

# Found in Translation: Poetry and words

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Translation, especially between English and Chinese is an arduous and difficult process due to a number of inherent challenges, especially for poetry. It can be argued that aspects of art are always lost through translation, and as a result translation itself is a pointless activity. Others argue that the difficulty of and variety within translation is an asset to the creative process.

## Challenges of Translation

The core characteristics of English and Chinese as two non-cognate languages are very different. For example, the unique tone system that *baihua* Chinese - Modern Standard Chinese - adopts does not have any exact equivalent in English (Tietjens, 1992). These tones were often used in classical Chinese poetry in a set pattern that structured the poem itself. For example, a *tsueh* is a four line poem with certain tonal rules which dictate where to have *ping* (low or flat tones) or *tseh* (rising, sinking or abrupt tones). When using an English analogy, *iamb*s, in translation, it has been found that clashes between stresses occur, causing very clumsy sounds and disrupting the reading process (Tietjens, 1992).

The complexity of Chinese poems is what, in the opinion of Tietjens, many non-Chinese readers underestimate. She claims that the simplicity of classical Chinese poems are the result of a complexity far beyond anything the West has ever produced which, as a result, means that Chinese poems are filled with plays on words, double meanings, and classical and cultural allusions that are easily misunderstood by translators. For example, below is the last line of the original and the translated versions of the poem 'On and On' from 'The Nineteen Old Poems of the Han':

弃捐勿复道，努力加餐饭。

Abandoned, I will say no more, but pluck up strength and eat my fill.

This English translation, by Arthur Waley, evokes a sense of abandonment and a dismissive breaking of ties at the end of the poem. However, a deeper meaning of the last line is demonstrated by Xu Yuanzhong (1988):

Alas! Of me you're quit,  
I hope you will keep fit.

This ending presents a very different atmosphere of benevolence and devotion. Jing Xie (2014) believes that this discrepancy in translation is primarily caused by Waley's failure to recognize the importance of the virtue of obedience in women in Chinese culture at the time.

The very purpose of Chinese poetry, according to Tang Yanfang (2014) has been viewed as a means to express human emotion (*qing*) through the depiction of a scene (*jing*). *Qing* and *jing*

are two basic elements of *yi jing*, a concept that is pursued by the poet and the reader as the most important mode of poetic expression and understanding.

*Yi jing* has two prominent characteristics: pictorial concreteness, where feelings are embedded in an artistically beautiful and rich scene, and purposeful ambiguity, where enough ‘gaps’ in clarity are left that the reader can fill them to re-create the poetic world that the poet puts in place. Translating this concept into English has proven troublesome, mainly because of the hypotactic nature of English and the paratactic nature of Chinese. English translators lean more towards verbosity, because English has more of a requirement for discursiveness (including subjects, tenses, pronouns and so on) to make it clear. Tang Yanfang (2014) argues that Chinese language, which is characteristically concise and imprecise, leaves a large amount of information to be placed in context, hence translation into English, a language which is inconcise and precise, means that one loses the ‘holes and gaps’ which can serve as aesthetic spaces.

By way of example, consider the literal English translation of Zhang Ji’s poem ‘*Mooring at Night by the Maple Bridge*’ is as follows:

Moon fall crow caw frost fill sky  
River maple fishing lamp face sadness sleep  
Gu Su city outside Cold Mountain Temple  
Night middle bell sound reach visitor boat

And now a translation by Witter Bynner (1929):

While I watch the moon go down, a crow caws through the frost,  
Under the shadows of maple-trees a fisherman moves with this torch,  
And I hear, from beyond Su-chou, from the temple on Cold Mountain,  
Ringing for me, here in my boat, the midnight bell.<sup>5</sup>

The literal translation is quite clearly nonsensical in English, however there is ambiguity in who or what is sad, who or what is facing whom, which leaves room for the objects and the world they belong in to adopt and encapsulate the emotions of the scene. Bynner tells a story rather than presenting a scene without comments, which is what the poet originally intended. The use of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me’ draws attention to the implied author, intervening between the poem and the reader and going against the aesthetic of *yi jing* (Tang, 2014).

In Chinese poetry, repetition of nouns, quantifiers, verbs and adjectives can be used to introduce a new implied meaning to a word, without loss of its original meaning. This is usually used in classical Chinese poetry to express and emphasize deeper human feelings. A challenge is presented in translation, as repetition in English usually highlights the word but the word remains one-dimensional (Xie, 2014).

