

# The Travel of Clear Waters: A Case Study on the Afterlife of a Poem

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May, 2019

## ABSTRACT

Inspired by Walter Benjamin's theory on translation, this paper examines the process and effect of translation in detail. It observes how the meanings and particular elements of a poem change when introduced into a drastically different foreign language. Through tracing the French renditions of a classical Chinese poem "Lu shui qu", the paper argues that translations supplement the original text and lead the two languages to converge and reach for the "pure language" suggested by Benjamin.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1862, Hervey de Saint-Denys published the first ever French translation on classical Chinese poetry, *Poésies de l'époque des T'ang*. In an academically-based style, his anthology has notes to the back of every poem, detailing the background information and providing interpretations. Since then, more scholars (Guillermaz 1957; Demiville 1962; Cheng 1977; Hu-Sterk 2015), professional translators (Jacob 1983, 1985), poets (Gautier 1867; Roy 1991), or simply enthusiasts (Naville 1968)<sup>1</sup> for classical Chinese would embark on the task of translation and offer their insights on poetries. Some of the works only circulate within an academic context, but many of them are indeed read widely in Francophone countries and have become inspirations

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<sup>1</sup> The list is in no way exhaustive. I list them here as examples.

for the creation of music, literature, and arts. Most evidently, translation allows and cherishes the travel of culture. Yet what does it do to texts and languages, what experience does it provide for the readers, and finally what does it mean to the translators?

Benjamin beautifully writes in his essay “The Task of the Translator”, “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully.”<sup>2</sup> Can we observe the formation of “pure language” through the French translations? How does Benjamin’s theory play out between classical Chinese and French, where the source and target languages are so remote and different from each other? This project, therefore, wants to understand the effects of translation through a detailed case study. By close-reading and comparing texts side by side, I will explore the travel of aesthetics, poetic sensibilities, objects, imageries and all other elements from a text. Being aware that no work of translation is perfect, I will also keep track of the reduced content from it. After all, despite the impossibility of translation we still dedicate time and effort to it, rely on it, and resonate with it. Indeed, instead of stressing the unattainability of translation, I want to find the possibility of it, the compatibility of it, and finally the unity of it.

For this case study, I have selected the poem, “Lu shui qu” (淩水曲) by Li Bai<sup>3</sup> (701-762)

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2 Benjamin. “Task of the Translator”, *Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*, Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, p.260

3 His name has also been transliterated as Li Bo, Li Po, and sometimes Li Taibai.

and an example. The author Li Bai together with Du Fu (712-770) are considered the best poets of Tang dynasty (618-907) or even of China. Many legends have been recounted for Li Bai's unfettered spirit, his fondness for drinking, his passion for nature and Taoist practice, and of course his image as a banished immortal. For many, Li Bai is *the poet* of Chinese poetry. The poem "Lu shui qu" is not one of Li Bai's best known or most studied works. But it still stands out as a perfect example for the purpose of this project because of its richness in content, theme, and form. In fact, because of the lack of study for it, the interpretations for the poem have never been exhausted.

"Lu shui qu" belongs to a *yuefu* (Music Bureau) genre where poems are written under established themes. At the same time, the poem is also a *jueju* (quatrain), which requires itself to be a matched pair of couplet. In fact, the combination of a *yuefu* genre and a *jueju* style has complicated one's interpretation of the poem. Yet what is special about this combination and its relationship to the poet? A detailed examination of *yuefu* and *jueju* would be helpful.

*Yuefu* as a poetic genre was first established during Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) in the Han court and was originally composed as lyrics in folk songs and ballads style. According to the extant Han *yuefu* corpus, there are two major types of songs: the first one consists of "ceremonial and sacrificial hymns", and the second type of "popular songs written mainly in pentasyllabic lines on various topics"<sup>4</sup>. While the first type mainly thrives within a religious sphere and has not much influence on the later development of medieval Chinese poetry, the songs depicting ordinary lives

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4 See Jui-lung Su, *How to Read Chinese Poetry*, p.84-89

have inspired later poets and are continued to be appreciated<sup>5</sup>. It is undeniable that *yuefu* is closely associated with music, but by the time when Li Bai started to write *yuefu*, most of the original musical scores had long since disappeared. Only the composition of *yuefu* lyrics continued to live. Nevertheless, this neither means that the later *yuefu* totally abandoned the musical aspects, nor does it imply that the oldest *yuefu* were all performed as songs and were never written down. As Charles Egan elaborates carefully, the performed and written *yuefu* facilitate each other throughout the genre's maturing.<sup>6</sup>

As for poets, adopting voices and directness from the performative tradition of *yuefu*, they are given a chance to “role-play” personas and toy with subjectivity. Li Bai indeed seizes this feature and maximizes its effects. A master of this form of writing, Li Bai never hides his fondness for *yuefu*. He composes almost 120 of them throughout his life<sup>7</sup>, and pushed the genre to its apogee using his creative approach<sup>8</sup>. Scholars try to understand why and how Li Bai master the genre. Focusing on the game of performance, Owen suggests that Li Bai reaches a creative freedom by role-playing various character and behaving outside of the roles of “scholar-official and serene recluse”<sup>9</sup>; similarly, Allen suggests that Li is fond of the genre because he can challenge the settled thematic continuity within it and thus claim his mastery of it<sup>10</sup>. And finally, according to Varsano,

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5 Ibid.

6 See Egan, “Reconsidering the Role of Folk Songs in Pre-T’ang ‘Yüeh-Fu’ Development”, p.97-98

7 Allen, *In the Voice of Others*, p.168

8 See Varsano, Chapter 4. *The Yuefu, Tracking the Banished Immortal*, for the creative features of Li Bai’s *yuefu*.

9 Owen, *Great Age*, p.135.

10 Allen, p.170.

in *yuefu* poems, Li can playfully manipulate subjectivities and then direct his readers to seek for possibilities<sup>11</sup>.

In addition, “Lu shui qu” also incorporates a pentasyllabic *yueju* (quatrain) form, which is one of the “shortest and most focused forms by the Tang poets”<sup>12</sup>. A pentasyllabic *jueju* is a matched couplet with five syllables in each line, and so twenty words in total for the poem. Thus, its composition demands great brevity and density. To realize this, a poem would inevitably introduce ellipses. Limited by the word counts, the poem is usually not a complete account of a story but rather a snapshot of a specific moment. The scene might end with the last word of the poem, but the flavor can linger for a quite long time. As Egan elaborated, *jueju*’s brevity can be both “constraining and potentially liberating”<sup>13</sup>. Despite the minimal word count, a poem’s entirety can actually be strengthened and freed up in this “less is more” aesthetic.

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11 Varsano, p.206.

12 Egan, “Recent-Style *Shi* Poetry – Quatrains (Jueju)”, *How to Read Chinese Poetry*, p.199.

13 Ibid.

## YUEFU AND “LU SHUI QU”

## 淶水曲

淶水明秋月，南湖采白蘋。

荷花嬌欲語，愁煞蕩舟人。

In Paul Kroll’s *A Student’s Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, “lu” is defined as “virtuously clear; translucent”, “shui” as water, and “qu” as a musical tune<sup>14</sup>. The title, therefore, may be translated as “Tune of the Clear Water”. According to the *Yuefu shiji*<sup>15</sup> anthologized by Guo Maoqian (1041—1099), there exist already four *yuefu* poems under the same tune “Lu shui qu” prior to Li Bai’s piece. These poems were written during the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589), by Jiang Huan (Southern Dynasty), Jiang Hong (~500~), and Wu Jun (469-520)<sup>16</sup>. In *Yuefu shiji*, the timbre “Lu shui qu” is under the category of *guqin lyrics*<sup>17</sup>, meaning that these poems were originally written as lyrics to accompany in the *guqin* melodies. Indeed, historically, there is a *guqin* song called “**Lü** shui qu” (“Tune of the **Green** water). In response to this song, Xiao Shibin’s edition of Li Bai’s collected works actually records the title as “**Lü** shui qu”. Apparently, the commentators want to underscore the relationship between this *yuefu* poem and

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14 See Kroll.

15 *Yuefu shiji* (樂府詩集, *Anthology of Yuefu Poetry*) is a collection of almost all the surviving *yuefu* style lyrical pieces from the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) to the Five Dynasties (907-979).

