

Study on Translation Strategies of Chinese Ancient Poetry Based on Thematic Theory—With *Yumeiren* as an Example

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Abstract: Chinese ancient poetry is the gem of Chinese culture. With the development of Sino-foreign cultural exchanges, more and more scholars attempt to translate Chinese ancient poetry into English and propose translation strategies. Linguistic theories have provided the theoretical foundation and new perspective for poetry translation. Therefore, under the guidance of thematic theory, the paper will take the poem *Yumeiren* and its two English versions as an example to study translators' translation characteristics and provide translation strategies of Chinese ancient poetry.

Keywords: Chinese ancient poetry, *Yumeiren*, thematic theory, translation characteristics translation strategies

INTRODUCTION

Chinese poetry as one of the main components of Chinese culture has been broadly studied by Chinese scholars. With the development of international communication and cooperation, more and more scholars attempt to translate the Chinese poetry into English to transmit Chinese culture. However, there are inadequate objective analyses of Chinese poetry based on linguistic theories. Therefore, in the realm of translation, there has been a hot debate of how to convey the beauty of Chinese poetry better. Among the linguistic theories, the theory of thematic structure has been successfully applied in the field of translation. It focuses on how to convey meaning through form, which can help foreign readers understand the implied meaning of Chinese poetry. Therefore, many scholars use the thematic theory in Chinese poetry translation. There are different definitions of Theme, among which the most famous are that of Mathesius and Halliday. The notion of Theme was first proposed in 1939 by Vitem Mathesius, who is the founder of Prague School. In his terminology, Theme refers to "that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation and from which the speaker proceeds", accordingly, another notion Rheme refers to "what the speaker states about, or in regard to, the starting point of the utterance" [1]. This definition emphasizes the information whether is given or not and the point whether speaker proceeds or not. Different from the Prague School, Theme, from the systemic point of view, has new connotations. Halliday [2], as an advocate of Systemic-Functional Grammar, believes that Theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that which

locates and orients the clause within its context. He emphasizes clause and distinguishes between information structure and thematic structure. The elements of structure Given and New comprises part of the information structure, while Theme together with Rheme comprises part of the thematic structure of the clause. The two definitions have different emphases, but they are not controversial. One of the most widely studied poems is *Yumeiren*, which is a representative of emotional beauty contained in Chinese poetry. It was created by Li Yu, who witnessed his country decline as the emperor. Through this poem, Li Yu showed his regrets and memory for his country. The poem has been translated by many scholars. Previous studies on translation of *Yumeiren* are mainly carried out from two perspectives: the cognitive perspective and functional perspective. Sun Ningning and Li Gaojia [3] apply the Relevance Theory to analyze the poem *Yumeiren* from cognitive aspect. Han Hongmei [4] uses the cognitive imagery theory to analyze *Yumeiren* and its two English versions. These studies show that translations can be commented from the perspective of cognition. Some other scholars have done the research from another functional perspective. Many scholars have tried to analyze the poem with the theory of Halliday's ideational function, for example, Gu Zhengguang [5] and You Mengna [6] study the poem *Yumeiren* and its English versions from the perspective of ideational function. There is no authoritative research of the poem *Yumeiren* from the perspective of textual function or thematic theory. Therefore, the paper analyzes the poem from the perspective of thematic structure specifically. Theme here follows the definition from Mathesius,

which emphasizes given information and the point speaker proceeds. The two English versions of *Yumeiren* by Xu Zhongjie [7] and Xu Yuanchong [8] are two most convincing ones. So, this paper adopts the two English versions to illustrate the feasibility of applying linguistic theory to poetry translation and translation criticism, and to give some suggestions on translation strategies.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Yumeiren was the representative work of Li Yu, who was an unsuccessful emperor but a brilliant poet of Southern Tang Dynasty. His country was defeated and he was imprisoned. After captured for three years, Li Yu created the poem *Yumeiren*. The poet expressed his strong feelings of regrets and memory for his declined country. Because of the poem, he was finally poisoned. The most distinctive feature of Chinese poetry is its implicitness of meaning expressed through the

employment of rich images. Therefore, it is crucial for readers and translators to exactly understand the contents of the poem. In the Chinese version, Li Yu asks when the spring flower and autumn moon will diminish, and they know how much about the past. It starts with a question about nature and ends with the answer about the poet himself. He believes his sadness is like the river running to the east. Through the question and answer, Li Yu’s melancholy is expressed thoroughly. In the middle of the poem, he contrasts the eternality of nature with the vicissitudes of life. He uses rich images such as buildings, east wind, and spring water to draw forth his sorrow. The scenery and buildings are lasting still, while people have changed. In this sense, his regrets and memory for his declined country are clearly shown between the lines. On the basis of meaning, the paper will analyze the thematic structure of the Chinese poem *Yumeiren*.

