

A Comparative Study of the Three English Versions of Tao Yuanming's Retired Country Life

Lifang Chen

English Department

City College of Dongguan University of Technology
Dongguan, China

Abstract—Tao Yuanming, one of the earliest idyllists during the Eastern Jin period, has made a far-reaching impact on poets of later generations by contributing a lot of idylls. Among them, *Retired Country Life* is one of his greatest idylls that has been rendered into different English versions by enthusiastic Chinese and foreign scholars and appeal to readers home and abroad. Based on a comparative study of the three English versions of this poem respectively by Amy Lowell (1921), Prof. Weng Xianliang (1985) and Prof. Zhuo Zhenying (1996), this paper aims to discuss some of the problems in the translation of classical Chinese verse by relating to the translation strategies in this field. The result shows that the form of the poem that reflects the harmony between the melody and rhythm is as much important as the content. Meanwhile, the author proposes some translation strategies to cope with difficulties encountered in the process of rendering classical Chinese verse.

Keywords—comparative study; *Retired Country Life*; imagery; hermeneutics translation strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

The standard and criteria for classical poetry translation, especially for the translation of classical Chinese verse in English rhyme, are always controversial in the translation circle. Carrying the mission of cross-cultural communication and understanding, many translators invariably tend to focus on the form, original meaning and imagery, in other words, on how to faithfully and appropriately interpret the aforementioned elements wherein lays the wonderful beauty of Chinese poetry, without diminishing the taste of English-speaking readers.

Tao Yuanming, one of the earliest idyllist during the Eastern Jin period, has made a far-reaching impact on poets of later generations by contributing a lot of idylls, toasts and intonations of his own sentiments. Among them, the idylls depict the idyllic pastoral life of farming and drinking number the most, not only containing the poet's intimate ideals and sentiments but also representing his highest artistic achievement. Because of this, he was later termed the "Poet of the Fields." In his idylls, he "recreates the beauty of nature and of simplicity in a fresh, simple and natural style" (Zhuo, 1996: 64), and thus makes the greatest achievements in the Music-Institute poetry of his time. As the epitome of Tao's simple and natural language and his transcendental and

refined artistic conception, *Retired Country Life* is one of his greatest idylls that has been rendered into different English versions by enthusiastic Chinese and foreign scholars and appeal to readers home and abroad. The poem recounts why the poet has retired to farming, describes the tranquility of country life and expresses the poet's happy feelings over his return to nature. In it is embodied both the poet's and the Chinese concept of the unity of man and nature. Based on a comparative study of the three English versions of this poem respectively by Amy Lowell (1921), Prof. Weng Xianliang (1985) and Prof. Zhuo Zhenying (1996), this thesis aims to discuss some of the problems in the translation of classical Chinese verse by relating to the translation strategies in this field. It will show that the form of the poem that reflects the harmony between the melody and rhythm is as much important as the content. The chronological difference, the brevity of language and the density of images frequently result in the confusion of interpretation.

II. A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE TRANSLATION OF CHINESE CLASSICAL POETRY

In terms of form, different translators treat the poem differently: Weng Xianliang presents his translation into a free prose in three paragraphs; Amy Lowell arranges her translation into a prose poem in six stanzas; while Zhuo Zhenying well preserves the form and the metrical structure of Tao's poem by rendering it in twenty lines, every two of which rhyme in a neat manner. In another word, except Zhuo's version, both Weng's and Lowell's versions are unrhymed and written in a much less rigorous format. Weng structures his version in three parts in the form of paragraph according to his own understanding and division of the meanings of Tao's poem: He translates the first eight lines of the source text in his first paragraph, the next eight lines in the second, and the last four lines in the third. His version is the most irregular one, with its three paragraphs or its lines within not equalizing each other in length. More regular than Weng's, Lowell's unrhymed version of six stanzas contains thirty-three lines, with four to eight lines in each stanza. With a pretty different understanding of the meanings of the poem from Weng, Lowell divides her lines in a small but complete manner: She puts every four lines of the first sixteen lines in one stanza and the last four lines in two separate stanzas. By contrast, Zhuo makes no stanza division in his rhymed version and uses the iambic pentameter for the twenty lines

in order to be identical with the formal properties and the metrical structure of the original.

