



**HAL**  
open science

**Selected Essays of Zhou Zuoren by Zhou Zuoren, Ed.  
and trs. by David E. Pollard**

Georges Bê Duc

► **To cite this version:**

Georges Bê Duc. Selected Essays of Zhou Zuoren by Zhou Zuoren, Ed. and trs. by David E. Pollard.  
MCLC RESOURCE CENTER Modern Chinese Literature and Culture, 2007. hal-04201584

**HAL Id: hal-04201584**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04201584>**

Submitted on 10 Sep 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Copyright

## Selected Essays of Zhou Zuoren by Zhou Zuoren, Ed. and trs. by David E. Pollard

Reviewed by Georges Bê Duc

MCLC Resource Center Publication (Copyright May 2007): <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/book-reviews/selected-essays-of-zhou-zuoren/>

The publication of this selection of Zhou Zuoren's literary prose will certainly contribute to correcting our fiction-centered view of modern Chinese literature. As a result of long-standing cultural habit, nonfiction prose tends to be relegated to the margins in western literatures<sup>1</sup>. Yet the essay (*sanwen*) – whether critical (*zawen*) or not (*xiaopinwen*)<sup>2</sup> – is central to Chinese literature. Western cultural influence, although it upset the traditional genre system, did not displace the essay from its central position. If Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), who is considered one of the fathers of modern literary prose in China, remains largely unknown in the West, it is largely a consequence of this difference in perspectives<sup>3</sup>. To introduce works by an as yet unknown practitioner of a marginal genre to the Anglophone public, therefore, is in and of itself a challenge. Given the central importance of Zhou Zuoren's oeuvre, the appearance of this book is most welcome.

A notable Zhou Zuoren expert, David E. Pollard – the introducer, translator, and editor of the texts in this volume – is doubtless the right man for the task. Among his studies of Zhou Zuoren and his works, *A Chinese Look at Literature* is a pioneering inquiry<sup>4</sup>. In addition, Pollard's interest in Chinese literary prose (classical and modern) came to fruition with *The Chinese Essay*, a sweeping anthology exploring nonfiction prose from the Three Kingdoms era to modern times. *Zhou Zuoren: Selected Essays* represents in this sense a logical outcome of Pollard's earlier work<sup>5</sup>.

Yet the question remains: how should one approach such a fecund and problematic oeuvre, written by such a complex and controversial author? Which Zhou Zuoren is to be introduced to the public? What aspects of his varied work should be introduced first so as to guarantee the best possible reception? The first merit of Pollard's collection is the consistent answer he gives to these questions by way of his selection, translation, and his introduction, which presents an essentially biographical approach to the author.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is true despite a strong Anglo-Saxon tradition of the essay. This marginalization is in great part the result of an Aristotelian conception of literature based on mimesis. As one sort of proof, we might cite René Wellek's theoretical difficulty in accommodating this kind of writing within the framework of literature. See René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956), pp. 20-28.

<sup>2</sup> This subdivision is, however, a relatively consensual and usual conception, leaving aside the question of the relationships, inclusive or exclusive, between the two concepts.

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Zhou Zuoren has not left any fiction, unlike his contemporaries Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, or Lin Yutang. Another reason is the long ostracism his works endured after 1949 on the continent and Taiwan because of his collaboration with the puppet regime during World War II.

<sup>4</sup> *A Chinese Look at Literature – The Literary Values of Chou Tso-jen in Relation to the Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> *The Chinese Essay*, Selected and Translated by David E. Pollard (Hong Kong: Rendition Books, 1999; New York: Columbia University Press, 2000; C. Hurst and Co., London 2000). A critical review by Charles Laughlin was published on MCLC Resource Center in January 2004.

### **Which Zhou Zuoren to introduce?**

Until recently, Zhou Zuoren was mostly mentioned in handbooks and histories as one of the principal promoters of “new literature” during the May Fourth period. His crucial manifestos (“Humane Literature,” “The Revolution of Thought,” “A Literature of the Common People,” “Requisites of the New Literature,” etc.<sup>6</sup>) identify him a leading theorist of the new literature, alongside the likes of Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi. This decisive role in the movement endowed him with prestige and authority in the intellectual world. His apparent ideological reversal in *Our own Garden* (Ziji de yuandi, 1923) – a collection of essays that affirms the autonomy of literature, contrary to the militant conception for which he argued not long before in “Humane Literature” – is therefore particularly spectacular, and helped to nourish misunderstandings about his person and his work throughout his career. Indeed, his consciousness of an enduring frustration among a portion of his readers with his positions had a real impact on his writings. An insistent need to justify himself marks the rhythm of his writings, along with a concern, not to say an anxiety, for moral consistency. Against what one might expect, Pollard avoids this decisive aspect of Zhou Zuoren’s biography. Obviously, Pollard is interested in Zhou Zuoren neither as a theorist nor as a public figure. His position in the May Fourth movement and his contributions to it are only briefly mentioned (p. xiii). In the same spirit, Pollard neglects the crucial conference Zhou Zuoren presided over at Furen University that precipitated the publication of his *The Origins of Chinese Modern Literature* (Zhongguo xinwenxue de yuanliu, 1932). This work theorized Zhou’s experiences in the wake of *Our own Garden*, as well as inaugurating an important debate about the rebirth of the literary essay (*xiaopinwen*) in the mid-1930s.

