

Original Paper

A Study on the Translation of the Image of “Moon” in Classical Chinese Poetry: A Cognitive Perspective

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Abstract

Image is a very important component in poetry which is the combination of object things and subjective feelings. Proper translation of images secures smooth communication between the readers and the poets. The author aims to apply cognitive linguistics to analyze the cognitive process of transferring imagery of “the moon” in Chinese Classical poetry. On the basis of the close connections between the translator’s internal cognitive mechanism and the comprehension and reproduction process of imagery and ideorealm, the possibility to reproduce the original imagery and ideorealm in the translations is analyzed to facilitate cross-cultural communication.

Keywords

translation, Chinese Classical Poetry, cognitive linguistics, the transference of image “moon”

1. Introduction

Chinese poetry has a long history for more than three thousand years. The first collection of poems is *The Book of Songs* which was written between the 11th and 6th century BC. After that, many excellent poets created mounts of outstanding works and these works has far-reaching affect both in our own land and over the sea. Chinese classical poets usually imposed their emotions on various images and each image bears certain meanings and their status in a line of poem can reflect the focus of cognitive activities of the poets. The “moon” image has very important role in ancient Chinese poetry. We can have a deep understanding of the thinking process of translators through the cognitive analysis of the source texts and the target texts.

The word image is originated from the Latin word “imago” and it refers to the mental representation of what we perceive by our peripheral organs. Now the very term concerns literary theory, aesthetics,

psychology and philosophy with various connotations (Gong, 2005). Ezra Pound has made perhaps the most widely used definition of image: “An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”

Finke (1989) argues that image is “functionally equivalent to perception on the extent that similar mechanisms in the visual system are activated when objects or events are imagined as when the same objects or event are actually perceived”. Langacker (1987) defined a motor image, which is “an event equivalent to one which elicits a motor response but which in fact actually fails to do so.” Lakoff (1987) pointed out that it is important to distinguish images from perceptions, because the former is much richer in detail. Palmer (2001) thought that “imagery is what we see in our mind’s eye” and “our imaginations dwell on experiences obtained through all the sensory modes, and then we talk”. Imagery is considered as the essence of classical Chinese poetry, the beauty of which is reflected by the beauty of images.

2. Formal Translation and Spiritual Resemblance

To many translation theorists, translation is both a science and an art. As an art, it has its aesthetic values. As a science, it has its scientific principles. Zhou (2007) pointed out that in the history of translation in China, translation has been regarded more or less as a branch of art, drawing a great deal of its concepts from painting, and one example being the ideas of “form” and “spirit”. Chan (2008) argues that formal transplantation is not only necessary for readers to appreciate the original text in its entirety, but also essential for local poets to infuse foreign structures to their composition. Burton (1988) classifies this type of translation “formal translation”, and he has the following to say about formal translators: the formal translator concerns fidelity and exact. He wants the literary form and prosody is exactly like the original poem. He also wants to show the ideas, the social and philosophical orientations in his original although he knows his goal is just like a mirror image of the original.

Fu Lei is in favor of “spiritual closeness/resemblance” and he indicate that a translator must try to achieve spiritual closeness rather than formal closeness. Chan (2008) reviewed Qian Zhongshu’s opinion that the highest standard of literary translation is “sublimation” by which he means to transfer the language of a text into another language without any trace of stiltedness resulting from the differences in usage and at the same time retaining all the flavour of the original.

Every translation involves both loss and distortion. Undoubtedly, this notion is quite correct as far as literary translation is concerned, but this does not necessarily mean that “loss and distortion” should be arbitrarily made (Zhou, 2007). Nida and Taber (1969) pointed out: “In any translation there will be type of ‘loss’ of semantic content, but the process should be so designed as to keep this to a mini mum”. It is widely known that classical Chinese poetry has no general accepted interpretation (Chen, 2004). In this sense, every theory, principle or strategy makes its contribution to the development of Chinese poetry translation, to the improvement of communication between different cultures.

The well-known Robert Frost witticism that ‘poetry is what disappears in translation’ is only valid if poetic translation aims to produce a ‘perfect re-creation of the original,’ and Ricci (2004) thought that

successful translators re-create poetry in another language as opposed to translating it into a second language. That is to say translating poetry is possible.

