

A Review on the English Translation of *Shijing* from Chinese Poetic Culture Prospective

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Abstract

Shijing, the source of Chinese poetry culture, contains two different literary meanings, namely, political edification and metaphor for the social context in that time. Different cultural interpretations are mapped out according to these two meanings, marking their English translations with special characteristics. The most "faithful" James Legge opened the door to the study of *Shijing* in the English-speaking world for missionary purposes, allowing subsequent scholars to create their distinctive translations based on different cultural interpretations. The scholar William Jennings, who focused on the rhyme and rhetoric of the original text, brought out the rhythmic beauty of Chinese poetry skillfully. Clement F. R. Allen, who emphasized the narrative of the poem, likewise restored the essence of the original work. The most "creative" Sinologist Arthur Waley, the literary scholar Pound, whose translations met the demand of diverse English-speaking readers and contributed to the dissemination of Chinese literature and culture.

Keywords

Shijing; English translation; Chinese Poetic Culture.

1. Introduction

Shijing, the Book of Song, is the source of classical poetry in China and is honored as one of the canons of Confucianism. It is classified as popular songs, ballads (Feng, wind), courtly songs (Ya, elegant), or eulogies (Song, ode), with three types of "straightforward" (Fu, the genre of prose rhapsody during the Han period, which is a very descriptive and often didactic type of poem), "simile" (bi, parable), and "xing" (a holistic introduction of a poem). However, for western writers who express their feelings directly, translating such a hazy and obscure expression is a difficult task. The foreign translation of *Shijing* has been in progress for more than a century. From the missionary James Legge to the Sinologists Arthur Waley and Clement F. R. Allen, the literary scholar Ezra Pound, and finally, back to the Chinese translators, *Shijing* has traveled on the world express of English to different languages across the country and then back to the literary land of China.

Chinese ancient poets love to use imagery, and *Shijing* is a typical example. In almost every poem, famous objects of that time, such as flowers, trees, animals, vessels, costumes, and musical instruments, appear to indicate rituals or symbolize love, etc. Such objects make it more difficult for foreigners who initially translated classical Chinese poetry into English. Because some things would be missing in the western world, and even if they do exist, the cultural context, connotation, and other issues would lead to a very different meaning.

2. The Literary and Cultural Significance of *Shijing*

2.1. Literary Significance of *Shijing*

The two-way interaction between the author and the reader co-creates the meaning of a literary work. This meaning is constantly generated by the interaction and dynamic exchange between three elements: the author, the text of the work, and the reader. *Shijing* is a literary text without

origin, context, or unknown author, leading to its interpretation being severely compromised. But no amount of interpretation can be divorced from the original text. Due to the absence of origins and context, textual constraints are also not as strict as they are in other texts, so readers enjoy greater freedom in the reading process. Although the meaning of a literary text is derived from the meaning given by the author's creation, it is not equal to, but greater than, the author's meaning; because a literary text has its relative independence after being detached from the author. The literary domain of meaning must have expanded, especially because excellent literary works leave a huge space for interpretation by readers of different times.

The primary function performed by *Shijing* in ancient China is not literary, but rather political and moral edification. But heaps of historical relics conceal the original purpose of its composition, leaving its literary interpretation open to various degrees. But all can be reduced to two major categories representing the basic reading paradigm: the first paradigm sees *Shijing* as a reflection of a bygone era and tends to read it as a moral and political expression of that era; the second paradigm takes *Shijing* as a poetic expression of an individual in the past and thus tends to treat the poem as a tool for personal self-expression. Some scholars believe that *Shijing* is realized in the biographies, papers, spellings, and notes of scribes as a political and edifying tool. While others believe that it is also a metaphor for the social context, lending itself to the expression of personal pursuits and other intentions, all of which can be summarized in the two paradigms mentioned above.

James Legge and Herbert Giles, the first two scholars to introduce *Shijing* to the West, noted the use of allegorical or symbolic readings without the use of the allegorical method. Marcel Granet is probably the first to use the term "allegory" to describe classical interpretation, and since then, allegorical reading has become the term used to describe traditional modes of reading.