16 Jiang Huan (江奐) was active during Southern Dynasty in the State of Qi (齊, 479-502), his birth and death are unknown; Jiang Hong (江洪) was a poet active around the year of 500; Wu Jun (吳均) was a historian and writer in the State of Liang (梁, 502-557).

17 *Guqin lyrics*: 琴曲歌辭.

its potential *guqin* tunes.

As Joseph Roe Allen carefully examines in his book *In the Voice of Others*, *yuefu* poetry provides its readers with a network bridged by intratextuality. It is common practice for a *yuefu* poem to refer and derive from a previous poem under the same timbre of title<sup>18</sup>, and “Lu shui qu” is no exception. In fact, if we compare these earlier “Lu shui qu” side by side, we would notice a stream of schematization. Poet by poet, rendition after rendition, “Lu shui qu” forms its own particular outline in writing about the particular theme. Featuring a water background, the poem talks about love and the inaccessibility of it from a woman’s perspective. Furthermore, later poems are inheriting references from previous poems while innovating new ones. And through this intratextual refinement of references, the content and poetic imagery of the poems come to be more full-fledged. In the end, “lu shui” is more than a title and even more than a reference of the theme. It embodies the sensibilities of female characters, and serve as an agency for them to express themselves.

The earliest<sup>19</sup> “Lu shui qu” is a four couplet pentasyllabic poem written by Jiang Huan. The actual phrase “lu shui” does not appear anywhere in the poem. Nevertheless, the poem from every angle reflects the strong presence of water: three of the four couplets feature lives on and along the water, no matter if it is a pond or a river. The poem is located in chapter 59 of *Yuefu shiji*:

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18 Allen, p.10-12

19 There is an earlier poem titled “Lu shui qu” but Guo Maoqian did not group it with the rest because it does not follow the same theme as later poems.



塘上蒲欲齊，汀洲杜將歇。

春心既易蕩，春流豈難越。

桂楫及晚風，菱江映初月。

芳香若可贈，爲君步羅襪。

The poem starts by describing an exquisite scene of aquatic plants and blossoming flowers on the pond and by the river; then it moves on to capture the difficulty of crossing a flowing spring river; next, the scene switches to nighttime. A boat is drifting in a breeze while the water chestnuts are reflected under the new moon. The poem ends with a sensual and explicit discourse in a woman's voice: she is willing to walk on her socks if she could send her to beloved (her) fragrances. It is mainly the very last couplet that confesses a strong emotion of longing and passion, but the previous delineation of water scenes plays a significant role in the ensuing lyric expressions. Water is used here not only as a part of nature but also as an agency in liberating a woman's inner world. In the springtime where every form of life is blossoming, the girl in the poem while longing for her lover, is saddened by the distance between them. "Luo wa" (socks) and "fang xiang" (fragrance) in particular are explicit terms. While "luo wa" implies the act of revealing one's body, "fang xiang" implies a close distance. In order to show socks, one needs to take off her shoes. In order to send off one's "fragrance", one needs to either take off her coat or keep a stand next to her lover. In a straightforward and sensual scene, the girl in the poem is revealing her feelings.

The merge of nature scenery and a woman's internal feeling continues to appear throughout the writings of "Lu shui qu". A strong presence of water, a detailed description of flowers, and an invitation to sensuality involve to be a scheme of "Lu shui qu" writing. While the imageries and specific scenes vary from poem to poem, this line of structure preserves. In the two pieces by Jiang Hong, he carries on the reference to clothing but transforms the action of walking in socks (or stockings) into the washing clothes. He further renders the water with more evocative power in calling out a woman's emotions by an interaction between the woman waiting and the water:

塵容不忍飾，臨池客未歸。

誰能別綠水，全取浣羅衣。

The woman cannot bear to beautify her tired face; by the pond she waits for her wanderer. How can I leave "lu shui", she says; I still rely on it to wash my clothes. The poem starts with a gaze on the woman's tired face. It invites us readers to pay detailed attention on her appearance, her hair, and even her skin. She waits by the pond, quietly and wearily. In this poem, "Lu shui" becomes a meaningful location, not because she really needs to wash her clothes by it, but because this is the very spot she waits for her lover.

Another important element in "Lu shui qu" is reflection. In Jiang Hong's second poem, a bird sadly misreads her reflection in the water as her beloved companion. So, when ripples caused by a rowing boat disturbs her reflection in the water, the bird immediately realizes her solitude and soon is attacked by this extreme loneliness:

潺湲復皎潔，輕鮮自可悅。

橫使有情禽，照影遂孤絕。

Yet where is the promised female character? In fact, she presents as the narrator, and very likely the boat rowing girl here who stirs the ripples and interrupts the fantasy of the water bird. Here without portrayed directly, the girl's emotion is pronounced through the heartbreaking experience of the bird.

The idea of reflection is also employed in Wu Jun's "Lu shui qu", where the sunlight is creating shadows that are reflected on the walls of a tall tower:

香暖金堤滿，湛淡春塘溢。

已送行臺花，復倒高樓日。

The fragrant flowers fill the dam; limpid water flows out of the pond in spring. The woman witnesses the falling of flowers and the setting of the sun.

Although not all elements are reincorporated by later "Lu shui qu", a schema is established. The poem would usually start with a flourishing description of nature. But in the later section, a contrast in emotion, sometimes sheer and sharp, would come in, leaving the poem with a sorrowful flavor. No matter how the scenario may change, the image of a sorrowful woman stays as the heart of "Lu shui qu". Furthermore, over the course of this theme-group's development, the connection between waters and the woman's emotions seems to grow more obvious and intense. As the clear water mirrors one's appearances and heart, it also becomes a projection of a woman's beautiful

sensibility. In the end, the image of “lu shui” is enriched through its associations with love, a female’s subtleness, sensitiveness, and sensuality.

A successor and innovator of *yuefu* poems, Li Bai adopts the skeleton of “Lu shui qu” but not strictly following it. In fact, as the commentators write, Li Bai here fuses “lu shui qu” with a “cai lian” or “cai ling” (lotus picking or water chestnut picking) theme.<sup>20</sup> While keeping some most representative elements such as water, blooms, reflections, and boat rowing, Li Bai introduces an aquatic plant picking scene to complicate the scenario in the poem. Like previously presented in the introduction of *yuefu*, nothing can really compel Li Bai to conform to the tradition. By introducing new theme into the poem, Li breaks probably the most stringent rule on the composition of *yuefu*. Nonetheless, one can still easily identify Li’s work’s lineage from the earlier “Lu shui qu” pieces. From the sheer transition in tone and emotion to the image of a sorrowful woman, one can never say Li Bai betrays “Lu shui qu” in any sense. Indeed, his playful style in writing announces his mastery of the genre.

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<sup>20</sup> See *Li Bai Ji Jiaozhu* (LBJJZ, 李白集校注) edited by Qu Tuiyuan and Zhu Jincheng.

## LI BAI AND “LU SHUI QU”

Li Bai’s “Lu shui qu” very well adopts the drastic transition in emotion and reproduces the image of another lonesome woman. As we are still enjoying the flourishing scene and beautiful images, a sadness suddenly attacks both the rowing girl and us readers. With such bitterness, the poet ends his narrative, leaving us with not only a lingering taste of sadness but also a series of questions on why the girl feels sorrowful. These questions line up together and urge us to restore the distant image from Tang Dynasty in our own minds.

淥水明秋月，南湖采白蘋。

荷花嬌欲語，愁煞蕩舟人。

Clear water, bright autumn moon — the first line introduces us with the time and space of the story. The crystalline clarity (*ming*) of the moon implies a lack of clouds in the sky, which can contribute to a feeling of coldness from the scene. Reading “lu shui”, our visions are firstly bound to the water. Then the poem directs us to a bright autumn moon, which requires us to tilt our heads up to search. Overall the landscape stays stationary and serene.

