

TRANSLATING CHINESE LITERATURE



Edited by
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1995

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Bloomington and Indianapolis

CONTENTS



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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Translating Chinese literature / edited by Eugene Eoyang and Lin Yao-fu.

p. cm.

Includes papers presented at the first International Conference on the Translation of Chinese Literature held in Taipei, Nov. 19–21, 1990.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-253-31958-7

I. Chinese literature—Translations into English—History and criticism—Congresses. I. Eoyang, Eugene Chen. II. Lin, Yao-fu, date III. International Conference on the Translation of Chinese Literature (1st: 1990: Taipei, China)

PL2658.E1T73 1995

428'.02951—dc20

94-18309

1 2 3 4 5 00 99 98 97 96 95

PREFACE	vii
WORKING NOTES	
CYRIL BIRCH	
Reflections of a Working Translator	3
WILLIAM H. NIENHAUSER, JR.	
The Implied Reader and Translation: The <i>Shih chi</i> as Example	15
DAVID R. KNECHTGES	
Problems of Translation: The <i>Wen hsüan</i> in English	41
RICHARD B. MATHER	
Translating Six Dynasties "Colloquialisms" into English: The <i>Shih-shuo hsün-yü</i>	57
GLEN DUDBRIDGE	
A Second Look at <i>Li Wa chuan</i>	67
JAMES I. CRUMP, JR.	
Two Tools for the Translation of <i>San-ch'ü</i>	77
ROBERT JOE CUTTER and WILLIAM G. CROWELL	
On Translating Chen Shou's <i>San guo zhi</i> : Bringing Him Back Alive	114
STEPHEN H. WEST	
Translation as Research: Is There an Audience in the House?	131
CYRIL BIRCH	
Translating Ming Plays: <i>Lumüan</i> (The Green Peony)	156

JOHN MINFORD "Pieces of Eight": Reflections on Translating <i>The Story of the Stone</i>	178
ANTHOLOGIZING	
DOMINIC CHEUNG The Parting of the Ways: Anthologies of Early Modern Chinese Poetry in English Translation	207
JOSEPH S. M. LAU More Than Putting Things Together: The Anthologizing of Chinese Literature in Translation	221
VICTOR H. MAIR Anthologizing and Anthropologizing: The Place of Nonelite and Nonstandard Culture in the Chinese Literary Tradition	231
DAVID D. W. WANG Translating Taiwan: A Study of Four English Anthologies of Taiwan Fiction	262
CRITICAL SURVEYS	
MICHELLE YEHL On English Translation of Modern Chinese Poetry: A Critical Survey	275
EUGENE EOYANG Speaking in Tongues: Translating Chinese Literature in a Post-Babelian Age	292
CHING-HSI PENG Translation and Individual Talent	305
JOHN J. DEENEY Foundations for Critical Understanding: The Compilation and Translation of Encyclopedic Dictionaries of Chinese Literary Terminology	315
CONTRIBUTORS	343
INDEX	347

PREFACE



In November 1990 the Council for Cultural Development and Planning, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, and National Taiwan University joined together to convene the first International Conference on the Translation of Chinese Literature. More than forty scholars from abroad were invited to Taipei to interact with their counterparts and colleagues from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia. More than one hundred papers were presented over a three-day period, November 19–21, 1990. This volume presents a selection of the papers. Unfortunately, it wasn't possible to publish every paper presented: such a volume would have exceeded three thousand pages. Many worthy contributions had to be omitted, not to mention many worthy contributors. We explored different criteria for selection. Our publisher not unexpectedly selected papers that concentrated on the translation of Chinese literature into English. This linguistic chauvinism can be easily criticized, except that it does reflect the greater preponderance of expertise at the conference, and is very likely to reach the greatest audience of readers.

