



Japan Bilingual Publishing Co.

Classical Literature

<https://ojs.bilpub.com/index.php/cl>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study on Translation Methods and Strategies in the English Translation of the *Li Sao* by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang

Weiwei Yang Chuanmao Tian* 

School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, Hubei, 434023, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 1 October 2023

Revised: 27 October 2023

Accepted: 12 December 2023

Published Online: 19 December 2023

Keywords:

Li Sao

Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang

Translation methods

Translation strategies

ABSTRACT

The poem *Li Sao* in *Chu Ci* first created the form of the unique genre “Sao Ti” in Chinese literature, displaying a positive romantic spirit. It has been included in textbooks multiple times and has had a significant impact on the development of Chinese literature. After the Han Dynasty, later literati always highly respected Qu Yuan. The quality of the English translation of *Li Sao*, as a representative chapter of the *Chu Ci*, directly reflects the quality of the selected translation. This article takes the English translation of *Li Sao* by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang as the starting point, analyzes its translation methods from three levels: rhythm, rhetoric, and culturally-loaded words, and explores the translation strategies the translators adopt. This will provide valuable reference experience for translators and have a certain guiding significance for the English translation of literary classics in China.

1. Introduction

As the representative work of Qu Yuan, a statesman and poet of the State of Chu during the Warring States period, *Li Sao* is the longest political lyrical poem in the history of ancient Chinese poetry and also the most far-reaching work of the *Chu Ci*, occupying an important position in the translation of classical books. The work *Li Sao* pioneered the unique genre “Sao Ti” poetry form in Chinese literature, combined with the poet’s unique and

romantic associations and colorful fantasies, supplemented by slowly unfolding descriptions. It interweaves real people, historical and mythological characters, heaven, earth, people, and illusions, forming a unique and charming image world, which demonstrates a positive romantic spirit that has a profound impact on future generations^[1].

Qu Yuan opened up the source of romanticism in Chinese literature, and his artistic creation had a significant impact on the literary creations of later generations. The “风” represented by the *Book of Songs* and the “骚” repre-

*Corresponding Author:

Chuanmao Tian,

School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, Hubei, 434023, China;

Email: tcm_316@163.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/cl.v2i1.108>

Copyright © 2023 by the author(s). Published by Japan Bilingual Publishing Co. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

sented by *Chu Ci* have formed the cornerstone of ancient Chinese literature and the two highest standards of classical poetry. However, in terms of its dissemination history, it was not until 1852 that the German translation of *Li Sao* by Austrian sinologist Augustus Pfizmaier (1808–1887) began to be introduced to the West. Shortly thereafter, Parker first published an English translation of *Li Sao* in 1879, and over the following centuries, more than ten English versions gradually emerged, with translators such as James Legge, Herbert Giles, Arthur Waley, David Hawkes, and others attempting to do so. Compared with foreign countries, the translation of *Li Sao* in China started relatively late. The first English translation of *Chu Ci* in China was published in 1953, and was jointly completed by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. Subsequently, translated versions by Sun Dayu, Xu Yuanhong, Zhuo Zhenying, and others were successively published.

In order to gain a more intuitive understanding of the unique literary qualities inherent in representative English translations in China, and to provide valuable reference experience for translators through this study, this article will focus on Mr. Yang Xianyi's English translation of *Li Sao* from two aspects: translation methods and translation strategies, analyzing the distinct characteristics of them.

2. Literary Characteristics of *Li Sao* and Its Translation Research

From the perspective of language characteristics, the uneven sentence forms, scattered and varied sentence structures, and the widespread use of the word “兮” in *Li Sao* demonstrate its distinctive literary features compared to other works. From the perspective of artistic characteristics, *Li Sao* is deeply rooted in realism and positive romanticism, using metaphorical and contrastive techniques, and adding storyline narration to the lyrics. All of these have added great richness to the English translation of *Li Sao* and also increased the difficulty of translation, especially in terms of word selection, which puts forward more complex and diverse requirements for translators. However, research on the word selection techniques and strategies of different translators in the process of translating this classic into English still needs to be supplemented. At present, research on the English translation of *Li Sao* is also trending towards prosperity.

