

## ESSAY

# Inside the History of the World: Syntheses of Literary Form between Prose Poetry and China

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China, G. W. F. Hegel notoriously said, lies “outside the World’s History” (*Philosophy* 116). Elsewhere he wrote that poetry can “be translated into other languages without essential detriment to its value, and turned from poetry into prose,” because “ideas and intuitions are in truth the subject-matter of poetry” (*Aesthetics* 2: 964). What might these two statements, apparently unrelated, have to do with my twin aims in this article with respect to literary history—to trace a translation-centric history of literature and to argue against the segregation of China from the translation-centered international history of literature? What might Hegel’s two statements have to do with the curious relationship between translation, China, and prose poetry?

Take the following stanza by the contemporary Chinese poet Xi Chuan 西川 (b. 1963), from 曼哈顿乱想 (“Random Manhattan Thoughts”). What informs the translation of such a stanza?

做一个中国人，你肯定没有你的本体论、方法论。哲学是西方的概念，源自古希腊。你肯定只有一套老掉牙的、只能用来哄小孩的伦理教条。黑格尔在《哲学史讲演录》中这样说。 (108)

Being Chinese, you have no ontology or methodology. Philosophy is a western concept, originating in ancient Greece. You just have some toothless old ethical dogma good for nothing but mollifying children. Hegel says so in *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*. (109)

The stanza mocks Hegel’s Eurocentric denial of the possibility of Chinese philosophy, even as Xi Chuan’s mention of it acknowledges

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the power such denial still has over the mental lives of Chinese intellectuals. Mocking Hegel, Xi Chuan rejects the exclusion of China from world history: both in text and in context, the thoughts of a Chinese person walking down New York City streets are drenched in history: How did he get there? How did the conditions that allowed him to get there get there? The answers are all part of what constitutes history.

In translating Xi Chuan's meditation in and on history, though, where do I locate the poetry? In its ideas and intuitions, in agreement with Hegel? Or in the rhythms and formal linguistic features of the prose poem? I do, after all, maintain the prose form in my translation (see Klein, "Same Difference"). The question is all the more intricate because the prose poem as a form is a synthesis of, on the one hand, the thesis that poetry is what gets "lost . . . in translation" (Frost 7) because of the unity of poetry's formal features and semantic content, and, on the other, the antithesis that poetry is defined by "ideas and intuitions" and therefore supremely translatable "without essential detriment to its value." A synthesis, I call it, but not a Hegelian synthesis operating through a strict dialectic. It is a mediation, rather, between the contrary notions. Nevertheless, in this paper I trace the literary history behind my presentation of Xi Chuan's writings as prose poetry, by discussing the relationship between literatures in European languages and literatures in Chinese, made possible by translation.

Other syntheses are at work here, too. China was outside history for Hegel because world history moved dialectically and China was only "the mere presupposition of elements whose combination must be waited for to constitute their vital progress" (*Philosophy* 116). For Hegel, "The History of the World is the discipline of the uncontrolled natural will, bringing it into obedience to a Universal principle and conferring subjective freedom. The East knew and to the present day knows only that *One* [the Emperor] is Free; the Greek and Roman world, that *some* are free; the German World knows that *All* are free" (104). "The History of the World travels from East to West," he said, "for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning"

(103). But what does contemporary Chinese literature have to say to such a view of its stasis?

The Hegelian take on history is nowhere more wrong than in literary history. Of course, history neither begins in Asia nor ends in Europe for many reasons, not least of which is that history is not a linear progression. In literary history, neither Franco Moretti's view of modern and contemporary non-Western literature, that it is "a compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials" wrought by Western power enacted upon the rest of the world (58), nor Jacob Edmond's, that it contains "qualities shared equally by non-Western and Western modernism" and postmodernism and more (*Make It* 11), pretends that Asian literature is stagnant or irrelevant to world historical processes. That said, neither view offers a good explanation of how these world historical processes *proceed* in literature. Against Moretti's view that world literature is simply an instantiation of globalized power, some scholars have pointed out how modern and contemporary poetry can complicate the simplistic representation of international politico-economic power dynamics—I am thinking of Jahan Ramazani's interest in poems that, in "language, form, and subject matter . . . articulate and imaginatively remake the contending forces of globalization and localization, alien influx and indigenizing resistance" (8), as well as of Edmond's resuscitation of "the often violently superimposed singularities through which the poles of sameness and difference are constructed and sometimes challenged" (*Common Strangeness* 11)—but in critiquing the notion that poetic form around the globe is a mere allegory of the world order as we know it, they end up implying that poetic history simply happens, without offering a compelling vision of how history is made. By looking at the role of China in the international history of the prose poem, this essay offers a vision of world literary history not as occurring through coincidences but as made by acts of translation, performed by translators and poets attempting to navigate the intricacies of cross-cultural representation.

Chinese prose poetry makes plain its international pulling and pushing with world history, for reasons having to do with translation. Michel

Hockx has written about the importance of prose poetry translation to the casting away of classical Chinese as the sole medium for literary composition in favor of a standardized vernacular, in the early twentieth century. Additionally, before Charles Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose* (*Little Poems in Prose*; 1869) was published, prose poetry was known as the form used in *Le livre de jade* (*The Book of Jade*; 1867), Judith Gautier's collection of translations of Chinese poetry into French (P. Yu).<sup>1</sup> In both instances, prose poetry developed as what the Chinese poet Bei Dao 北岛 (b. 1949) has called a "translation style"<sup>2</sup> (or, as I call it, a "translation genre"), which occupies "the strip between two languages, and carries the inspiration of the two languages without belonging to either" (61). Thus, when Xi Chuan writes about China and the West's viewing each other in the format of prose poetry, he is melding these traditions and surpassing them.

