

Study of the Translation of Stephen Owen's Tang Poems

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Abstract: Tang poetry is not only a historical sparkle and a literary treasure of China, but also an important part of world literature. In recent years, many scholars have begun to translate Tang poetry in an attempt to convey the charm and beauty of Tang poetry to the world. The charm of Tang poetry has crossed national boundaries and become international. In the process of enhancing the impact of the culture of Tang poetry throughout the world, translation is inevitable. In the practice of translating Chinese poets into foreign languages, not only Chinese scholars but also overseas sinologists have been involved. One of these overseas sinologists, Stephen Owen, who is a great fan of Chinese Tang poetry, has made a significant contribution to the translation of Tang poetry through his love and dedication to the cause of translation. This paper will analyse Stephen Owen's book-- *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics : Symbols of the World* to analyse his understanding of Chinese poetry. Then the paper will also examine examples of Stephen Owen's translations of Tang poetry. By analysing his understanding of Chinese poetry, as well as his translation practice, a study of Stephen Owen's translation of Tang poetry will be realized.

Keywords: Overseas sinologists, Translation, Stephen Owen.

1. Introduction

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Stephen Owen is a renowned American sinologist who received his doctorate in East Asia from Yale University in 1972 and went on to teach at Yale[1]. He gave himself the Chinese character for his surname, "Yuwen(宇文)", and took the word "Suoan(所安)" from the *Analects of Confucius*, which reads: "视其所以, 观其所由, 察其所安." It is his symbol of identity. Stephen Owen is the surname of the ancient Hu people (an ethnic minority), and it is also a combination of Hu and Han people[2]. In fact, he has deep roots in Chinese poetry, having first encountered it at the Baltimore City Library and having fallen in love with Tang poetry through Li He's "The Tomb of Su Xiao". Since then, he has quickly fallen in love with poetry and remains so today, having reached great depths in his poetry studies. He was a great fan of the poet Du Fu, whom he considered to be a world class poet on a par with Shakespeare and Dante. Existing studies of Stephen Owen's poetry in translation focus on translations of Du Fu's poetry. Finally, his masterpieces include *In Memoriam*, *The Labyrinth*, and translations into Chinese include *Poems of the Early Tang Dynasty*, *Poems of the Sheng Tang Dynasty*, *The End of the Chinese 'Middle Ages'*, *Essays on Chinese Tang Literature and Culture*, *Poems of the Late Tang Dynasty, 827-860*, *In Memoriam: Recreations of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature*, *The Labyrinth of Poetry and Desire*, and, most recently, *Poetry and the Labyrinth of Desire*. *The Chinese Literary Essays and The Stone Records of Other Mountains*, among others[3].

2. Stephen Owen's Views on Ancient Chinese Poetry

Stephen Owen's ability to translate Chinese poetry is inseparable from his understanding of Chinese culture. In his book *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics : Symbols of the World*, we get a glimpse of his understanding and analysis of the theoretical level of ancient Chinese poetry.

2.1. Differences Between Chinese and Western Poetry

The book directly suggests that the world of formal meaning as constructed in the West and China is different, as reflected in poetry, and the author gives examples of verses from Wordsworth and Du Fu throughout the book. The concept of the other side, such as God, is popular in the West because of religious traditions, so called Caesar's to Caesar and God's to God. The West is constructed in a detached way, where one complete world can be constantly fictionalized. As a counterpart, Western poetry is full of symbols and imagery, and the things in poems are often "sanctified", written in poems that are not meant to be instances of their own reality. The ancient Chinese, on the other hand, firmly grasped the ground beneath their feet and did not speak of strange forces, did not play tricks, but faced the world directly, and the things in their poems were the items that the poet actually faced and saw and heard. In terms of content, Chinese reality is particularly rich, and everything grows vigorously in this world where the sky is round, whereas in the West there may not be so much content in one world, but there are different forms of worlds in which one can keep jumping and moving.