From the angle of literary reading, the original intent or meaning of *Shijing* has been lost with the death of the author which makes the recovery of the original intent of the poems impossible. It is only an illusion to think that it is possible to reconstruct the context in which the poems were created and, accordingly, to reconstruct the original meaning. Every reading is unique, because each reader inevitably adds his story into the context, and thus to other factors external to the poem. In this sense, all readings, whether traditional or modern, are equal.

2.2. Cultural Significance of *Shijing*

The origins of Chinese and western thought are vastly different. From a macro perspective, the unique cultural spirit of Chinese texts, such as Laozi's "Tao" and Confucius' "Ren", is the core of traditional Chinese culture. And different translations will cause differences in the overall interpretation. From a micro perspective, material culture will change, extinct, or lost with the development of time and population migration. For example, the two musical instruments "qin" and "se", which are commonly found in *Shijing*, have rich cultural connotations, either related to rituals, rites, and music, or feasting culture, and do not refer to musical instruments alone. However, it is difficult to reproduce these images in western culture. This is a kind of cultural default.

Translation, as the interpretation and reconstruction of language, also contains rich cultural meaning behind the discourse. Thick translation is an important means to manifest the cultural meaning of the original text. It can provide cultural context for the translated text by using annotations, commentaries, prefaces, in-text interpretations and out-of-text explanations so that readers can fully understand the culture of the source language. The uncertainty of meaning in literary translation makes it necessary to provide rich contexts for translations, especially for literary and cultural canonical texts. By providing a rich cognitive context for classical literature, readers can then have a more intuitive experience of the source language through this added information, including texts, poetics, and culture, and also deepen their understanding of the source language culture.

In terms of the translation and dissemination of Chinese literature and cultural texts to foreign countries, translators must first identify the target language reader groups, such as professional or general readers, children, language learners, etc. Only then can they choose appropriate translation strategies, serve the target reader groups, and disseminate classical Chinese culture in a multifaceted way.

3. The History of the English Translation of *Shijing*

The evolution of *Shijing*'s translation is divided into four periods: the budding stage (17th to the end of the 18th century), the establishment stage (19th century), the transition stage (early 20th century to the 1980s), and the reverse translation stage (1980s to the present). The language which first transmitted *Shijing* is French, and it was not until the 19th century that English-Chinese translation was developed. The first English translation of *Shijing* was by Sir William Jones, but his books were not pure translations. He wrote it under the influence of ancient poetry in China.

3.1. James Legge's Translation

To some extent, the first English translator of *Shijing* is James Legge. As a Christian missionary to preach religion, he wanted Chinese people to accept God's will by first accepting their traditions as a way to break their solidified mindset and converted them to God. With this intention in mind, in 1871 Legge translated the first unrhymed English translation of *Shijing*, called *The Chinese Classics: With a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes*. And later, after an in-depth study, he published the rhyming translation *The She King, or, The Book of Ancient Poetry*, which opened a window to classic Chinese poetry for the western world. Its style was in line with the original text and somewhat thick translation, but it has exposed many western readers to the almost first-hand Chinese original and has influenced many later translators.

In the preface to the second edition, Legge says, "The She King was translated into Latin about 1733 by Father Lacharme, but in 1830 M. Jules Mohl, an eminent sinologist of Paris, edited the manuscript before it was published. I also want later sinologists to regard my translation as the most reliable translation of the original. I did my best to make my translation perfect by attaching notes and introductory remarks, etc., to the original." For example, in his translation of the *Guan Ju* (关雎), Legge translated "关关雎鸠" as "Kwan-kwan go the ospreys", retaining the onomatopoeia of the osprey's call. Compared to Waley's translation " 'Fair, fair,' cry the ospreys", it is closer to the original text.

It is clear that although Legge's translation was the most widespread and influential translation of its time, it was not the first. He drew on the "rough" translations of some Latin and French versions, adding his own understanding of the original and a series of examinations. He also mentioned that many of the flora and fauna in the book was a problematic issue, and he went to the trouble of consulting the zoological and botanical professors to prove his work. The faithful style of translation, the exhaustive commentary, and the apt attachment of the original text are features that make Legge's translation surpasses those of his predecessors and becomes a promising English version of *Shijing*. It also has guided William Jennings, Clement Allen, Arthur Waley, and Ezra Pound in their interpretation and translation.

