

A Study on Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's Translation of “Guan Ju”

LI Mengting, ZHANG Shunsheng

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The Book of Songs, as the first collection of poems in China, is of great significance for understanding the culture of China's pre-Qin Dynasty and plays an important role in the history of Chinese literature. Confucius once said, “If you do not study *The Book of Songs*, you cannot speak”. However, poem translation is of great difficulty and importance during cultural exchange. On the one hand, translators should strike the balance between the original poem's beauty and readers' understanding. This paper aims to offer suggestions upon how to render Chinese poems into English by analyzing Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's translation of “Guan Ju”, the first poem of *The Book of Songs*.

Keywords: “Guan Ju”, poetry, translation, language and culture, theory, issues, challenges

Introduction

The Book of Songs is the earliest collection of poems in China, covering the period from the early Western Zhou Dynasty (the 11th century BC to 771 BC) to the middle of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC). It occupies a very high position in the history of world culture and is also one of the earliest and most widely spread Yuan scriptures abroad. Its status as a literary classic is beyond doubt (Wang, Han, & Zhang, 2018). Therefore, its translation is worth discussing.

Translation is a very complex activity, especially the translation of poetry into English (Li, 2015). The translation of Chinese classical poetry is not only the transformation from Chinese into English, but also the connection and communication between two cultures. As a communicator between two languages and cultures, the translator's understanding and grasp of the original text of “Guan Ju” and the choice of translation strategies, to a great extent, determines the quality of poetry translation into English.

The poem “Guan Ju” is inspired by natural scenery and the courtship of birds. It mainly describes a man's pursuit of a woman and his final love with her. It is regarded as a classic love poem in China. The third sentence and the fourth game are often quoted. This poem was used by Confucianism as a symbol of “the virtue of empress”, which played a role in moral education and exerted a profound influence on Chinese folk customs, especially the virtue of female talent. Therefore, it has a very important cultural significance. The identity of the characters in the work is very clear: “Junzi or gentleman” was a generic term for aristocracy in the time of *The Book of Songs*, and the “gentleman” usually had a certain status when his family prepared the music of lute,

LI Mengting, M.A. candidate, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

ZHANG Shunsheng, M.A., professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

song, bell, and drum. The poem was often interpreted as a "folk love song", which, I am afraid, is misplaced. It describes the life of the aristocracy.

Yang Xianyi's poetry translation has its own characteristics, with rigorous considerations and emphasis on the aesthetic feeling of language. "Poetry translation" or "prose translation" is not a bigot on one side, but an adaptive choice that reflects the traditional Chinese philosophy of the mean. Yang Xianyi's translation practice has exerted a great influence on the poetic language of the poets who grew up in the 1980s. The doctrine of the mean of Yang Xianyi's poetry translation is embodied in the following aspects: the pursuit of the unity of truth, beauty, and goodness; the principle of translation is to follow the faithfulness in *yun* or rhyme.

Analysis of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's Translated Version of "Guan Ju"

Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's translation (referred as Yang's translation in the following paper) of "Guan Ju" is highly praised by other translators both home and abroad; their version is displayed as follows:

Crying Ospreys

Merrily the ospreys cry,
On the islet in the stream.
Gentle and graceful is the girl,
A fit wife for the gentlemen.
Short and long the floating water plants,
Left and right you may pluck them.
Gentle and graceful is the girl,
Awake he longs for her and in his dreams.

When the courtship has failed,
Awake he thinks of her and in his dreams.
Filled with sorrowful thoughts,
He tosses about unable to sleep.

Short and long the floating water plants,
Left and right you may collect them.
Gentle and graceful is the girl,
He'd like to wed her, the qin and se playing.
Short and long the floating water plants,
Left and right you may collect them.
Gentle and graceful is the girl,
He'd like to marry her, bells and drums beating.

The Words in the Translation

The title of the poem is translated as "Crying Ospreys", which makes the emotional tone of the poem filled with sadness. "Guan" is the sound made from a waterfowl, and the waterfowl, which is "Ju", always appears in pairs, thus being seen as a symbol for love between men and women. The term "Ju Jiu" is translated as "Osprey", and also used the word "cry". The tone of the first half of the whole poem is not lighthearted. The words "merrily" and "cry", which form a sharp contrast, in the first sentence, expresses the sadness of the "gentleman's" not being able to ask for the "girl". Apart from that, the "girl" and the "gentleman", as well as all those instruments, are meant to tell readers their status, because average families are unable to afford that. The word "Gentleman" is appropriate to show the noble temperament and graceful demeanor of a gentleman.

