Translating China: An Interview with Professor Zhao Yanchun on His Spreading Chinese Literature and Culture to the English World

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Abstract: This interview features a profound dialogue between Professor Zhao Yanchun—a distinguished translator and scholar dedicated to the international promotion of Chinese classics—and Associate Professor Sun Chengping. Centered on the translation and global communication of classical Chinese works, the conversation covers Professor Zhao's decades-long translation journey, spanning foundational texts like *The Book of Songs* and *The Word and the World* (his pioneering rendering of Dao De Jing), as well as complete poetic collections of Li Bai, Du Fu, Bai Juyi, and other literary giants. Key topics include core translation principles such as "as literal as is possible; as free as is necessary" and "Every A is A" (A=A), practical strategies for overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, systematic plans for large-scale projects like *The Complete Tang Poems*, and insights into the role of translators in cross-cultural exchange. The interview also offers invaluable guidance for young scholars aspiring to classical translation, making it a comprehensive exploration of the art, challenges, and mission of bringing Chinese classics to the English-speaking world.

Keywords: Chinese classics; translation; global communication; translation principles; cross-cultural exchange

Sun Chengping: Professor Zhao, thank you for accepting this interview themed on the topic of spreading Chinese literature. As is widely recognized, you have achieved remarkable accomplishments in the English translation of classical Chinese works. Could you first provide an overview of your translation practice journey and share your insights on the current overall status of Chinese literature translation?

Zhao Yanchun: My translation practice has always centered around "bringing classical Chinese works to life in the English-speaking world" and can be roughly divided into three phases. In the early years, based on linguistic research, I constructed the framework of *Reductionist Approach to Translatology*, providing theoretical support for the English translation of classical works. In the middle phase, I focused on core classics, completing the English translations of foundational texts such as *The Book of Songs*, *The Word and the World*, and *Three Word Primer in English Rhyme*, while exploring the practical path of "translating poetry as poetry and classics as classics." In recent years, I have delved into translating complete poetic collections of renowned poets, successively launching rhymed English translations of the complete works of Li Bai, Du Fu, Bai Juyi, Wang Wei, and other literary giants. Currently, I am advancing the English translation of Su Dongpo's complete prose and poetry, and will initiate the English translation project of *The Complete Tang Poems* in the subsequent phase.

From the perspective of the overall current situation, Chinese literature translation today presents the characteristic of "two-way efforts yet remaining imbalance." On one hand, attention to the English translation of classical works has been continuously rising. Projects

such as the National Social Science Fund have provided strong support, more and more scholars have engaged in this field, and the number of translations has increased significantly. On the other hand, there are still three prominent issues: first, the scarcity of high-quality works—some translations either fall into semantic deviations of "character-centeredness" or lose the cultural connotations and artistic characteristics of the original works to accommodate foreign language expressions; second, inadequate promotion—most translations are confined to academic circles, failing to form an effective mechanism of "being translated and then widely promoted"; third, incomplete system—the English translations of important texts such as the works of the Hundred Schools of Thought lack systematic collation, and translation standards and dissemination paths have not yet formed a cohesive force. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that with the enhancement of cultural confidence and the deepening of cross-cultural exchanges, the academic community has reached more consensus on the translation concept of "being faithful to the original and reproducing its spirit and charm," which has laid a solid foundation for the high-quality development of Chinese literature translation.

Sun Chengping: You proposed the translation principle of "as literal as is possible; as free as is necessary." Could you, with specific examples, illustrate how you choose between literal and free translation strategies when handling philosophically profound texts like the *The Word and the World* line "Dao Chang Wu Ming"? What is the core criterion for deciding to use literal or free translation?

Zhao Yanchun: The core of "as literal as is possible; as free as is necessary." lies in "taking the original text as the foundation"—literal translation is the basis to ensure semantic accuracy and preservation of cultural characteristics; free translation is a supplement, used only to address failures of literal translation caused by linguistic differences or cultural gaps, never a free interpretation divorced from the original.

The translation of "Dao Chang Wu Ming" as "The Word has no constant name" in the *The Word and the World* is a typical practice of this strategy.

First, one should assess the feasibility of literal translation. "Dao" is a core philosophical concept. Instead of transliterating it as "Dao," I translated it as "Word," which not only retains the philosophical connotations of "origin and universal law" but also aligns with the English-speaking world's cognitive context of "Word" (ultimate truth, creative origin)—this is a "precision literal translation" of key concepts. Meanwhile, adjustments to English word order ensure natural expression, conveying the philosophical speculation that "the Word, as the ultimate law, inherently transcends the scope of human linguistic naming" while avoiding the awkwardness that literal translation might bring. If we rigidly pursue word-for-word literal translation (e.g., "Tao is often without name"), "often" weakens the connotation of "eternity" in "Chang" (常), and the transliteration "Tao" leaves Western readers unable to grasp its philosophical essence—this would instead violate the core goal of translation: "conveying meaning."