Instead of focusing on Zhou Zuoren’s unquestionable influence as an intellectual, Pollard looks into his personality: “[He] was a highly complicated person, which is not surprising considering the circumstances and influences that shaped him” (p. x). Rather than outlining his activities in and commitments to the intellectual scene, his achievements and his literary production, Pollard focuses on the factors that molded his sensibility as a writer – his education, his life experiences, his personality, and the choices that he made as a result of them. He describes Zhou Zuoren’s personality as a convergence of a temperament and a time. The story of his life narrated in the introduction helps us understand the link between Zhou’s life experiences and recurrent themes in his essays – of which the selected texts that follow provide a panoramic display. Pollard lingers on facts that one might at first glance deem irrelevant, but which may well have influenced his writings. He says, for example: “Another factor, in his childhood was that he was undernourished in infancy, which might help to explain his lifelong amazingly vivid recall of various snacks and confectionaries enjoyed wherever he went and celebrated in his essays” (p. xii). Pollard further suggests that the studies of Buddhist scriptures Zhou undertook in 1904 may well have inspired his future theoretical choices, especially his conceptions of “literature without scope” (*wenxue wumudi*), “useless literature” (*wenxue wuyong*), as well as his radical pessimism concerning the human capacity to alter the course of History: “Soon afterwards he began to study Buddhist scriptures, and imbibed the doctrine of misery of existence and purposelessness of activity” (p. xiv).

---

<sup>6</sup> These texts are collected in *Yishu yu shenghuo* (Art and Life), 1931. The most famous of these articles, “Humane Literature” (Ren de wenxue), translated by Ernst Wolff, is published in Kirk Denton ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) pp. 151-161. “Requisites of the New Literature” (Xin wenxue de yaoqiu) has been translated by Kirk Denton.

This emphasis on the influence of the contemporary environment, as opposed to on his active engagement in the literary movement, carries with it the risk of reducing Zhou to a mere witness and unduly creates an impression of passivity before the progress of events. For example, Pollard explains Zhou Zuoren's temporary withdrawal from the literary scene as a consequence of the journal *Threads of Talk* (Yusi) being banned in 1927 (p. xx)<sup>7</sup>. As a matter of fact, this withdrawal occurred in 1929 and was the result of a personal choice – a refusal to engage in controversy with an ever-combative left wing, a refusal to engage in futile debates leading in directions contrary to his sense of literary ethics. Furthermore, Pollard ascribes thematic changes in Zhou Zuoren's essays in the 1930s to an adaptation to the curricular content of his university lectures. It seems more likely that the latter was conversely a result of his continued effort to rehabilitate Ming prose, an effort he had undertaken as early as the mid-1920s<sup>8</sup> and openly advocated by the 1930s.

This focus on significant details of Zhou Zuoren's life does supply readers with some hints for a better understanding of the selected essays. Naturally, the biographical overview also extends beyond the temporal frame of the works presented in the volume (the latest of which, "My Own Compositions," was written in 1936). Readers, whose sympathy for Zhou Zuoren as an individual will have been aroused by this biographical sketch, will expect to be taken further. The figure Pollard depicts is appealing indeed: Pollard seems inclined to stress his good sides and overlook less attractive traits. In this regard, the way he minimizes the less than glorious episodes in Zhou Zuoren's life – those that resulted in his works being banned for decades in the PRC as well as in Taiwan – becomes relevant. From January 1941 to February 1943<sup>9</sup>, Zhou Zuoren occupied the position of Director of the North China Office of Education in the pro-Japanese government. Pollard comments: "He enjoyed the material fruits of office to the full, living lavishly. No doubt his wife, always a big spender, had a part in that [...] He could be said to have dissatisfied his masters, for he was dropped from this post after a year [sic; see above], and thereafter relied on the generosity of the central puppet government in Nanking for his livelihood." Pollard suggests then that this collaboration was a logical result of Zhou Zuoren's pessimistic attitude toward life. Moreover, the historical situation he faced was not unprecedented: many literati faced with a cruel dilemma had made similar choices in the past (in Zhou Zuoren's view) by serving a new dynasty. This, certainly, is not false<sup>10</sup>, but Zhou Zuoren's participation was more active and zealous than is suggested here. How can one not be astounded by the ugly scene (in 1943) of Zhou Zuoren wearing Japanese military costume and reviewing young militant troops, while making a speech in praise of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere, in which he appealed to a militarist rhetoric of "the union of wills" and "the display of strength."<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Actually, right from the following month, Zhou Zuoren continued to send articles to the same journal, which meanwhile had been relaunched in Shanghai. See Zhang Juxiang and Zhang Tierong, *Zhou Zuoren nianpu* (Annals of Zhou Zuoren) (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin, 2000) p. 367. Zhou Zuoren also wrote for several other periodicals.

