

A Comparative Study of English and Chinese Sonnets^{*}

LI Bao-feng

Harbin Engineering University, Harbin, China

English sonnets are characteristic of particular rhyming schemes, rhythm form and verse line transition. All these poetic forms are transplanted by some Chinese poets in composing their own sonnets, which vary a bit in these factors due to different utterances of Chinese characters and poetic rules in composing poetry. Chinese sonneteers made more attempts and changed a lot in accordance with their own language requirements. The two forms share their own merits and display different national characteristics. Based on poetic theory and with comparative methodology, the paper aims to find out the same and different characteristics between two kinds of sonnets in different languages. This might be of great significance for researches on English and Chinese sonnets, the development of world literature, integration and exchange of global culture.

Keywords: comparative study, English sonnets, Chinese sonnets

Introduction

English sonnets hereto refer to the sonnets in English, namely including the Italian Sonnets, Shakespearean Sonnets, and Spenserian Sonnets, while the Chinese Sonnets are actually some copies or imitations after translated from the English sonnets. Combined with Chinese poetic rules, the Chinese poets later created their own style of sonnets in fourteen lines. Ever since the “May-Fourth Period”, some modern Chinese poets searched out the staccato or the rhythmic beat, which influenced the rules and principles of the new poems. Between the traditional English sonnets and the newly coined Chinese sonnets, there obviously exist some common and different characteristics in some ways.

Commonalities and Differences in Rhythm

Chinese sonneteers elaborately imitated the original metrical rhythm of the English Sonnets, such as the widely known Iambic Pentameter, which has been prevalent later almost in all English sonnets over the world. Following is the early version by Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542):

I find/no peace/, and all/my war/is done:
I fear/and hope/, I burn/and freeze/likewise;
I fly/above/the wind/, yet can/not arise;
And nought/I have/, yet all/ the word/I seize on. (Translated from Petrarchan Sonnet 62)

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LI Bao-feng, associate professor, Foreign Languages Department, Harbin Engineering University.

In the imitation and transplantation of this rhythmic form of English sonnets, Chinese poets tried several different ways, experiencing some gains and losses in intonation, number of syllables and staccatos. Before they realized the difference of Chinese rhythm and verse line patterns, things were not quite successful.

WEN Yi-duo (1921) composed a sonnet in Chinese:

我戏将/陈檀/焚起来/祀你，	(four staccatos)
那知他/会烧得/这样狂！	(three staccatos)
他虽/散满/一世界底/异香，	(four staccatos)
但是/你的/香吻/没有/抹尽的。	(five staccatos) (Selected poems by WEN)

The rhythm of each line is quite messy with three, four, or five staccatos respectively. Soon they came to self-realize, although they were still trying to copy mechanically by matching ten Chinese characters with ten syllables of each line in English sonnets, which is wrongly borrowed. Following are two different versions of Sonnet 18 by Shakespeare (1609):

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shine,	
And often is his gold complexion dimmed. (Shakespeare, Sonnet 18)	
有时/天之目/亮得/太凌人，	(ten characters and four staccatos)
他的/金容/常被/云霾/掩蔽	(ten characters and five staccatos)

The number of syllables or Chinese characters is ten, equal to the number of syllables in English sonnets, but the rhythmic staccatos are not the same as the five feet in English sonnets. This is a contradiction and it is hard to consider the tidiness of both syllables and the rhythm. In general, they pay only attention to the tidiness of syllables of characters, but not of the rhythm, which is the most tough issue in translation and we can also see from ZHU Xiang's (1904-1933) poem:

如其/没有/痛苦、/饥饿、/寒冷，	(ten characters and five staccatos)
便没有/文化/针刺入/天空.....	(ten characters and four staccatos)
或者，/世上/如其/没有/折磨，	(ten characters and five staccatos)
诗人便/唱不出/他的/新歌	(ten characters and four staccatos) (ZHU, 1933)

Although it looks neat and tidy in visual sense, in fact, it is not consistent with the characteristics of modern Chinese. So it is not practically feasible in reality. Later then Chinese poets successfully sought out their own staccatos, to replace the meters in the English sonnets. They mainly stressed:

(1) Tidiness either in the number of syllables or of staccatos. If the poem is made with twelve syllables (Chinese characters) and five staccatos, then it is the same in other verse lines. This requires tidiness of both parts, but it is difficult to handle along with some metrical restrictions. ZOU (1948) sought out his own unique ways to establish verse lines, namely “three-two and two-three” lines, or namely “three two-character” staccatos and “two three-character” staccatos, which looks tidy both visually and in hearing. The intertwining arrangement made the verse lines rather rhythmic, smooth, and not awkward.

