Problems and Possibilities in Translating Proverbs and Allusions

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The use of proverbs and allusions is common in every language, not only in everyday speech but in literature; and the older and richer a culture is, the more proverbs and allusions it will possess. It is well said that "a proverb expresses the common feelings and experiences of the people among whom it originates, and where it has been put into its form by the polishing of many individuals. In fact, 'the genius, wit, and spirit of a nation are discovered in its proverbs'."[1] And Fernando Mateos writes:

> The study of the Chinese proverbs is one of the best approaches through which Western scholars may penetrate deeply into the mentality and customs of the Chinese people. If literary works are mirrors of the culture of a country, this is all the more true of proverbs, sentences coined by people themselves, and transmitted orally from generation to generation, as genuine expression of popular wisdom.[2]

This clearly suggests that proverbs are very deeply rooted in the culture of the source language; and so are allusions. Therefore, both are very difficult to transplant into another soil without losing their original color and spirit. However, Mateos adds that, according to the conclusion of modern ethnologists, proverbs may often contain universal ideas or concepts which "are basic elements of human thought, and are like the wild flowers of common sense."[3] In order to prove this point, he cites some "equivalents" of proverbs in Chinese, English, Spanish, Hebrew, French, Latin, and Italian.

The present article will limit its discussions to some problems and possibilities in translating proverbs and allusions from Chinese into English, with special reference to script translation for the actor or stage. We will

start with some examples of proverbs in Chinese and English which have often been considered to be equivalents:

A i) Chinese: 種 瓜 得 瓜
(plant/sow melon get melon
種 豆 得 豆
plant/sow bean get bean)
English: Whatsoever a man soweth, that also shall he reap.
Reap as one has sown.
You must reap what you have sown.

ii) Chinese: 打 鐵 趁 熱
(hammer/strike iron while [it is] hot)
English: Strike while the iron is hot.
Strike now, or else the iron cools.

B i) Chinese: 半 斤 八 兩
(half *chin* [catty] eight *liang* [tael])
English: Six of one and half a dozen of the other.

ii) Chinese: 一 言 既 出
(a word already out [spoken]
駟 馬 難 追
four-horse team hard overtake)
English: A word once spoken flies beyond recall.

iii) Chinese: 禍 不 單 行
(ill-fortune not singly come/go)
English: Woe is forerun with woe.
One woe doth tread upon another's heel.

C i) Chinese: 說 曹 操 曹 操 就 到
(speak/talk Ts'ao Ts'ao Ts'ao Ts'ao at-once arrive)
English: Speak of the devil and he will appear.

It is quite clear that the proverbs in Group A are really close in meaning and implication in the two languages. As soon as the translator finds the "equivalents," almost everything is there right away. Proverbs in Group B look different but would cause no problem in translation and understanding. For instance, in B i) the proverbs use only different units of measurement,

and, when the original unit is not familar to the reader or receiver of the target language, the change of unit terms in the translation should not cause any problem in meaning and spirit. Lines of B ii) look very different in wording, but the "four-horse team" is an image of fast speed and has the same connotation of "flies."

Generally speaking, in Group C the English and Chinese proverbs are equivalent in most situations, though the character Ts'ao Ts'ao is not thought of as the devil to the Chinese. Since the common English reader or audience would not know who Ts'ao Ts'ao is, a literal transliteration of the Chinese name will create difficulty in comprehension. Further-more, in rendering anything with proper names or special reference to it, the translator has to first of all make sure if that proper name and specific reference have any implication there beyond the literal meaning – as in many cases they do. In other words, a proverb of this nature may very often involve the problems of allusion at the same time.

Before we come to the problems of translating allusions, it should be helpful to have a brief understanding of their basic nature. As James Liu has pointed out, there are two kinds of allusions: general and specific. The former are those made to common knowledge and beliefs; the latter, to particular literary works, historical events and persons, legends, and myths. Allusions have been employed as an economical means of presenting an analogical situation or providing a contrast. By adding the authority of past experience to the present occasion, allusions skillfully treated can strengthen the desired effect in a work. Liu also says:

> As in dealing with symbols, so in dealing with allusions we should ask not so much whether they are original or conventional, popular or abstruse, but rather whether they have any purpose or justification. In other words, we should ask: Does this allusion add anything to the total effect or does it simply show off the poet's learning? Is there any reason for using allusions here, or could the poet have expressed what is embodied in the allusions just as well without using them?[4]

