

2 Working with Words

Poetry, Translation, and Labor

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Abstract

This essay offers an activist perspective on the *work* of poetry and of translation. Noting that literary translation does many things, from enabling the practice of comparative literary studies to the representation outside China of Chinese migrant worker poetry in a global-capitalist world, the author discusses how her translations of Zheng Xiaoqiong, Wang Xiaoni, and Zang Di confront English-language poetics at the same time as they interface with the work of several poets writing in English.

Keywords: Chinese poetry, translation, workers poetry, translator, work, labor

I have thought about work often: whether I was doing enough of it; whether the work I did was good enough; whether writing, because it is largely enjoyable, is in fact work; whether anybody was ever going to pay me for doing this work I love doing. I have also thought about other kinds of work, physical work and emotional labor, work that goes disregarded or unrecognized. I think of Robert Hayden's "What did I know, what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices," and the father who was never thanked. In my own poems I've addressed the pleasures and efforts of certain kinds of work, like in "Obey, Obey":

Your mother made the earth obey her will.
Not like your father did – no chemicals,
no machinery, no engineered seed.
Her hands were her tools, wrinkled and twisted
from hauling boys around by their collars,

cutting fat into biscuits with her fingers.
 At the height of summer, she stood sweating
 in the kitchen canning collards, Kentucky
 wonders, summer pickles, jellies of gooseberries,
 chokecherries, grapes from your Aunt Helen's vines.

(Goodman 2016c, 26)

"I haven't worked a day in my life," begins Donald Hall's literary and rural memoir *Life Work* (1993), a book I have long admired and frequently reread. The highly prolific former American poet laureate continues:

With the trivial exceptions of some teenaged summers, I've never worked with my hands or shoulders or legs. I've never stood on the line in Flint among the clangor and stench of embryonic Buicks for ten hours of small operations repeated on a large machine. Oh, I've watched this work, visiting a plant; I've watched *Modern Times* also. When I taught at the University of Michigan, many of my students worked summers installing gas tanks at River Rouge or building generators in Ypsilanti. Some of them came from families of line-workers; the university was a way out of Flint and Toledo. These children of line-parents moved to desks in offices, nine-to-five, which was my own father's work, and which I escaped. Doubtless my grandfather Hall, my father, and I made a stereotypical three generations: My father's father grew up without much school, doing muscle-work, and built a successful business; so he sent my father to college who worked out his life at a desk adding columns of figures among blonde-wood cubicles where properly dressed men and women worked with numbers five days a week and half a day on Saturday. Then there's me: I stay home and write poems – and essays, stories, textbooks, children's books, biography ... Work?

(1993, 3)

In the United States, some work is easily recognized and valued as "real work": it involves effort, frequently physical effort, and a tangible product. Intellectual or creative effort is in some circles not considered work, but rather leisure. As Hall goes on to emphasize in his comparisons of different kinds of work (teaching, writing reviews, editing, etc.), if art is pleasurable, if it functions as an escape from work, as it certainly can, where does that leave someone who "works" as an artist? The poet makes something that is intangible and potentially passed to unlimited consumers. Now take the literary translator, who takes something intangible and monetarily worthless

and spends a great deal of time and effort turning it into something else that is intangible and, for the most part, worthless.

But is a poem or a translation worthless, or is it invaluable? Its worth cannot be pinned down and quantified, unlike the hours of a day laborer. Then there is the sticky issue that poets and literary translators tend to enjoy their work. Work is something we frequently assume to be unpleasant, trying, tiring, difficult, and either dangerous or boring. My thesaurus helpfully offers these synonyms for *work*: “labor, toil, slog, drudgery, exertion, effort, industry, service; grind, sweat, elbow grease; travail.” The antonyms? “Leisure, rest.”

The contemporary Chinese migrant worker poet Xu Lizhi 许立志 described the working life in the factories of Shenzhen in just such terms:

seven years ago you came alone
to this part of Shenzhen
high-spirited, full of faith
and what met you was ice,
black nights, temporary residence permits, temporary shelter
after false starts you came here to the world's largest equipment factory
standing, screwing in screws, doing overtime, working overnight
painting, finishing, polishing, buffing,
packaging and packing, moving finished products
bending down and straightening up a thousand times each day
“My Friend Fa” (发哥)
(Goodman 2017b, 413)

The verbs here are simple and dynamic. They all imply movement, while the cascade of motion upon motion demonstrates the unstoppable pace of the work itself. Zheng Xiaoqiong's 郑小琼 take is even darker, in “Language” (语言):

Rust-speckled switches, stations, laws, the system. I speak a black-blooded
fired language
of status, age, disease, finances ... a fearful, howling language. Tax col-
lectors and petty officials.
Factory bosses. Temporary residence permits. Migrant workers ... their
languages
language of a girl jumping off a building. The GDP's language. Language
of official projects. Language of a kid's school fees.
(Goodman 2016b, 122)

There is no enjoyment here, but pure alienation in a Marxian sense. To capture that sense of alienation is key to translating these works into English, and in both cases here, some of that depends upon the rhythm of the texts, which walk a tightrope between the energy in the rush of information that drives the lines forward, and the breaks necessary to maintain meaning, commas in the case of Xu Lizhi, and periods and commas in the case of Zheng Xiaoqiong. How is the translator to balance these factors effectively?

