

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Use of One-Syllable Articles in the Literary Chinese Translation Classroom

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Abstract:

In the past 40 years, Literary Chinese has taken a firm backseat in the world of Chinese translation, which has encouraged an increasing trend of employing Mandarin Chinese as a conduit for understanding the text. This trend distorts translation and interpretation decisions, such as through first translating the text into Mandarin Chinese and then translating the Mandarin Chinese into English. This article therefore argues that Literary Chinese should be defined and understood on its own terms, aiming to reduce the use of Mandarin Chinese as a proxy and promote direct engagement instead. To operationalise this argument, I (i) author a One-Syllable Article of the /wu/ syllable that resists clean translation into Mandarin Chinese, and (ii) provide a teacher interaction sequence that can intervene with the problem and guide students through glossary building and effective translation decision-making.

Keywords: literary Chinese, one-syllable article, Chinese translation, wenyan

1. Introduction

Literary Chinese (*wényánwén* 文言文) is the continuation of Classical Chinese (500 B.C to 220 C.E), stretching through to 20th century China. (Hegel, 2012; Kroll et al., 2017, p. x; Lanselle, 2021). This continuation, rooted in Confucian and Daoist philosophy, has gone on for over 2,000 years and has influenced languages in Japan, Vietnam, the Ryukyu Islands, and the Korean Peninsula; this mixing had a direct hand in the creation of the “CJKV” family of Han glyphs (D. C. S. Li et al., 2022). For an authentic example of this shared medium, *Topical Discourses with Chibong* 芝峰類說 (지봉유설), written in Literary Chinese in 1604 by Korean academic Yi Sugwang (penname Chibong), notes the differences between Japan and Korea’s words for wetlands in the language (Yi, 2025):

倭國謂田爲畠。謂水田爲田。火田爲畑。猶我國以水田爲畓也。故官名有畠山殿。地名有畑島云。

Japan calls fields hatake 畠. They call wetlands den 田. They also take the components hi 火 and den 田 to make hatake 畑 (slash-and-burn fields). Similarly, my country takes the components su 水 and jeon 田 to make dap 畓 (wetlands). Thus, it is stated that there are formal titles such as Lord Hatakeyama 畠山殿 and placenames like Hatake Island 畑島.

This discourse demonstrates a trio of names for fields (or rice paddies) at the time: tián 田 in Chinese, hatake 畠 in Japanese, and dap 畓 in Korean, all independently created by each country. This is not to



say variant characters are all that distinguish the languages: Some grammar rules from Classical Chinese were forgotten and meaning shifted which, coupled with these variant characters, makes them very distinct entities. This is what distinguishes Literary Chinese from Classical Chinese: As a pan-Asian “scripta franca,” it features language transfer from each nation and time period it inhabited.

In Classical Chinese, we see object-subject distinctions for the first-person pronouns wú 吾 and wǒ 我 respectively. Take this line in Zhuangzi for example (Zhuang, 2016, p. 7):

堯讓天下於許由，曰：「日月出矣，而燭火不息，其於光也，不亦難乎！時雨降矣，而猶浸灌，其於澤也，不亦勞乎！夫子立而天下治，而我猶尸之，吾自視缺然，請致天下。」

Yao, proposing to resign the throne to Xu You, said, 'When the sun and moon have come forth, if the torches have not been put out, would it not be difficult for them to give light? When the seasonal rains are coming down, if we still keep watering the ground, will not our toil be labour lost for all the good it will do? Do you, Master, stand forth (as sovereign), and the kingdom will (at once) be well governed. If I still (continue to) preside over it, I must look on myself as vainly occupying the place - I beg to resign the throne to you.'

However, come the time of Western Han (~100 B.C.), this rule began to be forgotten. For example, in *Records of the Grand Historian*, written 400-500 years after the Classical period (Sima, 2025):

鄭人有賣鄭於秦曰：「我主其城門，鄭可襲也。」

A man from Zheng sold out Zheng to Qin, saying: 'I control the city gate, Zheng can be attacked.'

This is an unambiguous case of wǒ 我 being used in a way that would certainly not be found in the classical period: It is not emphatic, and it is used before the verb zhǔ 主 “to control.” During the Warring States period, one would see wú 吾 here.

