

# On the Boundedness of English Versions of Chinese Poems

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**Abstract:** As the main form of the creation of the Chinese classical literature, poetry is also a bright pearl of Chinese traditional culture. The ancient poetry is an art of language with distinctive rhythm, harmonious rhyme, concise character, rich connotation and profound artistic conception. Few western readers could enjoy its profound literary artistry. The primary reason is that Chinese was born with a poetic nature. The translation of Chinese classical poetry has limits. This essay analyzes this problem from three aspects—the beauty of sound, the beauty of sense and the beauty of form. The study not only helps us further comprehend and appreciate ancient Chinese poetry but also improves translation. This paper hopes that new light could be shed on the translation of ancient Chinese poetry with the help of this research.

**Keywords:** Chinese classical poetry, Translation, Three beauties, Limits.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The importance of the ancient Chinese poetry

The translation of ancient Chinese poetry is a main way to introduce Chinese culture to western countries. Classical Chinese poetry is a treasure in the world of art. It occupies a far more important place than any other literary in the history of Chinese literature. Translation of Chinese ancient poetry carries forward the traditional culture, makes the world know more about China, and promotes cultural communication. So it has important practical significance. The poem is implicit, rhythmic, and tidy (Catford T C 1965: 96-97). Ancient Chinese poetry attracts thousands of readers in the world. So, it is necessary for us to analyze the translation of ancient Chinese poetry. Some people think translation is an easy job. It seems that people who learn English and with the help of dictionary can do translate job. They are wrong. Mr. Guo Moruo once said“ Translation is a hard job. Not only I respect translation but also know the hardship of translation deeply. It is not ordinary work, and sometimes it is more difficult than creative work.”

There are many scholars who have made comments on the translation of the Chinese ancient poetry. “The ancient poetry is too ingenious. If you must translate it, you will ruin it (Luo Xinzhang 1984: 34-35).” “Poetry is unable to translate from one into another language.” If you can’t catch the sound rhythm in translation of poems, the essence of poems is completely lost. It is very hard to grasp the essential characteristics of poems, because the content and form of poem are combined closely and they are inseparable. Therefore many poets or translators say that poems are difficult to translate.

On translation of Chinese classical poems, Xu Yuanchong holds the opinion that the English version of Chinese classical poetry should meet there requirements, namely: form beauty, phonological beauty and meaning beauty. In the process of ancient Chinese poetry translation, the translators keep the beauty of artistic conception. The most important requirement is the beauty of sense.

### 1.2. The history of the poetry translation

The research on the poetry translation began from the last century in China. Influenced by “Eurocentric” and “New Culture Movement”, translators were busy in translating Western poetry and other literature. Thus, the research of Chinese poems is almost blank. Since the reform and opening up, as the East-west cultural exchanges and awareness of Chinese culture, more and more scholars have realized the imbalance of East-west culture translations. So they started to translate the Chinese classical poetry and research, and people’s awareness of limitations of ancient poetry started to awaken. From the mid-1980s, Chinese translation studies has experienced structuralism and deconstruction stages, but translating the classical poetry theory obviously didn’t experience this replacement process. Due to the particularity of the English translation of ancient poetry, traditional poetry paradigm has a natural advantage in this area. However, the application of new theory of translation needs a process of adaptation. By the mid-1990s, a variety of translation theory to find their own adaptation points within the field of translation of Chinese ancient poetry. The research of ancient poetry theory resulted in unprecedented prosperity. In the 21st century, the most important feature the Translation Theory is a systematic study of the various paths. It starts building their own theoretical system.

After World War II, the British passion for classical Chinese poetry unabated. Study of poetry translation itself or translation skills, have made considerable progress. John Turner in his translation of Chinese ancient poetry preface: Chinese literature is extant civilization’s oldest and richest literary artistry artistic peak. He translated Chinese poetry, to make the translation itself like a poem, to make it three beauties. Chinese poetry is more sophisticated than in other countries (Xu Yuanchong 2003: 55-56). As the world’s economic center moved to the United States, the Western world Sinology research focus gradually shifted from Europe to North America. Study of limitations translating poetry is also increasing.

