

Translations of Chinese Literature, Bulletin 1

Nathan J. Stoltzfus

September 11, 2022

Abstract This edition will feature several completed translations of Tang and Song Dynasty works. It will also include a foreword and a longer section that adds appropriate annotations to each translation as necessary. Several different translation strategies were employed throughout.

1 Translated Works

孟郊

Meng Jiao (751 - 814)

登科后

Passing the Imperial Examination

昔日齷齪不足夸，

Once unrefined and not worth an utter,

今朝放荡思无涯。

today I let loose and let my thoughts flutter.

春风得意马蹄疾，

With Spring's gust of pride and swift hoof of horse,

一日看尽长安花。

I saw all Chang'an's flowers in a single day's course.

Nathan J. Stoltzfus

Affiliated High School of Fujian Normal University

e-mail: stoltzfusnj@gmail.com

Consultation credit: cultural and historial consultation from Ann at chinafetching.com

李白
Li Bai (701 –762)

夜宿山寺
Staying the Night in a Mountain Temple

危楼高百尺，
From precipitous building aloft,
手可摘星辰。
a hand can pluck stars out sky.
不敢高声语，
Men dare not raise their voices,
恐惊天上人。
lest they startle the ones on high.

柳宗元
Liu Zongyuan (773 - 819)

江雪
River Snowfall

千山鸟飞绝，
Above mountains nary bird soars,
万径人踪灭。
Along paths nary footprint endures.
孤舟蓑笠翁，
Lone boat, codger wearing straw,
独钓寒江雪。
fishing through cold river snowfall.

柳永
Liu Yong (984 - 1053)

望海潮·东南形胜
Watching for the Sea's Tide: The Southeast Lands Lie Well

东南形胜，三吴都会，钱塘自古繁华。
The southeast lands lie well | their three Wu prefectures form a metropolis | Qiantang
has been flourishing since ancient times.

烟柳画桥，风帘翠幕，参差十万人家。
Misty willows, ornate bridges | windbreaking curtains, turquoise draperies | a sprawl
of a seeming hundred thousand households.

云树绕堤沙，怒涛卷霜雪，天堑无涯。
Great trees line earthen dyke | raging waves gather frostlike foam | the deep Qiantang
River runs on forever.

市列珠玑，户盈罗绮，竞豪奢。
Markets show pearls and gemstones | homes pile silks and fineries | they vie for ex-
travagance.

重湖叠巘清嘉，有三秋桂子，十里荷花。
The divided lake and rolling peaks are striking, beautiful | they boast osmanthus
flowers in autumn and lotus blooms for acres.

羌管弄晴，菱歌泛夜，嬉嬉钓叟莲娃。

Sounds of reed pipes pierce clear day | songs of water chestnut harvesters envelop night | merrily, merrily old men catch fish and young women harvest lotus!

千骑拥高牙，乘醉听箫鼓，吟赏烟霞。

High official's entourage throngs ivory banner-pole | tipsy drinkers listen to flute and drum | sing verse and admire the picturesque scenery!

异日图将好景，归去凤池夸。

One day be these lovely sights depicted | on return to Imperial court they shall be flaunted.

2 Foreword

Since this is the first edition, some background information ought to be provided. The translator has been learning Chinese off and on for over a decade, and has been studying translation rigorously for the better part of a year. He hopes to contribute to the corpus of Chinese-English translated materials going forward, at times providing new translations for previously translated works. As Wilhelm von Humboldt noted, "...readers of a national language who cannot read the classics in the original will get to know them better through multiple translations rather than just one translation." [1]. For instance, a new translation can attract a new demographic of reader, employ a different style of translation that brings out different characteristics of the original work, or improve upon an older translation.

This bulletin aims to provide readers with a better understanding of the Chinese language and its literature through the medium of new translations done by a native English speaker. While the translator's Chinese is far from perfect, compensatory measures have been taken. He has collaborated with a Chinese native speaker who runs a website about Chinese culture and history, and who has been invaluable in providing cultural and historical context during the final editing stages. Therefore, it is necessary to credit Ann from chinafetching.com for her consultation on many, but not all, of these works.

The translator has chosen to translate ancient works for several reasons. Firstly, they are available in the public domain and typically abound in literary criticism, which provides additional context for the translator (though results may vary). Additionally, they have all withstood the sieve of time, and thus are the gems of Chinese literature and wholly rewarding to translate. They must, of course, be treated with respect. Finally, they have something to provide to 'English' or 'Western' thought, as all works worth translating should. That is to say, a translation should stretch the reader's mind in new directions while preserving readability, and these works are fit for the part.

3 Selected Works

All works in this edition are from either the Tang (618-907, including a short interregnum) or Song (960-1279) Dynasties. The Tang Dynasty is widely considered the golden age for Chinese poetry. Later, in the Song Dynasty, the style changed massively, so much so that the literature genre changed from ‘诗’ (poems) to ‘词’ (words/lyrics), according to the common Chinese demarcation. The difference between the two will hopefully become clear by the end of this document.

