Form and Spirit in Poetry Translation

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Introduction

To many translation theorists, translation is both a science and an art. As an art, it has its aesthetic values. As a science, it has its scientific principles. In the history of translation in China, translation has been regarded more or less as a branch of art, drawing a great deal of its concepts from painting, one example being the ideas of “form” 形 and “spirit” 神.

Form and Spirit in Chinese Painting

As early as the Tang Dynasty, writers of art theory all shared the belief that the main function of painting was representation. Formal resemblance, however, was not enough in itself; the painter should strive to convey the spirit of the living things. As Teng Chun wrote in 1167:

What is this one [method of painting]? One can say: “To convey the spirit, that is all.” People merely know that human beings have spirit and do not realize that things have spirit. In this way, when Guo Roxu scorned common artisans, saying [of their work]: “It is not painting though it is called painting,” no doubt it was because they were just able to transmit the forms and could not convey the spirit. Thus, among the laws of painting, qiyun sheng-tong is the first, and Ruxu was right when he attributed this to high officials and recluses.

In the eleventh century, it became quite fashionable to equate painting with poetry. The affinity of these “sister arts” was further enhanced by the fact that they were being produced with the same materials — brush, ink and scrolls. During the Song Dynasty, it was generally believed that “Poems are formless paintings, paintings, poems in forms.” Their relationship was well put by the following poem.

Painting depicts the external shapes of things;
It is essential that these shapes not be altered.
Poetry conveys the meaning beyond the painted forms;
It is imperative that it contains a picture’s air.
Why should I look at the painting?
When I see the poem, the goose is really there.

書畫外意，非有畫中態，
Su Shih had a famous poem on formal likeness in painting in which he says:

If anyone discusses painting in terms of formal likeness,
His understanding is nearly that of a child.
If when someone composes a poem it must be a certain poem,
He is definitely not a man who knows poetry.
There is one basic rule in poetry and painting:
Natural genius and originality.

To the Chinese literati, poetry and painting were equivalent art forms, and this attitude has been prevalent in the translation of poetry.

**Form and Spirit in Literary Translation**

Opinions on the relative importance of form and spirit in translation are divided: some opt for formal resemblance 形似，others favour spiritual resemblance 神似 and still others believe that both form and spirit are important 神形兼似 in literary translation. Scholars of the first group include Chen Zuwen 陳祖文, Bian Zhilin 毕之琳, Zhou Xiliang 周煦良, Qian Chunqi 钱春绮 and John Turner.4 Supporters of spiritual resemblance include Mao Dun 茅盾, Lin Yutang 林语堂, Wang Keyi 王科一, Feng Huazhan 萬華瞻, Weng Xianliang 翁顯良, Fu Lei 傅雷, and Liu Ching-chih 劉錦之.5 Translators who take a compromising view are Jiang Feng 江楓, and Xu Yuanzhong 許源沖. Let us look at their views more closely.

Those who support the idea of formal resemblance believe that poetry should be rendered formally as poetry, and this balance of form can best convey the meanings, the syntax as well as the flowing cadence of the original. Compare for instance the following two translations of T. S. Eliot’s poem:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

April是最殘酷的季節
讓死寂的土原迸出紫丁香
摻雜著追憶與戀情
以春雨撩撥萎頓的根葉

（杜國清譯）

April is the cruellest of months, brooding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mingling
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

四月是最殘酷的月份，滋生著
紫丁香從死沉沉的地上，混雜著
記憶和欲念，煽動著
偶爾的根鬚，以春天的雨絲。

（葉維廉譯）
Whatever one’s impression of the above translations, poetic translation, according to Bian Zhilin, must strive to retain the form of the original which is one way of enriching the syntactical structure of the target language. A number of factors, nevertheless, contribute to the incompatibility of form of content of the source and the target texts.

On the level of language systems, there are
(1) arbitrariness of relationships of language features to expression;
(2) differences in the segmentation of the accepted reality into language (asymmetrical synonymy);
(3) incompatibilities between grammatical systems;
(4) non-correspondence of informational exponents in texts; and
(5) non-correspondence of socio-cultural environments of language users.

