

Form and Spirit in Poetry Translation

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Introduction

To many translation theorists, translation is both a science and an art. As an art, it has its aesthetic values.¹ As a science, it has its scientific principles.² In the history of translation in China, translation has been regarded more or less as a branch of art, drawing a great deal of its concepts from painting, one example being the ideas of “form” 形 and “spirit” 神.

Form and Spirit in Chinese Painting

As early as the Tang Dynasty, writers of art theory all shared the belief that the main function of painting was representation. Formal resemblance, however, was not enough in itself; the painter should strive to convey the spirit of the living things. As Teng Chun 鄧椿 wrote in 1167:

What is this one [method of painting]? One can say: “To convey the spirit, that is all” People merely know that human beings have spirit and do not realize that things have spirit. In this way, when [Guo] Roxu scorned common artisans, saying [of their work]: “It is not painting though it is called painting,” no doubt it was because they were just able to transmit the forms and could not convey the spirit. Thus, among the laws of painting, *qiyun sheng-tong* is the first, and Ruxu was right when he attributed this to high officials and recluses.

一者何也？曰：傳神而已矣。世徒知人之有神，而不知物之有神。此若虛深鄙眾工，謂「雖曰畫而非畫」者，蓋止能傳其形，不能傳其神也。故畫法以氣韻生動為第一，而若虛獨歸於軒冕巖穴，有以哉。³

In the eleventh century, it became quite fashionable to equate painting with poetry. The affinity of these “sister arts” was further enhanced by the fact that they were being produced with the same materials — brush, ink and scrolls. During the Song Dynasty, it was generally believed that “Poems are formless paintings, paintings, poems in forms” 詩是無形畫，畫是有形詩. Their relationship was well put by the following poem.

Painting depicts the external shapes of things;
It is essential that these shapes not be altered.
Poetry conveys the meaning beyond the painted forms;
It is imperative that it contains a picture's air.
Why should I look at the painting?
When I see the poem, the goose is really there.

畫寫物外形，要物形不改，
詩傳畫外意，貴有畫中態，

我今豈見畫，觀詩鴈真在。⁴

Su Shih had a famous poem on formal likeness in painting in which he says:

If anyone discusses painting in terms of formal likeness,
His understanding is nearly that of a child.
If when someone composes a poem it must be a certain poem,
He is definitely not a man who knows poetry.
There is one basic rule in poetry and painting:
Natural genius and originality.

論畫以形似，見與兒童鄰。

賦詩必此詩，定非知詩人。

詩圖本一律，天工與清新。

To the Chinese literati, poetry and painting were equivalent art forms, and this attitude has been prevalent in the translation of poetry.

Form and Spirit in Literary Translation

Opinions on the relative importance of form and spirit in translation are divided: some opt for formal resemblance 形似, others favour spiritual resemblance 神似 and still others believe that both form and spirit are important 神形兼似 in literary translation. Scholars of the first group include Chen Zuwen 陳祖文, Bian Zhilin 卞之琳, Zhou Xiliang 周煦良, Qian Chunqi 錢春綺 and John Turner.⁴ Supporters of spiritual resemblance include Mao Dun 茅盾, Lin Yutang 林語堂, Wang Keyi 王科一, Feng Huazhan 豐華瞻, Weng Xianliang 翁顯良, Fu Lei 傅雷, and Liu Ching-chih 劉靖之.⁵ Translators who take a compromising view are Jiang Feng 江楓, and Xu Yuanzhong 許淵沖. Let us look at their views more closely.

