

The Construction of Historical Discourse in the English Translation of Classical Chinese Poetry: A Case Study of *Selected Poems from Hunan*¹

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Abstract: Classical Chinese poetry is the crystallization of traditional Chinese culture and carries the time-honored Chinese civilization. The global spread of classical Chinese poetry will promote the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture, which is of positive significance for “telling Chinese stories well and spreading Chinese voices effectively.” Focusing on the historical narrative and identity shaping functions of classical poetry, this paper proposes that the English translation of classical Chinese poetry is a cross-cultural process of historical discourse construction. Taking *Selected Poems from Hunan* as a case study, this paper analyzes three types of subjects (historians, poets, and translators) and three types of objects (historical facts, historical life, and historical spirit) behind the construction of historical discourse in poetic creation and translation. It also expounds the translation concept of “integration while preserving differences” and the translation strategies of “upholding cultural subjectivity, aesthetic reproduction, and empathetic communication” adopted in the translation process, with a view to offering references for the practice of translating classical Chinese poetry into English.

Keywords: classical Chinese poems, English translation, historical discourse, construction

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The English translation of classical Chinese poetry dates back to the 16th century, with critical and academic research evolving alongside translation practices (Xiao 1). In recent years, national policies have offered strong support for this field. The “Opinions on Advancing Work on Ancient Books in the New Era,” issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council, explicitly call for deeper international exchanges and cooperation in this field, as well as the global promotion of ancient books publications. Similarly, the “Action Plan for the High-Quality Development of Philosophy and Social Sciences in Universities Towards 2035,” jointly released by the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee and the Ministry of Education, stresses the importance of boosting international

communication of Chinese discourse and building an open and confident discourse system that combines Chinese and foreign visions (Xie 21). The combination of historical inheritance, theoretical accumulation, and policy guidance has driven the overseas translation of classical Chinese poetry into a new stage of development.

Nevertheless, current scholarship mainly focuses on technical aspects of translation, such as translator subjectivity, target readers' reception, translation strategy selection, and rhetorical transformation. While prior research has thoroughly analyzed the rules of transforming sound, form, and meaning in translation, it largely ignores that translating classical Chinese poetry is essentially an act of constructing historical discourse. This oversight confines translation and cross-cultural communication merely to linguistic conversion, and fails to leverage the value of poetry translation in historical narration and the shaping of cultural identity. "We should, guided by historical materialism, vividly tell stories of China's history, construct a sound Chinese historical discourse system, and effectively disseminate Chinese historical discourse through historical translation" (Qu 26). As China's translation cause shifts its focus from "translating the world" to "translating China" (Huang, *From "Translating the World"* 103–104), new requirements and research prospects have emerged in this field.

Selected Poems from Hunan, compiled by Zhou Liuyan and translated by Peng Tianxiao and Jiang Hongxin, features 100 poems composed between 420 and 1928. The anthology contains 63 poems by Hunan-born poets and 37 by poets from other provinces who sojourned. These poems depict Hunan's grand landscapes and folk traditions, carrying forward the essence of Huxiang culture. "This volume brings together representative works by over fifty Huxiang poets, from the Southern Dynasties to the late Qing Dynasty, and the translations of these poems vividly illustrate how the translator navigates a dynamic balance between faithfulness and creativity, foreignness and fluency, within the dialectic of the part and the whole" (Liu 19). Drawing on this anthology's translation practice, this study takes historical materialism as its theoretical framework and focuses on historically oriented translation research. It explores how historical discourse is cross-culturally constructed and innovatively reshaped in the English translation of classical Chinese poetry, striving to present an amiable, respectable and approachable image of China to readers worldwide.

