



# Problems in Translating Culture: The Translated Titles of *Fusheng Liuji*

## Les problèmes soulevés lors de la traduction des cultures : le cas des titres traduits de *Fusheng Liuji*

Charles Kwong

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### Article abstract

Translating culture poses fundamental problems of perception and conception far deeper than matters of linguistic expression. This essay explores some of these problems by examining *Fusheng liuji* (*Six Records of a Floating Life*), a Chinese autobiographical text that has been translated into fourteen Asian and European languages. Even without going into the details of the rendered versions, one can notice various forms of intercultural mediation and reshaping in the translated titles and added subtitles. At one end is direct, partly helpless substitution: lexically flawless “float” cannot encompass the rich matrix of philosophical connotations and artistic resonances of *fu* in the source culture. At the other end is active reshaping: recasting, addition and omission based on interpretive (mis)reading, including a reduction of imagistic language into abstract concept (e.g., *fu* becomes “fleeting”). Through examining 17 renditions of the title of *Fusheng liuji*, this essay offers a case study that helps to cast light on the unavoidable factor of intercultural mediation in the translation process, with special focus on the translation of philosophical and aesthetic concepts. Some forms of mediation carry more significant effects than others, and there may be differences in verbal resources and orientations in various languages worthy of notice.

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# Problems in Translating Culture: The Translated Titles of *Fusheng Liuji*<sup>1</sup>

Charles Kwong

## Introduction

In basic terms, translation is an attempt at interlingual and intercultural communication. Whether one chooses to highlight its traditional task of bridging or its acts of “manipulation” (Hermans, 1985; Lefevere, 1992), translation is an active endeavor to link up two ways of perception, conception and expression. This is never a simple or value-free process, for while reality itself is not conceptually organized, each language is a unique structure of interpretive signs, each culture a dynamic system of codes, differentiating and categorizing reality in a way that rarely coincides with another. While George Steiner speaks of the translator as “a bilingual mediating agent between [...] two different language communities” (1975, p. 45), other critics like Bochner (1981) and Katan (1999) have focused more on cultural mediation: each “system for orienting experience [...] is a simplification and distortion” (Katan, p. 1), a specific frame of reference or finite grid imposed on reality. Any endeavor to connect two systems thus entails intervening, mediating and negotiating between divergent systems of codes and signs; whether fully intended or not, translation necessarily involves elaboration, reduction and reshaping. Such processes are especially evident when translation takes place between verbal systems that are far

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apart from each other, and when the attempt at cross-cultural communication touches on deep-seated modes of envisioning the world and constructing experience that are culturally specific. Translating philosophical and aesthetic concepts, for instance, poses fundamental problems of perception and expression that go far deeper than matters of linguistic expression.

This essay explores some of these problems by examining one aspect in the translation of *Fusheng liuji* 浮生六記 [*Six Records of a Floating Life*], a Chinese autobiographical text that has attracted translations into multiple languages. Written by Shen Fu 沈復 (1763–c.1825) probably in 1808,<sup>2</sup> *Fusheng liuji* was first published without the last two records in 1878, half a century after the author's death. Although Shen Fu was not a renowned writer in his time, and little is known about him even to this date, his sketches of the joys and tribulations of life amid livelihood needs and social constraints, his travel experiences and spiritual-aesthetic affinity for nature, and above all his moving remembrance of his deceased wife and the charm of their conjugal felicity, have won the broad praise of critics and the hearts of an international readership. For instance, the English translator Shirley Black celebrates the work as “a literary masterpiece; poetic, romantic, nostalgic and filled with emotion, it recreates a life essentially tragic, which yet held innumerable moments of an almost magical happiness and beauty” (1960, p. xii).<sup>3</sup> The Japanese translator Satō Haruo commends *Fusheng liuji* for its “consistent pursuit of truthfulness and frank recording of facts without affectation” (1938, p. 191), while the French translator P. Ryckmans feels that the work “successfully incarnates in the humble experiences of an individual the widest collective reality and lived inheritance of an entire civilization” (1966, p. 11). Showing a joyous, appreciative attitude to life that enhances its tragic sense without casting itself as a tragedy, this short classic has not only earned repeated printings at regular intervals in

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2 For a detailed discussion of the dates of Shen Fu and the composition of *Fusheng liuji*, see Chen, 1996, pp. 1–3 and 15–24.

3 Cf. Pratt and Chiang, 1983, p. 10: “Shen Fu has described his life with his wife in what is probably the most frank and moving story to come to us from the literature of his time.”

mainland China and Taiwan, but has inspired 17 translated versions<sup>4</sup> in 14 Asian and European languages since 1935.

How do the translated versions stand in relation to the original work? This is a question which the present essay cannot fully tackle with confidence, not only because of spatial limits but because the sheer linguistic competence required is beyond the author's command. Yet even without going into the details of the rendered versions of *Fusheng liuji*, one can notice various forms of intercultural intervention, mediation and distortion in the translated titles and the added subtitles inserted by some translators. At one end of the spectrum is a direct (if also sometimes helpless) effort at substitution through finding verbal equivalents: "six" is an exact match for *liu*, as "life" is for *sheng*; but "float," while lexically accurate, does not cover the rich matrix of philosophical and aesthetic resonances of *fu* in the source culture. At the other end is active mediation—recasting, addition and omission based on interpretive (mis)reading: "inconstant" shrinks the connotative range of *fu*, while also reducing the motional image of the original into an abstract notion. For the purpose of a practically feasible exercise, this essay will thus focus on the diverse translations of the title of *Fusheng liuji*, offering a case study that helps to cast light on the general issue of intercultural mediation and reshaping inherent in the act of translation, especially in the context of philosophical (and aesthetic) translation.

It may be noted that some scholars have raised doubts about "the problematic ontology of the original," taking exception to the concept that there is an original text which serves as a final authority by which translations are to be assessed.<sup>5</sup> This is no doubt a serious question for philosophical inquiry, for it concerns the reality of a text, and, in its ultimate reaches, even the nature of reality itself. Suffice it for the present purpose to say that one need not believe in the absolute fixity of the text in order to accept its reality; *human* knowledge rarely (if at all) reaches

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4 Counting Lin's 1935 and 1939 versions only once, and not counting occasional translations from the original classical Chinese into modern Chinese that are included in some recent editions.

