On Li Bai's "Jing Ye Si" and Its Translations into English

⊙ Anders PETTERSSON

Umeå University

Abstract: In my article, I base myself on 19 different translations into English of Li Bai's well-known poem "Jing Ye Si" (静 夜 思). These translations were published between 1898 and 2019, and I comment on how the ways of converting "Jing Ye Si" into a poem in English have changed over time. But first and foremost, I look at how various translators have dealt with some specific translation problems in the poem and with the overall challenge of recreating "Jing Ye Si" in English as an artistic whole. I conclude with some more general reflections on texts, meanings, and translations.

Li Bai (or Li Bo, or Li Po, 701–762) is one of China's greatest literary classics, and the short poem of his usually called "Jing Ye Si" (静夜思; "Still Night Thoughts," or "Thoughts on a Quiet Night") is extremely well-known, perhaps because of its relative simplicity and universality. Indeed, according to Arthur Cooper, this "must be the best known now of all Chinese poems, especially among Chinese overseas" (109).

There are many translations of Li Bai's poem into English, in print and also on the Internet. I know of 19 different printed translations, and most of these will figure in this article in some form. The oldest of the translations was created in 1898, and the most recent one in 2019.[1]

In this article, I will give an idea of how the way of rendering "Jing Ye Si" in English has changed over time, but first and foremost I will look at how the various translators have dealt with some specific translation problems in the poem and with the overall challenge of recreating "Jing Ye Si" in English as an artistic whole. I will conclude with some more general reflections on texts, meanings, and translations.

A Look at Li Bai's Poem

There are two slightly different variants of "Jing Ye Si." This is the one most common in the West.[2]

> 床前明月光
> 疑是地上霜
> 举头望明月
> 低头思故乡

If one uses *pinyin* and Modern Standard Chinese this reads:

> Chuáng qián míng yuè guāng
> Yí shì dì shàng shuāng
> Jǔ tóu wàng míng yuè
> Dī tóu sī gù xiāng

No translation into English will be unproblematic. Here is my own suggestion:

> In front of my bed bright moonshine
> My first thought: frost on the ground
> I raise my head and look at the bright moon
> I lower my head and think of my old home

In the other version of the poem the first line would read "In front of my bed I view moonshine" (看月光 instead of 明月光), and the third line "I raise my head and look at the mountain moon" (望山月 instead of 望明月).[3] Both the "bright moon" and the "mountain moon" versions seem to be accepted in China. Only three of my translators use the "mountain moon" variant: Shigeyoshi Obata, Robert Payne, and Burton Watson.

Li Bai's short poem is a kind of *jueju* (绝句) and is of a type that is called, in English, five-character quatrain: four lines comprising five characters each. In the Chinese original there is a slight pause, a caesura, after the first two words in each line. The first, second, and fourth lines in the poem rhyme (in the *pinyin* version above: guāng—shuāng—xiāng). The structure of rhymes, the caesuras, and the antithetical relationship between the last two lines are all conventional features of a five-character quatrain. In Li Bai's time, the pattern of tones in a *jueju* (the structure of accents, in the *pinyin* version) is also normally strictly regulated, but it is debatable whether or not this is so in "Jing Ye Si." In any case, Li Bai's use of tonality—the poem's character of regulated or unregulated verse—will have had a stylistic role for his contemporary audience. In short, many details in the form of "Jing Ye Si" were of special importance. Some of these can in principle be rendered in English—certainly the four lines, the rhyme structure, and the antithetical relationship between the last two lines—while others, particularly the tonal pattern, cannot.

It should be emphasized that Li Bai's poem was not, of course, composed in Modern Standard Chinese but in 8th-century Chinese. Hugh M. Stimson has offered a reconstruction of its original

structure of sounds and tones; according to him, this is an unregulated poem (57). I will not go into his reconstructed version of "Jing Ye Si," just mention that the role of assonance, of close sonic relationships, seems much more marked there.

