Explicitness and Implicitness: Translating Zhu Shuzhen, a Pre-modern Chinese Poetess

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Abstract
Translation of classical Chinese poetry into English is widely practised in Chinese literary circles. As China is fast becoming one of the world's great powers, more opportunities for bringing Chinese poetry into English are occurring as part of the general process of globalisation. What I found most interesting in translating Chinese poetry into English is that one has to relate the background information and the underlying psychology of the poet to decisions about how to transfer the meaning and tone of the poems into another language. Zhu Shuzhen (1135?-1180?), a Song Dynasty (960-1279) Chinese woman poet, whose life left no official records, produced a number of celebrated poems whose voice and tone display a resistance against the pre-modern social constraints affecting women at the time. This is true regardless of whether Zhu Shuzhen was merely an image created by *literati*, or a real woman poet living under oppressive circumstances. According to some critics, the Song Dynasty was a period when few women writers could gain public attention; this was due in particular to the rise of the Neo-Confucian teachings that restricted women's activities in the public sphere. As a result, Zhu Shuzhen's poems have rarely been translated into English, apart from one or two of the most 'famous' ones. Her concept of the 'self' often comes across in her poetry as a Western construct profoundly influenced by the ideology of individualism. The persona articulated in her poetry helps utter an *implicitly* sophisticated, intact yet *explicit* self of a woman under the suffocating restrictions exerted by the Neo-Confucian moral code. Using landscape descriptions as background and deploying appealing metaphors and other rhetorical features, Zhu Shuzhen's poetry displays an ambivalence of explicitness and implicitness. When translating her poems into English, her narrative self should thus be revealed to the target readers by digging deeply into the psychology of the poet, the undertones and the representative literary styles.

Keywords: Zhu Shuzhen, translation, Chinese poetry, self

Translation of classical Chinese poetry into English is widely practised in Chinese literary circles. These translations are encouraged by globalisation; as China is fast becoming one of the world's great powers, there are more and more opportunities for publishing Chinese poetry in English. The practice of merging Chinese and Western concepts of literature and translation has been very popular over the last ten to twenty years, as we have begun to see a feasible way of letting our Western readers understand more about Chinese culture, while at the same time learning ourselves to express traditional Chinese or Asian concepts in English in order to globalise and establish cross-references, keeping abreast of post-modern trends. In such cases, when translating poetry into English, the translator has to study the background information and the underlying psychology of the poet in order to make decisions as to how to transfer the meaning and tone of the poem into the other language.

Zhu Shuzhen 朱淑真 (1135?-1180?), a classical Chinese poetess who is the focus of this paper, offers a kind of psychological framework for textual analysis. Leaving few official records, her life is regarded as a mystery, and she was believed to be a Southern Song 南宋 (1127-1279) gentry woman who married an official who did not share her interest in poetry; hence her poems are filled with heartbreak. Many lament a melancholy marriage and express longings for love. With this information in mind, scholars in the past supposed that Zhu Shuzhen must have had an extramarital relationship, though the only grounds for this view lie in interpretations of her poetry. Zhu Shuzhen also attracts analysis because her poetry appears to display a resistance against pre-modern social constraints affecting women; this is true regardless of whether we think of Zhu Shuzhen as merely an image created by *literati*, or as a real woman poet living under strong oppression. When comparing these ideas in Chinese and in English, many may become aware of deep differences in the way oppression is perceived in East and West. This is particularly important in the light of contemporary discrimination against the assertion of womanly or feminine identity, especially in the Middle East where a large number of women are suffering from physical and mental coercion.

