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Genre Occludes the Creation of Genre: Bing Xin, Tagore, and Prose Poetry

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter argues that one of the strongest influences on contemporary Chinese prose poetry is Bing Xin's 1955 translation of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry collection *Gitanjali*. By declining to reproduce the music of Tagore's Bengali original, and suppressing the Biblical diction of his English version, Bing Xin created a version of his odes to the "religion of man" that implicitly opposes his insistence on poetry's untranslatability. Instead, she argues that rejecting culturally specific prosodies allows her to faithfully reproduce the content of Tagore's poetry. This paradigm exalts prose as a transparent, modern, and realist way to write; when it is used to render the subjective, passionate occasions of *Gitanjali*, the result is a mode of writing that treats transcendental feelings as concretely as it does the objects of daily life. The chapter ends with a call to study generic origins outside the bounds of the genres in question.

Keywords: prose poetry, Bing Xin, Tagore, genre, translation

MUCH contemporary Chinese prose poetry has a strong generic identity. Romantic, expressive, impressionistic, and abstract, its genre is palpable in the reading of the poem—individual pieces feel similar. This similarity, though, is neither derived from nor identical to works that have been named as prose poetry, or *sanwenshi* 散文诗. Prose poems of the Republican era, when the term *sanwenshi* was first used, were typified by experimentation, generic hybridity, formal lawlessness, and a shared mistrust of strict aesthetic categories.¹ The creative work that readers, editors, and authors called prose poetry before 1949 was varied to the extent that it makes more sense to consider it not as a genre but as an appellation, a particular way of describing many different kinds of work that range from unrhymed verse to short stage plays.² These pieces shared a generic name—prose poetry—but were produced with vastly different writing practices. Genre histories, however, largely focus on the history of the name rather than the origin and

nature of prose poetic writing practice: this chapter attempts to assess that tradition, and ask how and why contemporary prose poetry looks and sounds the way it does.

Beginning in 1957 with the publication of Ke Lan's 柯藍 *Short Flute of Morning Mist* (早霞短笛), contemporary prose poetry grew from roots in the humanist but ultimately Party-loyal socialism of the Hundred Flowers Period. After Deng liberalized, and arguably humanized, the politics of the Mao period, prose poetry became quite widespread, appearing in a monthly newspaper (now defunct) and two magazines (still extant) devoted exclusively to prose poetry, as well as countless literary magazines, anthologies, and individual collections.³ The authors and editors of these poems were linked personally and politically by institutions like the China Prose Poetry Study Group (中國散文詩學會), as well as a host of regional organizations. The success of this group of people in the world of publishing and the similarity of their creative work (p. 579) dominate the way in which readers of Chinese prose poetry today encounter the term *prose poetry*. The appellation as it was used in the 1920s is now seen through the lens of the contemporary genre, as an anticipation of a type of literature with which it shares surprisingly little.

The most important difference between the two periods, perhaps, is that rather than pushing back against strict metrical poetics, prose poetry in China today investigates and intervenes in the practice of prose from a position on the boundaries of prose writing itself. By borrowing the sonic and visual qualities of prose, prose poetry allows its readers to identify and question their assumptions about prose, about its objectivity, its transparency, and its relationship to plain speech. Writing that looks like prose but refuses to do the work that we expect from prose reveals that our reliance on prose forms is a matter of convention and expectation rather than an inherent formal function. By making those conventions and expectations visible, prose poetry also opens the grounds for their manipulation and transformation. To name prose poetry as a genre unto itself, on the other hand, to visualize it as the product of a separate tribe of authors who inherit the appellation from their May Fourth forebears, is to miss the way in which prose poetry plays across the boundaries of prose and poetry. This genre gestures outward as an intervention rather than inward toward self-definition: to read those outward acts, we must look past concepts of genre that center around categories and boundaries, and look instead at prose poetry as an evolving and transforming set of performances.

The existence of a widespread generic categorization called *prose poetry* can make it difficult to see or understand the many ways in which the practice arose; visualizing the categorization as a kind of territory instructs us to look for the founding and occupation of the category itself, rather than the noncategorical or transcategorical qualities that prose poems share with other kinds of literature. This is most sharply the case with the interventions made in prose poetry by the translations of Bing Xin 冰心. Her versions of

poems by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), a world-famous Bengali poet and the first non-European winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, were deeply influential; many contemporary Chinese prose poems look like these translations. They were not, however, influential in a categorical way. Because they were translations and because of their unique provenance, their appearance as literary products did not result in generic boundaries being drawn or redrawn around them: the pieces were easily categorized as being outside Chinese prose poetry. What was influential was instead the *work* that the translation of Tagore’s poems represented, the interventions Bing Xin’s translations made into poetry and prose, and the ideologies that both shaped and were shaped by her particular version of the work of translation.

