Approaches to Basic Concepts in English Translation of Classical Chinese Poetry

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Classical Chinese poetry, frequently praised as the treasury of native Chinese culture, has long enjoyed a high reputation both at home and abroad. The issue concerning English translation of Classical Chinese poetry has remained not only a much debated topic in the field of translation studies, but also a controversial one arousing numerous discussions from different perspectives. Especially, Chinese and English translators, in rendering classical Chinese poetry, have formulated various concepts or guidelines, thus producing different strategies and versions. Although these concepts more or less differ from one another, some similarities can still be drawn out, and even up to now, a few of them remain quite popular in poetry translation. What follows, merely focusing on four concepts shared and often employed by Chinese and English translators, attempts to make a careful analysis of them.
1. Translation as reproduction of the original spirit or beauty

As a matter of fact, reproduction, spirit and beauty are the traditional terms frequently mentioned in the western and Chinese histories of translation studies. So far as poetry translation is concerned, “the poem is a means, a spiritual statement, which is not, however, an end” (Yves Bonnefoy, 1992:187-188), and the poetic spirit or beauty is always a major concern of the translators. John Denham once said, “poetry is of so subtle a spirit, that, in pouring out of one language into another, it will all evaporate; and, if a new spirit be not added in the transfusion, there will remain nothing but a caput mortuum” (Dryden, 1992:20). And Rossetti argued, “The only true motive for putting poetry into a fresh language must be to endow a fresh nation, as far as possible, with one more possession of beauty” (1992:65).

As for classical Chinese poetry, “it is the vehicle to which the Chinese have entrusted their profoundest and most heartfelt utterances, the form that has come to be recognized as characteristic of the Chinese poetic spirit at its greatest”(Watson, 1971:1). In English translation of classical Chinese poetry, due to the aesthetic functions of poetic language, striving to reproduce the poetic beauty or spirit has turned out to be a common goal and guideline for most Chinese and English translators, and there are too many such examples to enumerate. Take Rewi Alley’s translations of classical Chinese poetry for example, “these translations are faithful to both the spirit and the letter of the originals” (Mao Dun, 1983:3), and “Rewi Alley’s translations pay less heed to the form than to the spirit of the original poems”(Mao Dun,1983:3). While in Chinese translators’ eyes, aesthetic claim is of paramount importance, it is widely acknowledged that without spirit or beauty, there would be no poetry and poetry translation at all. Compared with non-poetic translation, poetry translation means more than mere communication of information.

In general, spirit or beauty symbolizes the force or energy of language, which is a very generalized and abstract concept covering the whole aesthetic qualities and values of the poetic language. According to Leech, a famous English linguist, language may be divided into three strata, namely, semantics, form and realization (1969:37). Chinese language is invariably monosyllabic, which consists of three components: meaning, form and sound. It is often supposed that semantic, visual and auditory aspects of Chinese language have greatly contributed to the aesthetic qualities of Chinese poetry. Therefore, in order to reproduce the original spirit or
beauty, the translators have to decide on what kind of beauty or spirit should be transposed, for Chinese poetic beauty or spirit, at least, lies in three dimensions of sense, sound and form. In this respect, translators have held different viewpoints. Generally speaking, most English translators have attached great importance to the reproduction of beauty in meaning or imagery rather than formal properties. Many famous translators, such as Arthur Waley, Ezra Pound, W.J.B Fletcher and etc., have rendered Chinese poetry into unrhymed free verses, and only several translators including James Legge, Giles and John Turner have tried to retain the original beauty or spirit in metrics by way of rhythmical and metrical devices in English poetry. On the contrary, most Chinese translators, focusing on the original textual grids, have sharply emphasized the necessities to reproduce the poetic beauty both in meaning and sound. The eminent Chinese translator by name of Xu Yuanchong (1984:52-61) has proposed the criterion of "beauty in three aspects", claiming the reproduction of poetic beauty at semantic, sound and form levels, which, presently, is quite prevalent among Chinese poetry translators and researchers.

In a nutshell, although poetic spirit or beauty, in translating practice, may be confined to content, form or both of them, and may sometimes be further expressed by other terms such as meaning, emotions or artistic atmosphere, the underlying aesthetic consideration, by nature, is quite the same, just as Bassnett once commented, "time and again Pound reminds us that a translation should be a work of art in its own right, for anything less is pointless" (2001a:64).

2. Translation as poem into poem

The original is comprised of poetic content and form, so it is justifiable for the translator to render a poem into a poem. Not only Chinese translators but also English translators have such similar views. Specifically speaking, translation as poem into poem, at least, involves the following two senses and reasons: firstly, as a poem, the original is a special genre of artistic creation, and in translation it should not be distorted into prose or any other genre of writing; secondly, since the original is a poem full of poetic charm, the translation should also have the poetic values and qualities.

