A Study of Poetry Translation Taking the Eight English Versions of *Jing Ye Si* as an Example

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Abstract—Poetry translation is quite different from the translation of materials of other style because of the word employed, the artistic conception and other necessary points. This paper introduces the criteria of poetry translation, the analyzes the different characteristics of Chinese and Western poetry which must be taken into consideration in translating, introduces Li Bai's poem, *Jing Ye Si* and the eight English versions of it, and finally studies them from the perspective of diction, rhymes and style. Half of the chosen versions of *Jing Ye Si* are in prosody, and the other half in prosaism. From the comparison tables we can see that prosody versions are more faithful to the content of the original, while prosaism versions are much better in rebuilding the atmosphere. Since *Jing Ye Si* is a poem which goes strictly to the rules of Chinese poetry, and because of the translation criteria of faithfulness to the style of the original, the author believes that prosody versions are better than prosaism versions.

Keywords—poetry translation; characteristics of Chinese and western poetry; Jing Ye Si; English version

I. INTRODUCTION

In the translation circles there used to be two contending regimes, namely, those holding that translation is scientific and the other believing that it is artistic. In this paper, the author believes that poetry translation absolutely involves artistic elements.

Susan Bassnett (Bassnett & Lefevere, 2001:74) says that if translation is, as Lefevere and others claim, rewriting, then the relationship between writer and rewriter has to be established as productive. Translations of poems are part of a process of reading continuity. Writers create for readers, and the power of the reader to remake the text is fundamental. Different translators will produce different translations. What matters in the translation of poetry is that the translator should be drawn into the poem that he or she then seeks to transpose it creatively, through the pleasure generated by the reading. Susan thinks that poetry has different function in different cultural contexts. This is of great significance for the translator, for such cultural differences may well affect the actual process of translating. Poetry as cultural capital cannot be consistently measured across all cultures equally.

Many writers have struggled to define the difficulties of translating poetry. Shelley (1965:109) famously declared that

It were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as to seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower—and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.

This passage is sometimes taken as an example of the impossibility of translation. It is as absurd to consider subjecting a flower to scientific analysis to determine the basis of its scent and colour as it is to try and render a poem written in one language into another. But there is another way to read Shelley's very graphic description of the difficulties of the growth. It is not an imagery of loss and decay. He argues that though a poem cannot be transfused from one language to another, it can nevertheless be transplanted. The seed can be placed in new soil, for a new plant to develop. The task of the translator must then be to determine and locate that seed and to set about its transplantation. (Bassnett & Lefevere, 2001:58)

In China, the famous translator Xu Yuanchong puts forward the criteria of "three kinds of aesthetics" which consists of "the aesthetics in meaning", "the aesthetics in tone" and "the aesthetics in form".

II. THE CHARACTERISTIC OF POETRY IN CHINA AND IN THE WEST

Besides the criteria of poetry translation, different characteristics of Chinese and western poetry are of great importance and ought to be taken into consideration.

A. Poetry in the West

Poetic forms in English are nothing but forms, which is easy to learn or to imitate. But mastering only forms does not make one a good poet.

What follows is the definition of some basic terms in poetry, to make it easier to understand the English poetic forms.

- Line: The sequence of words printed as a separate entity on the page.

- Meter: The pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables or the units of stress pattern. Meter is a systematic regularity in rhythm. It creates and

organizes content, giving emphasis to words or elements that would otherwise escape attention: the tighter the meter, the more expressive can be small departures from the norm. Meter gives dignity and memorability, conveys tempo, mood, the subtle shifts in evidence, passion and persuasion beyond what is possible in prose. In the hands of great master like Shakespeare, meter provides grace, energy, elevation, expressiveness and a convincing approximation to everyday speech.

- Metric Line: A line named according to the number of feet composing it (including for instance monometer, dimeter, trimester, ect.)

- Rhyme Scheme: The pattern of rhymed words. Stanzas are often linked by their rhyme scheme. Rhyme scheme is lacking in some modern poetry.

- Rhythm: A variable pattern in the beat of stresses in the stream of sound. Rhythm can also be defined as the sense of movement attributable to the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Although rhythm is sometimes used to signify meter, it includes tempo and the natural fluctuations of movement.

