

# Composing and Translating Poetry: Learning From Scholarly and Daily Activities

Botao Wu

## Abstract

Poetic Inquiry invites people to return to the thousand-year-long scholarly activity, namely writing original poetry. It encourages multiple possibilities of combining lexical thinking, poetry composition, and translation. In an attempt to revive the glory of writing, Poetic Inquiry appeals to a broader readership of scholarly works. This article explores my scholarly and daily life and seeks to learn by writing original poems. It also analyzes how I translate my Chinese poetry into English. With poetic works, I travel across languages, time, and space toward a better understanding of myself and the world.

Education is a process of learning how to become the architect of your own experience and therefore learning how to create yourself. — Elliot W. Eisner (2002, p. 24)

## Background

As a way of learning and knowing the world, I would look around the environment and search for some interesting, yet, unobtrusive, things that are ignored in my daily busyness. I tidy up my thoughts, combing through all the memories and events that happened to me, and finding reasonable explanations and excuses for me to feel at ease. In such a process of exploring the outer world and examining my inner self, I come up with poetic lines. Writing regularly about my life is an effective way to dig into the deepest part of myself.

## Spring: Traveling Back to Ancient China

I try to write as many poems as possible about spring as a tribute to ancient Chinese poets. They used to engage in similar activities as a pastime. With borrowed images from classical Chinese poems, I travel back to the age when poetry was an inseparable part of scholarly life. Poetry and nature are a peaceful and transient haven for me.

In ancient times, Chinese poets introduced the image of a lonely person lingering at the window. Staying at the window can be an alleviation of the person's loneliness and unfulfilled expectations. However, other poets depicted a lonely person's lamentation over the scene outside the window, and thought this could aggravate one's bad feelings. Both explanations make sense, and I prefer the latter, so I don't approach the window when I'm not in high spirits. Instead, I write poems.

寻幽

月夜乌啼风瑟瑟  
山花初放隐蒿蓬  
桑榆萝径寻幽处  
蕙草禅宫若一梦

### Seeking Seclusion

In moonlight, the crow caws and the wind sighs,  
Mountain flowers just appear in the wild grass.  
On a trail flanked with vine-decorated mulberries and elms, I search for a secluded place,  
Fragrant plants at a monastery fill my senses like a dream.

The above Chinese poem is rhymed and rhythmical, and the word choices are generally literary Chinese. We don't say 蒿蓬 (wild grass) and 禅宫 (monastery) in modern Chinese. I used these classical Chinese words, as well as the classical Chinese poetry form, to create an imaginary scene. In such an imagined world, I indulge in the sheer beauty of nature, and comfort myself simultaneously.

When I translated the Chinese poem into English, I bore Benjamin's words in mind: "no translation would be possible if, in accord with its ultimate essence, it was to strive for similarity to the original" (Benjamin, 1997, p. 155). I appreciate the understanding of translation "task" not as "duty" and "responsibility," but as searching for "a solution within the domain of language" (Berman et al., 2018, p. 43). At the same time, I thought over my intention of writing and translating. I'm not trying to bind myself with doctrines. In writing, a globally recognized human right, I'm not interested in curbing my free will, although I definitely confine my writing to my own life instead of the vertiginous world.

In my pursuit of freedom in language, I also noticed the importance of "fidelity in translating" (Benjamin, 1997, p. 160), and I agree with Benjamin that my translation "can almost never fully render the meaning it has in the original" (p. 160). Benjamin developed a concept that "words carry emotional connotations" to describe the situation that the original meaning is "fully realized in accord with its poetic significance for the original work not in the intended object, but rather precisely in the way the intended object is bound up with the mode of intention in a particular word" (pp. 160–161). Also, a language has its long-established cultural, societal, ideological, psychological, and literary tradition. This tradition cannot be translated to its full potential, or even may not be accepted by readers from another culture. In this situation, I don't cheat my English readers by offering a wrong interpretation of Chinese culture. I try to avoid the controversial cultural backgrounds.

春

春深波淼雾迷蒙  
野树低垂岗上风  
浩浩千年今又见  
山狐田鼠笑孤鸿

Spring

Deep spring, rough water, and opaque fog,  
Wild trees hang low in the wind on the hill  
A thousand-year history sees again  
Mountain foxes and field mice laughing at a lonely swan goose

A lonely swan goose appeared in classical Chinese poetry as a representation of noble, outstanding, and ambitious people. The image of a swan goose in this poem is to express my respect for great poets of the past. I admire their mighty expressions composed from their life experiences. After reading them, I enjoy ordinary life more than anything else.

