ON TRANSLATING CHINESE POEMS WRITTEN IN CURSIVE SCRIPT

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ON TRANSLATING CHINESE POEMS WRITTEN IN CURSIVE SCRIPT

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1. **INTRODUCTION.** As a Chinese language teacher, I would like to offer some suggestions on reading Chinese cursive script and translating Chinese poems. They may be of some aid to those interested in doing further study. The first part of the paper deals with the general problems in translating Chinese poetry. The second part is devoted to specific problems found in John Hay's review of 'Chinese calligraphy' by Tseng Yu-ho Ecke, which appeared in *Oriental Art*, Vol. XIX, No. 1.

2. **THE LEVELS OF PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATION.** There are five levels of difficulty in doing translation work. Generally speaking, problems in translating Chinese poems are similar to those met in translating any other literature. The translator's comprehension of cursive script is dependent on his ability to integrate the five following levels. (1) The translator must first be able to recognize a character in its regular form such as 戌 *xū* 'No. 11 of the earthly branch' versus 戍 *shù* 'garrison', 鸟 *niǎo* 'bird' versus 乌 *wū* 'crow', etc. (2) He should identify the morphemes which the characters represent through the structural analysis of a given line or sentence. (3) He must re-evaluate the meaning which was arrived at from the structural analysis in terms of the cultural background of the source language. (4) The translator then needs to express the meaning of the source language as fully as possible in the target language. (5) He must finally carry over the aesthetic feelings of the source language into the target language.

Aside from these five levels of translating Chinese poems in cursive script, one more important point must be taken into consideration, that is, the identification of the characters which are represented by cursive script forms in their regular forms. As a matter of fact, this last point is the most important of all. In this paper, I will try to discuss procedures for deciphering the script forms and their meanings in the original text. No effort will be made to express the original meaning into another language.

In the whole field of translating Chinese poems, we find problems at all levels. If we use these levels as measures of analysis, we can easily discover the translator's problems and pinpoint them for discussion.

In deciphering the script forms, common procedure is either to identify the whole character as a unit or to identify the components which form the character. It often happens that both the whole forms and the components are ambiguous. But at this level, one must keep all the possible regular forms in mind and go to the following level to seek a solution. Besides, I believe that there are cases where one cannot translate a line accurately, even if he can

identify every character in it; but it is impossible to claim that the translation is correct or 'nearer the original' without being able to read the script forms correctly.

The second level is the grammar of Chinese poems. This level consists of three aspects: (1) metrical rules, (2) morphological rules, and (3) syntactical rules.

In the process of identification, quite often the metrical rules of Chinese are helpful. These rules include the end rhyme 韵脚 *yùn jiǎo*, the parallelism 对仗 *duìzhàng*, and the tonal sequence 平仄 *píng zè* of Chinese poems. These rules sometimes help us to decide the correct regular form from several possible ones.

On the morphological level, there is no definite meaning or meanings in isolated characters; the meaning of a character may or may not be defined. The character 青 *qīng* is a kind of color, from a light green shade to light blue, to dark blue, to black. But in the compound 青天 *qīng tiān* 'blue sky', it most likely means 'blue'; but in 青丝 *qīngsī* 'black hair', it usually means 'black'. The character 朝 *zhāo* or *cháo* may mean 'morning' or 'dynasty' or something else, but in a compound 明朝 it is still ambiguous; it may mean 'tomorrow morning' or 'Ming dynasty'. Consequently, the problem can not be solved unless we go on to the next levels.

On the syntactical level, certain problems of meaning may be solved. The character 长 may represent the morpheme *cháng* meaning 'long' or *zhǎng* meaning 'grow'. In a line of poetry by Zhāng Jì 张籍, 死生长别离 *sǐ shēng cháng bié lí*, a common compound 生长 *shēngzhǎng* meaning 'grow' occurs. But after trying to fit *shēngzhǎng* as a compound in the line, we discover that the line has to be broken down into 死生·长·别离 *sǐshēng cháng biélí* in order to derive its correct sense. In this case, 长 must serve as an adverb to modify 别离 meaning 'separate'. Only then can we identify the meaning of 长 as 'long time'. On this grammatical level, we must keep in mind the history of the Chinese language because most traditional poems are written in the T'ang style. We must also recognize that the linguistic elements which appear in different periods are not necessarily the same. In a line by Bái Jū-yì, 白居易 : 食罢一睡觉 *shí bà yī shuì juè*, 睡觉 looks like *shujiao*, the contemporary meaning 'to sleep'. But in the T'ang period, 觉 *kok* meant 'to awake', and there was no such compound 睡觉 *shuìjiào* as there is today. Therefore the meaning of this line is: 'I woke up from a nap after eating'.

