Interpreting Poems, Interpreting Worlds – on Poetry Translation

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Introduction

Of all the outstanding poets in the history of China, Li Bai (701-762) is perhaps the greatest and most famous. His name appears in W*orld's Who's Who*. His poems have been translated into several languages.

However, as the physical being and environment of a poet are often different from those of his/her translators, one cannot but wonder if the translation can really be embodied with the same messages as that the poet tries to transmit to his/her fellow countrymen.

This puzzle motivates me to rethink about various issues related to language, mind and culture, especially those concerning the disparity of physical beings and environments between the poet and the translator (cf. Balmer 2006: 185; Levý 2011: 89), as well as its impacts upon the poet's creation of the poem and the translator's interpretation.

My investigation into six English translations of Li Bai's poem *Yue Xia Du Zhuo* ("Drinking Alone in the Moonlight") by native English speakers reveals that the messages and poetic images in these translations are quite different from what we Chinese readers perceive while reading his poem.

The six Western translators whose translations (Lü & Xü 1988: 122-128) are investigated are W. J. B. Fletcher (1871?-1933?), Herbert A. Giles (1845-1935), W. A. P. Martin (1827-1916), Arthur Waley (1889-1966), Witter Bynner (1881-1968) and Amy Lowell (1874-1925).

Li Bai's *Yue Xia Du Zhuo* and my interpretation and translation

A literal translation of Li Bai's *Yue Xia Du Zhuo* (*Drinking Alone in the Moonlight*) in the prose style could be something like this:

Holding a pot of rice wine I am drinking alone without any companion. I have to raise my cup to invite the moon to join me. Plus my shadow in the moonlight, there seem to be three people now: myself, my shadow and the moon. But the moon doesn't understand the joy of drinking while my shadow is accompanying me aimlessly. In such a hopeless situation I have to treat the moon and my shadow as my companions, because the best moment of life should be enjoyed at the right time. When I am

singing, the moon paces up and down. When I am dancing, my shadow scatters here and there. When I am sombre, I share my happiness with them. When I am drunk, we part each other. So I would like to form an eternal friendship with them and expect to meet them high above in the Milky Way.

Based on this interpretation, a tentative translation of the poem can be shown below:

Drinking Alone in the Moonlight

Beside shrubs of flowers and a pot of wine,
Drinking alone I find no intimate friend around.
Raising my cup to invite the bright moon,
I toast to my shadow and we three hang around.
The moon is nonetheless incomprehensive of drinking,
While vacantly my shadow accompanies me to and fro.
Together with the moon and my shadow for the time being,
I enjoy the best moment in life at the right time though.
I am singing - the moon pacing up and down in the tranquil night;
I am dancing - my shadow getting scattered in the silvery moonlight.
Awaken - we share our joyful and merry time;
Drunken - we part each other singing all along.
Forever we form eternal friendship in our life;
In heaven we expect meeting again before long.

This is how I, a native Chinese speaker, interpret Li Bai's *Drinking Alone in the Moonlight* in a poetic form. Surely, it can be translated differently by other translators. But the general understanding and interpretation should be of little difference. However, when it is seen in the Westerners' eyes, the perception can be very disparate.

Westerners' interpretations and translations

In Fletcher's translation, the poet is side-lined in the poem while the moon and the shadow are placed in the spotlight ("The moon then drinks without a pause. /The shadow does what I begin."). The moment that the three rejoice is "until the spring come in" instead of enjoying their life at the right time. The promise that the three make to form an eternal friendship is misinterpreted as "Of loveless outing this the pact, / Which we all swear to keep for aye."

In Giles's translation, Li Bai is described as having a noisy party in the way ordinary Europeans will enjoy at the weekend ("And my shadow betrays/ we're a party of three!/ Thou' the moon cannot swallow/ her share of the grog,/ And my shadow must follow/ wherever I jog," and "At our next merry meeting"). In fact, what Li Bai really wants to present to the reader is an immortal figure who regards himself as someone who has become immersed in the union of the sky (the moon), the earth (shadow) and the supernatural human (the immortal figure).