1. Historical Discourse and the Construction of Historical Discourse

Historical discourse denotes language use within a specific historical context, or more precisely, discourse situated in a specific historical context. As an inclusive concept, historical discourse covers all written and verbal expressions with historical attributes, with narrative and historiography as its core forms. It involves two interconnected layers, historical narration and historical outlook. Historical narration embodies tangible phenomena, while historical outlook lays solid philosophical foundations for such narrative practices. In the context of English translation of classical Chinese poetry, historical discourse refers to the discourse and narration constructed and disseminated by translators for target-language readers. Guided by Marxism and oriented toward overseas cultural communication, such discourse centers on historical facts, historical life, and historical spirit as its core connotations. Discourse construction means the deliberate creation and dissemination of targeted discourse content and expressive forms through appropriate methods and

channels. In essence, translation acts as a vital practice to construct Chinese historical discourse across different linguistic and cultural contexts. The construction of historical discourse in the English translation of classical Chinese poetry embodies translators' intentional efforts to convey its embedded historical connotations to global readers.

For cross-cultural communication, such historical discourse construction has become crucial to engaging diverse overseas audiences. This practice sustains the continuity of Chinese history and culture, delivers authentic Chinese narratives to global communities, and fosters a positive national image that is “lovely, respectable, and amiable.” Beyond cultural dissemination, such efforts are particularly vital in the new era to resist Western-centric discursive dominance and resolve the long-standing dilemma of discursive silence within international cultural exchanges.

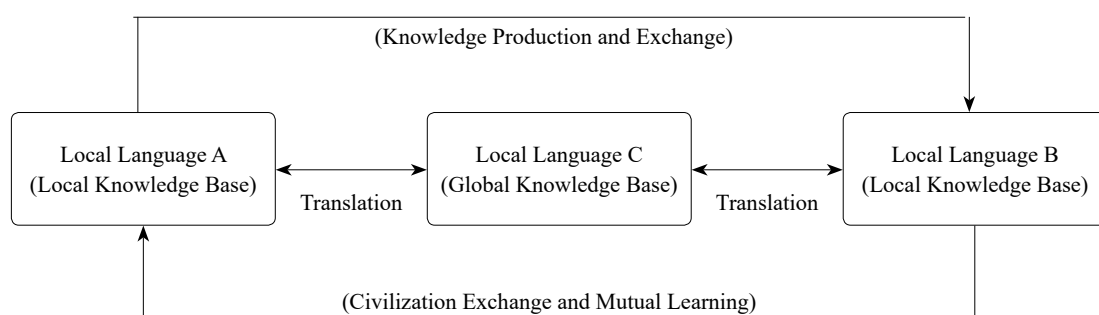


Figure 1. Construction Mode of Historical Discourse

Figure 1 illustrates how historical discourse construction relies on translational practice to circulate and reproduce historical knowledge. Yang Feng argues that “translation is a cultural practice and social activity involving the cross-linguistic processing, reconstruction and re-dissemination of knowledge” (2). Translation enables locally rooted knowledge to spread globally, turning knowledge bound to specific languages into shared public resources for global communities. All human knowledge carries local and ethnic traits alongside universal global features, with localized cultural knowledge emerging from unique geographical and cultural settings. Transforming local knowledge into globally shareable forms therefore lies at the heart of cross-cultural knowledge exchange. As the world’s predominant lingua franca, English serves as an inclusive global knowledge platform that gathers and spreads diverse knowledge from different ethnic groups. Ethnic knowledge can be integrated into this global system once translated into English, just as foreign knowledge can blend into China’s cultural and academic landscapes through Chinese translation. Although translation drives the production of new knowledge, it does not always ensure successful knowledge circulation. Only translations that gain recognition among target readers can effectively turn local knowledge into globally accessible content. Translating language-specific local knowledge into English endows it with greater global relevance, effectively facilitating inter-civilizational communication and mutual learning. There are three primary modes of such knowledge interaction. They include communication between local and global knowledge systems, mutual exchange among varied local knowledge forms, and relay-style exchange, in which local knowledge is first transformed into global knowledge before evolving into new localized cultural forms. Translation may retain the integrity of the original knowledge, a typical feature seen

in scientific and technical translation. In literary translation, by contrast, translators often recreate knowledge, and such knowledge reproduction naturally intertwines with the construction of cross-cultural discourse.

