

Improvising Chinese Classical Poems to Contemporary English Readers

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Abstract: The practice of traditional poetic translation to Chinese classical poems based on “imitation”, the principle that every word should be translated with nothing added, falls short of expressing the tone and spirit of a Chinese poem, since the tone always more or less escapes transference to another language and cultural moment. Moreover, the translated text turns out to be hardly an English poem. This paper proposes a new technique of translation, “improvisation” that makes accessible the unspoken context and emotional implications conveyed by the original Chinese language text. Improvisation in a three-fold process of “Imitation + Imagination + Modernization” brings translator’s personal awareness into the moment, and the element of heightened consciousness can result in the invention of new thought patterns, new practices, new structures or symbols, and/or new ways to envision. As a result, improvisation creates a mode of expression that uses an intuitive tapping into the poet’s sensibility as a bridge to creating a new poem understandable to contemporary English readers.

Keywords: Improvisation, Chinese classical poems, contemporary English readers, imitation.

1. Introduction

Though poetry translation aims at enabling readers to understand what is implied, as well as actually written, in the original, the practice of traditional poetic translation to Chinese classical poems has mostly been based on “imitation”, the principle that every word should be translated with nothing added. However, because of the typical features of Chinese language and the structures of Chinese classical poetry, “imitation” fails to translate them out and especially falls short of expressing the tone and spirit of a Chinese poem. Moreover, the translated text turns out to be hardly an English poem understandable to contemporary English readers.

When some features and structures of Chinese language and classical poems are proved to be untranslatable, it is not acceptable to rigidly follow the patterns of language at the cost of the tone and spirit of the poem. A new technique of translation “improvisation” makes accessible the unspoken context and emotional implications conveyed by the original Chinese language text in a three-fold process of “Imitation + Imagination + Modernization.” It brings translator’s personal awareness into the moment, and the element of heightened consciousness can result in the invention of new thought patterns, new practices, new structures or symbols, and/or new ways to envision. As a result, improvisation creates a mode of expression that uses an intuitive tapping into the poet’s sensibility as a bridge to creating a new poem understandable to contemporary English readers.

2. Why Chinese Classical Poems Have to Be Improvised

Charles Budd mentioned, in his translation of *Chinese Poems* in 1912 that many of the translations are nearly literal, “excepting adaptations to meet the exigencies of rhyme and rhythm; but poetry translation should be expanded to enable readers to understand what is implied, as well as actually written, in the original (p. 2)” After all, the chief aim of the translator of poetry should be to create in the mind of the reader the sensory atmosphere in which the poet existed when he wrote the poem. Although he did not achieve success in his task, Budd pointed out almost a century ago what is still the present situation: that Chinese poetry has been translated in dozens, if not hundreds of ways, but the full meaning and implications are still unperceivable to English readers.

Although everyone agrees that translation is more than a leap from dictionary to dictionary, what Robert Lowell refers to in his book, *Imitations*, as “poetic translation,” has been practiced at the level of “imitation” based on the principle that every word in Chinese poems should be translated with nothing added, while the resulting translation must be, in its own right, an English poem. However, in many cases, the translation as the result of “imitation” is hardly an English poem at all, not to mention whether it is able to transfer any comprehensible meaning of the original poem. Translation may be reliable with respect to the literal meaning but “misses the tone,” as Boris Pasternak said, though he also admits that the tone “always more or less escapes transference to another language and cultural moment” (Lowell, 1958, Introduction, p. xi).

This dilemma is caused by three tendencies in the field of linguistics until the mid 1960s when Gumperz and Hymes (1964) appealed for studies that would analyze in detail how language is deployed as a constitutive feature of the indigenous settings and events that constitute the social life of the societies of the world. The untranslatable structure and ambiguous multi-layered meanings of Chinese language and Chinese poetry prevent strict imitation from accomplishing the task of translating Chinese poems.

2.1. Three Tendencies in Linguistics of Neglecting the Intrinsic Figure-Ground Relationship of the Focal Event and Context

Duranti and Goodwin (1987, pp. 4-45) list three tendencies in the field of linguistics until the mid 1960s before the issue of context is raised by Gumperz and Hymes (1964) to remind people to look beyond the event itself to other phenomena (for example cultural setting, speech situation, shared background assumptions) within which the event is embedded, or alternatively that features of the talk itself invoke particular background assumptions relevant to the organization of subsequent interaction. These three tendencies are discussed below.

2.1.1. Focusing on the Figure and Ignoring the Ground

For quite a long period linguists have taken the segmental structure of language as the key focal phenomenon that is relevant to the production and organization of talk. One result of this is a vast disparity between the incredible amount of work that has been done within

formal linguistics on language structure, and the very small amount of research that has focused explicitly on the organization of context. There has been sustained focus on the details of language structure combined with a complementary neglect of the intrinsic figure-ground relationship of focal event and context.

2.1.2. Restricting Analysis to the Sentence

By way of contrast the individual sentence provides a clear, highly structured, well-ordered world, one that lends itself well systematic description and analysis of the organization it displays so prominently. However, that analytic clarity may be purchased at the cost of ignoring fundamental aspects of the ways in which human beings construct, interpret, and use language as a constitutive feature of the activities they engage in.

