"POETRY OF ANGUISH, POETRY OF PRAISE": A STUDY OF WANG JIAXIN'S POETRY AND TRANSLATION

Robert Tsaturyan

The representation of trauma in contemporary Chinese poetry is a complex and multilayered phenomenon that resists purely aesthetic, historical, and especially political readings. It conflates all of them. Among the poets that have exemplified remarkable perseverance in their exploration of personal and collective traumas over the past four decades, Wang Jiaxin (王家新, 1957–) is an important voice. This article studies the characteristics of Wang's earlier and later works and the subtilities of his translation-dialogues with primarily Soviet Russian and Eastern European poets. What is the relationship between poetry and translation in working through suffering and coming to terms with the suppressed memories of the past? How does translation render the mourning voice of a poet that is cosmopolitan yet has historical particularities? Situating the poet in the sociohistorical conditions of his time, this paper explores the vicissitudes of one voice against these larger issues.

Keywords: Wang Jiaxin, contemporary Chinese poetry, translation, anguish

1. Introduction

On the drawbridge
On the day that has now become a holiday,
My youth ended.

(Anna Akhmatova, end of the 1910s,
trans. Judith Hemschemeyer)

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That year
A teenager became a poet.

那一年
一個少年成為一個詩人。

(Wang Jiaxin, "That Year")[1]

Wang Jiaxin (王家新) was born in 1957 in Danjiangkou, Hubei province, and was sent to do hard labor in the countryside immediately after graduating from high school. He was among the first batch of students to take the *gaokao* (高考) in 1977, after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was over, and was accepted to the Department of Chinese at Wuhan University. He started writing poetry in his student years at the end of the 1970s and has become one of the most important voices in contemporary Chinese poetry and translation. In this paper, I will try to read Wang's poems not in relation to the 1980s onward poetic movements in China, which have been alternatively called by some critics as *xianfeng shi* (先鋒詩, "avant-garde poetry") or *shiyan shi* (實驗詩, "experimental poetry"),[2] and have been extensively studied (van Crevel 2007), but within their personal and historical matrix.[3]

The juxtaposition of Wang's poetry and translation makes it possible to encompass the two in the descriptive umbrella term: "poetry of anguish, poetry of praise" (創痛之詩，讚美之詩), a line taken from one of his recent poems.[4] I aim to explore Wang's "poetics of anguish" – burgeoning in his childhood, transformed and intensified after 1989, and eventually turned perspicuously bitter in recent years. I start the study with the "late style" of a young poet situating it in a historical context and go on to explore his "poetry of anguish" with a few examples of "poetry of praise" – taking the mediation between the two as a quest in maintaining the freedom and integrity of his voice – one poet's voice standing in as the expression of the collective will of

1 Most translations in this study are based on Diana Shi and George O'Connell's versions; the translations are mine whenever left unindicated.

2 See, e.g., an important early anthology edited by Tang Xiaodu (唐曉渡) and Wang titled *An Anthology of Contemporary Experimental Chinese Poetry* (中國當代實驗詩選 *Zhongguo dangdai shiyan shixuan*), published in 1987.

3 Zhang Zao (張棗, 1962–1910), a poet of the same generation, writes in the preface to his PhD dissertation, originally written in German: "The terms *menglong shi* (朦朧詩 Obscure Poetry) and *houmenglong shi* (後朦朧詩 Post-Obscure Poetry) lost all meaning in the interpretation of Chinese poetry after 1989" (Zhang 2004, 2020). Note that the Chinese translation of Zhang's dissertation has recently been published in mainland China. It has minor alterations; most relevant for our study is the replacement of the year 1989 with "the end of the 1980s" to avoid censors. This is a common practice in mainland China, and it usually does not affect the argument, as informed readers are well aware of this practice.

4 The poem is titled "The Seaside Mountain" (海邊的山 "Haibian de shan," 2017); however, the context of the poem differs from the theme of this paper, the latter is solely my own description of Wang's poetics.

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a generation. The role of translation in mourning history is thoroughly explored, with particular attention to Wang's translation-conversations with Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966), and Paul Celan (1920–1970), to a lesser extent. Trilingual comparisons are made between versions in Chinese, English, and Russian, where necessary.

The research is primarily based on the following theoretical principle: textual sensitivity, biographical sensitivity, and historical sensitivity (Yim 2009).[5] By studying the relationship of Wang's poetry to history, broader questions are explored concerning literature and witnessing, writing and silence, aesthetics and atrocity.

2. Poetry, history, and transformation

Wang started writing poetry in his student years at the end of the 1970s. Early poems such as "Chinese Painting" (中國畫 "Zhongguo hua," 1984), "Awakening" (醒悟 "Xingwu," 1985), "Scorpion" (蠍子 "Xiezi," 1987), are meditative in tone, seizing minute instants of life experiences, absorbing the cultural and philosophical riches of *chandao* (禪道, "Zen/Chan Buddhism"). It was a period of the "cultural fever" in the People's Republic of China (PRC), which for Wang did not last long, and only left a transient mark on his poetry (Hong and Liu 2005, 255). His poems from this period are densely ornamented with symbols, some of the recurring ones are the sun, the sea, stone, autumn, and snow; in some cases, more than one of these images appear in a single poem.[6]

His early meditative voice is distinctive in the following lines:[7]

> Turned every stone on the mountain,
> not one scorpion: this was childhood?
>
> 翻遍滿山的石頭
> 不見一隻蠍子：這是小時候
> 哪一年、哪一天的事？
>
> (Wang 2001, 44; Shi and O'Connell 2016, 21)

[5] I am indebted to Prof. Yim Chi Hung Lawrence for inspiring us during the tumultuous autumn semester of 2019 to persevere with this academic posture. Although not developed into a theoretical framework, Yim applies this principle in his studies of Ming-Qing poetry, with slightly different articulation; he calls them "the three contextualizations:" literary contextualization, biographical contextualization, and historical contextualization.

[6] Some early poems where the image of "stone" (石頭 *shitou*) is central are: "Notes from a Harvest Festival" (收穫節札記 "Shouhuojie zhaji," 1983), "Starting from a Stone" (從石頭開始 "Cong shitou kaishi," 1983), "Landscape" (風景 "Fengjing," 1985), "Empty Gorge" (空谷 "Konggu," 1985), "Gary Snyder" (加里·斯奈德 "Jiali Sinaide," 1986), "Scarborough" (斯卡堡 "Sikabao," 1992), "Motherland" (祖國 "Zuguo," London, 1992). In the last poem, "motherland" is compared to "stone exposed to the sun." Note that month and city/country annotations are omitted from the poems unless they assist in reading.

[7] This is Wang's first full-length volume in English translation.

