13 Celan's "Deathfugue" in Chinese

A Polemic about Translation and Everything Else

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Abstract

This essay reads three embattled Chinese renditions of Celan – by Wang Jiaxin, Bei Dao, and Yi Sha – for what they reveal about discourse on poetry and poetics, and on translation, in mainland China today. Drawing on historical context as well as images of poethood and poetry, it asks why Celan is so important for contemporary Chinese poets, and contextualizes this question in debates and polemics that go back to the 1980s and continue today.

Keywords: Chinese poetry, translation, Paul Celan, Bei Dao, Wang Jiaxin, Yi Sha

In the mid-2000s, the mainland-Chinese literary scene saw an emotional polemic on poetry translation, triggered by Bei Dao's 北岛 criticism of Chinese translations of Paul Celan, especially those authored by Wang Jiaxin 王家新. The polemic, which engaged poets from different camps, deepening divisions that go back to the 1980s and 1990s, soon evolved into what might be called a discussion about everything. In November 2017, during a poetry translation workshop in Beijing organized by Wang, I experienced firsthand how sensitive the topic of poetry translation continues to be for Chinese poets today, with Celan as a particularly striking example. Their official and unofficial conversations, in which Celan's name occurred nearly as frequently as "poetry" and "translation" – sometimes seemingly as a synecdoche for one or the other – prompted the questions that inform this essay.

Why is Celan so important for contemporary Chinese poets? Is it because he fits Chinese models, or myths, of poetry? Or, conversely, because his

work is expected to fill a local gap? Is it possible that Celan-in-Chinese somehow connects with local authors' experience of Chineseness in its contemporary mainland variety? Is he the Other, or the Our? If the latter, then whose, exactly?

Meridian as parallel: coordinates of Celan's poetry

In his early twenties, Paul Celan, a German-speaking Jewish poet born in 1920 in the Kingdom of Romania, experienced the cruelties of World War II, including the death of his parents in a Nazi camp. The second half of his life passed in emigration, in Austria and later in France. In 1970, bereft of friends, anguished over unfair accusations of plagiarism by Claire Goll, the widow of Yvan Goll, a German-French poet whose work Celan had once translated (cf. Meltzer 1994, 64-66; Eskin 2008, 11-14), he ended his life by throwing himself into the Seine.

Celan's poetry, written in German, his mother tongue but also the language of his mother's murderers, reflects the complexity of his personal story. Yet for all its legendary obscurity and idiomaticity, it is arguably anything but hermetic. In a famous 1960 speech on art and poetry, "The Meridian," Celan explains:

[I]t is very common today to complain of the 'obscurity' of poetry. Allow me to quote ... a phrase of Pascal's which I read in Leo Shestov: *Ne nous reprochez pas notre manque de clarté, car nous en faisons profession* [Do not reproach us for our lack of clarity, for we make this our business]. This obscurity, if it is not congenital, has been bestowed on poetry by strangeness and distance (perhaps of its own making) and for the sake of an encounter.

(2003, 46)

He asserts that his poetry "has always hoped ... to speak also ... on behalf of *the other* ... perhaps an *altogether other*," while simultaneously "holding its ground ... in order to endure, call[ing] and pull[ing] itself back from an 'already-no-more' into a 'still there'" (48). This apparent contradiction is resolved in the figure of the meridian, of which Celan says:

[I] find something which consoles me a bit for having walked this impossible road in your presence, the road of the impossible.

I find the connective which, like the poem, leads to encounters.

I find something as immaterial as language, yet earthly, terrestrial, in the shape of a circle which, via both poles, rejoins itself and on the way serenely crosses even the tropics: I find... a *meridian*.

(54-55)

From this image can be drawn an entangled spatiospiritual geography of Celan's poetry. Here, a poetic meridian is a vertical line between opposite metaphysical poles, which provides longitudinal, horizontal coordinates that position individuals on parallels of our worldly existence, in our involvement with our environment and our interactions with others. Or, if we read the metaphor from an (inter)cultural perspective instead of an (inter)subjective one: on a line that extends horizontally from East to West, Celan's place on the earthly map is described by the vertical coordinates of his spiritual lineage and a nebulous, painful sense of history as descending from heaven to earth through human bodies. The vertical and the horizontal come together and mutually co-define in the finely woven lattice of Celan's poetic language. Once they fall apart, poetry becomes unorientable.

This meticulous entanglement is not an effect of the poet's supernatural skills, and its reconstruction does not require special talents or profound erudition on the part of the reader. It is a matter of attention, assures Celan, and adds: "Attention, if you allow me a quote from Malebranche via Walter Benjamin's essay on Kafka, 'attention is the natural prayer of the soul'" (50). Yet, in the throes of postwar polemics on literature and art which culminated in Theodor Adorno's dictum that to write (lyrical) poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, there was little room for attentive reading. "The Meridian" was Celan's attempt to defend himself against those who accused him of taking artistic advantage of the traumatic experience of his nation; *and* against those, German critics among them, who tried to present him as a master of metaphor whose poetry carries a contextless, universal message for humanity. Now that politics no longer overshadows art to the extent that it did in the 1940s and 1950s, these discrepancies have become less visible. Still, scholarship to date can leave one with the impression that there are two irreconcilable Celans who give mutually exclusive answers to the same questions. One is vertical: conscious of his Jewish roots, well versed in the Bible and the Kabbalah, shaped by the unspeakable experience of the Holocaust, fighting Job-like battles with his ruthless God. The other is horizontal: torn asunder by the experience of exile, wandering between countries and languages, yearning for true dialogue based on mutual understanding.

