

Cultural Transference of Plant and Animal Images in *Shijing* Translation*

ZHENG Jing-jing

Shanghai Art and Design Academy, Shanghai, China

BI Hui-xue

Zhejiang University of Media and Communication, Hangzhou, China

ZHENG Da-hua

Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China

As one of the Confucian classics, *Shijing* (诗经) occupies a pivotal position in the development of Chinese culture. This paper makes a comparative study on the English translation of plant and animal images in *Shijing*, trying to reveal the cultural connotations in them and to suggest some translation strategies for the correct transference of cultural implications in plant and animal images in the poems of this ancient book.

Keywords: *Shijing* translation, cultural transference, plant images, animal images

Introduction

Translation is not only a simple transference on language level but also on the cultural level between two different countries. As the world cultural exchange is diversified, the focus on translation study also gradually turns to the exploration of cultural factors. *Shijing* has rich cultural images and connotations, carrying a large amount of cultural information. Particularly, as the ancient Chinese working people had a close touch with plants and animals, whose images appearing in *Shijing* have a profound influence on the later cultural development. So the translation of these images is of a considerable significance to the spread of the ancient Chinese culture.

Because of cultural disparities, different nations may hold different interpretations on the same plant or animal image. When dealing with images which carry Chinese culture but do not express the same implication in the target language, a translator should probe further into the depth of Chinese culture and transfer sufficient cultural information. Consequently, on one hand, it preserves the vividness and authenticity of these cultural images. On the other hand, it gives the target readers a sense of exoticness, and provides them with a chance of comprehending the ancient Chinese culture.

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ZHENG Jing-jing, M.A., Teaching Assistant at Shanghai Art and Design Academy.

BI Hui-xue, M.A., Researcher Associate at Zhejiang University of Media and Communication.

ZHENG Da-hua (correspondent author), Professor at School of International Studies, Zhejiang University.

How to transfer correctly the Chinese culture, especially the implications of images in Chinese classical works like *Shijing* is a question worth thinking of by contemporary translators. A translator is required to accurately transfer the cultural meaning in the original text. He has a duty to carry on the value of the traditional Chinese culture. Hence, during the process of translation, the purpose of cultural transference ought to be highlighted, and some methods such as annotation, cultural explanation and transliteration are applied.

The Importance of Translating Plant and Animal Images in *Shijing*

The cultural study is becoming more and more important in an age of globalization. Early in the 1960s, translation studies started to break the restraints of the traditional linguistics-oriented study and turned into a cultural research. Cultural translation refers to the practice of translation, which involves cultural differences. Cultural translation can also be defined as a practice whose aim is to present another culture via translation. We know that many culture-specific words and images have unique cultural meanings and connotations deeply rooted in a certain nation, and it is well noticed that some words in *Shijing* are quite culture-specific, reflecting the profound traditional Chinese cultural meanings and connotations. “Only does one come to the level of cultural thinking, can he fully and accurately transfer the cultural images in the source text” (LIU, 2008, p. 277).

Shijing is the first collection of Chinese poems and also the fountainhead of Chinese poetry. The Chinese ancients thought highly of *Shijing* and ranked it in the first place of *The Five Classics* (五经). *Shijing* is also one of the classical canons of Confucianism, which has been dominating Chinese ideology in her long history, and still wins large popularity in contemporary society. “*Shijing* embraces various disciplines such as literature, linguistics, history, philosophy, religious studies, art, archaeology, sociology, ethnology, pedagogy, astronomy and agronomy” (HOU & YANG, 2010, p. 11). This ancient book comprehensively displays Chinese social life during the Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BC), and faithfully reflects the historical appearance of Chinese slave society. In *Shijing* there are totally 305 poems, the contents of which are very abundant, including labor, love affairs, marriage, hardships of the vulnerable groups and the exposure of war and tyranny. *Shijing* boasts very rich cultural values, and many scholars and translators have shown great interests in it. Interpretation on cultural contexts is the key to translation, and the transfer of cultural meanings is a great concern in translating classical works with traditional values. We think that *Shijing* translation is largely a matter of cultural transmission. And in the context of globalization, a translator should have a good knowledge of Chinese and English cultures and values. Therefore, “it is hardly surprising that the meeting between cultural studies and translation studies, when it finally happened, would be a productive one” (Bassnett, 2004, p. 12). During the process of translating the classic works, the purpose of the cultural transmission should be a priority. The culture in ST (source text) will hardly be perceived or understood by TT (target text) readers, if a translator has not been aware of the cultural transmission when doing his work.

