The Translatability and Untranslatability of Classical Chinese Poetry

Lulu Ma
Graduate Student, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China
202220226004@bfsu.edu.cn

Abstract: The translatability and untranslatability of poetry have long been an issue for debate in translation studies. This paper analyzes the English translation of classical Chinese poetry and provides a new perspective on the dispute over translatability and untranslatability. I hypothesize that translatability and untranslatability can be compared to water (translatability) and sand (untranslatability) that coexist in a glass (source text). Translation is to deal with this glass of water and sand. To this end, the paper will assess (1) what is the definition of translation and how it affects the view on translatability and untranslatability; (2) what might be the factors that lead to the untranslatability of classical Chinese poetry; (3) what can justify the translatability of classical Chinese poetry. It is found that translatability and untranslatability coexist in the translation of classical Chinese poetry.

Keywords: Translation, Translatability, Untranslatability, Classical Chinese poetry.

1. Introduction

Untranslatability refers to a kind of language or unit that cannot be translated into another language or unit; in other words, people using two different languages fail to communicate or understand, or they cannot fully communicate or understand one another (Reiss, 2000). Translatability, on the contrary, refers to the possibility of translation.

A considerable amount of literature has discussed the translatability and untranslatability of poetry. Opinions used to be divided, with some scholars for translatability while others for untranslatability. By claiming that ‘Poetry is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation’, Robert Frost is seen as the representative of those who insist on untranslatability (Poirier and Richardson, 1995). Jakobson (1959) concurs with him by asserting that ‘poetry is by definition untranslatable’. Susan Bassnett, on the contrary, is a firm believer in translatability. She affirms that ‘Poetry is not what is lost in translation, it is rather what we gain through translations and translators’ (Bassnett and Lefevere, 2002). As translation research deepens, more neutral views on translatability and untranslatability were developed. Some scholars argue that there is no absolute translatability or untranslatability and that the degree of translatability varies under different circumstances (Sun, 2012). However, the relationship between translatability and untranslatability remains yet to be clarified.

This paper proposes that translatability and untranslatability can be compared to water (translatability) and sand (untranslatability) that coexist in a glass (source text). Differences in language, culture, and poetry are grains of sand that lead to untranslatability, while commonalities, translation history, and great translation works compose the water, i.e. translatability. Translators should maximize translatability and minimize untranslatability in creative ways.

Poetry has been part and parcel of human lives since ancient times. As precious cultural resources, classical Chinese poetry plays a significant role in cross-cultural communication and Chinese culture going abroad. By analyzing the translatability and untranslatability of classical Chinese Poetry and exploring ways to improve translatability, this paper helps translators better understand the opportunities and challenges they face and make greater contributions to international communication of Chinese culture.

The paper is divided into four sections: a review of definitions of translation, a discussion of factors leading to untranslatability, followed by an examination of justifications for translatability, and finally a summary that contains possible methods to improve the translatability of classical Chinese Poetry.

2. The Definition of Translation

The dispute over translatability and untranslatability lies in different definitions of translation and accompanying criteria for poetry translation. Robert Frost’s remark that ‘Poetry is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation’ is believed to reflect ‘an essentialist definition of translation’ (Ramazani, 2019). This section will review definitions of translation, analyze the relationship between definition, criteria, and translatability and present the author’s view.

2.1 Definitions by Scholars

The definition of translation varies among scholars. Catford (1965) defines translation as ‘the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)’. Nida (1993) notes that translation is communication and puts forward the well-known theory of dynamic equivalence: Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and second in terms of style. Susan Bassnett views translation from a cultural perspective and believes that translation should take culture as basic units. According to her, translation is not purely linguistic communication but an act of cultural exchange, so translation should focus on not only the equivalent effect at the linguistic level but also at the cultural level (Bassnett, 2002). Overall, scholars have different definitions of translation.
2.2 Definitions, Criteria and Translatability

Different definitions of translation reflect disparate criteria for translation. From Catford’s definition, one can infer that equivalence in textual material is one of the most important criteria for him. Nida’s theory of dynamic equivalence evinced his emphasis on meaning first and style second. Bassnett values culture and therefore transmission of cultural messages might be her major concern. In summary, the criteria for translation among scholars show wide divergence. Divergent criteria result in debates over translatability and untranslatability. Criteria stipulate what should be translated and to what extent the translation should be faithful to the original text. When the criteria are not met, untranslatability arises. Some criteria are easier to meet while others are harder. This is where the dispute over translatability and untranslatability originates.

