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Metric Montage in Chinese Poetry

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Metric Montage in Chinese Poetry

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ABSTRACT

It is said that the most obvious thing is the hardest to notice. For classic Chinese poetry, the most “obvious” thing is its *metric montage*, which is not just one of its features, but its life-blood. Defined in a 1929 essay on Soviet film theory, the concept of metric montage can help us understand how Chinese poetry works as well: namely, with a steady pulse, each the notional analog of a cinematic “shot,” but timed so that two such shots — i.e., two *hànzì* — pass per second. That is to say, we read two characters of Chinese poetry for each heartbeat, assuming a nominal resting rate of 60 beats per minute (BPM). But that is only the basic rhythmic aspect, with its several variants excluded from this summary. Once the visual aspect is added to the mix, it changes the way one judges whether a supposed translation of a Chinese poem should be accepted as English literature or downgraded to an attractively packaged species of commentary, with caesuras.

Keywords: Chinese poetry; metric montage; Shěn Zhōu; Lǐ Bái; Lǐ Hè; Frodsham

The monosyllabic myth is one of the truest myths in
Chinese mythology.

—a famous Chinese linguist

For the wry humor, we thank Y. R. Chao, as he warns the reader that so far as Classical Chinese is concerned, one must walk back the monosyllabic myth; 1968a, p. 103. And his “Classical Chinese” encompasses the *shī* 詩 poem, of course. Below I will argue that when dealing with 詩, there is another myth to revisit: the “pictographic language” myth. Not that we wish to lend it credence; rather, we need to broaden the semantic space around the term “pictograph” to accommodate something that is a legitimate feature of Chinese poetry: its *metric montage*,¹ which makes it, de facto, a *picto-generative* art form.

But before we explore the special case of Chinese poetry, let us review some situations where the terms *monosyllabic myth* and *pictographic myth* have direct, unqualified application. This preliminary step will give us a shared frame of reference for the ensuing discussion. While serious studies of Chinese literature are no longer in danger of being influenced by chinoiserie, the malady itself lives on, as it finds random brains to host it in new contexts. Consider the ADV Podcast² entitled “Celebrities with Wrong Chinese Tattoos,” which contains two useful examples.

¹ The term *metric montage* originates with Eisenstein, in “The Fourth Dimension in Cinema” (1929); see *The Eisenstein Reader* (1998), p. 116. For an overview of that collection of essays, see Concluding Remarks, below.

² The two hosts of the Youtube channel “ADV Podcast” are Cmilk (aka Laowhy86) and Winston (aka Serpentza). The nickname Laowhy86 alludes to the term *lǎowài* 老外 “foreigner.” The hosts deal with a wide variety of topics relating to the Peoples Republic of China and the Chinese language, both serious and whimsical. “Celebrities with Wrong Chinese Tattoos — Episode #81” aired on 22 October 2021, duration 2:09:25 (largely about issues *other* than the titular tattoos), youtube ID jYIAWqORuQ8.

FIRST EXAMPLE

The hosts present us with a still photo indicating that Megan Fox has a 力 tattoo on her neck. This picture causes co-host CmilK to recall an incident from a long-ago stint in retail. One day he observed that the customer at his checkout counter sported a 力 tattoo:

I'm like “Oh, nice character: *lì*; it means *power*,” and she was like, “No, it does not.” And she was all like huffy, like pissy. She goes, “I got it because my mother struggled with cancer.” And she goes, “It means ... I know what the meaning is ... the truthful meaning is *the power and strength to overcome any obstacle in your life*.”

—ADV Podcast #81, at 1:12:23–1:12:50.

In contrast to the customer described here, who takes 力 as a talisman, we understand the reality that the vast majority of Chinese words serve drab workaday functions, just as do the vast majority of the words in every other language on the planet. And in this instance, not only is *lì* 力 devoid of cancer-fighting magic, but it is a paltry one-half of any real word such as *lìliang* 力量 (power), *nénglì* 能力 (ability), *tǐlì* 體力 (physical strength), or *lìdào* 力道 (political strength). From CmilK's reminiscence, we are reminded that both the monosyllabic myth and concomitant magical thinking are alive and well.³

SECOND EXAMPLE

Earlier in the same episode, at 1:00:38–1:04:47, the hosts discuss a tattoo that Justin Bieber has near his left nipple: 怂. Was the intent to draw the character *sǒng* 慫 in its simplified form? That would be odd, since its meaning is “to instigate, to incite.”⁴ Could it be, then, that the characters *cóng* 从 and *xīn* 心

³ Before proceeding to the second example, we might have paused to play Devil's Advocate. We could have made the case that the foreigner is correct, and the Old China Hand wrong, by the following argument: Once a person receives a tattoo, it becomes his or her personal talisman, and if that person believes it to possess magical properties, then it *does*, since magic by definition operates beyond the realm of rational discussion.