The second line disturbs this tranquility by through the verb “cai” (pick). The scene starts to move and the environment starts to transform. On the South Lake<sup>21</sup>, a woman is picking the white

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21 South Lake is believed to be Dongting lake in Hunan Province. One of the most direct evidence is given by Li Bai’s commentators. In Qu’s edition, a line from Du Fu (712-770)’s 清明二首(Qingming in Two Parts) (written in the year of 768, after Li Bai’s death), is presented. In Du Fu’s poem, he refers to the images in “Lu shui qu” and

flowers of water-clovers<sup>22</sup> that bloom in early autumn. One may be curious about why we automatically assume the boat rowing person to be a female? Based on the literary tradition of China, it is always female characters who are picking flowers or plants on the water surface. The image of this water plant picking girl is so ancient and classic that the action of plucking is tightly associated with the presence of a woman. More obviously, written as a *yuefu* under the title of “Lu shui qu”, the poem *has* to be a poem about a female character. It *has* to relate to her voice and her complicated emotions.

The second couplet unveils another layer while zooming into the scene and wandering into the maiden’s mind. The third line literally says that the delicate and lovely lotus flowers<sup>23</sup> are about to speak. Yet how does a flower speak? Through blossoming, of course. This line engages us with the very moment of budding and blossoming. Firstly, it is somehow unexpected that lotus flowers, a plant that blossoms in early summer, would still be in season for autumn. However, if we decide Dongting Lake is indeed the South Lake in the poem, then it is still possible to find sporadic lotus flowers on the water, because the climate in Dongting Lake area is mild and warm. These flowers could be on the edge of withering but are still winsome and delicate with an ephemeral charm; or,

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identifies the South Lake as Dongting lake. He writes “春去春來洞庭闊，白蘋愁殺白頭人”：Spring comes and goes and the Dongting is wide as usual; the white water clovers saddens the white-haired man. Based on this clear reference to “Lu shui qu”, we have reason to believe that it is indeed Dongting lake that the story of “Lu shui qu” take place.

22 Pin (蘋): clover-fern, water-clover, four-leaf clover (*Marsilea quadrifolia*), fern growing near ponds and paddy fields. (See Kroll)

23 Jiao (嬌): the word itself literally means: delicately lovely; tender; charming, attractive; fragile, weak; dote(d) on, indulge(d) on; pamper(ed), coddle(d), pet(ted), cosset(ed). (See Kroll) Although it is an adjective of so many different layers of meanings, the key feelings here are “tender” and “beautiful”.

they could be blossoming wilding and disregarding the change of season. Either way, their presence signifies elegance and beauty. Of course, there is another more likely possibility; that is, Li Bai is commingling the girl with flowers, a common metaphor in Tang poetry. In fact, Li Bai himself is evidently fond of such comparison between women and flowers. In one of his most celebrated *yuefu* “Qingping diao” (“*Qingping* Melody in Three Parts) <sup>24</sup>, he extensively uses flowers to imply the elegance and charms of a woman, who is believed to be Yang Guifei<sup>25</sup> in this context. The poem guides its readers to look at flowers and woman separately and together side by side. The more we read into his commingling of the two, the harder time we would experience in distinguishing one from the other. The identity and illusions converge in his writing.<sup>26</sup>

It is the same with the third line. The petals are just starting to turn pink and the bud just about to open at the tip. So does the tender, beautiful woman: she slightly raises her lips, wishing to speak about her secrete harboring. A sensual moment is so exquisitely and naturally captured here through a flower’s blossoming moment. The maturing of a flower is the maturing of a maiden. Through lotus flowers, Li Bai speaks about the girl’s beauty and desire. Nevertheless, she is still coy and shy. The flower is “about to” or “wants to” speak, but not really saying a word. The verb here seems to suggest an unspeakable and elusive sentiment on the girl’s part. Yet why is she

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24 See the full poem in appendix.

25 Yang Guifei (719-756) is known as the four great beauties of China. She was the beloved consort of emperor Xuanzong of Tang (685-762) in his late years.

26 See Varsano. Chapter 4, The *Yuefu*.

unable to say anything here? Maybe it all comes from sorrow, as suggested in the ending line of this quatrain.

Like other previous “Lu shui qu”, after all the peaceful and flourishing reading experience, the quatrain ends with sorrow. An intensive feeling of sadness drowns the rowing girl. But why is she feeling so much pain? Li Bai never definitively gives his answer, and therefore the reasoning for sadness also varies. The girl could be jealous of the beauty of lotus flowers. She could be lamenting the fact that, despite her winsomeness and elegance, she has no beloved one to spend her youth with. Or she could feel sorrowful because her lover is far away and she has nothing to do here but squandering her days... There are just so many possible reasons that contribute to her sadness. By not pointing to one specific reason, the poem, through such an ambiguous and suggestive way of writing, leaves its readers with ample space to imagine and interpret.

The ambiguity of the poem is also manifest in its narrative voice. The whole poem could mostly be an observation on the poet’s part. It could also entirely be a first-person narrative in which the poet is mimicking the female character’s voice and projecting his sensibilities through her. Or it could be a mix of the two. No matter what combination it is, through situational thinking the scene is reproduced here in a performative way. In the last line, for example, sadness is described to its maximal extent. The word “sha”<sup>27</sup>, while understood here as an expression of intensity, is bound to the meaning of “death” at all times. This is true not only phonetically but also literally. As the

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27 Sha (煞): extremely, to the maximal extent; kill. Chou sha (愁煞): as sad as can be. (See Kroll)



contrast of emotion becomes more extreme, the sense of intensity creates a dramatic effect on the poem as a whole.

Li Bai's mixing of "Lu shui" and "Cai lian" themes, his commingling of flowers and women, and his toying with subjectivity together contribute to the most salient feature of the poem: ambiguity. The poet never wishes to definitively describe a scene or pronounce a feeling. Using the mixture of themes, images, and narratives, he rather invites his readers to investigate in his writing, to unveil the dense layers and seek for meanings. Nonetheless, there is not a real, authoritative meaning at all. Nor is finding the most accurate meaning Li Bai's true intention. In fact, these ambiguities are created precisely for readers to wander and get lost. "Lu shui qu" generously opens up the room for readers to participate in poetic creations. It is true that "Lu shui qu" as a poem is complete, but its story is not yet finished. Through readers' various perspectives and colorful recreations of the scene, the story of the rowing girl is thus prolonged, and the meanings of the poem extended.

## FRENCH TRANSLATIONS

### Judith Gautier

The first French translation of “Lu shui qu” that we know of is rendered by Judith Gautier (1845-1917), a French poet, a historical novelist and an Oriental scholar. The daughter of the famous Romantic poet Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) and opera singer Ernesta Grisi (1816-1895), she is the first female member of the Académie Goncourt. Judith Gautier started learning Chinese from her private tutor Tin-Tun-ling (1831-1886)<sup>28</sup>, and published her translation on classical Chinese poetry *Le livre de jade* in 1867 when she was only 22.

When in 1867, with *Le livre de jade*, ... the older daughter of Théophile Gautier made her debut in the world of letters, there was a stir surprise and near revolt. One could not believe that this literature, original and so coolly impersonal, was the work of a woman. It was like Gautier's, but even more pure, more ironic, and more delicate...<sup>29</sup>

*Le livre de Jade* has received overwhelming success in Europe and has been re-translated into numerous other languages including English, German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Polish and Russian. Its popularity does not simply come from an exoticism raised by people's curiosity for the distant oriental country but also lies in the actual messages – the language and style of the poetry, and the imageries they carry. According to Pauline Yu, who has carefully investigated Gautier's *Livre de Jade*, this rendition actually serves as a counterexample for the already banal

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28 Born in Shanxi province, China, Tin-Tun-ling (Ding Dunling, 丁墩齡) was a man of letters. He came to France as political refugee. Théophile Gautier met Tin in Paris and became friend with him. Later Gautier hired him as a family tutor to teach his daughter Judith Chinese.

29 Gourmont, Judith Gautier. Paris : Bibliothèque Internationale d'Édition, P5

structure and themes of Romantic poems. In other words, Gautier's works of translation are appealing because it stands outside of the rules and liberates poetic aesthetics.<sup>30</sup> This little volume is not only welcome with an enthusiasm by the general public, but also has been inspirations for artistic creations. *Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth)* by the Austrian composer Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) is actually indebted to several poems in Gautier's translation.

