

# On Necessity and Feasibility of Foreignization in the Translation of Classical Chinese Poetry\*

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**Abstract**—Classical Chinese poetry is the concentrated reflection of traditional Chinese culture and its translation is an event of cross-cultural communication of increasing importance in the present age of globalization. This essay aims to analyze the necessity and feasibility of foreignization in the translation of classical Chinese poetry (CCP). Foreignization in CCP translation can convey the profound cultural connotations that are contained in cultural elements and retains the original poetic flavor. The author concludes that only through foreignization can we meet the needs of those curious readers in the west and achieve cultural communication with the West in the real sense.

**Index Terms**—necessity, feasibility, classical Chinese poetry

## I. THE DIVERGENCE BETWEEN FOREIGNIZATION AND DOMESTICATION

Domestication and foreignization are two important translation concepts and strategies, the divergence of which can be summed up from three aspects: translation purpose, faithfulness to the original text and the prediction about the readers' ability to accept the foreign culture. First, the supporter of domestication considers the translation purpose to cross the linguistic and cultural differences for communication while the supporter of foreignization holds that the purpose is to present the culture of other countries. Secondly, the former stresses the faithfulness to the original meaning in order to achieve cultural equivalence while the latter asserts that only when the original information is transformed into the target language, can faithfulness be realized. Thirdly, the former puts the readers' easy reading and understanding at the first place while the latter is sure about the readers' ability to understand and accept the foreign culture.

## II. CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CCP

Poetry, as the most concentrated and condensed form of literature, is the gem of language and the crystallization of a culture. Poetry is rich in culturally loaded words, which may have very different or even opposite connotations in different languages. It is generally agreed that poetry is the most difficult genre of literature to translate, where linguistic competence alone does not guarantee the quality of translation.

As the carriers of Chinese culture, classical Chinese poems reflect the history, tradition and civilization of China and the living environment, thinking mode, values and tastes of its people in ancient times. They have roots in the fertile soil of Chinese culture, brimming with Chinese scent. The beauty of classical Chinese poetry can be felt from the integration of content and form that are displayed through Chinese language. There are so many poetic expressions in Chinese poetry that carry cultural sediments accumulated over the years and arouse rich literary associations. The allusions and folk tales in CCP may contain some beautiful or historical stories, which adds charm and beauty to the poems. However due to the language and culture differences as well as the special form of poetry, these allusions and folk tales pose great difficulties to translators.” For example, the folk tale of the cowherd and girl weaver (牛郎织女) is almost known to everybody in China. The two characters stand for loving husband and wife separated by invincible force who can only meet once a year. In Du Mu's “An Autumn Night (《秋夕》), he wrote, “天阶夜色凉如水，卧看牵牛织女星.” This poem depicts how lonely the heroine is when staying alone one night. “牵牛织女星” is used here to express the miserable loneliness and helplessness of this lady when her lover is not with her. Some culturally loaded words in Chinese poetry may arouse specific feelings or experience among Chinese people, which are difficult to be reproduced in other languages. For examples, the word “明月” can be associated with homesickness; the phrase “杨柳依依” may evoke memories of departure. In order to achieve successful cultural exchange and spread Chinese civilizations to the outside world through the translation of CCP, it is of great importance for translators to identify the cultural elements and translate them.

## III. TRANSLATABILITY CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN CCP

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Poetry, as the inheritance of human culture, interests people around the world. There is no denying that it should be translated. Appreciation of poetry may help people from other countries to have an insight into another culture. As a result, translation of poetry plays an indispensable and important role for those who aim at rendering poetry from one language into another successfully. The charm of classical Chinese poetry, the mainstream of Chinese poetic works, has intoxicated so many people. Thus a great number of international scholars and translators who are interested in Chinese culture have endeavored to recreate in other languages the beauty of CCP. Consequently, it is quite necessary to have CCP translated. Because of the necessity of translation of CCP, there may arise another problem, that is, whether CCP can be translated. Translatability and untranslatability have long been disputed in the area of translation study.