5 See for instance Eoyang, 2003, pp. 138-139.

absolute terms. Holding to the sacred authority of the original or denying its primary position altogether are both extreme stances equally removed from facts. While a literary text always carries a degree of indeterminate plurality and is thus problematic in some sense,<sup>6</sup> it remains irrefutable that the act of translation cannot happen without a source text: translation cannot erase its derivative nature entirely. In Walter Benjamin's view, the task of translation "consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original," since "the laws governing the translation lie within the original" (1923, pp. 258 and 254).<sup>7</sup> This essay will therefore accept the ontological value of the original work, and engage in empirical analysis of concrete textual phenomena rather than abstract theoretical inquiry. It will be obvious that some divergences or transformations visible in the translations will matter more than others in terms of artistic effect and significance.

### Translations of *Fusheng liuji* and the Translated Titles

We may begin by listing the translations of *Fusheng liuji* since the first attempt in 1935:

- 1935 English Lin, Yutang 林語堂. *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*. Published in installments in *T'ien Hsia Monthly* 天下月刊 and *Xifeng yuekan* 西風月刊.
- 1939 English Lin, Yutang 林語堂. *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*. Shanghai: Xifeng she 西風社. (revised from the 1935 version)
- 1938 Japanese Satō Haruo and Matsueda Shigeo 佐藤春夫、松枝茂夫. 《浮生六記》(うき世のさが) [*Nature of Floating Life*]. Tokyo, Iwanami shoten 岩波書店. (revised by Matsueda Shigeo in 1981)
- 1944 Czech Průšek, Jaroslav. *Šest historií prchavého života* [*Six Stories of a Fleeting Life*]. Praha, Plzákovo nakl.

6 A. Benjamin, for instance, views the text as "the site of differential plurality" that "provides the conditions of possibility for conflicts of interpretation" (1989, pp. 84, 38).

7 Cf. James Hynd and E. M. Valk's version, in Weissbort and Eysteinnsson, 2006, pp. 303, 298.

- 1955 Italian Lanciotti, Lionello e Tsui Tao-Lu. *Sei racconti di vita irreal* [*Six Accounts of an Unreal Life*]. Roma, Casini.
- 1960 English Black, Shirley M. *Chapters from a Floating Life: The Autobiography of a Chinese Artist*. London, Oxford University Press.
- 1961 Malay Li Chuan Siu. *Hidup Bagaikan Mimpi. (Fou Sheng Liu Chi). Riwayat Hidup Sa-orang Pelukis Dan Sasterawan Tionghoa* [*Life is Like a Dream: The Autobiography of a Chinese Painter and Writer*]. Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press.
- 1961 Swedish Wilton, Stig. *Pilblad i strömmen: en kinesisk konstnärns självbiografi* [*Willow Leaf in a Stream: A Chinese Artist's Autobiography*]. Stockholm, Geber.
- 1966 French Ryckmans, P. *Six Récits au Fil Inconstant des Jours* [*Six Accounts as Inconstant Days Went by*]. Bruxelles, Larcier. (repr. Christian Bourgois, 1982, J C Lattès, 2009, under the name of Simon Leys)
- 1967 French Reclus, Jacques. *Récits d'une vie fugitive: mémoires d'un lettré pauvre* [*Accounts of a Fleeting Life: Memoirs of a Poor Man of Letters*]. Paris, Gallimard.
- 1969 Korean 池榮在지영재. 《浮生六記：흐르는 인생의讚歌》 [*Paeon of a Flowing/Changing Life*]. 漢城서울：乙酉文化社을유문화사. (repr. 2004 as 부생육기：심복자서전 [浮生六記：沈復的自傳 *Autobiography of Shen Fu*])
- 1979 Russian Golyginoĭ, K.I. *Шесть записок о бистротечной жизни* (*Shest' zapisok o bystrotechnoi zhizni*) [*Six Sketches of a Fleeting Life*]. Moskva, Izd-vo "Nauka."
- 1983 Hebrew Daor, Dan. *Hahayim hasehufim* [*The Drifting Life*]. Tel Aviv, Sifriyat HaPo'alim. (Hargol, 1999)
- 1983 English Pratt, Leonard and Chiang Su-hui. *Six Records of a Floating Life*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.
- 1985 Spanish Brisac, Tessa. *Relatos de una vida sin rumbo* [*Stories of a Life without Direction*]. México, D.F.,

- Dirección de Difusión Cultural, Departamento Editorial. (rendered from Reclus's 1967 French translation)
- 1986 Danish Børdahl, Vibeke og Søren Egerod. *Kapitler af et flygtigt liv* [*Chapters of a Transient Life*]. København, Rhodos.
- 1989 Dutch Bronkhorst, Daan. *Verslagen van een vlietend leven: biografie van een liefde* [*Records of a Floating life: Biography of a Love*]. Groningen, Chinaboek. (abbreviated translation)
- 1989 German Schwarz, Rainer. *Sechs Aufzeichnungen über ein unstetes Leben* [*Six Records of an Unsettled Life*]. Leipzig, Philipp Reclam. (Muller & Kiepenheuer 1990)<sup>8</sup>

Some initial observations may be drawn from the translation data given above:

1. The character *sheng* is consistently rendered as “life” in fifteen versions; the two exceptions are “days” (French (Ryckmans)) and omission (Swedish).
2. The character *liu* (six) is left out in eight (i.e., almost half) of the versions (English (Black), Malay, Swedish, French (Reclus), Hebrew, Spanish, Danish, Dutch).
3. The character *ji* is translated as “records” or “chapters” (or their non-English variants, i.e. “accounts,” “stories,” “sketches”), but is not rendered in three versions (Malay, Swedish, Hebrew).
4. The character *fu* has generated the most divergences in the translation process (including a compound Swedish image).
5. A subtitle has been added in seven versions (Japanese, English (Black), Malay, Swedish, French (Reclus), Korean, Dutch),

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<sup>8</sup> There is supposed to be a 1981 German translation by Helmut Martin, but so far I have not been able to locate it bibliographically, not even in the Deutschen Nationalbibliothek.

which have variously used “autobiography” (four times), “biography,” and other descriptive (“Chinese artist,” “painter and writer,” “memoirs,” “poor man of letters,” “nature,” “love”) or evaluative (“paeon,” “flowing/unstable”) terms.

