

A Comparative Study of Two Chinese Versions of Gitanjali from the Perspective of Susan Bassnett's Cultural Translation Theory

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Abstract: Translators often take more time and energy to translate poetry because it is hard to balance the rendering of meaning and preserving of form. And it is difficult to translate poetry into another language without the loss in meaning and poetic expressions. Based on Susan Bassnett's cultural translation theory, this paper highlights the importance of cultural exchange in translation and emphasizes that meaning and form are equally important in poetry translation. This paper explores the semantic, formal and aesthetic equivalence in poetry translation through a comparative study of two Chinese versions of Gitanjali, and it also analyzes whether the translated version is easy for the target language readers to understand and appreciate, so as to achieve the purpose of cultural exchange.

Keywords: Cultural translation; Cultural equivalence; Gitanjali; Comparative study

1. Cultural Translation Theory and Two Translated Versions of Gitanjali

Bassnett's cultural translation theory^[1] highlights cultural exchange, with culture first and information second. Through translation, unique cultures of various nationalities can be introduced, their similarities and differences can be explained, and the comparative study of two languages and cultures can also get promoted. It is also highlighted that translation is by no means a purely linguistic act but is deeply rooted in the culture in which the language is located, and for truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism since words only have meanings in terms of the cultures in which they function^[2]. Also, Bassnett holds that if poetry loses its form, it loses its essence. So, under the guidance of cultural translation theory, meaning and form are equally important in poetry translation, the translator should not be limited to rendering the meaning of the source text but should reflect the equivalence of the cultural functions to avoid the lack of cultural connotation. Translators should reproduce the cultural information implied in the poetry, reproduce the form of poetry to the greatest extent, and at the same time consider the reception of the target language readers.

This paper mainly focuses on Bing Xin's and Bai Kaiyuan's translated versions for the comparative analysis.

Bing Xin's translation has stood the test of time and been widely accepted by Chinese readers. Her success not only comes from her admiration for Tagore's works, thoughts and Buddhist understanding, but her identity as a famous poet is also of great importance. In her work, Bing Xin gently depicts the love for nature, mother and children and her language is fresh and exquisite with a natural rhythm just like that of Tagore. Based on similar ideas and style, Bing Xin's translation faithfully and aesthetically conveys the essence of Gitanjali.

Bai Kaiyuan is a translator and Bengali scholar who bears a strong understanding of Bengali culture. He not only translated Gitanjali from the English version, but he has also referred to the original Bengali version to make his translation easier to understand^[3]. He did so because Tagore has deleted and altered some sentences and words when he himself translated the work from Bengali metrical verse to English prose poetry. So, his version aims at faithfully conveying the meaning and coherence of the poetry.

2. Analysis of two translations

2.1 Religious Terms

Gitanjali, as an “offering of songs” to the Lord, the images of Lord presented in poems are mysterious and vague. The translator must be both cautious and creative when translating those religious terms with as full reservation as possible of the religious connotation. Besides the reservation of the meaning and the rendering of culture, the translation should also ensure the reader’s understanding and appreciation of the text.

Since “God” is among the most important themes in Gitanjali, and Tagore uses different terms to address Him, among which “Lord” is the most frequent, so the translation of Lord is selected as the example for analysis.

Table-1 Different Translations of Lord

Translator	主人	主	王	天帝	薄伽梵大神	omission
Bing Xin	2	12	1	0	0	0
Bai Kaiyuan	0	12	0	1	1	1

As is shown in the above table, the word “Lord” has appeared 15 times in the poetry. Bing translated most of them into “主”, with two exceptions of “主人” and one exception of “王”. However, Bai’s translation is more diversified, with 12 times into “主” just like Bing does, and “天帝”, “薄伽梵大神” each once. There is also an omission in poem 99. It is essential to analyze the connotation of Lord in Gitanjali first before analyzing and judging the translation by two translators.

Tagore forms his unique concept about “God”, combing both the traditional Pantheism thoughts in ancient India and the influence of Western religion. Thus, the “God” he depicted not only embodies some qualities of Brahma from India but also with features from Christianity. Although it’s hard to nail an absolute definition for the word “Lord” in Gitanjali, Tagore has depicted Lord as a traceless, omnipresent spiritual subject.

The uncertainty of the connotation of “Lord” enables the translator to understand and interpret this religious term in his own way. But the address may be better to be consistent to avoid confusion and ambiguity. Bing chooses to translate it into “主” due to her understanding, with slight modification in necessary context. Bai also translates it into “主” mostly, yet his other choices are a little bit confusing. The following examples are his translation “薄伽梵大神” and the omission.

