

# What Does It All Mean? An Approach to Aesthetics of Ancient Chinese Poetry

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## Abstract

In this essay, I will compare different translations of ancient Chinese poetry by Stephen Owen and Xu Yuanchong. I will refer to *Book of Poetry* and poems from Tang and Song dynasties as examples. I argue, different translation versions represent different comprehensions of themes or aesthetics; and understanding artistic techniques of ancient Chinese poetry should be one of translation strategies.

*Keywords:* ancient Chinese poetry, translation, theme, aesthetics, artistic technique

## Different Comprehensions of Themes

Many ancient Chinese poems are ambiguous in themes. Different translations may represent different interpretations of their themes. In this part, I will focus on one poem in *Book of Poetry* (*Shi Jing* 诗经) entitled *Bei Feng* (北风). In Stephen Owen's version, the title is translated as "North Wind," while in Xu Yuanchong(许渊冲)'s version, "The Hard Pressed."

"North Wind"

Chilly is the north wind,  
heavy falls the snow;  
if you care and love me,  
take my hand, we'll go.  
Don't be shy, don't be slow-  
we must leave now!

Icy is the north wind,  
thickly falls the snow;  
if you care and love me,  
take my hand, come away.  
Don't be shy, don't be slow-  
we must leave now!

No red but the fox,  
no black but the crow;  
if you care and love me,  
take my hand, share my cart.  
Don't be shy, don't be slow-  
we must leave now!  
(Owen 1996, p. 35)

“The Hard Pressed”

The cold north wind does blow.  
And thick does fall the snow.  
To all my friends I say:  
“Hand in hand let us go!  
There’s no time for delay,  
We must hasten our way.”

The sharp north wind does blow  
And heavy falls the snow.  
To all my friends I say  
“Hand in hand let’s all go!  
There’s no time for delay;  
We must hasten our way.”

Red-handed foxes glow;  
Their hearts are black as crow.  
To all my friends I say  
“In my cart let us go!  
There’s no time for delay;  
We must hasten our way.”  
(Yan 2020, p. 66)

《北风》

北风其凉，雨雪其雱。  
惠而好我，携手同行。  
其虚其邪？既亟只且！

北风其喑，雨雪其霏。  
惠而好我，携手同归。  
其虚其邪？既亟只且！

莫赤匪狐，莫黑匪乌。  
惠而好我，携手同车。  
其虚其邪？既亟只且。

Stephen Owen may understand the theme of this poem as love and elopement. A modern Chinese poet and scholar, Wen Yiduo (闻一多) shares this understanding. Under this theme, a maid is persuading her lover to run with her. She expresses her eager desire that her lover should take her hand, share her cart and delay no more. She is full of self-consciousness and female subjectivity just like Ellen Olenska in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* or Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. This theme may also lead readers to think about parental pressures on lovers, which have been frequently discussed in Shakespeare’s works, for instance, Egeus’s pressures on Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or Romeo and Juliet as star-crossed lovers due to family relations. Owen may also understand the theme as marriage: a youth wants to take his beloved girl home, and he tells her not to be shy and hesitant. Xu Yuanchong understands the theme differently. He depicts the poem as hard-pressed people’s dissatisfaction with tyrannical rules. They can bear political pressure no more and decide to run away together. Zheng Xuan(郑玄), a prominent East Han scholar specializing in ancient Chinese classics shares Xu’s understanding of the theme. I argue, there could be different entryways to this poem and all interpretations will help it travel far. Different translations show different comprehensions of its theme, and a comparative reading of

different translation versions will help us see the original poem from different perspectives. Furthermore, every reading is already a translation.

### Different Comprehensions of Aesthetics

In this part, I will focus on Owen's and Xu's different translations of a famous Tang dynasty poet Li Bai(李白)'s *Yue Xia Du Zhuo*(月下独酌). They understand and depict moonlight in this poem differently, which I believe represent different aesthetics.

