

# ***The Reproduction of Helen's Practical Rhetorical Value in English from the Perspective of Pragmatics in Bai Juyi's—"Song of Everlasting Regret"***

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**Abstract:** This paper takes the translations of *A Tale of Han's Helen* (hereinafter *Han's Helen*) by Yuanchong Xu and Guojin Hou, addressing the following questions: 1) Are the pragma-rhetoric values of various aspects of *Han's Helen* realized in Xu's and Hou's version? and which one excels? 2) How can the two English versions of *Han's Helen* benefit the English translation of classical Chinese poetry in terms of the realization of various pragma-rhetoric values, as well as its translation evaluation? The study employs qualitative analysis based on the Pragma-rhetoric Translatology Principle (PRTP) and quantitative comparison using the Pragma-markedness Equivalence Principle (PMEP). We find that the pragma-rhetoric values of *Han's Helen* are to a great extent realized in the two versions. Under scrutiny, though, Xu prefers literal and liberal translation, quite in line with the form and content of the original text. By contrast, Hou opts for recreation of the poetic form by various rhetorical devices, without sacrificing much of the ST's meaning, hence greater tension and vividness between the lines. As seen, a good translation of classical Chinese poetry requires not only accumulation of literary and rendering skills but also a high sensitivity to and equivalent realization of pragma-rhetorical acts.

## **1. Introduction**

The challenge of balancing form and meaning in poetry translation has long been a contentious issue, as prioritizing one often leads to the loss of the other. Poetry, with its unique form, is inherently difficult to reproduce in another semiotic system, leading some scholars to argue for the untranslatability of poetry (Liu, 2018: 33-40)<sup>[1]</sup>. However, others emphasize the importance of preserving poetic form in translation, particularly through rhetorical techniques.

Despite extensive research on poetry translation, few studies have focused on the role of rhetoric in translating poetry. Most existing research evaluates poetry translation from a pragmatic, literary, or cultural perspective, with limited attention to specific rhetorical devices.

## 2. Literature Review

Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), as the highest achievement in the development of China's poetry, is certainly worthy of translation and translation research, hence many researchers. Bai Juyi<sup>1</sup>, as a great realistic poet in the Tang Dynasty, wrote many well-known poems, among which *Han's Helen* is one of the most famous. Western scholars have published no shortage of articles and books on the translation of the Tang poetry, such as *The Poetry of the Early T'ang* of Steve Owen and *The Jade Mountain* of Witter Bynner. It is a pity, though, that we do not find a monograph on the study of translation of Bai Juyi's poetry. Numerous studies abroad noticed the translation of Bai Juyi's poems, focusing largely on the use of this or that translation principle with its techniques. Many poems translated as seen, not many of Bai Juyi's are rendered. Howard S. Levy, who rendered so many Tang poems, failed to translate half of Bai Juyi's poems. Little critique is found on the English translation of *Han's Helen*. As for domestic studies, there is also no research monograph on the English translation of Bai Juyi's poems in China, in spite of a lot of papers thereabout (Chen, 2016: 44)<sup>[2]</sup>.

*Han's Helen* is a famous narrative poem by Bai Juyi, which combines narration and lyricism, and tells the tragic love story between Emperor Xuanzong and his favourite mistress Yang Yuhuan in the An-Shi Rebellion. Researchers mainly studied the two English versions of *Han's Helen* by Yuanchong Xu (1921-2021) and Yang Hsien-yi (1915-2009) and Gladys Yang (1919-1999) (Yang & Wen, 2012: 126; Chen, 2016: 44; Liu & Wen, 2021: 116), and sometimes conducted research and comparative analysis on the English versions by Fletcher, Howard S. Levy and Giles. In sum, translation of *Han's Helen* has been discussed comparatively in terms of translation strategy, by way of a pragmatic, literary or cultural perspective (Yang & Wen, 2012: 126; Chen, 2016: 44; Liu & Wen, 2021: 123).

Nevertheless, there exist several notable gaps yet to be addressed. Firstly, more efforts should be made to strengthen the study of the translators of English translation of Bai's poems, because previous studies mainly focus on the translation and life experience of the translators, which is a little patchy. Thus, it is necessary to construct a systematic study on translators.

In addition, the study and research on the acceptability of the translation among the public should be strengthened, because the effectiveness of translation of ancient Chinese poems in(to) the Anglophones' world needs, leads to or really makes a good standard thereby to evaluate translation quality. Yang and Wen (2012: 132) even add that such an acceptability of English-speaking countries is more valuable.