However, being a classic in English held in high esteem by many scholars and readers, Legge's accomplishment did not spread Chinese culture as he expected, perhaps because it mixed with some personal preference and sentiment. Professor Lauren F. Pfister's analysis of James's translating action, such as identity and perception, which influenced the process and outcome of his translation showed that James's translation was a dialogue between eastern Confucianism and western theology.

3.2. William Jennings' Translation

In 1891, William Jennings published *The Shi King—the old 'Poetry Classic' of the Chinese: A Close Metrical Translation, with Annotations. Poetry Classic' of the Chinese: A Close Metrical Translation, with Annotations*. As can be seen from its title, Jennings' translation is tightly metrical and annotated, and probably more suitable for a general public audience.

There are over thirty rhetorical devices in *Shijing*, many of which have evolved into the usual clichés of later poetry. In Jennings' translation, he paid special attention to the meter and rhetoric of the original text. The rhetorical style between the Chinese and the western is very different. Due to the differences in cultural backgrounds, the referents of diverse names also vary, which gives rise to translatability and untranslatability. The untranslatable can only be translated by adaptation. There are two ways of adaptation. First, to determine the rhythmic structure based on the rhythmic flow inherent in the translated poem, with the major premise that the meaning remains unchanged; Second, to focus only on the precision of the meaning and ignore the rhythm of the original poem.

Jennings used an embraced rhyme in the English translation of *Wei Feng Mu Gua* (卫风·木瓜) as follows. That is, in this four-stanza poem, the first and fourth lines have a rhyme of "[ent]" and the second and third lines "[ə'gen]" in addition.

Some quinces once to me were sent,
A ruby was my gift again;
Yet not as gift again; —
Enduring love was its intent.

For ancient Chinese poetry, rhyme is definitely among the untranslatable. In his first edition of the translation, Jennings completely ignored rhyme and focused on conveying the content, allowing readers to understand ancient Chinese poetry without allowing them to appreciate the charm of traditional Chinese poetry. In the subsequent second and third editions, rhyming translations were published, barely catering to readers' need for the beauty of poetic sound. In the foreword, he refers to his own enlightenment, revealing the redundancy of his translations and emphasizing his goal of reproducing the "phonetic beauty" of the original poems.

3.3. Clement Allen's Translation

The same year that Jennings published his translation, Clement Allen also published his English translation and argued that "There is no record of the ancient history of China except for a group of myths and legends, although these may have a factual basis." From this point of view, it is evident that Allen, harboring a personal bias or fallacy, is not as faithful as Legge. He takes a bolder critical approach to traditional Chinese poetics than his contemporaneous translators, interpreting and reconstructing *Shijing* in a new cultural context.

The Book of Chinese Poetry—the Shih Ching or Classic of Poetry was published in 1891. Although it also dealt with Legge's enlightenment, what distinguished Allen's translation from other translations was that it took the lyrical features of *Shijing* in the form of narrative poetry, and amplified the logic of the stories and the characters. He transformed traditional Chinese poems into a new English version. This also made *Shijing* more grounded and gained a more popular readership.

Legge explained various flowers, birds, insects, fish, and characters of the setting in his book. He applied the translation strategy of foreignization and retained almost entirely the cultural elements of the original text, usually with a brief footnote and a general outline of the story contained in the poem. But he did not give any account of the story's plot or context. On the contrary, Allen cares more about the human subject, focusing on a complete compendium of the story. *Shijing* enjoys a distinctive poetic feature, greatly contributing to the dissemination of Chinese culture and literature. Because Allen's translation is detached from the constraints

of the cultural context of the source language and aims to cater to the interests of western readers. It cannot help but become a mirror image of the east from the western perspective.

3.4. Waley Arthur's Translation

The English translations of *Shijing* by Legge, Jennings, and Allen each have their distinctive features. They also provide a great reference resource and guiding theory for the study and translation of Chinese classical poetry by later generations in the west. Waley has not only produced an English translation of *Shijing*, which is unique in the field of the study of Chinese poetry but has also translated and published *One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*, which crowned him an excellent sinologist. He once mentioned in his preface, "Considering the soul of image-poetry, I have avoided both adding my own imagery and suppressing the original meaning. In the real practice of poetry translation, although translators are mostly able to transform the imagery in the original poems, the translations are sometimes unsuccessful." Thus, it is clear that Waley harbored a lot of love and respect for Chinese culture. But for the sake of readability, his translation employs creative translations that bring Chinese poetry closer to English readers.