In terms of rules and form, the Chinese classical poetry can be divided into two categories — Old Verse and New Verse, with the period of Tang Dynasty being their dividing line. Originated from the oldest two-character and four-character poetry, Chinese classical poetry went through such transformations from the Sao-Style Poetry initiated by Qu Yuan as the rudiments for five-character and seven-character poetry, to the New Verse of strict rules during the Three Kingdoms of the Jin Dynasty and the Northern and Southern Dynasties as the result of the rise of phonology and the influence of folk songs of the time (Zhuo, 1996: 53). As to meter, New Verse is still flexible since the lines can be written in different lengths, and each two successive lines are not necessarily an antithetic couplet. Therefore, written in a transitional period, Tao's Retired Country Life still belongs to the category of the neat Old Verse of five characters. It consists of twenty lines, every two of which rhyme till the end in a rhyme-scheme of xaya, thus becoming characteristic of the whole poem.

Eugene A. Nida once put forward in his book *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation* that anything related to the text is meaningful, including the formal property of the language. Actually, for a long time past, the relation between form and content has been at once a most concerned and disputable topic in the translation circle. For literary translation, because the languages form usually plays a very important role in conveying the poet's emotions. People can no longer observe the rule in non-literary translation that when the conflict between them can't be reconciled, because the form has to be sacrificed to the content or meaning. More often than not, it is hard to draw a distinction between the form and the content of a poem. There is enough evidence to suggest that the language form is one of the two ingredients of poetry, supposing the poetry can be divided into the content and form. This is especially true of the Chinese Old Verse which is considered to be an independent category in Chinese literary history. The language form, regarded as the "thing-in-itself" of literary arts by the theorists of New Criticism, structuralism as well as semiotics, is very much meaningful, so to speak, and should be given prior consideration by a translator.

Due to the linguistic differences between Chinese and English, it is of course hardly possible to make every line of the English version contain the same number of words or to make sure that one word is spelled by the same number of letters as the other. In consequence, it is unlikely for any translator to perfectly represent the clean and neat form of Tao's five-character poem. As a complement to such a pity in English translation, Zhuo's deliberate adoption of iambic pentameter which is a common meter in English poetry has enough reason. Chinese poets embody the cadence of their poems from the aspects of length, pitch and stress of a "pause" (顿), which is just like the "foot" in English poetry. Considering the different accenting traditions between Chinese poetry and English poetry, Zhuo also goes beyond the rhyme-scheme of Tao's poem by altering the rhymes.

Chinese poetry, particularly the Old Verse, is characterized by its being broken into lines having the same length and rhythm as the unit; each of the lines should be complete in meaning; even if semantic completeness could not be achieved, breaks should be given between lines to achieve syllabic completeness, which is always given the priority in composing a poem. On the contrary, in English poetry, not every line is complete in meaning, and breaks need not be given between lines to achieve syllabic completeness. In light of such differences, Zhuo's arrangement is definitely the outcome of his cautious measure; his version attains to the effect of exhibiting the beautiful cadence of the source text and thus reads pleasant to the ears.

