

Exploring the Equivalence of Chinese and English Poetry Translations from the Perspective of Cultural Imagery

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Abstract: Poetry, as the highest form of language art, carries a profound national cultural heritage and unique aesthetic imagery. Cultural imagery is the soul of poetry, a condensed expression of national history, philosophical concepts, lifestyle, and emotional experiences. Chinese and English poetry belong to two major cultural systems, and their mechanisms of generating cultural imagery, expression methods, and acceptance contexts have fundamental differences, which pose significant challenges to poetry translation. The theory of equivalent translation aims to achieve similar or equivalent effects in the minds of readers between the translation and the original text. However, when dealing with images that contain unique cultural connotations, absolute equivalence is often difficult to achieve. This paper approaches the issue from the perspective of cultural imagery, deeply exploring the limits of achieving equivalence in Chinese and English poetry translations, translation strategies, and philosophical connotations.

Keywords: Cultural imagery; Poetry translation; Equivalence; Chinese-English translation; Translation strategies; Dynamic equivalence; Aesthetic reproduction; Cultural negotiation

Online publication: January 26, 2026

1. Introduction

Poetry, hailed as the pearl on the crown of literature, is the most refined and rhythmic expression of human emotions. It is not merely the weaving of language, but also the deep encoding of culture. Among the most concise and representative cultural carriers is the “image.” An image is the product of the fusion of subjective emotions and objective objects, and it is an artistic unit through which poets convey complex emotions and philosophical thoughts with specific and perceptible images. Cultural images go further, deeply rooted in the historical traditions, myths, philosophical concepts, geographical environment, and lifestyle of a specific ethnic group, becoming symbolic symbols of the collective unconscious of that culture.

2. The theoretical definition of cultural images and their manifestations in Chinese and English poetry

2.1. The theoretical definition of cultural images

Cultural images are not simple symbols that exist independently, but are the result of long-term accumulation of a national culture. From the perspective of semiotics, cultural images are a special combination of the signifier and the signified, where the signifier is the specific object, and the signified is the unique meaning assigned by the national culture to it. In Chinese and English cultures, due to different historical development trajectories, religious beliefs, values, etc., the same object may carry completely different cultural images. For example, in Chinese culture, “dragon” is a symbol of auspiciousness, authority, and power, and the emperor is called “the true dragon emperor”; while in Western culture, “dragon” represents evil and terror, and is an object that needs to be conquered by heroes. This difference stems from different cultural backgrounds and cognitive patterns, reflecting the different understanding and interpretation of the world by the two cultures ^[1].

2.2. The manifestation of cultural images in Chinese and English poetry

In Chinese and English poetry, cultural images are like brilliant stars, illuminating the emotional and ideological world of the poetry. In Chinese classical poetry, the image of “moon” frequently appears, often embodying the homesickness and reunion wishes of the poet. For example, in Li Bai’s “Raise your head to look at the bright moon, lower your head to think of my hometown,” the moon has become the emotional bond for the traveler to miss his hometown. In English poetry, “rose” (rose) is a symbol of love and beauty, like Burns’ “O my love is like a red, red rose,” using the rose to praise the beauty of the beloved and the passion of love. Moreover, cultural images in Chinese and English poetry are also reflected in the depiction of natural landscapes. Chinese poetry often favors landscape images, such as “I cannot look at the green mountains for long, the flowing water has endless charm,” where mountains are not only the beauty of nature but also embody Taoist thoughts of seclusion and Confucian virtues of a gentleman; while English poetry often appears with images such as the sea and the wilderness, such as Byron’s depiction of the sea, symbolizing freedom, power, and mystery.

2.3. The roots of the differences in cultural images in Chinese and English poetry

The differences in cultural images in Chinese and English poetry have profound roots. From the perspective of historical development, China has a long agricultural civilization, where people have long interacted with the land and have a deep dependence and reverence for nature, which makes the cultural images in poetry often related to nature and rural life. While England has experienced a long maritime era and industrial revolution, the elements of the sea and machines occupy an important position in its culture, reflected in poetry as the frequent appearance of related cultural images. Religious beliefs are also an important factor causing the differences. China is influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, and the cultural images in poetry contain philosophical concepts such as harmony, moderation, and emptiness; while England mainly believes in Christianity, the cultural images in poetry often have a religious color and the shadow of religious doctrines, such as “lamb” (lamb) in Christian culture symbolizing purity and redemption. The different geographical environments also have an impact on cultural images. China has a vast territory and magnificent mountains and rivers, giving poets more opportunities to encounter rich natural landscapes; while England is an island country with a long coastline, and the sea has a profound influence on its culture and poetry creation ^[2].

