

On Translating Blankness

Xiang Yang's "Poem Torn Apart"

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Xiang Yang 向陽 (1955 –) is the pen name of Lin Qiyang 林淇瀟, a writer of poetry, essays, and children's literature, among other things. Born in Nantou County, Taiwan, Xiang Yang is “a regional poet in the best sense of the word—his poetry comments on the universal human condition without sacrificing a sense of place” (John Balcom, translator). Xiang Yang's hometown, the Guangxing Village in Nantou's Lugu Township, was located near Dong Ding, a mountain famous for the oolong tea grown there. His parents owned a tea shop specializing in Dong Ding's tea, and he fondly recalls, “When Mother tasted the teas, the store would be filled with the scent, like the sweet fragrance of blooming flowers rushing at the nose. The golden brew would be poured from the narrow spout into the cup, a golden spring flowing into a valley.” And it was because tea leaves love the sun, because Lugu seemed always bathed in golden sunlight, that he later ended up with the pen name *Xiang Yang* 向陽—“seeking the sun.”

The first poet to write in Taiwanese after World War II, Xiang Yang published Taiwanese poetry during a period of martial law, when the Kuomintang (KMT) implemented a monolingual policy and languages other than Mandarin were labeled mere “dialects,” deemed unpatriotic, and faced discrimination in educational institutions. His poetry draws inspiration from his surroundings and his home, and on the whole he wrote works that speak of and to the Taiwan experience. Some of his poems are lyrical, evoking the charms of rural Taiwanese landscapes; others comment on Taiwan's history, politics, and society. In what follows, I present two poems wildly different in style and content, yet united by the fact that both are very much *Taiwanese*. The following poem, “Poem Torn Apart” 一首被撕裂的詩, falls in the latter category and forms a sort of commentary on a not-so-pleasant period of Taiwanese political history.

The following poem, “Poem Torn Apart” 一首被撕裂的詩, is taken from *Chaos* 亂 (2005), a collection of poems Xiang Yang wrote between 1987 and 2003, and a winner of the 2007 Taiwan Literature Award for books of New poetry (modern Chinese poetry). The collection served as his verdict on those sixteen years. During that time, Taiwanese society had gone from being under martial law to the lifting of martial law, from authoritarianism to democracy. Chaos was frequent, changes were rapid. *Chaos* can be taken as a reflection of the political and social changes in Taiwan, as well as the poet's expectations of the ruling government. “Chaos is in reality a *feeling*. We live in the nation we live in, and as soon as you begin to feel that my nation is not a nation, chaos has started.”

The form of “Poem Torn Apart” challenges: Must literature have words? Can poetry not be written with white space? And even—are the spaces silent? (Please listen to the author read the poem aloud [here](#)¹, if interested.) It is a poem in which the form is part of the message, in which thoughts aren’t limited to the linguistic. The poem starts with a mention of the massacres that occurred in Yangzhou and Jiading in May of 1645, mass killings of civilians by Manchu and defected northern Ming soldiers under the command of the Manchu general Dodo, and ends with a reference to the February 28 incident, an anti-government uprising that was violently suppressed by the KMT. Things become interesting in the middle three stanzas of the poem, which make use of the symbol □ to represent missing, garbled, or corrupted characters. It is perhaps after these stanzas that the poem was named (or after the poem’s title that these stanzas were written).

Below, I first present the original Chinese poem, followed by my translation and a discussion of the translation process in the Translation Notes. Note that although the current font displays these boxes as slightly smaller than the Chinese characters, I have also encountered renderings of this poem in which the boxes are about the same size as or slightly larger than a Chinese character, making it seem as though one could write into the boxes. One more thing that might or might not be of note is that the square box resembles the Chinese character □ *kǒu*, which means “mouth, orifice.”

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一首被撕裂的詩

一六四五年掉在揚州、嘉定
漢人的頭，直到一九一一年
滿清末帝也沒有向他們道歉

夜空把□□□□□□
黑是此際□□□□□
星星也□□□□□
由著風□□□□□□□
黎明□□□

□夕陽□□□□
□□唯一□□□
□遮住了□□
□雨敲打□□□□
的大□

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksezZyHtBS4>

□帶上床了
□□的聲音
□□眼睛
□□尚未到來
門

一九四七年響遍台灣的槍聲
直到一九八九年春
還作著噩夢

—8—

Poem Torn Apart

lost in 1645 in Yangzhou, in Jiading
the heads of the Han people had still received
no apology from the last Qing emperor by 1911

the night sky took [] [] [] [] []
black is this instant [] [] [] [] []
the stars too [] [] [] [] []
left to the wind [] [] [] [] [] []
daybreak [] [] []

[] the sunset [] [] []
[] [] the only [] [] []
[] have covered [] []
[] [] rain beats down [] [] []
its wide []

[] up into bed
[] sound remaining
[] [] their eyes
[] [] [] not yet here
gates

the gunshots ringing across Taiwan in 1947
were still haunted by nightmares
in the spring of 1989

—8—

Translation Notes

When I first read the poem in Chinese, I was able to appreciate it only on a visual level—for, I thought, how was one supposed to pronounce a box? It was only later, when I heard a reading of the poem by the author, that I learned that the answer to my question had been really rather trivial: You read it as what it is—框 *kuāng* “box, frame.” Here, it is worth noting that the syllable *kuāng* can be used as onomatopoeia for describing sounds of “clashing, banging, clanging” (may be written 哐). This means that, for example, in stanza 4, line 2, “□□的聲音” *kuāng kuāng de shēngyīn* may sound like something along the lines of “the sound of banging/clanging” when read aloud (see below for a side-by-side of the Chinese and a literal translation).

