

三衢道中 - 曾幾

sān qú dào zhōng – céng jǐ

梅子黃時日日晴	méi zǐ huáng shí rì rì qíng
小溪汎盡卻山行	xiǎo xī fàn jìn què shān xíng
綠陰不減來時路	lù yīn bù jiǎn lái shí lù
添得黃鸝四五聲	tiān dé huáng lí sì wǔ shēng

NB. While the poem ‘works’ in the descriptive rendering of the images, the symbolic significance was never far from the classics’ thought. *Orioles*, for instance, often stood for the contemporary officials at court, or in this case, the likely meeting with fellow poets on the final leg of his journey to a rather remote assignment. The pinyin is shown to convey something of the sound patterns of the poetry without combining compound nouns; tone marks over the vowels follow the primary pronunciation; in speaking some alterations may naturally occur (a phonotactic constraint, as a linguist might say).

ON TRANSLATION

In our increasingly international networks, translation from one language and culture to another is becoming vital to successful communications. Yet we need to remember that translation from one group to another has been around since the beginning of commerce between peoples. We know of Marco Polo going to China (I rather think he learned Chinese in the process), but way before then trade along the silk road brought individuals from Europe to Asian shores, and the Mongols went west, to say the least. There is even some evidence, as yet not systematically documented to my knowledge, that common morpheme elements can be found in Chinese, Korean and English (perhaps through loan word borrowing via Indo-European or from an original language base). For me, however, the specific issue of translating poetry from classical Chinese into English goes beyond a literal or grammatical representation: it needs to communicate the mind and feeling of the poet as well.

When I first began to explore the world of classical Chinese poets, one of the things that stood out to me was how stilted or arbitrary most of the translation sounded. The work of David Hinton¹ was an exception in the other direction: he was so free that lines traveled

¹ *Classical Chinese poetry: an anthology*. David Hinton, trans and ed; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY: 2008. This was helpful, however, for showing the pre- and post-Tang poetic literature and biography.

in nearly run-on sentences. Red Pine (Bill Porter)² does better at keeping to the simplicity of the original works, but the poems struck me still as awkward in some places and were more like reports of what a poet wrote than a song or poem.³ Fortunately, Red Pine includes the Chinese characters in his anthologies, and this gave me the best opportunity to research and write my own translations.⁴

In approaching the task of translation, I strive to do two things: to make the poem be true to the images of the poet, and to make the result sound like a poem in the English (not just prose sentences). This means being aware of parallel structure and contrasts in and between couplets, giving the language flow in sounds, and occasionally adding detail to make it intelligible to the Western reader — so long as this can be ‘seamlessly’ done — so long as it fits within the poetic constraints that the rest of the poem now uses. Since these elements are already part of my own English style of writing, adapting them to the translation of Chinese, and the Korean which has similar issues, becomes more like finding the poem within the poem, not merely a prose meaning exercise.

² *Poems of the Masters: China's classic anthology of the Tang and Sung dynasty verse*. Red Pine, trans; Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, WA: 2003. He has other works to his credit as well.

³ Records within poems and other sources show that the poetry of China was ‘chanted’ or sung, and poetic forms for entertaining songs constituted its own genre. A translation ought to approximate this feel.

⁴ There are some online resources with the Chinese characters as well: Two that I have used occasionally are Mountain Songs (www.mountainongs.net) [which also gives pinyin that is helpful] and 300 Tang Poems (<http://wengu.tartarie.com/wg/wengu.php?l=Tangshi>), where the English is primarily the translation work of Witter Bynner [a note says that “almost all the poems have been translated by Witter Bynner in *The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1929)] (no pinyin).

