



北大名家名著文丛

许渊冲 著

# 中诗英韵探胜

(第二版)



北京大学出版社  
PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS

许渊冲 著

# 中诗英韵探胜



北京大学出版社  
PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS

## 图书在版编目(CIP)数据

中诗英韵探胜/许渊冲著. —2版. —北京:北京大学出版社,2010.7  
(北大名家名著文丛)

ISBN 978-7-301-17152-3

I. 中… II. 许… III. 古典诗歌-中国-英语-翻译-研究 IV. H315.9

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2010)第 075937 号

书 名: 中诗英韵探胜

著作责任者: 许渊冲 著

责任编辑: 黄敏劼

标准书号: ISBN 978-7-301-17152-3/H·2497

出版发行: 北京大学出版社

地 址: 北京市海淀区成府路 205 号 100871

网 址: <http://www.pup.cn>

电子邮箱: [pw@pup.pku.edu.cn](mailto:pw@pup.pku.edu.cn)

电 话: 邮购部 62752015 发行部 62750672 编辑部 62750112

出版部 62754962

印 刷 者: 三河市欣欣印刷有限公司

经 销 者: 新华书店

650 毫米×980 毫米 16 开本 27.5 印张 506 千字

1992 年 3 月第 1 版 2010 年 7 月第 2 版

2010 年 7 月第 1 次印刷

定 价: 48.00 元

---

未经许可,不得以任何方式复制或抄袭本书之部分或全部内容。

版权所有,侵权必究 举报电话: 010-62752024

电子邮箱: [fd@pup.pku.edu.cn](mailto:fd@pup.pku.edu.cn)

## **On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme**

From the *Book of Poetry*

to the *Romance of the Western Bower*

This book presents 100 classical Chinese poems dated from 11th century BC to AD 14th century, with two or more different versions to each of them, in order that the reader may see more clearly from different angles the beauty of Chinese poetry or, in the words of John Turner, "the most literary, the most artistic, the longest established civilization that exists." This book also presents a comparative study of Chinese and Western masterpieces such as the *Book of Poetry* and Homer's *Iliad*, Tao Yuanming and Wordsworth, Li Bo and Byron, Du Fu and Shelley, Wang Shifu's *Romance of the Western Bower* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, etc. Therefore, it is predictable that this book will make a new contribution to the intercultural communication between the East and the West.

# Introduction

## I

There are one billion people who use the English language and another billion who wield the Chinese, so the translation from one language into the other is the most important intercultural communication in the world of today. As the English is an inflexional language and the Chinese a hieroglyphic one, their translation is also one of the most difficult tasks for translators. Interlingual communication, as described by I. A. Richards(1953, p. 250) is “very probably the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos”. It is particularly true of the translation of classical Chinese verse in English rhyme, for the relationship between the words is implicit in the former but explicit in the latter.

Difficult and complex as verse translation from Chinese into English is, different versions began to appear as early as the 18th century. As John Dryden(1631-1700)pointed out, verse translation may be classified into three types. The first is “metaphrase” or word-by-word and line-by-line literal translation as advocated by Ben Jonson. The second is “paraphrase or translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as not to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered.” The third is “imitation” or adaptation in which “the translator assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees the occasion.”

Sir William Jones(1746-1794)was the first to practise all the three types of translation for Chinese poetry. “His literal version is metaphrase,” said Professor Fan Cunzhong in *Chinese Poetry and English Translation*(*Foreign Languages* 1981/5), “while his metrical version is, we may say, half-way between paraphrase and imitation.” “Unlike a translator, an imitator is not in duty bound to find a parallel for every phrase in his original. He may select. He may amplify. Taking only some general hints from the original, he can write as if the original

writer were an Englishman addressing an English audience of the late 18th century. It is natural, therefore, that Jones's metrical version should be typical 18th century verse," which exerted considerable influence on English poets of the 19th century like Byron, Shelley, and Tennyson (See V. de Sola Pinto; *Sir William Jones and English Literature, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XI, Pt. 4, 686-694, esp. 687-688, 693). "The polished simplicity of the original," continued Professor Fan, "is entirely lost in a mass of conventional verbiage. From our point of view it can hardly be called translation. To borrow a term from music, it is but a variation of a theme from a poem in the Chinese *Book of Poetry*."

