

Inter-semiotic Translation in Traditional Chinese Literati Paintings*

Jiang Yicun

Abstract: Ancient Chinese literati, particularly in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, were fond of inscribing poems alongside their paintings. As a tradition, the art of Chinese literati paintings always seeks a perfect combination of painting and poetry. Thus, the painting and poetic lines put together in one canvas compose an inseparable artistic whole. Due to their connotative nature, Chinese paintings and poetry are very difficult to interpret or translate when seen separately. Traditional literati paintings, however, have created a good arena for painters to show their own interpretation of the painting and enable audiences to understand more about the painter's intention. This interpretation of meaning in terms of another mode of representation, i. e. , painting in terms of poetry, and vice versa, is defined by Roman Jakobson as inter-semiotic translation. The same phenomenon can also be interpreted through Umberto Eco's theory of transmutation, which is also considered a development and complementation of Jakobson's theory. Through his typology of interpretation, Eco pointed out five features of transmutation. The present paper elaborates how these five features are embodied in the painting-poem transmutation of Chinese literati paintings and what other unique features these specific modes of transmutation have.

* This research is sponsored by the Shandong Social Sciences Planned Research Project entitled "On Institutional Online Discourse and Its Management Strategies" (17CWZJ21), and the Shandong Social Sciences Planned Research Project entitled "Design of Individualized Teaching Objectives in College English Classroom Based on Information Technology" (14CWXJ50).

Keywords: inter-semiotic translation, traditional literati paintings, poem-painting transmutation, interpretation

论中国传统文人画中的符际翻译现象

姜奕村

摘要: 中国古代文人,尤其是明清时期的文人,喜欢在画作上题诗。作为一种艺术传统,中国文人画一直追求画与诗的完美结合。这样,在同一张画纸上,诗与画便形成了一个不可分割的艺术整体。中国画和中国诗都有着十分丰富的内涵意义,因此,分开来看,二者都很难阐释或者翻译。中国传统文人画则不然,它不但为画家提供了阐释自己作品的舞台,也给鉴赏者提供了理解画家创作意图的可能。文人画中这种诗—画相互阐释、互为翻译的现象被罗曼·雅各布森定义为“符际翻译”。翁贝托·艾柯在他的翻译理论中进一步探讨了这一现象,他的理论也被视作对雅各布森符际翻译论的发展和补充。基于对阐释的拓扑学分类,艾柯详细阐述了符际翻译中存在的五个显著特点。本文旨在阐明这五个特点如何在中国传统文人画的诗—画互译中体现出来,同时指出诗—画互译这种独特的符际翻译现象中存在的其他特性。

关键词: 符际翻译, 传统文人画, 诗—画互译, 阐释

DOI: 10.13760/b.cnki.sam.201802015

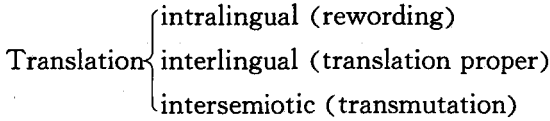
I . Translation and Interpretation

The term “inter-semiotic translation” was coined by the Russian-American linguist Roman Jakobson. In his seminal essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”, Jakobson suggested that translation should be divided into three categories: intra-linguistic, inter-linguistic and inter-semiotic. He remarked:

These three kinds of translation are to be differently labeled: 1) Intralingual translation or rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language. 2) Interlingual translation or

translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language. 3) Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems. (1959, p. 261)

The relationship depicted by Jakobson may be visualised through the following diagram:



One possible way to understand this classification, many scholars agree, is that rewording, translation proper and transmutation are three types of translation. Italian scholar Umberto Eco, however, contends that another way to understand this division is that there are three types of interpretation, and that in this sense translation is “a species of the genus interpretation” (Eco, 2001, p. 68), for Jakobson makes use of the word “interpretation” in each of the three definitions quoted above. Furthermore, Eco further points out that Jakobson’s division of translation is inspired by Charles S. Peirce’s notion that “meaning is the translation of a sign into another system of signs” (CP 4. 127). As argued by Eco, Peirce here actually uses the word “translation” as a synecdoche for interpretation. In other words, Peirce uses the word “translation” to define the notion of interpretation. Jakobson was deeply fascinated by Peirce’s understanding of interpretation via translation, as he enthusiastically stated:

