

# A Study on Arthur Waley's Translation



## 阿瑟·韦利翻译研究

陈惠 著

Arthur David Waley (1889-1966), one of the greatest British translators of the 20th century, devoted his whole life to the study and translation of Oriental literatures. Producing more than forty books totaling over nine thousand pages, more than eighty articles, and about one hundred book reviews, Waley brought the jewels of Chinese and Japanese literature to the Western public at a time when few Westerners realized that the East had a literary tradition as great as that of the West, and exerted a profound influence on Western perceptions of Asia, the development of Oriental studies in the West, and the Western literature and culture. T. S. Eliot once acknowledged Waley's contribution to English poetry and to European culture: "[...]in our own time, the poetical translations from the Chinese made by Pound, and those made by Arthur Waley, have probably been read by every poet writing in English" (Eliot, 1949:117). And David Hawkes said of his two translated novels *Genji* and *Monkey*: "[B]oth are likely to retain a permanent place in English literature, comparable to that occupied by the translations of Berners, Dryden, and the like" (Hawkes, 1966:146). Despite his astonishing lifetime production and the incalculable influence, the critical neglect of Waley is surprising. To provide some background for the present research, this chapter will start with an analysis of the possible reasons for this neglect, go on to review the existing studies on Waley, showing the fact of this neglect, then explain the purpose, significance, and methodology of the research, and outline the structure of the book.


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## PREFACE

This is Dr Chen Hui's comprehensive study, in the light of the receiving culture, of the great English translator of Oriental literature. The heading of the Introduction suggests the nature of the research: it is about "a remarkable translator", and it is concerned with finding "the fuller facts" and seeking "their implications". One expects from this a largely descriptive study intended to give a more complete, and hopefully more perceptive, picture of the translator than has been available so far.

Broad as such a study would necessarily seem, the research is not without a direction or focus. In "Research purpose and questions" (Introduction), the author defines her aim and approach: by "describing systematically the circumstances and facts of [the] production, promotion and reception [of the translator's translation]", she seeks to "reveal its socio-cultural context in terms of the target literary polysystem, its unique legacy for literary translation and the factors that made that legacy possible, and its modern relevance with respect to the translation of Chinese classics". We have here a threefold aim related to the general and overriding concern with the target socio-cultural context, or the interplay between translation on the one hand, and the literary and cultural conditions in the receiving society

on the other. But why the particular translator?

Arthur Waley is certainly “remarkable” in more ways than one as a translator. He deserves a close look if only for his translations of Chinese and Japanese poetry, which are valued as part of English literature and profoundly influenced poets including W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 12, p. 462). Indeed, according to a famous Chinese professor of English literature, his “translations of Chinese Tang poetry have become classics of twentieth-century English verse” (Wang Zuoliang, “The Poet as Translator” [1984]), a fact which the present enquiry will amply prove. To David Hawkes, Waley’s “achievement as an interpreter of Chinese poetry [...] lies in the creation of a form both suitable to the Chinese style of verse and acceptable to the literary taste of his own day”, “a style whose imitators nowadays are legion and whose imitations are banal and insipid to a degree — a tribute, no doubt, to the original they seek to emulate” (“Obituary of Arthur Waley” [1966]). Hawkes is right, and one may add that Waley’s being able to do so is due to the fact that his is a case of a poet — a scholarly one versed in the source language and culture and steeped in the native literary tradition — translating poetry. This is a point the author of this treatise does not miss. Speaking of his unique legacy as a literary translator, she stresses his skillful mediation “between the source and target cultures, represented in his case respectively by an Oriental scholarship of remarkable depth and scope, and an English poetics he was brought up with and educated in, one he handled with the facility and assurance of a creative poet or

writer” (Conclusion). This rare combination of foreign learning and an innovated-on native poetic idiom (“sprung rhythm”) is basically responsible for his success.

To go from here a little further, if Waley’s poetry translation is fashioned by his style combining foreign influence and native tradition, then his style is also fashioned by his translation. Remy de Gourmont’s analogy that the bird’s song is conditioned by the shape of the beak may be reversed: one can argue the beak is also conditioned by the song, evolution-wise—nothing moulds and adapts the beak like the constant, and conscious, singing. The influence is mutual. This is where Waley had the advantage over the poet who did not translate: he benefited from the huge amount of verse translations he did over a lifetime, from continuous exposure to new insights, new images, new forms, new rhythms, new language. In subjecting himself to new modes and new patterns, new rules and new rigours, the poet-translator mends his hand rather like the practising calligrapher who daily imitates the master copies until he develops a style that shows the influence of the model but is still his own. The result is that his mind is enriched, his sensibility sharpened, his rhythm improved, his language fresher, more malleable, more expressive—in short, he is in better shape—professionally—to tackle the job he has at hand. This training, special to the sensitive translator, is perhaps a less noticed fact behind the success of some poet-translators.

