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## Translating Migrant Worker Poetry: Whose Voices Get Heard and How?

Eleanor Goodman

When the poet and filmmaker Qin Xiaoyu 秦晓宇 asked me to translate the anthology that ended up as *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry* (Goodman 2017),<sup>1</sup> I was initially reluctant. One of my concerns was that the translation had to be completed in eight weeks in order to appear in time for the American premiere of the eponymous movie. My second concern had to do with the nature of anthologies.

Anthologies are fraught, messy projects. They involve the perennial questions of what to include and what to exclude, whose voices get heard and whose are ignored. Anthologies that are marketed as “The Best of X” are perhaps most guilty of this exclusionary tactic, by suggesting that some ultimate standard is being applied, rather than a combination of previous canonization, the tastes of the editor and dumb luck.

For contemporary mainland-Chinese poetry translated into English and other languages, anthologies are a pinhole through which a raging torrent of texts is squeezed, in addition to a fragile but growing list of single-author collections (for which Zephyr Press in particular has done exemplary work—and full disclosure: I am the translator of two of these books).<sup>2</sup> Of course, not all of what is being

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1 All the translations that follow come from this anthology, unless otherwise indicated.

2 Zephyr Press has published high-quality translations in their *Jintian* 今天

written today in China merits squeezing through. There is a lot of dross being produced along with the gems.

The metaphor of a gem is worth interrogating in this context. A gemstone is cut to be luminescent, polished, refractive, smooth, sharp-edged. There is nothing hazy, dull or blurry about it. In the dominant American literary scene, this is what we frequently look for in a poem, what we consider to constitute “high literary value”: a polished smoothness, a sense of having been cut so cleanly that the facets will shimmer under every kind of light. And like gemstones, we expect our poems to be expensive, to require a considerable investment of time and attention. We want them to be hard as diamonds, revealing their full color spectrum only after inspection through various theories, methods and associative processes. I have translated many such poems from Chinese, and endeavored to write such poems myself. But that is not all that poetry can do. It is not the only incarnation of poetic expression.

It is a defensible generalization to say that there is an unfortunate tendency to expel non-gemlike, stylistically different or otherwise challenging work from the larger corpus. This is an issue many have pointed to and many others continue to ignore. But perhaps it isn’t that the issue is being ignored, for there are clearly genuine differences of opinion about what is “valuable” in “literary” terms. I use scare quotes to flag the crushing freight that these concepts carry. It’s an old issue, but it’s alive and kicking and it won’t go away, and it happens everywhere.

The widely publicized disagreement between Rita Dove and Helen Vendler around Dove’s editorial decisions in *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2011) is a case in point. I have no intention of downplaying the realness and the importance of race, gender, sexuality and other dimensions of discrimination, which have always underpinned canon formation; but here, I wish to focus specifically on the rhetoric in which the discussion was framed on Vendler’s side of the dispute. In her review of the anthology in *The New York Review of Books*, she writes:

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series, as well as publishing authors such as the Taiwanese poet Hsia Yü 夏宇 under their own imprint. My translations with Zephyr are *Something Crosses My Mind: Selected Poems of Wang Xiaoni* (included in the *Jintian* series) (2014), and *The Roots of Wisdom: Poems by Zang Di* (2017).

Multicultural inclusiveness prevails: some 175 poets are represented. No century in the evolution of poetry in English ever had 175 poets worth reading, so why are we being asked to sample so many poets of little or no lasting value? Anthologists may now be extending a too general welcome. Selectivity has been condemned as “elitism,” and a hundred flowers are invited to bloom [...] It is popular to say (and it is in part true) that in literary matters tastes differ, and that every critic can be wrong. But there is a certain objectivity bestowed by the mere passage of time, and its sifting of wheat from chaff: Which of Dove’s 175 poets will have staying power, and which will seep back into the archives of sociology? (Vendler 2011)

The claim that no century in the evolution of poetry in English ever had 175 poets worth reading is startling in its vehemence and its bald exclusivity. To my mind, behind it is a deep misunderstanding of what poetry does and has the potential to do. It assumes a kind of homogeneity, not just of the poets but of current and potential audiences. We should apparently limit ourselves to “good” poets, or perhaps only to “great” poets, designations of course to be determined by “the experts.”