Unfortunately, the level of grammar studies by modern linguists has not gone beyond structural analysis of sentences as yet. While we may be able to solve a lot of problems at the syntactical level, many will still remain for the next level. Again, ambiguity arises when we quote a line from Bái Jū-yì's poem: 七十三人难再到 *qī shí sān rén nán zài dào*; here, 七十三人 is an ambiguous expression. It looks like 'seventy-three persons,' but

only when we know that when Bái Jū-yì wrote this, he was seventy-three years old, do we get the right meaning. The meaning of this line is 'I, as an old man who is seventy-three years old, will find it difficult to come again'. In this line from Lǐ Bái's poem, 明朝有兴抱琴来 *ming zhao you xìng bào qín lái,* 明朝 can only mean 'tomorrow morning' and not 'Ming dynasty'; this is obvious only because we know that the Ming dynasty is some hundred years later than Lǐ Bái's time, and Lǐ Bái could not predict that there would be a dynasty named Ming. Thus, these problems are interpreted from a cultural standpoint rather than adhering to a strict syntactic evaluation, because syntactically, there is no reason why we cannot interpret the meaning of 明朝 as 'Ming dynasty.'

The problem at the fourth level is usually caused by the translator's poor understanding of Chinese culture. We must emphasize that the cultural background must be understood in the context of specific periods at certain locations, and that it cannot be influenced by prejudices of Western cultural background. The following is another line from Lǐ Bái 李白 : 长安一片月 *cháng ān yípiàn yuè.* Here, it seems very natural to English speakers with Western backgrounds to translate 一片月 as 'a slice of moon'. But this translation is far from the Chinese concept. One must be familiar with such expressions as:

(1) 一片水 *yípiàn shuǐ* 'a stretch of water'
(2) 一片地 *yípiàn dì* 'a stretch of land'

Yípiàn in these cases means 'a stretch of'. Thus, one can easily see that 一片月 is not a 'slice of moon', but 月 refers rather to 月光 *yuè guāng* 'moonlight which is shining on the ground'. So, 一片月 *yípiàn yuè* means 'a stretch of moonlight'.

3. **APPLYING THE ANALYSIS TO HAY'S TRANSLATIONS.** In John Hay's review, four translations are commented on and retranslated. The translations are taken from the catalogue of the Chinese Calligraphy Exhibition.[1] These include numbers 24, 25, 37, and 57 of the catalogue.

[1]The Chinese Calligraphy Exhibition, which was exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (September 25 to November 7, 1971), The Nelson Gallery of the Atkins Museum, Kansas City (January 6 to February 6, 1972), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (March 14 to May 7, 1972), shows a great advancement in the fields of Chinese art and Chinese studies, not only in America but also in the whole world. There has never been an opportunity for art lovers to view such an unusual collection of Chinese art. It is both systematically arranged, tastefully displayed, and well-catalogued. Nevertheless, there were many important things left out. But when we realize that all the materials were from collections in the United States, it is amazing to find that such excellent quality exists in America. There are also mistakes in the catalogue. But when we consider that Chinese language studies in the West are just beginning to become popular and that this is the first catalogue compiled in English, it is quite satisfactory. In addition, I am very pleased to see that the translations of the difficult cursive script show that the translators understand more than eighty per cent of the original text. Of course, I have no idea about the kind of 'tools' the translators used, whether they were dictionaries or human references;

Number 24
Text: 平生睡足连江雨 *P'íng shēng shuì zú lián jiāng yǔ,*
尽日舟行擘岸风 *Jìn rì zhōu xíng pī àn fēng.*

The original translation by Kojiro Tomita is:

'The rain over the long river always brings sleep;
The wind beating against the cliffs all day wafts the boat on'.

John Hay's translation follows:

'Our fill of sleep in life till now stretches away like rain along the river;
Day-long the journeying boat cleaves into the wind from the shore'.

