

Foreword

前言

The Title of *Yecao*

《野草》書名的翻譯

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The essays that follow show how much there is to know about Lu Xun's 魯迅 collection *Yecao* 野草. They interweave complex historical, biographical, theoretical, philosophical, aesthetic and formal layers using tools ranging from close reading to reception studies, and they each help to illuminate this surprisingly difficult text. When the following essays are taken together, however, the conversation about the book that they represent performs a separate task: it demonstrates how little we know with certainty about *Yecao*, how the collection succeeds, against all our careful work, in remaining open as a subject of inquiry. As a group, these essays do not come to consensus about the genre of *Yecao*; they do not agree about what its quite disparate individual pieces have in common; they place the collection in substantially different roles in Lu Xun's personal and aesthetic biography. Each essay's reading responds to a substantially different book; one could say that each essay participates in the production of a meaningfully different book. When I title this introduction with the phrase "Layers of the Real," I mean to express what I've learned from participating in this conversation: that *Yecao*'s methods, motives and meanings appear to be different according to the direction and force of examination. Each type of excavation turns up a different vein of mineral, a different crystal. Unlike other texts where only one or two of those results might be valuable, in *Yecao* we see a warren of potential mines and lodes. Many of these attitudes of entry result in internally consistent reading experiences that feel like real, independent texts; the characters that make up *Yecao* comprise and are comprised of those possible texts, compressed, intermingled.

This compression and mingling affects even basic information about the book. The collection was published on its own in 1927, but had previously been serialized in the magazine *Yusi* 語絲 between 1924 and 1926. It is made up primarily of short prose pieces, some of which tend towards the symbolic and dreamlike (like "Dead Fire" 死火), and some of which seem like short stories (like "The Kite" 風箏); it also contains a piece of satirical

verse (“My Lost Love” 失戀), a play-script (“The Passer-by” 過客) and a highly lyrical preface. As Lu Xun put it when describing the collection’s form, they are “short pieces, to exaggerate a bit they are prose poems...”¹ The content of the book ranges from concrete, recorded events that transpired in Lu Xun’s life (as in “The Awakening” 一覺) to the wholly impossible (“The Shadow’s Leave-Taking” 影的告別); almost half the pieces are accounts of dreams. Accordingly, the individual pieces of the book have circulated widely and in complex, disparate ways: pieces from it are taught to middle school students in the PRC and identified as prose poems, and a largely different set of pieces from the book appear in the current *Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*, identified as essays.²

To name this book, to describe its genre or its contents, is to provoke questions about it whose answers require acts of scholarship like the ones contained in this issue. This is especially clear when one takes up the problem of the translation of the collection’s title.³ The papers that follow generally translate *Yecao* as *Wild Grass* because it is the title of the only published English-language translation, but there also exists a strong predilection in English-language criticism to name the collection *Weeds*.⁴ From the perspective of a translator, *Weeds* might be the better choice: more tonally dark, more lexically faithful, more concrete and even more felicitous, since it puns lightly on mourning garb in a way that suits *Yecao*’s funereal obsession. On the other hand, Gladys Yang 戴乃迭 and Yang Xianyi’s 楊憲益 decision to translate the title as *Wild Grass* has a romantic, adulatory tone to it that reflects the collection’s

1 Lu Xun 魯迅. *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 [Complete Works of Lu Xun], vol. 13 (Beijing 北京: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe 人民文學出版社, 2005), 469. My translation.

2 Joseph Lau 劉紹銘 and Howard Goldblatt 葛浩文, *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 609-12.

3 This question was first posed to me by Michel Hockx at the 2012 meeting of the Asian Studies Association, where many of these papers were first presented; he related an exchange about the title that he’d had with Lloyd Haft that took place during the preparation of the *JMLC* issue on prose poetry, 3.2 (2000) — so this is a debate of long standing. It is not, however, hypothetical: although Lu Xun’s fiction has received new translation into English just five years ago, the most recent English version of *Yecao* still dates from 1974, and another effort to translate the piece is long overdue.

