

Comprehension of the Translated Versions of Ancient Chinese Poems through the Perspective of Language Differences

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Abstract—Due to differences in form, style and culture between the original and the translated version of ancient Chinese poetry, the meaning of translated ancient Chinese poems is bound to differ from that of the originals. Therefore, to certain extent some ancient Chinese poems can never be completely translated; but it is possible that they can be better translated so that the reader of the translated poems may see more clearly from different angles the beauty of Chinese poetry.

Index Terms—the difference between Chinese and English languages, the ancient Chinese poems, meaning, untranslatability, problems, translating strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation is the bridge between translating the Chinese poems and English poems. Though such expert is rarely seen, great achievements have been made in this field, especially in the translating of English poems into Chinese. (Gu Zhengkun, 2003, p.444) A lot of ancient Chinese poems have been translated by experts in the field of translation, especially by the famous Sinologists Arthur Waley (1918), and foreign translators like Bynner, Ezra Pound and Watson. They contributed a lot to the introduction of Chinese literature, including Chinese culture, to foreign countries by doing plenty of translation works regarding to ancient poems as well as other literary works. It is hard to do it well when some of the ancient poems seem hard to understand even for Chinese people. In spite of that, their translation is of high quality and become so popular that many people in their countries began to read Chinese poems and their ideas of *poems* were greatly influenced by the those ancient Chinese poems. However, no translation can be perfect, let alone the translating of ancient Chinese poems by foreign translators. There are some problems faced by these foreign translators, which may greatly influence the quality of their translated works.

The aim of this paper is to explore some useful strategies by analyzing some problems appeared in several poems translated by some foreign translators', especially the one from the *Nineteen Old Poems*. The corresponding ways of avoiding and coping with these problems are introduced after the discussion of the problems so that they may be helpful for the present translators both home and abroad, and also the reader of the translated poems may "see more clearly from different angles the beauty of Chinese poetry or in the words of John Turner, 'the most literary, the most artistic, the longest-established civilization that exists'" (Xu, 1997, p.109)

Three parts will be included in this paper. The first part is a brief introduction to my topic and objectives I want to achieve. Then I will begins with the difference between Chinese and English language, then mainly discuss the problems of translating ancient Chinese poems into English by some foreign translators. Finally some ways of avoiding and coping with these problems will be suggested which may be helpful to the translators so that the true beauty of the originally ancient Chinese poems can be conveyed and real beauty of Chinese poetry can be available to foreign readers through translation.

II. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES

Generally speaking, Chinese and English cultures are different in that the former belongs to human culture while the latter belongs to scientific culture. The thinking pattern in Chinese appears synthetic and modest when that in English is analytic and emphasizing the details. Such differences are reflected in their languages. Chinese language is hypotactic and in grammar implicit while English language is paratactic and explicit. (Yi, 1999) Therefore different understanding to the same ancient Chinese poems will be inevitable and that also explains why different translators often translated the same poem into different versions.

III. THE TRANSLATION OF ANCIENT CHINESE POEMS

"There are one billion people who use the English language and another billion who wield the Chinese, so the translation from one language into the other is the most important intercultural communication in the world of today. As the English is an inflectional language and the Chinese a hieroglyphic one, their translation is also one of the most

difficult tasks for translators. Interlingual communication, as described by I.A. Richards (1953, p.250) is ‘very probably the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos’. It is particularly true of the translation of classical Chinese verse in English rhyme, for the relationship between the words is implicit in the former but explicit in the latter.” (Xu, 1997, p.1)

To translate Chinese poems has been a hard work for foreign translators because two reasons: the first is various nations still have minor differences among the many things they share in common; the second is poetry demand refinement in language, freshness in artistic conception and distinctiveness in style, in other words, it calls for beauty in form, sound and meaning. Thus it should be more difficult and complex for them to translate ancient Chinese poems into English. Not only the form, genre, style, function of the ancient Chinese language, but also the characteristics of the poetry, the culture, the people, as well as their way of expressing the feelings in that time always need to be concerned, otherwise they cannot convey the true beauty of the poems to the reader of the target language.

