



Verses Across Borders: A Study of Vikram Seth's *Three Chinese Poets*

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Abstract:

The paper is a study of a unique text in the corpus of Indian writing in English that has been overlooked by academia. Vikram Seth's *Three Chinese Poets*, published in 1992, is a translation by an Indian writer from Chinese into English. The study will adopt a qualitative textual analysis to examine Vikram Seth's translation of the three classical Chinese poets, Li Bai, Wang Wei, and Du Fu, by situating Seth's text within the framework of translation's role in world literature. It will employ a close reading of the translated poems through a historical and contextual paradigm, highlighting their contribution to the movement of these ancient poems across temporal and cultural borders. A post-colonial critique of the history of literary translation, focusing on Western writers' translations of Chinese poems, will be used to uncover the literary hierarchies that have shaped the texture of these translations. The analysis will also draw on paratextual references from Vikram Seth's prefaces and notes to emphasise Seth's attempt to cosmopolitanise world literature.

Keywords: Chinese poetry, Translation, Indian Writing in English, World Literature.

The great conversation of world literature takes place on two very different levels: among authors who know and react to one another's work and in the mind of the reader, where works meet and interact in ways that may have little to do with cultural and historical proximity.

—David Damrosch, *What is World Literature*

Introduction

Distances are often mental constructs rather than geographical realities, as evidenced by our woefully limited awareness of literature from geographically contiguous cultures. Even our familiarity with the literature of other Indian languages pales in comparison with our familiarity with distant European literatures. Consequently, literary translation is typically viewed as occurring between the West and the East. Throughout history, India has mostly been a recipient of translation rather than an active translator. When Indian translators have participated, their work has primarily involved translating texts between regional Indian languages or from English into Indian languages. As the global footprint of Indian Writings in English (IWE) expands and these writers explore new frontiers, it will be interesting to study a globally positioned Indian writer's foray into translating from a foreign language into English, a unique contribution to World Literature and a task hitherto undertaken only by Western writers. Among modern Indian English writers, Vikram Seth holds a special place for his translations of classical Chinese poetry into English. This paper will therefore study Vikram Seth, poet, novelist, and translator, who published *Three Chinese Poets* in 1992. While the main focus is on *Three Chinese Poets*, it will also explore the dynamic field of translation studies and Seth's contribution to global conversations, thereby enriching the ever-growing corpus of World Literature.

An examination of an Indian translator's version of Chinese texts raises key questions. Does Seth's translation embody the traditional Indian approach to literary translation, or does it adopt Western techniques for translating classical 'Orient' texts? If not, how does his translation differ from comparable translations by Western scholars? Considering the tense political relationship between India and China, does his translation show political bias, or, as seen in his travelogue *From Heaven Lake*, is it more of a cosmopolitan work influenced by human perspective rather than national identity? Since translation fosters cross-cultural dialogue, Vikram Seth's translations will be examined critically within this vibrant tradition and in relation to their function as a tool for promoting cosmopolitanism.

The paper's four sections begin by examining how global literature influences the development of "worlded" citizens, a concept from critic Valerie Henitiuk. The second section examines how translation promotes cosmopolitanism by contributing to world literature. The third part discusses various paradigms in Indian civilisation as they relate to translation practices. The fourth section provides a close textual analysis of Seth's translation methods, positioning his work as a natural extension of his cosmopolitan outlook. The final, fifth section addresses the complex issues surrounding cultural exchange and cultural patrimony.

***Weltliteratur*: Constructing Cosmopolitanism through Conversations**

Valerie Henitiuk, in "The Single, Shared Text? Translation and World Literature", conceptualises world literature as a process of transformation affecting both texts and readers, during their interaction. Henitiuk writes that when texts travel across national borders, they do so with their cultural and historical baggage, and their readers who engage with them become worlded in this process (33). In January 1827, Goethe told Johann Peter Eckermann that national literature had become less important as the *era of Weltliteratur* (World Literature) approached, and that everyone needed to accelerate its emergence (Eckermann 243). It was not

the first time Goethe had raised this concept. Goethe had previously criticised the notion of patriotic art and said that the current climate in Europe was conducive to the expansion and advancement of world literature.

Weltliteratur became a common term when Eckermann published *J. W. von Goethe, Conversations with Eckermann* in 1836, with a revised edition in 1848. The phrase was first used almost two centuries ago, but it has recently gained significance as a new understanding of humanity on a global scale has come to the fore. In the past, the canonical works of Europe, and perhaps a few significant works from the East that Orientalists had translated, were considered the entirety of world literature. A common misconception about world literature is that it is an elite construct created by privileged cultural tourists who collect national literary works for their libraries. While Goethe could unambiguously advocate creating a *Weltliteratur* in the nineteenth century while categorically refusing to assign Chinese, Serbian, or Calderon literature the same status as the Greek (Eckermann 243), this category has come under intense criticism, especially after the emergence of post-colonial studies.

In this context, David Damrosch poses four main questions in his book *What is World Literature*: What does the term “world literature” mean? Whose literary works and world are implied here? What connection does it have to the current national literature? What connections exist between the Global North and the rest of the world, between classical and contemporary texts, and so forth (1)? We now live in a globalised environment, whether out of necessity or inevitability. The digitisation of books and the use of computer-assisted translation have made literature from different countries more accessible. Literature is already travelling more freely than ever, unencumbered by national censorship laws or by the opinions of censorious critics whose recommendations govern the creation and distribution of books.

