



Experiential Metafunctional Analysis of the Folk Song of Han “Bei Ge” and Its English Translations

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze and compare transitivity processes of “Bei Ge” and its six English translations from the perspective of experiential function of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics and makes a comment on the similarities and differences between them. Through the analysis of the transitivity of the poem and its translations, it is found that there are 4 versions for the first line, 2 versions for the second, sixth and seventh lines, 5 versions for the third line, 3 versions for the fourth line and 1 version for the fifth and eighth lines, in which the transitivity maintains a high consistency with the original poem. At the end of the paper, a revised version is provided based on the transitivity of the original poem. This study can give clues to the study of poems and their translations of the transitivity processes, by exploring the differences of participants and circumstantial elements with the theoretical framework of Functional Grammar.

Keywords: Bei Ge”, English translations, Experiential metafunction, Transitivity.

1. Introduction

The folk song of Han “Bei Ge” describes the sorrow of a wanderer who is homesick and unable to return. The entire poem neither portrays scenery nor narrates, but touches the heart with sincere emotions and painful experiences. At the beginning of the poem, it is written to sing mournful songs instead of crying, and to look far away at one’s hometown instead of returning home. The author misses his hometown and is filled with depression, which is a continuation of the farsightedness in writing about what he saw in the distance. However, he still hasn’t seen his hometown, so he is very worried and depressed. Due to homelessness, having no boat to cross, life is hindered everywhere, and the future is bumpy, which is a vivid portrayal of the tragic fate of a wanderer. The last two lines describe the complex and infinite melancholy thoughts in a wanderer’s heart that are difficult to express, as if a wheel is spinning in his heart. There is relatively little research on this poem, Guo (2004) compared the writing techniques of Wang Can’s “Ode to Climbing the Tower” with those of the folk song of Han “Bei Ge”. Zhang (2006) pointed out “the beauty of sadness” in the folk songs of Han by analyzing relevant works in them. Zheng (2015) analyzed the nostalgia for his hometown in the poem, which is an irreplaceable nostalgia. Gan (2017) also had a similar viewpoint, as the poem described a wanderer’s attachment to the hometown, which is the sentiment of green leaves towards roots. However, there is currently no research on the English translation of this poem. This article will conduct a detailed experiential metafunctional analysis of the six translations of this poem from the perspective of Halliday’s (2014) systemic functional linguistics.

2. Methodology

The experiential metafunction is composed of multiple semantic systems, the most important of which is the transitivity system. Its function is to express people’s experience of the real and inner world through several processes, and to indicate the participants and circumstantial elements involved in the process. (Huang, 2002, p. 1) Halliday believes that people can divide human experience into six different processes through the transitivity system: (1) material process; (2) mental process; (3) relational process; (4) behavioral process; (5) verbal process and (6) existential process. (Hu *et al.*, 2008, p. 75) The following focuses on the transitivity of the original poem and its six English translations. It analyzes and compares the similarity and difference among them in transitivity and then proposes a new version of the poem.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Experiential Metafunctional Analysis of the Poem

From the perspective of the experiential metafunctional transitivity, “Bei Ge” consists of the following processes, namely:

- (1) Material process/Material process/Behavioral process: Bei Ge Ke Yi Dang Qi (Chinese: 悲歌可以当泣).

(2) Behavioral process/Material process/Material process: Yuan Wang Ke Yi Dang Gui (Chinese: 远望可以当归).

(3) Mental process: Si Nian Gu Xiang (Chinese: 思念故乡).

(4) Relational process: Yu Yu Lei Lei (Chinese: 郁郁累累).

(5) Material process/Existential process: Yu Gui Jia Wu Ren (Chinese: 欲归家无人).

(6) Material process/Existential process: Yu Du He Wu Chuan (Chinese: 欲渡河无船).

(7) Verbal process: Xin Si Bu Neng Yan (Chinese: 心思不能言).

(8) Material process: Chang Zhong Che Lun Zhuan (Chinese: 肠中车轮转).

