

Original Paper

A Study on the English Translation of Geographical Imagery in Li Bai's Poetry from the Perspective of Geographical Translation Theory

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Abstract

Li Bai is an inimitable and distinctive poet in the ancient time of China. His poetry fill with numerous geographical imagery, carrying rich emotions and cultural characteristics. This paper explores the translation strategies of geographical imagery in Li Bai's poetry from the perspective of translation geography. By analyzing representative translations, the study examines how the emotions and cultural connotations behind geographical imagery are preserved or transformed during cross-cultural communication. This research aims to provide new theoretical insights into the translation of Li Bai's poetry, advancing the Chinese culture and poetry to the world.

Keywords

Geographical Translation Theory, Li Bai, Geographical Imagery

1. Introduction

Li Bai is one of the great poets in ancient China. He is renowned for presenting exceptional landscape in his poetry, which often integrates a large number of geographical imagery such as mountains, rivers, and natural scenery. These geographical images not only show vivid depictions of nature but also manifest profound emotional and cultural significance. This paper seeks to explore the translation strategies of geographical imagery in Li Bai's poetry from the theoretical perspective of He Aijun's geographical translation theory. Through analyzing the specific types of geographical imagery and its concrete reference, the paper aims to find the best strategies to translate these words, thereby, providing new theoretical insights into the translation of classical poetry as well as other types of poetry.

2. Theoretical Framework of Translation Geography

He Aijun is a professor at Ocean University of China, specializing in translation studies and translation geography. He has conducted in-depth research on translation theory and practice. He argues that translation geography is a newly emerging research paradigm within the cultural turn of translation studies. It takes translation as its core and geography as its research methodology, exploring the relationship between translation phenomena and both natural and human geography (He & Yu, 2020). This paradigm cleverly integrates translation studies and geography, bringing new research perspectives and inspiration to the field of translation. Scholars have pointed out that this integration helps link cultural phenomena with geographical characteristics, thereby enhancing the humanistic and accurate aspects of translation (Rong & Zeng, 2023). Translation is not merely a linguistic transformation but also a reproduction of geographical space and a process of cross-cultural migration. The translator should fully consider the geographical environment and cultural characteristics of the source text to ensure that the target readers' understanding and perception of geographical imagery are as close as possible to the original meaning. This paper chooses his theory as the theoretical framework to reveal the translation strategies of geographical imagery in Li Bai's poetry. This framework is particularly meaningful for analyzing the translation of geographical imagery in Chinese classical poetry, as these images not only possess geographical features but also embody profound emotional and cultural connotations.

3. Geographical Imagery in Li Bai's Poetry

The term "Imagery" (means Yi Xiang in Chinese) consists of "Yi" (emotion, thought, or idea) and "Xiang" (concrete image or object), which means expressing abstract emotions or artistic conceptions through specific images. Poetic imagery is the combination of the poet's subjective emotions and objective external objects (Li, 2014). In the history of Chinese poetry, poets often use specific objects to convey emotions and ideas. For example, "the bright moon" is commonly used to express loneliness and homesickness, while "lotus flowers" symbolize purity and noble character of a person. The paper believes that the space between "Yi" and "Xiang" is abstract and blank, which can stimulate the reader's imagination and emotional response, thereby bridging the emotional connection between the poet and the reader. As scholars have stated, the indeterminacy and blank spaces in the original poem serve as a source of inspiration for the reader's imagination and engagement. (Yan & Li, 2024).

Geographical imagery in poetry refers to the depiction of geographical landscapes and natural environments to convey emotions, thoughts, and cultural messages. Li Bai frequently used geographical imagery to express his profound emotions and philosophical reflections. Such geographical imagery enriches the visual impact of poetry while carrying deep emotional resonance and philosophical insights.

(1) Imagery of Celestial Object

In Li Bai's lyrical poetry, celestial imagery such as wind, moon, and stars is often employed to express themes of homesickness, separation, and philosophical reflections on life. Among these, the bright moon stands as the most representative image, symbolizing both nostalgia and profound life philosophy.

In his poem *Thoughts on a Silent Night*, (The English translations of Li Bai's poems in this paragraph are all derived from Xu Yuanchong's work) the poet uses simple yet evocative language to paint a vivid scene of gazing at the moon in the stillness of the night and lowering his head in homesickness: "Eyes raised, I see the moon so bright. Head bent, in homesickness I'm drowned." (Xu, 2014, p. 36) This highly visual imagery directly conveys the poet's deep longing for home through the symbol of the moon. Similarly, in *Ballad of Four Seasons (Autumn)*, Li Bai writes: "Moonlight is spread all over the capital; The sound of beating clothes far and near." (Xu, 2014, p. 84) Here, the moon not only represents the night but also reflects the sorrow of separation during wartime. Women beating clothes under the moonlight express their longing for their loved ones fighting far away. The gentle breeze is another significant image in Li Bai's poetry, symbolizing freedom and transcendence. In *Hearing a Bamboo Flute on a Spring Night in Louyang*, he writes: "From whose house comes out of flute of jade unseen? It fills the town of Louyang, spread by wind of spring." (Xu, 2014, p. 64) The imagery of the clear wind and bright moon over Dongting Lake creates a serene and carefree scene, reflecting the poet's unrestrained spirit and yearning for freedom.

