

The Overseas Spread and Acceptance of Bashu Culture Imagery in the English Translation of Tang Poetry

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Abstract: This study analysed the challenges and strategies involved in translating Bashu cultural imagery and elements from Tang poetry into English for English-speaking audiences. The research employed a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative interviews with experienced translators and content analysis of selected English translations of Bashu-related Tang poems. The findings reveal the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by translators. Linguistic and semantic barriers, stemming from the lack of direct equivalents for Bashu-specific terms and concepts in English, posed significant obstacles, often requiring creative and adaptive approaches. The preservation of the original poetic essence and aesthetic appeal was another constant challenge, as translators sought to balance the conveyance of cultural nuances with maintaining the emotive and artistic qualities of the poetry. To address these challenges, translators have employed various strategies, including literal translations, cultural adaptations, and the incorporation of paratextual elements such as explanatory notes, glossaries, and visual aids. However, the findings suggest that the overuse of such contextual information can disrupt the reading experience and undermine the poetic flow. The study highlights the importance of collaborative, interdisciplinary efforts involving translators, sinologists, and cultural experts to ensure the accurate and nuanced representation of Bashu-related imagery and references in English translations. This approach is recognised as enhancing the cultural authenticity and relevance of the translated works.

Keywords: Tang Poetry Translation; Bashu Cultural Imagery; Challenges in English Translation; Semantic Barriers in Bashu; Preservation of Poetic Essence

1. INTRODUCTION

The Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) was an era of literary development in Chinese history (Cao, 2022; Huang, 2021). In particular, the era witnessed significant development of the Tang poetry that distinguished the era in the entire history of the country. The poetry work produced during the period not only has a significant philosophic depth but also the poetic

masterpiece that thus emerged in the era offered readers the evocative imagery and cultural depth and richness (Feng, 2021). The poetry of the era is not only widely read within China, but Zhang and Chen (Chen, 2022) are of the view that it has been translated into different languages across the world, thus enjoying global readership. The global audience who go through such unique poetry creation could get an idea about the cultural element and ethos regarding Chinese culture at the time of the Tang Dynasty (Feng, 2021). The closer analysis of the poetic work produced during the era could, however, exhibit that diverse themes could be found in the poetry, which have been largely associated with different regions of the country. Bashu (which is part of Sichuan province), located in the southwest of the country. Some of the prominent poets of the Tang Dynasty include Wang Wei, Du Fu, and Li Bai. As Bashu has a unique landscape and natural beauty, such factors have significantly influenced the poetry work produced during the Tang Dynasty. Going through the poetry produced during the period by poets like Wang Wei, Du F, and Li Bai, one could experience poetic masterpieces, as such poetry highlights vibrant norms and values, unique landscapes and natural beauty, and culinary traditions (Lin, 2021). Unlike the poetic work produced in other regions and eras, the Bashu poetry exhibits rich cultural tradition (Zhang, 2022). In particular, Zhang and Chen (Zhang & Chen, 2022) are of the view that the poetic work of the era exhibits the unique local custom that Bashu inhabitants were practicing during the Tang Dynasty. Due to the significant popularity of the Bashu poetry, belonging to the Tang Dynasty, different translations of the work have been carried out in the major languages, including English. However, Chen (Chen, 2022) and Wang and Feng (Feng, 2021) are of the view that there are significant challenges that individuals translating the poetic masterpieces have witnessed in the process of communicating the Bashu-related imagery and unique local customs and traditions to global readers. Huang (Huang, 2021) is of the view that individuals who have translated the work could have experienced significant intercultural barriers and contextual impediments while translating the work from Bashu to English, which in turn could have undermined the unique essence and appeal of such poetic masterpieces. This article critically analysed the extent to which Bashu cultural elements in Tang poetry have been effectively translated and received by English-speaking audiences. The article will analyse the unique translation strategies that translators could have utilised in translating the poetic masterpieces of poets including Wang Wei, Du Fu, and Li Bai into the English language while preserving the unique cultural elements, ethos, and imagery exhibited

in such work. On the basis of the analysis carried out in the article, efforts have been directed at what extent the medium of translation has been effectively used for developing a better understanding of the traditional Chinese culture and heritage for the global readers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

