

YANG MU: JUEGOS PROHIBIDOS*

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A Translation by Ryan T. Scott Nance

Noontime
The leaves at the window
screen lightly shudder,
shudder with some sort of feeling:
an inconceivable *grand romance*
(the G isn't easy to manage, she says—
her hair slides over to the left)
She squints down at her ring finger
suffering to press a Granadan air.
A nun in the window chants the Rosary,
happens to look up—
far off, trailing past, a drifter's horse;
that horse steps along so slowly
she's already clicked through twelve beads
before he drifts over the horizon, Lorca would say.
Now, there, at the ranch, the mango tree
is almost ripe. The noontime feeling
again seems to bear a strung stillness,
it seems twelve years is also a stillness—
She's finally got the G, even well enough
to manage that sort of exquisite timbre.

I hear it and then I hear a chinaberry tree
both growing taller
and dropping fruit. At first,
the time from letting go of the branch
to striking the earth was brief;
seven, twelve years later
that distance stretches out and out

* The original title of a song by Narciso Garcia Yepes (b. 1927) written for the Spanish guitar in 1952.

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(We measure with threads of spring rain, and I
am nearly unable to bear those divisions of time)
as the chinaberry vertically is cut through
by the five-lined stave of moment
after moment: tiny and low and bitter,
a tad lower, a tad more
bitter, clicking away,

ultimately, tumbling down onto the earth. She looks up
at me, wistfully listening to the unhearable leaves
at the window screen lightly, lightly shuddering—Noontime,
a white cat dozes on the patio,
last year's autumn leaves heaped under the stairs
and those dry leaves of many years ago piled in the mind—
“finally got the G,” she says grinning, “like so . . .”
and with a deft ring finger, lightly, grass-plain openly
presses a Granadan air.
The poet opens the door and strolls
into the heart of the street, the still noon
suddenly explodes open with a gun crack, Lorca,
left speechless, would prostrate himself.

Confused, people push open windows to investigate,
toppling so many pots of pansies;
under the searing sun, a scrub chinaberry
dips down an octave,
desolately winds up
the *grand romance* of fractured youth.



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World War II ended on 2 September 1945. For China, it meant a hard-won victory after eight years of the bloody “War of Resistance against Japan”; it also signaled an end to a century of exploitation and (partial) occupation by Western and Japanese imperialists. The victory, however, did not bring peace. Soon a civil war broke out between the Nationalists (Guomindang) and the insurgent Communists. In 1949, faced with imminent defeat, the Nationalist government retreated to the islands off the southeast coast of the mainland and reestablished itself on Taiwan, an island recently reclaimed from Japan. In October of the same year, the People’s Republic of China was founded in Beijing, and with the outbreak of the Korean War and the onset of the Cold War in 1950, two rivaling Chinas were separated by the one-hundred-mile-wide Taiwan Strait and have been coexisting, however uneasily, to this day.

Five years before the end of World War II and the return of Taiwan to the Republic of China, Yang Mu, pen name of Wang Ching-hsien, was born in Hualian, a small city on the east coast of the island. With the Pacific Ocean to the east and the mountainous Central Range to the west, Hualian boasted a majestic landscape inhabited by various indigenous tribes and recent Han migrants. Almost half a century later, in the first book of his autobiographic trilogy titled *Mountain Winds and Ocean Rains (Shanfeng haiyu)*, the poet would speak of Hualian just before the end of the War as “a small town without news”:

The train puffed coal-smoke as it crawled slowly along the vertical ravine. Against the vast emptiness, on the narrow highways chiseled into the fractured precipices, a caravan of automobiles occasionally drove by, carefully threading in and out of the tunnels. Yes, Hualian was asleep at the intersection of those highways and railways, on the beautiful alluvial fan, her head pillowed on the lullaby of the Pacific Ocean. The waves surged onto the beaches, receded, and then surged forward again, repeating a millennium-old melody, whether it was heard or not. On the tiny plain between the towering mountains and the vast ocean, Hualian sits, its low houses hidden among beetle-nut palms, phoenix trees, old banyans, breadfruit trees, and those nameless broad-leafed trees that sheltered in their shade chrysalises and ladybugs . . .¹

The peacefulness of Hualian was to disappear forever with the American bombings toward the end of the War, the withdrawal of the Japanese troops and the repatriation of the Japanese living in Taiwan, and the Nationalist takeover in 1945.

