The translation of migrant worker literature: China's Battler poetry

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CHAPTER TWENTY

The Translation of Migrant Worker Literature: China's Battler Poetry

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Since the 1980s, up to 300 million people in China have tried to escape rural poverty and make their way into urban life by looking for work in the cities. Directly exposed to the violence of global capitalism, many of these migrant workers are faced with the hardship that comes with precarious labor. Second-class citizens in many ways, they are the foot soldiers of China's economic rise but not necessarily its beneficiaries. And they write poetry. Not all of them by any means, but enough for their poetry to enter the public eye.

Their writing reflects their hardship: think displacement, exploitation, alienation, and a fundamental lack of socioeconomic security. While the voices of the best-known poets among them are unmistakable, much of this writing is unsophisticated by conventional literary standards. Theirs is a poetry that works toward social identification and the restoration of dignity in the precarious worker as a writing and reading subject, and a poetry of testimony and advocacy. Several of its authors have said they write to change their destiny, even as they realize this goal is hard to reach.

Similar to subaltern literature of other times and places, this poetry raises questions at the nexus of aesthetics and social experience. How do these questions play out when this poetry travels abroad, into other languages? What drives its translation? How is this reflected in what gets translated, with this question taken in the broadest sense?

While this chapter will focus on translation into English, its relevance extends to translation into other languages.[1]

WHAT TO CALL IT

Let's start from the names of the genre and their English renditions. The designation of China's migrant worker poetry is a complex and contested affair, in Chinese and English alike. In Chinese, it has been called 农民工诗歌 "peasant worker poetry" and subsumed under larger categories

[1]As I have worked on several projects on this poetry in recent years, the present chapter borrows the occasional passage or turn of phrase from other recent work (see list of works cited, especially van Crevel 2021, forthcoming).

such as 底层写作 "subaltern writing," 草根文学 "grassroots literature," 工人诗歌 "worker poetry," and 新工人文学 "new worker literature." Each of these terms has generated discussion. In the present context, suffice it to note that the one that translates as "worker poetry" conflates migrant worker poetry with state-sponsored proletarian literature of the high-socialist era, and the one that translates as "new worker literature" is intended as a term of empowerment in the postsocialist era.

But the Chinese name by which the genre is most widely known, and perhaps the only name by which it is known to the general reader, is 打工诗歌, romanized as *dagong shige*. This expression deserves an adequate English translation. It literally means "the poetry of working for the boss," as the most prominent component of 打工文学 *dagong wenxue* "the literature of working for the boss," which also comprises fiction, nonfiction, essays, and drama by migrant workers, about the migrant worker experience. But "the poetry of working for the boss" is a mouthful. Not to mention that it could be taken to mean that working for the boss is a poetic experience, which is not what the translator would want to convey in this case.

打工 *dagong* "working for the boss" generally refers to low-status, precarious labor. This is typically what migrant workers find themselves compelled to do: long hours, low pay, physically demanding and sometimes dangerous work, and a fundamental lack of control over their destiny in terms of employment prospects and civil rights. At the same time, alongside the hardship that comes with uprooting oneself from the countryside to *dagong* in the city, the term evokes a sense of opportunity in the context of the reform era and China's economic rise, conjuring an image of perseverance in the face of adversity. Thus, a panorama of suffering, inequality, and injustice is punctuated by stories of migrant workers whose ordeal in the city enables them to build luxurious homes in their native village, to afford better education for their children than they received themselves, and so on. In this way, as migrant workers have become visible as a social group whose cheap labor is indispensable to China's development but whose circumstances signal profound disadvantage, *dagong* has come to carry connotations of agency, dignity, and solidarity as well as subalternity, denigration, and atomization.

