

Translation Strategies for Shitang Yuejie Songs

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Abstract

Shitang Yuejie Songs, as one genre of Chinese folk songs and a vibrant constituent of Lingnan Culture, are rooted in the emotions, customs, beliefs, lives, and cultural traditions of the ordinary people living the area called Shitang. As a kind of unique cultural form, the translation of Shitang Yuejie Songs is also a kind of cultural translation. After reviews the translation propositions proposed by such renowned translators as Arthur Waley, Burton Watson, Bill Porter, John Minford, Wang Baotong, Wang Rongpei and Athony Appiah, this paper proposes some general principles concerning the translation of Shitang Yuejie Songs and puts them into practice.

Keywords: Shitang Yuejie Songs, translation methodologies, translation practice

1. Introduction

Now folklore study has become an academic discipline, and folk songs have become independent literary texts. With increased cultural exchange, translations of Chinese folk songs have have aroused more and more attention.

Shitang Yuejie Songs, as one genre of Chinese folk songs, are rooted in the emotions, customs, beliefs, lives, and cultural traditions of the ordinary people living the area called Shitang. Shitang Yuejie Songs consist of narrative songs, farming season songs, love songs, centering on universal themes—love, labor, longing, etc. Shitang Yuejie Songs have unique singing rhythm and they are mostly expressed as self-sighing, plaintive and lingering low chants. These songs have a strong local flavor and must be sung in the Shitang dialect.

Shitang Yuejie Songs have become a vibrant constituent of Lingnan Culture. How to conduct the translation of Shitang Yuejie Songs so that they can be disseminated to more places in the world has become a topic worthy of research. Its translation into English will make Western audiences get to know the richness of Chinese folk culture. Shitang Yuejie Songs, as a kind of unique cultural form, need us to propose some concrete and effective translation approaches.

2. Renowned Translators and Their Translation Proposals

There are some important translators in the history of translation. Arthur Waley (1889-1966), a renowned British sinologist and literary translator, was committed to translating Chinese classical literature into English. He played a pivotal role in introducing Chinese folk songs to Western audiences. Arthur Waley prioritized literary beauty over literal accuracy, adapting folk songs to English poetic forms to make them accessible to readers. We can understand his translation proposition as balancing cultural authenticity with poetic appeal. Unlike Arthur Waley who prioritized literary beauty over literal accuracy, Burton Watson (1925-2017) favored literal accuracy, avoiding excessive adaptation to Western forms. Some translators like Bill Porter emphasize emotional resonance over academic detail for the sake of broader readership, some translators like John Minford balance poetic fluency with cultural fidelity, using modern English without sacrificing the songs' historical resonance.

Wang Baotong, a renowned scholar of English poetry and a famous expert in poetry translation in China, proposes taking the path of nationalization in translation (Wang, 1996:91-95). He uses ballad metre to translate ancient Chinese mythology, successfully conveying its inherent flavor through using the most expressive common words. The translation strategy proposed by Wang Baotong is a good approach to translate such Shitang Yue songs which are related to myths.

The translation principle of spirit-oriented transference of meaning proposed by Wang Rongpei, a famous translation theorist in China, emphasizes the translation process of conveying both the spiritual connotation of the original text (conveying essence) and accurately expressing the meaning of the original text (conveying meaning).

Wang Rongpei notes that the principle of “conveying both essence and meaning” “can be a kind of translation criticism theory” (Wang & Men, 2010, p.7) . The core of this theory lies in the pursuit of the unity of fidelity and artistry in translation, emphasizing both the accurate transmission of the original content and the natural fluency and cultural adaptability of the translated text in the target language. In translations involving cultural differences, translators need to handle culture-loaded words flexibly, retaining the cultural characteristics of the original text while enabling the target readers to understand. The translation principle proposed by Wang Rongpei is quite enlightening for the translation of Shitang Yue songs.

Thick translation, a translation strategy proposed by Athony Appiah in 1993, is often used to present Chinese allusions, ancient names and places, and Chinese idioms that use homophones. According to Athony Appiah, only by adopting a thick translation method and adding annotations or terminology annotations in the translation can the rich and profound cultural context of the source language be reflected, so that the target language readers can fully understand the source language work. Thick translation proposed by Athony Appiah is a good approach to translate such Shitang Yue songs which are related to myths and which emphasize the social behavior behind the text. The function of this translation approach in translating the lyrics of Shitang Yue Songs lies in that it can preserve the cultural characteristics and special pragmatic meanings of them, so that readers can understand the cultural imagery on the basis of the literal meaning.