Though Liu is talking about the art of Chinese poetry, the same thing can be said of allusions in drama. In some cases, allusions contribute greatly to the tragic, comic, or ironic effect in a scene; in some others, they are superfluous, or even misused. Dramatically, it makes little difference if

the translator leaves out the superfluous allusions; and the omission of misused ones may add clarity to the translation. For example, in *The Rainbow Pass* (*hung-ni kuan* 虹霓關), General Hsin Wen-li has a dream of ill omen the night before he goes to the battle field. He describes it to his wife Tung-fang Shih, after which the dialogue continues as follows:

TUNG-FANG SHIH

As you are a great general, you should take no notice of nonsensical dreams.

HSIN

But there is nobody whom I can put in control of the Pass while I am away.

TUNG-FANG SHIH

Leave it to me!

HSIN

That's all very well, but have you forgotten the old story of Hsi Shih?*

*The famous beauty instrumental in the ruin of Wu, 5th century.[5]

Then she swears that she will never forget her duty as his wife. He goes to attack the enemy and is killed. She weeps and laments. Skillful in fighting herself, she mounts her horse and declares: "If I fail to avenge my dear lord's death I shall never return here again."[6] She captures the man who killed her husband, but she falls in love with him and marries him. Judging from the plot, Hsi Shih is superfluous or even misused here. The only possible analogy between Hsi Shih and Tung-fang Shih is that beautiful women may often bring a country to its ruin. But if this is the intention of General Hsin's reference to Hsi Shih, it must be the most unbelievable, stupid thing for a husband to say to his dear wife. Besides, to the Chinese Hsi Shih is remembered not only as a great beauty but also as a trustworthy heroine who sacrifices herself for the good of her own country.

At this point, the translator may have to look into the psychological background of the lines. To me it is quite obvious that the line is not the voice of the general, but that of the playwright as a teacher or preacher, though unconsciously it may be. This kind of psychology or attitude is not uncommon in classical Chinese drama. For example, a bandit leader almost always calls his men *lau-lo* 嘍囉 ("bandits"), which is actually a term of contempt used by law-abiding people to call the bandits; a general of a foreign country often calls his own soldiers *fan-ping* 番兵 ("barbarian

soldiers"). To the great majority of old Chinese audience, this kind of moral implication of the playwrights is usually not logically felt. They tend to identify themselves with the righteous, like the playwrights. However, a literal translation of anything of this nature would sound unnatural to the more logical minds of Western readers and audience.

In dealing with such allusions, the translator has to exercise his own judgement as to whether to translate them "faithfully," or to improve them by modification or omission. But in either case, he should explain his choice and the allusions with footnotes. For the convenience of comparison, let us have a look at another line with the same allusion to Hsi Shih. In the play *Two Men on a String* (*feng-i ting* 鳳儀亭), a very beautiful maiden named Tiao Ch'an offers to help her master Wang Yun to bring about the downfall of the evil Prime Minister Tung Cho for the good of the people. She is thus to be given to Tung as his concubine. Through her assistance, Tung is killed. When she is first called to wait on Tung at a feast in Wang's house, part of the scene runs as this:

TUNG

. . . Ah, my dear Minister, what is her name?

WANG

Tiao Ch'an.

TUNG

Good, good, good, Tiao Ch'an is a beautiful name, as beautiful as the person. She is as alluring as Hsi Shih.[5]

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[5] A famous beauty of the 5th century B.C. From a humble family, Hsi Shih 西施 was taken and trained by the King of Yueh and afterward used to seduce the king of Wu and cause his defeat.[7]

The analogy between Tiao Ch'an and Hsi Shih here is very good. Physically, both are among the most beautiful women in Chinese legend; symbolically, the allusion is a means of foreshadowing and irony. Notice that it is Tung, the future "victim," who compares Tiao Ch'an to Hsi Shih. That is to say, when he does so, he is only thinking of their beautiful appearances. Like the king of Wu, he is blinded by the physical beauty. But audience who knows the story is aware of both levels of meaning.

The adding of "alluring" in the translation seems an interesting choice in terms of technique, as the adjective implies the seductive kind of charm.