Chinese ancient poems are in natural connection with plants and animals. Plant and animal images appear quite frequently in the book of *Shijing*. “According to statistics, there are 250 poems directly concerning various plants and animals, accounting for 82% of the whole book” (LV, 2010, p. 33). As images are backbones of poems, correct translation of images loaded with cultural connotations plays an important role in conveying Chinese ancient cultural elements.

Due to cultural disparities, different nations may hold different interpretations on the same plant or animal

image. When dealing with images which carry Chinese culture but do not express the same implication in the target language, a translator should probe further into the depth of Chinese culture and transfer sufficient cultural information. Consequently, on one hand, it preserves the vividness and authenticity of these cultural images. On the other hand, it gives the target readers a sense of exoticness, and provides them with a chance of comprehending the ancient Chinese culture.

Plant Images in *Shijing* and Their Cultural Transference

Now let's come to the plant images. According to statistics, "there are totally 135 poems which are related to plants in *Shijing*, including 106 species of plants. This is rare among ancient Chinese books" (WANG, 2006, p. 112). In this paper, due to the lack of space we just take two examples of plants, *tang* (唐) and *fusu* (扶苏), in *Shijing* for analysis from cultural perspective.

[Example 1]

[ST]

国风·邶风·桑中

爰采唐矣？沫之乡矣。
云谁之思？美孟姜矣。¹

[TT1]

Guofeng·Yongfeng·Sangzhong

I am going to gather the dodder,
—In the fields near the town Mei.
Who is the girl of my heart?
—The pretty one from the family of the Jiangs. (Legge, 2011, p. 109)

[TT2]

Where to gather soy sponger?
Outside the City of Mei.
Whom am I missing?
The pretty maiden of the Mengs. (Chia, 2010, p. 105)

In *Shijing*, "the love poems are among the most appealing in the freshness and frankness of their language for this was a time when girls were not yet restricted by etiquette from expressing their wishes to be married or their longing for a sweetheart" (Conrad, 1991, p. 22). Guofeng·Yongfeng·Sangzhong is a poem depicting an appointment between a pair of lovers. The plant image *tang* (唐) in the beginning of the line has profound implications and indicates the main idea of this poem. It expresses a man's prospect of an eternal love and good marriage with his beloved girl.

"Plants clinging to each other is a typical image of love and marriage in *Shijing*" (WANG, 2010, p. 106). In China, *tang* is one kind of parasitic creeping weed. The meaning of *tang* is suggestive, reflecting plentiful love associations between a man and a woman. The hero expects that his love would be like *tang*, firmly twining round his lover's heart. It is recommendable that James Legge specifically translated *tang* into "dodder" rather than simply translating it into plant or weed. It properly describes the lovers' clinging emotion, and also correctly transfers the cultural image of *tang* which stands for the "lingering" love. In other words, "dodder" is the high praise for a wonderful and unchangeable love. In Chinese culture, deep love between a couple is often compared

¹ See TANG (1998), p. 103.

to the lingering relationship between dodder and tree. The translation of *tang* into dodder successfully realizes the function of the cultural transfer.

But in Fu-shiang Chia's version, he translates *tang* into "soy sponger", which may be a biologically correct term for *tang*, but we know "sponger" is largely used as a pejorative term for a person who sponges off other people. In English speaking countries it often stands for a disparaging cultural image that completely leans on others for existence. Though the "sponger" describes the natural attribute of *tang*, its meaning is quite different from the "lingering love" in this context. The image of "sponger" is in contradiction with *tang*'s Chinese meaning.

Thus, we can see that "sponger" fails to express the beauty of love. It is just the opposite of the original intention.

[Example 2]

[ST]

国风·郑风·山有扶苏

山有扶苏，
隰有荷花。
不见子都，
乃见狂且。²

[TT1]

Guofeng-Zhengfeng·Shan Yew Foo-soo

On the mountains is the mulberry tree.
In the marshes is the lotus flower.
I do not see Tsze-too,
But I see this mad fellow. (Legge, 2011, p. 201)

[TT2]

Guofeng-Zhengfeng·Shanyou Fusu

Luxuriant Leaves

Luxuriant leaves and branches shade hill,

Lotus flowers are reflecting sun in swamp.

