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Translating Chinese Famous Quotes into English*

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Introduction

In practical translation, such as in the translation of speeches and biographies, and in literary translation, such as in the translation of stories and novels, translators often have to translate famous poems, lines of poems or sayings from classics or well-known works, and these are collectively known as “famous quotes in Chinese writings”.

Some works, like short poems, are wholly translated, such as the following poem:

王之涣：〈登黃鶴樓〉

白日依山盡，黃河入海流。
欲窮千里目，更上一層樓。

Wang Zhihuan: “Climbing up the Yellow Crank Tower”

The sun is going down behind the mountains.

The Yellow River is flowing into the sea.

If you want to stretch your sight to a thousand miles,

You have to climb up one more storey of the tower.

[My translation]

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Others, mostly lines or sayings from famous works, are translated without the full context, such as the following lines:

杜甫：〈寄李十二白二十韻〉

筆落驚風雨，詩成泣鬼神

Du Fu: “Twenty Songs to Li Bai”

When Li Bai puts pen to paper, he stuns the wind and rain;

When he finishes a poem, he moves ghosts and gods to tears.

Thus, it can be seen from the above that “Chinese famous quotes” refers to quotations from Chinese classics, poems, prose-poems, and other types of writings which are frequently or specifically cited in practical and literary works to convey what the author intends to bring out in a specific context. Translating the best-known lines in the best-known works of the best-known poets and writers throughout the ages is both a great challenge and a source of great enjoyment.

This chapter is divided into two parts. Part 1 examines the characteristics of Chinese poetry and discusses the methods we use in translating poems and sayings in their entirety; and Part 2 takes the book I translated, entitled *Famous Sayings Cited by Wen Jiabao*, as an example to illustrate the issues relating to the translation of famous quotes in Chinese writings.

Part 1: Translating Well-known Poems

What Is Poetry Translation?

Before we discuss the methods of translating quotations, a more general introduction to poetry translation seems in order. Simply put, poetry translation is the translation of different types of poems from one language into another. As we all know, poetry is generally regarded as the most difficult genre to translate (Lefevre 1995: 747–57). This is closely related to the poetic language that is used to express ideas and feelings of the poets, which has several characteristics. First, poetry has a dense structure. Second, due to the rigid format that is used in poetic composition, the grammar and lexicon are often expanded. Third, the personal feelings expressed by the poet might not be fully

appreciated by the reader of the original, and even less by readers of the translated versions.

The Translatability of Poems

It is due to the above issues that several questions concerning poetry translation have frequently been asked. First, is poetry translatable? It is often said that poetry is a kind of writing which is not translatable (Wang 1984: 837–88). But judging by the actual translations of poetry in various parts of the world, it may not be possible for us to make the statement that poetry is beyond translation. Two more questions can also be asked: what standards are there for us to achieve and how many methods are to be used to produce a good translation of the original?

Standards in Poetry Translation

Standards in poetry translation are different from those in other genres of writings, such as commercial translation or legal translation. The focus of poetry translation is on the reproduction of form and spirit of the source text. Some theorists hold the view that formal resemblance (*xing si* 形似) is most important, others favour spiritual resemblance (*shen si* 神似), and still others believe that both formal and spiritual resemblance should be emphasized (*shen xing jian si* 神形兼似).

Formal Resemblance

To reproduce the form of the original, to the neglect of its contents, is formal resemblance. There is no lack of believers in formal resemblance in the modern and contemporary period, such as Chen Zuwen (Ch'en Tsu-wen) 陳祖文 in Taiwan (Ch'en 1971), Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 (1984: 188–95), Zhou Xuliang 周煦良 (1984: 972–86), Qian Chunqi 錢春綺 (1986: 300–314) in China, and John Turner (1976) in Hong Kong. They all believe that poetry should be rendered formally as poetry, and this balance of form can best convey the meanings, the syntax as well as the flowing cadence of the original. Poetry translation, according to Bian Zhilin, must strive to retain the form of the original, which is one way of enriching the syntactical structure of the target language (Bian 1989: 64–70). To advocates of formal resemblance, the most important elements of poetry are the rules and forms, or the tonal pattern and rhyme schemes and

other devices. It is therefore imperative to keep these features in the translated texts, otherwise it will lead to the vulgarization of language and loss of formal beauty. To Qian Chunqi, formal transplantation 形式移植 is not only necessary for readers to appreciate the original text in its entirety, but also essential for local poets to infuse foreign structures to their composition (Qian 1986: 300–314). Chen Zuwen's translation of a section of *Paradise Lost* serves to show how form is being transplanted on the Chinese soil (Chen 1969: 34–35).