Celan in the crossfire

The fate of Chinese authors who suffer political oppression has been compared to that of Jewish authors during and after the Holocaust, especially in Chinese-language commentary (but also in commentary in Western languages; see, for instance, Law 2003). The case of Liao Yiwu 廖亦武, discussed by Rui Kunze in her contribution to this book, is an example of such attempts at establishing linkage between the darkest pages of Jewish and Chinese history. Among other things, it presents us with a cultural translation of trauma. First, the translation of Jewish trauma into post-1989 Chinese sociohistorical discourse by Liao and his audiences (for example, Liao often mentions Elie Wiesel and is frequently compared to him); and then, once Liao found himself in Germany – where he fled in 2011 – the retranslation of Chinese trauma into German cultural production, for instance through performances such as the theater project *The Bullet and the Opium: Forbidden Biographies* (Die Kugel und das Opium – Verbotene Biographien) in Berlin (Marx 2016).

I feel little enthusiasm for such comparisons, since they do no justice to the unique historical experience of either nation. Still, far be it from me to criticize the parties involved for what may well be an attempt to satisfy a basic human, psychological need. While trauma is itself unreachable through language, its terrible meaninglessness is the very factor that stimulates the production of meaning in the surrounding symbolic space, through language among other things.

The history of the contemporary Chinese poetry scene starts from the trauma of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and later includes the trauma of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. Just like the Holocaust in the West, the Cultural Revolution in China reset local literary discourse. Forced to consider everything anew, Chinese authors and critics sought inspiration in postwar literature from the West, by Jewish authors among others. Perhaps this is the main reason that today, forty years on, the force lines of the Chinese literary field are structured in ways that recall mid-twentieth-century European culture. This is indirectly confirmed by similarities in the reception of Celan's poetry in post-1976 China and post-1945 Europe. Read along the force lines of the Chinese literary field, Celan's poetry splits into patterns that are virtually identical to those identified in Western scholarship above. This is illustrated by essays on Celan by two poets who represent opposite camps on the poetry scene, Yu Jian 于坚 and Song Lin 宋琳.

Yu presents Celan as a dispirited King David singing psalms in the ruins of the temple that only his fellow sufferers of misfortune can understand.

In this vision, Celan's poetry travels vertically between heaven, earth, and she'ol, where the dead wait for the Messiah – and it is locked in this single dimension.

I hold that what was said about translations of Celan is just a lie. He is untranslatable, in every respect. Celan is a local knowledge ...

Celan's poetry is a thing that cannot be experienced.

Perhaps some things on the surface can be translated, for example, meaning. Especially those common "politically correct" issues. Or his condemnation of violence.

But it is not where Celan's "sense" [意思] lies. This is a less important aspect of his poetry. Its core is Judaism. And Judaism is a local knowledge, even if it has great ambitions.

...

Auschwitz in the depths of language.

Tormented words.

His aspiration was perhaps to become the King David of words. Let readers and translators make his dream of universality come true, through radical distortion.

(2014, 4-5)

Song's Celan, in turn, is an apostle of the universal whose metaphors traverse boundaries between East and West and between different epochs:

The poet Celan, a survivor, a Jew ... an exile in the German language, a great master of metaphor. He wrote in difficult times. Chasing away evil spirits, searching for a proper form of resistance ... he recorded an indelible testimony. At a spiritual level, his work is like a "stretto" dialogue with Hölderlin, Kafka, Tsvetaeva, and Mandelstam ... Thanks to his ingenious magic, which transforms words, after his death he still continues as a modern man.

(2008, 31)

I should add that in discourse on poetry in China today this polarized picture of Celan emerges from multiple, more nuanced confrontations of different languages and visions over the past four decades. The field was shaped by tensions between Obscure Poetry (朦胧诗) and the Third Generation (第三代) in the 1980s, and by a high-profile polemic within the latter group in the late 1990s, between so-called Popular (民间) and Intellectual (知识分子) writing – and the force lines were drawn through

debates on themes also central to Celan. Exile and suicide were prominent among these, because of their topicality on the Chinese poetry scene and their mythogenic potential. Both themes have long traditions in Chinese poetry and discourse on Chinese poetry.¹ They combine in the ancient poet Qu Yuan 屈原, an exiled official of the state of Chu said to have taken his own life. In the late twentieth century, an entanglement of the exile and suicide myths is found in Gu Cheng 顾城, a key representative of Obscure Poetry. Gu killed himself in 1993 while living in exile in New Zealand, after having murdered his wife Xie Ye 谢烨.

