

The Pleasures of Translating

by Burton Watson

Lecture given May 1, 2001 as the Donald Keene Center's Soshitsu Sen XV Distinguished Lecture on Japanese Culture.

Discussions of the art of translation customarily begin with a rehearsal of the goals that we, the translators, should aim for: how we must remain always faithful to the intentions of the work we are translating; how we must capture its essential thrust and vitality; and how we should accomplish all this in such a way that the results sound not like a translation at all, but like an original creation in the target language. Once these lofty pronouncements are over, however, and the question arises as to how such aims are to be achieved, the discussion tends to devolve into a welter of petty rules and directives, some of them quite contradictory in nature. The art of translation, it would appear, resembles less a well-planned attack on the text, one conducted in accord with clearly defined principles of strategy, than it does an endless series of skirmishes with individual problems and quandaries, each posing a somewhat different challenges to the attacker.

Rather than attempting to formulate any overall do's and don'ts for translation, I would like today just to speak somewhat informally about some of the texts I have had the pleasure of working on. Many of my remarks, I am afraid, will be personal in nature, but I hope there will emerge from them some general observations regarding the problems faced by a translator and the ways one might go about solving them.

I should perhaps begin by explaining how I happened to become a translator. I entered Columbia College in the fall of 1946, after having spent three years in the Navy, the last six months of them in Japan. I chose Columbia for two reasons. First, because I knew I could get instruction in Chinese and Japanese there, and I had already decided that I wanted to do something connected with the Asian field; and second, because it is in New York, my favorite city.

I thought I would like to try being a writer, and so when I was in Columbia College, in addition to Asian studies, I took some courses in creative writing. It appeared that I had a certain aptitude with words, but all my compositions were returned with the complaint that nothing happened in them; there were long on description and very short on plot. Nothing happened in them because they were all based on personal experiences, of which at that time I had had few of any particular interest. What I seemed to lack was any ability to *invent* characters or incidents; to carry out, in other words, the chief duty of a creative writer.

Later, after I had done some graduate work in the Asian field and had gone to Kyoto for further study, I went on writing short pieces, now with a Japanese setting, and sending them around to various magazines in hopes of publication. One such piece that I sent to *The New Yorker*, I remember, was returned with a note penciled on it saying, "Try us with something that has more of a story line." Friends assured me I should be thrilled that the haughty *New Yorker* had deigned to take even this much notice of my efforts, but I was not greatly comforted by their observation.

Around that time Donald Keene, who was in Kyoto and was assembling material for his anthology of Japanese literature, asked me if I would translate some pieces for him. I was delighted to comply, and in the course of the work discovered what seemed to be an excellent

solution to my problem: by becoming a translator rather than a creative writer, I could concentrate all my attention on matters of wording and leave the story line to someone else. For his anthology Donald had asked me to translate some examples of kanshi or poems written in Chinese by Japanese poets, as well as some short works of fiction for the section on modern Japanese literature.

I would like to discuss the *kanshi* a little later, when I come to the subject of poetry in Chinese. Among the modern pieces Donald asked me to translate was the short story *Takasebune* by Mori Ôgai. I tackled this project with enthusiasm, it being my first attempt at translating fiction. The story concerns a criminal case in Kyoto and contains a great deal of dialogue. I did my best to render the dialogue into vivid and lifelike English, but unfortunately the Kyoto characters came out sounding like New York gangsters. Lesson Number One: dialogue must be translated in such a fashion that it sounds believable as an utterance in English, but never in a manner that suggests any particular dialect or regional speech. Donald and I, both of us from the New York area, agreed that my translation was a disaster, and I set about working on something else by Ôgai to replace it.