Due to social media and digitisation, readers now act as the ultimate jury and judge. While the concept of “world literature” has its critics and supporters, literature continues to be

created and valued across the globe. The term “world literature” is malleable and will continue to be redefined. David Damrosch asserts that the notion of world literature is a dynamic process rather than a fixed canon of texts, and he defines it as a method of reading and circulating rather than a set of books (5). Texts become part of world literature when they move away from their linguistic centre of origin and are “well presented” and “read well” without being “mishandled” or “misappropriated” in the new country. When they stop circulating, they may cease to be part of world literature until they return to circulation and are “read as literature” (5-8). This textual dynamism renders world literature vibrant and democratic. Here, Damrosch mirrors Goethe, who also defined “world literature” as international works in circulation and being read in Europe (and elsewhere).

As a writer, Goethe firmly believed that without the influence of world literature, national literature would stagnate and die. Additionally, he speaks as a German writer in Europe, when German literature was viewed as provincial or minor, especially compared to French and English literature (8). A literary text cannot be controlled even within its national borders, as a non-literary text can. A nation’s geography has no bearing on how well something is received or what relevance it may have for different readers. Consequently, when a text moves from its centre of origin and crosses international borders, its breadth and depth are enhanced. Compared to other cultural artefacts and non-literary texts, literature is more easily accessible. Its value and significance vary with each reader; for an individual, a text’s importance can change over time. Reading literature is a creative act that enriches one’s imagination through exposure to and understanding of writings from diverse cultures, enabling one to be “worlded” by engaging positively with the “Other.” A “worlding” of people is also the aim of cosmopolitanism. The ability of world literature to foster the creative expansion of one’s imagination and to refute ingrained concepts of one’s identity and imagination, shaped by the national culture, makes it cosmopolitan. It may be called a text-based re-socialisation.

Following this argument, cosmopolitanism, as contemporary scholars have defined it, does not challenge nationalism, just as world literature is not considered to compete with national literature. Both concepts offer constructive possibilities for redefining and reimagining oneself and the other. Hence, the idea of *Weltliteratur* serves as a metaphor for cosmopolitanism as a nationally situated universality. Just as cosmopolitans are not deracinated people, neither are works of world literature. It is important to note how Damrosch explains world literature using the example of refraction. Here, he refers to its dual focus, one coming from the source culture and the other from the host culture (133). Even within a nation-state, literary works are inherently refracted as they are interpreted individually. Consequently, neither transcendental universalism nor localised particularity will exist in any text, let alone in translations. It is impossible and improbable to translate the “real” text and meaning. From this perspective, translators are relieved of the burden of the original. The author, the translator, and the reader are the only three components essential to the growth of world literature, since, without them, books would no longer exist.

Translation and World Literature

The term ‘translation’ derives from the Latin word *translatio*, meaning “carrying across”. It is believed that translation conveys information that would otherwise be lost. Translation is seen as governed by the hermeneutical imperative. The difficulty has always burdened translators, and at times the impossibility of carrying across “correctly” what has been said, implied, or experienced. Like all attempts at conversation and communication that cross boundaries and borders, translation and translators have also had a chequered history. Nonetheless, the rich treasure of documented knowledge produced throughout human history, which forms our collective cultural patrimony, is due to those unacknowledged and often unknown scribes and translators. Texts have moved across countries throughout human

civilisation via scholars, travellers, or invaders. The entire debate between Original/Superior and Translation/Inferior is a modern construct; so is the paradigm of viewing texts as belonging to a fixed geographical location. Octavio Paz best exemplifies the organic nature of translation in “Translations of Literature and Letters”. When a child asks his mother to explain the meaning of an unfamiliar word, he asks her to translate the new phrase into his primary language. In this regard, translation between two languages is essentially the same as translation within a single language, and the experiences of all peoples match those of the child (152). Translation is thus seen as a natural process. Western metaphysics, which is based on the principle of exclusion and privileges the “original” over the “inferior” translated text, sees the latter as a “wannabe” to an “is”. This “metaphysical precondition of Western aesthetics” (182), as G.N. Devy calls it, was further buttressed during the imperial/colonial period, when purity and originality became central. There was only one locus: the West; everything else was seen through Western eyes, conceptualised through the Western mind, and mediated by Western politics. Contradiction, variation, and multiplicity were frowned upon, which had a powerful impact on translation discourse. As colonialism was also a period of translating the West for the East and vice versa, this ideology of power must be acknowledged in any study of textual or ideational translations during the centuries of European imperialism.

With decolonisation, power has shifted not from Western nation-states to the global South, but from Western nation-states to global capital controlled by the West. Translation continues to be mediated and regulated by the Western publishing industry. Significantly, strategies of subversion of the Original/ superior / West vs Translated/ inferior/East have come from post-colonial studies: Brazilian Haroldo de Campos’ neologisms like “translumination”, “transparadisation” “blood transfusion” P. Lal’s “transcreation”, or Octavio Paz’s theorising of translation as a natural activity, are powerful attempts at critiquing the Western metaphysics of exclusion (Bassnett and Trivedi 5-10). In this debate over whether translation is a distortion or

a shadow of the privileged original, and over the need to elevate its status, G. N. Devy writes that translated texts revitalise the original works and, in their attempt to approximate them, manage to transcend them (186-187).

Translation is a revitalising process that ensures the continual circulation of texts, and the insistence on location, ownership, and originality is unc cosmopolitan and unfruitful. G.N. Devy posits that “Due to the ontological uncertainty of whether it belongs to the history of the source or target language, translation studies spend too much time debating how to express the “original meaning in the altered structure” (183).

