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A STUDY ON THE STRATEGY FOR TRANSLATING CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY  
-REPRODUCTION OF BOTH SENSE AND FORM

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ABSTRACT

Translating classical Chinese poetry into English, in the era of globalization, is crucial to the wide spreading of Chinese culture and to the interaction and communication of all the cultures in the whole world. The translation methods can be mainly divided into three ways: "rhymed translation", "free verse translation" and "creative translation", during which the first two ways are under hot discussion of Chinese experts at present. A theoretical question on the translatability of classical Chinese poetry still exists in the field of translation. Some issues, such as "whether to use rhyme in translating classical Chinese poetry" and "sacrificing sense to sound", have aroused hot disputes in recent years. In this paper, the problem of how to translate classical Chinese poetry is analyzed and Nida's theory of functional equivalence serves as a principle employed to discuss poetry translation.

**Key Words:** Classical Chinese Poetry, Translation, Functional Equivalence, Reproduction of Both Form and Sense

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INTRODUCTION

China is the land of poetry, and classical Chinese poetry has been prosperous for a long time. Poetry is the gem of a language and the crystallization of a culture. Throughout the civilization of man, great poetry shines upon great cultures. Classical Chinese poetry is a golden gem in the great treasure house of Chinese literature. Its historical, cultural, and literal value determines its distinguished position in world literature: it is an indispensable literal heritage not only to the Chinese people but to the whole world. To exhibit its beauty and charm to people whose mother tongue is not Chinese, it is of special significance to translate it into English, the most widely used language in the world.

Scholars' opinions on whether poetry can be translated diverse greatly. There are some scholars who claim it is impossible to translate poetry. Robert Frost even defines poetry as "what is lost in translation." More scholars agree at least the fact that it is extremely hard to translate poetry. The difficulty in translating

poetry lies in the fact that poetic language puts more stress on the unity and harmony of content and form than any other literature. Poetry of each language has its own style derived from the unique national tradition and language system. When poetry in one language is put into another, the form is changed and the content is inevitably decreased. The translation of poetry is usually considered to be the most challenging job.

As to how classical Chinese poetry should be translated into English, heated argument has never ceased its voice. Some scholars insist on translating it into rhymed verse in English, while others advocate the use of prose form. There are also scholars who produce their own poems in English based upon the original Chinese poem. What form is the best seems to be an issue never to be resolved. Therefore, in this paper, the author attempts to study classical Chinese poetry translation in the light of functional equivalence. The theory of functional equivalence is introduced and employed to help establish an overall principle and some practical tactics for translating classical Chinese poetry into English. The thesis reviews the origins of functional equivalence and the different schools of contemporary classical Chinese poetry translation. Based upon the analysis of the contradictory standpoints of “rhymed translation” and “free verse translation”, a general norm for poetry translation is proposed.

## **1. Chinese Poetry and Poetry Translation**

Poetry is the supreme form of literature. It is the song of man’s soul and the picture of man’s imagination. Being the most condensed and concentrated form of literature, poetry conveys most in fewest words. China is a nation of poetic compositions. The history of classical Chinese poetry can be dated back to 3000 years ago. Classical poetry, a gem in the treasure house of Chinese literature, is a symbol of cultural beauty.

### **1.1 Definitions of Classical Chinese Poetry**

The history of classical Chinese poetry can trace back as early as nearly 3000 years ago when the first anthology, *The Book of Songs* was compiled in the spring and Autumn period. Later, *Chu Ci* emerged in the Warring States(475—221B.C.), *Yue Fu* of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.—A. D.220), and ancient verse with five characters in Wei, Jin, the Southern and the Northern Dynasties (A.D.220—589). Later *Shi* in the Tang Dynasty, *Ci* in the Song Dynasty and *Qu* in the Yuan Dynasty which are flowery in style. Tang *Shi*, Song *Ci* and Yuan *Qu* are the most spectacular and magnificent. The Tang Dynasty witnessed a period of great economic and cultural development in Chinese society. And poetry flourishes in the Tang Dynasty. During this age, numerous poetic masterpieces were written which exerted a profound influence on literary creation of later generations. In the Song Dynasty, its predominant poetic form is lyrics. After the Southern Song, the Mongols established the Yuan Dynasty. A new musical melody and new genre emerged: that was poetic drama. After the Yuan Dynasty, prose took predominance over poetry. The Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty witnessed the decline of classical Chinese poetry.

