

# A Comparative Analysis on Nine English Translations of Mao Zedong Poems

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A poem can not be interpreted to its exact meaning, which determines the different understanding and translation strategies and the ensuing different translation versions. This paper, by analyzing nine versions of Mao Zedong's poems from its form, choice of words, imagery and meters, finds that Prof. Li Zheng-shuan's version has reproduced both the lyrical and spiritual effects in the translation: Looking at it, it's pleasant to the eyes; listening to it, it's agreeable to the ear; thinking about it, it's penetrating to the mind; reading it, it's flowing fluently on the tongue.

Keywords: Mao Zedong Poems, English translation, comparison

# Introduction

Mao Zedong is a great statesman, strategist, philosopher, thinker, writer, and calligrapher. Throughout his life, he wrote many poems and plays a prominent role in the history of Chinese poetry. These poems are permeated with the lofty aspirations of the poet, reflecting Mao Zedong's ideals and pursuits. "In China, the number of articles and books in the research and publication of Mao Zedong's poems and words, and the high quality, are all ranked first in the research and publication of various poems" (Li, 2003, p. 59). Throughout so many research papers and works, most of the research focuses on specific imagery. Professor Zhang Zhi-zhong's 2008 doctoral dissertations *Comparative Study of English Translations of Mao Zedong Poetry* is a quite systematic and comprehensive one in China at present. The English versions of this book used were published in 2008 or before, but in June 2010, Hebei People's Publishing House published the translated works *Selected Poems of Mao Zedong* (Chinese English contrast reading) by Professor Li Zheng-shuan of Hebei Normal University. The advent of this translation pushed the translation of Mao Zedong's poetry to a comparatively new height. In the preface to Professor Li Zheng-shuan, Professor Wang Rong-pei said,

"poetry has no absolute interpretation". Different readers have different understandings of the same poem in different times; "poetry has no perfect translation". Different translatorsin, different times, and different places will translate the same poem creatively; The good or the bad of translation is relative because different readers in different times and different places will make different evaluations on the advantages and disadvantages of various versions. (Li, 2010, p. 3)

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Therefore, this paper compares Professor Li Zheng-shuan's version with the other eight important translations from four aspects: form, words, images, and rhymes of the translated poems.

#### **The Beautiful Form**

Chinese traditional literary theory emphasizes "Forgetting the Form", but in fact its form should not to be forgotten, "because form is the carrier of meaning, and sometimes the meaning itself" (Wang, 2014, p. 102). Poetry is first of all intuitive in appearance, which distinguishes it from other texts at a glance. As far as poetry translation is concerned. Ye Wei-lian believes that "almost all the English translations of Chinese ancient poems have ignored the unique syntactic structure of Chinese ancient poems, so it is impossible to understand the characteristics of ancient Chinese poetry from the translated poems in form" (2006, p. 75). Therefore, when translating poetry, we should first try to preserve the appearance of the original poem. In general, the translated poem should follow the form of the original poem, as faithful to the content of the original poem. If the translator is not able to express the difference between the external form of the poem and the word in the translation, he certainly can not reproduce the beauty or beauty of the form of the original poetry. Lu Xun also said, "beautiful form is pleasing to the eye" (2018, p. 23). For example, in Bacon's classic prose Of Studies, the first sentence of the original text is "Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability". Mr. Wang Zuo-liang translates it into "读书足以怡情,足以傅彩,足以长才". Because this translation achieves equivalence in form and style, it becomes a model of translation in China. The beauty of form in poetry includes the number, length, opposition, and arrangement of lines carefully created by the poet. Next, take the case of Cai Sang Zi (The Double Ninth Day) as an example to see the translator's handling of form. Because the space is limited, it only shows professor Li Zheng-shuan's translation.