Another critical debate surrounding translation, which is significant in this study, concerns the translation of literary texts. Unlike other intercultural transfers, literary texts are not information-centric; in such a case, is literary translation even viable? While Paz’s observation on the naturalness or primacy of translation may be applied to non-literary texts with certainty, what about literary texts, where form and content are equally important? Robert Frost said that poetry gets lost in translation, a pithy comment encapsulating the widely held belief of literary translation that has persisted since the onset of modernity. However, contemporary redefinitions have gradually shifted away from this fixation on the original, making room for a more nuanced understanding of literary translation and its importance. Valerie Henitiuk describes texts as mobile works of art, though they are shaped by the translators facilitating their journey (31). She considers this mobility to enhance value, with the recipient culture also playing a role as a co-creator through new interpretations (32). This act of value addition, facilitated by translation, helps nurture cosmopolitanism. Nevertheless, not all translations are necessarily value additions. Furthermore, appropriation persists without acknowledgement. It is crucial to ensure that the original vague notion of “aesthetic pleasure” is clearly conveyed in translation.

David Damrosch contends that literary texts may gain or lose in translation, depending on their translatability. In contrast, non-literary texts stand to gain or lose only if the “information” is conveyed. A valued text in its source culture may not be “read well” elsewhere because its language cannot be well translated, or its cultural conceptions do not travel. He illustrates this view with the help of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* and *Dubliners*; he sees the prose of the former as irreproducible and often ending up as a “curious” object when translated, while *Dubliners*, which is more localised in content, translates well and makes a significant impact even in other languages. P. Lal attempts to resolve the problem of a text’s “untranslatability” through the translation praxis of adaptation, which he calls “transcreation” (translation + creation), ensuring that nothing is untranslatable. His coinage is based on the literary tradition of Indian civilisation, where new texts are created from the pre-existing tradition without concerning themselves too much with authorship. In the Indian literary tradition, the recensions and adaptations of the text hold greater significance than the authorial signature. This civilisation’s multilingual, multicultural character is facilitating this unique translational praxis.

In the twenty-first century, while contextual readings of literary works remain valuable for accurate and thorough understanding, translation studies have evolved beyond the simple binary of original versus translation. Damrosch’s view that a text gains in translation if it becomes world literature and loses if it remains national literature highlights the centrality of translation in facilitating global conversations. Loss and gain, the transference and translation of identities, texts and culture, are inevitable in a globalised world. Hence, an either/or politics of translation is invariably dated.

Translation in India

In this section, I will situate the tradition and praxis of translation in India within the broader cosmopolitan ethos of civilisation. Terms such as “transculturación”, “transcreation” and “transtexualisation” are not an exercise in verbal gymnastics. Instead, they point to the creative processes involved in translation. An Indian grows up in a world of translated texts, including fables, religious discourses, epics, myths, folk stories, folk ballads, popular cinema songs, dress, and cuisine, whether or not they have received a formal education. Thus, translation is a civilisational norm rather than an anomaly in a multilingual nation, underpinning its syncretism. The people of the subcontinent are primarily bilingual, often trilingual, and cultural exchange is integral to being Indian.

Historically, travellers, invaders, colonisers, and scholars have come to India for material, cultural, and spiritual wealth, and many have brought with them the literature and knowledge of their countries. India has been translated and transformed through these exchanges, which have sometimes been pleasant but often brutal. Nonetheless, the fundamental ethos of the civilisation has remained unchanged, as its elastic, fluid nature has accommodated disparate elements within its fold. With its unbroken civilisational history and wealth of oral traditions, it should therefore come as no surprise that translation of texts is an ancient practice.

The word “translation” means “to carry across” - “carry across” being the operative principle - and is thus distinct from interpretation or paraphrase, and closer in implication to metaphrase (word for word). To take an analogy from the material world, if a physical book is carried from the source to its destination, it is expected to arrive in its original form. This emphasis on the “Original” in Western discourse on translation differs from that of its Indian counterpart, as Harish Trivedi elucidates in *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. He argues that the Indian epics have been reworked innumerable times over the centuries. Each

time the text is translated, there are shifts in ideology, emphasis, and character depiction, resulting in a new version of the text (Bassnett and Trivedi 9).

This theorisation of translation in Indian civilisation privileges the creativity and uniqueness of each translation over faithfulness in carrying across the “original”. G.N. Devy goes deeper into metaphysics to explain this fundamental difference between translation in Western and Indian civilisations. He argues that this difference emanates from the philosophy of individualism and the metaphysics of guilt (Original Sin), which renders European literary historiography incapable of grasping the origins of literary traditions. In contrast, Indian literary translations have flourished through translations unfettered by the burden of “carrying across” the Original (Devy 187). In the Indian view of translation, the notions of authorial privilege, ownership, and rootedness become less relevant, resulting in a more mobile and cosmopolitan text. Harish Trivedi likens this process to an ancient banyan tree, symbolising a tradition that continuously expands by adding branches and roots. Over time, this growth renders the original tree less distinguishable, yet more resilient and lively.

The history of translation in India shows that translation activity has taken place both within the country, as illustrated by the existence of multiple versions of the epics, and from the country, as shown by the translations of *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha*, and the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese by monk-travellers like Fa-Hein (4/5 CE) and Hiuen Tsang (7 CE). The dynamics of translation in India changed with British imperialism, a period characterised by frenzied translation of Indian texts. While England was thus “creating” India, this process was consistently subverted by figures such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and R.C. Dutt in the nineteenth century and, more vigorously, by post-colonial studies in independent India.

