

On Ezra Pound's Translation of the Chinese Poem "The City of Choan" from the Perspective of Translator's Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT. *Chinese poems contain unique prosodic rules and meaningful images which are difficult to understand for the western readers. In order to transfer the atmosphere and connotations of the original poem "The City of Choan", Ezra Pound exerted the translator's subjectivity and translated the Chinese poem into one with a typical English poetry style in the aspects of rhyme and rhythm and the arrangement of lines. However, the translation still maintains some typical Chinese images, but these are not like the ones in the original poem. They are different completely or to a certain degree but they can be understood more easily by the target readers. Pound's translation activities can provide some reference for us to translate ancient Chinese poems into English.*

Keywords: *"The City of Choan", Ezra Pound's translation, Chinese poem, translator's subjectivity*

1. Introduction

Translation is a complex activity, which involves not only the conversion at the linguistic level, but also the exchange of two cultures. Traditional translation theories regard "faithfulness to the original text" as a rule that cannot be violated, thus suppressing the translator's creativity in translation activities. Ezra Pound was a pioneer in modern American and English poetry and the main initiator of imagism. In the process of poetry creation and translation, he pursued a way of "making it new" and innovated poetry with an advanced concept. In poetry translation, especially in the translation of Chinese poetry, Pound fully exerted the translator's

subjectivity, and translated ancient Chinese poems into easy-to-accept ones for the English and American readers according to his own understanding. Through this way, the traditional Chinese culture has been spread widely in the western world. This paper appreciates Pound's English translation of "The City of Choan" written by the famous ancient Chinese poet Li Bai from the perspective of translator's subjectivity in three aspects, namely imagery, rhyme and rhythm, and arrangement of lines.

2. Translator's subjectivity

Translator's subjectivity refers to the subjective involvement of the translator as the subject in the translation activities under the premise of respecting the original text [1]. As for subjective involvement, it is related with modern theories in which translators' importance is highlighted and their understanding and interpretation are stressed [2]. It should include such features as the translator's cultural consciousness, reader awareness, personal traits, social and ideological positions, linguistic competence, aesthetic tendency and creativity [3]. It can be seen from the above definition that the translator's subjectivity does not mean that the translator can completely forget the original text and show no faith to it. Translator's subjectivity is to exert subjective initiative on the basis of respecting the original text, so that the translation can achieve a specific translation purpose, and it can be accepted by the specific readers of the target language. The translator consciously or unconsciously selects some texts and adopts some measures in the process of translation to generate target texts, which are absorbed and internalized by the target readers and exert a certain influence on the culture of the target language. Also, translation is required if a country wants to spread its culture to the world. All these need the translator's subjectivity because the translation should be understood by the target readers before it plays a role. This is especially true for literary translation, where poetry translation has always been the most difficult part to overcome because of its special rhyme and rhythm requirements and unique way to express itself. The translator needs to play the role of subjectivity more actively in poetry translation so that a better balance between the two cultures on the basis of respecting the original text can be achieved.

3. The Chinese poem and Pound's English translation

This poem "The City of Choan" was made when the poet Li Bai had a setback in his career and traveled around. Li Bai was a famous poet in Tang Dynasty. But he failed to gain a good career because of his unwillingness to flatter influential officials. This poem is an eight-line one with seven Chinese characters in each line, where some prosodic rules are followed. In fact, two tones, namely level and oblique tones, help to form the rhythm of an ancient Chinese poem. This is really different from an English poem, where the rhythm is formed because of stressed and unstressed syllables. Simply speaking, each Chinese character linked with a tone in ancient China. For such kind of poems, the arrangement of the tones are fixed in a way. For the rhyme scheme, end rhyme is used in the second and fourth lines as well as the first, sixth and eighth lines. Besides, the third and fourth lines are symmetrical in their diction. This is also true for the fifth and sixth lines. The Chinese "Phoenix" appears in the first two lines repeatedly, contributing to the sound and rhythm of the poem. In addition, phoenix contains an illusion as it is the symbol of auspiciousness and of a prosperous country. In the third and fourth line, the poet used the images of the Wu State palace in the period of Three Kingdoms and cloths and hats (actually the tombs) of scholars in Eastern Jin Dynasty to allude to Jinling, once the capital of six dynasties, which was then just a scene of desolation. No matter how fascinating they had been, they finally disappeared in time and space. In the fifth and sixth lines, the poet shifted from historical thinking to natural description. In the last two lines, the poet used the "floating clouds" to describe the "sinister men" in the imperial court, and the "sun" to refer to the "emperor". And a Chinese character which means "worry" was used to end the whole poem to express the poet's strong worry about the country.

Without considering too much of the ancient Chinese rules about poetry, Pound translated the poem as follows:

The City of Choan

The phoenix are at play on their terrace.

The phoenix are gone, the river flows on alone.