On the whole, the first three variations are relatively innocent. “Days” can be taken as a synonym for “life” without compromising the sense of the source text or the target-language version. It is quite likely that “six” has been left out by some translators because the last two records (missing from the start) are typically not translated despite a false attempt to fabricate them,<sup>9</sup> while to add “four” to the rendered title would go directly against the original title. Even where the target-language versions keep the word “six,” the translations, like the original work, only give (if at all) the titles of the last two records.<sup>10</sup> The major anomaly here is Black’s incomplete rendition, which has chopped up the four records of the original text, deleted a number of episodes (especially from the fourth record), and rearranged other episodes in order to reconstitute a more chronological account in three parts and twelve chapters,<sup>11</sup> so that it will be inaccurate and

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9 An allegedly complete edition was published in 1935 on the claim that the last two missing chapters had been “rediscovered.” These have been proven to be forgeries, most recently by a special study in 2007 (see Chen, 1996, pp. 53-81 and Cai, 2007). It may be noted that a calligraphy-copied version (with slight alterations) of what may prove to be part of the original fifth record was discovered by accident in 2008; if established, this will prove even more conclusively that the last two “records” currently in circulation are fabrications (see Peng, 2008a and 2008b, and Cai, 2008 (a full version of this essay can be found on the *Zhongguo gudai xiaoshuo wang* website)). The calligraphy version was included in a new edition of *Fusheng liuji* (Shen, 2010), but in the meantime, its own authenticity has been cast into doubt. The debate on the fifth record will continue, awaiting further analysis of the discovered pages.

10 A certain number of recent Chinese editions do include the texts of the last two chapters, and some of them even offer a rendition of the “complete” version into modern Chinese; but as stated above, these do not count for the purposes of this essay.

11 Black’s version ends where the original third record ends.



even misleading to indicate a number in the translated version. Regarding the choice between “chapters” or “records,” the former may give a stronger sense of being parts of a larger whole, but neither term implies completeness, and the difference cannot be said to constitute a significant variation reflective of cultural mediation.<sup>12</sup>

As for the subtitles, each serves to crystallize the translator’s perception of the source work’s form or nature, to supplement or elaborate on the words used to render the title. It has been pointed out rather paradoxically that “[i]n one area alone can translators enjoy complete freedom in disregarding the original, and that area is the translation of book titles. But the danger here is they are quite likely to misrepresent the author and mislead their readers” (Tsai, 1995, p. 80). The first statement points to an extreme view that is allowable in certain situations more than in others; the second statement implies that the translator does not have total liberty to ignore the original title after all. In any case, the rendering of a literary text with a title that is at least partly reflective of its contents does not allow complete freedom to render the title in subjective terms. In the present case, most of the added words are more or less harmless (if somewhat reductive and unnecessary); the more problematic word is “autobiography,” as this term carries certain implications for a literary form that does not entirely fit the original work. For besides having a dual rather than single personal focus, there is little attempt in it to set forth the protagonists’ character, mentality, activities, experiences and milieu in chronological or systematic order, with some kind of clear beginning and end. Where autobiographies are “extended, organized narratives prepared for the public eye” (Holman and Harmon, 1986, p. 43),<sup>13</sup> *Fusheng liuji* is but loosely organized by theme and topic, written largely for personal purposes with

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12 In this essay, the use of “records” rather than “chapters” to render the character *ji* is a matter of slight personal preference more than absolute academic judgment.

13 Note that autobiography should be distinguished from memoirs, which share this basic description, but carry an emphasis on the public events and personages that the author has known or witnessed, rather than on the author’s developing self or life.

little thought of publication in the author's lifetime. But the truly significant issue in the present context pertains to the translation of the word *fu*, for the term is imbued with philosophical and aesthetic overtones in the source culture.

### **Renditions of *Fu* and Its Philosophical and Aesthetic Resonances in the Source Culture**

It will thus be useful to list the renditions of *fu* in the various languages—other than the Japanese version, which repeats the Chinese characters without adding anything substantive in the subtitle. The 1969 Korean version also repeats the Chinese characters, but adds the term “flowing/unstable” in the subtitle.<sup>14</sup> Granted that all verbal forms are “abstract” in that a word does not impact the sense organs directly like a visual image or musical phrase, it will be valid to differentiate among the translators' choices, which include “floating” (all three English versions, Dutch) and “willow leaf in a stream” (Swedish) on the more imagistic and concrete side, in contrast to “fleeting” (Czech, French (Reclus), Russian), “unreal” (Italian), “dreamlike” (Malay), “inconstant” (French (Ryckmans)), “flowing/unstable” (Korean), “drifting” (Hebrew), “without direction” (Spanish), “transient” (Danish) and “unsettled” (German) on the abstract, conceptual side. “Floating,” which leads one to visualize a sensory object or stimulus (such as sound and smell) moving slowly in a liquid or gas medium (usually on water or in the air), is less specific in form than “willow leaf in a stream,” but can still be justifiably seen as imagistic and tangible in a general, motional sense. It is relevant to note that most renditions of *fu* have reduced it to a conceptual verdict, whereas the original term is vividly evocative linguistically and poetically: underlying and on top of its content as a motional image, *fu* is a pictophonetic character (*xingsheng* 形聲字)<sup>15</sup> whose semantic radical on the left offers a visual reminder of its association with water. The point should not be

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14 In the 2004 Korean reprint, “paean” and “flowing/unstable” are dropped in the subtitle, replaced by “autobiography.”

15 A pictophonetic character (sometimes also called “phonetic compound”) is made up of 2 elements: one indicates the semantic category of the character, while the other gives a clue to its pronunciation.

stretched, but it is true that Chinese characters are graphically imagistic in a way that abstract, alphabetically constructed words are not, which further extends the distance to be negotiated in translation.

