

A time will come to ride the wind and cleave the waves;  
I'll set my cloud-like sail to cross the sea which raves.

长风破浪会有时，  
直挂云帆济沧海。



Chinese-English

300 Tang Poems Classified by Theme

# 唐诗三百首

北京大学教授 许渊冲 译注

Translated and annotated by Pr. Xu Yuanchong  
(Peking University)



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Chinese civilization is the only civilization in the world that has been developing continuously for 5,000 years and is as dynamic as it has ever been. The books in this series have been carefully selected from a vast number of Chinese classics that were enormously influential throughout history, and have received considerable attention from Western readers. Since these books are fundamental to the understanding of traditional Chinese culture, both the Chinese texts and the corresponding English translations are provided so that the highest current standards of academic research can be maintained. This allows both Chinese and foreign people to read original ancient Chinese books and capture the essence of Chinese civilization.

## Preface

The 300 Tang poems selected in this anthology are classified into 10 categories according to themes, namely:

Man and Nature

Nature Poems

Farewell Poems

Homeland Poems

Love Poems

Historical Poems

Frontier Poems

Political and Satirical Poems

Personality and Character

Reflections and Recollections

The Classification is not strict, that is to say, one poem may fall into different categories. The first category includes 41 poems which describe natural scenery and communion of man with nature, for example, Li Bai's *Waterfall in Mount Lu Viewed from Afar*. The second category includes 39 poems which describe the force and beauty of nature, such as wind, rain, birds, trees, flowers, for example, He Zhizhang's *Willow*. The third category relates the poets' love of their friends and their sorrows of parting, for instance, Wang Bo's *Farewell to Prefect Du*. The fourth category shows the poets' love of their family and homeland, for instance, Meng Jiao's *Song of a Parting Son*. The fifth category is important for it includes 30 love poems which are not so passionate as English love songs, for example, Li Shangyin's *To One Unnamed*. The sixth category includes 30 historical poems which are not so long as Western epics, for example, Bai Juyi's *Everlasting*



*Regret.* The seventh consists of 20 frontier or war poems, for war usually broke out on the frontier, for instance, Wang Changling's *On the Frontier*. The eighth consists of 20 political and satirical poems, such as Du Fu's *Song of the Conscript*. The ninth deals with personality and character, such as Wang Zhihuan's *On the Stork Tower*. The last category deals with the poets' reflections and recollections on life, such as Li Bai's *Hard is the Way of the World*.

As Robert Payne says in *The White Poeny*, "We can understand a people best through their poetry, and the Chinese who have written poetry since the beginning of time always regarded poetry as the finest flower of their culture." And Lytton Strachey says of Giles's translation of Chinese poetry, "the poetry in it is the best that this generation has know," it "holds a unique place in the literature of the world. Its pages, for all their strange antiquity, are fresh to us, their humanity keeps them immortal." What is their humanity? I think it may refer to the Tang poets' love of nature as shown in the first and second categories of this book, their love of the country and people in the third and fourth categories, love of beauty in the fifth, of heroes in the sixth, of peace in the seventh, of freedom in the eighth, of honor in the ninth and of life in the last. These are what keeps Tang poetry immortal. So the publication of this anthology will help the world to achieve a better understanding of China. As Confucius says, it is good to understand, better to enjoy and best to delight. If the understanding will bring enjoyment and delight, then "what more felicity, as says Spencer, can fall to creature."



## About Tang Poems

It is said that the 21st century will be an age of globalization. The new generation worthy of the new age should be bred not only in its national culture but also in the global culture. Therefore, each nation should try to globalize its culture, in other words, to make its culture known to the world and become a part of the global culture so as to make it more brilliant.

If the 20th century may be said to be an American age, then the 19th was a British age and the 18th a French one. If we go further back, we may say that the 7th–13th centuries were Chinese ages, for during the Tang and the Song dynasties (618–1279), China was the most advanced country in the world, so far as political system, economic development and artistic and literary culture are concerned.

How did the Tang and the Song attain the highest development in the world during six hundred years? The answer may be summed up in two words, that is, the reign of “rite and music”. According to professor Y. L. Feng, music imitates the harmony of nature and rite imitates the order of the universe. Rite is instituted to secure the mean in man’s desire, and music, including poetry, to secure the mean in man’s sentiment. Music is benevolence concretized and rite is justice externalized. If a state is governed with rite and music, its people will be just and benevolent, and the world will be peaceful and happy. That is one of the reasons why China has been standing among the great nations for thousands of years.