Also, in ancient China, it was widely believed that women should be virtuous and graceful, so the word "graceful" here directly reflects the ancient definition of a lady. The phrase "a fit wife" is the carrier of the relationship process in the original poem, and a fit wife is used in Yang Dai's translation, which is very close to the original text. "Long for" expresses a gentleman's admiration for a lady. The original poem uses psychological process and vividly reproduces the psychological activities of a gentleman. The translator applies the psychological process and longs for expressing the fervent emotion of a gentleman.

There are altogether three verbs in the whole poem used to describe "water plants", which are "pluck", "gather", and "collect". The gentleman sees the girl for the first time when the girl is plucking water plants, telling readers about how he noticed her. After that, in the gentleman's mind, he is thinking about gathering water plants for serving their families and friends owing to his imaginary wedding. Also, the verb "collect" is playing the same role as can be seen from the word "wed" and "marry".

But is the wedding really held? If so, why I keep saying it is an imaginary wedding? We can find a clue from "Sorrowful", which cleverly shows our character's sadness owing to his failure to pursue the girl; they do not get married eventually, which can also be assumed from the word "crying" and "cry".

The Sentence in the Translation

After reading Yang's translation, there is a vivid picture in our minds of the process of a gentleman courting a girl. Firstly, when we see the sentence "gentle and graceful is the girl, a fit wife for the gentleman", we know that the moment he sees the girl, he thinks she is graceful and gentle and wants to take the girl's hand. The sentence "awake he longs for her and in his dreams" indicates that he can't help thinking about the girl day and night. In the readers' mind, we may think he attempts to find the girl again to show her his love, but he never gets the chance to see her again; that's why he misses the girl so much and could not fall asleep, which exactly displays the mood of a man who just falls in love with a girl and unable to have her at the beginning. "When the courtship has failed, he tosses about, unable to sleep" tells us that the man, whose courtship has failed, is so sad that he could not be able to find sleep as his friend. The poem mentions two different kinds of sleeplessness with different reasons and mental states. At the beginning, he fails to sleep as a result of missing the girl, and the second time is for being rejected. In the third stanza of the poem, "he'd like to wed her, the qin and se playing" shows us that the gentleman persistently chases the girl and he strongly desires the girl to be his wife. In the last stanza, we can learn again our character's enthusiasm about the girl through the sentence "he'd like to marry her, bells and drums beating", which successfully conveys the happy atmosphere, but the truth is that it is really very sad because they do not get married in the end. Yang's translation enables us to see the fluctuations of a young man's mental state and reminds us of our youth as well.

The fifth sentence adopted the same rhetorical features as the original texts. In the original poem, this line was a relational process, with the carrier "peltate" and the attribute "variable difference". Yang's translation adopted the relational process, and the translation of carrier and attribute is basically the same. But he did not translate the specificity of the original poem, with its exceedance; nor did they express the subtlety of the rise and shine.

The Structure of the Translation

"Guan Ju" is a song, a love song, so its original structure is neat, rhythmic, and full of charm. When we take a look at Yang's translation, we do not feel so much rhyming, and it hardly can be regarded as neatly structured.

The 11th sentence follows with an abab-like idiom to express lovesickness, and is an attribute of the relational process. The translator uses a grammatical metaphor to express the psychological process in terms of the material process, and omits the active author and the target, but uses a word to express the accompanying environmental component, sorrowful thoughts. Generally speaking, the process types of the four-sentence poems in the translated version and those in the original text are the same, both of which adopt the relational process and have no environmental component. About the carrier, the translator used the girl. Yang keeps using "is" on the process verb. He uses only gentle and graceful manners in the entire translation.

In short, Yang's English translation recreates the original poem, and the tone of the whole poem is a little bit bleak and sad, and the language is also expanded. The English version tends to be vernacular, which has the feeling of modern poetry, and also has the literariness of modern poetry translation. Seemingly romantic, in fact, there is, however, something regretful about it that it fails to capture the original sense of the poem.

Conclusion

It can be seen from the above example that translating "Guan Ju" is not a piece of cake. The "Tendency" and "Track" of the spread of *The Book of Songs* is also "watching" and "reflecting" on it. The overseas spread of his classical poetry and the discussion of the "going out" mode of classical poetry provide important "reference". Therefore, we can conclude that the translation of poetry is not a piece of cake. We must reflect the structure, rhythm, and meaning of the original poem while fully understanding the context of the original work.

Chinese classical poems are splendid, deserving to be enjoyed by all, both home and abroad. During the process of communication, translation takes a huge responsibility. As translators, we need to strike a balance between the structure, connotation, and rhyme of the original poem, and though it is a hard job, we can choose to be a reasonably good translator to bring about the best translation we can.

References

- Li, Y. L. (2015). On translation of the cultural tradition of *The book of songs*. *Foreign Language Journal*, (5), 155-158.
- Wang, T. T., Han, W., & Zhang, H. R. (2018). On the English translation of "Guan Ju" in *The book of songs*. *Journal of Anshun College*, 20(4), 57-60.