A Note on Line Length in Verse Translation

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ABSTRACT

In translating English poetry into Chinese (or Chinese poetry into English) we must consider not only our choice of words and word order, but also an "equivalent" or "comparable" line length. This does not mean the English and Chinese lines need to be the same length – on the principle of character-for-syllable, syllable-for-character, character-for-syllable-segment or syllable-segment-for-character (where the "moun" of "mountain" is a syllable and the "m" and "n" of "moun" are syllable segments)––though they could be of equivalent length according to any of these standards of measure if it seems to fit the feeling and meaning in that particular case. However, there is no real need for a "regular" meter in the source language to be rendered into a regular meter in the target language. On the contrary, more natural rhythm and speech may well be achieved by an "irregular" meter in the target language – that is, by adding "padding words" or phrases. This also helps us to catch the sense of the "run-on lines" in English verse when we translate into Chinese, since formal Chinese poetry is felt to have end-stopped lines.

KEY WORDS

syllables
syllable segments
regular meter
irregular meter
padding words
run-on lines
end-stopped lines
natural rhythm
natural speech

Years ago in my study on translating the singing part of Chinese Peking Opera into English, I suggested that the common practice of matching a Chinese character to an English syllable is far from being ideal, especially in the case of translating songs of fast tempo. My reason is very simple. A Chinese character is monosyllabic, formed of phones or phonemes in homorganic sequences in which the point of articulation changes little or not at all (as in [mb] or [kx]). Besides, there are no codas like [p], [k], [t], or [ps], [ks], [ts]. An English syllable or monosyllabic word, except for words like "tea," "pan," and "ray," is often formed in heterorganic sequences, in which the point of articulation shifts (as in [mt] or [ks]). In other words, in strict phonetic terms, a monosyllbic English word may consist of more than one syllabic segment. For instance, "put" has two syllabic segments; "split" has three. Naturally, it takes more time and breath to vocalize "split" or "sticks" than to say "go" or "do".[1]

Thus we easily can see the significance of line length in translating songs, since songs are set to music. This fact made me feel that the length of a line must also be taken into serious consideration in verse or poetry translation from Chinese into English or *vice versa*, because there is music or musicality in poetry, especially poems with traditional regular meters, whether or not they are intended for singing or chanting.

In his "The *Pai-hua* and Modern Chinese Poetry," Wai-lim Yip points out how Tu Fu's line

國	破	山	河	在
Empire	broken	mountain(s)	rivers	exist

has been rendered into:

> Though a country be sundered, hills and rivers endure.
>
> — Bynner (1928)

> A nation though fallen, the land yet remains.
>
> — W. J. B. Fletcher (1933)

> The state may fall, but the hills and streams remain.
>
> — David Hawkes (1967)

In these translations, the analytical or explanatory "though," "yet," and "but" have "destroyed the montage presentation in the original." The same

thing happens when Liu Ta-ch'eng turned the line into *pai-hua:* now the original five-character line becomes a fifteen-character one. Liu's *pai-hua* version reads:

國家／ 已經／ 破碎了／祇是／ 山河／依然／如故
country already broken only mountain still as before.
(empire) (river)

The words "already" (已經), "only" (祇是), and "still" (依然) destroy "both the montage presentation and the directness in the same manner the English versions have turned drama into analysis."[2]

I certainly do agree. But my present interest in quoting Yip's discussion above lies not in the imagery of the line, but in showing that when the length of a line changes, the rhythm of the musical or sound effect changes, too. Take Fletcher's translation, which is the shortest of the three in terms of syllables or syllabic segments, and also cut off the "though" and "yet" there, and make the line read:

A nation/ fallen,// the land/ remains//

We can still see that even when there are no more additional elements of analytical or explanatory nature, Tu Fu's line gives us a different rhythm.

This is true not only in translating from a different language, but also in revising a poem in the same language. A further comparison between Tu Fu's original and Liu's *pai-hua* version will make it clear. Now suppose we also take away the explanatory words in Liu's work and make the line read as follows:

國家／破碎了／ 山河／依然／
country / broken / mountain / still //
river

or

國家／破碎了／山河／如故／
country / broken / mountain / as before //
river

Now, even if we do not count the number of characters in the lines, their rhythmic patterns are very different from the original, which reads:

國破／山河在//
Country broken/ mountain-river there//.

Generally speaking, when a Chinese line of poetry is translated into English, the line in the target language is usually longer than the one in the source language. But it does not follow that when an English verse or poem is rendered into Chinese, the lines in Chinese will be shorter than those in the English original. A quick look at some translations of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" will show the contrary. This poem has been rendered into Chinese by several translators, who are mostly poets themselves. Since it would be too long and unnecessary to quote all of them here, I will select the first stanza of three versions by one translator, which may add some interest to the present analysis.

