

Book Review

A vibrant literary legacy. [Review of *Tang poems in English a selection: Spring breezes over calm waters, will never fail to create ripples*, by Phin-Keong Voon]. Kajang, New Era University College, 2022, 224 pages.

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The Tang Dynasty of China (618-907) left behind a priceless collection of poems that are now a living legacy of the Chinese communities in and outside China and indeed of the world. Today they studied in schools and transmitted from generation to generation. The wisdom and insights embedded in the poems continue to be relevant to contemporary life and provide endless enjoyment to the young and old. The publication being reviewed is a manifestation of the durable significance of Tang poems.

Many attempts have made in the West as well as China and Southeast Asia in translating Tang poems. Among the early translators were Herbert A. Giles (1845-1935), Arthur Waley (1889-1966), Harold Witter Bynner (1881-1968) and Innes Herdan (1911-2007). These were scholars or Sinologists and based their translations from the original Chinese poems in their attempts to introduce Tang poetry to the English-speaking world. They adopted their own styles, methods and interpretations in rendering the original poems to capture the beauty, form, and subtle sensibilities of each poem to enable Western readers to appreciate Tang poetry and its rich literary tradition. American poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972) though illiterate in Chinese, also translated of some of Li Bai's poems from the notes of Japanese translators. Yet his translation was original and highly regarded.

There are numerous translators among the Chinese. The doyen of these translators was Xu

Yuanzhong (1921-2021), professor of English of Peking University. A prolific translator, he published 100 titles in Chinese, English and French during his lifetime. His outstanding work won the “Aurora Borealis” prize in 2010, the first for an Asian. Other translators include Loh Beiyei and Wu Juntao both collaborators of Xu, and Zhou Ji, Du Sen and Chen Yujun.

There was a small number of Tang poem enthusiasts in Southeast Asia who produced their own translated works of selected Tang poems. In Singapore, Lien Wen Sze and Foo Check Woo brought out a volume in 1991. This was followed by Dr. Too Chee Cheong and his 99 Tang and Sung poems in 1998. In 2006, two new translations appeared, one by C. K. Ho of Hong Kong and the other by Shi Ying Zhou of the Philippines.

These are remarkable individuals in their own right, all united in the single purpose of the love for Tang poems. Lien and Foo are professionals respectively with the doctorate and master’s in chemistry. Too was a medical doctor and C. K. Ho was an Adjunct Associate Professor of Hong Kong University and represented Hong Kong in the 1984 Olympics and 1990 Asian Games and had won many medals in international competitions. Shi Ying Zhou was a senior editor of a Chinese press in the Philippines and an ardent supporter of Chinese education in the country.

The latest addition to the list in 2022 is *Tang Poems in English: A Selection* by Phin-Keong Voon. The author is neither a graduate of Chinese Studies nor had he received any formal education in Chinese, yet he has been enchanted in his own way by the enduring beauty of Tang poems since his university days. From the subtitle in his book, he likens Tang poems to the breezes of Spring that forever sustains the eternal durability of Tang poems to delight and captivate readers of all ages. The book is a collection of 109 poems selected from Li Bai, Du Fu, Wang Changling, Wan Wei, Bai Juyi, Du Mu, Li Shangyin, Liu Yuxi and many other poets.

Translators of poems are like artists each with his or her own interpretation of the meaning, rhyme and rhythm of every poem. Hence there are as many translated versions of any single poem as there are translators. The basic objectives of the author are to satisfy three basic requirements of being faithful to the beauty of the imagery of the poem, its rhyme and form. The pursuit of these objectives symbolises the search for accuracy, perfection, and beauty.

The first objective is to capture the imagery in the poem and to capture the creator’s inner feelings and thoughts. Each poem is an artistic painting wrought by the broad strokes of creator’s brush. Zhang Jiuling portrays the serenity of the moon emerging from the sea to evoke a scene that is shared by far-away loved ones (page 9). Li Bai’s farewell to Meng Haoran at the Yellow Crane Tower is a picture of the wide expanse of distance and space of the Yangtze River extending to the far horizon merging into the end of the land (page 41). The imposing Lushan waterfall is a majestic scene as it cascades three thousand feet in airy flight as if descending from the Milky Way (page 55). Wang Wei feels the tranquillity of the moment as moonlight pierces through the pine forest to keep him company (page 67). Cui Hao’s famous line recalls the fairy crane vanishing from the Yellow

Crane Pagoda to leave an intense sense of despondency in a thousand years of solitude (page 73). The translation of many lines poses real challenges. Some examples are as follows: 海日生残夜, 江春入旧年 is rendered as *The night fates with the glowing dawn, Spring is here ere the year is spent*; 不废江河万古流 as *Not in vain your styles like streams for ages flow*; 东边日出西边雨, 道是无情却有请 as *Sunny on the east and rain on the west, Who says it not fair when it is fair?*; 山雨欲来风满楼 as *In sweeping gusts a potent rainstorm gathers*; and 花开堪折直须折, 莫待无花空折枝 as *Gather flowers at their fullest charms, Pluck not barren twigs for lack of time*.