Owing to different cultural heritage, languages of different nations have their own characteristics of lexis, syntax, grammar and so on, which make culture difficult to translate or even untranslatable. "One difficulty involved in translation is that an obligatory category expressed in the one language may not obtain in the other language" (Allén Sture, 1999, p.223) Chinese and English belong to different language family, which means greater differences between Chinese and English. The translation of CCP, involves great difficulties because of the use of culture elements in CCP. For so many nouns, especially proper nouns, being used repeated in poetry creation have become so culturally loaded and the mention of them can spontaneously arouse certain feeling in Chinese. Without any footnote or the like for explanation, the essence of such poetry will be lost. Some of the cultural elements are often rather subtle and ambiguous even to Chinese readers without the prerequisite knowledge of history and poetic cultivation; the translated version is bound to lose something when translated into English. Therefore, many scholars, writers, and translators suspected and even denied the translatability of cultural elements in CCP.

However, in spite of cultural differences and all the above difficulties, translators devote themselves to translation activities in order to promote the mutual understanding throughout the world. We should admit that in the translation process of CCP, certain problems or barriers would be encountered, however it is still possible to translate CCP into another language. In fact, translatability is absolute, while untranslatability is relative. There are several reasons for the translatability. First, it is because of the language and culture universals. Despite the uniqueness of a language and culture, there are also similarities. Nida once said,

"All people engage in eating, working, sleeping, and procreating, they make artifacts such as furniture, tools and vehicles. They organize themselves into families, clans, in-groups and out-groups, nations and associations of nations. They share many ideological similarities in cosmologies, values, and religious. The fact, different peoples throughout the world have far more in common than they have of what which separate them from one another." (Nida, 2004, p.78).

It is due to cultural similarities of different nations that people from different cultures understand each other and translation is possible. Secondly, the translation practice has already strongly demonstrated the translatability of CCP. Many scholars and poets at home and abroad have translated the crystallization of Chinese literature into English and versions in other languages are also available now. These facts have not only helped demonstrate that poetry is translatable, but also provided invaluable examples illustrating how to deal with the cultural elements in poetry translation. Thirdly, with the ever-increasing cultural exchange and global communication, it is more likely for people to translate a poem into another language and appreciate a poem from another culture.

#### IV. NECESSITY AND FEASIBILITY OF FOREIGNIZATION IN CHINESE-ENGLISH TRANSLATION

The discussion in China about the superiority or inferiority of the domestication and foreignization among translation theorists has mainly revolved around English-Chinese translation. Most scholars hold that in English-Chinese translation, the foreignizing strategy should be more often employed, allowing Chinese readers' freedom of learning about English and English-related cultures. They use Venuti's theories to justify their argument. However, they should not forget the contexts in which they are used in the discussion. For Venuti (2004, p.306), foreignizing translation is highly desirable, insofar as it seeks to resist the dominant target-language cultural values and signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text. It is a strategic cultural intervention pitched against the hegemonic English-language nations and the unequal cultural exchanges. Foreignizing translation in English can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interests of democratic geopolitical relations. Some scholars hold that in Chinese-English translation, domestication should be used as much as possible. As a matter of fact, this is exactly what Venuti is against. In the past, in Chinese-English translation, domestication is mainly used to adapt the target text more acceptable and welcome, as is supposed, to English readers, paying far less respect to the fidelity of Chinese culture. The relatively unbalanced employment of strategies reflects, as it were, the permeation of the powerful culture (English) into the weak (Chinese).

By employing foreignization in English-Chinese translation, we have absorbed so many words, expressions, customs, and even some values from western cultures, which resulted in a cultural unbalance. At present, our emphasis should be laid particularly on introducing Chinese culture and literature abroad, so as to let more people know about China and Chinese culture. Only in this way can we promote our mutual understanding with our Western colleagues." Foreignization should be more often employed in the translation of Chinese literary works, especially of Classic Chinese poetry, which abounds with cultural elements.

##### A. *From the Perspective of Introduction of Chinese Culture and Promotion of Cultural Communication*

As we know, translation is not only an inter-lingual activity but also an intercultural activity. In fact, the essence of translation lies more in its intercultural communication, and the ultimate target of translation is to promote the cross-cultural exchange between different nations.

Today more than ever, a culture has the opportunity to be communicated and introduced to the world. However, international communication is far from an equal one. Economically powerful nations, the United States in particular, dominate the production, circulation and consumption of global media products; while developing countries are merely passive subordinate participants in international communication. The disparity in international communication has constituted a serious threat to the weak and small cultures. As the largest developing country in the world, China has a history of over 5,000 years and is famous for its brilliant ancient culture. Nowadays, China is undergoing remarkable economic growth and social changes resulting from globalization, information explosion and knowledge economy as well as domestic reforms and opening up to the outside world.