## II

James Legge (1814-1897) was the second scholar to translate the *Book of Poetry* in two English versions, one literal and the other metrical. Here is his "metaphrase" of the first stanza of the first poem of the *Book of Poetry*:

Kwan-kwan go the ospreys,  
On the islet in the river.  
The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady:—  
For our prince a good mate she.

This stanza of a nuptial song describes a young man thinking of his love on hearing the soft cry of a pair of water birds. What are these birds? Are they ospreys which live on fish-eating? No. Legge himself admits in his Notes that "the introduction of a bird of prey into a nuptial ode was thought, however, to be incongruous." So I think it would be better to use the word "turtledoves" instead. Since the Chinese word with an ambiguous meaning capable of different interpretations has no exact equivalent in English, we can only translate it by an approximate English word. As the Chinese is not an onomatopoetic language, the harmonious notes of the male and female birds answering each other cannot be accurately described in the original. In fact, their soft cry is less like "kwan-kwan" than "kwa-kwa" or even "ku-ku". If the birds are turtledoves and not ospreys, then the low sound they make should be "coos" instead of "kwan-kwan."

In line 2 of the original, the place where the water birds are crying is also capable of different interpretations; it may be an islet or simply a sand bar. As the Chinese language is not so precise as the English, it

would be better to denote the place by a word of vaguer meaning such as waterside or rivershore which may apply both to an islet and a sand bar.

In line 3, Legge uses three adjectives to modify the young woman: “modest, retiring, virtuous,” saying in his Notes that “modest” is to be understood of the lady’s mind and “retiring” of her deportment. It seems very exact, but the Chinese words have a vague meaning and “modest” and “retiring” form together a phrase which simply means “beautiful” or “slender”, so Legge’s word-for-word translation is only faithful to the original in form but not in sense.

In line 4, Legge follows strictly the word order of the original and calls the young man “our prince”. But now most scholars agree that this poem is only a folk song collected by royal musicians from the countryside over two thousand years ago, so the young man and woman are only common people and not princes. I think it better to retranslate this stanza as follows:

By riverside are cooing  
     A pair of turtledoves;  
 A good young man is wooing  
     A maiden fair he loves.

### III

Herbert A. Giles (1845-1935) was a translator highly praised by Lytton Strachey, who said in *Characters and Commentaries* (1933) that the poetry in Giles’s version “is the best that this generation has known.” If Legge’s version is “metaphrase”, then Giles’s may be said to be half-way between “paraphrase” and “imitation”, closer to the former than to the latter. We may read for example his version of Yuan Zhen’s *At An Old Palace* in Chapter VIII.

For another example, we may compare Giles’s version of Li Shangyin’s *Souvenirs* with mine:

You ask when I’m coming: alas not just yet...  
 How the rain filled the pools on that night when we met!  
 Ah, when shall we ever snuff candles again,  
 And recall the glad hours of that evening of rain? (G)

You ask me when I can come back, but I don’t know,  
 The pools in western hills with autumn rain o’erflow.  
 When by our window can we trim the wicks again

And talk about this endless, dreary night of rain? (X)

The original is susceptible of two interpretations for we are not sure whether the verb in line 2 is in the present or past tense. Giles selected the past and entitled his version *Souvenirs*, those of the glad hours of an evening of rain. But most Chinese critics would select the present and that night become dreary. If the translator's selection should reflect the poet's preference, we may conclude Chinese poetry tends to be more melancholy than English verse.

