

A Study on the Translation of Allusions in Ancient Chinese Poetry from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural — Taking the English Translation of Li Bai's Poetry as an Example

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Abstract

President Xi once said: "Chinese culture has a long history, accumulating the deepest spiritual pursuit of the Chinese nation, representing the unique spiritual identity of the Chinese nation, and providing rich nourishment for the endless development and growth of the Chinese nation." Poetry, the brightest pearl in the treasure house of Chinese culture, with its rich cultural heritage and profound cultural connotation, glows with great vigor and vitality in the new era. The key to the profound meaning of Chinese poetry lies in the use of allusions. From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, this paper will study the English translations of Li Bai's poems and translation strategies, so as to further explore the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and better spread Chinese culture.

Keywords: Chinese culture, poem, allusion, cross-cultural communication, English translation

1. Introduction

The Chinese civilization is one of the world's civilizations that has never been interrupted, and poetry is a shining pearl in the treasure house of Chinese civilization. Chinese culture is a poetic culture, and the traces of poetry can be found in almost all fields of its culture. Carrying forward Chinese culture is inseparable from Chinese poetry, which is the root of Chinese culture.

Up to now, the development of Chinese poetry has roughly gone through eight stages: poetry in ancient myths and legends; the period of *The Book of Songs* and *Chu Ci*; the period of Yuefu

poems in the Han Dynasty and folk songs in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties; Tang poetry in the prosperous Tang Dynasty; Song ci; Yuan qu; poetry in the Ming and Qing Dynasties; and modern poetry. However, when it comes to the peak and heyday of poetry development, it must be the Tang Dynasty. Tang poetry stands as the culmination of classical Chinese poetry. During the Tang Dynasty, China was powerful and prosperous, the people lived and worked in peace and contentment, and scholars were full of high spirits—all of which provided fertile soil for the prosperity of Tang poetry and created important conditions for it to surpass the poetry of previous dynasties. The

great national integration in the Tang Dynasty laid the foundation for cultural integration and prosperity, and a large number of talents and masters emerged continuously. Tang poetry reached the climax of all-round prosperity during the 50 years of the Kaiyuan and Tianbao reigns of Emperor Xuanzong in the heyday of the Tang Dynasty. When talking about the prosperous Tang Dynasty, it is impossible not to mention Li Bai, the most outstanding poet of this period. With his profound thoughts, amazing talent and extraordinary literary inspiration, he deservedly became an extremely shining star among the numerous talents of the Tang Dynasty. Li Bai enthusiastically eulogized all beautiful things in the real world, while showing contempt for unreasonable phenomena. This progressive attitude of pursuing liberation and freedom is a concentrated embodiment of the powerful spiritual strength of the Chinese nation in resisting dark forces and vulgar customs.

Nowadays, with the country's emphasis on traditional Chinese culture, large-scale programs such as Everlasting Classics and Chinese Poetry Competition have once again captured the hearts of thousands of Chinese people. Reading classics has become a national trend. Poetry is also a window for cultural exchange. Adopting reasonable translation methods and strategies to translate Chinese poetry into foreign languages can play a role in disseminating Chinese culture. In view of this, this paper starts from the English translation of Li Bai's poetry, explores the cultural factors to be considered in translation, and adopts appropriate translation strategies to better carry out cultural exchange.

2. Comparison Between Chinese Poetry and Western Poetry

Regarding the relationship between Chinese and Western poetry, Lv Yang mentioned in his article *"Comparative analysis of Chinese and Western Poetry"* (2014): "Chinese and Western poetry differ in many aspects such as form, content and structure, yet it is not difficult to find the intricate intrinsic connections between them." (P.1)

2.1 Similarities

Classical Chinese poetry is concise in wording and profound in artistic conception, and can express the author's thoughts and feelings in a few words. Western modern poetry, influenced by classical Chinese poetry, also presents the

characteristics of implicitness and gravity.

2.2 Differences

China started with lyrical short poems, forming a strong tradition of lyrical poetry. The West, on the other hand, began with epics, forming a strong tradition of narrative poetry. Chinese culture is introverted and implicit, so Chinese poetry emphasizes implicitness and takes simplicity as beauty. Chinese poetry either expresses aspirations through objects or conveys emotions through scenery, burying the author's feelings deep in the poetry. Only by "savoring" carefully can one feel its true beauty, which is just as the saying goes: "The words are finite, but the meaning is infinite." Western culture is bold and explicit, so British and American poetry is more unrestrained, free and full of emotional tension. British and American poetry usually expresses the poet's meaning directly, making the intended meaning fully expressed with the words.

