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The Garment Industry between Local Configurations
and Global Flows

Lu Xun, *Nouvelles et poèmes en prose* (Short Stories
and Prose Poems), translated and edited by
Sebastian Veg,

Paris, Éditions Rue d'Ulm, "Versions françaises" series, 2015, 664 pp.

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should not be an *either/or* choice when a scholar studies a complex issue such as transnational migrant labour. Rather, she believes that one should take a stand of *and*, examining both the structural constraints and the personal creativity involved in the process. She describes her theoretical and methodological approach as public anthropology with “micro-feminist-ethnographer-activism” (p. 21).

Along this line, Chapter 3 discusses the difficulties that migrant women face, on the one hand as domestic workers, and on the other as mothers, wives, and daughters. These sometimes complementary, causal, but at times contradictory roles of the FDWs are shaped and produced by the two-year renewable contracts based on which FDW’s visas are granted, in addition to “employment policies and practices, overcharging by employment agencies, the two-week rule, and the live-in requirement” (p. 21) imposed on FDWs through working conditions in Hong Kong society. At the same time, they are still under the moral, emotional, and socioeconomic expectations that link them to their places of origin. These paradoxical and interwoven tensions are what Constable describes (p. 56) after Rachel Silvey (*Indonesia*, No. 87, 2009, p. 54) as the “gendered tensions of modernity.” That female morality and sexuality are symbols of family and national honour, and hence a factor of female social and cultural restriction, has been a subject of discussion in feminist literature. Constable places her discussion of the FDWs’ dilemmas in this context, and argues that the dominant beliefs in their countries of origin – Islam for the Indonesians, and Roman Catholicism for the Filipinas – have reinforced this restriction.

In chapters 4 and 5 this discussion is extended to a pair of overlapping issues – Chapter 4 on the role of men, the fathers of these women’s babies, and Chapter 5 on sex and babies in the migrant women’s lives. Starting with the seemingly obvious question of why FDWs even engage in intimate relations with men and get pregnant under the very restrictive employment policies, Constable traces how a lack of information on contraception, the patriarchal mentality to appease men’s needs, the low sense of responsibility of men, and resignation to luck or God’s will, all contribute to these unwanted pregnancies and the subsequent problems that women have to face alone. Notwithstanding the multiple voids in the migrant women’s lives, these relationships paradoxically offer “hope of family and security in a precarious world” (p. 22).

With these paradoxes in mind, Constable then describes the large range of situations that FDW single mothers find themselves in. Chapter 6 tells stories of a relatively “privileged” group – women who married local men and hence their children were legal citizens, and women who were able to keep their contracts during and after childbirth. Chapter 7, on the other hand, presents the stories of those considered less fortunate – asylum seekers and overstayers who live in constant fear of repatriation, and hence in a miserable, vulnerable, and even dismal state. Under Constable’s sympathetic pen, the stories of these women and their babies can move the reader to tears.

Chapter 8 examines the possibilities of going home. At stake are the woman’s and her family’s reputations among their neighbours, and while family solidarity helps ease the initial stage of return, poverty and lack of opportunities in the home country frequently lead to bad endings. Constable explains her own process of coming to understand the reasons why FDW single mothers prefer to remain in Hong Kong. A woman who has chosen migration, whether to fulfil her duty to her family as a daughter, wife, or mother, or for personal freedom and enjoyment in a metropolitan city like Hong Kong, enters what Constable calls “the migratory cycle of atonement” (p. 230), and often she does so repeatedly (p. 231).

The book, while offering rich ethnographic data and engaging stories and personal narratives, would make an even better contribution to the anthropology of globalisation if it provided more systematic theoretical discussion, for example on how migrant women’s lived experiences are interwoven with social class and ethnicity. And while appreciating Constable’s empathy as an activist and public anthropologist, readers may find the language patronising at times. Nevertheless, the book is well written and is an excellent addition to the literature on women’s transnational labour.

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David Damrosch attaches great importance to translation in his definition of world literature, identifying the latter as a mode of reading involving an “elliptical refraction of national literatures” rather than as an established list of canonical works. Translation has a major role to play in our current situation in which the integration of Chinese literature into world literature has yet to be achieved. This volume translated and edited by Sebastian Veg is all the more welcome in this respect because while there have been previous translations into French of Lu Xun (1881–1936), a key figure in twentieth-century Chinese literature, they suffer either from randomness or non-existent availability, or from ideological distortions.

This book, in addition to the pleasures of its fine quality paper and its manageable square format, is also exceptional in the way it combines in one volume Lu Xun’s three collections entitled *Cries* (*Nahan*, 1923), *Wanderings* (*Panghuang*, 1926), and *Weeds* (*Yecao*, 1927). Sebastian Veg justifies this unprecedented inclusion on the grounds of the intrinsic coherence of this body of work within the author’s overall opus. For him, these short stories and prose poems are distinct not only from the journalistic and polemical essays that dominate his later output, but also from the other literary genres that he practiced, such as the tale or the autobiographical memoir (p. 9). This volume includes translations of the short stories that were published in 2004 and 2010, but are now out of print, and it combines them with 23 newly translated prose poems. These are all brought together in a scholarly edition supported by a substantial critical apparatus that provides detailed notes, an inserted commentary on each of the included texts, and an elaborate afterword dealing mainly with *Weeds*. As an expert in literature, intellectual history, and Chinese political debates of the twentieth century, Sebastian Veg imparts to this masterly volume his deep and extensive

knowledge of Lu Xun's work, which he illuminates in its various discursive, symbolic, and contextual aspects.

