

A Question of Choice, a Matter of Rendition

By Hin-cheung Lovell

IN THE RAREFIED world of Chinese painting scholarship, the translation of titles of paintings into English is of decidedly peripheral interest compared to such weighty concerns as analyzing styles, defining schools and trends, isolating individualism from traditionalism, establishing authenticity, reconstructing transmission and searching for corroborating textual evidence. . . . Perhaps because it is so peripheral, the matter has been somewhat overlooked. The following are some random thoughts on the subject in the time-honoured *pi-chi* 筆記 tradition which absolves one from cogent reasoning and penetrating analysis.

Grammatical Infidelity

Broadly speaking, titles of Chinese paintings fall into two grammatical categories: the noun construction and the verb construction. Examples of the former category are legion: *Tsao ch'un t'u* 早春圖 ("Early Spring"); *Liu-yin kao-shih t'u* 柳陰高士圖 ("Scholar under a Willow"); *Wen-hui t'u* 文會圖 ("Literary Gathering"); and so on. They are simple noun phrases and present no problem in translation. Less numerous, but still considerable by proportion, is the latter category, titles with a verb construction. These have on the whole been less well served by translators. When rendering these titles into English, there is a tendency on the part of the translator to turn what is grammatically a verb construction into a noun phrase or noun clause. Examples which come readily to mind are Kuan T'ung 關同's *Kuan-shan hsing-lü t'u* 關山行旅圖, which is usually rendered as "Travellers in the Mountains" instead of "Travelling in the Mountains", and Fan K'uan 范寬's *Ch'i-shan hsing-lü t'u* 谿山行旅圖, usually rendered as "Travellers among Mountains and Streams" instead of "Travelling among Mountains and Streams". It is evident that along with the grammatical alteration from verb to noun, something of the sense of movement in the original title is lost, and the emphasis shifts from travelling to the traveller.

The sense of movement is important because the image of travelling is a pervading one throughout the history of Chinese painting. It is a reflection of an important facet of life, almost a way of life, of the Chinese literati in medieval times, from the Six Dynasties period to the Ch'ing. Indeed, it would be difficult to think of a society in history in which travel played as significant a role in the life of a certain social caste as it did to the educated Chinese. The Chinese scholar travelled for official reasons, taking up appointments a long distance from home and undertaking numerous trips in the course of duty. He also travelled for family reasons. Above all, he travelled for spiritual reasons, to meetings with friends, to secluded mountain retreats, to regions of scenic beauty, and to locations hallowed by historical and literary associations. In a life not infrequently touched by disappointments, sad

partings and sudden deaths, his imagination found solace in the cosmic imagery of man as traveller through the journey of life.

T'ang Yin 唐寅's (1470-1523) *Nan-yu t'u* 南遊圖 provides an excellent example of a painting on the theme of travel as a source of spiritual renewal, and as a means of communion with kindred spirits of the past.¹ The short handscroll presents a close-up view of a path which winds along the rocky bank of a river. At the right is a young scholar astride a donkey, followed by an attendant carrying a *ch'in* 琴 on his back, and preceded by wheelbarrows loaded with boxes and bundles of scrolls. There is no dedication on the painting, but on the same piece of paper, immediately following the painting, T'ang Yin has written a poem of farewell with an obvious musical reference.

*"In the old days, Chi K'ang composed the Kuang-ling-san.
Its melodies are lost in the silence of a thousand years.
Today I travel here with you and perchance we can
Rediscover the music according to the score."*

