

中诗英韵探胜

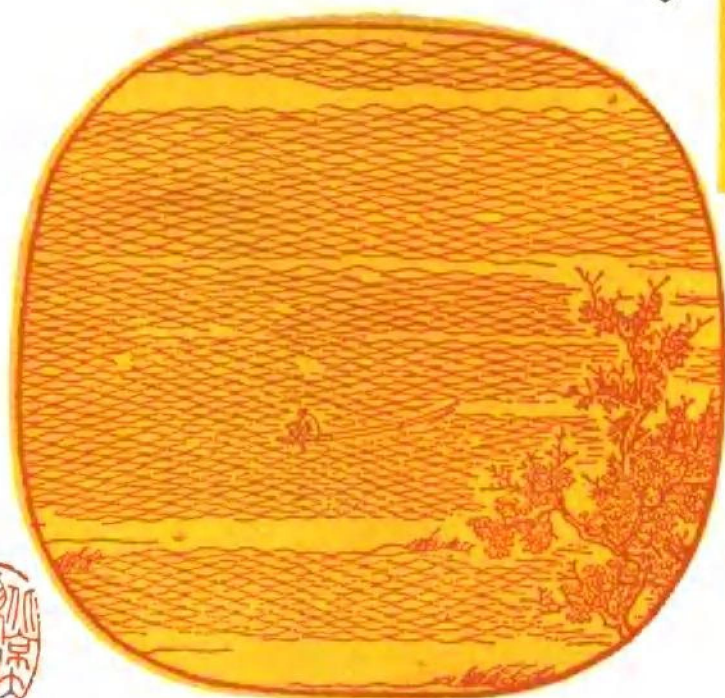
——从《诗经》到《西厢记》——

许渊冲 著

ON CHINESE VERSE
IN ENGLISH RHYME

FROM THE BOOK OF POETRY
TO THE ROMANCE OF
THE WESTERN BOWER

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许渊冲 著

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**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.

内 容 简 介

本书作者在汉诗英译方面自成一派，在传情达意的前提下，尤其注重形式美。本书精选从《诗经》到《西厢记》两千年间的诗词一百首，每首配以两种以上不同的英译，并加以比较。评述之中对中国古诗词与英语诗歌、中国诗人与英语诗人作了比较和阐发。全书对于向西方展示中国古文学的神采，促进文化交流，多有意义。全书文字简洁、优美、流畅。

Xu Yuan Zhong, professor of Comparative Poetry at Peking University; author of *Art of Translation* (Beijing 1984), *On Literary Translation* (Beijing 1991), *On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme* (Beijing 1991); editor of *300 Tang Poems* (Hong Kong 1987, Beijing 1988), co-editor of *Gems of Classical Chinese Poetry in Various English Translations* (Hong Kong 1988, Taipei 1990); translator from English into Chinese of John Dryden's *All for Love* (Shanghai 1956), Henry Taylor's *Flying Change* (Beijing 1991), co-translator of Sir Walter Scott's *Quentin Durward* (Beijing 1987); translator from French into Chinese of Romain Rolland's *Colas Breugnon* (Beijing 1958, 1978, 1984), Honoré de Balzac's *Un Début dans la Vie* (Shanghai 1983; Beijing 1986), Victor Hugo's *Théâtre* (Beijing 1986), Guy de Maupassant's *Sur l'Eau* (Beijing 1986), co-translator of Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu III* (Nanjing 1990); versifier and translator from Chinese into French of *42 Poèmes de Mao Zedong* (Luoyang 1978), *Cent Poèmes lyriques des Tang et des Song* (Beijing 1987), co-translator of *Croquis de la Campagne* (Beijing 1957); versifier and translator from Chinese into English of *Epic of Chinese Revolution* (Hong Kong 1981), *Su Dongpo—A New Translation* (Hong Kong 1982), *150 Tang Poems* (Xi'an 1984), *100 Tang and Song Ci Poems* (Hong Kong 1986), *Selected Poems of Li Bai* (Chengdu 1987), *Golden Treasury of Chinese Lyrics* (Beijing 1990), *Song of the Immortals* (Beijing 1991, Penguin Books), *Book of Lyrics* (Zhengzhou 1991), *Book of Odes and Hymns* (Zhengzhou 1991), *Book of Poetry* (Beijing 1992), *Romance of the Western Bower* (Beijing 1992), etc.

Professor Xu has gained a world-wide reputation for his rhymed translations of Chinese verse. The poems are a delight to read. —Stephen H. West, Professor, Oriental Languages, University of California, Berkeley, U. S. A.

Xu's translation provides some fascinating insights when compared with Pound's. —Ray G. Wright, Professor of Poetry, University of Houston-Downtown, U. S. A.

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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, re-

tiring, 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 (156-87 BC):

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 Bai Ju yi’s *Red Cockatoo*:

Sent as a present from Annam—
A red cockatoo
Coloured like the peach-tree blossom,
Speaking with the speech of men.