

A Comparative Study on the Translation of Rhetorical Devices in Zhang Ji's *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night* — A Case Study of Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang's and Xu Yuanchong's English Translations

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Abstract

Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night by Zhang Ji is a well-known seven-character quatrain of Tang poetry, which abounds in various rhetorical devices. Drawing on Yu Lisan's three-dimensional rhetorical classification theory including phonological rhetorical devices, lexical rhetorical devices and structural rhetorical devices, this paper conducts a comparative study on the English versions produced by Xu Yuanchong and Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang. It focuses on analyzing how the two translators handle phonological rhetorical devices, lexical rhetorical devices and structural rhetorical devices in the poem. The comparison demonstrates that Xu Yuanchong prioritizes poetic aesthetic reproduction, recreating rhyme-rhythm beauty, implicit imagery and flexible sentence layout, while Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang stick to literal faithfulness, preserving original semantic information and formal correspondence while giving less weight to poetic musicality. Their divergent translation choices stem from distinct translation purposes and intended audiences. Both versions achieve different balances between rhetorical fidelity and target-text readability.

Keywords: *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night*, rhetorical devices, Yu Lisan's rhetorical theory, poetry translation, comparative translation study

1. Introduction

Zhang Ji (approximately 715-779) was a representative poet in the Mid-Tang Dynasty. His quatrain *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night* enjoys enduring reputation among Tang poems. With merely twenty-eight Chinese characters, the poem skillfully blends scenery depiction and inner emotional expression. It paints a midnight waterside scene: setting moon, cawing crows, frosty sky, river maples, fishing lanterns and

distant temple bells, conveying the traveller's homesickness and melancholy. The whole piece is compact in form, melodious in sound and rich in rhetorical techniques, making rhetoric the core carrier of its artistic conception.

Owing to its high literary status, *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night* has been rendered into English by numerous translators. Among existing translations, Xu Yuanchong's version and Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang's version are the

most representative. Xu Yuanchong's translation serves the goal of spreading Chinese poetic aesthetics to foreign readers, guided by his "three beauties" principle. Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang's translation belongs to the official translation project of Chinese classics, aiming at objectively introducing Chinese literary works to the English-speaking world. Given translators' different theoretical orientations, translation purposes and target readership, these two translations provide valuable materials for comparative rhetorical translation research.

Though short, this Tang quatrain is loaded with diverse rhetorical devices, which create major obstacles in poetry translation. Translators are required not only to transfer literal meaning between two languages, but also to reconstruct rhetorical effects embedded in sound, word choice and syntactic arrangement for target-language recipients. Influenced by personal translation beliefs, translators often adopt disparate strategies when coping with the same rhetorical phenomena, which further leads to varied effects of artistic and cultural transmission.

This research takes Yu Lisan's classification of rhetorical devices as its analytical framework. It compares Xu's and the Yangs' renderings of phonological rhetorical devices, lexical rhetorical devices and structural rhetorical devices within *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night*. It explores their respective translation strategies and rhetorical reproduction effects. The purpose of this paper is to offer references for rhetorical reproduction in English translation of classical Chinese poetry.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Definition of Rhetorical Devices in Chinese-English Translation Studies

Rhetorical devices occupy a central position in classical Chinese poetry, since they are essential tools for poets to create imagery, rhythm and emotional atmosphere. In translation studies, the rendering of rhetorical devices directly determines whether target readers can grasp the original poem's aesthetic charm.

Chinese scholar Yu Lisan put forward a systematic classification of rhetorical devices in his monograph *English-Chinese Rhetoric Comparison and Translation* published in 1985. He points out that rhetorical devices refer to various language techniques adopted by writers or poets to strengthen expressive force and artistic appeal (Yu, 1985). Unlike traditional research which lists

scattered rhetorical figures such as metaphor or antithesis, Yu divides rhetorical phenomena into three large groups according to linguistic levels: phonological rhetorical devices, lexical rhetorical devices and structural rhetorical devices. This tripartite division focuses on how rhetoric is realized through sound, vocabulary and syntax, which is highly suitable for contrastive analysis between Chinese and English texts.

Other scholars have offered complementary viewpoints. Newmark (2001) mentions that poetic rhetoric covers sound effects, figurative word meaning and syntactic patterning, and word-for-word translation often damages rhetorical effects. Nida (1993) emphasizes that rhetorical equivalence requires translators to consider target readers' aesthetic habits rather than merely pursue formal correspondence. Chinese researchers such as Liao Qiyi (2000) note that many rhetorical devices in ancient Chinese poetry are culture-rooted, so complete equivalence is hard to obtain in target language. Chen Tian (2016) further argues that rhetorical phenomena are not confined to single words; they can also be reflected in line arrangement and textual layout.

