

3rd Prize (Non-LT)

MEI Chengjie

Postgraduate Certificate in Laws

黃鳥歌

Song of the Orioles

翩翩黃鳥

Cheerful, cheerful, the orioles fly in cheerful couples.

雌雄相依

Lovely, lovely, the couples cuddle in lovely nests.

念我之獨

Lonely, lonely, I lament my the lonely self.

誰其與歸

Sadly, sadly, my missing half is not on my lone way home.

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Commentary

The magic of literary translation is the unlimited potential to demonstrate the unique aesthetic expression of one language in another, given their very different linguistic and cultural contexts. Poetry written in classical Chinese carries its fantastic aesthetic values in terms of brevity, neatness and rhymes. These characteristics can hardly be exactly carried into another linguistic context. The original text of “Song of the Orioles” contains only sixteen Chinese characters. The same beauty will be lost even in a modern Chinese translation, let alone an English one. As I identified this problem when I carried out the translation, I found the need to rewrite the poem in English by giving it a different aesthetic perspective, and thereby preserving its aesthetic value. Modern English poems are seldom brief and neat like classical Chinese ones, but they can sound impressive with good tempo controls and rhymes. So I decided to expand the poem by repeating the first adjective/adverb in every verse. After careful deliberation, I supplemented some words which I think were implicit in the original text, and omitted some other words whose meaning is already implied contextually. The following are some of my observations in translation of this poem. “翩翩” literally means lightly. I think the author intended it to mean “cheerful”, as opposed to his own sorrow and loneliness. “相依” literally means cuddling, but merely putting that into the second verse will make it awkwardly short. The Orioles could not cuddle each other while they were flying. So they must be either cuddling on the branches or in the nests. I pick “nests” because this best illustrates the author’s grief for not having his concubine at home. “雌雄” literally means male and female, but literal translation is both unnecessary and inelegant, so I substituted the word “couple”. “念” literally means think. In the context of the poem the author was clearly expressing his grief, so I put the word “lamenting”. In the third verse I put both “me” and “self” to emphasize the author’s loneliness. Finally, when translating the last verse, I decided to change the rhetorical question in the original into a narrative sentence so it is consistent with formats of the other verses while carrying the same meaning.