Second, the core criteria for choosing literal or free translation is priority to semantic fidelity. If literal translation can fully convey the original's core semantics, cultural connotations, and logical relationships without causing comprehension barriers for target-language readers, literal translation is mandatory. For example, "Shang Shan Ruo Shui"

(上善若水) is translated as "The top goodness is like water"—literal translation preserves the metaphorical relationship, allowing Western readers to intuitively perceive the nature of "goodness" without the need for free translation.

Third, translation should resolve cultural gaps. If literal translation would trigger cultural misunderstanding or cognitive blankness among target-language readers, free translation is needed to supplement cultural context, but without altering the core semantics. For example, "Tian Di Bu Ren, Yi Wan Wu Wei Chu Gou" (天地不仁，以万物为刍狗). "Chu Gou" (刍狗) refers to straw dogs used in ancient rituals, and I translated it as "straw dog" to retain the core meaning of "temporary and discarded when useless," avoiding cultural misinterpretation.

Sun Chengping: Having completed the English translations of *The Book of Songs*, *The Word and the World*, and the complete works of poets such as Li Bai, Du Fu, and Wang Wei, how has the principle of "As A is A" specifically guided you in striking a balance between "conveying meaning" and "expressing emotion" throughout these extensive classical translation projects?

Zhao Yanchun: The core of "Every A is A" (Shi Qi Suo Shi) lies in "letting the original text live in the target language in its true form"—neither distorting the original's semantic essence or cultural characteristics, nor neglecting its genre attributes or emotional core. This principle provides a clear anchor for balancing "conveying meaning" and "expressing emotion": conveying meaning is restoring the original's "objective reality" (semantics, logic, cultural connotations), while expressing emotion is recreating its "inherent essence" (emotion, temperament, aesthetic traits). The two are unified in faithfully presenting the original's "true appearance."

For translating foundational classics like *The Book of Songs* and *The Word and the World*, "Every A is A" demands safeguarding the essence first before matching form, as conveying meaning entails transmitting their ideological core and expressing emotion involves reproducing their stylistic temperament. Take the translation of "Dao Fa Zi Ran" as "The Word is modeled on nature": the core semantics— "the operation of Dao （the Word）follows its inherent, natural laws" (conveying meaning)—and the key to expressing emotion lies in capturing the "spontaneity and non-interference" of "Zi Ran" (nature) as well as the original's concise, aphoristic tone. "Word" accurately corresponds to the philosophical essence of "Dao" (conveying meaning), while the brief sentence structure restores the classic's condensed temperament (expressing emotion), avoiding extra interpretations without diluting the profound connotation of "Zi Ran" for the sake of fluency.

In translating the complete works of individual poets, "Every A is A" requires aligning the balance between conveying meaning and expressing emotion with each poet's unique characteristics, ensuring the translation reflects their authentic creative style. Li Bai's poetry is defined by "boldness and elegance": conveying meaning means transmitting his romantic imagination and free-spirited sentiment, while expressing emotion involves recreating his majestic momentum and unrestrained rhythm. For example, "Tian Sheng Wo Cai Bi You Yong, Qian Jin San Jin Huan Fu Lai" from *Do Drink Wine* is translated as "So born by Heaven we must be of use; spend all the money and more will come up." It first accurately conveys the core meaning of "I, born with talent, am destined to be useful; even if a thousand taels of gold are spent, more will return" (conveying meaning), then uses English

exclamatory patterns and forceful rhythm to restore the poem's boldness and heroism—neither weakening the core semantics of "confidence in one's talent" nor letting rhythm constrain the outburst of emotion.

Du Fu's poetry is marked by "gloom and restraint": conveying meaning emphasizes his patriotic compassion and realistic portrayal, while expressing emotion reproduces the staggered rhythm and profound sentiment. The line "Guo Po Shan He Zai, Cheng Chun Cao Mu Shen" from "A View of Spring" is translated as "The state broken, the land we keep; The spring grass in the town grows deep." It first clarifies the tragic semantics of "the country has fallen, but the mountains and rivers remain; in spring, the city is overgrown with grass, yet sparsely populated" (conveying meaning), then uses words like "broken" and "deep" to enhance the gloomy atmosphere, and static verbs such as "keep" and "grows" to convey a sense of vicissitudes (expressing emotion)—accurately restoring the post-war scene while transmitting the original's sorrow and grief.

Wang Wei's poetry is characterized by "painting in poetry": conveying meaning restores the details and logic of the scene, while expressing emotion recreates the quiet and ethereal artistic conception. The line "Ming Yue Song Jian Zhao, Qing Quan Shi Shang Liu" from "The Hills Wearing Autumn Hue" is translated as "The moon bright to the pine trees glows; the stream clear on the pebbles flows." It first precisely presents the scene of "the bright moon shining through the pine forest, the clear spring flowing over the stones" (conveying meaning), then uses concise, serene language to convey the "peaceful beauty of mountains and countryside" (expressing emotion). Words like "clear" and "bright" echo the qualities of moonlight and spring water, while parallel structures restore the poem's pictorial sense and harmony—neither straying from the core of the scenery description nor failing to let readers perceive the Zen and tranquility in the poem.

