

TRANSLATING BEI DAO'S "UNTITLED: A HUNDRED THOUSAND WINDOWS SHIMMER"

LK to CE, July 29, 2009 3:35 PM:

Here's the next BD poem, "Untitled."

I found it very difficult, which you'll be able to tell from my footnotes. One thing that comes to mind is that the first Chinese poet to write "Untitled" poems was Li Shangyin (ca. 813-858) of the late Tang. They're known for being dense, allusive, and hermetic, and are assumed to be allegorical, though no one knows for what, and also for being about love, though guesses about with whom proliferate. And it's not that they're untitled, but rather that their title—which was an important indicator of context and social referent in Chinese poetry up to that point—was the deliberately vague "Untitled." I imagine that Bei Dao may likely be invoking Li Shangyin in this and the other "Untitled" poems in *The Landscape Over Zero*.

Here's a quick bibliography for Li Shangyin in English, if you're interested:

- C. Graham, *Poems of the Late T'ang* (Penguin, 1965), pp. 141-173.
- James Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin: Ninth-Century Baroque Chinese Poet* (U. of Chicago, 1969)
- David Hinton, *Classical Chinese Poetry: An anthology* (FSG, 2008), pp. 308-320
- Lucas Klein, a few Li Shangyin poems, *Fascicle 1* (www.fascicle.com; link seems to be dead, unfortunately)
- Robert Kelly's "Reading Li Shang-yin: Falling Flowers," in *Red Actions* (Black Sparrow, 1995), pp. 330-336

it's a goal of mine to translate the collected works of Li Shangyin into English. I'd like the book to be called *Untitled*.

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北島 《無題》

Bei Dao, “Untitled”

千百個窗戶閃爍
這些預言者
在昨天與大海之間
哦迷途的歡樂

a hundred thousand windows shimmer¹
these sooth-sayers²
between yesterday and the sea³
murmur an errant delight⁴

橋成爲現實
跨越公共的光線
而涉及昨日玫瑰的
秘密旅行提供
一張紙一種困境

the bridge becomes reality
stretching over a public⁵ ray of light
and touching on yesterday's rose's
secret voyage to provide⁶
one sheet of paper one kind of dilemma⁷

母親的淚我的黎明

mother's tears my dawn⁸

¹ I like “shimmer” better than DH’s “glimmer” because the word uses repeated /sh/ sounds (shānshuò), but another definition for the word is to be vague or evasive, maybe like “hem and haw.” Also, I don’t think the number—which is actually more like “millions and millions”—should be taken literally. It strikes me that the number itself is a kind of *shānshuò*, or imprecise speech.

² I think I like “sooth-sayer” here better than “prophet” because the Chinese word includes the character for “speech.”

³ Probably in English these lines should be transposed, so that “between yesterday and the sea / these soothsayers...”

⁴ For DH this line reads “o that joy of losing the way,” which is considerably different from how I understand it. I read the line as *é mítú de huānlè*, where *é* = “v.: recite softly,” *mítú* = “adj.: lose one’s way; wrong path,” and *huānlè* = “n.: joy, delight” (so that *mítú de huānlè* = “a lost joy, an errant delight”). For DH, it’s *ò mítú de huānlè*, where *ò* = “oh, ah,” and *mítú de huānlè* = “the joy of getting lost.” Both are possible, but I’m sticking with my reading. At some point, though, we might want to ask Bei Dao, and see if he didn’t mean to cover both meanings at once. If that’s the case, we might have to figure out a way to encapsulate both meanings in their simultaneity in English.

⁵ DH has this as “the public,” but I don’t think *gōnggòng* can be a noun, only an adjective.

⁶ The grammar of this poem is particularly complicated, and I find myself reading it differently from Hinton at just about each turn. I’ll exchange line breaks for punctuation to show the different readings. Hinton: “A bridge becomes reality, spanning the public’s gleam, and the clandestine journey involving yesterday’s rose offers a sheet of paper, a dilemma.” Me: “The bridge becomes reality stretching over a public ray of light and touching on yesterday’s rose’s secret voyage to provide a certain dilemma for every sheet of paper.” I guess we just have to pick whichever one we like better.

⁷ My English here is admittedly strange, and strained. I think it probably means, as would be colloquial Chinese, “a kind of dilemma per sheet of paper” (kind of like how we say “one man, one vote”). See above.