The handling of dialogue was also a problem in my next major translation project, which was to render into English substantial portions of the *Shih chi* or *Records of the Historian*, the voluminous history of ancient China written around 100 BCE by Ssu-ma Ch'ien. The work contains many passages of direct speech, sometimes high-flown orations in elaborately rhetorical style, at other times impassioned exchanges between persons of widely varied social background. In these latter passages in particular, it was often difficult to judge the exact emotional tenor of the pronouns and terms of address used, and to hit on appropriate English equivalents. Terms of address are notorious for the way in which they often start out being highly complimentary but become eroded through repeated use and may end up as actually derogatory in tone. The Japanese word *kimi*, for example, originally meant a lord or ruler, and hence, as a term of address, "you, my lord;" but it is now used only when addressing persons with whom one is intimately associated or those in a socially inferior position. An even more striking example is the word *kisama*, which in its written form appears to be the very soul of politeness, but which, if you are unwise enough to use it in addressing someone, will very likely land you in a fight. How, then, is one to estimate the exact emotional impact of similar terms of address in ancient Chinese and make them sound plausible in English? When someone in an early Chinese text speaks of himself as "your lackey" or "your groom," or of the person he is addressing as "you beneath whose feet I cower," is he really being as abject as these terms suggest, or merely polite in a quite conventional manner? This was one of the principal problems I faced in my *Shi chi* translations.

Around the time when I was translating the *Shih chi* there was considerable controversy in academic circles as to how certain key terms in Chinese historical and philosophical texts ought to be rendered in English. Some Sinologists claimed, for example, that the English word "emperor" was inappropriate and misleading as a translation for the Chinese *huang-ti*, which instead should be rendered as "illustrious theocrat," and similarly unfamiliar-sounding equivalents were recommended — or rather, mandated — as renderings for other frequently occurring terms.

Fortunately, my *Shih chi* translations were sponsored by the Columbia University Committee on Oriental Studies and were to be included in its translation series, which was specifically intended for students or general readers who were not specialists in Asian Studies. I could thus decline to comply with these troubling dictates of the philological experts, though this of course

did not exempt me from their disapproval.

I was also able to include less annotation on the translation than would ordinarily be expected in a work intended for specialists, and by doing so could translate a larger volume of the Chinese. And this, I might remind my listeners, at a time when footnotes were not yet looked on as reader-unfriendly, but were regarded as almost as important as the text itself. I hope my translations from the *Shih chi*, sparingly annotated though they are, have been helpful to readers of English over the years since their appearance. There is now in progress a project to produce a complete and fully annotated translation of the *Shih chi*, though unfortunately, as often happens with such large scale undertakings, it seems at present to be bogged down due to lack of funding.

After finishing with the *Shih chi*, I undertook, once more with the backing of the Committee on Oriental Studies, to prepare selections from the writings of four early Chinese philosophers, Mo Tzu, Hsün Tzu, Han Fei Tzu and Chuang Tzu. That is not their strict chronological order, but I did them in that order because I knew that Chuang Tzu would be the most difficult and so I wanted to leave him until last.

In these translations, in addition to the question of how to handle key philosophical terms, I was faced with problems of textual emendation. The writings of Hsün Tzu and Han Fei Tzu present relatively few textual problems, but those of Mo Tzu, in part because of the long period of neglect that they suffered, contain many passages that are obscure or can only be made intelligible through emendation. And in the case of Chuang Tzu, a writer notorious both for his highly unconventional thought and his startling and often paradoxical modes of expression, one is confronted with textual problems or differences of interpretation on every page.

When my Chuang Tzu translation was published, one reviewer opined that there are two types of translators: one, the kind who has a sound overall grasp of the meaning and direction of the text; and two, the kind who just goes along translating from sentence to sentence and hoping for the best. I was not entirely happy to discover that the reviewer assigned me to the second category. And yet I would have to admit that, when I was doing my Chuang Tzu translation, that often seemed to be the manner in which I was proceeding. With so many signs pointing in different directions, so many forks and turnings in the road, one seemed to have no alternative but to trust to luck to see one through.

Often, late in the evening when I am enjoying a drink, I like to read over one or another of my old translations, recalling the pleasures I had doing it. But Chuang Tzu is not one of the works I take up at such times. I am grateful to him for the royalties he brings in — far more than any of the other philosophers in the series — but I prefer to forget the headaches he gave me.

I would like to turn now to the subject of poetry in Chinese. I mentioned earlier that Donald Keene had asked me to translate some of the *kanshi* or poems in Chinese by Japanese authors for his anthology of Japanese literature. This was in the early 50's, not long after the end of the Pacific War, when *kanshi*, because of the nationalistic sentiments often expressed in them, were frowned on as "feudalistic," the term then in use to designate anything thought to be politically incorrect. There has since been a revival of interest in the form. But because Chinese is no longer a required subject in the Japanese public schools, few young people in Japan today can read the *kanshi* with ease.

