

2017

## Strong and Weak Interpretations in Translating Chinese Poetry

Lucas KLEIN

*The University of Hong Kong*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.ln.edu.hk/jmlc>



Part of the [Translation Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Klein, L. (2017). Strong and Weak Interpretations in Translating Chinese Poetry. *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, 14(2)-15(1), 7-43.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Centre for Humanities Research 人文學科研究中心 at Digital Commons @ Lingnan University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 現代中文文學學報 by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Lingnan University.

# Strong and Weak Interpretations in Translating Chinese Poetry

Lucas Klein

The other day I saw an announcement of a forthcoming book which I found exciting, though I think its title is missing a word: Michael Fuller's *Introduction to Chinese Poetry: From the Canon of Poetry to the Lyrics of the Song Dynasty* (2018). It's not the first treatment of Chinese poetry in literary Chinese—or *wenyan wen* 文言文—to miss a word in its title. *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*, edited by Zong-qi Cai (2007), does the same, as does Stephen Owen's Norton *Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (1996).<sup>1</sup> The absent word, of course, is “classical,” or “premodern,” or “ancient,” or some other synonym that specifies that we're not talking about poetry written in vernacular or modern standard Chinese, or *baihua wen* 白話文—because for all that it has been shaped or “coauthored” by translations of international poetry, modern Chinese poetry is just as Chinese as classical Chinese poetry.<sup>2</sup>

To say that modern Chinese poetry is no less Chinese than classical Chinese poetry is, strangely, a controversial opinion in the world of Chinese literary studies. Witness the titles above, and Owen's famous—or infamous—question about Bei Dao 北島 (b. 1949), “is this Chinese literature, or literature that began in the

---

1 I have also made this point in Klein 2014.

2 I hinted at this point in Klein 2008, as well. For my argument about the significance of translingual poetic influence on the development of medieval Chinese poetry's “Chineseness,” see Klein 2013. For “coauthorship,” see Liu 1999 and Robinson 2017.

Chinese language?” (Owen 1990, 31).<sup>3</sup> Witness, too, from the other side of the divide, Michelle Yeh writing of “the radical nature of the transition from traditional to modern in the recent history of Chinese poetry,” with modern poetry “a self-proclaimed iconoclast struggling against a most formidable predecessor, the tradition of three millennia of classical poetry” (Yeh 1990, 88). Interestingly, translation plays a role in Yeh’s demonstration of her point. She means to contrast the poets Fei Ming 廢名 (1901–1967) and Li Shangyin 李商隱 (c. 813–858), but what she contrasts is translations of their work (Yeh 1990, 83, 85). Yeh translates Fei Ming’s “Street Corner” 街頭 herself:

<p>as I walk to the street corner,  a car drives by;  thus, the loneliness of the mailbox.  mailbox P O  thus, can’t remember  the car’s number X,  thus, the loneliness  of Arabic numbers,  loneliness of the car,  loneliness of the street,  loneliness of mankind.</p>	<p>行到街頭乃有汽車馳過，  乃有郵筒寂寞。  郵筒P O  乃記不起汽車的號碼X，  乃有阿拉伯數字寂寞，  汽車寂寞，  大街寂寞，  人類寂寞。</p>
---	--

but for Li Shangyin’s “Leyou Height” 樂遊原, she quotes a translation by James J. Y. Liu (1969, 160):

<p>Toward evening I feel disconsolate;  So I drive my carriage up the ancient heights.  The setting sun has infinite beauty—  Only, the time is approaching nightfall.</p>	<p>向晚意不適  驅車登古原  夕陽無限好  只是近黃昏</p>
--	---

Notably, while she engages with the similarities and, more importantly for her argument, the differences in form, imagery, and convention between the two poems, she says nothing about their translation into English or how these relate to her notions of poetry. For instance, a

3 Owen was reviewing Bei Dao 1990.

translation into modern Chinese of Liu's translation of Li Shangyin that took the same kind of liberties with line breaks and punctuation that Yeh's takes with Fei Ming's would yield a longer, more modern-looking poem, its diction perhaps contributing to the appearance of modernity (would "carriage" still be "carriage," or would it be "car"?). It would then look more like Fei Ming's poem—and taking this further, to a certain degree Fei Ming's poem is a translation of Li Shangyin's poetics through the filter of international poetics; some of what reads as most modern about Fei Ming is an extension of, rather than a rupture from, premodern poetry. But by presenting two such notably different translation types as if they could be neutral representations of the poems in question, Yeh prevents her readers from seeing such continuity. By quoting Liu's translation of Li Shangyin instead of providing her own, Yeh creates the epistemological split for which she argues.

And yet, if premodern Chinese poetry and contemporary Chinese poetry are equally Chinese, then is translating classical Chinese poetry the same as translating modern Chinese poetry? If modern Chinese poetry is in some ways a translation of premodern Chinese poetics via international poetics, what are the similarities and differences between translating modern and premodern Chinese poetry into English? Do we do anything differently when translating Bei Dao than when translating Jia Dao 賈島 (779–843)? Are *wenyan wen* and *baihua wen* one language, or two? I have earlier written that my motivation as a translator comes from my belief that the reader not only wants to know but can know both what the poet says and how she or he says it, in terms of both images and style, both allusions and elusiveness (Klein 2012, 13). And elsewhere, I've argued that phonemic similarity in poetry is not sensed as semantic relationship, as Roman Jakobson puts it, but semantic relationships are sensed as phonemic similarity (Klein 2016b, 47; cf. Jakobson 1971, 266)—which is to say that we should respect the physical order (what comes first, and what comes next) and integrity of the source text when translating poetry. My search for answers here will lead me back to these and other earlier positions, to suss out where they are valid and where their limits are.

Translation requires interpretation. Matthew Reynolds has pointed it out, in a string of quotations: "Translation is a form of

interpretation’, says Umberto Eco, echoing Roman Jakobson, for whom translation is ‘an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language’. The philosopher Karl Popper tells us that ‘every good translation is an *interpretation* of the original text.’” And pages later Reynolds quotes Hans-Georg Gadamer: “Every translation is at the same time an interpretation” (Reynolds 2011, 59, 62).<sup>4</sup> But the piling-on of such statements gives the sense that all interpretations are created equal, leaving undiscussed the finer points of interpretation. How much is too much? Are certain kinds of interpretation appropriate or inappropriate for certain texts? And so on. My goal here is to align such questions with the issue of how to approach modern and premodern Chinese poetry via translation.

The key critical point I will rely on is Lydia Liu’s notion of the “super-sign,” and my treatment of that will involve what I’ll call weak interpretations and strong interpretations. Though I am being prescriptive, I do not mean “weak” and “strong” to be evaluative; I am not arguing for strength rather than weakness. Rather, I am using these terms the way philosophers do when describing strong and weak versions of a hypothesis or argument, and I argue that some texts require weak interpretation while others require strong interpretation. Looking at my experiences translating contemporary poets Xi Chuan 西川 (b. 1963) and Ouyang Jianghe 歐陽江河 (b. 1956), as well as Tang dynasty poet Li Shangyin, I observe that while we can never get past the issue of the translator’s subjective interpretation—and why should we?—the baseline for translating contemporary Chinese poetry into English is weak interpretation, and the baseline for translating premodern Chinese poetry into English is strong interpretation.

### Weak Interpretation

“Nietzsche said, ‘Reevaluate all values;’” Xi Chuan writes in “Exercises in Thought” 思想練習, “so let’s reevaluate the value of this toothbrush” 尼采說「重估一切價值」，那就讓我們重估這一把牙刷的價值吧 (Xi Chuan 2012, 104–5). Nietzsche’s phrase in German is *Umwertung aller Werte* (Nietzsche 2017), which in English is

4 Reynolds goes on to argue that “as the vehicle for a metaphor, ‘interpretation’ is unusually problematic” (60).

commonly “The reevaluation of all values” but is usually printed as “The revaluation of all values” (the earliest translation I could find, by H. L. Mencken, had “The transvaluation of all values” [1918, 91]).<sup>5</sup> I don’t know German, but something is evident nonetheless: the root *Werte*, which is a cognate of “worth,” sits in the middle of *Umwertung*. This not only explains the English translations, all of which begin with words built around the root *value*, but also my English translation of Xi Chuan’s Chinese, which notably does not repeat the wordplay. Whereas I might otherwise translate *chonggu* 重估 as “reconsider,” “reexamine,” or “reassess,” when translating Nietzsche as quoted in Chinese, I align my English with the existing Nietzsche translations in my target language.