The translation of Chinese literature has, in a generation, progressed to such a stage that we no longer have only a handful of variously gifted practitioners ranging throughout the historical corpus. Now we have specialists translating the *Shih chi*, the *Wen hsüan*, the *Shih-shuo hsün-yü*, the *San-kuo chih*, the *Yüan ch'ü*, the *Shih-tou chi* (*Hung-lou meng*), even the *Lumudan*. Such a gathering of practitioners provided an excellent chance to share workshop notes. Many of the participants took advantage of this opportunity of sharing their frustrations and their all too infrequent triumphs, to the edification of all. Whatever differences emerged in the conference, those attending were unanimous about the fragility of the translator's art, and the precarious position of the translator. Still, there was a special sense of encouragement for each translator-participant to confer and to commiserate with fellow agonizers over the arduously bilingual art known as translation.

Reflections of a Working Translator



CYRIL BIRCH

I am deeply grateful for the honor of this invitation to address the conference today, but what really excites me is that an event such as this conference can occur at all. I believe it is a genuine milestone in a progress to which many of us here have dedicated our working lives, the bringing of the great gift of Chinese literature within the reach of those peoples of the world who do not have the good fortune of knowing the Chinese language. At this opening stage of our proceedings I would like, on behalf of all here, to congratulate and thank the initiators and organizers of the conference and to express our appreciation for the very generous support of the Council for Cultural Planning and Development, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, and the National Taiwan University.

Upon reaching a milestone, it is natural to look back at the way one has come. So I would ask you to indulge me if I take you back for a moment to my own situation as a recent graduate in Chinese studies, London circa 1950, the midpoint of this bustling century. No doubt it was a very salutary experience for me to be able to find so little satisfaction from the English translations of Chinese literature in existence—let alone in print—at that date. I am not suggesting that I read at that time every English translation that had ever been made; but a reader with enough *Sitzfleisch*, a sufficiently well-padded seat, probably could have done so and still have obtained only the sketchiest idea of the breadth and sweep of Chinese literature. Yes, in

This essay was delivered as the keynote address at the International Conference on Translation of Chinese Literature, Taipei, November 1990.

retrospect I suppose it was good for my soul to be forced to actually read things in the original because the translations either didn't exist or were basically unreadable. The case was surely the same or worse with other languages of Europe—with practically every language, in fact, except for the special case of Japanese.

Of course there were delights among the translations that had been made. I wish it were possible for me here to pay tribute to the many worthy pioneers—to Julien for French, Bernhard Karlgren for Swedish, Jaroslav Prusek for Czech—but let me limit myself to the English translators. Of them, from the great James Legge on down, I shall make brief mention only of Giles and Waley. Herbert Giles, a Cambridge professor at the turn of the century, wrote what I imagine must have been the first history of Chinese literature in any language (including Chinese), produced handsome Edwardian verses from Tang and other originals, and rendered Chinese prose in an English style that carried one along in a sort of airy canter. He also had a rather idiosyncratic way with a footnote. I remember laughing out loud in the hush of a college library when I was looking through some translations from old tales—I think it was probably Giles's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, his Liaozhai selections. The charms of a fair maiden were being catalogued in conventional fashion, and when the text arrived at the slenderness of her tapering fingers, the usual "onion-shoot" simile was used. At this point the translator—as I say, I think it must have been Giles—supplied a footnote. I don't have the book at hand, but approximately it read: "Onion-shoots: when sauteed lightly with a little ginger, these are esteemed a particular delicacy by the Chinese." Now, I'm all for adding local color. One great virtue of footnotes is that they can help bring to the outsider some of the cultural advantages enjoyed by the native reader. But Giles is far from the only translator who has included wildly incongruous or irrelevant material in footnotes.

One way, incidentally, to keep footnotes to a minimum and thereby reduce the irritation they inevitably cause is to incorporate explanatory information in the text itself. Let me give a simple instance. When Du Liniang, in scene 3 of *Mudanting*, first greets her parents, she has the following lines, among others, in her aria:

Zhu xuanhua chunshu
Suize shi zi sheng chimu
shoudejian zhe pantao shu.

祝萱花椿樹
雖則是子生遲暮
守得見還嬌桃熟

We might translate these lines more or less word for word:

Wish that lily and cedar
Though child born late in evening
May see me raised to ripen as fairy peach.

