3 Translating Great Distances

The Case of the *Shijing*

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Abstract

This essay reflects on translatorial practice across great distances in space and time, illustrating a range of practical and theoretical issues that come to the fore in the author's new, in-progress translation of the *Shijing* (also known as the *Classic of Poetry*, *The Books of Songs*, or *The Book of Odes*). In incorporating the commentarial tradition of Chinese-intralingual interpretation into his English rendition of this foundational text, he brings together philosophy, philology, and literary aesthetics.

Keywords: Chinese poetry, translation, *Shijing*, intralinguality, ambiguity, archaic language

What happens when we attempt to translate a text that is largely “unreadable” in the original? That is what we face in proposing a new translation of the Chinese poetry classic, the *Shijing* (詩經, Book of Songs).¹ The theoretical and practical issues raised with such a translation may not be unique, but two things about this project *are* definitely special: the questions of distance and of intralinguality. The intervening millennia, diachronic linguistic drift, and inherent qualities of the Chinese literary language have created conditions of extreme distance for the reader of this classic. As I have argued in “The Babel Fallacy” (2019), interlingual translation was not an important cultural or intellectual matter for early, or even medieval, Chinese literature, but intralingual work was of paramount importance. That intralinguality begins at least by the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and centers on the

¹ For an introduction to this sixth-century BCE anthology, see my “Postface” in Waley-Allen 1996, 336–383; for a different configuration of that information see Kern 2018.

Shijing and the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters), the world's first monolingual dictionary (c. 100 CE). This essay explores the issues of distance and intralinguality that a new translation of the *Shijing* needs to address.

A new translation

There are at least eight different translations of the *Shijing* available in English, by James Legge (1871 and 1876), Clement Allen (1891), William Jennings (1891), Arthur Waley (1937), Bernhard Karlgren (1950), Ezra Pound (1954), and Arthur Waley and Joseph Allen (1996). These translations offer the reader a wide range of renderings and apparatus to engage the *Shijing*. So we must first ask, how could one find a useful, new intellectual or poetic position within this array? Let me review some ways this might be achieved. First, like Legge's and Karlgren's, this translation will be a Chinese-English bilingual edition, but it will offer the poems for the first time in line-for-line *en-face* format, on recto (right-hand) pages. Moreover, accompanying each poem will be selected passages from key traditional commentaries, especially from the Mao Prefaces (毛序), Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, and Zhu Xi 朱熹. These passages are to be translated into relatively close renderings, distinct from but complementary to the poems, forming their own intralingual gestalt in translation. In other words, the selections from commentaries will appear on recto pages with weight nearly equivalent to the poems themselves, allowing the reader to see obliquely the intralingual frames in which Chinese readers came to know these poems over the centuries. Steven Van Zoeren (1991) and Haun Saussy (1993) have detailed how those different levels of commentary created an interpretational protocol (what Van Zoeren calls the "hermeneutic context") for the traditional reader. As Saussy suggests, to ignore that protocol and context is to ignore the very meaning that the anthology held for millennia (23; see Klein's essay in this volume for an appreciation of Saussy's work). My presentation of these commentaries will diverge from that of Legge and Karlgren. Legge quotes and critiques the commentaries in his notes, but always to make an argument for a translation, not to provide broad contextual knowledge of the commentaries themselves. Karlgren's detailed treatment of the commentaries in *Glosses on the Book of Odes* are used to eke out certain contested readings, not to provide a range of possible readings available to the traditional reader (1964). In many ways, Legge and Karlgren are employing a reading strategy developed by Qing philologists whose

work I discuss below. I am seeking to maintain a more neutral stance, one that allows for possible divergent readings.

On the facing, verso (left-hand) pages will be two types of secondary material for each poem. The “Annotations” are to be notes on central philological and textual issues of each poem, ranging from glossing of key words to discussions of the architecture of the poem. The sources for the annotations are various, from the earliest interlinear Mao commentary (毛傳) to the latest scholarship, but are especially indebted to the Qing-dynasty scholars of the *Shijing*, Chen Huan 陳奐 (1975), Ma Ruichen 馬瑞辰 (1971), and Yao Jiheng 姚際恆 (1963). In constructing these “Annotations,” I will follow closely the comments and notes of Cheng Junying 程俊英 and Jiang Jianyuan 蔣見元 (1991) – they often cite Qing commentaries at length, which is especially useful. The other component of the verso materials will be the “Comment,” where I relate more of my own thoughts, or of others that I have read, to provide a reflection on the poem in a contemporary literary or cultural context. While the “Annotations” will follow a similar format and logic throughout, the “Comments” will be more eclectic, drawing inspiration from the circumstances of the poem in question. Taken together, these different components create an intralingual context for the translation, which can become a refraction of the intralinguality of the original.

