

On the English Translation of Culture-loaded Words in *Qiang Jin Jiu*

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Abstract— *Qiang Jin Jiu*, a classical poem created by one of the best ancient Chinese poets Li Bai, has more than one English version. Whether it is translated into a metrical verse or a free verse in English, the culture-loaded words in the poem have always been a major problem. For this reason, this study selects four English translations of metrical and freestyles respectively and sorts out the culture-loaded words that are easily misunderstood, aiming to find out the differences between the metrical and free verse translations through case studies to promote the out-going of Tang poetry.

Keywords— differences, free verse translation, metrical translation, misunderstanding of culture-loaded words, *Qiang Jin Jiu*

I. INTRODUCTION

China has been a country of poetry since ancient times, and there is a saying: if one wants to understand Chinese traditional culture, Chinese classical poetry must be first considered. Tang poetry (唐诗) is not only a peak of Chinese classical literature, but also a splendid treasure of world literature [1]. There are many poets in the Tang Dynasty, whose poems belong to different styles. But the poet Li Bai (李白) stands out for his poetry in powerful style. *Qiang Jin Jiu* (将进酒) selected in this article is the most representative one written by Li Bai on wine drinking. Although the poem is ancient-styled, both Chinese and foreign translators have given translations in metrical verse and free verse. These different versions are generally acceptable, but flaws of lexical misunderstanding still exist in all selected English translations of the poem. Most of the misunderstood words belong to culture-loaded words, which are very unfavorable for the spread of Chinese culture. In this regard, the mistranslated culture-loaded words must be evaluated and corrected in time to remove obstacles in intercultural communication.

II. ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATIONS

2.1 Culture-loaded Words and Research Status

In the process of formation and development, language can reflect a unique cultural phenomenon of a nation. At the lexical level, many culture-loaded words come into being. Culture-loaded words refer to words, phrases, and idioms that mark something unique in culture. These words reflect the unique activities that a particular nation has accumulated over a long historical process [2].

It is precisely because of the close connection between language and culture that the continuous promotion of Chinese culture in the context of globalization can effectively maintain the balance of the global language and culture ecosystem [3] [4] [5]. As the essence of the Chinese nation, poetry contains rich cultural connotations. Imagery is the soul of poetry which refers to objective images used to express subjective feelings. In a certain sense, translating poetry is the translation of imagery, the quality of which can even determine the success or failure of poetry translation. In addition, the interpretation of imagery must also consider the cultural information behind it: the translation of cultural images [6]. Many studies on the English translation of culture-loaded words in poetry have been based on the cultural imagery [7] [8] [9] [10]. There are also studies from different theoretical perspectives: Yao Xiaofang [11] applies Newmark's semantic translation and communicative translation theory to the explanation of culture-loaded words appearing in Tang poetry; Yu Lixia [12] studies the different translations of culture-loaded words of Mao Zedong's poetry from the perspective of Skopostheorie; Xiao Meiqi [13], from the perspective of translation characteristics, analyzes the English translation of Chinese culture-loaded words. What's more, researchers also discover some special phenomena from the culture-loaded words in poetry and discuss them: the names of plants with Chinese characteristics which appear repeatedly in Xu

Yuanchong's *Three Hundred Tang Poems* (《唐诗三百首》) are regarded as research objects [14]; likewise, the culture-loaded word "x flower" that often appears in Tang poetry is chosen as the main topic [15]. From the above studies, we can see that the translation of culture-loaded words in poetry has always been discussed, but basically, it is based on the image or translation strategies of domestication and foreignization. However, we discovered misunderstanding in the English translation of culture-loaded words in Tang poetry. After a careful analysis, the differences between the metrical and free verse translations is concluded, which will help guide the English translation of Chinese poetry in the future.

2.2 Background of the Poem

Qiang Jin Jiu is a name of Yuefu (乐府) songs. Since the Yuefu tunes were lost, the poems about drinking and singing have been using this name in later generations. According to historical records, in the first year of Tianbao (天宝), the poet Li Bai was summoned to the capital by the emperor but was later exiled for political reasons. This poem expresses the poet's frustration in his official career by depicting the scene of drinking with his friends.