I suppose this is understandable as it is, but footnotes would make it a little less cryptic. I chose instead to build the minimum information required into my English text, as follows:

O mother gentle as lily,
father as cedar strong,
though the fairy peach comes only
after thirty centuries to fruit
and even so I your child
was born of your evening years
yet with careful guarding
may you see me brought to ripeness.

I have made eight lines here out of three, and perhaps this is unforgivable, especially with a text as long as *Mudanting* is to begin with; but I wanted a version of Liniang's lines that would retain the arboreal imagery and still be intelligible, without distracting the reader into sifting through yet another mass of little numbers at the bottom of the page.

But to return to Herbert Giles. People, it appeared, certainly read him for pleasure, because it was with Giles that my own model and mentor, Arthur Waley, had to compete when he first began to publish. The duel between the two of them over the question of rhymed iambs versus free verse and sprung rhythms in English versions of Chinese poems caught the interest of literary circles of the twenties and did more than anything else to put Chinese poetry on the English literary map.

Should we use rhyme when we translate? Always? Sometimes? Never? To pick away for a minute at this knot I would like to revert again to my usual practice as a teacher of literature and use a specific example. My intention is to illustrate two convictions of mine that conflict with each other: first, that Chinese poems that rhyme should be translated into English verse that rhymes, whenever this is possible; and second, that Arthur Waley was a giant figure in our past even though he set his face against the use of rhyme in translation and sternly criticized the kind of thing Giles had been producing. Waley, after all, came along at a time when most young poets were experimenting with rhymeless verse after Whitman, sprung rhythms after Gerard Manley Hopkins, and so on, and so it is hardly surprising that he developed his particular kind of line, which has had such a universal impact on the practice of subsequent translators into English. And yet if a translator is working from a rhymed original in French, German, or most other languages, it is most unlikely that the resulting English version will not be rhymed.

The example that shows both that Chinese verse can be translated into rhyming English with superb success and that, paradoxically, Waley could do this himself if he wanted to, is his version of the famous "Wang Jiangnan" *ci* by Li Houzhu:

Duoshao hen.
Zuoye menghun zhong
Hai si jiushi you Shangyuan:
Che ru liushui ma ru long,
Hua yue zheng chunfeng.

多少恨
昨夜夢魂中
還似舊時遊上苑
車如流水馬如龍
花月正春風

Waley's version:

Immeasurable pain!
My dreaming soul last night was king again.
As in past days
I wandered through the Palace of Delight,
And in my dream
Down grassy garden ways
Glided my chariot, smoother than a summer stream;
There was moonlight,
The trees were blossoming,
And a faint wind softened the air of night,
For it was spring.

I have seldom read an English translation of a Chinese poem that had this kind of verbal magic about it. Unfortunately the translation is obviously far from perfect; indeed, some of Waley's decisions here seem headed for disaster. Why no dragons? The dragons are absolutely central both to the royal persona and to the dreamlike setting of the original. And where do the grassy garden ways come from? Kensington Palace, surely, rather than any Chinese royal park. In fact, it is tempting to speculate that the word *grassy* is in the poem because the graph *yuan* in *Shangyuan*, Li Yu's third line, is topped with a grass radical, *caozitou*—perhaps even Waley was not quite immune from the visual semantics bug that Fenollosa brought in to bite Pound, Florence Ayscough, and others. But looking at how the pluses of Waley's translation outweigh the minuses, how grateful we should be that the atmosphere of Li Yu's last line is so perfectly captured in the English, even though it took daring as well as great skill to expand five syllables into four whole lines of English, lines whose uneven length recalls the metri-

cal pattern of the original but only in a generic, not a precise, sense. It goes without saying that a quatrain, *jueju*, or an eight-line *lushi* would be destroyed if one played around with the number of lines like this. It would be like translating a sonnet by Michelangelo into seventeen or twenty-three English lines—no one would think of doing such a thing. But when translators have to tackle a lengthy and semantically packed line of a *ci*, or worse still a *qu*, they will almost certainly have to consider departing from the attempt to represent the metrical form of the original quite so slavishly.