From the above-mentioned, it may be perceived that the concept of poem into poem is of some positive significance in poetry translation, as Gallagher once said, "what an English-only reader wants is a good poem in English" (Mona Baker,
Therefore, the concept, to some extent, may be employed as a guideline or criterion in practice. However, poem into poem, by nature, is too general and obscure to be effectively applied to poetry translation, which may easily lead to two potential limitations or demerits in comprehension and practice.

For one thing, how to define poem or poetry is still a much discussed and disputed topic, and it seems that currently, no one has reached a unified and widely accepted definition. In reality, translators may have their own understandings of the central issue what a poem is, thus producing sharply distinct views and strategies in practice. For example, some translators regard the musical quality as the inseparable part of poetry, so believing that the translation of classical Chinese poetry must be rhymed. On the contrary, some hold different opinions that only the poetic content, artistic atmosphere or imagery can be qualified to measure up whether a piece of work is a poem or not, accordingly arguing that classical Chinese poetry should be rendered into free verses. Simply judging from the above controversies, these two kinds of opposite views, based on different definitions of poetry, sound partially reasonable and practicable, but these views are not beneficial to translation practice and evaluation. By and large, if the translator wants to consider poem into poem as a criterion, the term of poem should first of all be defined with great clarity. In this respect, it is often supposed that the definition of poem had better cover all the qualities deriving from both poetic content and form.

For another, the guideline of poem into poem, in some cases, can hardly reveal the essential requirements in poetry translation, or rather, translation itself. Viewed from translation studies, the relations between the original and the translated may be expounded like this. The original is the objective reference for a translator, and translator’s duty or obligation is to reproduce the original in the target language and culture, so as to seek for the similar function and effect of translation in the target language. Then, the clear demarcation line between the creation of source text and the recreation of translated text should not be confused and dismantled, although Paz has stressed “translation and creation are twin processes” (1992:160). These basic requirements are vitally essential to the nature of translation, without which translation can hardly exist in its true sense. That is to say, in poetry translation, translator, unlike the original poet, can only recreate a poem under the referential scope of the original rather than create a new poem independent of the original. Ezra Pound’s translation of classical Chinese poetry is a good case in point. Pound’s translation may stand on its own as a good poem, or rather, a new poem which is
perfectly up to the measurement of poem into poem concept, but strictly speaking, his translated poem is quite like the original poet’s creation instead of faithful reproduction of the original, and it can hardly be called translation. It goes without any exaggeration, translator, by following poem into poem, may sometimes go too far to violate the nature of translation and turn translation into a sort of free creation.

3. Translation as seed transplanting

Against the background of the cultural turn in translation studies, the concept of “transplanting the seed” concerning poetry translation has been formulated by Susan Bassnett (2001a). In general, the cultural turn in translation studies marks a shift of academic emphasis from the former linguistic and textual grids to the present cultural and extra-textual factors in translation. Nowadays, the so-called culture studies approach to translation seems to be more and more fashionable and influential, thus casting new light upon poetry translation. Needless to say, seed transplanting, mainly based on the perspectives of culture studies and comparative literature theories, may provide an access to English translation of classical Chinese poetry.

To begin with, it is better to introduce the connotations of the term seed transplanting. Bassnett first cited Shelley’s following words about difficulties of poetry translation: “it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its color and odour, as to seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower— and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel” (2001a:58). Then based on Shelley’s imagery of change and new growth, Bassnett mentioned that “the seed can be placed in new soil, for a new plant to develop. The task of the translator must then be to determine and locate that seed and to set about its transplantation” (2001a: 58). That is to say, “the task of the translator is to compose an analogous text in another language” (Bassnett, 2001a:66). In this sense, poetry translation may be regarded as energy-releasing, freeing the linguistic sign into circulation, re-flowering in another language and culture (Bassnett, 2001a:74).

Specifically, as for English translation of classical Chinese poetry, translator, according to the above-cited concept, should dismantle the original to select the seed of the Chinese poetry and then reconstruct it in English language to release the
energy and the cultural capital into circulation. By doing so, translator must, first of all, decide on what kind of seed in the original poem should be picked out and transplanted. For this, Bassnett suggested, “in order to translate poetry, the first stage is intelligent reading of the source text, a detailed process of decoding that takes into account both textual features and extra-textual factors” (2001a:60). It seems that how to define the seed will be influenced by both textual and extra-textual elements. And the seed is also a very generalized and uncertain concept. In practice, translator’s choice of seed will be subject to numerous constraints, which may roughly be grouped into following categories: textual qualities, translators’ preference or purposes, reader’s expectation, language discrepancies and etc. To be more specific, in classical Chinese poetry, any aspect related to poetic content and form may be qualified to rank as seeds or cultural capitals, but some of them, due to the above various constraints, will have to fall out of the translator’s choices and will not be transplanted. This is just as Lawrence Venuti once pointed out, “every step in the translation process—from the selection of foreign texts to the implementation of translation strategies to the editing, reviewing and reading of translations—is mediated by the diverse cultural values that circulate in the target language, always in some hierarchical order” (Bassnett, 2001b:137).

