The Aesthetic Transference of Images in Translating Xu Zhimo’s Poems

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Abstract. Image and its aesthetic value are possibly translated due to the common recognition in human’s affective world. The author argues some translation strategies of images with the case of Xu’s poems including conversion of form and rhyme, dynamic-static substitution and domestication. It is thus concluded that the understanding of original images and artistic conception is the key factor in poetry translation; translators should do their utmost to interpret the symbolic use of images so as to transfer and reproduce the aesthetic beauty of original artistic conception.

1. Introduction

Xu Zhimo wrote down a number of poems full of images, recognized as the sparkling valuable treasure among Chinese modern poetry. His poems covered a variety of vivid images, including descriptive images, figurative images and symbolic images which combined the beauty of Chinese and Western cultures. The author thus would like to manifest the beauty of Xu Zhimo’s Poems by finding out the appropriate translating strategies based upon the accurate aesthetic awareness of the original images.

The research on the translation of Xu Zhimo’s poems mainly exists in the anthologies of modern Chinese poetry. The preliminary studies were mostly conducted by Harold Acton and Ch’en Shi-hsiang in 1936 in the United States. Acton indicated that it was quite tough to translate the cultural images yet translators can add annotations to explain the specific meaning plus transliterating at the cost of attention diversion. Later, more translators have attempted to translate Xu’s poems including Michelle Yeh (1992), who studied the peculiarity of modern Chinese poetry from the perspective of image, metaphor, form and sound. In 2013, Skerratt Brian Phillips from Harvard stated the poetic obscurity and put forward some alternative approaches to the question of untranslatability.

Wang Fang (2009) stated in her paper that Yuan Kejia believed that translator should retain the style of translated works, even though it may result in a loss of original form of poetry. In modern Chinese translatology, “Translation on aesthetics” as a research subject has sprung up at the end of 20th century. Xu Yuanchong published his work The Art of Translation in 2006, on the emphasis of three beauties in translating poems.

According to the latest data analysis of CNKI, since 2010, much attention has been paid to the research on the translation of modern Chinese poetry, especially on Xu Zhimo’s poems, such as Li Defeng’s The English Translations of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Poetry 1935-2011: A Review (2013), Chen Liming’s The Translation and Writing of Modern Chinese Poetry: A Case Study of Xu Zhimo (2017), Interactive Production in Xu Zhimo’s Poetic Writing and Translation (Chen and Ma, 2018). However, few researchers have touched upon the transference of images aesthetically and specifically with the case of Xu’s Poems.

2. Image in Poetry and Xu’s Poems

2.1 Image in Poetry

Image is a carrier of splendid civilizations accumulated by series of generations. Ezra Pound (1951) an American poet, defined it as “presenting an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”. Thus the image is not a self-existent object, but an aesthetic one integrated into poet’s emotions. The poets hide their emotions into objects, with which they can express their own
delight, anger, sorrow and so on. The beauty of image derives from its artistic characteristics—symbolism and the integration of emotion and scene. Artistic conception is the integrated representation of image combination; the beauty of artistic conception is the beauty of artistic image combination.

In a certain cultural background, the symbolic meaning of an image is definite. For example, in Chinese poetry, “willow” refers to “farewell”; “wild goose” for “nostalgia”; and “xiaoxiao” (sound of rain) for loneliness and melancholy. While in western culture, there were various images in the sonnet of Renaissance, such as “garden” symbolizes the spiritual home, “sickle” for the relentless time and “phoenix” for the eternity of life. In poetry, such a spiritual world produced by the combination of images is the artistic conception that can strike a responsive chord in the hearts of readers.

2.2 Images in Xu’s Poems

Decorated with emotions and colors, Xu’s poems demonstrate the romantic feelings of the idealized world. The images in Xu’s poems mostly are soft and gentle. In his inner heart, by contrast, is lying a rich world filled with his desire for the freedom of life and the pursuit of ideal. From the perspective of expressive function, images in Xu's poetry can be classified as descriptive image, figurative image and symbolic image.

Descriptive images mostly are nature images, such as flowers, birds, insects, wind, rain, moon and stars, which best accounts for Xu’s deep affection towards the nature. Figurative images use a highly aesthetic metaphor to strengthen the effects of expression. Those simple images which are meticulously selected serve artistic conception and render the proper emotion. For example, “井底莲”(twin lotus) is used to describe the sleeping posture of a girl. Thirdly, symbolic images in Xu’s Poems mainly consist of Xu Zhimo himself who used the symbolic imagery to express his own thoughts and feelings. For example, “星辉斑斓”(shining stars) symbolizes the dream that the poet has pursued. The awareness and comprehension of the images in Xu’s poem would pave the way for tackling the translation of theirs.

3. Strategies in Translation Images in Xu’s Poems

3.1 Conversion of Form and Rhyme

Rhyme is a means to add on the aesthetics of poem and with which the poetry can differentiate from other literary works. Despite the non-equivalence in the aspect of rhetorical devices, rhyming or alternating short-long sentences can be used to compensate for the effects of special form in Chinese poems. The similar sound and visual effects of images can thereby be achieved by the conversion of form and rhyme.