3. The General Strategies for Translating Shitang Yuejie Songs

Translation is not simply a conversion between languages, but also a conversion between culture and ways of thinking. It can be said that translation is a cross-cultural communication behavior. Due to different geographical environments, social customs, religious beliefs, social history, etc., there are certain differences between Chinese and English cultures. Translators need to have cultural and reader awareness during the translation process, understand and be familiar with the similarities and differences between Chinese and English cultures, flexibly choose target language expressions, and convey cultural information. In addition, the ways of thinking of different ethnic groups are reflected through different languages, and the diversity of language expression forms is determined by the different ways of thinking. Therefore, translators also need to have a consciousness of thinking transformation during the translation process, adjust their inherent ways of thinking in a timely manner, understand the hidden ways of thinking through language form structure, and pay attention to flexible transformation in terms of words, sentence patterns, logic, and other aspects. (Zhong, 2021:207)

Shitang Yuejie Songs are a type of Lingnan culture. The translation of Shitang Yuejie Songs is also a kind of Cultural translation.

Cultural translation is a term in translation studies that differs from traditional language-focused translation. In the view of those who advocate the cultural translation view, previous translations only regarded translation as a language conversion, and the evaluation of translation was often based on the original text, with fidelity as the criterion, limited to micro level comparisons of words, phrases, sentences, and texts between the original and translated texts. The cultural translation perspective holds that translation is a cross-cultural communication, and attention should be paid to the influence of cultural factors beyond language on translation. Cultural translation advocates starting from existing translations, breaking away from the narrow perspective of language and writing, and exploring from a macro perspective why translators translate in this way, and what cultural factors constrain or restrict them (Chen, 2014:7) .

Liu Jingzhi asserts that a translation lacking cultural elements is equivalent to a translation lacking spirituality. The translation is actually a mixture of the original text, the cultural background of the original text, the cultural background of the translation, the temperament and style of the original author, and the temperament and style of the translator. In Chinese English translation, the translator must be familiar with both Chinese and English cultures and the relevant factors involved in order to correctly understand the source language and express it faithfully and fluently in the target language (Liu, 2000:22-26) .

In translation, to be able to balance linguistic accuracy, cultural authenticity, and poetic resonance is very important. Translating Shitang Yuejie Songs into English surely involves navigating unique linguistic, cultural, and artistic challenges.

Linguistic accuracy can ensure the translated texts to be an exquisite presentation of the essence and truth in Shitang Yuejie Songs. Shitang Yuejie Songs are sung in dialect. To bring Shitang Yuejie Songs to life for Western audiences, translators should carefully choose words to preserve the dialectal flavor in it.

Shitang Yuejie Songs are also a kind of songs, thus they possess the basic characteristics of songs. In translation, we shouldn't neglect the rhythm and rhyme in the songs. When translating Shitang Yuejie Songs, translators should

also mind that Shitang Yuejie Songs rely on rhyme and rhythm specific to Shitang dialect. When translating, translators should try to present these elements without losing the original meaning, that is to say, translators should convey both the meaning and the musicality of Shitang Yuejie Songs.

And the translated texts should be able to convey the readers the cultural authenticity. To achieve this, translators should have a thorough understanding of the flavor and emotions of Shitang Yuejie Songs and present this through their translated texts.

When Shitang Yuejie Songs are sung, performances are often accompanied. And what is performed is always symbolic. Translators should strive to convey this performative dimension, presenting the symbolic movements and actions on stage in details with annotations. And the imagery contained in the lyrics of Shitang Yuejie Songs should also be retained by translators with annotations. And the rituals and beliefs that appear in the performances when Shitang Yuejie Songs are sung should be given an explanation in translation so that readers can have a deeper understanding of the songs.

The theme of love in Shitang Yuejie Songs often expresses longing indirectly through images, symbols or metaphors. Translators should balance this subtlety with clarity, ensuring the emotions such as longing and affection can be presented clearly without being over-explained. The best way to do so is adding annotations to let the readers of the target language have a clear understanding of the images, symbols or metaphors with Chinese cultural characteristics.

Under the general translation principles mentioned above, translators will surely be able to highlight the themes of love, labor, and longing in Shitang Yuejie Songs.

4. Translation Practice and Exploration of Shitang Yuejie Songs

Under the guidance of the foregoing general translation principles in translating Shitang Yuejie Songs, we choose some representative Shitang Yuejie Songs and translate them into English to conduct practice and exploration of the translation of this genre of Chinese folk songs.