Like the translation of novels, prose and dramas by quite a number of noted translators, the translation of poems has also attracted much attention from Sinologists and translators both home and abroad. They may know the two languages well but not each of them is able to know Chinese language and culture so well that no shortcomings can be found in their translated works. That is why some translated poems always sound paraphrased and lack of the real beauty of the original poems for Chinese experts and readers no matter how much work the translator has done. But why and what makes it sounds not that authentic? Thus it is necessary for us to find out the reasons. Here in this paper, the author will mainly discuss the problems of translating an ancient poem *On and On* from the *Nineteen Old Poems* by some foreign translators. Much attention will be focused on the language used in the poems, the authors’ understanding to the cultural background of it, and the problem of untranslatability.

A. *The Characteristics of the Ancient Chinese Poem*

“Poetry,” said Confucius (552-480BC), “may serve to inspire, to reflect, to facilitate communion or intercourse and to give vent to grievances.” (Xu, 1997, p.27) In the *Nineteen Old Poems* we see for the first time the appearance of a new kind of poetry that employs a five-charactered line instead of the four-charactered line typical of the *Book of Poetry*. Its freshness and vitality exercise a great influence on the development of later Chinese poetry.

古诗十九首

(一) 行行重行行

行行重行行，与君生离别。
相去万余里，各在天一涯。
道路阻且长，会面安可知？
胡马依北风，越鸟巢南枝。
相去日已远，衣带日已缓。
浮云蔽白日，游子不顾反。
思君令人老，岁月忽已晚。
弃捐勿复道，努力加餐饭。

On and On---the first of the *Nineteen Old Poems*---deals with one of the deep rooted human feelings, that of regret at separation, common to Chinese people since olden days. It is all the more touching for this feeling can equally apply to the man who is out far away and the woman who is staying at home.

Many foreign translators have tried on translating the poem and it seems their translation is simply doing the impossible well. Three versions of translation done by several foreign translators will be presented as follows:

(1) Burton Watson (1984):

SELECTIONS FROM THE “NINETEEN OLD POEMS OF THE HAN”

I

On and on, going on and on,
away from you to live apart,
ten thousand li and more between us,
each at opposite ends of the sky.
The road I travel is steep and long;
Who knows when we meet again?
The Hu horse leans into the north wind;
The Yueh bird nests in the southern branches:
Day by day our parting grows more distant;
Day by day robe and belt dangle looser.
Shifting clouds block the white sun;
The traveler does not look to return.
Thinking of you makes one old;
Years and months suddenly go by.
Abandoned, I will say no more

But pluck up strength and eat my fill.

(2) Arthur Waley (1918, 1977)

NINETEEN PIECES OF OLD POETRY

I

On and on, always on and on

Away from you, parted by a life-parting.

Going from one another ten thousand "li",

Each in a different corner of the World.

The way between is difficult and long,

Face to face how shall we meet again?

The Tartar horse prefers the North wind,

The bird from Yueh nests on the Southern branch.

Since we parted the time is already long.

Daily my clothes hang looser round my waist.

Floating clouds obscure the white sun,

The wandering one has quite forgotten home.

Thinking of you has made me suddenly old,

The months and years swiftly draw to their close.

I'll put you out of my mind and forget for ever (That I'm cast away and rejected I will not repine,)

And try with all my might to eat and thrive. (But only hope with all my heart you're well)

(2) Xu Yuanzhong (1988)

NINETEEN OLD POETRY

I

You travel on and on

And leave me all alone.

Away ten thousand li,

At the end of the sea.

Severed by a long way,

Oh, can we meet someday?

Northern steeds love cold breeze

And Southern birds warm trees.

The farther you're away,

The thinner I'm each day.

The cloud has veiled the sun,

You won't come back, dear one.

Missing you makes me old,

Soon comes the winter cold.

Alas! Of me you're quit,

I hope you will keep fit.

