

# A Brief Analysis of the Beauty of Artistic Conception in English Translation of Ancient Poems

## —A Comparative Study of Three English Versions of Prelude to Water Melody

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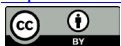
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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study the artistic conception of the English translation of ancient poems. Artistic conception, as the main artistic feature of poetry, is produced by the superposition of images. In this paper, I choose three different versions of famous translators' translations of *Prelude to Water Melody*, to make a comparative study, and discuss how to convey the artistic conception in the process of English translation.

### Keywords

Prelude to Water Melody, Artistic Conception, English Translation, Comparative Study

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## 1. Introduction

As for the artistic conception, Wang Guowei once pointed out that the top of Chinese ancient poetry was the artistic conception (Sun, 2013). In the translation of poetry, the reproduction of the original artistic conception is the target pursued by the translator. In this paper, I choose three different versions of following translators' translations, Lin Yutang, Xu Yuanchong and Zhao Yanchun (hereinafter referred to as Translator Lin, Translator Xu and Translator Zhao), and make a comparative study of *Prelude to Water Melody* to explore how different translators deal with the expression of artistic conception. My main research method is literature research. The reason why I choose the translations of these three translators is that they are all representatives of the Chinese transla-

tion circle, especially Xu Yuanchong, whose translation focuses on the translation of ancient poems into English. His translation theory also has a profound influence on the later generations. Therefore, the selection of their translations will contribute to study the artistic conception of the English translation of ancient poems from different perspectives.

## 2. Analysis

Artistic conception begins with the concept of Taoism in the pre-Qin Dynasty. For Taoism, we cannot accurately express and explain it, but it is a kind of real existence. It is this characteristic of thinking that can only be understood but cannot be explained that inspires the writers of later generations to pursue such a lofty artistic realm—artistic conception. With the help of artistic conception, the author mobilizes the imagination of the readers and inspires them to feel the connotation of the works spontaneously. This is the charm of artistic conception in ancient poetry. Therefore, whether the artistic conception of Chinese ancient poetry is successfully reproduced in translation determines to a great extent the success of the translation of the whole work.

*Prelude to Water Melody* is written by Su Shi, a great writer in the Song Dynasty. This poem is widely circulated in China, the whole is a good sentence and has a high aesthetic value. Its biggest characteristic is the use of a lot of artistic conception, expressing the author's true feelings, which is also the reason why I choose this poem. It concentrates on the Mid-Autumn moon to begin imagination and thinking, putting the human world's vicissitudes of life into the philosophical pursuit of the universe of life (Cheng, 2010). Su Shi expressed the resentment of not being recognized through the Mid-Autumn Festival, in which feelings mingle with scenes, with a strong beauty of artistic conception. Meanwhile, he also expressed his optimistic attitude towards life and good wishes for life. The original text is as follows:

明月几时有？把酒问青天。不知天上宫阙，今夕是何年？我欲乘风归去，又恐琼楼玉宇，高处不胜寒。起舞弄清影，何似在人间？  
转朱阁，低绮户，照无眠。不应有恨，何事长向别时圆？人有悲欢离合，月有阴晴圆缺，此事古难全。但愿人长久，千里共婵娟。

The first half of the poem focuses on the sky, and the author uses the artistic conception of the moon as a metaphor for being pure and lofty. While the second half of the poem focuses on the world, the scenery was turned into feelings, with a full moon to foil the departure. The following is my detailed analysis of the original text.

明月几时有？把酒问青天。

Translator Lin: How rare the moon, so round and clear! With cup in hand, I ask of the blue sky.

Translator Xu: How long will the full moon appear? Wine cup in hand, I ask the sky.

Translator Zhao: How often does the bright moon appear? Holding my cup, I ask the blue sky.