Ancient Chinese poems have a large number of fixed usage. Many fixed usage in English are unable to explain. This requires a deep understanding of the accumulation. Ancient

Chinese Poetry can be divided into many categories according to the content, and each category has a different background, respectively, in the same class and have similar backgrounds. Each author has a different understanding on the basis of different dynasty and life experience. Translators should fully understand the authors' tensions in an effort to have better translations. (Chen hongwei & Li Yadan 2008: 262-263). In many ancient poetry, the feelings are subtle and profound. It is difficult to judge the author's emotional expressions only from the literal meaning.

## 2. On the Limitations of English Versions of Chinese Poems

Accurate translation is not only based on the accumulation of vocabulary, but also the deep understanding of culture. China is a great country with five thousand years of profound cultural tradition. However, the refined words and the rich meaning in poetry bring great difficulties for translation. Once translated, the aesthetic effect and the lasting appeal of it will change or even disappear. Lu Xun first pointed out the three beauties in his *Han Literature Outline*, and then Xu Yuanchong applied the three beauties to translation. In translation, there are limitations of sound, beauty and meaning. The thesis will make a study on the limitation of the beauty of sense, the limitation of the beauty of form, the limitation of the beauty of sound.

Theoretical study of Chinese ancient poetry has developed nearly 30 years, and it has made gratifying achievements. However, the study of ancient poem translation is also facing difficulties and challenges. Western scholars know better about readers' psychology, so the translations are easily accepted by western readers. But its disadvantage is susceptible to cultural fetters, and western translators often do not fully understand the implication of Chinese poetry (Zhuo Zhenying 2002: 58-70).

### 2.1. The Limitation of the Beauty of Sense

Whether the translation can show the deeper meaning of the poem or not is the key of the beauty of sense. Thus, the imagery's beauty makes the poems even better. Therefore, the translator should make the target readers understand the core idea of the author. The translation of Chinese poetry aims initially at English readers who almost don't know the Chinese language and Chinese culture. The translator's task is to express poem's original meaning and convey the implicate emotion correctly. I hope translators can improve their poetry translation ability through analyzing the former translators' translated poems.

#### 2.1.1. The Reasons of the Limitation

The beauty of sense is difficult to convey, because the Western and Chinese have different cultural backgrounds and social environment. Affected by their environment or subjective awareness, different people may have different responses when they face the same object. Xu Yuanchong thinks that the beauty of sense is sometimes formed by historical reasons or imagination. If they don't have the same historical backgrounds, they will fail to imagine the same thing and also fail to understand the meaning of the poem.

Poetry is a concentration of language and it contains rich meaning. The beauty of sense is the soul of the poetry. Therefore, translating the poetry is not only to express its content, but also convey its form, phonology and sense (Lu Shuxiang 1980: 88-92). Only translations are successfully

reproduced the original style, image and temperament and interest, can it have the same artistic conception as the original one. The beauty of sense of poetry is a sublimation on the basis of reality.

The most important part of the art of poetry is imagery. The so-called imagery, is a word in poem, and the basic unit of the art of poetry. The poets reproduce the sensing target by language, and focus on rhetoric and sentences. Many imagery generate the artistic conception, and the artistic conception is equal to the sum of the poem images. That is the artistic image created in the poem (Liu Zhongde 2000: 103-110).

Mood is the highest level of ancient poetry writers pursuit, thus the artistic beauty should be the core in translation process. Literal translation performs artistic conception more directly clear. For example:“无奈夜长人不寐，数声和月到帘栊” (Li Yu 《Dao Lian Zi Ling》), it was translated into “What could I do when sleep's destroyed? In endless night, but count the stars until the morning.” It is like the poem in modern Chinese directly translated into English. But the character's “sorrow” and “thinking” is still can be read.

In China, the moon represents homesickness, especially in mid-autumn festival. It almost becomes the symbol of family reunion at that time (Xu Yuanchong 2005: 223-250). On the contrary, the symbolic meaning of the moon in English slang is perpetration. In the eyes of the westerners, an ominous night of the full moon is the brotherhood of the Wolf. So the beauty of sense can only be sensed but difficult to express with words There is an example to illustrate the limitation of the beauty of sense.

Example:

窗前明月光，疑是地上霜。  
举头望明月，低头思故乡。

(李白)

《静夜思》)

Translation version 1:

The Moon Shines Everywhere

Seeing the moon before my couch so bright,  
I thought gray frost had fallen from the night.