Emperor Xuan Zong (685–762) who reigned at the zenith of the Tang Dynasty enjoyed the highest economic and cultural prosperity when his government promoted the performance of rite and music. This may be seen from the first two verses he wrote when he offered sacrifice to Confucius in his temple:

How much have you done, O, my sage,



All for the good of all the age!

This shows how much he worshipped Confucius and admired his wisdom. He followed Confucius in imitation of the order of the universe and provided conditions to make the performance of rite and music possible.

Hence, Tang poetry has become a gem of traditional Chinese literature. As early as 1898, Herbert A Giles published his rhymed translations of Tang poems, of which Lytton Strachey said, "the poetry in it is the best that this generation has known," and that it "holds a unique place in the literature of the world" "through its mastery of the tones and depths of affection." Later, Arthur Waley said in his *Translations from the Chinese*, "If one uses rhyme, it is impossible not to sacrifice sense to sound," and he translated Tang poems into free verse. Thus began the controversy between rhymed version and free version in the translation of Chinese poetry. Generally speaking, the free translation emphasizes faithfulness to the original while the rhymed version, the beauty of the translated verse. Therefore, the controversy between these two types of translation may be said to be contradiction or conflict between faithfulness or truth and beauty. This controversy has lasted for a century. For instance, we may read the following versions of Li Bai's *Farewell to a Friend*. The first version is a word for word transliteration, the second is more faithful to the original in word, while the third is more beautiful and poetical than the second.

(1) blue	hill	traverse	north	wall
white	water	wind	east	town
this	place	once	for	part
lonely	thistledown	thousand	miles	journey
float	cloud	roam	son	idea
fall	sun	old	man	feeling
wave	hand	from	here	go
sough	spot	horse	neigh	

(2) Green hills range north of the walled city,

The White River curves along its east.

Once we part here you'll travel far alone

Like the tumbleweed swept by the autumn wind.



A floating cloud—a wayfarer's feeling from home,  
 The setting sun—the affection of an old friend.  
 Waving adieu, as you now depart from me,  
 Our horses neigh, loath to part from each other.

(3) Blue mountains bar the northern sky;

White water girds the eastern town.

Here is the place to say goodbye;

You'll drift like lonely thistledown.

With floating cloud you'll float away;

Like parting day I'll part from you.

You wave your hand and go your way;

Your steed still neighs, "Adieu, adieu!"

If we compare these versions, we may say the second is faithful to the original so far as words are concerned, and the third is as balanced as the first so far as lines are concerned. If we compare their diction, we may find "range" is a geographic term and "curve" a geometric one, and they are not so beautiful as "bar" and "gird," for the one may be found in Keats' verse "while barred clouds bloom the soft dying day." And the other may remind us of Edmund Waller's poem *On a Girdle*. What is more important is the third couplet. In the second version "feeling" and "affection" are used; these two words are rather prosaic. In the third we can find no such words but the repetition of "float" and "part", which cannot be found but implied in the original and which make the version more poetical. The same is true of the "adieu" in the last verse. These may be called creative translation or recreation. In the fourth line of the second version we find the tumbleweed "swept by the autumn wind", which cannot be found in the original either. Can it be called creative translation? If the poet compares his friend to tumbleweed "swept by the autumn wind", he implies that the friend is forced to leave the place, which is not the case. So I think the "swept" phrase should be considered as mistranslation. The difference between mistranslation and creative translation lies in whether the translator makes his version better or worse. A creative translator should make his reader understand and enjoy his version and even delight in it.



The difference between faithful translation and creative translation may be considered as contradiction between truth and beauty, or between science and art. Sometimes there is unity between them, that is the reason why Keats says, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." But more often than not there is more contradiction than unity so far as verse translation is concerned. For instance, a couplet of Du Fu may be translated as follows:

(1) word for word transliteration:

literature	piece	thousand	ancient	affair
gain	loss	inch	heart	know

(2) A piece of literature is meant for the millennium.

But its ups and downs are known already in the author's heart.

(3) A poem may long, long remain.

Who knows the poet's loss and gain?

(4) A verse may last a thousand years.

Who knows the poet's smiles and tears!

When we compare these four versions, we may find "a piece of literature" and "loss and gain" faithful to the original in words, and in these two cases may we say that there is unity between truth and beauty or between science and art. As Robert Frost said, poetry is "saying one thing and meaning another", so when Du Fu said "a piece of literature", he meant a poem or verse, for he did not write much prose but poetry. So "a piece of literature" may be particularized into "poem" or "verse" here. As to "gain and loss", this phrase may either be generalized into "ups and downs" or particularized into "smiles and tears". Here we see more contradiction than unity in verse translation.