The language of the *Shijing*

As for the issue of the language of the *Shijing*, I am here not so much interested in grammatical or phonological structures, although those are extremely important to my work. Rather I seek to place the poems within the frame of what we conventionally term “literary” or “classical Chinese” (*wenyanwen* 文言文). As Paul Rouzer (2007), Michael Fuller (1999), and many others have argued, although the literary language of China constantly evolved and diversified over its long history, there is a consensus that the base-standard for this language resides in the philosophical and historical texts of the late Zhou-Han period. Of those texts, we might argue that in terms of style, content, and consistency, the *Mengzi* (孟子, Mencius), from the fourth century BCE, set the early standard, while Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 *Shiji* (史記, Records of the Historian), from c. 90 BCE, defined this language at its peak. Yet, even in these standard texts, the literary language is noted for its multivalent potential and vague referents. It is assumed, however, that for early readers these qualities did not render the text unreadable or even ambiguous. If we accept these propositions, then we have to recognize

that the language of the *Shijing* is a type of *proto*-classical Chinese, and not a language that is compatible with the reading protocols of standard literary Chinese. In many of its formations, the language of the *Shijing* is more akin to the language found on Zhou bronze vessels than that of the *Mengzi* or *Shiji*. This “bronze-script nature” of the *Shijing* is masked, however, by the transcription of the text into standard script forms beginning in the Han period. At the graphemic level the *Shijing* may *look* like these other texts, but that impression dissolves when one turns to reading it.

As the earliest commentaries with their intensive glossing attest, even during the Han period, the *Shijing* was written in a “foreign” language that needed interpretations for the reader of the time. In addition to this inherent linguistic difference, the need for this glossing also rises from the pervasive secondary orality of the poems – they were most often transmitted in an oral context, even within an extensive written culture. In that transmission there were only spoken words; yet when the text was recorded (and there were many occasions when this happened), then one needed to transcribe it into written form, and the resulting sound-based graphs became the famous “loan words” that commentaries needed to clarify for the belated reader. Without the commentarial glossing of its vocabulary, no one could read very far in the *Shijing* without getting stuck. Thus, when we read 不顯不承 ‘not brilliant, not continuing’ in poem no. 266, we need the commentary, in this case Chen Huan quoting the *Mengzi*, which cites the *Shujing* (書經, Classic of Documents), which is glossed by *Shici* (釋詞, Lexicon), to inform us that *bu* is not a negative, but rather a word of praise (讚美之詞; Cheng and Jiang 1991, 935): yielding something like “such brilliance, such continuity.” That is what the *Shijing* commentaries do: they “translate” proto-Chinese into Chinese, first into the standard literary language, and more recently into standard modern Chinese, and currently often into a combination of the two.

Thus, very few people now actually *read* the *Shijing*, rather, they most often *decipher* it; and when they do “read” it, they often do so already knowing what it means from various other types of exposure. There are lines of the *Shijing* that work perfectly well in standard classical language, and some even in modern literary language – the latter often being transformed into aphorisms (成語). In most cases, however, we are reading the *Shijing* through a series of substitutions, led by the glosses and commentaries, whether we recognize that or not. This is what I call “surrogate reading.” The “Annotations” described above will extend that reading into the English context, alerting the reader of the translation to the general nature and specific examples of this type of reading. The final hermeneutical move is then to read the poems in translation.

Issues of translation

Within this linguistic and intralingual context, there are a set of intellectual and cultural issues raised in translating the *Shijing* that need special attention.

Who's listening?

When we enter into the contract of translation, we must imagine the original text in a communication context. We need to know not so much what the writer of the text meant to communicate, but rather how the text “sounds” to the listener/reader, either actual or imagined. We need to know not so much authorial intent, but rather textual resonance. When that context is clear, we can then strive to reconstruct it in the target language: not the intention but the reception of the text. The degree of transparency of those communication contexts and their textual resonance varies greatly. These can be as lucid as contemporary third-person reportage where we can ask/imagine almost any source-language reader/listener what they “hear.” Or it can be a difficult and ambiguous text, such as the poetry of high modernism, which may require us to imagine a much more informed source-language listener. But how do we approach a text as distant and difficult as the *Shijing*? Is there a contemporary listener whom we should ask or imagine? Or are we to imagine a listener at some other point in the long trajectory of this text’s reception – the Qing philologist, the Tang commentator, the Han annotator, the audience of the royal court, the wine-flushed guests at a clan dinner, or the old lady in the lane humming a local tune and making up the words as she goes along? Haun Saussy describes the difficulty, if not impossibility, of finding the “first meaning” of the *Shijing* poems (1993, 60–61). Even if we assume that the first singers and listeners understood these songs very well, by the time of the earliest textual versions for which we have evidence (second century BCE), the extensive glossing of individual words and phrases in the poems can only mean that the early commentators believed their contemporaneous readers needed these aids. The text would be incomprehensible without them, and thus emerges the first layer of intralingual work. That glossing only became more labored over the centuries, wherein there are glosses of glosses of glosses: Kong Yingda glosses Zheng Xuan’s glosses of the Mao glosses of the poems, to which critics from the Song to the Qing added their own evaluations.