2. The Subjects of Historical Discourse Construction in the Creation and Translation of Classical Chinese Poetry

The subjects of historical discourse construction in the creation and translation of classical Chinese poetry include historians, poets, and translators. Drawing on established historical facts and materials, these agents shape historical discourse in their respective works across time and space, guided by their own distinctive intentions and expressive modes. Figure 2 shows that historical facts and materials serve as the foundation of historical discourse construction. Historians are the original creators of historical discourse, whose achievements are embodied in historical works such as the *Twenty-Four Histories*. Based on their understanding of historical facts, materials, and historical works, poets reconstruct historical discourse in poetic works. Translators, primarily relying on poetic works and supplemented by their mastery of historical facts, materials, and historical works, reconstruct historical discourse in a target linguistic and cultural context.

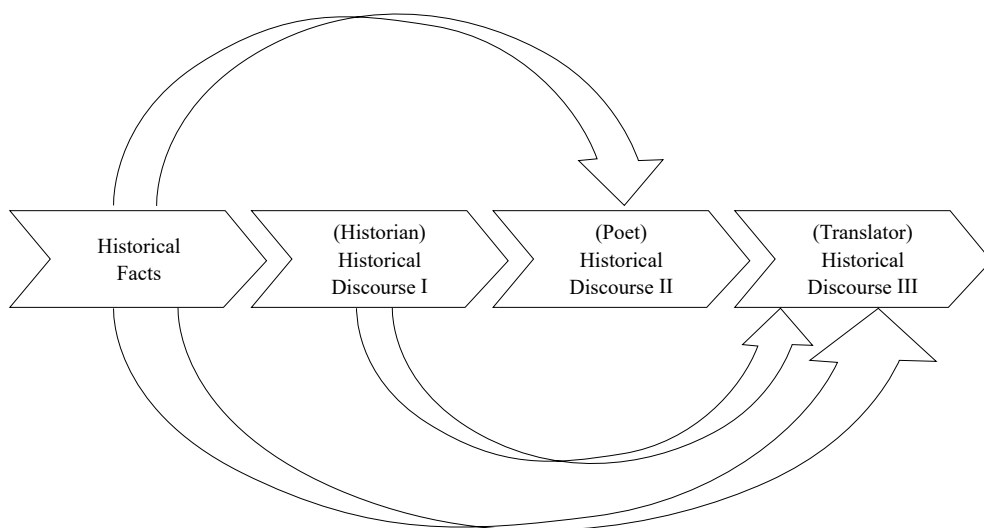


Figure 2. Mode of Multi-Layered Historical Discourse Construction

2.1 Historians: The Originators of Historical Discourse

Chinese historians engage in extensive academic exchanges and field investigations into historical relics and ritual traditions across different regions. They also conduct archaeological work and field research on first-hand historical materials, including stone artifacts, porcelain, weapons, and ancient battlefield sites. Guided by the principle that “when commending subjects, one does not inflate their virtues; when criticizing them, one does not erase their merits,” dynastic

historians regard upholding good and punishing evil as their core discursive objective. Possessed of rigorous rational thinking, a calm mindset, and a strong sense of mission, professional historians remain faithful to historical truth. They never cater to prevailing mainstream opinions, nor do they hesitate to reveal hidden political crises behind dynastic prosperity, even in the face of potential pressure and persecution. They record social realities objectively without partisan bias or manipulation by powerful groups. Adhering to strict scholarly norms, they document historical figures and major contemporary events without subjective moral prejudice. To safeguard the authenticity of history, many historians adhere to truthful record-keeping at the risk of ruining their reputations and even losing their lives, driven by an inherent scholarly conscience to hand down credible historical accounts to posterity. They inherit the fine tradition of ancient Chinese historiography, committing themselves to historical research and practical statecraft. Their academic pursuit aims to clarify moral principles through historical interpretation, regulate personal behaviors, and offer valuable references for social governance. By adopting diverse writing forms such as imperial annals, biographies, tables, and treatises, historians organize and record scattered historical facts to compile official historical texts, with the *Twenty-Four Histories* serving as the most representative corpus.

