

# 中國古詩英譯

林健民 译

中国华侨出版公司

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中國文學名著叢書

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## 中国古诗英译

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## SUGGESTIONS ON TRANSLATION OF ANCIENT CHINESE POEMS

by: Claro Ben Lim

### ( 代 序 )

For the past three years whenever I had opportunity to visit Taipei or Hong Kong, I used to frequent the book stores where they sell translations of ancient Chinese poems. On such visits I managed to have bought about a dozen kinds of translation including Select Chinese Verses by Dr. Herbert A. Giles and Mr. Arthur Waley which were published by the prestigious Commercial Press, Ltd. And as introduced by the Press, both Giles and Waley were proficient scholars of Chinese literature during the early 1920's.

My interest in gathering such kind of books was kindled by the fact that initially I found quite a few of the translations not to be satisfactory; they hardly could get 85% accuracy from the original text. This curiosity pressured me to buy more and more books of the like, for I myself had started my own translations some three years ago, and am eager to appraise others' work.

At the outset, I discovered that the inaccuracy of the translations was mainly due to one factor, i.e., they employed the conventional way of imitating an English rhyme to match the Chinese, and as a result, while the Chinese rhyme meant "white", the imitated English rhyme turned out to be "black" or some other meaning, thereby rendering the translation works appear funny.

In order to show some specific samples of this kind of literary manipulation, I prefer to cite a few sets of Dr. Giles translation work hereinbelow, and at the same time for comparison, I would like to present here also my humble counterpart of interpretation on each of the corresponding Chinese poems.

For instance on the well known Tang Dynasty Chen Tze Ang's poem "On Ascending The Yu Chow Tower", original Chinese text reads as follows:

### 登幽州台歌

唐·陈子昂

前不见古人 后不见来者  
念天地之悠悠 独怆然而泪下

Whereas Dr. Giles translation came out this way:

### R E G R E T S

My eyes saw not the men of old;  
And now their age away has rolled  
I weep--to think I shall not see  
The heroes of posterity!

As one can easily see, and compare with the original text of Chen Tze Ang, the Chinese rhyme occurred only in the second and fourth sentences, but Dr. Giles' translation rhymed it first and second, then third and



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fourth with a different rhyme. As a result, reading the translation may be pleasant to the ear, but the meaning of the whole poem in English is entirely quite far from Chen's original.

In my humble opinion, what actually Chen Tze Ang wanted to express in the poem is this:

ON ASCENDING THE YU CHOW TOWER

Ahead of me I see no ancient people,  
Nor do I see of any follower behind;  
To consider an illimitable universe,  
I feel so sad that am weeping alone!

Even the title, Dr. Giles had no reason to change it to "REGRETS" when the ancient Chinese poet specifically pointed out his feeling occurred at a certain scenic place, i.e., The Yu Chow Tower. If one reads this writer's translation, he can readily see that it will corroborate the poet's expression of thoughts right at the Tower.

In another Tang Dynasty poem by Wang Chang Ling, which is so well known that all Chinese intelligentsia can recite it, entitled "A MATRON'S REPENTANCE", but Dr. Giles titled it as "AT THE WARS" which is rather inaccurate. For the same reason there are discrepancies again in the translation of this four-sentence poem.

I herewith reproduce both the Chinese poet's text and that of Dr. Giles' translation:

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## 闺 怨

唐·王昌龄

闺中少妇不知愁 春日凝妆上翠楼  
忽见陌头杨柳色 悔教夫婿觅封侯

### AT THE WARS

See the young wife whose bosom ne'er  
    has ached with cruel pain!--  
In gay array she mounts the tower  
    when spring comes round again.  
Sudden she sees the willow-trees  
    their newest green put on,  
And sighs for her husband far away  
    in search of glory gone.

At a glance, one could easily see that the translated sentences are a little too long simply because Dr. Giles wanted to match an English rhyme with the Chinese one; however, the original Chinese rhyme appeared only in sentences 1, 2, and 4, but Dr. Giles produced a rhyme in sentences 1 and 2, while in sentences 3 and 4 he introduced another rhyme which technically speaking, like the first above cited Chinese poem, he did not even comply with the original form of rhyming work of Wang Chang Ling. Such being the case, why insist in producing rhymes just to suit the pleasure of the translator?

My humble thinking again, a fair interpretation of this poem and its title should be read as follows:



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## A MATRON'S REPENTENCE

A young matron in the boudoir seemed to be free from worries,  
One spring day ascended her bluish chamber elegantly dressed;  
Upon seeing green willows are flourished over the paddy path,  
She repented on convincing husband to seek a marquise post.

In the meaning of the first sentence, Poet Wang merely indicated the "young matron had no worries", unfortunately Dr. Giles elaborated it to "never has ached with cruel pain", in order to match the rhyme of "again" in his second sentence.

Again, on the fourth sentence, Poet Wang surmised that "the matron repented on convincing her husband to seek a marquise post", it is a specific presumption which Dr. Giles should not have twisted it to appear like the husband has voluntarily "gone in search of glory".

Such kinds of elaboration just for the purpose of obtaining a desirable rhyme, naturally is at the expense of an honest and truthful translation work.

Another example is Dr. Giles' translation on the Tang Dynasty Ho Chi Chang's "Script On Returning Home" which is also a very popular verse remembered by all the Chinese intelligentsia. The original poem reads as follows:

### 回乡偶书

唐·贺知章

少小离家老大回 乡音无改鬓毛催  
儿童相见不相识 笑问客从何处来

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While Dr. Giles translated in this way:

THE RETURN

Bowed down with age I seek my native place,  
Unchanged my speech, my hair is silvered now;  
My very children do not know my face,  
But smiling ask, "O stranger, whence art thou  
?"