In terms of functional discourse analysis, the participant and circumstantial element associated to various process types need to be identified. The first line includes two material processes and one behavioral process. “Bei Ge (悲歌)” and “Ke Yi Dang (可以当)” are material processes, while “Qi (泣)” is a behavioral process. The second line includes one behavioral process and two material processes. “Wang (望)” refers to the behavioral process, “Ke Yi Dang (可以当)” and “Gui (归)” are the material processes, and “Yuan (远)” is the circumstantial element representing the concept of space. The third line “Si Nian Gu Xiang (思念故乡)” is a mental process, “Si Nian (思念)” is a process, and “Gu Xiang (故乡)” is a phenomenon. The fourth line “Yu Yu Lei Lei (郁郁累累)” is a relational process, and it is an attribute. The fifth line includes both material and existential processes. “Yu Gui (欲归)” is a material process, “Jia (家)” is a scope, and “Wu Ren (无人)” is an existent. The sixth line also consists of both material and existential processes. “Yu Du (欲渡)” is a material process, “He (河)” is a scope, and “Wu Chuan (无船)” is an existent. The seventh line is a verbal process, “Bu Neng Yan (不能言)” is the process, and “Xin Si (心思)” is the verbiage. The eighth line is a material process, “Zhuan (转)” refers to a process, “Che Lun (车轮)” refers to the actor, and “Chang Zhong (肠中)” is the circumstantial element that represents the concept of space.

3.2. Experiential Metafunctional Analysis of Its Translations

On English translations of the poem “Bei Ge,” these six versions have been collected (See Appendix). For narrative convenience, the following versions are arranged by the order of time: Watson (Watson, 1984, p. 80), Yang (Yang & Yang, 1986, p. 23), Xu (Xu, 1996, p. 77), Yip (Yip, 1997, p. 87), Wang (Wang, 2008: 35), and Li (Li & Han, 2013, p. 67) represent these six translations. For comparison purposes, the analysis will be performed line by line below.

3.2.1. “Bei Ge Ke Yi Dang Qi”

Table 1. English Translations of “Bei Ge Ke Yi Dang Qi”.

Translated by	Process	Participant	Circumstance
Watson	Material process: can take the place of Behavioral process: crying	Actor: a sad song Goal:	
Yang	Material process: sing Behavioral process: weeping	Actor: I Scope: a song of grief	
Xu	Material process: sing Relational process: is	Actor: I Scope: a song of grief Carrier: it Attribute: my tears	
Yip	Material process: Behavioral process: weeping	Actor: Goal: sad song	
Wang	Material process: sheds	Actor: the sad song Goal: my tears	
Li	Material process: sing Behavioral process: weeping	Actor: I Scope: a sad song	

The translations of the first line are firstly analyzed below. The various translations are discussed from three aspects: processes, participants, and circumstantial elements. The first line of the original poem includes material processes and a behavioral process, and the translation processes by Watson, Yang, Yip, and Li are the same as those of the original line. The material process translated by Watson is “can take the place of,” the actor is “a sad song,” and the behavioral process is “crying.” The material process translated by Yang is the same as that translated by Li, which is “sing” and the actor is also the same, which is “I.” The scope are “a song of grief” and “a sad song” respectively, and their behavioral process is consistent, which is “weeping.” The behavioral process of Yip’s translation is the same, also translated as “weeping,” and it has a goal of “sad song.”

The material process translated by Xu is the same as that translated by Yang and Li, which is “sing” and the actor is also the same as “I.” The scope is “a song of grief”, and the relational process is “is,” the carrier is “it,” and the attribute is “my tears.” Wang translated it as a material process “sheds,” with the actor being “the sad song” and the goal being “my tears.” According to the material and behavioral processes of the original line, this line can be translated as “I sing a sad song to replace (take the place of) weeping.”

3.2.2. “Yuan Wang Ke Yi Dang Gui”

Table 2. English Translations of “Yuan Wang Ke Yi Dang Gui”

Translated by	Process	Participant	Circumstance
Watson	Material process: can take the place of	Actor: peering in the distance Goal:	Space: home
	Material process: going	Actor: Goal:	
Yang	Behavioral process: stare	Behavior:	Space: into the distance
	Material process: going	Actor: Goal:	Space: home
Xu	Behavioral process: gaze	Behavior: I	Space: afar
	Material process: appears	Actor: no homeland Goal:	
Yip	Behavioral process: looking	Behavior: Behavior:	Space: into the distance Cause: for homebound trip
Wang	Material process: brings	Actor: the long gaze Scope: my home	
Li	Behavioral process: look	Behavior: Behavior:	Space: afar Role: as home-going

The second line of the original line is comprised of both behavioral and material processes, and the process types translated by Yang and Xu are the same as the original line. The behavioral processes of Yang’s and Xu’s translation are “stare” and “gaze” respectively. Xu’s translation has an actor “I,” and their material processes are “going” and “appears” respectively. Xu’s translation has an actor “no homeland,” both of which have circumstantial elements representing the spatial concept, namely “into the distance / home” and “afar.”