Describing his early career, during which he wrote mainly prose poetry, Liu Zaifu 劉再復 says: “I was willing to accept an innocent self, so I liked poetry, I liked Tagore, I liked Mozart, I liked Bing Xin.”⁴ Wolfgang Kubin argues that “many a modern Chinese poet is nothing more than a translated Tagore,” and identifies Bing Xin as the foremost example.⁵ The record of literary interactions further shows that behind many prose poetry careers, there lies the implicit or explicit presence of Bing Xin. She was (p. 580) tangentially involved in the funding and organization of the *Prose Poetry Newspaper* (散文詩報), appears repeatedly in histories and analyses of the genre, and had lifelong relationships with leaders of early prose poetry like Guo Feng 郭風.⁶ Bing Xin was not, however, a prose poet in the style or manner of the *Prose Poetry Newspaper*, Guo Feng, or Liu Zaifu: her own short prose, mainly published in the 1920s, was often editorially identified, and self-identified, as fiction or essays.⁷ Her poetry, albeit highly influenced by Tagore, lies somewhere between his shortest verse and Japanese haiku, and has substantial differences from contemporary prose poetry. Her foundational influence on contemporary prose poetry comes instead from her 1955 translation of Tagore’s *Gitanjali*, which she titled *Jitanjali* (吉檀迦利). Published only two years before Ke Lan’s seminal collection, Bing Xin’s translation does, in fact, explicitly call the pieces *poetry* even though they take the shape of prose, and she later calls them prose poems.⁸ This is an inversion of her earlier May Fourth-era practice, which was more likely to categorize texts with poetic qualities as some type of prose, whether *xiaopin* (小品), *meiwen* (美文), or *xiaoshuo* (小說).⁹ This change in name is doubtlessly motivated by the nature of the text Bing Xin is translating: one literal translation of *Gitanjali* is “song offerings,” and Bing Xin chooses to gloss the Bengali title as *xian shi* (獻詩), “poems offered up.”¹⁰

But Bing Xin was not translating Tagore’s Bengali poetry into Chinese prose; instead, she was translating English prose renditions of Bengali poetry into Chinese prose. Able to work only in English and Chinese, she produced her translations from the English version of *Gitanjali*, which Tagore had based upon poems from several of his collections, and

which he wrote aboard a ship en route to his first visit to England.¹¹ The English *Gitanjali* and the Bengali poems on which it is based have important differences. The first is the particular deployment of the lyric; the Bengali poems were conceptualized and often circulated as songs as well as texts, and their rhythmic and rhyming structure reflects the roots of Bengali verse in traditions of oral performance and music.¹² The English prose versions are arguably metrical and rhythmic, as well, but for the English reader—and especially, perhaps, for the Chinese reader of English—that music is muted, distanced.¹³ Amit Chaudhuri points out that “as a Bengali poet, Tagore’s instinct was to simplify” his verse, and bring it close to the vernacular—but that what he produced in English was instead full of “thees and thous” enabled in part by Tagore’s early education at Christian schools, and benefiting perhaps from British associations between the literature of the Orient and antique, classical wisdom.¹⁴ *Gitanjali* in English was partially produced through the logics of translation, but must also be seen as an independent creation for a new literary context. The mixture of terminology in Mary Ellis Gibson’s *Indian Angles* is telling. She writes, “Though Tagore’s poetry combined the influences of English romantic poetics, Bengali folk traditions, and Vaishnava poetry, his self-translations of these poems were clearly written with an expectation of the London market.”¹⁵ Gibson suggests that *Gitanjali*, even though it is a self-translation of Tagore’s own poems, is to be contrasted with his own Bengali originals. *Gitanjali*’s roots in the British market give the collection something new, something not simply “translated” but “written” in a process comparable to the composition of an original poem.

(p. 581) The creative dimension of Tagore’s self-translative praxis is intimately linked to his ideologies about art, language, and translation. At a dinner in Beijing, he addressed a group of scholars with the following: “Languages are jealous. They do not give up their best treasures to those who try to deal with them through an intermediary belonging to an alien rival. You have to court them in person and dance attendance on them.”¹⁶ Visible throughout Tagore’s discussions of art is an insistence that art is irreducible, that it is an experience and not a product; like all the other parts of reality, “we know it, not because we can think of it, but because we directly feel it.”¹⁷ Discussing the translation of his poems into Chinese (albeit before Bing Xin produced her own), he says, “Man cannot reach the shrine, if he does not make the pilgrimage. So, you must not hope to find anything true from my own language in translation.”¹⁸ For Tagore, art must necessarily be human-centered and practiced by hand; it cannot be artificially or automatically transmitted outside of its relationship to the language and voice of a speaker. Tagore therefore writes his own English versions of his Bengali poems, bringing them to English readers as an individually authored literary experience.

In producing her translation of *Gitanjali*, however, Bing Xin was acting explicitly as a translator and as an intermediary; she was obviating the need for Chinese readers to

“make the pilgrimage” into English or Bengali. But she did not believe, as Tagore did, that it was impossible to find “anything true” from the English version in her translation. Introducing a collection of her translations, she wrote that the best poems she translated “were written [by Tagore and Gibran] in English, and have not undergone translation by others from Bengali or Arabic. I start my translations from the word ‘trust’ (*xin* 信) and I can take responsibility for them myself. I have never dared to retranslate a translation!”¹⁹ Even in the same breath as Bing Xin admits that translation can degrade the desirability of a literary work, and elides the fact that Tagore’s *Gitanjali* was in fact a self-translation, she claims the central importance of faithfulness and trustworthiness in her own translations. Bing Xin’s discussion of *xin* is brief—she is no theorist—but it does reveal a great deal about the principles under which she translated Tagore. Her concept of *xin* requires a writer to take the position that there is a content to poetry that can be separated from its language and reproduced in other idioms. Bing Xin’s defense of her own work shows, though, that such a reproduction is prone to anxiety-producing errors and losses. A bad translator—or a retranslator of a prior translation—can produce impurities or inventions that distance the result from the original. This is why the sense of *xin* as faithfulness, prescription to the ideal of the original, is matched by a sense of the term as trustworthiness. A good translator cannot necessarily avoid losses—Bing Xin’s translations are quite different from Tagore’s English *Gitanjali*—but limits them, as we shall see, to the parts of the poem that are of secondary or tertiary importance, and can be relied upon to make those decisions on behalf of the reader. Bing Xin’s protestation that she refuses to take part in retranslation is intended to convince us that her motive is to correctly and appropriately take down the English pieces into Chinese; it also recommends her translation by eliding the complex, hybridized transformation that the poems have already gone through in Tagore’s hands.