Those who support the idea of formal resemblance believe that poetry should be rendered formally as poetry, and this balance of form can best convey the meanings, the syntax as well as the flowing cadence of the original. Compare for instance the following two translations of T. S. Eliot's poem:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

四月是最殘酷的季節

讓死寂的土原迸出紫丁香

摻雜着追憶與慾情

以春雨撩撥萎頓的根莖

(杜國清譯)

四月是最殘酷的月份，迸生着

紫丁香從死沉沉的地上，雜混着

記憶和欲望，鼓動着

呆鈍的根鬚，以春天的雨絲。

(葉維廉譯)

Whatever one's impression of the above translations, poetic translation, according to Bian Zhilin, must strive to retain the form of the original which is one way of enriching the syntactical structure of the target language. A number of factors, nevertheless, contribute to the incompatibility of form of content of the source and the target texts.

On the level of language systems, there are

- (1) arbitrariness of relationships of language features to expression;
- (2) differences in the segmentation of the accepted reality into language(asymmetrical synonymy);
- (3) incompatibilities between grammatical systems;
- (4) non-correspondence of informational exponents in texts; and
- (5) non-correspondence of socio-cultural environments of language users.

On the poetic use of languages in texts, there are

- (1) polyvalence and polyfunctionality;
- (2) dense structuration;
- (3) expansion of ordinary grammar and lexicon; and
- (4) non-fulfillment of reader expectations.⁷

As the most important non-semantic elements of poetry are the rules and forms, or the tonal pattern and rhyme schemes and other devices, it is imperative to keep these features in the translated texts, otherwise it will lead to the vulgarization of language 語言庸俗化 and loss of formal beauty.⁸ Make a comparison of the original poem by Li Shangyin and an intralingual translation into Modern Chinese cited below, you would tend to agree with Bian:

〈夜雨寄北〉 李商隱
君問歸期未有期，巴山夜雨漲秋池。
何當共剪西窗燭，卻話巴山夜雨時。

噢！教我怎麼向你回答歸家的日期
漲滿秋水的池塘又添上聲聲夜雨；
什麼時候呵！我們才能相倚在燭火融融的西窗下
一起回味，巴山客舍雨聲中的淒涼和憂鬱
《唐詩今譯集》

To Qian Chunyi, formal transplantation 形式移植 is not only necessary for readers to appreciate the original text in its entirety, but also essential for local poets to infuse foreign structures to their composition.⁹ In *The Art of Translating Poetry*, Burton Raffel classifies this type of translation “formal translation”, and he has the following to say about formal translators:

What the formal translator is after is what he calls “exactness.” He is apt to be much concerned with notions like “fidelity” and with the “exact” reproduction of literary form, prosody, and so on. Though he often thinks that his goal is a kind of mirror image of the original, a precise reproduction achieved by a process of bodily transference, in fact he is most likely to give his readers the ideas, the social and philosophical orientations, the information, and the historical data contained in his original. He struggles, often honorably and sometimes very

successfully, to avoid any intrusion of an alien presence, any sort of interference between the original and his rendering thereof. Frequently (though not always or even necessarily) he makes no objections to making available, through translation, something of the literary experience of his original. But that is almost never his goal; he will regularly and even combatively sacrifice literary to scholarly values.¹⁰

Those in favour of “spiritual closeness/resemblance” 神似, on the other hand, have a host of scholars in traditional China to support their position. We have earlier on mentioned briefly the tradition to recapture the spirit of a painting and the close relation between poetry and painting in pre-modern China. In more recent decades, particularly in the 1950s, there was a revival of interest in that “spiritual closeness” and “formal closeness” led in the 1920s and 1930s by Chen Xiyong and Lin Yutang, and later by the experienced translator Fu Lei. According to Fu, a translator must endeavour to achieve spiritual closeness rather than formal closeness. And his translations show that it is possible to achieve equivalence free from the bondage of the form of the original 離形得似.¹¹ A further step in this direction is the idea of “sublimation” proposed by Qian Zhongshu who says:

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

文學翻譯的最高標準是「化」，把作品從一國文字轉變成另一國文字，既不能因語言習慣的差異而露出生硬牽強的痕跡，又能完全保存原有的風味，那就算得入於「化境」。¹²

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

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

Naturally, such a translation is not purely a technical change in the form of language, but it requires that the translator realize the author's process of artistic creation, grasp the spirit of the original, find the most appropriate confirmation in his own thought, feeling and experience, and reproduce fully and correctly the content and form of the original in a literary language suited to the original style.... Since the main task of literary translation lies on the faithful reproduction of the spirit and features of the original, such creative artistic translation is quite necessary.¹³

