



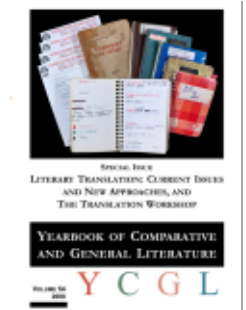
PROJECT MUSE®

Translating Chinese Poetry with a Forked Tongue

S-C Kevin Tsai

Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature, Volume 54, 2008, pp.
170-180 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/402979>

TRANSLATING CHINESE POETRY WITH A FORKED TONGUE

S-C Kevin Tsai

In his State of the Union Address in 2003, George W. Bush employed an unusual turn of words: “...there’s power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.” A populist, crowd-pleasing statement, most might take it, though perhaps with more rhetorical flourish than was expected from this president. *Heckuva job on the alliteration, Dubya*. There was, however, a more selective audience he was speaking to at the same time—those who knew better immediately heard echoes from a hymn: “There is pow’r, pow’r, wonder-working pow’r/ In the precious blood of the Lamb”—a reference to Revelation 7:14, suggesting a messianic purpose for the American people. Though the humble enterprise of translation cannot hope to compete against such holy purpose, it does share with Bush, at moments of difficulty, such an art of esoteric speaking. While the enormous literary and cultural background that a poem summons and deploys like so many soldiers generally cannot be easily carried across into another language with its own tradition, one can however create a mirage of communication, and by doing so, actually achieve communication. There is no set recipe for this, but whatever method one invents invariably depends on finding ad hoc, multiply-capable words that convey the meaning of the original while operating with the poetic code of the target language.

I came upon this realization through translating classical Chinese poetry, not as a serious undertaking at the start, I confess, but as a supplement to my own poetry writing. At the time I was searching for instruction, and found much in Ovid, Saigyō, Heine, Eliot, Plath, and Brock-Broido. The twelfth-century Chinese poet Li Qingzhao, for her brilliance and for the subject matter we shared, naturally became another mentor. Commonly regarded as China’s greatest woman poet, Li exemplified the School of Delicate Restraint [*wanyue*], and excelled in the song lyric [*ci*] genre. She was perhaps best known to Anglophone readers through

Kenneth Rexroth's translation, which transliterates her name as Li Ch'ing-chao. In spite of the universal resonance of her poetic spirit, the great distance in time, language, and all that falls under the label of culture are a great challenge for today's reader. Finding means to bridge this gap was both difficult and instructive, and this process has informed my other creative endeavors. Year later, I suddenly find myself doing a complete translation of her poetry, and the editors of this volume have kindly invited me to contribute a few thoughts on the problems I have thus encountered on the way. In this essay, I will address the thorny issues of names and places, and of the natural compression of Chinese poetry, as well as "the power, wonder-working power" of the evocative.

I. THE NAME OF THE PLACE

If history deals with actuality and literature with potential as Aristotle says, then China had perhaps the strongest historical leaning of any literary tradition. Names and places often appear with a keen sense of specificity and historical 'situatedness,' possessing meaning integral to the poem. Alas, they mean nothing to most Anglophone readers, and what's more, Chinese and English phonology are often at odds, making the appearances of names highly interruptive musically. How, then, to remain faithful yet serve the reader?

To tackle this issue, let us consider a poem of fidelity, Li Po's "*Changgan xing*," better known to English readers through the title Pound gave it, "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter." The marvelous final couplet, upon which the rest of the poem depends, concludes on a town along the interminable Yangzi River. One might attempt a prosaic paraphrase to bring out the nuances: "I shall not regard as too far any trip taken to meet and welcome you, and for this purpose I shall go without hesitation to Changfengsha." The Qing Dynasty commentator Wang Qi estimates that this town is about 700 *li* (around 217 miles) from the speaker's location of Changgan—an arduous and dangerous journey for a young woman. With no way to convey such travel advisory, Pound effectively renders the couplet as: "And I will come out to meet you/ As far as Cho-fu-Sa." The location is given in the Japanese reading of the Chinese characters, for Pound was working from Fenellosa's notes. It was a lucky choice, since the unadorned vowels and consonants of the Japanese roll off the tongue more readily. This unfamiliar location, with its legato nomenclature (punctuated by hyphenation), is what enables the poem to achieve closure by imparting a sense of truth—about the river merchant's wife. We need not know precisely what it means to travel "as far as Cho-fu-Sa" or where it is, for this unknown is bound up and verified in a touch of innocence that Pound relies on throughout this translation. Truly a masterstroke.