In the end it is a different magic from Li Yu's that one derives from Waley's poem, and perhaps from the difficulty of the decisions Waley had to make here one can see how he developed his distrust of rhyme. I have belabored this one lyric long enough—but it seems to me to be only through intensive consideration of this kind of text that one can think through some of the problems involved in the audacious, presumptuous, and ultimately humbling business of translating from Chinese into English.

As I have been suggesting, way back in 1950 we could afford to quibble at this kind of length about the intricacies of translation simply because we had so few models before us. Forty years later we have, praise be, a very different situation. One can teach a college-level literature-in-translation course nowadays with a fairly respectable reading list. Anthologies of poetry no longer come in slim volumes with wide margins and a terminal point somewhere in the Tang dynasty. It is possible for the reader of English to gain familiarity with a fair sampling of the oeuvre of a number of individual poets, especially of the Tang and Song dynasties. The level of readability is often high and the quality and quantity of annotation impressive; translators no longer confine themselves to the more colloquial lyrics, free from allusions and self-explanatory in English.

In the area of fiction, every one of the six great classical novels, the *Sida qishu* plus *Hongloumeng* and *Rulin waishi*, is now or soon will be accessible in a respectable—sometimes a brilliant—translation, and of course the number of traditional novels well worth reading and available in English versions is by no means limited to six. There are readable translations of plays of various generic types. *Yuan zaju* have received the most attention, as is only proper when we reflect that it is now two and a half centuries since William Hatchett published *The Chinese Orphan: a Historical Tragedy... Interspers'd with Songs, after the Chinese Manner*; his version of *Zhaoshi guer* retranslated from the French of Father Prémare. By this time we have English versions of perhaps some thirty *zaju* altogether, though the quality of translation varies rather violently. This again is understandable, since Chinese dramatic forms are hospitable to the widest imaginable range of language levels, from classical-style lyric through parallel prose down to dialect slang and gutter invective. Perhaps this might explain why after all this time there is still no single volume on the market of representative *zaju* plays, translated in full into idiomatic English.

I shall have a little more to say later about the long Ming *chuanqi* plays, but in surveying what has been done already we may note that several of the best-known plays are now available in English. The only other dramatic genre that has been translated in more than specimen form is Peking opera, and here again we have available a handful of the minority of these plays that are in fact readable as literary and not just as theatrical pieces.

You will have noticed, I'm sure, that I am using a highly Westernized definition of what sort of writing counts as literature. It would take me too far afield to argue the case here for historical, philosophical, or other texts, but let me simply comment that, again, a fair sampling is possible in English of the more "literary" of such works, the *Shiji*, the Mencius, and so on, and I suppose the number of English-language versions of the *Laozi* must have passed two hundred long ago.

A really startling boom has been under way for some time now in the area of contemporary writing. Two obvious reasons for this are the rise in quality of the writing itself, in Taiwan since the sixties and on the mainland in the post-Mao years, and the exponential growth in the number of British and American students of modern Chinese. A considerable pool of qualified language experts is now a reality, with the result that the sorts of works that used to be translated by travelers and journalists are now being tackled by well-trained professional scholars. Surely the younger Chinese writers of today, whether publishing in Taiwan or on the mainland, are accessible to the Anglophone reader to a degree undreamed of by any preceding generation. Without question, fiction writers have fared better than poets or dramatists in this regard and important and exciting pieces in all genres wait still to be discovered, but it is truly heartening to see Chinese writers on the way to crashing the language barrier and taking their place on the world literary scene as Japanese and Latin American writers did in the sixties.

The speed and breadth of this expansion of the field of translation, welcome as it is, naturally give rise to concern about a corresponding improvement in quality. For if there is one fundamental truism about the translation of literary works, it is that a bad translation is much worse than no translation at all. I'm sure many here have known the frustration of having a non-Chinese-reading friend comment in lukewarm fashion on a favorite piece that the friend has read in a flat, wooden English version. One wants to cry: "But if only you could read the original! This really isn't what Chinese poetry is like!"

In this regard I should like to use this platform, which really is what Teddy Roosevelt would have called a bully pulpit, to put forward a plea and a prayer. The plea is for help in the elucidation of literary texts from scholars across the entire field of humanistic studies, and the prayer is that future translators from Chinese will be blessed not just with linguistic skill but with a passion for literature.