4.1 Two Love-Themed Songs

4.1.1 绣香包

正月香包绣牡丹，好花落了 (哩) 姐伤心，
 郎要麒麟对狮子 (呀)，姐要金鸡 (哩) 对凤凰。
 二月香包绣两行，绣个香包 (哩) 铜钱大，
 绣个香包铜线圆 (呀)，百样花朵 (哩) 香包藏。
 三月香包绣三行，姐在房中 (哩) 哩绣鸳鸯；
 姐在房中绣鸳鸯 (呀)，鸳鸯成对 (哩) 姐成双。
 四月香包绣四行，郎在厅里 (哩) 写字行；
 郎在厅中字行写 (呀)，字行成对 (哩) 姐成双。
 五月香包绣五行，玉龙含凤 (哩) 又含花；
 娇郎打来江边过 (呀)，箭箭射来 (哩) 都成龙。
 六月香包绣六行，上楼发火 (哩) 下楼光；
 照见我郎白如雪 (呀)，照见我姐 (哩) 白如霜。
 七月香包绣七行，绣起织女 (哩) 会牛郎；
 绣起天上七姐妹 (呀)，绣起神仙 (哩) 来下凡。
 八月香包绣八行，绣起八仙 (哩) 翻大江；
 绣起天上峨眉月 (呀)，绣起天上 (哩) 月团圆。
 九月香包绣九行，九月九日 (哩) 是重阳；
 旁人话我绣得好 (呀)，不晓老人 (哩) 在何方。
 十月香包绣十行，绣起文官 (哩) 对武官；
 绣起文武两边排 (呀)，真命天子 (哩) 坐朝纲。
 十一月香包绣得起，绣个香包 (哩) 郎带起；

绣个香包娇郎带 (呀) , 囑口娇郎 (哩) 莫传人。
十二月香包绣得起, 绣个香包 (哩) 郎带去;
绣个香包娇郎带 (呀) , 娇郎带去 (哩) 过新年。

Embroidering the Scented Pouch

In the first lunar month, the scented pouch is embroidered with peonies.
When the fine flowers fade, the lady grieves.
The man wants a unicorn paired with a lion;
the lady wants a golden rooster paired with a phoenix.

In the second lunar month, I embroider sachets with two rows of stitches,
Embroider a sachet as big as a copper coin,
Embroider a sachet as round as a copper wire,
A hundred kinds of flowers hidden in the sachet's scent.

In the third lunar month, I embroider sachets with three rows of stitches,
and sister sits in her room embroidering mandarin ducks;
Sister embroiders mandarin ducks in her room,
mandarin ducks pair up, and sister finds her match.

In the fourth lunar month, I embroider sachets with four rows of stitches,
And my love writes lines of characters in the hall;
My love writes lines of characters in the hall,
lines of characters pair up, and sister finds her match.

In the fifth lunar month, I embroider sachets with five rows of stitches,
a jade dragon holding a phoenix and hiding flowers too;
My dear love passes by the riverbank,
and every arrow he shoots turns into a dragon.

In the sixth lunar month, I embroider sachets with six rows of stitches,
firing up when going upstairs, calming down when going down;
I see my love as white as snow.
I see my sister as white as frost.

In the seventh lunar month, I embroider sachets with seven rows of stitches,
Embroidering the Weaving Maid meeting the Cowherd;
Embroidering the seven celestial sisters in the sky,
Embroidering immortals descending to the mortal world.

In the eighth lunar month, I embroider sachets with eight rows of stitches,
Embroidering the Eight Immortals crossing the great river;
Embroidering the crescent moon in the sky,
Embroidering the sky's full moon shining bright.

In the ninth lunar month, I embroider sachets with nine rows of stitches,
the ninth day of the ninth month being the Double Ninth Festival;
Others praise my embroidery skills,
But I don't know where the elders might be.

In the tenth lunar month, I embroider sachets with ten rows of stitches,
embroidering civil officials facing military officers,
embroidering civil and military officials lined up on both sides,
with the true emperor ruling the court.

In the eleventh lunar month, the sachet is fully embroidered —
a sachet embroidered for my love to carry;
Embroidering a sachet for my dear love to wear,
I tell my dear love not to show it to others.

In the twelfth lunar month, the sachet is fully embroidered —
a sachet embroidered for my love to take away;
I embroider a sachet for my dear love to carry,
and my dear love takes it to celebrate the new year.

4.1.2 正月哥哥来接妹

(媳) 正月哥哥来接妹,
心肝妹妹家娘 (哟) 等我,
顺口问过我家娘 (呵),
等我家娘 (个) 顺开口,
等我早早见爷娘。

(婆) 媳妇 (啊) 没思量 (啊),
新年时节 (个) 乱麻麻没得闲见爷娘。

On First Lunar Month My Brother Comes to Fetch Me

(Wife) First lunar month, my brother comes to fetch me, my dear;
Mother-in-law (yo) is waiting.
Let me casually ask my mother-in-law,
let my mother-in-law (just) speak up,
let me meet my parents early.

(Mother-in-law) Daughter-in-law, don't think too much.
The New Year season (is) all hustle and bustle,
no time to go see your parents.