One of the most felicitous, brilliant ideas which general linguistics and semiotics gained from the American thinker is his definition of meaning as “the translation of a sign into another system of signs” (4. 127). How many fruitless discussions about mentalism and anti-mentalism would be avoided if one approached the notion of meaning in terms of translation [...] The problem of translation is indeed fundamental in Peirce’s views and can and must be utilized systematically. (Jakobson, 1977, p. 1029)

His interest in Peirce’s notion thus led Jakobson to develop the tripartite division of translation. Eco (2001), however, challenges the traditional understanding of Jakobson’s division and points out that the term

“translation” is used by Jakobson (1959): “in a figurative and not in a technical sense” (Vassallo, 2015, p. 162), in a manner similar to Peirce’s figurative understanding of meaning. Indeed, Eco (2001, p. 71) discussed his idea with Jakobson and recorded their exchange:

Jakobson was simply saying that the notion of interpretation as translation from sign to sign allows us to get round the diatribe about where meaning lies, in the mind or in behaviour, and he does not say that interpreting and translating are always the same operation, but that it is useful to tackle the notion of meaning in terms of translation (I would like to add: as if it were a translation). In explaining Jakobson’s position, in a long article on his contribution to semiotics, I wrote: “Jakobson demonstrates that to interpret a semiotic item means ‘to translate’ it into another item (maybe an entire discourse) and that this translation is always creatively enriching the first item...” (Eco, 1977, p. 53). As you can see, I put “to translate” between inverted commas, to indicate that this was a figurative expression. My reading might be debatable, but I would like to point out that I submitted my essay to Jakobson before publishing it and that he had discussed various points, certainly not in an attempt to force conclusions upon me that were different from those I had reached (that was not his style), but in order to specify, to make things scrupulously clear, and to suggest references to other writings of his that confirmed my reading. On that occasion, no objections were made to my inverted commas. If Jakobson had thought them misleading, insofar as I was quoting him nearly verbatim, he would have pointed out to me that he had intended to use “to translate” in a technical sense.

As is shown in the above quotation, Jakobson at least did not refute Eco’s conclusion that he used the word “translation” in a figurative rather than a technical sense, i. e., as a metaphor for interpretation. In other words, what Jakobson wanted to emphasise in his division was that “it is always necessary to bear that aspect of the problem of meaning in mind, not that it is necessary to establish an absolute equivalence between translation and interpretation” (Eco, 2001, p. 71). In addition to analysing the underlying meaning of Jakobson’s division, Eco also discussed several

problems in detail:

Jakobson's distinction did not take into account certain phenomena that require discussion. First of all, just as *rewording* exists within a language itself, so there are also forms of *rewording* (but this would be a metaphor) within other semiotic systems, as, for example, when we change the key of a musical composition. Secondly, in talking of transmutation, Jakobson was thinking of a version of a verbal text in another semiotic system (in Jakobson, 1960, the examples offered are the translation of *Wuthering Heights* into film, of a medieval legend into a fresco, of Mallarmé's *Après midi d' un faune* into a ballet, and even of the *Odyssey* into a comic strip); but he does not deal with other cases of transmutation between systems other than verbal language, like, for example, the ballet version of Debussy's *Après midi*, the interpretation of "Pictures in an Exhibition" by means of a musical composition by Mussorgsky, or even the version of a painting in words (ekphrasis). (2001, p. 67)

Thus the first problem pointed out by Umberto Eco concerns the definition of rewording or intra-semiotic translation. Eco's doubt is reasonable because the term "intra-lingual translation" rules out non-verbal rewritings within other sign systems, such as key changes in musical composition. The second problem in Jakobson's division is that his definition of inter-semiotic translation or transmutation did not include translation between two nonverbal sign systems. For example, the representation of a painting through music is excluded from "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (Jakobson, 1959, p. 261). Throughout his academic career, Eco paid much attention to how a sign is interpreted by its users, and how different types of interpretation might be categorised. As he acknowledged (Eco, 2001, p. 72), his understanding of the relationship between translation and interpretation is faithful to Peirce and Jakobson. Eco (2001, p. 100) thus proposed "a different classification of the forms of interpretation, in which due importance is attached to the problems posed by variations in both the substance and the purport of the expression":

1. Interpretation by transcription

2. Intrasystemic interpretation
 - 2.1 Intralinguistic, within the same natural language
 - 2.2 Intrasemiotic, within other semiotic systems
 - 2.3 Performance
3. Intersystemic interpretation
 - 3.1 With marked variation in the substance
 - 3.1.1 Interlinguistic, or translation between natural languages
 - 3.1.2 Rewriting
 - 3.1.3 Translation between other semiotic systems
 - 3.2 With mutation of continuum
 - 3.2.1 Parasynonymy
 - 3.2.2 Adaptation or transmutation

