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A Translation of Four Chinese Shi-Poems

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Today I will be sharing with you my translation of four poems from Tang dynasty

1. Original text and translation of the *shi*-poem *Chenyi chaoshiyuan*

duchanjing 晨詣超師院讀禪經

1.1 Original text

晨詣超師院讀禪經（柳宗元）	
汲井漱寒齒，清心拂塵服。	道人庭宇靜，苔色連深竹。
閒持貝葉書，步出東齋讀。	日出霧露餘，青松如膏沐。
真源了無取，妄跡世所逐。	澹然離言說，悟悅心自足。
遺言冀可冥，繕性何由熟。	

1.2 Translation

A Morning Visit to Chao Shi Monastery to Read Buddhist Sutras

By Liu Zongyuan

With the cold water drawn from the well, I rinse my mouth,
Brushing off the dust on my gown, I purify my mind.

Serenely I pick up the Buddhist Sutras,
I recite the verses as I depart from the East Quarter.

The true essence of Buddhism is not understood by the secular,
The world is rather interested in pursuing absurd matters.

I hope to live according to the teachings,
But when can I perfect my cultivation to attain enlightenment?

All is tranquil and peaceful in the courtyard of the monk,
The verdant moss extends into the thick bamboo grove.

The Sun rises and shines on the morning mist and dew,
Green pine trees glisten as if having been anointed.

The feeling of tranquility in my heart is unspeakable,
I am truly happy and contented in being awakened to the truth.

Commentary

Background:

In the late Tang Dynasty, there was much corruption in the government; Liu Zongyuan participated in a reform movement hoping to improve the political system, however it ended in failure. For this reason, he was demoted to a poor and remote city, called Yongzhou.

During his time in Yongzhou, Liu Zongyuan often went to the nearby monastery where Venerable Chao lived to recite Buddhist Sutras.

This poem shows that he sees through secular matters and aspires to seek a way to free his mind through the practice of Buddhism

Points to note in the translation:

1. For the title of the poem, I translated 院 as monastery by taking into account the background information, rather than the literal meaning of college.

My translation for 禪經 is Buddhist Sutras, not Zen sutras. Because in ancient China, 禅经 was the general term for Buddhist texts, it does not specifically mean the Zen Sect of Buddhism. In addition, the monastery 龍興寺 Liu Zong Yuan visited belonged to the Pure Land Sect, so it was not a place to practice Zen.

2. For 貝葉書, I also used Buddhist sutras, because in the old times, Buddhist scriptures were written on the leaves of Bei Duo tree(贝多树). So 貝葉書 is Buddhist scripture. To avoid confusion, I just used its actual meaning in my translation.

3. 真源、遺言

Because of the Buddhism background of this poem, both of those terms refer to the essence and teachings of Buddhism.

Next I will explain the meaning of some difficult words.

4. 冀: hope to be able to

冥: to go according to

繕性: to cultivate one's nature

熟: the literal meaning is ripe, but in this context, it means to perfect and attain enlightenment

5. The remaining verses show that after immersing his mind in the wisdom of Buddhism, Liu Zong Yuan was able to let go of his distress caused by the demotion. Buddhism helped him overcome tough times. His mind was at peace and he could enjoy the beauty of nature again. To emphasize his change of mood, I used words such as tranquility and contented.

2. Original text and translation of the *shi*-poem *Xinglunan* 行路難

2.1 Original text

行路難（李白）	
金樽清酒鬥十千，	閒來垂釣碧溪上，
玉盤珍羞直萬錢。	忽復乘舟夢日邊。
停杯投箸不能食，	行路難！行路難！
拔劍四顧心茫然。	多歧路，今安在？
欲渡黃河冰塞川，	長風破浪會有時，
將登太行雪滿山。	直掛雲帆濟滄海。

2.2 Translation

Hard Journey :Three Poems: No. 1; by Li Bai (Tang Dynasty)

A gold vessel holding rice wine for ten thousand coins,

Delicacies served on a jade platter are of the same worth.

Yet without an appetite, I put away the cup and lay the chopsticks down,

I draw my sword and look around, feeling completely lost.

The Yellow River is frozen when I wish to cross it,

The Mountain Taihang is enshrouded in snow when I wish to climb it.

I think of Jiang Tai Gong, leisurely fishing by a limpid stream,

And Yi Yin, who dreamt of sailing in his boat to the Sun.

The journey is hard! The journey is hard!

Countless forks in the road; which one to take?