How to outdo Pound? Literalism can do wonders if only less literally used. My juvenile effort concludes with the couplet: "I will wait for you—Nowhere is far—/ on the Sands of Lasting Wind." Here I commit the sin of translating *verbum verbo*, word for word, much against Horace's advice for a *fidus interpres*: for Changfengsha, character by character, is "long/wind/sand or beach." This place name turns haunting once one recognizes that *chang* means long not in length, but in duration. In this act of esoteric speaking, the classical Chinese reader recognizes

a literal rendering, while the Anglophone reader finds something evocative. One envisions a woman standing upon sandy riverbanks, eyes fixed on the horizon for signs of her husband, as she endures the endless winds that wear away all but true love. Perhaps one hears Catherine Deneuve in the background: *mon amour, je t'attendrai toute ma vie...* The truth of the closure is still in the speaker's devotion, but now with more complex imagery and something other than innocence.

The original has some light echoes of the poetic genre of boudoir lament [*guiyuan*], and from these came the pivotal touch of romance that my translation weaves in throughout the poem, because the world no longer knows the virtue that Li Po quietly extols in the wife. Transforming *Changfengsha* to the 'Sands of Lasting Wind' would thus be 'in character,' yet it departs from the characteristic specificity of names and places, for the location suddenly takes on a larger, symbolic significance. The danger does not end there: rendering names literally can often bring out root meanings that have little significance. After all, no one regards Quentin Tarantino as "The Fifth Child from the City of Poseidon's Son." Why did I think it would work? Because in a way it does double duty by evoking the classical tradition as well. The sentiment captured is quite close in spirit to what is found in the medieval *Carmina cantabrigiensia* (*Cambridge Songs*) 14A, a lovely little poem that ought to be more widely read. It describes a woman "languishing for the love of you," making her way (barefoot) through the morning cold and snow to the beach to "catch sight of the prow of a ship," in Peter Dronke's translation. This poem was likely inspired by Ovid's accounts of Ariadne's abandonment by Theseus on the sands of Dia. Indeed, my translation draws from two traditions of distressed damsels—the lone Chinese woman of the boudoir, and the abandoned heroine of Greek mythology.

The whole translation, perhaps as evidence for how fidelity betrays:

When my bangs hung about my forehead
I played by the gates, bending off flowers;

Riding on a horse of bamboo, you came
Circling the well in play, infant plums in hand:

Two children without dislike or suspicion,
Living in the land of the boatmen.

At fourteen I became your wife.
My shy cheeks widened for laughter not once.

I lowered my head to a dark wall;
Beckoned a thousand times, I answered not once.

Only at fifteen my eyebrows opened to you:
I would follow you as ashes mix with dust.

I gave you my antique promise.
I won't climb the look-out for you.

At sixteen you traveled far beyond the Gorge,
Where the Horse-Head Rocks pile high.

Beware the month of May—there
The apes call of sorrow, the heavens wail.

Your footsteps at the gates
Grew of green moss,

Moss deeper than broom sweepings. Leaves fell—
By autumn wind. Early this year.

In August butterflies turn yellow, pair by pair,
Flying over the grass in the Western Garden.

They hurt your wife, pair by pair.
She frets on a chair for her cheeks growing old.

Tell me in a letter
When you will come down from Sanba.

I will meet you—nowhere is far—
Even on the Sands of Lasting Wind.

II. POETRY AT SEVEN PACES

Chinese poetry is highly compressed, and its texture is generally dense and complex—in other words, the opposite of most existing translations. Why these acts of unfaith? Chinese poetry creates meaning partly through implicit, metonymic operations that evoke patterns of associations and comparisons. Moreover, the monosyllabic nature of the classical language offers an incomparable tool for structuring the lines and, when combined with the relatively flexible syntax, can say so much in so little. However, Chinese poetry avoids long, extended sentences with grammatically explicit relationships between clauses. In translation, a poem often sounds like a series of fragments or short declarative sentences, which feels simplistic because the sense of complexity in English derives in part from the organization of a sentence. We are not accustomed to intuiting the implied relationship between the clauses.

‘Unpacking’ the lines becomes a task for every translator—a particularly risky one at that, for so much of the Chinese poem depends on its overall architecture that is visible only with compressed individual components. Such density in the original often causes problems of rhythm in the translation. For this problem we turn to a poem of betrayal, as dramatized in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a historical novel set in the third century. According to tradition, the emperor Cao Pi, in a fit of paranoia and jealousy, demanded that his brother Cao Zhi live up to his literary reputation of being able to compose a poem within seven paces, or else face capital punishment. Pi imposed the additional condition that the poem must speak of their brotherhood without referring to it explicitly. (Is it any surprise

that in actual history Pi was also a literary critic?) Before Zhi even finished his seventh pace, out from his mouth came, in my translation:

O burn bean stalks for cooking
 The hapless beans in the pot.
 In the pot the beans are weeping,
 For the stalks' whim is their lot.