3. Allusions

The term "allusion" (dian gu in Chinese), originates from of "dian" (典), meaning principle or rule, and "gu" (故), meaning reason or cause. Originally, it referred to old systems, old examples, and also the official title in the Han Dynasty responsible for rituals, music systems and other historical facts. Later, it commonly refers to stories or legends about historical figures and institutions that are cited in literary works such as poetry and prose (Zhang, 2013).

3.1 Sources of Allusions

In summary, allusions mainly come from historical events, historical stories, myths, folk legends, fables, literary works, proverbs, customs, personal names, place names, and names of animals and plants.

3.2 Structure of Allusions

The structure of allusions is not fixed, but they are all compact, mostly using concise phrases or expressions, and there are also allusions in the form of short sentences. Generally speaking, English allusions are more flexible in form, which can be either long or short. Chinese allusions mostly adopt a four-character structure.

4. Employing Allusions: A Defining Feature of Li Bai's Poetic Style

Li Bai's poetry is full of allusions and quotations,

and this unique technique makes his poetry more diverse and profound in meaning.

4.1 Modes of Using Allusions

In Chinese poetry, the use of allusions is relatively flexible, with four common ways: explicit use, implicit use, positive use and reverse use (Li, 2016).

4.1.1 Explicit Use and Implicit Use

(1) Explicit use refers to directly quoting the original story of an allusion, and the poet's emotion is consistent with the train of thought of the allusion used.

Example 1:

“景公一何愚，牛山泪相续。物苦不知足，得陇又望蜀”。——李白《古风·秋露》

“King Jing of Qi was so foolish; Tears flowed continuously on Mount Niu. People suffer from insatiability; Having seized Long, they covet Shu again.” — Li Bai, *Ancient Style Autumn Dew* (Translated by author)

Analysis: In these four lines, the poet quotes the allusion of Duke Jing of Qi. Once, Duke Jing of Qi climbed Mount Niu. Although the scenery in front of him was extremely beautiful, he suddenly thought that people would eventually die, so he couldn't help but shed tears. At the same time, the poet also uses the idiom “得陇望蜀” from the *Book of the Later Han* (*Hou Hanshu*) to warn people not to be insatiable, as greed may eventually lead to gaining nothing.

(2) Implicit use refers to indirectly quoting an allusion, that is, integrating the allusion into the poetry in a concise, meaningful, natural and unadorned way. The writing is smooth and coherent, and the words seem to be the poet's own creation. Even if one does not know the allusion used, one can still understand the poetic meaning; those who know the source of the allusion will find it more meaningful. Therefore, implicit use is also called “adaptation”.

Example 2:

“闲来垂钓碧溪上，忽复乘舟梦日边”。——李白《行路难》

“I poise a fishing pole with ease on the green stream; Or set sail for the sun like the sage in a dream.” — Li Bai, *Hard is the Way of the World* (Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

Analysis: These two lines implicitly use allusions: Jiang Ziya (Lv Shang) once fished by the Panxi River in Wei Shui, met King Wen of

Zhou, and helped the Zhou Dynasty destroy the Shang Dynasty; Yi Yin once dreamed that he was sailing past the sun and the moon, and later was hired by King Tang of Shang to help the Shang Dynasty destroy the Xia Dynasty.

4.1.2 Positive Use and Reverse Use

(1) Positive use of allusions means directly borrowing the original meaning of a story or literary work to express the author's thoughts and feelings from a positive perspective, that is, “directly using the event”. Authors consciously use allusions to enhance the artistic effect of their works or express deeper meanings. By using allusions, authors can rely on cultural knowledge familiar to readers to deepen their understanding and resonance with the works. Positive use of allusions can also be used to emphasize themes, express emotions, shape images, etc., making works more rich and diverse.

Example 3:

“陈王昔时宴平乐，斗酒十千恣欢谑”。——李白《将进酒》

“The Prince of Poets feast'd in his palace at will; Drank wine at ten thousand a cask and laughed his fill.” — Li Bai, *Invitation to Wine* (Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

Analysis: These two lines adapt the sentence “Returning, they feasted at Pingle; Fine wine cost ten thousand coins a cask” from The Capital. “Prince Chen” (Cao Zhi) was a role model in Li Bai's mind. Cao Zhi was suspected in the imperial court and could not realize his ambitions, which resonated with Li Bai emotionally. Through this allusion, the poet expressed his feelings about life, his belief in himself, and his deep anxiety and indignation.