(p. 582) Bing Xin’s concept of *xin* is more than just practical; its many valences reinforce Lydia Liu’s instruction to read methodologies of translation as fundamentally ideological, context-driven, and historicized.²⁰ Once we read her translation methodology in this way, we can see not just a practical opposition between Tagore and Bing Xin, but a broad political and aesthetic difference as well. During a celebrated conversation with Albert Einstein, Tagore expressed his lifelong belief in human subjectivity: “This world is a human world—the scientific view of it is also that of the scientific man,”²¹ and nothing comes to us save through “an organ of thoughts which is human.”²² This view was not antimodern; rather, it was an attempt to force open a space inside the modern in which to independently and meaningfully pursue non-European cultural practices alongside Eurocentric scientific modernity.²³ To put people at the center of science and modernity is to make Einstein, for example, into someone who can be spoken to instead of simply listened to and obeyed. As Chaudhuri puts it, “Tagore’s poetry, especially his songs ...

speak of an old world that is lost but is being transformed into something new.”²⁴ The goal is not to wind modernity back to the premodern, but to draw from the premodern—in a way that occasionally satisfies Orientalist notions of the exotic ahistorical—in order to create a contemporary, vernacular Bengali poetry that can serve as the basis for a new and independent regional culture. This is evident in the way he writes traditional, devotional-style poetry in which the old gods have been replaced by a “religion of man.”²⁵ Translation fights Tagore’s attempt to found this culture by mechanically reproducing the meaning, but not the experience, of the text, separating the art from its human author. Translation holds the promise of finding something true in art without making “the pilgrimage” that connects the reader to the author in language.

Bing Xin’s position is quite different. To her, it is the reproduction that is emphasized, and whatever she takes to be irrecoverable and nonconvertible ends up being abandoned: “I only dare to translate prose poems or fiction, I don’t dare translate poetry. I’ve always thought that poetry is a literary form whose musicality is particularly strong.”²⁶

Discussing *Stars* (星) and *Spring Water* (春水), her Tagore-influenced collections of 1921 and 1922, she writes that they “are not poetry. At least at that age, I hadn’t set my sights on the composition of poetry. I didn’t understand modern poetry, I didn’t trust it, and I didn’t dare try it. I felt like poetry’s heart was in its content and not its form.”²⁷ Her position on the possibility of writing original modern poetry subsequently changed, but her distinction between musical, untranslatable verse and content-oriented, portable prose never did. For her, rhyme and meter were untranslatable, musical, and ineffable, while prose content was separable, reproducible, and usable. This is why *xin* translation can only take place in the world of prose. In an essay called “On Prose” (關於散文), Bing Xin opens by writing “Prose is the literary form that I love most,”²⁸ and continues to enumerate the best things about prose: its flexibility and its freedom. Prose flourished after 1949, she writes, because “all of the new people and new experiences appearing all over the country influenced and encouraged a great many writers.”²⁹ The diversity and novelty of those experiences and identities, the advent of modernity, needed a transparent medium with (p. 583) no restrictions: prose. For Bing Xin, belief in a unitary and universal modern world that can be conceptualized by humanity—whether or not it has been conceptualized, and whether it is described in the language of physics, psychology, or literature—must be spoken and shared through precise translation, a transparent and trustworthy medium that does not alter the unity of the world it describes. The desirability of that modernity motivates the abandonment of experiences that are unspeakable in its idiom. To Tagore, unitary and objective modernity is impossible, in part because it requires a language of science that is not a subjective language of “scientific man.” Bing Xin translates as if that modernity were possible with the right technique, as if language truly could produce a trustworthy, anxiety-free reproduction of the core content of experience.

To be clear, Bing Xin never wrote anything formal that disagreed with Tagore's philosophy. Instead, she embraced it. One of her earliest published writings is a letter to "the Indian Philosopher Tagore," in which she praises his syncretism and his natural aesthetics as the expression of beliefs she has long held, but has been unable to elucidate.³⁰ When a poem in *Gitanjali* addresses the ineffable and speaks from the human to the transcendent, Bing Xin translates those concepts—indeed, one feels that she is attracted to their sublime enormity. *Gitanjali* #102 reads, "I put my tales of you into lasting songs. The secret gushes out from my heart. They come and ask me, 'Tell me all your meanings.' I know not how to answer them. I say, 'Ah, who knows what they mean!'"³¹ In *Stars*, Bing Xin engages in similar gestures to the inexpressible:

無限的神秘
何處尋它?
微笑之後
言語之前
便是無限的神秘了。

Limitless mystery,
where can it be found?
After the smile,
before language,
that is the limitless mystery.³²

What is displayed here is not Bing Xin insisting on the theoretical existence of a translatable, trustworthy language that does not transform the truths it contains; quite the opposite. It is the implicit ideology of her method of translation that transforms *Gitanjali* into *Jitanjali*, and prose poetry in China arises in part from her particular, hybrid mix of a subjective, human-centered ideology inherited from Tagore, transmitted in a form that she believed to be objective, transparent, inhuman, and therefore "free."

