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Arthur Sze: I believe every translator is aware of loss. If I'm looking at a Chinese poem and I'm thinking, “How do I translate this into English?” I immediately see, OK, Chinese is tonal. I'm going to lose all of the sounds. I'm going to lose the rhythms in English. I can't carry that over. So what I'm going to try and do is carry the spirit over. And there's that sense of humility of approaching the translation, thinking, OK, how can I not betray what's happening in the original when I know I'm losing the sound, I'm losing the rhythm? And yet I think we need translation more than ever. The more we can understand and appreciate each other, the better. And for me, translation is a huge vehicle for insight and cultural exchange. And it has great urgency to it.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Arthur Sze. Arthur is a poet and translator based in Sante Fe, New Mexico. His latest collection, *The Silk Dragon II: Translations of Chinese Poetry*, compiles fifty years of his translations, illustrating the vitality and versatility of the Chinese poetic tradition across nearly two millennia. In my conversation with Arthur, we talk about the ruptures and continuities between classical and contemporary Chinese poetry, the destruction and renewal inherent in the process of translation, and why he believes that we need translation now more than ever. Plus, Arthur reads a few poems from his new collection. So here's my conversation with Arthur Sze.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with poet Arthur Sze. Hi Arthur. It's great to be with you again.

Arthur Sze: Hi, nice to see you.

James: So Arthur, we're here to talk about your new book, *The Silk Dragon II: Translations of Chinese Poetry*. So to start, could you tell us a bit about the book and what the inspiration for it was?



Arthur Sze: Sure, *The Silk Dragon II* compiles all of the translations of Chinese poetry that I've done over, if you can believe it, fifty years. And I started when I was an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley translating ancient Chinese poetry because I felt like I could learn from them. So I looked up character by character, stroke by stroke, each poem of the original ancient Chinese poems. I translated them one by one, and over time they grew. In 2001, I put together *The Silk Dragon*, and I always felt that that collection was incomplete because it ended in the 1950s. It left out a lot of exciting contemporary Chinese poets. And just this last year, it felt appropriate to do a *Silk Dragon II* to add eighteen new translations.

So the earliest poems in the book start at 400 Common Era, and the most recent poem is probably written about 2011. So it spans a huge history of Chinese poetry. And in a way, it's my own quirky personal anthology of poems that I've loved, that I've wanted to bring over into English to share with American readers.

James: Well, let's look at the title of the book, *Silk Dragon II*. You say that silk dragon is your metaphor for poetry. So could you walk us through that?

Arthur Sze: Sure. The dragon is, of course, a huge symbol in Chinese culture. And for instance, the imperial dragon that has five claws is reserved for the emperor. So there are three-clawed dragons. If you start to look at Chinese paintings, it's fascinating. But the dragon is a magical, powerful creature and associated very early on with the emperor and fertility and prosperity. Silk, of course, is one of the huge cultural treasures of China. I believe in the Palace Museum in Taipei, the most treasured and the earliest thing is actually a silk cocoon that has been split in half. So sericulture in China is huge and weaving and the cultivation of silkworms and the whole silk industry, which was a secret for many years. I brought those two worlds together in a sense, because I see language as spinning or weaving with silk, and I think of the dragon as the imagination, being able to transform, having a lot of power to it.



So as I was working on different poems in this collection, the image of silk and the dragon came together and I thought, this really is my metaphor for poetry. Language is silk, it's something tactile, and the imagination is something powerful and able to travel and transform.

James: You're a translator, yet you describe translation as an impossible task, and you quote the Italian phrase *traduttore/traditore*, or translators, traitors. So how is the translator a traitor, and what makes the task all but impossible?

Arthur Sze: Thanks for a wonderful question. I believe every translator is aware of loss. If I'm looking at a Chinese poem and I'm thinking, how do I translate this into English? I immediately see, OK, Chinese is tonal. I'm going to lose all of the sounds. I'm going to lose the rhythms in English. I can't carry that over. So what I'm going to try and do is carry the spirit over. Also, if you look at Chinese characters, they're nonlinear and they sometimes incorporate metaphor through juxtaposition. The characters get very intricate and complicated. It's such a different language system than English.

But with that in mind, I think it's good to have that sense of translators/traitors as a point of humility too, to recognize that you cannot just easily transport from one language to another, and to be able to work with the spirit in a poem and translate that, that requires a lot of time and patience.

And again, I'll just say that the translations in this book are over fifty years of translating on and off, and there are only maybe seventy-four poems, which is about one or two a year. So I'm obviously not prolific. It's not something that I am doing to produce because there's a demand for it. These are poems I love, and I have to live with the poems.

