

Translation Language and Poetics on Chinese Modern Poetry

Korenaga Shun¹

Abstract

This paper aims to clarify the translatability of poetry through the translation language of modern Chinese poetry. In translation of poetry, metaphor should be rendered creatively, while the original meter cannot be transferred precisely into the target language. This makes the translatability of poetry a critical issue. In the 20th century, both Japan and China have been influenced by European modern poetry, especially by French symbolism and surrealism. In contemporary China, modern poetry was revived at the end of the 1970's after the Great Cultural Revolution. Contemporary Chinese poetry was first introduced into Japan in the late 1980's and has continued to spread over the several decades since this revolution. Walter Benjamin asserted that the radical mission of translation is dedicated to the realm of pure language on the philosophical side of poetry translation, while Roman Jakobson attempted to explicate poetry from linguistic points of view and defined the poetic function in linguistic terms. This paper describes the findings through the empirical analyses of the translation language of Chinese modern poetry, focusing on both philosophical and linguistic facets.

Key Terms: translatability, colloquial style, modernity, symbolism, surrealism, metaphor, equivalency

1. Chinese modern poetry and modernity

Giving a brief overview of Chinese modern poetry in the 20th century, modern poetry written in a colloquial style, which emancipated the literary form from the rigid rules of classical poetry, started after the May Fourth Cultural Revolution in 1919. The revolution of expression came together with the revolution of consciousness; that is to say, the change of sense of values. The May Fourth Cultural Revolution was the epoch-making cultural and social revolution which wholly denied the absolute authority of the classics and feudalistic ideology based on Confucianism. This Cultural Revolution promoted a shift in the medium of expression from the standard literary style, which had been supporting feudalistic hierarchy fundamentally, to the modern colloquial style. Hu-Shi, a representative advocate of the colloquial style of poetry, asserted that the new colloquial style was not only a drastic liberation from the bondage of the classical style, but was also a natural change that had been developing along the current of poetic style since *Shih-ching* [The Book of Song], edited in the sixth century B.C., in his critical essay *Tan Xinshi* [On New Poetry] (Hu-shih, 1919). Free verse style gradually came to dominate in the poetical circle in modern China; however, the

¹President, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU), Beppu City, Oita, Japan e-mail: korenaga@apu.ac.jp
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consciousness of regulation which had been cultivated through thousands of years in Chinese Literature produced some movements to pursue a modern, regulated style of colloquial verse and sonnet form from Europe.

Modern poetry, which had pursued modernity, with an inner meter developed during the 1920's to the 1930's led by Bian Zhilin, passed through the Nine Leaves group² in the 1940's, and resurfaced at the end of the 1970's with *Today* magazine³ led by Bei Dao. While the discourse of mainland China was ruled fundamentally by the mass propaganda of The Communist Party of China, for a period of about 30 years from 1949 until the end of the Great Cultural Revolution, modern poetry blossomed in Taiwan and produced many outstanding poets including Ya Xian and Zheng Chouyu as the representative poets.⁴

The features of modern poetry are composed of two factors: linguistic features and ego-consciousness. As to the linguistic factor, we recognize that modern poetry is based on the linguistic features of modern colloquial style which broke away from the poetic code of the standard literary style. The linguistic character of poetry changed drastically from the literary style to the colloquial style. At the same time, people raised the ego-consciousness of their own existence in their modern lives. They were aware of their world of consciousness in which they demolished old fashions and produced a new style of thinking and sensibility about the various facets of modern life, such as radical existence, divinity and reinterpretation of traditional aesthetics. Tanji Ai pointed out that the significant features of modernism appear as the dialectical relationship between demolition and regeneration repeated mutually during this transition with the consciousness of the historical gap (Tanji, 1994). Contemporary Chinese poetry after the Great Cultural Revolution is remarkable for its tendency to focus on death, demolition and divinity according with the destiny of poets: committing suicide, living in exile or being put in jail⁵ before and after the June Fourth Incident in 1989 (Korenaga, 1993). Poetry has been produced to represent their individual consciousness of their real lives with individual inner meter respectively. Imagination in modern poetry sparked in

² Modernism school in the latter half of the 1940's which consisted of nine poets including Xin Di, Mu Dan, Yuan Kejia, Zheng Min and others.