That everyone should be looking for more or less the same thing with a similar set of requirements, tastes and desires is a highly questionable premise. While I don’t reject the idea that one can set one’s own standards for judging poetry, it seems self-defeating of readers to accept standards so limited that over the course of a century there should be fewer than two poets writing in English in any given year who are worth reading.

I prefer to think of poetry as an ecosystem in which different kinds of growth are possible, with diversity itself as a feature that will enrich the whole. The Vendlerian alternative is articulated nicely in Thomas Sayer Ellis’s poem “All Their Stanzas Look Alike”:

All their favorite writers  
 All their writing programs  
 All their visiting writers  
 All their writers-in-residence  
 All their stanzas look alike

All their third worlds  
 All their world series  
 All their serial killers  
 All their killing fields  
 All their stanzas look alike  
 All their state grants  
 All their tenure tracks  
 All their artist colonies  
 All their core faculties  
 All their stanzas look alike  
 All their Selected Collecteds  
 All their Oxford Nortons  
 All their Academy Societies  
 All their Oprah Vendlers  
 All their stanzas look alike  
 (Ellis 2005, 116)

This kind of deadened and deadening uniformity is not just a problem in American poetry, of course. It is equally at play on the Chinese poetry scene, although the terms are somewhat different. Perhaps more visibly than in the US, the most happening poets (often referred to as “avant-garde” 先鋒, in a local use of the term that bears little relation to how it is generally used in English) (van Crevel 2008, 9) tend to divide themselves into poetry “schools” 流派 or “factions” 幫派 that loudly advertise themselves as operating under their own rules, with their own criteria for success and failure, value and lack of value, inclusion and exclusion. To varying degrees, these factions vie with each other, spurn each other or indeed reject and refuse to read each other—yet somehow there is an assumption that everyone is part of the conversation, no matter how toxic this becomes. But occasionally a group of poets comes along that is dismissed or ignored by most if not all others. To an extent, this is the fate of “official” 官方 poets who are sanctioned by the government and therefore widely assumed to write politicized and unoriginal, inferior work. Another such group are the *dagong shiren* 打工詩人.

It would be nice to have a dynamic, versatile translation for *dagong shiren*. One fairly literal rendition is “temporary worker poets,” which is flat and awkward. Another possibility is “migrant

worker poets,” which I have used elsewhere and will use here as well, for convenience. This is less awkward but hardly as catchy as the Chinese term, and it is potentially misleading inasmuch the migration in question is internal to China, whereas in American English, migrant workers would normally be assumed to refer to people who left their home country in order to find work. Alternatively, one might use “working-for-the-man poets”<sup>3</sup> or even something like ‘displaced poets,’ even though that strays far from the original and is a far-reaching interpretive intervention. As a matter of fact, there is no terminological consistency in the Chinese to begin with, with some using *dagong shiren*, others using *nongmingong shiren* 農民工詩人 “farmer-worker poets,” and still others returning to the Maoist figure of the *gongren shiren* 工人詩人, the “worker poet.”

In the movie *Iron Moon*, a documentary that follows the lives of several of these migrant worker poets, there is a scene in which the poet Wu Xia 吳霞 comments on her living arrangements in Shenzhen. She says:

This is where we live. It’s called Greenview Garden. It sounds like a luxurious place, but actually, there are no flowers at all. It’s not a garden at all. Actually, it’s a farmers’ compound. We’re farmers, but in the city we’re called migrant workers. I think that’s pretty interesting (Qin and Wu 2015).

This is a problematic translation, and I tore my hair out over it at the time. What Wu Xia says is: We’re *nongmin*, but in the city we’re called *nongmingong*. In a literal translation: We’re farmers, but in the city we’re called farmer-workers. The term *nongmingong* is superficially descriptive but widely perceived as derogatory. If Wu Xia, who had moved to Shenzhen at fourteen and lived there for nineteen years when the movie was shot, is still considered a farmer—or in a more pejorative translation of the term, a peasant—then the designation does not actually reflect one’s work, but one’s social status as formally determined in China at birth. While this is nowhere near as politicized as it was in the Mao era, it does reinforce the rural-

3 This is inspired by Sun Wanning’s 孫皖寧 translation of *dagong* as “working for the boss,” cited alongside other possible renditions in Maghiel van Crevel’s review of *Iron Moon* (2017b).

urban divide in present-day China, and it is something that cannot be sloughed off or changed as easily as a job.