3.1 Tang Poem 1

The context of this poem is easy to pick up for native speakers. Continuing even to the present day, national-level exams have always been a part of Chinese culture, and finishing one is a cause for celebration. This particular exam was to qualify one for civil service. The translation strategy paid special attention to the author’s rhyming, parallelism, and overall joyous feeling.

孟郊

Meng Jiao (751 - 814)

登科后

Passing the Imperial Examination

昔日龌龊不足夸¹，

Once unrefined and not worth an utter,

今朝²放荡思无涯。

today I let loose and let my thoughts flutter.

春风得意³马蹄疾，

With Spring’s gust of pride and swift hoof of horse,

一日看尽长安花。

I saw all Chang’an’s⁴ flowers in a single day’s course⁵.

¹ In the original, the last characters of the first, second, and fourth lines rhyme.

² Completing the important time parallelism between the first and second lines (Once...today...)

³ A new four-character idiom originating in this very line, literally “Spring wind receive meaning,” or being proud of one’s success. In this context, it makes sense and is possible to render it more closely to the original by personifying Spring as we often do in English poetry.

⁴ Chang’an was the capital at the time, similar to Beijing today.

⁵ Although it does not map directly to any character in the original, the addition of this word does not affect the meaning and completes the rhyme nicely, even contributing to the quick feeling of covering the entire city on horseback.

3.2 Tang Poem 2

This poem was written by Li Bai, famous for his works on drinking, friendship, and solitude. The need for parallelism is not so strong in this poem as in some others. Of course, he still sticks strictly to lines of five characters and rhymes the second and fourth lines. The translation strategy does not preserve the form exactly but focuses on the imagery while preserving the rhyming scheme of the original.

李白

Li Bai (701 –762)

夜宿山寺

Staying the Night in a Mountain Temple

危楼高百尺⁶，

From precipitous⁷ building aloft,

手可摘星辰。

a hand can pluck stars out sky.

不敢高声语，

Men⁸ dare not raise their voices,

恐惊天上人。

lest they startle the ones⁹ on high¹⁰.

⁶ Literally “a hundred ‘feet’ high,” a useful exaggeration to convey a feeling, here rendered as aloft without too much loss incurred.

⁷ As painful as it is to use four-syllable words to translate single-syllable characters, this choice is slightly more accurate than ‘perilous’

⁸ A common difficulty in translating these poems is the lack of subjects; that is, many Tang poems are acted out purely in the passive voice with no ‘doer’ in sight. Thus, additions like this become convenient for readability, if not completely necessary at times.

⁹ This is purposely vague and areligious, mirroring the original

¹⁰ Though it still makes use of the useful English phrase ‘on high’ to convey the implication of supernatural beings as well as their location relative to the writer.

3.3 Tang Poem 3

This is an incredibly famous poem, and a quick Google Images search of “River Snow Liu Zongyuan” will show many artists’ renditions of the scene portrayed below. The form of the poem is quite strict, with the first two lines rhyming and showing parallelism. It is unique in that what is happening is not quite revealed until the last line, which finally shows what the title meant all along. Since this poem has been translated many times over in more standard ways, the translator chose a strategy of scant word usage and attempts to closely mirror the form of the original.

柳宗元

Liu Zongyuan (773 - 819)

江雪

River Snowfall¹¹

千¹²山鸟飞绝，
Above mountains nary bird soars,
万径人踪灭。
Along paths nary footprint endures.
孤舟蓑笠¹³翁，
Lone boat, codger¹⁴ wearing straw,
独钓寒江雪。
fishing through cold river snowfall¹⁵.

¹¹ The title was slightly adapted from the common *River Snow* so that the form could be preserved. To English ears, it is difficult to parse the phrase, “fishing alone in the cold river snow[4],” which is how another translator rendered the last line. There has also been, “is fishing snow in a lonely boat,” which is equally perplexing. One might as well say “jumping yellow” and “eating left” in English. Even in Chinese, it requires the explanation of scholars to fully make sense. In any case, the implication is that the sky, air, and river all look white because of the heavy snow all around[2].

¹² See section 3.3.1 for a further explanation of 千，万，孤， and 独.

¹³ 蓑笠 is actually describing both a straw cloak and a wide-brimmed bamboo or straw hat, a fairly weatherproof getup.

¹⁴ We don’t exactly have a single-word neutral ‘old man’ in English to mirror the Chinese 翁; however, codger has several connotations and ‘an eccentric old man’ luckily works here, since he is stubbornly (or carelessly) fishing despite the weather conditions he finds himself in.

¹⁵ Completing the poem, and finally showing the meaning of the title. Even ‘cold river snowfall’ is a little grating, but hopefully passes muster.

3.3.1 Aside

River Snowfall highlights an important part of Chinese that is worth discussing. The language does not possess singular and plural forms for most nouns. Therefore, the number is to be inferred from context or from additional characters that quantify the number. As Roman Jakobson skillfully noted, “Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey[1].” For instance, with some exceptions, English nouns cannot be conveyed without showing their singular or plural nature. Even in ancient Chinese, in a strict-form poem, some rendering of count was necessary to aid in understandability.

