

# The Image Variation of Li Bai in His Poem *The Last Words*\*

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**Abstract**—As one of the most famous Chinese ancient poets, Li Bai's poems are translated for English readers and there are also a lot of researches for the translations. Li Bai's image is varied in the English version by Gilles and the variation is analyzed from the key elements including alcohol, the moon and Li Bai's own shadow. However, the image of the poet reflects the image of Gilles as a reader, an observer and a writer.

**Keywords**—image variation; *The Last Words*; English translation; acceptance

## I. INTRODUCTION

Li Bai's poems are regarded as gems in Chinese literature, and are accepted as English version in western countries. Since Sir John Francis Davis (1795 – 1890), an English diplomat and sinologist, published an essay to introduce Chinese poem in which there are two poems by Li Bai on *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1830, Li Bai's poems begin their translation and acceptance in the English world. [1] Till nowadays, Li Bai has been the second poet whose poems are translated into English. [2]

Compared with the translation history of Li Bai's poems, the history of the translation researches which begins from 1990s is somewhat short, and the first scholars are Liao Zhiqin and Wen Jun. After them, there are great achievements with the various perspectives such as the general transmission and research of Li Bai's poems in America, the subjective studies and the sponsors of translators. However, there are some disadvantages. For example, more researches are given to the some famous poems such as *Night Thoughts* ("静夜思"), *The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter* ("长干行") and *Farewell* ("送友人"), and less academic attention to others. As far as *Last Words* ("月下独酌") concerned, main research is about the translation strategies, methods, styles and influences with the contrast from different English versions are given more attention, and version by Ezra Pound attracts more academic eyeballs. In a word, how to realize the similar meanings between the original poem and its translation is the main task for most of the scholars. However, the differences and variety of Li Bai's

images in the original poem and the translation by Herbert Allen Gilles is the theme in this paper.

## II. THE IMAGE OF LI BAI IN *THE LAST WORDS*

In recent years, when the Chinese culture is spread abroad for the foreign countries and cultural meanings are connoted in the images, the cross-cultural researches for the images of the poets are significantly meaningful.

The famous founder of comparative literature, famous French scholar Jean-Marie Carré coins the word "imageology", which comes from French "imagologies" and means the mutual interpretation for various ethnic groups, travelogues and imaginations. [3] The other representative of comparative literature scholar Daniel-Henri Pageaux believes that image is the recognition for the foreign countries in the process of literalization and socialization, and it is the description for the others, which is the special expression for social imaginaire. This expression of social imaginaire is borrowed from the historians. [3] Then, the French scholar, Jean-Marc Moura, thinks that the image is, in fact, the foreign image which is created by the foreign writers according to their special feelings. [3] Based on these researches, Chinese professor of comparative literature, Cao Shunqing, gives his own theory of image. At first, Cao regards image is the connotational description for the certain historical and cultural reality and is the combination of the feeling and thoughts from the writer who is both the observer and the imaginer so far as the generative mechanism and all the images are created or description by a certain person or group with some approaches. Then, Cao emphasizes that an image is not the copy for the reality and the real value for the image research is not the verification and contrast of the similarities between the original image and the varied one, but the cultural modes of the image creator expressed in the images. [4] Therefore, it can be concluded that an image is the subjective description from the observer to the foreign culture and is the reconstruction in the foreign culture, which involves internal and external researches for the texts. All these are the common foundation with the translation research. When cultural turn of translation began in 1970s and was widely accepted in 1990s, the translation activities have been dealt with cultural activities and cultural construction between the original and target language cultures as far as the translation theories and approaches concerned. The beginning, processes and the effects are

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described from the perspective of target language culture for the cultural turn of translation, and translation is studied as the power of cultural construction and the expression of cultural identification. Because of the cultural turn, the study of external context is paid the same attention as the internal context, and translation itself is the important approach of the image reconstruction in the foreign culture. Therefore, it is the function of translation to reconstruct the image of Li Bai in the English world.

According to He Nianlong, a Chinese famous scholar, the subjective world of the poet is the direct object of the theme in his poems, such as Qu Yuan, Li He and Li Bai. That is, Li Bai precedes the poets of his times and even the other romantic poets in Chinese literary history to show himself in his poems. In them, different aspects of his subjective world are expressed vividly, all kinds of feelings are shown fully and his own image is clear and vivid. [5] The typical example is *The Last Words*, which is also one of the representatives for the creation of his self-image, and his image is constructed with alcohol, the moon and his own shadow.

"Drinking Alone under the Moon"

Amid the flowers, from a pot of wine,

I drink alone beneath the bright moonshine.

I raise my cup to invite the Moon who blends,

Her light with my Shadow and we're three friends.

The Moon does not know how to drink her share;

In vain my Shadow follows me here and there.

Together with them for the time I stay,

And make merry before spring's spent away.

I sing and the Moon lingers to hear my song,

My shadow's a mess while I dance along.

Sober, we part and each may go his way.

Our friendship will outshine all earthly love,

Next time we'll meet beyond the stars above. (By Yuanchong Xu)

It is acknowledged that Li Bai always constructs his own image with "alcohol", and many other famous poets, such as Dufu, also show the importance of alcohol in their poems. In fact, the culture of alcohol which is found originally in *The She King* ("诗经"), evolves with the development of poetry since alcohol is the most beloved fashion for the poets in the Tang dynasty. It is Li Bai who pushes the culture of alcohol to its peak with his poems, and he expresses his feelings, makes friends and even tries to get rid of sadness with alcohol. In this poem, Li Bai drinks alcohol because of the failure of his official career. "Drinking alone" is the key for this poem, but the poet gives the readers his happy drinking along with the moon and his own shadow. With the help of alcohol, the pleased atmosphere is stressed which shows his more loneliness on the contrary. Li Bai gives his drinking

more connotations and the alcohol is combined with his feelings, and the image of immortal is constructed.

