

## Translator's Foreword

I met Song Lin at the very first poetry festival I attended in China in 2008. The festival was held in Tongli, an ancient town with waterways and arched stone bridges not far from Suzhou. I ended up sitting at Song Lin's table at the opening night banquet. The now deceased poet Zhang Zao was there from Germany, and he and Song Lin were talking about their experiences living in Europe. They invited me to go to Lake Tai with them the next evening, but I somehow missed going with them. When they returned, Song Lin's face was bright with excitement as he told us about walking along the shore at night and describing the moonlight on the water. "You have to go there sometime," he said, telling me of the lake's size and about the Lake Tai stone's use in traditional Chinese gardens. The next day as the poets walked around Tongli, Song Lin said we needed to walk with the poet Gao Xing, because Gao Xing grew up nearby and he could tell us stories about the bridges and buildings. Later that night, we were two of the poets who went to a local karaoke bar at one a.m. to sing, dance, eat fruit, and continue the conversations that had been flowing all day. Song Lin got out his sketchbook and showed me some drawings he'd done. Later he sang "Moscow Nights" in Chinese. When I moved to Beijing later that year, Song Lin and I became close friends almost immediately, and we spent a lot of time together at poetry and art events in Beijing and around China. Those days in Tongli were my first introduction to Song Lin as a poet, artist, and a person.

Song Lin is a combination of poet, artist, wanderer, storyteller, and philosopher. All these aspects are woven through his poetry as well as his daily life. In some ways, he seems to exist outside of time, but it's because he's inhabiting several times at once. He once told me, "Sometimes I feel like someone from antiquity. So many ancients live inside my body, and looking at the world and creation through their eyes, I see so much disappearing, but I haven't disappeared. I still exist." Standing beside a

pavilion in Yangzhou, he's just as likely to be reminded of a story about an emperor and his concubines from the Sui Dynasty as he is to be lost in conversation with the gardener tending to the flowers. And both of these might later end up in the same poem. Song Lin has traveled much of his life, and he's absorbed the histories, landscapes, cultures, and literatures of the various places he's lived.

His life has also been a mixture of idyllic moments, transitions, and deep traumas. He was born in 1959 in Xiamen, Fujian, but was raised by his maternal grandparents in Qibu Village, in Fujian Dongshan District. He says that the rural landscape and folk customs there shaped his childhood worldview, and that his grandfather's kindness and his grandmother's Buddhist beliefs helped to nurture gentleness in him. When he was ten he went to live with his parents in Ningde, Fujian. He wrote his first poem in middle school and became infatuated with poetry after his father encouraged him in his writing. His mother died from an illness when he was fifteen and his father was imprisoned the following year due to a factional struggle during the Cultural Revolution. In 1977, his father was sentenced to death under the baseless charge of "Destroying the Knowledge of Youths Sent to the Countryside." During this time, Song Lin had graduated from high school and had been sent to the countryside as an educated youth himself; he was treated unfairly due to his father's situation. He was forbidden from taking the college entrance exams two years in a row, but when he was finally allowed to take them, he was accepted into East China Normal University's Chinese Department in Shanghai.

During college, he helped establish the Summer Rain poetry club and began publishing his poetry in 1981. After graduating, he stayed on as faculty and taught writing. Song Lin has said that when he moved to Shanghai, he experienced the shock Benjamin describes people experiencing when they first encounter big cities, and he wanted to write about the city in his poetry. He was inspired and guided by Shi Zhecun, who was his teacher and later his colleague. Shi was one of the earliest and most prominent urban writers in Shanghai in the 1930s, and he edited the modern literature journal, *Les Contemporains* (现代). In addition to Shi, Song Lin also began

reading poets such as Baudelaire, Elliot, Rilke, and Borjes in translation. In 1987, his first poetry collection was published in *Urbanites*, a collection of poems by four poets that is seen as a representative work of 1980s Chinese urban poetry. In 1989 Song Lin participated in the democracy protests in Shanghai and was sentenced to nine months in prison. He wrote poems in prison to grapple with the uncertainty of not knowing when he would get out. The title poem of this collection, “Sunday Sparrows,” is one such poem. After his release, he was stripped of his teaching qualifications and became a librarian in the Chinese Department. He immigrated to France in 1991 and later studied ancient Chinese philosophy at the 7th University in Paris. He left Paris in 1997 and lived in Singapore and Argentina before returning to China in 2003 to teach at various universities.

I began this project several years ago when Song Lin and I were both living in Beijing and he asked me if I would be willing to translate a collection of his poems. I jumped at the chance, and we spent many days during the next several months meeting to go over his poems.

When I translate the work of contemporary poets, I translate a rough draft of the poem and then meet with the poet to talk about the poem before revising my translations. With some poets, this process is fairly quick, but Song Lin and I would often spend several hours together and only get through one poem, or we would get to telling stories and forget to do any poems. Other times we spent several hours on one poem while Song Lin told me the background story of the poem, the emotional/mental state he was in when he wrote it, and/or the literary and historical allusions in the poem. Or we would spend an hour discussing the meaning of a particular word. Two of Song Lin’s nicknames are Song Zhenman (Song is Really Slow) and Lao Manye (Old Slow Grandpa). This is due to his tendency to show up several hours late for dinners or parties—again, this is related to how he exists within and beyond “modern time.” Once I was at a birthday party he’d invited me to and he showed up four hours after it started. After he arrived he began telling stories and later played his bamboo flute. Song Lin is beloved even for his perpetual tardiness. I have a tendency to lose track of time when I’m involved in conversations, or to

lose track of projects while I'm busy traveling for events. This combination meant that this project happened off and on for several years and spanned different cities once Song Lin moved to Dali to paint and write full time and I moved to the US and was traveling back and forth across the Pacific. But this project has been a labor of love for me the entire time, not only because it deepened my friendship with Song Lin, but because his poems are weavings of history, myth, nature, city, everyday life, melancholy, joy, story, image, and classical and modern Chinese.

—*Jami Proctor Xu*

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