So to whom does one listen if the task is to translate the *Shijing*? Both Legge and Waley relied very much on Zhu Xi’s text, about which Legge is

clear and Waley is less so. Karlgren more often went back to Mao and Zheng Xuan, but also struck off on his own, as only he could. And Pound? Pound often relied on Pound, although he did have the assistance of Veronica Sun to read the annotations for him (Carpenter 1988, 797-798). No matter the strategy, in every case the text is rendered more comprehensible in English than it is in Chinese, and that is because the English translation is largely a translation of intralingual glosses. If we actually translated the text as it stands, I would predict that fifty percent of it would be gibberish to almost any reader. To wit, no. 280:

Set up business, set up <i>ju</i>	設業設虞
Lofty incisors tree feathers	崇牙樹羽

The HYDCD gives sixteen discrete definitions of the common term *ye* 業 of the first line (1993), Paul Kroll gives nine for classical Chinese (2007), and Xiang Xi's dictionary dedicated just to the language of the *Shijing* gives two, "danger" and "bell stand" (1997) – but there is already a bell stand in the line, *ju* 虞. *Ju* is an extremely rare character for which the HYDCD cites this poem, so it would have also been a puzzle to most readers, historical and contemporary. I won't even go into the tangled web of the second line, other than to say that every graph is given extensive annotation and commentary, producing a meaning something akin to "On their wooden dentals, plumage stands" – this assumes the reader of English knows what architectural "dentals" are, and does not confuse them with false teeth. This is why we need intralingual glossing in both Chinese and English.

The names of things

The *Shijing*'s deep engagement with the material world makes for fascinating reading. Yes, these are works of great emotional weight: poems of ritual and spirituality, poems of dynastic glory, poems of social woes, poems of family affairs, and poems of romance. Yet this emotional weight is often borne on the backs of *things*. Things from the most wrought to the most natural: from elaborate bell stands to ospreys on an island in the river. Bill Brown has argued that an object becomes a thing through its increased subjectivity: "The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (2001, 4). That is a relationship found throughout the *Shijing*, where objects find their subjects, both in the poems and in their reception. This creates an

ecology of things, a complex of material relationships. It is difficult to know if we can enter into the ecology that generated the things, but we should be able to appreciate the ecology that emerges from the text's long reading history. But is that an ecology that can be translated?

The first issue is the thing named. As with the *ju* bell stand, there are certain objects named in the *Shijing* for which we have no equivalent term, even when we know exactly what that object is. Other things named are irretrievable, except as a vague term, such as “type of plant.” Problems are compounded when the objects have special “thing-ness” in their naming.

Poem no. 292, “Silk Robes” (絲衣), which describes the sacrifice to a star spirit, names three sacrificial vessels: *nai* 鼎, *ding* 鼎, and *zi* 鼎 (l. 5). We know what these are: beginning with the *ding*, the most common term, “a meat-stewing tripod” (Von Falkenhausen 2006, 524), or “ancient cooking cauldron with two handles and three or four legs” (MDBG). This usually gets rendered simply as “cauldron.” The other two vessels are much more obscure, not appearing in extant listings of sacrificial objects; here the Mao glosses come to our rescue, saying that the *nai* is a large *ding*, and *zi* is a small *ding*, which is repeated by the HYDCD (but note that in the Lu school commentary, the *nai* is said to be a small *ding*). So we know what we have, more or less – different vessels for preparing and holding the sacrificial meats – but we cannot really translate the terms without a prosaic paraphrase or transliterating the original names. We can imagine that for the singer and reader, this small catalogue of things would possess affective weight, as if we were to read, “Chalice, goblet, and wineglass.” It is this weight, the subject-object relationship, that is difficult to recover.