Tracking the translation of the poems, step by step, gives a sense of what Bing Xin's practice does to the art she translates. In lieu of the Bengali, here is the first stanza of Joe Winter's contemporary English translation of poem #22 from Tagore's Bengali *Gitanjali* (p. 584) (poem #3 in his English rendition), which has been translated with a certain level of sensitivity to the original's meter and rhyme:

Maestro your song is such as to astound.
Dumbstruck I only listen to the sound.
Its melody-light fits the world as a cover;
through the heavens its air is carried over;
bursting through rock a tumultuous river
streams out to make a melody of the ground.³³

This version retains Tagore's six-line stanza from the original Bengali, for which he was particularly well known,³⁴ and it also keeps the Bengali version's pentameter—itsself imported from English verse—and its AABBBBA rhyme scheme.³⁵ The language of the Bengali as well as of Winter's version above is vernacular and rhythmic, and in quite a different diction from Tagore's version of the stanza in the English *Gitanjali*:

I know not how thou singest, my master! I ever listen in silent amazement.

The light of thy music illumines the world. The life breath of thy music runs from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on.³⁶

Tagore's English version is in unrhymed prose, but is strongly rhythmic at the same time. Likely due to Tagore's reproduction and transformation of Bengali verse meters, the excerpt can be divided into three phrase-groups, all of roughly equal and balanced length: ten syllables/eleven syllables, eleven syllables/twelve syllables, and twenty syllables.³⁷ The inversion here is telling: in the Bengali poem, Tagore uses a traditional English meter, and in the English poem, he imports a Bengali meter. Present in this practice, at some level, is a sense of necessary cultural difference deployed alongside the attempt to bridge that difference. As mentioned above, the ritual and devotional quality of rhyme has been replaced by Biblical diction, and the occasional use of formal inversions that were already archaic by the early twentieth century: *I ever listen, I know not*. One wonders if Tagore would have written new rhymes had he been able to do so. He accepted that English was a barrier to *Gitanjali*, once telling his niece "[that] I cannot write English is such a patent fact that I never had even the vanity to feel ashamed of it."³⁸ The diction in question, however, immediately recognizable in the British market Tagore was addressing, does much to identify the poem as something declaimed and offered rather than simply written to be scanned. Bing Xin's version of the paragraph appears below, with an English version that attempts to be tonally and lexically faithful to her translation rather than Tagore's original:

我不知道你怎樣地唱，我的主人！我總在驚奇地靜聽。

你的音樂的光輝照亮了世界。你的音樂的氣息透徹諸天。你的音樂的聖泉沖過一切阻礙的岩石，向前奔涌。³⁹ (p. 585)

I don't know how you sing, my master! I am always listening quietly, in amazement. The light of your music illuminates the world. The breath of your music pierces the sky. The holy well of your music collides with all the rocks that impede it, and rushes forward.

Bing Xin's version lacks any "faithful" interaction with the Bengali or English rhythms, it chooses a modern vernacular free of intentional grammatical inversions or archaic language, and it does not create any replacement for these qualities. Unlike Tagore's

English and Bengali meters, his participation in the Bengali musical tradition, and his archaic English speech, Bing Xin's translation declines to use or adapt classical Chinese rhythms or language—an understandable decision for a poet who was so committed to the May Fourth project of cutting out imperial, premodern Chinese culture at the root. Without traditional meters or language, there is little that identifies this piece as a song. More fundamentally, the fact that the lyricized qualities of the originals can be suppressed under an ideology of *xin* faithfulness amounts to the assessment that traditional, regional prosody is a transient and disposable by-product of a poem, something that is not inextricably linked to its most important content. This matches cultural attitudes common after the May Fourth movement. Reformers in the early Republican era argued that traditional Chinese culture is premodern, and contemporary transnational culture is modern; old verse forms are vessels for weak, inhumane traditional culture, and new verse forms can produce healthy, empowered citizens. Instead of advocating for this transition, though, Bing Xin is producing an epistemological structure that ensures it. Bing Xin is quite clear, in her translator's preface, that the music of the Bengali *Gitanjali* and the "delicate poetic feeling" of the English version are both untranslatable, and have therefore been abandoned.⁴⁰ When Bing Xin claims that prose is "free," she means that it is free from convention and free from the past: it is free of the untranslatable and contingent music of tradition and locality. What poetry means is separable from that music, and can be rendered in prose.⁴¹ This philosophy of translation is particular to her praxis, as we know that other translators draw different lines between the translatable and the untranslatable. For example, Bing Xin's contemporary, poet Bian Zhilin 卞之琳, explicitly claims that translating content without regard for metrical and musical "flavor" is not *xin* or faithful.⁴² Her philosophy is also subtractive, in that objectivity is reached by the negation and elimination of successive subjectivities.⁴³

