Primal Nights and Verbal Daze: Puns, Paranomasia, and the People's Daily[1]

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ABSTRACT

Here I analyze the phenomenon of a politically subversive message ("Down with Li Peng") embedded, unseen by the editor, in a very traditional, nationalistic poem in the People's Daily. In addition to discussing the literary/political ironies of this situation and the linguistic/literary/pragmatic issues involved in translation—I've translated the poem into English, attempting to keep the hidden "acrostic"—I reflect on the broader question of the relation between literary sensitivity (traste) and political sensitivity (acuteness, "correctness"). People are, after all, members of a linguistic community and culture before they are members of a political state.

KEY WORDS

acrostic
chauvinism
taste
primal
sensitivity
subversive
embedded
irony
political
correctness

The question of "national literature in another language or in other languages" poses some fundamental problems which should be addressed before we confront actual instances. First, there is an implicit assumption in the formulation that for every national literature, there is but one language, from which "another language" or "other languages" can be easily distinguished. This is far from being true in such countries as Switzerland or Yugoslavia or Singapore, where there are several "official" languages.[2] There are also countries which are effectively multilingual, such as Rumania, Bulgaria, Afghanistan, Iran, and Luxembourg,[3] as well as countries – South Africa, the Philippines, Czechoslovakia, Israel among them – with two official languages.[4] India has both an official language, Hindi, and "associate official" language, English. Then there are countries that are effectively bilingual; they include: Sweden, Belgium, Finland, and Thailand.[5] Consider also the anomaly of the following: in Haiti, French is official, but the majority of the population speak Creole; and in Malawi, where the official language is English, Chicewa is the designated national language.

The notion, too often assumed, that a national language is the same as the mother tongue or the indigenous language in a country simply does not apply to a significant number of countries. Francophone and Anglophone countries in Africa, for example, have grafted "official" European languages onto indigenous tongues, somewhat condescendingly labeled, even in this day and age, as "tribal." Nor is a person's native language necessarily his or her national language. The secessionist tendencies in a number of Soviet republics – Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania – reflect the fact that the national language in those regions, Russian, is not the native language of the populations – which is, respectively, Latvian, Estonian, and Lithuanian.

The notion of nationalism itself seems just a bit outmoded these days. The liberation of the East European countries – Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Poland – only served to uncover the intense ethnic conflicts in these countries, reflected in the different ethnic languages represented within their borders. Nor is the fact of a single language necessary evidence of a coherent nationalism, as the case of Northern Ireland all too depressingly reminds us.

Nationalism and a national language are political, not cultural or linguistic, concepts. From a historical point of view, there may be more coherence between populations of shared cultures than among peoples of the same nation. The attempts to co-opt cultural unities in language for

political purposes can often be pernicious, as one can see from the policies of National Socialism in Germany in the thirties, or the English First movement in the United States in the eighties. If patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, then linguistic chauvinism may be his penultimate shelter.

In the case of Chinese, it could be claimed that traditional Chinese literature is the patrimony not only of China, but of Korea, Japan, and several southeast Asian cultures. But, here, cultural diffusion was not the basis for political imperialism. Here, the Asian and European models contrast sharply. From the time of the Romans, the symbiosis between language and political hegemony produced empires, whether the Latin and the Roman Empire, Spanish and the Conquistadors in the New World, the French of French colonialism, or the English of the British Empire.

The relationship between politics and national literature emerged prominently in a recent literary incident. On March 20 this year, a poem appeared in the People's Daily which was clearly a nationalistic, chauvinistic poem. It expressed a longing for home, a gratitude to the People's Republic of China for supporting the poet's life abroad, presumably to study, and it intimated a particular nostalgia for the homeland at the onset of spring. The poem was titled, Yuan Hsiao ("Primal Night"), which marks the end of the Chinese New Year's celebration, and the beginning of spring. It is the time of the Lantern Festival. The poem in the original Chinese reads as follows:

元 宵

朱海洪

東風拂面催桃李
鷂鷹舒翅展鵬程
玉盤照海下熱淚
游子登台思故城
休負平生報國志
人民育我勝萬金
憤起急追振華夏
且待神洲遍地春

After its publication, readers in the People's Republic and elsewhere noticed that there was a hidden message in this eight-line regulated (*lü-shih*) form. If read transversely, from the last word in line one to the first word in line seven, the poem spelled out the following message: *Li Peng hsia t'ai;*

p'ing min fen 李鵬下台，平民憤. I decided to render this poem in English, preserving the half-hidden acrostic.