³ A non-official underground magazine published in 1978 after the Great Cultural Revolution in Beijing. The magazine was suspended by Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau in 1980. Ten years later, in the year following the June Fourth Incident, the magazine, resumed publishing in Oslo, Norway in 1990 and had been published until 2016 quarterly. Bei Dao was involved as an editor in chief. The so-called Great Cultural Revolution was actually an unprecedented rebellion which had continued for ten years from 1966 to 1976. Under these catastrophic circumstances, a group of young poets and writers honed their critical thinking and sharpened their sense of beauty.

⁴ While modern poetry was oppressed by communist party in Continental China, it blossomed in Taiwan during the 1950s to the 1970s after World War II. If we broaden our horizons in terms of poetries written in Chinese, we could also find many outstanding Taiwanese poets. (Korenaga, 2002).

⁵ Hai Zi committed suicide in Beijing in 1989, Ge Mai in Beijing in 1991, Gu Cheng in Auckland, New Zealand in 1993. Bei Dao, Duo Duo, Yang Lian and other quite a few poets lived in exile. Song Lin, Zhou Lunyou, Liao Yiwu and Wan Xia were put in jail.

the creative poetical movements like symbolism, imagism and surrealism. These artistic movements have formed the component elements of modernity. French symbolism was introduced to Japan in the late 1890's, which is about twenty years earlier than its introduction in China.⁶ Nishiwaki Junzaburō introduced surrealism from France and developed a theory of surrealism in the 1930's. Comparing the poetry of Bian Zhilin and Nishiwaki, it could be said that the poetical works of surrealism were produced almost simultaneously in Japan and China.⁷

2. The acceptance of Chinese contemporary poetry in Japan

Contemporary Chinese poetry, or modern Chinese poetry during the several decades after the Great Cultural Revolution, was first introduced into Japan in the late 1980's. The first individual *Collected Poems of Bei Dao* and the first anthology *A Million Scintillating Suns* were published in 1988. Subsequently, several individual collected poems followed such as the poetical works of Mang Ke, Niu Bo, Ge Mai and two other anthologies.⁸ A new *Collected Poems of Bei Dao* was published in 2009, which contained his poems written while in exile in Europe and the United States for 20 years from 1989.⁹

We can recognize a double literary filter in the typical response from Japanese poetical circles at their first acceptance of Chinese contemporary poetry in the modern poetry's history. What is a double literary filter? Japanese have appreciated classical Chinese poetry, especially the poetry of the Tang dynasty through their unique and traditional reading method.¹⁰ As is well known, Chinese classical regulated verse has rigid rules for meter and rhyme. The acceptance of

⁶ The first article on symbolism in Japan was Ueda Bin's "Furansu shidan no shinsei" [The new voice of French poetical circle] published in *Teikoku Bungaku*, No.7, in 1898, while Mori Ōgai's *Shinbi Shinsetsu* [A new theory of aesthetics] was published by Shun'yōdō in 1900. In China, Sun Yushi pointed out that Zhou Zuoren recognized his own poem was similar to Baudelaire's work in his "Xiaohē" xu [Preface to Brook] in *Xin Qingnian*, Vol.6, No.2, in 1919, and Luo Jialun recognized Shen Yinmo's poem Yueye [Moonlit night] as work of symbolism in *Xin Chao* Vol 1, No.5, in 1919 (Preface to "Anthology of Symbolism School" edited by Sun Yushi, Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe People's Literature publisher, 1987, Beijing).

⁷ Nishiwaki Junzaburō's *Chōgenjitsushugi shiron* [On the poetry of surrealism] was published in 1929, and his collection of poems *Ambarvalia* was published in 1933. Bian Zhilin, a representative poet of the first half of the 20th century in China, graduated from the English literature course of Beijing University. His collection of poems *Sangu ji* was published in 1933 and *Yumu ji* was published in 1935.

⁸ *Hoku Tō shishū* [Collected poems of Bei Dao] by Korenaga Shun (ed. And tr.) and *Okuman no kagayaku taiyō – Chūgoku gendai shishū* [A billion scintillating suns: An anthology of Chinese contemporary poetry] by Takarabe Toriko and Mu Guangzhu (tr.) were published in 1988. Other publications followed these two books: Korenaga Shun (tr.) *Bō Koku shishū* (Korenaga, 1990), Asami Yōji (tr.) *Gyū Ha shishū* (Asami, 1993), Korenaga (tr.) *Ka Baku shishū* (Korenaga, 2000).

⁹ *Collected Poems of Bei Dao* was published in 1986 in China, and its Japanese translation was published in 1988. Bei Dao left China in 1989, and was living in exile in Europe and U.S. for 20 years after the June Fourth Incident, and obtained the position of professor at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2008.