I don't see handsome man called Zi Du,

I just encounter a mad and foolish man. (WANG, 2010, p. 183)

Shanyou *Fusu* is the tenth poem of *Zhengfeng*. As a very nifty love poem, it describes an unmarried woman who was flirting with her beloved man. The first line starts with *fusu* (扶苏), serving to introduce the mood and enunciate the theme. *Fusu* is a kind of mulberry tree with luxuriant leaves and branches. This tree has a unique cultural connotation in ancient China. It is said that the eldest son of the first emperor of Qin (259-210 BC) was named after *fusu* by his mother, because she hoped that her son grew up sturdily and healthily like *fusu*. And in this poem, mulberry's luxuriant foliage refers to a handsome man.

James Legge simply translates *fusu* into "mulberry tree". Though mulberry is a precise English word for *fusu* and reveals some features of the plant, it does not point out the specific name of the tree. In short, his version does not convey *fusu*'s Chinese cultural connotation. Though Wang Fanglu's translation reveals some features of the mulberry tree, neither does it give the specific name of the tree. After all, many species are featured with luxuriant foliage. So we felt that Wang's dealing with *fusu* is somehow ill-conceived for it weakens the original image in some measure.

² See TANG (1998), p. 179.

We think that the transliterated word *fusu* with a foot notation is highly suggested for *fusu*, that is, *fusu*, the mulberry tree with luxuriant leaves and branches, symbolizing a handsome and strong man.

Animal Images in *Shijing* and Their Cultural Transference

An animal image is the mental product of the integration between a person's perception and an animal figure. There is no doubt that animals are absolutely indispensable in our human life, and their names are frequently endowed with certain cultural meanings. The ancients looked up at the sky and looked down on the ground, getting an understanding of the endlessness of heaven and earth. At the same time, they placed their various feelings on birds, beasts, insects and fish.

However, it is often the case that people of different cultures may designate different interpretations to the same images, so an image which has a certain meaning in one culture context may make a different effect in another culture, and a certain animal image in Chinese may have a different cultural implication in English. In general, the animal images involved in *Shijing* are featured with vividness and authenticity. They were largely created when the ancient poets were doing hard labor or expressing their thoughts. And people's rich feelings on them make these images overflow with human ideas and reflections. As for the translation of the animal images, on the premise that it will not lead to a wrong association or interpretation, these animal images should be translated as literally as possible in order to preserve their fresh and vivid culture-specific features. "No matter how good the translation is, if it loses or even distorts the cultural image in ST, it'll cause a fly in the ointment, or misguide readers" (XIE, 2002, p. 92). Accordingly, it is inadvisable to change or simply omit the animal images when a translator is rendering Chinese classical poems. A translator should transfer these images in *Shijing* without going beyond the general principle.

In the following part, two animal images *shijiu* (鸣鸠) and *qingying* (青蝇) are selected for detailed explanation. Two translators' English versions are put in comparison.

[Example 1]

[ST]

国风·曹风·鸣鸠

鸣鸠

鸣鸠在桑，其子七兮。

淑人君子，其仪一兮。

其仪一兮，心如结兮。³

[TT1]

Guofeng·Caofeng·Shijiu

She-kew

The turtle dove is in the mulberry tree,

And her young ones are seven.

The virtuous man, the princely one,

Is uniformly correct in his deportment.

He is uniformly correct in his deportment,

His heart is as if it were tied to what is correct. (Legge, 2011, p. 355)

[TT2]

The Cuckoo

The cuckoo nestles in the mulberry tree,

She feeds seven of her young.

The gentleman of moral excellence,

Consistent he is in his personal integrity.

³ See TANG (1998), pp. 313-314.

He is consistent in his personal integrity,
His will is as firm as a rock. (AN, 1999, p. 363)

Shijiu serves to eulogize an honorable gentleman's merits and virtues and satirize the fatuous and self-indulgent emperor and his officials of great eclat in feudal times. James Legge and An Zengcai differ in translating *shijiu* (鸚鳩), one being the "turtle dove" and the other the "cuckoo".

In Western countries, the image of a "turtle dove" mainly implies two cultural meanings. For one thing, it has a rich religion color. Legend has it that two turtle doves sacrificed themselves for the Birth of Jesus in the Christian religion. For another, a pair of turtle doves has long been regarded as emblems of loyal love between a couple. This cultural meaning is frequently seen in a lot of European folk songs and love stories. As for the "cuckoo", its call being bitter and biting, this bird is a very familiar cultural image in ancient Chinese poems. According to Xiong Youqi, "it is often used to express a poet's complaints and dreariness" (XIONG, 2013).