III. ANALYZING THE THREE ENGLISH VERSIONS OF RETIRED COUNTRY LIFE: A HERMENEUTIC PERSPECTIVE

With the development of hermeneutics, people have become more and more aware of the semantic blanks. As pointed out by the postmodernists, in addition to only being able to know the world through the words we use to describe it, we are also confronted with the problem that whenever people try to establish a certain reading of a text or expression, they allege other readings as the ground for their reading. In other words, "All meaning systems are open-ended systems of signs referring to signs. No concept can therefore have an ultimate, unequivocal meaning" (Wikipedia). Despite its equivocal nature, language still bears the greatest function of expressing ideas communicable to human beings; otherwise, mutual exchange of information and understanding would not be possible. Hermeneutics is considered a science because it has rules and these rules can be classified into an orderly system. It is considered an art because communication is flexible, and therefore a mechanical and rigid application of rules will sometimes distort the true meaning of a communication. With Schleiermacher, hermeneutics begins to stress the importance of the interpreter in the process of interpretation; he says that every problem of interpretation is a problem of understanding. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics focuses on the importance of the interpreter understanding the text as a necessary stage to interpreting it. Understanding, for him, does not simply come from reading the text, but involves knowledge of the historical context of the text and the psychology of the author. Agreeing with Schleiermacher's ideas, in this section, the author would like to quote some of the lines from the poem for the comparative study of the content in the three versions by the translators. The original Chinese version of the Retired Country Life is as follows:

少无适俗韵，性本爱丘山。
 误落尘网中，一去三十年。
 羁鸟恋旧林，池鱼思故渊。
 开荒南野际，守拙归园田。
 方宅十余亩，草屋八九间。
 榆柳荫后檐，桃李罗堂前。
 暧暧远人村，依依墟里烟。
 狗吠深巷中，鸡鸣桑树颠。

户庭无尘杂，虚室有余闲。

久在樊笼里，复得返自然。

- 误落尘网中，一去三十年。

But for thirteen years it was so I lived. (Lowell)

The number "three" in ancient Chinese is an ambiguous number which means many, like in such phrases as "三思而后行", (think twice before you leap) "三番四次"(again and again) and "三令五申"(repeated orders). Thus, "三十年"(thirty years) in this line is not exactly thirty years as regarded by Zhuo, but an utterance of Tao's lament over his so many years in his position as county magistrate. As Tao abdicated his position in the year 406, which was just thirteen years after the appointment in the year 393, its interpretation "thirteen years" given by Lowell and Weng might be better.

- 开荒南野际，受拙归田园。

Having retired to farming for character's sake, / In reclamation of the southern wastes I'm engaged. (Zhuo)

These two lines tell people the poet's enjoyable actions of returning to reclaim the wild southern moor and therefrom leading an idyllic pastoral life after his retirement. Probably out of her wild imagination, Lowell's translation of the phrase "田园" into "my walled garden with its quiet paths" is really strange. She elaborates the ideas of this couplet in four lines: "So I desired to clear and seed a patch of the wild southern moor. / And always a countryman at heart. / I have come back to the square enclosures of my fields / And to my walled garden with its quiet paths." By contrast, Weng's treatment of the couplet is too simple and neglects its essentials: "Now I am once more a simple farmer, tilling the long abandoned soil." Only Zhuo's version is the most appropriate in not only faithfully conveying the ideas, but also implicitly revealing the poet's aloof and understated manner: "Having retired to farming for character's sake, / In reclamation of the southern wastes I'm engaged."

- 方宅十余亩，草屋七八间。

Around my thatched house of nine rooms lies a track of land, which measures below twenty mu in all." (Zhuo)

The difficulty in dealing with the numerical translation occurs again in this couplet. Weng's avoidance of numerical translation by oversimplifying these two lines into "A few thatched huts in modest acres standing" is actually unwise and has deprived his own translation of reviving the numerical antithesis and balance in the couplet. Besides, Weng's adoption of the American unit of area "acre" as the equivalent to the Chinese unit of area "mu" (亩) is mistaken, for there is a discrepancy between the two units (One mu is equal to 6.667 ares or 0.165 acres). As emphasized by Dong Leshan in his book *The Cultural Misconception*, special attention should be paid to the translation of monetary and metric units, because there is always the problem of conversion involved. Likewise, such a problem is noticeable in the translation of these two lines. Both Zhuo's and Lowell's translations are proper in this sense:

"Around my thatched house of nine rooms lies a track

Of land, which measures below twenty mu in all." (Zhuo)

"Mine is a little property of ten mou or so,

A thatched house of eight or nine rooms." (Lowell)

- 榆柳荫后檐，桃李罗堂前。

The elms and willows shade the hindmost eaves, With peach and peach trees spread before the hall. (Lowell)

These two lines are the poet's elaborations of the surroundings of his humble house. Lowell's treatment of the orientations in the couplet is really redundant and groundless: "On the north side, the eaves are overhung / With the thick leaves of elm-tress, / And willow-trees break the strong force of the wind. / On the south, in front of the great hall, Peach-trees and plum-trees spread a net of branches / Before the distant view." As we can see in the source text, the poet tells us neither the direction of the front of his house, nor that of the back. In addition, Lowell's arrangement of the front on the south side and back on the north does not correspond to the architectural tradition kept by the Chinese people who usually prefer to have the front of their house face the north while the back the south.

