Reflections on Arthur Waley’s Views of Poetry Translation

Chen Cheng
Sichuan University

As a scholar, a translator and a poet, Arthur David Waley (1889-1966) is a genius with a combination of talents that is unlikely to be repeated. In his unrhymed, elegant, and lucid verse translations, Waley succeeds in creating poems that are faithful to the text yet possess the vitality and freshness of original compositions. His thoughts and views on poetry translation are mostly scattered in the prefaces or appendixes of his works, which can contribute a great deal to poetry translation. To sum up these scattered views, there are three main points. The first is on three important factors in poetry translation, which include poetic flavor, inner rhythm and imagery; the second is on the selection of poems to be translated and the third is on the translator’s qualifications. Moreover, with Waley and his verse translation as a case study, some reflections on the situation of Chinese-English verse translation...
1. Three Important Factors

1.1 Poetic Flavor

At the beginning of the article “Notes on Translation”, Waley says, “If one is translating a legal document all one needs to do is to convey the meaning; but if one is translating literature one has to convey feeling as well as grammatical sense” (Morris, 1970:152). Waley always regards the intrinsic feeling, intellectual and emotional, as the translator’s true starting point. What he cares about most is how to catch the essence and flavor of a poem and to turn them into an English one. In his eyes, in a literary translation one must find equivalents consistent with the elevation of style which poetry demands.

To effect this purpose, he often translates rather the implied meaning than the actual words. This is why he regards his work as literal but at the same time literary translation. In his opinion, although it is crucial that the original be recognizable in the translation, a further criterion for a successful translation is the intrinsic poetic value of the translated verse. In short, the general readers will accept whatever makes good sense and good poetry.

Hence, in the introduction to More Translations from the Chinese, Waley calls attention to the fact that the book “aimed at fuller literary form, which necessarily implied a less literal method” (Waley, 1919b:9). Since in a literary translation one must find equivalents consistent with the elevation of style which poetry demands, Waley tries wherever possible to use general and non-technical equivalents when dealing with proper nouns. He does not seek scientific equivalents to the names of birds, animals, etc. When having an argument with Herbert Giles, Waley still insists on his opinions. For example, in his opinion, the word “harp” which Giles does not admit as an equivalent to se (瑟) and qin (琴) may in a non-technical work be used in a much wider sense. What he translates is a poem, rather than a work on “natural history” (Waley, 1920:591).

1.2 Inner Rhythm

A “music mode” or inner rhythm, regardless of whether there is any formal metre or rhyming pattern, is one of the most elusive yet essential characteristics of the work that the translator is going to translate. Waley regards such kind of music mode as one of the essential factors in his translation. In his eyes, a translator’s role is rather like that of the executant in music, as contrasted with the composer. The
sense of music is so important in poetry translation for Waley that he attempts to reproduce the metrical pattern of the original in his version. Therefore, he evolves a stress-based free verse that neatly avoids both stifling exactitude and the cloying rigmaroles of fixed-meter rhyming English prosody. With abundant practice of translation, he puts forward the meter he employs, “I have therefore tried to produce regular rhythmic effects similar to those of the original. Each character in the Chinese is represented by a stress in the English; but between the stresses unstressed syllables are of course interposed” (Waley, 1919a:33).

“Each character in the Chinese represented by a stress in the English” is the key concept of Waley’s way of handling rhythm in translation. In the next forty years of translating ancient Chinese poetry, he gradually improves and perfects such kind of meter. In fact, in the book A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems Waley uses this rhythm in a considerably mature way. In the late period of his work, he could even handle the Chinese seven-word lines in this meter successfully, which is awfully difficult to do. For example:

闲开新酒尝数盏，醉忆旧诗吟一篇。

——白居易《自感吟寄教诗梦得》

At leisure I open new wine / and taste several cups;
Drunken I recall old poems / and sing a whole volume.

