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Selected Classic Poetry and the Translation of *Shijing*

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The *Shijing*, or the *Classic of Poetry*, consists of 305 poems collected in China over five hundred years from the early Western Zhou Dynasty to the middle of the Spring and Autumn Period (c.1100-600 BCE). Two of these poems, "Xiangshu" (On a Rat) and "Jianjia" (Reeds), have been selected for translation in this work. In reviewing the *Shijing*, I noticed that several interpretations for both poems were possible; I have therefore analyzed the contextual issues in the selected poems, and offered my own translations, drawing the reader's attention to two new potential readings to allow further access to the originals.

Introduction to *Shijing*

The word "poetry" in Chinese can be translated as "shi" (poetry) or "shige" (poetry and songs). The poems collected in the *Shijing* were written by ancient Chinese people from all walks of life, from the aristocracy to commoners; they were also lyrics sung by the Chinese before or after they were compiled into book form in about 600 BCE. The text then offers a comprehensive look at ancient Chinese social life, and at people's perspectives and inner feelings, truly reflecting Chinese history, culture, philosophical and aesthetic values, during the time of the Zhou Dynasty's high point and the decline. For about five hundred years, Chinese people used the *Shijing* for expressing aspirations or concerns, for rituals, petitions or satirizing and admonishing people in the royal court, and for entertainment or memorial services. The text was an important part of the ritual and musical culture of ancient China, circulating in the feudal states of the Zhou Dynasty as a highly significant instrument for enlightenment ("Shijing"). Hence, *Shijing* can also be interpreted as the *Book, or Classic, of Songs* (Minford and Lau 69).

The collected lyrics were referred to as "Poetry" in the Pre-Qin period (2,100-221 BCE), and are the first recorded form of poetry in China. There were 311 works in the earliest version, including six pieces without content apart from separate titles, called "Shengshi" (Sheng Poetry). In the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE-25), *Shijing* was revered as one of the "Six Classics" of Chinese ("Liujing"). Classical Chinese philosophers acknowledged that poetry, songs and music expressed people's aspirations and conciliated people's temperament ("Shijing"). As is written in the *The Morals of Confucius: A Chinese Philosopher* (1691), music has been "greatly esteemed and much used in China" and what is published in the *Shijing* was "composed in Verse" so that the "Purity of Manners, and Practice of Virtue" might be sung by all (qtd. in Minford and Lau 69). Hence, with its metaphors, poetical figures and musical quality, *Shijing* played an important role in cultivating the ancient Chinese virtues and spirits. This is consistent with the opinions of sinologists across the ages (Minford and Lau 69).

As a rich source of the Chinese language from fifteen different ancient states, or later "regions", *Shijing*'s rhyme schemes and phonology have also been studied as a learned discourse since the Qin Dynasty. It was suggested by David Hawkes (1923-2009) that *Shijing* was the "ancestry of Chinese poetry" together with *Chuci* (Chu Poetry) and that:

> In the ancient poetry of China, we may, indeed, find clues to the dual origin of all poetry: the expression of men's feelings as social beings and the expression of their feelings as isolated individual souls.
>
> (238)

Finally, Classical Chinese poetry was considered by religious studies scholar John Turner (1909-1971) to be "the high artistic peak of the most literary, the most artistic, the longest-established civilization that exists" which is "distinguished by its aesthetic values in sense, form and sound" (Xu 20-21).

Contextualization of the poetry for translation

The 305 poems in *Shijing* are in three categories: "Feng", "Ya" and "Song". The "Feng" also has the general title "Guo Feng", meaning the states' lyrics/poetry, and includes 160 works from fifteen states. The "Ya", meaning the elegant, or the proper and standard lyrics/poetry used in the imperial court, includes 105 works that were generally sung for festivals, banquets and the entertainment of guests. The "Song", which refers to odes/hymns to the ancestry and lyrics to sacrifice songs, includes 40 works, in soothing styles for dancing, that were sung in temples or ancestral temples.

The two poems here are selected from "Guo Feng", which I interpret as "State Poetry". The 160 poems of the "Guo Feng" reflect the Chinese philosophical and aesthetic values of ancestry-worship, nature, virtue, love, peace, harmony, justice and anti-war, anti-predatory and anti-exploitation spirits. These works were also subtitled separately with the names of the fifteen ancient states, which roughly correspond to present-day Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, Hebei, Shandong, and Northern Hubei in China.

"Xiangshu" (On a Rat) was collected from the ancient Yong State, located in today's Henan Province, China. The poem was historically recorded as the first work in the general collection of the first classic poetry in ancient China. It is generally considered the most straightforward, explicit and resentful of the 305 works in *Shijing*, and was even judged "rampant" by Han Confucianists ("Shijing"). There are five poems on rats in *Shijing*; in four of them, rats are described as ugly, cunning and villainous, and are directly reprimanded or driven away. In the poem "Xiangshu", however, a rat/rats was/were compared with (a) human being/s who was/were believed to be even worse than (a) rat/s. While there is little evidence as to why, and as to who the poet and the "incumbent/s" were, the poem clearly satirizes a certain vileness and shamelessness of (a) mean person/s, expressing contempt against them.