However, the culture exchanges between China and the Western countries are unequal. On one hand, there has long been an unbalance in China's cultural and literary translation, with the number of translation of foreign culture much more than that of Chinese culture. On the other hand, the disparity can be detected easily in the process of translation through the analysis of the option of source texts and translation strategies. Translators in the weak culture are accustomed to choosing the literary works of the dominant cultures, especially those of the most influential one, to begin with, while translators in the dominant cultures seldom translate the literary works of the weak cultures. Moreover, some translators in the dominant cultures generally compel the translators in the weak to keep consistent with their values not only in language but also in culture. Meanwhile, compared with the Chinese acquisition of the West world, people in the West know much less about China. In these circumstances, it is Chinese translators' responsibility to introduce the remarkable, excellent and preeminent achievements to the outside world to change the unequal exchanges between nations.

In CCP, a lot of Chinese customs are presented. They remain the most original and vital traditions in Chinese culture, long in history, varied in form and rich in content. The words and expressions of Chinese folk customs have been enriched throughout Chinese history. A better understanding of the cultural elements of this field will contribute to effective translation.

Original:

何当载酒来，共醉重阳节。(孟浩然《秋登兰山寄张五》)

Version:

Why don't you bring wine here to have a time gay,  
And be drunk with me on this Double-Ninth day? (Tr. Wu Juntao)

Notes: Double-Ninth Day, the ninth day of the ninth moon of the lunar calendar, was, and somewhat will, is a Chinese festival. On that day people customarily climb up the mountains to drink chrysanthemum (or other kinds of) wine.

The Chongyang Festival (重阳节) falls on the ninth day of the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, so it is also known, as the Double Ninth Festival. Chongyang has been an important festival since ancient times. Since nine is the highest odd digit, people take two of them together to signify longevity. Therefore, the ninth day of the ninth month has become a special day for people to pay their respects to the elderly and a day for the elderly to enjoy themselves. The festival is held in the golden season of autumn, at harvest time. The bright clear weather and the joy of bringing in the harvest make for a festive happy atmosphere. By foreignizing translation, the author reserves this important cultural element in TL. The footnote, as compensation, not only introduces Chinese "Double-Ninth Day" to western readers, but also helps them understand the aesthetics of the poetry.

Since foreignizing translation aims to transfer as much as possible the original cultural elements, it is of great significance for translators to employ this strategy in Chinese-English translation. And in the translation of CCP, the Chinese translators have the responsibility to keep the exotic flavor so as to enhance foreigners' understanding of China and Chinese culture. Thus retaining the cultural features of CCP while transferring them into the TL becomes an important factor in the assessment of whether the translation is successful or not. If all the cultural elements in CCP were domesticated into English, it would be absurd to say that we are "translating" poetry from one language into another. If such were the case, the culture underlying the CCP would never be able to be known by Western people. When the source language culture contained in CCP is lost, translation, as an important means of intercultural communication, fails in its mission of promoting cross-cultural exchanges.

#### B. *From the Perspective of Faithfulness to the Original Text*

"Faithfulness" has long been the focus of translation. Many translation theorists both at home and abroad stress the importance of "faithfulness" of a translated version. Early in the Tang Dynasty the distinguished monk Xuan Zang put forward his criteria of translation with emphasis on accuracy in meaning and popularity in expression. In the Qing Dynasty, Yan Fu established his famous three-character standard in translation: "faithfulness", "expressiveness" and "elegance", which have long been supported as the only maxim that all translators must observe in China. He was an outstanding forerunner in the circle of translation and made great contributions both to the theory and practice of translation. After the May 4th Movement, Lu Xun proposed his principle of "faithfulness" and "smoothness" as the

criteria of translation.

In the last decade of the 18th century, British Translation theorist Alexander Fraser Tytler laid down the three fundamentals by which a translation should be made or judged. They are:

1. A translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work.
2. The style and manner of writing should be of the same character as that of the original.
3. A translation should have all the ease of the original composition. (Lefevere, 1992, p.128)

It is obvious that Tytler also regarded “faithfulness” as the most important element of translation criteria.

