RESEARCH ARTICLE

On Transliterating the *Book of Odes*

Geoffrey Sampson*

School of Engineering and Informatics, Sussex University, Brighton, BN1 9QT, England

ABSTRACT

The Chinese *Book of Odes* (詩經), a poetry anthology that is possibly the earliest literary monument in any still-living language, used phonetic effects such as rhyme, metre, and alliteration to achieve its poetic artistry. However, these effects have been largely obliterated by changes in the sounds of Chinese over almost three millennia, and the non-alphabetic nature of Chinese script has concealed the fact that the effects once existed. The author discusses some of the issues that arise in compiling an edition of the *Odes* that uses transliteration of the original pronunciation, as reconstructed by recent historical linguistics, to restore their "speech music", as well as issues in producing new English versions of the poetry which come as close as possible to showing present-day readers what the poems were for their first readers.

1. Lost Speech-Music

The Chinese *Book of Odes* (詩經), an anthology of 305 poems of various genres, is possibly the earliest literary work in any of the world's still-living languages, its individual poems dating from roughly the period 1000-600 B.C. (The only plausible rivals for age are the Homeric epics and other early Greek writings; their relative priority must be partly a matter of definition.) Like any poetry, the *Book of Odes* used phonetic effects in order to create artistic unity within its poems: the *Odes* are metrical, and most of them use rhyme—indeed they represent the earliest known use of rhyme in any language, living or dead.

Like any living language, Chinese has changed over time, and the nature of the changes has tended to destroy the "speech-music" of the *Odes*, though the non-alphabetic nature of Chinese script has concealed many of the changes from all but philological specialists. Many pairs of words which rhymed in Old Chinese, the language of the *Odes* period, no longer rhyme today—and pairs of rhyme words are so much more numerous in modern Mandarin than they were in Old Chinese that the impact of rhyme as

*Corresponding Author:
Geoffrey Sampson,
School of Engineering and Informatics, Sussex University, Brighton, BN1 9QT, England;
Email: sampson@cantab.net

a poetic effect has lessened. Literary Chinese (文言)[①], though it was the standard written language of China until 1919, long ago ceased to be a spoken language, and has been replaced as a vernacular by a language-variety very different in vocabulary and grammar; the concept of metre is scarcely applicable to literature which today can only be encountered in writing, and where any attempt to read it aloud would be an artificial exercise thoroughly divorced from the original pronunciation.

Already about a thousand years ago, Wu Yu 吴棫, alias Wu Cailao 吴才老, produced a book 韻補 ("Rhyme Mender") which tried to compensate for changed pronunciations by specifying that certain words should be given the pronunciation of other words when they occurred in the *Odes*; and a near-contemporary, Xu Chan 徐蒇, commented that 自韻補之書成,然後三百篇始得爲詩 "Only after the Rhyme Mender was produced could the *Odes* be accepted as poetry". (Quoted by James Legge [1], Prolegomena p. 103; I have corrected Legge's Chinese writing of the name Wu Yu.) Writing long before modern phonetic science was developed, Wu Yu could do no more than suggest that particular *Odes* words were pronounced as other words sounded in the Chinese of his day. He had no way of dealing with the fact that Old Chinese contained many sounds and sound combinations that did not exist anywhere in the Chinese he knew. But, beginning in the Qing dynasty, many Chinese and Western scholars have been reconstructing the Old Chinese sound system, which was quite different from that of present-day Mandarin—on this work see e.g. William Baxter [2]. At first, there were large differences between different scholars' reconstructions, but recently there has been a reassuring convergence. To quote the announcement of an academic conference on Old Chinese held in Germany in 2018, "systems proposed independently by different scholars … resemble each other much more than earlier reconstructions".

Accordingly, it seemed to me worthwhile to produce a version of the *Odes* which, alongside the Chinese text and new translations into 21st-century English, would make it easy for the *Odes* to be "accepted as poetry" by showing the lines as they sounded to the poets who composed them almost three millennia ago. My attempt to achieve this is published as *Voices from Early China* [3]. In this paper, I discuss some of the issues of principle that arose in carrying out this exercise, not all of which I had foreseen at the outset.

