

Appreciation of the Quintessence of
Chinese Classical Poetry

用英语欣赏国粹

©邢全臣 译著 程慕胜 审



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审者序

国粹欣赏，过目不忘。偶读几行，满口生香。本书以汉语名诗佳句为原料，溶文学、写作和翻译于一炉，肉多汤浓，语美义丰。可谓滋补之方，余味绵长。藉此洞察社会、感悟人生、亲近自然、净化心灵。业余治学，先飧读者。瑕疵难免，贤士评曰。

清华大学外语系

程慕胜

二〇〇八年九月

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Preface

Famous old Chinese poems we translate,
 Whose versions are the nicest down to date.
 Just like you, we love genuine beauty,
 And we read literature of first rate.
 For the West to enjoy Chinese poetry,
 We have made much effort to open the gate.
 Time may bury our youth without mercy,
 But our desire for learning will not abate.

Poetry is the refinement of human language, composed in regular rhymed forms. It is used like other literary genres to express human thoughts and feelings, and reflects almost all the aspects of social life. It has in it the beauty of language, of artistic conception and of music. Since the appearance of literature, written or oral, in the human community, poetry, as a finer part of it, has been used for relentless pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty, and for merciless denouncement of falsehood, evil and ugliness as well. Chinese poetry has a comparatively long history and has spread far and wide. In fact, we might say, poetry is above all else the summing up of daily life. As early as in the Xia Dynasty of about four thousand years ago, for instance, the laboring people of China summed up the repetition of their everyday labor by saying the lines: "Start to work at sunrise, and retire at sunset" (日出而作, 日落而息). Before the Spring and Autumn Period there appeared such lines as: "Water birds in pairs over the isle are warbling; A graceful girl a gentleman enjoys courting" (关关雎鸠, 在河之洲。窈窕淑女, 君子好逑). It can be said that four-character poems of this kind, which continued to exist till the Tang Dynasty, were the embryonic form of Chinese poetry. Many of the ancient Chinese poems, familiar to every educated household, have been repeatedly cited and recited through the ages, exerting an in-depth influence on the

Chinese intelligentsia, on the refinement of people's morals and on the forming of the outlook of people on the world and life of one generation after another.

Poetry is created in language, so it must conform to the characteristics of using language for creation. In his *Chinese Poetry and Chinese Painting*, Qian Zhongshu, a noted scholar of modern China, said, "Poetry and painting are arts that have common features. But they do not belong to the same art, and each has its own particularity." An artist presents what he (or she) sees of the world. A poet presents what he thinks of it. Poetry is shapeless painting. Painting is soundless poetry. The common character is embodied in a "picture-in-poem effect and vice versa". The particularity lies in that painting, which consists of colors and lines, is suitable for depicting images and colors, but it is not fit for expression of feelings. Poetry, which is made up of language, is suitable for the expression of feelings, but finds it difficult to portray images. An artist has the ability to express his feelings and thoughts while depicting images and colors, namely, achieving a poem-in-picture effect. A poet says what has not been said before and says what others want to, but cannot, say. He (or she) expresses his (or her) feelings and thoughts by using the language he believes right and proper for description of the images and colors that are reflected in his mind's eye, namely, achieving a picture-in-poem effect.

Time can obliterate your adolescence, but it cannot obliterate your lasting desire for truth, for beauty, for knowledge, and for whatever can make you happy and learned, and your life rich and worth living. To meet your needs for both cultural and language learning, this small project that may take you to the realm of art the moment you are immersed in its perusal, covers some areas of the Chinese culture embodied in ancient Chinese poems, which we hope will spark your interest in Chinese literature, Chinese culture, especially poetry, which non-Chinese speakers are not familiar with simply due to the language barrier. So far as its content is concerned, and when used as a medium through which people in other parts of the globe may find access to at least some knowledge of Chinese culture that has experienced thousands of years' accumulation in its onward process, this book best suits those whose mother tongue is English or who know English well, eventually helping them to realize through learning what has been

left untouched in cultural acquisition. Though what we have done here is a mere drop in the vast reservoir of Chinese poetry, this project still can serve as a steady stepping stone for access to the realm of this oriental art of ours. In the course of its perusal, you will find yourself owing much to it for furthering your pursuit of cultural knowledge, providing training for your mind and stimulating academic life.