Yip’s and Li’s translations are behavioral processes, which are respectively “looking” and “look.” The word form is different, and Yip’s translation also has circumstantial elements that represent spatial and causal concepts, such as “into the distance” and “for homebound trip.” Li’s translation has circumstantial elements that represent spatial and role concepts, such as “afar” and “as home-going.” Wang translated it as “brings” of a material process, with the actor being “the long gaze” and the scope being “my home.” According to the behavioral and material processes of the original line, this line can be translated as “I look afar (into the distance) to replace (take the place of) going home.”

3.2.3. “Si Nian Gu Xiang”

Table 3. English Translations of “Si Nian Gu Xiang”

Translated by	Process	Participant	Circumstance
Watson	Mental process: think	Senser: I Phenomenon: my native village	Manner: with longing of the old village
Yang	Mental process: dream of	Senser: Phenomenon: my native village	
Xu	Mental process: dream of	Senser: I Phenomenon: native village	Time: still
Yip	Mental process: thinking of	Senser: Phenomenon: hometown	
Wang	Material process: grow	Actor: my home thoughts Goal:	Time: by day
Li	Mental process: missing	Senser: Phenomenon: my hometown	

The third line of the original poem is a mental process, and five translations of all are mental processes. The mental process in Watson’s translation is “think.” Yang’s translation is the same as Xu’s, which is “dream of.” Yip’s translation is “thinking of,” while Li’s translation is “missing.” Watson’s and Xu’s translation have the same senser as “I,” while other translations have no senser. The phenomenon in Watson’s translation is the same as that in Yang’s translation, which is “my native village.” The phenomenon in Xu’s translation is similar to the former, which is “native village” without “my.” The phenomenon in Yip’s translation is similar to that in Li’s translation. They are “hometown” and “my hometown”, where “my” is omitted in Yip’s translation. Watson’s translation has a circumstantial element that represents the concept of manner, “with long of the old village,” while Xu’s translation has a circumstantial element that represents the concept of time “still.”

Wang translated it as “grow” in a material process, with the actor being “my home thoughts” and the circumstantial element representing the concept of time being “by day.” By analyzing and maintaining the mental process of the original line, this line can be put into “I miss (dream / think of) my hometown (native place).”

3.2.4. “Yu Yu Lei Lei”

Table 4. English Translation of “Yu Yu Lei Lei”

Translated by	Process	Participant	Circumstance
Watson	Relational process:	Carrier: my spirits Attribute: downcast, fretful and forlorn	
Yang	Relational process:	Carrier: my heart Attribute: full to bursting	
Xu	Mental process:	Senser: Phenomenon: of tree on tree and hill on hill	
Yip			Manner: densely-meshed, clods and clusters within
Wang	Material process: would roam	Actor: I Goal:	Space: wherever
Li	Relational process: 'm	Carrier: I Attribute: laden	Cause: with woe

The fourth line of the original poem is a relational process, and the translations by Watson, Yang, and Li are also relational processes. There is no relational process in Watson’s and Yang’s translation. The relational process in Li’s translation is “m.” The carriers of these three are “my spirits,” “my heart,” and “I” respectively, with attributes of “downcast, free and forgotten,” “full to bursting,” and “laden.” In addition, Li’s translation has a circumstantial element representing the concept of causality, “with woe.”

The translation by Xu is a mental process, and the line only includes the phenomenon of “of tree on tree and hill on hill.” Yip’s version is a circumstantial element of the concept of manner, which is “densely-meshed, clods and clusters within.” Wang translated it as a material process “would roam,” with the actor “I”, and “where” represents a circumstantial element of the spatial concept. According to the relational process of the original line, this line connects the previous line, indicating the low and anxious feelings when missing one’s hometown. It can be translated as “I am feeling so down.”

