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Historic Classic as Global Interculture: 文心雕龍 Literary Heart Carving Dragon and its Translations

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I. ONE: ON THE 文心雕龍

The classic 文心雕龍 is distinct and unique on at least three counts. One, this book is China's first major literary criticism, out about 501AD, centuries before medieval era. Two, as poetics is on poetry, so this literary criticism is careful scrutiny of literary writings, and all China's writings are literary. Three, 文心雕龍 dares to be comprehensive, packed tight in poetic rhythm. *Literary Heart Carving Dragon* is a dragonish pivot in China, epitomizing Chinese writing and thinking.

Born here now, the "dragon" soars far beyond here now in life's throbbing heartbeat of poetry; poetry is defined as packed rhythm jumping alive, humming tuneless tune, alias dragon self-carving in today's literary heart. The invisible dragon-beat is carved out 雕龍 into the "literary heart 文心" of China millennia young. Liu Xie 劉勰 cannot help but write out such life-act, intimate infinite, into *Literary Heart Carving Dragon* 文心雕龍 in 50 gem-chapters, orderly sparkling, compactly poetic, solid soaring.

Thus Liu gives us poetic literature on Chinese literature; his *Literary Heart Carving Dragon* is itself the carved dragon soaring-crisscrossing into the literary heart of the dragon-cosmos, vast all over in history, to stun us to stabilize us, in joy breathless, by hitting the heart of literary beauty dragon soaring. The book covers China's cultural horizons from its cosmic principles (chapters 1-4), spreading poetically (chs.5-9) in various genres (chs.10-25), elucidating inner-outer structure (chs.26-35) and patterns of progress of writing (chs.36-44), to concluding in historical trends of the times (chs.45-50). The whole book is a sparkling gem shining throughout China worldwide.

II. TWO: ON TWO ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

Now we are readied to consider translations by Shih and Yang. We first *a.* specify the ideal of translation, in whose light to scrutinize *b.* Shih, then

c. Yang, then in *d.* compare complaints on both, to sum up *e.* their failure.

a) Ideal: poetic style

Translation is translucency via which the author freely appears unhindered, at home in the translated language as in his native tongue.¹ Liu Xie is alive, critical and sophisticated, weaving rhythmically various senses and authors—he is punchy poetic. Therefore, he must be rendered poetic alive in English as he is in Chinese. Liu-translation is an English "dragon carved" by a poet in Liu's Chinese poetry, "literary heart" (English) to "literary heart" (Chinese).

Ignoring this exigency of tight style-match, to arbitrarily add translator's explanations, adds alien legs to Liu-snake,² to botch up this translation that now turns ridiculously leg-disfigured, immobilizing the Liu-snake alive dragonish. Sadly, such fatality is baldly shown in Shih and Yang. Now, let me unpack all this.

Liu's book is woven by the how of poetic rhythm into a what-said tapestry of each idea into others; what-said is part and parcel of how-saying. Any Chinese prose is poetic, a carved dragon soaring, a philosophical poetry; missing the how of literary rhythm misses what is said. This how-what unity is *the* normative principle of translating all Chinese writings historical, argumentative, literary, and fictive. The translator must be a poet embodying China's literary heart to carve out a comparable dragon-poetry in English, to write what is said in how it is said, as the Chinese original writes poetic beautiful.

¹ Rainer Schute and John Biguenet in *Theories of Translation*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, say, translation lets the author talk in the target language as if the author knows the language. For more nuances and minute complexities, see Umberto Eco, *Experiences in Translation*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001, and William Radice and Barbara Reynolds, eds., *The Translator's Art*, NY: Penguin Books, 1987. Here, the sole sine-qua-non is hit hard: China's dragon-rhythm vigorous must translucently soar throbbing in other tongues—translated.

² The ridiculous image of "drawing snake, adding legs 畫蛇添足" in *Warring States Stratagems* ("Qi Stratagems") 戰國策, 齊策 (117/57/15-17 in 戰國策逐字索引 1993), is justly applied to botched translation here, for "state stratagems" amount to shrewd tactics of translating the situation of present danger into targeted prosperity. The whole *Stratagems* volume collects many gripping stories of how the situational translations astutely transpired, during the two and a half cutthroat centuries of Warring States.

