

Translator's Foreword

In a poem about visiting an open-air market in the town of Baiyangdian, Xi Chuan 西川 writes,

how bright the sun I do not know
but I've seen the sun shine so an old man held the light in his eyes

how many people the sun illuminates in this market I do not know
but I've heard the sun make pots pans ladles spoons open their
mouths to speak

太阳有多亮我不知道
但太阳晃得老汉双眼含光我看到了

太阳照耀多少人聚在集市上我不知道
但太阳让锅碗瓢勺开口说话我听到了¹

The title notes that Xi Chuan traveled with Mang Ke 芒克 to Baiyangdian, the lakeside town in Hebei province to which the latter poet had been “sent down” in 1969. But the sun here is different from that of Mang Ke’s 1983 “Sunflower in the Sun” 阳光中的向日葵. For Xi Chuan the Baiyangdian sun is the sun, visible and accessible to the shoppers and shopkeepers in the countryside market in ways it might not have been to consumers and salespeople in Beijing. For Mang Ke, drawing on the iconography of the Cultural Revolution, in which the citizens of the People’s Republic were drawn as sunflowers, basking in the light of their solar Chairman Mao, the sun is a dictatorial force, threatening not nourishment but strangulation—against which the sunflower stands in open opposition:

do you see
do you see that sunflower in the sun
you see, it doesn't bow its head
but turns it back
it turns its head
as if to bite through
the rope around its neck
held by the sun's hands

你看到了吗
你看到阳光中的那棵向日葵了吗
你看它，它没有低下头
而是把头转向身后
就好象是为了一口咬断
那套在它脖子上的
那牵在太阳手中的绳索

One of Mang Ke's most overtly political poems—certainly the most unequivocal in this collection—"Sunflower in the Sun" presents a good starting place for understanding his trajectory as a poet and his development of contemporary poetry in mainland China, as the sunflower marks the point when the implicit politics of the poet's language becomes most explicit.

Before he was known as Mang Ke, the Beijing-born Jiang Shiwei 姜世伟 (b. 1950) followed Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution call for educated youths to "rusticate," or be sent down to the countryside, to learn revolution and proper socialist behavior from the peasants. While the extent to which he learned socialism is unclear, he did develop the framework of a style that would transform into contemporary Chinese poetry. Together with Duo Duo 多多 (penname of Li Shizheng 栗世征, b. 1951) and the poet Genzi 根子 (penname of Yue Caigen 岳彩根, later known as Yue Zhong 岳重, b. 1951), they would become known as the

“Three Musketeers of Baiyangdian” 白洋淀三剑客. In what is still the best early history of contemporary poetry as it grew in the sixties and seventies, Maghiel van Crevel writes that “Mang Ke was the first to develop an individual and mature mode of expression in Experimental poetry written in and around Beijing in the early 1970s,” and defines his style as one of “simple vocabulary, precise and sometimes repetitive wording, and a limited number of recurring images”:

In a blend of common sense and fantasy, powers of Nature such as day and night, the sun and the wind, are personified and endowed with human or animal attributes like eyes, hair or the ability to cry. They have ambiguous but intimate relationships with the protagonists, usually denoted by personal pronouns. In free verse with inconspicuous but frequent rhyme and rhythm, his poetry is distinguished by its flowing diction more than anything else. Together, these features make for a sophisticated naivete in his poetic oeuvre.²

It is from this naïve sophistication of intimate ambiguity within flowing diction that contemporary Chinese poetry originated.

While Mang Ke's early poems read today with an undeniable sophistication, this should not override the innocence van Crevel notes, or their basis in simple, straightforward play. Because of his cavalier attitude and wildness in Baiyangdian, his friends called him *Houzi* 猴子, or Monkey, and when I asked Mang Ke to explain a line from one of his earlier poems so I could translate it better, he told me that in those days they were just writing for fun, so I shouldn't take it too seriously.

