

# On Untranslatability of Phonological Beauty of Chinese Ancient Poetry

Yujun Li

School of Languages and Literature, University of South China, Hengyang 421001, China

## Abstract

The beauty of phonology is an important aesthetic feature of Chinese ancient poetry. When translating ancient poems, we must first understand how to appreciate the beauty of phonology of poetry. This thesis starts with the level and oblique tones of Chinese characters, and analyzes how ancient poetry realizes the harmony of sound and rhyme, thus forming the unique phonological beauty of Chinese ancient poetry. In view of the huge gap between Chinese and Western languages, no matter what translation strategy the translator uses, the phonological beauty of Chinese ancient poetry cannot be perfectly translated by another language.

## Keywords

Chinese ancient poetry; phonological beauty; untranslatability.

## 1. Introduction

Each Chinese character has its own individual syllable and tone, which gives Chinese a sense of rhythm and natural poetry. Chinese ancient poems are mostly created by poets based on the tones and rhythms of Chinese characters. The famous Chinese scholar Zhu Guangqian once said in his book "On Poetry": "Rhythm is like a thread of pearls, and this thread is especially indispensable to ancient Chinese poetry [1]." In addition to the beauty of artistic conception and thought, the more important thing of a poem is the beauty of rhythm. But can the phonological beauty of ancient Chinese poems be reproduced through translation? The famous British romantic poet Shelley believed that "translating a poem is futile. Translating a poem from one language to another like throwing a bunch of violets into a crucible and trying to appreciate their original tones and fragrance is really unwise." The translation of ancient Chinese poems is the same. The rhyme of translated poems is like putting violets in a crucible, and the beauty is greatly compromised.

## 2. Construction of Phonological Beauty of Ancient Chinese Poems

Lu Xun said in the "Compendium of the History of Chinese Literature: From Literature to Articles": As for Chinese characters, "The first beauty of meaning is to feel the heart; the second beauty of sound is to sense the ears, the third beauty of form is to sense the eyes [2]." It can be seen that the beauty of phonology plays an important role in Chinese characters, and so does poetry. Poetry is a literary form that expresses ideas by means of rhyme. The fundamental feature that distinguishes poetry from other literary genres is the beauty of phonology. Rhythmic beauty is the soul of poetry. Metrical poetry is also the most beautiful literary form in poetry, so it pays more attention to the precision of rhythm. In Tang Dynasty, strict metrical poems were formed, requiring poems to have precise characters, level and oblique tones, antithesis, and rhyming [3]. Ancient poets used many poetry techniques, such as alliteration, ending rhyme, and repetitive words. Li Chonghua said: "The extensive use of alliteration and primal rhyme, such as the string of pearls, is pleasant and comfortable [4]." All of these create

the musical beauty of the Chinese language, making Tang poetry onomatopoeia and expressing a perfect blend.

### 3. Beauty of Phonology and Rhyme of Ancient Chinese Poems Disappearing in the Translation Process

Translation should be the re-creation process of the translator. When we see the translation, it must be the translator's own understanding and processing. The translation of Chinese ancient poems should be based on the premise that the translator is familiar with the beauty of phonology in ancient poems. Because only through the creation of the melody of the poem, can it be possible to deeply appreciate the beauty of music in the poem. It is a pity that creators who really know the phonology of poetry often do not translate poetry, and those who translate poetry may not really understand the creation of poetry melody. If the translator himself does not have a deep understanding and grasp of the phonological beauty of poetry, the resulting poems are basically the same as modern free-form poetry in terms of form. In the following, we will analyze whether the phonological beauty of poetry can be perfectly presented in the translation process with examples, mainly taking metrical poetry as an example:

Example 1:

春望  
(唐) 杜甫  
国破山河在，城春草木深。  
感时花溅泪，恨别鸟惊心。  
烽火连三月，家书抵万金。  
白头搔更短，浑欲不胜簪。

#### Musing in Spring

Our motherland is gone, but mountains and rivers stay on.  
City in springtime is luxuriant with trees and grass.  
In poignancy petals get mingled with teardrops.  
My lamenting heart could easily be startled by passing birds.  
War beacons have been blazing for three unbroken months, and  
any note from home is worth thousands of gold pieces  
My gray hair is thinning from unnervingly rubbing,  
so much so that there isn't enough to hold a hairpin.  
(translated by Alexcwlin)

#### View in Spring

The state broken, its mountains and rivers remain,  
the city turns spring, deep with plants and trees.  
Stirred by the time, flowers, sprinkling tears,  
hating parting, birds, alarm the heart.  
Beacon fires stretch through three months,  
a letter from family worth ten thousand in silver.  
I've scratched my white hair even shorter,  
pretty much to the point where it won't hold a hatpin.  
(translated by Prof. Stephen Owen)

### A Spring View

On war -torn land streams flow and mountainsstand;  
 In vernal town grass and weeds are overgrown.  
 Grieved over the years, flowers make us shed tears;  
 Hating to part, hearing birds breaks our heart.  
 The beacon fire has gone higher and higher;  
 Words from household are worth their weight in gold.  
 I cannot bear to scratch my grizzled hair;  
 It grows too thin to hold a light hairpin.