After 1989, exile became something of a generational experience of authors associated with Obscure Poetry. Among the most prominent, Bei Dao, Yang Lian 杨炼, and Duo Duo 多多 settled abroad due to the credible threat of persecution and limitation of their artistic freedom. Also, several Third Generation poets, most of whom would later be associated with the Intellectual camp, lived abroad for extended periods. Among them were Wang Jiaxin and Song Lin. Others chose what was called “inner emigration” in wartime Germany, meaning mental dissociation from the social-political environment in which one is physically based. These various forms of emigration provoked aggressive reactions by members of what would later be known as the Popular camp, whose tacitly recognized leaders were Yu Jian and Han Dong 韩东. In the 1990s, their attacks centered on Wang Jiaxin. Wang’s emigrant episode in London – where he lived in 1992-1993 – and his professed brotherhood with Western and Russian emigrant poets were ridiculed as pseudo-exile by Yi Sha 伊沙 among others.

The suicide theme received a powerful impulse after Haizi 海子 killed himself in March 1989, at age twenty-five. He was called a martyr of poetry, and his death was attributed to solitude and spiritual banishment, as inherent parts of the poet’s fate. Widely associated with the end of the high-culture fever (文化热) of the 1980s, Haizi’s decision was seen as transcending individual tragedy. And along with exile, suicide soon became a foundational myth of what would in the late 1990s be called Intellectual writing. In the emerging Popular camp, voices argued in defense of a personal, intimate death, as opposed to a faceless, shareable death. Many other discussions derived from, or recombined, the threads of exile and death-and-suicide.

In light of the above, in the case of Celan’s poetry, the task of the Chinese translator appears particularly daunting. First, because of this poetry’s sheer difficulty. Second, because of a perennial issue in literary translation that is

1 See van Crevel 2008, chapters 1 and 12 (poetical debates on the contemporary Chinese poetry scene), 4 (exile), and 3 (suicide).

made especially acute by the intensity of poetical debate in China: to what extent should – and can – the translator disentangle themselves from local literary discourse and speak from the source instead? Third, and related: to what extent is the translator willing, or do they desire, to sacrifice the discursive benefits of working along the force lines of the Chinese literary field? The latter two issues appear particularly complex for translators who identify as poets and are involved in local polemics, as is true for those whose renditions we will consider here: Wang Jiaxin, Bei Dao, and Yi Sha – and it is, of course, precisely for this reason that they offer direct insight into current Chinese discourse on poetry.

The debate

Scattered Chinese translations of poetry by Celan – from the German source texts and via intermediary English versions – appeared in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China in the 1970s and the 1980s, the earliest authored by Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉 (1976) and Qian Chunqi 钱春绮 (Qian and Gu 1988). Their circulation was limited, but they ignited sinophone readers' interest in the author of "The Meridian." In the early 1990s, Wang Jiaxin translated a few dozen poems via English. Around the same time, Zhang Zao 张枣 was translating Celan from the German. Trained in German literature and then based in Germany, Zhang was another poet who was later associated with the Intellectual camp. Some of his translations were published in *Today* (今天) in 1991.² The first collection of Celan's poetry in Chinese, translated by Wang in collaboration with Rui Hu 芮虎, a scholar of German literature, came out in 2002. For a time it went unchallenged on the domestic poetry scene, perhaps because the Popular camp was keeping its distance from foreign authors, and most Popular authors couldn't comment on the translations inasmuch as they did not read German or English. But in 2004, in "Celan: It's Time for the Stone to Blossom" (策兰: 是石头要开花的时候), Bei Dao, then living in the US, criticized the work of Wang, Qian, and Zhang, focusing especially on Wang's and Qian's renditions of "Deathfugue" (Todesfuge), and offering his own.

Bei Dao's essay elicited an emotional reply from Wang in the same year, in "Something Hidden or Kept Secret: Answering Bei Dao" (隐藏或保密了

2 Eight poems translated by Zhang were first published in the second issue of *Today* in 1991. In 2015, they were reprinted in a collection of Zhang's translations (3-15).

什么：对北岛的回答）。³ This set the tone for a “total” debate that was soon joined by several voices from the Popular camp. The aforesaid existential threads of the literary discourse reemerged – most of all those on exile and death-and-suicide – and the original rhetoric of the two camps was recycled for addressing the issue of translation. The most conservative among the Popular authors, like Yu Jian, stuck to their guns. To them, more translations merely meant more evidence of the untranslatability of Celan, if not of poetry per se. But others tried to incorporate translation as an integral part of their literary strategies. Working with his wife Lao G 老G (who reads English), Yi Sha proposed another relay translation of “Deathfugue” in the 2013 anthology *When You Are Old: New Translations of 100 World-Famous Poems* (当你老了：世界名诗100首新译). Together, Wang Jiaxin’s, Bei Dao’s, and Yi Sha’s renderings of “Deathfugue” constitute a fascinating record of the debate. On the textual surface, between the wounds and scars of Celan, we find traces of the translators’ struggles with themselves and, sometimes, with each other.⁴

Not just on the Chinese literary scene, “Deathfugue” is itself a poem that encourages, and actually embeds, discussion on translation. Celan wrote it in German in 1944 as “Todestango” (Deathango), but it was first published in 1947, in a Romanian translation called “Tangoul Morții” by Celan’s friend Petre Solomon. The German source text appeared in 1948. The poem’s three-year voiceless existence, between its writing and its first publication, and its one-year banishment into another language, after which it was modified and renamed by its author, are an integral part of the text. Almost every phrase in the poem reminds one of the shocking non-obviousness of Celan’s choice to write in German.