- 暧暧远人村，依依墟里烟。狗吠深巷中，鸡鸣桑树颠。

A village is located some distance away, / Above whose chimneys wisps of smoke are hanging low. / At times from the deep lanes the dogs will bark and bay, / And cocks atop mulberry trees will proudly crow. (Zhuo)

The word "墟里" in the first couplet is similar to the word "墟落" (the village) in "渭川田家" 斜日照墟落，穷巷牛羊归 by Wang Wei, which also means "village;" hence, "墟里烟" refers to the smoke from kitchen chimneys. Again, Lowell's translation of these two lines is questionable: "The village is hazy, hazy, / And mist sucks over the open moor." Here, Lowell's double "hazy" for "暧暧" is indeed far-fetched; taking it for granted that the poet aims to create a sense of mystery and loneliness, she mistakes "墟里烟" for "mist...over the open moor," which is completely far from the artistic conception of tranquility, contentment and stability of country life as created through the imagery by the poet. In spite of not misinterpreting "墟里烟", (the smoke or mist in the village) Weng describes the village as "a dark mass of house," which somehow undermines such a positive artistic conception. Only Zhuo's version is referable: "A village is located some distance away, / Above whose chimneys wisps of smoke are hanging low. / At times from the deep lanes the dogs will bark and bay, / And cocks atop mulberry trees will proudly crow." What deserves our notice in Zhuo's version is his pluralizing the imagery "dogs" and "cocks," which is pretty different from the other two translators' rendering the two images in singular form. With such vivid descriptions of the animals as "bark and bay" and "proudly crow," Zhuo has set off a scene of the villagers living a well-off, happy and harmonious life.

As shown by the above examples, some mistranslations obviously result from the translator's inadequate knowledge of the Chinese culture. Whereas everyone's knowledge and experience is limited, the author's comparative study still echoes with an idea considering the translation to be cultural

mediation, and the translator the cultural mediator who, bearing in mind the purpose of cross-cultural communication, is in a position to exercise discretion in deciding the appropriate strategies for settling the cultural conflict. Except for some very little imperfection, Zhuo's version is on the whole an ideal one for bridging the gaps both between the two languages and the two cultures.

IV. COMPARING THE TRANSLATION STRATEGIES IN TREATING IMAGERY

Imagery, which refers to the mental pictures as the result of the fusion of subjective feelings and extrinsic matters, is another important element in Chinese ancient poetry. By virtue of the ideographic and pictographic nature of the Chinese language, Chinese poetry is essentially imagistic poetry. The Chinese language is concrete and direct and metaphorical, and Chinese poetry is noted for its virile laconism and austere pregnancy. The history of Chinese writing conditioned Chinese literature to its conciseness and precision. To make fewer words do more work was the cherished aim of literary training in ancient China. Since images need fewer connectives and convey more, it is only natural that they are built into the very texture of classic Chinese poetry. They either juxtapose with, or superimpose or melt into each other, and often form clusters of fused ideas impregnated with power and energy. It is no wonder that the champions of Imagism, Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, were infatuated with Chinese poetry.

