

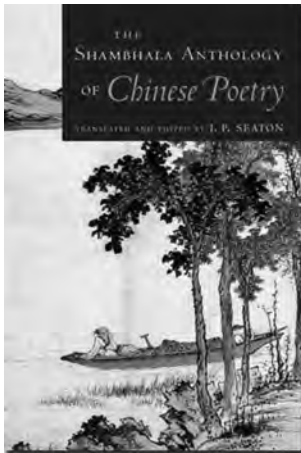
Using *The Shambhala Anthology of Chinese Poetry* in the Classroom

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY J. P. SEATON

BOSTON: SHAMBHALA PUBLICATIONS, 2006

272 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1570628627, PAPERBACK

By Fay Beauchamp



For *The Shambhala Anthology of Chinese Poetry*, Professor J.P. Seaton draws upon a lifetime of translating and teaching Chinese philosophical classics as well as off-beat poets who prefer as an artistic subject “a rat, with some scurry left in him” to “elegant dragons” (207). In his introduction and notes, Seaton’s high regard for teaching and for Chinese poetry is evident. The poetry is culled so that it represents the Chinese literary canon and the author’s favorites. It does not overwhelm but invites the reader to pursue enjoyment of literature.

In three-fourths of his book, Seaton’s selections reflect the Chinese literary canon as currently recognized, for example, in the first two volumes of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*. Seaton begins with a strong selection from the *Shi Ching (Book of Poetry)*, the 308 poems that Confucius revered and quoted in his *Analects*. The next poet is Tao Ch’ien (365–427), who is essential in this tradition where allusion is prized and influence is celebrated rather than sublimated through anxiety. Seaton is less generous to the trio of Tang dynasty poets who established “The Golden Age” of Chinese culture: Tu Fu, Li Po, and Po Chu’i. (I am using the Wade-Giles spelling instead of the pinyin Du Fu, Li Bai, and Bai Juyi because Seaton does.) Seaton dismisses Po Chu’i as having “pandered to the imperial family,” but to someone less enamored of Po Chu’i than I am, these may not be fighting words.

Having an anthology exclusively on poetry makes the book usable in many high school and college classrooms. However, many teachers would want to supplement the text, so an introduction to the *Analects* and to Daoism provides cultural contexts for Tu Fu and Li Po, respectively. The philosophical texts not only illuminate the poetry, but the poetry also helps students understand how Chinese who knew the poems internalized those philosophies. Poetry of Tu Fu, Li Po, and Po Chu’i remained well-known even through the twentieth century when Communism turned against the culture of the scholar-literati class.

Seaton adds to the canon his interest in poets after the Tang dynasty. Poets such as Ou-yang Hsiu (1007–1072) invite Seaton to play with words more freely, conveying puns and rhymes with different words and sounds. So we get “grain grows glossy green with groves of grounded geese” in the following lines (225). Earlier pioneers in Chinese poetry translation, like Ezra Pound and Arthur Waley, eliminated the elaborate rhyme schemes of the originals, but Seaton’s frequent alliteration reminds the reader that there is a lot in the sound of the Chinese words that translators can hint at, if not reproduce. At times, however, Seaton’s play with words is distracting, such as with the question “Mayn’t a man’s way wander” (58).

One concern in having one translator for a 3,000-year-old tradition is that the poets sound alike, and one depends upon the notes to know which poets are trying out new forms and rebelling against rules. Also, it would be helpful to have an anthology always include a few poems with traditional calligraphy, so we can see the beauty of the characters. Having the pinyin transcription of a few poems would help convey Seaton’s explanations of the original patterns. A teacher now, however, can easily begin by taking a few poems and securing alternate versions from the Internet (see teaching translation comparison). Students can experiment with making alternate translations with different styles and interpretations.

To end on a practical note: This attractive, affordable paperback with the breadth needed for the classroom is produced with students in mind. If Professor Seaton introduces those of us who know the Shi Ching, Tu Fu, and Li Po to poets of later ages, so much the better.