Below I cite the German source text and John Felstiner’s translation, which I find the best of the various English renditions I have seen, and the most non-obvious. Wang Jiaxin’s and Bei Dao’s essays on translating Celan show that they were familiar with Felstiner’s translation and his commentary on Celan’s work. They also consulted Michael Hamburger’s translation (Celan 1972, 33-34 or later editions). Yi Sha does not list his sources. His phrasing often appears to reflect Hamburger’s word choice and

3 Bei Dao’s essay was first published in *Harvest* (收获) 2004 (4), and Wang’s response appeared in *Red Rock* (红岩) 2004 (6). Here, I cite Bei Dao’s essay as reprinted in Bei Dao 2011, and Wang’s response according to Wang 2008, where it was republished with some changes as “Something Hidden or Kept Secret: Taking Issue with Bei Dao” (隐藏或保密了什么：与北岛商榷).

4 Translations of Celan published in Taiwan and Hong Kong will not be considered here, because the issues under scrutiny are part of mainland-Chinese discourse on poetry; because Qian Chunqi did not enter the debate, I will not dwell on his translations.

syntax. However, he translates "Germany" as the slightly archaic *Deyizhi* 德意志, which is phonetically closer to the German *Deutschland* than the currently more common *Deguo* 德国; this suggests he may also have read Felstiner's translation or Jerome Rothenberg's (Celan 2005, 46-47), both of which retain *Deutschland* and a few other expressions in German.

Todesfuge

- Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
 wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
 wir trinken und trinken
 wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng
- 5 Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
 der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar
 Margarete
 er schreibt es und tritt vor das Haus und es blitzen die Sterne er pfeift
 seine Rüden herbei
 er pfeift seine Juden hervor läßt schaufeln ein Grab in der Erde
 er befiehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz
- 10 Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
 wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir trinken dich abends
 wir trinken und trinken
 Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
 der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar
 Margarete
- 15 Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da
 liegt man nicht eng
 Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich ihr einen ihr andern singet und spielt
 er greift nach dem Eisen im Gurt er schwingts seine Augen sind blau
 stecht tiefer die Spaten ihr einen ihr anderen spielt weiter zum Tanz auf
- Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
- 20 wir trinken dich mittags und morgens wir trinken dich abends
 wir trinken und trinken
 ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
 dein aschenes Haar Sulamith er spielt mit den Schlangen
 Er ruft spielt süßer den Tod der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
- 25 er ruft streicht dunkler die Geigen dann steigt ihr als Rauch in die Luft
 dann habt ihr ein Grab in den Wolken da liegt man nicht eng

- Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
 wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
 wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir trinken und trinken
³⁰ der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau
 er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau
 ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
 er hetzt seine Rüden auf uns er schenkt uns ein Grab in der Luft
 er spielt mit den Schlangen und träumet der Tod ist ein Meister aus
 Deutschland
- ³⁵ dein goldenes Haar Margarete
 dein aschenes Haar Sulamith

(Celan 2013, 36-38)

Deathfugue

- Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
 we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
 we drink and we drink
 we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped
- ⁵ A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
 he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Margareta
 he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are all sparkling he whistles
 his hounds to come close
 he whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in the ground
 he commands us play up for the dance
- ¹⁰ Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
 we drink you at morning and midday we drink you at evening
 we drink and we drink
 A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
 he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Margareta
- ¹⁵ your ashen hair Shulamith we shovel a grave in the air there you won't
 lie too cramped
 He shouts jab this earth deeper you lot there you others sing up and play
 he grabs for the rod in his belt he swings it his eyes are so blue
 jab your spades deeper you lot there you others play on for the dancing
- Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
²⁰ we drink you at midday and morning we drink you at evening

we drink and we drink
 a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margareta
 your aschenes Haar Shulamith he plays with his vipers
 He shouts play death more sweetly this Death is a master from Deutschland
²⁵ he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise then as smoke to the sky
 you'll have a grave then in the clouds there you won't lie too cramped

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
 we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland
 we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink
³⁰ this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue
 he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true
 a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete
 he looses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air
 he plays with his vipers and daydreams der Tod ist ein Meister aus
 Deutschland

³⁵ dein goldenes Haar Margarete
 dein aschenes Haar Sulamith

(Felstiner 1995, 31-32)

How (not) to translate Celan: what poets say about translation

Bei Dao writes of Wang Jiaxin's⁵ translation: "[D]egrading ['Deathfugue'] to such an extent that it proves inferior even to *sanwen* [散文] – what a pity for Chinese readers who may thus see in Celan anyone but the great master of language" (2011, 353). *Sanwen* can be translated as "prose" or as "essay," with "essay" best reflecting specific features of Wang's work: poetically almost unprocessed, semantically underdetermined language that the reader needs to fill with inter- and extratextual knowledge. In his rejoinder, Wang does not deny Bei Dao's observation. Instead, he turns it to his own advantage in his critique of what he sees as Bei Dao's lack of empathy, solidarity, and emotional imagination:

Bei Dao is blind to all of this. Maybe for him poetry is just lyricism, metaphor, and image. Maybe it is precisely this disbelief in the capacity of

5 Bei Dao speaks of Wang and Rui's translation, but Wang claims the translation as his own and says Rui "checked my translations meticulously against the German source text, but in 'Deathfugue' he did not make any essential changes" (2008, 36).

poetry that makes him criticize others' translations for being *sanwen*-ized, or "even less than *sanwen*."