But perhaps all these syntheses can be subsumed within the attempt to reconcile the two statements by Hegel I quoted at the beginning of this article, contradictory in context. One of Hegel's reasons for casting China out of his consideration of the historical is that, for him, the Chinese "Written Language is at the outset a great hindrance to the development of the sciences." This is because, he explains, the Chinese written language "does not express, as ours [German, but by extension any European language] does, individual sounds—does not present the spoken words to the eye, but represents the ideas themselves by signs." For Hegel, this means that "[t]he Chinese . . . do not mature the modifications of sounds in their language to distinct articulations capable of being represented by letters and syllables" (*Philosophy* 135)—in other words, the language is too juvenile to be written in letters, too ambiguous for abstract thought. Out of this reasoning, Hegel concludes, "A free, ideal, spiritual kingdom has here no place. What may be called scientific is of a merely empirical nature, and is made absolutely subservient to the Useful on behalf of the State" (*Philosophy* 134), corresponding to his proclamation that the East knows only the freedom of the emperor while everyone else is enslaved. Hegel's logic here is that since the Chinese written

language reduces science to mere utility, rather than abstract thought as he imagined it, *Geist* (spirit, mind, intellect) cannot progress toward its telos of universal freedom; China, then, is outside of that historical progression. Yet what interests me is that while Hegel, counterintuitively, finds sound unimportant for poetry, he finds it of utmost importance for the prospect of Chinese knowledge and its place in world history. The representation of ideas by written signs that makes philosophy impossible for Hegel seems to enable the possibility of poetry.

As the early work of Haun Saussy has shown, Hegel remains surprisingly relevant to contemporary attempts to wrap the Euro-American mind around China (*Problem* 151–84 and *Great Walls* 35–118), and Hegel is important enough to theories of the lyric for Jonathan Culler to discuss him in *Theory of the Lyric* (92–109). In the tension between Hegel's contradictory views on the sonic features of language and their relationship to ideas, then—between form and content or material signifier and abstract signified—I locate my questions about translation and the association between prose poetry and China. Though I reiterate that this relationship does not constitute a dialectic, because its spiraling is not so neat, nor is it teleological, as Hegel envisions history to be, still, the relationship between prose poetry and China nevertheless merits being called a synthesis. Developed through translational attempts to bypass formal linguistic constrictions on poetry in favor of ideas, intuitions, and imagery, the prose poem ended up reconsecrating the importance of those formal linguistic features by other means, namely the prose of prose poetry. The prose poem thus constitutes an *Aufhebung*—sublation, or a simultaneous negation and preservation (Hegel, *Phenomenology* 164)—of formal linguistic features in poetry translation. This is also why—and how—translators from modern Chinese into English are able to translate without engaging in interventionist reinventions of contemporary Chinese poetic form (Klein, "Strong and Weak Interpretations"). But what, then, can this *Aufhebung* tell us about China and its relationship to prose poetry?

In what follows, I narrate a transnational and translational literary history of prose poetry to

discuss in more detail the issues touched on so far—the development and spread of the prose poem through translation; how it engendered an association of the prose poem with China, first in French, then in English; and how this history can be activated in the translation of Chinese prose poetry into English. I conclude with a word on Hegel and how Chinese prose poetry proves him both right and wrong at the same time.

### “But the Thing Itself No Longer Exists”: Prose Poetry as Chinese Translation Style, in Four Subsections

The following subsections involve a history of Chinese literature that largely leaves out literature written in Chinese, and a translation-centered literary history that quickly steps beyond translation proper. They simultaneously negate and preserve Chinese literature and translation-centered literary history.

This simultaneous negation and preservation is necessary because centering literary history on translation requires discussing the impact of translation on literature that is not translated yet remains in various ways *translational*—engaged with translation and defined by similar questions of representing cultural others. A literal *deformation*, prose poetry emerged in, and can be analyzed according to, what Joyelle McSweeney and Johannes Göransson call a “deformation zone,” “in which the counterfeit infects the original, the original ‘context,’ and the target culture, opening up a ‘deregulating’ space of poetic ‘encounters’” (Göransson 11; see also McSweeney and Göransson). I look at some of these encounters below.

### Recitation and Refusal: Prose Poetry in China and the World

As for Chinese literature, its importance to translational literature in the West is obscured by its having been narrated out of its literary history. For instance, in his excellent study of the Chinese prose poem, *Recite and Refuse*, Nick Admussen considers Chinese-language prose poetry in the contemporary People’s Republic of China (PRC) as distinct from prose poetry in other languages. He makes the curious case that what Xi Chuan writes is not “prose

poetry” (散文诗) in the Chinese context: “In China today, prose poetry is an establishment genre,” he writes, “born from a negotiation with the state about what literature should be allowed, dominated by Communist-style study groups, published in state-funded magazines, and used in textbooks for schoolchildren” (157). To fight “the domination of the orthodox in prose poetry,” Admussen says, Xi Chuan “cedes and avoids the term, defining idiosyncratic, prose-based poetic forms that have as many qualities of the prose poem as he wants them to, but which he does not call prose poetry” (157–58). This is accurate so far as it goes—Xi Chuan is more likely to talk about 诗文 (“poessays”) or simply 文本 (“texts”), and Admussen’s study is focused on Chinese literature as a national literature, not what makes the prose poem international—but his point relies on a separation of Chinese literature from the literature of other countries and languages, on a division of the prose poem in China from the prose poem elsewhere. Yet when I translate Xi Chuan into English, I frame his writings, both in how I describe them and in my translations, as prose poetry *tout court*. More than that, I want to point out that, bringing Chinese literature back into consideration as literature in the world, Xi Chuan is indeed writing in the vein of international prose poetry simply by writing prose poems about China.<sup>3</sup>

Its more recent sequestering aside, the history of Chinese prose poetry is an international history, tied through translation to the poetry, in prose or in verse, of other languages.<sup>4</sup> Discussing the importance to the Chinese prose poetry tradition of the 1955 translations by Bing Xin 冰心 (1900–99) of Rabindranath Tagore’s English prose versions of his Bengali verse, Admussen describes her translations as part of “a concretizing, a vernacularizing, and a normalizing process that partially removes *Gitanjali* from its relationship to the transcendental” (66; see also Admussen, “Genre”). And as Hockx has pointed out, the first Chinese translations of prose poetry—renderings of Ivan Turgenev by Liu Bannong 劉半農 (1891–1934), in 1915 and 1918, by way of English renditions by Constance Garnett—were labeled fiction in Chinese, because “none

of the styles of poetry writing” available in classical Chinese “allowed him enough freedom from formal restrictions to be able to translate the poem more or less literally” (Hockx 109). Yet after the vernacular movement gained prominence in 1919, Liu was one of the first to write his own prose poetry in Chinese, in a new style “created, at least to some extent, to challenge the existing styles” (Hockx 113) of translation such as those Liu himself had earlier employed. These examples demonstrate the interdependence between Chinese prose poetry and translation.