There shall come a day when I ride the strong winds and break the waves,

The sails shall be hoisted high as I march across the vast and deep blue sea.

Commentary

Background:

The author of this poem is Li Bai. He was once a man with political aspirations, but his unruly character offended some royals and high ranking officials in the government, so he became excluded and had to eventually leave the capital city. This poem was written to describe his mood at leaving.

Points to note in the translation:

1. My translation for 清酒 is rice wine. 清酒 in China is mainly divided into rice wine and Golden Millet wine, both are brewed through fermentation and belong to the grain family. So in general, 清酒 can be considered a type of rice wine.

2. 十千 is translated as ten thousand coins. In ancient times, monetary unit is different to what we have today, like dollars or pounds. The ancient Chinese mainly used coins made of different metals, such as copper, so I thought “coins” would be a more suitable terminology to use to describe money.

As 萬錢 has the equivalent value to 十千, so to avoid repetition and add more elegance to the translation of this poem, I used “are worth the same” instead of “ten thousand” again.

3. 停杯投箸不能食: Li Bai is known for his love for drinking, despite this, he still put away his glass when offered great wine. This really shows his misery from not being appreciated by the government and not being able to contribute his part in helping the country. He is too depressed to enjoy the feast.

4. In the next verse, Li Bai describes the dangerous circumstances of the Yellow River and Mountain Taihang to reflect the obstacles he was facing in his political life.

5. 閒來垂釣碧溪上，忽復乘舟夢日邊:

These two verses bring out two classic stories in Chinese history, they tell the experiences of Jiang Tai Gong and Yi Yin before they became highly regarded by the government. Considering these stories may not be familiar to non-Chinese, so in my translation, I added the names of the two famous figures. Although this may not be ideal for literal translation, but I think by adding the names, the meaning will be clearer for the western readers, hence it is more faithful to the original text.

6. Li Bai once felt confused and lost; but due to the examples of Jiang Tai Gong and Yi Yin, he regained his confidence from reflecting on the experience of those two great minds. His change of attitude is reflected in the translation of the last verse, the language used

demonstrates much power and bravery.

7. 沧海 refers to the ocean, especially its vast expanse, depth and the blue colour. In ancient times, 沧海 was also used to describe the East China Sea, so I translated it as “the vast and deep blue sea.”

3. Original text and translation of the *shi*-poem *Kurexing* 苦熱行

3.1 Original text

苦熱行（王維）	
赤日滿天地，火雲成山嶽。	思出宇宙外，曠然在寥廓。
草木盡焦卷，川澤皆竭涸。	長風萬里來，江海蕩煩濁。
輕紈覺衣重，密樹苦陰薄。	卻顧身為患，始知心未覺。
莞簟不可近，絺綌再三濯。	忽入甘露門，宛然清涼樂。

3.2 Translation

Suffering from the Heat
By Wang Wei (Tang Dynasty)
Heat from the scorching Sun fills Heaven and Earth, Fiery clouds appear like the mountain peaks.
Grasses and trees are all burnt and shriveled, Streams and marshes are completely dried out.
Even light silk clothes feel heavy on me,

And the dense trees sadly have thin shade.

The bamboo mats are not within my reach,
Linen clothes are washed again and again.

I think to go beyond the universe,
Into the boundless void.

The strong winds come from ten thousand *Li*,
Rivers and the ocean sweep away worries and affliction.

It is known that the body can bring trouble,
Until one realises that the mind is not yet awakened.

In an instant turning to the way of enlightenment,
It feels like meandering in the joy of a pure and refreshing sensation.

Commentary

Background:

Poet Wang Wei is well known for his exceptional description of natural scenery, whether it is the magnificence of mountains or the tranquility of flowing water; he is capable of integrating poetry and scenery into a whole.

Just like this poem, by describing the challenging environmental conditions causing suffering for the body, Wang Wei points out that the lack of spirituality is even worse than physical pain, this is actually his purpose of this poem; and spiritual improvement should come from the practice of Buddhist teachings.

Points to note in the translation:

1. The literal meaning of 赤日 is red Sun which implies extreme heat from the Sun, hence expressing very hot weather, so here I used “scorching Sun” to convey this message.

火雲成山嶽: Because of the hot weather, the red colour of the fiery Sun is reflected on the clouds, which from a distance, appear like continuous mountain peaks.

2. 輕袢覺衣重，密樹苦陰薄。

My translation here used comparative adjectives: Light and heavy, dense and thin; to show that the very favorable conditions in the external world are still unable to resist the invasion of heat, causing much discomfort to the body.