Table-1: Analysis on thematic structure of the Chinese poem *Yumeiren*

Group	Line	Theme’s Type 1	Theme’s Type 2
1	1	Simple Theme	Unmarked
	2	Simple Theme	Unmarked
2	3	Simple Theme	Marked
	4	Simple Theme	Unmarked
3	5	Simple Theme	Unmarked
	6	Multiple Theme	Unmarked
4	7	Simple Theme	Unmarked
	8	Omitted	Omitted

Two lines of Chinese ancient poetry are often considered as one group in poetry writing and analyzing. Therefore, the poem *Yumeiren* can be divided into four groups, and each group consists of two lines. The above figure shows that most Themes are simple Themes. The first four simple Themes are about the circumstances the poet is standing in, the scenery he sees and the memory he has. A kind of scenery reminds him a sort of memory of the past. Then he makes a contrast between the unchanging building and the changing people to express his melancholy. The next simple Theme is about the poet’s own direct expression of his emotions, and with an omitted Theme of sorrow, his feelings are delivered to the readers explicitly. In the

poem, there are six unmarked Theme in the eight lines. The format of Chinese poetry is relatively fixed and the number of words is limited. Therefore, most Themes in the poem are unmarked Theme, which makes the syntactic structure more simple. Based on the analysis of the Chinese version, the paper will continue to analyze the two English versions from the perspective of thematic structure. The paper will compare the thematic structure of Chinese version with the two English versions to decide whether the English versions are in consistent with the Chinese one. Furthermore, it will analyze the thematic structures of two English versions in detail.

Table-2: Thematic Analysis on thematic structures of the Two English Versions

Group	Theme of the first English version	Is the Theme in consistent with the original?	Theme of the second English version	Is the Theme in consistent with the original?
1	Too long	No	When	No
	I	No	For me	No
2	Last night	No	My attic	No
	With a bright moon	No		
3	The palace; only here	No	Carved balustrades and marble steps	Yes
	My complexion	No	But rosy faces	Yes
4	Should I; It	No	If you ask me how much my sorrow has increased	No

The above figure shows that there are seven Themes in the Chinese version. In the first English version, there are nine Themes and none of the Themes are in consistent with the Chinese version. In the second English version, there are six Themes and two of them are the same with the Chinese version. From the aspect of number, it can be concluded that from the perspective of thematic structure the second English

version is more faithful to the original poem. The number of Themes is only one apparent aspect of the Two English versions. Therefore, the paper will continue to analyze the thematic structure of the two English versions in turn from other aspects. The analyses of thematic structure of the first English version are as follows:

Table-3: Thematic structures of the first English version

Group	Line	Theme	Theme's Type 1	Theme's Type 2
1	1	Too long	Simple Theme	Marked
	2	I	Simple Theme	Unmarked
2	3	Last night	Simple Theme	Marked
	4			
3	5	With a bright moon	Simple Theme	Marked
	6			
4	7	The palace	Simple Theme	Unmarked
	8			
5	9	Only here	Simple Theme	Unmarked
	10	My complexion	Simple Theme	Unmarked
6	11	Should I	Multiple Theme	Unmarked
	12	It	Simple Theme	Unmarked

In this version, the translator writes 12 lines instead of the original 8 lines. It looks strange, because it has changed the metrical pattern of the poem. Most of the Themes employed in this version are simple Theme, which is similar to the Chinese poem. But the multiple Themes are changed into a simple Theme with the omission of the structural element which means strong contrast. Moreover, this version adds more marked

Themes than the original poem. Such arrangement makes the sentence patterns full of variation but it ignores conciseness of expression. Therefore, from the perspective of types of Theme, this version seems not that faithful to the Chinese version. The paper gives analyses of thematic structure of the second English version too:

Table-4: Thematic structures of the second English version

Group	Line	Theme	Theme's Type 1	Theme's Type 2
1	1	When	Simple Theme	Marked
	2	For me	Simple Theme	Unmarked
2	3	My attic	Simple Theme	Unmarked
	4			
3	5	Carved balustrades and marble steps	Simple Theme	Unmarked
	6	But rosy faces	Multiple Theme	Unmarked
4	7	If you ask me how much my sorrow has increased	Clausal Theme	Unmarked
	8			