Not long after I had finished translating the film subtitles, I attended a private dinner with professors and students at Peking University at which this issue came up. Everyone at the table looked uneasy, and we felt we were treading on uncertain ground. The question was not what to call the *dagong shiren* or *nongmingong shiren*, but whether referring to them as belonging to a poetry movement or school was appropriate in the first place. The most senior member of the group was of the opinion that to categorize these writers together in one group was to reduce them to their *shenfen* 身份, which is the aforesaid social status and the kind of identity associated with that underprivileged and frequently maligned group. This would minimize their individuality as manifest in stylistic difference, and emphasize their disadvantaged backgrounds instead.

One of the students disagreed, saying that showing society that *nongmin* can write poetry demonstrates that perceptions of *nongmin* as uneducated, non-creative, uncultured and even unfeeling are inaccurate, or limited and limiting at the very least. She argued that only by viewing these poets in terms of this category could such stereotypes be challenged—which, she took it, was one of the reasons these poets wrote in the first place.

I did not venture an opinion at the time, and there is something to be said for both of these points of view. I would, however, approach the issue in a different way. Rather than focusing on *shenfen*, I think we should focus on the notions of experience and material. These can be related and intertwined, but at any rate this will shift the emphasis from the poet to the poetry. Someone working in a coalmine or an electronics factory or a printshop has seen, heard, smelled, felt and done things that most of those who fit the conventional picture of a poet have not. All of that sensory data may constitute the raw material that goes into a literary work.

As with the devil, so with poetry: it's in the details, and for many poets, those details come from lived experience. Regardless of whether the *dagong shiren* constitute a poetry school, the reason I agreed to translate *Iron Moon* even though I had to work with an impossible deadline was that as I read on, it became clear to me that migrant worker poetry is made by important voices that should be

heard, and that it reflects experience of a kind whose expression from an inside perspective is well worth the outsider's while. There has been scholarship, abundantly in Chinese and increasingly in other languages, about the lives of migrant workers: Leslie T. Chang's 張彤禾 *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (2009) and Sun Wanning's 孫皖寧 *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices* (2014) are two powerful English-language examples. But little has been written, or more precisely: little has been formally published about the lives of migrant workers by the migrant workers themselves. The view is largely external, be it journalistic or scholarly. There's nothing wrong with that—but this outside writing is inherently removed from the experience, and many of these stories benefit from being told from a more intimate angle.

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Several months after translating a selection of poems by Xu Lizhi 許立志 and publishing them in the *China Labour Bulletin* 中國勞工通訊 (Xu 2016), I was contacted by the composer and union leader Arun Ivatury who wanted permission to set one of my translations to music. The poem in question, "I Swallowed an Iron Moon" 我嚥下一枚鐵做的月亮 is perhaps Xu's best-known work:

I swallowed an iron moon  
they called it a screw

I swallowed industrial wastewater and unemployment forms  
lower than machines, our youth died young

I swallowed labor, I swallowed poverty  
swallowed pedestrian bridges, swallowed this rusted-out life

I can't swallow any more  
everything I've swallowed roils up in my throat

to spread across my country  
a poem of shame  
(Goodman 2017, 198, amended)

In his email, Ivatury noted that he'd seen a translation elsewhere that used the verb "to unfurl" in the final stanza. As he quoted it to me (without crediting the translator—and as it turns out, the translator is not credited in the original news source): "All that I've swallowed is now gushing out of my throat / Unfurling on the land of my ancestors / Into a disgraceful poem" (Tharoor 2014).

"Unfurl" is a wonderful word. The closed sound of "un" opening up into the long curl of the "furl" is very appealing. It brings to mind a flag being unfolded and hoisted up a flagpole to wave proudly, or a scroll being unrolled to reveal its secrets, or the tall sail of a sailboat rippling open in wind and sunshine.

