

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Translating Seven Types of Ambiguity in Classical Chinese Poetry

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Abstract:

This article aims to investigate the English translation of seven types of ambiguity in classical Chinese poetry (CCP), namely, grammatical ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, rhetorical ambiguity, thematic ambiguity, logical ambiguity, intertextual ambiguity and stylistic ambiguity. By analyzing typical examples and their corresponding translations, it is found that: (1) ambiguity in CCP often arises from the peculiarities of Chinese language and culture and it contributes to the poetic effect of the original poem; (2) explicitation is the most frequently used technique to deal with ambiguity due to linguistic, poetic or cultural differences; (3) paratextual information in the form of footnotes or the translator's commentary and so on is deemed necessary in translating some types of ambiguity like thematic ambiguity and intertextual ambiguity; (4) evaluation of the translation of ambiguity in CCP should be dialectical and flexible, using the poetic effect of the translated poem as a major yardstick. Since ambiguity is a typical feature of CCP, it allows open interpretation and free imagination; therefore, how to strike a balance between reproducing the original ambiguity and explicating it is still a big challenge for translators.

Keywords: classical Chinese poetry; ambiguity; translation; explicitation; poetic effect

1. Introduction

Classical Chinese poetry (hereafter CCP for short), spanning as long as about 3000 years, is the gems of Chinese literature. According to Peng Fasheng (2017), 1166 classical Chinese poets have 14634 poems translated into 27976 English versions up until the year 2000. This bibliographical data alone shows, to a large degree, the lasting appeal and attraction of CCP to translators past and present. However, translating CCP still poses many challenges and how to deal with ambiguity inherent in CCP is one of those big challenges. For example, when Xu Yuanchong (1992:289-290) translates “白头宫女在，闲坐说玄宗” in Yuan Zhen's *At an Old Palace* (《行宫》), he makes a comment regarding the singular or plural form of “宫女” as follows: “...how many dames were there: one, two or some? Since the chambermaid could not speak to herself all alone, I rule out the possibility of ‘one’ and think ‘some’ better than ‘a couple’”. So he translates “白头宫女” into “Some white-haired chambermaids” while Herbert A. Giles and Soame Jenyns render it respectively into “One white-haired dame” and “A white-



haired palace woman”¹. So is there really one “宫女” or more? No one could say for definite. Here lies a typical kind of grammatical ambiguity in translating CCP because Chinese is not an inflective language and Chinese nouns themselves do not have any singular or plural forms. Thus, it is up to the translator or reader to decide which kind of form is more suitable in a specific context, at least in his or her own opinion.

Ambiguity is pervasive in a natural language, especially in poetry. William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* brings this term into prominence in and provides clear perspectives for poetry criticism. According to Empson (1949:5-6), “‘Ambiguity’ itself can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings.” He further classifies ambiguity into seven types and elaborates on every type with specific examples. However, his classification is rather general without a cover term for each specific kind of ambiguity. For example, Empson (1949:102) says, “An ambiguity of the third type, considered as a verb matter, occurs when two ideas, which are connected only by being both relevant in the context, can be given in one word simultaneously.” His research, full of insights, reminds me of the omnipresent ambiguity inherent in CCP translation, which is a daunting challenge for translators and deserves a comprehensive investigation.

As to the translation of ambiguity in CCP, there has already been some research done in China, such as Zhu Hui (1991), Gu Xuman and Ouyang Junling (1992), Cao Shanke and Huang Feiyan (2006), and Chen Jie (2017). These studies touch upon several kinds of ambiguity in CCP and their English translations, such as grammatical ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, and metaphorical ambiguity, which are enlightening but far from comprehensive. This article intends to summarize, according to my own observation, seven typical kinds of ambiguity in CCP (overlapping but different from Empson’s classification in view of unique features of Chinese language and culture) and analyze the pros and cons of the translator’s choices in dealing with ambiguity, especially their influence on the poetic effect of the translated poem. It is hoped that this study may spark more interest and investigation on this issue in the future.

2. Grammatical Ambiguity

Since Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family while English belongs to the Indo-European family, there are huge differences between them. When we translate Chinese into English, these differences often come into prominence, especially regarding inflection, such as tense and aspect, number, and personal pronouns. According to my observation and understanding, grammatical ambiguity in CCP mainly refers to an ambiguity that arises from a lack of inflection in Chinese, which is usually explicated differently by different translators, resulting in different poetic effects and esthetic appeal.

Number of nouns give rise to grammatical ambiguity. In Zhang Ji’s *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night* (《枫桥夜泊》), there is a line “月落乌啼霜满天”. Here “乌” refers to crow, but from the context it cannot be decided whether there is one crow or more. For instance, Witter Bynner translates it into

¹ In Xu, Yuanhong. (1992). *On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme: From the Book of Poetry to The Romance of the Western Bower*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 289-290.