3.2.5. “Yu Gui Jia Wu Ren”

Table 5. English Translations of “Yu Gui Jia Wu Ren”

Translated by	Process	Participant	Circumstance
Watson	Mental process: want Material process: to go Existential process: 's	Senser: I Phenomenon: Actor: Scope: home Existent: no one	Space: there
Yang	Material process: would go Relational process: have	Actor: I Goal: Carrier: Attribute: no one to help me	Space: back
Xu	Material process: 'll go Mental process: can see	Actor: I Goal: Senser: I Phenomenon: no kinsfolk	Space: home where (no kinsfolk can I see)
Yip	Material process: to return Existential process:	Actor: Goal: Existent: nobody	Space: at home
Wang	Existential process: is	Existent: no one	Space: at home
Li	Material process: to return Relational process: is	Actor: Goal: Carrier: no one Attribute: at home	

The fifth line of the original poem contains both material and existential processes, and Yip’s translation is the same process as the original line. The material process is “to return,” the existent is “nobody,” and “at home” is a circumstantial element representing the concept of space.

The process of Yang’s translation is the same as that of Li’s translation, which includes a material process and a relational process. The material processes of both are “would go” and “to return” respectively, and the actor of Yang’s translation is “I.” The relational processes of these two are “is” and “has,” Yang translates it without a carrier, Li translates it with a carrier of “no one,” and their attributes are “no one to help me” and “at home” respectively. Yang translates it with a circumstantial element representing a spatial concept, “back.” Watson translates it as three different processes, the mental process is “want,” the senser is “I,” the material process is “to go,” the scope is “home,” the existential process is “s,” the existent is “no one,” and “there” is a circumstantial element representing the spatial concept. Xu translates it as a material process and a mental process. The material process is “ll go,” the actor is “I,” and “home where (no kinsfolk can I see)” is a circumstantial element representing the spatial concept, which includes a mental process, the process is “can see,” the senser is “I,” and the phenomenon is “no kinsfolk.” Wang translates it as an existential process “is”, and the existent is “no one”, and “at home” as a circumstantial element representing the concept of space. According to the material and existential processes of the original line, this line can be rendered as “To return home but there is no one (kinsfolk).”

3.2.6. “Yu Du He Wu Chuan”

Table 6. English Translations of “Yu Du He Wu Chuan”.

Translated by	Process	Participant	Circumstance
Watson	Mental process: want	Senser: I	
	Material process: to cross	Phenomenon: Actor: Scope: the river	
	Existential process: is	Existent: no boat	
Yang	Material process: would cross	Actor: I Scope: the river	
	Existential process: is	Existent: no boat	
Xu	Material process: 'll cross	Actor: I Scope: the stream	
	Material process: will ferry	Actor: no boat Goal: me	
Yip	Material process: to cross	Actor: Scope: the river	
	Existential process:	Existent: no boat	
Wang	Existential process: is	Existent: no boat to take	
Li	Material process: to cross	Actor: Scope: the river	
	Relational process: is	Carrier: no boat Attribute: nearby	

The sixth line contains both material and existential processes, and the processes of Yang’s and Yip’s translations are the same as those of the original line. The material process translated by Yang is “would cross,” the actor is “I,” and the material process translated by Yip is “to cross,” with the same scope as “the river.” The existential process in Yang’s translation is “is,” while in Yip’s translation, there is no existential process. The existents of these two are the same, which is “no boat.”

Watson translates it as three different processes, the mental process is “want,” and the senser is “I.” The material process is “to cross,” and the scope is “the river.” The existential process is “is,” and the existent is “no boat.” Xu translates it as two material processes, the processes are “will cross” and “will ferry,” the actors are “I” and “no boat,” and the scope and the goal are “the stream” and “me” respectively. Wang translates it as the existential process “is,” and the existent is “no boat to take.” Li translates it as a material process and a relational process. The material process is “to cross,” the scope is “the river,” the relational process is “is,” the carrier is “no boat,” and the attribute is “nearby.” According to the material and existential processes of the original line, this line can be translated as “To cross the river but there is no boat.”

3.2.7. “Xin Si Bu Neng Yan”

Table 7. English Translations of “Xin Si Bu Neng Yan”.