2.3 View of This Paper

This paper maintains that the translation of poetry is not just on the linguistic level. Moreover, it involves transerring the message in the source text, which also contains cultural elements, artistic features, aesthetic style, etc. Given that the message is often partly transferred in practice, the author argues that translatability and untranslatability coexist when translating classical Chinese poetry into English. In the following sections, factors leading to untranslatability and justifications for translatability will be illustrated.

3. Factors Leading to Untranslatability

Those who cling to the idea of untranslatability contend that there is always something changing or even lost in the translation of poetry. Then what causes the change or loss? Scholars have explored the factors leading to untranslatability. Catford (1965) divided untranslatability into linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability, which means differences in language and culture lead to untranslatability. In addition, the distinctive features of classical Chinese poetry also result in untranslatability.

3.1 Linguistic Untranslatability

According to Catford (1965), untranslatability in linguistics is due to the differences between the source language and the target language. The greater the differences between the two languages are, the more likely they are to cause untranslatability. Chinese and English belong to different language systems. Chinese is a Sino-Tibetan language while English is an Indo-European language. The big differences between the two languages in phonetics, lexicon, and syntax give rise to untranslatability.

3.1.1 Phonetics

Different phonetic systems of Chinese and English hinder translation. Chinese characters are monosyllabic while English words are polysyllabic, which makes the sentences sound different. Besides, the Chinese voice rises and falls by tones. Take the phoneme ‘a’ as an example. There are four tones: ã, ò, ô, ò. Each Chinese character has a fixed tone or more than one fixed tone. A special arrangement of tones, especially in poetry, enables the sentences to sound like music. In contrast, the English voice rises and falls with intonation that does not depend on words. Such differences make it hard to reproduce the beauty of sound in the translation of poetry. In short, different phonetics is one cause of linguistic untranslatability.

3.1.2 Lexicon

On the lexical level, the lack of corresponding words brings about untranslatability. A large number of Chinese words have no lexical equivalent in English. For example, zongzi is a kind of special Chinese food. Due to the lack of an equivalent in English-speaking countries, it is transliterated, but the culture behind this traditional Chinese food is lost. Additionally, even if some words seem to have their counterparts in English, they may be totally different. A widely known example is loong, an auspicious and sacred creature in China. Some translated it into ‘dragon’, which has evil connotations. This may cause misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. All in all, the different lexicon is the second cause of linguistic untranslatability.

3.1.3 Syntax

Syntactical differences between Chinese and English also generate untranslatability. A major disparity in syntax is that English is hypotactic while Chinese is paratactic. English is a language in which prepositions, conjunctions, connectives, and other cohesive devices are applied to ensure cohesion and coherence of the sentences. Chinese, on the contrary, uses few connectives. Words and phrases come one after another without additional links to show their relations. As a result, Chinese sentences can be very concise, especially in poetry. However, it is a daunting task to achieve such conciseness in English translation. In brief, the different syntax is the third cause of linguistic untranslatability.

3.2 Cultural Untranslatability

Cultural untranslatability is due to the absence of relevant cultural experience in the target language (Wilss, 1982). According to Peter Newmark (2002), language is the product of culture and the carrier of culture as well. Chinese carries Chinese culture while English bears western culture, the two cultures being quite unlike. Consequently, cultural translatability is common in the translation between Chinese and English. Nida (1993) has classified culture into social culture, geographical culture, religious culture, etc. Cultural untranslatability will be demonstrated from the three aspects.