Comparatively speaking, this book includes a substantial amount of cultural information contained in the translating of the ancient Chinese language into modern English and in the notes and background notes added, quite different from most books on translation published in China during the past century, which many dwell on the translation of Chinese into English, or vice versa, for the mere purpose of language teaching. Cultural exchange is a two-way or multi-way process in which different cultures may influence, interact on, and infiltrate one another for the common flourishing of all human cultures. In addition, the spread of Chinese culture through translation to the outside world is an important link in the cultural chain of all the human race and will be of strategic significance to the coexistence of the culture of the Chinese nation with those of other nations in the third millennium and even longer. The Chinese nation in ancient times contributed much to the world's material civilization, with its four greatest inventions, which are the base for modern science, and to the world's spiritual civilization, by presenting its art and philosophy, the Confucian ideas about government and *Master Sun's Military Science*. The world has developed into an era of today, when all sons and daughters of God need to communicate not only in language, science and technology but in thought and culture as well. Exchanges in the latter two, seem to be vastly insufficient, and as a result, mankind has spent much time in bloody conflict, conflict that has arisen due to the differences in cultures, in outlooks on value, and in religious and political beliefs. Is there any possible way for man to avoid constant conflict and build a world of peaceful coexistence? It is believed that the interaction of different cultures and thoughts will help. The ancient culture of the Chinese nation lays stress on harmonious differences, namely pluralism, which is also an important part of the ancient Chinese philosophy, unlike the advocacy by some countries that all the world be put in one frame, which is difficult to accept by many with different cultures and beliefs. We are culturally near-sighted if we ignore the

pluralism of culture; we are far-sighted and praiseworthy if we take cultural diversification into account in the course of the common progress of the cultures of mankind.

It has been said that a nation without poetry is a sad one, and that the loss of a poem, and even a single line, by a great poet, is a tragedy for mankind. This means that poetry is a kind of treasured spiritual wealth of mankind. Different poets of different nations produce different poems in different forms and different languages, but it is interesting and worth notice that when working on their literary pieces they abide by the law of harmonious rhythms without prior agreement. This proves that there exists a common nature, which we call the relentless pursuit of beauty and the ceaseless endeavor to show it, in the thinking activities of mankind when people use many different languages they have created to express their sentiments in rhymed lines. It can be said that excellent literature loses no chance to capture some or many essential elements of personal experience in life and puts them artfully together for demonstration of an everlasting brilliance that appeals to readers of one generation after another. In literary creation, poets are found more able than ordinary people to form generalizations and to draw conclusions from trivialities in refined language.

The materials used here are unrelated to current politics or political viewpoints which should help make this project useful over a longer period. Furthermore, it is hoped that it can be used outside China. Intended for trans-lingual representation and protection of the excellent cultural heritages of mankind in China, this book will be of some help to those who are interested in the ancient Chinese spiritual wealth, especially to those cultural researchers who have a stronger interest in many more things across China when this oriental culture still remains a mystery to them. The poems carefully chosen here, which have been popular through the ages and are familiar to even old women and pupils in China, are the masterpieces of those excellent poets of China, who were the outstanding representatives of Chinese culture, including emperors, prime ministers, generals, fishermen and woodcutters, local government officials, professional literary figures, civilians, peddlers and wanderers, and even prostitutes, on behalf of the different classes and strata of society, thereby enabling their creations to reflect the life