2.2. Characteristics of Chinese Poetry - With a Voice

Stephen Owen argues that because Chinese poetry lacks metaphors and relative perspectives, all of its content comes from the subjective experience of the poet. The second chapter of the book is entitled "Transparency". Transparency here does not mean simple superficiality, but honesty, where the content of the poem is determined by what the poet has seen, heard and touched. In contrast, Western poetry emphasizes honesty, and the content can be fabricated or symbolic in itself as long as the intention is sincere. The beauty of Chinese poetry, according to Stephen Owen, lies in the fact that there is a real voice of people in it. This voice comes from real life, the voice of the spirit, such as when you go to a friend's house and knock on the door and the host is not there, and then you wait for a while and knock a second time with a slightly nervous and worried feeling. Even if the

sound, timbre and frequency of the two knocks are identical and the machine cannot tell the difference, the human being can still feel the change in mood behind the two knocks. The silence inside the door is also an expression that implies different feelings. It is a sound that can only be recognized with the benefit of life experience. Faced with a reality that cannot be changed, one's voice is a mixture of universal disdain, self-deprecation, comfort and anger. In the poetry of Su Shi and Huang Tingjian, hidden pain and seriousness lie beneath the wit. In Chinese poetry, people meet people, the world, and then make sounds, people "meet" in the world, whereas in the Western tradition, the abstract format is like a standard net with which people snare and identify things in the world, what they are doing is "identifying". The beautiful voice is like a cloud on Mount Tai, free and unsettled, unpredictable and unplanned, sounding out as life goes on, with a mixture of feelings stirring within. This is also the style of Stephen Owen's own writing. He is adept at making arbitrary arguments and following the flow of the narrative, unwittingly taking the reader to the depths of a different valley - a paradise that those who follow the map will never find.

2.3. Sense of Isolation

The author argues that solitude has also contributed to the different characteristics of Chinese and Western poetry. From the Tang to the Song, personal awareness gradually gained ground and solitude was increasingly valued. On the whole solitude is negative, and one's existence needs to be mirrored. In the West, there is a concept of God on the other side, and when people in the West are lonely, they look to God for their existence. In China, because we do not have a concept of God (which is not the same as the Jade Emperor), Chinese people can only find support in morality and politics. As children, they looked for "fatherly grace", and as adults, they looked for "sacred grace (from the emperor)". The family and the state were entirely homogeneous, and all moral and political construction was framed in this way. The emotional weight that the ancient Chinese placed on politics, and the importance of politics in their worldview, far exceeded what was necessary for the administration of the state, meaning that political rule had a strong philosophical (or theological?) function in addition to its own technical realm. It seems fair to say that ancient China was a sort of political form of secularism. The loneliness of the ancient Chinese came essentially from the severance of their connection with the "sacred grace". In those days the sky was round, the sky was like a dome, and the ancestors were firmly enclosed in a cramped spiritual space. In the West, God was like a rope that held people together, giving them an ultimate point of reference. As a result, the loneliness of Chinese and Western people is different, and this has led to different styles of poetry.

3. Example Studies of Poetry Translations of Stephen Owen

Among the many overseas sinologists, Stephen Owen is undoubtedly one who has a profound understanding of Tang poetry. He has a very solid textual background and a broad disciplinary perspective, taking a close reading of Tang poetry as a starting point for his understanding and interpretation, and has studied the linguistic and compositional characteristics of classical Chinese poetry in depth. Stephen Owen is a professional researcher of Chinese Tang poetry and

is married to a Chinese wife who is also renowned for her poetry studies. With his solid expertise and boundless love for Chinese Tang poetry, Stephen Owen has particularly deep understanding and high achievement of Tang poetry among contemporary foreigners.