To provide an example, here is Li Qingzhao’s poem ‘*Sheng sheng man*’ followed by two translations:

寻寻觅觅, 冷冷清清, 凄凄惨惨戚戚

Search. Search. Seek. Seek.  
Cold. Cold. Clear. Clear.  
Sorrow. Sorrow. Pain. Pain.

I've a sense of something missing I must seek.  
Everything about me looks dismal and bleak.  
Nothing that gives me pleasure I can find.

The first translation retains the same repetitive structure of the original poem, nevertheless the lack of a subject makes the repeated verbs 'search' and 'seek' imperatives (Xie, 2014), which evokes a sense of urgency and vigour, contrary to the poet's intention. The repetition of words such as 'pain' and 'sorrow' give no extra meaning to them, resulting in an unnatural sounding presentation of the words with no clearer insights into the context behind them.

The second translation conveys a lot more about the meaning of the original poem, however, the lack of repetition results in the loss of emphasis on the emotions evoked by the words in the original poem, as well as a loss of the original beauty of the poem (Xie, 2014).

Then there is the challenge in translation of 'semantic zero'. This refers to a semantic meaning that exists in one culture, but not another. For example the concept of '*yinyang*' (referring to the unity of opposites in everything) does not exist so precisely in the English language. The word '*dao*' is rich with a broad, profound meaning in Chinese, though the English translation of 'way' does not do this justice (Xie, 2014).

## **Translation Methods**

There are clearly many disagreements about the 'correct' way to approach translating poetry, resulting in many different translation methods and strategies designed to overcome translation challenges and focus on different aspects of the original poem. The most general way to categorize translation methods is with respect to the naturalization vs. foreignization model. Naturalization is a method within which the translator moves the reader towards the writer, in other words, makes the translation conform to the culture being translated to. Foreignization refers to moving the writer towards the reader, in other words, retaining characteristics of the source text that may not conform to the conventions or aesthetic preferences of the culture being translated to (Xie, 2014).

The argument of spiritual resemblance vs. formal resemblance is a manifestation of this model. Spiritual resemblance refers to the translated text having the same meaning or spirit as the source, whereas formal resemblance refers to the translated text having the same form or structure as the source (Li, 2010). In practice, spiritual resemblance in translation tends to lean towards naturalization, whereas formal resemblance in translation tends to feature more foreignization.

'Sinolisation', a naturalization technique of translating English metrical poetry into Chinese, involves translating the poem into traditional poetic forms such as *siyan*, *wuyan*, *qiyan* or *ciqu*. Advocates of this method argue that traditional forms of poetry are the most popular and

attractive to Chinese people, and more catchy and readable, as there are some translators who stress that poems should be 'chantable' and easily memorized for the sake of circulation (Li, 2010).

At the same time, many argue that sinolisation fundamentally ignores the duty of translators to introduce foreign poetic culture into China. For instance, Jiang and Xu (1996) argue, "How could Chinese-only readers become familiar with features of Shakespeare's sonnet or Mayakovski's staircase verse?" and mention that the development of new Chinese poetic culture based on foreign influences will be postponed (Li, 2010). Some argue that sinolisation will encourage the readers' mental association with Chinese traditional subjects or concepts, which may be confusing or even comical. Another key argument is that traditional Chinese poetic forms are too condensed to reflect the colloquial, complex nature of the English language (Li, 2010).

Sinolisation was one of the first methods of translating English metrical poetry into Chinese, however, when the literary language changed from classical Chinese to *baihua* Chinese, less poetic rules or versification rules applied. Hence, liberal translation (translating metrical poetry into prose, free verse or semi-free verse) became popular (Li, 2010).

The most famous adoptions of liberal translations into prose are the translations of Shakespeare's plays by Zhu Shenghao and Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales' by Fang Chong. Advocates of this method, such as Weng Xianling argue that if translators do not free themselves then the translations would be too rigid to keep the flavour of the original, an argument inclined towards spiritual resemblance over formal resemblance. In general, however, this is the least practised method, as many believe that despite encouraging semantic accuracy (spiritual resemblance), this method misses the soul of poetry. It is argued that the reader would not be able to tell from the prosaic style that the original was a poem, though it is agreed by some that this method is well suited for epics or poetic dramas (Li, 2010).