This duality, coupled with the colloquial conciseness of *dagong* and a desire for literalness or at least resonance whenever we can help it, moves me to propose rendering *dagong shige* in English as "battler poetry." I do so after an Australian colloquialism for

> "ordinary" or working-class individuals who persevere through their commitments despite adversity … Typically this adversity comprises the challenges of low pay, family commitments, environmental hardships and lack of personal recognition … It is a term of respect and endearment intended to empower and recognise those who feel they exist at the bottom of society.
>
> (Wikipedia n.d.)[2]

In a nutshell, "battler poetry" attempts a resonant if not exactly literal translation of the source term, whereas "migrant worker poetry," also frequently used in English, is more of an explanation. There is nothing wrong with explanations, and of course explanations are translations in their own way. And yet, depending on context, this poetry deserves to be called "battler poetry" in English

[2]I first called it "battlers poetry" (e.g., van Crevel 2017a), but I have since grown convinced that the -s needs to go.

alongside "migrant worker poetry." This is not just because *dagong shige* is the most widely used term in Chinese but also because the comfortably undefinable notion of style can be especially challenging for the translator of this writing, as we will see below.

In English, in addition to "migrant worker poetry" and "battler poetry," other designations of this writing include "labor poetry," "workers' poetry" or "worker poetry," and "working-class poetry." All three fail to evoke either or both of the dual connotations of *dagong*. In addition, the English "workers' poetry" reiterates the conflation of precariat and proletariat in the Chinese *gongren shige*, and thus of misery and jubilation. And "working-class poetry" belies the fact that Chinese state capitalism is not conducive to social class formation, especially in the lower strata of society. As of this writing, class and class struggle are politically sensitive notions in China, and they are not part of official discourse.

WHAT GETS TRANSLATED?

Battler poetry is a recent topic in the study of Chinese literature, and the number of published translations to date is limited. Yet the particular nature of battler poetry enables the exploration of issues of translation that are specific to the genre. To identify these issues, this chapter raises a well-known question in translation studies along loosely functionalist lines (Nord 2013): What *drives* the translation of battler poetry? What is its translation meant to be and do? What motivates the translation of battler poetry, and what determines how its translation works out? And what gets translated, as a result?

In asking these questions, I proceed from two established facts. First, the translation of poetry is rarely a commercially viable endeavor in itself. Second, different from classical poetry, the translation of modern poetry from Chinese remains a peripheral affair when compared with other languages. Moving on from these observations we can home in on battler poetry as distinct from the various broadly modernist poetries in Chinese that have received the most attention in scholarship and translation to date (see, for example, Manfredi and Lupke 2019).

THE AESTHETIC IMPULSE AND THE MORAL IMPULSE

Focusing on mainland China in the postsocialist era, we find that the vast majority of translation is undertaken for "avant-garde" 先锋 poetry, a term that means something else than it does in the West, but is similarly associated with high literature and culture (van Crevel 2017c, pars. 72–113). Except for a few early texts published in the context of the 1978–1979 Democracy Movement (see S. G. Goodman 1981, ch. 5), what drives the translation of Chinese avant-garde poetry is by and large what I will call the aesthetic impulse, with the translator primarily addressing a literary audience of fellow scholars, students, and general readers of literature. The texts are presented to this audience for their (foreign) aesthetic value—even if this process is frequently marked by politicization, when the poem is made to tell us as much about particular (foreign) visions of Chinese politics and society as about poetry (Bruno 2012, 264–68; van Crevel 2019c, 338–44).

When it comes to the translation of battler poetry, it is by no means the case that the aesthetic impulse and the literary audience disappear from view. For one thing, the translators may well be the same people; and—just like the literary audience—they are bound to take an interest, if only because this new genre on the block also claims the status of literature. However, because battler poetry is circumscribed and overdetermined by the social experience of its authors, it complicates the issue of aesthetic value and often triggers in its commentators a juxtaposition of aesthetic value and social significance. This juxtaposition can be of the soul-searching, self-questioning kind, but it often takes the form of a zero-sum game instead: the greater the poem's aspirations to social significance or its ambition to effect social change, the lower its aesthetic value. In that case, to rework W. H. Auden's dictum, it is not just that poetry makes nothing happen, but rather that poetry that does make something happen, or harbors this ambition, cannot be any good.[3] But also in less rigid scenarios and for the soul-searchers (among whose number I count myself), battler poetry's source texts and its translations will foreground the complexities of literature's relation to reality, of the relation of word and world.

