

A Comparative Study of the Five Translations of *Back to Country Life (I)* from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

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Abstract: Tao Yuanming is one of the greatest poets of ancient China, and the English translations of his poems have lasted for more than a century. By now, many famous translators at home and abroad have translated them into English. From the perspective of Eco-translatology, the paper aims to take “three-dimensional transformation” as the theoretical guidance to compare and analyse five English translations of *Back to Country Life (I)* in the post-1950s, namely the translations of J.R. Hightower, David Hinton, Roland Fang, Wang Rongpei, and X.Y. Z., from the language dimension, cultural dimension, and communication dimension. The paper hopes to promote the translation of Tao Yuanming’s poems and the integration of Eco-translatology and poetry. Finally, the retranslation and the dissemination of Chinese poetry can be promoted.

Keywords: Eco-Translatology; *Back to Country Life (I)*; Comparison of Translations

1. Introduction

In 2001, Professor Hu Gengshen first proposed translation as “adaptation” and “selection” at the Third Asian Translators’ Forum. Up to now, Eco-translatology has gone through twenty years of development, from germination to gradual maturity, and has made great contributions to the development of local translation theory in China. Eco-translatology defines translation as the following three core concepts: “text transplantation” “adaptation and selection”, and “ecological balance”^[5], which is a set of “trinity” structure of thinking, constituting a translation ecosystem. The theory of adaptation and selection is briefly summarized as “three-dimensional transformation”. Under the principle of “multi-dimensional adaptation and selection”, it is relatively focused on the the language dimension, cultural dimension, and communication dimension.^[4]

Poetry is a special literary genre, and poetry translation is also a relatively special kind of literary translation. As a linguistic art, poetry translation requires the translator to be equipped with the strong linguistic skills and foundation. Chen Yuehong compares the views of nature in China and Western countries in poetry translations to provide a new perspective for the study of Eco-translatology, which defines the translation from the ecological perspective as how to transpose the view of nature in the original text to the translated text in the translation process. As an indigenous Chinese translation theory, Eco-translatology is regarded as a new perspective in translation studies, but there are few studies on the English translation of ancient Chinese poetry from that perspective.

2. A Study of the English Translation of Tao Yuanming’s Poetry

Tao Yuanming is one of the most iconic poets of ancient China, with a focus on pastoral poetry. At present, the scholarly community is still lagging in the study of English translations of Tao’s poetry, compared to the poetry of Li Bai and Wang Wei, which makes the study of Tao’s poetry more urgent. Papers related to the English translation of Tao’s poems were collected from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Wanfang Data Knowledge Service Platform, and as of 10 July 2022, there are 128 papers, among which there are 17 papers on *Back to Country Life*. However, in the past, scholars have mostly studied the translations of Arthur Waley, William Acker, Roland Fang, and Wang Rongpei in comparison, but few have studied the translations of the post-1950s sinologist J.R. Hightower and David Hinton, and Chinese translator X.Y.Z.. This paper holds that there is still much room for the study of the English translation of *Back to Country Life*.

3. A comparative study of the five translations of *Back to Country Life (I)*

Back to Country Life occupies a very important place in Tao’s poetry. The first poems in *Back to Country Life* depicts Tao’s return to his homeland, the peace of the rural landscape, and the poet’s tranquil state of mind. The translations of J.R. Hightower, David Hinton, Roland Fang, Wang Rongpei, and X. Y. Z. have been selected for comparative analysis. J.R. Hightower and David Hinton are renowned sinologists who have studied Tao Yuanming in depth and have good bilingual skills and thinking; Roland Fang’s *Gleanings From Tao*

Yuanming is the first relatively comprehensive and systematic English translation of the poetry of Tao Yuanming in China, and is of high research value; Wang Rongpei, whose favourite poet is Tao Yuanming, published a masterpiece on Tao Yuanming; X. Y. Z., a great translator in China, is known as “the only one who translated Chinese poetry into English and French”. Many Chinese and foreigners believe that the ideal translator for Chinese to foreign languages should be a sinologist rather than a Chinese, but in fact, Chinese have been engaged in such a process since ancient times.^[14] In the following, the translations of five translators will be compared from the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions.