Although detailed discussion of Eco's classification of interpretation is beyond the scope of this paper, it is necessary to explain some key terms. Eco's table divides interpretation into three types: interpretation by transcription, intrasystemic interpretation and intersystemic interpretation. By "interpretation by transcription", he refers to "interpretation by automatic substitution, as happens with the Morse alphabet" (Eco, 2001, p. 100). This process may also be conducted by a machine. By "intrasystemic interpretation", Eco refers to interpretation in "the same semiotic system as the interpreted expression (the same form of the expression)". For instance, a musical piece is rendered into a different key, or a diagram is reduced in scale. By intersystemic interpretation, Eco refers to interpretation in different semiotic systems, which subsumes Jakobson's translation proper and transmutation. Eco insightfully commented on his typology of interpretation:

All I have tried to do in my table is to establish some macroscopic distinctions, as I am well aware that there will always be an overlap between one category of the typology and another. Such zones will be imprecise and of a kind liable to generate endless subcategories, at least until such time as we are free to think up infinite forms of interpretation of a text.

But the fact that there can be many nuances in the wealth of semiosis does not mean that it is inadvisable to establish the basic distinctions. On the contrary, it is essential, if the task of semiotic analysis is that of identifying

different phenomena in the apparently uncontrollable flux of interpretative acts. (2001, pp. 129—130)

In his typology of interpretation, Eco also specifies the two types: “variation in substance” (translation proper) and “mutation in continuum” (transmutation). While they both contain a change in the form of expression, they are very different. Translation between verbal languages—for instance, rendering a Chinese poem into English—means changing the expressive substance, i. e., variation in substance; while expressing a poem in the form of a painting means the mutation of continuum in both content and expression of the target and source. What should be emphasised here is the “intersystemic interpretation with mutation of continuum”. There is, in these processes, “a decided step from purport to the purport of the expression, as happens when a poem is interpreted (by illustrating it) through a charcoal drawing, or when a novel is adapted in comic-strip form” (Eco, 2001, p. 118). According to Eco, the change of continuum can be taken as a criterion for distinguishing transmutation from other modes of interpretation, including translation proper. To explain the change of continuum in transmutation, Eco (2001, p. 89) took Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” as an example, with an emphasis on the following lines:

“Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the night shore—Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!” Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”[...]

Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door, With such name as “Nevermore.”[...]

Till I scarcely more than muttered “Other friends have flown before—On the morrow he will leave me, as my Hopes have flown before.” Then the bird said “Nevermore.”

On the mutation of continuum, when a poem is transmuted into an image, Eco remarks:

Let us now ask ourselves what would happen if someone wanted to transpose “The Raven” from a natural language to an image, “translating” it

into a picture. An artist could make us feel emotions similar to those aroused by the poem, such as the darkness of the night, the melancholy atmosphere, the mixture of horror and insatiable desire that churns within the lover, the contrast between black and white (and, if this served to emphasize the effect, the painter could change the bust into a full-figure statue). However, the picture would have to forgo rendering that obsessive feeling of the (reiterated) threat of loss, which is suggested by *nevermore*. Could the picture tell us something of the Lenore who is so frequently invoked in the text? Perhaps, by making her appear to us as a white ghost. But it would have to be the ghost of a woman, not of another creature. And at that point we would be obliged to see (or the painter would be obliged to make us see) something of this woman who in the written text appears as pure sound. In this case, at least, Lessing's distinction between the arts of time and the arts of space holds. And it would hold because in the passage between poetry and picture there has been a change of continuum. (Eco, 2001, p. 95)

II . Poem-painting Transmutation in Chinese Literati Paintings

Following Eco, many previous studies (cf. Dusi, 2015) have investigated various kinds of inter-semiotic translation, such as the adaptation of literary works into cinema and the transmutation of a musical piece into ballet. As stated earlier, recent discussion (Dusi, 1998; Dusi, 1999; Eco, 2001; Eco, 2003; Dusi, 2015; Vassallo, 2015) of this gambit calls for attention to various kinds of transmutation or inter-semiotic translation, of which the interaction between painting and poetic inscription in traditional Chinese literati painting serves as a very special instance. Scholars of the relationship between Chinese poetry and Chinese painting have paid much less attention to the ubiquitous painting-poem interactions in traditional Chinese literati paintings than to similar interactions in traditional Chinese poems. What is more, many have focused on the aesthetic aspect rather than the inter-semiotic aspect of these artistic works. On the basis of his typology of interpretation, Eco (2001, pp. 119 – 128) further elaborated five salient features of transmutation, in contrast to translation proper or Jakobson's inter-linguistic translation. The rest of this paper thus examines whether

these features still pertain to poem-painting transmutation in traditional Chinese literati paintings, and explores other unique features of this mode of transmutation.

