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Translating “Liangzhou Ci”: Alternating between Intervention and Non-Intervention

JUN TANG and CONRAD BAUER
Southeast University, China (JT)

“Liangzhou Ci” was written by Ge Fei, the pen name of Liu Yong (1964-), winner of three national literary awards in China and currently a professor at Tsinghua University. The fictional story, which was first published in the mid-1990s and has been republished several times since, describes a conversation between the narrator and Dr Lin An, regarding an academic article of Lin’s. The story begins with Lin’s self-exile and rumours of his death, and highlights his resistance to complying with the expectations of academic rigour in his unsubstantiated account of the life story of the Tang poet Wang Zhihuan. In summary, Lin is portrayed as one of those Chinese intellectuals who have failed to keep pace with the changing society.

Literary translations “have always been expected [...] to be near-equivalents of the originals’ message, meaning, tone, and quality” (Koerner 213). However, translation scholars are familiar with concepts such as translation as a form of rewriting (Lefevere) and translation as intervention (Munday), which have been used as umbrella terms describing the textual manifestations of a multitude of intentional or deliberate translation shifts in target texts. Although rewriting and intervention have often been ascribed to ideological concerns or political agendas, cross-linguistic or intercultural differences may also lead to the adoption of an “interventionist approach” to translation (Limon 30), which will result in various translation shifts (e.g. additions, omissions, lexical changes, stylistic changes).

To avoid the cross-linguistic or intercultural pitfalls that translating into one’s non-native language can entail, the native Chinese-speaking translator (Jun Tang), through networking, found a co-translator (Conrad Bauer), who is a native English speaker from the United States and holds a Master’s degree in Chinese Language and Literature. We also sought some help from Bauer’s brother, a professional editor.

Rejecting the “more traditional understandings of fidelity” (Floros 70) that tend to disempower translators and reduce their confidence in mediation and intervention (Limon 33), we agreed on the importance of producing a readable and culturally adequate translation. We alternated between two approaches for this purpose: an interventionist approach intended to enhance readability of the target text by making changes or rewriting textual segments, and a non-interventionist approach intended to preserve the textual features of the source text by staying close to the original words. Due to space restrictions, only outstandingly significant translation shifts regarding cross-linguistic or intercultural differences are explained here.

The first thorny problem is how to translate the culture-laden title of the original story. First, “Liangzhou Ci” (lit. A Song of Liangzhou) is also the title of a well-known ancient poem mentioned in the story, which is also known as “Chu Sai” (lit. Beyond the Border), and which depicts the desolate scenery of the northwestern border region of the Tang Empire. Second, Liangzhou is a prefecture of the Tang Empire (618-907), whose capital city is Wuwei – the setting of the fabricated anecdote of the Tang poet in the second section of the source text and one of the stops on the protagonist’s lengthy trip. However, we deemed it impractical to burden readers with lengthy notes, and hesitated about the choice between an interventionist approach and a non-interventionist one. Upon the suggestion of one of the anonymous peer reviewers of the translation, we opted for a non-interventionist approach and elected to render “Liangzhou Ci” as “A Song of Liangzhou”.

A second thorny problem is how to render the culture-specific references in Ge Fei’s story (e.g. personal names, place names, poem titles, book and magazine titles). First, the protagonist’s name, Lin An, coincides with the name of a southeastern city (Lin’an, the ancient

name of Hangzhou). The original writer seems to use the geographical distance between Lin'an and the northwestern city Wuwei (the setting of the anecdote fabricated by the protagonist in the story) as an indicator of the protagonist's disorientation in a changing society and his isolation from reality. We were thus faced with two options – either to follow the norm for transcribing Chinese names (i.e. spelling the family name and the given name separately and making the family name precede the given name), transcribing the protagonist's name as “Lin An”, or to disregard the default pattern, spelling the name as “Lin'an”, recalling the name of the southeastern city. After some hesitation we decided to abide by the norm and adopt a non-interventionist approach because English-speaking readers lack the background knowledge to understand the cultural inferences of the second option.

Second, the source text uses both the name Wang Zhihuan as well as an alternative form – the courtesy name Wang Jiling – to avoid repetition. Although this is a culturally specific tradition that is familiar to Chinese readers, a non-interventionist approach to translation will only confuse the English-speaking receiving audience, who might not understand that these names refer to the same person. We therefore adopted an interventionist approach in this instance, and only used Wang Zhihuan as the poet's name, to avoid confusion. We felt that this change, while diluting the cultural specificity of the source text (Tymoczko 224), could help produce a readable target text.

Third, the Chinese original also mentions some place names. To improve the readability of the target text, we adopted a primarily interventionist approach, omitting two place names that seemed unnecessary or irrelevant (i.e. “Aqsu” and “Changsha”) and adding geographic location information where we saw fit (e.g. “the northwestern city of Zhangye”, “the southeastern seaside city of Shanghai”, “Lin traversed diagonally two-thirds of China”, “the heartland city of Taiyuan”).