“a crow” and Xu Yuanchong’s version is “crows”². Since there are no inflectional markers as to the number of nouns in Chinese, the translator has to make a choice here, be it in singular or plural form. Although both are grammatically acceptable, the poetic effect is quite different. A crow in the frosty sky can be considered a symbol of the forlorn author himself, and its very singleness intensifies the desolate quietness of the scene, which reflects the author’s inner bleakness when he wrote the poem. On the contrary, the plural form (crows) is unlikely to produce such an effect. A similar example appears in a line in Jia Dao’s *Seeking the Hermit in Vain* (《寻隐者不遇》), namely, “松下问童子”. As to “童子” (boy), Louise S. Hammound translates it into “they” and Xu Yuanchong renders it into “your lad”³. This poem depicts a hermit as the title suggests, and one lad could make a better image of a true hermit than two or more. So Hammound’s plural form of the noun (they) is not a good choice. Of course, there are also cases when nouns in singular or plural form are both poetically acceptable, as is “吴姬” (a girl or girls from Wu) in the line “吴姬压酒劝客尝” in Li Bai’s *Parting at a Tavern in Jinling* (《金陵酒肆留别》). Thus, a translator should be sensitive to the number of nouns in translating CCP and make an informed decision according to the context when the poetic effect is concerned.

Personal pronouns are also indeterminate in CCP because they are, more often than not, absent in the text as is a habit in Chinese. This causes another kind of grammatical ambiguity, especially when it is not easy to determine to whom the author refers. In the couplet “晓镜但愁云鬓改，夜吟应觉月光寒” written by Li Shangyin in his poem *Untitled* (《无题》), four verbs are contained in these two lines, namely, “镜”, “愁”, “吟” and “觉”, but there is no telling who the real subject is. David Young’s corresponding translation is “mornings she looks in the mirror / to see if her hair has changed / evenings she chants sad poems / as the bright moon grows colder” while Xu Yuanchong translates it into “At dawn I’m grieved to think your mirrored hair turns grey; / At night you would feel cold while I croon by moonlight”⁴. Although it is improper to say who is right and who is wrong, undoubtedly, Xu’s version intensifies the love between the poet and his beloved by choosing the subjects alternatively. He explains in the commentary of this poem as follows: “Looking into the mirror in the morning, the poet does not see his own image but that of his beloved, and he does not worry about the grey hair on his head but on hers. Crooning verse at night, he does not feel the chill of moonlight, but it is she who does.” (Xu, 1992:313) This seems to enhance the poetic effect by creating a mysteriously intriguing mood. Chen Weiyong (2006) holds that subject-adding in the translation of CCP could do harm to the artistic conception (意境) or esthetic appeal of the original. This argument is, to a certain degree, reasonable, but it is not always true. After all, languages are different, and explicating personal pronouns is only a way to abide by the norms of the target language, which is not necessarily inferior in poetic effect.

² In Pan, Wenguo. (1994). Singular or plural?—24 categories of English translation of Tang Poetry (单数乎? 复数乎? —唐诗英译二十四品之一). In Liu, Zhongde (ed.). *English-Chinese Comparisons and Translation I* (英汉语比较与翻译 1). Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, p. 97.

³ In Xu, Yuanchong. (1992). *On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme: From the Book of Poetry to The Romance of the Western Bower*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 291.

⁴ In Xu, Yuanchong. (1992). *On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme: From the Book of Poetry to The Romance of the Western Bower*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 312-313.



Since Chinese has no inflectional markers for tense and aspect, ambiguity also occurs when translating CCP regarding this. For example, whether “巴山夜雨涨秋池” in Li Shangyin’s *A Note on a Rainy Night to One in the North* (《夜雨寄北》) depicts a present scene or a past one, no one knows exactly. Consequently, Giles translates it into “How the rain filled the pools on that night when we met!” while Xu Yuanchong’s version is “The pools in Western Hills with autumn rain overflow.” One uses past tense, depicting a scene cherished in their shared memories, and the other present tense, showing his beloved a scene which is before the author’s eyes when he was writing the poem. Which is poetically better in the context? It is up to the reader to decide. In Liu Zongyuan’s *A River Covered with Snow* (《江雪》), there is a line like this “孤舟蓑笠翁，独钓寒江雪”. Xu Yuanchong translates it into “A straw-cloak’d man afloat, behold! / Is fishing snow on river cold.”⁵ Here it seems that the present progressive form is better than the simple present tense because the former could present more easily a picture of the fisherman which is the very image of the author. All in all, grammatical ambiguity in CCP mainly arises from the lack of inflection in Chinese and different ways of translating it may result in different poetic effects.

3. Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity occurs when Chinese characters have multiple meanings, especially when their modern usage is quite different from their meanings in ancient times. We tend to understand the meaning of a Chinese character according to its modern usage, and the diachronic differences are sometimes overlooked. For instance, what does “床” refer to in the first line of Li Bai’s famous poem *Night Thoughts* (《静夜思》) “床前明月光”? There are many studies in China and the interpretations vary, from an ordinary sleeping bed, a Hun bed that could be folded, a jinglan (井栏, the part of wooden frame that is above a well in ancient China), the frame of a kind of windlass to fetch water in the well, to jingchuang (井床, the platform for fetching water around the well) (Jiang, 2019). Among these interpretations, a translator has to decide which one to use. Most translators simply use “bed” (like Xu Yuanchong, Giles, Lowell, and Bynner) but it is not without doubt both semantically and poetically according to some scholars’ investigation regarding the real meaning of “床”. In Du Fu’s poem entitled *An Account of My Concerns* (《述怀》), the last two lines are “沉思欢会处，恐作穷独叟”. Here “处” refers to a specific time in its ancient usage instead of a place as commonly understood nowadays. Stephen Owen’s corresponding translation is “I yearn deeply for that moment of joyous reunion / and fear becoming a poor and solitary old man”⁶. His understanding of “处” (that moment) is right, but many others most probably do not know this meaning which is rarely used today. For instance, “处” in “凭栏处，潇潇雨歇” in Yue Fei’s *The River All Red* (《满江红》) also refers to the time when the author leans on the railings, but Xu Yuanchong translates it into “I lean on railings where / I see the drizzling