(2008, 41)

To Bei Dao, poetry is almost absolutely translatable, without taking recourse to non-poetic techniques. Perhaps this is a consequence of his poetics at large, which was influenced by Russian Formalism's emphasis on the power of form and the poetic function of language, as Jacob Edmond shows elsewhere in this volume. And notably, to some extent, Bei Dao's view is in line with Celan's argument in "The Meridian," where it is poetic language that synchronizes the poet's physical and spiritual geographies. But, Celan reminds us, this can happen only if this language satisfies two conditions: attention – or, rephrased in terms of attitude, attentiveness – as opposite to what the author calls *automaton*, and openness to the Other. In these respects, Bei Dao's approach raises questions. He holds, for example, that the Chinese language itself is inherently "suitable for translation," especially the translation of poetry, and that the grammatical and lexical material it offers is "flexible and varied, and draws on everything that is around; except for neologisms and puns, which are always difficult to render, it is almost omnipotent" (2011, 353).

Bei Dao's confident and, as one might say in the present context, almost *automatic* conclusion is based on his observation that Mandarin easily handles one of the most perplexing problems faced by German-English translators, i.e. what Felstiner describes as "the irreconcilable paradox embedded in the two halves of Celan's genitive, *Fugue of Death*," which in English "loses the German genitive's compactness – *Todesfuge* – the compact, so to speak, between order and rupture, the word's two sides" (1986, 253-257). Bei Dao writes that in Chinese this compactness is "very natural (很自然)." The nouns for *death* (死亡) and *fugue* (赋格) can be directly paired without any unsightly "grammatical glue" (语法胶) like the English *of* (2011, 353) – fortuitously removed by Felstiner, but present in other English renditions.

It is doubtful whether Bei Dao, who notes that he understands but a single word (*Deutschland* 'Germany') of the German source text, would have realized this point if it were not for Felstiner's essay, but it features prominently and assumes the status of a stylistic principle in his poetics of translation. This is evenly pointed out by Wang Jiaxin in "Something Hidden," and later put more forcefully by Huang Canran 黄灿然, a poet originally from Fujian then living in Hong Kong, who has translated Celan himself (but not "Deathfugue"; for his translations of other poems, see Celan 2010).

Huang observes that Bei Dao, while "perfecting" extant translations of poems by Rilke and Lorca, deletes all instances of 的, an (optional) subordinating marker of attribution or possession in Chinese, and other function words; and that this is presumably in order to make his idiom approximate the conciseness of classical Chinese (2006).

Also, while modern Chinese offers interesting solutions for some lexical issues in the translation of "Deathfugue," Bei Dao does not discuss them. For example, in the source text, ll. 7-8 contain the macabrely meaningful internal rhyme *Rüden* (hounds) + *Juden* (Jews). Felstiner finds it impossible to transfer this, so he substitutes it with another rhyme: *close* + *rows*. In Chinese the source rhyme is translatable into a graphic or visual rhyme, no less macabre than its acoustic counterpart. The first character of the word for *Jew* (犹太人) consists of a (loosely) phonetic element 尤 plus a (loosely) semantic component 犭, and the latter is a variant of the character 犬 'dog, hound'. Additionally, the phonetic element 尤 bears a striking visual resemblance to 犬.

Another challenge for the English translator is the recurrent, ominous alliteration of *Schlangen* 'snakes' and *schreiben* 'write'. For *Schlangen* Felstiner uses the semantically narrower term *vipers*, in assonance and near-alliteration with "writes." Here, too, Chinese offers a solution, which is used by Wang Jiaxin: *she* 蛇 'snake' and *shuxie* 书写 'write'. Bei Dao opines that this should be adjusted to *xie xin* 写信 'write a letter'. As Wang notes, this is needlessly narrow and indefensibly disambiguating.

Bei Dao's belief in the near-absolute translatability of poetry (into Chinese) appears to be based on a belief in the limitless potential of the Chinese language, and of his own poetic idiom – which leads to a notable, sinicizing convergence of the idiolects of Celan, Rilke, and Lorca, particularly in their rhythmical patterns. This is unacceptable to Wang Jiaxin and Yi Sha. In "Something Hidden," starkly different from Bei Dao's self-confidence, Wang writes:

I realize that to gain insight into Celan's work will take my entire life. It requires faithfulness and patience, that "secret love hidden from people's eyes." It requires constantly returning to Celan's untranslatable vocabulary and his darkness, until it is finally lit up or we arrive at a more profound understanding.

