

# Style and Substance

one hundred poems  
from the chinese

Background

colin john holcombe

ocaso press

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Volume Two: Background  
by  
Colin John Holcombe

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## PREFACE

This present volume, entitled 'Background', is not a scholarly work but a simple commentary on Chinese verse that I hope bridges the gap between the translations of Volume One and the detailed notes making up [Volumes Three and Four](#). I have tried to collect introductory material on the history, language, and poetry of China to explain what will seem to many a backward step in the translations. My underlying contention is that today's preferred model, the so-called 'Modernist free verse' model, has outlived its usefulness, and we must now go back to fundamentals.

Academic renderings necessarily aim for semantic accuracy, even if that accuracy leaves the poetry a distant second. Translations by professional poets may add some aesthetic and rhythmic shaping, of course, but these reworkings nevertheless follow Modernist objectives, generally hostile to the exceptional refinement, musicality and intricately rule-based nature of Chinese verse. As a consequence, neither approach represents the poetry properly, and indeed tends to make all translations sound pretty much the same.

I suggest the models needed lie somewhere between true free verse and traditional verse, perhaps close to early Modernist experiments. Far from being written in an antiquated style, as it may doubtless seem, the translations presented in Volume One are in fact

responding to two key developments. First is a better appreciation of the nature and structure of Chinese poems through the publication of detailed studies\* aimed at the general reader, which disclose features not captured by our current renderings. The second development is a reaction to the increasingly prose-like nature of contemporary poetry, which is too mundane to represent the refined and somewhat artificial nature of Chinese poetry.

All art is artifice to some extent, but Chinese poetry is exceptionally so. It is a product of a tradition- and ritual-governed world entirely different from ours, which employed a language that from Tang times was essentially a dead language. Only the *Qu* genre employed everyday speech, and even that *Qu* genre was closely controlled by tone and rhyme patterns. Outside *Qu*, Chinese poetry was not written in the everyday language, but exclusively in the literary language, *wén yán*. Nor, unlike the Modernism and its associated verse styles, was Chinese poetry in the slightest innovatory or exploratory but, on the contrary, exceptionally traditional and conservative, continually harking back to earlier models centuries in the past. Whatever the topic, Chinese poetry was nearly always refined, musical, allusive and evocative.

Simple as they are, these matters have far-reaching consequences for translation. Our current styles are inappropriate because they employ everyday words arranged in idiomatic prose patterns, intentionally



diminishing the aesthetic distance between artwork and reader, which is very much the opposite of what Chinese poets aimed to do. To this should be added today's habit of dispensing with metre and happily juxtaposing the prose words in so-called free verse, which provides little opportunity for the work to be refined or musical. Extended craft skills are needed for those purposes, but it is precisely these skills that contemporary poetry has jettisoned, arguing that these are passé, confining and inauthentic.

In contrast, I attempted to do four things in the translations. The first was to create faithful renderings that stand on their own as acceptable poems in the English tradition. Second was to give some indication of the different Chinese poetry genres. Third was to convey the literary characters and personalities of the individual poets, which are quite distinct in the Chinese. The fourth, which explains the bulky prose sections, was to provide the social background to Chinese poetry, the context in which poetry was written and understood, which colours our translation approaches.

The American free verse model is still fighting the battle against 'stuffy Victorian verse', a battle settled some seventy years ago, but which continues to force translations into the one mould, and one that has grown more prose-like as serious poetry itself has become more plebeian and theory-based. The way back from such disappointing results is through verse models, I suggest, that purposely accentuate the important features of the

poems in question, including genres, individual voices and social setting. That means putting back many of the structures that modern translations tend to leave out. Just as Victorian translators turned Chinese poem translations into not-very-good Victorian poems, so today's translators have turned Chinese poems into not-very-good free verse. Good contemporary poetry is in fact exceptionally difficult to write, and has a subtle and idiomatic 'rightness' that is nothing like our popular Chinese poetry translations, which an older generation of translators called 'prose cribs'.

Those cribs are still the most popular format, and understandably so. They are easy to read, write and appreciate. They facilitate the transliterations essential to scholarship. They can be written without much knowledge of English verse, producing a text that appears both natural and capable of conveying the prose meanings clearly. All are important considerations, but for the larger purposes of poetry, as the word is commonly understood, they have serious deficiencies. Whatever Ezra Pound and the early Modernists supposed — who could not usually read the Chinese language, or understand its poetry traditions — these prose fragments have made the various voices and genres largely indistinguishable. However much the natural diction, broken lines and everyday speech patterns may belong to successful Modernist traditions, giving a vernacular freshness to English verse, they are quite foreign to the poetry of imperial China.

The full prose sense has to be faithfully conveyed in any translation, of course, with any overtones of meaning, but that is only one aspect of the literary whole: equally important are the visual and aural aspects of the enabling verse, the depth and subtlety of thought and the various, often multi-layered emotions evoked. As readers can see by checking the word-for-word transcripts in Volumes Three and Four, the lines in Chinese poetry very often do not have a single indisputable prose sense. And even when they do, or can be argued to do so, simply transcribing that sense word for word will not generally create poetry, any more than it would in other languages. The Imagist movement did indeed suppose that content could be created by simple, vivid images alone, but the movement was short-lived, and had little understanding of how images actually operate, in Chinese or other verse.

Similar reflections apply to studies that have reread Chinese poetry through Modernist outlooks, or have seen Modernist poems through the lens of Chinese poetry. As always with thoughtful academic work, the results have given depth to both dimensions, but it has not generally been a helpful depth because such studies evaded the essential point. The poem that 'worked' in Chinese did so because it fulfilled the many rules, expectations and traditions of Chinese poetry, and a translation into something that 'works' as an English poem must in some way fulfil in the various rules, expectations and traditions of English poetry.

Pound's experiments notwithstanding, and the protective scholarship they have attracted, which verges on a latter-day scholasticism, the Modernist free verse model has always been the wrong model, limiting the aesthetic experience to the bald prose sense. Banning rhyme was a further misfortune when Chinese poetry has employed rhyme, internal rhyme and half-rhyme continually, throughout its three thousand years of existence. Modernist models clearly need enlarging, and Volume One suggested a possible approach in its reworking of early twentieth century styles: traditional but with the licence to relax the rules of rhyme, rhythm and line length if greater subtleties of pausing, tone and meaning could be achieved in this way.

Though the structure of Chinese poetry cannot be fully duplicated in English, the pre-Modernist verse employed here does let us write things that create effects in English similar to those in Chinese. We can suggest the archaic verse of the early *Shijing* by making translations stoutly workman-like, for example, and echo the crystalline musicality of *Regulated Shi* by emphasizing assonance and insisting on tight end-rhyme.

Rhyme is very much taboo in contemporary translation, but I hope readers will see that the ban is more a contemporary fad than soundly based. Rhyme works very well when used competently to shape lines and distinguish genres. Where possible, therefore, I have indicated the original rhyme schemes, or at least provide something approximating to them, though rhyme is only one feature

among many requirements. All but a few poems are line for line, but I have generally broken lines longer than five characters into more manageable double tetrameters, and occasionally into pentameters.

The translations of Volume One presented the poetry as simply as possible, stressing genres and social context but excluding scholarly references. This volume, in contrast, explains the translation approaches at some length: the historical context, relevant aspects of the Chinese language, contemporary and older views on translation, their value and difficulties, matters theoretical and practical, all referenced to the degree possible in a non-specialist work. Volumes Three and Four have detailed notes on all the poems, with word-for-word renderings, text sources, other translations, audio recordings, the odd literary criticism and general references.

\* Notably Zong-Qi Cai's most useful compilation *How To Read Chinese Poetry: a Guided Anthology* (Columbia University Press, 2008).

## INTRODUCTION

Modernist poetry and pre-modern Chinese verse embody radically different outlooks. Modernism generally believed that: {1}

Form was imprisoning  
Immediacy of composition spoke for honesty  
Image and myth took precedence over prose sense  
Everyday language was to be preferred, and  
Open forms reflected contemporary life.

None of these would have made sense to pre-modern Chinese poets. Quite contrary to Modernism, Chinese poems were rigidly formal, intensely traditional, and conservative to a fault. Whereas Modernism uses a relaxed, contemporary language, providing in varying rhythms what the educated and sensitive reader expects from intelligent, well-crafted conversation, Chinese verse could hardly have been more different: it was exceptionally refined and employed a literary language, *wén yán*, that was not spoken by the common people. Modernism has gradually given up rhyme and metre, employing rhythms and line lengths to no constant base, many of them approximating to natural speech, and so eventually becoming indistinguishable from prose, at least to the untrained ear. Chinese allowed itself no such licence. It was wholly and unremittingly formal, indeed tightly organized with specified rhyme schemes, line lengths and tonal patterns, with hardly an aspect left unspecified. It was not innovatory at all, but continually

harked back to earlier models, particularly those of the splendid Tang Dynasty.

## Introduction to Fundamentals

All Chinese poems rhyme and scan. The metre is either a semantic one and the lines are arranged in couplets: *Shijing* and *Shi* (poetry). Or the metre is based on old song tunes, and the lines are arranged in strophes: *Qu* and *Ci* poetry. Semantic metres are based on meaning, or, more exactly, how that meaning is phrased in the head. Semantic metre is quite unlike the stress-syllabic metre of English verse, therefore, or the quantitative measures of Greek or Latin poetry, but still strongly marked. Rhyme is well nigh universal in all genres. That rhyme is looser than ours in concept but more pervasive. Shorter poems may use the same rhyme throughout, moreover, though longer poems are commonly broken into stanzas marked by rhyme change. {2}

As mentioned, the basic unit of *Qu* and *Ci* poetry is the strophe, a group of lines focused on a particular theme. In all other genres, the basic unit is the couplet, the two-line structure that is emphasized by consistent line length, rhyme, tonal patterns, ordered themes and allusion. Contrary to Modernist interpretations, the key structure is not the image, therefore, though the regulated verse of the Tang era did indeed reduced other elements so as to give prominence to 'content words', often verbs acting as nouns, adjectives and adverbs. The gaps left in understanding had to be bridged by the reader, moreover,

where the ambiguity was deliberate, making the meaning subject to larger and more evocative interpretations. The Chinese language is also pithier than English, preferring the concrete example to the abstract generalization, though few of its characters are simple pictograms. {2}

Chinese poetry translations today tend to be evocative assemblages of images brokenly arranged in what is called 'free verse'. Some could indeed be free verse, a beautiful medium where the traditional rules of line length or metre have been intelligently relaxed for specific effect, but most examples known to me are a broken prose lacking the properties that give any 'textural meaning'.

The translations making up Volume One were literary renderings, which stand or fall on the quality of the work, i.e. how much they carry across of the excellence in one language to the excellence in another. Literary approaches are also the themes of this second volume, and so only tangentially apply to academic translations. These must be alive to all possible meanings of the original text, and not over-concerned with the pleasure or otherwise the results may give the lay reader. Also to be admitted at the outset is the obvious fact that poetry in Chinese is more difficult to translate than that of European languages — particularly so given the compact nature of Chinese, the dense allusion, the tone patterning and the repetitious rhyme schemes — but these notes should indicate what I have borne in mind in undertaking the translations, and may therefore help those making the same journey. All Chinese poetry was refined, musical, allusive, evocative



and closely rhymed. The rules governing the various styles or genres were, first in broad outline: {2}

*Shijing*: archaic Chinese in 4 character lines

*Sao*: Shamanistic chants: 3-7 characters per line.

*Fu*: Rhapsodic verse-prose: 3-7 characters per line: sometimes long poems.

Pre-Tang experiments: 4-5 characters per line: varied in most respects.

*Unregulated Shi*: couplets, 5 or 7 characters per line: any number of lines.

*Regulated Shi*: rule-based couplets: 5 or 7 characters in 8 or 4 lines.

*Qu*: strophe-based, colloquial language, lines of various lengths.

*Ci* poetry: strophe-based, literary language, lines of various lengths

And in more detail, which we shall come to in due course:

Period	Genre or <i>Source</i>	Substyle or Theme	Formal Name	Poem Length	Words per Line	Rhyme	Tonal Patterns
Pre-Han	Shijing	Shi	Shijing	various	4	often	no
Warring States	Chuci zhangju	Shi	Sao	various	3-7	yes	no
Han	Chuci zhangju	Shi	Fu	long	3-7	often	
Han	Music Bureau	Yuefu	Yuefu	various	4-5	yes	no
Han	Wen xuan	Early Pentasyllabic Verse	Nineteen Old Poems	various	5	yes	no
Six Dynasties	Shi	Farmstead & Landscape	Tianyuan Shi	various	5	yes	no
Tang	Shi	Unregulated	Gutishi	various	5	yes	no

Song	Shi	Unregulated	Gutishi	various	7	yes	no
Ming - Qing	Shi	Unregulated	Gutishi	various	7	yes	no
Tang - Song	Jintishi	Lushi	Wulu	8 lines	5	yes	yes
Tang - Song	Jintishi	Lushi	Qilu	8 lines	7	yes	yes
Tang - Song	Jintishi	Jeuju	Wujue	4 lines	5	yes	yes
Tang - Song	Jintishi	Jeuju	Qijue	4 lines	7	yes	yes
Ming - Qing	Jintishi	Lushi	Wulu	8 lines	5	yes	yes
Ming - Qing	Jintishi	Lushi	Qilu	8 lines	7	yes	yes
Ming - Qing	Jintishi	Jeuju	Wujue	4 lines	5	yes	yes
Ming - Qing	Jintishi	Jeuju	Qijue	4 lines	7	yes	yes
Yuan	Qu	Unregulated	-	various	3-7	yes	yes
6 Dyn. - Qing	Ci	Xiaoling	Short songs	short	varying, 3-8	yes	yes
6 Dyn. - Qing	Ci	Manci	Long songs	long	varying, 3-8	yes	yes
Song- Qing	Ci	Yongwu	Lyrics on objects	long	varying, 3-8	yes	yes

And finally, again looking ahead, the 'spirit' or nature of various styles in keywords, where keywords indicate extra features or special emphasis to be conveyed by the translations. All these are additional to indicating the line length correctly and conveying the spirit of the Chinese poem in question. *Not* the spirit of Chinese poetry as a whole, note. That overall nature does not exist, beyond a common refinement and elegance of expression, emotional restraint, sympathy with human nature, and lack of obvious malice toward others. Each poem has its own spirit or character as genre, period, theme and poet determine.

Style	Formal Name	Keyword 1	Keyword 2	Keyword 3	Keyword 4	Rhyme
Shijing	Hymns	ceremonial	reverent	simple	repetitive	basic
Shijing	Odes	commemorative	declamatory	simple	repetitive	basic
Shijing	Songs	melodious	folk-song	artless	bucolic	tight
Sao	Chuci	long	delicately musical	dream sequences	allusive	free
Sao	Nine Songs	martial	declamatory	heavy assonance	basic	as needed
Fu		long	rhapsodic	luxuriant in detail	descriptive	free
Yuefu		workmanlike	-	-	-	basic
Early Pentasyllabic	19 old songs	mood evocative	effective	-	-	basic
Early Pentasyllabic	Court poetry	mood evocative	refined		assonance	tight
Shi	Tianyuan	effective	spare	personal	blunt	basic
Shi	Gutishi	rich - textured	melodious	fresh-struck	traditional themes	varied
Shi	Gutishi	rich - textured	melodious	conventional	more personal	varied
Jintishi	Wulu	studied	melodious	dissociated	assonance	tight
Jintishi	Qilu	studied	melodious	dissociated	assonance	tight
Jintishi	Wujue	studied	melodious	dissociated	assonance	tight
Jintishi	Qijue	studied	melodious	dissociated	assonance	tight
Qu		open-textured	song-like	living speech		generally close
Ci		song-like	catchy	personal	focused	generally close

This 'spirit' or character are not rules imposed by theory, moreover, but generalities gradually derived from each individual poem itself, academic commentaries and the trial and error of translation. I call them 'models' in Chapter 8. Further overlaid on these keywords are the personalities and distinctive voices of the poets themselves, which go further than the potted biographies appended to Volume One. They are treated in Chapter 9.

## Introduction to Cultural Setting

All Chinese histories categorise by dynasties. A simplified listing is: {3}

Shang	1600 - 1028 BC
Zhou	1027 - 475 BC
Warring States	475 - 206 BC
Qin	221 - 206 BC
Han.	206 BC – 220 AD
Six Dynasties:	220 - 589 AD
Tang:	618 - 907 AD
Song:	960 – 1279 AD
Yuan:	1279 – 1368 AD
Ming:	1368 – 1644 AD
Qing	1644 - 1911 AD

It was probably in the Shang dynasty of the second millennium BC that the most characteristic element of the Chinese civilization first appeared — the representation of the Chinese language in logographic characters. All actions of the brush, in poetry, painting and calligraphy, thus became associated with the refinement, ritual and strict conventions that characterize east Asia life. Odd lines of poetry appear on Shang bronzes, and fragments on bamboo strips are continually being unearthed from excavated tombs, but our real knowledge of the first millennium of Chinese poetry comes from a single anthology of poems surviving the ravages of time and politics.

The first emperor of China (221-206 BC) was not accustomed to having his orders questioned, and famously ordered the burning of all books not serving a practical end, i.e. all except medicine, divination, agriculture, and forestry. Scholars today doubt that story, and indeed sufficient survived for the succeeding dynasty, the Han (206 BC-AD 220), to make Confucianism its state religion and turn the previous documents into classics of literature. A certain master Mao collected some 305 ancient poems as the *Shijing*, which in time joined the material studied by all Chinese entering the civil service. The *Shijing* is a miscellany of sacred hymns, state odes and songs. It is difficult to find much poetry in the hymns and odes, which no doubt served court and temple ceremonies. Certainly there is nothing of the splendid epics of contemporary Mediterranean peoples, or the Sanskrit classics of India, but many of the songs have a fresh and folk-song nature, and have been much translated. A great deal is unknown or only conjectured about the *Shijing*, but it set the course of Chinese poetry to come. Following its lead, most early Chinese poems are short, tightly rhymed, and employ an archaic Chinese in four-character lines.

We are also dependent on Han anthologies for the poems that followed. The *Chuci zhangju* is a collection of early and late Han poems in markedly different styles. The *Sao* allude to shamanistic practices, the *Fu* are rhapsodic verse-prose without a close counterpart in western literature, and the *Jui Ge*, or Hymn to the Fallen, is one of the included *Nine Songs*. Also dating from Han times, in

fact collected by the Music Bureau re-established by emperor Wudi, are the ritual-like folk ballads called *Yuefu*, possibly contemporary court pieces, possibly slightly earlier. Also from Han times are the *Nineteen Old Poems*, though they are once again a composite collection, with pieces from the earlier and later Han. In all these collections, the pentasyllabic line is becoming more pronounced, with five instead of four characters to the line, allowing denser content and more rhythmic variation.

The succeeding period, from the Han (206 BC- AD 220) to the Tang (618-907) is known as the Six Dynasties, where many short-lived kingdoms and dynasties came and went across a politically fragmented China. Its poetic legacy is also complicated, more confusing even than that of the earlier Han, with various collections exhibiting various tendencies. From this period date the poems of the *Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove*, the poems of the *Orchid Pavilion Gathering*, the *Midnight Songs* poetry of the four seasons, the '*Field and Garden*' poems of Tao Yuanming, the *Yongming* period poets, and the poems collected in the anthology *New Songs from the Jade Terrace*, compiled by Xu Ling (507-83). Nonetheless, with only a few exceptions, poetry is now settling into the outlines it will occupy throughout imperial times: short pieces that show great refinement, subtle allusion and emotional restraint.

In the Tang dynasty of 907 to 960 AD, Chinese poetry reaches its first zenith. The poetry is refined, evocative and allusive. Its so-called *Unregulated Shi* was defined by strict rules regarding line length and rhyme patterns. The

*Regulated Shi* was even further defined, with additional rules for poem length, word use and tone patterns, the aim being refinement in diction, *recherché* allusion and crystalline musicality. As the language employed was the literary, understood only by the scholar class, and not the everyday vernacular, the regulated poetry in particular could become somewhat artificial. Poets generally wrote in both styles, regulated and unregulated, but poets like Wang Wei and Du Fu preferred the regulated, while the iconoclastic Li Bai was probably happier in the unregulated, though could be matchless in both.

A short period of independent states followed, the Five Dynasties (907-960), and the unified China of the succeeding Song dynasty (960-1279) was a different entity: more centered on the Yangtze river basin, mercantile, highly literate and pleasure-seeking. The Song possessed large fleets and armies but preferred to buy peace from its powerful neighbours, until they and China itself fell to the Mongols. Song poetry is a continuation of the Tang, generally less elevated in treatment, more a personal narrative, but also at times including intellectual themes. It was joined by a new style, *Ci* or sung poetry, which is varied as to poem size and line length, but written to the rhythms of contemporary songs, hundreds of them, the details of which are now largely lost.

The Yuan, or Mongol dynasty (1279-1368) put China under foreign rule, and many of its poets no longer thronged the imperial courts but retired to the countryside to keep alive their customs and literary practices. Plays became popular, however, and these catered for the

larger populace, not merely the literati and scholar class. The earlier poetry styles did survive, however, and were joined by a new style, the *Qu*, which was freer in form and based on popular songs and dramatic arias. The language was also more colloquial, sometimes more plebian and bawdy than later dynasties felt comfortable with.

*Ci* poetry further developed in the succeeding Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), which was otherwise a xenophobic and intensely conservative dynasty, with repressive internal government and rejection of things non-Chinese. Printed books became cheap and plentiful, however, giving poets a wide audience. Poets also formed themselves into societies and academies, as they had in previous dynasties, but the emphasis now alternated between recapturing old ground of the Tang and exploring the more easy-going styles of the Song. There were many accomplished poets, still read by the Chinese, but something of the earlier splendour and adventurous spirit had disappeared.

In the succeeding Qing dynasty (1644-1911), China was again conquered by barbarians, the Manchus, but these new rulers rapidly became as Chinese as their subjects. The first emperors were long-lived and hard working, giving China a prosperity unequaled elsewhere in the world. All reigns compiled records of their own and previous dynasties, but the Qing were particularly meticulous. Today the imperial records contain some 48,000 poems from the Tang, 200,000 poems from the Song, and a million or more from the following Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The last group has only been



documented recently, making generalizations somewhat provisional. Nonetheless, though there were revivals of Confucianism in Song and Ming times, and important developments in literary theory, the elevated splendour of Tang poetry at its best was not recaptured.

## References and Further Reading

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<http://www.textetc.com/modernist.html>
2. Cai, Z.-Q. (2008) How To Read Chinese Poetry: a Guided Anthology. Columbia University Press.
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# 1. BRIEF CULTURAL HISTORY OF CHINA

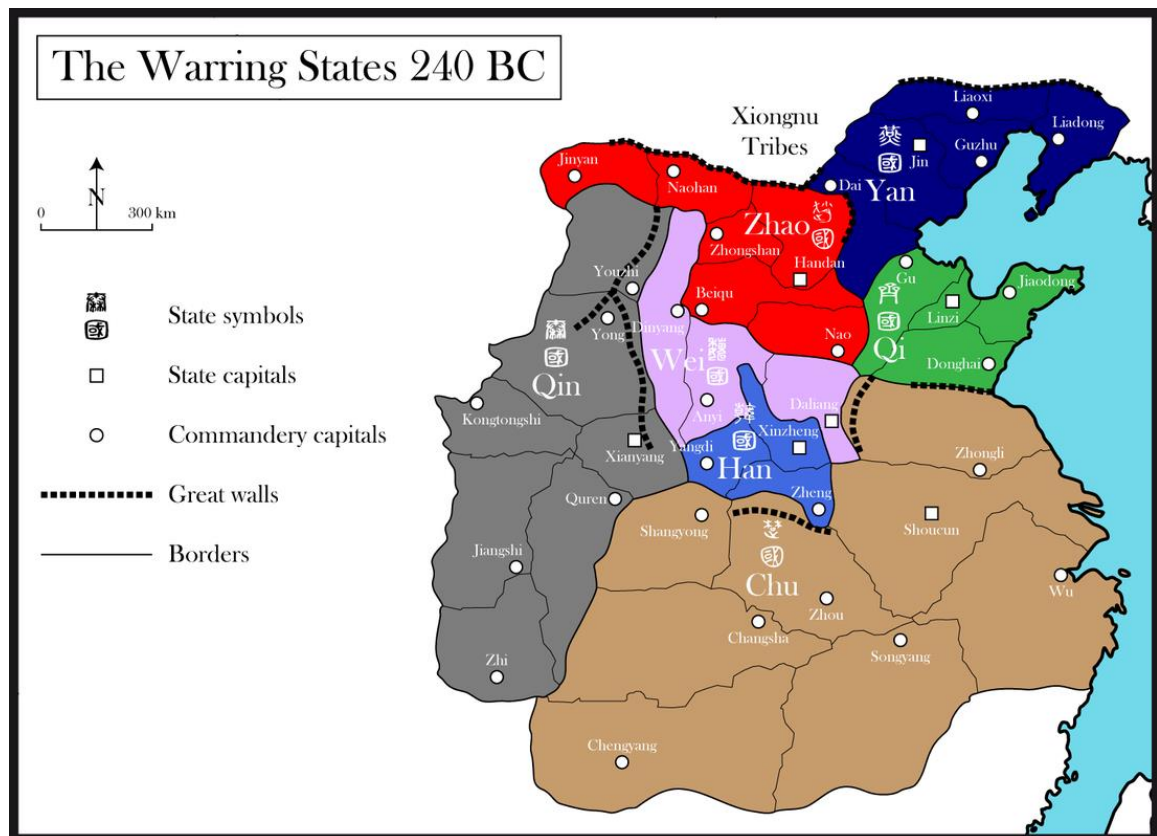
## 1.1 Overview

Life in the early Shang (2100-1600 BCE), Shang (1600-1028 BCE) and Zhou (1027-256 BCE) Dynasties revolved around princely courts, where warfare was common but conducted in fairly chivalrous manner.



This changed in the later Zhou, in the so-called period of the Warring States (BC 403-221) where every barbarity was inflicted on the participants, inhabitants of whole towns and cities being massacred by opposing armies. To this period also belong the great philosophers, Confucius, Mencius and others. The Qin state finally overcame its rivals, and the Qin emperor created a unified, imperial China. With his strongly centralising policies, the first emperor was less seen as the creator of imperial China

than a brutal tyrant, and the Qin Empire did not survive his death. {1-3}



Thereafter, throughout its imperial history, from the Han (221-206 BC) to the Qing (AD 1644-1911) dynasties, China was governed as a centralized bureaucracy. Until 700 AD, the more important officials were generally nobles or relatives of the emperor, but from Tang times the bulk was selected by the imperial examination system theoretically open to all, i.e. appointment was on merit. Most emperors took their duties seriously, particularly those of the early Qing dynasty (1662-1796) who were exceptionally sensible, hard-working and long-lived rulers. {1-3}

The Qin dynasty (221-207 BC) established the first centralized Chinese bureaucratic empire.



Recruitment was based on recommendations by local officials, a system initially adopted by the succeeding Han dynasty. But in 124 BC, under the reign of the Han emperor Wudi, an imperial university was established to train and test officials in the techniques of Confucian government. Confucianism was only gradually adopted by the Han, but it was one that matched the mood of the time and met the needs of the state, a synthesis of ancient ideas and customs. The world was a self-generating and self-sustaining organism governed by cyclical but never repeating flows of yin and yang and the

five phases of fire, water, earth, metal and wood. Through these concepts were viewed the seasons, the emperor's mandate and the dynastic successions. Just as there were harmonies in nature and bodily responses, as there were in music, so the dragon throne required moral and ritual observances from its occupants. Floods, droughts and earthquakes would point up shortcomings, and perhaps signal the end of the reign or dynasty. With modifications, that Han view of the world prevailed through later dynasties. {3}

The Sui dynasty (581-618 AD) adopted the Han bureaucracy, but applied it much more systematically, adding rules that officials of a prefecture must be appointees of the central government rather than local aristocrats, and that the local militia were to be subject to officials of the central government. The Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) created a system of local schools where scholars could pursue their studies, and this system gradually became the major method of recruitment into the bureaucracy. By the end of the Tang dynasty, the old aristocracy had largely disappeared, and their position was taken by the scholar-gentry. {1-3}

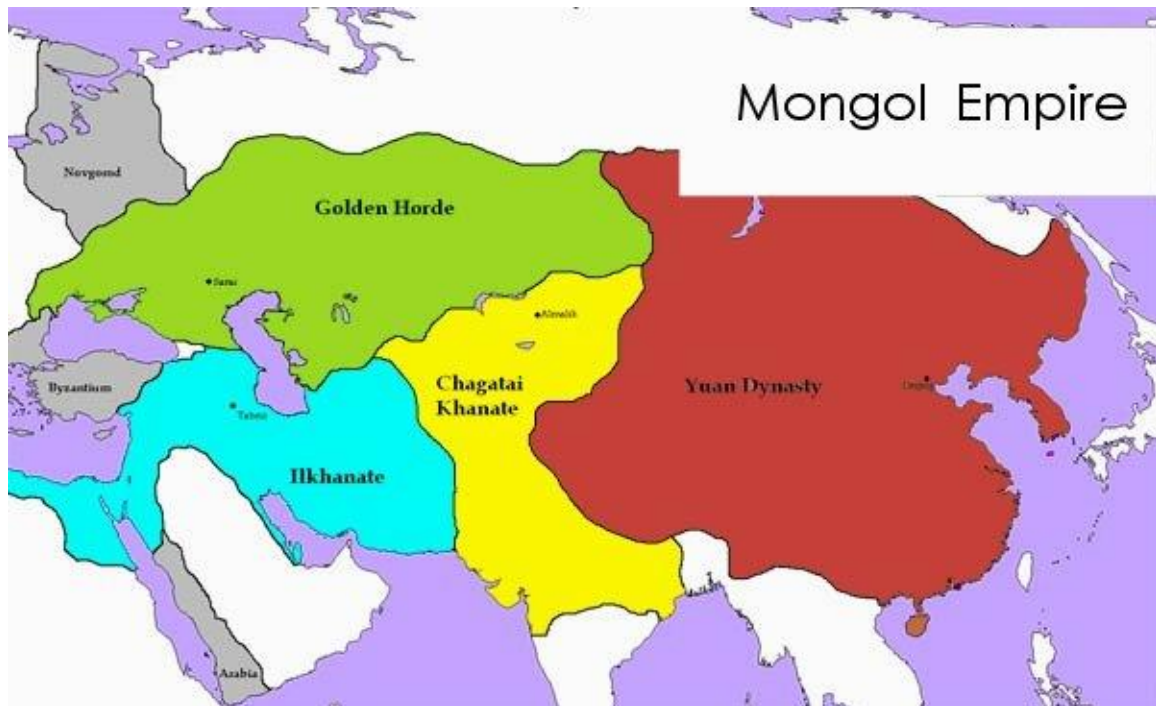
This nonhereditary elite would eventually become known to the west as 'mandarins', a reference to Mandarin, the dialect of Chinese they spoke. The civil-service system expanded to its highest point during the Song dynasty (960-1279 AD). Public schools were established throughout the country to help the talented but indigent, business contact was barred among officials related by blood or marriage, relatives of the imperial family were

not permitted to hold high positions, and promotions were based on a merit system in which a person who nominated another for advancement was deemed entirely responsible for that person's conduct. The higher levels of the bureaucracy required passing the *jinshi* degree, and after 1065 the examinations were held every three years for those who had passed qualifying tests at the local level. {6-7}

Under the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD), the civil-service system reached its final form, and the succeeding Qing dynasty (1644-1911) virtually copied the Ming system wholesale. No man was allowed to serve in his home district, and official's positions were rotated every three years. The recruitment exam was divided into three stages, but only achieving the *jinshi* made one eligible for high office. Other degrees gave one certain privileges, such as exemption from labour service and corporal punishment, government stipends, and admission to upper-gentry status (*juren*). Elaborate precautions were taken to prevent cheating, different districts in the country were given quotas for recruitment into the service to prevent the dominance of any one region, and the knowledge tested became limited to the Nine Classics of Confucianism. As such, it bore no relation to the candidate's ability to govern and was often criticized for setting a command of style above thought. The examination system was finally abolished in 1905 by the Qing dynasty, which was itself overthrown in 1911-12. {6-8}

Chinese society was quite unlike the European. Except in periods of unrest, there were no slave classes or extensive slave-owning families as in Greece or Rome, nor were people generally tied to the land as in feudal Europe. The greater part of the population were simply farmers, who worked their own holdings or the larger estates of landlords. The entire state resembled an extended family, which was the revered and stabilising entity, arranging marriages and giving members specific status, obligations and duties. Romantic attachments could be honoured, but marriages were never between persons with the same surname. Generally, as is often seen in Tang poetry, the closest bonds were friendships between officials rather than between the sexes as in European societies. People in the towns and cities were largely literate, and more so than in the countryside, though most villages by Song times had their local school. {1-3}

The country under strong dynasties was generally peaceful, settled and prosperous. The Mongol invasion was horrific, as to some extent were also those of the Jurchen and Manchu tribesmen. There were also civil wars: the Taiping and other revolutions in the nineteenth century took tens of millions of lives. And there was always banditry and local lawlessness when imperial authority weakened.



Epidemics raged as elsewhere in the world, and famines could be widespread when major rivers flooded, particularly that of 'China's sorrow', as the Yellow River was called. Beyond wars and natural disasters, however, it was the depredations of the tax collector that were most feared, where failure to pay could result in beatings or imprisonment. Everything in imperial China was taxed, moreover, though generally lightly, as a contented people made for a secure government. Many magistrates were beloved for the good they did to the areas they governed, but more were also ambitious, anxious to exchange rural obscurity for a city or court position. The scholar-official class enjoyed the highest status in imperial China, followed by the farming class and then craftsmen. The merchant class were not well regarded, but many became rich and cultivated, marrying into the most honoured stratum of officialdom. {1-8}



Given the bureaucratic governance, the unchanging nature of rural life, and the continuance of Chinese culture, all the major dynasties can seem much alike to westerners. But the differences are apparent to art lovers, and, even in the humble province of numismatics, no coin collector would confuse the fluid calligraphy of the Song with the hieratic script of the Ming.

Broadly summarising therefore, the Han (BC 206-220 AD) was a conspicuously joyous dynasty, open to new influences and one that conquered vast tracts of central Asia.

Four centuries of disorder followed. Many short-lived states and dynasties tried to extend their influence across China, generally as northern landowners against aristocratic southern states, and in both areas farmers found themselves indentured to the land or practically enslaved. When the short-lived Sui empire gave way to the splendid Tang, a very different China emerged, still ruled from the north but with populations starting their expansions southwards.

The Tang (618-907) was an exceptionally cultivated dynasty, still revered for its poetry and craftsmanship. The population expanded further southwards to the humid Yangtze basin, and the warlike, rather stiff and hieratical society of the Tang gave way to societies more lively, mercantile, and pleasure-seeking. The Song (960-1279) was generally peacefully disposed, buying off its more warlike neighbours but still fielding large military and naval forces. The succeeding Yuan (1279-1368), when

China became part of the Asia-wide Mongol empire, was conspicuously warlike and badly ruled by dissolute emperors, who were often no more than the short-lived pawns of contending Mongol factions. The country was open to new influences, however, and saw many changes in the arts, particularly in plays and books that catered for the common people.

The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) was xenophobic in the extreme, seeking to rid itself of non-Chinese influences. Ironically, the Ming fell to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), which was founded by the Manchu, another of the 'conquering barbarians', but one that governed wisely, expanded Chinese influence and supported traditional Chinese values.



China and surrounding countries were largely self-sufficient until well into the nineteenth century. Defeat in the 1840-2 Opium War damaged the prestige of the Qing dynasty, however, and belief in its centralized bureaucratic monarchy, the patriarchal family and the scholar-official elite were shattered by civil wars. The 1850-64 Taiping Rebellion alone claimed upwards of 20 million lives, and a 20,000-strong European army invaded and looted Peking in the 1900 Boxer Rebellion. In contrast to Japan under the (1868-1905) Meiji emperor, China only reluctantly looked abroad, and indeed had its own commercial and industrial history to call on.

