

### On & Off the Rails: Notes on the Practice of Poetry & Translation from the Time of Departure (Check Your Phone)

Without necessarily having realized it until now,<sup>\*</sup> I've arrived at a point<sup>†</sup> in my practice as a poet and a translator of poetry in which time-as-scheduled is something both to make and to miss if it is to be experienced as anything close to itself, let alone that which exceeds and escapes it (the Real?). So this is a poetics talk that is also about the practice of writing and translation, and I'll be talking about two sets of rails: The China Eastern Railway on one hand, and the Shanghai Metro System on the other.

In the first case, I'll be talking about translation: Translating Han Bo's (韩博) nine-poem cycle, 中东铁路 / "The China Eastern Railway," and in particular addressing how these poems understand and undermine the concept of modernity, which we might imagine, among so many other ways, as, if not *now*, then the idea of *now* that we know is right behind our own *now* (is it past postmodern yet? How far? How fast?).

In "The China Eastern Railway," Han Bo's poetry enacts—at least it does as I read it, now, in translation—a mediation on China's specific and ongoing engagement with modernity, and in particular *railroad technology* as a primary vector for the set of forces that have led in no small part to the creation of this very moment in which you read this: *now*.

*Dissolve* (in a cinematic sense).

Exit the high-speed train from Harbin (founded as a railroad town during the construction of the China Eastern Railway) to Shanghai (via Beijing) and hop on Metro Line 10. You'll be in my former French Concession neighborhood in no time. I've lived on the corner of Yongjia Lu and Shaanxi Nan Lu for over a decade, right across the street from the site of the old Canidrome Ballroom, now home to Culture Square, where I just saw a production of *West Side Story* the other week with my family.

Let me tell you a bit about my experiment in attempting to *write the Shanghai Metro to the end*. Clearly, there is not enough time in one's life to do this. So I must make the most of accelerating *no time*. Toward this end I'm using a process that draws on the *Yijing* to generate pseudorandom walking algorithms in conjunction with a number-randomizer coordinated to a list of all Shanghai Metro stations that sends me to randomly selected stations. Once I arrive, I walk the *Yijing*-generated algorithm and create short poems from the experience. The lines from each individual poem feed into an algorithm that randomly selects lines for a "(no) master poem" which combines lines from all poems (and all Metro lines). Presently, the poems are 14-liners which correspond to the 14 active Metro lines; as new Metro lines open, the poem will add lines. I plan on pursuing this project for the rest of my time in Shanghai (presently I expect to be here at least another 3 years). I hope to develop a site featuring not only the "(no) master poem," which continuously changes, but also individual "station poems" and documentation on the process, including an essay engaging with the history of the translation of the 易经 into English and the use of the 易经 in avant-garde and experimental compositional practices.

Do these two projects connect? *Now* they do, because I'm telling you.

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<sup>\*</sup> I mean *now* literally. What time is it? Look. Look again. Now do you know? How do you know? Is this line of questioning becoming boring? If so, good: then it is *just in time*. It has already left you behind, and you it. (Until next time.)

<sup>†</sup> I also mean *point* as literally as possible: Spatially. But this is also spatio-temporally, for we are in motion and this point in space is not the same as this point in time, even as it cannot be otherwise. That's one thing a poem is for, I think: catching up, getting off, making the most of time in between.