It came out like this:

> East Wind urges plum to flourish its petals, soft as **DOWN**;
> The hawk unfurls its wings, soars far away **WITH** the wind.
> The moon shines, sheds tears on the **LI**-ward sea,
> And a sojourner in the **PENG**-hu islands thinks of home.
> I'll strive to the **END** and realize our hopes for the motherland.
> The **PEOPLE'S** gift to me is worth more than millions.
> **RAGE**, impetuous rage, invigorates the good earth,
> As we wait for spring to spread all over the land.[6]

The challenge of the poem, one soon realized, was not merely to embed the seditious message in the first seven lines, but also to "disguise" the lines effectively so that one can imagine a hard-pressed editor being impressed by the surface meaning even while he missed the "poisoned pill" in the acrostic.

The native reader will have noticed that the translation pares down the *t'ao-li* ("peach and plum") trope for spring by concentrating on the "plum." This has the net effect, if one remembers the meaning of the Li in "Li Peng," of a first line that flatters the prime minister even more than in the original: 東風拂面摧桃李 East Wind urges plum to flourish its petals, soft as DOWN. In an earlier version, I had the East Wind "blowing the peach and plum blossoms down." Now, while it is true that spring winds do blow flower petals off until they fall down, the convention of seasonal imagery mandates that blowing petals down suggests gusty "West winds" of autumn, rather than the gentle breezes of spring. That this is mere convention and not sound meteorology can be evinced by the recurrence of tornadoes in springtime. But, more to the point in this connection, surely an editor, even one with minimal literary sensibilities, might suspect a line that makes a point of the East Wind blowing petals down. So the strategy of disguise suggested the conversion of "down" as adverb to "down" as noun. In a certain sense, the choice of "down" was unavoidable, since the hidden acrostic had to read naturally like a slogan calling for action. That required the "Down with . . . ." formula: anything else would seem unnatural.

The third and fourth line posed the greatest challenge. While it is easy in Chinese to talk about "plums" and surreptitiously mean a man whose surname is Li and one can cite a mythical bird, the *p'eng*, and designate at

the same time the Prime Minster's given name, to render these as "plum" and "the p'eng bird" in English veers too much toward disguise. There is no way in English to recognize "Plum, the p'eng bird" as paranomasia for Li P'eng. To present a recognizable name, one was bound to use the familiar English transliteration, Li P'eng. The problem now became one of disguising what would otherwise be too obvious: how might one camouflage "Li" and "P'eng"?

Fortunately, the line itself 玉盤照海下熱淚 "The jade plate [the moon] shines on the sea, sheds hot tears" offered some latitude, although "hot tears" was perhaps more conspicuous in English than it would be in Chinese. It was necessary to finesse the trope of "the jade plate" as signifying the moon, not only because it would involve lengthy explanation and circumlocution, but also because the Western mind is not accustomed, as the Chinese are, to thinking of jade as white. Hence, "a jade plate," imagistically viewed as a "green plate," is not likely to conjure up the moon even in the most fertile Western imagination. One decided to opt for simplicity in this instance and use the denotation, "the moon." But how to smuggle in the prime minister's family name in English?

The "sea" invoked in line 3 suggested waves and wind and sailing, and so the play on words, "LI-ward", presented itself naturally, and accommodated the imagery in the line. One considered disguising the pun on "Li" by spelling "LI-ward" as "leeward." But even though LI and LEE are phonetically equivalent, the reader of English is not likely to see in LEE an equivalent to the family name of the Chinese Prime Minister (even though LEE is a frequently encountered transliteration for 李). As for P'eng, there was no phonetic equivalent discoverable in English, so one hit upon a happy accident. Using a different grapheme for "p'eng" one could posit the "P'eng-hu tao," the Pescadores Islands. Since these were offshore, they would be a natural location for a sojourning Chinese thinking of home, particularly poignant because it was, in a sense, so close to home yet so far away. The longing for home from someone across the Taiwan Straits was an apt counterpart for the original line, which read: 游子登台思故城, "The sojourner mounts the lookout and thinks of the ancient city." A Chinese reader could be imagined to miss the conjunction of "Li" with "P'eng" when these words are so naturally embedded in such moving reminiscences.

