

## PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

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“Wrong from the start!”

Borrowing a phrase from Pound’s critique of the decline of English poetic art, in 1960 I protested in dismay and anger against a century of gross distortions of Chinese poetry by translators who allowed the target language (in this case, English) to mask and master the indigenous Chinese aesthetic, creating treacherous modes of representation. These translators seemed unaware that classical Chinese poetry emerges from a perceptual ground with a set of cultural-aesthetic assumptions radically different from that of Western poetry; that its syntax is in many ways inseparable from this perceptual ground; and that by imposing Indo-European linguistic habits on classical Chinese without any adjustment the translators were significantly changing the poetry’s perceptual-expressive procedures.

Therefore, in order to remedy these problems in translation, I’ve organized the Chinese poems in this book into a three-part structure. Given first is the poem in the original Chinese. It is followed by my word-for-word annotations, and, finally, my translation with minimal but workable syntax. I’ve done this in order to open up an aesthetic space where readers can move back and forth between classical Chinese and modern American perceptual-expressive dimensions.

Underlying the classical Chinese aesthetic is the primary idea of noninterference with Nature’s flow. As reflected in poetic language, this idea has engendered freedom from the syntactical rigidities often found in English and most, if not all, of the Indo-European languages. In English, a sentence is almost always structured according to rigid syntactical rules, whereas classical Chinese, as it is used in poetry, is syntactically flexible. For example, although the Chinese language has articles and personal pronouns, they are often dispensed with in poetry. This opens up an indeterminate space for readers to enter and reenter for multiple perceptions rather than locking them into some definite perspectival position or guiding them in a certain direction. Then there is the sparseness, if not absence, of connective elements (prepositions or conjunctions), and this lack, aided by the indeterminacy of parts of speech and no tense declensions in verbs, affords the readers a unique freedom to consort with the objects and events of the real-life world.

The words in a Chinese poem quite often have a loose relationship with readers, who remain in a sort of middle ground between engaging with them (attempting to make predicative connections to articulate relationships between and among the words) and disengaging from them (refraining from doing so, since such predicative acts would greatly restrict the possibility of achieving noninterference). Therefore, the asyntactical and paratactical structures in Chinese poetry promote a kind of prepredicative condition wherein words, like objects (often in a coextensive and multiple montage) in the real world, are free from predetermined relationships and single meanings and offer themselves to readers in an open space. Within this space, and with the poet stepping aside, so to speak, they can move freely and approach the words from a variety of vantage points to achieve different perceptions of the same moment. They have a cinematic visuality and stand at the threshold of many possible meanings.

In retrospect, I must consider myself fortunate to live during a time when both poets and philosophers in the West have already begun to question the framing of language, echoing in part the ancient Taoist critique of the restrictive and distorting activities of names and words and their power-wielding violence, and opening up reconsiderations of language and power, both aesthetically and politically. When Heidegger warns us that any dialogue using Indo-European languages to discuss the spirit of East-Asian poetry will risk destroying the possibility of accurately saying what the dialogue is about, he is sensing the danger of language as a “dwelling,” trapping experience within a privileged subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> When William Carlos Williams writes “unless there is / a new mind there cannot be a new / line,” he also means “unless there is / a new line there cannot be a new / mind.” Until we disarm the tyrannical framing functions of the English language, the natural self in its fullest sentience cannot be released to maximum expressivity. The syntactical innovations initiated by Pound (aided by his discovery of the Chinese character as a medium for poetry), Stein, Williams (who, among other sources, took William James’s lesson very seriously, i.e., to retrieve the real existence before it is broken up into serial orders through language and conceptions), and E. E. Cummings, and reinforced in practice and theory by the Black Mountain poets, John Cage, Robert Duncan, and Snyder, suddenly open up a new perceptual-expressive possibility in English, a new ambience whereby I can stage Chinese poetry according to its original operative dynamics rather than tailoring it to fit the Western procrustean bed.<sup>2</sup>

In reprinting this anthology, I wish to make this new perceptual ground and expressive dynamics accessible to more readers who are eager to reach beyond Western frames toward newer landscapes and to enter into an inter-reflective dialogue with Chinese poetry.

1. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 4–5.

2. For a fuller discussion of this change in ambience, see my *Diffusion of Distances: Dialogues between Chinese and Western Poetics* (University of California Press, 1993), especially chapters 2, 3, and 4.