"Drinking Alone by Moonlight"  
(Translated by Stephen Owen)

Here among flowers one flask of wine,  
with no close friends, I pour it alone.  
I lift cup to bright moon, beg its company,  
then facing my shadow, we become three.  
The moon has never known how to drink;  
my shadow does nothing but follow me.  
But with moon and shadow as companions the while,  
this joy I find must catch spring while it's here.  
I sing, and the moon just lingers on;  
I dance, and my shadow flails wildly.  
When still sober we share friendship and pleasure,  
then, utterly drunk, each goes his own way  
Let us join to roam beyond human cares  
and plan to meet far in the river of stars.  
(Owen 1996, p. 403)

"Drinking Alone under the Moon"  
(Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

Among the flowers, from a pot of wine  
I drink without a companion of mine.  
I raise my cup to invite the moon who blends  
Her light with my Shadow and we're three friends.  
The Moon does not know how to drink her share;  
In vain my Shadow follows me here and there.  
Together with them for the time I stay,  
And make merry before spring's spent away.  
I sing and the moon lingers to hear my song;  
My shadow's a mess while I dance along.  
Sober, we three remain cheerful and gay;  
Drunken, we part and each may go his way.  
Our friendship will outshine our earthly love;  
Next time we'll meet beyond the stars above.  
(Xu 2006, *300 Tang Poems*, p. 355)

《月下独酌》

花间一壶酒，独酌无相亲。  
举杯邀明月，对影成三人。  
月既不解饮，影徒随我身。

暂伴月将影，行乐须及春。  
我歌月徘徊，我舞影零乱。  
醒时同交欢，醉后各分散。  
永结无情游，相期邈云汉。

In Owen's version, the poet begs for the moon's company. The moon, the shadow, and the poet gather randomly as three embodiments of solitude—loneliness has not been alleviated, even strengthened. However, in Xu's version, the moon blends with seeming curiosity for human mind and world. The poet then happily invites her into the group. Along with the shadow, they become three friends.

In Owen's version, the moonlight, the shadow and the poet do not interact with one another. "The moon *just* lingers on (emphasis mine)" when the poet sings. Conversely, in Xu's version, the poet sings and the moon then becomes an attentive audience.

Owen's version reveals that peaceful moments are often suddenly victimized by an inevitable mutability and a profound solitude. In Owen's narrative, the poet bears deeply in mind that friendship is only shared on the condition of soberness, and that a drunken spirit will finally go on its own way until it finds its doom. Xu's version contrasts with this sobriety. The poet is blessed with an ethereality full of possibilities. The moon, the shadow, and the poet as three friends share the happiness, which will later evolve into an everlasting memory brewed into a fragrant wine. And each may find a path, which leads somewhere and everywhere.

In addition to the prior point, in Owen's version, secularity seems what the poet tries to get rid of. In Xu's version, it is something to experience and transcend. Owen depicts the poet, the moonlight and the shadow as three wanderers to move beyond human cares and find an eternal bliss outside secular boundaries. In Xu's version, the three friends cling satisfactorily to earthly love, and not without a wish that their friendship will outshine the earthly presence. They are cheered up by a fantasy, though quite unattainable, that they should someday meet beyond the stars.

Moonlight as the focus of this poem plays a very important part in western and Chinese aesthetics. Both western and Chinese poets like using moonlight as a metaphor, though usually in different ways. In western literary imaginations, moonlight is seldom connected with pleasant themes. For instance, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet tells Romeo not to swear by the moon because she fears the inconstancy of the moon will foreshadow the variability of their love. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Theseus threatens Hermia with the prospect of being a nun, he refers to the moon as cold and fruitless. However, for Chinese, the moon can symbolize transcendence and companionship. For instance, a Tang dynasty poet Zhang Ruoxu (张若虚) once wrote "The Moon Over the River on a Spring Night (春江花月夜)," which depicts the moonlight in the most transcendent way. In Zhang's imaginations, the moon, the sky, and the tide fulfil a poetic landscape which transcends secularity. In his poetic imagery, the moonlight decorates people's dreams with an eternal bliss, and fills people's hearts when they wish to reunite with loved ones but cannot. The moonlight can also transcend space and time, which reaches out to people in the most intimate way, and brings them well wishes from a faraway land.

