coaching from the sidelines. Translation starts with reading, and if I'm no good as a reader, there's little hope for me as a translator. I have to understand a poem to the best of my ability and proceed from there. This requires a leap of faith, faith in myself as a reader and as someone who writes a poem in English that captures my experience. This brings us to the other side of the ethical coin: the translator's responsibility to the audience in their target language. When I translate a poem, I must give my readers a poem.

This implies some sense of what makes a poem in English. What if something sounds good in Chinese but not in English? What if a common Chinese rhetorical strategy (incremental repetitions, repeated words, passive voice) sounds dull in English? An editor will want you to tighten it up. Chinese grammar lends itself to a brevity that English lacks, but the ear is a different ear. The strategy I use is to recreate effect. This is not the same as grammatical fidelity.

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- 2 Authors, even living ones, are not always available to the translator or other readers, and it is important and necessary to translate “unavailable” authors as well. My preference for translating contemporary authors does not stem from their availability but from the fact that I have a much better grasp of the context—cultural, historical, and linguistic—of the modern and contemporary Sinophone world than I do of antiquity. I feel better grounded; and by that token I feel equally at home translating modern authors such as Lin Huiyin 林徽因 (1904–1955) and Dai Wangshu 戴望舒 (1905–1950) as I do the three contemporary authors whose work is the focus of this essay.

Another issue translators face is how not to sound like one's self all the time. The above exercise notwithstanding, this is a fundamental challenge. The more freely we translate, the more likely we are to sound like ourselves rather than the writer we're translating. I do my best to internalize the voice that speaks through a source text, the voice I hear in my head when I'm reading another writer's work. I will allow that I have favorite devices, particularly alliteration and assonance. These are some of the musical qualities that hold poems together, audible threads that connect words within a line or between different lines. If you combed through my work, would you find a lot of these tropes? Definitely. If you read the source texts of my translations, would you find these devices as well? Yes. Chinese is full of alliterative and rhyming binomes (two-character phrases). Has this informed my prosody in English, or are rhyme and alliteration so universally fundamental to poetry that the question is moot, and it's more a matter of degree? Many of my favorite poets in English write poems with abundant alliteration and assonance. Do I like their work because my taste has been formed in part by Chinese prosody? Does Chinese prosody delight me because it uses these devices so liberally? Both? Chicken and egg.

When I parse a poem by the Chinese-language poets I'm writing about in this essay, I find many examples of these qualities. I also find something else, which is much harder to replicate or contrive an analogue for in English: visual rhymes, word pairs with characters containing the same radical or other graphic elements. This creates another sort of cohesion, on a graphic and semantic level. But how to replace it? Because English is written with a phonetic alphabet, words that look similar often sound similar, so visual rhymes are almost always musically akin. Is it legitimate to substitute an auditory device for a visual one? I would argue that it is.

Each of the poets discussed here approaches poetry in their own way. Yang Mu's fluid syntax and pivotal line breaks create a sort of shape-shifting lyricism that is both very challenging and rewarding to translate; Zhai Yongming's imagery, strong voice, and distinct perspective caught my attention many years ago and have held it ever since; and Wang Yin's lyrical sensibility and oblique metaphors resonate with me. I will highlight the ways in which my understanding of their poetics has guided my decisions as a translator.³

3 Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are mine. If no

Yang Mu

Yang Mu's syntax and use of enjambment are striking. Here I will talk about my negotiation of his dramatic line breaks in "Afternoon of a Gladiolus" 劍蘭的午後 and "Since You Went Away" 自君之出矣.⁴ Enjambment creates suspense. Yang Mu's use of it in the following poem is especially felicitous.

Afternoon of a Gladiolus

I think I'm nostalgic for moments like that
 afternoon of a gladiolus. Perhaps it's lonely upstairs
 No voices there, I lean back into memories
 Maybe someone is in the courtyard putting away gardening tools
 when wind chimes sound, interrupting
 the dull bell that leans against the north wall
 By now the grape vine should extend to
 those mossy steps over there
 right by the gnarled red pine, where the thinnest faintest
 smoke floats in the air
 The neighbors are trying to build a fire in their fireplace
 So early in the season and they're already trying to use their
 fireplace? This is what I'm thinking as I stand by the window
 letting my eyes wander over the distance. On the desktop
 scattered thoughts cover a stack of incomplete
 drafts. I think I no longer remember
 the subject, but I keep trying to get a hold on
 what sort of moment the style belongs to
 (Lingenfelter 2014, 58)⁵

publication information is cited, the translation is as yet unpublished.

- 4 I've written about these two poems previously, along with "Symbol," for *Chinese Literature Today* (CLT) (Lingenfelter 2014). The article, "Imagine a Symbol in a Dream: Translating Yang Mu," discusses these poems but takes a different perspective.
- 5 This translation has been slightly modified from the CLT version.