[①] "Literary Chinese" refers to the grammar and vocabulary of a language that remained fairly constant over much of Chinese history despite huge changes in the pronunciation of words; "Old Chinese" refers to an early stage of that phonetic evolution.

2. Intended Audience

These issues arose in many cases from the fact that the work I needed to draw on in order to achieve my goal consisted of highly technical linguistic research and argumentation, whereas my edition of the *Odes* was intended to appeal to the interests and concerns of literary folk, most of whom have little knowledge of subjects such as phonetic science, and probably no wish to learn about them.

There have been many previous English translations of the *Odes*, but the majority—e.g. Legge [1], Karlgren [4]—are intended for a scholarly audience interested as much or more in philological problems as in literary value. I know of only two translations intended chiefly to appeal to the general reader: Jennings [5], and Waley [6]. Waley's version is easily the best-known translation so far as the general public are concerned. Jennings's translations from Chinese are, perhaps unjustly, quite forgotten today; Zhang Xiaoxue comments that he is impressed by Jennings's version of the Confucian *Analects*, particularly by its "retaining artistic features of the original in a creative yet still faithful way" [7]. But the English of both Jennings's and Waley's versions of the *Odes* is not everyday language—it strikes me as somewhat high-flown and "poetic". The *Odes* were down-to-earth compositions emanating from a notably down-to-earth society—a society which was, as Henri Maspero put it, "*à demi-sauvage encore*" [8]. If a translation is to have the best chance of giving readers a sense of what the *Odes* were for their original hearers, I believe it should be couched in down-to-earth modern English.

The nature of my intended readership affected, in the first place, the form in which I could represent the sounds of Old Chinese on the page. An initial decision was which scholar's version of Old Chinese pronunciation to follow: Although, as said, there has been considerable convergence of opinion, there remain (and doubtless always will remain) differences of detail between different scholars' reconstructions of the language. I opted to follow Axel Schuessler [9,10], whose reconstruction of Old Chinese has the virtue of restraint: Schuessler calls his reconstruction "Minimal Old Chinese", meaning that his system incorporates all those distinctions of sound for which the evidence is relatively clear and generally recognized, while omitting features that have been postulated by some but which are more debatable. (I would not have been tempted to base my work on Baxter and Sagart's 2014 "New Reconstruction" [11], despite the considerable *Anklang* it has received recently, because it postulates many highly speculative and idiosyncratic elements in Old Chinese—in

practice the question did not arise, since this work had not yet been published when I began compiling my edition of the *Odes*.)

However, I could not take over Schuessler's transcriptions unchanged. As is right and proper in a scientific linguistic context, they make heavy use of phonetic symbols; but anyone reading poetry for pleasure or for its literary value is likely to find technical phonetic symbols offputting, to say the least. Sometimes it was straightforward to replace Schuessler's symbols with ordinary letters or letter combinations. Where he uses the symbol ŋ for the velar nasal of English *sing*, *hanger*, the obvious and unambiguous replacement was the digraph *ng*. More problematic, for instance, was the glottal stop—the sound that occurs in a Cockney pronunciation of words like *bi'*, *bi'er* in place of the *t* of *bit*, *bitter*. All authorities agree that the glottal stop occurred frequently in Old Chinese as an independent phoneme, rather than as a substitute for *t* or another consonant, but the Roman alphabet offers no letter to represent it. The international phonetic symbol for glottal stop is ʔ, but a page littered with ʔ symbols would try the patience of someone hoping to read the poems for pleasure; and representing the sound by apostrophe would make a page look as if many sounds had been omitted. The letter *q* could have been used, since it was not needed for any other purpose, but numerous words ending in *-q*, *-nq*, *-mq* would have given an outlandish impression: this would be too different from the established use of *q* in English. The principle I adopted was that my Old Chinese transliterations should not only be pronounceable but look pronounceable: they should use only standard alphabetic letters in fairly normal combinations. (I did allow myself to use the grave accent, familiar from French, to mark a phonetic distinction that is known to have existed but whose precise nature is unknown.) Old Chinese is bound to look foreign, but it ought not to look Martian.