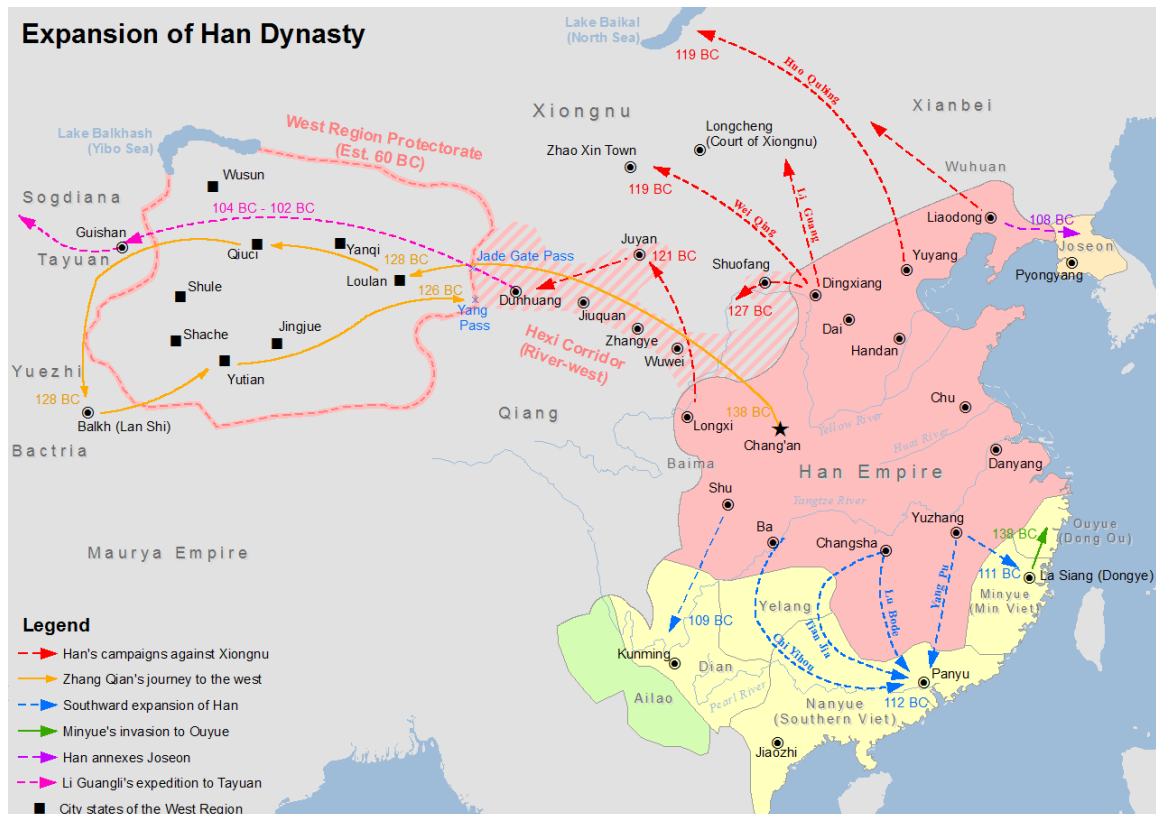


## 1.2 Chinese Society in More Detail

From Neolithic roots, a complex bronze age civilisation arose on the north China plain soon after 2000 BC, one characterized by writing, metal-working, domestication of the horse, class stratification and a political-religious hierarchy ruling a larger area from a cult centre. Of the earlier Xia dynasty there is no certain archaeological evidence, but the Shang dynasty (c.1700-1046 BC) may have ruled from five successive capitals, and certainly employed religion and ritual to back its military supremacy. Around 1050 BC, the Shang were overthrown by the Zhou dynasty (1045-256 BC), which progressively fragmented through the Spring and Autumn period (771 to 476 BC) into rival states. The elaborate chivalry with which Zhou warfare was generally conducted descended into blood-soaked barbarism in the following period of the Warring States (403-221 BC), only ending when the Qin finally overcame its rivals and created China's first empire in 221 BC.

The emperor Shih huangdi imposed a centralised uniformity, in currency, writing and administration, but is remembered less as a statesmen than as a ruthless tyrant who met criticism with summary execution, moved hundreds of thousands of prominent families from the provinces to his capital at Xianyang, burnt books that were not simply practical manuals on agriculture, medicine or divination, and subjected millions to hard labour in constructing his palaces and the Great Wall. {1-3}





The first empire fell apart on the death of its founder, but was followed by the dynamic Han dynasty (206 BC- 220 AD). The arts flourished, Chinese suzerainty was extended to central Asia, and the examination system introduced to select and train administrators. {6} The Han dynasty was founded by Liu Bang (temple name Gaozu), who assumed the title of emperor in 202 BC. Eleven members of the Liu family followed in his place as effective emperors until the dynastic line was challenged by Wang Mang, who established his own, brief regime under the title of Xin until AD 25. The Eastern Han dynasty continued with Liu Xiu (posthumous name Guangwudi), and thirteen descendants who ruled until 220, when the country split into three separate kingdoms. Chang'an (modern Xi'an) was the capital of the Western Han empire, and Luoyang of the Eastern Han. {1-3}

From these disorders, and many rival states and kingdoms that followed the collapse of the Han dynasty, there rose the splendid Tang dynasty (AD 618-907), renown for the arts, the opening of the Grand Canal linking the north and south, and the growth of Chang'an, its capital, as the largest city in the world at the time. Its one million-odd inhabitants drew traders, students and pilgrims from all parts of the globe. The early Tang was also noted for strengthening, standardising and codifying its political institutions. Taxes were made uniform and extensive, but fairly acceptable. The code of 653 AD had more than 500 articles specifying crimes and their punishment, from a token beating to penal servitude and execution. The Tang was significantly expansive, creating divisional militia and sending armies into central Asia. Confucianism flourished, but there was also an increasing interest in Buddhism, with travels to India for original manuscripts. {3}

The high point of Tang culture came with the reign of Xuanzong (r.712-56), an able administrator and great patron of the arts. Unfortunately, in his sixties, he became enamoured with Yang Guifei, a beauty who shared his interest in music and dance. Her dalliance with An Lushan, a governor of non-Chinese origin, encouraged Xuanzong to entrust 160,000 troops to his command. In 755 An Lushan rebelled and, marching on Loyang and Chang'an, compelled the emperor to flee. An appalling civil war followed, and the Tang was never the same, becoming dependent on the support of Turkish tribes. Disgruntled troops indeed compelled Xuanzong to have Yang Guifei strangled, an event remembered in Chinese literature as the 'everlasting sorrow'. {3}



The civil service was expanded and increasing numbers of young men from all classes sat the necessary examinations. Though the aristocracy tended to do better than most, the upper classes gradually became more bookish and less concerned with the martial skills of horsemanship, archery and swordplay. The new central administration resembled that of Han times, with its various ministries, boards, courts, and directorates. Local government in early Tang times had a considerable degree of independence, but each prefecture was in direct contact with the central ministries. In the spheres of activity that the administration regarded as crucial — registration, land allocation, tax collection, conscription of men for the army and for corvée duty, and maintenance



of law and order — prefects and county magistrates were expected to follow centrally codified law and procedures, but could interpret the law to suit local conditions. {1-9}

The Tang was less centralised after the An Lushan revolt. The rebel leaders had to be eventually pardoned, and activities once regarded as government monopolies opened to private enterprise. Government no longer controlled land sales, but still taxed holdings, either directly, or by adding a surcharge to the salt it sold through licensed distributors. Merchants gradually became increasingly powerful, and overcame cash shortages by circulating silver bullion and notes of exchange. The population also shifted south, into the more productive areas of the lower Yangtze basin. The Uighur Turks, who had helped put down the An Lushan rebellion, had to be paid off with large quantities of silk, thus setting the pattern for the more pacific dynasty that followed. {3}

In the succeeding Song Dynasty (960-1279) — shrinking to the Southern Song when the north was lost to Jurchen tribesmen — Chinese society reached its apogee of wealth and refinement. Its founder, Taizu, stressed the Confucian spirit of humane administration and the reunification of the whole country. He took power from the military governors, consolidating it at court, and delegated the supervision of military affairs to able civilians. A pragmatic civil service system was the result, with a flexible distribution of power and elaborate checks and balances. Each official had a titular office, indicating his rank but not his actual function, a commission for his normal duties, and additional assignments or honours.

Councillors controlled only the civil administration because the division of authority made the military commissioner and the finance commissioner separate entities, reporting directly to the ruler, who took the important decisions. In doing so, he received additional advice from academicians and other advisers who provided separate channels of information and checks on the administrative branches.



Similar checks and balances existed in the diffused network of regional officials. The empire was divided into circuits, which were units of supervision rather than administration. Within these circuits, intendants were charged with overseeing the civil administration. Below

these intendants were the actual administrators. These included prefects, whose positions were divided into several grades according to an area's size and importance. Below the prefects there were district magistrates (sub-prefects) in charge of areas corresponding roughly in size to counties. {8-9}

### 1.3 Everyday Life

To understand poets in their settings we need to picture the pre-modern Chinese world. Song China was incomparably the richest, most diversified and best governed economy of its time. Trade stretched across the world: to islands in the southeast Pacific, to India, to the Middle East and to east Africa. The ships were large, stoutly constructed and employed maps and compasses. Wealthy merchants and landowners strove to educate their sons for entry into government service, the upper echelons of which were lavishly rewarded. Industry was equally dynamic. Per capita iron output rose six-fold between 806 and 1078, and China may have been producing 125,000 tonnes/year by 1078. Copper sufficient to cast 6 billion cash coins/year in 1085 came from numerous small mines, of which some fifty alone were shut down between the years 1078 and 1085. All mining, smelting and fabrication of iron, steel, copper, lead, tin and mercury were government monopolies, though some competition was later allowed the private sector, with beneficial results. Coal replaced charcoal as the country was stripped of its forests. Steel was used for armour, swords, spears and arrowheads, but most went into agricultural implements, notably the plough.

Cotton was grown in central China, tea and sugarcane plantations increased, and Suzhou became famous for its silk production. Towns and cities saw a bustling commercial life. There were 50 theatres alone in Kaifeng, four of which could entertain audiences of several thousand each. The pleasure districts — where stunts, games, theatrical stage performances, taverns and 'singing girl' houses were located — were packed with food stalls that stayed open virtually all night, and there were also traders selling eagles and hawks, precious paintings, bolts of silk and cloth, jewelry of pearls, jade, rhinoceros horn, gold and silver, hair ornaments, combs, caps, scarves, and aromatic incense. {9}

The government set social norms by defining crimes and their punishment; it anticipated crop failures and provided relief measures; it encouraged hygiene, public medicine and associated philanthropies; it recruited and tested public officials; it constructed and maintained roads, canals, bridges, dikes, ports, walls and palaces; it manufactured matériel and armaments; it managed state monopolies and mines and supervised trade. The numbers were large. In a population reaching 120 million in Song times, over 1 million belonged to the army and some 200-300,000 registered as civil employees (of whom 20,000 were ranked as officials). Most taxes were paid in kind, but payment by money increased throughout the dynasty, probably reaching a quarter to a third of the government's revenues. Larger transactions employed silver ingots and bolts of common silk cloth, and merchants issued notes of credit, at first privately but soon taken up the

government. Factories were set up to print banknotes in the cities of Huizhou, Chengdu, Hangzhou, and Anqi, and were often large: that at Hangzhou employed more than a thousand workers. Issues were initially for local use, and were valid only for three year period. That changed in late Southern Song times when the government produced a nationwide standard currency of paper money backed by gold or silver. Denominations probably ranged from one string of cash to one hundred strings (each of a thousand coins odd). {9}

The Song was not a military state, but the army was large and well trained, generally in the latest techniques. The Song could also put to sea a formidable navy. Nonetheless, it was diplomacy that China traditionally preferred, binding surrounding powers by treaty and tribute systems. That statesmanship went sorely amiss when the Northern Song allied themselves with the Jurchen tribesmen to conquer the threatening Tibetan Liao dynasty in 1125. When the Song quarrelled over the division of spoil, the Jurchen promptly invaded northern China, and took the young emperor, his father Huizong and most of the court into captivity. Though they were never released, ending their days staring at forests and wild tribesmen, a scion of the family did evade capture to create the smaller Southern Song state. The Jurchen occupied northern China as the Jin regime, which gradually became Sinicized. The reduced Song made Hangzhou its capital, when court life regained its old splendour and sophistication. All three kingdoms — the Liao, the Jin and the Song itself — were eventually

overrun by the Mongols, who founded their own Chinese dynasty, the Yuan, in 1279. {8}

It is against this background that we must view Chinese poets. They were not visionary outcasts or Romantic rebels in the main, but ordinary men (with a few women) enjoying much the same life as their neighbours: cautious 'petit bourgeois' one writer called them, though the best were rather more. The most highly rewarded were officials, generally in employment only half of their working lives, who thus had the opportunity and training to distil their everyday thoughts on everyday occurrences. Indeed it is thanks to the Song poet Lu You (1125-1210), who wrote over 9,000 surviving poems, that we have thumbnail sketches of the great mass of Chinese society, about whom the official records are largely silent. He was one of the best half-dozen Song poets, noted for his patriotism, whose first official posting was in Sichuan. He kept a travel journal of the 160 days it took to reach Kuizhou from Hangzhou, but was for the next nine years much occupied with his official duties: repairing dykes, building bridges, preparing for the annual review of the military, supervising prefectural examinations, and the like. He retired from official duties in his sixties and settled in a small village near Shanyin, which was his family's old home in northern Zhejiang. {15}

From here, for the last 20 years of his life, on a small and diminishing pension, he travelled around, recording his impressions in copious poems. He noted the effects of warfare and famine. He described the bustling marketplaces, the resourceful peddlers, the countless

boats of merchants on the central Yangtze in what is now Wuhan, comparing them to those at Hangzhou and Nanjing. He watched crowds ten thousand strong flocking to see naval displays involving 700 vessels, and described the many town and village festivals throughout the year. It is a picture of general contentment, where officialdom worked quietly in the background, and government's only feared impact were the sub-official tax collectors whose demands were not easily ignored. {15} The wandering and boastful Li Bai, and the self-driven and often destitute Du Fu were exceptions: most poets lived very ordinary lives, where their small hopes and happinesses are reflected in their superficially undemanding poems.

## 1.4 Social Structures

Under the Confucian ethic, Chinese society was governed by five basic relationships: father to son, older sibling to younger sibling, husband to wife, friend to friend, and ruler to fabric of the state. The first should act as guide and role model to the second, and could expect loyal service in return. Just as the emperor and officials worked for the good of the state, so the farmer worked to feed his family and the wife made clothes for them. Crafts and trade were secondary, a necessary evil that diverted effort from more practical ends.

From Qin times, the government tended to classify society into four groups: landlord, peasant, craftsmen and merchant. Above these came officials, first drawn from the aristocracy, but more open to merit and civil service examination in later dynasties. Except for the emperor,

none of these was initially fixed and hereditary. During the civil unrest that followed the Han dynasty there was a partial return to feudalism, when powerful families held large estates maintained by serf labour. The families naturally controlled the important civil and military positions, but the Tang gradually extended the examination system to counter and then eliminate that power.

Chinese society by Song times had become stratified, with divisions enforced by law, though some social mobility was still possible. At the top were members of the royal house, who led a privileged and independent life, with food, clothes, accommodation and luxury items supplied by imperial warrant. At the bottom were commoners, divided into city and rural dwellers and further segregated in status by wealth and employment. Farmers were rated higher than artisans and these higher than merchants, though the latter often used their wealth to gain social prominence. Immediately below the royal house was the educated gentry class, who made up a fluctuating 1-3% of the population. The class was not hereditary, but achieved by civil service examinations, though children of officials and rich merchants could more easily find the time for the long study required.

Life changed under the Yuan. The Mongols enjoyed certain privileges distinct from the ethnic Chinese, who were then classified as farmers, soldiers, craftsmen, hunters, physicians, messengers, and Confucian scholars. The categories were hereditary. With the exception of craftsmen, prized for their weapon-making skills, the



poorer classes were not favoured, and were indeed sometimes massacred. Independent farmers were often pressed into plantation workers. Captives and criminals were commonly made into slaves. The ethnic Chinese could also be kidnapped into slavery, or killed with impunity. In contrast, the wealthy and the gentry retained their status, often becoming large plantation owners.

That social register was codified and compressed by the Ming, with all classes made hereditary. Some ten percent of farmers were independent; the rest worked for large landowners. The gentry class continued, but was split between those who had passed the civil service exams and others. The first became officials and received a modest stipend. The others worked as mentors to rich families. Of the other social groups, there were only three: soldier, commoner, and craftsman. Commoners were those of good standing but with menial occupations, and the 'mean' people were slaves, servants, prostitutes, entertainers, and low-level government employees. The craftsman group was especially exploited, and had to provide their skills gratis to the royal household. With their relations, the royal households were large and ever increasing, moreover, and being supported by taxpayers, eventually bankrupted the state.

Matters were only a little improved in the Qing, which recognized five classes: the emperor and immediate family, the gentry class of officials, the agriculturalists, of landlords, farmers and peasants, then artisans and merchants, and finally the class of vagabonds and criminals. Slavery gradually decreased, however, and

female slaves were bought and sold through time-limited contracts. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the social divisions were largely fixed, essentially outlawing social mobility. The gentry class was small, reaching 1.5 million in 1850, but, entry being by examination only, and for a qualification that had little practical value, the countless years of study required were also a drain on the state.

{16}

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## 2. THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

### 2.1. In Outline

To understand its poetry we need to know something of the Chinese language and its literary traditions.

The foundation of Chinese is the character, a logogram where every symbol represents a sound, and minimal unit of meaning. In the literary language each character generally represents one word and its monosyllable sound, but a modern Chinese word can have two or more syllables (e.g. dianshi for television). The average Chinese today knows some two to four thousand characters, but many more exist: an eleventh-century dictionary listed over 53,000, for example. {1} The earliest writings stretch back to 12th century BC divinatory texts written on bones and shells, and some of these are clearly pictograms, stylized drawings of what they represent. But many are not, and today only some 600 Chinese characters are pictograms of some sort, these being no more obvious than the etymology of English words is to us.

The sound associated with these early pictograms gradually gained independence, however, enabling it to be detached and applied to new words constructed as approximations to their pronunciation. Some word meanings were tangible objects, but others were abstract grammatical notions, like 'completion of an action'. Today the vast majority of Chinese characters are simply phono-

semantic compounds, constructed from elements once hinting at both meaning and pronunciation, but now not fully or even partially doing so. Today's character, with its seemingly arbitrary sound and meaning, has simply to be learned, though dictionaries help a little in this laborious business by listing words under their radical, the basic sound and meaning from which each character is built.

{2}

The radical is modified by additional elements, which extend the sound and meaning, often beyond what could be easily guessed. Generally, the additional elements appear to the immediate right of the radical, but may also appear to the left, above or below. There is little pattern in this arrangement, and the new compounds (i.e. new words) simply have to be learned. Such meanings can also be rather vague. The character for water may indicate a body of water, for example, running or still, but also actions performed by and with water. Characters are written in strokes according to strict rules (left before right, top before bottom, etc.) and those rules have to be followed if intelligibility is to survive the many styles in which the characters can be written, from orthodox script to everyday handwriting.

At its best, Chinese calligraphy is a high art form. The combination of technical skill and imagination, acquired by laborious practice, must provide interesting shapes to the strokes and create beautiful structures from them without any retouching or shading. Most important of all, there must be well-balanced spaces between the strokes. The fundamental inspiration of Chinese calligraphy, as of all

arts in China, is nature. In regular script each stroke, even each dot, suggests the form of a natural object. As every twig of an actual tree is alive, so every tiny stroke of a piece of fine calligraphy has the energy of a living thing. Printing does not admit the slightest variation in the shapes and structures, but strict regularity is not tolerated by Chinese calligraphers. A finished piece of fine calligraphy is not a symmetrical arrangement of conventional shapes but something like the coordinated movements of a skillfully performed dance — impulse, momentum, momentary poise, and the interplay of active forces combining to form a balanced whole. {3} Some also see a cosmic significance in how the characters are written. {4}

Chinese is remarkably free of grammar as westerners know the term, i.e. something governing the parts of speech and the relationship between them. We change the form of words to indicate tense (sing to sung), and function (verb sing to noun song), but Chinese does not. We use periodic sentences, with multiple relative clauses, but Chinese does not. We make the word order important (he hit her), but Chinese is less concerned with such matters, at least in its poetry, which deliberately cultivates ambiguity. Prose is much more precise, however, and there is nothing in English, even the most technical, that cannot be exactly said in Chinese.

So how does Chinese overcome its apparent shortcomings? By rather different approaches to language. Word order is important, and Chinese has rules and expectations that govern practically everything, from

simple expressions to complex phrases. Chinese does not distinguish between singular and plural nouns, it is true, but employs specific indicators like *dou* (all), *zhèixie* (these) or *haoxie* (a good deal): there are also measures, like *tóu* (head), *zhang* (stretch) or *tiáo* (long), etc. The word *dé* indicates possession: *tade shu* (his book). Chinese verbs are not conjugated, do not possess tenses, nor express mood (conditional, subjunctive, etc). Indeed only their ability to be preceded by *bu* (not) distinguishes them from nouns.

But the Chinese are not confused by this similarity, in fact distinguishing between active verbs and verbs indicating a state of being. Verbs are words that can use predicates, follow adverbs, take suffixed particles and take a modifier like *hen* (very or good). Chinese doesn't use relative phrases or clauses but generally modifies word order with time or place expressions: *pùzi qiántou nège rén* (that man in front of the shop, but literally 'shop in front of that man', where *qiántou* is 'in front of'). Compound verbs are very common: *ba shu nágei wo* (hand me the book, but literally 'book take give me'). Conveyance travel usually includes the verb *zuò*, to sit: *he shi zuò bus come de* (did he come by bus, where *shi* is the verb 'to be'). There are no past tenses but the suffix *le* suffices: 'good afternoon' becomes 'have you eaten' (*ni chile fò le ma*: a double use of *le*). The suffix *guò* indicates something done in the past and so a successful conclusion: *qing ni guò lá* (please come here). Through such elements — and there are a great many in Chinese — the language is kept flexible and expressive.

Chinese is always conscious of the context in which something occurs, and generally proceeds from the general to the particular: year before month, family before given name. Antithesis is common, and indeed opposites run right through the language. Also stressed is 'direction', the *ái* (to come) and *qù* (to go) being used as appendages to other verbs. To 'look and see something' is *kànjian* (*kàn* is to look and *jiàn* is to perceive). Something like 'he didn't expect' becomes 'he think not arrive' in Chinese, which often uses suffices like *qǐ* (to rise) and *zhù* (to retain). The 'I cannot afford those things' becomes *wǒ mǎibāqǐ nèixie dōngxi* (literally 'I buy not rise those things'). The phrase 'excuse me' is *dùibuqǐ* (literally 'face not up'). And so on: this small selection of examples can only provide a flavour of the language, which is immensely complicated in detail. {5}

In fact there are rules and expectations for most things. {6} We have already noted that nouns and adjectives are not inflected for case, gender or number, that verbs are not inflected for person, number or tense, and that variations to the subject-verb-object (SVO) order commonly arise. We should also note the flexibility of word classes. Nouns can be used as verbs, adjectives or adverbs. Verbs can be used as adverbs and occasionally nouns. Adjectives can be used as verbs, nouns and adverbs. Neither topic, subject nor object has to be stated if the meaning can be inferred. Parataxis (parallel sentences without a conjunction) is preferred to subordinate clauses, and heavy use is made of particles, differently employed to vernacular Chinese. Where the last would use 的 (*de*) to indicate possession, literary Chinese would use 之 (*zhī*),



which also acts as a direct object pronoun, a demonstrative pronoun and occasionally as a verb meaning 'go to' {7}

Literary Chinese was rather different from the colloquial or vernacular language. Most of the characters were the same, or, more exactly, since modern colloquial Chinese has words for things not envisaged before (telephone, bus, airplane, etc.), the characters in Chinese poetry still have the same meaning today (hill, river, sky etc.) but they were employed in different types of sentences. The literary language was much more compact and concise than vernacular Chinese, made more use of allusion, and was often purposefully imprecise. Chinese verse could also relax syntax for certain effects. Thus the standard word order of a Chinese sentence is subject, verb, object SVO, but verse can see VS or OV. Topic and comment T+C, structures are also common, moreover, indeed vital to its success. Copular sentences in verse commonly lack a verb: 'sky blue' can mean that 'the sky is blue' or 'the blue sky'. Qualifiers and relative clauses precede the head noun, but cardinal numbers can appear before or after the noun they modify. Adverbs generally precede the verb in adverbial phrases. The literary language also makes much use of co-verbs (verbs in serial) and postpositions (verbs denoting time and space). Chinese (literary and vernacular) also prefers short simple sentences to dependent clauses, though there are ways of employing such clauses, some of which appear before the main clause, and some after the main clause.

Because the matter can be hard to grasp, it is worth repeating the previous paragraph at a more leisurely pace. The literary language of China, though used for official announcements until well into the twentieth century, is rather different from the vernacular spoken by the everyday Chinese. Many of the words are the same, but are used much more succinctly, ordered by syntax into certain arrangements, but with understandings left tacit and not fully spelt out. In literary Chinese, nearly all these words are of a single syllable, moreover, which allows them to be grouped as elements of meaning, with a momentary pause after each group. In a five-character line of pentasyllabic verse, for example, this 'semantic rhythm' may consist of a 2+3 grouping of characters.

To see how different is the Chinese semantic rhythm, we should glance at prosody in other languages. European verse has five metrical systems, quantitative, syllabic, accentual, accentual-syllabic and free. Traditional English verse is predominantly accentual-syllabic, but the natural stress that syllable carries can be somewhat modified by its position in the line and the meaning of the words. French is syllabic, with a pause or caesura appearing after the sixth syllable in the alexandrine. Latin verse is based on an intrinsic property of words, whether the syllables are pronounced as inherently 'long' or 'short', which has to be learned or looked up in the dictionary'. Russian verse is accentual, but the stress is fixed for that particular word, and again has to be learned. Sanskrit is a quantitative language but the pattern of longs and shorts can be partially modified with word assemblages governed by rules of harmony. In contrast, literary Chinese employs

words of a single syllable, which are neither inherently long nor stressed, but are grouped for meaning in one or other of two basic syntactical constructions, generally subject + predicate, or topic + comment. This simple arrangement allows for great diversity of emphasis in lines commonly composed of 4, 5 or 7 characters. In poetry and prose these patterns are learned as the language is learned, and so seem inevitable to the Chinese, making the semantic rhythm appear as marked and inevitable as the traditional accentual-syllabic system is to us.

The earliest Chinese poetry was clearly chanted, serving the needs of ritual and ceremony more than private thought. Note the repetition in the concluding section of in Mao 237 (Poem 7):

虞芮質厥成 (yú ruì zhì jué chéng)  
文王蹶厥生 (wén wáng guì jué shēng)  
予曰有疏附 (yù yuē yǒu shū fù)  
予曰有先後 (yù yuē yǒu xiān hòu)  
予曰有奔奏 (yù yuē yǒu bēn zòu)  
予曰有禦侮 (yù yuē yǒu yù wǔ)

Chinese poetry evolved slowly, moreover, keeping that internal rhyme for centuries, which we have to bear in mind if translations are to be faithful to the verse structures. Unlike this example, the earliest *Shi* (poetry) was generally tetrasyllabic: four characters to the line. Its 2+2 rhythm could be either subject + predicate (S+P) or topic + comment (T+C). The early *Sao* poetry, however, is generally pentasyllabic, 3 + 2, but with *xi*, a pause-indicating character, after the first three words in the line.

With later *Sao* poetry that pause-indicating character shifts to the end of the line, which makes for a more forward-driving rhythm. *Fu* poetry inherited both the 2 + 2 and the 3 + 2 rhythms, which provides its characteristic varied and rhapsodic character. Early pentasyllabic poetry ushered in a 2 + 3 rhythm, which makes for a more balanced and dynamic rhythm of 2 + 1 + 2 or 2 + 2 + 1, not simply for sound effects, but underlining the sense. By the high Tang, these possibilities had crystallized into specific rules, which also governed the tone arrangements. The heptasyllabic poetry of the Tang employed a 2 + 2 + 3 rhythm, which allowed for great range and density: rhythm, meaning, tone patterns were all complexly intertwined. {8}.

*Shi* in the 2 + 3, 2 + 2 + 3 and 4 + 3 rhythms continued to be written throughout the later dynasties, but the varied rhythms of *Ci* poetry (from the late Tang) and *Qu* poetry (from the Yuan) added a further diversity. *Ci* and *Qu* poetry accepts lines of unequal length, even of just one or two characters long, and allows the meaning to run on from one line to the next, rather than be end-stopped as before. Equally important, the rhythms were not based on semantic patterns but on old tune rhythms. Strict end rhymes were often employed to give some structure to these varied stanza shapes

Not to be confused with literary versus vernacular, however, is the *traditional* versus the *simplified* Chinese character, which indicates only how the character is written. Literary Chinese in this book uses traditional characters, but other books and websites can employ

simplified Chinese. Note also that 'classical' strictly refers to the Chinese employed in the period spanning the Warring States and Han dynasty, but is often used to mean the literary language per se, i.e. used throughout imperial times. Finally, that poetry is usually recited today as the pinyin indicates, i.e. with a modern pronunciation, even though the original was written to capture different sounds, and the rhymes no longer 'work'. All these are small points, but can add to the beginner's difficulties.

There are many useful guides to Chinese grammar, in books and free internet articles, {9-12} but they generally apply to vernacular Chinese, naturally, as most beginners want to say simple things like, 'Where is the railway station?' Those who wish to learn Chinese *only* to read its poetry may like to start with Archie Barnes' *Chinese Through Poetry*, {13} but will probably have to supplement this bare-bones treatment with something more explanatory. {14-15}

The key point for its poetry is the flexibility of language usage, which can be written without the regimentation by grammar that English requires.

The poetry record is also much longer and larger than ours: three millennia and 48,000 poems from the Tang, 200,000 poems from the Song, and a million or more from the following Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Though poetry in later dynasties was a refined art, written almost exclusively by the educated class of China, essentially the scholar-officials we call Mandarins, the individual poets down history have been a varied lot: emperors,

statesmen, military commanders, magistrates, hermits and a sprinkling of the less exalted. Many lived exemplary lives, but there's a good wedge of those who did not, particularly in the Yuan dynasty when common speech and attitudes crept into plays, music and poetry. But the class most active in poetry was always the scholar class who provided the country with an effective civil service system for almost two millennia.

Apart from that tested in state examinations, poetry was largely written as a private diversion, by and for fellow bureaucrats, and so dwelt on the matters mutually important. The association of simple words with traumatic events (demotion, injustice, exile to distant provinces, etc.) gave them a poignancy that can only be vaguely imagined by us. Individual words also had connotations and symbolic values: the innocuous 'peach blossom' called up marriage and offspring, the cheeks of young women, return of spring and youthful vigour, and even the defeat of evil spirits. {13} We can grasp these connotations intellectually, but not always respond instinctively in the manner needed for poetry.

The educated Chinese also know their history, as we have to if their literature is to speak to us. {16-20} Wide reading is required, with insight and imaginative understanding, without which a collection of Chinese paintings, ceramics or coins, for example, remains an accumulation of lifeless objects.

## 2.2 Chinese Language in Practice

China is a large country with diverse ethnic groups that speak many varieties of Chinese, called dialects but fact different members of a broad family of languages, many as distinct as French is from Spanish. Mandarin, the official language in China and Taiwan, is based on one dialect, that of the Nanjing area of the lower Yangtze valley adopted by the royal courts of the Ming and early Qing dynasties. But, even today, many dozens of mutually incomprehensible dialects still survive in local usage, despite the efforts by authorities to enforce one unifying tongue intelligible to all across the country. Vernacular Chinese appeared in the popular plays and novels of the Yuan dynasty, and the peasant-based Communist Party naturally sought to extend its use into important documents and policy statements, which had once been the preserve of the literary language. But the two languages, literary and vernacular, do not mix well. Wén yán, the literary language, tends to express one idea with one character, whereas the vernacular language is not so restricted. Conversely, the literary language also tends to be too ambiguous for watertight legal and commercial documents. {21}

The traditional Chinese script has also been replaced by a simplified Mandarin for everyday purposes on mainland China, though less so in Taiwan. The simpler characters may or may not remain the same, but the more complicated characters involving many strokes of the pen or brush have been recast into something easier to write and remember. Pronunciation is the same, but collections

of pre-modern poetry may now be printed in simplified Chinese, i.e. not as they were originally written.

Changes extend into the vernacular language itself. From the 1930s a standard national language, Guóyu, has been encouraged, but this 'national language' tends to be learned with its local pronunciation, simply because children come to school already speaking the local dialect, which they must slowly learn to associate with written characters of the 'national language'. Not only is this Guóyu (simplified characters in Mainland China and traditionally-written characters in Taiwan) at odds with the literary language, therefore, and with how that language will be locally pronounced, it is also the end-product of aggressive language reform. Words have been dropped or modified over the centuries, and the radicals of Chinese characters listed in Chinese dictionaries have been steadily reduced, though not always consistently. The Han dynasty dictionary of Xu Shen showed 540 recurring graphic elements, for example, which were reduced to 214 in Mei Yingzuo's 1615 dictionary. In modern times, Richard Newnham gives selections from 212 radicals, {21} but Rick Harburgh lists 182. {22}

Romanization is a further problem. Wade-Giles may be still the most widely used system, but is difficult to learn. It employs many marks and accents, and the aspirated and non-aspirated consonants are not always clearly distinguished. The Gwoyeu Romatzyh system was designed in 1926 by Chinese scholars and writes easily, without marks and accents. Tones are indicated with spelling changes, but learning is again difficult, and the



text not visually pleasing. Indeed, so baffling was it to the average Chinese that western intelligence services seriously considered using it for encryption. The Yale system originated with America's entry into W.W.II, and has many advantages: it is easy to learn, reads easily and the spellings are eye-sounds. Pinyin is the simplified, romanized system made official by the PRC, and has from 1979 been employed in external press releases and the like. It is easy to learn and writes easily, but is more designed for native Chinese use. {23} Many of the Chinese vowels and even the consonants are quite unlike their English equivalents, so that western tourists faithfully enunciating the pinyin characters as the letters would sound to their own ears will not be understood. Pinyin pronunciation has to be learned.

The Chinese response to romanisation has also been somewhat mixed. Having arduously learned to associate their native dialect with the written 'national language' Mandarin, something that takes many years, they have then to go through the whole process again by linking sounds to a pinyin that, though simplified, alphabet- and phonetics-based, may not match their local pronunciation. {5} Chinese children now generally learn Mandarin and pinyin together, of course, and children's books may indeed be printed in pinyin alone. Many authorities also provide comparisons, of pinyin with the Yale systems, {24} etc., and specialist works will also explain the differences (often involving tones) between the languages of Tang and Song poetry and the standardized Chinese of today, but difficulties remain. {25}

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### 3: ANATOMY OF A CHINESE POEM

#### 3.1. Form and Spirit

Poetry occupies a very high place in Chinese culture, and is cultivated more generally and more assiduously than in the west. Poetry was expected of the well educated, both to know the classic works of the past and to turn out appropriate verses as occasion demanded. Poetry thus interpenetrated life far more than in western societies: it was not a special gift but an everyday social accomplishment. In explaining its essence to the west, Lin Yutang {1} indeed saw poetry as replacing religion, as something cleansing a man's soul, an awareness of the mystery and beauty of the universe, and a feeling of tenderness and compassion for one's fellow-men and the humble creatures of life. Religion was not adherence to some dogma or faith, therefore, but more a continuing inspiration and living emotion.

Poetry could thus heal the wounded soul, and through its practice teach enjoyment in the simple things of life, which remained a sane ideal for the Chinese civilisation. Sometimes it appealed to their romanticism and gave them a vicarious emotional uplift from the humdrum workaday world. Sometimes it appealed to their feeling of sadness, resignation and restraint, thus cleansing the heart through an artistic reflection on sorrow. Often it taught them to listen with enjoyment to the sound of nature around them, to the sight of cottage smoke rising in the evening, and the smell of fields and woods after

rain. Above all, it taught them a pantheistic union with nature, a sense of eternity in the fleeting lives of humankind. {1}

Poetry was particularly attuned to the Chinese language, which thinks in emotional concrete imagery and excels in the painting of atmosphere. The language has a genius for contraction, suggestion, sublimation and concentration, and even its prose tends to be pithy and to the point. In art, said Bertrand Russell, the Chinese aim at being exquisite, and in life at being reasonable. Chinese poetry is exceptionally refined. It is rarely bulky, and rarely very powerful. But it is eminently fitted for producing small gems of sentiment, and for painting with a few strokes a scene that was alive with rhythmic beauty and informed with spiritual grace. Chinese scholarship emphasized the unity of knowledge, and in pre-Revolutionary days was unconcerned with the narrow specialisations of science. Poetry was essentially thought coloured with emotion, and the Chinese thought about everything with emotion. The Chinese language is crisp, and poetry needs that crispness. Poetry works by suggestion, and the Chinese language is full of contractions that mean more than what the words strictly say. Poetry should express ideas by concrete imagery, and the Chinese language revels in word-imagery. And, finally, the Chinese language, with its clear-cut tones and lack of final consonants, retains a sonorous singing quality, something without parallel in non-tonal, western languages. {1}

The above was an earlier view of translating poetry into poetry, no doubt as uncontemporary as the thoughts of

John Turner (1909-71): 'Chinese Literature is the high artistic peak of the most literary, the most artistic, the longest-lived civilisation that exists. It is a sister art to Chinese painting and to Chinese ceramics, and therefore one would naturally expect to find in it a similar perfection of form and design, a natural 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 seems 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*.'