When contrasting translation praxis in India and the West, the Mahabharata’s contemporaneity with Indian civilisation, as opposed to the “strangeness” of the *Iliad* to the West, may be explained by the ongoing re-creation and recension - a banyan tree-like

translation practice - that has taken place over the years. Texts live if they are read, heard, or performed; it is thus better to have a translated text than no text. When we study translation among contemporary Indian English writers, Girish Karnad is a prominent figure, having translated his plays from Kannada into English. A.K. Ramanujan, a close friend of Karnad, translated ancient Tamil literature into English, and Vikram Seth translated Chinese poetry into English and transcreated fables from around the world. Salman Rushdie, though not a translator himself, encapsulates the unique spatio-temporality of contemporary writers who write in English when he calls himself a 'translated man'. Today, world literature is created not only by the movement of texts across nations, as Goethe understood, but also by the global movement of writers and translators.

The Shared Texts: Reading Wang Wei, Li Bai, and Du Fu

Indian Writings in English have come a long way since Raja Rao's remark in the early seventies about the difficulty of conveying one's spirit in a language that is not one's own. Characteristic of the adaptable nature of Indian civilisation, the English language, too, once the symbol of the imperial masters, has been embraced, adopted, and adapted, albeit in unique ways. As English is not their first language, when an Indian writer chooses to write an original text in English, s/he is already engaging in translating culture into a language that originates in a different culture. India is a multilingual country; even when Raja Rao succeeds in rendering the rhythms of Kannada in English in *Kanthapura*, for a non-Kannada speaker, these speech patterns and rhythms will not be "natural" because there is no language that is common to all. Due to its sheer linguistic diversity, India has always been distinct from the monolingual Western nation-states, so translation is a way of life.

Louis Massignon, the renowned Islamic scholar (and practising Catholic), said that if we want to comprehend the difference, we must become a host rather than a victor. It calls for a

recentring, a decentering to the other's centre (Henitiuk 33), which is apt to study Vikram Seth as a cosmopolitan writer turned translator. An analysis of Vikram Seth's translations of *Three Chinese Poets* requires an elucidation of his conceptualisation of translation. In the "Introduction" to *Three Chinese Poets*, Seth enunciates his views on translation. He dedicates this book as a "dual offering" to the three translators, Charles Johnston, Richard Wilbur, and Robert Fitzgerald, and the three Chinese Poets, Wang Wei, Li Bai, and Du Fu. Though conscious of the challenging task of translating classical Chinese poetry into English, a journey that is, among other things, cultural, temporal, and spatial, Seth proceeds in the hope that accessibility to the poems of these Chinese poets may be fruitful (Seth, *The Collected Poems* xix). He acknowledges the vital role of translations in his writings, "...to have at hand Charles Johnston's *Eugene Onegin*, Richard Wilbur's *Tartuffe*, or Robert Fitzgerald's *Iliad* has allowed me at least some ingress into the worlds that would otherwise be unreachable and most likely unimaginable" (xviii). What is essential for a contemporary reader is the ingress he provides into the world of High T'ang culture, which would have been unreachable to those who do not know Chinese. Life is indeed short, as Seth pragmatically states. It is impossible to learn all the languages in the world to "correctly" appreciate all the cultural productions. Hence, a translation should be seen as a value addition to cosmopolitanising the globe. U. R. Ananthamurthy, too, said he translated when he felt his writing failed to express the world around him. So, in the process, Ananthamurthy translated Yeats, Brecht, Rilke, Edwin Muir and Lao Tzu into Kannada. These writers provided him with a new outlook on the world. In Seth's present avatar as a translator, primacy and fidelity to the original will be his guiding principles. However, he is cognisant that any translation of Chinese poetry is fraught with the risk of distortion, as each word or image "carries a heavier charge of association (than prose), and where the exigencies of form leave less scope for choice and manoeuvre" (xxxi-xxxii). He

further writes that he will not use these poems as trampolines for his transcreation but will remain faithful to the original compositions (xxxi).

The meticulousness with which Seth performs this task in *Three Chinese Poets* can be grasped even by non-Chinese readers, who can capture the rhythm and imagery in each poem. Most of the poems in this collection are octets—each line consists of five or seven syllables, with the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth lines rhyming. The Chinese language depends heavily on tones, and a change in tone can alter the meaning. This tonal inflexion is invariably lost in any translation of Chinese poetry. Nonetheless, for a contemporary Indian reader, these poems are a window into a different society and time in history, though not wholly alien due to the influence of Buddhist philosophy, which permeates the imagery and symbolism. Vinay Dharwadker notes that in translations between cultures, a translation might be viewed as an endeavour to convey culture, not entirely, but to a certain extent (A. K. Ramanujan's "Theory and Practice of Translation" 121). David Damrosch posits that we respond to a foreign text in three ways: enjoy its difference, become gratified by similarities, or, what is most productive, recognise "what is like-but- unlike", which changes our perception of the world (11). He further argues that any view which suggests that a thorough knowledge of the cultural specificity of a text is suggests that a thorough knowledge of the cultural specificity of a textual production is mandatory is absurd (22).

In 1914, Herbert Giles (1848-1935), the British diplomat and Sinologist, better known for the Wade-Giles system of romanising the Chinese language, translated a Chinese poem into English in verbose, ornate verse. Ezra Pound (who was then experimenting with Imagism) later re-crafted it, with no prior knowledge of the Chinese language, as "Fan Piece for her Imperial Lord". Ezra Pound later published a volume of Chinese poems titled *Cathay* in 1915, a collection of nineteen poems based on Ernest Fenollosa's detailed notes. Ezra Pound's prominent role in the English literary scene greatly shaped perceptions of Chinese poetry. His

translation efforts were crucial in introducing Chinese literature to the West. Pound's influence was so profound that T. S. Eliot famously said he was the first to create Chinese poetry in English. However, in the "Introduction" to the *Three Chinese Poets*, Vikram Seth notes that his translation of the Chinese poems will be careful to prevent Ezra Pound's ignorance and self-indulgence from distorting the original words and meanings (xxx1).