Perhaps one of the things that annoy dyed-in-the-wool capitalists about the claim that poetry is work is that a lot of the writing of poetry and the translation of poetry involves reading. And if writing poetry probably isn't work, reading poetry definitely isn't. Yet for both poet and translator, reading is one of the primary sources of nourishment, and for the translator, translating is inherently reading. In this sense, translation is fundamentally and complexly intertextual. As Hans J. Vermeer puts it, in Andrew Chesterman's translation:

To the extent that a translator judges the form and function of a source text to be basically adequate per se as regards the predetermined skopos [the purpose of the translation] in the target culture, we can speak of a degree of "intertextual coherence" between target and source text. This notion thus refers to a relation between *translatum* and source text, defined in terms of the skopos. For instance, one legitimate skopos might be an exact imitation of the source text syntax, perhaps to provide target culture readers with information about this syntax. Or an exact imitation of the source text structure, in a literary translation, might serve to create a literary text in the target culture. Why not? The point is that one must know what one is doing ...

(Chesterman 2004, 229)

That is indeed the point. But beyond the intertextuality between source text and translation, and between two different linguistic traditions, there is also an underlying intertextuality between the source text and the texts the translator has read and can use – consciously or unconsciously – as models, in the same way that an author in any language uses the models that she finds around her. In understanding a translator and her practice, we should ask not just what she was writing and translating at a given time, but also what she was reading, and had at that time read. Below I will offer a few glimpses of the background to some of my translations as instances of how this kind of intertextuality might work.

The translator as intertextual worker

As of mid-January 2018, if someone in America were to google “workers poetry,” one of the first hits would be a review of my translation of *Iron Moon*, an anthology of contemporary Chinese poetry (2016b). Of the nine links listed on the first page, four have to do with workers in Asia, the other two being the website singaporeworkerpoetry.com and a review of a film about workers in Singapore. The only American poet named among these links is Langston Hughes.

I remember reading Hughes as a middle-school student and becoming immediately drawn to his voice, and in particular, to his rhythms.

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human
blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1994, 23)

The whole poem is incantatory, incandescent. The repetition draws the reader along like a current, while the grand scope (rivers, the world, human blood, leading to “my soul”) opens the reach out into the metaphysical. Hughes of course also wrote many poems about the working life, having held various manual jobs after dropping out of college.

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,

I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.

I am the red man driven from the land,

I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek –

And finding only the same old stupid plan

Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,

Tangled in that ancient endless chain

Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!

Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!

Of work the men! Of take the pay!

Of owning everything for one's own greed!

“Let America Be America Again” (1994, 190)

Zheng Xiaoqiong's "Language" begins:

I speak this sharp-edged, oiled language
 of cast iron – the language of silent workers
 a language of tightened screws the crimping and memories of iron sheets
 a language like calluses fierce crying unlucky
 hurting hungry language back pay of the machines' roar occupational
 diseases
 language of severed fingers life's foundational language in the dark place
 of unemployment
 between the damp steel bars these sad languages

..... I speak them softly

(Goodman 2016b, 122)

There are many differences here, of course, but Zheng's "I speak," like Hughes's "I am ... I am," is a pronouncement of identity and a declaration of agency, no matter how compromised. The sentences that begin Hughes's "Let America Be America Again" eventually break down, just as Zheng's beginning quickly shifts into declarations and lists, exclamations of anger, and taut descriptions of modes and methods of exploitation. The semantic disintegration reflects an increasingly forceful emotional call and response between writer and reader. As the writer's pain increases on the page, so the reader's empathetic response intensifies. That is the power of literature.

The chances that Zheng Xiaoqiong read Langston Hughes in translation before writing "Language" are slim. But the influence I am arguing for is not poet upon poet, but poet upon translator, and thereby upon poet-in-target-language: I am influenced by Langston Hughes, therefore Zheng Xiaoqiong in my English carries some of his traces.