Looking at various studies on the translation of *Li Sao* in recent years, from the perspectives of stylistic markers, iconicity theory, interpersonal meaning, way of thinking and hermeneutics, comparative research methods are often used. By comparing different translations, a unique perspective is used to analyze and interpret them. This combination of different theories and translation practices can

discover many problems in translation, enabling future translators to discover the characteristics and shortcomings of the translated text, thereby leveraging strengths and avoiding weaknesses^[2]. However, it is worth emphasizing that from the perspective of literary characteristics, it is relatively important to first understand the connotation of poetry itself, and then maximize the display of the characteristics and beauty of the unique genre “Sao Ti” poetry in order to truly do a good job in the translation of *Li Sao*^[3]. From this perspective, it can be seen that the study of literary characteristics in the English translation of *Li Sao* is extremely important. As the most fundamental step in translation, the use of translation methods and strategies can be said to be the most intuitive manifestation of the literary characteristics of the translated text, but research on this aspect in domestic English translation works still needs to be supplemented.

3. Translation Methods and Strategies in the Yangs' Translation of *Li Sao*

3.1 Translation Methods

Translation Methods for Reproducing Rhythm

Chinese and English belong to different language families, and the rhythms of Chinese poetry and English poetry also have their own characteristics. From the perspective of textual form, most Chinese characters have one sound per character, which is relatively stable in form. Due to the “character-based” nature of Chinese characters, Chinese poetry has strict requirements for word count and rhyme, making it relatively neat. English poetry, on the other hand, is often divided into stanzas, lines, and steps, corresponding to the syllables in Chinese characters, which are arranged in a certain pattern by stressed and unstressed syllables. Different arrangements form different metrical patterns in English poetry. The length of a poem is calculated based on the number of steps, so there is no clear requirement for the number of words. Therefore, English poetry does not appear as neat in form as Chinese poetry.

Based on the above analysis of the textual forms of Chinese and English, it can be seen that when translators translate Chinese poetry, attention should be paid to the corresponding relationship and laws between the two, and the coordination of rhythm should be emphasized in the written text, so as to comprehensively reproduce the aesthetic value of poetry^[4]. At this point, Yang's choice of words undoubtedly showcases the charm of rhymes to the fullest. *Li Sao* is known as the template for later poetry in the unique genre “Sao Ti”. But Qu Yuan did not pay much

attention to the rhythm and rhyme in *Li Sao*, or rather, the language conditions at that time were still far from the formation of metrical poetry. So, although six-character poetry is the main subject, there are also lines as short as five characters and as long as a cross. Chinese poetry has tonal divisions, while English poetry displays the cadence of the poem based on the intensity of the intonation. Yang's version of poetry rhyme translation imitates Dryden's style, using the typical English poetry rhyme method of heroic double rhyme, and the rhyme feet are treated in the form of "aabccdd" [5]. Domestication translation makes the translation concise in form, with balanced and neat sentence structures, making it more convenient for Western readers to read. For example:

Example 1

Original text	路漫漫其修远兮，吾将上下而求索。
Yang's translation	The way was long, and wrapped in gloom did seem; As I urged on to seek my vanished dream.

The first half of this sentence does not emphasize "路漫漫", but instead uses "long" and "on" in the following sentence to seek consistency in rhythm, and uses inversion techniques to express the objective perspective of knowing that the road is long. At the end of the sentence, the word "ream" is used in the second half of the sentence to directly refer to the content of "求索", seeking the rhyme of "seem" and "dream".

Example 2

Original text	济沅湘以南征兮，就重华而漱词。
Yang's translation	To barbarous south I went across the stream; Before the ancient I began my theme.

"沅湘" refers to "沅" or "湘水". Yang translates "沅湘" into the stream, using fuzzy and shallow methods to treat place names, in order to achieve the beauty of rhythm and rhyme, and also facilitate the reading of Western readers.

The sound and meaning of *Li Sao* are exquisite, and the tone is passionate. Although Qu Yuan did not pay attention to the rhythm and rhyme, the natural and clear rhythm of the rhyme arrived, followed by the pen when the meaning arrived, and the rhythm of recitation was slow, urgent, and orderly, with a strong poetic atmosphere. This is largely determined by its unique language form and style, especially the unique use of the "兮" tone, which not only brings readers the enjoyment of beauty, but also poses certain challenges to translators. In the translation of *Li Sao*, Yang chose to omit the function word "兮", maximizing his pursuit of rhythm in the translation, so that the English translation also retains the artistic effect of poetry creation

in rhythm, bringing readers the enjoyment of beauty in form and charm.

