

## **On the Adaptability of Cultural Context in English Translation of Tang Poems**

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### **Abstract**

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*The main purpose of translating Tang poems is to exchange ideas and culture. On the basis of the theory of adaptability in cultural context and translation criticism, the thesis discusses how to make the target language adapt to the cultural context of the source language during the process of the translation of Tang poems. Specifically, the target language should adapt the source language, the rhetoricalness, style and culture words of the original text should be reproduced accurately.*

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**Key words:** English translation of Tang poems; translation criticism; adaptability of cultural context; rhetoricalness; style; cultural words

Translation is a cross-cultural activity, so it is not only a transfer of linguistic symbols, but also a transfer from one culture to another. With the appearance of “Cultural Turn” in translation studies in 1980s, foreign scholars pointed out that “...the act of translation always involves much more than language. Translations are always embedded in cultural and political systems, and in history.”<sup>[1][96]</sup> Based on the theory of medio-translatology, translation is an independently existing form of literature, but also a reflect of social culture; therefore, the literary translation criticism should be carried out in wider cultural context. China is a land of poetry. Tang poetry (simplified Chinese: 唐诗; pinyin: Táng shī) refers to poetry written in or around the time of or in the characteristic style of China's Tang dynasty, (618 - 907), often considered as the Golden Age of Chinese poetry. The English translation of Chinese poems plays a remarkable role in carrying forward the national spirit and translation studies. The purpose of translating Tang poems is to let foreign readers appreciate the gem of Chinese nation and enjoy the poetry and delight in it. How to realize “beautification”, which means a translated verse should be as beautiful as the original in sense, in sound and in form, translators should adopt “versified translation”, which means realizing the adaptability of cultural context when translating. Concretely speaking, several factors such as the style, cultural images of poems, etc. should be considered when translating Tang poems. Translators can adapt the characteristics of Chinese ancient poems and let foreign readers understand and accept Chinese culture. The cultural communication will be realized.

### **I. The Translation Criticism in Cultural Context**

Translation criticism is the systematic study, evaluation, and interpretation of different aspects of translated works.<sup>[2]</sup> It is an interdisciplinary academic field closely related to literary criticism and translation theory from the perspective of content, expression, style, language and vividness on the background of cross-cultural communication. We are in multi-cultural society, and multi-cultural context needs multiple value orientation on the judgement of things. Similarly, the criteria of translation criticism should be diversified, multi-dimensional and multi-leveled. With the acceleration of globalization, the translation has transferred from text paraphrases into cultural interpretation, and translation plays an increasingly important role in cultural communication. The focus of translation criticism has transferred from the text to the related elements produced by the text, i.e. the cultural background, function and significance brought by the translated version. The translation criticism is give description, interpretation and evaluation that conform to the history against the translation, a cultural phenomenon under the guidance of translation theory.

Tang poetry has become a gem of traditional Chinese literature. Looking back the English translation of Tang poetry in recent decades, due to translators' misunderstanding of some words in the original text or following old translation methods, there exist some mistranslations. For example, A. Giles translated “鼙鼓” in “渔阳鼙鼓动地来” (it means “rebels beat their war drums, making the earth quake”, from Bai Juyi's *The Everlasting Regret*) into “fish-skin war-drums” for he didn't know “渔阳”(Yuyang) is a place name, today's Ji county of Tianjin). J. Fletcher translated “早晚下三巴” (it means “when are you to leave the western land?” from Li Bai's *Ballad of a Trader's Wife*) into “Early and late I go to gorges.” for he didn't understand “早晚” here is a question mood word. The mistranslation mentioned above is not only a problem of the understanding of words of the original text, but also it concerns expressing artistic spirit of Tang poetry.

Jef Verschueren holds that the process of using language is one of constant language choosing. It includes many aspects of language use, especially it must conform with the communicational circumstances and its objects, and cultural adaptability is of first importance. On the basis of adaptability theory, the author chooses several famous English versions of Tang poems, explains how to realize a translated text with multilateral agreement in source-language writer, translator and target-language reader when conducting literary translation criticism. The concept of adaptability can provide a scientific and reasonable basis for translation criticism. The adaptability of cultural context can enable us to evaluate translation from a new perspective, and thus promote the study of translation criticism.

## II. Four Representations of the Adaptability of Cultural Context

Chinese Tang poetry contains rich cultural connotation and it is an important milestone in Chinese ancient civilization. When translating these poems, one should try his or her best to adapt to Chinese culture and adapt to readers' understanding. Concretely speaking, the linguistic style of the translated text should adapt to the aesthetic context of the original text, represent the rhetoric methods and style and express the cultural words correctly.