嵇康舊日廣陵散，
寂寞千年音調亡；
今日送君遊此地，
可能按譜覓宮商。

Chi K'ang 嵇康 (Hsi K'ang 奚康, 223-262 A.D.), poet, philosopher and musician, was one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, the famous coterie of literary figures of the Three Kingdoms period. He fell out of favour with the Wei 魏 emperor and was executed in 262 A.D.. Just before his execution, he sang the *Kuang-ling-san* 廣陵散, accompanying himself on the *ch'in*. When he finished the melody, he said, "Yüan Hsiao-ni 袁孝尼 [his brother-in-law] used to ask me to teach him this tune, but I persistently refused. The melody *Kuang-ling* now dies with me."² Over the centuries, the name Chi K'ang evoked the poet's tragic fate and the *Kuang-ling-san* became the symbol of something beautiful that had been irretrievably lost. Although most of his life was spent in the Loyang 洛陽 area in Honan, Chi K'ang was a native of Ch'ü 滁 in eastern Anhui which adjoins Nanking. Moreover, the *Kuang-ling* of the title of the lost melody refers to the region of T'ai-hsing 泰興 east of Nanking in modern Kiangsu. Thus, Nanking became a place of pilgrimage to generations of musicians, as well as to the literati to whom such an association conveyed a special poignancy.

The identity of the person for whom T'ang Yin painted the *Nan-yu t'u* as well as composed and wrote the poem is revealed elsewhere in the handscroll: in the inscription which accompanies the title and in some of the colophons which follow the painting. He was Yang Chi-ching 楊季靜 (ca. 1477-after 1530),³ a young and distinguished *ch'in* master, apparently much esteemed by his contemporaries, as evidenced by the praise of his musical virtuosity expressed in the nine colophons appended to the painting. These were by Wen Cheng-ming 文徵明, Hsü Shang-te

¹Freer Gallery of Art, acc. no. 53.78. Discussed and fully illustrated by Thomas Lawton in "Notes on Five Paintings from a Ch'ing Dynasty Collection", in *Ars Orientalis*, vol. VIII (1970), pp. 191-215; figs. 9-14.

²*Shih-shuo hsün-yü* 世說新語, 中 A/24a-b.

³There is no biography of Yang Chi-ching in the

official history, but Chiang Chao-shen 江兆申, in his "Yang Chi-ching and the Wu School of Painters" (*National Palace Museum Bulletin*, vol. VIII, no. 3 [July-August, 1973]), has reconstructed an outline of Yang's life by culling all the information from the *Nan-yu t'u*, as well as from Wen Po-jen 文伯仁's "Portrait of Yang Chi-ching" and T'ang Yin's "The Lutist", both in the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

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Plate 48 TITLE OF NAN-YU T'U, seal script
by Wu I. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

徐尚德, Wang Huan 王渙, Liu Pu 劉布, P'eng Fang 彭昉, Huang Yün 黃雲, Chu Yün-ming 祝允明, Ch'ien T'ung-ai 錢同爰, and Hsing Ts'an-fu 邢參復. Serving as a preface to the other contributions, P'eng Fang's colophon provides the most explicit background information on the event which brought about the handscroll.

"... Chi-ching is troubled that he rarely meets anyone who understands [his music]. Therefore he takes all his possessions and, thinking nothing of travelling 1,000 *li*, he will in the second month of *i-ch'ou* [1505] carry his *ch'in* in a sack to the top of Chung-shan at Chin-ling. [Nanking] and to the banks of the Ch'in-huai River. There he will loosen his clothes and play a melody on his *ch'in*. So ancient is the melody and so pure and resounding are the notes that no one who hears him will not be moved or exhilarated. His trip will not be in vain. For his journey, the poet Ch'ien K'ung-chou [Ch'ien T'ung-ai] composed an eight-line poem and presented it to him. Several others followed the example. Their poems and essays are abundant and harmonious as a string of pearls. I humbly place my coarse words at the beginning...."⁴

...季靜慨知者之罕遇，以故挾其所有，不遠千里而遊。乙丑之二月携琴一囊復上金陵鍾山秦淮之畔。解衣盤礴試一鼓焉。渾渾古調，琅琅清響，其無感而興者乎，非徒行也。于其行，詩人錢孔周賦一律以贈，繼而作者凡若干篇。倡和盈帙，鏗如貫珠，而猥以鄙言在首...

