

# Ezra Pound's "Liu Ch' e" and Poetics of Translation

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**Abstract** Ezra Pound's poem "Liu Ch' e" is a translation of a Chinese poem, "Song of Fallen Leaves and Whining Cicadas." Pound's "Liu Ch' e" has become a new poem that has incorporated his poetic theory: it is an independent, self-contained poem, without reference to the original poem, "Song of Fallen Leaves and Whining Cicadas." The paper investigates the original poem and the translation by looking into Chinese scholars' critiques and Giles' and Pound's translations of the same poem.

**Key words** poetics of translation; "Liu Ch' e"; "Song of Fallen Leaves and Whining Cicadas"; Pound Giles

In translation there is the problem of communicability between two languages — the original language and the target language. In prose translation meaning outweighs form. The target language in this case focuses on the transfer of meaning in the original. And the problem of literary quality or art in writing seldom surfaces, unless the prose work is highly "poetic." However, Pound's "Liu Ch' e" is not merely a literary translation. It is a creation of a new poetic work, based on a Chinese poem, though Pound's knowledge of the Chinese language seemed limited. It was likely that he read an English translation of the original Chinese poem. Pound was a good translator of poetry in several languages. And when he translated poetry, he tended to translate it freely, which turned out to be very good.<sup>1</sup>

Ezra Pound is one of the most important poets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his being a poet outweighs his patronage of the writers of the last century; his role as a patron in literary circles is, however, well known, for T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and James Joyce. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is a result of collaboration between Eliot and Pound; without Pound, it would have looked different or would never have been a representative poem of the last century. His influence on other writers was thus so great and changed them better and great. It is not difficult to assume that this ability of his to ameliorate a literary work in a draft must have applied to what he had accomplished as translator of so many great classical works of the East and the West, as Ming Xie surveys what Pound has achieved in his "Pound as Translator" (204 - 223).

Pound's "Liu Ch' e" is a translation. But it is also one of his own poems. Pound knew Chinese, but he might have been unable to read poetry in Chinese, as He

Huang claims, as below, in his article discussing Pound's translation of the same poem<sup>2</sup> and Ming Xie mentions that Pound's Chinese "remained rudimentary" (Xie 205). When Pound saw a translation, just as he had been asked to look at "The Waste Land," he must have seen a possibility of it being a great poem.

To make a comparison, three of the poems are put together: first, Pound's "Liu Ch' e"; then, H. Giles' "Gone," a translation of Lie Che's poem; finally, Liu Ch' e's poem, which is in Chinese, with the transcription of each word's Chinese pronunciation added by the present writer for the purpose of this study:

Pound:

**"Liu Ch' e"**

The rustling of the silk is discontinued,  
Dust drifts over the court-yard,  
There's no sound of foot-fall, and the leaves  
Scurry into heaps and lie still,  
And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them;  
A wet leaf that clings to the threshold. (Huang 14)

H. Giles:

**"Gone"**

The sound of rustling silk is stilled,  
With dust the marble courtyard filled;  
No footfalls echo on the floor,  
Fallen leaves in heaps block up the door...  
For she, my pride, my lovely one, is lost,  
And I am left, in hopeless anguish tossed. (Huang 14)

Liu Ch' e:

落叶哀蝉曲	<b>luo ye ai chan qu</b>
罗袂兮无声,	luo mei xi wu sheng,
玉墀兮尘生,	yu chi xi chen sheng,
虚房冷而寂寞,	xu fang leng er ji mo,
落叶依于重扃,	luo ye yi yu zhong jiong。
望彼美之女兮,	wang bi mei zhi nv xi,
安得感余心之未宁!	an de gan yu xin zhi wei ning! (Chen 223)

## II

To have a point of reference, the original poem in Chinese is discussed first and then the two translated poems by Giles and Pound. The two translations need to be compared side by side. Without Giles' initial translation, Pound would not have made this poem, as he was not as good at Chinese as Giles was. But it seems that Giles was not as competent a poet as Pound was, as the two translations are compared. Translation of a poem from one language into another is an impossible task, unless the trans-

lator is a bilingual poet in both languages. But the fact is, Giles was good enough to translate a poem in Chinese, but not as good a poet as Pound.

It will be of great help to understand the translations if we can understand the original work. So, we would like to follow He Huang and discuss his article, “Rewriting Strategy in Ezra Pound’s Translation of ‘Song of Fallen Leaves and Whining Cicadas.’” Huang offers three key elements in the Chinese poem to consider: the music, or the rhymes, the imagery, and the metaphor in it.

First, music: The pronunciation of each word is transcribed, to follow what he explains:

luo ye ai chan qu  
 luo mei xi wu sheng,  
 yu chi xi chen sheng,  
 xu fang leng er ji mo,  
 luo ye yi yu zhong jiong。  
 wang bi mei zhi nv xi,  
 an de gan yu xin zhi wei ning!

Thetwice repeated exclamation, xi (兮), in lines 1 and 2 emphasizes the powerful grief of emotional rise and fall in the poet. The last characters in lines 1 and 2, sheng (声) and sheng (生), are rhymed, and the last characters in lines 4 and 6, jiong (肩) and ning (宁) are also rhymed. These four that end with the nasal sound, “-ng,” produce sad lingering affection. Then, Huang gives the metrical feet, “/” for strong accentuation, “x” the weak one, and “||” for the break:

/ x / || x /,  
 / x / || x /。  
 x / || / || x x /,  
 x / || / || x x /。  
 / || x / x x /,  
 x / || / || x / || x x /? (Huang 15)

The first four lines are two parallel couplets, which flow well. But in line 5, there is a change in tone, but this fifth line again matches with line 6, with a slight difference. This abrupt change represents the poet’s intense grief and inquietude.

