

Ecological Translatology in the Translation of Ancient Chinese Poetry: A Case Study of *The Departure from Baidicheng in the Morning*

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Abstract: The paper explores the translation of Li Bai's poem *The Departure from Baidicheng in the Morning*. Applying the Eco-translatology theory, it aims to analyze how different English translations—by Xu Yuanchong, Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie, and Weng Xianliang—reflect the adaptation of language, culture, and communication in the translation process. Given “Adaptation and Selection” Idea as well as “Three-D” Theory, the paper compares the linguistic, cultural, and communicative strategies employed by these translators. The findings suggest that each translation demonstrates varying degrees of adaptation, with Xu Yuanchong's version achieving the most balanced ecological transformation. It is also found that Eco-translatology provides valuable insights into enhancing the accuracy and cultural transmission of Chinese poetry in translation.

Keywords: *The Departure from Baidicheng in the Morning*; Eco-translatology; “Adaptation and Selection” Idea; “Three-D” Theory; Chinese poetry in translation.

1. Introduction

Li Bai is one of the most outstanding poets in ancient China of the Tang Dynasty, with his poetry characterized by grandeur and elegance. He has pushed Chinese romantic literature to a new peak (Li Xiaohong, 2017). Li Bai loved nature, was close to nature, embraced it, and was lost in the beauty of mountains and rivers. In his poems, landscapes are often depicted vividly, imbued with a rich sense of ecological aesthetics, allowing readers to deeply feel the joy of adaptation, the joy of friendship, and the joy of benevolence and wisdom that the poet obtained from his interaction with nature.

The Departure from Baidicheng in the Morning was written in the second year of the Qianyuan era of the Tang Dynasty (759 AD), when Li Bai was exiled to Yelang. In the spring of the following year, upon arriving at Baidicheng, he suddenly received news of his pardon, overwhelmed with joy and surprise. He immediately boarded a boat and traveled downstream to Jiangling. This poem was composed at that time. *The Departure from Baidicheng in the Morning* integrates the joy of being pardoned with the magnificent beauty of nature and the ease and pleasure of boating downstream. Through its extraordinary imagery and fresh style, the poem praises the grandeur and beauty of the mountains and rivers, expressing sincere emotions, and fully demonstrates the poet's profound feelings towards natural landscapes and his extraordinary poetic expression ability. These poems are not only Li Bai's personal artistic creations but also carry the expression of people's emotions through scenery during that time. It is one of the classic works of ancient Chinese poetry and still celebrated today. For a poem like *The Departure from Baidicheng in the Morning* with deep cultural connotations, and its English translations are of great significance. By studying the translation strategies and expressions of different translators, we can better understand the representation of Chinese classical poetry in cross-cultural communication and promote mutual understanding and exchange between Chinese and Western cultures. Therefore,

this paper aims to explore the different English translation versions of the classic Chinese poem *The Departure from Baidi City in the Morning* in from the perspective of eco-translatology. By comparing and analyzing the translations by Xu Jingcheng, Xu Yuanchong, Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie, and Weng Xianliang, the paper seeks to provide new ideas and methods for the international dissemination of Chinese classical poetry.

2. Brief Analysis of the Concept of Eco-translatology

Professor Hu Gengsheng provides a detailed interpretation of Eco-translatology in his work *An Interpretation of Eco-translatology*. He held the view that Eco-translatology is a new perspective for studying translation, an ecological perspective on translation studies. Starting from the perspective of the translation ecosystem, it draws on the essence of ecology to metaphorically describe the entirety of translation. Using the narrative style of Eco-translatology, it offers new descriptions and explanations of the nature, process, standards, principles, methods, and phenomena of translation. Eco-translatology is an interdisciplinary study that involves at least the fields of ecology and translation studies. It conducts holistic research by metaphorically comparing the translation ecosystem with the natural ecosystem, while also studying the relationship between translators and the translation ecological environment. (Hu Gengsheng, 2008)

Eco-translatology is developed based on the theory that translation is a process of adaptation and selection, utilizing the concept of “survival of the fittest” from Darwin's theory of biological evolution. It offers a new description and explanation of the essence, process, standards, principles, and methods of translation from the perspective of “selection and adaptation”. It emphasizes the central role and leading function of the translator in the translation process, stressing that the translation process is a cyclical alternation of the translator's adaptation and selection; the translation principle involves multi-dimensional selection; and the translation

method involves the three-dimensional transformation, namely language, communication, and culture. The criteria for evaluating translation include the degree of multi-dimensional transformation, readers' feedback, and the quality of the translator. From the perspective of Eco-translatology, "Adaptation and Selection Theory" refers that the best translation is the one with the highest "degree of integrated adaptation and selection". Therefore, the mechanism of three-dimensional transformation is of great guiding significance for translation research. The three dimensions are language dimension, culture dimension, and communication dimension. Language dimension transformation involves processing the translation by changing vocabulary choices and sentence structures; cultural dimension transformation involves interpreting the text so that readers can understand the meaning expressed in the original cultural context through the translation; and communication dimension transformation aims to express the communicative purpose and effect of the source language. (Xu Lulu, Feng Libo, 2024)