There is no problem in the first level. The parsing of the sentences is 4-3. It should be read as 平生睡足 · 连江雨
尽日舟行 · 擘岸风

Both 连江雨 and 擘岸风 are nominal phrases. The problem resides in 连江 and 擘岸.

Tomita takes the first line to mean 'The rain caused me to sleep' and the second line to mean 'The wind caused the boat to go'. Hay's interpretation, on the other hand, implies that 'sleep resembles rain'. But there is no indication from the original text to suggest ideas such as 'till now' and 'stretches away like'. In the second line, 'The boat cleaves to the wind', the meaning of 'cleaves' seems to be derived from 擘, but 擘 is not the verb of that sentence, rather 擘岸 is the modifier of 风. And 擘岸风 does not mean 'cleaves into the wind from the shore', It is rather 'the wind which slaps on the shore'. However, the more literal translation would be 'I sleep in the rain', 'The boat goes in the wind'.

Number 25 簿簿残妆淡淡香
Text: 眼前犹得玩春光
公言一岁轻荣悴
肯厌繁华惜醉乡
Bó bó cán zhuāng dàn dàn xiāng,
Yǎn qián yóu dé wán chūn guāng,
Kōng yán yí suì qīng róng cuì,
Kěn yàn fán huá xī zuì xiāng.

The original translation by Adele Rickett is provided below:

'My makeup thin and faded, scent a trace and nothing more,
Yet here before my eyes Spring's beauty still makes sport,
You said a year blooms quickly and as quickly dies,
Yielding to the boredom of luxury, I long for the land of wine'.

John Hay's translation of the last line reads:

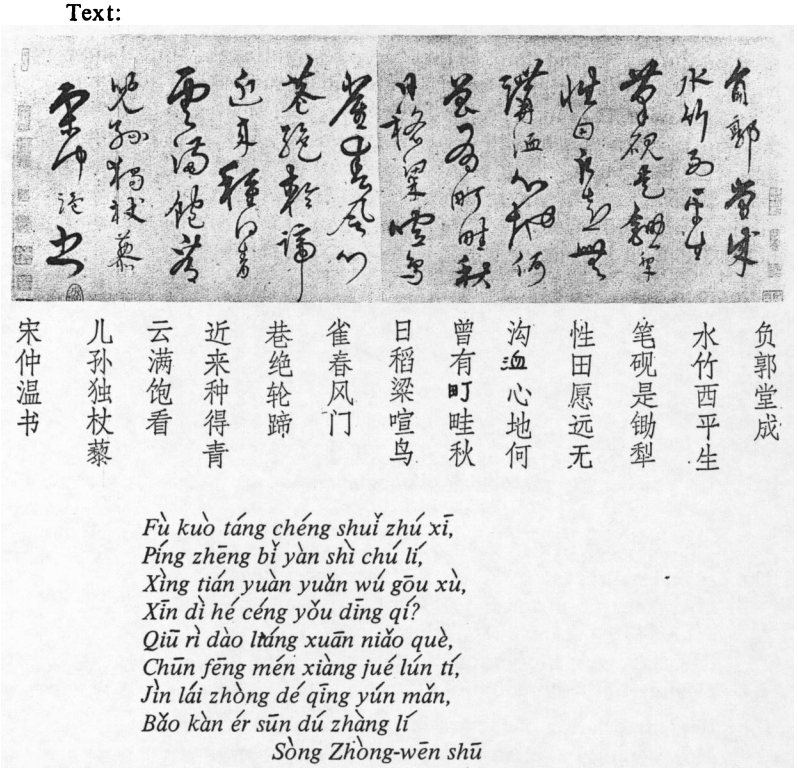
'How could I be satiated with the luxury of Spring?
I long for the drunken land where seasons do not change'.

nevertheless, despite some obvious mistakes, the knowledge of the translators and their application of this knowledge is admirable.

There are two problems with Hay's translation. The first is concerned with the meaning of 厌. It has two readings, either *yàn* 'to be tired of' or *yà* 'to be satiated', which would be a short form of 餍 *yà*. The second problem arises from the wrong interpretation of 厌. Hay took it to mean 'to be satiated'. However, if 厌 means 'to be satiated', then the meaning of the whole line will not be coherent with the context of the poem. Therefore, Hay has to consider it as an interrogative sentence. But again, it is not possible to make the whole line a question. Consequently, he made the first half of the sentence an interrogative sentence, and the second half a descriptive sentence. Yet, in the pattern of Chinese poems, convention does not permit the breaking of one line into two sentences to make the first part a question and the second part a statement. I cannot find any examples, moreover, which follow the pattern Hay has suggested in his translation. Rickett's translation is much closer to the way of Chinese thinking, syntactically and semantically.

