



Living for Translation: An Interview with Professor Zhang Zhizhong

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Abstract: In his rich career as a translator, Professor Zhang Zhizhong has formed a unique aesthetics on translation based on his own experience: spirit over form, and prose enjambment to rewrite Chinese poetry into sterling English poetry. In Professor Zhang's opinion, the English translation of Chinese poetry, broadly speaking, is divided into two schools: metrical school and liberal school, and there are poems translated in metrical style and liberal style, mixed with both good and bad ones. Being poetic, or poetry itself, is the most important point. In the interview, Professor Zhang expressed his hope to be friends with the students majoring in translation and make joint efforts in the globalization of Chinese culture and literature. It is his belief that the English translation of Chinese poems shall be poems themselves, and excellent poems in the English world, which, ideally, are published by the prestigious publishing houses in Western countries, hopefully, to exert influences on the readers. This is the ultimate goal of the globalization of Chinese culture and literature.

Keywords: Zhang Zhizhong; aesthetics of translations; English translation of Chinese poetry

Notes on the interviewee: ZHANG Zhizhong, is professor, doctoral supervisor and dean of the Translation Department, as well as director of the Center for Globalization of Chinese Poetry of Foreign Languages College, Nankai University; meanwhile, he is director of the Translators' Association of China, vice chairman of the Committee for English Translation of Chinese Classics of the Association for Comparative Studies of English and Chinese, part-time professor of Cross-Culture & World Literature Academy of Tianjin Normal University, director of Tianjin Comparative Literature Society, member of Tianjin Municipal Government Academic Degree Committee, member of Tianjin Municipal Government Professional Degree Education Guiding Committee, director and English secretary-general of World Sinology Literary China Seminar, expert for the approval and evaluation of projects funded by the National Social Science Foundation of China, part-time researcher at the Central Literature Translation Research Base of Tianjin Foreign Studies University, guest editor of *Rendition of International Poetry*, English editor-in-chief of *World*

Sinology, member of the editing board of *Guided Reading Series in Contemporary Chinese Poetry*, and member of the Board for Contemporary Chinese Poetry Prizes. He has published more than 110 books and 120 academic papers, and he has won a host of prizes in translation and academic research. His English translation of Chinese poetry is widely acclaimed throughout the world and is favorably reviewed by international poets and translators. His view on poetry translation: spirit over form, and prose enjambment to rewrite Chinese poetry into sterling English poetry.

Notes on the interviewer: WANG Zuyou, male, is a professor and doctoral supervisor. He was born on August 26, 1968, in Hexian County, Ma'anshan City, Anhui Province. He graduated from the Department of Foreign Languages at Guangxi Normal University with a Master's degree in literature in June 1998. In April 2002, he graduated from the Yale University East Asian Scholars Program in the United States. He obtained his Ph. D. in literature from the School of Foreign Languages at Xiamen University in June 2006. His main research areas are American literature and literary translation. He has published nine books and 88 academic papers in journals such as *Foreign Literature*, including 24 papers in key academic journals. He has also translated several works. He serves as a member of the editorial board for *The Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* and *World Literature Review*, as well as a committee member of the Jiangsu Comparative Literature Society, Jiangsu Translators Association, Guangxi Translators Association, China Translation Cognition Society, and China Ecological Translation and Cognitive Translation Society.

向譯而生 ——張智中教授訪談錄

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摘要: 在豐富的翻譯人生中,張智中教授根據自身經歷、體認,形成一種獨特的翻譯審美觀——但為傳神,不拘其形,散文筆法,詩意內容。張教授認為漢詩英譯,從大的方面來講,無非兩個流派:格律派和自由派。有好的格律體譯詩,有差的格律體譯詩;有好的自由體譯詩,有差的自由體譯詩。詩性或詩意,是最為重要的。在書面訪談中,張教授表達了跟學生成為朋友,共同為中國文學文化走出去做出貢獻的願望。他認為漢詩英譯的真正成果,體現在譯文能達到英詩境界,在西方主流出版社出版,並產生一定的國際影響,這才是中國文化走出去的最終目標。

關鍵詞: 張智中;翻譯審美;漢詩英譯

Wang Zuyou: Dear Professor Zhang Zhizhong, it's my great pleasure to be entrusted by the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* to conduct a written interview with you from a translation perspective. When did you start your translation work? What memorable events have there been in your translation practice? Will you please give a concise and brief response?



