

詩經·國風·秦風·蒹葭<sup>[1,2,3]</sup>

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蒹葭蒼蒼<sup>[4]</sup>， 白露為霜<sup>[5]</sup>。  
所謂伊人<sup>[6]</sup>， 在水一方<sup>[7]</sup>。  
溯洄從之<sup>[8]</sup>， 道阻且長<sup>[9]</sup>。  
溯遊從之<sup>[10]</sup>， 宛在水中央<sup>[11]</sup>。

蒹葭萋萋<sup>[12]</sup>， 白露未晞<sup>[13]</sup>。  
所謂伊人， 在水之湄<sup>[14]</sup>。  
溯洄從之， 道阻且躋<sup>[15]</sup>。  
溯游從之， 宛在水中坻<sup>[16]</sup>。

蒹葭采采<sup>[17]</sup>， 白露未已<sup>[18]</sup>。  
所謂伊人， 在水之涘<sup>[19]</sup>。  
溯洄從之， 道阻且右<sup>[20]</sup>。  
溯游從之， 宛在水中沚<sup>[21]</sup>。

The Reeds and Rushes, *Airs of Qin, Airs of the States, Classic of Poetry*

By Anonymous

English translation by Boshuo Wang and Yiwen Zhang

The reeds and rushes, lush and lusty,  
“That one”, whom I call oft and dearly,  
Against the torrent, up I seek thee,  
Along the current, down I seek thee

The reeds and rushes, thick and thriving  
“That one”, whom I call oft and dearly,  
Against the torrent, up I seek thee,  
Along the current, down I seek thee

The reeds and rushes, green and glist’ning,  
“That one”, whom I call oft and dearly,  
Against the torrent, up I seek thee,  
Along the current, down I seek thee

With autumn dew, so white but frosty.  
Beside the river, somewhere, surely.  
The path resistive, long and lengthy.  
Amidst the water, *thou stand there, seemingly.*

With autumn dew, so white yet drying.  
Close by the river’s bank, *probably*.  
The path resistive, raised and rising.  
Ashore an islet, *thou stand there, seemingly.*

With autumn dew, so white still hanging.  
Right at the river’s edge, *alleg’dly*.  
The path resistive, zig and zagging.  
Atop an island, *thou stand there, seemingly.*

Metric cues: stressed, *unstressed*. Mostly following an iambic tetrameter with feminine endings.

## Notes on English translation and interpretation of the poem

### [1] General principles for this translation

- a. Faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance. This is a three-facet theory attributed to Chinese scholar and translator Yan Fu (嚴復, 1854—1921).

Faithfulness: the translation should be accurate and “literal”, i.e., a metaphrase, does not deviate from the original text, has no omission, and should not increase or decrease the meaning *ad libitum*. Here, in particular, each character in the original poem has a corresponding translated English word or phrase, with only one exception of “水中”, which appears in the last line of each of the three stanza and is further discussed in notes 11 and 16. Overall, the translation attempts to include minimal paraphrasing and extension of meanings, and where there are, the notes explains what is extended and the motivation and justification.

Expressiveness: the translation is accessible to the target reader. The text should be coherent, use simple and clear expressions, and be free from grammatical errors.

Elegance: the target reader accepts the language as being educated. In particular, the translation attempts to achieve this in rhetoric, rhymes, and rhythm, with word choices that adhere to archaic and poetic uses. The rhythm is especially emphasized, as the poems in the *Classic of Poetry*, also known as *Book of Songs*, were akin to songs, odes, or hymns.

- b. The lines that contained the two groups of rhymes ending in –ang, i.e., characters 蒼, 霜, 方, 長, 央, and –i, i.e., characters 萋, 晞, 躋, 已, in modern Chinese pronunciation, were translated into adjectives and adverbs ending in and rhyming with –y, and present particles and gerunds ending in and rhyming with –ing, respectively.

The other lines that ended in characters which don't rhyme in modern Chinese, i.e., the other group of –i characters 之, 坻, 涘, 汜, and the remaining 人, 湄, 右, were translated so that they rhyme with either of the –y or –ing endings.

