

# Treason and Defect in Arthur Waley's English Translation of Nineteen Ancient Poems

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There must be some kind of “Deviation” between the translated text and the original one, which is called creative treason. This kind of deviation is most prominent in poetry translation. Arthur Welly is a famous British Sinologist in the 20th century, and *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* is his masterpiece. The English translation of *Nineteen Ancient Poems* is taken as an example to analyze the treason and defect in the translation. The discussion can be divided into three parts through specific induction: the lack of angle, the loss of image and the misreading of reduplicated words. Behind these superficial rebellions and defects, the hidden essence is the difference brought about by different cultures.

*Keywords:* Arthur Waley, creative treason, nineteen ancient poems

## Introduction

Arthur Waley (1889-1966) is a famous English Sinologist and translator in the 20th century. He devoted all his life to the research and translation of Chinese and Japanese classics, and yielded fruitful results in these areas, which had a wide influence both in the East and the West. He translated and published nearly 30 Chinese classics, including classical philosophy, such as *Tao Te Ching* (1934); Classical novels, such as *Chin Ping Mei* (1939), and *Monkey* (1942); Classical poetry, such as *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (1918), *The Book of Songs* (1937), *Nine Songs* (1955) and so on. Among them, classical poetry is the most influential translation. In 1953, Waley won the Queen's medal for poetry for his outstanding achievements in poetry translation, which is one of the highest honors in the 20th century poetry circle of Britain and even the Commonwealth countries.

Among all his poetry translations, *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* is the most representative. In 1918, *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* was published for the first time and made him stand out. After dozens of reprints and translations, it had a wide influence. In the preface to the reprint of *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* in 1962, Arthur Welly said: “over the last 40 years, the translation has maintained a fairly stable demand, one of the reasons is that it is very attractive to those who do not often read poems” (1970, p. 135). It can be seen that this work is very popular.

There are many researches on Waley's translation of Chinese poetry. First, the studies focused on translation skills and translation strategies, such as scholar Zhang Baohong's *An Exploration on the Rhythm of Waley's Translated Poetry* (2020) and *A Study of Arthur Waley's Literal Translation in His English Versions of Ancient*

*Chinese Poems* (2018). Second, the comparative studies of several translation versions or with other translators is also an unique perspective, for example, *Brief Analysis on Three Translation Methods in Arthur Waley's English Version of Nine Elegies* (2011) wrote by Jiang Lin and She Yesheng; Jiang Wenyan's *A Comparative Study of Arthur Waley and Amy Lowell on Li Po's Poetry* (2018). Third, it is also a distinctive angle to study Waley's translation on a specific Chinese poet, like Ge Wenfeng's *The Obsessive Poet' on a Far Journey: Introduction to and Translation of Bai Juyi's Poetry by Arthur Waley, an English Sinologist, and His Influence* (2016). Apart from those, there is no lack of research on Waley's translation thoughts like Liang Huizhen's *Arthur Waley's Humanism Underlying His Translation of Chinese Poetry* (2015). Besides, Zhang Jie's *On Arthur Waley's Poetry Translation from the Perspective of Hermeneutics* (2016) is also a research perspective to study Waley's translation on Chinese poems with specific theories. However, few articles have been published to interpret Waley's English translation of Chinese poetry from the perspective of treason and defect.

Selecting *Nineteen Ancient Poems* from *One hundred and seventy Chinese Poems* as text basis, this paper will make a review and research on the translation of Waley's poems from the perspective of treason and defect in translation, in order to explore the English translation of Waley's poems from a new view.

## I . Creative Treason and Poetry Translation

The concept of “creative treason” comes from Escarpit's Sociology of Literature. Escarpit put it this way: “if we are willing to accept that translation is always a kind of creative betrayal, then the stimulating problem of translation may be solved” (1987, p. 137). In other words, Escarpit believes that translation will inevitably carry out “creative treason” to the original.