Seth and Pound have translated different Li Bai poems, so it is difficult to compare their merits. One can say that Pound's poems are well edited and crafted, despite his apparent limitations in translating from a foreign language; they read well. Only someone with first-hand knowledge of both the Chinese language and ancient Chinese poetry can judge whether either Pound or Seth has failed to translate the "original meaning" of the poems. This brings us to another debate surrounding translation across cultures: What makes for a good translation? Is it the translator's knowledge of the host culture and linguistic nuances? Is it the translator's ability to craft a good poem? Or is it both? Should translation even be attempted if one of the necessary factors is missing? Here I am referring to the translation of poetry, which is more technically challenging than prose translations. Based solely on the translations of Giles and Pound, it can be said that, as far as poetry is concerned, the translator's ability to craft a good poem should be given precedence over knowledge of the culture. Consequently, specific cultural allusions and connotations may be lost in translation. However, translation does not have to be a Catch-22 situation. With her argument that expecting an exact reproduction of the original work is naïve, given that translation involves live human beings who differ in gender, power, and other factors, Henitiuk offers a solution to this impasse (32).

Starting from one of David Damrosch's formulations of world literature, in which he states that the translated text "should be read as literature", one may argue that the nebulous aesthetic experience for which the poem was originally crafted should take precedence over all other considerations. A text lives if it is read and enjoyed, and knowledge of the Chinese

language and literature alone does not ensure aesthetic pleasure. Nor is it possible to invest years of scholarship in each culture whose literature one wants to enjoy. One who knows Chinese may not even read or enjoy these poems. Literature is written and cherished in a very private sphere, and its significance and meaning are personal, so searching for the correct text with the correct meaning is a contentious and rather sterile debate. This brings us to the fraught concept of cultural patrimony, which will be further elaborated in the concluding section of this chapter.

Suffice it to say that David Damrosch's call for a paradigm shift in how translation is conceptualised frees it from unproductive debates by recognising that a text, when translated, is manifested differently in the target culture than in the source culture (6). In an interview, Vikram Seth also mentioned that a translation of Wang Wei's poems inspired him to learn Chinese so he could read them in the original. Herbert A. Giles's *Chinese Poetry in English Verse* (1898) and Arthur Waley's *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (1918) were two prominent translations of Chinese poetry. Giles's use of expressions like "glittering wealth", "Concealed...vulgar eyes", "Flowery Land", and "grasps the glowing prize" appears florid to the contemporary reader. Nonetheless, despite the datedness and absurdity of the language, to Giles's credit, he did try to undo the prejudice prevalent at the time, aptly captured in Alfred Tennyson's ignorant proclamation, "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay" (WU 55). For any Indian, Tennyson's derision is reminiscent of Macaulay's condescending attitude towards Asian literature. The Opium Wars further exacerbated the English prejudice and racial hatred towards the Chinese. However, Giles's ambition to develop an interest in Chinese culture was guided by an honourable intention (56). Arthur Waley's *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (1918) was long regarded as a definitive text of Chinese poetry in English and was the preferred source for including Chinese poetry in companions and anthologies. In his

detailed analysis of the two translators, Fusheng WU states in “Translations of Chinese Poetry by Herbert A. Giles and Arthur Waley” that Waley tends to domesticise translations.

In contrast, Giles adopts a foreignising approach (WU 57). Whether a translator adheres to the principle of faithful translation, privileging the source text and cultural authenticity, or focuses on the readers and seeks to narrow the cultural divide, each translation is valuable for developing world literature and expanding the reader’s imagination. (It is worth noting that when Goethe coined the term *Weltliteratur*, he was reading a Chinese novel.)

Like any field of study, the translation of Chinese poetry has improved since Giles’s “Flowery Land”. Contemporary discourses on translation propose various strategies, and one suggested by Andrew Lefevre in “Composing the Other” appears helpful. He writes that Chinese T’ang poetry will be easier to comprehend if readers are given a comprehensive account through introductions, in-depth analyses of selected works, and other techniques (77).

When *Three Chinese Poets* was published in 1992, translations of Chinese poems were already in circulation. They were at least good enough to have inspired Seth to learn the language and embark on his translation journey. Seth’s translation praxis in *Three Chinese Poets* aligns with Andre Lefevere’s suggestion above. He offers a comprehensive introduction to these poems, which serves as a helpful guide for those unfamiliar with ancient Chinese poetry and language. Alongside a short biographical note on all three poets, he briefly explains the technicalities of ancient Chinese poetry, including rhythm, rhyme, and metre. The golden period in Chinese poetry is associated with three names: Li Bai (701-761 CE), Wang Wei (701-762 CE) and Du Fu (712-770 CE). It is the poems of this trinity that Vikram Seth translates as both “a dual offering- as thanks to those three translators (Charles Johnston, Richard Wilbur and Robert Fitzgerald) of one generation who have meant so much to me, and as thanks to the three Chinese poets of another generation whose original poems have meant even more” (xix). His reverential attitude is reminiscent of Harish Trivedi’s account of translation in India as an

act akin to a poet's complete surrender to the divine subject (Bassnett and Trivedi 8). This is a new location for a translator who begins his task with due deference to the original and, only after having wholly surrendered by first learning the language and the source culture's poetic elements, embarks on the journey. It is thus a product of both rigorous scholarship and poetic practice.