There are two major theoretical frameworks that could be used to analyse the translation of Bashu cultural imagery during the Tang Dynasty, which include Skopos theory and the functionalist approach to translation. According to Xinci, (Xinci, 2023), the Skopos theory stressed that while carrying out the translation process, the translator is expected to take into consideration the target audience and the core aims of the translation process. Contrary to this, Vermeer (Vermeer, 1989) has elaborated on the functionalist approach that has been suggested, where the core stress is on the communicative functions so that a reader could grasp the source culture concept and values of the readers that have been thus targeted. This in turn dictates that while carrying out the translation process, the functionalist approach goes beyond the word translation, as the cultural concepts and values are incorporated so that a reader could better grasp the translation. Contrary to this theory, in the Skopos theory, the core focus is on the target audience and the core goals that a translator has been aiming to achieve, which means that greater significance in this approach is given to the reader, rather than the translated text (Xinci, 2023).

2.2 The Unique Bashu Cultural Context

The Bashu region has a unique cultural identity and natural wonders that the region has sustained throughout history. In particular, the region has a unique cultural identity and heritage that has been widely celebrated by the regional poets in their poetic work. A casual look at Bashu poetry produced during the Tang Dynasty could thus reveal that the poetic masterpieces shed a light on the unique culinary traditions followed in the region, the cultural and traditional landscape of the people in the region, and the rich landscape and natural beauty of the region (Feng, 2021). The impact of cultural and contextual factors found during the Tang Dynasty on the Bashu poetry has been extensively analysed, and the majority of writers have found a strong Bashu imagery and motif impact on the Tang poetry. The analysis carried out by Liu (Liu, 2021) stressed that the poets have

admired the natural landscape, particularly the lush green countryside, towering mountains, twisting rivers, and lush bamboo forests. On the other hand, Li (Li, 2024) is of the view that Bashu poetry reveals the rich customs and traditions that people followed during the Tang Dynasty, the folklore, and the unique festivals, including the Lantern Festival and Qingming Festival, that they were then celebrating. Furthermore, Tang,(Tang, 1993) analysis exhibits that the poet during the Tang Dynasty has shown significant admiration for the culinary and cuisine and the agricultural products that were produced at that time. As a result, Zhang (Zhang, 2022) has maintained that from going through Bashu poetry, one could grasp the cultural and imaginative elements that have been masterfully articulated in the poetry work in an artistic manner.

2.3 Challenges Encountered in Translating Bashu Cultural Imagery into the English Language

Although there is extensive literature exhibiting the translation of Bashu poetry in the English language, Huang (Huang, 2021) is of the view that, irrespective of the appropriate translations of the words and meaning, the translation work lacked the direct equivalent in the English language, which in turn has affected the true concepts. An example of this could be the translation of culinary terms that have been used in Bashu poetry, whereas the corresponding words for the same may not be found in the English language. Huang (Huang, 2021) has elaborated that such linguistic and semantic barriers have significantly affected the translation of Bashu poetry to the English language. There are different challenges that translators have been witnessing while translating the work of Bashu poets produced during the Tang Dynasty into English. Wang (Wang, 2022) is of the view that words could be reproduced; however, the contextual connotation of the work could not be fully comprehended from such translations. In particular, Zhaopeng,(Zhaopeng, 2024) has asserted that many of the English translations have lost the Bashu-related imagery. The writer held that although some of the translation work has provided extensive supplementary explanation, due to word limitations, the true meanings have still been sacrificed. In particular, Wang (Wang, 2022) has elaborated that an audience reading the translation could not be familiar with the unique geography of Bashu and its scenic beauty and could thus struggle to develop a core understanding regarding symbolic meaning implied in the poetic expressions. On the other hand, elaborating on the challenges in this regard, Zhu (Zhu, 2022) held that although some precise efforts

concerning the preservation of poetic essence could be witnessed in the case of translation work that has been carried out, the aesthetic appeal that could be experienced in the case of original Bashu poetry has not been reproduced in the English translation. The cultural nuance is thus lacking in the translated work from Bashu to English. Additionally, Zhaopeng, (Zhaopeng, 2024) has asserted that while carrying out the translation from one language to another, a translator confronts the dilemma of navigating the literal rendition and linguistic accuracy. As per the analysis carried out by this author, many translation works have ensured linguistic accuracy; however, the writer believes that this has been done at the cost of artistic and emotive qualities.