(2008, 50-51)

Yi Sha takes translatability for granted, like Bei Dao, but that is their only commonality (Yi Sha and Lao G 2013, 1-3). In Yi Sha's opinion, present-day

translations into Chinese are hampered by the presence of the translator's idiolect across all of their various translations, and by basic linguistic misunderstandings. But while he points out countless "self-evident mistakes" in translations by others (2), he himself makes such mistakes as well. In "Deathfugue," for example, he renders ll. 6-7 as 他写道: 黑暗正在降临德意志, 你的金发的玛格丽特 / 他写信, 然后走出门去, 满天繁星闪烁 'He writes: darkness descends on Germany, your golden-haired Margarete / He writes a letter, and then goes out, the sky is full of sparkling stars'. Lexico-semantic problems aside, Yi Sha's use of punctuation suggests a vision of translation in which shortening the distance between the author and his contemporary (Chinese) audience requires stripping the poem of ambiguity and limiting its discursive versatility. Instead, in line with his own Popular-poetic style, he refocuses the poem around simple, straightforward language, presumably because he considers this comprehensible to any reader.

Sense, sound, and strain: what translation says about poets

One salient feature of Wang Jiaxin's translations is a consistent effect of estrangement. Through the long lines of Wang's "Deathfugue," the reader wanders as if through spacious arcades, open-ended like those in the eponymous project of Walter Benjamin, whose translation theory Wang often cites: the poem's windows are open for various contexts to enter, so the wanderer can pick and choose. However, one must tread carefully because the ground is uneven, irregularly paved with what Bei Dao might consider "prosaically" or "essayistically" scattered words.

There are several areas where Wang seems especially cautious, perhaps because he feels the turbulence caused by the draught of the extratextual "sense" in the poem's arcades. There, he appears to slow down, in order for his readers to consciously consider the consequences of their intervention in the text, just like the translator has done. The pace decreases most dramatically where Wang introduces the poem's protagonists. There, the language is belabored and borders on being awkward, especially when juxtaposed with Bei Dao's polished phrases. Consider, for example, Wang's rendition of *A/a man [who] lives in a house* (ll. 5, 13, 22, 32). Bei Dao translates concisely, omitting the verb: 那屋子里的人 'a person in the/that house'. Wang translates more literally and meticulously: 住在那屋子里的男人 'a man who lives in the/that house', as if the translator paused to observe. Whereas Bei Dao starts the sentence with 那屋子里 'in the/that house', Wang

begins with the verb 住 'live' (in the sense of reside), shifting focus from the surroundings to the protagonist. This shift is even more pronounced in Yi Sha's version, which opens with 一个男人 'a man': 一个男人呆在屋子里 'a man stays in a/the house'.

In Bei Dao's rendition, *Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*, the poem's signature phrase, becomes 死亡是来自德国的大师 'Death is a/the master who comes from Germany / whose origins lies in Germany', suggesting the master is of German descent. Yi Sha follows the same sentence pattern, but renders the German *der Tod* 'death' as 死神, a common expression for death in a general sense but literally "god of death," and *Deutschland* 'Germany' as 德意志, as noted above. Wang has 死亡是一位从德国来的大师 'Death is a master who comes / has come from Germany', which may or may not mean that Death is German. Death might be a demon without a homeland, who sojourns wherever he – with the masculine pronoun reflecting *Der Tod* in the original – is invited. Again, Wang seems to carefully examine this passerby, giving the reader time to consider various interpretations and implications.

And this matters a great deal, as is clear from Wang's analysis of the lines where Margarete and Sulamith appear: "dein goldenes Haar Margarete / dein aschenes Haar Sulamith." Bei Dao and Yi Sha have 你 [的] 金发的玛格丽特 / 你 [的] 灰发的素拉米斯 'your golden-haired Margarete / your ashen-haired Sulamith' (Yi Sha with the subordinating marker 的, Bei Dao without it), bringing out the physical presence of the women as well as their belonging to, or being owned by, another person, probably the man who writes. Wang translates: 你的金色头发玛格丽特 / 你的灰色头发素拉米斯 'your golden hair Margarete / your ashen hair Sulamith', where the women's hair is the grammatical subject, not the women-as-persons. According to Wang, Margarete and Sulamith are "carriers of different hair, different ethnicity, different stories" (2008, 41). He presents an insightful analysis of relationships between the writing man and the two women, showing how the women's (de)subjectivization and (de)individualization operate in the poem.

Sensitive to the slightest flow of "substance" from the textual to the lived and from the lived to the textual, Wang scrutinizes the poem in order to determine whether its words and phrases matter in and of themselves as elements of physical or spiritual reality, or rather function as figures of speech or tropes. Unlike Bei Dao and Yi Sha, he detects the metaphorical implications of "golden hair" and "ashen hair," and realizes the literalness of another forceful image: the smoke from the cremation furnaces, the final element of the genocidal machinery of the concentration camps. Bei Dao

and Yi Sha interpret as in “he shouts scrape your strings darker you’ll rise then as smoke to the sky” as signaling a comparison. They use the word 像 ‘(just) like’ to narrate what is going to happen to the Jews. Rising *like* smoke to the sky has much less dramatic connotations than rising *in the form of* smoke – indeed, it could even be taken as an allegory for a soul released and ascending to heaven. Wang’s translation leaves no room for doubt: 尔后你们就会化为烟雾升向空中 ‘then you will turn into smoke and rise to the sky’. Preceded by this image, the image of the dead “lying not too cramped” (不拥挤) reveals its dark irony.