In a sense, “willow leaf in a stream” is the most concrete, poetic and imagistic rendition. Yet it is also reductive over-translation, since all unneeded attempts to specify will narrow the connotative range. Besides, the compound image is a little out of place in the source culture, for the literary verb most naturally associated with the willow (*liu*柳) is “hanging” (*chui*垂), while the images most naturally associated with *fu* are clouds (*fuyun*浮雲) and duckweed (*fuping*浮萍),<sup>16</sup> with a spectrum of existential, artistic and philosophical connotations that range from helpless drifting to unfettered freedom. The Swedish compound of images finds no natural occurrence in the poetry of the source culture, and is thus a clear example of willful construction and mediation. In comparison, “floating” is the most literal, accurate and least arduous rendition of *fu* in terms of conceptual sense as well as imagistic representation. In the context of literary translation, a relatively neutral term with no heavy emotional or conceptual slant is often better endowed to preserve an intrinsic multivalence, and to carry a flexible range of associative potential within the parameters set by the language. “Float” is such a term in English, even though it cannot be expected to match the culture-specific pictographic trace as well as connotative multiplicity of the Chinese term (as shall be explained below).

In contrast, it can be seen that the majority of the renditions of *fu* revolve around the semantic core of “fleeting,” “transient” and “inconstant;” “drifting,” “unsettled” and “without direction;” even “dreamlike” and “unreal”—which are all abstract and conceptual, picking but one meaning of the term that is neither its deepest nor its most literal sense. If “floating” is descriptive and expansive, the conceptual versions are evaluative

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About 80% of Chinese characters are pictophonetically formed. For a succinct description in English, see Norman, 1988, pp. 67–69, 267, n. 11. 16 Thus a compound term like *fuliu*浮柳 (floating willow) is rarely (if ever) used; *fuye*浮葉 (floating leaf) is used either as a general term, or to refer to lotus leaf when used in specific terms.

and restrictive. Ryckmans's French rendition shows an effort to convey the motional sense of *fu* by including a meaning of "passing," but the overall effect ("as inconstant days went by") remains less vivid and succinct than "floating life." One may find it relevant to ask the obvious question: since every language has a signifier for the semantic meaning of "float," why have so many translators made verbal choices that are arduous and reductive? The French poet and critic Yves Bonnefoy has made an interesting observation on the English and French languages that might be of reference value. He contends that English has a "great aptitude for noting appearances, [...] to describe what consciousness perceives, while avoiding any preconception about the final being of these referents," whereas French is "a language of essences," "impregnated by the idea of a world order" of "permanence" (1989, pp. 126, 133, 129 and 127). In his view, French is a conceptual language of Platonic idealism, while English is oriented towards the concrete and empirical.

Strictly speaking, Bonnefoy's assertion is a generalizing claim open to debate. Suffice it to note the evidence that the mostly European translators do show a penchant to think in terms of abstract ideas rather than concrete images, that their renditions entail recontextualization within a different cultural framework. Apart from the factor of cultural temper and the scenario of cumulative influence, the translators' choices may represent a common partial interpretation that takes its cue from the words of the native scholar Lin Yutang (1895-1976), who was also the first translator of *Fusheng liuji* into a foreign language in 1935 (initially in serialized form).

For Lin Yutang asserted in a preface (1935) that the title of the work is based on the Tang poet Li Bai's 李白 (701-762) words "Floating life (*fusheng*) is like a dream; how often do we find happiness?" (1999, "Preface," p. 23). In context, Li Bai's statement from his "Preface to Peach Blossom Garden, Feasting Younger Male Cousins" reads as follows:

Now Heaven and earth are the guesthouse of the myriad things;  
time is the passing traveller of a hundred generations. And  
floating life is like a dream; how often do we find happiness?

夫天地者，萬物之逆旅也；光陰者，百代之過客也。而浮生若夢，為歡幾何？

〈春夜宴從弟桃花園序〉

If Lin's assertion were true, the renditions of *fu* as "inconstant" or related meanings would be legitimate (the Malay version of the title is based directly on Li Bai's lines). Indeed, there are other poetic usages of *fu* that support this reading, as the following examples will attest:

Floating life is just like the water under ice,  
Day and night flowing east without our awareness.

Du Mu, "Obstructed by the Ice at Bian River"

浮生恰似冰底水，日夜東流人不知。

杜牧（803-852）〈汴河阻凍〉

In floating life I always regret the scarcity of joy;  
Would I give up laughter for a thousand pieces of gold?

Song Qi, Tune: "Spring in Jade Mansion"

浮生長恨歡娛少，肯愛千金輕一笑？

宋祁（998-1061）〈玉樓春〉

The slightly resigned tone in these excerpts would at least mildly support Lin's interpretation.

What Lin Yutang did not mention, however, is that his quote had taken its cue directly from an earlier reader Pan Linsheng 潘麐生. Writing a "Preface to *Six Records of a Floating Life*" 浮生六記序 in 1874 for the first printing of the incomplete text, this self-confessed "man of grief"<sup>17</sup> stamped onto the writing paper a personal seal of his, consisting of the carved lines *fu sheng ruo meng, wei huan ji he* 浮生若夢，為歡幾何 taken from Li Bai's "Preface to Peach Blossom Garden" cited above.<sup>18</sup> The lines reflect Pan's affective response to Shen Fu's life story; it is quite unlikely that they are meant to be an exegesis of the

17 See Wu, 2007, p. 123. Pan's 1874 preface, an 1877 preface by Yang Yinchuan 楊引傳 and an 1877 postscript by Wang Tao 王韜 are included in some recent editions of *Fusheng liuji*, including Wu's edition, pp. 123-126.

18 See Yang Yinchuan's 1877 preface, in Wu, 2007, p. 125.

connotative range of *fusheng*. Lin may have turned Pan's personal response into a virtual near-definition that helps to reduce and constrain the translators' understanding of the terms *fu* and *fusheng*.

Like many other Chinese characters, *fu* came to be imbued with multiple connotations in the course of 3000 years of usage. The *Hanyu da zidian* 漢語大字典 (A Dictionary of the Chinese Language) lists nineteen senses of the term (1986-1990, vol. 3, pp. 1629-1630), while the *Hanyu da cidian* 漢語大詞典 (A Dictionary of the Chinese Language [with Compound Words and Phrases]) lists seventeen (1988-1993, vol. 5, pp. 1238). Not every sense is relevant to the present purpose, but it will be appropriate at this point to examine some of the original meanings of *fu*:

Drifting, drifting is the poplar boat,  
Now dipping, now floating.

