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Stopping the Boat Near Xiling Bridge, Reciting Alone, and Leaving Jiufeng Mountain by Night by Tan Yuanchun

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Stopping the Boat Near Xiling Bridge

Tan Yuanchun

近西陵橋邊息舟

The lake and the sky merge seamlessly,
And the constellations are reflected above and below.
Nearby skiffs haven't noticed the dew,
Distant lanterns seem moved by unseen people.
Walking beside the dike among yellow leaves—
On shore it feels like autumn.
It's past when wild geese finish migrating,
A lonely patch of mist lasts until morning.

Reciting Alone

獨吟

I struggle to read the book beside the stand
While a white butterfly circles around the wattled fence.
I look up, as if someone has come—
A single leaf falls in front of the stairs.

Leaving Jiufeng Mountain by Night

夜別九峰

This bright moon calls me back.
But the sound of this spring draws me on.
Even the mountain knows I'm leaving—
But how light the Autumn makes my staff!

Commentary

Tan Yuanchun (1586–1637) was born towards the end of the Ming Dynasty in Jingling (now Tianmen) in China's Hubei Province. A scholar-official, he came in first in his Provincial examination in 1627 and was given a job in the Ministry of Rites. Tan was one of the co-founders of the Jingling School, which rejected using the more formal style, structure and diction of ancient writings as a model, and which emphasized instead creativity, emotion and expressing the writer's personality. He died at the age of 51 as he traveled to Beijing to sit for the national-level examination.

Translating these poems brought both collective and individual challenges. Taken as a group, all three are composed mainly of images, often contrasted in (sometimes rigidly) parallel phrases. For example, the lines “Nearby skiffs haven't noticed the dew/Distant lanterns seem moved by unseen people” both follow the exact same pattern: adjective/noun/modifier/verb/noun. The parallelism is intentional, making it difficult to keep a similar structure without twisting the English syntax into difficult-to-read phrases. For example, the second of those two lines literally reads “distant lanterns as-if have people” and I couldn't translate it without adding words to convey what I felt to be its meaning.

In addition, Chinese poetry is often written with an ambiguous point of view and/or narrator. In fact, with one exception (the word “I” in the line “Even the mountain knows I'm leaving”), a narrator is never actually stated in any of these poems. This meant that in “Reciting Alone,” I was forced to create an “I” to establish a point of view.

There were also translating challenges within each poem. For example, in “Stopping the Boat Near Xiling Bridge,” I was forced to ponder a way to deal with two consecutive words meaning “end/finish” (過盡) in the penultimate line; while the last line of “Leaving Jiufeng Mountain by Night” made sense only by taking a word normally recognized as the number “one” (一) and reading it in a rarely used adverbial form instead.

Source text:

Tan, Yuanchun 譚元春. Tan Yuanchun ji 譚元春集 [The Works of Tan Yuanchun]. Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1998, pp. 201, 275, 285.