This interdependence inheres in other languages, as well. Referring to prose poetry in both France and Japan, Dennis Keene writes that “what gave the strongest impetus to the movement toward prose was the great vogue for translations of foreign poetry at the time, which were almost invariably made in prose” (5). Even so, many histories of prose poetry underplay its development through translation, preferring instead to discuss the form in terms of, say, the rise of the modern city—as both Cole Swensen and Donna Stonecipher do, despite being poet-translators themselves. As Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s renovation of Paris between 1853 and 1870 “altered views and horizons, transportation, air quality, and ambient sound,” Swensen writes, “the prose poem . . . established a new rhythm, less regular, less formally structured; it was poetry adapted precisely to the changes in ambient sound” (192–93). Stonecipher, meanwhile, reads the prose poem as simultaneously “laying out a rhetoric of vertical and horizontal positions,” like the city experienced both “from above—an abstract, conceptual city—and the one experienced by the people below, ‘in’ it—a lived city, thus laying out a rhetoric of vertical and horizontal positions” (5). Certainly, many prose poems are about and of the city, from Baudelaire’s *Petits poèmes en prose* onward, but to overlook the importance of translation to the foundation and growth of the prose poem is to deny translation’s significance to literary history. This denial keeps literature the province of the national language department.

More than it is national, though, the prose poem is translational. In his introduction to *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*, Jeremy Noel-Tod

discusses urbanization and the “travaux haussmanniens” (“Haussmann projects”; xxxiii–iv) and mentions translation: “prose poets themselves have significantly contributed to the translation of prose poems, and thereby helped to create an international tradition” (xxviii). Baudelaire himself was influenced by “contemporary writers of hallucinatory English prose . . . whom he had translated into French” (xxxiv), he writes. Noel-Tod elaborates:

Versification varies from language to language and its subtleties are notoriously difficult to translate. One convention is simply to accept the loss of poetic form and render verse as prose. . . . The translation of prose into prose, however, does not so obviously require the sacrifice of formal effects, allowing the prose poem to move with relative ease between national traditions. (xxvii)

In other words, prose poetry emerged from deformation, or translators’ implicit agreement with Hegel’s statement that poetry could be turned into prose and translated into other languages without essential detriment.

#### “Through the Brush, I Wave My Hand One Last Time”: Prose Poetry in French Presentations of China

But while *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem* brings up translation, its subtitle—*From Baudelaire to Anne Carson*—nevertheless marks the historical parameters of its contents. Mentioning Baudelaire and Carson may be good marketing, but as literary history it smacks of the cults of genius and of origins—perennial problems in literary studies—to locate the birth of prose poetry in Baudelaire. As mentioned, before the posthumous publication of *Petits poèmes en prose* (also known as *Spleen de Paris*, or *Paris Spleen*), Judith Gautier had already published *Le livre de jade*, a widely read collection of Chinese poetry translated into French, dedicated to her Chinese teacher and cotranslator, Tin-Tun-ling 丁敦齡 (today his name would be romanized as Ding Dunling). My point is not that Gautier beat Baudelaire to the punch; that would equally fall into the trap of searching for origins and originality, which the study of translation should caution against.

(Indeed, it is not impossible that Baudelaire influenced Gautier's use of form after she began learning Chinese in 1863, since they knew each other, through her father, Théophile Gautier, and evidently Baudelaire wrote the *Spleen* poems between 1857 and his death in 1867.) Rather, my point is that Gautier's prose poems are at least as important as Baudelaire's, in showing the importance of translation to the form and in centering literary history on translation.

As a description of the process through which prose poetry was developed, Hegel's idea that ideas and intuitions are the subject matter of poetry is harder to refute than it is when taken on its own. The mechanism can be seen in Gautier's method: as Pauline Yu has written, "[H]er renditions do not attempt to replicate prosodic features of the originals, of which her introduction suggests she was aware, and have therefore sometimes been characterized as 'prose poems'" (470). Yu translates into English Gautier's French version of a famous poem by Li Bai 李白 (701–62), whom Gautier calls Li-Taï-Pé:

"Le départ d'un ami"

Par la verte montagne, aux rudes chemins, je vous  
reconduis jusqu'à l'enceinte du nord.  
L'eau écumante roule autour des murs, et se perd vers  
l'orient.  
C'est à cet endroit que nous nous séparons . . .  
Je m'en retourne, solitaire, et je marche péniblement.  
Il me semble, maintenant, que j'ai plus de dix  
mille lis à parcourir.  
Les nuages légers flânent, paresseusement, comme  
mes pensées.  
Bientôt le soleil se couche, et je sens plus vivement  
encore la tristesse de la séparation.  
Par-dessus les broussailles, une dernière fois, j'agite la  
main, au moment où vous allez disparaître.  
D'un long hennissement, mon cheval cherche à rap-  
peler le vôtre . . . Mais c'est un chant d'oiseau qui  
lui répond! . . .

"A Friend's Departure"

By the verdant mountain, on rough paths, I lead you  
back to the northern rampart.  
The bubbling waters flow around the walls and vanish  
toward the east.  
It is here that we part. . . .  
I return alone, walking wearily. It now seems that I  
have more than a thousand miles to traverse.

The light clouds drift lazily, like my thoughts.  
Soon the sun sets, and I feel more intensely again the  
sadness of separation.  
Through the brush, I wave my hand one last time, just  
as you're about to disappear.  
With a long whinny, my horse tries to call out to yours.  
But it's a bird's song that replies! . . .

