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Chok Meng Chan
Hong Kong Baptist University

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Translation Critique - On Five English Translations of Li Bai's

Poem "Jingyesi"

Chan Chok Meng

1) Introduction

靜夜思 李白
牀前看月光¹ 疑是地上霜
舉頭望山月² 低頭思故鄉

The above *yuefu*-poem, written by Tang great poet Li Bai, can be comprehended almost from a first reading: One night, the travelling poet laid down on a bed (or a couch) but could not sleep. He watched the moonlight on the floor and wondered if frost came early this year. Then he sat himself up or probably walked towards the window and gazed at the mountain moon (a symbol of family reunion), which otherwise could not be seen when lying down. The thought of home(town) suddenly arose and the poet was immersed in the contemplation of it. The power of the poem lays in its simplicity in structure, plain language, effortless transition and evocation of a universal emotion. In my view, an ideal English translation of the poem should have at least some of these qualities if not all.

2) Translation Criticism

a) “Night Thoughts” by Herbert A. Giles (1898: 60)

*I wake, and moonbeams play around my bed,
Glittering like hoar-frost to my wandering eyes;
Up towards the glorious moon I raise my head,*

¹ “看月光” (“watch moonlight”) can be found in most versions of Li Bai’s oeuvre, whereas “明月光” (“bright moonlight”) only appears in some anthologies of Tang poems in Ming and Qing dynasties, including the influential *300 Tang Poems*. See Qu & Zhu 1980:443-44 and Hengtanguishi 1984:187.

² “山月” (“mountain moon”) is replaced by “明月” (“bright moon”) in some anthologies. In that case, the phrase “明月” is repeated in the 20-character poem. See Qu & Zhu 1980:444.

Then lay me down, — and thoughts of home arise.

This early attempt by sinologist Herbert A. Giles is characterized by its use of rhyme and stanzaic form for the Victorian translator decided to render the poem into an “English verse” as the title indicated. He employed a typical *abab* rhyming scheme, which separates rhymes by a line to allow an easier pacing. The language used here is plain and simple but the choice of words is nothing short of fantasy: “play around”, “glittering”, “wandering” and “glorious”. By interpreting the poem into some strange thoughts of a poet in a restless night, Giles perhaps tried to bring out the other side of Li Bai, the crazed and whimsical poet that he is best known for. If that is the case, he clearly barked up the wrong tree. In the last line, Giles wrote “lay me down” instead of “lower my head”, suggesting that the poet first sat on the bed to watch the moon then laid back down to think. This reading may not be wrong, but it results in a naturally continuous action unnecessarily divided into two separate movements, and weakens the directness of the poem’s appeal.

b) “Night Thoughts” by Florence Ayscough/Amy Lowell (1921: 74)

*In front of my bed the moonlight is very bright.
I wonder if that can be frost on the floor?
I lift up my head and look at the full moon, the dazzling moon.
I drop my head, and think of the home of old days.*

This translation is the outcome of the collaboration of Florence Ayscough, a teacher in Chinese, and Amy Lowell, an Imagist poet who had no knowledge of

Chinese language. According to Lowell's preface, some rough translations along with analyses of the characters and explanatory notes were first prepared by Ayscough, and then Lowell would "put them into poetic shape." (Ayscough/Lowell 1921:vii) Since Lowell's understanding of the poems relied heavily on the notes provided by her partner, she inevitably focused on the literal meaning of each character. This can be observed from the translationese rendition of "故鄉" (hometown) into "the home of old days". As a renowned Imagist poet, however, Lowell also paid careful attention to construct an image that would be close to the original. Also, she did not hesitate to add her own impression ("the full moon, the dazzling moon") to the work to enhance its visual effect. The free verse form she opted for is more effective than the stanzaic form as the directness of the original is no longer held back by rhyme scheme. Overall, Lowell managed to achieve clarity and directness of presentation in her translation, despite its lack of poetic merit and overuse of I's and my's in a single 20-character Chinese poem.

c) "Quiet Night Thought" by Arthur Cooper (1973: 109)

