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Staying Again at Youqi Temple by Yao Nai and The Peaks Along the River are Green by Zhang Dai

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Andrew Gudel
Staying Again at Youqi Temple

Yao Nai
重宿幽棲寺

The east face of South Mountain rises up alone.
I lean on my staff and, climbing, ponder the nature of all.
The temple is small among the surrounding peaks
And growing from the yellow plum is a branch worth admiring.
On the spring steps, the rain stops just at the hammock
In the summer courtyard, the gathered shadows bolt the doors.
The deep cave has not the slightest trace of comings or goings
Just marks of moss and trickling water on the many rocks.

Andrew Gudel
The Peaks Along the River are Green

Zhang Dai
江上數峰青

The autumn water is pure—as if it weren't there—
And shadows of passing birds don't appear in it.
The distant mountains are a gathering of dark marks
And the haze in the air makes them look like a sketch.
When the river is still, it's as if the mountains are floating
And can't be separated from the distant sky.
Shimmering waves shine
Their ripples only a couple of strokes.
And scattered among them
Places where the sky and water don't unite.

Commentary

Zhang Dai (1597–after 1680) was one of the premier essayists of the late Ming/early Qing Dynasty. Though never an official himself, he was born into a family with a history of imperial service. Zhang lost his house, fortune, and possessions when the Ming Dynasty fell. He was fifty. He spent several decades hiding on a nearby mountain before finally returning to rent a portion of what had been his ancestral home. Zhang's most well-known work is *The Dream Recollections of Tao An*, a collection of essays about his life before the fall of the Ming. It was Zhang's belief that "many small [details] make up a large [picture]" and his writing—both poetry and prose—are composed using simple, straightforward words and images that have a cumulative effect greater than the sum of their parts. For example, in the fourth line of "The Peaks Along the River are Green," Zhang compares the scenery to a sketch. This idea is built on by the mention of the mountains "floating." Many Chinese landscape paintings leave blank space below distant mountains to help give the illusion of distance. The mention of the ripples on the waves looking like "a couple of strokes" adds to the comparison. From these simple elements, Zhang creates and maintains a rich metaphor throughout the poem.

Yao Nai (1731–1815) was born roughly fifty years after Zhang Dai's death and was a high-level official during the Qing Dynasty. Though the writing is straightforward, Yao's poems are often filled with allusions to earlier poets, seldom-used words, and double meanings. For example, in the line "Growing from the yellow plum is a branch worth admiring," the phrase "yellow plum," is an allusion to the spring rainy season of the lower Yangzi River valley, and which foreshadows the line below where spring and rain are both explicitly mentioned.

In translating these two poets, I attempted to mirror the styles of both poet and poem as best as possible. Zhang Dai uses a five-character-per-line style for his poem. As a result, I tried to keep the lines of my translation as short as possible. Yao Nai uses a longer, seven-character-per-line style, which allows for more fully realized images on each line. As a result, I tried to use more description, longer sentences and a somewhat more formal tone.

As would be expected, the challenges faced in translating these two entirely different poets were also dissimilar. With Zhang Dai, the problem was to show how the whole poem assembles itself from lines and thoughts that were almost independent. With Yao Nai, the difficulty was rather how to express his richness without losing the reader in the clever wordplay of the original poem.