In terms of sense, imagery can be categorized into visual imagery, auditory imagery, olfactory imagery, gustatory imagery and kinaesthetic imagery. It can also be divided into literal imagery and rhetorical imagery according to the relation between its denotation and connotation. In Tao Yuanming's *Retired Country Life*, phrases like "尘网" (enmeshed in public affairs), "樊笼" (cage) are rhetorical imagery, while "羁鸟" (caged bird), "池鱼" (the fish in the garden pool) are literal imagery; Visual imagery include "宅子" (the house), "桃李" (peach and plum trees), "榆柳" (elm and willow trees), "村落" (village), and "炊烟" (smoke); "狗吠" (dog barking) and "鸡鸣" (sound of cock) belong to auditory imagery; "开荒" (breaking of land) and "归田园" (return to countryside) should be kinaesthetic imagery.

Different translations of the rhetorical imagery are as follows:

"尘网", "樊笼"

Lowell: a dropped leaf snared under the dust the streets ... cage

Weng: enmeshed in public affairs ... abject servitude

Zhuo: net of worldly affairs ... a pent-up animal

And different translators render the literal imagery differently:

"羁鸟", "池鱼"

Lowell: ... caged bird ... the fish in the garden pool

Weng: ... caged bird ... a fish impounded

Zhuo: ... bird that is cag'd ... a fish in the pool

Through the above comparison, it can be seen that in handling the literal imagery, all the translators come up with nearly the same translation by doing literal translation. When it comes to translating the rhetorical imagery, a variety of renderings comes out, which suggests not only the complexity of translating rhetorical imagery, but also different considerations involved in this process. In general, there are three ways of translating rhetorical imagery as demonstrated by the above translations. The first way is to directly render out, in I. A. Richard's terminology, the vehicle of the metaphorical imagery, e.g. "cage." The second way is free translation, which may change the imagery or create a totally new image, such as Lowell's "a dropped leaf snared under the dust of streets" and Zhuo's "a pent-up animal." The third way is to render out both the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphorical imagery in such a formula "Vehicle +of +Tenor" as employed by Zhuo: "net of worldly affairs." Such a way of expression is just similar to expressions in English like "a flood of complaints" and "oceans of flowers," and it is safe to say that this way is comparatively more acceptable to the English-speaking readers. As regards Weng's "enmeshed in public affairs" and "abject servitude," their metaphorical implications are not very obvious because the vehicle has been concealed so that his version fails to restore the distinctive feature of the source text. At this rate, the third way is the ideal one of translating rhetorical imagery.

With regard to sensory imagery, all the translators by coincidence have done faithful renditions. By supposedly incorporating new components into the source text, they have more or less created a proper poetic atmosphere to help the readers appreciate the artistic conception in Tao's poem. The below underlined words and phrases are a few examples of new components created by the translators:

Lowell: "It was my nature to love the rooted hills, / The high hills which look upon the four edges of Heaven."

"And willow-trees break the strong force of the wind."

"And calm with the leisure of moonlight through an open door."

Weng: "in front, peach trees, plum trees, a fine array...this is my home."

"No social callers to stir the dust at my door, no worldly cares to rob me of peace and leisure."

Zhuo: "While peach and plum trees grow nicely in front of the hall."

"Above whose chimneys wisps of smoke are hanging low. / At times from the deep lanes the dogs will bark and bay, / And cocks atop mulberry trees will proudly crow."

The source-text oriented strategy tends to give the original color, keeping cultural names and concepts and imitating the original formal properties as much as possible. Nevertheless, the sensory imagery still belongs to the kind of cultural signs, deriving its message from the readers' experience. In other words, if the readers are different, this

kind of cultural components makes no sense. In this sense, it is in vain to retain the formal properties of the original because however rigorous the translation seems to be, communication can occur only when the readers are able to connect the unique formal properties on papers to images drawn from their own experience. Undoubtedly, with the accession of the above words and phrases as clarifications and illustrations, more colors and wit and artistic inventiveness have been added to the poem, if regardless of the standard and criteria for classical poetry translation. As the old Chinese saying goes: "As the intelligent love waters, so the benevolent adore mountains," these illustrative expressions have thrown light on the implication of the whole poem, which reveals the poet's unyielding and proud nature and his love for freedom and great rejoice over his return to nature. Moreover, as a channel for cultural mediation, they may also serve for the target readers who are devoid of essential knowledge of Chinese culture. Although the aim of translation is to introduce the cultural difference, the cultural difference should still be confined to such an extent that the target text is still accessible to the target readers. If translation is regarded as an exercise in cultural communication, the translator should be a cultural mediator instead of a mirror that returns image, for in this cross-cultural communication process the translator participates actively in modifying the source text so as to achieve the mutual understanding. The view considering the translator as cultural mediator helps him to make appropriate decisions as to the strategies of settling cultural conflict.