Zhang Zhizhong: After graduating with a master's degree in 1996, I was engaged in translation at Tuohe Toure Steel Co., Ltd., a Sino-American joint venture in Luohe, Henan Province. Thirteen months later, I moved to Shenzhen and worked part-time for several translation companies before starting my own. I collaborated with well-known companies such as Huawei in providing translation services. Even after I returned to Tianjin in June 2000 to work as an English teacher, still I maintained a working relationship with Huawei until the head of the company's translation department changed his work a year later. I then focused on my studies and pursued a doctorate degree at Nankai University with Professor Wang Hongyin as my supervisor. During those four years of working exclusively in translation, I gained valuable experiences and have cherished many unforgettable memories. I recall working on a translation project of just three Chinese characters: “蝶戀花” (Butterflies & Flowers), for a newly opened bar in need of an English name. Thinking it over for a few days, I came up with the translated name, with which the client was pretty happy. I also recall translating such works as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Tale of Sister Liu*, among many others. Looking back, those were truly tumultuous and memorable years.

Wang Zuyou: You have done a wide range of translation. What are the differences in translation standards and techniques for different knowledge domains and genres with your extensive translation practice?

Zhang Zhizhong: The workload at the time caused it, and I felt that I had translated so many types of materials. Personally, when translating the fields with which I am not particularly familiar, I would seek out similar Chinese-English texts to refer to and see how they are translated and handled. At the same time, for some technical terms that cannot be found in the dictionary, sometimes it is necessary to ask relevant professionals. For example, when I was once translating financial statements and came across the term “成新率” (which means the proportion of new items in inventory), I really didn't understand what it meant. So, I turned to the company's accountant for help, who explained it to me in great detail. I seemed to have understood it a little bit and boldly translated it into English purely based on my own understanding. Luckily, though, the American general manager did understand it after reading my translation. But now I have forgotten how I exactly translated that term at that time. Anyway, that was more than 20 years ago.

Overall, I feel that translating materials for companies, especially technical materials, requires the accuracy of information as the top priority. This cannot be wrong. Later on, I translated many technical terms for Huawei, and it didn't seem difficult because these technical terms are actually very simple, one-to-one, and often have no other choices. Therefore, as a translator, even if you don't understand them, you can still translate them correctly. However, for translating documents such as corporate introductions, including the aforementioned TV series plays such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Tale of Sister Liu*, English language fluency is required. The translator is no longer just delivering information, but also trying to bring out the linguistic beauty. “Literary translation or poetry translation focuses on conveying aesthetic information, instead of basic information” (Zhang Zhizhong 2015: 21). Therefore, I feel that translating technology texts tends to be rather monotonous, especially when it is done for money only after a long time. However, translating literary texts is different. Translators often feel the process of translating aesthetics personally and enjoy it very much. In

summary, for translating corporate texts, “faithfulness” is usually the first concern and consideration. The language must be smooth and clear. For translating literary texts, it requires even more “elegance” than “faithfulness”. The English translation should be concise and to the point.

Wang Zuyou: In brief, you hold the opinion that for non-literary translation, the key point lies in “faithfulness” and for literary translation, in “elegance.” In your translation of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Tale of Sister Liu*, how do you achieve “faithfulness” on the basis of “elegance”? What revelation does it bring to the present subtitling?

