

# A Study on the English Translation of "Sorrow" in Du Fu's Poems from the Perspective of Creative Treason

Wang Xiaoya, Wang Yuxi, Han Ying, Hou Yatong, Chang Maolin

Shandong University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Jinan, Shandong, 250300, China

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the English translation of the concept of "sorrow" in Du Fu's poems from the perspective of creative treason. As one of the most prominent poets in the Tang Dynasty, Du Fu's poems are renowned for their profound expression of sorrow, which is intertwined with personal misfortune, social upheaval, and national crisis. Creative treason, a core concept in translation studies proposed by French literary theorist Antoine Berman, refers to the inevitable deviations and innovations that occur during the translation process due to cultural, linguistic, and contextual differences (Berman, 1992). By analyzing several representative English translations of Du Fu's poems (e.g., translations by Arthur Waley, Xu Yuanchong, and Burton Watson), this paper examines how translators employ creative treason to convey the multifaceted sorrow in Du Fu's works, and discusses the effects and rationality of such treasonous practices. The study finds that creative treason plays a crucial role in bridging the cultural and linguistic gaps between Chinese and English, enabling English readers to better understand the depth and complexity of Du Fu's sorrow. However, it also notes that translators need to strike a balance between creative treason and faithfulness to the original text to ensure the authenticity of the poetic connotation is preserved.

## KEYWORDS

Creative treason; Du Fu's poems; "Sorrow"; English translation

## 1 Introduction

Du Fu, hailed as the "Poet-Historian" in Chinese literary history, created a large number of poems reflecting the social reality of the Tang Dynasty. His poems are filled with a strong sense of sorrow, which is not only the grief of personal life experiences such as poverty, displacement and the loss of relatives, but also the worry for the country and the people in the context of the Anshi Rebellion. The concept of "sorrow" in Du Fu's poems is rich and multi-layered, involving emotional, cultural and historical connotations, which makes its translation into English a challenging task (Gu Zhengkun, 2003).

Creative treason, proposed by the French literary theorist Antoine Berman and further developed by other scholars, has become an important theoretical perspective in translation studies. It breaks the traditional view that translation must be completely faithful to the original text, and acknowledges that translation is a creative activity with certain degrees of deviation from the original (Berman, 1992). In the translation of classical Chinese poetry, due to the huge differences between Chinese and English in language structure, cultural background and poetic traditions, creative treason is almost inevitable. Translators need to make appropriate adjustments and innovations to convey the artistic charm and ideological content of the original poems to target readers (Chen Fukang, 2000).

This paper selects several representative English translations of Du Fu's poems, such as those translated by Arthur Waley, Xu Yuanchong and Burton Watson, and focuses on the translation of the concept of "sorrow" in these poems. By analyzing the specific translation strategies and methods adopted by translators, this paper explores how creative treason is reflected in the translation of "sorrow", and evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of these translations. The research aims to provide a new perspective for the translation study of Du Fu's poems and offer some references for the translation of classical Chinese poetry (Wang Shaorong & Zhao Wensheng, 2005).

## 2 The Connotation of "Sorrow" in Du Fu's Poems

### 2.1 Personal Sorrow

Du Fu's life was full of frustrations and hardships, which left a deep mark on his poems. His personal sorrow is mainly reflected in the aspects of poverty and disease, displacement and the pain of separation from relatives. For example, in Figure *My Cottage Unroofed by the Autumn Wind*, Du Fu describes the scene of his thatched cottage being destroyed by the autumn wind, and he laments his own poverty and powerlessness. The sorrow here is the direct expression of personal misfortune. In Figure *A Song of My Wanderings at the Age of Fifty*, he recounts his experiences of wandering around for decades, suffering from hunger and cold, and being separated from his family for a long time. The sorrow in this poem is mixed with the weariness of life and the longing for his relatives (Watson, 1984).

The personal sorrow in Du Fu's poems is not only the expression of individual emotions, but also a microcosm of the

lives of ordinary people in the troubled times. His personal experiences are closely linked with the social background of the Tang Dynasty, making his sorrow more real and touching (Gu Zhengkun, 2003).

## 2.2 National and Social Sorrow

As a poet with a strong sense of social responsibility, Du Fu always cared about the fate of the country and the people. The Anshi Rebellion, which broke out in the Tang Dynasty, brought unprecedented disasters to the society, and Du Fu's poems fully reflected the social unrest and people's sufferings caused by the rebellion. His national and social sorrow is embodied in his worry about the fall of the country, his sympathy for the people's hardships and his criticism of the corrupt rulers (Waley, 1946).

