

# The Name and Nature of Translation

By Frederick C. Tsai

WHEN I FIRST picked up the Everyman's Library edition of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, what struck me was there was no English translator's name on the title page, nor could I find it anywhere else in the volumes. (It was a three-volume set.) Who was the person, or persons, who made it possible for me to read this classic Russian novel, I wondered.

Recently I saw in the official quarterly of the American Translators Association<sup>1</sup> where its editor deplored the fact that reviewers of translated books talk about anything but the translators. Only one out of twenty such articles, he found, mentions that the book under review is originally written in a foreign language. "Perhaps one in a hundred has something to say about the quality of the translation." He went on to say that Philip Toynbee, in the *London Observer*, devoted three columns to a review of Hermann Hesse's *If the War Goes On*, "yet no word about the translator . . . Ralph Manheim," who won the 1964 P.E.N. Translation Prize for Günter Grass's *Tin Drum* and, in 1970, the American National Book Awards prize for translating Céline's *Castle to Castle*.

Nobel Prize winners from the Orient ought to be grateful to their translators for making their writings intelligible to the judges of the Prizes, thus helping to bring them the awards. (We understand that the Japanese government sees to it that notable works by Japanese authors are duly translated into English.) Still, no one bothers to mention or remember the names of these translators.

All this seems to indicate that a translator's labor is of little significance, in spite of the fact that such eminent poets as Alexander Pope (1688-1744) and William Cowper (1731-1880) translated Homer, and a scholar like Yen Fu 嚴復

<sup>1</sup>*The American Translator*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1971.

(1854-1921) translated into Chinese a number of Western classics, including *The Wealth of Nations*. As translators, they are not so fortunate as writers of lesser rank. If their translations are still read, they are read more for historical than literary interest, even though some of these translations have come to be regarded as masterpieces in their own right. Each generation of readers demands new translations of the classics, in language that more nearly suits its own taste. Only on the dusty shelves of libraries do we find once famous English versions of *Aesop's Fables* or *San-kuo chih yen-i* 三國志演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms),<sup>2</sup> and I suspect that they are there more for purposes of reference than for casual reading.

Of course Edward FitzGerald (1809-1883) is a somewhat different case. His *Rubáiyát of Omar Kháyyám* has survived generations mainly because it is so free (and surely also dexterous) that it amounts to a creative work rather than a translation. John Florio (1553?-1625) is in the same category. He loved Montaigne, and when he translated the French essayist he made such a vivid work of it that his translation preserved the "spirit" of the original, unconstrained by any differences in language.<sup>3</sup> Its influence on English literature and philosophy claims for it a place beside Bacon's *Essays*. Even so, later hands were not deterred from producing new translations of Montaigne. We might not have known that George Chapman (1559-1634), a renowned scholar and dramatist, had translated Homer had he not been mentioned in the title of one of Keats's immortal sonnets. He was also admired by Pope, who praised his translation as being animated "by a daring fiery spirit". But, while so saying, Pope did not hesitate to offer his own eighteenth century Homer.

Though Pope's and Cowper's translations are good poetry, they were severely criticized by Matthew Arnold. A great scholar in Greek and himself no mean poet, Arnold refrained from translating Homer. He had been asked to do it, but he found it too difficult a task, he said, and he did not have the time. Perhaps he was wise in not making the attempt. Could he have done a better job? I am afraid even he himself was not quite sure.

As to Yen Fu, a pioneer introducer of Western thought to China, he employed a very archaic language for his translation. "In using the syntax and style of the pre-Han period", he says in his preface to Huxley's *Ethics and Evolution*, "one actually facilitates the comprehensibility of the profound principles and subtle thoughts whereas in using the modern vernacular one finds it difficult to make things comprehensible."<sup>4</sup> He may be right, but the result is, to a Chinese who is conversant with English, Yen's translation is today more difficult to read than the original. Even in his own day his translations must have been beyond the grasp of the average reader on account of the abstruse classical Chinese to which he adhered.

Chapman, Pope, Cowper, and Yen are still admired for their famous translations. There are many others, like the translator (or translators) of my *War and*

<sup>2</sup>Brewitt-Taylor's two-volume translation *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, published by Kelly & Walsh in Shanghai in 1925, has the good fortune of coming out again in a reprint edition 34 years later (Tuttle, 1959). A recent considerably abridged translation is *Three Kingdoms: China's Epic Drama* by Lo Kuan-chung, translated and edited by Moss Roberts, Pantheon

Books, New York, 1976.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*.

