

# Translating Chinese Poetry

## — My Aim and Scope

By John Turner (1909-1971)

*The late Jesuit priest, John Turner, came out of Dublin in 1935 and found the Chinese and their poetry. For the rest of his life, for some 35 years, he lived and worked mainly in Hong Kong and Canton and immersed himself in many labours of love—chief among which was translating Chinese poetry into poetic English. In Renditions No. 1 (Autumn 1973), a number of Fr. Turner's translations were introduced for the first time to the general public. On page 59 of this issue we publish his interpretation of Po Chü-i's oft-rendered narrative poem 長恨歌 —“The Song of Enduring Woe”.*

*Rev. John J. Deeney, S. J., a scholar in Comparative Literature and editor (with Dr. Kenneth K. B. Li) of a collection of Fr. Turner's translations, has quoted the Irish poet-translator to the effect that “no one could be really faithful to the strict formalism of most Chinese verse and do anything but attempt a counterpart in English verse.” The following article, compiled posthumously from Fr. Turner's correspondence and unpublished essays, will appear as an Introduction to the forthcoming volume. As Rev. Deeney puts it, “It elucidates Fr. Turner's translation policy and . . . provides a constant and fairly comprehensive view of the problems of translation in the context of Chinese literature.”*

*One does not have to agree with all of Fr. Turner's views and methods—which he expounded vigorously in the following piece—to recognize that he was not only a translator of Chinese poetry but a poet of genius among translators. The footnotes to this article are supplied by the editors of Renditions.*

[THESE] POEMS are a selection of verse translations done by the author since he commenced the study of Chinese in 1935. Being as close to the originals as perspicuity, the requirements of English idiom and convention, and the author's limitations would permit, they may serve as well for the use of beginners in Chinese and students of Chinese poetry as for the interest or amusement of readers of English verse. They are entirely independent in style and syntax, and almost entirely in interpretation, of the work of previous translators into English.

My sole qualifications for attempting the work are a fair knowledge of the English and Chinese tongues, a certain familiarity with Chinese ways, an unbounded admiration of Chinese poetry, a fondness for versifying, and—the only criterion of true translation which encourages me to publish them—that my Chinese friends like them, and take them as authentic.

The translator's aim has been to make close translations of representative and popular Chinese poems, which should reproduce their style and spirit, and thus bring to readers of English a glimpse of the beauty which I see in Chinese poetry—the traditional poetry of Old China.

I say “Old China” because this to me means “beauty and order”. Also because I want to show tacitly that the tradition of classical Chinese beauty is continuous

and alive; and because I personally loathe what is called "Modern China", the vulgarity, insincerity and imitativeness (of all that is shoddy in the West) that sprang from the 1919 May 4th Movement.

Chinese Literature is the high artistic peak of the most literary, the most artistic, the longest-established civilization that exists. It is a sister art to Chinese painting and Chinese ceramics, and therefore one would naturally expect to find in it a similar perfection of form and design, a like fluency and delicacy of expression, a like vivacity and force of idea and emotion, a like fusing of composite elements into a simplicity and workmanship which seem almost organic, a like mastery of craft, and a like concinnity and finish and exquisiteness of construction.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that these qualities are entirely absent from the general run of poetic translations from the Chinese. The best that can be said of the best of them is that they have a quaint and piquant, rather rugged charm, like imitations, in wood-cut or literary composition, of *Ye Olde English*.

### *True translation is poetic translation*

MY FIRST OBJECTIVE in making this book has been to show to people who do not know Chinese that the Chinese can write poetry and how they write it. But this book is not an academic treatise. It is a book of poems and my intention is to make the translation of a poem to read like a poem itself. Accordingly, I do not comply with the modern fashion of putting Chinese verse into line by line prose, or into unmeasured sprung rhythm, which is the same thing. Besides, I believe that poetry cannot really be translated into prose. The translation of a poem into prose, which is merely verbally accurate, is not itself a poem and remains a crib. It misses the point and soul and reason of a poem, its specific beauty.

The superiority of poetic translations over prose ones is borne out by English literary history. The good translations of poetry which have been made in English were made by poets; by Chaucer, Spenser, Jonson, Dryden, Pope, Shelley, Fitzgerald. (Shelley's translations from the Greek are much closer to the letter as well as to the spirit of their originals than those by Richard Jebb and Gilbert Murray.)

