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ESSAY

Translating I Am a Primeval River: Between Current and Voice

Essay • by Anna Yin

Translating *I Am a Primeval River* (《我是一条古老的河流》) by Chinese poet Yuan Fan (远帆 / 一民) was less an act of converting words across languages than entering the river of another poetic consciousness. The poem speaks in a grand, almost prophetic voice: the river is not merely landscape, but history, witness, lover, and a means of self-examination and self-articulation. As translator, the central challenge I faced was how to remain faithful to the original while preserving its expansive, surging rhetorical force and poetic beauty, without allowing the English to become unrestrained or overly ornate.

One of the earliest challenges was the title, which also opens the poem:

“我是一条古老的河流”

A literal rendering would be:

“I am an ancient river”

The Chinese word 古老 carries a range of meanings—ancient, old, primordial, even primeval—depending on context. In my early drafts, I used “ancient,” as it felt natural and familiar in English. Gradually, however, I felt that “ancient” did not fully

convey the poem’s force, nor its movement beyond historical time into something more elemental.

Translating *I Am a Primeval River* (《我是一条古老的河流》) by Chinese poet Yuan Fan was less an act of converting words across languages than entering the river of another poetic consciousness

I revised the phrase several times:

“I am an ancient river”

“I am a primordial river”

Finally, I settled on:

“I am a primeval river”

The shift is subtle but significant. “Ancient” suggests historical depth, whereas “primeval” points to something more originary—preceding history itself. Reading the Chinese, I sensed not simply age but a mythic, untamed continuity, a river always in the process of becoming. “Primeval” also lends sonic gravity in English, allowing voice and motion to carry equal weight with meaning.

The following lines extend this fluidity:

我散漫在原野上

像如歌的行板……

A literal rendering would be:

I am scattered loosely across the plains,
like a singing andante...

While semantically accurate, this version feels somewhat prosaic in English and lacks the lightness and musical ease of the original. The Chinese reads fluid, unforced, and rhythmically open. I therefore shifted toward conciseness and movement:

I wander across plains
in a singing andante...

“Scatter loosely” preserves meaning but weakens musical motion. “Wander,” by contrast, retains openness and drift, suggesting both river and speaker in a shared condition of flow. I also chose “in” rather than “like” to place the river directly within the musical movement rather than merely comparing it to one.

A similar but more complex negotiation appears in the following line:

“我没有齐整的岸柳砌石”

A literal rendering would be:

“I do not have neat riverside willows or carefully built stone embankments”

The phrase “岸柳砌石” is highly condensed yet instantly recognizable within Chinese poetic imagery: ordered willows lining riverbanks and carefully arranged stonework associated with classical landscape aesthetics. Its symmetry creates visual and rhythmic balance.

My first attempt sought to preserve both image and rhythm while making explicit what is compressed in the Chinese:

“No regimented willows or stacked stones confine me”

However, “regimented” felt overly formal, and “confine me” suggest an emphasis not present in the original. I revised it to:

“No aligned willows or stacked stones hem me in”

Here, “hem me in” restores spatial enclosure rather than psychological constraint, while “aligned” softens rigidity without losing visual order. The aim was not strict equivalence, but a balance between image, rhythm, and openness.

Repetition in the poem posed another challenge. Chinese rhetorical repetition often accumulates force through parallel structure, whereas in English it can become heavy or monotonous if reproduced mechanically. For example:

我走着
像一个农夫走向他忠实的土地
我走着
像一个少女走向她欢蜜的夜晚
我走着
像一个将军走向他仪仗如林的兵团

A literal rendering would preserve repetition directly:

I walk
like a farmer walking toward his faithful land
I walk
like a maiden walking toward her sweet night
I walk
like a general walking toward his army of banners.

In English, however, the repeated “I walk” flattens momentum and weakens the sense of forward movement. More impor-

tantly, “walk” does not fully capture the river-like energy of the speaker.

I therefore introduced variation within repetition:

I surge forward
like a farmer toward his faithful land.
I press forward
like a maiden toward her sweet secret night.
I forge forward
like a general toward his marching army.

The recurring “forward” preserves the original pattern, while the changing verbs —“surge,” “press,” and “forge”—create increasing momentum. The repetition is not removed but transformed into progression, allowing accumulation of force through motion rather than identical syntax.

Imagery required equally careful negotiation. Some images—fish, reeds, cliffs, stars—travel easily across languages; others carry different poetic associations in English. My aim was to preserve tone and essential vision while allowing the English to breathe.