⁵ In Xu, Yuanchong. (1992). *On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme: From the Book of Poetry to The Romance of the Western Bower*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 287.

⁶ In Stephen, Owen. (2016). *The Poetry of Du Fu* (vol. 1). Boston/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Inc., p. 299.



rain has ceased”⁷. It is obvious that Xu misreads it for place (railings where...) though it does little damage to the poetic effect of the translated poem.

Another typical example is “青”, which abounds in CCP when it refers to color. However, the kind of color it refers to depends on the specific context and can be hard to discern sometimes. For example, in Li Bai’s *Hard Is the Road to Shu* (《蜀道难》), there is a line “蜀道之难, 难于上青天” and here “青天” means the blue sky; in Li Bai’s *Invitation to Wine* (《将进酒》), a line goes like this “朝如青丝暮成雪”, and here “青丝” means one’s black hair. Usually, it is easy to tell which color “青” refers to according to its collocation or context. But what about “青衫” in “江州司马青衫湿”, a line from Bai Juyi’s *Song of a Pipa Player* (《琵琶行》)? It refers to a kind of colored robe or gown worn by officials in the Tang dynasty (AD 618-901). But what color was it? Xu Yuanchong and Bynner translate it respectively into “blue-robed”⁸ and “blue sleeve” while L. Cranmer-Byng and Lin Yutang’s versions are respectively “darkened robe”⁹ and “black gown”¹⁰. Wang Qi (2004) argues that “青衫” in this poem means a kind of “light green” robe and it sounds quite reasonable according to relevant historical records. This tells us when translating Chinese characters with lexical ambiguity, a translator should think twice, and it is necessary to refer to relevant research or dictionaries if there are debates about their meanings. Only by doing so could an informed decision be made in translation.

4. Rhetorical Ambiguity

Rhetorical ambiguity is produced by certain rhetorical devices or figures of speech, such as metaphor, pun, hyperbole, synaesthesia, and euphemism. This type of ambiguity is closely related to the artistic conception of a poem and usually turns out to be a hot potato in translation. Since it is nearly omnipresent in CCP, here only a few typical rhetorical devices are analyzed.

Puns belong to the category of rhetorical ambiguity and they are also included in William Empson’s third type (Empson, 1949:102). A pun refers to one thing on the surface and implies another which is usually more important through the same pronunciation or the same character with two or more meanings. The latter can also be classified into lexical ambiguity since it is related to Chinese characters. For example, in one of the *Songs of Ziyue* (《子夜歌》), there is a couplet “理丝入残机, 何悟不成匹”. Here “匹” is a pun produced by the same character with two meanings because it can mean “a piece of cloth” and “a couple” at the same time. “丝” (silk) is also a pun with the same pronunciation as “思” (miss or long for), which the author intends to express according to the context. Wang Rongpei’s translation is “With my love woven into cloth, / Why should you look for crisscross!”¹¹ He tries to

⁷ In Xu, Yuanchong. (1992). *On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme: From the Book of Poetry to The Romance of the Western Bower*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 412.

⁸ In Xu, Yuanchong. (1992). *On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme: From the Book of Poetry to The Romance of the Western Bower*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 285.

⁹ Lv, Shuxiang (ed.). (2002). *A Comparative Study on English Translation of Old Gems* (《中诗英译比录》). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 268, 273.

¹⁰ Lin, Yutang. (2009). *The Importance of Understanding*. Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, p. 286.

¹¹ In Wang, Rongpei. (2008). *Gems of Yuefu Ballads* (《英译乐府诗精华》). Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, p. 100.



incorporate the deep meaning of “丝” into his translation (my love woven into the cloth) but regrettably fails to reproduce the double meanings of “匹”. Feng Quangong (2018) holds that since it's very hard to translate puns effectively in CCP, translators should make the best use of their rhetorical cognition to reduce or compensate for the esthetic loss in the process of translation. In Liu Yuxi's *Bamboo Branch Song* (《竹枝词》), there is also a phonetic pun in the lines “东边日出西边雨，道是无晴却有晴”. Here “晴” (sunny) is pronounced the same as “情” (love, affection), and the hidden meaning (情) is what this love song intends to convey. Xu Yuanchong translates this couplet into “The west is veiled in rain, the east enjoys sunshine. / My gallant is as deep in love as the day is fine.”¹² This version has an appeal of its own by converting the almost untranslatable pun into a metaphor, which is the result of the translator's rhetorical cognition.

