Research on C-E Translation Strategies of Culture-Loaded Words in the Poetry of the Tang Dynasty—A Case Study of “X Flower”

Tan Zhanhai, Su Xiangjun, Huang Jixing
Zunyi Medical University, Guizhou, China

The research on the translation and introduction of Tang poetry plays a huge role in promoting the spread of Chinese culture around the world. Plenty of the culture-loaded words with the suffix “flower” in Tang poetry contain rich cultural connotations. This thesis aims to find representative culture-loaded words, to contrast and analyze their corresponding translations, and to discuss the application of the translation strategies of domestication and foreignization to translate “x flower.” It uses the method of literature contrast analysis to research the Chinese to English (C-E) translation of culture-loaded words in Tang poetry, especially a case study of “x flower,” by case comparison of several translation versions of the same “x flower.” The authors, from the perspective of readership response, discuss the retention and acceptability of culture-loaded words in the target language. In this thesis, the study argues that when translating the culture-loaded words in Tang poetry, it is advisable to reasonably use domestication and foreignization, so as to balance cultural retention and acceptability of translation. The research on the C-E translation strategies of the culture-loaded words “x flower” is an effective way to explore the spread of Chinese culture abroad.

Keywords: culture-loaded words, x flower, Chinese to English (C-E) translation strategies, review of C-E translation of Tang poetry

Review of C-E Translation of Tang Poetry

Translating Tang poetry into English is an exceptional method of spreading Chinese culture around the world. Starting from the beginning of the 19th century, Tang poetry translation boasts a history of 200 years, including three periods: germination, development, and prosperity. The 19th century saw the germination of Chinese to English (C-E) translation of Tang poetry. At that time, British missionaries and diplomats in China who are proficient in Chinese began to realize the value of Tang poetry and set about translating and introducing Tang poetry to the West. The first existing English translation of an individual poem in Tang poetry was written by the British missionary Robert Morrison (Translations From the Original Chinese With Note) and was published in 1815 by Guangzhou East India Company Press. During that period, Tang poems were also translated by foreign sinologists, including Alexander Wylie (1867), Joseph Edkins (1888), Edward Harper...
Until the first half of the 20th century, the translation of Tang poetry continued to develop and the first monographic English translation was born. In 1919, the Commercial Press published 181 English Tang poems translated by W.J.B. Fletcher in his book *Gems of Chinese Verse*. In 1925, the Commercial Press published the sequel *More Gems of Chinese Poetry*, which included 105 English Tang poems, along with detailed notes in English and Chinese. In 1929, the first complete English translation of *The 300 Poems of the Tang Dynasty* compiled by Hengtang Tuishi (Qing Dynasty) was *The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology, Being the 300 Poems of the Tang Dynasty*, translated by Witter Bynner and Jiang Kanghu (Jiang & Luo, 2009). These are the important achievements of C-E translation of Tang poetry during the 19th and early 20th centuries. During the 21st century, the research on English translation of Tang poetry in China expanded rapidly. This expansion came both from the number of Tang poetry translations and from the perspective and depth of research, which is far more advanced than the past. When searching for “research on English translation of Tang poetry” on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), there are 548 papers. When searching the same words on Baidu, there are 3.79 million papers. Linguistics, stylistics, semiotics, cultural, and other interdisciplinary studies are widely used in the research on Tang poetry.

During this period, the key research focuses on macro- and micro-sopic aspects:

1. From the angle of macro-sopic, the research themes include book reviews related to works, the translation criteria of English translation of Tang poetry, the macro-sopic criticism of English translation of Tang poetry, the translators’ subjectivity, translatability, cultural loss, and the translation history of Tang poetry.

2. From the angle of micro-sopic aspects, the research themes focus on certain categories of words in Tang poetry (color terms, numerals, and toponymy), specific words (e.g., green), imagery, the poets, individual poems, poetry anthology, translations, translation strategies, translation skills, comparison of linguistic structures, rhetoric, rhyme, meter, hypertext, and so on.