However, just as her rendition is praised for the various poetic innovation it brings in, it is also harshly criticized because of the mistakes in translation and her re-writing of many poems. As she recalls later, "[I]t was the result of a noble effort that, despite its tenacity and sincerity, did not entirely assure me of the accuracy of the poems that composed this little volume; thus, I did not dare affirm that they had been precisely translated"<sup>31</sup>. Indeed, some poems in her collection have no originals to match with. Readers might be surprised to see how much Gautier adapt or even re-write each poem. Facing the minimal plot line in "Lu shui qu", Gautier tries to pinpoint each specific sentiment she could define from the original.

#### Fleur Défendue

Sous la claire lune d'automne, l'eau agitée secoue ma barque.  
Solitaire, je vogue sur le lac du Sud, et je cueille des lotus blancs.  
Oh! qu'elle est belle, la blanche fleur du lotus...! Qu'elle est délicate et délicate ! Un ardent désir me dévore de lui avouer la passion qu'elle m'inspire...  
Hélas!...une tristesse mortelle submerge mon cœur...l'embarcation s'en va à la dérive, sur les eaux narquoises, qui s'en dont jouet.

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30 Yu, "Your Alabaster in This Porcelain": Judith Gautier's "Le Livre De Jade", p.12

31 Yu, p.468; Meyer-Zundel, p.245. Yu cites the paragraph in her article on *Le Livre de Jade*.

In the very first line of her translation, Gautier most declaratively points out the presence of the subject by establishing a first-person narrative voice. Different from the original poem where our attention is drawn firstly by water and then the autumn moon, Gautier sets up with moonlight (“la claire lune d’automne”) first and then focus back on the water surface. Here the moon tinges everything with its color as the whole scene is “under” (sous) its beam. Gautier avoids the translation of “lu shui”, but uses the phrase “l’eau agitée”. She assigns an agitated and restless feeling to the nature environment. “L’eau” (water) here, as the grammatical subject of this line, “secoue” (shakes) the boat above it. Such action emphasizes the water’s significance in the story by reminding us the emotional aspect of water. However, if we search for “**ma** barque” (**my** boat) in the very same line, we will notice that the true subject is actually the boat rowing person. The water always ripples, as this is its nature. It is the narrator’s projection that fills the water with actions and emotions. The emotion of the water is in fact the emotion of the narrator’s mind. In summary, this autumn night is no longer quiet, and the water is no longer calm. A hidden anxiety or unease is evident in the entire atmosphere, preparing for the intensifying of feelings yet to come in ensuing lines.

Setting up the scene and actions that take place therein, the second line of the original narrates the simple action of flower picking. Although the action of “cai bai pin” (picking the flowers of water-clovers) used in the original poem strongly invokes the presence of a rowing girl, her interiority is vague and unperceivable. Nevertheless, Gautier makes an explicit disclosure of lonesomeness and isolation in her writing. She emphasizes the narrator’s solitude: feeling lonely

(“solitaire”), “I” rows on to the South Lake and picks white lotus flowers. Here “solitaire” is not only a feeling that accompanies the narrator, but also possibly the very reason she wanders onto the water side. It is remarkable that Gautier repeats the subject “I” twice and assigns an additional action: “vogue” to the subject. Firstly, the repetition of “I” has strengthened the subject’s presence and her ability to control the scene. Secondly, the additional verb separates the action of “picking” and “rowing”. In a very subtle way, “bai pin” plucking seems less likely to be the narrator’s goal. It is possible that the narrator first wanders on the South Lake, and then decide to pick these water-clovers. In any event, “rowing” and “picking” come to be less related events.

In the second line we also welcome the first mistake in translation: Gautier renders the plant “pin” (蘋) as lotus. It might be a misunderstanding on her part or an on-purpose adaptation, but nonetheless, by mentioning white lotus she relocates us to a summer scene. The seasonal references have created confusions for those who are well aware of the flowering seasons of plants. In any event, the image of lotus is probably more accessible than the outlook of the tiny white flowers of water-clover. No matter if this is her intention or not, as a guide to Chinese culture and poetic sentiments, Gautier transfers the information and aesthetics in a more publicly accessible way, despite the risk of distorting the original image. She chooses to present the work of literature in a way where one’s western knowledge can feel fresh yet not pedantic. Indeed, instead of simply critiquing her slovenliness and thinking of this as a common mistake for western readers who has no knowledge on botany, we might want to reconsider the effect of such “misreading”. As a matter of fact, Gautier’s choice (or accident!) of rendering the white water-clover as lotus coincides with

the perspectives of many commentators and general readers. Gautier's translation does grasp the theme of "lotus picking" and is in some sense responding to Li Bai's invitation to interpret and break traditions. No matter if this is her intuition, a result after scrutinizing piles of documents, or simply a misread of plant, the effect of such rendering actually re-emphasizes the original's "unfetteredness" in its anti-traditional writing.

Moving on to the third line, instead of spelling out the personification of flowers, Gautier she takes the lotus flowers quite literally and juxtaposes the two images. And from the sensual dictions used in this line, we finally can confirm that the subject here is a girl. The girl rowing the boat is enchanted by the delicacy and deliciousness of the lotus flowers; while exclaims the beauty of them, her passionate self is inspired and her mind is devoured by the ardent desire. The mood in Li Bai's work, though sensual and erotic as well, is much subtler. Gautier more overtly and passionately pronounces desires. The lotus flowers seem to blossom wildly at this moment. Gautier first characterizes these flowers using adjectives including "belle", "délicate", and even "délicieuse". Then she moves on to use verbs, including "dévore", "avouer", and "inspire", to portray the interior mood of the girl. Through these evocative words, Gautier unequivocally spells out the mental activity of the rowing girl. However, the result of such explicit disclosure has its shortcoming and compromises. While she articulates the feelings, she also narrows down the possible visions and perspectives. Consequently, the promised room for personal imagination is reduced, and the beauty of subtleness is undermined.

In the last two lines, Gautier tries to “francophonize” the poem by adding modal particles such as “Oh!” (in line 3) and “Hélas” (in line 4). This effect renders the poem much more dramatic and intense compared to the original. Even though the emotions in the original are strong, Li Bai’s diction mainly captures an unspoken interiority that is more private. In Gautier’s rendition, the subtleness and room for imagination are washed away by her word by word articulation. Somehow Gautier seems to be redrawing a western oil painting based on a Chinese wash painting, where her reproduction has its every inch filled with paint, whereas the Chinese one intentionally leaves blank spaces.

To finish the poem, Gautier actually returns to a description of nature, a seemingly external physical world. The boat is drifting on the mocking water. Similar to the beginning of the poem where the water is “agitée”, nature elements are colored with sensibilities. Here, the water is “narquoises” (mocking) again. Similar to the analysis for the opening line, it is still the girl’s restless mind that charge water with a guilt of mocking her. With both the beginning line and the finishing line depicting the unquiet water, Gautier’s translation keeps an internal consistency and coherency.

Albeit the explicit expressions and a divergence from the original tone, this type of evocative and erotic writing echoes certain features of the poems in *Yutai xinyong* (*New Songs from a Jade Terrace*)<sup>32</sup>. *Yutai xinyong* is an anthology of early medieval Chinese love poetry

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32 *Yutai xinyong* :玉台新詠

compiled by a court poet, Xu Ling (507-583)<sup>33</sup> in about the year of 545. These romantic and semi-erotic “gongti” (palace style) poems are rich in “evocative imagery, symbolism, decorative pathos, and verbal virtuosity”<sup>34</sup> As a matter of fact, the two precedent “Lu shui qu” by Jiang Hong are anthologized in this collection. I have the second poem’s original as well as the translated version by Anne Birrell below:

尘容不忍饰，临池思客归。

谁能别绿水，全取浣罗衣

**My Grimy Face**

*My grimy face I cannot bear to beautify.*

*I lean over the pool, dream of my wanderer’s return.*

*Who can take green water in her hand,*

*Wash silk robes in a tedium of despair?*

This poem, as presented before, speaks fully in the female character’s voice and describes her deep pining for her “wanderer”. The woman here not only articulates her affection for her lover but also explicitly shows her melancholy in an evocative way. She is willing to show her grimy face because she is in such despair that nothing would cheer her up. She leans over the pond to overtly show her pining for her lover. Her feelings are too deep and too intense to hide from the public. In the end, she tends to dwell in the marsh of emotions and finds a pretext for her attachment: she will keep on waiting because she still relies on the water to wash her silk robes.<sup>35</sup> Instead of

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33 Xu Ling: 徐陵

34 Birrell, p.28

35 This is my more literal translation of the poem.



conveying a series of veiled sensibilities, this style of writing most directly and passionately exposes one's feelings. It does not create ambiguous or subtle desires but speaks about an ardent and genuine heart. In this perspective, Gautier's work resembles the spirit of such writing. Again, we do not know how Tin-Tun-Ling teaches Gautier poetries, nor do we know if she has access to all the precedent poems under the same title, but her decision to render a poem in this style nonetheless coincidentally revisits the Jiang Hong's beautiful work.

