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Review of Some Twentieth-Century Chinese Works in Translation

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Hong Ying. *I Too Am Salamambo*. Translated by Mabel Lee. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2015.

Hong Ying, Zhai Yongming and Yang Lian. *Poems of Hong Ying, Zhai Yongming and Yang Lian*. Translated by Mabel Lee, Naikan Tao and Tony Prince. Asia Pacific Poetry Series. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2014.

Gao Xingjian. *City of the Dead and Song of the Night*. Translated by Gilbert C. F. Fong and Mabel Lee. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2015.

In her introduction to the collection of new translations of poems by Chinese writers Hong Ying, Zhai Yongming and Yang Lian, translator and scholar Mabel Lee writes that “while older writers were still reeling from their Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) experiences, young unpublished writers came forward to reclaim their own voice and to write about the full range of their own perceptions of reality” (xi). The work of the authors in this cohort, which also includes Gao Xingjian, exemplifies what Lee describes as the “proliferation of Chinese literature” in recent years. Each, in their own way and from their particular location, took part in this 1980s movement to “reclaim their own voice”.

Hong Ying (born 1962) is an internationally acclaimed feminist novelist. While she is now a UK citizen, all her important works have been written in Chinese. Born an illegitimate daughter and raised in poverty, her background pervades the tone of her works. Hong Ying’s life changed significantly in the early 1980s when, inspired by the blossoming of those “young unpublished writers”, she decided to become a writer herself. Her personal trajectory, from a slum by the Yangtze River – resembling tears and death in her poems – to a prominent writer, reflects, to an extent, several key aspects of China’s cultural transformation in recent decades.

I Too Am Salamambo, the title of both this collection of Hong Ying’s work and of one of the poems it includes, suggests latent connections to Flaubert’s Orientalist French novel *Salammbô* (1862). This is a collection of works spanning two decades, including some that were translated and collected in the 2014 anthology *Poems of Hong Ying, Zhai Yongming and Yang Lian*. The poems are organized as if reading an autobiography in reverse, looking back across the path of memory from poems written in 2012 to those written in 1991. The first section, “Illegitimate Child (2007-2012)”, opens with the poem “Chongqing Slum”, referring to Hong Ying’s place of origin as remembered in the present day. This section is followed by poems of spiritual exploration in “Lotus Prohibition (1999-2005)” and “Scales of Grief (1990-1997)”, and then a section immersed in the painful beauty of love and cruelty in “Butterflies and Butterflies (1992-1995)”. The reader is finally led ashore by poems like “London”, “Berlin” and “Paris” in the section “Record of Nine Cities (1991)” which remembers the poet’s life overseas. Like many other curiosities about the author, the question of the mysterious link with Flaubert is perhaps answered in the poem “Salamambo is just a name” (44).

In the 2015 edition, Lee has made changes to certain phrases, lexical choices and formal features from the 2014 selection. Through the removal of a line in the earlier edition of “Another Sonnet”, for example, this rhyming verse complies more closely with the traditional English format of the sonnet. The translator finely tunes the tone of “Electric Shock” through

a different choice of verbs: “descend” rather than “lower”, and “scream” rather than “shriek”. The reorganization of the syllabic beginning of each line in the 2015 edition emphasizes the pattern of a set of dental consonants and a set of open vowels in crisscross form, allowing utterances to flow more smoothly in a well-formed rhythm.

In the earlier selection, Hong Ying is joined by Zhai Yongming, translated by Naikan Tao and Tony Prince, and Yang Lian, again translated by Mabel Lee. Combining the work of three poets in a single book is a challenge. Most of the works in this collection were considered “avant-garde” at the time of their publication in China, with the term tending to indicate the influence of Western ideas. This may be so. But under the skin of the lexical peculiarities that traditional Chinese aesthetics would reject, the imagery is uniquely native. Given that many of Hong Ying’s poems in this book are also included in *I Too Am Salammbo*, I will concentrate here on the other two poets in this collection.

Zhai Yongming (born 1955), a generation older than Hong Ying, “spent two years doing hard labour with the peasants during the Cultural Revolution” (xv). She was actively involved in the 1980s poetry movement in which the two cycles of poems *Woman* (1984) and *Jing’an Village* (1985) established her credentials among Chinese contemporary poets. Apart from writing, Zhai is also a cultural practitioner, hosting a literary salon where many literary events are held.