3. Cognitive linguistics and translation

Ungerer and Schmid (2001) views cognitive linguistics as an approach to language that is based on our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it. Cognitive linguistics explores the relationship between cognition and language, and it holds that language can reflect cognition and is the product of mental activities. Cognition, as a part of psychology, is people's behavior and ability to sensibly get to know things and obtain knowledge through the ways of intuition, perception, inference etc. Cognition, in a broad sense, is the core of thinking, for it is formed on the basis of perception, presentation and memorization and then affects perception, presentation and memorization (Zhao Yanfang, 2000). Meaning is a mental phenomenon that must eventually be described with reference to cognitive processing (Langacker, 1987).

Cognitive linguistics has two great concerns. The linguistics representation of conceptual structure is the central concern of cognitive linguistics. Talmy (2000) indicated that cognitive linguistics examines the formal properties of language from its conceptual perspective and seeks to account for grammatical structure in representation of conceptual structure. Another great concern of cognitive linguistics is the cognitive process in the utilization and interpretation of language.

Cognitive linguistics focuses its studies on human brain's processing of the linguistic units and language activity. Xu (2007) indicated that because translation involves both comprehension and reproduction of linguistic, so it has provided profound linguistic materials for cognitive linguistic research. On the other hand, the study of cognitive linguistics has great effect on some language phenomena such as metaphor and implication which is useful for the study of translation.

Like any other type of linguistic process, translation is also a mental activity with the potential to construal and manages various meanings in the constraints of context. Jiang (2004) indicated that a proper translation depends not only on translator's familiarity with two languages and flexibility in constructing the versions, but more importantly on his or her sensitivity and intellection to perceive the cognitive world of the author/reader.

Images referring to the abstract things is the result of processing and synthesizing on the basis of the image to the concrete things and he pointed out such kind of images in Li Shangyin's Wu Ti: "There's not much road to Penglai, where the green bird diligently comes to explore". Here "Peng lai" is one of the fairy mountains believed to lie in the Eastern Sea; "Green bird" is said to be the messenger that heralds the arrival of the Queen Mother of the west to the court of the Han emperor. Image of the objective world directly come from human beings' constant contact with the natural world and during the cognitive process of processing and synthesizing of concrete things in human beings' brain the abstract images are formed (Jiang, 2008).

4. An Analysis of the “Moon” Image from a Cognitive Perspective

We know that one image has different meanings in different cultures because of different social conventions and cultural traditions. Liu Chongde (1998) once declares: “Owing to the differences in the characteristics of various languages, it is both impossible and unnecessary for the translator to render the original poems word for word” In the Chinese poem, the moon have many different types such as homesick, farewells, boudoir lament, yearnings between lovers and so on.

4.1 Homesick

Because the moon has varied shapes, in Chinese people’s traditional mind, a full moon represents to have a reunion. But many people can’t came home to get together with their families, so the poets write many poems to express their regret.

Before my bed, the bright moonlight,
Seems like frost upon the ground.
Raising my head, I gaze at the moon,
Lowering my head, I think of my hometown.

(Li Po, *Thinking in A Quiet Night*)

Before my bed a pool of light---
Can it be hoarfrost on the ground?
Looking up, I find the moon bright;
Bowing , in homesickness I ’m drowned.

(Translated by Xu Yuanzhong)

In this poem, the poet conveys his homesick feelings through the moon. He stands near the bed, watching the bright moon, and the surroundings are so quite. He is so heartbreaking.

4.2 Boudoir Lament

Jade steps gleam with dew so white,
Night's long hours invade my silken socks.
I lower the curtain of water dumplings,
Gazing at the autumn moon, so bright and clear.

(Li Po, *Jade Steps Complaint*)

On marble steps her silken socks have been
Already soaked with white dew late at night;
She turns in and dews down the crystal screen,
Through which she is still eyeing the moon bright.

(Translated by Wu Juntao)

This poem writes a maid-in-waiting who is under a cloud. She is so sad that she can’t fall in sleep at this night. The stair is made by jade which indicate that this is not a common family; the white dew has already soaked her hose which means that she has stand in the outside for a long time. Her lovers don’t come so she can only watch the moon.

The theme of the neglected courtesan, or “boudoir lament” (gui yuan), is one of the most famous poems in the Chinese classical canon. Much of the popularity of this poem can be attributed to Li Bai’s art of oblique portrayal.