Fourth, since the aim is to produce a sense-oriented rather than sign-oriented translation (Limon 36), we alternated between two approaches when translating culture-specific references such as poem titles and book and magazine titles. In cases where we believed that a faithful representation of the original culture-specific reference might mislead the reader, we opted for an interventionist approach and made relevant changes. Otherwise we adopted a non-interventionist approach. For instance, the first paragraph of the third section of the original story mentions *Tang Shi* (lit. *Tang Poems*), which is a well-known abbreviation for *Quan Tang Shi* (lit. *The Complete Tang Poems*). Following an interventionist approach, we stuck to the unabbreviated title of the book and added the descriptive word “authoritative” in the target text to designate the literary status of the collection of poems. Another illustrative example is “Yan Ge Xing” (lit. A Song of the Yan State), a poem by the Tang poet Gao Shi, which is mentioned in the second section of Ge Fei's story. Since a literal rendering of the poem title could leave target readers wondering about the meaning of “the Yan State”, we opted for an interventionist approach and translated the poem's title as “The Battle on the Northern Border”. Our reasons were twofold: first, the poem describes a bloody battle fought on the northern border, and “the Yan State” does not designate the location of the battlefield; second, “Yan Ge Xing” is one of the preset titles for poems written according to the *yuefu* style (a folk song style well-known in ancient China).

The third challenge lies in bridging crosscultural differences in stylistic preferences. “Writer responsibility is when the burden of communication is on the writer” (McCool 2). It has been contended that English is characterized by writer responsibility (Hinds) and promotes values such as “clarity and concision” (McCool 2); Chinese, on the contrary, is characterized by reader responsibility and “demands more of the reader” (McCool 14). From the perspective of a writer-responsible language, the Chinese style of writing may be wordy, implicit and unclear. In this regard, we endeavoured to produce a readable target text instead of trying to reproduce the original style.

The source text is divided into four sections, which recount, respectively, the narrator's unexpected meeting with Dr Lin An and Lin's frustrating experience with academic research, a fictional anecdote regarding the Tang poet Wang Zhihuan's social life in northwestern China told by Lin, a fictional story regarding the loss of the bulk of Wang Zhihuan's poems and Lin's discussion of Wang's motive in destroying those poems, and the end of the narrator and Lin's conversation on the Tang poet. The author employs four section headings, whose literal translations, following a non-interventionist approach, are as follows: "The chit-chat", "An old tale", "Poems and their disappearance" and "Conclusion". English-language readers would normally expect that section headings of a fictional story and those of an academic article would be written in quite different styles. In contrast, the section headings of the source text are written in a reader-responsible style – being unclear or misleading, they fail to fulfil their primary function, that of clearly summarizing multi-paragraph sections of a fictional story, and instead lend a sense of alienation to the target text, a feature which could distract the attention of the target readers or disrupt the reading experience. We first attempted to adopt an interventionist approach and rewrite the headings. However, having failed to find satisfying substitutes that sounded natural in English, we decided, in the end, to omit the headings. Omission of the four headings makes the last paragraph of the second section strike readers as an irrelevant digression. Literally, this paragraph can be translated as "Lin stayed in the bathroom much longer than I expected. I knew that was not the end of our conversation. In the humming noise of the freezer compressor, the sad face of his wife came to my mind. I had not seen her since their divorce." In order to avoid the perception of irrelevance, we used an interventionist approach and cut out the paragraph to maintain the coherence of the text.

Other stylistic changes (e.g. rewriting or restructuring sentences, combining or splitting paragraphs, eliminating unnecessary or irrelevant details) have also been made to enhance clarity and readability. For instance, as mentioned above, Chinese writing tends to be wordy and often contains unnecessary or irrelevant details, which can be omitted to guarantee a less distracting reading experience. In the fourth paragraph of the first section of the source text, Lin is quoted as saying in one of his academic articles that the opening line of the well-known poem "Shu Dao Nan" (The Perils of Traveling in Sichuan) is "Yi xi hu xu" (噫唏嚅嘘), which is a misrepresentation of the original line, "Yi xu xi" (噫吁嚱). The misrepresentation is intended to demonstrate Lin's contempt for scientific rigour. The problem is that both the original line and its misrepresentation are comprised of several interjections that defy a word-for-word approach to translation. Since the mere mention of "the opening line" is enough, we adopted an interventionist approach and omitted the cluster of interjections. In the last section of Ge Fei's story, the second paragraph reads "Light had appeared in the sky, but the sun didn't rise". From the perspective of an English-speaking reader, it provides irrelevant details that disrupt the cohesion and coherence of the text. Hence we cut out this sentence.

The fourth challenge derives from the translation of several segments of the source text portraying the appearance and behaviour of women. Scholars have noticed "the internalized male gaze surveying the female as sex object" (Conway 4) and criticized patriarchal modes of representation. However, maintaining a critical stance does not mean that translators can freely change textual segments to fit their own ideological inclinations. Any ideological intervention on the part of the translator must be justified not only because "translators are normally expected, even assumed, to keep their politics out of their work" (Von Flotow 24), but also because certain changes to the original content may affect the source text's cohesion and coherence. Hence we made only a number of minor textual changes of lingua-cultural rather than political or ideological significance.