Three Translations from Different Times

Herbert A. Giles—the Giles who completed the Wade-Giles romanization system for Chinese—was the professor of Chinese in Cambridge 1897–1932 and an important introducer of Chinese literature to the Anglophone world. Giles translated "Jing Ye Si" (as "Night Thoughts") in his anthology *Chinese Poetry in English Verse*:

> I wake, and moonbeams play around my bed,
> Glittering like hoar-frost to my wondering eyes;
> Up towards the glorious moon I raise my head,
> Then lay me down—and thoughts of home arise. (72)

As we can see, Giles uses iambic pentameter and an ABAB rhyming scheme. This has forced him to depart from the original on many points. For example, there is no talk of moonbeams or eyes in Li Bai's original, and no "glorious" moon. I would say that we are offered a rather heavily poeticized and more idyllic poem.

To Giles, the use of rhyme was a given thing, and of course there is rhyme in Li Bai's original. "All Chinese poetry is lyrical," Giles writes in his preface to the second edition of his book, "in the sense that it was originally intended to be set to music and sung," and he quotes Algernon Swinburne's words that "a rhymeless lyric is a maimed thing" (Giles, Preface n. p.). This was no doubt a widespread feeling in his time and culture, and rhyme in different forms was also used in the other two translations from before 1920 in my material: L. Cranmer-Byng and W. J. B. Fletcher.

However, Ezra Pound's *Cathay*, a small book containing translations of Chinese poetry in free verse, was epoch-making in the translation of Tang poetry into English. Pound did not know Chinese himself, and he worked from notes made by the American orientalist Ernest Fenollosa. From a sinological point of view Pound's translations are not at all up to standard, but as poems they made a very strong impression. After the effect of *Cathay* had sunk in, all of the most renowned translations of Li Bai's poem are in free verse—early examples from the 1920s are the translations by Florence Ayscough, Obata, and Witter Bynner. However, later translations in formal verse certainly exist, in my material those by T'ing-Kan Admiral Ts'ai, Man Wong, and John A. Turner.

Ayscough was a sinologist, writer, and translator with a Canadian-American background, born in Shanghai and living in China for much of her life. In her *Fir-Flower Tablets* she cooperated with her long-time friend, the American poet Amy Lowell. This is their translation of "Jing Ye Si" ("Night Thoughts").

> In front of my bed the moonlight is very bright.
> I wonder if that can be frost on the floor?

> I lift up my head and look at the full moon, the dazzling moon.
> I drop my head, and think of the home of old days.　　　　(74)

Apart from the free verse, this is also a different kind of style than that of Giles. Ayscough's translation is, on the whole, quite literal. That she calls the moonlight "very" bright and refers to "the full moon, the dazzling moon" can seem surprising. However, just like Fenollosa and Pound, Ayscough was convinced that the separate elements in a complex Chinese character retain some of their independent sense and add this sense, as an extra nuance, to the overall meaning of the character. The presence of the "sun" character *ri* (日) in the important character "bright," *ming* (明), may, for her, have made the brightness extra bright.[4]

The early translations in free verse can give the impression that the form is still imperfectly mastered. The translations by Ayscough, Obata, and Bynner seem a little like prose divided into lines. What is new in later translations, particularly in those from after World War II, is the combination of free verse with artfulness, often relaxed artfulness, as in the rendition of Li Bai's poem (as "Still Night Thoughts") by the American sinologist Watson in his *Chinese Lyricism*.

> Moonlight in front of my bed—
> I took it for frost on the ground!
> I lift my eyes to watch the mountain moon,
> lower them and dream of home.　　　　(146–147)

In the introduction to his book, Watson distances himself from every ambition to approximate, in his translations, specific elements of form in Chinese poetry. His intention is to translate in a consciously modern way. "I myself translate into the spoken language of present-day America," he writes. "It is obviously the language I know best and therefore the one in which, if I am to achieve any success at all, the chances for success seem brightest" (14). Watson departs from Li Bai's original in important details in the last two lines.[5] But he retains much of the brevity of the original, and he introduces a varied rhythm—now dactylic, now anapestic, now iambic, and, in the final line, prosaic—which, to me, lends his version of the poem an air of freedom and agility.[6]

Two Ways of Understanding "Jing Ye Si"

The contents of "Jing Ye Si" can seem simple and obvious. Someone sees moonlight by his bed and first misunderstands it as frost, then raises his head and looks at the moon, finally lowering his head again and thinking of home.

