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SPECIAL ISSUE:
Chinese Literature

John Balcom
Guest Editor

Introduction..............................................................................................................................................................................1
John Balcom

On the Role of the Translator..................................................................................................................................................2
N. G. D. Malmqvist

An Interview with Burton Watson ..............................................................................................................................................7
John Balcom

Lu Yu (Lu You), Twelve Poems ...............................................................................................................................................13
Burton Watson

Bo Juyi and Guan Panpan: the Swallow Tower Poems ....................................................................................................19
Geoffrey R. Waters

On Li Bai’s “Jeweled Staircase Grievance” .........................................................................................................................22
Steve Bradbury

Flirting with the Explicit: Euphemism and Eroticism in the Chinese Lyric ........................................................................24
Mike Farman

A Conversation with J. P. “Sandy” Seaton .............................................................................................................................33
Steve Bradbury

What Develops in a Dark Room Dazzles Brighter than Light: Resistance and the Translation of Chinese Poetry .................45
Simon Patton

On a Poem by Bei Dao .........................................................................................................................................................49
John Balcom

Translating Ideogram into a Culture of Phonogram in Tae-Sok Oh’s Play Bellflower ................................................................53
Hyung-Jin Lee

Waiting for a Better Translation ..............................................................................................................................................58
Nancy Tsai

Book Reviews
Poems of the Masters: China’s Classic Anthology of T’ang and Sung Dynasty Verse, tr. by Red Pine .................................68
Reviewed by Mike Farman

Big Breasts and Wide Hips, by Mo Yan, tr. by Howard Goldblatt ..........................................................................................70
Reviewed by Christopher Lupke

Contributors ..............................................................................................................................................................................74
**Introduction**

*by John Balcom, Guest Editor*

The Chinese literary tradition extends uninterrupted from early in the first millennium B.C. to the present. The translation of Chinese literature into English largely dates from the Victorian era, with scholarship and translation really blossoming in the 1960s and '70s onward. For the translator, the field of endeavor is vast and it is impossible to cover all facets of it. In this issue there is a vague focus on the translation of poetry, because it is still perhaps the most popular genre among translators. We include two pieces on Tang dynasty poetry (Waters and Bradbury), one on Song dynasty *ci* (Farman), and two on the modern period (Patton and Balcom).

The issue begins with a general essay on the translation of Chinese literature by N. G. D. Malmqvist of the Swedish Academy. Professor Malmqvist was trained as a linguist but has spent a good deal of time engaged in the translation of literature.

We are also pleased to include interviews with two of today's foremost translators of classical Chinese literature: Burton Watson and J. P. Seaton. Burton Watson is perhaps the best-known translator of classical Chinese literature in the last half century. He has produced what are now widely considered to be the standard English translations of the major works of Chinese history, philosophy, and poetry. (As a side note, Burton informed me in a recent letter that he is currently at work on a new translation of Confucius for Columbia University.) He has also contributed twelve new translations of poems by the Song dynasty poet Lu You. Sandy Seaton is a translator of classical poetry whose fine ear and sensitive translations of Ou-yang Xiu and Yuan Mei, among others, have a following among general readers, poets, and scholars. He has also collaborated with Ursula LeGuin on her translation of the Lao Tzu and co-translated with Sam Hamill selections from Chuang Tzu. We are pleased to be able to include a selection of his translations as well.

Hyung-Jin Lee has contributed an article on translating Chinese within Korean drama. The article will be of interest to anyone who works with multiple-language texts or texts containing dialect.

Nancy Tsai provides us with a translator’s-eye view of the fiction of Ha Jin. This is a perspective that is unknown to his readers save those in the field of Chinese literature. It is an important essay for the perspective it offers on translation as well as for expanding the dimensions of the critical discourse on a contemporary novelist.

Two book reviews of translated works of significance follow: Mike Farman’s review of *Poems of the Masters*, Red Pine’s complete translation of the classical anthology *Qianjiashi*, and Christopher Lupke’s review of Ma Yuan’s *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, translated by Howard Goldblatt.

Lastly, in addition to thanking all the contributors, I would like to express my gratitude to a number of institutions and individuals. This issue of *Translation Review* devoted to Chinese literature grew out of a conversation with Rainer Schulte at an ALTA conference; I would like to thank him for his unflagging support and patience. Thanks also to the Donald Keene Center at Columbia University for providing the photo of Burton Watson. I also would like to acknowledge Lucas Klein for allowing us to reprint Steve Bradbury’s article from his online journal *Cipher Journal*. (Anyone interested in literature in translation will certainly want to have a look at the journal.) Rich DeRouen has spent a good deal of time on this issue, working to overcome a good many difficulties. I would also like to thank Jingbo Shen, my graduate assistant at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, for her assistance in preparing some of the manuscripts. My final thanks go to Lo Fu for contributing the topically appropriate calligraphy that graces the cover of this issue.
On the Role of the Translator

by N. G. D. Malmqvist

I would like to state at the outset that my main field is Chinese linguistics. My scholarly production is confined to the fields of dialectology, historical phonology, archaic and modern Chinese syntax, and semantics. I have no formal training in the disciplines of literary theory and criticism, nor have I entered into a serious study of translatology. I have read a fair amount of Chinese literature—ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary. In the last fifty years I have engaged in translation and consider myself an amateur translator. (I refer you to the second definition of the term “amateur” in the Oxford English Dictionary: “One who cultivates anything as a pastime, as distinguished from one who prosecutes it professionally.”)

In the early 1950s, all dogs disappeared from the streets of Chinese cities. The shaggy Airedale bitch that followed me to my office every day during a three-year stay in Peking in the mid 1950s naturally created quite a stir: “Have you seen! A lion!” “A tiger!” “A wolf!” “A lamb!” cried the children in the street. The Chinese word for “dog” (gōu), which can be traced back to the fourth century before our era, had suddenly become a nonsense-word in the language of the children, as an effect of the decision by the Chinese health authorities to exterminate all dogs in Chinese cities.

The units in the systems on which language builds (the phonological system, the grammatical system, and the semantic relations) cannot be defined in positive terms, out of what they are, but only negatively, out of what they are not, in relation to other units in the systems. In consequence, a change in one single unit in a given system will influence the relations between all units involved in the system. When the dog disappears, the lion becomes a shaggy beast.

If a dog can change into a lion, what may then happen to words with more abstract significance, such as “co-determination,” “individuality,” and “culture”? The term zhishi qingnian, which prior to the cultural revolution referred to intellectual youths, has come to refer to youngsters with a certain school education who, during the cultural revolution, were sent down to the countryside to be re-educated. Great misunderstandings may appear when words are carried over from one cultural milieu to another. When Indian missionaries and Chinese converts to Buddhism in the third century of our era began to translate the subtle philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism, they made free use of terms that had gained acceptance in the Confucian and Daoist schools of thought. Dao, which stood for the cosmic order of the Confucianists and for the Absolute in Daoist thought, had to make do for the complex Sanskrit term Dharma (“the Law,” “the Teaching”). The Confucian term xiaoshun (“filial obedience”), had to make do for Sanskrit sila (“moral conduct”). Because these translations possibly could entice some Confucians and Daoists to join the imported religion, they were at the same time instrumental in distorting the Buddhist credo.

Words are labels that we stick on all things and phenomena around us and within us. Sometimes we find a fairly close concordance, in different languages, between the labels and the reality that they denote. But on the whole, I tend to believe in Wittgenstein’s thesis that language delimits our perception of the world around us. I firmly believe that the Swedish word gul, the German word gelb, the English word yellow, and the Chinese word huang cover different fields of the underlying physical reality. Even the most skilled and conscientious translator will sometimes have to content himself or herself with translating labels, not the underlying reality.

Most problems of a purely linguistic nature can normally be solved by a translator who has a perfect command of his mother tongue and an excellent command of the language into which or from which he translates. In his magnificent translation of the Chinese novel Hongloumeng (or Shitouji, The story of the Stone), David Hawkes has shown that even puns and play with words can be carried over from one language to another. But there are cases when even the most skilled translator is forced to throw in the towel. The medieval ontological proof Deus bonus est, ergo Deus est (God is good, therefore God exists) builds entirely on the linguistic fact that the Latin word esse, like English to be, serves both as a copula, linking a subject to a predicate, and as an intransitive verb, meaning “to exist.” Any attempt to translate this ontological proof into a language like Russian or Chinese, which lack a verb with this double function, is bound to fail dismally. What was once seen as an eternal theological truth turns out to be nothing but a demonstration of a linguistic feature common to most Indo-European languages.

One difficulty involved in translation is that an obligatory category in the one language may not obtain in the other.
In his magnificent work *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975), George Steiner points out that translation, among other things, is a work of self-denial, demanding that the translator serve the original rather than imposing himself or herself on it. But he also points out that all translation, like all reading and even all listening, is a work of editing, a work of interpretation, determined by subjective and contextual factors. If the poet is a Maker and Creator, which indeed is the basic meaning of the word, then the translator is ideally a highly skilled craftsman. And we know that in ancient times, in both Eastern and Western civilization, craftsmen were slaves. Self-denial is one of the cardinal virtues of slaves. But as the task of translation also involves editing and interpreting, the translator must also serve as actor. The translator must imitate the author of the original work and his translation must be a likeness of the original work. The translator must never strive to surpass the author, although the literary qualities of a translation occasionally and for various reasons may appear to be superior to those of the original work. A skilled translator who masters the language into which he translates (normally his mother tongue) is bound to use to his best advantage such prosodic, euphonic, and musical effects as his language places at his disposal. In doing so, he may add to his translation features that are not present in the original work. Paradoxically, the more skilled the translator and the more acutely his ear is tuned to prosodic and musical features, the further his translation may deviate from the original text. A famous Swedish poet and man of letters of the 19th century once said, “Beautiful translations are like beautiful women, that is to say, they are not always the most faithful ones.”

It does sometimes happen that the literary qualities and the readability of a translation surpass the original text. In the first quarter of the 20th century, Lin Shu, who himself did not master any foreign language, translated some 130 works of Western literature into classical Chinese with the aid of a competent assistant. His translation of Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* was instrumental in creating a great interest in the study of English literature. Dr. Hu Shi has the following to say about Lin Shu’s translations: “It was a tremendous task and exceedingly amusing to read the comic figures in the novels of Charles Dickens talking in the dead language of two thousand years ago.” The British sinologist, translator, and poet Arthur Waley voices a diametrically opposed view in his assessment of Lin Shu’s translations of works by Dickens: “Dickens inevitably becomes a rather different and to my mind a better writer. All the over-elaborations, the overstatement and uncurbed garrulity disappear.” The famous scholar-writer Qian Zhong-shu, who achieved a complete mastery of the major European languages, somewhere stated that in his youth he preferred to read Rider Haggard’s novels in Lin Shu’s translation.

In my opinion a translator should literally work like a slave. He should be conscious of his twofold responsibility and must serve both the author of the work he translates and his readers as well as he possibly can. What a translator has to work with are texts. These texts may be structured in a variety of ways. They may be cut up into segments of varying length that are linked together by no prosodic rules other than those that are inherent in the language itself. Other text segments may have been linked together by
more or less strict rules that govern the length of the segments, the placing of stressed and unstressed syllables, caesurae, and euphonic elements such as rhyme and alliteration. The task of the translator is to transfer, as faithfully as he possibly can, the message of the original, even that part of the message that is carried by the form and structure of the original.

My late friend Jaroslav Prusek (1906–80), the great Czech scholar in the fields of Old Vernacular, pre-Modern, and Modern Chinese literature, once said to me, “‘You cannot discuss a work which you have not translated!’ I did not believe him then, but having spent my spare time during the last forty years translating Chinese literature, I have come to realize that Prusek’s statement is not altogether wide of the mark. No matter how carefully you read a literary work, it is only when you sit down to translate it that you really come to grips with it.

Each translator approaches work in his or her own way. To me translation is a work of love. (I should add that my amateur status affords me the privilege of choosing what I want to translate.) But this love must be tempered by recognition of the translator’s twofold responsibility toward the author of the original text and his own readers. Before starting to translate, be it a long novel or a poem, I read the work several times in succession to get a feeling for the structure and the flow of the text. When reading and re-reading the text I make mental notes of passages that I know will present a challenge, and ponder over how they might be best translated. I always articulate the text silently when I read, which gives me a sore throat at the end of a long day’s work. The repeated readings make me feel the presence of the author and the author’s voice. When I eventually arrive at the point when my own voice and breathing are in harmony with the voice and breathing of the author, then the work is almost done. I am aware of the fact that my notions of the author’s voice and breathing may sound like hocus-pocus to you. I am at a loss to explain how it works, but I do know that it does. Once I feel that I have reached this stage, I am ready to devise a language and a style to match those of the original text.

I once discussed this method of translation with a Swedish colleague, who happens to be an excellent translator. He objected that this method would deprive him of the pleasure of surprise and unexpected encounters: to him, turning pages in the book he translated was like following a meandering mountain path, not knowing what view might unfold itself beyond the next bend.

The repeated and articulated readings of a text have an added advantage in that they may make you discover features that otherwise may have been undetected, such as the occurrence of dialect. Phonological dialectal features are effectively hidden under the logographic Chinese script. But they may appear in the vocabulary and as features of both morphology and syntax. Such dialectal features as do appear must be mirrored in the translation. A translator who fails to account for such features is guilty of what has been called the deadly sin of normalizing and leveling.

Guo Moruo’s (1892–1978) poetry collection Nüshen (The Goddesses), published in 1921, must be considered the first successful attempt to employ modern vernacular and free verse to express new ideas about life and society in the wake of the May Fourth movement. Guo Moruo was born in the town of Leshan in Sichuan, the very strange dialect of which he retained throughout his life. On the phonological and prosodic levels this dialect differs greatly from Standard Mandarin and also from Standard Southwestern Mandarin as spoken in the city of Chengdu. One major difference is that the Leshan dialect possesses five tonal accents, as opposed to the four tonal accents of Standard Mandarin and Standard Southwestern Mandarin. The fifth tone of the Leshan dialect is shorter than the other tones and is also incapable of carrying stronger stress than the following syllable. The poetry of Guo Moruo is highly dramatic and expressive and contains a great many exclamations. A reading of these poems in Standard Mandarin, with its different phonological features and prosodic patterning, would completely destroy the form of the poem. A translator who insists on at least trying to convey as much as possible of the form of the original poem would have to base his translation on a reading of the poem in the Leshan dialect. Most translators who have tackled Guo Moruo’s poetry do not seem to have been aware of this problem.

While spoken Chinese is split into a great many regional dialects, few instances of social dialects have found their way into written texts. The underlying reason for this must be found in the logographic nature of the script and the exceedingly limited morphological devices, together with the stern rules of the syntax of the language. To translate the sentence “Ah ain’t got no money” into an equivalent Chinese sentence would indeed be a hard nut to crack.

The difference between two languages is sometimes so great that any attempt to transpose poetic forms from one language into another is doomed to fail. Some forty years ago I experimented with a kind of a-syntactic translation of classical Chinese poetry into Swedish, with an utter disregard for the syntactical and morphological demands of the
Swedish language. Here is an example transposed into a similar kind of English, a short lyrical poem (jueju) by the Tang poet Liu Zongyuan:

Thousand mountain, bird fly sever,  
ten-thousand path, man footprint extinguish.  
Solitary boat, rain-cape, bamboo-hat, old man,  
alone fish, cold river snow.

Several features account for the great obstacles facing the translator of pre-modern Chinese poetry, be it tonal (jintishi) or non-tonal (gushi). The long rhyme sequences in a poem like Kongque dongnan fei (“The peacock flies toward the southeast”) could not possibly be equated in a Western language. Again, the regular placing of the caesura in five- and seven-syllabic verse cannot possibly be carried over in translation. Metrically, the form of non-tonal poetry can be approximated in a translation. The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89) is characterized by the use of “sprung rhythm,” a rather free iambic meter, with occasional added trochees and a free use of unstressed syllables. This meter was praised by both T.S. Elliot and Ezra Pound. Hopkins’s “sprung rhythm” fairly closely resembles the meter that Arthur Waley used for his translation of Chinese poetry, a meter in which each syllable in the original line is matched by one stressed syllable in the translation. I have myself used this meter in my translations of Chinese poetry, a meter in which each syllable in the original line is matched by one stressed syllable in the translation. I have myself used this meter in my translations of Chinese poetry. As one or more unstressed syllables normally occur between the two stresses, the line becomes considerably longer in the translation. It is also impossible to convey the compact structure of the Chinese line, which often accommodates two predications, one before and one after the caesura.

The antithetical arrangement of level and inflected tones in tonal poetry cannot, of course, be mirrored when translating into a non-tonal language.

Polymetric poetry (ci) plays a very important role in the sixteenth-century novel Xiyouji (Journey to the West). I fully concur with the view expressed by C. T. Hsia that the author of that work must be considered as “one of the most skilled descriptive poets in all Chinese literature.” In the poetic interchanges between the wood-cutter and the fisherman in chapter 10 of the Xiyouji, the two friends use the same tunes, namely “Die lian hua,” “Zhegutian,” “Tianxianzi,” “Xijiangyue,” and “Linjiangxian.” Even though it is impossible to mirror the form of these ci patterns, the conscientious translator should at least create identical counterparts for each occurrence of these patterns.

In some cases the metrical form of a poem is so closely linked to its content that it is well-nigh impossible to achieve a translation that does justice to the original. Wen Yiduo, to my mind the greatest Chinese poet of the 1920s, asserted that the form of the poem must satisfy both the eye of the reader and the ear of the listener: the musical features of the language must serve as building bricks in a structure of architectonic beauty. The title poem of the collection Sishui (Deadwater) was considered by Wen Yiduo himself to be his most successful experiment in the field of metrical architecture. Each verse in the poem consists of nine syllables, which are grouped into three two-syllabic units and one three-syllabic unit. The three-syllabic unit changes position from verse to verse, but can never occur in the verse-final position. This feature creates a rhythmical tension in the regular structure. The first verse in the poem reads as follows in the original:

Zheshi yigou juewangde sishui  
Here’s a ditch of hopeless deadwater

One English translation of this poem amounts to nothing less than cold-blooded murder of one of the finest poems in Modern Chinese literature:

This is a ditch of hopelessly dead water

The translation utterly destroys the rhythm of the original verse. It also treats the compound noun sishui as a phrase, “dead water.” Finally, the adjective juewangde has been converted into an adverb, “hopelessly.” This one example goes a long way to demonstrate that a translator must have a firm grasp of the purely linguistic aspects of the text he is translating.

Normalization and leveling are at the very core of the problem of all literary translation. These terms refer to the action of trimming off, smoothing out the text, cutting off its edges, and neutralizing its very effects. The author, the creator, of the text allows himself the freedom to deviate from norms, forging new words, distorting syntax, and playing with the multiple senses of words and nuances. The translator, the craftsman, must do his utmost to convey such deviations in his translation. The worst case of leveling is cutting out segments of the text and adding what is not present in the text.

Cultural leveling is equally reprehensible. Any source language expresses a particular world vision that may be quite different from that of the target language. The translator should be aware of the fact that the translation of a text at the same time is a translation of a culture. Such cultural elements as may seem strange to the reader must be eluci-
dated to him or to her. I personally abhor footnotes, which tend to obstruct the flow of the text. I much prefer to deal with such elements in an introduction or a foreword to the work.

Stylistic leveling is no less reprehensible. Every translator has his stylistic idiosyncrasies, which he may feel free to indulge as long as he does not translate. My own Swedish, both spoken and written, is rather conservative in that I retain certain linguistic forms, such as subjunctive forms of verbs, which went out of fashion fifty years ago. I have to be very careful to avoid such forms when I translate a colloquial Chinese text.

A translator who wishes to guard himself against the “normalization threat” should bear in mind that only empathy will guide him onto the right path. Empathy, not necessarily with the author but with the work, will give rise to a common sensitivity, which in turn will result in the stylistic identification of the original work and the translation.

The unique nature of the Chinese script has given rise to many misunderstandings. One learned gentleman who to a high degree was responsible for fomenting such misunderstandings was Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), an American orientalist and poet who spent many years in Japan. Much thanks to Ezra Pound, his posthumous essay “The Chinese Characters as a Poetic Medium” (published in 1920) had a great impact on translators of Chinese poetry in the Western world, especially on Florence Aiscough. Fenollosa and Pound both asserted that the graphic form of the Chinese characters contains a rich semantic content. Fenollosa based his theory on the mistaken notion that Chinese characters are pictograms or ideograms, depicting things and ideas. True, the Chinese script does contain pictograms and ideograms, but they amount to far less than one percent of all characters. The Chinese characters are logograms, each denoting a monosyllabic unit, a morpheme.

Ezra Pound did not know Chinese. In his translation of the classical anthology Shijing (The Book of Odes), he based himself on others’ translations and on his poetic intuition. Sometimes he trusted in Fenollosa’s strange notions, and then with astonishing results. The 113th poem in the Shijing, in which farmers bitterly complain about cruel tax-collectors, has the title Shishu. Shu means “rat.” What shì in this context means nobody knows. Karlgren suggests that shì was a kind of rodent. The character for shì is made up of two graphs: the graph for “stone” on the left, and the graph for “head” on the right. Now, listen to Ezra Pound’s magnificent translation (if that is what it is):

Rats,
Stone-head rats lay off our grain,
Three years pain,
Enough, enough, plus enough again.
More than enough from you, deaf you,
We’re about thru and ready to go
Where something will grow
Untaxed,
Good earth, good sown,
And come into our own.

There are many truths in this world. The poetic truth that Ezra Pound arrived at in his translation of this poem is no less true than that which Bernhard Karlgren arrived at through his meticulous philological methods.

Let me end this article on a rather sad note. The Western translator of Chinese literature, and especially of classical Chinese poetry, is often frustrated by the pedantic and tyrannical demands of his own Western language, which force him to specify what is not specified in the original text, thus making it impossible for him to convey the feeling of universality and timelessness that characterizes the original. One choice is of course open to the translator: he can throw in the towel and abstain from translating; or he can struggle along, conscious of the fact that in every sentence and in every line he is committing the deadly sins of normalizing and leveling.

It is often argued that literature, and especially poetry, is untranslatable. I am personally convinced that much literature of lasting value has been carried across language borders by competent and devoted translators who have not allowed themselves to be intimidated by sometimes seemingly insuperable obstacles.
An Interview with Burton Watson
by John Balcom

Burton Watson really needs no introduction. He is the preeminent translator of classical Chinese history, philosophy, and poetry. Through his books and translations, he has probably done more than anyone else to introduce Chinese history and classical literature to the English-speaking world. Anyone who has ever taken a course on Asian Studies or China has probably read his translations. (A list of his major translations is included at the end of this interview.) The interested reader is also encouraged to look at his *The Rainbow World: Japan in Essays and Translations* (Seattle: Broken Moon Press, 1990), because it contains some fascinating autobiographical writing. For example, in one essay he records his first impressions of Japan when he was stationed there as a young man just after the war. The essay goes into far more detail than is possible in a single interview. Burton Watson lives in Tokyo, Japan.

Balcom: I'm interested in tracing your development as a translator. How did you first become interested in Chinese?

Watson: I was born in New Rochelle, a suburb of New York City, and had most of my schooling there. We took my father’s shirts to a Chinese laundry near New Rochelle Station, and each year at Christmas the laundry people gave us a box of dried litchi nuts and a container of jasmine tea, and sometimes they threw in a copy of an illustrated magazine in Chinese. This was my first encounter with written Chinese. I asked the laundry people if they had any books that would help me to learn Chinese characters. They lent me a little Chinese-English conversation manual, which wasn't much help, though with it I was able to teach myself to write the Chinese characters for the numbers one to ten. I was in seventh grade at the time.

My father was in business in New York, and when I was in the city he would often take me to Chinatown, where we bought Chinese trinkets and toys. I wanted to try having a Chinese meal, but my father was born and raised in Texas and was extremely conservative in matters of food. It was not until some years later that I got to try Chinese cooking.

B: Early impressions make a difference – I remember as a child visiting my grandmother, who had a number of Chinese paintings and prints, which I would look at for what seemed like hours. What actually propelling you to study Asian languages?

W: In the spring of 1943, at the age of seventeen, I volunteered for duty in the U.S. Navy. I was aboard a ship in Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands when the war ended. The following month, September 1945, the ship went to Japan and anchored at the Yokosuka Naval Base in Tokyo Bay. I had had no training in Japanese, but managed to pick up a little of the language on the times we were permitted to go ashore for liberty. By the time I left Japan in February of 1946, I had decided that I wanted to go into the field of Chinese and Japanese studies.

On being discharged from the Navy later in the year, I applied for admission to Columbia because it was in New York, my favorite city, and because I knew that it offered instruction in both Chinese and Japanese.

B: Who were your teachers at Columbia?

W: When I wrote out my program for my freshman year at Columbia, I indicated that I intended to take first-year Chinese. When my adviser, a professor of French, learned that I had never had any French, he refused to sign my program. But I went over his head, to the person in charge of freshmen, a professor of philosophy who happened to have studied Japanese in the Navy during the war. He said we needed more people in America who knew Chinese and Japanese and readily okayed my program.

At that time Dr. L. Carrington Goodrich, the regular professor of Chinese, was in China on a sabbatical; in his place we had an Englishman, Rev. Lutley, who had been a missionary in Sichuan. Almost all the class time was spent on learning to read and write Chinese characters. It was assumed that if we were serious about Chinese studies, we could go to China later to pick up the spoken language.

For my second and third years of Chinese I had Professor Goodrich. He had been born in China of missionary parents and had spoken Chinese from childhood and con-
stantly stressed that the difficult part was learning to read. For my fourth and fifth years of Chinese at Columbia, when I was in graduate school, my teacher was Chichen Wang, a Chinese who taught Chinese literature and had published some excellent English translations of both modern and traditional Chinese literary works. He was very insistent that translations not only be accurate in meaning but in an English style that was pleasing and unlabored. Under him I learned to be careful about what kind of English I used when I translated. He had the greatest scorn for any translation that sounded stilted.

**B:** Professor Wang’s views seem informed by those of Yan Fu and his three principles of *xin, da, ya* (fidelity, readability, and elegance). What was your first translation?

**W:** The Columbia University Department of Chinese and Japanese encouraged students to produce a work of translation for the MA thesis.

**B:** That would be pretty uncommon for a university today.

**W:** In my fifth year at Columbia, 1950–51, I accordingly, under the direction of Mr. Wang, translated the chapter on the *youxia* or wandering knights from the *Shiji* or *Records of the Historian*, a famous early work of Chinese history, and submitted this as an MA thesis. Later I made the *Shiji* the subject of my PhD dissertation, and still later translated and published a large number of chapters from the history.

Histories make up a very important part of traditional Chinese literature, in some ways occupying a place comparable to works of mythology or epic poetry in the literatures of other cultures. Chinese poetry, for example, is full of allusions to events and personages described in the histories. In translating sections from the *Shiji, Han shu,* and *Zou zhu* or *Records of the Historian,* my aim was to make the most famous and influential passages of these texts available in easily readable form so that they could be read by English readers as one reads *Herodotus,* *Thucydides,* *Polybius,* or *Livy.*

**B:** How did you go on to become a professional translator?

**W:** In college and in the years immediately following, I tried writing short works of fiction. But although I had a certain facility with words, I seemed to lack the ability to invent interesting and convincing plots or characters. As I gained more experience in translating, I came to realize that my talents lay more in that direction. I was greatly aided in my efforts in this direction by the fact that the Columbia University Committee on Oriental Studies was looking for someone to produce new translations of important works of early Chinese philosophy and was in a position to pay me a stipend for undertaking such translations. So in the years following the completion of my PhD degree in 1956, I happily settled into the role of translator.