2.1.3. Extracting the Focal Event from Its Context for Analysis

The structural articulation of the focal event is matched by an apparent clarity in its shape, outline, and boundaries. The effect of this is that it becomes easy for analysts to view the focal event as a self-contained entity that can be cut out from its surrounding context and analyzed in isolation, a process that effectively treats the context as irrelevant to the organization of the focal event. It is tacitly assumed that the process of removing a speech form from the setting in which it actually emerged and placing it in a new and often radically different context, the analytic collection of the investigator, does little if any damage to its intrinsic structure. However, as Halliday and Hasan (1976), Kristeva (1980) and Silverstein (1985) suggest, much of what is important in a story or myth is not the “content” but its intertextuality. It is very convenient to be able to extract speech forms from local contexts of production, a process that is facilitated by the clarity with which an event can be perceived as a discrete, self-contained unit, but in this process, the intertextuality is missed.

When translating Chinese poems, these three tendencies, with the result of strict imitation, have proved to be unsuccessful because of the untranslatable features of Chinese language and poetry.

2.2. Features of Chinese Language and Poetry

2.2.1. Untranslatable Features of Chinese and Chinese Poetry

Chinese has a limited number of sounds compared with other major languages. In Chinese, a monosyllable is pronounced in one of four tones, and any given syllable in any given tone has scores of possible meanings. Thus a Chinese monosyllabic word (and often the written character) is comprehensible only in the context of a particular phrase: a linguistic basis, perhaps, for Chinese philosophy, which was always based on relation rather than substance (Weinberger, 1987, p.5).

For poetry, this means that rhyme is inevitable. Chinese prosody is basically concerned with characters per line and the arrangement of tones — both of which are untranslatable.

Unfortunately, “some translators still ... attempt to nurture Chinese rhyme patterns in the hostile environment of western language” (Weinberger, 1987, p. 5).

Weinberger (1987) has presented nineteen ways of translating Wang Wei’s poem *Deer Park* and analyzed each of its deficiencies as the result of imitation. As a prelude to discussion, each character in this poem is translated word-by-word in its literal meaning as follows, without considering the context:

鹿 柴
[lu4 cai2]
Deer Park

空 [kong1] Empty	山 [shan1] mountains/hills	不 [bu2] not	见 [jian4] to see	人, [ren2] person/people
但 [dan4] But	闻 [wen2] to hear	人 [ren2] person/people	语 [yu3] words/ conversation	响。 [xiang3] sound/to echo
返 [fan3] To return	景 [jing (ying)3] brightness/ shadows	入 [ru4] to enter	深 [shen1] Deep	林, [lin2] forest
复 [fu4] To return/again	照 [zhao4] to shine/to reflect	青 [qing1] green/blue/black	苔 [tai1] moss/lichen	上。 [shang4] above/on (top of)/top

The following translations by Fletcher and Liu have attempted to follow both the structure and rhyming system of the original poem.

1) The Form of the Deer

So lone seem the hills; there is no one in sight there.

But whence is the echo of voices I hear

The rays of the sunset pierce slanting the forest,

And in their reflection green mosses appear.

— W. J. B. Fletcher. (1919)

2) The Deer Enclosure

On the empty mountains no one can be seen,

But human voices are heard to resound.

The reflected sunlight pierces the deep forest

And falls again upon the mossy ground.

— James J. Y. Liu. (1962)

In these two versions, when the diction imitates the rhyming pattern of the original Chinese poem, it introduces oddities. Fletcher invents a first-person narrator who can *hear* and asks where the sounds are coming from, but if the hills are *there*, where is the narrator? The fourth

line also creates confusion; how can green mosses *appear* in their reflection? In Liu's attempt, the archaic word *resound* is only utilized to rhyme with *ground*.

These examples illustrate precisely why it is advisable, as Weinberger (1987, p. 5) suggests, not to "nurture Chinese rhyme patterns in the hostile environment of a western language," but to keep the translation closer to the spirit of the original poem. Many translators attempt to overcome the dilemma of the untranslatability of Chinese poems, as shown in other translations in Weinberger's book. Kenneth Rexroth, in his translation, ignores the structure of Chinese poems since that cannot be translated and introduces words and phrases, in order to keep the meaning of the poem close to the spirit and comprehensible to readers,

3) Deep in the Mountain Wilderness
 Deep in the mountain wilderness
 Where nobody ever comes
 Only once in a great while
 Something like the sound of a far off voice.
 The low rays of the sun
 Slip through the dark forest,
 And gleam again on the shadowy moss.

— Kenneth Rexroth. (1970)

Rexroth, as Weinberger noted (1987, p. 23), ignores what he presumably considers untranslatable in the original. The title is eliminated, and the philosophical *empty mountain* becomes the empirical "mountain wilderness." Certain words and phrases are Rexroth's own inventions. Still, one of them, "Where nobody ever comes," leads him into an ambiguity and his modification of "the sound of a far off voice" with "something like" makes a rather awkward fourth line.

By comparison, Gary Snyder's translation is considered structurally sound while being as concise as the original (though expressed in eight lines instead of four), adds nothing, and exists as an English poem.

4) Deer Park
 Empty mountains:
 no one to be seen.
 Yet — hear —
 human sounds and echoes
 Returning sunlight
 enters the dark woods;
 Again shining
 on the green moss, above.

— Gary Snyder. (1978)

Snyder's syntactical use of the imperative *hear* creates an exact moment—the immediate present—while "sounds and echoes" convey the double meaning of the original Chinese

character. This translation has escaped the untranslatability of Chinese by avoiding its structure and rhyming patterns. Simultaneously, it overcomes the ambiguity of the Chinese poem by introducing time and a first-person narrator (implied through the imperative *hear*); and evokes a multi-layered meaning (in the phrase “sounds and echoes”). These features are considered to further complicate the translation of Chinese poems.