The two translation versions of Li Bai's *Yue Xia Du Zhuo* (*drinking under moonlight*) are two narratives, and their different depictions of moonlight show different aesthetics. They both delete, add, misuse and appropriate some parts of the original poem. I

argue, the subtlety and exuberance of the poem dwell upon different readings, both by people geographically nearer to the aesthetics, like Xu Yuanchong, and psychologically intrigued by the aesthetics, like Stephen Owen. An ancient Chinese philosopher, Zhuangzi, once argues, "'this' is also 'that,' 'that' is also 'this.' When we cannot tell from 'this,' we can tell from 'that,' and vice versa." (Zhuang 2018, p. 67) He believes one side, through which people project and express, and the other side, through which people receive and take, will eventually help clarify and prove each other. Xu Yuanchong reconstructs the poem from within-the-context, while Stephen Owen reimagines the poem from beyond-the-context, which are both beneficial.

### **The Opening Image and Human Sentiments: How to Understand Their Connection?**

Even though all entryways are beneficial, I argue we still need to know how ancient Chinese poems were created in their own era, which will not help explain all, but explain more. In this part, I will discuss one artistic technique in ancient Chinese poetry: 'Xing (兴).' Many western scholars have been puzzled about arbitrary connections between opening images of Chinese poems and human sentiments. Stephen Owen is one of them. He once commented: "In many cases the connection between the opening image and the human sentiment seems arbitrary, perhaps an accident of rhyme or play on an image that may have been associated with a tune or tune type." (Owen 1996, p. 43)

But this is not the case. The connection is not arbitrary. Besides, it is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese aesthetics known as 'Xing,' which literally means 'evoking.' In *Wenxin Diaolong (Literary Mind and Dragon Carving 文心雕龙)*, one of the most well-written works on ancient Chinese literary theory, one chapter is entitled 'Bi Xing (比兴),' which deals with the concept and practice of 'Bi (comparing)' and 'Xing (evoking).' 'Bi' and 'Xing' are defined in the following way:

'Bi(comparing)' is to compare the characteristic of an object with that of another, while 'Xing(evoking)' is to evoke human sentiments. By 'comparing the characteristic of an object with that of another,' I mean highlighting of the characteristic by drawing a connection between two different things; by 'evoking human sentiments,' I mean the metaphorical expression of human sentiments regarding the subtle relationship between two different things.

(Liu 1982, p. 307)

Zhu Xi (朱熹), a leading scholar in Song dynasty, wrote a book entitled *Comments on Book of Poetry (Shiji Zhuan 诗集传)*, which has become a must-read for later generations in Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. He sees many poems in *Book of Poetry* as marvellous examples of 'Xing,' which he defines in the following way: "poets use 'Xing' when they begin their poems with discussions of other objects, and then gradually elaborate their main argument along with expressions of human sentiments." (Zhu 2007, p. 2)

Many ancient Chinese poems begin with the discussion of seemingly random objects, which in fact is not random at all. Since many western translators of ancient Chinese poetry do not bear 'Xing (evoking)' as an artistic technique in mind, their translation versions sometimes do not engage the opening image with subtly-expressed human sentiments in a proper way. I will focus on a comparative reading of Stephen Owen's and Xu Yuanchong's translations of *Book of Poetry*, to better explain 'Xing (evoking).'

I will take three poems as examples. In Owen's version, they are entitled "Fishhawk," "Peach Tree Soft and Tender" and "Gather the Fiddleheads." In Xu's version, they are entitled "Cooing and Wooing," "The Newly-wed" and "A Home-sick Warrior."

"Fishhawk"

(Translated by Stephen Owen)

The fishhawks sing *gwan gwan*  
on sandbars of the stream.  
Gentle maiden, pure and fair,  
fit pair for a prince.  
Watercress grows here and there,  
right and left we gather it.  
Gentle maiden, pure and fair,  
wanted waking and asleep.  
Wanting, sought her, had her not,  
waking, sleeping, thought of her,  
on and on he thought of her,  
he tossed from one side to another.  
Watercress grows here and there,  
right and left we pull it.  
Gentle maiden, pure and fair,  
with harps we bring her company.  
Watercress grows here and there,  
right and left we pick it out.  
Gentle maiden, pure and fair,  
with bells and drums do her delight.  
(Owen 1996, pp. 30-31)