In *FigureThe Ballad of the War Chariots*, Du Fu depicts the tragic scenes of the war, the separation of families and the desolation of the countryside, expressing his deep sorrow for the people who suffered from the war. In *FigureSpring Prospect*, he writes "The country broken, mountains and rivers remain; The city spring, grass and trees grow thick." The poem expresses his grief over the fall of the capital Chang'an and his longing for the peaceful days of the past. This kind of national and social sorrow elevates the connotation of Du Fu's poems to a higher level, making his works have important historical and social value (Xu Yuanchong, 2000).

## 2.3 The Integration of Personal and National Sorrow

In Du Fu's poems, personal sorrow and national social sorrow are often intertwined and inseparable. His personal misfortunes are caused by the social turmoil, and the sufferings of the country and the people also arouse his deeper personal grief. For example, in *FigureOn the Height*, he writes "I climb the height alone, my heart breaks with grief; Looking out at the world, I see only decay and strife." This poem not only expresses his personal loneliness and sadness, but also reflects his worry about the current situation of the country. The integration of the two kinds of sorrow makes Du Fu's expression of sorrow more profound and moving, and also makes his poems have a stronger emotional appeal (Chen Fukang, 2000).

# 3 Creative Treason in the English Translation of "Sorrow" in Du Fu's Poems

## 3.1 Linguistic Creative Treason

### 3.1.1 Lexical Translation

Chinese is a pictographic language with rich imagery, while English is an alphabetic language with a more logical and analytical structure. When translating the word "sorrow" in Du Fu's poems, translators often need to make lexical choices according to the context and the connotation of the original text, which leads to linguistic creative treason at the lexical level (Xu Yuanchong, 2006).

For example, the word "忧" in Du Fu's poems can be translated into different English words such as "sorrow", "grief", "melancholy", "woe" and so on. Arthur Waley tends to use simple and common words to translate "忧". In his translation of *FigureSpring Prospect*, he translates "感时花溅泪, 恨别鸟惊心" as "Grieved by the times, flowers shed tears; Hating separation, birds break the heart." Here, he uses "grieved" and "hating" to express the emotion of "忧", which is relatively straightforward and easy for English readers to understand, but to some extent, it loses the subtlety of the original word "忧" (Waley, 1946, p. 82).

Xu Yuanchong(2000), on the other hand, pays more attention to the poetic beauty of the translation. In his translation of the same line, he translates it as "Grieved by the fall of times, flowers weep in tears; Saddened by the pain of parting, birds cry with fears." He uses "grieved", "saddened" and "fears" to convey the complex emotion of "忧", which not only retains the original meaning, but also has a certain rhythmic beauty. However, this translation also makes some adjustments to the original text in terms of word choice, which is a kind of creative treason (Xu Yuanchong, 2000, p. 128).

### 3.1.2 Syntactic Translation

The sentence structure of classical Chinese poetry is flexible and concise, while English poetry usually has a relatively fixed grammatical structure. When translating Du Fu's poems, translators need to adjust the sentence structure to adapt to the grammatical rules of English, which results in creative treason at the syntactic level (Gu Zhengkun, 2003).

For instance, in *FigureMy Cottage Unroofed by the Autumn Wind*, the sentence "南村群童欺我老无力, 忍能对面为盗贼" is a typical classical Chinese sentence with an inverted order and omitted components. Burton Watson translates it as "The boys of the southern village, taking advantage of my old age and weakness, Have the effrontery to act like robbers to my face." He rearranges the sentence order and adds some auxiliary words to make the translation conform to the English

expression habit. Although this translation is grammatically correct, it changes the concise and implicit sentence structure of the original text, which is a form of syntactic creative treason (Watson, 1984, p. 215).

Xu Yuanchong(2006)'s translation of this sentence is "The village boys in the south, who see I'm old and weak, Daringly steal right before me what they seek." He also adjusts the sentence structure, but tries to keep the brevity of the original text as much as possible. His translation uses a more concise sentence structure and rhymes at the end of the lines, which makes the translation more poetic, but it also deviates from the original sentence structure to a certain extent (Xu Yuanchong, 2006, p. 58).

## 3.2 Cultural Creative Treason

### 3.2.1 Cultural Image Translation

Du Fu's poems are rich in cultural images with Chinese characteristics, such as "moon", "willow", "chrysanthemum" and so on, which are closely related to the expression of "sorrow". When translating these cultural images, translators often need to make appropriate adjustments due to the differences in cultural connotations between China and the West, which leads to cultural creative treason (Chen Fukang, 2000).