3.1 The Language Dimension

In terms of form, J.R. Hightower and David Hinton both translated the poem as free verse. Roland Fang focused on the inner spirit of the original poem, rather than rhyme. Wang Rongpei and X. Y. Z. translated the poem in metric lines. Wang’s translation rhymes with the end of the line, with the double rhyme “aa”, which is a catchy way to read the poem and reflects the musicality of English poetry. Xu’s translation is more formal and concise, rhyming with the end of the line. However, it is overly simplified, ignoring some of the images and limiting the reader’s imagination to a certain extent.

Core Words	J.R. Hightower (Trans.1)	David Hinton (Trans.2)	Chong Fang (Trans.3)	Rongpei Wang (Trans.4)	Yuanchong Xu (Trans.5)
尘网	the dusty net	net of dust	the dusty web	mundane careers	mundane snares
羁鸟	the migrant bird	a tethered bird	the fettered bird	birds in the cage	a caged bird
守拙	simplicity intact	nurture simplicity	cling to solitude	suit my bent for	live a rural life
鸡	a cock	roosters	the cock	larks	cocks
荫	shade	shade	are shaded by	screen	cast
罗	stretch out	spread wide	rows...stand	shade...with	have
尘杂	worldly dust	no dust	dust	worldly moil or gloom	no one should intrude
樊笼	a prisoner in a cage	that trap	prison of men	bitter strife with men	official servitude
自然	my freedom	that comes of itself	nature and its ways	free and easy life	nature

Chart 1 Keywords in *Back to Country Life(I)*

In the third line, “尘网” was translated as “the dusty net” “net of dust” and “the dusty web” respectively in Translation 1, 2, and 3 directly. “尘网” is a net with dust in it, and the question arises as to why Tao Yuanming has fallen into such a net. Translation 1 and 2 are translated by two sinologists. The paper believes that their identity as sinologists plays a crucial role in the understanding of the Chinese language and rhetoric. Free translation was adopted in Translation 4 and 5. They didn’t translate the word “尘”, but use “the net of public life” “earthly net” or “mundane snares”, which is much smoother to read^[11]. In “误落尘网中”, the metaphor was used to describe the “尘网” as “官场”, echoing “樊笼”. It is a pity that the metaphor in the original is lost when the implied meaning is translated, as the latter two translations are more appropriate here. In the fifth line, “羁鸟” means the bird was to be bound, and here it referred to the poet himself. In Translation 1, “羁鸟” was translated as “migrant bird”, which is a comprehension error; Wang’s and Xu’s translations are more concise and straightforward, adding a sense of sadness and image. Their translations are more appropriate. “守拙” means that the poet doesn’t follow the crowd and return to his rural life. Translations 1 and 2 emphasized the simplicity and purity of the poet in nature, understanding it as a noun; the action of “守” was translated in Translation 3 and 4, expressing the poet’s willingness to make such a choice, which is more in line with the logic of “开荒南野际, 守拙归园田”. There is a question sentence in Translation 5, which shows a more resolute attitude. “守拙” and “归园田” were fused into one. It is concise but lacks the poetic meaning of the original line. The translation of “鸡” into “larks” is mainly for two reasons, the first being that larks are often used by Western poets as an image to express a leisurely and happy life, which is more easily understood by readers of the target language. The second reason is that it rhymes with “barks” at the end of the previous line. “荫” and “罗” are verbs. Some translators have used “shade” “screen” and “cast” to mean “荫”, which is authentic. In translation 1, “罗” was translated as “stretch out”. The peach and plum trees are stretched out before the reader’s eyes. However, the use of “have” in Translation 5 loses the poetic elements. As for “尘杂”, “worldly” was chosen in Translation 1, indicating both the literal and implied meaning; Translation 2 and 3 retained the surface meaning to make a pun. Translation 5 is too