First, the plea for help. The most immediate form of assistance that I have in mind is a very obvious one, the reprinting of reliable texts and the provision of copious annotation. And here I can speak with true feeling, because I have been the beneficiary of aid of this kind. I launched out on a complete translation of *Mudanting* (The Peony Pavilion) realizing that I was probably doing a very foolhardy thing, and in the face of certain passages I suppose I came close to despairing of ever finishing the task. But I could never have begun if it had not been for the appearance in the late fifties of a generously annotated edition of a reliably complete text of the play.

Over and above the immediate help of annotated cribs, translators depend on scholarship from many sides. First-rate critics help them select their material; historians of literature help them place it in perspective. Comparatists who make analogy studies between totally unrelated literary traditions make possible a stronger sense of genre, and if translators have these studies, then the required tone will come much more naturally to them, whether it be the distinctive tone of satire, polemic, lyrical reminiscence, comic romance or heroic tragedy, naturalist fiction, or fairytale.

From other fields of scholarship, the work of historians in general helps translators develop the necessary depth of understanding of the cultural context, the work of linguists can refine their appreciation of the kind of choices of diction that were available to the original author—style, in any language, being a matter of choices made between alternative intelligibilities. Reference aids of all kinds are indispensable—the *Zhongwen da cidian* alone has made possible a quantum leap in our ability to cope with obscurities. And yet no form of aid is more absolutely precious to us than the work of annotation, by means of which the innocent outsider can avoid the nightmarish traps of ignoring allusions, translating proper names, and all the other horrors that bring cold panic to the translator's sweating brow.

So much for the plea; now for the prayer. It is that translation be undertaken by men and women with a genuine passion for literature, people who read texts for fun and not just because they get paid to teach them. I don't want to sound cynical, but I suspect all of us have come across colleagues as well as students who set up as translators but whose true interests may be historical, linguistic, in fact anything but literary, who in fact would find it hard to recall the last work of imaginative literature they actually read for pleasure. And I'm not speaking just of Chinese literature. A good translator should be able to command a considerable range of English styles, chatty, stately, vulgar, pompous, nervous, virile, lyrical, ascetic, sentimental, whatever. And the only way I can think of to develop this kind of range is to read, as a matter of love and habit, both the classics of the past and the inventors of the new English styles of today.

Above all, an obvious prerequisite of good translation is to be in love with the text one is translating. That is why I have always deeply appreciated the freedom of choice that is accorded a Free World academic. If I were

translating for a government bureau, or for money to pay the rent, or as part of some kind of master plan devised by someone else, I don't believe I could infuse into my work the sense of relish for the original that I hope it at least sometimes conveys. For this reason, the old expression "a little of what you fancy does you good" aptly describes my first principle of translation. What I mean by this is that if I try to translate only things that hold a special attraction for me, then the chances are that my translations will repay to other readers some of the debt of pleasure I've owed to the original creators. Also, because the saying calls for only a little of what you fancy, I have tried to make it a rule not to go on working at the actual putting into English (though I might continue some of the donkey work of dictionary thumping and allusion chasing) after I've begun to feel tired or bored.

Compiling an anthology of translations from Chinese literature was for me an unalloyed delight, since I could choose all the juicy texts to translate myself and use the work of other translators to represent pieces which I thought should be in a representative anthology but which didn't excite my own particular tastes—things like prose essays of a philosophical bent, for example. And when I speak of "unalloyed delight," I am thinking also of the fact that I could do things like take from a particular poet those pieces that I thought I understood and ignore others, however worthy, that would need interpretation by an expert more erudite than myself.

And now, although in these rambling remarks I have been discussing literature in general, I should like to spend the rest of my time considering a specific question, the question of abridgment or partial translation of a text, and to discuss this question in relation to one type of text in particular, the Ming *chuanqi* play.