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The translator must exhibit poetry in English, translucently seeing the Chinese dragon alive. Explanation must be separated from translation. To translate Liu Xie into English transfers China's typical best into English best, heart to heart. Translation is a pivotal task of intercultural in our Global Village today. Such tall order of translating *Literary Heart Carving Dragon* is responded to imperfectly by two into English, among six mentioned by Yang (40, 79), to my knowledge.

One is known, back in 1959, Vincent Yu-chung Shih, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragon: A Study of Thought and Pattern of Chinese Literature*, NY: Columbia University Press, 1959. Another is *Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind (Wenxin diaolong)*,³ written by Liu Xie (c. A.D., 465-521) and translated into English by Yang Guobin with an Introduction and Annotations, 2 vols. Beijing: Library of Chinese Classics in English Translation, 2003. My impressions on both translations are here.

a) Shih

Let us begin with *Shih's* translation. Reading *Shih's* translation tastes some thin soup of de-zinged Chinese spirits thick vibrant. *Shih* is barely reminiscent of distant skeletal Liu Xie, as *Shih* even confuses prosaic explanation with strictly lyrical translation. Flatly wordy, *Shih* has lost echoes of rhythmic punches of the terse original, killing Liu gutsy.

Shih's Introduction begins with general description of poetry and music in ancient China, to wander into "Chinese philosophy" of poetry as of moral utility, as Confucius appreciates music. Mencius' subjectivity is then added, with "fostering the vital spirit or breath" moral, continued with Hsüntzu repeating Confucius' moralistic socialism. Then Chuangtzu appears to criticize conventional morality and language, to stress *shen* (the spirit or divine) and mystical transcendence—all in vague if not deviated description. Thus it goes on for 30 pages.

Un-clarified platitudes are thrown about, and general terms today are used to explain ancient text, as profuse words fill pages. Bulky fluffy generality results, trite stale. We keep asking, "So, what else is new and not trivial?" In the last page but one, some later praises of the book are thrown in, and the last page closes with the difficulty of understanding terms of Chinese writers, to be resolved by understanding them in context, (surprisingly) citing I. A. Richards on Mencius as a model, unaware that, with modern Western logic, Richards⁴ exhausts all logically possible meanings of some of ancient Mencius' sentences; Richards writes in

an anachronism, hardly helping us understand ancient Chinese writings.

Besides, *Shih's* noncommittal "art as moralistic didacticism" (Chuangtzu is dropped) is applicable, duly adjusted, to any literature anywhere. It is unclear how such trait of Chinese aesthetics, if valid, can explain what uniqueness of Liu's. And then, suddenly, on pp. 33-34, Liu's biography appears. Mentioning no distinct feature of Liu's book, none of its specific contribution or importance, Introduction plunges forthwith into précis of each chapter of the book, beginning at the Preface Chapter 50 (at the end of the book).

Totally absent are how the book is structured, much less how lyrically, forcefully, and concisely it was written, and how the how and the what are organically at one, to typify Chinese writings (to concretize Yang's assertion in general, 17, 44). A good summary of the book that begins *Shih's* Introduction is all forgotten, never to develop anywhere. In all, *Shih's* Introduction is alarmingly inferior to 導讀 by 羅立乾 meticulously researched (though still imperfect), in 文心雕龍, 臺北三民書局, 民83, pp. 1-27.

In vague verbosity, all *Shih's translations* are of content only, cut and dried, omitting all the original colors and throbs as dispensable frills, to bring a set of skeleton-pieces out of the closet of the past. The whole Introduction and translations lay flat, scattered, bare and loose. I am sorry to have been harsh on *Shih*; still the magnificence of the original shows through his translation thinly mostly accurate, shorn of original rhythmic echoes (even in sense) as it is, so many points left to desire in each phrase, as it does.