2.2.2. Ambiguous and Multi-layered Meanings of Chinese Poetry

Chinese poetry has the characteristics of universality, impersonality, absence of time, and absence of subject, which create ambiguity. These features are amplified by the difficulty of understanding cultural context, and as a result multiple interpretation appears relative to the perception of each reader.

Ma Zhi-yuan's poem, *Tian Jing Sha: Autumn Thoughts* is considered one of the extreme examples of the untranslatable features of Chinese poetry, which makes imitation completely impossible. The word-by-word translation is as follows,

5. 天净沙·秋思 [tian1 jing4 sha1 qiu1 si1] Tian Jing Sha: Autumn Thoughts

枯藤 [ku1 teng2] Withered vines	老树 [lao3 shu4] old trees	昏鸦 [hun1 ya1] crows at twilight
小桥 [xiao3 qiao2] A small bridge	流水 [liu2 shui3] a running brook	人家 [ren2 jia1] a farm hut
古道 [gu3 dao4] An ancient road	西风 [xi1 feng1] the west wind	瘦马 [shou4 ma3] a bony horse
夕阳 [xi1 yang2] The dusk sun	西 [xi1] west	下 [xia4] down
断肠人 [duan4 chang2 ren2] A broken heart	在 [zai4] at	天涯 [tian1 ya2] the end of the world

Attempting to imitate the original, Cyril Birch (1972, p. 17) translates the text as follows.

6) Autumn Thoughts

Dry vine, old tree, crows at dusk.
Low bridge, stream running, cottages,
Ancient road, west wind, lean nag,
The sun westering
And one with breaking heart at the sky's edge.

In English, noun phrases are clustered in the first three lines without verbs. Apart from being totally un-poetic, this structure prevents the reader from understanding the grammatical relationships necessary to form a complete picture. In this case, the attempted imitation of Chinese language patterns results in ambiguity and uncertainty without achieving either coherent meaning or poetry. The reader is left to make whatever he can out of it.

The relationship among the crow, the tree, the house, the river, the horse and the sunset still depends on each reader's imagination and understanding, based on which verbs can be added to, make it at least meaningful, though, perhaps, not a poem.

7)

In twilight, a crow perched on an old tree which was twisted by a withered vine.
A house stood beside a bridge that crossed the river.
A jade horse was lingering alone on the ancient road swept by the bitter west wind.
Now the sun gradually sets.
The traveler moving toward his next destination is far away from home
And his homesickness makes him think this is the end of the world.

Ding, Zhuxing and Burton Raffel manage to recompose the text by adding verbs to create relationship among noun phrases while remaining its poetic structure by resulting in a 8-line (instead of 5-line) poem (Wang, 2009),

8) Tune: Tian Jing Sha

Withered vines hanging on old branches,
Returning crows croaking at dusk,
A few houses hidden past a narrow bridge
And below the bridge a quiet creek running.
Down a worn path, in the west wind,
A lean horse comes plodding.
The sun dips down in the west
And the lovesick traveler is still at the end of the world.

It is still difficult to assess whether this translation conveys the exact tone and meaning of the original Chinese poem or fully realizes itself as an English poem, which should be based on understanding of the biographical and cultural context in which its author was situated. Ma Zhiyuan, like many other poets, vacated his government position from disappointment and sought to become a hermit. The melancholy autumn scene evokes sorrow about his own life, and his decision at an old age, to become a lonely tramp on a voyage without a destination. This is the cultural context that imitation cannot convey.

3. Improvisation: Translator as Co-author

Bakhtin put forward the notion of the dialogic organization of language and called attention to how a single strip of talk (utterance, text, story, etc.) can juxtapose language drawn from, and

invoking, alternative cultural, social and linguistic home environments, the interpenetration of multiple voices and forms of utterance (cf. Bakhtin, 1981, 1984). Accordingly, a range of work has been focusing on the contribution made by the audience to a telling (see for example the special issue of *Text* on “The Audience as Co-author” [Volume 6.3, 1986] by Duranti).

When imitation falls short of expressing the tone and spirit of a Chinese poem, it is proved that it needs the translator to turn into a co-author with his imagination to create the English poem together with the poet in the same context. The imaginative translator can approach the poem through the poet’s life records, cultural, and historic context to gain an intuitive understanding of how the imagery and narrative come together as a poem. The imagination liberates a new technique of translation that makes accessible the unspoken context and emotional implications conveyed by the original Chinese language text. This technique is a form of “improvisation”.

The following translation to *Tian Jing Sha: Autumn Thoughts* begins to move in this direction. While following the text in some details, it alters the original by imagining the environment through the narrator’s perspective. As a result it conveys the underlying meaning, or tone, of the poem which is understandable to contemporary English language readers.

9) Autumn Meditation

Crows resting on the old tree’s withered vines,
 send out fitful sad cries at the evening dusk.
 Across a foot bridge on the stream of running water,
 a solitary household stands.
 How lonely!
 How sad!
 Leading a scraggy horse,
 walk slowly along the ancient path
 against the west wind.
 The sun is going down in the west.
 At the remotest corner of the world,
 I, a heartbroken tramp, am thinking of my past.
 — Wang Shi-jie (2009)

3.1. What Is Improvisation?

The meaning of the verb “to improvise” is to “perform or deliver without previous preparation ” (*Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*). This spontaneous technique can be applied to acting, singing, speaking or creating something original, in the moment and in response to the stimulus both of the environment and inner feelings. One of the typical models of improvisational activity is musical improvisation, especially jazz. As opposed to playing music that is strictly pre-composed, musical improvisation is the act of spontaneously creating music. Classical icons like Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, revered for their composed masterworks, were all expert improvisers.