**B:** You’ve also translated a good deal of Chinese philosophy, including Mozi, Xunzi, Zhuangzi, and Han Feizi. Anyone who has taken an Asian Studies course in college has probably read one or more of your translations. Which Chinese philosopher proved the most challenging to translate and why?

**W:** The *Zhuangzi* was the most difficult and challenging text among the early philosophers I translated. First of all, because the thought is unconventional and often expressed in paradoxical form. Also, it is uncertain whether the text as we have it now is the work of a single thinker or a mixture of writings by writers of differing dates and points of view. Finally, because of the unconventional nature of the thought and expression, the text often appears to be in need of emendation in order to produce a satisfactory reading. Commentators offer various suggestions for emendation, but just how many and just which should the translator adopt? On the other hand, the *Zhuangzi* gives the translator an unparalleled opportunity for the use of creative and imaginative language. I hope that to some extent I was able to live up to these opportunities. I had great fun trying.

**B:** When did you begin translating poetry?

**W:** Almost as soon as I could read any of it. At the end of the class hour in second-year Chinese, Dr. Goodrich would sometimes put a short Tang poem on the board and explain the meaning. I remember later in my room experimenting in making translations of such poems.

My first real translations of poems in Chinese were done in 1954 when Donald Keene, who was then compiling an anthology of Japanese literature, asked me to translate some examples of *kanshi* – poems in Chinese written by Japanese – for him. The results appeared in his anthology *Anthology of Japanese Literature,* first published by Grove Press in 1955. Though I tried to do my best at the time, the results are something of an embarrassment to me now because of their sometimes old-fashioned and stilted English.

A few years later, when I had accumulated a small selection of translations of early Chinese poems from the *Yutai Xing-yong,* I sent them to Ezra Pound for comment. I had been in correspondence with him because I translated an article
in Japanese on an interview between him and Professor Yoshikawa Kojiro, my teacher at Kyoto University, which took place at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital when Yoshikawa visited America in 1954. Pound kindly replied, making no comment on my translations – each generation, he said, must produce its own critics – but he suggested places I might send them for publication.

**B:** Did you have a mentor for translating poetry?

**W:** I have gotten much friendly, or sometimes unfriendly, advice from friends and/or poets to whom I have shown my work, such as Cid Corman, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder. But for the most part I have had to learn from my own errors. In the case of poetry translation in particular, I have found that the best procedure is to read as much good contemporary American poetry as possible, since contemporary American English is the idiom I wish to use in my poetry translations. I never attempt to translate into any of the styles or forms of pre-modern English poetry.

**B:** Wow! That’s an impressive array of friends and teachers. How did you meet them?

**W:** Gary Snyder and I were both living in Kyoto in the ’50s and associated with the First Zen Institute of America in Japan. Over the years Gary was very helpful in giving me copies of his books and works of other poets. When I did the first draft of my Han Shan translations, I asked Gary to look it over. I did not know at the time that he had translated a selection of Han Shan poems, and he didn’t mention the fact.

He gave my translations to Cid Corman, who had recently come to Kyoto, I think partly through arrangements made by Gary, and I met with Corman to get his reactions. Corman was extremely critical of my translations, complaining of awkward or sloppy English, and more or less implied I was wasting my time trying to translate poetry. He only went over two or three poems with me, but I could see the sort of things he objected to and later went through my manuscript and made revisions.

Corman seemed outraged at the fact that I was at the time receiving a stipend from Columbia to translate works of Chinese philosophy. He kept asking if I thought he could receive a similar stipend if he offered to do translation work for Columbia. Finally I said, “But Cid, you don’t even read Chinese!” “Oh, that doesn’t matter,” he replied. “I’ll just get someone to tell me what it means.” That was his approach to translation.

**W:** I got to know Allen Ginsberg in the early ’60s when he was in Kyoto for a time and staying with Gary. He spent a whole morning going over some of my Su Dongpo translations I was working on at the time. He was friendly and helpful and I was able to make extensive revisions on the basis of his suggestions.

**B:** Who is your favorite Chinese poet?

**W:** Bai Juyi, because he is relatively easy to read and translate, he has a sense of humor, and most of the time I feel in sympathy with what he is saying.

**B:** Which Chinese poet do you find most difficult to translate and why?

**W:** Du Fu, because his poetry is often so difficult to read, the language is so dense and compressed, and there are so many allusions to be explained.

**B:** You must have always been a reader of poetry. I’m curious to know which modern or contemporary poets you like.

**W:** Leaving aside those poets who are friends, others whose works I particularly admire include Frost, Eliot, Roethke, Robert Lowell, Frank O’Hara, and James Wright.

**B:** Do you particularly admire the work of any other translators?

**W:** In my translations of Chinese poetry, I have of course been very much influenced by the translations of Pound and Waley, particularly the latter. I never had a chance to meet Waley, but I dedicated one of my books, Chinese Rhyme-Prose, to his memory.

I much admire the writings on Chinese literature by Steven Owen and the Chinese translations of David Hawkes and Cyril Birch.

**B:** More recently, you have also translated Buddhist texts. What was the motivation?

**W:** My first acquaintance with Buddhist texts came when I was working part time for the First Zen Institute of Amer-
ica in Japan in Kyoto in the ’50s. Some time later, I took up Zen meditation and koan study in Japan and became further involved with Chinese Zen texts. Still later, I went to work as a translator for the Soka Gakkai, a Japanese Buddhist organization that adheres to the teachings of the Japanese monk Nichiren. I am not a follower of the Nichiren school of Buddhism or a member of the Soka Gakkai. But I have greatly enjoyed my work for the organization and have profited immensely from the opportunity it has given me to broaden my knowledge of Buddhist thought and history. Among other things, it gave me a chance to make an English translation of Kumarajiva’s Chinese version of the Lotus Sutra, one of the most important texts of Mahayana Buddhism.

B: Which Sutras do you prefer?

W: I did the Lotus Sutra at the request of the Soka Gakkai, and was happy to do it, as it gave me good practice. But my real favorite is the Vimalakirti – not, you understand, that I have read all that many sutras. I have thought of making a translation of the Diamond Sutra, just as an exercise in translation. Conze and Bill Porter have done much more work on it than I ever could.

B: Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?

W: Yes.

B: Do you continue to meditate?

W: I do, though not as much as I used to when I was engaged in koan study. I attend a meditation group that meets once a week at a temple nearby. It is headed by Yoshida Shodo Roshi, head of Kencho-ji, a major Rinzai Zen temple in Kamakura. The temple where we meet in Tokyo was his temple before he took the position in Kamakura and he likes to visit it at frequent intervals. After meditation he lectures on the Kattoshu, a koan collection. The group is made up largely of older persons like myself.

B: Have you been able to support yourself translating?

W: I taught off and on for a number of years at Columbia, and one year at Stanford; and, as I have indicated, I was fortunate to receive a stipend from the Columbia Committee on Oriental Studies that allowed me to do translation work in Japan. At a later period in Japan I worked for a Japanese organization called the International Society for Educational Information, translating nearly all the entries for a Biographical Dictionary of Japanese Literature and a Biographical Dictionary of Japanese History, and many of the entries for a Biographical Dictionary of Japanese Art. This work constituted a splendid course in Japanese history and culture and opened the way for my later translations from Japanese literature. In more recent years, as I have indicated, I have been supported by my work for the Soka Gakkai. Thus I have largely avoided the fate of having to teach English in Japan to support myself, though I have done that at times too.

I always urge young people to go into the translation field, because you can usually do your work when and where you feel like it, and you learn a great deal in the process. At first you may find yourself spending much time looking up words in the dictionary, but as you gain more experience, you will find the work going faster and with greater ease.

But one should not be too fussy about what sort of material one is required to translate. Any type of translating is good experience in both the languages one is translating out of and into. Though most of my experience has been with academic material, for a number of years I worked part time as a copywriter for a Japanese advertising agency in Osaka. Sometimes I wrote ads for electric fans or car radios, or translated instruction manuals on the use of machines being exported to Southeast Asian countries. It was often dull going, but it got me out of the house, got me into downtown Osaka, afforded me many insights into the workings of the Japanese business world, and many happy hours of after-work dining and drinking.

B: It’s comforting to hear that a translator of your stature has translated instruction manuals. Your readers see the impressive academic works and never realize that a translator often earns money in other ways. I want to change the subject now. You have lived in Japan a good part of your life. What impact has this had on you as a translator of Chinese literature?

W: When I began studying Chinese as a freshman in college in 1946, I of course had every intention of later going to China to study. But by 1951, when I had finished my MA and used up all the money I was entitled to under the GI Bill, mainland China was closed to Americans, Hong Kong and Taiwan were in turmoil, and I had no contacts in the latter two places. In order to further my studies, my best bet seemed to be to go to Japan, where I had assurances that I could get a job teaching English to support myself. So I went to Kyoto in the fall of 1951. I had had only one year of Japanese at Columbia and therefore had to spend much time learning spoken Japanese. While teaching English at Doshisha University, I was enrolled as a graduate student in the Department of Chinese Language and
Literature of Kyoto University and continued my Chinese studies there.

I probably should have gone to Taiwan at some later time to work on spoken Chinese. But all my translation work was on texts in classical Chinese, and because I was adjusted to life in Japan, I found I could do my work easily and comfortably there.

I greatly regret that I was never able to experience Chinese life, as many of my older colleagues in the China field did in Beijing before the country was closed to Americans, but that was just the way the history of the period played out. Meanwhile, living in Japan I was able to acquire a knowledge of the Japanese language and literature. In later years I have much enjoyed making translations from works of Japanese fiction and poetry, of both the modern and pre-modern periods.

My situation, therefore, was somewhat similar to that of Japanese scholars of Chinese language and culture in earlier ages, who spent their lives studying Chinese texts but were prevented by the political conditions of the time from ever actually going to China.

Incidentally, I would like to note here that I do all my Chinese translations directly from the Chinese. Because I frequently mention having consulted this or that Japanese translation of a Chinese text, some persons have supposed that I translated from Japanese translations rather than from the Chinese original, which is not the case. Chinese commentators will usually explain difficult words or allusions in a poem or passage, but leave the poem or passage as a whole unexplained. Japanese commentators, since they are writing for readers whose native language is not Chinese, are likely to be more thorough in their explanations. I welcome all the explanation I can get.

B: I recall you working on the Shiji, from the original Chinese, when you were in Hong Kong in 1990. Have you been to China? Waley never made it.

W: In the summer of 1983 I made a three-week trip to China, expenses paid by the Soka Gakkai. I traveled in company with a Japanese friend from the Soka Gakkai and we had Japanese-speaking guides throughout. The itinerary included Beijing, Luoyang, Hangzhou, Shaoxing, and Mt. Tiantai, places that I particularly wanted to visit. At that time I considered the possibility of trying to spend some time in China, but was told that the only type of employment I could expect was that of English teacher.

In the spring of 1990 I spent a very pleasant six months in Hong Kong as a recipient of a Renditions Fellowship at the Research Centre for Translation of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. There I worked on further translations from the Shiji and revisions of my earlier translations.

B: Have you ever read or considered translating any of the great classical Chinese novels?

W: Professor Ogawa Tamaki, one of my teachers at Kyoto University, once asked me, “Aren’t you ever going to read the other half of Chinese literature?”

When I was teaching at Columbia, I was responsible for the history of Chinese literature from early times up to the Tang, and C. T. Hsia took care of everything from the Tang to the present. To be sure, in some of the undergraduate courses I taught, we read some of the famous Chinese novels, but we read them in English translation, so I had no real need to read them in Chinese.

I have read all the extant prose works up to the end of the Han, and many from the periods immediately following, and all the extant poetry up to the beginning of the Tang. But doing so has used up a lot of my eye power, and I have never felt up to embarking on an extensive program of reading in later Chinese literature, particularly as I have no experience with the colloquial language or of Chinese life. Instead I read fairly extensively in Japanese literature, of both the pre-modern and the modern period, since many of my years have been spent in Japan.

B: Then I suppose you do not read or translate modern or contemporary Chinese literature?

W: I have never translated anything from modern Chinese and in fact have read almost nothing in the modern period except in English translation. Never having lived in China, I lack any real facility in the spoken language and do not feel I could properly understand or appreciate works in the modern idiom. And I have never become completely comfortable with the abbreviated characters. What eye power I have left these days I prefer to use reading works in classical Chinese or in Japanese.

B: What are you working on at the moment?

W: I am not working on any translation project at the moment, though I am always on the lookout for something that would be interesting and suitable for translation. I would like to do more on the Sung poet Lu You (Lu Yu), but I do not know if Columbia University Press would be
interested in putting out an expanded version of my earlier Lu You book.

B: One last question. Which of your translations are you most satisfied with?

W: I tend to be most satisfied with the translation that I have worked on most recently or am now working on. I do not spend a great deal of time looking over old translations, because if I do so I invariably see things that I wish to change or wish I had done differently, and one very seldom has an opportunity to correct or redo a translation that has already gotten into print. I try to learn from my earlier errors, but I find it best to concentrate on doing the best I can with my present project.

Principal Publications of Burton Watson

Ssu-ma Ch’ien: Grand Historian of China, Columbia University Press (CUP), 1958
Early Chinese Literature, CUP, 1962
Mo Tzu: Basic Writings, CUP, 1963
Hsin Tzu: Basic Writings, CUP, 1963
Han Fei Tzu: Basic Writings, CUP, 1964
Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings, CUP, 1964
Su Tung-p’o: Selections from a Sung Poet, CUP, 1965
Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, CUP, 1968
Cold Mountain: 100 Poems by the T’ang Poet Han-shan, CUP, 1970
Chinese Lyricism: Shi Poetry from the Second to the Twelfth Century, CUP, 1971
Chinese Rhyme-prose: Poems in the Fu Form from the Han and Six Dynasties Periods, CUP, 1972
The Old Man Who Does as He Pleases: Selections from the Poetry and Prose of Lu Yu, CUP, 1973
Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the Former Han by Pan Ku, CUP, 1974
Ryokan: Zen Monk-Poet of Japan, CUP, 1977
Grass Hill: Poems and Prose by the Japanese Monk Gensei, CUP, 1983
The Tso Chuan: Selections from China’s Oldest Narrative History, CUP, 1989
The Rainbow World: Japan in Essays and Translations, Broken Moon Press, 1990
Saigyō: Poems of a Mountain Home, CUP, 1991
The Lotus Sutra, CUP, 1993
The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi, Shambhala, 1993; reprinted by CUP, 1999
The Wild Goose, Mori Ōgai, Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1995
Sutra on the Exposition of Vimalakirti, CUP, 1997
Masaoka Shiki: Selected Poems, CUP, 1998
Po Chü-i, Selected Poems, CUP, 2000
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Translation Review
Lu Yu (Lu You), Twelve Poems

by Burton Watson

Lu Yu (1125–1210) spent much of his life serving in a succession of relatively minor government posts, retiring from official duty in 1181. The first three poems date from the time when he was a government official. The remainder are from his retirement years, when he was living in a farming area on the outskirts of Shao-hsing in Chekiang.

Lu Yu Poems, No. 1

夜行至白鹿泉上

小雨病良已

新秋夜漸長

隔城聞鶴唳

出戶逐螢光

荒徑穿蒙密

遙空望莽蒼

泉聲落環佩

肝肺為清涼

Evening: Walked to White Deer Spring
(regulated verse, 1180)

Light rain, illness all gone,
new autumn, nights gradually growing longer.

Beyond the town wall I hear cranes calling,
out the door, I chase after firefly glow.

Overgrown pathway, pushing through underbrush,
staring at the vacant blue of a far-off sky:
from the spring a sound like girdle pendants dropping –
makes my lungs and liver feel clean and cool.

Lu Yu Poems, No. 2

宿城頭鋪小飲而睡

亭傳臨江澗

牀敷息我勞

屋茅殘月冷

庭樹北風鏖

虛市饒新兔

村場有漉醪

氣衰仍病著

小飲不能豪

Putting up for the night at Ch’eng-t’ou Station:
a little drink and then to bed (regulated verse, 1180)

The post station overlooks the river margin;
bed and blanket rest my weariness.
By thatch roofs a fading moon cold,
courtyard trees racketing in the north wind.
Marketplace, plenty of fresh-cooked rabbit,
village square even sells muddy brew.*
Running low on energy, ailing besides –
just a little drink – I couldn’t manage much.

* milky rice wine
Lu Yu Poems, No. 3

Looking at Someone’s Vegetable Garden
(chüeh-chü, 1180)

Mustard, rape greens ready for pickling, cress to go in soup;
evening winds, gust on gust, rattle the well sweep.
Lone official, white haired, what delights does he have?
Too bad I didn’t spend my life tending a vegetable patch!

Lu Yu Poems, No. 4

Can’t Get to Sleep
(regulated verse, 1181)

Town far off, too far to hear its bells and drums;
lone village, wind, rain noisy in the night.
Sad – how the green wine jeers at my many ailments.
Dare I scold the blue lamp for laughing at my sleeplessness?
Water gone cold: on the toad inkstone, first signs of thin ice;
fire still in it: the duck censer goes on faintly smoking.
Vacant windows suddenly tell me the east is growing brighter –
before the embroidery Buddha once more I open the sutra scroll.

(The bells and drums in line 1 signal the time of day or night; in lines 5 and 6 the inkstone well is shaped like a toad, the censer, like a duck. As the last line indicates, Lu Yu was a Buddhist believer.)
Lu Yu Poems, No. 5

Chüeh-chü on My Vegetable Garden
(first in a series of seven poems, 1181)

Meant to plant turnips – too late now,
right, though, for late rape greens, early chives.
An old man needs something for his plate on fasting days –
I beg seedlings, while the rain lasts hurry to get them in.

Lu Yu Poems, No. 6

In my study, fiddling with a writing brush, I happened to come up with
this to show to my son Yü (regulated verse, 1198)

Left and right, chi’in and wine cask –
silence! no more clatter!
Fang-weng is embarking on
his new old age career.
Burning incense, I pore over
the Hsieh River Collection;
tending the fire, I brew myself
a cup of Ku-chu tea.
My calligraphy – half drunk –
has something of an antique air;
my poems, hard as I work at them,
not yet in the master class.
Lingering sun in my lone window
calls up dreary thoughts;
from the river town, long-drawn in twilight,
the wailing of barbarian flutes.

(Yü was Lu Yu’s youngest son. Fang-weng in line 2 is Lu Yu’s literary
name. The Hsieh River Collection in line 3 is the collected poetry of Su
Kuo, son of the famous poet Su Shih; Ku-chu tea is fine tea from the
region of Mt. Ku-chu in Chekiang.)
Lu Yu Poems, No. 7

甲子歲元日  
飲罷屠蘇酒  
真為八十翁  
本憂緣直死  
却喜坐詩窮  
米賤知無盜  
雲霧又主豐  
一簞那復慮  
嬉笑伴兒童

Chia-tzu, New Year’s Day  
(regulated verse; the cyclical term chia-tzu indicates the year 1204)  
Done drinking my New Year’s spiced wine,  
truly now an eighty-year-old man.  
Used to worry outspokenness would be my death,  
now content just to be poor and write poems.  
Rice cheap – that means no thieves this year;  
cloudy skies foretell another good harvest.  
Something in the food bowl – what other cares?  
Smiling, happy, I tag along with the young boys.  
(Regarding line 6, a note by the poet explains that overcast weather on the first day of the year was believed to be a sign that there would be a good harvest.)

Lu Yu Poems, No. 8

春日雜賦  
人生覓飯元多術  
最下方為祿代耕  
脫卻朝衫猶老健  
快如苦雨得春晴  
鳥聲頻喚五更夢  
花氣頓醒三日酲  
最喜晨興聞剝啄

Spring Day, Random Verses  
(regulated verse, 5th of 5 poems with this title, 1206)  
In this life so many ways to earn your rice;  
in place of farming, official stipend – that’s the worst of all!  
I’ve put off court robes, old but still hearty,  
a joy like spring sunlight after wearisome rains.  
Bird calls insistently wake me from fifth watch dreams;  
breath of blossoms in no time cures my third-day hangover.  
Happiest of all, up at dawn, the rapping I hear –  
a letter from my boy delivered to my brushwood gate!
Lu Yu Poems, No. 9

南堂雜興

Ten miles south of the town, rice and millet hamlets;
white-haired, things on my mind, who to talk them out with?
Lazy, careless, long since spurning my father’s instructions;
so stupid I offend the mercy of our sacred ruler.
From time to time, sickness in abeyance, I get out my worm-
eaten books;
when the mood comes, now and then venture beyond my
brushwood gate.
Slanting sun, propped on a cane, who knows what I’m doing?
Shooing in the pigs and chickens before darkness falls.*

* A note by the poet says that old people like himself who can no
longer work the fields are given the task of gathering in the live-
stock at sundown.

Lu Yu Poems, No. 10

春 遊

Paired boats plunging through
the lake waves’ emerald,
steeds side by side trampling to dust
the red of blossomed paths –
in a seventy year span
a whole new set of people,
but Fang-weng, just as ever,
drunk in the spring wind.
Lu Yu Poems, No. 11

夜坐小飲
零落槐花已滿溝
江湖又見一番秋
水輪有轍淩空上
銀漢無聲接地流
丹荔甘寒勞遠致
玉醅醇洌喜新篘
移牀坐對西南電
好雨心知不待求

Sitting at Night, Drinking a Little
(regulated verse, 1208)

Patter-patter, blossoms of the pagoda tree
already clog the gutters;
amid rivers and lakes once more
I look out on an autumn scene.
Following its track, the moon’s icy disc
wheels high into the air;
The Milky Way, soundless,
sweeps over the earth.
Red litchis sweet and cold,
gift from a far-off region;
jadelike brew rich and fragrant,
nice when it’s newly strained.
I move my chair, sit where I can see
lightning in the southwest sky –
The good rain knows when to fall,
doesn’t wait for our calling.

Lu Yu Poems, No. 12

病中自遣
一鴉振羽鳴
窓色忽已縞
眾鳥次第來
各矜語言好
病夫正擁被
宛如兒在褓
跣婢織衣襦
丫童謹除掃
紅日已入簾
吾豈尚恨早
悠然一盃粥
頑鈍聊自保

In Sickness, Cheering Myself Up
(old style, 1209)

A lone crow flaps its wings, cawing,
and suddenly the window’s the color of white silk.
One after another the other birds come,
each boasting how well it can speak.
Sick fellow only buries himself in covers,
like a small child wrapped in swaddling.
The barefoot maid tends to my robe and jacket,
the boy in braids carefully cleans up after.
Red sunshine already filtering the blinds,
how can I go on complaining it’s too early?
With deliberation I down a bowl of rice gruel,
fool that I am, hoping to keep myself alive.
Bo Juyi and Guan Panpan: the Swallow Tower Poems

One of my favorites among the stories in Jingshi Tongyan 警世通言 (“Comprehensive Words to Admonish the World”), collected in the 1620s by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646), is “Director Qian Writes a Poem About the Swallow Tower” 錢舍人題詩燕子樓.

The story opens with an account, much embellished from the spare historical sources, of an exchange of poems eight hundred years earlier between the great Tang poet Bo Juyi 白居易 (772–846) and a woman named Guan Panpan. She had been the favorite and lover of Zhang Yin 張愔, a former Minister of Rites who later served as Regional Military Commissioner of Wuning, with his headquarters at Xuzhou, in present-day Jiangsu.

In Bo Juyi’s preface to his three “Swallow Tower” poems, he wrote:

徐州故張尚書有愛妓曰盼盼善歌舞雅多風態
子為校書郎時遊徐泗間張尚書宴予酒酣出盼盼以佐歡
歡甚予因贈詩云醉嬌勝不得風嫋牡
丹花一歡而去爾後絕不相聞迨茲僅一絕矣

In Xuzhou, the former Minister Zhang had a beloved singing-girl named Panpan. She sang and danced well and was famous for her elegance and refinement. When I was an Editor [in 804], I traveled in the area around Xuzhou and Sizhou. Minister Zhang gave a dinner for me, and once we were all half-drunk, he had Panpan brought out to assist in the merriment. I enjoyed myself so much, I gave her a poem that included the lines, “Nothing is quite like this tipsy beauty, waving in the breeze like a peony flower.” After the entertainment, I departed, and until now, I have heard almost nothing about her. Yesterday, Vice-Director of the Bureau of Merit Titles Zhang Zhongsu came to visit me. On the occasion, he chanted some new poems. Among them were three about the “Swallow Tower.” They were so lovely, I asked him if they were by Panpan herself.

Zhang Zhongsu had served in the Wuning Army and over some years had a slight acquaintance with Panpan. So, he told me that when Minister Zhang died [in 806], his body was taken back east to Luoyang for burial. However, there remains in Pengcheng a place that was the Minister’s former house. On the grounds is a small tower called the Swallow Tower. Because she remained true to her old love and never married, Panpan has lived in this tower for more than ten years in seclusion with none to keep her company. She is still there, even today. I loved the new poems that Zhang Zhongsu chanted, so recalling my old travels in Pengcheng, I wrote three quatrains by the same title.

In Feng Menglong’s version of the story, Bo Juyi writes his three Swallow Tower poems in reply to Guan Panpan, using the same rhyme words as in her poems, then sends them to her in a letter. As she is reading them, she notices a loose slip of paper sticking out of the envelope. On it is another quatrain by Bo Juyi. It makes an ironic comment that despite all the money and care Zhang Yin lavished on his women, he went to his grave alone. Feeling that Bo Juyi criticized her for not following Zhang Yin in death, Guan Panpan writes to tell him what had kept her from suicide all these years: her fear that the amorous Minister Zhang had taken another lover in the afterlife. Then, she composed a poem reproaching Bu Juyi, using the same rhyme words as Bo Juyi’s fourth quatrain, and starved herself to death.

Her tower eventually fell into disuse. In the intervening eight centuries, it was renovated a number of times. Today, Guan Panpan and her Swallow Tower – most recently rebuilt in 1986 – are a tourist attraction: one of the “Five Famous Buildings of Xuzhou.” It can be seen on the Internet at www.xztb.com/tobig5/jxxz/625.htm.
關盼盼: 燕子樓三首
The Swallow Tower, Three Poems, by Guan Panpan

樓上殘燈伴曉霜
獨眠人起合歡床
相思一夜情多少
地角天涯未是長
Up in my tower, guttering lamp, frost my dawn companion;
I sleep alone, then rise from the bed we shared.
Thinking of him all night, so many feelings;
Earth’s end and sky’s edge cannot contain them all.

北邙松柏鎖愁煙
燕子樓中思悄然
自埋劍履歌塵散
紅袖香消已十年
On North Mang Hill, pine and cypress wrapped in sad mist;
In Swallow Tower, I sit quietly and mourn him.
Since they buried his sword and shoes, I haven’t sung;
From my red sleeves, the perfume faded ten years ago.

白居易: 燕子樓三首并序
The Swallow Tower, Three Poems, by Bo Juyi

滿窗明月滿簾霜
被冷燈殘拂臥床
燕子樓中霜月夜
秋來祇為一人長
The bright moon fills her window, frost fills her curtains;
Her cloak is cold, her lamp’s last light flickers across her bed.
In Swallow Tower, on this frosty moonlit night, As autumn arrives, only one grows older.

鈿暈羅衫色似煙
幾會欲著即潸然
自從不舞霓裳曲
疊在空箱十一年
Her filigree pin and silk dress are the color of mist;
How many times she wanted to put them on, but broke down crying.
Since she no longer dances to the “Rainbow Dress Tune,” Folded in their case, they have slept ten years or more.