Chinese poetry tends strongly to be epigrammatic, and most short Chinese poems are Epigrams.<sup>1</sup> Now if an effective epigram is transformed into prose, it becomes inconsequential. For the point of epigrammatic and antithetical poetry (and Chinese poetry is both) is carried by its rhyme and rhythm. This is very clearly shown by taking any good epigram and de-rhyming it.

Balance and antithesis is of the essence of *all* Chinese art, and Chinese artistic unity is firmer than any other. Chinese poets always have observed the rules of Chinese rhetoric which are just slightly more streamlined than those of Greek rhetoric; and every Chinese poem has a point, firmly and tellingly driven home.

<sup>1</sup>The word is here used to denote the Chinese 絕句, sometimes translated as "quatrain". The O.E.D. has this definition of *Epigram*: "A short poem ending in a witty or ingenious turn of thought, to which the rest of the composition is intended to lead up." *The En-*

*cyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, 1965) says: "As a poetic form, the epigram generally takes the shape of a couplet or quatrain, but tone, which is usually either ironic or gnomic, defines it better than does verse form."

### Versification

IN AN ATTEMPT to preserve the singing or musical quality in Chinese, I regularly employ rhyme. For instance, the last four lines of "A Patriot's Dream" by Lu Yu (陸游) would be flat indeed without rhyme.

Deep in the night, I heard a gale	
Roaring, and rain lashing;	夜闌卧聽風吹雨，
And dreamed there rode horsemen in mail,	鐵馬冰河入夢來！
Through icy rivers splashing.	

It is unfair to Chinese poets, I believe, to render them into "Free Verse". Their rhyming and metrical systems are more purely wrought and exquisite than any other. And the bulk of their poetry has in fact been written for music.

But rhyme presents its own special problems too. For instance, one feels that Li Po's (李白) "Night Thoughts" has to be translated. But every time I looked at it, the Cockney rhyme of *now*, *low* hit me between the eyes. It is the most difficult poem I ever tried. It is so simple and natural that translating it is like trying to dye a rose-leaf.

In Chinese the unit of rhythm is not the foot, or stressed plus unstressed syllable, but the syllable. A common characteristic of Chinese and Gaelic poets is their predilection for seven-syllabled and five-syllabled quatrain forms, with an interlaced pattern of sound that makes for "Unity in Variety". It could be made clear to English readers by reference to Shakespeare's heptasyllabics (*The Turtle and the Dove*, and 'Orpheus with his lute made trees' [*Henry VIII*, III, i, 3], and songs in *The Tempest*). Pentasyllabics, on the other hand, are rare in English—and are very difficult to write—since they easily fall into a stark and terrible trochaic rhythm.

Then there are the tones. Translation of pitch and timbre (in the special sense of smoothness or non-smoothness of utterance) is a special feature of Chinese articulation. This variation, especially in timbre, is employed as a component of versification. The patterned interlacement of words of opposite pitch-and-timbre imparts to the poem a sort of poetical "fourth dimension", greatly increasing its power of expression and its concinnity, and making it approximate to music (in the strict sense of that word). Because of the importance of this musical dimension, sometimes lines have to be transposed for the sake of euphony.

For prosodic purposes, Chinese vocables are divided into two groups, of *smooth* (resounding, prolonged) syllables and *unsmooth* or *rough* (abrupt, vague, relatively harsh or jerky) syllables.<sup>2</sup> "Smooth" and "unsmooth" are called "even" and "oblique" by English writers on Chinese, translating the terms in a literal manner. The poets adopted a criss-cross alternation of "smooth" and "unsmooth" syllables into the general structure of their verse. In Standard Tonal Verse, *shih* (詩), these are arranged in an antithetical, slightly asymmetrical order. The following, for example, is one of the patterns that a Chinese heptasyllabic Epigram may take (reading, as in ordinary English, from left to right):

<sup>2</sup>Here, *smooth* is used for 平; and *unsmooth* or *rough*, for 仄.

*Smooth smooth rough rough rough smooth smooth*  
*Rough rough smooth smooth rough rough smooth:*  
*Rough rough smooth smooth smooth rough rough*  
*Smooth smooth rough rough rough smooth smooth.*

A fair notion of what this pattern sounds like can be given in English by means of a slight *tour de main*, as in the following quatrain, where sonorous syllables are used for the Chinese 'smooth' syllables, and are italicized to make them quite clear. The rhyme system, which is the same as the Chinese, is that used in the *Rubáiyát*.