4 The scholars who use *Weeds* to translate *Yecao* include Alexander C.Y. Huang, “Tropes of Solitude and Lu Xun’s Tragic Characters,” *Neohelicon* 37.2 (December 2010): 349-57. W.F. Jenner, “Lu Xun’s Disturbing Greatness,” *East Asian History* 19 (June 2000): 19. Bonnie McDougal and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 46-7. David Pollard, *The True Story of Lu Xun* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003), 217-8. The majority of recent books, however, use *Wild Grass*: Eileen Cheng, *Literary Remains: Death, Trauma, and Lu Xun’s Refusal to Mourn* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2013), 14. Gloria Davies, *Lu Xun’s Revolution* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2013), 229-230. Nicolas Kaldis, *The Chinese Prose Poem: A Study of Lu Xun’s Wild Grass (Yecao)* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2014).

rule-breaking, its potentially revolutionary ardor, and its lyric intensity. Each of the following essays takes up a position or set of positions from which to view *Yecao*, and accordingly, each one produces an implicit perspective on the title: briefly, I'll offer my own (highly subjective) interpretation of that implicit perspective in order to introduce these excellent critical essays, but also to demonstrate how they each reveal a different layer to the text.

Roy Chan's essay "Dreaming as Representation: *Wild Grass* and Realism's Responsibility" reads *Yecao* not as a realist work of art, but as a text in an ethical and polemical relationship to realism. Chan describes how *Yecao*'s repeated return to the world of the dream allows it to operate at the interface between individual bodily experience and collective imaginative exchange. In dreams, subject and object are confused: we become other people, a process that has deep and meaningful implications for Lu Xun's political and ethical pursuit of empathy. Since the phenomenological world includes the dream, realism must therefore include the unreal, the fantastic — this can be an antidote to realism's drive to, as Chan puts it, "overcome individual subjectivity" and press us all into roles suiting a single, monolithic version of "real" experience. From the perspective advanced in Chan's piece, we should not perhaps be too quick to prefer a literal or defensibly faithful translation of the title of *Yecao*: we can appreciate what is lost, gained, and transformed in translation because its queering effect is inherent to reading, to the materiality and reality of the text. The overtranslation that results in the English title *Wild Grass*, in which the individual characters of a binome are translated separately, and the additional image of widow's weeds that the translation *Weeds* produces are therefore not to be discounted out of hand, or at least on the grounds that they are not part of the original text. In every text, we are reminded, is the spur to imagine a different or absent text: those qualities are as real as dreams are, which is to say that they are at once incontrovertibly real and outside the real.

Charles Laughlin's essay "Intractable Paradox: The Chinese Reception of *Wild Grass*" is a history of early readings of the collection. *Yecao* presented a political and hermeneutic problem to early readers. Laughlin argues that early readers lacked hermeneutical tools to read *Yecao* through anything but a realist lens, and leftists therefore criticized it sharply for being insufficiently revolutionary — failing to do the work that they assumed it was attempting. This position was reversed following the canonization of Lu Xun as a Maoist revolutionary hero, a process that created an elaborate interpretative narrative of hidden revolutionary zeal that would, ironically, protect the book during the literary upheavals and suppressions of the Mao period. To this reception history, Laughlin adds a valuable new context through which to read the poems of *Yecao*: the editorial, authorial and readerly community of *Yusi*, the magazine in which all the pieces of *Yecao* originally appeared. Since we know how dramatic the effect of audience has been on the interpretation of the work, a sense of its original audience adds

a crucial layer to our understanding of *Yecao*. Even after supplying this originary context, though, Laughlin shows us that the study of *Yecao* “will always be a study in revisionism”; this helps us see some potential reasons why *Wild Grass* was chosen as the title for *Yecao* in 1974. The title *Wild Grass* suppresses the darkness and hopelessness of the collection — one of the major differences between the two titles is that *Weeds* has an abject quality that calls Lu Xun’s undertaking into question from the start. This would have been an undesirable outcome at Beijing’s Foreign Languages Press in 1974, when Gladys Yang and Yang Xianyi produced their translation: the interpretation of the text current to them was of an author who was about to set out on a fully committed revolutionary path, not an artist writing from dejection or disaffection. If there is a consensus that *Weeds* should be the new English-language title of *Yecao*, Laughlin’s analysis tells us that it will be so because it suits our present needs, and he implicitly predicts that *Yecao* may very well generate further titles in the future. If those titles are accepted as the “real” translated title by readers, that acceptance is only temporary.

