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## Four Sonnets by Feng Zhi

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Emily Goedde  
Four Sonnets by Feng Zhi

Feng Zhi 馮至  
十四行集

6.

I often see on the open plains  
a village boy, or a farmer's wife  
sobbing toward a clear, wordless  
sky. For a punishment, or

for a toy, broken and discarded?  
For a husband's death?  
Or a son, suffering and wounded?  
They cry without pausing for breath,

as if all of life were set  
in a frame, beyond which  
there is no human, no world.

I feel as if they come from the distant past,  
a time of tears impossible to hold back,  
flowing for a universe that has run out of hope.

6.

You endured hunger in empty villages,  
 your thoughts on ditches filled with the dead,  
 yet you never stopped singing lamentations  
 for the ruin of the solemn beauty of the human:

on the battlefield, warriors, wounded and dead  
 on the horizon, stars fallen from the sky,  
 thousands of horses follow clouds and disappear—  
 your life is their offering.

Your poverty emits light in glimpses,  
 like a saint's tattered robe, a thread,  
 a filament, in this human world

emits an inexhaustible, spiritual force  
 in whose light those who govern  
 are revealed to be pitiful forms.

16.

We stand on a high mountain summit  
and become a limitless view,  
we become the vast, open plains before us,  
we become footpaths crisscrossing plains.

Which roads, which streams do not connect,  
Which wind does not bend to cloud bent to wind:  
we pass through cities over mountains and rivers  
and they become our lives.

Our growth, our grieving  
is a pine tree on some mountain,  
dense fog in some town.

We follow wind blowing, water flowing,  
we become footpaths crisscrossing plains,  
we become the lives of those passing by.

16.

Often we pass an intimate night  
in an unfamiliar room. What is it like  
in broad daylight? We cannot know, so no  
need to speak of its future or past. A plain

outside our window extends beyond view.  
We can scarcely recall the road we travelled  
at dusk. When in the morning at last  
we meet it, we know we will never return.

Close your eyes! Let those intimate nights  
and strange rooms weave into our hearts:  
our lives like plains beyond windows.

On the hazy plain we recognize a flash  
of lake light, a tree. Its limitless view  
hides indistinct futures, forgotten pasts.

## Commentary

How to hold what cannot be held? How to offer shape to something that is, in its very essence, shapeless. These are the questions at the heart of Chinese poet Feng Zhi's (馮至 1905–1993) collection *Sonnets* (十四行集), written in 1941, during the dark days of World War II.

Feng was a novelist and essayist as well as a highly acclaimed translator and scholar of German literature. He specialized in Nietzsche, Schiller, Rilke, and Goethe. *Sonnets* is held among the most important poetry collections in modern Chinese letters. Its twenty-seven sonnets describe many things from insects, to puppies, to trees, to flowers, to footpaths, to famous historical figures, but its central themes are ephemerality, transformation, and how form's arrangement brings attention the presence of space. The latter is stated most clearly in the collection's final poem, "Sonnet 27":

In flooding, formless water, someone  
dips down to dip up one oval pitcher,  
and the water obtains one set form.  
Look, a flag rippling in autumn wind,  
holding what cannot be held.

One thing that cannot be held, despite its heft and pull, is the trauma of war. And a deep thread running through the poems is the inherent ineffability of traumatic experiences. How can one possibly write of what lies beyond the mind's frame? "Sonnet 6" puts it this way:

They cry<sup>1</sup> without pausing for breath  
as if all of life were set  
in a frame, beyond which  
there is no human, no world.

How does a frame help us see? Certainly it brings our attention to what lies within, but in Feng Zhi's work, it also helps us comprehend the things that lie beyond. It is to this play between

<sup>1</sup> Chinese verbs do not require subjects, an openness that poets often use to their advantage. Thus, a way to read this line is to understand a multitude of subjects: I/You/He/She/We/They all cry for breath.

what can and cannot be held that Feng Zhi brings the sonnet, a form, a sonic frame to hold the unholdable: sound itself.

He writes about this in his introduction to the second edition of his poems:

As it regards my choosing of the sonnet, I never had the intention of transplanting this form within China. It was purely for my own convenience. I used this form, only because it helped me. Just as Mr. Li Guangtian says in his discussion of the collection, “because its layers rise and fall, it gradually both brings things into focus and releases them [...]” The form is just right for representing the things I wanted to represent. It never limited the activity of my mind; it only received my thoughts, and gave them a well-suited arrangement.

A sonnet’s arrangement (another way to frame, to form; the Chinese here is 安排, *ānpái*, “to set in a row”) allows Feng Zhi to highlight themes of transience and change, expressed in the turn from octave to sestet in the sonnets’—sometimes purposefully muddled—thesis/counter-argument structure. But they also suggest continuity by playing with the freedom of movement within repetition. Build, turn, resolve. Build, resolve, turn. Build, build more, sort of turn, sort of resolve. A sonnet collection arranges the antithetical: difference in pattern.

In translating poetry, it is sometimes held that form must be sacrificed for meaning, even as we know form itself is meaning. Such is clear in Feng Zhi’s sonnets. But rather than bemoan the fact that my English sonnets cannot be Feng Zhi’s sonnets, I wonder if we might think about the space that is created between their different arrangements, the way space can be seen anew when words and languages shift into new patterns, new ways of holding what cannot be held, new ways of framing and seeing what lies within, and beyond, different frames. Between Feng Zhi’s arrangements and my own, I imagine there exists a beautiful Venn-diagram, framing the negative space of language, the things and ideas that lie within and beyond each circle, the ideas that a certain arrangement of words cannot capture, but which another may.

In suggesting so much, I follow the themes of Feng Zhi’s sonnets; I follow the philosophical, the ineffable. But I would like

to pause for a moment in another realm, the political. Arrangements of words, especially when they engage different cultural spheres, stir up systems intent on power and its pigeonholing. Feng Zhi alluded to this when he wrote, “As it regards my choosing of the sonnet, I never had the intention of transplanting this form within China.” Some of his contemporaries understood his choice of the sonnet form not as aesthetic but political, an effort to advance European culture within the world of Chinese letters. These are arguments that use frames of purity, assimilation, acculturation. In English-language scholarship on Feng Zhi, another frame is common: influence. But in addition to disregarding his agency and genius, these political ideas obfuscate Feng Zhi’s unique position in the world, his ability to see within, beyond, and between many frames. They confuse the generative power of moving across languages and cultures with political discourses intent on proliferating certain arrangements.

Translation, too, travels in this disparaged border-crossing space as it shifts between frames. Indeed, the field of Chinese-English translation is rich with overlapping political positioning and creative practices. (One need only say: Pound.) Yet it seems to me that, as Feng Zhi did, we can embrace the creative, aesthetic, and philosophical possibilities of moving between frames, even as these very frames make us aware of the political.

My translations reframe Feng Zhi’s poems, but rather than an obfuscation, perhaps we can understand this to be an invitation to see what lies beyond their particular arrangement, a suggestion that underlines both their presence and their relation to Feng’s work. If you do not know Chinese, you might imagine what lies beyond the translation’s frame; you might find new insights, including ones about the familiar frames you fall back on; you might seek to find answers from the Chinese, or you might be content with the fact that between the translations and Feng Zhi’s poems there are two arrangements of words, each working to hold what cannot be held, each illuminating unholdable aspects of the other.

Source text:

Feng Zhi 馮至. *Shisihang ji* [十四行集 *Collected Sonnets*]. Sinology Book Center, 1971, pp. 13–14, 25–26, 33–34, 37–38