送友人  
青山橫北郭  
白水繞東城  
此地一爲別  
孤蓬萬里徵  
浮雲遊子意  
落日故人情  
揮手自茲去  
蕭蕭班馬鳴

(qtd. in P. Yu 471)

As Yu notes, "The skeleton of the original is readily recognizable despite the expanded interpretations of the relations among the images that Gautier inserts into her translation" (471). More importantly, at the level of form and the sonic features of language, Gautier makes no attempt at reproduction. Rather, she foreignizes (Venuti), coming up with Bei Dao's "translation style" *avant la lettre*. Significantly, Li Bai's poem here is 律詩 ("regulated verse"), a form whose origins in the Liang dynasty (502–57) bespeak a desire, as Victor Mair and Tsu-lin Mei put it, "to reproduce, in Chinese, the same euphonic effect achieved by meter in Sanskrit" (379–80)—in its way, a much earlier kind of foreignizing translation genre (Klein, *Organization*), albeit one opposite to prose poetry in its avoidance of reproducing the "euphonic effect" achieved by Chinese prosody. By avoiding poetic form in this translation and other French prose versions of Chinese regulated verse, Gautier performs an *Aufhebung* with respect to poetic form, deforming the formal features yet extending a tradition of interlingual translational poetics into the present.

Something of Gautier's translations from Chinese has remained in the DNA of prose poetry. As Noel-Tod writes, "[O]ne subgenre of the prose poem is to perform the translation of an absent original" (xxvii). His first example is an English-language poet I will discuss soon; astonishingly, he does not mention

Victor Segalen, whose *Stèles / 古今碑錄* (1912)<sup>5</sup> present themselves as pseudo-translations of Chinese inscriptions he wrote at the top of each poem (the Chinese inscriptions were effectively ignored by readers until the 2007 translation by Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush). Segalen even seems to refer to his continuation of the prose poem format as a way to write China: “Tant de pinceaux élégants s’appliquent à calquer formules & formes” (“So many elegant brushes apply themselves to replicate formulas & forms”), he writes in his first poem in the book (74; 75). The line implies the recombination of form and content as the subject matter of poetry.

The relationship between prose poetry and China in French extends at least to Henri Michaux’s *Idéogrammes en Chine* (*Ideograms in China*; 1975), the opening of which seems to make metacommentary on its form just as Segalen does:

Traits dans toutes les directions. En tous sens des virgules, des boucles, des crochets, des accents, dirait-on, à toute hauteur, à tout niveau; déconcertants buissons d’accents.

.....

Sans corps, sans formes, sans figures, sans contours, sans symétrie, sans un centre, sans rappeler aucun connu.

Sans règle apparente de simplification, d’unification, de généralisation.

Ni sobres, ni épurés, ni dépouillés.

Chacun comme éparpillé, tel est le premier abord.  
(*Idéogrammes* 817)

Lines going off in all directions. In every which way: commas, loops, curlicues, stress marks, seemingly at every point, at all levels: a bewildering thicket of accents.

.....

Without form, figure, or body, without contour, symmetry, or center, without evoking any known property whatsoever.

Without any apparent rule of simplification, unification, generalization.

Neither stripped nor refined, lacking sobriety.

Each seems, at first, as if scattered. (*Ideograms* 3)

Michaux could almost as easily be talking about prose poetry as about Chinese characters; though “a bewildering thicket of accents” must be a comparison of strokes in Chinese characters with diacritical marks in French orthography, it also seems to describe literature according to changes in what Swensen called ambient sound in an urbanity inundated with new migrants.

“Chinese Space Breaks Free from the View in Front of Me”: English Presentations of China against the French

While in French the association between prose poetry and China extends smoothly from the middle of the nineteenth century to the late twentieth, in English the history is more contentious. Whether Chinese translation holds any association with prose poetry in English in this period has to do with a split between translations done by scholars, on the one hand, and translations or pseudo-translations done by poets, on the other. The name Noel-Tod provides for his first example of prose poetry’s performance of pseudo-translation is Allen Upward, for his “invented classical Chinese poems, ‘Scented Leaves—from a Chinese Jar’” (xxvii). This one is titled “The Middle Kingdom,” after the calque of “China” (中國): “The emperors of fourteen dynasties, clad in robes of yellow silk embroidered with the Dragon, wearing gold diadems set with pearls and rubies, and seated on thrones of incomparable ivory, have ruled over the Middle Kingdom for four thousand years” (Upward 195). A simple description of historical detail, it also reiterates the idea that in China history did not progress (before the Sui dynasty [581–618], emperors did not wear yellow).

Yet aside from Upward, representations of China and Chinese in English poetry from the time of *Le livre de jade* until roughly one century afterward appear almost determined to avoid the prose poem format. Some *Livre de jade* poems were translated into English prose by Stuart Merrill for his *Pastels in Prose* (1890), an anthology of French prose poetry (87–101), but in 1918, when James Whitall published *Chinese Lyrics from The Book of Jade*, he rendered Gautier’s versions into free verse,

not prose poetry.<sup>6</sup> And two years after Upward's prose poems appeared, Ezra Pound published *Cathay* (1915)—yet while Pound otherwise seems to have been quite influenced by Upward (Levenson 71–74), publishing nine of the *Scented Leaves* poems in his anthology *Des Imagistes* (Pound 51–53), and though Donald Hall has remarked on “the lyric potential of flatness” (119) in *Cathay*'s free verse, the translations in *Cathay* are lineated, almost in adamant opposition to prose poetry (Bush has remarked that “Gautier's style might today remind us at least as much of what Pound was rebelling against as what he promoted” [6]). After *Cathay*, Arthur Waley, Amy Lowell and Florence Ayscough, Burton Watson, A. C. Graham, and Kenneth Rexroth (despite some of his translations' being derived from Gautier's [P. Yu 480n13]), all translated Chinese poetry into lineated free verse, rather than prose poetry.

Translations of classical poetry by scholars, however—or, rather, translations aimed at a scholarly, rather than literary, audience—were often rendered in prose. Translations by scholars that aimed for a literary readership were still done according to the lineated verse standards of the day, such as Herbert Giles's rhyming jingles (his 1898 translation of the Li Bai poem quoted above, which he titled “Farewell,” ends, “Your heart was full of wandering thought; / For me,—my sun had set indeed; / To wave a last adieu we sought, / Voiced for us by each whinnying steed!”), quite the opposite impulse from what motivated Gautier. James Legge's translations offer an interesting case, demonstrating the pull of different audiences: mostly a translator of classical philosophy, his only translations of poems are three versions of the anonymous bronze age 詩經 (*Shijing; Book of Poetry*)—a lineated nonmetrical version for a scholarly readership (*She King* [1871]), a rhymed version for a general audience (*She King* [1876]), and an abridged third version (“Religious Portions” [1879]), which is in prose—the wording mostly unchanged from his first version, minus the line breaks. Scholars relied on prose until the 1950s, avoiding establishing new prosodic possibilities for poetry in English that could handle the formal features of Chinese poetics.

