

# Research on the Translation of Romantic Description in Ancient Book Selected Poems of Li Bai Based on Hermeneutics

Jia Ni, Chao Wang

School of Applied English, Mudanjiang Normal University, Mudanjiang, China

## Abstract

The poems in Selected Poems of Li Bai embody strong romantic taste and distinctive cultural characteristic, so they are praised by scholars. Among many translators, Mr. Xu Yuanchong's translation is easy for readers to understand and has won a good reputation in academic circles. Under the Fourfold Translation Motion of Hermeneutics translation, this paper analyzes and summarizes the key of Xu's translation from the three dimensions of word selection, syntax and rhythm, and is hoped to improve the interpretability of the external translation of romantic poetry.

## Keywords

Hermeneutics; Chinese translation of poetry; Romantic description.

## 1. Introduction

Li Bai (701-762) represents one of the greatest romantic poets in ancient China. The poems in Selected Poems of Li Bai have a distinctive color of Chinese culture and romanticism, and have won the favor of many foreign scholars and people. Cultural translation is a kind of behavior that uses language symbols to have an effective impact on the target language audience, in order to achieve the expected public effects. It aims to promote Chinese national culture further to the center. There are different ways in writing romantic image in Chinese and western poetry. The former is relatively virtual and the latter is more in reality. At present, the foreign translation research of Selected Poems of Li Bai focuses on the transmission of the original discourse in the language environment, to solve the problem of language loyalty on the surface of the translation for readers. Few scholars have paid attention to the interpretation of romantic description in the translation. On the understanding and interpretation of Hermeneutics, George Steiner, one of the important representatives of Hermeneutics translation theory, regards translation as an interpretative movement and divides the translation process into four parts: trust, aggression, incorporation and restitution. This theory boasts unique characteristics in the field of contemporary western language and translation theory.

## 2. George Steiner's Fourfold Translation Motion in Hermeneutics

### 2.1. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics has a long history, which can be traced back to ancient Greece. In the Middle Ages, Hermeneutics evolved into a branch of Bible research. Since then, in the period of Renaissance and Religious Reform, scholars used the research of Hermeneutics to publicize classical books of ancient culture. Therefore, Hermeneutics in this era was called classical Hermeneutics. Then, after two periods of breakthrough, Hermeneutics has become an independent philosophy, with interpretation as the core (Xie Tianzhen, 2009:101).

### 2.2. Fourfold Translation Motion and Poetry Translation

Hermeneutics has given vitality into the study of western philosophy and literary theory in the 20th century. Later, some scholars applied this theory to the field of translation studies. George

Steiner represents one of important representatives of Hermeneutics translation theory. After *Babel--Aspects of Language and Translation*, published in 1975, is regarded as a milestone in the field of contemporary western translation studies(Xie Tianzhen, 2009:102). George Steiner believes that understanding is translation. He combines Hermeneutics with translation, and points out that the translation process can be divided into four steps: trust, aggression, incorporation and restitution.

The first step in translation is trust, which means, once the translator believes that the text is worth translating, then he decides to translate it. Therefore, the presentation of all translations begins with trust. Vice versa, if the translator does not arouse interest in the text to be translated, he will consider it to be unworthy of translation. In this case, trust will disappear and translation behavior will not occur. Take Xu Yuanchong's translation of *Selected Poems of Li Bai* as an example. Xu Yuanchong is known as "the great person who translates poetry into English and France". Xu Lao has a deep foundation and strong interest in poetry translation, especially the translation of Chinese poetry. As Qian Zhongshu commented on Prof. Xu , "if Li Bai lives till now and knows English, he must be a true friend with Xu Yuanchong." Therefore, under the framework of Hermeneutics, Xu Yuanchong's translation behavior stems from trust.

The second step is aggression. From the perspective of Hermeneutics, to understand needs aggression into the entity which we are going to translate. If it is applied to translation studies, aggression refers to the conflict between two languages and cultures when the translator understands the original text(Xie Tianzhen 2009:107). Before translating Chinese poetry into English, Xu Yuanchong needs to carefully read and understand the original text, and repeatedly consider the similar or opposite poetry images used in western culture. If similar, they can be considered for adoption. But if they are opposite, they will be transformed between cultures, which is the result of aggression.