2.3 Free Verse Translations and Metrical Translations

Qiang Jin Jiu, as one of the masterpieces of Li Bai in the Tang Dynasty, naturally attracted the attention of Chinese and foreign translators. We divide the English translations of the poem into two categories: free verse and metrical verse, including four free verse translations by Arthur Waley [16], Stephen Owen [17], Burton Watson [18] and Witter Bynner & Kiang Kang-hu [19] and four metrical translations by Sun Dayu [20], Xu Yuanchong [21], Zhao Yanchun [22] and W. J. B. Fletcher [23].

As for free verse translation, because it's challenging to balance the accuracy and readability of poetry in translating, the charm of poetry may be preserved, but its rhythm must be abandoned [24]. For metrical translation, things are different. It's believed that the life of poetry depends on its musicality, and the rhythm can achieve this musicality to a large extent [25].

2.4 Easily Misunderstood Culture-loaded Words in *Qiang Jin Jiu*

American linguist and translation theorist Eugene Nida once divided culture into five categories, namely, social culture, material culture, ecology, religious culture and linguistic culture [26]. Only two types of culture-loaded words are easily misunderstood in *Qiang Jin Jiu*. Based on Nida's classification, we divide them into the

following two categories: social and material culture-loaded words.

2.4.1 Social Culture-loaded Words

The traditional customs, lifestyles, social activities and appellations of a nation can be called social culture. Each nation has different historical backgrounds, political characteristics, custom cultures, and appellation methods, which has made various social culture-loaded words come into being. For example, different nations have different naming methods for colors:

(1) 君不见，高堂明镜悲白发，朝如青丝暮成雪。

The word "青丝" in this sentence does not refer to "blue thread", but it symbolizes black hair. In the traditional Chinese culture, the color word "青" not only indicates the life color of the plant itself but also symbolizes the status of "youth". When people are in youth, their hair is always black. Observing Table 1 (See Appendix), we can find that: the color word "青" has been translated in all metrical translations, while only half free verse translations have translated it; the material word "丝" has been translated in all free verse translations, while only one metrical translation has translated it. According to the analysis of these translations in detail, most of the metrical translations are biased towards free translation (3/4), which captures the remarkable feature that "青丝" is black and does not make errors in the transmission of the original information. Moreover, Prof. Xu Yuanchong has properly combined the translations of "青" and "丝" to achieve the unity in form and content according to the original text; free translations are biased towards literal translation (4/4), among which there are two translations belonging to excessive literal translation (2/4): the original "青丝" has been simply understood as "silk" or "black silk". This transmission of the original information has failed. It can be seen from the above analysis that although the words used in the metrical translations are concise, only one is inaccurate (1/4); although the free verse translations have a large choice of words, errors also exist (2/4).

2.4.2 Material Culture-loaded Words

Material culture-loaded words are related to the material culture produced in the process of human survival and development, including the vocabulary about people's clothing, food, shelter and transportation. E.g.:

(2) 人生得意须尽欢，莫使金樽空对月。

The word "金樽" in this sentence refers to a golden wine-cup with a small body. Observing Table 2 (See Appendix), we can find that: 1. The metrical

translations tend to omit the translation of the color word (2/4) because of the metrical style. 2. Free verse translations tend to retain the translation of the color word (4/4), one of which has replaced the color word. According to the analysis of these translations in detail, the translator Sun Dayu whose translation belongs to the metrical style uses the word “beaker” to refer to the “wine-cup”, but the fact that this kind of cup is not small shows it’s improper to use the word “beaker” here. Meanwhile, Fletcher, another translator of the same translation style, translates the word “金樽” as a proper noun, which not only reminds the readers of this unique wine-cup, but also compares the general shape of this special wine-cup with the goblet which is familiar to the target readers. Thus, the foreign culture can be reserved and the readability of the translation can also be improved; in the free verse translations, Stephen Owen uses “gold” to modify the “wine-cup”, but a cup used for drinking is generally gold-plated rather than made of pure gold. Thus this translation misinterprets the original intention. Arthur Waley changes the color word “金” into the color word “银” which is translated into “silver”, and the original information is changed. Burton Watson translates the material word “樽” into “cask”, which obviously changes the original image. Through the above analysis, it can be seen that the words used in the metrical translations are concise in consideration of the meter, but they are still relatively accurate (3/4); although the free verse translations have a large choice of words, there are also errors (3/4).