Floros has demonstrated the possibility of "a contradiction between theoretical ideals and actual contexts of practice" (65), something we encountered in translating Ge Fei's story. We assumed the role of cultural mediators, with the intention of guaranteeing the survival of

the source text in the target culture by enhancing readability of the target text. We “see it as part of [our] role to intervene” (Limon 31); our choices were based on the aforementioned ethical intention. While we cannot guarantee that all our solutions are optimal, we can guarantee that they are justifiable.

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凉州词
格非
闲谈

作为当代文化研究领域内声名显赫的学者，临安博士近来已渐渐被人们遗忘。四年过去了，我从未得到过他的任何消息。正如外界所传言的那样，不幸的婚姻是导致他最终告别学术界的重要原因。最近一期的《名人》杂志刊发了一篇悼念性质的文章，作者声称，据他刚刚得到的讯息，临安先生现已不在人间，他于一九九三年的六月在新疆的阿克苏死于霍乱。直到今年秋天，当临安博士背着沉重的行囊突然出现在我寓所的门前，上述推断才被证明是无稽之谈。

他是从张掖返回长沙的途中经过上海的。由于那则不负责任的谣传和多年不见的隔膜，我们相见之下令人不快的尴尬是不难想象的。这些年来，世事沧桑，时尚多变，在大部分人忙于积攒金钱的同时，另一些人则自愿弃世而去，我们的谈话始终笼罩着一层抑郁、伤感的气氛，临安博士已不像过去那样健谈，激情和幽默感似乎也已枯竭。我们长时间看着窗外，看着那些花枝招展的少女穿过树林走向食堂，难挨的沉默使我们感到彼此厌倦。

在我的记忆中，临安先生尽管学识丰湛，兴趣广博，却称不上是一个治学严谨的学者，他的研究方式大多建立在猜测和幻想的基础上，甚至带

A Song of Liangzhou
Ge Fei

Translated by Jun Tang
and Conrad Bauer

Though Dr Lin An had once established himself as a renowned scholar of cultural studies, he had backed out of the spotlight four years ago, cutting off all contact with his academic colleagues. I had heard nothing about him since then. The rumour, which happened to be true, was that he could not cope with the devastating effects of his divorce. *Celebrities* magazine had recently published a memorial for Lin; the author claimed that, according to freshly-obtained information, Lin had succumbed to cholera in the northwestern border region back in June of 1993. When Lin suddenly showed up at my door weighted down by a heavy backpack, I could not have been more surprised by the gap between reporting and reality.

Travelling from the northwestern city of Zhangye to the southeastern seaside city of Shanghai, Lin traversed diagonally two-thirds of China. Owing to that erroneous report and all these years of estrangement, our unexpected meeting was considerably embarrassing. Much had changed in the last four years, not just for those within our academic circles, but the rest of society as well. While most people busied themselves in amassing personal fortune, others amongst us had willingly forsaken the pursuit of worldly goals. Lin and I carried on our conversation in a melancholic and sentimental mood. He was no longer the passionate and humorous conversationalist I once knew. During the awkward moments of silence that bored both of us, we gazed out the window, watching stylishly dressed co-eds walk through the trees towards the university cafeteria.

For as long as I could remember, Lin would not abide by the expectations of academic rigour, though he was a person of wide knowledge and diverse interests. His research, laced with facetious

有一些玩笑的成分。对于学术界在困难的摸索中渐渐养成的注重事实和逻辑的良好风气，临安常常出言讥诮，语露轻蔑：“捍卫真理的幼稚愿望往往是通向浅薄的最可靠的途径。”

四年前，他将一篇关于李白《蜀道难》的长文寄给了《学术月刊》，从此销声匿迹。在这篇文章中，他一口断定《蜀道难》是一篇伪作。“它只不过是一名隐居蜀川的高人赠给李白的剑谱，其起首一句‘噫唏唵嘘’便是一出怪招……”《学术月刊》的一名女编辑在给她的信中流露出了明显的不安：“你的那位走火入魔的朋友一定是神经出了问题。”现在看来，这篇文章也许仅仅是临安博士对学术界表示绝望的戏仿之作。

不过，临安博士并未就此与学术绝缘，这次见面，他还带来了一篇有关王季凌《凉州词》的论文。他告诉我，他写这篇论文的初衷只是为了排遣寂寞，没想到竟意外地治愈了他的失眠症。文章的风格与他的旧作一脉相承，标题却冗长得令人难以忍受。如果删去枝蔓，似乎就可以称做：《王之涣：中唐时期的存在主义者》。

旧闻

“普希金说过：湮灭是人的自然命运。我也是最近才明白这句话的真正含义……”临安博士就这样开始了他的论述，并立即提到了有关王之涣的一段旧闻。

remarks, was based on presumptions and whimsy. As China's reform-era academics strained to incorporate international standards of scholarship, Lin used to mock their gradual and laborious development of respect for facts and logic: "The childish wish to defend the truth is the surest route to shallowness". Before he disappeared four years ago, Lin had sent a lengthy contribution to *Academic Monthly* on the poem "The Perils of Travelling in Sichuan" by Li Bai. In the manuscript, he proclaimed that the poem should not in fact be ascribed to the famous Tang Dynasty poet: "It is a manual of sword fighting techniques bequeathed to Li Bai by a reclusive martial artist living in Sichuan. The opening line describes an unidentified fighting technique..." One of the magazine's editors sent me a letter expressing her concern: "Your eccentric friend must be mentally disturbed." It is probable that the submission was intended as an ironic expression of his disappointment with the academic world in which he had been unable to find his place.