In brief, in recent years, the researches on C-E translation of Tang poetry cover many areas (linguistics, culture, and translation) and many achievements have been made at home and abroad. However, research on the cultural retention and acceptability of culture-loaded words in Tang poetry is not as prevalent in China.

**Comparative Analysis of the Translation and Strategy**

The “*x flower*” in Tang poetry has some specific cultural connotations, so it is a challenge to translate “*x flower*” precisely and to successfully spread its Chinese cultural message around the world when being translated into English. Due to the differences of these two languages and cultures, facing the inequivalence in meanings and forms between the source language and target language, different translators may make different choices in terms of the translation principles, criteria, and translation strategies (Nida, 2001). Translation is not only the transition of two languages, but also the exchange of two cultures.

Thus, despite there being many translation theories, from the perspective of literary translation and cultural exchange, translation strategies can be generally divided into two categories (foreignization and domestication) (Sun, 2001). Foreignization and domestication are two opposite but complementary translation approaches. Foreignization is centered on writers’ understanding and is to promote readers actively and positively understanding the writers’ intention and purpose through translation. Domestication is to actively bring writers...
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closer to readers through translation works, so as to communicate writers’ intention and purposes. Therefore, this thesis, based on five different translation versions of The 300 Poems of the Tang Dynasty by Witter Bynner (1929), Xu Yuanchong (2007), Wang Yushu (2011), Tang Yihe (2005), and Zeng Peici (2011), respectively, aims to analyze the different English translations of the same “x flower” in the same Tang poem, so as to discuss different translation strategies and methods.

Peach Flower

The last two sentences in Lines on South Village (Tí Dū Chéng Nón Zhuong) by Cui Hu: “人面不知何处去, 桃花依旧笑春风。” (Rén miàn bù zhī hé chǔ qù, táo huā yī jiù xiào chūn fēng。) Here are two different translation versions for the original:

1. The version translated by Xu Yuanchong (2007):
   I do not know where the pink face has gone,
   In vernal breeze, still smile pink peach blossoms full blown.

2. The version translated by Tang Yihe (2005):
   Where has the girl’s face gone?
   In the spring breeze, the peach blossoms remain smiling dear.

It is obvious that the two translators translate “桃花 (táo huā)” as “peach blossom” and the verses faithfully and expressively suggests the poet’s affection for his beloved girl. But Xu Yuanchong (2007) added one word “pink” before “peach blossom,” so that readers may easily associate the symbolic connotation of peach blossom with this beautiful girl and it also echoes “the pink face” in the previous sentence. However, Tang Yihe’s translation requires readers to apply more cognitive effort to understand the connection between “the girl’s face” and “peach blossom.” Therefore, in terms of poetry translation, only by being faithful to the source text (ST) will it inevitably lack “poetic flavor.” In addition, Xu Yuanchong’s translation has preserved the stylistic features of metric poetry, not only using an inverted sentence to emphasize, but also maintaining the characteristic of rhyming at the end of each sentence in Tang poetry (Zhuo, 2002). As for the translation strategy, Tang Yihe (2005) adopted foreignization—source language-oriented and writers’ intention-focused. While Xu Yuanchong (2007) adopted both literal and free translations, which closely links with source language (SL) and the writing intention and also maintains the original style and considers the readers’ feelings. As a result, it is a superior method of translation.

Plum Flower

The last two sentences in Miscellaneous Poems (Zó Shì) by Wang Wei: “来日依窗前, 寒梅著花未?” (Lái rì yī chuāng qián, hán méi zhuó huā wèi?) Here are three different translation versions for the original:

1. The version translated by Witter Bynner (1929):
   Was the plum, when you passed my silken window,
   Opening its first cold blossom?

2. The version translated by Xu Yuanchong (2007):
   Did mume blossoms in face,
   Of my gauze window blow?

3. The version translated by Zeng Peici (2011):
On the day of your departure, by your ornate window,  
Did you notice any budding flowers on those plum trees?