And there's that sense of humility of approaching the translation, thinking, OK, how can I not betray what's happening in the original when I know I'm losing the sound, I'm losing the rhythm. I can't convey, for instance, how the water radical or the rain radical is running visually through a



line of Chinese poetry. And yet I think we need translation more than ever. We need to bring our cultures together. We're on one planet. The more we can understand and appreciate each other, the better. And for me, translation is a huge vehicle for insight and cultural exchange, and it has great urgency to it.

James: Arthur, you mentioned your awareness of loss when you're translating these. You also mentioned your awareness of transformation, destruction, renewal, all of these inherent in the process of translation. So can you tell us more about how a poem is destroyed and transformed as it's translated?

Arthur Sze: Sure. I know we're going to get to a Tao Qian poem to begin with, and one of the things I do is write out the poem in my own handwriting, stroke by stroke. My Chinese is poor, but I need to personalize the language. I need to step inside the mind of the poem, the creation that's there. And so as I'm generating the poem, stroke by stroke, with my own handwriting, I'm stepping into that process. And I will put a word or a cluster of words in English under each Chinese character because for me a Chinese character, even if it's the character “rain,” it could be rain or rains. It could be a noun; it could be a verb. It could be yesterday; it could be tomorrow. There's so many possibilities. I really see each Chinese character as having a field of energy. So I have to write clusters of words in English under each Chinese character. And I'm very slow. I don't try to think, “Oh, here's a line. How do I translate that into English?” I take that character and I say, “OK, how do I honor the field of energy in that word?” And I'll write out clusters of English words underneath the Chinese characters. So I have a mess in the beginning. I have lots of words and no syntax, no way to string them together.

James: Yeah. You illustrate how you do this in the beginning of the book. I found that fascinating. You actually show us the process. You just mentioned Tao Qian's poem. Let's turn to that. Would you be willing to read “Drinking Wine (I)”? And tell us a bit about your process of translating it afterwards. It'd be very interesting.



Arthur Sze: My pleasure. I'll read the poem first and then I'll talk a little bit about it. By the way, this poem is written about 417 Common Era. And to me, that's just amazing to think a poem over 1,600 years old can be so present tense and immediate today.

“Drinking Wine (I)”

A green pine is in the east garden,
but the many grasses obscure it.
A frost wipes out all the other species,
and then I see its magnificent tall branches.
In a forest, men do not notice it,
but standing alone, it is a miracle.
I hang a jug of wine on a cold branch;
then stand back, and look again and again.
My life spins with dreams and illusions.
Why then be fastened to the world?

So my process of translation follows almost line by line the Chinese. The English is ten lines long, and in Chinese, it's ten lines, five characters to a line. There's a caesura or a silence inside of each line, a pause. I sometimes followed that in English and sometimes I didn't. One of the things I really like about Tao Qian is the kind of lyrical flow, so I didn't want to say, for instance, “OK, the Chinese has a pause in every line. The English has to have a pause in every line.” I want it to be intuitive and where there were pauses that made sense, “stand back, and look again and again,” That pause made a lot of sense because the speaker is standing back and that silence, that space gives a reader the space to step in and experience what's happening. But in the opening line, “A green pine is in the east garden,” it didn't make sense for me to put a pause in there. I wanted the image. I wanted to establish the flow and the rhythm of language. So that's some of the process of my translation work that's happening here.



James: Can you tell us a bit about the poet Tao Qian and how he helped shape the direction of classical Chinese poetry?

Arthur Sze: Thanks. Another wonderful question. We could talk for hours. Tao Qian's dates are 365 to 427 Common Era. He's one of the great early dropouts in the Chinese poetic tradition. He worked in a bureaucratic job and was always dissatisfied, and one day he quit his job. He bought some land in the rural area. He built his own house. He planted chrysanthemums, drank wine, and wrote poetry. So he literally is a dropout of that tradition. But he wasn't a hermit. He didn't try to run away from people. In another poem, he makes it clear there are people in the area, but he finds his own inner space, his own place of peace. And Tao Qian is famous for making that break with social expectation and contention and pursuing his inner fulfillment and pursuing the path of poetry.

His kind of poetry is called *tianyuan*, which is “fields and gardens.” And he's really one of the great early poets. Of course, poets in later years who drop out or travel or go away from the cities, Tao Qian is a huge symbol of, and the chrysanthemum is a symbol of, cultivating one's inner self and spirit.

James: So the last line of the poem is “Why then be fastened to the world?” Could you tell us a little bit about the Taoist and Buddhist influences at play in early Chinese poetry? What are some of the major themes at work here?

