

Editor's Note

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, IN 1915, EZRA POUND PUBLISHED *CATHAY*, A book of classical Chinese poetry in translation. He didn't know the language, and it can be (and certainly has been) argued that these are not translations at all. What he made was a series of new poems, based on what he could glean from the originals, relying entirely on the notes and "decipherings" of scholars who could read Chinese characters. Once he had these notes, his own poetic genius got to work. T. S. Eliot famously said, in response to this little book, that Pound was "the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time." He also called the poems "translucencies," rather than translations, which sounds a bit like hedging but in the end seems fair enough. Finally, here was some suggestion of Chinese poetry that English speakers could read in the form of actual poems, instead of in the opaque, literal translations available at that time, most of which were created by missionaries. With his study of Chinese poetry, Pound unlocked new ideas for himself; by tapping into a language and culture unknown to him and most Westerners, he changed his own way of thinking, shook up his syntactical complacencies and ideas about image, and opened up the modern literary tradition to what he found there.

In 2015 we have much more access to Chinese culture and language; by now, Li Po, the main subject of *Cathay*, and many other classical Chinese authors have been translated and retranslated into English by poets and scholars alike, and a fair number of more recent authors, writing in vernacular, modern Chinese, have appeared in English as well. This year's Best Translated Book Award went to novelist Can Xue and her translator Annelise Finegan Wasmoen. China was "Guest of Honor" at this year's annual book trade convention, BookExpo America, and even some popular, commercial Chinese novels are being presented to American readers. Still, what we see in English is proportionally very small, given China's vast current of literary output over the millennia.

At *NER*, the door has always been open to translations, from any language, but Chinese literature has been missing from our pages since 1987, when we published David Hinton's rendition of classical Chinese poet Tu Fu. So for this issue we reached out in order to bring more of it in. We've assembled a handful of contemporary works translated from Chinese as well as works pertaining to China written in English. This is not an attempt to present some kind of overview—not at all—but rather we're doing what *NER* does best, that is, offering a lively sample of what's new and good. They're presented not as a discrete section but are integrated into the issue as a whole, because it turns out that the China-related pieces in this issue speak just as often, and sometimes more clearly, to the other works assembled here as to each other.

Still, the typical questions that come up in editing any issue were especially revealing here. I heard, for instance, that “Chinese has a third person singular for animals,” and “Chinese doesn’t often distinguish between singular and plural.” I learned that until 1919 all Chinese poetry was written in classical Chinese, which adhered to strict formal rules very different from those of spoken, modern Chinese, and that Chinese characters, very similar to those in use today, first appeared more than three thousand years ago. Frankly, for native English speakers these are fairly mind-blowing concepts, as are the grammatical, tonal, and structural differences between our languages. But that doesn’t mean that those of us who are unable to devote years of study to learning Chinese shouldn’t at least try to access this vast and significant world culture through its vast and significant literature. For our purposes, we don’t need to know all that went into each decision the translator made or where any inaccuracies may lie. We are looking for the translator to convey the essence of the original and to make something new. In the summer 2015 issue of *Paris Review*, poet and translator Peter Cole says that “at some point in the translation process you have to forget the original. Some would say you have to kill it. Ideally by eating it alive.” “Eating it” and “alive”—that seems just about right.

The imaginative qualities of poetry and fiction are generally acknowledged, but translation also is imaginative work, as are works of nonfiction that attempt to understand, for instance, David Foster Wallace’s *Pale King* (see Jeff Staiger) and Ai Weiwei’s show at Alcatraz (see Wendy Willis), or that examine racial curiosity (Camille Dungy) and a language on the verge of extinction (Eric Wilson). Poetry may be a form of diagnosis rather than a cure for what ails us, as Marianne Boruch argues in these pages, so we just have to follow the clues. Let’s face it, even one’s native language is an imperfect tool for conveying intent and ascribing meaning. And so in that sense all imaginative writings are works of translation, or maybe we should just call them translucencies.

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