The Difficulty in Translating Chinese Poetry as Exemplified by Ezra Pound

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The River-Merchant’s Wife by Ezra Pound is a translation of the first of Li Po’s Two Letters from Chang-kan Tang Dynasty. “Traveling to Chang-kan” is one of the best known poems that Li Po wrote at that time. The Tang Dynasty (618-970) is the most prosperous dynasty in the entire Chinese history, which Chinese people called “The Golden Age”. During the reign of Emperor Tang Xua-zong, who occupied the throne from 712 to 756, China achieved powerful economic and political strength. During that period, Chinese literature, and specifically Chinese poetry, reached the peak of its centuries long development. Included in the multiple groups of poetry was the group which might be called the “pastoral” or “landscape” poets, who enjoyed celebrating the beauty of China’s land. Li Po was regarded as one of them.

Li Po (Li Bai, 701-762) is arguably one of the greatest Chinese poets of premodern times. It is generally agreed that he and Tu Fu raised poetry in the Shi form (roughly equivalent to the western “Ode”) to its highest level of power and expressiveness. Maybe this follows “the Chinese prejudice”: the older, the better. But scholars agree that later poets may approach but never surpass Li Po and Tu Fu. Several centuries passed before the true worth of Tu Fu’s work
was acknowledged, but Li Po’s poetry seems to have gained almost immediate recognition. This may be because, unlike Tu Fu, Li Po was no innovator. For the most part he was content to employ the poetic forms inherited from his predecessors and to devote himself to the conventional themes of the past. Li Po’s distinction lies in the fact that he brought an unparalleled grace and eloquence to his treatment of the traditional themes, a flow and grandeur that lift his works far above the level of mere imitations of the past. But his style of using words still contained vestiges of the old, traditional manners. He was especially famous for expressing his feelings of separation, departure and reunions in his poems. He was the one who made the natural world an expression of human emotion. In western terms, he was famous for using pathetic fallacy. He wrote a lot of poems on these kinds of feelings.

One must be aware, before one read the English version of Li Po’s The River-Merchant’s Wife, that Ezra Pound translated a poem that was written more than a thousand years ago. Since some of the Chinese idioms are not be translated into English, Pound had to alter the original work. The River-Merchant’s Wife is a spontaneous expression of Li Po’s feelings. Li Po actually put the experiences of his whole life into his poems. Most of his poems describe the great landscape and beauty of nature, and expresses his loneliness and longing for his missing friends and home due to his life-time of wandering. Part of his wandering was a result of his political exile. The River-Merchant’s Wife describes not only a landscape but also an emotional overflow.

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker recollects her early childhood. Ezra Pound’s translation reads:

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan;
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

(Ellmann 380 line 1-6)

The hair-cut appears in the first line. Perhaps it means nothing to people who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture, but the speaker tells us that she met her husband when she was a very young child. Traditionally, boys and girls have the same hair style until they are 4 to 5 years old. They cut all their hair except for the front part; therefore, the line “while my hair was still cut straight across my forehead” suggests the image of a very young child.

You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.

(379 line 3-4)

The boys and girls have different interests in playing games. The boy is riding on a piece of bamboo that he got from a stilt fence. To pretend the piece of bamboo on a horse is a common game since there were not many toys available at that time. The blue plum is actually a kind of unripe green plum that girls always play with. Another important theme of traditional Chinese poetry to be touched on is that of the beauties of nature, particularly as seen in remote mountain areas. It’s a theme that is of prime importance in Chinese painting as well. Plants and animals can symbolizes many things in Chinese poetry. For example, plum blossoms, because they open so early in the spring, symbolize fortitude; bamboo symbolize integrity, these
two lines only implies their relationship of childhood. Li Po’s five-character poem reads like:

郎骑竹马来
绕床弄青梅

Because Li Po writes in the conservative, early Tang style, he pays attention to the use of elegant, refined words. Li Po customarily uses a line made up of five to seven characters. Since one character represents one syllable, and since classical Chinese is basically monosyllabic, this means in effect that there usually are five or seven words to a line. Lines tend to be end-stopped, with few run-on lines except in the final couplet, so that the effect of writing is of a series of brief and compact utterances or images. Chinese poems are like strings of jewels, the jewels being the Chinese characters, each of which represents a one-syllable word string together as a poem.