It is Professor XieTianzhen who introduced this viewpoint into China and then it has engendered a great influence in academic circle. He mentioned that “creative treason is a selective translation of the English term Creative Treason, which is a neutral word. And it is an objective description of some deviation phenomenon between the translation and the original text” (2019, p. 6). I deem that it is quite correct.

Strict translators in history have tried to pursue the fidelity of translation and to the content, form and spirit of the original. But practical experience illustrates that it is impossible to achieve a perfect reproduction of the original. Due to the reasons of language and culture, the translated works always bear the translator's own cultural imprint. At the same time, Dr. Xie pointed out that Creative Treason is not used to guide specific translation practice, but just a descriptive statement.

Creative treason is unavoidable in poetry translation. As a genre of poetry, the text is highly concise whereas the content contains thousands of words. The translator cannot restore the form and content at the same time when translating, especially when translating Chinese poetry into English. Chinese poetry is not only concise in writing, but also out of meaning. The more aesthetic content Chinese poetry contains, the more difficult it is to translate. At the same time, there are many symbolic images in Chinese poetry, such as “Chan Juan” expressing homesickness and sadness of hometown, “pines and cypresses” representing lofty and pure, and “cloves” implying sadness and fragility. If translated directly, Western readers may not understand the implied symbolic meaning of these images, which will lead to the deconstruction of images. And then creative treason happened. The tradition of using allusion in ancient Chinese poetry also increases the difficulty of translation, but Waley skillfully avoided those poems with many allusions, so this paper will not focus on them.

Nineteen Ancient Poems is an anthology of five character poems of *Ancient Chinese Literati*, which was compiled by Xiao Tong of the Southern Dynasty from 19 Ancient Poems of anonymous family. It marks the literati tendency of ancient Yue-fu Poems and expresses some of the most basic and common feelings and thoughts in life. The language of the whole poem is simple and natural, and the description is vivid and true. Liu Xie called it “the crown of five words” which demonstrates its literary status. This paper will take Waley’s English translation of *Nineteen Ancient Poems* as an example to analyze the treason and defects in the translation. And also analyze the deviation from the original poems that caused by different cultures.

## II. The Lack of Perspective in Waley’s Nineteen Ancient Poems

*The Bright Moon* is very unique among Waley’s *Nineteen Ancient Poems*. The original text and translation are as follows:

明月何皎皎，照我罗床纬。  
忧愁不能寐，揽衣起徘徊。  
客行虽云乐，不如早旋归。  
出门独彷徨，愁思当告谁！  
引领还入房，泪下沾裳衣。

The bright moon, oh, how white it shines,  
Shines down on the gauze curtains of my bed.  
Racked by sorrow I toss and cannot sleep.  
Picking up my clothes, I wander up and down.  
My absent love says that he is happy,  
But I would rather he said he was coming back.  
Out in the courtyard I stand hesitating, alone.  
To whom can I tell the sad thoughts I think?  
Staring before me I enter my room again;  
Falling tears wet my mantle and robe. (Waley, 1919, p. 17)

There are two perspectives on the original poem. One is from the perspective of a traveler who lives in a foreign land, can’t sleep at night and is homesick. The other is written from the perspective of a sad woman who is alone in the empty boudoir, worried about her husband’s return. According to the first perspective, this poem expresses the homesickness of the wanderers. The moon has implied homesickness in China since ancient times. For example, Li Bai wrote in *Thoughts in the Still of the Night* as follows:

Looking up, I find the moon bright;  
Bowing, in homesickness I’m drowned. (Xu, 2009, p. 216)

The thought of seeing the bright moonlight is mostly the same for the protagonist in the poem. Living in a foreign country and unable to sleep, he put on his clothes and wandered around. He craned his neck to look at the direction of his hometown, but he couldn’t go back to his hometown (probably living in the capital for the sake of fame) and couldn’t help tearing. According to the second perspective, the poem expresses a woman’s expectation of her husband’s return. The bright moon shines on the boudoir, evoking a woman’s yearning for her husband. It is not only the expectation of husband, but also contains its own sorrow. At this time, she still cannot see her husband, can only wander alone in tears.