The problem is that a word has a core-sense with halo-nuances, and Chinese word's core-sense constantly shifts with usage-contexts alive as Greek Proteus elusive allusive, and Liu Xie is the worst Chinese Proteus. To capture these subtle nuances requires poetic sensitivity to persistently trail the original poetic vigor. To transfer word for word kills the sense alive, and no explanation may clutter translation, as explanation is no translation. It is sheer joy to hit the Chinese just right in English, but it is quite a difficult art to hit it.

b) Yang

Let us now go to *Yang's* translation. Two bulky *Yang* volumes are due to cramming in the pages Chinese and its English equivalent (not quite), such as original Liu Xie's text, its Chinese translation 今譯, and its English translation. *Yang's* volume in English alone may be about *Shih's* size. *Yang's* General Preface is a rough historical survey, not on what China is, what the West is, and poorly translated into English, though its major stress on global intercultural is correct. *Yang's* Introduction did touch on Liu's book's importance, but mostly on what it says, no why or how it is important, much less its signature characteristic of tight rhythm,

³ Why the original Chinese order in the title is reversed in *Yang's* English translation is not told.

⁴ I. A. Richards, *Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definitions*, Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1932.

and is again vaguely translated into English, often even surprisingly different from its Chinese equivalent.

Yang's long Introduction 前言 on *what* 文心雕龍 said (pp. 17-83, the Chinese version followed by its slightly different English version) is lucid, coherent, informative, and even ingenious, rather a delight to read, though it tends to be vague due to lack of definition of key terms, "genre," "imagination," etc., and Yang's whole setup deviates from Liu's. I must resolutely resist the temptation to present my summaries of it, "adding legs to Yang's snake." I should only mention one critical point: All Yang's introduction and translations are a "snake" drawn ingeniously prosaic and dead-set, not Liu Xie jumping alive exquisite.

Here are my miscellaneous comments. Yang's footnotes at the back are well researched, but his citations are hard to locate. Yang in p. 19 is good, but I would put it the other way: Dao is root of human, human is root of literary pattern, and so the literary exhibits humanity and heaven and earth.

c) *Yang and Shih*

Curiously (for I don't know why), Yang's Introduction is more appropriate (not precise) than Shih's, while Shih's translations are more accurate (not appropriate) than Yang's. Yang's simplified syllabary 簡體字 illicitly lumps 讚 with 贊, 弔 with 吊, and so on.

More, Shih's odd "Glossary" replaces Yang's careful "Bibliography," while Shih's footnotes under each translation page are helpful, lacking in Yang. Shih's title-translations of chapters are more in rhyme with the original than Yang's illicitly explanatory. Translations by Shih and Yang missed "how-expression intrinsic to what-expressed" that turns Liu sparkling coherent and alive; both translations are flat flabby, not the original poetry lush and tight.

A simple example is here. Liu Xie concludes every chapter with a short sharp poem he calls "tsan 贊" a chanting sum-up. Shih sensibly leaves it untranslated, just explaining it with Chapter Nine 頌讚 (12, n, 26), while Yang brutally puts it as "summary," to kill the chanting poetic aura at the core of *tsan*, a glorious finale of each chapter, as chorusing to round up Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. This instance exemplifies all Yang's barely correct, brutal insensitivity in all *tsan* that, over-interpreted, turn into partial translations. Actually both translators' *tsan* are disasters.

It is easier to pursue Liu's skeletal "meanings" than re-presence-ing, in the novel world of English, Liu's Chinese vigor, his full-blooded "sense" punchy, luscious, and complexly fresh. Worse, even such skeletal pursuit is elusive as trailing a tiny boy jumping alive, as we vainly try to "download" his primordial bone-movements into our adult "chart" decently systematic, as he shouts to fight his favorite "monster." Downloading Liu spanking alive, Shih thinks he captured one aspect of Liu's "meanings" as Yang thinks he did another.

All this while, a third party beside both scratches his head, "Is this a real Liu?" Somehow their tones are off; *their* tunes are felt alien to Liu. Such bewilderingly elusive but clear mis-renderings are embarrassingly displayed as "translations," as we read them with Liu's original text beside. Still, remaining inaccurate, explanatory, and out of Liu-rhythm as both are, Shih's translation seems less so than Yang's.

