I began translating Liet’s poem about form in Phoenix in 1966 and have been studying and tinkering with the English version ever since. Translation is like mining, although when mining for meaning, you’re never quite sure whether you are finding what is there, what you’re looking for or both. Probably both. While I am sure that my persistence and scrutiny have taken me closer and closer to the poet’s original intentions, I also recognize how much I have changed as a reader and interpreter over the thirty year process.

“One of the special challenges of an ideographic language is how contextually dependent the characters are. Relationships between adjacent and nearby characters influence and subtly shade the meaning. Gradually one also learns to look beyond the immediate and proximate for the additional perspectives, tone and nuances given by a more global patterned context. It takes a truly great poet to have created such a multi-scaled network of relationships and figural patterns that are still able to guide and please after eleven centuries.

Robert Frost’s witty remark (at the time) that it was poetry that was lost in the
translation has served as a kasina for this meditation along with the poem. For me the poetry has been in the translating, in my engagement with the poem. This is of course the postmodern perspective. Poetry is not the thing, the artifact, but rather the relationship that the reader, or listener, has with the material.

“The official attitude about the Frost remark is that “no one believes that anymore.” But since I will trust a poet’s insight over a critic’s ideological axis every time, and because of my own confirming experience, I am not quite able to let Frost go. There is something more to say here; there is something more that is going on.

“Experience in designing leads one to be very skeptical of formulations into this or that. First there was this emphasis on the poem and what the poet meant; then there was that emphasis on the reader’s relationship with the poem. In designing it is always the both and one’s relation to them as a whole, taking first the one and then the other point of view. Why should it be different with poetry?

“My experience translating Chinese characters has taught me the profound rewards of looking for deeper relationships. And so, in this meditation, I am imagining the poet’s relationship with the poem to be a deeper relationship which is layered under the one I have. The relationship I have with the poet is only through the poem, but since it is an intentional structure I can sense and begin to winkle out some of the thought, feeling and purpose behind the work. I know my translation will inevitably be a construction influenced by my own life experience and point of view. Are not our Supreme Court justices in the exact same situation with the two century old Constitution? Even with excellent scholarship, one would expect the Brennen and Requins versions of Liet’s poem to be quite different in terms of interest, emphasis and tone.

“While it is not always easy to sort out my meaning from the poet’s, an attempt to become more aware of the biases I bring to the experience and an openness to other possibilities always leads to new depths of insight in the work and personal growth.

“There is yet another layer beneath the one I have been describing as the poet and the poem. No poet can ever be detached from their own time, place, language and culture. Each subject is decentered in place and time. Metaphors are born out of this experience. One can only wonder about the spectacle of juggling or sport that occasioned ideas to be compared to ‘royal blue balls.’ Does this refer to the court or perhaps to the importance of the ideas? Or both? Was it at court where the really important ideas and concerns were set into work? If there is a layer behind the poet and the poem, then it is easy to imagine another behind any reader, linking that person deeper into their own situation and culture where the reading is taking place.

That make four important relational layers: “Designer’s, like all who participate in the poem or artifact, maker’s culture, time, place... Maker ———

Poem or artifact ———

Reader ———

Reader’s culture, time, place...

Four Relational Layers

Liet’s Poem
creating the reality of experience, alter-
nate consciously and intuitively between
the maker and the reader positions. A
good writer, for example, needs to know
what makes a good read and that means
more than just making the reader’s head
jingle; the pulse must race and the bones
tingle. Designers, poets, makers in the
broadest sense, all have a naturally
heightened interest in the way that meta-
phoric compositions mediate between the
valuing of making and the meaning of
experience.

“Given the number and complexity of the
human filters involved, it ought to be very
obvious that making and meaning can
not be connected simply as suggested by
the linguistic sign. Nor can it be remotely
comparable to electromechanical process-
es, such as that of the telephone, which
transform sound energy into electrical
patterns and then back into recognizable
sound. Neither is an adequate model.
Music, to paraphrase and oversimplify
Susanne Langer, presents a constructed
image of feeling as it unfolds in time. In
Chopin’s Opus 28 No. 4, for example, we
do not have to feel sad or melancholy
to enjoy the piece. In fact we may have
quite the opposite feeling as we re-cognize
authentic human experience, measured
against our own, out of the musical com-
position. Poems and places are similarly
made, experienced and complexly mea-
sured.

“In Liet’s poem, it is the original callig-
raphy which I think defies translation.
With some study and care the poem’s
ideas are transportable over the centu-
ries, but the ‘joyous playful strokes,’ as
one critic described Liet’s brushwork,
seem trapped forever in a culture distant
in more than time which experiences a
portion of intended meaning in the visual
manner of the writing.

“If there is no way to adequately repro-
duce the clearly intended spirit and feel-
ing of the writing, perhaps Frost is partly
right and some of the ‘poetry’ is lost or
unavailable in translation. Perhaps
metaphors or contextual relations be-
tween words or in places are much more
uniquely tied to a particular time, place
and situation than we have realized.

I remember being shocked to see London
Bridge reconstructed over Lake Powell in
Lake Havasu City, Arizona. Severed from
its web of cultural relations it had become
more theme park or urban zoo than Lon-
don Bridge. As a student in Germany, I
remember being baffled by the children’s
riddle: ‘A sewing needle and a thimble
fell in the water. Why couldn’t the nee-
dle hear the cries for help and save the
drowning thimble?’ Every German child
responds, ‘Because it got water in its ear.’
German needles have ears instead of
eyes.

“I have tried to reproduce the Liet’s focus-
ing structure by organizing the number
of lines in each stanza in a diminishing
sequence of 7,5,3,2,1. It is, if you will, a
kind of V-like conception with each part
building up to, contributing to and being
integrated into the whole. The focal line
functions much like the concluding cou-
plet in a sonnet.

“The last line of the first stanza,

But a structure of the structured and the
structurer.

comes as close to the valuing relationship
I have been describing as anything I’ve
encountered. Old wisdom laying dormant
for eleven centuries?

If the first stanza is full of philosopher
jugglers at court, the second is set in the
sea where a cyclic upwelling of new possi-
bilities tends and mends the cultural net.

In the third, we are in the garden, mak-
ing something out of our intentions, try-
ing to find correspondences between their
possible expressions by ‘putting them in
rows.’

The final three lines return to an image
which binds up an attending presence,
the driving force of human desire and an
organic, tangled Darwinian world.

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