This is the opening scene of "Scorpion," a representative poem from his lyrical and meditative 1980s. Here, "stone" can be read as the image of an unshattered past, that is, the long cultural history of China, but, as we will see in the later works, the spirit of endurance is more important than culture per se.[8] The decade of the 1980s is also known, up until 1989, as a time of extraordinary openness and interest in non-Chinese, mainly Western, literature and theory (Yang 2009, 42–85).[9]

The image of "snow" was already widespread in Wang's early meditative poetry, but it gradually transformed to become a metaphor for a static, unalterable wound, a metaphysical imagination of existence.[10] His poems from the first half of the 1980s can be characterized by borrowing the title of his 1989 essay collection as "man's encounter with the world" (see Wang 1989). Unlike the poetry of anguish discussed in this study, his most famous poem among the general public is probably the early poem "Beyond the Mountain" (在山的那邊 "Zai shan de nabian," 1979), as it has been included in the Compulsory Education Curriculum of some experimental textbooks in the PRC, since as early as 2001.[11] The long poem "Answer" (回答 "Huida," 1998) is widely considered by critics as his most important work, for its succinct narrative quality yet apparent simplicity in language, enabling the integration of an honest portrayal of private life's failure with that of a defeated era (Zhang 2017).[12]

In 1989, in the wake of the Tiananmen incident, Wang went through a stylistic, existential, and, indeed, historical transformation. He started to write predominantly in the past tense, that is, he abandoned hope. But merely a year before the

8 In recent years, especially, Wang has been contemplating "endurance/perseverance" in his poetry. See, for example, a recent poem "Football Field" (足球場 "Zuqiuchang," 2019). In this poem, the poet expresses his admiration for the teenager who is the last to leave the field.

9 Although read through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which has its shortcomings, this lengthy article gives some robust analysis and is an interesting viewpoint on the nature of the relationship between Western and Chinese poetry from that period.

10 Some early poems where the image of snow (雪 *xue*) is central are: "Hexi Corridor" (河西走廊 "Hexi Zoulang," 1985), "A Visit" (訪 "Fang," 1986), "What Place" (什麼地方 "Shenme defang," 1988), "Northern Notes" (北方札記 "Beifang zhaji," 1988–1989); fragment poems: "Continuous Arrival" (持續的到達 "Chixu de daoda," 1990–1991), "Reversal" (反向 "Fanxiang," Beijing, 1991), "Poetry" (詩 "Shi," 1992), "Diary" (日記 "Riji," 1992), "Solitary House Overlooking the Sea" (臨海孤獨的房子 "Linhai gudu de fangzi," winter 1992). Note that the various manifestations of the snow metaphor are abundant throughout Wang's whole writing career.

11 2001 is also the year when a selection of his poems was published by the prestigious *Lanxing shiku* (藍星詩庫 *Blue Star Poetry Series*) of *Renmin wenxue chuubanshe*.

12 Although the poem is also a manifestation of trauma, the main difference is that the event that "triggered" the poem is a divorce, a strictly personal matter, in contrast to the primarily historical reading of this paper. For this reason, it is a question for a separate study, and I refrain from analyzing it here.

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tragic events he had written the following concluding lines to "Étude" (練習曲 "Lianxiqu," 1988), imagining his other self, perhaps the poet-prophet:

> Without him, the rain's sound could not ascend,
> not my two hands touch this paper.
> Nor could I write this bitter line.
>
> 沒有他，雨聲不會響起
> 而雙手不會伸向稿紙
> 我不會寫下這痛苦的詩句。
>
> (Shi and O'Connell 2016, 20; Wang 2001, 46–47)

The last stanza of another poem called "Praise" (讚美 "Zanmei," 1988) from the same year, full of dread, reads:

> Autumn has arrived
> between a gust of wind and another, it has arrived.
> And I know what is ahead of me,
> sitting amidst the mountains and hills, all my blood drains.
>
> 秋天來了
> 在一陣風與另一陣風之間，來了
> 而我知道是什麼在等著我
> 坐於群山之中，我全部的血流盡。
>
> (Wang 2001, 48–49)

In praise, there is a bitter voice.

This "bitter line," becomes more historically striking after 1989, in his poem "Transformation" (轉變 "Zhuanbian," 1990), which defined both his era and the turn in his literary world. As the "snowstorm" suggests in the poem, the image of wind (風 *feng*) is a symbol of the intruder, the force in history that often disturbs the calmness of things. He states the poets' role in a destitute time, which, in the last two lines of "Transformation," is 1990 (Wang 2001, 66–67; Shi and O'Connell 2016, 32): "It is time to stand in the wind / or surrender" (是到了在風中堅持 / 或徹底放棄的時候了). The appropriation of history in poetry came to shape the "late style" of Wang's poetic career. Yet, at the same time, history is explicitly present – in the form of a date or a historical place/event – only in a small number of poems. It is worthy to note that his "late style" appeared at a time when he was only a little over 30 years of age.

In what follows, I present an analysis of the relationship between Wang's poetics and his often explicit manifestation of indebtedness to primarily Russian and Eastern European poets. This intertextuality is an interpretative and creative act, done through writing and translation, in which the particularities of the two overlap in the process. Recognition (辨認 *bianren*), as Wang insists, is possible

only through translation – recognition of the other, and thus of your own cultural, linguistic, and also existential condition (Wang 2017). Translation itself has a twofold meaning for him: translating from a foreign language into Chinese and conversations with the poets that he interprets through his own poetry – the two meanings are often interwoven.

3. The writing of anguish: "What is it that is agonizing us?"

In almost all the poems that Wang is recollecting childhood memories, which tragically coincided with the tumultuous ten years of the Cultural Revolution, the poet is reminiscing traumatic memories, as in the long poem: "Early Youth" (少年 "Shaonian," 2003), as well as the short poems: "Simple Autobiography" (簡單的自傳 "Jiandan de zizhuan," 2004) and "Tangerines" (橘子 "Juzi," 2006).[13] In his poetry from the first decade of the 21st century, memories of the past are often the subjects of contemplation. However, memories of the past are not about individual events, and what makes his pain all more visible is the unspoken between the lines, which shows that the poetry of anguish has its origins in the traumatic memories of childhood.[14]

In a poem composed in 1990 called "The Last Camp" (最後的營地 "Zuihou de yingdi"), the image of "stone," in a violent burst, is "gathered by a storm" (聚集起石頭的風暴). The political-historical context is crystal clear here; however, a mere political reading of Wang's poetry, or indeed any poetry, will be misleading. The events of 1989 had a lasting effect on Wang's writings; however, it is already his mature poetics of anguish, his well-crafted images, and his slightly pessimistic tone that intensified during and after the crackdown of the Tiananmen Square protests. It is not that Tiananmen caused friction in his poetry, but with the grim hand of history, it created the necessary conditions for an already tragic voice to further aggravate. Nevertheless, rather than having major signifying ruptures in the metaphorical chain mentioned above, the images evolved into similar but somewhat more stern representations. I argue that Wang's pessimistic tone is a response to traumatic history; it is a form of ethics but also an aesthetic choice.