Improvisation is about creativity, being in the moment, and discovering new modes of expression, and as such is not tied to any specific genre (Perlmutter, 2010). Improvisation

brings personal awareness into “the moment.” This element of heightened consciousness can result in the invention of new thought patterns, new practices, new structures or symbols, and/or new ways to envision. As applied to poetic translation, improvisation creates a mode of expression that uses an intuitive tapping into the poet’s sensibility as a bridge to creating a new poem.

3.2. John Digby’s Three-fold Process of Improvisation

The techniques of musical improvisation are applied to poetic translation by John Digby¹, an English poet, and his three-fold process of improvisation “Imitation + Imagination + Modernization” has been adopted in the joint work of him and the author of this paper to translate a series of Chinese classical poems (Digby and Bai, 2011). The three steps can be defined as follows,

Step 1: Imitation: uses literal words, meaning, structure.

Step 2: Imagination: approaches the poem through the poet’s life records and cultural context, to achieve an intuitive understanding of how—at the moment of poetic composition—the words, meaning and structure came together.

Step 3: Modernization: uses universal language to make it understandable to contemporary readers, as Robert Lowell claimed, “to write live English . . . [as] authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America” (1958, p.xi) .

The following translations of Tao Qian’s poem by William Acker, David Hinton and Charles Budd will be compared with John Digby’s improvisation.

Tao Qian
<p>责 子 [ze2 zi3]</p> <p>白发被两鬓，肌肤不复实。[bai2 fa4 bei4 liang3 bin4, ji1 fu1 bu2 fu4 shi2] 虽有五男儿，总不好纸笔。[sui1 you3 wu3 nan2 er2, zong3 bu2 hao4 zhi3 bi3] 阿舒已二八，懒惰故无匹。[a1 shu1 yi3 er4 ba1, lan3 duo4 gu4 wu2 pi3] 阿宣行志学，而不爱文术。[a1 xuan1 xing2 zhi4 xue2, er3 bu2 ai4 wen2 shu4] 雍端年十三，不识六与七。[yong1 duan1 nian2 shi2 san1, bu4 shi2 liu4 yu2 qi1] 通子垂九龄，但觅梨与栗。[tong1 zi3 chui3 jiu3 ling2, dan4 mi4 li2 yu2 li4] 天运苟如此，且进杯中物。[tian1 yun4 gou3 ru2 ci3, qie3 jin4 bei1 zhong1 wu4]</p>

¹ John Digby is a British-born poet and collagist. He is the author of four books of poems: *Sailing Away from Night*, *The Structure of Bifocal Distance*, *To Amuse a Shrinking Sun* and *Incantations*. He is also co-author of *The Collage Handbook*. His poems have been translated into many other languages. He translated more than 100 Chinese poems before shaping this new technique of improvisation to Chinese classical poems. He and Hong Ai Bai improvised Du Fu’s poem *Watching Gong-sun’s Student Dancing Jian Qi*, (2010), *Three Neglected Chinese Women*, *Three Deserted Tang Poets* (2011), Bai Juyi’s poems *Simple-Simple*, *Losing a Slave Girl* (2011), *Six Songs from Ancient China* (2011), and six brochures on horse poems in Chinese literature.

William Acker (1952)	David Hinton (1993)	Charles Budd (1912)
Putting the Blame on His Sons White hair covers my temples --- My flesh is no longer firm, And though I have five sons Not one cares for brush and paper. Ah/shu is sixteen years of age; For laziness he surely has no equal. Ah/hsuan tries his best to learn But does not really love the arts. Yung and Tuan at thirteen years Can hardly distinguish six from seven; T'ung/tzu with nine years behind him Does nothing but hunt for pears and chestnuts. If such was Heaven's decree In spite of all that I could do, Bring on, bring on The things within the Cup.	Scolding My Sons My temples covered all in white, I'm Slack-muscled and loose-skinned for good now. And though I do have five sons, not one of them prizes paper and brush. A-shu is already twice eight, and who's ever equaled him for sheer laziness? A-hsuan is fifteen, time studies began, But he's immune to words and ideas. Yung and Tuan are both thirteen now, and they can't even add six and seven. And T'ung-tzu, who's almost nine, does nothing but forage pears and chestnuts. If this is heaven's way, I'll offer it that stuff in the cup. It needs a drink.	The Five Sons I am wrinkled and gray, And old before my day; For on five sons I look, And not one loves a book. Ah-Shu is sixteen years, The sight of work he fears; He is the laziest lout You'd find the world throughout. Ah-Suen has tried in vain A little wit to gain; He shirks the student's stool, At grammar he's a fool! Yong-twan is thirteen now, And yet I do avow He can't discriminate The figures six and eight! Tong-tze is only nine, But clearly does opine That life, with all its cares, Consists of nuts and pears. Alas, that Fate so dour On me her vials should pour! What can I do but dine, And drown my woes in wine!

William Acker's version literally translates every Chinese character of the poem in its original meaning, while David Hinton's version is more like an English poem, but both remain at the level of imitation. Although Charles Budd had intended his translation to convey the atmosphere of the poet's environment, as previously discussed, his effort to adapt to the rhyming pattern obstructs the meaning because of obsolete diction in phrases such as "the laziest lout," "shirk the student's stool," "opine," and "dour."