¹ Yang Mu, *Mountain Winds and Ocean Rains (Shanfeng haiyu)* (Taipei, 1987), pp. 6–7.



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Annexed to the Qing Empire in the nineteenth century, Taiwan was ceded to Japan in 1895 when China was defeated in the first Sino-Japanese war. Under Japanese rule, the island underwent rapid modernization and industrialization. Despite strong resistance in the early decades of colonization, the Taiwanese people were increasingly assimilated into Japan through education, social, and cultural policies. The linguistic and cultural differences between Taiwan and mainland China made the postwar years extremely difficult. The handover of the island to China, the replacement of Japanese by Chinese as the official language, and the influx of approximately one million refugees from the civil war on the mainland, exacerbated the confusion and devastation at the end of the war. The tension escalated between the new ruling regime and the Taiwanese people and erupted into large-scale violence and suppression in 1947, the consequences of which were to impact Taiwanese culture and politics for decades to come.

Ironically, it is against this bleak backdrop that a golden age in modern Chinese poetry was ushered in. From the early 1950s through the mid-1960s, a new generation of poets began to write, found poetry clubs and journals, and publish their own poetry in Chinese as well as Chinese translations of foreign poetry (English, French, Japanese, German, etc.). They read avidly both Chinese and foreign poetry and experimented boldly in new styles of writing, from symbolism and neoclassicism to surrealism and concrete poetry. Far from a homogeneous group, they came from vastly different backgrounds. Many were young servicemen who retreated to Taiwan with the Guomindang; some were teachers and students who were either mainland émigrés or native Taiwanese. A few had established themselves as poets before 1945 in Taiwan or on the mainland, but most only began to write in the 1950s.

In many ways Yang Mu is representative of the postwar generation. A native Taiwanese, he began to write at the age of fifteen, partly inspired by a senior schoolmate who was publishing poetry in local and nationwide newspapers. They became friends and worked together as editors (and frequent contributors) of a poetry journal featured every Monday as literary supplement to a Hualian newspaper. Later, Yang's poems began to appear in major newspapers and poetry journals based in Taipei, the cultural center of the island. As his reputation grew, he got to know many avant-garde poets; joined the Blue Stars (Lanxing), one of the most influential poetry clubs; and published two volumes of poetry (under an earlier penname, "Ye Shan") in the early 1960s.



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In 1964, after graduating from college and completing the mandatory military service, Yang Mu left Taiwan for the University of Iowa where he received an M.F.A. in creative writing from the Writers Workshop in the English Department. He then entered the doctoral program in comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied classical Chinese as well as Old English and Ancient Greek poetry. Yang received his Ph.D. in 1970, and his dissertation, in which he employed the theories of Parry and Lord to analyze the first anthology of Chinese poetry compiled in the sixth century BCE, was published four years later under the title *The Bell and the Drum: Shih Ching as Formulaic Poetry in an Oral Tradition*.

At Iowa, Yang Mu developed an interest in Federico Garcia Lorca (1898–1936). In early 1966, he started to translate Lorca's *Romancero Gitano* (*The Gypsy Ballads*, originally published in Madrid in 1928) into Chinese. Besides the fifteen poems in the original collection, Yang added three more. He translated the first poem on 18 January, completed all of them on 6 March, and published them in a volume in Taiwan in August of the same year. In the translator's preface, Yang Mu thanked his teacher, Frederic Will, and his friend from a poetry class, Robert Casto, both at the University of Iowa, for their assistance with the texts, and he dedicated the book to Paul Engle and Frederic Will.

In the translator's preface, Yang Mu expressed his intention to read Lorca not "as a glorious statue in the history of Spanish literature," but "as a living young poet, a balladeer from the prairies of southern Spain, a warrior with love and hate, a nightingale that sheds tears and blood."² Such description applied to the twenty-six-year-old poet from Taiwan no less than to the poet from Andalusia, but it was not until ten years later that Lorca appeared directly and explicitly in Yang's own poetry. In May 1976, Yang Mu wrote the first of what would be a four-poem sequence under the title "Juegos Prohibidos," after a Spanish guitar classic that had been popular in Taiwan in the 1960s–1970s. After completing the first poem in May, he wrote the second and third in September, and the fourth in October. He also penned "Ballad—In Memory of the Fortieth Anniversary of Lorca's Death" and "Spain. 1936" in September and November of the same year, respectively. In these poems, we find a number of recurrent images associated

² Yang Mu, Preface to Chinese translation of *Romancero Gitano* (*Xibanya langren yin*) (Taipei, 1966), n.p.