The third group of scholars are the middle-of-the-roaders who hold that both

spiritual resemblance and formal resemblance are important, and this brings us to the views of a Western translation theorist Robert de Beaugrande whose work, *Factors in a Theory of Poetic Translating*, focuses on issues that we have to bear in mind when translating a poetic text. One such consideration is the concrete imagery created by the text as a whole. The translation unit should be the text rather than individual word or sentence. This holds true in poetic translation between Chinese and English. As A. C. Graham puts it:

Classical Chinese is a language of uninflected and generally monosyllabic words grammatically organized solely by word-order and the placing of particles.

This means that we must first set out to have a thorough reading of the original text, known elsewhere as translation-reading. The process of reading is a type of translating which consists of several phases:

- (1) translating the text into a mental representation;
- (2) matching non-expected usage with possible expected equivalents;
- (3) rearranging sequences by their communicative content;
- (4) collecting information from context and co-text to interpret problematic elements;
- (5) finding exponents in the target text for the overall mental representation obtained so far;
- (6) collating the source text against the draft translation and the mental representation; and
- (7) consider the reader's response to the translation.

But then poetic texts are hard to translate because of their peculiarity of structure:

- (1) non-ordinary use of language;
- (2) undefined nature of fictional texts;
- (3) historical distance between the text production and translation; and
- (4) structural peculiarities typical of poetic texts.

Poetry is a literary genre which communicates large quantities of information in a relatively small number of signs, and thus it has a low level of redundancy. Low redundancy levels in texts are likely to cause a wider spread of interpretations than would apply to texts with high redundancy. The following two lines from a poem by Du Fu 杜甫 give us some ideas about the difficulty of reading Chinese poetry:

〈秋興八首〉 杜甫
叢菊兩開他日淚，孤舟一繫故園心。

[Interpretation 1]

The myriad chrysanthemums have bloomed twice.

Days to come — tears.

*The solitary little boat is moored, but my heart is in
the old-time garden.*

[Interpretation 2]

*The clustered chrysanthemums have opened twice,
in tears of other days;*

*The forlorn boat, once and for all, tethers my
homeward thoughts.*

As we translate, we will gradually move from text-supplied information to

reader-supplied information. As Beaugrande asserts, “only if the reading process is consistently pursued to the point where the interpretation is maximally dominated by text-supplied information can a truly objective translation be produced.” So we may find that different translations of the same text are due a number of factors:

- (1) the strategies we use in reading;
- (2) the degree of objectivation, and;
- (3) the type of bilingualism.

Given the enormity of factors governing poetic translation, we have to employ a number of translation strategies. In this respect, André Lefevere has provided us with seven strategies in translating poetry.¹⁴

A. Phonemic translation/phonological translation

This attempts to reproduce the source language sound in the target language while producing an acceptable paraphrase of the sense. An example has been given by André Lefevere:

Celia and Louis Zukofsky’s translation of Catullus opens with the following preface: ‘This translation of Catullus follows the sound, rhythm and syntax of his Latin — tries, as is said, to breathe the “literal” meaning with him.’ Fidelity to the source text means, purely and simply, fidelity to its sound, to the near exclusion of all other elements.

As Chinese and English are not cognate languages, the usefulness of this method is doubtful. To illustrate the application of this method to the translation of Chinese poetry, the following is the Pinyin romanization of a poem by Du Fu 杜甫 “Moonlit Night” 月夜]:

〈月夜〉 杜甫
今夜鄜州月
閨中只獨看
遙憐小兒女
未解憶長安
香霧雲鬢濕
清輝玉臂寒
何時倚虛幌
雙照淚痕乾
jīn yè fū zhōu yuè
guāi zhōng zhī dù kān
yáo lián xiǎo ér nǚ
wèi jiě yì cháng ān

xiāng wū yún huān shī
qīng huī yú bì hán
hé shí yī xū huàng
shuāng zhào lèi hén gān

For a reader who does not know Chinese, he cannot possibly get any sense out of it. But it is clear from the romanization that lines 2, 4, 6, and 8 rhyme.

