

An Analysis of Classical Chinese Four-Lined and Five-Charactered Poem Translation

A comparative study of the English Versions of Meng Haoran's Chun Xiao

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Abstract— Through the comparative study of several English versions of the classical Chinese poem, Chun Xiao by Meng Haoran from the Tang Dynasty, an issue concerning diction and rhyme in ancient Chinese four-lined and five-charactered poem translation is delved into so that an understanding of the translation techniques in ancient Chinese four-lined and five-charactered poem translation could be achieved in that the translation successfully convey both the meanings and the rhetorical charm of the Chinese poem by its diction and rhyme in English.

Keywords—ancient Chinese four-lined and five-charactered poem translation; diction; rhyme

I. INTRODUCTION

The translation of ancient Chinese poems into English is always considered as a challenging issue, regarding Chinese poem's unique language features, like its four lines and five characters. Because in ancient Chinese poems, the use of ambiguity, symbolism, irony and other stylistic elements of poetic diction and rhyme as a structural element for this specific poetic form—four lines and five characters often leaves a poem open to multiple interpretations. However, a successful translation which is semantically close to the original poem and conveys the rhetorical charm of it could be achieved if enough attention is given to diction and rhyme.

There are several English versions of Meng Haoran's "Chun.Xiao". The translations, either from the accuracy in the diction or from the rendering of the meanings and its rhetorical charm, appear so interestingly different due to different translators. The main reason lies in the power of translator's comprehension and perception, how they maintain the rhyme patterns of the original poem, and how they express the source text in mood.

II. ACCURACY IN DICTION

It seems rarely hard to translate poems both satisfactorily and successfully. Robert Frost said, "Poem is what gets lost in translation.[1]" Various people have minor differences among the many things they share in common. In addition to the difference in their linguistic characteristics, there are differences in their local environments, social customs and

cultural background, etc. Secondly, poetry demands refinement in language, freshness in artistic conception and distinctiveness in style. It calls for beauty in sound, form and meaning. It goes without saying that the three-aspected beauty is not easy to reproduce.

Although it is rather difficult, it is possible to translate poems. Here is an example. The translation of Meng Haoran's "Chun Xiao" demonstrates the difficulty of translating the Tang Dynasty's four-lined and five-charactered poetry into English poem in the classical English form. The following English version was translated in the first half of last century.

Spring Dawn

I slept in spring not conscious of the dawn,
But heard the gay birds chattering all around,
I remember, there was a storm at night,
Pray, how many blossoms have fallen down [2]?

Firstly, the diction of the English translation is successful. As we talk about diction, we can not avoid mentioning something of the background of the Chinese original poem. As we know, Meng Haoran is the first landscape poet in Tang Dynasty. In his poem, he describes the later spring to the readers. In the first and second lines, he shows his love and praise to the spring. In the third and fourth and lines, he expresses his sentimental feelings to the decaying of the spring. Only twenty Chinese characters create a profound meaning. Much space is left for the reader to imagine. We could say the whole poem is very abstract. As to the translator, how to achieve the faithfulness is a big problem. According to different people, different translation may occur. So in the translation, "xiao" is translated into "dawn", "ti" into "chattering", "fengyu" into "storm" and "hua" into "blossoms", and "luo" into "fallen".

As we could not find a very specific time in the original and we don't know whether Meng Haoran has got up at that time or not. We could find translation to the word as "dawn" or "morning". I prefer the first one. Since Meng Haoran is not conscious of the coming of the day, and also the birds sound could be heard at that time. I suppose the time could not be very late. It seems closer to the time right after daybreak. So "dawn" is better. Also, "dawn" is literary and symbolic, which means before sunrise while "morning" means "before noon".

As to the rendering of “ti”, we could find many words such as “chatter”, “twitter”, “chirp” and “peep” in the sense of “the sound made by birds”. “Twitter” means “short high rapid sound made by birds”; “chirp” means “short sharp sound made by small birds” and “peep” means “short weak high made by young birds” while “chatter” means “make short repeated high noises”. So the rendering of the word could be any of the words above. But as to the rendering of “cry”, I suppose it is not so acceptable. As far as I know, the first two lines express poet’s love for the beautiful spring. If we just consider these two lines as the poet’s pity for the passing of the spring and to show the sadness to it, we may go to another way. The ideas of the whole poem are in two: one is the poet’s love for the scenery of the beautiful spring according to what he feels and what he hears. Another is the poet’s upset emotion to the spring’s leaving. We could not translate the poem based on the later idea only. As we know, for the translator, the content of the original work is something that exists objectively, and the translator’s task is to convey it instead of anything of his own to the reader. In this sense, translation is not writing. It does not mean that the translator writes his own borrowing the ideas from the original. That’s to say, it should be faithful to the original. So I don’t think the word “cry” is suitable.