However, moving back to *Topical Discourses with Chibong* (Yi, 2025), we see yú 余 supplant wú 吾 in most subject positions, but also see wǒ 我 remain the object pronoun:

余謂我東人名能文詞者。

I see my/our people from the east as those skilled in writing.

Variance in grammar and vocabulary such as these, is why we see the use of terms such as “Medieval Chinese” to comprise the Literary Chinese during the 3rd to 10th Centuries by Kroll et al. (2017, p. x), noting that the explosion in new glyphs and meanings necessitates the usage. One fluent in Classical Chinese, therefore, may not necessarily understand a Medieval Chinese or Qing dynasty Literary Chinese text without additional research. I would therefore use Literary Chinese to comprise Kroll’s (2017) meaning of “premodern written Chinese,” which fell out of use with the New Culture Movement (Priestley & Shou-jung, 1962).

When compared with Mandarin Chinese, the lingua franca of modern mainland China, Literary Chinese is functionally its own distinct, unspoken language (Fuller, 2024; Hegel, 2012; Lanselle, 2021; Priestley & Shou-jung, 1962). Literary Chinese operates on a significantly different set of principles



and parameters (Chomsky, 1981) to modern topolects: It is largely monosyllabic, has extreme flexibility in word class between nouns and verbs (*huóyòng* 活用), often relies on parataxis through omission of function words, and diachronically adopts meanings from Classical Chinese – the language on which it is based – and the language of the given time period (Fuller, 2024; Pulleyblank, 2000).

Pan (2024) therefore calls for the cultivation of skills within translators of Literary Chinese, which requires a reflection on the teaching practice of translators in the first place. They describe a teacher-centred, knowledge-transmission model of education, akin to the “banking model of education” described by Freire (2017), sometimes resulting in rote memorisation that treats Literary Chinese as a cipher to decode rather than a language system. Li Haijun (2012) highlights problems with “unreasonable” textbooks, the absence of technology, and, most importantly, a lack of legitimate practice. With respect to textbooks, Li focuses on the stilted, literary styles of text in the textbooks in use, something also noted in 20th century Chinese education in general (Chen, 2014). In modern-day, there is an emphasis on etymological understanding of characters, the ability to punctuate an unannotated classical text, and conducting full-text translation; the latter is seen as strong for forcing the student to engage with the entire text, including what many annotators commonly miss (Pan, 2024). Proficiency is chiefly analysed with multiple-choice questions, which Pan (2024) particularly criticises on the basis of them not telling a student why their answer is right or wrong.

To challenge the use of Mandarin Chinese as a benchmark for Literary Chinese translation, I raise a potential material: A One-Syllable Article (*Tóngyīn Wénzhāng* 同音文章; a form of monosyllabic text) that I composed, named The Fog 霧 wù. This poem makes specific use of various grammar points that Mandarin Chinese cannot replicate; this includes exceptional *yìhé* 意合 parataxis, the polysemy of wù/w 恶, and variation in negation patterns using wù 勿 and wú 毋. This specifically addresses a point made by Pan (2024), responding to the aforementioned benchmarking. I will make the argument that this specific poem cannot be fully translated into modern Mandarin Chinese, only interpreted in a myriad of ways; this is a reality to be accepted, and to dismiss “incorrect” translations would be to deny the interpretation the translator made (Baker & Saldanha, 2009; Hermans, 2019; Heward, 2023). This will therefore expand upon Pan’s argument that cultivation of talent in understanding Literary Chinese is key, but one must navigate within the language itself, so as not to fall into a *géyì* 格义 (Pan, 2024) pitfall across topolects. That is, one should not try to forcibly match Literary Chinese words and concepts with Mandarin equivalents and instead navigate The Fog.

2. Literature Review

This review builds the theoretical foundation necessary for using One-Syllable Articles as a teaching intervention in Literary Chinese translation. Firstly, drawing on Pan (2024), it situates the current history of Literary Chinese translation before outlining the central problem of Mandarin Chinese being used as a conduit for understanding Literary Chinese, which can railroad a translator into premature conclusions. My classroom solution, the One-Syllable Article, is reviewed, situating it within the history and conceptualisation to show how and why this type of text can be useful to “block” proxy usage of Mandarin Chinese. To accentuate this, translation hermeneutics used by human translators is brought up to explain why “trust” (knowing the text has meaning) and “aggression” (the interpretive



selection amongst alternatives) should be expected in students' translation work. Finally, a small nod is made to AI and machine translation's contributions to the field as a secondary point of comparison.

