

Panel 18
Images and Graphic Elements in Poetry

Encaging the Blackbird: Wallace Stevens in Contemporary Chinese Poetry

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Situated in the tension between “a supreme fiction” and “a mind of winter,” or between transcendental imagery on the one hand, and minimalist and even impoverished depictions of reality, on the other, Wallace Stevens’s poetry and poetics have inspired many acclaimed Chinese contemporary poets. They have sought to reestablish the connections among reality, imagination, and language amid the cultural aftermath of the Maoist era, where language was torn between fervent vision and extreme banality. This paper examines how Chinese poets have translated, interpreted, and reconfigured Stevens’s image of the blackbird from the 1980s to the present, discussing works by Chen Dongdong, Ouyang Jianghe, Xi Chuan, Yang Li, Yu Jian, and Zang Di. I argue that while these poets embrace Stevens’s epistemological theory of vision, their incorporations of the blackbird into their poems subjugate Stevens’s cubist deconstruction to intimate lyrical expressions, dialectical philosophical discussions, accessible syntax, centralized perspectives, and consistent voices—all of which are conventional versification techniques that Stevens deliberately challenged in his original poem. I discuss how the discrepancy between Stevens’s poem and the Chinese reconfigurations reveals distinct understandings of cultural imperatives, and why Chinese poets select Stevens as the foundation of their yearning for a holistic, intuitive relationship with language, reality, and fictionality.

Biography

Celia Xu Yinzhi received her Ph.D. degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Chicago, specializing in Chinese and American poetry and digital humanities. She is Assistant Professor in the English Department at Nanyang Technological University.