

BOOK REVIEWS/CENTRAL ASIA

Yin, Kenneth J. *Mystical Forest: Collected Poems and Short Stories of Dungan Ethnographer Ali Dzhon*. Peter Lang, 2023. 174 pages. Hardcover, \$89.95; eBook, \$89.95.

Mark Bender, PhD¹

¹ East Asian Languages and Literatures, Ohio State University

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Mystical Forest: Collected Poems and Short Stories of Dungan Ethnographer Ali Dzhon, introduced and translated by Kenneth J. Yin, opens the world of a Dungan writer from Kyrgyzstan to global audiences. As the translator of the volume, Yin has played the crucial roles of both literary scholar and ethnographer—two roles that greatly contribute to translating works that are set deeply within local cultural contexts.

Mystical Forest: Collected Poems and Short Stories of Dungan Ethnographer Ali Dzhon, introduced and translated by Kenneth J. Yin, opens to global audiences the world of a Dungan writer who was born in Kazakhstan and lived most of his life in Kyrgyzstan. As translator, Yin has played the crucial roles of both literary scholar and ethnographer—two roles that greatly contribute to translating works that are set deeply within local cultural contexts. Although Ali Dzhon is a contemporary writer, his work is informed by his extensive ethnographic work among the Dungan and deep readings within the complex linguistic warrens of Dungan oral and written literature. This book builds on Yin's earlier translation and publication of *Dungan Folktales and Legends* (2021) compiled by the late, great Russian Sinologist, Boris Rifkin, which lent a global understanding to Dungan/Hui folk narrative and lore.

In editing and translating *Mystical Forest*, Yin demonstrates not only deep engagement with Dungan literature, but a resonate connection with the creative soul of Dzhon. The collaboration between Yin and Dzhon traverses thousands of miles and several cultural barriers, but the result is a rare glimpse into the world of a poet and writer whose work is at once highly personal and idiosyncratic yet probes into Dungan history, culture, and identity in several historical contexts. That history and culture extend back to late nineteenth-century China during the time of the so-called "Dungan Revolt," which resulted in the emigration of ten thousand Dungan—or, as they are called in China today, Hui (*Huizu*). The Dungan migrated to Central Asia from the Chinese provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, and Yunnan, places in China that are home to many hundreds of thousands of Hui people today. That period is recalled in one of Dzhon's poems entitled "Unrest," which specifically contains the names of places and persons who were involved in the mass displacement and, in some cases, mass murder of Hui people.

The generational trauma of the exodus is recounted in the lines:

The ancestral home, more malicious than a she-wolf
You drank the blood of your children!
Like a wench who, concealing her shame,
Abandons her baby in another's courtyard,
You did everything to banish,
Us to a strange land to die. (124)

For Yin, the translator's challenge is to penetrate the generations of trauma and grief within the lyrics of a contemporary poet through the medium of Russian, a language imposed upon the Dungan sometime after their removal from the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Other poems in the section of the book "Poems of a Nationalistic Character," which seem to hold traces of former Soviet "liberation" ideology, require similar delving into layers of cultural experience, one being a poem entitled, "The Ma Family Maiden Has Been Bridenapped," which engages the custom of bride kidnapping as a pretense for escaping an unwelcome marriage contract made more for family gains than the bride's personal well-being. The poem is juxtaposed across the page from a poem entitled "To the Dungan Woman," which begins with the lines, "Your destiny is from dawn till dusk / To cook, to feed, nurse, wash . . . , / You don't demand a reward for your hard work / And you'll prematurely lose your youth" (121).

Focusing on the title poem of the volume, which opens the chapter called "Rumination," we find a dream-like lyrical poem that sets the pace of the entire volume, beckoning readers to enter a world in which "owls burst out laughing" and the "lion and the rabbit share the same bed" (20). The poem is at once intensely personal, yet ever drawing us in to encounter personal struggles, the struggles of a particular people, or even a more global community—all within the metaphorical "Mystical Forest."

The poems in other chapters are collocated from the perspectives of autobiography, family, love, friendship, nostalgia, melancholy, parting, and religious character. The volume culminates with four short stories.