Lastly, let us take a final look at the title. Gautier re-names "lu shui qu" as "Fleur Défendue". Yet why and how would a flower be forbidden? As we move along the original poem with her translation, we should first question ourselves: what is this flower referring to? Most evidently through the series of juxtapositions of flower and woman, we know that it refers to the rowing girl. But to what is she forbidden? The answer ties back to the overarching theme of "Lu shui qu": she is, like all other female characters, "forbidden" to love. It might be a lack of companion, an endless solitude, or a teetering expectation that her beloved one would come back soon, etc... For Gautier specifically, while the girl at her blossoming age is so beautiful, passionate, and desirous of love, she has no one to be with to realize her desire. At first glance, we might suspect that the title "Fleur Défendue" is going to deface the poem with overwrought sentiments. But now, as we think about it, maybe she Gautier is right. With her intuition as a poet, she accurately grasps the theme and amplifies it. In addition, the title keeps a beautiful consistency with the content as well: notice that the flower is written in a singular form. Naturally, we think of

the solitary image of the rowing girl. Consequently, the relationship between the flower and the girl is more tightly knitted, and the two subjects further melt and collapse into one figure.

“Fleur Défendue” is probably not the most precise translation because it is heavily edited. Through her adaptations, Gautier deconstructs of the original’s ambiguity and subtleness. However, Li Bai’s manipulating of perspectives and voices indeed encourages his readers to interpret and reconstruct the scene. In response to the task, Gautier turns in an intimate, passionate and personal disclosure by filling in the ellipses in the original language. Furthermore, if we take Gautier’s background into consideration, given that this is also her very first attempt in translation at all, her “Lu shui qu” becomes more acceptable and even lovely. Sharing a similar blossoming age as the boat rowing girl in the poem, she seems to empathize so much with the maiden. Her tone in the poem is so passionate and compassionate that as if she can perfectly communicate with the rower girl. One would believe that she actually pictures herself alone rowing in a boat, picking up the white lotus, and suffocating due to her loneliness. In some ways, Gautier is re-writing the poem through a twenty-year-old girl’s sentiment and recounting her story.

Lastly, even though “Fleur défendue” is established as a work of translation, Gautier has made her own presence and style so evident in the poem that she becomes, that one can hardly recognize Li Bai’s rhetoric anymore. As a poet, she renders “Lu shui qu” in a way that is meaningful to herself, despite the mistakes taken and the inaccuracies occurred. As when she translates, the poem finally becomes her own. Gautier, though criticized as being “unfaithful”, is absolutely genuine and loyal to her bare heart.

## René Naville

The second French rendition of “Lu shui qu” is accomplished in 1968 by René Naville (1905-1978), a Swiss diplomat, writer and scientist. René Naville had been an ambassador working at Swiss Embassy in Beijing for about four years (1959—1963)<sup>36</sup>. In 1968, he published his translation on Chinese poetry, *Joyaux de la Poésie Chinoise (Jewels of Chinese Poetry)*, an anthology of mainly classical Chinese poetry dating from Qin dynasty (221-206 BC). But it also includes pieces from the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Being aware of the wide utilization of symbolic terms in Chinese poetry, Naville prepares us with a long list of examples in his preface: “white signifies grief, sadness...the flowers are women and the greatest flower is the most beloved one...the boat evokes an idea of distance and absence...(for) the river, it’s the passing of time.”<sup>37</sup> Naville’s list is like a treasure map that suggests the passcode to open each treasure box. We as readers can more easily understand his choice of translation by referring back to the passcodes he has provided. Moreover, all poems in this book are translated directly from Chinese into French in *Vers libres (French free verse)*<sup>38</sup>. This style of writing guarantees Naville a creative freedom in which he can better integrate the Chinese

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36 See website *Diplomatische Dokumente der Schweiz*

37 Naville, 10-11. Naville’s list is longer but here I only picked out the ones mentioned in “Lu shui qu”. The French translation was mine.

38 Free verse is created in late 19th-century in France. This poetic innovation no longer requires strict rules on rhyming, no more meters but encourages free production. Nonetheless, a poet can still use them to create a sense of structure. A few representatives of this genre are Gustave Kahn, Jules Laforgue and Francis Viéle-Griffin. Naville does not explain why he chooses this specific genre but I would assume this is due to *Vers libres*’s popularity and flexibility.

content into a French language. “Lu shi qu”, being one of the jewels from Naville’s treasure box, has its charm brilliantly displayed in this new form of life:

**Chant de la rivière verte**

La rivière brille sous la lune d’automne.  
 Dans le lac du sud nous allons cueillir  
 Les blancs marsileas qui bourgeonnent  
 Et les lotus délicats semblent dire :  
 Pourquoi est-il triste dans son bateau  
 Ce promeneur qui vogue dans nos eaux ?

In translating “lu shui qu”, Naville follows the original shape of the poem and tries to recapture a rhythmic and a visual effect of this quatrain. While Gautier extends the poem through her overfilled brushstrokes and almost turns it into a prose, Naville reproduces the language to its succinct. For rhymes, he mimics an AB/AB/CC form; the divided sentences not only facilitate rhythmic and sounding qualities to the writing but also guide the readers’ visions to creep into changing imageries and environments. Most importantly, Naville is well aware of the game of subjectivity introduced by Li Bai. In response to such feature, he reads into such ellipses, grasps the ambiguous moments born along with them, and engages with these moments to play around subjectivity. His rendition both inherits legacies from its original, and reinvents the original creatively: “Chant de la rivière verte” is aesthetical in its outlook, pleasant in sound, and lingering in the flavor it creates through relishing ambiguities.

Naville translates “Lu shui qu” as “Chant de la rivière verte”<sup>39</sup>, preserving the reference to *yuefu* genre and injects a beautiful vigor from nature. This moment forms in shape when he specifies “shui” (water) as “rivière”. A river reminds one of its flowing sound, its ripples, its expansive scale in landscape, and the various plants and forms of lives it nurtures. A simple specification of diction has created significant change in imageries. Actually “lushui” also happens to be the name of a real river in Hunan province, which is quite well-known due to the various references by other Chinese poets. So, it is likely that Naville simply locates himself in that “lushui” river when translating this work. Again, it is true that by doing so readers could harvest a more dynamic scene, but such specification could have also suppressed other possibilities from the ambiguous title, too, as “water” could also be a pond or a lake, or even a metaphor according a reader’s preference.

Naville translates the first line with a quiet, relatively inactive landscape scene, not attempting to evoke any emotions. He strictly follows Li Bai’s vision: first the water, then the autumn moon. Naville substitutes the adjective “ming” (bright) with a verb “brille” (shine), making the river the main subject of the line. The river now shines itself rather than being illuminated by moonlight. Instead of telling us directly the brightness of the moon, he relies on a description of water to show obliquely an illuminating moonlight. Moreover, although Naville here omits the word “lü” (green)<sup>40</sup>, fortunately this omission does not undermine any delivery of information.

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39 It is likely that Naville is reading the Xiao edition where the poem is recorded as “lü shui qu”.

40 Likely due to a rhythmic effect of this line. Another possibility is that he wants to avoid repetition.

The title “Chant de la rivière verte” has already well informed the readers with its color “green”, so a repetition in the first line would become unnecessary.