Traditionally, Li Bai's poem is taken to be about homesickness. "This poem describes the traveller's longing for home," reads the concise description of its theme in a Li Bai anthology from Fudan University (Li Bai, "Jing Ye Si" [*Li Bai Shixuan*] 275). And in her book on the reception of Tang poetry in the West, Lan Jiang characterizes "Jing Ye Si" as "a few plain lines expressing a man's homesickness after traveling or residing in a place far away from his home" (81). True, I have seen more complex descriptions of the attitude expressed in the poem—like Yuanming Wang's (301–302) and Charles Egan's (210)—but I believe that the common way of understanding

"Jing Ye Si" is as a poem about a man longing for home.

When I considered the differences between the translations into English, and compared the translations with the Chinese original, my perception of details in "Jing Ye Si" was sharpened, and this affected my view of the poem. One of the points catching my attention was the seeming ambiguity of the final line: *si gu xiang.* There are important differences between the translations when it comes to these three words. For example, Ayscough lets the protagonist "think of the home of old days," while Watson lets him "dream of home." Who is right—or is it impossible to say?

In Classical Chinese, *si* (思) meant "to think, think of, think about, conceive of" and could both have the sense of "reflect on" and that of "long for." Consequently, from a strictly linguistic point of view, the person in the poem can be longing for his old home, or he can be just thinking about it, reflecting on it. (All my remarks about words and meanings in Classical Chinese refer to the information about the respective word in the dictionary by Paul W. Kroll.)

Gu (故), taken by itself, could mean just "old," but also something like "of a past age." Linguistically speaking, then, the person's home can very well be "the home of old days," as in Ayscough. However, if one wishes, *gu* (故) *xiang* (乡) can also be understood as one word, as *guxiang*, a synonym of *xiang*, whose meaning here must be that of "one's native place, homeplace, hometown." Consequently, the person's home can also very well be his homeplace, simply his "home," as in Watson.

There is, then, linguistic backing for the interpretation of "Jing Ye Si" as a poem about a longing for home, but also for an understanding of it as presenting a much more reflective and distanced attitude. Spontaneously, I am much more drawn toward this second option. Distance is a prominent element in "Jing Ye Si." There is vast distance between the person and the moon, underlined by the verb for "see" that is being used, *wang* (望), which, unlike *kan* (看), denotes a viewing from afar. And there is distance between the person and the homeplace—in space, and perhaps also in time. Observation is at the center of the poem, and it begins with the shattering of an illusion through viewing and thinking. Vulnerability, exposure, is also a feature. At the beginning—or before the beginning of the events of the poem—there is the chilling impression that there is frost in front of the bed. Actually, there is the impression that the bed is outdoors: that there is frost on the ground in front of the bed, as in Watson's translation. (For Ayscough, we are inside, and there is the impression that there is frost on the floor, but it seems far-fetched to me to understand *di* [地], here, as meaning "floor.")

We are not being told what the person experiences when, at the end of the poem, his old home is on his mind. Why not leave this more open? Is it not something of an overinterpretation to speak so definitely of homesickness and longing? And does this not make the poem too cosy and sentimental? To me, at least, the experience of frost and the experience of distance leave an existential chill.

Translation Problems in "Jing Ye Si": The Contents

The 19 translators in my material all seem to have had the traditional ambition to produce a translation that is reasonably true to the original while at the same time being effective as a piece of poetry in the target language. As is well known, these two goals are difficult to reconcile.

In the case of "Jing Ye Si"—as so often when it comes to literature—it is not really easy to

say more precisely what thoughts or feelings are at the heart of the work. But the translator also encounters a number of more specific problems, most of these typical of Chinese poetry or of the *jueju*, but some special for this Li Bai poem. I will reflect on a number of relevant difficulties facing every translation of "Jing Ye Si" into English.

In Li Bai's Chinese original, there are no pronouns. There must be a person in the poem, someone looking and thinking and moving his head, but he is not being referred to as "I" or "he." He is not even explicitly characterized as a male, so the pronoun "she" (or "they") might also have been an alternative, had it not seemed so artificial, against the background of Li Bai's time and culture, to think of the person in the poem as being, possibly, female.