Zhang Zhizhong: Yes, the difficulty in translation varies from “accuracy” to “elegance,” with literary translation being the most challenging. When I translated *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Tale of Sister Liu*, it was a collaboration with Shenzhen Xianke Entertainment, and the English-subtitled VCDs were mainly sold in Southeast Asian countries. I also translated over 50 classic American movies, which were also subtitle translations. The biggest feature of this type of translation is the limitation of space and time. The text cannot be too long. Otherwise, it cannot be displayed on the screen at once. Therefore, conciseness is the key to subtitle translation. “Non-linguistic symbols are a decisive factor that affects the audience’s perception. Therefore, generally speaking, subtitles in film and television productions should not exceed two lines. This is because the dynamic nature of the screen means that the translation subtitles must be in sync with the corresponding images on the screen, so that the audience can effectively input and process information under limited conditions and reduce cognitive load.” (Gong Mengru 2022: 151–152) At that time, when I was translating, I worked with someone who input the Chinese or English version into a computer, and I did not watch the film or TV show. After finishing the translation, I repeatedly proofread and deleted some words based on the film or TV show. For example, some song lyrics are relatively easy to translate, and the length is not a major issue since the singing time is long, and the English words can easily be displayed on the screen, and even multiple displays do not affect the audience’s appreciation. However, sometimes the dialogue is carried on too quickly, or the image is very clear, so the original translation text needs to be compressed or even deleted, but it does not affect the audience’s understanding. In order to improve the literary quality of the translation, when I was translating *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Tale of Sister Liu*, I used my spare time to read various English books, including classical Chinese poetry translated into English by Xu Yuanchong. “In order to achieve successful communication, the translator must choose social norms that are in line with the target language and cater to the cognitive context of the target language audience” (Wu Jianguo and Tang Wenxin 2018: 101–107). I remember a line from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* that goes thus, “Zhou Yu, your days are numbered,” which I translated as such. I felt it was simple and concise, but I believe there were probably still some shortcomings in the whole translation.

Wang Zuyou: Talking about the famous translator Xu Yuanchong, who has ever praised you as “one of the outstanding young translators in China with excellent bilingual abilities in Chinese and English.” Can you recall how you received this compliment?

Zhang Zhizhong: In 2002, I began studying for a Ph. D. in translation and contacted Professor Xu



Yuanchong through letter writing. Then I started writing *Xu Yuanchong and the Art of Translation*, and each time I finished a chapter, I mailed it to him for his scrutiny. As Tianjin is rather close to Beijing, I used to visit him at his home, especially during the holidays. In this way, Xu Yuanchong got to know me, and he thought my Chinese and English proficiency was rarely seen in China. I remember one time during a visit to his home, Xu Yuanchong said, “There are few people with such a high level of proficiency in both Chinese and English in the foreign language community, especially those under 50 years old. It is rare to have such a young person with such excellent language skills.” Looking back now, there was more criticism than praise for Professor Xu Yuanchong from the domestic translation community at that time. Also, I was the first person to write a book on him, so he naturally got to know me and praised me. In the preface to my book *An Aesthetic Study of C-E Poetry Translation*, Professor Wang Baotong, my postdoctoral supervisor, also mentioned my relationship with Professor Xu Yuanchong: “Professor Zhizhong is a young talent appreciated by Professor Xu Yuanchong and deeply influenced by him.” “He shares the same interests and pursuit of the beauty of poetry as Xu Yuanchong. It is said that each morning, the first thing Xu does is to translate a poem. Even in his old age, he still writes every day. Similarly, Professor Zhizhong, during his hard times of study, lived on meager means just like a daffodil living on a spoonful of water, yet he never abandoned his love for poetry.” (Wang Baotong 4). However, I must also mention that when I was writing *Xu Yuanchong and the Art of Translation*, I included a chapter titled *Mistakes in Xu Yuanchong’s English Translations of Classical Chinese Poetry*. When Xu read it, he was not satisfied and wrote me a letter refuting me. Later, when I visited him at his home, he told me that the chapter was not good. Out of respect for him, I decided to remove the chapter. Unfortunately, the content of that chapter was not saved after my computer failure. It is a regret that over 30,000 words were gone with the wind.

Wang Zuyou: So, you and Professor Xu Yuanchong developed a deep teacher-and-friend relationship through your study and research of him. *Xu Yuanchong and the Art of Translation*, the first monograph by you, has demonstrated such a relationship between the researcher and the person being researched. *Xu Yuanchong and the Art of Translation* is your first book on translation studies, and you published *A Comparative Study of the English Translations of Mao Zedong’s Poetry* in 2008. Artistically speaking, what do you think are the differences between the two monographs?