The poem begins with a “wide-angle shot” that confirms the palatial setting suggested by the title. It then cuts to a close-up of a telling detail that, together with the reference to the lateness of the hour, literally fleshes out the scenario as that of a disappointed tryst. In the third line, the poet’s “camera-eye” takes us inside the courtesan’s apartment, where we are given a brief glimpse at her interior life in both senses of the phrase. Finally, in another abrupt shift in perspective, the camera dissolves to an “over-the-shoulder shot” of the clear autumn moon in a panoramic closing image that is as poignant as it is suggestive.

4.3 Parting

On Mount Emei, the moon appears a half circle in autumn,
Its reflection enters the waters of the Qingjiang River.
At night I set off from the clear creek towards the Three Gorges,
Thinking of my beloved who I cannot see, down in Yuzhou.

(Li Po: *Song of the Moon in Mount Emei*)

Song of the Emei Mount Peaks Moon
Half a disc of that autumnal moon o’er Emei peaks
Throws its bright image into the streams of Pingqiang
Leaving Qingyi for the Three Gorges by night,
I think of, seeing not thee, all the way down to Yuzhou

(Translated by Sun Dayu)

The poem writes that after the poet’s friend leaves off the riverbank just have lonely pavilion and a cold moon. All these made the poet feel very sorrow.

4.4 Seclusion

People are idle, and the osmanthus flowers fall;
The night is quiet, and the spring mountains are empty.
The moon rises, startling the mountain birds;
They call out from time to time, in the midst of the spring brook.

(Wang Wei, *Birds Singing in a Ravine*)

Bird-Chirping Hollow
The light beams of the moon on the earth softly rain,
The night is quite, the spring mount empty,
The moon’s uprise the birds doth frighten
To cry now and then in the springtide hollow

(Translated by Sun Dayu)

In the poet's late years in life he lives a secluded life at Wangchuan villa and enjoys life from natural scenery. In this poem, the poet creates a fairyland through a genial moon: white wind is blowing again and again, the sweet scent of the osmanthus flower float in the air and some little bird is singing on the tree.

5. Methods of Translating the “Moon” Image Based on the Cognitive Theory

5.1 Literal Translation

Sometimes the Chinese cultures and Western cultures have the same cognition for one thing. For example, the proverb “an inch of time is worth an inch of gold” can be translated as “money cannot buy time”. Both of the two cultures have the same cognition for the imagery “gold” and “time”, thus we can use the literal translation theory. Another example is the phrase “paper tiger” can be translated as “paper tiger”. We have the same recognition of “paper” and “tiger”.

Literal translation takes sentences as its basic units and the whole text into consideration at the same time in the course of translating. It strives to reproduce both the ideological content and style of the entire literary work and retain as much as possible the figures of speech and main sentence structures or patterns. In Du Fu's poem *Longing for My Younger Brothers in a Moonlight Night*, the sentence “The dew is white tonight, the moon so bright in my homeland” can be rendered as “The season called the White Dew begins tonight, nowhere as in our native place is moon so bright (Translated by Wu Juntao)”.

The poet writes this poem to express that he is so missing his brothers. He was separated from and lost touch with them. This entire poem didn't write “missing” but we can feel it. In the first part of the poem, the poet hears the “garrison drums”, “goose honks” and he saw the “autumnal frontier”, “men passed by”. We can conclude that the social environment is troublous. The war made families separated from each other. The “White Dew” represents the cold weather and it also indicates that the poet's heart is so cold. He watched the moon and missed his hometown. In the second part of the poem, the poet turned to the theme—missing his brothers. Many families were broken up and their members were killed in the chaos caused by the war. The poet was also losing touch with his brothers. He sent many letters but none of them replied and all he can do is to wait. In this poem, the translator translates the image “moon” to “moon” directly which can fully describe the artistic conception.

5.2 Substitution

In another cases, the Chinese cultures and Western cultures have totally different cognition. The proverb “as timid as a mouse” is translated as “as timid as a hare”. In our cognition, mouse is not a good animal and it is timid while in the western culture, hare is such animal. When translating the proverb, we should use the image “hare” to be a substitute for the image “mouse”.

Sometimes using another image to substitute the original image can make the translation work more fluency and the readers can have a clearly understand about it. Sometimes if direct translation is not possible, we can use the means of substitution. Substitution means finding another image which conveys a similar meaning and produces a similar effect on the readers of the target language as the original image

does in the source language. This method means that sometimes you can give up the original image and use other image to substitute it.

