

## **A Brief Discussion on the Features of Classical Chinese Poetry and Rhetorical Strategies in English Translation**

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**Abstract:** Classical Chinese poetry, as an emotional vehicle, employs vivid, concise, and rhythmically musical language to convey poets' intense emotions and imaginative visions. When translating poetry into English, it is crucial to first grasp its essential characteristics. Building on a thorough understanding of the original text, translators should utilize rhetorical devices such as metaphor, personification, and metonymy to enhance imagery and resonate with readers.

**Keywords:** Poetry; Features; English Translation; Rhetoric

### **1. Introduction**

Classical Chinese poetry, a literary form prioritizing emotional expression, utilizes metaphors, personification, and metonymy to encapsulate poets' profound sentiments and imaginative landscapes. Its language is characterized by vividness, conciseness, rhythm, and musicality. Successful poetic translation demands not only accurate comprehension of the poem's content, emotions, stylistic nuances, and historical context but also a deep understanding of its fundamental features. Without these, translations risk losing both the poem's aesthetic essence and its accessibility to target readers.

## **2. Key Features of Classical Chinese Poetry**

### **2.1 Intense Emotional Expression**

William Hazlitt, the 19th-century British critic, asserted: "Terror is poetry, hope is poetry, love is poetry, hate is poetry; contempt, jealousy, regret, admiration, wonder, pity, despair, or madness—all are poetry." Poetry serves as an outpouring of the poet's emotions, with sentiment itself becoming the subject of poetic expression.

### **2.2 Rich Imagination**

Poetry manifests as emotional catharsis. Poets transcend temporal, spatial, and existential boundaries by imbuing lifeless objects with vitality and sentiment, thereby crafting unique imagery to convey intense emotions. Translators must fully grasp the original poem's imaginative landscape and artistic conception to recreate equivalent resonance in target readers.

### **2.3 Linguistic Conciseness with Profound Meaning**

Classical Chinese poetry employs exceptionally condensed language, where minimal words convey maximal meaning. Translators must decode these layered significances while preserving linguistic brevity. This requires concise phrasing, elimination of redundancies, and avoidance of complex syntax, ensuring readers grasp rich meanings through economical expression.

### **2.4 Musical Rhythm and Rhyme**

Poetic language thrives on rhythm and musicality. The cadence, dictated by content, not only creates aesthetic pleasure but also enhances emotional expression. Translators must carefully reconstruct rhythmic patterns and rhyme schemes to preserve this musical dimension.

## **3. Rhetorical Strategies in Poetic Translation**

Classical Chinese poetry enchants through vivid diction and nuanced imagery, achieved via sophisticated rhetorical devices. As Yuan Mei noted in *Suiyuan Shihua*: "All poetry must make words stand on paper, not lie flat"—emphasizing the need for dynamic, animated language. Below are translation approaches for key rhetorical devices:

### **3.1 Metaphor in Image-Building**

Chinese poetry abounds in fresh, vivid metaphors—particularly potent in character

portrayal. When translating metaphors, prioritize literal translation to preserve original imagery, allowing target readers equivalent aesthetic experiences.

“*Fu De Zi Jun Zhi Chu Yi*” (*Since Your Departure*) written by Zhang Jiuling, a poet of the Tang Dynasty, belongs to the miscellaneous song lyrics of the Yuefu poetry tradition. This poem portrays the image of a pining wife gradually withering from longing. The opening lines depict a husband who has departed on a distant journey and remains absent, leaving the wife too heartbroken to return to her loom. The last two lines employ a vivid metaphor to capture the wife’s inner torment. Her ceaseless yearning for her husband has left her face gaunt and pallid, akin to the moon transitioning from fullness to a waning crescent. The translation reads as follows:

*Since you, sir, went away,  
I have not returned to tend my fading loom.  
For thinking of you,  
I am like the moon at the full,  
That nightly wanes and loses its bright  
splendor.*

"I am like the moon at the full" literally means "I resemble the full moon". The subsequent line, "That nightly wanes" mirrors the original text. Superficially, it describes the moon's gradual diminishment, but metaphorically, it reflects the lady's emotional anguish and physical decline due to her longing for her absent husband. Her face grows gaunt as her sorrow deepens night after night, much like the moon transitioning from fullness to a waning crescent. By adopting a literal translation of the poem's metaphorical imagery, the translation faithfully reconstructs the poet's intended meaning, allowing English readers to experience the same linguistic elegance and emotional resonance as the original.