Equally uncompromising were his views on translation: 'which should reproduce their form and spirit, and thus bring to readers of English a glimpse of the beauty which I see in Chinese poetry . . . 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 poetry cannot be translated into prose. The translation of a poem into prose, which is merely verbally accurate, is not itself a poem, but remains a crib. It misses the point and soul and reason of a poem, its specific beauty.' Even further from academic practice was 'The good translations of poetry made in English were made by poets; by Chaucer, Spenser, Jonson, Dryden, Pope, Shelley, Fitzgerald.' and 'In order to preserve the musical or singing quality in

Chinese, I regularly employ rhyme. . . . the patterned interlacement of words of opposite pitch and timbre imparts to the poem a sort of poetic “fourth dimension”, greatly increasing its power of expression and its concinnity, and making it approximate to music.’ {2}

In that ‘concinnity’, the skilful and harmonious arrangement or fitting together of the different parts of something, a studied elegance of literary style, I suspect Father Turner was correct, and it was, after all, a requirement emphasized by someone who wrote accomplished traditional verse (which most poets today do not), by someone who understood Chinese (as Pound did not) and was actually living in the country and speaking its language (as Arthur Waley did not).

The second, no doubt contentious, aim is that of poem into poem, as Stanley Burnshaw put the matter sixty years ago. {3} Translators vary greatly here. A few do still count this aim as worthy of poetry translation, difficult though the task is. Others discount the matter entirely, championing prose accuracy above everything. Perhaps the majority is happy if their translations approximate to a poem of some sort.

This is not question of verse skills or otherwise, however, but of wholly different ends. Poems, or poems of any quality, are exceptionally difficult things to create, and the good translator not only understands the poem in those terms, but, guided by that understanding, apprehends the originating experience, which he or she has then to recreate in the target language, with differing grammar



and literary expectations. All aspects are challenging: understanding the original poem, appreciating the originating experience and its expression, and recreating something as close as possible in a translation.

Translators generally have to live with their authors for the months and years their work takes them, and that sense of effort is also part of the translation process. Victorian translators of Chinese poetry are not at fault for shaping their pieces as contemporary poems — all translators do that — but of not properly appreciating the originating experience, of finding glib phrases for what was in fact rather different.

Some of the renderings in Volume One are a little free, and purposely so. Translation, as I see it, is not faithful transcription but a re-creation in the medium of another language. Perhaps an analogy in the visual arts will explain what I'm getting at, at least to those with some painting experience. If, for example, we were hoping to convert an oil painting into a watercolour, it would be futile to copy each little detail of one across to the other medium. Oil painting allows for a progressive approximation to get things right, matters like composition, lighting, colour harmony, and so forth. Watercolours, in contrast, require immediate and decisive brushwork to capture the vitality and freshness of the subject. To achieve that, we'd have to start afresh from the subject, as each medium possesses features missing from the other, and technical success is judged on different criteria.

To continue the analogy: Art-class beginners commonly arrive with a photo that they wish to paint, and which they do paint, meticulously, the tutor helping them over the difficult bits. The sky in the photo is blue, and, prompted sufficiently, the beginner lays in the appropriate mixtures on the canvas. Ditto for the green fields, and the church tower emerging from the wooded hill. Each feature of the photograph, skills permitting, is carefully transferred over, item by item. A few weeks later, perhaps with some deft touches from the tutor, and the picture is finished.

Unfortunately, no thought having been given to composition, to tonal values, to colour schemes, or even to the way that paintings grow out of the perceiving and depicting process, the picture — through of course delighting the beginning artist — is no better or worse than the other offerings that exasperate us in going round the annual amateur art show. A painting has not come about, only a transcription of the photograph, usually a rather laboured and prosaic transcription. Yes, it is an honest and conscientious attempt, just as is so much translation of Chinese poetry, but it *hasn't used the medium in its own terms to re-create something alive and individual*.

That is not to disparage academic translation. As Nabokov remarked, it's essential, what we cannot do without. But there are now so many accurate renderings, and so many serviceable online translation services, that it seems reasonable to expect something more, that a poem will survive the translation process. And this in turn means

reading beyond the Modernist canon to really appreciate the range of English literature, in poetry and translation, as it is against those past but still living accomplishments that their efforts will finally be judged. Verse-writing is no different from any other art form, of course, where skill comes from many thousands of hours of practice, whatever the gifts an artist may be born with, but as important as technical proficiency are matters of inspiration, imagination and deep experience of life.

Returning to the form of Chinese poetry, we can note that Chinese poetry was different from European, but was still a fusion of sense, aural harmonies and images used variously. We can therefore overdo the visual aspects, though Chinese poetry does conjure up specific images, if leaving sense open very often, so that the reader has to meet the poet halfway. Even in Chinese painting, and many poets were also superlative painters, scenes were impressionistic, so that in seeing the roof of a distant monastery lightly indicated, for example, the connoisseur would imagine the sound of temple bells. Of Wang Wei it was said that 'there is poetry in his painting and painting in his poetry', and Wang Wei indeed excels in descriptive landscapes that can be read imaginatively and visually.

From this impressionistic technique of suggestion arose what might be called symbolic thinking. The poet suggests ideas, not by concrete statements, but by evoking a mood putting the reader in that particular train of thought. The thoughts are often indefinable, much as are the opening bars of an opera, and the connection between the outside scene and man's inner thoughts is not logical but symbolic

and emotional, in fact called *hsing* in Chinese and employed well before Tang times. That pantheism is achieved by paralleling nature and human action in the poetry, and by investing natural objects with human actions, qualities and emotions through pointed metaphors, like 'idle flowers', 'the sad wind', 'the chaffing parrot', etc. Old palaces may be called 'heartless' because they do not feel the sense of fallen grandeur or register the poet's poignant regret.

Both aspects, a humanising of landscape (*jing*) and a reflection of human emotion (*qing*) in landscape, are two poles about which Chinese poetry continually turns, and which allows it to be called carefree and unrestrained (*hao fang*) or restrained, tender and resigned (*wan yüeh*). Li Bai best exemplifies the first and Du Fu the second, but there are legions of poets who added their personal colour to all the shades in between.

### 3.2 Nuts and Bolts of Chinese Poetry

We start with the rhythm of early Chinese verse, that from the Han (206 BC to AD 220) and pre-Han periods.

All Chinese verse, then and later, was built of two sentence structures. The first is subject plus predicate (S+P). The second is topic plus comment (T+C) {4}

For those who have forgotten their high-school grammar, a *predicate* is part of a sentence or clause containing a verb and *saying something about the subject*: e.g. the

geese *sink into blue mists*. A topic *plus comment* example would be 'geese *in the blue sky*'.

It is worth noting that subject plus predicate sentences (S+P) are much less precise and restrictive in Chinese, because the language works without our indications of tense, case, number, gender and the like. In everyday conversation the Chinese make themselves clear by various constructions and expectations, but in their poetry these matters were left far more undecided, obliging the reader to puzzle out the meaning by imagining the scene and its elements. This is one reason why Ezra Pound and other Modernists thought Chinese an inherently more poetical language than English, and which led them to champion images over a sense spelt out by syntax in their own poetry.

The topic plus comment (T+C) structure occurs in English, but is far more common in Chinese, particularly in Chinese poetry, where it may describe the outward scene but more commonly denotes the poet's state of mind or response to the scene.

As Chinese poetry evolved into different genres, so also evolved the composition of these (S+P) and (T+C) structures. The various genres — early *Shijing*, the *Sao* and *Fu* poetries of the Han, the pentasyllabic and heptasyllabic *Shi* of the Tang and later, regulated verse, the *Qu* poetry and the *Ci* — are all characterized by slightly different S+P and T+C structures, specific to the genre and essential to them, without which the genre could not be written.

The different structures are most obviously reflected in line lengths. The early *Shijing* verse of generally four characters to the line was quite limited in what it could say, either in denoting the sense or evoking the appropriate emotions. In contrast, pentasyllabic verse was much more powerful, and heptasyllabic verse even more so. With their irregular line lengths, *Ci* and *Qu* poetry enjoyed further freedoms. Also to be noted is that these S+P and T+C structures were *additional* to both the rules governing tone patterns in regulated verse *and* the tune orderings in *Ci* poetry. Chinese poetry is thus exceptionally ordered by rules and expectations, all operating concomitantly on interlinked levels.

The key point is this: Such sentence structures are the building blocks of Chinese verse, what makes it what it is, and what needs to be in some way echoed in English if translations are to properly reflect the different Chinese poetry genres. How we achieve that aim, or whether we can at all, is the continuing theme of this volume. I shall approach it practically, moreover, by seeing what can actually be written, rather than wade through the many theories of prosody, which, as we will see, are immensely complicated and contested. {5}

### 3.3 Tetrasyllabic *Shi*

Firstly, we have to appreciate that the rhythm of Chinese verse is a semantic one, strong but quite unlike European verse, which has five metrical systems, quantitative, syllabic, accentual, accentual-syllabic and free. {5} All

European systems are based on the intrinsic properties of their individual words, moreover, either the weight or length of time taken in speaking the syllables, or the stress they habitually take. Traditional English verse is predominantly accentual-syllabic, for example, but contemporary English verse often adopts free forms, adjusting the rules as required. But there is no concept of stress on or intrinsic weight in the syllable of Chinese verse. On the contrary, all Chinese words in the literary language are monosyllables, but they group semantically as one or two syllables. (True, there are tones, which drastically change both the meanings and how the words sound, but they have nothing to say on rhythm as such.)

The semantic rhythm, as the term suggests, is based on *meaning*, on the pattern of predictable pauses between words comprising a sentence or line of verse. The French alexandrine, for example, groups twelve syllables into an end-rhymed line, with a noticeable pause or caesura after the sixth syllable. Chinese poetry is simpler. All words are heard either as a simple word on its own, the monosyllable, or as a two-word compound called the binome. Thus the Chinese in the first line of Poem 1 (Mao 6) is 桃之夭夭. In pinyin this is *táo zhī yāo yāo*, and in English *peach of tender tender*. Metrically, this would be seen as a 2+2 line: two disyllables making up the tetrameter: *peach of : tender tender*. This has a topic plus comment structure, moreover: T+C. The third line in the same poem is 之子于歸. In pinyin, this is *zhī zǐ yú guī*, and in English *this girl going-to marry*. Again this is a 2+2 line, *this girl : going-to marry*, but the sentence structure has now subject plus predicate structure: S+P.

From these simple structures — monosyllable or binome, T+C or S+P — is built all the poetry of the *Shijing*. Often the T+C structure was the most effective, bringing together two disparate segments, the external object and the internal response. In addition, and throughout, there was copious rhyme, pararhyme, assonance and repetition, elements that are found throughout later Chinese poetry, and create such headaches for translators who aim for more than the prose sense.

We start with other translations of this poem, which is listed as Poem 1 in Volume One (Mao 6). The first stanza {6}:

a. Peach trees are fresh and young  
 Its flowers are flamboyant  
 This maiden is going to be a bride  
 And she will get along with her future home

b. The peach tree is young and elegant;  
 brilliant are its flowers.  
 This young lady is going to her future home,  
 And will order well her chamber and house.

c. The peach tree budding and tender,  
 Vivid and bright its flowers.  
 This girl is going to be married,  
 And fit for her chamber and house.

Rendering c is rhythmically the most accomplished, with pleasing feminine line ends, but none of the renderings gives much indication of the original repetition. The Chinese, pinyin and word-for-word English of the stanza are:

桃之夭夭	(táo zhī yāo yāo)	peach of tender tender T+C
灼灼其華	(zhuó zhuó qí huá)	burning burning her splendour T+C
之子于歸	(zhī zǐ yú guī)	of child concerning marry S+P
宜其室家	(yí qí shì jiā)	suitable her room home S+P



Since the original is rhymed, we might follow the practice in the translation:

Tender, tender is the peach,  
and ardent, ardent are her powers:  
the girl who makes her marriage vows  
conforms to chamber and the house.

We should also note that the original distinctions between T+C and S+P structures have been maintained, though the word order is reversed in line one.

### 3.4 *Regulated Shi Verse*

Later poetry was far more complicated. Here is Du Fu's 'Spring Prospect': Poem 41: {7}

春望

国破山河在 城春草木深  
感时花溅泪 恨别鸟惊心  
烽火连三月 家书抵万金  
白头搔更短 浑欲不胜簪

As transliterated by Chinese-Poems.com writers, {8} the pronunciation is:

chun wàng

guó pò shān hé zài  
chéng chūn cǎo mù shēn  
gān shí huā jiàn lèi  
hèn bié niǎo jīng xīn  
fēng huǒ lián sān yuè

jia shu di wàn jin  
bái tóu sao gèng duan  
hún yù bù sheng zan

Zong-Qi Cai also gives the Middle Chinese pronunciation  
{7}

kwok pò shan hé zài  
chéng chun cao mù shen  
(gan) shí hua jiàn lèi  
hèn bjet niao jing xin  
(feng) huo lián san yuè  
jia shu di wàn jin  
(baek) tóu sao gèng duan  
hùn yowk pwot (shèng) zan

Which is similar to Alex Forman's own Middle Chinese  
rendering under a different transliteration system: {9}

kwek1 phè1 sran2b ghe1d dzèi1a  
dzye3b tshywen3b tsháu1 muk1b syem3  
kám1a dzyi3d hwa2 tsàn3b lwì3c  
ghèn1 pat3bx táu4 keing3a sem3  
phung3c hwé1 lan3b sam1b ngwat3a  
ka2 syuo3b téi4 màn3a kem3x  
beik2a dou1 sau1 kèing2a twán1  
ghwèn1 yuk3c pet3a syeng3 tshrem3

There is little disagreement on the words: {7}

1.	country	broken	mountain	river.	remain
2.	city	spring	grass	wood.	thick
3.	feel	time	flower.	shed	tear
4.	hate	separation	bird.	startle	heart
5.	beacon	fire	span.	three	month

- |    |        |             |          |                |           |
|----|--------|-------------|----------|----------------|-----------|
| 6. | home   | letter      | equal.   | ten_thousand   | gold_tael |
| 7. | white  | head        | scratch. | even           | shorter   |
| 8. | simply | be_about_to | not.     | able (to hold) | hairpin   |

. marks a minor pause between a monosyllabic word and a disyllabic compound. End rhymes in level tone occur in lines 2, 4, 6 and 8. There are no end rhymes in oblique tone. We should know that the poem was written during the terrible An Lushan rebellion (AD 755-763), that the city in ruins is the once splendid capital of Chang'an, and that a hairpin was used to hold the official's cap in place.

The first thing to notice is that this is a poem in the so-called 'recent-style *Shi*' (*Jintishi*) in the *Wulu* type (five characters) of the *Lushi* form (eight lines). What we should notice next is the high concentration of content words: the only empty words are 'even', 'simply', 'about' and 'not'. The content words call up emotions and thoughts from a past millennium of use, just as poetry in English uses 'heart', 'spring', etc. as a shorthand for the educated reader, though in Chinese the allusions are more complex and subtle. Lines 5-8 have the subject plus predicate structure. Lines 1-4 are composite, topic plus comment structure being followed by the subject plus predicate structure.

Unlike western Imagist poems, which break their syntactical connections, this poem (and Chinese poetry generally) strengthens them.

Every line here consists of a disyllabic unit and a following trisyllabic element. Between the opening and closing

couplets, both in parallel, the interior two couplets must be parallel in theme and grammar (more strictly show similarity, analogy and/or contrast in these features). 'Feel' is parallel with 'hate', 'time' with 'separation' (one in time and one in space), 'flower' with 'bird' (natural world), 'tear' with 'startle' (emotional response), 'beacon fire' with 'home letter' (messages) 'three' with 'ten thousand' (numbers), 'month' with 'gold' (measures).

Parallel and non-parallel couplets alternate.

The poem shows the typical progression of Chinese poems. The required opening (*qi*) sets the time, place and theme. What is human (country) is set against what is natural (hill and water). What is broken by men is set against what is unbroken in nature. The contrast between human destruction and nature's luxuriance is again implied by the second line.

The required second couplet (*sheng*) is more complicated. By turning away from the exterior world and omitting obvious subjects, Du Fu allows several interpretations:

I feel this wretched time so badly  
that even flowers make me shed tears.  
I hate separation so much  
that a bird startles my heart.

Feeling affected by seasonal flowers  
I shed tears.  
Hating to see the separated bird  
my heart is startled by its call.

As I feel the wretched time  
the flowers shed tears.  
As I hate separation,  
birds are startled in their heart.

Feeling the wretched time  
flowers shed tears.  
Hating separation  
birds are startled in their hearts.

Each interpretation is equally valid and applicable, but distinct perspectives are offered on human suffering. In the first two interpretations, nature is indifferent to human suffering, a time-honoured view. In the third interpretation human suffering is part of nature. In the fourth interpretation man is part of nature and it is therefore nature rather than man that knows sorrow.

The third couplet exhibits the required turning away (*zhua*), here from nature to the human world. The beacon fire (warning of nomad invasions) is contrasted with the wished-for message from home. The three months (a long time) is paralleled by the thousand gold taels (a large amount) — which is linked to catastrophic events and so to a terribly long time.

The final couplet rounds off (*he*) the poem by paralleling the poet's careworn appearance, ravaged by time and grief, with a country equally affected. It's part of the Confucian vision of unity in man, country and universe.

The tone pattern is: {7}

1.	O	O	X	X	O
2.	X	X	O	O	X
3.	(O)	X	X	O	O
4.	O	O	X	X	X
5.	(X)	O	X	X	O
6.	X	X	O	O	X
7.	(O)	X	X	O	O
8.	O	O	O	(X)	X

Where O is an oblique tone, and X is a level tone. Oblique tones refer to the third and fourth tones in Mandarin (falling-rising and the short-falling) and the entering tone in Middle Chinese (generally ending in p, t or k). Level tones refer to the first and second tones in Mandarin (level and rising tones). The pattern of oblique and level tones was governed by strict rules. Simplifying a little, the first demands the maximum contrast of tones within a line. In a pentameter line, this means the tones must appear in opposing pairs: a pair of level tones (X X), a pair of oblique tones ( O O ) and a single level or oblique tone to tip the balance. The second rule demands a maximum contrast between the two lines of each couplet. If one line is X X O O X, the following line must be O O X X O. The third rule demands a partial equivalence between two adjacent couplets. If one couplet is X X O X X and O O X X O, the following couplet must be something like X X X O O and O O O X X. In practice, because these rules can be so difficult to follow, a little licence was usually afforded the poet, as lines 3, 5 and 7 show.

It's also worth noting that the tones applying to words used in Tang and Song poetry do not invariably correspond to modern pronunciation. In fact the *first*, ping

(平, also called *ge*: see below) or level tone of pre-modern Chinese poetry corresponds to the first *two* tones of today's standard Mandarin pronunciation, and the pre-modern *second* tone *shang*:(上) corresponds to the falling-rising tone that is today's the *third* tone of modern pronunciation. That leaves *qu* (去), the *third* or falling tone to correspond to today's Mandarin *fourth* tone, and the *entering* tone, *ru* (入), to make up the rather different pre-modern *fourth*, which is now unrecognised or lost in modern Mandarin (but kept in modern Cantonese). All entering tone words ended with an unaspirated p, k or t consonant. Commentaries on *Jintishi* poems, and even general works on Chinese poetry, will often identify words pronounced with the entering tone.

Finally, in what will seem over-complicated to the common reader, but is nonetheless important in translation, the *ping* was classified as the pre-modern *ge* or level tone, while the other three (*shang*, *qu* and *ru*) counted as the oblique or inflected tone, *ze*. {10}

Even this, unfortunately, is a gross simplification, but complications generally remain academic since they can't be reproduced in English. {4} But we should note that today's Mandarin first tone *yī* and second tone *yí* were level tones. And today's Mandarin third tone *yǐ* and fourth tone *yì* were oblique tones. {11}) Regulated verse did not allow the same word to be used more than once in the poem, moreover. Finally, to add to the difficulties, words in the Han and earlier dynasties were not necessarily pronounced as they were in Tang times. There had come a shift in pronunciation between these two dynasties, i.e.

from early to middle Chinese, so that pronunciation of early poems is further cut off from the modern pronunciation, even though the written characters remain the same. {12}

Rhyme is another vexing matter. Most poems rhyme, commonly, at least in regulated verse, on the level tones concluding even-numbered lines. Short poems often use the same rhyme throughout, but longer poems may be broken into verses marked by a change in rhyme. Rhyme is easier in Chinese verse than ours because most words do not end in a consonant, thus requiring only a correspondence in vowels. That correspondence may be broadened further, as pronunciation was not constant across China, as is still the case today. Yet the devil is in the details. The vowels in the entering tone noted above (i.e. preceding the final p, k or t) changed drastically in pronunciation, so -auk, for example, became -ue, -uo, -ao, or -u. And while the final -m simply became -n, and the -ng remained unchanged, the vowels *preceding* them often changed under the influence of the preceding medial semivowels, so that -in became -n, -en or -un.) Rhyme was only between words of the same grouping, most commonly belonging to the *ge* (level) tone category in regulated verse, but on occasions to the *ze* (oblique or inflected) tone. Tones thus entered into rhyme rules, though occasionally, a *ge* tone was replaced by a *ze* tone, and vice-versa. {12-13}

Several consequences follow:

1. One cannot always tell the rhyme scheme of a pre-



modern poem from a first glance at the text. Pinyin rhymes may not correspond to the original sounds.

2. Given the pronunciation changes of both words and their tonal values, and also the non-correspondence of pinyin characters to European pronunciation, any attempt of ours to read a pre-modern Chinese poem may fall well short of how the poem was actually intended to sound.

3. As always in translation, image and thought are the easiest to bring across, but that does not mean that sound was unimportant, only that various aspects of sound in an ancient and very differently pronounced language are difficult to be sure about, and practically impossible to duplicate. Image, sound, meanings and allusion are all important ingredients of Chinese poetry, therefore, and the translator often has to be guided by expert commentaries in arriving at the best balance of possibilities.

Tone and rhyme are integral to the poem's 'texture of meaning', of course, and not an obstacle course that the gifted poet has somehow to navigate around.

Chinese poems are not always so complicated as the Du Fu example we were looking at, but most are highly stylised, and to some extent artificial.

Translation suggestions I will leave for the present, simply observing that many translations of the *Spring Prospect* poem have fallen at the first fence, which is to accurately render the simple prose sense. In place of something like:

The country is broken, but mountains and rivers remain.  
The city enters spring, grass and trees have grown thick.  
Feeling the time, flowers shed tears.  
Hating separation, a bird startles the heart.  
Beacon fires span over three months,  
A family letter equals ten thousand taels of gold.  
My white hairs, as I scratch them, grow more sparse,  
Simply becoming unable to hold hairpin.

We can make a composite of published examples:

A kingdom smashed, its hills and rivers still here,  
Spring in the city, plants and trees grow deep. {14}  
Moved by the moment, a flower's splashed with tears,  
Mourning parting, a bird startles the heart. {15}  
The war-fires have burned for three months.  
Any word from home is worth ten thousand coins. {16}  
My white hair is even scarcer from scratching.  
And can barely hold a hairpin. {17}

'Smashed' has the wrong connotations: China was torn apart by civil war, not hit with a hammer. Line 2 misses the point: the city has been abandoned to vegetation. Line 3 has the flower apprehending the moment. Line 4 is over-visceral and seems not to understand that the poet feels abandoned and as fragile as a startled bird. It's not war fires (line 5) that have burned but beacons warning of approaching danger. The poem does not say 'coins' (line 6) but 'taels of gold': coins in Tang times were the low-denomination copper cash. Line 7 misses the parallel between ravaged poet and country, as does line 8, where the reference is to proprietary, to the Tang bureaucracy destroyed by the An Lushan civil war, and not to personal vanity.

One culprit may be Ezra Pound, whose translations could be very free, introducing the notion that the translator's sensibilities took precedent over accuracy. {18} Arthur Waley's renderings were accompanied by notes indicating the structure of Chinese poetry, though these structures were (understandably) not carried into his own renderings, which were generally accurate and pleasing — indeed are still pleasing, though rather thin as verse, degenerating to unimaginative prose in lesser hands. {19-21} Waley was a useful ally to Modernism, of course, and his plain, prose-like renderings presented themselves as transparent honesty, though in fact containing as much interpretation as any other translation must — particularly where the *Shijing* were concerned, where meaning can be very gnomic.

Chinese poetry thus gave new opportunities to Modernism, which in an early phase adopted the primacy of the image and threw off the shackles of Victorian versifying. Modernist poets saw themselves as translating in a fresher, more honest and contemporary manner. Academics could produce very pleasing renderings, hardly inferior to those of professional poets. And educators could point to the universality of the heart's affections, without any reference to tedious matters like rhyme, metre, alliteration and other leftovers from the European tradition. No doubt the new translations could be somewhat prosaic, but previous renderings were hardly inspiring, the Chinese originals being all too often bent into conventional English forms with contrived rhymes. {22}

### 3.5 *Ci* Poetry

*Ci* poetry employs 2 3, 2 2 3 and 4 3 structures, but, unlike previous genres, adopts various song rhythms rather than an unvarying semantic rhythm. There are some four hundred of these songs, which play no part in establishing the themes or moods expressed by the words, incidentally. Thus the same song rhythm could be and was used for a lament, mischievous comment, martial bravado, etc. *Ci* rhythms used pre-existing *Shi* rhythms, moreover, but also created radically new ones. Most importantly, the key structure in *Ci* and *Qu* poetry was not the couplet, but the strophe, an indefinite number of lines expressing the same theme. Thus Li Yu's *Crows Call at Night* (Poem 80), the title refers to the tune, not to the theme of the poem. Its concluding lines are:

剪不斷 (jiǎn bú duàn) cut not break

理還亂 (lǐ huán luàn) order still confusion

是離愁 (shì lí chóu) is leave sorrow

別是一般滋味在心頭 (bié shì yì bān zī wèi zài xīn tóu) another special one kind taste  
flavour at heart end

Each line of these lines has a S+P structure, but, additionally, the first two lines form the subject S, and the last two lines form the double predicate P, the last being also an amplified comment. The first three lines also have a 1 3 rhythm, and the last has a 4 3 rhythm. Clearly complicated. To keep the rhyme scheme which is aa bb, I have expanded the lines to an interwoven a a b b b, and got them to refer back to each other through the rhyme:

Hurt, the heart, it does not break,  
nor, smothered over, does it take  
    on the happiness it wore.  
Parting, grief: new flavours where  
    the heart tastes other than before.

Two points. As we have noted above, such organized renderings are only possible with traditional verse techniques, which may seem over-formal today, but then Chinese poetry, as we shall see even in *Qu* poetry below, indeed *was* refined and very tightly organized, and not as contemporary translation supposes. Secondly, while these varying line lengths and interwoven rhyme schemes will distinguish *Ci* poetry from *Shi*, what do we do with *Ci* poems that seem quite regular? Here are the opening lines of Wu Wenying's To the Tune 'Prelude to the Oriole's Song', Poem 93:

殘寒正欺病酒 (cán hán zhèng qī bìng jiǔ) lingering chill just now plague sick with wine  
掩沉香繡戶 (yǎn chén xiāng xiù hù) close aloewood wrought door  
燕來晚、飛入西城 (yàn lái wǎn fēi rù xī chéng) swallow come late fly into west city  
似說春事遲暮 (sì shuō chūn shì chí mù) as if tell spring matter late evening  
畫船載、清明過卻 (huà chuán zài qīng míng guò què) painted boat carry Qing Ming passed over  
晴煙冉冉吳宮樹 (qíng yān rǎn rǎn wú gōng shù) clear mist luxuriant supple Wu Palace tree  
念羈情游蕩 (niàn jī qíng yóu dàng) reflect traveler feeling drift sway  
隨風化為輕絮 (suí fēng huà wéi qīng xù) follow wind change into light catkin

Which I have translated as:

This wretched cold still lingers on,  
    and I have drunk enough of wine.  
Behind me now I close a door  
    of finely fashioned aloe wood.

The swallows have come late this year  
into the city's western wards:  
the spring indeed is almost gone,  
or so it would be understood.  
5. Our Qingming festival of painted  
boats has also slipped away,  
and mists round Wu's old palace trees  
have thinned until there's nothing there.  
I think somehow of travellers  
unsettled, lifting with the wind,  
as catkins do, so ever changing,  
insubstantial as the air.

The answer, I think, is to work within certain conventions for the themes applying. Here the poet is telling a story rather than evoking specific emotions.

### 3.6 *Qu* Poetry

*Qu* poetry, which enjoyed great popularity in Yuan times, was similar to *Ci* poetry, but the tunes are slightly different (and more limited, only about 160 in all) and more radically structured. Ma Zhiyuan's *Autumn Thoughts*, for example, Poem 84 in Volume One, has its first three lines as triple T+ C structures:

枯藤老樹昏鴉 (kū téng lǎo shù hūn yā) dried-up vine / long-standing tree / twilight  
crow

小橋流水人家 (xiǎo qiáo liú shuǐ rén jiā) small bridge / flow water / person home

古道西風瘦馬 (gǔ dào xī fēng shòu mǎ) old road / west wind / thin horse

夕陽西下，斷腸人在天涯 (xī yáng xī xià duàn cháng rén zài tiān yá) sun sets in  
west, heart-broken person located end-of-world

The one rhyme is used throughout, suggesting that we translate something like:

The dried-up vines, long-standing trees and evening  
crows,  
a cottage, bridge that's small, where water flows:  
along the ancient road the west wind blows,  
and westwards too the sun goes down  
    on people saddened, far, where no one knows.

We have not touched on diction or word choice in this chapter, but it's worth pointing out that, though *Qu* poetry is known — uniquely so — for using the common tongue rather than the literary language, this feature is not always easy to bring across. Attempts at coarsening the English can seem contrived, and fail to bring any poetry whatever across. As Poem 84 indicates, *Qu* poetry is still Chinese poetry, i.e. highly organized and written to certain rules.

### 3.7. Chinese Poetry General Characteristics

Classical Chinese poems differ in several features from European poems, and these features are crucial to comprehension and translation. The features changed as Chinese poetry evolved, moreover, and could be specific to the type of poem being written, so that the following is only the briefest overview.

1. Ambiguity. Key aspects may be missing from the text, often the where, the time, who did what to whom, etc. All these will be disclosed by seeing the poem in its cultural context, and by following the hints and associations of the words given — or disclosed as much as the poet intends. Discretion, refinement, allusion — these are part of the

cultural tradition, and readers by Tang times were expected to work things out for themselves. Indeed that slow making sense of the words, and the shadowy ambiguities beyond those words, was part of the poetic experience. Poetry often served to suggest the shadowy and transient existence of the world apprehended through the senses, not the clear-cut, no-nonsense terms of a government decree.

2. Syntactical construction. As we have noted, the words of each line of the poem are arranged in one of two ways, as subject plus predicate or as topic plus comment.

3. Parallelism. Lines commonly repeat themselves in Chinese verse, expressing the same meaning in a slightly different way or with different imagery. In four-line poems it was usual for the interior lines to show parallelism, but here line 2 repeats the freshness comment of line 1, and line 4 repeats the subject and predicate sense of line 3.

4. Progression. Chinese poems commonly showed a four-stage progression, from *qi* (begin or arise) to *cheng* (continue) to *zhuan* (make a turn) and *he* (conclude or enclose). This was noted in the Du Fu example given above.

5. Rhythm, or, more exactly, semantic rhythm. In the early *Shi* (Zhou dynasty) poetry, of which the above is an example, the tetrasyllabic line forms two disyllabic segments, often designated 2 + 2. But as poetry became more ambitious, and the lines longer, a greater variety of measures became possible. In the Lyrics of the Chou



(Period of Warring States) for example, the line often lengthens to a 3 +2 rhythm, where the 3 may be 1 +2 or 2 +1. In the first case the initial word is followed by a minor pause (.) and the second two words form a semantic binome: 'oh. whom linger'. The 'whom linger' is still two separate monosyllabic words, but the sense links them as a disyllable. After the third word may come a pause, indicated by the Chinese word *xi*, between topic and comment: 'oh. whom linger *xi* middle isle'. {4} Even more rules come in later poetry.

6. Rhyme. Chinese poems generally rhyme, often on even lines, but sometimes only approximately, by repetition of similar vowel sounds only, rather than the vowel and concluding consonant expected in English verse. There was good reason for this looseness. Chinese poems have short lines, and poets did not want to be too restricted in word use. They were also conscious that pronunciation had changed over the centuries, and indeed differed between dialects across the country. In the regulated new style poetry of Tang times (*Jintishi*), the poet had to alternate level and oblique tones between and within the lines. A first rule demanded that the tones of a pentasyllabic line appear as opposite pairs. A second rule required that the tonal combination of the first line be antithetically matched by that of the closing line of the poem. A third rule demanded a partial equivalence between two adjacent couplets. The matter is technical, complicated in detail, but indicates how remote from simple heart-felt simplicity was Chinese poetry at the zenith of its powers. Such poetry was read in public, of course, indeed was expected of educated officials, as

though impromptu on important occasions, but the literary language was nonetheless a dead language, intensely conservative and backward-looking — something translators need to remember when casting their renderings into aggressively contemporary forms.

7. Rhetoric. Far from simply letting images speak for themselves, Chinese poems, even from earliest times, employed various tropes, including metaphor, simile, synecdoche (part representing whole), alliteration, onomatopoeia and puns.

8. Allusion. Chinese poems commonly allude to other poems on similar themes, not by only by selective quotation from older poets but weaving them into the lines so that the themes are emphasized, contrasted, undermined or subtly made to change their shape.

9. Imagery and its requirements. By Tang times, Chinese poems had accumulated many content words (*shizi*) with a marked visual aspect, the continual use of which evoked thought, emotion and even remembered scraps of history. New style, *Regulated Shi* poems particularly tended to maximize the imagistic content at the expense of so called 'empty' words, though it is the latter that are needed for full understanding in western poetry. Chinese in fact goes much further than the focus on images, the so-called Imagism of early Modernist poets like Ezra Pound. This brief but still influential movement adopted three requirements: the vers-libre principle that the phrase is the unit of composition, the Imagist principle that a poem may build its effects out of things it sets

before the mind's eye by simply naming them, and the lyrical principle that words or names, being ordered in time, are bound together and recalled into each other's presence by recurrent sounds. Chinese poetry, in fact, works rather differently. There is the linkage by semantic rhythm noted in 5 above. There are also many expectations, styles and traditions. And there are strict rules governing the use of couplets, noted above and illustrated further in the analyses below.

### 3.8 Further Dimensions

The literary tongue of China was in truth a dead language; {6} not only in being no longer spoken, but by lacking (naturally) any recording from the time it was spoken. {24} Writing poetry may have been seen as an act of loyalty to the legitimate government, or the Chinese view of good governance. {25} Chinese poems commonly elide particulars: the scene, the timing, the who is doing something to whom or what, and sometimes the verb itself. {26} Word play and metonymy are common. {27} Images may be restricted but serve larger purposes, notably to reinforce the Chinese world-view. These often serve as metaphors. {28} Chinese poetry has a strong sense of rhythm, reinforced by tonal organisation. {29} Rhyme was near universal from earliest times, and it is through rhyming dictionaries that we learn how middle Chinese was pronounced. {30} Image is important in Chinese poetry, but not all-important. Other aspects play key roles, and western translators have often imagined etymological subtleties that are not really present. {31}

### 3.9 Influences

Tradition ruled imperial China, in government, social affairs and the arts. Complexity in the last was continually being scaled up for effect and reduced for convenience.

{32}

Most critically, throughout its history, poetry has been repeatedly influenced by music, with songs being taken over by the literati, refined into greater elegance (though still showing emotional restraint, a sympathy with human nature, and lack of malice toward others), and then returned to folk songs and everyday speech for new inspiration and appeal. {32}

Religion and philosophy are other influences on Chinese poetry, but most important of all is politics: governments from Zhou times took a keen and necessary interest in poetry. Everyday songs reflected government popularity, and officials toured the country, collecting these pieces and their musical scores. A department of music was even set up, the *Yuefu* or Music Bureau, which languished in the barbarities of the Period of Warring States and the first Qin empire, but was revived by the Han emperor Wudi in 125 BC. {32}

By portraying the essence of correct behaviour, poetry therefore lay at the heart of the examination system. Confucius commented favourably on the *Shijing*, or Book of Songs, which tradition claims were his own selection

from many circulating at the time. When the Zhou empire decayed into princely states, that of Chu was particularly prosperous and encouraged popular religious songs that were collected under the title *Jiuge* (*Chiu Ko* or nine songs), becoming in time the model for a new genre. The following century saw Qu Yuan's *Li sao* (Encountering Sorrows), when an unmistakable personal element enters Chinese poetry. {32} The Hanlin Academy, set up by the seventh Tang emperor to study the classics, had many celebrated poets among its officials, {33} and that close affiliation of government with literature continued in succeeding dynasties. Women became celebrated poets in Song, Yuan and Ming times. {34} The Qianlong emperor alone had composed over 40,000 poems by his death in 1799, for example, though all were rather bad. {35}

Some associations were more in the way of private clubs, as was that of the West Lake in southern Song times, to which the best scholars of Hangchow belonged. The West Lake Poetry Society held competitions of poetry in free and regulated forms, and the winning entries enjoyed a wide circulation. {36} Later, in post Yuan times, the Society re-emerged as the prestigious Fenghu Academy of the Ming and Qing dynasties. The subordinate Bureau of Translators also appeared in Ming times, but was more official, though also staffed by the literati, many of whom agitated for political reform. {37} In short, poetry was an accomplishment of all educated men in China and surrounding nations, with outstanding individuals too numerous to mention here. Ritual and appropriate behaviour governed most aspects of life, but new thoughts and policies also emerged in its complex

bureaucracy. Poets and the literati strengthened traditions by compiling histories of previous emperors and dynasties, detailed and not always critical, but they also joined movements for change that sought the emperor's ear.

