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Four Poems by Yao Nai

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Four Poems by Yao Nai

Yao Nai

A Trip in the Mountains

山行

Sown grain flies, encouraging the early plow,
The spring hoe thumps as the sky clears.
Layer upon layer of rocks and trees follow the road;
A belt of mountain fields fills with the sound of running water.

Summer Night

夏夜

The shower that started at dusk stopped at night.
I begin to see glowing clouds spit out a white jade hook,
And stand for a while in the sharp shadows beneath the stairs.
The wind that touches the branches hints of autumn.

Autumn Arrives

秋至

As the rainy spell clears, wind fills the front of my robe.
The setting sun scatters long shadows into the empty courtyard.
Whose business is it that summer's gone and autumn's here?
Let the cold cicada on the tree cry out.

It Snowed at Jingfu Academy

敬敷書院值雪

Leftover snow flutters bleakly in the empty hall;
Now and then a perching crow speaks of his being alone.
I sit for a long time, not knowing where or when I am,
Then stand and climb the pavilion to watch the Yangzi flow.

Commentary

Yao Nai (1731–1815) was born in Tongcheng in China's Anhui Province. In 1763, he not only passed, but came first in the Qing Dynasty's national-level examination. Yao served in several imperial government bureaux, but retired for reasons of health and spent the rest of his life teaching at various academies in central China. He was also one of the early members of the Tongcheng School of writing, which stressed natural, straightforward prose and maintaining harmony between theme and form.

These four poems were not written as a set. The body of Yao Nai's poetry stretches to over 700 individual works, covering topics as diverse as seeing off friends departing on official travel, flowers, landscapes, reading, historical events, and even meditations on growing old. Reading through page after page of titles, I felt the need to pick some sort of overarching theme by which to select just a few poems. I decided to use the four seasons and began looking for works I thought were appropriate. This quartet of poems was the result.

As always happens in translations, unexpected difficulties cropped up. Sometimes these difficulties become humorous. In the first poem, the word translated as "grain" in the first line took over an hour to define. None of my usual dictionaries contained a definition that made sense in context. I was finally able to confirm a definition (and my original guess) when I consulted the *Kangxi Dictionary* (康熙字典), compiled in 1716. Two weeks later, I discovered that the simple lack of a cross reference in the first dictionary I consulted had led me on an hour-long quest to define a word that I later was able to find in just a minute or two.

The second poem forced me to add words for clarity's sake. In China, jade is not always green in color and one kind of white jade (known as "mutton-fat") is, in fact, highly prized. Thus the addition of "white" to describe the "jade hook" of the moon that is spit out by the clouds.

Both the third and fourth poems posed questions of whether (and how) to personify an animal. In the third poem, the last word in the last line can mean both a cry of sadness and the cry of an animal (吟), while the fourth poem uses the

verb “to speak” (語) when describing the sound the crow makes. Ultimately, I decided to leave the cry of the cicada ambiguous, while maintaining a direct translation of the verb for the noises the crow made.

The fourth poem also contained a pleasant surprise. The Jingfu Academy was one of the schools where Yao Nai taught later in life, so it’s possible that events in the poem were based on first-hand experience rather than being born of poetic imagination. The realization that Yao Nai might be describing something that actually happened made me feel as if I were standing beside him, watching events unfold, even though translator and poet were actually separated by more than two centuries and thousands of miles.

Source Text:

Yao, Nai 姚鼐. *Xibaoxuan shiwen ji* 惜抱軒詩文集 [*The Poetry and Prose of Xibao Studio*]. Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2008, pp. 516, 558, 561, 605.