B. Literal translation

In poetic translation, literal rendering is always undesirable. A line from the *Book of Odes* “思君令人老” can be literally translated as “thinking of you makes me old.” The two lines of a poem by Zheng Banqiao 鄭板橋

今日重逢深院裡
一種溫存猶昔

can be rendered into English as

*Today we meet again in this secluded courtyard
And there is a kind of tenderness as of old.*

C. Metrical translation

In the reproduction of the metre, the content of the text is often distorted.

D. Poetry into prose

This is to change the form of the original poem into another literary genre. This translation method will result in the loss of the sense, communicative value and syntax of the source text. Lin Shu’s translation of Shakespeare’s plays is a good example.

E. Rhymed translation

This is to rhyme the translation according to the schemes of the target language to create the poetic flavour. The following is a poem translated by John Turner.

弄文罹文網
抗世違世情
積毀可銷骨
空留紙上聲

*To be a writer,
I fall into censorship’s fabrications;
To defy society, I choose against the world’s choice.
Heaped slanders can destroy a man
and his blood relations.
In vain, I leave on paper only a voice.*

The following is also a rhymed poem by Su Manshu 蘇曼殊 (1884–1918), writer, translator, and artist of the first water. His translation of Byron’s poetry is considered by some scholars as unsurpassed to date.

《恰爾德·哈洛德漫遊記》

第一卷第十三節〔插曲〕

喬治·戈登·拜倫

行行去故國，
瀨遠蒼波來。
鳴喘激夕風，
落日照遠海
游子行隨之。
須臾與爾別，
故國從此辭。

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage

Canto I: XIII (Interlude)

George Gordon Byron

*Adieu, adieu! my native shore
Fades o'er the waters blue;
The Night-winds sign, the
breakers roar,
And shrieks the wild sea-mew.
Yon Sun that sets upon the sea
We follow in his flight;
Farewell awhile to him and thee,
My native Land — Good Night!*

But Theodore Savory's comments on this translation method are worth pondering:

Rhyme imposes a constraint upon the writer, a constraint which bears most heavily on the essential feature of the translator's art, his choice of words. It is scarcely possible to find a rhymed translation of a lyric which does not contain evidence of this as shown either by the omission of something that the original author wrote, or the inclusion of something that he did not. (Savory, 1957:85)

F. Blank verse translation

Translation by unrhymed lines is blank verse translation. This method can give greater accuracy and higher degree of literalness.

〈生查子〉 歐陽修

去年元夜時
花市燈如畫
月上柳梢頭
人約黃昏後

*In the warm sun the jade in the blue fields
engendering smoke —
So should our loves endure, being filled with memory;
But already these days are fading into the years.*

By John Turner

*Vain are the jewelled zither's fifty strings:
Each string, each stop, bears thought of vanished things.
The sage of his loved butterflies day-dreaming:
The king that sighed his soul into a bird:
Tears that are pearls, in ocean moonlight streaming:
Jade mists the sun distils from Sapphire Sward:
What need their memory to recall today? —
A day was theirs, which is now passed away.*

By Xu Yuanzhong

*Why should the zither sad have fifty strings?
Each string, each strain evoke but vanished springs:
At dawn the dream to be a butterfly;
At dusk the heart poured out in cuckoo's cry.
In moonlit pearls see tears of mermaid's eyes;
From sunburnt jade in Blue Field let smoke rise!
Such feeling cannot be recalled again,
It seemed long-lost e'en when it was felt then.*

Conclusion

It is imperative to realize that as far as poetry translation is concerned, form cannot be reproduced. But how about spirit? What do we mean by spiritual resemblance? And if spiritual resemblance can be achieved, how should we achieve it? The answers to these questions are hard to come by. But we can certainly achieve some degree of spiritual resemblance by paying attention to the reproduction of ideas rather than form. We must observe the way the ideas have been expressed and how they can be idiomatically and stylistically rendered in the target text.