I have always been fond of the *kanshi* because so often they seem to capture the scenes of Japanese life in a manner that is more concrete and vivid than anything I have found in poetry in the native language. Because of the autobiographical nature of much of the poetry written in Chinese by Sugawara no Michizane, for instance, we know more about him as a person than we know about his contemporary poets in the Heian period who wrote only in Japanese. I also like

the *kanshi* because, since they are usually set in Japan, I can go and look at the places depicted in them, something that was impossible in the case of poems with a Chinese setting during the long years when Americans could not travel to China.

My first book-length translation of Chinese poetry was the volume on the Tang dynasty poet Han-shan or Cold Mountain, followed by volumes on Su Tung-p'o and Lu Yu. In these translations of poems in *shih* form I followed the example of translators I admired such as Pound and Waley, sticking to the lineation of the Chinese as closely as possible, making no attempt to employ rhyme, and using present-day English, in my case of course the American variety.

While I was living in Kyoto, where I did most of these, I was able to receive advice on my work from two well-known poets who lived in or were passing through the city: from Cid Corman, editor of the poetry magazine *Origen*, who looked over some of my Cold Mountain translations; and from Allen Ginsberg, who went over a few of the Su Tung-p'o poems with me. Their advice, which I found very helpful, might be summed up in two dicta: make it short, and make it interesting.

Classical Chinese, the language from which I was translating, is highly concise in expression, and I fully agree that it should be rendered in as concise English as possible. I always go over my translations again and again to see if there aren't words that can be cut, or ways to convey the meaning in shorter and simpler form. I stop short of actual telegraphese, since that would be bizarre in a way that the Chinese almost never is, but I push constantly in that direction. I omit pronouns wherever possible, since pronouns are used very sparingly in Chinese poetry — and in Japanese poetry as well, for that matter — and keep articles at a minimum.

As for making the translation sound interesting, any good writer, whatever the literary form, tries to avoid clichés or shopworn diction, and a good translator must constantly be asking if there are not better and brighter words in which to render the original. But should the translation in fact come out sounding more interesting and innovative than the original? Since so much is inevitably lost in translation, one might argue that the translator is justified in trying in this way to make up for some of the loss. But it seems to me that great caution is needed here.

In the *shih* form, where the lines are of fixed length and most are end-stopped, there is simply no room for any "spread out against the sky / like a patient etherised upon a table" type of simile. One or two judiciously chosen modifiers are all that the line will allow. Some Chinese poets were clearly out to startle readers with their daring and unusual diction, but others — surely the vast majority — seem to have been content to stay within the limits of conventional language and strive for distinction in other ways. To take a quite conventional poem and try to make it sound more "interesting" by hyping up the diction in my opinion verges on a betrayal of the translators' code of ethics.

If translators find the wording or ideas of a particular poem unduly drab and wish to liven them up with innovations of their own, they should label the results "imitations," in the manner of Robert Lowell, rather than presenting them as translations. By doing so, they will receive due credit for the felicities they have introduced into the original, and at the same time will avoid making life hard for less venturesome translators who come after them.

Most traditional Chinese poetry is quite commonsensical in tone and its interest drives in most cases not from any startling brilliance of language but from the concreteness of the imagery. It is this imagery therefore that it is most important to bring across effectively in translation. When dealing with Asian poetry, of course, one encounters images of clothing or foods or plants that have no ready equivalent in English. One may have to hunt around for a suitable English translation of the term, or perhaps append a note of explanation. But I do not think it is

acceptable simply to ignore the term in the original and substitute some Western food or plant that is vaguely similar.

The American poet Gary Snyder, whom I heard recently reading poetry and speaking on environmental issues, remarked that we owe it as a matter of courtesy to Nature to know the names of the plants and trees in our immediate environment. And I would add that translators of Asian poetry owe it to the authors they are dealing with to familiarize themselves with the exact nature of the images that appear in such poetry. If you don't know what a particular Chinese or Japanese plant or tree looks like, go to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and look around until you find a specimen of it.