Critic Huang Tingjian (quoted by Wang Shijie, 2010) argues that while the poem is a criticism of the poet's sons, the exaggerated and satiric expressions reveal the poet's bittersweet

feelings of a father's affection mingled with the disappointment that his sons might not fulfill his expectation of them. The tone, according to Huang, never becomes hostile scolding or mockery of the sons' laziness and stupidity. None of the above-mentioned versions of translation have successfully "created the sensory atmosphere in which the mind of the poet moved when he wrote the poem" (Budd, 1912, Preface).

Instead, Digby's 3-step model of improvisation, besides fidelity to the original ideas of the poem, re-imagines the immediate context of the poet at the time of composition and creates, using these materials extemporaneously, the credible voice of an old man speaking in a plain language that is accessible to the contemporary reader. This model of improvisation is based on the awareness and understanding of the following three elements:

- The original poem: literal meaning → blaming the five sons who have no interest and talent in learning or arts, even make no effort to do anything productive or positive. Even Tu Fu considered that this poem expresses Tao Qian's worry and concern over his sons, none of whom had any ambition to succeed.
- The immediate context of the poet: → Tao Qian adopted a hermit's life after resigning from his government position, relinquishing his ambition to serve the country and people. He contemplates his five sons, whom he loves as a father though they might fail to meet his expectation or realize his ambition.
- The skills and techniques of improvisation: → no need to follow the structure and rhyming patterns of the original, use universal language comprehensible to contemporary readers to express humorous sarcasm about his sons and over his retreat into drinking to escape the unalterable reality.

Based on this understanding to Tao Qian's poem as well as his immediate context, Digby improvised the poem as follows,

Five Sons: Fruits from the Old Tree

So be it
I'm old
beyond getting an erection
aching all over
thinning hair
sagging cheeks
almost toothless
and my neighbors
yell me how much joy
I have for being
blessed with five sons

I ask myself
how far does the fruit
fall from the tree?

Fruits of my loins!
that's a laugh —

What a bunch I've got!

Ah-Shu is going on
for seventeen
and he's beyond lazy
I've seen rocks move quicker
except when it comes to eating

As for Ah-Husan he's reaching
up for fifteen and cares
little or nothing
for writing or the arts
probably wouldn't know
what end of the brush to hold

There's Yung and Tuan
twins
thirteen years old
neither can differentiate
six from seven
both have difficulty counting
the fingers on one hand

And lastly there's T'ung
who's almost nine
and spends his waking life
dashing around seeking
only pears and nuts
he's as giddy as a squirrel
and almost as intelligent

I have no idea
what I said or did
to offend my ancestors
The State is falling to pieces
and it probably started here
where I'm sitting now!

The only constant
we have is change
and that's a euphemism for decay

So what can I tell you!

After quaffing back
several bowls of wine
the world appears a rosier place

And to tell you the truth
in the fading evening light
with the moon drunkenly
swimming away
my kids appear a pretty
intelligent bunch
after all

This obviously is antithetical to previous translations. It expands the poem into a pictorial narrative that is only implied by the words of the Chinese poet. This manner of improvisation is readily understandable by analogy with a jazz musician who spins a single melodic line into a five minute solo.

The very first sentence of Digby's improvisation, "So be it," sets the tone of the poem. The poet appears cynical about the future of his five sons. Using a visual reference to the youngest son T'ung seeking "only pears and nuts," Digby evokes a common English idiom, "the fruit doesn't fall far from the tree," in order to express the affectionate though ambiguous core relationship between father and sons. By asking "how far does the fruit fall from the tree?" the poet is teasing his sons and reflecting on his own disappointing life. This tree (himself) is perhaps incapable of producing fruit (children) who are no more than average. Through much of the poem he holds himself responsible for their mediocrity, which is also the cause for a more general lament about the state of government, "The only constant/ we have is change/ and that's a euphemism for decay." Helpless to control the future of his family and state, he retreats into wine. After a few drinks, the world "appears a rosier place" and "his kids appear a pretty intelligent bunch." This is a universal story extracted from the past and from another culture by way of improvisation.

4. Practice of Improvisation on Du Fu's *Watching Gong-sun's Student Dance Jian Qi*

What should be borne in mind is that when improvising, the original plan and past experience serve as crucial points of departure, from which improvisation starts. Wachtendorf (2004, pp.30-31), writing about the use of improvisation in a theoretical dissertation, identifies 3 types of improvisation, which we can apply to the process of poetic improvisation.

- 1) *Adaptive improvisation*: The original system can still remain, but in order to adapt to the new context or situation, a slightly different action or additional improvisation is necessary to adapt and opt for a novel alternative approach. As applied to poetry, the decision should be made about whether certain details in the original poems are to be retained or changed to fit in the cultural context of English poetry.

- 2) *Reproductive improvisation*: “When an existent system is disrupted, those involved are compelled to improvise to make do or employ a substitute to achieve the same result” (Wachtendorf, 2004, p. 30). With respect to Chinese poetry, the system of language and structure cannot be exactly reproduced in English. Therefore, a substitute must be used to achieve the result, an English poem.
- 3) *Creative improvisation*: In cases in which no pre-existing plan exists to contend with the environmental demands, and in which reproductive and adaptive improvisations are deemed insufficient, creative improvisation is employed to establish a new course of action. These new approaches are not completely divorced from the original system, but do involve new arrangements that better evoke the original meaning of the poet. This technique becomes most applicable in poetic improvisation when the original text makes allusions that cannot be understood without expanding into contemporary imagery that can convey the full implications.