Historians often differ in their interpretive perspectives, historical outlooks, and temporal perceptions when documenting identical historical events. Such differences in narrative stance essentially generate original historical discourse construction. For example, the historical accounts presented in Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian* and Sima Guang's *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* demonstrate noticeable divergences when depicting the same historical episodes. The textual records compiled by historians therefore constitute genuine historical discourse, as different interpretations of fixed historical facts give rise to diverse discursive outputs. Though objective historical facts remain unchanged, the historical discourses constructed and delivered in historical works vary significantly across different historians.

2.2 Poets: The Reconstructors of Historical Discourse

The historical knowledge that poets draw on to build historical discourse comes from two sources: historical facts and materials, as well as the works and records left by historians. Most historical accounts in poems are not based on the poets' personal experience or direct observation. Instead, they are adapted from existing records and second-hand accounts. Events depicted in classical Chinese poetry are therefore not purely objective realities. Poets reshape these materials into new "facts" based on their creative needs and personal standpoints. They also learn from historical writings, absorbing historical content from others' narratives to develop their own discursive expressions. Guided by their own "historical poetics," poets hope the history carried in poetry can bring insights to readers. A distinguished poet will carry forward poetic traditions, and pass down literary and historical heritage to later generations through the discourse they create.

Poets pursue varied goals when constructing historical discourse. Rather than simply replicating the past, they seek to blend historical knowledge with personal experience. Poetic discourse bears strong aesthetic features and reflects individual life experience, while often carrying underlying political or literary intentions. It follows its own unique goals and expressive rules. Poets develop historical discourse as part of poetic creation. They use verse to praise rulers or offer implicit remonstrance, voicing their own ideals. Poetry also allows them to share rational reflections, uphold loyalty to family and nation, and advocate moral principles. It gives outlet to

inner thoughts and personal feelings, capturing the joys and sorrows, separations and reunions that define individual life. Poets express their unique personalities, and pursue intellectual freedom and personal fulfillment. They also favor a plain, natural aesthetic style. Their works integrate Neo-Confucian tenets, a worldview shared by Neo-Confucian scholars who sought to chronicle their age and expose social realities. Poets work with a wide range of poetic forms, each governed by its own established discursive norms. Relying on their unique creative intentions and expressive styles, poets take established historical knowledge and present it in new discursive forms and content within their poems.

2.3 Translators: The Ferryman of Historical Discourse

When transferring historical and cultural content between source and target languages, core historical facts stay unchanged. Working from original historical materials and the historical discourse created by historians and poets, translators recreate this enduring historical and cultural knowledge through new discourse in poetic translations. Their main goal in building such historical discourse is to share China's fine historical and cultural heritage and present a positive national image. Translators also select appropriate expressive forms to match their translational aims, such as rendering poems into blank verse, free verse or rhymed verse.

"Ferryability" stands as a core concept in Western poetics. The poet as ferryman undertakes the task of linking the past, present, and future (Yin 9). This idea resonates deeply with the practice of translation. As Chen Min observes, "'ferrying' refers to transporting people and goods across rivers, lakes and seas, while 'translation' is conveying the ideas from the other shore across the invisible divide of language and culture. Both are acts of communication, sharing the same essence despite different forms" (106). Given this inherent connection, people often use the metaphor of "ferrying" for translation. It highlights that "'ferrying' is dialogue, another mission of the poet as ferryman across cultures and borders to 'connect the past, present, and future'" (106). Translators of classical Chinese poetry are history's "ferryman." They bridge languages, present original poetic charm to new readers, and pass down the historical and cultural values embedded in classical poems. It should be noted that when translators help turn local knowledge into global knowledge in this ferry-like role, their work is inevitably shaped by the prevailing social and cultural environment. This restrictive dynamic also reveals how complex and flexible translation is as a form of cultural transmission.

