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Four Poems from *The Divine Way Station* by Shaojun Li

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Shelley Kristina Hu
Four Poems from *The Divine Way Station*

Shaojun Li
神降临的小站

At Dusk

傍晚

At dusk, time for dinner
I went out to call my old father walking in the woods

The night color was saturating little by little
Darkness was spreading like ink on rice paper
With each call, the night color was pushed out a little further
With each pause, it gathered again

The sound of my call
Echoed for a very long time in the woods
Then rippled out in the wind like waves

The answer from my father
Seemed to have brightened up the dark night

Shelley Kristina Hu

Shaojun Li

The Divine Way Station

神降临的小站

A few wooden cabins

Diffuse gloomy lights

I'm little as an ant

Held up in an anonymous station

In the middle of a mighty Hulunbeier prairie¹

Enduring the piercing loneliness but peace inside

Behind me, stands the brutal early winter night

Farther back, is a distinct empty road

Farther back, the slow flowing Argun River

As bright as light in the darkness

Farther back, a forest of endless white birch trees

And the dull vast wilderness

Farther back, against the soft blue curtain

Stars twinkle quietly in the sky

Farther back, reside the holy spirits in the infinite north

¹ Hulunbeier prairie is located in Inner Mongolia and regarded as the most beautiful grassland in China, as well as one of the three most famous grasslands in the world.

Shelley Kristina Hu

Shaojun Li

Confession

抒怀

Under the tree, we chatted about our dreams
You said you would write biographies for the mountains, and chronicles for
the water

For me, I just wished to shoot a portrait album of the clouds
Paint a landscape picture outside the window
(sprinkled with a couple of birds singing)
And a sketch of my little girl at home

Needless to say-----
she has to stand in the garden under the papaya tree

Green Jade

碧玉

When the country is big, there's room for convolution
When it's small, it can be grabbed in the palm to enjoy
As soft and warm as jade
He's lingering with ease between you and the country

For one moment, it's about the national business
For another, personal affairs
When he's exhausted, you're the cooling gel on his chest
When it's peaceful, you're the romantic soft spot in his heart

Commentary

Shaojun Li is one of the best-known contemporary poets in China, and acclaimed as the “poet of the natural world.” Like American poet Mary Oliver, Li’s poems are largely centered around nature: mountains, rivers, ocean, birds, and so forth. In this fast-paced chaotic era, the poet turns to nature for reflection, inspiration, and peace of mind. As poet Li-Young Lee once said, “poetry is the yoga of the mind”; for Li, it’s an act of meditation through which he sheds new light on ordinary objects. The four Chinese poems translated here were selected from his latest poetry collection *The Divine Way Station* (2016).

In the poem “At Dusk,” the speaker’s search and love for the father (biological or religious) can be seen as a universal experience. Although it is a short poem, it is challenging to westernize it for English readers while keeping it as close to the original wording as possible. In Chinese poetry, words such as 又 (again), 一下 (a little), 一点点 (a little), 一声 (one call) are frequently used; however, that would sound wordy in English. Hence I have to be careful about where to keep and where to omit those words without straying from the original meaning.

The poem “The Divine Way Station” is one of Shaojun Li’s masterpieces. In this poem, the poet used “little ant” as a metaphor to express the insignificance of a human, in contrast to mighty and magnificent nature—the prairie. He uses an anonymous train station as the center point, and then gradually zoom out with layers of natural sceneries and beauties, all the way to the farthest north where the holy spirits reside. The challenge of translating this poem is in choosing the most accurate word. I first used “further back” for 背后, later changed to “farther back” since it’s more about the physical distance rather than figurative distance.

Searching for the best English word to match its Chinese counterpart is not always easy because one must take into consideration the word’s meaning, the metaphor it’s often associated with, and the tone. For example, in the poem “Confession,” I was stuck on a common word, 当然, which means “of course.” If I translate directly using the words “of course,” it would sound too hasty for such a gentle and calm poem. Therefore I decided

to use “needless to say--” and made it a separate line to slow down the pace. This way, it conveys the same meaning, is visually more pleasant, and reads well.

“Green Jade” is about romantic feelings. Green jade usually symbolizes a pretty girl in a middle-class family in Chinese culture. In this poem, the poet’s feelings move between career ambitions and personal romantic love. There are a couple of challenges in translating this poem. For the second line of the first stanza, I was not sure whether to add the word “it” to represent the subject because the subject of the clause in Chinese is ambiguous. The other challenge is to find the most accurate translation for the Chinese idiom 游刃有余. I was hesitating among “maneuver,” “linger with ease,” and “drift,” and finally decided to go with “linger with ease” since it’s the best choice to describe such fuzzy romantic feelings.

I hope the above poems provide a glimpse of contemporary Chinese poetry, in particular the poetry of Shaojun Li, which is worthy of a wider readership and greater attention.

Source text:

Li, Shaojun. *The Divine Way Station*. Writers Publishing House, 2016, pp. 1, 2, 3, 6.