Number 37

Text:



Fù kuò táng chéng shuǐ zhú xī,
Píng zhēng bǐ yàn shì chú lí,
Xìng tián yuàn yuǎn wú gōu xù,
Xīn dì hé céng yǒu dǐng qí?
Qiū rì dào liáng xuān niǎo què,
Chūn fēng mén xiàng jué lún tí,
Jìn lái zhòng dé qīng yún mǎn,
Bǎo kàn ér sūn dú zhàng lí
Sòng Zhòng-wēn shū

The original translation of the above poem, written by Sòng Zhòng-wēn, is given by Jonathan Chaves:

'My house stands in a bamboo grove, on a stream outside the city wall.
Brush and ink-stone are my hoe and plow;
No ditches furrow my spirit, no boundaries limit my mind.
On Autumn days, sparrows chirp in the rice paddies;
No wheel ruts pit the road in the Spring.
I've sown my seeds, and I am content, leading the life of a recluse,
Leaning on my cane, watching my children and grandchildren'.

John Hay's translation follows:

'My house, turning its back to the city, associates with bamboo and stream.
Brush and ink of former days are now hoe and plough.
The field of my nature grows freely, with no rigid demarcation;
Whilst my mind is cultivated with well-ordered paths.
In autumn days the harvest brings birds, cracking and spitting the grain;
With the spring breeze the flowering heart stops its plaintive cry.
The fields recently planted are now full-clouded green.
I look with satisfaction at my children, leaning solitary on my cane'.

The script forms in Sòng Kè's 宋克 poem are not easy to identify. But they can be deciphered with the aid of some tools. From the translations of Chaves and Hay, there are clear indications that they have misread some of these script forms and with some of the others they may have had trouble, although there is no evidence to indicate that they cannot decipher them. The difficult forms are:

(1) The third character in the second line  , is 西. Besides the fact that matches the forms which represent 西, 西 is the last character in the first line. The rhyme characters in that poem are 犁, 畦, 蹄, and 藜. 西 is in the same rhyme category. Chaves took it as 外, which is wrong. The form was used by Wáng Xī-zhī 王羲之, T'áng Tài-zōng 唐太宗 and Xiǎnyú Shū 鲜于枢 (see *Dictionary of Cursive Script*).

(2) The third character in the fourth line  , is 愿. matches the forms which are used by the same writer in other works to represent 原. Again, neither Chaves nor Hay show any evidence that they can decipher this. However, this form was used by Sòng Kè twice in another piece of his calligraphical work, known as *Sòng Kè Shū Shī* 宋克书诗. This is presently in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. It is recorded in *Kù Kūng Shū Huà Lù* (故宫书画录) and photographically reproduced in both *Kù Kūng Weekly* 故宫周刊 11.235:2 and 11.236:2 and *Shina Mok Kai Taisei* 支那墨迹大成 10:176.

The deciphered regular form of the poem is in the accompanying explanatory book of *Shina Mok Kai Taisei*. The poem which Sòng Kè wrote was actually two poems by Táo Qián (陶潜). Consequently, the identification of

the script forms is quite easy. The script form in question,  , appeared in line ten and line fourteen. The same form also appeared in 草书韵汇 *cǎo shū yùn huì* (see Zhāng Tiān-xī (1231)) and was also used by Huái Sù 怀素, Huáng Tíng-jiān 黄庭坚, and Zhào Mèng-fǔ 赵孟俯.[2]

(3) The fourth character in line four,  , is 远. This form is actually quite common and easy to identify. However, neither Chaves nor Hay identified it correctly.

(4) The second character in line 7, , is 稻. No previous writers wrote 稻 as . There is no difficulty, however, in identifying the left part and the bottom right part. The only problem is with the upper-right part. But, on the grammatical level, it has to be 稻 to make sense.

(5) The fourth character in line eight,  , is 门. It is true that, according to Mr. Hay's interpretation, this form may represent 心. But it may also represent 门, which I believe is the correct choice. Therefore, is 门巷. There should not be any questions on form and meaning.

(6) The first character in line nine,  , is 巷. This script form should not be considered to be 苍 (花) as Hay suggests.