of all aspects of the society in their time. Some of them served as emperors and poets, some as prime ministers and poets, some as generals and poets, and so on. A profound knowledge enabled them to stand high and see far. Sharp-witted and philosophical, they loved life like ordinary people, but stood detached from material profit; they knew well the worldly affairs but remained uncontaminated in their lifetime in the then often filthy social atmosphere. Their special style of life, high moral character, erudite learning and skills of processing language, when reflected in poems, were transformed into numerous epigrams. Their works that appeared in various subjects were devoted to landscape and idyllic scenery, praises of friendship and love, advocacy of seclusion from the noisy society, parting and lovesickness, eulogy of heroism and patriotism, criticisms of social maladies, visits of olden places that aroused sentimental feelings for the past, expression of their viewpoints in a specific case, or inscriptions on a painting to sing praises of a certain thing, etc. In the course of our selection for translation we stick to the standard “the quality of the works selected is first”, without consideration of the social status of the poets, or the political clique or literary school to which they belonged, in an effort to present to the readers our measured, unbiased selection. The chief purpose of their representation in English is to let more people around the globe know more of China, and appreciate and share the cultural heritages left behind by ancient Chinese scholars, in short, for transculturation between human beings themselves.

Language is the carrier of culture, and culture varies from nation to nation, from area to area, and from period to period. Human beings use language also in their cultural life to express their different thoughts, their complex feelings, and their best wishes, and, in the final analysis, for communication with one another. But, such communication between different nations who use different languages is in most cases realized in written form in a triangular relationship among the writer, the translator, and the reader. Without the part played by the translator, mutual understanding is impossible. Translation, written or oral, is, so to speak, essential to cultural exchange. In a sense, without language translation there would be little exchange in culture, science and technology among different nations, little common progress of human civilization, and little mutual understanding between different peoples. If the language barrier is

described as a chasm to the communication between two countries or two nationalities or two races, translation serves as a bridge over the chasm. As a significant part of man's knowledge, it will run through all ages of human society unless eventually all peoples speak or use only one language.

During the long period of its taking shape, Chinese culture, which takes the Confucian culture as its cornerstone, has eventually become a culture of plural composite type, or a mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Su Dongpo (a famous literary figure of the Song Dynasty), for instance, who entered the society as a Confucianist, stood detached from the society as a Buddhist and lived a life of seclusion as a Taoist, had all three qualities at the same time. In its long-term practice, Chinese culture lays stress on the responsibility and duty of an individual to his family, to the society and to the country, advocating that a personal value be calculated in the social value, and that a person ought to have high morals, perform meritorious deeds and expound useful ideas to the society, the three of which serve as the criteria for the ideal dignity of a person. Thus, the value of a person is measured by referring to his contributions to the society and his country. In the course of a few thousand years gone by, this cultural outlook on the value of life has been influencing people's thinking and social practice across China. In this culture, the philosophy "Every social member is responsible for the rise and fall of his nation" is called patriotism; "With utter devotion to one's post till one's last breath" is selflessness; "Poverty and humbleness cannot make one swerve from principles" is called integrity; "Indifference to fame and profit, and removal of one's selfish desires" is self-discipline; "Showing respect to the old, to the wise and to friends, performing filial services to one's senior family members and providing support for the young" is a praised ethical concept; "Be the first to bear hardships and the last to enjoy comforts" is showing care for the fate of one's nation; "Go back to nature and stay in harmony with nature and the society" is a peaceful coexistence with the surroundings. These qualities have struck deep roots in the common culture and psychology of the Chinese nation and become the most important parts of the national spirit. Generally speaking, poets are cultural prototypes of an era and their cultural ideas are reflected directly or indirectly in their works. Ancient Chinese poems, which constitute a brilliant part of Chinese literature and covered almost all the aspects of

nature and the Chinese society then, are permeated with a rich culture. In fact, inherent in translation are in a sense the transcultural exchanges of different nations that use different languages. So, it is worth our painstaking effort to reveal to the world the beauty of the ancient culture of the Chinese nation, the attitude of our ancient scholars towards life and their philosophical ideas about society, so that the representation of these cultural heritages may work a positive influence on the whole human community of the world.

