

The Art of Ambiguity and Its Effect in Wang Wei's Poem *Lu Zhai*

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Abstract—In this article, I would like to make a brief summary of the characteristics of the translation and interpretation practices by modern Chinese and Western people, when they deal with Wang Wei's poem *Lu Zhai*. By enumerating the key features of their practices, I intend to point out the different approaches to the same poem from the perspective of culture, religious interest, and language use. After making a comparison of understanding and translating the poem between the Chinese and Westerners, I make a further analysis to find out why the poem generates so many different ways of understanding, in spite of a cultural difference. In the end, I conclude that it is the ambiguity of the language in a poem that provides a possibility of multiple ways of translation and interpretation. The ambiguity not only creates a special beauty and far-reaching influence of Chinese poems, but also leaves much space for readers to recreate them and decide their own ways to deal with it.

Index Terms—Ambiguity, poem, translation, Wang Wei.

I. INTRODUCTION

The great Tang poet Wang Wei (ca. 700-761 CE) has long enjoyed a high reputation and keen interest not only among literati in China, both ancient and present, but also among Chinese poetry-lovers, critics, and translators worldwide. Also, known as a painter and Buddhist practitioner, Wang Wei distinguishes his poems from those composed by other contemporary poets owing to the special features, such as elegance, simplicity, quietude, and profound Chan spirit. To all the readers, his observation and rendering of nature is not a direct depiction from an objective viewer, or a pure appreciation of the desolate world. Although his works often seem in this way, they are in fact a true harmony with nature, both physically and mentally, in the means of Buddhist contemplation and meditation. Due to this particular way of rendering landscape, Wang has been recognized as a poet who successfully grasps the essence of nature -- a founding role of the Pastoral School -- and meanwhile, one of the representatives of "oriental" poets in Western scholar's eyes.

Despite the great differences between the classical Chinese and modern Chinese, modern Chinese readers undoubtedly have an inherent advantage in understanding classic poems. In a certain group of people, their way of thinking is always influenced and shaped by its language to a great extent. So, as posterities of Wang Wei, modern

Chinese people can notice some well-designed metaphors or allusions in his poems at their first glance and sense the very subtle feeling or state of mind which he unfolds through the nuances in language use. Compared to Western scholars' emphasis on linguistic analysis, Chinese readers usually take an appreciation approach when studying a poem. On the one hand, it is easier for them to understand a hidden meaning beyond a pure beauty of language use. On the other, they tend to take some cultural patterns for granted without regarding the differences between Chinese and Western ways of poem-composing. Lu Zhai is a representative of Wang Wei's poems, which conveys his comprehension of the Buddhism through depictions of beautiful landscapes.

鹿柴

The Deer Fence

[唐] 王维 [Tang Dyn.] Wang Wei

空山不见人，

On the empty mountain, no one is seen.

但闻人语响。

But the sound of voices is heard.

返景入深林，

Returning: light enters the deep forest.

复照青苔上。

Again: it shines on the green moss. [1]

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF TRANSLATIONS

A. Characteristics of Translations by Chinese

For this poem, modern Chinese readers' translations have the following characteristics:

First, based on the literal meaning of this poem, scholars would like to translate it into modern Chinese word by word. For example, a Chinese scholar Li Zhizhong translated the poem as "no man can be seen in the empty mountain, but sound of voice is being heard; the reflected sunlight enters into the depth of the forest and shines on the green moss on the ground again." [2] (空旷的山上看不见人的踪影，但是却听到了人说话的声音。折射的阳光照射进树林深处，

又照在地上青青的苔鲜上) It is just an expansion of the original poem from a condensed and regulated form to a modern, prose-like one, and the scholar reorganizes the sentence elements to suit the contemporary favor without modifying it too much. From the aesthetic perspective, this translation, due to its plain rendering and a selection of common words, loses the beauty and elegance of the original one to a great extent.