1) Poetry types and styles in English: The following is a list of poetry types and styles that we have learned about, used and discovered through many different sources. Each type will be given a detailed explanation.

- Ballad: A narrative poem which is, or originally was, meant to be sung. Ballads are the narrative species of folk songs, which originate, and are communicated orally. The narrator begins with the climactic episode, tells the story by means of action and dialogue, and tells it without self-reference or the expression of personal attitudes or feelings.

- Blank Verse: A kind of unrhymed iambic pentameter, used in Shakespeare's dramas and Milton's 'Paradise Lost', is one of the most common metrical patterns in English poetry.

- Cinquain: A poetic form invented by Adelaid Crapsey, an American poet. The five lines of the poem contain, in order, two, four, six, eight, and two syllables. Iambic meter prevails.

- Chorus: Among the ancient Greeks the chorus was a group of people, wearing masks, who sang or chanted verse while performing dance-like maneuvers at religious festivals. Choruses also served as commentators on the characters and events who expressed traditional moral, religious and social attitudes. During the Elizabethan Age the term "chorus" was applied to a single person who spoke the prologue and epilogue to a play and sometimes introduced each at as well.

- Couplet: Two successive lines of poetry with end-words that rhyme.

- Epic: Long narrative poem, majestic both in theme and style. Epics deal with legendary or historical events of national or universal significance, involving action of broad sweep and grandeur.

- Epigram: In literature, a terse, pointed, frequently witty observation, often in verse.

- Free Verse: A fluid form of poetry which conforms to no set rules.

- Idyll: Expression of experience of serene happiness; an experience or period of serene and carefree happiness, usually in beautiful surroundings and often in the context of a romantic relationship.

- Limerick: A light or humorous verse form of five lines in which lines one, two and five are of three feet and lines three and four are of two feet, with a rhyme scheme of "a a b b a".

- Nursery Rhyme: A short poem for children written in rhyming verse and handed down in folklore.

- Ode: A lyric poem, usually expressing exalted emotion in a complex scheme of rhyme and meter.

- Sonnet: Fourteen-line rhyming poem with a set structure; a short poem with fourteen lines, usually ten-syllable rhyming lines, divided into two, three, or four sections. There are many rhyming patterns for sonnets, and they are usually written in iambic pentameter.

In addition to creating balanced rhythms or cadence through the use of meter, poets give richness to their language through shadings of sound, orchestrating the musical quality of vowel and consonants through the words they use. Perhaps the most familiar form of sound patterning is end-rhyme, a similarity of sound carried by word endings. It began as an aspect of oral poetry (poetry composed, transmitted, or performed orally rather than through writing), and was probably intended to help people memorize poems. Over centuries written verse forms developed using rhyme in set patterns known as rhyme schemes.

The classical Greek philosopher Aristotle (Pamela A. Smith, 1972:325) in his 'Poetics' declared metaphor one of the highest achievements of poetic style: "It is the token of genius. For the right use of metaphor means an eye for resemblances."

2) Content of English poetry: Poetry all over the world is the same in the view of content. Poet create poems to express their feelings to the nature, to human beings, to some event, no matter the feeling is love or abomination.

Within a given culture a conventional image—an image with a long history—reminds people of thoughts, feelings, and ideas that have collected around that image over time. For example, one of the most common Western images in poetry is the moon. It is also a common image in Eastern poetry but carries different meanings. In Greek and Roman myth, in which Western culture originated, the moon was associated with the goddess Artemis (called Diana by the Romans). This association, along with the moon's shifting shapes, led to a shared understanding of the moon as an

image of women's indifference, changeability, elusiveness, and inconstancy. Even when not attached specifically to a particular woman, the image evoked a principle of change and flux that was thought of as essentially feminine.

B. Poetry in China

Unlike English poetic forms, the Chinese poems have much simpler forms. Stanzas are usually two, each consisting of four lines which have either five characters or seven characters. The rhyming scheme is also simple with even-numbered lines rhymed with each other.

In modern China, there are fewer restrictions on poetic forms and free verse become more and more popular, but many still keep the traditional style sticking to the poetic forms strictly. The new "free verse" style is not taking a dominant position yet.