This weight can extend to materials of the natural world as well. The *Shijing* is famous for its language of flora and fauna, generating extensive attention and scholarship (Lu Ji 1967, Lu Wenyu 1957). Referents to animals and plants are also often fraught with cultural meaning. On occasion that meaning is transferable in translation. The peach blossoms of poem no. 6 need no apologia (although see Saussy's detailed analysis [1993, 110-114]):

The peach is young and strong	桃之夭夭
Blossoming into buds	灼灼其華
This girl goes to her new home	之子于歸
All is right with house and chamber	宜其家室

But other cultural-connotative transfers are not in the making, such as with the auspicious omen of swarming locusts alluded to in poem no. 5. These we either have to explain or translate away.

In addition to these singular names/images of flora or fauna, there are also the catalogues where material and cultural information piles up, creating a density of denotative and connotative meanings that challenge the translator, sometimes at the denotative level, but almost always at the connotative level. One such catalogue of fishes is found in poem no. 281, “Depths” (潛). This is a very short, perhaps fragmentary, poem of sacrifice, where the fish are presumed to be the viands of the offering. In characters and transcription:

猗與漆沮	Yi yu qi ju
潛有多魚	Qian you duo yu
有鱣有鮪	You shan you wei
鰈鰕鰻鯉	Tiao chang yan li
以享以祀	Yi xiang yi si
以介景福	Yi jie jing fu

These fishes (ll. 3-4) are variously identified. The first and last have common, accepted English identifications: *shan* ‘sturgeon’ and *li* ‘carp’. Yet Zheng Xuan glosses *shan* as “big carp” (大鯉), while the HYDCD identifies it with another character, 鰩, which is a type of eel – appropriate in the Chinese context, but not felicitous at all in English. Citing a description by Chen Huan, Cheng and Jiang identify *shan* as huso sturgeon (鰻魚, *Huso dauricus*). “Sturgeon” seems acceptable. The other names present more denotative problems. *Wei* is now a term for tuna, which would work except the names need to be freshwater fishes. Zheng Xuan glosses it as *luo* 鰩, another type of sturgeon (*Acipenser sinensis*, Chinese sturgeon), which Kroll glosses as “beaked sturgeon, paddlefish,” though he gives it a different Latin name. The *tiao* is also called a *bai tiao* (白鰩 ‘white tiao’), identified as a “Korean sharpbelly” (*Hemiculter leusiscultus*), but also called a “chub.” The *chang* is of the catfish (*Bagridae*) family; the HYDCD identifies it in another *Shijing* poem as 黃鰭魚, for which Kroll has “golden catfish” with a different Latin name (*Pseudo-bagrus aurantiacus*). The *yan* is unfortunately commonly identified as a “mudfish,” although HYDCD has, citing the Mao commentary, 鯰魚 ‘catfish’. Kroll, without identifying a Latin name, gives “cutler, sheatfish” – sheatfish is a European catfish; cutler is an East Asian fish of the *Cyprinidae* (carp) family.

It is very unlikely that a contemporary Chinese reader, even a highly literate one, would know more than two or three of these fishes. Yet the catalogue would be easily seen as one of fishes, because of the “fish radical” for each graph – a reading protocol not reproducible in English. So what do we do with this catalogue of fishes? These have been some solutions:

Sturgeons, large and snouted,
T'ëaous, yellow jaws, mudfish, and carp. (Legge)

Sturgeons and snoutfish,
 Long-fish, yellow-jaws, mudfish and carp, (Waley)

There are shan sturgeons and wei sturgeons, tiao fish, and ch'ang fish,
 yen fish and carp (Karlgrén)

Lo, how our love of god is shown in fish,
 here be all sorts in sacrificial dish. (Pound)

While Legge and Waley have walked a middle way, Karlgrén and Pound have taken the extremes, both avoiding translation *per se*: one in extreme foreignization and the other in domestication of such a degree that it is difficult to identify the couplet. I think it is important to keep the catalogue in place, since it is a dominant rhetorical device in the *Shijing* (and in Chinese literature generally), but I favor manipulating the things named for *some* poetic effect. My first reaction, as a North American angler, was to turn to the fishes of the American Northwest and Midwest:

There are rainbow, there are steelhead
 Bass, walleye, perch, and whitefish

I particularly like the first line: just as *shan* and *wei* are the same fish with different names (types of sturgeon), so are rainbow trout and steelhead – steelhead are rainbow that have gone to sea and returned to freshwater as monster versions of their former selves. But I also thought of keeping the native fishes with some affect. Sturgeon remains, but paddlefish (which is an endangered species in the Yangtze River) is used as more euphonious than the “snout” – I wish I could use “swordfish” but that is now too oceanic; even more so, I wish we had a one-syllable name for this slot. For the second line I have chosen names (often secondary in their dictionary entry) based on alliterative euphony (except for “chub,” which has “visual” alliteration) – “cutler” is a bid toward foreignization.