¹⁰ For example, the Japanese read the lines "嫦娥应悔偷灵药,碧海青天夜夜心" (李商隐 "嫦娥") as "Jōga wa Masani kuyubeshi reiyaku o nsumishi o, heikai seiten yoyo no kokoro". We read "偷灵药 (V+O)" as "reiyaku o nsumu" (O+V) reversibly according to Japanese syntax. The original regulated meter cannot be translated and this method is merely the way to read it, not its translation. Real appreciation needs accurate comprehension of metaphor in the line of a poem through a creative translation. Otherwise, reading it as "heikai seiten yoyo no kokoro" does not make us appreciate its meaning: "Every night her grief sinks into the emerald sea and blue sky"

classical poetry through this reading method and appreciation of it has nurtured and determined our literary code with regard to classical Chinese poetry. On the other hand, we have also made our pilgrimage to modern European poetry, and particularly French symbolism and surrealism have had a tremendous impact on our poetry over the last one-hundred years. Consequently, we have developed a double literary filter; that is, a filter of the combination of Chinese classical poetry and modern European poetry to appreciate modern Chinese poetry (Korenaga, 1997).

A typical first reaction of Japanese poets to the literary filter in 1988 was as follows. Isaka Yōko commented “We usually think of classical poems when we hear the mention of Chinese poems, but whenever I read the *Collected Poems of Bei Dao*, I always find that there is not much difference between the European poetry such as by Éluard or Paul Celan and modern Chinese poetry.” Another poet, Ōoka Makoto, has written, “I remembered Éluard when I read Bei Dao, while Mang Ke reminded me of Du Fu.” (Korenaga, 1997, p. 107) These were the typical first reactions of Japanese poets to the literary filter. However, as time ticked away, this filter faded away gradually and critics came to focus on the universality of modern world poetry. Seven years later, when I introduced Song Lin through the literary magazine *Shinchō*'s special issue on world contemporary poetry in 1995, Shibusawa Takasuke made a comment: “I read Song Lin with surprise. I had already read poets such as Bei Dao and Mang Ke of the *Today's Group*, and had sufficient knowledge of contemporary Chinese poetry to realize that there was a modern poetry deserving of the name. However, this is the only time in several years, that I have encountered a poet like Song Lin who has completely assimilated the wealth of modern world poetry from the time of symbolism and surrealism, which appeared to a greater degree than in the work of the *Today's Group*” (Shibusawa, 1995). Incidentally, in that issue of *Shinchō*, they featured a special issue on world contemporary poetry and selected five representative poets of the period: Seamus Heaney (Ireland), Giovanni Giudici (Italy), John Ashbery (USA), Song Lin (China), and Wisjawa Symborska (Poland). It was as one of the obvious examples of universality that one Chinese contemporary poet was included among the five representative poets of the world in *Shinchō*'s special issue.¹¹

3. Translatability of poetry

Talking about the translation of poetry, it could be divided into two dimensions: the linguistic side and philosophical side. As to the linguistic side, the content of the original text is expected to be rendered equivalently in the target language, the equivalency of metaphor should be rendered creatively, yet the original meter cannot be transferred precisely into the target language. We know that modern poetry in the 20th century emancipated itself from the rigid rules of classical poetry and

¹¹ I introduced Song Lin's two poems: *Huainian* [Cherish the memory] and *Kongbai* [Blank space].

that poets became able to choose the form of meter respectively.¹² Regardless of the rigid rules or inner forms, the original meter is untranslatable. The translator should be conscious of a fine diction and his/her own inspired creation of meter, and represent them. As to the phonetic aspect, in poetry this is untranslatable. We cannot help searching for an appropriate and creative meter; in other words, his/her one-of-a-kind meter in the target language.