At the same time, battler poetry is capable of addressing other audiences than the literary: for instance, as a way of community-building among precarious workers and as evidence invoked in the work of social scientists (e.g., Sun 2014, ch. 7) and labor activists (examples below). So there is a moral and sometimes activist and/or documentary impulse at work in battler poetry as well, triggered by the pursuit of justice and truth as much as by the pursuit of beauty, and reinforced because in China, poetry is a firmly rooted social practice that has endured from antiquity to the present. And this moral impulse extends to the translation of battler poetry.

Translator and poet Eleanor Goodman's afterword to Qin Xiaoyu's 秦晓宇 *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry* is a case in point (Qin 2016, 199–200). *Iron Moon* is a groundbreaking effort in the translation of battler poetry. Presenting the work of thirty-one authors, it qualifies as a survey anthology of the genre, even if Qin's selection reproduces the disturbing male dominance that marks most representations of contemporary mainland-Chinese poetry. The aesthetic impulse is evidently present in Goodman's other reflections on translation, but her afterword to *Iron Moon* is an undiluted plea for seeing China's battlers and hearing their voices, focusing on the world behind this poetry rather than the words in it—even though she pays painstaking attention to those words in her actual translations (see Klein 2019). As such, the afterword implicitly portrays poetry as the amplifier of a morally compelling message rather than anything like art for art's sake. It says nothing about the poetry as poetry.

Of course, my choice of words here is questionable in that it presumes a particular poetics that might be irrelevant to battler writing. One that holds, for instance, that poetry is a type of language that draws attention to itself more than to the realities it appears to signify. This highlights the need to ask at every turn whose aesthetics we are talking about as we study battler poetry—and as we study its translation.

Different from her afterword to *Iron Moon*, Goodman has elsewhere addressed this question in great detail (Goodman 2017). This goes to show that the translator's perspective and their positioning are not a matter of either/or any more than the source text author's, and that they are not carved in stone for the individual that moves through the various settings and stages

[3] *Pace* Share 2009, I go with the admittedly simplifying popular take on Auden's dictum.

of their writing and translating (cf. Brownlie 2013, 45). The moral impulse is not static and it does not exclude the aesthetic impulse, for the translator or their audience—quite aside from the fact that the moral impulse does not make the translator any more money than the aesthetic impulse and beggars can't be choosers. The cynicism of this expression is propelled here by the improbable disregard for translation in a world that would be dead without it or at least very dull.

SETTINGS

To ask if battler poetry is true literature or just labor activism with line breaks, then, would be to create a false dichotomy and fail to recognize the very synergy of the aesthetic impulse and the moral impulse that defines this poetry, even if their relative weight fluctuates. But even though the aesthetic impulse and the moral (activist, documentary, etc.) impulse mix and synergize, distinguishing them can shed light on the question of what gets translated.

I take this question broadly. It can, for instance, speak to the selection of source texts. This may be affected by the author's "story" and the poem's message—as in, what does it paraphrasably "say"?—especially when the story and the message overlap (much of battler poetry is demonstrably autobiographical), and when they align with hot topics in the media: say, the tens of millions of "left-behind" children growing up without their (migrant) parents, or consumer complicity with violations of labor law in Chinese manufacturing (e.g., Zhang 2018; Rauhala 2015). But the question of what gets translated can also be about the actual translations, about the actual words presented by the translator to the target-language reader together with their paratexts, as translations and paratexts reflect translation strategies that are motivated by the nature of the genre. I have noted that many battler poems are unsophisticated by conventional literary standards in the host culture setting, where they might be called pamphletesque, clichéd, naïve, technically unaccomplished—for instance, in their frequent use of abstractions and big words such as "life," "destiny," "fate"—and more generally unconstrained in various ways. So if the source text is unsophisticated, does the translator sophisticate the poem in translation, and do they tell the reader? If not, do they explain and justify the poem's lack of sophistication in a paratext, or do they unapologetically send it out there on its own? We will return to these issues below.