B. Problems in Translating the Ancient Chinese Poems

Reduplication VS Repetition

The rhetoric of duplication and repetition often appeared both in Chinese and English literary works. In Chinese, nouns, quantifiers, verbs and adjective can be used in the reduplicated forms according to certain rules. And the reduplicated word not only has the original meaning of the word, but also endowed with the implied or suggested meaning. Reduplication is usually preferred in Chinese poems, especially the ancient ones. Two forms of repetition are often used in ancient Chinese poems, one is using totally the same words such as the reduplication, and the other is partially same in form but different in content. Reduplication and repetition are usually used to show emphasis, but also appear more expressive and touching in showing all kinds of farther human feelings. (Chen, 2004) In the first line of the poem *On and On*, the same word is repeated four times. The repetition of four monosyllabic words does not seem monotonous, but shows on the contrary, the farther the husband goes away, the lonelier the wife becomes.

While in English the repetition of a word usually implies emphasis (Nida, 2001, p.3). So the translation from Chinese to English is likely to lose the original feelings or spirit expressed in the original poem. Let's see an example. In the female poet of Song Dynasty Li Qingzhao's famous poem *Sheng Sheng Man*, the most typical repetition of the same word is shown in the first line:

寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚。

It is so creative that seven words are repeated successively in the beginning, which sounds pleasing and rhythmic to ear and gradually deeper in feelings. The author's grief and sorrow are fully conveyed through this short line. But it is not easy to make it in its English versions. For example:

(1) So dim, So dark, So dense, So dull,

- So damp, So dank, So dead.
 (2) Search. Search. Seek. Seek.
 Cold. Cold. Clear. Clear.
 Sorrow. Sorrow. Pain. Pain.
 (3) I've a sense of something missing I must seek
 Everything about me looks dismal and bleak.
 Nothing that gives me pleasure, I can find.

In version (1), the translator uses one form of repetition in English---alliteration---to translation the line. The neat structure strictly followed the original but the translation appears a little affected to some extent. In the second version the translator's omission of the subject turns the verbs "search" and "seek" into imperatives and the reader would not know it is the poetess who was seeking, so he fails to bring out the original beauty in sense (Xu, p.22). In version (3) the translator aims to convey the spirit but ignored the beauty in the original form and structure. Though the three versions are all from the famous translators, it seems there is always something lost compared with the original poems.

The same is true with the translated versions of the poem *On and On*. Something has been lost when the foreign translators try to translate the reduplicated word "行行" by simply repeating "on and on, always on and on" or "on and on, going on and on". It is clear that their effort does not help them to reach the effect they have intended to achieve. While the Chinese translator Xu Yuanzhong didn't use the same method of repetition, but it is he who understood the real meaning of the original poem and conveyed it to the readers. That is why it is said that the translation of poems is so complex and difficult and sometimes even untranslatable.

Semantic Zero

A semantic meaning in one culture may not exist in the other. This is called semantic zero by Lado. (1957, cited by Chen in 2004) Due to the great differences in many aspects of Chinese and English culture, semantic zero become common in their vocabulary systems---people cannot find out the corresponding or similar words or expressions when translating some typical Chinese cultural items. (Chen, 2004, p.107) For example, the ideology "道" is quite rich in meaning while the translated version "the way" can hardly convey its true meaning. The philosophical conception "阴阳" is also not exist in English culture.

In the above poem, "胡马" "越鸟" and "浮云" "白日" are typically used in ancient Chinese poems to express certain meanings, but their meanings are not exist in English. Therefore, translation without further consideration would cause confusion and misunderstandings. In Watson's translation, "the Hu horse" and "the Yueh bird" are used and in Waley's version "the Tartar Horse" and "the bird from Yueh". These translations are even hard for Chinese readers to understand, let alone English readers.

The untranslatability of some Chinese poems may cause other problems. Some translators, especially foreign translators, may try to avoid selecting these poems and prefer those which are easy to translate. It will then result in the "one-side" understanding to ancient Chinese poems as well as misleading in their knowledge of Chinese poetry.

Half-understandings to the original poem

The first step in translation is to fully understand the original text---the poem. In the above translation, Watson and Waley have well done in repeating four times the same adverb "on". But Watson's interpretation of the second line seems wrong for the original does not mean that the wife is going away from the husband to live apart, but only implies how she is grieved to be separated from him. (Xu, 1997, p.110) There are several understandings to the last line of the poem *On and On*. Compared with the Chinese translator Xu's translation, Watson misunderstood the implied meaning so the last two lines he presented to the reader is just opposite with Xu's, which would inevitably mislead the reader's understanding to the original meaning. Waley also presented two version of the last line, of which the first understanding is the same with Watson's. They have such half-understandings to the line because they didn't really understand the virtue and rule women have to possess and obey in ancient China. If they know more about Chinese people, the society and the history, they will fully understand why the wife still give her best wishes to her husband when she was abandoned by him.