But the opposition between anglophone poets' verse translations and scholars' prose translations of Chinese poetry reached a synthesis, and it did so because of more literary translation. In 1969 Nathaniel Tarn's translation of Segalen's *Stèles* was published in the United States, as *Stelae*, helping to introduce, as the poet Ron Silliman has pointed out, to “American poetry something that had not previously existed here: the prose poem as a serious—and extended—work of art” (Silliman, “Think”). Tarn not only introduced prose poetry as an *art* form (rather than a fallback for scholars with no pretensions to poetry), he also seems to have reintroduced prose poetry's association with China. Silliman was among the first to take up the implications of Tarn's translation with his *Chinese Notebook* (1977), a prose poem formally reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* that tries to emphasize the materiality of language as well as the materiality of the notebook:

18. I chose a Chinese notebook, its thin pages not to be cut, its six red-line columns which I turned 90° the way they are closed by curves at both top and bottom, to see how it would alter the writing. Is it flatter, more airy? The words, as I write them, are larger, cover more surface on this two-dimensional picture plane. Shall I, therefore, tend toward shorter terms—impact of page on vocabulary? (540)

Silliman is one of the lead figures of language poetry, a movement that has often exploited the relationship between prose poems and China (Klein, “Dislocating Language”). Bob Perelman's “China” (1981), for instance, is on the porous boundary between prose poetry and lineated free verse:

We live on the third world from the sun. Number three. Nobody tells us what to do.

The people who taught us to count were being very kind.

It's always time to leave.

If it rains, you either have your umbrella or you don't. (32)

And China peppers the work of Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, even decades later. Her “Permanent

Home,” from *Nest* (2003), ends, “Chinese space breaks free from the view in front of me, while my house continues rotating on earth” (15). Of course, poetic engagements with China unrelated to language poetry were written during language poetry’s heyday, such as Allen Ginsberg’s “One Morning I Took a Walk in China” (1984), also on the boundary of prose poetry and lineated free verse (as is much of his work):

Students danced with wooden silvered swords, twirling  
on hard packed muddy earth  
as I walked out Hebei University’s concrete North  
Gate,  
across the road a blue capped man sold fried sweet  
dough-sticks, brown as new boiled doughnuts  
in the gray light of sky, past poplar tree trunks, white  
washed cylinders topped  
with red band the height of a boy—Children with  
school satchels sang & walked past me (903)

That many of these poems refer to China in their titles without necessarily featuring good faith engagements with the broad range of what China is, might be, means, has meant, and might mean raises a question. If Segalen and Upward were translating “absent originals,” how present or absent is China in these language-era pieces? Berssenbrugge’s “Chinese space” takes on a meaning in the light of the fact that she was born in Beijing and that she calls her poem “Permanent Home,” beginning it, “I seek a permanent home, but this structure has an appearance of indifferent compoundedness and isolation, heading toward hopelessness” (11). And Ginsberg was in China when he wrote about his walk, of course. But for Silliman and Perelman? While “Silliman’s ‘Chinese’ notebook represented a ninety-degree ‘turn’ from American writing and culture,” as Timothy Yu puts it (63), that “turn” is based on China as a trope of self-referentiality—and for Perelman, on China as a trope of inscrutability (Klein, “Silences” 275). Both “translation” and “China” cover an array of meanings. Is the relationship that prose poetry has with China a translational one with the living civilization known as China, or is it rather a pseudo-translational relationship with chinoiserie and orientalism?

A translation-centered transnational literary history must also take into account pseudo-translations; a form that fits China will also fit chinoiserie. A poem that is a translation from Chinese and a poem that in one way or another is about China in a language other than Chinese both present an image of China, and therefore both traffic in the network of those images available in that language, rather than the reality (which is inaccessible to those who do not know the language and so cannot read the texts) of that place. Nor can we judge a priori if a translation is an honest interpretation of a source text aimed at expanding the target readership’s understanding or else a fantastical representation aimed at placating the target audience with received notions; we have to read, and closely, if we want to make such judgments. And what works to expand understanding in one era may appear to placate with fantasies in another. Segalen and Michaux spent time in China in the 1910s and 1930s, respectively, yet I suspect their prose poeticizations of China as forever beyond reach helped Silliman and Perelman imagine China as nonreferential. This notion of China as nonreferential must be why Joan Retallack writes, in her contribution to the tradition of prose poem about China, “The Woman in the Chinese Room . . . . A Prospective” (1996),

imagine that you are locked in a room and in this  
room are several baskets full of Chinese characters  
she is glad they are Chinese of course glad to continue  
Pound’s Orientalism there will be no punctuated van-  
ishing points she is given only rules of syntax not  
semantic rules she is relieved of the burden of making  
meaning she need only make sense for the food to be  
pushed through the slot in the door (160)

Of course, in addition to her mention of Pound she is also writing about John Searle’s thought experiment of the “Chinese room” (Searle 32–33), another example of hooking the question of formal linguistic features and whether ideas can be the subject matter of poetry onto the philosophical belittling of Chinese writing, as Hegel had done.

### “The Word Doesn’t Say It”: China and English Prose Poetry Today

In any event, beyond Retallack and Berssenbrugge, the English-language poets and translators now writing prose poems that deal with China are not, to my mind, engaging in chinoiserie or using China only to signify problems of signification but are rather engaging with the scope of meanings China can offer. Exemplifying Göransson’s description of “deregulating” spaces of poetic “encounters,” they respond to what lingers of chinoiserie in the prose poem by tapping into its potential for expanding understanding of China.

