Out of the Ghetto and in Again: A Report on the Translation Panel

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Altogether eight papers were presented in the Translation Panel: one purely theoretical, six on classical Chinese poetry in English, and one on the translation of a critical text.

The first paper, Andre Lefevere's "The Study of Literary Translation, Productive and Less So," is perhaps also the most important. In it Lefevere advances a bold hypothesis and advocates a radical reorientation in the study of translated literature. "The questions that have been asked over and over again in the past," he observes, are the questions of "What is a good translation?" and "What should we translate?" But these may be the "wrong" questions to ask, "wrong" because "they tend to remain unproductive, at least beyond a certain point, and that point is reached quite fast." As an alternative, he suggests that we "start from the undeniable fact that translations tend to exist," and then proceed to ask "what texts *are* translated, and how" and, finally, "why." In this way, the study of literature in translation – he uses the term "refracted literature" – goes "beyond the the study of literature proper and becomes productive for understanding of the way(s) in which cultures try to, have to deal with each other." As Mohammed Ackbar Abbas observes, the implication is that "in so far as translation cannot be dissociated from ideology, translation can be said to lie 'at the heart' of comparative literature and literary theory." However, as Abbas is quick to point out, "the same point may be made about criticism, historiography, and anthologization."

In a sense, the papers that follow are direct or indirect comments on Lefevere's claim that to argue about the merits and demerits of any piece of literary translation is relatively unproductive. With Joseph S. M. Lau's "Translation as Interpretation: A Pedagogical View," for instance, we plunge right into what Lefevere has called "the ghetto" of translation study. Drawing on examples taken chiefly from the collection of short stories, *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream,* the English translation of Pai Hsien-

yung's *Taipei Jen* 台北人 , Lau demonstrates that even the best translation team we can possibly hope for can be inadequate for the task of translating. Lau suggests that we resort to ample annotation to help get the nuance across. How otherwise, for instance, would the English reader know that a dish of hot pepper beancurd (ma-p'o tou-fu 麻婆豆腐) has *every*thing to do with the psychology of an important character in a story?

Beginning with Donald Wesling's "Translating Sung *Tz'u:* Contemporary English Renditions of the Chinese Lyrical," we have three papers focussing on the translation of the *tz'u* poetry. According to Wesling, "Translation of Chinese lyric poems into modern Western languages will need to bring across as many features of the Chinese Lyrical as are feasible. The successful translation will convey, in its language, knowledge not only of the Chinese Lyrical but also of the conditions of possibility of advanced professional poetry in the moment of the translator's life. This may well mean that scholarly translations and free-verse translations will be superior as literature to metered and rhymed ones . . . ." Convinced of the link between Chinese poetry and cosmology, Wesling believes that "reenactment [of Energy] is not just the highest criterion of success; it is the only criterion." But the question remains of how to locate that energy. As a discerning reader of the English translation, Wesling has convinced us of the superiority of certain versions over others. We must remember, however, that the qualities that have made the English versions so transparently admirable may not really exist in the original.

Peter Dragin and Paul Dresman's joint paper, "Forms of Open Form: A Comparison of English Translations of Li Ching-chao," too, is a critique of a number of *tz'u* 詞 translations, concentrating on the implications of the form the English version takes. Once again, the authors display considerable insight in their interpretation and evaluation of the various English versions. The third paper on *tz'u* has a different orientation. In his paper titled "Kenneth Rexroth's Versions of Li Ch'ing Chao," William J. Lockwood gives us an intimate picture of "the irreducible man." He tries to demonstrate that Rexroth's style is often reminscent of sixteenth century English lyrical poems. He also draws our attention to the parallel between the life of Rexroth and the life of Li Ch'ing-chao, "the irreducible woman," contending that biographical similarities lie behind some poetic affinity between the poet and the poetess.

