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Commentary on Translating Tan Yuanchun, Zhu Heling, Song Wan, and Yao Nai

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Commentary

Rather than the more well-known (and more often translated) poets of the Tang Dynasty, I picked one lesser-known poet each from the Ming (Tan Yuanchun) and Qing (Yao Nai) Dynasties as well as two (Zhu Heling and Song Wan) whose lives began in one Dynasty and ended in the next. For both Zhu and Song, the midpoint of their lives saw collapse, chaos and war, followed by the establishment and consolidation of a new dynasty.

Classical Chinese is very terse—often omitting pronouns and prepositions—and its grammar is very flexible, so a single line (and sometimes entire poems) can be both ambiguous in meaning and have multiple translations. There is also a rich tradition of allusions and of borrowing turns of phrase from earlier poets which suffuses additional, unwritten yet implied meanings into lines and poems.

With each piece, I read through it several times; first silently, then out loud—Chinese poetry is meant to be recited—and finally jotted down notes on the “feeling” it gave me. Was it joyous or wistful? Were there deeper meanings and if so, what were they? Take, for example, the poem “A Vase of Plum Flowers.” Plum trees flower in late winter in China and large numbers of people would (and still do) go out to view the blossoms. At the same time, connoisseurship was considered one of the marks of a scholar in late-Ming times and it was common practice to keep cut flowers in one’s study. So by putting a plum branch in a vase to enjoy privately, Tan Yuanchun implies both his scholarly refinement and his purposeful separation from the public sphere.

Only when I thought I had a good “feeling” for the poems did I begin rough-drafting the translations. The finished rough drafts were left to sit for a week, then re-checked for accuracy. Another week was spent smoothing the drafts before they were shown to an English-speaking Chinese friend for comment.

Each poem presented a unique challenge and each had at least one line that I puzzled over for anywhere from an hour to an entire day. In the above-mentioned “A Vase of Plum Flowers” it was a short sentence that, when translated into English, contained consecutive ambiguous adverbs. In “Mountain Temple,” it was a line that read: 於茲衣蘿薜—literally, “with grass-mat clothes (or “to wear”) tree-moss climbing-fig.” (The last two characters, if inverted, become a literary allusion to another work that predates Yao Nai’s by approximately sev-

enteen centuries.) Yet in the context of the poem, this list of items implies staying with a hermit.

Despite the challenges, however, each poem also brought moments of sudden, joyful revelation and translation's sweetest reward—the feeling of touching another mind separated by both time and space.