3.2.1 Social Culture

The difference in social culture is a major contributor to cultural untranslatability. Social culture is an all-inclusive concept that encompasses historical experiences, beliefs, values, habits, etc. The Chinese and westerners have diverse social culture, which leads to untranslatability sometimes, as demonstrated by the translation of allusions. Chinese literati often allude to historical stories. For example, ‘高山流水’ is an allusion to the friendship between Boya and Zhong Ziqi, two historical figures in the Pre-Qin Dynasty. Those who do not know this story may translate it directly into ‘high mountains and flowing water’, in which the meaning is lost. In short, different social cultures give rise to untranslatability.

Volume 5 Issue 8, 2023

www.bryanhousepub.org
3.2.2 Geographical Culture

The geographical background of different cultures may also result in untranslatability. The geographical location exerts an impact on culture. For instance, China is located in the east of the Eurasian continent and the west wind is cold in autumn. Conversely, the United Kingdom is on the east of the ocean and thus the west wind brings warmth on cold days. In Chinese poetry, the west wind often means cold air in autumn as demonstrated by ‘西風來幾日，一葉已先飛．’ written by Bai Juyi. If this sentence is translated as ‘west wind comes, one leaf flies’, English readers may get confused. In this sense, untranslatability occurs as a result of different geographical cultures.

3.2.3 Religious Culture

Another culture that may bring about untranslatability is the religious culture. Religion is an integral part of culture and it exerts profound influence on society. China and western countries have different religions. In the west, the major religion is Christianity while in China, there are Buddhism and Taoism, of which Taoism is the indigenous religion. Different religions constitute cultural barriers. This can be seen in the translation of 3三清觀’, a temple dedicated to the three highest gods in the Taoist pantheon. If it is translated simply as ‘Taoist Temple’, the cultural connotation is lost. This example illustrates how different religions give rise to untranslatability.

3.3 Untranslatability of Classical Chinese Poetry

Apart from the general linguistic and cultural obstacles in CE translation, translating classical Chinese poetry represents a special challenge. Compared with English poetry, classical Chinese poetry has some distinctive features and such features leave the translation a formidable task. The following paragraphs will illustrate its untranslatability from three aspects: image, prosody, and form.

3.3.1 Image

Images in classical Chinese poetry are often untranslatable. Ancient Chinese poets rely on images to express their feelings. As a result, most images contain symbolic meanings. For example, plum blossoms symbolize fortitude; bamboo integrity; pavilion farewell; wild geese signify sorrowful farewell. However, English readers may get confused. In this sense, untranslatability occurs as a result of different cultural backgrounds.

3.3.2 Prosody

Chinese and English poetry have different prosody, which means prosody is also untranslatable in most cases. Influenced by their respective phonetic systems, the rhythm of classical Chinese poetry is rooted in rhyme and tone, while that of English poetry is rooted in stress. As mentioned before, there are four tones in Chinese and special tonal patterns create beauty in sound. In contrast, English uses stressed syllables to produce the rhythm as can be seen in the iambic pentameter. However, English words are polysyllabic and not as readily arranged as Chinese. This means it is difficult to reproduce the prosody of classical Chinese poetry, as illustrated by the following verse:

尋尋覓覓，冷冷清清，淒淒慘慘戚戚。
(李清照《聲聲慢》)

So dim, so dark, so dense, so dull, so damp, so dank, so dead.  
(Translated by Lin Yutang)

This verse is written by Li Qingzhao, a female Chinese poet in the Song Dynasty. With repetitive words and regular tonal patterns, it presents special beauty in sound. The translation is by Chinese scholar Lin Yutang. Lin has successfully transferred the meaning and style of the original work but failed in translating its ‘sound’. In summary, distinctive prosody causes the untranslatability of classical Chinese poetry.

3.3.3 Form

Classical Chinese poetry has its distinctive form and translators may find it hard to retain its form in English. Classical Chinese poetry developed in stages and those in later stages particularly emphasize form. They exhibit two main features: (1) Fixed length. Each genre has fixed lines and each line contains a definite number of characters, as shown by the jueju, a quatrains consisting of five or seven words in each line. (2) Parallel structure. Ancient Chinese poets tried to achieve parallelism of meaning and structure in their works. Notably, in li Shi, a genre composed of eight lines, the middle lines are always couplets. However, English words are polysyllabic and they must follow strict syntax, so it is hard for the English translation to be faithful to the original form. This is evident in the following case translated by Shigeyoshi Obata (2010):

