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Metamorphosis: The Problem and Potential of Classical Chinese Poetry

RICH TORGERSON

Ancient poetry is a window into the soul of ancient culture. Out of necessity, most of us approach great poetry through English translations. However, giants such as the Homeric epics, the Hyakunin Isshu court poetry of Japan, and the Book of Poetry from ancient China are often introduced in our literature and culture classes through the myopic lens of only one translation.

With regard to the Homeric epics, Harris has suggested that “we are in the process of consigning the “real” Homer to the scrap-pile of unread documents, while we exploit the Epic Tradition in translation for those who sit in our classes, who can hear only the faint echo of a proud and mighty voice.”1 Harris concludes that the power of Homer can be accessed, “but only if approached authentically and through the process of very hard and often frustrating study of the original Greek words.”2 While I agree with this approach to classical literature to some extent, Harris has established a demanding and largely impractical standard.

2. Ibid., Finale.
Perhaps a more practical standard for people would be to encourage an approach to great literature through the careful study of two or more quality translations.

Translation of ancient texts is not a simple artifice. The issues surrounding the conversion of classical Chinese into English are especially problematic. Even beyond the lexical and explicatory challenges, the translator must come face to face with the challenge of interpreting a language used over two thousand years ago, a time of which very little historical fact remains. To make matters worse, this historical void has been filled with a portentous amount of assumption and extrapolation. Thus it is burdensome even to contemplate accurate translation of the Book of Poetry (Classic of Poetry or Shijing), a text which contains portions dating from as early as the tenth century BC. Fortunately, many scholars have dedicated much of their lives to bringing portions of this priceless poetry to us.3

Comparisons

The body of this paper will be focused on the translations of two different poems from the Book of Poetry performed by two of the most well-known and respected sinologists Arthur Waley and James Legge.4 I will also discuss what these specific translations teach us about the perspective of the translator. I will suggest some alternate translations, and we will use a more sound approach to comprehending ancient poems by applying a “two or three witnesses” approach.5 Let’s begin with this poem written during one of the earliest parts of China’s history, taken from a portion of the Book of Poetry Owen calls the “Temple Hymns of Zhou.”6

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3. Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 12. Owen reports, “Despite millennia of scholarship and great progress in linguistics and philology during the past four centuries, much remains uncertain in the language of the Classic of Poetry.... There are many words in these poems that we understand only roughly, which leaves the translator to rely more heavily on the interpretation of the Zhou world from which the poems come” (12).


5. 2 Corinthians 13:1.

6. Owen, 12.
“Making the seasonal progress throughout the States”

Now is he making a progress through the States,
May Heaven accept him as its Son!
Truly are the honour and succession come from it to the House of Chow.
To his movements All respond with tremulous awe.
He has attracted and given rest to all spiritual Beings,
Even to [the Spirits of] the Ho, and the highest hills.
Truly is the king the sovereign Lord.
Brilliant and illustrious is the House of Chow.
He has regulated the positions of the princes;
He has called in shields and spears;
He has returned to their cases bows and arrows.
I will cultivate admirable virtue,
And display it throughout these great regions:
Truly will the king preserve the appointment.7

“He goes”

He goes through his lands;
May high Heaven cherish him!
Truly the succession is with the Zhou.
See how they tremble before him!
Submissive, yielding are all the Spirits,
Likewise the rivers and high hills.
Truly he alone is monarch.
Bright and glorious is Zhou;
It has succeeded to the seat of power.
“Then put away your shields and axes,
Then case your arrows and bows;
I have store enough of good power
To spread over all the lands of Xia.”
And in truth, the king protected them.8

As we look carefully at these two English versions, we immediately find some striking differences. Each author’s choice of words is important to consider; each word important to compare and contrast. The following consists of only some of the questions these two very different translations brought to my mind. Does the original convey the lands were “his” or not? What is the association between “cherishing him” and “accepting him as its Son”? Is Heaven really an “it,” or did Legge simply give his own impression here? Why doesn’t Waley’s translation specify that

honor and succession come from it [Heaven] to the Zhou? Is there a reason why the two men utilize both “all” and “they” with regard to those who tremble, and what does this demonstrate about their individual views of the poem? While Legge’s version seems to maintain a connection between Heaven and the House of Zhou, Waley keeps the focus on the might of the House of Zhou and its King with an almost supercilious “May High Heaven cherish him!”9 Waley ensures that the reader perceives only one “he” in the poem, while Legge’s version allows for a more open interpretation. Was the former justified in his assertion?