Obviously, the audience has a major role to play here. So the selection of source texts, their manipulation in translation, and their paratextual framing will all depend to some extent on the nature of the venues where the translations appear. For battler poetry, this includes small-press literary publishing, usually with an explicitly international outlook, that counts as culturally elitist (this is not a value judgment). For example, the White Pine Press in the United States, where *Iron Moon* appeared, and Giramondo in Australia, which published Zheng Xiaoqiong's 郑小琼 (1980–) *In the Roar of the Machine: Selected Poems* in 2022, also in Goodman's translation.

To my knowledge, *In the Roar of the Machine* is the first full-fledged single-author book of battler poetry in English translation, fittingly so as Zheng Xiaoqiong is the face of China's battler poetry.[4]

[4]Indonesian and Vietnamese translations of Zheng's《女工记》(Stories of Women Workers) appeared in 2017, by Willy Japaries and Hàn Hồng Diệp, respectively. Chantal Chen-Andro published a book-length anthology of Zheng's work in French in 2020. See MCLC Resource Center (n.d.).

She left her home in rural Sichuan for the Pearl River Delta in 2001, and dedicated herself to writing at the same time as working on the assembly line for close to a decade. Zheng is the exception that proves the rule: in the late 2000s she actually succeeded in "changing her destiny," writing her way out of subalternity and into a socioeconomically secure position as a ranking editor at《作品》(Artworks) in Guangzhou (see Zhou 2021).

One of Zheng's signature texts is a poem called《生活》(Life; 2006, 23). Eleanor Goodman and Zhou Xiaojing have gone before in translating it into English (Qin 2016, 112; Zheng 2017).[5] This is my translation:

Life

You all don't know but my name is now hidden in a work ID
my hands are now part of the assembly line, my body signed over
to a contract, hair gone from black to grey, what's left is the racket and the rush
and the overtime and the wages … through the white-hot lamplight
I see my tired shadow projected on the machine, slowly shifting,
turning, bending, silent like a chunk of cast iron
oh iron that speaks like a mute, covered in the trust and hopes of strangers
all this iron rusting in time and trembling in reality
I don't know how to protect a voiceless life
this life that's lost its name and gender, mechanical life at the mercy of contracts
where is it and how does it start, on eight iron dorm-room bunk beds moonlight
shines on sorrow, in the roar of the machine there's slyly flirting love
and youth berthed on a pay slip, how can this restless mortal life
comfort a frail soul, if the moonlight comes from Sichuan
my youth is set alight by memories but dies out on the assembly line seven days a week
what's left is blueprints, iron, metal products, white
quality labels, red rejects, and under the white-hot lamp the loneliness I still bear
and the pain amid the rush, hot and endless …

But in addition to literary small-press publishing, battler poetry in translation also appears on labor activism platforms and in mainstream media, as the entry point to a discourse of social justice and hence in an explicitly instrumental role (not a value judgment, take two). The most striking example is the work of Xu Lizhi 许立志 (1990–2014), the second-biggest name in battler poetry after Zheng Xiaoqiong. Xu's fame was tragically occasioned by his suicide. Originally from rural Guangdong, he was a factory worker at the Shenzhen plant of Foxconn, a globally dominant electronics manufacturer that is infamous for the cruelty of its labor regime and the resultant "Foxconn suicides" of the early 2010s. Like many other battler authors, Xu published his poetry privately, on his blog. When he ended his life, the universal topos of the Poet's suicide combined with China's migrant workers' ordeal to produce highly mediagenic subject matter and generate an explosion of publicity, leading to the posthumous publication of

[5]Line 7 in the source text as included in Zheng's first book (2006, 23) has 托付与期待, which I render as "trust and hopes." Zhou and Goodman work from a source text that has 失望与忧伤, which they render as "disappointment and grief."

a book of Xu's poetry with the prestigious Writers Press (Xu 2015). Outside China, Xu made the pages of labor activism platforms such as China Labour Bulletin and Libertarian Communism as well as popular and highbrow mainstream media such as *Time* and the *London Review of Books* among countless other venues (CLB 2014; Nào 2014; Sheng 2014; Rauhala 2015; on Xu, see van Crevel 2019b).

