

Translator's Introduction

How to make sense of Duo Duo's poetry is the overarching question it poses, at the root of its political significance as well as its literary interest. In the words of his 1987 poem "Remade," he has worked to "remake language with remade tools" and "with remade language / keep remaking." How should his continued remaking be read? What does the reader need in order to understand his remade language?

Duo Duo was born in Beijing in 1951 as Li Shizheng 栗世征 (he gave himself his pen name in honor of his daughter, called Duoduo, who died in infancy in 1982). He was born two years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, and his life follows its general historical outlines: he came of age during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), reached maturity as a poet during the "reform and opening" years of the 1980s, lived abroad during China's economic explosion in the 1990s, and returned in 2004 to a country beset by problems known in many other internationalized economies (inequality, authoritarianism, nativism, etc.). But his writing has never been reducible to a mirror of or straightforward response to the conditions of its creation.

He told me once, with only a hint of frustration, that Chinese readers tend to favor his earlier works—I think because they take his early works as expressions of the era. In contrast, I have placed the poems he has written since his return to China first in this book; the parts of the book move progressively back in time. Chinese publications tend to divide poetry by decade; this book

is arranged by life period and roughly follows the decades, but not precisely. The first part, titled “The Force of Forging Words (2004–2018),” covers the period since he returned to China; “Amsterdam’s River (1989–2004)” represents his exile years, which he spent mostly in the Netherlands; “Delusion Is the Master of Reality (1982–1988)” corresponds to China’s “reform and opening” years; finally, “Instruction (1972–1976)” includes his earliest work, from the middle of the Cultural Revolution until the eve of the Deng Xiaoping era. I have arranged the book this way to some extent because I feel that the more the poems move into the past, the more they require contextualization for the non-Chinese reader. My introduction of Duo Duo and his works will likewise start with the present and move backward as I ask to what degree contextualization is useful in reading his poetry.

Appreciation of Duo Duo’s most recent work is not helped much by knowledge of the environment in which it was produced. Though naturalized as a Dutch citizen, he returned to China in 2004 after fifteen years living abroad to teach at Hainan University, dividing his time between the southern island and Beijing. He has lived in Beijing full-time since retirement. He stays in a small apartment without a mailbox; if you want to send him something, he must be there himself to receive it. A vegetarian (and one not opposed to drinking), he has an affinity, revealed in his poetry, with the mixture of Indian Buddhism and Chinese Daoism known as Zen, with its mysteries and suspicion of language. From “To Have the Honor of Reading Shivers in the Moonlight” (2007):

sūtra rivers reciting words of inaction
the departed are the audience
the audience is silence

And yet language – despite refracting what it is meant to reflect, contorting what it means to convey – is also made, constructed.

The first part of this book is titled after this 2014 poem:

The Force of Forging Words

outside force, continuing on
from enough, is insufficient hallucination

light vanishes with feathers
stillness cannot be forfended

candles stuck with wings know only to advance
what's most loved is dark and quiet

this is rationale's wasteland
but the ethics of poetry

dream and the boat on the shore must join forces
if words can spill beyond their own bounds

only there, to test the hearing of the end

Words may be inadequate, and silence may be the audience, but Duo Duo has been writing of language—and, by extension, poetry—as a made thing since 1984, when he wrote his poem “The Construction of Language Comes from the Kitchen.” Here, in “The Force of Forging Words,” Duo Duo acknowledges at once that what lies beyond this force is a dream, itself inadequate, and that stillness is unpreventable—even as it may be the wasteland of reasoning, if not reason itself. Stillness is also where we must look for what is ethical about poetry. These ethics are separate from solutions to the practical problems of life in a country such as China or a city such as Beijing, which do not enter his poetry much. Yet there may be something applicable in the

poem's philosophy, which is for words to "spill from their own bounds," to unite the force of forging words with the force of what words forge.