*Book of Songs* #176, "Jingjing zhe'e"

汎汎楊舟，載沉載浮。

《詩·小雅·菁菁者莪》

So he [Fan Li] rode a light boat and sailed on the five lakes, and no one knew where he eventually went.

(*Conversations of the States*, "Conversations of Yue," Pt. 2)

〔范蠡〕遂乘輕舟以浮於五湖，莫知其所終極。

《國語·越語下》

In the first excerpt, which can be no later than the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, *fu* means "float on liquid or in the air"; in the second excerpt, no later than the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, *fu* means "travel on water," or to "sail."<sup>19</sup> The first meaning indicates motion on water and is neutral in value; the second meaning arises from the narrative context of a brilliant minister turned recluse. Leaving the political vortex at the height of his career, Fan Li's (5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BC) *fu* heralds the Daoist thinker Zhuangzi's (c. 369-c. 286 BC) use of *fu* in the philosophical text that bears his name.

19 An earlier example can be found in the *Book of History*, "Yu's Contributions": "Sailing on the Ji and Ta rivers, they reached the Yellow River." 《書·禹貢》：「浮於濟漯，達於河。」蔡沈集傳：「舟行水曰浮。」

Let us briefly examine how the *Zhuangzi* uses the term *fu* in various places.<sup>20</sup>

- (1) Now you had a gourd that holds five piculs. Why didn't you empty it into a big vessel [and tie it on your waist] so you could go floating on the rivers and lakes, instead of worrying that it might be too large to dip into things!  
 "Free and Easy Wandering"  
 「今子有五石之瓠，何不慮以為大樽而浮乎江湖，而憂其瓠落無所容？」  
 《莊子·逍遙遊》
- (2) The sage [...] discards cleverness and craftiness, and follows the principle of Heaven. Thus he suffers no calamity from Heaven, no encumbrance by things [...]. His life is like floating, his death like rest. He does not ponder or deliberate, or plot for the future [...]. His pure spirit flows forth in all four directions; there is no place beyond its reach. It borders Heaven above, encompasses the earth below [...]. He who can embody purity and simplicity is called a "true man."  
 "Tempering the Will"  
 聖人……去知與故，循天之理。故無天災，無物累，……其生若浮，其死若休。不思慮，不豫謀，……精神四達並流，無所不極，上際於天，下蟠於地。……能體純素，謂之真人。  
 《莊子·刻意》
- (3) Ford the rivers and float on the sea. Gaze and you cannot see its far shore; journey further and you will not know where it ends [...]. Discard your encumbrances, cast off your cares, and wander alone with the Way in the land of great nothingness [...]. A person who can empty himself and wander through the world—who can do harm to him?  
 "The Mountain Tree"  
 「君其涉於江而浮於海，望之而不見其崖，愈往而不知其所窮。……去君之累，除君之憂，而獨與道

<sup>20</sup> The character *fu* is not found in the *Laozi*.

遊於大莫之國。……人能虛己以遊世，其孰能害之！」  
《莊子·山木》

- (4) There is nothing under Heaven that does not dip and float, that stays unchanged throughout its existence. *Yin* and *yang* and the four seasons run their courses, each in its proper order.  
“Knowledge Wanders North”  
天下莫不沉浮，終身不故。陰陽四時運行，各得其序。  
《莊子·知北遊》

It may be further noted that the dynamic image of “floating” (*fu*) is often associated with the idea of “wandering” (*you*) in the *Zhuangzi*:

- (5) I float and wander, not knowing what I seek; I traverse at will, not knowing where I go [...] to observe the absence of Illusion.  
“Let Be, Relax”  
「浮遊不知所求，猖狂不知所往，……以觀無妄。」  
《莊子·在宥》
- (6) It would be different if you were to ride on the Way and its Virtue, and go floating and wandering. With neither praise nor rebuke, [...] you transform with time, without being stuck in one course; now up, now down, taking harmony as your measure. Floating and wandering with the source of the myriad things, you treat things as things without being dictated by things; how could you then incur any encumbrance?  
“The Mountain Tree”  
「若夫乘道德而浮遊則不然。無譽無訾，……與時俱化，而無肯專為；一上一下，以和為量。浮遊乎萬物之祖，物物而不物於物，則胡可得而累邪！」  
《莊子·山木》

Carefree and unfettered in its freedom, Zhuangzi’s image of a “floating life” (which also includes a sense of “flowing” [*liu*



流]) is spiritedly described in passage (2), in his characterization of the “sage” and “true man” as readily interchangeable terms.<sup>21</sup> There can be little doubt that *fu*, *fusheng* (though the compound term is not directly used in this passage) and *fuyou* are expansive and liberating states of existence in physical as well as spiritual terms. In the final analysis, *fu* in the Daoist sense is suggestive of the human spirit’s natural rhythm in parallel to the inspiring changes and transformations of the Way in the universe. This sense of *fu* is directly recited by Jia Yi 賈誼 (200-168 BC) in his “Rhyme-Prose on the Owl,” and further echoed by Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263 AD) in his “Biography of the Great Man”:

Let life be like floating, death be like rest. Placid as the stillness of a deep pool; drifting as an unfastened boat. Do not value oneself for the sake of life, but cultivate emptiness and float.

「其生兮若浮，其死兮若休；澹乎若深淵之靜，泛乎若不繫之舟。不以生故自寶兮，養空而浮。」

《文選·〈鵬鳥賦〉》

The Great Man is one in body with Creation, coexistent with Heaven and Earth. He floats in the world free and easy, having been constituted with the Way. He transforms in accordance with life and death, which keeps no constant form.

「夫大人者，乃與造物同體，天地並生，逍遙浮世，與道俱成。變化散聚，不常其形。」

《大人先生傳》

Jia Yi’s first two lines here are virtual quotes from the *Zhuangzi* (cf. passage 2 above), and his imagistic characterizations of the synonymous “man of understanding” 達人, “great man” 大人, “perfect man” 至人 and “true man” 真人在 his work culminate in an image of “floating in emptiness.” In addition, Li Shan’s 李善 (c. 630-689) commentary in the *Wen xuan* 文選 cites this echoing remark by the great scholar Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200): “The Daoist cultivates emptiness—he is empty like a floating boat.” 道家養空，虛若浮舟也。 In much the same vein, the Great Man’s *fushi* rhythm of life is characterized unequivocally as *xiaoyao*; Ruan Ji’s rhetorical flourish is a resounding reverberation of *Zhuangzi*’s

21 *Zhuangzi* 1, “Free and Easy Wandering”: “The perfect man has no self; the spiritual man has no merit; the sage has no name.” 《莊子·逍遙遊》：「至人無己，神人無功，聖人無名。」

dynamic language. There is no doubt that since early times, the Chinese philosophical sense of *fu* is positive and liberating.

