

# Confucianism in Du Fu's Poetry and Sun Dayu's Translation\*

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The great Chinese poet Du Fu's poetry in the Tang Dynasty has important significance in the development of the world culture. Confucianism is the main theme of his poetry, which penetrates connotation of benevolence, love of all life and self-cultivation. The famous poet Sun Dayu strived to highlight ideological content and the essence of Confucianism in Du Fu's poetry through translation. On the basis of deep understanding of the source text and careful choice of words, Sun Dayu mainly used literal translation, free translation and explanation in order to make the target readers know the spirit of Confucianism. His translation activities showed solicitude for national destiny and historical responsibility.

*Keywords:* Confucianism, Du Fu's poetry, Sun Dayu's translation

## Introduction

Du Fu (712-770) is the greatest realism poet in ancient China. He lived in the Tang Dynasty from prosperity to decay and retained more than 1,500 poems. Du Fu's poetry reflects serious social contradictions and the poor people's severe sufferings at that time. By now none of the writers' works have as many annotations as that of Du Fu's poetry in China, which proves Du Fu had won outstanding achievements in poetry art. His drawing on the experience of previous poems was innovative. However, the profound influence of Du Fu has overflowed literature. It has entered into other aspects of Chinese culture and deeply rooted in the future generations' hearts. The meeting of the Presidium of the World Peace Council, which was held in Stockholm in 1996, decided to commemorate Du Fu as the "World Cultural Celebrity" in the following year (Mo, 2004, p. 11). The most obvious feature of Chinese culture character can be described as such words: love, loyalty, tolerance, perseverance, humility. Du Fu is one of the typical representatives of Chinese culture. The ultimate value of Du Fu's poetry is the most vivid explanation of Chinese culture.

Du Fu's poetry has become common cultural heritage of mankind and they were introduced to Western world in the nineteenth century. Du Fu and his poetry should be translated in the specific cultural context and historical background so that they can be understood objectively and thoroughly. Among rich connotations of Chinese culture, Confucianism takes the first place, which is described as tradition, philosophy, religion, way of governing, or simply way of life. Du Fu plays a very important role in developing Confucianism in China. The fundamental spirit of Confucianism is humanism. Born in a family of Confucian tradition, Du Fu always believed

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in Confucianism all his life and he was concerned about benevolence, love of all life and self-cultivation. Such qualities are widely accepted by the people with different cultures. Some Western sinologist and Chinese translators have translated Du Fu's poetry in English. Sun Dayu (1905-1997), the famous poet and translator in modern China, published *An Anthology of the Tang Dynasty Poetry* in Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 2007. The English version of selected Du Fu's poetry is in this collection. Translation of Du Fu's poetry should show the complicated social relationship, profound ideological realm and tenacious national spirit. Through the mutual dialogue of "harmony but diversity", the translator should let the target readers get a better understanding of traditional Chinese culture.

This paper tries to make analysis of how Sun Dayu interpreted the main doctrine of Confucianism by careful choice of words and clever arrangement of poetry structure in his translation.

### Translation of Benevolence of Confucianism

The main content of Du Fu's poetry contains the royal court affairs, the people's livelihood, rivers and mountains, vegetation and insects, and so on. The outside world was integrated with the poet's inner feelings, which incorporated into the Confucian political ideals, ethical principles and aesthetic norms. Benevolence is the essence of humanism and it indicates a charitable disposition to others. Taking heavy responsibility of the nation and the people, Du Fu inherited the glorious tradition of Confucianism and always gave priority to the group's interests.