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Second, when interpreting this classical poem, Chinese scholars tend to focus on the contrast as a device in this poem. The scholar Wu Chunhui states "The author underscores the overall and long-lasting emptiness and loneliness by noting the partial and temporary existence of sound" and "the moss growing under the trees strengthens the depth and darkness of the forest, which is in total shadow and silence." [3]

B. Characteristics of Translations by Westerners

For Western people, it is inspiring to notice that they are as aware as many Chinese translators of the use of rhyme in a Tang regulated verse. Regardless of its imperfectness in employing the rhymed feet, *Lu Zhai* indeed is an outstanding embodiment of Tang regulated verse because of its elegance, profound connotation, and treatment of rhyme. As a general feature of almost all kinds of poetry, rhyme is a focal point as well as a linguistic challenge not only for a poet who is ambitious to compose an excellent work, but also for a translator who wishes to maintain the phonetic beauty of an original work. Thankfully, almost all the seven translators take this issue into consideration and accomplished this task to varied extent. For instance, Fletcher did a great job by employing the rhymed words in every sentence except the third, which perfectly meets the rule of Chinese regulated verse and also suits the Western reading convention.

However, because of their unfamiliarity with Chinese, Western translators initially found it difficult to understand Wang Wei's *Lu Zhai*, and their translations or interpretations differ from what Chinese people usually conduct. For example, this poem was once cited by the British composer Brian Dennis in his songs. His translation is "On the lonely mountains I see no one. I hear only the echo of voices." [4] Although he tries to create the same mood or atmosphere revealed in the original poem, there are some deviations in his understanding, such as the fact that he added the subject "I" who acts as the narrator in the lyrics.

Likewise, Western scholars or people work in English also incline to regard the poet himself as the narrator of this poem, when they devote to figuring out the correct syntax for the first couplet. For example, Daniel Hsieh demonstrates that after describing the scene of the empty mountain, Wang Wei begins to focus on the sunlight and so on. In other words, Wang Wei must be personally on the scene, and wrote this poem as the narrator. After briefly explaining that in this poem the word "empty" derives from the Buddhist theory and is full of Chan spirits, he expresses a wondering what Wang Wei experienced that day and how it helped him write such a poem.[5] That is to say, he eventually regards Wang Wei himself as the narrator of the poem. It is not surprising to find out that even though the scholar Hsieh is a historical Asian, the way in which he works and thinks is Western in a narrow sense. English, as an inflectional language, features in strict grammar and syntax rules, which

make it easy for people to analyze each element of a sentence and to understand its tense as well as agent-recipient relations.

In the study of the translation of *Lu Zhai*, Western scholars have already realized that a lot of problems and misinterpretations were caused by the great difference between these two languages. First of all, as what we can see from the seven translations of the title of this poem per se, one aforementioned and six in the appendix, there is no consensus or authoritative decision of the English title among the both Chinese and Western translators. (The) Deer Enclosure or The Deer Fence, which is a direct, word-by-word translation, seems the most preferable and acceptable one for translators, given its plain expression and escape of subjectivity. In contrast, it is obvious that the translations "The Deer Park" and "Deep in the Mountain Wilderness" are imbued with translators' own preconceptions and even poetic treatments, which romanticize the rendering of the poem while imperiling or at least glossing its basic meaning. Not to mention, a lack of title or the use of abstract word -- "form" -- leads to a sense of confusion and odds when first encountering this Chinese poem. For the sake of directness, I consciously use the phonetic transcription of the title, from Chinese to English, which eschews a potential disturbance of personal interpretation or confusing feeling created by uncommon use of words. Even though this conduction itself may generate a new kind of ambiguity, especially for foreign readers, due to its meaninglessness, I use it only to designate the very poem, as a signifier, instead of a satisfactory or determined translation of the title per se.