Next, Naville transforms the second line from Li Bai’s original into a couplet. In fact, he does the same architectural design for the second couplet, too, creating an aesthetically neat, pleasant structure. Naville here uses “nous allons cueillir” to suggest a collective water plant picking scene. One might find this phrase peculiar due to its use of future tense. The flower-picking activity is not yet a fully realized plan. It somehow implies that the girls on the lake are still rowing to the flower picking site. While a present tense has a narrative quality attached to it, the combination of a future tense and a first-person account makes the narrator stand out; in fact, she seems to make an announcement to her audiences.

Another salient effect comes to the use of subject “nous” (we). This is where the discussion of subjectivity chimes in. In Chinese poetic tradition, it is almost a tacit agreement that “water blossoms picking” is a solitary action: one girl in one boat, and of course the poet, usually a male as a hidden audience, is falling in love or empathizing with her. Yet Naville seems unaware of or does not want to concede to this tradition. His narrator has been “nous” for the whole poem, always accompanied by other people that are thinking and speaking in a unanimous tone. His usage “nous” instead of “je” (I) has introduced a potential community and a collectiveness for the ones invited by it, but at the same time a potential solitude for the ones isolated from it. Subsequently, through this writing of belonging, the poet is laying the groundwork for an effective portrayal of solitude in the ensuing lines. In the next line, Naville adds “bourgeonnent” (bourgeoning, budding) to

portray the status of “marsileas” (water clovers). The fact that they are burgeoning or budding retains a sense of freshness and vitality for the imagery. More importantly, this addition in content cleverly matches the image of these delicate lotus flowers in the next line.

Back in Gautier’s version, the lotus flower has inspired the rowing girl to desire and be passionate. The “delicious” lotus flower introduces her to the world of sensuality, desire, longings, and of course, love. Yet for Naville, from the very first glance, his flowers seem to be less evocative, nor do they really seem like a personification of the rowing girls. They most directly function as spectators of a show, asking questions to the actors on stage. As Naville translates, “Pourquoi est-il triste dans son bateau / Ce promeneur qui vogue dans nos eaux ?”, these flowers are somehow detached and carefree. While “dans **son** bateau” and “dans **nos** eaux” match each other, they stand as oppositions, separating sad male rower “him” from the group of innocent girls “us”.

Maybe it is wise to revisit the treasure map again. If we take its direction and read flowers as women, then it seems to solve the “riddle” of the scene. In fact, Naville gives us with the clue through the pronoun “nous” itself. In the first couplet, a group girls are plucking “bai pin”. If we follow this thread carefully and patiently, we would notice that Naville matches the plural form of flowers and girls, and plants this subtle reference in the pronoun of “we” (or our) to remind us their commingling identities. Contrary to what we saw at first glance, the flowers are indeed the rowing girls, just like the personification in the original “Lu shui qu”.

Revisiting the last couplet, an alien “il” is introduced quite disruptively. He appears alone on the river and interrupts the scene of flowers and girls, a scene of delicacy and togetherness. Now we have other questions to answer: who is this male boat rower? And why is he sad? Rowing in their individual boats, talking to each other while gathering “bai pin”, these girls discover the presence of a lonesome wanderer. They wonder among themselves about where his sadness comes from; yet they could not understand his pain. Instead of being investigated under the onlookers’ gaze, these girls reverse their positions and start to interpret the onlooker’s mind.

Again, the poem features an ambiguous narrative voice. This problem could be a challenge for translation but could also provide a potential space for recreation and reinterpretation. Naville astutely seizes this moment of ambiguity and regenerates it creatively and productively. He writes against the tradition of “Lu shui qu” where women experience heartbreaks; in “Chant de la rivière verte”, not only does a man feel sorrow, but also can his usually hidden presence be discovered and critiqued by female characters. Somehow the center of the poem changes as it finally locates at the portraying of the poet himself. All the beautiful peaceful images with these young girls are designed to underscore with his inward sensibilities. He is using the voice of young girls, who are as beautiful as lotus flowers, to contrast with his sorrow. These carefree girls, unfortunately, would never understand the bitter desire harbored by the reticent lonely man. An elusive yet unbreakable isolation thus emerges. Such sense of isolation reaches its peak when the young girls use a declarative tone to claim “**nos** eaux” to exclude the “promeneur” from the public space. As he watches the beautiful young girls rowing on the lake, he realizes that his affection for them can be



in no way accepted. The inaccessibility to love torments his mind. In some sense, Naville's interpretation gives us another anti-traditional moment; that is, these girls, in turn, become heartbreakers. They are not suffering from love anymore.

Twelve years later the publishing of Naville's translation, the Japanese scholar Jitsunosuke Ōno (1905-1989) offers an interesting insight on the subject of the poem. His interpretations coincidentally echo with "Chant de la rivière verte". This sadness, Ōno suggests, does not come from a female character. The poem is not about women envying each other's beauty, but should be a self-reflection by the poet himself. He believes that the poet Li Bai writes this piece while touring the lake at night. Seeing the flower-like beautiful girl(s), he is charmed by her (their) winsomeness and elegance. Yet the poet is unable to change either the heart of these girls, or his own captivated mind, so he is suffering from his own affection and his strong attachment.<sup>41</sup>

Evidently, Li Bai is not the only one toying with voices and perspectives. His readers, interpreters, and translators all respond to his initial invitation to the second-round of poetic recreation. Ōno repaints the picture against one's common knowledge by introducing the poet's melancholy voice into the scene. And Naville translates this anti-traditional voice into another language, spreading the game of subjectivity across the globe. Yet such recreation brings in more questions, probably the fundamental questions of translation: how much weight should we put onto the original meaning? Does conveying the most faithful interpretation worthwhile at all, if

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41 Ōno, p.1243

we regard our reconstructions of poetic imagery a creative process? Bearing these questions in mind, let us walk into our last piece of translation on “Lu shui qu”.

### **Paul Jacob**

In 1985, “Lu shui qu” was translated to French again by Paul Jacob (1950~) in his book dedicated to Li Bai: *Florilège de Li Bai - Connaissance de l’Orient collection*. Paul Jacob is a sinologist and a professional translator. In the 80s, He published two other anthologies of classical Chinese poetry translations: *Vacances du pouvoir* (1983) and *Poètes bouddhistes des Tang* (1987). As he mentions in his introduction chapter, he always translates verses into verses. He believes that translating “meanings” would be detrimental to a poem’s completeness and fullness. He strives to recapture the music, the colors, and the senses that occur in the original through the form of another poem. To do so, Jacob usually presents a Chinese pentasyllabic quatrain in a decasyllabic form<sup>42</sup> to imitate the shape and musicality of the original. Again, as a scholar on classical Chinese poetry, for each poem in his collection, he would give an exhaustive footnote which explains certain confusing objects, symbolism, the particular historical context, textual research, the interpretations by commentators and of course, by himself.<sup>43</sup>

#### **Sur l’air des eaux limpides**

Le clair soleil d’automne sur les eaux,  
 On vient cueillir la blanche marsilée.  
 Ils parleraient, les nénuphars si beaux,  
 Mais qu’elle est triste en sa barque agité

Jacob prioritizes a visual and auditory aesthetic by offering a decasyllabic poem with A B / A B rhyme. While this poetic style comes from a French origin, it echoes harmoniously with the

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42 It is a form of poetic writing that contains 10 syllables for each line.

43 Jacob. 30-31

Chinese original. Through it, a *jueju*'s poetic skeleton is vividly presented. Restricted by the number of syllables, the decasyllabic form indeed also pushed the French language to its most concise and condensed style. Actually, Jacob's foreign recreation still feels like a Chinese quatrain in its form and sound. But what happens to the meanings and poetic imageries of this poem? How does Jacob balance a poetic meaning with a structured form?

Starting from the title, Jacob translates "qu" into its most accurate corresponding: "l'air". Unlike "chant", which focuses more on the combination of melodies and lyrics, "l'air" emphasizes more on tunes and the presence of instrument. We sense that words here are actually less important: they supplement the air of *guqin* instead of taking over it. Similar to Naville, Jacob here omits the adjective "lu" in the first line, and relies on the title to transmit the quality of water into the rest of the poem. In the first line, Jacob grammatically abandons the verb necessary to a French sentence but strictly follows the original's design of image: a simple juxtaposition of autumn sunlight<sup>44</sup> and limpid water. In a sense, Jacob integrates the Chinese grammar in to a French sentence. Presenting features of the original language, Jacob willingly challenges both the French grammar and the French speakers. He trains his readers to accommodate to this unique style of expression even though a lack of verb could fail the sentence potentially. Jacob disrupts the

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44 Apparently in his edition, "yue"(月) is written as "ri" (日). This is a very common typographical and writing mistake due to the similarities of the two character.

targeted language and somehow expands it through injecting a new language structure to it. Though fragmented, the sentence is still easily understandable.