Example 1: 跟着我来，我的恋爱
Trans: Come with me, my beloved

The original verses have the same number of words. In order to pursue the aesthetic rhyme, “Beloved” is used to maintain an equal foot in the same line. If translating “恋爱”into “love” or “romance” according to the original form, we must feel hard to experience the sense of rhythm and beauty.

3.2 Dynamic-Static Substitution

In the translation field, dynamic-static substitution describes the inter-conversion between dynamic and static language. Dynamic state is used more in Chinese, while English prefers static state. Therefore, changing the dynamic state into the static state is more adaptable in the process of Chinese-English poem translation.

Example 2: 顺着我的指头看
Trans: In the distance where I point

“看” literally means “look” and it is a dynamic verb. But there isn’t any specific verb that can
best display the action of “look” in the translation. Instead, the translator adopted prepositional phrase “in the distance”, a static expression to help the readers open up the view. The picture that the verse describes accordingly gives the readers the feeling of stretching without losing its original dynamic beauty, which inspires the readers’ imagination about the poet’s inner ideal world. As a result, the original aesthetic beauty has been optimized to transfer from the source text to the target text.

3.3 Domestication

Social cultural background is related closely to the symbolic implications. Same comparison may produce different implication in English and Chinese language, thereby resulting in the difference in its extended meaning. Due to the limit of generic structure, poetry translation is suggested to base upon domestication in that foreignization with the addition of explanation or annotation can possibly eclipse the beauty of original artistic conception.

Example 3: 我又飞吻给银河边的星

Trans: I kissed the star on the Silver river

In Xu’s poem Worship, there is a culture image “银河”, which means “galaxy” or “Milky Way” in the astronomy field. Both derived from the ancient Greek mythology in which a legend describes it as a smear of milk created when the baby Herakles suckled from the goddess Hera. In Paradise Lost, Milton compared the road that Adam walked on when visiting God as the Milky Way where existed dusk and stones. Therefore, the “Milky Way” symbolizes “road” in English culture, while in Chinese traditional culture, “银河” represents the river in the heaven. Thus, if translated either way, it is not appropriate so that the sense of beauty is lost.

4. Aesthetic Transference of Image

4.1 Static Beauty

Undoubtedly the successful translation of the nature images is a key point to demonstrate the beauty of painting in Xu's poems which directly connected to the aesthetic transference of artistic conception. Take Xu’s most famous poem Second Farewell to Cambridge as an example:

Example 4: 波光

Trans: sparkling water

In Chinese, the image “波光” literally means the light reflected by water so that it is able to bring readers a visual stimuli. Since there is no exact equivalent in English, adding the modifier to explain would be a possible compensation for the sense of beauty. According to the Oxford Dictionary, “sparkling” means shining and flashing light. It seems that readers can see the shining ripples woven by the flowing water through “sparkling water”. It leaves readers a visual aesthetics to create a quiet and filmy artistic conception.

Example 5: 白茫茫的大海/白茫茫的大海

Trans: The white sea/The shining sea

“白茫茫” describes the color of spray. Two different adjectives to modify the same image are to extend the space into a multiple layering scene because people usually observe the color of objects earlier than receive visual stimuli. “The white sea” and “the shining sea” highlight the vast of the sea and express poet’s strong desire for boundless freedom, so that the static beauty is well achieved.

4.2 Dynamic Beauty

Poetry is an art in which even and oblique tones can create the beauty of sound. Poets fancy applying several continuous dynamic images to express strong feeling, which is the reason why poems have the beauty of rhythm. A Snowflake’s Delight is a typical one that has the beauty of sound due to its repeated dynamic images.

Example 6: 飞扬，飞扬，飞扬，—— 消溶，消溶，消溶——
“飞”， as a dynamic image, is used as verbs or adjectives in grammar. It is a simple word in Chinese but the grand one, with which Xu builds a vivid artistic conception to reflect the romantic inner world and the desire for freedom and happiness. “飞扬，飞扬，飞扬” figures out a steadfast soul. Above translation maintains the original structure and the repeated images retain, too. Due to its special expressive effect, the repeated images in poems cannot be omitted casually, or else the effects of rhythm sensation in original poem could be considerably shortened.

**Example 7:** 披散你的头发/赤露你的一双脚
**Trans:** Let your hair down/Kick off your shoes

“披散” and “赤露” are two dynamic images and it is difficult to retain the original corresponding sentence pattern. However, it tends to adjust the order of words so as to satisfy the criteria of dynamic equivalence and ensure the meaning coherence. “kick off” is highly capable of creating mental pictures, which changes the static description into dynamic association so that the poet’s feeling of breaking through the constraint and being a free man has been properly demonstrated.

5. **Conclusion**

The soul of Xu’s poems evolves from the varieties of images, which add the tremendous difficulty to the English translation. In order to reproduce the beauty of images in his poems to the maximum extent, the translators should embrace the good understanding and respect of the original image and poet’s emotions, including covering the complete message, proper word diction, and reasonable structure. After analyzing some images translation in Xu’s poems, we conclude some translation strategies in aesthetic transference such as conversion of form and rhyme, dynamic-static substitution and domestication. With the exquisite skills involved, the translators would absolutely transfer and reproduce the static and dynamic beauty of artistic conception in poetry translation.

**References**