In the case of the glottal stop, my solution was context-dependent. Many Old Chinese glottal stops occur after nasal consonants, *m*, *n*, or *ng*, and these combinations can naturally be rendered as *mp*, *nt*, *nk*—an utterance of English *don't* or *want* will in practice often have an unreleased glottal stop after the *n* sound, rather than a clear *t*, so this rendering is quite appropriate. When the glottal stop follows a vowel, I rendered it as *c*. To an English-speaking reader, this looks like an alternative spelling for the *k* sound; in Old Chinese, glottal stop and *k* are separate phonemes which contrast with one another— 綌 "coarse cloth" is *khak*, 去 "eliminate" is *khac*— but, phonetically, both are "stops" which abruptly cut off the flow of sound, as opposed to "continuants" such as *m*, *s*, or a vowel (this is potentially a relevant feature for

the speech-music of poetry), and *k* is the closest stop to the glottal stop (both are made in the rear of the mouth). And indeed we find that this similarity was recognized by Old Chinese poets. Their rhymes are not always perfect, by our standards, and they sometimes rhyme a -c word with a -k word. The first verse of Ode 209 楚茨 has six words in rhyming position, five of which end in *-uk*, e.g. 棘 *kuk* "thorns", 稷 *tzuk* "broomcorn millet", 福 *puk* "good fortune", but the fifth rhyme word ends in *-uc*, namely 祀 *sluc* "sacrifice".

I shall not give further details here of my Old Chinese spelling system, but it faithfully reflects all features of Schuessler's Old Chinese phonology in a manner that looks, I would claim, "only foreign, not Martian" to Western eyes.

One fortuitous factor that made this easier to achieve than it might have been is that the phonemic tones which were to develop in Chinese and became crucial to the metre of later poetry, and which most Westerners find it very difficult to distinguish, had not yet arisen in the Old Chinese period. All authorities agree that Old Chinese was not a tone language.

3. Scansion Restored

Once the poems are transliterated into Old Chinese, some of what previously seemed to be metrical oddities fall into place. Most Odes consist mainly or wholly of four-word lines, and since (with marginal exceptions) Old Chinese words are monosyllabic, four-word lines are tetrameters. For instance, the first verse of Ode 1 關雎, which is about a young man's longing to find a girlfriend, runs:

> *Kròn, kròn, tsa-kou,*
> *dzùc Gày tu tou.*
> *Ìwc-lìwc diwk nrac*
> *kwun-tzuc hòuc gou.*

which I translate, linking pairs of Chinese lines into single English lines, as:

> *Kròn, kròn,* calls the fish-hawk on an islet in the River.
> A girl who's alluring and lithe is the fit match for a princely man.

In some Odes an occasional line will have an extra syllable. Sometimes this is clearly intended to create a poetic effect. For instance, each verse of Ode 129 蒹葭 contains seven four-syllable lines followed by a five-syllable line: here, the extra syllables create a sense of closure to successive verses. But in other cases the extra syllable seems

prima facie redundant. Thus, Ode 76 將仲子 has a more complex metre of eight-line verses in the form:

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x x x x
x x x A
x x x x A
x x x x
x x x A
x x x B
x x x x
x x x B
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(A, B indicate rhyme words). The extra syllable in the third line is part of the metrical pattern, recurring from verse to verse. However, in the third verse, the fifth line also has five rather than the expected four words: 畏人之多言 *ouys nin tu tày ngan* "I'm afraid of people's gossip". Now, it is noticeable that a number of "little words" with grammatical functions are reconstructed in Old Chinese as a single consonant followed by the vowel *u*, representing the obscure vowel ("shwa") of English *comm<u>o</u>n*, <u>*about*</u>: e.g. 其 "his/her/its" is *gu*, 之 (the third word of this line), which is a general object pronoun or genitive particle, is *tu*. The word 之 is not used in the modern vernacular; if it occurs in writing read aloud, it will conventionally be pronounced as a full syllable *zhī* and this line would be metrically out of place. But it is easy to guess that shwa vowels in "little words" were often reduced or eliminated in Old Chinese speech as shwas commonly are in English, so that 人之 "people's" could in practice have been said as *nin-t'* rather than *nin tu*—in which case the metric irregularity disappears.