Before analysing a translation work of such Chinese poems, especially those of the classical era, it is essential to consider the

background information and the scenario of imperial China, things not widely discussed in academic circles in the West. The Song Dynasty (960-1279) saw the emergence of strict distinctions in terms of female status within a male-centric society in general and in conjugal relationships in particular. Although the change did not lead to an explicit improvement in women's status, which remained inferior, the shift did provide an unprecedented opportunity for women to express themselves in a way not foreseeable in previous dynasties. The "historical process" that

> worked to undermine women's status [...] was the aestheticizing and sexualizing of women's writing, possibly a complex outcome of the self-conscious development of a female voice by male writers. (Mann 2000: 846)

In this way, the female voice was at times veiled by the dominant male literary circle, which allowed very few women to express self-oriented emotions, and hence to create content in poetry relating to their *selves*.

Unlike the Western world, in Chinese society "it has been the common features and not the uniqueness of an individual that draws attention" (Hegel 1995: 6). This bias toward the general was even stronger for women, since their gender representation discouraged them from becoming superior to their male counterparts. In a society dominated by Neo-Confucian ideology, women were expected to have a clear understanding of their inferior status[1]. As a result of the compulsory assumption of the stipulated roles of boudoir daughter first, then obedient wife and later responsible mother, a woman had no alternative channels to explore. As Joel Kupperman noted,

> traditional "feminine" roles operate as a trap for some women, limiting their opportunities and also their chances for awareness of underlying desires and preferences. (Kupperman 2000: 44)

Other constraints and the assumed didactic purpose of specific kinds of literature only led to a more acute dilemma concerning the

[1] An example can be seen in the sentence "[w]omen were infrequently the subject of biographical writing in old China; even then they are most commonly referred to only by surname and by the names of their spouses" (Hegel 1995: 5).

relationship between virtue and talent. According to Larson, the separation between women and literature reflected:

> moral content (*de*) [德] of women – physical, concrete, and self-sacrificing – that was not in tune with the talent (*cai*) [才] implied in literature – abstract, transcendent, and self-promoting (Larson 1998: 74)[2].

As Larson points out, virtue and talent were believed to be contradictory concepts in terms of the idea of self-realisation. The powerful ambitions arising from a possible combination of virtue and talent could be characterised as a continuous danger, something that discouraged women from creating their own literature. Under the "virile" (using Julia Kristeva's term) or authoritative power of patriarchal families, women were in no way capable of asserting their own identity, or even maintaining their dignity.

> [S]he [a woman] will only represent the authority of the in-laws and the husband; she herself is not the authority, she herself is not vested with it, she is never 'herself'. (Kristeva 1977: 79)

It is true that some Chinese women were happy to be excluded from self expression and to behave selflessly, this in in obedience to their Confucian upbringing, which was manifested in Southern Song by the drastic imposition of *correct* behaviour by the Neo-Confucianists who thought that only a selfless wife was capable of sacrificing her selfishness and serving in-laws, husband and sons in a considerate manner.

According to prevailing values, it was a serious flaw in a woman's character to be emotional and disrespectful, especially if this meant submitting only reluctantly to the stipulated patriarchal norm. Therefore, a good Chinese wife was expected neither to display jealousy towards her husband's concubines, nor to place self-interest before anything else. In short, she was expected to maintain a harmonious family without personal passion, and without, needless to say, any passion at all outside her own boudoir. To transgress beyond this behavioural realm was to be self-centred and thus not

[2] The statement may actually serve as a generalised concept throughout Chinese literary history, and is perhaps more applicable to traditional China.

within the criteria of the traditional ruling system. Women were even more stringently restricted and victimised within literary circles. Birrell gave a clear definition of the 'self' in poetry when looking at the portrayal of feminine images in Southern Dynasties poems:

> For terms such as "self" presuppose the poet's willingness to inject into the fictionalized image of a woman in love some semblance of his [or her] own personal experience. Those terms also imply a sense of uniqueness about a person, which is the opposite of a conventional type. (Birrell 1985: 36)

In response to the pressure from powerful patriarchal requirements, some women resorted to expressing their personal feelings through literary creations and Zhu Shuzhen's poems are an example, displaying a range of topics in order to reveal the true self of an individual[3]. What seems contradictory is the fact that more and more female poets wrote poetry in their inner chambers even under the prevailing oppressive atmosphere and, moreover, that the poems they produced are imbued with sophisticated feminine emotions and styles. As far as their status was concerned, expressions of passionate love in poetry by married women were always taken as indications of extramarital love affairs.