In 1901 Herbert Cushing Tolman in his book *The Art of Translation* approaches the principle of faithfulness from several aspects. According to Tolman’s point of view, the translator’s first and supreme purpose in translating is to convey the whole ideology of the original, especially the essence of it. The translator should reproduce the elegance and passion of the original and move the power of the original completely into his translation too. Finally, the style of a translation should be faithful to that of the original. It should strictly accord with that of the original. Even the defects of the original should be reproduced in the translation to maintain the characteristics and features of the original. (Tan, 1991, p.224)

From the above translation criteria put forward by various translators or translation theorists, we can come to the conclusion that faithfulness is the core of translation criteria. However, one thing has to be made clear, that is “faithfulness” does not only refer to being faithful in conveying the communicative information of the original but also being faithful in the transference of cultural connotations of the original. Therefore whether it is faithful or not largely depends on the degrees of the translator’s knowledge of the subtle differences of the cultural content expressed in the languages.

Original:

寥落古行宫，宫花寂寞红。  
白头宫女在，闲坐说玄宗。(元稹《行宫》)

Version 1:

Some white-haired chambermaids at leisure  
Talk of the late Emperor’s Pleasure. (Tr. X.Y.Z.)

Version 2:

There still the palace maids, with grey hair-buns,  
Sit and talk about Xuanzhong-their better days. (Tr. Wu Juntao)

Version 3:

Inside a white-haired palace woman  
Idly mumbles of the glorious days of Hsuan Tsung.( Tr. Soame Jenyns)

Version 4:

The ancient palaces present a rueful sight,  
Tis vainly that are blooming flowers red and bright.  
Those white-hair’d ladies who’ve survive’d their mental pain,  
Now sit at ease recalling Xuanzong and his reign. (Tr. Zhuo Zhenying)

The poem presents us a state of decay and a scene of desolation. The depiction of the palace flowers that are red in full bloom and the white-haired maids who used to be beautiful and full of vigor, forms a sharp contrast between the prosperous past against the decayed present. Then the maids sit, talking about “玄宗 (Xuan Zong)”, an emperor of Tang Dynasty, who made great contribution to the prosperity of Tang Dynasty in the early period of his reign, whose indulgence in the pleasure and the beauty in latter period gave rise to its decline. What the maids exactly talk gives us lots of imagination. They may recall the glorious days of his reign and miserable present. The allusion “Xuan Zong” evokes endless imaginations and its translation should try to endow TL readers with the same degree of aesthetic vagueness. Version 1: with the name of the Emperor omitted, TL readers bear no idea of its related cultural background in which the poet’s grief over the decline of the Tang Dynasty can’t be sensitively comprehended. The last three Versions all keep the cultural elements by transliterating “玄宗” and giving an explanation. version 2 and 3 both give specific interpretation of their own –“their better days” and “the glorious days”, leaving the readers no space of imagination while version four is rather suggestive and leaves the readers maximum space for imagination by giving a implicit explanation –“his reign”. From the point of preserving the cultural elements as well as the reader’s imaginations, the last version is no doubt the most successful. The adoption of foreignization with the cultural terms and its implications preserved can better evoke TL readers’ curiosity and imaginations.

“Being faithful to the original, in my opinion, means that the translation of a poem should convey the content of the original and adopt a form close to the original. Only when this is achieved can the translation be regarded successful.” (Liu, 1991, p.140) We all know that Chinese literature, especially its representative classical poetry, is characterized by subtle richness of cultural elements which are usually heavily loaded with Chinese cultural information. Since domestication often substitutes the source text image with the target cultural terms, it may easily distort the intended meaning of the source text. Foreignization, on the other hand, strives to retain the cultural messages of the source text so that it works better to convey to western readers the original flavor of CCP, and it is therefore more faithful to the original poetry.

### C. *From the Perspective of Readers' Demands*

For several centuries, Britain and America have always held the dominant position in the world in politics and economy and undoubtedly the culture marked by English language gradually holds the leading place. All these result in the fact that British and American literary works are translated in other cultures in considerable quantity while they seldom translate literary works from other countries. What's more, in translation, those foreign cultural elements are domesticated in English by paraphrasing or substituting with the counterparts –the English culture, so readers will not only be unable to learn about or appreciate foreign cultures, but also capable of getting false illusions. Thus readers are deceived into believing that the work distorted by the mainstream native culture and values are what the original work is really like.