The rhythm Waley uses easily reminds people of “sprung rhythm”, which is a term invented by G. M. Hopkins in the late nineteenth century to describe his own unique poetic meter, as opposed to the regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. The relationship between Waley’s meter in his poetry translation and Hopkins’s sprung rhythm has been discussed by some scholars. In this meter, only the beat of the strong stresses counts in the scanning, while the number of intervening light syllables is highly variable. Especially in old English poetry, the stresses are four in number, and this four-stress line is divided in half by a strongly marked caesura. Furthermore, the stressed syllables are marked by alliteration. From Waley’s translations above, it is clear that by paying much attention to the caesura in each line as well as to alliteration or internal rhyme, Waley in fact borrows regulations from old English poetry and from ancient Chinese prosody.

1.3 Imagery

As one of the vital factors in ancient Chinese poetry, imagery plays a crucial part
in translation. Waley also attaches great importance to deal with images in the original. In the introduction to *The Book of Songs*, he writes about “Imagery”, comparing images in Chinese and English poetry. In the introduction to *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*, he clearly points out, “Above all, considering imagery to be the soul of poetry, I have avoided either adding images of my own or suppressing those of the original” (Waley, 1919a:33). In his eyes, even to put in a “like” or “as if” where there is none in the original is to alter the whole character of a song. Hence, out of a hundred instances, he has not done so more than once or twice, in special cases where it does not seem to matter. Here are two examples how he remains the original images:

栏杆十二曲，垂手明如玉。

——南朝乐府《西洲曲》

The rail is twisted into a twelve-fold pattern.
She lets fall her hand white like the colour of jade.

腰中双绮带，梦为同心结。

——梁武帝《有所思》

Round my waist I wear a double sash:
I dream that it binds us both with a same-heart knot.

In the Western culture, the color of jade should be green and it is strange or even awful for Westerners to compare a lady's hands to jade. But Waley conveys the original image faithfully and adds the word “white” to illustrate the implied meaning. “A same-heart knot” is also a typical image in traditional Chinese culture and Waley introduces it to Westerners through his accurate translation.

2. Selection of Poems to Be Translated
2.1 Translation Purpose

The key factor Waley considers during his translation is whether the content of the poems would attract the attention of general public. When referring to the circulation of *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*, Waley says, “I think one of the reasons that it remained in fairly steady demand for forty years is that it appeals to people who do not ordinarily read poetry” (Morris, 1970:135). The people who do not ordinarily read poetry are always the target reader of Waley’s works. Eugene
Chen Eoyang called Waley “sinicized Westerners” (Eoyang, 1993:68) and believed that as the forerunner of the present generation, Waley addressed audiences almost exclusively Western, making their mark with English-speaking readers who seldom knew Chinese.

One of the prominent characteristics of Waley’s selection is the huge number of folk songs or poems with the quality of folk songs. There are two main reasons for such kind of selection, one of which has something to do with the genres of dominant poetics at that time and the other relates to Waley’s translation purpose. The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries saw in England an immense increase of activity in the collection, transcription, and publication of folk songs. Not only in England, but in whole Europe, folklore, especially folk songs, attracted widespread interest for research, which even had an influence on Chinese literature. Under this trend, Waley decided to show English readers ancient Chinese poetry as folk songs, especially The Book of Songs, though he knew clearly the didactic function of the original.

Meanwhile, the selection of poems is closely related to Waley’s aim of translation. The general public who do not ordinarily read poetry have been always the target reader of Waley’s versions. Even if there is a great deal in his translations that specialists might quarrel with, he hopes that will not be misleading to the general public. The Book of Songs consists of translations and notes which can be understood by those who are not students of Chinese, and the supplement which deals with technical questions is meant only for specialists.

Different from many other Sinologists, Waley thinks that poems which can be more accessible to European readers are Gu Shi (古诗), in the old style, rather than Lü Shi (律诗), in the new style. Du Fu and later Bai Juyi may be mentioned as the chief protagonists. Hence Waley chooses a large proportion of Gu Shi to translate as well as abundant poems of Bai Juyi. Besides, Waley emphasizes the uniqueness of the poems, which is also one of the factors that attract readers. In his A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems, only thirty odd pieces had been translated before. He retranslates them just because the previous versions were full of mistakes or they were too typical to omit. Most of the works that Waley chooses to translate are largely unknown in the West at his time, and their impact is thus all the more extraordinary.

