

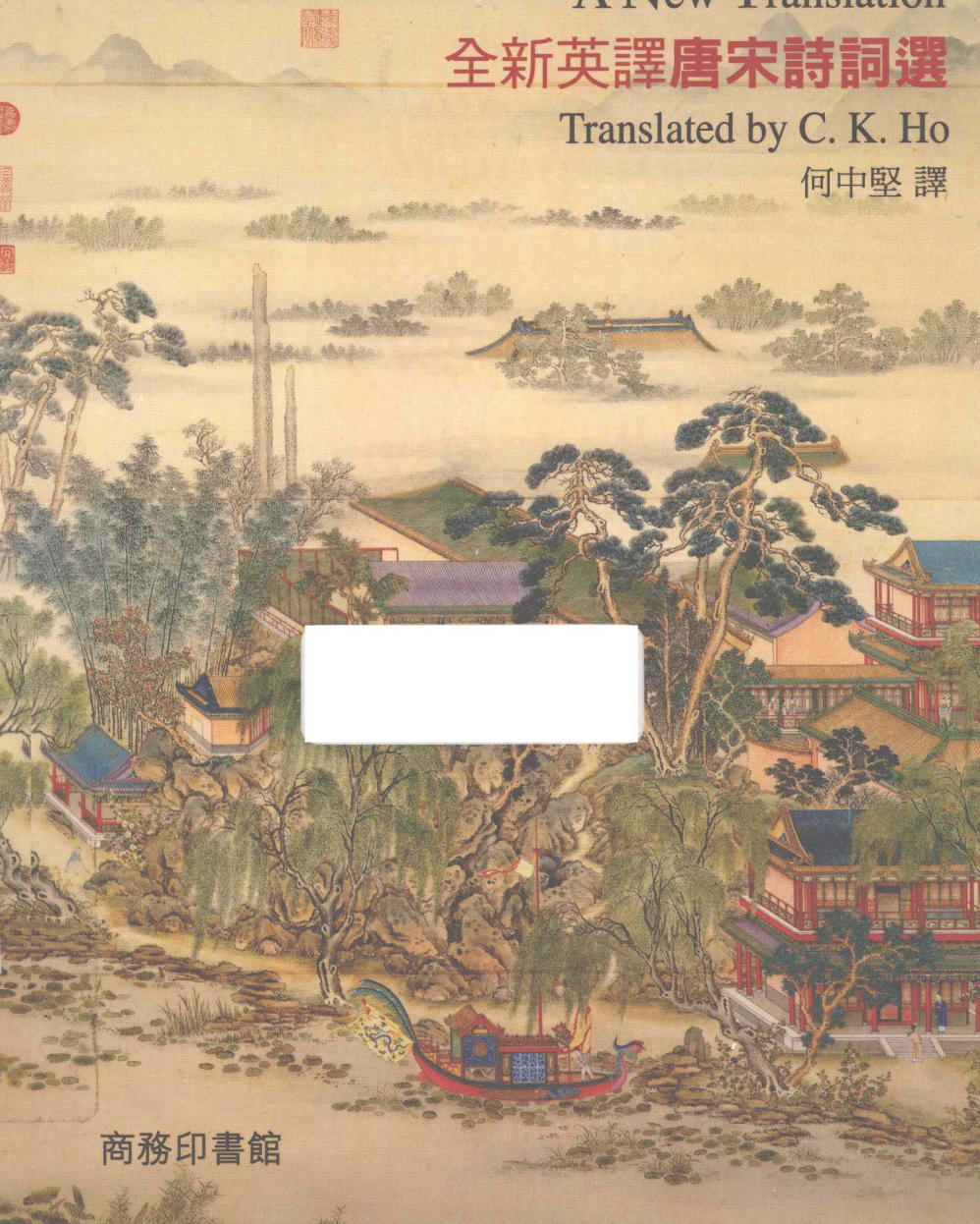
# CHINESE POETRY OF TANG AND SONG DYNASTIES:

A New Translation

全新英譯唐宋詩詞選

Translated by C. K. Ho

何中堅 譯



商務印書館

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獻給我的母親陳淑佳  
Dedicated to My Mother Chan Sook Kai



樹欲靜，而風不息。  
*A tree wants peace,  
But the wind won't cease.*

子欲養，而親不在。  
*A son wants to repay,  
But his parents won't stay.*

## Preface 前言

Classical Chinese poetry is one of the three greatest heritage arts of China. The other two are calligraphy and painting. The exquisite beauty of classical Chinese poems, especially those of the Tang and Song Dynasties, has earned them their prominent status in Chinese literature and popularity among Chinese people through the centuries.