Conversely, Wang also strays from the original, sometimes more so than Bei Dao and Yi Sha. In l. 24 his translation of the English *play* (for the German *spielen*), which can mean “play music / a musical instrument,” “play a game,” “perform a role,” or “have fun, amuse oneself,” stays close to the latter meaning. Rather than, for instance, something like 更甜蜜演奏死亡 ‘play Death more sweetly’, as if Death were a piece of music, he renders the line as 更甜蜜和死亡玩 ‘play more sweetly with Death’, just like the playing with the snakes elsewhere in the poem. Bei Dao and Yi Sha steer clear of this pitfall. Another image that is distorted in Wang’s translation is that of the Jews playing musical instruments to accompany the dancing. In Wang’s version, this changes into a scene where the Jews themselves play and dance (表演跳舞 ‘play and dance’ and 给我们跳舞 ‘dance for us’). In a third example, for the bullet that “shoots you level and true,” unlike Bei Dao and Yi Sha, Wang does not provide the technical detail that the bullet is made of lead, but focuses on the person shooting, repeating the pronoun: 他用子弹射你他射得很准 ‘he shoots you with a bullet he shoots accurately’.

Aside from the question of whether these omissions are intentional, they appear to mirror the translator’s rhythm of thought. Notably, this resembles the rhythm of Celan’s own vocal interpretation,⁶ though Wang says he has never listened to or viewed any audio or video recording of the poet’s recital. Bei Dao mentions one such recording, calling Celan’s diction as “now plain, now shrill” (2011, 354). It would seem to me that Wang more adequately reproduces the musical effect of the poem in German as recited by Celan, even if this effect is not generated by the musical properties of the translator’s language. Where Celan modulates his tone, as if imitating the orders of the camp guards, Wang speeds up, or rather: his thought appears to accelerate. Line length does not decrease significantly – on average Wang’s lines are longer than those in the source text by two to four syllables – but

6 Paul Celan’s reading of “Todesfuge” is available online, e.g. at bit.ly/2GmJreg (accessed March 25, 2018).

the translator becomes limited in his semantic scope, less equivocal and more concrete. Where Celan's recital becomes mesmerizingly monotonous, Wang's translation generates ambiguity, allowing all kinds of context to enter the poem.

Yi Sha's lines are long too, in some cases as many as ten syllables longer than the source text, as we see in l. 4: 我们用铲子在空中挖出墓穴在那里你躺下不会觉得太窄 'with shovels we dig a grave in the air [when] you lie down there you will not find it too narrow'. The (co)verb 用 'use' or 'with', the verb 觉得 'think, reckon, find, feel', and the directional complement 下 'down' have no lexical anchorage in the source text. Theoretically, these modifications should dynamize the scene. But the dynamic of Yi Sha's translation does not make the action more vivid. Rather, it functions as a microdynamic that works within individual actions and makes these more strained and more physical. Sometimes, this leads to near-tautology (e.g. dig a grave using shovels), and sometimes to complication: the dead are said to lie down and perceive their grave in a particular way, which grants them an agency that is not there in the original.

Yi Sha's translation hinges on its description of concrete actions. Occasionally, these break down the visual and acoustic structures of the source text, reconfiguring lines and adding line breaks and pauses between more or less obvious recitation units: reading the long l. 4 naturally in one breath, as Celan does in the recording, would be difficult in Yi Sha's translation. His earthly, straightforward phrases are also less likely to become contextually active in the way they do in Wang's translation. If any abstract or metaphysical meaning manages to flow into the poem between one move of the shovel and the next, it is turned back to its universal physical, prelingual source, and presented as an extension of palpable, lived reality.

Yi Sha's rendition is not unlike that of Qian Chunqi, which both Wang Jiaxin and Bei Dao consider stylistically awkward: lacking the right rhythm (Wang 2008, 39; Bei Dao 2011, 351), "imperfect" (Wang 2008, 39), and "sluggish" (Bei Dao 2011, 352). Qian also tends to produce more concrete, fixed images than those in the source text, through his word choice and by using multiple spacing within lines, which has an effect that is similar to that of punctuation. Wang defends him, noting that his imperfection is that of a pioneer and the inelegance of his rendition should be forgiven (2008, 39). Yi Sha's heavy style is not so much that of a pioneer as that of an engineer who tries to make the gravity of the language work for their own project.