The painting of “Luoshen Fu” (《洛神赋图》) by Gu Kaizhi in the Eastern Jin Dynasty of ancient China is one of the earliest examples of Chinese literati paintings. Painters of the following dynasties further developed this genre of painting, which became mainstream in traditional Chinese painting beginning in the Song Dynasty. Literati paintings flourished in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. As a tradition, the art of Chinese literati paintings always seeks a perfect combination of painting and poetry. Because most literati paintings are created to evoke a poetic mood, many literati painters are fond of inscribing in the paintings the poetic lines that inspired them. Although these poems may not be the only source of these paintings, they indeed have great influence on their creation. Due to their connotative nature, Chinese paintings and poems, seen separately, are both very difficult to interpret or translate. Traditional literati paintings, however, offer both a good medium for painters to depict their own interpretation of the painting and give audiences the opportunity to understand more about the painter’s intention. Thus, the painting and poetic lines together on one canvas make up an inseparable artistic whole.

As stated above, Chinese literati paintings with inscriptions are a good example of inter-semiotic translation or transmutation. Looked at from the angle of the Western tradition of painting, Chinese literati painting is a very special case, with the painter as a translator or interpreter of his own artistic work. The five features of transmutation elaborated by Eco (2001) are simultaneous presence of the target and the source, showing things left unsaid, understanding through manipulation, isolating a level of the text, and adaptation as a new work. In the following sections, I will elaborate on how these five features are embodied in the painting-poem transmutation of Chinese literati paintings and explore other unique features of this specific mode of transmutation. While there are many layers in this topic worth excavating, the calligraphy of the painter and the placement of the poetic lines in the painting are not within the scope of the present study. In addition, by inscriptions, I mean inscriptions on paintings made by the painters themselves

rather than by other people, as such inscriptions have a certain authority in interpreting the painting. There are, of course, paintings that are transmuted from a poem which is not inscribed on the painting. This area is also outside the scope of the present paper, as in these cases, extensive historical investigation is needed to find reliable evidence for a direct relation between the painting and the proposed poem.

| . Simultaneous Presence of the Target and the Source

According to Eco, “translation proper can be made both in the presence of the original text and in its absence” (2001, p. 119). Eco distinguishes translation in absence from translation in presence. By “translation in absence”, he refers to the most common phenomenon of translation that includes “every foreign novel read in one’s own language”, while translations in presence refer to those “with the original text on the facing page” (2001, p. 119). For instance, the Chinese translation of an English novel such as Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* may either appear independent of its source, or be presented in parallel with the original novel in one book. These two approaches are very common in translation proper, and nobody would feel that “a translation with the original text on the facing page would justify cuts or manipulation or any particular license just because the reader can always refer to the original” (2001, p. 119). It is, however, a different matter with the transmutations in Chinese literati paintings, in which inscription and painting are present together as a composite work of art, involving the simultaneous presence of the source language and target language. We can randomly pick a painting of this kind (Figure 1) to exemplify the phenomenon.