劍蘭的午後

我想我是懷念著那種時刻
 劍蘭的午後。或者樓上寂寞
 沒有人聲，我斜靠記憶坐
 或者人在院子裡收拾芟葺的工具
 偶爾風鈴響，打斷
 倚北牆上淡漠的鐘
 葡萄藤應該延伸到
 長苔蘚的石階那一邊了
 也就是赤虯松那邊，空氣裡
 漂浮著細微薄薄的煙
 鄰人在試用他們的壁爐
 時間還早他們就試他們的
 壁爐？這樣想像我站在窗前
 朝遠處隨意看。桌子上
 打散的思維覆蓋一疊未完成的
 草稿。我想我是不記得它的
 主題了，但依稀揣摩
 風格屬於哪種時刻
 (Yang 1997, 30–31)

The poem has several highly effective line breaks, underlined below:

when wind chimes sound, interrupting
 the dull bell that leans against the north wall

偶爾風鈴響，打斷
 倚北牆上淡漠的鐘

The break after “interrupting” is itself an interruption, while at the same creating suspense: what is it that has been interrupted?

By now the grape vine should extend to
 those mossy steps over there

葡萄藤應該延伸到
 長苔蘚的石階那一邊了

Here, the line break emphasizes the ongoing nature of the growth of the vine and creates another implicit question—to where has it extended?—which is answered after the line break.

The poem's concluding four lines are marked by a series of enjambments in which the line breaks emphasize the surface meanings:

scattered thoughts cover a stack of incomplete
 drafts. I think I no longer remember
 the subject, but I keep trying to get a hold on
 what sort of moment the style belongs to

打散的思維覆蓋一疊未完成的
 草稿。我想我是不記得它的
 主題了，但依稀揣摩
 風格屬於哪種時刻

The first of these lines, which ends with the word “incomplete,” is itself an incomplete thought and incomplete sentence that is only completed at the beginning of the next line with the word “drafts”—and semantically, this very word undermines the notion of completion. This line ends in another suspension, this time by the statement that the speaker “no longer remember[s].” The implicit question is answered in the following line: it's the topic of the essay the speaker is unable to recall. The final enjambment comes in the penultimate line with the speaker “trying to get a hold on” something. Imitating the physical action of trying to grasp something or feeling around for it is the placement of the word itself, which further adumbrates the underlying theme of epistemology. Throughout this poem, technique mirrors content.

“Since You Went Away” begins with a vivid set of images and a characteristically strong line break:

Since You Went Away

Imagine a symbol in a dream
 bringing unbidden and unexpected joy, fine rain
 sprinkling newly sprouted melons, and then oblique sunlight

shining on the rapt window where they grow taller day by day
 in their sparse arrangement, supported by thin bamboo stakes and
 spooling ever upwards
 Maybe given to a passionate woman who explains it all, a string of
 profound thoughts
 or perhaps empty glances gather in clear autumn waters
 seeing through the alternations, layers of classical biology
 The full moon wastes away, while indoors
 stands a long-neglected loom
 (Lingenfelter 2014, 60)⁶

自君之出矣

虛擬一種象徵為了夢中
 不期而遇且驚喜，小雨
 輕灑發芽的瓜苗，然後太陽傾斜
 照到它在出神的窗口寥落為擺設
 逐日抽長，歇靠一節細竹竿盤旋上升
 且交給多情的婦人解析，思維深刻
 或者，空洞的眼色積著一泓秋水
 透視反覆，重疊的古典生物學
 滿月在消瘦，室內供著
 一架曠日不理的殘機
 (Yang 2006, 32–33)

What I find most compelling about the first two lines is the three thematically linked images in the first line—“imagine,” “symbol,” and “dream”—and the way the line break creates a sense of anticipation, which is gratified by the “unexpected joy” in the second line, with the language of the poem implying this is akin to the fine rain on melon sprouts and followed by the appearance of slanting rays of sunlight.

Imagine a symbol in a dream
 bringing unbidden and unexpected joy, fine rain

6 With the exception of some lower case line openings, the translation in this paper is identical to the one cited.

虛擬一種象徵為了夢中
不期而遇且驚喜

However, I left something out from the source text's first line: the phrase *weile* 為了 (“for [the sake of]”). The prose equivalent of this line and a half might be rendered, “Imagine a symbol that brings unbidden and unexpected joy to a dream,” or “imagine a symbol that brings unbidden and unexpected joy for a dream.” But if I were to translate the opening section of the poem in this way, I would have to break the line differently and move “dream” to the second line, thereby blunting the power and imagistic clarity of the lines. This seemed too high a price to pay for lexical completeness.

As it happens, this translation is set to be included in a large collection of Yang Mu's poetry. A number of seasoned translators are contributing work, and there are two editors, both learned and respected scholars. Each wrote me in turn, pointing out the omission and asking if it was intentional or an oversight. I explained that it was intentional. I understood the literal meaning of the lines, but in order to bring forward the progression of images, I chose to treat the surface meaning as secondary. The editor who'd written me first forwarded my explanation to Yang Mu, along with a draft of the translation. I had confidence in the logic of my reading—it's not the only possible reading, but it is my reading—and I was somewhat surprised to learn that the editor was asking Yang Mu to adjudicate. Yang Mu responded that after having read and considered both my translation and my rationale for it, he found both persuasive, so we kept the translation as it was.