Words spilling from their own bounds means that they pour out into mystery and multiplicity, but amid the multiplicity there can be room for a bit of context—context does not need to undermine what is compelling about the mysteries of Duo Duo's poetry. Duo Duo himself lived "beyond bounds"—in the UK and Canada for a time, as well as the Netherlands. He ended up abroad because he was invited to the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam and flew from Beijing to London, where he had also arranged readings. His flight departed on June 4, 1989, but since April of that year Tiananmen Square, at the center of Beijing, had been occupied by students and workers whose commemoration of the death of reformist Communist Party leader Hu Yaobang had turned into a large-scale demonstration for democratic reforms, with hunger strikes and protests spreading to many other cities throughout China. On the night of June 3, a matter of hours before Duo Duo's flight, the military entered Beijing to crush the protests, killing an untold number (the Chinese government once reported 241 deaths; the Chinese Red Cross had estimated 2,600 but retracted it) in what would become known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre (or, within China, as the Tiananmen Incident). Duo Duo had not been known as a dissident, and his plane ticket had been booked long in advance. But he had been a witness to the demonstrations and the military suppression, and in London and Rotterdam he spoke freely to journalists about the massacre. Going home soon was not an option. The second part of this book, representing his years in exile, is titled from a poem written in the first year of that exile:

Amsterdam's River

in the November nightfall city
there is only Amsterdam's river

suddenly

the tangerines on my tree at home
shake in the autumn wind

I close the window, but no use
the river flows upstream, but no use
that sun inlaid with pearls, rising

no use
pigeons disperse like iron filings
and the streets with no boys suddenly seem so spacious

after autumn rain
the roof that's crawling with snails
— my country

slowly floats by, on Amsterdam's river

The poem is one of displacement: the home with the tangerine tree is not in Amsterdam, even as the speaker's country floats by on Amsterdam's river. And since the river is flowing upstream, things are not proceeding the way they were expected to proceed. Context provides an anchor: in the line about streets with no boys suddenly seeming so spacious, I see an image of Beijing's streets after the slaughter of the protesters.

Duo Duo was not there to see China's transformation in the nineties, but the decade was a time of exponential growth

and drastic change there. In 1989, Europe and the United States put an embargo on selling arms to China; by 2000, Beijing had been awarded the 2008 Summer Olympics. In 1992, the paramount leader of China, Deng Xiaoping, made a tour of the south of China, including his Special Economic Zones, such as Shenzhen (then a city of 1.3 million, today a city of over 12 million), called for the development of the Pudong region of Shanghai (now the city's most populous area, in addition to being the location of its financial district and most famous skyscrapers), and proclaimed "To get rich is glorious." Duo Duo's "Courtyard Home" (1999) contains the following lines:

stone coffin wood cart ancient road urban infrastructure

over the ridges of low-rise roofs, the logic of
the courtyard home, street grids, whose
palmprint prophesied it into a square

The poem reads like an attempt to work through news of China and its changes in relation to what Duo Duo remembered. A poem such as this must have been psychologically necessary for him to return to China a few years later. The "square" here is not the shape but a city square, such as Tiananmen.

If there is a tension between these two ways of reading Duo Duo's poetry—reading them for the arguments they make about eternal concepts or else looking for the contexts provided by his life experiences and seeing how the contexts might ground what the poems say—then to some extent Duo Duo's own poetry can offer an answer. The third part of this book borrows its title from a poem written in 1982:

Delusion Is the Master of Reality

and we, we are birds touching lip to lip
in the story of time
undertaking our final division
from man

the key turns in the ear
the shadows have left us
the key keeps turning
birds are reduced to people
people unacquainted with birds

The poem prizes the abstract and ethereal: birds, which are ungrounded; stories, which are removed representations; shadows . . . and yet the shadows have left us, and the birds are reduced to people who do not know what they were reduced from. If delusion is the master of reality, if we do not want the birds of our reading reduced to the point where we are unable to understand the ungrounded and airborne, then perhaps the best way to read a poem is for our own thoughts to drift from the words provided and master the reality of the poem with our fantasy, with our imagination. After all, our thoughts will control what we understand more than objective reality will offer us truth from facts.