(2) Imagery of Water

In Li Bai's poetry, the imagery of water like rivers, lakes, and seas often symbolizes the change of life and the passage of time, unfulfilled ambitions, or feelings of homesickness. Among them, the Yellow River, with its vast and majestic presence, is frequently used to represent the brevity and grandeur of life. In *Invitation to Wine*, the poet laments: "Do you not see the Yellow River come from the sky, Rushing into the sea and ne'er come back?" (Xu, 2014, p. 92) The surging Yellow River symbolizes the irreversible losing of time, reflecting Li Bai's broad-minded and uninhibited attitude toward life. The Yangtze River, on the other hand, often conveys themes of heroic boldness or the impermanence of life. In *Farewell to Uncle Yun, the Imperial Librarian, at Xie Tiao Pavilion in Xuanzhou*, Li Bai writes: "Cut running water with a sword, it will be faster flow; Drink wine to drown your sorrow, it will be heavier grow." (Xu, 2014, p. 196). The ceaselessly flowing river symbolizes sorrow that cannot be severed, expressing the poet's deep contemplation on the fleeting and unpredictable nature of life.

(3) Imagery of Mountain

The mountain imagery in Li Bai's poetry not only shows the grandeur of nature but also conveys his aspirations, heroic spirit, and longing for seclusion. Mount Lu, for example, appears as an ethereal paradise in his works. In *Song of Mount Lu*, he writes: "Lu Mountains tower high beside the wain stars bright, like a nine-paneled screen embroidered with clouds white." (Xu, 2014, p. 226) With magnificent diction, the poet captures the breathtaking beauty of Mount Lu while also expressing his yearning for an immortal realm and a reclusive life. Mount Tai, on the other hand, symbolizes reverence and lofty ambition. Since ancient times, Mount Tai has been regarded as a sacred site where emperors performed rituals of state. By climbing it, Li Bai not only praises its majesty but also conveys his own grand aspirations.

4. Translation Strategies for Geographical Imagery in Li Bai's Poetry

(1) Literal Translation

Although Chinese classical poetry resonates deeply with readers due to its concise expression, layered artistic conception, rich imagery, and unique linguistic style, these characteristics often make it difficult for non-native speakers to fully empathize with and comprehend the original meaning. However, this paper believes that regardless of the type of imagery, equivalent imagery can be found in different cultures because human experiences and emotions are universal.

Therefore, when dealing with geographical imagery in Li Bai's poetry, if the imagery carries relatively little emotional or cultural significance, a literal translation approach can be employed. This means finding an equivalent image in the target language that corresponds to the source language. As scholars have noted, equivalence in imagery is a crucial condition and prerequisite for poetry translation. Translators must faithfully reproduce the original imagery without arbitrarily altering or modifying it, as this is a fundamental principle that requires great attention (Ye, 2017).

Example 1

ST: 众鸟高飞尽，孤云独去闲。相看两不厌，只有敬亭山。《独坐敬亭山》

TT: Sitting in Reponse Alone on Jingting Hill. All birds have flown up high and far away; A lonely cloud floated off leisurely. We gaze at each other to our both fill, I myself and my hearty Jingting Hill. (Sun, 1982)

Example 2

ST: 床前明月光，疑是地上霜。举头望明月，低头思故乡。《静夜思》

TT: Before my bed a pool of light—Is it hoarfrost upon the ground? I raise my head and watch the bright moon; Lower it and think of home. (Xu, 2014)

Although Li Bai uses the geographical imagery of “孤云” to create a sense of solitude, Sun Dayu translates it literally as “a lonely cloud.” By contrasting this with the previous image of “all birds”, the translation effectively conveys the sense of loneliness to the target readers. Thus, the use of literal translation in this case is highly appropriate.

Similarly, Xu Yuanchong's translation largely preserves the original geographical imagery, such as “霜” (hoarfrost), and “明月” (the bright moon). The frost is a little chill while the moon is so bright and round. All these imagery function to manifest the stillness of the cold night, and readers can directly feel a sense of loneliness and homesickness from the imagery. So there is no need to translate anything beyond the image itself. By employing a literal translation approach, the translator successfully preserves the geographical imagery of the original poem. The translator's use of literal translation for geographical imagery in Li Bai's poetry ensures both fidelity to the original meaning and the preservation of the poem's rhythm and artistic conception.

Overall, this translation strategy effectively conveys the poetic ambiance created by geographical imagery, allowing Western readers to appreciate the unique charm of Chinese landscape poetry.