(2) Reverse use refers to using an allusion in the opposite sense to its original meaning, that is, the meaning of the allusion is opposite or relative to the author's intention. It extends the meaning of the allusion through implication, contrast, foil and other techniques, expressing one thing while implying another. Reverse use of allusions is a kind of reverse thinking and even a kind of wisdom.

Example 4:

“脚著谢公屐，身登步云梯”。——李白《梦游天姥吟留别》

Hsie's sandals so homely I wear; And climb the ladder Blue Sky. —Li Bai, *My Dream of Mt. Sky*

Mum: To Go Or Not to Go (Translated by Zhao Yanchun)

Analysis: The character Xie Gong in the poem is known for his landscape poetry, and is represented by Xie Lingyun. Therefore, for Xie Gong, the wooden clogs symbolize his exploration and pursuit of nature. However, the poet Li Bai uses this allusion in reverse to highlight his longing for Tianmo Mountain with the clogs of Xie Gong, implying his dissatisfaction with the constraints of reality and his pursuit of a free spirit.

Example 5:

“归时莫洗耳，为我洗其心”。——李白《送裴十八图南归嵩山之二》

“When you return, do not wash your ears; Wash your heart for me.” — Li Bai, *Seeing Pei Shiba Tunan Off to Songshan* (II) (Translated by author)

Analysis: Origin of the allusion: According to Biographies of Gao Shi (Gaoshi Zhuan) by Huangfu Mi of the Jin Dynasty, Xu You was upright and would not sit on an evil mat or eat evil food, living in seclusion in the Peize. Yao, the wise king, wanted to abdicate the throne to Xu You, but Xu You refused and hid. He fled to farm on the north bank of the Ying River, at the foot of Jishan Mountain. Later, Yao came again to ask him to be the governor of the nine provinces. Xu You thought this statement defiled him, so he went to the bank of the Ying River to wash his ears. Therefore, Xu You became a representative of noble and loyal people who were far away from secular fame and wealth.

Here, the poet Li Bai used this allusion in reverse: “When you return, do not wash your ears; Wash your heart for me.” Because at that time, there were many people who retired from officialdom to fish for fame and reputation. By this, the poet wanted to advise his friend not to pretend to learn from Xu You to wash his ears, but to “wash his heart” and maintain a noble and sincere soul.

5. Methods for Translating Allusions in Li Bai's Poetry

Translation aims to achieve information equivalence between two languages, but not all forms of genres can achieve complete equivalence. The translation field has always believed that translating poetry is extremely difficult, and translating allusions with national cultural characteristics in poetry is even more

challenging. When translating poetry, we must consider both the original text and the target text, try to reproduce the national cultural characteristics implied by the allusions in the original poem, and also take into account the target language readers to make it easy for them to understand and accept. Many scholars at home and abroad have translated Li Bai's poetry, and the large number of allusions in his poems undoubtedly increases the difficulty of translation. The following are different strategies adopted by domestic and foreign translators when translating the allusions contained in Li Bai's poetry.

5.1 Literal Translation or Literal Translation with Notes

Example 1:

“闲来垂钓碧溪上，忽复乘舟梦日边”。——李白《行路难》

The two allusions in these two lines have been mentioned above. Both Lv Shang and Yi Yin assisted emperors in establishing great undertakings. However, Li Bai was not valued politically, had an unsmooth official career, and his talent was not recognized, leading to a very tortuous life. At this time, Li Bai thought of the experiences of Jiang Ziya (Lv Shang) and Yi Yin, wanting to show that his political future was not dark and there was great hope.

Translation 1: “So I sat quietly drooping my hook, on the banks of gray stream. Suddenly, I mounted a ship, dreaming of a sun's horizon.” (British scholar)

Translation 2: “I poise a fishing role with ease on the green stream. Or set sail for the sun like the sage in a dream.” (Chinese scholar)

The first translator adopted the method of literal translation, which conveys the basic meaning of the poetry but ignores the cultural connotation implied by the poetry, failing to convey the cultural connotation of the allusion behind the poetry and unable to achieve the conversion and transmission between cultures.

The second translator, a Chinese scholar, has a better understanding of Chinese culture and the allusions behind the poetry. Therefore, in Translation 2, the translator made some subtle adjustments and used “like the sage in a dream” to convey the author's thoughts, which is quite ingenious.

Example 2:

“白兔捣药秋复春，嫦娥孤栖与谁邻？”——李白《把酒问月》

This poem involves two allusions: “jade hare” and “Chang’e”. Chang’e is the fairy living on the moon in Chinese mythology, and the jade hare is the immortal hare living in the moon palace in Chinese mythology. Chang’e and the jade hare are usually regarded as images representing the moon and are often used in literary works.