China has a rich tradition of poetry dating back to the *Book of Songs*, also known as the '300 Songs', believed to have been compiled by Confucius (551 BC-479 BCE) from a body of more than 3000 poems. Its literary, ethical, social, political, and philosophical influence makes it the foundational literary and knowledge text of Chinese civilisation. Later, during the Tang dynasty (618-906), particularly in the eighth century CE, Chinese poetry flourished. The T'ang dynasty, founded by Tai Zong in 618 CE, marks the beginning of the efflorescence of Chinese culture. Empress Wu, Tai Zong's concubine, who took over the reins of the re, is credited with developing classical Chinese poetry. During her reign, which lasted for fifteen years until 705 CE, poetry composition was compulsory in the much-coveted Imperial Civil Service Examination. This requirement spurred the growth and development of Chinese poetry, which earlier styles had largely shaped up to that point. The three notable Chinese poets—Wang Wei, Du Fu, and Li Bai—lived during the reign of Emperor Ming Huang (713 AD–756 AD).

By this time, the Chinese elite composed and read poetry. As the number of poetry connoisseurs grew exponentially, poetry also became a discursive tool for artistic, moral, philosophical, and political expression, and poets continued to seek new subjects and modes of expression. Because the three poets lived and wrote under similar socio-political conditions, there are strong thematic and attitudinal similarities among them: "their stance concerning the court and affairs of state, and the value they placed on friendship in a world of slow transport and great distances, where parting from a friend held the real possibility of never seeing him again. There is (also) a large common zone of sentiment among the three-their appreciation of

music, their acute perception of nature, their bent towards nostalgia” (Seth, *The Collected Poems* xxi). One can see why these Chinese poems would resonate with Seth, the translator: friendship, longing, solitude, nature, and music are the subjects of his poetry. Nonetheless, the three poets were also significantly different from each other. Seth describes the challenge of translating three poets with unique temperaments and styles by comparing Wang Wei to Mozart, Du Fu to Bach, and Li Bai to Beethoven (xxx-xxxi).

Li Bai (701-762 CE), also known as Li Po, lived during the High T’ang period of 712-755 CE and is considered one of the greatest Chinese romantic poets. Almost 1100 of his poems are extant, and he has so captured the Chinese imagination that he was immortalised in dramas, artefacts, and paintings in the years to come. Kathryn Maurean Liscomb sheds light on this “multivalent iconic” representation in “Li Bai A Hero Among Poets, in *The Visual, Literary and Dramatic Arts of China*”, where she describes the poet as a Confucian, Daoist, flamboyant, generous, benevolent, impulsive bohemian who flouts social conventions yet seeks to fight for the underprivileged (354). Unlike the other two poets, Li Bai’s personality, as revealed in his poems, is that of a flamboyant and romantic hero. The eleven poems which Seth has translated are characterised by extravagance—the most profound friendship, excessive drinking, and heart-wrenching yearning. Even the descriptive poems are noisy, larger than life, and pulsating with teeming gibbons, jutting streams, cataracts plunging thousands of feet, cockfights, and the swirl of dust.

It is not surprising that this embodiment of *joie de vivre* should continue to live on in Chinese art and artefacts for generations to come. As one who loved life and achieved great fame in his lifetime, Li Bai is fittingly remembered in poems centred on travel, drinking and friendship, though invariably tinged with nostalgia and loneliness. Li Bai is also considered one of the greatest Taoist poets. Taoism is a philosophy that advocates harmony and going with the flow. It arose from rural life and held that human beings should live lives akin to the smooth

rhythms of nature. This philosophy significantly influenced the T'ang dynasty and was declared the country's official religion. Li Bai's fondness for liquor (seen as a naturally fermented drink), his many wives, and his love of the good life were not "vices" under Taoist philosophy, which promoted joyful, mindful living as an extension of the natural world. We can read the following poem, "Bring in the Wine", as a document of Li Bai's philosophy of life: "Fulfil your wishes in this life, exhaust your every whim/And never raise an empty golden goblet to the moon/...The sages and the virtuous men are all forgotten now. / It is the drinkers of the world whose names alone remain" (248).

It is evident from the poems that Li Bai loved his friends, liquor, and the world in general. As a poet, he also has a knack for hyperbole. He often uses superlatives, as seen in the vivid descriptions of scenes in poems like "The Mighty Eunuch's Carriage". The eunuchs mentioned here were an essential part of Imperial China. These men voluntarily allowed themselves to be castrated for a life of relative comfort in the royal palace and, over time, came to wield enormous power. Consistent with his temperament and idiom, "The Road to Shu is Hard" highlights Li Bai's views on physical discomfort. Seth traces a close relationship between the poet and his poems, which are full of zest and vigour, providing an escape from the ordinariness of human life (xxv).

Wang Wei (701-761 CE) came from a distinguished family and entered the elite circle after passing the Imperial Civil Service Examinations. In addition to being a skilled poet, he was a distinguished painter. Su Shi (1037-1101 AD), the statesman and poet, writes that Wei had "poetry in his painting and painting in his poetry" (Seth, *The Collected Poems* xxiv). The twelve poems in the collection validate Su Shi's view, creating vivid images in the reader's mind. Wang Wei and Li Bai appear as opposites in their idiom and conception of the world. Wang Wei's verse is spare, concise, crisp, and, for the most part, devoid of emotion. Most of the poems in this collection are descriptions of nature and of the poet himself. However, unlike

the English Romantics, the poet and nature do not seem to have any intrinsic connection, and neither is the poet seen in opposition to nature. The poet remains in harmonious detachment with the serene natural world surrounding him. These poems are deceptively simple yet so perfect in their composition that looking for a more profound, hidden spiritual or emotional meaning almost seems like a transgression.