I see a similar pattern with respect to Philip Levine. Here is the beginning of "Fear and Fame," from his 1991 collection *What Is Work*, whose first section is built around issues that also concern many of the Chinese migrant worker poets I've translated:

Half an hour to dress, wide rubber hip boots,
 gauntlets to the elbow, a plastic helmet
 like a knight's but with a little glass window
 that kept steaming over, and a respirator
 to save my smoke-stained lungs.

...

A gallon of hydrochloric
steaming from the wide glass mouth, a dash
of pale nitric to bubble up, sulphuric to calm,
metals for sweeteners, cleansers for salts,
until I knew the burning stew was done.

(1991, 3)

Levine is both more lyrical and more narrative here than either Xu or Zheng, but something in the flow of his language is familiar. There is a push through the details that might otherwise bog the reader down, produced by the concatenated lines and delicate internal half-rhymes (window/over, nitric/sulphuric, sweeteners/cleansers). I have done something similar in both translations above, as in the movement of these lines, from Xu's "My Friend Fa": "high-spirited, full of faith / and what met you was ice, / black nights". My off-rhymes of "faith," "ice," and "night" are in part meant to propel the reader down through the lines into the litany of motions that follow. Am I copying Levine? Certainly not – or, not consciously. But it is there in the background as an influence, a text that informed not only how I translated this Chinese migrant worker poetry, but, just as importantly, part of the internal context in which I read that poetry in the first place.

The translator as witness

Why does Donald Hall bother to describe work he's never done at the beginning of a book about the work he does do? Is it to establish that he knows what "real work" is, to posit his bona fides before he goes on to argue that his creative writing is work? One of the reasons Hall's description of his background draws me in is that it so closely mirrors my own, one generation removed. My father is a retired university professor who, as it happens, went to the same fancy university as Hall, while my father's father was a low-status professor of German at a large public university. His father (my great-grandfather) worked in a steel mill in Middletown, Ohio: ARMCO, the American Rolling Mill Company, on the banks of the Miami River. When I visited Middletown long after the deaths of my great-grandfather and grandfather, the decaying decadence of the mansions of the steel barons gave the town the solemn air of a cemetery; it reminded me of the eerie stilled opulence of the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, with moss and vines framing the houses along wide silent avenues. The mill continues to

operate, now as AK Steel, and it seems that everyone who can continues to leave Middletown, just as my grandfather did.

As a child, my father told me stories that his father had told him, of working conditions in the mills, of abuses of power and dangerous conditions, injuries and the loss of digits and limbs, dangerous chemicals and unbreathable air, and the backbreaking labor that men (nearly all men then) returned to, day after miserable day. These stories are a part of my family lore, and one reason hard work is so prized. The work that is valued above all in my family tends to be intellectual work, or, in my case, creative work. The underlying mythos – and I believe this of many other families around the world – is that my grandfather escaped the fate of working in the steel mills through willpower, effort, and luck, sent my father to a fancy college on a scholarship for poor kids, and thus released our family from lives spent in manual labor. Donald Hall points to the same pattern.

Rather than the contempt for manual workers that some in our economically privileged strata seem to hold, I feel a deep ancestral interconnection with them. It informs my own poetry, as it informs my translation, both of the poetry of migrant workers and of those poets who serve as witness. The translator is also a witness to the experience of text as text, an experience that she then endeavors to pass on to other readers in her own language. I am also a witness to my own family, to the generational fear passed down by my grandfather to my father and on to me, a palpable dread of the furnace of the steel mill and a resistance to ever going back there.

While my great-grandfather was working in the steel mill all day, my great-grandmother was taking care of six children, a ramshackle house, a kitchen garden, and a sizable chicken coop for eggs and meat, along with all the cooking, cleaning, feeding, weeding, shopping, organization, and budget-making necessary for running a large household of limited means. Her labor, and the labor of many millions of women like her, has long been overlooked, and continues to be today. As Wang Xiaoni 王小妮, in her typically understated feminist way, puts it: “I let my significance / happen only at home” (“Starting Anew as a Poet” 重新做一个诗人) (2014, 25).

The first feminist poet I read consciously as a *feminist* was Adrienne Rich. As a woman in my twenties, her work was a shock to my system: I hadn’t realized I (read: a woman) was allowed to be that angry. In addition to her writings in poetry and prose about feminism, lesbianism, Judaism, and politics, Rich also wrote powerfully about workers. A daughter of a well-to-do family, she did not herself work in farm fields or on an assembly

line or in a steel mill. But her acute eye and capacity for empathy, as well as her anger, brought workers' lives and livelihoods into vivid relief.