你曾/以翱翔/空间的/恶魔/自况	(three two-characters and two three-characters)
你曾/写下/明朗而/轻快的/诗篇	(three two-characters and two three-characters)

你曾/自比作/喇叭，/要唤醒/人间 (three two-characters and two three-characters)
 你曾/走海外，寻求/慷慨的/死亡。 (three two-characters and two three-characters) (ZOU, 1948)

(2) Tidiness of staccatos, regardless of the number of characters or the tidiness of syllables, which is loose and easy to make, in accordance with the rhythmic characteristics of Chinese poetry:

纪念馆/有如/玉雕的/帕尔/特农， (three two-characters and two three-characters)
 身披/青色的/荧光，/屹立在/夜幕前。 (three three-characters and two two-characters)
 华盛顿/纪念馆/如一支/白色的/巨剑， (one two-characters and four three-characters)
 同他/遥遥地/相对，/在都城/正中。 (three two-characters and two three-characters) (TU, 2004)

With five staccatos or pauses each line, but untidy syllables with 12, 13, or 14 characters. This avoids the mechanism of syllable counting system from ZHU. Some other affluent creations, with five to thirteen characters and two to six staccatos each line, later developed into four or three staccatos each line, which is rather consistent with the pattern “two-two-two-one” staccatos of the modern “Seven-Character” poetry, and “two-two-one” staccato pattern of the “Five-Character” poems, characteristic of rather common Chinese poetry.

Common and Different Characteristics in Transition of Verse Lines

Transition of verse lines is not only one of the means to compose verse lines but also one to link and unite two or more verse lines, creating the variation of rhythms. Since Chinese and English are different in rhythm systems, the function of their verse line transition is also different. The rhythm of English poems stresses the sound, with incomplete coordination of meters and meanings. The transition of English verse lines seeks mainly for the unity of forms rather than the meanings, such as in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (1819):

The winged seeds, where thy lie cold and low,
 Each like a corpse within its grave, until
 Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow.

While the second line is transited to the third line, the meaning of the verse lines continues without any coordination with the feet but with sharply tidy rhythm between the regular temporary light feet. The Chinese rhythmic staccatos are based on meanings, creating the unity of staccatos and the sequenced meanings. The ending of the verse line is the key rhythm part, so the transitional point is generally the part where the meaningful sequences might pause most often. Otherwise, it might break the meanings as well as the rhythmic staccatos:

尽管是法力无边，人类所崇
 拜的神不曾有过一百只手。
 如其有一天我能化作鹰，高
 飞入清冷的天，在云内涤翼。 (ZHU, 1933)

ZHU, with quite obvious foreign sense, did not realize the characteristics of Chinese rhythm, separating two Chinese terms “崇拜” and “高飞”，seeking for the tidiness of the number of syllables, and also for the sake of rhyming. Till the 1930s and 1940s, things changed with more national characteristics when Chinese sonneteers realized the rhythmic features of Chinese poetry. FENG Zhi did well in transition of verse lines and even of the

stanzas, with very national Chinese style as well. After the foundation of China, Chinese sonnets boasted more national characteristics in transition of verse lines, but the Europeanized style, adding more tenacity and elasticity to Chinese sonnets, should never be ignored.