In connexion with metre, it is suggestive that Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, the great German expert on the history of Greek and Latin poetry, held that the various complex metres of the classical period, such as the epic hexameter, all derived from a primordial four-syllable line which is never observed "at the surface" because word inflexion, and quantity and stress differences among syllables, led to the more complex metres actually used [12]. Much of the poetry of the *Odes* matches Moellendorf's description of the "primordial" metre, and the factors which he described as leading to its complication in European languages scarcely obtained in Chinese: Old Chinese was an isolating language lacking word inflexions, the concept of syllable quantity has no obvious application to it, and although we have seen that there were some unstressed syllables, the minimal grammatical apparatus of the language meant that they were few. If Moellendorf was correct about the origin of metre in Europe, could it be that his primordial tetrameter is somehow a psychological universal for humankind?

4. Rhymers and Chimers

Another feature of Old Chinese that can only be appreciated via transliteration is its wealth of "rhymers and chimers": two-syllable words within which the syllables alliterate or rhyme to create colourful, expressive vocabulary. Returning to the verse already quoted from Ode 1, the word which I translate as "alluring", 窈窕, was pronounced *ìwc-lìwc*, which to my ear reinforces the meaning through the sound. Later in the same Ode, in his longing for a girl the young man tosses and turns in his bed: 輾轉反側 *Trent-tront pant juk* "Restlessly I toss and turn". In the word *trent-tront* we virtually hear the bed creaking. Some East Asian languages, such as Vietnamese, contain many of these rhymer-and-chimer words today, but in modern Mandarin they have almost all been lost. Like any written words, the rhymers and chimers of Old Chinese have conventional Mandarin reading pronunciations, but to my ear these do not have the same expressive force, and they do not relate to any properties of today's living spoken language.

5. Translation Issues

I shall say less here about the issues I faced in producing new English translations of the poems, not because there is less to say—very far from it—but because many of these issues have a family resemblance to the problems faced by those translating from any ancient language, whereas this paper is mainly concerned with the special problems associated with making poetry in a non-alphabetic ancient language accessible to present-day readers.

Reading the *Odes* involves the same difficulties of detecting scribal errors and resolving linguistic obscurities as does reading any other ancient language. One issue that has no exact parallel in a language written alphabetically is that in the *Odes*, dating from a period when Chinese script was not as fully conventionalized as it later became, a graph that was eventually specialized as the writing of one particular word might also be used to write other words, usually (near-)homophones. For instance, a word might on occasion be written with a bare phonetic element although in the standard script that word requires the addition of a specific signific, and the phonetic written alone always stands for some other word. (For "phonetic" and "signific" see e.g. Sampson [13], p. 179.)

Another problem familiar to students of any ancient language is that of determining the meanings of long-obsolete words. For early Chinese the difficulty tends to be not that we have no information, but that the information we are given is not always believable. Consider the word 舝 ,

which so far as I know is a *hapax legomenon* occurring in Ode 128 小戎 and nowhere else in Chinese literature. Ode 128 deals with horses of various colours, e.g. black, dappled grey, and so forth; and according to all reference works I have consulted, whether Chinese (e.g. Shu et al. [14]) or Western (e.g. Mathews [15]), 騵 means "a horse with a white left hind leg", a definition given without further discussion. This definition is taken from the *Shuo Wen* 說文 dictionary, which was completed in A.D. 100, long after the *Odes* were composed. I do not believe that any language would use a simple root word for such a complex meaning (there is no suggestion that the colour of a particular leg had some cultural significance, for instance making the horse suitable for ritual sacrifice). To my mind the *Shuo Wen* definition was probably a wild guess which with age has come to seem unchallengeable; the guess was perhaps suggested by the fact that an early form of the graph appears to depict a horse with cross-strokes over three legs that might—or might not—have indicated darkness. We are not obliged to believe a guess because it was made two thousand years ago. I do not believe we can ever know what the composer of Ode 128 meant by 騵 (beyond that it was some kind of horse), so my edition leaves the word untranslated.

