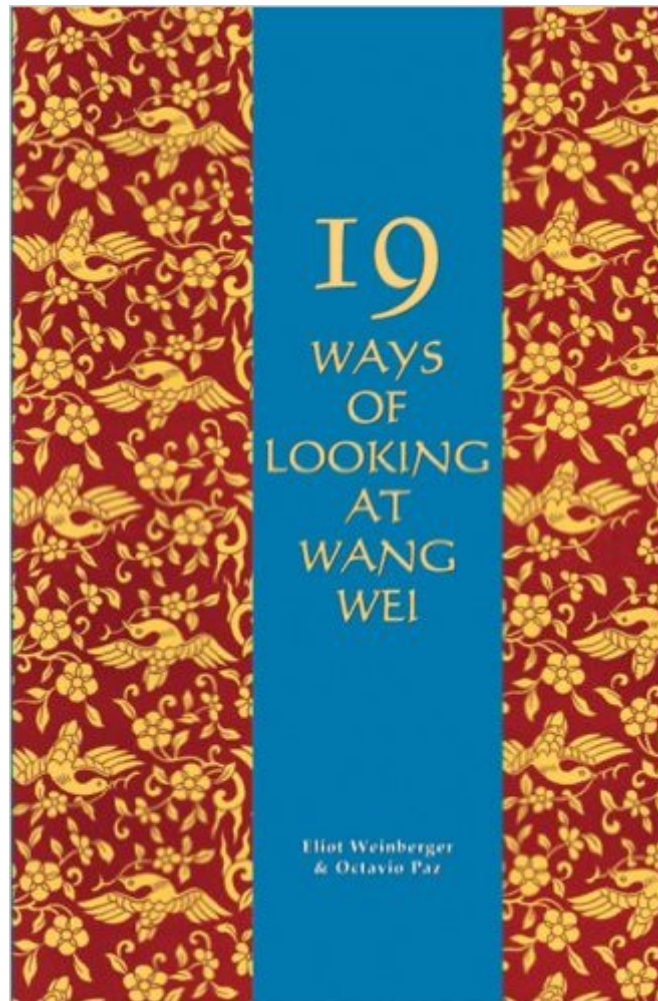


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# 19 Ways Of Looking At Wang Wei: How A Chinese Poem Is Translated



## Synopsis

Nineteen different translations of a single poem with comments on each version by Eliot Weinberger and introduction contributed by Octavio Paz.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Poetry, said Robert Frost, is what gets lost in translation. Poetry, says Eliot Weinberger in the introduction to this small volume, is that which is worth translating. Both, of course, are right. That is what I like about poetry. It tolerates different points of view, a multitude of interpretations. A poem, or its translation, is never 'right', it is always the expression of an individual reader's experience at a certain point in his or her life: "As no individual reader remains the same, each reading becomes a different - not just another - reading. The same poem cannot be read twice." "Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei: How a Chinese Poem is Translated" contains a simple four-line poem, over 1200 years old, written by Wang Wei (c. 700-761 AD), a man of Buddhist belief, known as a painter and calligrapher in his time. The book gives the original text in Chinese characters, a transliteration in the pinyin system, a character-by-character translation, 13 translations in English (written between 1919 and 1978), 2 translations in French, and one particularly beautiful translation in Spanish by Octavio Paz (1914-1998), the Mexican poet who received the 1990 Nobel Prize for literature. Paz has also added a six-page essay on his translation of the poem. Wang Wei's poems are fascinating in their apparent simplicity, their precision of observation, and their philosophical depth. The poem in question here is no exception. I would translate it as: Empty mountains I see no

one but I hear echoes of someone's word evening sunlight shines into the deep forest and is reflected on the green mosses above. Compared to the translations of Burton Watson (1971), Octavio Paz (1974), and Gary Snyder (1978), this version has a number of flaws. My most flagrant sin is the use of a poetic first person, the "I", while the original poem merely implies an observer. The translation reflects what I found most intriguing in the original text. First of all, the movement of light and sound, in particular the reflection of light that mirrors the echo of sound earlier in the poem. Secondly, the conspicuous last word of the poem: "shang"; in Chinese it is a simple three-stroke character that today means 'above' (it is the same "shang" as in Shanghai - the city's name means literally 'above the sea'). This is a very simple poem. The simplicity is deceptive, though. What looks very natural, still wants to make a point. The point is that looking is just one thing, but being open to echoes and reflections is what really yields new and unexpected experiences. Wang Wei applies the "mirror" metaphor in a new way in his poem. This metaphor was very popular in Daoist and Buddhist literature, and says roughly that the mind of a wise person should be like a mirror, simply reflective and untainted by emotion. Wang Wei seems to have this metaphor in mind when he mentions echoes and reflections in his poem. A Buddhist or a Daoist, for that matter, would also recognize the principle of "Wu Wei" (non-action) here: nothing can be forced or kept, everything simply "falls" to you and will be lost again. In this sense, a person cannot "see" (as in the activity of seeing); a person can only be "struck" by the visible (as in being illuminated - the "satori" of Zen Buddhism). "Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei" is a light, unscholarly book - and I mean this as a compliment. It is a pure pleasure to read the different translations together with Weinberger's lucid comments. Weinberger has a wonderful sense of humor to accompany his analytical mind; and he is allergic to pomposity. He enjoys mocking the pompous. This is what he has to say about one translator's misguided efforts to rhyme Wang Wei's poem: "line 2 ... adds 'cross' for the rhyme scheme he [the translator] has imposed on himself. (Not much rhymes with 'moss'; it's something of an albatross. But he might have attempted an Elizabethan pastoral 'echoing voices toss' or perhaps a half-Augustan, half-Dada 'echoing voices sauce')." In the translation of Chinese poetry, as in everything, Weinberger notes, nothing is more difficult than simplicity. Simplicity is particularly difficult for certain academics, it seems. A professor, who had read Weinberger's comments on Wang Wei's poem in a magazine, furiously complained about the "crimes against Chinese poetry" Weinberger had allegedly committed by neglecting "Boodberg's cedula." Weinberger later discovered that this cryptic reference was to a series of essays privately published by professor Peter A. Boodberg in 1954 and 1955 entitled "Cedules from a Berkeley Workshop in Asiatic Philosophy" ('cedule' is an obscure word for 'scroll, writing, schedule'). "Boodberg ends his 'cedule'