"Jianjia" (Reeds) was collected from the ancient Qin State, which is located in today's Gansu Province, China. Like with "Xiangshu", the author is unknown. The work starts with an artistic conception, painting a scene with reeds, water, and a figure pursued by the protagonist. The pursuit is determined and persistent, while the way is tortuous and long, and the object always appears far away or on the other side of the water. Historically, interpretations of this poem have involved multiple scenarios. What the protagonist pursues could represent the culture and rites of the Zhou Dynasty during the decline, or purely certain ideals in the poet's mind, or a hermit, as described in some classical Chinese literature during the time of change. Philosophically, water is often considered the original source of everything in the world and is seen to bring people's integrity. In classical Chinese literature, sages were supposed to live by a river or water.

The object pursued in the poem could also be a beauty or even a lover. It was not unusual for classical Chinese literati to use the genre of love poetry to express their pursuit of spiritual "beauty" or "ideals". Taking the poem "Li Sao" (Sorrow of

Departure) by Qu Yuan (c.340-278 BCE) as an example, in the verse – "I am worried that lavender is fading through the winter, I am afraid my beauty is dying" (Chen 1-31) – both the "lavender" and "beauty" symbolize noble persons and noble ideals in Qu Yuan's mind. Writers around the world have long used similar symbolism, such as the images of Virgil, Beatrice and Banner, standing in for the relentless pursuit of reason, spiritual love, faith and ideals, in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1265-1321) ("Dante Alighieri"). My understanding of the important role of the symbolic in "Jianjia" explains my focus in this commentary on the possibility of diverse interpretations and influences my overall approach to translation.

Challenges and translation strategies

To convey the philosophical and aesthetical values of the original in English, I followed the principle of faithfulness to the original in sense, form and style, as recommended by influential translators, such as Alexander Fraser Tytler (1747-1813), Yan Fu (1854-1921) and Lin Yutang (1895-1976). Tytler specifically emphasized that a translation should fully represent the ideas and style of the original (Peng 138-155). Central to my approach was an understanding that these aspects are interrelated; my attention to diction choices, syntax and patterns – as I will come to shortly – was not only about conveying the style of classical Chinese poetry but also about seeing form as reflective of cultural and aesthetic values.

At the same time, however, I treated translation as a compromising art. According to David Hawkes, the "first thing to be lost when Chinese poetry is translated is not some subtle nuance of the meaning but the poetic form" (238). Hawkes also says, however, that if we look beyond the superficialities of this lost form, we will see in ancient poetry the very "spirit of Chinese poetry – the Chinese poet's way of looking at the world, his vocabulary of images, and the various assumptions that he makes" (238).

My application of the principle of faithfulness to the original, in sense, form and style, began with the titles. Where relevant, I used both pinyin (the phonetic transcription) and an English note or title, to avoid losing the history of the original, since the meaning of the titles and categories varied with time and place. For example, I used the pinyin "Yong Feng" together with "Yong Poetry" and "Qin Feng" with "Qin Poetry" to translate the subtitles under "Guo Feng".

In terms of the poems themselves, a particular challenge was maintaining faithfulness to the original style without sacrificing readability for contemporary readers. In this regard, I considered the language difference between Chinese and English and particularly the "oral, anonymous nature" (Hawkes 238) of *Shijing*. Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family and it is a root-isolating language without additional components attached to each single character to indicate the gender, form, tense and so on. It is different from English, which belongs to the Indo-European family, and particularly from archaic English, which is a typically inflected language. To accommodate the difference of the two languages and the needs and expectations of readers, I decided to use modern English in the translation. This decision is in line with the style of the *Shijing*; although each individual poem can be distinguished by its specific features, and similes and metaphors abound, most use standard expression and oral or simple language.

In "Xiangshu", for example, instead of the old-fashioned "Lo" to translate the Chinese character, "xiang" (look/see/view/observe/behold), I used "See". I also referred to the work of Ezra Pound (1885-1972), as an innovator in modern English

poetry, and his translation of the poem "Shi-shu" (Rats) (130), which is similar in style to "Xiangshu". There, Pound used simple, straightforward and colloquial English, with expressions such as, "three years, no pay", "we're about ready to move away" (130-131). I adopted a similar approach where appropriate, using simple expressions like, "See, a rat has its skin", instead of the more literal: "A rat is viewed with skin".