<sup>4</sup>See Yen Fu's "General Remarks on Translation", translated by C. Y. Hsu, in *Renditions* No. 1, Autumn 1973.

*Peace* to whom no credit whatever is given. We don't know how much he was paid for his labour any more than we are familiar with his identity, but we can be certain that the amount could not be significant. These people are the Unknown Men of Letters.

INDEED, THE LACK of respect for the translator's trade is nowhere more evidenced than in the mere pittance usually paid him by his employers. I have heard that a translator working for a certain publication earns less than almost any of the other employes in his office. While authors inaccessible to foreign readers can achieve a name and even wide popularity abroad through the good offices of their translators, they alone are entitled to the not inconsiderable royalties that accrue from the various foreign editions. Translators usually get no more than a one-shot fee. Some publishers pay translators a little better, but when compared to the income of other classes of professionals, it is a dole. A lawyer can charge his clients a handsome fee for providing the translation of a document, but the biligual scribe who performs the actual work gets only a fraction of it. We have often heard complaints about the poor quality of translations, but what people don't seem to realize is that the compensation for services rendered is commensurately low. In his Preface to Ovid's *Epistles* Dryden deplored on behalf of translators that "... there is so little Praise and so small Encouragement for so considerable a part of Learning." Quality translation is desirable, but it is also desirable that translators are treated as professionals and, as such, given their due. Only in these circumstances can they be expected to invest their time and money in the requisite education; and, in plying their trade, to acquire expensive reference books, apply themselves diligently to difficult passages, consulting specialists when necessary, and work over endless revisions and improvements.

In the 1930's, Fu Lei 傅雷, one of China's most eminent translators, used to sell hundreds of acres of his ancestral land to keep himself and his family going when he was engaged in the project of translating the French classic novels. He consulted French professors, priests, consulate officials and merchants in Shanghai when he encountered in his work anything he did not understand or was not quite sure of. If still in doubt, he would write to specialists in different fields in Paris for explanation or elucidation. His progress was slow, at most two to three thousand characters a day, but the result was well worth the effort. Not every translator is as fortunate as Fu Lei for the greater glorification of his profession. Poor quality, then, is often the result of poor pay.

People are prone to regard translators as so many know-it-alls. Those who profess to this occupation are apt to be asked to take on all manner of material—from the utterances of an eccentric to the loftiest thoughts of a poet; from the nomenclature of the lunar calendar to Einstein's theory of relativity; from legal gibberish or bureaucratic jargon to the slogans of a political party or the catchphrases in advertising. They are supposed to be able to transform the puns and proverbs of one language into another. If a lawyer can represent all kinds of clients in a variety of cases, a translator must translate all kinds of writings.

Novelists may not be poets, nor poets, novelists. But translators are expected to assume practically every role in writing. He must be equally adept at prose and

verse. He must know how to draft a speech or telegram for a head of state or a company executive, write copy for an advertisement, compose letters between lovers or government officials. He must be skilful in descriptive, expository or sentimental compositions; be at home in all styles, archaic or modern, colloquial or elegant; and have all the technical terminology of medicine, space and computer science at his finger tips. To venture into the world of sports for an analogy: would a tennis player be expected to excel in the ring, compete in the Marathon, or swim the English channel?

BUT WHAT DOES a translator do? Or, to put it in another way, what is translation? The dictionaries define it as "to change into another language, retaining the sense" (Dr. Johnson); "to turn from one language into another" (*S.O.D.*); "to turn (something written or spoken) from one language into another" (*Random House*). . . . All such definitions, serviceable as they are, do not seem to have touched the heart of the matter. Perhaps Hilaire Belloc came closest when he called it "the resurrection of an alien thing in a native body".

Resurrection—there is the rub! It is not enough for a translator to have a reading knowledge of one language and the ability to write in another. On the road to "resurrection" there are difficulties and obstacles too numerous to count. Often it is not merely a matter of "retaining the sense" of the original. Many things claim the translator's consideration, deliberation and imagination: the tone of a speech, different cultural backgrounds, various idiomatic usages, words employed entirely for their sounds (in prose as well as in poetry), styles of writing, degrees of vulgarity and literariness, the necessity to create new concepts in the target language, an endless search for existing equivalents. . . .