A dark woman, head bent, listening for something
 – a woman's voice, a man's voice or
 voice of the freeway, night after night, metal streaming downcoast
 past eucalyptus, cypress, agribusiness empires
 THE SALAD BOWL OF THE WORLD, gurr of small planes
 dusting the strawberries, each berry picked by a hand
 in close communion, strawberry blood on the wrist,
 Malathion in the throat, communion,
 the hospital at the edge of the fields,
 prematures slipping from unsafe wombs,
 the labor and delivery nurse on her break watching
 planes dusting rows of pickers.

(1991, 3)

This is the beginning of the poem that opens Rich's seventeenth (talk about hardworking) collection, *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991). The lines palpitate with indignation, and we become the "dark woman," listening to the stories of these strawberry pickers, likely migrant workers from countries south of our border. There is one small detail that stands out to me now, and it's a humble indefinite article. Each berry is not picked by hand, but by *a* hand, a human hand, a hand that is attached to a body, a history, a name, an individual. With this one move, Rich humanizes what has been systematically dehumanized, either deliberately or by unfeeling oversight.

Was Rich's poetry in my mind when I began reading Wang Xiaoni's work? Certainly I am reminded of it now when I read my own translations of Wang, particularly in the case of what I think of as Wang's "train poems." There are at least six train poems collected in *Something Crosses My Mind* (Goodman 2014), in which the perspective of the speaker is placed behind a train window, or at a distance, and from that angle serves as a witness to rural life. One of these poems is "November's Rice-Gleaners" (11月里的割稻人):

From Guangxi to Jiangxi
 I glimpse rice-gleaners bent to the ground.

In province after province
 the vegetation yellows

in province after province
this country was once willing to pave the ground with gold.

Still there are always people at dusk
looking like bent black nails.
Who will come to admire the ancient sorcery
of rice-gleaners turning a bit of gold into a grain of rice.

Don't be like me hurrying along on the train
as though there's urgent business
crossing three provinces in a single day
occasionally noting the earth is still adorned with rice-gleaners.

I want to call for them to stand up
to see the faces worth the least gold
to see the color of sweat they produce.

(Goodman 2014, 43)

Wang's touch is softer than Rich's here: there are no poisonous pesticides like Malathion, no blood of strawberries. The tone is less urgent. But there is the same demand for attention to be paid to "the faces worth the least gold" who are working "in province after province" to feed the nation. The rice bowl rather than the salad bowl, and yet the risks and the lack of compensation are similar.

Likewise, the understated use of "by a hand" rather than "by hand" in Rich's poem is a similar move to one in Wang's "Plowman" (耕田的人), another poem narrated from a distance by a speaker who is not a worker but who empathizes and records:

He is turning over the whole mountaintop with a plow.

He follows behind an ox
and the two reveal the earth's forehead by force.
A dark red wound appears
the red seen after a fever passes.
The red that comes after punishment.
The red that comes after pain has been quietly survived.

Suddenly the small plowman disappears
the just-turned red mud has buried him in the mountainside.

His partner raises his enormous head
 like he's another plowman wearing an ox mask
 like the pair at the front and back of the plow are brothers.

(Goodman 2014, 47)

The easy move here is to compare the agricultural worker to an animal. Instead, Wang inverts the expected metaphor, and the ox becomes a man in a mask. The man is not lowered to the status of an animal being exploited for its labor; rather, the animal is being raised to the level of the man, an equal partner, a “brother.” This emphasizes the dignity of the man and animal both. We also see the cooperation, the reliance, and the personal relationship between these two working partners, an ancient relationship that has faded only with the industrialization of agriculture across the world, an industrialization whose sheer scale has led to the degradation of the individuals involved.

The role of witness is fraught, and it is easy – especially in the current climate – to be accused of cultural appropriation or exploiting another's pain. In 2018, when I presented on “the poetry of work” in Beijing, the audience reacted positively to the poems by Xu Lizhi, but were very suspicious of “Plowman.” Wang Xiaoni's account rang false to them. What right does she have to write about farmers? Part of their response had to do with my framing: I gave very little context, and my audience did not know that Wang was among the educated youth sent down during the Cultural Revolution and is no stranger to physical labor. But here she serves as a witness to the labor, not a participant in it like Xu Lizhi. Rich gives an elegant defense of the poetry of witness in her powerful collection of essays *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*. Discussing Elizabeth Bishop's “Songs for a Colored Singer,” she writes:

This is a white woman's attempt – respectful, I believe – to speak through a Black woman's voice. A risky undertaking, and it betrays the failures and clumsiness of such a position. The personae we adopt, the degree to which we use lives already ripped off and violated by our own culture, the problem of racist stereotyping in every white head, the issue of the writer's power, right, obligation to speak for others denied a voice, or for the writer's duty to shut up at times or at least to make room for those who can speak with more immediate authority – these are crucial questions for our time, and questions that are relevant to much of Bishop's work. What I value is her attempt to acknowledge other outsiders, lives marginal in ways that hers is not, long before the Civil

Rights movement made such awareness temporarily fashionable for some white writers.