The image of "snow" in "Pastoral" (田園詩 "Tianyuanshi," 2004) reaches its utmost as a metaphor for death:

> On the country roads outside Beijing
> you're sure to spot sheep

[13] Not to be confused with "Pomelo" (柚子 "Youzi," 2005), written one year earlier.

[14] Wang comes from a family of *dizhu* (地主, "landlord"), which was an unfavorable title during Mao's purges when even children were often bullied by their classmates; Wang, as a child, was no exception. See "Early Youth" for hints on his experience as a nine-year-old when the Cultural Revolution started.

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scattered over fields, like unmelted snow
or swollen blooms burst open.
They cross the road in clumps,
the herdsman barking them down
a weedy ditch, tripping and tumbling
through the dust.
I never paid much attention
until one afternoon
in flurries of snow
I nosed close behind a sheep truck,
the dark eyes gazing down
gentle and quiet, not knowing
where they were headed.
They turned toward me then,
curious as children.
I let the car drift back
through the thickening curtain of snow
and watched them disappear.

如果你在京郊的鄉村路上漫遊
你會經常遇見羊群
它們在田野中散開，像不化的雪
像膨脹的綻開的花朵
或是縮成一團穿過公路，被吆喝著
滾下塵土飛揚的溝渠
我從來沒有注意過它們
直到有一次我開車開到一輛卡車的後面
在一個飄雪的下午
這一次我看清了它們的眼睛
（而它們也在上面看著我）
那樣溫良，那樣安靜
像是全然不知它們將被帶到什麼地方
對於我的到來甚至懷有
幾分孩子似的好奇
我放慢了車速
我看著它們
消失在愈來愈大的雪花中。

(Shi and O'Connell 2016, 86; Wang 2021, 77)

It is known that the Nazis used to transport Jews and other prisoners in sheep-trucks or cattle-trucks. We can read this poem as an allegory of Jews being transported to Auschwitz. About the latter, Zygmunt Bauman (1989, 23) writes,

> The gas chambers, temptingly dubbed "bathrooms," presented a welcome sight after days spent in overcrowded, filthy cattle trucks. Those who already knew the truth and entertained no illusions still had a choice between a "quick and painless" death, and one preceded by extra sufferings reserved for the insubordinate.

Those in the "sheep-trucks," unsuspecting – "not knowing / where they were headed" – are the Jews, or in Wang's poetry the symbolism of Jews, that is, the victims of a catastrophe. Wang's metaphorical associations with the Holocaust may cause uneasiness to readers; thus, it is one of the objectives of this paper to answer the following question: why does Wang, and some other poets of his generation, feel a kinship with the Holocaust witnesses and post-Holocaust writers?

As I already mentioned, in the wake of the Tiananmen incident, the poet went through a stylistic and spiritual transformation; the movement left an indelible mark on the whole generation of writers, and even more so on Wang. He was working as an editor of a major poetry magazine based in Beijing, *Shikan* (詩刊, *Poetry Monthly*), at the time; and when the movement was crushed by the government, as a liberal-minded editor, he was an unwanted person. Thus started his self-imposed exile in Europe, and it was in London, from 1992 to 1994, where he would eventually settle for two years. Whether it was a forced exile or a conscious choice is still a matter of debate, but what is crucial is that the tragedy he witnessed, followed by years of political repressions, transformed Wang's poetry, at least partially, into "poetry of anguish."[15] It was in the early 1990s that he composed the poems that are considered, even today, his representative works: "Varykino Ballad" (瓦雷金諾敘事曲 "Waleijinnuo xushuqu," winter 1989), "Pasternak" (帕斯捷爾納克 "Pasijieernake," December 1990), "A Man Splitting Wood for Winter" (一個劈木柴過冬的人 "Yi ge pi muchai guodong de ren," October 1989), his fragment-poem series "Words" (詞語 "Ciyu," England–Belgium, 1992–1993),[16] and others.

"Pasternak," an often-anthologized poem, is representative for several reasons. It is, first of all, a classic example of his stylistic transformation, which in the 1990s signified more than merely a literary transformation. It is at the same time a moving elegy to Boris Pasternak (1890–1960), the great Russian poet, and metamorphosis of his own voice under the new social and political climate.

I quote the celebrated two lines of the second stanza, as well as a stanza from the middle part:

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15 For the question of "exile" in Chinese poetry circles after 1989 and the various debates surrounding it, see van Crevel (2008, 137–186).

16 Not to be confused with Wang's 1990 poem with the same title, which is not fragment-poem series, but a single short poem.

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I can finally write to my heart's content,
but cannot live true to my inner heart.

終於能按照自己的內心寫作了
卻不能按一個人的內心生活

[...]

Crying out those noble names
Those exiles, sacrifices and witnesses, those
Souls meeting in the tremor of Mass
Those shining in death, and my
Own land!

呼喊那些高貴的名字
那些放逐，犧牲，見證，那些
在彌撒曲的震顫中相逢的靈魂
那些死亡中的閃耀，和我的
自己的土地！[17]

(Yang 2009, 55; Shi and O'Connell's translation is consulted)

Poetry critic Zhang Taozhou (張桃洲) refers to the two Pasternak odes as "companion poems," about which he maintains that apart from "Transformation," two poems from the same period – "Varykino Ballad" and "Pasternak" – have composed the spiritual pain of the era most profoundly (Zhang 2018, 130). This indirect mourning encompasses the pain of two nations, it at the same time, shares the predicaments of artistic and literary representations. About these two poems, Yang (2009, 56) writes, "Wang Jiaxin's Pasternak poems are representative of the imaginary transference and symbolic transference that Chinese poets were generally engaged in the late 1980s and early 1990s." The psychoanalytic reading of the poems as the manifestation of transference, Chinese poets' tendency to write about Western masters they admire as a kind of symbolic resistance, is only partially correct. The obvious question is, however: Why is this relationship not mutual but only one-way? To answer this question, we perhaps need to explore the socio-political contexts of the time in their respective countries. Hereafter, I will briefly explore the interaction of poetics and politics, and poetics and life experience.

What all these works from the beginning of the 1990s have in common, apart from being a poet's answer to the great political and social transformations of his time, is the striking intertextuality with early and mid-20th century Russian and Eastern European writers, especially those who lived through the worst times of

[17] I partially follow Yang's citation of this couplet.

their respective histories. As the snowstorm rages just beyond the door, Wang chooses to dedicate the poem to Pasternak, perhaps to gird his endurance – "turning pain to music" (把苦難轉變為音樂) (Wang 2001, 59–62). In "Varykino Ballad," even such a reoccurring image as "snow," is transformed into a snowstorm (暴風雪 *baofengxue*).