Without further investigation, one is left to wonder whether the spirits were “attracted and given rest” or were “submissive and yielding,” or was it simply all of these combined? Did the ancient(s) write “the king” or “he alone” is the sovereign lord, or was there no designation of any kind? Waley’s use of quotation marks certainly gives a different voice to the poem, which is in need of explanation. The translators’ mutual agreement in the third to last line on the use of “I” raises the question of whether Waley attributes the entire quotation to the Duke of Zhou, as Legge does to the last few lines, or whether Waley attributes these words to someone else. The use of the word “power” in describing the triumph of the Zhou and the king’s ability to spread over the lands of Xia (China) may be interpreted differently by Westerners than James Legge’s more gentle description of a display of “virtue,” even if power and virtue are written the same in the Classical Chinese.

This shows that each of these translations has its own slant that stems from the perspective of the translator. Both men have construed the poem to mean that the mandate had gone directly from Heaven to the king, but why not consider that another intermediary could be involved? Both concur that he who was going, or progressing, throughout the land of Xia wielded incredible power and influence. Either the king’s greatness was exaggerated to the extreme, or Legge was mistaken in his statement that “Truly are the honour and succession come from it [meaning

9. Ibid.
Heaven] to the House of Chow.” Another possibility is that the honor came from he who was cherished and accepted by Heaven: Hou Ji. This seemingly random connection can be better explained as we look at our next poem, concerning Hou Ji, also from the oldest portion of the Book of Poetry:

"Accomplished"  
O accomplished How-tsieh,  
Thou didst prove thyself the correlate of Heaven;  
Thou didst give grain-food to our multitudes;—  
The immense gift of thy goodness.  
Thou didst confer on us the wheat and the barley,  
Which God appointed for the nourishment of all;  
And without distinction of territory or boundary,  
The rules of social duty were diffused throughout these great regions,11

"Mighty are you"  
Mighty are you Hou Ji  
Full partner in Heaven’s power  
That we, the thronging peoples, were raised up  
Is all your doing.  
You gave us wheat and barley  
In obedience to God’s command  
Not to this limit only or to that frontier,  
But near, far, and for ever throughout these lands of Xia.12

In line one “accomplished” and “mighty” seem ambivalent, but I found it surprising that neither of the translators considered the possibility of polygraphy (many graphs for the same meaning), which is so common among early Chinese texts.13 Simply changing the first syllable of Si wen (accomplished or mighty) to its perfect homophone Siwen (cultured or refined) could allow a greater understanding of how Hou Ji was perceived by the Chinese.

Did Hou Ji prove himself the correlate of Heaven or not? Did he raise up the multitudes or give them grain-food? Was Hou Ji acting out of obedience or out of unity with God as Legge suggests? How did Legge translate, “The rules of social duty were diffused” out of the same line Waley translated, “But near, far, and for ever

10. Legge, 577.
11. Ibid., 580.
ever”? Finally, was the wheat and barley diffused throughout these great regions or the lands of Xia?

In addition to these questions, when looking back at the first poem we find some intriguing connections between the two different pieces of poetry. For example, both poems start out describing someone revered, loved, or respected by the people. In Waley’s translations he wrote, “Mighty are you Hou Ji, / Full partner in Heaven’s power,” and “He goes through his lands; / May high Heaven cherish him!” 14 Both translations of the final lines of our first poem assert that this luminary’s goodness and protection spread throughout the lands, which seems to reflect the same message at the conclusion of our second poem. James Legge wrote, “And without distinction of territory or boundary, / The rules of social duty were diffused throughout these great regions.” 15 And from Waley, “Not to this limit only or to that frontier, But near, far, and for ever throughout these lands of Xia.” 16

Obviously readers will have their own impressions and opinions, well founded or not. My point here is not to prove my impressions are right, but to emphasize the importance of searching poetry for its original meaning, which entails much more than reading a single translator’s version of the original. Presentism, or judging the past based solely on our own modern perspective, is not an easy thing to overcome. Truth, in any realm, must be substantiated by two or more witnesses.

As we compare the general feeling created by the individual translators, we find that the renderings reveal some of the author’s own impressions concerning the events which took place around the time of the Zhou victory. Arthur Waley likely believed that the relationship between subject and ruler at that time consisted only of that held by master and “submissive” servant. The praise of the people seems almost hollow and forced. Raw power was the ultimate cause of triumph, and cold military procedure the method.