(1986, 131)

Rich strikes exactly the right balance here, between the need for the writer to shut up sometimes, and to sometimes speak for others – respectfully, with a conscious acknowledgment of difference – as indeed the translator, by definition, always does.

The “white” is important here, and so is the “woman.” Rich grew up in a time when women were expected to have children first and careers only if they must. Similarly, Wang Xiaoni has always had to navigate a situation that critic and poet Zhou Zan 周瓚 describes as centering on “suspicions about the concept of ‘women’s poetry’ [女性诗歌], distortions of feminist theory, the objectification of women inherent in a consumerist culture, the decadence of a male-dominated culture, the backsliding of the state of equality between the sexes ...” (in Goodman 2016a, 72). Elsewhere, again in the context of discussing so-called “women’s poetry,” Zhou adds: “In Chinese literary circles, using the term ‘beautiful woman writer’ [美女作家] ... is on the one hand a result of commercial considerations, and on the other hand an expression of the traditional male gaze that regards women as a ‘seen object’ or an ‘object of desire’” (2014, 209).

This of course extends far back into history. As Shu-mei Shih puts it, “to call someone a ‘talented lady’ [才女] is a traditional way of relegating her to a special category outside the male-dominated literary canon” (2001, 211). This is even truer when women writers are referred to in terms of their appearance, a point Amy Dooling makes in her chapter in David Wang’s *New Literary History of Modern China* (2017). Yet this way of thinking carries over into Western literary and sinology circles. I am eager for the day to come when we no longer need chapters titled “Women Writers in Early Modern China” (Widmer 2017), also in Wang’s *History*, and instead can devote as much time and space to women writers – without categorizing them reductively by their gender – as is devoted to men.

Maghiel van Crevel notes the outcome of this underrepresentation of women in the Chinese poetry scene itself: “it is shocking how many men and how few women visibly and audibly *get to speak* on the Chinese poetry scene, as in producing and shaping the discourse through editorships, event organization, group formation, access to public and private funding, jury memberships, academic and publishing leverage, and more generally running the show” (2017, par. 15). Having observed the same phenomenon myself over many years, I also find this deeply disturbing. It is imperative

that a space be created in which women are able (and invited!) to speak for themselves if they so wish, in person as well as on the page.

The translator in the conversation

The translator necessarily speaks for another. But she also speaks for herself, as well as with and between others. Translation is a conversation between author and translator, as Sherry Simon emphasizes throughout *Gender in Translation*. As she puts it:

Because it is an activity which has long been theorized in terms of a hierarchy of gendered positions, the rethinking of translation will necessarily upset traditional vocabularies of domination. In particular, the rethinking of translation involves a widening of the definition of the translating subject. Who translates? Fidelity can only be understood if we take a new look at the identity of translating subjects and their enlarged area of responsibility as signatories of “doubly authored” documents. At the same time, a whole nexus of assumptions around issues of authority and agency come to be challenged. When meaning is no longer a hidden truth to be “discovered,” but a set of discursive conditions to be “re-created,” the work of the translator acquires added dimensions.

(1996, 12)

Although Simon is focusing on the role of women translators, and to a large extent on women writers as well, this sense of a “doubly-authored document” has been especially present for me when translating the work of the male poet Zang Di 臧棣.

Zang Di is a tremendously allusive poet. He loves references of all kinds – Chinese and Western, contemporary and ancient, literary and pop – and uses them liberally. This is one reason his work can be difficult to understand, and to translate, but it also presents many opportunities for conversation: not just between poet and text, and poet and reader, but also between poet and translator. Zang Di wrote “After the New Wisdom Association” (随着那新鲜的深度协会) in the fall of 2013 after hearing of the death of Seamus Heaney:

The love of Ireland. Far enough
but not unfamiliar. With every dig,
Ireland's orchids follow

that new wisdom, and find in the language of loneliness
 a supreme support. The deep green tips of leaves sway
 the careful heart. How will the pistils trembling
 in those worded intentions regard
 this side of human life, now poetry's prisoners.
 As for the hole left by the digging, only sweat
 can fill it. Only this kind of hole
 leads to a deeper trust in this wearisome world.
 Call the reflections –
 they've already persisted this long
 in a landscape set in the landscape. Love is ice.
 If you don't believe it, you can go see for yourself.
 The last day of August came like an elephant.
 Don't look at me that way – for now, I'm blind.
 Blind men for dark times.
 As Delmore Schwartz, Humboldt's model
 in *Humboldt's Gift*, painfully said –
 "For like a gun is touch." All grim,
 but still you open the blacksmith's oily shop curtain,
 teach me to be like a hammer, to trust in every touch.