In comparison, although Martin presents an exquisite poem with well-arranged rhythms and romantic imaginations, his interpretation shows some misunderstanding of the context of Li Bai's poem, where the central figure is the poet, who is inspired by the enlightened experience from the communion between the human, the heaven and the earth and thus absorbs the essence of immortality, rather than the translator's interpretation of the poet's expectation of the feminine moon to be "a merry company" when he sings a "festival song".

In Waley's translation, the poet, the moon, which is sometimes a male ("he") and sometimes a female ("the moon flickers her beams"), and the shadow, embodied as a slave, who "creeps about at my side", are having a drinking "feast", where "three shared the fun" as good friends. When the party is over, "each goes his way". Yet the poet expects that they may "meet at last on the Cloudy River of the sky". Waley's interpretation blurs the leading role that the poet plays in the scenario. The three characters in the poem are placed in an equal position and the focus is pivoted on their friendship. As a result, the sublime that Li Bai attempts to achieve fails to be present in the translation.

Similarly, Bynner's translation interprets the scenario of Li Bai's poem as a drinking party of the poet, the moon and the shadow, where the moon is unable to drink and the shadow follows his steps passively ("my shadow tagged me vacantly"). However, the interpretation shows great disparity from what Li Bai endeavours to depict. For instance, in Li Bai's poem, the poet sings while "the moon paces up and down". Yet in Bynner's translation, the moon becomes rather proactive ("The moon encouraged me") and the shadow tumbles when the poet sings. This is rather different from what the original poem intends to express: the shadow is merely scattered on the ground to decorate the stage for the poet to dance.

In the translation offered by Lowell, the moon is interpreted as "cannot drink" rather than fails to comprehend the meaning of drinking. Moreover, the poet in the

translation exclaims, “Oh, be joyful!” This is a misinterpretation of Li Bai, who has no intention to place the poet in melancholy. Instead of wandering without intention, the poet tries to invite the moon and the shadow to meet him in heaven and live immortally.

From the above comparison, we may discover that Western translators perceive the Chinese poem rather differently from native Chinese readers. Except for a few lines where mistranslations occurred because of the translator’s misunderstanding of the original text, almost all the misinterpretations are caused by the translators’ lack of what Levý calls “conscious understanding” of Chinese culture and the semiotic significance embedded in Li Bai’s poem (2011: 32). In other words, the disparity between Western translators’ interpretations and native Chinese readers’ comprehension of Li Bai’s poem demands an explanation that can demonstrate the fundamental difference of the cognitive world perceived by a native Chinese and a European.

Allow me to give a brief introduction to Li Bi’s time before I go further into some issues related to philosophy, cultural linguistics, and translation studies.

Li Bai, his time and his poem

Li Bai lived in an era, when Emperor Li Longji (685-762) of the Tang Dynasty neglected the governance of the state and corrupted officials rode roughshod over the Chinese people.

Li Bai (701-762) was an ambitious man, intending to become an able official and contribute all his life to the development of China. Around 740 he was called to Chang’an (now Xi’an) to serve as a court official in the capital. However, he soon lost the favour of the emperor and was driven out of the court. He became disillusioned by the corrupt political system, which resulted in a deteriorating economy. Under such a circumstance, he became addicted to alcohol to release the depression.

In his short poem *Drinking Alone in the Moonlight.*, Li Bai used the romantic approach to express his feeling of isolation and loneliness by describing a scenario of drinking alone in a quiet moonlit garden, where he found no one could truly understand his disappointment and disillusionment of the political reality of his time. Then he imagined that he, the moon, and his shadow became soul mates to share the moment, drinking, singing and dancing together to dispel the loneliness and

depression. At the end of the poem, he showed his expectation to form an eternal relationship with the moon and the shadow.