Flowers and grass

Cover over the dark path
where lay the dynastic house of the Go.
The bright cloths and bright caps of Shin
Are now the base of old hills.
The Three Mountains fall through the far heaven,
The isle of White Heron
Splits the two streams apart.
Now the high clouds cover the sun
And I can not see Choan afar
And I am sad. [4]

4. Pound's English translation appreciation

4.1 Imagery

The first thing that needs to be discussed is the choice of imagery. The title of the original poem contains a movement meaning “mount”, which emphasizes a sense of dynamics. However, Pound translated the whole title as “The City of Choan”, emphasizing the image of the capital at that time. The ancients often liked to climb high and express their feelings. This movement not only depicts the poet's activity, but also implies that the poet was about to express his feelings. Combining it with the images of “Jinling” and “Phoenix” in the title, Chinese readers can easily imagine the poet's inner feelings. However, limited by a completely different historical and cultural context, English and American readers are not easy to grasp the profound connotations of these images and the movement. Therefore, fully exerting the translator's subjectivity, Pound completely subverted the original title as he only used one image “the city of Choan”, simple and relevant, which can stimulate the readers' strong curiosity about ancient Chinese history and attract them to continue reading. Another example is the images of “cloths and caps”, “old hills” and “blue sky”, which were translated as “the bright cloths and bright caps”, “the base of old hills” and “the far heaven”. The “cloths and caps” in Chinese refer to the

graves of the gentry in Eastern Jin Dynasty, but for the target readers, they are not aware of the illusion, so Pound creatively added the word “bright”, so that the original connotation could be revealed in another way. For “old hills”, Pound added the word “base”, which refers to “the bottom of the ancient hills”, to hint “death”, just as the original poem does not directly mention the tombs. In translating the “blue sky”, Pound omitted the translation of the color but added the adjective “far” to show a broader space.

At first, Pound’s image was the presentation of “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”, but then he redefined it as “a radiant node or cluster...a vortex from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing” [5]. So, Pound did not stick to the images of the original that might be hard to understand for the target readers and tried to add something to create new images, more strong ones for the translation to form a powerful energy vortex, so that the meaning and atmosphere of the original could be maintained in the translation.

4.2 Rhyme and rhythm

First of all, alliteration, assonance, consonance and eye rhyme are used in the translation. Pound did not follow the rhyming way of the original poem. Instead, he creatively applied various rhyming methods in English and American poetry to create a unique phonological beauty. Among them, the pronunciations of “phoenix”, “fall”, “far”, “flows” and “flowers” all start with the friction sound [f], which is alliteration, while assonance is found in “grass”, “dark”, “path”, “far”, “apart” and “afar”, which all contain the long vowel [a:]. Assonance is also found in “bright”, “isle”, “white” and “high”, which all contain the diphthong [ai]. Consonance is found in “terrace”, “grass”, “house” and “base”, while a kind of eye rhyme is used in the words “gone” and “alone” in the second line. These kinds of rhyming seem to appear in a mess, but in fact, a unique kind of musical beauty and connotation is included. For example, the diphthong [ai] appears repeatedly, as if it were a sigh, suggesting sadness and depression, and the long vowel itself can slow down the rhythm of the poem and highlight this kind of sadness. Second, iambus is mainly used in the translation. Although Pound did not pay so much attention to the rigorous rules about rhythm as the romantic poets, there are still some clues to prove

his unique rhythm in his translation. Mainly using iambus forms a strong contrast as it is used to express something melancholy. This is Pound's another creative means of translation.

4.3 Arrangement of lines

The original poem consists of eight lines, each of which contains the same number of Chinese characters. Some of the lines are symmetrical in diction. However, Pound's translation consists of two stanzas, the first with seven lines and the second with six ones. In addition, the number of syllables per line is not equal, and each line's length is therefore different. And some of the sentences are split and put into different lines, which seems to express the poet's broken heart and sadness. The third, sixth and ninth lines are composed of noun phrases, which seems to intentionally emphasize these images and strengthen the contrast between these beautiful images and the sad ones appearing in the next lines. The long and short sentences are also an expression of emotional ups and downs, suggesting the poet's emotional changes.

5. Conclusion

According to Michael Alexander, Pound's translations are of two kinds: one is called "copies" that stick to the original, the other is called "remakes" that edit and reshape the original and cast it into the English style [6]. "The City of Choan" should be the latter. In general, the original poem uses a large number of images and expressions with unique Chinese connotations, which actually creates great obstacles for the translators. Yet Pound actively exerted the translator's subjectivity to create something new but understandable for the target readers in the aspects of imagery, rhyme and rhythm, and arrangement of lines. He was able to grasp the atmosphere and keynote of the original poem as a whole and well cater to the aesthetic taste of British and American readers for poetry. Although there are certain misunderstandings in the translation, it is generally an excellent work, which deserves our reflection and reference.

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