### 2.2 Translatability

Another factor Waley takes into consideration is the translatability of the original.
He does not translate everything in hand. At first he dislikes most Tang poetry. Apart from Bai Juyi’s poems, there are only five pieces of Tang poems in his A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems. In his eyes, many of the Tang poems are burdened with the excessive use of allusions. Even after he likes it better, he prefers to confine himself to the poetry which loses least in English, to the pre-Tang poets and to Bai Juyi, who reverts to a simpler style. Waley’s own words are the best illustration: “The fact that I have translated ten times more poems by Po Chū-i than by any other writer does not mean that I think him ten times as good as any of the rest, but merely that I find him by far the most translatable of the major Chinese poets. Nor does it mean that I am unfamiliar with the works of other great T’ang and Sung poets. I have indeed made many attempts to translate Li Po, Tu Fu and Su Shih; but the results have not satisfied me” (Waley, 1949:5).

Meanwhile, Waley does not think Ci is suitable for translation. On the one hand, most of Ci pieces are purely conventional in character and in content. On the other hand, Ci is a pure music of words and the beauty of rhythm can not be represented in translation. There is only one piece of Ci Waley once translated and it is rather intriguing that some critics regard that version as the best translation of ancient Chinese poetry that Waley has made.

Since Waley dislikes the poems of a highly allusive nature which require an undue amount of annotation, it is obvious that he is not for the use of large number of annotations. His versions show this by themselves. The notes are usually simple and concise when really necessary, or else the textual notes will be issued separately, just as The Book of Songs. Here is an example:

诗人感木瓜，乃欲答琼瑶。

——秦嘉《赠妇诗》

The man in the Book of Odes who was given a quince

Wanted to pay it back with diamonds and rubies.

In the bottom of the whole poem, there is a very short annotation for “the Book of Odes”: Odes, v, 10. The note points out the derivation of the allusion in the Book of Odes and it would not make any interruption of reading because even without the annotation, the translation is clearly expressed. If the reader has the desire to know more about this allusion, he can dig it further by himself.
2.3 Translator's Interest and Taste

Translators often stress the need for a sense of affinity with the poet they are translating. Waley thinks highly of this aspect. For him, to select poems according to the translator's interest as well as to his literary taste is one of the principles in poetry translation, just like what he says, "I have chosen and arranged chronologically various pieces which interested me and which it seemed possible to translate adequately" (Waley, 1919b:9).

In spite of his great modesty about his writing, Waley has total confidence in his own literary judgment and taste. It is remarkable that he is able to find in Chinese poetry qualities which are obviously native to himself. The irony, the relative avoidance of metaphor, the non-romanticism behind most of the poems, all of which he has obviously found congenial. This is probably one of the reasons why his translation of Bai Juyi has made such a huge success. In the person of Bai Juyi, Waley finds someone who is immensely compatible, who speaks directly to the worries of Waley's time with a wise voice 1100 years old.

Besides the immeasurable contribution to the spread of Bai Juyi and his poetry, Waley also introduces some new names to the Western general public. As the first one to translate poems of Tao Yuanming (陶渊明) and Han Shan (寒山), he has contributed to the wide acceptance of the two poets in Western countries. Guided by his interest and literary taste, he digs out some poets and poems which were mentioned before neither in Western world nor in China. For example, in A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems, he translates "Inviting Guests" by Cheng Gongsiu (成公绥《延宾赋》), "Climbing A Mountain" by Xie Daoyun (谢道蕴《登山》), "Sailing Homeward" by Chen Fangsheng (湛方生《还都帆诗》), etc. These poets and poems of the Jin Dynasty had been ignored for a long time in the Chinese literary history. Yet Waley finds them with his incredible instinct of literary taste.

3. Translator's Qualifications

3.1 Passion and Devotion

As a successful translator, Waley has his own principles and standards to evaluate whether a translator is qualified or not. The first qualification for a good translator in Waley's eyes is passion. Waley detests the institutional approach to literature and scholarship and he has grave doubts about the value of such programs. What matters is that a translator should have been excited by the work he translates, should be haunted day and night by the feeling that he must put it into his own
language, and should be in a state of restlessness and fret till he has done so.