One of Xu's best-known poems is called《一颗螺丝掉在地上》(A Screw Falls to the Ground; Xu 2015, 214). It has a wide appeal, in labor-activist contexts and beyond. *Time* illustrated a long essay on Xu Lizhi, called "The Poet Who Died for Your Phone," with an image of a screw in mid-air (Rauhala 2015). The poem's appeal is explained by its brevity, a hard-hitting message of dehumanization, and a final line that runs "a human being fell to the ground" and appears to foretell the suicide of its author, who leapt to his death from a high-rise near the Foxconn plant. An English translation appeared on Libertarian Communism soon after Xu's death (Nào 2014). This is my translation:

A Screw Falls to the Ground

a screw falls to the ground
in this night of overtime
it drops straight down, with a faint sound
and it won't attract anyone's attention
just like when some time ago
in a night just like this
a human being fell to the ground

A third setting in which battler poetry appears in translation is that of international poetry events. The Rotterdam Poetry International Festival, for instance, featured Guo Jinniu 郭金牛 (1966–) in 2015, with English translations by Brian Holton (Guo 2015), and Zheng Xiaoqiong in 2019, with English translations by Jonathan Stalling, Zhou Xiaojing, and Eleanor Goodman (Zheng 2019), alongside Silvia Marijnissen's Dutch translations of both authors. If small-press publishing often leans toward the aesthetic impulse, and activism platforms and mainstream media often lean toward the moral impulse, then international poetry events can be seen to partake of both (unless they are defined by the moral impulse to begin with, such as the Singapore migrant worker poetry competitions and festivals that have taken place since the mid-2010s). Poetry events with a diverse line-up will make ample room for the story of battler poetry—but equally so for the story of every other poet who makes it past the event's gatekeepers, not just those whose work invites classification under the moral impulse.

Thus, if all goes well (for which it is essential that translation be well resourced), international poetry events can actually counterbalance the powers of the prefix that makes someone not a poet but a woman poet, a Chinese poet, a battler poet. Depending on the context, the prefix can be reductionist as well as emancipatory—or, it can be primarily informative and enable the reader to decide for themselves, with plenty of room for variety and eclecticism. This point came to me during the 2019 Poetry International Festival, when I sat in an audience of over a thousand that took in Frank Báez's "Self-Portrait" (translated by Hoyt Rogers, see Báez 2019) just as enthusiastically as it did Zheng Xiaoqiong's "Hu Zhimin" (translated by Zhou Xiaojing, see Zheng 2019). The

former is a hilarious, self-mocking, quasi-autobiographical parody of (male) poethood. The latter is a heart-rending poem about a rural girl who is forced into sex work in the city and dies of alcohol poisoning.

CHOICES

In regard to the selection of source texts, it is safe to say that what gets translated of battler poetry are overwhelmingly texts that foreground the hardship of the migrant worker experience. This holds for aesthetically driven settings as well as morally driven ones, and it shows in the multiple-author anthology *Iron Moon* as well as in scattered translations of poetry by individual authors in serial venues in print and online. Notably, even the rare optimistic poem in *Iron Moon* can be seen to reaffirm what is ultimately a pessimistic message, albeit indirectly. Consider, for instance, the almost unimaginable cheerfulness and generosity in Wu Xia's 邬霞 (1981–)《吊带裙》(Sundress). In Goodman's translation, Wu's sweatshop labor of ironing, folding, and packaging clothes for export spawns a declaration of love for the "unknown girl" who will buy the sundress in "a fashionable store," wear it as she walks down "a tree-shaded lane" and then "sit by a lake or on a grassy lawn/and wait for a breeze/like a flower" (Qin 2016, 165). Aside from the gender-stereotypical image of the girl (beautiful and vulnerable, passively awaiting an outside actor), what stands out is the contrast with the terse author byline. It says Wu Xia, born in rural Sichuan, "began working in Shenzhen at the age of fourteen." Child labor, roughly 2,000 kilometers away from home.