No. 281, Depths

Lo, the rivers Qi and Ju
 Hide many fishes in their depths
 There are sturgeon, there are paddlefish

Chub, catfish, cutler, and carp
 To be enjoyed, to be sacrificed
 In order to get great fortune

In this naming of things, there are occasionally happy accidents. The variety of plants named in the *Shijing* is astounding, having received monograph-length classification and analysis (Lu Wenyu 1957). Sometimes identification is relatively easy, if not fortuitous. In poems no. 289 and no. 291, the plant *liao* 蓼 is used metaphorically to allude to something politically adverse. *Liao* is a member of the *Polygonum* genus, of which there are hundreds of species; in the *Shijing*, it is typically translated by its common name “smartweed” (Legge, Waley, Karlgren). However, since the implications of the plant are consistently negative, “smartweed” is not a felicitous choice. This is especially so when its more common name is “knotweed, knotgrass” – presumably the “knots” refer to the swollen jointed stems, just as does the Greek term *Polygonum*. The name “knotweed” would seem to carry connotations of “difficulty.” In fact, Shakespeare is our proof. From *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 3.2:

Get you gone, you dwarf,
 You minimus of hindering knotgrass made,
 You bead, you acorn!
 (1993)

Thus, we in turn have:

Inept at dealing with family troubles	未堪家多難
I again landed in the knotweed	予又集于蓼 (289)

and

To weed out the thistle and knotweed	以薅荼蓼
Thistle and knotweed rot away	荼蓼朽止 (291)

In this case the denotative sense is unchanged, but the connotation cleaves closer to the original sense.

Also by happy accident, sometimes the connotations of a translation are *more* effective than the original, producing a translational gain. The most famous plant in the entire corpus is the floating water plant (*xingcai* 荇菜) of the first poem, which is gathered (presumably by women) for either its medicinal or edible quality. Various described and identified, Zhu Xi has a full, if somewhat late description:

Xing approaches excess [per Mao]. The roots grow from water's bottom; its stems are thin threads like hairpins. They are green on top and white underneath. The leaves are purplish red, more than one inch (*cun*) around, and float on the water surface.

荇，接余也。根生水底，莖如釵股。上青下白。葉紫赤，圓莖寸餘，浮在水面。

Legge translates *xingcai* as “duckweed,” which is both inaccurate (accepting Zhu Xi's description) and awkward; Waley has “water mallow,” which is euphonious and culturally appropriate (it is also a medicinal plant and may be edible), but is not botanically close – water mallow is a flowering bush of the hibiscus group. Originally, I translated *xingcai* loosely as “water cress” – it is gathered, eaten, and healthful; yet, I knew water cress was not a floating plant and that it grew in moving water. Then I discovered that *xingcai* has been identified as *Nymphaoides peltata* (Anderson, 33), a miniature water lily of East Asia, with the common name “floating heart.” I am unaware of edible or medicinal qualities of this plant, but the plant is attractive, and given the romantic overtones of the poem, the name “floating heart” is coincidentally perfect:

Short and tall stands floating heart	參差荇菜
Left and right she plucks it	左右流之
Fine and fair is the good lady	窈窕淑女
Awake and asleep he wants her	寤寐求之 (poem 1)

At times the right name has the wrong effect. The vine, *ge* 葛, in poem no. 2, with the variation *gelei* 葛藟 in poem no. 4, is clearly identified as a type of kudzu (*Pueraria lobata*), which is eaten, used for medicinal purposes, and made into cloth. The connotations of the plant is thus entirely positive and domestic. Yet in American English the name “kudzu” brings with it connotations of invasion, strangulation, and destruction; it is called “the vine that ate the South.” The Missouri Department of Conservation describes it, in relatively mild terms:

Kudzu rapidly forms dense mats over the ground, shrubs, mature trees, and buildings. It kills or injures other plants by smothering them under a solid blanket of leaves that allow little light to penetrate. It can girdle shrubs and trees, break branches, and uproot entire trees with its weight.