In Chinese, "kong shan" only refers to "empty mountain," but an English speaker may quickly come up with a question that where is the man to "see" it? In addition to the questionable "I," some translators also tend to add some descriptive phrases, such as "the mountain wilderness," "the dark forest." But after all, these additional meanings are out of the translators' own comprehension and even imagination. Some other translators choose more dynamic verb phrases, such as "casts motley patterns," "drift on the air," and so on.[6] And each translation gives people a different impression in their minds. This special language use is also an undesirable yet inevitable situation when translating Chinese into English.

Despite the tough issues caused by different uses of languages, many western scholars have taken another way to study Wang Wei's poem by interpreting it from the perspective of culture and ideology. Some scholars have realized that Wang Wei is not only a representative of the Pastoral School, but also a poet who composed "court poems" "Buddhist poems" and so on. Accordingly, they manage to find out more implications hidden beneath its superficial literal meaning. [7]

Some western scholars make their interpretations in terms of thoughts and philosophies. In fact, scholars have realized that Wang Wei consciously avoided the concept of "self" in his poetic practice. In his poem

Zhuli Guan, only one figure is presented, who is sitting alone in a bamboo forest. Further, Wang Wei tried to avoid the appearance of the subject in *Lu Zhai*. The problem is that if no one is in the mountain, where does the human voice come from? If we steer away from the agent-recipient relation, the subject becomes the phenomenon itself. [8] In other words, the poet integrates himself into the environment depicted in the poem, as the Daoists return to nature and become part of it. In this sense, there is no need to deliberately point out an “I,” as an independent and exclusive subject standing opposite to the physical environment.

Consciously associating with Wang Wei’s Buddhist thoughts, the scholar Wai-lim Yip argues that *Lu Zhai* and other Wang Wei’s poems embody the Chan spirits, which is to achieve the state of empty mind in the means of the Chan meditation practice or “Zuo Wang”. In this state, the poet retreats from the mundane life and pursues the truth and essence of nature and world. He can hear the sound that ordinary people cannot hear, and he can see things that ordinary people cannot see. [9] The representation of the special scene as well as the mind state is manifested in the vivid depiction of the returning light shining on the green moss. The subtle feeling is conveyed by an observation of the play of light and shadow, and a contrast of the colors of the dark forest and green moss. And it also explains why Wang Wei’s poetry can bring unusual meanings.

III. AMBIGUITIES IN LU ZHAI

Being read at the first time, this poem *Lu Zhai* appears to be concise and readable enough, for it is a direct description of the nature scenes without any difficulty in understanding. However, a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty emerges, when we recall the diverse approaches of translating and interpreting taken by the Chinese and Western people. In his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Empson defines the conception “ambiguity” in English poems, and he demonstrates that “I propose to use the word in an extended sense, and shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.” [10] Considering the descriptive feature of ambiguity, Empson chose to make an analytical approach to further classify, explain, and judge this linguistic phenomenon in poetry within the historical framework of development of semiotics.

According to Empson, the “ambiguity” can be divided into seven types and manifests in three scales or three causes: “the degree of logical or grammatical disorder, the degree to which the apprehension of the ambiguity must be conscious, and the degree of psychological complexity concerned.” [11] Regarding its content, the rendering of this poem is closely related to the subject matter, by depicting the natural scenery surrounding Wang’s retreat *Lu Zhai*. It is different from Li Shangyin’s poem *Jin Se*, which features in the logical and narrative ruptures between couplets and which is full of emotional suggestions

and literary allusions. On the contrary, each sentence in this poem is in relation to its central topic, and Wang renders it with simple, concise phrases and in the form of a condensed cinq-syllable quatrain. However, although Empson categorizes ambiguities into seven specific types within each underlying a meticulous analysis, his theory is based on scholarship of Western poetry, rather than poetry cultivated by another cultural tradition. According to my research, the problem of the translations of this poem can be explained by two kinds of Empson’s ambiguities.

