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Abstract

The conception of interpretation, it is argued, only makes sense if its range of application is restricted: There are some things which are very real and which are not interpretations. If the concept of interpretation is generalized into a systematic all-inclusive category, this may lead into a paradox. Therefore, interpretation has its limits. Furthermore, an unrestricted notion of interpretation has a number of rather unbecoming consequences. Among other things we want to keep up the distinctions between a sign and its object, reality and fiction, between interpretation and those actions which follow from our interpretations of beliefs. Therefore, this paper advocates a semiotic-pragmatic account of interpretation which allows one to have all these good things and even use them - for example, the relation between beliefs and actions - for a philosophical explanation of meaning. Furthermore, it is shown how the concept of the objects of a sign can be embedded into a principle for distinguishing relevant from irrelevant interpretations and that this principle is due to the purposive view of action favored by a pragmatic theory of meaning.

Translating the Untranslatable
Approaches to Chinese Culture

Karl-Heinz POHL, Trier

James Liu once remarked: „Just as all literature and art are attempts to express the inexpressible, so all theories of literature and art are attempts to explain the inexplainable.“[1] Following James Liu, we may feel tempted to extend his dictum to „[...] and so all translations of literature and art are attempts to translate the untranslatable.“ This extension might, however, not find unanimous approval, because we have been translating literature since time immemorial. In doing so we may be standing, from a theoretical point of view, on shaky grounds, because the possibility of understanding, at least in our post-modern period, is being questioned altogether: Understanding, after all, is just another form of misunderstanding, and if that is the case, then translation in fact is also mistranslation.

From a more pragmatic point of view, however, we have to disregard these post-modern deficiencies because we simply cannot do without translation. It needs to be done, somewhat like a Sisyphean task, in full awareness not so much of the futility but rather of the inadequacy of the endeavor. In fact, culture depends on translation: Our history of ideas is nothing but a history of translation, only to mention the translations from the Bible, the Greek and Roman philosophers and epics that have laid the foundations of Western culture.

As George Steiner has pointed out,[2] translation has two dimensions: (1) translation across space, that is between different languages, and (2) translation across time, that is between different ages. Seen from this perspective, human communication, inside a language or between languages, first of all depends on translation. Secondly, it is because we have learnt to translate out of time that we possess a civilization (in that we can refer to a tradition). Furthermore, translation, on the one hand, is always also interpretation, that is a particuar, limited, and subjective way of understanding a work. On the other hand, translated works (particularly works of literature and art) need interpretation. We need to understand how art (let us say that of the Renaissance period) has to be read. Again George Steiner: „Art dies when we lose or ignore the conventions by which it can be read.“[3]

[1] James J.Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, Chicago 1973, 3.
[2] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, Oxford 1975, 31.
[3] Steiner, 30.

All these preliminary notions should be self-explanatory, at least concerning translation within our own cultural hemisphere. But what about translation from a culture of enormous or radical difference such as the Chinese? Here we have been doing it as well, and we keep doing it, but we might have to be even more aware of the inadequacies. Confronting a radically different culture, we become conscious that culture itself is a semiotic system of all sorts of interrelated elements that can be, that even needs to be, translated or interpreted as well.

I

Since literature and art are (next to philosophy and religion) particularly telling manifestations of a culture, we might approach a different culture, that is pursue intercultural understanding (or misunderstanding), by way of understanding its literature and art. In the following, I shall focus on this aspect. I will try to exemplify the difficulty (and necessity) of translating Chinese culture by a concrete example: classical Chinese poetry. In other words, I shall try to highlight certain aspects or qualities in Chinese poetry which pose particular problems in translation but which, when properly understood, might help us in understanding particular aspects of Chinese culture, i.e. to see them as manifestations of a certain cultural pattern. I will try to show that the magic of Chinese classical poetry is the result of an interplay of two seemingly contradictory (but complementary) forces: (1) a sense of form or rather a love for regularity, rules and regular patterns; (2) an open, ambiguous or oblique way of communication/expression, a suggestive quality. One might also say, it is an interplay of rule and freedom.

What is regularity in Chinese poetry? The Chinese poets of old had a possibly worldwide unmatched sense of regular patterns. This concerns:

- regular numbers of characters by line;
- regular numbers of lines per poem;
- regular patterns of word tones;
- regular balance of contrasting concepts (parallelism).

The most telling manifestation of these regular features is the so-called eight-line „regular poem" (*lüshi* 律詩) or the four-line „short cut" (*jueju* 絕句); but they are also visible in the set melody patterns of the *ci*-songs (詞) and the *sanqu*-arias (散曲) of the Yuan-Dynasty.