今春有客洛陽回
曾到尚書墓上來
見說白楊堪作柱
爭教紅粉不成灰
This spring, a traveler returned from Luoyang; He had visited the Minister’s burial mound.
When he said the poplars there had grown as tall as pillars, She struggled to keep her face from turning the color of ashes.

* Zhang Yin was buried on North Mang Hill, near Luoyang. “Sword and shoes” stand for a trusted minister who may enter the Emperor’s presence without first taking off his sword and removing his shoes.
Sad Thoughts About Vice-Director Zhang's Singing-girls, by Bo Juyi

黃金不惜買蛾眉
揀得如花三四妓
歌舞教成心力盡
一朝身去不相隨

He spared no expense on beautiful women,
Choosing three or four as fine as flowers.
They learned to sing and dance beyond all others;
One day he died, but they did not follow.

Feng Menglong’s version changes the last three characters in the second line, and with them, the entire tone of the poem:

黃金不惜買蛾眉
揀得如花只一枝
歌舞教成心力盡
一朝身去不相隨

He spared no expense on beautiful women,
Yet chose only one to be his finest flower.
She learned to sing and dance beyond all others;
One day he died, but she did not follow.
On Li Bai’s “Jeweled Staircase Grievance”

by Steve Bradbury

李白 LI BAI
玉階怨 The Jeweled Stairs’ Grievance
玉階生白露 The jeweled stairs glow white with dew;
夜久侵羅袜 The long night wets a silken shoe.
卻下水晶簾 Withdrawn behind her autumn blind,
玲瓏望秋月 She courts the moon, the clair de lune.

This set piece on the theme of the neglected courtesan, or “boudoir lament” (gui yuan 閨怨), is one of the most famous poems in the Chinese classical canon and among the first to have been translated into a Western language. Versions of it can be found in most standard anthologies of Tang verse, both Chinese and English, as well as in two formative texts in the genealogy of Western modernism: Judith Gautier’s Le Livre de jade (1867), a pioneering collection of poetic chinoiserie elegantly cast in that oxymoronic genre of then recent invention, the prose poem; and Ezra Pound’s Cathay (1915), where it appears in the American poet’s ground-breaking “vers libre.” Much of the popularity of this poem can be attributed to Li Bai’s art of oblique portrayal. As commentators have long noted and Pound himself observed in a memorable footnote to his version of the poem, Li Bai’s neglected courtesan “utters no direct reproach.” Instead, with the cinematic economy of an Eisenstein or Antonioni, the Chinese poet conveys his subject’s feelings through a series of visual images that gradually enlarge our perspective on her situation.

The poem begins with a “wide-angle shot” that confirms the palatial setting suggested by the title (yu jie sheng bai lu “jade stairs glazed [with] white dew”). It then cuts to a close-up of a telling detail that, together with the reference to the lateness of the hour, literally fleshes out the scenario as that of a disappointed tryst (ye jiu qin Luo wa “night long saturates gauze stockings”). In the third line, the poet’s “camera-eye” takes us inside the courtesan’s apartment, where we are given a brief glimpse at her interior life in both senses of the phrase (que xia Shui jing lian “withdrawn [inside, she] lowers [the] crystal curtain”). Finally, in another abrupt shift in perspective, the camera dissolves to an “over-the-shoulder shot” of the clear autumn moon in a panoramic closing image that is as poignant as it is suggestive (ling long wang qiu yue “clear and bright, [she] gazes [at the] autumn moon”).

Two other aspects of “The Jeweled Stairs’ Grievance” that help account for its continued popularity among Chinese readers are the graceful feel of the poem in the pleasure of the reading moment and the deft manner with which it reaches back to earlier texts. The form of the poem is a standard wujue yuefu, or pentasyllabic rhymed quatrain set to music in the style of the “palace poetry” of the Southern Dynasties period, which flourished some 150 years before Li Bai took up the theme of the neglected courtesan. Although the “sheet music” has not come down to us, the musicality of Li Bai’s rhyme and meter has not been effaced by the centuries even in modern Mandarin. Phonetic changes in the Chinese language have reduced the end rhyme to a slant rhyme, but the richness of the poem’s internal rhymes and the elegant lift of its metrical scheme make the Chinese version of “The Jeweled Stairs’ Grievance” as pleasurable to the ear as it is to the eye and sensibilities. I should also point out that, contrary to his reputation for being a brilliant but largely untutored eccentric who spun poems whole-cloth out of a wine-inspired imagination, Li Bai was a poet of no small culture and education who followed the general Tang practice of drawing upon the work of those who came before him. For example, the title of the poem, “Yu jie yuan” (literally “Jade Stairs’ Grievance”) had already been used by more than one poet by the time Li Bai took up the theme of the neglected courtesan, and a number of the words and phrases in the poem proper had long been common tropes of the genre. All of which gives “The Jeweled Stairs’ Grievance” an allusive texture that is difficult to convey in a literal translation.

In the interest of suggesting the form and texture of the Chinese poem, I have taken several liberties with the letter of the text, beginning with the title. I have lifted Pound’s version of the title in part to mimic Li Bai’s compositional practice but also to bolster my rhyme and meter. The more literal “The Jade Stairs’ Grievance” would not have allowed me to repeat the opening words of the title at the beginning of my first line without sacrificing my iambic meter. Moreover, Pound’s title inadvertently provides me with a number of fortuitous internal rhymes that are not unlike those in the original. Note, for example, how the first sylla-
ble of “jeweled” chimes off the end-rhymes of the opening couplet – here too I took the liberty of making a verbal substitution (“silken shoe” for “gauze stockings”) to bolster my rhyme and meter – and resonates with the vowels in the end-rhymes of the two phrases in the closing line (moon/lune). Finally, the repetition of the word “jeweled” helps to compensate for the loss of the word “crystal” in the third line, which I replaced with the word “autumn” (bumped up from the final line) in order to leave room for “clair de lune.” Linguistic purists may object to my using a French phrase in an English translation of a Chinese classical poem, but this Gallic term for moonlight does have the virtue of being faithful to what the line says by way of rhetorical assertion. At the same time, it does much to reinforce the impression that Li Bai is writing within a formalist tradition: “Clair de lune” is the title of a poem by Paul Verlaine that was set to music by Claude Debussy and Gabriel Fauré. The fact that Verlaine composed this poem while still under the potent spell of Gautier’s Le Livre de jade lends the translation an allusive texture that is almost as rich as the poem it represents.2

1 For a discussion of Gautier’s Le Livre de jade as well as Pound’s version of this Li Bai poem, see my “On the Cathay Tour with Eliot Weinberger’s New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry,” in Translation Review 66 (Fall 2003): 39–52.

2 The influence of Gautier’s Le Livre de jade on Verlaine’s poetry has not been widely noted by literary scholars, no doubt because Gautier has fallen off the literary map and Le Livre de jade, which Verlaine enthusiastically reviewed shortly before composing “Clair de Lune,” has been out of print for more than half a century. Verlaine and Gautier shared the same publisher and penchant for melodious phrasing and exotic atmospheres.
The Chinese lyric, known as 詞 (ci in pinyin, tê in Wade-Giles), evolved as a popular form of poetic expression in the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and reached its artistic peak in the Song Dynasty (960–1279). It is believed to have originated with the songs and dances composed by singing-girls and courtesans in the entertainment quarters of the great cities, particularly in the multi-cultural Tang capital of Changan, where girls imported from western Asia were bringing a new and exotic quality to the entertainment. Among their patrons were elite scholar-officials who were famed for their literary skills and who prized poetry above all other forms of expression. It could not have been long before these literati were writing their own words to some of the favorite songs. Not surprisingly, many of these lyrics were about the relationships formed with the girls; whereas the original songs were about a variety of subjects, those of the poets were almost exclusively about “boudoir sentiments.” They could be performed, perhaps by one favored courtesan, in situations of intimacy or to an audience of like-minded scholars.

The practice of writing these new lyrics soon spread, and the genre became known as ci, or “words to music.” For hundreds of years these products of the poets’ leisure activities were not regarded as serious art, but nevertheless were composed by nearly all the major literary figures of the Tang and Song Dynasties. Not until the late Song were they accepted by the literary establishment as “art” poetry. They had always represented a relief from the more formally constrained verses that were the standard poetic currency, although they adopted new conventions, particularly in the use of images from nature. These could generate a considerable erotic charge and express themes of love and desire beyond the range of the more formal verse forms, without being over-explicit. An expression like “clouds and rain” for example, is traditionally understood to refer to a sexual encounter, while blossoms, flowers, or willows often stand for courtesans. Many other favorite images or “props,” designed to evoke a colorful setting, occur again and again, reused by poet after poet, not with any consciousness of plagiarism, but because these were warmly received as favorites by their audiences.

It would be wrong to assume that the euphemisms were used through shyness or reluctance to deal with sexual matters; they surely arose from an aesthetic fondness for inhabiting the borderland between explicit statement and allusive suggestion. To my mind, the finest ci live and breathe in this region, as I hope to show with some examples.

Another prominent aspect of the ci is the element of charade and role-playing, inherent in the relationships between the girls and their clients, that imbues the lyrics with a particular flavor of elegant artifice. The emotions expressed should not necessarily be taken as an evocation of the poet’s or the girl’s sincere feelings; with an audience in mind they were designed as part of a feedback process, in which the girl’s musical performance was guided by the fantasy image portrayed in the lyric.

As with many forms of lyrical poetry, sorrowful emotions predominate, but are these really the simple cries from the heart that some commentators and a few well-known translators would have us believe? The truth seems to be that the ci inhabits a region that may encompass both genuine expression of emotion and a clever facsimile of it.

Stephen Owen, in his essay “Meaning the Words,” puts it this way:

The love song is both the stylized imitation of love and at the same time the words in which a truth of love can be spoken. The singer is both a professional, paid to enact passion, and a human being, to whom love, longing and loss can actually happen. We would be overcredulous to believe every statement of love-longing is indeed love; we would be foolishly cynical to believe that every statement of love-longing is purely professional or part of a hollow game. And we can’t tell the difference.1

I recommend Stephen Owen’s essay as a fascinating exploration of this dichotomy. But there is yet another potential for artificiality: what we regard today as male chauvinism. In a society where women were subservient and courtesans were skilled in acting the perfect love-object, it is unlikely that the men would perceive the grimmer reality of these girls’ lives. Or if they did, they would not want to write about it. The sorrowing courtesan was a highly favored subject; she is often depicted with crumpled brow or concealed tear, implying that her true feelings are elsewhere, with a distant lover or perhaps with the poet himself. All very lyrical, but I can’t help speculating on the wide gulf between the lovesick languishing so often portrayed and
the far less pleasantly melancholy realities of the courtesans’ existence. Perhaps her frequently recorded tears were for her own predicament.

On the whole I am inclined to the “foolishly cynical” view when contemplating these lyrics, although this doesn’t detract from my admiration for the artistry that goes into them.

For readers who would like to know more about the development of the 作词 over the six hundred years or from the early Tang to the late Song, I recommend the introduction by Alice W. Cheang to her recent Renditions anthology. I will limit myself here to a few examples to illustrate the continuity of the erotic theme in the stylized form characteristic of the genre.

温庭筠 Wen Tingyun (c 812–870) was the first major literary figure to publish 作词 as artistic creations. The first collection, 花间集 hua jian ji, was published in 940, included some of Wen’s lyrics, marking the beginning of the recognition of 作词 as a separate genre.

Kang-I Sun Chang notes:

The hua jian poems, which represent the efforts of early literati . . . were found to be almost exclusively characterized by the love theme. This seems to be a logical outcome of the actual interrelations between poets and singing girls.

Although Wen never held down a major government post and spent much of his time in the pleasure-quarters, he was an accomplished musician as well as a poet, and the images in his sophisticated lyrics are not simply visual but seem to combine inputs from all the senses. Moreover the tones are organized musically in an innovative way. The atmosphere of these poems is highly charged, static, and tantalizingly devoid of narrative or explanation. The voice is often that of a courtesan seemingly imprisoned within her boudoir. This is a typical example:

更漏子
柳丝长
春雨细
花外漏声迢递
惊塞雁
起城乌
畫屏金鹧鸪

Surely, here is the essence of imagism; a string of apparently unrelated images, leaving the reader to form his own connections. Notice that, until the final line, the subject is described entirely in terms of the scene around her. Eroticism, like the fragrant mist, permeates Wen’s 作词 with an almost decadent atmosphere, reminiscent of Beardsley or Klimt. The swooning imagery and the choice of feminine persona were to have a lasting influence on later practitioners of the 作词.

薦薦 Wei Zhuang (836–910), a near-contemporary of Wen, was a prolific writer of both 作词 and 诗. His imagery often echoes that of Wen, but he had a greater fondness for colloquial language and storytelling. The following example is also on the theme of the abandoned courtesan, but told from her point of view:

應天長
別來半歲音書絕
一寸離腸千萬結
難相見易相別
又是燕樓花似雪
暗相思無處說

* Lady Xie was yet another euphemism for a courtesan.
To the Tune: “Echoing Eternity”

Ever since we parted, half a year ago
no news of you.
Our farewell left my tiny heart
in tangled knots.

Our meetings were hard,
parting was so casual.
Jade pavilions harbor blossoms
plentiful as snow.

There’s nowhere I can voice
this secret longing
through dismal nights of mist and moon.
I dream of love we could enjoy today,
tears darkening my red sleeves.

Only in the last line do “red sleeves” give away the fact that she is a courtesan; she expects her ex-lover to frequent those other “jade pavilions” in his travels and enjoy the “blossoms.”

This lyric might be even more affecting if we were unaware that it was one among many other very similar lyrics produced by Wei Zhuang. It is likely that they were designed to be performed by singing-girls, perhaps to a wine-soaked audience from whom tears of sympathy might come easily.

Li Yu (937–978), the last ruler of the Five Dynasties, is famous for the poignant lyrics he wrote after he was overthrown and exiled. His earlier lyrics, in contrast, embody narrative and celebrate a lifestyle in keeping with the erotic *ci* tradition, although rather too explicitly to rank among the finest examples of the genre:

To the Tune: “A Cluster of Pearls”

Evening –
her adornment begins
with a little oil of sandalwood.
She shows off to her man
a tip of lilac tongue.
Her cherry lips part briefly
to hum a tuneful snatch of song.

Dark red stains her silken sleeves;
her quilt’s aroma
betrays a tumbled winecup.
She sprawls across the embroidered bed,
so spoilt and seductive.
Chewing the soft red pulp,
she giggles,
spits it at her lover.

Liu Yong (c 987–c 1053) was an innovator who perfected a new form of *ci*, the *man ci* or “slow lyric.” He did not invent this longer, multi-stanza form, but learned it from the entertainment quarters and bohemian fringes he frequented. He was, however, the first literatus to use it consistently. He used it with skill and artistry, but was widely criticized by scholars of the time for vulgarity, principally because of his unprecedented use of colloquial language. Among ordinary people he was immensely popular, especially with singing-girls and courtesans. It is thought that he earned the displeasure of the administration not because he frequented the lowlife areas of the cities, nor for the subject matter of his poetry, but because he used common street expressions that were considered unseemly. This, in fact, cost him his career as a state official; he was turned down for a post and forced to live on his wits and hand-outs for most of his life.

I chose the following example, not simply as an illustration of Liu’s use of the female voice and some of the more customary euphemisms, but for its apparent truthfulness concerning the less glamorous side of a courtesan’s life:
To the Tune: “Enchanted by Immortals”

Just past the age of fifteen,
I pinned my hair in cloud-coils
and learned the art of song and dance.
At banqueting and wining,
the sons of nobles shared my services;
recklessly, to buy my smile,
they’d throw their gold around.
I only worried that my bloom would wilt
from all those squandered days and nights.

Then you, my good lord, kindly favored me:
tended my flower,
gave me pride of place.
“A thousand miles of sunset skies”;
why not hold hands and go with you?

I’d promise to abandon
my former mist and bloom companions;
no longer keeping company
with morning clouds and evening rain.

I have an uneasy feeling that after all this may be read in a
more cynical light; it could be designed for the chosen
courtesan to sing to each and every one of her clients. For
the duration of the tryst she could then enact the make-

To the Tune: “Jade Butterfly”

Strolling in the city,
I wandered down an alley.
Deep under painted eaves,  
behind a beaded curtain, slightly open,  
there, among silk hangings,  
I recognized a beauty  
I'd met before:  
her eyebrows, graceful lines  
of distant mountain peaks;  
her shining hair, deep layers  
of dark spring mist.

Time's barrier crumbled:  
I was gazing on the past,  
drawn again by the lure of passion.

I lingered there.  
She found a brush of rhino horn  
among the corals in her basket.  
Unfolding a perfumed writing-sheet,  
smiling, offering wine,  
she urged me to write a new song.

I penned a few new verses.  
Performing the song to me  
her lovely voice took on conviction.  
Remembering our old emotions,  
her face grew flushed.  
She begged me not to go –  
Phoenix quilt, lovebird pillows:  
I stayed  
and relished heaven's gift.

歐陽修 Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) was an outstanding  
man of letters from the Northern Song. Self-educated, his  
literary skills embraced criticism, history, prose, and all po-  
etic forms. He became a prominent member of the central  
government, but his outspokenness earned him political  
enemies and led to several episodes of banishment and ex-  
ilie. He was even accused, although finally acquitted, of in-  
decency and incest. Here is one of his delicately suggestive  
ä that's also an irresistible idyll:

漁 家 傲  
花底忽聞敲兩 棹  
遙巡女伴來尋 訪  
酒 瀟 旋 將 荷 葉 當  
蓮 舟 蕩  
時 時 龜 裏 生 紅 浪  
花 氣 酒 香 清 醞 醞  
花 斬 酒 面 紅 相 向  
醉 倚 綠 陰 眠 一 餘

To the Tune: “Fisher Family Pride”  
Under blossoms, I hear the splash of oars;  
coyly, a girl has come to me  
with winecups fashioned out of lotus leaves.

The rocking lotus boat  
forms red waves in the cups,  
on and on.

The scent of lotus-blossom blends with wine’s aroma;  
flower-complexion faces wine-flushed face.

Drunk, we doze beneath green shade,  
to wake up startled,  
the boat stuck on a sandbank.

The following ä is a frank admission of Ouyang’s attraction  
to a very young girl . . . or is the narrator here simply an-  
other assumed persona?

望 江 南  
江 南 柳  
葉 小 未 成 陰  
人 為 絲 輕 那 忍 折  
鶯 嫌 枝 嫩 不 勝 吟  
留 著 待 春 深  
十 四 五  
開 抱 琵琶 尋  
階 上 簈 錢 階 上 去  
恁 時 相 見 早 留 心  
何 情 到 如 今

To the Tune: “Gazing Towards the South”  
A willow of the South,  
with leaves so tiny  
they give no shade;  
surely no one would be cruel enough  
to snap those fragile shoots.

The oriole suspects  
such tender branches  
can’t provide a singing perch,  
and waits for spring’s advance.

Fourteen, maybe fifteen years of age;  
calmly cradling a pipa,  
she was practicing her song.
We were dicing for money on the steps
as she passed close by.
Even then, my heart was captured;
what if we met again today?

黃庭堅 Huang Tingjian (1045–1105) was another
prominent state official and prolific poet. A number of his
lyrics are presented in the voice of an old man with failing
powers. He apparently composed some of these while he
was still a young man, which suggests a high degree of de-
tachment. In this example the old man confesses he can no
longer enjoy wine and so obliquely confesses to his inability
to make love.

好事近
太平洲小姑楊蛛彈琴送酒
一弄醒心弦
情在兩山斜疊
彈到古人愁處
有真珠承睫
使君來去本無心
休淚界紅顏
自恨老來僧酒
負十分蕉葉

To the Tune: “Good Things Coming”
In Taiping district, a singing-girl called Yan Shu played the qin
and served wine.
A touch to stir the heart –
her feelings are revealed
in valleys of those eyebrow-hills.
At the moment in the song
when ancients grieved
a pearl hangs from her eyelashes.
This ancient lacks the will to come or go;
but don’t let teardrops spoil that lovely face!
In my old age, I’m done with wine
and bitterly regret
no longer can we sip together
from the plantain leaf.

秦觀 Qin Guan (1049–1100) was a protégé of the famous
Su Shi (Su Dongpo), but while Su extended the range of his
ci to express almost any subject, Qin kept to the erotic tra-
dition, modeling many of his lyrics on those of Liu Yong.

This example is typical of Qin and perhaps others in the
way that the girl’s reactions are filtered through his own
self-regard:

河傳
恨眉醉眼
甚輕輕覷者
裡魂迷亂
常記那回
小曲闌干西畔
鬟雲鬆
羅襪饒

丁香笑吐嬌無限
語軟聲低
道我何曾慣
雲雨未諧
早被東風吹散
悶損人
天不管

To the Tune: “River Message”
Anxious brows, intoxicating eyes;
gaze into them, if only fleetingly,
your soul will soon be stolen.
The memory’s still fresh
of railings by the western shore,
her hair uncoiled,
silk stockings disarrayed.
Her smile, her lilac tongue,
delicate, vivacious,
hers soft, low voice:
when did I feel like this before?

But harmony of clouds and rain
was too soon scattered by the east wind:
heaven has no pity
on the sufferings of men.

李清照 Li Qingzhao (1084–c 1151), the celebrated
woman poet of the Song Dynasty, is a prime target for
misunderstanding by critics, commentators, and translators.
Li is too often presented as if her poems are completely
autobiographical, with much emphasis on her assumed
misery after her husband’s death and her enforced move to
the South after the barbarian invasion of the North. In one
well-known collection of translations, her songs are organized into chapters headed “Youth,” “Loneliness,” “Exile,” “His Death,” etc., in spite of the fact that the chronology of many of these songs has never been determined. This is an example of circular reasoning that assumes autobiographical details from the songs and then fits them into a chronology based on those assumptions. Moreover, some of Li’s surviving critical and political writings reveal a very resilient personality that contrasts sharply with the delicate, languishing persona so frequently assumed in her songs. Here, for example, is her take on highly regarded lyric-writers Yan Jidao, Ho Zhu, Qin Guan, and Huang Tingjian:

Yan is sadly lacking more extended narrative, and Ho has lamentably little classic gravity. As for Qin, he puts great store on the expression of feeling, and gives scant attention to the substantive and real…. Huang, on the other hand, esteems the substantive and real, yet has numerous defects. His writing is like fine jade with flaws, whose worth is thereby diminished by half.

(Translation by Stephen Owen)4

In contending that the first priority in writing is the creation of a beautiful artifact, I don’t wish to imply that the emotions expressed in Li’s lyrics are entirely insincere; rather that they are presented with far more artistic objec-
tivity and keen awareness of the conventions of the genre than she is often given credit for. Li is often regarded these days as a feminist icon, but she was born into a privileged family, and in her ci she was simply following the example of the male practitioners of the genre, although her unique sensibility enabled her to beat the men at their own game.

Grace S. Fong, in her essay “Engendering the Lyric,” speaking generally of ci by women poets, comments:

Melancholy, loneliness, depression, emptiness, and vague, unfulfilled longings are common themes in their songs…. [T]he morbidity is reinforced by and exaggerated in the normative emotional categories of the song lyric.5

Li’s beautifully crafted lyrics hold all the erotic charge evident in those of the best of her predecessors, but there is occasionally a hint of something else: a sly use of double entendre, following a tradition that goes back at least to the 4th century and the songs of Zi Ye. This seemingly innocent idyll was perhaps inspired by the Ouyang Xiu lyric quoted above (she is on record as admiring his work):

如夢令
常記溪亭日暮
沉醉不知歸路
興盡晚回舟
誤入藕花深處
爭渡
爭渡
驚起一灘鷗鷺

To the Tune: “Like a Dream”

I often remember that pavilion by the stream at sunset.

Celebrations over, returning tipsy in the boat with darkness falling,
we went astray deep among the lotus blooms:

beate bo!
beate bo!
startling gulls and herons from the sands.

For me the crux of this lyric is in the repeated short lines:

爭 zheng1, meaning “contend” or “strive”
渡 du4, meaning “cross over,” but also “pass through”

suggesting that the activity in the boat that scared the birds may have been something other than rowing. Here is another example:

訴衷情
夜來沉醉卸粧晩
梅萼掐殘枝
酒醒熏破春睡
夢斷不成歸
人悄悄
月依依
翠帳垂
更授殘蕊
更燃餘香
更得些時
To the Tune: “Telling Inner Feelings”
Night comes; drunk, I undress late.
My wilting plum spray
still holds a few bright blossoms.
Sobering; sleep spoiled by wine,
my dream fades, vanishes.
Silence.
The moon, reluctant to leave,
hangs beyond the emerald curtain.
I caress my final damaged blossom,
pressing out the fragrance
and the memories of times gone.

And another:

一 剪 梅
紅 藕 香 殘 玉 簟 秋
輕 解 羅 裳
獨 上 蘭 舟
雲 中 誰 寄 錦 書 來
雁 字 回 時
月 滿 西 樓
花 自 飄 零 水 自 流
—種 相 思
兩 處 閒 愁
此 情 無 計 可 消 除
才 下 眉 頭
卻 上 心 頭

To the Tune: “A Sprig of Plum Blossom”
Red lotus fragrance
has faded in the autumn carpet.
I untie my silk robe,
alone in my orchid boat.
Will some dweller-in-the-clouds
send me a love message?
Maybe when the wild geese return
moonlight will flood my room again.
Blossoms fall and wither; water flows on,
there’s no stopping them.

Li Qingzhao was, of course, followed by others who made
fine contributions to the \( ci \) genre before it declined in po-
tency and popularity in succeeding dynasties, but since I
feel that her achievement represents a climax (if you’ll par-
don the expression), I will end the quotations here in the
hope that my comments and these examples have gone
some way to correct the simplistic view of the \( ci \) that some
past critics and translators have promulgated.

What conclusions can I offer? I believe that both translator
and reader should bear in mind that, for most of its heyday,
the \( ci \) was designed for performance, either in public or
more intimate circumstances. The sensual and musical na-
ture of the lyric should be understood in terms of refined
entertainment, not necessarily as the intimate confessions
of the poet.

One challenge for the translator is the shared pool of im-
age, beloved by the audiences of the time, but likely to be
read as clichés in our western culture, which is so intent on
originality of expression. Should we follow the originals
closely, or try to vary the images to produce acceptable
English versions that are in keeping with the delicate spirit,
if not the letter, of the lyrics, bearing in mind that a transla-
tion that looks like a translation is not a good translation?

Rhyming was intrinsic to the \( ci \), but like many other fea-
tures of the originals, is most often absent from transla-
tions. While I have no antipathy in principle towards
rhyming translations, I have come across very few, if any,
such translations of \( ci \) that I regard as successful.

Should we use footnotes to explain some of the less obvi-
ous euphemistic images, or trust to the readers’ imagina-
tions? Footnotes may be suitable for translations produced
purely for academic analysis, but need the general poetry
reader, whoever she is, be burdened with them? After all,
she is expected to absorb much contemporary verse without
such assistance. And how does one convey the music
inherent in the characters and tones? I feel that little atten-
tion has been paid to this question. Perhaps some future
translator could collaborate with a musician to produce
modern equivalents of these songs.

Leaving you with more questions than answers feels some-
how appropriate for this ambiguous genre, but I would like
to declare my lasting fascination with it. After three years of translating 亀, the image that typifies this genre for me is that of a beautiful courtesan trapped in a hall of ornately framed mirrors.

Notes

All translations are taken from Clouds and Rain by Michael E. Farman (Pipers’ Ash, 2003).