人煙寒橘柚，
秋色老梧桐。
(李白《秋登宣城謝朓北樓》)

The smoke from the cottage curls,
Up around the citron trees.
And the trees of late autumn are,
On the green paulownias.
(Translated by Shigeyoshi Obata)

In Chinese, ‘willow (柳)’ is a homophone of ‘stay (留)’, so it symbolizes ‘unwilling to part’. The two lines imply a sorrowful farewell. However, Legge translated the sentence literally and failed to convey the implicit meaning carried by the willow. This example showcases that images impede the translation of classical Chinese poetry.
the Tang Dynasty. As can be seen above, each line of the Chinese poem contains 5 characters and the two lines have the same structure. The English translation tries to achieve the same effect but fails due to linguistic differences. In short, the special form of classical Chinese poetry leads to untranslatability. To sum up, this section has reviewed the possible causes of untranslatability, namely linguistic and cultural differences as well as special characteristics of classical Chinese poetry. Admittedly, untranslatability is almost unavoidable in translating classical Chinese poetry into English. Untranslatability, nevertheless, can not deny the possibility of translation.

4. Justifications for Translatability

Having discussed the obstacles to translation, this section now turns to illustrate the possibility of translation. Humans share much more similarities than differences. Commonalities across cultures serve as the basis for translatability. In addition, the long history of translation and great translation works also count as evidence for translatability.

4.1 Commonalities across Cultures

Commonalities between different cultures make translation possible. People, though from different cultures, share a wide range of commonalities in cognition, emotions, habits, expressions, etc., all of which can help with the practice of intercultural translation (Anjum, 2016). Cultural and linguistic commonalities between China and western countries keep increasing with globalization and the evolution of languages, which further contributes to the translatability of classical Chinese poetry.

4.1.1 Cultural Commonalities

The overwhelming trend of globalization brings about more cultural commonalities and thus translatability. An important aspect of globalization is the increasingly frequent intercultural communication. Mutual understanding between different cultures is strengthened as a result. An example is that Chinese concepts like yin and yang have been known to many western readers. When cultural concepts can be understood by target readers, they are no longer untranslatable. Cultural gap, the absence of common cultural background knowledge between the writer and readers, becomes a lesser problem, which thus reduces factors for cultural untranslatability.

4.1.2 Linguistic Commonalities

The constant evolution of languages and the absorption of foreign linguistic elements also add to translatability. Chinese keeps evolving and learning from English, as exemplified by loanwords such as ‘巴士’ (bus) and ‘三明治’ (sandwich). The phenomenon is so salient that Chinese scholar Yu Guangzhong warns against the ‘Europeanization of Chinese’ (2014). Though the phenomenon has been widely criticized by Chinese experts, it is not completely negative in the sense that it facilitates communication. What is more, the influence is two-way. For instance, English words like ‘dim sum’ and ‘kung fu’ all come from Chinese. Mutual learning between the two languages adds to linguistic commonalities and thus translatability.

4.2 History of Translation Practice

The above analysis is on the theoretical level, and now we turn to the practical level. The long history of translation practice has confirmed the possibility of translation. Furthermore, valuable experience has been accumulated, which helps increase translatability.

4.2.1 Translation Practice

Translation practice has a long history in both China and the west, which proves the feasibility of translation. There have been waves of translation activities throughout Chinese history. The first wave was as early as the 2nd century when Buddhist scriptures were translated into Chinese in great numbers. Several waves followed in the 17th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Now we are embracing the latest wave in the 21st century. In the west, translation dates back to Cicero and Horace in the 1st century BC (Li and Shao, 2013). Translation activities have been carried out since then, contributing significantly to the progress of human civilization. In brief, translatability is irrefutable because translation practice has already had a long history and played an increasingly important role on the world stage.

4.2.2 Valuable Experience

Valuable experience is accumulated in the history of translation and it helps increase translatability. In the long history, translation theories, strategies, and methods have been developed. Theories of translation are well-developed in the west. Since the inception of translation, Cicero has distinguished between word-for-word and sense-for-sense translation (Li and Shao, 2013). Later generations combined translation with other disciplines and schools of translation studies flourished. Besides, strategies such as domestication, dynamic equivalence, and communicative translation provide guidance for translators. Translation methods including amplification, omission, conversion, combination, etc. also help translators improve their translation. On the whole, humans have made progress in improving translatability.

