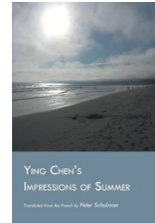


REVIEW

## Review of Peter Schulman's translation of Ying Chen's *Impressions of Summer*

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When Ying Chen originally published *Impressions d'été: poèmes (haïkus) chinois-français* (MEET, 2008), the choice of the stripped-down constraints of the haiku was enigmatic, especially for those accustomed to rich symbolism of her novels. In fact, in an interview accorded to *Lingua Romana* in our premiere volume, Ying Chen admitted “Il est très difficile de dire en quelques mots ce que je cherche à faire dans les livres que j'écris [...] parce que tout y est très métaphorique ou symbolique.” [It is very difficult to say in a few words what I'm trying to do in the books that I write [...] as everything is very metaphorical or symbolic.] However, this devotee to Proust turned to the haiku, being “seduced by its potential to tighten life within a narrow moment, into a few words” (x).

In an abridged version of her original French preface, well-rendered in a page-and-a-half translation by Peter Schulman, she confesses that she “embraced haiku writing because (she) had been devastated by turmoil” (x), which she later explains was the premature death of a loved one. The haiku offered her a familiar nostalgia for China, a persistent theme across her novels, but also the ability to “experience eternity within a moment, to fully embrace, with all our awakened senses, misery along with happiness, displeasure along with pleasure” (x). Finally, she puts forth – as a sort of dedication – that the “majority of the verses in this collection are devoted to my children for whom I die and live” (xi). This reversal of the common idiom is telling, as the haiku performs a sort of death of language or florid expression, to allow language and the multiple ideas it evokes to live.

Indeed, the first haiku of 100 evokes the voice of a persistent child addressing its mother: “look over there / over there look my mommy / mom look over there” (1). But where is she/are we to look? As suggested by the title, there are impressions of summer – both impressions of ink onto paper, as in the original Hànzì characters from which her French translations emerge, as well as impressions in the artistic sense, something that requires an oscillation, a negotiation between word and reader. This hesitancy is captured very carefully by Schulman, who appropriately opts for precise meaning over adopting the 5-7-5 syllabic procrustean bed of the haiku (although some, but not all, still do conform). The feeling is light, as in a summer home, with images of ticking clocks, cherry-patterned tablecloths and rice cooking on a fire regularly evoked. All five senses are summoned to hear the sounds of bells, fireworks or seagulls, “feel the wind sun and sand / stroking my body” (22), taste a dripping popsicle or peach that mysteriously disappears from a fruit basket, etc. The feeling is familiar and impregnated with meaning, with impressions of summer often from a child's vantage point. In fact, in a moment of mise-en-abyme, Ying Chen reveals the power of the haiku within this summer setting: “within the body / an entire universe / a pregnant woman” (12). It contains life.

Compelled to do something different, as “something had to change” (x), Ying Chen did so with the haiku, which she rendered so magnificently into French and to which Schulman did complete justice in his translations.