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ON THE TRANSMISSION OF THE AESTHETIC FEATURES FROM EZRA POUND'S CREATIVE TRANSLATION OF "CHANG GAN XING"

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Abstract. The translation of poetry has always been a challenging work. Pound's creative translation of Chinese classical poetry has been a hot topic that has caused increasing attention. His translation has been criticized by some scholars for his deviations from the original, but canonized in American literature in the mid-20th century and become classic works of American poetry. Whether through merit or controversy, Pound has stayed in the history of American modern poetry. By comparing Pound's translated English version with the original Chinese ancient poem, we can gain some insight into the transmission of the aesthetic features in the process of translation and reception in the cross-cultural communication.

Key words: Ezra Pound; *Chang Gan Xing*; *River Merchant's Wife: a Letter*; creative translation; aesthetic features.

INTRODUCTION

The process of translation is a process of contending of ideas in the choice of form and meaning, especially the translation of poetry. The challenge for the translation of a poem lies in the fact that it is, on the one hand, loaded with subtle artistic conceptions and whimsical expressions, and on the other hand, the poetic forms, such as rhymes, rhythms and cadences and have to be weighed and considered again and again, otherwise it is not a poem [8, P. 100].

Chang Gan Xing (《长干行》), a famous poem of Li Bai in Tang Dynasty, ancient China, is translated by an American poet Ezra Pound as *The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter*. By studying Pound's translation of ancient Chinese poem, which embodies Pound's poetic achievement, we can learn how the aesthetic features contained in a classic Chinese poem are transmitted, from an ancient classic Chinese poem into the American modern poetry. And it has gained the status of a classic poem and exerted an enduring influence on the imagist movement.

MAIN PART

1. *Chang Gan Xing*: the Original Chinese Classic Poem

Chang Gan Xing was written by Li Bai, a very famous poet in Tang Dynasty. The poem consists of 150 Chinese Characters, which

narrates a touching love story. Chang Gan Li is the place where the story happened, which provides the setting of the love story. It is located in today's Nanjing, where once lived many river-merchants who would go a long way to upwards along the Chang Jiang River to Sichuan Province on a business voyage in Tang Dynasty. The poem tells the river merchant's life to express her complicated mixed feelings of love and concern for her husband far away from home. The poem begins with her memories of her childhood:

妾发初覆额，折花门前剧。
郎骑竹马来，绕床弄青梅。
同居长干里，两小无嫌猜。

Here the river-merchant's wife recalls her innocent childhood playfulness when she and her perspective husband first met. They were innocent playmates and attached to each other. The description is vivid, lovely and picturesque. The vivid expression “青梅竹马，两小无猜” has become Chinese household set phrases for idealized innocent childhood sweet heart. Then she proceeds to describe her marriage.

十四为君妇，羞颜未尝开。
低头向暗壁，千唤不一回。
十五始展眉，愿同尘与灰。
常存抱柱信，岂上望夫台！

She married at 14, she was shy and bashful, and then they get familiar with each other, she

expressed their feelings and devotions towards each other. Here the poet employed two allusions of Chinese ancient love story to express their devotion and faithfulness to one another that even death cannot alter. In the following part the poem begins to describe her husband's going away on business.

十六君远行，瞿塘滟滪堆。
五月不可触，猿鸣天上哀。

She recalled the departing scene when her husband was leaving. Her care and her worries about her husband on the risky voyage are presented by mentioning "Qu Tang Xia", a very dangerous rock for the sailing in the rocky Three Gorges.

门前迟行迹，一一生绿苔。
苔深不能扫，落叶秋风早。
八月蝴蝶黄，双飞西园草。
感此伤妾心，坐愁红颜老。

In this part, her inner feelings and sentiments were revealed by describing the change of scenery associated with the different seasons to remind us the elapse of time. Everything she witnessed would remind her of her husband who is far away from home. The images of "moss", "falling leaves", "paired butterflies", etc., the endless bleak and lonely aspects of scenery, described the subtle changes in natural scenery, but at the same time are the descriptions of her inner feelings and sentiments, illustrating how hard she was living with husband away from home. She even fancied herself an old woman suffering from missing her husband for several months. In the end, she told her husband; before he come home he should write a letter to her in advance, she would meet him at Chang Feng Sha, which were very far from home.