Sometimes it is easier to translate a quite differently constructed sentence into another language than when no difficulty seems to be confronting us. Frequently, it is not a matter of "turning"; it is creation—but a by no means unfettered creation. Whether the object at hand is the familiar essay, a fiction, a dramatic dialogue, emotional or coolly argued polemics; whether the original is meant to be humorous, satirical, instructive or moralizing; the translator's job is to re-create the author's intention in another language, and to do so with the same effects. A novelist may find it difficult to translate a novel of a kind he is unfamiliar with, notwithstanding his proficiency in the language in which it is written. A person who knows two languages equally well does not necessarily have the talent to translate his own writing from one into the other. In the seventeenth century it was not unusual for English poets like Richard Crashaw and Andrew Marvell to write their poetry in the classical language, Latin, and then translate it into the vernacular, English, or less often the other way round. However, they had had much practice in translation in their school days, and they wrote Latin more easily than they did English. Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) is a contemporary example. He wrote impeccably in both Russian and English, and yet he did not translate his own works from one language into the other.

I remember when I translated into Chinese Vincent Cronin's *Wise Man from the West*, the story of Fr. Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), the first Jesuit missionary despatched to China in the Ming dynasty, the assignment sent me to the voluminous

*Ming shih* 明史 (History of the Ming dynasty), *Ming T'ung-chien* 明通鑑 (The annals of the Ming dynasty), *Ming shih chi-shih pen-mo* 明史紀事本末 (Chronicles of the Ming dynasty), and books in Chinese written by Fr. Ricci and others concerning his missionary work. Not infrequently, I found in the text Chinese book titles and terms appearing in English; it was not a job of translating them into suitable Chinese but one of restoring the original wording. Many of the terms used, the forms of address, and the style of speech and writing purported to be Chinese are out of date. Cronin's chief sources were Ricci's own history of the Chinese mission, entitled *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Cristianità nella Cina*. "Sometimes," says Cronin, "he (Ricci) wrote ungrammatically, at other times substituted Portuguese or Spanish words unconsciously. . . ." These Cronin translated into English, and I was to translate, or rather put back into Chinese. Unless I could find the same passage in the original and copy it, there was no way to do the restoration. Identification of each of these passages was a backbreaking job, since the documents and books quoted from or referred to were not easily available. The setting was China of about four centuries ago. A list of the tributes which Ricci presented to the Emperor defies translation; so is his memorial to the "Son of Heaven", written in the formal literary style appropriate to the occasion.

Take a simple English word like "passport". I had to spend hours looking for its Ming equivalent in various kinds of books. Polite conversation in Ming times between a literatus (such as Ricci would like to be considered) and a Chinese official was not what modern Chinese of similar rank would employ. All this had to be reconstructed. Furthermore, Vincent Cronin was a vivid and imaginative writer, and his heroic story of the martyr-like Jesuit missionary was written in part in highly embellished English. The rhythm and symmetry of this language demanded a suitably literary Chinese style in translation, whereas the book as a whole, designed for the present-day reader, must be in the vernacular *pai-hua* 白話.

IT IS A TRUISM that poetry is impossible to translate. From a poem in the source language the best way is to try to create another poem in the target language. Euphony and rhythm, and poetic diction, are the very life of poetry; no translator can do anything with them unless he makes them reborn in another language—still beautiful and melodious, but different.

In her poem on sorrow, "To the tune of *Sheng-sheng man* 聲聲慢", Li Ch'ing-chao 李清照 (1084-1151), in one of the most famous of *tz'u* 詞 poems, boldly tried a new cadence by using seven pairs of characters in succession for their alliteration and rhyme to produce a striking effect of sadness, her repetition of some of the characters in the fourth tone suggesting sobbing:

*Hsün hsün mi mi,*  
*Leng, leng, ch'ing ch'ing,*  
*Ch'i ch'i ts'an ts'an ch'i ch'i.*  
*Cha nuan huan han shih hou,*  
*Tsui nan Chiang hsi.*

尋尋覓覓  
 冷冷清清  
 淒淒慘慘戚戚  
 乍暖還寒時候  
 最難將息

[I'm] searching, searching, seeking, seeking,  
 [It's] cold, cold, clear, clear [that is, desolate or solitary].  
 [I feel so] sad, sad, melancholy, melancholy, mournful, mournful.  
 Sudden warm [but] still cold [the] season [is].  
 [It's] most difficult [for me to] rest and recuperate.

Strictly speaking, this poem is untranslatable, but Fr. John Turner, S.J. (1907-71), himself a poet, created a different cadence in English that is equally striking:

I pine and peak  
 And questless seek  
 Groping and moping to linger and languish  
 Anon to wander and wonder, glare, stare and start  
     Flesh chill'd  
     Ghost thrilled  
     With grim dart  
 And keen canker of rankling anguish.<sup>5</sup>

This is not exactly a translation, but a poetic transmutation and something not to be strived after by one who is only linguistically competent.