Due to the differences in understanding and translating “寒梅 (hán méi),” there are three distinctive translation versions above. Witter Bynner (1929), an American sinologist, used “cold plum blossom” to express “寒梅 (hán méi).” In terms of delivering information, his translation can fully embody the imagery of “寒梅 (hán méi)” and it falls in line with westerners’ general understanding of the plum blossom. In addition, with smooth verse and semantic clarity, the two words “my” and “first” highlight the emotion that the poet is eager to learn more about his hometown from the interlocutor, which better demonstrates that the poet deeply misses his hometown and family. Zeng Peici (2011) also used “plum blossom” to express the flower itself. However, due to the lack of the word “cold,” this verse cannot deliver the images of “寒梅 (hán méi).” So, compared with ST, this translation fails to precisely convey the meaning of “寒梅 (hán méi).” Besides, Zeng (2011) used the second person “you” or “your” so many times that readers are less able to experience the poet’s feeling of homesickness. As a consequence, the whole verse appears to be bland. Compared with Witter Bynner and Zeng Peici, Xu Yuanchong translated “寒梅 (hán méi)” as “mume blossom.” Although it is not as popular as “plum blossom,” it is in fact more accurate. In Latin, “plum blossom” is called “prunus mume.” Westerners often confuse “梅 (méi)” with “李 (lǐ)” and “杏 (xìng),” and use “plum” to translate “梅 (méi),” but actually “plum” refers to “李 (lǐ).” Its official name is called “Japanese apricot” or “ume” more often. The “ume” is 梅 (méi)’s pronunciation in Japanese and it is said the reason is that “梅 (méi)” was first introduced by Japan to the West. What is more, Xu (2007) used the word “blow” in the translation, which is more in line with the features and requirements of poetry’s style, because “blow” is a literary word. The only drawback is that Xu (2007) did not clearly point out that “mume blossom” refers to “寒梅 (hán méi),” so it lacks some images when readers attempt to appreciate the poem. In general, with the intention to be close to readers, Witter Bynner (1929) and Zeng Peici (2011) adopted domestication, but they ignore the main requirement in translating poetry—to maintain the style and tone of ST, so the translations are distant from the poet’s meaning. However, Xu (2007) took foreignization largely and his translation not only keeps the thought and style in ST, but also seeks to smooth the verse, which makes up for domestication to some extent.

**Chrysanthemum Flower**

The last two sentences in Visiting an Old Friend’s Cottage (Guò Gù Rén Zhuāng) by Meng Haoran: “待到重阳日, 还来就菊花。” (Dài dào chóng yáng rì, hái lái jiù jú huā.) The translation versions are listed as follows:

1. The version translated by Witter Bynner (1929):  
Wait till the Mountain Holiday,  
I am coming again in chrysanthemum time.

2. The version translated by Xu Yuanchong (2007):  
On Double Ninth Day, I will come round,  
For the chrysanthemum again.

3. The version translated by Tang Yihe (2005):  
I will be back again to see his chrysanthemum,  
When the ninth day of the ninth moon is coming.

When comes the Double Ninth Festival of the year,
Surely, I will come again for chrysanthemums dear.

5. The version translated by Zeng Peici (2011):

Looking forward to the Double Ninth Festival we are,
To again gather here and chrysanthemum admire.

By comparing the five translations above, it is obvious that although all of them translate “菊花 (jú huā)” as chrysanthemum, they use different ways to present the image of chrysanthemum. Firstly, when translating “就菊花 (jiù jú huā)” (indicating to gather with friends to have drinks and appreciate chrysanthemum on the Double Nine Festival), only Bynner (1929) adopted domestication to translate it as “in chrysanthemum time,” while the rest of them employ foreignization, like “for chrysanthemums,” “see his chrysanthemum,” and “chrysanthemum admire,” to express the poet’s desire to be with friends to have drinks and appreciate the chrysanthemum during the Double Nine Festival. Secondly, in terms of the structure of the poem, the sentence sequence in the translations of Witter Bynner, Xu Yuanchong, Wang Yushu, and Zeng Peici is in accordance with the original verse, so it belongs to foreignization. Nevertheless, the sentence sequence in Tang Yihe’s translation represents domestication, because it is the typical English complex sentence. In addition, by using domestication, Bynner translates “重阳节 (chóng yáng jié)” as “the Mountain Holiday,” which is more easily understood by English speakers, but the translation is not conducive for readers to connect “重阳节 (chóng yáng jié, the Double Ninth Day)” with “菊花 (jú huā, chrysanthemum)” and understand the Chinese cultural connotation of “菊花 (jú huā).” As for delivering information, the translations of Witter Bynner (1929) and Xu Yuanchong (2007) were more concise and compact, which better embody poetry’s language features of being simple and beautiful (James, 2002).

