



To cite this article:

Langsford, Steven. "A Yi's 'The Doctor' in English Translation." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 12 (December 2017): 89-92.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

A Yi's "The Doctor" in English Translation

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I learned a lot from this translation, one of main things being that author A Yi enjoys crafting stories that act like bear-traps. If he never intended for a translator to lose sleep over the definite article in the title, then I would have to apologise for this accusation. But it seems unlikely, because nothing else in this tiny story happens by accident.

Why the lost sleep? The explicit concrete/abstract distinction made by the English indefinite "a" and definite "the" engages one of the central themes, but it is only implicit in the article-free Chinese, leaving the translator guessing. Some phrases have a strong lean to the general or the specific and are relatively easy, but A Yi is continually switching back and forth, leaving key phrases (like the title) ambiguous. Possibly accidentally, because the ambiguity is natural in Chinese, possibly deliberately, to keep the reader guessing.

The possibility of this being accidental starts to look increasingly unlikely in light of the intricate structure of the story, where every element has a contrasting partner, and these pairs are themselves related in pairs. There is that concrete/abstract duality, two branches to the doctor's story and, of course, two sons. There is also a nature/humanity duality, a modern/traditional duality, and probably others I have not spotted. Eventually everything "has a part to play" in the doctor's death; none of the pairs are allowed to stand in isolation. Every pair is paired with every other.

But none of the dualities are "clean" contrasts. The clearest example is the doctor himself. A symbol of pure abstraction if ever there was one, he first enters the story without a physical presence, and his fatal crime in the eyes of the girl is abstraction, a physical remoteness. But what kind of spirit of pure abstraction has a hole in its sock? Similarly, the villagers are as crazy as a bucketful of frogs and believe in the King of the Underworld and lynchings. However, "A doctor had made a girl drink pesticide, and then couldn't save her. So the villagers put him to death" is clearly a kind of logic, as inevitable as the deduction that Socrates is mortal.

It seemed on my first reading that delving into the structure of the story and trying to unravel the abstract/specific duality and its role in the drama was the best way to solve translation problems such as: should the second paragraph begin, "On one of the doctor's consultation visits" or "the first consultation visit" or "a single consultation visit"? But going down that road opens up an Escher-like structure where everything is connected to everything else, and every extreme also contains its opposite. Ultimately, it is what it is, and there is no simpler way of saying it than through the story itself. I can only hope that A Yi has derived some satisfaction from crafting his trap, and that the translation follows the original closely enough to share the pain a little.

Honestly, I have come to think that the most critically important character here is not the doctor, but rather the policeman.

医生
阿乙

医生的鬼魂骚扰整个村庄。但是巨大的恐怖其实由人心引起，他们害怕，只要有点风就吓坏了。自从杀了医生，他们就觉得因果必来，很久时间没人管这事让他们不安。几个月后，当第一个警察走进乡村，他们才感到踏实。他们既觉得应该逮捕人，又本能地觉得不会。他们看着警察浑然不知地走进他们。每个人都出了一份力，在杀死医生时。

他们将医生杀得不成样子。

在一次问诊时，医生和少女建立类似于邪教的关系。长着大理石脸庞、深邃眼窝和洁白牙齿的他将听诊器贴到少女胸上，说“不抽烟的”，然后转过头来，对少女说：“不要紧的。”寡言少语的他就说了这么四个字，便拥有了无限的支配权，可以命令她做任何事。但他不这样，他矜持、冷漠。有时怕得罪对方，才挤出笑容或客套话。一切的主动在于信徒。少女在医生喝了她家一碗水后，不许家人碰那只碗，将它供奉在床头；医生的袜子露出一只洞，她心里便永记他白皙的脚踝，整个冬天都在打毛线袜子，打了很多，送不到对方手里——当别人想要穿时，她羞愤地要去死。

她终于死掉了。

在医生无意做出一个冷淡的动作后，她明白掉彼此间的关系。她知道他宽厚的手永远不可能抚摸她的乳房，就像朝圣者

The Doctor
By A Yi

Translated by Steven Langsford

The soul of the doctor disturbed the whole village. Though actually, the greatest terror came from within the hearts of the people. They were so scared they started at the slightest puff of wind. Ever since they'd killed the doctor, they'd felt that retribution was at hand, and as time stretched on and still no-one noticed, they grew uneasy. It wasn't until a few months later, when the first policeman entered the village, that they felt themselves back on solid ground. They all felt that there should be arrests, and instinctively knew that there wouldn't be any. They watched the policeman walk oblivious amongst them. Every one of them had played a part, the day the doctor was killed.

It had been a brutal death.