Poets have been patronized by royal courts from time immemorial, east and west, but the Chinese emperors often prided themselves on writing excellent poetry themselves. Li Yu (937-78), the last emperor of the Southern Tang, widened the range of *Ci* poetry. {37} Huizong (1082-1135), the penultimate emperor of the Northern Song, an astonishingly gifted calligrapher and painter, was also noted for his poetry, though not perhaps for the statesmanship that lost the northern provinces to the Jurchen. {38} But even the wildest of the Jurchen themselves, Wanyan Liang (1122-61), so cruel and dissolute that posterity denied him the title of emperor, wrote poetry that was far from contemptible. {39} At the other end of the scale were many poets of humble origin, or who were content to become so when retired from official duties. Tao Qian (also known as Tao Yuanming, 365-427) pioneered a rustic poetry whose simplicity and directness became an invigorating influence in an art that was always in danger of being refined away into melodic emptiness. {40}

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## 4. CHINESE POETRY: THEMES

### 4.1 Introduction

In contrast to their European counterparts, most poets in China were busy officials in daily contact with the people and/or the governing classes. They were intimately familiar with the philosophy of the sages as that knowledge was tested in the civil service examinations and indeed made the five strands of the Chinese outlook on the world: spiritual existence, morality, harmony, intuition, and practice. {1} In general, Chinese governments followed some version of Confucianism, Buddhism and/or Legalism. The first stressed the inherent goodness of men, who could be persuaded by example, the second recognized the need for understanding in this elusory world of shadows, and the third focused on the evil in men, who had to be governed by coercion and savage punishment. Some poets, notably Li Bai, were also drawn to Daoism, which divined the life spirit in the world — elusive, individually expressed and liberating — which might also be espoused when scholars escaped the daily grind of officialdom, through recreation, retirement or periodic banishment from court.

From Daoism (or more strictly, Mohism) developed the Chinese interest in language, logic and science, more extensive than once realised, {2} but the Confucian notion of correct naming still prevailed. An emperor was only worthy of the title to the extent he behaved like one, and a similar propriety underlay a poet's use of words.

Chinese poems use single words for abstract notions in ways European, at least modern European poetry, does not. How those words interconnected was a legitimate topic, indeed often explored in poetry, but poets never played fast and loose with language in the manner Postmodernism encourages. Words had a social purpose, and poets were guardians of that purpose. Words did not have a mystic self-rootedness in irreducible truth, however. Word usage in Chinese poetry changes, as would be expected over three millennia. Older words drop out, and each evolving style has its own unique patterns of word usage, with some words being more used than others. {3} Nor were poetry texts immune from being tampered with: {4} well-known poems were continually cannibalised by later poets.

The early poetry was not primarily a means of transmitting knowledge otherwise inaccessible, but rather a way of resolving the inner stirrings of the mind and then channelling them into clear intent. {5} As James Lui summarises them, {6} the later Chinese poetry sought many ends: to encourage personal morality, reflect the people's feelings towards government and expose social evils, aspire to *ya* (refinement, correctness and elegance), imitate the ancients that also included wide reading, obey the metrical rules without becoming too ornate and artificial, and put more stress on theme than style. At its most basic, poetry was how the poet felt — an essential sincerity that can never be overlooked in translation.

Finally, for those who'd see Chinese poetry as simple expressions of mundane matters, it is worth stressing

that, in the three thousand years of its existence, Chinese poetry has expressed a wide variety of things, which are commonly grouped under eleven themes of life: namely love and courtship, the beautiful woman, the abandoned woman, eulogy and admonition, hardship and injustice, the wandering man, landscape, farming and reclusion, an imagined journey to the Celestial World, shamanist and Buddhist depiction of things, and remembrances. {7}

## 4.2 Chinese Thought in More Detail

As happened in other parts of the world, in India and in Europe, the arts, money, government and religion became intertwined, and indeed shared many common purposes. All organized individuals for public ends, and all used ideologies, if by that term we mean the intellectual foundations of the customs, beliefs, obligations and understandings that integrate and give a common purpose to society. Examined closely, many ideologies are problematic, little more than myths, irrational frameworks that rest on nothing more fundamental than the ways men have traditionally thought and acted together. But, however fanciful or contrary to the facts, the ideologies were useful, sometimes essential. Few now believe in the divine right of kings, for example, but European countries in the sixteenth century most certainly did, and would have been hard pressed to find alternatives. Most nations now separate church and state, but that was not the case in medieval Christendom, and is not the case in Iran today. {8}

Ideologies must serve a practical end, which is to create and maintain societies that are broadly acceptable to their members. The power of kings was gradually usurped by the merchant classes in Europe, but persisted into the twentieth century as the divine status of the emperor in Japan and China. From that status descended the panoply of power: how government functioned, and the obligations each citizen felt towards government and fellow citizens. However irrational they now appear to westerners, those divinities were part of common belief, and so acquired an extensive justification in the thought, literature and art of the times. {8-9}

Literature conserves thought but also perpetuates accepted attitudes to government. Coinage, to give a tangible example, coincides with the growth of armies, and of taxation to pay them, in China, India and Europe. Chinese knives, spades and round coins only appear in any number during the Period of the Warring States (403-221 BC). Not coincidentally, it was also the period of philosophers, who countered Legalist arguments that states needed strong laws resting on military coercion. {10} The philosophers tried to put back what materialists had banished: the spiritual nature of man. Mo Di noted that the costs of warfare outdid its benefits, and Confucius spoke of benevolence and righteous behaviour. Because such cold calculations of cost and benefit that underlay societies employing coinage could divorce man from his larger nature, the spiritual dimension had to be rationally re-conceived in material entities (religion and philosophy) and conveyed to coinage. Coinage in particular should embody conspicuous trust, i.e. their features should

demonstrate that the coins could indeed be used to pay taxes, public fees and legal penalties. {8} Art too came to represent power, authority and authenticity, and where India and the near east used precious metals for money, China used base metals but came to specify how landscapes should be painted and its poetry written.

Writers on warfare in early China are quite specific about the aims of warfare: it is waged for material gain. The same drive for profit drove the war economies of countries like India, though Kautilya dressed the matter up in morality and justice. Thucydides likewise spoke of honour and national prestige in debating the massacre of the Melians who had refused to pay their dues to the Athenian empire, but the economic consequences of allowing the empire to fragment in this way were also perfectly clear. {8}

That close connection of coinage with war and slavery, David Graeber sees as an inevitable component of successful foreign policy in these harsh times. Wealthy Phoenician cities, pacific in nature and slow to issue coins in the face of growing hostility from Babylon, the Greek city-states and Rome, were one by one destroyed. When Sidon was taken by the Babylonians, some 40,000 inhabitants committed suicide. The silver needed to pay Alexander's mercenary armies was looted from Achaemenid treasuries, and those armies, when they destroyed Sidon in 322 BC, sold 30,000 of its inhabitants into slavery. At the end of the Punic Wars, when Rome finally eliminated its old foe, Carthage was levelled and

some hundreds of thousands were killed, raped or sold into slavery. {10}

Captured Chinese cities fared little better in the period of the Warring States, when all inhabitants, women and children included, were commonly massacred. Shi Huangdi, the ruler of the successful Qin state, waded through continual bloodshed to create the first Chinese empire. In 293 BC he defeated the Han and Wei kingdoms, taking 240,000 heads in the process, and then another 150,000 in a subsequent campaign. In 260 BC he defeated the Chao, taking as bounty another 400,000 heads. {11} Those same methods were used to centralise the empire he had created, but the peasant founder of the subsequent Han dynasty, who took the title of Gaozu (r.202-195 BC) also kept power firmly in his own hands. The energetic Wudi (r.141-87 BC) confiscated the estates of nobles, curbed the power of merchants, and sent armies into central Asia.

Most Chinese were simple farmers, unconcerned by power struggles, but poets were often attached to courts, and these could be perilous positions. The strong-willed Empress Lu took control when her husband Gaozu died, promoting her relatives to positions of power, but, when in time the Empress died, wide swathes of those relatives and their families were executed. Wang Mang usurped the throne in 9 BC, imposed policies that displaced peasants and landlords, and was himself overthrown in AD 25, with the bloodshed of civil war. The bureaucratic machinery of government, which served China for two millennia, was not always benign, therefore, and poets who graced one



administration could find themselves exiled to the far provinces in the next. Many left voluntarily, disheartened by the incessant struggles for wealth and influence. {12}

Poets were thus part of a social system. The first Ming emperor was barely literate, but highly suspicious of officials, carefully scrutinising all documents that came into his hand. Their private poetry was even more suspect, and in an extended literary inquisition the Ming Taisu emperor had the literary movement of the previous Yuan dynasty practically extirpated: its poets were banished or executed. {13} The third Ming emperor, Yung Lo, who had usurped the throne, was even more paranoid. He had the poet Gao Qi (1336-74) edit the official history of the Yuan dynasty, for example, but when the man declined further positions at court, proceeded to have him executed on trumped charges of conspiracy {14}

Matters were hardly better in the succeeding Qing dynasty. Zihuang Tinglong, a rich merchant, hired scholars to prepare an unofficial but by no means flattering history of the Ming, in which the first emperor of the Qing found odd mistakes, minor and unintentional, often no more than the careless carrying over of Ming forms of address, but enough to initiate a witch-hunt. On authors, printers, those who had purchased copies of the work, officials who had not reported the matter, anyone vaguely connected, fell the imperial disfavour. All male members of their extended families concerned were executed and the female made slaves of Manchu household. {15} Even the much lauded *Complete Library* of 1792, a compilation of 3,470 works and more than 360

million words, which preserved much poetry that would otherwise have been lost, also repressed and destroyed anything inimical to Manchu rule. Some 7,000 works are noted only by title, and all copies of some 10,000 works are estimated to have been destroyed. {16}

Theology was important in medieval Christendom, and the Chinese writing on life in its mundane and spiritual dimensions is equally voluminous, impossible to summarize here. Confucianism was made the official policy of the Han, and enjoyed a great revival in the Song dynasty. Ouyang Xiu (1007-72) was statesman, philosopher, scholar, and poet known especially for his outstanding *Lushi* verses. He was brought to prominence by the reforming Fan Zhongyan (989-1052) but demoted to a very minor post in the upper Yangtze River when his supporter fell from power. The Khitan threat saw Ouyang Xiu brought back to court in 1041, where he and Fan Zhongyan practically ran the government and implemented reforms. {17}

But Ouyang again overstepped the mark in 1045, and was banished to a series of minor positions, far from power. After the customary mourning period for his parents, Ouyang was once more returned to court and made responsible for compiling a *New Tang History*. Later he wrote his own *History of the Five Dynasties*, and in 1055 served as envoy to the Liao court. His calligraphy was sought as far afield as Korea, and he served as examiner for the *jinshi* examinations. In the 1060s, Ouyang reached the highest levels of power and influence, but success bred jealousy, and in 1067, under the new emperor

Shenzong, he was accused of doubtful morals, of having been too fond in youth of the courtesan quarters. His requests to retire were ignored, and Ouyang was compelled to serve in various provincial posts until a year before his death in 1072. His third wife and mother of all his children, the Lady Xue, stayed on in Anhui until her death, at the age of 72, in 1089. {17}

Ouyang was alternately part of the reforming and conservative elements in the Northern Song dynasty, and, while exceptional, his career should caution us against supposing Chinese poets were generally rebellious outcasts only happy when communing with nature. Chinese poets, both the ambitious and the self-effacing, were a natural part of the fabric of imperial China, and each had an individual voice and career.

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## 5. PREVIOUS TRANSLATIONS

### 5.1 A Brief History of Chinese Verse Translation

An important point to bear in mind is that translation styles and attitudes have varied enormously over the last couple of centuries, a variety that cannot be categorised as a contest between the good (fresh, enterprising, Modernist) and the bad (imperialistic, stuffy, traditional). All kinds of influences, literary and political, are also woven in. {1}

The first translations were made by British officials posted to China: John Francis Davis, James Legge, William Jennings, and Clement Francis Romilly Allen. The verse, made to the fashion of the times, no doubt left much to be desired, but renderings were often scholarly, with helpful annotations. Legge is indeed still studied by academics and students. {2} In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century came the more familiar renderings by Herbert Giles, resolutely rhymed, and Launcelot Alfred Cranmer-Byng's 1909 *A Lute of Jade: Being Selections from the Classical Poets of China*, part of a popular series to improve understanding between east and west. Ezra Pound's *Cathay*, based on Ernest Fenollosa's manuscript, appeared in 1915, and was followed, in 1918, by Arthur Waley's *One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*. Both authors used an unrhymed free verse. Pound's verse was pleasing, but the renderings could be rather notional. Waley's renderings unconsciously echoed Hopkins' 'sprung rhythm', included useful notes on the structure and aims of Chinese poetry, and was generally faithful to the

Chinese texts: key words were stressed by the verse, and little added or left out. Also in 1918, came *Gems of Chinese Verse: Translated into English Verse* by W.J.B. Fletcher, a British consular official in China, who tried to represent the original versification, difficult though that was. {3}

Thereafter, translations appeared more frequently: Florence Ayscough and Amy Lowell's 1921 *Fir-Flower Tablets: Poems from the Chinese*, Shigeyoshi Obata's 1922 *The Works of Li Po [Li Bo]*, Witter Bynner's 1929 *The Jade Mountain*. These were reprinted over the following decades, and joined by volumes from many other translators: Burton Watson, Wu-chi Liu and Irving Yucheng Lo, Hans Frankel, and John Turner. The stream of translations had become a broad river by the 1960s, and is now represented by names too numerous to be mentioned here. Studies and anthologies were brought out, by both leading academic publishers and the small presses, and it is these that have built the western reputations of Li Bai, Du Fu and Wang Wei, {3} though the Chinese themselves have wider tastes. {4}

## 5.2 Ezra Pound et al: the Modernist Model

Many of today's translation standards are based on early Modernist practices, which form a 'template' for today's prodigious flow of translations.

Probably the best known of Pound's Chinese translations is *River Merchant's Wife* (Poem 26) but equally accomplished was his *Exile's Letter*, a translation of Li Bai's 62-line poem 忆旧游寄谯郡元参军, which starts: {5}

To So-Kin of Rakuyo, ancient friend, Chancellor of Gen.  
Now I remember that you built me a special tavern  
By the south side of the bridge at Ten-Shin.  
With yellow gold and white jewels, we paid for songs  
and laughter  
And we were drunk for month on month, forgetting the  
kings and princes.  
Intelligent men came drifting in from the sea and from  
the west border,  
And with them, and with you especially  
There was nothing at cross purpose,

And concludes with the famous:

It is like the flowers falling at Spring's end  
Confused, whirled in a tangle.  
What is the use of talking, and there is no end of talking,  
There is no end of things in the heart.

I call in the boy,  
Have him sit on his knees here  
To seal this,  
And send it a thousand miles, thinking.

Pound does not depart wildly from the Chinese here, but perhaps more faithful was his rendering of Li Bai's *The Jewel Stairs' Grievance*:

The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,  
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,

And I let down the crystal curtain  
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

The verse is a little limp, though, and the rendering misses key points: see Poem 56 in Volume One.

Nonetheless, most of these Pound's translations are true free verse, where both the metre and line length constraints are modified for effect:

To **So-Kin** | of **Rakuyo**, | **ancient friend**, | **Chancellor of Gen.** || 7  
**Now** I remember that **you** | **built** me a **special tavern** || 6

It is **like** | the **flowers falling**| at **Spring's end** | 5  
Confused, | **whirled** in a **tangle.** || 3  
**What** is the **use** of **talking**, | and there **is** no **end** of **talking**, || 6  
There **is** no **end** | of **things** | in the **heart.** ||| 4

I **call** in the **boy**, | 2  
**Have** him **sit** on his **knees here** | 3  
To **seal this**, | 2  
And **send** it a **thousand** | **miles**, || **thinking.** ||| 4

In addition, which keeps them still being admired, is the poet's acute ear for sonic textures and phrasings, gifts that are sometimes more important than the right choice of translation model. Whatever their infidelities, we will always read superb literary technicians. In other words, Pound's translations were successful not by reason of his free verse model, but because he was a good poet.



Arthur Waley

Here is Arthur Waley with his translation of Li Bai's  
Drinking Alone by Moonlight: Poem 25 in Volume One.  
{6}

A cup of wine, under the flowering trees;  
I drink alone, for no friend is near.  
Raising my cup I beckon the bright moon,  
For he, with my shadow, will make three men.  
The moon, alas, is no drinker of wine;  
Listless, my shadow creeps about at my side.  
Yet with the moon as friend and the shadow as slave  
I must make merry before the Spring is spent.  
To the songs I sing the moon flickers her beams;  
In the dance I weave my shadow tangles and breaks.  
While we were sober, three shared the fun;  
Now we are drunk, each goes his way.  
May we long share our odd, inanimate feast,  
And meet at last on the Cloudy River of the sky.

The translation lies close to the transition of prose verse to free verse. Note the five stresses to the line (4-5 in the poem as a whole), the alliteration (bright beckon, make men), an end rhyme replaced by slant rhyme (moon men wine, trees beams feast, near way sky) and the iambic metre modified, but not entirely pleasingly:

A **cup** of **wine**, | **under** the **flowering trees**; || 5  
I **drink** **alone**, | **for** no **friend** is **near**. || 5  
**Raising** my **cup** | I **beckon** the **bright moon**, || 5  
For **he**, | **with** my **shadow**, | will **make** three **men**. || 5

We might also note that Waley is often cited as the gold standard of fidelity in academic publications, but is here a little free. There's no warrant in the Chinese for 'flickers her beams' or 'tangles and breaks' (see Volume Three). I personally have no quarrel with these improvisations, only with the double standards that give license to one favoured translator but deny it to others.

As verse, Waley's translations are rather a mixed bag, however, with many being neither fish nor fowl. His *Gathering Duckweed* from the *Shijing* (see Poem 2 in Volume 3) starts with a 'galloping' meter that gradually falters into irregularities, exhibiting only limited organization by lines — what I would call largely 'prose verse'. The fourth line of each stanza is an awkward dimeter or trimeter.

Here we are gathering duckweed  
By the banks of the southern dale:  
Here we are gathering water-grass  
In those channeled pools.

Here we are packing them  
Into round basket, into square.  
Here we are boiling them  
In kettles and pans

Here we lay them beneath the window  
Of the ancestral hall.  
Who is the mistress of them?  
A young girl purified.

Kenneth Rexroth

After Pound, Kenneth Rexroth did most to popularize Chinese poetry. His rendering of Lu You's *Idleness* is: {7}

I keep the rustic gate closed  
For fear somebody might step  
On the green moss. The sun grows  
Warmer. You can tell it's Spring.  
Once in a while, when the breeze  
Shifts, I can hear the sounds of the  
Village. My wife is reading  
The classics. Now and then she  
Asks me the meaning of the word.  
I call for wine and my son  
Fills my cup till runs over.  
I have only a little  
Garden, but it is planted  
With yellow and purple plums.

This poem (compare with Poems 53 and 63 in Volume One) is what I would call 'prose verse': there is no metre to speak of, and few rhetorical devices. It is reasonably accomplished prose verse, nonetheless: the lines run easily without undue emphasis or false notes. As Eliot Weinberger points out: 'According to his introduction to *One Hundred*, the poems were derived from the Chinese texts, as well as French, German, and academic English translations, but the sources hardly matter. Rexroth had reimagined the poems as the work of someone on the other side of the Pacific Rim, speaking in a plain, natural-breathing, neutral American idiom. Ignoring the Chinese line, which is normally a complete syntactical unit, Rexroth enjambed his, often with end-stops in the middle, to give them the illusion of effortless speech'. {7}

The trouble — apart from the cheerful improvisation — is the unambitious flatness of the verse, which makes all poets sound much the same, all musing quietly on the mundane ordinariness of life. No doubt that's what readers of popular translations expect, and what blurbs still call the 'authentic spirit of Chinese poetry', but the 'spirit' is largely an artefact of the translation process, a distortion created by the narrow filters of Modernist expectations. As I've tried to show in Volume One, Chinese poetry is in fact much more diverse, in its periods, genres and poet's voices.

By way of example, here is Rexroth's translation of Tu Fu's poem, *Dawn over the Mountains*: {8}

The city is silent,  
Sound drains away,  
Buildings vanish in the light of dawn,  
Cold sunlight comes on the highest peak,  
The thick dust of night  
Clings to the hills,  
The earth opens,  
The river boats are vague,  
The still sky —  
The sound of falling leaves.  
A huge dog comes to the garden gate,  
Lost from the herd,  
Seeking its fellows.

No one could dislike this style, which became popular for all Chinese poetry translations, {9} but again we don't have the poet's individual voice, any vestiges of the original's structure, or any sense of Du Fu's greatness. Rexroth is now accepted into the academic canon, and generates many approving articles. Here is his translation of Wang Hung Kung's *In the Mountain Village*. {10}

Wild flowers and grass grow on  
The ancient ceremonial  
Stairs. The sun sets between the  
Forested mountains. The swallows  
Who nested once in the painted  
Eaves of the palaces of  
The young prince are flying  
This evening between the homes  
Of woodcutters and quarrymen.  
More ancient by far than the stairs  
Are the cyclopean walls  
Of immense dry laid stones covered  
With moss and ferns. If you approach  
Quietly and imitate their  
Voices, you can converse all day  
With the tree frogs who live there.

The style probably originates in Eliot's *Wasteland*, where blank verse was broken for emphasis, with the simplicities taken further by William Carlos Williams and his followers. {11} The piece works well if we don't really listen to the sounds, or expect a meaning beyond the bald prose sense.

Garry Snyder

Gary Snyder's verse is similar, though generally a little more idiomatic. This is his rendering of Hah Shan's poem number six. Hah Shan ('Cold Mountain') was a Chinese Buddhist monk whose isolated life in the wilderness allowed him to disdain civilization and follow the Zen and Taoist precepts that also attracted Snyder: {12}

Men ask the way to Cold Mountain  
Cold Mountain: There's no through trail.  
In summer, ice doesn't melt  
The rising sun blurs in swirling fog  
How did I make it?  
My heart's not the same as yours.  
If your heart was like mine  
You'd get it and be right here.

All these are pleasing, of course, but also limiting, reducing the originals to mundane thoughts in Jack and Jill language. Nonetheless, they have become the standard model: all Chinese translations should be plain and homely, without rhyme, exhibiting broken rhythms or none at all, making us pay attention to each word employed. The model underlies the precepts that follow, though, as I've endeavoured to show, the model was largely constructed to support and push a Modernist agenda. The poetry of imperial China was no more concerned with the immediacy of experience than was pre-modern European poetry. Indeed, viewed through the arguments to date, Modernist translations are as much literary colonialism as the despised Victorian versifying.

### 5.3 Contemporary Precepts

### 5.3.1. Precept One: Do Not Use Rhyme

*Contemporary English poetry rarely uses rhyme, and a similar change has come over translation.* The arguments are straightforward.

1. Unlike Chinese, English is comparatively poor in rhyme words, and a translation that employed the same rhyme throughout the poem, as *Shi* commonly does, would be difficult to achieve and likely appear only comic and/or contrived. True, but some approximations can be made: see Volume One.

2. *Rhyme distorts the meaning as translators manipulate words into patterns that are foreign to Chinese verse anyway.* {13-14} Largely true, though the culprit may be verse-writing incompetence more than rhyme per se. I have given some examples of how it can be done, in Volume One, on the Ocaso Press website {15} and below. We should also note that there is rarely one meaning anyway in Chinese verse: 'distortion' is a matter of degree, with some gains and some losses.

3. *Most translations using rhyme have been unsuccessful.* Doubtless again true. Julie Sullivan gives many examples, which make painful reading. {16} But hers may not be a wholly balanced and non-partisan survey. She is arguing from the Modernist standpoint, and does not provide examples of rhymed translations that do succeed, at least to some extent. {17-19} Nor may she be a wholly reliable judge if the style she recommends is Waley's 'beautiful,

free-verse translations'. They don't seem beautiful to me, or anyone, I would think, who cares for English verse.

Perhaps we should just accept that it's difficult for non-poets to write good English verse of any description, and practically impossible when English is not their native tongue. Rhyme exposes the translator's blundering incompetence more cruelly than does free verse, moreover, because traditional verse is built to more obvious and demanding standards.

Much may be simple fashion. We stare in disbelief at Victorian translations of Chinese poetry, but those Victorians would be even more perplexed by today's renderings. A middle way, combining the advantages of both, seems a sensible strategy, or would be were not Modernism so jealous a god. Traditional verse is no longer taught at higher education levels, nor, to judge from academic papers, much appreciated. Free verse is today's orthodoxy, a style easy to write correctly but phenomenally difficult to write well. Even US academics of Chinese ethnicity, exceptionally gifted and entirely bilingual, may find themselves compelled to adopt contemporary styles quite at odds with the Chinese literary tradition.

As surveys on the Ocaso site of the leading figures of Modernism suggest, contemporary poetry has become a minor anti-art, posing as democratic but in fact acutely conscious of its inheritance and intellectual affiliations. It is rigidly iconoclastic, dismissive of anything that supposedly straightjackets poetry in the passé and



inauthentic. It is also a coterie movement, not widely popular, and heavily dependent on critical theory and university funding. Contemporary poetry thus has its strengths, but traditional verse craft is not one of them. Or, to be more exact, good poetry today is exceptionally subtle, and concerned with matters only tangentially relevant to classical Chinese poetry. I will touch on this important point throughout the chapter, simply noting for the present that some Chinese authors do still look for beauty in its various guises. {20}

*4. A good translation should read as a good contemporary poem.* True, to some extent. We don't want a rendering in antique language, or one filled with imagery from the European pastoral tradition. But good contemporary poems are anti-traditional, generally, whereas pre-modern Chinese poetry was profoundly traditional, steadily building on earlier schools of poetry — suggesting that contemporary poems may not make the best yardsticks. More to the point, however, the great majority of today's Chinese poetry translations fail as poems of any sort. Standards may have fallen, but I cannot imagine the translations being published as poetry per se by the small presses, or passing unscathed through the most generous of poetry workshops: they are simply too amateur, maladroit and banal.

*5. The most popular translations — as literature — are those of Pound, Rexroth and Waley, and they did not use rhyme.* No rhyme, certainly, but what they wrote was also rather limited. I very much enjoy these renderings, as do most readers, but those of Pound, Rexroth and Snyder

can be lacking in depth and accuracy, and Waley devised an unlovely stress verse.

6. Pound could not read Chinese and misinterpreted the identities of “友” and “故人,” and of “友” and “故人” in some of his best-known translations, for example, ignoring their multiple meanings and tending to view Li Bai’s poems in the light of his own experiences. But the misunderstandings were not wholly a loss, his supporters have argued. ‘Pound, polishing Fenollosa’s draft translation, might have made an editorial decision to de-historicize Li Bai from Chinese grammar, poetic principles and even Chinese space and time’ . . . but the ‘result transcended the level of translation; indeed, his translation deserves to be designated as “another original.”’ . . . He urged ‘both Eastern and Western readers to . . . take possession of the practical wisdom of using a Taoist’s laughter in the long, hard voyage of life.’ {21}

Pound used only a few poems of the many examples in Fenellosa’s notes, generally those with themes that would be familiar and meaningful to an English audience. {22} The great bulk of poems in Fenellosa’s notes operate in ways quite foreign to the European tradition — different themes, imagery and outlooks. Pound’s particular interest was in the vivid presentation of the image, in the phanopoeia, as he termed it. Pound dropped the imagery of Herbert Giles, rejected the iambic meter and the rhyming couplets, allowing each of the lines to operate as self-contained, independent and detached images of rhythmic autonomy, uncoupled from any subjective ‘I’, the

speaker, who remained only implicit in the scene. In the light of what we understand today of *Shi* rules, Pound was correct to do so, and he also understood that this curtailed, image-based form allowed only loose combinations into larger units. {23} But this reduction in connecting sense (Pound's logopoeia, or dance of the intellect) was something he was prepared to live with, and indeed became axiomatic in many Modernist poets that followed.

Translation also, if rather slowly, became what Modernists were expected to do, whatever their linguistic skills. Perhaps as John Hollander remarked, 'A very, very good poet can do a version of something from another language, even if he doesn't know the language. That is, he can write a poem based on somebody else's prose paraphrases of the thing. But this is purely and simply a matter of the translator's having a certain kind of poetic skill, a very rare thing to find.' Chinese scholars have naturally stressed the pitfalls in such an approach, their interest in Pound and his followers growing rather slowly, perhaps reluctantly, somewhat in line with Chinese influence on the world scene. {24}

Rexroth not so much missed textural subtleties as disregarded them altogether. {25} His goal was to be 'true to the spirit of the originals, and valid English poems' — a 'spirit' that has today, unfortunately, become synonymous with fractured prose. Many sources he consulted were not the original Chinese, but translations of Du Fu into English, French, or German. The power and the beauty of his translations often lay in the passages he

rendered most freely, which can bear little resemblance to the Chinese texts. {26}

In contrast, Waley's renderings were generally accurate, but they often have to be 'speed read' with the ear closed to verse craft, just as one skims through a mass-market thriller on a beach holiday, not attending to the individual words too much. In contrast, traditional English poetry had to be read carefully and intelligently, however, with one's full attention. It was frankly a time-consuming, elitist art, one which employed highly complicated devices to refine, shape and emphasize the thoughts and emotions put across: rhetoric, imagery, allusion, rhyme, subtle patterning by metre, even different language, which was far from the everyday. It had license and responsibility: the two went together: poetry was given great license because it carried great responsibilities, to press language to its limit, to give depth, sensuousness and beauty to everyday experience, expressing as fully and movingly as possible what was important to human beings. Indeed it is that larger world of depth, transcendence and sensibility, with sustained flights of imagination, that is so fatally missing from Modernist translations of the Chinese classics. The poetry surely cannot be so fragmentary, jejune and thin as appears in today's translations, not if it has held the allegiance, indeed profound reverence, of the Chinese people for almost three millennia.

### 5.3.2 Precept Two: Do Not Paraphrase

*Translators owe it to their readers to be faithful to the*

*text, using the original words wherever possible, and not superseding them with 'inspired' substitutes of their own.*

The maxim derives from Waley, who demonstrated the injunction by writing an unrhymed stress verse, where each stress fell on a key word, and where that keyword was a Chinese character in the original text. That key word had also to be reproduced in its plain prose meaning and not in any paraphrase. Original words were not to be added to translation, moreover, or removed from it. With not a little ingenuity and some bending of the rules, those aims were largely achieved by Waley, {27} and in a generally pleasing manner, though the verse itself was thin and brittle, lacking most of the overtones of meaning and rich sonic properties expected of English verse. Nonetheless, since so much was captured of the plain prose sense, why not make these aims into rules for all poetry translation from the Chinese?

Many translators have, of course. But what seems so sensible and straightforward often hides a host of problems, which range from the obvious to matters involving arcane literary theory.

1. As Volumes Three and Four indicate, Chinese words may not have an exact word-for-word English equivalent. Usage, connotations and overtones are often very different. For us the heart is the seat of the emotions: the Chinese more sensibly see the stomach as such. The Chinese have many phrases — indeed are continually making them {28} — whose apt and evocative nature does not carry over into English, any more than our 'stitch in time', 'keep a dog and bark yourself', 'tip of the

iceberg', etc. carry over into Chinese. Conversely, how literally we should render the likes of 'purple spring river', so pleasing in Chinese but so odd in English, is a moot point.

2. As in any poetry, the Chinese words are chosen for reasons larger than any prose sense, particularly:

*Syntax of Chinese:* Poetry exploits features of the language in which it is written, in an individual manner and at a deep level. Those features are quite different in the two languages, Chinese and English, and the language user mentally shapes and structures the semantic content of an expression, which at the same time imposes a frame upon the described scene or situation, which in turn affects translation. {29}

*Allusion:* Pound is often charged with overlooking the key allusions in his *The River-Merchant's Wife*, {30} but that was only to be expected at the time, and is still a problem for translation from so allusive a poetry as Chinese. Notes are helpful, perhaps essential, but cannot substitute for an intimate knowledge of the literary canon, any more that a foreigner would clue into the Wordsworth allusion in phrases like 'flare into the light of common day' — supposing a contemporary poet were unwise enough to employ it.

*Tradition:* word usages change. Augustan verse diction looks out of place in a modern English poem, for example, and the Chinese are similarly sensitive to social and historical registers, as indeed to their many calligraphic

styles.

*Fit with formal requirements of the verse form:* It is form, and its many associated features, that make traditional poetry more than the meaning of its constituent words.

{31} Extracting the Chinese words, converting the words to English, and arranging them to make plain sense, therefore makes a very pared-down poetry, because those vital additional features cannot be duplicated in English. Reading such a translation, however skilful, is like trying to appreciate an opera from the libretto only.

3. *Words in poetry do not generally have a simple prose sense, but tissues of meaning deriving from their present context and previous uses.* Bakhtin, for example, stressed the multi-layered nature of language, which he called heteroglossia. Not only are there social dialects, jargons, turns of phrase characteristic of the various professions, industries, commerce, of passing fashions, etc., but also socio-ideological contradictions carried forward from various periods and levels in the past. Language is not a neutral medium that can be simply appropriated by a speaker, but something that comes to us populated with the intentions of others. Every word tastes of the contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life. Chinese poetry also has to be read in its larger context. There are several words for faintness, obscurity and the like (*míng míng*, etc.) and each has its specific overtones. *Shuǐ* means not just water, but any body of water, and the actions done by and with water. And because China's great rivers flow west to east, rivers also hold connotations of the perils and hardships that faced

officials travelling south to take up their duties. Similarly, Chinese readers don't have to be told that clouds symbolise the wanderer, or wild geese speak of homesickness, because these and a host of other characters are stock images — which translators have to understand. {32}

4. *The requirement overlooks how poets actually compose.* Very rarely (W.B. Yeats being a notable exception) do poets proceed from prose meaning to poetic phrase, converting an idea or thought into something conforming to the poem's sonic and semantic matrix. The words are generally given in the process of the poem's creation in that matrix, which of course is language-dependent. The delight a Chinese reader draws from a phrase will likely disappear when those word equivalents are assembled in English, naturally so, because their sonic properties, allusions, histories of use, and triumphant exemplification of the rules will be then quite different, if they survive at all in the second language.

5. *Words, phrases and lines in poetry have a life independent of their meaning.* This is not an argument for traditional verse, but a finding from the Formalists and other schools of close poetry analysis. The Russian Formalists, for example, looked objectively at many authors, and came to accept that poetic speech should be an end in itself, not a simply medium for conveying ideas and emotions. {33} The Formalists made countless studies of rhyme, metre, consonantal clusters, etc. of the Russian classics and of poems by contemporaries. Claiming, contrary to Symbolist assertions, that words and



their connotations are not the most important ingredient of poetry, they replaced loose talk about inspiration and verbal magic by 'study of the laws of literary production'.

6. Paraphrase and workaround are essential to literary translation, which, in poetry at least, and especially from non-European languages, would be otherwise rendered impotent to convey anything but the plainest prose sense. German places verbs at the end of the clause or sentence, but we don't translate 'Wenn ich gewusst hätte, dass ich anders gehandelt hätte' as 'If I known had, then I different acted had'. Russian also lacks the definite and indefinite article but we don't translate 'Я добавил примечание к рисунку' as 'I added note to figure.'

Conversely something like the English 'The article he wrote on this occasion — calculated in its timing, calculated in its laboured phrasing and honest perplexity, calculated in its very deployment of terms that the government had removed from the political agenda — had a success for which even his own supporters could scarcely have hoped', a style that derives from Roman oratory, and which is beautiful when done properly, would be broken into short, pithy sentences in Chinese, which has more limited means at its disposal, namely certain introductory words and preferred word orders. Google Translate in fact comes up with

他在这次会议上写的这篇文章取得了成功，

即使是他自己的支持者也难以期待 for the above sentence, where the subordinate clauses are simply omitted. Machine code translating that sentence back with Yandex

gives 'The article he wrote at the conference was a success that even his own supporters could not expect.' — perfectly sensible, but with none of the original's appeal.