"Cooing and Wooing"

(Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

By riverside a pair  
Of turtledoves are cooing;  
There is a maiden fair  
whom a young man is wooing.  
Water flows left and right  
Of cresses here and there;  
The youth yearns day and night  
For the maiden so fair.  
His yearning grows so strong,  
He cannot fall asleep,  
But tosses all night long,  
So deep in love, so deep!  
Now gather left and right  
Cress long or short and tender!  
O lute, play music light  
For the fiancée so slender!  
Feast friends at left and right  
On cresses cooked tender!  
O bells and drums, delight  
The bride so sweet and slender!  
(Yan 2020, p. 2)

## 《关雎》

关关雎鸠，在河之洲。  
窈窕淑女，君子好逑。  
参差荇菜，左右流之。  
窈窕淑女，寤寐求之。  
求之不得，寤寐思服。  
悠哉悠哉，辗转反侧。  
参差荇菜，左右采之。  
窈窕淑女，琴瑟友之。  
参差荇菜，左右芼之。  
窈窕淑女，钟鼓乐之。

Many readers may ask, why does the poem begin with ‘The fishhawks sing *gwan gwan*? What is the relation between the singing of fishhawks and a fair maid fit for a prince? How does watercress function in this poem? What does it all mean? A quick explanation: This is ‘Xing (evoking).’ In Zhu Xi’s *Comments on Book of Poetry (Shiji Zhuan)*, he explains with details why fishhawks (or turtledoves in Xu’s version) and watercress make sense. ‘*Gwan Gwan*’ is the sound fishhawks make when wooing partners. They make a perfect pair by the riverside, with sincere fondness and trust for each other. A well-bred beautiful maid also fascinates a noble prince’s heart. How the prince wishes he could make a lovely pair with the lady, and witness the flow of time together with her, just like these water birds! The watercress grows here and there waiting to be picked out. The fair maid, who enlightens the prince’s imagination, and whom the prince eagerly wishes to embrace even in dreams, also waits to be pursued, just like the watercress expecting to be discovered by someone. (See Zhu 2007, pp. 2-3)

Owen’s translation does not draw a connection between fishhawks’ cooing and a prince’s wooing. The collecting of watercress and the pursuit of a fair maid are also arbitrarily connected in his narrative. But in Xu’s version, he sees how the sound of cooing could be compared with wooing. He also makes each section of his narrative rhythmic, which may arouse readers’ imaginations about in-built connections, as is suggested in “Now gather left and right / Cress long or short and tender! / O lute, play music light! / For the fiancée so slender!”

The next poem I will discuss is about a newly-wed maid, who shares something in common with a soft and tender peach tree.

“Peach Tree Soft and Tender”  
(Translated by Stephen Owen)

Peach tree soft and tender,  
how your blossoms glow!  
The bride is going to her home,  
she well befits this house.  
Peach tree soft and tender,  
plump, the ripening fruit.  
The bride is going to her home,  
she well befits this house.  
Peach tree soft and tender,  
its leaves spread thick and full.  
The bride is going to her home,  
she well befits these folk.  
(Owen 1996, p. 34)

"The Newly-wed"  
(Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

The peach tree beams so red;  
How brilliant are its flowers!  
The maiden's getting wed,  
Good for the nuptial bowers.  
The peach tree beams so red;  
How plentiful its fruit!  
The maiden's getting wed;  
She's the family's root.  
The peach tree beams so red;  
Its leaves are lush and green.  
The maiden's getting wed;  
On household she will be keen.  
(Yan 2020, p. 8)

《桃夭》  
桃之夭夭，灼灼其华。  
之子于归，宜其室家。  
桃之夭夭，有蕢其实。  
之子于归，宜其家室。  
桃之夭夭，其叶蓁蓁。  
之子于归，宜其家人。

This poem describes the beauty of a newly-wed maid, which is also a great example of 'Xing (evoking).' The peach tree beaming red represents a proper time for marriage, and it pleases the poet's eyes. A beautiful maid's virtue, in the poet's eyes, will well fit her new household, and what she brings to the new family must be as pleasant as the fragrance and elegance of the peach tree. Xu's translation makes the focus of this poem clearer, as he directly translates the title into "The Newly-wed." And through a masterful use of rhymes, Xu also helps readers see peach tree and a newly-wed maid not randomly connected, but share characteristics in common: the flower beaming red symbolizes the maid's beauty; the plentiful fruit of peach trees may symbolize the maid's fertility and future contributions to the household; the lushness and greenness of the leaves of peach trees also symbolize the future prosperity and harmony in the household. In Owen's version, the above-said connections are vague, which may be because of his repetitive use of similar sentence patterns like "well befits this house" and "the bride is going to her home" without further explanations.

