

New Endeavor on English Translation From Classical Chinese Regulated Verse: A Case Study on Selections From Tu Fu's Thatched Cottage Era^{*}

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Tu Fu's (712-770) Chinese-English translated poems could not get rid of the dilemma of cultural difference if we glance through and check the extant translations in which most of the versions are simple and straightforward. They have no rhymes, no antithesis, as well as syntactic symmetry, even though they are faithful to the words and structure of the original poems. This case study on some regulated verses during Tu Fu's stay at the thatched cottage in Chengdu shows it is possible for translation from literary Chinese to modern English according to the principle of faithfulness, expressiveness, and gracefulness based on three aspects.

Keywords: Tu Fu, classical Chinese regulated verse, translation

Introduction

Poetry of Tu Fu (杜甫) (712-770) has been constantly attracting much attention of Western poetics circle and widely translated by overseas Sinologists since several centuries ago. Tu Fu, is a conventional translation of the great TANG dynasty poet due to Wade-Giles Romanization, which is the most widely-used system of transcription in the English-speaking world for most of the 20th century, especially before the 1980s.

It is known to all that differences really exist between Chinese and English on several aspects, not only in the form of the languages such as phonetic and grammatical features, but also in the various ways of thinking and behaviour under the different cultural environments. What is more, to be as a special form of language, poetry has unique techniques on expressing poets' desire and emotion on lexical and syntactic levels under the guidance of prosody and versification of literary Chinese which distinguished from modern Mandarin Chinese. There is no room for doubt that once classical Chinese poetry is translated into another language, the original flavour has gone immediately. So the problem that everyone cannot avoid solving is the way of translation, literal or free?

Theoretical Analysis and Translative Practice

Tu Fu's Chinese-English poems cannot get rid of this dilemma if we glance through and check the extant translations in which most of these versions are simple and straightforward. They have no rhymes, no antithesis,

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and no syntactic symmetry, even though they are faithful to the words and structure of the original poems. It is worth mentioning that the translated verse is similar to an English poem rather than a classical Chinese poem judging from its format!

It is possible for translation from literary Chinese to modern English according to the principle of faithfulness, expressiveness, and gracefulness. Here are some poems selected from Tu Fu's oeuvre during the period of his stay in the thatched cottage in Chengdu. All the translated verses have following common characteristic.

Balance of Lexical and Syntactic Structure

To begin with, we can keep the translation as closely as possible to the original form of the regulated verse or quatrain by following the original lexical and syntactic structure. Although it is impossible to correspond the number of the syllables in each line of the translated version with the original Chinese verse perfectly, we still guarantee the length of lines is as similar as possible, and the number of lines in a poem is definite in both contexts. Take a couple of nouns selected from "Opt to Dwelling" (卜居) for example, the Dragonfly (蜻蜓) is a single word, while the Purple Mandarin Ducks (鸂鶒) is a compound phrase. Obviously, neither of the translation in the former or latter line can match the disyllabic binding Chinese word (连绵词) in the numbers. It is a paradox in translation (see Examples 1-2).

Example (1)

卜居

浣花流水水西头，主人为卜林塘幽。
已知出郭少尘事，更有澄江销客愁。
无数蜻蜓齐上下，一双鸂鶒对沉浮。
东行万里堪乘兴，须向山阴上小舟。

Opt to Dwelling

Located at the west, the blossom-washing stream flows.
A place is selected by a master for me to dwell, with peaceful wood and pond in a row.
Escaping from the worldly affairs is known as soon as leaving the city wall,
The limpid river, furthermore, can dispel the guests' sorrow.
A lot of dragonflies fly together, ups and downs,
A couple of purple mandarin ducks paddle with each other, above or below.
To travel eastbound five thousand kilometers in the mood,
Towards Shan-yin County for a visit with a tiny boat.

Example (2)

江村

清江一曲抱村流，长夏江村事事幽。
自去自来梁上燕，相亲相近水中鸥。
老妻画纸为棋局，稚子敲针作钓钩。
但有故人供禄米，微躯此外更何求？

Riverside Village

A clear river crooking around the village flows,

In long summer, everything in the riverside village peacefully grows.
 To and fro, the swallows fly the beam above,
 Close and intimate, the gulls sink the water below.
 My old wife draws a chessboard on a sheet of paper,
 My naive son makes fishing-hooks by twisting needles.
 So long as my former friends provide with some money and rice,
 What more can I ask for, beyond my humble body follows?

Stress on Antithesis and Paronomasia

In addition, to stress the antithesis of the middle two couplets of a regulated verse, we usually take paronomasia into account sometimes. For instance, “梁甫吟” (Liang-fu-yin) is translated into “A Song of Master Liang” from the poem whose title is “Mounting the Tower” (登楼). On account of homophone of “Liang”, it could be either considered as a song chanting around a famous mountain where is close to Mount. Tai probably named after a respectable man whose surname is “Liang” (梁) on one hand, or regarded as an authorship attributed to Chuheh Liang 亮 (诸葛亮), a famous brainpower during the Three Kingdoms in Chinese history, based on the allusion on the other hand (see Examples 3-4).

