

A Study on the Reproduction of Artistic Conception in Translation of Chinese Classical Poetry from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics Theory*

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Chinese classical poetry has long been known for its unique artistic conception of mixture of sentiments and scenery, the conception beyond image and the refinement out of rhyme. From the perspective of reception aesthetics theory, this paper analyzes translation strategies of the classical poetry, probes into the problems that retaining “indeterminacy” and satisfying the readers “horizon of expectations” when translate Chinese classical poetry. It is necessary to keep enough aesthetic space, and to give full play to the translator’s aesthetic creativity when translate Chinese classical poetry, so as to reproduce the artistic conception of Chinese classical poetry.

Keywords: reception aesthetics theory, Chinese poetry translation, artistic conception

Unlike modern literary works, Chinese classical poetry is highly concise and profound in meaning. It requires translators to communicate with two different languages, cultures and audiences across time and space. Hu Yinglin once said, “The beauty of ancient poetry is the pursuit of imagery” (1979). The poet always conveys his own feelings through a variety of images. The various images bearing the poet’s feelings get together to create the artistic conception beauty of poetry, which goes beyond the simple sum of various images to express the poet’s meaning beyond words and beyond rhyme. Based on the theory of reception aesthetics, this paper analyzes the translation strategies of Chinese classical poetry to give a reference when reproduce the artistic conception of Chinese classical poetry.

1. The Beauty of Artistic Conception of Chinese Classical Poetry from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics

1.1 The Beauty of Artistic Conception of Chinese Classical Poetry

Artistic conception is a poetics category which is related to image but higher than image (Wang, 2005, p. 30). Artistic conception can also be understood as literary images with triple structure. The first level is composed of images, which are characterized by blending of scenes. The second level is the external image,

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that is, through the creation of images to trigger readers' imagination, so that it reaches a realm, the characteristics of this level is the virtual reality of the generation; The third level is denotative, that is, based on the realization of the first two levels, we can taste implicit meaning from the perspective of language, so as to taste the charm brought by implicit meaning.

1.2 The Undecided Points and Expecting Views of Reception Aesthetics Theory

Wolfgang Iser, the representative figure of reception aesthetics, believes that readers, as the dynamic power of reception, play an important role in the process of reading. He pointed out that readers include "realistic readers" and "conceptual readers", and "conceptual readers" include "intended readers" and "implied readers". Chinese scholar Zhu Liyuan put forward "potential readers" after research. In fact, both "implied readers" and "potential readers" indicate that literature itself is an appealing structure, with its uncertainty and blank meaning, that is, the "indeterminacy" in the works, which makes different readers have different understandings and interpretations when they concretized it. Translation is also a literary text. The translation itself cannot produce independent meaning, but the realization of meaning should be materialized through the readers' reading of the translation, so as to achieve the complete completion of the translation (Mu, 1990, p. 10). Therefore, in order to reproduce the artistic conception of Chinese classical poetry, it is necessary to keep the "indeterminacy" in the text and let the translated readers feel the artistic conception of the poetry while reading.

Hans Robert Jauss, another representative figure of reception aesthetics, put forward the concept of "Horizon of expectations". "Horizon of expectations" refers to the thinking set or preexisting structure formed by readers' literary reading experience when reading a work. In the process of receiving, each reader always views the translated works from the perspective of his own life and literary "horizon of expectations". Different horizons of expectations make different readers have different needs for reading objects (Ma, 2000, p. 49). Therefore, when translating Chinese classical poetry, full play should be given to the translator's aesthetic creativity to satisfy the "expectation horizon" of the target readers, so as to reproduce the artistic conception beauty of Chinese classical poetry.

2. Strategies for the Reproduction of Artistic Conception in Chinese Classical Poetry from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, as Iser once pointed out, reading must involve readers' imagination, and only readers' active and creative imagination and association can make reading produce pleasure (Iser, 1978). Therefore, there should be an aesthetic distance between the translated poem and the actual content and form of the original poem. If the distance is too close and straight forward, readers don't have space for imagination and participation. If it is too far, the reader's "horizon of expectations" will not be fulfilled. Therefore, the translator must master a proper degree between retaining the implicit poetic beauty of the original poem and making the translation readable: It should not only reserve enough aesthetic space for the target language readers, but also give full play to the translator's aesthetic creativity to fully express the artistic conception that is closest to the original text, so that the emotional resonance and aesthetic experience of the target text readers can be closest to that of the original text readers.