It is clear from the above interpretation that the poet did not hold a noisy party full of fun in the garden at all. The leading character is the poet, while the moon and his shadow are merely his soul mates for the time being. By this bold personification approach, the disillusionment and disappointment that an ambitious poet experienced are fully exposed to us readers. As the moon, the night and the shadow are regarded as the *yin* (as against the *yang*) objects in ancient Chinese philosophy (cf. Fung 1948: 138), their appearance in the poem gives a negative tone instead of a scenario of merry-making revelry, which is contrary to the background situation of the poem.

Another factor to take into account is Li Bai's spiritual belief. Although in China's history of religion, Buddhism has dominated for centuries, a quite large number of Chinese people believe in Daoism (also spelt as "Taoism"), the native religion of China. Li Bai was one of them. When Li Bai left his hometown in Sichuan, he started to travel and visit Daoist priests and made friends with them. From their preaches, especially their fundamental belief that everything in the universe derives from "Dao", i.e., the Way of Ultimate Reality (Lao Tzu 1988: 15, 84), Li Bai came to realize the insignificance of one's life and official career in contrast to the eternity of the universe.

After he lost the favour from the Emperor, Li Bai became indulged in escapism and alcohol. He became a fervent believer of Daoism, dreaming of escaping from the real world and making himself a recluse in the high mountains (Yuan 1983; Tan River Recluse 1989). He was obsessed with pursuing an immortal life. He drank a lot and was known as a great drinker and poet. He got inspirations from the virtual world he imagined while drinking, which contributed to a number of the best poems Li Bai had ever written, including *Drinking Alone in the Moonlight*, which expresses his feeling of loneliness in the real world and his imagination of friendship in the virtual world.

If a translator has hardly any knowledge about the background of Li Bai, his time and his poem or about Li Bai's spiritual life, his/her translation will no doubt fail to embody the spiritual value that is contained in Li Bai's poems. The six translations under discussion more or less misleadingly interpreted the poem owing to the translators' lack of knowledge about Li Bai's time and his spiritual belief. That is why their translations of Li Bai's poem seem to be presentations of distorted images of the poetic world that Li Bai attempted to create in the form of poetry.

Disparity of way of thinking and the impact on its embodiment in poetry

In Western culture, the way of thinking is embodied in explicit expression and logic reasoning; whereas the Chinese tend to express their thinking in a more inexplicit way and the connection between one meaning and another is realized by association in a context rather than by conjunctions as marks to show the logic relationship between them (Shen 1990, 1991, 2000). Such an implicit way of expressing thinking by native Chinese speakers has to be attributed to the fundamental impact of Chinese philosophy on their mental mechanism.

Fung Yu-lan (1948) summarizes the fundamental difference between Chinese and Western cultures. He points out that although "the craving for something beyond the present actual world is one of the innate desires of mankind", the Chinese people, however, "satisfy their craving for what is beyond the present actual world" (ibid: 4-5). They also have the "super-moral values" expressed and appreciated in philosophy, and these super-moral values are experienced while they live according to philosophy (ibid).

Fung further posits that Chinese philosophy values highly "the elevation of mind", striving for "what is beyond the present actual world, and for the values that are higher than the moral ones" (ibid: 5). Such values can be regarded as the crystallized and idealized ones that one pursues as one's utmost goal. To express one's craving for such "super-moral values", ancient Chinese philosophers preferred suggestiveness to articulateness to express their outlook of the world (ibid: 12). Impacted by Chinese philosophy, the way of expression in all traditional Chinese art, including classical poetry, also adopts the approach of suggestiveness as its ideal realization of thinking.

Fung continues,

In poetry, what the poet intends to communicate is often not what is directly said in the poetry, but what is not said in it. According to Chinese literary tradition, in good poetry "the number of words is limited, but the ideas it suggests are limitless." So an intelligent reader of poetry reads what is outside the poem; and a good reader of books reads "what is between the lines." Such is the ideal of Chinese art, and this ideal is reflected in the way in which Chinese philosophers have expressed themselves. (ibid: 12)

In other words, a good reader of classical Chinese poetry should be able to perceive

the implication and overtones of what a poet suggests in a poem (cf. Kennedy & Gioia 1998: 77). This demands that the translator should fully understand the messages contained in the poem by seeing through the poet's world view, which is to be interpreted as closely as possible not only to the surface meaning of his/her poem but to the underlying relationship between the physical environment where the poet lives and the spiritual outlook that he/she has towards it.