It is evident that the colophons, abounding in references to Chi K'ang and the *Kuang-ling-san*, were written by Yang Chi-ching's friends before his departure for Nanking. They were then assembled and appended to the *Nan-yu t'u*, which can be firmly dated to the year 1505 on the basis of the cyclical year *i-ch'ou* in P'ang Fang's preface.

The title of the painting is of singular interest (Pl. 48). *Nan-yu*, two perfectly formed characters in seal script, are followed by the calligrapher's signature and

⁴By virtue of its role as the preface, P'eng Fang's colophon should occupy the first rather than the fifth place in the sequence of the nine colophons. The order was re-arranged at the time of the mounting or re-mounting probably in deference to the seniority or eminence of some of the writers.

dedication: *Wu I wei Chi-ching ch'i-chia chuan* 吳奕爲季靜契家篆, "seal-script [calligraphy] for my sworn relative Chi-ching by Wu I". He was the nephew of Wu K'uan 吳寬 (1435-1504), the famous connoisseur and one of the leading spirits of the Suchou literati circle at the time of Shen Chou 沈周 (1427-1509). Although Wu I (1472-1519) was an active member of the same circle in his generation, little is known about his life and only three specimens of his seal-script calligraphy seem to have survived.⁵ The year of his birth, 1472, is ascertained from the seal at the lower right corner of the title which reads *jen-ch'en sheng* 壬辰生, and the year of his death, 1519, is computed from Wang Ch'ung 王寵's (1494-1533) eulogy which laments Wu I's untimely death at 48 *sui*.⁶

The profusion of documentary material contained in Wu I's title, in T'ang Yin's poem, in P'eng Fang's preface as well as in the other eight colophons leaves not the slightest doubt as to the exact nature of the painting's subject matter. The painting depicts not any trip undertaken by a scholar, but one particular trip undertaken by Yang Chi-ching from Suchou to Nanking in the spring of 1505, and the beardless young man riding the donkey is none other than the *ch'in* master himself. Such specificity demands an equal measure of exactitude in the comprehension and translation of the title. *Nan-yu t'u* is perhaps best translated as "Journeying to Nanking", a rendition which retains the sense of movement in the original verb construction, states the specific destination and conveys the spiritual *raison d'être* of the journey.

In the context of verb construction versus noun construction, one might take passing note of Huang Kung-wang 黃公望's *Fu-ch'un shan-chü t'u* 富春山居圖, where the seeming ambiguity of "*shan-chü*" in the original title is fortuitously matched by a similar ambiguity of "dwelling" in the generally accepted English title, "Dwelling in the Fu-ch'un Mountains". While "dwelling" triumphantly straddles the fence which separates the verb from the noun, and while "travellers" and "journey" can be painlessly changed to "travelling" and "journeying", the life of the translator is bedevilled by innumerable words which defy translation. One such is the character *hsing* (in the title *Ming-huang hsing Shu* 明皇幸蜀), denoting "to bestow one's imperial presence on", of which there is no succinct English equivalent. "Ming-huang Bestowing His Imperial Presence on Szechwan" is indeed a cumbersome title, one which a translator, however brave, would hesitate to advocate in preference to the much simpler "Ming-huang's Journey to Shu". The subject of the two versions of this composition in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, has been identified as the flight of T'ang Ming-huang from Ch'ang-an 長安 to Szechwan 四川 in 756 A.D..⁷ The journey was no glorious imperial tour, but an ignominious flight from the rebel forces of An Lu-shan 安祿山, a flight made more catastrophic by the death of Yang Kuei-fei 楊貴妃. The translator is fortunately spared the dilemma of having to choose between an awkward translation and an abbreviated one by two pertinent points.

⁵The other two, in the collection of John M. Crawford, Jr., are illustrated and discussed by Marc F. Wilson and Kwan S. Wong in *Friends of Wen Cheng-ming*, nos. 12 and 17.

⁶Wang Ch'ung, *Ya-i-shan-jen chi* 雅宜山人集 [facsimile reprint] (Taipei, 1968), p. 432.