Some of these engagements with China are political. An excerpt from “101 Rooms,” from *Too Too Too* (2018), by Tammy Lai-Ming Ho, reads:

A room where nobody speaks your language. A room with absolutely no straight lines. A room that is stuffed with burnt marshmallows. People get drunk in this room and take the wrong umbrellas home. The room is enormous and belongs to e.e. cummings. A room that cannot be photographed. A room in which one’s memory of childhood is rekindled. A room in which Sherlock Holmes plays his violin. A room in which love is made. Jane Eyre discovered that the chill red room was very seldom slept in. A room in which time does handstands on five continents. They don’t feel excluded when two real English speakers are in the same room, commenting on *Memoirs of a Geisha* or Bill Ashcroft’s postcolonial theories. Chow Mo-wan agrees to rent Room 2047 in the meantime. A room that is both sour and sweet. (73–74)

The second to last sentence alludes to the Wong Kar-wai 王家衛 film *2046* (2004), a sequel to *花樣年華* (*In the Mood for Love* [2000]), and 2047 is not only a room the protagonist rents, it also represents the first year after Basic Law is set to expire and Hong Kong is scheduled to become governed like any city in the PRC. Ho is herself from Hong Kong, where she was until recently a professor of English, and the prose poem is full of more allusions to English literature (e.g., Cummings, Holmes, *Jane Eyre*) than it is to Chinese culture. Yet the mentions of nobody speaking your language or not feeling

excluded when speakers of English comment on English-language representations of Asia also demonstrate her response to the prose poem form’s roots in orientalism and in China.

Many engagements with China use the poet’s family ties with China to re-explore its cultural history in a postcolonial context. Sarah Howe’s T. S. Eliot Prize-winning book of poetry *Loop of Jade* (2015), structured around the Jorge Luis Borges description of “a certain Chinese encyclopedia” (“Analytical Language” 103), made famous by Michel Foucault (xvi), often features prose poems that write of China (where her mother was from).<sup>7</sup> In “(b) Embalmed,” she writes:

West of this chamber where our breaths guttered out, nine horses were led backward down a ramp into the pit, tethered & sealed in. At the command, craftsmen rigged up hidden crossbows to impale

intruders. Waterways of twisting quicksilver modeled the hundred rivers, the Yangtze & seas, contrived so they seem to flow. Above are mapped the celestial bodies, winking in seed pearls. Man-fish

oil nourishes his lamps, calculated to burn through eras, undimmed. In life, the First Emperor took pleasure from a hunting park stocked with strange birds & fierce beasts offered by nations in far quarters:

the land of *K’un-ming* sent a Gold-sifting Bird as tribute. (8)

A psychogeography of allusions to Chinese culture and its mythopoetic past—“strange birds & fierce beasts” calls to mind the bronze-age bestiary *山海經* (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*) and its catalog of legendary creatures; “Man-fish” likely refers to Lu Ting 廬亭, the amphibious hybrid ancestor of the people of Hong Kong—is charted against the real geography of China’s “Yangtze & seas,” itself shaped into an allusion to the phrase 海納百川 (“the sea takes in the hundred rivers”). In the face of the lost understanding of China due to emigration and postcoloniality, Howe presents an intimate re-creation of her heritage culture that mixes the fictive with the factual.

Ken Chen also uses the prose poem to reach back to Greater China—in his case, Taiwan, where his parents were from. In “The Invisible Memoir,” from *Juvenilia* (2010), which won the Yale Younger Poets competition in 2009, he writes:

We invented ghosts to hide the thing from its definition. We miss the thing, which was not lovable, he was stingy and spoke a Mandarin that smelled like nicotine, who gave us candy when we sat on her couch, and who worked as a statistician when he was in Beijing—but the thing itself no longer exists. “Tomorrow, my mother will be dead,” wrote Jules Renard in 1900. “I shall know another ghost.” Pu Song-Ling, the author of the Ming Dynasty classic *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*), describes a man named Hsu who carries the ghost of his true love and finds her “so light that she is like carrying a child.” When translator Herbert Giles compares this “to the German notion that the spirit of the dead mother, coming back at night to suckle the child she has left behind, makes an impress on the bed alongside the baby,” we may argue that he divulges an appositive desire—the desire to contextualize. While Giles aims only to renovate the scope of the sentence, widening his focus from a Chinese romance to a nursing mother in Germany, it seems also accurate to say that he describes the weight of the past as it hangs behind each object, thick and transparent. The appositive is the noun’s ghost. (72)

Through his focus on family, he touches on a broader Chinese culture that can also be found in translation.

But poets who do not have familial ties to China or an interest in referring to premodern Chinese literature also describe the country’s development in prose poems. The Korean American poet Cathy Park Hong, in “Adventures in Shangdu,” from *Engine Empire* (2012), writes:

Of Lucky Highrise Apartment 88

The contractors were in a hurry to catch up with the rest of the world so they rushed off before they finished building Highrise 88. So here is my apartment without its last wall, gaping out to a panoramic view

of Shangdu’s river. Across the river, all the white-tiled factories hum anxiously. This hum of 2,000 factories can inspire or drive you mad. Yesterday, a drunk man and a suicide used 88’s unencumbered views to fall to their deaths and now there are ads for new roommates. I am one of the few women who live alone in this building. My last roommate married as quickly as she moved in with me. I see her in the neighborhood, pregnant and gloating, with men who fetch her footstools. (46)

Hong is writing of China’s recent economic frenzy and its human cost from the vantage point of Shangdu 上都, the Inner Mongolian town that was Qubilai Qan’s capital and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Xanadu. Her description of contractors “in a hurry to catch up with the rest of the world” is an appropriate rebuke to Hegel’s imagination of China as “outside the World’s History.”

Many prose poetry treatments of China deal with vocabulary or questions of language, as if testing the Hegelian belief in the unimportance of formal linguistic features in the prose poem’s rejection of form. Eleanor Goodman, a translator of the contemporary poets Wang Xiaoni 王小妮 (b. 1955), Zang Di 臧棣 (b. 1964), and others, writes in “Mangosteen,” from *Nine Dragon Island* (2016):

It must be the same, the peel unyielding and dark like cracked leather, the flesh musky, unpleasant, with a whiff of iodine or dry stone. The word doesn’t say it. In a book of love poems someone else wrote, a drop of acid eats through the page to the past, to my temporary teacher, three years before. Jolene, she called herself then. She laughed when I tried it and the taste burned on my tongue. Mangosteen, richer than persimmon or wet-eyed longyan, rarer than *jin foshou*, the bitter Golden Hand of the Buddha. A study of tongues, a lesson: heat, market, barter, eat. Speak, touch, taste. And that other poet, did his lover give it to him, the one he met in a bath in Beijing, fine-boned with delicate hands? Fruit and tea in the morning, after dark, after dancing. Context is all. The word arrives like the friend of a friend I’m putting up for the night. The tongue’s memory fails, one of the body’s countless betrayals. But I remember the taste isn’t like mango, tropical but never “peach and pineapple” as Webster’s has

it. Jolene, whose name I never knew, she called it *shanzhu*, while other worlds went unspoken. Is this what we mean when we say the meaning of things?