## IV

If the methods of translation practised by Legge and Giles are "metaphrase" and "paraphrase", then that of Ezra Pound (1885-1972) may be called free translation or even "imitation". For instance, we may read Pound's version of the elegy on the deceased Lady Li written by Liu Che, Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty (156-87BC):

The rustling of the silk is discontinued,  
Dust drifts over the courtyard.  
There is no sound of foot-fall and the leaves  
Scurry into heaps and lie still.  
And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them;  
A wet leaf that clings to the threshold.

The first four lines are metaphrased or paraphrased, but the last couplet cannot be found in the original and may be called a new conclusion of Pound's own. The multiple comparison of the dead woman with "a wet leaf" is considered a success. But the image of yellow leaves can be found in another poem by Liu Che, *Song of the Autumn Wind*. It can also be found in other poems by other Chinese poets, for example, in Lu Lun's *Grief in Autumn*:

As years pass by, grey grows my hair;  
When autumn's come, the trees stand bare.  
Perplexed, I ask the yellow leaf,  
'Do you like me feel gnawed by grief?'

Did Pound draw inspiration from other poems or poets? I can not say for sure. But, anyhow, his version may be classified as "imitation" for he has only taken some general hints from his original or other poems



written by other poets.

But his "imitation" is not always successful. For instance, in *The River-merchant's Wife* we find the following:

At sixteen you departed,  
 You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies.  
 And you had been gone five months.  
 The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.  
 You dragged your feet when you went out.  
 By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,  
 Too deep to clear them away!  
 The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.

This poem has found its way into Helen Gardener's *New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1972) and Norton's *Anthology of American Literature* (1974), but I am afraid it would seem more narrative and less lyrical than the following version:

I was sixteen when you went far away,  
 Passing Three Canyons studded with rocks grey,  
 Where ships were wrecked when spring flood ran high,  
 Where gibbons' wails seemed coming from the sky.  
 Green moss now overgrows before our door,  
 Your footprints, hidden, can be seen no more.  
 Moss can't be swept away, so thick it grows,  
 And leaves fall early when the west wind blows.

Here we may catch a glimpse of the difference between Western epic and Eastern lyric.

## V

If Giles's translation is half-way between "paraphrase" and "imitation", then Arthur Waley's (1889-1966) is half-way between "metaphrase" and "paraphrase". Giles is on the side of rhymed verse for "rhyme", as says Swinburne in his *Essays and Studies* (1875), "is the native condition of lyric verse in English; a rhymeless lyric is a maimed thing." Waley, on the other hand, is against the use of rhyme in translating Chinese verse. "The restrictions of rhyme necessarily injure either the vigour of one's own language or the literalness of one's version." Or as he puts it more briefly, "If one uses rhyme, it is

impossible not to sacrifice sense to sound." Now, let us compare his rhymeless version with a rhymed one of Cao Song's *Protest*.

The hills and rivers of the lowland country  
You have made your battleground.  
How do you suppose the people who live there  
Will procure firewood and hay?  
Do not let me hear you talking together  
About titles and promotions;  
For a single general's reputation  
Is made out of ten thousand corpses. (W)

The lakeside country has become a battleground.  
How can the peasants and woodmen live all around?  
I pray you not to talk about the glories vain;  
A victor's fame is built on bones of soldiers slain. (X)

Which version has injured the vigour of the English language: such prosaic long words as "promotion" and "reputation" or such poetic diction as "glories" and "fame"? Which version has injured the literalness of the version: "the lowland country" or "the lakeside country", the "corpses" or "bones of soldiers slain"? It would not be difficult to see the rhymed version has not sacrificed sense to sound.

For another example, we may compare Waley's rhymeless version and another rhymed one, of Bo Juyi's *Red Cockatoo*:

Sent as a present from Annam—  
A red cockatoo  
Coloured like the peach-tree blossom,  
Speaking with the speech of men.  
And they did to it what is always done  
To the learned and eloquent.  
They took a cage with stout bars  
And shut it up inside. (W)

Annam has sent us from afar a red cockatoo;  
Colored like peach-tree blossom, it speaks as men do,  
But it is shut up in a cage with bar on bar  
Just as the learned or eloquent scholars are. (X)

This quatrain has revealed the fate shared by bird and men, by intel-

lectuals ancient and modern. Waley writes, says *New Statesman*, “as one might talk, he accommodates the deep with the trivial; he delicately, coolly enchants.” But in the present version, I find him talking less like a poet than like a prosaic writer, less delicately than coolly, and his version less deep than trivial, for he has sacrificed beauty to truth.