The core methodology guided by "Every A is A" is "prioritizing the essence before adorning the form": the original's semantics, ideas, and core emotions are the "essence," which must be firmly guarded through conveying meaning; rhythm, diction, and sentence structure are the "form," serving the expression of emotion without overriding the "essence." In translation, one first accurately anchors "conveying meaning"—clarifying what the original "is" (semantics) and what it "intends to express" (ideas and emotions)—then considers "how to express it" (form and rhythm). This ensures all efforts to express emotion revolve around the original's true appearance, without adding arbitrary content, deliberately omitting key elements, or distorting the essence. In this way, conveying meaning and expressing emotion are not opposites but a unity of "essence" and "form," ultimately allowing target-language readers to both understand the original's core connotations and feel its unique artistic charm.

Sun Chengping: Your Complete English Translation of Du Fu's Poems is currently regarded as the most comprehensive English version of Du Fu's poetry and the only full rhymed translation. When converting the level tones (pingze) of Chinese poetry into English iambic meter, how do you address the inherent differences between the two linguistic prosodic systems?

Zhao Yanchun: The core to resolving the inherent differences between Chinese pingze (level tones) and English iambic meter lies in "functional equivalence rather than formal

duplication." Instead of forcing direct correspondence, I achieve equivalent conversion between "emotion conveyed by pingze" and "aesthetics of iambic meter" through "prosodic adaptation, rhythmic resonance, and semantic coordination." The goal is to let English readers perceive the cadence and depth that pingze brings to Du Fu's poems, rather than fixating on tonal matching itself.

The key insight is to move beyond "tonal correspondence" and focus on "prosodic function." Chinese pingze refers to the rise and fall of tones—ping (level tones) is smooth, while ze (oblique tones) is brisk—their core function is to create rhythmic fluctuations and emotional tension. English iambic meter, by contrast, is the alternation of "weak-strong" syllables, primarily serving to form fluid rhythm and convey intensity. In translation, I do not pursue mechanical "ping-to-weak, ze-to-strong" matching. Instead, I align the rhythmic ups and downs of iambic meter with the functional role of pingze in the original poem: for example, using the "stress emphasis" of iambs to correspond to the "cadential emphasis" of ze tones, and "weak syllable connection" to mirror the "smooth narration" of ping tones.

A fundamental principle guides this process: prosody serves "meaning" and "emotion." While the differences between the two prosodic systems cannot be fully eliminated, the priority is to prevent them from hindering "conveying meaning" and "expressing emotion." I always adhere to using iambic meter to convey the emotional characteristics (gloom, cadence, passion) and semantic focus of Du Fu's poems, not merely to comply with iambic rules. The function of pingze is realized through equivalent prosodic devices, not mechanical duplication. Ultimately, the English translation allows readers to grasp the connotation of Du Fu's poems while feeling their unique artistic temperament through rhythm—this is the concrete manifestation of the principle of "restoring the original essence" in prosodic conversion.

Sun Chengping: When translating *The Complete Poems of Bai Juyi*, you encountered syntactic structures regarded by academia as "uncharted territory," such as "semantic fragmentation" and "inverted word order." What role did methods like cross-linguistic comparison and semantic decomposition play in overcoming these difficulties?

Zhao Yanchun: Cross-linguistic comparison and semantic decomposition are not mere technical tools but the core methodological pillars for navigating the "uncharted territory" of Bai Juyi's syntactic structures. Semantic decomposition addresses "semantic fragmentation" by breaking down fragmented imagery and implicit logic into independently analyzable semantic units. For example, in the line from "The Song of Long Grief"— "Gu Deng Tiao Jin Wei Cheng Mian" (translated as "His lamp dying out, He can't fall asleep")—the original omits causal conjunctions, resulting in a semantic leap. I first disassembled the line into three core units: "solitary lamp," "burning through the wick," and "failing to fall asleep," then identified the implicit adversative logic. In the English translation, I restored semantic coherence without adding redundant content, preserving the original poem's conciseness while conveying its underlying sorrow.

Cross-linguistic comparison resolves "inverted word order" through functional equivalence rather than formal replication. Bai Juyi often inverted word order to emphasize imagery or adapt to rhythmic patterns—for instance, placing locative phrases at the beginning of sentences. By contrasting Chinese paratactic structures (relying on logical coherence) with

English hypotactic norms (relying on grammatical connectors), I avoided the awkwardness of mechanically replicating the original word order. Instead, I employed English syntactic devices such as fronting core nouns and adjusting attributive positions to retain the intended emphasis. A case in point is the inverted line from "The Song of the Pipa Player": "Dong Chuan Xi Fang Qiao Wu Yan" (translated as "All silence aboard this yacht or that boat"). I fronted "qiao wu yan" (complete silence) as "All silence aboard," echoing the original's locative emphasis while ensuring natural English rhythm and fluency.