What is openness or suggestiveness in Chinese poetry? In Chinese poetry we have from the earliest times on a preference for an indirect metaphoric mode of expression. Already in the preface to the classic *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經) this feature is discussed as *xing*, meaning „stimulation" or „association"[4]. In poetry, it manifests as a natural im-

[4] Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 109f.

age at the beginning of the poem, linking in an oblique way, or by way of analogy, the world of nature with the world of man. In later times, particularly through the coinage of the poet and critic Sikong Tu (司空圖 837-908) of the Tang-Dynasty, this predominant aesthetic quality in Chinese poetry was described as „meaning beyond the flavor" (*wei wai zhi zhi* 味外之旨)[5] or „the words are exhausted, but the meaning is never exhausted" (*yan you jin er yi wu qiong* 言有盡而意無窮,[6] Yan Yu 嚴羽, 13th cent. A.D.).

What are the roots of these qualities? There are, first of all, linguistic origins. The Chinese written language possesses two features that are directly linked to them:

(1) It is a language made of isolated, uninflected, monosyllabic entities, i.e. the Chinese characters. This facilitates orderly patterns with all sorts of regular features such as length of lines and matching pairs of opposites.

(2) The classical Chinese language possesses a syntactical indeterminacy:

- There is no morphology, no inflection of words;
- meaning is achieved by position and analogy (in poetry often by parataxis of words or images);
- the language is not subject centered but topic centered;
- many Chinese characters have more than one meaning.

All this results in a high degree of openness or ambiguity - a characteristic that is not only found in poetry but also in philosophical prose. Quite different from Western philosophical writing, Chinese philosophical texts have a poetic, suggestive, i.e. aesthetic quality. The interplay of regularity and ambiguity is also found in other forms of prose, such as in „parallel prose" (*pian wen* 駢文) or the „eight legged essay" (*ba gu wen* 八股文). It is even a feature in painting by analogy of the interplay of real and empty space, of form or substance and emptiness. There is also a philosophical background to these qualities:

- The love for regularity and rules goes back to the concept of *fa* (法: law, rule) in the Legalistic-Confucian tradition which dominated China since the early Han Dynasty (2nd and 1st cent. B.C.). (In Confucianism the accent is more on ritualistic regularity, i.e. *li* 禮. However, as has often been pointed out, the orthodox Chinese tradition was Confucian on the outside and Legalistic on the inside.)

[5] Maureen A. Robertson, „'To Convey what is Precious': Ssu-k'ung T'u's Poetics and the *Erh-shih-ssu shih-p'in*", David Buxbaum and Frederick W. Mote (eds.), *Transition and Permanence. A Festschrift in Honor of Dr. Hsiao Kung-ch'üan*, Hong Kong 1972, 327ff.

[6] Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1992, 406.

– Ambiguity and openness have their origin in Daoist notions, such as „spontaneity“ (*ziran* 自然) or the unfathomable, wordless comprehension of the *Dao* 道.

– Lastly, the tendency of balancing complementary pairs of opposites goes back to the *Yin-Yang* (陰陽) thought which has permeated all other Chinese philosophical school.

II

Let us now examine a few examples of poetry. The regular poem „Visiting the Temple of Accumulated Fragrance“ by the famous Tang poet Wang Wei (王維 701-761) consists of eight lines with five characters per line (the eight-line poem can be divided into two halfs of four lines each).

過香積寺

不知香積寺，
數里入雲峰。
古木無人徑，
深山何處鐘？

泉聲咽危石，
日色冷青松。
薄暮空潭曲，
安禪制毒龍。

A literal translation would read like this:

not	know	fragrance	accumulated	temple
several	mile(s)	enter	cloudy	peaks
old	tree(s)	without	people	path
deep	mountain(s)	what	place	bell

spring/stream	sound	choke/gush	jagged	rocks
sun	color	chill	blue/green	pine(s)
near	evening	empty	pool	bend
quiet	meditation	subdues	poison	dragon

The following is a more literary translation:

Not knowing the way to the Monastery of Accumulated Fragrance,
Wandering many miles through cloudy peaks.
Ancient woods - no trace of human footsteps;

Deep in the mountains - somewhere the peal of a bell.

Sounds of a stream - choked by treacherous rocks;
The sun's color - chilled by blue pines.
At evening by the bend of an empty pool,
Sitting in meditation to subdue the poisonous dragon [of desire].

Lines five and six are ambiguous. It is not clear whether the sound of the spring stems from gushing over the rocks, or if it is choked by the rocks. Line six, as a matching line according to the rules of parallelism, possesses the same indeterminacy: Does the sun's color chill the blue pines, or is the sun's color chilled by them. But as James Liu has once remarked on this line:

> The ambiguity of the syntax is not a shortcoming but rather a source of poetic richness, for it allows the poet to present a total experience in its immediacy, without subjecting it to a logical analysis of cause and effect.[7]

The following example is a couplet from a poem of Du Fu[8] (杜甫 712-770) describing the view of a temple. First the literal translation:

碧瓦初寒外
金莖一氣旁

green	roof tiles	first	cold	beyond
gold	pillars	one/unity	cosmic energy	beside

Green glazed roof tiles beyond the first cold -
Golden pillars beside the all-permeating cosmic energy.