⁴ The compound *sǒng yǒng* 慫恿 comes from the *Shiji* 史記 (see GYTD IV:3735, where the gloss for *sǒng yǒng* 慫恿 is “to offer encouragement from the sidelines with drums and dancing”). If one enters either simplified 怂 or traditional 慫 into

were joined by the following logic: “Since Chinese is a pictographic language, why not marry the picture-for-*from* to the picture-for-*heart*, to craft my very own pictogram that means *from-the-heart*?” Indeed, in a Youtube Comment, one “SKYWalkers SG” doubles down on that very concept, as follows: “Every Chinese word has a meaning to it. Because it is a pictorial language, every word construction means something. 忄 means activity originate [*sic*] from self. Originate from the heart. 发自内心.”⁵ Consider the two myths updated to the present.

Now for the main event. Please refer to Figure 1, where each of the three constituent tables is to be read left-to-right and row by row. Thus, Figure 1 provides three windows on the following dummy couplet which I cobbled together not with literary intent but for a pedagogical purpose:

雲帶束山腰

石磴聽翁簫

yún dài shù shān yāo

shí dèng tīng wēng xiāo

Taken word by word, we have: CLOUD, BELT, BIND, MOUNTAIN, WAIST and STONE, STAIRWAY, HEAR, OLD MAN, FLUTE. Or, in quasi-literary terms: “A belt-like cloud encircles the mountain’s waist / On a stairway of stone, I pause to listen to an old man’s flute.” The imagery is based on a poem by the painter Shěn Zhōu 沈周. (See Appendix A for a discussion of the poem itself, which has four lines of seven characters each.)

Google Translate as an isolated character, the gloss is “arouse,” which resonates with the classical meaning; no mention is made of *alarmed, panicky, terrified, chicken out, huh?, coward, timid, and worthless*, all of which come up in the ADV Podcast or/and its comments section in the attempt to explain 忄 in isolation.

⁵ Given the repeated grammatical error on “originate,” combined with the suggestion in well-formed Chinese of what the celebrity wished to express (发自内心), it seems likely that “SKYWalkers SG” is Chinese, and with a chauvinist chip on his/her shoulder to boot. The point being this: People who believe in the pictographic myth or/and monosyllabic myth are not always ignorant foreigners. Sometimes a Chinese person may suffer a case of the same disease. Who knows? The two myths may even have their long-ago genesis in the unthinking banter of certain native Chinese, only half-aware and half-caring that they were spouting nonsense to a foreigner who would take it all to heart.

BOYCE, “METRIC MONTAGE IN CHINESE POETRY”