Waley's translation *The Book of Songs* did not rhyme, but that means it is easier to understand. This feature can be clearly seen in his translation of *Guan Ju*. For example, in the translation "优哉游哉，辗转反侧", Legge translated it as "Long he thought; oh! Long and anxiously; \On his side, on his back, he turned, and back again", he did not rhyme here either. The difference in Chinese-western concepts makes him follow the original closely, which is a bit confusing to English readers. Waley's translation is "Long thoughts, oh, long unhappy thoughts, \ Now on his back, now tossing on to his side. "The word "tossing" can reflect the eagerness of the gentleman for the lady.

3.5. Ezra Pound's Translation

It is well known that Ezra Pound was heavily influenced by the moods of Japanese and Chinese classical poetry and pioneered the American "Imagist school". Pound's poetic theory and literary criticism are a paradox. He is loved for the new source he injected into poetic literature, connecting mysterious and ancient eastern literature with the rapidly developing western world and making a great contribution to world literature. He is hated for the way he turned western poetry into a hybrid, and also for the way he took the liberty of codifying the beauty of traditional eastern poetry. In his youth, Pound's acquaintance with the classic giants of Keats, Shelley, and Whitman laid a deep foundation of his research on poetry, and later he was lighted by Ernest Fenollosa's classical Chinese poetry, then gradually entered the world of studying Chinese poetry. In 1915, Pound published his first anthology of classical Chinese poetry *Cathy*, a beautiful pamphlet, mainly based on Fenollosa's notes. Later he translated three of the Four Books, with *Shijing* being the last of his translations.

It is notable that Pound himself was not familiar with Chinese, and most of his translations were done from the perspective of an independent-minded reader who had read the English, Spanish, and Latin translations of his predecessors. But the translations Pound was exposed to at that time were popular faithful translations, and they were too much for this uniquely-minded reader, so Pound began his own journey of transcreation.

Many mistranslations occurred in Pound's translations because he did not have first-hand resources. However, when translating *Shijing*, Pound first read Jennings' translation and some other western translations. And he was not very satisfied with any of them. After obtaining the source text, he did not immediately proceed with the translation and continued to "write" *Shijing* while studying the Chinese language and history. Pound's creative translation of ancient Chinese poetry set his work apart from the translations of that time and was distinctive, ushering in a new era of American poetry. However, the original beauty of Chinese classical

poetry was weakened by most of the deletions and reorganizations, making Pound's translations almost completely divorced from the Chinese cultural background and a mishmash of western elements.

Shijing was adept at repeated chanting back and forth as a way to enhance the rhythmic feel of the folk song. For the sake of the reader's and the beauty of the stanzas, Pound did not copy them in the original order, but underwent creation, line breaks, etc., to suit the logic of the English reader. It is also note-worthy that Pound paid more attention to the refinement of the imagery of the original text in the translation process, and even creates new imagery by splitting the words. For example, he translates *Jing Nv Qi Luan* (静女其變) as Lady of silk word by splitting "變" which means "Silk-like woman". This is somewhat inexplicable to the Chinese. It can be assumed that for Pound each Chinese character was an image in itself, and could also be broken up and combined to represent a name.

4. Conclusion

English translations from the missionary Legge, the scholar Jennings, the sinologist Allen and Waley, and the literary Pound have greatly contributed to the dissemination of Chinese literature and culture. They also satisfied different types of English readers at the same time. But only if foreign translators simplify their work, face up to and respect Chinese culture, can they be said to have spread the Chinese classics. Their translations developed from "faithfulness" to "deviation". "Faithfulness" is respect for culture, literature, and knowledge. *Shijing* is profound and full of humanistic sentiments of China for thousands of years. It has deeply attracted many outsiders whose translations have greatly promoted the outward movement of Chinese culture for whatever purpose.

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