On her clear face I gaze with lifted eyes;

Then hide them full of Youth's sweet memories.

(Translated by W.J.B.Fletcher)

Translation version 2:

Thoughts on a Tranquil Night

Abed, I see a silver light.

I wonder if it's frost aground.

Looking up, I find the moon bright;

Bowing, in homesickness I'm drowned.

(Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

The first translation is not as good as the original poem. Firstly, the title “The Moon Shines Everywhere” can't express the poet's thoughts. As a foreign translator, Fletcher fails to know the true meaning of this poem. Because lacking Chinese traditional culture, he is unable to express the beauty of sense of this poem. That is a limitation of the beauty of sense. This poem expresses the homesickness of the poet. The Chinese and English don't have equivalent expressions.

### 2.2. The Limitation of the Beauty of Form

The form beauty means the translation should possess the beauty of form in English poetry. The forms of Chinese poetry

are more strictly than English poetry. The beauty of linguistic form occupies an important place in poems, since poems express meaning through unique or original forms, and when the form is lost, the meaning is lost. Therefore, the aesthetic function of linguistic forms in poems shall not be neglected. The beauty of form of the classical Chinese poems is formed by two parts. One is the vision of Chinese characters, and the other is the form of lines. According to Gu Zhengkun's analysis "Chinese characters are not only auditory language, but also visual language. Thus it is easy to produce the beauty of sound and vision. Therefore, Chinese characters are almost congenitally superior to western literature. Thus it is historically inevitable the Chinese lyric has a place in the world culture (Gu Zhengkun 2003: 99-100)." Double sound words are commonly used in classical poetry, and they are the characters with the beauty of sound and form.

### 2.2.1. The Characteristics of the Chinese Classical Poetry

The Chinese ancient poetry are concise and implicit, with neat form. In the process of translation, there are many non-translated elements. Thus, it will cause great losses in the form of translating poetry. The losses include simple words and punctuation of original poem, Chinese characters' structure and text structure.

Chinese classical poetry is very simple in form, and the number of words are the same per line, and words also have their fixed format. But the number of words in English poetry is not fixed. Most of the Chinese characters are block-shaped. Therefore, the overall shape is the same neat in poetry. The English poetry can't achieve this forever. In Chinese, there are many characters referring to something resembling its shape, or they are made by simulating things. For example, the Chinese character "山", whose shape is similar to the mountain; the English word "hill" or "mountain" lose the shape of character. By using these Chinese characters, readers can image the shape of the rolling mountains. In English translation is almost impossible to achieve this effect (Zhang Peiji & Yu Yungen 2007: 12-14).

The Chinese characters are used as building materials, because they have the advantage of the beauty of form. Thus, in terms of Chinese poetry translation, it's normal that something might be missed. This loss should be minimized through changing translation. Poetry is an organic unity of content and form. Therefore, the translations should not only accurately convey the contents of the original poem, but also simulate the form as much as possible. If we try our best to simulate the form of the original poem as much as possible, we can express the contents of the original poem and reproduce the style successfully.

### 2.2.2. The Two Forms of Translation

Nida has proposed two forms of translation: one is formal correspondence and another is functional correspondence. Formal correspondence: translators convert the source language into the target language and focus on original poem of the source language. Pound's poem translation is the model of pursuing the formal correspondence. Mostly is the form of correspondence in Pound's translation.

The functional equivalence: the relations between the receiver and the target text should be similar as the relationships between the original recipient and the source text information. The principle of functional equivalence is embodied in the translation practice of poetry. That is the use of various translation compensation methods. The target readers must get a deeper understanding of the translation to

achieve "functional equivalence".

From the above analysis, the poetry's rhythm and form cannot be completely interpreted in English due to differences in the language structure. Although some translators try hard, it is hard to achieve the complete interpretation.

Liu Miqing wrote in Translation Aesthetic Theory: "Exquisite unique structural form is an important means of people's aesthetic externalization. In order to make the translation's architecture beautiful and symmetrical, the translator should choose the right words (Liu Miqing 2011: 321-330)." There is an example to illustrate the limitation of the beauty of form.

Example:

乞火不若取燧，寄汲不若凿井。

(《淮南子·览冥训》)

Translation version:

We would better fetch a flint than beg for light.