In Zhang Ji's poem *Night Mooring at Fengqiao Village* the original sentence can be rendered as "At moonset cry the crows, streaking the frosty sky; Dimly lit fishing boats' neath maples sadly lie (Translated by Xu Yuanzhong)". When the poet is on a boat mooring by Maple Bright at night, he writes this poem to express his homesick feelings. He was so missing his home that he couldn't fall in sleep. The world is so quiet and tranquilizing that the poet was deeply absorbed in it. In the first sentence, the poet described the scenery from different sense. He heard the crow's call and saw lots of frost. He used exaggeration to express his feelings—the sky was full of frost, which means that the poet was surrounded by chilliness. Then the poet described that in the cold night there are only "Dimly lit" and "fishing boats" which can company him. In the far-away, the bell's sound broke the night's quietness which indicated his homesick feelings. In the first sentence, the translator gave up the "falling moon" image and used a time image "at moonset time" to substitute it which can fully depicted at what time this story happened.

5.3 Omission

In some cases, we can't find the corresponding cognitive image in the Western culture, so we can use the method of omission. It refers to, according to the meaning of the original, without paying attention to the details and give up some images. The translation work would also be fluent and natural.

In Li Bai's poem *Thoughts in a Still Night*, the translation read as follows: "Before my bed a pool of light—Can it be hoarfrost on the ground? (Translated by Xu)". In the quiet night, bright moonlit irradiated into the house which made the floor turned white. The poet mistook it for the frost. On the one hand, it indicated the season is autumn; on the other hand, it expressed the poet's loneliness feeling. "Looking up" was corresponded with "Bowing" and "moon bright" was corresponded with "homesickness". In this poem, "bright moon", "hometown" are static images, and "head raising, "head lowering" are dynamic images. In Langacker's views, the selection of nouns and verbs is closely related to human beings cognitive ability, especially their scanning ability when dealing with cognitive inputs (Langacker, 1987). In the first sentence, the translators use the phrase "a pool of light" to substitute image "bright moon beams". The word "pool" can best depicted the house was full of moonbeams. The translator didn't mention the image "moon" but the reader can see the moonbeams made the house bright.

5.4 Amplification

Amplification, also called addition, means supplying necessary words in our translation work on the basis of accurate comprehension of the original so as to make the version correct and clear, to make it appear more like the language translated into. While direct transference may retain some of the cultural flavor and graphicness, this method aims at making up for the cultural implications missed through direct translation. The culture background of the Chinese culture and the Western culture is so different. The cognition of our mind can be very different. Sometimes we need to use the method of amplification. For example, in the Western culture, the word "blue" means sadness while in our culture it means peace. The word "green" means jealous and lack of experience, but our culture don't have this meaning.

We can classify the amplification into two types: the first one is adding the word directly into the translation work; the second one is adding the words as postil or accessory. A case in point is a poem written by Jin Changxu in the Tang Dynasty. In the line “If from these dreams I wake, I’ll never reach Liaoxi” the poet expressed his lofty sentiment and he ignored honor or disgrace. In the first sentence, he said the woe “stay not in mind” and all the big changes in the world is just like “floating cloud” which indicated his character of fortitude. In the second sentence, he images he was on a traveling across the sea tin staff. He held a tin staff and flied a long journey with the wind. Bright moonlight shines on his body. All of this indicated the poet’s big-hearted and a strong sense of confidence.

In last sentence, the translator added the word “immortal” and “riding moonlight”. “Immortal” can express the philosophical meaning of the total poem and “riding moonlight” can let the reader image the poet is now riding the moonlight and had a free flying in the sky.

6. Conclusion

Chinese poetry is the soul of Chinese literature and Chinese culture. A good translation of a Chinese verse can promote the prevalence of Chinese culture. The author applies cognitive linguistics to analyze the cognitive process of transferring imagery and ideorealm of Chinese Classical poetry. On the basis of the close connections between the translator’s internal cognitive mechanism and the comprehension and reproduction process of imagery and ideorealm, we can analyze the thinking process of translators in deep going way, and understand the possibility to reproduce the original imagery and ideorealm in the translation of Chinese Classical poetry. We discuss the different meanings of the image “moon” in the poet and conclude four methods to translate it: literal translation, image transformation, image omission and means of amplification.

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