*Cold lakes shimmer at noon-day:*  
*By the bleak shores lovers stray.*  
*On my gold lute, now and then,*  
*Sad tunes of the south I play.*

In order to catch the effect of these Chinese internal pitch-rhythms, I frequently use not only internal assonances, but also internal rhymes, especially when it is a case of carrying over some of the effect of that medial euphonic element 兮. This interjection, *hsi* (Mandarin pronunciation), occurs so frequently it demands further explanation. In Cantonese, which preserves ancient sounds, it is pronounced like "Hi", lightly sighed—reminiscent of English literature's "*Heigh-ho, Hey nonny nonny*". It is sometimes joyous, sometimes sad. Other translators render this interjectional word as "O" or "ah". I rarely if ever do. This interjection is characteristic of *Ch'ü Tz'u* (楚辭) and early Han poetry, and is sporadic in all dynasties. For instance, it occurs in each of the nine lines in Liu Ch'e's (劉徹) "Lines on the Autumn Wind";<sup>3</sup> there I compensate for it by putting in double rhymes throughout the poem. (Waley in translating the same poem simply ignores it—as well as the original rhyme, of course; and the result is—complete flatness.)

### Diction

CHINESE HAS naturally its own specific modes of expression: its own metaphors and its own rhetorical forms. There are stock patterns of expression (which school-masters call idioms), and forceful original patterns which the individual writer invents. To discern the latter is certainly no easy thing; yet it is easy to know the former by the simple criterion of frequency in use. Now a forceful original mode of expression may be rendered into a forceful or usual form in English, but one may perhaps be mistaken in regarding a fairly common Chinese combination as an unusual one: it is a mistake I have often made and corrected on better judgment. But a stock idiom or a stock metaphor cannot be obtruded as such into English. "As brave as a lion" may be wearisome, but it is English; "as brave as a tiger" is not.

Certain expressions must be altered. "Fair as jade" (applied to beautiful women) is a very charming metaphor in Chinese: but it cannot be put down in English (perhaps because jade connotes a worn-out taste and also a vulgar woman). "Moth-brow",

<sup>3</sup>The first two lines of Liu Ch'e's 秋風辭 go 秋風起 are scudding free./Green hill and vale grow sere and  
 兮白雲飛,草木黃落兮鴈南歸. Turner translated them as pale./And wild geese southward flee.  
 follows: *The autumn blast is rising fast:/White clouds*

as an epithet for fair ones, is both inaccurate and repugnant in English. It is inaccurate because the Chinese expression does not mean the brow of a moth, nor a brow like a moth, nor a brow like a moth's; it means moth-antenna. The word, before its application to a woman, is already metaphorical. As applied to a woman it means literally that her eyebrows have the dainty sweep of a moth's antennae. In fact it presupposes a concomitant loveliness. Thus when I translate,

*The dainty-browed beloved one  
Before the horsemen dies<sup>4</sup>*

the translation is accurate linguistically and, I hope, appropriate in the English context.

Similarly, in Tu Fu's (杜甫) poem "The Winsome Bride", "Fair as jade" is adequately rendered:

*Sweet as a lily or a rose—*

the lily and rose being, in fact, terms of comparison for human loveliness, every bit as natural (I may say conventional) in English as jade is in Chinese.

In attempting to capture the elegant and refined nature of Chinese poetry, I had sometimes almost forgotten that affected simplicity and deliberate homeliness are characteristics of Chinese poetry. For instance, there is a quality vaguely reminiscent of ballad poetry that pervades the poetry of Tu Fu and other poets of his time. All true art is traditional, Chinese not less so than any. In traditional folklore, in old ballads and good modern ones, and in the work of great traditional poets, there is a quality the Chinese call "flavour of antiquity", which might perhaps be more clearly described, in modern analytical fashion, as "psychological primitiveness". Poetry works with words, with their associations and suggestive "aura". You have the chivalrous poems of Spenser, the drawing-room poems of Pope, the political poems of Dryden, each with its apposite associative, suggestive words and phrases. But certain words and phrases have no associations but those which are primitive and therefore touch the heart most intimately.