<sup>8</sup> See "To Yu Pingbo" (Zhi Yu Pingbo) (May 5, 1926). In *Zhou Zuoren shuxin* (Correspondence of Zhou Zuoren) (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu, 2002), 86.

<sup>9</sup> See *Zhou Zuoren nianpu*, pp. 606-607 and p. 652.

<sup>10</sup> There are indeed extenuating circumstances in favor of Zhou Zuoren. See "Zhou Zuoren churen Huabei jiaoyu duban weizhi de jingguo" (Story of Zhou Zuoren holding the puppet position of Director of the North China Office of Education), in Cheng Guangwei, *Zhou Zuoren pingshuo bashi nian* (Eighty years of critical studies on Zhou Zuoren) (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin, 2000), pp. 646-647.

<sup>11</sup> *Zhou Zuoren nianpu*, pp. 646-647.

### Zhou Zuoren: a great stylist?

Pollard is clearly indulgent with respect to the man. Yet he is severe concerning his literary style: “As an essayist he was no great stylist, and for rhetorical devices he was heavily dependent on irony, understatement and pretended innocence. His modern Chinese was not very fluent, being either over-plain or giving the impression of an incomplete translation from the classical language” (p. xxx)<sup>12</sup>. Judgments of this sort, of course, depend on one’s conception of style. If we think of style as the way words reflect and espouse the thought of an author in its subtlest and most ineluctably individual fluctuations, we will on the contrary be struck by the great variety of forms displayed in Zhou Zuoren’s writings. The selected essays demonstrate this clearly. What is there in common, for example, between “First Love” (40-45), where oblique description, brief reflections, and dramatization follow one another, all conveyed by way of a distinctly laconic style, and “Thoughts on the Shanghai Incident” (102-107), where paradoxical and crude arguments are presented without a glimmer of irony? Again, does “Relentless Rain” (2-11), with its intimate tone reminiscent of a familiar letter, also carry the same authorial stamp? All these texts convey affect (be it anger, anxiety, nostalgia, or amusement), display their own rhetorical eloquence, establish a relation of connivance with the reader, or express the simple desire to share an experience, and all of these aspects of his writing are certainly part of his “style.”

As Pollard points out, Zhou Zuoren makes a great deal of use of rhetorical devices. But besides the array of rhetorical tricks common to both Chinese and Western literature, he also draws on more classical forms, less perceptible in terms of Aristotelian rhetoric, such as digression, allusion, symbolic stimulation (*xing*)<sup>13</sup>, blandness, bareness, and so on. The most frequent expression used by critics to describe Zhou Zuoren’s style is “peacefully bland” (*chonghe pingdan*). Monotony and blandness are indeed the predominant tone of many of his essays: in this, they match the classical canon, which praises suggestiveness as an incitement to allusion and favors restraint over effusion. At the same time, they reflect the importance of serenity and detachment (*xianshi*) as the ideal disposition of the literati. The absence of fluency that Pollard finds in his essays is precisely the style that Zhou Zuoren sought. Zhou thought it advisable to impart to writing a certain roughness and astringency (*sewei*), a particular savor (*quwei, qiwei*) that would be smoothed over by an overly fluent style, as agreeable as it might be in other respects. A more fluid style would be appropriate for the novel, but inadequate for the essay. Zhou Zuoren expresses this idea in his “Postscript to Yanzhi Grass” in which he claims that unlike the novel, for which everyday language is enough, the language used in essays ought to be enriched by spoken, foreign, regional and classical sources<sup>14</sup>. So Pollard’s impression that his writing is a sort of “incomplete translation” reflects a deliberate choice on Zhou Zuoren’s part. The “mixture of classical and spoken language” (*wen bai hunza*, p. xxxi) is far from being homogeneous: bai and wen can be found commingled in his essays in every possible proportion as a matter of stylistic choice. Indeed, they often appear in dialogic alternation. In an essay like

---

<sup>12</sup> The Chinese version of this introduction does not refer to incomplete translation but more suitably to a mixture of spoken and classical languages (*wen bai hunza*) (p. xxxi).

<sup>13</sup> This “symbolic stimulation” (*xing*) is one of the most important devices in Chinese poetry. But a kind of prosaic *xing* can be perceived in his essays. *Xing* is for Zhou Zuoren an essential element of writing. See “Preface to Yang bian ji” (Yang bian ji xu) (May 30, 1926). In *Tan long ji* (Talks on dragons) (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1987), 68.