From the above comparison, An Zengcai's "cuckoo" is a better choice for the translation of *shijiu* because it vividly shows this dreadful and complaining image of *shijiu* to the target readers. That is, in his translational action, An Zengcai interprets the ST with regard to *shijiu*'s Chinese cultural connotation. Additionally, in doing translation, one should not alter the cultural image of the original to suit the TT readers' taste. In this sense, turtle dove's rich western cultural meaning can largely misguide readers' interpretation on the original poem's mood. Though James Legge wipes the cultural distance, he is very likely to give English readers a misleading impression of the source culture.

[Example 2]

[ST]

小雅·青蝇

营营青蝇，
止于樊。
岂弟君子，
无信谗言。⁴

[TT1]

Xiaoya· Qingying

Buzzing all around are the green bottle flies,
Finally lighting on the fence.
O thou, sovereign gentle and amiable!
Do not believe those slanderous talks. (AN, 1999, p. 629)

[TT2]

They buzz about, the blue flies,
Lighting on the fences.
O happy and courteous sovereign,
Do not believe slanderous speeches. (Legge, 2011, p. 605)

Xiaoya·Qingying is a poem written in the early years of the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BC). Its main idea is to satirize the ruler of the time who lent a ready ear to rumormongers, and to reprimand treacherous court officials who wrecked the country and did harm to the people. In this case study, we compare James Legge's and An Zengcai's versions and find their difference in translating the word *qingying* (青蝇).

The ST's rich cultural connotations are embodied in *qingying*. Qing in Chinese refers to a color between green and blue, and ying is a kind of fly. So Legge and An Zengcai translate qing into green and blue respectively.

⁴ See TANG (1998), p. 560.

Actually, Qingying is a green-body blowfly, making a buzzing and annoying noise in flight. It has a unique cultural implication. From ancient times, the color “green” has been endowed with a dual character in traditional Chinese culture. For one thing, it stands for peace, youth, gallantry and vitality. For another, it is rather negative. “Green is also used to describe jealousy and envy” (MA & CHEN, 2009, p. 64). Indeed, “green” can imply a despicable person or action.

And here in this context, “green” and “blowfly” are bound together to act as a metaphor for a jealous person who always gives his slanderous talk and insidious advice to others. Coincidentally, in English, “green” has a negative connotative meaning for jealousy and grudge. “The phrase *green eyed* finds its equivalent in Chinese, which refers to a strong feeling of envy” (ZHANG, 1999, p. 124). Other phrases like “green-eyed monster”, “green with envy”, help to emphasize the degree of one’s jealousy.

As for the color blue, Chinese scholar Lu Yan believes that “to Chinese people, the color ‘blue’ gives a sense of profoundness, tranquility and coldness” (LU, 2009). Besides, some Chinese experts also indicate that “blue is a favorable word in Chinese. Blue stands for peace, tranquility and calmness in Chinese” (MA & CHEN, 2009, pp. 69-70).

In English culture, “blue” is usually used to describe a person’s melancholy temperament, and in some situations, it is an implication for truth and justice. From this it appears that “blue” does not have an associative meaning for jealousy or bad actions. Accordingly, “the blue flies” in James Legge’s version cannot express the original text’s connotation adequately, while “the green bottle flies” in An Zengcai’s version is more recommendable for it properly transfers the connotative meaning behind *qingying* in the ST culture.

Conclusion

From the above-cited examples, we find that although some words have the similar referential meaning in both Chinese and English, they sometimes carry different associative meanings and cultural connotations. The differences on the interpretation of some cultural connotations between Chinese and English pose lots of translation problems.

Hence, for the translation of the cultural connotations, the reproduction of their suggestive features is an important task for translators. Among the above-cited English versions, some translators directly borrow Western cultural terms to render the Chinese culture-loaded words in the ST. Though these English versions are more accessible to Western readers, they deviate themselves from the Chinese culture reflected in the ST and even remove the Chinese cultural peculiarity. For them, their purpose is to cater for the English readers’ familiarity, instead of preserving the traditional Chinese culture in the ST.

Snell-Hornby “states that the translation process can no longer be envisaged as being between two languages but between two cultures involving ‘cross-cultural transfer’” (Katan, 2004, p. 126). Cultural connotations appear frequently in *Shijing*. A translator is required to catch these connotations during the translation process.

In short, good translation relies on a translator’s deep thinking on the cultural factors in the ST. If a translator wants to realize the cultural transfer, he should first of all have a wide range of knowledge of ST’s country culture and then do his best to realize the cultural transmission during the process of translation. The translation ought to retain the cultural connotation in the ST, and intentional omission, deletion or replacement of culture-loaded

words especially images in classical poems are not suggested, while annotation, transliteration, cultural explanation are more recommendable. Only in this way can the world cultural exchange and the mutual understanding be further promoted.

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