As to the “storm” for “fengyu”, it produces the image and scene of a heavy and strong wind in the late spring, so as to lead to the question in the last line. Still in the last line, the translator chooses “blossom” instead “flower” or “petal” to express the meaning of “hua” in Chinese. Flower is part of a plant from which the seed or fruit develops, often brightly colored and lasting only a short time; blossom is flower, esp. of a fruit tree or flowering shrub; petal is any of the delicate, colored, leaf-like divisions of a flower. All these words are acceptable. I prefer the last one. The word “petal” brings it to people’s mind that the flower are very delicate. It produces sharp contrast between the gentle blossom and the merciless storm. These two lines also suggest poet’s feeling of pity to spring. Although it is spring, but it is too late yet nobody could stop the leaving step of spring. As to “” the word “fall”, “drift”, “lash” (strike as with a wipe) I prefer “fall”. Just like “dawn”, “fall” has a symbolic connotative indication that the writer is describing something unpleasant and something negative. What’s more, the diction of the word is good. It is literal, and in its old use it meant “ask seriously and with strong feeling”.

III. RHYME PATTERNS

All these above are about the meaning of the words of the translators. Moreover, I would give some words about the rhythm of the translation. The principle that the translation must be as expressive as the original, neither should it be more nor should it be less. Poems call for the beauty not only in meaning, but also in form. A translator of them should not be satisfied with the mere conveying of the ideas in the original, but must strive for the reproduction of the original beauty. To achieve this, he ought to, first of all, retain the original meaning and artistic conception and secondly, do his best to make his translation bear a certain due form, rhythm and rhyme when necessary. Owing to the differences in the characteristics of various languages, it is both impossible and unnecessary for the translator to render the original poems word for word. However,

he has the responsibility to try to overcome the difficulties and even the individual untranslatability which may arise from the different characteristics of the original and target languages. What is most important for him to do in translating a poetic word is to keep its original artistic conceptions and style.

If we analyze the Chinese original we could find the rhyme of the five-charactered, four-lined poetry is like following:

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(“---” refers to the rising-intonation of Chinese character)
(“^^” refers to the falling-intonation of Chinese character)

Certainly, it is impossible to translate the poetry into English in the same. If we want to translate it into five syllabled poetry, it seems difficult, because it would easily go as the very stubborn trochee which will hurt the beauty of the original work’s rhyme.

The English version’s rhyme is like the following:

I slept/ in spring/ not conscious of/ the dawn,
But heard/ the gay birds/ chattering/ all around,
I remember, /there was a storm/ at night,
Pray, /how many blossoms/ have fallen down?

So the first two lines are of tetrameter and the later two lines are of trimeter. Also the last words of the even lines are made masculine rhyme by using the word “around” and “down”.

Judging from the meaning and the form of the English version we may get the conclusion that it is good but not so satisfying in every aspect. The rhyme of it is similar to target language but not so good as the rhyme in the following versions:

Dawn in Spring

How suddenly the morning comes in spring!
On every side you hear the sweet birds sing.
Last night amidst the storm—Ah, who can tell,
With wind and rain, how many blossoms fell [3]?

Spring Dawn

Sleeping in the spring, one hardly knows it’s daylight,
Birds are heard everywhere trilling.
There’ve been sounds of wind and rain in the night,
How many blossoms have been falling [4]?

The rhyme is aabb and abab respectively and seems better than the first version.

Of course, the quality of translation if more or less related to the personal ability and level of linguistic attainments of the translator. From this we can see that only with enough accomplishment in language can one translate poems in a classical form and that it demands a high artistic level of one to produce better translation without the aid of an appropriate form and some corresponding scheme.

The reasons for why it is difficult to succeed in translating the classical English poem in the form of the Tang Four—lined, five—charactered poetry are:

Firstly, the classical Chinese poetry is compendious and condensed whereas the English words are accurate and detailed so they both often disagree with each other in how to express the meaning. Our mother tongue has developed from the classical style of writing with monosyllabic characters as units into modern spoken language with monosyllabic or more than one syllabic character as units evidently runs counter to the characteristics of the modern Chinese.

Secondly, the syllables of the foreign languages with an alphabetic system are based on vowels. The number of syllables in a word is determined by the number of vowels it contains. But in Chinese when viewed as a mere collection of characters, a character can only make a syllable in any case. As a result, such monosyllabic characters can never well match the polysyllabic words.

Thirdly, even if the corresponding lines in the translation contain as many syllables as in the original, yet the translation must be read in such a way that each group of two or three characters is recited in a breath. As a consequence, each character in the translation does not agree with each syllable in the original whether it is judged by its pause in time or by its effect in hearing.

The famous American translator G Rubasson says “Impossibility of translation does not exist in translation practice. But the translation ability is a matter of degree. We may have some loss during translation. If we take a responsible attitude to translation, we are not criticized by readers.” So we should not say which one of those versions is better, for they are all not satisfying but good in some aspects.

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