To the people of China, the third and fourth lines of The River-Merchant’s Wife were so famous and beautiful that there arose a well-known idiom derived from these two lines. “Qing mei zhu ma. (blue plum and bamboo horse)” Li Po first used the lines to describe an innocent and lovely son and daughter playing a game at home. Now it refers to any young boy and girl, who were neighbors or came from the same kinds of families, and are on very intimate terms with each other in their childhood. The last two lines of this stanza show that they both moved to the same village with their parents and were getting along very well. They were playing happily without worrying about anything.

The next stanza talks about their marriage, especially the night after their wedding. In Chinese tradition, the marriage is decided by the bride and groom’s parents and most couples marry while they are
teenagers. There are many poems and stories describing the first night of marriage, because of the traditional idea that young boys and girls are not allowed to see each other before they are married. The girls are strictly confined at home to practice sewing and cooking. As a result, when the young couple are finally alone with each other on their first night, they usually feel strange and do not know how to break this shy situation. In the third stanza, the poet depicts the feelings of that night. The marriage, in fact, is not a positive thing for the woman at that time. The marriage means that her happy childhood is over, and she and her husband can never again play innocently and happily together. She assumes the responsibilities of adulthood and the struggle for livelihood. She is deeply saddened. In the original Chinese poem, the word “Lord” is a term of address that friends use when speaking to one another. A Chinese wife also address her husband as “Lord”, but there is no resentment in the term. In Ezra Pound’s interpretation, the term “Lord” carries a sense of bitterness, since it implies a sense of the wife’s inferior status. Her childhood playmate has now become her master.

The third stanza of the poem is really a difficult one to translate, since it not only involves language problems but also some cultural problems. The poem reads in Chinese:

十五始展眉
愿同尘与灰
常存抱柱信
岂上望夫台

Pound’s translation reads:

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
"Stopped scowling" here does not really mean that she feels sad and angry. "si zhan mei" is connected with eyebrows, and it means in Chinese that she is growing up and is no longer as innocent as a child; her feelings can be expressed in her eyebrows. She was married very young and did not know much about life so she can not express her feelings to her husband. In English, eyes or lips can express feelings. We use phrases like "with dancing eyebrows and a radiant face" and "Knit the brows and a stratagem comes mind." Of course, the feelings can be sad or happy. Here the mention of the eyebrows means she is now old enough to let others know her feelings or she can show her feelings. She now knows she loves her husband, and her husband knows it too. They love each other and are loyal to each other, so she desires to "mingle the dust" with her husband.

In the next two lines the poet cites two famous stories to express young couple's love and loyalty. "Bao Zhu" means "to hold trunk tightly" which refers to a story. Long ago, there was a young man who loved his girl friend very much. One day, they agreed to meet under the bridge near the village because, according to Chinese tradition, boys and girls were not allowed to meet in the public at that time. The young man waited and waited under the bridge, but the girl did not come. Perhaps she could not escape from home. In spite of the fact that the river was rising, the boy would not leave the rendezvous. He wished to prove his credit, love and loyalty to his girl friend and he would not disappointed her. He held the trunk of the bridge tightly until he was drowned. To young people these days, the young man is stupid to have drowned himself for the foolishness of love, but the story is a model of loyalty.
This kind of story had two functions in ancient China. The story was used as entertainment for people after a full day’s toil in the field. Like early English morality plays, its purpose was to perform a moral education. The story set up a model for later generations to follow.

In the last line, “look out” means “platform of look out”, which in the Chinese was called “Wang Fu Tai 望夫台”, which refers to another story. A merchant had a very beautiful wife and he went to city by boat along the Yangtze River to do his business. Wife waited for him at home. He did not return for years while the wife worried about him and missed him very much. She went to the “Look Out” everyday to wait for her husband to come back. He never appeared. No one knows why he did not come back. Perhaps he made money and married a new woman; maybe he died on his way. In the end, the sad wife had stood at the “Look Out” day after day without any food, and became a rock. This is another model of loyalty.

These two lines of the poem mean that the woman is full of confidence about her husband, like the character of the first story he loves her and is loyal to her and he will surely come back. Why should she become the character who stands on the platform at the Look Out in the second story in which the woman can never find her husband? Dozens of well-known legends, stories, and poems in Chinese history are based on the family separation. For example, in the Qing Dynasty, a husband was forced to build the Great Wall. He died of hunger. His wife walked several thousand miles to the site where her husband had toiled. When she found her husband’s bones, she cried and cried till her tears flooded a part of the Great Wall. This legend passes from generation to generation, and his site is a well-known tourist sight on the Great Wall.