### **Summer: Savoring the Moment**

倦怠

阳光懒懒地在草坪上溜达  
风把枯叶聚拢在一起  
广告牌静静地站着  
你，  
坐在窗前

----倦怠 (Wu, 2016a, p. 150)

Ennui

The sunlight languidly strolls on the lawn  
Wind rakes together dead leaves  
Billboard stands silently by the pile  
You,  
Sit listless at the window--  
Ennui

My poetic inquiry is a spiral and upward endeavour to become maturer in character and more versatile and proficient in abilities. The aim is glamorous and glorious, but the road toward it is slippery. I slither, drop, give in, rest, and regain courage and momentum. Sometimes, I'm distracted from my main duty, namely reading and writing (Clarke, 2012, p. 53). I indulge in distraction and retrospection, and learn lessons from them. Similar to the nature of my poetic inquiry, I recall a story of eating meat.

My father liked meat and provided his employees with all kinds of meat when they drove my father's combine harvester to harvest wheat for farmers. These people were very satisfied for the first few days, as meat was not in daily supply at that time. Then they would be turned away by the smell of meat and begged for fruits and vegetables. Finally, they were able to eat meat in large quantities. I like meat and I like reading and writing. But reading poems and novels every day was really challenging, and sometimes nauseating. Later, I was able to persuade myself to keep reading and writing after I recalled my father's advice on how to hoe a whole acre of land by hand. He said: "just keep doing it, and when it is done, it is done."

电视机

作为电视技工，父亲说：

“不用大号元件

无法组装大电视机，而

大电视和小电视播放同样的内容”

作为诗人，我想说：

“没有足够长的经历

我无法写出长诗，而

长诗与短诗同样让人愉悦”

(Wu, 2016b, p. 152)

TV Set

Father, as a TV technician, said

“You cannot make a TV set big

Without parts big enough, and a big

TV shows the same as a small one.”

I, as a novice poet, would say

“I cannot compose a poem long  
Without contents long enough, and a long  
Poem evokes the same pleasure as a short one.”

### **Autumn: Returning to Reality**

Autumn has a binary connotation in Chinese worldview. It represents mellow fruitfulness and augurs the past of the best time. The lamentation on the sad side of autumn is plentiful in Chinese literary works. Chinese scholars, especially the pessimistic, tend to link autumn with the elapse of the best years of their lives. For instance, Du Fu, the poetic genius of the Tang dynasty, wrote eight poems inspired by autumn, each of which was enshrouded in a sad tone and atmosphere and his worry about his country. Ascribing a scholar’s emotional vulnerability to changing weather is not uncommon.

I thought I was already immune to emotional stimuli, but an ordinary scene on a grey afternoon could engender my thoughtful forlornness. I remembered mother again. My mother looks nothing like the description in the following poem, but her virtue is much more laudable. She is not the kind of person who knows her rights and still pushes for more. Instead, she concedes any of her belongings for the benefit of the family.

In terms of diction, I intentionally used some allusions like 青州从事 and literary words like 寒英 in the poem. 青州 is a location, and 从事 the name of an official position. They were used together in classical Chinese literature to refer to good wine. The two characters 寒 and 英 literally mean “cold” and “flower,” respectively. In poetic language, the phrase is figuratively used to refer to plum blossoms, which bloom in cold winter. It is a literary tradition that a poet uses classical Chinese to write traditional Chinese poems. This kind of word choice also helps me create a poetic world that is aloof from the physical world. In this imagined world, I can stay away from the struggles and the impurity in the real world. I meditate, change my memory of the past, and (re)write my stories.

I first translated the literary Chinese lines into modern Chinese, and then rewrote them into English-free verse. I focused on conveying the meanings of my Chinese poems, and the cultural background embedded in the poems. A Chinese child raised in the traditional way is supposed to fulfill filial duty and gain fame and honor for the family. The Chinese tradition may be “new concepts” (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1995, p. vii) for English readers, but Berman called for respect for “the differences of foreign texts and cultures” (1999, p. 76 as translated and cited in Venuti, 2013, p. 186), Recognizing and respecting cultural differences, I write to better myself. I try to overcome the confines and limitations of languages and communicate “the universal spirit,” or “the human spirit” (Venuti, 2013, p. 118).

美

明月寒英惹蕙心  
 青州从事相与饮  
 柔荑拨开流苏密  
 琴瑟丹青赋弹棋

A Beauty

Bright moon and plum blossoms grace her chaste heart  
 I drink fine wine with her  
 Her white and tender fingers push away the dense tassels  
 As she plays zither, draws pictures, and writes poems about our chess game

### **Winter: Enduring the Coldness**

I take writing as a way to alleviate my overwhelming feelings and emotions, and as a compass guiding me toward a more meaningful existence. I'm a poet trying to find my way in the complex world.

I enjoy poetry by feeling it. I would taste the texture of lined-up words, immersing myself in all the wild imaginations with musical and picturesque backdrops produced in my mind. I would form vivid scenes in my head when I try to write each sentence. I align words the way I like and delineate the scenes I saw. I just play with words in the most unadorned way. I call them my primitive poems in a simple and naive style.