The imagery: The poet, Emperor Wu, describes the dusty steps, which were once clean, and the fallen leaves on the numerous doors to express the desolate scene in late autumn. The “fallen leaves,” luo ye (落叶), and “numerous doors,” (重肩), give a peaceful and still impression; the verb, “cling,” yi (依), breaks the impression, reminding the readers of death. The poet makes effective use of the image, which is still and in motion as well, to express his deep sorrow.

The metaphor: In line three Emperor Wu uses xu, (虚), as in “xu fang leng er ji mo” (虚房冷而寂寞), which means two things. It means “emptiness” and “loneliness.” And what follows, “leng er ji mo” (冷而寂寞), means both isolation

and the grief that the poet feels keenly when he is left alone. In line four *yi* (依, meaning to rely, rest, cling) is the central word in sound, image, and meaning: it is a soft unrounded vowel, representing the poet's fragile temperament, the inseparable attachment to each other, and the pain, which the parting causes.

### III

Pound's translation is to be regarded as an independent poem, though he must have been exposed to Emperor Wu's original poem, "Song of Fallen Leaves and Whining Cicadas," by way of Giles' translation of the poem, "Gone." Pound's poem is farther removed than Giles' translation from the original poem. Giles' translation and the original poem in general have some similarity, despite the difference in Chinese and English. There is a difference between the original poem and Giles' translation. Giles, according to Huang, changes the tactile sensation of temperature into an auditory sensation. Giles, for example, translates "the empty house feels cold and lonesome" (xu fang leng er ji mo: 虚房冷而寂寞) into "No footfalls echo on the floor." The word "echo" well expresses emptiness and sadness, which is a good translation. In the following line, "Fallen leaves in heaps block up the door..." to "block up" cannot express the original poem's beauty and affection. Compared with Giles' translation, Pound's is farther away from the original. But Pound's difference is not a mistake or disregard of the original, but an enhancement of the original, which is a "creative translation." "The sensibility of the original writer and his translator interact in the creation of a new work of art" (Sullivan 106).

We have now come to Pound's translation, "Liu Ch'e." Pound adapted many of Chinese poems contained in Herbert Giles' *History of Chinese Literature* (1901) and published "Liu Ch'e" and others in *Des Imagistes* in the early 1914. And in April 1915 he published *Cathay*, a book of 14 Chinese poems, which can be regarded as his translations and his own poems as well. The full text is quoted again to have a whole picture:

#### "Liu Ch'e"

The rustling of the silk is discontinued,  
 Dust drifts over the court-yard,  
 There's no sound of foot-fall, and the leaves  
 Scurry into heaps and lie still,  
 And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them:  
 A wet leaf that clings to the threshold.

In this translation Pound is an imagist poet: the point of view is like that of a moving camera lens; the auditory image in the first line: "The rustling of the silk is discontinued" is followed by a visual image of "Dust [that] drifts over the court-yard." Then the third line combines the auditory and visual images: "There's no sound of foot-fall, and the leaves." The next line links the third line, which is a subject for the verb, "Scurry into heaps and lie still." Lines 1 to 4 are continuous, as in the original poem, as He Huang has demonstrated above. What is marvelous is, how

could Pound feel the sense of grief building up in the original poem, without knowing the original poem in Chinese? And as in the original poem, Pound mimics the music in the translation: line 5 abruptly breaks the rhythm that has built up in a similar tone, but the final line goes back to the previous rhythm. Further, the image of the beloved is emphasized, or the absence of her: “And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them:” She is beneath the leaves! And the final line is a powerful ending to the poem, and to the poet. It is a metaphor and a literal image of “A wet leaf.” It is a metaphor that represents his heart that sheds tears and is wet, his heart still clinging to the departed. It is a wet leaf, cold and cruel, that clings to the stone of the threshold.

Giles’ translation has contributed to Pound in making a great poem, which is a kind of unintended collaboration between translators. A good original has to wait for translators, until it becomes a good piece, such as Pound’s “Liu Ch’e.”

## Notes

1. As J. P. Sullivan in his book review “Ezra Pound as a Latin Translator” points to “Pound’s disregard, intentional or unintentional, of literary accuracy. . . . and [his] willingness to compress what he regards as poetically irrelevant, antiquated, or incomprehensible to the modern reader . . .” (101), Pound tends to *create* a new poem, rather than just translates it into English. This is a review on *Ezra Pound: Translations* (Eds. Ezra Pound and Marcella Spann. New York: New Directions Paperback, 1964) and *Confucious to Cummings. An Anthology of Poetry by Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1964).

2. See *Journal of Anqing Teachers College* (Social Science Edition) 7 (2008): 14–16. He Huang’s article has been translated into English, and it is worthwhile to sum up his main points about the music, imagery, and metaphor in the Chinese original in this article, Sections II and III. Huang is a native speaker of Chinese who can best discuss the original poem, and provides a basis for the present argument that Pound was a good imagist poet when he translated the poem into English. This essay and the other one by Chen are translated from Chinese into English by Jin, Lihua (金丽花), a Ph. D. student at Department of English Language and Literature, Graduate School, Hanyang University, Seoul.

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