Due to its impact on Chinese letters, though, it seems clear that the Chinese version of *Gitanjali* represented powerful, positive novelty for its readers. Although *xin* as a translation philosophy might have been subtractive, what resulted from it was something new. The subjectivities and particularities that remain in the poems become powerfully important: because *xin* promises the rendering of objective, core material across languages, the particular shape of the medium in which core material is expressed comes to be interpreted as an indivisible part of that material. This is visible in the way in which foreignness, and foreign linguistic structures, are rendered in Bing Xin's translation. Although Bing Xin eschews the recreation of archaic inversions and King James grammar, her version of *Gitanjali* does tend to reproduce vernacular English syntax. (p. 586) For instance, in the first sentence of poem #3, above, she reproduces the English and Bengali clause order by putting *my master* after the rest of the sentence. Chinese, with its topic-comment heritage, more commonly would place the object of address before the

sentence's main clause. Similarly, when Bing Xin translates ejaculatory particles like *ah* or *oh*, she inserts them into the position they hold in Tagore's English version, even when their position in Chinese would normally appear in a different part of the sentence.⁴⁴ None of these linguistic predilections is absolute, and modern Chinese sentences are flexible enough to accept multiple syntactical orders, but the effect is one of gentle alienation, the palpable sense of foreignness in the Chinese-language translations. This makes sense as a product of modernity and *xin* ideology: the transparent language that can render our objective reality is yet to be invented. It cannot be handed down from the ancients, because that would insinuate it had been used and then forgotten or rejected. The new objective forms must therefore have an alien or undiscovered quality to them, and this justifies the use of structures from unfamiliar languages, especially those that are considered more modern, more effective, or more flexible.⁴⁵

Prose poetry today retains these ideologies, both in structure and spirit; a major vessel for their dissemination is imitation of Bing Xin's translation of Tagore. Unlike other genres, prose poetry never does entirely nativize into an unremarkably Chinese undertaking. While other types of short lyric prose take traditional Chinese names (*meiwen*, *sanwen*, *xiaopin*), and individual pieces are shunted from one genre to another by editors and publishers, prose poetry as a genre retains its otherness even down to its unwieldy three-character generic name *sanwenshi*. This matches, in a way, the implicit position the translations take with regard to the vernacular: they claim to reflect Chinese speech, and they do reflect it in some ways, but they also transform it. They do so by working from the assumption that classical Chinese idioms and structures are *not* vernacular—even though they make up a measurable part of daily Chinese speech—and that structures from foreign languages can and should be treated as vernaculars, even when they are archaic or affected.⁴⁶ These assumptions are an ideal (“we should have a language in which daily speech has no reference to premodern language or literature”) expressed as the definition of an almost ontological category (“the vernacular is the language of actual use; it is the opposite of the classical and the traditional”).

Interest in the vernacular is just one of the ways in which Bing Xin echoes Tagore's work, however; another centers around the concept of the *simple*. In her introduction to her translation of *Gitanjali*, Bing Xin says that Tagore has written the “most simple and most beautiful” of all Bengali poems, and claims that they are composed in “the people's own lively and simple language.”⁴⁷ Later, she goes so far as to call Tagore “innocent” (*tianzhen*, 天真).⁴⁸ This attitude is reflected in her translations of his poetry, where she consistently opts for a Chinese rendition that can be read with ease. In English, *Gitanjali* #28 begins, “Obstinate are the trammels,” which is translated as “羅網是堅韌的” (“the nets are resilient”).⁴⁹ The difference between the two is more than the archaic and rarefied diction of the English; in the English version, there is a slight

mismatch between *obstinate*, which generally refers to living beings, and *trammels*, which is an abstract noun, and as a result the juxtaposition defamiliarizes them (p. 587) both. In the corresponding Chinese version, the words *luowang* (羅網; “nets”) and *jianren* (堅韌; “resilient”) fit together more comfortably. What this increased simplicity and straightforwardness reinforces is one of the basic and often-imitated qualities of both the English and Chinese versions of *Gitanjali*: the constant and seemingly effortless motion from the most concrete language to the most abstract.

Consider the next poem, #29: “He whom I enclose with my name is weeping in the dungeon. I am ever busy building this wall all around; and as this wall goes up into the sky day by day I lose sight of my true being in its dark shadow.”⁵⁰ Part of the appeal of the poem is that it invites the reader to visualize a familiar image, like a wall under construction whose shadow grows longer as it gets taller, and to see that image equated with nearly unimaginable abstractions. What is a “true being”? What is it to “enclose” someone with a “name”? To call these mysterious concatenations simple, as Bing Xin does, is to represent them as basic elements of experience, as if one was being asked to describe the contents of a drawer that contained a pen, a piece of paper, and eternal love. Song forms and elaborate diction bind the concrete and the abstract in language, they produce a new artificially literary occasion in which abstract and concrete experiences can coexist; to simplify that language, to boil it down even further toward the quotidian as Bing Xin does, is to intensify the reality of the abstract and equate it even more strongly with the concrete. Her translation of #29 therefore begins “被我用我的名字囚禁起來的那個人，在監牢中哭泣” (“The person whom I have captured with my name weeps in prison”).⁵¹ In the Chinese, the sense of the fictive and imaginative is less strong: from the dramatic “dungeon” to the physical conundrum of “enclosure” to the literary diction of “he whom,” the English version feels more like an invented maxim or parable rather than a realist description. Bing Xin’s version in fact reinforces the poem’s underlying juxtaposition of the tangible and the intangible, a practice that becomes crucially important to 1950s poets tasked with writing romantic realist art that is required to be both unremittingly ideological and wholly concrete.