In addition to these views of womanhood, the rise of the Neo-Confucian teachings imposed strict restrictions on women's exposure to the outer world. As a result, Zhu Shuzhen's poems were hardly considered by literary scholars, and hence only rarely translated into English, apart from one or two of the most 'famous' ones. There is still some debate as to who wrote the celebrated *ci*-poem titled "To the Tune: *Sheng chazi* ('yuanxi')". Originally attributed to Zhu Shuzhen, the poem was cited as proof of her breaching of moral principles:

生查子 (元夕)

去年元夜時, 花市燈如晝 月上柳梢頭, 人約黃昏後
今年元夜時, 月與燈依舊 不見去年人, 淚溼春衫袖 (Zhang 1999: 287-8)

[3] Scholars always feel that, "In *tz'u* poetry in particular, we find women poets like Li Ch'ing-chao writing out their lives, creating a wonderful poetic fusion of convention and originality, of the female and male traditions" (Chang 1994: 180).

The Night of the Lantern Festival (To the Tune: *Sheng chazi*)

At the festival last year,
Lanterns in the market were like daylight.
The moon was on the tip of the willow tree,
We met each other after evening light.
At the festival this year,
The lanterns and the moonlight still remain.
But not seeing the one I saw last year,
Tears wet my spring sleeve. [my translation]

The poem was criticised for its immorality in that it described a pair of lovers under the moonlight. Many scholars believed that Zhu Shuzhen had breached conventional moral principles by writing, and some in the Qing 清 Dynasty (1644-1911) made highly critical comments of Zhu Shuzhen. The misunderstanding has prevailed to the present day, with some scholars still eager to condemn Zhu Shuzhen's immoral behaviour on the sole basis of this poem. It might, however, be more useful to examine her concept of the 'self', which is often understood to be profoundly penetrated by the Western ideology of individualism. Whether she actually entertained such an ideology or not, there is no doubt that it would be unprecedented for a Chinese woman in these times, a woman who was forbidden to get in touch with the outside world. The persona articulated in her poetry helps utter an *implicitly* sophisticated, intact yet *explicitly* female self, despite the strong pressure imposed by the Neo-Confucian moral code.

Through the description of scenic backdrops, Zhu Shuzhen's poetry displays an ambivalence of explicitness and implicitness, deploying appealing metaphors and other rhetorical features. When translating her poems into English, her narrative self should thus be opened up for the target readers by digging deeply into the psychology of the poet, the undertones and the representative literary styles. This idea also conforms with Stephen Owen's comment that "*shih* [*shi* 詩, poetry] was the stuff for inner life, the person's *chih* [*zhi*] 志, 'intent,' and *ch'ing* [*qing*] 情, 'emotions' or 'subjective disposition'" (Owen 1986: 74). Hence the unconventional characteristic of the self is revealed when the poet becomes preoccupied in seeking his or her self, consciously or unconsciously.

In this case, Zhu Shuzhen's biography becomes interesting as a means of anticipating her possible literary behaviour, as Hegel remarks, the individual self can be "implicitly" presented through "conventional modes of expression in verse", because literature "reveals the self as expressed by an individual self, whether consciously or inadvertently" (Hegel 1995: 16). Zhu Shuzhen's psychological state of self survives only in her literary representations, and in most of her poems her self-assurance manifests a larger sense of ego, building up descriptions of the persona's selfish thoughts and desires.