This is how Digby improvised Du Fu’s *Watching Gong-sun’s Student Dance Jian Qi* 《观公孙大娘弟子舞剑器行》.

昔有佳人公孙氏，一舞剑器动四方。

[xi1 you3 jia1 ren2 gong1 sun1 shi4, yi1 wu3 jian4 qi4 dong4 si4 fang1]

观者如山色沮丧，天地为之久低昂。

[guan1 zhe3 ru2 shan1 se4 ju3 sang4, tian1 di4 wei2 zhi1 jiu3 di1 ang2]

燿如羿射九日落，娇如群帝骖龙翔。

[li4 ru2 yi4 she4 jiu3 ri4 luo4, jiao1 ru2 qun2 di4 can1 long2 xiang2]

来如雷霆收震怒，罢如江海凝清光。

[lai2 ru2 lei2 ting2 shou1 zhen4 nu4, ba4 ru2 jiang1 hai3 ning2 qing1 guang1]

绛唇珠袖两寂寞，晚有弟子传芬芳。

[jiang4 chun2 zhu1 xiu4 liang3 ji4 mo4, wan3 you3 di4 zi3 chuan2 fen1 fang1]

临颖美人在白帝，妙舞此曲神扬扬。

[lin2 ying3 mei3 ren2 zai4 bai2 di4, miao4 wu3 ci3 qu3 shen2 yang2 yang2]

与余问答既有以，感时抚事增惋伤。

[yu3 yu2 wen4 da2 ji4 you3 yi3, gan3 shi2 fu3 shi4 zeng1 wan3 shang1]

先帝侍女八千人，公孙剑器初第一。

[xian1 di4 shi4 nu3 bai1 qian1 ren2, gong1 sun1 jian4 qi4 chu1 di4 yi1]

五十年间似反掌，风尘澒洞昏王室。

[wu3 shi2 nian2 jian1 si4 fan3 zhang3, feng1 chen2 hong4 dong4 hun1 wan2 shi4]

梨国子弟散如烟，女乐馀姿映寒日。

[li2 guo2 zi3 di4 san4 ru2 yan1, nu3 yue4 yu2 zhi1 ying4 han2 ri4]

金粟堆南木已拱，瞿塘石城草萧瑟。

[jin1 li4 dui1 nan2 mu4 yi3 gong3, qu2 tang2 shi2 cheng2 cao3 xiao1 se4]

玳弦急管曲复终，乐极哀来月东出。

[dai4 xian2 ji2 guan3 qu3 fu4 zhong1, le4 ji2 ai1 lai2 yue4 dong1 chu1]

老夫不知其所往，足茧荒山转愁疾。

[lao3 fu1 bu4 zhi1 qi1 suo3 wang3, zhu2 jian3 huang1 shan1 zhuan3 chou2 ji2]

In order to grasp its original meaning, a literal translation into prose is necessary before improvisation.

In time past there was a lovely woman called Gong-sun, whose *Jian Qi* dance astonished all. Whenever she danced, audiences as numerous as the hills watched awestruck, and, to their reeling senses, the world seemed to go on rising and falling, along with her dance.

Her flashing sword like the nine suns falling, transfixed by the Mighty Archer Hou Yi's arrows; her soaring posture like the lords of the sky driving their dragons aloft; Her dance starts like the thunder suddenly gathers up its dreadful fury, and ends like seas and rivers frozen with its cold glint of ice.

Now her crimson lips, and the pearl-encrusted sleeves are all at rest. Fortunately in her latter years there had been a student to whom she transmitted the fragrance of her art. And now in the White Emperor City this beauty from Lin-ying performs her dance with same elegance and spirit. Her answers to my questions have revealed the source of her dance, and the reflections of old days fill us both with painful emotion.

Of the eight thousand women who served our late Emperor, Gong-sun was from the first the leading performer of the *Jian Qi* Dance.

Fifty years have now gone by like a flick of the hand—fifty years in which rebellions and disorders, like wind and dusts, darkened the royal house. The students of the Pear Garden have vanished like the mist. And now here is this dancer, whose fading beauty is silhouetted in the cold winter sun.

In the South of the Golden Grain Hill the trees have already grown into man-size. In the White Emperor City of Qu-tang the wild grasses are rattling forlornly.

At the glittering feast the strings and flutes conclude another song. At the height of pleasure follows sorrow, the moon rising in the east;

I, an old man, depart; not knowing where to go; The calloused feet walk him onto the path in the wild mountains, the wearier his pace, the more sorrowful his heart.

This literal translation is neither idiomatic English nor a poem. However, by the process of improvisation it can be transmuted into poetry.

4.1. Adaptive Improvisation

Line 1 to 5 of Chinese poem are improvised as follows,

In time past
the dancer Gong-Sun danced *Jian Qi*
astonishing all with her masterful presence
audiences were hushed and awestruck

Her flailing sword glittered
flashed lightening
as she whirled circles
a living tornado

Action and turmoil collided
the Sky Lords woke scattering demons
as she danced
energy into fury

A force erupted before her spectators
juggling violence between the tips of
two flashing swords creating frenzy
an approaching storm
sweeping all leaving havoc

These rapid movements conjured
the Mighty Archer Hou Yi's arrows
shooting down nine suns
brilliant tumbling fragments
bursting shattering

She stopped
as if freezing a running river
before stunned patrons
her pearl-encrusted sleeves
falling to rest

A sculptured silence
startled breathless viewers
as if turned to jade
a compliment to her virtuosity

Many expressions that are elegant and poetic in Chinese, might be prosaic, even incomprehensible in English. Phrases like “audiences as numerous as the hills,” “the world seemed to go on rising and falling” are not understandable; “the lords of the sky driving their dragons” is hard to grasp because dragons have a negative connotation in western culture but a positive connotation in Chinese culture. “The thunder suddenly gathers up its dreadful fury,” and “seas and rivers froze with its cold glint of ice” are archaic personifications of nature that need modernizing.