The difference in poetics from *Umwertung aller Werte* to *chonggu yiqie jiazhi* 重估一切價值 is where certain scholars would claim “untranslatability,” as the German contains, in Emily Apter’s words, “an incorruptible or intransigent nub of meaning” that cannot quite be captured in Chinese, triggering “endless translating in response to its singularity” (Apter 2013, 235). But of course this involves a transfer from German to Chinese, and to my knowledge no scholar today has dared imply that Chinese cannot accommodate the sublimity of German expression (such sentiments are, thankfully, left behind with Hegel, who said Chinese writing had been “a great hindrance to the development of the sciences” [1956, 134–35]). Meanwhile, since there seems to be no resistance to reproducing *Umwertung aller Werte* as “revaluation of all values,” neither *Umwertung* / revaluation nor *Werte* / value has an entry in Barbara Cassin et al.’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2014). More pertinently, despite the poetic difference, how different can Chinese translations of *Umwertung aller Werte* be from *chonggu yiqie jiazhi*? Two of the three Chinese editions of *Der Antichrist* in Hong Kong’s academic libraries translate the statement this way (Nietzsche 2003, 171 and Nietzsche 2012, 267); the other, earlier by decades, settles on the lexically similar *dui yiqie jiazhi de chongxin gujia* 對一切價值的重新估價 (Nietzsche 1974, 151). This indicates not only that, as above, semantic relationships are sensed as phonemic similarity, but also

5 The English translations I consulted are Kaufmann (1954, 656), Hollingdale (Nietzsche 1968, 199); Wayne (Nietzsche 2004, 174); and Ridley (Nietzsche 2005, 66).

that there is something about modern languages—modern Chinese, modern German, modern English—that relate to each other along a certain threshold of translatability.

But why does a phrase from late nineteenth-century German translate so readily into early twenty-first-century Chinese? I believe the answer has to do with Chinese purchase into the international economy of the super-sign, which Liu defines as “a hetero-cultural signifying chain that crisscrosses the semantic fields of two or more languages simultaneously and makes an impact on the meaning of recognizable verbal units, whether they be indigenous words, loanwords, or any other discrete verbal phenomena,” which “always requires more than one linguistic system to complete” (Liu 2004, 13). In other words, it is what asks readers of Chinese, if only indirectly, to consider the particular history of the word *Werte* when they are considering the word *jiazhi* 價值, but also what creates the high translatability between *Werte* and “value” and *jiazhi*—and therefore what keeps us from thinking about the translations that take place between these notions. There are times, for instance, when these words should not be seen as immediately fungible. If I say that you and I have different values, I would probably want to say that we have different *jiazhi guan* 價值觀. But then again, are *values* and *value* the same in English? Is the former more than the plural of the latter? Should the Chinese translation of Nietzsche’s aphorism more properly be *chonggu yiqie jiazhiguan*? Is linguistic value the same as economic value? Is this the kind of reevaluation—or revaluation—that Nietzsche had in mind?

Is linguistic value the same as economic value? Though the answer could involve a rereading of Nietzsche as an influence in twentieth-century post-Marxism and post-Saussureanism, suffice it to say that for Liu, the two certainly have at the very least a shared history. Her specific example of the super-sign is the translingual signifier *yi* / *barbarian*, or the codification of the Chinese word *yi* 夷 as the derogatory “barbarian” in English, for which the Chinese term was banned in the 1858 Treaty of Tientsin, which ended the first phase of the Second Opium War. Liu asks, “Why should the character have posed a threat to law and to the emergent order of international relations? And what are the sources of the anxiety that led to the ban?” (Liu 2004, 3). Stephen Owen also assumes a link between

linguistic value and economic value, at least in the contemporary period, when he complains about the international poet's "need to have one's work approved in translation," which "creates, in turn, a pressure for an increasing fungibility of words" (Owen 1990, 28). Too much emphasis on "fungibility" ends up degrading the translator—as if her or his work wasn't really work, as if "these poems translate themselves" (Owen 1990, 31). And yet, some poems do indeed examine economic value in light of cross-cultural linguistic value.

These lines from Ouyang Jianghe's "Taj Mahal Tears" 泰姬陵之淚 come to mind (Ouyang Jianghe 2013, 176–89; for my translation, see Ouyang Jianghe 2017a and 2017b):

Tears about to fly. Do they have eagle wings  
 or take a Boeing 767, taking off on  
 an economic miracle? Three thousand km of old tears, from Beijing  
     to New Delhi skies  
 just like that. After time flies, can the double exposed  
 red and white of our minds' oriental archaeologies  
 match the supersonic, withstand the miracle's  
 sudden turbulence? Can we borrow eagle eyes to watch the sunset  
 dissolve inside a jellyfish like mica? Can the Ganges's  
 rainbow span of 2009 flow through the heavens, back to 1632?  
 If the flying sea trembles like a bedsheet,  
 if people today fall asleep in the depths of the sky, will the ancients  
 be jolted awake, waking from traversing the sky's torrential tears,  
 waking from the warbling of one hundred birds, into the eagle's  
     singularity and sobriety?  
 Eagle, stop: the flight is preparing its descent.  
 With a swipe, mountains and rivers switch their masks.

淚水就要飛起來。是給它鷹的翅膀呢，  
 還是讓它搭乘波音767，和經濟奇跡  
 一道起飛？三千公里舊淚，就這麼從北京  
 登上了  
 新德里的天空。時間起飛之後，我們頭腦裡  
 紅白兩個東方的考古學重影，  
 能否跟得上超音速，能否經受得起神跡的

突然抖動？我們能否借鷹的目力，看著落日  
 以雲母的樣子溶解在一朵水母裡？2009年的恒河  
 能否以虹的跨度在天上流，流向1632年？  
 要是飛起來的大海像床單一樣抖動，  
 要是今人在天空深處睡去，古人會不會  
 驀然醒來，從橫越天空的滔滔淚水醒來，  
 從百鳥啁啾醒來，醒在鷹的獨醒和獨步中？  
 鷹，止步：航班就要落地。  
 俯仰之間，山河易容。

“Wings,” “Boeing 767,” “economic miracle,” “three thousand km,” “double exposures,” and the question of the commensurability of Beijing and New Delhi: the poem takes advantage of, and takes place in, the vocabulary of fungibility. And much of this vocabulary is indeed created via growing commensurability, even if this may strike one as enforced. The language of modernity, like the economy, metric system, recording devices, and brand names that define it, must be conversant and convertible around the world.

In translating this poem, I too traffic in such readily translatable vocabularies, made so by economic modernity’s production of the super-sign. My ability to render Ouyang’s poem more or less word-for-word and have it still be intelligible argues for the economic substructure of what we call modernity, with such poetry and translation made possible as superstructural expressions of the deeper definition of values through exchange. This is not to say that my labor risks being made redundant by automation. The decision to make *gongli* 公里 “km” or “kilometers” (or, perhaps, for US readers, to convert the approximate distance between the Chinese and Indian capital cities to 2,000 miles), not to mention the decision to render the poem so “faithfully” in the first place—by which I mean adhering to the physical order, trying to capture the dictionary definition of the words, etc.—are *my* decisions. They are my interpretations of the poem toward the way I believe it can and should operate in English. Yet I am not asking questions about the grammar of the sentences or whether the poem should rhyme or conform to meter, as such aspects are answered already in the modernity of Ouyang’s poem in Chinese. The narrow parameters of these decisions demonstrate the weakness of my interpretation in translating this and other contemporary

Chinese poetry.

But then Ouyang's poem asks if India's sacred river can flow back in time, in what the poem elsewhere refers to as a "trans-incarnational" 隔世的 connection. To ground such inquiry in the history of interaction between India and China, he uses Buddhist terminology. This is anachronous, as Buddhism was largely gone from India by the time the Taj Mahal was being built (commissioned in 1632, as Ouyang mentions, it was completed in 1653), under the Mughal Empire, but it does present a precedent for Indo-Chinese transculturation in its language. Which is why I have translated Ouyang's Buddhist terms not into English, but into transliterated Sanskrit:

Root, branch, leaf—three avidyās of ignorance flowing in  
counterpoint.

