

The Comparative Study on the English Translations of Du Fu's Poems from the Perspective of Steiner's Hermeneutic Motion

-- Taking Xu Yuanchong's and Watson's Translations as Examples

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Abstract: Du Fu's influence in Chinese classical poetry is very far-reaching, and he is honored as the "Sage of Poetry" by later generations, and his poems are also known as the "History of Poetry". As a typical representative of traditional Chinese culture, Du Fu's poems are loved by the public, and different translations have made the world better understand the culture of ancient Chinese poems. Based on the hermeneutic motion of George Steiner, this paper selects two English translations of Du Fu's poems by Mr. Xu Yuanchong, a domestic translator, and Mr. Watson, a foreign sinologist as the objects. Through the comparative study of the two translations, this paper explores how the four hermeneutic steps of "trust", "aggression", "incorporation" and "compensation" in Steiner's hermeneutic motion are represented in their translations. It provides a new perspective for the study of Du Fu's poetry translation into English and promotes the dissemination of ancient Chinese poems.

Keywords: Steiner Hermeneutic Motion; English Translations of Du Fu's Poems; The Comparative Study; Xu Yuanchong; Watson.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China has been vigorously promoting traditional Chinese culture and taking the export of Chinese culture as a major national development strategy. Poetry, which has always been deeply favored by people at home and abroad, is a typical representative of the excellent traditional Chinese culture. Poetry is a literary art that expounds the mind, utilizing mature artistic techniques and following strict rhythmic requirements to express social life and the spiritual world of mankind in a highly concentrated manner with dense chapters, condensed language, abundant feelings and rich imagery. Moreover, poetry is of great significance to human beings in understanding and expressing their feelings, reconstructing and constructing the world, thinking and exploring life, and cultivating aesthetic taste and moral concepts. Therefore, poetry translation is an important window for interpreting Chinese culture and promoting Chinese culture to go abroad (Huang Chuxuan, 2021:89). China is a country of poetry, with a long history of poetry and literature. There have been a large number of poets throughout history, leaving us with a vast number of magnificent chapters which become an important part of the excellent literary heritage of the Chinese nation. Du Fu, who was honored as the "Sage of Poetry," left behind about 1,500 poems, which are the essence of Chinese poetry. Therefore, the translations of Du Fu's Poems greatly help the international dissemination of Chinese poetry.

Nowadays, there are many translators and scholars of Du Fu's poems, who use different translation strategies to translate Du Fu's poems. For example, there are Xu Yuanchong (*Selected Poems of Du Fu*) and Wu Juntao (*Tu Fu: One Hundred and Fifty Poems*) in China, and Watson (*The Selected Poems of Du Fu*) and Stephen Owen (*The Poetry of Du Fu*) in foreign countries. Different versions of Du Fu's

poems in English translation also allow more scholars to explore and research. In CNKI, inputting the keyword "Du Fu's poetry translation", it can be found about 130 papers, mainly from the perspectives of eco-translatology, social semiotic approach, communication studies, etc., on Du Fu's poetry translation strategies, translation history, principles, etc. These studies found that there were some issues in the process of Du Fu's poetry translations. However, generally speaking, there are still some limitations. First of all, most of the research objects mainly focus on the color words, imagery, allusions and so on in Du Fu's poems, and do not systematically analyze and explore the transformation of meaning in the process of translating the poems. In addition, the method of studying Du Fu's poems by analyzing the English translation of one of the poems or focusing on the English translation of one scholar is actually very limited. In fact, multiple translations to a certain extent can better reveal some problems in the translation process. Therefore, under the framework of Steiner's four steps of hermeneutic motion, this paper intends to compare two English translations of Du Fu's poems by Xu Yuanchong and Watson, to reveal how each of the two translations realizes the transformation of meaning and plays a role in the process of translation, aiming to provide a new perspective for the translation study of Du Fu's poems, and to promote the dissemination of Chinese poems in the international arena as well as to enhance the influence of Chinese poems.