早晚下三巴，预将书报家。
相迎不道远，直至长风沙。

The poem is written in rigid rhyme scheme of ancient Chinese poetic form more than a thousand years ago, with five characters in each line, rhyming in alternating lines.

2. "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter": A Classic American Poem

Pound creatively translated Li Bai's *Chang Gan Xing* (《长干行》) as "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter". It has become a classic American Poem since the mid-20th century. Pound as a translator didn't understand Chinese himself and he never came to China. His acquisition of Chinese classic poetry benefited from an Orientalist Scholar, poet, Ernest Fenollosa, who studied Chinese poetry from Japanese translation, and paraphrase it into English. Unfortunately, he didn't finish his work, and left his manuscript into Pound's hand. Pound, according to his own insight and understanding of Chinese poetry, translated the poems creatively, and collected as "Cathay" in English version.

Pound's English version of Li Bai's *Chang Gan Xing* (《长干行》) deviates from the original poem in many ways. Li Bai's original poem is a typical Chinese poem of Tang Dynasty, with very strict rhyme scheme; each line contains five Chinese characters. Pound translated it in free verse. The narrative is changed into a sort of dramatic monologue, or a letter, written in the first person narration by the river-merchant's wife. Another remarkable change appeared in the title. *Chang Gan Xing*, not only carries the information of the place, the geographical location, but also the river-merchants' living condition, their way of living, the social and environmental atmosphere, which is so familiar to Chinese people that they were seldom conscious of it. The foreign readers may have great difficulty in understanding of the situation of the heroine and development of the story, and may even fail to get the attention. In translating the title in this way, he directly tells the readers, who is the speaker (the river-merchant's wife), and who she is talking to (the river-merchant), indicating their way of life and why there is such a story of love and complaint. Here also lies the difference of two cultures: The Chinese people tend to be implicit, introspective while the Western people tend to be more direct and extroversive. The Chinese tend to say less to convey more [12, P. 65]. In the poem, more details of their life and feeling are just hinted between the lines, and these may cause

difficulties in understanding. Here also implied some hidden but deep-rooted moralistic value in the historical background: the man should take up the responsibility for the country and for the family and should have great prospects in the future, whether to hold responsibilities for the country, to be army man or to go out for business to make a fortune for the family, they are often expected to be absent from the family for a long time, and there are great many poems of this kind written in the tone of the women at home complaining and missing their husband far away from home. Therefore, Pound's creative shift in the title of the poem is here of great functional value not only to help bridging up the gap of difference in culture, but also help the foreign readers to get the atmosphere, the mood and tone of the poem.

3. The Aesthetic Features Transmitted in Pound's Creative Translation

Pound creatively translated Li Bai's "Chang Gan Xing" into: "River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter", with the intention to transmit the aesthetic features of Chinese poetry. He presented the beauty of the poem in beautiful English language by transmitting his own subjective perceptions of this Chinese Poem [10, P. 149]. The English version of Pound's translation established its classic position in American literary history since mid-20th century. His mastery of cultural knowledge and English language cannot be underestimated. Indeed, he has transformed the ancient Chinese poems into beautiful touching and masterly English verse form. His translations are canonized and collected with other American masterpieces into anthologies of English and American poems as original creative works, like *Norton Anthology of American literature* of different editions [11, P. 35]. It may be that his position and influence as a leading poet has contribute to the recognition of his translation, or vice versa, although his translation works is not great in number, his translation works occupies an unique important position in the American literary history.

Li Bai, famous for his romantic and imaginative poems, here in this poem tells the story of a shy, timid, bashful, sentimental and passionate girl of 16, and spoke out her mind in an innocent and complaining tone. Pound's

translated poetic lines runs natural and eloquent in everyday speech, each line in one sentence, with concise expression and natural rhythm. Here is the beginning of translated version of Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter", with the first part presents the childhood memories of the river-merchant's wife:

"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

And we went on living in the village of Chokan:

Two small people, without dislike or suspicion" [6, P. 132].