Heart of the sun, heart of the earth, heart of man—three ineffable  
nirjalpās shrinking  
from teardrops, as small as a piece of your heart, smaller than  
the self in submission to anatta and selflessness.

根，枝，葉，三種無明對位而流。  
日心，地心，人心，三種無言因淚滴  
而縮小，小到寸心那麼小，比自我  
委身于忘我和無我還要小。

The immediate transferability of—or, if you prefer, reincarnation between—Sanskrit *avidyā*, *nirjalpā*, and *anatta* and Chinese *wuming* 無明, *wuyan* 無言, and *wuwo* 無我 implies that the supersign may have currency even before high modernity, though the construction dates of the Taj Mahal already place the object of Ouyang's description well within the early modern. At any rate, it is another instance of weak interpretation on my part to exchange the Chinese Buddhist terms for their Sanskrit equivalents in English.

Of course, stronger moments of interpretation do appear in the translation of contemporary Chinese poetry. Xi Chuan's "Exercises in Thought," for instance, includes the following passage:

Nietzschean thought, when we are in thought, makes us brazen

and shameless. But does that mean we aren't brazenly mimicking the singing of the sparrow, shamelessly mimicking the silence of white clouds? Does that mean we aren't brazenly and shamelessly being brazen and shameless?

尼采思想,這讓我們思想時有點恬不知恥。但難道我們不是在恬不知恥地模仿鳥雀歌唱,恬不知恥地模仿白雲沉默?難道我們不是在恬不知恥地恬不知恥?

Xi Chuan repeats *tian bu zhichi* 恬不知恥 five times in these two sentences—an amount of repetition I did not think the English could bear, given how English rhetoric handles theme and variation differently from Chinese. So I translated the phrase into “brazen and shameless,” then separated its members. Another translator might have done this differently.

Mention of a hypothetical “other translator” introduces the question of translatorial style, or the test of interpretational strength or weakness. In short, while different translators certainly have their own styles, translators of contemporary Chinese poetry into English, if not most literary translators from any contemporary language into English, tend to be interested in reproducing and representing their translated poets' styles more than insisting on their own. David Bellos writes: “I often wonder, in fact, whether my English versions of Georges Perec, Ismail Kadare, Fred Vargas, Romain Gary, and Hélène Berr—whose characteristic uses of French are manifestly quite different—are all, stylistically speaking, just examples of Bellos” (Bellos 2011, 289). Yet looking at different translators' translations of Xi Chuan into English demonstrates our similarity as much as our differences. Here are lines translated by George O'Connell and Diana Shi 史春波:

even the Tang Dynasty fell into decline  
 even in the trashcan people are living  
 even optimists are uncertain how to live  
 even men with fallen shoulders want to leave home  
 (Xi Chuan 2007)

Then by me:

even the Tang Dynasty fell in the end  
even dumpsters have people living in them  
even indulgent idealists have no clue how to live  
even men with sloped shoulders run away from home

連大唐帝國也最終走向衰落  
連垃圾箱裡也有人居留  
連奢談理想的人也拿不准該怎樣生活  
連溜肩膀的男人也要離家出走  
(Xi Chuan 2012, 74–75)

And more by Maghiel van Crevel:

So please allow me to stay in your house for an hour, because an eagle plans to reside in a chamber of my heart for a week. If you accept me, I will gladly turn into the image you hope for, but not for too long, or my true features will be thoroughly laid bare. (Xi Chuan 2003, 41)

Then by me:

So please let me stay in your room for an hour, since an eagle plans to live in one of my ventricles for a week. If you accept me, I'll change into any form you wish, but not for too long, or my true form will be revealed.

所以請允許我在你的房間呆上一小時，因為一隻鷹打算在我的心室裡居住一星期。如果你接受我，我樂於變成你所希望的形象，但時間不能太久，否則我的本相就會暴露無遺。(Xi Chuan 2012, 186–87)

There are differences, but they read more like different drafts of the same work in progress, rather than like fundamentally different poems by different writers. Where Bellos is “quite happy” that his translations are, “stylistically speaking, just examples of Bellos” because, he says, “those translations are *my* work” (Bellos 2011, 289), Eliot Weinberger has written, in contrast, “A translation is based on the dissolution of the self. A bad translation is the insistent voice of

the translator” (Weinberger 1992, 60).

The super-sign, then, affords me and other translators the ability to convey both the what and the how of contemporary Chinese poems by interpreting weakly. As I’ve written elsewhere, I follow what Burton Raffel in *The Art of Translating Prose* (1994) calls “syntactic tracking” to treat Xi Chuan’s sentences as sentences and clauses as clauses, retaining as much as I can his periods, commas, exclamation points, and semicolons (Klein 2016b, 45). Here, for instance, is my translation of “Bird” 鳥:

The bird is the uppermost organism upon which our naked eye can gaze, at times singing, at times cursing, at times silent. As for the sky above the bird, we know nothing: it is an irrational kingdom, a vast and boundless void; the bird, then, is the frontier of our rationality, the fulcrum of cosmic order. It’s been said that the bird can look directly into the sun, and certainly the eagle, king of all avians, can perform this feat; whereas we peek at the sun and in a second our heads start to spin, we get spots in our eyes, and in six seconds go blind. Legend has it that Zeus transformed himself into a swan to ravish Leda, and that God transformed into a dove to procreate with Mary. *The Book of Odes* says: “Mandated by Heaven the dark bird / Alighted to bear Shang.” While some have indicated that the aforementioned “dark bird” means *dick*, we don’t have to believe this. To descend as a bird is God’s way to possess the world, equivalent to the emperor paying visits in the human realm incognito, disguised as his own manservant. Ergo, God is accustomed to being condescending. Ergo, the bird is the intermediary between earth and sky, a table between man and spirit, a ladder, a passageway, a demigod. The platypus mimics its outward appearance, the bat mimics its flight, but even the ungainly fowl is “a fallen angel.” The bird of our songs—its magnificent plumage, its lissome frame—is but one half of the bird. The bird: creature of mystery, seed of metaphysics.

鳥是我們憑肉眼所能望見的最高處的生物，有時歌唱，有時詛咒，有時沉默。對於鳥之上的天空，我們一無所知：那裡是非理性的王國，巨大無邊的虛無；因此鳥是我們理性的邊界，是宇宙秩序的支點。據說鳥能望日，至少鷹，

作為鳥類之王，能夠做到這一點；而假如我們斗膽窺日，一秒鐘之後我們便會頭暈目眩，六秒鐘之後我們便會雙目失明。傳說宙斯化作一隻天鵝與麗達成歡，上帝化作一隻鴿子與瑪麗亞交配。《詩經》上說：「天命玄鳥，降而生商。」儘管有人指出：玄鳥者，雞巴也，但咱們或可不信。自降為鳥是上帝佔有世界的手段，有似人間帝王為微服私訪，須扮作他的僕人。因此上帝習慣于屈尊。因此鳥是大地與天空的仲介，是橫隔在人神之間的桌子，是階梯，是通道，是半神。鴨嘴獸模仿鳥的外觀，蝙蝠模仿鳥的飛翔，而笨重的家禽則堪稱「墮落的天使」。我們所歌唱的鳥——它絢麗的羽毛，它輕盈的骨骼——僅僅是鳥的一半。鳥：神秘的生物，形而上的種籽。(Xi Chuan 2012, 162-63)

I have tried to repeat Xi Chuan's punctuation so as to repeat his pacing—so as to convey his rhythm and the *how* of what he says. And while most literary translators, as I said, will also try to represent the style of the source text, note the exception when the author her- or himself is the one translating. Here is Xi Chuan's own version, done before mine, with Inara Cedrins, titled "Birds":

Birds are the highest creatures we can see with our naked eyes. Now and then, they sing, curse, fall into silence. We know nothing about the sky above them: that is the realm of irrationality or of huge nihilism. Thus birds create the boundary of our rationality and the fulcrum of cosmic order. It is said that birds can behold the sun: whereas we will feel dizzy in one second, and six seconds later go blind. According to mythology, Zeus presented himself as a swan to fuck Leda; God occupied Mary in the semblance of a dove. There is a line from the Book of Songs: "Heaven let its black bird descend, and the Shang dynasty thus came into being." Although some experts argue that this black bird is nothing but the penis, still let's forget it. Coming to own the world as a bird is a god's privilege; as is an emperor's disguising himself as attendant to pay a private visit. Hence we may say, God is used to condescending. Hence birds are the mediators between earth and heaven, counters between man and God; and the stairs, passageways, that form quasi-deities. Duckbills copy the appearance of birds; bats fly in a

birdlike way; and clumsy fowls could be called “degenerate angels.”  
The birds we are singing for—their gorgeous feathers, their light  
bones—are half-birds: mysterious creatures, seeds in metaphysics.  
(Xi Chuan 2006)

