story of Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, who sails with his army to sack the city of Troy. Odysseus has some difficulty getting back home. Only after ten years, and a goodly number of Boy’s Own adventures, is he restored to his faithful wife, Penelope, and his stalwart son, Telemachus.

Joyce questions Homer's Odyssey and splits it out in his saga of a day (June 16, 1904) in the life of two Dubliners, Leopold Bloom (Ulysses) and Stephen Dedalus (Telemachus). Penelope is represented by Bloom's not so faithful wife, Molly. Ulysses does not slavishly follow the Odyssey, though each episode in the ancient tale has a counterpart in the modern one. For example, in one Homeric episode Odysseus descends to Hades, the world of the dead; in Joyce's version Leopold Bloom—a Jew and therefore, like Odysseus, an outsider—goes to a funeral. If Homer marks the beginning of Western literature, Joyce suggested, Ulysses was its culmination. "The task I set myself technically in writing a book from eighteen different points of view and in as many styles," he wrote to his benefactress, Harriet Shaw Weaver, "all apparently unknown or undiscovered by my fellow translators, that and the nature of the legend chosen would be enough to upset anyone's mental balance."

Xiao and Wen don’t need to read Joyce's poem to his own genius to appreciate the mental upsetts that Ulysses can produce. "There are pieces," Xiao says, "where I think he made it unnecessarily difficult." His fellow translators can only agree. Ulysses has been translated into more than twenty languages, including Hebraic, Arabic, Malayalam, and, fittingly, Irish. Perhaps the surprising thing is not that it has now been translated into Chinese but that the translation is now available.

Much of the delay can be attributed to the antipathy of the Chinese Communists toward bourgeois liberal Western culture. Joyce's work became caught in the Chinese government's straitened view of literature's role—that it should extol the morally upright deeds of workers, peasants, and soldiers. Ulysses—bawdy, irreverent, and anti-heroic—hardly suits. Nor did the Maoist cultural commissars ap-
TRANSLATING Joyce is no easy game in any language, of course. Even a simple sentence like “And going forth, he met Butterly” presents dangers. In fact, in the book Bock Mulligan and Stephen Dedalus meet no one named Butterly. Mulligan, Stephen’s roommate, is just tossing off a clever remark as he and Stephen leave their residence south of Dublin. He is referring, crudely, as is his wont, to the biblical description of Peter after his betrayal of Jesus: “and going forth, he wept bitterly.” In English the allusion is obvious enough. In German, though, after much cogitation, the thought has been put this way: they went forth “und weinte Buttermilch” — or “and wept buttermilk.” In Chinese it is translated for sound: they “went out and met Bu Tei,” meaning “to go out secretly.”

Another example: Stephen recalls that he has borrowed a pound from the poet and writer George Russell, who styles himself “A.E.” Thinking of his debt, Stephen puns “A.E.I.O.U.” In the German, Italian, Czech, and Latvian translations, the expression is simply left as it is, which must be rather baffling to readers. Most others include a native-language gloss. In the 1929 French translation the passage reads “A.E. Je vous dois. I.O.U.” In Spanish it is “A.E. Te deba. I.O.U.” In Hungarian the vowels are changed, killing the joke: “A.E.K.P.” The same is true in Croatian, where an explanation is also added: “A.E.J.V.D (Ja vam duguem).” “You can only do your best,” says Fritz Senn, of the Zürich James Joyce Foundation. Senn is an authority on Joyce translation. “But of course, if a joke is explained, it is no longer funny.” Right. Is there any way to translate Stephen’s witicism about Shakespeare’s wife: “If others have their will, Ann hath a way”?

Many languages at least share the Roman alphabet, and therefore, to varying degrees, a common corpus of sounds. The name Leopold Bloom looks and sounds much the same from Dublin to Detroit, from Harare to Hanói.

Enter China and the rules change. To begin with, there are only 404 possible phonetic combinations in Mandarin, far fewer than in English. Wordplay is inevitably distorted. And Chinese is ideographic, not alphabetic; “home,” for example, is represented by a stylized picture that has traditionally been interpreted to be a pig beneath a roof. Ulysses is no pictorial but oral, and comes alive most vividly when read aloud.

To make things more difficult, Chinese is a tonal language. In Mandarin, the official national tongue, there are four possible tones to each sound: high level, rising, falling rising, and falling. The tones make a difference. For a crude example of the sounds, consider using the word “Ma” in these different contexts: “Oh, Ma!” in surprise at seeing your mother where she shouldn’t be, “Oh, Ma!” in exasperation, “Mi” in sober conversation, and “Oh, it’s Ma!” in warning at an unexpected phone call from the maidservant. In Chinese tones change the meaning of a word, not just the emphasis. The four tones for “ma” mean, respectively, “mother,” “hemp,” “horse,” and “to curse.” (A fifth tone for “ma,” which is actually neutral, turns a sentence into a question.)