Thus, to illustrate what I have been saying, if you are translating a poem in which the poet says he is drinking wine and eating *chi* or *nazuna*, you should say that he is eating shepherd's purse. Readers of English may not be exactly certain just what shepherd's purse is, but they can look it up in the dictionary. It looks, and tastes, something like dandelion greens, though perhaps a little more peppery. But it is not the same thing as dandelion greens, and the difference is important to bring across. The clarity and precision of its imagery is often what is most impressive about Chinese poetry. I have always tried to render the names of such items in poetry in as accurate a manner as possible, but there was one time when this led to great difficulty. In my volume of translations of Chinese poems in the fu or rhyme-prose form, I included a long poem by the early Han poet Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju which describes the Shang-lin Park, the hunting park of the Chinese emperor. The poem in many places is little more than an exuberant catalogue of all the different kinds of birds and beasts that inhabit the park, with, for example, the names of sixteen species of wild ducks, followed by eleven kinds of monkeys, and so forth. Commentaries on the poem, written many centuries later, offer no help other than to say that this or that word indicates "a species of monkey," which one might have guessed from the context. Perhaps the commentators did not want to bother going into detail, or perhaps that particular species of monkey had by the commentators' time disappeared; we know that many types of wild life that existed in ancient China became extinct in later centuries. Chinese dictionaries are no help in reading the poem, since they were compiled much later and merely repeat the glosses of the commentators. Many of the names in the poem are in fact what is known as *hapax legomena*, words that appear only once in the written language and can never be identified with certainty.

The translator could of course render such passages by saying, "and then there were *fu* monkeys and *piao* monkeys and *hsiung* monkeys," simply romanizing the Chinese the Chinese words in their modern pronunciation, but such a procedure hardly makes for memorable poetry and would convey no clear image to the reader. Instead, I must confess that, to the horror of philologists, I arbitrarily substituted the names of various varieties of monkeys in English for the unknown — and unknowable — originals, taking care of course to explain to the reader what I was doing. This was a rather special case, and translators are happily not often faced with dilemmas of this sort. I am pleased to report that my translation of the poem on the Shang-lin Park, despite the questionable practices involved, has been well received by most readers and more than once anthologized.

In my early years I did not do much translation from Japanese, since Chinese was my main interest and I had had little formal training in the Japanese language. But in the late 70's, when Hiroaki Sato invited me to join him in putting together an anthology of Japanese poetry in English, I was delighted to take advantage of the offer, as it would allow me to work with some of the finest poems in the language, and Sato had promised to check my translations to save me from egregious error. The results of our efforts appeared in 1981 under the title *From the*

Country of Eight Islands: An Anthology of Japanese Poetry.

Classical Chinese, the language of traditional Chinese poetry, is close to English in word order, and if one sticks to the wording and sequence of the original, one usually comes out with something quite good in English. Moreover, Classical Chinese is largely monosyllabic, so that a line written in five characters will generally go easily into a line in English. Japanese, on the other hand, is polysyllabic and its word order differs greatly from that of English. In translating a Japanese poem into English, therefore, one often has to do a considerable amount of rearranging in the syntax and word order, though I try if possible to preserve what I can of the order in which the ideas and images of the original are presented to the reader.

I translate *waka*, or poems that employ a 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic pattern into four or five lines of English, and haiku into two or three lines, not out of conviction that this is the absolutely correct procedure, but simply as a means of slowing down the reading of the poem. I never attempt to reproduce in English the syllabic pattern of the Japanese poem. English in almost all cases requires fewer syllables to express a given idea than does Japanese. Any effort to reproduce the syllabic pattern of a *waka* in English will therefore almost invariably result in English that is deliberately padded, a violation of the "make it short" dictum mentioned earlier. Like the rhyme in Chinese poetry, the syllabic pattern in Japanese poetry seems to me the prosodic feature of the original that can most readily be ignored in favor of more important considerations of euphony and concision in the translation.

In the case of Chinese poetry, because the word order is so similar to that of English and because the lines are so concrete in expression, the translator is usually guided, or even impelled, in a certain direction in the rendering. Japanese poetry is much less impelling in this respect — one seems to have much greater leeway in choosing the type of syntax or wording one wishes to employ in the translation. I am always surprised at how many different English versions can be made of a Japanese poem, nearly all of them valid and effective in a way, of how many variations one can achieve by tinkering with the syntax or the word order, by shifting from a singular noun to a plural one, or from an indefinite article to a definite one. Even when dealing with a poetic form as brief as the 17-syllable haiku, there seem to be almost infinite possibilities open to the translator, a point entertainingly illustrated in Hiroaki Sato's *One Hundred Frogs*, which contains one hundred different translations of Basho's famous haiku on the frog and the old pond.

