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## Community of Orphans: Mirrors and Windows: East West Poems with Translations compiled and translated by Anna Yin

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**A Community of Orphans: *Mirrors and Windows: East West Poems with Translations***  
compiled and translated by **ANNA YIN** Guernica Editions, 2021. \$21.95 USD, \$25 CDN

Reviewed by **KATE ROGERS**

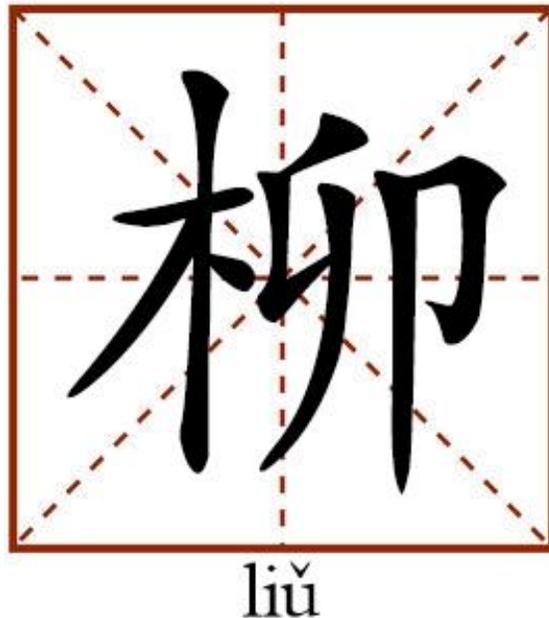
Anna Yin's selection of poems for her new anthology, *Mirrors and Windows: East West Poems with Translations*, shows her understanding of poets' yearning to bridge cultural divides through poetry and to celebrate a love of the natural world beyond borders. Yin's own extensive publication history in Canada and her role as the inaugural Mississauga Poet Laureate (2015-2017) attest to her commitment to communicating both unique and universal experiences across cultures through poetry. She sees translation of poetry as a very important way to help poets and their readers connect and build understanding. The anthology consists of translated poems and is divided into three parts, "Part 1: From English to Chinese," "Part 2: From Chinese to English," and "Part 3: Poems Inspired by Translations."

At the online launch of *Mirrors and Windows* Yin described translation as "necessary diplomacy." In this era of tension between China and the West her attitude is important because it emphasizes our common humanity and appreciation of the natural world. Translation, from my perspective as an English-language poet who can understand and speak some Mandarin and Cantonese, but can only read a number of simplified and traditional characters, is as creative a process as composing poems in one's first language. I have used Cantonese transliterated into English in my own poetry set in Hong Kong where I taught tertiary level language-through-literature and related courses for two decades. I am very grateful for the guidance of Cantonese speaking editors in developing those poems (Rogers 62).

Anna Yin's poem "Spirit Tree," which is inspired by Priscilla Upal's poem of the same name, also emphasizes the important role of cultural exchange in this anthology. I experience both poems as a kind of prayer. Upal's poem arrives at reverence for a cemetery tree after some self-mocking reflection: "I don't speak tree well . . . Maybe we should stop all this pretense/ . . . and I should do what I came here to do / and drop to my knees" (lines 42-47). Yin mourns Upal's passing by describing Yin's relationship with her own spirit tree—a willow. Yin grieves when it is struck by lightning and is grateful when it is re-born with fresh shoots in spring.

Willow poems were popular during China's Tang Dynasty. Yin likely grew up with that poetic tradition in her birthplace of Hunan, China. In his essay on the willow as an important symbol in Chinese literature, scholar Xue Wensu tells us:

The word for willow is a homophone of the Chinese character "liu," which means "to stay." The behavior of breaking off a willow branch and sending it to those departing for a long journey then became a gesture of asking them to stay, a way to express their . . . feelings. This custom, dating back to the Han Dynasty, was particularly popular in the Tang Dynasty. The saying [sic] at that time, for example "All the willow branches have been broken off" or "Why so frequently pull down and break off a willow branch?" were vivid examples of this custom (Xue 2018).