Mystical Forest can be considered in juxtaposition with Hui writing from China, the foremost author being Zhang Chengzhi, who writes in Chinese, and whose works include *The Black Steed* (*Hei junma*) translated by Stephen Fleming (1990). Likewise, Yin's earlier translation of collected Dungan stories can be profitably compared to the work of Mario DeGrandis (2020), who researches Hui and Salar origin stories and oral literature in various print collections since 1949, and modern Hui literature.

Several questions may help contextualize Dzbon's work within conversations about inter-Asian literature and global discussions of ethnic minority literature. One question that has been raised and debated in the People's Republic of China and by scholars worldwide working on Chinese ethnic

minority literature is the bicultural backgrounds of authors identifying as ethnic minority persons. In China, we have the well-known case of Alai, a novelist who is of Gyalrong Tibetan and Hui background and has written works such as *Red Poppies* (2002), which deals with ethnic minority themes. The Gyalrong of Sichuan are an interesting case, as they have been classified as Tibetan but are presently seeking formal recognition as a separate ethnic group. Other cases are Dondrup Gyal and Zhaxi Dawa, both of Tibetan and Han parentage, who sought to develop only the Tibetan aspects of their identities as they developed as authors. All three authors use Standard Chinese as their medium of expression. Burao Yilu, a poet of Wa and Han ancestry from Yunnan, also writes in Chinese, as do the majority of ethnic minority writers in China, regardless of background, although considerable writing in languages including Tibetan, Mongolian, Uyghur, Korean, and Yi has been and continues to be produced. Such writings, however, remain inaccessible, except in translation, to readers who do not speak those languages. In all these cases, the languages used as a medium for expression are what Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, a Khasi poet from Northeast India who often writes in English, calls “languages of interaction” (2006, 3–4). Language such as Chinese, English, and in Dzhon’s case, Russian, serve as national languages and common mediums of expression in their realms. Thus, many questions arise concerning not only self-identity but also ethnic representation, cultural survival, and artistry. In his poem, “Testimony on an Ethnic Topic,” Dzhon directly addresses the issue of “purity of descent” as he terms it.

Dzhon shares the dual roles of ethnographer and creative author, as do other figures such as Desmond Kharmawphlang, a Khasi folklorist, ethnographer, and poet who is a professor at North-Eastern Hill University. Two poets of the Nuosu subgroup of the large Yi ethnic group from China are Bamo Qubumo of the Institute for Ethnic Literature (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) and Luo Qingchun (also known as Aku Wuwu) of the Southwest Minzu University, who have written many poems incorporating accurate ethnographic material that reflect cultural and environmental change in their respective areas. A similar example from North America is Anton Treuer, who is of Native American and German immigrant roots and is a professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University. Treuer is consequentially involved in maintenance of the Ojibwe/Anishinaabe language and culture of the Great Lakes area through scholarly and creative writing. Such potent combinations of ethnographer/scholar and poet/author offer avenues for cross-cultural study.

Questions also surround the idea of Sinophone literature and how Dungan literature, mostly written in Russian and produced by diverse peoples in Central Asia with roots in China and with a history of Chinese language use that is now endangered, can be fit into the picture of a greater Hui literature that has emerged in China since the early 1980s and is written primarily in Chinese. How do we sort out the linguistic, cultural, religious, and political

entanglements between these literary strands and place them within even greater contexts of literary production in the multiethnic communities of China, especially western China and Central Asia? Is alignment with Sinophone poetry the best option, or are there other configurations that would be useful to explore in critiquing Dungan literature and similar cases?

Finally, Yin's work gives us an opportunity to discuss the role of translators as "cultural bridges," who aid in the exposure, representation, and interpretation of works between cultures and audiences literally around the world in an increasing array of media outlets. One wonders, in the case of the Dungan literature, how many bridges are needed in this complex, multicultural environment? Although questions of translation raise many issues, increasingly so in the age of AI, the great effort exerted by translators such as Yin is too often misunderstood and underappreciated, despite deserving recognition.

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