(3) 天生我材必有用，千金散尽还复来。

When the word “千金” is used as a measure of value, it’s familiar to foreign readers. The word “千金” in this poem belongs to this usage, referring to “a lot of money”. Observing Table 3 (See Appendix), we can find that both the metrical translations and the free verse translations use the literal translation method (7/8), but there are some differences in these literal translations: two translators in the metrical translations have translated “金” in specific expressions, which makes the translation more picturesque; the replacement of words in three translations can be discussed too. First, Fletcher translates the word “金” into “ducats” in his metrical translation, but it is important to note that “ducats” refers to the gold coins commonly used in some European countries. It is obvious that in Fletcher’s translation Chinese culture has been replaced by European culture. The excessive domestication is not conducive to the spread of foreign culture to target language readers. In the free verse

translations, Arthur Waley translates the word “金” into “guilders”, which also belongs to excessive domestication. In addition, Witter Bynner & Kiang Kang-hu replaces “gold” with “silver”, making the translation information inconsistent with the original information. According to the above analysis, although the free verse translations have a large choice of words, there are also errors (2/4).

(4) 钟鼓馔玉不足贵，但愿长醉不愿醒。

The word “馔玉” refers to food as fine as jade. Observing Table 4 (See Appendix), we can find that: 1. The expressions in metrical translations are short (2/4) because of rhythm. 2. The expressions in free verse translations are long (3/4). According to the analysis of these translations in detail: in the metrical translations, “dainties” appears twice, meaning exquisite and delicious snacks, which largely preserves the meaning of the original; in the free verse translations, Burton Watson translates the word “馔玉” into “foods rare as jade”, only emphasizing the rareness of food. Witter Bynner & Kiang Kang-hu have a misunderstanding that the word “馔玉” is the combination of “dishes and treasure”, which is inconsistent with the original meaning of “exquisite food”. Through the above analysis, we can see that the metrical translations are not inaccurate (2/4) though they are concise; the free verse translations have a large choice of words, but there are also errors (2/4).

2. The Differences Between the Metrical and Free Verse Translations and the Choice of Translating Methods

After making a comparative study on the English versions of Li Bai’s *Qiang Jin Jiu*, we have found there is a rule of differences between the metrical and free verse translations: although the metrical translation tends to be concise in terms of expressions, it’s not necessarily inaccurate. And even because of the choice of specific words, the translation can create a strong sense of picture; the free translation has a larger space in the choice of words, but the choice of words is not always accurate, even with excessive domestication.

On the basis of this rule, considering the misunderstanding of two kinds of culture-loaded words which appear in Li Bai’s *Qiang Jin Jiu*, we give the following translation suggestions:

(a) When we translate social culture-loaded words such as “青丝”, it is necessary to accurately understand the contextual meaning of words in poetry and avoid excessive literal translation.

(b) When we translate material culture-loaded words, it is necessary to learn to choose the appropriate translation

method based on the different relationship between culture-loaded words and target language culture:

(c) Because of the great commonality of different countries in language and culture, people can communicate easily in many situations. As shown in the translation of “千金” mentioned above, we can use the literal translation method and pay attention to the preservation of characteristics of the source culture, avoiding excessive domestication.

(d) In many cases, it is difficult to find complete equivalence of culture-loaded words in the target language. For example, the translation of “金樽” is based on the similarity between the source language and the target language.