And the list of my comparative complaints goes on. I said, e.g., that Yang is better in Introduction, while Shih is better in translation. My criteria (detailed in TWO, a. above) are poetic thrust as Liu's original, no-explanation as translation, and appropriateness, etc. But such comments have no end, as anyone can see. Still, the point has been made by just this much amount of comments. I had better cut off such a list at this point.

d) *Failing ideal*

In sum, Shih and Yang are literalistic unliterary, not literary poetic as Liu, missing this "as." To re-present 文心雕龍 alive, we need its *comparable*⁵ poetic rendition in English, attending to the translation closely matching up to *how* its Chinese original is written in vivid rhythmic vigor ever fresh. For example, "神思 divine musings" is flattened by Yang as "imagination." 朱自清 says it is "big-scaled heart-travel 大規模的心的旅行" to form a "trinity" with "hidden reverie 玄想" and "depth thought 潛思."⁶

That is translation in close match with the original literary vigor. The reason is obvious. As Liu insists and executes in 文心雕龍, literary presentation portrays typical features of living; literary Liu hits essentials of life homo-cosmic. Translation must be as literary alive as Liu. Trying for literal accuracy to the original Chinese, literalistic translation ironically turns un-literal to Liu.

Even my entire meta-comments here are more literary-careful than literal-analytical, less Aristotelian than reminiscent of the literary and tight *Warring States Stratagems* 戰國策; all this while, my comments are logical critical and involved passionate. Interestingly, a comparable view is expressed even more forcefully by Lattimore,⁷ saying poetic rhythm *alone* punches out what even surprises the writer. I say poetic style sings sense; he says poetry creates sense. We agree that how-says parameterizes what-said. Gesture says; poetic gesture shouts sense, in China for millennia, as typified

⁵ Of course, what is comparable can only be felt, discerned, by those at home in both cultures of translation and translated, and agreement among the bicultural is not determinate. Still, what is comparable has a rough parameter and has to exist to tell an apt good translation.

⁶ See the fabulous "海闊天空與古今中外 'Ocean wide, sky vast' and 'Ancient and modern, at home and abroad'" in 朱自清全集 *Chu Tzu-ch'ing: Complete Works*, 臺南市大孚書局, 1995, p. 212.

⁷ Richmond Lattimore, *The Poetry of Greek Tragedy*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1958; Harper Torchbook, 1966. The last chapter is punchy revealing.

in 文心雕龍. China's specific cultural excellence is the sparkling pride of the global.

III. THREE: ON INTERCULTURAL PROSPECT

It is time to take stock. Our grand finale is made of a. reviewing the translation-ideal and its actual failures so far, b. precisely via which we envisage our positive prospect today in global intercultural.

a) *Ideal and failures*

Liu Xie delightfully crisscrosses writings to cross-refer sages ancient and contemporary into a network subtle rich, poetic *peculiarly* Chinese; he thereby alludes to the *ubiquitous* human living homo-cosmic. Liu Xie nods to a Greek sea-god Proteus shepherding seals, changing his self liquid as sea, to dodge capture until hung on to, to reveal future truths vast as sea. His oceanic elusiveness alludes to oceanic truths.⁸ Liu Xie's poetic web is Chinese Proteus fleeing our capture, too ancient allusive for us today. Still, Liu is not beyond our grasp. Let me explain.

In my opinion, Liu's 文心雕龍 is poetic crisscrossing, so inter-involved in sense, in rhythm, and in allusions as to be well-nigh untranslatable, but it does not mean we cannot understand it. For example, the Bible is a mixed bag of literary beauty in many ancient languages; it has been variously translated, and reading many of them with sensitive care surprisingly enables us to approach it more than we can expect, as we hear great sermons based on translated Bible passages. Similarly, reading *many* imperfect translations of 文心雕龍 awesomely unapproachable enables us to appreciate its cultural magnificence beyond we initially suspected; thus it excitingly nourish our souls everywhere.

In sum, Chinese writings sing sense in tunes situational, as detailed by 朱自清.⁹ "Tune is mood groping for its logic" (Robert Frost); mood is attunement (Heidegger)¹⁰ with things around. So, in order to mean just right, felt logic must be in the writer's mood in tune with the mood of things. Our mood means; it must

⁸ Ocean-elusive, ocean-truthful, Proteus the sea-god of the future is interestingly portrayed in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, ed. M. C. Howatson, 1991, p. 470.