In “The Future of Writing in English,” from *The Wug Test* (2016), Jennifer Kronovet, who cotranslated the poetry of Liu Xia 刘霞 (b. 1961) under the pseudonym Jennifer Stern, writes, “After being released from a concentration camp and becoming an exile in Shanghai, Charles K. Bliss invented a language of no sounds. A writing system of symbols to circumvent speech, its manipulations. Ideographic. Ideo. Idea. Ideal as the space between mind and page as silent” (17). Kronovet’s poem challenges claims of the idealism of the Chinese language, while Goodman’s sound play—the alliterations of “through the page to the past, to my temporary teacher”; the meditation on naming and language difference (“Jolene, whose name I never knew”; “*jinfoshou*, the bitter Golden Hand of the Buddha” and “*shanzhu* [mangosteen]. . . . Is this what we mean when we say the meaning of things?”)—demonstrates that, even in prose poetry, formal linguistic features are part of the definition of poetry.

China has long served, in Zhang Longxi’s words, as “the image of the ultimate Other” for the West (110). Prose poetry, despite the fact that it is no longer a new genre, is also something of an other, which may further explain why China and prose poetry so often find themselves together. Admussen, too, who argued that in the PRC today prose poetry is an “establishment genre,” uses the formless form of prose poetry in English to write about China. In his “Parable of the Birth of Zhuangzi,” in *Stand Back, Don’t Fear the Change* (2019), he writes:

My wife was going to have a baby and the baby died and the baby was born anyway and the baby was a very small Zhuangzi. He was not a baby, he was a fetus, not a fetus, an embryo, he was a curl, he was a gray smudge between concept and execution, a feather fallen loose from the arrow of progress. He said, I’m telling you. Animal life is a limited life and the world is an unlimited world, the world despises your animal life, it’s swallowing your little chimp life whole. Zhuangzi had died because he was made of incomplete genetic information, or

perhaps because all our bodies are singing with poison. My wife tried to love Zhuangzi because he was her son but he brushed her off. He wanted me to promise him that I would leave home immediately and with such theatrics that no home could reassert itself in the place where I’d left it. He kept gesturing at his own gelatinousness, he said this is not natural, you made it all up, he said let’s throw off the oppression of descent. I knew he was a real person and that he was my own real son because he was so incredibly scared about having died. He said to have a party after he was gone, he said never to say anything about him to anyone so that the unspoken word of him would remain eternally identical to itself, the pregnancy of the silence before speech. He said he was just a dream of himself anyway, that none of it mattered. I told him everything would be okay. I tried to name him something guttural and unwritable, but he had already gone back to not ever really having been here. (37)

The bronze-age Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi 莊子 shows up here refracted but still recognizable from his parables, skeptical of language as a means to convey truth, celebratory of death as its own stage in life, raising questions about the reality of his existence, and interested in oneness with greater processes of nature. Of course, it is worth asking of this poem about a miscarriage: Is this poem equally *about* China, or does China rather make up its method? I think the answer can be found in the gelatinousness to which Admussen gestures in this poem. Some of the poems I have cited here treat China as a subject, others as a reference, but either way, they are incorporating China into their methodology. This kind of signficatory gelatinousness defines both China and the prose poem. And since contemporary Chinese prose poets such as Xi Chuan, particularly when writing about the changing definitions of China, are also gesturing about their and their country’s gelatinousness, they are indeed writing “prose poems” in a mode central to the international context, even if it is peripheral or marginal in the contemporary Chinese context.

So where does that leave us? Poets do not write only about China in prose poetry, and certainly there are more prose poems *not* about China than

there are those about China. And yet, as I have shown, China shows up as a common topic—as an idea or intuition—in prose poetry. Given that China constitutes some of the “genetic information” of the prose poem, to use Admussen’s phrase in “Parable of the Birth of Zhuangzi,” it should not be surprising to see China appear in prose poems written in English today, extending translation beyond the immediate treatment of a source text in a target language, outward to the broader representation of certain subject matter in certain styles. Is this the meaning of Admussen’s phrase “the oppression of descent”? But rather than be oppressed by prose poetry’s China-related lineage, prose poems find identity within it.

### “To Tenderly Mingle in Speculation”: Conclusion

In the prose poem “Merry Christmas from Hegel,” Anne Carson writes:

It was the year my brother died. I lived up north and had few friends or they all went away. Christmas Day I was sitting in my armchair, reading something about Hegel. You will forgive me if you are someone who knows a lot of Hegel or understands it, I do not and will paraphrase badly, but I understood him to be saying he was fed up with popular criticism of his terrible prose. . . . The function of a sentence like “Reason is Spirit” was not to assert a fact (he said) but to lay Reason side by side with Spirit and allow their meanings to tenderly mingle in speculation. I was overjoyed by this notion of a philosophic space where words drift in gentle mutual redefinition of one another but, at the same time, wretchedly lonely with all my family dead and here it was Christmas Day, so I put on big boots and coat and went out to do some snow standing. Not since childhood! I had forgot how astounding it is. . . . It has nothing to do with Hegel and he would not admire the clumsily conventional sentences in which I have tried to tell about it but I suspect, if I hadn’t been trying on the mood of Hegel’s particular grammatical indignation that Christmas Day, I would never have gone out to stand in the snow, or stayed to speculate with it, or had the patience to sit down and make a record of speculation for myself as if it were a worthy way to spend an afternoon, a plausible

way to change the icy horror of holiday into a sort of homecoming. Merry Christmas from Hegel.

Carson’s poem is not about China, of course. Yet it is relevant to my argument here for shifting our approach to Hegel’s thinking in the direction of poetics (and for actualizing that shift in poetry). Just as Hegel wanted to let the meanings of Reason and Spirit mingle in speculation, we have here been letting the translation of poetry and the turning of poetry into prose mingle with China in speculation—or in thinking somewhat more grounded than just speculation.