(2) Free Translation

The charm of Chinese classical poetry lies in its ability to express emotions through imagery. Whether it is the sorrow of parting, the joy of reunion, or the melancholy of disappointment, Chinese poets always find specific images to embody these abstract emotions. Li Bai frequently employs geographical imagery to reflect his emotions and state of mind, as these images are particularly effective in evoking readers' thoughts and associations.

However, He Aijun argues that since translators and original poets are immersed in different geographical and cultural contexts, their descriptions and perceptions of the same natural landscapes often differ significantly (He & Yu, 2020). Therefore, in the translation process, the translator must first understand the specific emotions embedded in the imagery. Rather than simply translating the literal geographical reference, the translator should convey the underlying emotions and artistic conception to the target audience. In such cases, a purely literal translation of geographical imagery may fail to capture the deeper emotional connotations, making free translation a necessary strategy.

Example 5

ST: 孤帆远影碧空尽，惟见长江天际流 (李白《黄鹤楼送孟浩然之广陵》)

TT: He sails for River Town. I watch his lone sail vanish into the boundless, azure sky, While only the Yangtze Continues its endless journey Toward the horizon. (Xu, 2014)

ST: 浮云游子意，落日故人情。《送友人》

TT: Your heart was full of wandering thought. For me, my sun had set indeed. (Translated by Herbert A Giles)

Just like the example of “碧空” in example 5, this phrase is not merely a description of geographical imagery. Instead, it constructs a vast and open landscape, which, in stark contrast to the lone sail drifting away, evokes a subtle sense of solitude. This highlights the poet's feelings of loneliness when bidding farewell to a friend. Similarly, “浮云” do not simply refer to “clouds drifting in the sky”; rather, they symbolize the traveler's unsettled journey, complex emotions, and wistful melancholy.

Therefore, translators cannot translate these geographical imagery terms word for word in a literal manner. In this case, phrases such as “boundless, azure sky” and “wandering thought” are used through free translation to convey the sentiment of departure, allowing the target audience to experience the emotional depth of the scene and resonate with the poet's feelings.

(3) Add Annotation

In Li Bai's poetry, many words that appear to be mere geographical imagery actually carry rich geographical characteristics and cultural symbolism. When translating such imagery, translators must not overlook its precise meaning. As Gu Zhengyang stated, “Translators must not turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to Chinese culture, nor should they discard or omit it in translation” (Gu, 2013).

However, since poetry emphasizes concise expression—using minimal words to convey profound meaning—translators must strike a balance. They should neither add excessive explanatory details that disrupt the poem's rhythm and structure nor provide lengthy cultural explanations that break the poetic

imagery. In such cases, an annotated translation approach can be adopted to preserve both the poetic essence and cultural depth.

Example 5

ST: 燕草如碧丝，秦桑低绿枝。《春思》

TT1: The grass in Yan is like green silk; The mulberry trees in Qin have low green branches. (Xu, 2014)

TT2: When the grasses of Yan are like tufts of green silk in breeze, the luxuriant mulberry leaves of Qing hang low on trees. (Sun, 2020)

Annotation: When the grasses of Yan begin to turn verdant like tufts of green silk, the mulberry leaves of Oin are already thick and hanging low on the branches. When the husband is touched by the approach of spring as he sees the grasses turning green, the wife has for more days been struck by the mulberry leaves growing thick and hanging low on the branches of the trees. The dear wife is so devoted to her beloved husband that she does not wish the spring breeze, a total stranger, to be wafted into her silk curtain piece. (Sun, 2020)

This verse expresses a woman's longing for her husband, who is far away in the northern frontier during a bright spring day. The term “燕草” generally refers to the grasslands in the northern borderlands, symbolizing the place where the soldier is stationed, while “秦桑” refers to the mulberry trees in the Shaanxi region, representing the homeland of the longing wife. Both terms carry rich symbolic meanings, so they cannot be translated simply as literal imagery. Some level of annotation is necessary to convey their deeper connotations.

In first translation version, while the imagery is preserved and the structure remains parallel, it does not clarify the symbolic meanings of the two words, potentially confusing the target reader. In contrast, Sun Dayu adds explanatory notes in his translation, allowing readers to grasp the contrast between the geographical imagery and its cultural symbolism, enhancing their understanding of the poem's deeper meaning.

5. Conclusion

The main challenge in translating geographical imagery in Li Bai's poetry lies in how to accurately convey its cultural, emotional, and philosophical significance. For purely geographical imagery, translators may adopt literal translation strategy, finding equivalent imagery in the target language to preserve the original poetic effect. For geographical imagery infused with deep emotional significance, the way to directly translate word for word is no longer suitable. Under this condition, free translation strategy can be used, focusing on capturing the abstract emotions underlying the imagery. Meanwhile, for geographical imagery with strong historical or literary allusions, literal translation with annotation is an effective strategy, ensuring that the rhythm and structure of the poem remain intact while providing additional context to help target readers appreciate the deeper cultural resonance.

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