This complexity of cultural exchange is most apparent in how a translator's historical outlook influences their work. As cultural messengers bridging different eras, translators' understanding of history dictates how they process historical and cultural information. It also fundamentally defines the cultural stance and value orientation embedded in translated texts. Their views on history and political positions guide every choice in translation, which can eventually be seen in the finished works. A translator's historical outlook, the perspective they adopt to interpret history, constitutes their basic understanding of social development and an indispensable part of their overall worldview. Their historical stance, or the attitudes they hold when approaching historical topics, mirrors their political beliefs concerning revolution, social class, and political power, as well as their national standpoint. For instance, when translating key historical terms such as "太平天国运动" (the Movement of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom or the Taiping Rebellion), the English translation chosen reveals the translator's underlying historical stance.

3. The Objects of Historical Discourse Construction in the English Translation of Classical Chinese Poetry

To construct Chinese historical discourse in the English translation of classical Chinese poetry for Western readers, translators should establish three core dimensions embedded in texts: historical facts, historical life, and historical spirit. The construction needs to comply with the Chinese discourse system, as illustrated in Figure 3.

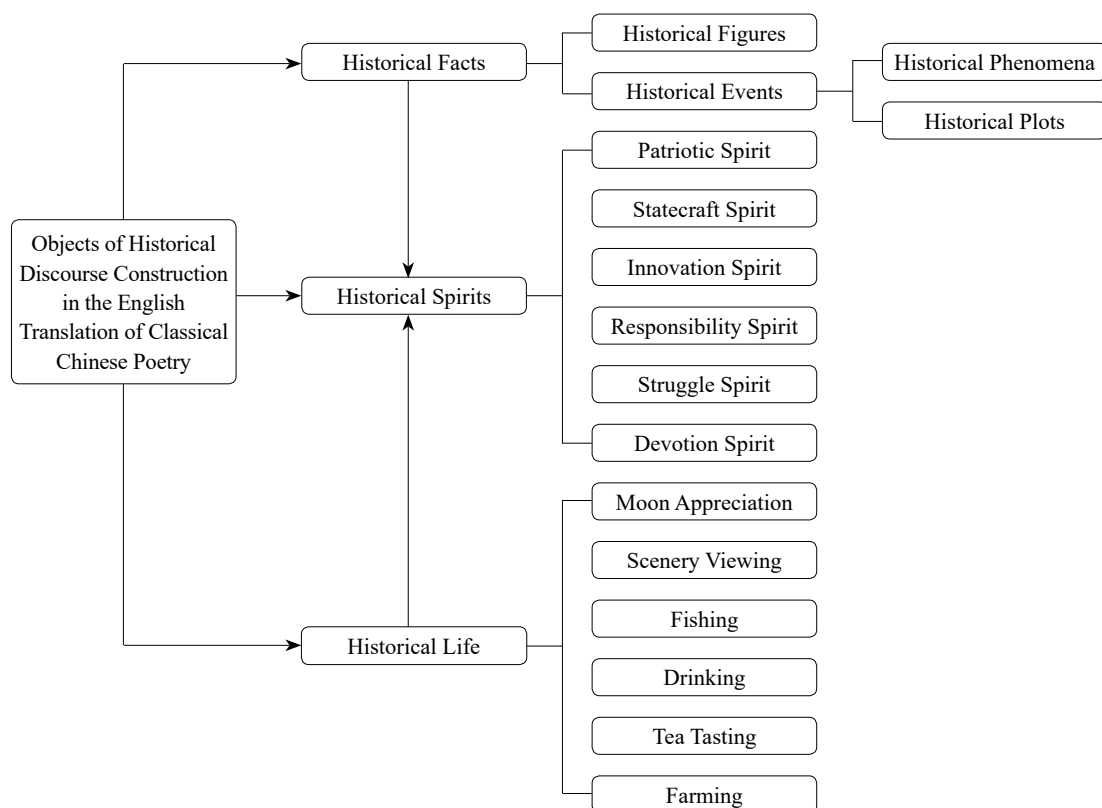


Figure 3. Construction Modes of Historical Discourse Objects in English Translations of Classical Chinese Poetry