For example, the image of "moon" in Du Fu's poems often symbolizes the longing for relatives and hometown, and is closely associated with the emotion of "sorrow". In English culture, the moon also has certain symbolic meanings, but they are not exactly the same as those in Chinese culture. Arthur Waley, in his translation of *Figure Night Mooring at Maple Bridge*, translates "月落乌啼霜满天" as "The moon goes down, crows cry, frost fills the sky." He directly translates the image of the moon, without adding too many cultural explanations, which makes it difficult for English readers to fully understand the symbolic meaning of the moon in the original poem. This is a kind of cultural creative treason caused by the simplification of cultural images (Waley, 1946, p. 79).

Xu Yuanchong(2000), however, pays more attention to the transmission of cultural connotations. In his translation of the same line, he translates it as "The moon sets, crows caw, frost veils the sky." He uses the word "veils" to describe the frost, which makes the translation more vivid and also implies the hazy and sad atmosphere of the original poem. In addition, he adds some notes to explain the cultural connotation of the moon in Chinese poetry, which helps English readers better understand the emotion of "sorrow" expressed by the moon image. Although this translation enriches the cultural connotation, it also makes some additions to the original text, which is a form of cultural creative treason (Xu Yuanchong, 2000, p. 132).

### 3.2.2 Historical and Cultural Background Translation

Du Fu's poems are deeply rooted in the historical and cultural background of the Tang Dynasty, and many of his poems involve historical events, social customs and cultural traditions of that time. When translating these poems, translators need to make appropriate explanations and adjustments for English readers who are not familiar with the historical and cultural background of the Tang Dynasty, which results in cultural creative treason at the historical and cultural level (Wang Shaorong & Zhao Wensheng, 2005).

For example, *Figure The Ballad of the War Chariots* Figure describes the tragic scenes of the war during the Anshi Rebellion, involving many historical events and social phenomena of the Tang Dynasty. Arthur Waley, in his translation of this poem, makes a lot of abridgements and adaptations to the original text, and omits some historical allusions and cultural expressions that are difficult for English readers to understand. Although this translation makes the poem easier to read, it loses some important historical and cultural information, which is a kind of creative treason caused by the simplification of the historical and cultural background (Waley, 1946, p. 88).

Xu Yuanchong(2006), in his translation of the same poem, tries to retain the historical and cultural information of the original text as much as possible. He adds some notes to explain the historical background and cultural allusions in the poem, and uses more accurate words to translate the historical events and social phenomena. However, this translation also makes some adjustments to the original text in terms of the arrangement of the content and the choice of words to adapt to the reading habits of English readers, which is also a form of cultural creative treason (Xu Yuanchong, 2006, p. 62).

## 3.3 Stylistic Creative Treason

The style of Du Fu's poems is characterized by grand momentum, profound emotion and concise language. When translating his poems into English, translators need to reproduce the stylistic features of the original poems as much as possible, but due to the differences in poetic traditions between Chinese and English, it is inevitable to produce stylistic creative treason (Gu Zhengkun, 2003).

Arthur Waley's translations of Du Fu's poems are mostly in the form of free verse, which is more flexible in expression and easy for English readers to accept. However, this form of translation loses the metrical and rhythmic beauty of

classical Chinese poetry, which is a kind of stylistic creative treason. For example, in his translation of Figure *On the Height*, he uses a relatively loose free verse form, which makes the translation lack the compactness and momentum of the original poem (Waley, 1946, p. 91).

Xu Yuanchong(2000), on the other hand, advocates the "three beauties" principle of poetry translation, namely beauty in sense, sound and form. He tries to reproduce the metrical and rhythmic beauty of classical Chinese poetry in his translations. In his translation of Figure *On the Height*, he uses a sonnet form with a fixed rhyme scheme and meter, which makes the translation have a strong rhythmic beauty. However, this translation also makes some compromises in terms of the content and form of the original poem to adapt to the sonnet form, which is a form of stylistic creative treason (Xu Yuanchong, 2000, p. 140).

Burton Watson's translations of Du Fu's poems strike a balance between free verse and metrical poetry. He uses a relatively concise and compact form of translation, which retains the basic stylistic features of the original poems, but also makes some adjustments to adapt to the English poetic tradition. His translation style is more neutral, and the degree of stylistic creative treason is relatively moderate (Watson, 1984, p. 220).

## 4 The Rationality and Limitations of Creative Treason in Translation

### 4.1 The Rationality of Creative Treason

Creative treason is an inevitable phenomenon in the translation of Du Fu's poems, and it also has its rationality. Firstly, due to the huge differences between Chinese and English in language, culture and poetic traditions, it is impossible to achieve a completely faithful translation. Creative treason helps translators break through the limitations of language and culture, and convey the essence of the original poems to target readers. For example, by using appropriate lexical and syntactic adjustments, translators can make the translation more in line with the expression habits of English readers, thus improving the readability and acceptability of the translation (Berman, 1992, p. 32).