This translation presents a stronger interpretation than mine. Xi Chuan’s contribution to his and Cedrins’ rendition comes, I think, not only from the words he wrote in Chinese but also from his recollection of the preverbal thoughts he had before he wrote it—in other words, not *how* he said what he said, but *what he wanted to say*. What he wanted to say isn’t a bad standard in the abstract—I’ve seen “Don’t translate what I said, translate what I meant to say” attributed as a credo to both Ezra Pound and Jorge Luis Borges (who happen to be among Xi Chuan’s favorite writers).<sup>6</sup> But I know of no way for a translator who is not the author to get at what the author “meant to say” without going through the words as written in the source text. The super-sign and the proximity of contemporary Chinese and English poetics allow for the translator to access what the author “meant to say” and how the author expressed it, with the translator’s weak interpretation as the only intermediary step.

Weak interpretation is made possible by the proximity of contemporary English and Chinese poetics and the phenomenon of the super-sign that underpins such proximity—and this proximity seems to be a feature of modernity itself, of both Chinese and English as languages that poets use to respond to modernity. But what happens when translators must not only translate words that exist in relation via the super-sign, but navigate the distance between modernity and the premodern?

### **Strong Interpretation**

Later in “Exercises in Thought,” Xi Chuan asks, “But did Nietzsche ever meet Wang Guowei? No. Did he meet Lu Xun? No” 那麼尼采遇到過王國維嗎？沒有。遇到過魯迅嗎？沒有 (Xi Chuan 2012, 104–5). While these two turn-of-the-century Chinese writers never met Nietzsche in person, they did meet him in language—or languages,

---

6 For the attributions, see Perloff (1990, 10) and Grossman (2005).

as their hypothetical meetings took place in different versions of Chinese: Lu Xun (1881–1936) is hailed as “the father of *modern* Chinese literature” 中國新文學之父, but Wang Guowei (1877–1927) wrote in classical Chinese. As Zong-qi Cai points out, “a few scattered references to Nietzsche” appear in Wang Guowei’s writings on literature and aesthetics, including “Wang’s use of the term *shili zhi yu* 勢力之欲, a rough translation of ‘will-to-power’”; today the term is usually rendered as *quanli yizhi* 權力意志 (Cai 2004, 186). What this means is that, at least insofar as Nietzschean terminology is concerned, before the twentieth-century switchover from classical Chinese to the modern vernacular, the super-sign had not yet overcome ordinary linguistic bounds with European languages or stared into the translingual abyss long enough to establish its sovereignty.

If the super-sign is linked with the switchover from classical to vernacular Chinese—though for Liu of course its roots are in the legislation of terminology in the nineteenth century—then we have a way of understanding differences in translating premodern and modern Chinese poetry into English. In both, English poetics’ purchase of what Michel Foucault called the modern episteme (Foucault 1973) plays a defining role, enabling the super-sign in the translation of contemporary poetry but requiring strong interpretation for the translation of premodern Chinese poetry. Consider James Liu’s translation of Li Shangyin, of a poem he calls “Without Title” 無題:

It is hard for us to meet and also hard to part;  
 The east wind is powerless as all the flowers wither.  
 The spring silkworm’s thread will only end when death comes;  
 The candle will not dry its tears until it turns to ashes.  
 Before the morning mirror, she only grieves that her dark hair may  
     change;  
 Reciting poems by night, would she not feel the moonlight’s chill?  
 The P’eng Mountain lies not far away;  
 O Blue Bird, visit her for me with diligence!  
 (Liu 1969, 66)

Though the translation is rather artless, it is nevertheless made

possible by a conscious putsch in English to undress poetic expression while simultaneously claiming classical Chinese poetry for modernist purposes. That putsch, of course, was largely Pound's. Before his *Cathay* (1915), a small volume of translations of poems mostly by Li Bai 李白 (701–762; Pound called him Rihaku), classical Chinese poetry in English sounded like this:

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!  
 (Giles 1898, 70)

But once “A Farewell” by “Li Po” was retranslated as “Taking Leave of a Friend” 送友人, it would be hard for Chinese poetry to sound so singsongy again:

Blue mountains to the north of the walls,	青山橫北郭
White river winding about them;	白水繞東城
Here we must make separation	此地一為別
And go out through a thousand miles of dead grass.	孤篷萬里征
Mind like a floating wide cloud,	浮雲游子意
Sunset like the parting of old acquaintances	落日故人情
Who bow over their clasped hands at a distance.	揮手自茲去
Our horses neigh to each other	蕭蕭班馬鳴
as we are departing.	

(Pound 2016 [1915], 50–51)

In fact, Liu himself resisted adopting such rhythmical transformations in the presentation of classical Chinese for quite some time. He had earlier published a version of the same poem as,

Hard it is for us to meet and hard to go away;  
 Powerless lingers the eastern wind as all the flowers decay.

The spring silkworm will only end his thread when death befalls;  
 The candle will drip tears until it turns to ashes grey.  
 Facing the morning mirror, she fears her cloudy hair will fade;  
 Reading poems by night, she should be chilled by the moon's ray.  
 The fairy mountain P'eng lies at no great distance:  
 May a Blue Bird fly to her and my tender cares convey!  
 (Liu 1962, 28)

But the power of the discourse Pound founded for classical Chinese poetry—why, in other words, T. S. Eliot called him “the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time” (Eliot 2010 [1928], 367)—can be seen in the fact that by the end of the decade Liu would adopt a version of poetic modernity himself and stop trying to make everything rhyme.

Some of the differences between Liu's 1962 translations in *The Art of Chinese Poetry* and those in the 1969 *Poetry of Li Shang-yin* are explained by the appearance of A. C. Graham's *Poems of the Late T'ang* in 1965 (also, where Liu's earlier volume includes a handful of translations amidst its explanations of classical poetic conventions, his *Li Shang-yin* comprises one hundred translated poems).<sup>7</sup> Graham's volume is one of two books that are largely responsible, I think, for the incorporation of modernist poetics into the language of classical Chinese poetry translation by academics, the other being Burton Watson's *Su Tung-p'o*, also from 1965.<sup>8</sup> Graham acknowledges his debt to Pound, opening his introduction with the explanation

7 Other translators have managed to make all of Li Shangyin rhyme, however. See Chan 2012 and Ndesandjo 2016.

8 Before Graham and Watson there was Arthur Waley, of course, who published unrhymed translations, “because the restrictions of rhyme necessarily injure either the vigour of one's language or the literalness of one's version,” with each Chinese character “represented by a stress in the English” (Waley 1918, 19–20) not long after Pound. But Waley's primary readership, I think, was not other sinologists. Versions for sinologists from before 1965 that did not rhyme were more likely to be presented in prose versions that made no attempt at being poetic (e.g. Karlgren 1950). For an outline of a history of premodern Chinese poetry translation, see Weinberger 2016, and for a commentary on that Saussy 2001, 61–65, esp. where he notes that “between [Pound's] invention [of Chinese poetry] and its reduction to practice [...] some sixty-five years elapsed” (65). For more on Waley as translator, see Raft 2012.

that the art of translating poetry is “a by-product” of the movement “first exhibited in Ezra Pound’s *Cathay*” (Graham 1965, 13). Significantly, Li Shangyin plays a considerable role in finalizing the incorporation of that by-product into scholarly discourse. Here is Graham’s translation of one of the “Untitled Poems,” which Liu called “Without Title” above:

For ever hard to meet, and as hard to part.  
 Each flower spoils in the failing East wind.  
 Spring’s silkworms wind till death their heart’s threads:  
 The wick of the candle turns to ash before its tears dry.  
 Morning mirror’s only care, a change at her cloudy temples:  
 Saying over a poem in the night, does she sense the chill in the  
     moonbeams?  
 Not far, from here to Fairy Hill.  
 Bluebird, be quick now, spy me out the road.  
 (Graham 1965, 150)

Rather than ask classical Chinese poetry to sound like some approximation of “classical” poetry in English (whatever that might mean), Graham reinterpreted convention to make Li Shangyin sound like a contemporary.