straightforward and loses the hazy beauty of the poem. “樊笼” refers to the officialdom, echoing the word “羁鸟”. Translation 1 retained the image “笼”, which is encouraged. The other translations took the free method, expressing a strong sense of emotion. The image should be retained to echo the above. In the last line, “自然” refers to both the natural environment and the way of life in accordance with the poet’s nature. Two meanings were both translated in Translation 3, which proves the translator’s fine interpretation of the original poem. It echoes the opening two lines “少无适俗韵，性本爱丘山”, and reveals the topic of *Back to Country Life (I)*.

Example 1: 少无适俗韵，性本爱丘山。

From early days I have been at odds with the world;
My instinctive love is hills and mountains.^[7]
Nothing like the others, even as a child,
rooted in a love for hills and mountains,^[3]
From my youth I have loved the hills and mountains,
Never was my nature suited for the world of men,^[2]
I’ve loathed the madding crowd since I was a boy
While hills and mountains have filled me with joy.^[12]
While young, I was not used to worldly cares,
And hills became my natural compeers.^[13]

Syntactically, for the convenience of readers’ understanding, J.R. Hightower bridges the differences between Chinese and English thinking by adding subjects “I” and “My”; David Hinton adopted the method of the negative preposition to emphasize the poet’s high moral integrity, never choosing to follow the crowd, and his unique love for hills and mountains; Roland Fang changed the word order of the original sentence, describing “爱丘山” by “少” and “世俗韵” by “性”. The English translation of him can be interpreted as “少本爱丘山，性无适俗韵” by Chinese word order. The translation excels in that it expresses the poet’s nature through slight changes, which lays an emotional foundation for him to resign and return home in the future. Comparatively speaking, the word “少” pays more attention to the acquired formation, that is, the former is the concrete manifestation of the latter, while the latter is caused by nature. Roland Fang’s translation ideas are peculiar. Moreover, in the translation of the second line, Roland Fang adopted a similar translation method to David Hinton, emphasizing the poet’s nature and quality at the beginning by the negative preposition. Wang Rongpei and X.Y.Z. both added the subject “I” in the translation of the first line, indicating that the protagonist in the poet’s works is himself; In the second line, “hills and mountains” is used as the subject, which accords with the expression habit of English sentence patterns.

Example 2: 开荒南野际，守拙归园田。

Now I have cleared some land to the south of town,
Simplicity intact, I have returned to farm.^[7]
land out on the south edge cleared, I
nurture simplicity among gardens and fields,^[3]
Back to my land I cling to solitude,
To till the soil in the open south country.^[2]
So I reclaim the land in southern fields
To suit my bent for reaping farmland yields.^[12]
Go back to till my southern field I would,
To live a rural life why not return?^[13]

Among the above five translations, only the third translation reverses the order of the two lines. Some scholars justify the logic of the third translation that the poet knows that he doesn’t know how to follow the crowd, so it is better to stick to his own solitude, and he doesn’t have to live in the earthly world reluctantly. He is more willing to resign and return home to reclaim the wasteland in the fields in the south. Roland Fang’s translation reverses the order of two lines, which actually restores the logic of the original poem and is more in line with the writing habits of English readers.^[9] Of course, it can be understood that the poet is willing to reclaim the wasteland in the south and go home to the farm following his nature, just like the other four translations. Here, this paper views that the key to understanding these two lines lies in how to understand “守拙”. Tao Yuanming classified his motive for choosing to be a hermit as “守拙”. Dai Jianye^[8] wrote in *The Realm of Clarity: New Essays on Tao Yuanming* that Wo Yizhong pointed out that “守拙” is a necessary

condition for “返自然”. In fact, it is also the matter itself, and the process of “守拙” is the process of returning to inner nature. The former coincides with the latter. Here, X.Y.Z. translated the second line into a question line, and combined “守拙” with “归园田”, which is also worth learning from. “开荒南野际” is a concrete practice after “守拙归园田”, the logical relationship between which should be clarified. Thus it meets the logic of English writing.