It may faintly suggest the ironic and foreshadowing quality of the allusion in the original play. Tung must know the story of Hsi Shih, but the drink and the beauty in front of him have made him conscious only of his animal desire. Therefore, the added word "alluring" – a written-into-the-line footnote – would give some idea of the allusion to the audience of the target language who can only listen to the dialogue of the actors,[8] or to the readers who do not like to stop to look at the footnotes at the bottom of a page.

It may not be irrelevant now to have a closer look at the use of footnotes, which have been so commonly employed by translators for explanation. From the examples above, we know that the translator can write a footnote into the translation and/or use a bottom footnote as long as it is used to good effects. Generally speaking, bottom footnotes are easier to use than the writing-into-the-translation type, but the translator must still be very careful when he is forced to use them. The most unusual instance of footnote I have come across is the following one used to explain a proverb in a line spoken by a Communist hero Li Yu-ho in *The Red Lantern* 紅燈記. Here is the line and the footnote:

LI

I don't believe in Buddhism. But I've heard the saying, "The law is strong, but the outlaws are ten times stronger!"*

*Here "law" means the reactionary ruling class while "outlaws" the revolutionary spirit of rebellion of the proletariat and revolutionary people in their struggle against the reactionaries. In striking back against Hatoyama, Li Yu-ho uses his saying to imply that the Japanese bandits may ride roughshod for a time. But it is the revolutionary people who are really strong. The Japanese bandits are doomed. The Chinese people are sure to win.[9]

According to the footnote – which, it should be noticed, is a literal rendering of a footnote in the original – what Li intends to say simply is, as another English version based upon the same Chinese edition has put it:

The evil is strong, but the good is ten times stronger.[10]

This simplified translation is undoubtedly very clear in meaning and needs no footnote. But is this better? To answer this question, we have to take a careful look at the proverb in the original, which runs:

道 高 一 尺 魔 高 一 丈
(*Tao* high one foot *Mo* high ten feet)

It means *Mo* is ten times higher or more powerful than *Tao*. Traditionally, in China *Tao* is always referred to as the Good or Right Way; *Mo*, the Evil or Wrong Way. That is, the proverb Li quotes is not used to mean what is traditionally or usually understood. The playwrights must be conscious of the abnormal usage of the expression when they put the footnote there in this revised edition of the play. I think it should also be clear to them that the footnote would not reach the audience – and the play was intended for the stage. They should also know that in the theatre the possible reaction to such a line could be this: If it is spoken by a *ch'ou* (a clown type of character/actor), it may win a good laugh because it is obviously misused and the speaker is making a fool of himself. It is a strong joke or irony. Yet such an interpretation could hardly be applied here as Li is the Communist hero and the play is meant to be a propaganda of the Chinese Communists and the revolutionary people refer to themselves. It is very puzzling, indeed! In such an instance, it seems that the translator had better indicate in a further footnote of his own that it is an original footnote. He should not try to clarify it without any indication as the second translation does.

So much for the use of footnotes. We will now come back to see some special referents and animal images in translating proverbs and allusions. The first thing I would like to consider is: What should the translator do if the referent in a proverb or allusion does not exist in the target language? Or it exists but does not mean the same to the reader of the translation? For example, every country has mountains, but Mount T'ai 泰山 has a special position or significance in the minds of the Chinese people. It stands for something of great significance, or somebody of great personality and reputation, or the respectable title for father-in-laws. Here is a line from a play that contains the image:

Chinese original:
我不知道啊！阿慶嫂，我刁小三有眼不識泰山，你宰相肚裡能撐船，別跟我一般見識啊！

English translation:
How was I to know? Sister Ah-ching. I have eyes, but can't see Mount Tai, while you have the heart of a statesman, big

> enough to hold a boat. I am sure you won't let yourself sink to my level.[12]

Obviously, the translation is a little too literal and the term "statesman" is not a good equivalent for "宰相" (*tsai-hsiang*, which is usually translated as "Prime Minister," and in this line it is simply a synonym for Mount Tai). To take away all the figurative elements, the line basically says: "I didn't know [it was you], Sister Ah-ching! But you are a great person. Please don't look at things like me a small man!" In treating such a line, a writing-into-the-translation footnote may easily solve the problem, and the whole passage could be rendered into something like this:

> I really didn't know, Sister Ah-ching! I must be blind not to have recognized you great as Mount Tai. But you, a great person, surely have a heart big enough to allow a boat to sail there. Please don't look at things like me a small man!

