The Reservation of Images in Translation of Chinese Ancient Poems

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Keywords: Image, Translation, Classical Chinese Poetry.

Abstract. Classical Chinese poetry, the very important part of Chinese literature, is cherished as our cultural heritage with its unique charm. Images in Chinese ancient poems play an important role in poetic creation. The charm of poetry is attributable to the adoption of rich images.

Introduction

Image as one of the most important categories in classical Chinese poetics has become a constant subject of research in recent years. Critics and translators in particular have attached primacy to image, which is widely cited as a key component of poem. Being a trans-disciplinary concept, image arouses interest from researchers in the field of philosophy, aesthetics, psychology and literature.

Poetry is a most condensed and compact literary form. Poetic language’s highly figurative and expressive power lies not only in its ideas, but also in its concrete and vivid images, particularly in the creation of the classical Chinese poetry. It is generally agreed that a good poet will not express his emotions directly, but rather he fuses his feelings into the exterior objects. Therefore the classical Chinese poets made extensive and flexible use of images in their poetic creation. The classical Chinese poetry is thus marked by its distinctive features of suggestiveness, vagueness and simplicity presented in deliberately chosen images. However, image which constitutes the core to the creation and serves as a key to the appreciation of the classical Chinese poetry, also poses great obstacle to its translation.

Arthur Waley says that image is the soul of poetry. Angus C. Graham (1988) asserts that the translation of imagery is fundamental since it is the essence of poetry. He says that “The element in poetry which travels best is of course concrete imagery” and “the essence of poetry is the image.” Seeing that the connotations of some images are not always universal, a possible corollary of the relocation of images is transformation and re-creation.

The Definition of Image

Imagery is the product of imagination. The term, as one of the most common in modern criticism and one of the most general and variable in meaning, covers verbal, and non-verbal description or representation of objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind, and any sensory and extra-sensory experience. More specifically, imagery signifies the collective body of images, or images taken collectively; all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in the poem; the formation and presentation of images.

This definition is quoted from Appreciation of English and American Literature Essay & Poetry. In this definition, there are two counterparts for the Chinese word “意象”; “Imagery” is a collective noun, designated as the collective body of images or images in general; “image” is a simple noun, designated as the constitute part of imagery.
Current Poem Translation Styles

According current poems translation styles, Chinese poetry translation can be grouped into classical style, free style and creative style.

Classical style stress on special attention to the meter and rhyme scheme. As John Turner puts it, “My intention is to make the translation of a poem read like a poem itself”. Herbert A. Giles maintained that verse should be turned into verse and that rhyme is requisite for translating rhymed originals.

Free style is characterized as translating poems in the form of free verse. Arthur Waley and Witter Bynner maintain that sticking to the meter and rhyme constraint will impair the meaning reproduction. They attach more importance to the transmission of the real meaning and spirit.

Creative style may possibly get the inspiration of the poem and display the charm of the poem, but the translation is too free to express the original meaning of the poem. A translator tends to locate himself in the imagination of the real situation where the poem lied to feel what the poet feels.

Comment on the Reservation of Images in the Poem of <月夜>

Chinese poetry is best known for the rich and colorful images embodied in it. “Poets are the poets of reflection, preoccupied with patient beauties and subtle relationships of simple things.”

The ever-lasting charm of Chinese poetry often lies in its internal beauty aroused by images. All the images in those short verses try to show a vivid picture before the readers’ eyes.

In Chinese ancient times, poetry is a way for the intellectuals to express their ideals and political pursuits. Xu Yuanchong points out that English poets are interested in the inner world of the persona and Chinese poets in the outer world through which the inner world of the persona is revealed. So the images adopted by the Chinese poets not only unveils a vivid picture before people’s eyes, but also serve as a channel to express the poets’ emotions buried in their hearts’ depth. Now we have understood the importance of proper image transfer when translating Chinese poetry into English.

As what have mentioned before, images carry the beauty and the poet’s deep felt meditations. So every image has its reason to be used there and the best way for translators to retain the original beauty and profound meaning is to reserve these images.

I would like to choose a translation version of Chinese ancient poem Moon Night (月夜) by Du Fu and give some comments.

月夜
今夜鄜州月，闺中只独看。遥怜小儿女，未解忆长安。
香雾云鬟湿，清辉玉臂寒。何时倚虚幌，双照泪痕干。

Moon Night
This night at Fuchow there will be moon light and there she will be gazing into it,
今夜鄜州月，闺中只独看。
With the children already gone to sleep, not even in their dreams and innocence thinking of their father at Chang ‘an;
遥怜小儿女，未解忆长安。
Her black hair must be wet with the dew of this autumn night, and her white Jade arms, chilly with the cold;
香雾云鬟湿，清辉玉臂寒。
When, oh when, shall we be together again standing side by side at the window; Looking at the moon light with dried eyes.
何时倚虚幌，双照泪痕干。

By Rewi Alley

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This poem was created in autumn in the year of 756 when Du Fu with his family tried to avoid the rebellion war started by An Lushan. After he left his family in the county of Fuchow, he was captured by the rebellious army and detained in Chang’an. It happened to be autumn, which was regarded the exact time for unity of a family as the round moon in calendar according to Chinese traditional culture. Now is celebrated as Mid-Autumn Day in most of Chinese cultural areas. The deep sad feeling of missing his family and uncertainty for the safety of his family contributed to his inspiration of this poem.

From the poem, Du Fu imagined his wife sitting in the empty house and missing her husband with the innocent children unknowing what happened to their father.

“月” here refers to the moon and “闺中” is a synonym of his wife. “独看” means gazing lonely possibly because her children were sleeping. “未解” means his children were be of innocence of their father's situation. “香雾” is a imagination of missing his wife’s flavor which enhanced the sad atmosphere. “云鬟” refers his wife’s long, black hair. “湿” is wet which hints us that because of missing her husband, his wife was sleepless for the whole night so the autumn humid morning put the dew on his wife’s hair. “清” in ancient Chinese poems often suggests a feeling of sadness and oneliness.

“清辉” especially refers to the sad moonlight. “虚幌” refers to curtains of the window. “双照” refers to gazing each other which is corresponding to “独看”. This shows the author’s strong desire to be reunion with his family.

Rewi Alley’s translation reserved most of images appearing in Du Fu’s Moon Night. He succeeded locating himself in the imaginative situation as Du Fu did and fully expressed the sadness and loneliness and strong sense of missing for his family. Du Fu literally wrote out the imagination of his wife ‘situation but in fact this even displayed his love and mood for his family in that disturbing society.

Conclusion

To reserve the unique beauty of Chinese poetry, the reservation of images is for certain an essential practice in image transfer. Of course, the reservation of images depends on the understandability of the target readers. If there lies no barrier for the foreign readers to understand the images properly, we’d better keep these images in the translations.

References