Proper names are not always translated syllable for syllable. If “America” were to be written sound for sound—that is, one Chinese character for each syllable—it could be construed as “inferior beautiful beneficial addition.” That’s not a good metaphor for Chinese ambivalence toward our country, but the standard term for America is actually nei guo, which sounds like “American” said with a mouthful of marbles. At least the name translates well: “Beautiful Country.” Sometimes names are assigned with reference not to sound at all but to the way China understands the world. This magazine, for example, named after a great body of water, is translated as “The Great Western Ocean Monthly.”

And finally, normal Chinese discourse is sometimes best translated loosely. When Americans see each other on the street, they ask, “How are you?” But when two Chinese acquaintances meet, they greet each other this way: “Chi le ma?”—literally, “Have you eaten yet?” That does not call for a recapitulation of the day’s diet any more than “How are you?” is an invitation to describe one’s fitness.
program, Therefore, in translating Chinese into English, "Chi le ma?" becomes "How are you?"

So it’s no wonder that Xiao was not altogether thrilled when a Chinese publisher suggested in 1990 that he undertake a translation of Ulysses. Pity the poor soul who has to deal with a fairly typical scrap of Ulysses like this one:

Unbatten your dagger definitions.
Horsemen is the whiteness of allhorse.
Streams of tendancy and thus they worship.
God: noise in the street; very peripatetic.
Space: what you damn well have to see. Through spaces
smaller than red globules of man’s blood they creepily-crawl after Blake’s
buckets into eternity of which this vegetable world is but a shadow. Hold
to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past.

I asked Judy Arase, a translator, to find this passage in the Chinese translation and then, without reference to Ulysses, translate it from the Chinese back into English. Here’s the result:

How about laying bare your dagger-like definitions? That which is the nature of a horse is the essence of all horses. They rever the up-down flow and surging-beginning. God: cries in the street. Downright leisure school of thought. Space: the thing you are bound to see. They slowly crawl towards eternity, boring through spaces smaller than man’s red blood cells, chasing after Blake’s buckets. This vegetable world is only but its shadow. Hold tightly to the here and now; all of the future shall surge into the past through it.

The translation is inventive and carries something of the texture of Joyce’s prose. Still, it’s not quite the same for one thing, it’s far too intelligible.

Wen was unadorned by the complexities; indeed, she was positively eager to take a crack at Joyce. Then sixty-two, and recently retired from a career as a translator of Japanese and the editor of other people’s English translations, she felt it was time to put her skills to the test.

"In Chinese there is an expression, "Only the head, not the tail"—meaning that a work has been started but not completed. "For forty years I only published the translations of others. I never had a chance to translate a famous book, a classic. Why not Ulysses?" Eventually she persuaded her husband that they could crack it together. The project has been an act of teamwork from the beginning, with Wen doing the first draft, Xiao applying the polish, and the two of them arguing over the final version.

Beginning in October of 1990 they set the following schedule: Rise at 5:00 each morning (Wen often had to raise her less committed husband), work until 3:00, and pause for breakfast. Then work until lunch, and again into the late afternoon. Wen worked nights and weekends as well, putting in, she figures, fifteen hours a day just about every day. She even gave up television and newspapers. For two years her sister took over the household, doing the shopping, cooking, and cleaning, so that the couple could work. The sister died in 1992; the translation is dedicated to her memory.

The couple leaned heavily on published sources to antagonize Joycean knots; they cite Don Gifford’s annotated Ulysses as a particular help. They consulted the Chinese Catholic Church, foreign-language specialists, geologists, doctors, and others for specialized knowledge. The Irish Embassy helped with specifically Irish references. What’s “braccy”?” Wen asked. The answer, as translated: “Bracally as usual.” And “on the stoolarm”?: A drifting state of mind. The embassy also provided reference books, maps of Dublin, and a videotape of the movie version of Ulysses, which was invaluable because Wen and Xiao have never been to Ireland. A Canadian resident in Beijing helped research linguistic oddities like “snotty moff for a mattress jig” —Joyce’speak for "prostitute."

Xiao and Wen were also able to refer to a work in progress by a man named Jin Di, a Chinese literary scholar now living in the United States, who began his own Chinese translation of Ulysses in 1978 but has not yet seen all of it into print. Bits of Jin’s work had been published by the time Xiao and Wen began theirs, and they acknowledge that they saw these, though not the twelve chapters that had appeared in Taiwan by 1993. Jin is somewhat chagrined that he has been working longer and yet is finishing later. But there is room for more than one Chinese translation. The Japanese, after all, are on their fourth. Xiao and Wen do not claim that their work is flawless; they are, however, delighted to have published first. “A gold medal is better than the silver one,” Wen says.

The work is not, in fact, flawless. A sharp-eyed Chinese reader has pointed out a few mistaken translations from the Latin. More important, sometimes things are just missed.

Molly and her lover, Blazes Boylan, eat Plunkett’s Poached Meat during their assignation; the term is translated as “pluntree trademark canned meat.” Good enough, but it misses the pan: “poached meat” was Dublin argot for sex. When Leopold recalls Molly’s description of the plump Ben Dollard, that his fine singing voice was a “bass barrelone,” the translation does not embody the play on words. His voice and shape, she is saying, are derived from barrels of Bass beer. Joyce experimented with different ways of expressing cat sounds: “mikngna,” “mikngna,” “mikngna,” and prosangically, “miaw.” In Chinese, which does not have the array of sounds English has, the characters don’t change.