Prose poetry also lets ideas mingle in speculation. One leitmotif of this paper (from mentions of Hegel to Wittgenstein to Searle to Zhuangzi) has been the close relationship between prose poetry and philosophy, operating with their own dialectical swirl. But prose poetry is not philosophy: even as they broil with ideas, many of the poems above also challenge the notion that “ideas and intuitions are in truth the subject-matter of poetry” as they are in philosophy. Rather, prose poetry’s heterodox rhythms are also part of their definition as poetry (imagine rewriting them in rhymed verse, for instance). As the form developed out of avoiding metrics, through translation, it defined a new musicality and formality for its new poetics. Prose poetry disproves Hegel’s thesis about the unimportance of formal linguistic features to poetry by absorbing it, by keeping formal linguistic features conspicuous in their absence, or by pointing to the missing rhythms of another language.

The act of translation also puts ideas into a speculative mingle—as poetry does, but also the speculative mingle of content in a new form and new context. What *poetry* means might differ in any given language or era, so to translate something *as* poetry in English is to put in place a certain kind of speculation. The same is true of prose poetry translated from Chinese into other languages. If prose poetry is an “establishment genre” in China today, then to translate Xi Chuan into an otherized prose poetry in English is to speculate about what an antiestablishment prose poetry might be in China—a prose poetry that does not need to find another

name for itself (“poessay” or “text”). That is what I do when I translate Xi Chuan for readers of Segalen, Retallack, Berssenbrugge, Ho, Howe, Chen, Hong, Goodman, Kronovet, and Admussen. Yet such speculation is not only speculative. As Xi Chuan writes in “Random Manhattan Thoughts”:

或许天上另有一个曼哈顿。或许曼哈顿梦想把全世界都变成曼哈顿。早晚有一天，埃兹拉·庞德漫步北京街头，会感叹“北京找不到能够称为北京的东西。”你只好劝他“再找找”，看能否发现什么秘密。

北京的秘密，就是即使北京没了城墙，没了骆驼，没了羊群，没了马粪，没了标语口号，它依然是北京。北京拆了盖，盖了拆，越拆心里越没障碍，越盖越什么都不像，但一个假北京就更是一个真北京，偏偏不是曼哈顿。

(110)

Maybe there’s another Manhattan up in the sky. Maybe Manhattan dreams of making the whole world Manhattan. One day, Ezra Pound will stroll through the streets of Beijing and sigh, “There is nothing in Beijing that can be called Beijing.” And you’ll say, “Keep looking,” and see if he can discover any secrets.

Beijing’s secret is: even if Beijing never had a city wall, never had camels, never had herds of sheep, never had piles of horse shit, never had slogans and political posters, it would still be Beijing. Beijing has been torn down and rebuilt, rebuilt and torn down, and the more it’s torn down the less obstructed we feel, the more it’s rebuilt the less it resembles anything. But a false Beijing is an even truer Beijing, because it isn’t Manhattan. (111)

Xi Chuan’s prose poems are an antiestablishment prose poetry in China. And as his texts enact an *Aufhebung* on the formal features of language mattering and allude to the image of China presented by Western poetry in the process, his prose poems simultaneously negate and preserve Western prose poetry and their history of representing China. This is his answer to my question above, about what the prose poem’s treatment of linguistic features in poetry translation might tell us about

China. Regardless of whether I move them from East to West, his poessays, his prose poems, subverting the relationship between the Western prose poem and the image of China, move literary history from West to East. That is not how Hegel envisioned history moving, but such movement is made possible by a synthesis of the contradictions embedded in his statement that poetry can be translated or turned into prose because ideas and intuitions are the subject matter of poetry.

## NOTES

1. A prose poetry precursor to Gautier’s translations is Aloysius Bertrand’s *Gaspard de la nuit* (*Gaspard of the Night*; 1842), which reportedly sold only twenty copies. Other prose poetry precursors worth considering in the light of translation are the pseudo-translations of James Macpherson’s *Works of Ossian* (1765) and, of course, the King James Bible (1611).

2. The Chinese translated as “translation style” is 翻译文体.

3. Other poets whose engagement with international trends in prose poetry makes them central internationally if peripheral in the Chinese context are the early Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 (b. 1956) and Yu Jian 于坚 (b. 1954). For readings of these poets as well as Xi Chuan, see Admussen, *Recite*, and Van Crevel.

4. By “sequestering” I am referring to the difficulties literary histories of European languages have in acknowledging the importance of translation and literature in Chinese, not difficulties Chinese literature has had in coming to terms with international influence. Socialism is international by definition, and even Chinese state poets have published translations (Volland).

5. A revised and expanded edition of this work was published in 1914.

6. P. Yu quotes Gottfried Böhm’s rhymed version of a Gautier prose poem, the translation laid out like a diamond (475–76). Clearly different languages managed the relationship between poetic form and associative content differently.

7. In addition to Simms, whose somewhat obscure translation of Borges’s essays is cited above, Eliot Weinberger also translated Borges’s essay (Borges, “John Wilkins’ Analytical Language”). Interestingly, however, Howe’s inscription to *Loop of Jade* quotes from the (anonymous) English translation of the French translation Foucault was quoting, rather than from Simms’s or Weinberger’s translations.

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**Abstract:** What is the international literary history behind Xi Chuan’s Chinese prose poems, and what is the literary history behind translating them into English as prose poems? Did Hegel’s belief that poetry can be “translated into other languages without essential detriment to its value” contribute to the birth of prose poetry, through a synthesis with poetic form? If so, what does this notion say about Hegel’s idea that China lies “outside the World’s History”? In the light of the historical association between China and prose poetry in the literary history of French (Judith Gautier, Victor Segalen, Henri Michaux) and English (Allen Upward, Nathaniel Tarn, Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman, Joan Retallack, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Tammy Lai-Ming Ho, Sarah Howe, Ken Chen, Cathy Park Hong, Eleanor Goodman, Jennifer Kronovet, and Nick Admussen), I discuss prose poetry as an outcome of what Joyelle McSweeney and Johannes Göransson call a translational “deformation zone,” to argue that translating Chinese prose poetry demonstrates China to be inside, not outside, the history of the world.