

## Translation through a Zen Mind: Sam Hamill's Translation of Li Bai's "Du Zuo Jing Ting Shan"

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In the global spread of religions and philosophical thoughts, translation is always at the forefront. In the case of Buddhism, the typical image is that of learned intellectuals or scholarly monks assiduously working on the interpretation and translation of important words and concepts across cultures. But there are also other forms of Buddhist translation at work exerting a less visible, but no less important impact on the reception of Buddhism. This paper discusses American poet Sam Hamill's translation of one of Li Bai's renowned poems and argues that this form of translation is co-influenced by Hamill's dual identities of literary translator and Zen practitioner. As a result, it not only provides new understanding to the source culture, but also adds variety to the Buddhist literature of the target culture.

**Keywords:** Sam Hamill; Zen Buddhism; Li Bai; Translation

Translation has always played a pivotal role in the global spread of Buddhism, from as early as the Han Dynasty all the way to the present day. As far as religious texts are concerned, an accurate understanding of the key concepts and terms is profoundly important (Saitō 2017: 17); because these key concepts more often than not have fewer counterparts in the target culture, translators are faced with the challenge of designing strategies for representing them faithfully, like the translational principle (*wuzhong bufan* 五种不翻, five situations for adopting transliteration) of Xuanzang (602–664). As a result of translation, new concepts and lexicons are brought to the target culture. This paper explores a novel form of translation that has the potential to influence the interpretation of classic literature and the cross-cultural spread of Buddhism.

Sam Hamill (1943–2018) was an American poet and a translator, who composed over a dozen collections of poetry and made numerous translations from ancient Greek, Latin, Japanese, and

Chinese. He was also the co-founder of Copper Canyon Press, a well-known publisher of poetry. His translations of classic Chinese poetry have been highly praised by readers for their excellence, simplicity, and reliability. However, there is a major “error” in one of his translations in *Crossing the Yellow River: Three Hundred Poems from the Chinese*—his translation of Li Bai’s “Du Zuo Jing Ting Shan” (独坐敬亭山) differs greatly from how the poem is understood in its source culture.

The Poem by Li Bai	Hamill’s Translation	Xu Yuanchong’s Translation
独坐敬亭山	Zazen on Ching-t’ing Mountain	Sitting Alone in Face of Peak Jingting
众鸟高飞尽， 孤云独去闲。 相看两不厌， 只有敬亭山。(Peng 1979: 1858)	The birds have vanished down the sky. Now the last cloud drains away. We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains. (Hamill 2000: 94)	All birds have flown away, so high; A lonely cloud drifts on, so free. We are not tired, the Peak and I, Nor I of him, Nor he of me. (Xu 2007: 176–177)

Figure 1. Translations of Li Bai’s Poem

The above figure presents translations of Li Bai’s poem by Sam Hamill and Xu Yuanchong (the first Chinese to win the Aurora Borealis Prize for outstanding translation of fictional literature). The first difference is shown in the translation of the poem’s title: Hamill’s translation of “zazen” (*zuo chan* 坐禅) with its Zen Buddhist connotation stands in stark contrast to Xu’s “sitting alone.” The first two lines of the poems are translated similarly. However, the two translators differ greatly in the understanding of the last two lines: Hamill’s translation echoes his Zen interpretation of the title, while Xu’s translation is devoid of Buddhist connotations.

The poem “Du Zuo Jing Ting Shan” was written in 753 CE when Li Bai was traveling to the city of Xuanzhou (known today as Xuancheng in Anhui Province). As he sat facing Jing Ting Mountain with churning emotions, he created the remarkable poem. The poem is traditionally understood in Chinese culture as a reflection of the poet’s loneliness and his disheartening political career (Pei 1998: 171–173; Wang 1993: 42). It has been frequently studied by Chinese scholars for its aesthetic quality and philosophical suggestions. Yang Shenggang interpreted the poem from Daoist perspectives, revealing Li Bai’s pursuit of detachment (2012: 83). Tang Jun and Liu Xiaochen employed Harold Bloom’s “map of misreading” in their analysis of six different translations and gave a detailed description of the translation of poetic images and metaphors (2018: 86–91). Hamill’s translation is unconventional, but his translation in *Crossing the Yellow River: Three Hundred Poems from the Chinese* is far from being “looser-limbed or quirkiest” as is claimed by Andrew Radford (2010: 108). It is rather a combined result of three factors: the Zen culture, Hamill’s translation philosophy and the characteristics of Chinese language.

It is hard to overlook the influence of Zen Buddhism on Hamill’s translation since the first word of the translation is “zazen,” a traditional Zen Buddhist meditative practice. Zen played a key role in Hamill’s life. In his youth, he had been a juvenile delinquent. While serving in the U.S Marine Corps,

he developed a love for Zen and began to practice zazen. Later, he became a devoted Zen Buddhist and translator of Zen poetry. Hamill's translation philosophy differs from others. In contrast to the traditionally upheld translation standard of fidelity to the source text, Hamill was quoted saying in an interview (Clauser 2011) that translation, for him, was a provisional conclusion and the same classics needed to be translated periodically. He stated that there was no strict formula for good translation, citing Ezra Pound's erroneous yet influential translations of Li Bai. Additionally, Hamill believed that there were no exact intentions in the ancient poems, and therefore, that it was the role of the translator to surmise the thinking of the poets. He also stressed that true translations should not be bad poetry, and therefore, he had passed over many poems because they didn't make good poems in American English. The Chinese language poses constant challenges for foreign translators, especially for those who translate ancient Chinese poetry. Hamill has noted the "plurisignation" (ambiguity) of the Chinese language, which forces translators to choose from various possible meanings.