3.2 The Cultural Dimension

Example 3: 狗吠深巷中，鸡鸣桑树颠。

A dog is barking somewhere in a hidden lane,
A cock crows from the top of a mulberry tree.^[7]
country. Here, dogs bark deep in back roads,
and roosters crow from mulberry treetops.^[3]
And the dog barks in the deep lane,
And the cock crows on the mulberry top.^[2]
In silent country lanes a stray dog barks;
Amid the mulberry trees cocks crow with larks.^[12]
In alley deep a dog is heard to bark,
And cocks crow as if over mulberry trees.^[13]

These two lines are plain to read, but they have profound cultural origins. Tao Yuanming used “鸡鸣” and “狗吠” many times in his works to describe a peaceful and tranquil pastoral life. In *Peach-Blossom Springs*, Tao Yuanming yearns for an ideal society, that is, “阡陌交通，鸡犬相闻”. Here, the poet applies “鸡鸣高树颠，狗吠深宫中” in the Yuefu poetry after changing “高树” to “桑树”. For a long time, our country has always advocated the simultaneous development of agriculture and mulberry planting as the foundation of our country.^[10] In ancient China, mulberry trees were closely related to people’s lives and had unique symbolic significance. It not only symbolized the vitality of primitive pastoral life (natural significance) but also metaphorically represented people’s noble quality (cultural significance). This is also an important reason why many poets frequently use this image. In *the Book of Poetry*, the line “鸣鸠在桑，其子七兮” (The cuckoo in the mulberries, breeds seven fledglings with ease. Tr. X.Y.Z.) symbolizes the integrity of a gentleman. Here, the poet uses “桑树” to describe his integrity and specificity and to explain that the countryside has become the sustenance of his soul. For this image, five translators invariably translated it as mulberry trees, preserving the image with national accumulation, which made western readers have a deeper understanding of the historical origin of China. In this poem, the images are very rich, such as “方宅” “草屋” “榆柳” “桃李” “远村” “炊烟” with long-term and close-up views, representing a sense of static state; the two images of “鸡鸣” and “狗吠” bring a sense of dynamism. Finally, the beautiful life in the countryside is shown to the fullest.

3.3 The Communication Dimension

Example 4: 误落尘网中，一去三十年。

By mischance I fell into the dusty net
And was thirteen years away from home.^[7]
I fell into their net of dust, that one
departure a blunder lasting thirteen years.^[3]
By mistake have I been entangled in the dusty web,
Lost in its snares for thirteen long years.^[2]
By mistake I sought mundane careers,
And got entrapped in them for thirty years.^[12]
But by mistake I fell in mundane snares,
And was thus entangled for thirteen years.^[13]

As for “三十年”, some translators think that Tao Yuanming has just spent thirteen years from being an official to resigning and returning home, so “三十年” should be translated as “thirteen years”, which is in line with his experience; Some translators think that “三十” here is only an imaginary number, which is used to express a long time and does not need to be converted into an actual year. Both understandings are reasonable. Here, among the five translations, only Wang Rongpei’s translation used “thirty years”, and the other four translations are translated into “thirteen years” according to the real situation. This paper holds that poetry is a platform for Tao Yuanming

to vent his inner thoughts and feelings. He wrote “三十年” not to express specific numbers, but to express that he spent one day seeming for a year after straying into the mundane snares, thus forming a huge emotional momentum and paving the way for setting off the incomparable joy of the poet after returning to the countryside.^[1]