According to reconstructed Old Chinese pronunciation of circa 1000–700 BCE, it is believed that the lines in each stanza rhymed, even for those characters that seem have not-so-close modern pronunciation. However, this factor has not been considered in the translation of these lines when choosing whether to rhyme with –y or –ing. Ideally, the pronunciation of Old Chinese should be considered.

- c. At the beginning of each stanza, an adjective reduplication is used to describe the luxuriance of the reeds and rushes, which are each translated into a pair of alliterating adjectives.

Overall, the most important criteria for word choice in this translation is rhyming. This includes the regular rhyming at the final positions of the lines and words, head rhymes or alliteration to match the initial consonants, and assonance or consonance, which is to have resembling vowels and/or consonants in syllables of words in the same line or even across lines.

- d. The lines with four Chinese characters are translated into 9 English syllables, and those with five characters into 11. Thus, the distinct feature of having an extra character in the last line of each stanza is preserved in the form of having two extra syllables in the translation.

Number of English syllables = Number of Chinese characters × 2 + 1.

- e. Overall, the stresses and breaks are placed on or at the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth syllable of each line (underlined), to form a distinct rhythm and follow an iambic meter. These stresses mostly coincided with the stresses of the English words, and the unstressed parts can be read even

more softly and quickly, such as -es in rushes, -where in somewhere, -a in against, along, amidst, and atop, re- and -tive in resistive, etc.

- f. The linking verb “be” was omitted in the translation of “在”, to be located (somewhere), whereas specific prepositions are chosen for the appropriate situations. Verb tense is also avoided, which reflects the grammatical habit of Chinese.

All lines of scenery are translated with adjective phrase or attributive clauses to describe a state and therefore avoid verbs completely (past and present particles as adjective do appear). The translation of these lines are therefore in a form of verbless poetry that captures a still image of the landscape.

In contrast, the characters appear as first person and second person in the translation and have verbs to describe their actions. Three verbs appear in the entire poem, all in present tense: call, seek, and stand. “Call” appears in the clause in the second line of each stanza that describes “that one”, before I, the poet, starts the searches. Thus, there are only two actions, seek and stand, whose subjects are the poet and “that one”, respectively, both set into motion by the search started by the poet.

- g. Across the three stanzas, the translation attempts to capture the subtle changes of the autumn dew as the sun rises and the temperature changes, as well as the changes of the poet’s mentality, and the changes of the image of “that one” in or above the water.
- h. The translation uses second person instead of third person, to avoid the use of third-person gender pronouns (s/he) or English words such as man or women, which is not merely for political correctness but actually for translation accuracy of the original genderless phrase 伊人, “that one/person”. And especially, the translation should reflect the implicitness and reservedness of Chinese culture, and not use overt expression such as “He whom I call ‘that man’”, or “The man I love.” For a detailed discussion regarding the translation of 伊人, see note 6.

- [2] 詩, poem, 經, classics. The *Classic of Poetry*, translated variously as the *Book of Songs*, *Book of Odes*, or simply known as the *Poetry*, *Songs*, or *Odes*, is the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, which comprises of 305 works dating from the 11th to 7th centuries BCE.

國, state, 風, wind. The *Airs of the States* is one of the main sections of the *Poetry*, the others being the eulogies or hymns. Here, “air” refers to atmosphere in the figuratively sense, meaning the mood and customs or characteristics of a certain place, and the poem in this section are generally folk songs that record the voice of the common people. “Air” can also mean a song or an aria, and therefore *Airs of the States* confers both the meaning of the atmosphere and the songs. “The States” refer to the ancient Chinese states during the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046 – 256 BCE) of which 秦 Qin (established 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE) is a historically prominent and influential one that unified all the other states and founded the Qin dynasty later.

- [3] 蒹, refers to the giant cane (*Arundo donax*), one of several so-called reed species, especially before it has shoot out its ears. 葭, means reeds, especially those freshly grown. Thus, 蒹葭 refers to reed in general, which is a common name for several tall, grass-like plants that commonly grow in wetlands. Rushes are a family of wetland plants and biologically close relatives of reeds, both belonging to the order Poales. Thus, they often appear together in English, such as in ecology, environmental protection, and seed sales. Therefore, the two are used as an alliterating pair in the translation to correspond to two characters of the original poem, which has been used by several translators.

