

On the Emotional Equivalence of Ezra Pound's Translation of Shu Li

Wenxian Qiao

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou 510320, China

ABSTRACT. Ezra Pound's translation, especially of the Chinese ancient poetry, is always a bone of contention and seldom fails to provoke a riot of criticism. The *Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* (1954), i.e. Pound's translation of *Shih-Ching*, is no exception. This paper takes *Shu Li*, one of the typical poems from *Shih-Ching*, as an example, to research how Pound achieves the emotional equivalence of the source text in his translation through conciseness, enhanced images and sympathetic response, in comparison with other well-known translations.

KEYWORDS: Pound; *Shih-ching*; Translation; Emotional equivalence

1. Introduction

"No man understands a deep book until he has seen and lived at least part of its contents."

--Ezra Pound

In translation's regard, the poet Ezra Pound is widely known as an outstanding figure in view of his strong promotion of imagism and capability of writing "obscure" poems that juxtapose universe-wide stuff. His creative translation, especially of those Chinese classic poems, despite all controversies can still be valued as a paradigm, for his accurate grasp of the spirit of the original text as well as the wonderful way he chooses to represent it, which in Zhao Yiheng's words "provides new possibilities and new forms for development for American poetry." (Jiang, 177-178) In this paper, I'd like to take Pound's translation of *Shu Li* as an example to research the emotional equivalence of his translation.

Shu Li is one poem of *Shih-Ching* written about three thousand years ago, which narrates the sovereign Zhou Pingwang's deep lament for the falling of his kingdom. Actually "the melancholy of *Shu Li*" has now been a literary allusion in Chinese culture that conveys the sadness out of the devastating state or the solitary souls. Here is the original text.

1) 彼黍离离,彼稷之苗.Stragglng Miller, Grain in Shoot,

2) 行迈靡靡,中心摇摇.Aimless Slowness, heart's Pot Scraped out.

3) 知我者谓我心忧,不知我者谓我何求.Acquaintance Say: he is Melancholy;
Strangers Say: What is he Hunting Now?

4) 悠悠苍天!此何人哉? Sky, Far, So Dark. "This, Here, Who, How?"

5) 彼黍离离,彼稷之穗.Stragglng Miller, Grain on the Stalk,

6) 行迈靡靡,中心如醉.Aimless Slowness, Heart Drunk with Grief,

7) 知我者谓我心忧,不知我者谓我何求.Acquaintance Say: Ah, Melancholy.

Strangers say: what is he hunting now?

8) 悠悠苍天!此何人哉?Sky, Slate, Afar. "This, Here, Who, How?"

9) 彼黍离离,彼稷之实.Stragglng Miller, Grain Heavy in Ear,

10) 行迈靡靡,中心如噎.Aimless slowness, choking in heart,

11) 知我者谓我心忧,不知我者谓我何求.Acquaintance say: How melancholy.

Strangers say: what is he hunting now?

12) 悠悠苍天!此何人哉?Sky, never near: "This, here, who, how?"

It can be detected that the poem consists of three stanzas and twelve lines, with repetitions of the last two lines of each stanza, distinguished by conciseness.

In view of the cultural difference between China and English-speaking world, Pound on the one hand gives priority to making its translation accessible to readers and on the other hand tries to keep the spirit and flavor of the original text through a set of skillful adaption. In other words, "Pound's idea about translation was to bring emotion into focus, while remaining true to the source text."(Nadel, 34) And the emotional equivalence of Pound's translation will be discussed from following aspects.

2. Emotion in Conciseness

Although insufficient in Chinese knowledge, Pound at least detects the conciseness of Chinese poetry and its significance in conveying emotions. Pound's concern about conciseness is in fact consistent with his theories on poem-writing according to three principles he raised for imagists before translating Shih-Ching.

1) Direct Treatment of the "Thing" Whether Subjective or Objective.

2) To Use Absolutely No Word That Does Not Contribute to the Presentation.

3) As Regarding Rhythm: to Compose in the Sequence of the Musical Phrase, Not in Sequence of a Metronome. (Li, 229)

Take the first line for instance. James Legge's translation is "there was the millet

with drooping heads; there was the sacrificial millet into blade”, which applies a parallel structure with fourteen words. Xu Yuanchong’s version is much shorter, employing nine words: “The millet drops head; The sorghum is in sprout.” (215) While here is Pound’s translation: “Stragglng millet, grain in shoot.” He just makes his sentence extremely concise (even shorter than the original line that contains eight Chinese characters), simple and vivid, by taking use of the word “stragglng”, which precisely describes how the millets looks like.

Aware that “知我者”and “不知我者” should be two images or figures in Chinese, Pound therefore refuses to use the cumbersome diction like “those who know me” or “those who do not know me”, which will inevitably ruin the beauty of the original text. To achieve his goal, he goes against the gravity of English grammar to keep his translation concise and shining, meanwhile, with a sort of Chinese flavor. Under Pound’s pen, “知我者”and “不知我者” turn into “acquaintance” and “strangers”.