To sum up, rhetorical devices in classical Chinese poetry possess two prominent characteristics. First, they are multi-level: rhetorical effects can be generated by phonetic features, lexical connotations or syntactic organizations. Second, rhetoric is aesthetic-oriented: rhetorical expressions carry poetic emotion and artistic conception rather than delivering plain factual information. All these features bring challenges for poetry translators.

2.2 The Classification of Rhetorical Devices by Yu Lisan

To conduct systematic textual analysis, clear classification criteria are indispensable. Many scholars have proposed different categorizations for rhetorical figures. Western rhetoric tends to separate tropes and schemes, while traditional Chinese rhetoric research often enumerates individual rhetorical types.

Breaking this pattern, Yu Lisan establishes a cross-linguistic classification oriented toward translation practice. He sorts rhetorical devices into three categories: phonological rhetorical devices, lexical rhetorical devices and structural rhetorical devices (Yu, 1985).

Phonological rhetorical devices: Rhetoric achieved by phonetic means, including rhyme,

rhythm, onomatopoeia and tonal patterns, which produce musical quality for literary texts.

Lexical rhetorical devices: Rhetoric realized by word selection, figurative meaning, imagery and emotional connotation, such as metaphor, metonymy and affective diction.

Structural rhetorical devices: Rhetoric formed by syntactic patterns, sentence arrangement and textual organization, including parallelism, juxtaposition of scenes and semantic progression between lines.

Yu's three-category framework covers sound, meaning and form of literary works. Its criteria are consistent and operable, and it has been widely adopted in Chinese-English contrastive rhetoric and translation criticism. Accordingly, the present study adopts Yu's tripartite system to examine rhetorical reproduction in two English versions of the Tang poem.

2.3 Previous Studies on the Translation of *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night*

Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night has long attracted translation researchers. Existing papers mostly compare multiple English versions from the perspectives of translation aesthetics, imagery transmission or the "three-beauty" theory. Many researchers comment on Xu Yuanchong's rhyming strategy and the Yangs' literal-translation tendency.

Nevertheless, most existing studies select scattered rhetorical examples without applying a unified systematic rhetorical classification. Few researches take Yu Lisan's framework about phonological rhetorical devices, lexical rhetorical devices and structural rhetorical devices to carry out full-scale rhetorical comparison. This paper fills this research gap and provides a fresh analytical perspective for translation criticism of this classic Tang poem.

3. The Two English Translations of *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night*

Among numerous English translations of *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night*, Xu Yuanchong's version and Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang's version are the most representative. The two translations differ greatly in translator identity, translation purpose and adopted strategies.

3.1 Xu Yuanchong's Translation

Xu Yuanchong is a distinguished Chinese poetry translator. He has devoted decades to rendering Chinese classical poetry into English and French.

His well-known "three-beauty" theory requires poetry translation to pursue beauty in sense, beauty in sound and beauty in form at the same time.

In terms of translation strategy, Xu Yuanchong advocates aesthetic optimization. On the premise of preserving core original meaning, he will adjust diction, rhyme and sentence patterns to conform to English poetic conventions, so that foreign readers can appreciate the aesthetic charm of Chinese poetry. His translation is as follows:

Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night

At moonset cry the crows, streaking the frosty sky;
Dimly lit fishing boats' neath maples sadly lie.
Beyond the city wall, from Temple of Cold Hill
Bells break the ship-borne roamer's dream and midnight still.

3.2 Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang's Translation

Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang form a legendary translating couple in China's translation history. From the 1940s onward, they translated large quantities of Chinese classics into English, including *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Their translations are celebrated for faithfulness to source text content and cultural information.

Their dominant strategy is foreignization supplemented by domestication. They prefer literal translation and avoid excessive subjective rewriting. They intend to present original Chinese literary features honestly to English-speaking audiences. Their translation is shown below:

A Night-Mooring Near Maple Bridge

Moon going down, crow cawing, frost filling all over the sky,
Maple-trees near the river and torch in the fisher opposite the sleeping anxiety.
From the temple on Cold Mountain out of Suzhou, The midnight ding touches my boat.

3.3 General Features of the Two Versions

Xu's product is a typical metrical poetic translation. It employs end-rhyme and compact poetic lines, prioritizing artistic appeal. By contrast, the Yangs' version reads more like poetic prose. It sticks closely to original word order and semantic content, yet sacrifices metrical musicality. These two translations stand for two mainstream orientations of Chinese classical poetry translation: aesthetic-oriented translation and information-faithful translation.

4. Comparative Analysis of Rhetorical Devices

in the Two English Translations

When translating *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night*, Xu Yuanchong and Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang follow different translation principles, generating obvious divergences. This paper applies Yu Lisan's rhetorical classification and divides rhetorical phenomena into phonological, lexical and structural groups. Typical examples are selected for side-by-side comparison to examine translators' strategies and rhetorical reproduction effects.