> 人生易老天难老, Nature does not grow old as fast as man does; 岁岁重阳。Yearly the Double Ninth comes around. 今又重阳, Today the Double Ninth comes around. 战地黄花分外香。Very sweet are yellow flowers on battleground. 一年一度秋风劲, Each autumn the wind blows with might, 不似春光。Unlike spring time, 胜似春光, But more sublime: 寥廓江天万里霜。Boundless are the sky, waters and the rime. (Trans. Li Zheng-shuan)

The poem itself is pleasing in the beauty of form and architecture: The number of words in the first two lines is the same, and the middle two lines are equal, which looks like the word "凹". But from the nine translations at hand, it can be seen that although the versions of official translations, Professor Wong Man and Professor Xu Yuan-chong have the same number of lines as the original text and have basically achieved parity, they do not show the "concave (凹)" shape and lose the original form beauty. The translations of Barnstone, Gu Zheng-kun, Wang Hui-ming, and Nancy increased from 8 lines to 10, 13, 10 and 10 lines respectively. The number of translated poems is not equal to that of the original poetry, thus the form beauty of the original poem will not be displayed.

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Professor Li Zheng-shuan's translation reproduces the beauty of this architecture, making the first and last lines of English the same length, and the middle lines the same, which is visually equivalent in appearance. Therefore, throughout these translations, except Li's translation, the other translations basically fail to reproduce the beauty of ups and downs. In the preface of Li's translation, Liu Yi-qing pointed out that

one of the special points in Li Zheng-shuan's translation is that he tries to keep the lines of the original poem as much as possible, including the number of lines and the length of each line, instead of adding his own elaboration. (Li, 2010, p. 1)

"... Only Li Zheng-shuan's translation fully respects the 457 lines of the original poem, and the average length of each line is the closest to the original poem" (Liu & Zhang, 2012, p. 70). In addition, Li Zheng-shuan's and Xu Yuan-chong's translation have flexibly handled the two lines of words in the middle of the lower que, without repeating the "springtime". Instead of "springtime", "sublime" is employed on the basis of deep understanding of its spiritual essence. It not only maintains the form, but also expresses vividly the beauty of meaning and sound.

## **Proper Words**

At the end of the Ming Dynasty, He Yisun said in the poem *Shi Jian*: "a word is like a dragon's eye, a fluttering scale, a word of alarm, which can make the whole sentence novel" (Feng, 2016, p. 59). It can be seen that the choice and refinement of words are very important for classical poetry, not only for understanding, but also for elegance. Mao Zedong is such a master of the wording that even the ordinary words will be refreshing and unforgettable after being selected and organized by him. For example, in *Bu Suan Zi (Ode to the Plum Blossom)*, the artistic conception is different by changing from "she laughs next to her" to "she smiles in the cluster".

In the line "Roll and roll cold streams rush in the high sky" of *Seven-word-line Poem (Winter Clouds)*, "cold streams rush (寒流急)" is changed from "cold streams vent (寒流泄)" in his original work. Here, by changing the word "vent (泄)" to "rush (急)", it shows the severe current events. In contrast, the word "vent (泄)" is much lighter. (Zhang, 2008, p. 90)

It can be seen that these are common words, but they can not only best express the poet's inner feelings, but also impress the readers most. The translation of poetry should be the same as making a poem. The following is an exemplified analysis of the translation of the poem *Nian Nu Jiao (A Dialogue Between Two Birds)* written in the autumn of 1965. Because of the limited space, only the last five lines are displayed.

还有吃的, There was also food, 土豆烧熟了, Potatoes were cooked, 再加牛肉。And beef was stewed. 不许放屁! Don't you fart! 试看天地翻覆。See how the world'll greatly change! (Trans. Li Zheng-shuan)

Although there are many ancient Chinese words in Mao Zedong's poetry, there are still a large number of modern spoken vocabulary. Qian Yong, a scholar in the Qing Dynasty, said in his *Lu Yuan Tan Poems* (《履园 丛话》): "oral language can be used in poetry and will be a good sentence if used in harmony" (1998, p. 125).