The juxtaposition of the tangible and intangible in Bing Xin’s translations is metonymic for the intervention into literary art and literary genre that her translations represent. Tagore’s poems are intended to produce, among other things, material traces of the unspeakable divine; Bing Xin’s translations attempt to produce a prose account or version of his work that faithfully retains some particular traces of his poetry, itself already transformed by a prior passage into prose. Her belief about what the original poetry does—and especially what can be retained across languages and styles—makes his poetry, his prose, and her prose *visible* as media, even at the moment when she claims that her translation is based in reproductive *xin* transparency. The first sentences of her

introduction to her translation read: “This book *Gitanjali* is a poetry collection by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. *Gitanjali* is an Indian word that means ‘poems offered up.’”⁵² Like the enclosure made from the human name in poem #29, the rendering of these poems into prose is a conundrum that defamiliarizes both prose and poetry. Even as the translation quietly claims the power of prose—that it can be used to render poetry—it also makes prose visible as a form in a way that contradicts (p. 588) assumptions about its ability to transparently render diverse experience without transformation or loss. If prose is the standard objective, why must we specify it or defend it? This moment of the defamiliarized visibility of prose as an instrument is vastly different from the way that Tagore produced the English *Gitanjali*, which retained musicality and orality, and did not make epistemological or categorical claims that the English versions were faithful to the Bengali originals. For Tagore, the two sets of works were related pieces, using slightly different techniques to pursue overlapping but measurably distinct goals.

Bing Xin’s conundrum is also substantially different from the existence of an independent genre called *prose poetry* that is understood to mix qualities from each constituent genre; it is instead the uneasy claim that poetry has become prose, a claim that the finished work contains something central to poetry that can be and has been refined and then transported into other terms, other genres. The name *prose poetry* and the sense of a stable category that it provides prevent us from seeing the verbal, procedural negotiation with poetry by prose (and vice versa) in which Bing Xin’s translation, and the prose poetry it influenced, engage. *Prose poetry* is often interpreted as designating simply a subcategory of poetry that uses prose methods;⁵³ such a definition is ill suited to carry the idea that an individual piece, like Bing Xin’s *Gitanjali*, is directed outside its own genre, serving as a commentary on other types of poetry, or indeed other types of prose. This is evident in the fact that later works called *prose poetry* engage in multiple types of interventions and transformations both into poetry and into prose. There exist lyricizations and subjectifications of prose forms—for instance, the *Prose Poetry Newspaper* once advocated for and published a “reportage-style” prose poetry that borrowed its structure from the prose genre of reportage literature.⁵⁴ There are also poems that carry out Bing Xin’s implication that prose more faithfully recreates real experience, and that poems about the realities of socialist life should be in prose. For example, the work of socialist-era prose poets features a great deal of detailed description of agriculture, industry, travel, and other quotidian events. Still other poems make similarly quotidian experiences seem, by the poetic manner of their description, highly lyrical and subjective, and tightly centered around the poem’s speaker, as is true of a great deal of the prose poetry of Liu Zaifu.⁵⁵ We know that avant-garde, experimental, or even simply novel work inside a genre has the power to transform it.

However, we rarely consider genres as projects whose force is directed outside their genre, and it is even rarer to conceptualize genre practices as side effects of other literary practices like translation, even though we know that many genres—including the sonnet, the villanelle, and Chinese regulated verse—have transnational influences and roots.⁵⁶ To name a genre and draw a circle around certain works invariably entails breaking connections between those works and others to which they are related. As one moves back in time towards the genesis of a genre, the number of crucial interactions between works inside a genre and works outside a genre swells until it is difficult to say much with certainty about the genre's origins.

Prose poetry is an especially critical field of inquiry for the understanding of generic origins because it is so resolutely textual and modern. Its early history has practically (p. 589) no oral component, was rarely performed or read live, and has been elaborately documented. Rather than relying on records accumulated by later practitioners or viewers of the genre, we can observe and read influential works of the proto-genre as well. Reading before a genre's origin encourages us to historicize genre and visualize it not as a successful or failed ontological category, but as a bundled set of practices—among which acts of generic naming (announcing that one is writing in a genre, or being told that one is doing so) hold equal importance with compositional methodologies, ideological preferences, and the challenges of communication.⁵⁷ Other approaches arise because the language of genre as it is sometimes understood today participates in the same intellectual lineage of the objective modern that is implied by Bing Xin's belief in faithful translation: we assert, then test, then sometimes deny the possibility that there is a transparent metalanguage outside literary practice that can appropriately or reliably divide works into categories. To treat the question of genre in this way, regardless of the outcome of the debate, is to focus on particular qualities of literary pieces that serve to distinguish or connect groups of works with the expectation that these distinguishing factors will then be the crucial or central quality of writing in genres. When we instead rephrase the question to ask what people are *doing* when they claim to be reading or writing prose poetry, we begin a conversation that allows genres to overlap and affect one another, that allows them to speak and listen outside themselves in a historicized, contingent, contradictory way. This matches the contingencies and historical shifts we see in the corpus of modern and contemporary Chinese prose poetry.