The culture of the Chinese nation is profound and extensive, of which Chinese poetry makes up a very important part. When cultural exchanges between human communities on the globe occur more frequently than ever before, it is a good thing to translate these cultural heritages into English that has become a world language. In the past there has been little Chinese culture and literature, poetry in particular, introduced to the outside world while large quantities of foreign culture and literature have been introduced into China. This is out of proportion so far as such a big nation is concerned. Cultural exchange should be a two-way process, thus helpful to the mutual understanding of different nations and to the common progress of mankind. Since the Opium War, especially since the adoption of reform and opening up policies after 1978, China has absorbed advanced foreign cultures, science and technology by way of translation and enriched its spiritual wealth. It is a basic national policy that China will continue to learn whatever is advanced and scientific in the future from other nations and make further contributions to both the spiritual and material civilizations of the world. Only a limited amount of Chinese culture and literature has been presented to the outside partly because the Chinese language is difficult to learn, partly because the level of translation is relatively low, and partly because fewer people in China are concerned about such an undertaking which brings little material benefit.

In addition to what is basically required of poetry the composing of poetry seems always related more or less to the cultural tradition, political atmosphere and historical background of a country, and also to the personal life experience, outlook on the world, and language attainment of a poet. The translating of poetry requires an integration of the bilingual qualifications, cultural knowledge and appreciative ability of a language

worker. If any of these essentials are lacking, translation would be impossible, or at least not so persuasive or enjoyable, and even lead to failure, in which case it would be better to let the original remain intact as it is. It is generally acknowledged that translating poetry, especially old Chinese poems into a foreign language, is much more difficult than translating other forms of literary works. But it does not necessarily follow that old Chinese poems do not brook translation. In the past and even now, many if not most learners, including scholars, of English averred that it is an impossible job to translate old Chinese poems, into English. Such an averment is based merely on a subjective judgment, but not on practice. This is a judgment by none other than laymen and lazy men who ignore or at least forget the universality of thinking of mankind. It is true that the translating of Chinese poetry into foreign languages is much more difficult than the translating among related languages. If Chinese poetry cannot be translated into other languages, this is equal to saying that Chinese scholars cannot exchange thoughts and feelings with the outside world through the genre of poetry, and that non-Chinese speakers can never appreciate the literary content contained in Chinese poetry. What is more, it is illogical that mankind is wise enough to compose poetry that beams everlasting brilliance but cannot render it into different languages. Nor does this conform to the law of language by which mankind can exchange thoughts and feelings in languages he has created. So, in this respect, difficulty in and impossibility for the translating of Chinese poetry into other languages should not be regarded as one thing. When Chinese poetry, for instance, is put into English, some beauty of the form and rhythm in the original may be lost. There are characters repeated, for example, in Chinese poetry, which are used to heighten the atmosphere and strengthen the language effect. For instance,

鸟无声兮山寂寂，
夜正长兮风淅淅。
魂魄结兮天沉沉，
鬼神聚兮云幂幂。

The birds are noiseless and the mountains lifeless.
The night is tedious and the wind blows loud,

The ghosts of the killed gather under the sky of dark heaviness,
The spirits of the dead come to mass under the dense cloud.

However, in no way can they be expressed in English when they are translated, for English poems rarely use repetitions of words to express emotions as repeating a character in Chinese. Chinese written language is made up of individual square characters, with its poems (for instance, four-character poems, five-character poems and seven-character poems) running neatly antithetic, and even the part of speech in the upper and lower lines running antithetic, too. For instance,

两个黄鹂鸣翠柳，
一行白鹭上青天。

In the green willow trees are two orioles warbling,
In the blue sky is a single file of egrets flying.

But, it is justifiable that when translated into a language with an alphabetic writing system, one line may be longer, the other shorter, since such a disparity is caused by the different formations of these two writing systems. Translators are not to blame for their linguistic qualifications. When a Chinese poem is turned into English, what is more important is to let non-Chinese speakers see an internal audible, recognizable image in place of an external visual image, which will leave them with an unfading impression of beauty, and let foreigners themselves comprehend what is actually meant in it and search for its aftertaste, after it is read or heard. Still some people judge that it requires a poet to translate poetry. Such a statement is not true. Of course, a poet is more able than others to translate foreign poems better and faster if he (or she) knows foreign languages, since he has more inspiration and comprehension when exposed to the atmosphere of poetry. If no poet understands any foreign language, the poems composed by himself or by other poets cannot be put into other languages, and then there will appear a blank in the translating of poetry. In fact, those who can translate poetry are not necessarily poets, and poets are not necessarily able to translate poetry. Unknown persons can compose excellent poems and produce excellent versions, too.