O from the same root are they,
 Made kin by God, lashed and laced.
 For one the other to betray—
 Why the hurry, why the haste?

The original is a pentasyllabic quatrain, with rhyming even lines. In effect, the whole poem has as many syllables as this very sentence. Because of the extraordinary compression of classical Chinese, attempts to preserve the line-by-line structure in translation generally do so at the cost of rhythm and even comprehensibility; they resemble a wounded snake dragging its slow, twisted length along. The swift pace of the original, its balladic rhythm, the heartbeat of the rhyme—all lost. To capture all this, and the folksong-like feel of the poem, why not something that reminds of Robert Burns? Most translators opt to expand; for example, David Young makes a couplet out of a single line, as I do here (though not necessarily elsewhere). The potential problem with this approach is that not all lines are equally dense, hence when translating into a fixed metrical form, the Chinese may short the translator. Yet the context makes free verse less appealing, for the poem really needs to be set apart from the prose of the novel. At times it is in form that translation choice speaks the loudest. Do I fear the critics in this test of wit for the two lines I conjured up from thin air? I hope they will spare me from punishment by death.

III. THINGS AND FEELINGS

In a sense poetry is not written with words, but with nodal points of history, culture, literary tradition, and, perhaps most importantly, the author's aesthetic idiolect. The real 'carrying across' is not of language, but of cultural poetics. Without ever losing sight of how the poem operates in the original context, the translations, speaking with a forked tongue, must create a skeleton for Anglophone readers to concretize in light of the poetics in the target language. This is the game that gives me perhaps the greatest pleasure as a translator—how to tell a different lie to each audience simultaneously in order to tell them the truth. The translation must please the Plain Reader, whose delight is the mirror-like surface of the water and the inconstant wonders of the sky upon this mirage. The poem must please the Scholarly Reader, who navigates the water between the perils visible only to his eyes. The translation must please the Insightful Reader, who fathoms the seabed of it all and see the geography of my heart inscribed upon the three worlds.

My translation of Chinese poetry is opportunistic, shifting according to circumstance, accountable by no stable framework. There can be no code, no 'fixed' or consistent message directed at the different audiences by the esoteric speaking of the translation, because this is ultimately a contingent operation,

requiring a special eye to recognize the occasion. The ‘hidden’ message is mostly in plain sight. This maneuver is not quite like how Korean poets under the Japanese occupation employed traditional poetic vocabulary to create lyrics that seemed like innocuous poetry to the government censors, but spoke to their compatriots in subversive ideological codes, as David R. McCann’s study shows. Somewhat closer is Lucan’s address to Nero in the *Pharsalia*: when your majesty inevitably ascends to heaven, he beseeches the emperor, take care to sit in the center of the sphere lest the axle feel the burden, *sentiet axis onus*, and the whole universe tip over. Of course in the Homeric tradition divinities were ponderous by convention, but Nero was also fat. Closest of all is perhaps the genius behind the 1930s advertising campaigns of Coca-Cola in China. In a public competition to find a brand name for this most American of soft drinks, someone proposed *Kekou kele*, a good phonetic approximation that just happens to sound like ‘delicious and pleasurable.’ This linguistic *tour de force*, for which its maker received no reward, does not twist or bend beyond what transliteration allows, and the outcome skillfully exploits the Chinese fondness for auspicious tetrasyllabic product names, with a bit of musicality added. One would think such a rendering is unrepeatable, but then Pepsi Cola caught up with *Baishi kele* [‘all things pleasurable’]. The poems in the remainder of the essay are examples of *ad hoc* translation tactics.

Li Qingzhao’s “Shadow of a Drunk Flower” takes place on September Ninth, which is called the Holiday of Twofold Yang [*Chongyangjie*] because the number nine is classified as yang. There is no way to gloss this as one might in a prose translation (e.g., “September Ninth, the autumnal holiday celebrated with mountain climbing, chrysanthemum appreciation, and chrysanthemum liquor, for these refined activities are said to increase longevity and ward off evil”—and hence ironic in light of the disparate tone of loss in the poem). How to give the reader a sense of the significance without resorting to a long explanatory note? Highlight the crux of the problem, but whispered softly to give it a sense of the numinous. Set it apart from the rest of the stanza—nay, let it even interrupt. Don’t explain, and let the problem itself, with its suggestive numerology, be the solution. But then the architecture of the poem suffers: the second stanza is an exact metrical duplicate of the first. So highlight the contrast between the two, let the second stanza be much more human, if only by my faithless hand. The poem concludes with a reference to mums, which simply does not carry the sense of literary refinement in English. In *Class*, Paul Fussell wryly points out that the prole garden features these flowers along with geraniums and poinsettias because they are found on Sunday morning TV religious programs. The daisy is not the most elegant thing (Fussell recommends roses, “except for bright-red ones”), but it expresses the fragility of the human condition quite well. And the so-called “Paris daisy” includes *Chrysanthemum leucanthemum* after all. Indeed, plant names and their cultural associations are so troublesome that Stephen Owen felt compelled to provide a table of his somewhat arbitrary translation choices in *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*.