## VI

If Waley’s free verse translation is half-way between “metaphrase” and “paraphrase”, then that of Witter Bynner, like Giles’s rhymed version, is half-way between “paraphrase” and “imitation.” Unlike Waley’s prosaic version, Bynner’s is more poetic for he has performed “the miracle of identifying the wonder of beauty with common sense,” as he says of the Tang poets he translated in his *Jade Mountain* published in 1929. For instance, we may compare his version and Innes Herdan’s, of Du Shen-nian’s *On a Walk in the Early Spring*:

Only to wanderers can come  
 Ever new the shock of beauty,  
 Of white cloud and red cloud dawning from the sea,  
 Of spring in the wild-plum and river-willow. . . .  
 I watch a yellow oriole dart in the warm air,  
 And a green water-plant reflected by the sun.  
 Suddenly an old song fills  
 My heart with home, my eyes with tears. (Bynner)

We two are just wandering officials  
 Taken unaware by the freshness of season and scene;  
 Pink clouds rising from the sea at daybreak;  
 Spring edging the river with plum and willow.  
 Mild air excites the golden oriole;  
 Clear light twinkles in green duckweed.  
 Suddenly I hear you singing an old tune  
 And home thoughts fill my eyes with tears. (Herdan)

Herdan’s free verse translation is half-way between “metaphrase” and “paraphrase”, closer to the former than the latter, for she tries, as she says in her *300 Tang Poems* published in 1973, “to keep as close to the original as it is possible to do in a language so utterly different”. In hers we find only an objective description of the wonder of nature, but in

Bynner's a subjective, lyrical narration of the wonder not only of nature but also of the poet, especially in lines 2-4 and 7-8 in which we can see the miracle of the identification of the two wonders.

The same is true of his version of Du Fu's well-known verse in *A Spring View*:

Though a country be sundered, hills and rivers endure;  
And spring comes green again to trees and grasses  
Where petals have been shed like tears  
And lonely birds have sung their grief....

According to most Chinese critics, lines 3-4 should mean that the poet sheds tears on seeing the fallen petals and feels grieved on hearing the singing birds. If so, there is only common sense without wonder of nature. When Bynner says it is the petals that are shed like tears and the birds that are grieved for loneliness, we see even flowers and birds share the poet's feeling and common sense, and become wonder of nature. Here we may say Bynner has outdone the original.

## VII

Henry H. Hart is probably the first American translator who has modernized his version of ancient Chinese verse, perhaps because "poetry", as Herbert Spencer said, "should diminish the friction between the minds of the writer and reader." Afraid the modern Western reader might fail to see "the universal humanity which shines through every line" of ancient Chinese poems and "the beauty which is everywhere in the world for those who trouble to seek it out," as he says in *A Garden of Peonies* published in 1938, Hart has translated three books of classical Chinese poems in the form of modern American verse. For example, we may compare his modern version and my rhymed one, of Wang Wei's *Man and Nature*:

Day after day  
In vain we labor—  
And grow old.

So come,  
Empty a cup of wine  
With me.

Waste no pity  
On the falling blossoms,  
Year after year  
They will come again  
With spring. (Hart)

From day to day man will grow old,  
So drink the cup of wine you hold.  
Don't grieve o'er flowers falling here;  
They'll come with spring from year to year. (Xu)

We cannot fail to see the difference between a romantic quatrain of the 19th century and a modern poem of the 20th.

It is true that before Hart, Amy Lowell (1874-1925) has already modernized her version of Yang Yuhuan's *Dancing*:

Wide sleeves sway.  
Scents,  
Sweet scents  
Incessant coming.