Wang Wei is recognised as the greatest nature poet of the T'ang dynasty. Shan Chou, in "Beginning with Images in the Nature Poetry of Wang Wei", writes that although the poet has written on different subjects, he is mainly identified with nature poetry (Chou 117). In these brief, evocative scenes, devoid of overt emotion, the meaning remains elusive, and one only senses vast, empty spaces. It is, but a perfect state of Being. In "Deer Park", he writes, "Empty hills, no man in sight-/Just echoes of the voice of men/In the deep wood reflected light" (223). In this poem, though one hears men's voices, they are echoes, implying the distance between the poet and humanity. Those men are unaware of the poet's presence, and the poet, on his part, seems to prefer his solitude. In "Autumn Nightfall at my place in the hills", he describes the sense of equanimity brought about by the emptiness around him (229). In "Zhongan Retreat", he writes about choosing to seek out a solitary life, as it aligns with the "Way" (230).

Through his highly lyrical poems, we see that his solitude brings him physical rejuvenation. A sense of enlightenment pervades these poems. Wang Wei's wife died when he was barely thirty, and even though he was childless, he never married again. Though he served his duty with distinction, he seems never to have cared for the political intrigues commonplace among the elites. At seventeen, he composed what is considered his most famous poem, the "Ballad of the Peach Tree Spring", about a fisherman who loses his way and, on entering a narrow cave, reaches what can be called a paradise on earth. Unlike the other poems, which are devoid of fellow human beings, this place is populated by those who have fled the world and become immortal. These men and women, with Han names and surnames, belong to a

bygone era, as they still wear Qin-dynasty clothing (3 BCE). The poem suggests that Wang Wei prefers solitude not because he dislikes human company but because he prefers the company of kindred souls. He would prefer to live in a society based on the same values he holds dear. The fact that such a society does not exist, and that the older poet prefers solitude, does not arouse any bitterness or alienation in him. Wei exists in perfect harmony with the solitude surrounding him. This poem about a Shangri-La-like paradise tells of what a younger Wei must have wished for and of his later enlightened acceptance of reality.

Most of the poets of the T'ang period were influenced by Buddhist philosophy, and Wang Wei, too, was a Buddhist scholar who spent hours perusing religious texts and contemplating philosophical concepts. Though these poems are not overtly religious in tone and content, a sense of detachment runs through Wei's nature poems, a Zen-like state of being beyond intellectual and emotional interaction or reaction. The hills, rivers, moon, and the poet all exist in harmony without impinging upon one another. In nature, he does not see himself as alienated, nor does nature stir in him any "overflow of powerful emotions". Thus, his poems are unique within the corpus of nature poetry in world literature. However, not all of Wang Wei's poems in this collection are devoid of emotion. Some very poignant poems express loss and loneliness, composed either at the death of a dear friend or in response to the loneliness he felt during festivals. As a member of the civil service, Wei was often posted to outlying districts, and it was not always possible to reach home in time for these cherished celebrations.

He writes a poignant yet philosophical poem, "Lament for Yin Yao", on the death of his friend. The poem "Remembering My Brothers in Shandong on the Double-Ninth Festival" captures the disadvantages of being a coveted civil servant of the Empire. It is also one of the rare occasions when he uses the word "alone". This poem is reminiscent of Vikram Seth's "Rakhi", from his first collection, *Mappings*, "Your rakhi came, / Showing how things have changed/...How we must both have changed; / Only the custom stays, / Educing from the past/

the undying days” (Seth, *The Collected Poems* 20). Deeply inspired by Wang Wei’s poems, Seth chose to learn Chinese, allowing Wei’s spirit to live on through his poetry. Not only did Wei influence Seth’s craft, but Seth’s literary output also seemed to mirror the treatment Wei received from scholars and critics. Seth and Rushdie have often been pitted against each other, with most scholars hailing Rushdie as the better writer. Pauline Yu’s essay, “Wang Wei: Recent Studies and Translations,” highlights the similar treatment meted out to Wei, especially in comparison with the poet Du Fu.

Du Fu (712–770), the Confucian sage-poet, is the most popular of the three poets. Even a cursory reading of the fourteen poems translated here, from his prolific body of work, is enough to explain his popularity. His realist poems, often expressing sadness, melancholy, despair, despondency, loss, and hopelessness, explore the vagaries of life, quotidian incidents, and military adventurism, themes that may make a Western reader feel closer to home. Du Fu met Li Bai in 744, and the two became great friends, even though temperamentally, they were poles apart. Du Fu commemorates their friendship in “Dreaming of Li Bai”, written during Li Bai’s exile to Jiangnan. In Du Fu’s poems, nature imagery shifts with his emotional state. The imagery of the green maples of joy turns into a black pass of separation when he misses his friend. He not only laments the loss of his friend but also expresses his longing for his family in poems such as “Moonlight Night”. Having failed to pass the Imperial Civil Service Examinations despite several attempts, he finally secured employment as a government officer. His strong principles and philosophy, together with his share of bad luck, made his life difficult. His paltry salary did not allow him to keep his family together, and in a particularly trying time, his young child died of hunger.