Pan (2024) notably identifies the trend in which Mandarin is increasingly used as a conduit through which Literary Chinese is translated into other languages, used as a benchmark for understanding. Therefore, this process results in a tertiary or "proxy" translation, one that will be dictated by the interpretations that went into the Mandarin translation, which they call *géyì* 格义. This paper aims to address that central concern. Due to the aforementioned differences between the Mandarin and Literary Chinese, the use of the former as a "benchmark" for understanding forces a much more rigid interpretation of a normally context-light, interpretation-demanding text. Pan has therefore argued that Literary Chinese translation has to move in four directions: Organisation, comparative research of texts, expanding and deepening the field's repertoire beyond the central classics, and cultivating talent amongst existing translators. This paper concurs with Pan's ideas and believes they are necessary.

Pan (2024) shows that Literary Chinese translation to and from English has come a long way over the past 400 years, going from missionaries attempting to translate the Christian Bible into Literary Chinese to make the Delegate's Edition (Hanan, 2003; Taiwan Bible Society, 2006) to modern renditions of the Analects in English (Chan, 2003; Kong, 2000). Even before this time, individuals were translating between other languages, including variable registers of Chinese during the Ming and early Qing dynasty (Lanselle, 2021). The Literary Chinese to English medium has therefore reached a point where the classical texts are generally understood and are moving towards comparative translation through mass archival efforts.

While translation is fundamentally ancient, teaching translation is a more modern development. While chiefly focused on Mandarin and English, this field has come a long way in the past 40 years (D. Li, 2006). For example, Liang Qichao's 梁啟超 *On the Translation of Books* 論譯書 (Y. Gao, 2021) had a heavy influence on state translation programmes. Li Defeng (2006) notes that translation testing was seen as extremely important, mainly for analysing competence and whether the course contents were being met. Tests were mostly conducted 1-3 times per term, but their efficacy had not been extensively studied at that time. Cheung (2021) proposes the use of language teaching techniques in translation to move past textbooks and into a more practice-focused model of education, on the basis of translation techniques never being independent of language competence (Poon, 2000); "translationese" tends to come from attempts to simplify and normalise a text, erasing its personality and structural complexity. Therefore, teaching complex Chinese that resists English interference and gives the translator the footing to create as rich a translation as the English version is key. Xu and You (2021) identify teacher quality as a key bottleneck in the industry's progress, chiefly due to teacher inexperience in the field and few opportunities for students to practice in the market.

My One-Syllable Article takes inspiration from Hu Mingfu's *Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den* (Chao et al., 2002; Z. Zhao, 2024), which Yuen Ren Chao edited, among at least four others (Ceng & Chu, 2022; Chao, 1980, pp. 147–151). The term "One-Syllable Article," calqued from the Chinese *Tóngyīn Wénzhāng* 同音文章, is used as the name dispersed into internet consciousness, starting on Wikipedia and now being used on other websites. *Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den* was originally made as an *argumentum ad absurdum* against the phoneticisation of Literary Chinese during a period in which Chinese topolects were under consideration (Chao, 1980, pp. 147–151). It is commonly



misconstrued as a critique against all phoneticisation, which Chao has denied (Chao, 1980, pp. 150–151; Z. Zhao, 2024). However, this ignores that Chinese varieties operate fine when phoneticised: Dungan Mandarin (Huízú yǔyán Хуэйзү йүян 回族語言) uses Cyrillic (Rimsky-Korsakoff, 1967), and Southern Min (Bân-lâm-gú 閩南語) sometimes uses Latin script (Klötter, 2005). Therefore, had Chao argued against all phoneticisation of Chinese, it would have failed on its face. When put towards Literary Chinese, the argument has teeth: How can one romanise a language that is not actually spoken? Do we use reconstructions that must continually be updated (Baxter, 2016; Behr, 2015)? If not, do we use the reader's topolect? In which case, how does one comprehend the homophony and unfamiliarity that arises? It is possible, but with cultural inertia and technological advancements, Chao's argument has seemingly won out. Building on Chao's work, I have published One-Syllable Articles (Evans, 2025) to bridge the medium with Oulipian literature from France, particularly taking inspiration from *Alphabetical Africa* (Mathews et al., 2005, pp. 47–48) and *A void* (Perec, 2008), testing the potential literature of Literary Chinese when faced with Chao's constraints. This is, as of now, an extremely underdeveloped field of research, with very little literature.