Secondly, creative treason is a manifestation of the translator's subjectivity. Translators, as the intermediaries between the original text and the target readers, have their own understanding and interpretation of the original poems. Their creative treason in the translation process is not only a way to convey the original meaning, but also a way to express their own artistic views and aesthetic tastes. For example, Xu Yuanchong(2006)'s pursuit of the "three beauties" principle in his translations reflects his unique understanding of poetic translation, and his creative treason makes the translations have a higher artistic value (Xu Yuanchong, 2006, p. 55).

Finally, creative treason is conducive to the spread and acceptance of Du Fu's poems in the English-speaking world. By making appropriate adjustments and innovations to the original poems, translators can make the translations more in line with the aesthetic tastes and cultural psychology of English readers, thus promoting the international dissemination of Chinese classical poetry (Chen Fukang, 2000, p. 188).

### 4.2 The Limitations of Creative Treason

Although creative treason has its rationality, it also has certain limitations. Firstly, excessive creative treason may lead to the loss of the original meaning and artistic charm of the poems. If translators make too many adjustments and innovations to the original text in pursuit of the readability and acceptability of the translation, they may deviate from the original intention of the poet and lose the unique artistic features of the original poems. For example, some translators over-simplify the cultural images and historical allusions in Du Fu's poems in their translations, which makes the translations lose the profound cultural connotation of the original text (Gu Zhengkun, 2003, p. 98).

Secondly, creative treason may cause misunderstandings among target readers. If translators' creative treason is not properly controlled, target readers may have a wrong understanding of the original poems. For example, some translators add their own subjective opinions and emotions to the translations, which makes the translations deviate from the objective content of the original poems, thus misleading the readers' understanding (Wang Shaorong & Zhao Wensheng, 2005, p. 118).

Finally, the degree of creative treason is difficult to measure. There is no clear standard for how much creative treason is appropriate in translation, which depends on the translator's own judgment and the needs of the target readers. This may lead to inconsistent translation quality, and some translations may have excessive or insufficient creative treason (Berman, 1992, p. 40).

## 5 Conclusion

This paper studies the English translation of "sorrow" in Du Fu's poems from the perspective of creative treason, and

analyzes the manifestations of creative treason at the linguistic, cultural and stylistic levels through the case study of several representative translations. The research shows that creative treason is an inevitable phenomenon in the translation of Du Fu's poems, which plays an important role in bridging the cultural and linguistic gaps between Chinese and English and promoting the international dissemination of Du Fu's poems (Xu Yuanchong, 2000).

Translators adopt different strategies and methods of creative treason according to their own translation concepts and the needs of target readers. Arthur Waley's translations are more inclined to the readability and acceptability of the target language, with a relatively high degree of creative treason at the linguistic and cultural levels (Waley, 1946); Xu Yuanchong's translations pay more attention to the reproduction of the poetic beauty of the original text, and his creative treason is mainly reflected in the stylistic and lexical aspects (许渊冲, 2006); Burton Watson's translations strike a balance between faithfulness and creativity, with a moderate degree of creative treason (Watson, 1984).

However, creative treason also has certain limitations. Excessive creative treason may lead to the loss of the original meaning and artistic charm of the poems, and cause misunderstandings among target readers. Therefore, translators need to strike a balance between creative treason and faithfulness to the original text, and make appropriate creative treason according to the specific situation of the original text and the needs of the target readers (Chen Fukang, 2000).

This paper only focuses on the translation of the concept of "sorrow" in Du Fu's poems, and there are still many aspects to be further studied in the translation of Du Fu's poems from the perspective of creative treason. For example, the translation of other emotions and images in Du Fu's poems, and the influence of different translation contexts on creative treason can be further explored. In addition, with the development of translation studies, new theories and methods can be applied to the study of the translation of Du Fu's poems to provide more comprehensive and in-depth research results (Gu Zhengkun, 2003).

## References

- [1] Berman A. *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*[M]. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992: 25-40.
- [2] Waley A. *Chinese Poems*[M]. London: Allen & Unwin, 1946: 78-91.
- [3] Watson B. *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: From Early Times to the Thirteenth Century*[M]. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984: 210-225.
- [4] Chen Fukang. *History of Translation Theory in China* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2000:180-195.
- [5] Gu Zhengkun. *Comparative Appreciation and Translation Theory of Chinese and Western Poetry* [M]. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2003: 90-105.
- [6] Xu Yuanchong. *The Art of Translation* [M]. Beijing: Wuzhou Communication Press, 2006:50-65.
- [7] Xu Yuanchong. *Chinese Classical Poetry in English Translation*[M]. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000: 120-140.