In Chinese poetry without pronouns, the translator into English can also sometimes do without them. For example, Egan (207) gives such a translation of Wang Wei's "Lu Zhai" (鹿柴; "The Deer Fence"), successfully, to my mind. But in "Jing Ye Si" the presence of a specific human subject is so manifest that a translation without a pronoun (like Wong's) is bound to become strange. All my translators except Wong introduce a pronoun and use the first-person singular. This is quite natural, but inevitably removes something of the precious indefiniteness in the Chinese original. What we get is something slightly more bound to a special person, slightly more idiosyncratic.

Since Chinese verbs do not have inflected forms, tense in Chinese has to be indicated by different means. Such temporal indications are lacking in "Jing Ye Si." This means that the events recounted are not clearly lodged in the past or the present—or, for that matter, in the future. This feature cannot be reproduced in English, unless—absurdly—one chooses to use only infinitives in one's translation, or no verbs at all. Twelve of my translators place the poem in the present (like Giles and Watson), while seven of them use past tense (like Ayscough). Some (like Watson) create a now, but use past tense to refer to the initial illusion ("I took it for frost on the ground!").

In my understanding of "Jing Ye Si," it is an important feature that we as readers or listeners take part in a successively developing experience: a (false) impression of frost in front of the bed; then a look at the cause of the impression, the moon; then thoughts of the old home (obviously triggered by the view of the moon). Using the past tense in any place in the poem seems to me to introduce a distance to the recounted experience that I find uncalled for: the experience itself may be distanced, as I suggested, but there seems to be every reason to keep that experience close to the poem's audience.

The indefiniteness created by the lack of pronouns and tense in this poem cannot really be captured in an English translation. As so often in Chinese poetry, the content can seem to exist in a special, floating, lyrical reality. This effect should not be overstated, but I believe that every reasonable English translation inevitably, and unfortunately, becomes a little bit more commonsensical and mundane.

Stephen Owen has referred to "the inherent indeterminacy of poetic Chinese" (323). The indeterminacy may not be so much inherent as carefully cultivated, but its existence and importance appear evident. Even if it cannot really be reproduced in an English translation, I find it good to preserve the openness of the Chinese original whenever possible. My hesitation with respect to the reading of "Jing Ye Si" as a poem about homesickness, a way of taking the poem reflected in some of the English translations, has to do with that impulse: why not let the contents of the thoughts in the quiet night remain as unspecified as I think they are in Li Bai's poem?

The question of punctuation is not without relevance where indeterminacy is concerned. Reflecting on the translations I came to be bothered, more and more, by the liberal use of

punctuation. Li Bai's original, whatever it looked like, will hardly have contained commas or full stops, let alone exclamation signs or em dashes. Punctuation makes relationships more precise and definitive; it introduces an extra layer of clarity that many ancient Chinese poems can no doubt do without. My own suggested translation just used one colon. In my material of translations, the punctuation in that of Egan is similarly sparse—and I would not miss its three commas and its semicolon if they were all left out:

> Before my bed, the bright moonlight
> I mistake it for frost on the ground
> Raising my head, I stare at the bright moon;
> Lowering my head, I think of home   (210)

Translation Problems in "Jing Ye Si": The Form

A five-character quatrain has a very distinct form due to its brevity, its equally long lines, its rhymes and caesuras, the antithesis at its ending, and its regulated tonal structure (or absence of one). The combination of a certain indeterminacy with a strong form is no doubt very important to the effect of a good *jueju*. Form in lyric, music, et cetera implies a kind of control over the material presented. The strong form in a five-character quatrain may give the impression that the partly evasive content is still, in some non-cognitive fashion, grasped and held fast.

It is natural to think that a good translation of a five-character quatrain should also preserve, as much as possible, the form of its original. "As much as possible"—for given the aims of translations like the ones in my material, it is also always a question of producing something that works well as a piece of poetry in English. The translator will have to perform something of a balancing act on this point.

We saw that Watson explicitly distanced himself from attempts to recreate the form of Chinese poems in translations into English. At least some of my translators obviously view things differently, most clearly Wong in his translation from 1950:

> On bed bright moon shone,
> Thought frost on ground foamed,
> Raised head faced bright moon,
> Lowered head dreamt of home. (25)

I noted earlier that Wong is the only one of my translators who does not introduce a pronoun into his text. When it comes to form, he also stays close to the original. He matches Li Bai's four lines containing five Chinese characters/words each by using four lines with five English words each. Wong does not employ Li Bai's AABA rhyme scheme, but he does use imperfect rhymes according to the pattern ABAB. If one wishes, one can also discern a caesura after the first two words in each line. And the antithetical relationship between the last two lines is naturally there.