This rejection had not dampened Lin's enthusiasm for academic writing. He brought with him a recently finished article on "A Song of Liangzhou," a well-known poem by Wang Zhihuan, a contemporary of Li Bai's. Lin told me that he began writing the article to dispel feelings of isolation and exclusion. Unexpectedly, the process of writing cured his insomnia. The article was characterized by his signature writing style and an unbearably long title. If I were to take the liberty to present the title in a condensed form, it would read: "Wang Zhihuan: An Existentialist of the Mid-Tang Period."

Lin's article began: "Pushkin once remarked that 'Man's ineluctable fate is to pass into oblivion.' It is only recently that I have come to understand his meaning..." In the ensuing paragraphs, Lin commenced his discourse on Wang

在甘肃武威城西大约九华里外的玉树地方，曾有过一座两层楼の木石建筑。现在，除了门前的一对石狮和拴马用柱铁之外，沙漠中已无任何遗迹。这幢建筑位于通往敦煌和山丹马场的必经之路上，原本是供过路商旅借宿打尖的客栈。到了开元初年，随着边陲战事的吃紧，大批戍边将士从内地调集武威，这座客栈一度为军队所租用。最后占领这座客栈的是一些狂放不羁的边塞诗人，他们带来了歌妓、乐师和纵酒斗毆的风习，竞夕狂欢，犹如末日将临。

自从世上出现了诗人与歌妓之后，这两种人就彼此抱有好感。但这并不是说，在地僻人稀的塞外沙漠，诗人与歌妓们蚁居一处饮酒取乐，就一定不会发生这样或那样的争执。为了防止流血事件的频繁出现，一个名叫叶修士的诗人在酒后发明一种分配女人的方法，具体程序说来也十分简单：诗人们一般在黄昏时从城里骑马来到这里，随后饮酒赋诗，叙谈酬唱。等到月亮在沙漠中升起，歌妓们便依次从屏风后走出来，开始演唱诗人们新近写成的诗作。只有当歌妓演唱到某位诗人的作品时，这位诗人才有权与她共度良宵。

“这种仪式有些类似于现在在英国流行的‘瞎子约会’，”临安博士

Zhihuan by relating an anecdote about the poet.

In a place that nowadays is nothing but sand, there once stood a two-storied wood and stone building. This was in Yushu, less than three miles away from the city of Wuwei in the remote desert province of Gansu. The preserved traces of this long-forgotten building are two stone guardian lions and an iron hitching post. The vanished building initially served as a caravansary for merchants and travellers on what was once the only route to the Shandan Horse Farm and Dunhuang. When in the early eighth century military forces were called into Wuwei from inland areas to help secure the border against invading nomads, officers and soldiers requisitioned the inn to serve as their lodgings. Later, its rooms were occupied by a group of free-spirited frontier poets, together with musicians and courtesans, whose revels often lasted until dawn.

We know from even the earliest written records that poets and courtesans have long possessed a natural affinity for each other. But when sardined into this isolated inn drinking and carousing on the edge of the uninhabited desert, they inevitably came to quarrelling over one matter or another. Desperate action was needed to reduce the frequency of bloodshed. In a moment of drunken inspiration, a poet named Ye Xiushi devised a method for distributing the courtesans amongst the poets. The procedure was exceedingly simple: the poets usually arrived at the inn on horseback at dusk. They wrote as they drank, bantering and composing responses to their friends' poems. When the moon rose above the desert horizon, the courtesans appeared one by one from behind a screen, singing one of the recently finished poems. The poet whose poem the courtesan sang won the privilege of her company for the evening.

“To a degree, the procedure shares similarities to a blind date,” Lin explained.

解释道，“它使得传统的嫖娼行径更具神秘性质，而且带有一种浓烈的文化色彩。”

自从王之涣贬官来到武威之后，就成了这座客栈的常客，遗憾的是，他的诗作从未有幸被歌妓们演唱过。根据后代学者的分析，王季凌在这里备受冷落，除了他“相貌平平，神情犹疑”，不讨女人们喜欢之外，最重要的原因是他的诗歌不适合演唱。情况确也是如此，让一个卖弄风情、趣味浅俗的歌妓大声吟唱“黄河远上……”一类的词句，的确有些过分。不过，不久之后发生的一件事似乎完全出乎人们意料。这件事显然不属于正史记述的范畴，清代沈德潜在其《唐诗别裁》一书中对这段旧闻偶有涉及，但描述却极不准确。

这天晚上，诗人们的聚会依旧像往常一样举行。只是听说客栈新来了几名歌妓，诗人们的情绪略微有些激动。第一个从屏风后面走出来的是一名身材臃肿的当地女子。大概是因为此人长相粗劣，诗人们的目光显得有些躲躲闪闪，惊惶不安，唯恐从她的嘴里唱出自己的诗篇。这位姑娘用她绿豆般的小眼扫视了一遍众人，最后将目光落在了高适的身上。她唱了一段《燕歌行》。人们在长长地松了一口气之后，都用同情的目光看着高适。高适本人对此却有不同的看法，他低声地对邻座的王之涣说道：“这个姑娘很可爱，我喜欢她的臀部。”

接着出场的这名歌妓虽然长相不俗，但毕竟已是明日黄花。她似乎被王昌龄高大、英俊的外表迷住了，曾经异想天开地用一把剪刀逼着王昌龄与她结婚。她每次出场，总是演唱王昌龄的诗作，因此，其余的诗人对她不会存有非分之想。果然，她这次所

“It lent seeking professional pleasure a sense of mystery and refinement.”