2.1 To Leave Enough Aesthetic Space for the Target Language Readers

Chinese classical poetry pays great attention to the beauty of refinement and implication. In the process of translation, over-interpretation and flexible translation tend to block the realization of artistic beauty. Therefore, there should be a blank space in the translation of classical poems, so as to reserve enough aesthetic space for the target language readers, so that the readers can concretized the “indeterminacy” in the text in the process of reading, and realize the artistic conception in the translation.

Case 1:

回乐烽前沙似雪，受降城外月如霜。
不知何处吹芦管，一夜征人尽望乡。
(李益《夜上受降城闻笛》)

Version:

The sand below the border-mountain lies like snow,
And the moon like frost beyond the city-wall,
And someone somewhere, playing a flute,
Has made the soldiers homesick all night long. (Bynner, 1929)

In the first two sentences of this poem, a desolate night on the frontier is unfolded before the eyes of readers. The poet uses the image of “moon”. The moon in his hometown is a border moon, but the scene is not the scene in his hometown. The translator retains the two static similes in the original poem, and also creates the atmosphere of homesickness in the desert. The third sentence in the original poem arouses the readers’ auditory experience, which makes people think that in the profound silence, the night wind sends the sound of reeds whining, which is the embodiment of the second level of artistic beauty: the environment is born outside the image. The translator faithfully translates this dynamic flute sound, while also using the blank space to give the reader the imagination of “what flute sound is like”. Compared with the original poem, the fourth sentence of the original poem is about the reeds affecting people’s desire to return to their hometown, not to be homesick, not to be hopeful, but to show their psychology through the characters’ modality, revealing the meaning beyond the words and reflecting the third level of artistic beauty. But Bynner’s translation points out “homesick”, which translates the implicit beauty of Chinese poetry into a bit straight forward. However, it is more appropriate to keep “indeterminacy” of the original poem. The last sentence should be translated to “Has made the soldiers stare towards hometowns all night long”. Such treatment does not affect readers’ understanding of “homesick” in parallel, but it is closer to the artistic conception of the original poem and has endless aftertaste.

Case 2:

月落乌啼霜满天，江枫渔火对愁眠。
(张继《枫桥夜泊》)

Version 1:

While I watch the moon go down, across caws through the frost;
Under the shadows of maple-trees a fisherman moves with his torch. (Bynner, 1929)

Version 2:

The setting moon, a cawing crow, the frost filled the sky;
River maples, fisherman flares, and troubled sleep. (Zhang & Wilson, 1991)

The first two sentences in Zhang Ji's famous poem *Night Anchorage at Maple Bridge* are full of images: the falling moon, the wailing crow, frost all over the air, maple along the riverside, lights from fishing boats and sleepless traveler, which create a kind of aesthetic situation with rich connotation. The first quarter moon rises early, and by midnight it has sunk, leaving only a grey shadow in the sky. The crow on the tree wakes up and caws because of the change of light and shade before and after moonset. Deep night, the frost congeals. In the dark and quiet environment, the person becomes particularly acute to the feeling of night cool. The description of "frost all over the air" doesn't correspond to the reality of the landscape, for the frost is on the ground but not air, while it perfectly suits to the poet's feeling of the bitter cold of the night and makes him feel that the night air is filled with frost outside him. The whole sentence arouses the reader's infinite imagination. The second sentence of the poem goes on to describe the characteristic scene of "night mooring at Maple Bridge" and the feelings of travelers. In the dim light of night, the trees beside the river can only be seen as a vague outline. And through the fog of the river, there are a few spots of "fishing lights". Because of the dim and misty surrounding, the scene is particularly striking and fascinating. "Maple along the riverside" and "lights from fishing boats", a quiet movement versus a dark a bright, along the river versus on the river, the sceneries mix in a proper way. Then the poet points out the travelers. "Sleepless" refers to a traveler who lies on a ship with sadness. This sentence combines the sad thoughts of travelers with the scenery, implying the poet's own thoughts of travel, worries about home and country, and worries that there is no home to return to in troubled times. Although Bynner's translation is fluent and more in line with the common English grammar, it loses the charm of the poem and fails to reflect the artistic beauty of the original poem. The latter adopts the method of translating various images, leaving the reader with sufficient imagination space and retaining the "indeterminacy" of the original text, which is closer to the original poem in structure and perfectly reproducing the artistic conception of the original poem at the same time.

2.2 To Give Full Play to the Translator's Aesthetic Creativity

Artistic conception is the feeling and scene attached to poetry. Apart from the scene, the feeling is not attached to the situation, while apart from the feeling, the scene can only become an empty shell. Only when the translator gives full play to his aesthetic creativity, grasps the "horizon of expectation" of the target readers, makes the poem true and passionate, and retains the implicit effect for the readers to chew, can he truly convey the artistic conception and beauty contained in the original poem.