Last but not least, the current research is almost confined to a few English versions, other versions untouched, resulting in repeatability and narrowness. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the collection and research of various versions of translation (Chen, 2016: 45; Yang & Wen, 2012: 132).

## 3. Theoretical Framework

The study employs the Pragma-markedness Equivalence Principle (PMEP) and the Pragma-rhetoric Translatology Principle (PRTP) as its theoretical framework.

Hou (2023: 144-151) proposes the Pragma-rhetoric Translatology Principle with eight maxims on the basis of pragmatranslatology and rhetoric translatology, exploring how to achieve pragma-rhetorical equivalence and link pragmatics, rhetoric and translation more closely<sup>[3]</sup>.

The eight maxims of the Pragma-rhetoric Translatology Principle are (Hou, 2023: 146):

(1) Consider whether the pragma-rhetorical acts of the original text is related to the context and pragmatic purpose of the original text, and whether it fully expresses the intention and main idea of the original text. Try to exert oneself in pragma-rhetorical equivalence.

(2) Consider whether the information contained in the pragma-rhetorical acts of the original text can satisfy the information gap, and try to exert oneself in pragma-rhetorical equivalence.

(3) Consider whether the information contained in the pragma-rhetorical acts of the original text is true and credible, and try to exert oneself in pragma-rhetorical equivalence.

(4) Consider whether the pragma-rhetorical acts of the original text is related to the contextual elements, especially the identity, relationship, generational differences, and social distance of the communicative parties as well as the purpose of the pragma-rhetorical. Try to exert oneself in pragma-rhetorical equivalence.

(5) Consider whether the pragma-rhetorical acts of the original text is clear and concise, and whether it is a good construction. Try to exert oneself in pragma-rhetorical equivalence.

(6) Consider whether the pragma-rhetorical acts of the original text have polite values as generosity, modesty, sympathy and praise, and whether it is appropriate on manner and degree. Try to exert oneself in pragma-rhetorical equivalence.

(7) Consider whether the pragma-rhetorical acts of the original text is civilized, optimistic, vivid and characteristic, and whether it is appropriate on manner and degree. Try to exert oneself in pragma-rhetorical equivalence.

(8) Consider if the pragmatic rhetorical acts in the original text are complete speech acts, and whether they comply with the relevant constitutive rules and behavioral norms in the cultural context to achieve pragmatic rhetorical equivalence.

## 4. Comparison of Two Versions of Han's Helen

### 4.1 Poetic Characteristics of "Han's Helen"

Bai Juyi's *A Han's Helen*, written in 806 AD, is narrative in lyric. Besides, it is the love tragedy between Emperor Xuanzong (reigned 725-768 AD) of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) and his favourite mistress Yang Yuhuan (719-756 AD) in the An-Shi Rebellion<sup>2</sup>. The original intention of Bai Juyi was to criticize the emperor for his lewdness and addiction to beauties. However, the poet, moved by his own writing perhaps, somehow turned to praising the undying love between Yang and the emperor and expressed regret for their tragic ending.

Therefore, *Han's Helen* not only contains mild criticism of the emperor, but orients more to people's pursuit of beauty and kindness as well as the recognition of the common emotions and desires. This love or historical elegy and the folk legend *Butterfly Lovers*, a love story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, together make the eastern *Romeo and Juliet*.

The poem comprises 120 lines, each with seven Chinese characters, and employs various rhetorical devices, including metaphors and metonymies.

### 4.2 Translation Gains and Losses of Pragma-Markedness Values of Rhetorical devices

#### 4.2.1 Metaphors

*Essentials of Rhetoric* of Wangdao Chen (1997: 73) says that metaphor can compare the signified with other things that are similar without figurative words<sup>[4]</sup>. However, if the metaphor has been standardized or has been so well established in popular use, it is dead metaphor (Nesfield, 1974; Nilsen & Nilsen, 1987), which is low in pragma-rhetorical value. Thus, the metaphors we analyzed are new ones with high pragma-rhetorical values<sup>[5]</sup>.

Example 1:

Original Text:

cloud hairs flower face gold step shake  
lotus tent warm spend spring night.

Xu's Version:

Flowerlike face and cloudlike hair, golden headdress,  
In lotus-flower curtain she spent the night blessed.