- [4] 蒼蒼, the first reduplicative adjective to describe the abundance of the reeds and rushes, here translated the alliterating adjective pair “lush and lusty”, which comes from Act II, Scene 1 of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: “How lush and lusty the grass looks! How green!”

As explained in note 1f, the linking verb “are” is omitted.

- [5] 白, white. 露 dew. White dew refers to autumn dew and White Dew is also the 15<sup>th</sup> solar term in the traditional Chinese lunisolar calendars. According to *A Collective Interpretation of Seventy-two Phenological Terms*, “White Dew is a solar term of the eighth month. Autumn corresponds to the metal element, and metal shines white, so as the *Yin* (cold and wet) *Qi* (air) becomes heavy, dew condenses and becomes white.” Thus, the translation uses “autumn dew” and supplements it with “so white”.

為, to become. 霜, frost. As the freezing occurred during the night and the poet only sees the icy dew drops in the morning, the translation uses “but” and “frosty” to reflect the result instead of the process. “But” also shows an element of surprise, that the poet finds the morning temperature to be colder than expected.

By adding “with” to the beginning, this line is turned into a phrase and becomes further detailed description of the reeds and rushes instead of a separate line focused on the dew.

- [6] 所, a grammatical prefix attached to verbs to form noun phrases, meaning a person or thing that is the object of that verb, i.e., to whom or to which an action is done. Thus, here it loosely corresponds to “whom” in the translation. 謂, call, name. 伊, (literary) that. 人, person. Together, this line translates to “whom is called/named ‘that person’”.

Here, the translation extends the meaning of the “so-called person” with “oft and dearly” to reflect near-universal interpretation that this person is someone of close relationship with the poet, who is often mentioned by the poet and deeply missed. Whether the relationship is of romantic nature and this song is a love poem is up to interpretation.

“That person” is used gender-neutrally in Chinese, and in different interpretation, is broadened to represent a wise ruler, virtuous talent, even the abstract ritual and system of governance, or other things of beauty. Therefore, the translation intentionally uses “one” instead of “person” for ambiguity and neutrality to allow open interpretation.

- [7] 在, to be located somewhere, here translated as “beside” according to the context, with the linking verb “be” omitted. 水, water, here translated as “river” as it refers to the river as a whole, and not a specific location as in the last line of each stanza; this translation also has better correspondence to the character’s appearances in the second and third stanza.

一, one. 方, side or area/region. Thus, together they refer to an unspecified area or region along the river, and is translated as the adverb “somewhere”, whose morphemes correspond to each of the characters.

In addition, the translation added the adverb “surely” for several reasons. First, the general interpretation of the poem considers the poet to be very sure that “that one” is somewhere near the river before the search, which contrasts with the “seemingly” at the end of each stanza. Second, “surely” alliterates with “somewhere”, and forms a consonance with the –side syllable in “beside”. Third, “surely” ensures a rhyme with –y. Additionally, “surely” should not be stressed but be read quickly to keep a consistent rhythm with the last line each stanza (see note 11).

Here, it should be noted that some interpretation, whether Chinese or English, considered 方 as “side” and translated this line as “on the other side of the river”. This, however, is inaccurate, because

if that were the case, the poet could have easily crossed the river and just looked on that one side and would not have had to wade up and down the river to search both sides. The corresponding lines in the second and third stanzas also only mention the bank or edge of the river in general and not a specific side.

From the uncertainty of the location of “that one”, it can thus be confirmed that the poet waded through the water (instead of walking on the riverbanks), and “resistive” is an actual description of the water resistance and not a mere figurative speech of the difficulty of the path. It also explains why the poet later seemingly sees “that one” appears in the middle of the water.

- [8] 溯, go upstream, go against a current. 洄, also means following a current upstream. Thus, they are translated as “against”, and “up” is inserted to enhance the directionality as well as to adjust the rhythm. 洄 has another unrelated meaning, eddy water, especially rapid and roiling currents, and thus it is also translated into “torrent”, which further shows the difficulty of the search. 從, to follow or come after, here translated as seek, searching with a clear purpose. 之, the literary third-person pronoun, here translated as the archaic second-person pronoun “thee”, which rhymes with –y and also alliterates with seek.

