Poems for Mandarin Entries

You can enter an English translation of any poem out of any language for the Stephen Spender Prize. Below we have gathered some suggestions for Mandarin entries.

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Discover more resources and activities on our Multilingual Creativity hub. Full details about how to enter the Stephen Spender Prize can be found on our website.

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The poet says, “I wrote this poem at the age of nineteen. What I was saying was, I didn’t care that I was young and inexperienced, or that life was difficult, I still wanted to speak out and live life my way”.

《三原色》
车前子

我，在白纸上
白纸—什么也没有
用三支蜡笔
一支画一条
画了三条线
没有尺子
线歪歪扭扭的
大人说（他很大了）：
红黄蓝
是三原色
三条直线
象征三条道路
—我听不懂
（讲些什么啊？）
又照着自己的喜欢
画了三只圆圈
我要画得最圆最圆

(By kind permission of the author)
Han Dong (born 1962, Nanjing) writes about the poverty of the woodworkers he knew in his youth when he was sent to a remote village during the Cultural Revolution. The characters “木工” (Mu Gong, the title of the poem) can equally mean “wood work,” the activity, and “wood workers,” the people. When asked by a translator which interpretation he preferred, Han Dong said, “whichever you like,” which raises interesting questions about the role of the translator in his poetry.

Try listening to the poem to get an idea of the sounds and rhythms

木工
韩东

木工车间里工人们躺在刨花里干活
没有门，没有窗，也没有墙
只有芦席围起三面的金色工棚
只有阳光、刨花和木料和
已雕刻成型的各类农具的柄
没有门，没有窗，没有桌凳和门槛
没有床。是木工取消了木工
刨花掩盖了泥地

(By kind permission of the author)
Tong Zi

Tong Zi is a children’s poet and author. He says, “this poem talks about how the seasons - from winter to spring - fill children’s hearts with expectation and make little dreams germinate.”

Try listening to the poem to get an idea of the sounds and rhythms

直到故事开花
童子
瓦上的雪
讲着春天

它把春天的故事
写在雪上
讲给路过的
麻雀和风

雪在屋顶融化
故事流到屋檐下
发了芽

阳光呀
请把故事讲给孩子
孩子请讲给你们的同伴
请细心照料嫩绿的藤蔓
直到故事开花

(By kind permission of the author)
Xi Xi

Xi Xi (born 1938) is Hong Kong’s most popular writer, known for her witty and playful poems. This one is about a David and Goliath of the animal world, the fearsome crocodile and the butterfly that ultimately wins.

Try listening to the poem to get an idea of the sounds and rhythms

蝴蝶和鱷魚 / 西西

大無畏的鱷魚
畏懼蝴蝶，小蝴蝶

飛來，鱷魚趕緊閉上
眼睛，沉下水面

大衛用石頭打倒
巨人，蝴蝶以

溫柔、芬芳的
花粉

(By kind permission of the author)
Yu Yan Chen lives in Singapore now, but she was born in China. She writes, “the poem is a snapshot of my childhood in China in the 80s. It was a fishing village in Fujian Province located right across from Taiwan. Back then people from Mainland China and Taiwan weren't allowed to mingle. One word of explanation, “依姆” is Fuzhou dialect, and is a respectful way of addressing or referring to an old woman. [In this poem] she was my Grandma’s age.”

Note: Ms Chen adds that the man in question was actually a young albino, not a whiskery old man, but you are at liberty to ignore this bit of information if you prefer!

Try listening to the poem to get an idea of the sounds and rhythms

說書人
陳瑜燕

講故事的人
白鬚白髮
左手握著一面扇子
變換出各種朝代的
男女老少，高低貴賤的
種種聲響

背後是一堆帽子
前面是幾件樂器
說著唱著，偶爾一聲響鑼
翻閱書本與歲月
並行的扉頁
直達心田
那是春天的事情
一到初秋，彈棉花的
就在同一院子裏
放松棉絮緊繃的臉
經過的人都停下來
發一會兒呆

想著寒風中的春聯
唱大戲的青衣花旦
以及院裡住著的依姆
她的男人去了臺灣
再也回不來

來年春天，說書人
又來了，還有劁豬的
剃頭的、賣片片糖的
也都來了，各自唱著小調
走在鄉村的小路上

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These poems were selected by Paper Republic, a UK charity that promotes Chinese literature in translation. Paper Republic also recorded the audio and wrote the notes.