⁷*Ku-kung ming-hua san-pai-chung* 故宮名畫三百種 (Taipei, 1959), vol. I, nos. 4 and 35.

Firstly, the subject matter of the two paintings in question is still uncertain, and the attachment of the title to the paintings occurred in very recent times. Secondly, even if the subject matter is correctly identified, the unmistakable note of irony in the title is entirely unintentional, and to render *Ming-huang hsing Shu* faithfully would be to perpetuate a nuance of meaning which is absent from the original.

Literary Allusions

In the cases of those paintings which illustrate specific literary works, their titles present a special problem in translation. The problem is exemplified by a painting by Lu Chih 陸治 (1496-1576) in the Freer Gallery of Art.⁸ The handscroll depicts a wide expanse of river, with horizontal spits of land in the background, another projecting from the right in middle ground, and a promontory at the left foreground. Skirting the promontory is a path by which host and departing guest had travelled to the boat which is moored along the riverbank. The painting bears an inscription by the artist: *Chia-ching chia-yin chiu-yueh Pao-shan Lu Chih tso* 嘉靖甲寅九月包山陸治作, "Painted by Lu Chih, [hao] Pao-shan, in the ninth month of the *chia-yin* year in the reign of Chia-ching [1554]".

The title preceding the painting, written in *hsing-shu* 行書 by P'eng Nien 彭年 (1505-1565), reads: *Hsün-yang ch'iu se* 潯陽穉色, "Autumn Colours at Hsün-yang" (Pl. 49). The allusion is to Po Chū-i 白居易's (772-846 A.D.) famous poem, the *P'i-p'a hsing* 琵琶行, which narrates an encounter on the Hsün-yang River in the Chiu-chiang 九江 district of Kiangsi province.

"One night by the Hsün-yang River, I was bidding a guest
farewell.

Maple leaves and rushes rustled in autumn's desolate chill.
I, the host, dismounted and the guest had boarded the boat.
We raised our wine cups, but alas there was no music. . . ."

潯陽江頭夜送客，
楓葉荻花秋瑟瑟。
主人下馬客在船，
舉酒欲飲無管絃。

The allusion is confirmed by the transcription of the poem in *chuan-shu* 篆書 by Wen P'eng 文彭 (1498-1573) which is appended to the painting. Both P'eng Nien's title and Wen P'eng's transcription of the poem were probably executed immediately or very soon after the painting. There is no doubt that Lu Chih's painting was intended to illustrate Po Chū-i's poem. Within the simple composition of the painting are contained all the details in the first four lines of the poem—the riverbank, the maple trees, the reeds, the host and departing guest, the boat—as well as the virtuoso *p'i-p'a* player who is about to make her appearance. With a dry brush, a sparing use of *ts'un* 皴, and washes of pale colours accented only by touches of red for the maple leaves, the artist evokes to perfection the profoundly melancholic, almost elegaic, quality of Po Chū-i's poem.

Several choices present themselves as possible renditions of the title. A straightforward translation of *Hsün-yang ch'iu-se* into "Autumn Colours at Hsün-yang" has

⁸Acc. no. 39.3. For illustration, see *The Freer Gallery of Art, I: China* (Kodansha, Tokyo, [1972?]), p. 171, top. For a colour illustration of a portion of the painting, see James F. Cahill, *Chinese Painting* (Skira, 1960), p. 133.

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the virtues of being faithful to the original as well as being descriptive of the painting. However, to those unfamiliar with the opening passage of Po Chū-i's poem, the allusion is obscure. That translation is, however, preferable to the adoption of the poem's title *P'i-p'a hsing* for the painting. A third possibility is the rather unfortunate "The Lute Girl's Lament", to be mentioned only to be immediately rejected. It is a title less recondite than either of the other two and is meaningful to the generation familiar with Giles' translation of Po Chū-i's poem into English. It would appear that the ideal translated title of this type of painting should retain the allusion, and at the same time be not too abstruse for the English reader; further, it should not lose sight of its function as the title of a painting. By these criteria, "Autumn Colours at Hsün-yang" does seem to be the most satisfactory.