2. Steiner's "Hermeneutic Motion" and Translation Studies

Hermeneutics is a philosophical and cultural trend widely popular in the West after the 1960s, which is a discipline that studies understanding and interpretation (Liu Zhongyang & Peng Weifang, 2023:174). The process of converting two

different languages is equal to the process of transforming the source language into the target language. And translation, whether literary translation or non-literary translation, cannot be separated from the understanding and interpretation of the original language (Zeng Yan & Cheng Jianshan, 2023: 36). Additionally, translators also have different cultural backgrounds, ideologies and so on, which will affect the translator's understanding of a work thus affect the translation process. The essence of translation is cross-cultural communication, which not only needs to cross languages, but also needs to cross cultures (Li Hongman, 2021:96). Therefore, the translators must understand and interpret the linguistic symbols in the source language, exert the translator's subjectivity so that the readers can understand what the texts in the source language are trying to express, and build up a circulatory system of interpretation and understanding between the authors, the translators, the readers and the texts. So in this process, translation and hermeneutics also have some similarities. Therefore, on the basis of hermeneutics, the hermeneutic view of translation has been developed.

In the 1970s, Steiner further enriched and developed the hermeneutic view of translation in his book *After Babel*. Steiner (1998:249) defines the hermeneutic approach as 'the investigation of what it means to 'understand' a piece of oral or written speech, and the attempt to diagnose this process in terms of a general model of meaning'. He also describes translation as "the act of elicitation and appropriative transfer of meaning"(ibid.: 312). And this process of translation, the hermeneutic motion, consists of four steps: trust, aggression, incorporation and compensation.

2.1. Trust

The translator's first move is 'an investment of belief', a belief and trust that there is something there in the source texts that can be understood.(ibid.: 312). This suggests that the translators should have trust in the texts, believing that the texts have desirable features that make them worth translating. And Rao Li (2020:37) points out in her article that "initial trust" means believing that the texts to be translated are valuable, meaningful and contains something worth translating. This trust is built on the symbolic correlation of all things in the world. However, in this process, due to the translator's different backgrounds, ideologies, translators have their own self-reflection and understanding of the texts, which will make it difficult for the translators to get close to the real meaning of the source texts. And in this process, it will also lead to the aggression, which is the second step of the hermeneutic motion.

2.2. Aggression

"Aggression" is explained as "angry or threatening behavior or feelings that often result in fighting" in *Longman Dictionary*. " It can be seen that the word "aggression" has a violent and dangerous side. Because in the first step of the process of trust, the translators are constrained by the factors of history, culture and language, which result in the acts of resistance to the source texts. And those factors are also manifested in the process of translation as the violent behavior of attacking and plundering. It is unavoidable in the translation activities. In Heidegger's view, the transformation from existential meaning to understanding meaning inevitably goes through the process of aggression(Liu Zhongyang & Peng Weifang, 2023:174). And Steiner looks to Heidegger for a basis of this view of comprehension as

'appropriative' and 'violent'(Munday, 2016:266).

2.3. Incorporation

Steiner (1998:266) states that the third movement refers to how the source texts meaning, extracted by the translators in the second movement, is brought into the target language which is already full of its own words and meanings. The meaning of the original texts is captured by the translators from the original texts in the second step, while the translation is already full of its own discourse and meaning. That is to say, on the basis of the second step, the translator absorbs the meaning of the original texts and incorporates it into the target languages, reflecting all the information content of the original texts. However, in this process, Steiner (1998: 315) believes that the importing of the meaning of foreign text 'can potentially dislocate or relocate the whole of the native structure'. Therefore, in order to solve the problem of imbalance in the translated texts, it can only be balanced by the fourth step "compensation".