Poet-translators of poetry have often made a landscape on the literary scene, if their translation has not always been a sig-

nificant topic in literary or translation research. In English literature, for example, the list of poets who translated is a long one: Sidney, Donne, Herrick, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Rossetti, Yeats ... Their outstanding spokesman is of course John Dryden, both a practitioner and a theorist of translation. Regarding poetry translation, he was against “metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and line by line from one language into another” (“Preface to *Ovid's Epistles*” [1680]), and he had little patience with the “sort of blundering, half-witted people who make a great deal of noise about a verbal slip” (“Preface to *Sylvae*” [1685]); but he was equally against the kind of “imitation”, which was in essence “an endeavour of a later poet to write like one who has written before him on the same subject”, “taking only some general hints from the original” (“Preface to *Ovid's Epistles*” [1680]).

Dryden seemed to anticipate the practice of a poet like Ezra Pound, who, in the words of a fellow poet-translator, chose to air his own sentiments in an earlier poet's name (余光中: “假李白之名, 抒庞德之情”, 《翻译与创作》[1981]). However, the dispute over a definition of translation aside, he of all 20th-century poets made the single largest impact on British and American modern poetry, arguably with his poetry renderings from several sources, most importantly Chinese. His *Cathay* (1915) is claimed as “not only the best inspired work of [his] uneven canon, but the achievement which comes nearest to justifying the whole ‘imagist’ programme” (George Steiner, *After Babel* [1998]). His “The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter”, which is

his rendering of Li Bai's "Changganxing" (《长干行》), has become one of his most anthologized poems, though the novel titling may owe a debt to Anne Bradstreet, the colonial-time American poet, who named one of her poems "A Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment". Pound's limited knowledge of the source language may have been an advantage rather than a drawback, even as Waley's Oriental scholarship was an asset. Denied direct access to the original text, Pound was free from the bond of language and able to use his poetic instinct to catch in a foreign tradition those elements which seemed to best demonstrate his poetic principles. Another contribution of his is that he initiated a work pattern, in poetry translation, in which a poet collaborates with an informant on the original, native to the source language or otherwise, in a combined linguistic and literary team, and produces excellent poems. Pound's story can hardly be repeated, but it goes to show—as Waley's does in its way, quietly and without fuss—that there are different roads to success in poetry translation. The only requisite is sensibility, application, innovation, and a receiving society open, restive for change, ready to embrace what's new in art and literature of a different culture. Waley and Pound are lucky because their translations — with Pound partly at least — won for them a recognized place in British and American literature respectively.

Which is rather more than can be said for their Chinese colleagues. In China, verse translation has been a prominent feature of the "new poetry" (non-metrical poetry in vernacular that de-



veloped after the May 4th Movement of 1919). Many poets have tried their hand at translating and some, like Bian Zhilin (卞之琳) in connection with Shakespeare, Zha Liangzheng (查良铮) in connection with Byron, Dai Wangshu (戴望舒) in connection with the French poets, have produced translations that could rank among the best original poems. However, none of their translations have had a place in modern Chinese literature comparable to that of Waley or Pound in their respective literatures. But despite the marginal—if that much—status of translations in the Chinese literary canon, the tradition of Chinese poets translating poetry is still there. Since the 1980s, poetry translation by poets seems to have been gaining force, bringing life to the profession and challenging the work of academic and professional translators. An increasing number of poets on the mainland are engaged in this thriving, if not always profitable, business: Xichuan (西川), Shucaï (树才), Zhang Shuguang (张曙光), Ma Yongbo (马永波) and so on. They are joined by expatriate poets (“流寓诗人”) such as Beidao (北岛), Duoduo (多多), Zhang Zao (张枣) and Li Li (李笠), who find their vantage, away from the centre, from impetuosity and frivolity, quiets down their very life and gives them a mood for reflection and creation (北岛:《失败之书》序[2004]). The forums for these translator-poets include a number of unregistered journals in the form of copyright books (以书代刊) in addition to the regular literary and poetry magazines. This fresh release of creative energy by Chinese poets may be seen as a response to a Western trend and a return to the May 4th tradition. This is an

invigorating force in the development of Chinese poetry, likely to give it a new spirit and find it a new medium, and promise for some of the practitioners a new lease of their poetic lives.

The ideal translator of poetry, according to one scholar, “should not only be a poet in the host language, but should be completely fluent in the language of the original, deeply versed in its culture (poetic and social), and fully informed of all relevant historical, geographic, and contextual matters bearing on the poem” (Burton Raffel, in A. Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [1993]). Sinologist, linguist and poet, Waley was typical of the ideal translator of poetry in every aspect. He merits a thorough probing if we consider the lack of research on him except for some of the nature of “general introductions” and “close readings of his texts” (Introduction).