The third step is incorporation. In the process of translation, the translator should absorb a large number of fresh elements and arrange them appropriately. In the process of merging, the translator will certainly transplant its meaning and form. In the process of doing so, the target language may become richer, due to the integration of new elements with the source language(Xie Tianzhen 2009:109). From Mr. Xu Yuanchong's translation, we can see that Prof. Xu creatively transformed the rhythm in poetry, flexibly transformed the quatrain form in Li Bai's poetry, into the rhythm format in western poetry, and transformed the number requirement of unified word into the prose style familiar to westerners, which provides a new reference for the study of poetry translation.

The fourth step is restitution, which means to keep the balance between the source and target text. Take the first step as an example. Due to trust, we may actively approach the original text and show interest in it. Therefore, trust may make the translator lose balance when facing the original text. Some may add too much information, such as filling information and decorating text. Others may delete or ignore information that is difficult to translate, thus undermining the harmony and balance of the whole conversion system(Xie Tianzhen 2009:110). Due to the step of restitution, loyalty to the text and culture is more concrete.

### 3. Case Analysis

The western way of thinking is analytical, which is used to establish an abstract conceptual system through logical operation on the basis of individual experience. Therefore, the western artistic expression is more rational, common in reproducing and imitating. Chinese art emphasizes the unity of heaven and man, and its performance tends to be perceptual, lyrical and freehand. In view of the great differences in the writing methods used in the description of romantic images between Chinese and Western poetry, the translator should give due

consideration to the target language readers' understanding of the romantic description in poetry, so as to flexibly choose the translation methods at the lexical, sentence and formal levels.

### **3.1. Translation Characteristics of Romantic Description in Selected Poems of Li Bai**

The romantic description in ancient Chinese poetry has the characteristics of refined words, neat form and rhyme at the end of the sentence. From the perspective of the fourfold translation motion, this paper holds that Xu Yuanchong's translation can make readers better understand the romantic images in the translation, and finds that Mr. Xu Yuanchong can adjust the characteristics of poetry appropriately according to the habits of Western readers, so as to achieve directness in word selection, faithfulness in writing and rhyme in style. Therefore, the translator can make the translation better explain the romantic artistic conception of the original text.

#### **3.1.1. Simplicity of Word Selection**

Li Bai's poems often use high mountains and flowing water as romantic artistic conception, which is a remarkable feature of romantic description in ancient Chinese poetry. In the process of revealing the connection between nature and human nature, it can popularize the profound moral. Mr. Xu Yuanchong strives to be faithful to the original poem in form, make it easy for readers to understand in Chinese translation, and better spread the writing characteristics of ancient poetry. Therefore, his choice of words is relatively simple and straightforward. In addition, the translator should ensure that the number of single syllable words in the translation is limited when necessary.

#### **3.1.2. Stylistic Fidelity**

In poetry translation, faithfulness and equivalence have become the invariable measurement criterion and the most feasible principle to abide by in practical operation. Faithfulness in literary translation not only includes word semantics, but also includes word rhetoric color, syntactic logic, writing style, artistic image, etc., which is reflected in "understanding of the original text and reproduction of style". In order to achieve better effects, domestication strategy is often used in the external translation of Chinese literary works. As China's comprehensive strength is becoming stronger and stronger, translators should flexibly use translation methods, such as literal translation and free translation, in order to promote China's national culture from the edge to the center and stabilize China's soft power position.

#### **3.1.3. Metrical Rhyme**

Beauty in music is a major feature of poetic language, and rhythm is an important manifestation of its musicality. It is an obvious sign that poetry is different from prose, novels and other styles. The diversification of translated poetry forms includes five forms: loose type, poetic non rhyme type, assonance rhyme type, borrowing type and self metrical type. The Selected Poems of Li Bai translated by Xu Yuanchong mostly use the rhyme translation, which not only retains the branches, but also makes the translation have a certain rhythmic form. The specific performance is that there are fixed rules for the number of single syllable in most poems, the translated poems are divided into sections, and the two lines rhyme at the end of the poem.

### **3.2. Translation Methods of Romantic Description from the Perspective of Fourfold Translation Motion**

Under the framework of the fourfold translation motion, this section will sort out the translation methods selected by the translator to meet the different translation principles of word selection, syntax and rhythm.

### 3.2.1. Generalization Translation Method

The generalization translation method refers that the translator uses more generalized words to express the nominal objects that are actually referred to in ancient Chinese poetry. In other words, to translate the subordinate words with the superior words. The premise of using generalization translation method is that the omitted details can be found in the context of the target text or are irrelevant. This method "can solve the problem that the special meaning in Chinese traditional culture is not understood by foreign readers".