One such poem, “Thoughts while travelling at Night”, reflects his disillusionment and distress. If Wang Wei’s poems capture the essential harmony of nature and Li Bai’s grandeur, Du Fu’s attitude towards nature is markedly different from those of the two. In the verse above,

nature is portrayed as a symbol of the vagaries of his life. Seth explains Du Fu's varying attitude to nature and writes:

He sees nature not as a retreat or drama but as an emotional or moral entity set in juxtaposition to human life and events, whether in sympathy or antipathy. The noble cypress that is not uprooted by violent storms and the flowers that insist on returning in spring to a devastated war-stricken country-these appear to him to be intimately tied through either consciousness or heedlessness to human vicissitudes and griefs. (Seth, *The Collected Poems* xxv)

Michael Yang, in "Man and Nature: A Study of Du Fu's Poetry", writes that in Chinese poetry, nature imagery has been used to serve as an analogy for the speaker, to provide a contrastive function, or to symbolise joy, but Du Fu also uses nature to represent animosity or hostility, "stands out as an anomaly... bringing to his poetry dramatic tension, complexity, and vitality" (317). Du Fu has also been given the appellation of a "poet-historian" for documenting specific historical events, the volatile political climate, and the high cost of military expansionism on the lives of ordinary men and women. He captures the quagmire of politics in "An Autumn Meditation".

Two poems, "Spring Scene in Time of War" and "Ballad of the Army Carts", capture the ravages of war on both the edifices of civilisation and humanity. Du Fu has been seen as an embodiment of Confucian values, including loyalty to the king and a disciplined life guided by a solid moral core. Vikram Seth emphasises the Confucian elements in Du Fu's poems and his enduring popularity among Chinese writers, noting that the latter's poems reflect society, history, and the state.

Conclusion: Cultural Exchange and Cultural Patrimony

The contentious concepts of cultural exchange and cultural patrimony merit examination. Walter Benjamin, in *On the Concept of History*, argues that documents of civilisation are documents of barbarism. Because most exchanges occurred under conditions of tremendous violence and unequal power relations, the term “cultural exchange” is misleading, as it obscures the traumatic history of inter-civilisational relationships.

The Greek conquests under Alexander, the Romanisation of Europe, the repeated invasions of India, the colonisation of the world by Europe, and the more covert yet equally pernicious interactions enabled by global capital are just a few examples of these documented “interactions”. Even the towering structures of civilisational cultures that countries proudly display as examples of their “history” were built under dreadful circumstances, including slavery, an oppressive tax system, and war booty. Given this history, it becomes clear that any notion of a harmonious exchange of cultures is utopian. While the thesis of barbarism lurking beneath civilisation cannot be contested, it is also true that human beings have never existed as discrete islands of civilisation.

Interaction, forced or otherwise, has always been part of the way of the world. The corpus of world literature, art, and architecture attests to civilisational conversations over the years. There is much to learn from history, and it is therefore imperative to understand the motivations behind cultural exchanges today. This is where the idea and practice of cosmopolitanism are helpful. Its fundamental tenet is a paradigm grounded in the moral and ethical conviction that we have obligations to the entire human race as well as to our country. Any cosmopolitan view of the world is feasible only in nations that act within an ethical and moral framework. Imagining a world, like imagining world literature, must be done from a specific location. Therefore, cosmopolitanism is first inward-centred before radiating outwards. If nations are imagined communities, we can extend this imagination to encompass humanity, and in this

way literature and translation play a crucial role. Literature can expand one's imagination to encompass a wider "imagined community". Since cultural exchange is inevitable, all efforts should be made to democratise and facilitate it.

According to David Damrosch, when literature is translated, it ceases to be "unique" to a specific culture. As Fernando Ortiz defined it in the 1940s, translation provides "transculturation," allowing one to experience many cultures through the text (Damrosch 22–24). By focusing on our shared humanity, Appiah also offers a global disquisition on cultural patrimony. He believes that, whether it is the Sistine Chapel or the Great Wall of China, we may respond to other people's cultural products and enjoy them as works of art made by people just like ourselves. The "realist connection" we can make is to recognise that they were created by people just like us (*Cosmopolitanism* 135). Among many other strategies, translation can facilitate this effort.

It is pertinent to quote Vikram Seth to underscore the importance of translation. In an interview with *The Print*, he discusses his three favourite books; interestingly, they are all translations. Charles Johnston's translation of Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* "inspired me to write a long poem in verse... If it hadn't been for Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, I don't think I would ever have written a novel in verse or, for that matter, a novel at all." The second book he picks is a translation of poems by Wang Wei, and he says, "It influenced me in a strange way because it changed my life completely. I was so moved by these poems on nature, about friendship, about solitude, that I decided that I got to learn Chinese". The *Hanuman Chalisa*, which he is currently translating, is the third text he selects. "Now I am not very religious as a person, but I find that poem rather wonderful... but what I don't like is that wonderful religious poem being hijacked by those who want to breed intolerance between one Indian and another... The poem belongs to all of us" (Gupta, Shekhar, "Off the Cuff").

Vikram Seth's English translation of the three Tang dynasty poets, Wang Wei, Li Bai, and Du Fu, from Chinese exemplifies David Damrosch's idea that a text gains in translation, as each act of translation prevents its erasure. *Three Chinese Poets* is a very important contribution to the corpus of World Literature (yet to receive its due). The present study shows that Vikram Seth's translation aligns with Devy's concept of translation in Indian literary traditions as an act that revitalises the text, prioritising the text over the writer or the translator. Vikram Seth's nuanced translation has revived these ancient poems, making them accessible beyond China. Seth carries the poetry of three Chinese poets across twelve hundred years and two civilisations, in a language belonging to a third, thereby transforming it into what Valerie Henitiuk describes as a "Shared text". These poems by Wang Wei, Du Fu, and Li Bai are now part of our collective cultural patrimony.

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