These two methods form a complementary framework: semantic decomposition guarantees the fidelity of core meanings amid fragmented expressions, while cross-linguistic comparison ensures the naturalness of the target language. This approach allowed me to tackle Bai Juyi's syntactic difficulties without compromising the precision of his lucid and vivid style, nor losing the poetic integrity of the original texts—upholding the translation principle of "restoring the original as it is."

Sun Chengping: *Three Word Primer in English Rhyme* is acclaimed as a "masterful restoration" for its approach of matching three Chinese characters with three English words while achieving rhyme. Behind this groundbreaking achievement, what innovative attempts did you make to balance preserving the stylistic features of the original text and ensuring the naturalness of English expression?

Zhao Yanchun: The core innovation behind *Three Word Primer in English Rhyme* lies in a dual-focused strategy that reconciles the rigid stylistic constraints of the original and the natural flow of English. First, I developed a "trisyllabic rhyme-matching" framework to preserve the defining stylistic features of the *Three Word Primer in English Rhyme*—its three-character line structure, rhythmic cadence, and rhyming scheme. Unlike literal translations that sacrifice rhyme for meaning or vice versa, I prioritized finding English trisyllabic units that not only correspond semantically to the Chinese triplets but also form cohesive rhymes. For example, the opening line "Ren zhi chu, xing ben shan" is rendered as "Man on earth, good at birth.", where "birth" and "earth" create a subtle rhyme, mirroring the original's rhythmic harmony while adhering to the three-word-per-line structure.

Second, to ensure natural English expression, I adopted a "semantic core prioritization" principle, avoiding forced word choices that would compromise readability. When direct three-word matching risked awkwardness, I adjusted word order within the trisyllabic unit or selected functionally equivalent synonyms, rather than distorting the original meaning. For instance, the line "Zi bu jiao, fu zhi guo" is translated as "What's a father? A good teacher." where the slight flexibility in word order maintains both the three-word structure and the naturalness of English syntax, while the rhyme between "not" and "fault" preserves the poetic rhythm.

Additionally, I integrated "cultural adaptive annotation" for culturally specific terms, embedding brief, unobtrusive explanations within the poetic structure rather than appending lengthy notes. This approach ensured that the translation retained the original's didactic conciseness and poetic form, while making cultural connotations accessible to English readers without disrupting the rhythmic flow. These innovations collectively realized the balance between stylistic fidelity and natural expression, embodying the principle of "translating classics as classics" in the translation of this iconic didactic text.

Sun Chengping: You are currently advancing the translation of *The Complete Prose and Poetry of Su Dongpo*. Su Dongpo shares a profound bond with Hainan. When handling texts with such special cultural connections to the target region of translation and dissemination, what targeted adjustments will you make to your translation strategies? What differences in strategies will there be between your upcoming translation of *The Complete Tang Poems* and your translation of Su Dongpo's works?

Zhao Yanchun: For Su Dongpo's works intertwined with Hainan, my core strategic adjustment centers on culturally embedded functional equivalence. Unlike generic classical translations, I prioritize contextualizing Hainan-specific cultural markers—such as local flora (coconut palms), ethnic customs of the Li people, and his exile experiences—through a layered approach: retaining original terms (e.g., "coconut wine", "Li cloth") with concise parenthetical annotations instead of free translation, preserving cultural specificity while ensuring readability. Meanwhile, I amplify the emotional resonance of his Hainan verses via prosodic fine-tuning: his melancholic yet resilient tones during exile are rendered with a measured iambic rhythm, mirroring the duality of his mood, which aligns with the principle of "translating poetry as poetry".

In contrast, translating *The Complete Tang Poems* demands a systematic, stylistically diverse framework distinct from the single-author focus of Su's corpus. First, a unified terminological system will be established for shared cultural concepts (e.g., "jianghu" [rivers and lakes], "yun" [rhyme and spirit]) across 2,200 poets to ensure consistency. Second, stylistic adaptability is paramount: Li Bai's bold romanticism calls for fluid, elevated diction and loose verse structures, while Du Fu's solemn realism requires precise, weighty phrasing and strict meter. Unlike Su's works, where I can deeply align with a single author's voice, *The Complete Tang Poems* requires toggling flexibly between hundreds of poetic styles, prioritizing each poet's unique artistic identity over a uniform translation tone. Additionally, a comprehensive glossary of Tang-specific historical and cultural terms will be included to facilitate both academic research and general readership.

Sun Chengping: The English translation project of *The Complete Tang Poems*, led by you, is soon to be launched. Involving more than 2,000 poets and about 50 thousand poems, what systematic plans do you have for this large-scale project in terms of team collaboration, unification of translation standards, and quality control?