One of the important elements of benevolence is to improve the people's living conditions and environment. Du Fu especially showed solicitude for vulnerable groups. Such feelings were expressed vividly in the poem entitled *Song on My Cottage Being Broken by Autumnal Blasts*. In deep autumn, the fierce wind swept away several layers of thatched grass of the crude roof. Inside the small and broken hut, there were few dry places while it was raining hard. Since "An Shi Rebellion" in the period of Emperor Tang Xuanzong in the Tang Dynasty, Du Fu could sleep very little time every night due to his being anxious for the war disaster and severe social reality. Facing the crumbling hut in the wind and rain, Du Fu hoped that each poor family could live in the unshakable house. The representative lines of this poem are in the following:

How could there be great hosts of mansions broad,  
To shelter and cheer up scholars all over,  
Where they may live as calmly as mountain tops,  
With nor wind blasts nor drips to deter! (Translated by Sun Dayu, 2007, p. 229)

The expressions "mansions broad", "shelter", "cheer up" and "as calmly as mountain tops" create powerful rhythm and majestic atmosphere. The structure of "nor... nor..." emphasizes the poet's best wish for getting the warm and wide houses for those who had no place to live in. Such translation shows Du Fu's unrestrained passion and fiery hope from his own painful life experiences. The greatness of any great poet is based on his rooting pain and happiness into the soil of society and history. Du Fu reflected the poor people's distress by sharing his individual experiences as well as sufferings of that period. His sentimental fervor and lofty aspirations of changing dark realities had already inspired the readers' spiritual resonance for thousands of years.

The British translation theorist Peter Newmark points out that "Context is the overriding factor in all translation, and has primacy over any rule, theory or primary meaning" (Newmark, 2001, p. 113). It is clear that

context is the basis for correctly understanding the poem. The translator's grasp of the context determines faithfulness of the source text. On the basis of deep research and comprehension, Sun Dayu used clear, simple and appropriate words to translate Du Fu's promotion of benevolence, which touched the target readers' mind.

Benevolence of Confucianism is against injustice war. In the Tang Dynasty, most poets were in favor of Emperor Tang Xuanzong's opening war to the border. However, Du Fu scathed his denunciation of the incompetent rulers and wrote the narrative poem entitled *The Rime of the War-Chariots* to expose serious damages to the people's peaceful life caused by the war disaster. He hoped that Emperor Tang Xuanzong could take the implementation of benevolence as Yao and Shun did in the ancient times in order to realize harmony of the whole society. Obviously, this is the Confucian ideal of society. This poem predicted that the style of Tang poetry had changed from romantic imagination to strict realism. Du Fu gave sharp criticism of the militaristic action and disclosed the main causes of the war. Let's look at the kernel lines of this poem:

When departing, ward leaders wound turbans round their heads,  
Coming back hoary, they are sent to the borderland.  
On the frontiers bloodshed flusheth to form seas of gore;  
Emperor Wu yet aimeth his domain to expand. (Translated by Sun Dayu, 2007, p. 153)

Du Fu described the tragic scene of parting caused by the war which was strongly resented by the poor people. Putting on military uniforms, also wearing bows and arrows, so many young men were forced to go to the battlefield. With the chariots rumbling and the horses neighing, the wives pulled their husbands' clothes and the heartbreaking cries raised skyward. The word "bloodshed" vividly shows injuries and deaths in the battlefield. "Emperor Wu" refers to Emperor Tang Xuanzong. Here Du Fu so boldly directed the highest ruler, which burst out of the fierce protest and furious indignation from his heart.

Translation is not only a kind of communicative activities, but also a process of aesthetic empathy. Inspired by the rich emotion of the poet, Sun Dayu tried to produce the similar emotion of the target readers. Here we can not neglect the fact that translation of historical figures' names inevitably leads to certain cultural deficiencies. In other words, it will bring a meaningful vacuum to the target readers and make them difficult to know the historical background. Therefore, transliteration plus explanation can be used in order to offer appropriate compensation. Meanwhile, it can keep the favor of Chinese culture.

### **Translation of Love's Another Connotation of Confucianism**

Love is realistic and practical proposition in Confucianism, which is by no means a mandatory code of ethics for human being. Du Fu loved his family members, good friends and relatives; in the meantime he extended love from human being to other life, such as plants, animals, natural scenery, and so on. It is Du Fu's great contribution to understanding connotations of love of Confucianism thoroughly. He expressed the mood of relief and pleasure while appreciating blue sky, gentle willows and lovely birds in the poem entitled *A Quatrain*.