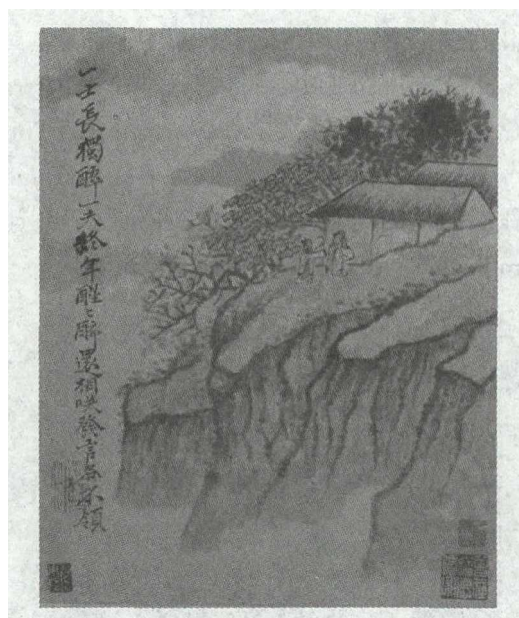


Figure 1

For many traditional art critics, like Shi Tao in the Qing Dynasty, a poem and the painting illustrating it share the same ground. Similarly, a painting and the poem describing it also share the same ground. In other words, a painting and the poetic inscription in it mirror each other. As we can see from Figure 1, the painting and the inscribed poem interpret each other. An adequate appreciation of the work might be obtained by viewers after several modality changes, during which the continuum of one mode of representation is broken down by frequent movement from painting to poem and poem to painting. Because it is nearly impossible to know whether the painting or the poem came first in the painter's mind, it is difficult for us to decide whether the painting or the inscribed poem is the source. It is perhaps safe to say that because they are always present together from the viewer's perspective, they transmute and interact with each other to form a composite art. Thus, in place of the equivalence between the source and the target in translation proper, we have instead a bidirectional poem-painting interaction in transmutation.

|| . Showing Things Left Unsaid

By "showing things left unsaid", Eco (2001) refers to the discovery or

manifestation of hidden elements as a result of the process of transmutation and the mutation of continuum. The same is true for the transmutation from poem to image in traditional Chinese literati paintings. Through the process of transmutation, we may know the painter's feelings and intentions when producing this work, which might never otherwise be discovered. Take the Figure 2 as an example.



Figure 2

The inscription in the painting is a famous poem about homesickness written by Wang Wei in the Tang Dynasty. The poem reads (with its English translation on the right):

九月九日忆山东兄弟

Reminiscence of My Brothers in Puzhou to
the East of Huashan on the Double
Ninth Festival

王 维

by Wang Wei

独在异乡为异客，
每逢佳节倍思亲。

Being a stranger alone in a strange land,
I miss my dear ones on every happy festival

with a heavy mind.
 遥知兄弟登高处， I know from afar the heights where my
 brothers have ascended
 遍插茱萸少一人。 With dogwood on their heads but without
 me accompanying them.

As we can see from Figure 2, the painting depicts a mountainous area where two persons are talking in a cottage. Without the inscribed poem, it would be very difficult for viewers to relate the painting to a feeling of homesickness. Furthermore, the poem might lead its readers to imagine that, among the lofty mountains in the painting, people are ascending with dogwood on their heads. Some painters merely inscribe part of a long poem in a painting due to limited space on the canvas. Viewers may thus learn a lot more about the painting when they read the complete poem. The following painting (Figure 3) is a good example.

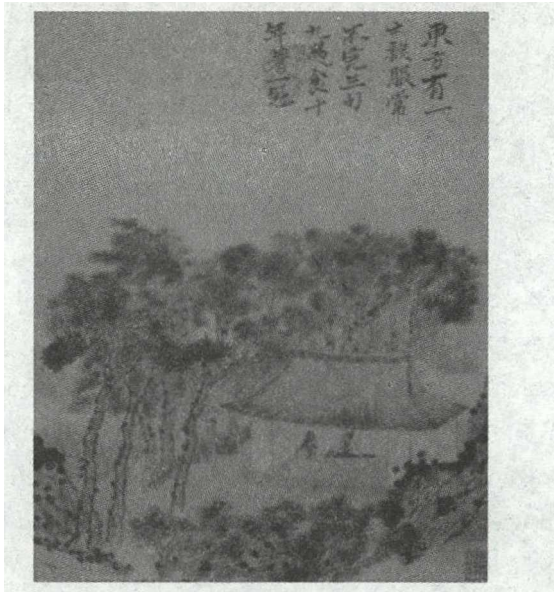


Figure 3

The inscription is the first four lines from a poem by Tao Yuanming, which is presented below with its English translation on the right:

怀古 其五

陶渊明

东方有一士，
被服常不完。
三旬九遇食，
十年著一冠。
辛勤无此比，
常有好容颜。
我欲观其人，
晨去越河关。
青松夹路生，
白云宿檐端。
知我故来意，
取琴为我弹。
上弦惊别鹤，
下弦操孤鸾。
愿留就君住，
从今至岁寒。

In Imitation of Old Poems (V)

by Tao Yuanming

There lives a wretched hermit in the east,
Whose ragged coats are often torn and pieced.
In thirty days he eats nine meals on mat;
In ten long years he wears the same old hat.
He takes the greatest pains in human race,
And yet he always keeps a cheerful face.
As I would like to see this saint forlorn,
I went over hills and rivers in the morn.
Along the road were lined pines with lush leaves,
And white clouds coiled upon his cottage eaves.
To be aware of what I'd like to see,
He fetched his lute and played a tune for me.
He first played woeful tunes of Parting Cranes,
Then Lonely Phoenix in exalted strains.
I long to stay and dwell with you together,
To stand the test of freezing weather.