In this version, the translator keeps the eight-line pattern of the poem. The themes in this version consist of all the three types of Theme---simple Theme, multiple Theme and clausal Theme. The simple Theme is in the majority like the original. Different from the first English version, this one uses the word “but” as the structural element to express transition in meaning. As for the clausal theme, it is accepted because of the omission of Theme in the last line of the Chinese poem. Therefore, from the aspect of types of Theme, the second English version is better. Form both the aspects

of number and type of Theme; the second English version seems to be better. But besides thematic structure, there are other perspectives involved in Chinese ancient poetry translation, such as meaning, rhythm and so on. However, the paper focuses mainly on thematic structure. So it will analyze translators’ translation characteristics and translation strategies based on thematic structure in the next chapter.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the perspective of thematic structure, Xu Zhongjie's first English version seems not so faithful to the Chinese version in the aspect of form, but he pays more attention to meaning. He tends to give priority to meaning instead of form, which makes the thematic structure different from that of the original one. For example, he adds his own understanding of the poem and changes the third and fourth lines of the Chinese version into four lines in his English version. Such translation may make the poem easier to understand by foreigners. Different to Xu Zhongjie who focuses on meaning, Xu Yuanchong emphasizes form. In the second English version, Xu Yuanchong tries to keep the thematic structure in consistent with the Chinese version both from the number and the type of Theme. This meets the standard of translation put forward by him, that is, "Beauty in sense, sound and form". It can not be concluded who is better than the other, because the two translators have their own translation characteristics and advantages. Understanding the translators' translation characteristics can be used to explain the differences of thematic structure in their translation. It is also helpful for translation and translation criticism. The above analyses of the Chinese and two English versions of the poem *Yumeiren* indicate that the two translators translate the poem out of their own translation characteristics and strategies. Through the analyses, the advantages and disadvantages in their translations are revealed. Based on the analyses of thematic structures and their advantages and disadvantages, the paper will propose some translation strategies of Chinese ancient poetry.

Keeping the Form of Chinese Ancient Poetry

In the first English version, Xu Zhongjie changes the form and metric pattern of the original one. He writes 12 lines instead of the original 8 lines. The purpose of this is to convey meaning clearly to the readers, especially the foreigners who may not understand the poem without explanation of the meaning. But as analyzed, form is an important element of Chinese ancient poetry. From form, readers are easy to recognize the Chinese ancient poetry from other literature works. The changing of form will lose its identity and the beauty of form. Therefore, translators ought to keep the form of Chinese ancient poetry in their translations to make it look like Chinese ancient poetry, at least, in appearance.

Keeping the Beauty of Artistic Conception of Chinese Ancient Poetry

Some translators like Xu Zhongjie emphasize meaning in translation. However, too much focus on meaning will lead to transference of meaning, which means losing the beauty of artistic conception. Besides, to make the meaning clearer, the translator has added his own understanding into the English version. This

may mislead readers because of his misunderstanding of the original poem.

So, in the process of translating Chinese ancient poetry, translators should give faithful translation and keep the beauty of artistic conception without too much focus on meaning.

Keeping the Type of Theme of Translation in Consistent with that of the Original Poetry

Li Yu expresses his sorrow through the famous contrast between the unchanging scenery and building with the changing people. In the first English version, Xu Zhongjie ignores the structural element and changes the multiple Themes into a simple one; while Xu Yuanchong keeps the theme in consistent with that of the Chinese version. Thus, Xu Yuanchong's translation delivers the poet's emotions more exactly. Consequently, in the translation of Chinese ancient poetry, translators should choose the type of Theme in their translation according to the original poem and try to express the main idea of the poem accurately.

CONCLUSION

The above analyses indicate that the two translators have their own advantages and disadvantages in the translation of the poem. The paper will not conclude which one is better for the whole poem, but point out some specific advantages or disadvantages in the translation to give some inspiration for other translators and translation commentators. The paper finds that in translation, Xu Zhongjie focuses more on meaning; while Xu Yuanchong emphasizes form. In the practice of translation, translators should balance form and meaning well. They can follow the strategies of keeping the form, the beauty of artistic conception and type of theme in consistent with the Chinese ancient poetry in their translation. The findings of this research can offer some guide for translation commentators and translators from the perspective of thematic structure theory. Translation commentators should apply objective methods like linguistic theories in their translation criticism. Such methods are more scientific than their intuition or experience. For translators, their translation should be faithful to the original both from meaning and form. Lack of either is not suitable. Applying the theory of thematic structure to translation can polish their works. Therefore, translators should combine the theories of linguistics like the theory of thematic structure with theories of translation.

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