3.1. A New and Different Way of Thinking

At an international academic conference where researchers of Tang poetry from all over the world gathered, Stephen Owen offered his opinion on a line from Du Fu's poem. Du Fu's original line was "Li Bai's writing was unrivalled, and his brilliant ideas were far beyond the average. Li Bai's poetry has the freshness of Yu Xin's and the elegance of Bao Zhao's." This poem, Remembering Li Bai on a Spring Day, is generally regarded as a poem written by Du Nan in praise of Li Bai, his idol, as he missed him. But Professor Stephen Owen makes an observation that has thrown us Chinese for a loop: Du Fu is actually elevating himself and implicitly degrading Li Bai's status. Why? It turns out that this is how he understood it: Chinese poets like to use allusions in writing their poems, and Du Fu in particular is simply an expert in the use of allusions. One of these allusions comes from the quotations of the ancients, so Professor Stephen Owen found this line in the Analects: "How virtuous, Yan Hui! A bowl of rice, a ladle of water, living in a humble alley, no one else could endure such poverty and hardship, but Yan Hui did not change his (love of learning) pleasure. How virtuous, Yan Hui!". "How virtuous, Yan Hui!"--This is Confucius' commendation of his favourite disciple Yan Hui. The two sentences are very similar, according to Professor Stephen Owen. Therefore, the phrase is in fact an assessment of Li Bai made by Du Fu from the position of a teacher or an elder, and is therefore seemingly positive but actually negative. The scholars were stunned to hear this, and thought it was a novel idea.

3.2. "Close Reading" Interpretation of the Poem

Very often, even if foreigners know Chinese, or even literary texts, their paths and approaches to understanding Tang poetry are very different from those of us Chinese. Professor Stephen Owen is already considered the upper limit of contemporary foreigners' understanding of Tang poetry. The translations of Stephen Owen are so good that they often make people who seem to understand the original text suddenly dawned on when they read Stephen Owen's translation. For example:

Original text:

伤高怀远几时穷？无物似情浓。离愁正引千丝乱，更东陌、飞絮蒙蒙。嘶骑渐遥，征尘不断，何处认郎踪？双鸳池沼水溶溶，南北小桡通。梯横画阁黄昏后，又还是、斜月帘栊。沉恨细思，不如桃杏，犹解嫁东风。

English translation of Stephen Owen:

When will it cease - this pain/ of gazing from heights and thoughts on distances?/ Nothing dyes us so deeply as feeling:/ there is the sadness at being apart , just now/ drawn out by a thousand tangled threads,/ beyond which on the eastward path/ willow catkins fly in their haze./ His mount neighs, going ever farther,/ and in the unceasing dust of travelers in passage/ where can I make out his prints?/ On the pool duck and drake/ in the rippling waters/ crossed north to south by a small skiff,/ then after dusk the outer staircase rising/ diagonally up the painted tower/ and once again the moonlight angled/ on If deep in bitterness you think on it

carefully:/ better the blossoms of apricot and peach/ that still know to run off with their lover/ spring's east wind. spring's east wind.

Original text: 《春望》

国破山河在，城春草木深。感时花溅泪，恨别鸟惊心。烽火连三月，家书抵万金。白头搔更短，浑欲不胜簪。[4]

Translation: The View in Spring

The state broken, its mountains and rivers remain/the city turns spring, deep with plants and trees./Stirred by the time, flowers, sprinkling tears,/ hating parting, birds, alarm the heart./Beacon fires stretch through three months,/a letter from family worth ten thousand in silver./I' hating parting, birds, alarm the heart./Beacon fires stretch through three months,/a letter from family worth ten thousand in silver./I've scratched my white hair even shorter,/ pretty much to the point where it won't hold a hatpin.

The lines drawn with slashes are branches of the original translation. Read out loud along with Stephen Owen's translation, which is itself a good English poem. In terms of his understanding and translation, I think it is a very good translation. The translation is very faithful to the content of the original text, so many specific words are translated directly, for example, "东风" is translated as "east wind", "桃杏" as "apricot and peach", and "恨别鸟惊心" as "hating parting, birds, alarm the heart" and so on. , Because Stephen Owen's translation is almost word-for-word, after reading the translation, the reader is often able to understand some of the difficult expressions in the original text. His straightforward translation strategy allows the integrity of the poem to be preserved. In the conflict between rhyme and content, which are often incompatible in poetry translation, Stephen Owen favors the delivery of the poem's content, using logical, faithful words to convey a story with a complete plot.