3. The applicability and dilemmas of equivalent translation theory in the translation of poetic images

3.1. The applicability of the equivalent translation theory in the translation of poetic imagery

The equivalent translation theory has certain applicability in the translation of poetic imagery. When the imagery in a poem has similar connotations and associations in two cultures, applying the equivalent translation theory can achieve a relatively

accurate conveyance. For example, in Chinese and English cultures, there is an imagery of “rose” symbolizing love. When translating such poetic imagery, directly using equivalent words for translation can enable readers to quickly understand the original emotions and meanings in the target language, making the translation equivalent in terms of emotions and cultural connotations. Moreover, for some natural imagery with universal significance, such as “sun” symbolizing light and hope, in the translation of Chinese and English poetry, the equivalent translation theory can be used to achieve a more fluent expression, allowing readers in different cultural contexts to experience similar artistic conceptions.

3.2. The challenges faced by the equivalent translation theory in the translation of poetic imagery

However, this theory also faces many challenges in the translation of poetic imagery. There are significant differences between Chinese and English cultures, and much of the poetic imagery has unique cultural connotations. It is difficult to find a completely equivalent expression in another culture. For example, in Chinese poetry, “wild geese” often convey the homesickness of wanderers and the meaning of letter delivery. However, in British culture, there is no corresponding imagery. If the equivalent translation theory is forcibly applied, it may lead to the inability of the translation to accurately convey the cultural meaning and emotions of the original text. In addition, the language of poetry has a high degree of artistry and symbolism. The meanings of some imagery are expressed through the overall context and rhetorical devices of the poem. The equivalent translation theory is difficult to deal with such complex language phenomena, and it is likely to make the translation lose the charm and beauty of the original text ^[3].

3.3. Strategies for solving the challenges of the equivalent translation theory in the translation of poetic imagery

To solve the challenges of the equivalent translation theory in the translation of poetic imagery, various strategies can be adopted. On one hand, annotations can be used to explain some imagery with unique cultural connotations, helping readers understand their cultural significance. On the other hand, the method of idiom translation can be employed, without striving for complete equivalence of words, to convey the core meaning and emotions of the imagery. At the same time, the translator can combine the overall style and context of the poem, flexibly applying various translation techniques, so that the translation can retain the cultural characteristics of the original text while also conforming to the expression habits of the target language, thereby to some extent compensating for the shortcomings of the equivalent translation theory.

4. Strategies for the translation of cultural imagery and the realization of equivalent dimensions

4.1. Imagery reconstruction

When translating cultural imagery in poetry, if the source language imagery lacks a corresponding expression or is difficult to directly convey its connotations in the target language culture, the strategy of imagery reconstruction can be adopted. That is, based on the characteristics of the target language culture and the readers’ acceptance ability, the source language imagery can be transformed into a new imagery with similar cultural significance and emotional resonance in the target language. For example, in Chinese poetry, “wild geese” often symbolize the homesickness of wanderers and the meaning of letter delivery, while in Western culture, there is no completely corresponding imagery. At this time, the translator can reconfigure “wild geese” as “mail pigeons” and so on, so that the target language readers can better understand the emotions expressed in the poem. At the same time, when reconstructing the imagery, one should not deviate too much from the core meaning of the original imagery and ensure that the new imagery can accurately convey the cultural value and emotional color of the original imagery.

4.2. Context integration

The meaning of cultural imagery is often closely related to its context. In the translation process, attention should be paid

to the integration of context. The translator needs to deeply understand the context of the poem, the creation background, and the cultural context, and translate the cultural imagery in combination with the target language context. For instance, the imagery in some poems has specific historical and cultural backgrounds. When translating, one should take into account the readers' understanding of this background knowledge. If direct translation might confuse the readers, then supplementary relevant background information can be provided, or the expression of the imagery can be adjusted to be more in line with the context of the target language. Moreover, attention should be paid to the language style and rhythm characteristics of the poem. While integrating the context, efforts should be made to retain the style and rhythm of the original text as much as possible to maximize the equivalence in multiple dimensions ^[4].

4.3. Dynamic equivalence

Dynamic equivalence emphasizes that the effect produced in the reader's mind by the translation should be as consistent as possible with the effect produced in the source language readers' minds by the original text. In the translation of cultural imagery, the dynamic equivalence strategy requires the translator not only to pay attention to the literal meaning of the imagery but also to its function in the poem and the emotional response it evokes. For some imagery with strong emotional color or cultural symbolic meaning, the translator can adopt flexible translation methods to enable the target language readers to experience the charm and emotional power of the poem as the source language readers do. For example, when translating imagery with religious cultural connotations, the translator should consider the religious beliefs and values in the target language culture and express them in an appropriate way to ensure that the translation can achieve equivalence in both emotional and cultural aspects with the original text. At the same time, the dynamic equivalence strategy also requires the translator to dynamically adjust the translation strategies according to different translation purposes and target language readers, to achieve the best translation effect.