Interpretation is not linear: We understand a word based on its sentence, theme, and use; this is a matter of pragmatics (Brown & Yule, 1989; Griffiths & Cummins, 2023) and hermeneutics (Regan, 2012). When translating the poem here, the translator is faced with a serious challenge; how one chooses to interpret the poem is a difficult question to answer (Grondin, 2015; Piecychna, 2023). When making that interpretation, one will enter with their own prejudice (Gadamer, 2007; Piecychna, 2023; Regan, 2012): Are they taking a westernised lens, or perhaps a Daoist one? This heavily influences one's translation before they even begin to engage in it. Therefore, the individual interpreting the work will fuse the text's horizon with their own. This does, of course, require the individual does not assume it is nonsense. We can describe this within Steiner's model of translation (Ma, 2023; Robinson, 2021): They need to trust the work is not nonsense, make aggressive choices about individual Han character meanings, incorporate those results into their own understanding of Literary Chinese, and compensate for the loss of meaning with their own restitution. We can therefore embrace the translator's prejudice as not a barrier, but the conduit for translation we need.

Small nods must be made to technological advancements in Literary Chinese translation. The field has benefited from artificial intelligence efforts being explored, such as the recent release of *AI 太炎 Taiyan* (S. Li et al., 2025a, 2025b), which has produced admirable results in translating Literary Chinese into modern Mandarin Chinese. Furthermore, multiple pre-trained models have been produced, such as SikuBERT (Wang D. et al., 2022), which was built off the *Siku Quanshu* corpus from the Qing dynasty, and GujiBERT (D. Wang et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2024), which achieves similar accuracy. In the neural machine translation (NMT) space, Chinese translation from Literary Chinese to Mandarin has seen advancements thanks to the advancement of sequence-to-sequence models bolstered by a new dataset (Jiang et al., 2023) using a variety of literary genres, including Buddhist literature, which was previously underexplored. This advancement is massively helpful for those engaging in post-editing, dramatically reducing the clicks needed to produce a suitable result (Koehn, 2009; Sturgeon & Lee, 2016).



3. Methodology

3.1 Materials design

Composing a One-Syllable Article requires extensive knowledge of the syllable in question, particularly regarding the function words and the nouns and verbs that can be sequenced into a given theme. The workflow can be operationalised like this:

1. Search dictionary aggregators such as Pleco (Love, 2025) with its *A Student's Dictionary of Medieval Chinese* (Kroll et al., 2017) extension and *zi.tools* (2019).
2. Verify their definitions in historical dictionaries such as *Yupian* 玉篇 and *Jiyun* 集韻; this can be with *Kangxi Dictionary's* (Zhang & Chen, 2015) aggregation or in the primary sources themselves. Should there be no dictionary entries, searching corpora such as *Scripta Sinica* (Hsieh & Chen, 1984) or *Chinese Text Project* (Sturgeon, 2020, 2021) and making a value judgement is acceptable.
3. Develop a shortlist of vocabulary that could be useful in constructing a narrative, wherein definitions, common word classes, and Mandarin tone are appended.
4. Functional Minimum Test – Analyse the shortlist for potential Topic-Comment structures within the principles and parameters of Literary Chinese. Can it construct a reasonable SVO sentence with more than one character?
 - a. Any character can form a tautology such as 吾, 吾 *I am me* or 霧, 霧 *the fog is fog*. It is also possible to construct 霧霧 *the fog "fogs,"* so the absolute minimum is always possible.
5. Semantic Viability Test – Attempt to form an SVO, SOV, or Topic-Comment sentence using the characters that use more than one character and convey meaning.
6. Refine the shortlist based on potential themes spotted during the tests.
7. Produce the poem based on the shortlist.

