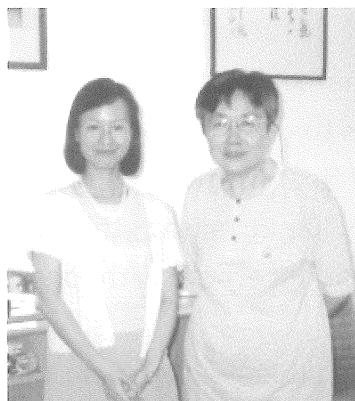


The Elusive Perfect Parallel

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Eva Hung and Zhu Hong
(right).

My first brush with translation, if it may be so called, was a second-year college course with the late Professor Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 in Peking University in 1952. The assignments alternated between Chinese/English and English/Chinese. After grading our papers, Professor Zhu would write up on the blackboard our happy turns of phrases for general emulation. Mistranslations were also held up as warning of HOW NOT TO. We looked forward to praise, of course, and dreaded being held up as a warning, though the offender's name was never made public.

Once we had to translate a newspaper story about Chinese soldiers breaking up huge blocks of ice. The title of the piece was literally 'The Struggle with Ice'. At the time I had just skimmed through John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and came up with what was a perfect parallel—'Of Ice and Men'. I handed in my assignment, expecting an honourable mention. During the next class hour my unique title was indeed held up, but as a warning of

How Not To. 'It may seem clever, borrowing from Steinbeck, but it is not truthful to the original.'

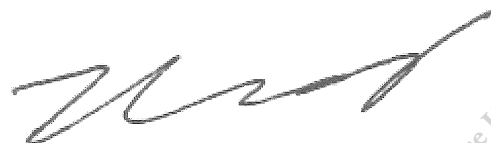
Over the years, in my desultory attempts at translation, I always begin by looking about for a Western 'parallel' to the Chinese original, hoping for a clue to truthful rendition into English. For instance, when I was translating 'The Stubborn Porridge' 堅硬的稀粥 by Wang Meng 王蒙, I read some Kundera and some Bulgakov, and even a semi-autobiography by a Yugoslavian writer *How I Survived Communism and Even Laughed*. But I still could not find a parallel for the particular tone of frustration revolving around the metaphoric menu in Wang Meng's story. The year before last, before translating Su Xiaokang's 蘇曉康 *Memoir of Misfortune* 離魂歷劫自序 based on his wife's near fatal accident, I read John Bayley's memoir of Iris Murdoch, hoping to find a parallel from which to draw on for style and tone. But John Bayley's tone was celebratory of Iris, while Su focused on self-reproach and his own search for answers. Nothing daunted, I recently re-read Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* while planning to revise my translation of Li Xiao's 李曉 'The Overpass' 天橋, a story which began with an ordinary Chinese housewife's accidental fall from an overpass. A suppressed bitterness runs through the protagonist's narration of the perverse combination of events which led to his mother's meaningless death, while Father Juniper in Wilder's story actively looked for meaning in the death of five people from the collapsed bridge. There was no perfect parallel for me to draw on, no shortcut to the truth of the original.

My latest published translations—and a happy first for me in *Renditions*—were two short stories by Li Xiao, one of which had been previously published. So I was surprised to see my copy returned with many suggestions for revision. And right on target they were, too! It made me recall that while translating 'Anecdotes from the Office' 機關軼事, I had been musing on the comic Kafkaesque nature of the story in which organizational bureaucracy took over people's lives, but had overlooked some basic facts. If I had called up in my imagination a picture of that office with its deliberately placed row of desks with manifold drawers, and if I had imagined myself trying to get into one of the drawers, I would surely realize that it could only be done

by a mouse, and not a rat, as in my version! Obviously, what I need is to soak myself in the original, instead of looking about for parallels.

Renditions reminded me to get down to solid work to be truthful to the original, as my beloved Professor Zhu had taught me, fifty years ago.

Thank you, *Renditions*! ☒

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Zhu' followed by a stylized flourish.

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