In addition to passion and love for work, the translator should be devoted to his job, which requires diligence and hard working. Waley is a perfect-pursuing translator. He has always done his endeavor to choose the best choice among various approximations, "It becomes a question of choosing between various approximations...Hundreds of times I have sat for hours in front of texts the meaning of which I understood perfectly, and yet been unable to see how they ought to be put into English in such a way as to re-embodi not merely a series of correct dictionary meanings, but also the emphasis, the tone, the eloquence of the original" (Morris, 1970:158).

Besides, Waley keeps revising his translations so that the latest state of a version must be assumed to be the one which satisfies him most. Honestly speaking, Waley's translation of ancient Chinese poetry is one of the most faithful among that of Sinologists. He himself seems confident for the accuracy of his translations. In the preface of Translations from the Chinese, he says, "To understand unfailingly anything written a thousand years and more ago is not easy; but my Chinese friends have generally assured me that these translations come pretty close to the original; closer, they have sometimes been kind enough to say, than those of any other translator" (Waley, 1941:Preface)

3.2 Direct Translation

"It is almost always better for the translator to be writing in his own language. It is in the highest degree improbable that a writer will command all the resources of a foreign language even as regards vocabulary, and when it comes to rhythm he is almost certain to be completely floored" (Morris, 1970:164). It is not difficult to find that Waley advocates direct translation, working from a foreign language into one's mother tongue. When asked the reception of his translations in the Oriental countries and how about the reaction there, Waley answered, "In Japan a great deal. Not in China, I think. But they get rather cross in China at one translating their own poems and think that, if anybody does it, it ought to be themselves" (Morris, 1970:142). Waley's words indicate some discontentment as well as some irony, which further demonstrates his favor in direct translation rather than inverse translation.

It seems that a large part of Sinologists do not think Chinese translators can do the job of rendering Chinese into English well. Waley's student, A. C. Graham, also a well-known Sinologist and translator of ancient Chinese poetry, has a well-known
judgment on this issue, more extreme than that of his teacher, "we can hardly leave translation to the Chinese, since there are few exceptions to the rule that translation is best done into, not out of, one's own language" (Graham, 1977:37). As the representative of the idea that there is few feasibility of translating ancient Chinese poetry into English well by native Chinese translators, Graham has got much criticism from Chinese scholars and translators. However, there are still some scholars who think that there are indeed some shortcomings in native Chinese translators' English translation of ancient Chinese poetry, especially when the reception of these versions is concerned.

4. Reflections on Chinese-English Verse Translation in China

4.1 Needs of the Host Culture

Amazon online book market is one of the convenient and effective ways to know about the status quo of all kinds of English books. According to the statistics based on the survey of English translation works of classical Chinese poetry on this website, from February 2004 to August 2005, several points are clear:

1) Arthur Waley's *The Book of Songs* had always been on the top ten best sellers of English translations of classical Chinese poetry. And his *170 Chinese Poems* has got supreme praise and recognition of Western readers.
2) The translations in the top ten best sellers are almost written in free verse.
3) Nine authors of the top ten are native English speakers, British or America. The rest one, Wai-lim Yip, is Chinese-American.

The first point demonstrates the high status that Waley and his works enjoy in the English-speaking countries. And the second one shows the present dominant poetic of free verse prosody in English poetry and the last relates to the issue of the direction of translation.

One of the most important reasons why Waley's new form of free verse can appeal to so many Western readers lies in its accordance with the host culture's literary norms, especially the dominant poetics. Nowadays, the dominant prosody in English poetry is still free verse and the statistics above are one of the proofs. Many translators in China incline to choosing regular form when transferring classical Chinese poetry, which they think can retain the form of the original poetry. Xu Yuanchong (许渊冲) is one of the representatives. Although Xu's works have won a high reputation at home, readers in English-speaking countries rarely know about him and his translations. What is more important is that nearly most of the
C-E verse translations made by Chinese translators cannot appeal to Westerners.