In this poem, the several characters that help to quantify nouns also serve the dual purpose of accentuating the feeling of loneliness. Specifically, ‘千山’ and ‘万径’ are literally ‘A thousand mountains’ and ‘Ten-thousand paths.’ The numbers not only show that these are plurals, but also exaggerate to show loneliness when contrasted with the number of boats and fishermen later. ‘孤舟’ and ‘独钓,’ literally ‘solitary boat’ and ‘alone fishing’ show this disparity. In addition, the numbers of birds (plural), footprints (plural), straw coats (singular), and rivers (singular) need not be specified as they are obvious from context. Finally, “Above” and “Along” have no mapping to any character in the original, but they are used to add context about what is happening in lieu of providing a count of the mountains and paths, which is done naturally in English.

3.4 Song Words 1

As mentioned earlier, the ‘poetry’ of the Song Dynasty is considered a slightly different form, called ‘词’ or ‘words, lyrics’, so the translator has cheekily called this subsection ‘Song Words’, even though Song is meant to be a dynasty, not a singing form. In any case, the form of this work is starkly different. It is much more freely written, and the only strictness comes from the writer’s use of different sorts of parallelism in many instances. The translation strategy adopted follows the parallelism as strictly as possible and uses a unique punctuation mark ‘|’ to aid in readability, since Chinese use of punctuation and English use of punctuation, even if they are using the same symbol, are not the same.

柳永

Liu Yong (984 - 1053)

望海潮·东南形胜

Watching for the Sea's Tide: The Southeast Lands Lie Well

东南形胜，三吴都会，钱塘自古繁华。

The southeast lands lie well | their three Wu prefectures form a metropolis | Qiantang¹⁶ has been flourishing since ancient times.

烟柳画桥，风帘翠幕，参差十万人家。

Misty willows, ornate bridges |¹⁷ windbreaking curtains, turquoise draperies | a sprawl¹⁸ of a seeming hundred thousand households.

云树绕堤沙，怒涛卷霜雪，天堑无涯。

Great trees line earthen dyke |¹⁹ raging waves gather frostlike foam | the deep Qiantang River²⁰ runs on forever.

市列珠玑，户盈罗绮，竞豪奢。

Markets show pearls and gemstones | homes pile silks and fineries | they vie for extravagance.

重湖叠巘清嘉，有三秋桂子，十里荷花。

The divided lake²¹ and rolling peaks are striking, beautiful | they boast osmanthus flowers in autumn and lotus blooms for acres.

羌管弄晴，菱歌泛夜，嬉嬉钓叟莲娃。

Sounds of reed pipes pierce clear day |²² songs of water chestnut harvesters envelop night | merrily, merrily old men catch fish and young women harvest lotus!²³

¹⁶ The ancient city and surrounding area which is roughly the same as the city of Hangzhou today.

¹⁷ This division, as in the original, shows the parallelism between the first two objects, which are both made of woods and contain the character radical for wood, and the last two objects, which are both made of cloth and contain the character radical for cloth.

¹⁸ The original seems to play on the fact that ‘参差’ may mean ‘about,’ as when approximating number or ‘uneven’ as when describing house heights. Scholars give various interpretations[3]. The translation is somewhat of a compromise.

¹⁹ A beautiful parallelism by the writer, following the pattern: adj., noun, verb, adj., noun for both phrases.

²⁰ In the original, ‘天堑’ means ‘natural moat,’ referring to the Qiantang River.

²¹ Referring directly to the West Lake in Hangzhou, which is still quite the popular tourist attraction, popularized over a thousand years ago by works such as this one.

²² Another great parallelism, slightly adapted for English readability.

²³ Ancient Chinese did not make use of exclamation marks; however, this one and the next one seem to fit.

千骑拥高牙，乘醉听箫鼓，吟赏烟霞。

High official's entourage throngs ivory banner-pole | tipsy drinkers listen to flute and drum | sing verse and admire the picturesque scenery!

异日图将好景，归去凤池夸。

One day be²⁴ these lovely sights depicted | on return to Imperial court they shall be flaunted.

4 Final Notes

As this edition draws to a close, the author is conscientious of its method of delivery, and hopes to receive feedback from the reader. A balance was struck between over- and under- footnoting, perhaps too much for a casual reader and not enough for the likes of Vladimir Nobokov. As the author and reader continue to grow together, future bulletins may increase in difficulty or assume that knowledge shared in previous bulletins is already known. Translations will always be posted in the beginning for those uninterested in the full details but who still want to appreciate the works.

The more that two cultures become intertwined and mutually understood, the less work a translator has to do. Therefore, the ultimate goal of this project is to benefit the future of cultural understanding and translation between the English-speaking and Chinese-speaking worlds.

References

1. Rainer Schulte, John Biguenet, et al. *Theories of translation: An anthology of essays from Dryden to Derrida*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.
2. 古时文网. 江雪. URL: https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwenv_58313be2d918.aspx.
3. 古时文网. 望海潮·东南形胜. URL: https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwenv_a52ca0ee5a22.aspx.
4. 翻译教学与研究. 柳宗元《江雪》（英译十版），Nov 2017. URL: https://www.sohu.com/a/206452222_176673.

²⁴ The original also employs the subjunctive mood.