On the poetic use of languages in texts, there are
(1) polyvalence and polyfunctionality;
(2) dense structuration;
(3) expansion of ordinary grammar and lexicon; and
(4) non-fulfillment of reader expectations.7

As the most important non-semantic elements of poetry are the rules and forms, or the tonal pattern and rhyme schemes and other devices, it is imperative to keep these features in the translated texts, otherwise it will lead to the vulgarization of language and loss of formal beauty.8 Make a comparison of the original poem by Li Shangyin and an intralingual translation into Modern Chinese cited below, you would tend to agree with Bian:

〈夜雨寄北〉
李商隱
君問歸期未有期，巴山夜雨漲秋池。
何當共剪西窗燭，卻話巴山夜雨時。

噢！教我怎樣向你回答歸家的日期
漲滿秋水的池塘又添上聲聲夜雨；
什麼時候呵！我們才能相倚在擁火融融的西窗下
一起回味，巴山客舍雨聲中的淒涼和憂鬱
《唐詩今譯集》

To Qian Chunyi, formal transplantation is not only necessary for readers to appreciate the original text in its entirety, but also essential for local poets to infuse foreign structures to their composition.9 In The Art of Translating Poetry, Burton Raffel classifies this type of translation “formal translation”, and he has the following to say about formal translators:

What the formal translator is after is what he calls “exactness.” He is apt to be much concerned with notions like “fidelity” and with the “exact” reproduction of literary form, prosody, and so on. Though he often thinks that his goal is a kind of mirror image of the original, a precise reproduction achieved by a process of bodily transference, in fact he is most likely to give his readers the ideas, the social and philosophical orientations, the information, and the historical data contained in his original. He struggles, often honorably and sometimes very
successfully, to avoid any intrusion of an alien presence, any sort of interference between the original and his rendering thereof. Frequently (though not always or even necessarily) he makes no objections to making available, through translation, something of the literary experience of his original. But that is almost never his goal; he will regularly and even combatively sacrifice literary to scholarly values. 

Those in favour of “spiritual closeness/resemblance” 神似, on the other hand, have a host of scholars in traditional China to support their position. We have earlier on mentioned briefly the tradition to recapture the spirit of a painting and the close relation between poetry and painting in pre-modern China. In more recent decades, particularly in the 1950s, there was a revival of interest in that “spiritual closeness” and “formal closeness” led in the 1920s and 1930s by Chen Xiying and Lin Yutang, and later by the experienced translator Fu Lei. According to Fu, a translator must endeavour to achieve spiritual closeness rather than formal closeness. And his translations show that it is possible to achieve equivalence free from the bondage of the form of the original 萬形得似。A further step in this direction is the idea of “sublimation” proposed by Qian Zhongshu who says:

the highest standard of literary translation is “sublimation” by which I mean to transfer the language of a text into another language without any trace of stiltedness resulting from the differences in usage and at the same time retaining all the flavour of the original.

代表性的一群学者是茅盾 who pointed out in 1954 that one of the most important considerations in literary translation is to reproduce the spirit of the original:

Literary works are a kind of art created in language. What we demand of them is not merely the recording of concepts and of incidents. Besides these, they should possess artistic images which are attractive to the reader. In other words, the reader must have a strong feeling towards the characters’ thought and behaviour through the artistic images portrayed in their literary works. Literary translation is to reproduce the original artistic images in another language so that the reader of the translation may be inspired, moved, and aesthetically entertained in the same way as one reads the original.

Naturally, such a translation is not purely a technical change in the form of language, but it requires that the translator realize the author’s process of artistic creation, grasp the spirit of the original, find the most appropriate confirmation in his own thought, feeling and experience, and reproduce fully and correctly the content and form of the original in a literary language suited to the original style…. Since the main task of literary translation lies on the faithful reproduction of the spirit and features of the original, such creative artistic translation is quite necessary.

The third group of scholars are the middle-of-the-roaders who hold that both
spiritual resemblance and formal resemblance are important, and this brings us to the views of a Western translation theorist Robert de Beaugrande whose work, *Factors in a Theory of Poetic Translating*, focuses on issues that we have to bear in mind when translating a poetic text. One such consideration is the concrete imagery created by the text as a whole. The translation unit should be the text rather than individual word or sentence. This holds true in poetic translation between Chinese and English. As A.C. Graham puts it:

Classical Chinese is a language of uninflected and generally monosyllabic words grammatically organized solely by word-order and the placing of particles.