The second half of the poem is a series of platitudinous expressions of resolve, determination, as well as gratitude for the nurturing support of the motherland. As a student studying abroad, presumably with the financial

support of the Ministry of Education, the poet-narrator does not appear to be like so many Chinese students abroad, critical of the government and seemingly ungrateful to the homeland. On the contrary, he claims that the education received from the people is worth more than ten thousand pieces of gold: 人民育我勝萬金. The seventh line is perhaps the only place in the poem which is not piously pacific: 憤起急追振華夏. The binome, *hua-hsia* 華夏, a literary reference to China, is a term used by Chinese to indicate their homeland. To translate this phrase as "China" would be to trade connotation for denotation, and to confuse the deictic point of reference from that of an insider to the vantage point of an outsider. "China" is a neutral term that can be used by anyone; but *hua-hsia* is what I call an endotropic term, i.e., it is a term used by insiders. Just as intimates do not refer to themselves by their full name, so one's reference to one's motherland will be different from the terms that outsiders use. The problem for the translator is to capture this allusion and these suggestions, without violating the natural fluency of the original. The vigor of the imagery in the line suggested that a concrete nominal would be better than an abstract reference. "The good earth" recommended itself, not only because it carries out the theme of the world in spring, but also because, for the reader of English, "the good earth" will almost certainly – after Pearl Buck's novel – remind the reader of China. Another self-referential nominal occurs in the last line: *shen-zhou,* which is an ancient name for China. Here, again, it seemed advisable to avoid the alienating reference to China: one was content to allow context to determine that the "land" mentioned in the line was unmistakably Chinese.

What struck me about this instance of "national literature in another language" were the ironies. The very nationalistic ardor of the original poem is what probably attracted the attention of the editor of the People's Daily, looking for appropriate items from all the submissions that are received unprompted and unsolicited. The aptness of the piece for a particular seasonal festival was obvious, and no one could question the inclusion of the poem if published around *yüan-hsiao.* And one could hardly blame a loyal bureaucratic sub-editor who, wishing to ingratiate himself with the authorities, publishes a poem from an overseas student that, far from criticizing his homeland, extols it in the most heartfelt way. The traditional nature of the form also spoke in favor of the poem: written in the classical *ch'i-yen lü-shih* form rather than a more modish and modern free verse, this verse was a reaffirmation of uniquely Chinese values, evidence that not all students

were irrevocably influenced by the West. Surely the publication of this piece would be a coup for all those involved, an occasion for self-congratulation, a reassuring reminder that not all youth were rebellious or disloyal. Indeed, one can hardly imagine a more "nationalistic" poem to mark the auspices of spring.

Had the editor been more literary, he might have noticed that the poem was almost totally without ambiguities: there appeared to be no resonant ironies. The meaning was unmistakable: each line celebrated the season and the devotion to one's country. A more exigent literary reader might have dismissed the poem as too platitudinous, too trite, altogether too obvious – even if he were to miss the fatal diagonal acrostic.

It is semiotically important, of course, for Chinese readers that the acrostic is diagonal – *hsieh* 邪 – because in the contrast between *hsieh* and *cheng* 正 is the contrast between not only the oblique and the straight, but also the heterodox and the orthodox. Here, from the viewpoint of those who disapprove of the government, what is heterodox is orthodox, and what is orthodox is heterodox, or to borrow the formulations from the *Hung-lou meng,* what is true is what is false and what is false is what is true: *jia tso chen shih chen yi jia* 假作眞時眞亦假.

Even for a traditionalist culture, the poem might have been suspected of banality. In this connection, one might think that all nationalistic poems are banal, and indeed it would be hard to avoid that conclusion. But there are many great poets who are not nationalistic in any meaningful sense, including Coethe for the Germans, and Tu Fu for the Chinese. What differentiates national poetry that is banal from national poetry that is not banal? I think there is a simple answer: banality discourages fresh insights; it encourages smug atavisms; it is inimical to thinking. The trouble with clichés is not that they are wrong, but that they do not stimulate the mind. As Donal Henahan of the New York Times once wrote, "Clichés are simply truths rubbed so smooth they deflect thought."[7] What the editor of the People's Daily saw was a poem that was well-meaning; a poem that he thought meant well. He saw only the sentiments that he recognized, and looked no further. The irony is that if the sub-editor was arrested he was arrested for political impropriety and not for bad taste in literature. (Fortunately or unfortunately, bad taste in literature has never been a criminal offense, although some consider it at least a misdemeanor.) Yet the editor's political instincts were surely correct. How many politicians can be expected to look behind the slogans they mouth, to be sensitive to ironies behind the shibboleth, to be

suspicious about "politically correct" sentiments? Certainly, the poetic sentiments in this poem are "politically correct."