Consider the seasonal passage:

我的盛夏浑浊而暴愠
我的秋天凝重而虚涵
我柔软起伏的前胸迎着春天的絮语
我还给冬天以——坚冰

A literal rendering would be:

My midsummer is turbid and violently heated
My autumn is heavy and inwardly hollow
My soft rising chest welcomes spring’s whispers
I return to winter as solid ice

While accurate, this version feels somewhat prosaic. I therefore moved toward a more imagistic register:

“My midsummer is rich with tempers”

This preserves ambiguity, allowing readers to imagine turbulent waters, summer storms, or emotional intensity rather than a fixed emotional state.

Similarly, “虚涵” posed particular difficulty. Its meanings may include inwardness, receptivity, spaciousness, and contained depth. My first attempt, “inclusive,” felt abstract and explanatory. I eventually revised it to:

“My autumn, solemn and embracing”

This retains emotional density while preserving a sense of openness.

The spring line required attention to bodily motion and rhythm:

“I rise in curves to welcome spring’s whispers.”

Here, “前胸” (literally “front chest”) is transformed into movement rather than anatomy. I chose to emphasize the river’s gesture and flow rather than preserve a bodily image that might sound awkward in English.

The final line became:

“I return in winter as solid ice”

Here, “in winter” rather than “to winter” broadens the temporal sense and aligns more naturally with English idiom. It also creates a clearer parallel with the preceding lines, giving the stanza greater balance and closure. In this passage, emotional intensity and seasonal transformation mattered more than literal correspondence. Translation became not a matter of substitution, but of re-creation.

Another example appears in the following lines:

我有敏感到脆弱的神经
我有多情到多愁的情感

My first rendering was:

My nerves are sensitive enough to be frail.
My emotions so affectionate they turn sorrowful.

While close in meaning, it felt explanatory and emotionally diffuse. I revised it for rhythm and resonance:

My nerves are tuned to sensitivity and fragility.
My heart is attuned to passion and pathos.

Here, “tuned” and “attuned” create internal resonance, while “passion and pathos” condense emotional transformation into a sonically charged pairing. The aim is not lexical equivalence but emotional reconstruction through rhythm and sound.

Yuan Fan’s poem moves continually between mythic declaration and intimate interiority. It speaks through both river-consciousness and human consciousness. As poet-translator, I approached translation not as a problem to solve, but as a

relationship to sustain.

Translation becomes an act of listening — an act of listening to rhythm, silence, repetition, and what remains unsaid beyond language.

The poem’s ending is especially crucial, carrying both propulsion and self-realization:

我的形状像一条远去的道路
坚定地流动着
履行 我 - 自 - 己 -
穿过无尽无休的
白昼和夜晚.....

A literal rendering would be:

I am shaped like a disappearing road,
flowing forward with determination,
fulfilling myself,
through endless days and nights...

While accurate, it lacks rhythmic momentum. I therefore expanded and reshaped it:

I take the shape of a long winding road,
determined to press forward,
becoming myself, fulfilling myself,
crossing endless days and nights...

Here, repetition becomes structural emphasis rather than redundancy. “Becoming myself” foregrounds continuous self-formation, while “long winding road” restores visual continuity of the river image. The ending remains open-ended, sustaining motion rather than closure.

A river changes shape as it flows. So does translation. The task is not to rebuild

riverbanks stone by stone, but to ensure
that the river continues to move.

During the translation process, I wrote the
following poem in response:

Insomnia for Translating a River Poem

Because it surges with power,
and I am a soul-bound human.

Because all words have limits—
“ancient” or “primeval”
are simply not enough.

How can one name
such wild spirit,
such untamed life force?

Because it is real,
flowing into my body,
coursing through my mind.

Because I long to become
a stream or a fish,
moving beyond walls.

Because its calling is timeless.
Day and night,
I fear missing
the most essential part.

Anna Yin 2026/06/09

Yuan Fan is a Chinese poet, reciter, and advocate for public poetry, as well as a partner of “Reading Poetry for You.” He explores the poetic essence of life and its very being, often through visual media. Formerly based in Mississauga, Canada, he has since traveled widely and is known as the “Flying Poet.” His poetry collection *I Am an Ancient River*, along with other acclaimed works, has been widely celebrated.



Anna Yin

Anna Yin was Mississauga’s Inaugural Poet Laureate (2015-2017) and has authored seven poetry collections (five in English) and four books of poetry translation. Her poems/translations have appeared at Queen’s Quarterly, ARC Poetry, New York Times, China Daily, CBC Radio, World Journal etc. Anna won poetry awards from Canada, USA and China. She has read on Parliament Hill, at Austin International Poetry Festival, Edmonton Poetry Festival etc. Her website: annapoetry.com