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

This poem adopts the format of "平仄平平仄, 平平仄仄平, 平平平仄仄, 仄仄仄平平". In the same sentence of the original poem, the level and oblique tones of even-numbered words (second and fourth) of each sentence must be opposite. For example, the second word "破" in the first sentence is a oblique tone, and the fourth word "河" is a level tone; the first and two words "城春" in the second sentence are all level tones, and the two characters "草木" are all oblique tones. In the sentence pairs , the level and oblique tone of the words in the same position must also be opposite. For example, the first sentence is "仄仄平平仄", then its counterpart must be "平平仄仄平". Finally, the poem uses the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth lines in level rhyme. Because it follows these rules called five-character quatrains. Violating any of the above rules, it is no longer a metrical poem. Let's take a look at the three translations above: the translations of the three translators basically have no rhyming rules, or even no rhymes at all, and the phonological beauty of the original poem is gone. The arbitrariness of these translation is great, and the length of sentence is also different, and the rhyme is not followed by the rules of the metrical poetry. Talking about the translation of the sound beauty of poetry, Xu Yuanchong once said, "The time when the sound beauty and the sound seem to be contradictory far exceeds the time when they are consistent. That is to say, the sound beauty of the original text is often unable to be conveyed. Generally speaking, Generally speaking, it is difficult to require the translation to be similar or sound like the original text [5]." However, judging from the above translations, in the translation of phonological beauty, there is no similarity. The reason may be as Mr. Weng Xianliang said: "All languages have musicality, and all literary works pay attention to tones, especially poetry. However, different languages have different tones. Poets follow the sounds of their native languages. To achieve the best artistic effect, make sure that the voice's clarity, tone, intonation, and rhythm change with changes in thoughts and feelings, so as to achieve the best artistic effect. When translated into another language, although words can sometimes correspond to each other and the meaning is basically the same, the sound is completely different [6]." The phonological beauty of Chinese metrical poems is completely dependent on the level,rising,departing and entering tones , but there is no such difference in tones in Western languages. In view of the huge differences in language and phonetic expression systems, it is impossible to translate metrical poems without losing the beauty of phonology, rhyme and phonology.

### Example 2

#### 江雪

(唐) 柳宗元

千山鸟飞绝，万径人踪灭。  
 孤舟蓑笠翁，独钓寒江雪。

The rhyming characters of this poem are "绝", "灭" and "雪". The first sentence of the five-character quatrain in this poem is rhymed. According to the metric requirements of the modern poem, its poetic metric should be "平平仄仄平,仄仄仄平平. 仄仄平平仄,平平仄仄平." But the rhyming characters in this poem are not even tones. From this point of view, Liu Zongyuan's "Jiang Xue" greatly violated the laws that literati must abide by when writing poems. Why is this? Liu Zongyuan is a firm Confucian scholar who cares about the suffering of the people, is upright and brave, and has a skeptical spirit. When composing the poem "Jiang Xue", he boldly used the departing tones as the rhyme of the poem, so as to express the desolation, loneliness and hope in his heart. However, due to the differences between Chinese and Western languages, this artistic technique of phonology in Chinese cannot be reflected in the English translation process.

### River Snow

A hundred mountains and no bird,  
A thousand paths without a footprint;  
A little boat, a bamboo cloak,  
An old man fishing in the cold river-snow.

(translated by Witter Bynner)

### River Snow

From a thousand hills, bird flights have vanished;  
On ten thousand paths, human traces wiped out;  
Lone boat, an old man in straw cape and hat,  
Fishing alone in the cold river snow.

(translated by Burton Watson)

### Fishing in Snow

From hill to hill no bird in flight;  
From path to path no man in sight.  
A lonely fisherman afloat  
Is fishing snow in a lonely boat.

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

None of the first two translations can reflect the rhyme of ancient poems. The author believes that Xu's translation is significantly better than the first two translations in terms of clause length or rhyming. Nevertheless, the phonological beauty features of the Chinese metrical poem that we analyzed above, such as the same position of the even and oblique tones in the sentence pairs, which still cannot be expressed. At the same time, none of these three translations can dig into the deep emotions of the author. It seems that the impression given to Western readers is that Chinese metrical poetry is a very casual creation. In this way, because the translation is not in place, there is no way to show the original appearance of Chinese metrical poems to Westerners. On the contrary, through our unsuccessful translations, foreigners think that the metrical poems regarded by the Chinese as literary and artistic treasures and the pinnacle of poetry art are nothing more than this, and it is not worth mentioning. Are we self-defeating?

## 4. Conclusion

In summary, we can find that: 1. The words in a metrical poem are all rules (for example, in the same sentence, after the word "仄仄" must be "平平", and after "平平" must be "仄仄"). The beauty of the phonology in the sentence cannot be translated; 2. The sentences in a metrical poem are all rules (for example, the opposite sentence of "仄仄平平仄" must be "平平仄仄平"), and the beauty of phonology between sentences cannot be translated; 3. The rules of rhyme compilation in rhythmic poems and the emotions of the author behind the poem cannot be translated. Due to the huge differences between Chinese and Western languages, it is in fact impossible not completely to damage the beauty of metrical poetry in the process of translating metrical poems. That is to say, no matter what translation technique is used, whether it is free to translate poems, whether to translate poems with poems, whether it is domestication or foreignization, because the phonological beauty of Chinese metrical poetry is designed according to the phonetic characteristics of Chinese characters, so as long as it is separated from the Chinese characters, the translated works are not strictly Chinese metrical poems, at best they can only be regarded as free-form verses, and their translations cannot achieve functional matching with the original in terms of phonological beauty.

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