Why did Pound not mention these two stories in his translation?
The reasons are simple. It is impossible for a translator to explain these two stories in such a short poem, whereas in Chinese the poet could tell the stories by simply employing five Chinese words by allusion. The other reason is that the Chinese poet has greater freedom in literary language. In Chinese, a phrase consists of two or more words in the sentence. The poet only needs to choose one of the key words from them; the meaning of the sentence would still be the same.

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-en by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

(380 line 15-19)

Ku-to-en actually is a name of a big rock at the middle of the river. In the dry season this big rock is like an island in the river, but in the rainy season when the water rises, it becomes a submerged danger. At the time of the poem, boats were the main transportation for the people who lived on the banks of Yangtz River. This place is a dangerous, especially in May of the Chinese lunar calendar. Since May is a rainy season, the rock is a dangerous place for boats to pass.

The monkey's cry is always a symbol of sad feelings, especially in the south part of China. But in this poem Li Po describes the attracting place where a lot of monkeys lived. From this stanza's last line, one can tell the exact place that the poets depict. This famous scenic place is so beautiful and attractive that thousands of paintings and poems were painted or written here; for generations artists and poets have written about it. Li Po wrote several poems describing the
place. In 759 A.D. when he returned from his exile, he wrote:

\[
\text{At dawn} \\
\text{We leave White Emperor,} \\
\text{High among colored clouds,} \\
\text{Returning to the lowlands,} \\
\text{A thousand miles in a day.}
\]

\[
\text{From both banks of the river} \\
\text{The gibbons' howling never stops.} \\
\text{But the light boat} \\
\text{Has already passed ten thousand} \\
\text{Layered peaks.}
\]

(Whincup 62)

Obviously, it is the same place he described with joyful feelings. There is a good reason for this kind of joyful feeling because it is his song of returning from exile. His best friend, another great poet of the time, Meng Hau-ran, wrote a poem describing the same place. This also is a “five-character” poem:

\[
\text{I hear the apes howl sadly} \\
\text{In dark mountains.} \\
\text{The blue river} \\
\text{Flows swiftly through the night.}
\]

\[
\text{The wind cries} \\
\text{In the leaves on either bank.} \\
\text{The moon shines} \\
\text{On a solitary boat.}
\]
These wild hills
Are not my country
I think of past ramblings
In the city with you.

I will take
These two lines of tears,
And send them to you
Far away at the western reach of the sea.

(Whincup 48)

Each of these poems mentions a type of monkey, but the translators give the monkeys different names. In fact, gibbons are small tree-dwelling apes that were found throughout southern China during the Tang dynasty, but now live only in southeast Asia.

For some of the cultural reasons and Chinese language usage at the time, the structure of this kind of poem is very simple. Poets paid much more attention to choosing elegant words than the structure. Just as a Western sonnet writer must follow the traditional fourteen-line structure, the writer of the five-character poem usually follows the traditional four themes. The same pattern is followed by the poem in Pound’s translation: 1. introduction, 2. continuing detail, 3. some special twist of thought or feeling, and 4. conclusion. Pound also translated some other Chinese poems that express the sad feelings of separation from friends and describe the beautiful landscape.

Because this poem was translated from Chinese into Japanese and then from Japanese into English, one doubt whether Western people would appreciate this kind of poem or not. There is no need to say that this is the poor translation, but there is the need to say that the
translator has an insurmountable language problem. The original poem was written with Chinese characters. Each character carries not only a verbal but a pictorial image as well. By using only twenty-five Chinese words the poem vividly expresses the poet's sad feelings and describes the magnificent landscape of Yangtze River.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
(line 19-20)

These three lines show the poet's speaker recalling the scene five months ago when she and her husband had parted. Two key images in English properly and vividly depict the couple's feelings at the moment of departure. That her husband "dragged his feet" tells people that he was reluctant to leave his wife behind, but he had to leave for some reason. This is a common expression employed by Chinese people to describe leaving home, or a departure from loved ones. Here "dragged his feet" implies that she knows her husband loves her and wants to stay with her. The moss grown at the gate obviously shows her situation at home. The moss is a kind of plant that could not grow by the gate if people were always stepping on it. This moss image is frequently employed in Chinese literature to depict deserted places in the south of China. The moss in these lines implies that her husband never comes back after he had left, and she was staying home alone with neither friends nor relatives to visit her. Of course, it was impossible for a woman to join a social circle and make friends with others at that time. That the moss is too deep to clear away shows that her loneliness is so heavy upon her that she can not bear it any longer:
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me I grow older.