But could it be otherwise? Would it be a good thing if translations of battler poetry did more to foreground the opportunities brought by migrant labor instead of the hardship? First of all, opportunity tends to lose out to hardship in the source texts too, and in Chinese-language commentary. After all, battler poetry is rarely the product of a carefree life. Then again, if this sounds like stating the obvious, we should not lose sight of the agency, dignity, and solidarity that are also connoted by *dagong*, and of the embodiment of these sentiments in battler literature. There is a lot of this, for instance, in writing by members of the Picun Literature Group 皮村文学小组, based at a nongovernmental organization for labor rights on the outskirts of Beijing, whose slogans include "All battlers under heaven are family" 天下打工是一家 and "Labor is glorious" 劳动最光荣, echoing political rhetoric from both Chinese antiquity and the contemporary era (see van Crevel 2019a). But overall, it is hardly very surprising that the selection of source texts for the translation of battler poetry tends to highlight the suffering, inequality, and injustice that trigger the moral impulse to translate, especially when the translations are presented in contexts that activate the emancipatory power of the prefix. So, does the prominence of suffering in the translations suggest confirmation bias during the selection of the source texts? Or does it simply reflect the nature of the genre?

As for the actual translations, far be it from me to suggest that translators of battler poetry mechanically adopt, or switch between, strategies and styles depending on the relative weight of the aesthetic impulse and the moral impulse in a given project. Hence, I differ with Lucas Klein when it comes to the "stiffness" of the Xu Lizhi translations by the Nào blogger(s) on the Libertarian Communism website (Klein 2019, 214–15; Nào 2014). In Klein's view, this stiffness implies that "either Xu has no worthwhile poetics"—which I would say begs the question of why Nào bothered

to translate Xu's poetry at all—"or … his poetics must remain forever inaccessible beyond the translational border," which in this case runs between battler poetry as an authentic expression of the battler's experience and this poetry's literary translation into English. But maybe the stiffness of the translations reflects something else: a lack of literary-translational expertise and/or the readiness to invest time and effort.

Not a value judgment, take three. After all, said expertise is not automatically interesting or available to all, and said readiness presupposes a poetics that the blogger(s) may not subscribe to. It is conceivable, for instance, that poetry is not their usual input or output medium, they feel Xu's poetry matters because of a message that aligns with their cause and the vexed question of paraphrasability does not enter their line of vision, and they are not tuned in when it comes to linguistic subtleties or style at large. And it is equally conceivable that for them, their experience of the text requires no conscious positioning, let alone explicit assertion. My sense of how the Nào translations work is strengthened by the way they appear on screen, where each line of the source text is followed directly by its translation. Regardless of the reader's proficiency in Chinese and English, this exposes them to something not unlike consecutive interpreting-per-sentence rather than the organic wholeness of a poem that a high-literary translation might aim for.

None of this detracts from the validity of Klein's assessment of the Nào translations, or from the space that is open to me for agreeing with his assessment, or from the space that is open to Klein for adopting a different style in his own translations of Xu's work (CLB 2014). On the contrary, all that is precisely the point. As long as the translators and their audience proceed from the observation that there is poetry here and hence an aesthetic of one kind or another is at work, the translator is going to do their best to speak back to the source text in ways that do it justice and the audience are going to do their best to hear it so, and there is no single right way of speaking or hearing.

And yes, I assume the Nào blogger(s) and other mostly morally driven translators do in fact register the presence of an aesthetic and this does govern their word choice, even if they experience this differently from their mostly aesthetically driven counterparts, who are more likely to be poetry specialists. I would venture that for the poetry specialists, doing justice to battler poetry (world over words?) requires the same mix of considered rules and equally considered rule-breakings that is required for translating high-literary poetry which signifies nothing but itself (words over world?). It is just that the rules will be different, and so will the rule-breakings.