Thus, we cannot name *ge* by its actual name, but must choose a more cultural neutral term, to wit:

The cloth vine so long	葛之覃兮
Spreads across the valley floor	施于中谷 (2)

and

In the south, a tree with bended branches	南有樛木
Has woodvine climbing up it	葛藟纍之 (4)

Say again

One of the most ubiquitous of the rhetorical devices in the *Shijing* is the use of “reduplicatives” (疊詞), which are either adjectival or adverbial expressions composed of the same, repeated graph, or of two closely rhyming graphs. The first stanza of the first poem offers both, in *guanguan* and *yaotiao*:

Guanguan jujiu	關關雎鳩
Zai he zhi zhou	在河之洲
Yaotiao shunü	窈窕淑女
Junzi haoqiu	君子好逑 (1)

These types of repetition are readily available in Chinese, especially with its wide range of potential rhymes. Although English allows for some modifier repetition and some rhyming binomes, it is impossible to reproduce the original density of these devices in translation. Yet, it seems at odds with the goal of this translation, where I hope to preserve important rhetorical forms that can be seen as innovative poetic practices in English, to convert the reduplicatives into undistinguished modifiers – lonely ospreys, pretty ladies. The awkwardness of reduplicatives (lonely lonely) and most rhyming binomes when possible (lovey-dovey) is also counter to the goals here: to produce viable poetic expressions, albeit innovative ones. Although to my ear the *Shijing* forms of repetition are not available or effective in English, there is a type of repetition that does work, both poetically and in calling attention to its foreignness. This is the alliterative binome, often joined by the conjunction “and.” We have a good number in English already – fast and furious, down and dirty, rough and ready. Moreover, for a language in which alliteration is more available than rhyme, innovative alliteration is eased: big and bountiful (harvest), mighty and martial (king’s

deeds), fine and fair (young woman), full and flourishing (plants). Once this basic form of repetition is established as a rhetorical device shared across the breadth of the anthology, then one can use variations that allude to the basic form: pick, picking (plants, no. 3), whistling whoosh (blades, no. 291), ornate and adorned (ritual hats, no. 292). These types of repetitions then become a new poetic form in English – a “Chinese” form, as it were.

Beautiful, just beautiful

Sometimes the information provided by the traditional commentaries does not present problems because of the specificity of the glosses or the rich cultural connotations of the terms, but rather just the opposite: there is too little information. The most common of these glosses are the 貌 ‘appearance’ and 然 ‘like’ suffix-constructions: the suffixes turn phrases into vague adjectives or adverbs. Thus, in poem no. 4, the term *ying* 榮 is glossed (following a substitution) as 草施貌 ‘the appearance of vegetation coming out’, and in the highly laconic poem no. 268, the adjective 熙 is glossed by Cheng and Jiang, following Zheng Xuan, as 光明貌 “the appearance of radiant and bright”; but we already have numerous uses of “radiant” and “bright,” so we need yet another word:

See how clear and luminous	維清緝熙
Are the judgments of King Wen	文王之典 (268)

The most overused glosses, however, are *mei* 美 ‘beautiful’ and *da* 大 ‘big’. If there is no clear definition of a word, other than it should be positive, it is then often described as *mei*. So in poem no. 290, *mei* 媚 is defined as *mei*; in 292, *xiu* 休 is defined as *mei*; in 293 *shuo* 鑠 is defined as *mei*; and in 296 *huang* 皇 is defined as *mei*. If the positive qualities of a word are also infused with a sense of grandeur, then it is often glossed as *da*. In 274, that is the gloss for the reduplicative *jianjian* 簡簡, and in no. 293 for the common term *chun* 純 ‘pure’. In the best of translational worlds, we should find a unique and consistent translation for each of these terms, one that perhaps catches some echo of the other meanings associated with the term. Given the plethora of these terms, we will need a large thesaurus to name each, and a database to keep track of them.

Oh, alas, what to do?

Lo, there is, alas, yet another problem in translating the *Shijing* – indeed there is. Yea, ’tis true, and it has to do with the auditory expressions (語助

詞 / 讚嘆詞 / 發語詞), of which many, oh so many, are found in the text. Oh my, what to do, oh what to do? Whoo hoo, yes, here's an idea!

There is a wide variety of auditory expressions used in the *Shijing* and if we tried to translate them all, the effect could be similar to the preceding paragraph – like an email message larded with emoji. These expressions are dense and diverse, presenting two problems for English translation. First, their density extends from the level of the text as a whole to within individual poems and indeed lines. The last line of poem no. 3 is three-quarters atmosphere:

Oh, how dreadful it is!

云何吁矣。

Yun 云, *he* 何, and *yi* 矣 are all relatively absent of meaning, but full of affect. The only substantive word is *yu* 吁, which looks like an exclamation (with its “mouth radical”) but is said to be a loan for 盱 – here read not as “to stare with eyes wide open” but as 憂 ‘sorrow’, per Mao. Although I think the translation above is quite effective, it is hard to maintain that over many lines.