According to the distinguished Chinese-American translator Liu Wu-chi, the free school of translating Chinese poetry, whose representative is Arthur Waley, has emerged as the most popular and attracted a majority of followers among Western scholar-translators. A new generation of competent and distinguished translators has taken over the field of Chinese-English translations since Arthur Waley, greatly extending for Western readers the horizon of Chinese poetry. Eva Hung says, “Despite the high hopes for cross-cultural communication expressed by many translators, the reception of literature in translation is conditioned almost exclusively by the host culture’s literary and cultural norms, and its needs and expectations. It is for this reason that the brave but sometimes misguided efforts of many mainland Chinese academics at translating classical poetry for an English readership are not discussed” (France, 2000:227). The words above hit the point of the issue. If the English renderings of classical Chinese poetry are expected to win the favor of Westerners, translator must take the needs of the host culture into consideration.

4.2 Direction of Translation

Direction of translation, which is also called directionality, in translation studies refers to whether translators are working from a foreign language into their mother tongue or vice versa. Direct translation means working into mother language and inverse translation means the opposite. The assumption that direct translation is the only viable professional option is particularly dominant in English-speaking countries.

Partly as a result of the spread of English language all over the world, the numbers of translations into English far outweigh those into any other language. And because there are not enough translators with English as their mother tongue in the right place at the right time, many of these translations are inverse. It is of truth that translator of direct translation has better language ability and is more familiar with the host culture’s literary and cultural norms as well as its needs and expectations. However, those who stress the importance of native speaker competence in the culture and language of the target text often do not attach enough importance to understanding the culture and language of the source text, particularly when discourse patterns differ greatly from one culture to another, such as poetry translation. This may lead to obstacles in cultural communication. Therefore, the direction of translation is not the key point determining the quality of
Chinese-English verse translation. Chinese translators should be aware of their limitations in inverse translation and go about preparing themselves for the task, such as the sensibility to the needs of the host culture, the excellent bilingual and bicultural competences, etc.

Summary

When Arthur Waley’s first translations of Chinese poems were privately printed in 1916, Chinese literature was the preserve of specialists and of dabblers in quaint exotica. During a half-century of East-West conflict, Waley helps foster a more civilized dialogue between China and the West. He never once set foot in China nor held a university chair, and yet with extraordinary empathy he enabled Chinese poets to speak to the world. As an extraordinarily successful translator of Chinese literature, he has devoted all his life to the career of translation. His views on poetry translation and his translating experience are undoubtedly of immeasurable value for the successors. His ideas about a good translator’s qualifications will certainly be of immense use for those who are longing to be excellent translators. Moreover, his views and experience of translation could give some clues for improving the situation of English translation of classical Chinese poetry made in China.

Bibliography:

Baker, M. (ed.) Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2004.

De Gruchy, J. W. Orienting Arthur Waley: Japonism, Orientalism, and the Creation of Japanese Literature in English. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003.

Eoyang, E. C. The Transparent Eye: Reflections on Translation, Chinese Literature, and Comparative Poetics. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993.

France, Peter. (ed.) The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Graham, A.C. Poems of the Late T'ang. London: Penguin Book, 1977.

Johns, F. A. A Bibliography of Arthur Waley. London: Athlone Press, 1988.

Morris, I. (ed.) Madly Singing in the Mountains: An Appreciation and Anthology of Arthur Waley. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1970.

Raffle, B. The Art of Translating Poetry. University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988.

Waley, A. (trans.) A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1919a.

——. (trans.) More Translations from the Chinese. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1919b.

——. “Notes on the ‘Lute-Girl’s Song’”. New China Review, ii, 1920.
---. (trans.) *The Book of Songs*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1937.
---. (trans.) *Translations from the Chinese*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1941.
---. (trans.) *Chinese Poems*. London: Readers Union, Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1949.

CHEN Cheng received her MA degree in translation from Sichuan University and is currently working on her Doctorate in the same program. Her research covers translation theory and practice and cultural relationships between East and West.

E-mail: Chencheng1982@yeah.net