But within this fun, a focus on the minute reveals a language of political significance. In their study of the changes to the Chinese language during the Cultural Revolution, Lowell Dittmer and Chen Ruoxi refer to what they call the “inflation of language.” Against popular slogans of

the day like “Hold high the great red banner of Mao Zedong Thought to wage the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the end” 高举毛泽东思想伟大红旗把无产阶级文化大革命进行到底, the lines of Mang Ke

in the center of the sky
hangs a strand of sunlight-softened hair
the city
saturated in eastern luxury

当天空中
垂下了一缕阳光柔软的头
发
城市
浸透了东方的豪华

must have been read as shockingly direct and heterodox at the time. The sunlight represents not Mao Zedong, but is rather, as with Xi Chuan’s poem, just the sunlight. If Dittmer and Chen are correct, that written Chinese had once been known “for its subtlety and delicacy, for . . . honesty and sincerity, moderation and respect for wisdom, and also for its cultivation of a refined and elegant literary style,” then Mang Ke’s telegraphic, imagist writing represents a return to an earlier standard of subtlety and sincerity. Likewise, if the Cultural Revolution’s “monothematic emphasis on politics deprived the language of subtlety by polarizing alternatives and reducing the vocabulary to a terminology of warfare,” then the popularity and power of Mang Ke’s poetry may have come from the heterodox interpretive space it opens in its understated—and anti-inflationary—use of language.³

In its understatement, Mang Ke’s writing takes an early stance against what Chinese critic Li Tuo has called *Mao wenti* 毛文体, translated as “Mao style” or “Maospeak.”⁴ Mang Ke’s implicitly counter-Maoist poetics not only grew into the explicit politics of “Sunflower in the Sun,” but also into a poetry movement with its own publication mechanism, the first

non-official literary journal in the history of the People's Republic of China—where publishing was strictly a state-controlled affair. Back in Beijing, Mang Ke co-founded, with another young poet named Zhao Zhenkai 赵振开 (b. 1949), the journal *Jintian* 今天 (*Today*), to publish poetry, fiction, and criticism that would offer new forms of literary expression in a China emerging from the Cultural Revolution. Securing a printing press for a private venue was a crime in those days, but the editors rode their bicycles (with covered license plates) to deliver their issues to the steps of bureau buildings and official organizations. Still, they used pseudonyms for protection: Zhao was given the name Bei Dao 北岛, and he gave Jiang Shiwei the name Mang Ke in turn—as it sounded like the English word “Monkey,” his earlier nickname in Baiyangdian.

Jintian ran from 1978 to 1980, publishing nine bi-monthly issues and seven series titles, distributing a total of nearly twenty thousand copies to readers in Beijing and throughout China. Bei Dao recalls that their literary salons were the largest Beijing has ever known, and their public poetry readings attracted audiences in the hundreds. Not surprisingly, *Jintian* was shut down, and the government launched an official campaign against writing it called *menglong* 朦胧, or “obscure” (often mistranslated as “misty”). Bei Dao re-launched the magazine in exile after 1989. Although *Jintian* is not officially available in mainland China, it is widely read there, and remains one of the most important journals of contemporary Chinese literature and thought, with an influential website and an international publishing mission to promote contemporary Chinese poetry. *Jintian* has always been not only independent but often oppositional, and there is a much larger non-official discourse on poetry in China today. As such, poetry maintains an association with counter-hegemonic principles and political opposition—in contrast to fiction, which publishes in official venues and is often targeted at filmmakers.

This assumption of political opposition has come at significant cost to a large number of poets, and many were in exile for years. Though Mang Ke has always lived in Beijing, one journalist writes that, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre on June 4, 1989, because his name was

on a petition calling for the release of human rights activist Wei Jingsheng 魏京生, Mang Ke “was detained at his home. A black bag was placed over his head and he was taken to a place he didn’t know. After two days, he was released. The people who took him said he was detained for his own safety.”⁵ Over the years, Mang Ke has devoted himself less to poetry than to painting—colorful abstracts that resemble but cannot be reduced to landscapes—but I do not think this represents a turn away from the implicit politics of being a poet. He has also published a novel of frank sexuality and Cultural Revolution micro-histories, *Wild Things* 野事 (1994), which Wendy Larson, in her study of *Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China*, says “deconstructs the very notion of spiritual embodiment and consciousness through his spatial flattening and oddly disconnected histories, events, and styles.”⁶ What links these efforts is a continued focus on the luminous detail as a way of speaking against the prevailing ethos of overly or wrongly politicized language.