According to Martin Huang, commenting James Olney's idea of "self as metaphor" ('the self expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects'), this expression of self also "comes close to the concept of *jituo* 寄托 [self-allegorizing] or *zikuang* 自況 [self-comparison] in traditional Chinese writings" (Huang 1995: 11). This serves as an autobiographical representation of the poet, and it functions as another way of looking at how a poet personalises his/her sentiments in indirect ways, projecting him/herself onto plants, animals or objects that possess certain allegorical significance in Chinese culture. The self-effacing attitude presented in Zhu Shuzhen's poetry on the one hand prevents the readers from discovering her genuine identity, yet on the other hand the use of strong words and phrases gives us an idea of her toughness:

直竹

勁直忠臣節, 孤高烈女心 四時同一色, 霜雪不能侵 (Zhang 1999: 267)

Upright Bamboo

Upright is the loyal official's integrity,
Just as a female martyr's heart is haughty.
Appearing in the same colour in four seasons,
Even frost and snow cannot overcome. [my translation]

By using bamboo to symbolise *lienü* 烈女 (a female martyr), Zhu Shuzhen draws attention to women, particularly those who have measured up to "martyr[s]". On the surface the poet recounts her feelings towards bamboo, with the emphasis on the adjective "upright," which has two different symbolic meanings, one physical (*explicit*) and the other mental (*implicit*). The physical-mental transformation takes place in the assimilation of her appearance and

moral attitude, assuming that analysis is based on the idea that she writes about her own aspirations. Despite the fact that there is not one Chinese character obviously signifying her identity, there is a slight hint in the translation that a "[haughty] female martyr's heart" is not to be overcome by "frost and snow", a symbol of destructive or obstructive forces both in Chinese and English contexts. The implicit identification in the translation points to the "bamboo" in the title; however, if we agree that Zhu Shuzhen herself was an explicit persona revealing herself in her poems, her feminine self and determination are witnessed between the lines through the words "upright" and "haughty".

Zhu's description of her hope of obtaining another individual's sympathy, although there is still no explicit personal identification to be found in the poem, offers a clear picture of her self-unconscious mind. The absence of pronouns makes identification ambiguous in Chinese, but the application of *shui* 誰 ('whom' referring to other people) establishes a distinctive difference between her *self* and other beings, which should be brought out in English. One such example is shown below:

冬夜不寐

推枕鴛帷不奈寒, 起來霜月轉闌干 悶懷脈脈與誰說
淚滴羅衣不忍看 (Zhang 1999: 257)

Sleepless on a Winter Night

Pushing aside pillow and embroidered bed-curtain,
the cold is intolerable,
As I rise the frosty moon is crossing the balustrade.
To whom should one recount the silent loneliness?
Seeing the tears dropping on the silk dress,
how unbearable! [my translation]

Sadness and solitude are overwhelming in the above poem, evoked by the use of words in English like "frosty" and "loneliness", etc. Zhu Shuzhen is assumed here to have been recounting a woman's solitude in her boudoir, and the subject-less phrases – "pushing aside", "intolerable", "silent loneliness" and "how unbearable" – are nevertheless transparent enough to allow the retrieval of her inner feelings. Huang Yaqing suggests that,

[W]hether she writes love poems in her loneliness or expresses lonely feelings in her love poems, they can only be seen as an expression of her self-imagination, which goes beyond the imagined lonely feelings arising from her loneliness (Huang 2003: 60).

As mentioned above, the extant undated poems of Zhu Shuzhen, and our limited knowledge of her biographical background, make it impossible to establish whether she was writing them with conscious reference to herself. We see how Zhu Shuzhen's correlates her own hidden identity to other people's explicit individuality in her poetry, and it is hard to say whether it is fair to speak of a self-unconscious mind from her point of view. What has been done in this regard is to analyse and translate her poems concentrating on the explicit or implicit personae of the self, where the former strengthens the sense of oneself, and the latter, in describing the behaviour and emotions of a self, even without pronouns, enriches an individualised sense of the literary self.