2.4. Compensation

Compensation refers to compensating for the content lost in the process of translation, which means compensates for its original meaning (Liu, Zhongyang & Peng, Weifang, 2023:175). And Steiner(1998:317) believes that the importation of certain translated texts causes an imbalance of energy, which flows out of the source texts and into the target texts, 'altering both and altering the harmonies of the whole system'. In Munday's book, that says:

Such an imbalance needs to be compensated. At those points where the target text is lesser than the original, the target texts makes the original's virtues 'more precisely visible'; where the target text is greater than the original, it nevertheless identifies points in the source text that have the potential for enhancement and for the realization of its 'elemental reserves'. In this way, balance and equity are restored. and the translators need to make efforts to restore this balance. (Munday, 2016:233)

Therefore, translators need to strive to restore the balance. Zeng Yan and Cheng Jianshan (2023:38) also point out that in translation practice, the translators who have not yet reached a good state of translation often make a lot of additions to the translation, misinterpreting and appending, or frequently skimming the translation, and try not to translate which can be difficult to be understood in the source texts, while the real translation "always seeks an equal compensation".

Through the four steps of hermeneutic motion proposed by Steiner, it can be seen that the status of the translators in the translation process has been greatly enhanced from the "official serving as an interpreter", "dancers in shackles" to advocate the subjectivity and creativity of the translators. Therefore, the translators are no longer invisible. Moreover, translation is not only a simple copy and paste, but also requires the participation of the translators. However, the translators will also be subject to more constraints which influence the understanding of the original texts. This will also be directly reflected in the translated texts.

3. Analysis of the English Translations of Du Fu's Poems based on Steiner's Four Steps of Hermeneutic Motion

Du Fu's poems have always been popular among the public, and his translations have also been valued by translators at

home and abroad. Additionally, there are also several versions of English translations at home and abroad. By analyzing the two English translations of Du Fu's poems through Steiner's four steps of hermeneutic motion, it can be more objectively and directly to see the differences between the translations of Du Fu's poems, so as to provide reference for the future English translations of Du Fu's poems.

3.1. The Translators' "Trust" in the Original Work

According to Steiner's hermeneutic motion, the translators' trust in the original work is a prerequisite for translation, trusting that the original work has value of translation and that the translation is meaningful, so that the translators will devote himself to the translation work. *Beijing Daily* commented that "Mr. Xu Yuanchong is the only expert in China who can translate between classical poems and English and French rhymes, and he is regarded as "the only person who translates poems into English and French". Wang Gangyi, head of the delegation of Translators Association of China, commented on him, "Mr. Xu Yuanchong is an outstanding representative of the older generation of translators in China, who has devoted all his life to the translation of Chinese-English and Chinese-French literature, and who has made significant contributions to the promotion of cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, especially the international dissemination of Chinese culture. In 2010, he was awarded the 'Lifetime Achievement Award in Translation' from Translators Association of China. He deserves to have this award." Burton Watson is a renowned American sinologist, a key figure in introducing classical Chinese works to Western readers, who is recognized as one of the finest translators of classic Chinese and Japanese literature and history in Western academia. John Balcombe, former president of the American Literary Translators Association, once commended on him, "Watson does no need any introduction. He is a pioneer in the translation of classical Chinese history, philosophy and poetry. Through his books and translations, he has probably made more contributions to introducing Chinese history and classical literature to the English speaking world than anyone else." It is because of their love for Chinese poetry and culture that Xu Yuanchong and Watson enthusiastically participate in the process of translating Du Fu's poetry, believing that it is meaningful and valuable, and also commit to letting the world appreciate the charm of Chinese poetry. As the quintessence of Chinese poetry, Du Fu's poems have been favored by readers at home and abroad through their translations.

3.2. Translators' "Aggression" in the Original Work

After the translators choose the texts, but due to the differences of languages and cultures between the translators and the original authors, they will unconsciously and violently "invade" the original texts. The translators also have their own ways of dealing with the texts, so the translations will also show different effects. Xu Yuanchong and Watson, who have a full understanding of Chinese poetic culture and own high literary literacy, and invade the English translations of Du Fu's poems in many aspects, such as cultural awareness and linguistic features.