Then we welcome the subject of the poem in the second line. Again, in the original, the narrative voice is ambiguous. We do not know if it is from the poet's observation, or the rower's first-person account. Similarly, unwilling to disturb the vagueness of voices, Jacob uses "on" (one) as the pronoun of the subject. In modern-day practices, "on" mostly means "we". But it actually can refer to so much more. "I", "he", "she", "one", "someone" ... "on" is probably the most impersonal subject in French. Jacob uses "on" to include every possible narrative voice into the picture and so keeps the ambiguity of the original.

In the same line, the narration omits the geographical location: "south lake", and adds a verb "vient" to connect the action "cueillir". For French readers, it might be true that a geographical reference to a lake in China would not be sensible anyway. Not knowing the location, nevertheless, readers also lose the more specific picture of the water. Is it a river? Or is it a lake? The ellipsis Jacob creates leads to an even more the ambiguous tone. Furthermore, the verb "vient" implies a subtle movement: One *comes* to gather the white water-clovers. Of course, "vient" could be positioned there to balance the number of syllables in one line, but it still subtly suggests that one has already arrived in the planned destination. The action of flower gathering is also emphasized as now it becomes the goal for the rower: one rows on the water in order to pick flowers.

The next couplet generates a silent conversation with sympathy and helplessness: "Ils parleraient, les nénuphars si beaux / Mais qu'elle est triste en sa barque agitée". Such beautiful

water lilies would have talked, but seeing this sorrowful girl on her boat rowing, they could no longer bear to say a word. In the last line, Jacob finally reveals the mysterious subject in this poem: the rowing girl. While carefully retaining the ambiguity of the original, he does not fail his duty in clarifying the image to its appropriate degree. For the readers with some knowledge of the theme “cai lian” or “Lu shui qu”, the gender of the rowing person is rather obvious and explicit. But for readers have no background of these two themes, they somehow need to confirm the identity of the rower. Instead of a betrayal to the sense of ambiguity Jacob tries to maintain, this is a necessary and beautiful clarification. It is necessary because it actually is in line with the explicitness in the original. It is beautiful because we now naturally relate her feminine body to these handsome water lilies.

Through a final sharp transition in tone and topic, our vision re-focalizes on this sad girl rowing in her rough boat. The usage of the exclamatory sentences naturally invite the idea of “chou sha” into this picture through a performative effect. The narrative, although not in a first-person account, still speaks in a theatrical tone. The two exclamatory sentences, “si beaux” and “qu’elle est triste”, are echoing each other in this couplet, equalizing the extent of beauty by the blossoms and the extent of sadness by the rowing girl. These flowers as part of nature landscape are in return comforting her using their silence. Such helpless feeling is so intense and heavy that even comforting words would be burdensome for rowing girl. Out of sympathy, the flowers shut their breaths.

Lastly, Jacob hides from his reader the rhetorical troop of using flowers to represent women. He separates the woman and flower by giving water lilies a plural form. Similarly evident is the masculine form of the noun “*nénuphars*”. In his rendition, the flowers and the girl are juxtaposed in one image. But unlike many popular interpretations, the sorrow is not inspired by water lilies. Instead, these flowers are here to comfort her. They might have been striving to bloom and competing with each other on the colors of petals. But seeing the sad girl, they could not continue their game anymore. They wish to reduce their presence and leave enough space for the girl to express her feelings. The flowers consequently have their heads turn lower and their colors fade. The glorious scene is absorbed by the sadness of the girl and thus becomes bleak.

As initially presented, “*Sur l’air des eaux limpides*” *feels* like a Chinese poem even though it adopts a decasyllabic style of writing. The flavor of foreignness comes from two aspects: the first being its ungrammatical reproduction of French language, and the second being its audacious and even wild adoption of an ambiguous narrative voice. From the very first sentence, Jacob leaves the French readers with perplexing moments to ponder. When he opens up the poem with an intentional ungrammatical sentence, he shows his reader how to write and read in the Chinese language. The fragmented problematic sentence in French is not only correct but also poetic in Chinese. Written in a decasyllabic style, the poem itself is conflicted. The grammatically destructive sentence resides in a traditional, regulated French form: the French language is challenged. Yet such challenge could yield creative and productive results, because the targeted

language is now introduced with another way of expression, an opportunity to become more diverse.

Unlike Naville who plays with voices, Jacob goes with the original's flow, and strives to hide his personal interpretations as much as possible. Because of his unwillingness to reveal, questions are raised: who is the narrator? What is the relationship between the blossoms and the rowing girl? Why are the flowers about to speak? Why is she sad on her boat... Yet again because of these overwhelming confusions, one is forced to seek for plausible connections between lines and couplets, between symbols and objects, and between natures and characters. A reader is exposed to this rhetoric of ambiguity, frustrated by it and feeling insecure because of it. Nevertheless, such rhetoric expands the dimension that allows for interpretation.

Still one may question the task of the translator. To what extent should he or she offer interpretations? And more specifically, how does Jacob balance his task of revealing meanings and not revealing too much? In fact, footnotes play an important role in Jacob's translation. For example, under the line "On vient cueillir la blanche marsilée" he notes that one would gather white water-clovers for wedding ceremony. Jacob here completes his task by providing less obvious interpretations that could otherwise be hindered by cultural barriers. Indeed, the footnotes liberate him from the obligation of seeking the truest and the only "meanings". With footnotes, the translator no longer needs to declaratively present *the one* interpretation; instead, he can stay vague or even perplexing because he knows that he has a chance to elucidate confusions and guide readers to find meanings.



In any event, the reading experience of “Sur l’air des eaux limpides” can both be an anti-poetic and a poetic one. It is anti-poetic because a language’s grammatical tradition is disregarded and the narrative voice stays ambiguous and unseizable; the sensibilities of a poem can be undermined by such discrete composition and ellipses on the side. On the other hand, it can be a creative poetic practice precisely for the very same reasons: the ellipses lead to personal connections with poetic images. In such carefully designed disruptive moments, we tell ourselves to pause and reimagine the beauty of the limpid water and the blossoming of lotus flowers...

Benjamin in his “The Task of the Translator” cites from Rudolf Pannwitz’s theory of translation<sup>45</sup>, “... (the translator) must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language”<sup>46</sup>. Indeed, intentionally or not, Jacob explores the possibilities of the French language by transmitting the messages from the remote classical Chinese in which everything is so unfamiliar. Yet through his practice, the gap seems to close up. The French language grows to be more tolerant and expands to be more diverse.

### **Water lilies or lotus flowers?**

While Gautier or Naville translate “he hua” as “lotus flowers”, a plant more specific to Asian culture and image, Jacob chooses to render them as “nénuphars” (water lilies), a species from the

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45 Benjamin, p.262; Pannwitz. *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur*

46 Benjamin, p.262.

west. Both are aquatic plants that bloom in warm seasons. Nonetheless, the western counterpart does shorten the poem's distance its western audiences. To some extent, the water lilies could even evoke one's memory of "*Les Nymphéas*" by Claude Monet. If this is the case, then the imagery of the original poem could be largely jeopardized. Is this a Chinese girl rowing in France then? Seemingly, there rises a paradox: while Jacob himself so eagerly wishes to present a *real* Chinese poem to his Francophone audiences, he wants to incorporate the poem into a western aesthetic. Is Jacob catering to westerns readers in a way? Does he wish to use a familiar object to mitigate the challenge he poses on a reader's reading experience? Or for him, the two words are not contradictory and the images brought by each word are essentially the same?