Bing Xin's translation of *Gitanjali* rests precisely within the zone of exclusion generated by the tradition of genre studies. Because it is a translation, her work is not comfortably Chinese; because it is of a work from 1913, it is not comfortably contemporary; and because it accrues the qualities of prose poetry during the process of translation itself, it is hard to identify the book as a straightforward exemplar of the genre. And yet it is this work—by which I refer both to the poems of *Jitanjiali* as well as the work of translation

that Bing Xin performed to produce them—that provoked contemporary Chinese prose poets and helped establish the contemporary genre. Critic Che Zhenxian 車鎮憲 elides the influence of translation, assuming the translations collapse into the originals, but is straightforward about its result: “Tagore’s prose poetry created a deep and persistent influence among Chinese writers, particularly his praise-songs to life, nature, and love. Even more, his boiling passions, rich imagination, and profound philosophy directly forged generation after generation of Chinese poets and writers.”⁵⁸ To envision genre as a category rather than a kind of performance would be to relegate these influences to an extrageneric, supplementary role; worse, it would prevent us from reading and understanding the intricate ideological and practical process that brought Tagore’s original Bengali poems to the generative border of Chinese prose poetry, a process that powerfully colors the life of *Gitanjali* in Chinese letters. If we instead choose to understand prose poetry as a performance, Bing Xin’s translations can rightly be seen as a crucial part of the vocabulary of gesture through which prose poetry addresses and transforms both poetry and prose.

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Notes:

(1.) Its first use in 1918 was a half-mistaken effort at translation by Liu Bannong. See Michel Hockx, *Questions of Style: Literary Societies and Literary Journals in Modern China, 1911–1937* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

(2.) By *unrhymed verse*, I am referring to the way Guo Moruo 郭沫若 uses the phrase in his introduction to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. See Kirk Denton, ed. *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 204–205. By *short stage-play*, I mean Lu Xun's "The Passer-By," in *Wild Grass*, trans. Gladys Yang and Yang Xianyi (Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 2000). A more comprehensive discussion of the early period of Chinese prose poetry and a rationale for its separation from later prose poetry appears in Nick Admussen, "Trading Metaphors: Chinese Prose Poetry and the Reperiodization of the Twentieth Century," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 22.2 (Fall 2010): 88–129.

(3.) The newspaper was *Sanwenshi bao* 散文詩報 from Zhuhai, Guangdong. The magazines are *Sanwenshi* 散文詩 in Yiyang, Hunan, and *Sanwenshi de shijie* 散文詩的世界 in Chengdu,

Sichuan. Two of the largest anthologies are Feng Yi 馮藝, ed., *Zhongguo sanwenshi daxi* 中國散文詩大系 [Compendium of Chinese prose poetry] (Nanning: Guangxi minzu chubanshe, 1992) and Wang Fuming 王幅明, ed., *Zhongguo sanwenshi jiushinian* 中國散文詩90年 (1918–2007) [Ninety years of prose poetry (1918–2007)] (Zhengzhou: Henan Wenyi Chubanshe, 2008), but there are also yearly “best of” compilations, as well as many individual anthologies. Single-author collections of the 1980s are too numerous to name.

(4.) Liu Zaifu 劉再復, *Yuanyou suiyue* 遠遊歲月 [My wandering years] (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 1994), 77.

(5.) Wolfgang Kubin, “Stray Birds: Tagore and the Genesis of Modern Chinese Poetry,” *Asian and African Studies* 18.2 (2009): 43.

(6.) Ke Lan’s visit to Bing Xin is mentioned in Zhongguo Sanwenshi Xuehui, eds., *Yongyuan de Ke Lan* 永遠的柯藍 [Ke Lan forever] (Guangzhou: Huacheng Chubanshe, 2007), 96. An example of Bing Xin’s working relationship with Guo Feng appears in Bing Xin 冰心, *Bing Xin quanji* 冰心全集 [The complete works of Bing Xin], vol. 7 (Fujian: Haixia Wenyi Chubanshe, 1994), 63.

(7.) Admussen, “Trading Metaphors,” 95.

(8.) She calls the pieces “poetry” in Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, 142. She calls them “prose poems” in 1983; see Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 7, 408.

(9.) For the interplay of these forms, see Charles Laughlin, *The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, 2008).

(10.) Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, 141.

(11.) Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 7, 407.

(12.) Rabindranath Tagore, *Song Offerings*, trans. Joe Winter (London: Anvil Press, 2000), 15–16.

(13.) See Amulyadhan Mukhopadhyay, *Studies in Rabindranath’s Prosody and Bengali Prose-Verse* (Calcutta: Rabindra Bharatai University, 1999), 62–64. He argues that some poems in *Gitanjali* are in gently transposed Bengali meters and are fundamentally quantitative (counting phrase length rather than accentual patterns). He points out that these rhythms are rare in English, and perhaps this is why readers at the time remarked on the poems’ beauty without analyzing their rhythm. This is borne out by searches for performances of the poems: those in Bengali are set to music, and those in English are

generally read and not sung—except when the English performances are by people from Bengal, in which case they are sometimes musical arrangements of the English poems.

(14.) Amit Chaudhuri, *On Tagore: Reading the Poet Today* (New Delhi: Penguin Group, 2012), 10–11.

(15.) Mary Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 255.

(16.) Rabindranath Tagore, *Talks in China* (Calcutta: Arunoday Art Press, n.d.), 66.

(17.) Rabindranath Tagore, *A Tagore Reader* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 257.

(18.) Tagore, *Talks*, 68.

(19.) Bing Xin 冰心, “Xu” 序 [Preface], *Bing Xin zhuyi xuanji* 冰心著譯選集 [Selected writings and translations of Bing Xin], vol. 1. (Fujian: Haixia wenyi chubanshe, 1986), 1–2.

(20.) Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 3.

(21.) David L Gosling, *Science and the Indian Tradition: When Einstein Met Tagore* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 141.

(22.) Gosling, *Science and the Indian Tradition*, 162.