The point is this: We clearly want a translation that preserves some 'Chineseness' of the original, but that 'Chineseness' will also have to follow some of the expectations of English poetry if it is to read as poetry. Unfortunately, as we look back today, with only a few exceptions, the history of Chinese poetry translation seems to have run from bad poetry (Victorian renderings) to no poetry at all (today's renderings). On grounds of practical similarity, a solution is likely be something echoing the shorter and more economical Chinese, but also achieving what in the English tradition the Chinese achieves in the Chinese tradition. That requires some knowledge of both traditions. The equivalent will have to be consonant with the Chinese outlook and sensibility, but also draw on English approaches to similar problems. One fruitful approach, often necessary anyway with seven-character Chinese poetry lines, is to expand the Chinese phrases into self-supporting English lines and couplets, remembering that the basic unit of Chinese verse is not the image, the character or the line, but the couplet, {26} sometimes written on parallel themes, and sometime more loosely, but always aiming for a sense of overall balance.

### 5.3.3. Precept 3: Use a Linear Poetry Rather than a Conventional Verse Form

*Traditional verse is too limiting, Modernism argued.*

Chinese verse is written in lines, certainly, and does not allow enjambment, but the Chinese language itself is syntactically more fluid. There are no tenses, the verbs can be impersonal, etc. {34} and individual lines can often be read forward and backwards. Wai-lim Yip's {35} most useful anthology of Chinese verse opens with this snippet, for example, a line from a seven character regulated poem of Su Tung p'o (1036-1101):

tide follow dark waves snow mountains fall

and notes that the words can be read equally well as:

fall mountains snow waves dark follow tides

True, but traditional verse craft is not helpless at this challenge. We can write various permutations of:

Tides and mountains, snow and dark  
follow on but also fall

And can even get an end rhyme (I'm not suggesting we should):

The snow on tides and mountains, all  
the darkness following can also fall

The second line is even more semantically complex. In short, many things can be written, depending on what we think the poet is saying or suggesting. As I indicated in the analysis of Du Fu's Spring Prospect {36}, the ambiguities of Chinese verse are most easily addressed by turning verbs into nouns (which also echoes Chinese

usage, of course, where verbs have wider purposes.)

We don't then have to argue that the Chinese world-view is so different from ours that modern Anglo-American poetry is the only way forward, the one style in which these subtle complexities can find expression. Influences have often been based on misunderstandings. {37}

Wai-lim Yip {38} speaks of the arbitrary western concepts of time based on causal linearity imposed by human conceptualisation. In his view, 'the western concept of being conceals being rather than exposing it; it turns us away from the concreteness of objects and events in Phenomenon rather than bringing us into immediate contact with them. . . the Phenomenon can be illustrated by the way film handles temporality, for film is a medium most felicitous in approximating the immediacy of experience. . . Much of the art of Chinese poetry lies in the way the poet captures the visual events as they emerge and act themselves out, releasing them from the restrictive concept of time and space, letting them leap out directly from the undifferentiated mode of existence instead of standing between the reader and the events explaining them, analysing them.' Several points come to mind:

1. If vibrant immediacy were the whole or even primary purpose of Chinese poetry there would be little point in reading it. Human beings continually try to make larger sense of their surroundings, and indeed have to. They do not stare in intoxicated wonder at the over-brimming fullness of life, but look for significance, underlying

purpose, what those sensations are saying to them. Even in films that evoke a particularly sharp sense of time or place, moreover, where the camera lingers over telling details, those details are generally telling us something we need to know about the atmosphere and background to the narrative, the plot, the clash of characters, etc.

2. Many contemporary translations do indeed try to bring this aspect of Chinese poetry over into English, but fail as poetry if that is all they do. Immediacy, in itself, is not particularly interesting. The Chinese originals had the aesthetic resources to go further and make them poetry, namely:

Allusion, continually picking up and modifying snippets of other Chinese poems.

Compact nature, a fixed and limited number of words to the line.

Multiple ambiguities of meaning, which flexible Chinese grammar allows.

Strict rules concerning structure, how themes are introduced, developed, inverted, etc.

Tones, and strict rules concerning their use.

Beyond that, in any poetry worth its name, we also need a. some inter-penetration of larger purpose and b. an aesthetic shaping. Art has to make events, scenes and thoughts both beautiful and significant to us.

3. We should avoid arguing too much from one style of Chinese poetry. Tang *Regulated Shi* is impersonal, certainly, but it is also somewhat artificial. The personal

nature, the speaker or onlooker, is not missing from the earlier *Sao* and *Unregulated Shi* schools of poetry, or from the later *Ci* and *Qu* schools. Ontology develops as a rich and fascinating branch of philosophy in Chinese thought as much it does in European, though on different principles. To touch on matters readers can find for themselves, {39} we note:

'Chinese philosophers inheriting the ontology of the *Yijing* and Great Commentary still use the concept of the "nature" (*xing*) of something, but "nature" does not refer to some underlying essence or immaterial substance that makes something what it is in distinction from other things. "Nature" is a way of talking about the manner of qi correlation that actualizes a thing as it is and sets it apart from the correlations of other things.'

It's probably better to work from philosophy sites, e.g. that at Stanford, {40} to grasp such fundamentals as:

'While there was no word corresponding precisely to the term "metaphysics," China has a long tradition of philosophical inquiry concerned with the ultimate nature of reality—its being, origins, components, ways of changing, and so on. In this sense, we can speak of metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy, even if the particular questions and positions that arose differed from those dominant in Europe. Explicit metaphysical discussions appeared in China with a turn toward questions of cosmogony in the mid-fourth century BCE. These cosmogonies express views that became fundamental for almost all later metaphysics in China. In these texts, all things are

interconnected and constantly changing. They arise spontaneously from an ultimate source (most often called *dao* 道, the way or guide) that resists objectification but is immanent in the world and accessible to cultivated people. Vitality and growth is the very nature of existence, and the natural world exhibits consistent patterns that can be observed and followed, in particular, cyclical patterns based on interaction between polar forces (such as *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽).'

4. Much of Modernist poetry stems from Ezra Pound, who certainly widened what was possible, {41} leaving us very much in his debt, {42} but the poetry of the man himself and his disciples — Williams, Olson, Creely, Snyder and countless others, — is not without its problems. {43} What we might query is the unquestioned insistence on 'free verse' today, which is largely a prose, and is read as such, i.e. in its surface and immediately-given sense. Traditional verse, in contrast, abstracts the words to a medium where different rules and tacit understandings apply. What I am arguing for is not a return to traditional verse, and certainly not the Victorian verse of Herbert Giles, but for a greater appreciation of the diverse nature of Chinese poetry, to be explored through many verse techniques, both traditional and Modernist.

5. Too much can be made of language differences. In truth, most major poets have slightly different world-views, which translators must indicate, both in their renderings, and in added glosses and introductions. That requirement applies as much to nineteenth-century French poets as it does to medieval Sanskrit or Chinese

authors. To some extent, all readings are personal interpretations, moreover, as our experiences will never exactly match those of the poet's. Furthermore, to add to the difficulties, there are the literary traditions through which we must read the poem, sometimes enlightening, sometimes less so, but which have to be respected nonetheless. They are all part of the translator's everyday duties, taxing but not insurmountable requirements.

6. That does not mean that we can forget the fundamental differences to ours in the Chinese-world view (or views, to be more exact: Wang Wei was more Buddhist, Li Bai more Daoist, etc.). We have to understand the philosophical echoes in a poem {44} and see it in social setting {28} Indeed there would be few reasons to read Chinese poetry if the world it disclosed was not radically different from ours, vividly alive and aesthetically enhanced.

#### 5.3.4. Precept Three: Ignore the Chinese Poem Structure.

It is generally held that the structure of Chinese poems cannot be duplicated:

'In translation, it is impossible to reproduce the five-, seven-character lines, the original perfect symmetrical phrases or couplets. But it is possible reproduce the images, which is noteworthy component in Western poetry. In the Chinese poems the image concept consists of the noun or noun phrase, and the action verbs, i.e. hills, rivers, grass, trees, sky, the moon; ascend/descend, cross, see, watch, smell, touch, observe. The image concept



becomes the center of the poem, while the action maker “I”, “we” are either implied or seem marginalized.’ {45}

That, as the translations in Volume One indicate, is not entirely the case. Some key features can be brought across, and indeed should be brought across. {46} Ray Brownrigg {47} sensibly points out that, firstly, English is rich in words of the same or similar meaning, allowing good approximations to rhyme and metre, and that, secondly, any poetry form constrains word choice, which simply applies again in translation. His analysis of eleven translations of Du *Fu* poems looked closely at the rules of regulated verse, including tone patterns — as stipulated by various authorities, and as followed by the various translations. The analysis was objective in the nature of the hard sciences, simply accrediting the translations as each fulfilled or did not fulfil the prescribed rules. Translations were also checked against the ‘*Yan Fu* criteria’ of fidelity, comprehensibility and elegance. Most translations at least achieved a modest competence, sometimes more, suggesting that the translation process is not so difficult as supposed.

The second part of the paper was more adventurous, demonstrating how Ray Brownrigg himself, with no credentials in the world of Chinese and/or poetry (he is a lecturer in electrical engineering) could nonetheless turn out adequate translations that obeyed Regulated verse rules. Of his *Spring Prospect*, given as:

Nation fallen, yet nature’s alive,

The city; spring trees and grasses thrive.  
For these sad times the flowers they weep,  
Being apart, birds stir me deep.  
The war flames they'll span three months soon;  
Home news is worth a small fortune.  
My white hair it's torn out in vain,  
Soon not to hold even a pin.

he says 'This first translation was an early attempt to provide a translation with rhyme in order to be 'more accessible' to a non-critical audience. This would score four out of a possible seven points, since the rhyme is not fixed on even lines, there is no regularly located caesura in each line and couplets two and three do not adequately reflect the parallelism of the original.'

I wouldn't myself think this was an acceptable poem ('birds stir me deep', etc.) but I can think of worse by respected authorities. Ten other translations were also presented, some rather better:

#### Meeting Li Guinian in the South

At Prince Qi's palace	I often saw you;
Before Cui Jiu's hall	I sometimes heard you.
Southern scenery -	is truly special;
As we meet again	here in life's autumn

His conclusion seems a fair one: 'translations have shown that on average a translation which does exhibit some of the characteristics of the form of the original poem can do this without great loss of other qualities.'

But it's also unfortunately the case — 'if it is acceptable for a translation to compromise some of the non-formal characteristics in order to preserve more of the physical beauty of regulated poetry then there is the potential for this to be developed much further' — that such efforts will need the poet's skill and acute sensitivity to words. Simple word for word transpositions do not work, either in these no-nonsense examples, or the more literary versions issuing from the academic presses.

#### 5.3.5. Precept Four: Employ Free Verse

It was Ezra Pound who initiated the interest of Modernism in Chinese poetry, and it was Ezra Pound who said 'compose by the phrase and not the metronome.' Accordingly, the vast majority of Chinese poetry translation today is in 'free verse', which may range from deftly fingered verse to fractured and ungainly prose. What is 'free verse' exactly, and why is it important?

Free verse is simple in theory — a metre distinguished by a lack of structuring grid based on counting of linguistic units and/or position of linguistic features {48} — but less so in practice. Metrical analysis is indeed a complex and contentious field where even the simple, regular iambic can be represented by no less than sixteen theories of prosody, each different and only partly based on quantifiable evidence. {49}

As a reworking of traditional forms, or liberation from them, free verse gives the pleasure of variety, plus a

delicacy of phrasing, allowing the verse to be thickened, echoed, counterpointed, or indeed altered in a dozen ways that the poet's ear may suggest. For Pound, the benefits came more in his *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, allowing him to write such things as: {50}

Shades of Callimachus, Coan ghosts of Philetas,  
It is in your grove I would walk. (Pound 1.1-2, Loeb 3.1.1-2)

No, now while it may be, let not the fruit of life cease.  
Dry wreaths drop their petals, their stalks are woven in baskets,  
Today we take the great breath of lovers,  
tomorrow fate shuts us in. (P 8.28-32: L. 2.15.49-54)

But in one bed, in one bed alone, my dear Lynceus  
I deprecate your attendance; (P 12.15-6: L. 2.34.16-7)

This is beautiful verse, but not translation as commonly accepted, and the Classics fraternity still dislikes the liberties taken, much as Sinologists detest the games that serious poets can play with Chinese texts. The matter revolves around what is called 'the ear', that acute sensitivity to the verse texture that poets develop, and which, so often missing from academic translations, drives the well-read reader to enraged despair. I look at free verse more closely in Chapter 6 below.

## 5.4 A Personal View

Against this optimistic picture, so often used to illustrate the invigorating influence of Modernism, I tend to see Chinese poetry as having suffered a series of calamities in the last century of its osmosis into English verse. The first

three calamities were at the hands of the man who ironically did most to introduce translation into Modernist circles: Ezra Pound. It was Pound who championed the image rather than the line couplet as the essential structure in Chinese poetry, which he further promoted in contemporary English poetry as Imagism. Put the characters of sun and moon together and you get the character for bright. True, but, unfortunately, very few Chinese words are of this type, and even with these the average Chinese no more reads the pictures than we recognise the etymology of our words. It was also Pound who advocated free verse in poetry and translation ('compose by the phrase and not the metronome'), which not only overlooked the strong sense of metre in Chinese poetry, but rapidly became indiscernible from prose in the hands of less gifted followers. And it was Pound, who couldn't read Chinese, and who didn't consult Sinologists, that stripped the poetry of its many allusions and tacit understandings in bring the text to the reader as contemporary emotions in contemporary language. Translation was thus made to serve non-Chinese concerns, an ideological approach that became academic dogma in the later decades of the twentieth century.

Arthur Waley, in contrast, did read Chinese and developed a sprung rhythm for Chinese poetry translation. Intelligent paraphrase is the soul of translation, without which literary translation can only be academic, i.e. restrained, scrupulously correct and emotively dead, but Waley advocated rendering only the words appearing in the original text, with nothing added and nothing left out. Such translation became excessively restricted, a board

game of fitting key words in tight places, and sometimes at odds with the spirit of the individual poem, but Waley's approach is still followed by academia and recommended in translation courses.

Fifthly, neither Pound's or Waley's approach was congenial to rhyme, which was also dropped from contemporary poetry practice, odd revivals like *The Movement*, and *The New Formalists* notwithstanding. Rhyme detracted from Pound's advocacy of the image, and became practically impossible in the severely constrained Waley approach. Very few contemporary poets have any skill in rhyme, and indeed spurn the very notion, seeing verse craft as hobbling creation rather than enabling expression. {51} Nor do readers of Chinese poetry — poetry lovers as opposed to Sinologists — seem aware that rhyme is practically universal in Chinese poetry, far more than is the case in English poetry. So reactionary seem rhyme and metre today that contemporary academics can be found ridiculing the practice in Chinese poetry translation, and lambasting Victorian translators for their 'sing-song' renditions.

A sixth calamity was the decay of literary criticism, a skill that lingers on in small press publications and poetry magazines, variably done if not largely fraudulent, {52} but which has been replaced by speculative critical theory in academia on both sides of the Atlantic. Outside MFA courses, literary criticism is not taught at university level, and poems have simply become literary constructs into which ever-more abstruse contemporary notions can be read. {53}

A seventh and final calamity came in the promotion of speculative literary theory itself, the more so in the move from an principled Modernism to an entertaining if pedestrian Postmodernism, which insists on a contemporary language exploring contemporary concerns. Chinese poetry, which uses a restricted vocabulary, but where each word has acquired multiple overtones deriving from millennia of use, is thus replaced by a mundane and sometimes rather plebian expression of the 'authentic Chinese voice'. {54}

Though long delayed, the consequences of these developments have now come home to roost. Poetry of wide appeal is largely moribund. Few people now read contemporary poetry, or can appreciate literary excellence. English departments have lost their kudos, students, and now much of their funding. Chinese translations pour off the press, but are generally mundane depictions of the mundane, which thus give no hint of the close-knit nature and excellence of the originals. Chinese poetry is a small world, but one of great refinement, deserving translations of a comparable finesse, the very thing that today's literary world discounts as outmoded and elitist. {55}

## 5.5. The Chinese View

The narrative so far here has been from an almost exclusively western viewpoint, which overlooks two important matters. First is that the Chinese themselves have their own extensive record of literary assessment,

which has guided their ranking of poets and therefore ours. Du Fu's greatness was recognized in later generations of the Tang, for example, and more particularly in the Song. {56-57} Equally, the Ming authors wrote extensively about the Tang poets, and their lessons for any revival of that former greatness. The second matter is that the classics, both prose and verse, have long been kept alive by their being incorporated in later poetry, continually, down the ages. That incorporation modifies the Chinese view, and invests it with understandings and associations that may be very different from ours. There is no one interpretation of Chinese poetry, therefore, and sweeping generalisations are best avoided.

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## 6. VERSE, FREE VERSE AND PROSE

### 6.1 Introduction

We need to look more carefully at 'free verse', which is often defined today as freedom from previous restrictions. One popular account runs: {1}

'Free verse is a literary device that can be defined as poetry that is free from limitations of regular meter or rhythm, and does not rhyme with fixed forms. Such poems are without rhythm and rhyme schemes, do not follow regular rhyme scheme rules, yet still provide artistic expression. In this way, the poet can give his own shape to a poem however he or she desires. However, it still allows poets to use alliteration, rhyme, cadences, and rhythms to get the effects that they consider are suitable for the piece.' Particular features are:

- Free verse poems have no regular meter or rhythm.
- They do not follow a conventional rhyme scheme; these poems do not have any set rules.
- This type of poem is based on normal pauses and natural rhythmical phrases, as compared to the artificial constraints of normal poetry.

Examples are taken from Whitman, Ashbury, Dickinson and Pound. Attridge {2} adds a need for thoughts and intense feelings, internal rhyme, a musical rhythm, ability to break lines at points of the poet's own choosing, and for alliteration and other devices.

Free verse is a contentious subject, {3} and prosodic analysis even more so, {4} where it is easy to get lost in the details of analysis, important though they are {5}, and so overlook the relational, integrative nature of rhythm as the principle which fuses the utterance and allows unified expression. {6} To quote Einarsson: {7}

‘Northrop Frye expresses the same paradox in reference to his concept of the “genuine voice,” speech, which is expressed not in casual conversation but in accomplished literature, in which calculated skill paradoxically permits the freedom to communicate spontaneously:

‘The half-baked Rousseauism in which most of us have been brought up has given us a subconscious notion that the free act is the untrained act. But of course freedom has nothing to do with lack of training. We are not free to move until we have learned to walk; we are not free to express ourselves musically until we have learned music; we are not capable of free thought unless we can think. Similarly, free speech cannot have anything to do with the mumbling and grousing of the ego. Free speech is cultivated and precise speech . . . .’ (The Well-Tempered Critic)’

‘A solution to this often cited paradox may be the artificial nature of language itself. Artificiality is not alien to language, but is essential to it. Artifice became essential to language once the primitive

stage of the spontaneous vocal and physical gesture was transcended, and language inevitably became a conscious arrangement. Elaborating the arrangement, pattern, and artistry merely taps the essential quality of all language sophisticated beyond the stage of primitive gesture. The strength of primitive gesture is its immediacy and sincerity; the weakness is its inability to provide analysis. A sophisticated explanation, on the other hand, often loses the immediacy of the primitive outcry. Language must juggle these two aspects, the primitive expression and the sophisticated explanation. When language goes toward explanation, it loses expression. However, rhythm is the key to restoring the primitive immediacy in sophisticated expression: rhythm restores the unity and the gestural force of primitive expression throughout sophisticated language.'

In truth, free verse is part of a larger intention, which is to vary the arrangement of the poem on the page. Eleanor Berry {8}, for example, lists some twelve ways in which such visual layouts may support the irony, openness, dissonance, anticlimax, tension, surprise, fragmentation, ambiguity and self-reference of modern poetry.

Those emphasizing the poem's autonomy or unity may:

1. Give prominence to the sound or structure in the text.
2. Indicate the juxtaposition of ideas or images.
3. Signal shifts in tone, meaning or perspective.

4. Frame a word or phrase.
5. Emphasize (foreground) the text as an aesthetic object.
6. Provide an abstract shape of energy.

The textural and disintegrative may:

1. Signal a reference to poetic tradition.
2. Allude to genres of printed texts.
3. Sustain interest through textural differences.
4. Create counterpoint between structures occupying the same words.
5. Heighten awareness of the reading process.
6. Defamiliarise certain areas or aspects of the text.

Behind these devices generally lies a belief that poetry should be a representation of lived experience, as some advocates of Tang poetry have argued. At its best, poetry tries to replicate the perceptual, cognitive, emotional or imaginative processes that gave rise to the poem, and to do so in a manner that seems natural and everyday. Living and writing are matters not to be confused or fused completely, of course, but free verse at least tries to overcome the nineteenth century dichotomy between art and life.

These opening definitions have a Modernist orientation, therefore, a movement that has continually shifted the goalposts, not only insisting on new themes and expression but also outlawing the old. In practice, far from

being tolerant, open to new thoughts and forms, today's serious poetry is often prescriptive, imposing shifting filters to achieve what it alone considers to be contemporary and authentic. {9}

In summary, it seems to me, against those who'd argue that modern free verse is the *only* valid medium for Chinese poetry translation, we might observe:

1. In the hands of good poet, verse of all descriptions is an enabling and not a restricting medium.
2. Traditional verse lays down rules, certainly, but the good poet will aim for expressive deviation from, and variety within, those rules. Without such rules, moreover, there can be no expressive deviation to give shape and impact to the lines.
3. Traditional verse is not coercive, imposed by fiat of critics and theorists, but simply employs forms that have been found to work over centuries of use. {10-11} In a similar way, human beings have agreed forms of social address and behavior that enable them to cooperate and function in society.
4. Pre-modern Chinese verse is an intensely traditional art, far more restrictive than English verse at its most formal. If translation is to respect this feature, some form of traditional verse would be the natural choice.
5. 'Free verse' is in practice a difficult medium, and academic translators employing it too often lack the poet's necessary sensibilities and long years of training.

I'm not, of course, arguing that's always or necessarily the case. Here is Adetoro Banwo's translation of the Tao Yuanming's poem, Poem 20: {12}

I built my hut within where others live,  
But there is no noise of carriages and horses.  
You ask how this is possible:  
When the heart is distant, solitude comes.  
I pluck chrysanthemums by the eastern fence  
and see the distant southern mountains.  
The mountain air is fresh at dusk.  
Flying birds return in flocks.  
In these things there lies a great truth,  
But when I try to express it, I cannot find the words.

This seems to me excellent: it's verse not far from prose, but strongly crafted to echo the homespun honesty of Tao Yuanming's lines. The distinguished translator David Hinton also writes a quietly modulated free verse that works as a collage or sharply-cut pieces, here respecting the parallelism of the original: {13}

### Du Fu: Leaving the City

It's frost-bitter cold, and late, and falling  
frost traces my gaze all bottomless skies.

Smoke trails out over distant salt mines.  
Snow-covered peaks slant shadows east.

Armies haunt my homeland still, and war  
drums throb in this far-off place. A guest

overnight here in this river city, I return  
again to shrieking crows, my old friends.



It seems to me that translation in more traditional forms should at least equal or exceed such accomplishments. The first is hampered by its choice of a sensible, everyday language, and the second by aural phrasings, or, more exactly, their lack of them, which limits the emotive expression. The poem works, and works well, only if we don't really enunciate the words. If, however, readers will go carefully through Hinton's lines, properly sensing their sounds and phrasings, they may appreciate what I am drawing attention to. As I hear them, the words run as trucks in shunting yards, awkwardly bumping into each other as the lines are read. Hinton's translations serve his views admirably, but they are neither prose exactly, nor free verse, but assemblies of words unconscionably free of aesthetic requirements.

## 6.2 Free Verse and Prose Verse

In practice, much of today's 'free verse' is not verse as the word was commonly understood, i.e. text with some rhythmic and aesthetic coherence, but, in the derogatory phrase of its opponents, just 'chopped up prose'.

Free verse is still a contentious field, with more pamphleteering and literary politics than rational argument. Doubtless it's the case that traditional metre *can* be constricting or monotonous if not written properly. Or will seem woefully antiquated if the reader cannot distinguish the actual stress that syllables receive by being articulated in various ways — spoken or read

silently, emphasized or not for emotive effect — and, most particularly, how this stress differs from the set metre.

It is by playing one off against another, the speaking voice against the set metre, that poets create their distinctive effects. It is also this difference, or divergence, from the regular metre, that adds an expressive depth to the lines, beyond the host of other devices in the poet's arsenal. Clearly, the traditionalists argue, no divergence is possible if there is nothing to diverge from, i.e. expectation of a regular metre, and it is this plain observation that explains why 'free verse' is in fact more limiting than traditional verse. The extra freedom is in fact illusory, paradoxically so, and has to be made good by other means. T.S. Eliot was disingenuous in discussing the matter, and W.C. Williams frankly admitted that free verse had failed to rejuvenate poetry in English. {14}

But of course the foot-substitution approach of the preceding paragraph is only one of many prosodic systems, and any claimed interplay of metre and speech rhythms may disappear with other approaches. Prosody is enormously complex in detail, even in terminology. {3}

Free verse depends on many things, indeed on the simultaneous co-operation of all metrically relevant factors, which include syntax, lineal patterning, metre and the rules governing natural speech. {15}

Free verse may not adhere to any of the regular patterns by which metre is habitually characterized, and may reject end-pointing by rhyme, but there are usually rhythmic elements still in play, and often some residual echo of formal patterns.

Rhythm is a vague term, perhaps, but rhythm in poetry could be taken as the temporal distribution of the elements of language. {16} T.V.F. Brogan states the obvious in remarking that we will get nowhere in versification 'until we take the poem as a complex structure of meanings, i.e. a semantic system, in which many diverse and disparate types of elements and structures *all contribute information* in varying degrees and at various levels.' {16} Paul Ramsey wrote in 1968 that: 'Free verse can be partially analyzed and understood. Its metric habits, dispositions, and mysteries can also be seen in terms of the rhetoric and meaning and spiritual vision of the poems. It is a rich world for study and I would hope not merely accurate but illuminating study. Linguists should help us refine such study; so may musical metrics; keen ears and poetic sensibility must inform it.' Something written for the casual, conversational voice may be more susceptible to the subtleties of linguistic expression. {16}

Readers who read carefully the references listed here will probably despair of gaining a working definition of verse, free {17-18} or otherwise. Metrical skill anyway comes from practice, they will feel, rather than any slavish following of rules. In fact I have no quarrel with 'free verse' as such, and indeed use it for many of the translations in Volume One. What I do think is inadequate for poetry translation is the prose masquerading as verse, which, for want of a better term, I shall call 'prose verse'. Rather than attempt a definition, and be plunged into the prosodic difficulties of the previous sections, I will give some imitations of today's translation styles, and indicate

a progression from prose through prose verse to free verse and thence to traditional verse. Du Fu's *Spring Prospect* (Poem 41) serves as a convenient model, because we have met it earlier, and because it has been extensively translated. {19}

## 6.3. Progression of Prose into Verse

### 6.3.1. Simple Prose

Suppose we start with prose undistinguished by any melodic invention, assonance or emotive shaping: i.e. a simple, unadorned and rather flat-footed prose. Lines vary in length: Version A:

The country is broken, with only mountains and rivers left unchanged.

In spring the city streets are choked with grass and trees.

Moved by the times, the flowers show their tears.

Hurt by separation, the birds startle the heart.

Beacon fires have smoked for three months.

A letter from home would be worth ten thousand taels of gold.

I scratch my head, my hair is shorter and too thin  
even to hold a hatpin up.

There are some doubtful notes in the rendering, but I am only concerned with the verse. We could agree that the meaning of the poem sense is well conveyed, though there's little of phrasing at the syllable level that characterizes verse here.

### 6.3.2. Prose Verse

The next stage, which I call 'prose verse' has some aesthetic shaping in the lines. The lines may be expanded to pack in more detail: Version B:

Even while the state is broken  
its hills and streams remain;  
Now inside the walls of Changan  
grasses and trees grow thick.  
Seeing flowers come, a sense  
of sadness overwhelms me; cut off  
as I am, the bird song stirs  
my heart. It's three months and still  
the beacons flare as they did  
last year. To have news  
of home would be worth a full  
measure of gold. I try  
to make my hair presentable,  
but find it too thin and white  
to hold even a hatpin up.

Or, if we stick to the original eight lines: version C:

A broken realm, where only hills and streams remain.  
Spring is in the city: streets thick with grass and trees.  
Time makes its presence felt; flowers shed their tears.  
Hurt by separation, the heart's a startled bird.  
The beacon fires have flared for fully three months now  
and news of home is worth ten thousand taels of gold.  
I scratch this old white head, but find the hair too thin  
to grasp and hold in place a hatpin there.

Or with the sense expanded a little: version D:

The land goes back to natural streams and hill,  
and the springtime comes, with city streets in grass.

Flowers, the time in prospect, they both have tears,  
and heart is homeless like a startled bird.  
For three months now, the warning beacons smoke,  
and for a letter from home what gold we'd give.  
Helplessly I scratch at this white head  
that holds no gleaming pin of office now.

Alternatively, we can cut the redundant words: version E,  
aiming for something as spare as the original:

A land broken: hills and streams remain.  
Spring: city streets thick with grass and trees.  
Time hurts at parting: flowers shed their tears.  
Severed, the heart's a startled bird.  
beacons flare for three long months  
Home news is worth ten thousand weight of gold.  
I scratch my head, hair too thin and white  
to grasp and hold in place a hatpin there.

Now the lines have some verbal coherence; some stir the emotions and are pleasing, though renderings B, C and E are still rather disjointed. In particular, the verse lacks proper phrasing, assonance and vowel harmony to give emotive form to the rendering.

It is between the prose and 'prose verse' categories that most of today's renderings fall. Taking translations as they appear in the Internet search engines, the more popular translations of 'Spring Prospect' are:

Burton Watson. {20}

The nation shattered, mountains and river remain;  
city in spring, grass and trees burgeoning.

Feeling the times, blossoms draw tears;  
hating separation, birds alarm the heart.  
Beacon fires three months in succession,  
a letter from home worth ten thousand in gold.  
White hairs, fewer for the scratching,  
soon too few to hold a hairpin up.

John Tarrant {21}

The nation is broken,  
mountains and rivers remain.  
Spring comes to the city  
overgrown with grass and trees.  
Feeling the time—  
flowers weep,  
hating captivity—  
bird calls pierce the heart.  
The war beacons have burned  
for three months now  
and I'd give ten thousand pieces of gold  
for a letter from home.  
I've torn my white hair  
till it's so thin  
it almost won't  
hold a hatpin.

Pauline Yu {22}

The nation shattered, mountains and river remain;  
spring in the city — grasses and trees are dense.  
Feeling the times, the flowers draw forth tears.  
Hating to part, bird alarms the heart.  
Beacon fires for three months in a row,  
A letter from home worth ten thousand in gold.  
White hairs scratched grow even shorter —  
Soon too few to hold a hatpin on.

### Charles Hucker {23}

The city has fallen. Only the mountains and rivers have survived.  
The trees and grass grow thickly to greet the spring.  
Touched by the sight, the flowers shed tears;  
reluctant to leave, the birds are heavy of heart.  
The beacon fires have been burning for three months;  
A letter from home would be precious as gold.  
The hairs on my white head have grown so thin;  
That they can barely hold a hairpin.

### Stephen Owen {24}

The state broken, the hills and rivers remain,  
the city turns spring, deep with plants and trees.  
Stirred by the time, flowers, sprinkling tears,  
hating parting, birds, alarm the heart.  
Beacon fires stretch through three months,  
a letter from family worth ten thousand in silver.  
I've scratched my white hair even shorter,  
pretty much to the point it won't hold a hat pin.

### Hugh Grigg {25}

The nation is broken, though mountains and rivers remain.  
In cities in the Spring, the grass and trees grow deeply.  
Sensing the moment, flowers shed tears.  
Hating the separation, birds are fearful at heart.  
The beacons have burnt continuously for three months.  
A letter from home is worth ten-thousand pieces of gold.  
My white hair is even scarcer from scratching.  
And can barely hold a hairpin.

Readers must make up their own minds, but, on the craft



level, these renderings seem to me far from acceptable free verse. The lines have few of the extra dimensions required of words — organization into rhythmic and aesthetic units, effective phrasing, the needed connotations of words, their sonic properties, their histories of use. Does this matter? To the extent that this is great poetry in the original, it most certainly does. As Frederick Turner remarks: {26}

'From about the middle of the seventh century to the end of the tenth, one of the most remarkable bodies of poetry in the world was composed in China.'

How in the world can these renderings give any conception of: {26}

'Third, the mature classicism of Du Fu, perhaps the greatest of all the Tang poets, his exquisite style enriched with psychological depth and controlled passion. Here the objective and subjective are perfectly balanced, as in the work of such Western figures as Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Mozart.'

Perhaps academic fashion is to blame. Any translator wishing to publish a collection with a major publishing house must adopt contemporary styles, though there remains a serious divide. Many poetry translators probably feel they should be able to do as they please with the source material, provided what eventuates is poetry in the approved Modernist style. In contrast, Sinologists insist on conveying the exact sense, no matter

how crabbed may be the verse. If what they produce reveals a tin ear, then so be it: most contemporary poetry is the same.

True, but there the similarity ends. Much contemporary poetry has no aesthetic dimension, and is not intended to have, but that is not an argument for translating pre-modern Chinese poetry in a similarly limited way. Pre-modern Chinese poetry is beautiful, if in a way remote from European aesthetics, and a decent translation, it seems to me, should bring some of that beauty over.

### 6.3.3. Free Verse

In true free verse we relax some of the traditional verse constraints. Here, in this version F, we keep rhyme suppressed (it's across stanzas) and make the metre somewhat irregular:

But hills and streams of this hurt land remain:  
and spring is grass and trees in thoroughfares.  
Flowers, the time in prospect: they both have tears,  
and heart is homeless, like a startled bird.

Three months of warning beacons, distant fears:  
much gold for news of home, but nothing's heard.  
How can this scratched-at head of mine retain  
the pin of office with these thin, white hairs?

We might also use the remain / retain rhyme in lines 1 and 7 to emphasize the parallelism more:

But hills and streams of this hurt land remain:  
How can this scratched-at head of mine retain

In Version G we use slant rhymes, and the rhythm still a little irregular:

A splendid realm betrayed by man  
    where now but streams and hills remain.  
Prodigious spring, where Chang'an ways  
    are thick with streets of trees and grass.  
A grief that's palpable, our cares  
    reciprocating flowers' tears.  
The startled heart that dreads the time  
    when, like a bird, it's far from home.  
For three months now the beacons pour  
    their warning smoke into the air.  
Ten thousand taels of gold we'd give  
    to hear our loved ones were alive,  
but nothing comes. With that great pledge  
    of duty now undone by age,  
I scratch at hair grown white and thin,  
    where once the pin of office shone.

#### 6.3.4. Traditional Verse

In traditional verse we expect the full display of verse craft: regular lines and regular rhyme: version H:

There's nothing in this land of ills  
but first time things, the streams and hills.  
Spring, beautiful in Chang'an, sees  
but thoroughfares of grass and trees.

And time that's palpable with fears  
reciprocated in the flower's tears.

How far the startled heart must roam  
when, like a bird, it's far from home.

For three months now the beacons flare  
their warning portents in the air.  
Ten thousand taels of gold we'd give  
to know our dearest ones still live.

No letter comes. Undone by age,  
I scratch at thin white hairs, and rage  
now helplessly at what has gone  
from where that badge of office shone.

To my ears, version G is somewhat mechanical, and H is much too facile, simply floating over what needs to be emotively expressed. The rhymes are not contrived exactly, but don't earn their keep by shaping the lines properly. Overall, there is no sense of seriousness, of the verse being aware of what is being said. Like much Victorian translation, it is song-like, heartlessly pretty and unevocative.

Du Fu's poem was written in March 757, {27} when he was a prisoner of the An Lushan rebels at the Tang capital of Chang'an, which had been sacked the year before. {28-29} It is one of Du Fu's more famous pieces, {30-31} notable for its economy of language, and Du Fu's skill at social comment. {32} *Wulu* verse is known for its musicality and refinement. These are the general features a translation has to bring across, bearing in mind the themes and parallelism noted in section 4.3 above.

We return to version F, analyzing the translation sequentially, from content through expression to verse features.

## 1. Content.

First, we have two quandaries to consider. What does line 2 mean: that the spring comes back to the city regardless of its devastation, showing that nature is larger than man's transgressions? Or that the city streets are overgrown with trees and grass as a result of its sack by An Lushan rebels? Both can be read into the poem, though the second would be poetic licence. Chang'an had been sacked by rebel forces the previous year, so that grass could have sprung up in the streets, but hardly trees. I think it's better to leave the matter open, as rendering F does. The second difficulty may be line 8, but is easily resolved. Du Fu's hatpin refers to the pin used to hold the Tang badge of office in place, {33} i.e. the reference is the fall of the Tang dynasty and not to personal vanity (though Du Fu's aged appearance does echo the first line).