Similarities and Differences in Rhyming Schemes

Rhyming Schemes of sonnets are rather complicated with formal and variable patterns, or intermingled. Followed are some variations of English sonnets, and how Chinese sonneteers made imitations and creations on rhyming schemes:

(1) The rhyming schemes of Italian sonnets. Constantly they consist of the first eight lines (or namely octave) in two enclosing rhymes abba abba, and the last six lines (or namely sestet), in the form of cdc dcd, cde dce, cde dec, and cde edc; the Octave with fewer than two rhymes, the sestet fewer than three rhymes, and altogether fewer than five rhymes, otherwise, into variable rhyming schemes. In England John Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, Byron, and Keats usually followed these rhyming schemes. "The Grasshopper and the Cricket" by Keats (1816) presented well the Italian rhyming schemes in the form of abba abba cde cde. Many Chinese poets before 1940s imitated this most, among whom FENG Zhi did the best.

(2) The rhyming schemes of Shakespearean sonnets. English is different from Italian, with more consonants at the ending letter of a word and fewer words with the same rhymes. So it is difficult to repeat two enclosing rhymes. The Earl of Surrey changed that into alternative rhymes and even rhymes, suitable for the characteristics of English language: abab cdcd efef gg, which got fully developed later by Shakespeare and gained great fame, with seven rhymes altogether or else into variable rhymes. Sonnet 18 by Shakespeare is the most representative piece of English rhyming schemes. After the 1940s, more Chinese poets began to imitate this form, among whom ZOU and TU used most often.

(3) The rhyming schemes of Spenserian sonnets. This is one of the rhyming schemes created by English poets in the form of abab bcbc cdcd ee. In the first three stanzas, bb and cc comprise two inner rhymes, rather strictly intermingled, and altogether never beyond five rhymes, which is difficult to imitate even among the English poets. *Amoretti* by Spenser is a masterpiece composed of this rhyming scheme. So far only ZHU among Chinese sonneteers made use of the Spenserian rhyming schemes.

Besides, another yet major rhyming scheme is named after John Lily with six couplet rhymes and one even rhyme in form of aabb ccdd eeff gg, which were rarely used by either English or Chinese sonneteers. Many Chinese poets made use of its variable rhyming schemes to compose sonnets.

In general, all the English sonnets are composed of mainly three forms of rhyming schemes: enclosing rhyme (abba), alternate rhyme (abab), and couplet rhyme (aabb), which were not accepted and considered unsuitable for classical Chinese poetry that requires both rising and falling tones with less restriction. Actually before the age of *Shi Jing* (*The Book of Songs*) (1100 B.C.-600 B.C.), Chinese poets already used these forms but did not develop into mainstreams later in ancient poetry. In modern Chinese poetry, with the use of function words, the lengthening of verse lines and less stress on antithesis, without questions on coordination of the sound and meanings between the odd and even numbered lines, it is not unsuitable for Chinese poets to use these rhyming schemes. Furthermore, Chinese poets made some creation on the rhyming schemes of sonnets, which were finally accepted as follows:

(1) Combination of enclosing and alternative rhymes abba, cdcd, which is not possible in strict forms of sonnet making rules, but treated as a variation of sonnet rhyming schemes.

你指着太阳起誓，叫天边的鳧雁	a
说你的忠贞，好了，我完全相信你，	b
甚至热情开出泪花，我也不诧异。	b
只是你要说什么海枯，什么石烂……	a
那便笑得死我，这一口气的功夫	c
还不够我陶醉的？还说什么“永久”	d
爱，你知道我只有一口气的贪图，	c
快来箍紧我的心，快！啊，你走，你走……	d (WEN, 1927)

(2) The typical Chinese Rhyming Schemes. It was influenced by classical poetry and rather complicated:

(a) Rhyme each line till the end.

养蜂人云彩样到处游荡(dang)，	a
牧人样到处把蜂群牧放(fang)，	a
他们背负着酿蜜的蜂箱(xiang)，	a
到处去寻找花朵的芬芳(fang)；	a
春天里寻找喇叭的声响(xiang)。	a
冬天回到南方的棕榈旁(pang)。	a (“The Beekeeper”, TANG, 1967)

(b) Rhyme in the even-numbered lines in accordance with the classical poetry.