Should an educator wish to make their own One-Syllable Articles, semantically and grammatically rich syllables such as /yi/, /zhi/, and /ji/ are recommended as the starting points. Chao (1980, p. 148) produced an /yi/ article in *Aunt Yi* 漪姨, and I (Evans, 2025) replicated his experiment in *The Story of a Seagull Visiting an Egret* 鷺詣醫鷓憶; both of these articles take entirely different approaches. Chao has produced at least two /ji/ articles (Chao, 1980, p. 148, 2023) which also produce very different narratives. Therefore, these are where the most ground is covered. /zhi/ contains numerous grammar-centric characters such as the nominaliser and 3rd-person pronoun 之, the verb “to arrive” 至, and far more; 之 alone allows for a robust article.

3.2 Technique application

Using the Richards and Rodgers (2014) framework from English Language Teaching (ELT), this interaction sequence will assume a constructivist approach to teaching and that the learners are already familiar with Literary Chinese. I propose using this poem to consolidate a class's knowledge of



translation through group work. We can use task-based instruction to actualise this, something already common in Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) teaching. It has also been linked to advances in general education and assists with building practical competence in students (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000; Shei et al., 2020).

The following interactions are centred on a standard academic time of 1 hour and 45 minutes.

Table 1. Classroom Interaction Example

Step 1: Encounter (10 min)		
Action: Give a brief introduction to the poem and show it on a board in full. In a more advanced class, present it without punctuation.	Instruction: “Read the poem on the board. Do you notice anything interesting about it?”	Aim: First elicit the student’s intuition. They should almost definitely notice it is all /wu/. Keep a lighthearted mood.
Step 2: Building trust (10+ min)		
Action: Students engage with the poem.	Instruction: “Try to chunk the text – where do you think its logic begins and ends? No need to be correct, write them down.”	Aim: The students are made to engage with the poem. This will separate those with trust and those without it.
Step 3: Pyramid discussion (15+ min)		
Action: Have students compare their interpretations with each other, either in pairs or groups.	Instruction: “In groups, compare your interpretations with one another.”	Aim: Facilitate interaction between students; from a timetable fit perspective, students should have a sense of community already.
Step 4: Collaborative meaning extraction (30+ min)		
Action: Students use dictionaries to build a translation.	Instruction: “In your group, try to translate this poem into <i>Baihua</i> . Use dictionaries to help!”	Aim: Working together, the students try to translate the poem using their interpretations. This is where students should begin encountering vagaries and entering the aggression stage.
Step 5: Presentation (30+ min)		



<p>Action: Students present their interpretations to the class. Ideally, there should be differences to discuss afterwards.</p>	<p>Instruction: “Ok, time’s up! Let’s see what we’re working with here.”</p>	<p>Aim: Reveal the poem’s key trick to the class, allowing for a discussion on how to translate materials with dual meanings within.</p>
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This application can be used with advanced undergraduate students who are hoping to translate Literary Chinese. It aims to build the translation competence desired by Li Defeng (2006) while avoiding the Mandarin-as-a-Conduit practice I take issue with from Pan (2024). This approach also satisfies the validation of interpretation that is so important in the field, as mentioned by Baker and Saldanha (2009), Hermans (2019), and Herward (2023), all whilst actualising Steiner’s hermeneutic theory of translation (Robinson, 2021). Problem solving, analysis, and engagement with the language are all forced here. Taking a workshop approach to this session is plausible, using the AI failure outlined earlier as either an authentic material for post-editing (Sturgeon & Lee, 2016) or a showing the importance of the student’s translation prejudices.

4. Case Study: *The Fog*

Table 2. /wu/ Poem and Translation Examples

「霧」

烏鳴，伍武鶩鶩，晤岬塢。

霧搗塢。吾惡悟？

勿侮毋誤。務務霧霧。

惡悟？毋憚。乍霧。

吾勿鶩鶩。寤鳴霧霧。



<p>简体译文</p>	<p>《雾》</p> <p>乌鸦在哀鸣，一队武士正策马狂奔，最终相遇在一座荒山下的坞堡前。</p> <p>浓雾笼罩，彻底吞没了坞堡。我该如何才能参透这其中的道理？</p> <p>不可轻侮，不可失误。必须专注于这迷蒙的大雾。</p> <p>仇恨导致冲突怎么办？不可灰心丧气。要与此雾对峙，融为一体。</p> <p>我将不再肆意奔驰。最终，我在雾中醒来，听见了鸚鸟的啼声。</p>
<p>English Translation</p>	<p>“The Fog”</p> <p>Crows caw. A troop of warriors charge wild, meeting a barren peak at a fort.</p> <p>The fog smothers the fort. How am I to comprehend this? Am I evil?</p> <p>Do not scorn, do not err. Attend to the fog, the crawling fog.</p> <p>What clashes? Hate? Be not dismayed. Confront the fog; abide within it.</p> <p>I shall not charge wild. I awaken to a bunting’s call within the mist.</p>

