The Company of Souls

Yu Kwang-chung（余光中，1928-）is a prolific writer, having published more than fifty collections of verse, prose, and criticism over the past five decades. He is well known on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, and many of his lyrics have been turned into popular songs. Yu has taught Chinese and English literature in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States and is currently teaching English and American Poetry at National Sun Yat-sen University in Kaohsiung. In the course of his career, he has translated numerous works from English into Chinese.

Translating a literary work and creating a new one are essentially similar activities, in that they both involve “translation.” What writers do is translate what’s in their minds into words. Their thoughts and emotions are often quite vague, and can’t take on the necessary quality of subtlety until they’ve been put into words that will enable readers to share the author’s experience. The language has to be commensurate with the experience if readers are to access the experience through the language used.

Translators work on clean text composed of phrases and sentences. They ponder the author’s thoughts and feelings through this text and then translate them into another language. The original, the author’s experience leading up to this original, and the translation are like the three points of a triangle, connected with and influenced by one another.

To know what was going on in the author’s mind, a translator therefore needs to research as much as possible of the writer’s cultural, historical, and social background and personal experience. When translating Hemingway’s books, you need to know him as a writer, as a person, whose best friends were, his frustrations in love. You need to know about Hemingway in the Spanish civil war and why he went to that war. When translating The Old Man and the Sea, you have to read Hemingway’s other books as well, to acquire the necessary knowledge about the species of fish and the weather in the Caribbean, because they were all part of the environment and personal experiences Hemingway based himself on.

"A translator never has to worry about running out of ideas, because there are so many great works awaiting his attention, so many great souls waiting to be accompanied."
Hemingway was not a writer who liked to use historical allusions. His characters were mostly men of action. But when you’re translating James Joyce, for instance, you need to know the entire history of Europe and its classical literature. But that is precisely the most amazing experience and the greatest reward for the translator: he can keep company—for six months, three years, or even longer—with some of the greatest souls who ever lived. When a pianist plays Chopin, he becomes Chopin. When I was translating Keats’ poems, I felt I was Keats. Incidentally, I don’t think we should translate everything into modern Chinese. Wouldn’t it be more faithful to the original if we translated an English poem written five hundred years ago into classical Chinese?

Some people have tried to translate my poems into English, and I think they’ve done a good job. I’ve also translated some of my own poems. The advantage there is that there’s no risk of misinterpreting the original. But the author, because he knows his work too well, is often discouraged by the feeling that it’s impossible to do full justice to the original in all its subtle nuances. As soon as he commits himself to a foreign language, he feels guilty of distortion. To keep my translation from degenerating into mere prosaic paraphrase, I’ve sometimes had to sacrifice accuracy for sheer verve.

I’ll only translate poems that are based on the more universally accessible human experiences. Translating a poem with a unique cultural context, historical background, or linguistic style usually results in less rather than more, despite all the painful effort involved. I have some poems about Li Po (李白, 701-762), but how many foreigners can appreciate a poem about an ancient Chinese poet? But I’ve also written poems about van Gogh, who I think is not unfamiliar to most foreigners.

Since I do both translating and writing, the two are bound to work on and be influenced by each other. I’ve translated more than three hundred English and American poems. This has familiarized me with the poets’ skills, and I’ve adopted some of them, particular rhyming schemes, for example, in my own poems.

Writing needs both inspiration and skills that have properly matured. You hear of this or that person who no longer writes, because he has used up all his talent or story ideas, but translating is mostly about skills that mature with time. Many years ago, I spent a year translating an English book of poems. Some time later, when a publisher wanted to reprint it, I spent another year on the original translation and made literally thousands of changes. It wasn’t because I’d misinterpreted the original the first time around, but because my Chinese writing style had changed over the intervening years, and I no longer felt satisfied with my original translation.

A translator never has to worry about running out of ideas, because there are so many great works awaiting his attention, so many great souls waiting to be accompanied.

—interview by Jim Hwang