Pound used modern colloquial language as the diction of the poem. The image of the merchant's wife is created as a lively and innocent little girl, with a vivid and lifelike image, her mood and intonation is natural, a sentential stop at the end of each line, and a familiar tone as if she had come to us from the neighborhood instead of more than a thousand years ago. Her haircut, the way the two children played is so fresh and cute, which ended with "two small people, without dislike or suspicion" in simple language, vivid and sharp images and fresh expressions. And then the story proceeds to their married life:

"At fourteen I married My Lord you.

I never laughed, being bashful.

Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.

Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back" [6, P. 132].

These lines give the evidence that how he can make use ordinary dictions but creates special effects. For instance, "being bashful", "lowering my head", "called to a thousand times", "looked at the walls", etc. these are but some short and crisp oral expressions, clauses, phrase, free and flexible in structure but have managed to create deep impressive effects. The next part describes her married life, when she and her husband lived together:

"At fifteen I stopped scowling,

I desired my dust to be mingled with yours

Forever and forever and forever,

Why should I climb the look out?" [6, P. 132]

Here the source text employed two allusions of Chinese ancient love story to express their loyalty and devotion to one another that even death cannot alter. Pound did not translate the classical allusions, which is often very complex and difficult to understand, but expressed their devotion to each other: "I desired my dust to be mingled with yours./ Forever and forever and forever!" How impressive!

"At sixteen you departed,

You went into far Tu-Ku-en, by the river of swirling eddies

And you have gone for five months.

The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead." [6, P. 132]

These four lines describe heroine's husband departure and her feelings after his leaving. She directly expresses her worries for his security by mentioning "Tu-Ku-ren, (Japanese for "Qu Tang Yan Yu Dui") Which is a gigantic rock at the Three Gorges of Chankiang River, the river of swirling eddies", and shows her worries, her concerns, her sorrow and her loneliness by mentioning her fancied scene: "The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead."

"You dragged your feet when you went out.

By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,

Too deep to clear them away!

The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.

The paired butterflies are already yellow with August

Over the Grass in the West garden;

They hurt me. I grow older." [6, P. 133]

This part is her observations of the world around her, natural scenery, the change of seasons, but dramatic enough to express her suffering from her husband's absence with the cycle of the seasons as if this sad state of mind would lasted a whole life, although he has gone just five months. The images of natural scenery remained: "the mosses", "leaves fall early this autumn", and "the paired butterflies hurt me". All these images are typical of Chinese sensitivities to describe the loneliness, sadness and solitary but may not cause the same feeling for foreign readers, and then Pound translated the lines directly: "They hurt me / I grow older". He actually has simplified the original Chinese connotations, but made the images telling and

the sensitivity deeply felt with dramatic effect. The last part is her enthusiastic expectation and her bursting out of feelings:

"If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,

Please let me know beforehand,

And I will come out to meet you

As far as Cho-fu-sa."

Cho-fu-sa is from the Japanese spelling of "Chang Feng Sha", which is a beach several hundred miles away from Nanjing, even now, there is quite a long distance far away, but the river-merchant's wife who lived a thousand years ago said: I will come out to meet you there, at Chang Feng Sha, and I don't think it is far away.

The reason that the English version of Pound's creative translation of Chinese poem are taken as classic works of American literature may be trace to its cultural or even political causes, but the fact that if any literary works could be regarded as masterpiece it must have its prerequisites, that is, it has to come up to its own standards of aesthetic requirements in its own culture. In addition to its freshness in language, the tone and mood is also expressed vividly and eloquently. Evidently, His success in translation here does not lie in evidently not his faithfulness in transmit the meaning from one culture to another but in his skillful transformation of the heterogeneous elements such the Chinese poetical Aesthetic features. We can sum up his creativity in the change of poetic forms in the following aspects:

1. He changed the title: from the name of a place into the identity of the Heroine;

2. He shifted the angle of the narrating perspective; from third person narrative to first person narration;

3. He changed form of poetry: from a narrative poem into a dramatic monologue or a letter;

4. He changed the poetic diction, from Chinese classic poetic diction to oral everyday speech;

5. He omitted classical allusions, metaphorical expressions and simplified some details of the content;

In spite of all these, he managed to translate the poem and make it well received and appreciated as a masterpiece of English writing. How did he achieve it? That is because he

changed the overt forms but retained the essential aesthetic qualities of the Chinese poem:

1. Sharp vivid images;
2. Conciseness of expressions;
3. Rhythmical and flexible cadences;
4. Compactness of contents.
5. Flexibility of sentence structures;

Compared with other translator's English version, there aesthetic features are evident in Pound's translation, and these features made the translation like the migration of the soul, from Tang Dynasty, ancient China, to 20th century America. T. S. Eliot wrote the preface to Pound's "Cathay" in 1928. Eliot regard him as "the inventor of Chinese Poetry for our time", and "through his translation we really at last get the original." [1, P. 285] Maybe there is some element of exaggeration in the preface, being eager to praise the work, and that T. S. Eliot cannot really know the original of Chinese poetry through this work, and Pound's translation, in fact, had deviated too much from the original Chinese ancient poetic works, but it is not deniable that Ezra Pound did introduce the aesthetic features of Chinese poetry into American literature by his creative translation, and hence influenced the course of development of modern American Poetry.

CONCLUSION: The Transmission the Aesthetic Features the Imagist Poetry

In translation, there are often some heterogeneous elements, include the Aesthetic features, which cannot be directly introduced into another culture directly but may be transmitted in the creative translated version. In Pound's creative translation of Chinese classic poetry, we can get some implications in his creativity in handling these Aesthetic features.

Ezra Pound is now generally recognized as the leading poet of the imagist movement, with his rejection of traditional English poetic form and meter and of Victorian diction. He has steered American poetry toward greater density, difficulty, and opacity, and opened up American poetry to diverse influences, including the ancient classic poetry of China. That is to say, not only he transmitted the Aesthetic features of Chinese poetry into his translation, but also transferred then into his own creation of his imagist poems. Central to his Imagist idea was clarity of expression through use of precise

visual images. He advocated concision and directness, building short poems around single images; these features are precisely some of the features of Chinese classic poems. And there is no doubt that one of the greatest cultural influences over Pound came from ancient China.

"*In a Station of the Metro*" was published in 1913, which serves as the classic specimen of Imagist poetry in which Pound led the way. The poem contains only two lines:

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough." [5, P. 383-185]

The famous poem is regarded as the masterpiece of Pound's Imagist poem. It reflects an observation of the poet of the human faces in a Paris subway station where Pound was once impressed by the pretty faces of people hurrying out of the dim, damp and gloomy metro station. The faces Pound observed reflect variously against light and darkness, like flower petals on a wet and dark bough [5, P. 384]. This is something new in American literary history, for there is not any poem so short and concise, with juxtaposition of vivid images and density of meaning in American poetry before, but you can find many evidences in Chinese classical poems, even shorter than this with deep Aesthetic and philosophical depth. And his "Imagist faith" was listed in his 1913 lists of "tenets":

- 1) Direct treatment of the "thing". Whether subjective or objective.
- 2) To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
- 3) As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phase, not in sequence of the metronome [1, P. 301-302].

If this imagist poetry is read in relation with creative translation, it is not difficult to find clues traced back to the influences of Chinese aesthetic features from his creative translation [12, P. 146]. That is to say, not only had he translated Chinese poems, but also strongly influenced by the aesthetic features of Chinese poems, especially in his adoption and application of the Chinese poetics [10, P. 149]. Whether through merit or controversy, Pound has stayed in print. Both his creative translations and his imagist poems have achieved classic status in modern American literary history.

Many a time, we are conscious of the influence of western countries in the shaping of

Chinese modern literature, but through the discussion above, we may come to the conclusion that the opposite is also true. The Chinese ancient poetry has a strong enduring influence on American modern poetry. There is the interaction of the two cultures, each absorb strength and vitality from the other.

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