2.1.1 Misery knocks at thy door, and her message is that thy lord is wakeful, and he calls thee to the love-tryst through the darkness of night. (Gitanjali, poem 27)

Bing Xin: 悲哀在你门上敲着，她传话说你的主醒着呢，他叫你在夜的黑暗中奔赴爱的约会。

Bai: 苦难的女神在叩你的门，她说你的薄伽梵大神已经苏醒，午夜一片漆黑，他召唤你赴爱的幽会。

In this poem, “lord” does not refer to a specific Brahma or God according to the context and is used in the same way as other poems. So, if the meaning of this word does not change, it seems strange and confusing why Bai makes an alternation here. Due to Bai’s footnote, “薄伽梵” is a respectful term for the supernatural power dominating the universe, and does not refer to a specific Brahma or God, whose meaning has not changed.

To better achieve cultural exchange, the translation should be the natural and close equivalent of the source language text in terms of meaning and form. Although Bai’s translation here matches the meaning with the original text, the word he chose is not formly equivalent. His rendering of this word caused incoherence in his translation and may confuse the target readers.

2.2 Nouns

2.2.1 One final glance from thine eyes and my life will be ever thine own. (Gitanjali, poem 91)

Bing Xin: 你的眼泪向我最后一盼，我的生命就永远是你的。

Bai: 你的眼睛投来最后的一瞥，我的生命从此属于你。

Glance is “a quick look at someone or something” in English, and both the translation of “瞥” and “盼” accord with its meaning. But the Chinese character “瞥” has both passive and active meanings while Bing’s translation as “盼”, containing the meaning of affection in Chinese culture better expresses the relationship between the poet and the God. Therefore, Bing’s translation reduces misunderstandings of target readers and is more acceptable.

2.3 Syntax

The poems in Gitanjali lose the rhythmical characteristics of poems but possess more of a prose style when it is translated by Tagore himself from Bengali metrical poetry to English prose poetry. Burton Raffel ^[4] puts forward that the most important determinant for prose is syntax, and he argues that syntax must be handled if the translator aims to reflect the original text in a meaningful way. The following examples are selected to show how the translators cope with the casual but elegant syntactic factors of the original poetry while naturally and closely expressing the meaning of the poems.

2.3.1 When the heart is hard and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy.

When grace is lost from life, come with a burst of song. (Gitanjali, 39)

Bing Xin: 在我的心坚硬焦躁的时候, 请洒我以慈霖。

当生命失去恩宠的时候, 请赐我以欢歌。

Bai: 当我的新田焦枯, 来吧, 化作慈爱的甘霖。

当生命失去恩惠, 来吧, 化作高唱的歌曲。

In this poem, Tagore mentions that people need comfort and encouragement when experiencing the time of hardship, such as feeling exhausted and abandoned. The poem adopts the structure of “come...with”, representing the beauty in form and style. It also implies that the poet yearns for the grace and comfort from the God.

Both translators reproduce the feelings implied in the original poem but in different ways. Bing’s version is closely and naturally equivalent to the original poem in terms of meaning, form and style. But Bai’s version lacks the proper rendering of meaning and style. By using the rhetorical device of antithesis, Bing not only convey the meaning in a beautiful and native way, but she also keeps the original tone of the poem by starting with the Chinese character “请”, which shows a reverent attitude. Her translation well reserves the flavor of the poem even if she does not strictly accord to the form.

While Bing attempts to preserve the language and style in natural equivalence, Bai makes great alternations. He separates “come” by translating it into “来吧” and divides the “come...with” structure into two parts. The tone of the poem has changed since the expression “来吧, 化作...” represents the imperative mood, highlighting the request of the poet. Contrary to Bing’s mild, humble tone, his translated version is more active and shows an equal relationship between the poet and the God. Besides, the translation of “化作” involves his own understanding yet the expression “化作歌曲” is strange and seldom used in Chinese.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, compared with Bing Xin, Bai Kaiyuan’s word choice better express the connotative meaning of the original poetry. He tends to choose plain and straightforward expressions to let the readers better understand the poetry, yet his great alternations somehow fail to represent the natural and beautiful aesthetic styles of Tagore’s work.

Secondly, when considering whether the translation achieves culture exchanges and caters to the target readers’ understanding and appreciation, Bing Xin’s version takes better care of Chinese readers’ mode of thinking and aesthetics. Apart from cultural and semantic equivalence, she also makes her version equivalent in form and aesthetics. Thus, it helps the target reader to appreciate and understand the poetry without the loss of meaning and poetic sentiment to the greatest extent.

Therefore, considering the purpose of cultural exchange and the aim to let target readers better understand and appreciate the poetry, it can be concluded that poetry translation, differing from other genres, should not only focus on the rendering of meaning of the poem, but also the reproduction of the poetry both in form and aesthetically.

References:

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