A. First Type of Ambiguity

First, according to Empson, the first type of ambiguity – the ambiguity due to metaphors – derives from a variety of suggestions in the meaning of a word. For example, both Chinese and Western scholars notice that as a Buddhist, Wang Wei’s poems are embodiments of his religious thoughts in terms of contents and ways of expression. From this perspective, this poem is not a pure depiction of the landscape and beautiful scenery around his retreats, but a manifestation of his insights of how to understand Buddhist theories and to conduct its practice. But, Chinese and Western scholars have different opinions on which words reveal his religious thoughts and how to explain the use of these words.

Chinese scholars connect this poem with the Chan theory. They contend that this poem of Wang Wei depicts a picture full of Chan spirits. For instance, in his article, Zhuang Hongyan argues that “I would like to treat the sound of voice as a sound in the poet’s imagination, a mysterious Brahma sound, rather than a real one from human being.” “The returning light is also an indicator of the Chan meditation. And the green moss is compared to the subtle and clean things of the world.” [12] That is to say, what behind the simple language use of Wang Wei’s poem is the mysterious and harmonious theories of Buddhism.

To Western scholars, some have been aware of Wang Wei’s identity as a Buddhist practitioner, and they particularly concentrate on the very word “empty.” The “empty” functions not only as a realistic description of the mountain, but also as an important concept in Buddhism, which is used to depict the illusory essence of nature and phenomena world. And “emptiness” is a common theme in Wang Wei’s poetry, such as the hibiscus flower blooming in an empty valley in his poem *Xinyi Wu*. A lot of things in his poems may serve as metaphors with connotation.

In Buddhism, “emptiness” is the essence of this world. In this sense, all things do not exist as independent, self-contained entities in the reality, but as secondary products of causality when prerequisites of their existence are sufficient. In other words, things will turn to the state of “emptiness” and disappear, if conditions do not meet the causality of their existence. From this perspective, Wang Wei stresses the nature “emptiness” of this mountain, which suggests that every phenomenon in it is ephemeral and insubstantial, such as the sound of voice and returning light.

However, the poet also takes an opposite approach to enforcing the reflection on the relation between cause and effect. Take the sound of voice as an example. No doubt that the sound of voice must be made out of human behaviors, but the poem begins with a straightforward statement that “on the empty mountain, no one is seen.” Thus, readers would feel confused and then hard to understand and interpret this couplet, due to a contradiction between the senses of vision and hearing.

And the persistence of a phenomenon remains questionable, considering the transient nature of the real world. Without a suitable condition, nothing can last for long. The emergence of these phenomena relies on a realization of specific agent, time, and space; for instance, the returning light enters the deep forest only if it is at dusk. In the daytime, sunlight is screened out by the dense foliage in a forest. Furthermore, the green moss which grows in a dark and humid environment could be only exposed to light at this specific time. This is the reason why so many readers regard the last couplet as a highlight of the whole poem, for it is not only a close observation of a trivial yet meaningful scene in nature, but a vivid depiction of the very moment which best unfolds Buddhist conception of “emptiness.” From this perspective of understanding, even though “empty” seems an ordinary word used in everyday life, it actually functions as the eye of the whole poem and an embodiment of Wang Wei’s Buddhist thoughts.

To Chinese poems, readers can comprehend ambiguity caused by metaphors from the perspective of appreciation and interpretation instead of a linguistic analysis. Metaphors take effect as a medium in the form of signs, and the understanding of which requires a mastery of relevant knowledge and allusions. So readers cannot benefit from an analytical approach of language, if they aim to fully grasp the profound meaning, the subtle connotation, and its historical framework of a poem. Take the example of the character “empty” again. To common readers, it is sufficient enough to understand this sentence in the sense of its literal meaning. And the whole poem appears to be a coherent and effective narrative. To readers who know Buddhist theories, however, the meaning of “empty” get extended to a degree that the poem is closer to a religious expression rather than a literary product. The character “empty” not only echoes the nature of the phenomena “sound of voice” and “returning light,” but also enhance a religious implication and aesthetic value in this work. Accordingly, ambiguity is not a device solely created by author him/herself, but a conspiracy of both author and reader. The more you know before reading a poem, the more it reveals to you.