The following poem depicts a warrior in a foreign land, who is melancholic when seeing fiddleheads around, and desperately wishes to go back home.

"Gather the Fiddleheads"  
(Translated by Stephen Owen)

Gather them, gather them, fiddlehead ferns,  
fiddleheads now start to grow.  
We want to go home, to go home  
for the year soon comes to a close.  
We have no house, we have no home  
all because of the Xian-yun.  
No chance to sprawl, no chance to sit,  
all because of the Xian-yun. ...

Long ago we marched away  
 with willows budding in a haze.  
 Back we come today,  
 in falling snow, sifting down.  
 Slowly we walk the way,  
 we hunger and we thirst.  
 Our hearts are wounded with pain,  
 no man knows how much we mourn.  
 (Owen 1996, pp. 41-42)

“A Homesick Warrior”  
 (Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

We gather fern,  
 Which springs up here.  
 Why not return,  
 Now ends the year?  
 We left dear ones,  
 To fight the Huns.  
 We wake all night:  
 The Huns cause fright....

When I left here,  
 Willows shed tear.  
 I come back now,  
 Snow bends the bough.  
 Long, long the way  
 Hard, hard the day.  
 Hunger and thirst  
 Press me the worst.  
 My grief o'erflows.  
 Who knows? Who knows?  
 (Yan 2020, p. 212)

《采薇》  
 采薇采薇，薇亦作止。  
 曰归曰归，岁亦莫止。  
 靡室靡家，玁狁之故。  
 不遑启居，玁狁之故。  
 .....

昔我往矣，杨柳依依。  
 今我来思，雨雪霏霏。  
 行道迟迟，载渴载饥。  
 我心伤悲，莫知我哀！

In this poem, the poet describes the melancholy of homesick warriors: how they are exhausted by wars and wish to return home to reunite with loved ones. The first stanza is also a wonderful example of ‘Xing (evoking).’ Why does the poet begin with discussions of fiddleheads to evoke? According to Zhu Xi’s explanation, these warriors gather fiddleheads and eat them when they are in a foreign land, and the fiddleheads remind them of “long, long the way” and “hard, hard the day.” (See Zhu 2007, p. 123) Therefore, they use what they see and eat daily to represent themselves, a despair, a weariness, and a hunger to go back home. Again, Xu’s version makes the focus of the poem clearer in the title. Besides, Xu interweaves the poet’s genuine and subtle senti-

ments into his translation, even adding some parts. For instance, he changes the last part of the poem into a question—not only a statement of warriors' profound grief that "Our hearts are wounded with pain, / no man knows how much we mourn," but also a desire to receive a response, and a spontaneous overflow of concrete sadness, which evolves into a poetic talent and drives them to ask "Hunger and Thirst / Press me the worst. / My grief o'er flows. / Who knows? Who knows?" These lines also move future readers' heart.

### How to Understand Scenery Depictions in Chinese Poems?

In this part, I will discuss another artistic technique in ancient Chinese poetry: the connection between scenery depictions and emotions. I will focus on Owen's and Xu's different translations of a famous Tang dynasty poet Du Fu (杜甫)'s *Chun Wang* (view in spring 春望) in particular.