Second, the language of the *Shijing* is replete with words that are said to “have no meaning” (無意) but still have affect. Some are well established: 哉、矣、於、止、言, and the delightfully contemporary but not quite appropriate *wuhu* 嗚呼 (often written 於乎). These alone present challenges, in part because English has fewer such expressive/empty terms: “ah,” “so,” “oh so,” “yes,” “yea,” and Waley’s favorite, “lo.” Moreover, English has always used them less. Even in a corpus of overwrought emotion such as Shakespeare’s sonnets there is only about fifty-five uses (mostly O/Oh) in 2,154 lines (1993). What is more, it seems that in the *Shijing* almost any graph, no matter its denotative meaning, even ones of very common usage, can be deployed (through phonetic loan) as an emotive expression. So in poem no. 280, we have what appears to be a straightforward use of 有 ‘there is’: 有瞽有瞽 / 在周之庭 (there are blind ones, there are blind ones / in the court of Zhou), but Cheng and Jiang (1991, 961) inform us that here 有 is a “prefix [頭詞], without meaning” – this, despite the fact the formula *you ... you* appears elsewhere in this subset of poems in its substantive sense (no. 281 and no. 285). With this type of reading, the potential number of “meaningless” words greatly increases.

The disparity of the two poetics presents a difficult choice: to Oh, or not to Oh. In the sober, often laconic Zhou Hymns I have chosen to reduce the “Oh-factor,” sometimes with substantive replacements such as: “indeed” for final *yi*:

Then in time, they were splendid indeed 時純熙矣

In translating the more open and syntactic *Airs*, there seems more room for the pop-song quality of the catchy rhythms of the *Oh*-factor:

Awake and asleep, he ponders 寤寐思服
Oh, it's so, so long 悠哉悠哉

One way to “pad” a line without the *Oh*-factor is with prepositions and conjunctions, abundant in English but relatively scarce in literary Chinese. Their cautious use can help fill out a line and also bring more syntactic flow to the English line, as opposed to the strongly paratactic poetics of Chinese (see Zhou Min's essay in this volume). Again we can turn to see how Shakespeare has used these in his sonnets, especially the empty “and” (1993). He does that with extravagance in Sonnet 66, in ten lines out of fourteen; a more moderate and model use is in Sonnet 67:

Ah, wherefore *with* infection should he live,
And *with* his presence grace impiety,
That sin *by* him advantage should achieve
And lace itself *with* his society?
Why should false painting imitate his cheek,
And steal dead seeing *of* his living hue?
Why should poor beauty indirectly seek
Roses *of* shadow, since his rose is true?
Why should he live, *now* nature bankrupt is,
Beggared of blood to blush through lively veins?
For she hath no exchequer *now but* his,
And, proud of many, lives *upon* his gains.
 O him she stores, to show what wealth she had
 In days long *since, before* these last *so* bad.

This is a hard act to follow and less suitable for the oblique, liturgical poems, such as the Zhou Hymns, but for the more fluid, narrative pieces, it can enhance both content and form.

One poem

I will conclude with a representative sample of the format described above.

Annotation: Bernhard Karlgren (*Glosses*) says that nearly every line of this poem is disputed, and he offers readings that often diverge from the mainstream. The first issue is the title *zhuo* (to pour/drink), a term that does not appear (as is the usual practice) in the poem. This has led to a series of substitutions; yet, none of those proffered graphs appear in the poem either, so it seems prudent to let it stand as is. L. 1 is perhaps the simplest to parse, one merely needs to decide if *shi* is a noun (troops) or a verb (to lead), either one is possible, as it is modified by *shuo*, beautiful *mei* 美 per Mao. Questions with l. 2 surround the main verb *yang* (nourish), which Mao glosses as *qu* 取 (seize); Karlgren thinks this gloss highly unusual, but the Chinese commentaries follow Mao up through at least Chen Huan, whom Cheng and Jiang cite (991). This reading then turns *hui* (dark) into its object, which is read as “un-enlightened one,” that is, King Zhou of the Shang/Yin, the defeated (seized) enemy of King Wu. The alternative reading is to take *hui* adverbially as “in obscurity/darkness” and *yang* as “nourish/lead (troops).” Understanding, per Zhu Xi, that King Wu trained his troops secretly, and waited for the time of glory of l. 3. The identical graphs *shi* in l. 2 and l. 3 are read differently: “this” and “timely,” respectively. *Jie* (l. 4) is glossed, per the *Erya*, as *shan* 善 (good/goodness). The first-person pronoun (l. 5) is said to refer to King Cheng, who is leading this ritual song/dance; but it is also glossed as *wo Zhou*; “we the Zhou people.” *Long* (dragon) is a loan for *chong* in the sense of *tianchong* 天寵, the favor of heaven. The reduplicative *qiaoqiao* (l. 6) is glossed by Mao as 武然 “martial-like.” The *si* in l. 7 has been used above to refer to King Cheng, as the “successor” of King Wu; I am assuming that he is the referent here again. The configuration of the last line(s) is in dispute. First, Chen Huan has proposed that there are two lines not one: one of four syllables, and one of two syllables. Cheng and Jiang follow, as does the *Maoshi yinde*. However, Kong Yingda, Zhu Xi, Legge, and Karlgren do not; Karlgren saying that a two-syllable verse ending a poem is “quite out of the question.” Second, the reading of key words is disputed: *gong*, Mao reads, and Zheng follows, as “affairs/duty” *shi* 事, but others understand in the sense of “ancestral rulers” *xian Gong* 先公 (that is, King Wu) – Cheng and Jiang, 991. The term *shi*, which in l.1 means “troops/lead” is said here to mean “model” by Cheng and Jiang (991), citing Wang Xianqian. This reading (as model) is followed by Legge and Waley, but not by Karlgren. Zheng Xuan paraphrases, “the affairs/duty of the king was to raise the army and conquer, this is truly your duty, to sincerely obtain the Way of using the troops.”