However, to me, Wong's translation is not really felicitous. An obtrusive impression of strangeness stands in the way of my appreciation of its lyrical content. One is not used to poems

in English consisting entirely of monosyllabic words. To go as far as this in the attempted reproduction of the original Chinese form seems to be to go too far.

The tonal structure of Li Bai's poem cannot, for purely linguistic reasons, be recreated in English, and it is hard to think of any other near-equivalent than a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, that is, a definite meter. A bound form—meter and rhyme—can indeed, at first sight, seem to be a good choice for a translator. However, the rhymed translations in my material—exemplified here by those of Giles and Wong—all interfere a good deal, in their search for rhymes, with the delicate details of Li Bai's seemingly so simple poem. I can see no reason why this is bound to be so, but I feel that the rhyming translator with a magic wand has not yet appeared.

The antithesis in lines three and four will be realized automatically in any competent translation. Where the caesuras are concerned, they can certainly be introduced, or approximated in some form, in an English translation. The unusual division into lines in Innes Herdan's version of the poem was most probably intended to do so:

> The bright moon shone
> 　　before my bed,
> I wondered—
> 　　was it frost upon the ground?
> I raised my head
> 　　to gaze at the clear moon,
> Bowed my head
> 　　remembering my old home. (387)

Making conspicuous efforts to include caesuras can seem to be to devote too much attention to a formal feature that does not, perhaps, carry that much aesthetic weight. But giving the translation a strong form, a palpable character of unity, appears quite important, as I argued above. Keeping the poem quite short is one way of achieving this, and several translators take care to do so. It is difficult to come down to the 20 words used by Wong, but there are only 29 words in Watson's translation, and only 30 in Egan's. Another method of enhancing the poem's unity is the (moderate) use of assonance, something one can certainly find in Herdan's version of "Jing Ye Si."

Texts, Meanings, and Translations: Some Concluding Reflections

In the preceding sections, I commented on Li Bai's "Jing Ye Si" and some of its translations into English. What I wrote may give rise to thoughts of many kinds, but I have no specific conclusions to present. Instead, I would like to take a step back and say something about in what spirit I want my remarks to be understood. For that reason I will explain briefly how I think about literature, meaning, and translation.

It is easy and seemingly natural to conceive of a text, literary or non-literary, as a genuinely existing something and as an entity possessing its own specific meaning. However, it is not easy to understand the actual nature of texts.[7]

For my part, I believe that what we call texts and meanings are human conceptions, products

of our conventional ways of speaking, not some kind of objects that are really there in the world. If one thinks that a text exists as a separate thing and has a true meaning, one has much to account for. What stuff, quite concretely, are texts and meanings supposed to be made of? What way of being (material, immaterial, or mental) should we ascribe to them? And what real-world processes can conceivably give rise to them? These are absolutely basic questions, and questions that, to my mind, believers in the true existence of texts and meanings have never been able to answer in any plausible manner.

Let me sketch another way of conceiving of that which we call texts and meanings. Faced with a material copy of, say, "Jing Ye Si"—a copy of (a copy of …) Li Bai's long-lost material original—any person with a command of Classical Chinese will form ideas about a sequence of Chinese words and about the meaning of these words—both the linguistic meaning involved and the "deeper" meaning, the point. In finer, but no doubt important, details, these meanings will vary from person to person. Every competent reader or listener will agree on what words are meant to be construed, but people may differ more or less tangibly when it comes to understanding the meaning. While there are no words or meanings with a true, objective, existence, the understanding of a material copy is likely to coincide in most respects among competent readers or listeners (but will probably also diverge on important points). There will then be a wide, but not all-encompassing, area of consensus about words and meaning. But consensus is not the same as truth, and there will be no truth of the matter anyway, since words and meanings are not things that exist independently of what we think or say.

This sketch could be worked out in much more detail,[8] and more layers of philosophical complexity could be added. But this is not the place to go deeply into philosophy or linguistics. I do not claim to have settled the contentious issues involved with my short explanations. Their role here, I repeat, is just to make it clear in what spirit I want my remarks about "Jing Ye Si" and its English translations to be understood.