Likewise, the editors noted that I had translated *can* 殘 (“broken” or “damaged”) as “neglected”, and they wondered why. The reasons had to do with subtext and intertextuality. “Since You Went Away” is but one poem in a long tradition of poems going back almost two thousand years. The title is taken from a line in a Han-dynasty *yuefu* 樂府 poem, “Chamber Longings” 室思, by Xu Gan 徐幹 (170–217). This line became the template for many later poems that incorporated the phrase “since you went away.” Yang Mu's poem alludes to one of the better-known versions, written by the Tang poet Zhang Jiuling 張九齡 (678–740):

Composition after ‘Since You Went Away’

Since you went away,
I haven’t tended my broken loom,
Missing you is like the full moon,
Night after night its clear rays diminish.
(Lingenfelter 2014, 62)

賦得〈自君之出矣〉

自君之出矣
不復理殘機
思君如滿月
夜夜減清輝
(Gao 1973, 752)

Zhang’s poem, like the others in this long string of textually connected poems, is a “boudoir lament” (*guiyuan* 閨怨), a poem centered on an abandoned woman pining for her absent husband or lover. The imagery emphasizes the woman’s neglected state, conflating her neglect with that of the loom that she hasn’t tended to or tried to repair. She misses “you”, and like the waning moon, she grows thinner and thinner as the days go by.

The concluding lines of Yang Mu’s poem clearly echo the imagery and even the word choices of Zhang’s poem:

The full moon wastes away, while indoors
stands a long-neglected loom

滿月在消瘦，室內供著
一架曠日不理的殘機

A literal translation of these lines would read something like: “The full moon becomes emaciated, [while] indoors stands / a broken loom that hasn’t been fixed [or tended to] for a long time.” The moon grows thinner, just as it does in Zhang’s poem, and the loom has long stood unrepaired or untended. So why would a translator (in this case, me) depart from this surface meaning? The answer lies between

the lines: it has everything to do with context, with the tradition of “boudoir laments.” Readers of the source text are likely to bring knowledge of this tradition to the poem. While a sensitive reader would perceive the implicit identification of the woman with the waning moon and the broken loom (a feminine symbol, since weaving is traditionally “women’s work”) in any language, a reasonably educated sinophone reader would be aware both of Zhang Jiuling’s poem and of the “boudoir lament” tradition as a whole. But how do we provide this rich context, or at least suggest it, for Anglophone readers who aren’t as steeped in Chinese literary history? By choosing “neglected” over the literal “broken” I have attempted to recreate the missing context for the readers of my translation. As a translator, this fulfills my ethical obligation to my audience while remaining faithful to the original text. Once again, the editor queried Yang Mu, and once again Yang Mu was happy with my version of the poem.

In the end, Yang Mu reviewed all of the translations I did for this anthology, and I can only assume that he did the same for the other translators involved in the project. Poets aren’t always well equipped to evaluate translations of their work, but Yang Mu most assuredly is. (He has a doctorate from UC Berkeley and taught for decades at the University of Washington, where I was his student.) I believe that it is his ear for poetry in English and his position as a poet that enable him to take a hands-off approach towards translation. On the few occasions where I’ve misunderstood a word or missed a reference, he tells me, and I can adjust it. But when the choices are aesthetic, he’s endorsed my artistic license.

There are times when the context of a poem is personal enough that one can miss references. Especially if coupled with the potential for ambiguity inherent in the Chinese language, which is of course one of its esthetic and epistemological strengths as a poetic medium, missed personal-contextual cues can send a translator down the wrong path. An example of this can be found in the deceptively simple opening lines of Yang Mu’s poem, “Symbol” 象徵:⁷

7 The translation has been previously published in CLT (Lingenfelter 2014, 57); the original text appears in *The Problem of Time* (Yang 1997, 72–73).

After my car crosses that long bridge
I nod

車過大橋
我點頭

Word for word, the first line says: “Car/s – crosses/crossed – big – bridge.” One has to interpret a fair amount to get from there to “After my car crosses the long bridge...” First of all, English grammar requires articles and tenses, and a translator has to make judgments in order to proceed. Although *che* 車 (car, vehicle) could denote a plural, I took it to be singular; and I imagined that events were unfolding in the present tense. The addition of articles, along with the extra syllables of “crosses” vs the monosyllabic *guo* 過, lengthened the line and altered the rhythm. In order to keep the line reasonably short, commensurate with the Chinese—and because I (mistakenly) thought Yang Mu had included the word *da* 大 (big, large) largely for rhythmic purposes—I omitted the adjective in my initial translation. I also imagined that the speaker in the scene was observing the car from a vantage point on one side of the bridge or the other, and I translated the opening lines thus:

A car crosses a bridge
I nod

Then Yang Mu reviewed the draft. Here is his response:

What I try to say is that the car I drive has now just crossed a certain bridge on the foothill of County Hua-lien. The bridge is kind of grand or stately, to me, and that’s why I say “大橋” [*daqiao* “big bridge”].