Since these images which describe the beauty of the dance in the original poem are unable to implant any clear impression to English readers, some adaptations are necessary. These include condensing phrases and altering the imagery. For example, not understandable images are omitted: “audiences as numerous as the hills”, “the world seemed to go on rising and falling”.

Also, images are adapted to English culture: “driving dragons” becomes “scattering demons”; “thunder” and “seas” become “lightning” and “tornado”.

4.2. Reproductive Improvisation

Line 6 to 11 are improvised as follows,

This beauty from Lin-Ying
invoking memories of Gong-Sun
I saw perform today
at White Emperor City

My conversation with her
evoked reminisces of
the late Emperor Xuanzong
whose eight thousand women
served him in a peaceful era
but one who outshone them all was
the peerless Gong-Sun

Fifty years have come and gone
and I have witnessed wars
rebellions and disorders destroying
even loveliness once engraved in stone

I pondered the Pear Garden
now faded a neglected wasteland
a melancholy shrine

In the original Chinese poem, the changes of time and persons are heavily dependent on the immediate context of the poem, but the English translation fails to clarify the relationship of all the people mentioned in these few lines: the dancer, Gong-sun; eight thousand women; the late

Emperor; the students of the Pear Garden, and the duration of time, fifty years. The matured trees, the Golden Grain Hill, and the wild grass in the White Emperor City of Qu Tang all refer to the passing of fifty years as well as the decay of society during this time.

This section of the poem is improvised by condensing topical reference and reducing multiple details to an essential few that carry the meaning of time and loss.

For some necessary names of places, proper nouns, or background information, notes are provided to help the reader's understanding, but the notes should be limited to a minimum.

4.3. Creative improvisation

Line 12 to 13 are improvised as follows,

This evening
I was deep in reverie
holding a handful of fading images
fragments of music
becoming dim and distant

Not knowing what road to take
I started walking with shards of memories
toward inhospitable mountains
void of life silent stretching blurring
the edges of night and day
where thoughts crumble beyond recall

The real intention of this poem is to show Du Fu's sorrow at witnessing the fall of the Tang Dynasty from its prime, through describing the beauty of Gong-sun's sword dance, which only exists in the poet's memory. Therefore, the last part of the poem, which is about the poet's pain because of his aging and illness, also alludes to his worries and concerns about the death of a prosperous age in the aftermath of war. Such implied meaning is always frustrating to translators who are keen to express but have no way to transmit secondary information through translation. Creative improvisation thus provides a necessary alternative, as in this final example.

5. Conclusion

The basic principles of improvising Chinese poems are, firstly, the translated result brings out the original meaning to the comprehension of contemporary English readers; secondly, the translation results in an English poem.

The three methods of improvisation all aim at bringing out the original meaning of the poem to the understanding of the contemporary English readers. Adaptive Improvisation is adopted to make a Chinese classical poem adapt to the new context or situation of contemporary English readers; Reproductive Improvisation employs a substitute of a Chinese classical concept with

an English contemporary one in order to achieve the same result. Creative Improvisation aims at presenting the underlying meaning of a Chinese poem which contemporary English readers are unable to comprehend. All these practices aim at the same goal, that is, to keep the tone of the original poem and transfer comprehensible meaning of the original poem to contemporary English readers.

Some translators question whether improvisation has sacrificed the structures and patterns of original Chinese poems, which are considered as the essence of Chinese language. As Digby admitted at a personal interview on August 26, 2010, “because there are no equivalents to the original words or phrases in the language of the translation; therefore the poem at times will appear to be unnecessarily burdened with facts that cannot be stated in a poetic form. This lack of melodic expressions jars the ‘anima’ of the poem, turning certain parts into prose. Some of these ‘prose’ references have to be clarified in the foot notes and inform the readers of the allusion and/or implications that cannot be expressed in the translated language. As a result, the term ‘improvisation’ is somewhat analogous to a ‘prose poem’.” A “prose poem” is not the ideal product of translation, but, by providing an alternative to literal translation and imitation and more satisfaction to readers of contemporary poetry interested in the poems of other cultures, improvisation is pursuing the right track through an intuitive tapping into the poets’ sensibility to create a text which still remains in the same genre as the original—poetry.

Of course, improvisation still needs improvement through endless practice so as to challenge the criticisms that the translated text cannot transfer the tone of Chinese poems while maintaining its original structure, and that the translator’s temptation to translate Chinese poems into English is a fruitless endeavor.

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Appendix:

John Digby's improvisation to Du Fu's poem:

Watching Gong-sun's Student Dance Jian Qi²

Du Fu (712-770)

Preface

I was fortunate to see Li Shi-er-niang of Lin-ying dance *Jian Qi* on the nineteenth day of the tenth month of the second year of Da-li (767)³, in the residence of Yuan Chi, Lieutenant-Governor of Kui-zhou⁴. Impressed by the brilliance and thrust of her style, I asked who her teacher was; she replied "I am a student of Gong-sun."