Translation Methods for Reproducing Figures of Speech

Figures of speech is a stylistic marker that cannot be ignored in *Li Sao*. The commonly used rhetorical markers in Chinese poetry include personification, onomatopoeia, metaphor, allusion, exaggeration, and so on. In order to reproduce the artistic conception of the original poem, translators sometimes have to break away from the language form of the original poem and change rhetoric as appropriate [6]. At this point, while Yang strictly demanded rhythm, he did not overlook the importance of rhetoric and adopted appropriate rhetorical changes when selecting words. For example:

Example 3

Original text	揽茹蕙以掩涕兮，霑余襟之浪浪。
Yang's translation	And melilotus leaves I took to stem; The tears that streamed down to my garment's hem.

It can be seen that during the translation process, Yang appropriately used exaggerated techniques, using the word "stream" to express the exaggerated image of tears and waves in his choice of words, bringing the romantic sentiment onto the paper. Not only that, Yang transformed stillness into action, conveying the tears of "浪浪" with verbs, achieving the aesthetic feeling of "tears flowing down like a river", further rendering the emotions of sadness and enriching the artistic effect of the translation.

Translation Methods for Reproducing Culturally-loaded Words

In the translation process, it is difficult for translators to find expressions that are completely equivalent to culturally-loaded words. Therefore, choosing a translation method for culturally-loaded words is not only a technical issue, but also affects the accurate reproduction of the connotation of culturally-loaded words in the target language [7]. From the perspective of the adoption of culturally-loaded words, Yang is precisely influenced by the cultural differences between China and the West, respecting the different cultural backgrounds in Chinese and Western cultures. The differences in the special meanings contained in Chinese and English words, especially those with symbolic meanings, have led to the choice of avoiding literal translation of plant names with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, the names of objects and places in poetry are often mishandled. For example, he once translated the word "杜若" into "fragrant herbs". And this is also fully reflected

in the translation of *Li Sao*. For example:

Example 4

Original text	摄提贞于孟陬兮，惟庚寅吾以降。
Yang's translation	When Sirius did in Spring its Light display; A Child was born, and Tiger marked the Day.

The term “摄提” in this sentence is translated as “Sirius”, meaning “天狼星”, but in reality, “摄提” refers to the “摄提格” of the chronology, which is the Yin year (寅年) in Chinese culture. It is clear that the concept of the Yin year does not correspond to the star name “Sirius” in Western ancient Greek (and Egyptian) astronomy.

It can be seen that Yang has avoided certain cultural connotations in order to make the translation more acceptable to readers. Based on the principle of facilitating Western readers' reading, Yang replaced the word in Chinese culture that required readers to further understand in order to achieve a certain level of understanding with symbolic and representative things in Western culture in his choice of words. From the perspective of facilitating readers to continue reading, it is also an efficient method to use this word selection technique based on respect for cultural differences and adding sufficient annotations.

3.2 Translation Strategies

The entire poem of *Li Sao* is a process of personalized struggle, a process of regulating and integrating various psychological activities into a whole^[1]. In the process of translation, in addition to selecting appropriate translation techniques and strategies, the translator's own subjectivity inevitably plays a role. Due to the different creative personalities of translators, there are also differences in their understanding, feelings, and evaluation of life, which affects their creative ideas, translation strategies, translation techniques and language use, ultimately forming a diversity of translation styles. The formation of personality is influenced by both innate and acquired factors, and is the result of the interaction of genetics, maturity, and environment. This fully explains why different translators generate completely different translation results. This is mainly due to differences in life experiences, life paths, personal cultivation, academic backgrounds, aesthetic tastes, and even gender differences.

Yang Xianyi prioritizes “faithfulness” as the translation principle and does not advocate that translators make excessive subjective changes to the original work, which is precisely determined by Yang's own subjective characteristics. It is Yang's extensive knowledge, independent thinking, and love for his motherland since childhood that have led to his unique translation of *Li Sao*, which is still

regarded as a classic and stands tall on the bookshelves of many European university libraries. For example:

Example 5

Original text	仆夫悲余马怀兮，蜷局顾而不行。
Yang's translation	My slaves were sad, my steeds all neighed in grief; And, gazing back, the earth they would not leave.