Furthermore, seldom are translators in the west so audacious and ambitious to seek an equal representation even accurate to the number of Chinese characters employed. The most striking one should be Pound’s translation of the last line “此何人哉”, which expresses the speaker’s inquiry to the heaven about what leads to the current situation. Equal to the word number of the original text, Pound juxtaposes four words separated by commas, “This, here, who, how?” corresponding to the four Chinese characters, remarkably lively, evocative and impressive. No wonder that T.S. Eliot praised him as “the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time”. (Wu, 111)

3. Emotion enhanced by images

“The image itself is the speech.”(Pound, 11)

In *Shu Li*, there are three major objective images presented: millet, walking and sky. The millet is depicted differently in each stanza, reflecting the passage of time from spring to autumn and meantime forming a contrast with the speaker’s gloomy mood. The walking or the gait in an indirect way demonstrates the speaker’s personal feeling of loss. As to the sky, it also plays a vital role in conveying the spirit of this poem. To some extent, we can even consider it as the most important image (instead of the millet) in this poem, given the fact that the sky in Chinese ancient culture is closely related to heaven or imperial power, thus capable of indicating the fate of a state. Above all, having a knowledge of the significance of these images is not sufficient, and how to deal with them and what strategies to take are the point.

In terms of the millet, Pound, we can see from the previous part, uses simple yet powerful words to make his translation vivid and laconic. Apart from the use of “stragglng”, he chooses “grain in shoot”, “grain on the stalk” and “grain heavy in ear” to show the growing process of the millet.

With regard to the walking, Pound also takes a quite different method in delineating a speaker full of confusion and sadness. He does not translate “行迈靡

靡” into “slowly I moved about” like James Legge does, nor does he translate it into “slowly I trudge and tread” like Xu Yuanchong does. He seemingly tries to cut the sentence as short as he could, without any unnecessary and complementary words no matter articles or adverbs. Instead, he uses merely two words, “aimless” and “slowness”, which is still shorter than the original text but in a sense larger than the original meaning. The original text only involves the slowness of the gait while Pound enriches it by creatively adding the aimless to the walking, which actually is coherent with the spirit of this poem. So, from where I stand, it is not only acceptable but also reasonable. Besides, despite “aimless slowness” bears no direct relation with walking, it is more evocative than the direct depiction, greatly inspiring reader’s imagination of the situation.

Concerning the description of sky, i.e. “悠悠苍天”, the strategy Pound applies is also impressive. In his translation, the sky in each stanza appears different. To be exact, he does not translate it directly into “distant and azure sky” and make it a dead line in each stanza, although the original text appears so. Pound’s homage finds expression in his faith in “the original sequence of images, rhythms and tone, although not the words.” (Nadel, 34) Gripping on detailed actuality, Pound aims to construct a livelier and richer image that can better serve the theme while accessible to the customs of English. In sequence of the three stanzas, he respectively uses “sky, far, so dark”, “sky, slate, afar” and “sky, never near”. Admittedly, these lines just reflect Pound’s profound perception of the poem and worth the merits for two reasons: First, they are in accordance with the change of the millet and the alteration of seasons, loyal to facts. As is known, the weather of spring is sort of recovering from the harsh winter and abounds in drizzles, so the adjectives “far” and “dark” can be seen as a loyal description. When it comes to summer, a cloudy season noted for inconstancy, the word “slate” seems also proper. As to the “sky never near”, it can so easily remind readers of the days of autumn (there is a Chinese saying called “秋高气爽”, which means the sky appears higher and the climate is cozy in autumn). Second, more significantly, they serve for a pulling-forward effect of the speaker’s emotions. The sky in the first stanza echoes a slight sorrow, in the second stanza a deeper oppression, and in the last stanza a wholly abjection. In telling the high sky of autumn, isn’t Pound’s employ of “never near” a powerful representation of the speaker’s accurate feelings? How melancholy!

It is admitted that Pound’s adaption is not without flaws in that it derives the poem from the original text in serving as an ancient ballad in which repetition counts much. But if we consider translation a choice or process of weighing loss and gain, Pound’s distinctive enrichment and clarification can be justified for its emotional equivalence.

4. Emotion as a sympathetic response

Through Pound’s translation, readers can easily get touched and involved in a strong feeling that seemingly originates from the original text. This paper is not willing to challenge the point in that the feeling Pound conveys is to a large extent in

line with the original poem, if not ingeniously presented in an enhanced way. However, the point in doubt is that whether the feeling is a complete and pure representation through Pound's own understanding, because the translations in many cases just betray his personal feelings. For instance, in handling with “独寐寤宿,永矢弗告”, a line in *Kao Pan* from *Shih-Ching*, Pound just “mistranslates” it into “wakes, sleeps again/ swearing he will not communicate/ with other man”(Pound, 27), which is nevermore the original meaning but possibly a manifestation of his personal mood. Because before long his releasing from the asylum, he just isolated himself from others, supposedly suffering from autism. Coming back to the chalk, personal feeling can still be detected here, in the poet's translation of *Shu Li*.