Pear Flower

The third and fourth sentences in Song of White Snow in Farewell to Secretary Wu Going Back to the Capital (Bái Xüè Gě Sòng Wǔ Pǔ Guān Gūi Jīng) by Cen Sen: “忽如一夜春风来, 千树万树梨花开。” (Hū rú yī yè chūn fēng lái, qiān shù wàn shù lì huā kāi.) This verse depicts a magnificent snow view—A sudden white scenery overnight beyond the Great Wall, which is widely used in praising pear flower in Tang poetry. There are four different translations as follows:

1. The version translated by Witter Bynner (1929):

   Is like a spring gale, come up in the night,
   Blowing open the petals of ten thousand pear trees.

2. The version translated by Xu Yuanchong (2007):

   As if the vernal breeze had come back overnight,
   Adorning thousand of pear trees with blossom white.


   As if the spring breeze suddenly came back overnight,
   To turn thousands of pear trees here in full bloom white.
4. The version translated by Zeng Peici (2011):

   It is all as sudden as the arrival of spring breezes overnight,
   At once snow falls like when thousands and thousands pear trees blossom and thrive.

By comparing the four different translations, it is not challenging to discover that Witter Bynner’s and Zeng Peici’s translations are domestication: both of them are centered on readers, so they translate “梨花 (lí huā)” as “petals of pear trees” and “pear trees blossom,” respectively. Although there are some differences between them, readers can depict the scene of night wind blowing the snow. Even if the two translations do not reflect the original rhythm, the former is more concise and compact than the latter. But Xu Yuanchong’s and Wang Yushu’s translations share more in common. Both of them translate “梨花 (lí huā)” as “pear trees blossom,” and emphasize the “white” of “梨花 (lí huā)” (as white as snow). The tone in the two translations is surprisingly similar. They use subjunctive mood to describe a vivid picture of a cold night like a spring breeze suddenly blowing overnight. In addition, the two translations keep the same rhyming features of “来 (lái)” and “开 (kāi).” All in all, they maintain the “reality” and “beauty” in the ST owing to the good use of foreignization and domestication.

Lotus Flower

The verse in The Ballad of Endless Woe (Chóng Hén Gē) by Bai Juyi: “芙蓉如面柳如眉, 对此如何不泪垂。” (Fú róng rú miàn liǔ rú méi, duì cǐ rú hé bù lèi chuí。) The translations are as follows:

1. The version translated by Witter Bynner (1929):

   But the petal was like her face and willow-leaf her eyebrow,
   And what could he do but cry whenever he looked at them?

2. The version translated by Xu Yuanchong (2007):

   Willow leaves like her brows and lotus like her face,
   At the sight of all these, how could his tears not fall.

3. The version translated by Tang Yihe (2005):

   Facing lotus flowers like the queen’s face,
   And like queen’s brows willow leaves,
   How could the emperor refrain?
   From shedding tears!


   The lotus and her face were alike,
   The willows her eyebrows were like.
   How could the emperor hold back his tears?
   When he saw all these of past years!

5. The version translated by Zeng Peici (2011):

   The hibiscus was like the late lady’s face and the willows her eyebrows,
   With such scenery, how could the emperor not be reminded of the lady’s countenance?