Arthur Sze: Sure, because this is 400 Common Era, I would say the Taoist influence is very strong and the Buddhist less so. There'll be more of a Buddhist influence in the other poems that we discuss. But in the *Tao te ching*, in one of the primary texts for Taoism, there's this idea of *wu wei*, do-not do, or practice nonaction. There's this idea that if you try to assert your ego and take a piece of clay and mold it, you basically make a mess of things. And what you need to learn to do is somehow learn nonattachment. Of course, that's huge in Buddhism, obviously, and it's there in Taoism as well. So the sense of if you start attaching to outcomes, to ambitions, to your



dreams and illusions from the last line, that's going to create trouble, that's going to create dissatisfaction for a Buddhist perspective. It's the cause of suffering, of attachment.

For me, this poem is interesting because he's not didactic. The speaker doesn't say, “And I let go of my attachment.” The speaker makes it a question: “I see my life is full of dreams and illusions. Why then be fastened to the world?” And I think that's such a beautiful ending to put it up for the reader to experience and say, you can see what's happening here, now what? And so the speaker isn't asserting his ego or trying to be attached. He's practicing at the end that *wu wei*, that nonattachment.

James: This is a very personal book too, because you say you only translate poems that deeply move you, and it sometimes takes many years before you're ready to work on one. So what drew you to this poem and how did you feel ready to translate it?

Arthur Sze: I was drawn to Tao Qian very early because of his love of nature, the clarity of his imagery, and the kind of spiritual purity, the spiritual commitment that was there. It takes a lot of courage to wake up one day and say, “I'm not going to go to work. I'm going to change my life, and I don't know where my paycheck is coming from, but this is what I need to do,” and to follow that spiritual path. Tao Qian is one of my heroes. And I came across this poem when I was about 25. I translated other ones before this one and I looked at, there were actually nineteen drinking wine poems in the series, and I only chose a few of them.

So I had to live with it. It wasn't a case where, “Oh, I can translate these and publish them.” It was like, “I like this poem. I want to live with it. And the more I read it and reread it and live with it, the more I respond to it and I'm moved by it.” And then at a certain point, I think, “Gee, I would like others to be able to experience this as well. This is a time to see if I can translate this well into English.”



James: You know, I'm a fan of your own poetry, and I'm wondering how translating Tao Qian's work influenced your own poetry.

Arthur Sze: Translating Chinese poetry in general was how I learned my craft as a poet. Unlike most American poets, I did not go to graduate school and get a MFA degree. I turned to translation to learn my craft. And I thought, this is where I can really learn to see how poems are made, and I can draw on my own lineage as a Chinese American, and I can find all sorts of possibilities. And that translation practice, again, is my craft. And then choosing certain poets along the way, Tao Qian was important to me because he knows how to use the image as a vehicle for expression powerfully. That sense of precision with language, I would submit, is also a form of caring, and he's showing me, when I read a Tao Qian poem, how to care for language and indirectly how to live in the world.

James: Okay, so are you ready to read another poem? Can I ask you to read “Autumn Comes” by Li He?

Arthur Sze: Let me read it and we can talk about it.

“Autumn Comes”

Wind in the plane tree startles the heart: a grown man's grief. By dying lamplight, crickets are weeping cold threads.

Who will ever read the green bamboo slips of this book?

Or stop the ornate worms from gnawing powdery holes?

Such thoughts tonight must disentangle in my gut.

In the humming rain, a fragrant spirit consoles this poet.

On an autumn grave, a ghost chants Bao Zhao's poem,

and his spiteful blood, buried a thousand years, is now green jade.



James: So, there are a lot of references in there that I had to look in the back of the book to understand. Would you like to say something about that?

Arthur Sze: Sure. Li He is a very challenging poet. His dates are 795 to 821. He was obsessed with time and immortality. He pursued a cult of taking elixirs, and in fact, he may have killed himself in the process. He died very young. In the poem itself, Bao Zhao is an early poet who writes an elegy, and the particular poem I think Li He has in mind is one that basically confronts mortality, that says that people can be rich, they can be poor, they can be happy, they can be sad, but everyone is going to have to face their mortality at the end. So I think that's how that reference comes in. And interestingly, it's on an autumn grave, and to me it's, OK, what's a spring grave like? What's a summer grave? On an autumn grave, a ghost, not a person, a ghost chants. It's like the speaker of this poem is aware of shamans of the spirit world. “And his spiteful blood, buried a thousand years, is now green jade,” there's a story that someone was buried wrongfully, and a thousand years later, when his body was uncovered, his blood turned to green jade. It had been miraculously transformed. And people tend to read this as Li He himself thinking in his own lifetime, he's writing, he's not really being recognized for his work, but maybe a thousand years later, someone will come along and find his work and it will be magically, powerfully transformed.

James: So you might want to also tell us about Li He and how he wrote on horseback and dashed off rough phrases of poems mid-ride. I found that pretty interesting, and maybe something about his backstory.

Arthur Sze: So Li He was a child prodigy. When he was 7 years old, if you can believe it, he was writing accomplished poems and word got out and a very famous Tang dynasty poet, Han Yu, who's also part of the official establishment, heard about Li He and said, “Oh, I need to go see if this is really true.”