Viewers who read the lines might recall the whole poem. Thus, in addition to what the painting shows visually, the inscribed poem presents more knowledge, background or detailed knowledge about the painting. The poem tells us that the person playing the lute is the wretched hermit and the one beside him might be the poet Tao Yuanming. When we learn who the author of the poem is, we also know that the inscribed poem long predates the painting, which was produced by Shi Tao in the early Qing Dynasty, and that the painter was inspired by the poem and depicted it in the painting. This feature is indeed different from translation proper or inter-linguistic translation, which cannot suggest additional knowledge or unsaid information from the source language through modalities other than linguistic equivalence.

iii . Understanding through Manipulation

In translation proper, translators have little opportunity to manipulate

the source language, while in transmutation the translator always has the freedom to manipulate the source. This feature is present in literati paintings. Viewers understand the painting through the painter's manipulation. To be more specific, many inscriptions on the painting serve as an instruction for viewers to appreciate it. Thus, the painter manipulates the source through inscribing poems as an instructive target during transmutation. Likewise, concerning the inscribed poems, the choice of objects and episodes from the poem to include in the painting is all up to the painter. Painters' manipulation through inscription is shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4

The two poetic lines inscribed in the painting are taken from another poem by Tao Yuanming. For the sake of explanation, the whole poem is shown below with a translation on the right. Again, the inscription is in italics.

归园田居 其一

陶渊明

.....

暧暧远人村，

Back to Country Life (I)

by Tao Yuanming

[...]

The distant village dimly looms somewhere,

依依墟里烟。 With smoke from chimneys drifting in the air.
狗吠深巷中, In silent country lanes a stray dog barks,
鸡鸣桑树颠。 Amid the mulberry trees cocks crow with larks.

The inscription in the painting may serve as an instruction for viewers. Following the inscribed lines, viewers may find the dog in the middle of the road and know that there are cocks amid the mulberry trees. In this way, the painter guides viewers to appreciate the specific state depicted in the two lines of poetry.

As argued earlier, inscriptions in paintings may serve as instructions to guide the viewer's interpretation. From the perspective of art appreciation, however, they are also likely to confine the space for interpretation. In other words, while the inscribed poems may reduce the chance of over interpretation, paintings with poetic inscriptions may be also less "open" than those without inscriptions.

IV. Isolating a Level of the Text

Due to the mutation of continuum, many transmutations concentrate on one level of the source text while dropping others. Eco offers a better understanding of this feature:

The most common example is a film that takes a novel and isolates the narrative level, the sequence of events, and may drop (or merely try to emulate in another continuum) its stylistic aspects. Or the same film may set out to render in another continuum the pathematic effects of the source text, perhaps even at the expense of literal faithfulness to the story. In trying to render the pangs of the narrator in Proust's *Recherche* when, at the beginning, he is waiting for his mother's goodnight kiss, those things that were inner feelings can be rendered with facial expressions (or quasi-dreamlike insertions of the mother figure, who is only desired in the text and not seen). In this sense, an adaptation would be similar to forms of poetic translation where, in order to preserve the rhyme or the metrical scheme, for example, we are prepared to compromise on other aspects. (Eco, 2001, p. 125)

Because the painter can manipulate the process of poem-painting transmutation, the level of the poem chosen for reflection in the painting is,

to a great extent, decided on by the painter. This feature can be illustrated by Figure 5.



Figure 5

The line inscribed in the painting is taken from another famous poem by Tao Yuanming. The whole poem and its English translation are as follows, with the inscribed line in italics:

归园田居 其三

Back to Country Life (III)

陶渊明

by Tao Yuanming

种豆南山下，	When I plant beans at the foot of Southern Hill,
草盛豆苗稀。	Bean shoots are few, but rank grass grows at will.
晨兴理荒秽，	I rise at early dawn to weed and prune,
带月荷锄归。	<i>Till, hoe on shoulder, I return with the moon.</i>
.....	[...]