⁸ The implied grammar here is probably parallel to the line above, so that, if “one piece of paper one kind of dilemma” means “a kind of dilemma for each sheet of paper,” then this probably means “a dawn for me for each of mother’s tears.”

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CE to LK, July 29, 2009, 4:02 PM:

Yes, a complicated one. But your information in your notes is very useful.

UNTITLED

Millions of windows shimmer
between yesterday and the sea
these sooth-sayers
murmur an errant delight

The bridge becomes reality
spanning a public ray of light
and touching on the secret voyage of
yesterday's rose providing
a certain dilemma for each sheet of paper

for me a dawn for each of my mother's tears

Try this version and let me know where I have missed a point.

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[CE then revises this version and sends a new one to LK later the same day:]

UNTITLED

A hundred thousand windows shimmer
between yesterday and the sea
these sooth-sayers
recite lost joys

A bridge becomes reality
spanning public rays of light,
touching on the secret voyage of

yesterday's rose providing
for each sheet of paper a certain dilemma

for each of my dawns my mother's tears

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LK to CE, July 30, 2009, 11:07 AM:

I think this is good. See attached comments. My only worry is that we're doing too much to lock the poem down to one meaning, as opposed to leaving it open to the ambiguities that would lead to David Hinton's translation.

UNTITLED

A hundred thousand windows shimmer
between yesterday and the sea
these sooth-sayers
recite lost joys

Comment [LK1]: I'm trying to think of a word that would go with "shimmer" to suggest a kind of verbal beating-around-the-bush. How about "shimmer and shuffle"?

Comment [LK2]: "recite" is good, but the verb in Chinese suggests low tones. "intone"? something else?

A bridge becomes reality
spanning public rays of light,
touching on the secret voyage of
yesterday's rose providing
for each sheet of paper a certain dilemma

Comment [LK3]: The Ch. word for "touching on" is explicitly verbal, e.g., "your argument touches on the issue that..." Is this clear in the English?

for each of my dawns my mother's tears

Comment [LK4]: I guess it's the same, but I think the Ch. says, "one of my dawns for each mother's tear." Of course, then we get into questions about whether it's each mother's tear, or mothers' tear, or tears, or...

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CE to LK, July 30, 2009, 2:27 PM:

Another version. "shimmer and shuffle" seem definitely off to me.

respond to what the poem says?), & of course the rest of life gets in the way sometimes.
Anyway, here are my comments, attached:

UNTITLED

A hundred thousand windows shimmer
between yesterday and the sea
these sooth-sayers
intone errant delights

Comment [LK5]: I asked my wife about this poem, & she says that this line is probably closer to Hinton's reading. So, "oh, the joy in getting lost." That would also mean that we wouldn't need to transpose lines 2 and 3.

A bridge becomes reality
spanning public rays of light
and bordering on the secret voyage of
yesterday's rose

providing
one kind of dilemma for each sheet of paper

Comment [LK6]: I like this, but since BD doesn't do it, I'm a bit hesitant to write it this way.

Comment [LK7]: This might be superfluous. What do you think?

one of my dawns for each of my mother's tears

As you can see, I asked my wife about the poem, & she doesn't agree with my reading of the first stanza, so I think we should move closer to Hinton's stanza 1, at least in terms of understanding. Also, the word we now have as "shimmer" is, pretty much, just "shimmer." The verbal obfuscation I felt implicit in the word is only there to the extent that "beating" implies "beating around the bush"; as in, not that much, really.

I think "bordering on" is fine. It's more literal as "touching on," but I like your reading of it, a bridge as something that crosses borders and becomes a border.

We're good with the last two lines, I think.

Finally, nice to have BD's take on what he'd like translated. FN#1

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CE to LK, August 2, 2009, 12:24 PM:

Dear Lucas:

your letter: I don't understand the main point you are making in paragraph 2. What is wrong with "shimmer"? What is the sense of the word that we must try to match?

I don't like repeating what Hinton has done in stanza one. I can't believe that his translation is absolutely accurate.

Once you give me more information on the shimmer problem, and explain, please, the difference between the way you and your wife now read stanza 1 AND what Hinton has, then I can do another draft of the poem.