(Goodman 2017a, 133)

The question of how to translate this poem hinges on the intertextuality that underpins it. No translator can be expected to pick up on every single reference a poet makes; nor can any reader. But here the echoes of Seamus Heaney's famous poetic manifesto "Digging" are on the surface (1966, 13-14). Zang Di's second line brings it to the fore: "with every dig," we move deeper into Zang's conversation with Heaney, and also with himself. The translator is presented with a choice: she can trust the references to reveal themselves subtly, or she can try to emphasize the intertextuality by examining and then explicitly calling attention to the other text(s) in question.

This might seem to be an obvious choice: of course the translator has a responsibility to try to tease out all of the elements that went into the poem, and to bring that to her target-language readers. But this is a naïve expectation. For one, it's unclear what the referent text here is: Heaney's original English poem, or a Chinese translation of the poem? And if a translation, whose translation? Zang's term (挖掘) may be his own translation of "digging," or it may be someone else's. Does it matter? And does it matter that I already have a strong relationship to Heaney's "Digging," that it has long informed my own sense of what I am doing with my time on this

earth? To what extent does my personal sense of Heaney's poem then affect my translation of Zang Di's poem speaking to Heaney's poem? How much should it?

I first read "Digging" in college, and found the depiction of a person who had come to a decision to do something different from his predecessors deeply inspiring. The speaker states his intention plainly and with conviction:

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

(Heaney 1966, 14)

That sense of unapologetic, though nuanced, commitment to individual purpose affected the course of my life. It informed how I answered every well-meaning (and not so well-meaning) *When are you going to get a real job?* It girded my obduracy through years of barely making it financially while failing spectacularly to publish anything. It carried me past barriers both internal and external. I had chosen my vocation, and my tool, and I was going to learn how to use it. Heaney was speaking, I felt, directly to me.

He clearly also spoke to Zang Di. But was the message we received the same? In translating "After the New Wisdom Association," I wanted to be careful not to impose my own relationship to Heaney's poem onto Zang Di's experience of it. And yet I was necessarily in the room; I was part of the three-way conversation. What can a translator do but be careful and humble?

It helped that my translation failed from the very first line. Zang Di plays a lovely little game with the sinification of the word Ireland. The first and third lines of the poem read, transliterated: "Aierlan de ai" (爱尔兰的爱) and "Aierlan de lan" (爱尔兰的兰). It is possible in English to mimic the taking apart of the components of the words. In fact, the second instance works reasonably well: Ireland's land. The "orchid" of the literal meaning of *lan* is lost, and it sounds rather flat, but it's something to work with. But the first instance is a disaster – Ireland's ire – since not only is it awkward, but the meaning is wrong, turning love (*ai*) into anger. So the whole structure of the original wordplay has to be abandoned.

Instead, I worked with the meaning. “The love of Ireland” captures some of the soundplay – the round vowels and alliterative l’s – and also reflects the emotional warmth the poem goes on to explore. “The orchids of Ireland,” however, isn’t as good. The positioning stresses the hard *k*-sound in orchid and that second syllable risks getting swallowed to turn into “orcs.” But “Ireland’s orchids” aurally emphasizes the parallel assonance of “ire” and “or” and consonance of “ands” and “ids.” And since in English, the orchid also hints at something rare and precious, it captures some of the sense of the Chinese word, with its allusion to unusual talent.

Indeed, Heaney shows a nuanced approach to talent in his poem. For the young Heaney – the poem appears in his first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, written when he was in his late twenties – an aptitude for agricultural labor is admirable. Like Donald Hall in many of his books, or Wang Xiaoni in her agrarian poems, the physical labor of working with the land is not only a skill, but a vocation. Heaney’s father “could handle a spade / Just like his old man. // My grandfather cut more turf in a day / Than any other man on Toner’s bog” and there is an undercurrent of discomfiture (or guilt?) that Heaney himself has not inherited those gifts. Yet the decision to dig with his pen is conscious; he vows to labor with his mind instead of his hands. In addition to the force of conviction, there is also the tension of a young man pushing himself forward, a wish as much as a vow.