### **1.2 Features of Classical Chinese poetry**

Classical Chinese poetry is a unique form of literature, which is rhymed, metrical, passionate and profound. It is concerned with beauty, just like Edgar Allan Poe once pointed out that “poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty”. It’s one of the oldest forms of literature as well as the most refined and delicate of all literary genres.

#### **1.2.1 Beauty in Artistic Conception**

One of the most striking features of classical Chinese poetry is the rich implications and associations connected to the words, with which the poet creates a beautiful “artistic conception” that can be learned through sense but cannot be explained in words. The “artistic concept” and some other poetic elements make a poem beautiful. A good poem is the perfect combination of meaning and artistic expression. Two definitions of the term are quoted as follows:

It refers to the artistic excellence resulting from the fusion of artists’ aesthetic experience, interest, ideal and the refined artistic figure. It is a sort of “sphere” presented through the fusion of life picture and emotion exhibited in literature.

### 1. 2. 2 Abundance of Images

"An image is language that addresses the sense. The most common images in poetry are visual, they provide verbal pictures of the poets' encounters---real or imagined with the world." Laurence Perrine stated the importance of imagery of poetry: "Since imagery is a peculiarly effective way of evoking vivid experience and since it may be used by the poet to convey emotion and suggests ideas as well as to cause a mental reproduction of sensations, it is an invaluable resource of the poet. In general, he will seek concrete or image-bearing words in preference to abstract or non-image-bearing words." However, imagery is not an indispensable part of all kinds of poems, for many poems without images are listed among the best ones.

### 1. 2. 3 Beauty in Musicality

It is obvious that poetry makes greater use of music than does language which is not poetry. The poet, unlike the person who uses language to convey only information, chooses words for sound as well as for meaning, and uses the sound as a means of reinforcing meaning.

Versification in Chinese poetry is mainly grounded on two characteristic auditory qualities of Chinese, monosyllabic nature of the characters and their possession of fixed tones. Broadly, there are three ways by which the poet may achieve the musical quality in poetry: rhythm, rhyme and some other musical devices.

### 1. 2. 4 Beauty in Form

It is well known that there are some stringent regulations upon the forms of classical Chinese poems. After reading some poems, one can easily draw a conclusion that form is an important factor of classical Chinese poetry. Everybody knows that poetry is a kind of art of language. It is not what to say, but how to say that makes a poem a real poem. Without appropriate forms, poets cannot express their thoughts accurately. Comparing with the western alphabetic language, Chinese characters maintain some part of visual artistry, and so does the poetry for its neatness and tidiness.

Besides the above-mentioned features, classical Chinese poetry has the following characteristics: regular sentence pattern, full adoption to the figures of speeches as parallel, couplet, and omission of some components. It is unnecessary to have subject or predicate, conjunctive words or pronouns in classical Chinese poetry. The word order can be inverted and the parts of speech can be handled flexibly.

## 1. 3 Poetry Translation

### 1. 3. 1 The Relative Translatability of Classical Chinese Poetry

Classical Chinese poetry is possible, but quite difficult, to translate poems satisfactorily and successfully. Only with the firm belief that poetry is translatable, can the translators make more achievements in this field. On the other hand, we should also realize the difficulty or even impossibility of translating some elements in poetry on account of cultural difference.

It is not possible to fully render anything written in one language into another tongue, but it is possible to satisfactorily translate---that is, to translate most things and translate them well. The inevitable differences between languages insure that there are always significant aspects of the original literary work which cannot be reproduced in another language. However, the practice has told us that in spite of the disparity in cultural features and linguistic structure, effective interlingual communication is always possible.

In my thinking, the analysis of classical Chinese poetry's translatability should be considered from the following two aspects: the translation of content and the translation of form. As for the content of the poetry, no works is untranslatable. When it comes to the form or style of the original poetry, it is difficult to translate and some may be untranslatable. A translated poem cannot fully transfer everything of the original work and there must be something lost.

That is to say, classical Chinese poetry is relatively translatable. Some of its sound effect cannot be reproduced in the translated version. As mentioned in Chapter One, Chinese language is a tone language featured by level and oblique tones, by means of which the harmonious tonality is formed. The characteristics of level and oblique tones in Chinese language cannot be reproduced in English.