3.1 Historical Facts

Historical facts refer to objectively existing historical realities, events that once truly took place, and the overall objective course of human history. They mainly cover historical events and figures, and are objective by nature. Classical Chinese poetry is rich in historical insights and embodies profound historical and cultural connotations. Restricted by poetic conventions, poets seldom state historical facts explicitly. Instead, they weave such content into lines via metaphors and allusions. Readers need to draw on their own historical understanding to dig out hidden information, which helps them better interpret the poems. This experience also forms a unique part of the aesthetic pleasure poetry offers.

For Chinese readers, it is already challenging to look back across time and space to understand the background of classical poems and the ideas their authors intended to convey. Foreign readers, who grow up in a different cultural setting and lack sufficient knowledge of Chinese

history, find it far harder to comprehend poetic lines. In addition, past historical events can rarely be reproduced completely in their original form. What readers perceive from poems is usually history reshaped through the poet's personal perspective, history as understood in individual cognition. Many factors may lead poets to form biased historical views. Readers without adequate historical awareness and knowledge are likely to misinterpret relevant facts. The events and scenarios depicted in classical poems are inevitably tinged with the poets' emotions, inclinations, standpoints, and perspectives. As a result, some poems record history fairly faithfully, while others deviate from or cannot fully align with documented historical facts.

This requires translators, when reconstructing historical content in translation, to identify historical accounts embedded in classical poems and verify their authenticity. Translators need to exert their subjective judgment to restate these historical narratives within the English cultural context, and thereby establish a complete framework for presenting Chinese historical ideas inherent in classical poetry.

3.2 Historical Life

Historical life covers the diverse ways of life led by ancient Chinese people. These include serene and refined pastoral existence, exiles finding inner peace amid mountains and rivers, wandering scholars traveling across the land, recluses dwelling peacefully in remote mountains and woods, farmers enduring grueling toil, fishermen living simple and free lives, monks detached from mortal affairs, displaced exiles, frontier defenders bearing hardships, and officials weighed down by bureaucratic duties. It also encompasses their daily routines and personal pastimes, such as admiring the moon, touring scenic spots, angling, drinking wine, tasting tea, playing the *qin*, and working the land.

Poetry gives voice to people's inner aspirations. Poets draw inspiration from life and nature, and put their sentiments into verse. They paint vivid pictures of rural landscapes and depict pastoral life with rich, varied touches. Classical Chinese poetry abounds with natural scenery and everyday objects, which gradually developed into distinct poetic imagery over time. Such imagery mirrors the lifestyles of ancient people, reveals poets' intimate inner worlds, and reflects their concerns over life's hardships as well as the destiny of individuals and society. Beneath these lines lie profound cultural meanings.

Selected Poems from Hunan features a wealth of such scenes and experiences. We see tranquil riverside villages at dusk and the plain livelihood of fishermen in Ma Zhiyuan's "Return of Sails from Distant Riverside," the toil of elderly farmers in Hu Tianyou's "Lament for the Absence of Oxen," reclusive life along rivers and lakes in Li Dongyang's "A Chant of Canglang," the bitter plight of local villagers in Tao Runai's "The Farmer of Weishan," and exiled life consoled by natural scenery in Wang Changling's "Open-Air Feast in Longbiao." When working across different social and cultural contexts, translators may adopt tailored strategies to represent these ancient ways of life and their associated aesthetic charm, allowing English readers to understand and even admire the lifestyles of ancient Chinese people.

3.3 Historical Spirit

Historical spirit refers to the shared ideals, beliefs, and noble virtues embraced and recognized by a collective community. It embodies a group's survival wisdom, moral cultivation, and social responsibility. It mirrors people's enduring pursuit of inner self-development throughout history

and underpins a nation's cultural heritage and ethnic identity. Human social and historical practices ultimately aim to enrich and elevate people's inner world. Shaped and refined throughout such social and historical experiences, these cultural and psychological traits form the core foundation of human moral and intellectual heritage. Accumulated through human efforts to understand, reshape, and transcend reality, these traits evolve into timeless historical values upheld by communities from generation to generation (Ma and Guo 1).

