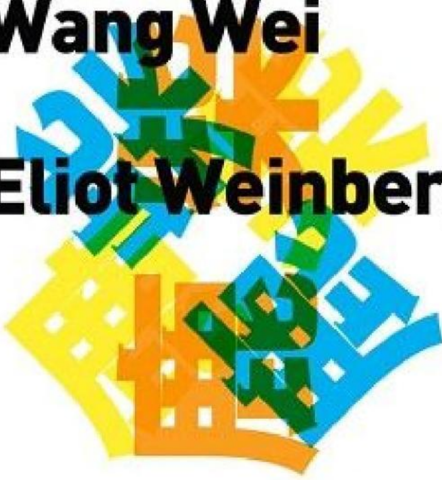
19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei



Eliot Weinberger

with more ways

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NINETEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT WANG WEI

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Poetry is that which is worth translating.

For example, this four-line poem, 1200 years old: a mountain, a forest, the setting sun illuminating a patch of moss. It is a scrap of literary Chinese, no longer even pronounced as its writer would have spoken it. It is a thing, forever itself, inseparable from its language.

And yet something about it has caused it to lead a nomadic life: insinuating itself in the minds of readers, demanding understanding — but always on the reader's own terms — provoking thought, sometimes compelling writing in other languages. Great poetry lives in a state of perpetual transformation, perpetual translation: the poem dies when it has no place to go.

The transformations that take shape in print — and not in the minds of readers — that take the formal name of "translation," become their own beings, set out on their own wanderings. Some live long and some don't. What kind of creatures are they? What happens when a poem, once Chinese and still Chinese, becomes a piece of English, Spanish, French poetry?

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1

(text)

鹿柴

空山不見人,
但聞人語響.
返景入深林,
復照青苔上

The poem is by Wang Wei (c. 700–761), known in his lifetime as a wealthy Buddhist painter and calligrapher, and to later generations as a master poet in an age of masters, the Tang Dynasty. The quatrain is from a series of twenty poems on various sights near the Wang (no relation) River. The poems were written as part of a massive horizontal landscape scroll, a genre he invented. The painting was copied (translated) for centuries. The original is lost, and the earliest surviving copy comes from the 17th century: Wang's landscape after 900 years of transformation.

In classical Chinese, each character (ideogram) represents a word of a single syllable. Few of the characters are, as is commonly thought, entirely representational. But some of the basic vocabulary is indeed pictographic, and with those few hundred characters one can play the game of pretending to read Chinese.

Reading the poem left to right, top to bottom, the second character in line 1 is apparently a *mountain*; the last character in the same line a *person* — both are stylizations that evolved from more literal representations. Character 4 in line 1 was a favorite of Ezra Pound's: what he interpreted as an eye on legs; that is, the eye in motion, *to see*. Character 5 in line 3 is two trees, *forest*. Spatial relationships are

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concretely portrayed in character 3 of line 3, *to enter*, and character 5 of line 4, *above* or *on (top of)*.

More typical of Chinese is character 2 of line 4, *to shine*, which contains an image of the sun in the upper left and of fire at the bottom, as well as a purely phonetic element — key to the word's pronunciation — in the upper right. Most of the other characters have no pictorial content useful for decipherment.

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2

(transliteration)

Lù zhái

Kōng shān bù jián rén
Dàn wén rén yŭ xiăng
Făn jĭng (yĭng) ru shēn lín
Fù zhào qīng tái shàng

The transliteration is from modern Chinese, using the current, quirky *pinyin* system. Obvious, perhaps, to the Romanians who helped develop it, but not to English speakers, is that the *zh* is a *j* sound, the *x* a heavily aspirated *s*, and the *q* a hard *ch*. The *a* is the *ah* of *father*.

Though the characters have remained the same, their pronunciation has changed considerably since the Tang Dynasty. In the 1920s the philologist Bernhard Karlgren attempted to recreate Tang speech; a transliteration of this poem, using Karlgren's system, may be found in Hugh M. Stimson's *55 Tang Poems*. Unfortunately, the transliteration is written in its own forbidding language, with upside-down letters, letters floating above the words, and a leveled forest of diacritical marks.

Chinese has the least number of sounds of any major language. In modern Chinese a monosyllable is pronounced in one of four tones, but any given sound in any given tone has scores of possible meanings. Thus a Chinese monosyllabic word (and often the written character) is comprehensible only in the context of the phrase: a linguistic basis, perhaps, for Chinese philosophy, which was always based on relation rather than substance.

For poetry, this means that rhyme is inevitable, and Western "meter" impossible. Chinese prosody is largely concerned with the number of characters per line and the arrangement of tones — both of which are untranslatable. But translators tend to rush in where wise men never tread, and often may be seen attempting to nurture

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Chinese rhyme patterns in the hostile environment of a Western language.

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(character-by-character translation)

1.	Empty	mountain(s) hill(s)	(negative)	to see	person people
2.	But	to hear people	person conversation	words to echo	sound
3.	To return	bright(ness) shadow(s)*	to enter	deep	forest
4.	To return Again	to shine to reflect	green blue black	moss lichen	above on (top of) top

*According to François Cheng, *returning shadows* is a trope meaning rays of sunset.

I have presented only those definitions that are possible for this text. There are others.

A single character may be noun, verb, and adjective. It may even have contradictory readings: character 2 of line 3 is either *jing* (brightness) or *ying* (shadow). Again, context is all. Of particular difficulty to the Western translator is the absence of tense in Chinese verbs: in the poem, what is happening has happened and will happen. Similarly, nouns have no number: rose is a rose is all roses.

Contrary to the evidence of most translations, the first-person singular rarely appears in Chinese poetry. By eliminating the controlling individual mind of the poet, the experience becomes both universal and immediate to the reader.

The title of the poem, *Lu zhai*, is a place-name, something like *Deer Grove*, which I take from a map of Illinois. It probably alludes to the Deer Park in Sarnath, where the Gautama Buddha preached his first sermon.

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The first two lines are fairly straightforward. The second couplet has, as we shall see, quite a few possible readings, all of them equally “correct.”

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4

The Form of the Deer

So lone seem the hills; there is no one in sight there.
But whence is the echo of voices I hear?
The rays of the sunset pierce slanting the forest,
And in their reflection green mosses appear.

—W.J.B. FLETCHER, 1919
(Fletcher, *Gems of Chinese Verse*)

The translation is typical of those written before the general recognition of Ezra Pound's *Cathay*, first published in 1915. Pound's small book, containing some of the most beautiful poems in the English language, was based on a notebook of literal Chinese translations prepared by the orientalist Ernest Fenollosa and a Japanese informant. The "accuracy" of Pound's versions remains a sore point: pedants still snort at the errors, but Wai-lim Yip has demonstrated that Pound, who at the time knew no Chinese, intuitively corrected mistakes in the Fenollosa manuscript. Regardless of its scholarly worth, *Cathay* marked, in T. S. Eliot's words, "the invention of Chinese poetry in our time." Rather than stuffing the original into the corset of traditional verse forms, as Fletcher and many others had done, Pound created a new poetry in English drawn from what he found was unique to the Chinese.

"Every force," said Mother Ann Lee of the Shakers, "evolves a form." Pound's genius was the discovery of the living matter, the force, of the Chinese poem — what he called the "news that stays news" through the centuries. This living matter functions somewhat like DNA, spinning out individual translations that are relatives, not clones, of the original. The relationship between original and translation is parent-child. And there are, inescapably, some translations that are overly attached to their originals, and others that are constantly rebelling.

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