Hou's Version:

Her hair turns into a flower  
In full beautiful bloom, thereupon perches  
A bird of a hairpin, all gold. No doubt  
A happy couple in the cottonrose  
Hibiscus net of the sweetest cozy  
Warmth, in the night time.

Analysis:

The phrase cloud hair refers to the hair that is as black as a dark cloud, and flower face refers to a beautiful appearance like a flower. Flowers in Chinese culture are frequently used to describe beautiful appearances like flower face, but more often, metaphorically, they can be leveraged to describe gesture like flower branch stretch, according to which arms and legs are also a part of flower. They are metaphors so the ST is strongly marked [M<sup>++</sup>].

In Xu's version, although the two none phrases, *flowerlike face* and *cloudlike hair*, have the comparative meaning due to the suffix *-like*, they fail to keep the form, thus unmarked [U] and only satisfying maxim 1 (intention and main ideas)<sup>[6]</sup>.

As for Hou's version, *Her hair turns into a flower /In full beautiful bloom* uses metaphor, which does not describe hair as fully as the ST, but it compares blooming flowers together to hair and beauty. However, the use of metaphor keeps the form and can compensate for the loss of meaning to some degree, so in Hou's version *yún b n* is medium marked [M<sup>+</sup>], while flower face is strongly marked [M<sup>++</sup>]. Besides, *nyght* in Hou's version is in the form of Old English, and it is "night" in nowadays<sup>[7]</sup>. Thus, Hou follows both maxim 7 (vivid and interesting) and maxim 1 (intention and main ideas).

Example 2:

Original Text:

jade face lonely tears dry,  
pear flower one spring with rain.

Xu's Version:

Her jade-white face crisscrossed with tears in lonely world  
Like a spray of pear blossoms in spring rain impearled.

Hou's Version:

Her countenance, though white as porcelain,  
And pretty as before, indicates a story  
Of sad pains, a pear flower rain-dripping.

Analysis:

pear flower one spring with rain refers to the pear flower that is covered with raindrops, from

which the Chinese idiom pear flower with rain gradually comes. It is originally used to describe the posture of Yang when she was crying, and later it is used to describe the delicate beauty of a woman. Thus, the ST is strongly marked [M<sup>++</sup>].

Xu's version literally translates it through simile, vividly depicting the expression of Yang Yuhuan. From tears to raindrops to pearls, the simile of the translation is gradually advanced, and thus Yang Yuhuan, surprised and sad, is fully presented in front of the reader. However, Hou's version not only uses a reversion, *a pear flower rain-dripping*, but also adds *of sad pains* in order to represent the implied meaning to the target readers<sup>[8]</sup>. Therefore, both methods are strongly marked [M<sup>++</sup>]. Therefore, both Xu and Hou observe maxim 1 (intention and main ideas), maxim 2 (information gap) and maxim 7 (vivid and interesting).

#### 4.2.2 Metonymies

Example 3:

Original Text:

spring cold award bath Huaqing pool,  
warm spring water smooth wash coagulated fat.

Xu's Version:

She bathed in glassy water of warm-fountain pool,  
Which laved and smoothed her creamy skin when spring was cool.

Hou's Version:

In spring's/Chilly dayes, she is to be by the king's  
Side, in the Huaqing Hot Spring for a favour'd  
Bath, which her snow skin by right deserves.

Analysis:

coagulated fat in the ST is a metonymy to the white and delicate skin of Yang Yuhuan. In Chinese, people always use it to describe women's smooth skin, e.g., skin like coagulated fat, so it is strongly marked [M<sup>++</sup>]. Xu's version renders it as *creamy skin*, a metonymy comparing the skin to cream. Since cream and skin share many similarities, Xu's translation is strongly marked [M<sup>++</sup>]. The *snow skin* in Hou's version leverages alliteration and metonymy. Both versions fully show the implied meaning and keep the form at the same time, thus strongly marked [M<sup>++</sup>]. Thus, both versions are strongly marked and strictly follows maxim 1 (intention and main ideas), maxim 2 (information gap) and maxim 7 (vivid and interesting)<sup>[9]</sup>.

Example 4:

Original Text:

at sky wish be close wing bird,  
at earth wish be link vein branch.

Xu's Version:

"On high, we'd be two lovebirds flying wing to wing;  
On earth, two trees with branches twined from spring to spring."