The most important image in these two sentences is the moon. I have consulted relevant materials to understand the source of this image and the emotion it expresses. “明月几时有?” originated in a poem by Li Bai, “青天有月来几时，我今停杯一问之。人攀明月不可得，月行却与人相随。” And the image of “moon” is widely used in ancient poetry, mostly to write the feeling of missing, expressing a kind of cold beauty of artistic conception. Both Xu and Zhao modify the moon. Xu uses the word “full”, while Zhao chooses “bright”. The expression of Lin’s translation is slightly different. He chooses “round and clear” to modify the moon, highlighting the completeness and brightness of the moon. The word of clear is used here to express the sense of coolness, which I think is more consistent with the artistic conception. In addition, I agree with Xu’s translation that there is no need to add modifiers before the sky for we cannot see the color of the sky at night.

不知天上宫阙、今夕是何年?

Translator Lin: I do not know in the celestial sphere. What name this festive night goes by?

Translator Xu: I do not know what time of the year. It would be tonight in the palace on high.

Translator Zhao: Tonight, I do not know, which year. It is in the palace on high?

For these two sentences, I compared the differences of the three translators in terms of words according to the original text. These two sentences push the praise for the bright moon and yearning feelings forward, with an open artistic conception. “Gong” and “Que” are both forms of Chinese ancient architecture. They refer to the palace when put together. Here especially mean the legendary “Guanghan Palace” where Chang’e lives in. “The palace on high” in Xu’s and Zhao’s translations seems to be more appropriate to the artistic concept. Lin’s translation of “celestial sphere” is somewhat inferior to that of the other two translators.

我欲乘风归去，惟恐琼楼玉宇，高处不胜寒。

Translator Lin: I want to fly home, riding the air, but fear the ethereal cold up there, the jade and crystal mansions are so high!

Translator Xu: Riding the wind, there I would fly, yet I’m afraid the crystalline palace would be too high and cold for me.

Translator Zhao: I would go above riding the air; in the celestial castles there, the cold, I’m afraid, I couldn’t bear.

These three sentences should be translated according to the author’s thoughts and feelings. Thus, based on a general understanding of the author’s biographical background and the feelings of the original work, I make a comparative analysis of the translations of the three translators. Lin’s translation of “乘风归

去” is different from that of the other two translators. His translation is “fly home”. Su Shi himself imaged before that he was a man on the moon in his previous life, so he had the idea of “fly home”. He wanted to fly to the moon, but he was afraid that he would not be able to withstand the cold in the imaginary palace. It contains the author’s expectation to return to the imperial court, but in the capital, he is likely to be unable to withstand the intrigue against each other. Thus, “乘风归去” has a double meaning. Therefore, I agree more with the “fly home” in Lin’s translation. “Home” refers to the palace in the imagination of Su Shi, but more importantly, it refers to the real court. For the translation of the latter two clauses, the translations of Xu and Zhao prefer literal translation. The word “ethereal” in Lin’s translation is a shining point, and he modifies “cold”. “Ethereal”, which originally means graceful, here conveys a beauty of being dim, which is very pictorial.

#### 起舞弄清影，何似在人间？

Translator Lin: Dancing to my shadow, I feel no longer the mortal tie.

Translator Xu: I rise and dance, with my shadow I play. On high as on earth, would it be as gay?

Translator Zhao: To dance there with a cool shadow whirled. Is not better than this human world.

I first consult the materials to understand what the author really wants to express, because these two sentences are the author’s imagination, which is difficult to understand. It is necessary to combine the scene at that time and reflect the author’s thoughts at that time in the translation. Imagine the situation at that time: Su Shi was slightly drunk, in the hazy as if flying to the palace carved by jade. The bright moonlight fell down the river, Su Shi could only dance with his shadow after looking around. A feeling of helplessness arose spontaneously from the bottom of his heart. The three translators are faithful to the original text in expression. For the first half of the sentence, “whirled” in Zhao’s translation is relatively better. It gives shadow a dynamic beauty and looks very light-footed. The word “rise” in Xu’s translation seems unreasonable, but it is also in line with the situation at that time. A little exaggeration to describe the state of Su Shi’s drunk, the feeling of dancing is likely to be shown. For the latter part of the sentence, the difference between Xu’s translation and the other two translators lies in the word “gay”. Su Shi lamented that it was better to stay on earth and dance in the moonlight than to fly to the palace on the moon. Although Su Shi did not express happiness directly, but the sentence of “何似在人间” is undoubtedly certain (Miao, 2002). “gay” describes Su Shi’s contradictory feelings between his birth and his return to reality from hallucination.