Otherwise, the renderings reproduce the content reasonably accurately. Note also that the ambiguities of the Chinese are retained in lines 3 and 4, and that mawkish expressions of 'flowers sprinkling tears' and the like are avoided by: *Flowers, the time in prospect: they both have tears.*

## 2. Structure

We now have to check how closely these translations follow the structure of the original. In the first:

a. The opening and closing couplets (lines 1 and 8), are in parallel (vanished splendour).

b. The interior two couplets ( 3-4 and 5-6) are parallel in theme and grammar. 'Grief' is parallel with 'fear', 'time' with 'far' (one in time and one in space), 'flower' with 'bird' (natural world), 'tears' with 'startle' (emotional response), 'beacons' with 'hear' (messages) 'three' with 'ten thousand' (numbers), 'months' with 'gold' (measurement).'

c. Parallels in meaning are also preserved: parallel and non-parallel couplets alternate. Lines 1 & 2 are parallel. Lines 3-4 are non-parallel. Lines 5 & 6 are parallel. Lines 7 & 8 are non-parallel.

d. The poem shows the typical progression of Chinese poems. The required opening (*qi*) sets the time, place and theme. What is human ('splendid realm') is set against what is natural ('streams and hills'). What is broken by men is set against what is unbroken in nature. The contrast between human destruction and nature's luxuriance is again implied by the second line.

e. The required second couplet (*sheng*) is more complicated. By turning away from the exterior world and omitting obvious subjects, Du Fu allows several interpretations. So does the translation: lines 3 and 4

preserve the four interpretations listed earlier. Each interpretation is equally valid and applicable, but distinct perspectives are offered on human suffering. In the first two interpretations, nature is indifferent to human suffering, a time-honoured view. In the third interpretation human suffering is part of nature. In the fourth interpretation man is part of nature and it is therefore nature rather than man that knows sorrow.

f. The third couplet exhibits the required turning away (*zhua*), here from nature to the human world. The beacon fire (warning of nomad invasions) is contrasted with the wished-for news from home. The three months (a long time) is paralleled by much gold — which is linked to catastrophic events and so to a terribly long time.

g. The final couplet rounds off (*he*) the poem by paralleling the poet's careworn appearance, ravaged by time and grief, with a country equally affected. It's part of the Confucian vision of unity in man, country and universe.

One point is worth noting: we have made explicit what is only implicit in the original, notably the 'pin of office'. I'd argue this is necessary since things left vague in the English poetry tradition tend to evoke only a vague response, which is one reason why Chinese poets can all seem the much the same in translation. Small differences in the original have to be emphasized for a western audience.

In short, we have conveyed the following:

- multiple ambiguities of meaning, which flexible Chinese grammar allows.
- strict rules concerning structure, how themes are introduced, developed, inverted, etc.

But not:

- allusion, continually picking up and modifying snippets of other Chinese poems.
- very compact nature, prescribing a fixed and limited number of words to the line.
- tones, and strict rules concerning their use.

More importantly, we have returned the translation of poetry to what it originally was, namely a rendering of poem into poem, but, unlike the Herbert Giles version above, we have avoided expressing the subtleties of the Chinese with inappropriate, stock phrases from English verse. It is not a contemporary rendering, however: does that matter?

Much of current practice derives from Ezra Pound, who had a theory of immediacy through images that was not new (having been anticipated by Russian poets), not at all convincing (Sinologists knew better) and not at all correct (most Chinese characters are not ideograms). {18} Arthur Waley devised a stress verse, not far from prose, where the key words in the Chinese were emphasized in the rendering, with nothing added and nothing left out. With these, the translation of Chinese poetry into English was pretty well doomed to a Jack and Jill simplicity — to



things that were faintly pleasing if we close our ears to what real verse can do, to the way it can and should work on the syllable level. Leaving this aside, we now have to look at what we've got.

### 3. Metre and Musicality

1. The lines in version F are pentameters, echoing the Chinese five-character line, but a little irregular, placing the poem on the borderline between free verse and traditional verse. Note the slow movement and the variety in the pacing, which underlines the meaning.

But **hills** and **streams** of this **hurt land** | **remain:** | |  
and **spring** is **grass** | and trees | in **thoroughfares.** | |  
**Flowers,** | the **time** in **prospect:** they | both have **tears,** | |  
and **heart** is **homeless,** | | like a **startled** | **bird.** | | |

Three **months** of **warning** **beacons,** | **distant** **fears:** | |  
much **gold** for **news** of **home,** | but **nothing's** heard. | |  
How **can** this **scratched-**at head of **mine** | **retain** |  
the **pin** | of **office** | | with these **thin,** | **white hairs?** | | |

2. Musicality: Assonance has to hint at tones in the Chinese: here in long vowels:

But hills and streameams of this hurt land remainai:  
and spring is grassee and treeees in thoroughfaresee.  
Floweers, the tieeme in prospect: they boooth have tearees,  
and heartee is homeless, lieeke a starteeled birdee.

Three months of warneering beacons, distant fearees:  
much goldee for news of homee, but nooothing's heardee.

How can this scratched-at head of mine retain  
the pin of office with these thin, white hairs?

### 3. Musicality: Alliteration

The alliteration is subtle: simplifying a little:

But hills and streams of this hurt land remain,  
and spring is grass and trees in thoroughfares.  
Flowers, the time in prospect: they both have tears,  
and heart is homeless, like a startled bird.

Three months of warning beacons, distant fears:  
much gold for news of home, but nothing's heard.  
How can this scratched-at head of mine retain  
the pin of office with these thin, white hairs?

### 4. Musicality: Rhyme

Rhyme is across the stanzas, and therefore muted. There is also pararhyme in lines 2-3 and 5-8.

But hills and streams of this hurt land remain:  
and spring is grass and trees in thoroughfares.  
Flowers, the time in prospect: they both have tears,  
and heart is homeless, like a startled bird.

Three months of warning beacons, distant fears:  
much gold for news of home, but nothing's heard.  
How can this scratched-at head of mine retain  
the pin of office with these thin, white hairs?

### 5. Refinement

The verse is slow moving and the diction is a little elevated.

## 6. Other Versions

A more emphatic (and, I think, better) rendering of lines one and two is:

But hills and streams of this bare land remain,  
spring floods with grass and trees in thoroughfares.  
The flowers, the time in prospect: both have tears,  
and heart is homeless, like a startled bird.

Three months of warning beacons, distant fears:  
much gold for news of home, but nothing's heard.  
How can this scratched-at head of mine retain  
that pin of office with these thinned white hairs?

Verse craft dignifies what would otherwise be banal observations.

## 7. Looking at Other Versions

Readers may wish to analyze the work of today's leading Chinese poetry translators in this light. If we look, for example, at Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping's translation {34} of Du Fu's *Night Thoughts While Traveling*, which is show-cased in their Introduction, we can see a nod towards traditional verse in the off rhymes (aaaabbcc) employed in their translation. {35} (Poem 43 in Volume One.)

Slender wind shifts the shore's fine grass.  
Lonely night below the boat's tall mast.  
Stars hang low and the vast plain splays.  
The swaying moon makes the great river race.

How can poems make me known?  
I'm old and sick, my career done.  
Drifting, just drifting. What kind of man am I?  
A lone gull drifting between earth and sky.

We should also note the slow rhythms and broad use of assonance. But Barnstone's Introduction also remarks:

'I have argued elsewhere that Chinese poetry in English has deviated deeply from the form, aesthetics, and concerns of the Chinese originals and that this is a result of willful mistranslation by modernist and post-modernist poet-translators. In the first decades of the last century, Chinese poetry was a powerful weapon in the battle against Victorian form. It was brought over to English in forms resembling the free verse that it helped to invent. Rhyme and accentual meter were quietly dropped from the equation because — unlike Chinese use of parallelism, caesura, minimalism, implication and clarity of image — they weren't useful in the battle for new poetic form. However, we are now in a new century and need no longer be constrained by past literary conflicts. While elimination of rhyme and meter from translations of Chinese poetry has created a distinguished English-language tradition of "Chinese" free verse — one that has influenced successive generations of American poets — it has also denied the poem its right to sing.' {36}

The following is spare, lively and intelligent, but where is its musicality? (Also translated as Poem 5 in Volume One.)

I beg of you, Zhongzi,  
don't come into my neighborhood,  
don't break my willow twigs.  
I'm not worried about the willow trees,  
I'm afraid of my parents.  
I do miss you  
but I'm scared  
of my parents' scolding. {37}

Ditto for many other translations. Barnstone goes on to say:

'I don't recommend a return to the practice of translating Chinese poems into rhyming iambics (generally this overwhelms the Chinese poem). But I do think that as much attention to the way the Chinese poem triggers sight, and that translators should use the whole poetic arsenal — syllabics, sprung rhythm, off-rhyme, half rhyme, internal rhyme, assonance, consonance and so forth — to try to give the English version of the poem a resonant life.' {36}

Brave words, and to be applauded, but where is that arsenal deployed in the translations that follow? Compare this quiet mediation of Wang Wei (Poem 57): {29}

Nobody in sight on the empty mountain  
but human voices are heard far off  
Low sun slips deep in the forest

and lights the green hanging moss

With this angry piece from Du Fu (opening) {39}

The four outskirts are not yet safe and quiet.  
I am old but have no peace:  
All my sons and grandsons died in battle.  
so what use is it to keep my body in one piece.  
Throwing away my walking stick, I walk out  
The other soldiers are saddened, pitying me

With the boastful Li Bai: (conclusion of poem 25) {40}

My shadow staggers when I dance.  
We have our fun while I can stand  
then drift apart when I fall asleep.  
Let's share this empty journey often  
and meet again in the milky river of stars.

Different personalities, different poetry forms and different themes, but all translations sounding much the same in rhythm, line length, diction and phrasing. The statements are certainly different, but bald statements don't make a poem, or not by themselves.

It is very much that 'distinguished English-language tradition of "Chinese" free verse' that I am questioning here. We need to go much further than Barnstone and Chou suggest, and move translation onto radically different ground.

Modernism I have briefly reviewed above, where I suggest that its arguments were useful in dethroning traditional verse, but also overdone and self-defeating. Modernism

became the undisputed template for serious poetry seventy years ago, but it was a pyrrhic victory, shrinking the readership of contemporary poetry to poets and fellow academics.

## 8. Chinese versus Western Notions of Poetry

Restricting translations to echoing how Chinese poetry operates, or we suppose operates, suffers from the obvious problem that what works in Chinese does not necessarily work in English. As I've outlined in chapter 3, Chinese approaches language quite differently, working in the small compass of its poetry to encompass a wealth of different genres, themes and personalities. It does so because it exploits the genius of a language deployed and developed for three millennia by the most populous people on the earth with a diverse cultural history briefly outlined in chapter 1. To our eyes, constrained by European notions, that universe doubtless seems small and unchanging. Chinese writing, poetry and painting indeed seems much of a muchness, and sustained study is in fact needed to unlock its richness: the purpose of our first chapter here.

## 9. Enlarging the Viewpoint: Sanskrit

Suppose we view matters from a different perspective. Sanskrit is a language very different from Chinese: a daunting grammar, a vast vocabulary, and long lines in quantitative metres that have no parallel in modern European languages. Sanskrit is also important to Tang poetry, as it happens, because there were many missions

to bring Buddhist scriptures from India for study, their themes and sometimes the words themselves thereby creeping into Chinese thought of the time. The opening stanza of Jayadeva's Meghaduta, or Cloud Messenger, a classic of Indian, if not world literature, runs:

कश्चित्कान्ताविरहगुरुणा स्वाधिकारप्रमत्तः

kazcit kAntA**virahaguru**NA svAd**hik**Ara **pramatta**H

g g g g | | | | | g / g | g g | g v

a\_certain beloved separation hard\_to\_be\_borne his\_own  
office negligent

शपेनास्तंगमितमहिमा वर्षभोग्येण भर्तुः

zApenAstaM**gamitamahim**A var**Sabhogye**Na bhartu**H**

g g g g | | | | | g / g | g g | g v

curse caused\_to\_set power a\_year to\_be\_endured  
master

यक्षश्चक्रे जनकतनयास्नानपुण्योदकेषु

yakSaz cakre **janakatanay**AsnA**napu**Nyod**ake**Su

g g g g | | | | | g / g | g g | g v

Yaksa made janaka daughter bathing pure water

स्निग्धच्छायातरुषु वसतिं रामगिर्याश्रमेषु

snigd

g g g g | | | | | g / g | g g | g v

pleasant tree\_affording\_shade dwelling Rama\_mountain  
hermitage



The three lines following the original Devanagari show 1. transliteration (with naturally long vowels shown in Capitals), 2. Mandakrata pattern of light (l) and heavy (g) syllables with caesura (/) and syllable of variable quality (v), and 3. a word-for-word translation. {32} The Devanagari is read from right to left.

All Sanskrit poetry aims for euphony, but Jayadeva's style is particularly elevated and harmonious, but also noted for its very free word order. Such freedom is allowed by inflected languages, of course, but Kalidasa's words can be jumbled up across whole stanzas, when the grammar does not wholly constrain meaning. Nonetheless, though assembling the fragments above into comprehensible lines involves some assumptions, it is not inherently difficult: there have been many translations. That by Ullah and Kirkpatrick is one of the more pleasing: {41}

A lean and lovesick Yaksha, newly wed,  
Dallied at home avoiding his work.  
His elder, made angry, packed him into exile  
For a year. Now his misery knows no bounds.  
He lives in Ramgiri Parvat near a crystal lake,  
Whose waters once touched by Sita, are holy.

It is close to my own translation: {42}

A year from amorousness: it passes slowly.  
So thought a Yaksha by his master sent,  
for scanting duty, to the Rāmagiry:  
to mope in penance groves as banishment  
by rivers Sītā's bathing there made holy.

Both renderings have rearranged phrases, and both have expanded the four lines of the original Sanskrit. Ullah and Kirpatrick use six lines. I use five but add rhyme not found in the original.

So, the first question: do these rendering resemble the original's mandakrata measure? Not in the slightest. The mandakrata is slow-moving measure of 17 syllables, ten of them long in a prescribed pattern, which goes something like this:

*Kalakalah, the ferry in the sound, now lets great boats lie. Beneath  
bold, broad, stone forts in which stiff Brits fix pride, lie little boats aground. Wet,  
wild, welcome, warm they hint at bitter storms. Bold, bitten barricades fall.  
Whose to say 'fly,' if nits pick petty fights and the work wanders widely?*

I simply devised a stanza (5 pentameters rhymed abxba) that is slow-moving and accommodates the Sanskrit meaning, i.e. that resembles in the English tradition what Meghaduta resembles in the Sanskrit. More exactly, to render the full meaning I have been obliged to transpose the Sanskrit measures onto the very different ground of English measures, as of course we do when translating the French alexandrine into English pentameters, though the two are not so markedly different. All translation requires such transposition, and Chinese is no different. There are further matters. The 'precise meaning' — in the way expected of European prose — is not always clear, and interpretations naturally differ. Compounds may also be long and involved — monstrously so in later poetry — but can create compact and evocative similes. A celebrated example is *vIcikSobhastanitavihaga zreNikAJcIguNA*, the first line of stanza 28 in *Meghaduta*,

which grammarians construe as 'an appositional descriptive consisting of two main parts. The second, *kAJcI-guNA*, m. *girdle-string*, is a Tatpuruṣa [samasa]. The first is an adjectival descriptive in which the Tatpuruṣa *vihaḡa-zreNi*, *row of birds*, is described by *vIciSobhastanita*, *loquacious through wave agitation*. The latter is a compound Tatpuruṣa, in which *stanita* is qualified by the simple Tatpuruṣa *vIci-kSobha*, *agitation of the waves*.' Involved, yes, but through its use Kalidasa can draw a parallel between the river and a woman making her overtures of love. Compound similes operate throughout the Megaduta, where the cloud's life-giving passage across the parched Indian landscape is an extended metaphor for the sexual congress of all nature, one difficult to render in the European tradition and foreign to the Chinese.

## 10. The Prison Bars of Language

Is that a feature we should duplicate in the translation, in the way translators sometimes require of Chinese translations? No. It cannot be done, and would be unintelligible if attempted. Does that necessarily mean that Sanskrit poets experienced life differently? Possibly, to some extent, but no one to my knowledge has suggested that the frequent use of samasas means Sanskrit poets saw disparate elements of life more closely interwoven than do we Europeans. These complex assemblies of words are just a feature of the language, allowing for compression and musicality. I suspect the same applies to Chinese. Academics and translators will naturally make large claims for what they have devoted

the better parts of their working lives to, and those claims also reinforced some aspects of radical theory that argues we live within 'the prison bars of language'. The arguments are far too complicated to pursue here, but readers can find the matter covered in some detail in my *Background to Literary Theory*. {35} In summary, there are many difficulties with this view.

It has, nonetheless, been very influential, and again reinforces what Barnstone calls the 'distinguished English-language tradition of "Chinese" free verse'. Whatever the claims, however, we are in practice restricting the marvellous richness of Chinese literature to narrow prose models, though pretending otherwise, indeed still marshalling ourselves behind the Modernist banner of liberation from stultifying Victorian verse. Many popular introductions to Chinese poetry approach the matter this way, emphasizing its continuing influence on contemporary poetry, which then locks us into various schools of poetry and critical theory, or, more exactly, as these are rarely explored in any depth, into the pamphleteering that characterises these schools. {43} A better approach is to see Chinese poetry in its historical and cultural contexts, {44} which I hope explains my inclusion of matters not normally seen in Chinese poetry translation.

## 11. Word Use in Poetry

An analogy may help. We are born into language, using its words and ready-made phrases to get through our busy lives. From those words and sometimes complete phrases

we make poetry — a poetry that is therefore ever latent in language. What verse does is to select, organize and shape that language, just as the radio set picks up and converts into sound what we otherwise cannot hear. Far from constraining language, therefore, verse gives it greater possibilities, significance and responsibilities. Verse is an enabling mechanism, but through terms and traditions that have to be learned. {45}

Why don't we? Because writing verse, and to some extent reading it — revivals tend too often to be only versified prose — has become a lost art. Contemporary poets have developed other interests, and academic study has today left the New Criticism far behind, seeing this as a quaint way of giving a poem or novel a technical audit, saying what works, what doesn't and why. Fashion affects literature as it does any other discipline, and possibly only historiography studies those fashions properly.

In general, we are still using Modernist notions to fight battles won seventy years ago, and overlooking our own larger literary traditions. Traditional English poems are bulkier, more brightly coloured, and more sentiment-charged entities, or were so until Post-modernism told us to look for clever ways by which the literary artefact undermined itself. Since Chinese poetry is an intensely conservative art, it is to those earlier traditions we have to return. Yes, we can say that Chinese poetry is more concise and refined than ours, and those characteristics should be respected in translation, but that is evading the point. We can only write poetry successful in English if we

use the features of English poetry that have made it successful, once known by heart down the centuries.

## 12. A Contrary View

Not so, say contemporary poets. We should turn matters around and ensure translations do *not* operate as traditional English poems, but in new ways that have to be judged on their own and quite different terms. Pound's translations launched Modernist verse, and Modernist verse is our new poetry style, however plain and limited it may seem to non-specialists. Indeed, rather than accept the self-evident, that these prose-like renderings fell far short of what had hitherto been regarded as poetry, the rules themselves have to be changed, making these plain renderings the only honest way forward in the more intellectualized twentieth century.

But marketing strategies don't play well forever. However novel and intriguing these attempts have been, in translation and contemporary poetry generally, they have not won a wide public. Little of contemporary poetry is now of interest to the common reader, or even to most poets, who have organized themselves into autistic coteries, deaf to the earlier claims of poetry or to the needs of a wider public. {46}

Note that I'm saying that traditional verse enables. It does not guarantee success. English verse is rich and powerful, but can come adrift even in the most practiced hands. When traditional verse blunders, it blunders badly. Free verse, true free verse that allows various shapings,

broken rhythms, line lengths and half-rhymes while still making a pleasing aesthetic entity is surely the way to go, though only the finest of distinctions separates the accomplished from the mundane.

Verse is only a means to an end, therefore, a step towards what may, with the right gifts and effort, become poetry. It enables a piece of writing to be effective, moving and beautiful. {47}

Finally, as should be obvious, but is sometimes overlooked, verse of all descriptions is more difficult to write than prose, and more time-consuming to read. That extra effort is only justified if the verse really creates something needful that is not possible in prose or what I call 'prose verse' — i.e. is more effective in shaping, musicality, semantic subtlety, emotional impact, etc. Correctness is of little value in the arts. It is the excellences of verse that enables, not the verse itself, and that excellence has to be fought for — which is why so much Victorian translation is unacceptable today: it's too glib and facile, too easily achieved in hand-me-down phrases, too much evading the painful heart of the original.

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## 7. TRANSLATION ISSUES

### 7.1 Genres

Genres should be distinct and self-evident in translations. Du Fu's Ballad of Beautiful Ladies (Poem 31) is in the *Unregulated Shi* genre, so that if we translated the poem as:

It is the third month festival at Chang'an  
and the beauties by the river in the warm spring air  
walk virtuous, walk regally, and in gestures share  
what their tight-knit bodies breathe aloud.  
Woven unicorns and peacocks strut on proud  
as gauze beneath will flaunt the courtesan.  
On their heads? Ringlets, glittering shapes:  
as a kingfisher flares each feathered cloud.  
And on their backs? Waistbands with pearls  
more thickly embroidered than slim backs bear:  
and prouder than these, than the preening swan,  
are the kith of the favourite all wait upon.

The objection would not be that this neo-Augustan verse is antiquated — Du Fu's poem goes back 1300 years rather than the 300 years of the Augustan style — but that we agreed to reserve such polished verse for *Regulated Shi*. Something like this would be more in keeping with the genre:

The third day, third month, with the weather fine,  
and the Chang'an beauties by the waterside  
walk virtuous and distant, with such veiled intent  
as their splendid flesh, bone and muscle have implied.  
The silvery unicorns, gliding on thin gauze skirts,

flare with golden peacocks in embroidered stride.

On heads are blue-green adornments that reach on down  
to the lips in leaf-like fashion such forms dictate.

On backs are waistbands, but so packed with pearls  
that their formal appearances scarce bear the weight,  
yet already in tented pavilions the Guo and Qin,  
allied to the famous, sit enthroned in state.

In fact, of course, we'd also have to take into account the  
poet's character, here the plain-speaking Du Fu,  
suggesting something more like the following would be  
the preferred version. The seven-character line has been  
split into two tetrameters, giving more space for an  
accurate rendering:

The third month, third day festival,  
    which, with the Chang'an weather fine,  
has many beauties by the river  
    walking, lingering everywhere.

Voluptuous as each appears,  
    they're also distant, upright, pure.  
So finely made are muscles,  
    flesh and bone that's flaunted there,  
that through the springtime's gathering dusk  
    the gauzy skirts' embroideries  
are rich with silver unicorns,  
    and peacocks with their golden flare.

And on their heads? Blue-green trinkets  
    that, leaf-like tinkling, reach on down  
to play about the spread of lips,  
    for so our etiquettes dictate.  
And on their backs they wear? Waistbands  
    but here so thickly packed with pearls  
that, graceful as deportments are,

their slender backs scarce bear the weight.  
But in the cloud-pavilions sat  
are Pepper-Chambered Go and Qin:  
both sisters of the favourite  
and waited on in sumptuous state.

This has a jeweled phrasing, but the diction is uncompromisingly blunt: 'flaunted', 'gathering dusk', 'undulate' and 'sumptuous'.

## 7.2 Fidelity

Pound's *River Merchant's Wife* may be his most beautiful Chinese translation: {1}

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead  
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.  
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,  
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.  
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:  
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.  
I never laughed, being bashful.  
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.  
10. Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,  
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours  
Forever and forever and forever.  
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,  
You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,

And you have been gone five months.  
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.  
20. By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,  
Too deep to clear them away!  
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.  
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August  
Over the grass in the West garden;  
They hurt me. I grow older.  
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,  
Please let me know beforehand,  
And I will come out to meet you  
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

But it wasn't wholly accurate. Arthur Waley's version  
was: {2}

Soon after I wore my hair covering my forehead  
I was plucking flowers and playing in front of the gate,  
When you came by, walking on bamboo stilts  
Along the trellis, playing with the green plums.  
We both lived in the village of Ch'ang-kan,  
Two children, without hate or suspicion.  
At fourteen I became your wife;  
I was shame-faced and never dared smile.  
I sank my head against the dark wall;  
10. Called to a thousand times, I did not turn.  
At fifteen I stopped wrinkling my brow  
And desired my ashes to be mingled with your dust.  
I thought you were like the man who clung to the bridge:  
Not guessing I should climb the Look-for-Husband Terrace,  
But next year you went far away,  
To Ch'ü-t'ang and the Whirling Water Rocks.  
In the fifth month "one should not venture there"

Where wailing monkeys cluster in the cliffs above.



In front of the door, the tracks you once made  
 20. One by one have been covered by green moss—  
 Moss so thick that I cannot sweep it away,  
 And leaves are falling in the early autumn wind.  
 Yellow with August the pairing butterflies  
 In the western garden flit from grass to grass.  
 The sight of these wounds my heart with pain;  
 As I sit and sorrow, my red cheeks fade.  
 Send me a letter and let me know in time  
 When your boat will be going through the three gorges of Pa.  
 I will come to meet you as far as ever you please,  
 30. Even to the dangerous sands of Ch'ang-fēng.

### Jun Tang gives a modern rendering. {3}

长干行

A Song of Changgan

妾发初覆额，	When I first wore bangs, I played
折花门前剧。	before the front gate, picking flowers.
郎骑竹马来，	You came straddling a bamboo stick in imitation of horse-riding,
绕床弄青梅。	and lounged around the bench, fiddling with green plums.
同居长千里，	We lived at Changgan in the downtown area
两小无嫌猜。	as two little children without misgivings or suspicions.
十四为君妇，	At fourteen I became your wife.
羞颜未尝开。	Shyness prevented me from smiling.
低头向暗壁，	Facing the dark wall with drooping head, I would not turn around
千唤不一回。	10. even if you called my name for a thousand times.
十五始展眉，	At fifteen I began to relax my eyebrows and smile.
愿同尘与灰。	I was willing to be with you until we turned into dust and ashes.
常存抱柱信，	I used to believe that you would be as dependable as Weisheng, but
岂上望夫台？	how could I foresee my mounting the high terrace for wives expecting their husbands' return?
十六君远行，	At sixteen you went away, somewhere
瞿塘滟滪堆。	far beyond the Yanyu Reef of the Qutang Gorge.

五月不可触,	The Reef was unapproachable in June,
猿声天上哀。	and the sky resounded with monkeys' whining.
门前迟行迹,	Your former footprints on the doorstep
一一生绿苔。	20. were covered by green mosses
苔深不能扫,	too thick to be swept away.
落叶秋风早。	This autumn, leaves fall early in wind.
八月蝴蝶来 (or: 黄),	August butterflies came in twos,
双飞西园草。	dancing above the grass in the west garden.
感此伤妾心,	At the sight my heart was broken
坐愁红颜老。	And the color of my face faded as I sat brooding.
早晚下三巴,	Sooner or later, if you will come down the Yangtze River,
预将书报家。	Please send me a letter in advance.
相迎不道远,	Regardless of the distance, I will go
直至长风沙。	30. all the way to Changfengsha to meet you.

I wouldn't doubt that Professor Tang's is the most accurate of the three, but I still prefer Pound's version, which has a poetry missing from the others. And even that translation, deservedly famous, can be made stronger and more evocative by using traditional verse (Poem 26):

How simple it was, and my hair too,  
picking at flowers as the spring comes;  
and you riding about on a bamboo  
horse; playing together, eating plums.  
Two small people: nothing to contend  
with, in quiet Chang Gan to day's end.

All this at fourteen made one with you.  
Married to my lord: it was not the same.  
Who was your concubine answering to  
10. the thousand times you called her name?

I turned to the wall, and a whole year passed  
before my being would be wholly yours —  
dust of your dust while all things last,  
hope of your happiness, with never cause

to seek for another. Then one short year:  
at sixteen I sat in the marriage bed  
alone as the water. I could hear  
the sorrowing of gibbons overhead.

How long your prints on the path stayed bare!  
20. I looked out forever from the lookout tower,  
but could not imagine you travelling there,  
past the Qutang reefs, on the torrent's power.

Now thick are the mosses; the gate stays shut.  
I sit in the sunshine as the wind grieves.  
In their dallying couples the butterflies cut  
the deeper in me than yellowing leaves.

Send word of your coming and I will meet  
you at Chang-feng Sha, past San Ba walls.  
Endless the water and your looks entreat  
30. and hurt me still as each evening falls.

That's a very free translation, of course, especially  
towards the end, where the last four lines have been  
rearranged, the three gorges of San Ba rendered as ' San  
Ba walls', 'the 'looks entreat /and hurt' have been added  
to the text, and the endless distance to Chang-feng Sha  
have been transposed to water, though it would have  
been by river travel that the wife would have reached her  
husband. Chang-feng Sha is today a province in west-

central China, so perhaps it was just distance that Li Bai was emphasizing with the name.

A more faithful (in words and rhyme scheme) but still moving translation is:

Your woman first, hair covering forehead,  
playing at gate and picking flowers:  
there you came riding on your bamboo horse,  
throwing blue plums round the trellised house.  
Just two small people, not vexed or worried,  
in Chang Gan village, and always close.

At fourteen I surrendered whatever powers  
I had to be yours, but only was  
shy and embarrassed, could not turn my head  
10. however you called, if a thousand times.  
At fifteen that stopped; I smoothed my brows,  
desired to be one with you: as life consumes  
that which is mine into ash with yours,  
nor climb to the tower with lookout cause.

At sixteen my lord on distant journey  
far to the reefs in the Qutang gorge  
that no one may cross in the hot June hours:  
the monkeys sound sorrowful in the skies.

The marks you left in your unhurried  
20. going are green as moss inset in floors:  
whatever that moss, too thick to clear  
as leaves and the wind come soon this year.

Eight months: the butterflies have me gaze  
on the heart and its hurting, make me stare  
on couples fled westward over orchard grass:  
I find myself blushing, as though you're near.

Soon it is evening at far San Ba.  
Send me a letter, tell me arrival where:  
wherever you go is my homeward there,  
30. though great the distance to Changfengsha.

Which is best? I prefer the previous approximation, with its vowel harmonies and greater emotive impact, though the academic presses would no doubt insist on the second. Fidelity in translation applies to the poem in all its dimensions, therefore, not only the prose sense of the words.

### 7.3 Improvisation

In practice some improvisation is often necessary since the transposition of words or phrases across languages will generally leave gaps to be filled. But to make 'improvisation' {4} a specific aim of translation introduces two dangers. The first is invention, of making up what doesn't exist in the Chinese tradition. The second is that great stress is placed on the translator's own gifts, on creating that necessary fusion of sound, image and connotation that characterizes poetry. By adopting modern practice, we may too often write things like the recreation of Tao Qian's poem 'Five Sons: Fruits from the Old Tree', where the crass diction (though the Chinese were not then so reticent on sexual matters as they later became) and straggling narrative turn what was astutely crafted into burlesque. The translation starts: {5}

So be it  
I'm old

beyond getting an erection  
aching all over  
thinning hair  
sagging cheeks  
almost toothless  
and my neighbors  
yell me how much joy  
I have for being  
blessed with five sons

The whole poem in Waley's translation reads: {6}

White hair covers my temples,  
I am wrinkled and seared beyond repair.  
And though I have got five sons,  
They all hate paper and brush.  
A-shu is eighteen:  
For laziness there is none like him.  
A-hsüan does his best,  
But really loathes the Fine Arts.  
Yung-tuan is thirteen.  
But does not know "six" from "seven."  
T'ung-tzu in his ninth year  
Is only concerned with things to eat.  
If Heaven treats me like this,  
What can I do but fill my cup?

We could wonder if Modernism's iconoclasm has not encouraged the translator to replace poetry with happy buffoonery — no doubt enjoyable, but a different animal. We could also note how today's preoccupation with theory has allowed critical skills to languish: the verse is not refined but delights in a crude, knock-about humour. Tao Qin is simple and dignified, not indecently loutish.

## 7.4 Style

Every age approaches translation slightly differently, commonly with the aim of either 'domesticating' it (so it is read comfortably and assimilated by the west) or 'foreignising' it (preserving the original features of the text and so stressing the differences to western literature).

{4} Much of literary translation — as opposed to academic renderings by Sinologists — has the first aim. It still follows the simplistic assumptions of early Modernism, without always realizing that, at least by Tang times, Chinese poetry was highly stylized, subject to innumerable rules, and more than a little artificial. Nor does it fully realize that by taking advantage of what doesn't exist in English (tones) or is so different in syntax and literary allusions, Chinese poetry operates in other dimensions altogether. If these are not accommodated, as they generally cannot be, translations shrink to a misleading 'basic English' that makes all Chinese poets sound pretty much the same. It was by exploiting these different dimensions that Chinese poets showed their breadth and individuality, and these dimensions, because complex and formal, are not easily recoverable in today's 'free verse', which is basically a prose lacking much in the way of shaping features on the line and syllable level.

Herbert Giles and John Turner, for example, produced very pleasing translations of Chinese poems, but they were commonly fitted — by a sort of colonial conquest, contemporary theory suggests {5} — into forms quite foreign to the Chinese, requiring the original words to be deformed or partially omitted to meet the rhyme and

stanza needs. Arthur Waley, on the other hand, adopted a rhymeless stress verse that allowed the key words to be emphasized, with much less violence to the original. Perhaps because so easy to write, it's still the style preferred in translation of Chinese verse today, though often one of minimal expectations.

Waley is in fact clear on what can and cannot be done. His extensive Introduction spells out the intentions. No rhyme. No paraphrase but word-for-word renderings. No introduced words, but a stress verse that emphasizes the key Chinese words. He didn't translate Du Fu's 'Spring Prospect' but a poem from medieval China is Tao Qian's *On Drinking Wine No. 5*. {7} (Poem 20 in Volume One.)

I built my hut in a zone of human habitation,  
Yet near me there sounds no noise of horse or coach.  
Would you know how that is possible?  
A heart that is distant creates a wilderness round it.  
I pluck chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge,  
Then gaze long at the distant summer hills.  
The mountain air is fresh at the dusk of day:  
The flying birds two by two return.  
In these things there lies a deep meaning;  
Yet when we would express it, words suddenly fail us.

Chinese-Poetry.com provides the constituent words and a sensible rendering. {7}

Settle home in person place  
But no cart horse noise  
Ask gentleman how able so  
Heart far place self partial



Pluck chrysanthemum east hedge down  
Leisurely look south mountain  
Mountain air day night beautiful  
Fly birds together return  
This here have clear meaning  
Wish argue already neglect speech

I made my home amidst this human bustle,  
Yet I hear no clamour from the carts and horses.  
My friend, you ask me how this can be so?  
A distant heart will tend towards like places.  
From the eastern hedge, I pluck chrysanthemum flowers,  
And idly look towards the southern hills.  
The mountain air is beautiful day and night,  
The birds fly back to roost with one another.  
I know that this must have some deeper meaning,  
I try to explain, but cannot find the words.

Three things should be evident. First, Waley's rendering isn't entirely word-for-word. There has to be some rearrangement and interpretation for the translation to make sense. Second, the rendering is still rather flat because the events depicted have little resonance with us. We don't immediately respond to the picking of chrysanthemums, or the birds flying two by two. And third, the verse itself is undistinguished because only rarely do the English words stray from the dull expedient of prose. To be successful, stress verse requires all sort of sonic adjustments, which today's insistence on everyday naturalness makes difficult to implement.

I would therefore suggest that Imagism's misunderstanding of Chinese ideograms, fundamental differences between English and Chinese, the evidence of

Pound's increasingly obscure Cantos, and Modernism's philosophic incoherence, {8-9} all argue for a different approach. One way would be to expand the Chinese lines to couplets, giving us more line space to work on the multiple meanings a poem may contain. In short, the issue is this: We can stick to more or less word-for-word translations that reflect the terse nature of the original Chinese, but the bald words will convey little of the greatness of the original because English lacks the other features that the original employs for success. Or we can expand the lines to probe, interpret and think about what the words are probably saying. Since the first approach has been tried for a century now with rather modest success, it may be worth putting Modernist views behind us and attempting things that return to the larger European tradition.

That was, of course, the intention of the styles Ezra Pound displaced. James Longenbach {10} gives today's orthodox view, noting that:

'O fair white silk, fresh from the weaver's loom,  
Clear as the frost, bright as the winter snow-  
See! friendship fashions out of thee a fan,  
Round as the round moon shines in heaven above,  
At home, abroad, a close companion thou,  
Stirring at every move the grateful gale.  
And yet I fear, ah me! that autumn chills  
Cooling the dying summer's torrid rage,  
Will see thee laid neglected on the shelf,  
All thoughts of bygone days, like them bygone.

This translation, by Herbert Giles, sounds today like a mockery of Chinese poetry. But you must remember that when the translation was made, there was no other way for English-language poetry to sound: if the translation was going to present itself as a poem, rather than prose, then it needed to be metered. And since Giles was not a very good poet, this translation is ineptly metered.'