### 3.2 Personification in Characterization

Personification enables poets to project human qualities onto nature. While some anthropomorphic nuances may be diluted in translation, the core imagery should remain intact.

“*Chun Yu*” (Spring Rain) is a poem written by Du Fu of the Tang Dynasty during his stay at the thatched cottage by the Huanhua Stream in Chengdu. Using personification, the poet portrays the spring rain as a considerate force that seems to understand human desires,

celebrating its gentle and empathetic nature. The translation reads as follows:

*A good rain falling just when it should in  
springtime;  
Riding on the wind it fills a whole night,  
Soaking the land with its goodness;  
Clouds hang heavily over country paths;  
A lone light shines from a passing boat;  
Morning and I see a damp redness on the  
branches,  
Laden down with flowers.*

The first line is translated as “when it should in spring time” (the season when it ought to arrive). Similarly, the lines “*Riding on the wind it fills a whole night, Soaking the land with its goodness;*” exemplify this anthropomorphic technique. Here, the rain is endowed with human-like agency—stealthily arriving under cover of darkness and tenderly nurturing life without fanfare. Though the personified nuance is somewhat diminished in the translation, the core imagery remains intact. The spring rain’s subtlety and selflessness—its quiet, all-encompassing nourishment—are still vividly reproduced, preserving the essence of the original poetic vision.

### 3.3 Imagery Constructed Through Metonymy

Metonymy refers to the rhetorical device of substituting a concept with something closely related to it, often using a part to represent the whole or vice versa. Widely employed in classical Chinese poetry, metonymy enhances conciseness, vividness, and stylistic variety while avoiding repetitive phrasing. Though crucial for characterization, metonymy in classical poetry is often subtle and culturally specific. Direct translation may confuse readers unfamiliar with the contextual nuances, necessitating a focus on paraphrasing to convey intended meanings.

“*Chang Hen Ge*” (*The song of Everlasting sorrow*) is a long narrative poem by Bai Juyi, a poet of the Tang Dynasty, depicting the tragic romance between Emperor Xuanzong and his consort Yang Yuhuan. The translation reads:

*Yet with such beauty bestowed by fate,  
How could she remain unknown?  
One day she was chosen  
To attend the emperor.  
Glancing back and smiling,  
She revealed a hundred charms—  
All the powdered ladies of the six palaces*

At once seemed dull and colorless.

The lines “Glancing back and smiling, she revealed a hundred charms; / All the powdered ladies of the six palaces at once seemed dull and colorless.” exemplify metonymy. Here, “fendai”, literally meaning “cosmetics” (powder for the face and ink for eyebrows), is used to symbolize the palace ladies who adorned themselves with such products.

The translation diverges slightly from the original: “fendai” is rendered as “powdered ladies” rather than a literal “powder and paint.” This choice serves dual purposes—avoiding confusion among English readers unfamiliar with the metonymic reference while preserving the poem’s aesthetic imagery. By reinterpreting the cosmetics as “powdered ladies” (women who use such adornments), the translation successfully retains Yang Yuhuan’s unparalleled beauty and the contrast between her radiance and the obscured charm of others.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Effective English translation of classical Chinese poetry requires deep comprehension of

source texts and adherence to poetic conventions. Through strategic use of rhetorical devices, translators can preserve linguistic precision, animate textual imagery, and evoke emotional resonance. By faithfully reconstructing the poet’s vision, translated works enable cross-cultural readers to experience both the aesthetic charm and emotional power of classical Chinese poetry.

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