"Reproduction" of the ancient poems---an extreme of foreignization

Since the introduction of Nida's translation theory into China in the 1980s, Jin Di (1921-), a noted Chinese translation scholar, has explored the applicability of "dynamic equivalence" to literary translation between English and Chinese. And on the basis of Nida's theory he formulated his own theory of "equivalent effect". A controversial issue over "dynamic equivalence" is its tendency toward naturalization. Friedrich Schleiermacher postulates two basic translation methods: one is to leave the writer alone as much as possible and move the reader toward the writer, and the other is to leave the reader alone as much as possible and move the writer toward the reader (Ma cited in Schulte and Biguenet 1992:42) The former may be termed as a naturalizing translation and the latter a foreignizing translation. (Ma, 2003, p.107)

Absolute foreignization and naturalization do not exist. But there can be extreme foreignization by which the original beauty in form is not preserved in the translated version. Waley translated most of the ancient Chinese poems in a prosaic way, that is, the original verse patterns are not strictly kept and even lost to a large extent. In the translation of *On and On*, none of the three translators kept the original form of the poem---two neat sentences in a line of ten words. Other foreign translator may also follow their way to render the poems. We can find evidence from some translated

versions of *On and On* and Sheng Sheng Man easily.

C. Some Strategies in Translating Ancient Chinese Poems

Translating reduplicated words

As far as translation is concerned, the translator may either repeat the same reduplicated words of the original in their translation, or avoid using the same method according to their own aesthetic judgment or experience, though sometimes it is impossible to avoid completely (Xi, 2000). There are no certain principles or forms for translators to follow. Therefore various ways of dealing with reduplication comes out from different translators, among which some are really successful. Take one of the translated versions of Li Qingzhao's poem as an example.

I seek but seek in vain,
I search and search again:
I feel so sad, so drear,
So lonely, without cheer.

The above translation is unique because the translator conveyed both the form and style of the original poem by not only reduplicating some key words but also using alliteration in every two lines. And the readers are able to understand all the beauty in the original poem.

Therefore, there are no rules guiding people in their translation of the reduplicated words and expression. They can either use the same method in their translation or avoid using it to dig out the real meaning. However, this does not mean they can translate any poems at their own will. The translation of ancient Chinese poems should reach the state of "as natural as the original".

Compensation

It seems semantic zero would always cause the problem of untranslatability. But it does not mean it cannot be solved. "Fletcher already made use of the method of compensation in translating poems. It is, generally, an affective accommodation often employed by experienced translators to overcome the local difficulties or local untranslatabilities while translating a literary or poetic work. Addition, extension, break-up, incorporation, substitution, transposition, etc. may all fall under the category of compensation. Whenever a translator cannot translate some words and expressions literally, he may make use of this or that compensation method so as to better convey the spirit of the original and reproduce the style of it." (Liu Zhongde, 2003, p.130) Compensation is an indispensable method to overcome the difficulties in the translation of poetic works. **The compensation in translation is to make up the semantic losses caused in the course of converting the linguistic forms of the original language into those of the target. The method is often used when no equivalents or proper expressions can be found in the target language.**

When you do translation from English into Chinese, you will have to use omission. When you do translation from Chinese into English, you will have to use addition. In the poem *On and On*, the expression "胡马", "越鸟" are used with their associative meanings which can not be found in English language. "胡马" means horses raised in the north while "越鸟" means birds grown up in the south. The author of the original poem uses these two expressions figuratively to show people's internal feelings of being sentimentally attached to their hometown. But in Waley and Watson's translation they only translated them literally into "the Hu horse/ the Tartar horse" and "the Yueh bird/the bird from Yueh" without conveying the real meaning of the original. The same is true with the expressions "浮云" and "白日" which are only typically used in ancient Chinese. The former refers to crafty and evil beauties and the latter symbolize loyalty of the wife's love to her husband. The sentence shows the guess of the wife that her husband may have allured by the beauties afar and forget to come back home. These messages can be conveyed to the reader of the translated poem only by using the method of compensation, that is to say, the necessary cultural background should be explained and added by the translator in order to help the reader really appreciate the feelings of the Chinese wife as well as the implied meanings in the poem; otherwise they may feel confused and bewildered when read those unfamiliar expressions which are probably just some meaningless symbols in their sphere of knowledge.