Exact equivalents are hard to find in any two languages. When there is no equivalents, the problem is to find something in the target language with similar association and/or implication to achieve the basic function of the expression from the source language. But the translator has to be specially careful with seemingly similar referents. Take the mythological animal *lung* 龍 in Chinese. It has often been rendered into English as "dragon," without realizing or indicating that a *lung* is believed in Chinese culture a heavenly being or creature, whereas a dragon is generally associated with evil in Western literature. The term *lung* seems very much like the word "luck" in English: when it is used alone it usually means good luck; otherwise, one will say "bad luck." When a Chinese *lung* is evil, it is always preceded by some modifiers to form a compound noun like *o-lung* 惡龍 ("evil or wicked *lung*") and *chiao-lung* 蛟龍 ("a serpent-like *lung* or dragon"). A few examples may make the point and some other related problems clearer:

a) 有 錢 一條龍
(with money a *lung*

無 錢 一條 蟲
without money a *ch'ung* [worm])

b) 拳 打 南 山 猛 虎
(fist[s] beat south mountain fierce tiger[s])
足 踢 北 海 蛟 龍
(foot/feet kick north sea *chiao-lung*)

Example a) is an irony of social manners – a rich person is respected as a *lung* (something with celestial, noble quality), but a poor man is despised like a small worm (a small, low insect). So *lung* and worm form a great contrast in rank, size, and nature. Example b) is used to describe the physical strength of a man, and the tiger and *chiao-lung* are both symbols of something evil and fierce that deserves to be destroyed by the Right. These two examples have been translated as follows:

a) With money one's a dragon,
without money a worm.[13]
b) i. My fists beat the tiger of the South Mountain.
My feet kick the dragon of the North Sea.[14]
ii. I've fought fierce tigers on the southern mountains.
And I've kicked the scaly dragon that swims northern seas.[15]
iii. With my fist I fell the leopard of the Southern Hill!
With my heel I crush the dragon of the Northern Sea![16]
iv. I can hit the leopard of the Southern Mountain.
And I can spear the dragon of the Northern Sea.[17]

In terms of the verbal meanings, the translations have all achieved their basic functions. But it seems that the translators could go a little further to pay some attention to the simplicity and rhythm of everyday speech which is common and characteristic of proverbs (e.g., *lung* and *ch'ung* rime in Chinese), and give a more subtle consideration to the absence of the grammatical subjects, which, in fact, have been supplied in these English translations to make them natural for their readers. However, although the addition of "one" in a) makes it a correct sentence, the line sounds a little weak. "You" might be a better choice according to the mood of the expression which is rather direct and forceful. In b) the adding of the singular first personal pronoun ("my" or "I") is not wrong. But in a play like *The Fisherman's Revenge* 打漁殺家 from which these lines are quoted, the plural form ("we" or "our") should be more logical as these two lines are spoken by the characters as one unit.[18] With all these in mind, it might

be closer to the original to render them as the following:

a) With money you are blessed,
without money you are damned.
b) Our fists can smash the tiger of the South Mountain;
Our feet can crush the serpent of the North Sea.

Sometimes the translator may find that the same referent virtually exists in the two cultures, like the water bird *yüan-yang* 鴛鴦. But to translate it as "madarin ducks" is only scientifically correct. "Love birds" may be a better choice. My simple reason is: In China, *yüan-yang* is always regarded as the symbol of happy marriage of mutual love and of being together. Such an association does not exist in the minds of the general English readers.

There are certainly other problems and possibilities in translating proverbs and allusions. But I would like to mention two more instances which, in a broader sense of proverbs and allusions, should be included in our discussion. They are the use of popular quotations and familiar expressions borrowed from the target language.

It is quite common to find lines from popular songs and poems used in daily conversation and treated and felt as proverbs. And fortunately or unfortunately, lines of very similar meaning can often be found in the target language. It seems "fortunate" because they appear to be very natural, happy "equivalents." But it is unfortunate because very often if we use them, we are taking the great risk of misleading the readers. For instance, we may often find in classical Chinese drama a character hesitating and pondering over problems and murmuring something as Hamlet does in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, saying ". . . ay, there's the rub! " If we use such a famous line from Shakespeare for translation, English readers may consciously think of Hamlet and/or unconsciously tint the Chinese character with the hue of Hamlet and thus form a wrong impression. There is the rub!