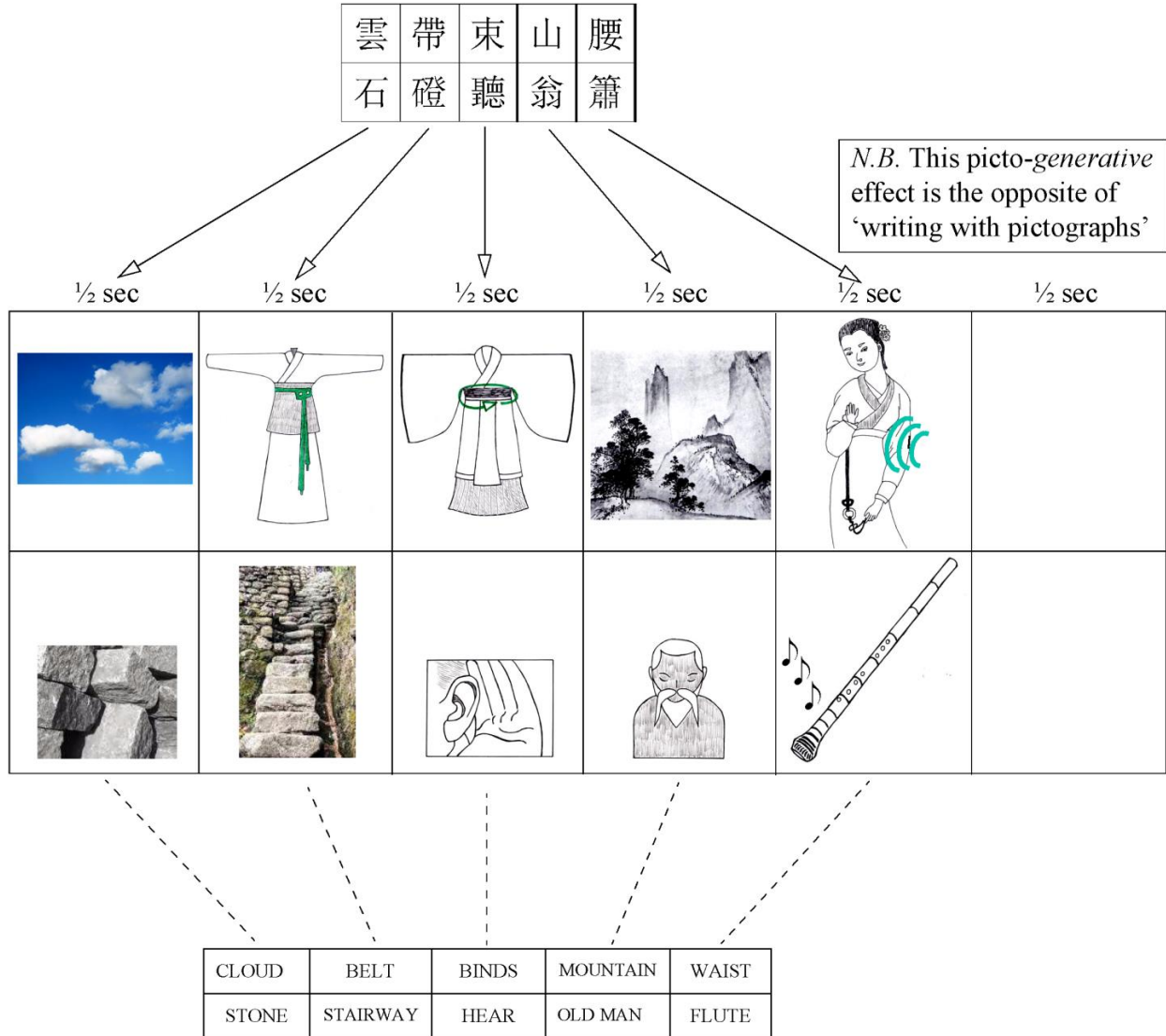


Figure 1. Metric montage in Chinese poetry, whose natural rate is two “frames” per second

Are the graphics in the middle panel of Figure 1 meant to imply that Chinese *is*, after all, a “pictographic language”? No. My intention in populating the middle panel with pictures is to illustrate the couplet’s *metric montage* aspect. The normal reading pace for a line of Chinese poetry is half a second per character, followed by a silence of like duration to terminate the line. This pattern holds regardless of whether one is reading silently or aloud (subject to some qualifications that involve chanting or/and “performance,” to be enumerated below). The point is that the timing of the grid in

Figure 1 is just as strict as the timing of the frames in cinema. This is why I speak of a montage effect — specifically, the subcategory known as metric montage.

Let's do a quick taxonomic survey of the ten characters in Figure 1. Seven of the ten belong to the semantic-phonetic category, a proportion that is not surprising since this category (*xíngshēng* 形聲) accounts for the majority of *hànzì* generally. We are left then with the following trio of characters to consider: *shù* 束 (to bind), *shí* 石 (stone) and *shān* 山 (mountain). The character 束 is likely descended from a diagram that depicted three branches (not unlike Cyrillic Ж), bound together by a cord, which latter component was eventually stylized as 口. (See page “etymology-15678.html” at qiyuan.chaziwang.com.) Meanwhile, since its meaning is “to bind” we must accept 束 as a picture that is not-a-pictograph, so to say; it is an ideograph. In this regard, it might remind us of the case of *dōng* 東, which should not be called “a picture of the sun, seen through a tree” since its *raison d'être* is to denote the abstraction “east.” (For more about this, see Sampson and Chen, 2013, their section on Compound Ideographs, pp. 261–263.) The next one of the trio is *shí* 石. Isn't that “a picture of a stone”? Not quite. What it depicts is the overhang of a rocky cliff (厶) from which a stone has fallen onto the ground. (See page “etymology-890.html” at qiyuan.chaziwang.com.) That brings us to *shān* 山 (mountain), the only one of the lot that works unequivocally as a pictograph (*xiàngxíng* 象形).

At the risk of pointing out the obvious, I'll note that stepping through the half-second frames of Figure 1 and looking up etymologies are two activities that do not mix. When reading 束, for example, as part of a stream of characters, one experiences it as “just another character passing by.” There is no time to ponder its etymology, whether popular (a ribbon around a tree) or scholarly (three branches bound together by a cord), any more than the Anglophone upon encountering the phrase “with rapt attention” will pause to look out the window and ruminate on the unseemly cognate relation of *rapt* to *rape*. We must remind ourselves often that the words marching past us, in whatever language, are *just* words, not bracelet charms or toys. As for the above digression, its purpose was to establish how many of the ten characters might legitimately be termed pictorial. Almost none. Yet for all the factors enumerated above that would seem to work *against* visualization, the reality is that each of the ten characters that comprise the couplet *does* generate some kind of picture in the reader's mind, as I've indicated by the five downward-radiating arrows that join the top table to the middle table in Figure 1. The take-away is this: It is helpful to distinguish between “being a picture *on* the page” and “generating

a picture *from* the page.” Speaking generally now (away from Figure 1 itself), I believe the ever-present montage effect in Chinese poetry arises primarily from the semantic plane, as it interacts with the rhythmic plane, and only occasionally from the shapes of the *hànzì* themselves.⁶

(a) M.M. ♩ = 60§
This is the fundamental pattern for a 5-character line of poetry. §

(b) This is the fundamental pattern for a 7-character line of poetry. §

(c) This is a variation on (b), used in the chanting of both *shī* and *cí*.
Notation after Boyce 1975 where, as ‘Motif N’ on p. 243, this pattern documents tape-recorded readings of *cí* in both *pǔtōnghuà* and *Mínánhuà*. §

(d) The same variation on (b), now using the notation of Chao 1968b, pp. 723-724, slightly modified so that a grace note is used here to represent his filler word *shi*.
The salient point: In both (c) and (d), the essential pattern is the same: < short-long, short-long, followed by three syllables of equal duration. §

Figure 2: A different view of the Figure 1 representation, with some rhythmic variants noted

Please refer to Figure 2, where panel (a) contains a recap of Figure 1, now using music notation.