In the original sentence, Yang chose to be faithful to the original text and translated “仆夫” as “slaves”, reflecting his main characteristic of placing “faithfulness” at the top of the translation principle.

Example 6

Original text	举贤才而授能兮，循绳墨而不颇。
Yang's translation	Exalted were the wise, the able used; The rule was kept and never was abused.

In this sentence, “绳墨” is a word with a specific symbol. According to Wang Yi and Zhu Xi's explanation, “绳墨” is an auxiliary tool used by carpenters to draw straight lines when making furniture. When translating words and phrases, Yang chose the word “rule” to directly indicate the symbolic meaning of “绳墨”, which means “规则”. This is the result of Yang's deep understanding of Chinese culture.

From this, it can be seen that Yang Xianyi's translation feature is faithful to the original text, but at the same time, he appropriately adopts methods of literal translation, domestication, and omission in word selection. The translation of poetry is not only a language conversion, but also a dialogue between cultures^[5]. This dialogue is not only in the text, but also closely related to the translator's cultivation, environment, education, etc. In short, through detailed comparison and analysis of different translations, we can come to the conclusion that when it comes to the translation of poetry, literature, and culture, it is difficult to use language to convert. Therefore, translation is a form of recreation. This also explains the reason why Yang's own subjective style displayed in his translation methods, and fully reflects the influence of the translator's subjective style on the selection of translation strategies.

4. Conclusions

The English translation of *Li Sao* by Yang Xianyi, from the perspective of translation methods, pursues consistency in terms of rhythm, achieving artistic beauty while facilitating the understanding of Western readers. As for figures of speech, appropriate changes are made to rhetorical devices and exaggerated techniques are used to deepen the

rendering of romantic sentiment. In the selection of culturally-loaded words, Yang avoids certain cultural connotations in order to make the translation more acceptable to readers. With regard to translation strategies, Yang Xianyi adopts a “faithful” translation strategy, appropriately using literal translation, domestication, and omission methods in word selection, fully reflecting the differences in the translator’s main style caused by different life experiences, personal cultivation, academic backgrounds, aesthetic taste, and even gender differences. Thus the subject’s own style is formed, which has a great impact on the application of translation methods and strategies. Therefore, translation is creative, not only a realm or a cultural collision, but also a personalized pursuit^[2].

Author Contributions

Weiwei Yang is a graduate student of the School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, and as the first author, she finished the writing of the draft manuscript; as Yang’s supervisor, Chuanmao Tian revised and polished it in ideological content, language and style; he is a distinguished professor of translation studies at Yangtze University with a Ph.D. degree in Translation and Intercultural Studies. He is an advanced member of the Translators Association of China. His area of interest is translation theory and practice. He has published over ten articles concerning translation in major scholarly journals at home and abroad, such as *Chinese Translation Journal*, *Across Language and*

Cultures, Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice Critical Arts: South–North Cultural and Media Studies, Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, LANS-TTS, Babel, English Today.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- [1] Johnson, J., 1959. Li Sao: A poem on relieving sorrow a prose translation with an introduction and notes. Olivant Press: Miami. pp. 1, 7, 9–11.
- [2] Nida Eugene, A., 1993. Language, culture and translating. Foreign Language Education Press: Shanghai.
- [3] Roy, D.T., 1960. Review: Li Sao: A third century B.C. poem by Ch’u Yuan by Jerah Johnson. *Journal of Asian Studies*. (1), 103–104.
- [4] Payne, R., 1947. *The White Pony*, an anthology of Chinese poetry from the earliest times to the present day. The John Day Company: New York.
- [5] Yang, X.Y., Yang, G., 1953. *The Li Sao and other poems of Ch’ü Yüan*. Foreign Language Press: Beijing.
- [6] Minford, J., Lau, J.S.M., 2002. *Classical Chinese literature: An anthology of translations*. Columbia University Press: New York.
- [7] White, L.A., 1943. Energy and the evolution of culture. *American Anthropologist*. 45(3), 335–356.