With so much foreplay, one only hopes the actual consummation does not fail to please:

To the tune of "Shadow of a Drunk Flower" [zuihua yin]

I.

Spare fog. Thick clouds.
I have languished through all the Hours of a day,
the sandalwood wasting away,
fragrant in the iron Beast.

(The day of the Double Nines is auspicious.)

On a pillow of jade,
only after midnight do I feel the cold
under a screen.

II.

By the East Hedges I cradle the wine goblet
after sunset, a wind of dark scent
filling my sleeves. Don't say
this does not waste away my bones.
The curtain rolled up in the west wind,
I know, my love, I have wilted
better than a daisy.

Turn the specific into the general, the atmospheric, the evocative. At the same time, do the very opposite: remain, as always, "precise about the thing, reticent about the feeling," as Wei Tai advises by way of Stanley Kunitz.

If all the culturally-bound issues can be bridged whether by hook or by crook, those of literary relations appear quite impossible. To appreciate the dialogues as well as the acts of one-upmanship and imitation that poets engage in with one another, not only must the readers be devoted to Chinese literature, but the translators must also do the key passages all the same way. The final tercet in the next example, also by Li, recasts—and trumps!—Fan Zhongyan's "Such sorrows— / whether on the brow or in the heart— / no cunning can avoid." While the translation reader is not likely to detect this intertext, Lady Luck has smiled upon us and bestowed to the world John Berryman's "He Resigns," the last three lines of which read: "I must start/ to sit with a blind brow/ above an empty heart." Sometimes the impossible is the easiest thing.

To the tune of "A Spray of Plum Blossoms" [yi-jian mei]

Red lotus withers, my bedding turns
The cold of autumn.
Softly casting off my raiment,
I board the Raft of Faith Alone.
Who would write me from the mist?
When the geese migrate, bearing word at last,
Moonlight will have filled the western wing.

Petals will so drift, and water so flow,
Heedless of each other:

Two bearers of idle affliction
 For only one means of longing.
 This love no cunning will remedy:
 What I've driven away from my brow
 I find descended upon my heart.

Almost every line of the first stanza is an exercise in translating the Chinese poetic vocabulary. The 'jade mat' [*yudian*, l. 1] and 'brocade letters' [*jinshu*, l. 5] are conventional kennings respectively for the bamboo mat for sitting or reclining, and for love letters from the spouse. Both of these would sound too luxurious and exotic for a stanza that calls for an astringent tone, and are hence unusable. Other terms are sufficiently glossed by the poem itself. Geese are not merely a seasonal symbol, but in the Chinese tradition they are said to carry letters much like messenger pigeons. The 'western wing' [*xi xiang*] is a conventional literary location of romantic longing, in the same way that the eastern hedge [*dong li*] is for gardening because of Tao Qian's poetic precedent.

These are simple problems compared to the fourth line. There is no 'Raft of Faith Alone.' The word *lanzhou* is just a fancy expression for any plain ol' boat, though Kenneth Rexroth insists that it is really an orchid [*lan*] boat [*zhou*], which he believes rather bizarrely to be a "common metaphor for the female sexual organ, as in this poem." (Does that give rise to an autoerotic reading of the first stanza?) He even makes that the title of his anthology of Asian women authors. *Lan*, however, is understood to be short for *mulan*, or the magnolia (yes, the name of the Disney heroine). And it is certainly not the vagina or the clitoris no matter how its blossoms may look to lechers. So the speaker, identified with Li Qingzhao by tradition, merely "boards the boat alone," the implication being that her husband is away, that she is longing for him, that she remains chaste. All this I attempt to capture by reinventing the kenning for the boat.