Translated by	Process	Participant	Circumstance
Watson	Material process: can find	Actor: I Goal: no words for thoughts	Space: in my heart
Yang	Verbal process: can tell	Sayer: no words Receiver: Verbiage: my longing	
Xu	Verbal process: can tell	Sayer: I Receiver: to whom Verbiage: what (I feel)	
	Mental process: feel	Senser: I Phenomenon:	
Yip	Material process: swallowed	Actor: all Goal:	Manner: in thought: no speech
Wang	Material process: grabs	Actor: my home thoughts Goal: my heart	
Li	Verbal process: to tell	Sayer: Receiver: to whom Verbiage: my melancholy	

The seventh line is a verbal process, and Yang and Li translate it as a verbal process, with the processes being “can tell” and “to tell” respectively. Yang translates the sayer as “no words,” and the verbiage is “my longing.” Li translates the receiver as “to whom,” and the verbiage is “my melancholy.”

The translation by Xu contains a verbal process and a mental process. The verbal process is “can tell,” the sayer is “I,” the receiver is “to whom,” and the verbiage is “what (I feel),” which includes a mental process “feel” and the senser is “I.” The translations by Watson, Yip, and Wang are material processes. The material process translated by Watson is “can find,” with the actor “I” and the goal “no words for thoughts,” and “in my heart” is the circumstantial element representing the concept of space. Yip translates it as the material process “swallowed,” with the actor “all” and “in thought: no speech” as the circumstantial element representing the concept of manner. The material process translated by Wang is “grabs,” with the actor being “my home thoughts” and the goal being “my heart.” According to the mental and verbal processes of the original line, this line can be translated as “I can tell no words of sad feelings (thoughts) / I cannot tell a word of sad feelings (thoughts).”

3.2.8. “Chang Zhong Che Lun Zhuan”

Table 8. English Translations of “Chang Zhong Che Lun Zhuan”.

Translated by	Process	Participant	Circumstance
Watson			Comparison: like cartwheels going round in my belly
Yang	Relational process: seems	Carrier: it Attribute: as if wheels were grinding over my heart	
Xu	Relational process: seems	Carrier: my heart Attribute: ground by rolling wheel	
Yip	Material process: grind and turn	Actor: wheels Goal: it	Space: inside the guts
Wang	Material process: makes Material process: pain and ache	Actor: Goal: it	
Li	Relational process: is	Carrier: it Attribute: like wheels churning in my chest	

The last line of the original poem is a material process. Yip’s translation of the material process is “grind and turn.” The actor is “wheels,” and “inside the guts” is the circumstantial element that represents the concept of space. Wang translates it as two material processes, namely “makes” and “paint and ache”, with the goal of “it.”

The translations by Yang, Xu, and Li are relational processes. The relational process by Yang and Xu is the same as “seems.” The relational process by Li is “is,” the carrier by Yang and Li is the same as “it,” the carrier of Xu’s translation is “my heart,” the attribute of Yang’s is “as if wheels were grinding over my heart,” which includes a material process “were grinding,” and “wheels” is the actor, and “over my heart” represents the circumstantial element of a spatial concept. The attribute translated by Xu is “ground by rolling wheel,” while the attribute translated by Li is “like wheels churning in my chest,” which includes a material process “churning,” “wheels” is the actor, and “in my chest” is the circumstantial element representing the spatial concept. Watson translates it as “like cartwheels going round in my belly,” which represents the circumstantial element of comparison, including a material process “going,” “cartwheels” as the actor, and “round in my bell” as the circumstantial element representing the spatial concept. According to the material process of the original line, this line can be translated as “Wheels are grinding in my guts (inside my guts).”

3.2.9. Translation of the Title “Bei Ge”

Table 9. English Translations of “Bei Ge”

No.	Translated by	Version
1	Watson	Sad Song
2	Yang	Far from Home
3	Xu	A SONG OF GRIEF
4	Yip	—
5	Wang	Sad Song
6	Li	A Song of Woe

The title of the poem “Bei Ge” has been translated by various translators as above. Except for Yip’s translation, Watson’s translation is the same as Wang’s, which is “Sad Song.” Xu’s translation is similar to Li’s, which are “A SONG OF GRIEF” and “A Song of Woe,” with different words to translate “Bei”. Yang translates it as “Far from Home”, which is a free translation method, not the literal meaning of a poetic title. According to the meaning of the poem’s title “Bei Ge,” it can be translated as “Sad Song” or adjusted to “Song of Sadness (Grief / Woe).”