5. Towards a dialectical view of poetry translation equivalence

5.1. Integration of multiple strategies

In the practice of poetry translation, translators should avoid mechanically relying on a single translation method and should integrate the strategies of imagery reconstruction, context integration, and dynamic equivalence organically to form a flexible and systematic translation strategy system. Due to the significant differences in cultural background, emotional tone, aesthetic style, and language expression methods among different poetry works, translators need to selectively and comprehensively apply multiple translation strategies based on the specific characteristics of the text. For example, when translating a classical poem with profound historical and cultural connotations, not only the imagery reconstruction strategy is needed to accurately restore the cultural imagery and symbolic meaning of the original poem in the target language, but also the dynamic equivalence strategy should be combined to ensure that the translation is highly consistent with the original text in terms of emotional transmission and cultural resonance, and at the same time, the context integration strategy can be used to appropriately integrate the historical background and cultural environment of the original poem into the expression of the translation, to avoid the loss or distortion of cultural information. Only through this multi-level and multi-angle strategy integration can the equivalence in multiple dimensions of poetry translation, such as language, culture, aesthetics, and emotion, be achieved to the fullest extent, thus being both faithful to the artistic value of the original work and enabling the translation to have vitality in the new language and cultural environment ^[5].

5.2. Balance of form and content

Poetry is renowned for its unique artistic charm, including its exquisite rhythm, distinct rhythm, and harmonious phonological structure. These elements together constitute the irreplaceable artistic beauty of poetry. At the same time, poetry also contains profound and rich content, such as emotional expression, ideological connotation, and cultural

implications, which are the soul of poetry. In the process of pursuing translation equivalence, translators must carefully balance the relationship between form and content to ensure that the translation is both faithful to the original work and can naturally and smoothly convey the charm of the original work in the target language. On the one hand, translators cannot mechanically preserve the form features of the original text, such as imitating the rhythm or rhyme of the original poem, at the expense of the accuracy, completeness, and readability of the content; otherwise, it may result in a stiff and difficult-to-understand translation, losing its original appeal. On the other hand, translators cannot merely focus on conveying the content information and completely ignore the beauty of the form in poetry. Because form and content in poetry are a mutually reinforcing and inseparable whole. Ignoring the form may cause the translation to lose the unique artistic and aesthetic value of the poem. Therefore, the ideal translation strategy is to ensure the accurate and complete transmission of the content while attempting to reproduce or ingeniously transform the form features of the original text in the translation. For example, when translating rhymed poetry, the translator can flexibly explore and choose appropriate and natural rhymes in the target language. By adjusting the sentence structure or selecting similar phonetic effects, the translation not only closely aligns in meaning with the original text but also forms an echo in the rhythm of sound with the original, thereby maximizing the overall beauty of the original poem^[6].

5.3. Consideration of cultural dynamics

Culture, as an important part of human society, is always in a process of continuous evolution and dynamic change. The cultural images contained in poetry will also present different meanings and interpretations as the times progress and society undergoes transformation. In this complex and meticulous task of poetry translation, translators must deeply understand the dynamic nature of culture. They should not only be familiar with the current state and characteristics of the source language and target language cultures, but also be keenly aware of the direction and trend of cultural development. Especially for those cultural images with distinct marks of the times, translators need to make precise and appropriate conversions and expressions by combining the current social background and cultural environment. At the same time, in the context of globalization, the exchanges and interactions between different cultures are increasingly frequent and in-depth, and the intensity of cultural infiltration and influence is constantly increasing. In this trend, translators can appropriately incorporate some emerging cultural elements into the translation process, making the translation more modern and enhancing its cultural inclusiveness and diversity, promoting cross-cultural understanding and resonance.

6. Conclusion

From a unique perspective of cultural imagery, we can deeply explore the issue of equivalence in Chinese and English poetry translation. This enables us to more clearly understand that poetry translation is not merely a simple language conversion process; rather, it is an arduous aesthetic journey and artistic re-creation that spans a vast gap of cultural differences and is fraught with challenges. Cultural imagery, as the core code and essence of a poem's national characteristics, carries the profound heritage and unique aesthetics of a specific culture. Its translation cannot possibly aim for the precise literal equivalence conversion like a mathematical formula. The equivalence theory proposed by the renowned translation theorist Eugene Nida does indeed provide us with an important theoretical perspective oriented towards "reader response" and "effect equivalence," which holds pioneering significance. However, we must recognize that the applicability and limitations of this theory when applied to poetry, a specific literary genre, need to be re-examined, critically analyzed, and appropriately revised and expanded.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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