⁶ “[T]he visibility of certain Chinese characters can contribute to the formation of a subtext in a poem, as Chinese poets often tap the visual potential of written characters to enhance the aesthetic value and signifying capacity of a verbal text [and this, too, puts the translator at a disadvantage].” Pan 2018[2000], p. 60.

Here I've added a tempo indication of quarter-note = 60, which is equivalent to the pace of half a second per character that we saw in Figure 1.⁷ And it is probably no coincidence that this pace matches the normal human heart rate of BPM = 60. In Figure 2(c), I show a rhythmic variant which is echoed in 2(d). Any such variant should be regarded as an overlay on the fundamental pattern of 2(b), playing out in a separate plane of analysis, as it were.⁸

The bottom panel: Am I claiming that the ten or eleven words at the bottom of Figure 1 comprise a *translation* of the couplet? No, they are simply a navigational aid. But rather than say those words “would sound dorky as a translation,” let's see why exactly they fail in that role. First reason for failure: Several of those English words are multisyllabic, so they cannot possibly be chanted in the necessary half-second-per-morpheme rhythm. Second reason for failure: That collection of English words suffers a grammar deficit. Granted, the first line has BELT BIND WAIST as SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT, but the second line has no grammar at all; whereas, in the Chinese original, both lines contain grammar — it's just that much of the grammar in Classical Chinese fails to announce itself in a way that is clear to the foreign reader (or any reader). What teachers of Chinese 101 generally fail to warn their students about is that every character in Classical Chinese can be anything at all — noun, verb, adjective ... — and it is the reader's rather terrifying job to figure it out.⁹

⁷ Alluding to “*Chinese as morpheme-syllable writing*,” which is the heading for §51 in Chao 1968b, pp. 102–105, we might also call this a half-second-per-morpheme rhythm.

⁸ A note re Figure 2(c): In my “Rhythm and Meter of *Tsyr* in Performance” (1975), motifs A through O on pp. 234–244 cover the variants for lines of three, four, five, six, and seven characters in 詞 recitation. The associated tape recordings that I collected in Taiwan in 1974 can be heard in digital form at yCantonese.org, whose librarian, Cecilia Wong, has indexed them under the name 葉嘉瑩, crediting me for the tape-recording work as 賈伯康, my Chinese name.

Note re Figure 2(d): Here is the text that accompanies the rhythmic pattern that I've reproduced, after Y. R. Chao, in panel (d): 黃河[是]遠上白雲間[啊]; Chao 1968b p. 723. (The other half of the couplet appears on p. 724 as: 一片孤城[是]萬仞山[嘔].) Chao's focus is not so much on the underlying rhythm as on the filler syllables 是, 啊, 是, and 嘔: Some use them in chanting, he says (including himself), while others frown upon the practice.

⁹ It gets worse. There is also the dispute among linguists over the *Topic-Comment* paradigm (Chao 1968b, pp. 69–72) versus the scheme introduced by Li and Thompson in 1989 (pp. 15, 93–94), which they call *Topic-prominent*. No doubt, Li/Thompson would like to call it their *Topic-Subject* paradigm, but dare not, since the latter half of the scheme may or may not have an *expressed* Subject. In its fixation on a Cheshire cat “Subject” that may or may not be present, theirs is a myopic

In fashioning the couplet for Figure 1, I avoided any “connecting words” such as *rú* 如 (like), *dú* 獨 (alone), *shū* 舒 (in a relaxed and leisurely manner) and *yù* 欲 (wanting to...), all of which are found in the source poem by Shěn Zhōu. (Shěn Zhōu’s poem warrants a close look for reasons that are not directly related to the topic at hand, so I’ve deferred that discussion to Appendix A.) Such connecting words are admittedly quite common in actual Chinese poetry, accounting for 15 to 20 percent of the words, let’s say.¹⁰ When constructing the dummy couplet for Figure 1, my exclusion of such “connecting words” was meant to help me broach the idea of metric montage. But stepping away from Figure 1 itself, we begin to notice that the montage remains active, in less obvious ways, with all parts of speech in a Chinese poem. To flesh out that train of thought, I now cite a quatrain that has something “even worse” than connecting words in it: two disyllabic place names:

朝辭白帝彩雲間，千里江陵一日還。兩岸猿聲啼不住，輕舟已過萬重山。

This is the poem “Xià Jiānglíng” 下江陵 (also known as 早發白帝城) by Lǐ Bái 李白. Should I worry that the place names Báidì 白帝 and Jiānglíng 江陵 will somehow defeat my montage thesis? Not at all. The first thing to realize is that even if the reader had zero knowledge of Chinese geography, the poem itself would tell him or her that both towns are situated on a very long river, one of them high in mountainous clouds, the other some thousand-*li* downstream in the direction of the ocean. So the place names pose no hindrance to appreciation, even for a child.¹¹ And when one encounters terms such as 白帝 and 江

view of Chinese grammar, whose proper label would be: “Topic-Subject [plus other stuff, which, by the way, might be lacking the desired Subject after which this portion of the scheme is named].” By serendipity, its weakness is demonstrated by *shí dèng tīng wēng xiāo* 石磴聽翁簫 in our Figure 1. That line has a topic (*dèng*), modified by *shí*, but only an implied subject for the verb “to hear”: [*wǒ*] *tīng*. Chao, as usual, gets it right, even if his scheme is “only” semantically motivated, with grammar quite consciously made to play second fiddle (1968b, p. 69n9). The “Topic” here is 石磴 and the “Comment” is 聽翁簫. End of story. His scheme works *generally* throughout both spoken Chinese and Classical Chinese.

¹⁰ There is probably a Venn-like relation between my “connecting words” and those that fall under the traditional label *xū zì* 虛字 “empty characters.” For my immediate purpose, I needed to set aside some “connecting words”; but in the broader view of Chinese poetry, the *xū zì* play an important role, as detailed in Pan 2018, pp. 63–64.

¹¹ Speaking of “children,” at Los Angeles City College in 1962, one of the first things Mr. Cheng taught us was 下江陵, followed by other poems. Looking back on it now, I marvel at his fancy-free (i.e., traditionally Chinese) notion of what Chinese 101

陵 in this poem (or 舒 and 欲 in the Shěn Zhōu poem in Appendix A), one naturally and automatically fills the current metric frame (or pair of frames) with sound — or with the lyric’s own music, as it were — in lieu of a cinematic image. In summary, the metric montage is the governing rule; everything else submits to it. And given its primacy in Chinese poetry, the upshot is this: With rare exceptions, our so-called translations of Chinese poems are only a species of commentary, glorified cribs, not literature, since they cannot bring the montage element across into English.

Take the case of Frodsham’s *The Poems of Li Ho* (1970), updated to reappear as *Goddesses, Ghosts, and Demons: The Collected Poems of Li He* in 1983. I admire his work. In fact, I view it as a monumental achievement, given the extreme difficulty of Lǐ Hè’s poetry. My one quibble is the tag that customarily finds its way onto the cover of any such volume: *The poems of...* Granted, Frodsham affords the caesura careful treatment, as detailed in 1970 p. xi and 1983 p. lix, but that is a “local” concern of no help in bringing us the voice of Lǐ Hè himself. In my view, what Frodsham offers us is a collection of finely wrought *prose guides* to Lǐ Hè’s 185 poems,¹² many of them famously difficult, even for native Chinese readers who are otherwise conversant with poetry.

Please refer to Figure 3, which reproduces part of page 99 from *Táng shī · Sòng cí · Yuán qǔ* (Peking 2006). This will help us make the tripartite distinction between poetry, commentary, and a literary translation.

should entail — along *with* Nǐ hǎo. He also gave us 馮諼客孟嘗君 (not all at once, since this is 850 characters of *wényán*), a story which I find now in my copy of 古代漢語, edited by 王力, Peking 1962 (1:89–96) — its publication date matching my LACC memory by serendipity.

¹² Traditionally the count is 177 poems, e.g. in the edition of Chén Hóngzhì 陳弘治 (1969). Having counted the stanzas and poems his own way, Frodsham presents us with 243 poems in 1970, reformulated as 185 poems in 1983.

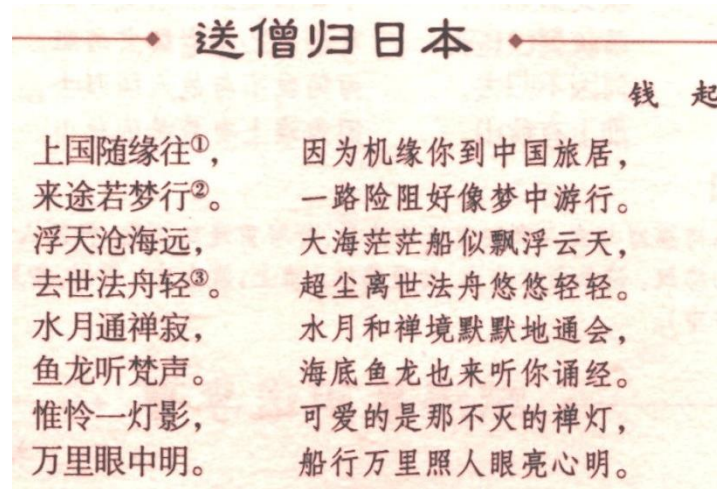


Figure 3: An example of “training wheels” placed beside the text of a poem (Peking 2006)