Not only did Yang Mu visualize the speaker as driving the car (hence “my car,” not “a” car), the word *da* 大 was central to his intention, and not there just for the sake of rhythm. At the same time, Yang Mu’s sense of rhythm and poetic economy allowed him to leave out the optional (but disambiguating) aspect particle *le* 了 (in addition to a string of other prosaic spoken-Chinese grammatical

devices one might use in a prose piece). Yang Mu and I conferred about a translation of *da* 大 that would convey the importance of the bridge to the speaker and also sound good in English. “Big” was too childish and ambiguous; “grand” or “stately” was over the top. Yang Mu explained that this particular bridge marked the crossing into Hualian county, where he was born and raised. I asked if the bridge also had a long span. He told me that it did, and I proposed the word “long”, which would imply a passage of some significance by emphasizing the distance between either side, and he liked this choice. Now that I understood the speaker’s temporal and spatial position in the poem as intended by Yang Mu, along with the significance of the bridge, I was able to adjust the line to its present state: “After my car crosses the long bridge / I nod”.

Here’s another of Yang Mu’s poems having to do with Hualian:

Zuocang: Sakor

When the moon is round, elephant ear plants jostle like the waters
of the ocean
green ghosts tread the hollows, sparking successive
flames on my body in the gloom, spiraling upward, until every
tumescient rootstalk rushes in, and I look up
Affirming that narrow patch of sky still overhead, our
collective memory, afloat with bits of indigo and lime
clumping, pressing—When the moon is round
I see human shapes drifting through wild lands where bamboo
shoots
and mimosas open and close, their shadows trailing
wind and dust, and the echoing of Spirit Creek.

His senses finely tuned, he moves between
the stillness of the living and the stirrings of the dead, the lush
greenery unchanged
Even when the body, warm the first half of the night, suddenly
grows cold and
turns to dew, and constellations both glorious and humble, each in
their own quadrants, are
toppled in succession and retreat, like no longer remembered

legends of the great flood: his tone of voice constant, its hues
unaltered

Lingering by an underwater cave with flashing white stones, and
even the

weeds bloom for him, concealing both late-comers and early
arrivals—look, he has a bow and arrows slung over his shoulder
and freshly picked soapwort, solitary spirit

spreading rumors bred of rumors, borne aloft by whirlwinds, and
then let fall, singing
a song of hunting and fishing

Thus, more keenly than most, you miss that different kind of time
When the new moon, hesitating like a frosty brow at the distant
edge of the predawn

sky, explains in a whisper that metaphors are predetermined,
born of the imagination, coalescing and dissolving

catching you unawares, scratching a sketch behind your ear and the
eyes of solitary stars, wings of the wind, the frozen rays of light

The swift blade slices stroke by stroke, incrementally shifting from
life to death

Sakor, facing the end of samsara:

The repleteness of the concrete
is the collapse of the abstract

佐倉：薩孤肋

月圓的時候有姑婆葉競生如海水
綠色精靈躡蹠窪地陸續在身上
點火於暗微旋飛，直到所有
充血的根莖都急於涉足，昂首
確認狹窄的天光在上，我們的
共同記憶，浮著染靛和石灰
簇擁，推擠——月圓的時候
我看到有人形飄過箭筍
和含羞草啟闔的野地，影子遺落
多風和塵土，多回音的祖靈溪

他的感覺細微無比，出入

生者靜於死者動間不改其蒼鬱
 甚至當上半夜的體溫剛才冷卻
 為露珠，輝煌與簡陋的星座各據一方
 相續傾斜，潰散，如不復記憶的
 洪水傳說；他的聲調不變而音色如一
 逡巡於白石閃光的水窟，甚至
 芒草也為他開花遮掩遲來和早到
 的個體，看他身上揹著弓箭
 和新菜的洗髮草，孤獨的魂
 以訛傳訛，飄舉，攸降，吟唱
 一首有關狩獵和捕魚的歌

於是妳就格外思念另外一種時候
 當新月謹慎若寒眉在遙遠未曙
 天邊細聲解說隱喻怎樣應運而生
 自幻想，集合繼之以解散
 出其不意在你耳後劃——道血痕以及
 孤星的眼，風的翅膀，漢光凜凜的
 快刀將它一一芟刈，遞嬗死生
 薩孤肋，朝向輪迴的終點：
 凡具象圓滿
 即抽象虧損之機
 (Yang 2006, 96–99)

After I'd made several drafts and was reasonably satisfied with the translation, I had a handful of questions for Yang Mu:

- Would you prefer “Tso-ts'ang” to “Zuocang”? [I wouldn't ordinarily raise this sort of question with a writer, but in the past Yang Mu had a strong preference for the Wade-Giles transcription.]
- Do you know which indigenous tribal language the name “Sakura” (Sakor?) is from? If possible, I'd like to have this information for a footnote.
- In the third line of the first stanza, you have: 。 。 。陸續在 身上。 。 。 Whose body? The unnamed warrior, the plants, the speaker?
- 祖靈溪: Is this a place name? I couldn't find it by googling.

- 洗髮草 : I couldn't find this plant, either. Can you tell me more about it?

In his response, Yang Mu explained that that the first part of the poem's title, "Zuocang" 佐倉, was a place name, which, when read in Japanese sounds like "sakura" (homophonous with the Japanese for "cherry blossom")—or *sa-gu-le* 薩孤肋 in transcription, in the part of the title after the colon. He was intrigued by this coincidence. He also told me that Zuocang had been the site of a battle between the indigenous Amis people and Japanese occupiers, which helped provide some historical context. I did some further research on my own and learned that *sa-gu-le* corresponded to the Amis word "sakor"—a kind of tree that once grew in abundance in the place now known as Zuocang.