3.3. Color Words with Emotion

In the creation of poetry, poets often express their emotions not only in a straightforward manner, but also in the context of the scene, by depicting different moods to express their inner feelings. This often involves the use of colour words, which not only carry specific cultural connotations, but also convey the author's emotional intentions. When translating colour words, the translator needs to take into account both the cultural meaning of the words themselves and the author's emotional context. Stephen Owen has incorporated his own considerations when translating colour words.

For example, the word "青" is a slightly more ambiguous word than the clearer colors of black, white, red and green, and its translation needs to be contextualized and analyzed. In the following poems, Stephen Owen translates it as green, gray and blue.[5]

3.3.1. Green

《望岳》：岱宗夫如何，齐鲁青未了[4].

And what then is Daizong like?

Over Qi and Lu, green unending[7].

In his youth, Du Fu wrote this poem. As a young man, Du Fu was full of vigour and enthusiasm, using the vigorous ambition of facing the mountains to express his ambition to climb and stand proud of everything. The word green in English symbolizes vitality, youth, vigour and hope, so the word green reflects the intention of the colour word and the author's state of mind, reconstructing the mood of the original poem.

3.3.2. Gray

《高都护骢马行》：安西都护胡青骢，声价欻然来向东[4].

Anxi's Protector - General's Hu dappled gray.

The fame of its worth in a flash came to the east[7].

Du Fu wrote this poem when he was trapped in Chang'an and had nowhere else to express his ambition. By depicting a horse with its head held high, he expresses his desire to express his ambition. The author felt bitter about this, so it would be inappropriate to translate the word "青" as "green". By translating it as gray, Stephen Owen not only conveys the dullness of the original verse, but also vividly depicts the majestic posture of the horse.

3.3.3. Blue

《袁王孙》：腰下宝玦青珊瑚，可怜王孙泣路隅[6].

A precious jue ring at his waist of blue coral.

A pitiable young prince weeps at the roadside.[7]

The poem was written during the An Shi Rebellion, when the mountains and rivers were shattered and the poet saw the killing of the princes and nobles and the displacement of the people. In the poem, the poet expresses his sympathy and gives some implicit advice to the rulers. The poem has a melancholy tone, and the colour blue, which is the English word for sadness, is apt in conveying the mood of the original poem.

3.4. The Translation Debate

Stephen Owen may not have the same Chinese language skills as China's leading scholars, but his passion and talent for the study of Chinese poetry is unquestionable. While Chinese scholars were still in the process of genealogical construction, in the 1980s Stephen Owen was already aware of the attributes of Chinese poetry as a whole. Of course, one cannot be perfect. Most of Stephen Owen's translations of Tang poetry are remarkable, but there are some that are controversial. Wu Qiyao, for example, cites some examples of Stephen Owen's translation missteps. But looking at just these four, I still prefer Stephen Owen's translation to Wu Qiyao's. Perhaps Stephen Owen's translation is not as good as it could be - the translation of Du's poem is already extremely difficult - but I don't think it can be described as "erroneous", at least in these following cases.

3.4.1. 料理--Watch over

江畔独步寻花七绝句 其二

稠花乱蕊畏江滨，

行步欹危实怕春。

诗酒尚堪驱使在，

未须料理白头人[4].

The translation of the word "料理(Liaoli)" as "watched over" was made by Stephen Owen. Wu Qiyao, on the other hand, suggests that the word here should mean "to bully" or "to make fun of", citing Guo Zaiyi's quotation from Lu Zugao's E Jin Men as an example: "做弄清明时序，料理春醒情绪." And let's not say that the word "Liaoli" in Lu Zugao's words is to be understood as what, even if it is to be understood as "to make fun of", it is also the meaning of the word that comes out later, Lu Zugao is a Song dynasty person, taking this evidence to explain Du Fu's "未须料理白头人", and "white head" is not convincing. If you take Du Fu's contemporaries, or people before Du Fu, preferably Du Fu's own usage of the word "Liaoli" as an example, it will be convincing.