What Poet Ho wanted to express in his first line of the poem is that he left his hometown in early youth days and returned home with grey hairs already on, so the period of departure could be a span of thirty or more years, therefore the children who first met him must be from other neighboring families but, not as in his translation described as "my very children". Furthermore, Poet Ho's poem in Chinese referred definitely to early teenagers or younger, so how can Dr. Giles use such words as "my very children" for, if the poet had children, they must be all adults by then.

As to the discrepancy in following the rhyme in Chinese text, as usual, Dr. Giles' appeared on lines 1 and 3, then 2 and 4, whereas Ho's rhyme is in lines 1, 2, and 4.

Now, let us see what actually Poet Ho wanted to say in the poem as per my understanding:

SCRIPT ON RETURNING HOME

I left in boyhood days now returned maturedly old,  
Native accent unchanged tho' grey temple hastened;  
Seeing the children couldn't recognize each other,  
Laughingly they'd asked whence comes this visitor?

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In my foregoing humble translation, one who is well informed with Chinese living custom, will easily realize that these are exactly what the poet wanted to express in his verse.

It must be noted that in China during the olden days when communications were difficult, whenever a man landed a job somewhere in the northern city, that he came home to southern China once every ten years or more was not uncommon.

Of the books on translation of ancient Chinese poems that I bought, of course like Dr. Giles, there are many others who constrained to practice the "imitated rhyme", but I cited only that of Dr. Giles for the simple reason that he is considered as one of the earliest and authoritative scholars in Chinese literature.

I say "imitated" because the matching of a foreign language rhyme to that of Chinese is a purely literary manipulation for, it is impossible to translate the same meaning in a rhyme in two different languages. For instance, I have read many Chinese translations of the famous Shakespeare's sonnet, they also "imitated" the English rhyme into Chinese, as a result of which, inaccuracies from the original text are common. In other words, the "imitated" rhyme is always at the expense of accuracy.

Speaking of producing a rhyme in English translation, if in the course of translation effort, the rhyme came by accident or the natural way, why not?

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For instance, I hereby cite a sample of the natural rhyme I obtained by accident, from my translation of Tang Dynasty Poet Wang Wei's famous poem, to wit:

### BIDDING FAREWELL

After bidding farewell in the midst of mountain,  
As sunset nears I have to close the wooden door;  
Till next spring all grasses are greenish again,  
My aristocratic friend are you coming home then?

The original Chinese poem reads like this:

### 送 别

唐·王维

山中相送罢 日暮掩柴扉

春草明年绿 王孙归不归

And of the same poem, Dr. Giles' translation appears below:

### G O O D B Y E

We parted at the gorge and cried "Good cheer!"  
The sun was setting as I closed my door,  
Methought, the spring will come again next year,  
But he may come no more.

As usual, we can see the constrained effort of Dr. Giles to obtain a rhyme but resulting the meanings in English that are utterly different from the Chinese originals.

The beauty of a classical Chinese poem is its form of parallelism either in 5-word

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or 7-word sentences and normally four sentences make a poem. This is not available in any other language in the world.

As we all know, the rhyme of a Chinese poem usually occurs in the last word of first, second, and fourth sentences or, in some cases rhyme comes only in the last word of the second and fourth sentences. Aside from this, in the composition of a sentence it is also governed by a rule to control and beautify the tone of each word which, literally is classified as "even tone" ( 平音 ) and "oblique tone" ( 仄音 ).

For example, in the above quoted Wang Chang Ling's poem: A MATRON'S REPENTANCE, let us use "A" as "even tone" and "B" as "oblique tone", the four sentences will produce a rhythmical sound something like this:

A A B B B A A  
B B A A B B A  
B B A A A B B  
A A B B B A A

Such a rule, again is not applicable also in any English translation although a good translator may obtain a desirable rhythm in its English counter part.

### CONCLUSION:

While this writer is suggesting that translating a poem from foreign language should not try to "imitate" the rhyme at the expense of accuracy, he also proposes a few other points in the translation of ancient Chinese poems to wit:

1. Inasmuch as ancient Chinese poems

cover a period of more than two thousand years, one who does the translation work must always consider the historical background of each poem, lest errors in interpretation of the Chinese text will often occur;

2. Next is to consider the living custom of every dynasty as well as the custom in a certain place where they were specifically indicated or expressed in a poem like the above quoted "Script On Returning Home" by Poet Ho Chi Chang;

3. It is the opinion of this writer that since ancient Chinese poems have the beauty of parallelism especially in some 8-sentence "ruled poems" ( 律詩 ) wherein from the third to fourth and fifth to sixth, each two lines are so composed like a Chinese couplet, the usual antithesis form is strictly enforced; therefore, the translated text in English should also as much as possible, make every sentence more or less in a uniform length, or very close to parallelism.

The reason for me to make suggestion no. 3 hereinabove is, of the many translations I bought from the Hong Kong and Taipei book stores, I notice in a poem of four or eight sentences, some of which are as short as five or six words, and sandwiched between other sentences as long as twelve

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words. Such imbalance, naturally would affect the beauty and meaning of an original Chinese poem.

In this connection, if the reader will try to examine my own translation on the above quoted four ancient Chinese poems, he will readily realize that all of them are absolutely in parallelism including the last punctuation.

It is the intention of this writer to correct the traditional way of translating ancient Chinese poems accompanied with "imitated" rhyme, therefore before my contemplation of publishing this book, such practice is totally abolished by me and instead, endeavored to obtain accuracy in translating the meaning of original text then, adjust the English sentences all in a parallel form just like my above-cited four translations, so that a discriminating reader can easily distinguish it from other translations in the book stores.

Manila, February 15, 1988



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