The attempt to replicate the beauty of the rhyme is another objective of the translation. In general, the second and fourth lines of many quatrains are rhymed, and often the first line as well, to produce a “aaba” rhyming pattern. In several of the popular quatrains, one may notice lines ending with a set of rhyming words such as *jia* (家 house or family), *hua* (花 flowers), *hua* (华 magnificent, splendid), among others. It is not always easy to rhyme words involving different combinations of these characters. The rhyming pattern of the famous Du Mu’s “Mooring by Qinhuai River” is rendered thus (page 175):

Mist-veiled chilly water and moonlit sand,	烟笼寒水月笼沙,
Moored by night near winehouse on Qinhuai bank.	夜泊秦淮近酒家。
Countryless, sing-song girls not knowing hate,	商女不知亡国恨,
Across the bank the <i>Back Court Flower</i> sang.	隔江犹唱后庭花。

The third objective to satisfy is the pursuit of beauty to reflect the poetic form of the original. English poetry is rich in form in terms of the standard number of lines a number of stressed and unstressed syllables as in the sonnet. Early translators of Tang poems often emphasised the meaning of a line rather than its length but at the expense of poetic elegance. The form of Tang poems takes the form of 5 or 7 characters per line in stressed and unstressed tones. The attempt to replicate this form in English is to maintain a similar number of syllables in each line. However, the search to rhyme a set of words often compromise the original meaning of the poem or interfere with the uniformity in the number of syllables. In this volume, the least number of syllables is in Du Fu’s “Timely Rains on a Spring Night” and Jia Dao’s “Swordsman” with 7 syllables per line (pages 83 & 165) and the largest number is in Du Mu’s “Southern Spring” with 15 syllables (page 187).

<i>Timely Rains of Spring Night</i> (Du Fu)	春夜喜雨(杜甫)
Timely comes the welcome rain,	好雨知时节,
Occurring even in Spring.	当春乃发生。
Seeping in with the night winds,	随风潜入夜,
To nourish all living things.	润物细无声。

Wild paths and clouds are all dark,	野径云俱黑，
River-boat's single bright light.	江船火独明。
Dawn, red and wet all over,	晓看红湿处，
Brocade Walls a full-bloom sight.	花重锦官城。

The Swordsman (Jia Dao)

Ten years to sharpen a sword,
 Never was it put to the test.
 To you it will be displayed,
 Let all wrongs be put to rest.

剑客 (贾岛)

十年磨一剑，
 霜刃未曾试。
 今日把示君，
 谁有不平事。

Southern Spring (Du Mu)

Orioles sing amidst a thousand miles of shining green and red,	千里莺啼绿映红，
River hamlets along foothills with wine banners fluttering.	水村山郭酒旗风。
The Southern Dynasties with four hundred and eighty temples,	南朝四百八十寺，
How many towers are still standing amidst the mist and rain?	多少楼台烟雨中。

江南春 (杜牧)

Each translation is accompanied by a brief commentary serving as an aid to the uninitiated or those who do not read Chinese. The purpose is to help readers to grasp the poem's meaning and the message that it conveys and hence to increase the empathy with the poet. The subtle and sublime beauty of Tang poems may indeed be enjoyed by the non-specialists in Chinese literature.

Although the author confessed that the publication is an exercise in self-study in post-retirement life, the appearance of this book is meaningful in several ways. It opens a window of opportunity to those who are not familiar with the Chinese language to appreciate the beauty of Tang poems. The translation of Tang poetry is not a venture that appeals to the specialist in Chinese literature or to anyone else. This publication is indeed the first attempt 30 years after Toh Chee Cheong's pioneering effort. This attempt may be seen as a renewal of the interest in translation though, on this occasion, by an academic whose area of specialisation is unrelated with literature. The translation of Tang poems may be undertaken by anyone and not necessarily one who is well schooled in Chinese literature through formal academic study. Perhaps more important is the motivation driven by passion and interest that is necessary to venture into an undertaking that calls for much patience and persistence. Lastly, this is a serious literary translation that may open up an additional avenue of study to Chinese Studies in Malaysia in general and the great poetry of the Tang Dynasty in particular.

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