This Ancient-Style poem 古體詩 *gǔtǐshī* was inspired by Zhuang Zhou’s 莊周 eponymous work 莊子 *Zhuangzi*, specifically the first chapter: *Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease* 逍遙遊 *Xiāoyáo Yóu* (Zhuang, 2016). Zhuang frequently puts forth parables that aim to challenge the reader’s rationality, edging them towards the conclusion of the Dao’s 道 metaphysical properties; this work therefore places itself within that tradition. The *Daodejing* 道德經 also served as a strong inspiration with its simple, yet profound description of the Dao (Laozi, 2019, pp. 2–3). *The Fog* is here to represent the confusion not just within the narrative, but the poem, the act of translation, and the Han characters one is seeing. The poem is a cacophony of homophones to a Mandarin reader, translation requires the translator’s interpretation to have any hope of leaving, and even the Han characters themselves have homographic meanings. It can be either an embrace of ambiguity or ferocious resistance to it.

I chose the characters to annotate based on the following:

1. Are they in the HSK 3.0 Bands 1-9?
2. Are they in the vocabulary of *SanBaiQian* 三百千?

Should they be in neither, I list them in annotations here. The reason I chose the HSK bands is to account for character vocabulary that should be expected in a fluent speaker of Mandarin. However, considering classical texts obviously have their own wordstock, I chose to use the Three Character Classic 三字經, Hundred Family Surnames 百家姓, and Thousand Character Classic 千字經, a foundational trio of texts used in teaching elementary-level Literary Chinese and calligraphy as an



additional discriminator, in the absence of a regulatory body for Literary Chinese vocabulary knowledge. I also omitted *wú* 吾 given its ubiquitous presence in Literary Chinese.

1. 作 *wǔ* – (1) Similar to; the same as; of the same sort; (2) To go against; rival; (be) oppose(d) (Kroll et al., 2017).

【玉篇】偶敵也。(Zhang & Chen, 2015)

【集韻】五故切，音悟。同也。【莊子·天下篇】以騎偶不作之辭相應，以巨子爲聖人。(Zhang & Chen, 2015)

2. 侮 *wǔ* – (1) To offend, affront; (2) To insult (Kroll et al., 2017)

【集韻】【韻會】罔甫切，𠂔音武。慢易也。(Zhang & Chen, 2015)

3. 鳴 *wū* – Onomat. for various sounds, such as sadness (Kroll et al., 2017).

【玉篇】嗚呼，歎辭也。(Zhang & Chen, 2015)

4. 塢 *wù* – (1) Baliwick; fortified area; (2) low area within a basin; (3) a protective embankment (Kroll et al., 2017).

【集韻】【韻會】於五切，𠂔音鄔。同隴。小障也。一曰庠城。(Zhang & Chen, 2015)

5. 寤 *wù* – (1) To awaken from slumber; (2) to come around; (3) to become aware of.

【說文】寐覺而有言曰寤。从癡省，吾聲。一曰晝見而夜寤也。(Zhang & Chen, 2015)

6. 岨 *wù* – (1) *Bare, denuded hill; bald-top* (Kroll et al., 2017)

【廣韻】【集韻】【韻會】【正韻】𠂔五忽切。音兀。嶺岨，山貌也。一曰秃山貌。(Zhang & Chen, 2015)

7. 憊 *wǔ* – (1) *Rueful; despair(ing), disappointed, despondent, discouraged.* (Kroll et al., 2017)

【廣韻】憊然，失意貌。【三蒼】怪愕之辭。(Zhang & Chen, 2015)

8. 晤 *wù* – (1) To meet or see face-to-face; (2) can be an alternative form of *wù* 悟 *to awaken.*

【詩·陳風】可與晤歌。【傳】晤，遇也。【箋】晤，猶對也。(Zhang & Chen, 2015)

9. 騫 *wù* – (1) To gallop about, to run around, a mad dash (Kroll et al., 2017).