Yet how can one justifiably conclude that Shen Fu's use of the term *fusheng* is closer to Zhuangzi than to Li Bai? First, the author did not write his work as a tragedy; this is evident from his gentle, positive tone throughout the entire text, which never indulges in self-pity or becomes overly plaintive.<sup>22</sup> In fact, it is precisely because the Korean translator feels a clear surplus of joy in Shen Fu's account that he has picked the word "paeon" in the added subtitle. Direct evidence is also seen from the simple fact that only one of the six chapters focuses on "the sorrows of misfortune" (chapter 3); the other chapters are respectively entitled "the joys of the wedding chamber," "the pleasures of leisurely moods," "the delights of roaming afar," "the experiences of Zhongshan" and "the way of nurturing life." Second, the text is essentially Daoist (much more than it is Confucian) in spirit; by nature and in experience, Shen Fu enjoys a peaceful artistic life amid nature rather than the entanglement of petty struggles and dubious schemes as a government official. A related third point is that the text shows Shen Fu to be an avid nature traveler, fond of the kind of "free and easy wandering" celebrated by Zhuangzi.

### **Cultural Hurdles in Philosophical Understanding and Translation**

Given the solid fact that *fu* is imbued with philosophical and aesthetic senses in Chinese culture, rendition of the term calls for a clear recognition of the problems of intercultural philosophical translation. Thomas McFarland's distinction between the rendition of primary and transcendent meanings may be useful here: "The vast activity of cultural equivalence is successful in translating primary meanings, which correspond to the words of the poem and its statement of fact, but unsuccessful in its attempt to translate transcendent meanings, which correspond to the inner spirit of the poem" (1987, p. 75). What is said of "the untranslatability of poetic essence," "invariably and without exception vitiated by the principle of attenuation," is applicable

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22 See Kwong, 2006, pp. 124-125.

to the translation of philosophy and culture as well. If “float” at least preserves the primary meaning of *fu*, the conceptualized renditions of *fu* are variations on a narrow core meaning that manages to capture but one negative and superficial sense of the original term. Empirically, the “fleeting/unsettled” interpretive slant can only be applied to the third chapter of the text: as attested by the positive spirit of the other chapters and especially by the author’s joyous experiences in nature, the primary sense of *fu* is expansive, liberating and uplifting. The target-language correlatives are not only reductive in their inability to match the connotative range of the original term; they are also distorting in lowering its semantic level in the source culture. One cannot simply attribute this limitation to an Indo-European penchant for abstract conceptual thinking (which includes the Malay and Hebrew versions), for that is merely the “active” dimension of the issue. In a veritable sense, the cultural intervention, whether actively willed by the translator or not, can be seen as *involuntary*: Lin Yutang may indeed have misled target-language translators not fully cognizant of the multiplex cultural meanings of *fu*, but in the final analysis, not even a thorough understanding of the concept would have enabled the translators to find a target-language correlative to the Daoist philosophical term. After all, is *Shangdi* 上帝 any closer to “God” than “the Way” is to *Dao* 道 or “energy” is to *qi* 氣?

In essence, the mediating acts by the target-language versions are acts of “naturalization” (also known as “domestication” or “appropriation”/“assimilation”),<sup>23</sup> a target-culture-oriented approach that tries to naturalize what is alien in the source culture within the familiar terms of the receptor culture. From the translator’s point of view, whose expression takes place within the target language, the gravitational pull towards naturalization is quite likely to exceed that towards foreignization: indeed George

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23 See for instance Liu, 1975; also Liu, 1981, p. 40. Cf. Xie, 1996; reprinted in Guo, 2000, pp. 52-77. Positing two polarities in translation can be traced back to the views of Goethe and Schleiermacher about the two directions in translation: bringing the author to the reader (naturalization), or the reader to the author (foreignization or barbarization); for relevant excerpts of their views, see Weissort and Eysteinsson, 2006, pp. 198-209, especially pp. 200 and 207.

Steiner once remarks that translation “aims to import and to naturalize the content of the source-text and to simulate, so far as it is able, the original executive form of that content” (1975, p. 333). This is generally in line with Nida’s belief in dynamic (functional) equivalence, which sees translation producing as far as possible the same effect on target-language readers as the original produced on source-language readers, and which is skewed towards naturalization as well: translation “aims at complete naturalness of expression, [...] it does not insist that [the receptor-language readers] understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context” (Nida, 2004, p. 156).

Translation theorists, of course, are well aware that the premise of dynamic equivalence faces serious challenges on at least three fronts. First, Nida admits that in practice, equivalents are most difficult to find “when both languages and cultures are disparate” (*ibid.*, p. 157). Second, the notion of dynamic equivalence is not universally accepted without question even in concept; thus Antoine Berman sees translation as “the mode of existence by which a work reaches us as foreign. A good translation retains this strangeness even as it makes the work accessible to us,” in contrast to “[a] bad translation... which, generally under the guise of transmissibility, carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness of the foreign work” (1992, p. 224, n. 46, 5). This argument becomes all the more pronounced when the genre factor comes into the equation; indeed Peter Newmark goes so far as to contend that for

[...] the artistic work with a strong local flavour which may also be rooted in a particular historical period [...] if the culture is as important as the message (the translator has to decide), he reproduces the form and content of the original as literally as possible [...] without regard for equivalent-effect [...]. In fact, if the creative artist writes for his own relief [...], then the equivalent-effect principle is irrelevant in the translation of a work of art; the translator’s loyalty is to the artist, and he must concentrate on recreating as much of the work as he can. (1988, p. 11)

In practice, the issue is more or less a matter of balancing polar positions, and handling the source text in a living, flexible way, since the text will call for different strategies at different points.

Suffice it to say that the price of avoiding “foreignness” altogether in order to make the rendered version easily intelligible is a sure reduction and distortion of cultural reality.

