

Li Yu. Poems for Spring

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Li Yu (936-978) was the last emperor of the Southern Tang, and by all accounts a much better poet than emperor. A monarch in the lounge lizard mould, the philosopher-cum-poet-cum-painter rarely got out of his slippers. Deposed, he died a prisoner in someone else's kingdom but not before penning quite a few complaints about cruel fate.

The English-language texts you see below (along with the Chinese originals) are products of a collaborative translation project conducted over the last two years, one of a number of such projects focused on the work of particular poets from the Chinese tradition (including Tao Yuanming, Meng Jiao, Li He, Xin Qiji, Nalanxingde). These projects are described in an article in the current issue of Jacket magazine (No. 32), titled "Conversation with Tang Poets: Some Notes on the Practice." The process is described with more examples there but essentially the process is this: poems are first roughly glossed (from Chinese into English) with some explanatory notes. The poems are then playfully responded to, initially in English, eventually perhaps in both languages. The possibility is there for a dialogue which need not have any specific end-point. Thus far, however, in working from any particular "original," the process usually has only three or four stages.

The purpose of these projects is broadly – to honour our ancestors in poetry by continuing the conversation with them. In practical terms, my hope as a teacher is to help my students create themselves as poets by engaging with their own tradition, initially as a guide for the foreign visitor (i.e. me), thereafter as effective participant/observers (i.e. informed makers) of poetry in Chinese and English. Of course, I myself hope to produce good poems along the way, and regardless of what status these may, in the end, be entitled to.

The question of what constitutes translation and what might constitute "variation" or "response" is fraught. It is likewise interesting to speculate as to whether these

should be theorised as a continuum or in some other way. From the poet's point of view though perhaps the line should be drawn (if need be) in these terms – would you rather be accused of (too) loose translation (i.e. parading your own work as that of the ancients) or of plagiarizing authors who are no longer in a position to defend themselves? I personally would feel more comfortable with being accused of (unwonted) infidelity than (unintended) theft.

The five poems below are from a volume Song of the Water Clock at Night, currently in press with ASM in Macao and scheduled to appear later this year. This volume is roughly evenly divided between “translations” and “responses,” but whether this is a line that is drawn effectively in our case (or indeed that can effectively be drawn) will be left for the reader to judge.

lovesick

her hair
mauve cloud
coiled bun
jade pinned

gossamer
pale
frowning brows
she wears

autumn wind on
drizzle out doors

plantain trees tall
too long night
out there



after evening make-up

soon after
the evening make-up
some rouge smeared
tip of the tongue unfolds
her mouth like a cherry
nearly silently chanting
gentlest of songs

crimson prints left
to the cup's rim,
splashes of wine
redden her sleeve,
this heavenly nymph
lounges against
embroidered bed

she chews a red thread
and coyly spits it
in her lover's direction

tryst

gorgeous flowers
dim moonlight
thin mist

shoes knitted with gold wire
in her hands

a stockinged tiptoe
to their tryst

he, in the south end
of the Painting Hall

she, into his arms
come trembling

how troublesome to meet
in shadows
how tender the moment –
hearts lit within



love lost and passion enduring

I cannot see the girl with the flute
only scenery remains

flowers bow and lift their heads
scent of her skin comes to me

twilight in the jewelled glass
willows cast shadows
night won't dispel

it is a cruel breeze
brings her to me

our moment
a memory
yet

our forty years

our forty years
of rivers and mountains

that dragon's tower
the phoenix in the attic

what heights we had!

dense foliage
misted the sight
in and out of the palace

I was ignorant
of weaponry, war

since I was captured
look how thin
how grey

I remember music
on the day
we departed the palace

I wept before maids
and concubines