As a result of the construed shortcomings of this method, translators often prefer liberal translation into free verse or semi-free verse. In comparison with metrical poetry, free verse and semi-free verse are more flexible forms of poetry, with less regular rhythm patterns. With semi-free verse, there are opportunities for rhyming or parallel structures to emerge within the translation, but free verse has no such characteristic. These methods satisfy the needs of advocates for the translation to remain a poem without losing too much semantic meaning. However, translators in favour of formal resemblance translation argue that Chinese readers of translated works cannot gain much knowledge about the formal characteristics of English metrical poetry (Li, 2010). Tietjens (1992) argues that translating Chinese poetry into English free verse also sacrifices the "magic of form," as the core of the complexity and value of Chinese poetry is in its form.

As a result, those in favour of formal resemblance may use 'poetic form transplantation'. The first manifestation of this technique involves replacing English syllables with Chinese characters. This means that the translator can imitate the rhyme of the original and the reader can infer that the original poem was one of regulate verse (Li, 2010). However, this may prove difficult and even clumsy, as one Chinese character can have robust, independent meaning as opposed to a

single English syllable, meaning that extra Chinese characters may have to be added into the translation, making the sentences seem excessively verbose and lengthy.

The second manifestation of this technique involves replacing English *foot* with Chinese *dun*. A *foot* in English metrical poetry is a basic rhythmical structure, based on a sequence of syllable types (such as long or short, stressed or unstressed), and a *dun* is a semantic and phonological unit usually consisting of 2 or 3 characters. Substituting *dun* for *foot* can facilitate translators in keeping the original rhyming and rhythm structure; however the resulting translation is considered not as neat in appearance and sound as the original poem (Li, 2010).

A combination of these two manifestations was first devised by the translator Huang Gaoxin in the 1980s. He argues that the characters provide neatness in appearance, and the *dun* (as well as reproducing the original rhyming structure) provide neatness in sound, hence faithfulness to the original metrical form is greater. For example, a poem in English iambic pentameter would have five *dun* and 10 characters per line in the translation. This method still attracts criticism because English is a ‘stress language’ and Chinese is a ‘tone language’: the Chinese *dun* is not an effective equivalent to the English foot, and therefore the lines appear long-winded in Chinese when they would not do so in English. For example, a line in iambic pentameter does not give the same impression of length as a 10 character, five *dun* line in Chinese, because of the lack of tones in English (Li, 2010).

### Advantages of variety

It is clear that there is a huge variety of translation methods, each with a different approach, outcome and set of advantages and disadvantages. So, it is appropriate now to pose the question: which translation methods are better? Is there a ‘perfect’ translation method?

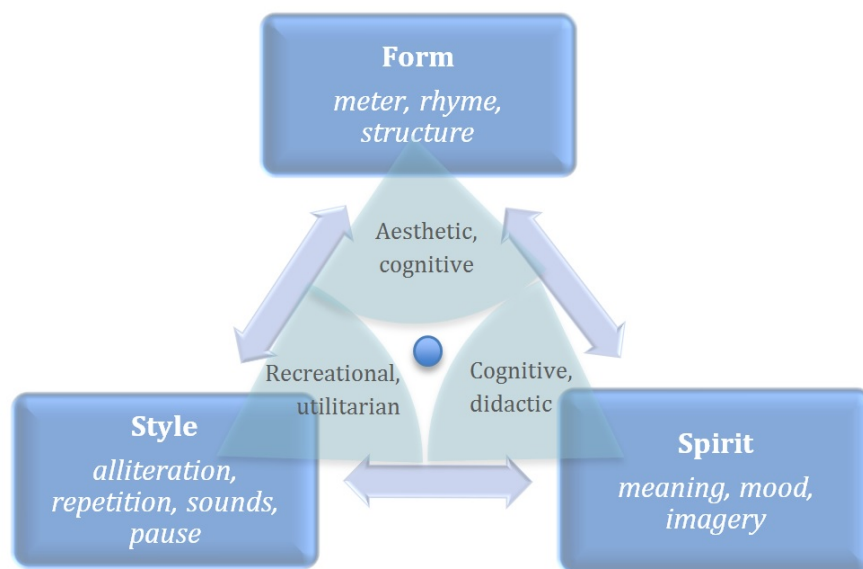


Figure 1: Characteristics of a poem and poetic functions.