This means that we must first set out to have a thorough reading of the original text, known elsewhere as translation-reading. The process of reading is a type of translating which consists of several phases:

1. translating the text into a mental representation;
2. matching non-expected usage with possible expected equivalents;
3. rearranging sequences by their communicative content;
4. collecting information from context and co-text to interpret problematic elements;
5. finding exponents in the target text for the overall mental representation obtained so far;
6. collating the source text against the draft translation and the mental representation; and
7. consider the reader’s response to the translation.

But then poetic texts are hard to translate because of their peculiarity of structure:

1. non-ordinary use of language;
2. undefined nature of fictional texts;
3. historical distance between the text production and translation; and
4. structural peculiarities typical of poetic texts.

Poetry is a literary genre which communicates large quantities of information in a relatively small number of signs, and thus it has a low level of redundancy. Low redundancy levels in texts are likely to cause a wider spread of interpretations than would apply to texts with high redundancy. The following two lines from a poem by Du Fu 绽甫 give us some ideas about the difficulty of reading Chinese poetry:

虚疏雨隔他日泪，孤舟一壑故园心。

*Interpretation 1*

The myriad chrysanthemums have bloomed twice.  
Days to come — tears.  
The solitary little boat is moored, but my heart is in  
the old-time garden.

*Interpretation 2*

The clustered chrysanthemums have opened twice,  
in tears of other days;  
The forlorn boat, once and for all, tethers my  
homeward thoughts.

As we translate, we will gradually move from text-supplied information to
reader-supplied information. As Beaugrande asserts, “only if the reading process is consistently pursued to the point where the interpretation is maximally dominated by text-supplied information can a truly objective translation be produced.” So we may find that different translations of the same text are due a number of factors:

1. the strategies we use in reading;
2. the degree of objectivation, and;
3. the type of bilingualism.

Given the enormity of factors governing poetic translation, we have to employ a number of translation strategies. In this respect, André Lefevere has provided us with seven strategies in translating poetry.14

A. Phonemic translation/phonological translation

This attempts to reproduce the source language sound in the target language while producing an acceptable paraphrase of the sense. An example has been given by André Lefevere:

Celia and Louis Zukofsky’s translation of Catullus opens with the following preface: ‘This translation of Catullus follows the sound, rhythm and syntax of his Latin — tries, as is said, to breathe the “literal” meaning with him.’ Fidelity to the source text means, purely and simply, fidelity to its sound, to the near exclusion of all other elements.

