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Four Poems by Yu Xiuhua

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Xinlu Yan
Four Poems by Yu Xiuhua

Yu Xiuhua
余秀华诗四首

My Dog, Little Wu

我养的狗，叫小巫

When I limped out of my courtyard, it followed
We walked by the vegetable garden, the field ridge, toward the north, to my
grandmother's house

I tripped and fell in the field, it wagged its tail
I extended my hand, it licked the blood off

He was drunk, he said there was a woman in Beijing,
She was better looking than me. When there was no work to do, they went
dancing
He liked women who danced
And liked watching their butts swinging back and forth
He said they moaned in bed, it sounded nice. Unlike me who was soundless
and
Always covered her face

I ate my meal in silence
Calling "Little Wu, Little Wu" and tossing it some scraps
It wagged its tail, barking exuberantly
When he yanked my hair, banged my head on the wall
Little Wu kept wagging its tail
To someone who was not afraid of pain, he was powerless

Only when we walked to the back of my grandmother's house
Did I recall, she had passed many years ago.

I Crossed Half of China to Lay You 穿过大半个中国去睡你

In fact, to lay you or to get laid by you is the same, nothing but
The force of two bodies banging against each other, nothing but flowers
erupting from the force
Nothing but spring virtualized by the flowers making us believe that life has
been unfolded again

In half of China, everything is happening: Volcanos erupting, rivers drying up
Some political prisoners and homeless people whom nobody cares about
Elks and red-crowned cranes always being targeted at gunpoint

I have crossed gun forests and bullet showers to lay you
I have squeezed numerous nights into one dawn to lay you
I have run numerous selves into one to lay you

Naturally, I might be sidetracked by butterflies and
Regard praises as spring
Regard a village that resembles Heng Dian as my hometown

And all these
Are the necessary reasons why I am going lay you

Xinlu Yan

Yu Xiuhua

An Evening in Early Winter

初冬的傍晚

The sunlight is retreating from the courtyard, slowly
With many pauses, like sobbing
The medicine pot on the stove gurgles and grumbles dully
The scent of herbs gushes out
beating her old sickly body
She crouches in the courtyard, curled up like a piece of leaf
The blade inside her body also curled up
She tries to smooth it out,
To cut out a piece of old love
This old disease always flares up in winter

Relying solely on Chinese herbs, only symptoms are cured, not the cause
But she can tell all the herbs by their scents
Out of twelve herbs, she picks “shall return” (*Dang1 Gui1*)
And tosses it in the heap of fallen leaves

I Please This World with Pains 我以疼痛取悦这个人世

My body is old, when I notice it for the first time, there is no way to turn
back time

Many parts of it start to ache: the stomach, the arms, the legs, the fingers

I suspect that I have done many evil deeds in this world

Speaking harsh words to the withered flowers. I suspect I have favored the
nights

and despised the mornings

But it's okay after all, some pains are negligible: Being abandoned, being
made lonely

Being adopted by a long desolation

These, I am too embarrassed to say: I haven't truly

Loved them enough

Commentary

Yu Xiuhua lives in a small village named Heng Dian in Hubei, a province in central China, where she farms and raises chickens and rabbits. She has cerebral palsy due to a prolonged birth. In a marriage arranged by her parents, she wed a man twelve years her senior. But the marriage was an ill-fitted one. She felt trapped and unable to escape. In 2014 she became a household name overnight for her poem “I Crossed Half of China to Lay You.” A year later she published two books, *Moonlight Rests on My Left Hand* and *In This Staggering World*. Three of the four poems above are from *Moonlight Rests on My Left Hand*.

Translating Yu Xiuhua’s poems has proven to be challenging yet fulfilling. Particular challenges derive from her use of homophones and homonyms.

The Chinese language contains many homophones. There are about 6,763 commonly used symbols but only 1,211 sounds in Mandarin, including the five tones. Because all symbols are monosyllabic, homophones are inevitable. For example, the sound *Li3* can be associated with 李 (a popular Chinese surname), 鲤 (a type of fish), 理 (reason), or 里 (inside). Yu uses homophones in her poems to create compelling effects.