On the left we see the poem “Sòng Sēng Guī Rìběn” 送僧歸日本” by Qián Qǐ 錢起 — a farewell to a student of Chán 禪 (Zen) upon his return to Japan. On the right side of the page is a “translation” (*yìwén* 譯文),¹³ supplied by the editors. Is it a *literary* translation? No. To my eye, it is something utilitarian, in the nature of a crib, or training wheels for a bicycle. True, its pattern of 4+6 characters per line lends it a quasi-literary rhythm, but on balance, it still seems closer to prose than to poetry. And this makes us notice the gulf that separates a “translation” of that nature (training wheels to be abandoned as soon as possible) from a “translation” in the Occident that presents itself to the world as literature. In trying to navigate this odd situation, it is helpful to recall the term *prose-poem* as applied to a work such as Baudelaire’s *Le Spleen de Paris*. (If a prose-to-poetry continuum exists, might *Le Spleen de Paris* serve to mark its approximate midpoint?) As for renditions of Chinese poetry into European languages, they fall somewhere in between the “training wheels” of Figure 3 and a formal prose-poem, I think. That is,

¹³ The poem by Qián Qǐ 錢起 is just a random sample, from page 99 of *Táng shī · Sòng cí · Yúán qǐ* (Peking 2006). Throughout the *Táng shī* section of that volume, the same format is found, in which the blocks of explanatory text tend toward lines comprised of 4+6 characters, though often departing from that implied template, as needed, e.g., with a line of 4+7 or 4+8 characters instead. Strictly speaking, the *yìwén* 譯文 label (“translated text”) does not appear until we reach the *Sòng cí* section, where the explanatory blocks are, of necessity, slightly less structured. Note that the poem by Qián Qǐ is the 128th poem of 294 poems total whereas in a full set of *Táng Shī Sān-bǎi Shǒu* 唐詩三百首 it would be found as the 142nd poem of 317 poems total, e.g. in the Yù Shǒuzhēn edition of 1965 [1957], p. 184.

the result in French, Spanish, English, or German is not a translated poem, no matter what is announced in the blurb or implied by the volume's title.

That concludes my own take on the untranslatability of Chinese poetry. But Frodsham himself has much to say on the topic, in his two prefaces and two introductions. So let us hear his opinion now, with its interesting points of variation (and stasis) across the interval 1970–1983:

Since many of Ho's poems are so esoteric as to *defy translation*, I am well aware of my rashness in embarking on [this] venture. I can only hope that what this volume lacks in *quality* it may make up for in *quantity* and thus convey something of the range and sustained intensity of this extraordinary poet. —Frodsham 1970, p. vii (Preface)

It may be objected that a great deal of the essential poetry of the original is lost through such a method of translation [where copious footnotes, employed to bridge the cultural gap, may be said to “obscure the text with philology”— quoting Pound]. I doubt this. Such a belief can be traced back to the French Symbolist view that poetry, “which is *made with words, not ideas*,” as Mallarmé expressed it, must evaporate like spilt perfume when poured into the alien flask of another language. This contention has come up against some very sharp and perceptive criticism of recent years [...] from the Chicago critics [who insist that] we are moved not by the words but by the things the words stand for [...]. It is precisely this characteristic of [Li He's] verse, the giving of sharp perceptions in images of extraordinary colour and clarity, that makes him a peculiarly *translatable poet*. —Frodsham 1970, pp. lvi–lvii

A belief in the essential untranslatability of [*any*] text, particularly a poetic work, has *ancient* roots in Western society, going back [to] St. Jerome [...], Dante, Du Bellay, Dr. Johnson, Diderot, and Heine; [also] Rilke and Nabokov. [T]he translator *must concede* that a great deal of the essential poetry of the original may be spilt in translation. As Mallarmé put it, since “poetry is *made with words not ideas*,” it must evaporate [etc.] On the other hand [...] the Chicago critics [etc.]..., [i]t is precisely this characteristic of

[Lǐ Hè's] verse, the giving of sharp perceptions in images of extraordinary colour and clarity, that makes him a peculiarly *translatable poet*.¹⁴ —Frodsham 1983, pp. lii–liii

Naturally, one is gratified to see, in the 1983 introduction, the references to Dante, Heine *et al.* along with the phrase “must concede.” But still we find the crucial passage (“images of extraordinary colour [...] peculiarly translatable poet”) repeated verbatim from 1970. Fully aware of that reiterated passage, how can I still contend that Frodsham has provided *no* translations of Lǐ Hè? Yes, Lǐ Hè's imagery is extraordinary — so astonishing that po-faced editors of the *TángShī Sān-bǎi Shǒu* 唐詩三百首 felt they must not risk even a single one of his poems (some of which are quite tame) for fear that such might, on its own, defile the whole lovely anthology.¹⁵ That's a powerful poet. But to understand just *how* powerful he is, one must take the trouble to read him on his own turf, in Chinese poetry's metric montage milieu.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

If you have followed me this far, you have surely had enough of my own view of the poetry-translation situation — a view that one might call “skeptical,” to be polite, though really it is just negative. To try mitigating that tone, I will now cite two cases¹⁶ that put the challenges of poetry translation in a positive light. The first is Edward FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. Note however that one pays a heavy price for such brilliance. One hundred sixty years after the work appeared as an anonymous pamphlet in a London bookstore's penny box (Richardson 2016, p. 3), some of us still wonder: Did FitzGerald really know enough Persian for the task or did he enter into a trance-like state, out of which came a personal

¹⁴ Emphasis added in all the above passages.