Comment: Waley says, “This is perhaps the most difficult poem in the whole book, and I am not confident that I have understood it correctly.” Needless to say, I feel the same, just more so. My solution is to leave the inherent ambiguity in the text where I can. This is especially when I cannot reconcile the differences in any other way. Thus for *yang shi hui* (l. 2), where there are strong arguments to read it as “to nurture in darkness” or “to seize the darkness,” I have created intentional ambiguity with “to take of this darkness” – it *sounds* like it means something but it’s not clear what. For the final line, I have decided to accept “duty” for *gong* (not “duke”) but try to split the difference between “troops” and “model” for *shi* – “your martial model.” As for the question of the concluding one or two lines, I have opted for one line with a strong punctuation break.

No. 293, *Libation* 酌

Mao Preface: “Libation” announces the completion of the “Great Martial.” It speaks of how in offering a libation to the way of the ancestors, one is able to take the empire. 《酌》，告成《大武》也。言能酌先祖之道，以養天下也。

Yes, glorious are the king's troops	於鑠王師
Bringing them to take of this darkness	遵養時晦
Then in time, they were splendid indeed	時純熙矣
From this method comes great good	是用大介
5 And with favor we do receive it	我龍受之
Mighty and martial were the king's deeds	躋躋王之造
And now his method has a successor	載用有嗣
Rightly this is your duty: a true warlike model	實維爾公允師

Zheng Xuan: In the sixth year of the Duke of Zhou's regency, he prepared the rituals and created the music. Returning governance to King Cheng, he offered prayers in the temple and had it performed. He began and he completed it; announcing this, all is done. 周公居攝六年，制禮作樂，歸政成王，乃後祭於廟而奏之。其始成告之而已。

Kong Yingda: The poem “Libation” is a song announcing the completion of the “Great Martial” dance. It refers to the sixth year of the Duke of Zhou's regency. In imitating the deeds of King Wu, they created the music of the “Great Martial,” and having completed it, they announce it in the temple. The creators observing that the music was completed, and contemplating his martial merits, describe it and make this song from it. 正義曰：《酌》詩者，告成《大武》之樂歌也。謂周公攝政六年，象武王之事，作《大武》之樂既成，而告於廟。作者睹其樂成，而思其武功，述之而作此歌焉。

Zhu Xi: This is a poem that praises King Wu. It speaks of how in the beginning although he had glorious troops, he did not use them; he held back and continued to train them, at the time all was in the dark. And when there was indeed splendid light, they put on their battle clothes, and as soon as they did, the empire was entirely settled. Later people were thereby favored and received the merits of the mighty and martial-like king. The one who thereby succeeded him will also take this work of King Wu as model, and all is thus. 此亦頌武王之詩。言其初有於鑠之師而不用，退自循養，與時皆晦。既純光矣，然後一戎衣而天下大定。後人於是寵而受此躋躋然王者之功。其所以嗣之者，亦維武王之事是師爾。

Epilogue

This sample translation introduces most of the issues and protocols that I have discussed. Yet there is one practice that needs to be highlighted: the use of strategic ambiguity. This practice, which runs through my translation from start to finish and is illustrated here by “to take of this darkness” (l. 2), helps maintain the complex intralinguality of both the Chinese commentaries and the English translations. The ambiguity is strategic in that it does not inhibit understanding, but rather allows for as many interpretational approaches as possible. It opens moments of the poem to intersecting, even contradictory readings. As such, it lies at the heart of my approach to negotiating the complexities generated by the *Shijing*’s antiquity and layers of multivocal commentary.

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