Notes

1. See T. H. Savory, *The Art of Translation*. London: Cape, 1957; Horst Frenz, "The Art of Translation," in N. P. Stalknecht and Horst Frenz (eds.), *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*. Carbondale: South Illinois University Press, 1961, pp. 72–96; William Radice and Barbara Reynolds, (eds.), *The Translator's Art: Essays in Honour of Betty Radice*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987; and Rosanna Warren (ed.), *The Art of Translation: Voices from the Field*. Boston: North-eastern University Press, 1989. For works in Chinese, see Liang Shiqiu 梁實秋, 《翻譯的藝術》(The Art of Translation) Taipei: Morning Bell Publishing Company, 1970; Xu Yuanzhong 許淵沖, 《翻譯的藝術》(The Art of Translation). Beijing: China Translation and publication Company, 1984; and Zhang Qichun

- 張其春，〈翻譯的藝術〉(The Art of Translation) Shanghai: Qiming Bookstore, 1949.
2. See K. R. Baush, J. Klegraf, and Wolfram Wilss, *The Science of Translation: An Analytical Bibliography*. Tübingen: Narr, 1970, 1972, 2 vols. Also Wolfram Wilss, *The Science of Translation*. Tübingen: Narr, 1982.
 3. Teng Chun 鄧椿，〈畫繼〉(Huaji), in Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (comp.), *《王氏畫苑》(Wangshi huayuan)*. Shanghai: Taitong tushuqu, 1922, Vol. 9, p. 33b.
 4. Chao Buzhi 晁補之，〈雜助集〉(Collected Essays) (1094), II.8.2a.
 5. Ch'en, Tsu-wen 陳祖文，〈英詩中譯：何以要忠實於原作的結構？〉(The Translation of English Poetry into Chinese — Why Is It Necessary to Be Faithful to the Original Form), Department of Extramural Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (ed.), *《翻譯十講》(Translation: A Symposium)*. Hong Kong: Swindon Bookstore, 1969, 65–81. Bian Zhilin 卞之琳，〈翻譯對於中國現代詩的功過〉(Contributions of Translation to Contemporary Chinese Poetry), paper presented at “Translation Today: Culture and Information Interflow,” Hong Kong, 17–21 December 1987; Qian Chunqi 錢春綺，〈談談譯詩的形式移植〉(On Formal Transplantation in the Translation of Poetry), Editorial Division, *Chinese Translators Journal*, Chinese Translators Association 中國譯協《中國翻譯》雜誌編輯部 (ed.), *《詩詞翻譯的藝術》(The Art of Translating Poetry and Rhymed Prose)*. Beijing: China Translation and Publishing Corporation, 1986, pp. 300–314. Zhou Xuliang 周煦良，〈談談翻譯詩的幾個問題〉(Several Issues Relating to Poetic Translation), in *The Art of Translating Poetry and Rhymed Prose* (1986), pp. 187–208. John A. Turner, *A Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1976.
 5. Mao Dun 茅盾，〈譯詩的一些意見〉(Some Views on Poetry Translation), Luo Xinzhang 羅新璋 (ed.), *《翻譯論集》(Essays on Translation)*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1984, pp. 344–349. Lin Yutang 林語堂，〈論譯詩〉(On the Translation of Poetry), in *The Art of Translating Poetry and Rhymed Prose* (1986), pp. 51–54. Wang Keyi 王科一，〈從雪萊論譯詩談起〉(Thoughts on Translating the Poetry of Percy Shelley), *op cit*, pp. 107–110. Feng Huazhan 豐華瞻，〈詩歌翻譯的幾個問題——英詩漢譯的體會〉(Some Problems of Poetic Translation — My Experience in Translating English Poetry into Chinese), *op cit*, pp. 111–121. For Weng Xianliang 翁顯良，see his book *《意態由來畫不成？——文學翻譯叢談》(Can Imaginery Be Drawn? Essays on Literary Translation)*. Beijing: China Translation and Publishing Corporation, 1983. Fu Lei's masterpiece on spiritual closeness is *《翻譯與臨畫》(Translation and the Copying of a Painting)*, which appeared in Liu Ching-chih 劉靖之 (ed.), *《翻譯論集》(Essays on Translation)*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Company, 1981, pp. 68–69. Liu's own article, entitled *《重神似不重形似——嚴復以來的翻譯理論》(Spiritual Resemblance Rather Than Formal Resemblance — Chinese Translation Theory since the Time of Yan Fu)*, *op cit.*, pp. 1–15, is also representative of this group.
 6. Jiang Feng 江楓，〈譯詩，應該力求形神皆似——《雪萊詩選》譯後追記〉(One Should Strive to Achieve Resemblance in Form and Spirit in Poetic Translation — Reflections on Translating Selected Poetry of Percy Shelley), in *The Art of Translating Poetry and Rhymed Prose* (1986), pp. 315–328. Xu Yuanchong 許淵沖，〈意美、音美、形美〉(Semantic Beauty, Phonetic Beauty, and Formal Beauty)，〈再談意美、音美、形美〉(More on Semantic Beauty, Phonetic Beauty, and Formal Beauty)，〈「三美」和「三似」的幅度〉(Dimensions in the “Three Beauties” and “Three Types of Resemblance”), in *《翻譯的藝術》(The Art of Translation)*. Beijing: China Translation and Publishing Corporation, 1984, pp. 52–86.
 7. Robert de Beaugrande, *Factors in a Theory of Poetic Translating*. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1978, p. 101.
 8. Bian Zhilin et al. 卞之琳等，〈詩歌翻譯問題〉(Problems in Translating Poetry), in *The Art of Translating Poetry and Rhymed Prose*, pp. 99–106.
 9. See Qian Chunqi 錢春綺，〈談談譯詩的形式移植〉(On Formal Transplantation in the