Fully understanding to the original poem

A full understanding not only refers a good understanding to the language of the original poems, knowing the language itself is certainly not enough since it is simply a tool to convey the author's ideas and feelings, but also a further understanding to the cultural and historical background of the poem, for example, people's ideas at that time, the characteristics of the society, the development of a certain part of Chinese history, etc., and the author's intention to write it. Only when the translator understands everything about the poem, can he achieve faithfulness in content in his "product". Based on that, he can then use the most appropriate words and expressions to translate, so that expressiveness in language can be achieved.

Compromise between Naturalization and foreignization

Absolute foreignization and naturalization do not exist. All translations have to make a compromise between the two basic methods of translation. Whether the translator chooses one or the other depends on various factors: the purpose of translation, intended readers, text types and so on. To evaluate which method is better one should take into account all these factors. From the standpoint of the intended readers, naturalization translation is directed toward a large number of common readers, whereas foreignization is only towards a few elitists who know the two languages concerned (Ma, cited in Robinson, 2003) That is because the purpose of translating ancient Chinese poems into English is to introduce

Chinese literature as well as culture to the target readers, which is much beneficial to the intercultural communication between the East and West.

IV. CONCLUSION

There is never a completely perfect or timeless translation as both language and culture are always in the process of change. Furthermore, language is an open system with overlapping meanings and fuzzy boundaries. (Nida, 2001, p.5) Translating is a communication event rather than a system for matching the features of source and target languages. Poems call for the beauty in form, sound and meaning, so a translator of them should not be satisfied with the mere conveying of the ideas in the original, but must strive for the reproduction of the original beauty. However, due to the differences in form, style and culture between the original and the translation of ancient Chinese poetry, the meaning of the translated ancient Chinese poems is bound to differ from that of the originals. Therefore, to certain extent some ancient Chinese poems can never be completely translated; but it is possible that they can be better translated so that the reader of the translated poems may see more clearly from different angles the beauty of Chinese poetry.

So what are the basic requirements then? Cheng Fangwu pointed out long ago that the translation of a poem must remain to be a poem (Liu, 2003, p.140), that is to say, the translator ought to do his best to make his translation bear a certain due form, rhythm, and rime when necessary. That is the first thing they should never forget. And secondly, it should be faithful to the original (Ibid. p.140), i.e. retain the original meaning and artistic conception concerning the language, culture and thought.

Either of the two requirements is indispensable, firstly because the original poem is a piece of artistic work both in form and in spirit and consequently its translation should also remain such a piece of work.. And secondly because the translation of poem, including ancient poems, should be faithful to the original since translating is not creation itself. Being faithful to the original means that the translation of a poem should convey the content of the original and adopt a form close to the original. The translation will be relatively satisfactory only when the translator achieved this. Although the process is difficult and complex in that the requirement of poetry translation is much higher and strict and the ideal state is nearly impossible to reach, there have been many high-quality translation works of ancient poems. We should be optimistic with the understanding of Chinese language and culture by more translators.

This paper does not means to criticize any translators who have been famous long before for plenty of excellent ancient Chinese poems they have done in the field of translation. Though some translated versions can hardly reach the state of closing to the spirit of the original poems, more misunderstandings and excessive reproduction can be avoid in the process of translation and typical problems would be limited to a very small scope if more attention of the translators, especially foreign translators can be focused on understanding the difference between the two languages and cultures. When enough preparations of the knowledge on Chinese and English languages and cultures and experience on translating between the two languages have been done before translation really begins, then it would be possible for the ancient poems to be better conveyed by the foreign translator.

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