- [9] 道, path or road. 阻, resistive, difficult. 且, and. 長, long, translated with an alliterating pair “long and lengthy” to rhyme with “thee”. Here the search is not just difficult, but it is implied that wading against the river, the poet fights the resistance of the water. The first stanza describes the difficulty of the path in the longitudinal direction.

The translation omits the linking verb “is”, and also, instead of placing the translated “and” directly after “resistive”, it appears in between the alliterating pair that translates the same concept of “long”. The same applies to the translation of the corresponding lines in the second and third stanzas.

- [10] 遊, part of a river. Thus 溯遊 means following the river. The translation uses “along” and “current” to translate the two characters, to differentiate them from the words used in the previous line while using rhyme/alliteration.

The insertion of “down”, just like “up”, is to include the direction, as well as to adjust the rhythm of this line.

- [11] 宛, seemingly, as if. 在, to be, is translated as the appropriate preposition “amidst”. 水, water. 中, middle. 央, center.

Technically speaking, “amidst” covers the three characters “在...中央” and is one of the three cases where the Faithfulness principle is not well adhered to, to have a one-to-one correspondence between characters and translation. However, the translation uses “stand” as an extension of “to be”, and it can be considered to correspond to 在. Also, “there” is inserted to adjust the rhythm and form an alternating alliteration of sibilant s/th initials for the remainder of this line, and it can be considered to correspond to 中. And “amidst” can be considered to correspond to 央.

The rhythm of this line is different from the other lines. The 5 syllables of the its first half are consistent with the main part of the stanza, whereas the tempo shifts in its second half, with only one stress on the eighth syllable “there”. “Thou stand” and “seemingly” before and after are read quickly and coherently. Especially, the tempo of “seemingly” should be consistent with the original “水中央”.

A key aspect of translation in this line is the word “seemingly”, which reflects the change of the poet’s mentality after the search. Several Western translators completely reverted the meaning by translating the last line into something like “Look! There he is!” which shows great certainty and

excitation. The poet goes up and down the river, endures the hardness of the journey, and only sees an unapproachable image in the middle of the water. Whether it is “that one” eluding the poet by going from the river side into the center of the river or it is completely an illusion of the poet, this is such unsatisfying results, unrequited love, and unresigned melancholy. To turn the translation into a happy ending of a reunion with “that one” depreciates the poem’s artistic values!

[12] 萋萋, the second reduplicative adjective to describe the reeds and rushes, here translated as the alliterating pair “thick and thriving”.

[13] 未, not yet. 晞, to dry under the sun. The dew has not completely dried. The translation of “yet drying” means the dews is still drying and therefore not complied dried.

[14] 在, is translated as “by”, on the side of. 之, (literary) indicates that the previous word has possession of the next one, like the English possessive form ‘s. 湄, the border of water and grass, translated as riverbank. Here, the spelling is intentionally separated, and the possessive form is used so that 之 has a clear correspondence in the translation and is not lost. It also better sets the rhythm of this line. The word “close” is added to shift “by” to the second syllable of the line. It also shows some uncertainty of the location but is more precise than “somewhere” in the first stanza.

The adverb “probably”, like “surely” in the first stanza, is an addition in the translation to reflect the mentality of the poet. After the search in the first stanza, the poet is not so certain whether “that one” is along the river, despite a more precise location is assumed. The consecutive p/b consonants of “probably” for a consonance with “by” and “bank”. Like the first stanza, the tempo changes slightly, and “probably” is unstressed.

[15] 躋, means climbing or rising. Here, it refers to the path being high and steep and is therefore translated into a pair of alliterating adjectives “raised and rising”, which further alliterates with “resistive” and rhymes with –ing. The second stanza describe the difficulty of the path in the vertical direction.

[16] 坻, an islet or sandbank, also see note 21 on the translation of 汜 as “island”. 在, here correspondingly translated as “ashore”, because the islet is small and thus anywhere inside is close to the water. In the second and third stanza, 水中 has no direct corresponding translation of “mid-water”, which is implicit in the definition of islands.

The second half of this line is exactly the same as in the first stanza. If the pronunciation and rhymes of Old Chinese are considered, this line could be translated as “Ashore an islet, thou seem to be standing”, so that it ends in –ing. However, this translation inharmoniously uses infinitive form and present tense, and also requires the change of the second line ending in “probably”. Further adjustment on this are left for future iterations of the translation.