The above lines of poetry are the best examples. Then how to translate such vulgar spoken language as "not to fart" (不要放屁)? Should the lines be translated elegantly just because Mao Zedong is the leader? Or should it be translatedliterally? So why did Mao Zedong say such a rude thing? Why does he want to call names? Did he express personal discontent? Or did he express China's dissatisfaction with the treaty? All need us to learn the creation background of this word.

In the 1960s of the last century, it was the age of blood and fire and also the age of revolution and war: "Oceans roar while clouds rage/All lands shake while storms rave". From 1963 to 1965, Mao Zedong issued six statements on behalf of the Chinese people to support the just struggle of the people in the world, and there was a huge debate with the Soviet Union about the nature of socialism. The situation in People's Republic of China is grim, with the United States hostile to us and the Soviet Union threatening us. The poem is written in a fable way. At that time, the leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States signed a contract on nuclear tests to restrict the right of other countries to defend themselves. Therefore, the obvious pertinence of this poem makes it possess the sharp power of daggers and guns. The Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the atmosphere, Outer Space and underwater signed in Moscow on 5 August 1963 by the Soviet Union, the United States and Britain effectively deprive other countries of the right to carry out nuclear tests. But these countries themselves can have nuclear weapons! "There was also food: Potatoes were cooked/And beef was stewed" refers to such statements as "welfare communism was a good dish of cooked potatoes and stewed beef" in the speech made by the Soviet leader Khrushchev's (1894-1971) in April 1, 1964. Imperialism welcomed such a speech because it catered to the taste of the imperialists.

Mao Zedong believes that the treaty prohibiting the test of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere, outer space and underwater or the communism described by Khrushchev is a nonsense. At that time, the ban on nuclear weapons was equivalent to prohibiting us from developing nuclear weapons. In order to prevent the threat of nuclear weapons, we must develop nuclear weapons. Therefore, the Treaty of the Soviet Union, the United States and Britain is "fart", and communism by Khrushchev is also "farting". In 1964, Khrushchev was forced to retire. In the same year, general Zhang Ai-ping, chief of the Chinese atomic bomb experiment, reported to premier Zhou En-lai the success of the nuclear explosion. This is the historical background of that time. Therefore, how to translate "do not fart" to relieve the anger? Compare different translations:

- 1. Stop your windy nonsense! (Official translation)
- 2. Wind and baloney! (Trans. Nancy T. Lin)
- 3. No passing wind, you bird! (Trans. Gu Zhengkun)
- 4. Shut up! (Trans. Xu Yuanchong)
- 5. None of thy windy windy stuff! (Trans. Huang Long)
- 6. Don't you fart! (Trans. Li Zhengshuan)

In combination with the creation background of the time, official translation, Lin's translation, Gu's translation, Xu's translation, and Huang's translation, all can be understood semantically, but the strength is not enough, and the momentum is not equal to the original text, which completely loses the unique feeling of the original word and destroys the spirit the poet carefully constructed in the original text. While Professor Li Zheng-shuan's translation "Don't you fart!", though a direct one, is more in line with the scene of the time, in line with the indignation of the time and the momentum of the original words. While conveying the rhythm and

strength of the original word, his translation also well communicates the artistic and ideological depth of it, showing the pictures in the words in front of the readers. What's more, fart begins with {f} sound, just as the Chinese word "放" begins with {f} sound. Fart is as short as "放屁", with almost the same length of pronunciation. It is powerful.