According to legend, Han Yu comes to visit Li He, and they have tea, and Li He pulls out his brush, he's 7 years old, and he writes a long poem called, “A Tall Official Carriage Comes on a Visit.” And Han Yu is just stunned, he can't believe it. And he goes back and he tells people, “He's for real. Li He is amazing. He wrote this incredible poem and he's only 7.”

And another thing about Li He, ahead of his time or born a thousand years before he could be appreciated, he had the custom of riding each morning, riding a small horse on horseback and phrases of poems would come to him. And he would presumably, I don't know how you do this with ink, take his brush out while riding on horseback and write down phrases of poems. But the legend is fragments of poems, inspired phrases would come to him, and only when he was galloping on horseback, and he would stuff them in his saddlebag, and then he would go home, and later in the afternoon, he would lay out the phrases, and then he would fuse them into a poem. But interestingly, he couldn't just wake up and write a poem. He had to physically be in motion for these magical phrases to come to him.

James: That's amazing. The poem is wonderful to read. And at the same time, I even got more out of it when I was able to check the references that you include. So that was very helpful.

James: This collection is unique in bringing together classical and vernacular Chinese poetry in the same volume. So can you tell us about your decision to include both? What can we learn from reading these two types of poetry alongside each other? I found it amazing when they slip into the vernacular and the change yet continuity.

Arthur Sze: Oh, great. Yeah. Thank you for this wonderful question. Because so many anthologies of Chinese poetry basically honor a divide, which is 1919, which is the beginning of writing in vernacular language, the classical language that had been used for 2,000 years was very strict in form, very spare, but it really was antiquated and couldn't really accommodate all of the changes that were happening in China.



And certainly a contemporary poet like Xi Chuan says that the distance between contemporary Chinese and ancient Chinese is as big as the difference between Chinese and a foreign language. If you look at classical Chinese, you can't say radio, television, car, cell phone, atom bomb, electricity. 90 percent of the vocabulary doesn't exist in classical Chinese. So the language had to be basically reconstructed, reassembled, opened up, broken apart. And so 1919 is a very exciting time when poets are beginning to write in a language that is close to spoken Chinese and all of the intricacies and complexities of modern society can come into poetry. And you'll see that in Wen Yiduo's great poetry.

So for me, I had this idea that rather than say, “Oh, these are two separate worlds, there's the classical tradition and you should stop in 1919,” which is what most anthologies of poetry in America do, or start in 1919 with the vernacular poetry and say, “OK, here's the modern era, we're only going to look at modern contemporary Chinese poetry,” I feel like there are certain continuities despite all the ruptures of history and transformations, and I thought it would be really valuable to run a small selection of poems from the earliest time up through this period of transformation into contemporary Chinese poetry and marvel at how contemporary poems are but also to think about how maybe some of the themes are actually there from ancient times, but they're being treated in a way that is appropriate to our day and age now, and so to think of continuity as well as rupture.

James: Yeah, that's what I was wondering about. I guess when we read Wen Yiduo's poetry, you can get us there, but you described the May 4th Movement, where poets decide to write in the vernacular in the 20th century as part of a broader call for social, political, and cultural transformation. So can you tell us about this movement and how it broke from tradition?

Arthur Sze: China in 1919 is a really difficult time. The last dynasty has ended. There's the Republic that started. China is a weak country. It's overrun by Western powers in Japan. There's a huge clamoring for transformation for society, and in particular, the recognition that China didn't possess Western technology, that China couldn't defend itself militarily, that it was taken



advantage of, that it was beaten down. And so there's this huge influx of a movement to learn from the West. And as part of that, there are floods of translations of not just literature coming into China but science, history, philosophy. It's like 1919 is this huge opening because the Chinese people recognized the whole society needed to be transformed. China couldn't just pretend like the last dynasty, they were the middle kingdom living in isolation in some blissful century or whatever out of the past. They were experiencing horrific social problems and war and warfare.

And so that sense of the May 4th Movement is it started with students demonstrating at Tiananmen Square, which is why Tiananmen is historically so significant for the authorities to see if people congregate there because the students brought down the last Qing dynasty there. The whole revolutionary movement started really through that as a change to transform all of Chinese society.

James: You mentioned Wen Yiduo, and he happens, of the moderns, to be my favorite. I discovered him only because I read your book. So I was wondering if you could read two of his poems, “Dead Water” and “Miracle.” The second one is a bit longer.

Arthur Sze: Sure. So here's Dead Water.

Here is a ditch of hopelessly dead water.

A cool breeze would not raise the slightest ripple on it.

You might throw in some scraps of copper and rusty tins,
or dump in as well the remains of your meal.