At the same time, to proclaim delusion the master of reality seems to argue against the possibility of “seeking truth from facts” – Deng Xiaoping’s slogan in promoting his brand of socialism as more pragmatic than Chairman Mao Zedong’s had been. To seek truth from facts is pointless, Duo Duo’s poem implies, if facts, or reality, are mastered by someone or other’s deluded sense of truth. Does contextualizing the poem this way, according to the facts of when it was written, counter the logic of the poem? Nevertheless, the eighties were days of optimism and idealism, of

“high culture fever” and debates about “Obscure Poetry” – poetry affiliated with *Jintian* (Today), the first unofficial literary journal in the People’s Republic when it went to print in 1978 – by poets such as Bei Dao (b. 1949), Mang Ke (b. 1950), Shu Ting (b. 1952), Yang Lian (b. 1955), and Gu Cheng (1956–1993). These poets became minor celebrities not only because distractions like televisions were rare but also because they wrote work that, in contrast to what little had been available before, rewarded rereading and instigated imagination. For a time, believing they were the masters of reality did not seem delusional.

In the even earlier era, a different kind of delusion ruled reality. The final part of this book is titled after a poem from 1976:

Instruction

—*a decadent memorial*

in just one night, the wound burst
and all the books on the bookshelf betrayed them
only the era’s greatest singer
with a hoarse voice, at ear-side, sang softly:
 night of jazz, night of a century
they were eliminated by the forests of an advanced society
and limited to such themes:
to appear only as a foil to the
world’s miseries, miseries
that would become their lives’ obligation

who says the themes of their early lives
were bright, even today they still take it
as a harmful dictum
on a night with no artistic storyline
lamplight originated in misperception
what they saw was always

a monotonous rope appearing in winter's snowfall
they could only keep playing, tirelessly
wrestling with whatever flees and living
with whatever cannot remember
even if it brought back their earliest longings
emptiness became the stain on their lives

their misfortune came from the misfortune of ideals
but their pain they'd helped themselves to
self-consciousness sharpened their thinking
but from self-consciousness, blood loss
they couldn't make peace with tradition
even though the world had existed
uncleanly a long time before their birth
still they wanted to find
whichever first criminal discovered "truth"
and tear down the world
and all the time it needed to wait

faced with chains hanging around their necks
their only crazy act
was pulling them tighter
but they were no comrades
their disparate destructive forces
were never close to grabbing society's attention
and they were reduced to being spiritual criminals
because: they had abused allegory

yet in the end, they pray in the classroom of thought
and fall comatose at seeing their own handwriting so clearly:
the time they lived in was not the one the lord had arranged
they are the misborn, stopped at the point of
misunderstanding life

and all they went through — nothing but the tragedy of
being born

Written at the end of the Cultural Revolution, the poem tells the story of the urban youths who were at first at the forefront of the era but soon became its victims, betrayed by their bookshelves: their misfortune was that of their ideals, and their self-consciousness resulted in blood loss and an inability to make peace with tradition, for they had to live lives of arrested development, their tragedy nothing but the tragedy of being born.

Here some knowledge of Duo Duo's life and times may be helpful. The Cultural Revolution began with Mao's attempt to rid the Party of suspected capitalists and its entrenched bureaucracy. For this he mobilized students to agitate not only against the Party, of which he was chairman, but, by extension, against anyone in a position of authority, including teachers. Schools were shut down, and China's educated young formed themselves into factions of Red Guards. Duo Duo was of this generation, and his formal education ended halfway through high school (given his intellectual family background, he was deemed insufficiently "Red" to become a Red Guard). Mao changed course in 1968 and called on urban students to move to rural villages, ostensibly to learn from the peasantry but also to get them out of the way as the military reimposed order on the country. This is how the educated youths were betrayed by their books.

Duo Duo was sent to Baiyangdian, in Hebei province, ninety-three miles south of Beijing, along with his high school friends Mang Ke and Yue Zhong (known as Genzi, b. 1951). They became known among poetry readers as the Three Musketeers of Baiyangdian; in an essay from 1988, "The Buried Poets," Duo Duo refers to the village as "a cradle." In 1969, Minister of Defense Lin Biao was named vice-chairman of the Party, and the military took control of the country, but within the Party's cen-

tral committee there were tensions between Lin's military, civilian radicals under the leadership of Mao's wife Jiang Qing, and more pragmatic officials, such as Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. After a failed coup by Lin Biao (or, more likely, his subordinates), Lin allegedly fled the country and died in a plane crash in Mongolia, resulting in intensified political struggles between Jiang Qing's radical faction and the Zhou Enlai-led pragmatists. As for the youths, "emptiness became the stain on their lives // their misfortune came from the misfortune of ideals."