Whether classical Chinese poetry should sound the way poetry in English sounds now or else the way English verse used to sound once upon a time is an unavoidable question for the translator of classical Chinese poetry, and it is what requires that such translations be strong interpretations. Later Liu would draw a distinction between the “poet-translator” and the “critic-translator” and their “different aims and different readerships,” and he looked askance at the “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,” with the aim of writing “a good poem in English based on his understanding or misunderstanding of a Chinese poem, however he may have arrived at this.” But he could not avoid explaining that his own aim as a “a critic writing in English about Chinese poetry” was “to show what the original poem is like, as a part of his *interpretation*” (Liu 1982, 37; italics added). And one of the fundamental interpretations, which is necessarily a strong one, is the

interpretation of what kind of overall poetics is right for the premodern texts being translated.

Lining up strong interpretation with translating premodern Chinese poetry and weak interpretation with the translation of contemporary Chinese poetry, I do not mean to imply a pat distinction whereby strong and weak interpretations are required and forbidden, respectively, for the translation of premodern and modern Chinese poetry. Strong interpretation may be necessary in the translation of premodern Chinese poetry into English, but rather than being dichotomous, I see strong and weak interpretations as the two ends of a spectrum. I've gone further with strong interpretations than my example of translating Xi Chuan's *tian bu zhichi*, above: I've translated *feng* 風 as "airs" in a Bei Dao poem, rather than "wind," because I understand it to refer to the "Airs of the States" 國風 from the *Book of Odes* 詩經 (Bei Dao 2011, 101; cf. David Hinton and Yanbing Chen's version, in Bei Dao 2010, 169). But the relative similarity of modern Chinese and modern English poetries means that the baseline for translation between these two discourses is weak interpretation (peppered with moments of strong interpretation, to taste), whereas in translating premodern Chinese poetry, strong interpretation is unavoidable.

Consider the work of the few translators who have published extensively from both languages. To refer to a moment of wordplay, above, here is Jia Dao by David Hinton, "Mourning Meng Chiao" 哭孟東野:

Orchids have lost their fragrance. Cranes no longer call.  
Mourning has faded into autumn skies, and the moon's  
brilliance gone dark. Ever since Master Meng Chiao died,  
I've wandered my grief away in cloud-swept mountains.  
(Hinton 2002, 184)

蘭無香氣鶴無聲  
哭儘秋天月不明  
自從東野先生死  
側近雲山得散行

and here is Hinton's Bei Dao, "Untitled" 無題:

hawk shadow flickers past	蒼鷹的影子掠過
fields of wheat shiver	麥田戰慄
I'm becoming one who explicates summer	我成為秋天的解釋者
return to the main road	回到大路上
put on a cap to concentrate thoughts	戴上帽子集中思想
if deep skies never die	如果天空不死
(in Bei Dao 2010, 107)	

In presenting Bei Dao Hinton sticks close to the source text, providing almost a trot for the stripped-down syntax in Chinese, changing only *tiankong* 天空 (“sky”) to “deep skies,” presumably to avoid the juvenile rhyme. In contrast, presenting Jia Dao he fleshes out the poetic with enjambment and embellishment (“lost” and “no longer” for *wu* 無; “brilliance gone dark” for *bu ming* 不明; and “wandered my grief away” for *san xing* 散行) to fit his own sense of how classical Chinese should sound for contemporary readers of poetry in English. The “liberties” Hinton allows himself with respect to premodern poetry, or rather the interpretations to convey his reading of the source text to the audience he wants to reach, are greater than those he allows himself in translating contemporary texts.

Likewise, here is Brian Holton translating the poem “1989” 一九八九年, by Yang Lian 楊煉 (b. 1955):

who says the dead can embrace?  
 like fine horses manes silver grey  
 standing outside the window in the freezing moonlight  
 the dead are buried in the days of the past  
 in days not long past    madmen were tied onto beds  
 rigid as iron nails  
 pinning down the timbers of darkness  
 the coffin lid each day closing over like this

who says the dead are dead and gone?    the dead  
 enclosed in the vagrancy of their final days  
 are the masters of forever  
 four portraits of themselves on four walls  
 butchery yet again blood

is still the only famous landscape  
slept into the tomb they were lucky but they wake again in  
a tomorrow the birds fear even more  
this is no doubt a perfectly ordinary year

like fine horses manes silver grey  
standing outside the window in the freezing moonlight  
the dead are buried in the days of the past  
in days not long past madmen were tied onto beds  
rigid as iron nails  
pinning down the timbers of darkness  
the coffin lid each day closing over like this

who says the dead are dead and gone? the dead  
enclosed in the vagrancy of their final days  
are the masters of forever  
four portraits of themselves on four walls  
butchery yet again blood  
is still the only famous landscape  
slept into the tomb they were lucky but they wake again in  
a tomorrow the birds fear even more  
this is no doubt a perfectly ordinary year

誰說死者會互相擁抱  
像一匹匹馬 鬃毛銀灰  
站在窗外結冰的月光中  
死者埋進過去的日子  
剛剛過去 瘋子就被綁在床上  
僵直如鐵釘  
釘著黑暗的木頭  
棺蓋每天就這樣合擾

誰說死者已死去 死者  
關在末日裡流浪是永久的主人  
四堵牆上有四張自己的臉  
再屠殺一次 血  
仍是唯一著名的風景  
睡進墳墓裡有福了 卻又醒在

一個讓鳥更怕的明天  
 這無非是普普通通的一年  
 (Yang Lian 2008, 26–27)

Other translators have treated Yang Lian differently (Cosima Bruno wrote a book about it [2012]), but most of Holton’s choices are straightforward and self-explanatory. There is interpretation here, of course—he adds a line to the English, disrupting the balance of the stanzas, and it’s a mark of interpretation to render *lian* 臉 (faces) as “portraits” and to come up with “perfectly ordinary” for the reduplicative *pupu tongtong* 普普通通—but if I say such interpretations are weak, in the context of what Holton does with premodern Chinese poetry, it is not a disparagement. When Holton turns to premodern poetry, that is, he gives the strong interpretation of translating not into standard English, but Scots. “Cantie ma Lane” 自遣, by Li Bai:

Dram afore uis, A didna see the derknin,	對酒不覺暝
ma claes happit owre wi flouers at fell;	落花盈我衣
tozie A rise, an follae the mune in the burn,	醉起步溪月
ilka bird reistit, fowk few an far atween.	鳥還人亦稀

(Holton 2016, 16)

If his English version does not seem to demonstrate strong interpretation (though it does: note “tipsily I rise,” and what he does with *ren yi xi* 人亦稀), this is because the English is a gloss of the Scots translation more than it is a rendering from classical Chinese. “Cheerful Alone”:

With drink in front of me, I didn’t see it get dark,  
 and my clothes are covered in fallen flowers;  
 tipsily I rise and follow the moon in the stream,  
 every bird gone to roost, and people few and far between.

Of course Holton has also translated contemporary Chinese into Scots, but he is more likely to use Scots to translate bursts of dialect (Sichuanese, say) in poetry written in Mandarin. That is an interpretation, too, of course, but it is a weaker one than revivifying the diction of Hugh MacDiarmid as a literary language for and

through classical Chinese translation.