3.2.1. Aggression in Cultural Awareness

Example 1:

The original text: 安得广厦千万间，大庇天下寒士俱欢颜

Translated by Xu Yuanchong:

Could I get mansions covering ten thousand miles,
I'd house all scholars poor and make them beam with smiles.

Translated by Watson:

Where can I get a big broad shelter a thousand, ten thousand span wide,
huge roof that all the world's poor people can share with smiling face?

"寒士" refers to a poor scholar who is born to an inferior station in the Wei, Jin, and North and South Dynasties of China. In Du Fu's poem, "*My Cottage Unroofed by Autumn Gales*", the term "寒士" also refers to a poor scholar like him. Xu Yuanchong translates and adds the meaning of "scholar" on the basis of "poor people", which is more appropriate to the meaning than Watson.

Through the comparison, there are also many manifestations of cultural consciousness aggression. It can be seen that due to the different cultural backgrounds of the translators, the use of "aggression" method in translation will also be bound by the cultural constraints. So there will be a different stance and bias that the translators adhere to in the translation. In addition, the translators' approaches to the features of the poems are also affected.

3.2.2. "Aggression" in Linguistic Features

Example 2:

Original text: 战哭多新鬼，愁吟独老翁。

Translated by Xu Yuanchong:

So many weep on battlefield;
An old man sings with grief he's filled.

Translated by Watson:

On the battlefield wailing, so many new ghosts;
fashioning his poem of sorrow, lonely old man.

Poetry is far more demanding in terms of rhythm than other literary forms, and rhythm happens to be the most heterogeneous feature among languages (Wang Zekang, 2023:40). Xu Yuanchong has always added the sense of rhythm to his translations, and he uses end rhymes more often for rhyming, as can be seen from the words "battlefield" and "filled" in the poem. The song "*Facing Snow*" can be seen in the words "battlefield" and "filled". What Watson prefers is to express the content of the poem as completely as possible, so that the readers can better understand the meaning of the poems. However, he does not show much in the rhythm of poems, which the meaning is more clear. In the target languages, the readers' acceptance is higher, and the popularization of the poems will also be wider.

3.3. Translators' "Incorporation" in the Original Work

After the first and second steps, the third step of "incorporation" requires the translators to integrate the understanding of the original work into the target language context. In the face of the conflict between two languages and

cultures, it is necessary to choose translation strategies with subjective initiative, avoiding absolute domestication and foreignization (He qinxi, 2022: 125). It also means that the translators should fully understand the content of the original work in the process of translation, and give full play to the translator's subjectivity to translate in an active way.

Example 3:

Original text:星垂平野阔，月涌大江流。

Translated by Xu Yuanchong:

The boundless plain fringed with stars hanging low,
The moon surges with the river on the flow.

Translated by Watson:

Stars hang down, over broad fields sweeping;
The moon boils up, on the great river flowing.

These two lines are from Du Fu's "*Mooring at Night*". The poem is about the poet's miserable situation of wandering in his twilight years. The vast plains, the mighty river, the brilliant stars and the moon that he saw on the way represented Du Fu's strong feelings. Xu Yuanchong has achieved the utmost in poetry translation in terms of rhythm. From his translation of these two lines, it can be seen that he used end rhyme rhetorical devices such as "low" and "flow" in order to give the poem a sense of rhythm. This way, the translation retains the characteristics of Chinese poetry and allows readers to understand the culture of Chinese poetry. Each small sentence in Chinese poems is absolutely full of meaning when translated. Xu Yuanchong's translation pays more attention to what the subject is, such as "plain" and "moon", and the rest of the content after it is modifying the subject, which is more in line with the English expression. In his translation of these two lines, Watson also uses the rhetorical device of end rhyme, such as "sweeping" and "flowing". In addition, Watson also translates the words in the lines in an active way. "Sweeping" means winds sweep a place moving quickly with a lot of force. Using this word to show vast field can remind people that the terrain is flat, which explains the meaning of "flat". And "boil up" means to heat food or a liquid until it begins to boil. The river is flowing, and the moonlight shines on the sparkling water, and the river undulates as if the water is boiling. This translation also makes the scene in the poem turn from stillness to vividness. Therefore, through this analysis, Xu Yuanchong and Watson made a active translation of this poem, combining their own literary literacy and cognitive understanding of the language features and content of the poem. With their own translation methods of domestication and foreignization, the step of incorporation is done.