The most challenging aspect of the translation process is no doubt trying to either preserve or find a replacement for the poem’s form. The first and last stanzas are symmetric, three lines each and each containing a starting date and an ending date for the political turmoil alluded to. The three stanzas in the middle are five lines each and, assuming that each □ is pronounced *kuāng*, a given stanza has syllable (aka character) counts $n, n, n-1, n+1, n-4$ for each of the lines in order, where n stands for the number of syllables in the first line of the stanza. Moreover, combining the textual portions of each line with the corresponding lines in the other stanzas reveals that the three stanzas actually form a single “stanza” that has been torn apart, true to the poem’s title. (This is something one likely does not notice immediately.)

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A Literal Translation (middle 3 stanzas collapsed):

一六四五年掉在揚州、嘉定	the year 1645 fallen in Yangzhou, Jiading
漢人的頭·直到一九一一年	Han people’s heads, until the year 1911
滿清末帝也沒有向他們道歉	the last Qing emperor did not apologize to them

夜空把 / 夕陽 / 帶上床了	night sky takes / sunset / bring to bed PERF ²
黑是此際 / 唯一 / 的聲音	black is this moment / the only / <i>de</i> ³ sound
星星也 / 遮住了 / 眼睛	stars too / cover PERF / eyes
由著風 / 雨敲打 / 尚未到來	left/up to wind / rain hits/hammers / not yet here
黎明 / 的大 / 門	dawn / ’s/ <i>de</i> big / door

一九四七年響遍台灣的槍聲	the gunshot sounds that rang across Taiwan in 1947
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² PERF = perfect aspect marker

³ *de* = prenominal modification marker, e.g. [adj/noun/verb/clause] *de* [noun] “[noun] that (is) [adj/noun/verb/clause]” (in the case of [noun1] *de* [noun2], “[noun1]’s [noun2],” “[noun2] of [noun1]”)

直到一九八九年春
還作著噩夢

until the year 1989 spring
still having nightmares

—8—

And lastly—or perhaps firstly, really, for I was confronted with the question from the outset—there are the □s. In my first drafts, I had translated the □ as ____ (four underscores, to be precise), since English words do not tend to fit in squares, and in my memory fill-in-the-blank questions usually left horizontal lines for one to write on.

Stanza 2, Line 1, Attempt 1:

the night sky took ____ _

Yet this never felt as elegant or clean or compact as the Chinese feels to me; there were too many questions, too much space, too many choices left unmade, intentions undiscovered. What should the length of the blanks be? In the Chinese a box is a box, because each character is the same height, the same width (in print, in most typefaces). Yet English words—even English letters, in most fonts—do not have a standard width that I could abide by for a “generic” unit of the language. Moreover, having a bunch of ____s lined up together is not visually compelling at all, for at a distance they appear to be a single line, and from even farther away they may cease to be perceived altogether.

Finally deciding to actually rack my brain for other possibilities, I ran through my options: Rectangular boxes?—that seems like it would look clunky. Question marks?—but then how would you pronounce them? Leave the square boxes as they are?—and what would those even mean in an English context? In the end, the solution I have settled on, as shown above in my translation, is to fashion these □s as something resembling redacted text. I figured something like this could still be plausibly pronounced as “blank,” which is convenient for being monosyllabic.

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In sum, I have treated the task of translating this poem as an exercise that involves balancing meaning, poetics (whatever that may mean), syllable counts, and visual possibilities. I hope the translation will be as interesting for an English reader to examine as the Chinese has been for me—in particular, I don’t want things to be so obvious as to require no rereadings whatsoever for the reader to discover all the little details I only discovered upon rereading or even until actually sitting down to translate, but I also don’t want them to be so obscure such that they are lost altogether.

In this vein, I invite those who are fond of puzzles to try to figure out what, exactly, determines the widths of the redacted boxes in this translation without copying and pasting those portions of

the text somewhere else. Their widths are not a necessary part of the consumption of this work or its translation, but they are certainly not random.

The interactive fiddle above forms a representation of the translation process, where I explore various other possibilities for translating silence: empty brackets and corrupted symbols, preserving the squares from the Chinese, question marks, whitespace, and so on. Several of these were suggested to me by others throughout the revision process, for which I am ever grateful. My main intent with this fiddle is to capture the “corrupted” sense of the blank boxes in the Chinese, which is of course a layer of interpretation, combined with a reflection on the uncertainty, instability, and volatility of translating blankness or silence from one language into another.