with his own version of the poem, which he calls 'a still inadequate, yet philologically correct, rendition ... (with due attention to grapho-syntactic overtones and enjambment)': The empty mountain: to see no men, Barely ear-minded of men talking - countertones, And antistrophic lights-and-shadows incoming deeper the deep-treed grove Once more to glowlight the blue-green mosses - going up (The empty mountain...) To me this sounds like Gerard Manly Hopkins on L S D, and I am grateful to the furious professor for sending me in search of this, the strangest of the many Weis."

Eliot Weinberger's "19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei" (subtitled "How a Chinese Poem is Translated") presents Wang Wei's famous "Deer Park" poem in 19 versions: Chinese, transliterated Chinese (Pinyin), and a word-by-word rendering, then in 16 (or so) translations with Weinberger's comments. (The translations are primarily into English, although a Spanish version and two French versions are also included.) From the title, which appears to be inspired by Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," I expected something a little more contemplative. I found Weinberger's comments, on the whole, to be unnecessarily vicious and judgmental. It's as if every section of Stevens's poem ended with the line "But this way of looking at a blackbird is wrong." Weinberger never does offer a translation of his own, although he appears to have some kind of ideal in mind of which every translation he profiles somehow falls short. This would not in itself be a bad thing--for we must recognize that every translation does, in some way, depart from the original. But Weinberger seems to feel that any change to the poem, especially any expansion, is due to the translator's special hatred for the poet and contempt for his readers' intelligence. In section 8 he states that additions to a translation are "the product of a translator's unspoken contempt for the foreign poet" (p. 17). He goes on to suggest that the translators of the version on which he is commenting were too dense to realize that Wang Wei could have written X (as in the translation) but chose to write Y. While I think his point is well-taken, it could easily have been made without the caustic innuendo. Reading some of the translations, you do wonder what these guys were thinking--but I don't believe that assuming they're stupid oafs at best or malicious tinkerers at worst is really the right way to approach things. I found the brief essays by Octavio Paz to be more what I expected: commentary on the poem itself, as well as a balanced and interesting exploration of the issues involved in translating it. He explains calmly why he made the choices he did in his Spanish version (also present in the book), and why he made certain (and significant) changes from his original draft. While it is interesting and perhaps even enlightening to have such a varied collection of translations side-by-side, any real insights into what the comparison says about "How a Chinese

Poem is Translated" will have to be deduced by the reader alone, as Weinberger's jeering comments are rarely much help in this direction. The concept is a solid one, but I wish the presentation were a little more balanced. (Note: for a more recent consideration of the poem, see J.P. Seaton's analysis of the role of written characters in the poem's meaning, "Once More, on the Empty Mountain," in *The Poem Behind the Poem: Translating Asian Poetry*, ed. Frank Stewart.)

This book takes a 4 line poem in Chinese, then looks at 19 translations of the poem and provides a commentary on what works, does not work, is added, is omitted ... for three of the translations - Octavio Paz, Gary Snyder and Francoise Cheng comments of the translator are also given. This is a wonderful case study on the art of translation. Outside the aspect of translation, the volume also gives the reader ample opportunity to become familiar with Wang Wei's poem and with its Buddhist content.

I checked the book out of the local library a couple of weeks ago and have not stopped reading it since. The library volume is due back, so I just purchased it. My only complaint is that the last poem is Gary Snyder's from 1978. I would like to see Mr Weinberger reissue the volume with latter translations such as Arthur Sze or Sam Hamill. And if any one is looking for a most needed project, a translation of all of Wang Wei's Wang River poems.

This book is very valuable on the art of translation. It offers one Wang Wei quatrain: in the original Chinese characters, a literal translation of those characters, and then about 1.5 dozen different translations of the poem...in English, Spanish, and French (all non English versions are translated themselves). If nothing else it is very interesting, and contains essays as well. I enjoyed it immensely.

This is such an interesting idea. My favorite translation of this poem, however, is not included it is by Francois Cheng which is found in *In Love With the Way*. If I had another life to live, I would study Japanese and Chinese so that I could read poems in the languages written.

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