In Memoriam: Zhao Luori, 1912-1998

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

IN MEMORIAM: ZHAO LUORI, 1912-1998

Zhao Luori (Lucy Chen)—professor of English at Peking University, poet, and literary translator, whose rendition of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* remains the only complete Chinese version done by a single translator—died on January 1, 1998, in Beijing, People’s Republic of China. For the Whitman scholarly community in China and around the world, her death is an irreparable loss.

Zhao Luori’s prolific work as a translator over a sixty-year-long career included Chinese versions of representative works of T. S. Eliot, Ignazio Silone, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Walt Whitman, William Faulkner, and Henry James. In 1937, when studying for her M.A. in English literature at Qinghua University, Professor Zhao became famous overnight when her Chinese translation of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* appeared. It was her first translation, and it introduced Eliot’s literary work into a Chinese context. Nine years later, when the grateful Nobel Prize-winning poet met Professor Zhao and her husband Professor Chen Mengjia at Harvard University, he presented her with inscribed copies of his *Poems, 1909-1935* and *The Four Quartets*. At this meeting, Eliot read parts of *The Four Quartets* and expressed his hope that Zhao would translate them into Chinese, and also that his Chinese translator would put her own Chinese poems into English, since he was interested in reading them and getting them published in Britain. Unfortunately, these dreams failed to materialize because of the situation Zhao Luori faced when she returned home in 1948.

From 1944 to 1948, Zhao had studied at University of Chicago under R. S. Crane and other well-known scholars. When she received her Ph.D in 1948, Zhao returned to China, as her husband and father wished, and began her lifelong career as professor of English and American literature at Yenching University and Peking University. The influence of the Cold War as well as China’s continuing political movements over the next few decades curbed the academic freedom and creativity of Chinese intellectuals and led to their persecution. Zhao Luori and her family were no exception.

In 1955 the Chinese government organized a commission of scholars and officials into a cultural administration, which was in charge of selecting foreign literary authors and their works that were deemed worthy of translation into Chinese and of determining Chinese translators who were considered trustworthy to render specific works. When the commission decided in 1962 that there should be a complete Chinese version of *Leaves of Grass*, Professor Zhao became the appointed translator. It took her three years to read all of Whitman’s works and the voluminous criticism that could be found in libraries in Beijing. But no sooner had she begun her translation than the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) broke out. The anti-cultural, political turmoil brought the whole country into chaos. In 1966 Zhao’s husband, a well-
known archeologist and poet, could no longer stand the tortures to his body and soul, and he committed suicide. During those suffocating years, Zhao Luori suffered spiritually and physically but strove to endure like the "noiseless patient spider" in Whitman’s poem. It was impossible, however, for her to continue work on her Whitman translation.

When the Great Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the commission suggested that Professor Zhao resume her translation, which she did in 1978. She was then sixty-six years old, weak in body but indomitable in spirit. In order to fulfill the assigned work she twice visited the United States in quest of necessary materials and assistance from Whitman scholars, especially Gay Wilson Allen and James E. Miller, Jr. Twelve years of reading, translating, and revising finally made it possible for her complete Chinese version of *Leaves of Grass* to appear in 1991—without a doubt her crowning achievement in the field of literary translation. Her research-based translation of Whitman’s poems is characterized by what she used to call “a style of literal translation”—that is, a comprehensive effort to make the Chinese version faithful to the original English text with regard to verbal meaning, connotation, rhythm, style, and even typographic form. Seven years after its appearance, her translation has won widespread praise for its faithfulness. Her achievements as a translator brought her numerous awards and prizes, including the "Professional Achievement Citation" at the centennial of the University of Chicago (1991), the “Award for Sino-American Cultural Exchange” (1994), and the “Rainbow Translation Prize” (1994).

In the 1990s Zhao Luori decided it was important to take Whitman studies in China to an even higher level. In addition to publishing her own translations and articles on Whitman, she encouraged young people to study the American poet. Thanks to her help, a number of distinguished Whitman scholars such as David Kuebrich, Kenneth M. Price, James E. Miller, Jr., and Ed Folsom taught or lectured at Peking University, bringing new perspectives and information. When Ed Folsom was invited to visit Peking University and two other universities in Beijing in October, 1997, Zhao Luori was in the hospital and unable to attend his lectures. Folsom visited her in the hospital, but she regretted missing the lectures and, in her final days, was already beginning to plan for the next Whitman expert to be invited to China. The Whitman scholarly community, and the growing Chinese audience for the American poet, are lucky to have been served so well by this Chinese poet-professor, who, even at the age of eighty-five, continued to contribute energetically to the dissemination of Whitman’s work.

—Liu Shusen
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