The most convenient example I can find of this "psychological primitiveness" is a short poem (which is deliberately archaic), by an early T'ang poet, Sung Chih-wen (宋之問 660?-710), "Down the Mountain" 下山歌:

Down, down the Lofty Mountain

(Many a time I sigh!)

Hand in hand with a bonny person,

Step by step went I.

下嵩山兮多所思，

携佳人兮步遲遲。

The moon that shone between the pines

Is shining to this day:

But never, never again, my dear,

Shall we go down that way.

松間明月長如此，

君再遊兮復何時。

It may be noticed that in this poem every word and every phrase is primitive, and

<sup>4</sup>From Po Chū-i's 長恨歌, the line 宛轉蛾眉馬前死. Woe" on p. 59 of this issue. See Turner's full translation of "The Song of Enduring

wakes a train of feeling that can only be described as primitive. Going down a mountain with a beloved person—'hand in hand'. A feeling of instability and insecurity: 'step by step'. A solitude reaching back to the threshold of his race: 'The moon that shone between the pines'. And the primitive feeling behind all sad lyric poetry: 'never, never again, my dear'.

Tu Fu, like Shakespeare, spread his net wide, and used every device that came to his hand. This 'psychological primitiveness' is part of his art. It was also consonant with his character. He had a very kind heart and was fond of simple and old things. So it is not surprising that he should remind an English reader of 'the old song of Percy and Douglas'. I was once severely criticized for indulging in "off-key analogies", by which the reader presumably meant things like the incongruity of making a Tartar horseman cry out with a Scottish "och"! According to my critic, a particularly offensive translation was Han Shan's (寒山) "No Title":

Old Jones who lived on the North Side	城北仲家翁，
Kept a most hospitable table:	渠家多酒肉。
The night old Jones's missus died	仲翁婦死時，
His house was thronged from floor to gable.	弔落滿堂屋。
But now old Jones himself is dead,	仲翁自身亡，
No, not a tear for him is shed.	能無一人哭。
From those who swilled his wines and food	喫他栢斮者，
One would expect more gratitude.	何太冷心腹。

In fact, I do not like the poem much (though I believe it is perfectly translated—for what Touchstone is not faithful to his Audrey?), and it is by an obscure author. I was taken by its freakishness and lack of T'ang dynasty "augustness". And one of my "by-aims" in translating is to discount the prevalent notion that Chinese poetry is "august" and stodgy. In this case the poem is quite homely in the best sense of the word.

The translator also has to search for equivalents to archaic expressions of ancient Chinese poetry. There is, of course, justification for archaisms and even a grace in their use, if they can be smoothly introduced into a piece that is itself archaic. For instance, in the "Mountain Wraith", the first eight lines are representative:

One may you see that haunts the mountain combe,	若有人兮山之阿，
In kirtle of clinging fig-leaves frocked, girdled with trailing	被薜荔兮帶女蘿。
doddery green.	既含睇兮又宜笑，
Lustrous-eyed is she, smiling fair;	子慕予兮善窈窕。
Of winsome mien and debonair.	乘赤豹兮從文狸，
Her team of brindled panthers driving, followed by ratels	辛夷車兮結桂旗。
streaked, she moves	被石蘭兮帶杜衡，
In chariot hewn of sapan-wood with flags of cinnamon,	折芳馨兮遺所思。
Wild dianthus all her gems, her braid of wintergreen,	
To gather posies of the field, a gift for him she loves. <sup>5</sup>	

<sup>5</sup>From 楚辭：九歌。Cf. David Hawkes' translation, Oxford, 1959; Beacon Press, Boston, 1962, p. 43. *Ch'u Tz'u: The Songs of the South*, Clarendon Press,

The poem is almost impossible to translate. It is bristling with *hapax legomena* and archaisms (even for 300 B.C.), and all through is interspersed with the interjection *hsi* 兮 (one for each of the twenty-seven lines). My translation attempts to match the original in every way: "Debonair" is the only translation of the Chinese epithet applied to this lady. She is queenly and elegant as well as winsome and weird. At every syllable I was striving to get "weird" sounds and effects corresponding to the "queerness" of the original. It is musical; so is the original. It is archaic and out of the mainstream of English writing; so are the *Ch'u Tz'u* archaic (gruesomely so). And being Southern songs, they are out of the mainstream of Chinese writing. Is the "Mountain Wraith" in its original form a bit "phoney"? I think so, but it makes a wonderful contrast to the clean primitiveness of the *Book of Poetry* and the robustious mouthings of the dynastic warriors that follow. Notice, for instance, the completely different tone in the following song of pure *braggadocio*, the "Great Wind Song" written by the first Han Emperor Liu Pang (劉邦):