Du Fu's poetry is the portrayal of the poet's thoughts and emotions in specific circumstances. Translation is a kind of cognitive activity, which is based on the interaction of the cognitive subject with the realistic experience. Sun Dayu focused on the reality described in the poem and the cognitive world. Let's make analysis of *A Quatrain*:

Two yellow orioles atop th' green willows sing,  
 A row of egrets white ascends the sky pale blue.  
 My casement frames th' west mounts capped with perennial snow,  
 Outdoors my house are moored ships thousands of Li from East Wu. (Translated by Sun Dayu, 2007, p. 233)

Du Fu created some poems with ingenious combination of writing and painting. He loved nature and appreciated fragrant flowers and grass, which gave him more confidence of pursuing life ideals.

"Yellow orioles" and "green willows" make complement each other. "Egrets white" and "the sky pale blue" form a delightful pleasing contrast. "Atop" shows the birds were happy and contented. "Ascends" presents the lithe posture of the egrets. "Frame" describes the poet was leisurely overlooking the scene through the window as if the beautiful scenery was embedded in the window frame.

"Yellow, green, white, blue" conveys the brilliant color of nature. Color words reflect cultural connotations and social features. Although Chinese culture and Western culture are different, there are still some corresponding color words. Therefore, the original color image can be retained in translation.

"West mounts" refers to Mountain Min in Sichuan Province, which is located in southwest of Chengdu. "Perennial snow" indicates the remote past. "East Wu" is also known as Jiangnan region along the Yangtze River, which was founded by Emperor Sun Quan in the Three Kingdoms.

"Thousands of Li" indicates the wide space. Number represents the basic meaning of quantity. Moreover, it has rhetorical functions such as exaggeration, metaphor, and so on, which reflects the aesthetic ideas and philosophical attitudes of the people. The fuzzy meaning of number often exists in specific contexts. Staying in the cottage and thinking of things happened in the distance long, long ago, Du Fu had long term version. The last two lines make the whole poem different, which also makes Du Fu eternal famous.

Du Fu's love of all life comes from inner heart and it is an important development of benevolence. When living in his simple cottage in Chengdu, he was very caring about plants and trees in the yard. Du Fu showed extensive spirit of love to embrace the whole world. In his eyes, heaven and earth, also animals and plants should be bathed in love. Let's take one of the *Two Quatrains* as an example to illustrate this point.

Under the slowly moving sun,  
 The streams and hills with beauty abound;  
 As blown by breezes of the sparkling spring,  
 All flowers and herbs sweet scents spread around.  
 The clay erst frozen waxing soft now,  
 Is pecked by swallows their nests to make;  
 The sandy bank of the ait being warm,  
 Along it paired mandarin ducks dozes take. (Translated by Sun Dayu, 2007, p. 235)

This poem was written in Chengdu cottage, which was full of vitality and dynamic beauty of early spring. In the beginning, Du Fu depicted the bright sunshine, gentle breeze, blooming flowers and lush herbs. The clay soil was so wet that the industrious swallows were busy building their mud nests back and forth. Du Fu was very careful of observing the swallows flying back from the north to the south in spring. On the warm sand, mandarin ducks were enjoying warmth of spring and bathing leisurely in the brilliant sunshine. Du Fu always expressed his feelings through describing living things and concrete scenery. The whole picture of unity and harmony reflected the poet was leisurely and carefree.

Ernst-August Gutt pointed out that "To determine what close enough resemblance in relevant respects is, the translator needs to look at both the likely benefits, that is, the contextual effects, and also at the processing effort involved for the audience" (Gutt, 2004, p. 191). As a kind of cultural symbol, "image" has superficial meaning and deep meaning. The translator should know the reason why the poet chose the specific one to reveal its connotation. By using literal translation in most cases, Sun Dayu tried to seek the maximum relevance from the poet's intention and the readers' cognitive environment so that the translation obtained the best communicative effect.