Hou's Version:

to be Siamese-twin birds

In heaven that co-fly so high, otherwise  
To be Siamese-twin twigs of the same  
Tree's bough on the earth for the same sunne  
And dew.

Analysis:

In terms of rhetoric, link vein branch means two trees with trunks hugging each other. Likewise, close wing bird refers to the birds that can fly only with a partner because they each have but one wing. The two metonymies are used for the deep love and affectionate relationship between a couple who love so not to depart in this life, hence not difficult for readers to guess from the images, hence medium marked [M<sup>+</sup>] as the ST.

In Xu's version, *two lovebirds flying wing to wing* and *two trees with branches twined from spring to spring* not only shows the deep love between the couple, but also uses repetition to maintain the form. The added part *spring to spring* corresponds to the form of *wing to wing*, which enhances the beauty of sound.

In Hou's version, the *Siamese-twin* is used as an anthropomorphic metaphor to describe the *birds* and *twigs*, which not only keeps the meaning and form, but also makes it easier for target readers to understand. Therefore, both of them are medium marked [M<sup>+</sup>], and observe maxim 1 (intention and main ideas), maxim 2 (information gap) and maxim 7 (vivid and interesting).

Example 5:

Original Text:

Zhaoyang palace in love end,  
Penglai palace in sun moon long.

Xu's Version:

Love and happiness long ended within palace walls;  
Days and months appeared long in the fairyland halls.

Hou's Version:

Donkey's years past since the rosy affairs  
Of the Zhaoyang Palace, o'er the time lag  
Longer time to come for heavenly residence.

Analysis:

Zhaoyang Palace is the bedroom of Zhao Feiyan, the concubine of the Emperor Cheng of Han, so it is a metonymy for the palace where Yang used to live. Similarly, Penglai Palace is a legendary fairy mountain surrounded by the sea, also a metonymy for the current residence of Yang. Since they refer to places of origin substituting each other, they are medium marked [M<sup>+</sup>] for it is reasonable for readers to know that the palaces usually lie in the capital. As for translation, *palace walls* and *fairyland halls* in Xu's version represent the implied meaning without a specific name, hence unmarked [U]. However, Hou literally translates *Zhaoyang Palace* and keeps the form, though he renders Penglai Palace as *heavenly residence*, the same way of Xu. Thus, *Zhāoyáng Diàn* in Hou's version is medium marked [M<sup>+</sup>], while Penglai Palace is unmarked [U].

## 5. Conclusion

Bai Juyi is the greatest realistic poet in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), and his *A Tale of Han's*

*Helen*, a long narrative poem, is featured by the pragma-rhetorical value. Based on PMEP and PRTP, this paper calculates the NEVs of the translations of Xu and Hou, mainly by analysing the realization of such rhetorical devices as metaphor and metonymy, and then does a quantitative comparison.

As for the findings, Xu prefers literal and liberal translation, quite in line with the form and content of the original text. By contrast, Hou opts for recreation of the poetic form by various rhetorical devices, without sacrificing much of the ST's meaning, hence greater tension and vividness between the lines.

This study analyzes the different ways of Xu and Hou to realize the rhetorical values of *Han's Helen* and explores their style from a new perspective, which strengthens the variety of research object and serves as an example of translation of classical Chinese poetry. However, the limitations of this thesis mainly lie in the subjectivity caused by the unavoidable vagueness and the varied markedness cognition and sensitivity to pragma-rhetorical acts. Besides, the persuasiveness and representativeness remain to be improved because the negative rhetoric is not fully analysed, including diction, sentence structure and style.

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## Notes

1) All names of well-known Chinese figures in history or folk tales follow the traditional Chinese name-writing order (family name before given name).

2) An-Shi Rebellion (755-763 AD), launched by generals An Lushan and Shi Simin, is a civil war for domination with the Tang Dynasty and is a turning point for the decline of the Tang Dynasty. Besides, the event gets its name from An Lushan and Shi Simin who are the main initiators of the war.

3) The Book of Songs contains a saying, powerful powerful empire Zhou, Bao Si destroy it, satirizing the true story of how King You of Zhou (reigned 795-771 BC) fell addicted to Bao Si, his favorite concubine, bringing about his downfall. To please Bao Si, King You lit the beacon tower, causing his soldiers to think that enemy troops were invading. Finally, King You lost the support and trust of the people and ended his reign.

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