

An Analysis of the Difficulties in the Translation of Regional Classical Chinese Poetry-A Case Study on Chongqing's Overseas Transmission

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Abstract

With the deepening of the cultural exchange in the world, the unified orientation of Chinese literature is struggling in the cross-cultural communication. However, Chinese regional traditional culture has yet attracted more and more attention in foreign academic circles. As one of the local historical and cultural communication media, the translation of regional ancient Chinese poetry has become an urgent problem to solve. This kind of translation has a great significance in the increase of the influence of classical Chinese literature in global contexts. What's more, it plays an important role in making new breakthroughs in regional research and promoting differentiation of academic studies on overseas dissemination of Chinese literary heritage. Taking Chongqing classical poetry as a case, this paper focused on the using of noun, the organizing of meaning and the expressing of allusions to interpret some difficulties in the translation of regional ancient Chinese poems, so that it can provide references for those who study the overseas communication in global contexts of regional classical Chinese literature.

Keywords: classical Chinese poetry, regional culture, Chinese-English Translation, Global Context, Chongqing

1. Introduction and Background

It has always been difficult to translate ancient Chinese poetry into foreign languages. Although the core reason can be summarized as the differences in history and culture between China and western countries, it can be seen in the translation practice that the manifestation of this difficulty is multi-level, which covers almost all aspects, such as vocabulary, sentence patterns and thought-expressing. In order to convey the original charm of classical Chinese poems, as well as make the readers understand the potential meaning, a detailed analysis of the primary difficulties in translating ancient Chinese poems is required, so that we can undertake relevant research and improvement.

Due to the effect of geography, history, customs, among others, different varieties of poems with local characteristics and vitality were derived from classical Chinese poetry. Study of regional classical verse ought to be made on the basis of this kind of difference, so that we can discover historic differentiated academic directions.

At the end of the 20th century, represented by Professor Yan Jiayan in Peking University, a group of scholars began a full-scale study of local culture. Mr. Yan put forward a new point of view, "Regional influence on literature is a comprehensive one, which is closely connected with humanity factors in this region, and influences and restricts the literature through the middle part between regional cultures." In the 21st century that followed, Research for Chinese regional literature came active. Most provinces and cities have brought out historical literary works which reflect local literary achievements, and find out new problems as well as put forward new ideas in the study of regional literature. Nowadays, research on regional literature is booming. Consequently, diverse Chinese culture is gradually walking towards the world. Not only does it begin to occupy an increasingly important position in the field of theoretical research on world literatures, but also it promotes the communication of regional literature further more in the world.

As a city with the most characteristic regional culture, Chongqing has a massive Ba culture (Note 1) complex. Mountain Culture, Dock Culture, and Three Gorges Culture, etc. occupy an important position in the art of

Chinese regional poetry, hence became the cultural Mecca of poets who created and chanted poems here. Therefore, it is of typical significance to take Chongqing as an example in the study of the global communication of regional classical Chinese poetry as well as its strategy and meaning of overseas dissemination.

2. Difficulties in Translation

However, in the process of the overseas transmission of regional ancient Chinese poetry, although numerous, these poems are uneven in quality. Exploring the reasons, we can find that the most prominent problems are the irregular phenomena in the English translation. Such irregularities can be generally analyzed from "Using of noun", "Organizing of connotation", and "Expressing of allusion", namely, analysis of three difficult aspects in the Chinese-English translation of ancient Chinese poems.

2.1 Difficulty in Using of Nouns

Chinese character, based on table-shaped objective entity, is compatible with empirical sound, meaning, and form of the logogram, but as a whole, the system remains ideogram. Therefore, literary thinking of Chinese has always been inextricably connected with specific images of the nature, on which basis formed the means of literary expression of "represent one object with another" as well as single-formed and complex-patterned proper nouns. By contrast, English belongs to the Indo-European family, and it is based on the different combinations of the Latin alphabet to convey meaning. To a certain extent, both this language and its culture differ greatly from Chinese characters.