## 2. Introduction to Functional Equivalence

### 2.1 Nida's Theory of Functional Equivalence

Nida's Functional Equivalence is based on what he calls "the principle of equivalent effect", where "the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message" (Nida, 1964:159). He takes the readers' feedback into the translator's consideration. In this way, the translator is not passively faithful to source text any more, but balances and decides between original text and target reader. The message has to be tailored to the receptor's linguistic needs and cultural expectation and "aims at complete naturalness of expression". This receptor-oriented approach considers adaptations of grammar, of lexicon and of cultural references to be essential in order to achieve the naturalness; the TT language should not show interference from the ST, and the "foreignness" of the ST setting is minimized. (Nida, 1964:167-8) He emphasizes the importance of the reader of the translation.

Several important points about the Theory of Functional Equivalence are stated in the definition:

Firstly, the aim of translation is to reproduce the source-language message in the receptor language, or more exactly, to translate meaning which is given the priority in translating for it is the content of the message. In conveying the message, a conscientious translator will strive to reproduce the designative meaning as well as the associative meaning, which is generally far more important than the former, in order to reach a real closest equivalent translation.

Secondly, judging the degrees of adequacy of a translation undoubtedly depends on whether the translation achieves the satisfactory "functional equivalence", i.e. the closest natural equivalence, in which the term "functional" seems much sounder than "dynamic" in dealing with translation as a form of communication, for the focus is on what a translation performs. In Nida's understanding, "functional equivalence" should be valued in terms of a comparison between the way the original receptors understand and appreciate the text and the way in which receptors of the translated text understand and appreciate the translated text. The ultimate goal of a perfect translation, according to the principle of functional equivalence, is to produce an effect on the target-language readers that is closest to what the original produces on the source-language readers. Since complete equivalence or identical translation is out of the question, it is quite realistic for the translator to produce a translation equivalent in function.

Thirdly, "closest natural equivalence" in a translation first of all refers to meaning, however, style, though secondary, is not fiddling. Nida declared that "information" consisted of not only the "content" but also the "form", since sometimes the form is equally message-loaded. Correspondingly, "Functional Equivalence" required not only the equivalence in the content of the information but also the equivalence in the form as much as possible. The necessity of formal adjustments depends on whether literal translation is functionally equivalent in the TL. If the answer is negative, change in form is justifiably needed. In addition, Nida proposes five conditions under which the form can and should be changed: 1). when the literal translation will result in the misinterpretation of meaning; 2). when the loanwords or loan-translation will result in the semantic zero that the receptor is likely to misunderstand; 3). when the formal correspondence will result in total obscurity and ambiguity in meaning; 4). when formal correspondence will disobey the grammatical and stylistic rules in the target language; and 5). When formal correspondence will result in a significant loss in a proper appreciation for the stylistic values of the TL. If not, formal equivalence should be achieved. Yet, it cannot be achieved completely, but functionally, for no formal elements can be identical between two languages. Thus both form and content can only reach equivalent in function or effect in the target-language. In search for functional equivalence in a translation, the translator often faces a number of options, all more or less close to the original, from among which one should choose the closest.

According to Functional Equivalence Theory, what the translators should endeavor to do in the classical poetry translation from Chinese to English is to reproduce the closest natural equivalence of the original beauty in meaning, in sound and in form so that the reader could feel the same aesthetic sensitivity. It

is, of course, necessary to say “roughly equivalent to”. Since no translation can be an absolute rendering of all of the content and form of the original. The same can be said of intralingual communication, for it is quite clear that no receptor understands exactly the full intent of an utterance. In other words, communication, whether within a single language or between languages, is inevitably relative. (Jin Di & Nida, 1984: 86)

Nida’s functional equivalence theory put emphasis on cultural factors in translation. In Nida’s view, “the most serious mistakes in translating are usually made not because of verbal inadequacy, but of wrong cultural assumptions” (Nida, 1997:29).

## **2.2 Applying Functional Equivalence Theory to Classical Chinese Poetry Translation**

The focus of translating, in Nida’s comprehension, should not be the form of the message but the response of the receptor. This response must then be compared with the way in which the original receptors presumably reacted to the message when it was given in its original setting (Nida, Eugene A and Charles R. Taber, 1969: 1). The translator should by all means render his translation the equivalent function and effect as the original text and, consequently, achieve the communicative intention of translating.

Functional-equivalence translation is receptor-oriented and pays great attention to target receptor’s response. As far as translation is concerned, no one can find a complete equivalence between any source language and any target language, therefore a great many different translations can in fact represent varying degrees of equivalence. So here “equivalence” should not be understood in the meaning of “identity” but only in terms of “proximity”. It should be intended to have the meaning of the highest degree of adequacy, which is more useful and realistic in translation practice. As having mentioned above, a functional-equivalence translation is concerned mainly with the equivalence of receptor’s response rather than the equivalence of language forms. Using the term of “equivalent”, Nida suggests trying to make the response from the target language receptor as proximate as possible to that from the source language receptor. What functional equivalence tries to achieve is the equivalent effect between the response of source text reader and the response of target text reader.