A metaphor in CCP is ambiguous often in that the author does not reveal the similarities between the vehicle and tenor and sometimes it is even not easy to identify it as a metaphor. In Li Bai's *Bidding Farewell to a Friend* (《送友人》), there is a couplet, namely, “浮云游子意，落日故人情”，which are often interpreted as two metaphors even though there are no formal markers. Ezra Pound translates it into “Mind like a floating wide cloud. / Sunset like the parting of old acquaintances.” while W. J. B. Fletcher's version is “Those floating clouds are like the wanderer's heart, / Yon sinking sun recalls departed days.”¹³ Pound makes it explicit that the couplet consists of two metaphors although his translation is not that accurate. Fletcher considers the first line as a metaphor and uses “recalls” to link the elements of the second line. Though the second line is not a metaphor in the translation, it sounds natural nevertheless. Giles and Bynner's versions of this couplet contain no metaphors at all. Perhaps they fail to recognize this couplet as two metaphors. Here is another similar example: Du Fu's “家书抵万金” in *Spring View* (《春望》) is rendered by Fletcher into “A letter from home costs a fortune to bring”¹⁴. The original metaphor (家书抵万金) is also lost in Fletcher's translation. In Zhang Ji's *The Chaste Wife's Reply* (《节妇吟》), there is a line “知君用心如日月” which does not reveal the similarity between the man's love and the sun and the moon. Both Fletcher and Henry H. Hart's versions explicate the relation by rendering it respectively into “I recognize your love as bright as shining sun or moon” and “That your thoughts are pure as moonlight, / Or as the glowing sun at midday / Overhead.”¹⁵ The similarities they extract are different (bright, pure), which proves, to a certain degree, that metaphors in CCP are usually ambiguous.

Hyperbole is also ambiguous in CCP, especially numeral-related hyperbole. In Bai Juyi's *Song of a Pipa Player* (《琵琶行》), the line “千呼万唤始出来” is a typical use of hyperbole because it is impossible to call the girl to come forth one thousand or ten thousand times. C. Gaunt translates it into “Again we urge, and yet again. / And yet for long we urged in vain”, Cranmer-Byng's translation is

¹² In Xu Yuanchong. (2012). *1000 English Poems Translated by Xu Yuanchong from Classical Chinese Poetry* (Tang Poetry I) (《许渊冲经典英译古代诗歌 1000 首·唐诗上》). Beijing: Dolphin Press, p. 26.

¹³ In Lv, Shuxiang (ed.). (2002). *A Comparative Study on English Translation of Old Gems* (《中诗英译比录》). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 132.

¹⁴ In Fletcher, W. J. B. (2019). *Selected Chinese Poems Translated into English Verse*. Beijing: China Pictorial Press, p. 106.

¹⁵ In Lv, Shuxiang (ed.). (2002). *A Comparative Study on English Translation of Old Gems* (《中诗英译比录》). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 220-221.



“...At last / Slow yielding to their prayers, the stranger came”, and Giles’s version is “At length, after much pressing, she came forth”, all of which have no hyperbolic effect. Bynner renders it into “Yet we called and urged a thousand times before she started toward us”¹⁶ and his version is advisable in that he reproduces the hyperbole in the original though the number is not exactly the same. Hyperbolic usage only in the form of “千×万×” (a thousand...ten thousand...) in CCP is numerous, such as “千村万落”, “千树万树”, “千秋万岁”, “千山万水”. The hyperbolic effect engendered by this kind of expression needs to be reproduced no matter how the translator deals with them, literally or not.

As there are many kinds of rhetorical ambiguity, I end this section with *huwen* (互文) or mutual reference, a kind of rhetorical device that is probably only used in Chinese, and leave others for further investigation. The first line “秦时明月汉时关” in Wang Changling’s *At the Fort* (《出塞》) contains a typical *huwen* device. Literally it means the moon of the Qin dynasty and the pass of the Han dynasty, but actually it means the moon and pass of both the Qin and Han dynasties because of the mutual references of these nouns. Weng Xianliang’s translation is “The moon rises over this fort on the pass, just as in the days of Qin and Han”¹⁷, and his understanding is accurate. If a translator doesn’t know this kind of rhetorical device, he or she would probably literally translate this line, which will give rise to further ambiguity inaccessible to most target text readers.

5. Thematic Ambiguity

Thematic ambiguity occurs when the theme of a poem is uncertain or disputed or multiple, or the poem itself is a kind of contextual pun that says one thing literally while actually means another. Li Shangyin’s *The Bright Zither* (《锦瑟》) is a good example of thematic ambiguity just as Xu Yuanchong (1992:311) comments, it is “the most ambiguous of his poems. It is subject to various interpretations: some say it deals with the zither or the zither player, others say it was written in remembrance of his deceased wife or a beloved mistress, still others say it epitomized the poet’s sentimental life or his poetical or political career.” So different translators may have different interpretations, leading to different translations in which they might provide some clues or signposts for understanding if necessary.