Witter Bynner (1929) translated “芙蓉 (fú róng)” as “petal” to generally refer to the emperor Tang’s
beautiful Yang Yuhuan. Such translation (domestication) is not faithful to the ST and it can only generally deliver Yang’s beautiful image, from which the translator takes readers more into consideration when translating. The verse in his translation is concise, fluent, and well-expressive. Xu Yuanchong (2007) translated it as “lotus” to present Yang’s beauty—her glamorous image is like the “lotus flower out from water,” which not only delivers the poet’s idea accurately, but also easily triggers readers’ curiosity about Chinese culture. By comparison, in order to keep the original rhyming, Xu (2007) adjusted the word sequence in the verse “芙蓉如面柳如眉” (fú róng rú miàn liǔ rú méi) by echoing “face” with “fall” to stress the rhyme of “眉 (méi)” and “垂 (chuí).” Thus, it can be seen that the translator focuses on pursuing the three beauty principles (beauty in meaning, sound, and form) in translating Tang poetry (Liu & Gao, 2013). Tang Yihe (2005) also translated it as “lotus flower.” It seems to be linked to the original, but in fact it is redundant. In addition, in order to consider readers more, he used the domestication method to amplify the words “the emperor.” Wang Yushu’s translation “lotus” explains the poet’s idea and highlights that his translation belongs to foreignization, so the verse is antithetic and the rhyme is neat. In addition, the translation form fully demonstrates the spirit of Tang poetry. The biggest difference between Zeng Peici’s translation and the others is that he translates “芙蓉” (fú róng) as “hibiscus.” In fact, “hibiscus” and “lotus” refer to “cotton rose hibiscus” and “pistia stratiotes,” respectively, so they will bring different images and thoughts to readers. According to the historical records, there were many “pistia stratiotes” (the current lotus) during the Tang dynasty. Therefore, this translation is contentious. In addition, by adding “the late lady” and “the emperor,” the translator uses domestication method.

The Cultural Retention and Acceptability of Culture-Loaded Words “X flower”

Based on the case study of five different translations of “X flower” in Tang poetry, the translations strategies adopted include domestication, foreignization, and both of them. But generally, foreignization is the dominant translation strategy for “X flower,” whereas the translators prefer domestication to foreignization in translating the whole sentence and the whole poem. The reason is that due to the cultural absence of “X flower” in English, the translators, in order to be faithful to the original, intend to take advantage of literal translation method or foreignization to keep the original intention, which is the starting point and basic requirement in translation. At the same time, domestication or free translation method must be taken into account in the course of translation where the original cultural information cannot be spread from one culture to another before the readers appreciate and accept it. In the case study of “X flower” discussed above, the cultural information of “X flower” enjoy a very high retention or preservation as an individual word, but its cultural information can be carried, presented, and better spread in a statement instead of a word. That is why foreignization and domestication are interdependent and reciprocal in making a successful translation.

To sum up, from the perspective of linguistic translation and cultural exchange between English and Chinese, many factors, such as different aesthetic values, are involved in the cultural retention and acceptability of the translation of “X flower.” In what case will a translation strategy be properly applied? It might be hard to specify the details, but in the process of cultural exchanges, there is one principle we need to stick to: seeking commonality while preserving differences to dialectically cope with the relationship between domestication and foreignization in cultural translation. Therefore, we should strive to preserve the culture in SL while making it easy to understand in target language (TL) by using domestication, meanwhile strive not to change the original style and tone to avoid cultural misunderstanding in TL by using foreignization. In short, only by balancing the distance between the writer and the reader can the translator be free from restrictions in language and culture.
while not overstepping boundaries, so that both the translation’s faithfulness and acceptability can be expected to be strengthened (Zhu, 2004).

**Conclusion**

Tang poetry is the essence of Chinese classical literature and Chinese traditional culture, so carrying out the research on its English translation is crucial to spread Chinese culture and civilization around the world. With the backdrop of cultural globalization and the promotion of cultural development, it is of great significance. When translating culture-loaded words in Tang poetry, translators should reasonably use foreignization and domestication and should also consider the cultural retention and acceptability of the translation. In translation, translators should attach importance to cultural information, language, style, and aesthetics. Therefore, the research on C-E translation strategies of the culture-loaded words “flower” is an effective way to explore and understand the spread of Chinese culture abroad.

**References**