4 Op cit.

5 Op cit.
A Conversation with J. P. “Sandy” Seaton

by Steve Bradbury

J. P. “Sandy” Seaton is a class act. Other American translators of classical Chinese poetry may have attracted greater attention and sold more books, but none is more highly esteemed by Chinese translators themselves or has produced a finer body of work. He is, in the words of Carolyn Kizer, “our finest living translator and explicator of Chinese poetry. Beyond a genius for interpretation and impeccable scholarship, Seaton has that quality that can magically transcend intuition and learning; he is a poet.” He is also a respected Sinologist. For many years professor of Chinese at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Seaton has published more than half a dozen volumes of poetry in translation. He also translated the Tu Fu poems in both Bright Moon, Perching Bird (Wesleyan UP, 1987) and the English version of François Cheng’s L’écriture poétique chinoise (Indiana University Press, 1982). With the poet Sam Hamill, he co-authored an abridged version of the Chuang Tzu, titled The Essential Chuang Tzu (Shambhala, 1998), and co-edited The Poetry of Zen (Shambhala, 2004). He was also Ursula K. Le Guin’s primary informant for her rendition of Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way (Shambhala, 1998). Although now retired, Seaton is more productive than ever. When this interview was conducted, in the late summer of 2004, he had just finished an as-yet-untitled survey anthology of Chinese lyric poetry he had contracted with Shambhala and had several other projects in the works.

Bradbury: I was just going through Love and Time: The Poems of Ou-yang Hsiu and was struck, as always, by how well your versions read aloud: “The quiet court has melted into dusk / Gust upon gust, rain falls on the plantain.” Your cadence and alliteration are just exquisite.

Seaton: You are too kind, as they used to say in the polite old days. But those translations ought to sound good; I fiddled with them for ages. I started on them back in ’67, when I sat in on a seminar taught by Irving Lo at Indiana University. This was while I was still writing my dissertation. I really love Ou-yang Hsiu’s poetry. He deserves to be better known in the West, so it’s a pity the book went out of print.

B: “Thinking of My Little Boy” always comes first to mind. I love the warmth of your phrasing and the way the internal rhyme provides a formal correspondence to the psychology of recollection. I also love “House Cricket” – the way it starts out as a “trifling thing” then builds into an encomium to wifely devotion in the face of the poet’s impotence. Wonderful the way your “holds us still” suggests a physical embrace, as if the mere recollection of former intimacy were enough to sustain them through the long, restless nights of exile.

S: Those are two of my favorites. “House Cricket” has been anthologized a couple of times. I love that poem, and have taught it many times. It was always a great pleasure whenever any of the kids recognized that Tu Fu was using sexual dysfunction as a metaphor for political impotence. What American poet would do that? We can go on and on about poetry’s lack of relevance or art’s lack of power in these times when it seems nobody reads anything, much less poetry. But who would have the guts to say, “Hey, I can’t get it up because of anxiety for my fellow man”?

B: But then no American poet ever lived through the An Lu-shan Rebellion. Speaking of which, I really like the way you handled the opening couplet of Tu Fu’s “Facing Snow.” That’s a tough one to translate, but your version is as faithful as a literal gloss and yet wonderfully allusive. I especially like the way your “so many fine young ghosts” calls to mind the stock-phrase “so many fine young men,” which makes it clear the ghosts are those of the combatants while simultaneously driving home the point that, for Tu Fu, “the poetry is in the pity,” as Wilfred Owen would say.

S: Why else do we read?

B: But then no American poet ever lived through the An Lu-shan Rebellion. Speaking of which, I really like the way you handled the opening couplet of Tu Fu’s “Facing Snow.” That’s a tough one to translate, but your version is as faithful as a literal gloss and yet wonderfully allusive. I especially like the way your “so many fine young ghosts” calls to mind the stock-phrase “so many fine young men,” which makes it clear the ghosts are those of the combatants while simultaneously driving home the point that, for Tu Fu, “the poetry is in the pity,” as Wilfred Owen would say.

S: You sound like Dante invoking the spirit of Virgil.

B: You sound like Dante invoking the spirit of Virgil.

(interview continued on pg. 36)
A Seaton Sampler

Two Translations from the Chinese of Ou-yang Hsiu (Ouyang Xiu)

生查子
含羞整翠鬟
得意頻相顧
雁柱十三弦
一一春鶯語
嬌雲容易飛
夢斷知何處
深院鎖黃昏
陣陣芭蕉雨

面旋落花風蕩漾
柳重煙深
雪絮飛來往
雨後輕寒猶未放
春秋酒病成凋悵
枕畔屏山圍碧浪
翠被華燈
夜夜空相向
寂寞起來寒繡幌
月明正在梨花上

欧陽修

Blushing, they comb their dark, iridescent hair

Blushing, they comb their dark, iridescent hair,
and when it’s done they turn.
With swan’s neck lute of thirteen strings
one by one, each spring oriole will sing.
Pretty clouds, flown with the changes,
the dream gone, and where am I?
The quiet court has melted into dusk.
Gust upon gust, rain falls on the plantain.

Face turned to falling flowers; a breeze, ripples on the water

Face turned to falling flowers; a breeze, ripples on the water.
Willows deep in mist again, a snow of catkins flying.
Rain gone, a light chill lingers.
Spring’s sorrows mix with wine, and I grow sick and weary.
Wind in the curtain by my pillow surrounds me in green waves.
Blue-green ruff of bedclothes, flower of the lamp,
night after night I stare unstirring:
silent, I rise and lift the screen.
Bright moon just at the pear branch tip:
a pair, apart.
House Cricket

Trifling thing,
And yet how his mournful song moves us.
Out in the grass his cry was a tremble,
But now, he trills beneath our bed, to share his sorrow.
I lie still beside you, finding no release:
You, old wife, you suffer quiet through till dawn.
The song of our selves may move us, restless,
Through long nights. The cricket’s song of autumn holds us still.

Thinking of My Little Boy

Pony Boy, it's Spring, and we're still parted.
The orioles sing, as if to warm away our troubles.
Parted from you: surprised as your birthday passes,
Not a one to brag to of the clever things you do.
Water falls, there, by the empty mountain road,
By bramble gate, at Ancient Trees, the village where you dwell.
I think of you, and sleep’s the only antidote for grief.
I toast you, and sleep’s the only antidote for grief.
Beneath the smiling sunlight on the porch.

Facing Snow

Wailing war, so many fine young ghosts:
Chanting sadness, one poor lame old man.
A chaos of clouds droops into the sunset:
A rush of snowflakes dances, whirling in the wind.
The wine pot’s pushed aside, cup empty of its green;
The stove abides, there coals glow red.
No news from anywhere gets through.
Sadness sits, to draft a letter
Into emptiness.
袁枚

一卷

一卷書開引睡遲
洞房屢問夜何其
高堂憐惜小妻惱
垂老還如上學時

Two Translations from the Chinese of **Yuan Mei**

**One Page**

One page of a book and I’m caught, staying up.

My wife suggests, several times, “Enough is enough.”

Ivory tower suffering; my lady’s perturbed.

I’ve grown old. And still just a schoolboy.

**Sitting at Night**

Sitting at night by the west window,

rain everywhere.

Before my eyes the rule of nature’s bitter,

hard to fathom.

The lamp’s gentle gleam becomes a pyre:

from all about, moths come,

flight upon flight,

into the fire.

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**S:** In contemporary parlance, you could say I was trying to channel him [laughter]. It was admittedly naïve, like the undergraduate who sleeps with his class notes under his pillow. But I think it helped. In any case, the exercise gave me a chance to read a lot of Shakespeare. I worked on the Tu Fu translations so long I read everything Shakespeare ever wrote.

**B:** Everything? *Titus Andronicus*? *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*?

**S:** The *Complete Works*. It was the Yale edition my mom had given me as a high-school graduation present. It’s amazing what you can find in those lesser-known plays. In *Pericles*, for example, I stumbled on this wonderful phrase I stuck on my door to greet friends who stay over: “And we shall have flap-jacks!” But to get back to Tu Fu, I wanted to do more, but I got too depressed. He’s hard, and he lived a hard life.

**B:** Funny. Most Tu Fu translators, at least the ones whose versions have staying power, started translating Tu Fu’s poetry in order to cope with depression. Kenneth Rexroth, for example, started his to voice his frustration over America entering the war and over the collapse of his marriage. And didn’t William Hung start doing his Tu Fu volume after he got thrown into a Japanese concentration camp?

**S:** Yes, he did, but he had to work from memory until the war was over. The Japanese kept him in solitary confinement and wouldn’t let him have any books. Hung was a genius. He knew his Tu Fu down to the ground, and had digested the Taoism and the Buddhism that enabled both of them to survive war and exile. His versions are all in prose, but, in my opinion, they’re still the most poetic translations we have. They’re very free, very synthetic, synthesizing – actually brilliant paraphrases, in Dryden’s sense of the term. You could get a great classical education just from studying the translations and commentary in Hung’s *Tu Fu: China’s Greatest Poet*.

**B:** So what got you started on your own Tu Fu translations?
S: I was asked by Indiana University Press to translate the score of Tu Fu poems in François Cheng’s *L’écriture poétique chinoise*, which they were preparing for publication in English. I was so impressed by the poems and by Cheng’s commentary that I decided to do more translations on my own after I finished the ones in that book. This led to the Wesleyan volume I did with Jim Cryer, who rendered the Li Po poems in *Bright Moon, Perching Bird*.

B: So how did you wind up in Chinese literature? Were you a China “mish-kid” or something?

S: No, born and bred in the Midwest. My father was a professor of agronomy. That’s soils and crops, the very practical aspects of scientific farming. He was an early ecologist and anti-industrial farming man, which kept him down, professionally speaking. My mother was a registered nurse, the head operating room nurse in a local hospital in Lafayette, Indiana, where I grew up in the forties. She was blacklisted for taking part in the formation of a nurses’ union after the war.

B: Was she a party member?

S: No, thinking middle-class. My parents weren’t intellectuals – nor am I for that matter – but they were readers, mostly Book-of-the-Month Club stuff. But my mother did read me history for years after I could read myself, which is one reason I studied a lot of history as an undergraduate. She bought me Oxford books of English and American verse – probably premiums from the Book-of-the-Month Club, when I think about it – for my seventh and eighth birthdays. We were fairly musical, the four of us – I have a sister four years older than I. We used to sing around the piano several nights a week. This was before TV, of course. We had good voices, my mother was a passable accompanist, and my first stated ambition in life – made at the ripe age of four – was to be a songwriter and a singer.

B: What kind of music did you like?

S: As a kid? Early show music, classical, folk, African folk music. One of my Virginia aunts turned me on to Paul Robeson, who was a favorite of the Left. Hard to imagine being exposed to that in Indiana, at least in the 1940s. I just bought a copy of Robeson’s *Ballad for Americans* in a rare attack of nostalgia, and am loving it again. I grew up during the war, so I got a steady diet of so-called patriotism and pro-allied propaganda in my first five years. I remember my dad showing me this combat map in the Chicago Tribune with all these arrows and the caption “Yanks Cross Rhine at Three Points,” and saying the war was almost over. Took me a while, even as a relatively sophisticated college grad, before I could get over my anti-Japanese prejudice, and turn my eyes to the Far East. I certainly know first hand what it means to have been brainwashed.

B: So what turned you on to Chinese poetry?

S: Pound’s work. That was in January of ’59. I remember looking at the Cantos in the Purdue University library with Kathy Paradiso, who became my wife. Pound’s language was an immediate revelation. I’d never seen anything like it. The Chinese was merely something that caught my eye at the time, but I soon came back to it. That was quite a day. I had finished Jack Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans* in study hall that morning, got knocked cold in a sledding accident in the evening, and woke up hours later with amnesia. A memorable day, once I could remember it of course.

B: Paradiso – what a heavenly name!

S: Kathy’s an extraordinary woman. She’s my Muse, although sometimes she gets a little annoyed at my burning the midnight oil.

B: Sounds like Yuan Mei’s wife in “One Page”!

S: There are certain parallels. We met in my second year in high school, in 1956. We were both interested in literature. It was one of the ways she was pretty precocious. She’d even read some Joyce before she was twelve.

B: Incredible! I think I was still plugging away at Edgar Rice Burroughs at that age.

S: We spent every moment possible together in high school. She was a big inspiration. I typed up and sent out my first poems at sixteen with her help and prodding.

B: What kind of poetry did you write then?

S: Very bad poetry. Some rhymed, a lot of free verse in a kid’s take on Whitman mediated by Carl Sandburg. Optimistic, socially conscious, naïve.

B: So you went to Purdue?

S: No, Wabash College, about 25 miles from home. Kathy went to Indiana University, which was another 50 miles down the road. That first year, apart, almost killed me. Then we got married, which was shockingly young for Indiana, at least in 1961.
B: Wabash — wasn’t that where Pound did his one teaching gig, till he got kicked out for befriending a prostitute, fled to Europe, and “invented Chinese poetry for our time”?

S: The very place. Though the word around there was that the woman in question was a faculty wife. After Kathy and I got married, it wasn’t long before I realized that I couldn’t imagine a life on any other basis than the semester system, with summers off. But I also knew I wasn’t cut out for the nitpicking that comes and goes with an English Ph.D. — I was an English major at Wabash — and couldn’t afford grad school. By chance, Kathy saw a poster in the Wabash library for National Defense Title Six fellowships, so I was off and running.

B: How did you pay off your Title Six fellowship? As a language specialist in the Vietnam War?

S: No, in fact the year I was called up for my draft physical the money ran out. By the time the funding came back, I was already overdue. But the government eventually got their money’s worth from all the Chinese language and culture courses I wound up having to teach. I must have introduced five or six thousand students to Chinese language, history, and culture during my thirty-five years at the lecture. And I made every blessed one of them read the Tao Te Ching.

B: No wonder translations of that book sell so well! So where did you do your grad work?

S: At Indiana University. I transferred there my senior year and got a history degree, then stayed five more years to get my Ph.D. in Chinese.

B: What was your dissertation on, Chinese poetry?

S: No, Yuan drama, the plays of the tsa-chih master Kuan Han-ch’ing.

B: Ever translate any of them?

S: No. I couldn’t see any chance of getting them published, much less performed. I’ve always been more interested in establishing a popular audience than a scholarly one. Plus, there was the time factor. Poems I can work up in moments stolen from teaching and playing with the kids and quality time with Kathy. But the tsa-chih plays are so long they require much longer periods of uninterrupted concentration. Harder to steal that kind of time even in retirement.

B: What was it like doing graduate work in Chinese at Indiana University?

S: Kathy and I loved Bloomington itself, but I got so bored with all the elementary courses they made us take that I almost dropped out after my second year. Then came the amazing F. A. Bischoff. Some of his scholarship has been ridiculed and even condemned — I suppose you have to be pretty damned good to get condemned — but he was very inspiring. He went on to teach in Hamburg and Vienna, and is now a member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. I suppose he’d be utterly forgotten in the U.S. today if Geoffrey Waters, who was one of his students, hadn’t given so much attention to Bischoff’s theory of reading in his Three Elegies of Ch’u. That’s a great book, by the way. You should read it if you haven’t. Bischoff was an exciting teacher — funny, creative, with a real appreciation for the art, depth, and complexity of Chinese literature that few of my other teachers ever showed. A lot of very talented people cut their teeth in his seminars in classical prose. Bill Nienhauser, who is now at Wisconsin, translator of the Shib-Chi, the only foreign devil I know who can actually compose in classical Chinese; Charles Hartman, at SUNY-Albany, who is now writing the Sung chapters of the Cambridge History of China; Jan W. Walls, who was at UBC Vancouver and later Simon Frazier, and the David Lam center; Eugene Eoyang, the comparative literature man at Indiana and founder of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association; and, of course, Geoffrey Waters, now banker by profession but still translating Chinese classical verse. We used to sit around this little table working our tails off unraveling late T’ang and Sung prose. The table-talk and research, both wide-ranging, were great fun. I learned a lot from him, and from my fellow students, which is as it should be. He was a great teacher, and is still a good friend.

B: I still don’t see any classical Chinese poetry here. Where does that come in?

S: I had been writing my own poetry all along so I was inclined to move in that direction sooner or later. What really got me started though was Irving Lo’s seminar in classical poetry, where I started my Ou-yang Hsiu translations. Dr. Lo was a great inspiration and tried to encourage us to make poetry out of our translations. He even organized a public reading for three or four of us who had made translations in the class. Funny, after the reading, which was not bilingual, a young faculty member came up to me and insisted that my translations must be too free since they read so well. Luckily, Gene Eoyang jumped to my defense, but
it’s a charge that was leveled at me more than once by editors who rejected my work in the early years.

B: I don’t suppose they ever bothered to find out if your work was faithful or not?

S: What literary mag editor in the States knew a word of Chinese then? How many know a word today? But it wouldn’t have mattered. Most American editors seem to prefer Chinese translations that “sound like translations,” as they invariably put it, regardless of any other merits. I always translate that criticism as “read like a bad translation,” and say “to hell with ’em.”

B: After you got your degree, did you get hired right off or have to slum for awhile?

S: I was very lucky. Of the 18 letters I sent out in the winter of ’67–’68, I got eleven replies, six invitations to interview, and two job offers. I took the one at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Then the market collapsed the next year and many of my classmates who were far more learned or qualified than I had to work as bartenders or whatnot for four or five years before they managed to land a job. The problem was that most of the funding for Chinese studies programs came from the foundations, whose focus shifted in the sixties from Asia to the inner city or something else. It took years for universities to take up the slack.

B: What was it like teaching Chinese in the Carolinas?

S: For the most part it was hell, despite the fact that the university had a reputation for literary studies, although I’ve got to say some good poets served time at Chapel Hill. Both the late Cid Corman, a favorite of mine, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were there for awhile right after WW II. I would often hear the locals say things like, “There is no literature but Southern literature,” but a lot of the in-state students could barely even read, at least in 1968, when I started. But there were plenty of kids who wanted a class that was different. Mine certainly were, so I never had much trouble filling a classroom. Some of my classes were huge, and I was free to teach just about anything. I could do the Mahayana or classical philology, and get away with it. But it was a pit of complacent mediocrity as far as the faculty was concerned. I hated it, and took a lot of hits. And as with rugby, there came a day when I just couldn’t take one more, even a friendly pat, and so I retired.

B: There’s a rumor floating around that you got tenure solely on the basis of your translations. How on earth did you engineer that miracle?

S: I was very lucky, but I take credit for having the gall and foolish courage to tell my dean, who’d actually called me in to explain why he was turning me down for tenure, that I would translate – like Dylan Thomas’s kid who “would skate on Farmer Jones’s pond, and did, and drowned” – and that I was a kick-ass translator whose work would bring honor and prestige to his otherwise provincial university. I hadn’t published many translations at that point, but the bluff worked. He reversed his decision, and I made associate professor. Of course, it didn’t hurt a bit that David Lattimore had just quoted one of my translations of the Taoist eccentric Yun K’an-tzu – whom, by the way, I resuscitated from obscurity – as “the last word” on the subject on the front page of the New York Times Review of Books. It was a review of Sunflower Splendor, the big anthology of classical Chinese verse Liu Wu-chi and Irving Lo put out in 1975.

B: So how did you make full professor?

S: Pretty much the same tactic. I had a different dean but I also had a lot more translations in print. Once again the dean’s advisory committee refused to give me promotion, arguing that I needed at least one major article in a scholarly journal, which I didn’t have. They thought they were being kind, but I was incensed. I wrote the dean, impugning the committee’s knowledge of my field and explaining the arcane levels of scholarship involved in translating classical Chinese poetry. I insisted that I was – and would continue to be – a translator, only, and that I didn’t do articles. Be sure you italicize the “didn’t do” when you transcribe this. According to the dean, who had a great sense of humor, that was where my argument tipped the scales in my favor. “I don’t do windows,” he later cackled to me when he explained his reversal of the committee’s decision. How many university administrators are that sympathetic to translators? But then, it was a break for me that the department didn’t have any older Chinese scholars around to strut their stuff by trouncing me. On the other hand, maybe the dean just hated the committee and wanted to rattle their cage.

B: Any resentment over the dean’s decision?

S: You bet. Three of the nine folks on the committee never spoke to me again. Among the general faculty I
was virtually unknown, so they never felt any need to get outraged.

B: Did you ever teach translation or have your students make translations as part of their coursework?

S: Absolutely. My all-time favorite course was Chinese 144. This was on the books as a survey of Chinese poetry in translation, but I always taught it as a course in translating Chinese poetry. It was a ball when the students were up to it. I’d work them through a poem, one character at a time, analyzing it for etymology or ideographic suggestiveness, and anything else that needed getting into. We discussed how context limited the possible meanings or, in some instances, multiplied the interpretive possibilities. I often started with Wang Wei’s “Deer Park,” the “empty mountain poem” I discuss in my essay in Frank Stewart’s *The Poem Behind the Poem*. Many of the poems I chose were nature poems, and I was lucky a couple of times to get students with a special knowledge of field botany or bird watching or other related subject. Some of the kids did as many as five courses with me. I could introduce them to Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, which so many of these poets were steeped in and without which you really can’t understand their poetry. Not being able to teach that course is the one thing I really regret giving up when I retired.

B: Several of your former students have become translators, such as Jim Cryer, but who besides Irving Lo encouraged you to be a translator?

S: The great Liu Wu-chi, who was my thesis director. But the influence was indirect. He knew I didn’t have the stamina for twelve-hour-a-day library research but recognized that I did have a knack for poetry, and so encouraged me to pursue translation. He helped me gain confidence in my strengths and become aware of my weaknesses. I call him “the great” in honor of his status as a Confucian jun-zi, or gentleman of great learning. He had a jun-zi’s capacity to see the future. He fairly predicted my career, although he was extremely skeptical I would ever be able to get tenure on the basis of translation and literary criticism. Professor Bischoff was a big inspiration too insofar as he convinced me of the need to treasure every word.

B: What translators have influenced your verse technique in rendering classical Chinese poetry into English?

S: Well, actually I like to think my style is a reflection of the verse I’m translating and not other translators. But in terms of my general approach to translation, I’d say the big influences were Pound and Rexroth. Oh yes, mustn’t forget Gary Snyder. Back in the sixties Pound was persona non grata in Indiana because of the sedition charges lodged against him during the war, and Rexroth was under fire for his lack of scholarship, but Snyder had actually studied Chinese and was very hip. His Han Shan translations are great – as good as the originals. Together, their translations convinced me that, first, it was okay to write in my own vernacular and, second, that the quality of the product licensed certain liberties. I suppose Cid Corman, whose work I started reading in 1966, was also an influence. Come to think of it, Carolyn Kizer and the late Kenneth Hanson were also positive influences. Odd, both of them went to Reed, in Portland, Oregon, just like Snyder. Hanson even taught there. I learned an immense amount from Carolyn. She was writer in residence at Chapel Hill for several years in the seventies. She sat in on one of my classes. Talk about stage fright! It makes me sick just to think of it, and that was thirty years ago. Carolyn taught me about poetry and the nuts and bolts of getting published. Unfortunately, she left before I got the complete course. She also introduced me to some great poets, such as Denise Levertov and Snyder and Bill Harmon, who, it happened, was right across the quad in the Chapel Hill English Department.

B: Cid Corman was a good friend of yours, wasn’t he? I noticed you’ve published tributes to him in *Cipher Journal* and elsewhere.

S: Actually, I never met Cid. We exchanged letters over the years, and I had the privilege of blurbing his big book of haiku, *One Man’s Moon*, but I was never a confidant. Twice I begged him for work. The first time was for some poetry to include in a start-up literary magazine I was involved in during the late seventies, the second time for some translations for an all-China issue of *The Literary Review* I guest-edited in 1989. He sent me ten translations, some very free, all of them remarkable. They’re now up on the *TLR* website as a web chapbook. Cid had the crazy idea that “academics” had money, so he always asked for royalties. I knew he was hard up, so I always paid him something. The first time I had to dig into my own pocket, but *TLR* had an NEA grant for the all-China issue, so I was able to send him thirty dollars apiece for the translations.

B: That was generous.

S: The man deserved it. He lived the vita apostolica in Japan for fifty years, just for the sake of honing his poetry down to the cutting edge. He was the first master of the short poem in English. I’m convinced that he’ll eventually be
famous beyond some of the “great names” we know today. There are two twentieth-century poets I always read whenever my faith in the saving grace of poetry begins to waver: one is William Carlos Williams; Cid Corman is the other. Williams may have coined the phrase “No ideas but in things,” but Cid was the fellow who actually realized the concept. And yet he was very much a poet of words as well as of things; images weren’t really that important to him. Well, I’m no critic, but I know what I like and whom I have learned from. If I have a gravestone, it will have one of Cid’s poems carved on it.

**B:** Which poem is that?

**S:**

I picked a leaf up
it weighed my vision
I knelt and placed it
almost where it was

**B:** Nice. You read a lot of literature in translation, don’t you? Any translators outside your field whose work you especially admire?

**S:** I can’t really answer that question since I don’t read any other foreign languages besides Chinese well enough to assess the quality of their translations.

**B:** Let me rephrase the question. What translations outside your field do you wish you had made yourself solely on the basis of the pleasure they’ve given you as a reader?

**S:** That I can answer. The late Paul Blackburn’s translations of the short stories of Julio Cortázar, which meant a lot to my development 30–40 years ago; Eliot Weinberger’s translations of the poetry of Octavio Paz; Arthur Waley’s translation of *Monkey* and his six-volume version of *The Tale of Genji,* Constance Garnett’s Dostoyevsky; Scott Moncrieff’s Proust – basically, I love the great translations of my youth. But I also understand that things need to be retranslated. Language changes and there comes a point where even great translations begin to fail to “Make It New,” as Pound would say, and we need a new translation in the contemporary vernacular.

**B:** I often hear that argument, but I’m a little skeptical, if only because so many of the translations I love are so long in the tooth, as they say, and were probably dated even in their own time. The King James Bible, Lucy Crane’s *Household Tales of the Brothers Grimm,* Arthur Symon’s Baudelaire, even some of Pound’s translations like “The Seafarer” seem to me to look back rather than forward, at least at the linguistic level. Do you think by “Make It New” Pound might have meant “do something innovative” rather than simply compose in the contemporary vernacular?

**S:** Well. Yes, I agree, I think. It’s often hard to tell what Pound really meant. It’s true that there are some translations that are so engaging and have such a charismatic presence in the culture that they become a part of the literary heritage and continue to be read despite the fact that their style or language has become antiquated. I guess that means they’ve become “originals” in the culture of the translator – quite an accomplishment when you come to think of it. I would like to think a few of my translations would survive the “great winnowing” and become American originals – that would be immortality, for me. But maybe that’s wistful thinking in this age of prose.

**B:** Tell me about your collaboration with Ursula Le Guin on the *Lao Tzu*.

**S:** It was the greatest, the most intense, intellectual fun I ever had. She’s brilliant, utterly self-confident, and yet humble. And she challenged me to do the best scholarship I’d ever done. It was a great thrill to watch a great literary mind like hers at work. She taught me a lot about the Lao Tzu. Not just technical stuff; everything.

**B:** What prompted the collaboration? Were you old friends?

**S:** Oh no, we’d never even met. I’d been invited to edit that all-China issue of *The Literary Review* I mentioned earlier, the one in which I placed the Corman translations. I’d heard a rumor from a friend, poet, booklover, and devoted Ursula fan named Melody Ivins that Ursula was working on a new version of the *Lao Tzu,* I thought it would be nice to include excerpts of it in the issue and so I wrote her. It turned out the rumor wasn’t quite true, but she had done a few passages, which she agreed to send me. I liked them so I used them. We had no more contact until ’95, when she wrote and said she had decided to do a version of the whole book and asked if I could suggest anybody who might be willing to help her. Of course, I jumped at the chance myself. Honestly, I literally jumped for joy. We did the whole thing by snail mail. She wasn’t online yet.
B: Does she read Chinese?