Still, Xiao and Wen don’t miss much. First, they adapted Chinese-language tools to the challenge. Most Chinese names have three syllables (Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai); the Chinese transliterations of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus have seven each. Stephen’s is rendered phonetically—"Si de fen: Di da le si.” The unusual number of characters, the midline period between them, and the use of a few classical (rather than simplified) Chinese characters are all unmistakable signals to the Chinese reader to ignore the meaning and just note that it signifies a name. (A literal translation would be “This-base of a fruit-fragrant.” Enlighten-exchange-distinguish.) The practice is similar to using “%&*!” to indicate a curse in English; a reader doesn’t delineate each symbol but just consumes the meaning. Bloom, wandering through a newspaper office, reads in type the name of the friend whose funeral he has just attended: mungD keintip (Patrick Dignam backward). In Chinese the eight characters used to render the name are likewise reversed. When the normal pub owner, Davy Byrne, “smiledlywaves nodded all in one,” the issue was trickier. Chinese characters
are never smoothed together. Xiao and Wen used a quirk of Chinese grammar that implies simultaneously occurring actions.

They also adapted Chinese styles to Joycean ones. Molly, Leopold, and Stephen have interior monologues, and all sound different. Molly is not very well educated. She occasionally misuses difficult words, and her thoughts, in the famous soliloquy that ends the book, have an earthy resonance. Stephen, the teacher and literary scholar, is philosophical. And Leopold is a middle-class brute with a big heart who often thinks about sex and solved movements. So in the Chinese, Molly is rendered in working-class Beijing slang, Stephen mostly in classical Chinese, and Leopold mostly in a mixture of modern and classical that dates from the early twentieth century. By varying the styles, the translation manages to convey the differences in character among the three.

When there is no linguistic or literary analogue, which is most of the time, footnotes do the job. So much of Ulysses is built around puns, allusions, and time and place-specific Irish humor that it really cannot be translated; one must simply plough through. Wen and Xiao made the most readable Chinese translation they could and then explained the Joycean quirks in footnotes—5,991 of them, the most in any Chinese book ever published. Xiao thought that there was thousands too many, but Wen prevailed. The reviews in the Chinese press pay tribute to the couple’s thoroughness, and however unwieldily the footnotes may be to read, they are the only way to clue Chinese readers in to Joyce’s intentions.

Take the pun on Shakespeare’s wife, Anne Hathaway (whose name Joyce mis-spells, incidentally). The translation reads “If other women are capable of following their hearts for that which they desire, Ann herself has her own ways.” A footnote notes that the original is a pun on “Ann Hathaway.” Sometimes—a lot of the time—the explanations are considerably more complex. T. Luheah bumps into Bloom at a newspaper office and announces, “Madam, I’m Adam. And Able was I ere I saw Elba.” In the Chinese text this is translated “Madam, I’m Adam. And before seeing Eve, I was Abel.” The footnote fills in the considerable gaps:

These two short sentences can be read the same from either end, joined together by “and.” “Eva” [Eve] and “Elba” have similar pronunciations. The sound of Adam and Eve’s second-born son, “Abel,” is similar to “Able.” The quotation can be read as “Madam, I’m Adam. Before seeing Eve, I was Abel.” Another reading comes from mixing together the several elements of Napoleon’s saying that there is no “cannot” in his dictionary, his post-defeat banishment to the island of Elba, and his impotence: the first phrase can be reconstituted as “Mad am, I mad am,” and the latter as “Before seeing Elba, I did not know the word ‘cannot.’” “Able” can be understood as “can be done” or “is not impossible.”

Elementary, really.

Anthony Burgess, no mean Joyce scholar, has said, “Literature cannot be translated, only the appearance of literature, the arrangement on a page of words which do a minimal job, that of describing action, feelings, and dialogue of a fairly easily translatable kind.”

True enough, and yet... so what? By the Burgess standard, the English-speaking monoglot would be cut off from Tols, Garcia Márquez, and Lu Xin. And even if the poetry doesn’t always rise, action, feelings, and dialogue count too. One of the joys of Ulysses is just getting lost in the pub talk and the commonplace toings and froings of dear, dirty Dublin. The texture may not—cannot—be exactly the same in Chinese as in English, but it is possible to get a rude, true sense of it.

Joyce himself was a gifted linguist who spent his working life as an instructor of languages. He must have known that if Ulysses fulfilled its destiny, it would inevitably find a home beyond English itself a foreign import to Ireland. In fact, the first translation of Ulysses, a German effort in 1927, came out before the book could be legally published in the United States or Britain. It is difficult to believe that Joyce, hardly parochial in his own work, would frown on the labors of Xiao and Wen. For if Ulysses is the end of literature, as Joyce believed, the remaining eternity must include China, the world’s longest-lived civilization.

There are limits, though. No one in China is offering to translate Fomdage Woke.