Brave hearts, sing ho!	
Let the great wind blow,	
The clouds are spread in flight.	大風起兮雲飛揚，
From hard campaign we are home again:	威加海內兮歸故鄉，
All the ground the oceans bound	安得猛士兮守四方。
Our glory hovers o'er.	
O where shall I find me men of might	
To guard my frontiers four?	

### *Proper names*

BESIDE THESE intrinsic difficulties of translation, there are certain accidental difficulties. The chief one lies in the translation of proper names. For instance, it is impossible to translate Chinese place names into English verse. The various systems of romanization that are employed for the rendering of Chinese have not lessened but accentuated the difficulty; whatever their degree of scientific accuracy, they are uniformly ugly. The truth is that a majority of monosyllabic sounds in English have either a vulgar or a trivial connotation. Chu Chin Chow, however one pronounces the name, will always look funny.

There are various ways of rectifying this difficulty. One is to avoid poems with proper names. An alternative is simply to omit proper names when they are not essential to the meaning. I do occasionally, though rarely, omit proper names when they are not really necessary and, at the same time, sound cacophonous in their barbarous English romanization. A good example is Li Po's "Farewell". The proper names of Yang-chow city and the Ch'ang-chiang river have been deliberately omitted.

And so, dear friend, at Brown Crane Tower you,	
Bidding the West adieu,	故人西辭黃鶴樓，
'Mid April mists and blossoms go,	煙花三月下揚州。
Till in the vast blue-green	孤帆遠影碧空盡，
Your lonely sail's far shade no more is seen,	惟見長江天際流。
Only on the sky's verge the River's flow.	

Similarly in Tu Fu's "Gazing at the Great Mount", the first four lines of my translation read:

To what shall I compare	
The Sacred Mount that stands,	岱宗夫如何?
A balk of green that hatch no end,	齊魯青未了。
Betwixt two lands!	

The proper names, *Tai-tsung* (one of the names given to T'ai-shan, the Sacred Mount, as a god), *Ch'i* and *Lu* (names of two ancient principalities) are left out.

But one may not omit those proper names (and they are many) which have an evocative connotation. For instance, Lo-yang (洛陽) has as important associations to a Chinese ear as Waterloo or Marathon to a Western ear. So another solution is to give the literal meaning or to use a periphrasis as short and graceful as one can manage when names are retained. Sometimes, especially with regard to a less known place name, one can translate the Chinese literally, as Sapphire Fields (藍田) or Wormwood Lane (蒿里). And even if the proper name can go into English one should often append an explanatory phrase (as the learned Milton so often did in his poetry). Two examples are found in Lin Hung's (林鴻) "On Wine". The first couplet reads:

Confucianists that love old ways	儒生好奇古，
Forever prate of ancient glories.	出口談唐虞。

*Ancient glories*: this phrase replaces the author's T'ang (唐) and Yü (虞), a reference to two pre-historic legendary worthies, whose names would mean nothing to an English reader. This second couplet:

Where, if they lived in ancient days,	倘生羲皇前，
Should they find matter for their stories?	所談竟何如?

*Lived in ancient days*: Literally, "lived before Hsi Huang", the first legendary Emperor, which again would be meaningless in English. An equivalent translation would be, "before the days of Adam" (or Noah, or Methusaleh), but this would be altogether incongruous.

For scenic Chiang-nan (江南), which one cannot evade, I have used the original meaning of the expression, "South of the River" or else the more accurately-coined expression, "South River Land", as in Po Chü-i's (白居易) poem, "Remembering South River Land".

There is a similar difficulty as regards the names of plants which have no English name or else a hideous commercial one. The beautiful *Wu-t'ung* or Phoenix Tree (梧桐樹) is ineptly called by some the *T'ung*-tree, which reminds one of "the land where the Bong tree grows".