Remarkably, the lines in Bei Dao's translation are usually two to four syllables shorter than Celan's, even though translations often avail themselves of extra descriptive elements lest too much content be lost. But Bei

Dao occasionally sacrifices sense for sound, presumably to make the text run more smoothly and rhythmically – in musical not semantic terms. However, this is not necessarily in sync with Celan's voice. Unlike Wang, Bei Dao encourages the reader to surrender to the translator's rhythm, rather than co-shape it by adding their own semantic "beats." The most evident manifestation of Bei Dao's emphatic presence as a translator appears in the final passage of his interpretation of "Deathfugue." Here he appropriates its aforesaid, dramatic signature phrase almost as background music to his essay, interspersing his final sentences with the refrain: "Death is a master from Germany" (2011, 354). Wang Jiaxin objects:

I think, were Celan still alive, hearing his poetry repeated again and again, he would be upset. Because he wasn't one to play on people's heartstrings ... He never wished to expose his suffering to earn people's compassion, and never presented the Holocaust to assert the moral superiority of the Jewish nation. Instead, by arriving at the core of the language, by digging deeply in search of an individual voice, he began his heavenly journey. Why not see this? Why not respect it?

(2008, 46)

So?

In the context of contemporary Chinese poetry polemics, from the three Chinese renditions of "Deathfugue" emerge two Celans – an "Intellectual," horizontal Celan who begs for better understanding, and a "Popular," vertical Celan whose secrets the reader is asked to dig for in a grave, deeply and tautologically: "using shovels." Two Celans, and one Bei Dao, who positions himself outside the Chinese poetry scene and tries to reconnect the two Celans through polished phrases without grammatical glue. Bei Dao produced his translation before Yi Sha. But he knew Qian Chunqi's and borrowed from its down-to-earth yet linguistically precise awkwardness as much as he borrowed from the "prosaic" or "essayistic" nature of Wang Jiaxin's rendition, aiming to balance and re-entangle the two dimensions of Celan's writing.

Bei Dao's approach has its merits. Minimally, it was not unrelated to Celan's own (impossible) ideal of poetry as laid out in "The Meridian." Would Bei Dao's translation have been more successful if it had displayed more attention, in Celan's terms? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Later, Meng Ming 孟明, translating from the German, adopted a similar approach, in

his bilingual *Selected Poems of Paul Celan* (保罗·策兰诗选), published in Taiwan in 2009 and republished in China in 2010. Instead of privileging his own idiolect, Meng relied on idiomatic classical Chinese. But he, too, failed to integrate the coordinates of Celan's oeuvre for good. Something stronger than language split them again, as is in evidence in Yu Jian's and Song Lin's diametrically opposed essays – both of which refer to Meng's translations.

Or might this be a matter not of strength, but of method? In one of Celan's last works, "Place-Change" (Ortswechsel), dedicated to the Israeli writer Ilana Shmueli, whom Celan loved platonically, he gives yet another, now almost "other-shorely" interpretive hint, and leaves the reader with the shortest, most essential question. In Susan Gillespie's translation:

PLACE-CHANGE among the substances:

you, go to you, join in
with missing
earthlight,

I hear, we were
a heavenly bloom,
this is yet to be proven, from
somewhere on high, along
our roots,

two suns, do you hear, there are
two,
not one –
so?

(Celan 2011)

Rereading the polemic through this poem may prove instructive for understanding the misunderstanding of Celan in China. It is a coincidence, but a telling one, that "Place-Change" offers a picture that visually and conceptually constitutes a reversal of, and perhaps a remedy for, the clichéd myth of Tang-dynasty poet Li Bai. Believed to have drowned when attempting to embrace the moon's reflection on the surface of a river, he is supposed to have died the most poetic death in history, in which his spirit reached its apogee. The myth still haunts the Chinese poetry scene, but it does no justice to Li Bai and it does not benefit today's poets. Celan's proposition is radically different. Instead of imitating Li Bai, cultivating poethood, and

quarreling about whose garden pond has the prettier or more moon-like reflection of the moon, it might be refreshing to engage in a “place-change,” if only for a moment, for the duration of a poem; and, instead of writing/reading/translating along the force lines of the earthly literary field, to try to do so “along [the] roots” that are above our heads. This way, one might be able to collect the “missing earthlight” from the moon’s surface to arrive at a more complete and more transparent image of (Celan’s) poetry, and – looking through poetry’s eyes – a more complete and more transparent picture of the world.

Controversy surrounding the translation and reception of Celan is not a specifically Chinese problem. I believe it occurs in the literatures of many languages (e.g. German, English, Polish, and Russian, to mention only the other languages I read). At the same time, it lays bare issues that are specific to particular, local discourses. There is an apparent paradox in Celan’s poetry. It manages to embrace the universal, *and* it is exceptionally prone to “local diseases.” His poems are powerful, in that they shake our structures of feeling and thinking, *and* they are vulnerable, in that tiny cuts on their skin that have not yet turned to scars are easily contaminated by scattered pieces of the structures they shake loose – uncontrolled threads of discourse and emotions – and they fester and grow, and tear the text apart.

For the translator, Celan’s work is a touchstone of artistic craftsmanship and attentiveness, but even more one of intellectual and spiritual freedom. The same may hold for the entire literature of the target language in question. Poems like “Deathfugue” work as tiny, hypersensitive litmus papers, revealing to what extent the host literature has the ability to take a leap of transcendental imagination to reach for the “heavenly bloom,” without tripping over its own polemics, biases, and expectations at large.

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