It is red lilies,  
Lotus lilies,  
Floating up,  
And up,  
Out of autumn mist.

Thin clouds  
Puffed,  
Fluttered,  
Blown on a rippling wind  
Through a mountain pass.

Young willow shoots  
Touching,  
Brushing  
The water  
Of the garden pool.

But in Hart's version, what we see is a Chinese poet and his philosophy of life, while in Lowell's, it becomes an American dancer instead of an

ancient Chinese. Lowell has modernized few of her versions but Hart, many. So I would regard him as the initiator of modern American verse into classical Chinese poetry.

## VIII

In the 1940s appeared two collections of Chinese poems: *Selections from the 300 Poems of the Tang Dynasty* translated by Soame Jenyns and published in London and *The White Pony* edited by Robert Payne and published in New York. Both the English and American translators practise “metaphrase”. “It has seemed best to translate the poems as simply and literally as possible,” says Payne. “The Chinese has therefore been translated line by line—without rhyme, for to have succeeded in rhyme would have necessitated padding out the lines or so changing their forms that they would have become unrecognizable.” But we shall find out if we compare Jenyns’ rhymeless version and my rhymed one, of Du Fu’s *Coming across a Disfavored Musician on the Southern Shore of the Yangzi River*:

In the old days I saw you at the palace of the prince of Chi,  
And I often heard you before the halls of Tsui Chiu.  
South of Yangtze it is still peaceful and the scenery is good,  
And now in the time of falling blossoms I meet you again. (Jenyns)

How oft in princely mansions did we meet!  
As oft in lordly halls I heard you sing.  
The South with flowers is no longer sweet;  
We chance to meet again in parting spring. (Xu)

In which version is the contrast between the past and present more striking? Has the rhymed version padded out its lines and changed their form? I think it has padded them no more than Payne has loaded with notes his version of Li Shangyin’s *Inlaid Psaltery*:

I wonder why the inlaid psaltery has fifty strings.  
Every string and peg evokes the beautiful years,  
Dawn-dreaming Chuang-tzu, the hovering butterfly;  
In spring the Emperor’s heart haunting the cuckoos,  
Moonlight in the blue sea, pearls shedding tears,  
In the warm sun the jade in the blue fields engendering  
smoke—

So should our loves endure, being filled with memory;  
But already these days are fading into the years.

\* Li Shangyin is tenuous and recondite; nearly every poem needs a long commentary. Chuang-tzu is, of course, the famous philosopher who dreamed he was a butterfly. The soul of the emperor Wu returned in the shape of a cuckoo. The “pearls shedding tears” may refer to mermaids—“in the outer southern seas there are mermaids who can weave under the sea and whose tears are pearls.” Huai Nanzi claimed that pearls wax and wane with the moon. The legend of the fields may refer to the poor man who planted jade that flowered, ate the fruit, and with it won the beautiful lady; it probably has an evasive sexual meaning. No one quite knows what the poem is about, and what the inlaid psalter represents, but there is, at least in the original, an extraordinary effect of a stream of images that dissolve into one another and gain brightness from their dissolution. In Chinese the poem is sharp-edged as well as pleasantly obscure.

We may compare Payne’s version with mine in Chapter IX to see which has padded out its lines or loaded it with notes, and which would make the reader feel the regret of the bygone years as sweet as an amorous dream, as dazzling as the wings of a butterfly, as sad as the cuckoo’s heart-broken song, as pale as the tears in a mermaid’s eye and as dim as vapor rising from sunburnt jade? Which is more likely to reproduce the extraordinary effect of a stream of images that dissolve into one another and gain brightness from their dissolution?