### 1. The adaptability of cultural context and versified translation

The versified translation is to translate the aesthetic context of the poetry. In order to make the translated text expressive and represent “beauty” of the original text in form, rhyme, rhythm, imagery, emotion and style, the versified translation is every effective.

Farewell to Prefect Du was written by Wang Bo during he held office in Chang'an and it is one of famous farewell poems. The first two lines “城阙辅三秦 · 风烟望五津” are translated as following versions.

Translated version 1:

By this wall that surrounds the three Qin districts,  
Through a mist that makes five rivers one.

Translated by Witter Bynner

Translated version 2:

You leave the town walled far and wide,  
For mist-veiled land by riverside.

Translated by X.Y.Z.

Translated version 3:

The city of Chang'an guards the kingdom of Qin,  
Into the distance of misty crossing I'm looking.

Translated by Liu Junping

Translated version 4:

From the capital shielded by the Three Qins I gaze,  
Into the Five Ferries dimly veiled in the haze.

Translated by Zhuo Zhenying

Witter Bynner translated it literally, so he made the wall (the scope of Xi'an city) expand on a much larger scale. He reversed the relationship of Chang'an and Sanqin for “辅” has the passive meaning in the Chinese text. It means “Sanqin guards the city of Chang'an”. The translation of the second line was also unexpressive. Mr. X.Y.Z. adopted the free translation and the sentence structure is “he left...for...”. He got rid of the constraints of the original structure, but he could not express the idea of where the heroine in the poem left and where he went. He translated the ancient city Chang'an into “walled city”, which is unclear to tell target-language readers' information of Chang'an. Also, he translated “蜀地” into “mist-veiled land by riverside”, which cannot express the destination clearly. In the third translation version, the translator made a mistake of “辅” and failed to express “五津” (Five Ferries) clearly. In the fourth version, Zhuo Zhenying expressed the meaning of source-language text correctly for he realized the beautification of imagery, form and sound in the first couplet by using following words and structure. First, the structure “from ... into” expressed long distance of two places. Second, “gaze” and “haze” were used accurately. With “I” being the subject, the word “gaze” expressed missing feeling when bidding farewell to friends. The word “haze” embodied the meaning of “风烟” (the wind and mist). In addition, the two words are rhymed, realizing the beautification of sound. For this is a eight-line verse with five characters in each line for the rhyme is very important.

## 2. The adaptability of cultural context and rhetoric

Both Chinese and English use pun, but translating them is not easy. Pun is the use of a word in such a way as to suggest two of its meanings: one is the ostensible meaning, the other is the concealed. Li shangyin's *To One Unnamed* is perhaps the most cited of Li Shangyin's poems, mainly for its 3rd and 4th lines with their desperate expressions of love to the end. It is a masterpiece of lovesickness. In this poem, the couplet “春蚕到死丝方尽 · 蜡炬成灰泪始干” is eulogized as famous couplet of praising love. “丝” (*si*, thread) –miss, “泪” (*lei*, tears) – tears of candle and lovesickness. The couplet was translated as following four versions:

Translated version 1:

The silkworm dies in spring  
when her thread is spun;  
The candle dries its tears  
Only when burnt to the end.

Translated by Innes Hardan

Translated version 2:

A silk-worm exhausts its silk-threads, before it die;  
A candle gutters on, till its tear-drops run dry.

Translated by Xu Zhongjie

Translated version 3:

Spring silkworm till its death spins silk from lovesick heart;  
Candles only when burned up have no tears to shed.

Translated by X.Y.Z.

Translated version 4:

The silkworm ceases not to spin her thread before she'd dead;  
Unless burnt to ashes endless tears a candle'll shed.

Translated by Cha Tinggan

The translated version 1 is a literal translation, so it fails to express the actual meaning of the original text. The reason is that “silkworm” and “yearn”, “miss” or “long for” in English is not a pun. The translated version 2 does not contain the extensive concept of people, so it fails to express the meaning of the original text. The translated version 3 realizes the beautification in sound and form by using “assonance” in English poetry.

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds to create internal rhyming within phrases or sentences. “丝” is translated into “silk” and “love-sick”. By achieving beautification of sound and form, the pun in the original text is thus expressed well. The translated version 4 makes the subjective consciousness of “蚕”(silkworm) and “烛”(candle) explicit by using personal pronoun to refer to “蚕”(silkworm). “cease not” expresses the aspiration of “蚕”(silkworm); “Unless burnt to ashes” expresses the determination of “烛”(candle), which makes it have man’s personality. The semantic difference among man, silkworm, and candle can be transited.

