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Immanuel Ahiable
Ice Cream We All Scream (2016)

BETWEEN IMAGE AND ITS LESS TENDER LIFE:
A CONVERSATION WITH FIONA SZE-LORRAIN



Photo Credit: Dominique Nabokov

Fiona Sze-Lorrain writes and translates in English, French, and Chinese. Her most recent collection of poetry is *The Ruined Elegance* (Princeton, 2016). She lives in Paris where she works as a zheng harpist and an editor.

Quiddity's Poetry Editor, Lisa Higgs, interviewed poet, translator, and harpist Fiona Sze-Lorrain, about her recent work *The Ruined Elegance*, and translation of Yi Lu's *Sea Summit*, including the nuances of translating image and silence, as well as poetic sincerity and the spirit.

Lisa Higgs: Yi Lu's poetry in *Sea Summit* is equally of the earth and haunted by natural elements of the earth—her use of the breath of wind and the body of light in her poems comes to mind. What drew you toward translating this contemporary Chinese poet into English?

Fiona Sze-Lorrain: My encounter with Yi Lu came at an auspicious time: I was seeking poetry that communicated an urgency of living with the non-human in both urban and rural settings. I found in Yi Lu specific poems that each testified to an experience—either emotional or bodily—with nature and things and time without necessarily ritualizing or commodifying the process as well as the history, perception, and interpretation of it. Her poem “Early Spring” comes to my mind:

suddenly I found the only stirring in the fields
the tails of four cows
as solemn as a congealed storm

its swish and sway like an urge
their bowed heads seem unrelated to their tails
each cow also seems unrelated to itself
is the grass it eats also unrelated to its stomach
between their four whisking tails
a butterfly waltzes over hill and dale
even the butterfly seems unrelated to itself

I'm interested in Kantian beauty and poetic truth. Perhaps I see in Yi Lu's writing elements that demystify these abstract ideals only to work at making them more mindful. Also, she strikes me as sincere and in life, modest: by profession, she was in fact a national-ranked theater scenographer and stage designer—she has recently retired—and unlike some Chinese poets she does not, in her own writing, try to come across as an important poet who plays the role [and projects the “image”] of a “poet.”

LH: Yi Lu's work in *Sea Summit* marries precision in language and image with an expansive vision of life's boundaries—or as Melissa Kwasny states in her foreword to the collection—Yi's poems are “active encounters with the Image itself.” How central was Image to you as you translated the poems that make up *Sea Summit*? How central is Image to you as you work on your own poetry, which is also known for its precision and its reach?

FSL: Thank you very much for your generous observations on my poems. I would like to think that my poetry brings images into play with honesty, so Image and its integrity are just as important to me when it comes to translating. To rejuvenate an image is often harder than creating a good one, let alone transposing it into one with a capitalized and philosophical “I.” I enjoy memorizing paintings and photographs: this helps me in my own writing. In terms of music, I usually intuit and engage with a piece more smoothly when a concrete image rather than dialectics is at stake. I would like to share a poem that touches on Image and translation, “In the Thick of It” from my recent collection *The Ruined Elegance* (2016); it carries an epigraph by Misty poet Gu Cheng (1956—93), “To turn magnified trouser legs / Into savoury tripe”:

Gu Cheng's hat performed an exorcism.

Stovepipe, a leg

cut from old jeans, it
helped him feel kingly—relieved
of why and megalomania.

Maybe he wore it

to imagine
the year two thousand. Or his wife's
new pregnancy.

Turning his head, a utopia.

The hat is as real as a space reserved

for a long, terrible sleep.

Like a pagoda on the level plain, it
looked out,
farther—
over a world flooded with lights.

Of course,

I don't know who Gu Cheng was.

I think of his sketches, erasures,
what is found

in his verses,
lost in translation, sleepwalking

in a fight
between image and its less tender life.

LH: Your translations of Yi's poetry are highly accessible to an English-speaking audience—was this clarity already in the work itself, or did you find the poems evolved by translation into something so clear to English readers? Were there elements of Yi's poetry—its cultural basis, its underlying belief systems—that you felt would not translate well or would be overlooked by readers unfamiliar with the Chinese language, its literature, and its history?