4.1 Phonological Rhetorical Devices

Phonological rhetorical devices refer to rhetorical effects created by sound elements, including rhyme, rhythm and onomatopoeia (Yu, 1985). The original Tang poem uses end-rhyme and sound-silence contrast to build a desolate midnight atmosphere. Two representative phonological rhetorical phenomena are analyzed below.

Example 1: Original rhyming pattern of the quatrain. Source Text: 月落乌啼霜满天，江枫渔火对愁眠。姑苏城外寒山寺，夜半钟声到客船。

Xu's Translation: At moonset cry the crows, streaking the frosty sky; Dimly lit fishing boats 'neath maples sadly lie. Beyond the city wall, from Temple of Cold Hill Bells break the ship-borne roamer's dream and midnight still.

Yang's Translation: Moon going down, crow cawing, frost filling all over the sky, Maple-trees near the river and torch in the fisher opposite the sleeping anxiety. From the temple on Cold Mountain out of Suzhou, The midnight ding touches my boat.

The original Chinese poem adopts end-rhyme: "tian", "mian", "chuan", producing soft, lingering musicality matching the traveller's sorrowful mood. Xu Yuanchong adopts English poetic end-rhyme "sky / lie", "hill / still". He rearranges word order such as "At moonset cry the crows" to achieve rhythmic flow. He reconstructs phonological rhetoric so target readers can sense the musical feature of Tang poetry. By comparison, the Yangs give up intentional end-rhyme. They stack participial structures "Moon going down, crow cawing, frost filling" to list scenes. They restore the factual content of each image, yet lose the metrical phonological rhetoric of the original regulated verse. Xu's strategy aims at recreating poetic musicality, while the Yangs prioritize factual information over phonetic-aesthetic effects.

Example 2: Onomatopoeia implied in "乌啼" and "钟声". Source Text: 月落乌啼霜满天 夜半钟声到客船。

Xu's Translation: "cry the crows"; "Bells break the ship-borne roamer's dream and midnight still." Yang's Translation: "crow cawing"; "The midnight ding touches my boat."

"乌啼" (crows' cries) and "钟声" (temple bell sound) belong to phonological rhetoric: sounds set off the deep quiet of midnight. Xu uses "cry the crows" to suggest bleak emotional colouring instead of plain onomatopoeia. "Bells break ... midnight still" highlights the contrast between bell sound and surrounding silence, reproducing the original phonological rhetorical atmosphere. The Yangs employ plain description "crow cawing" and the direct onomatopoeia word "ding". They record sound fact literally, but fail to convey the rhetorical contrast between sound and stillness. For phonological rhetorical devices, Xu focuses on reconstructing aesthetic sound-effect; the Yangs focus on recording sound facts.

4.2 Lexical Rhetorical Devices

Lexical rhetorical devices are built on word meanings, imagery and emotional connotation, including figurative diction, imagery and affective implication (Yu, 1985). This poem relies heavily on imagery words to express the traveller's melancholy without direct sentimental statements. Two typical examples are discussed as follows.

Example 1: 霜满天. Source Text: 月落乌啼霜满天。

Xu's Translation: streaking the frosty sky Yang's Translation: frost filling all over the sky.

"霜满天" is a classic lexical rhetorical imagery. It does not literally mean frost fills the whole sky; it creates a psychological feeling of coldness and desolation spreading through the night air. Xu chooses "streaking the frosty sky". The verb "streaking" depicts the diffuse, piercing cold feeling, grasping the implicit rhetorical imagery beyond literal meaning. The Yangs translate it as "frost filling all over the sky", which only renders surface literal meaning. The psychological and emotional rhetorical implication contained in this imagery is lost. Xu excavates implicit rhetorical connotation of lexical items; the Yangs stick to denotative literal meaning.

Example 2: 愁眠 & 客船 Source Text: 江枫渔火对愁眠 客船。

Xu's Translation: "sadly lie"; "ship-borne roamer's dream" Yang's Translation: "sleeping anxiety"; "my boat".

"愁眠" refers to the sleepless traveller burdened with sorrow; "客船" symbolizes the wandering outsider. These two phrases carry strong lexical rhetorical emotion. Xu does not state sorrow directly. "sadly lie" projects the traveller's melancholy onto fishing-boat scenery; "ship-borne roamer" highlights the identity of displaced traveller. The rhetorical skill of "scenery embodying emotion" is reproduced. The Yangs translate "愁眠" into "sleeping anxiety". The feeling of sorrow is expressed in a direct, explicit way, destroying the implicit lexical rhetorical feature of ancient Chinese poetry. "my boat" weakens the rhetorical connotation of "traveller-stranger". In lexical rhetorical processing, Xu pursues imagery implication and artistic-conception equivalence; the Yangs emphasize transparent literal information transmission.