After Wang Zhihuan was demoted from his position in the central government and exiled to Wuwei to serve as a low-ranking official, he became a regular patron of this inn. Yet not once had any of the courtesans sung one of his poems. Later generations of scholars believed that Wang Zhihuan's poems were neglected for two reasons: the poet's "plain looks and unconfident demeanour" failed to win him the favour of the fairer sex, and, more importantly, his compositions were not easily put to music. It would be unimaginable for a coquettish and shallow courtesan to sing aloud his majestic verses.

At a certain point, the situation took an unexpected twist. Though official histories paid it no heed, an inexact account was rendered in the eighteenth-century work *A Collection of Tang Poetry* by Shen Deqian.

One evening, the poets gathered at the inn as usual. A rumour had circulated that several new escorts had arrived at the inn, which boosted the spirits of the poets. Appearing first from behind the screen was a plump, plain-looking local girl. The poets kept their heads down, each one fearing that she would sing one of his compositions. Glancing around, the girl's beady eyes fell on Gao Shi as she sang a stanza of his poem "The Battle on the Northern Border". The other poets all breathed a sigh of relief, looking at Gao Shi sympathetically. Gao Shi did not seem the least bit put off: "This girl is adorable; I like her backside," he whispered to Wang Zhihuan, sitting next to him.

The next courtesan was good-looking, but she was a fixture at the inn, and well past her prime. She was obsessed with the tall and handsome poet Wang Changling; in one encounter, she had impulsively menaced him with a pair of scissors, demanding a marriage proposal. Every time she appeared onstage she sang

唱，又是那首老掉牙的《出塞》。王昌龄看上去虽有几分扫兴，但仍不失优雅风度，他谦虚地嘿嘿一笑：“温习温习……”

时间就这样过得很快。王之涣似乎已有了一丝睡意。在这次聚会行将结束时，从屏风后面突然闪出一个女人。她的出现即使王季凌困倦全消。

关于这个女人的美貌，历来存有不同的说法。有人称她“玉臂清辉，光可鉴人”，有人则说“仪态矜端，顾盼流波，摄人心魄”。不管怎么说，这些评论在某一点上是一致的：她的身上既有成熟女人的丰韵，又有少女般的纯洁清新。她所演唱的诗作正是王季凌的《凉州词》。

看上去，这个端庄、俊美的女人并未受过基本的音乐训练。她的嗓音生涩、稚拙，缺乏控制，一名衰老的琴师只能即兴为她伴奏，徒劳无益地追赶着她的节拍。她的眼中饱含泪水，仿佛歌唱本身给她带来的只是难以明说的羞辱。

“如果有人决心喝下一杯毒酒，最好的办法莫过于一饮而尽，”临安对我说，“她就是在这样一种交织着犹豫、悔恨以及决定迅速了却一桩心愿的急躁之中，唱完了这支曲子，然后不知所措地看着众人。”

短暂的沉默过后，人们看见王之涣干咳了两声，从椅子上站起身来，朝这名歌妓走去。他脸上的冷漠一如往常，勉强控制着失去平衡的身体。他甚至连看都没看她一眼——就像这个女人根本不存在似的，匆匆绕过她身旁的几只酒坛，径直来到了屋外。

深秋的沙漠中寒气袭人，沙粒被西风吹散，在空中碰撞着，发出蜜蜂般嗡嗡的鸣响。借着客栈的灯光，他

one of Wang Changling's poems, so none of the poets had bothered to give her a second look. As expected, the courtesan sang "Beyond the Border". Although Wang Changling looked upset, he conducted himself with grace. Smiling modestly, he said, "For old times' sake..."

Time flew by quickly; Wang Zhihuan felt a little drowsy. Just as the evening was about to conclude, a woman emerged whose presence instantly dispelled the poet's lethargy.

There are multiple descriptions of the woman's beauty, either marvelling at her "jade-like, smooth arms" or acclaiming her as "a demure lady with alluring eyes". Observers were invariably impressed by her unique blend of femininity and innocence. She sang Wang Zhihuan's "A Song of Liangzhou."

It was obvious that this gentle and attractive woman had not received even the most basic vocal training. She sang awkwardly, seemingly unable to control her voice. An aged accompanist improvised on the zither, trying in vain to keep pace with her erratic tempo. The woman sang with tearful eyes as if experiencing some unspeakable humiliation.