S: Not really, but she certainly knew this book verse, line, and sinker. She’d pretty nearly memorized Paul Carus’s 1898 version, which is virtually a gloss. This is something her father, the great anthropologist Arthur Kroeber, had introduced her to when she was fifteen years old. Over those fifty years she had really done her homework. She’d read all the translations and kept up with the scholarship. She knew more about the *Lao Tzu* than I did, although I’d taught it as often as twice a year for thirty years, and could read the Chinese commentaries. I helped her in a few places, but the work was largely hers, the pleasure all mine. She not only gave me a royalty check and a byline; she dedicated the work to me along with her father. Imagine that – me, sharing the dedication with her father! What incredible generosity, and it didn’t end there. Two years after we finished she got invited to a conference at Harvard on “Taoism and the Environment” but refused to go unless they also invited me, which they would certainly not have done otherwise. This gave Kathy and me a chance to finally meet Ursula and her wonderful husband, the historian Charles Le Guin. Shambhala took us to the Hasty Pudding Club for lunch. It was the first time for both of us. When Ursula attended Radcliffe the club was still off limits to the better sex.

B: You could dine on that story for years. You’ve done two collaborations with the poet Sam Hamill. How did those come about?

S: Believe it or not, the very same day I wrote my last letter to Ursula, saying I thought we were done with the *Lao Tzu*, I got a phone call from Sam asking if I was interested in doing a version of the *Chuang Tzu* with him. He swore that he could guarantee a contract from Shambhala if I could guarantee the editor, Peter Turner, who is now the firm’s publisher, that it would be a new version and not just a rehash of someone else’s. I wasn’t sure at the time if I was up to it, even though I felt that I had gained a pretty firm grasp of the Taoist commentary prose style while working on the *Lao Tzu*, but I plunged in like the fool I am.

B: What I like about your version is its humor.

S: Well, humor is, I think, essential to any real understanding of the *Chuang Tzu*. It’s a funny book – witty, mocking, satirical, even warmly humorous. There is so little humor in the Chinese classical tradition. It would be a pity to leave out any of it.

B: I’ve always felt a summer doing standup comedy in the Catskills would be excellent preparation for translating the *Chuang Tzu*.

S: Well, I never got to the Catskills, but I used to run the day’s work by Kathy in the evening to see if I could get a laugh out of her. As a real test though, I would read the finished passages to my two aunts, then in their late eighties, who were real connoisseurs of the art. I remember one passage got them “laughing dangerously,” as my Aunt Helen used to say.

B: “Laughing dangerously”?

S: It’s an old euphemism for “almost peed in my pants.”

B: What a great back-cover blurb! The *Chuang Tzu* to make you pee in your pants! So how did you actually collaborate?

S: Well, I would work up a word-for-word version of each chapter and pass it on to Sam, who would revise and send it back to me for further revision. We would bounce it back and forth until we were both satisfied. After the first few chapters, Sam got a little caught up in other projects and I wound up doing most of the revision, with valuable prods from Sam whenever I got bored or fell into academese. It’s not a complete translation, but then much of the *Chuang Tzu* isn’t *Chuang Tzu* anyway. I’m very proud of that book, and coming on the heels of the *Lao Tzu* with Ursula, it gave me this wonderful feeling of accomplishment. I felt that with these two books I’d finally done something that was sure to be around in 2050. But then came the awful thought that there might simply not be anything else worth doing. It was terribly depressing until of course I got absorbed in other projects.

B: Everyone seems to have a great “How-I-Met-Sam-Hamill” story. What’s yours?

S: We were introduced by the poet and computer guru Paul Jones, founder of biblio.org [Ed.: Bibliomation, a network of and for Connecticut libraries]. Paul happened to be showing Sam around town and brought him by to meet me. The two of us hit it off, so later that afternoon we got together for drinks. We drank epically together – gin and tonic, as I recall – and I wound up giving him my working notes for the Tu Fu poems in *Bright Moon, Perching Bird*, which I had just sent off to Wesleyan. I don’t know if he read them – I doubt if anyone could make much sense of them – but they may have encouraged him to approach
me about doing the *Chuang Tzu* together. He’s a charming and talented man, with a real love and appreciation for Chinese and Japanese poetry. Drunk, we get along famously, in a small world of small fame. Sober, we take advantage of each other.

B: Sounds like Li Po and Tu Fu. How do you actually go about translating a poem when you’re doing it by yourself?

S: Most of the translations I do are part of a volume devoted to one poet, so the first step is always to decide on the poet. I try to pick ones that have been relatively neglected. Once I have my poet, I usually read enough biographical material to put the poetry in context, then I go through the collected poetic works. If these happen to be massive, as in the case of a poet like Yuan Mei, I try to focus on the more interesting years of the poet’s life and cull the poems I like and think I can translate. One trick it took me a long time to learn was to first make sure I could translate the last line of the poem before I invested too much time and energy into the translation. It’s really frustrating to finish seven lines of an eight-line poem only to discover that the last line is untranslatable for one reason or another. As you know, I translate for people who don’t want footnotes, so I tend to avoid poems with allusions that require annotation.

B: You read much criticism?

S: Some, but I find that what many critics have to say is far more a reflection of their own cultural or personal preoccupations than of the author of the work in question. But maybe that’s just *de gustibus* in action, no? I do read quite a bit of history and biography so I can get a feel for the context in which the poets were writing. When I’m confident I can translate a particular poem, I copy it out on a big sheet of paper so I can get all my notes on one page. I look up any unfamiliar characters and review common characters that appear to be used in any unusual fashion. I also hit the Harvard-Yenching concordances if I think my poet is alluding to other texts. Early in the process, I always scan the Chinese characters in each poem to see if there are any significant patterns of pictorial elements. As I argue in my essay in *The Poem Behind the Poem*, such patterns are sometimes a key to understanding the poem.

B: Which dictionary do you use? I remember hearing Morohashi’s *Dai Kan-wa Jiten* was favored by Sinologists in the sixties.

S: I stopped using Morohashi over twenty years ago, after I got a copy of the *Chung-wen Ta T’ieh-tian*, which is, I think, basically a Chinese translation of Morohashi. I also use Herbert Giles’s dictionary. It’s rather dated and somewhat unwieldy – I have it in a single volume that weighs a whopping seventeen pounds – but it’s still very serviceable. I tend to do the dictionary work – the shit work, I call it – when there’s no stirring of the creative spirit. This is not to put down dictionaries, which can be a tremendous source of inspiration. When there is a stirring, I always pick the poem that declares itself to me and just go at it, character by character, line by line. I don’t believe in the possibility of a “literal” translation, but I try to be as literal as I can. I make it a rule to keep all substantive words – every noun and every verb. I also make it a rule to carry over word order where possible. I try to use sound effects for emphasis where the same is happening in the original. Poetry’s art – wit, polysemy, *beauty* – that’s what I try to bring across when I translate. It always kills me whenever I fail, but I’m always reborn when I succeed. I believe in the power of the Muses and of K’uei Hsing, the Chinese god of literature, patron of all of us fool believers in the transformative power of well-crafted words.

B: Do you ever run your translations by fellow translators or poets for their feedback?

S: Sometimes, when I have finished a final draft. I don’t want to have my creative faculties bound up by someone else’s vision of the poem, and I’m a little shy about sharing my work. I’m actually soft, easy to bruise. I once sent Cid Corman some Shih Te translations and he responded with a characteristically hyper-laconic “Too much like Gary” – Gary Snyder that is. It was actually a hell of a compliment, but wrapped in that language ruined the translations for me. Until very recently, the only person I felt comfortable showing drafts to besides Kathy was my friend Jim Sanford. I did ask Irving Lo to read over the *Chuang Tzu*. He was kind enough to read the whole manuscript against the original, saving me much embarrassment. Talk about generosity!

B: What are you working on these days?

S: I’m high on the fact that I’ve just finished a big anthology *Hope* will replace Robert Payne’s *The White Pony*, which was probably the last really popular survey of classical Chinese poetry in English translation. When I finished translating the last poem I got so excited I could hardly get to sleep. Of course, you’re never really done until the printer has it, and I’m still tinkering with many of the translations. The anthology covers the whole classical tradition from the *Shih Ching* to the poets of the twentieth century, but it will also include samples of some relatively neglected poets like...
Kuan Hsiu, the portrait-painting monk I mentioned earlier, as well a complete new version of the *Li Sao*.

**B:** Sounds ambitious.

**S:** 468 pages worth.

**B:** You’re kidding! Payne had an army of translators working for him, but I guess you’re doing this on your own. Is this mainly old stuff you’ve published before?

**S:** About a third of the book consists of translations I’ve published before. But the rest of the translations are new, new in the sense that they have never been published. Some of the translations are things I’ve been tinkering with since graduate school.

**B:** Doesn’t sound like retirement has slowed you down. So what’s next?

**S:** A volume of the poems of Kuan Hsiu and, in his honor, a little book of wild antinomian – that is to say, “nut ball” – zen monk poems. People tend to like that kind of verse.

**B:** You have anything else you’d like to say before we tie a ribbon on this conversation?

**S:** I’m very concerned about the future of literary translation in the China field. There are so few of us, and there is so little support for translation. I’m convinced that in our present world-eating culture, literary translation is an absolutely good thing.

**B:** I couldn’t agree with you more.
What Develops in a Dark Room Dazzles Brighter than Light:
Resistance and the Translation of Chinese Poetry

by Simon Patton

In 1999, I was lucky enough to travel to the small town of Xizhou with the Chinese poet Yu Jian during a visit to Dali in Yunnan province. After a lunch that included sweet plum wine, we went for a wander, and in the course of a poke around quiet back streets, we came across a haunting old well. I have a photo of the scene taken by Yu Jian in front of me on my table as I write this: there’s me, pinched with cold, sitting on a slab of stone propped inelegantly in one dank corner; in a squarish niche in the wall beside me, the dirty sand in an earthenware bowl is pin-cushioned with the burnt-out stubs of incense sticks; close by this niche is the well-head, a single rough-hewn block bored with a hole. What is really remarkable about this rock is the deep grooves that line the circular well-mouth, grooves etched over a period of many years by the ropes used to haul up water from the black depths. To me, this lined well-mouth suggests a stark, concrete image of the literary enterprise, an enterprise that includes the art of translation. Using language as our ropes and buckets, we attempt, to the best of our abilities, to sample the unillumined waters of experience and human possibility and, in the process, our cultures – seemingly impervious in their solidity – come to acquire, thanks to endless acts of repetition, multifarious well-worn ruts and furrows.

These ruts and furrows ingrained in our patterns of speech, thought, and perception can be used over and over for our own personal encounters with reality – after all, they guide our ropes so smoothly – but they can also lock us into inauthentic styles of living and warp our view of what is truly around us. In a book on the Australian translator Ted Strehlow, I came across a resonant quotation from Rilke: We are born, so to speak, provisionally, it doesn’t matter where; it is only gradually that we compose, within ourselves, our true place of origin, so that we may be born there retrospectively. I don’t know German, so I cannot tell whether the use of the verb “to compose” is motivated by the poet’s word choice or the translator’s inspired interpretation, but this “composition,” to me, suggests that interconnected search for meaning in life and literature: people write, read and translate precisely in order to complete this unfinished work of self-creation, of self-composure. As Larzer Ziff points out in his introduction to the essays of Waldo Emerson, our truest motive for reading is “to experience those moments in which we hear a voice that we recognize as proceeding from the same center as our own voices” (the verb “to recognize” is poignant here: do we passively recover or do we actively discover such anomalous voices?). In a similar vein, the Irish-language poet Michael Davitt, who sadly passed away in June 2005, once memorably declared that the only cause he espoused was “man’s right to find his own center, stand firm, speak out, then be kind.” I suspect that such remarks contain important intimations for an ethics of translation: only where an authentic alignment of centers takes place can significant – culturally, artistically, and “spiritually” significant – acts of translation be accomplished. Without this correspondence, what we achieve is at best dismal homage.

People opt for distraction, entertainment, titillation or obscenity because there’s a lot to be afraid of in the gloom of human being and it requires courage, effort, and more than a spark of curiosity to confront the “understanding” locked up in literature. In the words of our contemporary idiom, a writing that seeks to establish a true place of origin has to jolt us out of our “comfort zones,” and this is something that provokes a mountain of resistance. In a recent batch of short, “note” poems, Yu Jian explores this whole issue of darkness in a world now so expensively overlit and so obsessed with the obvious that the twilight starts to grow more appealing. In poem no. 334 he writes (in my very “rough” translation):

old well:
as the city develops upwards
it vanishes downwards
returning to the darkness in the earth
just like my mother’s mother, who late in life
spoke less and less
until at last she fell silent.

In a general sense, Yu Jian revisits here that hackneyed light-dark opposition familiar to readers of both English and Chinese poetry (in the Chinese context, Gu Cheng’s The dark night has given me dark eyes, / Yet I use them to search for light remains a well-known example) in order to reassess the system of values that underpins it. In this reassessment, the logic of the well is the exact opposite of the contemporary (capitalist) myth of progress: in contrast to the upward development (in Chinese, this direction is also a metaphor for improvement), the “old well” – both in terms of its material existence and its status as a remnant of an obsolete cultural practice – performs an act of self-effacement in its
plunge into the subterranean lightlessness of earth. This inspires a comparison with the silence of the poet’s grandmother, based, perhaps, on a covert parallel drawn between “mother earth” [dadi] and its embodiment in human form. Accordingly, Yu Jian connects disappearance with silence and death. Nevertheless, despite the superficial impression of negativity these images generate, I think it is possible to read the well’s return to darkness and the grandparent’s gradual refusal of (glib) speech as productive, life-affirming choices, as acts directed at regaining some essential center that too much artificial light only obscures.

The image of rope on stone that has been playing on my mind as I write this can also be linked to a memorable pair of sentences written by Willis Barnstone: To translate what is cognate may be easy, yet even when well done it is rarely an artistic achievement. There is no resistance to overcome, no single effort of fantasy required to produce the obvious.8 Again and again, we confront experience along the same old guidelines, but what we need to sustain ourselves comes from somewhere else, from a paradoxical “silence” – a not-doing of our tired repertoire of responses – that is capable of serving as an entry-point into a more genuine version of life. Regardless of whether one writes poetry or translates it (the distinction is an intriguing one), obviousness is an affliction common to both. In the case of translation, the main reason for failure, I think, is the tendency to conceive of the activity entirely in terms of denotational meaning, a misapprehension encouraged by the existence of dictionaries – tools, it would seem to me, that are as destructive as they are useful. If you look up the words gulao and shuijing in a Chinese-English dictionary, you find “ancient” and “well”; in other words, you are given English equivalents of the basic “meanings” of these words. However, an exclusive focus on denotational meaning, while legitimate up to a point (no translator discards it lightly; in fact, most of us are haunted by it to an unhealthy/sobering degree), can never be the full story in literature. To try to explain what I mean, I would like to refer briefly to a recent review of my translation of six short stories by the Harbin-based writer Chi Zijian done by Duncan Hunter. He writes: “He [i.e. me, the translator] also has a tendency to embellish: where the original simply mentions ‘the sound of running water and birdsong’ the translation has ‘the purling of water and the twittering conversation of the birds’ . More infeliciously, where the original simply says ‘bitterly sobbing’, the translation gives us ‘bawling her eyes out’, a description more appropriate of a thwarted or spanked child than of a woman devastated by the disappearance of her terminally ill husband.”9 This criticism is spot on: I do have a tendency to equate “good writing” with ornamentation, preferring, if you like, the convolutions of beauty to the plain statement of truth. Might I also add here that, as a translator specializing in contemporary poetry, I find it difficult to resist the temptations of expansiveness offered by prose! But beyond the criticism, what strikes me here is the fact that Hunter finds himself needing to use phrases such as “the original simply mentions” and “the original simply says” when clearly, as everyone knows, the original does nothing of the sort. If it can be thought of as “speaking” at all, the original can only speak in Chinese and so must “say” (and only then to a reader who knows the characters) lishui sheng he niangyu sheng and tongku qilai. Sampled at random and snipped clear of all embedding contexts (sentences, paragraphs, whole textual assemblages and motifs) my translation choices may be judged as having strayed from the nearest (= statistically most frequent) dictionary definitions, but that is to ignore all the other, less obvious aspects of literature, aspects such as tone of voice, cadence, patterns of expression, intertextual association. A translation – if made with integrity – is the result of an incomparable familiarity with the text, a contact so intimate that impressions are made on the translator that exceed the usual ready definitions. The intensity and temperamental alignment that can take place in the lived process of translation is what creates Barnstone’s “effort of fantasy,” that element in translation that aims to lift language into the realm of “artistic achievement”; unfortunately, it is exactly this element that is most vulnerable to attack in judgments of the success or otherwise of a translated text. Nevertheless, let us recall that George Steiner has called the ideal translation an “active echo,” an ideal that implies resistance to any model that conceives of translation as the passive transcription of what “the original simply says.”10

Occasionally in my translation work I have enjoyed moments of exhilaration, an exhilaration known also to deep thinkers. In Marilynn Robinson’s recent novel Gilead, the protagonist Reverend John Ames writes in his journal: “I have wandered to the limits of my understanding any number of times, out into that desolation, that Horeb, that Kansas, and I’ve scared myself, too, a good many times, leaving all landmarks behind me, or so it seemed. And it has been among the true pleasures of my life. Night and light, silence and difficulty, it seemed to me always rigorous and good.”11 To confront a text written in another language with an openness not compromised or diminished by intermediaries and supports is a very special feeling, at once frightening and exciting and inspiring. Confronted with such a rich field of possibilities, the invention of the translator has the chance to prosper for a time, before that dreadful “terror of experts” makes itself felt again. In such moments, no one can tell how to translate any particular word or phrase or sentence because you are dealing with a
unique context only remotely linked to precedents and the stagnations of habit.

Of course, this intoxication is always tempered by the resistance the task of translation offers. Interestingly, I have been experimenting in recent years with ways designed to increase this resistance. Although the fixed rhyme schemes and metrical schemes once used in poetry often resulted in a sort of “crossword puzzle mentality” in which the fulfillment of the formal requirements of the game took precedence over all artistic considerations, I have realized that such compositional obstacles can serve a positive purpose: they discourage obvious and automatic expression and create space in which the unforeseen has a chance to manifest itself. One thing I have tried to do in some of my recent translations of Chinese poetry is to stick as close as possible to the original number of syllables and to reproduce any obvious effects such as the repetition of a single sound, even if this involves a little stretching of the literal meaning. (It is Barry Hill who helps to remind me of the importance of sound with his “Bodies sing in the company of voices.”)

For example, the opening lines of the poem “Borrowed Light” by Song Xiaoxian look approximately like this in romanized form:

xing lai, hai bu dao liu DIAN
ca ca yan jing
zhan zai chuang QIAN
hu ran fa XIAN
shui ta hou MIAN de zhao xia
hen mei

I have used capital letters to indicate an instance of sound repetition, an effect I think worthy of imitation (although it should be pointed out that the limited number of sounds in Mandarin means that repetition is more commonly encountered than in languages such as English). My English translation of the whole poem looks like this:

I wake up well before six a.m.
I rub my eyes
and raise the blind
quite suddenly to find
those colored clouds behind the water tower
are beautiful
I think about a photo
but see how the colors
fade by degrees
now I almost
forget myself
absorbed, at once, I find to my surprise
I’m like a new-born babe
swathed in red light
but this is no rite – serious and solemn

You can see how the sound repetition in Chinese is at least partially replicated in English: “and raise the BLIND / quite suddenly to FIND / those colored clouds behind the water tower.” Needless to say, this in no way guarantees the success of the translation – Barnstone’s “artistic achievement” – and can lead to all kinds of liberties and corniness, yet despite all this, I feel more of an edge creep into these words. What I mean is that the act of having to overcome resistance seems to make for a greater richness.

To give another example, lines 13–16 go something like this if you stick to your dictionary closely: “[I] myself resemble a new-born baby / wrapped in red light / this is not at all a solemn ritual / I hesitate at the window.” My departures from the obvious were again motivated by repetitions of sound in the Chinese: the “light/rite” pair derives from the Chinese hongGUANG (“red light”) and ZHUANGyan (“solemn”); the alliteration of “I waver at the window” mimics the Chinese wo zui CHUANG qian CHIyi. Of course, one needs to be able to be selective in the use of such effects in order to make poetry of poetry.

The poetry of resistance is, to me, hard fact: I am amused as I write this to realize that, after beginning with the Xizhou well as an image of darkness, I find myself quoting Song Xiaoxian’s very religious poem about light despite the fact that it never featured in my original writing-plan. It is significant, I think, that modern and contemporary poetry has tended to become more and more interested in different kinds of obscurity or “semantic indirection,” as Michel Riffaterre so wonderfully dubs it, as the enlightenment values of clarity have come to the fore in science, technology and economics. What this suggests to me is that human growth is not at all the same as economic growth, and that if we apply a scientific model to the organic-holistic realm, we create real problems for ourselves. Rather than aspiring to a beauty that would “shine with as much light as the sun and the moon” and “drive away the shadow of evil,” contemporary poetry, at least in Yu Jian’s view, provides us with pockets of darkness that allow us to escape the glare of our neon-illuminated environments and to recapture something of that dynamic, fruitful obscurity within ourselves. A healing, enlightening twilight rather than an all-revealing searchlight: perhaps this is how we should see poetry in this global age of over-exposure.

In translation, too, we need to beware of facility. Like the poet in Georges Mounin’s aphorism, the only intelligent attitude open to the translator with respect to her work and her reader is one of patience.
Notes


4 Willis Barnstone calls this alignment “friendship”: “A translation is a FRIENDSHIP between poets. There is a mystical union between them based on love and art. As in ordinary religious mysticism the problem of ineffability exists: how do you find words to say the unsayable? Since a vision cannot be replicated, you seek equivalents for the other.” The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

5 This is something I heard the writer Philip Roth say in an interview on an unidentified American TV program. The full quote is: “There is a lot of brilliance locked up in all these books in the library. There’s a lot of human understanding, there’s a lot of language, there’s a lot of imaginative genius....”

6 From an unpublished manuscript emailed to me by the poet on 26 April 2005.

7 Translated by Seán Golden and Chu Chiyu as “One Generation” in Gu Cheng: Selected Poems 1 (Hong Kong: Research Centre for Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1990). I was recently saddened by Xie Xiangnan’s “ironic” (cruel?) allusion to it in a poem entitled “Beautiful Women” [Meiren]: “The dark has given me dark eyes / Yet I use them to search for beautiful women.” See Huacheng, no. 1, 2005: 146.

8 The Poetics of Translation: 49.

9 Duncan Hunter: Renditions 63 (Spring) 2005: 129.

10 Quoted from George Steiner’s introduction to a book edited by him entitled Poem into Poem: World Poetry in Modern Verse Translation (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970): 25. (“A ‘clumsy’ literal translation of a living poem is none at all; a prose paraphrase is an important auxiliary, but no more. To find active echo, a poem must incite a poem.”)


12 Broken Song 3.

13 Published on Poetry International Web, 1 March at: http://china.poetryinternational.org/cwolk/view/24939

14 Unforgivably, perhaps, I have altered the literal “stand before the window” to “and raise the blind” in order to achieve this effect.

15 This key notion is presented in his book Semiotics of Poetry (London: Methuen, 1978).

16 These phrases are taken from Gu Cheng’s “Misty Mondo” published in Gu Cheng: Selected Poems: 171.

17 After reflecting on these lines, it occurred to me that there is something “pornographic” in the scientific desire to lay bare: the emphasis is exclusively one of “explicitness,” without concern for other elements of the human whole (emotional and aesthetic concerns, for example). In this sense Yu Jian’s “darkness” offers us a kind of eroticism.

18 For those who read French, the original sentence is “La seule attitude intelligente du poète envers son lecteur est la patience.” This comes from Mounin’s wonderful book on poetry, Avez-vous lu Char? (Paris: Gallimard: 1989): 14.
On a Poem by Bei Dao

by John Balcom

Bei Dao’s 北岛 poem “Ancient Temple” is a minor masterpiece of post-Cultural Revolution poetry. It was included in his Selected Poems 北岛诗选, his second collection of poetry, published in 1986.1 The poem has intrigued me since I first encountered it as a graduate student. Bei Dao’s poem is a blend of the modern and the traditional. The use of modern vernacular language and the free verse form make this a modern work, if not one that could be superficially perceived as western in derivation. However, the theme, structure, and internal development of the work all hearken back to the norms of traditional Chinese poetry.2 In this article, I first would like to briefly comment upon the historical and cultural background of the poem and discuss what I perceive to be its very traditional poetic qualities. This will be followed by a commentary on the poem loosely modeled on traditional commentaries of classical poetry.

Bei Dao is generally grouped among those poets who began writing just after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. These poets are often referred to as menglong 朦胧 or Misty poets. He was involved in the Democracy Wall activities in Beijing in the late ’70s as well as in Jintian 今天 (Today), one of the most important of the underground literary journals in the post–Cultural Revolution period. His poetry, along with that of many of his contemporaries, was widely denounced by the mainland literary establishment. Luminaries such as Ai Qing 艾青 and Zang Kejia 臧克家 criticized their work as being “incomprehensible” and as being too distant from the concerns of society.3 (I should note that the criticism of the older established poets was in no way meant as a blanket condemnation of Misty poetry. Their critique was directed largely against the large number of Misty imitators who could manipulate the Misty style, but whose work lacked content.)

Accused of blindly worshipping the West and opposing the Party, the charge of spiritual pollution was leveled against the Misty poets in the early ’80s. Ironically, in Bei Dao’s case, his contact with western literature occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Through friends, children of high-level cadres, he was able to read translations of modern writing in editions that were off limits to the general population. Yes, a case can be made for inspiration and cultural pollination, but what was condemned as western was in fact two things: 1) a modern vernacular poetry that was no longer focused on the political ends of the literary establishment; 2) a poetry that required a “new” hermeneutic. What most of the critics failed to notice is just how traditional his poetry can be. They were in fact applying a Maoist literary hermeneutic to poetry that required a different, more traditional way of reading.

Tradition. The critics of Misty poetry often commented on its hermetic qualities, its difficulty. However, traditional Chinese poetry is filled with such poetry – one need only think of the works of Li Shangyin 李商隐, Li He 李贺, and Du Fu 杜甫 from the Tang Dynasty. There is a tradition of “difficult” poetry in China. Structurally, Bei Dao’s poem follows the traditional thematic progression of a classical poem as outlined by Yuan dynasty scholars for discussing Tang dynasty regulated verse. This method partitions the poem into four parts – qi 起, cheng 承, zhuo 转, and he 合, or beginning, development, turn, and conclusion. Additionally, the poem is something other than a fictional text that affirms a metaphorical truth in the way many western poems, or modern Chinese poems, do. Instead, Bei Dao’s poem functions more as an “omen of the world,” as Steven Owen puts it, in which meaning in the poem is “subtly infused in the particular forms of the world perceived and uncertain, perhaps even to the poet; the poem raises up portentous forms, and in doing so, it tells [the reader] about both the world and the inner concerns of the poet.” Owen goes on to say that “the poem is the entelechy of a previously unrealized pattern, an uncovering of a pattern latent in the world.”4 Let us now turn to the poem:

古 寺

消失的钟声

结成蛛网, 在裂缝的柱子里

扩散成一圈圈年轮

没有记忆, 石头

空濛的山谷里传播回声的石头, 没有记忆

当小路绕开这里的时候

龙和怪鸟也飞走了

从房檐上带走喑哑的铃铛

Translation Review
荒草一年一度
生长，那么漠然
不在乎它们屈从的主人
是僧侣的布鞋，还是风
石碑残缺，上面的文字已经磨损
仿佛只有在一场大火之中
才能辨认 也许
会随着一道生者的目光
乌龟在泥土中复活
驮着沉重的秘密，爬出门坎

The Old Temple
Fading chimes
form cobwebs
spreading annual rings
in splintered columns
without memories
a stone
spreads an echo through the misty valley
a stone
without memories
when a small path wound its way here
the dragons and strange birds flew away
carrying off the mute bells under the eaves
once a year indifferently
weeds grow not caring
whether the master they submit to is
a monk’s cloth shoe
or wind
the stele is chipped, the inscription worn away
as if it be deciphered
yet perhaps
with a glance from the living
the tortoise might come back to life in the earth
and crawl over the threshold
bearing its heavy secret

(trans. Bonnie McDougall)

Commentary

古寺 (The Old Temple)

The very title of the poem is significant. A poem on a temple would have been unthinkable in the immediate past during the Cultural Revolution. In 1966, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards destroyed temples, churches, mosques, and other religious institutions. Monks and nuns were targeted because they held reactionary views. They were widely criticized and purged, and some were sent to labor camps, tortured, and killed. The devastation was massive. *Po sijiu* 破四旧 or “destroy the four olds” (thought, culture, habits, and customs) was the order of the day.