Readers in Chinese may note that the poet writes about herself with a partial identification, as when she uses characters like *ren* 人 [people] to refer indirectly to the self, and some situational phrases such as *gu* 孤 [loneliness] or *du* 獨 [alone] to show her miserable plight. Even if she applies indirect pronoun and situational phrases together, she still attempts to present an ambiguous image of an unnamed sorrowful woman. Fortunately English is a perfect medium for expressing such an image. One such example is shown below:

霜夜

彤雲黯黯暮天寒, 半捲珠簾未欲眠 獨坐小窗無伴侶
可憐霜月向人圓 (Zhang 1999: 254-5)

A Freezing Night

Dim, dim are the gloomy clouds, the dusk is cold,
By the half unfurled pearl curtain, unable to sleep.
Sitting alone beside the small window, without company,
How piteous is the freezing moon
which appears round to me. [my translation]

Given the melancholy atmosphere surrounding the persona, the uses of "alone" and "piteous" in English help to create the mood.

"Freezing" in the last line connotes with the depressing tone, while the "moon appears round to [her]" suggests regret and sadness. In Chinese culture a round moon, representing reunion, only appears before reunions, such as a family or a couple, which hints that the persona in the poem is left alone without a partner ("without company" in the translation). A very strong individual mental state appears in the last line, when to the lonely woman, a round moon becomes "piteous". The translated version here may require the reader to be sufficiently culturally literate to see that the *reflected* Zhu Shuzhen is only semiconsciously asserting herself to be the main object of the poem: in fact she is applying a typically Chinese writing style, which appears determined to conceal something, that is in fact all the more explicitly shown; a partial concealment of personal identity appearing more appealing to the readers. There is another very representative poem that shows Zhu Shuzhen's 'enhanced' self:

自責二首 (其一)

女子弄文誠可罪, 那堪詠月更吟風 磨穿鐵硯非吾事,
繡折金針卻有功 (p. 118)

Self Reproving (Two Poems) – Number 1

It is truly a great guilt for women to dabble in writing,
Let alone chant the breezes and even hymn the moonlight.
To rub through the inkstone is not for us to handle,
How more creditable it is to
embroider till breaking the needle! [my translation]

The sentiment in the poem has largely to do with traditional Chinese thought on how women should behave: to be good at writing and studying was a "great guilt". The argument started when "the side of this debate [on female literacy] represented by the maxim 'only the virtuous man is talented, only the untalented (illiterate) woman is virtuous' had gained credence" (Birge 1989: 356). On the other hand, a woman's mastery of embroidering techniques was appreciated in traditional societies. The remarkable Chinese element in it is that the voice employs a self-deprecatory attitude to abase her own status as a woman, yet satirises the emphasis in traditional China on women's virtue rather than their talent; as such it represents a breakthrough in protesting against the unfair way in which women

suffered discrimination (Zhang 1999: 211). My translation of the poem aimed to produce a piece of English verse with a focus on Chinese language components and cultural essence. In this specific case, neither a balanced nor an English-oriented translation would fulfil the objective of the title of the poem. On the contrary, a Chinese-oriented translation, like the above, provides a deep pool for readers' imaginations, allowing them to gain more knowledge about unusual aspects of Chinese culture. For instance, the words "to rub through the inkstone" simply means to write, but as the original poem applies an indirect form in expression, which evokes a vast realm of the imagination, the English version may be correct in keeping this circumlocutory (*implicit*) way of dealing with it.