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LK to CE, August 2, 2009, 1:07 PM:

Hi, Clayton—

My point, in para. 2 was that nothing's wrong with "shimmer." The word is "*shanshuo*," which means "shimmer, flicker," but is also part of a phrase "*shanshuo qi ci*," which literally means "shimmer your words" and means "to vacillate." I felt like "*shanshuo*" ("shimmer") implied "*shanshuo qi ci*" ("to vacillate"), and so I was looking for a word that would encompass both in English. But now I think that we don't need to do that, and that "shimmer" is good enough.

Also, it comes down to the "e" or "o" problem in line 4. I had read it as "e" (to intone), but I guess that would be a very obscure reading of the word. That doesn't mean it isn't so, but it does mean that most people reading the poem are going to see it meaning, "oh, ah."

I also don't like what Hinton has done with stanza one. I prefer the version we had based on my first reading. But that doesn't mean that that's what BD meant for it to say. Now,

it's our translation, so we can do what we want, or we could also ask BD which version he prefers.

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CE to LK, August 2, 2009, 3:15 PM:

I am now rethinking our Introduction and realize that one useful thing we could do would be to print all the versions of a single poem, with the Chinese and your right-hand box commentaries. That way no one would be puzzled as to our procedure.

In the first stanza, I am getting, now, the impression that the windows are the sooth-sayers, and that the whole first stanza is variations on what they evoke. They are the sooth-sayers either murmuring/reciting/or intoning whatever. Something in me wants to read the first stanza this way (I know it is incorrect):

A hundred thousand windows vacillate
between yesterday and the sea
sooth-sayers shimmering with
errant delights

Which leads quite naturally then to

A bridge becomes reality
spanning public rays of light
and bordering on the secret voyage of
yesterday's rose provoking
one dilemma for each sheet of paper

one dawn for each of my mother's tears

I know “provoke” and “shimmering” are off, but they make for a very interesting poem!
Alas...

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LK to CE, August 4, 2009, 12:20 PM:

I really like your response to the BD poem as it stands. You’re right that it involves some inaccuracies, but knowing that it’s coming from you, I think it’s great. That said, I’ve asked another native Chinese-speaker about my reading of the poem, and since she came back with something closer to David Hinton’s understanding, I’ve gone back for another version, incorporating some of where we’ve gotten already. Please let me know if you see any improvements.

UNTITLED

A hundred thousand windows waver
these sooth-sayers
between yesterday and the sea
oh joy astray

a bridge becomes reality
spanning public rays of light
while the secret voyage touching
yesterday’s rose provides
a dilemma for each piece of paper

my dawn for each of mother’s tears

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CE to LK, August 4, 2009, 2:34 PM:

Dear Lucas, I think you understand that I did not intend my last somewhat capricious version of “Untitled” as our version.

As for your new one: I like both “shimmer” and “vacillate” better than “waver.” I dislike the w w play, which is flat-footed as I hear it, and I think the word is weaker than either of the earlier two.

I also think that in English the reversal of lines 2 and 3 is very effective. Putting “these sooth-sayers” after “windows waver” seems to change the subject.

Alas, I really dislike “oh joy astray.” To my ear it is on the same level as “O bird thou never wer’t” (by Shelley). It is old-fashioned “poetic.”

Also your new version loses the implicit “logic of metaphor” in the first four lines. Your initial fourth line is much more engaging than the current one. I gather you now do not feel that “murmur” (or intone) “an errant delight” is correct?

The second stanza is ok, except that I thought the last two lines were parallel (initially: “a kind of dilemma for...” “a dawn for...” and yhou initially had “my” before “mother” which makes the ending personally acute, if somewhat sentimental. Without the “my” I think we have sentimentality without personal acuteness.

I guess I should wait to do another version. If you have decided that “oh joy astray” is an accurate translation for the Chinese, well, I guess we will have to keep it... Actually, Hinton’s “oh the joy of losing the way” is better.

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LK to CE, August 4, 2009, 5:03 PM:

Hi, Clayton—

What I liked about “waver” was that I thought it got at both “shimmer” and “vacillate,” though Chinese readers have told me that they think I’m going too far with reading “vacillate” into “shimmer.” So we stay with “shimmer.”

With “oh joy astray” I was trying to get at something that could mean both “the joy you feel when astray” and “joy that is itself astray.” Not liking the phrase, we’ll have to choose (“the joy you feel when astray” is what most Chinese readers are going to understand from those lines), but I’m afraid the reason you don’t like it—and why I wish I could trust my desire for it to be “murmur / intone”—is because of the “oh.” Do you see any way around it?