From the above examples we may conclude that the science school of translation emphasizes truth, that is, translation should be faithful to the original in word, in form and in sense, while the art school emphasizes beauty, that is, a translated verse should be as beautiful as the original in sense, in sound and in form. When a faithful version is not beautiful, we may use the methods of equalization (for example, millennium), generalization (long, long), and/or particularization (a thousand years) in order to make the reader understand and enjoy the version and delight in it. In short, the science school emphasizes understanding while the art school emphasizes enjoyment and delight.



Poetry, said Coleridge, is “the best words in the best order”. If the equivalent in the translated text is not the best word, we may sacrifice the equivalent to the best, that is to say, we may make the fullest possible use of the best expressions in the target language. That is the reason why equalization, generalization and particularization are used, and that may be called creative translation or recreation. If the formula for the principle of science school is “ $1+1=2$ ”, then that for the theory of art school is “ $1+1>2$ ”. For in science, the word goes as far as the sense, while in art, the sense goes beyond the word. Therefore, I think literary translation, and verse translation in particular, is not science but art.

In a certain sense, we may even say that literary translation is rivalry between the source language and the target language, to see which can better express the original idea. In reality, we may find such rivalry in the development of art and culture. For instance, the story of the Trojan war spread from mouth to mouth among the troubadours until Homer put it in words in the *Iliad*, so we may say that there was rivalry between the troubadours. Then Chapman in the 16th century and Pope in the 18th translated the *Iliad* from Greek into English, and there arose rivalry between the two languages. In a broader sense, even some of Shakespeare’s works may be said to be resulted from rivalry. Was not Hamlet in rivalry with the Danish legend and Romeo and Juliet with the Venetian story? In the 17th century, Dryden rewrote Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* and his *All for Love* was said to have improved and surpassed Shakespeare. Was it not rivalry? Whether Dryden surpassed Shakespeare or not, opinions may differ and vary. But anyhow, there was rivalry between them, and it cannot be denied that human culture has made progress through rivalry.

Tang poems are gems of Chinese literature. In 1929 Witter Bynner published his *Jade Mountains* in the United States, and in 1973 Innes Herdan published her translations in England. Both their versions are unrhymed: the former is more beautiful and the latter more faithful. In 1987 Hong Kong published a rhymed version of Tang poems, which won high praises from critics, but some of the translated poems cannot be said to be faithful and beautiful. In 1994 my *Songs of the Immortals* was published by Penguin Books and my *Poetry of the South* was considered as a high peak even in English literature by an American scholar in Melbourne University. In 1998 Minerva Press said my *Romance of the Western Bower* might vie with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* “in appeal and artistry”. So I am asked to trans-



late 300 Tang poems to vie with English and American poets. I have summed up my translation theories into the following words: "art of beautifulization and creation of the best as in rivalry." By "beautifulization" I mean a translated verse should be as beautiful as the original in sense, in sound and in form; by "ization" I include equalization (equivalence), generalization and particularization; by "ion" I imply comprehension (understanding), appreciation (enjoyment) and admiration (delight); by "creation" I understand the translator should be creative as the author of the original metamorphosed, writing and creating in the target language; by "the best" I mean an art of competition to see which version can better express the original idea, and make the reader understand and enjoy the poetry and delight in it.

There are a billion people who use the English language and more than a billion who use the Chinese, so these two languages are the most frequently used ones in the world, and the reciprocal translation between them is very important intercultural communication. As no people other than the Chinese have ever published a Chinese version of English or American masterpiece, so we have good reason to believe that our art of translation excels that of other nations in practice as well as in theory.

In 1988 dozens of Nobel Prize winners declared in Paris if mankind wish to perpetuate their existence, they must resort to Confucian wisdom. What is the wisdom of Confucius? Politically, it lies in the reign of "rite and music;" morally, it lies in the motto: "Do not do to others what you would not have others do to you;" literarily, it lies in the love of life, of nature, of peace, as shown in the Tang poems. The love of peace shows the Confucian idea of "rite" or order, and the love of nature shows that of "music" or beauty. If the people of the 21st century should learn wisdom from Confucius and put it into practice, if they love peace and nature as the Tang poets did, then Confucian wisdom might benefit global civilization and people might live a more peaceful, more prosperous and happier life in the coming years.



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