Waley's English translation only expresses one perspective of this poem. It can be seen that the protagonist in Waley's translation is a woman who thinks of her husband in the boudoir. Through personal pronouns such as "I" and "he", the perspective of poetry is focused on women, which makes poetry lack an interpretation. This may be due to the fact that western poets usually use personal pronouns to highlight the protagonists. There are few poems without subject. For example, the widely spread sonnet of Shakespeare's: "Shall I compare them to a summer's day?". However, there are few personal pronouns in Chinese poetry, so readers can give a variety of interpretations. This is also due to the fact that ancient Chinese poetry is concise, short and implicit. Although the personal pronouns added here make the poem easy for foreign readers to understand, they make the perspective missing. Different writing habits lead to different interpretations.

### III. The Loss of Images in Waley's Nineteen Ancient Poems

"In ancient Chinese poetry, image is the most important factor, that is, taking 'image' as the logical starting point. Then regarding the whole process of artistic expression as the process of expression centered on the structure of 'meaning' and 'image', also regarding 'all images' as the universal artistic pursuit" (Pan, 2015, p. 178). Many images in ancient China have their own unique meanings. For instance, green hills are characterized by steadiness and broad mindedness. It is a symbol of hometown, as well as a symbol of history and eternity. Chrysanthemum contains the spirits of not afraid influential officials and indifferent to fame and wealth, symbolizing the hermit and gentleman. Rhododendron is a symbol of loneliness, sadness, homesickness and etc.. In addition, there are some unique "images" in ancient China (like "Luo" as follows). And Waley's lack of understanding of them will lead to the loss of images.

"罗(luo)" in *The Bright Moon was translated* as gauze by Waley. "罗" is a kind of weaving method in which the plied silk is twisted by warp and weft. Later generations used it to refer to the silk woven made by this method. This unique image is lost here. In the translation of *Nineteen Ancient Poems*, image loss is common. For instance:

客从远方来，遗我一书札。

A stranger came to me from a distant land,  
And brought me a single scroll with writing on it. (Waley, 1919, pp. 67-68)

In ancient China, "札 (zha)" is bamboo slice for writing. Waley translated "札" as "single scroll with writing on it". Although there is not much difference in the main idea, the image of bamboo is lost.

庭中有奇树，绿叶发华滋。

In the courtyard there grows a strange tree,  
Its green leaves ooze with a fragrant moisture. (Waley, 1919, p. 63)

"奇树 (qi shu)" means beautiful tree. Waley translated it as "strange tree" mistakenly. "华" is an interchangeable word, which means flower. This image is missing in Waley's translation, and interchangeable words are also a unique literary phenomenon in classical Chinese.

驱车策驽马，游戏宛与洛。  
洛中何郁郁，冠带自相索。

Yoking my chariot I urge my stubborn horses.  
 I wander about in the streets of Wan and Lo.  
 In Lo Town how fine everything is!  
 The "Caps and Belts" go seeking each other out. (Waley, 1919, pp. 60-61)

“驽马 (nu ma)” means inferior horse. Waley translated it as “stubborn horse”. The image of bad horse was loss. Nanyang, formerly known as “Wan”, is located in the southwest of Henan Province. “Luo” is the eastern capital of Luoyang that Waley mistook “Luo” and “Wan” as streets. Perhaps because he was not familiar with ancient Chinese place names; “冠带 (guan dai)” means officials and dignitaries in the capital. The original meaning has been translated, but the implied meaning of high officials and noble people may be dispelled. This is due to the use of symbolism that deconstructs images in Chinese poetry.

玉衡指孟冬，众星何历历。

The Hand of the Pole-star points to the Beginning of Winter;  
 The host of stars is scattered over the sky. (Waley, 1919, p. 62)

“玉衡 (yuheng)” is the fifth star in the Big Dipper. “孟冬 (meng dong)” is a noun of locality. This poetic line means that Yuhengxing has already pointed to the direction of Mengdong Haigong, that is, to the northwest, and it is already past midnight. The Mistranslation of “玉衡” into “Pole-star” and “孟冬” into “the Beginning of Winter” may be due to Waley’s lack of clarity in terms of astronomical timing in ancient China.