4.3 Structural Rhetorical Devices

Structural rhetorical devices are realized by sentence patterns, line arrangement and semantic progression between verses (Yu,1985). This seven-character quatrain follows the traditional Tang-poem structure: the first two lines describe multiple juxtaposed night scenes; the last two lines shift spatial perspective and introduce temple bells to deepen the traveller's sadness. Such scene-arrangement and semantic transition form structural rhetoric. Two examples are analyzed below.

Example 1: Juxtaposed scene structure in the first line. Source Text: 月落乌啼霜满天 (three scene images stacked in one line).

Xu's Translation: At moonset cry the crows, streaking the frosty sky; Yang's Translation: Moon going down, crow cawing, frost filling all over the sky.

The original Chinese line piles three images: moon-setting, crows-cawing, frost-filling-sky, without conjunctions. This noun-dominant juxtaposition belongs to typical structural rhetoric of Chinese poetry. The Yangs strictly imitate this juxtaposition pattern by three present-participle phrases "Moon going down, crow cawing, frost filling". Formally they correspond to source-text structure, yet the English sentence lacks proper syntactic predicate, resulting in loose grammatical logic in target text. Xu reorganizes these scene fragments into one

complete English poetic clause. He does not rigidly copy Chinese paratactic structure, but retains the semantic juxtaposition of three scenes and conforms to English syntactic norms. In this way he achieves flexible reproduction of structural rhetoric.

Example 2: Semantic progression of the whole poem: from scenery to emotional resonance Source Text: first two lines: night-scene description; last two lines: temple bells strike traveller's boat.

Xu's Translation: At moonset cry the crows, streaking the frosty sky; Dimly lit fishing boats' neath maples sadly lie. Beyond the city wall, from Temple of Cold Hill Bells break the ship-borne roamer's dream and midnight still.

Yang's Translation: Moon going down, crow cawing, frost filling all over the sky, Maple-trees near the river and torch in the fisher opposite the sleeping anxiety. From the temple on Cold Mountain out of Suzhou, The midnight ding touches my boat.

The structural rhetoric of the whole quatrain lies in its semantic flow: objective night-scene depiction gradually leads to the traveller's inner melancholy triggered by midnight bells. Xu's translation keeps this logical progression: first two lines depict outer scenery; the third line introduces location of Cold-Hill Temple; the fourth line bell sound intrudes into roamer's dream. Subject-predicate relations are complete, and textual coherence is maintained. The Yangs preserve line-by-line formal correspondence, but excessive literal imitation produces awkward phrases such as "torch in the fisher opposite the sleeping anxiety". The semantic connection between scene and inner feeling becomes obscure. Concerning structural rhetorical devices, Xu makes flexible adjustments to guarantee semantic coherence while keeping original logic; the Yangs pursue rigid formal correspondence at the cost of target-text syntactic fluency.

5. Conclusion

Based on Yu Lisan's three-dimensional rhetorical theory covering phonological, lexical and structural rhetorical devices, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of Xu Yuanchong's and Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang's English translations of *Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night*. Major findings are summarized as follows.

In terms of phonological rhetorical devices, Xu

Yuanhong reconstructs rhyme and rhythmic beauty, restoring the musical rhetorical effect of Tang regulated poetry. Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang mainly record sound-related facts, abandoning metrical phonological rhetoric.

In terms of lexical rhetorical devices, Xu excavates implicit imagery and affective connotation behind source-text words and realizes the reproduction of artistic conception. The Yangs render literal denotation of vocabulary, yet some implicit rhetorical meanings are lost.

In terms of structural rhetorical devices, Xu retains the original poem's semantic progression and makes proper syntactic adaptation for English poetic norms. The Yangs stick to line-by-line formal imitation, which sometimes brings awkward English syntax and weakens textual coherence.

These differences arise from translators' distinct translation purposes and anticipated readership. Xu aims to deliver Chinese poetic aesthetic charm to foreign readers. The Yangs commit themselves to faithfully transmitting original literary and cultural information. Neither version is absolutely superior. They achieve different balances between rhetorical fidelity and target-text readability.

This study proves that Yu Lisan's tripartite rhetorical classification provides an operable analytical tool for classical-poetry translation criticism. For poetry translators, it is insufficient to merely transfer literal meaning. They ought to consider multi-level rhetorical phenomena on phonological, lexical and structural planes.

This research has its limitations: only two translations of one single Tang poem are investigated. Further studies may expand the corpus to more poems and more translated versions, so as to further test the applicability of Yu Lisan's rhetorical theory in poetry translation practice. Besides, future research may combine reader-response theory to investigate how target-language readers receive different rhetorical translation strategies.

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