As for themes and contents in Chinese poetic tradition, Zhu Guangqian(1987) divides ancient poetry into three categories: funny poems; riddles; play of words. Bai Juyi, a Tang Dynasty popular poet, holds that poets must take up the responsibility of speaking the truth and pointing out faults of the governing class so they could refrain from oppressing the common people too harshly. Wang Shizhen, a Ming Dynasty poet, believes that to write about poverty, old age, grief and sickness or a life of instability and un-safety is good poems while the opposite (wealth and high position) is considered bad poems, though in the real world these things are what are admired and adored. Wang Guowei, a poet and poetic theorist in the Qing Dynasty, proposes that all poems are good if they express the poets' real true exalted emotions. Many others firmly believe poetry expresses a kind of 'yijing', which should be considered most important above anything else but which is an elusive concept and can hardly be put into clear words. For them, form is far less important. However, the author assumes poetry is a combination of both form and content, with content carrying more weight than form.

III. OVERVIEW OF LI BAI'S *JING YE SI*

In this part, an overview of the poem Jing Ye Si is given, which is followed by the introduction of the eight English versions of it.

A. An Overview of the Poem

Jing Ye Si is one of the representative poems by Li Bai, the Tang Dynasty poet, and Chinese people chant it for centuries.

The original Chinese poem that is going to be discussed is the following one:

静夜思

（李白）

床前明月光，疑是地上霜。

举头望明月，低头思故乡。

We can easily get the subject of the poem: the poet is expressing his emotion of missing home. The most important word in the title is "思", and all of the other lines are talking about or showing this expression of "missing home". So, the things mentioned in the following four lines should be related to the subject of the poem, which goes from the title to the last word.

After reading the poem, we can even picture out the concrete environment and the detailed process the poem is created:

It is in a common quiet autumn night with the full moon in the sky. Bathing in the cool and bright moon light in silence, the author, who is leading a wandering life in a strange land, casually raises his head and sees the moon. Moonlight shines and the ground looks white, just like there is frost on the ground. The scene stimulates his thought of home. And at the moment he sees the moon, his mind flies to the home where he grow up and to his family.

The words in the poem are simple, and the subject is common. But this poem can evoke a sympathetic response to those who are wandering out of home.

In order to analyze the poem, several points should be made sure in reading it.

1) Whose bed is the moonlight before?

2) Who is the sensor? Or in another way, who is wondering, who lifts up his\her head, whose head is down and who is missing home?

3) What is wondered to be frost?

4) What roles do the nouns "床", "霜", "月" play in the poem?

There are three images in the poem: the image of "床", "霜" and "月". These three images would be discussed line by line in the following part.

B. The Eight English Versions Jing Ye Si

This paper collected eight English versions of this famous poem. The eight English versions of *Jing Ye Si* employed in this paper are written respectively by Mr. Mao Xiaoyu, Mr. Zhao Zhentao, Mr. Huang Xinqu, Herbert A. Giles from Cambridge University, Mr. Weng Xianliang, Mr. Witter Bynner, the American poet and expert of Chinese literature history, S. Obata, a Japanaese translator, and Amy Lowell, the female American poet. The first four versions are in the form of prosody, the others in the form of prosaism. The following are the eight English versions of the poem:

- Homesickness at the Tranquil Night

Before my bed I see bright moonlight

I wonder if it's frost on the floor

I watch the bright moon as I raise my head

I miss while stooping my hometown

— Translated by Mao Xiaoyu

- Quiet Night Thoughts

Moonlight before my bed

Could it be frost instead?

Head up I watch the moon

Head down I think of home

— Translated by Zhao Zhentao

- Thoughts on a Silent Night

A gleam of light streams down over my bed

I wonder if it's the frost on the ground

Raising my eyes I gaze at the bright moon

Lowering my head I miss my home town

— Translated by Huang Xinqu

- Night Thoughts

I wake, and moonbeams play around my bed,

Glittering like hoar-frost to my wandering eyes;

Up towards the glorious moon I raise my head,

Then lay me down---and thoughts of home arise.