Zhang Zhizhong: Yes, “Chinese translators embrace the whole country and the whole world, and use translation to convey their respect for the original work and the sense of mission for the success or failure of the nation” (Fang Mengzhi 2021: 11–20). I think this is very suitable for Professor Xu Yuanchong. I have been in close contact with Xu since 2002, and I feel that he is a very confident and easygoing person, and his wife, Ms. Zhao Jun (I call her Aunt Zhao), is also outspoken and very warm-hearted. Over the years, they treated me as a family member, and I learned a lot and was very moved occasionally. *Xu Yuanchong and the Art of Translation* was published in 2006, as my first academic monograph. *A Comparative Study of the English Translation of the Poetry of Mao Zedong* was published in 2008 as my doctoral dissertation. *An Aesthetics Study of C-E Poetry Translation* was published in 2015 as my post-doctoral report. The first book concentrates on the study of translators, and the second book is a study of twelve English translations of the poetry of Mao Zedong, which

can be regarded as a concentrated study of one kind of text. If these two books can be regarded as monographs on the translation of Chinese poetry into English, *An Aesthetics Study of C-E Poetry Translation* can be regarded as a theoretical study in a general sense. Taken together, the three monographs can be regarded as a “trilogy” of Chinese poetry translation.

Wang Zuyou: With decades of rich experiences in multiple fields of translation and persistent research and reflection on translation, as well as specialized studies on top translators in the world, you must have developed your own translation philosophy or aesthetic view through long-term translation and translation research. Could you give an overview of it, combined with your “trilogy” of English translations of Chinese poetry?

Zhang Zhizhong: During my doctoral studies, I was obsessed with the translations of Xu Yuanchong. Professor Wang Hongyin, my supervisor, criticized me, saying, “You won’t make progress until you get rid of Xu Yuanchong’s influence.” It took me over ten years after my graduation in 2005 to finally make some progress. Later, when I met the English writer Qiu Xiaolong, he said, “I didn’t expect you to translate so many Chinese poems. With continuous accumulation, you will naturally make progress and have new insights into the English translations of ancient Chinese poetry.” His words were truly insightful.

My “trilogy” covers a wide range of topics, mainly focusing on the theoretical issues of translating Chinese poetry into English. In fact, in addition to the theoretical “trilogy”, I have published many works on the English translations of Chinese poetry. In 2021, I published *Quatrains of Li Bai*, and the preface is *Prose Style to Express Poetic Content - Strategies for Translating Ancient Chinese Poetry*. My view on translating poetry can be summarized as follows: to convey the spirit without being restricted by forms, using prose style to express poetic content, and elevating the translations of Chinese poetry to the level of excellent English poetry. Regarding the translations of Chinese poetry into English, there are generally two schools of translations: the formalist school and the free school. For the two schools, there are both good and bad translations. The essence and spirit of poetry are the most important factors. In other words, ancient Chinese poetry is the first-rate poetry in the Chinese language context and is beloved by Chinese readers. When translated into English, it should also be the first-rate English poetry which English and American readers love to read. Success or failure in translation lies in the key point of whether or not the translation is a good translation.

In summary, my translation philosophy can be summed up as follows: to convey the spirit without being restricted by forms, using prose style to express poetic content, and elevating the translations of Chinese poetry to the level of English poetry. My translation philosophy and practice have been recognized and encouraged by some distinguished translators and writers, such as Professor Qiu Xiaolong, who said, “Zhang Zhizhong’s *Quatrains of Li Bai* has adopted a translation method that is sincere and straightforward, and it can faithfully present the original poems in another language. This is also an attempt to open up a new path for translating Chinese poetry into English” (Qiu Xiaolong 2021: 3 – 4). Professor Li Zhengshuan also said, “Professor Zhizhong’s understanding of the translation of prose poetry is the inheritance and development of Professor Weng Xianliang’s translation practice. He advocates a ‘prose style to express poetic content’ and aims to turn Chinese poetry into English poetry through translation”. (Li Zhengshuan 2021: 5)



Wang Zuyou: Are you currently committed to promoting international literature and culture alongside your teaching and research work?