Wu Qiyao adds, "Mr. Guo's explanation is in line with Qian Zhongshu's interpretation of "Liaoli" as "Cynicism" and "abuse". However, it is not known whether Qian Zhongshu's interpretation is the same as Du Fu's interpretation of this verse. Otherwise, it would not be appropriate to use it as evidence.

Let us look at the examples of Du Fu's contemporaries before and not so far after him:

My son has good feelings and pours out his home to take care of the mess. I have not yet tied the belt around my dress, but I have left it to the pedestrians. (The tenth stanzas of the Chagrin Song)

Who will take care of your hair? I will ask you to tell me what you think of me. Return your beauty to me and send me the truth. (The twelfth stanzas of the Chagrin Song)

The yellow dust stains one's clothes, and the soap pods are taken care of. (A nursery rhyme from the end of the Liang Dynasty)

Yan Lao is suddenly angry and late, he is waiting for his orders. I must lead the troops in a hurry, and come to get you. I will not leave my wife and children, but go forward and take care of them. (Poem by Wu Ming of the Tang Dynasty)

The ghosts of the unpredictable demons have arrived and are being chased in a hurry. He is walking barefoot, but he cannot put on his shoes. I'll take care of it, but I can't see it coming back. (Poem by Wang Fanzhi)

In all of the above examples, the word "Liaoli" is not suitable for the interpretation of "to bully" or "to make fun of". In the case of Bai Juyi's "The eyes have been bullied by books for a long time", it can be translated as "to bully", but that meaning has in fact been transformed, and is a derivative of sentiment, not something that has to be translated.

I thought that it was more important to translate the original meaning than the emotional overtones attached to it. For the derived meanings and emotional overtones can be very rich and can be understood in many different ways, but the original meaning is the most fundamental.

It is important to note that the lines "I will not leave my wife and children, but go forward and take care of them.", "I'll take care of it, but I can't see it coming back." are both related to death. And they occur not long before Du Fu. The use of these two lines is closer to that of Du Fu's "no need to take care of the whiteheads", both in terms of the period and in terms of meaning.

The Detailed Commentary on Du's poems says: "The interjection of walking is a sign of old age. Poetry and wine can be used, and there is no need to worry about death." In my opinion, this interpretation is very precise. In contrast, I am not inclined to agree with Du Gui's use of "fear of spring" as a "refrain". Let us read the original poem in a different view again.

My understanding is that as one gets older and walks less steadily, one will live less if one looks at the spring. That is why I say I am afraid of spring. This is a real fear, not a "counter-word" because I love spring. The phrase "the pistil is afraid of blowing into the river." The riverside is close to the river, so the flower is afraid of it. People are old, walking interjection is dangerous, and they are close to death. So they are afraid of spring. After a spring, there is one less spring ah. However, what can be done. The good thing is that there is still poetry and wine, which are used to paralyze and dispel the fear of death.

The line "Poetry and wine can still be driven in" seems, on the surface, to mean that one can still drive away poetry and

wine, that one can still write poetry and drink wine - but the beauty of Du Fu's poems is that often beneath the seemingly banal surface meaning lies a huge iceberg of emotion, what he is actually saying is What he is actually saying is not that I can drive poetry and wine, but that poetry and wine can drive away the fear of death from my heart. This is why the last line says, "no need to take care of the whiteheads" -- what if I die? I don't need to care about it. This can be seen in the same light as the saying, "It is not uncommon for people to be in debt for alcohol, and it is rare for people to live to the age of seventy."

In addition, see the seven stanzas of "Seeking Flowers by the River": "It's not that I love flowers so much that I'm afraid that old age will set in when they fade. When flowers are in full bloom, they tend to fall in droves, so please talk to the young stamens and open slowly." When you fall, I will be dead too. Can you bloom more slowly, young leaves? This sentiment of "looking at flowers and fearing death" is consistent with the first two lines of the second stanzas, and with the addition of the phrase, the meaning of it is basically synthesized.