The first thing I thought when I saw it was, *I wish I'd thought of "unfurl."* Isn't the point of poetry, and of translating poetry, to use beautiful, "poetic" words? "Unfurl" is certainly poetic: it's relatively uncommon and has grand resonances, and it demonstrates that the translator has a rich vocabulary. And the original *pu* 鋪 can legitimately be rendered as "unfurl," although its core meaning is "to pave."

In his brilliant essay "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign," Antoine Berman identifies twelve "deforming tendencies" that lead translators to inflict indignities upon their source texts. Among them is "ennoblement," which Berman characterizes as follows:

In poetry, [ennoblement] is "poeticization." In prose, it is rather a "rhetorization" [...] Rhetorization consists in producing "elegant" sentences, while utilizing the source text so to speak, as *raw material*. Thus the ennoblement is only a rewriting, a stylistic exercise based on—and at the expense of—the original (Berman 2004, 282).

The second thing I thought about "unfurl" was, *What an unfortunate choice*. Clearly, what underlies the opposition of "unfurl" and "spread" is the issue of ennoblement. The Chinese verb is plain, not grandiose but ordinary. Also, the suffix *cheng* 成 "become, turn into" contravenes the "un," which means to negate or un-become. But aside from the lexical level, there is also a problem in what one thinks is being unfurled. Ostensibly, it is a poem. A poem can be unfurled, if it's like a scroll, in some romantic Tang-dynasty image. But this hardly befits

Xu Lizhi, who wrote in grungy notebooks. And what is implied in his poem is vomit (“gushing out of my throat”), which definitely can’t be unfurled.

Vomit can, however, spread. As can ink. As can blood. As can shame. The poem is dated December 21, 2013 and it is among the last dozen or so poems that Xu wrote before taking his life on September 30, 2014. He was part of a tragic spate of workers who killed themselves by jumping off buildings on or near the Foxconn factory in Shenzhen. Overwhelmed by the conditions in which he was forced to work—he tried to escape by looking for work in a library, at magazines, somewhere that would employ his linguistic talents, but he failed and returned to the factory a few months before committing suicide—his poems turned darker and darker before ending in silence.

In the context of “avant-garde” poetry and with reference to the work of Michelle Yeh, Maghiel van Crevel has written about

the emergence of a “cult” of poetry, and of poethood. Its religious overtones, penchant for the grandiose, and infighting suggest subtle complicity with Maoist aesthetics, and distant kinship with the New Culture Movement. The cult facilitates a favorable view of the poet’s suicide [...] It makes martyrdom for poetry seem a self-evident thing (van Crevel 2017a, 807).<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the famous examples of Haizi 海子, Ge Mai 戈麥, Gu Cheng 顧城, and others, most recently Ma Yan 馬雁, what is striking about Xu’s suicide is that rather than being inward-looking, with the poet as sensitive, tragic artist, it is widely taken as a straightforward indictment of his outward circumstances. This is “Sculpture on the Assembly Line” 流水線上的雕塑:

On the assembly line, bending over ramrod straight  
I see my own youth  
gurgling past like blood  
motherboards, casings, steel boxes

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4 The notion of a “cult of poetry” in mainland China was put forward by Michelle Yeh in “The ‘Cult of Poetry’ in Contemporary China” (Yeh 1996).

and no one to help me with the work at hand  
 thankfully the work station grants me  
 two hands like machines  
 that tirelessly grab, grab, grab  
 until my hands blossom into flourishing  
 callouses, oozing wounds  
 and I won't even notice  
 I've already stood here so long  
 I've turned into an ancient sculpture  
 (Xu 2016)

Hands that ooze with blood and harden into callouses, backbreaking work performed for hours and hours on end. In a radio interview reproduced in the documentary *Iron Moon*, Xu describes the life of a worker this way:

*Interviewer:* You must feel sleepy after a night shift, right?

*Xu:* Yeah. The nightshift lasts from 8 pm to 7 am the next morning.

*Interviewer:* So eleven hours?

*Xu:* Yeah. I have to stand most of the time. And you have to ask permission to go to the bathroom.