Another aspect of Chinese poetry makes any attempt to convey its full values in another language an all but futile exercise. According to Huang T'ing-chien 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), leader of the Kiangsi School of poetry in the Sung dynasty 江西詩派, a poet should adopt the language of recognized masters to express his own thoughts and feelings. "It is difficult to create," said Huang. "When Tu Fu wrote his poetry and Han Yü his prose, no expression of theirs was without its origin. Nowadays, people, having read few books, assumed that these two created everything they wrote. Indeed, ancient masters could mold and melt everything, and though they might use a hackneyed expression in their writings, their touch was like a "magic pill" that turned iron into gold 點鐵成金."

The idea was to have almost every line traceable, in whole or part, to some earlier poet. A Chinese versifier could easily string out a complete poem with lines from a particular poet he admired or from poets of a particular period. This is called *chi chü* 集句—a collection of lines—to express in borrowed words what's on your own mind. Although this is carrying allusiveness a bit far, nevertheless it is true that anyone not familiar with the whole body of Chinese classical poetry can hardly be expected to appreciate fully a poem written in that tradition. Translations from such a literature are bound to be found wanting.

It is a strange thing but true that in many a poem there is little meaning (substance) but a lot of language (grace and euphony). When the latter is taken away or destroyed, the whole idea or sentiment would be like a skeleton without soul, flesh and clothing. Gray's *Elegy* is an example. The whole poem can be reduced to a few sentences, trite and banal. I. A. Richards says of this in his *Practical Criticism*.

<sup>5</sup>In *A Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry*, translated by John A. Turner. A Renditions Book, Hong Kong 1976, distributed by the University of Washington Press, Seattle and London.

Yet poetry, which has no other very remarkable qualities may sometimes take very high rank simply because the poet's attitude to his listeners—in view of what one has to say—is so perfect. Gray and Dryden were notable examples. Gray's *Elegy*, indeed, might stand as a supreme instance to show how powerful an exquisitely adjusted tone may be. It would be difficult to maintain that the thought in this poem is either striking or original, or its feeling is exceptional. It embodies a sequence of reflections and attitudes that under similar conditions arise readily in any contemplative mind. Their character as commonplaces, needless to say, does not make them any less important, and the *Elegy* may usefully remind us that boldness and originality are not necessarily for great poetry.

Such a poem when translated will lose nearly everything if no new qualities—beauty of language, agreeableness of sound and felicity in associations—are substituted.

WHEN I FIRST came across David Copperfield's reference to his father's aunt as his aunt, I felt sure that there was a misprint; but then I, as a Chinese, was flabbergasted to see the word used in the novel again and again. In China, with our high regard for correct familial relationships, it would be considered a serious breach of propriety to address your elders out of turn, as it were. In such a case, no Chinese translator could allow himself to be faithful to the original; he must save his readers from the cultural shock which he has experienced, and himself from being regarded as a careless translator. Dickens won't turn in his grave if he finds his "aunt" changed into "grandaunt" in the Chinese version of his story.

Chinese fiction can take Western readers equally by surprise. In a T'ang story by Shen Chi-chi 沈既濟,<sup>6</sup> the heroine Miss Jen, a fox-spirit transformed into a lady of surpassing beauty, is addressing an admirer, the influential friend and benefactor of her lover, Cheng, and these are her words:

愧公之見愛甚矣。願以陋質，不足以答厚意。且不能負鄭生，故不得遂公歡。

I am ashamed of myself because of your affection. But since I am ugly, I cannot show my gratitude to you for your great kindness. Nor can I be unfaithful to Mr. Cheng. Therefore, I am unable to gratify your [sexual] desire.

This is ridiculous! But the expressions of exaggerated modesty and blunt rebuff are not inconceivable in the context of the manners and mores of those days. Here

<sup>6</sup>This story has at least three English translations that I know of: Chi-chen Wang's in *Traditional Chinese Tales* (Columbia, New York 1944); my own in *Renditions* No. 8, Autumn 1977; and William H. Nienhauser's in *Traditional Chinese Stories: Themes and Variations* (Columbia, 1978).

the translator must mull over the passage and decide whether to tone it down a bit and do some editing, or add some suitable explanation to his text. Notes are sometimes necessary, though not desirable when the translation is a story for reading pleasure. In his English version of *Liao chai* 聊齋 (*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*) Herbert A. Giles provided hundreds of notes to help his readers understand Chinese customs, traditional beliefs, legends, etc. It is a veritable textbook of Chinese folklore, and of course a translation of a special kind.