Somehow I have never felt happy about abridgments—I remember the feeling I had of being cheated when as a schoolboy I read *The Brothers Karamazov*, by discovering only after I had finished the book that it was an abridged English version of Dostoyevsky's work, edited by Somerset Maugham, and not the complete text. And until the wonderful Hawkes-Minford *Story of the Stone* came out it was always with apologetic discomfort that one urged one of the various abridgments of *Dream of the Red Chamber* on eager undergraduates.

And yet, when it comes to the late-Ming playwrights I have to think of a remark made by an English critic about some of those endless verse tragedies written by Romantic poets and rapidly consigned to well-deserved oblivion: "They had the right to take their time," said our critic; "the question is, do they have the right to take mine?" That sounds like a very arrogant remark, but after all life is short and art is long, and those unemployed or underemployed mandarins of seventeenth-century China were writing, often enough in the tranquil comfort of their garden studios, for a public that had a lot more time for reading and far fewer masterpieces available to them than most of us have. In the history of world drama, the plays which

failed and today are lost or simply unread must outnumber the hits by some astronomical ratio. The French Revolution, for example, was swiftly followed by an extraordinarily prolific period of writing for the stage; but which of these predecessors of the great Victor Hugo is performed, read, or recalled at all now by any but historians of literature?

So why bother with late Ming effusions? Because, obviously, they contain passages and sometimes whole scenes that are still alive with wit, lyrical beauty, stirring sentiments, and insights into the human condition. But oh, the length and oh, the uneven quality of the writing! Even *The Peony Pavilion*, for which I have almost unqualified admiration, has its longeurs, its scenes that just about any intelligent director would abridge or delete, its passages that the translator, having committed to doing the whole thing, will delay facing up to until some morning when he or she is feeling unusually daring or desperate.

Discriminating Western readers surely are entitled to have placed in their hands a complete version of a play like *The Peony Pavilion* so that they may gauge for themselves the wit or dullness of the often pedantic examination humor, the nobility or sheer vainglory of the martial interludes, even the moving tenderness or the cloying sentimentality of the domestic scenes. We now have reasonably representative English renderings of a handful of *chuanqi* plays, and beyond argument we need complete translations of more.

But however it may go against the grain to contemplate abridgment or the mining of a long text for its precious gems, I believe there is a case also for the translation of selected scenes from certain plays, to do in fact for English translation what Chinese managers have done for centuries in stage performance by isolating single scenes which then became known as *zhezixi*. This might indeed be the best possible strategy for laying Ming *chuanqi* plays in translated form before the English-reading public, to present a sampling of selected scenes, with the kind of introductory material which would appropriately locate each scene within its dramatic context, before challenging the reader with the thirty-odd or forty-odd scenes of a complete individual work. The hope would be, obviously, that the reader of the selection, hooked and clamoring for more, would go on to read complete plays and eventually, in some future decade we can only dream of now, to the complete oeuvre of a Tang Xianzu or a Li Yu.

It would try your patience too far if at this point I were to launch into a full-scale discussion of which kind of play deserves full translation and which might well be abridged. For the present I will argue the case by considering two plays by Wu Bing: *Xiyuanji*, and *Lumudan*. Though both are comedies and very obviously the work of one man, they seem to me to call for very different treatments if they are to be presented to the English-reading public, which so far as I know can have no notion of their existence beyond the listing by Josephine Huang Hung in her *Ming Drama*. I shall plead for complete translation of Wu Bing's *Xiyuanji* but then try to suggest

how *Lumudan* might be introduced to the English-reading public, and shown to contain much wit, sharp satire, and some very effective stagecraft, without necessarily confronting this public with a full-length translation, which might indeed, to someone without a considerable background in traditional Chinese life and letters, prove virtually unreadable.