<sup>14</sup> Yanzhi cao ba (Nov. 22, 1928). In *Yong ri ji* (Endless day) (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1988), 78.

“On ‘Passing the Itch’” (221-243), for instance, the voice of the “ordinary man” (*fanren*) and the “literati” (*wenren*) engage in dialogue.

And what do we make of Zhou Zuoren’s tortuously long sentences, prolonged by vaguely coordinated clauses, between which discursive connections often seem indefinite? Those sentences, which Zhu Ziqing called “long and soft determinative sentences” (*changchang ruanruan de xingrong juzi*) and attributed to Japanese influence, do not always contribute to the clarity or simplicity of his writing<sup>15</sup>. Even so, must we consider this an imperfection of style? More likely, by avoiding the overly rigorous logical progressions or rhetorical breaks peculiar to rhetorical demonstration, these sorts of sentences lend his writing the chatty and spontaneous feel of causerie. A mode of writing that plays with imprecision and strives for “indetermination” (*menglong*) presuppose the artistry of a great stylist<sup>16</sup>.

Despite these reservations about Zhou’s style, Pollard considers Zhou Zuoren’s oeuvre to be genuine and enjoyable – the latter word being (as Pollard reminds us) an English equivalent for Zhou’s own standard term for literary excellence, *youqu*, which means something like “amusing,” “entertaining,” and/or “unexpected.”

### Which texts?

Since Zhou Zuoren’s rehabilitation in the 1980s, a slew of “representative” or “thematic” anthologies have come out in China. It would have been easy for Pollard to draw inspiration from them and establish a selection of essays based on frequency of appearance, but he rejects this approach. If certain famous texts like “Black Awning Boats” (12-19), “Flies” (20-27), “In Praise of Mutes” (244-243) have become unavoidable classics, other texts that Pollard includes are often left aside, although they are equally revealing of his style, such as “Where Hearts Have Gone to” (56-63), “A Tax on Dumplings” (64-67), “On the Arrest of Homosexuals” (140-145), and “Fear Heaven Pity Man” (116-127).

Of the criteria that guided his selection, Pollard gives the following explanations (p. xxx) : (a) the essays are “limited to the pre-war period” (i.e. before the July 1937 Japanese invasion); (b) he has favored “the more readily intelligible of his essays”; (c) he seeks to “represent their diversity; (d) and “In order to offset a common erroneous impression of [Zhou Zuoren] as typically affable and unworldly, I have tilted the balance somewhat more in favour of the fractious kind than is usual in selections of his works.” These choices, and especially the last one – favoring *zawen* over *xiaopinwen* – is judicious, with respect to both readerly pleasure and fairness toward the oeuvre. And Pollard adheres to this choice, scrupulously. The twenty-nine essays represent Zhou’s writing from 1922 to 1937. The different collections published during this period<sup>17</sup> are fairly represented, with an average of two or three per collection, with a noticeable presence of texts from the thick *Talks on Tigers* (Tan hu ji, 1928): this suits Pollard’s decision to promote *zawen* over *xiaopinwen*. Significantly, though, no essays are taken from two collections. The first one, *Art and Life* (Yishu yu shenghuo, 1931), gathers Zhou’s theoretical talks and articles published during the May Fourth period. The second, *Our Own*

---

<sup>15</sup> “On Baihua” (Lun baihua), in Wang Lili ed., *Zhu Ziqing xueshu wenhua suibi* (Zhu Ziqing’s scholar and cultural essays) (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian, 2000) p. 247. But behind the visual effect of punctuation, the textual structure is not so different from classical prose.

<sup>16</sup> See “Preface of Yang bian ji,” 69.

<sup>17</sup> A later collection of his “uncollected” writings supplements these earlier works. See Chen Zichan and Zhang Tierong eds., *Zhou Zuoren jiwaiwen* 2 vols. (Haikou: Hainan guoji xinwen, 1995).

Garden, marks Zhou Zuoren's impressive turn toward an affirmation of the autonomy of literature. These collections are the work of a theorist (the former) and a literary critic (the latter): they have little salient value as belles-lettres.