TEACHING TRANSLATION COMPARISON

The Peasant’s Song (J.P. Seaton’s translation, 11)

*Sunups, we get to work;
Sundowns, we get our rest.
Dig wells and drink,
plough fields, to eat:
what has some ‘emperor’
to do with us?*

CANTO XLIX: FOR THE SEVEN LAKES

(Pound’s translation from <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/canto-xlix-for-the-seven-lakes/>)

*Sun up; work
sundown; to rest
dig well and drink of the water
dig field; eat of the grain
Imperial power is? and to us what is it?*

Comparing translations is an excellent way for students to learn how to evaluate poetry and to realize that translators interpret the poems through their word choice. Comparing these two translations, one can explain a preference for Pound’s first four lines but a stronger preference for Seaton’s last two. Seaton’s plural “sunups” is more awkward, less fully English than “Sun up”; “we get to work” is wordier than the imperative “work.” Pound’s “to rest,” however, conveys movement and the opportunity to rest. The parallel lines “dig well and drink of the water” and “dig field; eat of the grain” conveys more a Chinese pattern of the next thousand years where parallel lines with contrasting words (well is to field as water is to grain) were prized. Pound there uses more words, but the addition of “water” and “grain” conveys the bare subsistence of the peasant’s life. But one notes that Pound’s last lines are a complete “botch.” “Imperial power is?” may be literal, but followed by “and to us what is it?” the lines seem half-digested, notes toward a translation. Seaton’s “what has some ‘em-

peror' to do with us?" moves the poem to political critique of the sort that Pound eschewed. There is a scornful voice of rebellion in Seaton's translation that draws the poem to a pointed conclusion. Owen describes how officials collected songs to discover the mood of the people. Here with Seaton, one hears how the unrelenting work is leading to rebellion.

The Modern Language Association has been urging teachers, especially those who do not know the original language, to recognize the effects of translation (for example, in the MLA publication *Profession*, an issue dedicated to translation in 2010). Using Pound and Seaton as alternate translators can make students aware of the importance of a translator's role for good or ill; poetry is not just brought from East to West like silk goods on a camel. Mark Twain and William Wordsworth may have led the English-speaking world to value succinctness and a simple vocabulary, but Pound dominated twentieth-century formulation and reception of poetry. "The Peasant's Song," moreover, conveys how Pound would lift an exact translation such as this into his own poetry without any attribution or indication he was an accurate translator and not the author. "A River Merchant's Wife: A Letter" (from *Cathay*, 1915) for decades was published with an airy byline "after Rihaku." By giving the Japanese name only, Pound made it doubly difficult for readers to realize that he was a gifted translator and not merely inspired by the Chinese poet Li Po.

Translators such as Seaton should be recognized as poets in their own right and commended when they clearly put the poems in cultural contexts. Seaton, for example, notes that the date of "The Peasant's Song" is uncertain but that it was quoted by Mencius and Chuang Tzu. What a remarkable continuous literary tradition!

For a review of Seaton's *Shambhala Anthology* that provided the link to Pound's canto containing "A Peasant's Song," see <http://bit.ly/y9H6Iv>. ■

SOURCES AND NOTES

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Owen, Mair, Pound, Waley, and Watson provide excellent alternate translations for many of the poems that Seaton includes, and their introductions and wide selection provide essential cultural contexts. These translations should be respected as among the best modern poetry in English.

FAY BEAUCHAMP is Professor of English at Community College of Philadelphia where she directs the Center for International Understanding. Her essay on Bai Juyi's interest in the prized consort Yang Guifei, "Tang Dynasty Revolution and Poetry: Bai Juyi's Construction of Yang Guifei" appeared in the spring 2009 issue of *EAA*. Her most recent article, "Asian Origins of Cinderella: The Zhuang Storyteller of Guangxi," *Oral Tradition* 25, no. 2 (2010) is available online at <http://bit.ly/xMDIm2>.



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