

THE SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS OF TRANSLATING CHINESE POETRY:
UNIMAGINATIVE VERSUS OVER-IMAGINATIVE INTERPRETATION

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After lengthy discussions on the translation of Chinese poetry during the Sixth Conference on Oriental-Western Literary and Cultural Relations in Bloomington, Indiana, last fall, in which many of us here participated, one would assume that all problems of translation would have been solved. Further discussion on the question of translation may seem to be beating a dead horse. But if I may be allowed to extend this hackneyed metaphor further, this problematic horse (translating Chinese poetry) is not only alive but kicking. Since translation of Chinese poetry has become an industry in recent years, those of us who are teachers of Chinese literature through translation are constantly called upon to evaluate and compare the innumerable versions of the same poems; thus we cannot afford to ignore the problems that constantly beset the translators. While I do not wish to be too critical about some translations, I would like to share my views concerning certain problems that confront us all. Indeed, one cannot exaggerate too much the difficulties of translating Chinese poetry, especially classical Chinese poetry, which is full of allusions, ellipses, and implications. Since consensus cannot, and perhaps should not, be reached on a unified, foolproof theory and method of translation, we must keep on plugging away, pooling our resources and comparing notes.

I would like to point out two pitfalls--the Scylla and Charybdis of translations--of which I am aware. These are the unimaginative and the over-imaginative interpretations of the original texts. Initially, unimaginative translation may be construed as literal translation, and over-imaginative translation may seem to mean free, poetic rendition--the same problems Professor Walls touched upon in his paper given in Indiana last fall. In his paper, Professor Walls said, "fidelity to the denotative statement at one extreme, and to the imaginative artistic effect at the other, are sometimes antagonistic, if not downright incompatible."¹ I am not quarreling with his statement, yet I believe that the translator must have both fidelity and imagination to successfully achieve a poetic translation. For poetry, in whatever language, is an expression of imagination. As such it requires imaginative interpretation, but neither unimaginative nor over-imaginative interpretation.

By unimaginative translation, I do not mean fidelity to the denotative statement; for fidelity to the appropriate denotative meaning does not necessarily destroy the connotation and implication. By over-imaginative translation, I do not mean poetic translation; for over-imagination does not necessarily bring about poetic effect. To best illustrate what I mean, I shall resort to some concrete examples. Take, for instance, the first verse of P'ing-ch'eng hsia {平城下} by Li Ho:

Chi han P'ing-ch'eng hsia
Yeh-yeh shou ming-yueh
Pieh chien wu yu-hwa
Hai-feng tuan pin-fa (1)

which A. C. Graham translates as follows:

Hungry and cold, beneath P'ing-ch'eng,
Night after night we guard the full moon.
In our farewell swords no flower-of-jade;
A wind from that sea cuts the hair from our temples. (2)

This is fairly faithful to the original denotative statement without any intrusive interpretation; it is, to me, a better version than the padded and watered-down version by J.D. Frodsham, which reads:

Hungry and cold we stand here in P'ing-ch'eng,
Night after night, on guard by the shining moon.
Our keen-edged swords have lost their flowers of jade,
Our hair is falling out in the Gobi wind. (3)

I would call the translation of Frodsham unimaginative, compared with the more literal translation by Graham, because, by loading his lines with explanations and interpretations of the allusions, Frodsham weakens the tension and vigor of the original poem which depends on the complex imagery. As Graham points out, in Frodsham's version, the original main verb shou (守) "guard" is robbed of its transitivity and the whole sentence is pivoted on the dummy word "stand," which contributes

little or nothing to the poetry. 4/

On the other hand, Graham seems to err in the same direction of unimaginativeness when he translates the famous "Farewell Poem" of Tu Mu:

Tuo ch'ing chueh szu tsung wu ch'ing
Wei chueh tsun-ch'ien hsiao pu ch'eng.
Lah-chu yu hsin huan hsi pieh
T'i jen ch'ui lui tao t'ien-ming. (2)

into the following poem:

Passion too deep seems like none.
While we drink, nothing shows but the smile which will not come.
The wax candles feel, suffer at partings:
Their tears drip for us till the sky brightens. 5/