When Zhou died in 1976, he was mourned in large-scale demonstrations featuring poetry readings – not experimental or underground poetry, but then these poets' "disparate destructive forces / were never close to grabbing society's attention." When Mao died in September, eight months later, Jiang Qing and her allies made a last-ditch power grab, but within months they were arrested, labeled by the military as the Gang of Four, and made to bear the blame for the tumult of the preceding years (in fact, their first charges were for "undermining" the Cultural Revolution). In 1978, Deng Xiaoping took the reins of the country and instituted the era of "reform and opening."

In his "Buried Poets" essay, Duo Duo says his life as a poet began when a fragment came to him: "the window opens like an eye." He had been reading Salinger and Sartre in clandestine editions, published for "internal circulation" among high-level Communist cadres. He remembers the date: June 19, 1972. It was the year after the plane crash that killed Lin Biao and only months after Richard Nixon's visit to China. To some extent, the changing times must have opened his eyes, just as some knowledge of what Duo Duo and China have gone through can open our eyes as readers. But even if context does help explain some of Duo Duo's poetry, and where he and his writing come from, it cannot answer all the questions the poems toss up. The first poem in the last part – and one of the first poems Duo Duo saved, the

first poem to open many of his retrospective publications — is titled “When the People Stand Up from Cheese” (1972). It reads:

song omits the bloodiness of revolution
August is like a cruel bow
the poison boy walks out of the commune
with tobacco and a dry throat
livestock wear barbaric blinders
blackened corpses hanging over their butts like swollen drums
until the sacrifice behind the hedge eventually blurs
and far away, more smoking troops embark

At one level, the poem gives voice to a startling expression of Red Guard ideological fallout. Everything is violent or else the passive result of violence, like charred corpses and smoke-dried throats. Yet the title is a mystery: the image of people “standing up” echoes Chairman Mao’s proclamation that with the victory of the Communist Party in 1949 the people of China had “stood up” (though to say so is to ignore the bloodiness of their standing). But to stand up “from cheese”? The word adds an absurdity to the depiction of Cultural Revolutionary pessimism. Perhaps the foreign foodstuff implies some of the foreign origins of Duo Duo’s poetics? He later defined the awakening he experienced when he read Baudelaire’s phrase “The sun is like a poet,” a contrast with “Chairman Mao is like the sun,” a line in a song he had grown up with. Or maybe *ganlao*, which I have translated as “cheese,” is *aruul*, the dried curds eaten in Inner Mongolia. That might make more sense given the agricultural setting of the poem, with its livestock and farm communes. Then again, scholars have claimed *ganlao* 干酪 to be a misprint for *ganhan* 干鼾, or “dry snoring.” And yet in Duo Duo’s publications in China, it is still printed as “cheese,” *ganlao*. So the reader must either find a way to make sense of it or yield to its senselessness.

As a translator, I must both make sense of his poetry and yield to its transcendence of sense. The questions through which I have traced this introduction to Duo Duo's work—namely, whether the poems are best read as tied to their contexts or as independent works of the imagination—are the same questions we must ask of translations: are they best approached as if tethered to the texts they are representing, or can they take on lives of their own in a new language? In both cases, I hope that the answer is *both*. I must make sense of Duo Duo's words and interpret them, but I have not tried to unpack or interpret or impose any deeper meanings. That is the task of the reader, not the translator.