3. Comparative Analysis of the Translations

3.1. Appreciation of the Original Poem

早发白帝城
李白
朝辞白帝彩云间，
千里江陵一日还。
两岸猿声啼不住，
轻舟已过万重山。

This poem begins with a beautiful description of the environment. The first line, "朝辞白帝彩云间" describes the poet's departure from the high Baidicheng in the morning. "彩云间" not only highlights the city's towering terrain but also describes the morning scenery, transitioning from twilight to bright daylight, which externally manifests the poet's inner emotional shift. The second line, "千里江陵一日还" conveys the swift speed of the boat. The sharp contrast between the "thousand miles" of the journey and the "one day" vividly illustrates the boat's rapid pace. This swift and smooth journey also reflects the poet's inner exhilaration and joy. Additionally, the word "还" in this line is particularly expressive, subtly indicating the poet's joy at being granted amnesty. The third line, "两岸猿声啼不住" describes the continuous mountain ranges between Fengjie and Jiangling, with the monkeys crying out incessantly on both sides. The final line, "轻舟已过万重山" expresses how the poet's small boat has inadvertently sailed through countless mountains. The word "轻" not only signifies the boat's agility but also reflects the poet's ease and happiness after enduring hardships and entering a smooth path. This line is both a description of the scenery and a metaphor, expressing both personal sentiment and a summary of life experience, evoking emotions through the landscape, rich in philosophical thought. (Yin Lefeng, 2014)

3.2. Analysis of the Three English Translations from the Perspective of Three-Dimensional Transformation

3.2.1. Language Dimension Adaptation

Language dimension adaptation refers to the translator's

adaptive selection and transformation of vocabulary and sentence structure during the translation process. The form of poetry also serves the content and is part of language dimension. Therefore, attention should be paid to the adaptive transformation of the language dimension when translating ancient poetry into English.

a) Xu Yuanchong's Translation:

Leaving White Emperor Town at Dawn
Leaving at dawn the White Emperor crowned with cloud,
I've sailed a thousand li through canyons in a day
With monkeys' sad adieus the riverbanks are loud;
My skiff has left ten thousand mountains far away.

b) Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie's Translation:

In the bright dawn clouds I left Baidicheng,
A thousand li to Jiangling only takes a day.
I hear the incessant cry of monkeys from the banks,
My light barge has passed countless folds of hills.

c) Weng Xianliang's Translation: Homeward

Good-bye to the city high in the rosy clouds of dawn.
Homeward, out the gorges, out today!
Let the apes wail. Go on.

Out shoots my boat. The serried mountains are all behind.

"The Departure from Baidi City in the Morning" is a seven-character quatrain, similar to English quatrains. However, English poetry does not distinguish between level and oblique tones, which is its shortcoming. Xu Yuanchong's translation adopts a metrical pattern, effectively leveraging the strengths of English poetry's stress and rhythm. The original poem has three pauses in each seven-character line, with the last word of the first, second, and fourth lines rhyming in the "an" tone. Xu's translation uses alternate-line rhyming, with an "abab" end rhyme pattern, resulting in harmonious sound and uniform rhythm. The original poem has three pauses in each line, and Xu's translation uses iambic hexameter, which is rhythmically regular and has a clear sense of rhythm and musicality, achieving a balance between form and sound, thus reflecting the beauty of the original meaning and realizing adaptive transformation in form. Additionally, Xu's translation makes necessary adjustments in word order; the third line "With monkeys' sad adieus the riverbanks are loud;" uses a prepositional phrase at the beginning of the sentence, making the end rhyme "loud" and "cloud" not only follow English poetic rules but also make the meaning more coherent. Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie's translation does not strictly adhere to a specific metrical pattern but maintains a similar flow and rhythm to the original poem. Weng Xianliang's translation does not strictly follow a single metrical pattern either; the number of syllables and the position of stressed syllables vary in each line, giving this translation a degree of freedom in terms of meter. Overall, in terms of linguistic dimension adaptation, Xu's translation is more appropriate.

3.2.2. Cultural Dimension Adaptation

Differences between cultures can lead to deviations in the reader's understanding of the language carrier, so the translator should not only focus on the conversion between English and Chinese languages but also pay attention to the expression and transformation of the cultural connotations within English and Chinese.