A contextual pun is a kind of typical writing technique in CCP, referring to a poem that describes or narrates one thing but actually means another if we know the author’s intention in writing such a poem. The communicative context or the writer’s personal situation reveals what he or she really intends by writing the poem. So, it is necessary for the translator to add some background information in paratexts in order to help the target reader to grasp the hidden meaning or the real intention of the poet. Cao Zhi’s *Seven Sorrows* (《七哀》) is a typical contextual pun, and Xu Yuanchong’s translation goes like this:

¹⁶ In Lv, Shuxiang (ed.). (2002). *A Comparative Study on English Translation of Old Gems* (《中诗英译比录》). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 258-274.

¹⁷ In Weng, Xianliang. (1985). *An English Translation of Chinese Ancient Poems* (《古诗英译》). Beijing: Beijing Press, p. 16.



Softly on the tower streams of light play;
It seems the moon is loath to move away.
For here is beauty wilting, tender sighs,
Telling of a tender heart in pain, which cries.

May we ask who is there so full of ruth?
A wife in name, a widow, ah, in truth!
“You are far, far away for o’er ten years;
I am alone, alone and oft in tears.

“You’re like the dust drawn upward on the way;
Like mud in dirty water still I stay.
One sinking, the other swimming we remain.
If ever, when are we to meet again?

“Would that I were the wind from the southwest,
That I could rush across the land to your breast!
From your embrace, if you should shut me out,
Where should I go? Where should I roam about?”¹⁸

If we know nothing about the poet Cao Zhi, his intention will escape us, because from the translation we only know it describes his sympathy for a lonely wife whose husband is absent for years. Chinese poets usually indirectly express their intentions, and that’s why indirectness or implicitness (含蓄) is highly valued in Chinese poetics. Xu Yuanchong (1992:114) has done a good job as to how to convey the real intention of Cao Zhi in this poem by adding a commentary in which he explains and comments like this:

During the reign of his father he was the prince in favor; after his father’s death he was banished from the capital by his brother. That is the reason why his poetry became melancholy and sorrowful after he was 29. / If we compare his *Lament (Seven Sorrows)* with Cao Pi’s *Song of the North*, we find both describe a lonely wife longing for her absent husband. In Cao Pi we only see the poet’s sympathy with the woman separated from her husband by a long war; in Cao Zhi, the abandonment of the woman alludes in effect to his own banishment and the comparison between ‘dust’ and ‘mud’ applies not only to husband and wife but also to the two brothers. In other words, Cao Pi’s poem is an objective description of a woman’s sorrow while Cao Zhi’s expresses his subjective or personal feelings. So, we may well say his poetry surpasses his brother’s in depth and strength.

Only when such paratextual information is given or known does the contextual pun of this poem become effective. In fact, there are many other poems like this one, such as Zhang Ji’s *The Chaste*

¹⁸ In Xu, Yuanchong. (1992). *On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme: From the Book of Poetry to The Romance of the Western Bower*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 113-114.



Wife's Reply (《节妇吟》), and Zhu Qingyu's *Sending to Zhang Ji Before Imperial Examination* (《近试上张水部》). They are all contextual puns, often resorting to a woman or a girl to stand for the poet himself, and to convey the poet's intention in translation usually requires some paratextual information to be added because the target reader most probably knows little or nothing about the poet or the communicative context.

Like contextual puns, some classical Chinese poems are political in nature but are dressed in different linguistic garbs which indirectly express the poet's intention. For example, Jin Changxu's *Grief in Spring* (《春怨》) shows the poet's sympathy for a lady whose husband is fighting in the far frontier. By describing such a grief-stricken lady, the poet criticizes wars at large. The last couplet “啼时惊妾梦，不得到辽西” is translated by Fletcher into “Their warbling broke the dream wherein / My lover smiled to me”¹⁹. In this translation, the associations aroused by “辽西” (a place in today's Liaoning Province often plagued with war during the Tang dynasty) are lost and so is its political nature. Thus, if the translator knows nothing about “辽西”, he or she most probably would miss the political touch of this poem. Lin Sheng's *To Lin'an City* (《题临安邸》) is a similar poem that criticizes the Southern Song rulers who were contented with themselves and did not think of recovering the lost capital and regions captured by the Jurchen. Xu Yuanchong's translation of “直把杭州作汴州”, namely, “They'd take the new capital for old place of pleasure”²⁰, is also misleading, for the implications of “汴州”, the lost capital of Northern Song dynasty (AD 960-1127), is totally different from an “old place of pleasure”. Thus, the political nature of the original poem is blunted by his careless wording. For such kinds of political poems, paratextual information or other compensation is also indispensable for the target reader.

6. Logical Ambiguity

Logical ambiguity refers to the implicit or indeterminate nature of logic between different words, phrases, clauses or sentences in a poem. Chinese is essentially an analytic language and the logic is usually hidden and ambiguous, especially in CCP which puts great emphasis on brevity. On the contrary, English, essentially a synthetic language, usually requires explicit logic. So, in translating CCP, the translator usually makes the originally implicit logic explicit in the target text. For instance, nouns are often juxtaposed together without any explicit relations among them in CCP, which gives rise to a typical kind of logical ambiguity. Ma Zhiyuan's *Tianjingsha-Autumn Thought* (《天净沙·秋思》) is a representative of such kind of poem. The original poem goes like this “枯藤老树昏鸦，小桥流水人家，古道西风瘦马，夕阳西下，断肠人在天涯”，and Weng Xianliang's translation is as follows:

¹⁹ In Lv, Shuxiang (ed.). (2002). *A Comparative Study on English Translation of Old Gems* (《中诗英译比录》). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 281.