In the 1920s, Mao Dun, a Chinese novelist and translator, advanced that a good translation should show spiritual resemblance of the original work (cf. also Liu 1996: iv). Later in 1951, in his preface to the retranslation of Honoré de Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*, the famous Chinese translator Fu Lei advocated that translation, like painting, ought to give priority to spiritual resemblance over apparent likeness of the source text (Fu 1951/1993: 68). This approach evoked great responses from translators and translation scholars in China in the 1950s and 1960s and has impacted on the development of Chinese translation theory ever since. Similar remarks have also been made by other Chinese scholars and translators (cf. Liu 1993: 1-15).

With a focus on spiritual resemblance in translation, one can easily understand the great disparity between European translators' interpretation and native Chinese readers' comprehension of *Drinking Alone in the Moonlight*. In appearance, all the translations seem to have good forms of poetry and fluent English. However, their interpretations of Li Bai's messages, especially those of "what is outside the poem" and "what is between the lines" (Fung 1948: 12), seem to be quite problematic. That has to be attributed to their failure to interpret the suggestiveness and overtones of Li Bai's poem, which are deeply implied in Li Bai's mentality when he created it, namely, something implicitly associated with Li Bai's Daoist outlook of the physical world where he lived, which had disappointed Li Bai and let him down.

Interpretation of the cultural content

Classical Chinese poems are characteristic of conciseness. A lot of socio-cultural information is condensed into and embedded in the context. Very often, a word presented in a classical Chinese poem does not mean what it really implies. This demands translators of Chinese poetry to know what the poet really intends to express before rendering the messages in the poem. If they fail to do so, the connotations implied in the poem may get lost. Consequently, any negligence of such information will cause misinterpretation or distortion of the poem.

In investigating the English translations of *Drinking Alone in the Moonlight*, I have found that the six translators' interpretations of the poem show some weakness in comprehension.

For instance, none of the translators really understood the fourth character (*jie* [解]: "understand", "comprehend") in "月既不解飲" (Line 5). All of them translated it as "(the moon) cannot (drink)" [Giles, Bynner, and Lowell], "(the moon) declines (the cup)" [Martin] or "(the moon) is no (drinker)" [Waley]. The most serious misinterpretation occurred in Fletcher's translation "[t]he moon then drinks without a pause". These interpretations obviously deviated from what Li Bai actually tried to express, namely, "the moon doesn't understand the joy of drinking", as we native Chinese tend to comprehend.

Also, quite a few translators [Martin, Waley and Lowell] assumed that the last word in this poem, *yunhan* [雲漢], which means "the Milky Way" or "the high sky", had something to do with "cloud", because they assumed that the meaning of the first character of the word *yunhan* is "*yun* [雲]" (i.e., "cloud"), which does mean "cloud" if it is an independent word in the normal Chinese text. However, here deeply embedded in this character is a classical allusion, which refers to the heaven or the remote Milky Way. As some of the translators did not know the background of this allusion, their translations mistook the Milky Way as the cloud or something to do with the cloud.

Another problem is some translator's lack of careful consideration of the socio-cultural background of this poem. Thus cultural misunderstanding leads to poor interpretations of the poem. In Fletcher's translation, he used "antics" to describe the shadow's movement, while Brynner used "tumble" and Martin "fleet" and "my flying feet" for its motion. This kind of misinterpreting makes the slow and gentle movement of the poet and his shadow look like an acrobatic or sports performance. Similarly, "gaily carouse" [Giles], "a merry company" [Martin] and "revelry" and "carousal" [Obata] are just out of tune with the true connotations of the poem.