In Hong Zicheng's (洪子誠) 1999 *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature* (中國當代文學史 *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi*), there is a short introduction to Wang. It is in this breath that Hong interprets Wang's poetry of the transformation period and its aftermath as "expressing the 'shouldering' of experience," and defines the poet's ongoing development as "orienting his literary aspirations on the basis of reflecting and critiquing the era" (Hong 1999, 312). This is precisely how Wang interprets the works of his literary heroes: those "Soviet-Russian exiles,"[18] poets who lived through the terrible years of Stalinist terror, and yet gave the world literature such everlasting works as *Doctor Zhivago*, the poetry of Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938), Anna Akhmatova, and Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941). The historical contexts are distinctly different, and what Wang does with his ode writing, reading, and translating is to decontextualize and apply – what he perceives as great works of literature – to his own times.

If we were to take one keyword, one which recurs in Wang's poetry, that would certainly be "anguish" (痛苦 *tongku*), a word which is not merely a rhetorical technique, as I will try to show in the following examples. Due to his traumatic experiences during the Cultural Revolution, lamenting over childhood can be traced even in his early meditative, largely ahistorical, and apolitical poetry.[19] In those post-1989 poems, which are mostly homages to poets who have gone through enormous pain and suffering, Wang is allegorically shouldering the suffering of a hard laborer (苦役犯 *kuyi fan*), and often chooses to translate Mandelstam and other poets in the same spirit. Thus, the term surpasses autobiographical dimensions, touching upon the atrocities of the 20th century befallen almost equally on the Western and non-Western worlds, with all its non-poetic connotations.[20]

One example is a poem from the "Marginalia" series, which I will discuss in the last section of this chapter. The poem is a praise and a critique of Johann Sebastian

[18] "Soviet-Russian exile poets" (蘇俄流亡詩人 *Su'e liuwang shiren*) comes from a recent poem titled: "Heaney in 1969, or in 1972" (希尼在1969，或在1972 "Xini zai 1969, huo zai 1972," 2019).

[19] Suffering (苦痛 *kutong*) or anguish (痛苦 *tongku*) can be traced in the following pre-Tiananmen poems: "Autumn Leaves Have Turned Red" (秋葉紅了 "Qiuye hong le," 1982), and "Poetry" (詩歌 "Shige," March 1989), dedicated to the memory of fellow poet Haizi (海子, 1964–1989).

[20] In addition to the poems examined, the phrase also appears in a late poem: "Reading Nadezhda Mandelstam's Memoir" (讀娜傑日達·曼德爾施塔姆回憶錄 "Du Najierida Mandeershitamu huiyilu," 2016).

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Bach's fugue composition, not as a piece of music, of course, but as an emblem of modern European culture:

> We hardly know how
> such transcendence can arise
> from this world of pain,
> but at the edge of the city,
> where I drive past mountains of trash,
> past empty-eyed kids, staring,
> Bach enters my ears, and I cross
> into my own country, vast and impoverished.
>
> 在這令人痛苦的世界上,
> 我們指責不該有這樣超脫的藝術;
> 可我仍忍不住去聽,
> 當我幾乎是含著淚, 緩緩駛過
> 垃圾成山、孩子們癡呆相望的城鄉結合部,
> 進入我貧寒而廣闊的國度。
>
> (Shi and O'Connell 2019a, 93; Wang 2019, 43)

The connection between music and atrocity, exemplified in poetry in its all intensity, is Celan's "Death Fugue" ("Todesfuge"), which Wang has translated. Thus, this poem quoted above, Wang's "Bach's 'Art Of The Fugue'" (巴赫《賦格的藝術》 "Bahe: 'Fuge de yishu'"), echoes Celan's poem, which in its turn, echoes Bach's fugue style compositions. Here, neither the analogy between music and literature is at stake, nor the fusion of the two in the technical sense, but the reference to music as a form of high art in literature. Wang's reconstruction of music in poetry is seen through the lenses of an intellectual; in "Words," he writes about the "pain of Rachmaninoff's exile" and "Tchaikovsky's elegy." Both composers are from Soviet Russia, and both of them are depicted in Wang's poetry in their tragic faith and bitter experiences. Here, not their music, but their fate as musicians is the key motif.

An extraordinary encounter of intercultural and extratemporal wartime pain, both for Celan and Wang, post-atrocities literature is the almost-sacred act of preserving memory, with the danger of reenactment of trauma all the more palpable. What we see here is not an imitation of poetic language, but an ethical response to history – one that belongs to humanity as a whole and not to individual nations. And even though committed to preserving autonomous history, Wang's poetry is tightly connected to the lineage of poets that he considers his literary forefathers. For this reason, he has often been called a poet with "uniquely cosmopolitan existential style" (Crespi 2011, 78–82). In other words, though his medium is the Chinese language, with its syntax, punctuation (especially Chinese dashes), form, and grammar – the last two heavily influenced by Western poetry – he is not writing national literature.

Time and again we can see in Wang's poetry that the tragedies of the other are intermingled and overlap with the tragedies which have befallen him and his compatriots. Even more often, the analogies of the foreign and Chinese catastrophes are so interwoven that unknotting them would mean creating incongruities in the world of a poet where there is no clear distinction between the pain of the other and his own. To Adorno's celebrated maxim, "there can be no poetry after Auschwitz," Wang would have replied in the bold spirit of the English poet Tony Harrison, that "there is only poetry after Auschwitz" (Adorno 1967, 17–35; Rowland 2009, 101). The tense juxtaposition of atrocities and aesthetics is ameliorated by the humane day-to-day language of his poetry. The moral and political challenges of writing poetry in Chinese after 1989, and the predicament that many writers faced, whether in physical or spiritual exile, are what Zhang (2020, 7) called "the exile of the word" (詞的流亡 *ci de liuwang*). In a 1991 fragment-poem called "Reversal" (反向 "Fanxiang"), Wang asks the following question and provides an answer:

> Where is your home?
> You hold your tears, you go into exile in your own language.
>
> 你的家園在哪裡？
> 你忍住眼淚，在自己的語言中流亡。
>
> (Wang 2001, 90)

In his earlier works such as "Scorpion," he alludes to classical Chinese philosophy, and his later works become more and more de-rooted.[21] His short fragment-poems are often rich with allusions, with philosophical undertones, exploring silence, time, history, Auschwitz, suffering, and survival.

The salient aspect of Wang's later works – the poetry of anguish – is the poetic diction which internalizes and thus gives voice to the inarticulable, not only in the sense of exposing the truth when it is silenced while evading censorship, but also in giving voice to anguish itself, a sensation that can be felt but not adequately expressed. Personal anguish intersects with the wider trauma of the poet's *dangxia* (當下, "the present times") – a term which, in his writings, has not only temporal but also a metaphysical dimension. A poem that mourns his mother's death, titled "Dawn, Five AM" (黎明五點鐘 "Liming wu dianzhong," 2018), also laments again and again the "hard laborer" or "jail worker," as in the following lines:

> Five AM, only city jail workers stepping out
> beneath pale blue seeped from the horizon.

[21] One recent poem in which he revisits his cultural roots is "Listening to *Qinqiang* Opera in Tianshui" (在天水聽秦腔 "Zai Tianshui ting qinqiang," 2018).