In addition, Li Guonan^[9] studied the cultural characteristics of Chinese numbers and pointed out that “三” and its multiples are the unique full numbers in Chinese culture and express exaggeration. In Li Bai’s *Songs of Autumn Pool*, the number in “白发三千丈，缘愁似个长” (Long long is my whitening hair, Long long is it laden with care. Tr. X.Y.Z.) is just to express sorrow more vividly; In *The Waterfall in Mount Lu Viewed from Afar*, the number “三千” in “飞流直下三千尺，疑是银河落九天” (Its torrent dashes down three thousand feet from high, as if the Silver River fell from azure sky. Tr. X.Y.Z.) . Here, exaggeration is used to express the grandeur of the waterfall; In the *Invitation to Wine*, “烹羊宰牛且为乐，会须一饮三百杯” (Kill a cow, cook a sheep and let us merry be, and drink three hundred cupfuls of wine in high glee! Tr. X.Y.Z.), exaggerated quantifiers are used to show the poet’s heroic and strong feelings. From this point of view, it is not appropriate to translate “三十年” into “thirteen years”, and it is not realistic to translate them in full. This paper thinks that those numbers should be translated fuzzily, emphasizing the long waiting time. Therefore, to translate poems accurately, the poet’s emotions at that time must be accurately analyzed, so as to express their feelings vividly and accurately.

Example 5: 方宅十余亩，草屋八九间。

The land I own amounts to a couple of acres

The thatched-roof house has four or five rooms.^[7]

home again. I’ve got nearly two acres here,

and four or five rooms in my thatch hut.^[3]

My plot of ground is only a few acres square,

The thatched roof covers eight or nine rooms.^[2]

My farm contains a dozen mu of ground;

My cottage has eight or nine rooms around.^[12]

My plot of ground is but ten acres square;

My thatched cottage has eight or nine rooms.^[13]

For “十余亩”, Hightower and Roland Fang translated it fuzzily, because they could not determine how many acres it was. That’s why they translated it as “a couple of” and “a few”, which meant there were, but not many, which showed the living environment of the poet. Translation 2 converts the land measurement unit to nearly about two acres. Wang Rongpei used the Chinese transliteration mu. In the dictionary, mu means “a traditional unit of area”, which can be converted into acres. However, “亩” in Chinese history is a very vague concept, which is not accurately quantified, and the use of “dozen” is too precise. This line briefly outlines Tao Yuanming’s living environment to highlight the simplicity of his life, so the specific number of land is not that important. As for “八九间”, Hightower and Hinton translated it as “four or five rooms”, which is intended to highlight Tao Yuanming’s poverty and simplicity in returning home to live in seclusion, while the other three translations are literally translated as “eight or nine rooms”. The measuring unit of land is worth noting. Although the literal difference between “more than ten acres” and “ten acres” is only a few cents, it is far from the concept of space. This paper thinks that it is appropriate to translate numbers fuzzily here.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, two sinologists, J.R. Hightower and David Hinton, retained the special images and rhetoric in Chinese, started from the keynote of the whole poem, and the transformation is better in the communicative dimension; Roland Fang started with the logic and internal meaning of lines. He explores the internal logic of Chinese poems and has a high degree of completion in the language dimension; Wang Rongpei’s translation pays attention to meter, parallel construction, and the implied meaning. His English expressions are modern and fluent; X.Y.Z.’s translation pursues beauty in form and pays attention to rhythm and fluency of sentences. However it is too simplified in some lines, ignoring images and some philosophical parts. Wang and X.Y.Z.’s translation is highly completed in the cultural dimension and communicative dimension.

The translation is an art full of regrets, especially poetry translation. By comparing the five translations, we can see those different translators have varied translation ideas and principles. However, although the ideas are different, the ultimate goal is to promote Chinese poetry to go global. Eco-translatology is an interdisciplinary translation theory. It regards the translation process as an ecological system, then its combination with poetics can be regarded as a small poetic ecological system, which embodies the view of nature. This process

has a long way to go, which highlights the importance of the collision of different voices. Therefore, keeping an inclusive vision is helpful to provide a reference for the later English translation of this poem.

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