#### The Beautiful Images

Image is the core concept of Chinese traditional aesthetics. In Ming Dynasty, Hu Ying-Iin said in *Shi Shou*, "the subtlety of ancient poems is in the pursuit of imagery". Wang Guo-wei said in *Ren Jian Ci Hua*: "the spring noises on the branches of the red apricot branches, and the word 'noise' brings out all the artistic conception" (Zhang, 2008, p. 100). The imagery of ancient Chinese poetry has the implied meaning. "Imagery to poetry is as important as plot to fiction or drama" (Zhang, 2009, p. 39). Therefore, the translation of poetry focuses on conveying the same "implied meaning", reshaping the image of the original poem and reconstructing the similar artistic conception. The following is the example of *Yi Qin E (The Loushan Pass)*:

西风烈, The west wind is strong,
长空雁叫霜晨月。Wild geese wail under the frosty moon of morn.
霜晨月, Under the frosty moon of morn,
马蹄声碎, Bugles sound hoarse,
喇叭声咽。And steeds' trotting sounds outworn and broken.
雄关漫道真如铁, The strong pass is indeed iron-clad on all sides!
面今迈步从头越。But we re-surmount it with big strides.
从头越, With big strides,
苍山如海, Green mounts look like a sea,
残阳如血。The dying sun presents blood-red dyes. (Trans. LI Zheng-shuan)

The poem, written in 1935, is a generous, sad and magnificent one. It describes the intense scene of Loushan Pass battle in the Long March from inside to outside, which shows the poet's unhurried attitude and magnanimity in the face of defeat and difficulties. "The west wind is strong/Wild geese wail under the frosty moon of morn" briefly points out the time of the battle, the climate, and also creates a heroic lyric atmosphere. The western wind is strong; the frost is everywhere in the morning; the moon is hanging on the horizon, and the wild geese are singing in the vast sky. These are not only a realistic description of the battle scene, but also a hint of the intense artistic rendering of the battle. The sound of horse hoofs reflects the speed of the Red Army: The Red Army captured the pass when the enemy was not ready. "Bugles sound hoarse" refers to the trembling of the army bugle in the cold early morning wind, describing the intensity of the charge. The trumpeter exhausted all his strength to blow the trumpet, hoarsening his throat, which is relieved against the Red Army's unstoppable courage. "The strong pass is indeed iron-clad on all sides" shows the Red Army's determination not to be afraid of difficulties and not to fear the strong enemies, and thus presents the heroic feelings of their contempt for hardships. "But we re-surmount it with big strides" wrote about the Red Army's occupying Loushan Pass with ease. "Green mounts look like a sea/The dying sun presents blood-red dyes" tells the reader that the green hills are like the waves of the sea, and the red sunset is like the color of blood. This sentence is mainly composed of colors. "Cang" writes about the color of mountains, and "blood" is about the sunset.

Through this description, a picture full of images is displayed. In fact, there are many images appearing in the poem, such as "west wind", "wild geese", "frosty moon of morn", "green mounts", "dying sun", and so on. Among them, the image of "Green mounts look like a sea/The dying sun presents blood-red dyes" has become a masterpiece. Look at the translation below.