However, curious readers hope to have access to foreign cultures, enlarge their cultural horizon, enrich their knowledge and receive some enlightenment. It is always presumed that it is because of the curiosity about foreign cultures and languages that they approach versions. With China's rapid political and economic development and its important role in the world's cultural exchanges, an increasing number of foreign readers are interested in China, especially its brilliant culture. They are eager to know the thoughts and feelings of Chinese people and get some ideas of Oriental cultures. In the process of reading, they inevitably draw their attention to the exotic elements of Chinese culture. What they feel most keenly is the differences between languages and what is concealed beneath, which are usually deeply rooted in a particular Chinese linguistic system, cultural backgrounds, religions, or historical periods. What they long for is to leave the source text as it is.

Original:

鬓花颜金步摇，芙蓉帐暖度春宵。(白居易《长恨歌》)

Version 1:

Her face like flower, her hair-cloud'dorned with a swinging gold pin,  
She passed the spring night with her Lord behind the lotus curtain. (Tr. Zeng Bingheng)

Version 2:

They set a headdress sewn with golden bangles  
Upon the cloudy hair of her whose face was like a flower.  
And sent her into the imperial presence.

Under a lotus patterned net the two then slept. (Tr. Zhang Tingchen)

This poem writes about the love story between Madam Yang (杨贵妃) and Emperor Xuanzong (唐玄宗). The words “春宵” originally means a night in spring which suggests a harmonious and sound sleep. Constantly used in Chinese literature, it has stabilized to mean a joyful night with love, as is the case in this poem. The emperor had so joyful nights with her love that he even no longer held his morning court. In version 1, the translator thinks that literal translation of this cultural image may not be accepted by the target culture. He deletes the original image and directly expresses it as “the two then slept.” This expression is too vulgar in this poetic context. Although it reduces the readers' comprehending efforts, it does not yield the aesthetic effects as the original does. In version 2, “spring night” is a literal translation of the image. The translator in this case aims at introducing new concepts into the target culture. He assumes that the following lines (春宵苦短日高起，从此君王不早朝) can suggest that “spring night” is a euphemism for “joyful moment with love”. Hence it does not cost the readers tremendous effort to get the contextual effects, and the translation successfully introduces the cultural image “spring night” to western readers.

## V. CONCLUSION

The process of translation is always regarded as pure language transference. As an important means of communication, translation is not only the transformation of language, but also the transformation of culture as well. Nowadays, as culture is on its way to globalization, cultural translation, aiming at turning the cultural connotation in one language into another, deserves more attention. China was passive in the communication of politics, economy and culture in the past, and therefore western civilization has much more effect on Chinese culture than the Chinese culture does on the West. In such a passive situation, the translation of Chinese works was subject to western influence. The cultural elements in Chinese literary works were always domesticated to conform to the clear explanation to the westerners', but not telling them how they were expressed in Chinese, which made many excellent Chinese traditional cultures unknown to western society and was a barrier for international community to know Chinese society. China is heading fast into the international community. Therefore, spreading Chinese culture through translation is extremely imperative and necessary.

Classical Chinese poetry is the concentrated reflection of traditional Chinese culture and its translation is an event of cross-cultural communication of increasing importance in the present age of globalization. As poetry is more abundant with cultural elements than other literary genres, it is imperative that the translator of poetry should be highly aware of culture and more skillful in handling cultural elements in translation. The present thesis mainly deals with the cultural elements in the translation of classical Chinese poetry and tries to find a way to tackle the culture-bound problems in translation.

Foreignization in CCP translation can convey the profound cultural connotations that are contained in cultural

elements and retains the original poetic flavor. “The translator should adopt foreignizing translation as the primary approach and try his best to preserve the foreignness of Chinese cultural elements, so as to spread the otherness of Chinese culture to the world through translation and fulfill the goal of global cultural diversity.” (Xie, 1999, p.12) Through foreignization of cultural elements in CCP, we Chinese translators can definitely produce more successful translation versions with introducing them as much as closely to the original to foreign readers so that the target readers may appreciate the elaborate composition and distinctive style of the poet as well as the distinctive Chinese cultural flavor and graceful artistic conception of CCP. Thus the world cultural exchange and the mutual understanding and communicating could be further promoted.

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