2.4 Core Strategies Used by English Translators to Address the Challenges

While translating Bashu poetry from Bashu to English, there are different strategies that the translator has used. According to Zhu (Zhu, 2022), the most widely used approach in this regard is literal translation, whereas a direct equivalent for the Bashu terms and concepts is sought in the English language.

However, Zhaopeng, (Zhaopeng, 2024) is of the view that since direct equivalents for many Bashu terms and concepts have been missing in the English language, translators have been bridging the gaps through more familiar cultural elements in the English language. Cao (Cao, 2022) has criticised such an approach as it could enhance the understanding of the word meaning; however, the true cultural connotations are sacrificed in the process. On the other hand, Wang (Wang, 2022) is of the view that the challenges emerging due to contextual factors and associated knowledge gaps have been addressed by many English translators through the provision of supplementary information such as footnotes, explanatory notes, and glossaries of key terms. Additionally, Li (Li, 2023) has asserted that the use of visual elements, particularly illustrations and photographs, has recently emerged as the core means through which translators have visualised the unique Bashu landscape, cultural practices, culinary practices, and architectural landscape of the region. The writer held that through the use of these visual elements, translators have successfully complemented the textual translation. Furthermore, Feng (Feng, 2021) is of the view that translators are engaging the local writers and sinologists, who usually have deeper understanding of the Bashu-related imagery and such specialised knowledge and competencies are accessed through cross-cultural collaboration with the Chinese writers.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design that has been adopted for analysing the translation of Bashu cultural imagery from Tang poetry into the English language is based on qualitative research methodology. A detailed qualitative analysis, leveraging the content analysis process, has been employed in the study to analyse the strategies and techniques that have been used by different writers while translating Bashu poetry to the English language and the extent to which cultural elements have been preserved in the translation process. While analysing the core contents, particular attention has been placed on noticing the linguistic and semantic approach utilised by the English translator, the use of visual aids, and the engagement of Sinologists and cultural experts to develop a deeper understanding regarding unique cultural attributes of Bashu cultural imagery. The content analysis process has been conducted with the aim of analysing how different translators have been retaining the original poetic essence while at the same time preserving the aesthetic appeal while carrying out the English translation. For this purpose, a few seminal works of Du Fu and Li Bai, 'Visiting the Shu' and 'Climbing the Crane Pavilion,' have been selected and analysed in depth. In addition, a secondary data collection method has also been adopted in this study, which could be termed as interview research. The investigator collected interviews with seven English-speaking readers who have gone through the selected work in the past. The core theme of the interviews was to gauge and evaluate the acceptance and understanding of Bashu cultural imagery in the English translation. The focus of the semi-structured interviews thus conducted was on the level of familiarity and the prior knowledge that such interviewees held regarding Bashu culture, the extent to which such interviewees comprehend and appreciate Bashu imagery from the English translation, and interviewees' perceptions regarding cultural authenticity that the translators have maintained in the translation of Bashu poetry and the extent to which relevance has been maintained. Through adoptions of the qualitative interview that effectively supplement content analysis strategies used in this study, the investigator has been able to access the desired data triangulations.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Translation Strategies Used for Bashu Poetry Translation in English

The analysis of the selected translation could reveal that the English

translator has employed different strategies while translating Bashu poetry into the English language. In this regard, the author who translated Li Bai's poem 'Ascending the Crane Pavilion' has employed literary translation techniques. Xu (Xu, 2022) has worked hard to find out the direct equivalent of Bashu terms. The strategies thus used have helped in maintaining original linguistic and semantic elements. On the other hand, while translating Bashu poetry into the English language, Bynner (Bynner, 2019) has employed the process of cultural adaptation, whereas instead of using the English equivalent, the translator has used a more familiar word in the English language. This could have significantly enhanced the readability. The strategies thus used by the translator could have added value to the readability and understandability of Bashu poetry in the English language; however, while doing so, the cultural imagery has been lost. Frost (Frost, 2021) has also adopted such a strategy, whereas the aesthetic appeal has been preserved; however, this could have been done at the cost of losing the original poetic essence of Bashu poetry. The following passage exemplifies Frost's (Frost, 2021) approach:

“The path to this verdant land is steep and long,
But the wonders of Sichuan make the journey worthwhile.
Lush bamboo groves, misty peaks, and crystal streams—
A true paradise on earth” (Frost, 2021)

Additionally, the analysis of the selected translation work of the English translator revealed that the translator had adopted paratextual elements in their writing. The paratextual elements include explanatory notes, whereas significant detailed notes, glossaries, and footnotes have been provided on numerous occasions to help the reader to develop an appropriate account of the context and cultural elements. In addition, the translator has also included visual illustrations, including photographs to highlight Bashu landscape, culinary practices, cultural norms, and values. An example of this is Li Bai's poem 'Ascending the Crane Pavilion,' whereas Xu (Xu, 2022) has provided extended details so that the writer could get a true image of the cultural and other contextual factors. Although Xu (Xu, 2022) has successfully employed the diverse explanatory notes and visual aids elements, the translation of other selected work failed to deliver the desired expectations in this regard. Strategic partnerships and collaborations could also be witnessed in different circumstances, whereas the native English speakers having interests in Bashu work have collaborated with sinologists and cultural experts to develop an appropriate account of Bashu poetry and cultural imagery. In particular, such collaboration has been witnessed with the core aim of developing a nuanced approach to Bashu cultural imagery

and references. This in turn dictates a transition in the translation work, whereas an interdisciplinary approach has been adopted where individuals having interests in literary work engaged linguists and cultural experts to capture the true meanings and the real essence of the original traditional poets. Although such concepts have been used in different circumstances, to a greater extent, this has not been comprehensively employed in the case of the translation of Bashu poetry of the Tang era into the English language. Only in the case of Bynner (Bynner, 2019) could a slight cooperation of the linguist with the cultural expert be witnessed; however, only limited engagement has been carried out in this regard. Extensive engagement of cross-cultural experts, poets, and linguists could be significantly beneficial, as it could ensure the right poetic expression retaining the poetic theme while at the same time ensuring the aesthetic appeal of the traditional Bashu poetry.

4.2 Reader's Perspective of Bashu Culture Imagery

The majority of the participants of the study acknowledged significant difficulties that the English translators could have witnessed while translating the semantic nuances of Bashu to the English language. One of the participants of the study pointed out that “many of the customs and culinary traditions followed in Bashu have no direct words in English. Even though the writers have employed creative and adaptive approaches in translations, readers could still not comprehend the true nature that could have been elaborated in Bashu”. Another participant of the study elaborated on this by taking an example from Li Bai's poem entitled ‘Ascending the Crane Pavilion.’ The reader pointed out that although words like ancient tree of Shu and fragrant Shu peach blossoms have been translated in English, she is still wondering what shape this could have been taking. Additionally, the readers who have gone through the ancient poetic work produced in Bashu during the Tang Dynasty pointed out that irrespective of the fact that sufficient details regarding the cultural context have been provided to the English readers, they still witnessed significant difficulties in grasping the true nature of cultural imagery and detailed accounts of the context. One of the participants of the study stated such difficulties as, “Without taking complete account of geography, context, and sociocultural factors of Bashu, the insinuation and implications of the poets have been lost.” The participants of the study pointed out that even though additional notes and explanations have been provided on numerous occasions, they have been witnessing difficulties in grasping the true nature of the culture and tradition of Bashu during the Tang Dynasty. Another

participant in the study exemplified this by quoting an example from 'Visiting the Shu,' whereas significant explanatory notes have been provided to the reader; however, the true essence of cultural imagery could still not be imagined by the reader. Furthermore, the participants of the study also acknowledged the significant challenges that the translator could have witnessed in maintaining the right balance between the original poetic essence and the aesthetic appeal. The majority of the participants of the study in this regard were of the view that although the poetic balance has been retained on numerous occasions, while doing so, the aesthetic appeal has been lost. Explanatory notes and details have been provided in different instances; however, the participants of the study believe that such notes have disrupted the flow and emotive impact of the Bashu poetry. One of the participants of the study stated this as "the aesthetic appeal of poetry largely depends on the continuity and rhythm; however, translators have incorporated explanatory notes that add value to understanding the cultural artefacts of the Bashu people; however, significant disruption has been witnessed."