From this point of view, it is not possible to interpret the word "Liaoli" in the second stanzas as "manipulate" or "hazing". The translation by Stephen Owen as "watched over" is not too good, but it is still more appropriate than Wu Qiyao's suggestion of "fooled", "teased", and "humiliated".

3.4.2. 努力--do one's best

古来聚散地，宿昔长荆棘。

相看俱衰年，出处各努力。 [6]514

Stephen Owen translates "努力(Nuli)" as "do one's best", and Wu Qiyao says, "The word here means to take care and love oneself." Indeed. "If we replace the word "Nuli" with another Chinese word, "保重(Baozhong)" is very apt. But what does the word mean? Rather than saying that "Nuli" means "Baozhong", we should say that "Baozhong" means "Nuli" (the old It means "work hard". Today we say "take care of yourself" instead of "work hard" because the meaning of "work hard" has changed, but in ancient times, before the Tang Dynasty, we said "to make more efforts". It means: you must try to take care of yourself. It means "to take care of oneself", but also "to try one's best". When we say "try" alone, we are not talking about "taking care of yourself", but about "trying your best". The phrase "take care of yourself" is omitted.

Let's look at some more examples and cite some lines from Du Fu's previous poem about "Nuli":

If you don't work hard when you're young, you'll be sad when you're old. (Han Le Fu)

From this moment on, we will each make our own efforts. (A poem on the termination of friendship with Liu Bozong)

Abandon not the way, but strive to add to the meal. (The Nineteen Old Poems)

May you keep trying, and don't forget me when you speak and laugh. (The fifth stanzas of the Twenty-one Poems on Farewell to Li Ling)

The time of life is not long, but generous in its efforts. (Ruan Ji, the sixty-sixth stanzas of Yonghuai)

The word "Nuli" occurs too often to mention. But in any case, it is not a problem at all to translate it as "do one's best", which is the original meaning. Wu Qiyao says that "do one's best" is the "modern meaning" of it, and that "from the Six Dynasties to the Sui and Tang dynasties, the word also meant to protect and love oneself". In fact, "do one's best" is not the "present meaning", but the "original meaning". The meaning

of "take care of oneself" is, however, derived. Therefore, I think there is no problem at all in translating the word "strive" as "do our best". I think it is not at all wrong to translate it as "take care of oneself", "love oneself", but it is not as apt as a literal translation.

In short, it does not necessarily follow that an original interpretation is reasonable or appropriate. However, there is no exegesis of poetry, and it is certainly worth advocating that a scholar like Guo Zaiyi, who is a researcher of language and exegesis, should offer his opinion where the common people do not suspect. I think that if Stephen Owen had paid attention to Guo Zaiyi and followed his ideas in his translation, he would have found that Guo's insights would not have been very helpful in the translation. For Guo did not translate Du's poem in its entirety, but merely commented on some of its words. But if one were to translate Du's poems in their entirety, as Stephen Owen did, one would rather be conservative. Where there is doubt, one would rather use the classical, mainstream interpretation. If one is looking for new meanings, one will find a plethora of new interpretations. If one thus incorporates the findings of Mr. Guo Zaiyi's, it may not, as Wu Qiyao suggests, reduce the number of errors in translation, but may be counterproductive.

4. Summary

Chinese is already quite difficult for foreigners to learn, let alone ancient poetry where the source language speakers have a cultural threshold. Stephen Owen not only reads the poems in their literal sense, but is also able to dig into the emotional meaning that lies beneath the words, giving culturally appropriate English equivalents in the context of his own source language background. By reading his translations, the reader is able to better understand the meaning of the poems.

A study of Stephen Owen's translations reveals that he takes a more classical, mainstream approach to translation in the face of the clash between old and new meanings, and although some scholars consider it a translation flaw, his approach is not a bad strategy in the context of the large number of poems translated. Stephen Owen's different views on poetry can give us a glimpse into the perspectives and research methods of overseas sinologists on Chinese poetry, and an insight into the scholarly vision of different linguistic contexts.

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