⁹ See "詩言志辨 On 'poems express intentions,'" in -, 上, 臺北市宏業書局, 民72, pp. 185-355.

¹⁰ "Conversations on the Craft of Poetry," *Robert Frost: Collected Poem, Prose, & Plays*, NY: The Library of America, 1995, p. 857. His poetic vigor cleanses my soul. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trs. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, NY: Harper & Row, 1962, indexes on pp. 518 (stimmen, Stimmung), 526 (attunement), and 551 (mood). Heidegger is so poetic as to inspire another translation of his *Being and Time* by Joan Stambaugh, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. Heidegger can claim to be today's Liu Xie. Both translations agree that mood is attunement for Heidegger. See Stambaugh's comparable indexes on p. 424 (attunement) and 453 (mood). We have quoted US Frost and German Heidegger to show how Liu Xie's dragon-poetic principle is supported

sound good to mean good sense. How-said means what - said, and meaning must be in things' mood. All this makes for dragon-poetry pulsating sensible sense, good sense just right, and in things.

To capture such mood-sense is to translate into today, to sing to understand, poet for poet, mood to mood to feel *that* way together. This is how "literary heart" of mood "carves dragon" soaring rhythmic-vigorous in matters homo-cosmic. *Explaining* all this kills the poetry of translation felt together in the right mood, never analytically explained in the general field. It is thus that literalistic-explained translations of 文心雕龍 fail, fail in mood in tune and in sense. It is so serious, so sad.

b) *Positive global prospect*

Still, Shih and Yang are not exceptions. Being an avid collector of translations, I closely observe how literary renderings of 孟子, 文賦, and even the poems of 張籍 were admirably *tried* by David Hinton (1998), Sam Hamill (1987), and Jonathan Chaves (2006)—and all sadly failed. I sigh deeply at many luminary-interpreters in *Wen-Lin* (ed. Chow Tse-tung, 1968) and at Lin Yutang's many courageous renderings (*Wisdom of Confucius* 1938, *Wisdom of Lao-tse* 1948, *On the Importance of Understanding* 1960, *Theories of Chinese Art* 1967, *The Wisdom of China and India* 1942, and the list goes on).

I hardly need to mention stellar elucidators Waley, Legge, Giles, Creel, Watson, Chan, Lau, Dobson, Wilhelm, Spence, Snyder, Graham, Watts, etc., all so close to the Chinese originals and so helpful, *and* so far from the originals. The reason is simple, and alarming. None has captured China's tight poetic dragon-thrust intrinsic to the literary heart of what is said, as performances shape musical compositions, though Waley and Graham vaguely approached the saying-said unity *unawares*.

I am happy that 聞一多 says Chinese sentences are rhythmic 音節, tightly packed 緊湊. I am sad as he says translation caters to the taste of audience, not faithfully conveying the translated work, as all authors and translators I know say.¹¹ He criticized Tagore, English translation of Li Po's poems, and translated Arnold's "Rugby Chapel,"¹² and his own sentences are often English-flavored. 朱自清 knew English well, summing up English books, translating English

even abroad; the dragon-principle is basic to humanity, intercultural, global.

¹¹ See Eco dictating various modes of translating his volumes, and Emil Brunner thanking his translator for consulting with him. Umberto Eco, *Experiences in Translation*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1949, pp. 11, 17. And the list goes on.

¹² 聞一多全集 三, 臺北里仁書局, 民89, 丙161, 162, 164-165, 丁203-221, 275-279 and 聞一多全集 武漢湖北人民出版社, 1993, 2:228-330. His Chinese translations read like his usual writing. Does it show his good translations? I omit comments on his critiques of English translations. On Chu, see many pages in 朱自清全集, 臺南市文國書局, 1996.

passages, wrote on English influences, and wrote vivid travelogues of the West.¹³ But neither paid special attention to translation as such.