Despite simple, oral expression, the works of the *Shijing* follow the typical style of ancient Chinese poetry with its "immediacy of imagery and pervasive music quality" (Wang 71). In my translation of "Xiangshu", I therefore endeavoured to replicate the rhymed verses and beats – with lines such as "The man has no morality", "Why shouldn't he die quickly?" – so that the style balanced the solemn and serious tone and conveyed both the toughness and gentleness of the original.

Different from "Xiangshu" in sense and style, the poem "Jianjia" is descriptive, implicit and reserved, with simple, natural and vivid language. With a desolate and solitary atmosphere, the poem uses similes, metaphors and symbolistic rhetoric to reflect Chinese philosophy and present aesthetic values. Here too, I translated the archaic and oral Chinese into simple and oral English, but with relevant adjustments to the number and, in particular, the gender of nouns and pronouns, due to language difference. To avoid unnecessary misinterpretation, for example, I used "She" instead of "It" to refer to the unidentified figure.

Like most of the poems in *Shijing*, "Jianjia" is "siyanshi" (four-word poetry): each line generally contains four Chinese characters in rhymes. This "unmistakable formulaic language" (Wang 71) is regularly composed and varied with relevant rhyme schemes. To convey the original effect, I have created similar patterns for each verse in my translation, although these may not exactly match the four-word pattern, as you can see in lines such as, "Reeds wave luxuriant" and "Dews are glazed rime". Furthermore, in the three rhymed stanzas of "Jianjia", each stanza consists of eight lines, with four characters each line for seven lines, and five characters for the last line, with the rhyming variation in verses, such as, -a-a-b-a, -c-a-c-a, -d-d-b-d, -c-d-c-d, -e-d-b-c and -c-f-c-c. Although I am unable to replicate the original, due to the language difference, I have tried to convey the style by creating a similar rhyme pattern. For example, to convey the musical effect of the first verse with the rhyming variation of "-a-a-b-a, -c-a-c-a", I created the rhyming pattern "-a-a-b-c, ~c~c-b-c" ….

Following the typical Chinese rhetorical device, the poetic mood of both poems gradually increases through the three consecutive stanzas, and the "fu" (a statement), then "bi" (a comparison) and finally "xing" (a reflection to release the most meaningful sense) are applied, presenting the artistic conception. I have paid attention to create similar effects and imagery in my English translation. Due to the limited space, I refer readers to the translation itself to experience the poetry.

Conclusion

Language is part of culture, as claimed by Aristotle. With cultural difference comes a difference in expression, which is embodied in poetry and poetry translation. Classical Chinese poetry pursues an artistic conception which can be seen as hazy, implicit and reserved in its beauty, rather than black and white. Moreover, many Chinese characters have multiple meanings and the language is highly context-based (Wang 62-63). As such, by following the principle of faithfulness to the original in form, sense and style, I present two new translations which do not intend to be definitive. Rather, I hope to add to existing translations to allow readers another angle of these classic works, written by Chinese people about three thousand years ago.

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诗经
鄘风
相鼠

作者：佚名

相鼠有皮，
人而无仪！
人而无仪，
不死何为？

相鼠有齿，
人而无止！
人而无止，
不死何俟？

相鼠有体，
人而无礼！
人而无礼，
胡不遄死？

Shijing: Classic of Poetry
Yong Feng: Yong Poetry
Xiangshu: On a Rat

Author: Anonymous
Translated by Li Wang

See, a rat has its skin,
A man has no decency!
The man has no decency,
Why is the man living?

See, a rat has its teeth,
A man has no shame!
The man has no shame,
Why isn’t the man dying?

See, a rat has its body,
A man has no morality!
The man has no morality,
Why shouldn’t he die quickly?

秦风
蒹葭
作者：佚名

蒹葭苍苍，
白露为霜。
所谓伊人，
在水一方。
溯洄从之，
道阻且长。
溯游从之，
宛在水中央。

蒹葭萋萋，
白露未晞。
所谓伊人，
在水之湄。
溯洄从之，
道阻且跻。
溯游从之，
宛在水中坻。

Qin Feng: Qin Poetry
Jianjia: Reeds

Author: Anonymous
Translated by Li Wang

Reeds verdant swaying,
Dews are frosty gleam.
The person I’ve missed,
Is beyond this river.
Upstream I search,
The way’s long and crooked.
Downstream I seek,
She appears in the water.

Reeds swing lush,
Dews are crystal fresh.
The person in my vision,
Is at the water edge.
Upstream I look for,
The way’s rugged and steep.
Downstream I trace,
She appears on a ledge.

蒹葭采采， 白露未已。 所谓伊人， 在水之涘。 溯洄从之， 道阻且右。 溯游从之， 宛在水中沚.	Reeds wave luxuriant, Dews are glazed rime. The person in my mind, Is at the waterside. Upstream I pursue, The way’s tortuous and curved. Downstream I follow, She appears at an islet.