The reductive renditions of *fu* call to mind something once done in early medieval China (3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century), when Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese. The translators made use of methods that ranged from adopting individual terms and concepts in the indigenous traditions, to the more formal, rigid adaptation system of *ge yi* 格義 or “matching concepts,” in which a group of Buddhist ideas were rendered with an “equivalent” group of Daoist (sometimes Confucian) ideas.<sup>24</sup> As one can expect, such a method of “projective fabrication”<sup>25</sup> was bound to lead to errors and distortions, so that the practice of analogical matching was discarded in the fifth century. Far more difficult to resist altogether was the continual use of Daoist terms (occasionally even Confucian terminology in later eras) to elucidate Buddhist ideas on the perceived ground of inner connectedness, which shows the inevitability of cultural mediation in the translation process. The 20<sup>th</sup>-century translators of *Fusheng liuji* were not engaged in matching concepts, to be sure, but the practice and pitfalls of naturalization, i.e., recasting the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, remain essentially the same.

Regardless of the extent to which thought is shaped or determined by language, there is no doubt that different cultures construct mental, emotional and spiritual realities with varying degrees of difference. If there is any validity at all in Bonnefoy’s claim that English is oriented towards the concrete and empirical while French is an essentialist language of abstract ideas, it can only add weight to the argument that Chinese, with its partly pictographic or imagistic characters, tends even more towards the concrete and empirical. The French sinologist Jacques Gernet obliquely supports such a perspective: “[in Chinese it is] so difficult to express how the abstract and the general differ fundamentally, and not just occasionally, from the concrete and

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24 See Tang, 1983, 1, pp. 167–170; Wright, 1959, pp. 36–38; Chan, 1964, pp. 68–69.

25 To use George Steiner’s phrase (1975, p. 333).

the particular” (1985, p. 239). As an image *and* a spiritual state, *fu* exemplifies Gernet’s point well: it is a term which English *preserves* as “floating” and French *conserves* as “passing cum inconstant” or “fleeting” via conceptual domestication. What complicates Gernet’s observation even more is that classical Chinese is a more condensed and evocative language than modern Chinese: if Chinese is already a “high context culture” in which meaning exceeds language to a greater degree than a “low context culture” like German (Katan, 1999, pp. 183 and 212), such a general challenge is heightened for the translator of classical Chinese texts, where terms are often imbued with rich philosophical and aesthetic import.

As pointed out by Roger Ames, the major problem facing Western-language translations of Chinese philosophy is that “the semantic content of the core philosophical vocabulary is not well understood,” because the renditions employ a domesticated vocabulary that “perpetuates a pernicious reductionism.” Underlying such an act is the reality that “a particular world view is sedimented in the language of a culture and the systematic structure of its concepts, encouraging certain philosophical possibilities while discouraging others” (1995, p. 731). Making a distinction between a rational (logical) and an aesthetic sense of order, Ames draws attention to differences between dualistic and correlative modalities of thinking in the Indo- European and Chinese world views.<sup>26</sup> He sums up the Western mode of thinking as follows:

[T]he development of our philosophical and religious thought was the presumption that there is something permanent, perfect, objective and universal which, existing independent of the world of change, disciplines it and guarantees natural and moral order—an eternal realm of Platonic *eidōs* or “ideas,” the One True God of the Judeo-Christian universe, a transcendental strongbox of invariable principles or laws [...]. The model of a single-ordered world in which the unchanging source of order stands independent of, sustains, and ultimately provides explanation for the sensible world, is a familiar if not often an unconscious assumption in our tradition. (1995, p. 731)

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26 See Hall and Ames, 1987, pp. 16-17 and 131-138.

Gernet has made an analogous point some time earlier: “According to Aristotle, it is normal for all things to be at rest, whereas for the Chinese, in contrast, universal dynamism is the primary assumption” (1985, p. 210).

Admittedly broad generalizations subject to debate, these statements by Gernet and Ames nonetheless help to explain why a thinker like Heraclitus (c. 535– c. 475 BC), who bases his thought on the principle of flux and change, cannot occupy a central position in mainstream Greek or Western philosophy: change is an entity of a lower order that does not reach the highest plane of philosophical or religious architecture in the metaphysical hierarchy. In the Western conception of cosmogonic order, there is the fundamental premise of an ontological disparity between the transcendent source of order and the world it orders, that what changes (including the world of physical nature) is inferior to and less real than what is presumed to be permanent. In terms of McFarland’s “transcendent” level of meaning, there may be little difference between “floating” and “unreal” or “fleeting” for the European(ized) translators. This cultural gap in philosophical orientation may also help to explain why most translators of *Fusheng liuji* seem unable to fully appreciate the positive, liberating side of *fu*, and end up reducing the term to some negative variant of “inconstant”: *fu* is fluid, changing, shapeless, spontaneous and unfixable, aesthetic rather than logical or rationalistic. The cultural mediation that took place in the translation process is not only unavoidable; it is partly instinctive as well. Interestingly enough, the Swedish version may be seen (in Ames’s terms) as an overzealous attempt to counteract the mediation—a turn from the rational to the aesthetic.

### Concluding Remarks

As has been pointed out by more critics than one, it is experientially true to the point of cliché that every act (though not every word) of rendition entails interpretation. Put in another way, “linguistic structures inevitably pose the question of modes of thought” (Gernet, 1985, p. 239); in the words of Walter Benjamin, translation is “removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation

passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity” (1916, p. 70). However intractable they may be, verbal problems in translation pale before those rooted in aesthetic, cultural and philosophical elements, which are not transportable across cultures standing distinctly apart from one another. Grasping these factors inherent and integrated in a literary text is intuitive and instinctive, not amenable to the strategies of translation. When T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) describes Ezra Pound (1885-1972) as “the *inventor* of Chinese poetry for our time” (1948, p. 14),<sup>27</sup> he is at once alluding to the ambiguities of cultural mediation or even fabrication in the translation process. Much the same can be said of Lin Shu’s 林紓 (1852-1924) earnest “translations”—or rather reinventions—of Western literature in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China.<sup>28</sup>

The ultimate difficulty in translation, especially in translating texts encoded with cultural content, will always be the basic question of untranslatability: assertions about the dynamic (re)creativity of translation amount to an acknowledgment of this insuperable problem. What is untranslatable is not so much the metaphysically indefinable or ineffable element (which is rooted in the limits of understanding and expression in the source language itself), as it is the cultural-historical (or spatial-temporal) factor. In translation as much as in literary expression, to add is often to reduce, and to define is to distort and mislead.