For example, in “My Dog, Little Wu,” Yu Xiuhua stacks three *Ta1* symbols. In the first, second, and fourth paragraphs, *Ta1* - 它 (it) is the pronoun representing non-human items in the third person point of view, in this case, the dog Little Wu. In the third and fourth paragraphs, *Ta1* - 他 (he) represents a single male in the third person point of view. In the last paragraph, *Ta1* - 她 (she) refers to the deceased grandmother. By stacking the three *Ta1* symbols, Yu juxtaposes several seemingly unrelated scenes together to tell a woman’s life story: searching for her grandmother, who represents her family history; interacting with her inseparable dog who represents her present life; and remembering a man who used to be in her life. When reading the poem aloud in Chinese, the three *Ta1* symbols also create a sound repetition which gives a structural unification to the poem. Together with the poignant story, Yu creates a rich and powerful emotional experience. After the poem is translated, although the meaning of the *Ta1* symbols is retained, the effect of sound repetition is not.

Another translation challenge is homonyms. In “An Evening in Early Winter,” in the last paragraph, Yu writes:

Out of twelve herbs, she picks “shall return” (Dang1 Gui1)
And tosses it in the heap of fallen leaves.

Dang1 Gui1, or Chinese Angelica, is a type of popular Chinese herb that’s typically used for medicines for women. The two symbols also mean “shall return.” *Dang1* means “shall” and *Gui1* means “return.” In the first paragraph, Yu refers to cutting out a piece of old love. In the second paragraph, when the woman in the poem tosses out *Dang1 Gui1*, the reader becomes aware of an absent man whom she once hoped would return. This double meaning is clear and powerful in Chinese, but in the English translation, the subtle implication of the missing man and the woman no longer wanting him to return is lost.

An additional challenge lies in accuracy in both grammar and nuance of meanings, which I believe is true to any language pair in poetry translation. The fact that Chinese grammar is remarkably different from English increases the level of difficulty.

For example, in “I Traveled Half of China to Lay You,” Yu writes: “In fact, to *lay you* or to *get laid by you* is the same....” In Chinese, the character 睡 (sleep) can be used as either a transitive or an intransitive verb. When used as an intransitive verb, it means the subject is sleeping. When used as a transitive verb, like in the phrase above—睡你 (sleep you), it refers to sex. 睡你 (sleep you) is a new slang from Taiwan that has become widespread via Taiwan’s pop culture, for example, in sitcoms and talk shows. It refers to sex in a casual and easy tone. It has been adopted by Mainland China, especially the young generation. In the first half of the phrase, 睡你 (sleep you) means that the narrator initiates sex with *you*. In the second half, 被你睡 (be slept by you) switches the roles of the narrator and *you*. Now *you* becomes the sex initiator. This is an interesting wordplay. It shows that the female narrator can take on either role at a given time. However, I found it tremendously difficult to find a suitable English word that can be used the same way 睡 is being used here. “Sleep” fits for its neutrality, but *sleep you* or *be slept by you* is grammatically incorrect and could be confusing to native speakers of English. “Sleep with you” is a little bland and weak. It is missing the sense of action, especially when sex

is initiated by the female narrator. “Fuck,” “bang,” or “screw” seem to fit grammatically but are rather obscene and vulgar compared with 睡 (sleep). I decided to use a less vulgar slang term, “lay.” While the transitive form, “lay you,” sounds a bit awkward because it’s not a commonly used phrase, it is grammatically correct and its meaning is more clear. The intransitive form, “get laid by you,” works very well.

Another example of grammatical challenges occurs in “I Please This World with Pains,” when Yu writes:

But it’s okay after all, some pains are negligible: Being
abandoned, being *made lonely*,
Being adopted by a long desolation

In the original text, Yu writes 被孤独 (being lonely). In Chinese, 被孤独 is grammatically incorrect—the helping verb 被 (a marker for the passive voice) is unnecessary in this case. Here Yu makes a creative choice to break the grammar rule in order to show that the absence of the narrator’s partner makes the narrator lonely against her will. It’s also a repetition from a structural point of view, with three 被 (again, the marker for the passive voice) symbols stacked consecutively. But when translated into English—“being lonely”—the grammar becomes appropriate, unfortunately. It simply talks about a woman who feels lonely. The idea that she is being involuntarily left behind is missing. To compensate for that, I added “made” to the phrase which does not exist in the Chinese text. It’s not an ideal solution, but better than leaving out the marker for the passive voice altogether.

Despite these three challenges, translating Yu’s poems has been a rewarding experience. Although some nuances are difficult to carry over into English, her poems still offer enough richness in language, imagery, and imagination for a translator like myself to ponder.

Source texts:

Yu, Xiuhua. “My Dog, Little Wu,” “An Evening in Early Winter,” and “I Please This World with Pains.” *Moonlight Rests on My Left Hand*, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015, pp. 4, 150, 101.

“I crossed half of China to lay you”: <http://t.cn/ROJfxP9>