Perhaps the green on copper will turn into emeralds,
or the rust on tin will sprout a few peach blossoms.

Let grease weave a layer of fine silk-gauze, and
mold steam out a few red-glowing clouds.

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Episode #100 with Arthur Sze

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Let the dead water ferment into a ditch of green wine,
floating with pearls of white foam;
but the laughter of small pearls turning into large pearls
is broken by spotted mosquitoes stealing the wine.

Thus a ditch of hopelessly dead water
can yet claim a bit of something bright.
And if the frogs can't endure the utter solitude,
let the dead water burst into song.

Here is a ditch of hopelessly dead water.
Here beauty can never reside.
You might as well let ugliness come and cultivate it,
and see what kind of world comes out.

James: I read that when I was flying to the West Coast for work and I read it again and again and a few hours passed. It's amazing. And I wonder if you can talk a little bit about thematically how it is related to its predecessors and on the other hand what a radical break it is.

Arthur Sze: Sure, and I'd also like to give you a little personal history about Wen Yiduo. Born in 1899, he died in 1946. He's a national hero in China because in 1946, he got up at a political demonstration and denounced the Nationalist Kuomintang government for corruption, and he was gunned down in the street later that day. It's hard for us as Americans to see how or recognize how seriously poetry is taken in other cultures. And China has a long tradition of reverence for poetry. Emperors wrote poetry. In the civil service exams to get a job working in bureaucracy and government, you wrote poems that showed your inner character as well as your accomplishment with language.



Wen Yiduo is lionized as a patriotic poet. He's not always, I think, fully appreciated, even in China, for how fantastic his poetry is. And his landmark book of poetry is *Dead Water*. One of the things Wen Yiduo did was he knew the classical tradition of Chinese poetry beautifully, and he thought to himself, “This is China in 1920, we need a different kind of poetry.”

And Wen Yiduo says that when he saw and looked at the beginning poems being written in vernacular Chinese, he felt like they had no structure, no architecture to them. And he wrote a really important essay called “Form in Poetry,” where he articulated the need for rhythm and rigor in language. And so Wen Yiduo created his own form, which is nine characters of Chinese characters to a line. In the traditional Chinese poem, they're often five or seven. And Wen Yiduo's are in vernacular Chinese, but they show an outgrowth from the tradition. So when Wen Yiduo says, “a few peach blossoms,” peach blossoms are a standard cliché image out of Tang dynasty poetry. Li Bai has a poem, “peach blossoms on flowing water go into the distance.” It's a beautiful image of transience. And look at how Wen Yiduo subverts that: “Rust on tin will sprout a few peach blossoms.” You don't go to nature to find the peach. You're finding in this grungy setting of rust on tin, or grease, or mold, or mosquitoes, or dead water. This is emblematic of what China is, and this is where you have to be able to transform things. And it's such a powerful collection of poems, and this is the title poem to it.

James: Would you mind reading “Miracle”? It's a bit longer, but it's equally wonderful.

Arthur Sze: It's one of my favorite poems. It's the longest poem I've translated from Chinese to English, and you can imagine it took me months to do this.

“Miracle”

I never wanted the red of fire, the black at midnight
of the Peach Blossom Pool, the mournful melody of the pipa,

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or the fragrance of roses. I never loved the stern
pride of the leopard, and no white dove ever had
the beauty I craved. I never wanted any of these things,
but their crystallization—a miracle ten thousand
times more rare than them all! But I am famished and harried.
I cannot go without nourishment: even if it is
dregs and chaff, I still have to beg for it. Heaven knows
I do not wish to be like this. I am by no means
so stubborn or stupid. I am simply tired of waiting,
tired of waiting for the miracle to arrive; and
I dare not starve. Ah, who doesn't know of how little worth
is a tree full of singing cicadas, a jug of turbid wine,
or smoky mountain peaks, bright ravines, stars
glittering in the empty sky? It is all so ordinary,
so inexorably dull, and it isn't worth our ecstatic joy,
our crying out the most moving names, or the
longing to cast gold letters and put them in a song.
I also affirm that to let tears come
at the song of an oriole is trivial, ridiculous,
and a waste of time. But who knows? I cannot be otherwise.

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I am so famished and harried I take lamb's-quarters
and wild hyssop for fine grain—

but there's no harm
in speaking clearly as long as the miracle appears.

Then at once I will cast off the ordinary. I will never
again gaze at a frosted leaf and dream of a spring blossom's

dazzle. I will not waste my strength, peel open
stones, and demand the warmth of white jade.

Give me one miracle, and I will never again whip ugliness,
and compel it to give up the meaning of its

opposite. Actually, I am weary of all this,
and these strained implications are hard to explain.