Amplification and Overamplification

Amplification of the original title may be justifiable, even desirable, in cases where the information is otherwise too terse to be meaningful to the English reader. There exists a number of handscrolls entitled *Wang-ch'uan t'u* 輞川圖 by various artists which illustrate the twenty stanzas of the poem *Wang-ch'uan chi* 輞川集, written by Wang Wei 王維 (699-759 A.D.) and his friend P'ei Ti 裴迪 (active 740's). The poem describes Wang Wei's country villa at Wang-ch'uan and its surroundings. Wang-ch'uan is in the southern part of Lan-t'ien 藍田 in Shensi province, an area of scenic beauty traversed by the Wang River 輞川. Not only did Wang Wei immortalize the locality in the poem, but he is also said to have created a pictorial record of Wang-ch'uan in the form of a long handscroll, thus bringing into play the two sides of his creative genius. All the paintings bearing the title of *Wang-ch'uan t'u* do claim descent from Wang Wei's lost painting. Artists who are recorded as having worked in this tradition include Kuo Chung-shu 郭忠恕 (latter half of the tenth century), and Chao Meng-fu 趙孟頫 (1254-1322).⁹ There are two extant versions of the *Wang-ch'uan t'u* by Sung Hsū 宋旭 (1525-ca.1605). One of these, dated in correspondence to 1574, was formerly in the Victoria Contag collection and is now in the Asian

⁹For various versions attributed to these and other artists, see *Bunjinga suihen, vol. I: O Ui* (Wang Wei) 文人畫粹編第一卷：王維 (Chuo Koron, Tokyo, 1975).

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Plate 49 TITLE OF HSÜN-
YANG CH'IU SE, *hsing-shu* by
P'eng Nien. Freer Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C.

Art Museum of San Francisco.¹⁰ The other, which is in the Freer Gallery of Art (acc. no. 09.207), bears a spurious Wang Meng 王蒙 signature, and is now attributed to Sung Hsü because of its close stylistic affinity to the San Francisco painting.¹¹

A mere romanization of the title into *Wang-ch'uan t'u* is unsatisfactory, as the name *Wang-ch'uan* carries little meaning to those unfamiliar with the background of this group of paintings. It is an impoverished version of the Chinese original; an arrangement of eleven letters of the alphabet simply does not convey the wealth of literary, pictorial and pictographic associations inherent in the three Chinese characters. This seems to be a case in which the translator is entitled to a certain licence to expand. "The Poet Wang Wei's Country Retreat at Wang-ch'uan" may be quite acceptable as it both retains the name Wang-ch'uan and provides enough information to make it immediately intelligible.

The licence to expand should be tempered with discretion. Sometimes it is advisable to refrain from using it even though additional information seems to warrant an amplification of the title to make it more precise. "The Hangchow Bore in Moonlight" for Li Sung 李嵩's (ca. 1190-1230) *Yüeh-yeh kuan-ch'ao t'u* 月夜觀潮圖¹² may serve as an admonition to leave well alone.

ONE OR TWO conclusions may be drawn from the above random observations. By their very nature, titles which are contemporaneous with the paintings and are therefore more true to the artists' intent, as distinct from titles acquired in relatively recent times, deserve closer attention paid to their identification, interpretation and rendition. The ideal translation of a painting title combines correct information, precision, fidelity to grammar and quintessential meaning, and, not least, elegance of language. These are qualities so diverse as to be almost impossible for any one translated title to possess. It is perhaps inevitable that any translation would in the end be a compromise. But in arriving at that compromise, one might do worse than to bring to the process a measure of the attention accorded to the major aspects of the study of Chinese painting.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pl. 27.

¹²*Chinese Art Treasures*, no. 51.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pls. 37-39.