B. Second Type of Ambiguity

Second, ambiguity of a poem can also arise from a disorder of syntax, that the second type of ambiguity emerges “when two or more meanings are resolved into one.” [13] According to Empson, this type of ambiguity is a representation of the complexity of

logics rather than of thoughts. Syntax is the rule of connecting words in a sentence, but in practice, a structure of sentence is flexible and even against rules. In reality, readers largely rely on phrases instead of words to think; so they try best to find out the “forces” that hold all kinds of elements together and thusly creates a complete and understandable sentence.

In English, strict rules of logics and grammar are extremely important, for the application of this inflectional language demands a clarification of the subject-predictive relationship and all sorts of sentence constituents. Chinese, as an isolated language, is different. To meet the formal and tonal requirement of a regulated poem, ancient Chinese poets consciously simplify or delete certain elements in a sentence, such as function words, conjunctions, and even verbs and content words. These words are supposed to possess grammatical significance or represent certain grammatical relations. Once getting rid of these words, a sentence appears to be more concise in characters, at the cost of an obscurity of the relationship between the remnant words.

The way of constructing a sentence is not to suggest a “correct and only” way to interpret a poem, no matter whether an author makes it consciously or not. After finishing a work, authors leave the right of interpretation to readers, who participate in the production of meaning in a different yet indispensable way. Considering that an uncertainty of its content is caused by a lack of strict grammatical rules in a Chinese poem, the role of readers changes from a pure recipient to a secondary author of artworks accordingly.

In this condition, unlike Li Shangyin’s poetic device by which he makes an implicit expression and ambiguous signification and thusly creates a contradictory and undecided sense of feeling, Wang’s rendering is clear and refreshing. Only one artificial device Wang utilized is the suspense in the first couplet: on the empty mountain, no one is seen; but the sound of voice is heard. No doubt that the poet deliberately applies this paradox here and it is one of the reasons why this poem differs from other poems describing natural sceneries. Hence, the multiple ways of translating and understanding Wang Wei’s *Lu Zhai* results from the a logical and grammatical disorder as well as a conscious application of this special language use in the work.

Besides, in *Lu Zhai*, the first challenge a translator encounters is a lack of a narrator, namely, this poem is in whose voice. Because the first couplet only tells what the narrator has seen and heard without mentioning the name or appellation of him/her, and the second couplet depicts a play of light and shadow in a forest. To solve this problem, the early English translators, like W.J.B. Fletcher, C.J. Chen and Michael Bullock, attempted to add the subject “I,” as the first-person narrator, into the English versions in order to the poem more coherent and understandable. [14] All of them adopted the word “I” explicitly and straightforwardly, and Chen & Bullock even repeated this word in their translation of the first couplet – “I meet no one, I hear only

the echo” -- despite an apparent lack of narrator in the original poem. No text in this book explains why the three translators made this decision; but we may consider that this could be a tradition in English culture that “I” should be the narrator if a poet does not offer any alternative, or just because the translators take it for granted in order to make the work complete. No matter which is the right answer, we have to confess that the addition of “I” changes the content and the tranquil atmosphere created by Wang Wei to some extent.

Three pieces of translations by Chinese as we can see, on the contrary, avoid using the first-person narrator but a more neutral substitute – “man” or “one.” This device not only corresponds to the original Chinese text, but also prevents the peaceful mood from being disturbed by subject’s behavior or even existence. Moreover, in order to remain the original meaning and mood in Wang’s poem, they have to find a way to escape the direct designation of the narrator, and that’s why a passive voice is always employed in their translations. In both James Liu and Wai-lim Yip’s translations, for example, “no man is seen, but voices of men are heard,” they adopt a passive voice in the two places mentioning people, exist or not, which is not common in English poems but acting as a special device here. In Chang’s piece, which was selected by Weinberger and Paz as a failure of the pursuit of originality, however, he only puts the word “man” to the object place in the first sentence, and uses the word “one” as the narrator in the first couplet. Slightly differentiating from the first two Chinese translators, Chang undermines the traces of the first-person narrator by replacing the “I” with the “one” so that the first couplet tends to give a more general description rather than a subjective one.