III. CONCLUSION

As the essence of Chinese classical culture, Tang poetry has greatly enriched the Chinese culture. At the same time, more and more domestic and foreign translators are devoting to the external communication of the ancient oriental civilization. This study selects the metrical and free verse translations of Li Bai's *Qiang Jin Jiu*, and identifies the differences between them: although the metrical translation tends to be concise in expression, it's not necessarily inaccurate. However, although the free translation has a larger space in choosing words, the choice of words is not always accurate. On the basis of these findings, the authors put forward relevant suggestions about translating the culture-loaded words, hoping to contribute to the promotion of high-quality foreign spread of Tang poetry represented by Li Bai's poetry.

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Appendix

Table.1: The social culture-loaded word “青丝” and its translations

Style	Translator	Original	Translation	Translation Features
metrical	Sun Dayu	青丝	jet black	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Only the color word “青” is translated, omitting the translation of the material word “丝”. 2. The translation “jet black” means “very dark black”, inclining to be an ancient word. 3. The translation generally belongs to free translation.
metrical	Xu Yuanchong	青丝	silk-black	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Both the color word “青” and the material word “丝” are translated. 2. The noun “青丝” is translated into the adjective “silk-black”. 3. The translation generally belongs to literal translation.
metrical	Zhao Yanchun	青丝	black	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Only the color word “青” is translated, omitting the translation of “丝”. 2. The noun “青丝” is translated into the adjective “black”. 3. The translation generally belongs to free translation.
metrical	Fletcher	青丝	glossy black	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Only the color word “青” is translated, omitting the translation of the material word “丝”. 2. The noun “青丝” is translated into the adjective “glossy black”. 3. The translation generally belongs to free translation
free verse	Stephen Owen	青丝	blue-black strands of silk	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Both the color word “青” and the material word “丝” are translated, and the material word “丝” is amplified into “strands of silk”. 2. The noun “青丝” is translated into the noun “blue-black strands of silk”. 3. The translation generally belongs to literal translation.
free verse	Arthur Waley	青丝	threads of silk	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Only the material word “丝” is translated, omitting the translation of the color word “青”. 2. The noun “青丝” is translated into the noun “threads of silk”. 3. The translation belongs to excessive literal translation.
free verse	Burton Watson	青丝	black silk	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Both the color word “青” and the material word “丝” are translated. 2. The noun “青丝” is translated into the noun “black silk”. 3. The translation belongs to excessive literal translation.
free verse	Witter Bynner & Kiang Kang-hu	青丝	silken-black	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Both the color word “青” and the material word “丝” are translated. 2. The noun “青丝” is translated into the adjective “silken-black”. 3. The translation generally belongs to literal translation.

Table.2: The material culture-loaded word “金樽” and its translations

Style	Translator	Original	Translation	Translation Features
metrical	Sun Dayu	金樽	golden beakers	1. The color word “金” is translated. 2. The singular word “樽” is translated into the plural word “beakers”. 3. The translation generally belongs to literal translation.
metrical	Xu Yuanchong	金樽	wine-cup	1. The translation of the color word “金” is omitted. 2. The material word “樽” is translated into “wine-cup”. 3. The translation generally belongs to literal translation.
metrical	Zhao Yanchun	金樽	cup	1. The translation of the color word “金” is omitted. 2. The material word “樽” is translated into “cup”. 3. The translation generally belongs to literal translation.
metrical	Fletcher	金樽	Golden Goblet	1. The color word “金” is translated into “golden”. 2. The material word “樽” is translated into “Goblet”. 3. The noun “金樽” is literally translated according to the rule of proper nouns.
free verse	Stephen Owen	金樽	goblet of gold	1. The color word “金” is changed into “金子”, which is translated into gold. 2. The material word “樽” is translated into “goblet”. 3. The translation generally belongs to literal translation.
free verse	Arthur Waley	金樽	silver cup	1. The color word “金” is changed into the color word “银”, which is translated into “silver”. 2. The material word “樽” is translated into “cup”. 3. The translation generally belongs to literal translation.
free verse	Burton Watson	金樽	golden cask	1. The color word “金” is translated. 2. The material word “樽” is changed into “木桶”, which is translated into “cask”. 3. The translation generally belongs to literal translation.
free verse	Witter Bynner & Kiang Kang-hu	金樽	golden cup	1. The color word “金” is translated. 2. The material word “樽” is translated into “cup”. 3. The translation generally belongs to literal translation.