Classical Chinese poems are succinct and melodious. They are in many ways different from English poems. The most obvious is in the use of rhyme. Unlike English poems, often the same rhyme runs through an entire Tang Poem (唐詩) in a fixed pattern whilst the same or different rhymes may be used in different stanzas according to the tune of a Tang or Song Lyric (唐宋詞). For example, with a Regular Poem (律詩), the same rhyme is used for the first, second, fourth, sixth and eighth lines as a rule. Sometimes the same rhyme is used in over ten alternate lines in certain old style poems or lyrics. Such a unique rhyme system greatly enhances their musical quality.

Translating these poems into another completely different language such as English is enormously difficult. Reproducing such a unique rhyme system in English requires even greater efforts. Indeed very few such translated versions can be found in bookshops and libraries. Often they are translated into un-rhymed line-by-line prose. Sometimes, the lines are rhymed in pairs. In so doing, it is possible that the original flavour and musical quality of these poems could get lost in the translation.



I am therefore amazed but pleased to learn that C. K. Ho, an adjunct Associate Professor of our Department, has successfully translated 153 selected poems of the Tang and Song Dynasties into English. He manages to rhyme his translations line by line according to the original poems' rhyme schemes without sacrificing their essence. The translated poems are fluent, melodious and beautiful. Through his dedication and perseverance over the years, the beauty of classical Chinese poetry is reproduced in English by retaining their original style. It is a difficult and daring endeavour. C. K. Ho surely deserves to be congratulated for his contribution in this field.

Besides being a literature lover, C. K. Ho is also a sportsman and an Olympian. He represented Hong Kong in shooting at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games and the 1990 Beijing Asian Games and had won many medals for Hong Kong in international competitions in the years past. He has demonstrated utmost patience, care and precision in his translations to the same high level as he had shown in his precision shooting sport.

I sincerely wish that his noble aim of showing to the world the real beauty of classical Chinese poetry would be fulfilled.

Professor K. W. Chau  
The University of Hong Kong  
August 2011

## Translator's Preface 譯者前言

Readers will find the translations in this book distinctly different from other English translations. They adhere to the rhyme scheme of classical Chinese poetry i.e. they rhyme in the same way as the original poems. Every endeavour was made to reproduce in English the style, the flavor, the essence and other qualities that render classical Chinese poetry elegant, compelling and melodious.

Rhyming is of the essence of classical Chinese poetry. Methodical rhyming gives the poems superb musical quality. They are therefore pleasant to read, to recite and to hear. Indeed, many classical Chinese poems were originally written for music and were sung at banquets and other gatherings. Imagine how a Tang poem would become were it to be de-rhymed. It would become flat and loses its appeal.

It is noted, however, that with a few exceptions, many Tang and Song poems have simply been translated into line-by-line prose bearing little resemblance to the original text. Rhyming is either completely absent or imposed in pairs at the expense of style and even meaning.

I believe the beauty of these poems can be better reproduced in English if their original style and rhyme scheme are retained.

I was prompted to embark on the translation work by my love for Chinese literature and my aim to show to the world the real beauty of classical Chinese poetry.

My love for Chinese literature is partly inherited from my mother

and partly nurtured. My mother was a school headmistress with profound interest and knowledge in Chinese literature. She taught me how to appreciate the beauty of classical prose and poems especially Tang poems, and how to enjoy reading and reciting them when I was a boy. I was not old enough to fully understand the contents but I remember I was deeply touched from time to time by the stories behind. Today, thanks to my beloved mother, I can still recite a few pretty long prose which had long since engraved in my mind.