4.2 Three Labor-Themed Songs

4.2.1 新采茶

正月采茶是新年呀是新年,
借你金山点茶芽,
茶芽点来几多丈呀几多丈,
茶芽点来是一年。
二月采茶茶苞芽呀茶苞芽,
手攀茶树采茶芽,
郎的采多姐采少呀姐采少,
多多少少转回家。
(唱词有 12 个月。)

New Tea-Picking Song

Picking tea in the first lunar month —
 it's the new year, ah it's the new year.
 Borrow your golden mountain to sprout tea buds.
 How many zhangs have the tea buds sprouted, ah how many zhangs?
 The tea buds sprouted mark a whole year.
 Picking tea in the second lunar month —
 the tea buds are budding, ah the tea buds are budding.
 Clinging to the tea tree to pick tea buds.
 The man picks more, the lady picks less, ah the lady picks less.
 More or less, we head home.
 (The lyrics cover all 12 months.)

4.2.2 倒采茶

十二月倒采茶 (人绣牡丹花) 又一年 (呀) ,
 十间茶寮 (人绣花呀哎呀) 九间空 (呀) ,
 等到 (哩) 明年 (哩) 正三月 (呀) ,
 茶树头下 (人绣花呀哎呀) 又相逢。
 (注: 此曲歌词是将《新采茶》顺序倒转来唱, 有 12 个月。)

Reverse Tea-Picking Song

In the twelfth month of reverse tea-picking , another year comes (ah) .
 Nine out of ten tea pavilions (oh alas) are empty (ah) .
 Wait till next year in the first and third months (ah) ,
 beneath the tea tree tops (oh alas) , we'll meet again.
 (Note: The lyrics of this song are sung by reversing the order of New
 Tea-Picking Song, covering all 12 months.)

4.2.3 季节歌

正月钉陂潭 (铛铛钉) ,
 二月透皮烂 (啊叮叮铛照迷路) ,
 三月耙田浸谷种 (铛铛钉) ,
 四月莳黄秧 (啊叮叮铛照迷路)

Song of Seasons

First lunar month: hammering the pond weir (clank, clank, hammer)
 Second lunar month: [fields] rot through the surface (ah, clink-clank, guiding the
 lost way)
 Third lunar month: harrowing fields and soaking rice seeds (clank, clank,
 hammer)
 Fourth lunar month: transplanting yellow seedlings (ah, clink-clank, guiding the
 lost way)

4.3 Two Ceremonial Songs

4.3.1 接月姐

赏高月高云清, 高云修个春千间,
 契月契契阴间, 契过阴间卷嫦娥。
 嫦娥卷高云清, 高得飘飘流绿荫,

罗白过罗白清，韶州过来走清明，
上上契果子香，串串果子香清甜。

Welcoming Sister Moon

Admire the high moon and clear high clouds;
a swing pavilion is built under the high clouds.
Inviting the moon, inviting the nether world;
after inviting the nether world, we summon Chang'e.
Chang'e is summoned beneath the clear high clouds,
high up where green shades drift gently.
White gauze passes through clear white gauze;
coming from Shaozhou to celebrate Qingming.
Inviting upwards, the fruits are fragrant;
clusters of fruits are sweet and fragrant.

4.3.2 送月姐

火当兵郎歌，
当兵走北西，
南西北面过，
一火拉龙来，
更深夜习习，
酌酒送杯前，
手捧三杯酒，
鸡公白马来，
羊头高月影，
月影遮盐西，
花好盐西好，
炮竹月天归。

Sending Off Sister Moon

A song for the soldier lad,
the soldier marches north and west,
passing through south, north, and west.
A group comes like a dragon,
the night deep and breezy.
Pour wine and offer it before the cup;
We holding three cups of wine in hand,
roosters and white horses arrive.
The sheep's head towers over the moon's shadow;
the moon's shadow shrouds Yanxi.
Flowers bloom well, Yanxi fares well;
firecrackers send the moon back to the sky.

5. The Significance of Translating Shitang Yuejie Song

Translating Shitang Yuejie Songs is a kind of preservation of heritage. In China, many folk traditions are at risk of fading. Translation can play a very important role in preserving Shitang Yuejie Songs, which can ensure their survival beyond their original context.

English translation of Shitang Yuejie Songs will have a far-reaching impact on Western understanding of Lingnan culture. Through the English translation of Shitang Yuejie Songs, Western audiences can enhance their understanding of China's regional diversity. The translated texts of Yuejie songs can highlight the voices of ordinary women, whose voices are often neglected in the society.

6. Conclusion

In the process of translating the lyrics of Shitang Yuejie Songs, the translation needs to accurately convey the semantic information of the original text and simultaneously be faithful to the artistic style and spiritual essence of the original text to reproduce the charm of the original text.

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