In the poem *Cai Wei* (采薇 *gather the fiddleheads*) discussed above, the line about willow is well-known among Chinese readers. Owen translates it as "Long ago we marched away / with willows budding in a haze." Xu translates it as "When I left here, / willows shed tears." 'Willow (柳 liǔ) in Chinese, is similar in pronunciation to 'stay (留 liú).' "Willows budding in a haze" is not a random depiction, but represents a melancholy when people wave goodbye to each other—a secret wish to stay, even though not allowed by actual circumstances. Readers can also get to know more about the metaphor of willow in one of Li Bai's poems entitled "Hearing the Flute on a Spring Night in Luoyang (春夜洛城闻笛)." It goes like this: "From whose house has come the song of jade flute unseen? / It fills the town of Luoyang, spread by wind of spring. / Tonight I hear the farewell song of Willow Green. / To whom the tune will not nostalgic feeling bring?" (谁家玉笛暗飞声, 散入春风满洛城。此夜曲中闻折柳, 何人不起故园情?) (Xu 2006, *300 Tang Poems*, p. 143) In ancient China, people break a twig of willow when they part with friends, which symbolizes farewell and nostalgia.

Wang Guowei (王国维), a literary critic in Qing Dynasty, once commented on the relations between scenery depictions and human sentiments in the following way. "When poets project themselves into objects in the surroundings, all these objects add a colour with human sentiments. When poets attempt to be absent from objects in the surroundings, the boundary between poets and objects becomes blurred" (Wang 1998, p. 1) Wang refers to two poetic lines which represent 'projection into objects in the surroundings.' One is from Ouyang Xiu (欧阳修)'s "Butterflies in Love with Flowers (蝶恋花)." "My tearful eyes ask flowers, but they fail to bring / an answer, I see red blooms fly over the swing (泪眼问花花不语, 乱红飞过秋千去)." (Xu 2006, *300 Song Lyrics*, p. 195) The other is from Qin Guan (秦观)'s "Treading on Grass (踏莎行)." "Shut up in lonely inn, can I bear the cold spring? / I hear at lengthening sunset homebound cuckoos sing (可堪孤馆闭春寒, 杜鹃声里斜阳暮)." (Xu 2006, *300 Song Lyrics*, p. 319) Most poets in ancient China tend to project themselves into objects of surroundings, and human sentiments are in a metaphorical way well-expressed through scenery depictions. We may thus get to understand Du Fu's *Chun Wang* (*the view in spring*) better.

"The View in Spring"

(Translated by Stephen Owen)

A kingdom smashed, its hills and rivers still here,  
spring in the city, plants and trees grow deep.

Moved by the moment, flowers splash with tears,  
alarmed at parting, birds startle the heart.  
War's beacon fires have gone on three months,  
letters from home are worth thousands in gold.  
Fingers run through white hair until it thins,  
cap-pins will almost no longer hold.  
(Owen 1996, p. 420)

"Spring View"  
(Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

On war-torn land streams flow and mountains stand;  
In vernal town grass and weeds are overgrown.  
Grieved over the years, flowers make us shed tears;  
Hating to part, hearing birds break our heart.  
The beacon fire has gone higher and higher;  
Words from household are worth their weight in gold.  
I cannot bear to scratch my grizzled hair;  
It grows too thin to hold a light hairpin.  
(Xu 2006, *300 Tang Poems*, p. 147)

In Owen's version, flowers can splash with tears and birds can startle the heart. He creatively vivifies and personifies flowers and birds. In Xu's version, there is a more intimate connection between sceneries and emotions. Flowers can make people shed tears, and birds' song can speak to people's heart. The poet projects himself into objects around him when thinking about the past splendours of the nation, the mutability of fate, the good old days which gradually sink into oblivion, and his own patriotic heart beyond any doubts. Scenery depictions and human emotions are interwoven. Both Owen's and Xu's translation versions are faithful to the poet's subtle and profound sentiments.

### A Tentative Conclusion

In this essay, I have talked about how different comprehensions of themes and aesthetics result in different translation styles and strategies; the artistic technique 'Xing (evoking),' and the connection between scenery depictions and human emotions. I have argued all entryways to ancient Chinese poems are beneficial; readers may get nearer to aesthetics of original poems with more knowledge about literary contexts and techniques; and different translation versions represent different aesthetics. There are many other aspects of ancient Chinese poetry worth discussing, which include picturesque and musicality. I hope I could have a future chance to write about them. Chinese aesthetics could and should contribute to the vastness of literary imaginations shared by humankind, and hopefully this essay may enlighten more discussions.

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