So far as the transplanting strategies are concerned, they are also likely to be very flexible, because the translator’s final choice of the seed, whether based on the original textual grids or target cultural grids, may affect his or her translating methods. It goes without any doubt that seed may be chosen with some restraints as well as some freedom, so is the case with the transplanting strategies. In spite of translator’s freedom and flexibility in seed transplanting, one point must be ensured in translation of Chinese poetry that the image or the truth of Chinese poetic culture must not be distorted and impaired. In other words, seed transplanting should base its rationality and practicability on such a premise not to violate the basic requirements of translation itself.

4. Translation as line by line

In classical Chinese poetry, it is usual for the poet to employ two or more than two verse lines to express the full meaning or information of a sentence often used in our everyday lives, and each verse line, in terms of linguistic function, is approximate to a clause or several phrases in grammar. In this sense, the expressive
mode in Chinese poetry is quite similar to enjambment in English poetry. Therefore, translating the poem line by line is widely acknowledged by both Chinese and English translators.

Actually, translation as line by line is not simply a practical strategy, but tightly associated with the choice of translation unit. According to Lorscher's views, "considered from a process-oriented point of view, the unit of translation is the stretch of source text on which the translator focuses attention in order to represent it as a whole in the target language" (Mona Baker, 2004:286). As a general rule, translation line by line may, at least, have the following two advantages.

Firstly, translation as line by line can facilitate translator's concentration on the syntactic features in Chinese poetry, which are crucially different from those in English poetry. Undoubtedly, the poetic theme or subject matter is of prime significance, but how to express it in poetic language also plays an important role. Particularly, the poet enjoys much freedom in breaking down the norms and conventions of language, which is called "poetic licence" (Leech, 1969:36). Watson once analyzed two major features of Chinese poetic language, that is, nouns contain no indication of number and verbs lack indication of tense (1971:7-8). In addition, Chinese, an uninflected paratactic language, does not have the indications of case, gender, subjunctive mood, dynamic or static verb and etc. Hence, the syntactic structure of Chinese verse line, as is well known, is often characterized by various omitted grammatical elements, inversions, lack of concepts in time and space and etc. Although Dryden argued, "but since every language is so full of its own proprieties, that what is beautiful in one, is often barbarous, may sometimes nonsense, in another..." (1992:21), the fine shades of poet's powerful or subtle feelings, to a great extent, are presented through the peculiarities of Chinese poetic syntax. Accordingly, the translator, whenever possible, should pay much attention to these structural features. In reality, translators, by way of disembodiment, may try to more or less imitate the brevity and conciseness of Chinese verse line. Certainly, there also exist some extreme cases that a Chinese verse line has been split up and rendered into several lines in English, which has completely overlooked the original syntactic features.

Secondly, any translation is intended for the reader in target language, and translation as line by line may be helpful to reader's reception and comprehension, for English readers have been well acquainted with the tradition of enjambment in poetry reading. Translation as line by line may conform to the reader's horizon of
expectation, and moreover, translation as line by line signifies an effort to keep the original outflow order of poet's thoughts and emotions, thus easily leading readers into the inner world of the poet through reading line by line.

5. Conclusion

To treat all the concepts in English translation of classical Chinese poetry exhaustively is really impossible by this short paper, which is not the intention of this paper. As mentioned previously, only four major concepts have been touched upon, but they are quite influential and popular, which can reveal some basic views shared by both Chinese and English translators. From the above analysis, a brief summary may be made here. Classical Chinese poetry has its own linguistic and cultural characteristics. The above concepts are proposed on the basis of different aspects of poetry translation. Comparatively speaking, translation as reproduction of original beauty or spirit sharpens the aesthetic claim or qualities in translation, and translation as poem into poem concentrates on the whole effect of the translation, while seed transplanting highlights the textual and extra-textual constraints in poetry translation, and translation as line by line pays much attention to the syntactic features. Although all the concepts are usually employed in rendering classical Chinese poetry, most of them are somewhat generalized and obscure, which need to be further defined clearly to avoid ambiguities. What is more, whatever concept may be chosen as a guideline or criterion in practice, translator should always bear in mind that English translation of classical Chinese poetry is merely a sort of cross-cultural reproduction and recreation instead of free creation irregardless of the original text.

Notes:

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