While I believe in the potential of readers to come up with their own readings, and the potential of poems in translation thereby to take on lives of their own, I also demand accuracy. I have aimed to put in English what he has put in Chinese, the way he has put it. There is enough mystery in his images and how they interact and interlock that I see no need to mystify the Chinese language he writes in (as his poems argue, the mystery is in all language, any language). Attentiveness to the syntax and vocabulary of Chinese can resolve some of the apparent ambiguities or obscurities in his poetry—to allow other ambiguities to develop more fully. For instance, the opening couplet of “Amsterdam's River” reads, *shiyi yue ruye de chengshi / wei you Amusitedan de heliu* 十一月入夜的城市 / 唯有阿姆斯特丹的河流. At the center of the first line is *ruye* 入夜, which character by character would mean “enter night”—making the line something like, “November / enter night / city.” At first I was confused: “city of November entering night”? “the city that enters night in November”? Is the city entering night or the month? How? But then I realized that *ruye* is simply a word on its own, meaning “nightfall.” (Imagine someone over-poeticizing the line in English, or misunderstanding it, to wonder whether November or the city was “falling” into night.) Hence my translation: “in the November nightfall city / there is

only Amsterdam’s river” (whether “river” should be singular or plural sent me to maps of the Netherlands: there are many canals in Amsterdam but only one river, the Amstel).

But translation is not only about getting the words right according to their dictionary definitions. Attentiveness on the translator’s behalf to the specifics of the imagery can clarify potential confusions. “Amsterdam’s River” also contains the line *gequn xiang tiexie sanluo* 鸽群像铁屑散落. The word *gequn* 鸽群 can refer to a flock of doves or pigeons; Chinese does not differentiate between the two, so the translator must decide. It is common, of course, for poets to write about doves—they have the same symbolism in modern Chinese that they have in English—but the birds in question are being compared to *tiexie* 铁屑, “shaved iron,” and so are not white but gray brown. The line reads “pigeons disperse like iron filings” in my translation.

My goal as both translator and compiler of the poems included here is to let Duo Duo’s style come through. A “new and selected” anthology, it includes every poem Duo Duo has published since his last collection in English translation, plus a selection of his poetry of the previous three decades. His previous books of poetry in English translation are *Statements: The New Chinese Poetry of Duoduo* (Wellsweep, 1989), with translations by John Cayley and Gregory B. Lee; an expanded and corrected edition of *Statements* titled *Looking Out from Death: From the Cultural Revolution to Tiananmen Square* (Bloomsbury, 1989); *Crossing the Sea: Poems in Exile / Poems in China* (House of Anansi, 1998), translated by Lee Robinson and Li Ming Yu; and *The Boy Who Catches Wasps* (Zephyr Press, 2002), translated by Gregory B. Lee. To avoid overlapping too much with earlier anthologies in English, I offer some poems they do not include, retranslate some poems they have already made available, and leave out other poems. My sources are the poems published in Duo Duo’s most recent career-spanning collections, *Promise* 诺言 (Zuojia chuban-

she, 2013) and *Delusion Is the Master of Reality* 妄想是真实的主人 (Yilin chubanshe, 2018), as well as Duo Duo himself, who provided me with a number of more recent poems.

The most thorough scholarly work on Duo Duo in English is *Language Shattered: Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Duoduo*, by Maghiel van Crevel (Research School CNWS, Leiden University, 1996), which not only includes readings of Duo Duo's poetry up to its publication but also presents a comprehensive history of underground poetry in mainland China from the sixties onward. Other books with significant scholarly treatment of Duo Duo's work are *Contemporary Chinese Literature: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future*, by Yibing Huang (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism and Hybridity in China and Its Others* (Duke University Press, 1996) and *China's Lost Decade* (Zephyr, 2012), both by Gregory B. Lee. Lee also describes details of Duo Duo's life leading up to and immediately after the Tiananmen Square Massacre in his remembrance, "Tiananmen: Lives of the Poets," published in the June 2019 issue of the online *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*. Duo Duo's fiction, translated by John A. Crespi, has also been published as *Snow Plain: Selected Stories* (Zephyr, 2010). For a translation of the Duo Duo essay I referred to as "The Buried Poets," see "Underground Poetry in Beijing 1970–1978," translated by John Cayley, in *Under-sky, Underground*, edited by Henry Y. H. Zhao and John Cayley (WellSweep, 1994), pp. 97–104. Duo Duo won the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2010, and he was featured in the March–April 2011 issue of *World Literature Today*, with scholarly appreciations by Yibing Huang and Michelle Yeh. Since 2002, however, his newest work has not been available to readers of English. This book rectifies that lack.

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