"If a person has decided to drink a glass of poisoned wine, he'd better empty his glass in one gulp," Lin drew a comparison. "The woman finished singing in just this kind of hasty manner, probably with regret. She stood there, bewildered, looking out at the group of poets."

While the audience looked back in silence, Wang Zhihuan cleared his throat twice and rose from his chair. He walked past the woman and the wine jars beside her without giving her a single glance, all the while keeping his balance and faking nonchalance. It was as if the woman were completely non-existent to him.

Outside, in that cold autumn night, wind-blown sands whipped against each other, making a droning sound. In the

在一排倒坍的栅栏边找到了那匹山丹马。接着，他开始流泪。客栈里传来了酒罐被砸碎的破裂之声，那名歌妓发出了惊恐的尖叫。

“现在，我们已经知道，那名歌妓正是王季凌的妻子。”临安故作平静地说，“这件事说起来有些令人难以置信，但它毕竟是事实。你知道，当时在玉树的这座客栈定期举行的诗人聚会与如今港台地区盛行的流行歌曲排行榜并无二致，在那个年代，它几乎完全操纵着武威这个弹丸小城附庸风雅的文化消费。王之涣的妻子平常足不出户，丈夫频繁的终夜不归使她颇费猜测。在一个偶然的机，她从一个上门来兜售枸杞子的穆斯林口中知道了玉树客栈所发生的一切，丈夫在那里遭受的冷落不禁让她忧心如焚。后来，她慢慢想出了一个办法……”

“看来，这个女人对于诗歌艺术有一种狂热的爱好……”我对临安说。

“仅仅是一种爱好而已。而且这种爱好也仅仅是因为她的丈夫恰好是一名诗人。那时的女人们就是这样，假如她的丈夫是一个牙科医生，那么她就会莫名其妙地对拔牙用的老虎钳产生亲近之感。事实上，她对诗歌几乎一窍不通。在太原时，她对王之涣的那首《登鹳雀楼》提出质疑，按照她的逻辑，欲穷千里目，更上一层楼是远远不够的，起码也应该一口气爬上四五层楼，因为这样才能看得更远。王之涣怎么向她解释都无法说服她。最后，他只得将妻子带到那座即将倒塌的鹳雀楼前。‘你瞧，这座楼总共只有三层，’王之涣耐心地解释道，‘我写这首诗的时候是在二楼……’

glow of the light emanating from the inn, Wang Zhihuan spotted his Shandan horse beside a toppled fence. Suddenly, tears ran down his cheeks. From inside the guesthouse, the sound of breaking wine jars was followed by a frightened shriek from the woman.

“We now know that the courtesan was Wang Zhihuan’s wife in disguise,” Lin said with feigned calmness. “However incredible it may sound, it’s true. You see, during the mid-Tang period, the regular poet gatherings at the inn in Yushu had an influence comparable to the Taiwan and Hong Kong singles charts nowadays. At that time, those gatherings served as the invisible hand guiding the cultural trends of the nearby city of Wuwei. Wang Zhihuan’s wife, who rarely left home, had become paranoid about her husband’s frequent absences. She soon learned what was happening at the inn from a Muslim hawker selling dried Chinese wolfberries. Concern for her husband’s possibly damaged self-esteem gnawed at her constantly. In the end, she thought of a ruse to prevent the situation from worsening.”

“Well, the woman must have been a passionate lover of poetry,” I chimed in.

“An amateur enthusiast. It is simply because her husband was a poet. A woman in pre-modern China was like that: if her husband were a dentist, she would undoubtedly take a liking to forceps. In fact, Wang Zhihuan’s wife knew nothing about poetic composition. When the couple was living in the heartland city of Taiyuan, the wife questioned the logic behind her husband’s composition, ‘On White Stork Tower’. The last two lines of the poem read: ‘An even grander panorama of the mountains and the Yellow River will stretch out before you / should you ascend the stairs to the next floor’. According to her line of reasoning, one has to climb at least four or five floors up to enjoy that kind of view.

…’他话音刚落，妻子便不好意思地笑了起来，露出一排洁白的牙齿：我明白啦。因此，这件不幸事情的发生仅仅与爱情有关。在我看来，所谓爱情，不是别的，正是一种病态的疯狂。”

“也许还是一种奢侈。”我附和道。

“确实如此，”临安站起身来，似乎准备去上厕所，“在王之涣身上发生的这件事已经远远超出了悲剧的范畴。按照现在流行的观点来看，它正是荒谬。类似的事在我们这个时代倒是俯拾即是。”

临安在厕所里有好长一段时间没有出来。我知道，我们的谈话远远没有结束。在冰箱压缩机单调的哼哼声中，我的眼前浮现出临安妻子那副忧戚的面容。自从她与临安离婚之后，我就再也没有见过她。

诗作及其散佚

众所周知，王之涣在十三四岁的少年时代即已开始了写作的生涯，四十年后在文安县尉的任上死于肺气肿，身后仅余六首诗传世。这些诗作后虽被收入《唐诗》，但经过考证，《宴词》等四首亦属伪托之作，“移花接木，殊不可信”。因此，准确地说，王之涣留给后人的诗篇只有两首，这就是脍炙人口的《凉州词》和《登鹳雀楼》。

临安博士告诉我，他在张掖、武威一带滞留时，曾在一家私人藏书楼中读到李士佑所撰木刻本的《唐十才子传》。作者的生卒年月皆不可考。其境界俗陋，引证亦多穿凿附会之处

Unable to persuade her to come to terms with the poem, Wang Zhihuan had no choice but to take her to visit the shabby tower. Upon their arrival, Wang Zhihuan said, ‘There! The tower only has three floors; I wrote my poem while standing on the second one.’ His wife grinned, embarrassed, ‘Now I understand.’