Original by Robert Frost:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

Translations by Warren Sung:

(a)我想我知道這是誰的樹林，
雖然他住在那個農村；
他不會曉得我在此駐立
凝視雪花被覆樹林。(1967)

(b)我知道這是誰的樹林。
雖然他家住那個莊村；
他看不見我在此稍待
觀賞雪花被覆着樹林。(1969)

(c)曉得這是誰家樹林。
他就住在那個莊村；
他不知我在此稍待
觀賞雪花被覆樹林。(1980)

The translator says that he started his translation of this poem in 1956 and it took him quite a long while to shorten the lines to eight characters each in

the 1980 version. But he does not like it as much as the 1969 version, which is more natural.[3]

Then, why did he try so hard to match the number of characters to the number of syllables in the original line? This, I suppose, was likely because of the influence of the common belief or practice that one character for one syllable is the best way of treating line length. Actually, I like his 1967 version best not only because it is more natural and its meaning is closer to the original (which is not our subject of discussion now), but because it approximates the original better in line length in terms of syllabic segments.

Of course the syllabic segment is not necessarily a better standard of measurement for line length than the one-character-for-one-syllable approach. A monosyllablic English word of two syllabic segments often does not have the same weight and strength as a word of two syllables; and a stressed syllable is different from an unstressed one. An examination of a few more examples may perhaps enable us to have a better understanding of the problem.

As a rule, the length of a line or sentence in a prose work is not so significant as that in a verse of regular meter, which follows specific conventional schemes of versification. For instance, in composing an English sonnet, the poet has to observe a fixed pattern of meter and rhyming. In blank verse, he has only to follow the pattern of iambic pentameter, but he does not have to worry about rhyming since the blank verse consists of unrimed lines. And in order to make our analysis of line length simpler, in the following we will study some lines from Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear*, which are generally agreed to be among the most powerful English. (Numbers at the end of the lines indicate the total of syllabic segments.)

Lear: Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow! (17)
You cataracts and hurricanes, spout (16)
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks! (20)
(III, ii, 1-3)[4]

The best known translations in Chinese are by Chu Sheng-hao (朱生豪) and Liang Shih-ch'iu (梁實秋). Their renderings of these lines are as follows:

Chu's version:

吹吧，風啊！吹破了你的臉頰，猛烈地吹吧！(16)
你瀑布一樣的傾盆大雨，儘管倒瀉下來，(16)
浸沒了我們的尖塔，淹沒了屋頂上的風標吧！[5](18)

Liang's version:

吹罷，風，吹破了你的腮！狂！吹！(11)
飛瀑龍卷一樣的雨，(8)
你淹沒了塔尖，溺死了塔尖上的風標鸡罷！[6](16)

One thing needs pointing out before we go any further. That is, neither of these versions observe the original line division of verse form. Both of them rendered the lines into prose in Chinese. The arrangement above is mine for the sake of easier comparison.

Now, in view of line length, any reader who has the experience of reading aloud, either for performance to an audience or just for pleasure, may find that Chu's translation is closer to the original than Liang's simply because it reads more naturally. This, of course, is not a matter of line length alone; it involves problems like sentence structure, style, individual sounds, punctuations and pauses, etc., which are rather difficult to treat separately. Take the first line for instance. Judging by the basic linguistic structure of the line, Ling's rendering has very much the same arrangement as Shakespeare's. It is almost a word-for-word translation with the same sequence:

Blow,	winds,	and	crack	your	cheeks!	rage!	blow!
吹罷，	風，		吹破了	你的	腮！	狂！	吹！

However, the last two Chinese characters (狂 for "rage" and 吹 for "blow") are rarely used alone like this in our spoken language. Chu combines "rage! blow!" into "猛烈地吹吧!" (blow as fiercely as you like or can which weakens the strength of the original in rhythm and tempo. This suggests that when a translator is considering the line length, he has also to think of the line structure—how the line is composed, the rhythm and tempo. And in translating verses for recitation by the actor, he has also to ponder on the sound effect and the naturalness of speech.