Nida uses the term “closest” to describe the degrees of proximity between the source language and the target language. Functional equivalence requires the highest degree of proximity. Language form and meaning are both very important aspects. The ideal situation is to make the version “closest” to the original message both in form and meaning. No aspect should be especially emphasized at the expense of the other, but actually, in the practice of translation, the problem between language form and utterance meaning always occurs. Thus, a translation that aims at “closest natural equivalent to the source-language message” inevitably involves a number of formal adjustments because of great differences in different languages. Nida points out that in three principal areas formal changes must be made: (1) special literary forms, (2) semantically exocentric expressions, and (3) intraorganismic meanings (Nida, 1964:171).

## **3. Functional Equivalence in the Reproduction of Similarities both in Form and Sense**

### **3.1 Translating Poetry at the Semantic Level(Semantic Equivalence)**

Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style (Nida & Taber, 1969:12). If the translator wants the readers to understand the artistic conception, first of all the readers must understand the meanings of the images. Thus the first principle for the transference of poetry is semantic equivalence. Equivalence is a term used by many writers to describe the nature and extent of the relationships that exist between SL (source language) and TL (target language) texts or smaller linguistic units. The precise sense in which translation equivalence is understood varies from writer to writer. Here semantic equivalence refers to that the TL text should evoke similar, if not the same, response from the TL readers to the response evoked by the original text from the SL readers at the semantic level. As we know, it is hard to define the extent of equivalence in translation as accurately as in mathematics, thus the notion used here is just in an approximate sense.

The author will make a study of poetry translation on the basis of image translation. In reproducing the images in poetry, first of all we should be faithful to the original in meaning. Secondly, we should see

through the superficial structure to grasp the central meaning in the deep structure to reproduce the artistic conception or the poet's temperament in the poem.

Due to the similarity and difference that exist between Chinese and English culture, there are different types of equivalence concerning the two layers of meaning. First, the ideal equivalence is that when two cultures share the same (or similar) image and the image can arouse the same (or similar) association from the TL readers as that of the SL readers. In this case, we should preserve the original image in the translated version. Second, there are also cases when the referential meaning of some images cannot even be understood in the TL culture, not to mention their associative meanings. In this case it seems nearly impossible to achieve equivalence in either of these two meanings. The translator can only resort to the strategy of omission or paraphrasing the connotation of the original images. Such were the main cases that the poetry translator may encounter in their translation practice. The following shall exemplify the concrete strategies that can be employed in translating poetry, especially translating imagery at the semantic level. These strategies are guided by the principle of semantic equivalence analyzed above. There are mainly two ways: preserving and changing the original images.

### **3. 1. 1 Preserving the Original Image**

Human experiences and observations of the world are in many respects similar, so some images in classical Chinese poetry have exact counterparts in English language, in another word, they can arouse the same association. These images should be kept literally in the translated version. However, some of the images, though existing in the target language, carry entirely different meanings. These images should be kept with annotation otherwise misunderstanding may arise.

### **3. 1. 2 Substituting the Original Image**

If the images in the source language cannot draw forth the same association from the TL readers or even may cause misunderstanding, they can be transferred into a different one in the target language. This method in translation is called substitution or adaptation. Most images cannot be rendered literally, it is necessary to convert the images. In other words, we may substitute the images in the target language for those on the source language.

## **3. 2 Translating Poetry at the Aesthetic Level**

The transference of classical Chinese poetry should achieve equivalence in its aesthetic function, too. Specifically speaking, the translated versions should attempt to give the same or similar aesthetic enjoyment to the TL readers as the SL text does to the SL readers. The aesthetic enjoyment that poetry can give to the readers is determined by its aesthetic features. As for its aesthetic features, in my opinion at least two aspects should be taken into account. The external shape and the sound effect of poetry, which make readers appreciate the auditory and visual beauty, namely, the beauty in form is one aspect of aesthetic features. The beauty deriving from the emotion and thoughts of the original poem, namely, the beauty in artistic conception, is another aspect of aesthetic experience.

### **3. 2. 1 Reproduction of Beauty in Sense**

Since sense is the soul of a poem, the reproduction of the original beauty in sense is first and foremost involved in translation.