"Poetry is the most intense, most highly charged, most artful and complex form of language we have" (Grossman, 2010, p. 93). Grossman tried to produce similar rhymes and meters when she translated Spanish poetry into English. Translating poems, Pound also made attempts at "recontextualization" (Venuti, 2013, p. 81). But, even Pound himself realized that recontextualization didn't fit exactly and was not accepted by every reader. When I read Pound's English poems translated from classical Chinese poems, I could barely recognize which Chinese poems he had translated. When I read other translated Chinese poems, I couldn't find their Chinese counterparts either. My peer Chinese scholars have the same feeling. In translation, something always gets lost. Pound produced rhyme schemes that are acceptable in English, but the poetic effect is not an equivalent to Chinese poems at all, especially for Chinese readers. This is an inevitable consequence of the fundamental differences of the two languages. For example, Chinese characters have tones for themselves, while English words don't; Chinese characters don't have stress, while English words have. Trying to create some poetic effects in English, a translator always has to add extra words, and to use different meters and diction from those of the original text (p. 87).

An alternative and common practice in Chinese and English poetry translation is to focus on meaning. Translating my own traditional Chinese poems, I don't try to produce similar poetic effects in English. I focus on translating meaning. The Chinese characters themselves are foreign enough for English readers. If my translated poetry can pique their curiosity, then they might begin to learn Chinese characters and then Chinese culture. On the other hand, I write original English poems without translating them into Chinese, and invite my Chinese students to write English poetry as well. Traversing the two languages, I anchor my emotions and memory.

冬韭

后院的韭菜

抵挡不住

冬的

盛情

脱去

碧绿碧绿

的

衣裙

蜷缩在

冰冻的

地上

和着风的摇篮曲

沉沉睡去

Leeks in My Backyard

Couldn't resist  
The hospitality  
Of Winter

They took off  
Their dark green  
Dresses

They huddled up  
On the frozen  
Ground

With the lullaby sung by wind  
They fell asleep deeply

## **Ending Remarks**

I write and translate to console myself and set an example for other people to take writing as a way of living and learning. I write poems to reconstitute my world as poetry accommodates blurriness. I write poems to avoid political and cultural conflicts. I write poetry for me to face the past.

When there is something wrong in our lives, it is easy to criticize others or the circumstances. The outside world affects us, to some degree, but cannot define and confine our lives. We control our own thoughts and reactions to things that happened to us. It is more rewarding and valuable if I focus on my (re)interpretation of the outside world, and on correcting the things that went wrong in my life. Traveling through time, space, and emotions, I write to discover aspects of me that need further improvement. I'm an "imperfect" human being, learning to live well "in the world" (MacKenzie-Dawson, 2018, para. 5).

## **Acknowledgment**

Parts of the commentary are from the author's dissertation.



## References

- Bassnett, S., & Lefevere, A. (Eds.). (1995). General editor's preface. In *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation* (pp. vii–viii). Routledge.
- Benjamin, W. (1997). *The translator's task* (S. Rendall, Trans.).  
<https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/ttr/1997-v10-n2-ttr1487/037302ar.pdf>
- Berman, A., Berman, I., & Sommella, V. (2018). *The age of translation: A commentary on Walter Benjamin's "The task of the translator."* Routledge.
- Clarke, A. (2012). Distractions. In A. Cohen, M. Porath, A. Clarke, H. Bai, C. Leggo, & K. Meyer (Eds.), *Speaking of teaching: Inclinations, inspirations, and innerworkings* (pp. 52–54). Sense Publishers.
- Eisner, E. W. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. Yale University Press.
- Grossman, E. (2010). *Why translation matters*. Yale University Press.
- MacKenzie-Dawson, S. (2018). Intimate uncertainties: A mother returns to poetic inquiry. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 19(3).  
<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2661/4267>
- Venuti, L. (2013). *Translation changes everything: Theory and practice*. Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203074428>
- Wu, B. (2016a). Ennui. In *Poet dossier* (p. 150). Sichuan Ethnic Publishing House.
- Wu, B. (2016b). TV set. In *Poet dossier* (p. 152). Sichuan Ethnic Publishing House.



**Botao Wu** is a poet, researcher, and teacher. His works appear in academic journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* and *Canadian Literature*, and poetry journals in North America and Asia. At the present time, he dedicates himself to a project that connects *Ar/tography* and Poetic Inquiry. He serves as associate editor and editorial team member for academic journals such as *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* and *The Qualitative Report*. He earned a doctoral degree from the University of British Columbia in 2019; currently, he works at Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics. After teaching in the United States, Canada, and China for many years, Botao aims to find a home in a nonreligious and apolitical way.