4.3 Great Translation Works

There have already existed a number of excellent translation works, which are the best evidence for translatability. Generations of translators, both Chinese and western ones, have devoted themselves to translating classical Chinese poetry into English. Some poetic translations, so profound and original, have impressed countless readers. This can be seen in the works of Xu Yuanchong and Ezra Pound. This part provides a critical perspective on their works.

4.3.1 Works of Xu Yuanchong

In China, Xu Yuanchong opposed the idea of untranslatability and proved the translatability of classical Chinese poetry with abundant excellent works. As one of the most influential poetry translators, he translated the poems of the Tang and Song dynasties, the Book of Poetry, and the Elegies of the South into English. His theory of ‘three beauties’: beauty in sense, sound,
and form can serve as criteria for poetry translation. Many of his translation works achieve the ‘three beauties’. One piece of evidence is his translation of ‘Jiangxue’ written by the Tang poet Liu Zongyuan.

江雪
千山鳥飛絕，
萬徑人蹤滅。
孤舟蓑笠翁，
獨釣寒江雪。
(柳宗元《江雪》)

Fishing in Snow
From hill to hill no bird in flight;
From path to path no man in sight.
A lonely fisherman afloat;
Is fishing snow in a lonely boat.
(Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

This translation by Xu Yuanchong (2012) exemplifies his pursuit of three beauties. First, beauty in sense refers to the reproduction of the aesthetic sense of the original poem. This translation recreates the sense of tranquility and loneliness and fulfills beauty in sense. Second, beauty in sound lies in the rhythm of poetry. Classical Chinese poetry relies on rhyme to produce rhythm and Xu employs this technique in translation. As shown above, the last words of every sentence, i.e. flight and sight, afloat and boat are strictly rhymed. Third, beauty in form requires overall uniformity, such as similar length and structure of verses. In the translation, the first two verses are in parallel structure. All the four verses are similar in length though the third verse is a bit shorter. In general, this is an excellent translation that demonstrates the possibility of poetry translation.

4.3.2 Works of Ezra Pound

In the west, Ezra Pound’s success in translating classical Chinese poetry also attests to its translatability. By translating the poetry of Classic Anthology, Cathay, and Book of Odes, Pound introduced classical Chinese poetry to the English-speaking world. He was extolled by T. S. Eliot as ‘the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time’ (Gao, 2001). Pound translated Chinese poems into free verse and promulgated the Imagism, a movement in poetry that derived its techniques from classical Chinese poetry—stressing imagery and clarity. His aesthetic philosophy is exemplified in the translation of Tang poet Li Bai’s ‘Changganxing’.

長幹行
妾發初覆額，
折花門前劇;
郎騎竹马来，
繞床弄青梅。
同居長幹裏，
兩小無嫌猜。
(李白《長幹行》)

The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter
While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead,
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse.
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
(Translated by Ezra Pound)

This is a successful translation work. Pound recreated the title and used the image of ‘letter’ to indicate the theme and the feelings of the protagonist. He retained the original images in translation, such as hair, flowers, and plums and successfully described their happy childhood. ‘The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter’ is popular among English-speaking readers and listed as one of the ‘105 Renowned American Poems’. Pound’s success shows the possibility of translating classical Chinese poetry.

4.3.3 A Critical Perspective

A critical view should be taken on the translation of the two renowned scholars. While praising them for their excellence and contribution, we should not forget that there is no perfect translation.

Although Xu Yuanchong has won the highest award in the field of translation, his works have not always been met with applause. He was criticized for over-emphasis on the form of poems at the cost of content (Wu, 2015). Xu did not always meet his own three criteria of beauty in sense, sound, and form in the same poem. Furthermore, though Xu’s works gain recognition from Chinese readers, they are not as widely accepted by western readers. If one of the major functions of literary translation is to promote cross-cultural communication, the translator should take into consideration the acceptability of works (Lee, 2012). In this sense, untranslatability still exists.