(Qin and Wu 2015)

Not just a poet would feel despair.

Xu's language, while evocative and rich, does not present the kinds of "difficulties" one might anticipate when coming to a poem. His vocabulary is fairly straightforward, and his images require no painstaking picking apart. Callouses that blossom open like flowers do all of the work of a more elaborate metaphor while remaining interpretively simple. In the current environment in American letters in which flashier and complex is largely considered better, where a sort of aesthetic regularity dominates ("all their stanzas look alike"), the challenge for the translator then becomes how to protect that particular aesthetic—as Berman points out, in particular and especially from oneself.

Translators operate with a lot of anxiety. Far beyond simple revision, translation is a kind of work that lends itself to fretful second-guessing and involves the frequently conflicting goals of “faithfulness” to the source text on the one hand, and artistic expression in the target language, on the other. This anxiety is mostly a hindrance, but it can also be a motivating force. Try it again, some other way; ok, now do it again.

Before I translated *Iron Moon* (the anthology) I worked for about a year on the subtitles for the movie. For part of that time, I was living in Shanghai, where the film company is based. In 2015 I attended one of their screenings of the original film, after which the filmmakers held an informal discussion session with the audience, a common tactic they used to ratchet up interest as well as to educate. At the session I attended in what is arguably the most cosmopolitan city in China, at a far remove from the rural hinterlands even though its breathtaking architectural overhaul was built by rural hands, the discussion session was held at a restaurant near the movie theater and was sparsely attended. Those who did attend, however, asked smart, interested questions, and had incisive comments to make. Many had personal connections to the film—they themselves had grown up in the countryside, or had relatives still living there, or had themselves barely escaped the difficult lives that are depicted in the film.

One man who looked to be in his mid-thirties stood up and made a comment about a poem by Wu Xia, “Sundress” 吊帶裙, which happened to be among the most difficult translations I did for the film.

The packing area is flooded with light  
the iron I'm holding collects  
all the warmth of my hands

I want to press the straps flat  
so they won't dig into your shoulders when you wear it  
and then press up from the waist  
a lovely waist  
where someone can lay a fine hand  
and on the tree-shaded lane  
caress a quiet kind of love

last I'll smooth the dress out to iron the pleats to equal widths  
so you can sit by a lake or on a grassy lawn  
and wait for a breeze like a flower

Soon when I get off work  
I'll wash my sweaty uniform  
and the sundress will be packed and shipped  
to a fashionable store  
it will wait just for you  
unknown girl  
I love you  
(Goodman 2017, 165)

Here is another poem by Wu Xia, which was just as difficult to translate, called “Who Can Forbid My Love” 誰能禁止我的愛:

Outside the train window, lovely scenery rushes past  
like a cluster of arrows shot into the heart  
the rented room is locked in a dark place

After eighteen years in Shenzhen, my hometown has become unfamiliar  
each day I wake up with Shenzhen, and at night we go to sleep together  
I love her vigor and vitality, each season brings another round of flowers  
evergreen trees and grasses  
and I love every inch of her growth. This kind of love seeps  
into the pores, skin, cells, blood, bone  
even though there's no residence permit with my name on it.  
(Goodman 2017, 167)

These poems are as straightforward in Chinese as they are in English. There's no need for dictionaries or head-scratching. So why did I find it so agonizing to translate them?

Many years ago, when I was getting my master's degree in Creative Writing, we were made to understand (although I don't remember if we were actually “told” anything by our professors, or these lasting impressions come from conversations with other students or classroom discussions) that one should never use words like “love,” “heart,” or “shard” in a poem, or else risk profound

humiliation at the hands of one's more sophisticated betters. I don't know what the problem was with "shard," which seems like an innocuous enough word—although "shards of my heart" is clearly out—but the issue with "heart" and "love" was a kind of resistance to what was perceived by a cultural elite as sentimentality, quite aside from what the words in question might mean and be elsewhere. Words in this category were known as "easy"—as pointing to clichéd emotional responses, the ones that Hallmark cards and TV commercials trade on. *We are better than that*, went the prevailing ethos, not only of my program, but of the dominant literary scene in the United States as a whole. Irony is in, sincerity is out. Sentimentality is a fatal flaw, and chicness, coolness and erudition are the marks of a True Poet.