As for the translation of cultural image in classical poetry, the greatest difficulty lies in the integration of "form" and "meaning", which determines that literal and free translations are complementary in the process of translation. Literal translation is used to translate the "form" of nouns. It mainly adopts the means of "pinyin" and "word for word", which require not so much technique of a translator. Free translation is used to solve the problem of "meaning". However, as for how to accurately express the poet's original meaning in the translation, it depends on a high literature attainment and strong ideation. This kind of personalized way of translation is the main cause of non-standard uses of the nouns in the process of translation of ancient Chinese poetry. Moreover, because of China's regional complexity, it is more difficult to balance "literal translation" and "free translation" of the translation of regional nouns. This leads to the ineffective expression of "regional Chinese culture" in the context of English. For example, "巴山"(Ba mountains) in Chongqing had been used by a number of poets in ancient China so as to express their melancholy or nostalgia. Li Shangyin's "Send To North In A Rainy Night" (《夜雨寄北》) is most famous:

君问归期未有期，巴山夜雨涨秋池。
何当共剪西窗烛，却话巴山夜雨时。

This poem uses night rain of Ba Mountains which are in Chongqing to express the poet's deep melancholy. Through the expressions like "night rain of Ba Mountains", "candle at western window" and so on, the poet made readers blend in with the scene, as if the scene became alive. In the four lines of the poetry, "Ba Mountains" was used twice, which might refer to Mt. Jinyun in northern Chongqing nowadays. But there are different forms of translation, which bring about different reading experience. For example, British Sinologist Herbert A. Giles translated it as:

You ask when I'm coming: alas, not just yet.
How the rain filled the pools on that night when we met!
Ah, when shall we ever snuff candles again?
And recall the glad hours of that evening of rain?

With reference to the translation, we can see that Giles didn't accurately express the original images. In the second line Giles didn't literally translate "Ba Mountains", but used "when we met", this conception of time instead, leaving the original meaning in the clouds and fogs because of his subjectivity. Similarly, in the translation of the third line, the phrase "candle at western window" was simply translated into "candles", with "the western window" vanished. That's not accurate enough in terms of literal translation, and it was far from the emotional tone of the original text. What's more, in the original poem, "autumn" and "rain" are two nouns, which were saturated with images of a kind of desolation. In the process of translation, however, Giles just translated the word "autumn pool" into "pools", which made the translation only retained the "rain" image, but left out the image of "autumn", thus greatly weakened Li Shangyin's expressing of loneliness in his poem.

These images were not the poet's impromptu, but a result of being moved by the rainy and sentimental Ba Mountains. However, the mutual infected melancholy emotions between the poet and Ba Mountains around

Chongqing were nothing left in Giles' version, while the special cultural atmosphere based on the specific geographical environment of Chongqing was thin and weak. In this regard, Chinese scholar Xu Yuanhong translated it as follows:

You ask me when I can return, but I don't know;
It rains in western hills and autumn pool overflow.
When can we trim by window side the candlelight?
And talk about the western hills in rainy night?

Through the analysis of this version, we can find that "Ba Mountains" was translated into "western hills" by Prof. Xu. This kind of alienate handling expressed the intention of the original poem and it was understandable as well. Meanwhile, "western hills" is also used in the last sentence. Though the original implicit style has been maintained, it lost the poet's clever attentiveness to personate the Ba Mountains which were far away from his home. Similarly, in the translation of "candle at western window", Xu's translation "by window side the candlelight" was only slightly better than that of Giles'.

In addition, the scholar Lin Yutang translated the second and fourth lines as "The night rains on Mount Pa swell the autumn pool", "And talk to the time of the night rains on Mount Pa". In this version, based on the Wade-Giles Romanization, the most widely used system of transcription in the English-speaking world for most of the 20th century, "Ba Mountains" was translated into "Mount Pa", which was more relevant to the pronunciation of the original. But the difference in geography and history also make English readers feel more difficult in understanding.