Yang Mu's response to my last two questions came as a bit of a surprise, although it did explain why I hadn't been able to find either term: he'd made both of them up. *Zulingxi* 祖靈溪 ("Ancestral Spirits Creek") and *xifacao* 洗髮草 ("hair washing grass/herb") were products of his imagination. *Zulingxi* evoked for him the warriors who had fallen in this place in the past; and he simply liked the sound of *xifacao*. Because he'd invented these words, I had license to do the same, and I enjoyed immensely the process of coming up with English equivalents that would fit the poem.⁸ In the end I opted to drop "spirits" from "Ancestral Spirits Creek," because it had too many syllables and sounded clunky. "Hair washing grass" also needed some massaging if it was going to work well in English. Because part of the subtext is that this fictitious plant had been in use for some time and was part of an old tradition, I was inclined to come up with a name that sounded like an older Anglo-Saxon name, one with not too many syllables. "Soap" is a good solid word, "wort" conjures up images of medicinal European plants, and both have roots in Old English, which strikes the right tone for Yang Mu's poem.

"Six Quatrains, Written in Fun" 戲為六絕句 presented me with a pair of challenges: how to render the *xi* 戲 ("sport", "play") of the

8 My fellow translator Jennifer Feeley generously let me bounce some ideas off of her, and she helped me settle on the solutions I ultimately decided to use.

title, and what to do about a line break in the first stanza. Once again, I queried Yang Mu. This poem, like “Zuocang: Sakor” had come across my desk much later, well after the other translations were finished; and since we’d established a dialogue with the earlier sheaf of poems, I knew he wouldn’t mind if I sought clarification on various terms or ran alternative versions of short passages by him.

The literal translations of the title, “Six Quatrains in Play” or “Six Quatrains in Sport” had problems. The former didn’t sound cultivated enough for a piece that alluded to a poem written by the brilliant and revered Tang poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770); and the latter sounded affected or anachronistic to a contemporary American ear (though I can’t speak for other varieties of English). Neither felt altogether idiomatic. So I came up with two possible titles that suggested the spirit of the original: “Six Quatrains in Fun” and “Six Lighthearted Quatrains.” Yang Mu preferred the first of these, as he felt it was closer to the meaning he intended.

The first quatrain of the six was bothering me. Hewing close to Yang Mu’s syntax and line breaks, my first version looked like this:

But maybe after autumn sets in we’ll
 Grow accustomed bit by bit to such melodies as this
 There are tiny insects in a clearing in the woods
 Reciting quatrains in slanting sunlight

但或許入秋以後我們
 就漸漸熟悉這樣的旋律
 有細微的蚊蠅在林間空地
 斜照的陽光裡背誦四行詩
 (Yang 1997, 42–44)

I wasn’t satisfied with the flow from the third line to the fourth line; the third line didn’t sound light enough on its feet to me—the rhythm dragged. I could sharpen the line and improve the rhythm if I rendered the stanza more liberally. Depending on how you look at it, it’s either one sentence, or else a two-line sentence followed by a two-line fragment:

But maybe after autumn sets in we'll
 Grow accustomed bit by bit to such melodies as these
 Tiny insects in a clearing in the woods
 Reciting quatrains in slanting sunlight

I was much happier with this second version, and because Yang Mu's syntax has a notable flexibility and he uses a good deal of enjambment, the choice was consistent with his poetics. Nonetheless, as a courtesy (and to make sure my poetic intuition hadn't led me off on some unhelpful tangent) I checked in with him, but without indicating that I had a strong preference. I was pleased that he too preferred the more concise version in English.

Zhai Yongming

Another poet who, like Yang Mu, is in frequent dialogue with Chinese literary and art history is Zhai Yongming. "Climbing the Heights on the Double Ninth"⁹ 重陽登高 begins with an epigram from a poem by Wang Wei 王維 (699–759), "All adorned with flowers, but someone is missing" 遍插茱萸少一人, also composed for the Double Ninth. Celebrated every autumn, on the ninth day of the ninth month of the Lunar Calendar, this festival has long been an occasion for hikes in the hills to some high point that affords a vista, chrysanthemum viewing, and the drinking of chrysanthemum wine, ideally in the company of family and friends. Traditionally, people also wore a particular kind of flower in their hair for good luck on the Double Ninth. The absence of those close to one would be keenly felt on this occasion.

The following two stanzas are representative of the poem as a whole. The speaker has climbed a peak on the Double Ninth and is drinking wine on the heights; but instead of being with friends and family, she is alone. The poem becomes a meditation on the contrast between an ideal of this holiday and the speaker's solitary reality, calling to mind the Jin-dynasty landscape poet Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433), whose ecstatic poetic tributes to the mountains were

9 *The Changing Room: Selected Poetry of Zhai Yongming*. Translated by Andrea Lingenfelter. Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2011.

frequently coupled with laments that so many of his ascents were made in solitude and that he had no one with whom to share these vistas. Here is an excerpt of Zhai's poem:

Today I raise a cup alone while River and mountains change
color

The green months of spring depleted me
This figure, "Nine Nine" is once again
Reborn in my veins
Faraway peaks above and below
Plunge naked into my heart
It's useless but all I can do is
Enjoy the glorious sunshine

Longing is miserable Being drunk is miserable too
How many sighs in the souging of the wind? Who will
answer my echo?