Pleasant the sun,
 When first on this delightful land he spreads
 His orient beam, on herb, tree, fruit and flower
 Glistening with dew; fragrant the fertile earth
 After soft showers, and sweet the coming-on
 Of grateful evening mild; then silent night,
 With this her solemn bird, and this fair moon,
 And these gems of Heaven, her starry train

可喜的是朝日
 初生，在這歡樂之地，他散布
 他東方的光線，在草上、樹上、果上、花上
 （這些都閃着露珠）；清香的是陣陣
 輕雨後的沃土，甜美的是溫柔
 宜人的黃昏；接着來了靜夜，
 還有這壯嚴的鳥，還有這美麗的月亮，
 以及這滿天的寶石（隨侍她的星群）。

The idea of formal resemblance can also be applied to the translation of Chinese poems into English, as demonstrated by the efforts of John Turner (1976).

城北仲家翁
 渠家多酒肉
 仲翁婦死時
 吊客漢堂屋
 仲翁自身亡
 能無一人哭
 吃他柩嚮者
 何太冷心腹

Old Jones who lived on the North Side
 Kept a most hospitable table:
 The night Old Jones's missus died
 His house was thronged from floor to gable.
 But now old Jones himself is dead,
 No, not a tear for him is shed.
 From those who swilled his wines and food
 One would expect more gratitude.

Spiritual Resemblance

To closely recapture the spirit of the original poem is known as spiritual resemblance in poetry translation. According to Fu Lei 傅雷, a translator must endeavour to achieve spiritual closeness rather than formal closeness (Fu 1981: 68). His translations show that it is possible to achieve equivalence free from the bondage of the original form (*li xing de xi* 離形得似). A further step in this direction is the idea of “sublimation” (*hua jing* 化境) proposed by Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (Qian 1986) who says:

The highest standard of literary translation is “sublimation” by which I mean to transfer the language of a text into another language without any trace of stiltedness resulting from differences in usage and at the same time retaining all the flavour of the original.

Representative of this group of scholars were the views of Mao Dun 茅盾 who pointed out in 1954 that one of the most important considerations in literary translation is to reproduce the spirit of the original:

Literary works are a kind of art created in language. What we demand of them is not merely the recording of concepts and incidents. Besides these, they should possess artistic images which are attractive to the reader. In other words, the reader must have a strong feeling towards the characters' thoughts and behaviour through the artistic images portrayed in their literary works. Literary translation is to reproduce the original artistic images in another language so that the reader of the translation may be inspired, moved, and aesthetically entertained in the same way as one reads the original.

Naturally, such a translation is not purely a technical change in the form of language, but it requires that the translator realize the author's process of artistic creation, grasp the spirit of the original, find the most appropriate confirmation in his own thought, feeling and experience, and reproduce fully and correctly the content and form of the original in a literary language suited

to the original style.... Since the main task of literary translation lies on the faithful reproduction of the spirit and features of the original, such creative artistic translation is quite necessary. (Mao 1986: 7–12)

Formal-Spiritual Resemblance

In poetry translation, scholars such as Jiang Feng 江楓 (1990: 15–18) and Xu Yuanzhong 許淵沖 (1993: 23–28) hold the view that both form and spirit should be retained in the translation. These middle-of-the-roaders believe that a translation must resemble the original closely in form and in spirit, because form and contents are not independent variables and that one can be neglected in favour of the other.

Jiang Feng's translation of Percy Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is illustrative of his effort to reproduce the form and spirit of the original text in the translation (1987: 324–25):

Percy Shelley: "Ode to the West Wind"

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If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear;
 If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
 A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share
 The impulse of thy strength, only less free
 Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
 I were as in my boyhood, and could be
 The comrade of thy wandering over Heaven,
 As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
 Scare seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven.