Chinese is more concise than English. In general, the information load of a Chinese poem is greater than that of an English poem. The number of syllables in each line of English translation is limited, which makes it difficult to keep the form of the source text. However, it can reproduce the original poem's flavor and gain the same effect by choosing appropriate translation methods. Sun Dayu used flexible rhyme and actively mobilized the most appropriate means of English to convey the spirit of the source text. Beauty of the meaning is the most important in translation. Beauty of the sound of is the second. Beauty of the form is the third. When the three elements can not be unified, conveying the meaning is the basic principle. It is important to find better expression of the target language than keep the form of the source text mechanically, which is consistent with functional equivalence. "Equivalence" cannot be understood in its mathematical meaning of identity, but only in terms of proximity, i.e. on the basis of degrees of closeness to functional identity" (Eugene A. Nida, 1993, p. 117). Aiming to provide the target readers with semantic information and cultural factors, Sun Dayu paid much attention to the relationship between the target language and the source language.

### **Translation of Self-cultivation of Confucianism**

Du Fu's another great contribution to Confucianism is that he is considered as a model of Confucian style of personality. Confucianism attaches great importance to self-cultivation, which is necessary for realization of the monarchs' political ideals. Since "An Shi Rebellion", a lot of dignitaries had kept alive with no great ambition. Under such situation, Du Fu still stood for moral standards of Confucianism from time to time. More importantly, Du Fu was away from the official position and he lived poor, simple and ordinary life, which was different to those political figures being in dignity. For ordinary people, an unattainable model was actually meaningless and the establishment of great opportunities also could not be expected in real life. Only did they feel that the model was one of them, they would have impulse to believe in Confucianism.

Du Fu placed his feelings of chastity and nobleness in the poem entitled *The Beauty*. In this poem, a young elegant lady who was abandoned by her fickle husband in troubled times of the war lived lonely in the uninhabited valley. Though undergoing hardships, the lady was not overwhelmed by the unfortunate fate and she always kept noble qualities. The tone of the whole poem is gloomy and forlorn. The following lines indicate the lady's and the poet's living philosophy of loyalty and toughness.

She plucketh flowers not to deck her hair,  
But filleth cypress leaves her palms' scoops all.  
In this chill air with green sleeves thin,  
She leaneth at dusk on a bamboo tall. (Translated by Sun Dayu, 2007, p. 209)

Du Fu highly praised the young lady's noble character all his heart. The images in this poem contain deep accumulation of Chinese culture and aesthetic interest. Furthermore, they embody the poet's rich emotion. "Cypress" and "Bamboo" are material carriers of traditional Chinese virtue. "Cypress" is an evergreen coniferous tree with small, rounded, woody cones and flattened shoots. The lady was just like cypress without withering against chill wind. "Bamboo" is evergreen in four seasons, which symbolizes the tenacious life. Its branches bend without folding, which indicates the poet's life principle of combination of tough and softness. Tall and straight, also free and easy, the image and quality of bamboo become the Chinese literati's common pursuit of noble spirit. By keeping the image of the source text, Sun Dayu conveyed the aesthetic elements of the poem and intricacy of the emotion. As a matter of fact, if the aesthetic subject and the object have a proper psychological distance, it will stimulate the target readers to find the hidden beauty of the poem through studying the relevant background knowledge.

The poem *The Beauty* not only reflects the severe social problems in the Tang Dynasty, but also reflects the poet's political tendencies and value attitudes. Du Fu compared the lady's tragic fate to his own, which strongly aroused sympathy and admiration of the readers. Cultural difference makes the target readers' response different to the same culture phenomenon. The translator should construct a bridge between the readers and the poet to reflect the intrinsic nature of the images in translation. The artistic conception is created by the poet's mental temperament, aesthetic taste and other factors, which become the core points of the aesthetic value.

Sun Dayu respected the poet's creative intention; meanwhile he considered the target readers' acceptance to convey semantic information and cultural information to the large extent. He was good at using archaic words, such as "plucketh", "filleth", and "leaneth", and so on. Archaic words have more quaint color. With the development of the times and the society, the connotation and extension of language will change. The appropriate use of archaic words in modern English will attract the attention of the readers.