The Chinese word ch'ing (情) is a very difficult word to translate--love, passion, emotion, heart, and feeling, may all describe in part the total meaning of the word. The lines in question, however, are not the first and last lines, but mainly the second and third. For the original second line simply says "I only feel I cannot smile before the wine cup." But in place of the original terse implication, Graham supplies with a long explication: "While we drink, nothing shows but the smile which will not come." The extra padding adds nothing, but tends to blur and diffuse the emotional tension. I am rather surprised that Graham, who claims that "the gift of terseness is the least dispensable literary qualification of a translator from Chinese," 6/ violates his very own theory. My main stricture, however, is reserved for his third line, "The candles feel, suffer at parting." The pathetic fallacy of the candles' feeling and suffering at the parting of the lovers, may be excusable, if it is a paraphrase of the original. The original line, "Even the wax-candle has a heart to grieve over our parting" is a sustaining metaphor, consistent with and responsible for the line which follows: "Dripping tears for us till daylight." The Chinese poet uses the visual imagery in a highly complex metaphoric way: he describes the candle--which has a heart (candle-heart is the poetic conceit for the wick), which accounts for the dripping wax, which in turn symbolizes tears in sympathy of the lover's feelings. By reducing the perfect concrete and consistent imagery into an abstract statement of "candles feel," the translator, while not distorting the meaning of the line, does destroy the poetry and the poet's intention. This is least expected from the one who tells us, "The element in poetry which travels best is, of course, concrete imagery." 7/

A more literal but no less poetic version simply reads:

Too much emotion is like no emotion at all.
I only feel I cannot smile before the wine cup.
Even the wax candle has a heart to pity our parting,
It drops tears for us until dawn. 8/

So much for unimaginative translations. On the other hand, the over-imaginative translations are not only unfaithful to the original imagery, syntax, denotative meaning, they are apt to distort or destroy the mood, tone, intention, or even sense of the original poem. The results, then, have little to do with the Chinese poems they profess to translate. To illustrate what I mean by the over-imaginative kind, I shall use two examples from The Orchid Boat, a work in collaboration by poet Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung, a woman poet from Taiwan. The original version of the Tzu-yeh ko reads:

Su-hsi pu shu-t'ou
Szu-fa pei liang-chien.
Wan shen lang hsi-shan
Ho-ch'u pu k'o-lien? (3)

In the hands of this poetic pair we have an overtly erotic poem with nothing left to the reader's imagination:

It is night again
I let down my silken hair
Over my shoulders
And open my thighs

Over my lover.
"Tell me, is there any part of me
That is not lovable?"9/

In the original, it may be noted that the term su-hsi (宿昔) in the first line is a bound form meaning "in the past," or "formerly," and may have the secondary meaning of "momentarily" or "temporarily," (although it may mean night in some instances, it is less applicable here).^{10/} But more fantastic is the third line in which the reader is given the voyeur's pleasure of the girl's "open thighs." Such interpretation is suitable perhaps for the pages of the Play-Boy Magazine, but certainly is too far-fetched and far removed from the Chinese. One reviewer of The Orchid Boat writes, "Wan is the wrist, the part of the arm which joins the hand with the arm. How did these translators convert it to the 'thigh' or 'thighs' is beyond one's ordinary imagination."^{11/} While I, too, cannot find whence the translators derive their "thighs," I believe they may not be guilty of converting "thighs" from "wrists." For the wan (腕) meaning wrist or wrists with the "flesh" radical (肉), is emended in another version as wan (婉) with a woman radical (女), meaning "winsome" or "gentle or gently." If this does not justify the translators' over-imagination, or indulgence in exhibitionism, it should vindicate them from committing such grotesque errors of human anatomy. There is no doubt of the sensual quality of the original poem, and these translators did not stray too far from the inherent erotic theme. But even in the most sensual and erotic Chinese poems, there are almost always circumspection and restraint. For to the Chinese, suggestiveness and subtle implication can arouse just as much if not more emotional response. Over-imaginative interpretation such as this destroys the subtleness and implicitness, which are the very essence of Chinese poetry.

Perhaps over-indulgence rather than over-imagination is the more appropriate term to describe Rexroth's and Ling Chung's translations. A more typical example is perhaps their version of Hsueh T'ao's poem to Yüan Chen. Yüan Chen (779-831), we all know, was one of the most celebrated poets of ninth-century China. Hsueh T'ao (768-831) was a famous courtesan known for her beauty and poetic talent. In fact, she corresponded with several famous T'ang poets, including Po Chü-i and Liu Yü-hsi, but her relationship with Yüan Chen, as the story goes, was more intimate. The Chinese title of the poem, Chi chiu-shih yü Yüan Wei-chih, (寄柳詩句元微之) means, "To Yüan Chen to whom I send my Old Poems," as the content of the poem seems to substantiate. Roughly, her poem may be rendered thus:

Everyone has his own poetic style and tone,
I only knew how to write the delicate romantic verse:
Under the moonlight I sang of the flowers and pitied their pallor;
In the morning mist I painted the willow's slant weeping branches.
For a long time I taught (poetry to) Green Jade hidden in seclusion.
I always wrote (poems) on red note-paper as I pleased.
Growing old, I cannot set them in order;
Take and correct them as if they were from a school boy. (4)

But in the over-imaginative poetic transformation it turned into a different poem, with an entirely different tone and intention. The English title, "An old poem to Yüan Chen" is a puzzle in itself. In what sense is this poem to Yüan Chen (or Yu Wei-chih) "old"? Was it old already when it was first sent to Yüan Chen? One is amazed at the tone and the lack of decorum and circumspection in the translated version of Hsueh T'ao's poem:

Each poem has its own pattern of tones.
I only know how to write
Delicate evanescent verse
About tranquil love making--
In the shadow of moonlit flowers,
Or on misty mornings under the weeping willows.
The Green Jade Concubine was kept hidden away.
But you should learn to write love poems
On red paper for the girls in the pleasure city.
I am getting old and let myself go,
So I will teach you as though you were a schoolboy.^{13/}

One could hardly conceive in one's wildest imagination that a traditional Chinese courtesan, no matter how talented and arrogant, would tell her patron, Yüan Chen, one of the most celebrated poets, an expert of romantic verse (yen shih), to take lessons from her like a schoolboy either in

the art of poetry or love.

Perhaps translating Chinese poetry may well be "Put anything you like."^{14/} I would prefer to go along with my mentor, Jackson Mathews, translator of Valéry and Baudelaire, that "A whole translation will be faithful to the matter, and it will 'approximate the form' . . ."^{15/} To do so, the translator of Chinese poetry must try to steer clear of the Scylla and the Charybdis of translation by maintaining a middle course, or to seek what both Confucius and Aristotle describe as the mean of their poetic imagination. In conclusion, I would like to parody the first line of Tu Mu's poem mentioned above: "Too much emotion is like no emotion at all," and say, "Over-imaginative translation is like unimaginative translation." For one exceeds and the other falls short of the norm of the poetic imagination that all translators of poetry must possess.

Notes

1. Jan W. Walls, "The Craft of Translating Poetry; Structure and Pattern: Fidelity to Form." (Presented at the Sixth Conference on Oriental-Western Literary and Cultural Relations. Bloomington, Indiana, October 17, 1974.)
2. A. D. Graham, "A New Translation of a Chinese Poet: Li Ho," Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (London University), 34 (1971), p. 563.
3. J. D. Frodsham, The Poems of Li Ho (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 197.
4. Graham, Bulletin, p. 565.
5. A. C. Graham, Poems of the Late T'ang (Penguin Books, 1965), p. 134.
6. Ibid., p. 19.
7. Ibid., p. 13.
8. This is my version. Cf. also John C. H. Wu, The Four Seasons of T'ang Poetry. (Rutland, Verm. Tuttle, 1972), p. 127.
9. Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung, trs. The Orchid Boat (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), p. 9.
10. Tz'u-hai, vol. I, 909-10; Morohasi, Tetsuji, ed. Tai Kon-wa jiten, vol. 3, 7195: 118.
11. C. Y. Hsu, "From the Chinese Boudoir," Asian Student, vol. 23, no. 6 (December 7, 1974), p. 11.
12. The Orchid Boat, p. 22.
13. Ibid.
14. Eric Sackheim, tr. The Silent Zero (New York: Grossman, 1968), p. 138, 172n.
15. Jackson Mathews, "Third Thought on Translating Poetry," in On Translation, ed. by Reuben A. Bower, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 67.

(1) 平城下

飢寒平城下 夜夜守明月
別劍無玉花 海風斷鬢髮

(2) 贈別

多情却似總無情 唯覺尊前笑不成
蠟燭有心還惜別 替人垂淚到天明

(3) 子夜歌 (其一)

宿昔不梳頭 絲髮背兩肩
婉伸郎膝上 何處不可憐 * 一作腕

(4) 寄舊詩與元微之

詩篇調態人皆 有 細膩風光我獨知
月下詠花憐暗澹 處 雨朝題柳為敬垂
長教碧玉藏深 得 總向紅牋寫自隨
老大不能收拾 得 與君開似教男兒