Beyond the literal or surface level, the poet has created a poetic state or poetic level that might be considered as evoking the spirit of traditional Chinese poetry. Because it was difficult for the painter to maintain literal faithfulness and make a word-for-word transmutation from a poem into image, he/she isolated the poetic level and dropped the literal level. To

simulate the poetic state, the literati used a unique technique called “写意”, freehand brushwork. As we can see in Figure 5, in the painting, a man with a hoe on his shoulder is returning home in the moonlight. Although there are several episodes described in the poem, the painter picked the inscribed line, froze that moment, and represented it in visual form.

Someone may argue that the literati paintings are only partial representations of the poems, and thus cannot be considered faithful translations. In addition, because of the brevity of traditional Chinese poetry, a literati painting usually contains many more elements, more concretely, than are denoted in the poems. However, “faithfulness” or faithful equivalence as a criterion of translation seems a greater challenge in an inter-semiotic context than elsewhere. As a linguistic representation, poems are much more abstract than traditional paintings. Anyone who wants to visualise the landscape depicted in a poem must imagine the surroundings. It is thus the painter’s decision as to what should be shown. Examples with poetic inscriptions are more obvious, and the translation should not be considered a mere representation of the inscribed lines; rather, many of these paintings should be considered a transmutation of the entire poem, or at least the understanding of the poem-painting transmutation should go beyond the limited poetic lines inscribed on the canvas. In other words, the poetic inscription is only a reminder for viewers. From this perspective, paintings without inscriptions but named after a poem should be considered akin to those with poetic inscriptions.

V. Adaptation as a New Work

As discussed earlier, the process of transmutation will inevitably cause the mutation of continuum. Each type of continuum produces its own semiotic space, in which hierarchically organised elements interact and new meaning is created (Dusi, 2015, p.182), hence the production of a new work. To elaborate this feature, Eco took the transmutation of Chopin’s music into actions in Zbig Rybczynski’s film *The Orchestra* as an example:

A typical example of this is *The Orchestra*, a film by Zbig Rybczynski (see the analysis of the film in Basso, 1999), where the music of Chopin’s

funeral march (executed in praesentia) is “shown” at the same time through a series of grotesque figures that appear gradually, as they place their hands on a piano keyboard that runs on for a very long time, as if it were moving along the screen (or as if the camera were tracking along a sequence of keys of infinite length). We are certainly dealing with an attempt to render the source music in some way, because the gestures of the characters are determined by the rhythm of the piece, and the images, including certain things that appear in the background (for example, a hearse), are intended to convey a funereal effect. But the director could have shown an infinity of George Sand clones, or skulls, in a sort of Totentanz, while still respecting the rhythmic structure of the piece and giving a visual equivalent of the minor key, and nobody could say, in theory, whether one choice was better than the other. With *The Orchestra*, we find ourselves confronted with an authentic interpretation that, if it were understood as a “faithful” translation of Chopin’s piece, would certainly pose some problems of musicological correctness. This is a work that is good in and of itself, even though the reference to Chopin is an integral part of it. (2001, p. 126–127)

The same is true with the poem-painting transmutation. Unlike poetic lines, which are based on linguistic representation, paintings belong to a system of visual representation. Through transmutation, poetic imagination is crystallised on a canvas to form a visual presentation of the poem. Thus, any of the paintings reproduced earlier may be viewed as adapted new works, and each is good in and of itself.

vj. The Visibility of the Painter

In addition to the five features put forward by Eco (2001), one unique feature of poem-painting transmutation is that the painters speak in their own painting; i. e., the painter is visible in the painting. Through the inscriptions, painters actually spoke and left their “utterance” in the painting. There are some extremes in this respect as in Figure 6.