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of the Research

This research analysed how Bashu cultural elements and imagery in the Tang poetry have been effectively translated and received by English-speaking audiences. The findings of the study are based on a mixed-method methodology, whereas qualitative interviews along with analysis of the selected translations of Bashu poetry in the English language have been carried out. As per the core findings and analysis of this study, there are extended challenges that translators could have witnessed in this regard, as the poetic work of Bashu is multifaceted, which requires considerable attention to the contextual, cultural imagery, natural landscape, and culinary practices found in the region during the Tang Dynasty. Different obstacles and impediments witnessed in the translation process have negatively affected the translation work, as there could have been numerous linguistic and semantic barriers. While finding out the direct equivalent of a Bashu-specific term in English, there have been dangers of losing the aesthetic value of poetry. On the other hand, most of the translators have adopted the cultural adaptation strategies, whereas the reader's understanding has been facilitated; however, while doing so, the cultural imagery has been lost. In order to add value to the understandability of the contextual and

cultural factors, some translators have adopted explanatory notes, glossaries, and visual aids; however, it has been found that through such a strategy, readers witnessed significant disruptions, losing the rhythm of poetry. As the preservation of poetic essence and aesthetic appeal are the two diverse goals that translators are confronting, this research stressed the significance of adoptions of an inter-disciplinary approach, whereas collaborations between individuals having expertise in poetry, linguistics, and cultural traditions of the region could help in better addressing the range of challenges that have been currently witnessed in the case of the translation of Bashu poetry into English.

5.2 Implications of Research

The findings of the research offered theoretical, practical, and policy-level implications. From the theoretical perspective, the core finding of the study is that the translation of Bashu poetry, while retaining the cultural imagery, required in-depth considerations, which could be made possible only when a multifaceted approach is adopted. The interdisciplinary approach in this regard is the most favoured approach, where individuals from the field of literature could collaborate with linguistic experts and anthropologists having sound understandings of the unique cultural and contextual factors of Bashu during the Tang Dynasty. Furthermore, the practical implications of the research are that Bashu-related imagery in the English language required in-depth consideration of the relevant contextual factors. The translators, who have successfully developed the understanding of readers regarding the contextual factors, have added to the better understanding of the cultural and contextual factors found during the Tang Dynasty. The policy-level implications of the research are that the Chinese government and policymakers should support the interdisciplinary approach, whereas cross-discipline collaboration between experts belonging to diverse fields could add significant value to the translation work, particularly in exhibiting the true symbolic meaning of the cultural norms and values found in the Bashu poetry.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of this study that need due consideration. The first and foremost limitation of the current study is that the findings of the study are qualitative in nature, which in turn means that this study has been lacking truly scientific and more objective research strategies that could affect the findings of the study. Additionally, interviews with just a

small number of readers have been conducted. The small sample could not be the true representative of the entire population. The same is the case with the core translations that have been selected as the primary sources for analysis in this study. Only the translations of Bynner (Bynner, 2019), Frost (Frost, 2021), and Xu (Xu, 2022) have been selected for this study. A broader selection and wider list of readings could have added greater value to the findings of the study.

5.4 Future Research Directions

For future research in the field, it has been suggested that empirical evidence should be produced regarding Bashu cultural elements in the Tang poetry that has been effectively translated and received by English-speaking audiences through a limited survey. Data collection using a questionnaire could help in finding more objective, scientifically accurate, and replicable results regarding core research issues. Additionally, for the future research, it is also recommended that a large sample should be used, which could help in accessing diverse viewpoints and considerations that could add greater value to the future research findings. In addition, for future research, it is also recommended that a broader reading list should be analysed, which in turn could help in the better comparison of the unique strategies that each of the translators has used and what impact such unique approaches have brought in terms of the range of challenges that translators experienced in translating Bashu work from Tang poetry.

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