Though we cannot form any criteria by the simple analyses above, —and it is not my intention here to establish or suggest anything definite,— we should see by now that line length is a factor worth considering in trans-

lating verses for recitation or the stage. Since line length can be decided neither by the a-character-for-a-syllable or a-syllable-for-a-character standard, nor by the a-character-for-a-syllabic-segment or a-syllabic-segment-for-a-character approach, we can perhaps say at this point that (a) when one of them is ideal by itself something in between may work better, and (b) it is not worth our effort to try to find some regular meter for translating an English poem into a Chinese poem of similar nature, or *vice versa.*

But this does not mean that we should completely ignore the verse form and translate poetry into prose. In my own experience with reading and translating, I prefer verse for verse. A traditional form of regular meter has the advantage of arousing in us certain specific feelings or emotion consciously or unconsciously associated with the form. But we do not have to stick to the superficial number of characters, syllables, or syllabic segments. To add some words or phrases to a line of regular meter, when skillfully done, would not necessarily break the basic rhythm. On the contrary, such added elements—the "padding words" (襯字 *ch'ien-tzu*) or sentences—may help achieve, in the hands of masters, "better rhythm and natural speech."[7] Lines of this nature are not uncommon in classical Chinese verses, and they can be found in many a song in the Yuan drama. If the traditional poets could create such "irregular" lines—lines with padding words—without doing harm to the rhythm of the regular meter, why can the translator not do so as long as he can preserve the basic rhythm and tempo of the original?

There is another factor that makes me feel that it's better to use such "irregular" lines in verse translating rather than use any regular meter (by following the character/syllable or character/syllabic-segment standard). This factor is: in English poems there are often run-on lines, like "He will not see me stopping here/ To watch his woods fill up with snow" or "You cataracts and hurricanes, spout/ Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!". As a rule, classical Chinese poetry is composed of end-stopped lines; every line comes to a stop or pause in our reading. Though lines like

欲窮千里目
更上一層樓

To look beyond the horizon
Go up one more story.

are run-on lines in the logical sense of meaning, to the ears of the

Chinese who are used to the traditional way of reading or reciting, they are felt quite differently from the run-on lines in the nature of English poetry. In other words, when a Chinese reads aloud a poem of regular meter he tends to have a pause at the end of each line. Therefore, to use a Chinese verse form of regular pattern for translating a classical English poem with run-on lines, even if the translator has done a perfect job in approximating the line structure, image sequence, diction and other elements, the rhythm will still be different in the mouth and ears of a Chinese who is familiar with the metrical patterns or musical feelings of the traditional forms of poetry. If the translator can create "irregular" lines in the way explained above, the irregularity in form may help free the reader from his conscious or unconscious association with the traditional form when such an association is not desired.

One may argue that to use regular meter for regular meter, either translating from Chinese into English or from English into Chinese, would make the work look more faithful, at least in form. That is certainly true. Yet we must also know that to a Chinese eye English poetry is almost always written in irregular lines. And the practice of writing or printing a Chinese poem line by line evenly as shown below seems a rather late invention:

x	x	x	x	x,		or	x	x	x	x	x	x	x,
x	x	x	x	x;			x	x	x	x	x	x	x;
x	x	x	x	x,			x	x	x	x	x	x	x,
x	x	x	x	x.			x	x	x	x	x	x	x.

Such a neat form of line division was not seen in older publications and has never been emphasized by the traditional poets and calligraphers.

With all these theoretical and practical considerations in mind, it seems to me that equivalent line length in a translation can only be achieved through careful weighing of various standards of measurement—syllable/character, character/syllabic-segment, and other elements like rhythm patterns and traditional associations of mood and feeling. Verse translation is one of the most challenging kinds of translation. The translator has often, if not always, to sacrifice one thing or another, concentrating on the meaning and spirit of the work. Comparability of line length is perhaps the last element to consider. But this does not mean that one can just ignore it. He should try his best to find or create something to complete his mission impossible.

Notes

1. For further discussion, see my "Translating the Verse Passages in Peking Opera: Problems and Possibilities," Part II, *Tamkang Review* VIII, 1 (April 1977), 172-74.
2. Wai-lim Yip, "The *Pai-hua* and Modern Chinese Poetry," *Tamkang Review,* I, 1 (April 1970), 45-48.
3. Warren K. J. Sung (宋廣仁 or 宋穎豪), " 也是一種譯法," 香港時報 Oct. 20, 1967; "' 駐立雪春畔 '之我譯," 聯合報, Jan. 19, 1980.
4. *The Arden Shakespeare,* ed. Kenneth Muir (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), *King Lear,* 99-100.
5. Chu Sheng-hao (朱生豪), tr. 李爾王 , 11th printing (台北 : 世界書局 , 1983), 58.
6. Liang Shih-ch'iu (梁實秋), tr. 李爾王 (台北：遠東圖書公司 , 1981), 91-92.
7. Yü Ta-kang (俞大綱), 國劇簡介 (台北：教育部社會教育司 , n.d.) 6. It is later included in his 寥音閩劇作 (台北：河洛圖書出版社 , 1977).