The first striking feature here is the quality of Sebastian Veg's translation. He sticks firmly to a "literalist approach to translation," which he considers necessary in view of Lu Xun's own idiolect. This consists of a modern Chinese "in the process of its creation" through juxtaposing the classical Chinese lexicon (*wenyan*) with the vernacular (*baihua*) influenced by a Westernised grammar. The translator believes that Lu Xun's "lexical and syntactic roughness" constitutes the essence of his newly created language, and that is what must be retained (p. 11). This position is not a neutral one (in this respect, see the discussions in *China Perspectives* between Isabelle Rabut, Noël Dutrait, and the translator himself). The need for "faithfulness to the letter of the text," re-emphasised by the translator (p. 10), leads to a strain on the foreign term, valued by Antoine Berman and probably by Lu Xun himself, without in any way lessening the constraints imposed by the host language. Due to the pressures of its constant concern to reconcile the style of the original with the need for readability, especially in the case of the two collections of short stories, the new edition is in effect a revised version, purified not of the harshness of the originals but of specific "typographical mistakes, and erroneous or clumsy translations" (p. 9). This rigorous precision is particularly evident in *Mauvaises herbes* ("Weeds"), which is presented as a homage to the late Pierre Ryckmans (1935-2014), the previous translator of these admirable pieces under the title of *La Mauvaise Herbe* ("The Weed"), which has long been out of print. To translate in the wake of the great Belgian sinologist is certainly to run a risk. This is energetically taken up by Sebastian Veg, not so much to mark out his own distinct approach as to attempt to recreate a heterogeneous style, indeed a whole genre, insofar as these "prose poems" (*sanwen shi*) contain a juxtaposition of rhythmic prose, popular poetry, and poetic drama, in addition to a mixture of archaic or religious expressions, strange metaphors, and everyday speech patterns. This version makes palpable the coexistence of lyricism and prosaic expression in the original works. For example, "My love sorrows" (*Wo de shilian*), a poetical parody written in the style of the popular satirical poems of the Tang dynasty, is rendered in free but rhyming lines that match both the letter and spirit of the original. The recurrent images, such as fire, ice, and gloom, are expressed in the very same words throughout their different contexts. On the other hand, the syntactical handling appears to be more open to a certain give and take, especially as it is difficult for a translation to bring out particular turns of phrase that have a foreign origin. The inversions for which Lu Xun shows a fondness for poetic reasons are inevitably "normalised": the placing of the circumstantial modifier after the main proposition, which is typically European and unusual in Chinese, had to be given its normal position in the French. Thus, 但我總記得見過一篇好的故事, 在昏沉的夜, becomes "Mais je me souviens que j'ai vu cette belle histoire, **au milieu de la nuit trouble**" (But I remember that I saw this beautiful story, **in the midst of the dark night**) (p. 533), and the line: 有所不樂意的, 在天堂裡, 我不願去, becomes "Il y a quelque chose qui me déplaît **au paradis**, je ne veux pas y aller" (There is something that I dislike **in paradise**, I do not wish to go there) (p. 514). This import-export traffic in the translation tends to modify the terms of faithfulness, bringing them closer to that of a double agent.

In reality, a translation has to respect both the original and the target languages, and this involves the subjective choices of the translator as he operates across the interdependent realms of translation and interpretation. Here the scrupulous textual deciphering that subtends the translation is

further clarified by the critical commentary, which brings out the translator's philological and hermeneutic concerns. Sebastian Veg's choice of the plural for the title of *Mauvaises herbes* ("Weeds"), unlike the singular adopted by Pierre Ryckmans, is to be explained, as he himself suggests, by the fact that each text in the collection can be read separately as "a weed" (p. 9). The reader's grasp of the individuality of these texts is systematically supported, as each one is accompanied by a commentary that gives precise information on its date of composition, source material, and editorial variants. This exegetical apparatus, which provides indispensable clarification of obscure references and metaphorical allusions, also invokes a supporting network of intertextual readings and throws light on the writer's creativity, woven out of a play of echoing voices, resonances, and obsessions. Sebastian Veg's interpretation takes full account of our contemporary concerns by considering these matters from a number of angles, such as democracy, the relationship between literature and politics, and the writer's independence, all of which broaden our reflections on a writer who has fallen victim to instrumental canonisation. His comments also draw on a wide range of criticism: Leo Ou-fan Lee, Wang Hui or, more recently Eva Shan Chou, Gloria Davies, and Nicholas A. Kaldis, to mention a handful of the writers of important works on Lu Xun. But Veg's approach depends above all on his attention to the texts, and this underpins his treatment of their manifold political, psychological, and aesthetic aspects. As a result, his reflections on the complex nature of Lu Xun's stance, which are developed further in the afterword, are fully supported by his luminous analyses of the signifying networks around fire and ice, darkness and light, heaven and hell. The image of the poet who chose to "wander in the midst of nowhere" ("Les adieux d'ombre," p. 514) takes on a clear profile thanks to the dual effects of these translations that also interpret. Here the ethos of the non-conformist writer receives inspiring and updated insight because, to cite Chan Koonchung, the author of *The Fat Years*, which refers specifically to Lu Xun, we find ourselves granted the good fortune to live in a past future China, between the beneficent hell and the false paradise, in the best of all impossible worlds.

■ Translated by Jonathan Hall.

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