All I want is one clear word flashing like a Buddhist relic
with fierce light. I want it whole, complete,

shining in full face. I am by no means so stubborn
or stupid; but I cannot see a round fan without

seeing behind it an immortal face. So,

I will wait as many incarnations as it takes—

since I've made a vow. I don't know how many
incarnations have already passed; but I'll wait

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and wait, quietly, for the miracle to arrive.

That day must come! Let lightning strike me,

volcanoes destroy me. Let all hell rise up and crush me!

Am I terrified? No, no wind will blow out

the light in me. I only wish my cast-off body

would turn into ashes. And so what? That, that minutest

fraction of time is a minutest fraction of—

ah, an extraordinary gust, a divine and stellar hush

(sun, moon, and spin of all stars stopped;

time stopped, too)—the most perfectly round peace.

I hear the sound of the door pivoting: and with it

the rustling of a skirt. That is a miracle.

And in the space of a half-open gold door,

you are crowned with a circle of light!

James: Wow, that's amazing. The thing about his poems is they carry me with them the whole way, and then those final lines bring such an impact and they stay with you. Can you say something about the final lines in those poems, both of them, or is that just me reading into it?

Arthur Sze: No, I think Emily Dickinson once said, “I can't tell you the definition of a poem but I know it if it takes the top of my head off.” And I always feel like the ends of Wen Yiduo poems are like that. It's like, where did that come from? And that amazing ending to “Miracle,” to give it a Buddhist perspective, also that sense of voice in one's ego self wanting to look for this



fulfillment and looking everywhere, all over the cosmos, and it's right there in front of you. It's just this fantastic moment.

James: You mentioned the Buddhist perspective, and I was wondering if you could speak to how his poems play with Buddhist language and teachings, and this poem in particular.

Arthur Sze: Yeah, I think it's there. I don't think he would call himself a Buddhist, but the Buddhist influence is definitely there. And I think the “Dead Water” poem, I would say one of the things that connects with Buddhism is this idea of thinking beyond polarities, beyond dichotomies, the idea of beauty and ugliness. We tend to, in the West, think of these categories as polar opposites. And when he turns one into the other and over the other, and when he says, and at the end, “see what kind of world comes out,” like the Tao Qian, he isn't making a pronouncement.

I would assert he's letting go, and that sense of release is a very Buddhist move to go through these motions where there is the self at work and arrive at a point where you say, No, that's it. See what kind of world can come out. I've reached this end, and it's beyond me. And that sense of letting go and that sense of emptiness, I think, is very Buddhist.

In “Miracle,” this idea of the speaker looking across all time and space and that sensation of like time stopped, but then, he's such a poet, it's like it happens when the door opens, something unexpected, and to me that's almost like satori in a way. All the Zen stories of studying and studying and you don't get it, and then the monk is like, “Ah, forget about it,” or a little rock hits a wall and it's like, oh, that's it!

James: Well, yeah, like the final lines themselves function in that way. It's really amazing. I don't know which are more difficult to translate, the classical poems or the contemporary ones, but I was wondering if you could tell us about the months-long translation process for this particular



poem. What did you learn from sitting with this poem for an extended period of time? Because it becomes a relationship after a while.

Arthur Sze: It does, and it becomes a push and pull and a lesson in stamina. Again, as with all, even though this is written in contemporary Chinese, I wrote out each character stroke by stroke, line by line, with a lot of white space, writing clusters of words in English under each Chinese character. I think I just lived with that for a while. And then I started to think, OK, I'm going to try and translate the first line and how do I go about doing it? And then to start to string the words together using syntax, it was a very long, arduous process. I think it took me several months just to get the first draft together, and it was not in couplets. It was not in two-line stanzas. I just wrote out a line with a bunch of characters. So I had all of these lines, and then I thought Wen Yiduo likes architecture, and I was thinking four lines is too dense, maybe. The four-line stanza in English likes to be a narrative, likes to tell a story like Wordsworth, but two lines at a time with empty space between the lines, I felt like, that's good, that might work, and that gives a kind of breathing space so that the reader doesn't feel overwhelmed by the waves of language or the waves of images.

So I came upon the form of the poem fairly soon after I had done all the groundwork of laying out. And then it was months of working with the lines and trying to get them to move with sound and rhythm. And the other thing I would say about Wen Yiduo's poetry that I love is his voice. You can feel a pressure behind the language. They feel urgent. His poems aren't beautiful artifacts. They aren't something you read and you say, “Oh, that was nice,” and put it away. There's an urgency, a pressure that demands the reader pay attention and the reader gets engaged and you step into that world. And I love that about Wen Yiduo's work, that sense of voice pressuring, moving the language into its shape, and that was the hardest part for me to do, but obviously I worked very hard to escalate it until it gets to “let all hell rise up and crush me.” It builds toward this moment and then it releases.