#### 转朱阁，低绮户，照无眠。

Translator Lin: She rounds the vermilion tower, Stoops to silk-pad doors, Shines on those who sleepless lie.

Translator Xu: The moon goes round the mansions red, through gauze-draped

window soft to shed. Her light upon the sleepless bed.

Translator Zhao: Thus, turns around the moon glow, from red roofs to my window, and floods my sleepless sorrow.

This is mainly a comparative analysis of verbs. I have looked up the functions of verbs in ancient poems before analysis. “转” and “低” indicate the movement of the moon, indicating that the night has deepened. Moonlight streamed across the vermilion pavilions, low through the carved windows and doors, and caught the sleepers inside. Both Lin’s translation and Xu’s translation use the technique of personification to personify “moon” and endow “moon” with spirit and movement, narrowing the distance between readers and moon. In Zhao’s translation, I think it is inappropriate to refer to the author as “the man who does not sleep”. Although Su Shi did not specify who the “sleepless man” was, it could not be the author himself. He could be referring to his younger brother Ziyou, or to all those who could not sleep during the Mid-Autumn Festival because they could not get together with their relatives. “Sleepless bed” in Xu’s translation used the writing skill of transferred epithet to represent people by using the bed, which added an invisible beauty of artistic conception.

不应有恨、何事长向别时圆？

Translator Lin: Why does she, bearing us no grudge, Shine upon our parting, reunion deny?

Translator Xu: Why then when people part, is the oft full and bright?

Translator Zhao: Gainst man the moon should bear no spite. Why, then, when people part is it round and bright?

Through the understanding of the original text, I feel that the author has a strong emotional expression from here. The author puts forward a question here, implying that the moon deliberately embarrasses people and adds trouble to people. The tone of complaint further sets off the poet’s deep feeling of missing his brother, but implicitly expresses his deep sympathy for the unfortunate people who have left their homes. Xu’s translation and Zhao’s translation do not reflect the feeling of “complaint”, so the word “grudge” in Lin’s translation is more appropriate.

人有悲欢离合，月有阴晴圆缺，此事古难全。

Translator Lin: But rare is perfect happiness—The moon does wax, the moon does wane, and so men meet and say goodbye.

Translator Xu: Men have sorrow and joy; they part or meet again; the moon is bright or dim and she may wax or wane. There has been nothing perfect since the olden days.

Translator Zhao: People gather and part again, the moon undergoes wax and wane One can ne’er perfection attain.

Some writing techniques are involved here, so I have a basic understanding of figures of speech such as metaphor and personification before the analysis. Su Shi twisted and uttered some words of relief to exculpate the moon. People have

joys and sorrows in union, the moon also has rain or shine round. She has the time of being covered by dark clouds and the days of imperfection. She also has her regret, since in ancient times it is difficult to have perfect things in the world. Why, then, grieves over a temporary absence? Compared with the three translators, Xu's translation is the closest to the original text. In particular, the call to the moon is used "she", so it appears more vivid by using the skill of personification.

但愿人长久，千里共婵娟。

Translator Lin: I only pray our life be long, and our soul together heavenward fly!

Translator Xu: So let us wish that man. Will live long as he can! Though miles apart, we'll share the beauty she displays.

Translator Zhao: How I wish man could live forever. And share her fair light everywhere.