A principle I treated as crucial was that the original wording of the *Odes* must have made sense when it was composed, so nothing must be translated into English nonsense. We might not always understand what situation a poem refers to, which is hardly surprising after such a gap in time. I cannot imagine what was going on in the brief Ode 36 式微 , which consists of two verses, the first of which I rendered as:

> It's no use, it's no use; why not come home?
> It isn't His Highness's fault. What are you doing in the middle of the road?

(and the other verse says much the same in slightly different words). But I can believe that it made sense on some particular occasion. What I would not do was produce translations that could never have made sense. This might appear too obvious to be worth saying, yet for an example of what can happen if it is not borne in mind consider Arthur Waley's version of Ode 51 蝃蝀 . The second verse begins 朝隮于西 , which Waley renders as "There is dawnlight mounting in the west". The sun did not rise in the west in Zhou-dynasty China any more than it does today.

The solution in this case is in fact easy, when one realizes that one sense of 隮 *tzì* was "rainbow". (It is possible that Waley in the 1930s had no reference book that would have told him this.) My rendering runs "In the morning there is a rainbow in the west", which is where a rainbow must be when the sun is in the east. Avoiding nonsense translations is not always as straightforward as this, but I would rather leave a blank than translate an Ode as nonsense. In fact I almost never had to leave a blank for that reason: almost always, with some imagination, and in a few cases (duly recorded in accompanying notes) by postulating use of one graph for another in a way not suggested to my knowledge by previous editors, I found it possible to turn the Chinese of the *Odes* into rational English. (I did leave a blank in the case of the third line of Ode 290 載芟 , where I could make nothing reasonable out of the words 千耦其耘 and where I wondered how much previous translators knew about agriculture.)

There were also a few cases where wording in the received *Odes* text appears to be a spurious interpolation—for instance, in the third verse of Ode 302 烈祖 the lines 約軧錯衡，八鸞瑲瑲 are word-for-word identical (give or take the signific of the last pair of graphs) to lines in Ode 178 采芑 , where they fit into the context. They do not fit in Ode 302 and must surely have been copied into it from Ode 178, possibly because Odes were being reconstructed from memory after the Burning of the Books in 213 B.C. and someone confused the two poems. In a case like that, a present-day scholar has no basis whatever for recovering the original wording, and the only honest recourse is to mark a lacuna.

6. Acceptability to Readers

Apart from all the problems of identifying the original meanings of the many obscure passages, in the exercise I set myself there was also a subsidiary issue of presentation: the overall compilation had to "work" as a published book.

One consideration here related to the *kròn, kròn* bird call at the beginning of Ode 1, already quoted above. I had taken this as a reasonable imitation in speech-sounds of a bird's cry. But, reviewing an earlier edition I had published of a few of the *Odes* poems, Edward Shaughnessy argued [16] that I had missed the point in Ode 1; the graph 關 *kròn* "bar" was being used there for the similar-sounding word standardly written 貫 , one sense of which was as a verb for the sexual act. The bird-call was reminding the young man in Ode 1 of what he wanted to do with his hypothetical girlfriend once he found her.

Although initially sceptical, I ended by finding Shaughnessy's argument convincing. But it seemed impractical to

use it in my translation of Ode 1. For the very first words in an English version of this earliest literary monument of one of the world's great civilizations to be "four-letter words" would seem so outrageous that the book would inevitably be rejected without further consideration, or so I believed. I let *kròn, kròn* stand as the sound of a bird call—which is not wrong, even if it is not the whole story. (I explained Shaughnessy's point in the introduction to the book, where its shock value to readers is less.)

7. Real Poetry in a Real Language

To sum up what I have attempted to achieve: clothing the *Odes* in their original sounds should, I believe, enable present-day readers to experience Old Chinese as a "real" language, which was once spoken by living people, rather than as the abstract and opaque written code which it can often seem to be. And I hope it may help readers to experience the *Odes* as "real" poetry, taking its rightful place among the great literature of the world, rather than being, for Westerners, an arcanum hidden away behind closed doors labelled "Oriental Studies".

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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