[17] 采采, the third reduplicative adjective to describe the reeds and rushes. It especially emphasizes the bright colors, and thus is translated as the alliterating pair “green and glistening” to illustrate the reflections of the sunlight from the crystal-clear dewdrops. To fit the more typical three syllables of /'glɪsn(ə)nɪŋ/ into the line, the alternate pronunciation is used with the dropped “e” /ə/. The spelling is changed to “glist’ning” to emphasize this.

Here “glisten” is chosen among several verbs with the phonestheme “gl” as it has the connotation of something wet or moist shining or reflecting light. “Glitter” has broader associations and also rhymes not as well with “green”. “Glint” refers to a small amount of light of short duration by one source. “Gleam” refers to steady light, especially brighter ones and those reflected. “Glimmer” means giving

out faint and/or waving light and is typically not used on reflections. “Glare” gives out strong and dazzling light.

- [18] 已, stop, here also refers to being dry. “The dew has not stopped” is translated as “still hanging” to match both the original meaning as well as the paraphrasing of not yet being dry. Hanging also adds some suspense to the still images.

- [19] 涘, water’s edge, translated as the river’s edge. 在, here correspondingly translated as “at”, which also alliterates with “edge”. The insertion of “right” shifts “at” to the second syllable, provides a precise description of location of “that one” on the river bank, and also makes up for the missing “right” in the next line due to the use of “to zigzag” as a paraphrase for “to turn right”.

The third stanza uses the adverb “allegedly” in the translation as an extension to show the poet’s mood and mentality, which alliterates with “edge” and further increases the uncertainty of “that one” being along the river. Whereas the poet is giving an even more narrow range of location on the riverbank in this stanza, this is only a piece of second-hand news and still warrants another search for verification. Again, “allegedly” is unstressed, and especially, since its standard pronunciation has four syllables /əˈleɪdli/, to fit it into the line and form a better rhyme, its pronunciation is adjusted. The second “e” /ə/ is dropped so that it is read similarly to one of the two pronunciations of its adjective form “alleged”, /əˈleɪ(ə)d/, by simply affixing –ly. The spelling is changed to “alleg’dly” to reflect this adjustment.

The presumed locations of “that one” across the three stanzas changed from vague to precise, in terms on distance to the water, but not location along the river. In the first stanza, “somewhere beside the river” can be quite far from the water, if compared against the entire length of the river or taken it as an abstract geographical concept compared with the nearby mountains and lakes. In the second stanza, “close by the river’s bank” narrows the location to quite close to the water, however, riverbanks can come in all kinds of shape, shallow or steep, narrow or wide, low or high (a cliff). In the last stanza, “right at the river’s edge” is a very precise description of the very frontier of the riverbank, from which the water is definitely accessible.

- [20] 右, right, meaning to turn to the right, meandering. It is translated as zigzagging, which is separated to create the alliterating pair. The third stanza describes the difficulty of the path in the transverse direction. Although “right” does not appear directly in this line of the translation, it made a “guest appearance” in the previous line.

- [21] 汚, also an islet or sandbank, here translated as island, as it is considered larger than 坻 (p. 623, Axel Schüßler, ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007). 在, here correspondingly translated as “atop” due to the larger size of the island.

If the size difference is truly the case, the place “that one” is standing on is not the same in the second and third stanza, but rather changed. Taken together with “that one” standing in the water in the first stanza, the place “that one” is standing has risen from the riverbed and formed an island with size growing over time.

zhōu<sub>2</sub> 洲 (tǎu) LH tǎu, OCM \*tu  
 ‘Island in a river’ [BI, Shi].  
 [T] *Sin Sukchu* SR tǎu (平); *MGZY* jiu (平) [tǎu]  
 Several synonyms with different vowels may be related:  
 \* zhǔ 渚 (tǎu) LH tǎu, OCM \*ta?  
 ‘Islet’ [Shi], smaller than *zhōu* [EY 12.2].  
 \* zhǐ 汚 (tǎu) LH tǎu, OCM \*ta?  
 ‘Islet’ [Shi], smaller than *zhǔ* [EY 12.2].  
 \* chí 坻 (dǐ) LH dǐ, OCM \*dri (?)  
 ‘Islet’ [Shi], smaller than *zhǐ* [EY 12.2].

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