We may ask again: are "lotus flowers" and "water lilies" fundamentally different? Though equally beautiful, a "népouhar" by a Frenchman is not the same thing as "he hua" by a Chinese person. Yet as Benjamin says, these two words, while "mutually exclusive"—striving to exclude each other, are also supplementing each other<sup>47</sup>. Jacob's translation could serve as an example of Benjamin's theory. The meaning of "lotus flowers" converges and expands through translations. Therefore, for Jacob, instead of being self-contradictory, he seems to aim for a conversation between languages themselves. Here, it is not only the Chinese that influences the French language but also is the opposite direction. The two languages through translation start to talk: they discover and understand their relatedness and tolerate each other their uniqueness.

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47 Ibid, p.257.

## CONCLUSION

“Lu shui qu” was born in Tang dynasty by one of the most brilliant poets in Chinese history. More than a thousand years later, it travels to Francophone countries—read in a different language, presented in front of a different culture. The image of the rowing girl survives through time and continues to tell the very moment where she is attacked by an intense sadness. Through an elliptical writing, “Lu shui qu” sets up a stage where audiences are invited to respond to the ambiguity of subjects and then interpret meanings on their own. The text begs to be investigated and comprehended. And in our context, it begs to be translated. Yet the process of interpretation is both challenging and risky. Commentators, for example, can only choose to comment on the lines that they *want* to comment. They focus on the lines that are most interesting to them or are most interpretable, and leaves the perplexing, confusing, uninterpretable moments unsolved. Translators, the interpreters of our focus, however, are not given the choice of skipping any couplet or any line. Surely, they can choose not to translate a poem, but they can never skip the ambiguous or the uninterpretable. Translating is risky, too. While one feels obligated to offer interpretations, one always needs to remember not to disclose too much, because there is the risk of narrowing down possibilities and ruining the rich flavor of the original. So here we are again, trying to answer what a translation truly is. What does it mean to texts and languages, to readers, and to the translators themselves?

The three French translations we have examined each responds to Li Bai’s invitation in its own way. “Fleur défendue” tries to pinpoint all possible emotions that exist in the original by

filling in the ellipses. However, the list of possibilities can never be exhaustive. Thus, by presenting and articulating each potential emotion, Gautier closes the door for other possibilities. “Chant de la rivière verte” responds to Li Bai’s invitation by engaging in further reproducing ambiguities. And “Sur l’air des eaux limpides” avoids making interpretations but almost wholeheartedly adopts the ambiguities from the original. While each has lost certain aspects of the original, each provides unique perspectives.

As a matter of fact, these works of translation, when juxtaposed and compared together, supplement each other with their different interpretations and their approaches to illustrate the scene. In addition, these French renditions in some sense enrich the original work. Now reading essentially the same poem generated from a French person’s perspective, we as readers are exposed to more diversities as well. We jump out of the framework of Chinese poetic or cultural traditions, even though they are correct by their own rights. While it is true that the translated works can never precisely reproduce the original, they to some extent also liberate possibilities. For example, the presence of Li Bai in both Naville and Ōno’s interpretations, although new to see, still appears to be plausible. Through translations, the original becomes fuller, rounder, and more complete. In the end, through the travel, “Lu shui qu” is no longer a poem that belongs exclusively to China, but a poem whose meanings and aesthetics are shared also by other parts of the world.

So do languages themselves. Through translating the unfamiliar foreign objects, and through the attempts to render the untranslatable experiences, the French language stretches and grows. The Chinese language is experiencing the same thing. As the images of “water lilies” and “lotus

flowers” converge, both languages become less exclusive and more tolerant. They thus recognize their similarities and relatedness to each other. Instead of standing opposite to each other, the two languages start to merge into one organic body and find unity. Is this not the starting point of Benjamin’s “Pure Language”<sup>48</sup>?

From a reader’s perspective, translation is really the gate that opens up the world. It provides accessibilities. Readers can picture the other culture by digesting word by word, image after image. Through reading works of translation, we travel in our minds both geographically and temporally. From Francophone countries to oriental China, from modern days to a thousand years in the past. While challenged by the strangeness of that culture, readers are also captivated by it. In any event, nothing calls for a piece of writing more emphatically than its translation. It is out of an urge to see the unfamiliar object, it is out of the wish to witness the beauty of the other language, and it is out of the fear that the translated work can never transmit the meaning of the original that we want to revisit the original text. After all, it is the true destination of one’s travel.

As Benjamin beautifully summarizes, “No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience”<sup>49</sup>. Indeed, a work of translation is essentially not intended for the readers who do not understand the original. Yet, no matter how much the translators wish to recapture the original, they all at some point implement their intuitions and persona into their works. For “Lu shui qu”, Gautier, Naville, and Jacob all have their speculations slipped through.

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48 Ibid, p.257

49 Ibid, p.253

Even in translation, even promises to serve the text, one still inevitably builds an intimate personal relationship with it. If we ponder on the question, why would one want to voluntarily translate a work, then the answer might be obvious to a point that makes people disappointed; that is, because one *likes* the text. Translators in a sense are feeling compelled to translate because he or she feels the urge to express. After all, translations, undoubtedly a recreation of the original, like all other writings, are autobiographical. Gautier narrates “Lu shui qu” from a twenty-one-year-old girl’s intuition; Naville, too, tells the story where his identity as a poet is present; Jacob as a scholar instead at many occasions uses footnotes to communicate his opinions. These translators are all telling the stories of themselves. However, this does not necessarily make them bad irresponsible translators. In fact, we love poetry precisely because it offers personal revelations and interiorities. It is because of such personal attachment that we are able to witness the afterlife of a poem, see the reflection of the moon on clear waters, and weep for the rowing girl on her solitary boat.

## EPILOGUE

This project started as a study of Li Bai. I wanted to compare the French and Japanese translations on Li Bai's works, and then observe how is Li Bai's persona received and delivered in these cultures. I quickly went to the library and soon got disappointed when I realized that all the Japanese translations simply rewrites the original Chinese character again with their corresponding Japanese *kanji*. So, I switched to French. And as soon as I started analyzing the first poem "Lu shui qu" in my sample, I was drawn to it. I never realized so many things are begging for attention even in such a short poem. Therefore, this project now becomes a case study of translation, a study on the travel of poetic sensibilities and the language itself.

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My heart was beating so loud when I first saw professor Paula Varsano. I was worrying that she would refuse to be my supervisor and close up the door. That day, with a topsy-turvy mind, I blankly walked into her office and said I wanted to write a thesis on Li Bai and his translation. And the next second, even before I could react, she pulled out the precious French translations she collected. Again over again, I was impressed by her knowledge and inspired by her enthusiasm. Without her, this thesis would never have existed. I want to thank profession Varsano for always being patient with my language and thoughts, for constantly encouraging me to challenge myself, and for giving me the best college experience I could ever ask for.

The day of my departure for the States, my parents and I went to the Gugong Palace in Beijing. It was a beautiful winter morning. The rough wind from Siberia blew away the clouds of dust in the city. The sky was so blue as if it had never been this blue before. A beam of sunlight shed on the red Palace wall, and all of sudden I remembered my middle school days.

I was a grumpy and rebellious child. I felt caged in school and at home. There were countless days where I secretly switched to a corner seat in order to read leisure books. And Li Bai's poetry was my favorite on my reading list. I had never read anyone like him before. How can you just get drunk and never wake up? How can you wish to never lower your head facing the powerful and the influential? I had never seen anyone this free and unconstrained. And his writing freed me, too. I always wanted to write something for him, to thank him for embracing a rebellious teenage girl, for introducing me his whimsical ideas and unfettered soul. I thought this project would be me paying my debt to the great poet, but now that everything is done, I only felt more indebted to him.

In any event, this has been an incredible experience for me. At last, I would like to thank my French teacher, Sarah Christofides for her help with 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century French poetry; I would also like to thank the advisor of Comparative Literature department Anatole (Tony) Soyka for walking me through the logistics for this thesis.



## Appendix

Note 24:

“Qinping diao”：清平調

云想衣裳花想容，春風拂檻露華濃。  
若非群玉山頭見，會向瑤臺月下逢。

一枝紅艷露凝香，雲雨巫山枉斷腸。  
借問漢宮誰得似？可憐飛燕倚新妝！

名花傾國兩相歡，長得君王帶笑看。  
解釋春風無限恨，沈香亭北倚闌干。

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