By comparing the above three versions, we know that although they are all close in the expression of vocabulary to the original poem, the implications that conveyed are totally different. This leads to the phenomenon that Li Shangyin's poem conveys different emotions in different translations, making the English reader unable to accurately understand the VIVID effect created by the original poet through "refined word".

2.2 Difficulty in Organizing of Connotation

Prof. Xu Yuanhong once mentioned the standard of "Three Beauties" in poetry translation in his monograph, *The Art of the Translation*, and he pointed out that:

Among the "Three Beauties", beauty of meaning or connotation is the first priority, and beauty of sound takes the second place, while the last one is the beauty of form. That is to say, translation is the creation of beauty, in which process spirit weighs more than shape, and the beauty of meaning that poems convey is where their essence lies.

The connotation of classical Chinese poetry is a unity of subjectivity and objectivity, a blend of emotion and scenery, a poet's sublimation of art when he was under the specific historical and cultural background, and an aesthetic creation by concise language and actual virtual transform techniques. Therefore, when one is translating classical Chinese poems, the problem of how to convey the abstract meanings with a particular cultural connotation becomes the most important and difficult aspect for him to grasp.

For example, the Three Gorges of Yangtze River in Chongqing, which have been chanted by generations of poets, have become China's important historical and cultural symbols, representing the hardships and dangers and majestic momentum. This cultural imagery is the cultural reflection of Chongqing's unique geographical factors and their effects on production and human lives. It is also a kind of regional culture formed by long-term history accumulation. This can be seen in Li Bai's poem, "The Early Sailing From White Emperor Town" (《早发白帝城》):

朝辞白帝彩云间，千里江陵一日还。
两岸猿声啼不住，轻舟已过万重山。

In the first part of this poem, "return in one day" is exaggerated in space and time, which shows Li Bai's romantic characteristic extremely. "White Emperor Town" and "Jiangling" are located respectively in nowadays Fengjie County of Chongqing and Jingzhou City in Hubei. The Three Gorges of Yangtze River are between the two places, along which the road is extremely complex, which can be known from another poem of Li Bai's—"Difficult Roads of Shu" (《蜀道难》). So, Li Bai used the exaggerated expression "return in one day" between the two well-known locations so as to express his majestic heroism, which was the unique connotation construction way used in ancient Chinese poetry. However, in the process of translation, translators are unable to explain the historical origins of Chongqing's local characteristics clearly to make readers realize the inner

emotional connection. This brings difficulty for the translation of classical Chinese poems to convey their connotations.

The following is two translated versions of the first couplet of this poem:

Leaving at dawn the White Emperor crowned with cloud,
I've sailed a thousand miles through Three Gorges in a day.
——by Xu Yuanchong

In the morning I leave Po Ti perched in the clouds,
The thousand li to Chiang-ling are compressed to a day.
——by Liu Shishun

Comparing the above two versions, we can find that different translators emphasized different aspects when they were translating. Among them, Prof. Xu agreed with Dr. Liu in the form of translation in general; but the translations of "白帝城" and "江陵" were different. Dr. Liu focused on pronunciation and transliterated them as "Po Ti" and "Chiang-ling" respectively based on Wade-Giles Romanization we mentioned before, while Prof. Xu translated as "White Emperor" and the "Three Gorges". Between them, "Chiang-ling" and the "Three Gorges" are two totally different ways of translation. Although "Chiang-ling" sounds familiar to Chinese, it is not the same for English-speaking readers. Prof. Xu translated it as "Three Gorges", a place people all around the world know. Compared with the original text, it showed the long distance between Baidi Town and Jiangling indirectly, and conveyed a great momentum as well.