Style of speech is a cross for the translator to bear. Each language has its own vulgarity, elegance and any number of other attributes. In Chinese, for instance, the double negative has never been the mark of the unlettered. Mispronunciations can hardly be duplicated in another language. What English dialect should be chosen to represent a Chinese dialect? Does the American southern accent find an echo in the speech of southlanders in other countries? In the '30's the popular Shanghai writer Sinmay Zau (Shao Hsün-mei) 邵洵美 used Soochow dialect to translate the speech of the "gold-diggers" in Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* with remarkable success because that was the soft, "come-hither" drawl commonly affected by the "sing-song girls" of the day. But I would hesitate recommending the use of the same dialect for rendering Eliza Doolittle's cockney English.

There are degrees of literariness and vulgarity in every language, with every speaker, and it is extremely difficult to retain them in translation. There are other problems of speech mannerisms. It is not impossible to render Mr. Micawber's special language; its smoothly flowing circumlocutions, long sentences and aposiopesis,<sup>7</sup> but it is a laborious and time-consuming task. Anytime he has finished his conversation or epistle "in short", it is a great relief to his wretched translator.

As simple a word as "privacy" and as difficult a term as "justification" (in its theological sense) would call for paragraphs if not a short article to explain, to readers who are foreign to the English language or have no conception of specialized meanings. No wonder Yen Fu, when he first introduced Western learning into China, observed that, "The determination of a term often took (him) a full month's pondering."<sup>8</sup> Buddhism has been introduced into China since A.D. 67, in fact almost "naturalized", and serious government-organized translation programs had been systematically carried out for centuries; yet its terms—many of which transliterated from the Sanskrit—are by and large foreign to the general public to this day.

THE RICHER A LANGUAGE the more difficult it is for a translator to use it as the target language. Except for the problem of different cultural backgrounds, which calls for special techniques in handling, there is a large stock of synonymous words and phrases for him to choose from when it comes to matching the original. Often, after racking his brains for what appears to be a most happy equivalent, he would wake up in the middle of the night with a still better choice! Once, while reading a pamphlet describing how fortunate an institution is because it has the support of both government and private sectors of the community, I came across the simple phrase that it is "uniquely situated". A particularly felicitous translation for this

<sup>7</sup>See G. L. Brook, *The Language of Dickens*, pp. 160-1.

<sup>8</sup>C. Y. Hsu's translation of Yen's article cited above.



phrase would be *teh t'ien tu hou* 得天獨厚, or "specially favoured by heaven". There is no apparent link between the two expressions, but the Chinese phrase, besides being succinct and idiomatic, somehow seems made to order for this particular context. It is the kind of thing that comes through sheer luck: to paraphrase another Chinese saying, something encountered by chance, and not to be consciously sought after.

Such being the case, no one can claim to be a perfect translator, not even the most learned scholar or a first-rate linguist. Perhaps a more experienced translator can point out the inadequacies in the work of the less skilled, but whether he can produce a more satisfactory version remains to be seen. A chess player, at least, knows what it is like to play against someone just a grade more skilful. Translation is a discouraging game, but it is also a rewarding one. In literary translation, in spite of all the sweat and pains, it can bring you very much closer to a genius and make you share in a measure his ecstasy of creation. Some writers actually have the habit of turning to translation when they have nothing brilliant to say, because translation opens their minds.

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### *Poet for Poet*

[My father was] as important a writer as Balzac or Hugo. The reason people in the United States don't know my father's works so well? I tell you why. It's those translations. Bad. Very, very bad.

In the States you have all those professors translating my father's works. And so you don't feel them breathe. It is as my father said: "You need a poet to translate a poet. To translate Dante you need a Hugo or a Claudel."

—PIERRE CLAUDEL,  
son of Paul Claudel, French poet,  
playwright and diplomat, as quoted  
in the *Washington Star*, Dec. 28, 1978.

### *Poetry Defined*

One almost workable definition of poetry might be "writing that cannot be adequately translated". Almost. There are, in fact, a few worthy translations, feats in some ways more difficult than those of original creation, since the translator owes fidelity to a foreign text while the creator need follow only his own fancy.

—JOSEPH McLELLAN  
in a review of a new translation of  
Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* by Sir Charles  
Johnston, the *Washington Post*,  
January 12, 1979.