This is of course an oversimplification, and there are many branches of the American poetry tree. But in trying to translate Wu Xia's work, I found myself crashing into my own internalized value judgments about what "good" poetry is. Obviously, Wu does not share my anxiety about the word "love." She uses it frequently, with abandon, one might say. Translating her work, then, became a balancing act between my personal aesthetic—not just stylistic judgments, but deeply ingrained, locally informed ideas about literariness—and the corresponding deforming tendency toward ennoblement on the one hand, and Wu's own words on the page and the effect she is trying to achieve, on the other.

In "Who Can Forbid My Love," Wu Xia relies on traditional ideas of love to produce the underlying tension in the poem. This implies not only an emotional connection and deep enjoyment, but also a commitment. Like in a marriage, "each day I wake up with Shenzhen, and at night we go to sleep together." It is a relationship for which she is willing to make sacrifices, in the expectation that it will last and bear fruit. The tension does not become apparent until the final line: "even though there's no residence permit with my name on it."

Although this love has become bodily and fully manifested practically and emotionally, it is not officially sanctioned. Given the restrictions of the national household registration system, strictly speaking, Wu Xia is in Shenzhen only for a temporary period—never mind that this has lasted for close to twenty years. This means that

she and her children are not eligible for a range of social rights, and that she is subject to the whim of both her boss and local enforcement officials. Essentially, she can be kicked out of the city and sent back to a “hometown [that] has become unfamiliar” at any moment, losing her livelihood and the city with which she has formed a strong and mutually beneficial bond.

This sense of insecurity, instability and displacement are themes that run throughout *Iron Moon*, a point I will discuss further below. But first let me return to “love.” The man who brought up Wu Xia after the screening of the movie in Shanghai also focused on the idea of love, but from a very different angle. He told the group that he had been deeply touched by the last stanza of “Sundress,” because it was extremely uncommon in contemporary Chinese culture for anyone to express concern, let alone love, for a stranger. He said that society had become highly fractured, with one’s familial and personal network overshadowing any broader sense of community or shared communal values. With tears in his eyes, he quoted Wu Xia’s last two lines from memory: “unknown girl / I love you” 陌生的姑娘 / 我愛你.

Why shouldn’t we be moved by a poet’s love for an unknown girl? Why shouldn’t it be a compelling move to love a stranger, in a culture in which mutual suspicion abounds and hierarchies are painfully reinforced socially, economically and legally? Love, then, becomes a radical expression of resistance to that reality itself, and to the social, political and cultural systems that sustain it.

Looking back at my translations now, I find that I responded to that sense of a radical resistance not by underplaying the love, or finding ways around it, but by emphasizing it instead. Both of the translations I quote above use the word “love” but also the word “lovely.” In the first instance, the Chinese original is *ke’ai* 可愛, which contains the character 愛 “love” but could also be translated as “cute,” “sweet,” “adorable,” and so on. In the second instance, I find to my surprise that I’ve actually *added* an instance of love. In the original, the first line of “Who Can Forbid My Love” reads: 車窗外，一幀幀美景從眼前掠過. I’ve translated *meijing* 美景 as “lovely” rather than “beautiful” scenery. Of course, this is also because I distinctly remember “beautiful” being a forbidden word in grad school too.

As I worked on translating Wu Xia’s poetry along with that of

the other poets included in the anthology, I began to value her emphasis on the good and the beautiful even more. Given the context, it began to stand out to me as a translator as an example of defiance, not of clichéd posturing. Who am I, after all, to forbid—or edit out—anyone’s love?