“So, it’s clear that the wife’s sole motivation for impersonating a courtesan was her love for her husband. As far as I can see, love is no more than a morbid fascination.”

“Perhaps also a kind of luxury,” I chipped in.

“Absolutely.” Lin stood up and moved toward the bathroom. “Taking a contemporary perspective, what Wang Zhihuan had gone through was not only pathetic, but absurd. Similar examples of this absurdity abound in our present age.”

It is common knowledge that Wang Zhihuan began his writing career in his early teens and died of emphysema in his fifties. Only six of his works were compiled in the authoritative *The Complete Tang Poems*. Yet after careful examination, scholars have concluded that four of these compositions are false attributions. Thus, only two of his poems have been recognized as authentic – “A Song of Liangzhou” and “On White Stork Tower”, both of which remain popular to this day.

Resuming the conversation, Lin told me that he had stayed for sometime in Zhangye, Wuwei, and nearby areas, where he came upon a woodblock edition of *Biographies of Ten Talented Writers of the Tang Dynasty*, by one Li Shiyong, whose personal information cannot be traced.

，但却以一种极不自信的笔调暗示了王季凌诗作散佚的全部秘密。

按照李士佑的解释，王之涣病卧床榻数月之后，自知在世之日无多，便在一个豪雨之夜将自己的全部诗作付之一炬，而将《凉州词》与《登鹳雀楼》分别抄录在两张扇面上赠给长年跟随的仆佣，聊作纪念之表。

对于王季凌自焚诗稿的原因，李士佑认为，这是王季凌渴望身后不朽的一种冒险。他进而做了一个象征性的说明：假如世上仅剩一对价值连城的花瓶，你砸碎其中的一只，不仅不会有任何损失，相反会使另外一只的价值于顷刻之间成倍地增值……

“这种描述的可笑与浅薄是不难证明的，”临安博士一谈起这件事，就显得愤愤难平，“我们知道，王之涣生前对于自己诗作的公之于众极为谨慎，即便是惠送知己、酬赠美人也往往十分吝啬，这种怪癖后来直接引发了他与高适、王昌龄二人的反目。如果王之涣像李氏所说的那样爱慕名声的话，那么他现在的地位已不在李、杜之下。”

在临安博士的这篇论文里，他用了很长的篇幅描绘了许多年前的那个风雨之夜，行文中处处透出苍劲和悲凉。但我不知道他的描述在多大程度上是真实的。当我留意到他的那张形同朽木的脸颊以及额上的茎茎白发，我知道，事实上我无权向他提出这样的疑问。

“即便是一个理智正常、神经坚强的人，也不免会产生出自我毁灭的念头，”过了一会儿，临安换了一种较为柔和的语调说道，“这种念头与他们在现世遭受的苦难及伤害的记忆有关。一般来说，这种记忆是永远无

The volume was poorly written, citing flimsy evidence and containing many far-fetched interpretations. As for the mysterious disappearance of Wang Zhihuan's poetry, Li offered a dubious explanation.

One night during a heavy rain, Wang Zhihuan calligraphed “A Song of Liangzhou” and “On White Stork Tower” onto two unfolded fans before burning the transcriptions of the remaining poems in his corpus. At that point, he had already lain on his sickbed for months. Knowing that he would soon depart this world, he gave the two fans to his servants as a token of his friendship. Li Shiyou believed that Wang Zhihuan took a gamble, destroying his other poems in hopes of consolidating his reputation as a leading poet. Li presented this analogy: imagine a pair of priceless vases; breaking one of them would only increase the value of the other...

“This line of reasoning is ridiculous and superficial,” Lin said indignantly. “We know that Wang Zhihuan was very cautious about disseminating his poetry. He seldom dedicated his poems to anyone, including his friends. This stubbornness even led to estrangement from his poet friends Gao Shi and Wang Changling. If what Wang Zhihuan really craved was literary fame, he could have been as celebrated as Li Bai or Du Fu.”

In his article, Lin wrote in detail about that dismal night when Wang Zhihuan allegedly destroyed the lion's share of his poems. The piece made for compelling reading, but I couldn't help doubting the truthfulness of the story. Looking up, I caught a glimpse of Lin's withered face and white hairs. I knew then that I was not in a position to question him.