To sum up, some image losses are due to Waley’s inadequate understanding of the special “images” in ancient China, such as the nomenclature of place names and astronomical timing terminology. While it is difficult to say that some image losses are due to Waley’s failure to understand the original text. More likely, it caused by different images between China and the West. Even if the original meaning is translated, it can not express the deeper meaning, such as the “Guandai” (original meaning: hat and belt; kind of ancient accessories) symbolizing the dignitaries, which is almost inevitable in poetry translation.

#### IV. The Misreading of Reduplicated Words in Waley’s Nineteen Ancient Poems

“Reduplication is a unique means of statement given by Chinese Monosyllabic characters” (Guo, 2003, p. 141). In terms of rhythm, it is difficult to find the feeling of the original poem in English translation. Moreover, the meaning of reduplicated words in Waley’s translated poems is also misread. Such as:

回车驾言迈，悠悠涉长道。

Turning my chariot I yoke my horses and go.  
 On and on down the long roads. (Waley, 1919, p. 64)

“悠悠 (you you)” not only means far away, but also means far away and hard to reach. However, the translation of “on and on down the long roads” does not mean far away and hard to reach. This may be the misunderstanding caused by Waley’s neglect of the multiple meanings of reduplicated words.

白杨何萧萧，松柏夹广路。

The white aspens how they murmur, murmur;  
 Pines and cypresses flank the broad paths. (Waley, 1919, p. 65)

“萧萧 (xiao xiao)” is an onomatopoeic word, often used to describe the sound of horse calls, grass and trees shaking. Waley translated it as “murmur, murmur”. Although it is translated as sound, it is not a special onomatopoeia to describe the horse’s cry in the English context.

“郁郁 (yuyu)” is used to describe the prosperous and bustling atmosphere in Luozhong, while “how fine everything is” is translated by Waley. Although it has the general meaning, it has lost the unique meaning of “郁郁”. “历历 (li li)” not only expresses the clear arrangement of stars, but also represents the shining. Waley translated it as “spoiled over the sky”, which has only one meaning. This kind of inaccuracy in translation may be due to the fact that Waley does not understand the multiple meanings of the reduplicated words, or that he cannot find the exact corresponding words in English. This is common in the context of heterogeneous culture. For example, communication was inconvenient in ancient China, so the task of transmitting letters needed to be done by swan goose. However, in the English context, swan goose did not have the meaning of letters, so it was impossible to find a complete corresponding word .

## V. Conclusion

Waley’s *Nineteen Ancient Poems* is an important chapter in his masterpiece *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*. His translation is fluent and beautiful, which has had a wide influence in the western world and objectively promoted the spread of ancient Chinese poems in the West. However, due to cultural heterogeneity and different literary habits, there are still rebellious and defects in the translated poems. According to the different types of deviation from the original meaning in the translated poems, it can be divided into three directions: the lack of perspective, the loss of image and the misreading of reduplicated words. This paper makes a specific analysis from these three aspects, although the interpretation angle is different, the fundamental reason for the deviation is the difference of cultural models and the resulting literary models. This kind of “creative treason” caused by heterogeneous culture is inevitable. The translator can only try to approach the original text, but the translation cannot be equal to the original text. To some extent, this kind of “creative treason” is also a very valuable cultural research material. In other words, treason and defect in poetry translation are valuable, through which we can explore the heterogeneous culture between different countries.

Whether poetry can be translated or not has always been controversial, but it is undeniable that poetry translation can help people overcome the barriers of language and appreciate poetry in different languages. Without poetry translation, those who do not understand English will not be able to appreciate the poetry of Shakespeare, Byron and other great poets, and those who do not understand Spanish will not be able to read the poetry of Neruda, Lorca and other poets. Poetry translation promotes cultural exchange and dissemination, and the analysis of treason and defect in English translation can not only evaluate poetry translation more comprehensively, but also explore the blending and collision of heterogeneous cultures.

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