The reader will be surprised by the great variety of themes tackled in this selection of Zhou's essays: Peking rain, flies, ways of dying, hair styles, Mencius' mother, reading in the toilets, and so on. Yet behind this disparate assortment, there is a unity. First, the essays reveal a unity of tone that is both informal and erudite, even if the tone varies from the serious to the humorous, from innocence to irony, and the mood is uneven, sometimes serene, sometimes angry. The texts also share a thoughtful and quiet approach to each subject that implicitly rejects exaggerated or extreme, indeed romantic or idealistic, positions. Furthermore, recurrent themes emerge in this collection. They illustrate Zhou Zuoren's lifelong struggle against neo-Confucian ethics (*lijiao*) and the disastrous influence of its intrinsic puritanism on popular habits – and under which women become the principal victims. They express his hatred of contemporary despotism, which was a direct consequence of *lijiao*. A half dozen essays (of which, more below) even indicate the profound frustration of an intellectual unable to exert any influence on his time, his difficulty in accepting this powerlessness, and his gradual abandonment of critical writing (*zawen*), and even writing itself (at least provisionally) in 1929. The retrospective look at his own work in "My Own Compositions" elucidates the inherent duality of Zhou Zuoren's essay writing: he cannot transcend a crucial dilemma between the ideal of peaceful, serene, and detached writing, and his inescapable disposition toward critical, "positive" (*jiji*) writing. More than once, he even concludes with reflections on the worthlessness of writing itself: when it strives to be "positive," it is in vain, when detached, it is useless. How then could he fail to be disappointed with his readers, who are themselves left disoriented by these shifts: half expecting him to be more "positive," half wishing he were more serene. Indeed, all of these readers must watch as Zhou Zuoren himself alternates between these two aspirations, incapable of committing himself firmly and definitely to one way or the other.

### **How best to translate these texts?**

Reading Pollard's translations are a real pleasure. The original Chinese texts are included on the right-hand side of each page, but the translations could easily stand alone as literary texts. This quality of the translations reveals, contrary to Pollard's rather negative assessment of Zhou's style, that he was a quintessential stylist. The translations make use of relatively few footnotes, which is surprising if we consider Zhou Zuoren's reputation as being more or less difficult to read<sup>18</sup>, and this contributes to the pleasure of uninterrupted reading. These two choices – literary rather than literal translation, light rather than erudite presentation – were by no means the easiest, given the fearsome pitfalls that await the translator of these essays. Zhou Zuoren's texts are often characterized by a concise and compact phraseology, often approximate and readily allusive, frequently studded with references from very different cultural sources. Nonetheless, Pollard's studied style elegantly manages to render Zhou Zuoren's highly literate manner. At the same time, the result is immediately comprehensible, with limited need for footnotes – a praiseworthy achievement.

Looking at Zhou Zuoren's famously "long and soft determinative sentences," we can see the attention Pollard pays to the rhythmical structure of the original. Instead of functioning as a

---

<sup>18</sup> We counted only 17 footnotes on 29 texts.

syntactic unit, organized by coordination of clauses or by subordination under a main clause – as in the Western phrasal model of a complex sentence – Zhou Zuoren’s sentences associate clauses according to a rhythmic rather than a syntactical scheme, without a single dominant clause. This type of sentence is akin to classical language, disregarding, of course, Zhou’s use of modern punctuation. It can thus stretch out indefinitely, leaning on the comma, rather than the full stop, whose difference with the former is only respiratory. Pollard may respect scrupulously the paragraph division of the original text – Zhou Zuoren’s essays tend toward very long paragraphs – but if he were to do this with Zhou’s sentences, which are similarly protracted, he would strain English syntax. Let us take a typical long sentence to show how Pollard comes to terms with this difficulty<sup>19</sup>. The eleven clauses of the original are kept in the translation, grouped into four sentences, where they are redistributed in rough symmetry: 4 + 2 + 4 + 1. In the first sentence, Pollard avoids a premature split in the sentence by using the conjunction “and,” absent in the Chinese text. The second and the third sentences remain tightly connected together thanks to their anaphoric links: “It certainly was not...”, “It is just that...” and the last sentence is annexed to the previous one by means of a colon. The Chinese sentence actually includes a twelfth clause, in parentheses, a simple metalinguistic commentary to justify the use of a Chinese character: Pollard preferred to ignore it.

Only this meticulous linguistic craftsmanship could have produced a collection of clear and graceful literary essays, easily accessible to an average English reader, which keeps faithful to both the words and the spirit of the original. To achieve this, Pollard strives to reduce all abstruseness, to polish all roughness, and only resorts to footnotes when they were unavoidable. Pollard naturalizes several locutions precisely to avoid a tedious recourse to those accessories that only hinder fluidity, such as footnotes, or incongruous pinyin transliterations. He tries to acclimate expressions in order to avoid all exoticism and local color, when not warranted by the text itself. Here, we can consider two cases. In the first, only the Chinese expression (not its reference) is exotic, and in the second one, a common reference does not exist in English.

When only the expression is exotic, a word-for-word translation would disconcert the reader, adding an irrelevant connotation, or making the addition of a footnote necessary. Pollard uses English adaptations to avoid this:

- (pp. 84-85) Speaking of the politician Wu Zhihui unmasking his real nature, Zhou Zuoren uses the expression *qiannian laowei ji yi xianlu* (literally: “the old, ancestral tail has appeared”). Pollard translates: “The inveterate devilry of his kind is plain to see,” and rubs out a colorful expression he considers superfluous, keeping only its fiendish connotation: [the tail of] the devil.
- (pp. 228-229) In translating a poem, Pollard prefers not to retain the clichés “peach blossom” (*taohua*) and “source of the Wu hill” (*Wuling yuan*) and only gives their accessible sense: “venal bloom” and “Arcadian charm,” deliberately evading the poetic allusion to Tao Yuanming’s mythical Peach Blossom Spring.
- (pp. 40-41) By using the English equivalent Tabby to translate Sanmao as the name of a cat, Pollard preserves the familiar connotation of the original.
- (pp. 172-175) Zhou Zuoren refers to the Japanese Buddhist essayist Yoshika Kenko as “Master Kenko” (*Jianhao fashi*). Pollard prefers the standard Yoshika Kenko, as is customary for writers.