Perhaps we should just call it very dated in diction and style. Arthur Waley himself said of Herbert Giles's 'Chinese Poetry in English Verse' that it 'combines rhyme and literalness with wonderful dexterity'. {11}

Giles's poem is by Ban Jiezu (c.48-6 BC), and a famous one, {12} frequently translated:

Traditional Translation: Zhao Xiaoming {13}

Of fresh new silk all snowy white  
and round as harvest moon;  
A pledge of purity and love,  
A small but welcome boon.  
While summer lasts, borne in the hand,  
Or folded on the breast;  
'Twill gently soothe they burning brow  
And charm thee to thy rest.  
But ah, when autumn frosts descend,  
and winter winds blow cold,  
No longer sought, no longer loved,  
'Twill lie in dust and mould.  
This silken fan then deign accept,  
Sad emblem of my lot;  
Caressed and folded for an hour.

### Prose Verse: Xu Kaichang {13}

Glazed silk, newly cut, glittering, white,  
As white, as clear, even as frost and snow.  
Perfectly fashioned into fan,  
Round like the brilliant moon,  
Treasured in my lord's sleeve, taken out, put in -  
Wave it, shake it, and a little wind flies from it.  
How often I fear the winter season's coming  
And the fierce, cold wind which scatters the blazing heat.  
Discarded, passed by, laid in a box alone;  
Such a little time, and the thing of love cast off

### Prose Verse: Thompson. {14}

Newly cut white silk from Qi,  
Clear and pure as frost and snow.  
Made into a fan for joyous trysts,  
Round as the bright moon.  
In and out of my lord's cherished sleeve,  
Waved back and forth to make a light breeze.  
Often I fear the arrival of the autumn season,  
Cool winds overcoming the summer heat.  
Discarded into a box,  
Affection cut off before fulfillment.

### Prose Verse – Prose: Wen Xuan {15}

Newly cut white silk from Qi  
Glistening and pure as frost and snow:  
fashioned into fan of "conjoined bliss."  
Round, round as the bright moon.  
It goes in and out of my lord's breast and sleeve;  
waved, it stirs a gentle breeze,  
But I always fear an autumn's coming,

when chilling winds dispel blazing heat,  
Then it will be thrown into a box,  
and his love will be cut off midcourse.

The versions pass from what is recognizable English verse but a very free paraphrase of the Chinese to close, somewhat prosaic renderings that unfortunately yield little poetry. Ezra Pound's version is typical of his free verse, incidentally, but is even a more a paraphrase, leaving out most of the text: {16}

O fan of white silk,  
    clear as frost on the grass-blade,  
You also are laid aside.

Indeed, Ezra Pound, though setting translation on new tracks, arguably ducked the essential requirements himself. Many of his translations were rather hit and miss: they were not faithful renderings, were not always pleasing verse, and did not indicate why the originals were revered by Chinese readers. But the problem with the earlier translations (as Longenbach points out) was that, in transposing traditions, in making something that would sound to English ears as significant poems, Giles introduced all kinds of things not found in the original: words, images, commonplaces, rhyme patterns. Today's translation practice is against such licence, but has problems of its own.

Modernism, it will be remembered, championed a 'modern sensibility', which continually shifted the goal posts on theme and diction, making poetry intentionally difficult, fragmented and allusive, so that its explication by critics,

poets and theorists became part of the subject matter. {17} Modernism's word choice was also slanted towards the non-literary, moreover — i.e. exactly the reverse of how classical Chinese poetry operates. It's hardly surprising that contemporary translations are apt to be uninspiring, or that 'the translated text turns out to be hardly an English poem'. {18}

## 7.5 Allusion

Chinese poems often allude to earlier poems on similar themes, but all the translator can do is to add helpful notes. Translations have already severed the link to the actual Chinese words, and allusions to English poems would be inappropriate.

## 7.6 Rhyme and No Rhyme

Rhyme is a powerful device and has to be used appropriately, appearing not only natural but also seemingly inevitable. Today's translators tend not to use it, whereas in earlier generations it was expected.

It goes without saying that rhyme should enhance to translation, not trivialize it as in this example (Poem 90)

Tune: "Groping for Fish": Xin Qiji

How much more can Spring bear of wind and rain?  
Too hastily, I fear, 'till leave again.  
Lovers of Spring would fear to see the flowers red  
Budding too soon and fallen petals too wide spread.

O Spring, please stay!  
I've heard it said that sweet grass far away  
Would stop you from seeing your backward way.  
But I've not heard  
Spring say a word,  
Only the busy spiders weave  
Webs all day by the painted eave {19}

Or these concluding lines of a translation from Su Dongpo,  
our Poem 94:

Why then when people part, is she oft full and bright?  
Men have sorrow and joy; they part or meet again;  
The moon is bright or dim and she may wax or wane.  
There has been nothing perfect since the olden days.  
    So let us wish that man  
    Will live long as he can! {20}

We want something that digs deeper, and start with a  
celebrated example of translation issues: Li Bai's *Farewell  
to a Friend*. (Poem 46 in Volume One.)

青山橫北郭，白水遶東城 o  
此地一為別，孤蓬萬里征 o

浮雲遊子意，落日故人情 o  
揮手自茲去，蕭蕭斑馬鳴 o

The bare words are:

Green hills above the northern wall,  
White water wind east city  
This place one do parting  
Lone tumbleweed ten thousand li journey  
Drift clouds traveller thought

Set sun old friend feeling  
Wave hand from this go  
Neigh part horse call

Ezra Pound's well-known rendering is: {21}

Blue mountains to the north of the walls,  
White river winding about them;  
Here we must make separation  
And go out through a thousand miles of dead grass.  
Mind like a floating white cloud,  
Sunset like the parting of old acquaintances  
Who bow over their clasped hands at a distance.  
Our horses neigh to each other  
    as we are departing.

That by Alice Poon is: {22}

Green hills skirt the northern border,  
White waters gird the eastern town;  
Here we part with each other,  
And you set out like a lonesome wisp of grass,  
Floating across the miles, farther and farther away.  
You've longed to travel like roaming clouds,  
But our friendship, unwilling to wane as the sun is to set,  
Let it be here to stay.  
As we wave each other good-bye,  
Our horses neigh, as if for us they sigh.

That on Chinese Poetry is: {23}

Green hills above the northern wall,  
White water winding east of the city.  
On this spot our single act of parting,  
The lonely tumbleweed journeys ten thousand li.  
Drifting clouds echo the traveller's thoughts,



The setting sun reflects my old friend's feelings.  
You wave your hand and set off from this place,  
Your horse whinnies as it leaves.

That by Witter Bynner is: {24}

With a blue line of mountains north of the wall,  
And east of the city a white curve of water,  
Here you must leave me and drift away  
Like a loosened water-plant hundreds of miles....  
I shall think of you in a floating cloud;  
So in the sunset think of me.  
...We wave our hands to say good-bye,  
And my horse is neighing again and again.

The rendering from 'Chinese Poetry' is very acceptable, but the best *verse*, to my mind, is Ezra Pound's, though it's a bit limp and shapeless, a common problem with free verse. More to the point, however, the rendering has an interpretation problem. Pound mistranslated tumbleweed as dead grass, which allowed him to create the mind-numbing 'thousand miles of dead grass', to carry that bewilderment through the 'floating white cloud' image and then make the sunset like the stunned parting of old acquaintances (rather than the other way round). Sudden loss, loneliness and then the bowing to the inevitable — it's only what any decent poet would create given the chance. But it's not quite what Li Bai wrote. We could 'amend' Pound's rendering to:

Green hills rise over the northern wall,  
white water winds on east of the city.  
Here we must make our final parting.

Like tumbleweed whirling ten thousand li,  
and thought untethered like the clouds,  
so sets the sun on this long acquaintance.  
We wave our farewells, and distantly comes  
of neighing of horses after us.

But it would be wise to look at the poem's structure more closely. The Chinese text is:

青山橫北郭，白水遶東城。○此地一為別，孤蓬萬里征。○

浮雲遊子意，落日故人情。○揮手自茲去，蕭蕭斑馬鳴。○

As Jihee Han notes, {25} Li Bai scholars see '*Seeing Off a Friend*' as one of his best formal five-letter *Lushi* verses, in which he perfectly maintains the composition rule of harmony between 景 (the outside landscape) and correspondent 情 (the inside feelings and emotions) and evokes the poetic mood with perfect imagery. In the first four lines, he describes the setting, which are 山, 水, 地 and 萬里, and the second four lines expresses correspondent feelings, which are 意 and 情. Moreover, he weaves each line correspondent to the next line for the aesthetics of balance: he arranges the blue (青), mountain (山), stagnant (橫), north (北)), and outer wall (郭) correspondent to the white (白), river (水), moving (繞), east (東), and inner wall (城), respectively, in the subsequent line. He uses a number, once (一爲) in the third line, and then uses another number, one person (孤蓬) in the fourth line. He also employs a Yin-symbol of a cloud (浮雲) in the fifth line, and then introduces a

correspondent Yan-symbol of the sun (落) in the sixth line. He also describes a movement of a waving hand (揮) in the seventh line, and then fills the empty space with a sound of hsiao (蕭). Finally, he builds up a flowing cadence by utilizing four tonal accents in each line and, simultaneously, makes the sound of the last letter in every even line (城, 征, 情, 鳴) to form an exact rhyme. Through perfect maneuvering of the formal rules of *Lushi* verse, Li conveys an unusually deep range of feelings, including sorrow, loneliness, emptiness, and even mourning.'

These we have now to represent:

Blue mountains, stagnant, north, the outer wall.  
The river, white and inward, flowing east.  
Here, at this place, we must make one final parting.  
Like tumbleweed whirling and falling ten thousand li,  
and thought that's drifting like the travelling clouds,  
so sets the sun on old friendship's departure.  
We wave hands and leave, and from this moment hear  
the neigh of horses that call on after each other.

To make this proper stress verse, five accents to the line, we have to shape a little. The need here is for a pleasing but ever varying pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that also reinforces the meaning — something the Waley approach cannot do:

Blue **mountains**, **stagnant**, and, **north**, the **outer wall**:  
the **river**, **white** and **inward**, **flowing east**.  
**Here**, at this **place**, we **make** one **final parting**.

Like **tumbleweed whirled** and **falling** ten **thousand li**,  
our **thoughts** now **bewildered** and **blown** like the **vacant clouds**,  
So **sets** the **sun** on long **acquaintance: flare** and **darkness**.  
Our **hands wave** a **farewell**, and we **hear** the **horses**  
**neighing, calling** through **distances, after us**.

Or something like that. Stress verse is exceptionally difficult to make a fully finished version of — unlike traditional verse where the right word 'clicks' into place. So, with rhyme to pull the lines into shape, and give them a little more emotive force:

Blue mountains, stagnant: north, the outer wall:  
the river, winding eastward: an inward blaze of white.  
Here, at this place, we make one final parting.  
Like tumbleweed whirling ten thousand li, a fall  
bewildering as the clouds go scattered and wandering on.  
So sets the sun on long acquaintance: light  
and then darkness. We wave our farewells, horses starting  
to neigh to each other, distantly, till each is gone.

In this connection it's difficult to know what Lucas Klein means by 'it would be hard for Chinese poetry to sound so singsongy again'. {26} That Pound has conclusively outlawed metred verse? Many do believe, of course, that Pound's free verse renderings are the best if not only model, but that, as I've tried to point out, brings difficulties. Or is Dr. Klein saying the 1898 Herbert Giles translation was particularly insensitive, in its sonic structure and its diction? That probably has to be conceded:

Where blue hills cross the northern sky,  
Beyond the moat which girds the town,

'Twas there we stopped to say Goodbye!  
And one white sail alone dropped down.  
Your heart was full of wandering thought;  
For me, —my sun had set indeed;  
To wave a last adieu we sought,  
Voiced for us by each whinnying steed!

The translation is not 'singsongy', I think, but simply a not-too-good rendering in the idiom of its time. Line 5 has a pleasing movement, but 'girds' and 'steed' are now very dated, understandably, given the time passed. 'Goodbye' seems heartlessly trivial. But to make Herbert Giles the butt of all that was wrong in pre-Pound translation, and so argue for a rhymeless, and often shapeless 'free verse', is to simply exchange one problem for another. Translations in traditional verse are often emphatic, and so can be clearly felt to blunder, but the unadventurous post-Pound styles are not always suited to the task. Often they set the bar so low that each rendering is pretty much like any other rendering, a boon to academics unconcerned with literary aspects, but a disappointment to readers wanting translations that hint at the splendour of the original.

By way of contrast in our rendering above, instead of transferring the meaning wholesale into our native tradition, we have understood how the poem operates in Chinese, and represented that operation in contemporary verse. A different type of poem has resulted, which avoids the shortcomings of the Giles version — Han's appreciation {6} notwithstanding — and some of Pound's.

## 7.7 Tones

Chinese poems generally rhymed level tones with level tones and oblique tones with oblique tones. Level tones refer to flat and rising tones in Mandarin. Oblique tones correspond to falling-rising and the short falling tone in Mandarin, plus the entering tones in middle Chinese (i.e. that ending in p, t or k).

It's generally accepted that conveying Chinese tones in English translations is a forlorn hope, but an illuminating paper on Chinese poetry generally by Thomas Mazanec {27} suggests distinguishing between English long and short vowels. His translation adopts the commonly accepted model of stress verse, with each stress falling on a key Chinese word, but here the English long vowel represents a level tone and a short one an inflected tone. Thus Dr Mazanec's translation of the first of Jiǎ Dǎo's poems in Yòuxuán jí a parting poem given to a Vietnamese monk who had visited the Táng capital), runs:

You delīver sūtras insīde sprīng vīstas	X O O X X
講經春色裏	
As flōwers flīt encīrcle the rōyal lōunge.	O X X O O
花繞御床飛	
Repēatedlŷ you've crōssed the Sēa of Tōnkin,	O X X O X
南海幾回渡	
And now lōok to retīre to your ōld hīlls agāin.	X O O X O
舊山臨老歸	
Ĭncense is blōwn ōut by the tōuch of the wīnd;	X O O X X
觸風香損印	
A stōne drūm dōns a rōbe of rāin.	O X X O O
霑雨磬生衣	
The skŷ and rīvers are thāt wāy as wēll:	O X X O X
空水既如彼	
Wōrd's been rāre from yōu, cōming and gōing.	X O O X O

Some of the long and shorts are questionable, but the system here just about works, as it does with other examples in Dr Mazanec's paper.

Also important are the problems I have mentioned in dealing with the Russian feminine rhyme {28}. Long vowels and diphthongs in English vastly outnumber short vowels, which makes finding appropriate rhymes difficult and time-consuming. The difference between long and short vowels will not be apparent to most readers, moreover, making the verse rather flat and undistinguished. And, finally, we are expressing a key feature of Chinese poetry with something incidental to English verse.

## 7.8 Parallelism

We have noted the importance of the couplet, and the part played by parallelism Chinese verse construction. But does this have any practical value, given that such parallelism is not generally followed in English verse and therefore not in translation? Occasionally, at least, the answer must be yes.

A case in point is Du Fu's *Night Thoughts in Travelling* (Poem 43). I give below the word-for-word rendering and the structure (*qi* to start, *cheng* to elaborate, *zhuan* to make a turn, and *he* to conclude):

Word –for-Word Rendering

Couplet

1	slender grass tiny wind shore	qi: setting (detail detail v environment)
2	loom/danger mast alone night boat	qi: setting (detail detail v environment)
3	star hang level space wide	cheng: setting (star down, river horizontal)
4	moon surge/bubble-up large river flow	cheng: setting (moon up, river horizontal)
5	name how literary-work succeed	zhuan: Du's life (literary work continue)
6	government-official should old ill	zhuan: Du's life (official work cease)
7	cease	he: Du Fu's position (suspended between, then
	float float what have similar	& now)
8		he: sand-gull (suspended between. sky &
	heaven earth one sand gull	earth)

In general, regulated verse has couplets arranged: non-parallel, parallel, parallel and non-parallel. Lines 1 and 2 are clearly non-parallel: 1 goes from small to large; 2 has no such direction. The two interior couplets are parallel, though in contrary directions, in both cases. The concluding couplets are non-parallel. Several points follow. First, the 危 (wēi) of line two, which is strictly translated as 'danger' refers to the mast, which is either perilous to the observer or at the mercy of the river. Second, the 湧 (yǒng) in line 4, which can mean 'bubble up' or 'rush forth', must mean 'bubble up' here, simply to preserve the mirror balance of lines 3 and 4. Third, the concluding line must have sense of upward movement, again to mirror the preceding line. Thus the sand-gull is not blown about, but soars imperially aloft. The poem is not about dejection, therefore, but depicts Du Fu's intention to stay above and unconcerned by events. The moon bubbles up or floats bobbing on the water, stationary as the current swirls on past. Like the sand-gull, Du Fu will remain fixed in his purpose however the An Lushan troubles threaten.



## 7.9 Longer Lines

Many Chinese poems have lines with more than five characters, making for difficulties in word-for-word translation. The hexameter is generally an unwieldy measure, and octameters commonly break into 4 3 measures. Experimenting suggests that the seven-character line will sometimes allow a hexameter representation if only four lines are involved, i.e. the *Qiyue* genre: Bai Juyi (Poem 61):

言者不如知者默 此语吾闻于老君  
若道老君是知者 缘何自著五千文

The unaware will speak: the knowing stay  
more silent — so the old man would convey.  
Yet surely if Laozi really knew the way  
why would he have five thousand words to say?

In general, however, it's easier to split the seven-character line into two tetrameters, and rhyme as follows:

a. Use no rhyme at all if the poem is packed with proper nouns. In place of this, with contrived rhyming: Li Bai (Poem 23):

我本楚狂人 鳳歌笑孔丘  
手持綠玉杖 朝別黃鶴樓  
五嶽尋仙不辭遠 一生好入名山遊  
廬山秀出南斗傍 屏風九疊雲錦張

I am that madman first called Chu. I sing

the Phoenix, treat Confucius to my scorn.  
I bear the one green staff of jade, to bring  
that Yellow Crane departure at the dawn.

Through Five Mountains I will seek transcendents  
                                  though the climb be steep and far.  
All my life I've loved to wander  
                                  through the mountains, famed and free.  
Lu Mountain touches with its blossoms,  
                                  the southernmost of Dipper star.  
The nine folds of the Windscreen Mountains  
                                  rise banked with cloud embroidery.

It is better to dispense with rhyme altogether, employing  
some assonance and textural variety:

I am the mad and elemental Chu  
who'd sing the Phoenix and confound Confucius.  
I too, with green jade staff in hand, at dawn  
will leave the Yellow Crane Pavilion.

I laugh at distance, through Five Mountains  
                                  stride to find the great Immortals.  
All my life I've loved to wander  
                                  through the mountains, wild and free.  
The Lu Hills now are filled with blossom  
                                  beneath the Southern Dipper star.  
The nine folds of the Windscreen Mountains  
                                  are clothed in cloud embroidery.

- b.       Lightly rhyme if *Unregulated Shi*: Wang Wei (Poem  
28)

漁舟逐水愛山春，兩岸桃花夾古津。  
坐看紅樹不知遠，行盡青溪不見人。

To springtime in the mountains gladly  
 press the boats of fisher-folk,  
 on both the ancient ferry banks  
 bloom rich flowerings of the peach  
 but, sat, beguiled by those red trees,  
 they never know how far they go:  
 and to the end of that green stream  
 will find no person on this reach.

- c. Rhyme closely if the poem has a narrative nature.  
 Wang Duanshu (Poem 37):

甲申以前民庶豐 億昔猶在花錦叢  
 鶯囀簾櫳日影橫 慵粧倦起香幃中

Before the Jiashen year, as I recall,  
 the common people had enough to eat,  
 Soft, wooded shades protected us, with all  
 the flowers rich-brocaded, fresh and neat.

We heard the oriole's plump tenderness,  
 as curtained sun glowed softly overhead.  
 There was no haste to rise and dress:  
 long hours I'd linger by the scented bed.

- d. Rhyme the two tetrameters if needing emphasis: To  
 the War Dead (Poem 10):

操吳戈兮被犀甲，車錯轂兮短兵接。  
 旌蔽日兮敵若雲，矢交墜兮士爭先

We warriors move as one great tide  
 of battering shield and toughened hide.

The clash of chariot wheels afford  
no shelter from the jabbing sword.  
The fume and unfurled banners run  
as fume and clouds crowd out the sun.  
And thick the air with arrows still:  
all move, relentless, to the kill.

e. Rhyme shapes the lines of Ci and Qu verse, and  
should be retained. Poem 79:

So if we met again in some such place,  
my words would show I'm not his bit of rough.  
I'm not the simpleton who'd flunk a letter  
or lack the guts to read it face to face,  
but for paper,  
circling on the long Clear River,  
the sky itself is not enough.

.

And Poem 82:

For all that Wutong trees will pay their court,  
and hard, unpausing is the third-watch rain:  
there's worse, the bitterness of which I speak, the thought

of being lost to you, to gaze on ground  
hear leaf on leaf, soft sound on sound,  
till, emptily, the dawn comes round

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## 8. MODELS

### 8.1 Main Genres

We should expect translations to respect the period, genre and personality of the original.

The early *Shijing* of impersonal hymns and odes, closely rhymed for ceremonial purposes, should be simple and declamatory. (Poem 7):

P7. More connected grow the gourds,  
so seen by folk of earlier birth,  
where, from the Du as far as Qi,  
Dan Fu to people of the earth  
afforded caves and pottery,  
if not true homes of proper worth.

The airs should be fresh and straightforward, with the verse having some 'singing' quality.

P1. Tender, tender is the peach,  
and ardent, ardent are her powers:  
the girl who makes her marriage vows  
conforms to chamber and the house.

The martial poetry of the Qin and Han should preserve those qualities, i.e. be robust and uncompromising, marshalling thoughts under codes of conduct: hard, monosyllabic words and close rhymes:

P10. We warriors move as one great tide  
of battering shield and toughened hide.



The clash of chariot wheels afford  
no shelter from the jabbing sword.  
The fume and unfurled banners run  
as cumbrous clouds will block out sun.  
And thick the air with arrows still:  
all move, relentless, to the kill.

The *Sao* poetry, half personal and half shaman and ceremonial, should retain that dawn-like quality, delicate and indistinct, here with assonance and slant rhyme.

P9. My lord, who does not come, is hesitant,  
and loath to leave — but why? — this island haunt.  
So beautiful my lady, delicate,  
that instantly I launch my cassia boat.

The *Fu* poetry of the Han is rich and exuberant, packed with sensory details. So the translation:

P11. Rivulets thin-tremble here, collect  
to run through valleys, and elect  
to take the course that opens wide  
past hillocks islanded, and cliffs  
120. ascending into clouded peaks.  
By hillocks and by secret caves  
the river rumbles, shouts and raves,  
and bursts out into rocky wastes

The *Shi* in the pre-Tang period has now a personal note, here in the solid, homely sense of Tao Qian:

P20. It is a home I've built, a human place,  
a long way off from noisy cart or horse.  
You ask of me: good sir, how can that be?  
I say the heart will find its natural course.

And here in the refined court poetry of Ban Jiezu:

P18. but still I fear that autumn comes  
when cool winds quench the summer's heat,  
and in a box be locked away  
our love, before it is complete.

Poets in the *Unregulated Shi* of the Tang have distinct personalities. Here the idiosyncratic Li Bai in boastful mood:

P23. I laugh at distance, through Five Mountains  
stride to find the great Immortals.  
All my life I've loved to wander  
through the mountains, wild and free.  
The Lu Hills now are filled with blossom  
beneath the Southern Dipper star.

And here in nostalgic, lyric mood:

P26. How simple it was, and my hair too,  
picking at flowers as the spring comes;  
and you riding about on a bamboo  
horse; playing together, eating plums.

Du Fu is different: blunt and plain-spoken, sometimes a bit wooden, but here enchanted by court beauties .

P31. The third month, third day festival,  
which, with the Chang'an weather fine,  
has many beauties by the river  
walking, lingering everywhere.  
Voluptuous as each appears,  
they're also distant, upright, pure.  
So finely made are muscles,

flesh and bone that's flaunted there,  
that through the springtime's gathering dusk  
the gauzy skirts' embroideries  
undulate with silver unicorns,  
and peacocks in a golden flare.

Or simply enchanted nights: here Zhang Ruoxo:

P34. The tide wells in, this Yangtze spring,  
and interfingers with the sea:  
the moonlight and the sea itself,  
are borne together on the tide.  
in wave on wave the waters run  
a thousand sparkling moonlit miles.

*Unregulated Shi* of the Tang is thus extraordinary  
accomplished, but also fairly free in form, varied in theme  
and tone, and individually distinct in its 'speaking voice.'

Regulated *Shi* is similar but more refined, restricted and  
musical. Its complicated rules allow for great variety  
within a limited compass, but that compass or  
homogeneity needs to be emphasized with repeated verse  
devices. Li Bai's thought is compressed here:

P44. Blue mountains, stagnant: north, the outer wall:  
the river, winding eastward: inward blaze of white.

As is Du Fu's:

P42. Odd bird calls strike the water, as though strewn  
with thoughts of hope or war: they pass on through  
like sorrows emptying to the night's clear tune.

Li He can be simply mystifying:

P54. The hare is old, the toad is cold:  
the sky is by its colour told.  
The cloud-encumbered tower falls  
half-open: whiteness slants the walls.

And Wang Wei shows his usual interest in the painterly aspects of landscape, the soft silhouettes here portrayed with slant rhyme:

P63. Emptiness. Mountains. No one unless  
in these low voices overheard.  
Sense falling into forest depths,  
green in sun-cast mosses overhead.

The essential features of regulated verse are line length (4 or 8 lines) and the complicated rules applying. Translations need to hint at that compressed intensity, here, in Du Mu's case, with assonance to emphasize the integrated oneness of the poem (Poem 65):

In wine I sunk my soul: went south through river lands.  
Broke hearts of Chu girls dancing careless on my hands.  
Now, ten years on, I wake from Yangzhou dream: it stands  
not well to be a heartless name with courtesans.

That essence should, I think, be shown in translation by some self-consciousness or over-emphasis on verse craft, here with Li Bai with close end rhyming. *Regulated Shi* is rule-bound, and its highly crafted, somewhat artificial nature should be emphasized:

P60. Old friend: from Yellow Crane Pagoda you have gone  
by way of three-month's mists and flowers, to far Yangzhou.  
The one sail fades and dwindles to a dot below  
the heavens of nothing but the long Jiang, flowing on.

*Regulated Shi* can also address plain realities: here Fan  
Chengda:

P71. Picking water-chestnuts is hard work,  
      where plow and hoe are left behind.  
Our bloodstained fingers hurt so much  
      we scarce belong to humankind.

*Qu* poetry has left the beauty of Tang poetry far behind:  
Guan Hanqing: Yuan Mei: Poem 82:

At that I called him what a jerk,  
      and with my dander up I went  
to turn my back on him, but felt  
      uneasy, as if ill-content.  
Though half of me would put him off,  
      the other half yet breathed consent

But can range from the authoritative: Zhang Yanghao  
(Poem 85):

Together ridge and mountains thrust,  
in time are all to wave and tempest lost.  
Between the hills and river runs  
      the road across the high Tong pass.

To the delicately melancholic: Ma Zhiyuan, Poem 84:

The dried-up vines, long-standing trees and evening crows,  
a cottage, bridge that's small, where water flows:  
along the ancient road the west wind blows,  
and so the evening sun goes down  
    on people saddened, far, where no one knows.

*Ci* poetry has lines of unequal length and, most importantly, was based on tunes, hundreds of them, now mostly lost. Some of that melodic invention should come across. Here is Li Yu (poem 87), with long lines broken into closely rhymed segments.

Hurt, the heart, it does not break,  
nor, smothered over, does it take  
    on happiness that once it wore.  
Parting, grief: new flavours where  
    the heart is other than before.

The greatly gifted Su Dongpo with a more conversational tone (Poem 94):

P87. Down here is difficult, it's never right,  
so for us both I wish a shared companionship,  
beneath a thousand miles of supernatural light.

And finally Wu Wenying of the Southern Song, with his melodic nostalgia for happier times (Poem 100):

I need to write a letter full  
of long and everlasting sorrow,  
but into the blue mists of the sea  
    fall flights of the migrating geese:  
and, unrestrained, my longings pass  
    into the mournful zither's strings.  
45. A thousand miles away, your soul

is in the south somewhere. With this  
hurt song I once more summon you:  
is heart not broken by such things?

## 8.2 Summaries

In case a summary is helpful, these are the rules governing the various styles or genres:

Period	Genre or Source	Substyle or Theme	Formal Name	Poem Length	Words per Line	Rhyme	Tonal Patterns
Pre-Han	<i>Shijing</i>	Shi	Shijing	various	4	often	no
Warring States	<i>Chuci zhangju</i>	Shi	Sao	various	3-7	yes	no
Han	<i>Chuci zhangju</i>	Shi	Fu	long	3-7	often	
Han	<i>Music Bureau</i>	Yuefu	Yuefu	various	4-5	yes	no
Han	<i>Wen xuan</i>	Early Pentasyllabic Verse	Nineteen Old Poems	various	5	yes	no
Six Dynasties	<i>Shi</i>	Farmstead & Landscape Shi	Tianyuan Shi	various	5	yes	no
Tang	<i>Shi</i>	Unregulated	Gutishi	various	5	yes	no
Song	<i>Shi</i>	Unregulated	Gutishi	various	7	yes	no
Ming - Qing	<i>Shi</i>	Unregulated	Gutishi	various	7	yes	no
Tang – Song	<i>Jintishi</i>	Lushi	Wulu	8 lines	5	yes	yes
Tang – Song	<i>Jintishi</i>	Lushi	Qilu	8 lines	7	yes	yes
Tang – Song	<i>Jintishi</i>	Jeuju	Wujue	4 lines	5	yes	yes
Tang – Song	<i>Jintishi</i>	Jeuju	Qijue	4 lines	7	yes	yes
Ming -	<i>Jintishi</i>	Lushi	Wulu	8 lines	5	yes	yes

Qing							
Ming - Qing	<i>Jintishi</i>	Lushi	Qilu	8 lines	7	yes	yes
Ming - Qing	<i>Jintishi</i>	Jeuju	Wujue	4 lines	5	yes	yes
Ming - Qing	<i>Jintishi</i>	Jeuju	Qijue	4 lines	7	yes	yes
Yuan	<i>Qu</i>	Unregulated	-	various	3-7	yes	yes
6 Dyn. - Qing	<i>Ci</i>	Xiaoling		short	varying, 3-8	yes	yes
6 Dyn. - Qing	<i>Ci</i>	Manci		long	varying, 3-8	yes	yes

And these are the 'spirit' of the translations in keywords, where keywords indicate extra features or special emphasis. All these are additional to indicating the line length correctly and rendering the overall spirit of Chinese poetry, which is refined, musical, structured, concise and allusive.

Style	Formal Name	Keyword 1	Keyword 2	Keyword 3	Keyword 4	Rhyme
Shijing	Hymns	ceremonial	reverent	simple	repetitive	basic
Shijing	Odes	commemorative	declamatory	simple	repetitive	basic
Shijing	Songs	melodious	folk-song	artless	bucolic	tight
Sao	Chuci	long	delicately musical	dream sequences	allusive	free
Sao	Nine Songs	martial	declamatory	heavy assonance	basic	as needed
Fu		long	rhapsodic	luxuriant in detail	descriptive	free
Yuefu		workmanlike	-	-	-	basic
Early Pentasyllabic	19 old songs	mood evocative	effective	-	-	basic
Early Pentasyllabic	Court poetry	mood evocative	refined		assonance	tight
Shi	Tianyuan	effective	spare	personal	blunt	basic
Shi	Gutishi	rich - textured	melodious	fresh-struck	traditional themes	varied
Shi	Gutishi	rich - textured	melodious	conventional	more	varied



					personal	
Jintishi	Wulu	studied	melodious	dissociated	assonance	tight
Jintishi	Qilu	studied	melodious	dissociated	assonance	tight
Jintishi	Wujue	studied	melodious	dissociated	assonance	tight
Jintishi	Qijue	studied	melodious	dissociated	assonance	tight
Qu		open-textured	song-like	living speech		varied
Ci		song-like	catchy	personal	focused	as necessary

This 'spirit' or nature are not characteristics imposed on the genres but generalities elicited from the poetry itself, academic commentaries and the trial and error of translation. Further overlaid on these keywords are the personalities and distinctive voices of the poets themselves, summarized in Chapter 9 that follows.

## 9. INDIVIDUAL VOICES

### 9.1 Cautions

Brief biographies of the poets represented can be found after the translations of Volume One. Personalities or distinctive voices are often another matter, however, which is one reason why *The New Criticism* was hostile to literary biography. Poems should stand on their own feet, and extrapolating from events in a poet's life was hazardous. We would not expect the following:

I face the downpour of the rain  
    on river and the evening sky  
that, cooling, cleanses autumn's murk away,  
but gradually the winds turn colder, frostier,  
as rivers tumbling through the bare mountain passes.  
5. The last brief lights on buildings stay,  
but everywhere go reds to greens, the flowers fade,  
all things once wonderful decay,  
and only the waters of the long great river run  
eastward, soundless, on their way.

to have come from a soldier poet (Xin Qiji (1140-1207: Poem 93) for example. The work of many poets, moreover, as Lu You (1125-1209: Poems 58 70) illustrates, resemble reportage, where anything individual will only emerge as hundreds or thousands of the poems are read and considered.

### 9.2 Individual Poets

That said, for the better-known and more-translated poets there does appear a broad consensus as to literary

character. By reading numerous translations and critical articles, as much as by our own translations where we try to sense the experiencing individual behind the poem, we could suggest these broad generalities.

Tao Qian: (AD 365-427) Poems 19 20.

The poems have a sturdy matter-of-factness in their celebration of rustic life, where great perseverance and integrity shine through.

Xie Lingyun (385-433) Poems 21 22.

An aristocratic, complex personality delighting in allusive landscapes. Xie was described as a wild character only slowly turning towards Buddhist notions of inwardness and resignation. Many poems are exceptionally compact, even gnomic, and achieve a tonal harmony that would become important in the later Tang.

Meng Haoran (689-740) Poems 38 39.

Meng was a nature poet, thoughtful and reflective, but simpler and more open than the Buddhist-influenced poetry of his friend Wang Wei.

Wang Wei (701-761) Poems 28 47 48 49 52 63.

Modest, supremely gifted but detached from life, Wang was the model scholar official. His poems exhibit an extraordinary 'quietness', an openness to Buddhist

notions, and a preoccupation with perspectives, mental and visual.

Li Bai (701- 62) Poems 23 24 25 26 27 61 62 66 67.

Li Bai was mercurial, imaginative and self-centered, known for brilliant improvisation, unmatched technical felicity, and for Taoist and alchemical leanings. Li made few innovations but seemed effortlessly to seize what was available to poets at the time. He was a strong character, making a vivid impression on everyone he met, but also boastful, callous, dissipated, irresponsible and untruthful. His saving quality is the poetry, whose brilliance should be apparent even in the translations here.

Du Fu (712-70) Poems 29 30 31 41 42 43 44 60.

Du Fu's work is noted for its range of subject matter, his compassion for fellow human beings and its technical excellence. He mastered all genres, in a wide range of social registers, and turned what can be only word play, only formal exercises in other poets, into something passionate, probing and visionary. As commentators stress, his compressed language uses words and phrases in overtones that no translation can do justice to, or even properly reveal.

Bai Juyi (772-846) Poems 32 33 68.

Bai Juyi was best known for his low-key poems written in everyday (but literary) language, many of them with political message. They are written in a plain and direct

style, so readily comprehended that Bai Juyi would rewrite anything that couldn't be immediately understood by his servants.

Du Mu (803-52) Poem 65.

Du Mu is best known for of sensual, lyrical quatrains featuring historical sites or romantic situations, and often on themes of separation, decadence, or impermanence. The style blends classical imagery and diction with striking juxtapositions, colloquialisms, or other wordplay. He also wrote long narrative poems.

Li Shangyin (813-58) Poems 51 53.

Li wrote in many styles, and could be satirical, humorous or sentimental: contemporary critics noted a masculine quality approaching that of Du Fu. The poems are typically sensuous, dense and allusive, the last making for many difficulties in interpretation, particularly when the poem is untitled.

Lu Yu (937-78) Poems 58 70.

Li Yu broadened the scope of *Ci* poetry to include history and philosophy, and introduced the two-stanza form that made great use of contrasts between longer lines of nine characters and shorter ones of three and five.

Lin Bu (967-1028) Poem 57.

Lin Bu created a new genre in poems (*Yongwu Shi*: poems on things), which not only described the outward appearance of things but also looked at their inner essence and significance. The attitude was typical of the Song dynasty, which shied away from the overt expression of highly wrought emotion in favour of the mundane and everyday aspects of life, which could accommodate a good deal of personal thought and reflection.

Su Dongpo (1037-1101) Poems 36 94 95.

Su Shi, who called himself Su Dongpo, was one of China's most accomplished literary figures, leaving behind a great mass of still-read letters, essays and poems, plus some paintings and calligraphy. He founded the *Haofang* School, which combined spontaneity, objectivity and vivid descriptions of natural phenomena, often on historical events or Buddhist themes.

Lu You (1125-1209) Poems 58 70.