ST1: 天姥连天向天横，势拔五岳掩赤城。

TT1: Mount Skyland threatens heaven, massed against the sky,  
Surpassing the Five Peaks and dwarfing Mount Red Town.

ST2: 兴酣落笔摇五岳，诗成笑傲凌沧州。

TT2: Seeing my pen in verve, even the mountains shake;  
Hearing my laughter proud, the seaside hermits wake.

For the first example, this poem describes the poet's desire for light and freedom, his dissatisfaction with the dark reality, and his rebellious spirit of contempt for dignitaries and unyielding. The poet writes romantically, exaggerating the towering mountains of Tianmu Mountain, even surpassing the Five Mountains. The first half of the sentence means "when a poet is in high spirits, writing can shake the Five Mountains", which exaggerates the poet's ambition. In these two cases, the word "Five Mountains" appeared in the original poetry, which fully highlighted the characteristics of the unity of heaven and man in ancient poetry. The poet expressed his lofty sentiments and ambitions through natural scenery. It literally means five famous mountains, including Mount Tai in the east, Mount Heng in the south, Mount Hua in the west, Mount Heng in the north and Mount Song in the middle of China. However, if the "Five Mountains" are specifically translated, the translation will appear too long and destroy the form and rhythm of poetry, which may lead to imbalance of the translation from the perspective of Hermeneutics. It's in accordance with the fact that some translators may add too much information in the step of "incorporation". Moreover, western readers are not familiar with the specific meaning of the "Five Mountains", but will feel strange. Therefore, translators have adopted the generalization translation method to translate "五岳" into "Five Mountains" and "mountains", which meets the principle of concise and straightforward in poetry wording, reduces readers' reading obstacles on the premise of ensuring loyalty to the original text, actively publicizes ancient Chinese poetry culture and improves the interpretability of the translation to readers.

### 3.2.2. Literal Translation and Free Translation

The purpose of translation is to spread the cultures of all ethnic groups and promote the prosperity of cross-cultural exchanges. After aggression into the poetry for understanding, the translator can appropriately use the foreignization strategy, which is conducive to enriching the national language and culture, that is, the function of the step of "incorporation". Therefore, translators should adopt the principle of more foreignization and less domestication in cultural translation.

ST3: 低头向暗壁，千唤不一回。

TT3: Hanging my head, I'd look towards the wall,  
A thousand times I'd not answer your call.

The second half of the Example 3 means "even if a man calls a thousand times, the woman in the poem is too shy to look her husband". The poet uses exaggeration to describe the shy mood of a 14-year-old woman at her first marriage, which is common to see in romantic description. In Chinese poetry, when Li Bai expresses exaggeration, he often uses numerals such as "thousand" and "ten thousand" to exaggerate the number of repetitions of a certain behavior.

Mr. Xu Yuanchong directly translates "thousand" into "a thousand times", which is a literal translation, to retain the image of the original metaphor, and to better highlight the informational principle of communication while realizing linguistic equivalence. It is helpful for Western readers to understand the romantic description habits of ancient Chinese poetry and realize the purpose of poetry translation.

ST4: 尔来四万八千岁，不与秦塞通人烟。

TT4: Have passed forty-eight thousand years,  
And few have tried to pass its border.

Example 4 means that "for about 48000 years since then, Qin and Shu have been blocked by the Qinling Mountains, so people never communicate back and forth". The poet used exaggeration techniques to emphasize that the roads in Shu are difficult to travel. If the literal translation method makes the sentence difficult to understand, the translation cannot copy and apply the original text. At this time, the translator needs to decide the content choice and the way of expression, and must consider the interests, needs, reading and audio-visual habits of the audience. The "people(人)" in the original text means "interpersonal communication". Because there is no corresponding expression in the west, if the translator adopts literal translation, "semantic" equivalence cannot achieve "cultural" equivalence. The word "people(人)" of Chinese culture is likely to lose its cultural connotation in translation and communication. Therefore, the translator adopts free translation to translate "tongrenyan(通人烟)" into its essential meaning "to communicate through the boundary", so as to meet the principles of straightforward choice of words and faithful writing, pursue the balance and harmony between form and content, and help the audience understand the ancient Chinese poetry culture. From the Hermeneutics, the translator adds some necessary content to help readers to understand its meaning, which shows the significance of the step of "restitution".