²⁰ In Yuan, Xingpei (ed.). (2006). *Gems of Classical Chinese Poetry* (新编千家诗). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p.151.



Crows hovering over rugged old trees wreathed with rotten vine – the day is about done. Yonder is a tiny bridge over a sparkling stream, and on the far bank, a pretty little village. But the traveler has to go on down this ancient road, the west wind moaning, his bony horse groaning, trudging towards the sinking sun, farther and farther away from home.²¹

It can be seen in Weng's translation there are many prepositions, adverbs and participles added, such as "hovering over", "wreathed with", "yonder", "over", "on" "down", "trudging towards", and "away from", which together present a vivid mental picture. Of course, this sounds natural in English though it, to a certain degree, restricts the reader's imagination by making the spacial relations between these nouns fixed. For example, Weng says crows are "hovering over" the trees, but it is also possible that they are flying around or perching somewhere near the trees. Most probably, that's why Pound likes this kind of image juxtaposition in CCP and even learns to create a similar kind of English poems by simply putting some nouns together. An equally typical example is found in the couplet "鸡声茅店月, 人迹板桥霜" in Wen Tingyun's *Early Departure from Shangshan* (《商山早行》), which is translated by Xu Yuanchong into "The cock crows as the moon sets over thatched inn; / Footprints are left on wood bridge paved with frost"²². This version also makes the original ambiguity clear and fixed by explicating the logical relations between the nouns according to Xu's own understanding. However, still some translators might use what is called "disjointed translation" (Jiang, 2010:339) in translating image juxtaposition in CCP by flouting the rule of English in order to preserve the ambiguity of the original poem.

Logical ambiguity arising from the lack of connectives is also often seen in CCP and likewise it is usually explicated in the English translation. In Du Fu's *On the Border* (《前出塞·其六》), the former part is as follows: "挽弓当挽强, 用箭当用长。射人先射马, 擒贼先擒王". Watson's translation is "If you draw a bow, draw a strong one, / if you use an arrow, use one that's long. If you want to shoot a man, shoot his horse first; if you want to seize the enemy, first seize their leader"²³. Here Watson uses four "ifs" to make the hidden logic explicit and most readers will also interpret the original this way. But we can also use "when" to connect the clauses, which can express either a kind of temporal or hypothetical relation. This can be proved by different connectives used in the translations of Du Qiuniang's "花开堪折直须折" in *The Gold-Threaded Robe* (《金缕衣》). For example, Fletcher's translation is "When flowers are fit for culling, / Then pluck them as you may" while Bynner's version is "If a bud open, gather it"²⁴. From their translations, we can see that the logic in the original is somewhat ambiguous. Another similar example is found in the couplet "灭烛怜光满, 披衣觉露滋" in Zhang Jiuling's *Looking at the Moon and Thinking of One Far Away* (《望月怀远》). Fletcher translates it into "When I put out the candle, I long for the light; / And outside I find, ah! how rich is this dew"

²¹ In Weng, Xianliang. (1985). *An English Translation of Chinese Ancient Poems* (《古诗英译》). Beijing: Beijing Press, p. 101-102.

²² In Xu Yuanchong. (2012). *1000 English Poems Translated by Xu Yuanchong from Classical Chinese Poetry* (Tang Poetry I) (《许渊冲经典英译古代诗歌 1000 首·唐诗上》). Beijing: Dolphin Press, p. 26.

²³ In Burton, Watson. (2009). *The Selected Poems of Du Fu* (tr.). Changsha: Hunan People's Press

²⁴ In Lv, Shuxiang (ed.). (2002). *A Comparative Study on English Translation of Old Gems* (《中诗英译比录》). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 283.



while Bynner's translation is "It is no darker though I blow out my candle. / It is no warmer though I put on my coat." Fletcher's translation contains an adverbial clause of time while Bynner's renders it into two adverbial clauses of concession. It seems Bynner's understanding is more accurate and acceptable because it corresponds well with the moonlight as is depicted in the poem.

7. Intertextuality Ambiguity

Intertextuality refers to "the relationship between a given text and other relevant texts encountered in prior experiences" (Neubert and Shreve, 1992:117). CCP places great emphasis on intertextuality (similar to "用事" in classical Chinese poetics) as is illustrated in the following statement made by Huang Tingjian "The source of every character in Du Fu's poems and Han Yu's essays can be traced. It is because of limited reading of later generations that they say Du and Han have created words of their own" (老杜作诗, 退之作文, 无一字无来处。盖后人读书少, 故谓韩杜自作此语耳) (cited in Zong and Li, 1998:480). This quotation tells us that intertextuality is sort of omnipresent in CCP and sometimes it is even difficult for general readers to recognize the intertextuality or to trace its sources. Intertextual ambiguity in the translation of CCP mainly arises from the reasons why the poet uses intertextual resources and which point(s) the poet wants to highlight. Sometimes the translator's effort in reproducing the intertextual relation also causes new ambiguity in the target text because of the contextual gap between the source text reader and the target text reader, that is, generally speaking, the contextual horizon of the source text reader is larger than that of the target text reader.