Noteworthy is Roger Ames's skillful incorporation of China's "idea-system" (J. Huxley) in his various translations of 孝經, 論語, 道德經, and many others. Ames' "translations" are actually an excuse for unobtrusive initiation of global intercultural. We are grateful. Of course, nothing is easier than to quibble over the adequacies of his translations, and his explanations of Chinese idea-system, but we must remember, he has just initiated global intercultural; he is the world's only translator firmly *and* tacitly to commence intercultural. For his pioneering initiation we are grateful deeply, rightly.

On the whole, imperfect these translations are as I have complained so far, every bit of their elucidations still adds to our stunned appreciation of the Chinese original vast deep, intimate infinite, and rhythmically magnificent *beyond* even its Chinese explication (as 今譯 in Yang's volumes show). We are deeply grateful to all translators for their decades of meticulous assiduity. We their beneficiaries owe them this realization: 文心雕龍 with its translations are not an end but our *means* to intercultural worldwide, as Ames nudges us to stare at to initiate.

Poetry sings sense-music; China is the culture of poetic music. It behooves us to spread globally China's poetic-musical *thinking* embodied in 文心雕龍, as Chinese musical depths are heard throbbing in German Schumann. China is as musical as Schumann is poetic, as his tuneless tuneful "Abendlied"¹⁴ echoes in deep sensibility the faintly rhymed rhythms of 文心雕龍.

It is thus that the most local is the most cosmopolitan; cultural locals are the pride of the global ubiquitous. Intercultural global advocates the heartfelt echoes of cultural localities, Liu Xie with Proteus, Schumann, the Bible, etc. We carve out various English dragon-translations of the literary heart of 文心雕龍, to use them as our poetic mood-means to global intercultural, excitingly to nourish our souls everywhere.

In sum, dragon-translations of Chinese writings remain in *our* hand in our literary-hearts as our urgent task of intercultural toward the future worldwide. We have job to carve alive, beginning today, inspired by our great predecessors with their mixed accomplishments so vast illustrious. Our daring dragon-translations of China,

however imperfect, perfectly dawn our cosmopolitan con-cord—hearts-together—worldwide.

Now, let us soberly tighten up the whole bit so far. Someone may demur, "Why bother with moldy China? We are too busy for such silly nonsense." We can gently remind him. Technical knowledge 知識 we are so proud of came from primordial life-wisdom 智慧, to facilitate wisdom. Sadly, as a teenager despises his parents, knowledge tends to disdain of wisdom, to turn inhuman human, a tragic monster worse than useless.

The "moldy" China warmly pats us on the shoulder, pointing to the glorious dragon soaring, carved out by our literary heart of primordial humanity; 文心雕龍 is *the* primal sine qua non to our basic humanity, the be-all and end-all of all. Everything, including technical knowledge, begins and ends here.

Our busy-ness that mocks this life-basic wisdom mocks our self to death, as shown by our technical knowledge that brings on ecological disasters to bring down everything, including our proud technical knowledge.¹⁵ Disdain of "moldy" life-wisdom, since time immemorial, commits proud suicide so silly so tragic. Now, what is sillier, technical knowledge today or ancient moldy life-wisdom in China's 文心雕龍?

Thus promotion of China's 文心雕龍 is never silly but indispensable to save the world from the brink of total destruction. Promotion of ancient wisdom, dragon soaring at the core of literary heart of humanity, is global intercultural. So, China-promotion via its translation is the absolute essential of global intercultural to save the world. This conclusion is inescapable, indicating China-translation to be our historic task indispensably urgent worldwide, right here and now today.

¹³ See Chu's sparkling penetrating travelogue throughout the Western hemisphere in 朱自清全集, 臺南市文國書局, 1996, pp. 269-327. Wen was educated in Chicago, Colorado Spring, and NYC during 1922-1925, 關一多全集, 武漢: 湖北人民出版社, 1993, 1: 1-9.

¹⁴ Listen to channel 9, wonderfully done, in "Meister des Bogens: Georg Kulenkampff: Kleine Stücke für Violine und Klavier oder Orchester," *Podium 4*. None even played this rare deep piece, much less so deeply movingly—to the best of my knowledge.

¹⁵ We do belatedly begin to use technical knowledge to redress disasters wrought by technical knowledge, but this redress is dictated by life-wisdom, not by knowledge.