Kenneth Rexroth is the subject of yet another apper, "This Ancient Man is I: Kenneth Rexroth's Translations of Tu Fu." Ling Chung, Rexroth's

collaborator in a number of translation projects, carefully compared Rexroth's versions with his sources – other translations as well as the Chinese original – and concludes that "Rexroth's versions are diverse to a great extent from the Chinese texts." Significantly, Rexroth deliberately rendered Tu Fu's poems in his own "vital American verse idiom." Because of Rexroth's belief that Chinese poetry *should* be concrete, imagistic, and specific, his translation turns out to be more precise than Tu Fu's original. On the other hand, because Rexroth considered the universe of Chinese classical poetry orderly and harmonious, his versions are also more logical. Hence his translations are at once more *and* less than what would ordinarily be considered translation. As Hans Frankel points out, "A feature that becomes very clear in the paper is the dichotomy of the poet and the translator." While Rexroth's own "growth as a poet was strongly influenced by Tu Fu, he also projects his own personality into Tu Fu's poetry."

The next paper is David R. Knechtges's "Problems of Translating Descriptive Binomes in the *Fuh*." Knechtges begins by defining the nature of the binominal descriptions in the *fu* of the Han dynasty. He then explains the way to establish the meaning of individual binomes. Finally, he comes to the question of how to render these binomes into English. Since "in many cases the graphs used to write the word are primarily phonetic and are irrelevant to the basic meaning of the word," the best way to translate these binomes into English, he suggests, is "through alliteration or repetition of synomyms that convey something of the euphonic effect of the Chinese expressions." The sample translation Knechtges gives of a short passage from Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju's 司馬相如 "Rhapsody on the Imperial Park" certainly bears out his theory. But then the success may be "accidental." As Stephen Owen observes, "The history of a literature invests certain tropes, schemes, and kinds of diction with particular values which these tropes, schemes, and kinds of diction cannot escape." In translation, "formal similarity is often a radical dissimilarity of quality." When this occurs, Owen tells us, "we would gladly sacrifice the formal properties of the Chinese binome to recreate that more elusive affective qualities."

Our only paper on the translation of a critical text is the one on "Vincent Y. C. Shih's Translation of the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung:* A Note on Literary Translation," jointly by Chiang T'ai-fen and Ch'iu Chin-jung. In the section on semantics, they discuss such items as literary terms, critical idioms, metaphors, and allusions. In the section on formal aspects, they discuss syntaxis, particles, and brackets and notes. While finding Shih's translation

largely unsatisfactory, they offer the following suggestions. "Since the *Wen-hsin* is a treatise on critical theory, the ideas are what matters . . . the precise rendition, . . . ranging from a semantic unit to a critical term, should be given first attention. When (literal) translation does not work, trsnsliteration seems to be the only alternative . . . though romanization as a kind of neologism is sure to meet hostility. . . ." Ching-I Tu notes that "the paper as a whole is a successful exercise based on a linguistic model, and will be of use to any would-be translator of the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung.*" Since Professor Vincent Shih has just turned out a revised edition of his English rendition of this important critical text, it would be interesting to see where the new version departs from the old, and how the present paper may be revised in the light of the new version.

Its published aim being "a reappraisal of recent English translations of classical Chinese literature," the translation panel most appropriately closes with Hans H. Frankel's paper, "English Translations of Classical Chinese Poetry since the 1950s: Problems and Achievements." The problems he groups into four categories: 1) meter and prosody; 2) syntax, word order, connectives, parataxis and hypotaxis; 3) parallelism and antithesis; 4) repetitions. To these, Mei-shu Hwang adds the problem of musicality. While observing that translators in recent times "have shown great ingenuity in tackling these problems," Frankel also comes to the conclusion that almost invariably "in finding equivalents for certain features of the original poem they have had to sacrifice other features."

Let me conclude my inadequate summary by referring to two points raised in Andre Lefevere's paper. The majority of papers dealing with the technical aspect of literary translation have thrown considerable light, not only on the translated work, but on the work translated, the original. The "interpretive" study of translation, if it is a ghetto, is a ghetto well worthy of the adventuresome scholars. And since it is painfully clear that no one translation can claim completeness, we may need – notwithstanding Lefevere's assertion to the contrary – "more, and better, translations." But this is by no means meant to detract from Lefevere's alternative approach, for his plea for the study of "why are some texts translated" instead of "what is a good translation" is a timely reminder of the vastness of the field of translation studies.