Shen Xiao-long, a Chinese cultural linguist, claims that the Chinese people tend to view language from an ontological perspective (Shen 1990: 37-39, 1991: 1, 453, 2000: 46-48). Such a view can be traced back to the ancient time of China, when the ancestors of the Chinese people took a dialectical view of the interconnection, interaction and inter-transformation between things and phenomena in the world, which became their way of understanding and experiencing the world (Shen 1990: 42-46, 1991: 2, 2000: 59). Moreover, they regarded humans as an integral part of the

world and the universe (Shen 1991: 4). In other words, the physical world impacts on human beings while the latter also actively interact with the former.

This outlook is reflected in the linguistic form of the Chinese language, which employs association as the means to express the Chinese people's understanding and comprehension of the world (Shen 2000: 76; cf. also Shen 1995: 208-211), often a direct perception of what they have observed (Shen 1990: 46-47, 2000: 76). In comparison, Europeans prefer explicit concepts and make sense of them by reasoning and logic (Shen 2000: 76). Thus, there is the disparity in linguistic expression: the explicit way prevailing in European cultures vs. the implicit mode of speech and writing in Chinese culture.

Literature, on the other hand, is regarded not something merely for leisure in China; instead, it is seen as one of the means that humans interact and impact on the world around them. Wilbur says, "[p]oetry does not merely speak to the analytical parts of our minds but to the wholeness of our humanity" (1966, quoted in Kennedy & Gioia 1998: 89). In ancient Chinese works, poetry was regarded as the vehicle for the expression of one's ambition and ideal (Shen 1991: 346). In extreme cases, a poet could be sentenced to death or put into jail simply because he had written a poem that had offended the royal court. From this perspective, it is not difficult to understand why Li Bai's *Drinking Alone in the Moonlight* can not be perceived as a poem about drinking only; instead, it should be analyzed as a poem that reveals Li Bai's disillusionment of the political system of his time and his hopeless and helpless situation that he lived in.

In Western literatures, poetry is seen as a vehicle that expresses the poet's feeling about the people, things and phenomena around him or her. Wilbur points out, "[a] good poem invites us to become fully alive and respond with our intuition, imagination, emotions, and intelligence" (1966, quoted in Kennedy & Gioia 1998: 89). The way to reflect the poet's feeling is often direct and explicit, which conforms to Western aesthetics.

However, the Chinese aesthetic tradition advocates the opposite tendency, that is, a style that promotes restraint, moderation, inexplicitness and elegance, which is the essence of Chinese rhetoric (Shen 1991: 287; cf. also Shen 1995: 25-28, 235). Such a tradition has been followed in Chinese culture and literature and art since ancient Chinese times. Li Bai's poetry, too, is no exception.

In language use, Chinese gives priority to the "spiritual" expression, based on the ontological outlook of the universe, to show the interconnection, interaction and inter-transformation between humans and the world. As a result, the Chinese language has formed its unique aesthetic and rhetoric value of language. The flow of speech or text is thus dominated by the way how the spirit/mind of the speaker or writer is verbalized, as against Western tradition which emphasizes the formal expression manipulated by logic (cf. Shen 1991: 465-468, 2000: 239; Eco 1997: 311, 315).

Because of this traditional philosophy of language, translators need to take into account the overall spiritual value of Li Bai's poem, especially that deeply implied with suggestive messages through connotations. In this sense, then, we may say that the process of interpreting Li Bai's poem is the one that demands the interpretation of Li Bai's spiritual world.

The "acculturation" issue: would you like a Big Mac or a McRice?

When commenting on the issue of the necessity of putting footnotes in the translation of poems, Lefevere (1997: 71) draws an analogy between acculturation and the acceptance of Chinese food, such as *chop suey*, in the West. He remarks,

Chinese poetry (and literature in general) have [*sic*] been translated often enough; there are enough Chinatowns and Amy Tans and Timothy Mos for an image of China to have established itself in the mind of the Western reader. (ibid)

There is no surprise to me that many Americans take the image of Chinatown in the United States as that of China and characters in Amy Tan's and Timothy Mo's novels as those of the Chinese people. No wonder in many Americans' minds today, as well as perceptions shown in illustrations by quite a few American illustrators, a Chinese guy's image is merely that of a man living in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) of China, where people wore pig tails, goat-like beards and straw hats, skinny and timid, and looked like opium addicts. However, I dare to claim that this is definitely not the true image of a Chinese. It is distorted.