【玉篇】奔也，疾也。【漢書·音義】直騫曰馳，亂馳曰騫。【爾雅·釋詁】騫，務強也。【疏】騫謂馳騫，務謂事務，二者皆以力勉強。(Zhang & Chen, 2015)

10. 鷓 *wú* – A bunting or thrush bird.¹ Used in species names such as the Chestnut-eared bunting 栗耳鷓 *lì'ěr wú*.

¹ This is the only character not mentioned in Kroll et al. (2017). I translated this one myself.



【廣韻】武夫切【集韻】微夫切，𠄎音無。鳥名。雀屬。(Zhang & Chen, 2015)

From a pedagogical perspective, these annotations should not be given immediately; allow the students to engage with the text themselves with their standard suite of translation tools. Only give the annotations after they have thought and researched for themselves.

5. Analysis & Discussion

This poem makes use of multiple key characters that cannot be cleanly translated into Mandarin Chinese or English one-for-one. Depending on one's understanding of the Han characters at hand, they may arrive at dramatically different interpretations. My English translation attempts to synthesise multiple paths, but it does not capture the polysemy at work, let alone the homophony, which are their own beasts.

5.1 Hermeneutic flowchart

To translate this poem, one must make several interpretive decisions, which we can show through a hermeneutic flowchart:

1. Is *wǔ wǔ* 伍武 an individual, 15 *chi* 尺, 5 footprints, or a band of troops?
 - a. 伍 can either be a name (e.g., XXX) or a banker's anti-fraud numeral for the number 5 五.
 - b. 武 can be an adjective or noun relating to the military or a martial. However, it can also be a measurement equivalent to 3 *chi* 尺, or a footprint.
 - c. Translation is assisted through pragmatics; *wù* 鶩 is used afterwards, implying the act of galloping freely. However, all translations are technically still valid:
 - i. There could be footprints stretching 15 *chi* 尺, with reduplication emphasising size or number depending on interpretation.
 - ii. There could be 5 warriors tearing forward.
 - iii. There could be one Wu Wu sprinting forward.
 - d. Additionally, the decision as to whether Wu Wu is one person or five dramatically changes the context of the commanding *wù* 勿 and *wú* 毋: Are they one person's thoughts, or is it a command from another martial?
2. The first 惡 presents another pathway:
 - a. *wù* can mean to detest, be averse to, or to denounce. Therefore, with this reading, one can assume the protagonist(s) detests awakening, is averse to awakening, or denouncing the act of awakening.
 - b. *wū* can be an interrogative how/what or exclamatory particle. With this reading, one can believe the protagonist(s) are asking how to awaken, what awakening is, or marvelling at the concept of awakening.



- c. This is where my own punctuating of my poem becomes problematic: I did add a?, which influences interpretation. One could change this to decrease comprehension in a practicing translator, and increase the accuracy, considering Classical Chinese did not use punctuation (S. Li et al., 2025b).
 - d. There is a possibility that one could engage in a polysemous reading; do they hate awakening, for example?
3. The second 惡 presents similar diversions in path, this time pertaining to going against the fog. One could mix the two interpretations here to present character development; from hating awakening to wondering how to engage the fog and awaken, for example. Alternatively, one could go in the opposite direction: The protagonist(s) could be seeking to awaken before embracing the fog.
 4. 作 challenges a translator's familiarity with classical dictionaries. Traditionally, it is seen as a character meaning "to contradict or confront." In the *Jiyun*, though, the character is listed as a synonym for 同:

《集韻》五故切，音悟。同也。

This is used by Zhuang Zhou here, translation provided:

《莊子·天下篇》以畸偶不作之辭相應，以巨子爲聖人。

They regarded their most distinguished member as a sage.

- a. Should the translator take the traditional path, the protagonist(s) choose(s) to confront and go against the fog. This is likely forced if the translator has already picked the military aesthetic.
- b. Should the translator take the Daoist interpretation as a 同 synonym, the protagonist(s) embrace(s) and internalises the fog. The Daoist leaning is likely one that would allow the translator to "awaken" and leave the fog.