Dr Chen’s research has several commendable features. For one thing, it devotes a whole chapter to introducing the historical and cultural background of Waley’s life and activities, something common in literary study but unusual in translation research. The detailed account of the historical circumstances of Waley’s coming on the scene places him in broad perspective and relates him to the socio-cultural conditions bearing on his translation.

Then, the literature survey is impressive, covering an admirably wide range of information, some of it (like that about Waley’s reception and influence) previously little mentioned or systematically researched. The information is commented on

and analyzed to draw proper conclusions, some quite original. In summarizing a comparison between Waley and Pound, the author writes: “[...] if we can borrow John Dryden’s phrases in his judgment of Ben Jonson (Dryden, 2006: 2129), we might say Waley was ‘the more learned and judicious writer’ [...] and though Pound was ‘the greater wit’, ‘one cannot say [Waley] wanted wit [poetic talent and insight], but rather that he was frugal of it’ — he was rather reluctant to allow it free rein in his preoccupation with scholarly correctness and a craftsman’s artistry” (Chapter IV).

One also notices that the broad-ranging and apparently discursive writing culminates in a clear conclusion, in which the three research questions are answered one by one, with the key issues considered at some length. Take the one concerning the literary environment in Waley’s society:

Though many scholars and academic poets still viewed the British literary tradition with high respect and imitated the poems of the late Victorian period, some other young poets started to feel dissatisfied with the outdated Victorian poetry which was lengthy, powerless, and embellished. When the established literary models no longer satisfied and stimulated the generation of writers, they turned to foreign literatures for ideas and forms. In the revolutionary movement in Anglo-American poetry, established and avant-garde writers produced translations from several classical traditions, with Chinese poetry at the front, and introduced new principles and

elements into English literature, poetry in particular. Pound's Cathay and Arthur Waley's *One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* constituted a watershed in the history of Chinese translation [...] Along with some other translators in this era, they started a new era of Anglo-American regard for Chinese poetry, and opened a new phase in the literary translation as part of the development of Modernism [...] (Conclusion).

Facts are given and interpreted in the light of Even-Zohar's theory to reveal Waley's role in the reshaping of the English literary polysystem of his time. This is also true of the discussion of Waley's legacy for literary translation, and his lesson for today's translation of Chinese classics.

Finally, of course, this is the first attempt to approach Waley in an all-round way. The structure of the book is a kind of mapping of a target context-oriented comprehensive investigation of a literary translator, showing the potential issues and their interconnections. This, and the extensive list of references, compiled through careful research, may prove convenient to future enquirers.

The issues are shown in their proper places, but not always in good proportion — granting that the relative emphasis received by each issue in an extended study like this largely depends on the aim of research. Still, for the purpose of this enquiry, some issues such as Waley's reception, his innovation in poetry translation, and his association and exchange with other poets, can receive more detailed treatment. One may also feel

the comparison between Waley and Pound justifies the inclusion of a new chapter; the present discussion, little more than a summary of some obvious — though important — differences, in only three aspects, has just begun to tap this potential topic.

In a descriptive study, a *critical* review of literature is essential; otherwise, the study will be a mere cataloguing of facts, unilluminated by perception or theoretical insight. In places we see more information than criticism or full discussion of a theoretical nature. The relevant theories, too, may more clearly underlie all discussions instead of just informing those in the Conclusion. Those are things which more theoretically-supported future research can improve.

All through her writing of the English treatise, in which I was involved reading her manuscript, Chen impressed me with her sense of purpose, understanding, academic potential, and proficient English — a demanding but pleasant and rewarding experience. I look forward with confidence to seeing new results in her Waley study.

Jiang Jiansong

May 20, 2012

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## INTRODUCTION

### Approaching a Remarkable Translator: in Search of the Fuller Facts and Their Implications

Arthur David Waley (1889-1966), one of the greatest British translators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, devoted his whole life to the study and translation of Oriental literatures. Producing more than forty books totaling over nine thousand pages, more than eighty articles, and about one hundred book reviews, Waley brought the jewels of Chinese and Japanese literature to the Western public at a time when few Westerners realized that the East had a literary tradition as great as that of the West, and exerted a profound influence on Western perceptions of Asia, the development of Oriental studies in the West, and the Western literature and culture. T. S. Eliot once acknowledged Waley's contribution to English poetry and to European culture: "[...]in our own time, the poetical translations from the Chinese made by Pound, and those made by Arthur Waley, have probably been read by every poet writing in English" (Eliot, 1949:117). And David Hawkes said of his two translated novels *Genji* and *Monkey*: "[B]oth are likely to retain a permanent place in English literature, comparable to that occupied by the translations of Berners, Dryden, and the like" (Hawkes, 1966:146). Despite his astonishing lifetime production and the incalculable influence, the critical neglect of Waley