Historical spirit manifests uniquely in individual poets' lived experiences, which translators can further refine, enrich, and reinterpret through their active engagement. Cross-temporal and cross-cultural translation thus becomes essential for contemporary English readers to access and appreciate the historical spirit embedded in classical poetry. Huxiang poetry embodies diverse traditional Chinese historical spirits. It features patriotism rooted in concern for the nation and people, the pragmatic ethos of applying scholarly knowledge to governance, a trailblazing and innovative mindset, and a commitment to shouldering public responsibilities. This precious historical and cultural legacy holds an important place in the evolution of Chinese national culture. Only translators with profound historical knowledge, keen historical awareness, solid historical literacy, and sound cultural judgment can adopt targeted strategies to faithfully convey the deeper cultural meanings of Huxiang poetry in English-speaking contexts.

4. Strategies for Historical Discourse Construction in the English Translation of Classical Chinese Poetry

In translating *Selected Poems from Hunan*, the translator reconstructs the historical facts, historical life, and historical spirit embodied in the source text across linguistic boundaries, and concretizes the translation philosophy of "Integration While Preserving Differences" into a tripartite translation strategy of "China-Centered Orientation, Aesthetic Fidelity, and Empathetic Communication," so as to fulfill the translator's dual mission of upholding a distinct cultural stance and constructing a bridge for cross-cultural dialogue.

4.1 China-Centered Representation of Historical Facts

China-centered representation of historical facts is an important translation principle for constructing an international discourse system with Chinese characteristics. In the translation and rewriting of Chinese culture and philosophy, the "naming" of concepts and categories is crucial (Meng Xianchun 71), as it directly bears on the establishment of cultural subjectivity and the control of discourse power. Translators' cultural positions and translation perspectives mainly fall into three categories, including other-oriented (target-language centered), integration of self and other (fusion of source and target languages), and self-oriented (source-language centered). With the remarkable rise of China's comprehensive national strength and global influence, translation strategies should advance with the times and gradually shift to "China-centeredness, harmony, and integration" (Meng Xianchun 71). This shift not only reflects enhanced cultural confidence but also constitutes an inevitable requirement for the international communication of China's discourse system. The translation practice of *Selected Poems from Hunan* fully embodies this principle. The translator adopts a China-centered strategy that also considers readers'

comprehension and acceptance. This strategy preserves the original text's connotations and constructs historical discourse in the English cultural context through paratexts (e.g., background introductions, annotations, translator's notes) and culture-loaded terms. This strategy performs a dual function. On the one hand, it deconstructs and breaks ideological symbols unfavorable to China in Western-centric historical narratives. On the other hand, it reconstructs modes of expression consistent with China's historical outlook and cultural stance, highlighting the characteristics of Chinese historical discourse. For example, the translation of key historical event terms such as the Movement of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, Battle of Fengdao Island, and the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, is an indispensable part of constructing the international discourse system. Translators should not simply follow existing conceptual expressions in the target language but adhere to the China-centered principle to avoid falling into Western discourse traps and safeguard the authority of China's historical interpretation. Such China-centered translation practice must be based on a profound understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western discourse systems. Translators must be fully aware that the translation of historical terms is not merely linguistic conversion but also a struggle for discourse power. Each term carries specific historical views and values, and the choice of terminology directly shapes readers' cognitive frameworks of historical events. Therefore, in the translation process, translators should consciously assume the role of cultural envoys, construct a comprehensive, objective, and fair Chinese historical narrative in cross-cultural communication through precise terminology and rich paratextual supplements, and provide international readers with new perspectives and possibilities for understanding Chinese history.