If I am right about texts and meanings, this underscores how much uncertainty underlies the translation of texts. A translator performing the kind of translation that is now at issue is expected to understand the text to be translated, and to produce a kind of equivalent in the target language. But there is, at bottom, no truth about what the original texts means.

This can sound like irresponsible relativism. But the lack of absolute truth does not preclude the possibility of rational argument. Indeed, we should recognize the situation from very many cases in everyday life. In human affairs, whether existentially important or just trivial, there are real-life consequences of one's choices, and rational arguments for and against possible actions, but there is arguably no objective truth about what is right. If one considers whether or not to emigrate, there will be weighty arguments for and against, but how could there be a literally true answer? The same goes for the question of whether or not to buy that apartment at that price, or the question of what to have for dinner. There will be no truth, but that does not mean that anything goes. One's choices will have tangible consequences and had better be guided by reasons that one finds good. That is also so regarding the question of how to understand "Jing Ye Si." In my view, this standpoint does not represent an acceptance of irresponsible relativism, but a rejection of unrealistic objectivism.

When the text to be translated is a literary text, like "Jing Ye Si," its point will not be to convey some definite message, some special statement or directive. Literary texts are—arguably—there to be experienced. They should have the capacity to give rise to a worthwhile experience

in the reader or listener. This circumstance introduces extra subjectivity into the translation of literature, not least the translation of poetry. There may be a consensual way of understanding the verbal meaning of "Jing Ye Si," but hardly a consensual way of experiencing Li Bai's poem.

The 19 translations in my material reflect, in a thought-provoking manner, different ways of understanding what is important in the content and form of Li Bai's "Jing Ye Si" (that is, in the content and form ascribable to an adequate copy). It is also interesting to see how translators in different times endeavored to make the poem accessible to audiences with different cultural expectations. The translation by Giles could already feel passé in the 1920s.[9] Watson's translation would perhaps have been met with little appreciation in the 1890s.

In my article, I have suggested a way of understanding "Jing Ye Si," and I have commented, sometimes critically, on several of the 19 translations. I attempted to support my views with arguments, but this final section should make it clear that I did not aspire to truth—and why I did not do so. I think of my remarks as part of an open-ended, but potentially clarifying, discussion.

I would like to add that I feel much respect for many of the translations included. The translatory work of people like Giles, Ayscough, and Watson has no doubt done very much to make Chinese poetry accessible to the Anglophone world, providing awe and delight and creating interest in Chinese culture.[10]

Notes

1. Translations before 1984 were registered in Fung and Lai, p. 91. Of my 19 translations, only those by Egan, Harris, and Jin are later. The 19 translations are all included in my list of Works Cited, see Alley, p. 195; Ayscough, p. 74; Bynner, p. 53; Cooper, p. 109; Cranmer-Byng, pp. 61–62; Egan, p. 210; Fletcher, p. 25; Giles, p. 72; Harris, p. 133; Herdan, p. 387; Jenyns, p. 76; Jin, p. 67; Liu, p. 21; Obata, p. 55; Payne, p. 167; Ts'ai, p. 29; Turner, p. 121; Watson, pp. 146–147; and Wong, p. 25.

2. For the wording, see "Jing Ye Si" [*Qianshou Tangren Jueju*], p. 146. However, in my rendition I use simplified characters, four horizontal lines, and no punctuation.

3. For this variant, see "Jing Ye Si" [*Quan Tang Shi*].

4. Cf. Ayscough, pp. lxvii–lxviii.

5. In Watson's translation, the person in the poem lifts and lowers his eyes, not his head, and he unequivocally *dreams* of home.

6. Lan Jiang has given a book-length account of the Anglophone reception of Tang poetry, in which she also comments on the work of Giles (ch. 3) and Ayscough (ch. 13). What was said in this section falls well within the historical pattern described by her.

7. Cf. the overview of previous and present ideas about the ontology of art in Livingston.

8. Cf. Pettersson, "On Literary Meaning" and *The Idea*.

9. See, e.g., Obata, p. vi.

10. This article is a shortened and thoroughly reworked version of my BA thesis in Chinese, presented at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2022. I wish to thank my supervisor, Fredrik Fällman, and my teacher of Classical Chinese, Martin Svensson Ekström, for corrections and suggestions in connection with the BA thesis.

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