A further irony is that the embedded message is a political slogan, and hardly poetic at all. "Down with Li Peng; End People's Suffering!" or, in a more literal version: "Li P'eng Step Down; Mollify the Anger of the People!" can hardly be viewed as very literary. The message is straightforward; the rhetoric forceful. Indeed in the translation it was the unambiguous slogan which set the constraints on rendering, for whatever else was achieved, the diagonal acrostic had to come across as a believable political slogan. Hence there was latitude in everything else – the imagery, the rhythm the diction – but the key words in the acrostic were set: they allowed for very little deviation. Slogans admit of no circumlocution. "Li P'eng, Step Down from the Platform" might be literally a more faithful rendering of "*Li P'eng Hsia T'ai*" but it is far from plausible as a rude remonstrance from the rabble.

This incident, as well as the exercise of translating the original poem in such a way as to preserve the hidden acrostic, has provided concrete insights into the notion of nationalism and the essence of literature. The moral of the story is that nationalism is, on the whole, only political and rather superficial. One's allegiance to culture may be more important than one's allegiance to a polity. And I don't mind saying this on *both* sides of the Taiwan Straits. When politics runs counter to culture, when ideology undermines the search for the multifaceted, dynamic truth, then the cretins and the Philistines have taken over. Any time anyone, whether Nationalist politican or Communist cadre, whether American patriot or Chinese loyalist, appeals to my emotion at the expense of my intelligence, then – yea, even if it were to celebrate motherhood and apple pie in America, or the sacredness of tradition in China – I want no part of that kind of chauvinism. My chauvinism is a chauvinism of humanity, which I conceive of as not very different from the Confucian notion of *jen* 仁. And anything that undercuts that notion of humanity, that subdivides and categorizes and specializes to such a degree that the promontory of humanity is forgotten, that sight of the continent is obscured, is mischievously ignorant and misguided.

In America, the fearful consequences of the Persian Gulf War have unleashed a wave of blind, flag-waving, yellow-beribboned patriotism which makes a mockery of true patriotism. It is ironic that Americans who support the students involved in the June 4 Tienanmen Incident should become increasingly intolerant of dissenters from the decision to go to war for a nation of desert shieks in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The freedom to

disagree, in the eyes of some, is more supportable when it occurs in another country than in one's own.

That, in the end, may be the most interesting lesson of the fiasco (or the success, depending on your point of view) of the *Yüan-hsiao* poem in the People's Daily. The ability to read a text, to read it as literature is an intensely subversive act. The literary imagination is – unlike the political intelligence – intensely self-critical and ironic. Literature has, within itself, a sort of "self-correcting ribbon," a "fault-proof" computer program, which doubts even as it asserts. Good literature will have this creative tension, which the now-old "New Critics" called ambiguity. That is, unfortunately, a negative formulation that privileges clarity and that assumes the definitiveness of declarative meaning: it suggests that something that is neither here nor there is ambiguous. There is even a hint of moral cravenness in being unable to decide between right and wrong. But the truth is dialectical, ironic, and self-reflexive – *cheng yen jo fan* 正言若反 , the *Tao Te Ching* reminds us, and we must read through the lines, between the lines, and, in the case of the *Yuan-hsiao* poem, *across* the lines.

As a literary scholar, I cannot help but see the whole incident as a recuperation of the value of critical discernment. Perhaps the editor at the *People's Daily* would have survived politically if he had been a more sensitive reader of literature, for the banal message in the original poem had nothing of the richness, either of literature or of life. Literary judgment (even without political vigilance) would have advised against the publication of the poem with the "poison pill."

Perhaps the moral of the story is that politicians should know something about literature, after all.

Notes

1. Paper presented at the Tamkang Comparative Literature Conference, Tamsui, Taiwan, August 16-20, 1991, in the panel on "National Literatures in An(other) Language(s)."
2. In Switzerland, the official languages are: German, French, Italian, and Romansh; in Yugoslavia, the official languages are Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, and Slovenian; in Singapore, the official languages are: Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and English.
3. Romanians speak Romanian, Hungarian, and German; Bulgarians speak Bulgarian, Turkish, and Greek; Afghanistan includes people who speak Pashta, Dari Persian, and Uzbek; Iranians speak Farsi, Turk, Kurdish, Arabic, English, and French; citizens of Luxembourg speak French, German, and Luxembourgian.
4. In South Africa, both Afrikaans and English are the official languages; in the Phillipines, Filipino and English; in Czechoslovakia, Czech and Slovak; and in Israel, Hebrew and Arabic. Other countries with two official languages are: Malta (Maltese, English); Somalia (Somali, Arabic); Swaziland (Swati, English); and Tanzania (Swahili, English).
5. In Sweden, the languages are Swedish and Finnish; in Finland, they are Finnish and Swedish; in Belgium, Flemish and French; in Thailand, Thai and Chinese.
6. Published on the "Op-Ed" page, *New York Times*, April 30, 1991 (see Appendix).
7. March 2, 1980, Section 2, page 33.