V. CONCLUSION

Poetry, which has enriched human language and merged into human culture, is a gem in world literature. It is a highly concise and musical literary genre wherein lies the soul of human culture and language. As the metrical structure of verse should undergo different phases of changes in its mother country, needless to say, explorations of different poetic forms can't be avoided in the process of poetry translation. With people's knowledge of poetry and poetry translation going deeper, both translators and readers have more and more realized the necessity of preserving the unique formal properties of poetry, which are pervaded by feeling, thoughts and meaning. Consequently, it is very natural to conclude that form and content should be well balanced in poetry translation, but if the conflict between the two can't be reconciled, the content or meaning has to give way to the form. It is thereby safe to say that translators must fully utilize the potential of the source language to revive the form of the original. While faithfully transmitting the content to the readers, translators need to exert more efforts in reproducing the formal properties which mostly embody the musical feature of poetry.

The translation of classical Chinese verse has gone through at least three phases from prosodic translation, prosaic translation and finally to prosodic translation. Such a course of changes is actually not an exception because there is an example to follow in the translation of Homer's epics. As a complement to the increasing intercultural communication and to the understanding of foreign culture,

it is a progress *de facto* rather than going backward; the defects that occur in the first phase are for sure to be eliminated in the last phase. Adopting three different forms to render Tao's poem, the three versions by Amy Lowell, Prof. Weng Xianliang and Prof. Zhuo Zhenying discussed in this thesis represent the three phases of such translation development. The author's comparative study has proved that both Lowell and Weng have failed to preserve the formal properties of the original; perhaps their formal arrangement can be applied to the translation of the Ci-poems of the Song Dynasty but not the Old Verse which is rather rigorous in form and metrical structure. Only Zhuo's version can be regarded as a perfect reproduction in this sense; his adoption of iambic pentameter to represent the rhymed five-character format is particularly a creation and will moreover be a reference for other translators in this circle.

As the imagistic Chinese poetry enables the reader to see the physical thing rather than put him through an abstract process, the American Imagists were fascinated with Chinese poetry and devoted themselves to eliminating as many function words with little semantic content of their own as possible and to producing imagist poems in the substantive language. This notion may offer a methodology for translators, notwithstanding that it will incur problems like the English-speaking readers, hindered by cultural differences, and can't appreciate the poetic artistic conception composed by related images. Such problems can be solved as long as the translators as cultural mediators make creative but appropriate decisions as to the strategies of settling cultural conflict. Carrying great significance, poetry translation is directly related to cross-cultural communication. In this process, what a translator needs to do is, on the one hand, to introduce the cultural information of the original so as to enrich the receiving culture, and on the other hand, to filtrate the cultural difference which would lead to the breakdown in the communication. It is at the translator's disposal to decide to what extent and in what way the cultural components of the original are transmitted in his or her translation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Dong, Leshan (1997). *The Cultural Misconception*. Beijing: Chinese Social Science Press.
- [2] Nida, Eugene A. & Jan de Waard (1986). *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation*. NY: Thomas Nelson Inc.
- [3] Zhuo, Zhenying (1996). *The Chinese Sentiments — As Expressed in 128 Oft-Quoted Poems (1100BC-AD1910)*. Guangzhou: Zhongshan University Press.
- [4] Zhuo, Zhenying (2003). *On the Key Issues in Translating Chinese Verse Into English*. Beijing: Chinese Science and Culture Press.
- [5] Zhang baohong. *Imagery and Chinese-English Poetic Translation — With Once More. Gardens and Fields (1) by Tao Yuanming as Example*. Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages. Vol. 28No. 4 July 2005.