No evidence proves that a tendency to use the passive voice and neutral substitute among Western translators was a direct response to the device favored by Chinese ones. But the influence of this special treatment of Chinese poetry cannot be denied, which readers can clearly sense from the selected translations in the book. In Kenneth Rexroth’s piece, he deliberately employs so many words and phrases, such as “wilderness,” “a far off voice,” and “slip through,” that the poem almost turns to his own creation instead of a reliable translation of a Chinese poem. Nevertheless, he does not follow his English predecessors to indicate who is the narrator explicitly, but suggests the existence of a narrator-observer by stating “where nobody ever comes.” As what Weinberger and Paz point out, Rexroth indeed created an implicit narrator but without using the first person. Such a genius who keeps a balance between two uses of language and two kinds of cultures! In the translation of the second sentence, he even manages to avoid mentioning any human at all by changing the way of expression in English but keeping the original meaning at best.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ambiguity is a remarkable device as well as aesthetic value in Chinese poems. It functions as an intermediate zone between specific content and implicit connotation of a poem. By creating ambiguity, an

author displays the power of language when enriching a concise expression with nuanced meanings and thusly offers a possibility of multi-layered interpretations. But readers and translators are not always in a passive position, or could only understand the work in the same way with the author’s. Ambiguity enables readers to imagine, to modify the way of its rendering, to find their own ways to interpret a work.

In this sense, this feature of poems is one of the main reasons why Chinese and Western scholars make such distinct approaches to understand and translate this short poem. On the one hand, this distinction results from a cultural difference, for Chinese scholars are naturally more familiar with certain metaphors and allusions in a Chinese poem while neglecting religious analysis to certain extent. On the other hand, Chinese, as a language, differs from English due to a huge discrepancy of grammatical or syntactical rules between the two languages. As in the poem *Lu Zhai*, the poet never points out that who is the narrator of this poem and nor does he need to do so, because Chinese allows a lack of subject or a questionable subject. In contrast, it would cause great confusion and misleading if an English writer does not make a statement with clear sentence constituents. As a result, the early English translators had to add the omitted parts in order to make this poem “complete” and “coherent.” But gradually, with the development of understanding in terms of language use and cultural difference, both Chinese and Western scholars tend to translate and interpret this poem in similar ways, such as an agreement of the use of passive voice. Meanwhile, readers still have their own place in the reproduction of this poem, for their personal experiences shape the ways to read and interpret a poem throughout different times

APPENDIX

The Form of the Deer

So lone seem the hills; there is no one in sight there.
But whence is the echo of voices I hear?
The rays of the sunset pierce slanting the forest,
And in their reflection green mosses appear.

(Tr. W.J.B Fletcher)

The Deer Enclosure

On the lonely mountain
I meet no one,
I hear only the echo
of human voices.
At an angle the sun’s rays
enter the depths of the wood,
And shine
upon the green moss.

(Tr. C.J. Chen & Michael Bullock)

Deep in the Mountain Wilderness

Deep in the mountain wilderness
Where nobody ever comes
Only once in a great while

Something like the sound of a far off voice.
The low rays of the sun
Slip through the dark forest,
And gleam again on the shadowy moss.

(Tr. Kenneth Rexroth)

On the empty mountains no one can be seen,
But human voices are heard to resound.
The reflected sunlight pierces the deep forest
And fails again upon the mossy ground.

(Tr. James J.Y. Liu)

The Deer Park

Not the shadow on a man on the deserted hill –
And yet one hears voices speaking;
Deep in the seclusion of the woods,
Stray shafts of the sun pick out the green moss.

(Tr. H.C. Chang)

Deer Enclosure

Empty mountain: no man is seen,
But voices of men are heard.
Sun's reflection reaches into the woods
And shines upon the green moss.

(Tr. Wai-lim Yip)

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