That was what I felt at eighteen: I wanted to work with words, and I was determined to do so. That sense of youthful self-enjoinment is absent in Zang Di’s poem. This is one mature poet speaking to another. The digging in Zang Di’s poem is also one step further removed than the digging in Heaney’s poem. For Zang, it is the metaphorical sweat of intellectual effort that fills the hole, rather than dirt or seeds. Still, in the final lines, like Heaney’s youthful exhortation to himself, Zang reaffirms his commitment to his vocation, and to the genuine work and genuine pleasure it entails. “To trust in every touch”: as a gifted farmer knows where to dig, the poet knows where to aim his line. Translating this poem, I felt myself suddenly negotiating between my youthful self and the future self I hope to move toward. I am in the middle, where the translator stands.

The translator between worlds

Not long ago, I gave a reading from *Iron Moon* at a venue not far from Boston, full of well-dressed, well-read people. In the Q&A afterward, an elegantly

appointed woman asked me why workers poetry doesn't exist in America. "Or at least not since Walt Whitman," another audience member helpfully clarified.

Since publishing *Iron Moon*, I am frequently asked to compare Chinese migrant worker poetry with American worker poetry. Just as often, I get asked how "workers" can even write poetry, since, after all, they're just workers. There are a lot of assumptions underpinning these questions that are worth confronting briefly, and doing so will I hope also clarify what makes this poetry particularly *Chinese* in addition to *worker*. What constitutes this Chineseness, if we accept that there is such a thing in the first place?

Perhaps I can approach this question by first discussing what is universal about these poems. At another reading, considerably less fancy, I read my translation of Zheng Xiaoqiong's "Language." Afterward, a man came up to me, told me he was from Panama, and exclaimed: "That poem could've been written by a Panamanian working here in the US."

The problems that workers face – like a lack of basic social protections, dangerous working conditions, exploitative bosses, limited access to legal recourse, and so on – are by no means limited to the Chinese case.

I do all I can to protect myself
 From this existence
 I have unknowingly allowed to be created for me
 As a manual laborer

I wear leather gloves
 To lessen the sore, aching calluses on my palms
 To protect my fingers from
 Wondering [*sic*] mind-stray hammer blows
 Jagged sheet metal
 Flesh tearing saw blades
 So I can type these poems in the morning time

"Walking into My Mind" (Yurcic 2009, 50)

These lines easily could have appeared in *Iron Moon*: the need for protection, the calluses, the self-identification as a "manual laborer," poetry as a relief from drudgery, and drudgery as a means to afford the time to write poetry. But this is from Jason L. Yurcic, a poet who grew up poor in Albuquerque, New Mexico, about as far geographically from the factories of Shenzhen as one can get.

Or take the acute awareness of class in the work of another American poet, Julie Sheehan:

There's a certain class of drinks – the “nicer” class, ordered by the “nicer” lady drinkers – that are made with the whites of eggs. Naturally, they are labor-intensive, but as we know, labor is the currency of respect.

“How to Make a Pink Lady” (2010, 53)

This tension between “high” and “low,” as well as where the speaker stands with respect to those tenuous categories, recalls Bing Ma's 冰马 poem “Cleaning a Wedding Gown” (清洗婚纱):

Beating and scrubbing, I use
a hog-bristle brush to scrub in detergent like thin rice gruel

The filth! Grease, lipstick, mud,
sweat-stains and body odor, on the bodice
and skirt, the lower hem and the straps
all over the white and pink sections
it's totally trashed

How can a filthy wedding dress be made spotless?
How can trash become holy and pure? These
are the drycleaners' worries.

(Goodman 2016b, 40)

The drycleaner's task, like the bartender's task, is in part to protect the customer – the one who has power and status by way of money – from having to face the fact of her own flaws and weaknesses. One of the purposes of money is to conceal one's human dirtiness from oneself. In obliquely addressing dirtiness and cleanliness, Juan Felipe Herrera, former American poet laureate and son of migrant farm laborers, brings Marxism into the picture:

Martínez:

Soap soap soap soap
all we do is make soap here
soap on the belt
in & out it comes in & out forever
it goes & nobody knows who makes it
you got that Schwartz? Nobody

you know I know all the guys here know &
sergeant García knows right sarge?

Schwartz:

Don't mess with him this may not be his best day
swinging that baton all dressed up for nothing
but us guys on the line me and you and Lim
hey Lim yeah get with it you getting that soap out?
you better get it right – soap for the
bourgeoisie right Martínez?