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Physical as well as emotional displacement abound in migrant worker poetry, and much of the force behind them comes from the details of specific lives and livelihoods. In stark contrast to Wu Xia’s affection for Shenzhen and her desire to stay there permanently and with official sanction, Tian Xiaoyin 田曉隱 has no love at all for his makeshift home in “Makeng Shantytown” 麻坑窪:

Stop at the lowest point of Makeng Shantytown, where everything  
     can be hidden  
 wait for the last leaf to be packed up with thoughts of galloping  
     cold  
 places luggage has passed, deep traces, we’re hoping for a good  
     snowfall

A weakness concealed for twenty years is insulted by your sneeze  
 gazes and suspicions, doting love and provocations  
 distorting pain compels me into a solitary rebellious escape

Hallucinogenic ads on bathroom walls, profusions of headlines  
     made by massage parlor lamps  
 scalping and the scalpers are taken in by the era, by the X Bureau....  
 no lists allowed! Just like Makeng Shantytown is looted by naked  
     animals

Makeng Shantytown is just the bottom of the era’s collapse  
 and I am just an injured ant still screaming in the hole  
 someday, black and white ants will join in lines and march

I need to go on a long journey. Makeng Shantytown is defined by  
     water

once you leave, you'll never want to go back  
 in the unknown distance: the yellowing green wheat, green and  
 yellow at once  
 (Goodman 2017, 190)

Here, as in other moments in the book, I've taken some liberty with the title, which literally means "Makeng Swamp." In translating it "Makeng Shantytown," I've tried to dispel potential confusion on the part of the reader (people live in shantytowns, but not necessarily in swamps), but also echo other histories and experiences of migrant workers globally, from the American Great Depression to the impoverished Parisian *banlieues* of today. According to the OED, the etymology of shantytown may come from the French Canadian word *chantier*, referring to temporary lumberjack cabins, which seems especially appropriate for these jury-rigged dwellings in southern China as well.

The environment—both physical and human—in the poem seems to offer no beauty at all, in a damp, surrealistic landscape into which people are packed like ants. The "hallucinogenic ads on bathroom walls, profusions of headlines made by massage parlor lamps / scalping and the scalpers" are images of exploitation and desperation. While Wu has made a long journey with Shenzhen as her destination, Tian is desperate to escape where he has ended up. Both sides of the migrant coin are richly represented. Other kinds of journeys are often prevented by a lack of a destination, reinforcing the sense of displacement and rootlessness. Hometowns become inhospitable, either because they grow unfamiliar through the rapid, profound changes that envelop today's China, or because of the lack of work other than basic subsistence farming. So in addition to describing the conditions in shantytowns, "farmer's compounds," cheap shared apartments and workers dormitories, these poets are often also looking back at where they came from. One particularly affecting and effective example is Tang Yihong's 唐以洪 "It Seems I'm Really His Father" 好像我就是他的父親:

When I went home one time, my son  
 was playing with the neighbor's kid  
 when he saw me he hid behind my mother's body

sticking his fingers in his mouth, sucking on them  
 as he peeked out, quietly, timidly  
 sizing me up, as though I weren't his father  
 but the neighbor's kid was excited  
 not knowing what to do with himself, singing for a bit  
 then dancing, then riding a kitchen stool  
 flying about shouting, circling my courtyard  
 running one lap then another, wanting to get close to me  
 until it was dark and he still didn't want to go home  
 so it seems I'm really his father  
 (Goodman 2017, 52)

The courtyard is still “my courtyard,” and going there is still going “home.” But the child has forgotten his father, and the emotional bonds have been broken by distance and separation. The relationships become confused—which child belongs to which missing worker?—and that eats away at the social fabric of the rural areas that have been emptied of their young able-bodied populations. This phenomenon has been studied from different angles, and the emotional resonance of the poem created by the juxtaposition of the two children's reactions powerfully conveys the actual human cost of this massive internal migration.

Tang's language here is fairly straightforward, but one moment initially tripped me up. In Chinese, the third line reads 看見我，立刻躲到我母親的身後。In my first draft, I wrote, “when he saw me he hid behind his mother's body,” which seems more natural to me. This detail, however, is as carefully chosen as it is subtle. It indicates the fact that it is not the child's mother, but the father's mother—i.e., the grandmother—who is raising the boy back in the countryside. The implication is that both able-bodied halves of this marriage have left the countryside to work in the city, leaving their child behind to be raised by the older generation, a phenomenon that can be seen all across the Chinese countryside, with as-yet unknown psychological and social effects. This is the subtext of the poem: the child is not just fatherless, but motherless as well.