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在黎明五點鐘，祇有勞改犯出門看到
天際透出的一抹蒼白的藍。

(Shi and O'Connell 2019b, 75; Wang 2019, 64)

Wang uses the same term in his translations to refer to the actual experiences of Russian poets such as Mandelstam, in Soviet labor-camps of the Gulag. Let us have a look at another recent poem, which can be read as an attempt in coming to terms with history.

There is a quietistic voice in the poem "This Street" (這條街 "Zhe tiao jie," 2016) – melancholic but not mournful. The poet is gazing at the street behind the window from his study. The street manifests all that is worldly, but also transient: "a girl in a mini-skirt walking /[...]/ we have been living on this little green street for five years" (現在，一個穿短裙的少女走過 /[...]/ 一條我們已居住了五年的綠蔭小街).[22] The fading time travels the street back and forth, and the poet stands authoritatively at the threshold of the present life and the past. The poem opens with an epigraph by Mandelstam: "I shall not return my borrowed dust / To the earth."[23] "This Street" was written in the same year when Wang published a rich collection of Mandelstam's poetry in Chinese translation (see Wang 2016), which once again shows the variations of the Chinese poet's dialogues with Russian poets and the constantly overlapping nature of his writing and translation. Mandelstam's tragic life ended in a Siberian hard-labor camp in 1937; Wang's poetic dialogue with Mandelstam incorporates the very essence of the poet's fate – hard laborer, perhaps as recognition of Mandelstam's pain.

4. Writing on a slant: "Glacial marginalia"

Wang came up with a formal breakthrough in 2016–2017, with a series of 34 marginal-style short poems called *Pang zhu zhi shi* (旁註之詩), which is translated into English as *Marginalia* by Shi and O'Connell. They are, structurally, a more sophisticated form of his fragment-poem series. The inspiration comes from the following line by Mandelstam, from his only piece of prose fiction *The Egyptian Stamp* (1928): "Destroy your manuscripts, but save whatever you have inscribed in the margin out of boredom, out of helplessness, and, as it were, in a dream" (Brown 1965, 187). The epigraph for *Marginalia* misses the phrase "as it were, in a dream;" by omitting it, the emphasis is on destroying manuscripts and saving the inscriptions in the margins. These short poems are mostly dedicated to the poets, and occasionally to individual books, that have shaped Wang's literary spirit and

22 Note: these two lines do not follow each other in the poem.

23 The English translation is by Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin.

style. In his lectures, he describes a kind of poetic family whose genealogy transcends national, temporal, and linguistic borders (Tsaturyan 2018, 158–159). Many of these poets are those whose works Wang has been translating since the 1980s: Akhmatova, Pasternak, Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva – from the Silver Age of Russian poetry. There are also poems dedicated to classic figures of world literature: Dante, Shelley, Camus, Rilke, T. S. Eliot; others are dedicated to philosophers: Benjamin, Heidegger, Levinas, and others. These are not odes, but poem-dialogues, at times critiques. They are fragmented "flash photographs" of the vulnerabilities of those giants, in the poet's eyes, and he writes on the borders of silence.

A poem on Heidegger with the same title:

> Confirmed in your black notebook:
> in the end one must be true
> not to philosophy scribbled at a mountain resort
> but to one's own blood.
>
> 你的黑色筆記本最終證實了：
> 一個人忠實的，不是他在
> 高山療養地寫下的哲學，
> 而是，他自己的血。

(Shi and O'Connell 2019a, 90; Wang 2019, 38–39)

In a way, this is an angry pronouncement, as it is known that Heidegger was a Nazi member and had joined the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party in 1933. Celan, a survivor of the Holocaust and whose parents had perished in the camps, continued reading Heidegger and writing in German until his death, including after their "historic encounter" in 1967 (Lyon 2006, preface). The poet committed suicide by drowning himself in the river of the Seine in Paris in 1970. Celan is one of the first poets that Wang translated. The affinity that Wang feels with Celan, the spirit or disposition manifested in his own works, is what American poet Robert Hass explores in an article, which is also an introduction to Wang's English volume of poetry. He writes, "They [these poems] seem to belong to a vision of the world stripped bare, to the voice that emerges from winter clarities" (Hass 2015, 22–24). In another poem written less than a year later, called "Flying Over the Alps" (飛越阿爾卑斯 "Feiyue A'erbeisi," 2017), Wang makes a reference to *Marginalia* in the following lines:

> The mountains turn ink-green
> with glacial marginalia,
> then red and yellow, mixed forest,
> beneath the clouds, fairytale houses.
>
> 然後是綿延的墨綠色山嶺
> 冰川的旁註之詩

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是變紅變黃的雜樹層林
是雲彩下童話般的房子。

(Shi and O'Connell 2019b, 68–75; Wang 2019, 58–59)

The poet compares "glacial marginalia" to the Alps – while flying over the mountain range. As in Wang's poetry, the image of "snow" is one of Celan's most forceful images, evoking winter and death (Joris 2003, 461–462).

Wang is also a professor of literature at Renmin University of China, and he has often been referred to as an "intellectual poet" (van Crevel 2008, 169). As an intellectual, he often keeps a keen eye on contemporary events, injustices, big and small tragedies befallen on ordinary people. One incident happened on November 18, 2017, to which Wang responded immediately. A major fire broke out at Daxing suburban district of Beijing, located at Xinjian village, part of Xihongmen town. Nineteen people were killed, and eight were injured. The Beijing government believed that the accident had crossed the bottom line of security in the capital; as a result, initiating a massive project to expel the *diduan-renkou* (低端人口, "low-income residents"). The "expulsion of low-end populace" became the headline of all major media outlets of the month.[24] Contemporary traumatic events recur, and Wang as a poet-intellectual became increasingly vocal in his writings, lamenting the pain of his fellow citizens, this time from the lowest strata of the society in the capital Beijing. He composed a poem during the peak days of the mass expulsion campaign. The title of the poem is "Tonight" (今晚 "Jinwan," 2017), and the striking details are in the 11th line, of a 14-line poem:

Tonight, I really wish there was a concentration camp
that would make me feel the mercy of death.

今晚，我倒真希望有一座集中營
讓我感到死亡的仁慈。

(Wang 2019, 60–61)

Similar to the gigantic events of the 20th century, at times abstractions of traumatic incidents, poetic engagement with small and specific incidents like the above partly arises from his desire – unlike in his earlier poems – to be in the present. This is a turn in his late style: from the past tense to the present. This tendency is even more amplified with the advance of social media and the fusion of daily news with social media; however, this does not mean that technological advancement plays a decisive role in Wang's engagement with the present. His is, rather, an attempt to bear witness to the true and real dimensions of suffering

[24] For details of the Daxing fire, the short introduction of a documentary by Chen Jiaping (陳家坪) is primarily consulted. The documentary is titled *Daxing Is on Fire* (大興失火 *Daxing shihuo*, 2019).

and write poetry as testimony, an attempt to grasp the essence of pain. On the relationship of testimony to poetry, Giorgio Agamben (1999, 161) explains:

> Hölderlin's statement that "what remains is what the poets found" (*Was bleibt, stiften die Dichter*) is not to be understood in the trivial sense that poets' works are things that last and remain throughout time. Rather, it means that the poetic word is the one that is always situated in the position of the remnant and that can, therefore, bear witness. Poets – witnesses – found language as what remains, as what actually survives the possibility, or impossibility, of speaking.