The moon is the second factor for the construction of Li Bai's image in Chinese literature. In fact, as a special image, the moon is never absent. More than two hundred poems are written about the moon for over one thousand poems by Li Bai,<sup>1</sup> and it is his poems to push the culture of the moon in Chinese poetry forward, since the moon is the poetic background in *The She King* and the emotional sustenance in Wei and Jin Dynasties and the peak in Tang Dynasty. In this poem, the moon is not only the poetic background with the poet's feelings and loneliness, but also one of the subjects. Here, much more philosophically connotational meanings are given to the moon, which agrees spiritually with the poet.

As far as the commonly-used images in Li Bai's poems are concerned, "shadow" is also significant besides alcohol and the moon. "Shadow" is a natural phenomenon, but it is its emptiness that plenty of meanings can be contained in it. The shadows in Li Bai's poems are full of vitality, and readers can be led to the unreal realm. As the comments by Hengtanguishi, the editor of *300 Poems from Tang Dynasty*, in the poem, three subjects are created although there is only one person, and the poet, accompanied with the moon and shadows, is more lonely. [6]

Therefore, in *The Last Words*, Li Bai is an immortal who attempts to avoid the spirit and worldly sadness, and then the loneliness from him is combined with the nature and the harmony between the nature and the poet is realized.

### III. THE IMAGE VARIATION OF LI BAI IN *THE LAST WORDS*

Over the past fifty years, there are even more researches to the English translation of Li Bai's poems than those to *The She King*. [7] English diplomat, Sir John Francis Davis (1795-1890) is the first sinologist to translate and study Li Bai's poems. However, it is Herbert Allen Giles (1845-1935) who introduces Li Bai and his poems to the western readers as the special research topic, and *The Last Words* is one of the typical examples.

An arbor of flowers

and a kettle of wine:

Alas! In the bowers

no companion is mine.

Then the moon sheds her rays

on my goblet and me,

And my shadow betrays

we're a party of three!

Thou' the moon cannot swallow

her share of the grog.

<sup>1</sup> There are still arguments for the total numbers for Li Bai's poems. According to Gu Zhengyang, the number is 1050, but the number in this paper is cited from *Complete Works of Li Bai* published in 1996 by Shanghai Classics Publishing House.

And my shadow must follow  
 wherever I jog,  
 Yet their friendship I'll borrow  
 and gaily carouse.  
 And laugh away sorrow  
 while spring-time allows.  
 See the moon—how she dances  
 response to my song;  
 See my shadow—it dances  
 so lightly along!  
 While sober I feel,  
 you are both my good friends;  
 While drunken I reel,  
 our companionship ends.  
 But we'll soon have a greeting  
 without a goodbye,  
 At our next merry meeting  
 away in the sky. (Tr. Herbert A. Giles)

According to Professor Cao, the production process of the image is comparatively subjective and the process is variation for the foreign historical and cultural reality through relevant psychological mechanism. [3] Variation of images in the translation is unavoidable, and the purpose of the variation is the acceptance of readers.

At first, as far as the form is concerned, there are more lines in the English version by Gilles than those of the original poem. One sentence or one line, in the original poem is divided into two, and then the number of the lines in the English version is doubled. Gilles attempts to translate the poem with the form of English poem. For example, the sentence "Amid the flowers, from a pot of wine" is interpreted as two lines, that is, "An arbor of *flowers*" and "and a kettle of wine", and the second line is indented. The aim of the form variation is to give readers the language and the form they are familiar. Secondly, each line in the English version contains six feet and three syllables. In all, there are not only the features of sonnet but also the creation because of the contemporary literary mainstream which stresses strict and stable rhythms. [8] The variation of rhymes and rhythms is for the contemporary English readers' reading habit.

Second, the variations of images are shown in the translation of sentences and words. The typical example of the image variation in the sentence translation is "I raise my cup to invite the Moon who blends", which is translated as "Then the moon sheds her rays on my goblet and me". Here, "明月" is "the moon", and the immortal atmosphere is decreased without the brightness of the moon. The other example is the two sentences of "I sing and the Moon lingers to hear my song; my shadow's a mess while I dance along",

in which the subject is replaced as the moon and the shadow. Without the help of the moon the shadow, Li Bai is just a poet who is drinking alcohol at night. Furthermore, some words, such as "grog", "carouse", "sober" and "drunken", show the image of a drunk to the readers in the translation, and the function of "thou" with the classic style make Li Bai become a sad drunk in the Victorian period.

Besides translating Chinese ancient poems, Gilles summarizes the poets' lifetime with vivid and interesting language. He thinks that Li Bai (705-762) is the greatest poet in China, known as "the exiled angel" because of his dissolute behaviors. He is the initiator of the club in which the members are addicted to drinking alcohol. He is legendarily dead of falling into water from the boat because he tries to scoop up the shadow of the moon in the water. [9] Therefore, the image of Li Bai is a drunk in the Gilles' version instead of the immortal who is drinking alcohol with the moon and his shadow in Chinese traditional poem reading.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It is clear that there are differences between Li Bai's images in Chinese ancient poems and in English version by Gilles, and the differences are the variations. A lot of internal and external causes can be found for the variation. The external causes involve historical, social and literary factors and the internal causes are about the lifetime and education of Gilles.

Therefore, the theory of image variation provides the strong interpretation for the poet's image variation and it is the Gilles' acceptable context which decides Li Bai's image by Gilles, or Li Bai's image by Gilles connotes Gilles' own image as a reader, an observer and a writer.

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