As I grew up, I read more classical Chinese literature and became enchanted by its brevity and beauty. I was amazed at how much more could be said in classical Chinese in one page when compared with modern Chinese. This is more obvious with poems where very few characters were used in each line. Indeed, no more than seven characters were used in a line as a rule and there are only either four or eight lines in most poems. Yet they were enough to beautifully recreate a scene, to convey a delicate message or to describe subtle feelings or mood or passion.

This book contains 153 of the most popular poems of the Tang and Song Dynasties including 113 Tang Poems (唐詩) and 40 Tang and Song Lyrics (唐 / 宋詞). Many of these are real masterpieces containing lines or phrases that have become proverbial in the Chinese language. Simple English is used in the translation to ensure pleasant reading. It is hoped that the translations themselves would read like poems.

The most difficult part of the translation process is in the choice of words that would truly reproduce the rich and delicate feeling, mood, emotion and passion expressed by the poet while at the same time ensuring the rhyme and rhythm are matched as far as possible and without straying from the spirit, style, meaning and succinctness of the original poem.



Due to the enormous difference between the Chinese and English languages, and the cultures of the two peoples, there are many limitations and obstacles in the translation. Often, many hours of research and brain searching were involved just to choose a suitable word to translate the thoughts or feelings that were uniquely Chinese and to match a particular rhyme. And, unlike writing poems when a writer has complete freedom in the choice of words, a translator's freedom is much restricted in order to be faithful to the original.

When a rhyme is repeated up to five, six or even seven times within a poem e.g. with rhyme schemes such as aa-ba-ca-da (Regulated Poem 律詩) or aa-ba-ca-da-ca-fa (The Moon over the Mountain Pass 關山月 by Li Bai 李白) or aaa-bbcb-bbb (Lyric – Phoenix Hairpin 詞 — 釵頭鳳 by Lu You 陸游) or aaaaaaa (Lyric – Eternal Longing 詞 — 長相思 by Lu You 陸游), rhyme matching poses even greater difficulties.

Full or perfect rhyming was achieved for most of the translations. Sometimes when perfect rhyming was unachievable, near-perfect or half rhymes were used. Under no circumstances, however, had I sacrificed the original meaning of a line for the sake of rhyme matching. In the process, I come to understand that certain English words and expressions, albeit good for English poems, often fail to produce the desired effects in translating Chinese poems.

The following are two examples of rhyme and rhythm matching:

- (1) *Dawn was missed in a good sleep in spring;  
Everywhere I hear birds sing.*

*Overnight, the wind and rain clamoured;  
How many flowers down did they bring?*

*(Dawn in Spring by Meng Haoran)*

春眠不覺曉，處處聞啼鳥，  
夜來風雨聲，花落知多少。

(2) *Deeply in love but*

*our passion appears to have gone;  
Before the wine, no smile we don.*

*The candle has a heart —  
it grieves to see us part,  
And sheds tears for us till dawn.*

(Farewell by Du Mu)

多情卻似總無情，唯覺樽前笑不成。  
蠟燭有心還惜別，替人垂淚到天明。

Antithesis is often present in classical Chinese poetry. Antithesis greatly enhances the vividness of pictures being presented before the reader. I have attempted to match this in English as far as possible so that the lines would be as lively and impressive as the originals. The following are two examples of antithesis matching:

(1) *In a thousand hills,*

*not a single bird would show;*

*In ten thousand trails, there's*

*not a trace of any soul.*

(Snowy River by Liu Zongyuan)

千山鳥飛絕，萬徑人蹤滅。

(2) *Out of the Han frontier,  
       like a tumbleweed I rolled;  
 Into the barbarian sky,  
       wild geese were homeward bound.*

*In the vast desert,  
       a lone pillar of smoke was straight;  
 Over the long river,  
       the setting sun round.*

*(An Envoy at the Frontier by Wang Wei)*

征蓬出漢塞，歸雁入胡天。  
 大漠孤煙直，長河落日圓。

Footnotes are included after some poems as necessary either to explain a name, a place, a custom, a tradition, a legend or an allusion or the background referred to in the poems so as to help readers to better understand and appreciate the poems.

My heart-felt thanks are due to my colleagues and friends in the University of Hong Kong for their support of my work, particularly to C. T. who patiently and critically read the entire manuscript and gave me invaluable opinions and suggestions.

C. K. Ho  
 August 2011



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