Those Chinese depicted in Amy Tan's and Timothy Mo's novels are also typical overseas Chinese, who might have kept certain Chinese traditions that their Chinese ancestors tried to keep when they arrived in America during the Gold Rush Era or that were merely followed by a small population of the Chinese. The authentic one, namely, the main root of the Chinese culture, is buried so deep that it has hardly had a

chance to be shown to the West because not many diggers have ever tried to unearth its treasures. In other words, the image of the Chinese in Westerners' minds transmitted by Amy Tan, Timothy Mo and the like is merely partial and "genetically modified" to suit Westerners' taste, just like the takeaway Chinese foods popular in Western countries: they look like Chinese foods yet are not eaten in China by the Chinese people. The authentic Chinese foods are much richer, tastier, and more enjoyable. Those faked ones are digested only by Westerners.

A similar situation can be found in Chinese speaking countries or regions, where Western visitors would be surprised to find that McRice Burgers are sold together with soya bean milk in McDonalds there. Will Americans are happy, or proud to claim, "Hey, that's our McDonald products!" I doubt.

That is why I feel disappointed when I read the six English translations of Li Bai's poem *Drinking Alone in the Moonlight*. To me, Li Bai's world is distorted. What Western readers of the English translations receive is merely the "take-away" grade of translation. If they appreciate the premium quality taste of Li Bai, they have no choice but desert the distorted images of Li Bai's poem and his world, because the "rewritings" are simply failures caused by misunderstandings of Li Bai, his spiritual world and his time.

Lefevere remarks, when commenting on the efficiency and success of commercial translating and interpreting, that "the significant point is that the client could not really judge the quality of the performance, only its results; interpreters that helped strike a good deal were good interpreters, no matter how they might have distorted what had actually been said" (1998:15).

That is only partially true. When translating marketing materials, especially advertisements, translators do need lots of flexibility to manipulate the target text in order to exert the maximum marketing power to touch the consumers' hearts as well as their pockets (Ho 2004: 233). However, when translators translate canonical works, they ought to keep in mind that a good knowledge about the background of the works, the authors, and the world they live in decides the quality of the translation. House states that "language has two basic uses: to transmit ideas and to link human beings with one another" (2009: 12). A distorted rendition that fails to transmit ideas as they are, obviously, will only implant the wrong image of the work in the mental framework of the reader who does not know the source language. In other words, the link between the poet and the reader will be broken. Consequently, the intercultural

communication is doomed to fail.

It is important to remember that translators must take full responsibility for the quality of the rendition of a source text into a target one. Translation, including that of advertisements and poetry, does not allow distortion at all. A distorted image of a source text is a false image, indeed. It cannot be counted as having any true value. Tactically translators may have full swing to manipulate the target text to optimize the translation; yet strategically they have to be strained by the essentials of the world where the source text comes into being, because translators have no right to convey distorted message to readers of their translations.

Conclusion

The history of translation is almost as long as human civilization's. Interpreters also played vital roles "in both trade and in the affairs of state" at the early stage of human history (Sofer 1997: 20). In any well-educated family today, there are at least a few books that are translated from a foreign language or foreign languages. Needless to say, translation enriches various cultures in a civilized world. Even within the same culture, later generations enjoy the benefits of sharing their ancestors' wisdom and thought through translation from classics into modern works, as is the case of Chinese-speaking people today. In a sense, translation plays the same role as the gene carrier. It keeps the essence of a culture and reproduces a variety of individual entities through the process of "genetic engineering". A source text has thus survived, or in other words, is reborn with a continued life (or, "afterlife") through translation (Benjamin 1970: 71, 76).

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