But strong interpretation is not only at play in the decision of whether to translate according to contemporary English norms or norms of poetry of the past, or into which dialect to translate classical poetry. Some of the need or possibility for strong interpretation in translating classical Chinese poetry comes from specific features of classical Chinese poetic syntax, in which “articles and personal pronouns [...] are often dispensed with,” as Wai-lim Yip has pointed out, and there is a “sparseness, if not absence, of connective elements (prepositions or conjunctions),” which, “aided by the indeterminacy of parts of speech and no tense declensions in verbs, affords the readers a unique freedom to consort with the objects and events of the real-life world” (Yip 1997, xiii). Conversely, looking at the objects and events of the real-life world consorting with contemporary Chinese poetry, Nick Admussen has written movingly about how a personal memory of a writing desk left to him by his father once interfered with his translation of a poem by Ya Shi 哑石 (b. 1966), causing him to make what he says “feels to me like a mistake, a moment when my work as a translator loosened and a ghost slipped in” (Admussen 2017). Admussen writes that his version “stretches the grammar without apparent rationale,” but we might not expect him to say such a thing if he were translating classical poetry. Though Yip overstates his case, arguing that “imposing Indo-European linguistic habits on classical Chinese without any adjustment” significantly changes “the poetry’s perceptual-expressive procedures,” his argument illustrates the interpretive distance between classical Chinese syntax and that of contemporary English. Strong interpretation is, in other words, the translator’s reckoning with what Yip calls classical Chinese poetry’s “indeterminate space for readers to enter and reenter for multiple perceptions rather than locking them into some definite perspectival position or guiding them in a certain direction.” Though for me, the location of that strong interpretation is not in Chinese poetic syntax *per se*, but rather in the distance between that syntax and the syntax we are used to in reading contemporary poetry in English.

It is translating across that distance that necessitates the particular decisions of how to translate each line within the broader parameters of any given poetic, making strong interpretation highly

likely. In the absence of the super-sign of stylistic equivalence, matching the stylistic *how* of the contemporary poet places a greater burden on the premodern Chinese translator. This is also where we get to issues of quality assessment, or which translators we like better than others. Here is another Li Shangyin translation by James Liu, “Lines to Be Sent Home Written on a Rainy Night”:

You ask me the date of my return—no date has been set.  
 The night rain over the Pa Mountains swells the autumn pond.  
 O when shall we together trim the candle by the west window,  
 And talk about the time when the night rain fell on the Pa  
                   Mountains?  
 (Liu 1969, 150)

And the same poem as translated by Stephen Owen, as “Night Rain: Sent North”:

You ask the date for my return;  
                   no date is set yet;  
 night rain in the hills of Ba  
                   floods the autumn pools.  
 When will we together trim  
                   the candle by the western window  
 and discuss these times of the night rain  
                   in the hills of Ba?  
 (Owen 2006, 351)

Though they both accept the free-verse premises for translating classical Chinese poetry invented by Pound, neither scholar prioritizes translating for poetry-reading audiences over translating for scholarly readers who want to know “what the original poem is like.” The problem is that there is no way to access “what the original poem is like,” in Liu’s words, in a translation other than through the translator’s own sense of poetics, the translator’s sense of what *poetry* is like, or should be like, in English. The implementation of the translator’s poetics is the interpretation, and modern Chinese poetry generally does not require as strong an interpretation on the translator’s part as does premodern Chinese poetry.

To my ear, both Owen's and Liu's versions fail by being too timid in their interpretations, perhaps in tacit agreement about "the insistent voice of the translator" (see Owen 1985, 121–26, for his version of Liu's distinction between "poet-translator" and the "critic-translator," culminating in the choice of what Owen calls "the best analogues from our own literature: the dramatic monologue, the confessional tradition, the diary" for "a model whereby the translator can simultaneously encompass two identities" (125–26)). This is not a bad impulse, of course. For an example in the translation of modern Chinese poetry, here are Bonnie McDougall's and Donald Finkel's translations of a stanza from Bei Dao's "The Answer" 回答:

A new conjunction and glimmering stars  
Adorn the unobstructed sky now:  
They are the pictographs from five thousand years.  
They are the watchful eyes of future generations.

新的轉機和閃閃星斗，  
正在綴滿沒有遮攔的天空。  
那是五千年的象形文字，  
那是未來人們凝視的眼睛。  
(McDougall in Bei Dao 2010, 6–7)

The earth revolves. A glittering constellation  
pricks the vast defenseless sky.  
Can you see it there? that ancient ideogram—  
the eye of the future, gazing back.  
(Finkel 1991, 10)

I find McDougall's translation superior to Finkel because, as Charles Bernstein notes, the "conventional sounding American free-verse [...] fails to convey one of the most fundamental aspect of how the poems were heard, and how they mean, to Chinese ears, which is the most interesting aspect of the work" (Bernstein 2012, 88; cf. Damrosch 2003, 23–24). But while McDougall's weak interpretation is what makes her version better, in my mind, than Finkel's, weak interpretation is not an option in translating from premodern Chinese poetry. There is no outside to strong interpretation when

translating from the premodern Chinese episteme into that of modernity in English poetics.

Though they translate as if to disavow strong interpretation, that is, both Owen and Liu enact it—even if their interpretations suffer from their disavowal. Liu’s genteel “swelling” of the autumn pond and vocative “O” to begin line three, and Owen’s indented hemistiches (equivalent to the last three characters of Li Shangyin’s heptasyllabic lines), indicate that there is an attempt at poetry, but their “no date has/is set [yet]” undermines this attempt—to say nothing of the unidiomatic “we together.” By contrast, though Herbert Giles’s late nineteenth-century translation, titled “Souvenirs,” does not fit my general taste, I find it more successful because it seems more comfortable in the strength of its interpretation:

You ask when I’m coming: alas, not just yet.....  
 How the rain filled the pools on that night when we met!  
 Ah, when shall we ever snuff candles again,  
 And recall the glad hours of that evening of rain?  
 (Giles 1898, 134)

From the perspective of a hypothetical Chinese Literature in Translation course, aimed at teaching Chinese poetry and poetics *an sich* (as they have been made legible to us through the history of twentieth-century translation), Giles’s version is not accurate enough to give to students—just as Pound’s translations are not usually accurate enough. Yet as an example of the translator’s confidence in his poetics and the strength of his interpretation, it works.

In translating contemporary Chinese poetry, my ethic is to give the reader both what the poet says and how she or he says it; in translating premodern Chinese poetry, it is to accept ownership of the strength of my interpretation. I still aim to satisfy both scholarly and literary audiences, believing Liu’s segregation of readers of versions by “poet-translators” and “critic-translators” to be based on a false dichotomy (scholars can read poetry, after all, and readers of poetry can be interested in scholarship; see Klein 2014b) or at least one that isn’t invariably and automatically activated. But I see no reason not to avail myself of similar interpretive tactics as translators

who use rhyme and more traditional metrics, even if I translate for what I take to be contemporary ears. Here is my version of Li Shangyin's "Night Rain, Sent North" 夜雨寄北:

You ask when I'll be back but there is no when.  
 In the hills night rains are flooding autumn pools.  
 When will we sit and trim the wicks in the west window  
 and talk about the hills and night and rain?

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

As part of translating for contemporary readers of poetry in English, I removed the reference to the mountains in Ba, today's Sichuan; this is, of course, open to debate, but I note that Giles made the same excision. Nevertheless, I remain interested in how the poet says what he says, in a way I think is more possible in contemporary diction than was in Giles's late Victorian conventions. I give a strong interpretation in distinguishing what is unique from what is not in Li Shangyin's phrasing. For instance, I see nothing special in Li Shangyin's use of *gong* 共, commonly translated as "together," so I can avoid Owen's and Liu's distracting redundancy; on the other hand, my hopefully somewhat startling "no when" comes from my interest in Li Shangyin's use of repetition, especially in his first lines—as in "Untitled," which I translate:

Time to meet is hard to find; parting, too, is hard.  
 The east wind has no force, but a hundred flowers fall.  
 Silk threads end when spring silkworms die, and  
 wax tears dry only after wicks go ash.  
 She worries in morning's mirror about temples turning white,  
 but reading my poems at night she'll feel the moonlight's chill.  
 A little road leads from here to Mt. Penglai, so  
 indulge me, bluegreen bird, and spy a little glance.

相見時難別亦難  
 東風無力百花殘  
 春蠶到死絲方盡  
 蠟炬成灰淚始乾  
 曉鏡但愁雲鬢改  
 夜吟應覺月光寒  
 蓬山此去無多路  
 青鳥殷勤為探看

Through the premise of wanting to preserve the *how* of the poet's expression in translation, I acknowledge that in moving from classical Chinese to modern English poetics, such preservation cannot but be filtered through my own subjectivity.