We would better dig a well ourselves than beg for water from others.

(Translated

by Zhang Lu)

The rhetorical device is used to emphasize the tone and literal translation strategy is adopted. The imagery word "燧" is translated into "flint", "井" is translated into "well". In addition, the subject "乞火" and "寄汲" are translated into "beg for light" and "beg for water" respectively. One pair of perfect parallelism sentence and symmetrical structure make the translation show the form's beauty.

## 2.3. The Limitation of the Beauty of Sound

The beauty of sound means the translated classical Chinese poetry should possess the beauty of rhythm and rhyme in English translation. Poetry was considered as the superior form of expressing thoughts in the field of literature. It is not enough to pay attention to both the beauty of meaning and form; sound effects also should be pay attention. Mr. Xu makes the preservation of the musicality (of the original) a principle of verse translation. "By musicality", he explains "we include rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, etc. As all classical Chinese poems are written in rhyme, no English version could reproduce an effect similar to the original if no rhyme were used." The beauty of sound is also crucial for poetry. Rhythm is a unique and emotional form of poetry. Thus, in the translation of the classical Chinese poetry, Xu Yuanhong said "If translations don't convey the beauty of sense of the original poems, it is impossible to produce a similar effect to the original poem. On the contrary, sometimes it helps to convey the beauty of the original poem's meaning with the rhyme sound."

### 2.3.1. The Differences in Sound between English and Chinese

Poems were originated from music, so the harmony of the sound and the beauty of rhyme are important for the poetry. English and Chinese poetry form the beauty of sound in different ways, because of the different language features. One Chinese character has one sound, and vowel syllable forever after consonants. So the beauty of sound is mainly composed of each sentence's rhyme. However, the English is almost combined with polysyllabic words, so the beauty of sound in English poetry is composed of alternation of light tone and stress. The beauty of sound and the inherent attribute of language have a close integration, so it's impossible to

translate the visual effect which is produced by the symbol itself (Yuan Hangpei 1996: 23-24). The English version also has the beauty of sound, but it is just not the same as the original's. It's an re-creation by translators. Adorno points out "The fundamental characteristic of poetry is the beauty of sound, and people can feel this beauty while reading." in his *Aesthetic Theory* (Theodor W. Adorno 1997: 31-33). There is an example to illustrate this limitation.

Example 1:

敕勒川，阴山下。天似穹庐，笼盖四野。  
天苍苍，野茫茫。风吹草低见牛羊。

(佚名《敕勒歌》)

Translation version:

Song of the Chile

At the foot of Mount Yinshan the Chile Plain does lie;  
Shielding the world is the enormous yurt-like sky.

On the prairie vast,

Under the azure clear,

When the wind sweeps past,

The grass stoops low, and flocks and herds appear.

In the original poem, there are two reduplicate words. These show the beauty of sound in the Chinese. If the translation doesn't use the reduplicated words, it will lose the beauty of sound. This expresses the limitation of the beauty of sound.

Example 2:

长太兮以掩涕兮，哀民生之多艰。

(屈原《离骚》)

Translation version:

I sigh and wipe away my tears, oh! I'm grieved at a life full of woes.

(Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

This translation adopts the foreignizing translation strategy. The Chinese character “兮” is translated into “oh” and ended with “Z” sound. This shows Qu Yuan's concerns and sigh for the country. The two verbs “sigh” and “wipe” make readers feel silent.

### 3. Conclusion

The beauty of sound, the beauty of form and the beauty of meaning are important in translation. The beauty of meaning is formed by historical reasons or imaginations. The beauty of linguistic form occupies an important place in poems, since poems express meaning through unique or original forms, and [11]

when the form is lost, the meaning is lost. The poetry's rhythm and form cannot be completely interpreted in English due to differences in the language structure. The biggest characteristic of poetry is the beauty of sound. The different cultural backgrounds and social environment and the Chinese characters' unique features are reasons for the limitations of Chinese poetry translation. Translators can use formal correspondence and functional correspondence in translation.

Although this thesis gives good theoretic methods to the limitations of English versions of Chinese poems, some practical suggestions should also be added to the further study. In the later study, the translation of ancient Chinese poems needs to be completed and perfected.

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