消失的钟声 (Fading chimes)
The beginning of the poem: the first line of the poem also sets the tone. The author is dealing with things that have faded and disappeared. This also marks the first stage in the thematic progression of the poem, or *qi* as it is called in the Chinese.

结成蛛网，在裂缝的柱子里 / 扩散成一圈圈年轮
(form cobwebs/spreading annual rings/in splintered columns)
The following lines also establish a pattern that will be developed throughout the poem: circularity, cycles, and the eternal return. This is accomplished through the visual imagery of circular objects: the spider webs and the annual rings. The sound waves of the bells can also be conceived of in a rippling, circular fashion, growing fainter with distance. The spider webs reinforce the dereliction of the scene, as do the broken columns. Clearly, the temple has fallen into disuse. The now exposed annual rings, however, also suggest memory: after all, the tree’s annual rings are also a record of its life. In the first part of the poem, as in many classical poems, mute objects set the tone and a visual pattern begins to emerge that will be further developed; meaning is subtly infused in the particular forms that the poet chooses to notice. As Owen points out, these forms tell the reader both about the world and the inner concerns of the poet.

没有记忆，石头 / 空濛的山谷里传播回声的 /

石头，没有记忆
(without memories/a stone/spreads an echo through the misty valley/a stone/without memories)
The lines actually provide a visual echo as the falling stone(s) echo across the valley. We are told there is no memory, but perhaps there is, perhaps it is as faint as an echo across a foggy valley. These lines also mark the cheng, or development, in the poem away from purely descriptive terms to a consideration of more abstract qualities such as memory.

当小路绕开这里的时候 / 龙和怪鸟也飞走了 /

从房檐上带走喑哑的铃铛
(when a small path wound its way here/the dragons and strange birds flew away/carrying off the mute bells under the eaves)
These lines continue with the idea of forgetfulness and memory. People have not visited the temple for a long time. Our speaker is back and viewing the scene with a renewed interest. However, the speaker has forgotten things: he remembers the word “dragon” 龙, but when it comes to the phoenix, he can only refer to it as a “strange bird” 怪鸟 (see photo 1). In short, some cultural memory has been lost.

Stone steles such as the one mentioned here are frequently encountered in front of historical buildings in China. They often commemorate the rebuilding of a temple after dynastic war. In this case, the historical record has been partially erased, presumably by the destruction of the Cultural Revolution. The speaker seems to suggest that perhaps as great an upheaval will be required to read or recover the past, to understand what was once written on the stele. The idea of circularity is once again introduced, but this is the cycle of human history, the rise and fall of dynasties in the case of China. These lines also mark the beginning of the he, or conclusion, of the poem. From the beginning to the conclusion of the poem, the idea of circularity has been developed and expanded upon; Bei Dao uncovers a pattern that seems to inform the universe from mute objects such as spider webs to larger natural cycles to the cycles of human history. It can be noted here that there are numerous classical Chinese poems on the subject of dwelling on the past and grieving for the present. One good example is the following poem by Meng Haoran 孟浩然:

On Climbing Yan Mountain with Others of My Age

Human affairs rise and fall
From ancient to modern, time has passed
There are famous old spots among the rivers and mountains
We climb this day to the peak once again
The water subsides showing the shallows at Yuliang
It’s cold and the water looks so deep at Mengze
The monument to Lord Yang abides yet
Reading the inscription, we all weep

(Trans. John Balcom)
也许 / 会随着一道生者的目光 / 乌龟在泥土中复活 /
驮着沉重的秘密,爬出门坎
(yet perhaps/with a glance from the living/the tortoise might come back to life in the earth/and crawl/over the threshold/bearing its heavy secret)

The final lines of the poem seem somewhat cryptic. Again, our speaker seems to insist that it is the living who will recover what is gone. The reference to the tortoise is important. Stone steles such as those mentioned previously were often set atop stone tortoises (see photo 2). The tortoise, of course, is the symbol of longevity and constancy. However, it is also more than that. According to Wolfram Eberhard the tortoise is a symbolic creature that “conceals the secrets of heaven and earth.” In this case the tortoise will perhaps provide the key to the secrets that have been lost due to recent history; perhaps the cycle of human history is turning again to a brighter, more positive future in which the once scorned past is recovered. Unlike many classical poets, Bei Dao does not look at the past and grieve for the present; instead, he looks forward to a better day.

Notes
2 Since the inception of the modern vernacular movement in China in 1917, an ongoing debate ensued over tradition, westernization, and modernization. By the second half of the twentieth century, poets such as Yuan Kejia in China and Yang Mu in Taiwan continued to comment on the issue, claiming (in the case of Yang Mu) that the influence of tradition on modern poetry is “invisible, yet thicker than blood; a born Chinese can never shake off this traditional literary heritage from his consciousness.” See his Guanya Ji Xian de xianzai heshi yu xiandaipai (On Ji Xian’s Modern Poetry Society and Modernism). Yuan Kejia also said the whole idea of being able to entirely reject tradition is ridiculous. See his Xianzai yu fanchuantong (Modernism against tradition) in Renmin ribao March 14, 1991, p. 5.
3 In 1981 Zang Kejia published an article in Hebei zhijian zhuobao titled Guanya menglong shi (On menglong poetry) and Ai Qing published a lengthier article in Wenhuibao titled Cong menglong shi tangqi (Starting with menglong poetry). Ai Qing’s article appears to have galvanized younger poets and critics, many of whom wrote responses defending the menglong poets. Both writers also wrote brief statements against menglong poetry in 1983 as part of the larger bureaucratic attack against spiritual pollution.
4 Steven Owen. Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985, pp. 16-21. Also see: Laurence G. Thompson. Chinese Religion. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989, p. 8. According to Thompson, in the West, people have traditionally perceived of the universe as something “out there,” whereas for the Chinese a gestalt cosmology has been the rule. In such an integrated universe, human beings seek out the signs writ large in nature whereby they may confirm that human actions are in accord or discordant with the universe. This approach to the world is reflected in divination practices as well as in poetry.
6 Stephen Owen, ibid., p. 22.
7 From the early Shang dynasty onward, the Chinese have traditionally conceived of time as cyclical, corresponding to the seasons. See for example the Wikipedia entry: <http://66.102.7.104/search?q=cache:i8nDDJnYgmgi:en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_philosophy+chinese+concept+of+time&hl=en>. Human history and the rise and fall of states and dynasties function in a similar cyclical fashion with the moral basis of a “mandate of heaven” (tianming).

Making it new. In the process of reading the poem, then, the reader can be said to actually participate in recovering some of the cultural memory that has been lost during the traumatic and destructive years of the Cultural Revolution. Reading, and the recovering of a traditional but now “new” hermeneutic, becomes the first step in reconstructing a larger cultural heritage that has largely been destroyed. The irony, of course, is that the detractors of the poem demonstrate that they simply have forgotten how to read.
Translating Ideogram into a Culture of Phonogram in Tae-Sok Oh’s Play Bellflower

by Hyung-Jin Lee

As the theater scholars who analyze a dramatic text need to take into account the performance-oriented nature of the text, as well as its literary values, in the same context the translator of a play into another language has to be more conscious of its inherent “performability.” The ultimate purpose of theater translation is to see the translated play performed in the target language on stage before a live audience, while not excluding the readers sitting curled up on the couch at home.

However, placing more than due emphasis on the importance of “performability” in theater translation often frustrates the translators, as it may unintentionally bind them to the nearly impossible task of translating “performability.” “Whereas Stanislavski or Brecht would have assumed that the responsibility for decoding the gestic text lay with the performers, the assumption in the translation process is that this responsibility can be assumed by the translator sitting at a desk and imagining the performance dimension. Common sense should tell us that this cannot be taken seriously” (Bassnett-McGuire, “Translating for the Theatre” 100).

Nevertheless, it is clear that the need for “instant communicability” is more urgent in theater translation than in other literary genres, such as poetry or the novel, where readers, unlike the theater audience, are given more active control over the reception of a literary work. For instance, while readers can stop their reading at any time and ponder it or resume reading from any point, the theater audience obviously may not stop the performance in the middle. Therefore, a priority in theater translation should be given to the communication with the audience in a more direct and immediate way.

Furthermore, while the translation of poetry or novels may resort to the use of references and explanation in dashes and parentheses within the text for clarification, in theater translation these auxiliary means of written explanation lose their timely function on stage and become literally ineffectual to theater audiences in live performance. Thus, for the sake of instant communication in translation, a certain degree of the modification of format or style of the original dramatic text is inevitable in the process of theater translation. Bassnett-McGuire suggests that “consequently the task of the translator must be to determine what those structures are and to translate them in to the TL [target language], even though this may lead to major shifts on the linguistic and stylistic planes” (Translation Studies 122).

Recently, while translating the Korean play Bellflower (1992), written by Tae-Sok Oh, into English, I was intrigued by several challenges with regard to “instant communicability.” One problem with the translation of this play had to do with transmitting an indigenous cultural existence whose close English equivalent is unlikely to be found in a Western context.

Oh’s play historicizes the critical time of the late nineteenth-century Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), the last dynasty on the Korean peninsula, which eventually succumbed to Japanese colonial exploitation in 1910 for thirty-five years. In the critical disintegration of social consciousness that coincided with the loss of the country’s sovereignty – already imminent in the 1890s, the time in which the play is set – cultural and social structures and the foundation of the dynasty became so fragile that it was violently dismantled, losing its juridical and cultural authority. One example of the disintegration of the social and moral consciousness is reflected in the play through the character Jong-U’s selling of 족보 (pronounced “jok-bo”), which can be roughly translated as a “family genealogy book.”

While an equivalent of a family genealogy book may be found in Western culture, the social and practical implications of the family genealogy book in the Joseon dynasty might have differed significantly from those of the potential Western counterpart. The Joseon dynasty was strictly based on a class system, and so a family genealogy book was one of the few official and practical means to verify personal identification as well as social class status. In the West, the role of genealogy text is limited to serving as a chronological record of a family tree. Furthermore, in the Joseon dynasty, aristocratic-class families were able to maintain their economic and social privileges through the inheritance of a family estate and to obtain government posts from their ancestors, as verified by this family genealogy book. Thus, it is no wonder that social and economic privileges associated with this family genealogy book and its accompanied identification tags were enormously valued.

Though local administrative offices were supposed to keep their own authentic copies of these family genealogy books and exercise strict jurisdiction over any modification of the
whose original purpose was to act as an alphabet that "Han-geul") with only 14 consonants and 10 vowels, a phonetics-based Korean alphabetic system

dynasty and his commissioned scholars created in 1443 a graphic language, historically King Sejong of the Joseon dynasty is that the Korean language derived from the Chinese ideogram be used to explain the term note or endnote. In this particular play, the endnote could be used to explain the term nyang, a basic monetary unit in the Joseon dynasty, for this does not urgently require an immediate understanding of the meaning in the play on the part of audience as well as readers.

In Oh’s play, while the trading of a government post becomes feasible through the selling of the family genealogy book, its cultural practice might be unfamiliar to Western audiences. Thus, in the process of translation it is necessary to establish a proper correlation between the ownership of family-inherited government posts and the practical value and role of the family genealogy book itself. In order to close the cultural difference in translation, I directly added my own explanatory line in the dialogue of Jong-U, an aristocrat character, about the implied value and function of the family genealogy book ("but this will let you take my family-inherited government post") rather than use a footnote or endnote. In this particular play, the endnote could be used to explain the term nyang, a basic monetary unit in the Joseon dynasty, for this does not urgently require an immediate understanding of the meaning in the play on the part of audience as well as readers.

Consequently, I expect the additional explanatory line in the dialogue to help Western theater audiences as well as readers understand without further delay the nature and implied role of this family genealogy book at the moment it is taken out by Jong-U for Mr. Gu just as much as the similar implication could be naturally understood by a Korean audience with the Korean play or text. In addition, this inserted line is designed to minimize its external impact on the dialogue structure as well as the internal one on the context of the dialogue.

However, a more serious challenge to the translation of the play arose during the process of translating an ideogram into a phonetic word. While a common misunderstanding is that the Korean language derived from the Chinese ideographic language, historically King Sejong of the Joseon dynasty and his commissioned scholars created in 1443 a phonetics-based Korean alphabetic system 한글 (read as "Han-geul") with only 14 consonants and 10 vowels, whose original purpose was to act as an alphabet that would be easy for common people to learn and use. Despite the passionate efforts of the king, however, the Chinese language still remained the official written language for most class-conscious aristocrats until the collapse of the Joseon dynasty. One major reason for conservative aristocrats’ fervent objection to this user-friendly alphabetic system was the desire to preserve their historically held cultural and social privileges and maintain hierarchical class distinction through the exclusive knowledge and use of Chinese language.

In the play’s scene in which Jong-U tries to sell his government post to Mr. Gu, a non-aristocratic, illiterate character, the title of the government post he puts up for sale is written in Chinese characters, though read in the sound value of the Korean alphabet – similar to the way Americans read the original Greek word θέατρο as “theatre.”

The use of the Chinese title of the government post (孝昌園奉事) in the play text is intended to highlight Jong-U’s higher-class status as well as the illiteracy of Mr. Gu, who is trying to buy aristocratic status with money. In this context, Mr. Gu is supposedly unable to figure out the meaning of the Chinese title as well as the nature of the post when the title is first mentioned. Thus, his lack of knowledge and understanding of the Chinese language leads him to repeat and re-repeat the same question to Jong-U about the post.

With regard to the translation of the use of a foreign word in the text, Henry S. Schogt claims that “a very common technique consists in repeating the foreign element immediately in the next sentence or in the same paragraph, using its equivalent in the main language, or in using the foreign element as a repeat of something that has been expressed just before in the main language. No matter which technique is used, the position of the foreign word or sentence is marginal in the development of the story” (113).

However, while the meaning of a foreign word may have a minimal impact in the context of the play, the use of the Chinese word in this particular play could become more than something marginal in the process of translation. In this play, it is particularly interesting to note that the playwright himself uses the original Chinese word, not the Korean sound value, for the government post in the dialogue, a practice that is neither common nor popular these days. More attention needs to be paid to the fact that when the government post is first mentioned by Jong-U, its title, though read in the Korean sound value, is written in Chinese, but as the title is mentioned again for clarification, it is written in Korean.
Bellflower ¹
written by Tae-Sok Oh & translated by Hyung-Jin Lee
丘氏가 모습을 보인다. 喪主와 맞결한다.
구씨: 비슬 팔려고 내놓았다 들었소. 물려받지 않고 어째 …
종우: (책보에 싼 號牌 족보를 내보인다.) 몇푼 될란가 모르겠습니까.
구씨: (문맹이다) 비슬이 된 비슬이요.
종우: 孝昌園 奉事지요. 여기 관할관청 陸園宮 도장 찍혔고요.
구씨: 영낙 그러네. 그런데 어째 내놓나. 뭔 일이 있어.
종우: 판 돈으로 노자해갖고 일본 갈랍니다. 거기 다녀오면
되는 비슬이 또 있지요.
구씨: 일본 가 받은 비슬 –그 비슬이 이 비슬보다 낫은가.
종우: 일본서 받은 게 아니고 일본 물정 보고 들은대로 전하께
전해주는 비슬로 別入侍 라고 합니다.
구씨: 파발꾼이구만 그게. 아이고 다리 아파 그짓 나 못해.
내게는 이쪽이 좋아 보이네. 효창원 봉사라 이거. 뭐하는
비슬인가.
종우: 능묘장입니다.
구씨: 능묘장 –능묘장—그런게 장이란 말이지. 30 냥 쳐주지.
(엽량을 내놓는다.)
종우: 호패—이거 아직 실감이 안 나시는가 봅니다. 이거 손에
쥐어 보십시오. 자체분은 과거를 볼 수 있지요. 종로에서
 cil 하십시오고—.
구씨: 포목 팔아.
종우: 포목상점은 조세 면세 받지요.
구씨: 조세, 조세 –300 냥. (엽량을 내놓는다.)
종우: 도량이 크십니다.
구씨: 일본 가는 배삯이나 되는가.
종우: 물지게 지고 물장사해서 보낼괄니다. 물사—료요. 물사—
료요. (12-13)
(Mr. Gu appears. He and Jong-U bow deeply to each other.)
MR. GU: I heard that you put your government post up for sale.
Why are you … instead of carrying on the inheritance?
JONG-U: (He shows a family genealogy book wrapped in a piece of cloth.)
I don’t know how much it is worth, but this will let you take
my family-inherited government post.²
MR. GU: (He is illiterate.) What is the title of this government post?
JONG-U: It’s a managerial position at Hyo-chang-won. Here the
register has an official stamp from the Yuk-Won-Gung that
has jurisdiction over it.
MR. GU: So it is. But why do you put this on sale? What’s the
matter?
JONG-U: With the money I garner by selling this post, I’ll have
travel funds to go to Japan. Once I have visited Japan, another
government post will be available.
MR. GU: A government post you receive in Japan? Is that one
better than this one?
JONG-U: It’s not what I receive in Japan; it is a government post
as a special royal envoy that will allow me to directly report to
His Royal Highness what I see and hear in Japan as it is.
MR. GU: That’s what an express messenger does. Oh my, that
hurts my legs and I don’t even want it. To me this one looks
better. A managerial position at Hyo-chang-won … what does
this post do?
JONG-U: It’s the general manager position at the royal ceme-
tery.
MR. GU: The general manager at the royal cemetery … the gen-
eral manager at the royal cemetery … it indeed is a manager
position, right? I’ll pay thirty nyang.³ (He takes out brass coins.)
JONG-U: This family identification tag … it seems to me that
you don’t understand exactly what this really is. Please hold
this in your hand. With this, your children are eligible to take
civil service exams. What did you say you do for a living on
Jong-no Street?
MR. GU: I sell linen and cotton.
JONG-U: With this tag, drapery stores benefit from a tax exemp-
tion.
MR. GU: Tax, tax … three hundred nyang. (He takes out brass
coins.)
JONG-U: You are quite a generous man.
MR. GU: Will this be enough for the ferry fare to Japan?
JONG-U: I will supplement it by carrying this back rack and sell-
ing water. “Wa-ter! Wa-ter!”

My English translation of the play will be included in Anthology of Con-
² Underlines, in both Korean and English, have been added for refer-
cence and comparison. The boldface clause was added in translation.
³ Nyang was a basic monetary unit (coin) in Korea, used for more than
800 years until Japanese colonization began officially in 1910.
Considering the fact that, while Mr. Gu’s lines in the Korean play text do not contain a single Chinese character, Jong-U’s lines contain several Chinese characters for the governmental titles and places, it is important to note the difference in the use of Korean and Chinese characters and to reflect its implication in translation.

Under the circumstances, one quick and simple solution to the problem is to fully translate the post title into English when it is first brought up and delete the repeated second dialogue about the title. However, the translator is then faced with a dilemma: once the original Chinese title of the post is translated fully into English at the time the title is first mentioned by Jong-U as “a general manager position at Hyo-chang-won royal cemetery,” it would already have completely revealed the nature of the post to Mr. Gu and prevented any further possibility of contrasting the illiteracy of Mr. Gu with the aristocratic status of Jong-U. This eventually blocks the playwright’s intention to highlight the ongoing process of the disintegration of the social class system and its hypocrisy, reflected in this particular dialogue. In addition, what could be more problematic is that the over-clarification makes the next few lines, where Mr. Gu asks Jong-U again about the post, literally repetitious and obsolete. In the next dialogue, while Mr. Gu mentions the title in Korean sound value, repeating it after Jong-U, Mr. Gu is still ignorant of the meaning and nature of the post title that he is trying to buy from Jong-U.

Thus, as the over-clarification could likely miss the hidden social implications of the context as well as its stinging criticism, I rather chose an intentional and selective suppression and temporary delay of the meaning to make the implication alive as well as keep the dialogue structure intact. As the Chinese title of the post is supposed to sound Greek to Mr. Gu when it is first mentioned, instead of translating the title fully into English, a selective and temporary suppression of the meaning in translation was implemented to delay Mr. Gu’s understanding of it.

First, rather than fully translating the title as “a manager position at Hyo-chang-won royal cemetery,” I intentionally suppressed any reference to the cemetery. Also, while the name of the place, written in Chinese 孝昌園, refers to “Hyo-chang-won Cemetery Garden,” the original name was simply replaced in translation with its English sound equivalent, “Hyo-chang-won,” without any reference to the royal cemetery. By so doing, the English translation provides the audience with no further information about the place other than just the Korean name just as, in a quite similar way, the name of “Hyo-chang-won” alone does not ring a bell with Mr. Gu in the first dialogue. In addition, the intentional suppression of the meaning helps to contextually legitimize Mr. Gu’s continuing ignorance of the place “Hyo-chang-won” and allows him to repeat the same question. More importantly, this temporary suppression of the meaning in translation helps to keep the dialogue structure and sequence largely intact.

Second, the implied title of “tomb manager” was deliberately avoided in translation and selectively modified into a non-specific term of “managerial position” in the first dialogue, so that this limited alternative term provides Mr. Gu with a minimum and vague level of understanding that the post is of an aristocratic nature. In fact, the post title 事 refers to a lower ranking public officer position in charge of the management of the royal cemetery. After the title was first mentioned, it appears that, while Mr. Gu is still not sure what this government post is about, his interest and curiosity stem from knowing that it is indeed an aristocratic post, as the title ends with the Chinese character 聘, pronounced “sa” in Korean sound value. Although very few commoners could read and understand Chinese then, they were at least able to sense that generally any profession whose official title ends with the Korean sound value “sa” was, whether prestigious or not, likely an aristocratic post.

Interestingly, however, in a scene where Jong-U, when asked by Mr. Gu, elaborates on the nature of the post more clearly, the playwright makes an interesting language choice. Here Jong-U uses a Korean title, 능묘장 (“a cemetery manager”), which is easier to read and understand even for illiterate commoners, instead of using the corresponding Chinese characters for “a cemetery manager,” which is 陵墓長. Therefore, the title 능묘장 is contextually translated into Korean, rather than being left untranslated with its Korean sound value (“Neung-my-o-jang”). It is clear that the alternative choice of language, in both Chinese and Korean, demonstrates the playwright’s own intention to emphasize the hierarchic process of communicative discourse between Jong-U, an aristocrat, and Mr. Gu, an illiterate, which requires a deliberately asynchronous understanding of the meaning in the dialogue. In addition, as this deliberate choice of language is clearly reflected in the Korean text that incorporates Chinese characters, it has become an important task for the translator in the English translation to reflect the implication of the use of different languages without incorporating foreign-language elements. For this matter, the translator’s active interference in the suppression and delay of the meaning could be one of the effective means to maintain the structural integrity of the play.
Translating dialogue for the theater requires more careful and immediate attention to the well-structured development of communication because the structure of the dialogue itself is a subtly structured condensation of actions. Accordingly, Brigitte Schultze asserts that “the dual context of dramatic language – oral communication with its markers of spontaneity and situation, and literature with its time-bound aesthetic codes – is a permanent challenge for translators” (189). In a similar context, theater translators are faced with two critical challenges. On the one hand, just as translators of other literary genres, they are asked to be faithful to the original structure and dialogue of the play, leaving the dialogue structure as intact as possible. On the other hand, theater translators are asked to be more concerned with communicability as well as “performability” for the sake of the live audience and actors.

One thing that differentiates drama texts from texts of other literary genres is the performance-oriented nature of drama text. This also underscores the peculiar nature of interdependence between drama text and performance in the meaning-creation process. “No text is ever completed. It is always meanings in process. Similarly, no matter how thorough and detailed the performance processes may be, a production does not complete those processes, it simply creates a new text for a particular time, place and reception” (Birch 12). This openness eventually allows theater translators to become more actively involved and intervene in the meaning-creation process through translation.

In this play, the alternative use of the different languages, ideographic and phonetic, which are intended to disclose and problematize implicated cultural hierarchies between the characters, demands more active intervention by a translator. In the process of translation, thus, the intentional and selective suppression and delay of meaning was necessary and used effectively. In doing so, I was able to make the use of the ideogram as alive as possible in the different linguistic contexts of phonetics in translation, without changing or harming the structure and logics of the dialogue in the source text.

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Waiting for a Better Translation

by Nancy Tsai

Amid the reviews oozing of saccharine praise Ha Jin has received for his second novel, Waiting, winner of the 1999 National Book Award and 2000 PEN/Faulkner Award, Claire Messud’s comment on Ha Jin and his writing is as refreshing as it is poignant:

Few foreign writers have successfully taken on the English language in adulthood, and those who spring to mind – Conrad, Nabokov – are supreme stylists, whose conversion implied a willed mastery.

Ha Jin, on the other hand, writes spare prose, with a limited vocabulary: his works read as if he had written them in Chinese and merely undertaken the translation himself.

Though Messud’s remark is intended for Ha Jin’s The Bridegroom, a collection of short stories published after Waiting, I find them just as precise an observation for the novel as for the short stories. I suspect none of the reviewers know Chinese well enough to see that the pages in Waiting abound with Chinese expressions, idioms, and clichés directly translated into English and hammered into the sentences like nails. Waiting’s “stripped down simplicity” (Garner), “lush melodic descriptions of the local flora and the clipped cadence of military names and lingo” (Freeman), its absence of “affectation characterizing so much modern fiction” and ability to preserve a “[fairy] tale’s brisk pace, economy, and omniscient tone” (Champeon) all owe to the fact that Ha Jin knows of no other way to write in English, his second language, with which, according to Garner’s own observations in “Ha Jin’s Cultural Revolution,” he still struggles to speak. In other words, Ha Jin’s grasp of the English language is such that he cannot but write with “simplicity” and “economy.” The “melodic” qualities and “clipped cadence” Champeon attributes to his writing sound to me like compliments that set out to exoticize the Chinese “accent” that is present in the English. As for affectation, this requires one to be so much at ease with the language that one begins flaunting its better qualities. Ha Jin is far from ease, let alone affectation. I see the awkwardness in his writing just as I have seen and been asked to “correct” the awkwardness in the English essays of my Taiwanese students and peers. From my experience of teaching English to Chinese students and trying to write in English myself, I have come to believe that the act of writing in a non-native language is the act of translation. Ha Jin’s Waiting is proof. It is filled, if not fraught, with direct translations, mistranslations, awkward use of idioms, expressions and slang, inappropriate or misleading choices of diction and tone, and just about any other trait the average critic would be likely to pick on if he or she were reviewing a text labeled as “a translation.”