### 3.2.3. Imitation Method

Imitation refers to retaining and imitating the form of the original poem in the translated poem. However, this kind of reservation and imitation is often merely similar rather than strictly following the source text. This method is often used in the English translation of ancient Chinese poetry. Imitation method can be divided into loose form and strict form. The so-called loose imitation method means that the translated poem has a certain rhythm or rhyme, so that the reader can perceive the rhythm of the poem. The loose imitation method adopted by Mr. Xu Yuanchong borrows the rhythm and line characteristics of western poetry in form, on the basis of keeping the content faithful. Prof. Xu fully embodies the translator's audience awareness in the way of discourse construction, especially in the text composition, which mainly adopts several methods such as logical reorganization and adjustment of textual cohesion to realize the re-rhyme, and moves the audience with the expression way recognized by the western audience.

ST5: 危楼高百尺，手可摘星辰。不敢高声语，恐惊天上人。

TT5: Hundred feet high the Summit Temple stands,  
Where I could pluck the stars with my own hands.

At dead of night I dare not speak aloud  
For fear of waking dwellers in the cloud.

In example 5, the original Chinese poem refers to "How high the temple building on the mountain is! People can pick the stars in the sky as soon as they reach out upstairs. I dare not speak loudly, lest I disturb the gods in the sky". Using the expressions of "hundred feet" and "talking loudly may disturb natural immortals", this paper describes the precipitous, tall and straight temple building. The original poem consists of four lines with five characters in each line. The structure is neat. The rhythm of English poetry are mainly realized by syllables. The



number of syllables in each line can reflect the overall characteristics of rhythm in the two versions to a certain extent. By using the poetry syllable online counting tool "Syllable Counter", it is calculated that each line in Xu translation is 10 syllables, which is in line with the law of fixed number of single syllable in English poetry. In addition, through the selection of words, inversion of word order and conversion of sentence patterns, Mr. Xu Yuanchong realized the rhyme of "stand" and "hand", "aloud" and "cloud" at the end of the poem. In particular, the double vowels "aloud" and "cloud" are not only catchy, but also make people feel that the image of mountains with broad vision and great momentum is ready to come out. Xu's translation is full of ups and downs, passionate and powerful, it vividly sets off the poet's ambition, pride and romantic style, which makes people feel refreshed again. Under the fourfold translation motion of Hermeneutics translation, Xu Yuanchong can make the translation rhyme again in the step of compensation, so as to meet the purpose of disseminating the audience to understand and appreciate the romantic description in romantic poetry and realize the translation of Chinese culture.

#### 4. Summary

Selected Poems of Li Bai is famous for its romantic color, and its romantic description is very characteristic. There are great differences in the habitual expression of romantic description between Chinese and Western poetry. Therefore, the study of poetry translation from the interpretable degree of romantic description in the original text is of great research value in realizing the better effect of translation. This paper holds that under the fourfold translation motion of Hermeneutics, Mr. Xu Yuanchong's translation can meet the reading and appreciation needs of the communication audience, make the translation more interpretable, and realize the role of Chinese culture translation. Prof. Xu adopted generalization translation, literal translation, free translation and imitation to meet the communication principles of word selection, syntax and form. It can be seen that the fourfold translation motion of Hermeneutics plays a certain role in improving the communication effect of translation. It can guide the audience to correctly understand Chinese culture, stimulate their interest in Chinese culture and actively publicize Chinese culture. It is hoped that the research results of this paper can provide reference for the study of Chinese culture translation.

#### Acknowledgments

Mudanjiang Normal University 2021 Postgraduate Science and Technology Innovation Project "A Study on the Translation and Dissemination of Chinese Cultural Classics" (kjc2021-099mdjnu).

#### References

- [1] Steiner George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*[M]. New York and London: Oxford University Press. 1975: 200-320.
- [2] Xie Tianzhen. *Contemporary foreign translation theory* [M]. Tianjin: Nankai University Press. 2009:101-110.
- [3] Xiong Bing. Conceptual confusion in translation studies -- Taking "translation strategies", "translation methods" and "translation skills" as examples [J]. *Chinese translation*. 2014:82-88.
- [4] Xu Jun. *Contemporary British translation theory* [M]. Hubei: Hubei Education Press. 2001.97-109.