---

<sup>19</sup> “*Wo chang xiang... keyi qiu chu mixin de yuanyi lai*” (p. 155) with its English counterpart (p. 154) : “I have always thought... back to superstition.”



- (pp. 246-247) *Cangjie xiansheng* denotes the mythical creator of writing, endowed with four eyes. Curiously, Pollard prefers the modern sense of *xiansheng* and translates the expression as Mr *Cangjie* – without, however, avoiding an explanatory footnote – though there exists a classical, certainly more adequate sense: Venerable.

I am rather ambivalent as to the last two translations: they lose important connotations in the transfer. When Zhou Zuoren mentions Yoshida (example no. 4), he has the Buddhist master in mind rather than the famous writer. The last example (no. 5) indicates the limits of the process: here, Pollard avoids an exoticism by using an anachronism. Units of length or time, traditionally different in China and in the West, are also affected by this desire to cancel out the useless difference. Here too, anachronism may result from the operation. The title of *Yu Lichu's work* (*Jisi cunghao*) is translated as "Manuscripts of 1833" (268). In this case, using square brackets could help to avoid an anachronism: "Manuscripts of the Year *Jisi*" is a possible alternative<sup>20</sup>. Approximations are sometimes happier: Pollard translates *san cun* by the suitable "three inches" (p. 14), though one inch is lost in the transfer! In spite of these reservations, one cannot deny that Pollard's approach provides the texts with fluidity, clarity, and efficiency, while avoiding undue or excessively colorful connotations.

But can this process be extended to those expressions for which there is no similar referent in English? Let us observe the following examples:

- (pp. 6-7) A *kang* designates a common object in North China houses, made with bricks, incorporating a kiln, and on which one can sit or lie down. Pollard simply renders it as "a table."
- (pp. 18-19) *Mao'erxi*: Pollard renders this kind of Shanghai opera with the phrase "caterwauling opera."
- (pp. 62-63) *Niuhuang goubao* (treasures of cows and dogs) denote the gallstones of cows and dogs, used in Chinese traditional pharmacopoeia, but here Zhou Zuoren only wants to connote a precious medicine. Pollard thus only retains the sense of "treasures" ("...*huang* ...*bao*") in the Chinese locution.
- (pp. 152-153) *Tuna* is a Taoist breathing technique. Pollard translates it as "yoga."
- (pp. 14-15) While describing a kind of boat common in the countryside where he grew up, Zhou Zuoren indicates, next to the Chinese characters, the pronunciation in Shaoxing dialect in Latin letters (*Sy-menngo*). Of course, this incongruous assemblage cannot be transposed into English: Pollard simply does not take it into account.
- (pp. 176-177 and 184-185) *Baguwen* is the standard form of examination essay characterized by its "eight-legged" structure. Pollard uses on successive occasions two different approximations: "prescription essay" and "stereotyped essay."
- (pp. 112-113) *Lijiao* designates the neo-Confucian ethical code. Here, the expression *weichi lijiao* (literally: "preserve the ethical code") is skillfully translated by the appropriate "upholding the lore of the nation."

These examples make the potential risks of approximation obvious. In the first three examples, this technique helps avoid digressive notes (although the reader is deprived of the Pekingese flavor of the reference in the first example). Note in passing that it is not necessarily the case that *mao'erxi* (example no. 2) owes its name to its supposed resemblance to mewing, since

---

<sup>20</sup> Pollard uses square brackets, too (p. 232: "39<sup>th</sup> year of the Kangxi era"), but only rarely.

other transcriptions for mao (i. e., not cat but hair) are also available. The fourth approximation might allow for the erroneous assumption of a contemporary practice of yoga in China, and also muddies the waters of the passage, in which Zhou Zuoren makes reference to four traditions: animism, Taoism, Christianity and Buddhism. Examples 6 and 7 would be all right, if they were not such distinctive cultural touchstones, and thematically central to Zhou Zuoren's work. *Baguwen* and *lijiao* for Zhou were crystallizations of Chinese cultural backwardness in literature and ethics, against which he engaged in a lifelong battle. To be sure, these last approximations would not necessarily matter terribly for isolated texts and for the presumed readers of the collection, who are seeing Zhou Zuoren's works for the first time. Thus, Pollard's approximations remain consistent with his purpose. But how could a well-informed reader, more demanding from the translator, fail to pay heed to these denotative and connotative losses? I wonder if – especially in the case of a translation attentive to precisely those intertextual or cultural overtones vital to the whole oeuvre – pinyin transcriptions for certain untranslatable keywords were not the best solution after all?