我若是一朵輕捷的浮雲能和你同飛
 我若是一片落葉，你所能提攜，
 我若是一頭波浪能喘息於你的神威，
 分享你雄強的脈搏，自由不羈，
 僅次於，哦，僅次於不可控制的你；
 我若像在少年時，作為伴侶，
 隨你同游天際，因為在那時節，
 似乎超越你天界的神速也不為奇蹟；
 我也就不至像現在這樣急切。

Xu Yuanzhong also holds the view that the best translation of a poem is to render both the form and spirit of the original, and it is important that the beauty of the source text is fully conveyed to the reader. To Xu, a

translated poem should be semantically, phonologically and formally as beautiful as the original and this is known as the “three beauties” (*san mei* 三美) in poetry translation (Xu 1983). Semantic beauty is not to transmit only the surface meaning, but also the deeper meaning by the methods of generalization (*qian hua* 淺化), specialization (*shen hua* 深化), and equalization (*deng hua* 等化) (known collectively as the “three types of -lizations”, *san hua* 三化) as demonstrated by the following translation:

王勃：〈杜少府之任蜀州〉

城闕輔二秦，風煙望五津。
與君離別意，同是宦遊人。
海內存知己，天涯若比鄰。
無為在歧路，兒女共沾巾。

You'll leave the town walled far and wide
For mist-veiled land by riverside
I feel on parting sad and drear
For both of us are strangers here.
If you've on earth a bosom friend,
He's near to you though at world's end.
At the crossroads we bid adieu.
Do not shed tears as women do.

The semantic beauty of the translation is achieved by generalizing *san Qin* 三秦 and *wu Jing* 五津 as “town walled” and “land by river”, by specializing *yu jun li bie yi* 與君離別意 as “parting sad and drear”, and by equalizing *tian ya* 天涯 as “at world's end”.

Phonological beauty in poetry translation can be achieved by firstly, the use of rhyme, as in the following poem written by Li Bai:

李白：〈靜夜思〉

床前明月光，疑是地上霜。
舉頭望明月，低頭思故鄉。

Abed, I see a silver light,
I wonder if it's frost aground.
Looking up, I find the moon bright,
Bowing, in homesickness I'm drowned.

Secondly, by the reproduction of reiterative words:

韋承慶：〈南行別弟〉

淡淡長江水，悠悠遠客情。
落花相與恨，到地一無聲。

Coolly, coolly the River Long rolls on;
Sadly, sadly for a far place I'm bound.
Our deep regret is shared by flowers blown
Off which fall mutely, mutely on the ground.

And thirdly, by the keeping of rhythm:

趙嘏：〈江樓感懷〉

獨上江樓思渺然，月光如水水如天。
同來望月人何處？風景依舊似去年。

Alone I mount the Riverside Tower and sigh
To see the moonbeams blend with waves and waves with the sky.
Last year I came to view the moon with my compeers,
But where are they now that the scene is like last year's?

Formal beauty, on the other hand, can be achieved by rendering the original form, seven-character four-line regular poems, into lines with twelve syllabi each, and five-character four-line poems, ten syllabi. If lines in the original poem are uneven in length, the unevenness will be kept in the translation.

王建：〈望夫石〉

望夫處，江悠悠。
化為石，不回頭。
山頭日日風復雨，行人歸來石應語。

Waiting for him alone
Where the river goes by,
She turns into a stone
Gazing with longing eye.
Atop the hill from day to day come wind and rain,
The stone should speak to see her husband come again.

Another important principle to follow is to keep the parallelism in the original.

杜甫：〈登高〉

風急天高猿嘯哀，渚清沙白鳥飛回。
 無邊落木蕭蕭下，不盡長江滾滾來。
 萬里悲秋常作客，百年多病獨登台。
 艱難苦恨繁霜鬢，潦倒新停濁酒杯。

The wind so swift, the sky so steep, sad gibbons cry;
 Water so clear and sand so white, backward birds fly.
 The boundless forest sheds its leaves shower by shower;
 The endless river rolls its waves hour after hour.
 Far from home in autumn, I'm grieved to see my plight;
 After my long illness, I climb alone this height.
 Living in hard times, at my frosted hair I pine;
 Pressed by poverty, I give up my cup of wine.

Ideally, a creative translation of a poem will have the voice of the translator heard, as suggested by John Nims. The following translation of Liu Zongyuan's poem by Bynner (1929) is cited as an example of creative translation.

柳宗元：〈江雪〉

千山鳥飛絕，萬徑人蹤滅。
 孤舟蓑笠翁，獨釣寒江雪。

Liu Zongyuan: "River-snow"

A hundred mountains and no birds,
 A thousand paths without a footprint;
 A little boat, a bamboo cloak,
 An old man fishing in the cold river-snow.

Methods of Poetry Translation

Several methods have been suggested in putting a poem into the target language. These methods include phonological translation, literal translation, rhymed translation, prose translation, metrical translation, interpretation, and blank verse translation.