Zhao Yanchun: For the large-scale translation project of *The Complete Tang Poems*, my systematic planning revolves around three core pillars: hierarchical team collaboration, standardized translation norms, and multi-tiered quality control. First, in team collaboration, I will establish a hierarchical framework consisting of academic advisors, core translators, and research assistants. Academic advisors, well-versed in Tang poetry and comparative literature, will oversee the overall academic direction. Core translators, specialized in different poetic styles and periods, will be divided into groups to handle works by major poets such as Li Bai and Du Fu, as well as lesser-known authors. Research assistants will be responsible for collating annotations, verifying historical allusions, and compiling terminological databases, ensuring efficient division of labor.

Second, unifying translation standards is critical. Based on the principles of "translating poetry as poetry" and "functional equivalence," we will formulate a detailed translation manual covering three key aspects: terminological consistency for shared cultural concepts (e.g., "jianghu" and "chanyuan"), prosodic adaptation principles for different poetic forms (e.g., lushi and jueju), and annotation norms for historical events and cultural allusions. This manual will serve as a unified guideline to maintain consistency across the entire corpus while allowing flexibility for individual poetic styles.

Third, quality control will adopt a three-tiered review mechanism: initial review by group leaders to check semantic fidelity and prosodic harmony, secondary review by academic advisors to evaluate cultural connotation and stylistic accuracy, and final review by the editorial board to ensure overall consistency and academic rigor. Additionally, we will establish a dynamic revision system, inviting external experts to conduct random audits and incorporating feedback to continuously improve translation quality. This integrated planning aims to balance efficiency and precision, ensuring the project achieves both academic excellence and poetic authenticity.

Sun Chengping: You are presiding over the Major Project of the National Social Science Fund, "Collation and Research on the English Translation and Promotion of the Works of the Hundred Schools of Thought". In your opinion, what is the biggest academic challenge currently facing the English translation of these works, and how should we construct a systematic translation and dissemination system?

Zhao Yanchun: The foremost academic challenge in translating the Works of the Hundred Schools of Thought lies in the dual dilemma of conceptual fidelity and cultural accessibility. Core philosophical terms—such as Confucius' "Ren" (Humanity), Laozi's "Word" (the Word), and Zhuangzi's "Xiaoyao" (Flying Free)—carry multi-layered, context-dependent meanings rooted in ancient Chinese cosmology and ethics. Literal translation risks oversimplification, while free translation often dilutes their philosophical essence or imposes Western conceptual frameworks. This dilemma is exacerbated by the lack of a unified terminological system across existing translations, leading to confusion for both English readers and researchers.

To address this and build a systematic translation and promotion system, we propose a three-pronged approach. First, establish a cross-disciplinary terminological consensus. By convening scholars of Chinese philosophy, linguistics, and translation studies, we will compile a standardized glossary that clarifies the semantic spectrum of core terms, provides functional equivalents in English, and documents their evolution across different schools. This ensures conceptual consistency while preserving the nuances of each thinker's ideology. Second, adopt a text-type adaptive translation strategy. For canonical texts like *The Analects*, we prioritize "translating classics as classics" with rigorous annotations; for argumentative works such as *Mencius*, we balance logical clarity with rhetorical fidelity. Third, construct a multi-channel dissemination ecosystem. Beyond academic monographs, we will develop abridged versions for general readers, digital databases for researchers, and collaborative projects with international sinological institutions to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue. This integrated system aims to resolve the fidelity-accessibility dilemma and promote the authentic, systematic dissemination of pre-Qin philosophical thought.

Sun Chengping: Your translated works are not only published domestically but also simultaneously released in overseas regions such as Canada. In promoting the international dissemination of translations, what kind of linkage mechanism do you think should be established between academic publishing, media promotion, and cross-cultural exchange?

Zhao Yanchun: Academic publishing serves as the core of the linkage and the cornerstone of quality, bearing the dual responsibilities of "fidelity and empowerment." On one hand, it is necessary to cooperate with authoritative Chinese and foreign academic publishing houses (such as Zhonghua Book Company in China and overseas academic publishers) to establish a bilingual review mechanism, inviting Chinese and foreign sinologists and translators to jointly review translations. This ensures the academic accuracy and cultural integrity of the works, laying a reliable foundation for promotion. On the other hand, the publishing process must pre-align with media and cross-cultural needs, balancing academic rigor with public readability in layout design, content abstracts, and annotation length—for example, attaching a concise cultural guide to lower the threshold for subsequent promotion.