Concerning the philosophical side, whenever we discuss the translatability of poetry, we are inclined to refer to Benjamin's essay "The task of the translator" ("Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers") (1923). This essay has essential qualities in terms of the dimension and value of translation. He discerns between the original work and its translation. He confirms the basic phase "a translation issues from the original" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 71) and says "It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 71). This shows a fundamental difference of dimension between the original and translation. Benjamin recognizes that "Its (a literary work's) essential quality is not a statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information — hence, something inessential" (Benjamin, 1969 p. 69). If so, how can the absolute differences from the original appear as related to the original? What is the value of translation? How does it exist? Benjamin raises a new concept: "pure language". "Rather, all suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole -- an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language" (Benjamin, 1969 p. 74). However, the term "pure language" is rather vague and difficult to understand. He sets the so-called 'realm of pure language', and proposes that translation is to search the nucleus of the pure element in the original language and set up the translator's own realm of language. Benjamin asserts that the translator's mission is to dedicate his/her creative knowledge to strike the nucleus of pure element in the original language through the task of translation. He thinks that translation is to be dedicated to the realm of pure language, not to be dedicated to a reader. He said, "No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 69). A translator renders the original language into the target language through a linguistic process, and at the same time, he/she should pursue to seek and strike the meta-linguistic element; in other words, the nucleus of pure language. Benjamin analyzed two dimensions of the original and translation which are different fundamentally, and raised his original idea of "pure language" to connect these quite different things as a philosophy of language. "Pure language" has its own magnetic energy to attract our consciousness; however, we are not sure whether we have a rigorous definition of this

¹² On this subject, Bei Dao has stated "I have no compelling reason to deny that an inner rhythm is a rhythm of modern poetry. I believe that the inner rhythm of poets exists beyond the confines of the formal rhythm of a classical poetry." (Korenaga, 1997, p. 116)

term or not. Referring to Benjamin's essay, Hosea Hirata mentioned in his criticism "The Detour of Translation" that, "like many other texts by Benjamin, this text on translation shows a peculiarly elusive density that makes it difficult for readers simply to understand" (Hirata, 1993, p. 171) and said, "In a strange sense, the text seems to advocate a pure meaning-less text, of which the text itself attempts to be an example by making two contradictory statements at once: translation is and is not possible" (Hirata, 1993, p. 171). This metaphysical aporia could be comprehended in the light of the empirical approach which translators should adhere to. The task of the translator is to create his/her own poetical realm. It is a kind of pure element for them to pursue because the diction and meter created by the translator has its own quality to render the untranslatable meter and diction of the original poem. However, it creates another different dimension from the original.

Here I quote a portion of Bei Dao's *Notes from the City of the Sun* 太阳城札记, from *Bei Dao Shixuan* ["Collected Poems of Bei Dao"] published in 1986. (Phonetic signs are displayed in Chinese alphabet and pitch tones with numbers: 1 for high level, 2 for high rising, 3 for low, 4 for falling, and 0 for neutral.)

自由 zì⁴ yóu²

飘 piāo¹

撕碎的纸屑 sī¹ suì⁴ de⁰ zhǐ³ xiè⁴

Freedom

Torn scraps of paper

fluttering

JYŪ

kaze ni mau

hikichigirareta kamikuzu

命运 mìng⁴ yùn⁴

孩子随意敲打着栏杆 hái² zǐ⁰ suí² yì⁴ qiāo¹ dǎ³ zhē⁰ lán² gān¹

栏杆随意敲打着夜晚 lán² gān¹ suí² yì⁴ qiāo¹ dǎ³ zhē⁰ yè⁴ wǎn³

(translated by Bonny. S. McDougall, 1988, same as follows)

Fate

The child strikes the railing at random

at random the railing strikes night

UNMEI

kodomo ga kimamani rankan o uchi

rankan wa kimamani yoru o utte iru

(translated by Korenaga, 1988, same as follows)

In the English translation of "Freedom", the order of lines is reversed. The translator did so by following her own inspired meter. In the original Chinese poem "Fate", the poet made up the number of syllables 2+2+3+2, a total of nine syllables for these two lines, to form a neat refrain, and the last syllables match the rhyming words "-gan" and "-wan". Rhythm and rhyme in this meter are untranslatable. However, in the Japanese translation we can see that each line has 12 or 13 syllables, which bring rather a neat phonetic function. These early works of Bei Dao, written before his exile, make us imagine the actuality of freedom in China. In the line of *Accomplices* 同谋, he wrote,

freedom is nothing but the distance 自由不过是 zì⁴you²bu²guo⁴shi⁴
 between the hunter and the hunted 猎人与猎物之间的距离 lie⁴ren²yu³lie⁴wu⁴zhi¹jian¹de⁰:ju⁴li²
 jiyū towa tada
 kariudo to emono tonō aida no kyori de shika nai

