

Preliminary Study of Lin Yutang's Translation Theory in Poetry

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Abstract: Lin Yutang is one of the giants of modern literature, renowned for his exceptional literary accomplishments and outstanding poetic translation skills. This paper attempts to explore Lin Yutang's transcendent creativity beyond the boundaries of language and culture through an examination of his poetic translation philosophy. His underlying thoughts on poetry translation form the foundation and premise of the authenticity of his translation practice. Deeply interested in classical Chinese poetry and traditional culture, Lin introduced numerous poetic works to the Western world, generating considerable influence and scholarly interest in his academic value. His poetic translations serve as a bridge for cultural exchange between China and the West. At the time, they greatly facilitated mutual understanding of each other's literary and artistic traditions and helped promote outstanding Western cultural works to Chinese readers. Lin thus made significant achievements and contributions to cultural development, acting as a cultural conduit that introduced Western culture to China.

Keywords: Lin Yutang, Poetry Translation, Translation Philosophy, Culture.

1. Introduction

Lin Yutang was born into a distinguished family that excelled in literature, philosophy, and translation. His poetry is renowned for its refined language, classical austerity, and a sense of tranquil antiquity. Within the vast landscape of literature, Lin's poetry translations have become a focal point of scholarly attention. Translation itself is a process of crossing and transforming languages, and Lin Yutang's poetic translations in particular reached an artistic realm [1]. Equipped with a solid linguistic foundation, unique literary sensitivity, and profound cultural insight, he was able to faithfully convey the emotion, meaning, and aesthetic of the original works in another language.

In Lin Yutang's poetry translation, we can observe his rigorous and meticulous word choice, as well as his masterful control of the poetic ambiance embedded within language. His translations are not merely linguistic conversions but also deep cultural and spiritual exchanges. They enable the original text to be presented to readers in a new language while simultaneously revealing the deeper literary connotations of the work. As a result, readers are able to appreciate the unique flavor and philosophical depth of the original poems without barriers.

Therefore, further study of Lin Yutang's philosophy of poetry translation is not only warranted but also holds significant theoretical and practical value for contemporary translation studies.

2. Lin Yutang's Biography and Literary Background

Lin Yutang was born in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China, and later studied in both China and the United States, where he earned a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Chicago. With a profound academic background, he initially focused on philosophy, influenced by Western thought, while also being well-versed in traditional Chinese literature [2]. In his literary works, Lin was skilled at using humor and wit,

combined with a deep and subtle approach, to depict various worlds. He made notable contributions across different genres, including novels, essays, and poetry. His representative works, *The Diary of a Madman* and *The Travels of Lao Can*, both focus on contemporary issues, though with differing emphases.

In addition to his novels, Lin Yutang's essay collection, *Selections of Lin Yutang's Essays*, provides unique insights into life, literature, and philosophy. Aside from his creative output, Lin also made significant contributions to translation. He translated many Western literary classics, including Shakespeare's plays and Victor Hugo's novels. His translations of Rabindranath Tagore's works, in particular, gained widespread acclaim.

From the 1930s onwards, Lin devoted himself to translating classical Chinese poetry into English, compiling works such as *Selected Translations of Classical Chinese Essays*, *The Biography of Su Dongpo*, and *The Selected English Translations of Lin Yutang's Poetry and Prose*. Many of his translations were published in his English works, capturing the mood of the original texts while striving to preserve their literary flavor and style. Lin's translations are marked by lively and expressive language, which conveys the underlying thoughts and emotions while avoiding the stiffness and artificiality of traditional vernacular Chinese [3]. His translations often illuminate the hidden poetic essence and emotions of the original works.

Lin's thoughts were broad and profound, extending across literature, philosophy, and society, with diverse perspectives on life. He emphasized combining humor with reason, advocating for a pragmatic and truth-seeking approach to life. His ideas attracted the attention of his contemporaries and continue to influence later literary creations and translation theory.