Zheng Xiaoqiong 鄭小瓊 manages to navigate between the dark pessimism seen in Tang Yihong and Tian Xiaoyin and the openhearted brightness of Wu Xia. In “Moonlight: Married Workers

Living Apart” 月光：分居的打工夫妻, for example, Zheng deftly employs both tactics:

Moonlight washes the steel faces, the moonlight leaves a line of  
 footprints on the iron vines of the security wall  
 the moonlight lengthens the distance between buildings 5 and 6,  
 from the female dorm  
 to the male dorm, the moonlight stops in the window for a minute,  
 the moon  
 illuminates him, or her  
 the moonlight illuminates their bodies, skeletons, inner desires, the  
 moonlight illuminates  
 their memories of their wedding night, the moonlight is too bright  
 like salt poured into the wound of living apart eighteen days after  
 their marriage

Moonlight illuminates the well in their bodies, illuminates the well  
 of desire  
 the moonlight illuminates their fifteen-day honeymoon,  
 illuminates his memory  
 of her body taken over by shade inch by inch, privet fruit trees  
 her body lies fallow in the moonlight, inch by inch  
 slipping along the 45 meters between buildings 5 and 6

If the moonlight were a bit closer, the far expanse it brings in would  
 be bigger  
 her desire would be a bit deeper, if the moonlight were a bit darker  
 the wounds on her skin would be a bit wider, his inner torture  
 would be a bit deeper

Moonlight illuminates the unfinished building for married  
 workers, the moonlight shines on an article in the paper  
 “The Sex Lives of Migrant Workers...”  
 if the moonlight were a bit darker, love would be a bit stronger  
 if the moonlight were a bit brighter, the planned rooms for married  
 couples would be a bit larger  
 (Goodman 2017, 125)

There is inherent helplessness and pessimism in the situation of young married couples being separated because they are forced by financial necessity or workplace decree to live in single-sex dorms. The building for married couples hasn't even been built yet, as though the issue had only recently occurred to the bosses. And if and when such apartments are built, they will be just as cramped and uncomfortable as the dorms. Simultaneously, the poem is constructed around the romantic—sentimental?—trope of moonlight. Marriage is described in rich, warm tones (“the moonlight illuminates their fifteen-day honeymoon, illuminates his memory / of her body taken over by shade inch by inch, privet fruit trees”) and the couple's humanity is retained. To walk this tightrope of despair and kindness is not easy.

Zheng Xiaoqiong is one of the most skillful migrant worker poets, and this balancing act is part of what makes her poetry so rich. To be sure, less “moonlight” and “illumination” and fewer comparatives (deeper, darker, brighter, closer) would make for a smoother, faster pace. These repetitions, however, are essential to Zheng's way of building energy in the poem and reinforcing her message. The slight awkwardness is not clumsiness; it is a strategy.

In fact, the most powerful moment in the poem is also the most awkward: “the moonlight shines on an article in the paper / ‘The Sex Lives of Migrant Workers...’” 月光照耀著報紙上的新聞 / 「關注外來工的性生活……」 The flow is broken at the end of the second line, as these lines force the reader to step out of the narrative of this particular married couple and face the larger social context in an especially jolting way. I chose to translate *wailai gong* as “migrant workers” even though it is a slightly different term (meaning “outsider workers” or even “foreign workers”) in order to keep it contextualized within the larger conversation of this poem and of the anthology as a whole. The lines are already sufficiently disconcerting that different terminology in English would only detract from the sharp, cutting effect of these lines. It's plain uncomfortable to talk about “the sex lives of migrant workers” in such clinical terms after the lyrical moonlit exposition we've been given.

It is precisely this disconcerting juxtaposition that highlights the essential problem I've pointed to in this essay. Migrant workers have been studied—in this case, as though they were akin to animals

in the wild—from the outside, but rarely been heard in their own voices. Zheng forces the issue by juxtaposition, and shows us just how cold the gaze of the outside eye is.

Who gets to write the lives of migrant workers? My hope is that projects like *Iron Moon* will give this vast group of people some kind of voice, a chance to articulate their own experiences, and to finally be heard—in Chinese, and in other languages.

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