However, apart from the basic requirements of poetry, composing poems call for inspiration and comprehension. By “inspiration or comprehension” here is usually meant “diligent attitude towards work, rich experience and accumulation of knowledge gained in practice, profound artistic attainment and mastery of language skills”, all of which are the premise of acquiring inspiration. The translation of poetry likewise calls for these things in practice.

In his *Resemblance of Literary Writing to Fine Sculpture*, Liu Xie (刘勰《文心雕龙》, 南北朝), the greatest critic in the history of Chinese literature, said, “The brilliance of a literary piece depends on the faultlessness of each paragraph; the clarity of the paragraph depends on the flawlessness of each sentence; and the purity of the sentence depends on a happy choice of each word”. He outlined what should be done in literary writing. So it is the same with translation. During the course of our project we abide from the beginning through to the end by the criteria for translation, namely faithfulness, smoothness and elegance, which were set by Yan Fu, a well-noted expert at translation in the late Qing Dynasty, in short, to express what is meant in the original against a specific background, without the slightest deduction. Only in this way can we meet the requirements of translation, so that our versions are worthy of our reader, of literature and of the hard work of those poets of hundreds or thousands of years ago. Generally speaking, in our project, more importance is attached to the content than to the form. For example:

1. 题都城南庄

(唐)崔护

去年今日此门中，
人面桃花相映红。
人面不知何处去，
桃花依旧笑春风。

Inscribed on the Door of a House in a Village South of the Capital

Cui Hu [Tang Dynasty]

To the house I paid a visit this time last year,
When in harmony were a beauty and peach flowers standing.
Where the beauty has gone by now I'm not clear,
With the flowers left still in the vernal breeze smiling.

2. 生查子

(宋) 欧阳修

去年元夜时，
花市灯如昼。
月上柳梢头，
人约黄昏后。
今年元夜时，
花与灯依旧。
不见去年人，
泪湿春衫袖。

Song of Hawthorn

Ouyang Xiu [Song Dynasty]

On the lantern festival of last year,
Lantern light on the floral show was bright as daylight.
Atop the willow tree hung the moon, full and clear,
Witnessing a rendezvous between a man and me after twilight.
On the lantern festival of this year,

Flowers and lantern light remain the same on show.
But the man I love fails to live up to his promise made here,
Thus my spring shirt is stained with tears of woe.

In these two examples cited above, the syllables and feet in each line are different in the transformation of Chinese characters into English words. A full expression of the content should be seen as more important. Since Chinese and English are very different languages, such a disparity in form between the translation and the original is in many cases unavoidable. However, the form is also taken into consideration where possible, for one of the remarkable features of poetry is the beauty of form and rhyming. In composing an English poem, importance is attached to the stress of syllables, while in composing a Chinese poem, importance is attached to tonal patterns. These two language phenomena are not the same but similar in a sense. So we can say here that all nations can manage to express the same or at least similar meaning in different ways when they are engaged in literary translation, but they obey one principle "attention paid to expression of the content" without prior agreement. For a translator, when possible, both the form and the content are taken into account. For instance:

海内存知己，天涯若比邻。

Upon the globe we have friends heart to heart,
We are like close neighbours, though far apart.

By Wang Bo [Tang Dynasty]

战士军前半死生，美人帐下犹歌舞。

Soldiers bleed and die on the battlefield,
Beauties sing and dance for the emperor.

By Gao Shi [Tang Dynasty]

In both of the above examples, the feet and syllables arranged are the same in the two lines, for such versions sound more like English poems and conform all the more to the requirements of poetry, which has in it the beauty of rhythms as music does. Without any consideration of the form, the translation of a poem would be reduced to disjointed prose, causing a loss of what is called poetry. Quite properly, poetry, like other literary genres, is a good combination of internal subjective sentiments and external objective