3. Lin Yutang's Experience with Poetry

Lin Yutang was born in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China. Two influences played a crucial role in shaping his character

and literary career: the landscapes of his hometown and his father. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, Chinese literary circles gradually began to engage with Western literature, translating Western literary works into Chinese. During this period, some early translators began translating Western poetry, introducing British Romantic poetry to China. New-style poetry and Western poetry became widely popular, and scholars and literati passed these ideas along. Lin Yutang, with his deep understanding of both Chinese and Western cultures, did not fall behind [4]. He had little to say in sharp critique of new-style poetry, though. Lin also believed that Chinese poetry's enduring brilliance was closely connected to the Chinese language and the Chinese people, which is the foundation of his understanding of the success of Chinese poetry [5]. The reasons behind Lin Yutang's significant achievements in poetry can be traced back to his rich and unique upbringing, where several key factors had a profound impact on his poetic creation:

3.1. A Multifaceted Academic Background

Lin Yutang pursued his studies in the United States and earned a Ph.D. in Philosophy. His mind was immersed in a deep and intricate culture of speculative thinking, which offered him numerous insights into life and the universe. With his understanding of both Chinese and Western cultures, he took a philosophical approach to contemplating life and existence, which endowed his poetry with a profound academic grounding and a broad, expansive perspective.

3.2. Literary and Translation Practice

In his youth, Lin began writing novels and essays, while also engaging in translation work. He extensively read Western literary masterpieces, especially French literature, which broadened his horizons and refined his writing skills. Through translating foreign works, he gained familiarity with various literary forms, which enabled him to skillfully use these techniques in his own creative endeavors.

3.3. Identity as a Literary Critic

Lin Yutang worked as a literary critic, which greatly influenced his views on literary criticism, his understanding of literature, and his appreciation of literary forms. This exposure transformed his approach to creation, raising his standards and gradually leading him to form a unique literary perspective.

3.4. Thoughts and Social Engagement

Lin Yutang lived through significant historical changes in China, including the Xinhai Revolution, both World Wars, the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, and the Chinese Civil War. These moments deeply impacted his inner world and shaped his intellectual outlook. As a result, his poetry reflects the spirit of the times, expressing his concerns for national affairs, the well-being of the people, and his aspirations. His works are not only moving on a personal level but also resonate with a sense of engagement with the broader social and political landscape.

4. Language Expression and Translation Philosophy

4.1. Fidelity to the Original Work

Lin Yutang adhered closely to the principle of fidelity to the original author in his translation process. Unlike ordinary

texts, the translation of poetry demands not only accuracy but also an aesthetic sensitivity to sound, rhythm, and rhyme. Translating poetry therefore requires a deep understanding of the phonetic and linguistic characteristics of the target language, and often necessitates creative linguistic flexibility. Since poetic language is typically highly concise—with each line often expressing a single idea in a refined and economical way—translating poetry becomes a major test of the translator's linguistic and literary sensitivity [3].

Yet Lin Yutang consistently preserved every detail of the original text. He faithfully translated all meaning, vocabulary, and syntax, striving to retain the original message and emotion as accurately as possible. For example, in his English translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, Lin rendered the line “余做新舅送嫁，丑末归来，业已灯残人静” as:

“After midnight, on the 24th, as bride's brother, I sent her off, came back at about 3 A.M., when the room was enveloped in quietude, surrounded by the languishing light of the candles.”

In Qing Dynasty China, time was recorded using the traditional Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches system, which can be confusing for foreign readers. Lin skillfully translated this complex temporal reference into the simple and clear phrase “after midnight,” without omitting or conflating time or date. He preserved the original meaning while effectively conveying the atmosphere of a silent, candlelit night.

The original Chinese line was meant to evoke the stillness and quietude of deep night. Lin captured this through a simple yet vivid description. Such precision requires not only a solid understanding of the original vocabulary but also a grasp of syntactical relationships and underlying context. Moreover, idiomatic expressions and cultural elements must be retained to ensure the unique style and aesthetic of the original are not lost. Otherwise, excessive translator subjectivity can result in translations that deviate in spirit and meaning—transforming the translator into the author's substitute rather than a faithful mediator—leading to cultural distortion or misrepresentation. A lack of cultural awareness or an inadequate understanding of the original text may mislead readers and diminish the text's distinctive charm. This underscores why fidelity is fundamental in poetry translation.