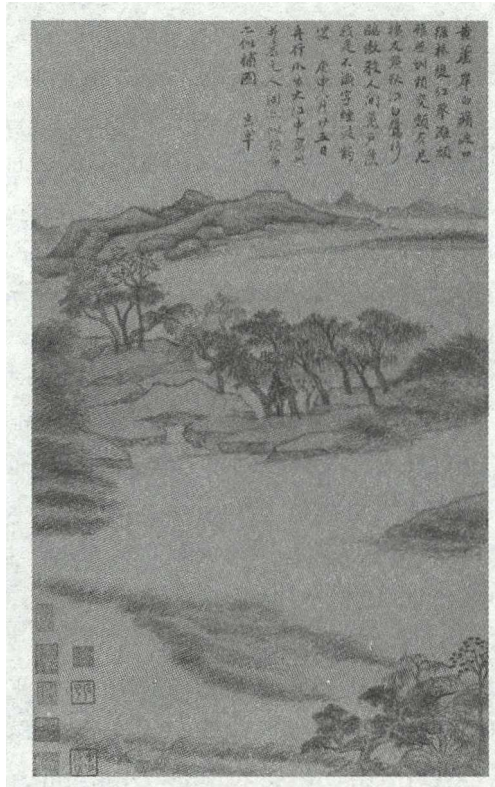


Figure 6

The inscription of the painting is written by a poet in the Yuan Dynasty. In the inscription, the painter added two characters “我是” (I am), to the last poetic lines “傲杀人间万户侯, 不识字烟波钓叟” (The one who despises the dignitaries is an illiterate fisherman), and turned the original poem into “傲杀人间万户侯, 我是不识字烟波钓叟” (I am the illiterate fisherman who despises the dignitaries). Through the above adaptation, the painter made himself or herself visible on the canvas. In this way, literati paintings also provide a space for painters to express themselves.

III. Coda

Concerning the literati paintings discussed in this paper, one might ask: Why on earth would painters want to inscribe poems in their paintings, given that normally artists do not describe their own works? Or simply, why are the painters willing to translate their own works inter-semiotically? One answer

might be that painters are at the same time literati, and perhaps could not help practising literary activities even when they were drawing. Gradually this practice became a norm, and then the norm became a tradition. A utilitarian reason might be that by inscribing poems in their paintings, the painters might also elevate the status of their paintings by locating them within the literary tradition; generally speaking, paintings were, for many people, considered a mere craft rather than an artform in ancient China. In other words, the status of painting was lower than poems and even calligraphy. Discourse about poetry, on the other hand, has a long history from the late Zhou to the Han, Tang and Song dynasties. It is in this way that the painter shows that painting is also part of the long literary tradition.

Whatever reason, the inter-semiotic translation between image and language authorised the painters to engage in roles usually absent in translation proper. In other words, the five aspects summarised by Eco make inter-semiotic translation different from traditionally defined translation proper. The unique feature of inter-semiotic translation in literati paintings, i.e., the visibility of the painter as a translator, enhances the reliability of translations either from painting into poem or from poem into painting, for normally painters have authority over the interpretation of their own paintings. As a result, the inscriptions become part of the paintings, and together they form a composite art. The examples in this paper show that traditional literati paintings have an important feature that distinguishes them from other paintings or artistic products: the bidirectional representation between painting and poetry. In other words, there is always a two-way translation between the poetry and the painting, until finally the painting becomes a visual version of the poetry and the poetry a verbal version of the painting. Most importantly, these literati paintings are also good illustrations of translatability between image and verbal language. Indeed, all the features of transmutation in literati paintings enable the painter to convey, through inscriptions, much more information about the history and story behind the drawing. In this way, the painting is no longer an isolated piece of work; rather, it is endowed with a connection to the literary tradition, and perhaps gains everlasting value for artistic appreciation.

References:

- Dusi, N. (1998). Tra letteratura e cinema: Ritmo e spazialità in "Zazie dans le métro". *Versus*, 80/81.
- Dusi, N. (1999). *Da un medium all'altro: La traduzione intersemiotica del senso e degli affetti*. Tesi di Dottorato in Semiotica, A. A. 1999–2000. Università di Bologna.
- Dusi, N. (2015). Intersemiotic translation: Theories, problems, analysis. *Semiotica*, 206, 181–205.
- Eco, U. (2001). *Experiences in translation*. Toronto, CAN: University of Toronto Press.
- Jakobson, R. (1959). On linguistic aspects of translation. In R. Brower (Ed.), *On translation* (pp. 232–239). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jakobson, R. (1977). A few remarks on Peirce. *Modern language notes*, 93, 1026–36.
- Peirce, C. S. (1931–1966). *The collected papers of Charles S. Peirce*, 8 vols. In C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss & A. W. Burks (Eds.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Vassallo, C. (2015). What's so "proper" about translation? Or interlingual translation and interpretative semiotics. *Semiotica*, 206, 161–179.

Author:

Jiang Yicun, Ph. D. in English, lecturer and researcher at the College of Foreign Studies, Shandong Technology and Business University. His research interests include semiotics, metaphor and the philosophy of language.

作者简介:

姜奕村, 博士, 现执教于山东工商学院外国语学院, 研究领域主要为符号学、隐喻研究和语言哲学。

Email: yicunjiang@ln. hk.