I might at this point say a word about some of my Buddhist translations, although these perhaps involve questions that are peculiar to sacred texts. The Chinese translations of the Buddhist sutras — and these are of course the ones I work from rather than from Sanskrit originals — customarily begin with four words spoken by Ananda, a close disciple of the Buddha who recited the sutras as he had heard them from his mentor; in modern Chinese the words are read *Ju shih wo wen*, or in the Japanese reading, *Nyoze gamon*. In earlier English translations of the sutras, these have often been rendered as "Thus have I heard," and some experts in Buddhism have wondered why I did not follow this rendering in my translations of the Lotus Sutra and the Vimalakirti Sutra.

I have no objection to "Thus have I heard" except that it is not contemporary English, at least not in this country. If one started off the translation with the words "Thus have I heard," it seems to me that one would have to continue in that same old-fashioned style of English, which, as I have indicated earlier, is something I would never attempt to do. Translations date quickly enough as it is without deliberately casting them in an outdated style to begin with. So I translate the opening words of the sutra as "This is what I heard," losing a certain elegance, to be sure, but

at least getting the translation going in present-day English.

I might also note that I write the word *sutra* without a macron or long mark over the "u," though someone with great authority has apparently decreed that in English it must always be written with the long mark. The Sanskrit word *sutra*, it seems to me, passed into English quite some time ago, and anyone who is familiar with it at all knows that it is pronounced *sootra* and not *sutra*, so the long mark serves no useful purpose. All it does is intimidate readers by warning them that this is a foreign word and they are to keep their distance. The aim of all my translations has been to make the literature and thought of Asian cultures as accessible to readers of English as possible, and I therefore have no sympathy with any such deliberately distancing devices.

Often, looking over my old translations, particularly those done in the earlier years, I have feelings of distinct dissatisfaction. Why didn't I work over them more carefully to eliminate faults of wordiness or awkward phrasing? I ask myself. Was I in such a hurry to get them out that I couldn't take the time? I don't think that was the case. I didn't work over them because I simply could not see the faults or rough spots that needed correction.

This is where critics come in. As Dr. Johnson observed, "What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure." If you hope to make any improvement in your work, you must get your friends — or perhaps better, your enemies — to read it over and tell you what is wrong with it. Even if they only go over a single poem or paragraph of prose, you can see the sort of things they object to and go on from there. And the franker the criticisms they hand out, the better friends they are. The friend who tells you "This is great just the way it is!" is no friend at all.

Of course you may go on rewriting and revising your translations until you find yourself in a position where you are merely changing back and forth between one possible wording and another. At that point it is best to set the piece aside and forget it for a while. Deadlines don't always permit such a procedure, but if possible I like to put aside a translation for a period of several months or more before getting it into final form. After such an interval, one can often spot all sorts of things that need correction.

In the title of my talk I indicated that I was going to speak about the pleasures of translating, but it occurs to me that I have in fact talked more about the problems. One reason, of course, is that problems tend to be more interesting to talk about than pleasures. And if any useful generalizations are to emerge from these rather random remarks, they will probably relate more to the difficulties of the translator's profession than to its delights. However, as I look back over my own years of translating, it is not the problems that I recall, but rather the pleasant memories of the places I lived when I did this or that piece of work, the people I knew then, and most of all, the many different authors with whom I was intimately associated in the process of rendering their writings into another language. It pleases me to think that I have given these authors a voice in English, and in doing so have enabled them to speak to countless readers who otherwise would perhaps never have known of them. The opening up of channels of communication is after all what translation is all about. Other professions no doubt have pleasures of their own, but if I had to do it over again, I would still choose that of translator.