Witnessing is not only about remembering the past but also a nuanced response to the impending catastrophes. Wang's poetics is the endurance of his voice.

5. "An infidel fidelity": Wang Jiaxin's translation of anguish

As a poet-translator, Wang regards encounters as deeply intrinsic and solemn events, like the one that occurred with Celan's poetry in 1991. "These kinds of encounters," he says in an interview, "are seemingly accidental, but they are not at all. Just look back at the 'historical conditions' of those two–three years. I think, precisely of all that we experienced amidst the tumultuous history what drew me to Celan. Otherwise, he wouldn't even come to me" (Wang 2012, 299–300).

The following is an attempt to investigate Wang's translation choices and strategies. In the case of translating Akhmatova, I try to answer the following question: Why did he especially select and translate those some 170 poems and the two celebrated long poems: "Poem Without a Hero" (1940–1962) and "Requiem" (1935–1940), out of more than 800 poems in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova* (1997) that he consulted?[25] I aim at establishing the link between his writing and translation, not in regard to style, but as the pursuits of a poet mourning in translation, both the past and the present. Theoretically, I follow Wang's discussions of "trauma" as a key to exploring Celan's poetry; I rely heavily on his explorations of the relationship between trauma and literature to read his poetry and translation strategies.[26]

His translations of Celan, Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva, and others are, what one young critic Chen Qing (陳慶) defined in a short but insightful article, referring to Wang's translations as *bu zhongshi de zhongshi* (不忠實的忠實, "infidel fidelity"). Chen is emphasizing the importance of *yinzhi* (音質, "tone quality") in

[25] In several translations cited in this study, it is evident that Wang has also relied on Nancy K. Anderson's versions, as in the example below.

[26] Wang has dedicated six essays on Celan's life and work in one of his essay collections, which mainly deal with the question of "trauma" (see Wang 2012, 147–248).

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translating from a second language. He writes: "The 'tone' that Ezra Pound referred to, at the same time includes the tone quality and intonation of a poem, or to put it more thoroughly, it includes: tone quality, intonation, flavor, as well as rhythm and syntax" (Chen 2017, 110–114). In the following, I will explore specific cases of Wang's indirect translations, as examples of "infidel fidelity" where the lack of rhyme and literalness is ameliorated by the strangeness of "tone quality" and its mood in Chinese. In the case of the Russian texts, although Wang's medium in reading and translating is English, as he does not master Russian, I often consult the original texts for comparison.

Wang first came to know Akhmatova's works at the beginning of the 1980s through the memoirs of Ilya Ehrenburg (1891–1967), collected in a work called *People, Years, Life*, published serially in the Soviet Union from 1961 to 1965. The Chinese translation of which, together with the translations of Akhmatova's poetry by Gao Mang (高莽, 1926–2017) and others, introduced Russian poetry from the Silver Age to Wang's generation of writers. As in other cases, Wang is attracted to Akhmatova's later poetry; thus, his 2014 translation-anthology titled *With the Book From Tarusa: Collected Poetry Translations of Wang Jiaxin* (帶著來自塔魯薩的書：王家新譯詩集 *Daizhe laizi Talusa de shu: Wang Jiaxin yishi ji*) includes over 30 later poems by Akhmatova, as well as an appendix of several letters and articles. His decades-long reading and translating culminated in his translation of Akhmatova's collected poetry, borrowing the book's title from the poet's famous long poem. The collection is titled *Poem Without a Hero: Akhmatova's Selected Poems* (沒有英雄的敘事詩：阿赫瑪托娃詩選 *Meiyou yingxiong de xushishi: Ahematuowa shixuan*), published in 2018. In a lengthy introduction to the book, which is also a tribute-essay to the poet, Wang draws our attention to Akhmatova's tragic life after the 1930s, her tremendous courage to bear the burden and responsibility of writing about the personal and historical disasters befallen on her compatriots in the beloved city Saint Petersburg, and the whole of Russia. Contemplating on the poets' role as witnesses, he quotes the following section in his translation from "Poem Without a Hero," perhaps as a classic example of a poem that "denounces history" (Wang 2018, 13).[27] This poem was not included in the text of "Poem Without a Hero," upon its publication and is only a later addition (Hemschemeyer 1997, 582). Interestingly, in its Chinese afterlife, it gets full recognition as an integral part of the enigmatic long poem:

> 去問問任何一位我同時代的女人，
> 任何一位囚徒，流放者，苦役犯——

[27] The title of Wang's introduction is borrowed from an epigraph that Akhmatova uses for one of her 1962 poems, herself quoting the line from Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996): "You will write about us on a slant." Wang's intentional mistranslation as "you will write about us in italics" is reading what he calls "the secret joining signal between Brodsky and Akhmatova," a symbolism of "unofficial" literature in an unfree country.

她都會盡力讓你明白——
是怎樣的恐懼讓我們變得癡呆，
我們又是怎樣為集中營，為監獄，
為斷頭台而扶養孩子。

(Wang 2018, 13)

In Nancy K. Anderson's English translation:

Ask any women of my age—
Any of those arrested, exiled, caged—
And she'll try to make you understand
How terror left us half-demented,
How we raised children to be sentenced
To firing squads or concentration camps.

(Anderson 2004, 171–172)

In the Russian original:

Ты спроси моих современниц,
Каторжанок, «стопятниц», пленниц,
И тебе порасскажем мы,
Как в беспамятном жили страхе,
Как растили детей для плахи,
Для застенка и для тюрьмы.

(Kralin 1990, 338)

As mentioned above, Wang cannot read Russian, so his translations of the Russian poetry are done through an intermediate language – English, a fact that scholars and particularly graduate dissertations often fail to emphasize.[28] Translating from a translation inevitably raises the questions of fidelity to the original. Assuming that indirect translation is entirely justified and is not in violation to the commonly agreed upon standards of a high-quality translation, both purposeful and accidental choices in the English versions need to be consulted for a more comprehensive analysis.[29] The polemic of translation choices has its occasional

[28] The practice is so widespread in mainland China that providing a reference will be arbitrary to no avail; the crucial point is, however, that the fact is so commonly known among scholars and students of Chinese poetry that it is a usual practice not to mention it unless the paper is concerned with the debate. In most cases, the debate is among poets and not scholars.