In 1956 appeared *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* translated by Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982), whose versions, according to *Renditions* Nos. 21 & 22, “are probably second only to Ezra Pound’s *Cathay* among all English translations of Chinese verse in terms of their superb vital idiom as well as their popularity and extensive influence.... William Carlos Williams hailed it as ‘one of the most brilliantly sensible books of poems in the American idiom’.... In *Naked Poetry; Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*, an anthology of contemporary American poets published in 1969, sixteen poems by Rexroth are selected and fourteen among them are translations from *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese*.” Rexroth’s translations “do not follow closely the source texts; instead, the source texts by and large only serve as a departure point from which his imagination soars freely.... The power and beauty of his translations often lie in the passages which he rendered most freely and which bear little

resemblance to the Chinese texts .... what are the innovative devices with which he ... improves on the source texts?... A close scrutiny of the different versions ... reveals how constantly Rexroth improved on his drafts and tried to transform his materials into concrete, exact, and vivid imagery. The mere 'paths' are turned into 'shattered pavements' which are much more concrete and echo the theme of a ruined palace. In the first version, the pipes 'moan' in the storm, in the second they 'roar' while in the final version, they 'whistle and roar'. 'Whistle and roar' are verbs which can more accurately describe the sound of organ pipes. Also, Rexroth first changed the 'autumn colors' to Autumn leaves, and finally into 'red autumn leaves'. This process clearly shows Rexroth's attempt to avoid abstraction and to render his imagery colorful, specific and precise."

Judging from the above, we may say Rexroth practises "imitation" more than "paraphrase". But, on the other hand, he also practises "metaphrase". For example, we may compare his version and mine, of Du Fu's following quatrain:

White birds, grey river.  
Scarlet flowers, green hills.  
I watch Spring pass.  
I doubt home return. (Rexroth)

Against the water blue birds look more white;  
On the green hills red flowers seem to burn.  
Alas! I see another spring in flight.  
Oh, when will come the day of my return? (Xu)

In this quatrain there are four things (river, birds, hills, flowers) painted in four colors (blue, white, green, red). As the original is already colorful enough, Rexroth uses "metaphrase" instead of "imitation", but he interpolates approximations of antithesis where there is none implied in the original, and as a result, he fails to bring out Du Fu's feeling of bitterness, that is, his homesickness set off by the beauty of the scenery. Therefore, we may conclude that he has sacrificed sense to form, and truth to beauty.

## IX

In 1965 appeared an important collection of Chinese poems translated by Angus C. Graham, who says in the Introduction, "The



element in poetry which travels best is of course concrete imagery” and “the essence of poetry is the Image.” Since every translation involves loss, the question is what the translator chooses to lose: image or idea. Since every translator chooses to preserve what he considers essential and to lose what seems of minor importance, Graham chooses to preserve the imagery at any cost. For instance, we may compare his version and mine, of a couplet from Li Shangyin’s *Untitled Poem* ii:

A gold toad gnaws the lock.  
Open it, burn the incense.  
A tiger of jade pulls the rope.  
Draw from the well and escape. (Graham)

When doors were locked and incense burned, I came at night  
And left at dawn when windlass pulled up water cool. (Xu)

This couplet hints at a tryst of the poet with his love. The image of gold toad carved on the lock is a symbol of the closed door. The door was not closed till night, so the locked door becomes a sign for the nightfall. The night is the time of the tryst, so it is only circumstantial when compared with the love affair. Thus we see the images of door, lock, gold toad cannot be considered essential in this couplet. Nor can that of jade tiger carved as an ornament on the windlass over a well. As people used a windlass to draw up water early in the morning, the poet’s departure at dawn implies he passed the night in the bedchamber of his love, so the morning is also circumstantial. The images of well, windlass, rope, jade tiger, all are of minor importance. As Graham would lose the idea of tryst rather than the images of gold toad and jade tiger, I think he has sacrificed the essential to the non-essential.

Chinese imagery may have multiple meanings. Graham would not lose any of them. An example is his version of a couplet from Du Fu’s *Autumn Meditation*:

The clustered chrysanthemums have opened twice in tears of other  
days;  
The forlorn boat, once and for all, tethers my homeward thoughts.

Then he makes the following comments:

“Is it the flowers which burst open or the tears, the boat which is tied up or the poet’s heart? Is the ‘other day’ past, or a