James: You also include poems from the Cultural Revolution, which is another major rupture. And honestly, I don't know if I gave them a fair enough chance that I will read them again, because certain imagery and expectations and associations pushed me away from it, although, like I said, I would like to read it again. How did the Cultural Revolution influence Chinese poetry? And what were some of the themes and stylistic shifts that emerged in that period?

Arthur Sze: The Cultural Revolution is huge. It's 1966 to 1976. It's a 10 year period. All the schools and universities were closed. So students basically wore red armbands and were organized into these brigades and they searched for anything “counterrevolutionary.” So they targeted intellectuals, leading scientists, historians, artists. Millions of people died in this bloodbath, and it really only ended with Mao's death in 1976. And after that happened in 1977, the first group of poets that emerged that weren't basically writing propaganda, that first group of poets emerged and that group is legendary at this point. Gu Cheng, the whole Misty School generation, Yang Lian, and they were called “misty” as a derogatory term. They were just trying to recover Chinese lyricism, personal expression, and Chinese critics read their poems and said, “We don't understand this. This is misty. This is cloudy.” They wanted to dismiss them. So that first generation of poets wrote in free verse, and they wrote with a horrific aftermath that they were dealing with. And over time, there have been different generations of younger Chinese poets who have come along, and so Chinese poetry is actually flourishing and very diverse right now. But that period of having nothing for ten years is a huge trauma for that whole generation. And in the seventies, 1977 at the end of the cultural revolution, like the May 4th movement, when I mentioned all of these translations of Western literature, science history, or coming into China in 1977, the same thing happened again.

Chinese poets discovered Ezra Pound, who was influenced by classical Chinese poetry. They looked at Whitman, they looked at Dickinson, there were floods of translations of world poetry coming into China. Russian poetry was probably the only poetry they knew well, but American poetry, Western European poetry, there was like an avalanche of translations coming in and it

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was in many ways a very exciting time because I think for those poets in China suddenly having the ability to write and experiment and pursue what they could imaginatively with language, translations were huge. It gave them permission to try anything and everything.

James: So let's read a piece of contemporary Chinese poetry. I was wondering if you could read “Very White Moonlight” by Wang Xiaoni.

Arthur Sze: Sure.

“Very White Moonlight”

The moon in the deep night lights every sliver of bone.

I inhale blue-white air.

The world's trifles and smatterings
turn into sinking fireflies.

The city's a carcass.

No living thing
matches this pure nighttime color.

At the window, I open curtains:
before my eyes, heaven and earth merge in argentine white.

In moonlight, I forget I'm a human being.

The last scene of life
is quietly rehearsed in a shadow of plain color.
Moonlight reaches the floorboards:
my two feet have already whitened beforehand.

James: Thank you. Can you tell us something about this poet, Wang Xiaoni?



Arthur Sze: Yes, she worked a lot in film as a film editor, and I oftentimes see her poetry as being very filmic, the kinds of sequences. She's one of the leading women poets in China. She lives in the South, in Shenzhen, and this is a really beautiful poem that she wrote. Like Wen Yiduo, in a way, she draws on the classical tradition because Li Bai has a famous poem about looking at moonlight, looking up at it, and then looking down and thinking of home. And Wang Xiaoni's response to the moonlight here is very contemporary, and there's a sense for me of how the whiteness is like bleaching everything out.

And I don't know, I could be reading a bit of contemporary Chinese history into this, the idea of almost things being censored or being whitened or blanched. But to open the moon and the deep night lights, every sliver of bone, the idea of bones being exposed and that they're catching the moonlight, that's a total transformation from Li Bai's just sitting in a cottage looking up at moonlight.

And the speaker of this poem goes to the window and opens curtains. “Before my eyes, heaven and earth merge in argentine white. / In moonlight, I forget I'm a human being.” That's a really powerful moment for me. I don't know how you would make a Buddhist take on that sense of not even being aware that you're a person, that you're alive, but maybe you're just reaching some threshold and stepping out or beyond it. I find that very moving.

And then the end again is amazing to me, that when the moonlight comes down in the Li Bai poem, he just sees the moonlight and he thinks of home. He misses things. But here, the moonlight reaches the floorboards, “My two feet have already whitened beforehand.” It's like the speaker doesn't realize her feet are already white until she looks down following the moonlight, and she herself is part of this whole blanching and whitening process, and there it is at the end. She didn't know it until the end, but even her feet, they've already been whitened. She's part of this. She's not immune. She can't step out of it. She's part of this erasure in a way. It's very moving, I think.



James: Yeah, I was going to ask you what drew you to translate this poem, but it's clear from your discussing it why it's a beautiful poem, and I frankly don't like to ask what's Buddhist about this or that because it's just there. There's no separation. It's imbued with ideas from Taoism, Buddhism, and so forth. It's not self-conscious. So with some of the contemporary poems, you actually got to meet the poets and get their feedback on your translations. I imagine you guys sitting in a room sometimes with a group of poets working on it collectively. So what was the back and forth like, and what does this sort of collective work yield?