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with Lorca: Granada, gunshots, St. Michael, guitar and folksongs, farmers and soldiers, etc.

The motif of music runs through the first “Juegos Prohibidos,” translated here by Ryan T. Scott Nance. Music, a temporal art, turns time into a piece of music that expresses the undulation of mood and the intensity of emotion: slow or swift, drawn-out or compressed, reminiscent or cheerful, wistful or joyous. Music also becomes spatialized in the images of the G string on the guitar and the five-lined musical staff. The young woman’s learning to play the instrument takes place before the speaker’s eyes, but in the mind’s eyes twelve years are superimposed on this moment; the two time segments are connected, subtly and almost imperceptibly, with an adverb “finally.” Similarly, the falling of chinaberries to the ground takes place over the superimposed image of the staff. The passing of time (twelve years), instead of erasing memory, only produces a note that keeps getting “lower” and more “bitter.” The abrupt drop by an octave at the end of the poem brings two things into collision: Lorca’s tragic death and the end of a “grand romance.”

The use of the music motif also creates an air of dreaminess that veils the concrete and rather mundane details in the poem; in doing so, it foregrounds the subjective nature of the narrative as the speaker juxtaposes the past with the present. The juxtaposition mirrors the sharp contrast between the speaker and the woman who plays the guitar: while he cannot escape from wistful remembrances, she exudes a sensuous innocence and seems oblivious to time; while he listens to the “unhearable” rustling of the leaves “piled in the mind,” she takes delight in the present moment in which she works on the “exquisite timbre” of the guitar. The scene of her delight at improved sound is abruptly juxtaposed with the gunning down of Lorca, who was “left speechless.” The poem ends on a note of silence.

A sense of futility permeates the poem. In the backdrop to the woman playing the guitar, the Rosary-chanting nun is a reminder of the transience of corporeal love in comparison to the higher love of God. (In his autobiographic trilogy, Yang Mu mentions that to him, as a young man, nuns always evoked sadness.) The drifter disappearing at the end of the horizon probably foreshadows the inevitable departure of the speaker. The recurrent chinaberry tree also suggests pain. A member of the tropical Mahogany family, it grows rapidly but is short-lived. Further, its berries, flowers, bark, and leaves are all poisonous, causing



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vomiting, diarrhea, irregular breathing, and respiratory distress. It is also meaningful that the Chinese name for chinaberry, *kulian*, contains the word “bitter” and it is also a homonym for “bitter love.” Like the premature death of Lorca, the love between the speaker and the guitar player is to end prematurely, a repeat of what happened to him twelve years ago: “the grand romance of fractured youth.” Playing on the words romance/romancero with a sarcastic twist, the poem equates the death of Lorca with doomed love.

The poem is an elegy mourning the transience of love rather than the tragic death of Lorca. If Lorca inspires some of the images, such as Spanish music, Andalusian landscape, and Catholicism, they are interspersed with images of the poet’s homeland: papaya and chinaberry trees. The presence of plants indigenous to Taiwan is probably linked to the past romance that is recreated in bits and pieces in the poem. Or, it may have to do with the fact that in 1975–1976 the poet was back in Taiwan for the first time in twelve years; the homecoming experience might have given his memories of youth a particular vividness and poignancy.

“Juegos Prohibidos” is also the title of Yang Mu’s book published in 1980, the seventh in an oeuvre of thirteen volumes of original poetry to date. It is interesting to note that after this cluster of six poems in 1976, Yang Mu never evoked Lorca in his work again. One subtle tribute may be found in the 1987 poem “Lama Reincarnated”; written in the ballad form reminiscent of Lorca, the poem tells the story of a Spanish boy from Andalusia who became a Lama, leader of Tibetan Buddhism. It is only befitting that Lorca reemerges in Yang Mu’s world in a tale of reincarnation.