In Du Fu (also transliterated as Tu Fu) contemporary He Zhizhang's "Ode to a Willow," (Hunter 2012) the tree is described as a beautiful woman with dangling braids (or silk ribbons in some translations). He Zhizhang compares the spring breeze to ruthless scissors slicing away thin willow leaves, thereby evoking vulnerability. There are echoes of He's description in Anna Yin's poem; she conjures hope with her lines, "from the open wound / she grew new twigs" (lines 15-16).

Already, in the two "Spirit Tree" poems by Upal and Yin, we can see different cultural sensibilities at work and how poets from different traditions can inspire each other. At the *Mirrors and Windows*' launch, Anna Yin said poets are like "orphans." A yearning for connection can be seen in her contributors' longing to bridge the East-West divide through poems she describes in her introduction as "windows to see outward" and "mirrors to see inwardly" (page 18). "Window" poems in this anthology by English-language poets Kate Marshall Flaherty, Kateri Lanthier and John B. Lee exemplify a longing to bridge the East-West divide.

The speaker in Kate Marshall Flaherty's "Dragon Fruit," for instance, contemplates the strangeness of the "slice of something milky-clear" on her plate at a dinner party (line 11). The speaker's hesitation about an unfamiliar food deftly and honestly mirrors the uncertainty people can feel facing an unfamiliar culture: "it could be other, almost / of the sea" (lines 13-14). She examines the fruit's "green scales with red tips" (line 21) and tries to relate the fruit to familiar objects: "a childhood puppet, amaryllis bulb" (line 23). However, she eventually reverts to an uncertainty, imagining "the komodo dragon's poison claws" (line 24).

Using fresh language and original metaphors in her poem "Guanyin Lamp," Kateri Lanthier's speaker expresses a longing for understanding. She beseeches the goddess of compassion in the store window: "Walk me through the flames. We'll emerge soft and fearless / With a

thousand arms each / And a mouth for every wound” (lines 22-24). Staring at the Guanyin lamp, the speaker feels “Moth-hearted . . . Thirsty for light” (line 29).

In John B. Lee’s “Being Human” the speaker reads Rumi and Tu Fu, recalling his time in a French farmhouse loft with an old friend, both “middle aged men . . . open / to starlight . . .” (lines 12-14). They aren’t as sad as “old Tu Fu” (line 22). Their “hearts [refuse] the silence” (line 30).

Among the most interesting “window” poems Yin has translated from Chinese into English for this anthology are “Songs” by Ya Xuan and “The Ruins” by Lan Lan. In “Songs” the speaker is inspired by Rilke to express the universal nature of grief through the repeated question, “Who is weeping in the distance (lines 1, 5, 9, 13)?” In the effective penultimate and final stanzas of “The Ruins” the speaker describes the universal pursuit of liberty: “tall pillars / Are collapsing . . . the shadow of freedom . . . begins to clear its throat in front of the microphone.”

In the “mirror” poem, “From the Tang Dynasty to the South of the Yangtze River” David Shu’s speaker seems to describe the power of cultural heritage, enriched by “the whole Tang Dynasty (line 3),” though Li Po, “who was drunk (line 5),” is left behind.

It was a pleasure to read both English-language and Chinese-language poets reaching across the East-West divide for inspiration and understanding. Anna Yin’s *Mirrors and Windows: East West Poems with Translation* will inspire anyone who appreciates poetry, values cross-cultural understanding and feels reverence for the natural world.

### Works Cited

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**KATE ROGERS’** (she/her) reviews have appeared in *RicePaper*, *Prism International* and *ARC Poetry Magazine*, among other journals. Her poetry has recently appeared in *SubTerrain*; *Looking Back at Hong Kong* (CUHK Press); *The Beauty of Being Elsewhere*; *the Dove Tails 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Writing for Peace Anthology*; *the Quarantine Review*; *Poetry Pause* (League of Canadian Poets); *Understorey Magazine* and *World Literature Today*, among other publications. Kate re-patriated to Canada in late 2019 after teaching tertiary level language-through-literature and related courses in Hong Kong for two decades. Her work can be viewed at: <https://katerogers.ca/>