Arthur Sze: I've been to several international poetry festivals in China and England, and interestingly, as part of those festivals, this idea of crosscultural exchange has been built into it.

So there has been time set aside, for instance, in England for poets from Wales, England, I was the poet from America, English-speaking poets, and Chinese poets to be paired. And we didn't choose each other, the organizers did. For instance, I sat down with Xi Chuan. There's one poem of his I've translated in this book, and he was like, “I've got four or five poems here I'm interested in talking about,” And I said, “Which is the one that means so much to you that you would love to see translated into English?” And we looked at two, and I chose the landscape poem.

So one of the things that happened in these conversations was a chance to meet the poet from China to figure out a poem to translate. And for me, it was like, if we're doing this kind of crosscultural exchange, I don't want it to just be arbitrary where we say, “Here, you translate this, you translate that.” That never works for me. And when I've been invited to be part of anthologies where the editor says, “Here, I'll send you these, you translate them,” I've said, “I don't work like that. I'm sorry. I can't be involved in that kind of project.” I need to really feel something at stake with the language and care about the poem. So for these encounters, they were really crucial because I could sit down and talk to Xi Chuan and see him and ask him questions. We could go through the poem and I could say, “I don't understand this. Talk about this. What's going on here? What are you doing here?” And then as we talked and we had a



version laid out, I would say, “OK, I'm not going to finish it here. I'm just doing the beginning. I'm going to go back to Santa Fe. I'm going to live with this poem for a few months. I'm going to work on it, but I want to be able to ask you questions. I want to be able to follow up.” And so then that was really wonderful because we met each other to be able to say, “OK, what's going on with this phrase? I don't understand it. How is this happening?” And so that personal connection that occurred, that sort of deep, authentic conversation that happened by meeting these poets, was really vital and important to my choosing the poems and to being able to complete the translations of them as well, because I could contact the poets as I ran into difficulties.

James: Yeah, that's very different, of course, in translating classical poetry. But I wonder, it must also shape the trajectory of your own poetry in working with these poets. Is that right?

Arthur Sze: Definitely. I'm not sure how much the contemporary poems have influenced me right now. I always feel like there's a lag time. I recently wrote a poem in *Compass Rose*, which was a book that came out in 2015, and I used a line that was literally my translation of a Du Fu poem from 755 Common Era. But I used that line, like, maybe forty years after translating it. So I think for me, I work on the translation and then I absorb it. Like you were saying about Buddhism, I no longer think about, “Oh, I'm translating a Chinese poem.” It's part of who I am. And suddenly I'm writing and the phrase “shaggy red clouds in the West” comes out. And I think that's exactly what I want. And then I think, Oh, that's the Du Fu line. That's OK. Because I wasn't thinking, Oh, now I'm going to borrow from Du Fu. It was just in me. It was there.

James: I think I interviewed you about *Sight Lines* or *The Glass Constellation*. I don't remember which collection, but both of them came up in that interview. And I can't let you go without asking you, what's next? What are you working on now?

Arthur Sze: I just finished a new book of poetry that Copper Canyon Press will publish in the spring of 2025. It's called *Into the Hush*. And if I can just say a little bit about the structure of it, it uses a Japanese form called *zuihitsu*, which means “follow the brush.” It's like freeform,



spontaneous prose writing. It has threaded through the book seven episodes where two people hold one brush. I've only met the Japanese calligrapher Kazuaki Tanahashi once in my life, and he probably wouldn't even ever remember that we had dinner together in Santa Fe. But after dinner, Kazuaki said, “Arthur, I want to do two-minded calligraphy with you.” And I thought, what is that? I said, “Sure, I'll do it.” So he got out his brush and he made the ink and he put out paper on the dining table, and we literally held one big brush, and I'll never forget, I'm left-handed, so first I have to reach with my right hand, which is awkward, and Kaz is holding the brush higher above me, and we say, “OK, we're going write the character emptiness,” so I say, “OK, let's start,” and he says, “OK, ready,” and I try and bring the brush down on the paper, he won't let me move the brush. It's like lesson one immediately: “Oh, OK. We've got to be in sync.” It was really fantastic. It was like this whole process of bringing two minds in unison to create one character on a page on emptiness that is threaded through the book. So the book is very sound-oriented. And again, it's called *Into the Hush*.

James: Well, Arthur, we're both left-handed, we both went to Berkeley, so you have to promise to come back in spring 2025.

Arthur Sze: Thank you. I'd love to.

James: Thank you, Arthur. That was wonderful. Thanks so much for joining. And for our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *The Silk Dragon II*, available now. Thanks again, Arthur.

Arthur Sze: Thank you.

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