Finally, in the Western tradition the notion of stratagem or calculation [*ji*] is not as pervasive or positively regarded, and it would really give love a bad name here. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate the range of the word in Chinese. One could form a 'clever stratagem' [*miaoji*], plot treachery [*jianji*, 'treacherous *ji*'], or formulate a grand design as a statesman [*bainian daji*, 'the great *ji* of a hundred years']. One could 'take counsel together' [*heji*], or 'fall into the *ji*' of another [*zhongji*] and be at wit's end [*jiqiong*, 'exhausted of *ji*'], at a loss as to what to do [*wuji keshi*, 'having no *ji* to effect']. This is close to the Greek notion of *mētis*, or cunning intelligence, with which the weak can overcome the powerful. The older denotations of the word cunning (with the root of *cunnan*, 'to know,' in Old English) center around the notion of knowledge, and the sense of deviousness comes only later. Even though *ji* might have been associated with wisdom in early dictionaries, 'cunning' is hardly an equivalent, but together with 'remedy,' does suggest the right range of stuff. It also achieves the right tone, implying the involvement of the self—something that the neutral, impersonal 'stratagem' cannot do, and 'calculation' does too much of. The Scholarly Reader would be in a position to reconstruct the Venn diagram of the semiotic parameters of these words, though no reader needs such expertise for this multi-level translation to work. Indeed, this section of the essay is meant not to assert the primacy of the

literary and cultural glosses, but to reveal the inner workings of the translation process, whereby one poetic code is transformed, embedded, and recast in another. For the translator, esoteric speaking is not outright reinvention, for the original is always there in spirit, enshrouded in new flesh. As Li Yu says, “The jade steps and balustrades still remain/ Only my countenance has changed.”

None of the techniques discussed in this essay can be applied as general principles—that would result in some incomparable horrors! For example, rendering every single Chinese name or term literally would be the worst of Orientalism dating back to Fu Manchu. Indiscriminately erasing specificity in favor of ‘the evocative’ falls prey to the fantasy of the timeless other. Every translation choice is a raindrop on a spider web that reverberates with the impact, and this knotty circumstance matters ever so much. The creative process requires something much more fundamental to guide the movement of words on this infinite chessboard. Perhaps the innumerable minute tweakings matter more than the larger, more systematic issues, but how can they be discussed? Indeed, the techniques that can be expressed in words are not the constant way, and that is why the translator’s craft is an art.

In closing, a word about the purpose of my translation. I am not in the business of “introducing Asia to the West.” Indeed, enterprises bearing such a banner account for all the harmoniously dull concerts, uninspired ceramic exhibits, and the innumerable, pointless tea ceremonies. Though satisfying the ethnographic interest of the Western eye, they prioritize cultural value over artistic excellence, and over time reduce art to information, to native artifacts that enchant mostly because of their foreignness. One may wonder whether art as an experience of art might not ultimately be an experience of the Other as well, but certainly not when the foreign other stands in for the transcendent. A few years ago Plácido Domingo lent his declining, though still magnificent voice to the world premier of Tan Dun’s wretched opera *The First Emperor*. Enthralled by the performance, someone in the audience was overheard to murmur, “So much history, so much culture.” But so little beauty.

Academics are quick to criticize the politics and the shallowness of such cultural exchanges, but when they try their hands at translating poetry, they often disappoint, drawn in by their scholarly knowledge like so many moths fluttering towards the candle flame. They strive to share all this expertise, and indeed their output is perfect for teaching everything about poetry except what poetry is—something that is determined by the literary tradition in the target language. If this uncompromising fact seems confining, it can conversely offer a great deal of creative freedom, for translation can be a means to intervene upon the practice of poetry, as it was for Pound, Rexroth, Gary Snyder, and others. We need not rehearse the debt that imagism or American poetry in general owes to the translation of classical Chinese poetry. Rarely can ‘faithful’ translations act as interventions, and in this sense a translation can still fail, though true in spirit and true in words. This point, unfortunately, does not concern most Asianists, since relatively few have any serious interest in contemporary poetry in English, much less write any themselves. However, raising the banner of aesthetics in the translation of Asian literature gives one opportunity to challenge a common

variety of poetry in the United States these days— the sort that labors ever so carefully to avoid the poetic register, that resembles a casual phone conversation or a prose passage with too many spasmodic carriage returns. I would a poetry that is concise, spare, unrepentant of artifice, willing to throw down the gauntlet of allusivity to the reader— a soul smitten with Li Qingzhao from birth. A love that dares speak its name.

Indiana University

ENDNOTES

“*Changgan xing*” and “Shadow of a Drunk Flower” were previously published in *Perihelion* 2.8, 2003. The Li Po poem was translated in 1996.

The translation of the apocryphal “Seven Pace Poem” appeared in *The Allusive Manufacture of Men in Chinese and Latin Literature*, UMI, 2008.