(Zhai 2011, 127–29)

今朝我一人把盞 江山變色
九九這個數字 如今又要
輪回我的血脈
遠處一俯一仰的山峰
赤裸著跳入我懷中
我將只有毫無用處地
享受艷陽

思傷脾 醉也傷脾
颯颯風聲幾萬？ 呼應誰來臨？

(Zhai 2002, 97–98)

The greatest challenge in translating this poem was finding a way to provide crucial cultural background on the Double Ninth festival to my readers without disrupting the lines. My Zephyr press editor Christopher Mattison and I agreed that it wouldn't be possible to shoehorn this into the poem, and a fairly substantial footnote ended up being the best solution.

For Zhai Yongming's pair of linked poems, "Letter from a Past

It has to do with dynastic progress
It has to do with the body politic

Setting aside the ever unfinished task of housework
I write a letter to a scholar in a future dynasty

I want you to remember the writing of an obscure woman poet...
My family name is Qiu, my given name Yanxue
My name will not be passed down
and I want you to know me
as you have never known anyone else before
This is our secret sign
My heart beats and so does yours
I am alone just as you, when you are reading
are also alone

Writing and reading The power of two players

Setting aside the ever unfinished task of housework
I write a letter to a scholar in a future dynasty

Silkworms spin their cocoons just as I spit threads into thoughts
When there is cloth there will be poetry
When brushes and ink are swept away by autumn winds
there will be tiny Chinese characters I use them
knowing that hundreds of years from now you too will use them
I control them, creating a sense of euphoria in your brain
Like an orb of blue light it draws your
attention a psychedelic cloud
propelling you endlessly forward and closer

Viewed from the vantage point of eternity
you begin to know me, know my dynasty
its water and soil its climate
its clear and mild landscapes
its cool and quiet books of poetry
its wars and beacon towers

It perished due to the climate perished due to the soil
Perished because the people rose up¹⁰

前朝遺信（組詩）

前朝遺信

——無考女詩人邱硯雪信札

放下做不完的家務事
我給後朝的書生寫信

米作成的紙滴上眼淚后
就變成圖畫 用墨點染后
就寫意為竹子 折枝和芭蕉
宿墨久臭 又遭至家人喝斥
閑來久踱而如思

放下做不完的家務事之後
我給後朝的書生寫信

在扇子上寫字 也在白娟上寫
在宣紙上寫字 也在羅帕上寫
寫，變得如此貴重
一筆一劃的氣息 在身體中呼吸

後朝怎樣 我不知道
後朝的紙怎樣 我也不知道
後朝的寫將不再貴重 我卻知道
與它的國情有關
與它的進步有關
與它的身體有關

放下做不完的家務事

10 A version of this translation, based on a different version of these poems, was published in *Pathlight: New Chinese Writing 1* (2012). I have amended my translation in accord with Zhai Yongming's most recent version.

我給後朝的書生寫信

我要你記住無考女詩人的寫……

我姓邱，名硯雪

我的名字不會流傳下去

我要你認識我

就像你從未認識過別人

那是我們之間的秘密符號

我心跳你也心跳

我單獨一人 正像你閱讀時

也單獨一人

寫和讀

二人博弈的力量

放下做不完的家務事

我給後朝的書生寫信

桑蠶作繭 猶如我吐絲成思

有帛就有詩

毛筆和水墨 隨秋風掃過

就有了小小的方塊字 我使用它

知道 幾百年後你們還是用它

我控制它，制作你大腦的欣快感

如同一團藍光 引起你注意

它 一團迷幻霧氣

使你無限向前 靠近

從永恆的透視點裡往外看

你開始認識我，認識我的朝代

它的水土 它的氣候

它的淡而清的山水

它的冷而靜的詩書

它的戰爭和烽火台

它亡於氣候 亡於土壤

亡於人民起義

(Zhai 2013, 26–30)

There is a lot in this long poem to discuss, especially in light of Zhai Yongming’s ongoing research into and deep appreciation of the vilified or forgotten women writers of antiquity; but this lies beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that this poem brings together Zhai Yongming’s profound consciousness of history and of how traditional gender roles have boxed women in. Zhai Yongming’s passion for these subjects is discernible in the text, and yet I am certain that information outside the text—conversations, Zhai’s other articles and poems—has played a role in the intensity of feeling I perceive when reading it, and thus guided the tenor of my translation.