I have added the characteristic ‘style’ to encompass the use of literary devices such as alliteration, repetition and pause, distinguishable from ‘form’ and ‘spirit’. The ‘dot’ represents a translation, and its positioning in the middle of the triangle means that the translation resembles each characteristic of the original poem equally. As the dot moves nearer to an individual characteristic, it means that the translation focuses more on resemblance of that certain characteristic of the original.

Li Chongyue (2010) discusses how poetry has five major functions:

- Aesthetic: poetry that is meant to arouse a sense of beauty through the use of meter, rhetoric etc.
- Recreational: poetry as a source of enjoyment to the reader.
- Didactic: poetry with a moralising role.
- Cognitive: poetry that helps readers acquire knowledge.
- Utilitarian: practical poetry, for example, health care tips being presented in the form of poetry to aid memorization.

The advantage of having different translation methods is that translators are free to choose which method best suits the function of the original poem, or their intended function of the translation.

For example, poetic form transplantation may help Chinese readers gain an understanding of English metrical verse; therefore the translation would serve a cognitive function (Li, 2010).

In Figure 1, the pale blue shaded areas near the corners of the triangle (which represent characteristics of the original poem) represent the areas where the translation (the ‘dot’) would focus more on resembling these respective characteristics. On the shaded areas are written a few examples of functions of the original poem for which the translations ‘within’ the shaded areas would be suited. The diagram therefore represents the vast flexibility that a translator has in terms of their motives for translation and their preferences or priorities in terms of resembling certain characteristics of the original.

Additionally, certain translation methods may better suit certain poetic styles. For example, spiritual resemblance may suit dramas or epic poetry; formal resemblance may suit metrical poetry or some forms of classical Chinese poetry; and stylistic resemblance may suit contemporary poetry.

The fact that aesthetic values vary between humans and between cultures is an important contribution to the formation of different translation styles. Conversely, the coexistence of different translation styles can also influence different aesthetic interests and make poetical aesthetic interests more varied within countries. Diversity entails richness and leads to a more accommodating attitude towards different ways of translating (Li, 2010).

In Li’s opinion, the process of translation means that there are always losses with respect to something within the original, but the coexistence of multiple forms of translations would give readers diverse opportunities to discover different aspects of the original, which can fuse into a possibly more accurate experience on the whole. This supports the argument that there is no such thing as a ‘perfect translation’, which is supported by Tietjens (1992): “it’s a laborious process, but can one [...] find a better?”

## **Why should translation exist?**

If 'something is always lost' in translation, what then is the purpose of translating if the reader would never experience the entire truth of the original?

Read (1961), argues that poems are always "translated in the process of reading". The words are "carried across the reader's senses, arriving at a destination which is not that from which it set out." The reader's interpretations are often far from the poet's original meaning, regardless of the written language, so foreign language is just an additional distortion of the original meaning.

Wang (2015), reports from personal experience that writing in one's mother tongue inhibits one from further exploration and investigation of the language. However, when writing in another language one keeps their eyes open for new meanings and expressions. This could also apply to the process of translation, making translators more aware and curious about the languages in consideration. As Wang says, "a second language gives us new eyes and new tools."

Li (2010) notes that translation is a gateway into experiencing and learning about other culture's forms of poetry, which can thereafter shape the future development of poetry in the target country.

Xie (2014), notes the words of Xu (1997): "There are one billion people who use the English language and another billion who wield the Chinese, so the translation from one language into the other is the most important intercultural communication in the world of today."

## **Found in translation**

The characteristics of Chinese and English language are very different, and their poetic cultures are equally as different, presenting many challenges and easily resulting in inaccuracies in translation.

As a result, there are many different translation methods, each with their individual merits and shortcomings. Translators tend to favour different methods based on what aspects of the original poem they prioritise, especially whether it be form or spirit.

The inherent variety of approaches to translation can be an advantage, because many argue that the idea of a 'perfect translation' is not something that can be realised. Instead, the variety of translation methods allow readers to explore different aspects of the original poem and possibly, as a result, gain a more accurate and broad understanding of the original poem. The variety also allows translators to prioritise the function of the original poem, or their intended function of the translated poem.

Above all translation, despite its difficulties and complications, represents an important form of cross-cultural communication that can widen acceptance of translation methods and widen readers' repertoire of poetic styles and cultures, possibly shaping the future development of poetry internationally.

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