If it is fair to characterize many late Ming *chuanqi* plays as interminable and uneven, these terms certainly cannot be applied to *Xiyuanji*. Not one of the thirty-three scenes of this play deserves to be cut. The opening scene (following the brief prologue) presents the *sheng* hero, as is obligatory, but immediately involves him in action and gives scope for a mime spectacle by having his pleasure boat rammed by that of the *jing* villain. Scene 3, again in obligatory fashion, brings on the *dan* heroine in a mood of boudoir lassitude that delicately recalls Du Liniang. Very soon comes scene 6, bringing the hero's misidentification of the heroine, which is the springboard of the action of the entire play. A succession of scenes from 9 onward poignantly contrast moods of gaiety and pathos: love idylls, the teasing of the hero by his friends, and the lamentations of the dying *xiaodan*. Highlights of later scenes include the complex feelings, on both sides, that accompany the act of adopting an orphan girl in the attempt to compensate for the premature death of one's own daughter (scene 18); coarse slapstick (immediately following, and again used for contrast of mood) as the villain prepares for examination and reminds us of the kind of abuses satirized at greater length in *Lumudan*; the superb lyrical evocation of ghostly wooing, hardly inferior to the *Mudanting* scenes on which these scenes, 23 and 26 especially, are patterned; and a scene of high comedy, 29, in which just about everyone assumes everyone else is a ghost and reacts in terror—a scene for which the only parallel that comes to mind is from the modern Western stage, in Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*. Scenes 31 and 32 economically clear up the multiple misunderstandings of Zhang's relationship with *dan* and *xiaodan*, and the grand finale of scene 33 strikes the absolutely appropriate note as the *xiaodan*, in ghostly form, attends the Buddhist mass for her salvation and communicates her thanks to each of the other principals through their common dream.

I am still in the process of reading Wu Bing's five plays, and not all critics consider this one his masterpiece, but I am convinced it would richly repay complete translation. Wu Bing in this play stays refreshingly clear of many of those irritating late Ming conventions of obligatory martial scenes, parting scenes, examination scenes, and so on; he gets on with his not-too-far-fetched plotting in a direct and economical manner, and his plot itself has witty twists that seem almost to prefigure the entertainments of Li Yu.

I am much less sure about *Lumudan*. This is again a stylish romantic comedy, but with an edge of satire in place of the pathos of the young *xiaodan*'s death that makes *Xiyuanji* that much the more absorbing as a work of drama.

In *Lumudan*, the prime criterion for the pairing of lovers is wit. In this regard the work resembles *Much Ado About Nothing* probably more than any other English play. But what makes it unique and quintessentially Chinese is its preoccupation with the traditional system of examinations for the bureaucracy, to the extent that we must redefine wit in this connection as the potential for examination prowess. The lover here enters the lists for his fair lady not by wielding his sword on the battlefield but by plying his brush in supervised literary composition.

And from this very preoccupation with the satirically presented catalogue of examination abuses stems the problem with the play for a modern English reader, the problem of the monotonous reiteration of a whole series of examination scenes. For the present purpose I will limit my comments on the play to a brief mention of three scenes, strategically placed through the action, which are basic to the characterization of the clownish pseudoscholars, *jing* and *chou*, and in this way central to Wu Bing's satiric purpose. All are examination scenes. Ostensibly they depict friendly literary contests held under club rules in a domestic setting; in fact the audience is perfectly aware of the parallel with the official halls of examination, in the provincial or national capital, where the prize will be not the hand of a local beauty as in Wu Bing's comedy but entrance into the imperial bureaucracy with its open avenues to wealth and fame.

Scene 5, "Club Meeting," sets the pattern for the chicanery of the two clowns, as their servants smuggle into the examination room the poems their surrogates have composed for them. The meat of this scene is the set of rules enunciated by the hero, rules outlawing various forms of cheating that were evidently a major source of concern to honest scholars of late-Ming times. Scene 25, "Examination by the Rules," is essentially a repeat performance of this scene, with the difference that on this occasion the rules against leaving the room or communicating with outsiders are strictly enforced. Scene 18, "Alcove Quiz," is the central major comic scene in which the essential stupidity of the two clowns is exposed, and this is the single scene I would choose to present in translation to the English reader as a fitting representation of the entire play.