In Li Bai's *Song of Chang'gan* (《长干行》), there are some allusions, and one of them refers to a story written by Zhuangzi which goes roughly like this: A man named Weisheng had made a date with a girl under a bridge, but before the girl arrived, a flood suddenly came; unwilling to leave, he clasped one of the piers of the bridge and was finally drowned by the flood in order to keep his promise. The line in Li Bai's poem alluding to this story is "常存抱柱信". But what does it mean specifically in the context? Weng Xianliang's translation is "Sooner die than break faith, you declared"²⁵ while Fletcher's is "My troth to thee till death I keep for aye"²⁶. Their interpretations are different as to who the subject is, which is partly caused by grammatical ambiguity (lack of subjects in Chinese). C. Gaunt's translation is "We swore to be true with a 'beam-clasping' faith"; A. Lowell's is "I often thought that you were the faithful man who clung to the bridgepost"; and Bynner's version is "That even onto death I would await you by my post". These three translations fail to convey to the target reader the message associated with "beam-clasping" or "clung to the bridgepost" or "by my post" because the whole story is not given, thus causing further unnecessary ambiguity in the translation. S. Obata's version is "You always kept the faith of Wei-sheng, / Who waited under the bridge, unafraid of death". This version at least provides some clues to the story. From the above-mentioned six different versions of Li Bai's allusion, it can be perceived that different translators may highlight different aspects of the allusion, which proves, to a certain degree, that intertextuality in the form of allusion is ambiguous in nature and translation itself is essentially an interpretation.

²⁵ In Weng, Xianliang. (1985). *An English Translation of Chinese Ancient Poems* (《古诗英译》). Beijing: Beijing Press, p. 24.

²⁶ This and the following four versions in Lv, Shuxiang (ed.). (2002). *A Comparative Study on English Translation of Old Gems* (《中诗英译比录》). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 149-157.



In Fan Zhongyan's *Yujia'ao* (《渔家傲》), the line “燕然未勒归无计” contains another typical allusion. Chu Dagao and Xu Yuanchong just convey the meaning of the allusion by translating it respectively into “The Huns have not yet been conquered, I have no power to go home” and “The Northwest is not won; I'm obliged to stay”²⁷. So to the target readers, the original allusion is evaporated and their translations suggest the poet has to continue to stay on the frontier because he has no other choices. Huang Hongquan's translation is “Yet return I cannot, for Mount Yanran / Has inscribed none of my merit”²⁸. He added a note regarding Mount Yanran: “now called Hangaishan (shan means mountain) situated in the People's Republic of Mongolia. When Dou Xian chasing the Xiongnu (Huns) reached the mountain, he inscribed his war credit on a rock there” (Huang, 1988-353-354). This note makes the allusion in the target text both prominent and comprehensible, adding some proactive inclination to continue to stay on the part of the author by comparing himself with Dou Xian, a famous general in the East Han dynasty (AD 25-220) who defeated the Huns, and thus revealing the poet's inner conflict to the full (go home or not). Or in Empson's (1949:192) words, “the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind”. This also tells us that the alluded intertextual resource may add a touch of special meaning to the source text and thus the translator is suggested to fully understand the allusion.

8. Stylistic Ambiguity

Style essentially refers to the way how language is used and stylistic ambiguity in CCP mainly arises from the uncertainty or indeterminacy of modes of speech or point of view and so on. Ambiguity regarding modes of speech and point of view is largely due to a lack of subjects in CCP and thus it is also closely related to grammatical ambiguity. As to modes of speech, there are five types, namely, direct speech, indirect speech, free direct speech, free indirect speech, and narrative report of speech acts (Leech and Short, 2001:318-336). Sometimes it is not easy to tell which type a certain line belongs to because there are no formal markers to one's speech. In Zhu Qingyu's *Sending to Zhang Ji Before Imperial Examination* (《近试上张水部》), there are the following two lines: “妆罢低声问夫婿，画眉深浅入时无？” Xu Yuanchong's translation is “She whispers to him after touching up her face; / ‘Have I painted my brows with fashionable grace?’” and Bynner renders it into “She has finished preparing; she asks of you meekly / Whether her eyebrows are painted in fashion”²⁹. Xu turns the last line of the poem into a direct speech while Bynner's is an indirect speech. Both of them are logically acceptable because of the inherent ambiguity contained in the original line caused by the lack of pronouns as well as quotation marks. But from the perspective of poetic effect, direct quotation is preferred because it is more vivid and expressive. That's why Weng Xianliang uses many direct quotations when translating CCP, for instance, “不免相烦喜鹊，先报那人知” in Xin Qiji's *Wuling Spring* (《武陵春》) is translated

²⁷ In Xu, Yuanchong. (1992). *On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme: From the Book of Poetry to The Romance of the Western Bower*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 340-341.

²⁸ In Huang, Hongquan. (1988). *Anthology of Song-Dynasty Ci-Poetry*. Beijing: People's Liberation Army Publishing House, p. 79.