The Qing-Dynasty critic Ye Xie (葉燮 1627-1703) gives the following interesting commentary to these lines:

> When we speak of „beyond“, we do so in order to contrast it to something within. Yet what is the „first cold“? Can here a distinction between „beyond“ and within be used at all? Could it be that „beyond the green glazed roof tiles“ there is no „first cold“? Cold is a form of the cosmic energy (*qi* 氣). This energy permeates the whole universe. There is no place that it does not reach. Could it be that solely the „green glazed roof tiles“ dwell beyond it and that solely the „cold“ energy is sheltered within

7 James J.Y. Liu, *Essentials of Chinese Literary Art*, North Scituate 1979, 27.

8 The title of the poem is „A visit to the Laozi temple on a winter's day in the northern part of Luoyang“; Harvard -Yenching Institute, Sinological Index Series, Supplement No. 14, *A Concordance to the Poems of Tu Fu*, II, 257.

> the area enclosed by the „roof tiles"? Regarding the „cold", it is here called „first cold". Is this a severe cold or not? „First cold" is formless, but „green glazed roof tiles" have a real substance. Therefore we have here a unification of abstract and concrete as well as a separation into „beyond" and within. Does Du Fu make a statement concerning the „roof tiles" or the „first cold", concerning something near or far? [...]
> When I try to put myself in [Du Fu's] place and time, I can understand the scene pictured by those five characters. Complete, as if created by nature, it shows itself in the imagination, is felt in the eye and understood in the heart. The words upon which this interpretation is based cannot be spoken. One may try to speak of them, but one will never succeed in explaining the meaning completely. The meaning reveals itself to me through wordless comprehension and imagination, so that, in the end, it seems to me that there really is a „beyond" and a within, a „cold" and „first cold".[9]

The analytical (and almost modern) way in which Ye Xie elucidates Du Fu's lines highlights this ambiguous and suggestive quality which coexists together with regularity in Chinese poetry.

As a last example of the interplay between regularity and oblique ways of expression let us examine a regular poem from the modern period, dating, in fact, from March 20, 1991 and published in the overseas edition of the *People's Daily*:

元宵
東風拂面催桃李，
鷂鷹舒翅展鵬程。
玉盤照海下熱淚，
游子登台思故城。
休負平生報國志，
人民育我胜万金。
憤起急追振華夏，
且待神州遍地春。

„The Fifteenth Night of the First Month"
(by Zhu Haihong, a Chinese student in America)

The east wind strokes my face, urges [to blossom] peach and plum (*li*),
A hawk spreads its wings, surging like the Peng-bird.
A plate of jade [the moon] shines across the sea - tears are pouring down.
The traveler ascends the terrace and thinks of his home.

[9] Karl-Heinz Pohl, „Ye Xie's 'On the Origin of Poetry' (*Yuan Shi*) - A Poetic of the Early Qing", *T'oung Pao*, LXXVIII (1992), 26.

I shall never forsake my lifelong duty to serve my country.
If the people educate me, that's worth more than 10.000 pieces of gold.
Stirred I rise, eager to shake up China,
And wait that everywhere in our holy land spring will blossom.

Because of its patriotic tone, this poem in the old fashioned manner appears to be quite acceptable for publication in the top official Chinese paper, although its style does not seem to be high class. But that is because the poem contains a hidden message. It is an example of the linguistic and formal qualities of classical Chinese poetry which allow for unique ways of oblique expression. Here the wily author uses a regular form in order to express an irregular, or rather literally „oblique", meaning. If one reads the original not from left to right but diagonally from the top right to the bottom left, one gets the not quite acceptable line: „When Li Peng (the prime minister responsible for the Tian'anmen-shooting in 1989) steps down, the wrath of the people will be pacified" (*Li Peng xia tai ping min fen* 李鵬下台平民憤). And then, as we can add the last line, spring will blossom everywhere in the „holy land" of China. The message was easily understood by the Chinese intellectual readers who are used to reading things against the grain, and the editor in charge was dismissed from office.