[29] Wang always emphasizes the importance of consulting several versions of the same poem when translating from a translation; however, the definitive edition of Akhmatova's poetry in English translation, and I believe the principal version he translates from, is the following: Hemschemeyer (1997). Note that all the English-language quotations of Akhmatova are from this version unless otherwise stated. Other translators of Akhmatova into English that Wang has mentioned include Walter Arndt, D. M. Thomas, and Nancy K. Anderson.

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outbursts in literary circles in mainland China; it is particularly so in the case of translating the modern classics (Krenz 2019, 287–308). However, the question that interests me more is why so many Chinese poets choose to translate Russian and Eastern European poets – Akhmatova, in this case, a poet of strict meters. What is this particular poet's intention and the significance of his translation in relation to the era? For this purpose, I will closely look at the characteristics of his translation and "mistranslation" choices.

One question to ask on the translation of this poem – apart from the specific word choices, line breaks, pauses, and other stylistic subtleties, is the following: Is there anything in the Chinese version that acts, in a meaningful way, independent of the poem in the other two languages? In other words, is there an element of Chineseness – linguistic or historical – in Wang's translated version? The repetitions of the question "how" is strikingly haunting in both the original and the English version, and in Chinese, the second question becomes "how, once again" (又是怎樣 *you shi zenyang*). The intensification of the question does create the "tone quality" mentioned above; that is, one minor and other not easily identifiable details that make a poem more palpable when read aloud. Line breaks and the punctuation mark *pozhihao* (破折號, "dash") work in the same way. It is interesting to note that the dash is absent in the original, the English version provided above does add dashes, and Wang probably adopts the dashes of the English version. In comparing these three language versions, there are other differences that we can analyze. However, what is more important is that the translator aimed to enter the very depths of Akhmatova's spiritual, and not the linguistic world.

The prophetic quality that Wang recognizes in Akhmatova's poetry is in a way the influence or even guidance of another Russian poet, Brodsky, especially his classic essay on Akhmatova titled "The Keening Muse," written in English in 1982 as the introduction to *Anna Akhmatova: Poems*, selected and translated by Lyn Coffin.[30] The idea of "poet as a prophet" appears time and again in this essay, which Wang often refers to in his introduction. The origin of the concept itself comes from Akhmatova's dictum, written in 1958: "But in the world there is no power more threatening and terrible / Than the prophetic voice of the poet."[31] Akhmatova took this role at the age of 17, adopting the pen-name Akhmatova, a patronymic coming from the Tatar name Akhmat, instead of using her aristocratic surname Gorenko, as her father had been opposed her becoming a poet, which would thus bring shame to the family. But it was also the prophecy of sensing what was coming in history (Brodsky 1985, 34–52). Not once did Wang declare these Rus-

30 Interestingly, Tsvetaeva had given Akhmatova a similar name: "Muse of Weeping."

31 It was quoted by Roberta Reeder as an epigraph to her biography of the poet (see Reeder 1994).

sian poets as his exemplary models, and it is in the context of reading Brodsky that Wang dedicates one of his *Marginalia* series poem called "Reading *The Gulag Archipelago*" (讀《古拉格群島》 "Du *Gulage qundao*"). The poem most importantly expresses what Brodsky says about the relation of poetry to history:

> At certain periods of history it is only poetry that is capable of dealing with reality by condensing it into something graspable, something that otherwise couldn't be retained by the mind. (Brodsky 1985, 52)

Here is Wang's poem, in which he "mourns the mourners," in Brodsky's words:

> Before it was written,
> no one would believe it.
> Now talking as we walk,
> what keeps us apart is no longer a fence
> but barbed wire.
>
> 有些東西沒有寫出來之前，
> 誰也不會相信。
> 現在，我與你談話，我們邊走邊談，
> 中間隔著的也不會再是籬笆
> 而是一道鐵蒺藜。
>
> (Shi and O'Connell 2019a, 87; Wang 2019, 34)

One striking example where Wang practices "infidel fidelity" and is faithful to his poetic spirit, is in translating Akhamtova's another long poem or a cycle of poems, the epic "Requiem." Poem #3 from the series is short, with only four lines and the single word "Night" standing alone on the fifth. Reeder (1994, 218) cites Gumilyov[32] scholar Michael Basker for drawing our attention to how

> Akhmatova's use of structure influences the meaning and impact of a poem [...]. The fourth line tails off with suspension points, and all development is halted by the single disruptive monosyllable of the fifth: *Noch* [Night]. The poem breaks off into another premature silence, the formal counterpart of unutterable darkness.

Wang generally follows the structure of the English versions but occasionally adds or removes certain words. He translates the first two lines of the poem: "No, it is not I, it is somebody else who is suffering. / I would not have been able to bear what happened" as "不，這不是我，這是另一些人在受苦。/ 我從來承受不了如此的苦難" (Hemschemeyer 1997, 387; Wang 2018, 92). The first line is plain, and both the English and Chinese versions are faithful to the original. At the end of the second

[32] Nikolay Gumilyov (1886–1921) is a Russian poet, one of the founders of the Acmeist movement in early 20th century Russia; he is also Akhmatova's first husband.

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line, Wang adds the word *kunan* (苦難, "suffering/misery") instead of the simple *chto sluchilos'* (что случилось, "what happened") in Russian, as well as in the two English versions. As a result, the Chinese version connotes suffering in two different words. Once again, the poet-translator has chosen a word that shares one [Chinese] character with *tongku*, pain or agony, echoing his poetics of anguish.

It is remarkable that already before the Bolshevik Revolution (1917), Akhmatova was writing, or prophesizing, what would so tragically befall on her years later: "Take my child and my lover, [...] / after so many tormented days" (Hemschemeyer 1997, 203). In another poem from the same year, the second poem in the two-poem series called "May Snow," from 1920s-onward, the two Akhmatovian themes merge: prophecy and anguish, unlike her earlier poems that were predominantly on the theme of sensual love. The first two lines of the second stanza read in English translation: "Don't torment me anymore, don't touch me! / Leave me to my prophetic woes..." (Hemschemeyer 1997, 198). Wang translates: "別再折磨我，別再碰我！/ 讓我守著我先知的苦惱……" (Wang 2018, 39). "Prophecy" or "prophetic" in Wang's translation is *xianzhi* (先知, literally, "someone who knows things before others"), which appears in the same line with "woes," which he has translated as *kunao* (苦惱, "distress"); with the light hand of a poet that writes of a disaster, the character of *ku* (苦, "bitter"), is omnipresent – out of which the angst vocabulary is often derived in Chinese: anguish, distress, pain, agony, suffering, misery, and even the hard laborer.