*Before my bed
there is bright moonlight
So that it seems
like frost on the ground:
Lifting my head
I watch the bright moon,
Lowering my head
I dream that I'm home.*

Arthur Cooper (1973:76) made it clear in the introduction of *Li Po and Tu Fu* that he wanted to produce “poematic” translations, not prose translations in his book. Thus, his translations are intended to bring out the poetic beauty of the originals and stand as poems in their own right. Judging from the above translation alone, he seems to have achieved what he aimed for. The image he conjured up is more or less the same as what Lowell did, except for the last line “I dream that I’m home”, which deviates from the original. However, comparing with the wordy translation of Lowell, his translation contains only three 9-syllable lines and one 11-syllable line at the end. Since Cooper intended that the translations “to be read aloud”, he used caesura to divide each line into two half lines with “the asymmetrical caesura comes 5 syllables before the end of the line” (Cooper 1973:101), though in this case, the last line has 6 syllables instead. Cooper’s rendition of the last couplet is more effective than the previous two translations not only because the parallelism is kept, but also for the use of present participle. Rather than using four present simple verbs like Lowell did, Cooper changed the first verb of the last couplet into present participle, and thus turned four separate actions into a sequence of connected actions and gave a stronger sense of continuity.

d) “In the Quiet Night” by Vikram Seth (1992: 19)

*The floor before my bed is bright:
Moonlight – like hoarfrost – in my room.
I lift my head and watch the moon.
I drop my head and think of home.*

Vikram Seth's free verse translation is quite faithful to the meaning and structure of the original, although he restructured the first two lines so as to render the imagery with more clarity, as the first thing the poet saw is the white substance on the floor that he later recognized as moon-beams. However, the image of "The floor before my bed is bright" is hardly poetic. With only four 8-syllable lines, Seth's translation is more economical in the use of syllables than Cooper's. The ending couplet is in near perfect symmetry and at the same time reminiscent of the original rhythm.

e) "Quiet Night Thoughts" by Zhao Zhentao (1986:15)

*Moonlight before my bed,
Could it be frost instead?
Head up, I watch the moon;
Head down, I think of home.*

So far I have analyzed four translations of Li Bai's poem. Although the last two have merits of their own, they are not to my complete satisfaction, and therefore I present here a translation by Professor Zhao Zhentao (趙甄陶) of Hunan Normal University, Changsha, who is known for his translated works of *Mencius* and Mao Zedong poems. The numbers of words and syllables in the above translation are remarkably few, using only 21 words to render the 20-character verse and 6 syllables

for each line. As brevity is the essence of Chinese poetry and the prevailing style of “*Jingyesi*”, Zhao successfully retained the brevity he sought for and, to my knowledge, no other translators of the same poem can rival. The cadence of his translation comes even closer to the original than Cooper’s or the last couplet in Seth’s.

The second line is translated into a rhetorical question, which cast a slight doubt on the thing the poet saw before his bed and conveyed the impressionistic vagueness inherent in the original. The last couplet is symmetric like Seth’s translation. By placing “head up” and “head down” before the main clause, the action verbs are more connected to each other like in Cooper’s translation. The only catch of this treatment is “head up” and “head down” may call up undesirable associations like exercise instructions, as some native English speakers suggested (See Jin 1998:56).

3) Conclusion

So far we have reviewed five translations of Li Bai’s little gem and found that each has its own merits and demerits. The translators, in general, wanted to be faithful to the sense of the original, but inevitably created a slightly altered vision as they tried to adapt the Chinese poem to an established form of English poetry, be it Victorian or

free verse. These attempts are totally justifiable, especially when we recall the words of Walter Benjamin saying “[...] a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.” (1923/2000: 22)

However, judging from the criteria I set earlier in the paper, I am convinced that Zhao’s rendition is the most effective one amongst them as its succinct style matches the tone of the original while recreating a natural rhythm. Considering the power of “Jingyesi” lies in its simplicity of structure, language and expression, Zhao’s translation truly captures the spirit of the poem by its economical use of words and syllables in evoking the universal feeling of homesickness.

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