²⁹ As cited in Li, Hongxia. (2015). On the Translation of the Quotation Contents in the Ancient Chinese Poems (中国古诗中引述成分的英译). *Journal of Southwest University of Science and Technology* (西南科技大学学报), (6):66.



into “I shout to a passing magpie: ‘Go quick! Tell her I’m coming.’”³⁰ This is Weng’s preference in using direct mode of speech, and the effect is desirable. Thus, if there is ambiguity in modes of speech in CCP, direct modes are often preferred due to their ability to create an effect of vividness.

Just like modes of speech, points of view are also sometimes ambiguous. In Liu Changqing’s *Seeking Shelter in Furong Mountain on a Snowing Evening* (《逢雪宿芙蓉山主人》), the last couplet is “柴门闻犬吠，风雪夜归人”. Here who does the “人” refer to? There is not a definite answer. So, this gives rise to ambiguity of point of view. Fletcher’s “us” in his translation “The house dog’s sudden barking, which hears the wicket go, / Greet us at night returning through driving gale and snow” implies “we” as the point of view. Dell R. Hale’s “A dog barks at the brushwood gate, / As someone heads home this windy, snowy night” implies a third person (someone) as the narrator while Xu Yuanchong’s version “At wicket gate a dog is heard to bark. / With wind and snow I come when night is dark.”³¹ indicates “I” as the point of view. There is no telling whose translation is more proper since the last line is open to interpretation. Li Gang’s Poem *A Sick Ox* (《病牛》) “耕犁千亩实千箱，力尽筋疲谁复伤？但得众生皆得饱，不辞羸病卧残阳。” is symbolic in nature and the ox symbolizes himself or those alike. Xu Yuanchong’s version uses “you” to refer to the ox, which creates an intimate relation between the ox and the narrator (the author). In fact, we can also use “it”, which involves a third person as the narrator but lacks the appeal of “you”. Since not a subject appears in the original poem, “I” can also be used as the point of view, which is more poetically interesting and appealing. Weng Xianliang’s translation of Wu Rong’s *Poplar Blossoms* (《杨花》) is such an example. For instance, the first two lines of the poem “不斗秣华不占红，自飞晴野雪濛濛” are translated into “Let others flaunt their beauty; let them vie for fame. I prefer to be like snow, to fill the air and fly over the sunny plains.”³² His translation is vivid and animistic by using “I” as the point of view, and in my opinion, it is poetically better than using a third person as the point of view.

9. Conclusion

Ambiguity in CCP covers a wide range of topics and it usually contributes positively to the poetic effect of the original poem. This article summarizes seven types of ambiguity in CCP and discusses its English translation with specific examples. It is found that: (1) ambiguity contained in CCP is often related to the peculiarities of Chinese language and culture, especially its lack of inflection and subject; (2) ambiguity is also related to the poetic effect of the original poem, therefore the way to deal with it in translation is of great importance; (3) explication is the most frequently used technique to translate ambiguity due to linguistic, poetic or cultural differences; (4) the achievable poetic effect of ambiguity translation is determined by many factors, such as possible alternatives, effectiveness in conveying the poet’s intention, and acceptability of the translated poem; (5) paratextual information in the form of footnotes or the translator’s commentary and the like is necessary in dealing with some kinds of

³⁰ In Weng, Xianliang. (1985). *An English Translation of Chinese Ancient Poems* (《古诗英译》). Beijing: Beijing Press, p. 97.

³¹ All these three versions in Xu, Yuanchong. (1992). *On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme: From the Book of Poetry to The Romance of the Western Bower*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 249.

³² Weng, Xianliang. (1988). English translations of 28 ancient Chinese poems (古诗英译 28 首). *Journal of Foreign Languages* (外国语), (6):15.



ambiguity, such as thematic and intertextual ambiguity; (6) since ambiguity is a salient feature in CCP, how to keep a balance between reproducing the ambiguity and making it explicit in translation is still a big challenge, especially for translators who want to retain the very characteristics of CCP.

In order to strike a balance between reproducing the original ambiguity and explicating it in the translated text, the translator is required to have a thorough understanding of the characteristics of the Chinese language, poetics, and culture and a keen awareness of poetic beauty that could be shared by both Chinese and western cultures. In other words, the translator must be “an immersive reader” (Zhou, 2019:174) to fully acquaint himself or herself with the ambiguity and beauty of CCP. Marsha L. Wagner (1979:56) maintains, “Ideally, the translation should be no more and no less ambiguous than the original”, that is, keeping the ambiguity intact is the best choice, at least theoretically. However, in reality explicitation is usually preferred and necessary in dealing with ambiguity in CCP. Thus, the translator’s choices inevitably involve norm-obeying and norm-breaking in the target language and culture, which shows, to a large degree, the tension inherent in translation itself. When it comes to typical cultural differences in translation like ambiguity in CCP, the tension between adequacy and acceptability becomes more prominent. In fact, many translators try to imitate the form of Chinese poems in order to preserve the original ambiguity at the cost of acceptability. All in all, the translation of ambiguity in CCP is a big and interesting topic that covers many sub-topics as is shown in this article, all of which are worth delving into. It is hoped that this article might provide some clues for further, in-depth research.

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