

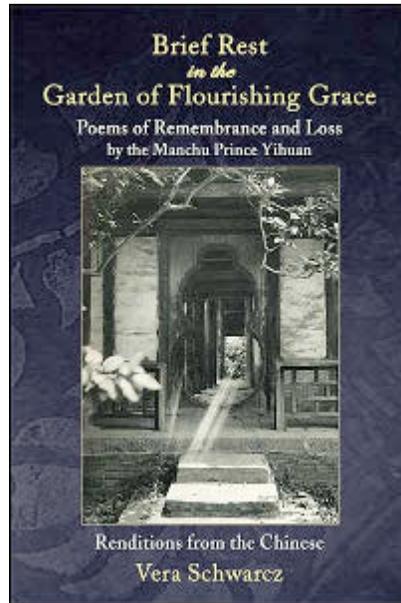
Vera Schwarcz Reviews.

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Revival and Reinterpretation in Translation

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Vera Schwarcz, *Brief Rest in the Garden of Flourishing Grace: Poems of Remembrance and Loss by the Manchu Prince Yihuan*, Red Heifer Press, 2009. 91 pgs.

It is common to hear that "a poem is open to various interpretations" or "every time you read a poem, you come up with a new interpretation." By the same token, a translation is a work of interpretation, and thus offers new insights into a piece. It might be useful then to focus less on what is lost in a translation and more on what is found, reflect on what poetry translation *can* do, rather than what it cannot. And although it is difficult to evaluate a translated literary work, we may as well consider new ways to interpret poetry in another language.

Vera Schwarcz's *Brief Rest in the Garden of Flourishing Grace* chooses rendition, rather than translation, as a means of bringing the poetry of Manchu Prince Yihuan into English. As Schwarcz puts it, "poetry...is what is lost in translation." Thus, she transports Yihuan's poetry to the present by assuming his voice and speaking as him. This is no easy task, but after reading the collection, I am convinced that the voice is indeed Yihuan's.

Yihuan was the father of the Guangxu Emperor, who, as the second last Emperor of China, ruled mostly under Empress Dowager Cixi's influence from 1875 to 1908. In his earlier days, Yihuan displayed literary talents and enjoyed arboreal gardens, but later, as the father of the Emperor, he gradually became one of the most influential people in the Qing court, despite his efforts at keeping a low profile.

Yihuan's poems, then, can be understood in terms of the tension between his mature and younger selves, and his remembrance and loss of his past. For example, when he revisits certain gardens in the Qing Emperor's summer palace, memories keep flooding back to him. Yet what he actually sees are the ruins of the gardens, what remains after the summer palace had been burned down by British forces in 1860. The lost scenery is therefore loosely linked to the downfall of the Qing empire, as the "land of China recoils / from shattered boundaries" ("Grieve for China").

There are two key features which contribute to Schwarcz's successful renditions of Yihuan's poetry. The first is her frequent use of crisp lines, short stanzas and enjambments to create a smooth, fluid feeling. Schwarcz does not abide by the old Chinese poetic forms and instead allows her lines to break naturally in the English language. It has an enthralling effect since the speaker's emotion is built up slowly as the imagery unfolds line by line. The last stanza in "Twenty Autumns" is a good example:

nothing
but the lonely shadow
of Jade Spring Temple,
wind bells chattering
among white clouds.
("Twenty Autumns")

As the scene is gradually revealed in these five lines, time seems to have lengthened, but then the poem ends with a full stop, hinting that it is the poem itself, not the stretching of time, that ends—and while the desolate image will last, so will Yihuan's reminiscence. This is an impressive technique, suitable for showing how Yihuan's world is slowly falling apart around him and how his favourite places have become ruins.

The second feature is the brilliant choice of material. Since these are renditions, Schwarcz does not translate the poems directly, but selects important images and combines them to evoke the feeling of loss and remembrance. An excellent example is the poem "Brief Rest in the Garden of Flourishing Grace", which is a set of four Chinese poems about Yihuan's visit to the ruins of the garden. The four original poems are dense in terms of their imagery, and they all share the same nostalgic mood. Yet, Schwarcz treats them as one poem, and chooses only the most striking images for her rendition. Here is a selection:

Terrace and courtyard, no
human sound, persimmon

blooms blood red,
river grass disheveled

by the west wind
on the trampled path,

[...]

all that shimmered

now eaten up
by red flames.

("Brief Rest in the Garden of Flourishing Grace")

Whereas Yihuan wrote four poems to express the sense of loss he experienced at the site of the ruined gardens, Schwarcz distills the essence of the originals and reworks them into a single touching rendition.

These renditions provide new scope to Yihuan's life; not only do they describe his sense of nostalgia, they also hint at his complex emotions towards China—no mean feat in a foreign language. Schwarcz chooses her words with care. In "Brief Rest in the Garden of Flourishing Grace", she also speaks of "barren mountains" and "dry rivers." When I first read the Chinese version, I understood the characters as "mounds" and "streams," items more likely to have appeared in an imperial garden. However, Schwarcz's choice of "barren mountains" and "dry rivers" may also be appropriate, if we see them as metaphors for Chinese national decline in the late Qing Dynasty or as representing the effect of war with foreign powers. In this sense, similar to *on the no road way to tomorrow*, these renditions also open up new interpretations of the original poems which even native speakers of Chinese might overlook.

Translating a poem involves a lot more than communicating its meaning; it must also bring the work to life. Both of these poetry collections have managed to accomplish this with different methods. They remind us that poems can, and should, transcend linguistic borders.