4.2. The Harmony of Form and Meaning

Translation is a value-based act involving constant choices, which in turn shape one's interpretation of the essence of translation itself. While fidelity to the source is necessary, the translation must also fully convey the original's thought, meaning, and values. In *On Translating Poetry*, Lin Yutang stated: “English poetry requires a meticulous polish of wording, but also a natural expression of mood. Although different from Chinese poetry, this is essentially the same.” Poetry, as a distinct literary genre, demands precision in diction, rhythm, and cadence. It often incorporates rhyme schemes and rhetorical devices such as contrast and juxtaposition, which are used to create stylistic tension and emotional depth. Vivid imagery enhances the visual impact of the poem, making it more engaging and expressive. Because poetry is a highly condensed form of language, it communicates thoughts and emotions through imagery. The success of a translation lies in capturing the poem's essence, using precise and stylistically rich language. For example, in translating Li Bai's *Drinking Alone Under the Moon*, the line “永结无情游，相期邈云汉” was rendered by Lin Yutang as:

“An eternal speechless trio then till in the clouds we meet again.”

Here, “trio” represents “myself, my shadow, and the moon.” With a single word, Lin encompassed all three characters while subtly conveying Li Bai’s sense of solitude. The term “speechless” is used not in its literal sense but metaphorically, representing emotional detachment. This reflects Lin’s mastery of both Chinese and English, and his ability to employ words with layered meanings.

4.3. Appropriate Creative Adaptation

Creative adaptation in translation refers to the translator’s ability to break free from the literal constraints of the source text and recompose the translation based on contextual, situational, and cultural factors. This enables the translator to reproduce the spirit and artistic resonance of the original text while incorporating personal insight and interpretive creativity—so long as the original intent remains intact. This approach requires a strong command of language, rich literary knowledge, and cross-cultural communication skills. For example, consider this modern paraphrase of an ancient Chinese idea:

“对于三位君王来言，在祭祀河海时都是把先河后海列为第一大洲，而不管是从源头出发还是输入之地。”

This has been interpreted by Lin Yutang as:

“Here he referred to Confucianism’s point about worrying over where you spring from rather than where you end up: ‘In their rite of sacrificing to the gods of rivers and lakes, ancient sovereigns honored the rivers before they honored the seas; discerning between spring and mouth, knowing your source or your destination, that was knowing where to focus.’”

Rather than translating each word literally, Lin summarized the underlying meaning with clarity for foreign readers. Terms like “祭河海” (sacrificing to rivers and seas) were expressed as “sacrificing to the gods of rivers and lakes,” effectively conveying the cultural significance. Similarly, “夏、商、周三代天子” (the emperors of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties) was generalized as “ancient sovereigns,” which suffices for the context without the need for historical specificity.

Lin Yutang’s translations demonstrate profound understanding of both source and target languages. His choices reflect sensitivity to cultural nuance and reader reception, ultimately producing translations that are not only faithful but also elegant and accessible.

5. Conclusion

This article mainly elaborates on Lin Yutang’s thoughts on poetry translation from three aspects: his views on language, literature, and culture. It then discusses his thoughts and practices in the field of poetry translation. As one of the

outstanding modern Chinese writers and translators, Lin Yutang demonstrated a high sensitivity to language and a profound understanding of literature in his poetic translation ideas. He proposed the concept of “restoring the mood” in translation, which distinguishes itself from the commonly recognized mechanical restoration. This idea emphasizes that the translated text should vividly reproduce the emotional attitude, the layers of meaning, and other aspects of the original work. Therefore, when translating Lin Yutang’s poetry with this “restoring the mood” approach, the language is not only precise but also artistic. His advocacy for “elegant and popular enjoyment” in translation also provides us with significant inspiration, encouraging us to understand the target audience and strive to tell stories in a way that suits everyone. Lastly, to some extent, Lin Yutang’s thoughts on poetry translation have subverted traditional approaches to poetic translation, highlighting the creative and subjective nature of the translator. According to Lin Yutang, the translator should fully leverage their subjective initiative, and in the process of translation, be aware of the target language audience, while incorporating their own understanding and interpretation of the work to infuse life into the translated text. In summary, Lin Yutang’s philosophy of poetry translation possesses notable uniqueness and depth, and it can serve as guidance for both the practice of poetry translation and the formation and development of poetry translation theory. This is where its special significance and value lie. By exploring Lin Yutang’s thoughts on poetry translation, we can gain a deeper understanding of the content of his ideas. Furthermore, this allows us to discern his distinctive translation concepts and his unique views on literature. In future research on poetry translation, we can discover new perspectives through Lin Yutang’s experience, broaden our horizons, and deepen our understanding.

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