And so for the translator who has worked on avant-garde poetry from China, expanding their scope to include battler poetry is likely to give them pause. Recalling her translation of "Sundress" and other poems by Wu Xia, Goodman writes: "These poems are as straightforward in Chinese as they are in English … So why did I find it agonising to translate them?" The answer is that she found herself "crashing into [her] own internalized value judgments about what 'good' poetry is." To illustrate this, she picks a phrase uttered by author/speaker Wu Xia to address the second-person "unknown girl" who will buy the sundress, in a fata morgana that could not be further removed from the sweatshop where Wu works and the dress is made. The phrase in question is 我爱你, which means "I love you," possibly the most clichéd expression in the trade. Goodman notes this would likely provoke knee-jerk resistance to "what was perceived by a cultural elite as sentimentality" in a creative writing program she attended in the United States, "quite aside from what the words in question might mean and be elsewhere." She proceeds to ask herself exactly

that, with due attention to the social, political, and cultural context of Wu Xia's writing. And shows convincingly why her translation ended up "not underplaying the love, or finding ways around it, but emphasizing it instead" (Goodman 2017, 118–21).

As a fellow scholar/translator of both avant-garde poetry and battler poetry, I recognize Goodman's dilemmas and her ruminations. These things highlight the importance of interrogating one's professional socialization, of recalibrating the perspectives one has been taught to take. Aided by collaborative work with other scholars/translators working on (Chinese) subaltern cultural production (e.g., Iovene 2023), in recent years I have grappled in successive essays with the question of how to engage with battler poetry on its own terms, a deceptively simple expression whose implications extend to the theory and practice of this poetry's translation. Which authors, and which texts? For which venues? In which words? Accompanied by what sort of paratexts? And since this is also about the translator's experience and their identities, one might add, even when pointing at oneself: by whom?

In writing about and translating Xiao Hai's 小海 (1987–) poetry, for example, I have found myself differentiating between what we might call nontypical battler poetry and run-of-the-mill texts. (Not a value judgment, take four: that there is such a thing as run-of-the-mill battler poetry is because the genre is overdetermined by the social experience of its authors.) My first essay that features Xiao Hai (van Crevel 2019a) includes a translation of a single poem called《债》"Debts," with an acknowledgment of its "unusual" character within his oeuvre as a whole, because formal features such as regular line and stanza length make it stand out in what is otherwise almost entirely free-verse writing. If this is privileging the nontypical there may be good reasons to do so, not least because Xiao Hai's talent for the nontypical appears to lie at the root of his success as a battler poet.

And I had another reason for spotlighting "Debts." While my essay's scope exceeds Xiao Hai's poetry, I named it after the poem and used the notion of a debt to reflect on the positionality of the privileged scholar/translator: "I don't believe in the kind of cultural identification that comes with exclusive ownership claims and disallows outsiders from engaging … But the issues [underlying subaltern cultural production] are real and the outsider *owes* awareness and respect" (van Crevel 2019a, 131–32 and 141, emphasis added). Yet, if the outsider aspires to a balanced, informed engagement with battler poetry, they need to make room for its full breadth and depth, at the very least by charting its "home" contours more or less comprehensively in translation and commentary alike, and this is what I work toward in more recent work on Xiao Hai (van Crevel 2023). As for the actual translation, for all the unusualness of "Debts," I still found myself faced with the distance between stylistic conventions in the poem's source and target settings, particularly in its use of anaphora from start to finish, with sixteen repetitions of the words "You owe" in seventeen lines of verse. Not incidentally, I believe this is representative of a penchant in battler poetry at large for a stylistic feature that may be summed up as insistent enumeration.

On that note, perhaps needless to say, the observation that much battler poetry is unconstrained in various ways is not a value judgment (take five). And it takes us back to the question of whose aesthetics we are talking about. If this poetry appears less precisely wrought, less measured, and less perfectly shaped than other writing, that might just be because it was never about precision, moderation, and perfection to begin with—which should lead us to reconsider consensual definitions of poetry rather than concluding that battler poetry falls outside their scope.

Not that this makes the task of the translator any easier. But that was never the idea in any case.

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