The final pieces in this book are from Mang Ke’s latest major poem, “Time Without Time” 没有时间的时间. No longer writing against linguistic inflation, “Time Without Time” begins in the absence of any sun or light:

there are no more feelings growing here
it is a blank expanse of time here
dark and cold
solitary and empty

这里已不再有感情生长
这里是一片光秃秃的时间
阴暗而又寒冷
寂静而又空荡

The poem runs to sixty pages in Chinese; hence, it is being excerpted here. While the sun in Mang Ke's earliest works was simply the sun, and later became a menacing dictator referring to, but also refracting the earlier depiction of Mao, here its absence shines a critique on the destitution of a society on the verge of believing in nothing. That this poem was written in the late eighties—a time in China many look back to nostalgically as a decade not only of reform and opening up but also of internationalist intellectual optimism—underscores the poet's insightful darkness.

Pushing back through this darkness, we might again glimpse Baiyangdian. Though I remarked earlier that in Xi Chuan's poem, as in Mang Ke's earliest works, the sun is the sun, this is not to say that Xi Chuan believes Baiyangdian to be any kind of cultural or economic holdover:

the waters of Baiyangdian grow gradually smaller under the sun
a hero from the Anti-Japanese War still living today gets rolled
into the market economy's great wave

白洋淀的水域在太阳下渐渐缩小
有抗日老英雄一直活到今朝卷入市场经济的大潮

Nevertheless, the economic and social reality Xi Chuan represents, and whose problems he handles, is distinct from that of the society to which Mang Ke's poems are addressed. And yet there is a line from one to the other, and along that line a similarity, a continuity. Today's poet addresses the inexorability of the market and writes against it; yesterday's poet writes against language inflation and the over-politicization that forecasted economic inflation. But this is not to relegate Mang Ke only to the yesterday, as both in his founding of *Jintian* and in the focus on clear detail in his earliest works, he has effectively created the possibility of poetry in China even now. In that, he remains a poet of today, and the light of his sun still shines.

Translating Mang Ke's poetry my goal has been, as always, to reflect not only what the poems say in Chinese but how they say it. Fortunately, a tradition of modern poetry in English also has focused on direct presentation of the luminous detail as a means of countering linguistic inflation, just as in Mang Ke, and my translations tack toward this tradition. In an early draft of "Dusk," for instance, I had,

by now it is dusk
by now the dusk is like a
stripped off
and wind-dried animal hide

这时正是黄昏
这时的黄昏就象是一张
已被剥下来的
已被风干的兽皮一样

which I amended to,

now is dusk
the dusk now like
a skinned-off
wind-dried animal pelt

and then,

now is dusk
the dusk now like a
skinned-off
wind-dried animal pelt

before finally arriving at,

now it is dusk
the dusk now like
a skinned
wind-dried animal pelt

Amidst such concentration, Mang Ke's repetitions are important to get right. Like the persistent *zheli* 这里 in "Time Without Time," the recurrent *zheshi* 这时 in this poem places his work in the here and now. That explains part of my preference for "now," which grounds the poem more, I think, than my earlier "by now." I also feel that the English rhythm requires more variation as it establishes its theme than the Chinese does, where the repeated syllables can occur in the same spot in successive lines. And while I want to respect and recreate his economy, I also want to draw attention to the language only where Mang Ke himself does, as well—hence my addition of a syllable in "now it is dusk," over "now is dusk." The lines can afford this word, I think, because of the reduction of "by now the dusk is like" to "the dusk now like," and "skinned-off" to "skinned." Overall, a progression of paring down and simplification.

I find the same aims and methods in the translations of Mang Ke by Yibing Huang and Jonathan Stalling, published in the anthology *Push Open the Window* (Copper Canyon, 2011), and so I have included some of their work in this volume as well, with minor edits for stylistic consistency.

Along with Mang Ke, my thanks go to Bei Dao, Christopher Mattison, Wang Ling, Simon Patton, Maghiel van Crevel, Eleanor Goodman, Ma Anting, and above all my wife, Shenxin Li, without whom this book would not have been possible.

—Lucas Klein, Hong Kong