5.2 AI failure

To put this into perspective, AI 太炎 Taiyan (v3.20250712.1), one of few language models specialising in Literary Chinese, made this interpretation on 15th October 2025:

《霧》

烏鴉鳴叫，伍子胥奔馳追逐，遇到山峯就停下來休息。

霧氣遮蔽了山塢，我怎麼能夠領悟？

不要輕慢不要失誤，一定要保持警惕。霧氣遮蔽了山塢。

不要驚慌不要錯亂，霧氣遮蔽了山塢。

不要急於奔跑，霧氣遮蔽了山林。



While superficially similar to my English translation, the troop of warriors is interpreted as an individual named Wu Zixu 伍子胥, framing the plot from one man's perspective. This implies the AI did not identify that this poem was monosyllabic; simply the act of adding a /zi/ and /xu/ to the poem shows the AI has failed the hermeneutic text; it is obviously not trained on One-Syllable Articles given their small amount of literature, and it is fundamentally untrusting and unprejudiced in its interpretations if viewed in Steiner's (Ma, 2023) model.

Furthermore, we ought to note the decisions it made when navigating *The Fog*:

- The first 惡 was interpreted as *how* 怎麼.
- The second 惡 was seemingly skipped, instead being the protagonist telling themselves not to lose one's temper (不要驚慌). It is possible 惡 was interpreted as an interjection.
- 件 is never addressed at all, instead stating the valley is obscured by fog (霧氣遮蔽了山塢). This skipping of characters is a common error when trying to navigate monosyllabic poems, but I do not have a good explanation for it; it could be that the character simply is not in the AI's vocabulary.

5.3 Pedagogical use

In this hermeneutic circle, Mandarin Chinese is not an acceptable benchmark for translating this poem, and AI has failed to navigate it. However, the directions one can take in translating it make it effective for many pedagogical situations. Given the proposals made by Li Defeng (2006), this poem could be used to test an individual's proficiency in Literary Chinese interpretation. Should they notice the ambiguity and reconstruct the flowchart, this is a significant marker of translation competence. This would require the educator to know the hermeneutic processes described above; one must evaluate the student's thought process as they combated the poem's interpretive diversity. This look into how a student thinks could be useful for finding where they need to grow; it could, potentially, be an area for further research.

However, it need not only be a test; the nature of the poem alone is a fine pull for a lead-in to an in-class activity, to use an ELT term (Ur, 2012; C. Zhao, 2020). I propose the use and development of other One-Syllable Articles in activities that force a Literary Chinese translator to interact with the characters; the homophony makes negative transfer between Mandarin and Literary Chinese unlikely, as they cannot use Mandarin phonology to guess meanings. It forces a visual engagement with the glyphs. Another key benefit of One-Syllable Articles is that they frequently encourage the use of obscure characters to maintain their meaning, allowing a teacher to deliver these characters without needing to use classical quotes out of context. When fully removing the regular conventions of Literary Chinese, one can test how prepared the student is for unconventional texts.

6. Conclusion

This poem has showcased the flexibility of Literary Chinese, the importance of interpretation when translating it, and affirmed the necessity of human engagement to translate a monosyllabic poem through AI failure. This has been coupled with the operationalisation of a hermeneutic circle. There is



a clear need to move beyond excessive use of Mandarin Chinese for Literary Chinese translation benchmarks: We must move towards an educated stock of human translators who understand Literary Chinese as a distinct entity. I therefore propose the diversification of translation genres, including the use of One-Syllable Articles, within a Chinese translation classroom. This can help tackle the current bottleneck of teacher experience when looking towards the increasing worker population and mushrooming translation industry.

The development of a strong corpus of One-Syllable Articles could train Literary Chinese AI like AI 太炎 Taiyan to produce higher-quality translations, which could merit further research; this would aid our understanding of the potential literature within Literary Chinese, Mandarin syllables, and their syntactic limits. There is an additional possibility of using unconventional texts such as this, with well-trodden translation flowcharts, in the development of robust tests to evaluate student progress. This especially applies to Mandarin Chinese, which has few, if any, One-Syllable Articles written within its own grammatical constraints; writing these could bridge my research into Mandarin Chinese translation classrooms proper.

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