- Translation of Poetry), in which she she says: 「既然原詩有整齊的格律，有完美的形式，在譯成漢語時，除了忠實於原詩的意義，又能表現出原詩的格律和原詩的形式之美，當然是合乎理想的。」 In *The Art of Translating Poetry and Rhymed Prose* (1986), p. 314. See also Ye Zinan 葉子南，〈得「意」豈能忘「形」——論形式對應在翻譯中的意義〉 (On Formal Correspondence in Literary Translation), 《中國翻譯》 (Chinese Translators Journal), No. 4 (1987), pp. 12–22.
10. Burton Raffel, *The Art of Translating Poetry* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), pp. 111–12.
 11. Luo Xinzhang 羅新璋，〈我國自成體系的翻譯理論〉 (China's Own System of Translation Theory), in Luo Xinzhang 羅新璋 (ed.), 《翻譯論集》 (Essays on Translation). Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1984, p. 11.
 12. Qian Zhongshu, 〈林紓的翻譯〉 (The Translations of Lin Shu), in Luo Xinzhang 羅新璋 (ed.), 《翻譯論集》 (Essays on Translation). Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1984, p. 696.
 13. Mao, Dun 茅盾，〈為發展文學翻譯事業和提高翻譯質量而奮鬥〉 (Work Hard for the Development of Literary Translation and Improvement of Translation Quality), in Luo Xinzhang 羅新璋 (ed.), 《翻譯論集》 (Essays on Translation). Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1984, p. 511.
 14. André Lefevere, *Translating Poetry, Seven Strategies and a Blueprint*. Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975. The following discussion, however, is based on Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 81–82.