For instance, the true meaning of “此何人哉”, is “what leads to this” rather than “who is this person” since “人” here is interchangeable with “仁”. However, Pound on one hand seems to misinterpret it according to his translation “this, here, who, how?” And it is very likely that he perceives the meaning as who is this man but not satisfied with presenting it directly and dully, so he once again wields his imagination and creativity. In fact, this astonishing adaption can even be merited as a stroke of genius in view of its effect. Pound unfolds a large picture for us by merely using four words. “This” refers to the current situation, i.e. the loss of an empire. “Here” refers to the place the speaker stands about, i.e. the wasteland. “Who” and “how” is more like questions raised by the voice-over: who is this person? Why is his walking so confused and melancholy? The transition of the vision, from the green straggling millet and the azure vast sky to the whole situation becomes so apparent. And different from the original text that barely shows a sorrowful inquiry in the end, this adaption brings in more images that ignite imagination, which at last presents us a picture, a panorama of the poem. This procession, although disloyal to the textual meaning, results in a powerful infectivity and captures the spirit of *Shu Li* in conveying a stately sorrow. For this account, Pound's creative translation, despite different from the meanings of original poem, can still be concluded successful in its dynamic equivalence, which according to Eugene Nida “is based on the principle of equivalent effect, i.e. that the relationship between receiver and message should aim at being the same as that between the original receivers and the SL message.” (Bassnett, 33)

Giving a close examination into the impressive enrichment and adaption, it at first owes to Pound's profound perception and wonderful writing as a leading and outstanding poet in the twentieth century. However, little attention has been accorded to the influence of the author's own feeling. “This, here, who, how”, instead of being a sole question or depiction, also becomes a way of unbosoming the poet's own emotion. In reality, Ezra Pound bears some similar experience with the speaker in *Shu Li*: First, they are both exiles metaphorically, who live in their own homeland yet possess no sense of belonging, one for the collapse of his state and the other for being rejected as a traitor. (Pound had been jailed in an asylum for over twelve years for treason where he finished the translation of *Shih-Ching* among other classic works.) Second, they both suffer from great oppression in hardly confessing their feeling of loss, in that one is the monarch of a conquered nation who is not allowed to relate his state while the other is sentenced as a lunatic who is

also deprived of the chance to speak. In all, they both feel desperate to confess their heart yet realize it hopeless to be understood.

This gloomy emotion also finds vivid expression in the stark contrast between “the stranger” and “the acquaintance”. Originally, the line “知我者谓我心忧,不知我者谓我何求” repeats itself in each stanza. But under Pound’s pen, it produces a dramatic effect capable of a much stronger solitary and sad emotion than the source text: What the stranger says in the translation is always the same and appears dull and indifferent while the acquaintance’s response to the narrator varies in different cases showing a deep concern for the unspoken melancholy. Although the narrator in *Shu Li* demonstrates that only those who know him can perceive his melancholy, we can say, it to a large degree also reveals the inner sadness of Pound. Furthermore, such an emotion advances in his translation level by level, from “he is melancholy” to “ah, melancholy, to the last “how melancholy”. Just as Pound once claimed that “no man understands a deep book until he has seen and lived at least part of its contents.” His days in the “jail” afford him the opportunity to seek solace from Chinese classics, which in turn contribute to his creative endeavor in translation.

To briefly and roughly conclude the translation, before composing freely and creatively Ezra Pound in a way has captured the spirit of the poem and therefore aims to achieve an emotional equivalence through conciseness, enriched images and sympathetic response. Personally, I’d venture to say, apart from the dominating analysis of translation techniques and cultural significance, the emotional perspective is both worthwhile and necessary in understanding and researching Pound and his translation.

References

- [1] Pound, Ezra (1954). *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [2] Xu Yuanhong (2011). *Book of Poetry*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [3] Bassnett, Susan (2012). *Translation Studies (Third Edition)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [4] Nadel, Ira (2008). *The Cambridge Introduction to Ezra Pound*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [5] Ye Weilian (2007). [Chinese Poetics] *Zhongguo Shixue*. Beijing: People’s Literature Publishing House. (in Chinese)
- [6] Jiang Hongxin (2001). [New Directions of English Poetry] *Yingshi Xin Fangxiang*. Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House. (in Chinese)
- [7] Wu Qiyao (2006). [Pound and Chinese Culture] *Pangde He Zhongguo Wenhua*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. (in Chinese)
- [8] Li Yuliang (2007). [Studies on the English Translations of Shih-Ching] *Shijing Yingyi Yanjiu*. Jinan: Qilu Press. (in Chinese)