Martínez:

What does that bourgeoisie need it for
they don't use soap Schwartz you know that

“The Soap Factory” (2015, 64)

This is a political note that Li Yongpu 李永普 articulates even more explicitly:

at worksites the hired foremen and overseers
give directions to make use of every bit of time and space
and force the sky's blue to turn toward limestone's
iron-pale direction while the eight-hour workday
came from the direction of the Paris Commune's blood struggles
and became the direction of the system's social classes
outside the system the additional four hours given to workers
were fixed to allow for this trifling transplanted
era of capitalism
and its direction of so-called equal justice

“Directions” (方向; Goodman 2016b, 37)

Similarly, Janice Mirikitani, who spent much of her childhood on an impoverished chicken farm, also does not shy away from terminology, nor the difficult cultural issues they point to:

we dance with the knowledge of similar struggles:
we samba, boogie down, turgete, LEAP
from the maw of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism,
from the fire of riots and demonstrations, from ashes of
our self-immolation, the addictions, abuse, the batterings

“Inaugural Address” (2001, 19)

Such issues of politics, interpersonal and national, are the foundation of Mark Nowak's book of palimpsests and found poems, *Shut Up Shut Down*.

The remainder of the year
 Reagan toured G.E. factories,
 speaking to employees and local civic groups on,
 as he put it in his autobiography,
 "the attempted takeover of the [electrical] industry
 by Communists" and "the swiftly rising tide
 of collectivism that threatens to inundate
 what remains of our free economy."

"Capitalization" (2004, 33)

I doubt that any of this is what my interlocutor meant when she asked me about American workers poetry. Are these worker poets? Is this workers poetry? Is it poetry at all?

I am bored with these questions. As Heather Inwood amply demonstrates in *Verse Going Viral*, twentieth-century poetry and poets of all styles and walks of life have made an easy target, for enemies and lovers of poetry alike. As the blogger Han Han 韩寒 put it, adding to a tradition of disparagement that reduces contemporary poetry to text with line breaks, "the only technique that modern poets need to master is how to hit the enter key" (Inwood 2014, 161).

Yet despite what I see as an underlying unity of themes, concerns, and challenges facing worker poets (or poets heavily invested in workers) around the world – and keeping in mind my limited approach in this essay of considering only American and Chinese poets – it seems also clear that there are some differences that speak to the question of Chineseness in particular. One is historical. Jack Linchuan Qiu reminds us that: "If the dominant industry for the British version of the 'world's workshop' was textiles, and the American version automobiles, then for China it is undoubtedly electronics ... Chinese workers and farmers, their families and communities, have borne the brunt of the upheaval brought by this Industrial Revolution of the twenty-first century" (2016, 15). Qiu goes on to mention Xu Lizhi's "posthumous fame" after committing suicide while employed at the Foxconn plant in Shenzhen, a notoriety that came about precisely because Xu could articulate in his poetry what workers there face on a daily basis (57). In a country that has both an extreme expression of capitalism (Qiu likens it explicitly to slavery) and a commitment to the ideals of communism, the poet – whether manual laborer or intellectual – is caught in between, as

likely to be ignored or denigrated as to be vaunted or feared. As George Steiner put it in *Language and Silence* (a book that made a splash when it came out in Chinese translation by Li Shaojun 李少均 in 2013):

In a communist society the poet is regarded as a figure central to the health of the body politic. Such regard is cruelly manifest in the very urgency with which the heretical artist is silenced or hounded to destruction. This constant preoccupation with the life of the mind would alone serve to distinguish Marxist autocracy from other species of totalitarianism. To shoot a man because one disagrees with his interpretation of Darwin or Hegel is a sinister tribute to the supremacy of ideas in human affairs – but a tribute nevertheless.

(1984, 45)

Perhaps that is what distinguishes these Chinese poets from American poets in this particular historical moment: the stakes.

The stakes are always high. There are three lines that come back to me again and again in my life as a poet and translator. It is the stanza that ends Richard Wilbur's poem "The Writer" (1988, 53-54), in which he describes hearing his daughter at her typewriter struggling to write, and sends her a silent blessing: "I wish her a lucky passage." I expect many poets of different stripes will relate to the poem's conclusion:

It is always a matter, my darling,
Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish
What I wished you before, but harder.

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Eleanor GOODMAN's first collection of poetry, *Nine Dragon Island* (Enclave/Zephyr, 2016), was a finalist for the *Drunken Boat* First Book Prize. Her translation *Something Crosses My Mind: Selected Poems of Wang Xiaoni* (Zephyr, 2014) was the winner of the 2015 Lucien Stryk Prize and shortlisted for the International Griffin Prize. She is also the translator of the anthology *Iron Moon: Chinese Worker Poetry* (White Pine, 2017), *The Roots of Wisdom: Poems by Zang Di* (Zephyr, 2017), and *Days When I Hide My Corpse in a Cardboard Box: Poems of Natalia Chan* (Zephyr, 2018). She is a research associate at the Harvard University Fairbank Center.