I think the problem now is the first stanza. We seem all right at least with the meaning of the second.

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CE to LK, August 5, 2009, 2:34 PM:

The first stanza would read better if set in three lines (lines 3 and 4 as one line). But I suppose you would not feel this would effectively translate the original.

The lines in the second stanza could be presented more forcefully if set in four and not in five lines.

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LK to CE, August 5, 2009, 4:06 PM:

Hi, Clayton—

I think we have a sense of how the poem works based on my first reading (intoning errant delights, etc). I think we need to have a sense of how the poem would work based on my

second reading, which is close to Hinton's reading, and which a couple of poetry-reading Chinese friends of mine have convinced me is the way they read the poem.

I see stanza one as saying:

A hundred thousand windows shimmer
These sooth-sayers
Are between yesterday and the sea
Oh the joys of getting lost

That is, "A hundred thousand windows [sooth-sayers] shimmer. These sooth-sayers are [lost] between yesterday and the sea. Oh, the joy of getting lost." It's unclear to me whether your idea to transpose the lines, so that "windows shimmer between yesterday and the sea" gets us as close to the Chinese as possible, or if it changes the logic of Bei Dao's stanza. I do, at any rate, think that "intone" is a misreading. Unfortunately, it's one of those misreadings that make the poem more interesting.

Second stanza:

A bridge becomes reality
Spanning public rays of light
While the secret voyage touching
Yesterday's rose provides
A dilemma for each sheet of paper

That is, "A bridge, spanning public rays of light, becomes reality, while the secret voyage that touches on the rose of yesterday provides a dilemma for each sheet of paper." I'm not sure what this image means, but I think we are dealing with a contrast here between "public" and "secret," between the bridge and the voyage. Without the preposition "while" or its equivalent, I think the contrast gets lost in favor of a suggestion (as per

stanza one, where we believe that windows = sooth-sayers) that the bridge is the secret voyage.

This may be the dilemma we have on this blank page of ours.

I'm fine with changing the line breaks if we think it's necessary.

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CE to LK, August 5, 2009, 4:08 PM"

Like this? I don't think we need to revise breaks and line lengths. We would be asking for criticism, and the gain I now think is not worth it.

UNTITLED

A hundred thousand windows shimmer
these sooth-sayers
are between yesterday and the sea
O the joys of getting lost

A bridge becomes reality
spanning public rays of light
while the secret voyage touching
yesterday's rose provides
a dilemma for each sheet of paper

my dawn for each of my mother's tears

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LK to CE, August 5, 2009, 5:17 PM:

I do like it, and think it does what Bei Dao wanted it to do (as I understand from my reading of the Chinese). And I think presenting some of our stops on the way to our final understanding in an introduction would be a great way to explain our process, and the requirements of translation.

Two questions: in the last line, do you think we need to specify “my dawn” for each of my mother’s tears?

Also, what if in line four, instead of “Oh the joys of getting lost,” we said, “Oh joy getting lost.” I think it has an ambiguity that echoes BD’s original.

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CE to LK, August 5, 2009, 5:33 PM:

On second thought: I think the repetition of “my” in the last line is less effective than leaving it as it is. The reader understands that the sheet of paper evokes the paper on which a poem is written, thus the consciousness of the piece is clearly at that point in Bei Dao’s court. If so, and if it is his mother’s tears in the last line, then the dawn is one he implicitly experiences too. Plus we have a nice parallel (which you earlier supported, I think) a dilemma a dawn

my dawn also sounds rather overly possessive to me.

What do you think?

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LK to CE, August 5, 2009, 5:40 PM:

Agreed. I think that it's implicitly clear that if we're talking about my mother, we're talking about my dawn.

NOTE

On August 2, 2009, Bei Dao sent the following letter to Clayton:

Dear Clayton:

How have you been? Today is my birthday of 60. I will be leaving for Paris tomorrow and will be back to Hong Kong on August 25.

Here is the list of poems that can be translated if you like:

Beyond

Apple and Brute Stone

New Century

Asking the Sky

A Portrait

On Eternity

Background

Untitled (in the plains of a father's imagination)

This Day

February

We

Bright Mirror

Nightwatch

Wax

Untitled (in waking there is freedom)

Winter Travels

Journey