4. Conclusion

This article is based on the experiential metafunction of Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics, and conducts a comparative analysis of the poem “Bei Ge” and its six English translations. By comparing and analyzing various translations, and considering rhymes, in order to maintain a Chinese character corresponding to two English syllables, “take the place of” is selected in the first line to form 12 syllables, while “afar” and “take the place of” are selected in the second line. Since the subject of the first and second lines is the same, the subject of the second line is omitted, “and” is added, and “going home” is exchanged for word order. At the end of the first two lines “going” rhymes with “weeping”. Since the third line has the same subject as the fourth line, the subject “I” is omitted from the third line, and “when” is added at the beginning of the third line, “old” is also added before “hometown.” Besides, “dream of” is modified into “dreaming of”. At the end of the line “my hometown” rhymes with “down” in the fourth line by adding “and down” at the end of the fourth line to form 8 syllables. At the end of the fifth line, “kinsfolk” is chosen. This line consists of 10 syllables and rhymes with the “boat” at the end of the sixth line. The seventh line is translated as “I cannot tell a word of sad thoughts,” with “thoughts” chosen at the end and rhymes with the eighth line “guts.” At the beginning of the eighth line “as if” is added to form 10 syllables. Finally, the rhyme of the entire poem forms the “aabb” format. The whole poem is translated as follows:

Sad Song

I sing a sad song to take the place of weeping,
And look afar to take the place of home going.

When dreaming of my old hometown,
I am feeling so down and down.
To return home but there is no kinsfolk;
To cross the river but there is no boat.
I cannot tell a word of sad thoughts:
As if wheels are grinding inside my guts.

Due to my limited research on translation, this article is not a commentary on the translations of famous translators, but rather aims to explore the English translation of ancient poetry from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics. By analyzing the transitivity system of experiential metafunction, linguistic exploration of the original poem and its translated works can deeply describe the transitivity between the original poem and the translated versions, as well as the similarities and differences between various processes related participants and circumstantial elements. This will be conducive to a more accurate grasp and translation of the original poem, and can effectively improve the level of translation.

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Appendix 1.

Watson: // Sad Song // / Can a sad song take the place of crying? / Can peering in the distance take the place of going home? / I think with longing of the old village, / my spirits downcast, fretful and forlorn. / I want to go home but there's no one there, / I want to cross the river but there is no boat — / Thoughts in my heart I can find no words for, / like cartwheels going round in my belly! (Watson, 1984, p. 80).

Yang: // Far from Home // / I sing a song of grief instead of weeping, / Stare into the distance instead of going home, / And dream of my native village, / My heart full to bursting. / I would go back but have no one to help me; / I would cross the river but there is no boat. / No words can tell my longing. / It seems as if wheels were grinding over my heart! (Yang & Yang, 1986, p. 23).

Xu: // A SONG OF GRIEF // / I sing a song of grief: it is my tears; / I gaze afar, but no homeland appears. / I dream of native village still, / Of tree on tree and hill on hill / I'll go home where no kinsfolk can I see; / I'll cross the stream, no boat will ferry me. / To whom can I tell what I feel? / My heart seems ground by rolling wheel. (Xu, 1996, p. 77).

Yip: / Sad song for weeping. / Looking into the distance for homebound trip. / Thinking of hometown: / Densely-meshed, clods and clusters within. / To return: nobody at home. / To cross the river: no boat. / All swallowed in thought: no speech. / Inside the guts, wheels grind and turn. (Yip, 1997, p. 87).

Wang: // Sad Song // / The sad song sheds my tears; / The long gaze brings my home. / My home thoughts grow by day, / Wherever I would roam. / There is no one at home; / There is no boat to take. / My home thoughts grabs my heart / And makes it pain and ache. (Wang, 2008, p. 35).

Li: // A Song of Woe // / I sing a sad song as weeping; / And look afar as home-going. / Missing my hometown, / I'm laden with woe. / To return? No one is at home. / To cross the river? No boat is nearby. / To whom to tell my melancholy? / It is like wheels churning in my chest. (Li & Han, 2013, p. 67).