Case 3:

移舟泊烟渚，
日暮客愁新。
野旷天低树，
江清月近人。
(孟浩然《宿建德江》)

Version 1:

I guide boat to mooring by a missy islet,
 With the setting sun, a travelers' sorrows revive.
 Wilds so vast, the sky stoops to the trees;
 Theriver so clear, moon close to man. (Kroll, 1981)

Version 2:

Our house boat is moored at a misty islet,
 Evening adds more to a traveler's plight.
 In the wilds, trees are seen as above the skies.
 On clearwaters, the moon seems nearer in our sight. (Xu, 1990)

The poet remembers the past things when the boat is moored by the misty river, so he takes the scene as his end-result to express his feelings, and writes his sentiment of missing of travel. The first two lines of this poem are emotional scenes, while the second two are lyrical scenes borrowed from the scenery. Both of them describe the fresh autumn night and highlight the subtle features of scenery. The whole poem is connotative and quite characteristic. By comparing the two translations, it can be seen that Paul Kroll's translation of the first three lines conveys a sense of movement, while Xu zhongjie's translation is only a static description. As in the second line, Xu's translation "Evening Adds more to a traveler's Plight" does not reproduce the process of the time and the psychological changes of the characters depicted in the original poem. Paul Kroll's "with" adverbial clause accurately recreates the dynamic process of this psychological change. In the fourth row, Xu's translation "On the clear waters, the moon seems nearer in our sight, the nearer" can only express space distance. Paul Kroll translated into "The river, so clear, the moon close to man". The word "close" refers not only to close about the space distance, and refers to the spiritual, conveys the deep meaning of the word "近" in the original poem. And Xu's translation "are seen as above" and "seems nearer in our sight" explicit the implied of the original poem, it is hard to leave the reader with space to imagine. In general, Paul Kroll's translation successfully reproduced the implicit artistic style of the original text, satisfied readers' "horizon of expectation" and conveyed the artistic beauty contained in the original poem (He, 2007).

Case 4:

空山不见人，
 但闻人语响。
 返景入深林，
 复照青苔上。
 （王维《鹿柴》）

Version:

Empty the hills, no man in sight,
 Yet voices echo here;
 Deep in the woods slanting sunlight
 Falls on the jade-green moss. (Xu, 2006)

This poem of Wang Wei mainly contains four images: “man”, “voice”, “woods” and “moss”. This poem creates a deep and bright symbolic realm, showing the author’s enlightenment during the deep meditation process. Although there is buddhist mood in the poem, it does not resort to argumentation, but permeates in the vivid description of the natural scenery. The artistic conception of this poem is very charming. “山” is modified by “空” in the original to describe the quiet artistic conception. In the translation, “empty” is converted into a verb to emphasize the emptiness and quietness of the hills, which is the center of the poem. “人语响” is translated into “echo” to emphasize the solitude and depth of the valley. The woods and moss that appear in the last two verses are found only in the most remote valleys. In translation, the translator retains the image of the culture accepted and recognized by both the source language and target language, which satisfies the reader’s “horizon of expectation” and thus achieves the true reproduction of the artistic conception.

Case 5:

春蚕到死丝方尽，
蜡炬成灰泪始干。
(李商隐《无题》)

Version:

The silkworm till its death spins silk from lovesick heart,
The candle but when burnt up has no tears to shed. (Xu, 2003)

The reason why these two lines of Li Shangyin have become famous lines that have been read through the ages is that the author uses pun rhetoric to convey rich and profound meaning in the concise images, which has aroused readers’ imagination. The word “丝” refers to both silk and the poet’s lovesickness. The word “泪” refers to both candlestick tears and sentimental tears. Xu Yuanchong’s translation tries his best to keep all the communicative clues in the original text and reproduce the implication of the deep structure of the original text. This version translated “丝” into “silk” and “思” into “lovesick”. Silk and lovesick not only have the same meaning as the original text, but also have the same sound, ingeniously realizing the best connection of the deep meaning of the original text and the target text, satisfying the reader’s “horizon of expectation” and thus reproducing the artistic conception of the original poem.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, in the perspective of receptive aesthetics, well handling cultural factors and accurately conveying the “indeterminacy” are the keys to reproduce the artistic conception of Chinese classical poetry successfully when translated it into English. To do this, translator should firstly fully understand the meaning of the original poem, then carefully consider the “indeterminacy” of the original poem, give full play to the translator’s aesthetic creativity, and give a reasonable explanation, as well as retain enough imagination space for target language readers, so that to meet the “horizon of expectation” of the target readers and to fully reproduce the artistic conception beauty of the original poem.

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