“Even a reasonable and strong-willed person is occasionally tempted by the idea of self-destruction.” Lin paused for a moment, then spoke in a gentler tone. “Likely it stems from old wounds and unforgettable trauma. These ineffaceable memories still have the capacity to

法消除的，它通常会将人的灵魂引向虚无缥缈的时间以及种种未知事物的思索，尽管逃脱的愿望往往带来绝望。正如曹雪芹后来总结的那样：世上所存的一切说到底只不过是镜花水月而已。”

临安的一番话又将我带向过去的岁月。早在几年前，他的妻子在给我的一封信中已预示出他们婚姻行将崩溃的种种征兆。这封信是用俄文写成的，她心事重重地提到，临安近来的状态让她十分忧虑，也使她感到恐惧。因为“他在不经意的言谈中已渐渐流露出了对地狱的渴望……”

“说到王之涣，倒使我想起一个人来，”临安用手指敲打脑壳，似乎想竭力回忆起他的名字，“一个犹太人……”

“你说的是不是里尔克？”

“不，是卡夫卡，”临安纠正道，同时由于兴奋，他的脖子再度绽出青筋，“王之涣焚诗的举动常使我想起卡夫卡忧郁的面容。他们都死于肺病，在婚姻上屡遭不幸；他们都有过同样的愿望——随着自己的消失，在人间不留任何痕迹，但都没有获得成功——世人往往出于好心而弄巧成拙，使这些孤傲的魂灵不得安宁。在这一点上，马克斯·布洛德的行径是不可原谅的。”

“你的意思是不是说，王之涣的自甘湮灭与他对这个世界的仇恨有关？”

“仇恨仅仅是较为次要的原因，”临安说，“况且，对于王之涣的身世，我们知道得很少，问题在于，王之涣已经窥破尘世这座废墟的性质，并且谦卑地承受了它。这一点，我以为，他在《凉州词》一诗中已说得十分清楚。”

“你在这篇论文中似乎还提到了地理因素……”

“沙漠，”临安解释道，“王之涣长年生活的那个地区最常见的事物

dampen one's spirits, engendering a vain desire for seclusion and hopeless speculation on the unknowable. Cao Xueqin is right in saying that in the end all things in this world are nothing but flowers in a mirror and the moon's reflection on the water.”

Lin's comments reminded me of a letter his wife had sent to me; it was written in Russian and suggested that their marriage was teetering on the brink of divorce. She mentioned that she was seriously concerned about Lin, whose mental state alarmed her. “His casual conversations gradually betray a desire for self-destruction...”

“Our discussion of Wang Zhihuan brings to mind a Jewish writer...” Lin attempted to recall the name, tapping his head with his fingers.

“Do you mean Rilke?”

“No, it's Kafka I'm thinking of,” Lin said. “Wang Zhihuan reminds me of Kafka. They both were unsatisfied with their relationships and died from lung-related diseases. They even shared the same wish: to leave no trace behind after death. For both of them, this wish went unfulfilled. They were immortalized: people, out of goodwill, tend to do the opposite of help. They just would not leave these writers' souls in peace. Max Brod's acts against Kafka's last will were truly unforgivable.”

“Are you suggesting that Wang Zhihuan's hatred of this world is the reason he yearned for oblivion?”

“Hatred is only a minor factor here,” Lin responded. “Besides, we know little about Wang Zhihuan's personal history. The point is: he already understood the nature of this world as a heap of ruins, humbly accepting it. In my opinion, he made the point quite clear in ‘A Song of Liangzhou’.”

“Your article mentions a geographical factor...”

“It's the desert,” Lin explained. “Wang Zhihuan lived in an area bordering

就是沙漠。在任何时代，沙漠都是一种致命的隐喻。事实上，我离开甘肃几天之后，依然会梦见它在身后追赶着我所乘坐的那趟火车。我走到哪里，它就跟到哪里。我在想，如果这个世界如人们所说的那样有一个既定的进程的话，毫无疑问，那便是对沙漠的模仿。”

结 论

“你无需考虑别人的命运，却也不能将自己的命运交给别人去承担，这就是我在这篇文章中所要表达的基本思想。”临安在做了这样一个简短的总结之后，我们之间的谈话就结束了。

天已经亮了，不过太阳还没有出来。

临安博士走到我的书橱前，大概是想随便抽出一本书来翻翻。

他在那里一站就是很久。

书橱的隔板上搁着一件工艺品玩具：用椰壳雕成的一头长尾猴。

它是临安以他与妻子的名义送我的纪念品。当时，他们新婚不久，刚从海南回来。我记得，那是一个遥远的午后，他们俩手拉着手，站在我的窗下，她头上别着的一枚银色发箍，在阳光下，闪闪发亮。

the desert. ‘Desert’ is a timeless metaphor for death. In fact, several days after I had left Gansu, I was still dreaming that the desert was chasing after my train. If, as people say, the world has some predetermined agenda, it undoubtedly concerns exemplifying the metaphorical meaning of the desert.”

“What I’m trying to make clear in my article is, let others determine their destiny, and take yours into your own hands.” Lin ended our conversation at dawn with this brief summary.

Lin walked over to the bookshelf, looking as if he wanted to flip through one of the volumes. For a long time, he stood there motionlessly. A handmade toy sat on one shelf, a monkey carved from a coconut shell. Lin and his wife had given it to me after returning from a tour of Hainan Island. I could still recall the image of the newly married couple holding hands and standing beside my window; the silvery hair band of his wife glittered in the afternoon sunlight.