And subjectivities will differ. I have earlier written about the possibility of highlighting the poetic difficulty of Li Shangyin by translating his lines into blocks of prose poetry with annotations embedded in the lines in smaller text, a strategy inspired by late medieval publications of Chinese poetry (see Klein 2016a and 2016c), but the translations quoted above are from a forthcoming edition edited by Chloe Garcia Roberts, to be published by New York Review Books. Avant-gardist typesetting would not be appropriate for this project, so I have lineated my versions and not provided extensive annotations. Nevertheless, knowing that my versions would be published alongside translations by Roberts and A. C. Graham gave me the rein to develop a more recognizable style. I wanted, for instance, to do what David Hinton does, without sounding like David Hinton. Here is his translation of the above poem:

It's so hard to be together, and so hard to part: a tender  
east wind is powerless: the hundred blossoms crumble:

the heart-thread doesn't end until the silkworm's dead,  
and tears don't dry until the candle's burnt into ash:

she grieves, seeing white hair in her morning mirror,  
and chanting at night, she feels the chill of moonlight:

exquisite Paradise Mountain—it isn't so very far away,  
and that azure bird can show us the way back anytime.  
(Hinton 2014, 318)

And here the poem as translated by Roberts:

To see each other: difficult.  
To part: also difficult.  
The east wind lacks force,  
A hundred flowers pale.

When spring's silkworm arrives at death,  
Its filaments have reached exhaustion.  
Beeswax candles grey,  
Then their tears begin to dry.

The mirror of dawn is only grieving  
The aging of your cloudmane.  
Night incantations  
Should feel the moonlight's cold.

There is not much road left  
to Penglai Mountain.

Bluebird, as much as in you lies,  
search out a glimpse for me.  
(Roberts 2017, revision of Roberts 2012)

Hinton's translation is in his inimitable style, which he has crafted to represent the poetics of a fixed number of words per line and the couplet as the unit of thought. Roberts, too, takes advantage of Chinese poetics both in its own right and as it has come to be represented in English to highlight what is disjunctive about Li Shangyin, "breaking the lines at the caesura to emphasize the internal patterns as well as the couplets," she explains (Roberts 2017). Knowing that my translations would be read alongside theirs, both within the volume and without, gave me the space to develop my own interpretation in my own translational style. I would not have given myself such interpretive liberty translating a contemporary

poet.

I've said that translations of contemporary Chinese poetry by different translators tend to look like different drafts of the same work in progress. Different translators' versions of premodern poetry look much more like full scale rewrites. I am happy to take advantage of this difference in the presentation of my own style.

### Translating on the Space-Time Continuum

Translators have known that our work requires interpretation since before *After Babel*, in which George Steiner defined “Interpretation,” or “that which gives language life beyond the moment and place of immediate utterance or transcription,” as “the vital starting point” of translation: “interpretative transfer [...] must occur so that the message ‘gets through.’” Steiner argued that “Exactly the same model—and this is what is rarely stressed—is operative within a single language” as is operative within translation between languages (Steiner 1998, 27–28). But the differences between translating across space and across time, or rather, across space *and* time, have, to my knowledge, been under-studied. The observation that I have detailed here is that while translating between the poetics of modern Chinese and English requires interpretation, such requirements are weaker than those for translating the poetics of premodern Chinese into contemporary English.

My scope so far is limited to Chinese poetics. Whether the same strong / weak interpretive distinction holds true in translating poetry into English from premodern versions of other languages—Sanskrit, ancient Greek, Latin, Old Slavonic—vis-à-vis modern and contemporary descendants of those languages I cannot say. Nor have I said anything about translation of premodern Chinese prose (classical or in the vernacular) into contemporary English, in comparison with the translation of modern and contemporary Chinese prose, or about other genres. I have elsewhere written that I have made cuts in translating prose that I would generally be very reluctant, if not completely unwilling, to make when translating poetry (Klein 2016b, 47), and I imagine translating children's literature requires a good deal of strong interpretation, modernity notwithstanding. Likewise, the proximity to Latin that contemporary

English inherited from that language may weaken the translator's requisite interpretation. As conventions congeal and norms naturalize, interpretation weakens—or, the need for interpretation weakens. (Even Liu's or Owen's interpretation to translate classical Chinese poetry into free verse is not as strong an interpretation as Pound's was. And yet, they are still stronger examples of interpretation than mine in translating Xi Chuan.) Congealed conventions and naturalized norms are, as I understand it, the super-sign.

This more particularized definition of the super-sign might offer a workaround to the tension I've been skirting, about the epistemological difference between modern and premodern poetry. On the one hand I've said that Yeh creates such an epistemological split in contrasting not Fei Ming with Li Shangyin but rather James Liu's translation of the latter with her own translation of the former; on the other hand I've said that there is no outside to strong interpretation when translating between the episteme of premodern Chinese poetry and the modern episteme as expressed in English poetics. What gives? But if the super-sign is rather the result of conventions and norms becoming taken for granted, then perhaps my observations are not so contradictory. Modernity certainly involves the naturalization of norms, especially the norms of Chinese poetry with respect to modern English poetics, but it is not the only cause of such naturalization between words and around the world.

At any rate, one aspect of the strong interpretation incumbent upon the translator of premodern Chinese poetry is to emphasize or de-emphasize, as the translator sees fit, the difference between modern and premodern Chinese poetries. It is our strong interpretation, in other words, either to treat premodern and modern Chinese literature as epistemologically separate or epistemologically continuous. Another example of a scholar treating the periodic branches of Chinese literature as epistemologically separate categories is in Olivia Milburn's recent article "The Chinese Mosquito: A Literary Theme" (2017). For all its erudition in the premodern archive, it does not mention Xi Chuan's "Notes on the Mosquito" 蚊子志 (Xi Chuan 2012, 100–3). Interestingly, Xi Chuan's poem cites the sixteenth-century *Investiture of the Gods* 封神演義 by Xu Zhonglin 許仲琳—but Milburn's paper does not. Perhaps if we did more to translate premodern Chinese poetry into modern English

poetry and understand it as we understand modern poetry, our de-emphasis of the differences between modern and Chinese poetries would lead to better scholarly understanding of the trans-incarnational dialogue that takes place between the two. Perhaps, that is, our strong interpretations could lead to stronger scholarship as well.

## References

- Admussen, Nick. 2017. "Errata." *New England Review*. July 25. <http://www.nereview.com/2017/07/25/nick-admussen/>.
- Apter, Emily. 2013. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso.
- Bei Dao 北島. 2011. *Endure*. Translated by Clayton Eshleman and Lucas Klein. Boston: Black Widow.
- . 1990. *The August Sleepwalker*. Translated by Bonnie S. McDougall. New York: New Directions.
- . 2010. *The Rose of Time: New and Selected Poems*. Edited by Eliot Weinberger. New York: New Directions.
- Bellos, David. 2011. *That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*. New York: Faber and Faber.
- Bernstein, Charles. 2012. "In Unum Pluribus: Toward a More Perfect Invention?" *Epsians* (2): 83–93.
- Bruno, Cosima. 2012. *Between the Lines: Yang Lian's Poetry Through Translation*. Leiden: Brill.
- Cai, Zong-qi 蔡宗齊. 2004. "The Influence of Nietzsche in Wang Guowei's Essay 'On the Dream of the Red Chamber.'" *Philosophy East and West* 54 (2): 171–93.
- , ed. 2007. *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cassin, Barbara, ed. 2014. *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*. Translated by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press.
- Chan, Kwan-hung 陳鈞洪, trans. 2012. *The Purple Phoenix: Poems of Li Shangyin*. West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishing.
- Damrosch, David. 2003. *What Is World Literature? Translation/*

- Transnation*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press.
- Eliot, T. S. 2010. "Introduction: 1928." In *New Selected Poems and Translations*, by Ezra Pound, edited by Richard Sieburth, 361–72. New York: New Directions.
- Finkel, Donald, ed. 1991. *Splintered Mirror: Chinese Poetry from the Democracy Movement*. San Francisco: North Point Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1973. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Translated by anonymous. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fuller, Michael A. 2018. *An Introduction to Chinese Poetry: From the Canon of Poetry to the Lyrics of the Song Dynasty*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Giles, Herbert Allen. 1898. *Chinese Poetry In English Verse*. London: Bernard Quaritch. <http://archive.org/details/ChinesePoetryInEnglishVerse>.
- Graham, A.C. 1965. *Poems of the Late T'ang*. London: Penguin.
- Grossman, Edith, interview by Joel Whitney. 2005. "On Translating the Prince of Wits." *Guernica / a magazine of art & politics*. [https://www.guernicamag.com/on\\_translating\\_the\\_prince\\_of\\_w/](https://www.guernicamag.com/on_translating_the_prince_of_w/).
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1956. *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by J. Sibree. New York: Dover Publications.
- Hinton, David. 2002. *Mountain Home: The Wilderness Poetry of Ancient China*. New York: New Directions.
- , ed. 2014. *Classical Chinese Poetry: An Anthology*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Holton, Brian, trans. 2016. *Staubin Ma Lane: Chinese Verse in Scots and English*. Bristol: Shearsman Books.
- Jakobson, Roman. 2016. "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation." In *Selected Writings: Word and Language*, 260–66. The Hague: Walter de Gruyter.
- Karlgren, Bernhard, trans. 1950. *The Book of Odes*. Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities.
- Kaufmann, Walter, ed. 1954. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Viking. [https://archive.org/stream/ThePortableNietzscheWalterKaufmann/The%20Portable%20Nietzsche%20-%20Walter%20Kaufmann\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/ThePortableNietzscheWalterKaufmann/The%20Portable%20Nietzsche%20-%20Walter%20Kaufmann_djvu.txt).