From the foregoing discussion, we can find that various translations of different translators show diverse understandings of the original poems, and emotions that the translations convey to the readers also vary. Between the original classical Chinese poem and its translation, there is a relationship of "original to translation" and "translation to original", while the former is the more important foundation of these two kinds of relations. On the one hand, various tests indicate that the fitness between the translated work and the original is in the "translation to original" relationship, while the standard is the original work. On the other hand, because of the difference in language structure and cultural concepts of English and Chinese, English readers' understanding of the original ancient Chinese poems is also in the process of "translation to original", which put them in a passive position in accepting and understanding. In these two aspects, the basic requirement of handling the relationship of "translation to original" is to use Chinese as a benchmark, which requires the translators to make every efforts to go up closer to the true meaning of the poem.

2.3 Difficulty in Expressing of Allusions

In some way, an allusion is a "high enrichment" of some typical historic events in China for thousands of years, which is a symbolic representation of concepts. Generally, it can be divided into two forms: historical and literary allusions. Historical allusion refers to using ancient myths, legends, tales, fables and so on to tell what the poet wants to express in real situation; while literary allusion refers to quoting poetry, prose, lyrics, etc., in other words, to borrow someone else's words to express one's own feelings. Allusions are used mostly in order to suggest the poet's implied meaning beyond the poem and "vivify" the expression of the spiritual purpose of the entire poem.

At present, even the Chinese academic circle can't always give a completely accurate explanation of the allusions in Chinese poetry, let alone ordinary people. When reading a poem, in order to understand, at least roughly, the allusions in it, people need to have accumulated certain historical knowledge or have to refer to a reference book. As for translating allusions in classical Chinese poems into English, it is necessary for the translator to stride across the gap of multiple cultures and history, instead of translating by explaining the nouns literally.

For example, the "Diagram of Eight Formations(八阵图)", located in Fengjie County, Chongqing, is a famous Chinese historical allusion used in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*(《三国演义》). It is used as a symbol of a high degree of intelligence and strategy, because it embodied the thoughts of traditional Chinese Legalism and *The Book of Changes*. Though this allusion is well known in China, it is quite difficult to translate it into English. Du Fu has a quatrain named "The Diagram of Eight Formations":

功盖三分国，名成八阵图。
江流石不转，遗恨失吞吴。

The first couplet in Du's poem was translated as:

His deeds overshadowed a land split in three,
His fame was achieved in these Eight Formations.

The translator is an eminent scholar in Chinese poetic studies, Prof. Stephen Owen. Even if the allusion “the Diagram of Eight Formations” was left alone as it was with no further explanation, Chinese readers are able to understand what Du Fu wanted to present here: to speak highly of Zhuge Liang’s achievements. However, after comparing various translation methods, translators may find that the extensibility of translation on this line is limited—it is hard to avoid literal translation. Prof. Owen translated it as "Eight Formations" in the context of English. Although it was the most reasonable way of translation, it was difficult for English readers who have quite little accumulation of Chinese history to understand the profound purpose of the poet.

3. Conclusion

Facing the three difficulties in the translation of classical Chinese poems, we must clearly realize that it is an inevitable problem that needs to be treated seriously. Not only is it closely related to the correct expressions of traditional Chinese culture, but it has something to do with the correct direction and methodology of traditional Chinese culture in global contexts.

As a city abundant in characteristic and diverse culture, Chongqing plays a significant role in the history of classical Chinese literature. Its various geographical landscapes, historical figures, and historical events had been chanted by poets from generation to generation. The translation of Chongqing classical poetry may solve the problems of nouns, connotation and allusions in the overseas transmission of the classical poetry in western China. It can also set an example for the overseas transmission of other regional classical Chinese poetry, and thus make Chinese classical culture well-known around the world.

Nowadays, multi-culture communication in China is booming. Attentions should not only be paid to the promotion of Chinese classical culture, but also to the regulations of translation of classical works. Only in this way can we make sure that Chinese classical culture won’t be altered or lost in the process of transmission.

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Note

Note 1. Ba is a the feudal state which mostly distributed centered on Chongqing and Eastern Sichuan in Spring Autumn and Warring States Periods (770B.C.-221B.C.).

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