Describing “Freedom” through metaphor in “scraps of paper” or “distance between the hunter and the hunted”, Bei Dao symbolizes the reality of freedom in contemporary China. In “Fate”, a child is striking a railing at random, and as a result, the sound of the railing is striking night. Bei Dao symbolizes “Fate” as if it is aimless, uncertain and indefinite, much like the behavior of a child. The poet juxtaposes the abstract idea of “freedom” and the concrete object “scraps of paper” or sense of distance, and it emerges that the audience of the poem imagines something new produced by bringing disparate things together, comparable to the juxtaposition of the abstract idea of “fate” and the child’s behavior in striking the railing. The juxtaposition of bizarreness of things that are normally not put together, is an essence of surrealist methods which represent a kind of revolt against all restraints on free creation. Through the appreciation of these features of modern poetry, the mind of the audience should be liberated from fixed logic and reason, being more in tune with the ways of thinking of modernity.

4. Linguistics and poetics

The inner meter of free verse is the breathing pattern of a poet, and it is also an acoustic phenomenon of syntax which is generated by a poet’s sentience. It would be ideal if we could analyze a poem by an effective method which combines its syntax and acoustic features. In this paper, I mainly focus on syntax that produces metaphor which develops associations along the lines of semantic similarity. Similarity is closely related to another concept “equivalency” that is a key concept of translation language. With regard to the equivalency of metaphor, we are reminded of the definition of poetical language clarified by Jakobson in his article “Linguistics and Poetics” (1960, p. 358): “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.” In usual life, we select an appropriate word from the group of similar words and combine them into a phrase or a sentence. Jakobson illustrated similar word groups such as ‘child, kid, youngster, tot’ and ‘sleeps, dozes, nods, naps’, and said that both selected words combined in the speech chain. Selection of words is based on equivalence, while the combination of words is based on contiguity. In poetical language, we consider rhyme, antithesis, and refrain as usual examples of equivalency of combination. Chinese versification of classical poetry offers various examples of the principle of projection. Except for formal codes, with regard to metaphor, Jakobson said that equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence (Jakobson, 1960, p. 358). I quote a portion of Bei Dao *The Island* 岛 which supports the effectiveness of this definition.

孩子们堆起小小的沙丘 hai²zi⁰men⁰dui¹qi³xiao³xiao³de⁰sha¹qiu¹
海水围拢过来 hai³shui³wei²long³guo⁴lai²
象花圈，清冷地摇动 xiang⁴hua¹quan¹, qing¹leng³de⁰yao²dong⁴
月光的挽联铺向天边 yue⁴guang¹de⁰wan³lian²pu¹xiang⁴tian¹bian¹

the children stack small sandhills
seawater laps around them
like a garland, bleakly rocking
the moonlight's elegiac lines stretch to the end of the sky

kodomora ga chiisana sunayama o tsukuri
kaisui ga torikakomu
hanawa no yōni, suzushigeni yurete
tsuki no hikari no chōren ga chinohate ni kakaru

In this stanza, seawater around a small sand hill, the garland, the moonlight and the elegiac line involve poetic associations of equivalency. These three images have in common a similarity, and metaphors which are produced on equivalence are projected on an axis of combination of three lines and promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence just as Jakobson defined. In addition, garland and the elegiac line are metonymy of a funeral, just as Jakobson pointed out: “In poetry where similarity is superinduced upon contiguity, any metonymy is slightly metaphorical and any metaphor has a metonymical tint” (Jakobson, 1960, p. 370). Jakobson analyzed poems from a linguistic method and considered the problem of the linguistic code in poetic language. His definition of the poetical function, which has its profound worth both in analyzing poetry and translating poetry, is rooted radically on the projection, namely, the spark of sentience.

5. Conclusion

This paper shows that the empirical approach is effective to understand “pure language”, which Benjamin asserted in his essay “The task of the translator”, as well as the definition of poetical language which Jakobson clarified. Considering the drastic change from classical poetry to modern poetry both in its linguistic and philosophical aspects, it needs much wider and more thorough research. This paper also describes the translator's responsibility to be conscious of a fine choice of diction and his/her own inspired creation of meter. The translatability is based on equivalencies of language and every language has equal worth. This means that the language is not just a tool of communication, but rather the language potentially becomes a path to make people appreciate a sense of equal worth and mutual respect. We have to realize that language learning inherently and inevitably is involved with progress toward understanding a different culture. Equivalencies of language render literature translatable, and translation of poetry may even be seen as a branch of literary creation in the target language, as long as translators remain sensitive to finer nuances and cultivate their sensibilities towards the literary heritage of their own cultures.

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