Wordplay is perhaps the most difficult thing to translate (after jokes that depend on wordplay, although perhaps these are one and the same thing). One poem where I was quite satisfied with my final choice is Zhai Yongming’s “Fireworks and Working Girls” 煙花的寂寞 (literally “the loneliness of fireworks,” which can also be read as meaning “the loneliness of prostitutes”).¹¹ I wracked my brains, summoning up different English words for prostitute, from formal to colloquial. None of them bore any relation to the word “fireworks,” which presented itself as the sole viable word for those explosive devices designed to create spectacle and/or noise. There was however, one exception: “working girls,” which played on the “works” in “fireworks.” My only concern was that term was a bit old-fashioned—some readers might not know it. However, I liked the poem very much and wanted to include it in a collection of Zhai Yongming’s poetry that I was then working on, and it did go in the book.

There was another issue with the title that needed to be resolved: what to do about *jimo* 寂寞 (“loneliness”)? The Chinese title, with just two main words (one carrying a double meaning) connected by a subordinating *de* 的, is something a reader can absorb. Because I chose to create a new kind of wordplay to render the pun, this transformed the Chinese *yanhua* into two English terms, “fireworks” and “working girls.” If I were to translate the title in full, it would look something like this: “The Loneliness of Fireworks and Working Girls.” This struck me as unwieldy, because English grammatical

11 The translation appears in *The Changing Room* (Zhai 2011, 115); the original appears in *Zhongyu shi wo zhouzhuan buling* 終於使我周轉不靈 (Zhai 2002, 62).

requirements like the addition of “the” and “of” made it a clunky phrase, and all that extra verbiage took the focus off the pun. It simply lacked the punch of Zhai Yongming’s original title. Something had to go, and since the pun was the point, I let “loneliness” fall by the wayside. I considered the pun of *yanhua* to be more important than the pathos of *jimo*, which could be gleaned from the poem itself. This was a judgment call, based on my own reading, but when we exchanged notes over the drafts of the manuscript of *The Changing Room*, it became clear that Zhai Yongming valued the double meaning of the title and wanted that to come through.

Wang Yin

Lately I’ve begun compiling a sheaf of new translations of poems by Wang Yin, whom I’ve known and been translating for the past decade. One of these newer translations is “Suddenly” 突然:

Suddenly

this afternoon
 a gigantic seagull
 dive-bombed a pedestrian street
 while fish exiled to the library for their crimes
 were eating fruit

an accident victim carried a stretcher
 down the road

when snow on the mountains drifts off to sleep
 we will still be awake

this afternoon
 a summer of reprisals drew to a close

突然

今天下午
 巨大的海鷗
 俯沖飛入步行街

發配到圖書館裡的魚
吃著水果

受傷的人抬著擔架
走過街道

山坡上的雪入睡的時候
我們還醒著

今天下午
剿匪的夏天過去了¹²

Although this deceptively simple poem is short, it went through seven drafts before I arrived at the current version. I was at a translation residency with Wang Yin, he was in the studio next door, and I could simply ask him in person. This quickened the process and changed it: email is great, but nothing beats conversation. I've underlined the passages in the Chinese text for which I sought clarification.

巨大 *juda* (“enormous, gigantic, massive”): Was the seagull merely large and meaty, or was it truly enormous? In other words, I asked, was this meant to surrealistic? The answer was yes. Therefore the seagull became “gigantic.”

受傷的人 *shoushang de ren* (“injured person”): The couplet revolves around the dramatic irony of someone who's hurt and should be lying on a stretcher carrying a stretcher down the street instead. But the literal translation didn't sit right with me. “An injured person carried a stretcher down the street” sounds awkward; and I thought “accident victim” would be stronger and more economical. Wang Yin was fine with the substitution.

剿匪 *jiaofei* (“bandit suppression”): This was the trickiest. I wasn't sure what the role of this phrase was in the poem. What was it doing? How did it fit? It turned out to be a spontaneous and intuitive choice. As Wang Yin explained, it was an old slogan that referred to the Communist government's mopping up and elimination (*jiao* 剿 “suppression”) of Nationalist holdouts (*fei* 匪 “bandits”) in the

12 Text of unpublished poem courtesy of author.

aftermath of the 1949 Communist victory in the Civil War. He was quick to say that he didn't mean this too literally—it had just sounded good to him—and he encouraged me to translate it as loosely as I saw fit. He definitely didn't wish for the poem to get side-tracked by a history lesson, nor did I. I didn't think the English version of this particular poem would have been well served by the insertion of wooden, official Mao-era political language. I slept on it, and when I sat down and reread my draft the following day, the term “reprisals” came to mind. It was in the same semantic domain as “bandit suppression” (violent conflict, revenge killings) but didn't sound like it had been issued by a mainland-Chinese publishing house circa 1955.

Another poem I hope to include in a book-length manuscript is entitled *Wu Fei Wu* 物非物 (literally “A Thing [Yet] Not a Thing”)¹³. There is a reference here to Bai Juyi's 白居易 (772–846) poem that begins, “A flower, yet not a flower, A mist, yet not a mist”¹⁴ 花非花，霧非霧. Wang Yin's title is homophonous with the second phrase in Bai Juyi's poem, punning *wu* “thing” with *wu* “mist.” But how to translate a title that puns on another poem, particularly one that is so well known to its original audience and freighted with so much history? Not only are the words for “thing” and “mist” overlaid on each other, the older poem mobilizes additional content and a reading tradition of its own. This is a puzzle I have yet to solve, but I look forward to brainstorming possibilities and seeing if I can have some fun with it.