— Translated by Herbert A Giles)

- Nostalgia

A splash of white on my bedroom floor. Hoarfrost?

I raise my eyes to the moon, the same moon.

As scenes long past come to mind, my eyes fall again on the splash of white,

and my heart aches for home.

— Translated by Weng Xianliang

- In the Quiet Night

So bright a gleam on the foot of my bed

Could there have been a frost already

Lifting my head to look I found that it was moonlight

Sinking back again

I thought suddenly of home

— Translated by Witter Bynner

- Night Thoughts

In front of my bed the moonlight is very bright.

I wonder if that can be frost on the floor?

I lift up my head and look at the full moon, the dazzling moon.

I drop my head, and think of the home of old days.

— Translated by Amy Lowell

- On a Quiet Night

I saw the moonlight before my couch,

And wondered if it were not the frost on the ground.

I raised my head and looked out on the mountain moon,

I bowed my head and thought of my far-off home.

— Translated by S Obata

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EIGHT ENGLISH VERSIONS

Among the prosody patterns, Mr. Mao Xiaoyu is an expert of Indian art who has an enormous knowledge on Buddhism; Mr. Zhao Zhentao and Mr. Huang Xinqu's works are both in prosody pattern and in a rhyme of "a a b b". So they are chosen for a comparative study. Mr. Zhao's translation is considered in this paper the best one. And the other prosody work composed by Herbert A. Giles is in rhyme of "a b a b" as Mr. Mao Xiaoyu's. Prosaism pieces are respectively composed by a Chinese, Japanese, an American and a female poet.

Can these English versions go with the artistic conception of the original? Can they be measured by the criteria of "faithfulness", "expressiveness" and "elegance"? After the comparison, it would be clear that these versions are quite different in the title translation, the words employed, the rewriting style, and each of them has unique characteristics.

The words employed in the original poem are simple and easy to be understood, and also the artistic conception and the connotation are abundant and magnificent. Therefore, the difference in the translators' points of view, in the translating methods and the readers' feelings are all matters whether the translation work is good or not.

The following tables are the comparative analysis of the eight English versions from the aspect of the dictions employed, the rhymes and the translating styles.

A. Diction

The words employed in original poem are extremely concise. In employing words, Li Bai's poetry absorbs the spirit of folk songs of Southern and Northern Dynasties, which can show tremendous sense with a few words. There are totally twenty characters. With these twenty words, the feeling of missing home pours out like a spring. With simple words, the whole poem enjoys a deep significance and deserves a good taste. The words employed in the English versions should be faithful to the original so as to go with the artistic conception of the original, as shown in "Table I' and "Table II".

TABLE I.   DIFFERENT TRANSLATIONS OF THE NOUNS

English nouns / versions	床	明月光	地	霜
Mao Xiaoyu	bed	bright moonlight	the floor	frost
Zhao Zhentao	bed	moonlight	——	frost
Huang Xinqu	bed	a gleam of light	the ground	frost
Giles	bed	moonbeams	——	hoar-frost
Weng Xianliang	bedroom	a splash of white	floor	hoarfrost
Bynner	bed	so bright a gleam	the foot	frost
Lowell	bed	moonlight	the floor	frost
Obata	couch	moonlight	the ground	frost

TABLE II.   DIFFERENT TRANSLATIONS OF THE NOUNS

English nouns / versions	头	明月	故乡
Mao Xiaoyu	head	the bright moon	hometown
Zhao Zhentao	head	the moon	home
Huang Xinqu	eyes	the bright moon	home town
Giles	head	the glorious moon	home
Weng Xianliang	eyes	the moon, the same moon	home
Bynner	head	moonlight	home
Lowell	head	the full moon, the dazzling moon	home of old days
Obata	head	the mountain moon	far-off home

In these eight English versions, the nouns are translated into different English nouns respectively. For example, "床" is translated into "bed", "couch" and "bedroom"; "地" into "ground", "the foot" and "floor"; "明月" into "moonlight", "moon", "the bright moon", "dazzling moon" and so on; "故乡" into "home", "far-off home", "hometown", as shown in "Table III".