As Chinese and English are not cognate languages, the usefulness of this method is doubtful. To illustrate the application of this method to the translation of Chinese poetry, the following is the Pinyin romanization of a poem by Du Fu 杜甫 “Moonlit Night” 月夜):

```plaintext
jin ye Fu zhou yue
gui zhong zhi du kan
yao lian xiao er nu
wei jie yi Chang an
xiang wu yun huan shi
qing hui yu bi han
he shi yi xu huang
shuang zao lei hen gan
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For a reader who does not know Chinese, he cannot possibly get any sense out of it. But it is clear from the romanization that lines 2, 4, 6, and 8 rhyme.

**B. Literal translation**

In poetic translation, literal rendering is always undesirable. A line from the Book of Odes “思君令人老” can be literally translated as “thinking of you makes me old.” The two lines of a poem by Zheng Banqiao 郑板橋

今日重逢深院裡
一種溫存猶昔
can be rendered into English as

*Today we meet again in this secluded courtyard
And there is a kind of tenderness as of old.*

**C. Metrical translation**

In the reproduction of the metre, the content of the text is often distorted.

**D. Poetry into prose**

This is to change the form of the original poem into another literary genre. This translation method will result in the loss of the sense, communicative value and syntax of the source text. Lin Shu’s translation of Shakespeare’s plays is a good example.

**E. Rhymed translation**

This is to rhyme the translation according to the schemes of the target language to create the poetic flavour. The following is a poem translated by John Turner.

弄文羅文網
抗世違世情
積毀可銷骨
空留紙上聲

*To be a writer,
    I fall into censorship’s fabrications;
To defy society, I choose against the world’s choice.
Heaped slanders can destroy a man
    and his blood relations.
In vain, I leave on paper only a voice.*

The following is also a rhymed poem by Su Manshu 蘇曼殊 (1884–1918), writer, translator, and artist of the first water. His translation of Byron’s poetry is considered by some scholars as unsurpassed to date.
Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage
Canto I: XIII (Interlude)
George Gordon Byron

Adieu, adieu! my native shore
Fades o’er the waters blue;
The Night-winds sign, the breakers roar,
And shrieks the wild sea-mew.
Yon Sun that sets upon the sea
We follow in his flight;
Farewell awhile to him and thee,
My native Land — Good Night!

But Theodore Savory’s comments on this translation method are worth pondering:

Rhyme imposes a constraint upon the writer, a constraint which bears most heavily on the essential feature of the translator’s art, his choice of words. It is scarcely possible to find a rhymed translation of a lyric which does not contain evidence of this as shown either by the omission of something that the original author wrote, or the inclusion of something that he did not. (Savory, 1957:85)

F. Blank verse translation

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Ouyang Xiu: “To the Tune of Shengchazi”

Last year on the Night of Lanterns
The flower market was bright as day.
The moon climbed to the tip of the willow tree;
I awaited my love at the hour of dusk.

This year on the Night of the Lanterns
The moon and the flowers are as they were.
My love from last year is nowhere to be seen.
Tears drench the sleeves of my spring dress.

G. Interpretation

This means that translators produce different versions of the original based on their different interpretations of the poem. Here I quote translations of Li Shangyin’s poem 〈錦瑟〉 by different hands as an example.

〈錦瑟〉
錦瑟無端五十弦，一弦一柱思華年。
莊生曉夢迷蝴蝶，望帝春心托杜鵑。
滄海月明珠有淚，藍田日暖玉生煙。
此情可待成追憶，只是當時已惘然。

The Richly Painted Zither By James J. Y. Liu

The richly painted zither, for no reason, has fifty strings;
Each string, each bridge, recalls a burgeoning year.
Master Chuang, dreaming at dawn, was confused with a butterfly;
Emperor Wang consigned his amorous heart in spring to the cuckoo.
By the vast sea, the moon brightens pearls’ tears;
At Indigo Field, the sun warms jade that engenders smoke.
This feeling might have become a memory to be cherished,
But for that, even then, it already seemed an illusion.

The Inlaid Psaltery By Robert Payne

I wonder why the inlaid psaltery has fifty strings.
Every string and peg evokes the beautiful years,
Dawn-dreaming Chuang-tzu, the hovering butterfly;
In spring the Emperor’s heart haunting the cuckoos,
Moonlight in the blue sea, pearls shedding tears,
In the warm sun the jade in the blue fields
engendering smoke —
So should our loves endure, being filled with memory;
But already these days are fading into the years.

By John Turner

Vain are the jewelled zither's fifty strings:
Each string, each stop, bears thought of vanished things.
The sage of his loved butterflies day-dreaming:
The king that sighed his soul into a bird:
Tears that are pearls, in ocean moonlight streaming:
Jade mists the sun distills from Sapphire Sward:
What need their memory to recall today? —
A day was theirs, which is now passed away.

By Xu Yuanzhong

Why should the zither sad have fifty strings?
Each string, each strain evoke but vanished springs:
At dawn the dream to be a butterfly:
At dusk the heart poured out in cuckoo's cry.
In moonlit pearls see tears of mermaid's eyes:
From sunburnt jade in Blue Field let smoke rise!
Such feeling cannot be recalled again,
It seemed long-lost e'en when it was felt then.

Conclusion

It is imperative to realize that as far as poetry translation is concerned, form cannot be reproduced. But how about spirit? What do we mean by spiritual resemblance? And if spiritual resemblance can be achieved, how should we achieve it? The answers to these questions are hard to come by. But we can certainly achieve some degree of spiritual resemblance by paying attention to the reproduction of ideas rather than form. We must observe the way the ideas have been expressed and how they can be idiomatically and stylistically rendered in the target text.

Notes


9. See Qian Chunqi 錢春姬, *談譯詩的形式移植* (On Formal Transplantation in the

See also Ye Zinan 叶子南, 《詩」言能忘「形」——論形式和意義在翻譯中的意義》 (On Formal Correspondence in Literary Translation), Chinese Translators Journal, No. 4 (1987), pp. 12-22.