1. There the hills are blue like the sea, And the dying sun like blood. (Trans. Andrew Boyd)

2. To see the green hills reeling like waves, And the dying sun like blood. (Trans. Wong Man)

3. Before us green blue mountains are like the sea, The dying sun like blood. (Trans. Willis Barnstone)

4. The rolling hills sea-blue, The dying sun blood-red. (Official translation)

5. The blue mountains are like sea, The dying sun is like blood. (Trans. Wang Hui-ming)

6. The hills are a sea of blue; Blood-dyed, the sun dips! (Trans. Nancy T. Lin)

7. The setting sun is bloodily red seen, The vast sea of mountains green. (Trans. Gu Zheng-kun)

8. Green mountains like the tide; The sunken sun blood-dyed. (Trans. Xu Yuan-chong)

9. Green mounts look like a sea, The dying sun presents blood-red dyes. (Trans. Li Zheng-shuan)

As can be seen from the above translation, the image of "mountain" is translated into "hills", "mountains", and "mounts" respectively. The selection of "mountain" is more than that of "hill" on the whole, which naturally conforms to the language style and poetic style of Mao Zedong's poetry, that is, to express the feeling of broadness by the wide scenery. As far as the pronunciation opening of these three words is concerned, the hill is smaller and suitable for the description of "small realm". "Cangshan" here refers to the Loushan mountain range. Since it is a special mountain range, it is more appropriate to use mounts. Generally speaking, mount is part of the mountain name, such as Mount Everest. So here using "mounts" is a little more appropriate than using "mountains". "Cang" in "Cangshan" is mainly translated into blue and green, except that Barnstone translates it into green blue. "Cangshan" is the green mountain, the dark green mountain. Here, the poet expresses his feelings through the scene, showing the joy after victory. Although the word "Blue" accords with the color of the sea, it also has the meaning of "melancholy", which is not consistent with the artistic conception in the original poem. The word "green" not only fully reflects the color and lush of the mountain, but also expresses a flourishing passion, which is in line with the environment and mood of the poet at that time. So it is more appropriate to translate it into "green". From the above analysis, we can see that Professor Li Zheng-shuan's green mounts is more consistent with the image of "Cangshan" in the original poem and conveys the implied meaning of the original poem.

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The image of "Can Yang" (残阳) is translated into different versions as follows: "the setting sun", "the dying sun", and "the sunken sun". Professor Xu Yuan-chong translates "Can Yang" into "the sunken sun", which is borrowed from The Lark Song by British poet Shelley (Shelly). He believes that when translating poetry, we should make full use of the famous sentences and vocabularies of foreign poets to "make foreign things serve China" (2015, p. 16). "The setting sun" is the most common word for sunset in the dictionary. In the process of English translation, "the proper words must be selected according to the context, rather than mechanically using a certain interpretation in the dictionary" (Lao, 2014, p. 22) because the construction of images can not be separated from the real world and cognitive environment of the poet. Mao Zedong wrote this poem in 1935. In October 1934, the Central Red Army began its long march from Jiangxi, and then broke through the enemy's four blockades and entered Guizhou province in December of the same year. On January 6, 1935, the Red Army conquered Zunyi. Then the enlarged Political Bureau conference was held in Zunyi which is known in history as Zunyi conference. The conference ended the leadership of Wang Ming's wrong line, established a new central leadership headed by Mao Zedong and the correct political and military line. After the Zunyi meeting, the Red Army continued to go up north to attack Loushan Pass. This poem is written after conquering Loushan Pass. Mao Zedong was very excited at that time because it was the first great victory after the Zunyi conference. Thus, we can imagine that the "Can Yang" here is not only a concrete image hanging in the sky near sunset, but also has its "implied meaning". The three words in the previous line "Cong tou yue" congealed an incomparable excitement to break through the failure of the past; the failure of the past and the bloody lessons of the past have been dying away and the new victory is coming. A magnificent spirit lingers in the poem. Thus, "dying sun" is slightly more suitable than "the setting sun" and "the sunken sun".

#### The Beauty of Sound

China is a country with well-developed metrical poetry. From the time of *Book of Songs* to the late Qing Dynasty, there has been no poetry writing without rhyme. Whether a poem can spread widely depends largely on its rhythm and rhyme. Mao Zedong's poetry is also a metrical form and the final rhyme often adopts the masculine rhyme, and the rhythm is sonorous, which represents the spirit and optimism of the poet. Gu Zheng-kun believes that "the reason why poetry is called poetry lies in its musicality". And the embodiment of musicality depends mostly on the metrical pattern, and if the translation of poetry is good atrhythm to serve as the artistic conception of the original poem, it is just like adding flower to the scenery" (Gu, 1998, p. 225). While Xu Yuan-chong thinks

if a poem can not convey the sound beauty of the original poem, it is impossible to produce a similar effect as the original poem; on the contrary, the imagery beauty of the original poem can be conveyed by the sound beauty of the rhyme. That is to say, using rhyme may be due to the loss of meaning, but not using rhyme will certainly cause the loss of the meaning. The degree of the loss of meaning by using rhyme is less than that without rhyme. (Wang, 1997, p. 246)