It can be seen from the analysis above that in the absence of an ideal equivalent, “float” is the most literal, precise and effortless rendition of *fu* in both conceptual sense and imagistic resonance. The most neutral and simple choice often turns out to be the best option, avoiding reduction and preserving associative potential by refraining from defining and thus contracting the connotative parameters of the original text. Cultural mediation in

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27 My italics. Pound’s rendition of classical Chinese poems, *Cathay* (1915), is in fact purposive creative misreading and rewriting rather than serious translation.

28 With no knowledge of foreign languages, Lin collaborated with others to produce Chinese versions of a massive number (over 200) of Western titles, mostly novels.



translation is unavoidable, and need not result in controversy on a technical level: thus one usually needs, for instance, to Westernize traditional Chinese dates or find near-equivalent terms for Chinese food dishes. Cultural mediation that entails recasting aesthetic and philosophical elements is much more difficult to handle; to expect any effort in translation to fully render a term like *fū* is to ask what is genuinely impossible. Where culturally specific ideas are concerned, there can be no dynamic equivalents for translation: the cultural codes which translation tries to carry across languages can never be covered in full. Nevertheless, if the source-language term cannot be naturalized and the target-language vocabulary cannot be recast, one viable strategy will be to abide by the original's basic semantic meaning, keeping reductive or distorting interpretation of the text to a minimum, and letting the translated language generate its artistic chemistry.

Since there can be no identity between cultures and languages, translation is not a mirror, but an interpretive re-creation that must "betray" in order to be "loyal to the spirit" (Barnstone, 1993, pp. 260-261). Given the variations and deviations seen in the renditions of a short textual title like *Fusheng liuji*, one may add the obvious point that "betrayal" entails its own artistic logic and cultural parameters. If language is partly universal and partly culture-specific, verbal artists, in particular poets, have always known that there lies in verbal expression a subtle, indefinable communicative frequency amenable to art rather than science, which a translator can access in order to partly bridge distances in cultural, aesthetic and metaphysical realities. In the words of Berman's reminder, "we must struggle relentlessly against our fundamental reductionism, but also remain open to that which, in all translation, remains mysterious and unmasterable, properly in-visible" (1992, p. 180).<sup>29</sup> This is not to turn translation into mysticism, but to acknowledge the limits of the endeavor and the limits of language itself on the basis of common reason. In Daoist terms, the translator has the option of minimizing the pitfalls of cultural mediation and distortion by not being overly clever

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29 Barnstone also thinks that "[t]ranslation has a mystique", and he celebrates the "mystical process" of translation as interpretive creation, with its three stages of "via negativa (or purgativa), via illuminativa and via unitiva" (1993, p. 262).

or active: “non-action” (*wuwei* 無為), or taking no unnecessary action, can be a key virtue in translation as well.

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**ABSTRACT: Problems in Translating Culture: The Translated Titles of *Fusheng Liuji*** — Translating culture poses fundamental problems of perception and conception far deeper than matters of linguistic expression. This essay explores some of these problems by examining *Fusheng liuji* (*Six Records of a Floating Life*), a Chinese autobiographical text that has been translated into fourteen Asian and European languages. Even without going into the details of the rendered versions, one can notice various forms of intercultural mediation and reshaping in the translated titles and added subtitles. At one end is direct, partly helpless substitution: lexically flawless "float" cannot encompass the rich matrix of philosophical connotations and artistic resonances of *fu* in the source culture. At the other end is active reshaping: recasting, addition and omission based on interpretive (mis) reading, including a reduction of imagistic language into abstract concept (e.g., *fu* becomes "fleeting"). Through examining 17 renditions of the title of *Fusheng liuji*, this essay offers a case study that helps to cast light on the unavoidable factor of intercultural mediation in the translation process, with special focus on the translation of philosophical and aesthetic concepts. Some forms of mediation carry more significant effects than others, and there may be differences in verbal resources and orientations in various languages worthy of notice.

**RÉSUMÉ : Les problèmes soulevés lors de la traduction des cultures : le cas des titres traduits de *Fusheng Liuji*** — La traduction des cultures soulève des questions fondamentales de perception et de préconception qui vont au-delà des préoccupations purement linguistiques d'énonciation. Dans cet article, nous nous pencherons sur certaines de ces questions en examinant *Fusheng Liuji* (*Six Records of a Floating Life*), un texte autobiographique chinois, traduit en 14 langues asiatiques

et européennes. Sans même devoir plonger dans les détails des traductions de l'ouvrage, il est possible de remarquer plusieurs formes de médiation et de remodelage interculturel dans les traductions des titres et des sous-titres ajoutés. À une extrémité du spectre, on trouve des substitutions directes, en partie inévitables : l'équivalent lexical exact « float » ne peut rendre le riche tissu de connotations philosophiques et de résonnances artistiques que « fu » évoque dans la culture source. À l'autre extrémité, on constate un remodelage actif : réaménagements, ajouts et omissions, basés sur une (fausse) lecture interprétative, incluant la réduction d'une langue imagée à un concept abstrait (par exemple, « fu » devient « fleeting ». En examinant 17 traductions du titre *Fusheng Liuji*, l'article propose une étude de cas qui permet de faire la lumière sur la médiation interculturelle, composant inévitable du processus de la traduction, tout en portant une attention particulière à la traduction de concepts philosophiques et esthétiques. Certaines formes de médiations sont porteuses de répercussions plus significatives que d'autres et il est possible de relever, selon les langues, des variations de ressources et d'orientations sur le plan verbal qui méritent qu'on s'y attarde.

**Keywords:** *Fusheng Liuji*, translating philosophy, intercultural mediation, naturalization, foreignization, reductionism

**Mots-clés :** *Fusheng Liuji*, traduire la philosophie, médiation interculturelle, domestication, exotisation, réductionnisme

**Charles Kwong**

Department of Chinese & Department of Translation  
Lingnan University  
8 Castle Peak Road, Tuen Mun, NT, Hong Kong  
charlesk@ln.edu.hk