Expressions borrowed from foreign languages usually have the novelty quality. So phrases of pidgin-English like "people mountain people sea" and "long time no see" may very often add novelty and freshness to lines in English. But to put them back into the original Chinese they would lose all the fresh colors. I have always felt puzzled in dealing with expressions of this nature. It seems to me that in some occasions to leave them in

pidgin-English might achieve a similar effect as they do in the English "original."

A. C. Scott says that "allusions with a peculiarly Chinese significance that would be meaningless in English had to be rationalized without destroying atmosphere."[19] In other words, when it is proved impossible to reproduce the total effect of an imagery in the target language, the translator should try his best, by all justified means within his reach, to preserve as much as he could the original spirit and atmosphere as well as the verbal function.

Notes

1. Clifford H. Plopper, *Chinese Religion Seen through the Proverb* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1969), p. 1.
2. Fernando Mateos, S. J., "Linguistic and Literary Structures of the Chinese Proverbs," *Tamkang Review* II, 2-III, 1 (October 1971-April 1972), p. 453.
3. Ibid., p. 463. For his examples, see pp. 463-65; for the structure of Chinese proverbs, see pp. 453-63.
4. James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 131-32.
5. L. C. Arlington and Harold Acton, trans., *Famous Chinese Plays* (1937; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), p. 252. For the complete play, see pp. 252-59.
6. Ibid., p. 253.
7. Josephine Huang Hung, trans., *Classical Chinese Plays* (Taipei: Mei Ya Publications, 1971), p. 118. For the original Chinese, see Shih Ling 石玲 ed., 平劇考 (台北: 啓源書報社, 1956-57), vol. 1, pp. 66-67, or Liu-hsiang Kuan-chu 柳香館主, ed., 京戲考, (台北: 正文出版社, 1969), Vol. 1, pp. 192-93.
8. Peter Arnott calls it "writing footnotes into the translation." For discussion and examples, see "Greek Drama and the Modern Stage," in *The Craft and Context of Translation: A Symposium*, ed. William Arrowsmith and Roger Shattuck (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1961; Gorden City, New York: Doubleday & Co. [Anchor Book], 1964), pp. 127-28.
9. See Lois Wheeler Snow, *China on Stage: An American Actress in the People's Republic* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 282. For the Chinese, see 中國京劇團集體改編, 紅燈記: 一九七〇年五月演出本 (北京: 人民出版社, 1972), p. 36.
10. Martin Ebon, ed., *Five Chinese Communist Plays* (New York: John Day Company, 1975), p. 241; see p. 216 for related information.
11. 紅燈記, p. 36. Another proverb is used in its place in an earlier edition, which reads: ". . . , 'A butcher who lays down his knife can become a Buddha, too.' " 放下屠刀立地成佛. (See *Modern Drama from Communist China*, ed. Walter J. Meserve and Ruth I. Meserve [New York: New York University Press, 1970], p. 349). This expression is usually offered as a piece of warning or advice to persuade a person to reform himself from evil to good and seems to fit the situation

in the play much better.

12. 北京京劇團集體改編，沙家浜：一九七〇年五月演出本 (北京:人民出版社，1970), p. 24; *China on Stage,* p. 145.
13. *Chinese Religion Seen through the Proverb*, p. 52.
14. Yao Hsin-nung, trans., *The Right to Kill, T'ien Hsia Monthly* II, 5 (May 1936), p. 472.
15. *Famous Chinese Plays,* p. 101.
16. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, trans., *The Fisherman's Revenge* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1956), p. 11.
17. Lisa Lu, trans., *The Fisherman's Revenge,* MS, p. 1.
18. For the Chinese, see 京戲考 , Vol. 2, p. 141. For further analysis, see Mei-shu Hwang, "Translating the Verse Passages in Peking Opera: Problems and Possibilities" (Part I) *Tamkang Review*, Vol. VII, 2 (Fall, 1976), pp. 102-06.
19. A. C. Scott, "The Butterfly Dream: The Record of a Chinese Theatre Workshop in New York," *Drama Survey* II, 2 (Fall 1962), pp. 159-60.