(line 22-24)

In these four lines, the poet uses images of season. The autumn is not traditionally a miserable season in Chinese literature because it is the harvest season, and it is a time of thanksgiving. But when it comes with wind, autumn usually changes into a sad time. People use phrases like “wailing wind and weeping rain” to describe sad feelings during this season. Autumn also gives people a chilly and cold feeling. The geese and swallows start to immigrate to a warm home as the people who labor in the cities or other places begin to go home. That is why Chinese people have the mid-autumn festival. When the moon is full, all the family members gather at home to celebrate it. The wife laments that this sad season comes so much earlier this year than before, and in doing so to emphasize her loneliness. “The paired butterflies are already yellow with August” also describes her loneliness. This is a kind of butterfly which is very common in south China. It turns yellow when autumn comes and dies in the winter. The poet implies that she, like the butterfly, is nearing the end of her life.

Butterfly images, like nature images—river, moon, stars—were stereotyped in Tang dynasty poems and stories. Butterfly metaphors even appear in modern Chinese literature. The butterfly usually refers to a young married couple that can not be separated from each other; if one dies, the other will die, too.

The modern Chinese poet Hu Shi wrote a traditional four line,
five-character poem about the butterfly:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Two yellow butterflies} \\
\text{In pairs fly to the Skies;} \\
\text{I don't know why} \\
\text{One suddenly returns} \\
\text{Leaving the other one} \\
\text{Lonely and pitiful.} \\
\text{It too has no heart to fly into the skies} \\
\text{For heaven is too a lonely place.}
\end{align*}
\]

(Julia C. Lin 37)

This poem is simple in structure and its theme is a common one that follows the traditional style. Though heaven is a good place to live in, the separation from a loved one is a high price to pay. Traditional elements are apparent in this piece. The choice of butterflies, a favorite with earlier poets, strikes a familiar note that prepares the traditional setting of the verse. The use of the standard five-character line is a derivative of five-character regulated verse of Tang dynasty, and the description of heaven as a lonely place adds another familiar echo from the past.

\[
\text{They hurt me; I grow older.}
\]

(line 25)

There are two meanings in the line. The flying butterfly makes the wife feel that she was confined at home and could not go with her husband. The butterfly arouses her desire to mingle her dust with her husband, like butterflies flying freely in the skies. “mingle dust” is a common expression in China. It evokes the image of two travelers
walking side by side raising a dust cloud together. But she could not go, and this makes her feel sad and hurts her. On the other hand, the yellow butterfly reminds her that she is getting older. In its life time, the yellow butterfly has only one mate. The husband's absence not only makes the wife lonely but also hastens her death.

If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang.

Please let me know before hand.

And I will come out to meet you

As far as Cho-fu-sa.

(line 25-29)

The last four lines are very simple in English. I think westerners would not like them. In Chinese, these lines express the true love the wife had for her husband and her anxious feelings for her husband's return. She is willing to meet him as far away as Cho-fu-sa. This place is far from where she is living, and the translator had had geographical knowledge about the place he was describing; he would mention how difficult is to travel over the swirling river. Long distance travel is always employed in Chinese stories and poems. Travel to a distant place is always difficult, and one needs strong determination.

The translation of Chinese into English is not an easy job, especially with Chinese poetry, which is the gem of the language. As Lin said: "The most striking surface feature of the Chinese language is the character, whose pictorial and ideographical nature has long bothered the imagination of Western writers. Every Chinese character has a specific 'tone' so that the character phonetically identical can be distinguished by the rise and fall of the voice." Tang
poetry demands strict adherence to fixed tone patterns. But the Chinese language, especially the literary language, though it possesses inflexible elements, is basically uninfluenced. The Chinese poet, therefore, enjoys greater freedom from the linguistic fetters of case. But the poet’s freedom causes even more difficult problems in translating the poems. When translating the poem into English, the translator must sacrifice some of the Chinese double-meanings in order to make the poem fit the demands of English grammar. Another important matter involved in the translation is the influence of the cultural life: ideas, customs, religions and philosophy.

Ezra Pound, whom T. S. Eliot called “the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time”, recreated for the English-speaking world the great poetry of Classic Anthology, Cathay, Book of Odes due to his forty years of studying Chinese language and philosophy.

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