"Alcove Quiz" turns the poor *jing* Liu Wuliu inside out. He is onstage throughout, most of the time seated at his examination desk, where he shows every sign of embarrassment and discomfort. He is a rich idler, overfed and overdressed, ill fitted to the confines of the scholar's desk. Being totally incapable of literary composition, he can only stretch and yawn, drum his fingers, and pretend to be humming his lines over; in fact he is dividing his time between waiting for his crony to bring him the answer his tutor (the hero of the play) has promised to ghostwrite for him and trying to crane his neck round the curtain to catch a glimpse of the delectable Che Jingfang, his examiner, his intended bride, and the *dan* character of the play. Behind the curtain, Miss Che is accompanied by her old nurse. Miss

Che, as is only proper, never leaves the privacy of her alcove, but the nurse emerges from time to time to bully poor Liu, especially at the point where he is strutting and mincing round his half of the stage in the absurd attempt to impress the young lady with his elephantine "elegance." The comings and goings from the alcove to the "examination hall" proper are complicated also by Miss Che's brother, the *chou* clown who is Liu's crony. He serves as a sort of go-between in this scene, smuggling in the crib to the hapless examinee, skulking onstage and off in an attempt to avoid detection, and finally entering the alcove to plead, in vain, the virtues of Liu's ghosted poem before his sister. By the end of the scene, even the *chou* has given up on Liu, who is left alone on stage completely discomfited. All in all, the construction of the "alcove" scene is a fine example of Chinese dramaturgy, wherein the absence of sets and scenery of any kind beyond a couple of poles supporting a simple curtain and the groupings and movements on stage are skillfully orchestrated for maximum comic effect. In the climactic concluding lines of the scene, the heroine Che Jingfang finally condescends to read out loud the "poem," actually an absurd piece of doggerel which the hero has conned the hapless villain into submitting as his own work and in which poor Liu Wuliu unwittingly ridicules himself as a turtle, i.e., a cuckold.

At least in the case of this one play, then, I would consider partial translation far more likely to win friends among the English-reading public than a complete translation, which would risk seeming oppressively pedantic, repetitious, and boring. My own recommendation would be for complete translation of the scene I have just described, "Alcove Quiz," introduced by a reasonably lengthy explanation of what has been going on earlier in the play, a brief biographical sketch of Wu Bing, some comments on the examination system itself and its late Ming abuses, and whatever other background information one might consider helpful. Add to this a suggestive description of the parallels in the use of comic devices between *Lumudan* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, and the Anglophone reader might perhaps begin to feel sufficiently at home really to relish the flavor of this priceless piece of Chinese dramatic satire.

In these scattered remarks I have restricted myself to my personal prejudices, my likes and dislikes. I hope I have not opened the floodgates to young translators itching to use rhyme but ready to sacrifice rhythm, accuracy, and naturalness in the process. I hope people will not stop making complete translations as a result of my support of partial ones. I hope my rapid survey of the scope of the translations already made from Chinese literature will not give the impression of complacency—in a certain sense, almost everything still waits to be done. But above all I hope I have provided some contentious observations that will help stimulate discussion.

The Implied Reader and Translation

The *Shih chi* as Example



WILLIAM H. NIENHAUSER, JR.

Despite the title, this essay is not really of a theoretical nature. It is primarily a status report on the progress of a project in which I am involved to translate a portion of the *Shih chi* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian). Besides myself, four other scholars are participating in the work: Chan Chiu-Ming 陳照明, Cheng Tsai-Fa 鄭再發, Lu Zongli 呂宗力, and Robert Reynolds (all of the University of Wisconsin). The theoretical portion of this essay consists mainly of my reflections on the work at this point in time.

Our project is one of six recent large-scale efforts—five ongoing—to render China's best-known early narrative, Ssu-ma Ch'ien's 司馬遷 (145–ca. 85 B.C.) *Shih chi*, into a modern tongue. The *Shih chi* is a fascinating work which attracted admirers almost from the time of its completion (ca. 90 B.C.). In modern times, a number of translators have shared this fascination. Yet of those who have turned their attention to this massive collection of materials—more than half a million words in the original—not a single one has produced a completely successful translation. In fact, to date no complete Western-language translation exists. Before turning to the question of "the implied reader," therefore, let me briefly address these translation texts—past and present—and their methods.¹ Out of convention I will present them in chronological order.