Media promotion undertakes the function of "breaking circles and attracting audiences," requiring precise alignment with different audience scenarios. For academic audiences, release the core viewpoints of translations through international sinological journals and academic seminars, and push in-depth interpretations via publisher official websites and academic databases. For the general public, cooperate with mainstream overseas media and cultural self-media to produce short video interviews, poetry recitations, and cultural interpretation columns, using daily language to decode the connotations of classic works. Meanwhile, leverage social media matrices to launch topic interactions, link overseas Chinese communities and Chinese learners, and form a spontaneous dissemination effect, bringing translations off the shelves and into public view.

Cross-cultural exchange acts as a long-term empowerment link, injecting emotional resonance into dissemination. Taking translations as the carrier, it is necessary to build platforms for Sino-foreign cultural dialogue—such as co-hosting translator meetings, classic recitation events, and cross-cultural forums with overseas universities and cultural institutions, inviting Chinese and foreign scholars and readers to discuss translations and interpret the shared values behind the culture. In addition, promote the integration of translations into overseas education systems, introducing them into local Chinese classes and general education courses to achieve regular dissemination through teaching scenarios. This linkage allows high-quality content from academic publishing to reach audiences via media promotion, then deepen understanding and build reputation through cross-cultural exchange, ultimately constructing a sustainable international dissemination ecosystem.

Sun Chengping: Your complete translations of poets such as Li Bai and Du Fu have provided systematic texts for international sinological research. What impact might these achievements have on the research paradigms of Chinese poetry in Western academic circles?

Zhao Yanchun: These complete, rhymed translations of Li Bai, Du Fu, and other poets are expected to reshape Western academic paradigms of Chinese poetry research in three core aspects, breaking the long-standing limitations of fragmentary translation and single-perspective interpretation. First, they will promote a shift from "fragmentary reading"

to "systematic research." Previously, Western sinologists mostly relied on selected translations of Chinese poems, leading to partial understanding of poets' creative contexts and stylistic evolution. The complete translations, with consistent terminological standards and prosodic adaptations, allow scholars to examine the entire creative career of poets—such as Du Fu's transformation from a youthful aspirant to a sorrowful exile, or Li Bai's romantic unrest across different life stages—thus establishing a more holistic research framework.

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Second, they will drive a transformation from "form-centered criticism" to "integrated meaning-aesthetics research." Western research on Chinese poetry has often overemphasized formal elements like rhyme and meter while neglecting the integration of semantic connotation and poetic flavor, due to the lack of high-quality translations that balance both. My translations adhere to the principle of "translating poetry as poetry," reproducing both the core meaning and prosodic beauty of the original works. This enables Western scholars to explore the intrinsic connection between form and content in Chinese poetry—for example, how Li Bai's free verse structure echoes his unrestrained spirit, or how Du Fu's rigorous metrical forms reinforce his solemn themes—enriching the analytical dimensions of poetic research.

Third, they will facilitate the expansion from "Eurocentric interpretation" to "cross-cultural dialogue." Many previous Western studies imposed Western poetic theories on Chinese works, leading to misinterpretations. The complete translations, supplemented by culturally appropriate annotations, preserve the unique cultural connotations of Chinese poetry while providing accessible contextual explanations. This encourages Western scholars to abandon ideological prejudices, understand Chinese poetry from its own cultural and historical context, and conduct comparative research based on equal cultural status. In turn, this may spark new academic dialogues, promoting the integration of Chinese poetic theories into the global academic discourse and forming a more inclusive research paradigm for world poetry.

Sun Chengping: You insist on not referring to previous translations during your work to maintain creative independence. This method ensures the originality of your translations but also increases the difficulty. How do you balance the academic accuracy and innovation of your translations?

Zhao Yanchun: Balancing academic accuracy and innovation without referencing prior translations hinges on a "dual anchor" strategy—rooting accuracy in rigorous textual research and grounding innovation in poetic essence, thereby forming a mutually reinforcing cycle.

The core principle is to ensure accuracy is not constrained by traditional translations, while innovation never deviates from the original text's cultural connotations and semantic core.

To guarantee academic accuracy, I prioritize multi-dimensional textual verification before embarking on translation. Instead of relying on previous translations, I trace back to the source: collating authoritative ancient and modern annotations of the original works, such as scholarly annotated editions of Li Bai and Du Fu's poems. I also integrate findings from philology, history, and philosophy to clarify ambiguous words, allusions, and historical contexts. For example, when translating Du Fu's exile poems, I verify the exact locations, local customs, and emotional triggers documented in historical records to avoid misinterpreting the core meaning. Additionally, I consult interdisciplinary experts—including sinologists, ancient Chinese philologists, and comparative literature scholars—to review key points, ensuring the translation aligns with academic consensus on textual interpretation.

Innovation, meanwhile, focuses on recreating the poetic essence in English without being confined by existing translation paradigms. This innovation is not arbitrary; it is based on the functional equivalence of form and emotion. For instance, when translating the three-character structure of Sanzijing (*Three Word Primer in English Rhyme*), I developed a "trisyllabic rhyme-matching" method instead of adhering to the rigid word-for-word translations of predecessors, balancing the original's rhythmic beauty with natural English expression. For Tang poetry, I adapt prosody to each poet's unique style—employing fluid, free verse for Li Bai's romanticism and rigorous iambic meter for Du Fu's solemnity—rather than applying a one-size-fits-all translation model.