¹⁵ As noted by Frodsham: 1970, pp. xxxv–xxxvi; 1983, p. xxx.

¹⁶ There is also a third case that I had in mind originally but which I've cut to make room for the ensuing discussion of Eisenstein. Briefly: Read Da'an Pan (2018)! Don't be put off by the title which suggests a well-known mode of Comparative Literature gobbledygook; the writing itself is quite approachable. And despite Pan's formidable knowledge of Chinese literature, his analysis of various Western attempts at its translation is, overall, quite forgiving and upbeat. See especially the coverage of Young (1990, pp. 11-14), in Pan (pp. 66-67), and of course Young himself.

masterpiece that outshines Khayyam? Alternatively, was there some third entity at play which spanned the cultural gulf and the seven-century interval to provide an ethereal bridge through which the two poets achieved genuine communion? Or, is something stranger yet required to explain the alchemy? “A miracle happens: from the fortuitous conjunction of a Persian astronomer who condescends to write poetry, and an eccentric Englishman who peruses Oriental and Hispanic books, perhaps without completely understanding them, emerges an extraordinary [third] poet *who does not resemble either of them*”; Borges 1964, p. 77, emphasis added.

In Jiaosheng Wang we find another case that is *sui generis*. Wang translated the complete *cí*-poems of Lǐ Qīngzhào 李清照 into English, and “So often when reading [his] translations of Li’s lyric *œuvre*, I have the strange sensation that the two have merged into one,” writes Victor Mair in his foreword to Wang (1989). Cf. the “third poet” above.

* * *

Finally, there are some loose ends to tie up regarding the filmmaker and cinema theorist Sergei Eisenstein. As noted at the outset, the concept of *metric montage* originates with him. He regards it as the most fundamental of his four montage types, which are metric, rhythmic, tonal, and overtone montage (*The Eisenstein Reader*, pp. 116–120). For metric montage, “The basic criterion is the *absolute length* of the shots.” For rhythmic montage, “the content within the shot is [weighted as] an *equivalent* element in determining [its] actual length”; pp. 116–117, original emphases. Given the strict, half-second pacing that I show in Figure 1, it will be clear why I borrowed the term *metric montage* to help explain my intent. So far so good.

But it happens that Eisenstein also wrote at length about the lessons Soviet cinema could learn from haiku, Kabuki, No drama, and even the *montage aspect of huiyi* 會意 etymologies of selected *hànzì*— as he zig-zagged back and forth between Japan and Ancient China, in “Beyond the Shot” (1929), which is reprinted with graphics in *The Eisenstein Reader* (1998), pp. 82–92. Had I mentioned these interesting passages in the body of the article above, it might have seemed that I was conducting a comparative literature experiment, in which Soviet era film theory and Chinese literature were poured together into a test tube to see what chemistry might result. Whereas, for the record, my article grew organically out of a lifetime spent with Chinese poetry (see note 11), in virtual ignorance of Eisenstein, save for the term *metric montage*, which I knew was his coinage. At this juncture, though, it should be

“safe” for me to cite some more passages from the *Reader* without causing confusion about their relation (mostly nil) to the article above.

The essay that contains detailed definitions of the four types of montage is entitled, “The Fourth Dimension in Cinema” (1929); pp. 111–123. There Eisenstein cites the patriotic demonstration in Pudovkin’s *The End of St. Petersburg* as “a classic of *purely metric montage*” (p. 116, original italics). The film is available on Youtube, duration 1:27:24; his reference must be to the sequence at 45:54–46:57, just after one of the recurring intertitles that reads “MOTHER RUSSIA CALLS!” A portion of the same film that I like better as a pure example is found after the intertitle “YOU’LL BE FACTORY MANAGER” at 14:49. There ensues a montage sequence at 14:51–15:02 that alternates between a close-up on the full gloating face of the young executive who shall be Manager, and architectural filigree of the rapidly rising lift cage in which he and his mogul chum are standing (but off-camera for the nonce). As an example of the second type, *rhythmic montage*, Eisenstein cites his own “Odessa Steps” sequence from *The Battleship Potemkin*; p. 117.

As for *hànzì*, what excites Eisenstein the most is the aforementioned compound ideograph (*huiyì* 會意) category: “It is with the [next] category of hieroglyphs — the *huei-i*, or “copulative” — that our real interest begins [...] But — this is montage!!” (p. 83, his emphasis). On that page, he even cites the details of six specific cases, including these three: “an ear next to a drawing of a door means *to listen*; a dog and a mouth mean *to bark*; a knife and a heart mean *sorrow*” — referring we assume to *wén* 聞 (hear), *fēi* 吠 (bark), and *dāo* 切 (grieved). (In another 1929 essay, he enthuses over the same set of examples, on pp. 95–96.) In such etymologies he finds what I would call *fossilized montage stories* to marvel at, meaning their connection to the present article is faint. But later (p. 84) he quotes three haiku and a tanka, citing *their* montage aspect as well — and there the connection to the present article is evident, if brief. Still later, on pp. 85–91, he takes inspiration from No theater; from Kabuki; and from the framing principles of Japanese art, which ‘capture’ a scene instead of ‘staging’ it (see Taylor’s introduction, p. 14). All told, the volume contains seventeen translated essays that span the period 1923–1947. Here I have sampled only two of the seventeen.