Though living a turbulent life, Du Fu was still optimistic and he drew strength from lovely scenery and good things. The poem entitled *The Crazy Man* is a good example. From the title, it seems that the poem's main focus was to describe the man who was wild uninhibited. However, Du Fu made good combination of describing the character and the environment. Few friends visited the simple and broken cottage in Chendu at that time. However, Du Fu derived pleasure by himself from the natural surroundings. The gentle breeze cherished dainty bamboo and the lotus bloomed pink in the river. The atmosphere was harmonious and intoxicating, but he poet's real life situation was not in proportion. When arriving in Chengdu for the first time, Du Fu had to rely on his old friend to help offering rice to live. Since they lost touch, his family members were hungry, especially his little sons. Feeling guilty and sentimental, Du Fu was not struck by the temporary difficulties. Instead, he called himself "the crazy man" in a humorous way, which shows free and unrestrained attitudes of life. In fact, he was not really crazy. Let's look at the following lines:

The letters of a friend with heavy Sovran bestowals cease to come;  
 Mine ever hungry children's faces grow drear and sad.  
 To be starved to death and be thrown to th'canyons, one should be defiant;  
 I laugh at myself while getting old being e'er more mad. (Translated by Sun Dayu, 2007, p. 221)

"Canyon" is a deep gorge, typically one with a river flowing through it. "Be thrown to th'canyons" indicates that the poet was going to die due to cold and hunger. As for ordinary people, the spirit had been severely

destroyed by the harsh reality of life. However, Du Fu had never given in. On the contrary, he appreciated the beautiful scenery and could not help laughing aloud. Regardless of living poor life or rich life, people should pursue moral personality, which mostly depends on our internalization and self-cultivation of Confucianism.

The translator is not an ordinary reader and he just chooses the source text according to two elements: One is his profound artistic accomplishment and language skills; the other is the theme of the translated works which should be consistent with his poetic ideas and value judgment. Sun Dayu reproduced the aesthetic value and deep thoughts of Du Fu's poetry and made the target readers feel self-confidence and self-strength of Du Fu.

### Conclusion

Literary works reflect a certain historical background of social aesthetic tendencies. Du Fu's poetry infiltrates truth and error, the good and the evil, also the beauty and the ugliness. As one of the symbols of traditional Chinese culture and a mirror of the history of the Tang Dynasty, Du Fu's poetry embodied in the poet's personal emotions and the society. He believed in Confucianism and the inner spirit of his poems is the Confucian way.

Translation of Du Fu's poetry has multiple implications in terms of cultural connotations, ideological realms, aesthetic values and social functions. The nature of cognition activities and aesthetic activities make the literary creation interlinked. The translator's appreciation should cater to the poet's creation. The basic attainment for the translator is to appropriately understand deep connotation of the poet's life and thought, the content of the poem, the background of the times and the social culture.

As a kind of intercultural communication activity, translation has a strong purpose. "The prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose (Skopos) of the overall translational action. This fits in with intentionality being part of the very definition of any action" (Nord, 2001, p. 27). That is to say, the choice of translation and the appropriate strategies reflect the translator's value concept, cultural tendencies and aesthetic intention. Du Fu's brave commitment to responsibility and relentless pursuit of truth always inspire people to make unity of personal values and national destiny. This is why Sun Dayu chose Du Fu's poetry to translate. As for specific translation methods, he considered lexical and syntactic features of Chinese and English. Faithfulness is the fundamental principle of translation, but it does not mean that the translator should be limited by the source text. Keeping the flavor of Chinese culture, Sun Dayu also effectively guided the target readers into the poet's ideological mood. Therefore, they can not only enjoy the aesthetic pleasure from the poem, but also get plenty of spiritual strength. Sun Dayu completed the inheritance of Confucianism in subtle ways. The Chinese cultural elements and the powerful spiritual strength in Du Fu's poetry are explored in the different cultural environment.

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