

## *Levels of Difficulty in Translation*

by Wang Fang-yu (王方宇)

THERE ARE five levels of difficulty in doing translation work. Generally speaking, problems in translating Chinese poems are similar to those met in translating any other literature. The translator's comprehension of cursive script is dependent on his ability to integrate the following five levels. (1) The translator must first be able to recognize a character in its regular form such as 戌 *xū* 'No. 11 of the earthly branch' versus 戍 *shù* 'garrison', 鳥 *niǎo* 'bird' versus 烏 *wū* 'crow', etc. (2) He should identify the morphemes which the characters represent through the structural analysis of a given line or sentence. (3) He must re-evaluate the meaning which was arrived at from the structural analysis in terms of the cultural background of the source language. (4) The translator then needs to express the meaning of the source language as fully as possible in the target language. (5) He must finally carry over the aesthetic feelings of the source language into the target language. . . .

In the whole field of translating Chinese poems, we find problems at all levels. If we use these levels as measures of analysis, we can easily discover the translator's problems and pinpoint them for discussion.

In deciphering the script forms, the common procedure is either to identify the whole character as a unit or to identify the components which form the character. It often happens that both the whole forms and the components are ambiguous. But at this level, one must keep all the possible regular forms in mind and go to the following level to seek a solution. Besides, I believe that there are cases where one cannot translate a line accurately, even if he can identify every character in it; but it is impossible to claim that the translation is correct or 'nearer the original' without being able to read the script forms correctly.

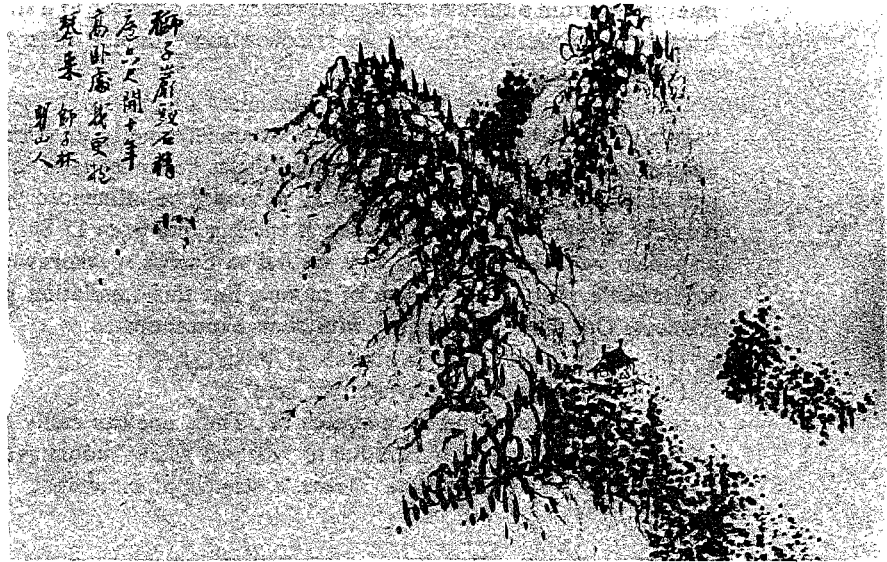
The second level is the grammar of Chinese poems. This level consists of three aspects. (1) metrical rules, (2) morphological rules, and (3) syntactical rules.

In the process of identification, quite often the metrical rules of Chinese are helpful. These rules include the end rhyme 韵脚 *yùn jiǎo*, the parallelism 对仗 *duìzhāng*, and the tonal sequence 平仄 *píng zè* of Chinese poems. These rules sometimes help us to decide the correct regular form from several possible ones.

As to morphological rules, there is no definite meaning or meanings in isolated characters; the meaning of a character may or may not be defined. The character 青 *qīng* is a kind of color, from light green shade to light blue, to dark blue, to black. But in the compound 青天 *qīng tiān* 'blue sky', it most likely means blue; but in 青丝 *qīngsī* 'black hair', it usually means 'black'. The character 朝 *zhāo* or *cháo* may mean 'morning' or 'dynasty' or something else, but in a compound 明朝 it is still ambiguous: it may mean 'tomorrow morning' or 'Ming dynasty'. Consequently, the problem cannot be solved unless we go on to the next levels.