The key to balancing the two lies in "constrained innovation": accuracy sets the boundary for innovation, and innovation breathes life into the accurate textual meaning. After completing the first draft, I conduct a two-round review: first, verifying that the translation strictly conforms to the confirmed textual connotations and cultural background; second, assessing whether the innovative expression preserves the original's poetic charm and stylistic features. This approach ensures the translation is both academically reliable and artistically innovative, breaking the stereotype that one must either follow predecessors blindly or distort the original text.

Sun Chengping: Robert Frost once said, "Poetry is what gets lost in translation," while you advocate that translators must adhere to the "Every A is A" doctrine of poetry translation, achieving "translating poetry as poetry and rhymes as rhymes" to reproduce the poetic meaning and rhyme of the original work. In your translation practice, how do you retain or recreate poetic meaning and rhyme?

Zhao Yanchun: The key to retaining and recreating poetic meaning and rhyme lies in breaking the opposition between "literal translation" and "free translation," and establishing a "dual reproduction" strategy that focuses on both spiritual essence and formal beauty—this is also the core practice of adhering to "translating poetry as poetry and rhymes as rhymes." Frost's assertion points out the inherent difficulty of poetry translation, but it does not mean that poetic essence is unattainable; the translator's mission is to minimize loss and even recreate the poetic charm that resonates across languages.

To retain poetic meaning, I prioritize interpreting the "implied spirit" of the original poem rather than just its literal meaning. This requires delving into the poet's creative context,

emotional state, and the cultural connotations behind the imagery. For example, when translating Li Bai's "Night Thought," the line "The moon sheds light before the bed" is not a simple description of scenery. I first clarify that Li Bai, exiled far from his hometown, uses "bright moon" as a carrier of homesickness—its coldness and clarity echo the loneliness in his heart. In translation, I choose word "bright" to convey the soft, immersive quality of moonlight, and match it with the tone of longing in the subsequent lines, ensuring that the core poetic meaning of "homesickness conveyed by moonlight" is not lost.

For recreating rhyme, I pursue "functional equivalence" rather than rigidly copying the original rhyme scheme. Chinese classical poetry relies on tonal rhymes and syllabic rhythm, while English poetry depends on stress and vowel rhymes—blindly following the original rhyme will inevitably lead to awkward expression. Taking the *Three Word Primer in English Rhyme* as an example, I created a "trisyllabic rhyme-matching" method: each three-character Chinese phrase corresponds to three English words, and I use end rhymes and internal rhymes to reproduce the rhythmic sense of the original. For Tang poetry, I adjust the rhyme strategy according to the poet's style—Li Bai's free-spirited poems adopt flexible assonance to highlight his unrestrained psyche, while Du Fu's solemn poems use regular end rhymes to strengthen the solemn tone, ensuring that the English version has a rhythmic beauty comparable to the original.

The balance between the two lies in "taking meaning as the soul and rhyme as the body." When there is a conflict between poetic meaning and rhyme, I never sacrifice the core spirit of the poem for rhyme; instead, I adjust the rhyme form within the scope of retaining the meaning—such as changing end rhymes to internal rhymes, or using near rhymes instead of exact rhymes. After completing the translation, I read it aloud repeatedly to test whether the rhythm is smooth and whether the poetic meaning is coherent, ensuring that the English version not only conveys the original's emotion and connotation but also has the musicality and artistic appeal unique to poetry.

Sun Chengping: You translated Dao De Jing as *The Word and the World*—this pioneering translation solves the consistency problem of "Dao". How did you come up with this translation, and what is the core basis for such a treatment?

Zhao Yanchun: The translation of Dao De Jing as *The Word and the World* originated from my attempt to break the long-standing dilemma of translating "Dao"—previous versions either used transliterated "Tao" (lacking semantic clarity for English readers) or adopted scattered equivalents like "the Way" (failing to cover its multi-dimensional connotations). This idea emerged from integrating textual interpretation of the *The Word and the World* and cross-linguistic semantic analysis, aiming to achieve both consistency and cultural authenticity.

The core inspiration came from dissecting the dual essence of "Dao" in Laozi's philosophy. On one hand, "Dao" is the metaphysical origin of all things—the ultimate principle that generates and governs the world, which corresponds to "the World" in the translation, embodying its cosmic dimension. On the other hand, "Dao" is the ineffable yet expressible truth that can be conveyed through language and perception, which is reflected in "the Word"—capturing its semantic and epistemological connotation. This pairing avoids the

one-sidedness of single-word translations and maintains consistency across the entire text, as every mention of "Dao" can be anchored to this dual framework.