The translation of stock phrases, such as idioms, proverbs, and expressions, is often one of the most troublesome issues the translator faces. On the one hand, you may choose to directly translate the phrase into the target language, a decision that almost guarantees that the translation will retain its “foreignness,” but one that also guarantees its “awkwardness.” For the readers whose native language is the target language, such translations will be a constant reminder that the text was indeed written in a foreign language, the characters indeed speak in a foreign language, and the usual criteria they employ to judge their own native language will not apply, hence letting “awkwardness” off the hook. In Waiting, Ha Jin directly translates (or attempts to translate) numerous Chinese expressions, idioms, proverbs, and usage into English:

1. Meanwhile the judge was waiting patiently, waving a large fan, on which a tiger stretched its neck howling with a mouth like a bloody basin. (11) 血盆大口

2. “What kind of model have you become? A man who doesn’t care for his family and loves the new and loathes the old – fickle in heart and unfaithful in words and deeds.” (12) 喜新厭舊—花心且言行不一

3. “Oh, why is the Lord of Heaven so mean to me?” (60) 老天爺

4. Haiyan said to her, “Without pressure no well will yield oil.” (97) 井沒壓力不噴油

5. “Better to stop before we’re trapped too deep.” (98) 陷得太深

6. Unfortunately his wife died two years ago; people used to call them “a pair of mandarin ducks,” meaning an affectionate couple. (115) 一對鴛鴦

7. Liang Meng wrote that he was very interested in Manna and that she seemed to him very “mature and unaffected.” (118) 成熟不做作

8. Shuyu unfolded a yellow toweling coverlet and drew it over the child, then went out to wash dishes in the cauldron. (125) 毛巾被
9. The author, who had not signed his name, using “Defender of Morality” instead, must have been Bensheng’s friend. (126) 衛道者
10. “Like I said, this is my personal matter.” (128)
11. “Like I said, this is my personal matter.” (128)
12. She remembered that when she was a little girl, she had often dreamed of wearing a flowered blouse, fluffy and flossy, which made her look like a butterfly fairy and enabled her to soar into the clouds whenever she ordered, “Fly.” (141) 蝴蝶仙子
13. “When we dug them out, nine men had no breath left in them…. You should’ve seen how they cried their hearts out; it twisted my entrails to hear them.” (149) 斷了氣、柔腸寸斷
14. How could she let a caged bird fly away? (159) 讓煮熟的鴨子飛了
15. According to the gossip among the nurses, this man was known as a Tiger General despite his lower rank of battalion commander. (161) 虎將
16. It hardly ever rains. But when it does, it shits and pisses without stopping like all the latrines in heaven have lost their bottoms. (163) 尿尿齊流
17. Halfway through dinner, the guest claimed that it was too bad that he wouldn’t be able to drink their wedding wine. (171) 喝喜酒
18. “With money you can hire the devil to grind grain and cook dinner for you.” (172) 有錢能使鬼推磨
19. “I’m afraid that giving Bensheng money will be like hitting a dog with a meatball — nothing will come back.” (174) 肉包子打狗—有去無回
20. “Don’t you know the saying: A good man must never take liberties with his friend’s wife?” (179) 朋友妻不可欺
21. Does this mean his sperm has already gone deep into my uterus and found an ovum? (183) 卵子
22. Although Haiyan was happy with her marriage many people would comment behind her back, “A fresh rose is planted on a cowpat.” (186) 鮮花插在牛糞上
23. That bastard Geng Yang must have done her an internal injury. (189) 內傷
24. In secret she had been taking a few kinds of herbal boluses, which she hoped would strengthen her body, nourish her yin, and help her recover. (190) 中藥丸
25. “Why? You’re crazy. That’s equal to broadcasting the secret.” (193) 等於
26. She hated the telltale’s bone marrow. (196) 恨之入髓
27. Sometimes the little woman would call him “a green-hatted cuckold” in front of others. (196) 戴綠帽
28. No wonder people say marriage is the death of love. (215) 婚姻是愛情的墳墓
29. Above the table a sign with these giant words was suspended from an iron wire: Secure the Law like a Mountain. (216–17) 執法如山
30. Even Shuyu couldn’t help calling their daughter “a stupid egg.” (222) 笨蛋
31. “My old devil,” she cried at her husband, “you come home with me.” 老鬼
“Leave me alone,” he grunted.
“Get up right now!”
“Okay, my little granny.” (237) 小奶奶
32. “Yes, let them eat a bobbing apple together,” several voices cried out. What they demanded was an apple strung by a thread in the air, so that the couple couldn’t avoid kissing each other while eating it. (241) 一塊兒咬蘋果
33. “Small friends – boys and girls – you can eat as many goodies as you want, but don’t take any home. Understood?” (242) 小朋友
34. There must have been something wrong with this woman, who seemed unable to live without seducing a man, like a weasel spirit. (263) 狐狸精
35. What angered her most was that pair of apricot eyes, which hadn’t left Lin since Manna began observing her. (263) 杏眼
36. He belched, and his mouth was filled with acid gastric juice, which almost made him vomit. (270) 胃酸
37. It was simple and clear like a bug on a bald head, the voice went on. (272) 禿子頭上的蝨子—明擺看
38. He remembered the saying “Raise a son for your old years.” (275) 養兒防老
39. “The Lord of Heaven has no eyes!” (287) 不長眼
40. “Life’s always like this, ridiculous – a monster thrives for a thousand years, while the good suffer and die before their time.” (288) 好人無長壽，禍害一千年
41. You’re a model fool. (297) 標準的——
42. Shuyu believed that now he was showing his true feeling about her, because a man would speak his heart when drunk. (307) 酒後吐真言

By directly translating stock Chinese phrases into English, Ha Jin succeeds in creating a foreign quality in the English language and, judging by the majority of reviews, wowing his readers and critics with it. But the degree to which this foreign quality is actually “Chinese” remains debatable, since once translated into English, the Chinese loses everything from sound and spelling to structure, not to mention that there is no real equivalence between languages to begin with anyway. Ideally, one may find similarities, analogies, parallels, or echoes of one language in another, as is often the case with proverbs; but never will one find equivalence, or rather equation, in the mathematical sense. So it’s not too surprising that when Chinese characters speak in English, they sound more “un-English” than Chinese. Worse, given the Chinese penchant for spewing out sayings, most of them usually end up sounding like various versions of Yoda. Not even the most capable translator can do anything about it, unless he or she is willing to give up “direct” translation. To me, what Ha Jin has achieved in his writing is mainly a showcase of the fact that the Chinese, average writers and ordinary people alike, love to litter their sentences with idioms, proverbs, expressions – and the more the better. It is a cultural trademark, and one I do not particularly admire in writers. Stock phrases are convenient, compact little packages, like microwaveable meals – all you have to do is pop ’em in. They save time, but are in fact poor imitations of sentences “made from scratch.” And too often they are so compact that they don’t really go with anything else around them. It is arguable that their use is less derogatory in dialogue, since it can be seen as a characterization of speech; but in the narrative, they stick out like sore spots. In addition to Ha Jin’s heavy use of stock Chinese phrases, the results of his translation of these stock phrases also offer some interesting insight into his competency as a “translator” and the struggles he faces as one.

In the examples I have provided here, there are some that clearly question the degree of understanding Ha Jin has of common connotations in American English:

14. How could she let a caged bird fly away? (159) 讓煮熟的鴨子飛了
34. There must have been something wrong with this woman, who seemed unable to live without seducing a man, like a weasel spirit. (263) 狐狸精
35. What angered her most was that pair of apricot eyes, which hadn’t left Lin since Manna began observing her. (263) 杏眼

The first example describes the thoughts of the nurse Manna who, out of carelessness, fails to hold the interest of Commissar Wei, a high-ranking official who, at first, regards her as a potential bride. For a Chinese reader, Ha Jin’s “let a caged bird fly away” easily, and almost immediately, calls forth its Chinese counterpart, which also involves a fowl of some sort, but is otherwise completely different. A direct translation of the Chinese expression would be this: How could she “let a cooked duck fly away”? The reason behind the discrepancy between the two expressions is ambiguous. Why the distorted translation (assuming that he had this specific Chinese expression in mind)? Was “cooked duck” just too vulgar compared to “caged bird”? But there is a problem with his use of “caged bird.” It is an image that implies the denial of freedom, the state of captivity, of subordination, which would explain the fact that women are often compared to caged birds and that they are constantly setting them free in novels. But Commissar Wei is a higher-ranking official, the one who is doing the choosing, who is in power. He was hardly a “caged bird.” If Ha Jin was aiming for cliché in the first place, “How could she let him slip through her fingers?” might be better. The use of “weasel” is also problematic. Calling someone a “weasel” implies that the person is deceitful, cunning, treacherous, one who will “weasel out” of responsibility. It is devoid of sexual implications, which makes it a poor and misleading term to describe a seductive woman who plays on the lust of men and lures them into her trap. The more appropriate translation would be “fox spirit,” which is commonly used in a considerable number of translations. “Fox” is also more appropriate than “weasel” because there already exists in English the term “foxy,” a remark most often reserved for sexy, alluring women. Similarly, there’s nothing seductive about “apricot eyes” either. An “apricot” is a small, plump, pudgy fruit, often eaten when dried and wrinkled. It would be very hard to picture a woman with “apricot eyes” as seductive or a threat to the wife. The reason behind Ha Jin’s mistake is very obvious to me here: the Chinese character 杏 can mean either “apricot” or “almond.” If one had to choose
for the sake of direct translation, “almond (almond-shaped) eyes” would be a better choice, since the shape of an almond comes close to the slender lines of Asian eyes. Ha Jin’s choice of “apricot” was a plain error, illustrating one of the pitfalls in translation – the first word that comes up in a dictionary is not always the right one.

Then there are the examples that are not in the strictest sense “wrong,” but just slightly “off”:

8. Shuyu unfolded a yellow toweling coverlet and drew it over the child, then went out to wash dishes in the cauldron. (125) 毛巾被

10. “Like I said, this is my personal matter.” (128) 我的私事

21. Does this mean his sperm has already gone deep into my uterus and found an ovum? (183) 卵子

22. Although Haiyan was happy with her marriage many people would comment behind her back, “A fresh rose is planted on a cowpat.” (186) 一朵鲜花插在牛粪上

25. “Why? You’re crazy. That’s equal to broadcasting the secret.” (193) 等於

36. He belched, and his mouth was filled with acid gastric juice, which almost made him vomit. (270) 胃酸

The conventions of English, in these cases, would probably call on speakers to prefer “terry blanket” over “toweling coverlet,” to say “a personal matter” not “my personal matter,” “egg” rather than “ovum,” “cowpat” instead of “cow-pat,” and “like” in place of “equal to.” Translators, though armed with dictionaries and rules of grammar that can attest to the legitimacy of the former, will still fail to be “right” even though their language isn’t necessarily “wrong.” The reason: “That’s not how we say it.” And the voice of we, though harsh and alienating, is unquestionable. As for “acid gastric juice,” there really is no common term in English to describe at the same time gastric juice and its acidity; there is no one word for “the taste” of heartburn. (Ha Jin is in fact describing “acid reflux,” but the term is at best clinical, at worst Pepto Bismol’s No. 1 enemy.) So something must be invented, putting to test the intuitional skills of the translator. In Ha Jin’s case, his skills are debatable, as he clearly cannot let go of the Chinese, which calls for “acid” and “gastric juice” to be put side by side, a rather cumbersome combination in English; and when to let go of grammar, dictionaries, and the original text is a decision based no less on knowledge than on feel, talent, and sudden inspiration – attributes that are more inherent than acquired.

Another ordeal the translator regularly goes through is whether or not to explain the alien terms in the form of footnotes or carefully inserted explanations in the text itself, both last resorts to make meaning clearer since they are a diversion from the narrative. Here are a few examples in which Ha Jin attempts to make things clearer for his western readers:

6. Unfortunately his wife died two years ago; people used to call them “a pair of mandarin ducks,” meaning an affectionate couple. (115) 一對鴛鴦

27. [S]ometimes the little woman would call him “a green-hatted cuckold” in front of others. (196) 戴綠帽

32. “Yes, let them eat a bobbing apple together,” several voices cried out. What they demanded was an apple strung by a thread in the air, so that the couple couldn’t avoid kissing each other while eating it. (241) 一塊兒咬蘋果

33. “Small friends – boys and girls – you can eat as many goodies as you want, but don’t take any home. Understood?” (242) 小朋友

What I have put in italics are the explanations Ha Jin inserts into the text. A Chinese reader would know what a “pair of mandarin ducks” means; calling someone “green-hatted” alone in Chinese is sufficient to indicate that he is a “cuckold”; “small friends” is how the Chinese address their “little boys and girls.” For Americans, “bobbing apples” refers to the game of biting apples that are in water, so no wonder Ha Jin has to explain that the apples are in the air. In the end, things are indeed clearer, but the reader is also temporarily distracted from the context, a result that should preferably be avoided. It would seem easier for Ha Jin to avoid this since he is not answering to an “original” printed text, unlike most translators who feel obliged to. Yet, in the sheer numbers of “direct” translations he has done, his insistence in answering to the Chinese is obvious.

Ha Jin’s insistence in answering to the Chinese appears to indicate the urge to showcase the language and culture of the Chinese to his Western readers, regardless of the unintentional negative effects. It is not an intention without merit, for everybody deserves to learn something about others. But what adds to the controversy of this practice is that he juxtaposes these very Chinese expressions with very American ones. That is, the narrative and dialogues are also packed with American idioms, proverbs and expressions.
To begin with, there is the affected language, the clichés and trite expressions that look like they were taken from popular, but poorly-written, romance novels:

1. From then on … she resisted his advances resolutely, her sense of virtue and honor preventing her from succumbing to his desire. Her resistance kindled his passion. (24)

2. For better or for worse, she shouldn’t just sit and wait without doing anything, or there would be no end to this ambiguous affair. (65)

3. He found her midriff a little plump, but he found her limbs so youthful that the sight of them made his heart skip a beat. (72)

4. In a word, she was definitely one in a hundred. (109)

5. “I’m sorry to hear that.” He felt a surge of delight in his chest, which to some degree embarrassed him. He turned his face away.

   She went on, “In the matter of love, I ought to follow my heart. Even birds may not become mates if you put them together in a cage, not to speak of us human beings. So don’t talk about looking for another man again.”

   “All right.” He heaved a sigh of relief. “So you think I’m a better man?” he asked half-jokingly.

   “If only I didn’t love you so much,” she said. Two or three wrinkles appeared at the left corner of her mouth, revealing a shadow of sadness. (119)

6. This information brought a flood of tears from her. (185)

7. His chin kept shaking, his lips were quivering, and his complexion was dead pale. Beads of sweat appeared on his nose. (191)

8. No wonder people say marriage is the death of love. (215)

But on the other hand, there are also expressions that are relatively unpopular; they seem to come from sources like the 1951 edition of Robert James Dixson’s Essential Idioms in English for the Foreign Born:

1. “I used to be good at playing ducks and drakes,” Lin said. (46)

2. Manna was troubled by his new haircut, which made him look nondescript, saying he now seemed like “neither a drake nor a gander.” (61)

3. “If you’ve decided to divorce your wife, you must carry it out by hook or by crook.” (166)

And in some instances Ha Jin even attempts to revamp age-old English expressions:

1. But that should provide no grounds for divorce, because it was normal for a married couple to have a quarrel or even a fist fight once in a while. A good marriage was full of moments of cats and dogs. It was the uneventful marriage that was headed toward disaster. (124)

2. The visitors all congratulated the couple on having two sons. “You landed two birds with a single bullet,” one would say. And another, “What a lucky man!” (280)

Preserving the structure and signature words of stock phrases, replacing only some words with others, induces a comical, humorous, or ironic effect, which is, in most cases, the desired effect. For example, “Dog is man’s best friend,” can be accordingly changed to “Google is translator’s best friend.” Thus Ha Jin’s second attempt is far more successful than his first one, which is an awkward installation in the serious language employed to discuss marriage. It’s funny, but in the wrong way. Yet in other cases, it is hard to believe that Ha Jin was trying to reinvent expressions:

1. She can’t wait to drop me. (138)

2. Possibly the commissar could place her in a crash program for training doctors or in a college to earn a diploma. (137)

3. His fish pond is a money cow. (227)

The idiomatic terms are “dump me,” “crash course,” and “cash cow.” For Ha Jin to come up with the approximate, but “wrong” word is no surprise as he is a non-native speaker of English, and that is what non-native speakers are likely to do; but for the editor to overlook these errors is quite unbelievable. It either suggests a poor quality of editorial work or the incredible degree of leniency and tolerance publishers are willing to exhibit toward foreign writers but not translators of foreign works.

Given the variety of language exhibited so far, it might not be much of a surprise that there is in fact a great deal of modern-day, idiomatic vocabulary, the kind that you are most likely to hear on TV shows such as Blind Date, read in magazines like GQ, or hear on American campuses:

1. “Knock it off, man! We have a lady comrade here.” (35)
2. “My, how can you tell one from another?” she asked Lin, drinking a bottle of mineral water he had opened for her. (35)

3. “What? Girl, you’re crazy,” said Manna. (64)

4. He found her midriff a little plump, but he found her limbs so youthful that the sight of them made his heart skip a beat. (72)

5. “Look, the big suckers all have a sewed-up butthole.” (90)

6. Bensheng had gone berserk, threatening to retaliate if Lin divorced his sister. (101)

7. In a word, she was definitely one in a hundred. (109)

8. “Elder brother, this is a gorgeous place,” Liang Meng said sincerely. (110)

9. “I never thought the mountain looked so awesome,” Manna said to him. (117)

10. He hoped they could hit it off when they saw each other next time. (118)

11. “Lin, he made me feel like a moron. He really is a character.” (119)

12. Lin overheard his wife order the child, “Girl, don’t suck that cane while you’re working.” (127)

13. “Few men would give up their woman so willingly. Some would go berserk if such a thing happened to them.” (136)

14. “She was so accurate, man. Caught me right between the legs.” (157)

15. Geng Yang would not chip in for the melons, insisting that… the future bride and groom ought to give him a treat in advance. (167)

16. “You know, a date rape is rarely treated as a rape.” (186)

17. For the time being he would be satisfied if he could take her away without a hitch. (228)

18. That night he and Bensheng went to Second Donkey’s home and clinched a deal. (229)

19. “Why the hell did you mention that thug here, moron?” (245)

20. “So you had a different pecker?” She chuckled. (247)

21. Suddenly the tip of the chalk sprang away from his fingers and he said, “Whoops!” (262)

22. Sometimes she felt depressed when he wasn’t home, and she couldn’t help imagining how to give him a piece of her mind. (267)

23. “It’s common for a woman in labor to go berserk.” (274)

As I have mentioned before, there is no real equivalence between languages, so there is no possibility of reproducing in English the exact effect or significance of a word in Chinese. Discrepancies are inevitable. So when the chalk springs away from Lin’s fingers (262), the translator has a choice of making him say, for example, either aiya or “whoops.” Each would leave a different impression on the reader. For readers of English, aiya is a foreign utterance and its pronunciation is ambiguous, to the extent that it might even temporarily slow down the process of reading; but it will also make the reader aware that Chinese people do not say “whoops” when things slip from their hands. Here Ha Jin chooses “whoops,” and as translators call it, “domestication.” Domestication allows for a smoother read because it employs language already in use in the target language. The danger of domestication is that the word used to “domesticate” may, below the surface, carry associations, implications, or suggestions that can barely apply, or do not apply at all, to the word in the source language. In this case, I do not see “whoops” as being as problematic as some of the others. It is a neutral word. It does not immediately denote a certain type of person, of a certain age, in a certain era; whereas phrases like “bottled mineral water,” “Girl, you’re crazy,” “She was so accurate, man” and “date rape” do. The term “date rape” wasn’t even coined until the 1990s, and it was a concept first developed in the U.S. Drinking “bottled mineral water” only became fashionable in the ’90s as well. Before that, most people just drank tap water. The image of Manna Wu, a Chinese nurse, being “date-raped” and drinking “bottled mineral water” in Communist China, in the mid-1960s, on the verge of the Cultural Revolution, simply cannot exist. Having the same nurse exclaim “Girl, you’re crazy” is extremely awkward in the same sense. If she were Mamma Wu and had one hand on her hip, one index finger pointed at the person she was speaking to, and was swaying her neck in perfect rhythm with her words, it might not be all that weird. Similarly, it is also a mismatch to have the middle-aged Chinese wife of the director of a military hospital say the words: “She was so accurate, man.” Even though at the time she was expressing her surprise and disbelief at being hit by a bicycle right in the buttocks, the situation still does not call for her to assume the identity of a young, male, cool-talking American. The problem is not that there is disagreement between the original Chinese and the translated English, because that will always be present. The problem is that when the disagreement is stretched to the point of conflict, the voice in the narrative and dialogue is displaced from its context and it becomes unrecognizable.

The case of Shuyu is perhaps the most consistent example of conflict resulting from inapt translation. Shuyu is the es-
tranged wife of Doctor Lin Kong, the protagonist in Waiting. She is the stereotypical Chinese peasant woman: uneducated, unassuming, simple-minded, caring, hard-working, obedient. Adding to this picture of submissiveness, she has bound feet. (A very unusual detail, given that the story is set long after the abolition of the practice and the fact that few women from peasant and working classes had bound feet since they were expected to work in the fields.) These are the various ways in which she talks:

1. A dialogue between Lin and Shuyu:
   “You must need this,” she said and handed him the money.
   “Where did you get that?”
   “Saved.”
   “How much have you saved?”
   “A hundred yuan last year, but spent most of it when Father died.”
   “How much do you have here?”
   “Thirty.”
   “Keep it. It’s yours, Shuyu.”
   “You don’t need?”
   “Keep it. It’s your money.” (92)

2. A dialogue between the judge and Shuyu:
   “What’s the true reason that your husband wants a divorce?”
   “Don’t have a clue.”
   “Is there a third party involved?”
   “What that mean?” (121)

3. A conversation between Shuyu and her daughter, Hua:
   “Don’t have a clue.”
   “Is there a third party involved?”
   “What that mean?” (121)

4. In response to the nurses’ request to see her feet: “No, I won’t do that. You know, take off your shoes and socks is like open your pants.” (206)

5. Telling the nurses about foot binding: “Of course it hurt. Don’t tell me about pain. I started to bind my feet when I was seven. Heaving, for two years I’d weep in pain every night. In the summer my toes swelled up, filled with pus, and the flesh rotted, but I dared not loosen the binding. My mother’d whack me with a big bamboo slate if she found me doing that. Whenever I ate fish, the pus in my heels dripped out. There’s the saying goes. ‘Every pair of lotus feet come from a bucket of tears.’” (206)

6. Telling the nurses the reason for her foot binding: “Mother said it’s my second chance to marry good, ’cause my face ugly. You know, men are crazy about lotus feet in those days. The smaller your feet are, the better looking you are to them.” (206)

7. When Lin asks her to say in court that she wants him to find a job for their daughter: “Why you want me to do that? I never wanted anything from you.” (213)

8. A conversation between Lin and Shuyu:
   “When did Second Donkey come?”
   “Last week. He was here with his son Handong to buy a used truck. He’s so rich now he wants to start a hauling business.”
   “How’s Bensheng doing?”
   “He’s fine, Second Donkey says he envies you a lot.”
   “Your brother envies me?”
   “Yes. Bensheng said, ‘How come all good things happen to Lin? Why am I never that lucky? He has the best education, a high rank, and three kids.’”
   “Why did he say that? Didn’t he make a lot of money from his grocery store?”
   “Don’t know. Second Donkey said Bensheng burst into tears when he heard you got two sons. Never so jealous.” (305–6)

9. Shuyu asks her daughter to tell Manna that Lin will be staying at their place: “Go call the hospital and let that woman know your dad is too drunk to go back tonight.” (308)

Ha Jin cannot seem to decide on what kind of English to let Shuyu speak in.

Maybe she should speak in the broken English of Chinese immigrants, which is usually characterized by the absence of subjects, articles, direct or indirect objects, be verbs, auxiliary verbs, or verb conjugations: “What that mean?” “You don’t need?” “I say put the cane away.” “You know, take off your shoes and socks is like open your pants.” “Why you want me to do that?” “How come all good things happen to Lin?” “Never so jealous.”

Or maybe she should speak southern English, or Black English, which would suggest her working-class, grass-roots sensibilities: “Girl, don’t suck that cane while you’re working.” “I didn’t. I just kept it here,” Hua said.

“Give me it!” (127)

Or maybe she should speak affected, emphatic, socialite English when she’s emotional: “Don’t tell me about pain.” “My heavens, for two years I’d weep in pain every night.” “I dared not loosen the binding.”
Or maybe she should speak the kind of English ESL students exhibit, the kind which shows the acknowledgment of English grammar, but in a confused way: “Give me it.” “There’s the saying goes.”

And when Shuyu is tired of putting on all these different figures of speech, maybe she should switch back to plain, polite, middle-class English: “He’s fine. Second Donkey says he envies you a lot.”

And when she’s tired of being the submissive, forsaken wife, maybe she can turn into the angry ex-wife and refer to Manna, Lin’s new wife, as “that woman.”

But maybe she shouldn’t do any of the above because she is none of the above.

Shuyu’s personality does not change throughout the story. We are even told she is happy that Manna bore Lin two sons, because to her it means the continuation of the Kong family line, which, traditionally, is all that matters. She is like a glass of water: flat and tasteless, but soothing to a parched throat. To have her undergo these various transformations in speech adds conflicting and confusing dimensions to her character. The strain of the writer to “translate” Chinese peasant speech into English is apparent. But I do not think that borrowing the different “dialects” from an array of social groups is going to make it any clearer that she is an uneducated Chinese peasant woman. These dialects already have specific connotations which fit her poorly. It is also very controversial to present her in broken, ungrammatical English since she is not necessarily speaking broken, ungrammatical Chinese. It is peasant talk, but it is not ungrammatical. In fact, if it were compared to any type of speech, it would be comparable to Black English, or Ebonics. It is a type of speech that, like Ebonics, has its own consistent “grammar rules.” But you can’t have Shuyu speaking in Black English because it is such a specific characterization of a certain group of people that it calls too much attention to its origins. I would suggest instead to have her use consistent, simple sentence patterns with elementary vocabulary. And for the same reasons, I would advise against having a Chinese judge say, “I reckon there must be lots of them around him in the army.” (121); or having Shuyu’s brother say, while drunk, “Tell me, how come Handong doesn’t de-deserve you? Where can you find a better lad, a real scholar?” (236). The fact that the judge is fat, has a greasy face, a sneering attitude, and nearly dozes off doesn’t make him a southerner any more than Shuyu’s brother being drunk makes him Irish. If it did, it would be discriminatory – toward the original character as well as the people from whom the language is borrowed.

So translators: beware of readily available dialects in the target language. They usually end up displacing the characters more than defining them.