15. Legge, 580.
To him these poems represent propaganda perpetuated by a power-hungry regime trying to substantiate its overthrow of the prior leading class.

James Legge, on the other hand, portrays the relationship between ruler and subject as more delicate, and the respect offered to a ruler as something that must be earned or proven. He believes that a ruler was one who attracted and gave rest to all spiritual Beings and whose movements inspired nothing other than awe. Legge's translation portrays a more positive outlook on the Zhou, who is commonly purported to have been commanded by Heaven to overthrow the Shang and was gratefully accepted by the people.

Despite the many questions brought to the surface by our comparison of these translations, these questions also serve as keys to unlocking answers. Take the previously mentioned example regarding the use of "power" and "virtue." One not well versed in Chinese culture, particularly in issues involving the Mandate of Heaven, would be at the mercy of their own western ideals in interpreting either of the translations. With both words, however, we can apprehend not only what is being depicted, but also the manner in which it was carried out. Careful study of the classical Chinese, alongside two or three accurate translations will enhance our comprehension. However, for those of us unable to become proficient with classical Greek, Latin, Chinese, etc., we can at least approach the original meaning of the poem by partaking of the fruits of those who have paid the price. The failure to look at more than one translation can lead to serious misunderstanding of the original meaning of a poem as well as the basic values and ideals held by the ancients.

**The Challenges of Classical Chinese Poetry**

As in modern times, the very nature of poetry often contributes and encourages variation in interpretation. This is especially true when dealing with classical Chinese poetry. First, classical Chinese poetry was written in condensed form, typically in short four-character lines, requiring the reader to decompress the phrase
before accessing the meaning. Second, another confounding aspect of classical Chinese poetry is best described by Professor David Honey.

For the student who has had to grapple with lengthy conjugations or declensions in learning, say, a European language, Chinese may initially come as a relief—no tense, no gender, no person—apparently nothing but endless characters. However burdensome such syntactical signposts may be to learn, the student of Chinese soon comes to rue their absence, for the grammatical function of a Chinese word is never registered in the graph used to represent it and is seldom expressed in the phonological garb of the word.17

This absence of tense, gender, and person, along with the possibility that a single character can serve as a verb, noun, or adjective, can quickly make a mystery out of the message behind each character and how it interrelates with its neighbors to form complete ideas.18

Third, Professor Honey has also suggested that because Chinese characters are graphic means to represent the sounds of words, students must delve deeper into “the ways in which words function behind the graph.”19 Three ways that these words are manifested in classical texts are introduced, namely polygraphy, polysemy, and polyptotons.20 Honey argues that an enlightened awareness of polygraphy (many graphs for same word), polysemy (one graph for many words), and polyptotons (one graph having two grammatical functions), can facilitate translation exponentially.21 Each character encountered must be analyzed within its linguistic and historical context, thus enabling dedicated students of classical Chinese to focus attention on the word being spelled, correct interpretation, and, hopefully, eventual cognizance how each word is being manipulated rhetorically and stylistically. Understanding the fact that polygraphy, polysemy, and polyptotons do occur in

17. Honey, 15.
18. Ibid., 16.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 16–19.
classical Chinese texts also indicates that even the most adept translator is bound to make mistakes.

The fourth aspect that leads to variation in translation, even for capable translators of Chinese like Waley and Legge, is that classical Chinese poetry is kept distant by vast barriers of time and culture. Two foreigners coming from totally different ethno-linguistic backgrounds trying to translate two-thousand-year-old poetry into complete English sentences is much like trying to fashion grapes out of grape juice. One quickly realizes it is impossible to grasp those poems in the exact same way as those who originally produced them.

Conclusions

When we study classical texts and multiple translations, we will naturally encounter different interpretations, with all their intriguing nuances. Watchful students will discover that when they read a poem, or any literature for that matter, they are actually bringing a whole set of personal values, experiences, and knowledge that is particular to them. They will understand the poem slightly differently than anyone else. They should also recognize that this is one of the reasons why there are so many divergent translations. This is both the problem and the potential of poetry.

In conclusion, I have uncovered some of the problems created by reading only one translation. We have seen that comparing and contrasting can begin to unravel some of the mysteries of ancient poetry as well as the opinions of the respective translators. Poetry is difficult to interpret because it is inherently open to interpretation. This is especially true with ancient writings because of the lack of linguistic, cultural, and historical clarity, hence the need to utilize a “two or three witnesses” approach in our study of ancient texts and their more recent English renditions.