- Klein, Lucas. 2008. "Review of *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology* edited by Zong-qi Cai." *Rain Taxi*. <http://www.raintaxi.com/how-to-read-chinese-poetry-a-guided-anthology/>.
- . 2012. "Translator's Introduction." In *Notes on the Mosquito: Selected Poems*, by Xi Chuan 西川, ix–xiv. New York: New Directions.
- . 2013. "Indic Echoes: Form, Content, and World Literature in Tang Dynasty Regulated Verse." *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (35): 59–96.
- . 2014a. "Review of *A Phone Call from Dalian*, by Han Dong, edited by Nicky Harman." *MCLC Resource Center Publication*. <http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/pubs/reviews/klein3.htm>.
- . 2014b. "Not Altogether an Illusion: Translation and Translucence in the Work of Burton Watson." *World Literature Today* 88 (3): 57–60.
- . 2016a. "Pseudo-Pseudotranslation: On the Potential for Footnotes in Translating Li Shangyin." *Journal of Oriental Studies* 49 (1): 49–72.
- . 2016b. "Same Difference: Xi Chuan's *Notes on the Mosquito* and the Translation of Poetry, Prose Poetry, & Prose." *Translation Review* 93 (1): 41–50. doi:10.1080/07374836.2015.1138077.
- . 2016c. "Dislocating Language into Meaning: Difficult Anglophone Poetry and Chinese Poetics in Translation—Toward a Culturally Translatable Li Shangyin." *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 70 (3): 133–42.
- Liu, James J. Y. 劉若愚. 1962. *The Art of Chinese Poetry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1969. *The Poetry of Li Shang-Yin: Ninth-Century Baroque Chinese Poet*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1982. "The Critic as Translator." In *The Interlingual Critic: Interpreting Chinese Poetry*, 37–49. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Liu, Lydia He 劉禾. 1999. "The Question of Meaning-Value in the Political Economy of the Sign." In *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations*, edited by Lydia Liu, 13–41. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2004. *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern*

- World Making*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Milburn, Olivia. 2017. "The Chinese Mosquito: A Literary Theme." *Sino-Platonic Papers* (270): 1–50.
- Ndesandjo, Mark Obama. 2016. "A Tang Poet From Nairobi: The Complete Poems of Li Shangyin Interpreted into English." *A Tang Poet From Nairobi*. <https://atangpoetfromnairobi.com/>.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 1918. *The Antichrist*. Translated by H. L. Mencken. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. <http://archive.org/details/theantichrist19322gut>.
- . 1968. *Twilight of the Idols; and The Anti-Christ*. Edited by R. J. Hollingdale. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- . 1974. *Shangdi zhi si: Fan Jidu* 上帝之死：反基督 [The death of God: Anti-Christ]. Translated by Qi Liu. Taipei: Zhiwen chubanshe 志文出版社.
- . 2003. *Fan Jidu* 反基督 [Against Christ]. Translated by Junhua Chen. Shijiazhuang 石家莊: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe 河北教育出版社.
- . 2004. *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is; & the Antichrist: A Curse on Christianity*. Translated by Thomas Wayne. New York: Algora.
- . 2005. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*. Edited by Aaron Ridley. Translated by Judith Norman. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2012. "Di Jiduzhe—dui Jidujiao de Zuzhou 敵基督者——對基督教的詛咒 [Anti-Christian—A curse on Christianity]." In "*Di Jidu Zhe*" *Jianggao* 敵基督者講稿 [Lectures on Der Antichrist], by Zengding Wu, translated by Zengding Wu and Meng Li, 119–269. Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe 三聯出版社.
- . 2017. "Der Antichrist: Fluch Auf Das Christenthum." *Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe Werke Und Briefe (EKGWB)*, AC-62. Accessed May 15, 2017. <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/AC>.
- Ouyang Jianghe 歐陽江河. 2013. *Ruci boxue de ji'e: Ouyang Jianghe ji, 1983-2012* 如此博學的飢餓：歐陽江河集 [Such an erudite hunger: The poems of Ouyang Jianghe, 1983-2012]. Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe 作家出版社.
- . 2017a. "From 'Taj Mahal Tears.'" Translated by Lucas Klein.

- Seedings* (3): 170–75.
- . 2017b. “From ‘Taj Mahal Tears.’” Translated by Lucas Klein. *Almost Island* (15). [http://almostisland.com/spring\\_2017/poetry/page/from\\_taj\\_mahal\\_tears.html](http://almostisland.com/spring_2017/poetry/page/from_taj_mahal_tears.html).
- Owen, Stephen. 1985. *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- . 1990. “What Is World Poetry? The Anxiety of Global Influence.” *New Republic* 203 (21): 28–32.
- , ed. 1996. *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- . 2006. *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century (827–860)*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Perloff, Carey. 1990. “Introduction.” In *Elektra*, by Sophocles, translated by Ezra Pound and Rudd Fleming, ix–. New York: New Directions.
- Pound, Ezra. 2016. *Cathay: Centennial Edition*. Edited by Zhaoming Qian 錢光明. New York: New Directions.
- Raffel, Burton. 1994. *The Art of Translating Prose*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Raft, Zeb. 2012. “The Limits of Translation: Method in Arthur Waley’s Translations of Chinese Poetry.” *Asia Major* 25 (2): 79–128.
- Reynolds, Matthew. 2011. *The Poetry of Translation: From Chaucer & Petrarch to Homer & Logue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, Chloe Garcia, trans. 2012. “無題 / Untitled (To See Each Other...)” *Cerise Press* 3 (9). <http://www.cerisepress.com/03/09/untitled-to-see-each-other#english>.
- Robinson, Douglas. 2017. *Critical Translation Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Saussy, Haun. 2001. *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Steiner, George. 1998. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. 3. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Waley, Arthur, trans. 1918. *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*. London: Constable and Co., Ltd. <http://archive.org/details/cu31924023430097>.
- Watson, Burton, trans. 1965. *Su Tung-p’o: Selections from a Sung*

- Dynasty Poet*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Weinberger, Eliot. 1992. *Outside Stories, 1987-1991*. New York: New Directions.
- . 2016. *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei (with More Ways)*. New York: New Directions.
- Xi Chuan, 西川. 2003. "What the Eagle Says." Translated by Maghiel van Crevel. *Seneca Review* 33 (2): 28–41.
- . 2006. "Close Shots and Distant Birds." Translated by Xi Chuan and Inara Cedrins. *The Drunken Boat* (Spring/Summer). <http://www.thedrunkenboat.com/xichuan.html>.
- . 2007. "Discovery." Translated by Diana Shi and George O'Connell. *Words Without Borders* (November). <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/discovery>.
- . 2012. *Notes on the Mosquito: Selected Poems*. Translated by Lucas Klein. New York: New Directions.
- Yang, Lian 楊煉. 2008. *Riding Pisces: Poems from Five Collections*. Translated by Brian Holton. Exeter: Shearsman Books.
- Yeh, Michelle 奚密. 1990. "A New Orientation to Poetry: The Transition from Traditional to Modern." *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (12): 83–105. doi:10.2307/495225.
- Yip, Wai-lim 葉維廉, ed. 1997. *Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Major Modes and Genres*. Durham: Duke University Press. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/yale/Doc?id=10207680>.