以诗的梦想、梦的诗篇，	
在睁裂的眼眶泛起彩霞(xia)—	a
哄闹的吼叫却充耳不闻，	
渊默里消融进敦煌壁画(hua)；	a
你们曾带我向云间飞舞，	
仙乐声伴随一群群天女(nv)，	b
啊，让天火净化这肉身，	
把我播洒成了一阵红雨(yv)！	b (“The Floral Hoop”, CHEN, 1968-1970)

Commonalities and Differences in the Art of Composition

This is involved with how the stanzas are divided and organized. To sonnets, it is defined that: (1) in the first four lines everything should be clarified, and the second four lines should make readers understand everything entirely; (2) after the octave will be a pause, but without obvious disconnection; (3) the sestet must reverse and enclose to the original conceptions or further to the end; and (4) the ending lines should conclude the whole poem.

In Italian Sonnets, questions in the octave should be responded in the sestet, where the poet has enough space to search out a reasonable and thoughtful solution to the question. English sonnets develop narration in the first twelve “fat” lines, but respond in the last “thin” couplet, where the poet has limited space to arrive at a final

solution. So the theme of Shakespearean Sonnets should extend fully in the former three four-line stanzas, and the last couplet has a function directly to the point, even making a motto. Comparatively speaking, the Shakespearean Sonnets close sharply but the Italian Sonnets gradually.

Followed is the English Sonnet 29 by Shakespeare (1609):

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

In the first three four-line stanzas, the poet complains about his own fate and then develops into delight for the friendship, which are the introduction and elucidation of the theme; the last two lines end sharply into transition and summing-up as the final solution to the questions raised in the former three stanzas.

Some English sonneteers made other creations: Milton (1655), in "On His Blindness", "To Cyriack Skinner upon His Blindness", and "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont", did not make any pause after the first eight lines (octave) but directly transited to the last six lines (sestet). Shelley, in his "Ode to the West Wind", changed the traditional arrangement of the compositional form with "three three three three two" line stanza forms.

The Chinese sonneteers showed prosperous creativity while learning from and imitating the English sonnets, with diversified patterns of composition. Some poems are naturally separated based on the poetic themes, but are mostly deliberate exploration for the rearrangement of opening, development, transition, and conclusion parts by altering the patterns of stanzas and rhythms.

Most failed to spread out, still some succeeded like TANG's (1980) "five-five-four" patterns:

那儿就是花朵似的南朝，
那个花团紧簇的中华！
这草原的可汗扬着鞭梢；
那片吴山下面的都市呵，
可就有参差的十万人家！

“那儿的湖上有楼船箫鼓，
那儿的街市有风帘翠幕，
那儿有烟柳从画桥垂下，
晴天有云树围绕着堤沙，
月夜有羌管、菱歌相对答！

铁骑一渡过长江天堑，
 我们就可以席卷这东南，
 那会儿你就是婉鸾的张丽华，
 我就是陈后主，聆着后庭花！”

In this sonnet, the forms of stanzas and rhymes were arranged based on poetic connotations, portraying the tragic image of the ambitious protagonist, as well as creating the atmosphere of grandeur and magnificence in the battle of millions. The final four lines slow down in simple and short stanza form, which is a breakthrough of the closed compositional form in traditional poems, a variation of Chinese sonnets.

According to WEN Yi-duo, the classified Chinese Lvshi, is rather like the English sonnets, which used the “four parts” (namely opening, development, transition, and conclusion) well and freely. TANG also mentioned that English Sonnets are rather similar to Chinese Lvshi. The intimacy of two types of poetry tells why sonnets are popular and developed among Chinese poets.

Conclusions

In the process of imitation and implantation of Chinese sonnets from English sonnets, both share common features of sonnets, but they obviously possess different characteristics in ways of rhythm, transition of verse lines, rhyming schemes, and art of composition due to distinctive traits of different language. Both sonneteers should never intend to copy the same structure and approach in composing sonnets in their own language. Each boasts their own merits in contributing to literary composition in respect of different features of their own languages. Sonnets become the bridge for Chinese poets returning to traditions while approaching Western literature. The successful transplantation of Chinese sonnets from English sonnets does not only enhance the confidence of Chinese poets, but also intrigues the potential power of Chinese literature, which may produce endless effects on the development of modern Chinese poetry. This can also promote exchange and integration of world literature, leaving a valuable legacy to Chinese culture, as well as to the world literature.

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