Underlying opposition to the restrictions imposed by the traditional moral code is present in a number of Zhu's poems. In this sense, regret at being regarded as an abandoned woman contributed most to the creation of a mysterious, teasing effect in her poetry. One poem which shows a bold attitude in articulating the lament and hence an undisclosed yearning for love unfolds thus:

清平樂 (夏日遊湖)

惱煙撩露, 留我須臾住 攜手藕花湖上路, 一霎黃梅細雨
嬌癡不怕人猜, 和衣睡倒人懷 最是分攜時候,
歸來懶傍粧臺 (Zhang 1999: 296)

Visiting the Lake in Summer (To the Tune: *Qing ping yue*)

Amidst the galling mist and teasing dew,
For a while he asks me to stay.
Hand in hand walking beside the lake of lotuses,
Suddenly the early summer drizzles spray.
In my passion I ignore people's suspicions,
With my clothes on, I lie in his embrace.
But so sad is the time when we part,
Back at home I am too listless
to approach my dressing case. [my translation]

The female persona described in the poem may be 'selfish' in the sense that, Zhu Shuzhen, as a traditional Chinese gentlewoman, wrote such an unusually bold account of a young lady and her lover going for a summer lakeside walk. The passion embedded throughout the

poem surges to a climax in the line "With my clothes on, I lie in his embrace", a line that constitutes a dilemma for the translator. Here again we need cultural context when reading the translation. In old Chinese society, to "lie in [one's] embrace" in public was considered highly unacceptable and hardly understandable, this when it was not simply and strictly forbidden, given the harsh insistence on female chastity. The restriction is emphasised by the odd decision of the female persona to *stress* that her body was covered with clothes. The explicitness and implicitness of such outlandish behaviour as revealed in the poetic realm is paradoxical. A kind of restricted love relationship can be discerned from the lines, and through this a severe challenge to traditional Confucian society is glimpsed.

The concepts of literary selflessness and 'selfishness' are vividly represented in Zhu Shuzhen's poems by the use of either concealed pronouns or no pronouns at all. By applying an image of the literary 'selfish' lady, her objection to being viewed as inferior or immoral emerge. We can say that she oscillates between the disguise of a tough female figure who does not submit to conventional ethical standards, and the masked image of a feeble and fragile woman with an intrinsic fear towards domination by the patriarchal society.

One obvious question to pose in translating her poetry is whether Zhu Shuzhen is inconsistent in the subtle expression of her womanly status. We might declare that she is inconsistent *yet* consistent in the ideas revealed in her poetry. She is inconsistent in that, on the surface, she works hard to treat the inequality for women with a light touch. She seems to be passive and submissive towards the frames established for women at the stage when she has no way of escaping from social constraints and is docile in the face of the heavy burden laid upon her. Many of her poems include references to submissive and vulnerable characteristics. Looking back at the poem titled *Self Reproving*, the underlying desire to get the approval of society for her talent is revealed as negative in the lines "To rub through the inkstone is not for us to handle, / How more creditable it is to / embroider till breaking the needle", an ironical representation of the unacceptable realm of women's writing. As Birrell points out,

> [This] self-referential poem, in which she mockingly censures herself as a female author, reads as one of the most modern statements on the ambivalent role of female writers in society. (Birrell 2001: 210)

Zhu Shuzhen was deeply concerned with displaying her feminine voice, her aspirations as a woman and her profound insights. In the process of translation I have tried to magnify her selfhood, which is constructed by culture and the established rules of society. What is more, her self-realisation and self-portrayal explode out of the suppression-submission setting resulting from society's demand for strict compliance. Thus the ideas of resistance reflected in her poems are actually derived from her cultured self, which is specific in terms of her feminine concern, and from her individual needs and longings that emphasise personal value, an idea more easily accessible and acceptable in the Western world. The combination of feminine characteristics and cultural responsiveness can help us look at the stance taken by a poet imbued in literary passions.

Apart from comparing the different situations in classical China and the West in literary terms, it would also be useful to compare Zhu Shuzhen's case with the phenomenon of male superiority and female inferiority in some countries today. Even though living almost 900 years ago, she set an example through her writings for most women who are under oppression today. That such oppression continues, forcing women into an attitude of resistance and denying them any self-realisation, is all too evident. Zhu Shuzhen's subtle opposition, if translated into English, could offer a pre-modern literary experience for all those who are still suffering.

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