2019

Three Poems from *Flowing Toward Serenity* by Tan Xiao

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Recommended Citation

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Flowing Toward Serenity

Tan Xiao
涌向平静

Returning to the Mountains[1]   百年归山

Ten years ago, grandpa had his coffin made.
Since then, grandpa had his burial clothes made, had his photo taken to be
  used at his funeral.
Last winter, he selected a grove of pines
as the burial ground for his return to the mountains.
The pine trees are abundant, the fallen pine needles soft,
an ideal resting place.
There is not much left for him to do.
He's made all the necessary arrangements of his life.
These days, he is raising a goat; he takes the goat to the pine grove.
Sometimes he cuts the branches from the chestnut and banyan trees to
  make charcoal.
The goat has grown bigger, in the grove,
only pine trees remain. Grandpa is still alive.
He attends banquets for weddings and funerals in the village.
Everybody he meets there is a stranger.
He invites each of them to his funeral.

[1] Refers to death.

Fabrication   虚构

A person contains some inevitable fabrications.
The surname, birthplace, and ethnicity on the resume
do not describe a specific person, for example, what he cares about,
or whether he has to endure it alone,
when there is no door opening up to him.

When I describe, fabrication begins along with it.
Born in poverty, therefore desiring very little,
I regard every gain as alms,
every achievement, a fluke.

Showing my weakness in words is like taking a shortcut.
My scribbling doesn't make the paper thicker.
Over and over, I try to write neatly,
as if graceful penmanship could hide my incompetence in everything else.

The Moon Knows   月亮知道

I have seen Yangtze River at dusk,
its surface tinted by sunset but the colors forgotten shortly after.
Later in the evening, the lights from the earthly world
brighten the flowing water, but they are unable to resurrect a person.
When the moonlight sprawls on the river,
there is nowhere better than here as my final resting place.
I cannot own more in the span of my life than in this moment.
On the shore, one rises and becomes the deceased.
The water rises along and becomes waves,
swelling and receding, babbling and burbling loudly under the moonlight.

Commentary

Tan Xiao was born in 1987 in Enshi, Hubei, China. He has published two poetry collections, *In Your Name* and *Flowing Toward Serenity*. The three poems cited above are from *Flowing Toward Serenity*.

As an east Asian language, Chinese has sentence structures, syntax, and linguistic customs that are quite different from English. Additionally, Chinese frequently contains polysemic expressions, homophones, homonyms, and idioms, which tend to be exceptionally difficult to translate. As a result, quite often the translator must make compromises by weighing linguistic fidelity against literary readability for an optimized reading experience. I encountered such decision-making processes when translating Tan's poems.

The title of the first poem "Returning to the Mountains" is *bainian guishan* 百年归山. This is a phrase comprised of two expressions: *bainian* 百年, which means "a hundred years," and *guishan* 归山, which means "return to the mountains." They are euphemistic expressions for death. *Bainian* 百年 ("a hundred years") is more well-known but linguistically plain. It could be simply translated to "death." However, when followed by *guis han* 归山 ("return to the mountains"), the phrase becomes more interesting.

First, *guis han* 归山 ("return to the mountains") is visual. It paints a tranquil scene with elegance and a subtle emotional touch. When a Chinese reader reads "return to the mountains," she may picture towering peaks embellished with rushing waterfalls with a small figure at the foot of the mountains, like one would see in a traditional mountains and water painting. She might feel peaceful and melancholic.

Secondly, the concept of mountains is culturally rich. The idea that humans are in harmony with nature is a vital tenet of Chinese philosophy. Mountains are central to the concept of the universe. The numerous shapes, colors, and ever-changing moods a mountainous landscape emits are believed to reveal the way of the universe. Mountainsides are also viewed as destinations for those seeking refuge from the secular world as well as spiritual enlightenment. Correspondingly, the idiom *guis han* 归山 ("return to the mountains") refers to not only the

death of one's physical body, but also to one's spirit reuniting with the universe. Another aspect I considered when translating this idiom was its location in the original poem. Because it is used in the title, it carries extra weight. However, the other idiom used in the title, *bainian* 百年 ("a hundred years"), also means "death" and is linguistically plain, so I decided to leave it out. The title therefore becomes "Returning to the Mountains." Knowing that this translation will probably not portray death to Western readers, I decided to add a footnote to help them understand. It is not an ideal solution, but I believe it's a justifiable compromise.

In *The Moon Knows*, the fourth sentence is *que wufa wanhui yige ren* 却无法挽回一个人 ("but cannot bring back a person"). The literal meaning of *wanhui* 挽回 is "hold back or tie back." As an expression, it is polysemic. It could mean "recover the situation," "make someone change her mind," or "save someone's life." Judging from the context—the use of "the earthly world" in the third sentence, "my final resting place" in the sixth sentence, and "deceased" in the eighth sentence—I settled on translating *wanhui* 挽回 ("hold back or tie back") as "resurrect" for consistency and a more direct reference to death. I believe this is more truthful to the poet's intention.

Source text:

Xiao, Tan. "Bainian guishan" ["Returning to the Mountains"], "Xugou" ["Fabrication"], "Yueliang zhidao" ["The Moon Knows"]. *Yongxiang pingjing* [*Flowing toward Serenity*]. China Youth Press, 2017, pp. 4, 9, 53.