I would like to conclude now by reading two poems in translation that I hope will illustrate some of the points I have been discussing. The first, entitled "A Pair of Stones," is by the Chinese poet Po Chü-i or Pai Chü-i. It was written in 826 and describes a pair of ornamental stones that the poet acquired in his late years when he was governor of the Suchou region. The stones came from nearby Lake T'ai-hu, which is referred to in the poem by the name Tung-t'ing. Those of you who are familiar with traditional Suchou gardens, or with the reproduction of a

Suchou garden in the Metropolitan Museum, know that such stones are rather spiky in shape and have a number of holes or depressions formed by the erosive action of the water. The poem is in the *shih* form and uses a five-character line.

Two chunks of gray-green stone,
their shapes grotesque and unsightly,
wholly unfit for practical uses —
ordinary people despise them, leave them untouched.
Formed in the time of primal chaos,
they took their shape at the mouth of Lake Tung-t'ing,
ten thousand ages resting by the lakeshore,
in one morning coming into my hands.
Pole-bearers have brought them to my prefectural office
where I wash and scrub away mud and stains.
Hollows are black, deeply scarred in mist,
crevices green with the rich hue of moss.
Aged dragons coiled to form their feet,
old swords stuck in for a crown,
I suddenly wonder if they didn't plummet from Heaven,
so different from anything in the human realm!
One will do to prop up my zither,
one to be a reservoir for my wine.
The tip of one shoots up several yards,
the other has a hollow, will hold a gallon of liquid;
my five-stringed instrument leaning on the left one,
my single wine cup set on the right,
I'll dip from the followed cask and it will never go dry,
though drunkenness long since has toppled me over.
Every person has something he loves,
and things all yearn for a companion.
More and more I fear that gatherings of the young
no longer will welcome a white-haired gentleman.
I turn my head, ask this pair of stones
if they'd consent to keep an old man company.
And though the stones are powerless to speak,
they agree that we three should be friends.

(*Po Chü-i*, "A Pair of Stones")

The second poem is by the Japanese Zen monk Ryôkan, who lived from 1758 to 1831 and wrote poetry in both Chinese and Japanese. The poem is in Japanese, in the *chôka* form, which is unrestricted in length and uses alternating lines of five and seven syllables. The Chinese and Japanese see the figure of a rabbit in the moon, and the poem entitled "The rabbit in the Moon," explains how the rabbit got there. It is based on one of the Jataka tales of India or stories of the Buddha in his earlier incarnations, which is why the Hindu god Indra appears in the poem.

It took place in a world

long long ago
they say: a monkey, a rabbit
and a fox
struck up a friendship,
mornings
frolicking field and hill,
evenings
coming home to the forest,
living there
while the years went by,
when Indra,
sovereign of the skies,
hearing of this,
curious to know if it were true,
turned himself into an old man,
tottering along,
made his way to where they were.
"You three,"
he said,
"are of separate species,
yet I'm told play together
with a single heart.
If what I've heard
is true,
pray save an old man
who's hungry!"
then he set his staff aside,
sat down to rest.
Simple enough, they said,
and presently
the monkey appeared
from the grove behind
bearing nuts
he'd gathered there,
and the fox returned
from the rivulet in front,
clamped in his jaws
a fish he'd caught.
But the rabbit,
though he hopped and hopped
everywhere,
couldn't find anything at all,
while the others
cursed him because
his heart was not like theirs.
Miserable me!

he thought
and then he said,
"Monkey, go cut me
firewood!
Fox, build me
a fire with it!"
and when they'd done
what he asked,
he flung himself
into the midst of the flames,
made himself an offering
for an unknown old man.
When the old man
saw this,
his heart withered.
He looked up to the sky,
cried aloud,
then sank to the ground,
and in a while,
beating his breast,
said,
"Each of
you three friends
has done his best,
but what the rabbit did
touches me most!"
Then he made the rabbit
whole again
and gathering the dead body
up in his arms,
took it and
laid it to rest
in the palace of the moon.
From that time till now
the story's been told,
this tale
of how the rabbit
came to be
in the moon,
and even I,
when I hear it,
find the tears
soaking the sleeves of my robe.

(*Ryôkan*, "The Rabbit in the Moon")

"A Pair of Stones," in Burton Watson, *Po Chü-i: Selected Poems* (Columbia Univristy Press 2000), p. 119.

"The Rabbit in the Moon," in Hiroaki Sato and Burton Watson, *From the Country of Eight Islands* (Columbia University Press 1986), p. 371.