

Words That Move

Maghiel van Crevel

is Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at Leiden University and has been contributing his translations of contemporary poetry to *Renditions* since 1999.

Normally, if the editors of a Chinese-English translation magazine agree with you that 動詞 means 'words that move', 名詞 means 'words that name' and 形容詞 means 'words that describe', you should think twice about letting them near your work. But if circumstances dictate disregard for received translations, editorial understanding is a blessing. Especially if support for words that move, words that name and words that describe as worthy substitutes for verbs, nouns and adjectives comes in the midst of a red pen frenzy well enough argued to be stimulating not frustrating. After extended textual battles preceding the publication of Yu Jian's 于堅 monster poem *File 0* 檔案, seeing it appear in landscape format was the icing on the cake: an important finishing touch to accommodate an important, unruly work of art. The experience was typical of *Renditions* as I know it, as reader and contributor. That is, the bouncy combination of conservatism and curiosity, of solid anchorage in tradition and outings after curfew.

In foreign-language training, translation has lost ground to communicative approaches that emphasize pragmatic effectiveness. Examination of the grammatical status of 'lunch' in 午飯吃了嗎 'Have you had lunch?' must compete for students' attention with questions of the type How do I order food / book a plane ticket /

draw up a business contract / help stem ecological disaster in China? This trend is a natural accompaniment *to the shift from a strong philological orientation to broader views and divergent applications of area studies.* True enough, certainly in an age shaped by economic 'rationalism', *it is often more appropriate to say Yes or No to food than to establish that 'lunch' is the topic of the sentence, or its direct object, or even its subject.* Yet, personal preferences and priorities aside, this scheme of things is wrong in that it relegates analytical, contemplative and artistic encounters with language to a category of chic irrelevance. This is easily disproved. Even the economic 'rationalist' worldview provides good reasons to safeguard an approach to language whose ambitions are not satisfied by food, travel, money or a healthier earth. For such an approach—analytical, contemplative, artistic—will, in the end, also make for better results in all of those areas.

Back to the glorious, deceptive stigma of chic irrelevance for its own sake, and to the truism that literature and art are under no obligation to justify themselves within a spreadsheet. In the present context, I will skip my plea for the value of literature, and of literary translation. I do want to say, even if it is preaching to the converted, that an institution like *Renditions* is worth its weight in metaphor. All modish prattle about globalization, omnipotent media and IT notwithstanding, that is precisely because of its cultural-linguistic specialization and its accumulated, human expertise in the theory and practice of translation. Journals like *Renditions*, or the Chinese-Dutch *Het trage vuur* 文火 celebrate both the craft and the art of translation, in the ongoing interaction and re-creation of self and other, of the exotic and the domestic. They provide many readers without access to the Chinese language with the riches of its literature, be it social documentation of things Chinese in a pleasurable form, or those exquisite parts of speech known as 感動詞 'emotives'. Dear Editor, would it be all right to make that 'words that move', too? ☒

