Literature Review on Translating Classical Chinese Poetry into English

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Abstract: In recent years, there seems to be a new boom in translating Chinese classical poetry into English. Many scholars find that the most difficult task in such translation work is translating Chinese classical imagery. This article will review some ongoing debates in the said issue by evaluating related sources and provide basic background knowledge on translating Classical Chinese poetry.

Keywords: Chinese poetry; Classical poetry; Imagery; Translation; English

1. Introduction

The current trend of translating classical Chinese poetry mainly focuses on delivering the meaning of the poem to the readers. Heated debate about different translation strategies and methods is ongoing. While most scholars support the semantic equivalence principle, other sources bring up new theories. Semantic equivalence is a translation principle popularized by Nida. It means that translators should find the proper equivalence in the target language based on a shared extended meaning of both the target and the source language. The scholars generally agree on the idea that the most difficult task in producing a good translation of Chinese classical poetry is to deal with the literary imagery and the traditional Chinese cultural symbolism. In this article, the content and the logic pattern of each source will be discussed via comparison and contrast in order to suggest a better approach to review the sources on this particular issue.

2. Challenges in Translating Chinese Classical Poetry

It is generally accepted by the Chinese scholars that translation is a process of cross-cultural communication and the perfect translation of Chinese classical poetry does not exist due to the huge gap between the Chinese culture and the cultures of English-speaking countries. Hongwei Ye, Lei Zhang and Xia Chen all attach great significance to the issue of Chinese classical literary imagery and cultural background while Xuelai Qiu suggests the similar idea by saying that the traditional Chinese language has distinctive features and requires compensation of cultural background knowledge to fully appreciate the poem.

Ye, Zhang and Qiu also believe that the main challenge of producing a good translation of Chinese classical poetry is to address the semantic issue. In Zhang's work, the challenge of literary imagery translation is demonstrated theoretically by explaining that the Classical Chinese poetry's essence is developed through the use of "意" (emotion, feeling) and "象" (scene). However, Zhang fails to provide inefficient translations as evidences to illustrate how difficult the challenge is. Ye and Qiu give thorough evidences by providing case studies of translation failures to support the same idea in term of the challenge. For instance, in Ezra Pound's translation work "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance", Qiu points out that Pound mistranslated a particular Chinese literal imagery "玉阶" (jade stairs) as jewel stairs and completely ignored its implied meaning. "玉阶" is often used by ancient Chinese poets to imply that the poem is set in an imperial palace and the protagonist is likely to be a court maid. Thus by mistranslating this important literary imagery, Pound has failed in conveying the original meaning and the beauty of this poem to the readers. Another example can be found in Ye's article where Ye uses "蛾眉" (brow which is drawn to be in the shape of a moth, often indicates a beautiful lady) to demonstrate the difficulty of literary imagery translation. On the other hand, Chen opines that the challenge is composed by three equal elements: literary imagery, the music and the form.

3. Reasonable Translation Strategies and Evaluation

Scholars have not reached a consensus on the proper method of translating literary imagery. Zhang and Qiu support Nida's domestication strategy on achieving semantic equivalence with various specific methods. In Zhang's work, literary imagery can be categorized into three kinds. The first kind are the ones that can trigger similar emotions for both the Chinese readers and the English readers. For instance, "月" (the moon) expresses the same melancholy feelings in both the Chinese poem "枫桥夜泊 (A Night Berth at Maple Bridge)" and the English poem "To the Moon" by Shelley. Zhang opines that this kind of

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literal imagery can be translated literally in order to preserve the original taste. Certain literary imagery, when translated literally, can not provoke the same feelings from the English readers' hearts but also does not cause confusion in cross-cultural communication. Such literary imagery belongs to the second category which can be translated properly by using an equivalence in the target language that has a similar implied meaning. For example, translating "辽西" (ancient China's borderland and battleground) as frontier in "春怨 (a complaint spring)" to show that the wife is missing and worrying about her husband who fights in the war of "辽西". The last group is literary imagery that should be omitted in the translation due to the complete absence of its semantic equivalence in English. Zhang takes "藁砧" (farming tools which only existed in ancient China) as an example to illustrate this point. Compared to Zhang's abundant evidences, Qiu only uses one case study to suggest that the translation of Chinese classical poetry requires compensation on cultural background knowledge to help the English readers fully understanding the poems.

On the other hand, Ye supports Venuti's foreignization strategy. Venuti opposes Nida's domestication principle because it distinguishes all the cultural elements in the source language for the sake of fluency and "an illusion of transparent translation". Ye then suggests three possible solutions to translate the literary imagery in the Chinese classical poetry based on the foreignization principle. The first method is literal translation, for instance, translating "蛾眉" as "moth eyebrows" in order to preserve the beautiful metaphor in the Chinese language, to present a new phrase to the English language and to provoke the English readers' enthusiasm for the Chinese classical culture. Ye also believes when literal translation is not sufficient enough to pass on the extended meaning or the allusion of the Chinese classical philosophy, "contextual explanation" is in need. "The butterfly of Zhuang Zi" is used as an example to demonstrate Ye's idea. The last solution is transliteration, here Ye also discusses about the translation of "辽西" and says that the proper translation should be Liaoxi, the sound of the word rather than the meaning of the word: frontier as in Zhang's work. Ye suggests by doing so, the sound of the word can attract English readers to learn more about the Chinese history. At the end of Ye's work, the idea of combining foreignization and domestication principle is vaguely discussed without any evidence to support the said idea.

On the contrary to the other three sources, Chen believes that the semantic equivalence principle can not help producing good translation of Chinese classical poetry due to the huge differences between Chinese poetry and English poetry on the aspects of literary imagery, music and format. In addition, Chen opposes the idea that the most important element in the Chinese classical poetry translation is its semantic aspect by suggesting that the content and the form of the poem can not exist without each other. Chen brings up a new theory called "mirror-shared reality" which demands the creation of a shared reality where the Chinese poets, the translators and the English readers can understand each other. This theory requires the translator to be creative and to establish a bridged reality before translating the source language into the target language. Chen then discusses how to apply such a theory to address the translation challenges on the literal imagery, the rhythm and rhyme and the format. In the first part concerning the literal imagery and cultural symbolism, Chen takes "杨柳" (willow, its sound is similar to "留" or "stay" in the Chinese language, thus "杨柳" implies the feeling of unwilling to depart in the traditional Chinese culture) for an instance. Chen greatly appreciates the translation of "采薇" done by Xu, in which Xu paraphrasing "杨柳" as "willows shed tears" to express the implied emotion of this poem. In the other two aspects, the musical beauty and the format of Chinese classical poetry translation, Chen follows the similar logic pattern as shown in the first part. The many inappropriate translation cases presented by Chen are of different translators from both China and English speaking countries. However, Chen only provides one successful case in each aspect and the translator is always Xu. Chen's sources are relatively biased and inefficient to illustrate the pioneering and abstract translation theory of "mirror-shared reality".

4. Conclusion

Translating Chinese classical poetry into English is never an easy task. Although the scholars acknowledge the difficulties in translating literal imagery and cultural symbolism, the debate of translation strategies has not been brought to an end. The current main stream theory is semantic equivalence principle which can be applied by translators from both the domestication and foreignization school. In addition, new ideas and solutions are forming. In future studies, foreign scholars' views need to be included in the discussion in order to achieve a better cross-cultural communication in the Chinese Classical poetry translation field.

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