#### Wang Rong-pei also believes that

in terms of poetry translation, it is not necessary to be faithful to the meaning; if the translated poem can not convey the charm of the original poem, and is not infectious, then it is the unsuccessful translation...whether it is a Chinese poetry or an English poetry, the beauty of music is very important. (Wang, 1997, p. 231)

In the English translation of Mao Zedong's poems, the translators have tried their best to translate prosody and antithesis, and have obtained different degrees of reproduction. Take *Qing Ping Yue (Mount Liupan)* as an example to see the specific treatment of prosody in each translation. The following are the translations of professor Li Zheng-shuan, Xu Yuan-chong, and Gu Zheng-kun.

天高云淡, Sky is high and clouds are light; 望断南飞雁。South-flying geese are out of sight. 不到长城非好汉, No hero fails to reach the Great Wall of such height. 屈指行程二万。We've covered twenty thousand li with all might. 六盘山上高峰, On Mount Liupan's very crest, 红旗漫卷西风。Red flags flutter in wind west. 今日长缨在手, With long cord in hand today, 何时缚住苍龙。When can we bind the dragon and the rest? (Trans. Li Zheng-shuan) The sky is high, the clouds are light, The wild geese flying south are out of sight. We are not heroes unless we reach the Great Wall; Counting up, we've done twenty thousand *li* in all. Of spiral Mountain at the crest, Red flags wave in wanton winds from the west. With the long cord in hand today, When shall we bind the Dragon Gray? (Trans. Xu Yuan-chong) The skies are deep, clouds are thinly wan; Fading into the south heaven wild geese we scan.

One is not a man if failing to reach the Great Wall, Counting, we know we've covered twenty thousand *li* in all.

High on the peak of Mount Liupan, In the west wind red flags flap and sound. We now hold the long cord in hand, When will the Dragon be bound? (Trans. Gu Zheng-kun)

In the original word, the first four lines have got the same rhyme: "dan (淡)", "yan (雁)", "han (汉)", "wan (万)"; and the four lines in the lower que are 1121 rhymes: "feng (峰)", "feng (风)", "shou (手)", "long (龙)". It can be seen from the nine versions that except for the three versions of Gu Zheng-kun, Li Zheng-shuan, and Xu Yuan-chong, the other six versions have no final rhyme at all. Although there are some alliterations in the lines, on the whole they do not display the rhythm and rhyme of the original word. In Gu Zheng-kun's version, there are final rhymes; it chooses AABB: "wan", "scan", "wall", "all", and ACDC: "pan", "sound", "hand", "bound" instead of having the same rhyme as the original word. At the same time, there are some alliterations in the translation, which plays a role in strengthening the rhythm and rendering the atmosphere. In Xu Yuan-chong's translation, rhyme is very obvious. He uses AABB, CCDD rhyme, and the inline rhyme (the first line of sky and high), which virtually increases the sound beauty of the translated poetry. The "A" rhyme are "light", "sight" and "B" rhyme are "wall" and "all". These words all contain vowels with a large opening, which is consistent with the masculine rhyme of "Dan", "Yan", "Han", and "Wan" in the original poem. Li

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### Conclusion

The highest level of translation is the reproduction of the style. Through the comparison of the nine different English versions of Mao Zedong's poetry in terms of form, words, images, and rhymes, it is found that the translation of the same poem by the different translators is influenced by the times, personal styles, and even the different regions. In the process of translation, no matter what translation strategies the translator takes, the translator should fully consider and respect the original work and the reader, and be faithful to the original work in order to help readers understand the true Chinese ancient poetry as far as possible: Looking at it, it's pleasant to the eyes; listening to it, it's agreeable to the ear; thinking about it, it's penetrating to the mind; reading it, it's flowing fluently on the tongue.

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