

# BOOK OF THREE ARTS

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Translators


Tommy W. K. Tao  
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Calligrapher

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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

三艺篇= Book of three arts: 英文 / 陶永强,  
潘铭燊译; 刘渭贤书法. —桂林: 广西师范大学  
出版社, 2014.2

ISBN 978-7-5495-4985-6



I. ①三 II. ①陶...②潘...③刘... III. ①古典  
诗歌—诗集—中国—英文②汉字—法书—作品集—  
中国—现代 I. ①I222②J292.28

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2013) 第 313611 号

广西师范大学出版社出版发行

(广西桂林市中华路 22 号 邮政编码: 541001)  
(网址: <http://www.bbtpress.com>)

出版人: 何林夏

全国新华书店经销

湛江南华印务有限公司印刷

(广东省湛江市霞山区绿塘路 61 号 邮政编码: 524002)

开本: 787 mm × 1 092 mm 1/32

印张: 4.5 字数: 8 千字

2014 年 2 月第 1 版 2014 年 2 月第 1 次印刷

印数: 0 001~3 000 册 定价: 29.00 元

如发现印装质量问题, 影响阅读, 请与印刷厂联系调换。

# 三艺篇

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陶永强 潘铭燊 一译

刘渭贤 一书

# Preface

Poetry is what is lost in translation — Robert Frost

Why would Robert Frost make such an unkind remark about poetry in translation? I have always loved Robert Frost, and considered him one of my favourite poets of the 20th century. As one who loves to translate poetry, I have thought long and hard about Frost's remark, and this is what I think he was saying: Too many translators are so devoted either to dictionary definitions of the words in the original, or to recreating the prosodic structure of the original in the target language, that they forget about reproducing the sublime feeling one gets when reciting the original. In both cases, the problem is that the translator seems to focus more on rendering words or prosody than on recreating the poetic experience of the original poem.

Robert Frost said something else about poetry that contains

very good advice for the translator: "Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words." Therefore, the translator should use the words of the original poem as a guide to find the original feeling of the poet, then find similar words and prosodic devices in the target language to recreate that feeling. Most traditional Chinese poetry is what we call "occasional", commemorating any significant occasion, whether it be the joy of meeting an old friend, the sadness of saying goodbye, or the nostalgia of visiting a famous historical site. The occasion may be as grand as a victory celebration or as personal as noticing the first grey hair in the mirror. I view most Chinese poems as a prosodic commemoration of a significant occasion in unforgettable words. I think the challenge of the translator is to recreate the same feelings using unforgettable words in the target language.

The recent re-emergence of China as an economic powerhouse underscores the importance of understanding Chinese culture by non-Chinese. As difficult as it may be, the English translation of traditional Chinese poetry is an important part of the effort to spread greater understanding of Chinese culture in the West. Poetry gives the non-Chinese reader concise and memorable insights into the essence of

Chinese culture – especially the importance Chinese have always attached to things like family, friendship, loyalty, education, moderation, decorum, justice, reciprocity, diligence, simplicity, love of nature, etc., none of which are foreign or alien to the English speaker in Western societies. Poetry in translation is a user-friendly overview of Chinese culture.

The bilingual publication format, placing the English translation side-by-side with the original Chinese text, is an added boon for this volume. On the one hand, this is a sign of competence and confidence on the part of the translators, who have no fear of revealing the Chinese original to the skeptical bilingual reader. On the other hand, it also gives the reader a chance to instantly appreciate the different translation strategies employed by the translators to arrive at their English versions of the original.

In their translations, Tao and Poon illustrate not only difference in approaches to poetry translation between translators, but also the variety of different translation strategies available for each individual translator – sometimes using rhyme, sometimes not; retaining comparable line length or diverging from the original. Tao and Poon both

demonstrate a variety of strategies to recapture the original poetic effect in their translations.

The great Chinese poet Yang Wan-Li (1127–1206) once wrote about good poetry: “If you say it is a matter of words, I will say a good poet gets rid of words. If you say it is merely a matter of meaning, I will say a good poet gets rid of meaning. But without words and without meaning, you ask, where is the poetry? To this I reply: get rid of words and get rid of meaning, and the poetry will still be there”. The Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky (1933-2010) has written, “Languages are many but poetry is one”. This should be a source of encouragement for the translator to use the words in the original verse as a guide to find the original poetry, then find the most effective words and prosody in the target language to recreate the experience of the reader of the original poem.

Jan W. Walls, PhD



# Introductory Remarks

Translation is a chore. But poetry translation is bliss.

Most poems cannot be translated. Well, one can translate them, but the translation would not be poetry. Only a poem that makes the translator tremble can be translated. And if the translation likewise touches its reader's heart, then the poetry has been translated.

Paul Celan says that "a poem ... can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the ... not always greatly hopeful ... belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on heartland."<sup>①</sup>

The poems here that I have chosen to translate are messages in bottles that have washed up on my heartshore.

So, my hobby of poetry translation starts with reading. Reading lots of poems, like pacing along the beach every weekend, hoping to find the next message-in-a-bottle, to be added to my collection. There are plenty of good poems, plenty of interesting poems. But I can only collect and translate those poems that wash up on my heartshore, that have a hold on me and won't let me go. I, the poetry collector must first be the captive.

Then comes the hard work. Scrutinizing words. Choosing words. Arranging words. Sometimes there is no equivalent for a word or an expression in another language. I use discretion to say things a little differently from the original poem in my rendition. But I make every effort to faithfully convey the content, the feeling and the epiphany, that I may have perceived in the original poem. That is the translator's discipline. Poetry translation is both a craft and a discipline. A poetry translator needs not be a poet at the start, but must learn a poet's craft, and use it under the restraints of a translator's discipline.

Then comes the magic, when the charged-up energy from reading the original poem that keeps one awake at night finally finds release in the rendition of words which works

just right in the translation. From the magic flows the bliss. And in such a magical moment, I believe, the poetry translator becomes a poet-translator.

I hope that a few of these poems that follow will wash up on heartland, somewhere out there.

Tommy W. K. Tao

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① Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem: and Fall in Love with Poetry*, Harcourt, Inc. 1999, p. 1.

# Introductory Remarks

Unlike my respectable friend Tommy Tao, I am a novice in poetry translation. Novice, because I believe quite firmly poems are not translatable, a view Professor Jan Walls shared in his preface. This I was told as a translation student, and later I told my students when I taught translation.

Attempting for the first time to translate the untranslatable I am obsessed, just like most apprentices would be, with outward resemblances. This obsession was characterized by an overuse of rhymes, alliterations and other “poetic” devices.

The secret of translation is to search for equivalents of expressions between languages. However, exact equivalents

of poetic expressions are almost nonexistent. This is especially true for classical Chinese poems which are loaded with feelings, rhetoric, nuances, phonetic niceties and cultural backgrounds. If you happen to find a few near-equivalents in my translations, they are products of luck, not results of the translator's artistry or creativity/recreativity. With this in mind, I am inclined to pardon myself for any insufficiency. In no way I disguise my translation as substitute for reading the Chinese original. But before readers achieve mastery of the Chinese language, translation is an art of inferior alternative.

Inferior as it is, translation is an art, just like poetry and calligraphy. This provides an explanation of the book title – the Book of Three Arts.

Ming Sun Poon, PhD

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