

PRELIMINARY NOTES

Though in possession of the 1863 edition, in the passages of *Brief account of the Journey to the West* given in translation and in other parts of the book, I almost always referred to the 2003 edition as it is easier to consult and has punctuation which facilitates the translation work. At the same time, I have used traditional form characters within the book for consistency, with the only exception being in the reference books quoted at the end, where I used the original writing for Chinese articles, books and essays when published in simplified characters in mainland China. As for transcriptions, the *pinyin* romanization has been used throughout, except for some personal names in translated sources (in Italian or other languages) and for Joseph Kuo, for whom I preferred the Wide-Giles romanization to distinguish him from his elder brother.

In the translated passages some sentences are written in a different font: they are marginal notes by the author in the original text which I decided to differentiate in this way. As for classical quotations from the Classics (*Mengzi*, *Lunyu*, *Zhuangzi*, etc.), I often refer to James Legge's translations but sometimes I used my own translation and not his. In this case, and also for poems, I often consulted the Chinese version of the Classics available online and provided in the Chinese Text Project (<<https://ctext.org/ens>>).

(Brief) and (entirely) personal considerations on the difficulties of translating Chinese literary works¹

If translation can be perceived as a “negotiation”, I would venture to define the translation of literary Chinese texts as “the art of approximation”. I would use this definition to summarize the arduous task of those who, like me, after a

¹ I decided to insert here the final paragraph of my PhD thesis' *Introduction* written in 2008. Even if more than ten years have passed, these words are still valid and representative of the translation work I undertook at that time.

few years of study are about to undertake the translation of a work – unknown and of a certain length – from Chinese to Italian. Although the millennial longevity of the (written) language of the “Middle Kingdom” may be misleading due to the illusion of an immutable solidity and stillness, only after going more in-depth into Chinese Studies does this longevity itself give the Chinese language its most aleatory traits. Furthermore, if we examine the late 19th century lexicon, sixty years before the May Fourth Movement (*Wusi yundong* 五四運動, 1919) the Chinese language still almost appears as an uneven, stratified and varied set of words which, in the majority of the cases, have survived for centuries if not for thousands of years. Therefore, at the end of the 19th century, not only had some lexemes already acquired new semantic nuances, but they had also often taken on another meaning and/or another syntactic function that may no longer have anything to do with the original lexeme.

Paradoxically, therefore, I believe that an ancient text – and by antiquity I refer here to an entity that goes from the Han to the Tang periods – may be more “decipherable” than a pre-modern text thanks to greater “rationality” and to a syntactic clarity that sometimes give ancient texts a halo of spatial and temporal permanence, certainly amplified by the ‘pictographic’ nature of the Han language.

Naturally I am aware that this idea of mine also derives from the fact that it is this classical language which is taught, for the most part, in the university courses of Chinese philology which, in the long run, contributes to creating a kind of familiarity between students and texts belonging to that period.

As for the language used at the end of the 19th century therefore, a translator must remember that it is often a collection of learned quotations, stereotyped formulae, dialectal expressions and neologisms, the latter born from the need to narrate the encounter between East and West and perhaps surviving only for a moment in time and in the pages of a single work. At this point, the translator is obliged to interpret certain passages by examining different hypotheses, working by exclusion, going back over and over again and leaving the meaning of a word or of a sentence hanging even for weeks. This difficulty in interpretation, which can also be found in any translation regardless of the source language, becomes more acute within the distance in spatial and temporal coordinates.

On addressing the translation of *Brief Account on the Journey to the West*, therefore, I found myself facing the aforementioned difficulties. Undoubtedly, from an interpretative viewpoint, the most challenging task was the translation of the poems. First of all, I must stress that, despite the temptation to do so, I have never tried to embellish the text, which in part – and I am not afraid to admit – is deathly boring. Secondly, the “ugliness” of the verses in translation is also attributable to my almost total lack of poetic afflatus. Thirdly, as yet there are no systematic treatises on the late-Qing poetry to be consulted. In

the compositions of the Chinese author, therefore, I found myself sometimes embarrassed (as were the two mother tongue teachers who helped me in interpreting some particularly obscure lines) of not being able to trace the subject, the main verb and so on.

Although the prosodic forms have remained intact for centuries, the corpus of literary quotations to draw from has widened out of all proportion. The need, in an aspiring Chinese man of letters, to memorize the Classics and, at the same time, to study the most famous *shi* 詩 and *ci* 詞 of the Tang and Song periods, makes the late poetic compositions an interlocking game of one quotation after another from Confucius, Mencius, Zhuangzi, poetic anthologies and anecdotes relating to characters and events of Chinese folklore and tradition. These references are not always obvious for a contemporary reader, especially when that reader is not Chinese.

Later in the translation of the work, some of these passages appeared clearer once I understood the implicit quotation in them; for some poems, however, a free translation has been preferred once the general sense had been deciphered.

Lastly, given the distance in space and time, I resorted to the use of the past for the translated passages, although it sometimes makes the reading slower and can be felt as inappropriate, as in e.g. “today we did”, “tonight I went”, et-cetera. This seemed to me the most effective solution and was somehow suggested by the reading of other famous “Italian journeys”.