The last two sentences are the essence of the poem. Accurate expression of emotion is the key point of the translation of these two sentences. I also make a comparative analysis based on the emotional understanding of the original work. Su Shi expressed his blessing and missing for his loved ones, showing his open-minded attitude and optimistic spirit. Xu's translation and Zhao's translation both reproduce this meaning from different angles. The sentence "And Our Souls Together Heavenward Fly" in Lin's translation may seem poetic, but it is a little different from the original text.

### 3. Translation Methods and Skills

Through the comparative analysis of this poetry, we can find that artistic conception is a unique artistic feature of Chinese ancient poetry. Different translators have different approaches to artistic conception. Therefore, how to convey the beauty of artistic conception in the process of English translation is an eternal problem facing the translator. In order to accurately convey the artistic conception of Chinese ancient poetry in English, translators often need to use some translation methods and skills as follows:

#### **The method of literal translation**

Literal translation is the most faithful translation method. Literal translation can be used when the artistic image is clear. For example, in the translation of "明月几时有", the artistic image of "moon" is relatively obvious and well known, so there is no need to add some skills in the translation process.

#### **The method of supplement**

Some of the artistic conception in Chinese ancient poetry is euphemistic and implicit, and it will lack aesthetic feeling if translated directly. Therefore, translators will use the rhetoric of metaphor or personification to enrich the artistic conception. For example, in Lin's translation of "fly home", there is no corresponding translation of "home" in "我欲乘风归去", but the translator added it based on Su Shi's state of mind at that time. In Xu's translation, "rise and

dance”, “rise” also has no corresponding translation in “起舞弄清影”. It was added by the translator to better express the state of Su Shi’s drunk.

#### **The method of ellipsis**

In Chinese ancient poems, there are often some words added by the author for the harmonious tonality (Zhao & Xu, 2008). If the words have nothing to do with the theme of the poem, the translator can choose to ignore them. For example, in the sentence of “把酒问青天”, there is no need to translate “青”, because we cannot see the color of the sky at night. If Translated as “blue sky”, it seems gilding the lily.

#### **The method of transfer**

In the process of translation, the translator will use rhetoric or break the original sentence pattern in order to make the translation smoother or better understood by readers. This translation method is acceptable on the basis of being faithful to the original meaning. For example, in the translation of the sentence “转朱阁，低绮户，照无眠”, Lin and Xu both use the technique of personification, narrowing the distance between readers and the moon (Mu, 2017). This sentence is a question, but Lin translated it into a declarative sentence without damaging the original meaning, which is also desirable.

The above four methods are common in translation, which can help the translator better express the artistic conception of the original text.

## **4. Conclusion**

On the whole, three translators are able to convey the thoughts and emotions of the original text well, but they have different treatment of artistic conception. The beauty of Chinese ancient poetry lies in its artistic conception. In the process of English translation, the translator needs to find appropriate words, sentence patterns and rhetoric to properly show the emotions of the author and convey the beauty of artistic conception, so as to enable foreign readers to better appreciate the beauty of Chinese ancient poetry (Zhou, 2015).

It is believed that this study can be used as a reference for students majoring in translation and some people engaged in translation. Artistic conception is not only embodied in ancient poetry, but also involved in some other literary works. By studying famous translators’ translations, we can learn how to use words and expressions in the translation of such literary works in order to retain the meaning of the original works. Besides, the translation ability is able to be improved and strengthened.

In addition, the translatability of poetry has been a controversial issue. Some people argue that it is difficult for the culture of China and the West to communicate. As a unique literary form of China, Chinese ancient poetry will lose its charm when translated into English, and foreign readers cannot fully appreciate the beauty of Chinese ancient poetry. But in fact, if we want to send Chinese ancient poetry to go abroad, translation may be the best way to play a role in promoting culture in the world. At present, with the increasingly frequent commu-

nication between China and the West, we should not only absorb the essence of foreign culture, but also bring the essence of Chinese culture to the world stage and let more people feel its charm.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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