### III. The adaptability of cultural context and culture-loaded words

In the language system, culture-loaded words are the vocabulary which can best embody the cultural information that a language carries and they also reflect the social life. Therefore, the vocabulary vacancy exists when translating due to the culture difference among different languages. For example, in Bai Juyi’s *The Everlasting Regret*, “缓歌漫舞凝丝竹·尽日君王看不足。”(Seeing slow dance and hearing fluted or stringed song, The emperor was never tired the whole day long.) Chinese musical instruments were traditionally classified into eight categories known as *bayin*. The eight categories are: silk, bamboo, wood, stone, metal clay, gourd and skin. “丝竹” (*sizhu*, silk and bamboo) usually refers to “music” performed with songs and dance in Chinese poetry. W.J.Fletcher translated it into “stringed music”, which only means some instruments (stringed instrument music). Witty Bynner translated it into “string and bamboo music”, this kind literal translation makes it hard to be understood. Zeng Bingheng translated it into “pipe and chord”, a kind of Western music, which makes it lose the connotation of the culture-loaded word. Mr. X. Y. Z. translated it into “fluted or stringed song”, which is in accordance with the Chinese culture. The author thinks that if it was translated into “silk and bamboo music”, which can make foreign readers know more about Chinese culture. Notes should be added here, “Silk instruments are mostly stringed instruments (including those that are plucked, bowed, and struck). Since ancient times the Chinese have used twisted silk for strings, though today metal or nylon are more frequently used.” “Bamboo mainly refers to woodwind instruments, which includes; flutes, free reed pipes, single reed pipes, double reed pipes.”

### IV. The adaptability of cultural context and style

Li Bai’s poem *Farewell to a Friend* was written in Chang’an in the third year (Tianbao) during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong. The poet was in political frustration at that time. The style of Li Bai’s poetry displays in different dimensions, but it is chiefly of magnificence and grace. The style of Li Bai’s poetry is magnificent, bold and unrestrained, simple and natural. *Farewell to a Friend* has following translation versions:

Translated version 1:

Blue	hill	traverse	north	wall
White	water	wind	east	town
This	place	once	for	part
Lonely	thistledown	thousand	miles	journey
Float	cloud	roam	son	idea
Fall	sun	old	man	feeling
Wave	hand	from	here	go
Sough	spot	horse	neigh	

Translated version 2:

Green hills range north of the walled city,  
 The White River curves along its east.  
 Once we part here you’ll travel far alone  
 Like the tumbleweed swept by the autumn wind.  
 A floating cloud – a wayfarer’ feeling from home,  
 The setting sun – the affection of an old friend.  
 Waving adieu, as you now depart from me,  
 Our horses neigh, loath to part from each other.

Translated version 3:

Blue mountains bar the northern sky,  
 White river girds the eastern town.  
 Here is the place to say goodbye;  
 You'll drift like lonely thistle down.  
 With floating cloud you'll float away;  
 Like parting day I'll part from you.  
 You wave your hand and go your way;  
 Your steed still neighs, "Adieu, adieu."

Translated by X.Y.Z.

The first version is a word for word translation, the second is more faithful to the original in word while the third is more beautiful and poetical than the second. If we compare these versions, we may say the second is faithful to the original so far as words are concerned, and the third is a balanced as the first so far as lines are concerned. If we compare their diction, we may find "range" is a geographic term and "curve" a geometric one, and they are not so beautiful as "bar" and "gird," for the one may be found in Keats' verse "while barred clouds bloom the soft dying day." and the other may remind us of Edmund Waller's poem *On a Girdle*. What's more important is the third couplet. In the second version, "feeling" and "affection" are used; these two words are rather prosaic. In the third, we can find no such words but the repetition of "float" and "part", which cannot be found but implied in the original and which make the version more poetical. The same is true of the "adieu" in the last verse. These may be called creative translation or recreation. In addition, iambic pentameter is used in this poem. The translator used the conversion of part of speech, "floating cloud" and "float away", "parting day" and "part from" to keep the poem's charm.

Translation criticism is a basic tie that links translation theories and translation practice. These three links constitute a whole system, being mutually beneficial, making the process of translation become more and more rational. Applying the theory of adaptability in the linguistics into literary translation criticism and evaluating Chinese Tang poems from a new perspective, we can see that only the translated text adapts to the various elements of communicative context, the purpose of cultural communication can be achieved.

#### Notes:

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