(23.) My particular understanding of the modern here comes in part from Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 115, where he typifies the modern period as the period in which the existence of a single, unitary, objective world was theorized, then reified. Tagore responded throughout his career to the assumption that such a modern world must be based on European ideas and cultures. His desire to valorize “Eastern” culture made him particularly popular in China; see Zheng Zhenduo’s attitude in Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 193.

(24.) Chaudhuri, *On Tagore*, 36.

(25.) Chaudhuri, *On Tagore*, 8–9. It’s also visible in the fact that the English *Gitanjali* is really a new kind of transnational writing, one that straddles languages and tradition in a way particular to modern Indian literature. Cf. Kubin, “Stray Birds,” 42.

(26.) Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 7, 408.

- (27.) Bing Xin 冰心, "Xu" 序 [Preface] *Bing Xin shiji* 冰心詩集 [Collected poems of Bing Xin] (Shanghai: Kaiming shudian, 1949), 9–10.
- (28.) Bing Xin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 543.
- (29.) Bing Xin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 544.
- (30.) Bing Xin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 33.
- (31.) Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 120.
- (32.) Bing Xin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 205.
- (33.) Tagore, *Song Offerings*, 49.
- (34.) Mukhopadhyay, "The Rhythm of Bengali Prose," 45.
- (35.) This particular form, which Mukhopadhyay calls rhymed blank verse, could also be read as a kind of iambic pentameter; for a discussion of Tagore's use and adaptation of Western meters and prosodic elements, including the sonnet, see Mukhopadhyay, "The Rhythm of Bengali Prose," 59–73. My warmest thanks to my colleague Sreemati Mukherjee for supplying much-needed expertise concerning the sounds of the Bengali original.
- (36.) Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 19.
- (37.) This rhythmic analysis is adapted from Mukhopadhyay, *Studies in Rabindranath's Prosody and Bengali Prose-Verse*, 62–64. The rest of poem #22 is loosely based on eight-syllable meters.
- (38.) Chaudhuri, *On Tagore*, 88.
- (39.) Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, 143.
- (40.) Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, 142.
- (41.) In a 1920 essay on translation, Bing Xin says that the target language of translation should be "common" (通俗) in order to be understood by the widest audience: this also asserts that literature is reducible, that nothing of particular value is lost by simply relating the content of a literary work. Bing Xin, "Yishu de wojian" 譯書的我見 [My views on translated books], *Yanda jikan* 燕大季刊 [Yanjing university quarterly] 1.3 (September 1920), n.p., accessed at <http://www.bingxin.org/databank/zp/zw/ysd.htm>.

(42.) Leo Tak-Hung Chan, ed. *Twentieth Century Chinese Translation Theory* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004), 75.

(43.) Ironically, this kind of thinking is also at play in the critical community's head-scratchingly insistent practice of reading and sometimes dismissing Bing Xin's prose exclusively through the lens of her gender. For a summary of this practice, see Wendy Larson, "The End of 'Funü Wenxue': Women's Literature from 1925 to 1935," *Modern Chinese Literature* 4.1/2 (Spring/Fall 1988): 46-47. To the critics Larsen describes, Bing Xin's femininity is figured as a supplement, a grease on the lens that tints her vision, and her gender must be suppressed in order for her to be a vessel for true realist fiction.

(44.) Examples appear in poems #9 and #39.

(45.) Lu Xun reflects this belief in a 1931 letter to Qu Qiubai: "Neither Chinese speech nor writing is precise enough in its manner of expression... . To cure this ailment, I believe we have to do it the hard way and seek to render thought in wayward syntactical structures. What is old and foreign (coming from other provinces, regions and countries) can finally be embraced as our own... . For an example, Europeanized syntax is most common in the writings of the Japanese... ." Collected in Chan, *Twentieth Century Chinese Translation Theory*, 159. This is notable not just because Lu Xun looks to Europe as a font of desirable linguistic qualities, but because it is *syntax* that he believes can make the desired change, rather than rhythm, diction, vocabulary, or any number of other linguistic qualities.

(46.) For the persistence of classical rhythm in modern Chinese, see Perry Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 21-112.

(47.) Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, 141-142.

(48.) Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 7, 408.

(49.) Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 44; Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, 153.

(50.) Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 45.

(51.) Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, 153.

(52.) Bing Xin, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, 141.

(53.) Wang Guangming and Teng Gu, for example, both define prose poetry as "poems written using prose," or "用散文寫的詩." See Wang Guangming 王光明, *Sanwenshi de shijie*

散文詩的世界 [The world of prose poetry] (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1987), 27-28.

(54.) See, for example, *Sanwenshi bao* 散文詩報 [Prose poetry newspaper] no. 10, 1987, n.p.

(55.) Liu Zaifu 劉再復, *Liu Zaifu sanwenshi heji* 劉再復散文詩合集 [A combined anthology of Liu Zaifu's prose poetry] (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1988).

(56.) For the latter, see Victor H. Mair and Tsu-lin Mei, "The Sanskrit Origins of Recent-Style Prosody," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51.2 (December 1991): 375-470.

(57.) Here I follow and adapt concepts from Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre," *New Literary History* 17.2 (Winter 1986): 203-218.

(58.) Che Zhenxian 車鎮憲, *Zhongguo xiandai sanwenshi de chansheng fazhan jiqi dui xiaoshuo de yingxiang* 中國現代散文詩的產生發展及其對小說文體的影響 [The development of modern Chinese prose poetry and its influence on fiction] (Beijing: Zuoja Chubanshe, 1999), 90-91.

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