TABLE III.   DIFFERENT TRANSLATIONS OF THE VERBS

English verbs / versions	疑	举	望	低	思
Mao Xiaoyu	wonder	raise	watch	stooping	miss
Zhao Zhentao	?	head up	watch	head down	think of
Huang Xinqu	wonder	raising	gaze at	lowering	miss
Giles	like	raise	towards	lay down	thought arise
Weng Xianliang	?	raise	(raise) to	fall	aches for
Bynner	?	lifting	found	sinking back	thought of
Lowell	wonder	lift up	look at	drop	think of
Obata	wondered	raised	looked	bowed	thought of

The verbs are in the same condition too. For example, "疑" is translated into "wonder" or with question sentences "Could it be frost instead?" , "Hoarfrost?" and "Could there have been a frost already?"; "举" into "lift", "lift up", "raise", "head up"; "望" into "gaze at", "look", "look at", "find", "watch"; "低" into "stoop", "head down", "lower", "lay down", "fall", "sink back", "bow", "drop"; "思" into "think of", "dream", "miss", "aches for", "thought arise" and so on.

B. Rhymes

Both Chinese and English poetry are fastidious in the beauty of cadence. Although their rhymes are quite different, they do have similarities. For example, Chinese "平仄" and "仄平" has the same function with English "lambus" and "trochee". English classical poem takes foot as the smallest unit, and stress syllables alternate with non-stress syllables to form cadence. In translating Chinese poem Jing Ye Si, combining with the Chinese rule of "the first line is not necessary to jingle, but even lines must be in rhyme",

according to the English poetry custom, there are three kinds of method to deal with.

The first one is to deal it with the rhyme pattern of "a a b b", which is taken by English versions composed by Zhao and Huang; the second pattern of "a b a b", which is taken by Mao, Giles and Weng; the others are in the pattern of no rhyme as a piece of prose. Because of the enormous difference between Chinese and English, in translating Chinese poem into English, the principle of "faithfulness", "expressiveness" and "elegance" is hard to achieve. Take rhyme where needs it, and change the form where does not need rhyme. It should never be done to take rhyme in order to make the form neat if it does harm to recur the exact meaning of the original.

Among the eight versions, Huang's is better than the others in the aspect of using rhymes, because it has four lines, which is the same with the original. And it generally goes with the pattern of the original:

- light + streams + bed

- wonder + frost + ground

- raise + gaze + moon

- lower + miss + town

C. Style

Translation is difficult; to translate poetry is more difficult; to handle the style in translating poetry is the most difficult. Poetry tells will, as the saying goes, "The writing shows the nature of the writer". A piece of poem always shows the style and nature of the poet, no matter brightly or connotatively. The main style of Li Bai's poems is like "a lotus comes from the clean water, and only nature could make it so beautiful". The English version should go with the original simple style as much as possible. Zhao's version is the best one to display this point. It mainly shows in the following three aspects:

- The present tense is used in the first sentence. The connotation of the whole poem is exhibited with the prepositional phrase "moonlight before my bed", which anatomizes to the original feeling of missing home in the aspect of both time and space.

- The second sentence is translated into a question "Could it be frost instead?" Not only it properly goes with the original but also the word "instead" responds to the end rhyme of the first sentence.

- In terms of sentence pattern, the number of the characters and sentences, this version is approximately faithful to the original.

V. CONCLUSION

The characteristics of poetry in the West and in China are compared in an elaborate way. It is these very characteristics that form the difficulty in translating Chinese poems into English ones. As mentioned above, comparing different versions of the same poem is one of the most useful critical methods for approaching translation. In this way, we can see the diversity of translation strategies used which could be located in a cultural context.

Eight English versions of Li Bai's Jing Ye Si are collected in this paper. And a comparison between these versions and the original is provided from the viewpoint of diction, rhymes and style. Half of the chosen versions of Jing Ye Si are in prosody, and the other half in prosaism. From the comparison tables we can see that prosody versions are more faithful to the content of the original, while prosaism versions are much better in rebuilding the atmosphere.

Since Jing Ye Si is a poem which goes strictly to the rules of Chinese poetry, and because of the translation criteria of faithfulness to the style of the original, the author believes that prosody versions are better than prosaism versions.

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