All of these factors are involved in Hamill's translation of Li Bai's "Du Zuo Jing Ting Shan," but the translator's openness to multiple possible meanings is particularly conspicuous. It appears that for Hamill the problem of translation lies in understanding the character "zuo 坐," but the key might well be in the phrase "zhi you 只有." Here, "zhi you" can be understood in two ways. Firstly, the two words "zhi" and "you" are potentially working together as an adjective with a meaning equivalent to "only," which implies "without others" or "without anything further." Alternatively, the two words could be understood separately. In this case, the word "zhi" assumes the role of an adverb with a meaning equivalent to the adverbial form of "only." The word "you" assumes the role of the verb "to be" with the meaning "it exists" or "there is." Together, the second potential meaning of the phrase would convey that "only it exists" or "there only is."

The contrast between different translations of the same poem serves to illustrate the point. Normally translators in China understand the phrase "zhi you" in the last two lines through the first meaning. For Chinese translators and native speakers, although there is ambiguity in the phrase "zhi you," it seems they all come to an agreed-upon understanding. However, Sam Hamill and David Hinton understand the phrase through the second meaning. In "Ching-t'ing Mountain, Sitting Alone," David Hinton translates the last two lines as "Inexhaustible, Ching-t'ing Mountain and I/ gaze at each other, it alone remaining" (1996: 67). Why the different understandings between translators? The problem originates from the omission of a predicate in the last line. In the poem, Jing Ting Mountain is positioned in comparison to the "birds" and "clouds" in the first two lines and it is only the mountain that is not tired of gazing at the poet. Therefore, the last line with its predicate added should be "Only Jing Ting Mountain doesn't grow tired of gazing at me." As the phrases "xiang kan 相看" (gaze at each other) and "liang buyan 两不厌" (neither grow tired of) in the third line paint a clear picture, they are omitted in the last line. This phenomenon is common in Chinese language, but it has clearly caused problems for both Hamill and Hinton.

By now, it is possible to give a plausible explanation for Hamill's translation by combining the three above-mentioned factors. Hamill admitted that his Chinese was not good but when he translated, he would look up each character in the dictionary and annotate the whole poem. The

word “*zuo*” literally means “to sit,” and it can be coupled with other words to form phrases. As a Zen practitioner, Hamill would be familiar with the coupling of the words “*zuo*” with “*chan* 禅” as “zazen,” a form of Zen Buddhist meditation. This understanding could be strengthened with the understanding that “*zhi you*” means “only it exists.” For Hamill, the last line of the poem paints a picture of the poet sitting with the mountain until the human gradually fades out, leaving only the mountain to exist. This reflects the key idea in zazen, where the practitioner enters the state of no-self, where the self is let go, and self and body disappear (Sunim, 2009: 1). Through zazen, the intervention of ego-self is washed away, enabling the practitioner to accept things as they are. As a devoted Zen practitioner, Sam Hamill would have been familiar with the principles of zazen; therefore, the phrase “*zhi you*” appeared to him as the perfect example of a Zen practitioner meditating and ultimately achieving a state of letting go of oneself and merging with nature. The translation of the third line further demonstrates Hamill’s understanding. The word “*xiang kan*” in the original text means to “gaze at each other,” yet Hamill translates it as “sit together,” which has a more direct relation with zazen and meditation. As stated above, in one of his translation philosophies, Hamill believes that no exact intentions exist for ancient poems, and as a result this leads him to go against mainstream Chinese interpretations of the poems.

When looking again at the “error” in Hamill’s translation, we are faced with an important question: what is a correct or incorrect translation? There is no deliberate distortion or misinterpretation in Hamill’s translation. Rather, a clear line of reasoning can be found. Sam Hamill could certainly be regarded as a good example of a literary translator: his translations are influenced by his unique cultural background, his own translation philosophy, and his personal way of understanding the source language. Therefore, it is rather unnecessary to distinguish between correct and incorrect translation because these translations in their own right are unique and valuable artistic products.

Further as both a literary translator and a Zen practitioner, Hamill’s translation exhibits traces of influence from both identities. On the one hand, being a literary translator, Hamill was bound by the language of the source text and strove to translate it in a linguistically correct way; on the other hand, he was a committed Zen practitioner, and when he read a text, he followed a long and honorable tradition of East Asian Buddhism to go beyond the linguistic meaning and strive to reach a true interpretation that was relevant to his personal worldview. As a result, his translation provides a new way of understanding the classic text. But, more importantly, it adds richness to Buddhist literature in the English language and further exerts a subtle influence over the spread and reception of Buddhism in the English-speaking world.

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