Sensitive to ordinary people’s daily encounters, Zhai’s harmonious voice poetically presents their lives from a sympathetic and sometimes critical stance, as shown in *Jing’an village* (1985). In their translation, Tao and Prince adopt a simple but effective strategy to represent 1980s rural China. The proverbs in daily use which have become disconnected from their original meanings are revived by revisiting the original form of the Chinese language through “literal” translation into English. For example, “how can I enter / This village where even the crows and sparrows are silent now?” A Chinese phrase for signifying absolute silence by presenting the image of soundless birds is brought back to its moment of invention when the birds were alive in the language users’ awareness, and thus in this line recreates a living (but absolutely silent) village.

Yang Lian (born 1955) is one of the most important figures of 1980s Chinese poetry. He was actively involved in *Jintian* [Today] magazine (established in 1978 and banned in 1980), an icon of China’s new poetry movement. However, because he was unaligned in the Chinese political ideology of the time, his poem cycle *Norlang* (1983) was criticized as “spiritual pollution” and he was banned from publishing for a year. While Yang Lian now lives in Germany and spends most of his time outside China, he continues to write in the Chinese language.

Yang Lian has formed his signature style in Chinese poetry through appealing to the epic landscape by way of a great historical sensitivity and a masculine voice. Such features also position his poems alongside a generation of cinematic works from the 1980s. These include the films of the so-called Fifth Generation film makers represented by Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (1984), which depicts the vast remoteness of western China, and Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* (1988), portraying rural figures in an unbreakable bond with their harsh and barren land. The translation of Yang Lian’s poem “The Golden Tree”, a piece from the cycle *Norlang*, emphasizes the first person pronoun “I” in the first two quatrains by announcing it at the beginning of each line. In doing so, the masculine voice that claims its power in the world is strengthened.

Gao Xingjian (born 1940) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000. While his novels are published and well received outside China, his dramatic works have had a significant impact on the development of China’s stage art. His monumental works, *Absolute Signal* (1982), *Bus Stop* (1983) and *The Other Shore* (1986), marked a new era of exploration in Chinese dramatic work. The language of Gao’s drama is both close to everyday language

and carefully crafted to comply with his emphasis on the purity of language. Although Gao is reluctant to embrace the view that regards scripts as “dramatic literature”, a separate literary form that does not require performance on the actual stage, his works nevertheless “can be fully enjoyed as literary texts”, according to Lee (ix).

The City of the Dead, written in 1987 and later translated by Fong, provides a new interpretation of a tale from classic Chinese opera. Attention is turned from the mockery of an unfaithful woman in the classic version to a criticism of men in Gao’s drama – what Lee refers to in the introduction as men’s “flippant and cavalier attitude to their female sexual partner or partners” (xv). Fong’s translation allows English readers an opportunity to look into one of Gao’s early experiments, an “attempt to transform an obsolete traditional opera into a modern play”. This attempt, in conjunction with Gao’s stress on the performer’s actions and his humorous (sometimes cheeky) and poetic language, is explored in the “Suggestions and Instructions” for performance that are included with the text.

Song of the Night was first written in French, then rewritten by Gao in Chinese as a “choreopoem” and published in Taiwan. Translated by Lee, this drama of dance, music and poetry continues to demonstrate Gao’s attention to the female psyche in the encounter with men. His exploration of pronouns in the Chinese language, also a feature of his novel *Soul Mountain*, presents a challenge to translation into English. Obvious differences between the two languages in terms of pronouns are that Chinese distinguishes regular Second Person Singular from Second Person Honourable (SPH) while English does not have the latter form; Chinese also distinguishes Second Person Singular from Second Person Plural (SPP) while modern English does not. Lee’s translation wisely adopts unadorned, grammatically functional expressions such as “you dear” for the equivalent of Chinese SPH and “all of you” for SPP. More importantly, the dramatic sarcasm of the Chinese Honourable is maintained. When the female actor pronounces the English word “dear”, the strength in a female psyche against men’s bias is, as Gao advises in the stage instructions, “directed at males in the audience” (64), and thus remains as powerful as in the Chinese original.

Evident in all three of these books is the dynamic poetic language that prospered in Chinese literature in the 1980s and has since continued to develop from those early experiments towards a more skilful application. This collection of translations offers multiple angles that allow us to examine contemporary Chinese poetry and literary works across different time periods, locations and forms.