On one of the doctor's consultation visits to the girl, a cult-like dependency arose between them. With his marble face, deep-set eyes, and shining white teeth, he placed his stethoscope on her chest. "Non-smoker" he said. Then, turning his head, he spoke to the girl: "Nothing to worry about". With just those four words, this taciturn man suddenly had complete power over her, the power to order her to do anything at all. But he didn't. He was reserved, cold. Sometimes, afraid of offending, he would squeeze out a smile or some fragment of small-talk. All the initiative came from the 'disciple'. After he accepted a drink of water from the household, the girl wouldn't let her family touch the bowl he'd used, enshrining it at the head of her bed. The doctor's sock had a hole: she remembered forever the pale patch of ankle, and knitted socks all winter. So many socks, that she never gave to him... but if anyone else wanted to wear them, she'd become horribly embarrassed.

In the end she died.

After one of the doctor's unconsciously cold gestures, an understanding of their relationship fell into place for her. She knew that his generous hands would never caress her breast, like a pilgrim coming to the end of a

跋涉千里，被神一脚踢翻。她自杀了，留下一封信，欲言又止，欲止又言，终于越说越开，进入谵妄状态。在信里：医生和少女亲吻、拥抱、不穿衣服行走在雪地、交媾。医生绝情、背叛、伟大、冷漠、温和。

一个医生让一个姑娘喝了农药，同时还救不活她。因此村民处死医生。

填补医生空缺的会计的儿子，吊儿郎当，被县城卫校开除，连自己的感冒也治不好。人们在他身上建立不起崇拜、迷信，不能拜倒在他的权威之下，得到他的保佑。从此，村里人看病要去几十里外的县里。有些人宁死不去。

医生是在一个大风之夜来到村庄的。他说他能治疗他们肚子里的虫，以此换取到定居的资格，由此也背负起由无尽期望带来的风险。村庄一直没死过人，但在医生死掉一个儿子后，死亡像阴影笼着它。

他不能责怪那些一起游泳的小孩。他搬走的消息传出来，但一直没走。直到他的第二个儿子长大可以读书了，他还是背着医疗箱像知识分子走在田野。他就像一块冰拒绝了少女的诱惑，灿烂而遥远地走在南方暖和的村庄。有一天这个儿子也死掉了，应该是疯子掐死的。没什么能解除这种悲伤。因此当疯子被放回来后，就死在水泥桥上。因为洪水冲刷，桥是歪斜的。疯子吊在桥板上，赤身裸体。村庄没有任何反应，那只是一个疯子，由阎王爷寄托在这里的虱子。

thousand-mile pilgrimage only to be kicked flat on their back by their god. She committed suicide, leaving a note behind with words that stumbled into silences, silences that burst with pent-up words, in a flow which became a torrent which became a frenzy. In the note, the doctor and the girl kissed, embraced, walked naked in the snow, possessed each other. The doctor broke it off, betrayed her, grandly, coldly, gently.

A doctor had made a girl drink pesticide, and then couldn't save her. So the villagers put him to death.

The gap he left was filled by the accountant's son, a complete slacker who was kicked out by the county health department, a man who couldn't even treat his own colds. No one would ever worship him, superstitiously believe in him, no one would ever bow to his imposing presence and receive his protection. From then on, the villagers had to go 40-odd li up into the county to see a doctor. Some people just wouldn't go, no matter what.

The doctor came to the village on a stormy night. He said he could cure the worms in their bellies, and in this way at a stroke he both earned a place to stay, and shouldered the risks of limitless, boundless hope. No-one had ever died in the village, but after the doctor lost a son, death enveloped them like the dark shadow of a cloud.

He could not blame the kids, who had all gone swimming together. The word went around that he was moving out, but he never moved. His second son grew up and went to school, and all the while he carried his medical bag through the fields like an intellectual 'sent down' to the countryside. He rejected the girl's overtures like a block of ice, brilliant and remote as he moved through the warm southern village. One day this son also died, apparently strangled by some lunatic. Nothing could relieve that kind of sorrow. So when the lunatic was released back to the village, he died on the concrete bridge. The rush of floodwaters had left the bridge leaning at an angle. The lunatic hung from a beam, naked. There was no reaction in the village. It was just a

两个月后,在少女喝农药死掉后,人们谋杀了医生。医生的房子开始长出青苔,青蛙在里边跳跃。没有人给他和他两个儿子上香。

医生第一次出现在村庄时,背上背着一个孩儿,手里牵着一个孩儿。一个睡熟了,一个困死了。这个鳏夫找到这个距最近的卫生所有四十里的地方。他冷峻而理性地走进村长家。这是冷峻和理性这两个词,第一次出现在村庄。

lunatic, a flea sent up here by the King of the Underworld.

Two months later, after the girl drank pesticide and died, the people murdered the doctor. Moss began to grow on the doctor's house, frogs jumped around inside. No-one burned incense for him and his two sons.

When the doctor first appeared in the village, he had one child on his back, and held another by the hand. One was fast asleep, the other dazed with fatigue. The widower had found this place, forty *li* from the nearest clinic. Grave, rational, he entered the home of the village headman. For the first time, the two words 'grave' and 'rational' appeared in the village.