Zhang Zhizhong: I have been working as a translator almost continuously. During my Ph. D. studies, I only translated two books, and after graduation, I focused most of my energy on translation. My main focus is on translating contemporary Chinese poetry into English, and I have translated over 100 books to date. In recent years, I have also published several books of translated ancient Chinese poetry, such as *800 Tang Quatrains: Chinese-English Bilingual Edition* (2019), *Poetic Yangzhou: Chinese-English Bilingual Edition* (2020), *Quatrains of Li Bai* (2021), *150 Quatrains of the Song Dynasty: Translations into Vernacular Chinese and English* (2021), and *Poems Portraying Centuries-Old City of Ningbo* (2022), among others.

If contemporary poetry has fewer classics, ancient poetry is more classic and, therefore, more interesting to translate. If we talk about the issue of promoting international literature and culture, Chinese poetry translated into English should not be limited to the entertainment of Chinese translators and readers, but should also be appreciated by Western readers. This is the only way that our translation and promotion can be effective. “Professor Graham of the University of London and Professor Stephen Owen of Harvard University both agree that Chinese poetry cannot be left to Chinese translators, but Xu Yuanchong disagrees, believing that Chinese poetry can only be ideally translated by Chinese translators” (Zhang Zhizhong 2022: 92–97). The advantage of Western translators is their proficiency in English, while the advantage of Chinese translators is their deep understanding of Chinese poetry. Therefore, as Chinese translators, we must read extensively in English literature and strive to reach the same level of language proficiency as English translators, so that we can catch up with or even surpass their translations.

Recently, Wang Shuhuai, a professor from Huazhong University of Science and Technology, wrote an essay on “English Readers’ Acceptance and Evaluation of Chinese Poetry Translation” in which he discussed three English translations of Du Fu’s “Autumn Meditations (one of eight poems),” respectively by Graham mentioned earlier, one by Black from the United States, and my own translation. He interviewed five Western experts who are native English speakers, and beyond my expectations, my translation received the highest praise. I was both surprised and encouraged by this, as it confirms that my translation philosophy is correct. Of course, Western translators still have many advantages that we need to learn from.

Wang Zuyou: With the rapid development of technology in the current era, machine translation is advancing at an incredible pace. What are your expectations for the future development of the translation discipline?

Zhang Zhizhong: I am not very familiar with machine translation, but I feel that it is gradually or maybe replacing some technology translation or information-type text translation, including conference interpretation. I have also heard of machine writing, including robots writing poetry, but I don’t think machines can truly replace human writers, right? Otherwise, should the Nobel Prize in Literature be awarded to robots in the future? This is impossible. I agree with Anthony Pym when he said, “Once translators get used to machine translation, their work efficiency and the quality of translating terms and fixed phrases will be greatly improved, and I think this is

not difficult to prove. Therefore, I think the focus of the problem is not the opposition between humans and machines, but how humans can use machines effectively” (Fan Mengxu & Anthony Pym 2021: 3–12). Machines have no emotions, and humans are emotional creatures, and literary translation is about conveying emotions. Therefore, in the era of rapid development of machine translation, we should strive for literary translation as a way out. Some students give up literary translation and only pursue technology translation, which will soon face the embarrassment of being eliminated.

Wang Zuyou: Thank you for sharing your translation journey with us! I believe that your students will surely admire and emulate you as a model translator, and your contribution to the Chinese translation industry will be recorded in the annals of translation history.

Zhang Zhizhong: Thank you! I like to be friends with my students and hope that they can also be engaged in translation in the future and make their own contributions to the promotion of Chinese culture and literature abroad. As for myself, my work on translating Chinese poetry into English has just begun. I hope that in the near future, I can publish my translated works of Chinese poetry in prestigious Western publishing houses to exert some influence so that my life will not be spent in vain.

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