APPENDIX A:

ON THE PAINTING ZHÀNG-LÍ YUǎN TIÀO 杖藜遠眺

BY SHĚN ZHŌU 沈周

Chronological note: Shěn Zhōu (1427–1509) was a contemporary of Hieronymus Bosch and Josquin des Prez. The above-referenced painting (known in the West as *Poet on a Mountain*) is seen on the cover of Munsterberg 1955. In the upper-left corner of the painting, we see the following eponymous poem, which seems to float in the sky:

欲	獨	石	白
因	倚	磴	雲
鳴	杖	飛	如
澗	藜	空	帶
答	舒	細	束
吹	眺	路	山
簫	望	遙	腰

Báiyún rúdài shù shān yāo / Shídèng fēikōng xīlù yáo.

Dúyī zhànglí shū tiàowàng / Yùyīn míngjiàn dā chuīxiāo.

The painting can be seen in Lee 1964, p. 434, Plate 575: *Poet on a Mountain*. Also, an on-line image of it is found here:

<https://www.comuseum.com/painting/masters/shen-zhou/poet-on-a-mountain-top/>

where replicas are available for \$229 as of 30 October 2021. On the comuseum.com website, an English rendition is provided:

White clouds sash-like
 wrap mountain waists,
 The rock terrace flies in space
 distant, a narrow path.
 Leaning on a bramble staff
 far and free I gaze,
 To the warble of valley brook
 I will reply, whistling.¹⁷

Note that *chuīxiāo* 吹簫, which unambiguously means “to play the flute,” was mistranslated as “whistling” (*xiào* 嘯). Given that the translation overall is quite good (I especially like the idea of *multiple* “mountain waists,” and the phrase “far and free”), I doubt this is a novice who mistook 簫 for 嘯. Rather, it might be someone who has ventured to “correct” the poet some five centuries after the fact. What would the correction be? Because the imagery of the first line is sensual and feminine, the presence of “play the flute” within the bounds of the same short poem might be considered in bad taste, the term *chuīxiāo* 吹簫 being dangerously close to *pǐnxiāo* 品簫. The latter expression likewise means “play the flute” (GYTD I:252), but also has a *double-entendre*, as in English.

Whatever the genesis of the mistranslation above, the word “whistling” puts one in mind of the confusion about *xiào* 笑 (to smile; to laugh) versus *xiào* 嘯 (to whistle; to howl) in the final two lines of Shén Xián Qǔ 神絃曲 by Lǐ Hè 李賀: 百年老鴉成木魅, 嘯聲碧火巢中起. Some editions have *xiào* 嘯 but include a comment that such-and-such venerable edition has the homophone *xiào* 笑 instead. In such editions, the implication seems to be that Lǐ Hè wrote 笑 in haste, but really meant 嘯, and someone therefore “corrected” him in one of the early editions. The choice matters. If we read the poem with 笑, the demon owl of *line 9* laughs at the start of *line 10* (thus, the owl demons “*Laugh wildly...*” in Frodsham 1983, p. 166). Whereas, if we read the poem with 嘯, it will be the rising flames of the emerald fire in *line 10* itself that make a *whistling sound* instead. Common sense, good taste, and general familiarity with Lǐ Hè all point to 嘯 as the word we want, and venerable editions be damned.

Back to the Shěn Zhōu poem, with a note about the interplay of its four lines. Line 2 contains

¹⁷ Attribution: “Translation from Indiana University.”

such startling imagery that it is a hard act to follow, causing lines 3 and 4 to fall flat in its wake. But there is an easy way to fix this, while maintaining the *yao* (or *-iao*) rhyme scheme of lines 1, 2 and 4. Simply swap lines 2 and 4, so that the poem concludes with its most arresting image, that of a “rock terrace” that “flies in space”:

石	獨	欲	白
磴	倚	因	雲
飛	杖	鳴	如
空	藜	澗	帶
細	舒	答	束
路	眺	吹	山
遙	望	簫	腰

GRAPHICS CREDITS

In the central panel of Figure 1, the “clouds” image in the upper-left cell of the table is the following royalty-free item: schoolphotoproject.com/clouds-sky/clouds-sky-photo5.html, accessed November 2, 2021. The landscape image in that row was scanned and cropped from Silbergeld (1982) Figure 26, which is a painting by Hsia Kuei [Xià Guī 夏珪, fl. 1195–1224], known as *Pure and Remote Views of Streams and Mountains*; handled under the fair-use convention. In the second row of the same table, the “stone” and “stairway” images are from photographs taken by a family member at Machu Picchu in 2003. The remaining six graphics that populate the central panel of Figure 1 are drawings of my own, using black and green ink. All of Figure 2 is my own. Figure 3 is a screenshot of the lower half of page 99 in *Táng shī · Sòng cí · Yuán qǔ* 唐诗·宋词·元曲 (Peking 2006); handled under the fair-use convention.

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