FSL: Translation is a relationship, the act of translating an establishment of some connection, so to a large extent it is more sacred than material—in spirit and as a metaphor. I come to realize that the poem must speak to me before I feel capable in some measure of making it sing in my own language. Rendering a text into English is typically possible, but to make it move as a poem (and how) is a separate issue. *Légereté* is a rather French quality, so I strive to make presence—physical or non-material—as light as possible. I seem to work best with poems that aren't written

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LH: Given that accessibility can sometimes be seen as a negative word in some American poetic circles—how might you convince skeptics of the high craft found in Yi’s poetry? How important is it that poets live outside the poetic circles of any geography?

FSL: I don’t convince or advertise or market. I do my part in helping Yi Lu and our publisher increase the visibility of *Sea Summit*, so informed readers may choose to read it—or not. There is a line to draw between “doing one’s part to increase visibility of a book” and using this as a way to create self-importance.

I also don’t have resources that equip me for back-and-forth dialogues with eloquent but argumentative minds; might there be any “gain” otherwise, I consider it my “loss.” I believe our world at large needs to be reunited, not divided. Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion. I try to remind myself that opinions, not excluding mine, are overrated alongside actions and do not always have the last say.

Yes, it’s vital for any good artist to live outside the artistic circle of any geography. We live in one world of many immensities. I’m a French citizen who believes in Europe. Trump’s “America First,” Xi Jinping’s “China Dream,” and United Kingdom’s Brexit,

to fit the expectation or “idea” of being a poem. It makes sense that a poem created to prove its literary ambition or authorial worth can’t quite endure an import into another language or cultural habit, not to mention that the question of ethics needs to be taken into account, but of course I’m generalizing and oversimplifying.

When I translate, I do it with clarity, and as inconspicuous as possible. I don’t use secondary materials, not until the job gets done. I don’t flatter. And that seems to get translated into my own work, in that my style of translating—and interpretation—doesn’t seek to flatter the original version or its Chinese language: if a poem’s vulnerability needs to be seen or made permeable in order to be humane, I’ll honor it in translation. It’s like a song during a concert: it can’t be academic.

for example, are dangerous propaganda that encourages illusions, among others. Cultural specificity doesn't equate cultural exclusivity.

LH: While describing what motivates you as a classical zheng musician on your website, you quote Stravinsky's *Poétique musicale* (1952): "True tradition is not the documentation of a closed past; it is a living force which stimulates and teaches the present." Do Stravinsky's words also inform the way you approach translation?

FSL: Yes, I hope so.

LH: With multiple modes of expression available to you—writing or translating in French, English, Chinese and performing music—have you found that the modes complement each other? Or do they create dissonance with each other in ways you would not have imagined at the beginning of your artistic career?

FSL: They complement one another as well as create dissonance, sometimes together, sometimes anachronically. This is a big mystery to me. I've given up trying to make sense of it.

LH: The interplay of word and white space, music and silence seems integral to your writing and translating. Do you think this interplay affects a poet's ability to create awareness and empathy in her or his poetry?

FSL: Yes, because only in silence and emptiness can deep listening and nonconsumption be possible, first to and for external elements (including another silence in response), next an inner listening, then various layers of nuanced listening . . . and hopefully self-knowledge and altruism, the awareness of an other. I'm interested in the politics of

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writing silence. And I'm drawn to those who make this artistic search their lifelong endeavor or philosophy in life. Samuel Beckett, who doesn't talk much and as you know also translates, is one of them.

LH: You once said, "I don't wish to be a poet; I wish to be many poets." How successful do you feel you have been at achieving this ideal? Would you encourage other poets to embrace a broader vision for themselves than simply a poet?

FSL: I don't know about "successful." What does it mean: "social recognition," "prize," "monetary return," "productivity," "contentment" . . . ? In an interview, French singer and songwriter Jean-Jacques Goldman defines himself as "a failure who succeeds." Next to those with vast lives—I'm thinking of Rousseau, Sartre, Churchill, Marie Curie, for instance—my work, really, is but a mote of dust. I don't think we should be afraid of admitting that poetry is more or less inconsequential when it is the case. I doubt poetry as much as I believe in its goodness.

Embracing a broader vision, absolutely.

"In the Thick of It" is reprinted with permission from the author.—Eds.