Lu You was a strongly patriotic poet who urged China to take a more aggressive stance in Jurchen-Song Wars. He wrote some eleven thousand poems, in the *Shi* and *Ci* genres. Scholars generally recognize three periods. Only some 200 derive from the first period, from teenage to maturity at 46, because Lu destroyed most of them. The 2400 poems from second period, when Lu was between 46 and 54 years of age, have military themes. The 6500 poems of the third period, though as patriotic as the

others, are more varied: local scenes, images both pastoral and of desolating bleakness.

Fan Chengda (AD 1126-1193) Poem 71.

Fan wrote in both the *Regulated Shi* quatrains and the *Ci* genres, but is best known for a series of sixty quatrains which he wrote in 1186, following retirement from high office at the Southern Song Court. The poems show a great love of the rural life, à la Tian Qian, but also keen eye for detail that does not sentimentalize the peasant's hard toil to meet the tax-collector's demands.

Zhang Yanghao (1270-1329) Poem 85.

Zhang Yanghao was a prolific of writer essays, *Ci* and *Qu* poetry. The last shows a high order of artistry and an abiding concern for the common people's welfare.

Guan Hanqing (1220-1307) Poems 82 83.

Guan Hanqing was a poet and a notable playwright, often described as among the most prolific and highly regarded dramatists of the Yuan period. The language is convincingly idiomatic and often subtly reveals his character's feelings and motivations.

Ma Zhiyuan (1250-1321) Poem 84.

Ma Zhiyuan, courtesy name Dongli, was both poet and celebrated playwright. Among his achievements is the development and popularising of the *Qu* genre, of which his poem 'Autumn Thoughts' is among the best known.

Guan Yunshi (1286-1324) Poem 86.

Guan Yunshi's 79 poems, arranged in 8 sequences, are mostly about poetry, wine, pleasure, and the love of men and women. His mastery of Chinese allowed him to use individual speeches to enliven dramatic scenes, an accomplishment that sets him apart from other *Qu* writers.

Li Mengyang (1475-1531) Poem 74.

Li Mengyang was the leader of an important group of poets, the so-called 'Archaist school of Former Seven and Latter Seven Masters', looked to the past for style and inspiration. One famously remarked 'prose must be that of the Qin and Han, and poetry must be of the high Tang.' What they sought was the grand, expansive vision, affective intensity and powerful imagery of the Tang, most particularly that of Du Fu.

Wang Shizhen (1634-1711) Poem 80.

Wang Shizhen created the 'theory of divine rhyme in poetry'.



His early poems were clear and lucid, but from middle age grew more expressive. Many poems show such a respect for previous forms that he was called 'Qingxiu Li Yulin'.

Yuan Mei (1716-98) Poem 81.

Yuan produced a large body of poetry, essays and paintings. His works reflect an interest in Chan Buddhism and the supernatural, and not in the more traditional Daoism and institutional Buddhism. Yuan is most famous for his poetry, described as of 'unusually clear and elegant language', which stressed both personal feeling and technical perfection.

## 10. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 10.1. Points to Bear in Mind

I have given some reasons why current translation practices of pre-modern Chinese poetry are apt to produce pedestrian nullities. We need something that will preserve the important elements of pre-modern Chinese poetry, but also give us something worth reading, i.e. illuminate the Chinese elements of the original, conveying their specific excellences. It is worth recalling that:

1. Chinese poetry was an intensely traditional pursuit, written in a literary language that by Tang times had become a 'dead language', i.e. different from the oral language of everyday use. Many characters are stock phrases, moreover, or shorthand for familiar themes (e.g. clouds floating through the sky for the wanderer, and water plants signifying separation, etc.) Both features, the intrinsic nature of Chinese verse and its use of stock phrases, argue for translation into traditional English verse, as only traditional verse adopts this approach, having of course its own 'shorthand' (heart, over the seas, bright morning, etc.). Equally strongly, both these features argue against Modernist styles, which are anti-traditional, avoiding earlier styles and moving the goal posts to themes and expressions not previously considered suitable for poetry. Grossly simplifying, Modernist poetry discards tradition to find fresh pastures, while traditional poetry gathers up the past to re-interpret the present.

2. The classical Chinese poem is still governed by grammar as any other Chinese text, but the expression is much pithier, with inessential words omitted and some ambiguity allowed or even courted. Chinese grammar is very different from English, however, being not only bound by different rules but different conceptions altogether. Many of our adverbs and adjectives, and indeed relative clauses, are created in Chinese by verbs, for example, though these must follow tacit rules if we are to read the lines properly.

3. *Regulated Shi* distinguishes between full words and empty words. The first, also called content words, are nouns, verbs and adjective that carry the main semantic content. The second, the empty words, simply denote grammatical relationships.

4. The basic unit in a pre-modern Chinese poem is either the strophe or the couplet; it is not the individual line or image/character. {1} Chinese verse couplets can be 'free ranging' in theme, as is commonly the case in the opening couplets of a poem, but may also run in parallel, when the same thought is expressed different ways or with different imagery. The verse couplet is also a feature of English poetry, we should note, and as such is commonly rhymed. Chinese poetry is also rhymed, indeed far more than their English counterparts, sometimes as internal rhymes but more commonly as end-rhymes that employ the same rhyme for the whole poem, though these rhymes are looser than ours.

5. As a consequence of the above, when stripped of intricacies of meaning in word order, of tonal patterns, and of complex allusions, 'faithful' translations of Chinese poems are apt to dwindle into trivialities, into lines that are dull, flat and banal. How we cope with such problems I've suggest in various sections above, and as follows:

## 10.2. Suggested Principles

### General

1. All aspects of the translation should be appropriate to the original — style, line length, verse patterning
2. The translation should be a decent poem, one that wouldn't disgrace the pages of the small presses. We can't therefore excuse some toe-curling translation by arguing that the 'Chinese said that'. It didn't. We have extracted a prose meaning from the Chinese verse and must put back English expectations to make something that 'works' in the extended English tradition.
3. Aesthetics takes precedence. Translations should be as concise as possible, but the expanded rendering is to be preferred if it's the better poem — more expressive, better-shaped, coming from greater emotive depths, etc.
4. Rhyme is an important feature, and translators need to acquire traditional verse skills.
5. Chinese poetry is an intensely traditional, tightly organized, musical and refined art. A rendering that doesn't reflect these features is not an adequate translation.

### 10.3 Avoiding Banality

Chinese poetry is outwardly simple: how do we avoid banality in our translations? I'd suggest two aspects need attention: verse craft and intelligence.

I am not laying down laws, of course, and readers will note that translations of even the most tightly-organized of *Regulated Shi* poems offer many possibilities. Here, for example, are the stanza forms employed for the 8-line *Wulu* (5 character) and *Qilu* (7 character) genres, where rhymes are shown as aa, slant rhymes as aa and non-rhymes as x:

abab abab	Poems 44 45 49 52
abab cdcd	Poems 38 39 42 50 57
aba baaa	Poem 55
ab bbaa ba	Poem 40
abcd cdab	Poem 41
aaaa bbbb	Poem 43
abca dbcd	Poem 46
abcd abcd	Poem 47
aabc cbaa	Poem 51
aaxa baba	Poem 47
aabb aacc	Poem 52
aaba baba	Poem 53
abaa baaa	Poem 55
aaaa bcbc	Poem 58
aabb aabb	Poem 48

*Unregulated Shi* offers even more possibilities, from entirely unrhymed of Poem 23 (28 lines) to the tightly rhymed of 24 (aaaa aa aa bbbbb ab bb bb). Both poems are by Li Bai.

The second approach is to first understand the depths of the poem and the thoughts implied, and then produce intelligent renderings that at least reflect our understanding of the lines. Naturally, it's open to abuse. Many feel that a translation should convey just the sense of the original, with nothing added and nothing left out. I'm against this lofty ideal because:

1. There is often no exact English rendering for the Chinese, a feature of the language, and Chinese poet's preference for matters alluded to or implied.
2. A literal, word for word rendering will often produce something of extreme banality because the original employed elements missing from the English translation: rhymes, vowel euphony, semantic rhythms, tone patterns and the like.
3. Poetry is always more than the plain words, being what Robert Frost quipped tends to get left out in the translation process. Poems are not therefore some precious distillate of thought that recreates itself in translation if we scrupulously reproduce its exact meaning. Great poems in all languages often boil down to universal homilies: it's their expression that keeps us reading them.
4. The approach misunderstands how poetry is written, that poems have to appeal to many things on many

levels, semantic sense being just one of them. Poems are not legal documents, therefore, carefully drafted to avoid misunderstandings, but entities drawing on varying literary and cultural contexts.

But that is not a license for doing just as we please with a translation. Any departures from a literal translation need to:

1. Be in the spirit of the poem and poet. We can't, for example, add a twentieth-century existentialist gloss to medieval Buddhist notions of impermanence.
2. Bring out or hint at matters only implied when it's crucial to the success of the translation, i.e. when not doing so will leave us with something of hopeless banality.
3. Add greatly to the strength of the translation.

In Section 7.3 above, for example, I criticized the improvisation of Tao Qian's poem 'Five Sons: Fruits from the Old Tree', because the crass expansion was wholly against the Chinese reticence on sexual matters. Similarly, I have some doubts about the first line of Adetoro Banwo's translation of the Tao Yuanming's poem reproduced in Section 6.1:

I built my hut within where others live,

because the 'within' is not given by the Chinese, and, while Tao Yuanming retired to the country, he did not retire from the world altogether in the Buddhist fashion: he was a hard-working gentleman farmer.

I have, of course, made many additions of my own, which readers may query. One occurs in the well-known Li Bai 'Quiet Night Thoughts' poem, number 61 here. My second line is

it may be frost on ground for all I know.

where the Chinese (疑是地上霜) is only 'suspect to-be ground upon frost'. A small licence, perhaps. Much more open to query is my last line of Du Fu's 'At Stone Moat Village' (Poem 29) whose last line I have rendered as:

I left the old man stood there on his own.

But there is no 'stood there' in the Chinese: 独与老翁别 (alone and old man leave). But the translation is very flat without a strong concluding line.

From a Wang Wei poem (Poem 28) are the lines:

We live together, still are found  
about the Wuling river source:  
for we've come back from that beyond  
to tend the countryside within.

Where there is no 'within' in the original Chinese: 還從物外起田園。 (return from thing exterior raise field garden/countryside). But there is a 'return from thing external', which strongly suggests that Wang Wei, a noted Buddhist, is meaning more than a literal return from the



countryside outside the Immortal's valley. Indeed the poem ends with:

The spring arrives, and everywhere  
are peach blooms scattered on the stream,  
but path to those immortals lies  
beyond what men can recognize

Poem endings are particularly difficult. Wang Wei's Poem 47 ends:

In seeking quarters for the night, I cross  
the stream and ask of woodsman stationed there.

The 'stationed' is not in the Chinese: 隔水問樵夫 (after water ask wood-cutter) but I have added the word to emphasize two things: that Wang Wei would have been afforded every courtesy on his pilgrimage, and, more importantly, that the whole poem contrasts social and geographical elevation.

## 10.4 Avoiding Greeting Card Verse

Suppose we had translated the start of Poem 33 (Planting Flowers on the Eastern Slope No. 2) as:

On springtime's evening on the eastern slope:  
what do the trees and forest show?  
Now casually that flowers have ceased to fall,  
the leaves in screen on screen begin to grow.

And every day I have the servant boy  
come, dig a furrow, clear and hoe

the soil into odd runnels round the roots  
and trunk, so guiding where spring waters go.

That's a fairly close rendering and unambitiously rhymed xaxax xbx b etc., in keeping with its character of *Unregulated Shi*. So what's wrong? A certain glibness, I'd have thought, a sprightly metre that glosses over the seriousness of what Bai Juyi has to say. In short, we need to slow the metre so that the individual words pull their weight more, perhaps using true free verse rather than traditional. So:

It's dusk and springtime. On this eastern slope  
what it is trees and saplings have to show?  
Absently-mindedly, the flowers have gone,  
and dense, thick screens of leaves begun to grow.

Each day I have the weighed-down servant boy  
come, dig a furrow with his hoe,  
and with a shovel heap up round the roots  
dry soil, so guiding where the spring rains go.

## 10.5 Writing Decent Verse

In brief, the problem is this: Chinese poetry, in its form, features and expectations, is quite different from anything we have in English. It appeals to the Chinese reader by exploiting what is missing, or largely missing from the English language and poetry tradition, namely:

- allusion, continually picking up and modifying snippets of other Chinese poems.
- very compact nature, prescribing a fixed and limited number of words to the line.

- multiple ambiguities of meaning, which flexible Chinese grammar allows.
- strict rules concerning structure, how themes are introduced, developed, inverted, etc.
- tones, and strict rules concerning their use.

That being the case, simply transcribing Chinese words to English, however astutely, will not create poetry, either as we understand the term, and most certainly not as the Chinese do. The features that made the piece poetry to Chinese readers are simply absent from the English language. Conversely, our poetry tradition looks for features subdued in or absent from its Chinese counterpart, notably semantic clarity, complex verse structures and deeper emotive charge.

Suppose, for example, the word for word translation of a Chinese poem was:

No speak wedding different brain  
 exist problem no exist like  
 when change exist exist change  
 when wash exist wash cleaner  
 No not change always place  
 See storm no exist fear  
 star fixed always pilot boat  
 value not know know height  
 time no betray red face  
 harvest enable inside active sickle  
 like not change hour week  
 exist even far edge disaster  
 if wrong me show wrong  
 no person write no like

It's not a very Chinese-sounding poem, of course, but if we were to follow contemporary practice, and keep these words largely unchanged, using as little paraphrase as possible, our translation might run:

Do not say marry if minds are different.  
If there is a problem there is no love,  
that changes happen prove changes exist ,  
to wash things clean you need a cleaner.  
Nothing ever changes its place.  
You can be unafraid to see storms.  
The fixed star will guide your boat,  
you don't know value but only height:  
Time will not fool you with a red face,  
but a well used sickle will get the harvest in.  
Love does not change in an hour or week  
even to far edge of disaster.  
If I'm wrong and proved to be wrong  
no one wrote anything or loved.

The poem in Chinese, of course, would have been the equivalent of the fully-fashioned Shakespeare Sonnet 166:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediment. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O no, it is an ever fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken:  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
Time's not love's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Why is this poetry? Partly because of what it says, which shakespeare-online {1} paraphrases as:

Let me not declare any reasons why two  
True-minded people should not be married. Love is not love  
Which changes when it finds a change in circumstances,  
Or bends from its firm stand even when a lover is unfaithful:  
Oh no! it is a lighthouse  
That sees storms but it never shaken;  
Love is the guiding north star to every lost ship,  
Whose value cannot be calculated, although its altitude can be  
measured.  
Love is not at the mercy of Time, though physical beauty  
Comes within the compass of his sickle.  
Love does not alter with hours and weeks,  
But, rather, it endures until the last day of life.  
If I am proved wrong about these thoughts on love  
Then I recant all that I have written, and no man has ever [truly]  
loved.

But more because of how that is said. The subject is  
constancy, and the argument is laid out in the usual way  
of Renaissance rhetoric: **exordium**, **confirmatio**, **peroratio**:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediment. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O no, it is an ever fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken:  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
Time's not love's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come.

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

The rhetorical schemes are also fairly obvious: **anaphora**,  
**parison**:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediment. **Love is not love**  
Which **alters when it alteration finds**,  
Or **bends with the remover to remove**.  
**O no, it is an ever fixed mark**  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken:  
**It is the star** to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
**Time's not love's fool**, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
**Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks**,  
But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

There's much more, of course. Stephan Booth's  
commentary {2} points out that the poem makes moving  
assertions on the nature of love that escape refutation or  
limitation by:

1. Identifying with matters that cannot be denied:  
*star . . . Whose worth's unknown, although his height be  
taken*  
*I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*  
*though rosy lips and cheeks Within (time's) sickle's  
compass come.*

2. Adopting theological language.  
The psalm-like *Let me not*. . . with its echo of the  
marriage service, also repeated in *impediment*.

The reminder of the burial service with *his brief hours and weeks*,  
*But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.*

3. Extended use of negatives. Since love is **not** what is listed, it can be anything that is left unstated.

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediment. Love is **not love**  
**Which** alters when it alteration finds,  
**Or** bends with the remover to remove.  
O no, it is an ever fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is **never** shaken:  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's **unknown**, although his height be taken.  
Time's **not** love's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
Love alters **not** with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me proved,  
I **never** writ, nor **no man** ever loved.

4. Conflating the action of looking and being looked at:

That **looks** on tempests and is never shaken:  
It is the **star** to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

5. Using **sweeping and energetic** images of action that a) have unspecified contexts:

**Let me not** to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediment. **Love is not love**  
**Which alters** when it alteration finds,  
Or **bends** with the remover to remove.

O no, it is an ever fixed mark

That looks on tempests and is never shaken:

It is the star to every wand'ring bark,

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Time's not love's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle's compass come.

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.

If this be error and upon me proved,

I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

And b) are supported by a text energized by long vowels (or vowels emphasized by stress) surrounded by harder consonants (to adopt a simple terminology):

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediment. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove.

O no, it is an ever fixed mark

That looks on tempests and is never shaken:

It is the star to every wand'ring bark,

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Time's not love's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle's compass come.

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.

If this be error and upon me proved,

I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Many more excellences occur in this celebrated piece, and will be apparent to every close reader. Note, for example at the repetition of m and n, that cluster so thickly in the opening sentence and continue throughout the poem. However created — probably unconsciously by Shakespeare — their effect is to bind the poem together:



Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
 Admit impediment. Love is not love  
 Which alters when it alteration finds,  
 Or bends with the remover to remove.  
 O no, it is an ever fixed mark  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken:  
 It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
 Time's not love's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.  
 If this be error and upon me proved,  
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

I think we can agree that the magic of the poem depends on these features. Remove them and the excellence of the original vanishes. That is very much, it seems to me, the situation prevailing in Chinese poetry translation today. Deprived of Chinese features — allusion, a very compact nature, musicality, ambiguities of meaning, rules on structure and tones — the translations become a very lame prose.

All this is Poetry 101, of course, but many notable anthologies, specialists and websites still argue the contrary, that the original words have an irrefutable authority, a sanctity which, to deviate from at all, is to only to betray. Eliot Weinberger in his popular little book *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei: How a Chinese Poem Is Translated*, {3} belongs to the proselytizing phase of Modernism. Two examples of its double standards:

1. Chang and Walmsley's version is criticized for adding lonely (original says empty), jade (original says green —

or blue or black or fresh) and motley patterns (not in the original). Weinberger comments: 'It is a classic example of a translator attempting to "improve" on the original. Such cases are not uncommon, and are the product of the translator's unspoken contempt for the foreign poet.' I doubt that is the case. Chang and Walmsley rearrange the poem, adding the odd word, in an attempt to make something that appeals as a poem in English. The rearrangement may be overdone, but we don't have to impugn an author's motives because we disagree on approach. 'Worse' licences are in fact taken by Modernist versions. Rexroth, for example, invents whole passages in his translation, and few of the words in these lines appear in the original Chinese: Deep in the mountain wilderness / Where nobody ever comes / Only once in a great while / Something like the sound of a far-off voice. .' But of this version Weinberger says: It is closest to the spirit, if not the letter, of the original: the poem Wang might have written had he been born a 20th century America. Rexroth's great skill. . . '

I enjoy Rexroth's poetry, as many do, but it's certainly not faithful to the text, and indeed misses important aspects noted in our rendering of Poem 57.

2. Of McNaughton's version Weinberger talks of 'cross' being added for the rhyme scheme he has imposed on himself, and concludes: The last line adds 'dark' to fill out the thumpety-thump. I think we could say that the translation simply reproduces the rhyme scheme already present in the Chinese. And the dark in *Glitter again*. . . on the dark green moss does not create a 'thumpety-

thump' rhythm, but a. brings the speaker's view from lofty mountains with which the poem begins to the solid ground and b. acts as a slowing device to round off the piece.

Two other points come to mind. One could wonder if Eliot Weinberger reads Chinese if he supposes that Chinese poetry doesn't rhyme, or that the original word had a single and unambiguous transliteration. As Volumes Three and Four indicate, neither is the case. Secondly, much more importantly, Weinberger seems not to understand even how poetry is written, that minor changes in word choice are needed to make a translation 'work' — if only because any poem depends not only on the prose sense of the meaning, but on the many non-semantic features of the language in which it is written. What is exploited in Chinese has to be exploited in the very different language of English, with obviously dissimilar but still useful features.

In contrast, Weinberger's co-author. Octavio Paz, adds this common sense:

'The poems of *Cathay* (1915) were written in an energetic language and in irregular verses which I have rather loosely labeled as free. In fact, although they do not have a fixed measure, each one of them is a verbal unity. Nothing could be more remote from the prose chopped into short lines that today passes for free verse. . . . At the beginning I used free verse; later I tried to adjust myself to a fixed rule, without of course attempting to reproduce Chinese meter. In general, I have endeavored to retain the number of

lines of each poem, not to scorn assonance and to respect, as much as possible, the parallelism. This last element is central to Chinese poetry, but neither Pound nor Waley gave it the attention it deserves. Nor do the other translators in English. It is a serious omission . . . because parallelism is the nucleus of the best Chinese poets and philosophers: the ying and the yang. The unity that splits into duality to unite and divide again. . . I decided to use a line of nine syllables. . . not only because of its greater amplitude but also because it appeared to be, without actually being, a truncated hendecasyllable. It is the least traditional of our meters and it appears infrequently in Spanish poetry, except among the "modernists" — above all Rubén Darío — who used it a great deal. I also decided to use assonantal rhyme, but unlike the Chinese I rhymed all four lines. . . ' {3}

Certainly, we can insist on a fidelity to the text, with nothing added and nothing lost à la Waley, or argue that adding features that belong to the European language tradition is a 'colonialisation', and many other contemporary notions, but the inescapable conclusion is that we cannot write a successful rendering as an English poem without using *something* of what makes a poem in English. Generally, as Octavio Paz noted, and I have tried to explain above, today's renderings do not work because verse translation needs a wealth of devices not given to prose posing as verse.

Contemporary poetry, antagonistic to traditional verse, will doubtless jibe at that last remark. Serious poetry may

have shrunk to a coterie interest today, being scarcely read outside academic circles and the poets themselves, but quality does not equate with popularity. Whatever the mishaps of Ezra Pound's Chinese translations, academics often feel his approach can still yield valuable insights into the Chinese world-view, and it's those insights that poetry of any importance should still be attempting to do. This, I think, is what David Hinton is arguing in his many well-regarded translations {4} and accompanying meditations. {5}

But in detail there are problems. We can say 'poetry is the cosmos awakened to itself, through a language of self identity', but these views are close to twentieth-century critical theory, notably to Barthes (the text writes itself) and Derrida (words are the only reality). {26} Tang poetry did concentrate on 'content words' but it's a large stretch to then say 'poetry pares language down to a bare minimum, thereby opening it to silence. And it is there in the margins of silence that poetry finds its deepest possibilities—for there it can render dimensions of consciousness that are much more expansive than that identity-center, primal dimensions of consciousness as the Cosmos awakened to itself.' It may, of course, but often doesn't. We're also downplaying the craft dimension, and arguing for the simplest language possible. It is not what David Hinton does in his translations, moreover, which often add considerably to what the plain Chinese says.

Too often, I suspect, such contributions are adopting contemporary academia's cleverness in reading into literature what doesn't exist outside the realms of literary

theory. No one would want to outlaw a practice that sustains English departments in today's hard times, and which is valid to the extent that the literary theory is valid, but that theory, I'm sorry to say, against a wide array of academic hagiography, is rather suspect. {6} Additionally, there is the danger of imposing western categories of thought on different eastern traditions, particularly if those categories override what Chinese poets believed they were doing. {7} On a personal level, I should add that I find such approaches stimulating if not always enlightening, and would far rather have thoughtful prose verse than well-turned greeting-card jingles.

## 10.6. Common Sense

Verse dignifies but doesn't prevent the translator writing idiocies. The concluding line of Tao Qian's *On Drinking Wine No. 5* (Poem 20) is often translated as something like: {8}

Yet when we would express it, words suddenly fail us.

Why? Because that's what the plain Chinese says?

欲辨已忘言 (wish recognize already forget words) Perhaps, but Tao was not a simpleton; nor had he suffered major memory loss. He retired to escape from the corruption of public life, where politician are apt to say one thing and mean another. I don't think the line can be translated as: {9}

Beyond my words, the world seen with closed eyes.

And the like, because Tao wasn't a mystic but a down-to-earth farmer. The line, I suspect, is complaining that words have been so misused (by politicians) that they no longer serve their purpose, so that something like this would be preferable:

with something deeper that I would explain  
if words mistreated had not lost their force.

Xie Lingyun's poems are often difficult to understand. What does 繕性自此出 (repair nature from this produce: the last line of Poem 21) mean? Wendy Swartz has: {10}

From that point on, one's nature starts to heal.

Which I think is better than the rendering by the 'Chinese Classics in English' site's: {11}

The nature of conservation is realized from here.

Which sounds more like an ecological magazine entry. The rendering of Volume One is:

and what's inherent in you will return.

Often it's a question of biography. Su Dongpo's *Night of the 20th Day of the First Month* (Poem 94) concludes with 明月夜短松岡 (bright moon night short pine harbour). If we remember that Su lost his wife in 1065, and took the body

back the following year to his homeland Sichuan, burying it there in the family graveyard and planting pines around the tomb, we won't write: {12}

Where the moon shines brightly in the night, and bare pines guard the tomb.

Or: {13}

The moonlit grave,  
The stubby pines.

But something more like:

I see the darkness, moon, and pines  
so small, that guard you, nonetheless.

In Mao 39, for example, (our Poem 4), we are surely entitled to make intelligent sense of what is only implied in the lines:

As careful waters of the spring  
but bubble back to join the Qi,  
so my heart is with the Wei.

Even the early Chinese poets were not simpletons, and shouldn't be treated so.

## 10.7 Respecting the Social and Cultural Setting



It's helpful, and sometimes essential, to understand the poet in his cultural setting. When, for example, the last two lines of Poem 47 are rendered as: {14}

In need of a place to spend the night  
I yell to a wood cutter across the stream.

We have the spectacle of a high official of the Tang hollering for attention in a way no official would. It's inconceivable. Even out of office, and traveling incognito, the official would be moving with the full knowledge and support of the minor officials through whose jurisdiction he was traveling. His bearing and dress alone would have commanded attention. Indeed the whole point of Poem 45 is how standing, social and physical is relative, that the lowly status Wang Wei has assumed for this journey is reflected in his descent from mountain heights to the stream below, that what was his by right to command he has chosen to request.

Again, in Poem 29, Du Fu, who never attained the social eminence of Wang Wei, is no danger of being conscripted. Even in the disordered world of the An Lushan Rebellion, the thought doesn't enter his head. It is the common humanity of Du Fu that is celebrated, the realization that in leaving the old man behind in the village he has abandoned his responsibilities as much as the old man did in abandoning his wife to the recruiting sergeant. We have to understand the social world of imperial China if we are to appreciate its poetry.

## 10.8 Emotive Content

Poetry is an art form, and thus needs to be felt. Art as *primarily* expression raises enormous problems {15} but an art that arouses no emotions at all is of interest only to historians. As section 3.1. above, and anecdotal evidence suggest, {16} the Chinese expect a poem to be 'living', suffused with emotions that are appropriate to the subject matter, the occasion and the expected form. The process is complicated, of course. The Chinese words have to be understood in their full context, which is rarely straightforward: various meanings and shades of meaning are usually possible. Then, by informed empathy, the originated experience has to be conjured up. Finally, guided by the poem's words, which form only the bare bones of the meaning, a poem has to be created that is true to the original and to what makes a poem in English. As John Turner remarked, {17} the best translations are often made by the best poets, much as the observation will infuriate the Chinese translation industry.

An example is Poem 60. The Chinese and word-for-word rendering is:

故人西辞黄鹤楼 old man west leave Yellow Crane Tower  
烟花三月下扬州 mist flower three month down Yang-zhou  
孤帆远影碧空尽 lone sail distant image blue air/empty finish  
唯见长江天际流。 only see long river(Changjiang) sky border flow

The original rhymes aaxa. A plain prose rendering might be:

The old man westwards leaves the Yellow Crane Tower (to go)  
through three months of mists and flowers down(river) to  
Yangzhou. A distant, lone sail forms an empty blue image and  
vanishes. I see only the long river (Changjian: Yangtze) flowing to  
the sky's horizon.

A first stab at a translation might be:

Old friend: from Yellow Crane Pagoda you have gone —  
by way of three-month's mists and flowers, to distant Yangzhou.  
The one sail dwindles to a blurring dot of blue  
then only the Changjian to see to the far horizon.

But *zhou* is pronounced 'djoe', and therefore doesn't  
rhyme with *blue*. It's a simple poem on leave-taking, and  
one that Ezra Pound got spectacularly wrong: his  
*Separation on the River Kiang*:

Ko-jin goes west from Ko-kaku-ro,  
The smoke-flowers are blurred over the river.  
His lone sail blots the far sky.  
And now I see only the river,  
    The long Kiang, reaching heaven.

Mist and flowers is an allusion to peach and cherry  
flowers, i.e. springtime. And the long Kiang may reach the  
heavens, i.e. the sky, but not 'heaven': even Li Bai wasn't  
so egotistical as to suppose his parting from Meng Haoran  
was celebrated or mandated by heaven. In fact it's the  
exact opposite. Rivers in Chinese poetry denote  
separation, here the 'long Kiang', i.e. the Yangtze, serves  
two additional purposes, to symbolize the flood of tears,  
and to indicate that nature is indifferent to human  
suffering. It's a popular poem and there have been many

translations. We should also remember that some Chinese sources have 山 — shan: mountain — as the sixth character in line three, when looking at some representative renderings:

That from *Lac Poetry* {18} has a few difficulties ('going west', 'reflected in the distance') but a strong ending:

Old friends going west from the Yellow Crane Tower  
Clouds of March blossoms on the way to Yangzhou.  
Solitary sail reflected in the distance, disappears into the bluish-green mountains  
Only see the Changjiang flow to the end of the sky.

That from *Chinese Poems* {19} adds 'cloud of willow blossoms' but does make something sensible of the third line.

My old friend's said goodbye to the west, here at Yellow Crane Tower,  
In the third month's cloud of willow blossoms, he's going down to Yangzhou.  
The lonely sail is a distant shadow, on the edge of a blue emptiness,  
All I see is the Yangtze River flow to the far horizon.

That from *100 Tang Poems* {20} adds a continental American flavour by attaching 'west' to the old friend, and and doesn't make too much of the last line:

"You left me, old friend of the West, at the Yellow Crane Tower,  
In Spring, going to Yangzhou, in a cloud of flowers;  
Your lonely sail, a speck against blue sky, disappearing  
Until now I only see the Yangtze and the sky."

And so on: more examples are given in Volume Three. I'm not suggesting there is an ideal rendering: all have their

merits and difficulties. But if we want a rhymed, strong version with every word pulling its weight, then perhaps we should look at these possibilities:

#### Version A:

Old friend: from Yellow Crane Pagoda you have gone  
by way of three-month's mists and flowers, to far Yangzhou.  
I see your one sail dwindling to a dot of blue,  
then endless nothing: sky and long Jiang, flowing on.

#### Version B:

Old friend: from Yellow Crane Pagoda you have gone  
by way of three-month's mists and flowers, to far Yangzhou.  
Into the blue distances of the river I see you go  
till the heavens hold nothing but the one sail dwindling on.

#### Version C

Old friend: from Yellow Crane Pagoda you have gone  
by way of three-month's mists and flowers, to far Yangzhou.  
Through haze and distances I see the Yangtze flow  
to the heavens' horizon, with yet the one sail dwindling on.

Being emphasized is the emptiness (空 尽 唯) of the scene, which also describes Li Bai's inner mood. But do we have to emphasize what would be obvious to the Chinese reader? Probably not, if we let word choice and phrasing do their work:

#### Version D:

Old friend: from Yellow Crane Pagoda you have gone  
by way of three-month's mists and flowers, to far Yangzhou.  
The one sail fades and dwindles to dot below

the heavens with nothing but the long Jiang, flowing on.

**Old friend:** ||| from **Yellow Crane Pagoda** | you have **gone** ||  
by **way** of **three-month's mists** and **flowers**, | to **far Yangzhou**. |||  
The **one sail fades**, || and **dwindles** || to a **dot** | below |  
the **heavens** | that **meet** || the **long Jiang**, || **flowing on**. |||

Version D is emphasizing the nothingsness LI Bai feels on his friend's departure. The dwindling sail shrinks to dot below the vastness of the heavens, which, on refocusing, Li Bai finds holds only the Yangtze perpetually flowing on. All the needed words are given by the Chinese, but they have to be made effective in translation by English verse skills.

## 10.9 Recommendations

The above are simply suggestions, methods of improving the literary quality of Chinese poetry translations. In many ways we are still at James Liu's distinction between the 'poet-translator' and 'critic-translator', where he remarks that whereas the latter's 'primary aim is to show what the original poem is like, as a part of his interpretation', the former's a poet or poet manqué whose native Muse is temporarily or permanently absent and who uses translation as a way to recharge his own creative battery [and] write a good poem in English based on his understanding or misunderstanding of a Chinese poem, however he may have arrived at this.' {21}

The jibe is unmerited. It's generally more difficult to make a decent translation than write an original poem, i.e. needs the full repertoire of craft, insight and imagination

to serve someone else's conception. The trouble, as always with literary translation but here acutely so, is familiarity with a foreign language and verse writing both take a long time to master. Thus we have skilled poets unable to appreciate the subtleties of Chinese verse on one side, and Sinologists with no ear for the graces of English verse on the other. It is not matter of skills, moreover, but of appreciation. Neither side can really see what is important to the other — perhaps obviously so, or there might be immediate improvement.

Rhyme is a particularly vexing matter. Only 'amateur poets' and a few translators generally employ rhyme today, and then not always well. Contemporary poets do not use rhyme because they aim for a contemporary language that deals with contemporary subject matter. Indeed they avoid it like the plague, most emphatically not wanting the musicality, shaping powers, and the 'aesthetic distancing' (i.e. continual signaling that 'this is not everyday speech') that rhyme provides. As a consequence, neither they nor academics seem to have much of an ear for verse craft, which is only to be expected when these aesthetic aspects have been outlawed from serious consideration for half a century. My own view is that rhyme can still be a useful tool, but one that requires considerable skill, taste and practice. Beginners should therefore tread carefully, as a translation without rhyme is a good deal better than a translation with bad rhyme.

All that said, Sinologists and poets could surely learn from each other, though the distinctions are still important. For

academic renderings, translators should:

1. Be literate in Chinese and familiar with the scholarly literature, in English, Chinese and, if possible, other languages in which academic papers appear.
2. Retain the customary 'free verse' styles in academic publications where Sinologists are writing for fellow specialists. Semantic accuracy is the chief need here, though more attention to the aesthetic dimension would be welcome.

For literary renderings, the translator should:

1. Have the poet's sensibilities, gifts and wide reading. Literary translations will be non-starters otherwise.
2. Appreciate what each poem is saying in its fullest aesthetic dimensions. That means mastering the critical literature, at least in English.
3. Understand how the poem works in Chinese, and its allusions to other celebrated poems.
4. Create a translation that works in the English verse tradition in ways similar to the original's operation in the Chinese verse tradition. Again, verse skills are important: if translators can't write decent English poetry, and in many styles, then they won't achieve literary excellence.
5. Deploy a verse form appropriate to the task in hand. Chinese verse styles are as varied as English, and we cannot hope to convey three millennia of Chinese verse in the same English style. Very formal styles could be



exactly rhymed, for example, and the more fluid styles represented by looser, twentieth century English verse styles. Today's free verse is rarely a strong enough medium.

6. Supplement all translations with the bare Chinese words and notes on matters not self evident in the translation. Renderings of the more celebrated poems should also have a bibliography of previous studies and translations. Notes and references could take the form of a separate pdf ebook, which is cheap to produce.

7. Accept that change will come slowly. It took fifty years for Pound's views to become mainstream, and it will no doubt take a similar period of time for more sensible approaches to prevail. Until that happens, translators may have to resign themselves to following their forebears, those Chinese poets who retired from court life to produce pieces for their own delight and instruction.

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A most useful, quantitative review. Rhyme is an instinctive part of Chinese poetry, far more than in English. Lefevere states that:

“[a]lthough the arguments against translating poetry into rhymed and metered verse are persuasive, rhyme can play an important part in the original poem: it marks a completion, a rounding of the line, and acts as a further ‘marker’ in the development of the poem as a whole. Furthermore, the sound effects produced by the succession of rhymes undoubtedly heighten the illocutionary power of the poem” (1992, p. 71). 'In sum, the monosyllabic, isolating-analytic and tonal nature of classical Chinese, its simple syllabic structure that facilitates a concentration of rhyme groups, all constitute significant prosodic and morphological differences from English. They suggest that Chinese poetry is intrinsically better suited to rhyming than English versification.'