Applying syntactical rules, certain problems of meaning may be solved. The character

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MEI CH'ING  
(梅清), 1623-1697

By the Lion Cliff Rock  
A fine little cottage stands.  
For ten years I have lived  
here  
Having brought with me  
my lute.

The painting and poem above, and those on the next page, are reproduced from the book *Chinese Painting: Its Mystic Essence*, by T. C. Lai, Swindon Book Company, Hong Kong, 1974, by courtesy of the author.

長 may represent the morpheme *cháng* meaning 'long' or *zhǎng* meaning 'grow'. In a line of poetry by Zhāng Jì 張籍, 死生長別離 *sǐ shēng cháng bié lí*, a common compound 生長 *shēngzhǎng* meaning 'grow' occurs. But after trying to fit *shēngzhǎng* as a compound in the line, we discover that the line has to be broken down into 死生 · 長 · 別離 *sǐshēng cháng bié lí* in order to derive its correct sense. In this case, 長 must serve as an adverb to modify 別離 meaning 'separate'. Only then can we identify the meaning of 長 as 'long time'. On this grammatical level, we must keep in mind the history of the Chinese language because most traditional poems are written in the T'ang style. We must also recognize that the linguistic elements which appear in different periods are not necessarily the same. In a line by Bái Jū-yī, 白居易: 食罷一睡覺 *shí bà yī shuì jué*, 睡覺 looks like *shuìjiào*, the contemporary meaning 'to sleep'. But in the T'ang period, 覺 *jué* meant 'to awake', and there was no such compound 睡覺 *shuìjiào* as there is today. Therefore the meaning of this line is: 'I woke up from a nap after eating'.

Unfortunately, grammar studies by modern linguists have not gone beyond structural analysis of sentences as yet. While we may be able to solve a lot of problems at the structural level, many will still remain for the next level [i.e., the role of cultural background]. Again, ambiguity arises when we quote a line from Bái Jū-yī's poem: 七十三人難再到 *qī shí sān rén nán zài dào*: here, 七十三人 is an ambiguous expression. It looks like 'seventy-three persons,' but only when we know that when Bái Jū-yī wrote this, he was seventy-three years old, do we get the right meaning. The meaning of this line is 'I, as an old man who is seventy-three years old, will find it difficult to come again'. In this line from Lǐ Bái's poem, 明朝有興抱琴來 *míng zhāo yǒu xìng bào qín lái*, 明朝 can only mean 'tomorrow morning' and not 'Ming dynasty'; this is obvious only because we know that the Ming dynasty is some hundred years later than Lǐ Bái's time, and Lǐ Bái

could not predict that there would be a dynasty named Ming. Thus these problems are interpreted from a cultural standpoint rather than adhering to a strict syntactic evaluation, because syntactically, there is no reason why we cannot interpret the meaning of 明朝 as 'Ming dynasty.'

The problem at the fourth level [inability to express the original meaning fully] is usually caused by the translator's poor understanding of Chinese culture. We must emphasize that the cultural background must be understood in the context of specific periods at certain locations, and that it cannot be influenced by prejudices of Western cultural background. The following is another line from Li Bái 李白: 長安一片月 *cháng ān yī piàn yuè*. Here, it seems very natural to English speakers with Western backgrounds to translate 一片月 as 'a slice of moon'. But this translation is far from the Chinese concept. One must be familiar with such expressions as:

(1) 一片水 *yī piàn shuǐ* 'a stretch of water'

(2) 一片地 *yī piàn dì* 'a stretch of land'

*Yī piàn* in these cases means 'a stretch of'. Thus, one can easily see that 一片月 is not a 'slice of moon', but 月 refers rather to 月光 *yuè guāng* 'moonlight which is shining on the ground'. So, 一片月 *yī piàn yuè* means 'a stretch of moonlight'.

P'U HSIN-YU  
(溥心畬), 1896-1963

*I take my books and sit here without a  
care,  
Dallying with a lonesome pine under its  
shade.  
Perceiving how rapidly the clouds and  
everything change,  
I invite the evening sun to stay a little  
longer.  
My pure hermit heart—what does it  
say?  
Ten thousand chariots are but old shoes  
to me.*