The Chinese translation of Waiting further supports the idea that the English novel can be seen as a translation. The translator of the Chinese version, Jin Liang, at times departs from the English text to such a great extent that the only way he could get away with it is to proclaim that the English is a poor and fragmented rendering of the “actual” Chinese. What is fairly simple, straightforward and somewhat awkward in the English becomes, in the Chinese, smooth, detailed descriptions, or lively exchanges loaded with regional dialect, sometimes to the extent that footnotes are required. Consider these two examples:

1. Then the curtain went up. Two actors in golden official robes and black caps with long trembling ears stepped onto the stage, sidling around in their white-soled platform shoes. (50)

大幕拉開了，兩個演員身穿金色的清朝官服，頭戴黑邊頂戴花翎官帽，腳蹬白底朝天靴，側著身子，邁著台步登場。 (56)

2. “Of course it hurt. Don’t tell me about pain. I started to bind my feet when I was seven. My heavens, for two years I’d weep in pain every night. In the summer my toes swelled up, filled with pus, and the flesh rotted, but I dared not loosen the binding...” (206)

「敢情，哪兒還有不疼的？你們知道那疼是啥滋味兒？我七歲上就開始裹腳。天老爺子，整整兩年，每天晚上都疼的哭啊。到了伏天²，腳指頭腫了，包裹布裡都是膿，肉也一塊塊兒一塊兒的爛了。就那樣也不敢鬆鬆裹腳的布頭。……。」 (237)

In the first example, the Chinese descriptions of the “black caps with long trembling ears” and “white-soled platform shoes” are much more elaborate and idiomatic. In fact, it is quite obvious that Jin Liang, the translator, sidesteps Ha Jin’s English and proceeds directly to the “customary” Chinese terminology for the Chinese opera costumes. He would have never arrived at what he has now in Chinese if he had translated from the English. He also adds in the Chinese that the officials are wearing “Qing Dynasty” official robes. As a Chinese who is moderately familiar with the Chinese opera, I nevertheless found it difficult to picture what Ha Jin had in mind. It wasn’t until I read the translation that the image of the actors and their attire became clear. The Chinese in the second example is rich with
colloquialism that is absent from the English; it evens requires a footnote. And likewise, if the translator had followed the English, he would have never been able to bestow Shuyu with such expressiveness.

The success of the Chinese translation suggests the blur between original and translation, source and target. Normally, the translation is always seen as the handicapped version of the original, the one that cries of “loss”; and the source language is always seen as the first language in which the literature is produced. But here, it is the English that cries of loss and the English that is the “target.” English is Ha Jin’s “target” language, his “second” language, the one in which he attempts to write. And the disadvantage of his attempt shows.

The disadvantage of writing in a non-native language is that although you may have looked up each word in a dictionary, have every sentence grammatically correct, each expression or idiom or proverb nailed down to its aspostrophes and prepositions, your writing still won’t sound “natural,” and you will be ignorant of the fact that it doesn’t. Why? Because you did not grow up with the language, you did not grow with it. The nuances escape you. You do not see their complications. As Bakhtin superbly puts in his “Discourse in the Novel”:

> All words have the “taste” of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word. (Rivkan 35)

It is hard enough for the native speaker to perceive the subtle layers of meaning behind every word, not to mention the non-native speaker, who usually approaches the language as a subject to learn in class, already stripped of its contexts. Translators, in this regard, also belong with those who share this disadvantage because they usually work in at least one non-native language, whether it be in the source language or the target language. Writers who succeed in recreating on the page “a concrete heteroglot conception of the world” (Rivkan 35) rise as masters. Ha Jin, writing in a non-native language, and translating in his head from Chinese into English, exhibits the qualities of an apprentice rather than a master. With beefy policemen sporting trunccheons (141), scholarly officials being rather avuncular (152), carbuncular-faced husbands (186), and people going berserk one too many times (101, 136, 274), his work resembles more an oddly patched quilt than a skillfully woven tapestry.

But, to my great amazement and disbelief, what I have identified in Ha Jin’s writing as a poor attempt to translate Chinese into English, scores of other critics have hailed as a masterly command of language, comparable to Chekhov, Gogol, and even Henry James (Garner). I suppose Waiting is exempt from the scrutiny and criticism a translation would have received since it is not a translation per se. I seriously doubt its ability to garner any sort of literary translation award if it were indeed one. As one of my fellow translation workshops remarked (and yes, translators have workshops too): “People tend to give the writer the benefit of the doubt.” The writer is experimenting with style; the translator is experiencing technical problems. If Ha Jin’s writing can be acclaimed by well-established novelists like Francine Prose, and upheld by prestigious literary awards such as the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner award, I don’t see why critics and readers aren’t scrambling to embrace translations of other languages into English – they incorporate the lauded qualities of Waiting, but display them in much better writing. But obviously, this is not happening. I’d hate to wonder, like the sole relentless critic I found on Waiting, “What in god’s name is going on in the incestuous charnel pits of the East Coast literary stew-pot? Have they no taste – outside of noisy television ladies, sugar red-bean paste pies, and salted jellyfish?” (Wang). Yet the celebrity of Waiting and the obscurity of literary translations promptly point out the arbitrary nature of the literary world.

It seems that as long as you manage to get into the right MFA writing programs, the right workshops, meet the right instructors, the doors to publication and publicity will rightly open. You don’t even have to knock. Works are judged less by literary quality than literary ideology, as in the example of Ha Jin. Ha Jin decided to turn his back on Communist China in response to the Tiananmen Square Massacre, he decided to write about life under Communist China, he decided to take on the challenge of expressing his Chinese sentiments in English, the language of the country that took him in. He becomes the perfect candidate to exemplify the generosity and sensibility of the American literary establishment, so much so that his editors overlook the errors in his book and the judges seek to portray the awkwardness in it as the mark of ingenuity. And on the other end of the spectrum, there is translation, a stigmatized form of writing, readily dismissed as inferior, banished beyond the realms of creative writing. Of course, arguments can be made to either justify its existence as creative writing or prove its ineligibility. But if we were to
use Ha Jin’s case as an example, the results of the arguments would reveal more irony than clarity: His work was more a translation of Chinese into English than anything else, but it was far from competent; yet, in the end, he still won one of the most prominent creative writing awards for it.

Ha Jin is writing in a non-native language; his efforts are commendable and his future promising. But he should be awarded on the grounds of result, not effort. The National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner award are not Best Effort Awards. Everyone has a great story, including Ha Jin. However, it is the language in which the story is told that distinguishes the masterpiece from the mediocre. I do not doubt the sincerity in Ha Jin’s storytelling, but sincerity is not enough; I do not believe that he painstakingly lobbied his work, but I can see why others would. Yet it is a discredit to an award and its recipient when the outcome suggests that the networking is more important than the writing – it is already bad enough that most of the time it is.

Works Cited


Mike Farman, Reviewer

Red Pine, a.k.a. Bill Porter, after giving us “The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain,” “The Zen Works of Stonehouse,” and “The Diamond Sutra,” has now completed his most ambitious project: the complete anthology of Tang and Song poetry known as 千家詩 Qian Jia Shi, or “Poems of a Thousand Masters.” “Ambitious” is probably the wrong word to use in connection with this translator who, in his earlier days, spent six years in a Buddhist monastery and lived a hermit’s life in Taiwan for the next fourteen years, saturating himself in Chinese literature. He has since applied himself to translation with the single-mindedness of a Buddhist devotee. Who would be better qualified to undertake these translations in a spirit of humility and simplicity?

The “thousand” in the Chinese title of the anthology is an exaggeration by the original compiler; it can be interpreted as simply meaning “many.” In fact there are only about a hundred masters included, and the total number of poems is 224. Red Pine wisely dropped the “thousand” from the title. Nevertheless, this collection includes regulated verses and quatrains of the most revered scholar-poets from one of the most artistically creative periods in Chinese history.

Red Pine presents these poems in the order that they appear in the original anthology. They consist of 絕句 jueju (quatrain with five or seven characters to a line) and 律詩 lushi (regulated verse having eight lines with five or seven characters to a line). The four sections of the book are arranged to accommodate these categories. Open a page at random and you will see the Chinese text on the left, nicely printed and oriented in the traditional vertical plane, with the translator’s text on the right. Below these there is a paragraph of scholastic comment and biographical detail. The presentation is admirably clear and the comments are always apposite and helpful.

But what of the translations? I feel that Red Pine’s approach can best be illustrated with an example. Below, I compare his version of a well-known Tu Fu poem with the same poem translated by Kenneth Rexroth. These are preceded by the original text and my rough literal word-for-word translation:

Red Pine:

旅夜書懷  travel | night | write | think of/conceive
細草微風岸 thin | grass | gentle/small | wind | shore
危檣獨夜舟 high/precarious | mast | alone | night | boat
星垂平野闊 stars | hang | open fields | wide/vast
月湧大江流 moon | rises/wells up | great | river | flowing
名豈文章著 name/fame | how? | literature | write
官因老病休 official | because | old and sick | retire
飄飄何所似 float/flutter | what? | so/therefore | similar/seem
天地一沙鷗 heaven & earth | one | sand/hoarse | gull

Kenneth Rexroth:

NIGHT THOUGHTS WHILE TRAVELLING

A light breeze rustles the reeds
Along the river banks. The
Mast of my lonely boat soars
Into the night. Stars blossom
Over the vast desert of
Waters. Moonlight flows on the
Surging river. My poems have
Made me famous but I grow
Old, ill and tired, blown hither
And yon; I am like a gull
Lost between heaven and earth.
Rexroth somehow makes eleven lines out of Tu Fu’s eight and introduces some curious enjambments. He has felt the need to hype up the images in the original; consequently the mast “soars into the night” (leaving his boat without a sail?), stars “blossom,” he is “tired” rather than “retired,” he’s “blown hither and yon” like some Victorian poet, and the seagull is “lost.” He also ignores the parallelism in the second couplet and the rhetorical questions in lines five and seven.

Red Pine, in contrast, follows the original closely, finds simple words, matching the proportions of the original. The lack of punctuation may appear strange, particularly in the penultimate line, but not as strange as Rexroth’s enjambments. Incidentally, both ignore the sand, or by association, “hoarse.” I personally like the idea of Tu Fu comparing his poetry to a hoarse seagull’s cry.

This comparison is not intended to denigrate Rexroth but to show how Red Pine has managed to avoid many of the pitfalls that even poets of great reputation fall into when faced with Chinese classical poetry. By comparison, his simplicity, faithfulness to the original, and lack of poet’s ego are a welcome breath of fresh air. It seems to me that in his objectivity he is much truer both to the Imagist tradition and to the Chinese than Rexroth. But there is a downside; he has chosen to follow the outward form of the originals so closely that the lines seem to emerge in English as a series of rather matter-of-fact statements, around which the fugitive ghost of poetry hovers but does not settle. For example:

_Climbing Hsieh T’iao’s North Tower in Hsuancheng in Autumn_

LI PAI

This river town looks like a painting
mountains at dusk against a clear sky
two rivers frame an unblemished mirror
twin bridges form a rainbow
kitchen smoke and winter oranges
fall colors and leafless paulownias
who thinks of climbing North Tower
of facing the wind and remembering Hsieh T’iao

But my reservations have more to do with the inevitable losses in translation than with Red Pine’s treatment of what remains. The regulated verses and quatrains belong to such a rich and enduring literary tradition that every character has resonances beyond the immediate surface meaning. The pictorial nature of each character, the frequent allusions and echoes of other poets, the parallelisms, the rhymes and the mandatory pattern of tones, all contribute to the impact of the poem. The typical Tang verse is therefore a lot more complex than a word-for-word translation will reveal. But what is the translator to do? He is forced to choose words in English that have little ability to carry these overtones. He can write notes, but this does nothing for the poetry. In order not to lose the baby with the bathwater, he must try to introduce some magic ingredient to compensate. In Red Pine’s case, I believe that ingredient to be a sincerity and directness stemming from the Buddhist tradition, which goes a long way to make up for what is lost. The end result, however, is a certain bareness and reading his work turns out to be rather like listening to a Bach fugue stripped of its counterpoint. So although these are fine translations, for me they still leave an ache for something more complete.

Those of us who love Chinese classical poetry and persist in translating it, knowing that we are all ultimately doomed to failure, can only echo Marvell:

My love is of a birth as rare
As ’tis for object strange and high;
It was begotten by Despair
Upon Impossibility.

Christopher Lapke, Reviewer

The fiction writer Mo Yan (original name Guan Moye), born and raised in a peasant family in rural Shandong Province, has emerged, over a twenty-year period of steadily producing blockbuster novels and dozens of short stories, as a literary giant of the post-Mao period in China and a perennial contender for the Nobel Prize in literature. Having first achieved international acclaim for his classic work Red Sorghum, adapted for the screen as Zhang Yimou’s breakout film of the same title, Mo Yan developed a reputation as a writer of “seeking roots” (xun gen) literature – a term attributed to Mo, Han Shaogong, Wang Anyi, and a few other of his contemporaries – literature from the 1980s that sought to re-establish the intellectual’s traditional position of privilege as the purveyor of China’s image in writing by peeling back the layers of ideology-laden rhetoric and excavating China’s most fundamental cultural traits. The style of his writing could perhaps be crystallized by the term “uncanny purity.” The subject matter is unequivocally brutal and bizarre but the style of writing is hypnotically simple and staid. Although the characters in his fiction can in a certain sense be said to be heroic, the heroism they exhibit is a far cry from the Maoist hagiography that had dominated Chinese narrative (from mainland China) for close to half a century. The unusual sensuality that characterizes his depictions of nature and bleeds into the unconventional lifestyles of his characters, the reconceptualization of peasant reality for a new audience both in China and abroad, and the relentless pursuit of the essence of national culture residing within the interior reaches of rural China has successfully slammed shut the door on any prayer that establishment party intellectuals harbored to revive the idealism of Maoist literary tenets.

This latest translation of a Mo Yan epic by veteran translator Howard Goldblatt represents the most recent incarnation into English of the Mo Yan style – a vernacular described by many as “magic realism” or “magical realism,” a mixture of the bizarre and commonplace in the manner of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Goldblatt, the preeminent translator of modern Chinese fiction with scores of translations to his record, is not someone who has come to Mo Yan by accident. Mo Yan is clearly one of his favorite writers, a writer to whom he has devoted a great deal of his energy in the last fifteen years. Goldblatt’s own Chinese training as well as his literary predilections and personal leanings are ideally suited to Mo Yan’s inimitable style. Goldblatt is highly skilled in Chinese and widely read in world literature of all stripes, but he is himself a person of the senses, a liver of life with working class origins and solid training in traditional and modern Chinese literature who possesses impeccable linguistic skills. Such training, experience, and interests are crucial in order to have at one’s disposal the range of lexical facility and flexibility necessary to do justice to Mo Yan’s idiosyncratic prose. Goldblatt’s style can be at once elegant and erudite while at the same time visceral and almost grotesque. Big Breasts and Wide Hips probably posed as much of a challenge to him as any Chinese work, since through it Mo Yan has worked to perfect his interesting hybrid of matter-of-fact expression combined with some of the most vivid and unimaginable events to meet the page in twentieth century Chinese fiction.

Big Breasts and Wide Hips tells the story of Shangguan Jintong (whose given name could be translated something like “golden boy”), a sometimes endearing, sometimes infuriating scion of the Shangguan clan, a male child born as a twin with sister Yunü after seven sisters before them but, as with the previous seven, born illegitimately, as his ostensible real father was infertile. While not exactly structured in a chronological fashion, the overall structure of the work follows a general historical trajectory through the twentieth century. Yet this structure is complicated by the fact that it was radically edited and slammed down for translation at the suggestion of the translator. The action of the novel basically follows the life of the antihero protagonist Jintong with an added chapter on “origins” explaining how his parents originally were married. Jintong is a malformed or, more precisely, not fully formed male growing up (or at least getting older) in a world more rough and dangerous than most of us – except perhaps holocaust survivors, refugees from ethnic cleansing or great disaster, and veterans of wars – can fully identify. His life parallels the historical development of modern China from the Boxer Rebellion (before his birth), through the War of Resistance, the land reform movement and Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and finally the post-Mao period of economic reforms and market economy.

The story of Jintong reveals crucial information about the author’s style of writing as well as the manner in which he depicts China. The expansiveness of the narrative, which in
its essence is a work of monumental proportions and technique by a writer of great significance, also exemplifies a serious problem in the Chinese literary world today, that of the lack of editorial discipline among writers. What China lacks in the literary world is any sense of a healthy relationship with editors who can assist authors in trimming and shaping, and by extension improving, their literary expression. There are two very damaging attitudes pervasive among Chinese writers: one, as to the size of a work, the bigger (or longer) the better; two, suggestions that one’s work needs editing tend to be taken as an insult and veiled hint that one’s work is not worthy of merit. As a result, many works that could truly be great end up being only very good. Masterpieces are often flawed masterpieces. It is for this reason that Goldblatt’s interactions with the author, which could easily have been construed as intrusive, have been essential to producing a book that, at 500+ pages in translation, is already taxing the attention span of all but the most dedicated reader. That Goldblatt convinced Mo Yan to reorganize the work and dramatically shorten it saved the novel from oblivion, in my opinion. The author likely shares this opinion, as editions subsequent to the baggy monster originally published in 1995 have been dramatically curtailed. Even so, the book is still a tome, but it is a tome one now can read with great pleasure.

The other important broad trait of the novel is its critical attitude toward Chinese culture. Jintong, as much a figure of pathos as anything else, is in a way a tool of Mo Yan’s cultural critique. Jintong is a mammophile, unremittingly obsessed with women’s breasts and with the milk they produce that sustains his life. Jintong grows up to be a man-child never fully weaned from the human nipple (although for many pages in the central portions of the work he drags along with him a goat from which he receives his suckle). What on the surface might seem to be a ridiculous cathexis to the mother figure is in fact an allegory for the dependencies that traditional Chinese culture fosters, for it has been a trend dating back to Lu Xun to use such inflammatory images as cannibalism and parasitic behavior to illustrate the ethical bankruptcy of Chinese culture – considered feudalistic – in the face of the modern cultural prowess of the West, characterized by individualism over relational subjectivity, equality over rigid hierarchy, and science over superstition. Mo Yan is not so much an innovator in this regard as he is the latest in a line of writers from the May Fourth through 1930s writers such as Wu Zuxiang, and including writers from Taiwan such as Bai Xianyong, Wang Wenxing, Wang Zhenhe, and Li Ang, to subject China to such a rigorous critique in his writing. In other words, Big Breasts could be read as allegory and satire as much as it could be read as a hyper-realistic or magical realist account of peasant atrocity through the wars and revolutions that were encountered in the countryside throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, the satire in the novel centers on the critique of the Chinese notion of “filiation,” the duty that one perpetuate the family line by producing sons. This sense of duty is so absolute that Jintong’s mother (referred to throughout as Mother), faced with the incontrovertible fact that her husband is sterile, is forced to have sexual relations with other men in order to produce an heir, is forced in other words to transgress on one taboo in order to avoid another. As the birth of daughters mounts, however, Mother’s in-laws put increasingly greater pressure on her. Only the birth of the son brings her the sense of fulfillment that in traditional China befits a deserving mother. Ironically, this predominantly female family of Mother and eight sisters in which Jintong grows up is a direct result of the compulsion to beget sons. Of course, the father could have taken concubines, but since he is sterile that would not have done much good either. The ultimate irony is that in his entire life Jintong never really develops any sort of mature relationship with a woman and, most important for the purposes of the cultural logic of filiality, never himself produces a son. That Jintong never grows up, is never properly weaned, then, is emblematic of the modern intellectual critique in China that traditional Chinese culture is incapable of successfully producing fully individuated subjects.

Much also has been made of Mo Yan’s “experimental” use of language. There is no question that his mixture of a soothing, idyllic style with violent and incredible imagery is distinctive. Big Breasts is narrated primarily with a mixture of first person (in the voice of Jintong) and a roving third person point of view which can insinuate itself into the perspective of other characters from time to time. In addition, many very strange things, such as the appearance of supernatural characters (bird people, fox people, animals that talk, and so on) do occur in his works, including this one. Nevertheless, I would suggest that his writing is not as radical as many have argued, which is not to say it is not creative and unique. While the structure of the narrative could be described at points as style indirect libre, it is far less challenging than that of James Joyce or even William Faulkner. This may in part be due to the times: as readers, we have grown accustomed to such flourishes some eighty years after their initial heyday. It is important to bear in mind that Mo Yan himself views his own style as a form of realism. The frequent comparisons to magical realism notwithstanding, Mo Yan’s work does bear some resemblances to an author as creative, dynamic, and prolific as Faulkner. Over the years of reading Mo Yan’s dissec-
tions of the quite real peasant community that is Northern Gaomi Township, in Shandong, one is at times reminded of the fictional yet no less palpable rural stage of Faulkner: Yoknapatawpha County, supposedly somewhere in the bayou country of Mississippi. Mo Yan etches the visual scheme of rivers and sorghum fields not with a loving nostalgia of a lost childhood home but with a dispassionate, near-serene tone. The geography that he lays out for the reader makes it unnecessary for one to visit the location. It is both unique, mapped in exquisite detail, and yet typifying (perhaps archetypal) of all peasant existence in China. There is some similarity with the world that Faulkner portrays, for within the cultural ticks and peculiarities of local life in the south lie the trials and betrayals that this titan of American literature would suggest epitomize the human condition writ large. Faulkner’s exploration of interior consciousness, mirrored in his alchemizing of the English sentence into something rivaled only by Joyce, is different from the intellectual peregrinations and syntactic structures of Mo Yan. This might be because, unlike Modernists such as Faulkner who see the human condition as a prison of interior consciousness, Mo Yan sees the imprisonment of his characters as just the reverse—a banishment from individual subjectivity and full-blown self-reflection.

I therefore believe there is something more visibly radical in the structure of Faulkner’s prose when compared to that of Mo Yan. Another, perhaps seemingly controversial, affinity is that between Mo Yan and Dickens. Admittedly, Mo Yan does not write of the urban landscape in the way Dickens has established London as the hallmark of his discursive geography. There is still an interesting parallel with the way that in Big Breasts the dizzying cast of characters is at least made manageable by the fact that each of the major characters returns at a subsequent stage of the novel (some repeatedly) and is dealt with in one fashion or another. As Mo Yan’s characters make their reentry into Big Breasts and their re-acquaintance with the protagonist, one is reminded of such characters as Uriah Heep or Mr. Micawber in David Copperfield, who may at any time lurk behind the next corner with proclamations that their luck is now finally about to improve. The recycling of the characters is an absolute imperative if this demanding text is not to totally slip into an unfathomable chaos. It provides a sort of scaffolding for the reader and a gauge for the development of the story. What Mo Yan’s works contain, in contrast to Dickens, is the utter violence and viciousness that was part and parcel of Chinese history for most of the twentieth century. This subject matter may be somewhat repellent to the Western reader; however, it is necessary that it is written this way and important that we acknowledge it. This was the reality of China in modern times. Would anyone suggest we would not read of the Jewish holocaust in Europe because it was too violent or that it exceeds in gruesomeness the limits of our imagination or our stomachs? It may seem unimaginable, but it did occur. The Chinese historical experience from the Taiping Rebellion through the Cultural Revolution was as violent as that in any nation, and it demands depiction in literature. The remarkable quality of this Chinese author is the way, much as in Jerzy Kosinski’s The Painted Bird, he chooses as his protagonists characters in their youth who do not have the benefit of perspective, characters for whom the call to describe things in a sober and placid manner, as if this were the way things should be because they have never experienced anything else, seems perfectly natural. This is why the utterly bare and occasionally somnolent tone of the narrative, at odds with the spectacular circumstances that it depicts, is the trademark of Mo Yan the writer.
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Cold Literature
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Gao Xingjian
translated by Gilbert C.F. Fong and Mabel Lee

Gao Xingjian is the first Chinese Nobel laureate in Literature. The Swedish Academy summarized his achievements as follows: “An oeuvre of universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity, which has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama.”

The Chess Master
A Cheng
translated by William Jenner

The protagonist of The Chess Master undergoes a gradual transformation from “chess fool” to “chess master” - from an alienated young man obsessed with the material needs of life to a spiritually enlightened transmitter of the Chinese tradition. A Cheng has created in The Chess Master a radically new fiction that is both thoroughly modern and deeply imbued with the Chinese tradition.
Contributors

John Balcom is the head of the Chinese program in the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. His Indigenous Writers of Taiwan: An Anthology of Stories, Essays and Poems was recently published by Columbia University Press.

Steve Bradbury is Associate Professor of English at National Central University. His poems, translations, and essays have appeared in boundary 2, Jacket, Raritan, and elsewhere. He is the translator of Fusion Kitsch: Poems from the Chinese of Hsia Yü (Zephyr Press, 2001) and Poems from the Prison Diary of Ho Chi Minh (Tinfish Press, 2003).

Michael Farman is an Englishman who has lived in Texas for the past fourteen years, where he works as an electronics engineer in scientific ballooning under contract to NASA. His translations of Chinese classical poetry have appeared frequently in literary and translation magazines and in the Renditions anthology A Silver Treasury of Chinese Lyric. His chapbook Clouds and Rain, Lyrics of Love and Desire from China’s Golden Ages was published in 2003. He is currently working on a collection of translations from the Book of Odes.

Lo Fu (Luo Fu) is the pen name of Mo Luofu, who was born in Hengyang, Hunan. He started writing poetry in the 1940s. He is the cofounder of the Epoch Poetry Journal in Taiwan, and served as its editor for more than a decade. He has been a controversial figure, involved in many literary debates in the 1960s and 1970s, and his poetry has been immensely influential in Taiwan and China. A translation of his book-length poem Driftwood will be published this year. He is also a calligrapher of note.

Hyung-Jin Lee was born in South Korea. He received his MA in Comparative Literature from the State University of New York, Binghamton, and his PhD in Comparative Literature from the Pennsylvania State University in 2003. He taught Korean and Asian literatures at Rice University in Houston from 2003 to 2005 and is now assistant professor of translation studies in the English department at Sookmyung Women’s University, Seoul, Korea. His forthcoming work Theater of Kang-Baek Lee contains original translations of one of Korea’s most “literary” playwrights, and his translation of Tae-Sok Oh’s play Bellflower will appear in the Anthology of Contemporary Korean Theater (Richard Nichols, ed.; publication pending). In 2004, he received a translation grant from the Korea Literature Translation Institute.

Christopher Lupke received his PhD in Chinese literature from Cornell University and is currently Assistant Professor of Chinese at Washington State University. He has published on several writers from Taiwan, including Wang Wenxing and Bai Xianyong, and is finishing a translation of Ye Shitao’s monumental history of Chinese literature in Taiwan.

N. G. D. Malmqvist is Professor Emeritus of Sinology at Stockholm University. He is a prolific translator of Chinese literature (classical, modern, and contemporary) and a member of the Swedish Academy.

Simon Patton has an amateur’s love for poetry and language. He teaches Chinese and translation part-time at the University of Queensland (Australia) for a living. He also co-edits the China domain of Poetry International Web (www.poetryinternational.org) with the mainland Chinese poet Yu Jian.

Nancy Tsai holds an MFA in literary translation from the University of Iowa and is currently studying translation and interpretation at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California. Her working languages are Chinese and English. She is fascinated by the theoretical and practical complexities of translation and interpretation, as well as how little the general public understands, or is even aware of, the profession and the study.

Geoffrey R. Waters is a senior vice president at Union Bank of California in Los Angeles. He earned a BA degree in History and Chinese from Vanderbilt University. After military service as a field artillery officer, he earned an MBA in Finance and a PhD in Classical Chinese from Indiana University. His translations of Chinese poetry have appeared in a variety of literary magazines and anthologies. He is the author of Three Elegies of Ch’u: an Introduction to the Traditional Interpretation of the Ch’u T’zu (Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985) and translator from Chinese of Broken Willow: the Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji (forthcoming from the State University Press of New York) and from Tibetan of White Crane: The Love Songs of the Sixth Dalai Lama (forthcoming from White Pine Press). He lives in Glendale, California.
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Dean Dennis Kratz
School of Arts & Humanities
The University of Texas at Dallas
P.O. Box 830688 J045
Richardson, TX 75083-0688
972-883-2984
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