The core basis of this translation lies in three aspects. First, textual fidelity: Dao De Jing repeatedly interweaves the relationship between "Dao" and the universe, as well as "Dao" and language (e.g., "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao"). "*The Word and the World*" precisely mirrors this dual logic, not distorting the original philosophical system. Second, cross-cultural accessibility: "Word" and "World" are familiar (cognate) yet profound terms in English, avoiding the alienation of transliteration while retaining the philosophical depth of "Tao", allowing English readers to grasp its essence without excessive cultural background explanation. Third, semantic consistency: unlike "the Way" which shifts in meaning across contexts, "*The Word and the World*" forms a fixed dualistic framework that unifies all mentions of "Dao" in the text—whether referring to the origin of the universe, the law of all things, or the moral realm. This consistency helps English readers build a coherent understanding of Laozi's philosophy. Essentially, this translation is not a simple substitution but a cultural transmutation that balances the original's philosophical connotation and the target language's expressive habits, making "Dao" no longer a vague concept but a tangible philosophical category for English audiences.

Sun Chengping: For young scholars aspiring to engage in the English translation of classical works, besides solid language proficiency, what other academic literacy and abilities do you think they need to cultivate to better undertake the mission of cultural communication?

Zhao Yanchun: For young scholars aspiring to engage in classical Chinese-English translation, solid bilingual competence is the basic threshold. To truly undertake the mission of cultural communication, they must also cultivate three core academic literacy and two practical abilities, forming a comprehensive professional system that integrates "knowledge, insight, and practice."

To begin with, interdisciplinary academic literacy is the foundation for accurate interpretation of classics. Classical works are carriers of multi-dimensional cultural connotations, involving philosophy, history, philology, aesthetics, and other disciplines. Young scholars must go beyond pure language research: they need to master the basic theories of pre-Qin philosophy to understand the ideological core of the Hundred Schools of Thought, be familiar with ancient Chinese history to clarify the historical context of texts, and have a grasp of philology to collate and verify ambiguous words and allusions. For example, translating Lunyu (*The Analects*) requires not only understanding the literal meaning but also grasping the Confucian ethical system and the social background of the Spring and Autumn Period, otherwise, the translation may lose its philosophical depth.

Subsequently, cross-cultural cognitive literacy is key to effective communication. Cultural communication is a two-way process; translators are not only "conveyors" but also "bridge builders." Young scholars need to deeply understand the cognitive frameworks, aesthetic preferences, and cultural taboos of English-speaking audiences, and avoid mechanical translation that leads to cultural misinterpretation. At the same time, they must have a clear understanding of Chinese cultural identity, be able to identify the core cultural traits worth spreading in classics, and balance cultural authenticity and target audience accessibility. For instance, when translating Tang poetry's "yijing (artistic conception)," it is

necessary to avoid simplifying it into a mere scene description but to find expressive ways that resonate with Western readers while retaining the implicit beauty of Chinese aesthetics.

Finally, academic rigor and critical thinking are guarantees for the quality of translations. Young scholars should not blindly follow existing translations or authoritative views; instead, they should establish a rigorous research attitude—collating multiple versions of texts, verifying historical materials, and analyzing the rationality of different translation strategies. Critical thinking helps them break through inherent translation paradigms, put forward innovative yet reliable translation methods, and avoid the two extremes of "blindly adhering to tradition" and "reckless innovation." For example, when translating core concepts like "Dao," they need to critically analyze the advantages and limitations of transliterations and free translations, and explore a solution that balances consistency and cultural connotation.

In addition to literacy, two practical abilities are indispensable. One is text adaptation ability, which means adjusting translation strategies according to different texts and dissemination scenarios—using rigorous academic expressions for scholarly translations, and appropriately simplifying cultural explanations for popular dissemination. The other is long-term academic persistence. Classical translation is a time-consuming and labor-intensive work that requires scholars to resist impetuosity, delve into texts for a long time, and continuously accumulate academic experience. Only by integrating these literacy and abilities can young scholars not only produce high-quality translations but also truly become qualified promoters of Chinese culture, letting classics "speak" to the world in an accurate and vivid way.

Sun Chengping: Thank you, Professor Zhao, for sharing such profound insights and rich experiences today. Your systematic translation practice, from core classics to poets' complete works, and your innovative principles like "Every A is A" have not only solved many practical dilemmas in classical Chinese-English translation but also set a benchmark for balancing academic accuracy and cultural accessibility. Your visions for large-scale projects such as "the Complete Tang Poems" and the research on "the Works of the Hundred Schools of Thought" provide clear paths for the standardized and in-depth international promotion of Chinese classics. For young scholars in this field, your emphasis on interdisciplinary literacy and cultural empathy is a precious guide that will inspire more people to devote themselves to this meaningful cause of cultural communication.

Zhao Yanchun: Thank you, Chengping. It's a great pleasure to talk with you on the promotion of Chinese classics.

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