3.4. Translators' "Compensation" in the Original Work

As the translators invade and incorporate the original texts, it will probably cause the lack of meaning. This will make the readers have doubts or even misunderstandings about the content of the poems, and the step of "compensation" can be done to check the omissions and make the translations more perfect, and the readers better understand the Chinese poetry culture. The most common methods of "compensation" are amplification and annotation. By comparing the translations of Xu Yuanchong's and Watson's, it is obvious to find that one

of methods they most often use is annotation.

Example 4

Original text:杨花雪落覆白蘋，青鸟飞去衔红巾。

Translated by Xu Yuanchong:

The willow down like snow falls on the duckweed white;
The blue bird picking red handkerchief goes in flight.

Translated by Watson:

The snow of willow catkins blankets the white-flowered reeds;
a bluebird flies off, in its bill a crimson kerchief.

The word "bluebird" in "*Satire on Fair Ladies*" was first used in "*Fantastic Creatures of the Mountains and Seas*", which is a kind of bird in Chinese mythology, and is said to be the messenger of the Queen Mother of the West. According to legend, when the Queen Mother of the West met Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, a blue bird flew in front of the palace to deliver a message. Later, the blue bird was regarded as a messenger between men and women. In this poem, the "blue bird" refers to the messenger of Yang Guozhong and the Lady of Guo. In foreign countries, "blue bird" symbolizes happiness, joy, dream and hope, which is totally different from the meaning of the imagery in this poem. Therefore, the translation needs to be supplemented with the content.

Xu Yuanchong's annotation on the "blue bird" in this line is in the Chinese part, "The blue bird is the messenger who carries messages for their private communication". Watson, on the other hand, adds a annotation of ② after the phrase "bluebird" and then at the bottom of the page adds this explanation:

"There were rumors that Yang Guozhong was carrying on an intrigue with the Lady of Guo, and this probably explains the reference to the bluebird, the traditional bearer of love notes. According to Chinese custom, sexual relations between persons of the same surname—in this case between cousins—was considered highly immoral." (Watson, 2009:39)

In this place, Watson supplements by adding the cultural background knowledge, so that the readers can distinguish the original meaning of "bluebird" and better understand the connotation of the poem.

4. Conclusion

Under the theoretical framework of Steiner's "hermeneutic motion", this paper makes a comparative analysis of two versions of Du Fu's English translations around the four steps of "trust, aggression, incorporation and compensation", which finds that translations of Du Fu's poems of Xu Yuanchong's and Watson's still have certain limitations. In the two steps of "aggression and incorporation", Watson's English translation usually lists the imagery, so that the readers can clearly understand what is written in the poem, and the comprehensibility is also higher, which is very good and successful in this aspect. However, there is a certain lack in the pursuit of rhythm, and the original form of the poem is not presented to the readers. Xu Yuanchong, on the other hand, fuzzily deals with the images in his translation of poems, which appears as a summary. In the final step of "compensation", Xu Yuanchong's translation has a supplement in the Chinese part, while the English translation has a missing supplementary part, which makes foreign readers misunderstand some cultural backgrounds and

knowledge of imagery in the poems. The problems of these two versions of translations also influence the dissemination of Du Fu's poems overseas to a greater or lesser extent. Due to the different cultural backgrounds and language knowledge of the two translators, the translation styles will be different and the translations will have their own advantages, which will provide a reference for the future English translations of Du Fu's poems. In order to make Du Fu's poems better translated and better disseminated, translators from different cultures can be allowed to work together, with the Chinese translators focusing on the cultural knowledge and the rhythm of the poem, and the foreign translators combining the local culture of the countries and translating the poems in a way that is most acceptable to the readers.

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