Mabel Lee’s essay “Lu Xun’s *Wild Grass*: Autobiographical Moments of the Creative Self” chooses an interpretive perspective that is particularly close to the events of Lu Xun’s life. She begins on the basis of her previous interpretations of *Yecao* as a self-conscious, self-imposed end to Lu Xun’s composition of fictive work — a suicide of the creative self. Through biographical rereading, she identifies and demonstrates the temporal immanence of the collection, the closeness with which it follows Lu Xun’s experience, and its present-tense quality. All of these elements, in her analysis, allow *Yecao* to express the traumas Lu Xun experienced in the early 1920s; as a reading practice, her focus on these elements of the book allow her to work beneath the “political scabs” that have accumulated on the work over the last eighty years. Seen from Lee’s tight, autobiographical angle, *Yecao* looks decidedly unrevolutionary, neither wild nor free nor lively and growing. It is a “dirge consisting of 23 poems” that mourns the end of a storied creative career, and turns a spadeful of earth on Lu Xun’s literary production. The title should therefore assuredly be translated as *Weeds*: the collection is made up of the last surviving life among the ruins, the ragged echo of life that chokes out fertile land’s ability to nurture the crop.

My own essay “The Poetics of Hinting in *Wild Grass*” attempts to think through the collection’s layeredness as an intentional product of its form. I survey contemporary English and Chinese critical responses to the collection, and theorize what it is exactly about the poems that shapes our current set of multiple, overlapping, and at times contradictory readings. Drawing on studies of Russian literature and classical Chinese poetry, I identify a structure at play in the book that I call the “literary hint,” in which an artist produces two or more partially independent valences, and composes the exterior surface layer in a way that draws readers towards the occluded interiors of their work. This structure, I argue, is inextricably

both aesthetic (building a layer that captivates) and political (transforming one interpretation into another). By considering matters of form, my essay insinuates a certain kind of fitness for the title *Weeds* — when placed against *Wild Grass*, the title *Weeds* seems more layered. The loss of the adjective leaves slightly more space for the reader to choose and interpret potential internal and external valences of the title: it is less explicit, more elusive, and more allusive. Although the title *Weeds* is immediately visualizable in a very simple way, it rewards further interpretation in a way that is less true with the title *Wild Grass* — and in this manner, *Weeds* is closer to the method and the form that I identify in individual poems and the collection itself.

These essays, taken singly or together, don't tell us how to translate the title of *Yecao* — they were never designed to. Their scope is much broader and deeper, engaging with issues about the collection's purposes, its contexts and its effects. The essays provide a set of entries into the text, and once a reader is inside that text they can generate not just translations, but interpretations, objections, and appreciations. The scholarship that follows gains, in my opinion, something extra from being juxtaposed together under one cover: unlike previous generations of work on *Yecao*, in which consensuses about the book were often insulated from one another by time, space and language, these essays are pressed together, forced into mutual interaction. This does not rectify the contradictions or beat down the conflicts between them. Instead, it mimics the experience of *Yecao* itself, in which each reading is subject to the subterranean echoes of other readings, whether they be spectral voices from other passageways, or tectonic rumblings from below. The socialists Laughlin chronicles are made uneasy by *Yecao*'s darkness; realists are incensed at the dreamy oddities Chan describes; those of us interested in Lu Xun as a leader and a model are given pause by Lee's view of *Yecao* as an artist's dying gasp. We should be unsettled: if I've learned anything from my own research into the book, it is that *Yecao* is yet open, and there is much in it still hidden from our sight.

The work of illumination that these essays represent is especially crucial for a text whose vitality and impact resides in the conversations that it occasions. From its first appearance in *Yusi* (whose own title is sometimes translated as *Threads of Talk*) to its contemporary study in classrooms around the world, *Yecao* has been experienced and appreciated as a participatory mystery, one that seems endlessly generous in providing a spur to the creative and the insightful. I'm lucky to have been a part of this conversation about this text, and grateful to the panel applicants, panelists, audience members, readers, writers and editors who have shaped the following essays. I look forward eagerly to the participation of more voices and more attitudes in the next iteration of this deeply rewarding debate. ✕