Example (3)

登楼

花近高楼伤客心，万方多难此登临。
 锦江春色来天地，玉垒浮云变古今。
 北极朝廷终不改，西山寇盗莫相侵。
 可怜后主还祠庙，日暮聊为梁父吟。

Mounting the Tower

Guest's heart is hurt by blooming flowers near the high tower screen,
 Much distress and disasters everywhere, now I mount here with pain.
 Along Brocade River, spring scenery overflows Heaven and Earth between,
 Above Jade Rampart, floating cloud demonstrates ancient and modern wane.
 Imperial court like North Polaris is not changed eventually,
 Bandits from West Mountain do not invade again.
 Even pathetic Latter Emperor of Sh'u kingdom still has an ancestral hall,
 Nothing more than A Song of Master Liang, chanting at dusk is so keen.

Example (4)

狂夫

万里桥西一草堂，百花潭水即沧浪。
 风含翠筱娟娟净，雨裛红蕖冉冉香。
 厚禄故人书断绝，恒饥稚子色凄凉。
 欲填沟壑唯疏放，自笑狂夫老更狂。

An Eccentric Man

A thatched cottage, situated on the west of A Thousands-li Bridge beyond,

Water of Ts'ang-lang is similar as that of Hundreds of Flowers Pond.
 The Breeze sways the green bamboo, gracefully gracefully stainless over,
 The rain moistens the red lotus, gradually, gradually fragrant upon.
 Rich old friends break off the letters and help,
 Hungry young sons starve with bleak on their face around.
 To fill in the ravine with our dead bodies, just be unruly,
 Mock myself, the eccentric man is more crazy as age grows along.

Similarity to Original Rhyme

At last but no least, to follow the original rhyme scheme. The same rhyme is used throughout a poem without permission of rhyme-changing and always falls at the end of even-numbered lines, sometimes the first line is optional. Most of the rhymes selected to be translated here are same or similar in vowels to those of the original poem not only in the corresponding places but also in the auditory effect. Because there is no existence of four tonal pitches in English, rhymes system of traditional classical Chinese poetry which is distinguished strictly by level or deflected tone has been ignored here and universal rhymes or slight tail consonants are allowed in some degree. "A Guest Visits" (客至), each rhyme in this poem always appears at the end of the even lines without a rhyme at the end of the first line and belongs to the Tenth Group//Grey (十灰) in Level Tones of Volume Upper (上平) according to the ancient Level-Water Rhyme System (平水韵)¹; however, they sound different nowadays. The final of the Chinese character (来, come), 开 (open) with the same phonetic transcription [ai] in the former part is similar to that of the English translation NIGH (nai), MINE (main), while the vowel of the word 醅 (wine), 杯 (wineglass) in the last four lines, which is marked as a phonetic symbol [ei], accords with the final of the WAY/MIDWAY [ei] (see Examples 5-6).

Example (5)

客至

舍南舍北皆春水， 但见群鸥日日来。
 花径不曾缘客扫， 蓬门今始为君开。
 盘飧市远无兼味， 樽酒家贫只旧醅。
 肯与邻翁相对饮， 隔篱呼取尽余杯。

A Guest Visits

To both south and north of my cottage is surrounded with spring water,
 Only a flock of gulls can be seen to come daily nigh.
 Blossom-Path has never been swept due to certain a guest,
 Thatched-Gate begins to open now just for you, gentleman of mine.
 Dish courses are few and simple because of the market far away,
 Vessel wine is cheap and stale only on account of impoverished way.

¹ Level-Water Rhyme System (平水韵系) is an ancient model of rhythm regulation. It divides all the rhymes into 107 groups according to the custom of TANG regulated verses and quatrains. It named after "Brief Rhyme of Ministry of Rites" (礼部韵略), since the author of this classic, LIU Yüan's (刘渊) original native place was Pingshui (Lever-Water, 平水) County, Shanxi Province in Southern Sung Dynasty. "Rhyme Treasury of Pei-Wen" (佩文韵府), which combines 107 into 106 groups, was an official reference book of rhyme for the Imperial Examination in QING Dynasty. Pei-wen is the title of Emperor Kang-xi's study.

How about drinking with the next-door old man?
The hedge apart, call him out to share the remainder midway.

Example (6)

春夜喜雨

好雨知时节，当春乃发生。
随风潜入夜，润物细无声。
野径云俱黑，江船火独明。
晓看红湿处，花重锦官城。

Delighted by Rain on a Spring Night

Good rain comprehends the season,
Exactly falls in the spring.
With breeze, secretly slips into the night,
As drizzle, quietly moistens everything.
The country paths all covered with clouds black,
A river boat only lightened by a candle burning.
Till next dawn to see the red and moist petals,
Plump blossoms ornamenting the Brocade City, swing.

Conclusions

It is believed that there is a long journey to go to translate classical Chinese poems into English or other languages in a perfect way, this case study on the anthology of Tu Fu's poems during his stay in Chengdu shows a new endeavor on translation according to three principles: its syntactic structure, antithesis, and rhyme scheme. The Chinese-English translated verses as quoted above try to find an aesthetic balance between the English poem and traditional Chinese verse.

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