The sparing use of footnotes also fits Pollard's purpose and dispensing with the superfluous display of erudition is commendable, but certain biographical, or bibliographical markers would sometimes contribute to clarity. Numerous proper names are introduced in the texts and, for the most part, the reader is not necessarily able to discern who these people are (writer? politician?) or the time they lived (antiquity? modern times?). In "Fear Heaven Pity Man" (116-127), the reader is left to make sense of a succession of names such as Liu Xizai, Wen Zhongzi, Hao Yixing, Yuan Xiaoxiu. A classical quotation like "Drinking, eating and sex: men's great desires reside in these" (246) is identified as such only thanks to the quotation marks. It might well be useful for the reader to know that it derives from a Confucian classic (the *Liji*). For surely the phrase might be construed to mean different things coming from a contemporary libertine or an ancient sage! In the same essay (248), Zhou Zuoren lets us listen to the voice of a wise man on a visit: "The weather today... ha ha ha." It could be instructive for the reader to learn that, this time, the reference is contemporary, to a prose poem by Zhou's brother Lu Xun.

At the end of the last essay of the collection ("My Own Compositions"), Zhou Zuoren refers to demons quarrelling (*yaojing dajia*). This is a quotation from the famous *Dream of the Red Mansion* (ch. 73). Pollard translates the phrase smartly with a Shakespearian quotation (fallen, in truth, in everyday speech): "making the beast with two backs" (*Othello*, Act I, scene 1). But Zhou Zuoren continues the allusion to the same chapter of the Chinese novel: "which surely would make the silly older sister [*Sha dajie*] laugh on the sly<sup>21</sup>." Unwilling to follow Zhou into the Chinese novel, Pollard makes do with "which would be certain to make all the old wives titter" (272). Here a teenager is suddenly transformed into an old lady by the miracle of translation!

Except for the reservations discussed above, I generally laud Pollard's strategy of not weighing down the text with many references. As dense and erudite as the essays of Zhou Zuoren are, Pollard is faced with an additional, and paradoxical, problem: to make reading them easier. Among the means Pollard uses to avoid footnotes, two are relatively frequent: let us call them the "explanatory insertion" and the "interpretive translation." In the former case, Pollard inserts a group of words he considers necessary for comprehension, though it is absent from the

---

<sup>21</sup> The silly older sister (*Sha Dajie*) is a fourteen-year-old character.

original. I would suggest here that, out of an ethical respect for the original, these insertions be systematically put into square brackets. Among the very numerous examples are:

- (p. 1) “[I don’t mean to say] it is always a pleasure to travel in train.”
- (p. 10) “in the [ancient] territory of Qin”
- (p. 56) “Story has it that the [last wicked] emperor of Shang”
- (p. 62) “the power of the [fortune-teller’s] wooden doll.”
- (p. 116) “less interesting than [his younger brother] Wang Wugong.”
- (p. 134) “they get themselves up [for their beaux].”
- (p. 196) “According to the [fourth century] Book of Anecdotes ”

On the other hand, footnotes would sometimes be welcome, if they could obviate the need for overlong insertions (which I put between brackets) or interpretive translations (which are underlined here):

- (p. 64) “I stumped up the four coppers he asked for, which was actually a small loss on the conversion rate.” (to translate : *duo chi kui le si li*: “a loss of at most four li”)
- (p. 124) “as well as the Bijiaofang [in Hangzhou where the Ming loyalist Zhang Huangyan was executed].”
- (p. 108) “did think of reincarnation as a kind of treadmill.” This translation of the Chinese expression *yi lunhui wei ku* is quite astute: “reincarnation” is a current but incomplete translation of the Buddhist concept of *lunhui* (samsara), which designates the cycle of existences, and is represented as a wheel (*lun*). Hence the term treadmill, which associates this lost semantic feature (*lun*) with the idea of endless routine or punishment (*ku*). Yet it remains an interpretive paraphrase (though a relevant metaphor).
- (p. 158) “The consort Lei [of the Yellow Emperor who first taught sericulture] could not appear again.”
- (p. 258) “it is like [the Taoists’ way of] perfecting themselves with the tonic [of another’s vital essence].” (to translate the Taoist locution *cai bu qiu dao*: “take the tonic to obtain the dao”)
- (p. 260) “Guanyu, for example, [played chess unperturbed while] his bone was scraped to remove the poison [from an arrow wound].” (to translate the locution *gua gu liao du*)

With these examples, I do not mean to point out translation inadequacies – indeed, I find the translation remarkable for its elegance and fidelity. I only want to show how far Pollard’s radical choice of avoiding exoticism and erudition at any price can lead. And the methods used by Pollard are not limited to the textual devices just mentioned. Two other debatable choices derive from Pollard’s radical bias: texts are not given individual contextual introductions, and no general bibliography is provided.