3. 思出宇宙外，曠然在寥廓。

This verse shows that the poet wants to escape from the present unpleasant reality to a different space beyond the universe, where it is boundless (曠然) and void (寥廓), and this is where his mind can be at peace.

4. 長風萬里來

The term 長風 describes two kinds of wind, 1. wind from a distant 2. strong and gusty wind. I chose to translate it as “strong wind”, because in the same phrase, distance is already mentioned - “from ten thousand li” (萬里來), so I think the poet wouldn’t talk about distance twice in the same phrase; and also with the context of the poem, it is reasonable to wish for strong wind to reduce the feeling of heat.

5. *Li* is a traditional Chinese unit for distance, it is also known as the Chinese mile. I kept it as *Li* in my translation instead of using miles, as I wanted to keep the authenticity of Chinese culture.

6. The literal meaning of 忽入 is “to suddenly enter”, but I think its use here is not about physical entrance, but a change of mindset. To turn away from the unsettled mood caused by unpleasant conditions of the external environment, to the wisdom of Buddhist teachings. And by practising, some level of enlightenment can be achieved to settle the troubled heart, from that joy can be attained. The poet realises here the importance of awakening the mind rather than focusing on relieving bodily discomfort.

7. 甘露门 is translated as “the way of Enlightenment” rather than its literal meaning of “the gate of Sweet Dew”. In Chinese Buddhist culture, it is commonly known as Buddha’s teachings, and 甘露 specifically refers to Enlightenment. But this is not well known by non-Chinese, so in my translation, I decided to deliver its underlying meaning, so it’s more straight forward for western readers.

4. Original text and translation of the *shi*-poem *Qiuxing bashou* 秋興八

首·其三

4.1 Original text

秋興八首·其三（杜甫）	
千家山郭靜朝暉， 日日江樓坐翠微。 信宿漁人還泛泛， 清秋燕子故飛飛。	匡衡抗疏功名薄， 劉向傳經心事違。 同學少年多不賤， 五陵衣馬自輕肥。

4.2 Translation

Ode to Autumn: Eight Poems (No.3)
By Du Fu (Tang Dynasty)

In a mountain city, thousands of households are serenely bathed in the morning sunlight,
Each day I sit in the pavilion by the river, watching the green hills.

Fisherman spending two nights on the boat continues to drift along,
Despite the season of cool autumn, the swallows are flying around the river as usual.

Kuang Heng admonished the Emperor with sincere advice, seeking fame and high rank
was not his pursuit,

Liu Xiang taught and passed down the classics, but things went contrary to his hopes.

The schoolmates from my younger years have mostly gained much fortune,
Living in Wuling city, they wear light furs and ride plump horses.

Commentary

Background:

This poem is the third poetry from a collection of eight. There was much social unrest at the time. When this collection was written, Du Fu had already retired from his position in the government for seven years. This third poem uses the description of autumn sights to express his feeling of unfulfilled aspiration.

Points to note in the translation:

1. I have translated 郭 as home or household. In modern Chinese, 郭 is often used as a family name. But according to *Shuowen Jiezi*, 郭 also means the wall that encloses the city. A home is also enclosed by walls. So 郭 could also be understood as home or a house.

2. 信宿: This phrase is also used in other Chinese classic texts. And it is used to mean staying over two nights.

3. 五陵: Wuling was a city near the capital city Chang An.

4. 輕肥 cannot be interpreted by its literal meanings. In this verse, 輕 relates to clothing, and 肥 relates to the size of the horse. In Chinese classics, 輕肥 is often explained as 輕裘肥馬, light furs and plump horses. This can be found in the Yongye chapter of the Analects.

五陵衣馬自輕肥 Implies that Du Fu's former classmates were doing well with their career as they lived near the capital and had a good material life.

4. Conclusion

Overall, translating ancient Chinese poetry can be very interesting but complicated at the same time, as it delivers much room for imagination. Its language is refined and implicit, often using succinct expressions to describe vast landscape, rich experiences and thoughts, classic stories are sometimes cited too.

I think it is challenging for me to translate ancient Chinese poetry into English, because not only do I need to accurately convey the meaning, but also meet the requirements of form, structure and rhythm for English poetry. In the process of translation, I constantly strived to achieve a balance of the two. However, I find my ability insufficient to fulfill all the requirements, so in the end, my English translation seems to have focused on conveying the true meaning of the original text. Those shortcomings in my translation would be the areas I will work hard to improve in the future.

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