Baidicheng, located in the Three Gorges, is a strategically important place with a rich military and strategic history. It has been a critical battleground since ancient times and is

especially renowned after Liu Bei retreat to Baidicheng and entrusted his son to Zhuge Liang, thus preserving the Han dynasty. It has become an important subject for literary and poetic contemplation by scholars of successive dynasties. (Chen Jing, 2024) In translating “Baidicheng”, a highly textualized scenic spot, different translations have adopted various approaches. Xu Yuanchong uses “White Emperor” to refer to “Baidicheng”, a name that conveys both an exotic connotation and the imperial hue of ancient Chinese culture to English readers, which aligns with the cultural background of the original poem and successfully conveys the artistic conception and emotion of ancient Chinese poetry. Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie use the transliteration “Baidicheng”, retaining the original place name without much cultural connotation. The “li” in the second line of the original poem, “A thousand li to Jiangling only takes a day,” is a unique Chinese unit of measurement with cultural significance. Different translators have chosen different strategies for this; both Xu’s and Yang and Dai’s translations adopt a domesticating translation strategy by using the Pinyin “li” to represent the unit, preserving the national cultural characteristic and reflecting the cultural dimension adaptation. The “apes’ cry” in the line “With monkeys’ sad adieus the riverbanks are loud” not only refers to the cry of apes but also carries a connotation of sorrow. Therefore, whether it’s Xu’s “monkeys’ sad adieus,” Yang and Dai’s cry of monkeys, or Weng’s “apes wail,” all these translations are the result of understanding the cultural connotation of the ape’s cry and using a domesticating translation strategy to express the sorrowful meaning associated with the cry in Chinese cultural imagery. Of course, the effects conveyed by these three expressions differ. “Adieu” is a French word, rarely used in English, meaning “goodbye,” typically used in formal or literary farewells. “Cry” is a general term that refers to a loud expression of sadness, pain, or intense emotion, often accompanied by tears. “Wail” often has a sustained, melodic quality, more sorrowful and intense than a regular cry. In comparison, Weng’s “apes wail” seems to render the cultural imagery of the ape’s cry more fully.

3.2.3. Communicative Dimension Adaptation

The communicative dimension adaptation focuses on fully conveying the intention and emotions contained in the translation, allowing readers to experience the same or similar emotional expressions as the author intended in the original work.

The first half of the poem uses hyperbole as a rhetorical device, literarily exaggerating the height of Baidicheng and conveying the speed of the journey through the brevity of time spent. Xu Yuanchong’s translation uses “crowned with cloud”, a personification in English that emphasizes the towering nature of Baidicheng and expresses admiration for the wonders of nature. Additionally, the use of “sad adieus” in Xu’s version conveys not only the scene of the original poem but also adds a layer of melancholic emotion, which is largely consistent with the emotions intended in the original. Xu’s translation aims to maintain the flavor of the original poem while establishing an emotional connection with English readers. Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie’s translation uses expressions like “only takes a day” and “incessant cry of

monkeys,” focusing more on the transmission of information and the depiction of the scene. Their translation is more effective in conveying the basic information of the original poem but may not be as rich in poetic expression as Xu Yuanchong’s. Weng Xianliang’s translation takes a significantly different stylistic approach, using a more freeform structure. Starting with “Good-bye to the city high in the rosy clouds of dawn,” he creates an atmosphere of farewell. His translation emphasizes emotional expression and direct scene depiction in the communicative dimension, as seen in the sentence “Let the apes wail. Go on”, which conveys a sense of urgency and decisive action. Weng’s translation may establish a more direct emotional connection with readers, but it may not convey the rhythm and formal beauty of the original poem as effectively as the other two translations.

4. Conclusion

Poetry, as an important literary form of the Chinese nation, reflects not only history, tradition, and ways of life but also its values, ways of thinking, and aesthetic concepts. It is the accumulation of the historical and cultural heritage of the Chinese nation and an important carrier for the dissemination of its excellent culture. This paper, from the perspective of Eco-translatology and taking three English translations of *The Departure from Baidicheng in the Morning* as examples. Upon examining the three translations, it is evident that translators have chosen different methods, displaying subjective initiative in their selection and adaptation. However, all three translations implicitly follow the principles of three-dimensional transformation, which may not have been a conscious decision on the part of the translators. It is undeniable that the more comprehensive the consideration of the three-dimensional transformation, the better the ecological balance of the translation is achieved, and the more the translation can convey the meaning, connotation, and emotion of the original work. Therefore, using the three-dimensional transformation principles to guide and analyze translations helps to restore the essence of the original and also aids in post-translation reflection and improvement. Under the guidance of Eco-translatology, translators can maximize the transmission of linguistic and cultural connotations, improve the quality of translations, and thereby contribute to the dissemination of Chinese culture.

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