Xu Yuanchong’s translation: “Jade Hare is not companion boon; For lonely Goddess of the Moon”

Yang & Dai’s translation: “Year after year the white hare pounds medicine; Who is there to keep lonely Chang E company?”

When translating “白兔” (white hare), both translators adopted the method of literal translation, translating it as “Jade Hare” and “white hare”. However, in translating “嫦娥” (Chang’e), a word with Chinese cultural characteristics, the translators handled it differently. Mr. Xu Yuanchong translated it as “Goddess of the Moon”, while Yang Xianyi and his wife translated “嫦娥” as “Chang’e” and added notes on the basis of literal translation, which largely retained the allusions in the original poem. Comparatively speaking, literal translation with notes is also a reasonable translation strategy to promote the dissemination of Chinese culture.

5.2 Free Translation

Example 3:

“功成拂衣去，归入武陵源”。——李白《登金陵冶城西北谢安墩》

Here, the allusion of “Peach Blossom Spring” is used. “Wulingyuan” in the poem refers to “Peach Blossom Spring”. Peach Blossom Spring, described in *The Peach Blossom Spring* (Tao Hua Yuan Ji), is a secluded paradise imagined by the author, where people are self-sufficient and far away from the troubles of the world. It is an ideal perfect society, which can also reflect people’s dissatisfaction and resistance to the real society at that time.

Zhao Yanchun’s translation: “When I succeed, I’d go afar; For free life there in Shangrila”.

Here, “Wulingyuan” is translated as “Shangrila”, which is considered the place closest to paradise and more in line with Western thinking. Through free translation, the connotation of the allusion is expressed without causing misunderstanding among Western

readers.

5.3 Creative Translation

Example 4:

“十五始展眉，愿同尘与灰。常存抱柱信，岂上望夫台。”——李白《长干行》

Pound’s translation:

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the lookout?

In Li Bai’s poem, there is an allusion of “embracing the pillar” (Bao Zhu). This allusion comes from Zhuangzi-Dao Zhi: “Weisheng made an appointment with a woman under a bridge. The woman did not come, and when the water rose, Weisheng did not leave and died holding the bridge pillar.” Later, “embracing the pillar” became an allusion to sticking to a promise. From Pound’s translation, we cannot find the translation of the allusion “embracing the pillar”, which shows that the translator did not translate it directly. Moreover, Pound’s translation is not confined to the meaning of the original poem, but is more like a re-creation beyond the original text. Pound chose to use the repetition of three ‘forevers’ to express the heroine’s desire to accompany her husband through old age, while also subtly revealing her endless sense of loss and sorrow in her heart (Zhang, 2014). This may be because Western translators have relatively little understanding of Chinese culture, so they adopted the strategy of creative translation to deal with it.

Here are the translations by Xu Yuanchong and Xu Zhongjie:

Xu Yuanchong’s translation:

I was fifteen when I composed my brows.
To mix my dust with yours were my dear vows.
Rather than break faith, you declared you’d die
Who knew I’d live alone in a tower high.

Xu Zhongjie’s translation:

By fifteen, more of marital love I had learnt;
We had vowed constancy till to ashes we’re turned

I e’er kept in mind the tale that Wei Sheng died—

To keep his promise—drowned by the rising tide
Or, to the Wives — Watch — Tower, must I go

my way?

There would not be and could not be, such a day!

As two Chinese translators, Xu Yuanchong and Xu Zhongjie have different translations of this poem. Xu Yuanchong adopted the method of free translation, while Xu Zhongjie skillfully explained the allusions contained in the poem. Coupled with the handling of the poem's rhymes, it is easier for foreign readers to understand the meaning of the poem and appreciate the formal beauty of Li Bai's poetry.

6. Conclusion

Translation is for communication and exchange, not just a word-for-word bilingual conversion. The ultimate goal of translation is to make the effect of the original text on the source language readers the same as that of the translated text on the target language readers. Translators should not only understand and convey the surface meaning of the original work, but also deeply understand its cultural connotation, try to retain the culture in the original work and convey it to the target language readers, and try to make it easy for readers to understand and accept. The same is true for the translation of allusions in poetry. Translators should first understand the source of the allusion, its original story content, the meaning it expresses, and the cultural connotation it contains. Then, according to the purpose of translation, readers' requirements and acceptance level, they should flexibly adopt appropriate translation methods to creatively reproduce the allusions in the original poem in the target language, so as to effectively disseminate the bilingual culture (Chen, 2012). There is no distinction between good and bad translation strategies, as their purpose is to achieve information transmission and exchange, and cultural dissemination.

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