True, the substantial biographical introduction makes it possible for the reader to understand the essays without each being given its own preface. The text itself often gives enough details to imagine the context. Indeed, context would sometimes feel useless, as in those texts where Zhou Zuoren recalls his childhood, evokes his native precincts, depicts his daily environment, or discusses a book. And as we have seen above, the recurrence of certain motifs – such as pessimism about history, or questions as to the utility of writing – may help the reader create a

framework with which to guide interpretation. Yet the reader who only has about thirty texts at his disposal might be misled by incomplete information. Further guidance by means of short prefaces would certainly be welcome. Failing that, Pollard could have relied on a better arrangement of the texts – chronologically aligned and thematically grouped – to convey the idea that, concealed beneath his discreet irony and humor, Zhou Zuoren was expressing a personal drama that would gradually lead him to a quasi-suspension of his activities as a writer in 1929. This is indeed what the chronological alignment and grouping of the following five texts (scattered throughout Pollard’s selection) would quite strikingly demonstrate:

(pp. 94-95) “History” (Sept. 17, 1928)<sup>22</sup>

(pp. 108-115) “On Closing One’s Door and Getting Down to Studying” (Nov., 1928)

(pp. 96-101) “On What Can Be Said” (Dec. 6, 1928)

(pp. 244-253) “In Praise of Mutes” (Nov. 13, 1929)

(pp. 254-261) “In Praise of Anaesthesia” (Nov. 30, 1929)

In any event, given the central place of this personal drama, which crosses and animates Zhou Zuoren’s entire oeuvre, a short commentary highlighting it (either in the introduction or in specific notes) would not have been superfluous.

As for the want of bibliography, we can only deplore it. That Pollard had no intention to produce a work abiding by academic standards is understandable. But given his presumed public – students being initiated into the Chinese language and literature – this book would have much to gain from helping them to move into other sources. A bibliography need not have been ambitious in scope: outlining the sources of the excerpts, one or two biographies in Chinese (those of Qian Liqun and Ni Moyan being probably the most comprehensive<sup>23</sup>), the major works on Zhou Zuoren in English (such as outstanding studies by Pollard himself as well as by Susan Daruvala<sup>24</sup>) would have been enough. This shortcoming is all the more surprising since we know from his accurate translations that Pollard is not a careless scholar.

In fact, each of the “defects” noted above – approximate translations of some definite notions, explanatory insertions (without square brackets), interpretive translations, scarcity of footnotes, want of contextual introductions, lack of a general bibliography – proceed from a consistent, deliberate choice on the part of the translator. This strategy seems quite clear indeed. All these “defects” work in the same direction: leavening the presentation, avoiding disheartening the reader with erudition, and not misleading with exoticism. All of this, in turn, is aimed toward keeping the reader’s attention riveted on the very quality of the texts. Indeed, the texts, carefully selected and accurately translated, are Pollard’s ultimate argument. Perhaps this is the reason why, paradoxically, he is so severe about Zhou Zuoren’s style, when he is so indulgent toward the man. For, according to Pollard, Zhou Zuoren’s essays do not need to be shown off to advantage, to be helped. They can go without commentaries or contextualized highlights. The biographical introduction takes particular care to avoid conveying any overarching thesis, emphasizing only Zhou Zuoren’s sensibility and temperament. On the occasion of the first

---

<sup>22</sup> Dates according to Zhou Zuoren nianpu.

<sup>23</sup> Qian Liqun, *Zhou Zuoren zhuan* (A biography of Zhou Zuoren) (Beijing: Beijing Shiye wenyi, 1990) and Ni Moyan, *Zhongguo de pantu yu yinshi: Zhou Zuoren* (A Chinese rebel and recluse: Zhou Zuoren) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Pollard: see above note 5; Daruvala, *Zhou Zuoren and an Alternative Response to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University, 2000).

presentation of Zhou Zuoren’s work to a western public, Pollard neither wants to help the texts, nor to guide the readers toward a certain interpretation: he banks upon the intrinsic qualities of the texts, and therefore lets them stand alone. However, I wonder if such confidence in a set of decontextualized essays does not generate – contrary to Pollard’s expectations – a first implicit interpretation of Zhou Zuoren’s essays as autonomous pieces of writing (“texts written for their own purpose” [*wei wenzhang de wenzhang*], as it were<sup>25</sup>), while running the risk of reducing their critical and historical significance to a mere pretext.

Georges Bê Duc

INALCO, Paris

denton.2@osu.edu

The MCLC Resource Center

---

<sup>25</sup> “Preface to Book for Rainy Days ” quoted in “My Own Compositions” (p. 265).