III

The interplay between regularity and ambiguity thus allows for all sorts of poetical expressions that are virtually unknown in the Western poetical tradition. For example, there are also particular ways of intertextuality as a means for indirect, oblique expressions. The most common mode of intertextuality in Chinese is the allusion, using a particular phrase, expression or line from another poet or classic. This kind of indirect expression allows a poet, without saying much, to achieve a wealth of associations. The problem is, however, that one has to have read a lot in order to get the ideas which are hinted at. Thus, erudition was a necessary requirement both for the writing and appreciation of poetry. Du Fu put that in the famous line „I have read ten thousand volumes to shreds" (*du shu po wan juan* 讀書破萬卷).[10]

Another way of intertextuality is more linked to the feature of regularity: responding to the poetry of someone else (mostly a friend) by using exactly the same rhyming words (characters) as the other poet did. There is a famous example for this kind of intertextuality in the history of Chinese literature: Su Shi (蘇軾 Su Dongpo, 1036-1101), one of the greatest poets in China, was so fond of the poetry of Tao Yuanming (陶淵明, living 700 years before him) that he wrote responding poems,

[10] *A Concordance to the Poems of Tu Fu*, II, 1.

using Tao's rhyming words, to almost all of Tao Yuanming's poems as an expression of his admiration and strong affiliation with Tao's lofty character.

Intertextuality has in Western literary studies only recently become a new focus, a new way of looking mostly at the relatedness of seemingly unrelated works literature. It has gone unnoticed so far, however, that the Chinese have always had a rich tradition of consciously employed intertextuality.

Is translation of such literature at all possible? A first response would be: If not outright impossible, then utterly inadequate, because within this rich indeterminacy one has to be determined by making choices, thereby leaving essential things unsaid (or having to put it in a tasteless explanatory footnote). This problem we encounter, of course, in the translation of poetry in general, that is, in the kind of literature in which form plays a dominant role, where meaning or special appeal is dependent on form. But the crucial thing is that we have here a dimension which goes „beyond words" and thus also „beyond form". Approaching the horizons of these texts means that we not only have to take into account the linguistic meaning, the historicity and the special form of these texts (all this we have to take into account when we translate in general), it also means that we have to understand the peculiar and culturally conditioned way in which these texts communicate, in which they produce meaning.

Thus, entering into a conversation with these texts, we also have to enter into a conversation with the culture itself, with the underlying cultural patterns. This intercultural conversation may lead to a twofold new understanding: (1) Understanding how the different linguistic and philosophical background has shaped the communicational quality of texts; (2) understanding how these literary or poetic (and philosophical) texts have shaped the way people relate and communicate with one another, i.e. how it has formed their behavior or mentality.

The peculiar interplay between regularity and ambiguity forms one important element in the so called „cultural-psychological structure" (Li Zehou 李澤厚) of the Chinese: We find rules and regulations in all areas of Chinese life, especially in the ritualized ways of expressing politeness. But we also find within this regularity a particular fondness of oblique expressions, for indirectness and suggestiveness: As we noticed above, the Chinese have a keen sense of reading and understanding messages between the lines.

There are some more elements or facets in this cultural pattern that could be pointed out with regards to poetry, such as:

– A tradition of expressing things and reasoning issues by way of analogy. This betrays a metaphoric or aesthetic world-view (in classical

Chinese thought, the universe possesses not so much a rational, but rather an aesthetic order in which things are interrelated by analogy).

– We can observe a balancing or harmonizing quality everywhere in Chinese ways of communication, such as the love for parallelisms. This also entails the tendency of not seeing things as mutually exclusive according to the either/or dichotomy, but inclusive according to the both/both pattern (*Yin-Yang* pattern). This can even be seen in the ideological realm, for example in the mutual dependence of Confucianism and Daoism or of Socialism and Capitalism.

– This inclusiveness, finally, concerns another amazing ability - for us either frustrating or enlightening, depending on the point of view - of seeing identities where we are inclined to see differences. Everyone, for example, who attempts to understand Chinese Neo-Confucian texts in an analytical, differentiating way will soon be frustrated because most concepts are characterized by way of identifying them with (and not by differentiating them from) something else (e.g. human nature is nothing but 'principle', *xing ji li* 性即理). Others, however, might find it enlightening to read that „Heaven and man form a unity" (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一) or, as in the Buddhist „Heart Sutra", that „form is emptiness, and emptiness is form" (*se ji shi kong, kong ji shi se* 色即是空，空即是色).

What does this mean in terms of translation and interpretation? In order to translate we have to understand first of all the semiotic system of the other culture. That is, we have to immerse ourselves in more than just texts. We rather have to enter into the „horizon of significance" (Charles Taylor) of the other culture, i.e. the cultural background through which things become meaningful. The ideal would be, as Alasdair MacIntyre once put it, „inhabiting both standpoints"[11]. Even if this is an unattainable ideal, it needs to be pursued. We need to acquire a cultural competence which is more than just linguistic in nature. This competence is like the ability to switch over to another angle of view, i.e. a sensitivity of seeing the world not just from one culturally conditioned perspective. Having acquired such a competence, Sinologists might become more than just skilled translators of texts (although this is also an important task). They might become what I consider to be their proper vocation: translators and interpreters of culture.

[11] Alasdair MacIntyre, „Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians About the Virtues", in *Culture and Modernity - East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, Eliot Deutsch, ed., Honolulu 1991, 111.