Now I recall when I was a youngster in the fifth year of Kai-yuan (717)⁵, watching Gong-sun dance *Jian Qi* and *Hun Tuo*⁶ at Yan-cheng⁷. I was told she was unrivalled in her time and even today after many years have rolled by, I still cherish my childhood memory of that performance.

I also remember the performers at the royal house and its talented students of the Spring and Pear Garden schools⁸ in the Palace. During the early years of the reign of the Tang Emperor Xuanzong⁹, neither they nor the professional entertainers summoned from outside could perform with the grace and perfection of the inimitable Gong-sun. Though I am a white-haired old man now, and though Li Shi-er-niang has passed her prime, she brings back memories that inspire me to compose this ballad of *Jian Qi*.

² The preface is translated by Hong Ai Bai and the poem is improvised by John Digby.

³ Da-li: a reference to the reign of Tang Dynasty Emperor Daizong (766-779).

⁴ Kui-zhou: place name

⁵ Kai-yuan: designates the first period of the reign of Tang Dynasty Emperor Xuanzong (713 to 741), which is often called the "Peak of Tang Prosperity".

⁶ *Jian Qi*: a sword dance performed by women. There were two categories of classical dance in the Tang Dynasty, soft dance and strength dance. *Jian Qi* is a typical strength dance. *West River Jian Qi* and *Hun Tuo* are variations of the sword dance and music.

⁷ Yan-cheng: place name.

⁸ Spring and Pear Garden schools: a reference to schools that trained the performers of music and dance.

⁹ Emperor Xuanzong:(685-762), personal name Li Long-ji, was the seventh emperor of the Tang Dynasty, reigning from 712 to 756. His reign of 44 years was the longest during the Tang era. He began as a diligent and astute ruler, credited with bringing Tang China to a pinnacle of culture and power. However, he relinquished responsibility and misplaced trust in Li Lin-fu, Yang Guo-zhong and An Lu-shan during his late reign, with the result that Tang's golden age ended in the An Shi Rebellion.

Several years ago, Zhang Xu, the grand master of the Grass Writing style of calligraphy, watched in awe many times as Gong-sun performed *West River Jian Qi* at Ye-Xian¹⁰. He discovered to his immense pleasure that his calligraphy improved through observing her dance movements. This gives one a clear idea of how inspirational Gong-sun was.

In time past
the dancer Gong-Sun danced *Jian Qi*
astonishing all with her masterful performances
audiences were hushed and awestruck

Her flailing sword glittered
flashed lightening
as she whirled circles
a living tornado

Action and turmoil collided
the Sky Lords woke scattering demons
as she danced
energy into fury

A force erupted before her spectators
juggling violence between the tips of
two flashing swords creating frenzy
an approaching storm
sweeping all leaving havoc

These rapid movement conjured
the Mighty Archer Hou-yi's arrows¹¹
shooting down nine suns
brilliant tumbling fragments
bursting shattering

¹⁰ Ye-xian: place name.

¹¹ Mighty Archer Hou-yi: Hou-yi, or simply Yi, a god of archery descended from heaven to aid mankind. In Chinese mythology, there were ten Sun-birds that were the offspring of Di-jun, God of the Eastern Heaven. Each day one Sun-bird travelled around the world in a carriage. According to legend, in approximately 2170BC, the Sun-birds grew weary of the routine and decided to rise simultaneously. The heat on earth became so intense that crops shriveled in the fields, lakes and ponds evaporated, humans and animals cowered in shelters or collapsed from exhaustion. Angered by the suffering of the people caused by the Sun-birds' misconduct, Yao, the Emperor of China, asked Di-jun for aid. Di-jun sent for Hou-yi to teach his sons a lesson. Hou-yi raised his bow and shot them one by one until Emperor Yao intervened to prevent him from killing the last one, which would have left the world in total darkness. Hou-yi was hailed as a hero of mankind, but his actions caused him to make enemies in Heaven, and as a result he was punished by divine wrath and banished.

She stopped
 as if freezing a running river
 before stunned patrons
 her pearl-encrusted sleeves
 falling to rest

A sculptured silence
 startled breathless viewers
 as if turned to jade
 a compliment to her virtuosity

Later in life
 she taught one chosen student
 Li Shi-er-niang
 these exquisite techniques
 wishing the dance to live
 for future generations

This beauty from Lin-ying¹²
 invoking memories of Gong-Sun
 I saw perform today
 at White Emperor City

My conversation with her
 evoked reminisces of
 the late Emperor Xuanzong
 whose eight thousand women
 served him in a peaceful era
 but one who outshone them all was
 the peerless Gong-Sun

Fifty years have come and gone
 and I have witnessed wars
 rebellions and disorders destroying¹³
 even loveliness once engraved in stone

¹² This beauty from Lin-ying: refers to Li Shih-er-niang of Lin-ying, the student of Gong-sun.

¹³ Wars, and rebellions and disorders: a reference to the An Shi Rebellion, which took place from December 16, 755 to February 17, 763. The rebellion spanned the reigns of three Tang emperors, starting during the reign of Xuanzong and ending during the reign of Daizong. The death toll of these events is estimated at 36 million, which would be 2/3 of the total taxroll population of the time.

I pondered the Pear Garden
now faded a neglected wasteland
a melancholy shrine

This evening
I was deep in reverie
holding a handful of fading images
fragments of music
becoming dim and distant

Not knowing what road to take
I started walking with shards of memories
toward inhospitable mountains
void of life silent stretching blurring
the edges of night and day
where thoughts crumble beyond recall.