Reproduction of beauty in meaning is important in translation. Eugene A. Nida also says that "translating means translating meaning." This is quite reasonable because meaning is of vital importance in all types of messages. Translation, a means of communication, is just to help readers get the same message of the original text. To achieve the aim of faithful reproduction, a translation must conform to the original in content, which is the basic requirement. To do it well is not easy. First of all, the translator should have a thorough comprehension of the original poem before he starts to his work. Otherwise, the translation may alter or deviate from the central meaning of the original poem.

However, the translator should not be content with the mere conveying of the ideas in the original, but must strive for the reproduction of the inner beauty, that is the artistic conception (*yijing*). Sometimes, even if the translator understands the poet's thought exactly and expresses it fully, the readers may not

necessarily get the same pleasure from it as from the original one. It is because the flavor, or the artistic conception of the poem, which makes a poem a poem, cannot be displayed in another language.

“There is no doubt that artistic conception of the original poem is the most important aesthetic elements that should be represented in the target poem.” It is the artistic conception that makes the poem beautiful. “In literary translation especially in poetry translation, we should not only have a full understand of the content of the original, but also comprehend the Poet’s feelings and emotions and meanings beyond stated words, we should endeavor to convey the artistic conception of the original. Chinese classical poets are particular about the artistic conception. So reproducing it into the target poem is the highest goal in poetry translation. Yuan Xingpei defines “Yijing” as the artistic realm which is the combination of the subjective emotion of the poet and the objective scenery.

From the definition Nida sets for translating, as mentioned above, it can be seen that the closest natural equivalent between two texts should, first and foremost, be in terms of meaning. Effective communication between different languages is of course based upon the mutual understanding of meanings, just as Nida states that “translating means translating meaning”. The translators, according to Nida, should fix their attention to the original meaning and, as far as their capacity allows, reproduce the author’s original intention. Therefore, the conveyance of meaning must be given priority in translating.

### 3. 2. 2 Reproduction of Beauty in Form

Formal elements also make sense and add much poetic effect to poetry. In a word with great artistic and aesthetic values, the sense and the form must adapt to each other perfectly, just as Louis Macneice said, “In any poet’s poem the shape is half the meaning”. That is to say, formal elements are important in poetry translation, too.

As to the translation of the form, Gu Zhengkun says, “It is very hard to imitate or even approximately imitate the form of the Chinese poetry, especially the length of each line, with the Indo-European languages.....The reason is very simple, it is impossible for the translators to find at all the monosyllabic word same as or similar to the Chinese character one by one.....Just one single failure in finding the corresponding equivalent monosyllabic word will lead to the failure in imitating the form of the original poem.....”

Here by “form” Professor Gu mainly refers to the external shape of poetry. What he states indicates the difficulty of translating poetry’s form. We can’t make the rendition the same form pattern as the original. We can only translate a long sentence into a long one, and a short sentence into a short one.

The translated version should preserve the beauty in sound. However, in most cases translational identity of metrical features cannot be effectively achieved, even between two related languages, let alone two widely different ones like Chinese and English. The realistic method for the translation of verse is to use metrical substitution for the original.

Reproduction of the same musical effect in the translated poem will convey the original sound beauty to readers and enable them to experience the same artistic delight originated from the music-like translated poem. However, reproduction of musicality does not require strict adherence to the original tonal patterns or metrical rules. Chinese and English poetries have different metrical systems and rhyme schemes to create musicality, so the translator should try to find a “new harmonious unity of sense and sound, namely, the unity of aesthetic effects, and in order to achieve this, the creative ability of the translator is needed” .

Chinese poetry and English poetry have their own metrical system and rhyme scheme to form the musical property in poetry, we can only achieve the functional equivalence by finding a corresponding rhythmic unit in English which has the same or similar rhythmic effect of the original. And the translator should also employ a proper rhyme scheme to reproduce the rhyming effect. In this case, the beauty in sound will not be lost so that the readers will experience the same artistic treat as the native readers.

### Conclusion

Classical Chinese poetry is a brilliant pearl in the treasure house of world literature. To translate it into English demands a high order of skill. The demanding and challenging job of translating classical Chinese

poetry has been appealing to many scholars and translators, domestic and abroad, and their work has done a great deal to the interaction and communication of different cultures.

With Nida's functional equivalence as its theory background, this paper studies the translation of classical Chinese poetry. The author believes that sense and form are interrelated and a translator should his best to achieve the equivalence both in sense and form in the translated version.

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