(7) The third character in line nine, , is 轮. This is not too difficult a form. But because Hay already made the wrong analysis within the poem's context, it is impossible for him to arrive at the correct interpretation which was made by Chaves. This form is used by Sōn Qiān-lǐ 孙虔礼 and appeared in *Shū Pǔ Xù* 书谱序.

(8) The fourth character in line nine,  , is 啼. Hay interpreted this script form as 啼 and translated it as 'cry'. This is an obvious mistake. Chaves, on the other hand, was unable to read it, but he skillfully dodged the issue.

The inadequacies shown above appear to disprove John Hay's claim that his translation is 'much nearer the original, semantically, at least'.

Number 57

Text: (see photo top of next page)

	破	事	起	难	衣	浑	潦	波	昨	秧	腰	花	日	瓦
澄[2]	寂	时	都	调	着	欲	情	失	夜	绿	一	晕	高	湿
明	寥	有	无	西	最	病	怀	断	新	催	香	碧	苔	初
		幽		斋		乍		桥	波	朱		草		乾
		禽		睡		暄		积		夏		齐		旭

Wǎ liù chū gān xù rì gāo, *Jī liào qíng huái hún yù bìng,*
Tāi huā yun bi cao qi yāo. *Zhà xuān yī zhuò zuì nán tiáo.*
Yi fān nóng lǜ cuī zhū xià, *Xī zhāi shuì qǐ dū wú shì,*
Zuó yè xīn bō shī duàn qiáo. *Shí yǒu yōu qín pò jì liáo.*

Chēng-míng

[2]Since both 頫 and 澂 are the older, unsimplified forms. 俯 and 澄 are used to substitute.

The original translation by Jonathan Chaves is:

'The moisture has dried on the roof tiles; the sun is rising.
A halo of green mist hovers over the moss.
Thick greenery brings in the Summer;
High tides have flooded the broken bridge.
The waters are rising, but I'm feeling fine–
Sudden sunlight makes me change to lighter clothes.
I awake from my sleep in the western studio, with nothing to do.
Now and then, hidden birds break the silence'..

John Hay's translation of the lines 2-5 is:

'The moss is brilliant green, grass comes to the waist.
A sheet of deep green presses against the red glow of summer.
Yesterday evening a new flood broke away the bridge;
Rain water rising, feelings rumbling, uneasy.
Sudden bursts of sun make it difficult to dress suitably'.

Both Chaves and Hay are wrong on several points:

(1) 晕 is neither 'halo' nor 'brilliant' but 'to show brilliantly';
(2) 番 is not 'a sheet' but 'a spell of'; and
(3) 催 is 'to urge' or 'to hurry'.

For 新波失断桥 , both Chaves and Hay derived the correct basic meaning. But the question is, how did the 'broken bridge' get 'lost'? Chaves thinks that since there is so much water the bridge is submerged and cannot be seen. But Hay thinks the bridge was washed away. On the syntactical level, both of them are right. On the cultural level, there might be an argument. If we look at the poem as a whole, the atmosphere is rather quiet. 'The bridge was merged by higher water' is more poetic in the Chinese way of thinking.

Therefore, I prefer Chaves' interpretation.

For 衣着最难调 , Hay translated the meaning correctly. Chaves' interpretation 'to change into light clothes' shows that he missed the true meaning. If Chaves thought about the line which was written by Lǐ Qīng-zhào, 李清照'At the time when it is suddenly warm but still cold, it is most difficult to adjust' 乍暖还寒时候 , 最难将息 *zhà nuǎn huán hán shí hòu, zuì nán jiāng xì,* he might have hit the original meaning of that line.

In conclusion, John Hay's ability to read cursive script is remarkable, that is, if he did the deciphering himself without the use of any tools. If he did use tools, the question remains as to the kind of tools he used. I believe that if he employed more adequate tools, books or human, the results could be further improved. I am very happy to see the younger generation of Western scholars advancing in the field of Chinese studies. While Chinese studies are difficult, they are not impossible. They require methodology, hard work, and, most importantly, humility. We say 'one will be benefited while he is humble' (qiān shòu yì 谦受益). Having met many humble young students, I am confident of a future of continuing advances in Chinese studies.

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*These works are attributed to Wáng Xī-zhī. Note that the first book referenced was not mentioned by scholars until the late Ming period.