The body of the poem is more straightforward, although it too contains wordplay, as in the first stanza (underlined in the Chinese):

(When) A Thing Isn't a Thing

at first, what drew me in was a certain quality
neither blankness nor blackness
but a thing whose name I can't call to mind

13 Unpublished poem, text courtesy of Wang Yin.

14 The translation of these lines was adapted and modified from Eugene Ouyang's as it appears in Liu and Lo 1975 (211).

物非物

起初，吸引我的某種物質
不是空白 也不是黑暗
而是回憶不起它的名字

Kongbai 空白 (“blankness”), which contains the word *bai* 白 (“white”), is juxtaposed with *hei’an* 黑暗 (“darkness”), which contains the character *hei* 黑 (“black”). The wordplay is subtle and would be lost in too literal a translation (i.e., “blankness” and “darkness”); and while it wouldn’t be a stretch to render *hei’an* as “blackness”, over-translating *kongbai* as “whiteness” would alter the meaning of the line too drastically. Nonetheless, these antonyms hold the line together, like magnets with opposite charges.

Fortunately, a solution presented itself almost immediately: to contrast “blankness” with “blackness.” I let the semantic black/white trope go, replacing it with an auditory and visual one that maintains a connection between the two halves of the line.

The first stanza is the only part of this short poem that is finished. The rest of my translation is still very rough—it’s not just the title that I’m going to let sit for a bit. Lest this essay become a self-congratulatory catalogue—and one that risks making finished translations appear to be the inevitable result of a straightforward walk from A to B—I will offer an antidote to this misimpression, while leaving the reader wondering how it will end.

What follows is the final stanza of my translation, in its current, unfinished form. I expect the first line to resolve itself without much fuss; but I am going to give the final two lines plenty of time, as they present a challenge, or a problem, in the sense of a chess problem:

I’ve sidestepped the gloomy parts / depressing parts but
still fell / slipped / blundered / sank / plunged / tripped into
the pure beauty of the cold / the purity of cold days / pure beauty
of the cold / pristine beauty
the rot of a mild climate / the blight of mild climates

我迴避著陰鬱的部分 卻陷入了
低溫下的美
恆溫下的罪

This is how it works for me. Translation is a process, and what you see above are my thoughts, first written out in longhand, and then typed up on my laptop. I give myself multiple alternatives as I think my way through a first draft—unless a word or phrase strikes me as an obvious choice. Often, things become much clearer on the second reading, especially if I’ve let a draft sit for a while. Here is what lies behind that first draft:

迴避著: “I’ve sidestepped ... but still fell ...” I looked up 迴避 and discarded the less concrete English equivalents (elude, evade). Part of literary translation is looking up words you already know, to make sure you haven’t missed any semantic windows that might open onto promising vistas. If I were going to be literal, I’d say “Sidestepping ... I’ve fallen ...” But that would entail not beginning the stanza with “I”. I might later opt to begin the stanza with “sidestepping” after all; but for now I’m leaning towards an opening with a more emphatically stated first person narrator.

陰鬱的部分: What to do with *yinyu* 陰鬱? Does it mean gloomy in a dim and shady sense? Or in the psychological sense of sadness, a mental funk? Can I imply both, as Wang Yin’s Chinese does? And what sounds better? If you say “I’ve skipped the depressing parts”, then it sounds like the speaker is reading a sad novel or watching a film and hitting the fast forward button. What is literal? What is abstract? Poetry often blends or juxtaposes these, and that’s part of what makes it rich. I want to incorporate this quality in my translation. “Sidestepping” is my preference, as it describes someone getting out of harm’s way and implies a certain nimbleness of spirit.

陷入了: “fallen into a trap”. 陷入 gives me a strong image of someone sliding into the muck, into a trap or pit. Thus far, English isn’t offering me much in the way of vivid equivalents, but the danger of over-translation remains real and ever present. Another one to think on.

低温下的美
恒温下的罪

The beauty in [times of] low temperatures
The crime in [times of] even / steady / stable temperatures

These lines, rendered literally, sound hopelessly prosaic, and they don't hold together in a meaningful way or convey enough depth of meaning. Thus, cleaving too close to the original is not the answer here. (Being literal rarely is, and being overly literal never is.)

I was initially baffled by the final couplet. Read in isolation, the penultimate line is fairly transparent, but because it's paired with the final line through rhyme and grammatical parallelism, it becomes enmeshed in that line. I found the last line rather obscure, and that in turn complicated my reading of the penultimate line, so I asked Wang Yin what he had in mind when he wrote these lines.

Wang Yin told me that his word choices were guided by the rhyme, and that he was trying to express the contrast between the crispness and clarity (*mei* 美 “beauty”) of cold weather (which also retards decay) and the problem with higher temperatures, namely the fact that things rot quickly when it's warm—the “crime” (*zui* 罪). How will I resolve all of this and condense as many of these associations as possible, at a minimum the key ones, into a couple of spare parallel lines with some kind of rhyme or assonance holding them together? As of today, I really don't know. What I do know is that I'm going to have a very interesting time finding out.

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