Pound’s translation works are not perfect either. A case in point is his translation of ‘The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter’. This poem is considered the most popular in the collection Cathy and one of the best in his career. However, a closer look at its content reveals problems. In particular, ‘郎騎竹馬來’ was incorrectly rendered into ‘You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse.’ In fact, ‘竹馬’ is a kind of toy in ancient China, but Pound understood ‘竹’ and ‘馬’ as separate objects and mistranslated them into ‘bamboo stilts’ and ‘horse’. This exemplifies untranslatability caused by cultural gaps.

Overall, the outstanding but imperfect translation works of Professor Xu Yuanchong and Ezra Pound demonstrate both the translatability and untranslatability of classical Chinese poetry.

In summary, this section has attempted to justify the translatability of classical Chinese poetry with commonalities across cultures, translation history and great translation works by masters. It also presents a critical analysis of the masters’ works.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the translation practice can be compared to dealing with a glass of water with sand in it. Translatability is water and untranslatability is sand. One can not deny the nature of water just for the sand in it, nor can he or she ignore
the existence of sand in water. Translatability and untranslatability coexist in translation the same way as water and sand coexist in the glass.

Based on the commonalities of humans, drawing experience from the long history of translation, great translators have proved to us the translatability of classical Chinese poetry with their excellent works. However, due to disparities in language, culture, and poetry, untranslatability is the other side of the coin that can not be ignored. In practice, it is beyond possibility to achieve absolute translatability.

Should we refrain from translating poetry, or should we attempt at translating it irrespective of all difficulties? The second view is advocated here because if poetry is left untranslated, humans would be deprived of a large number of poetic works which are masterpieces themselves. As Anna Holmwood (2018) noted in her translation of Legends of the Condor Heroes: A Hero Born, ‘The greatest loss that can occur in translation can only come from not translating it at all.’ Translators should try to maximize translatability and minimize the impact of untranslatability. Several methods can be adopted to improve the translation of classical Chinese poetry.

(1) Creative translation

Creative translation involves adaptation or recreation to ensure that the core message evokes the right emotional response among the readers. Poetry in itself is a product of creation. When it comes to poetry translation, both western and Chinese scholars have proposed creative translation. In the west, Jakobson (1959: 118) labels the translation of poetry ‘creative transposition’. Bassnett (2001) considers translation as ‘transplanting the seed’ and observes that translators need to fully comprehend the source language and give a creative explanation to realize a successful plantation of foreign cultural seeds into the target soil. In China, Xu Yuanchong (2006) asserts that even if the translation can not fully convey the sense of the original poem, compensation can be made by creation. Through creative translation, the beauty of the original poetry can be preserved at its best.

(2) Transliteration with annotation

This method can be used to deal with culture-loaded words, which are abundant in classical Chinese poetry. Since a culture-loaded word often has no equivalent in English, transliteration is the best choice to retain the original meaning. An annotation is necessary to help English readers understand the meaning of this word and the culture behind it. When the transliteration becomes well-known, the annotation can be omitted under certain circumstances. For instance, yin and yang are familiar to those who know Chinese culture, and therefore annotations about them are not always necessary. Translation is a decision-making process. The translator has the freedom to decide what to retain, what to shift, and what to omit. Different methods can be applied and combined to achieve the ultimate goal of producing the best translation work possible.

This paper provides a new perspective on the relationship between translation, translatability, and untranslatability: Translation is like tackling a glass of water with sand in it, where translatability is water and untranslatability is sand. The two coexist and untranslatability can neither be ignored nor exaggerated. This holistic approach enables readers to view the translation of classical Chinese poetry more objectively. By discussing the causes of translatability and untranslatability, this paper boosts the confidence of translators and meanwhile reminds them of the challenges they face. Strategies and methods are introduced in the summary to help translators improve their translation. However, further research is needed to explore more feasible ways to address untranslatability. Translators and scholars, Chinese in particular, are expected to innovate translation theories and strategies to facilitate the translation of classical Chinese poetry so that the treasure of Chinese culture can benefit peoples across the globe.

References