Table.3: The material culture-loaded word “千金” and its translations

Style	Translator	Original	Translation	Translation Features
metrical	Sun Dayu	千金	a thousand pieces of gold	1. The general word “金” is translated into the specific phrase “pieces of gold”, adjusting words sequence. 2. At the linguistic level, the translation belongs to literal translation, and at the cultural level, it belongs to foreignization.
metrical	Xu Yuanchong	千金	a thousand gold coins	1. The general word “金” is translated into a specific phrase “a thousand gold coins”, not adjusting words sequence. 2. At the linguistic level, the translation belongs to literal translation, and at the cultural level, it belongs to foreignization.
metrical	Zhao Yanchun	千金	all the money	1. The translation expresses the original’s deep meaning “a lot of money”, different from the literal meaning. 2. The translation generally belongs to free translation with common expressions.
metrical	Fletcher	千金	a thousand golden	1. The word “金” is translated into European currency “golden ducats”, with the method of replacement.

			ducats	2. The translation generally belongs to domestication.
free verse	Stephen Owen	千金	a thousand in gold	1. The word order is slightly adjusted. 2. The word “金” is literally translated into “gold”. 3. At the linguistic level, the translation belongs to literal translation, and at the cultural level, it belongs to foreignization.
free verse	Arthur Waley	千金	a thousand guilders	1. The word “金” is changed into “荷兰盾”, which is translated into “guilders”. 2. The translation generally belongs to domestication.
free verse	Burton Watson	千金	gold by the thousand	1. In the translation, “gold” is placed in front of “the thousand”, forming a reverse translation. 2. At the linguistic level, the translation belongs to literal translation, and at the cultural level, it belongs to foreignization.
free verse	Witter Bynner & Kiang Kang-hu	千金	a thousand pieces of silver	1. The word “金” is replaced into “银”, which is translated into “silver”. 2. The translation generally belongs to literal translation with some sort of errors.

Table 4: The material culture-loaded word “饌玉” and its translations

Style	Translator	Original	Translation	Translation Features
metrical	Sun Dayu	饌玉	untranslated	Probably because of the metrical style, the original is not translated.
metrical	Xu Yuanchong	饌玉	rare and costly dishes	1. The translation of the word “玉” is omitted. 2. The translation doesn't stick to the original form, but the deep meaning. 3. The translation generally belongs to free translation.
metrical	Zhao Yanchun	饌玉	dainties	1. The translation grasps the symbolic meaning of the word “玉”, not translating it literally. 2. The translation is concise and specific. 3. The translation generally belongs to free translation.
metrical	Fletcher	饌玉	dainties	1. The translation grasps the symbolic meaning of the word “玉”, not translating it literally. 2. The translation is concise and specific. 3. The translation generally belongs to free translation.
free verse	Stephen Owen	饌玉	the tastiest morsels	1. The translation of the word “玉” is omitted. 2. The taste and quantity of food are emphasized. 3. The translation generally belongs to free translation.
free verse	Arthur Waley	饌玉	fine food	1. The translation of the word “玉” is omitted. 2. It's emphasized that the food is exquisite. 3. The translation generally belongs to free translation.
free verse	Burton Watson	饌玉	foods rare as jade	1. The word “玉” is translated, and foods are compared with jade. 2. The rareness of food is emphasized. 3. The translation generally belongs to literal translation.
free verse	Witter Bynner & Kiang Kang-hu	饌玉	rare dishes and treasure	1. The word “饌玉” is misunderstood that it's the combination of two things, and the word is translated into “dishes and treasure”. 2. The translation generally belongs to free translation.