6. Un-silencing through translation

Mandelstam's tragic fate in exile and that of Akhmatova's – whose husband, the poet Gumilyov was executed in 1921, and their son was arrested – did not resemble Wang's personal tragedies. Still, it appears that he internalizes the ubiquitous suffering of those poets. Using the past to talk about the politically dangerous is a standard technique in Russian literature (Hemschemeyer 1997, 5). Wang, and other poets of his generation, have moved the technique a step further: to talk about the politically dangerous through foreign literature. If Mandelstam is the "hard laborer" in exile, then Celan is the survivor of a concentration camp; historical contexts differ, but all these motifs are mingled as an entirety of artists' suffering amidst the tragedies of humanity. Just as Akhmatova, Wang is a poet dedicated to writing the truth, as a testimony.

The spirit of translating, writing, and rewriting, which is the poetics that Wang firmly believes in, can also be found in his critical reading of Akhmatova, in the example of one poem as an archetype. This poem, the first line of which is usually

read as its title, written in 1933/1934,[33] can be defined as a praise to freedom, and condemnation of bloodshed by the Bolsheviks of the time. The opening line is praise: "Wild honey smells like freedom, / Dust—like a ray of sun." And the last line of the first stanza: "But we learned once and for all / That blood only smells like blood…" (Hemschemeyer 1997, 382). Wang's translation of the first two lines of the first stanza: "野蜂蜜聞起來像自由，/ 灰塵——如太陽的光線;" and the last two lines: "但是我們聞一次也就永遠知道了 / 血，聞起來祇能像血腥味" (Wang 2018, 67). Both the Russian original and the English translation use the phrase "blood only smells like blood," whereas Wang uses *xuexingwei* (血腥味, "smell of blood"), which sounds more detestable. But otherwise, a word-by-word translation would have sounded awkward. Hence, the crucial point in this case is not how Wang translates this poem, but how he reads it, and I argue that this is also, in a way, an expression of his poetics. About this poem, he writes:

> Its every word is thought-provoking, emotional; but they also have an aphoristic quality. The first line is a great, yet valorous praise; it is linking 'wild honey' with freedom that the poet wants to sing. The last two lines have a certain kind of merciless power of reaching to the point of historical reality. (Wang 2018, 24–25)

This reading is in the same breath with the above-mentioned "denouncing history," and it is to his own history, through the voice of Akhmatova, that Wang is filing a complaint.

In the title of a short memoir-style article, which is also a tribute to Imre Kertész (1929–2016), Wang is asking the following question: "What is it that is agonizing us?" He goes on with the self-interrogation:

> In the summer of 1998, in front of an old castle in Stuttgart where I was residing as a writer-in-residence, an open-air concert was held, sponsored by the Audi company. It was a grand scene: middle-class audience of thousands in their evening dresses; the final part of the concert was Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* by the Stuttgart Symphony Orchestra, and the conductor was Jewish, specially invited from Israel! When the music reached its climax, magnificent fireworks flew to the night sky from both sides of the stage; the crowd boiled with excitement and the champagne bottles popped. But for some reason, it was my most painful night. I thought to myself: I am a Chinese and have never experienced "Auschwitz," what is it that is agonizing me? (Wang 2008, 63)

[33] Both Reeder's biography and Hemschemeyer's *The Complete Poems*, and subsequently Wang's translation date the poem as 1933; however, the 1990 Russian language publication dates the poem as 1934. Similar inconsistencies occur elsewhere; however, they do not affect the translation or the argument in this paper. It is also important to note that there are many debates among scholars concerning the exact dates of Akhmatova's certain poems.

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Through translating Celan and other Eastern European tragic poets, Chinese poets sometimes address questions that cannot be explicitly addressed for fear of censorship or political persecution. But again, it is important to emphasize that a mere political reading of their poetry and translations – in Wang's case even more so – would be gravely misleading. More than this, there are ethical limitations in comparing historical incidents and catastrophes of different eras and contexts, and the matter is not merely about (ab)using one historical catastrophe to address another. The phenomenon is rather the recognition of pain and suffering as a shared human existence. As Cathy Caruth (1996, 18) puts it in her reading of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*,

> we could say that the traumatic nature of history means that events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others. And it is thus that Jewish history has also been the suffering of others' traumas.

This can explain Wang's repeated insistence that Celan's suffering still causes anguish to him. Thus, it is not surprising that Tsvetaeva, another poet that Wang has spent decades translating, writes in her 1924 poem written in Prague – "The Poem of the End," the following words: "In this most Christian of worlds / all poets are Jews" (Feinstein 1993, 67–89). Although she herself was not a Jew. Celan, writing decades after Tsvetaeva's poem, uses her line as an epigraph to his poem titled "And with the Book from Tarussa" ("Und mit dem Buch aus Tarussa") (Joris 2015, 2020). Several more decades passed and Wang titled his translation-anthology as *With the Book From Tarusa* (2014). Celan is a Holocaust survivor and a witness, and he has created an oeuvre which is in a constant dialogue with silent survivors. After all, careful readers are as much shaken by the fact that Tsvetaeva did not write a single poem on hunger while starving, as they are shaken by the silence in Celan's language: in his poetry, he never used the word "Auschwitz."

Many Chinese poets of Wang's generation feel the need to translate, I believe, as a search of poetic language amidst silence, a constant search of recognition, and a way of bearing the suffering of humanity.

7. Conclusion

Defining Wang's poetry as the "poetry of anguish, poetry of praise," at the same time encompasses his translation as an inseparable part of his whole oeuvre. As exemplified in this paper, some of his poems evoke praise and gratitude. At the same time, a larger part is philosophical contemplations and mournful testaments on the enigmas of the 20th century and beyond: the unachievable ideals, the hard-laborers' pain, Auschwitz, the artists' burden. Bitter memories of childhood during the dramatic years become increasingly painful when memo-

ries become recent; the present is explained through the past, hope is explained through anguish.

The "Aesopic language," which Reeder has attributed to Akhmatova, is equally true for Wang, expressing grief and devastation on specific historical events that cannot be discussed openly (Hemschemeyer 1997, 24). "Anguish" and "praise" may at first glance seem to be inherently opposite sentiments, but we should not view them in a dichotomous way. In Wang's poetry, there are instances when they reconcile, as in the following line from his fragment-poem series "Words:" "When the poems of praise ring, another generation felt that the poverty of their lives was left unaccomplished," "當讚美詩響起的時候，又一代人感到了他們這一生的貧困不可能完成" (Wang 2001, 117) – placing the celebratory and the accusatory all in one complex web of a generation's historical predicament.

Through reading Wang's *Marginalia* poems, the haunting repetitions of Celan's resentful "Death Fugue" reverberate, his translation of Akhmatova's most magical poema "Poem Without a Hero," as Isaiah Berlin called it (Hemschemeyer 1997, 40), the all-pervasive anguish in writing and translating, and many more, we see the vicissitudes of a poet of the beastly 20th century. In his poetry, Wang is often trying to step out of history and embrace everlasting values, or a "universal culture" – at times he succeeds, at times the trauma of particular historical events overweighs the eternal.

His irrepressible confidence in the power of poetry in un-silencing the harrowing details of human life experiences amidst the absurdities of history – in memory or as dark prophecy – continues into the 21st century.

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