Example 1

Original: 光绪十八年（1892），诗人因母亲病故伤痛不已，自号哭盒。两年后甲午战争爆发，他投奔两江总督刘坤一抵抗日军，后两度赴台湾参与抗战。

Translation: In the eighteenth year of Emperor Guangxu's reign (1892), the poet, overwhelmed with grief at his mother's passing, adopted the moniker Ku'an. Two years later, with the outbreak of the Jiawu War,¹ he joined Liu Kunyi, Governor-General of Liangjiang (present-day Jiangsu, Anhui, and Jiangxi provinces), to resist the Japanese aggression and later twice went to Taiwan to participate in the resistance.

Note 1: The Jiawu War, also known as the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, was ignited by Japan's expansionism following the Meiji Restoration. It commenced with the outbreak of the Battle of Fengdao Island on July 25, 1894. Amidst military weakness and corruption, the Qing Dynasty ultimately suffered defeat, marking a further entrenchment of China's semi-colonial status. In China, this conflict is widely remembered as the Jiawu War, named after the Chinese calendar year that coincided with 1894 in the Gregorian calendar. (Peng and Jiang 408–409)

The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, known as the Jiawu War in China, “Nisshin Senso” in Japan, the “Qing-Japan War” in Korea, and “the First Sino-Japanese War” in Western countries, was an act of Japanese aggression against the Qing Dynasty and the Joseon Dynasty in the late 19th century. According to the Chinese sexagenary cycle, 1894 was the Jiawu year, hence the name “Jiawu War.” The author translates it as “Jiawu War” by means of a combination of literal translation, free translation, and annotation, which better presents China as a victim of imperialist aggression and restores historical truth. For the same reason, while Western academia and media

render “丰岛海战” as “the Battle of Pung-do,” the author translates it as the Battle of Fengdao Island.

Example 2

Original: 此诗作于光绪二十二年，清政府与日本明治政府签订《马关条约》，被迫割地、赔款、增开商埠，激起诗人极大的愤慨。

Translation: This poem, written in the twenty-second year of Emperor Guangxu's reign (1896), reflects the poet's vehement indignation at the signing of the Maguan Treaty² between the Qing government and the Meiji government of Japan. The treaty forced China to cede territory, pay indemnities, and open additional trading ports.

Note 2: The Maguan Treaty, also known as the Treaty of Shimonoseki, was signed in 1895 after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. An unequal treaty, it imposed harsh terms on China, including territorial concessions and a substantial indemnity. Maguan is the Chinese name for the signing location, known in Japanese as Shimonoseki. (422–425)

The translator renders 《马关条约》 as the Maguan Treaty and supplements an annotation stating that “it imposed harsh terms on China, including territorial concessions and a substantial indemnity.” The translator also adds the word unequal in the note. Such treatment both respects history and maintains a principled stance.

4.2 Aesthetic Reproduction of Historical Life

As distinctive ideological, cultural, and discursive products, literary works take aesthetic value as their essential attribute, which differentiates literary art from other ideological forms (Tong 338). This inherent aesthetic essence defines the core task of poetic translation, which is to revitalize the aesthetic charm of historical life through artistic re-creation. As Wang Dongfeng observes, poetic translation strives to preserve the original's poetic functions to the fullest and reproduce its unique poetic beauty in the target language (13).

Aesthetic reproduction of historical life is a translational practice that reconstructs ancient life scenes through aesthetic remodeling, grounded in Xu Yuanchong's theoretical proposition of “the art of beautification, generalization, and transformation.” The theory includes four interdependent dimensions. The dimension of “beauty” pursues the integration of beauty in sense, sound, and form and follows the artistic standard of “the best words in best order.” As put forward by Xu, the dimension of “transformation” embraces three core approaches, which are equalization, simplification, and deepening, to realize artistic textual re-creation. The dimension of “attainment” aims to achieve three reader effects covering understanding, appreciation, and aesthetic enjoyment. The dimension of “art” leads to the ultimate artistic realm of “being free yet not overstepping the bounds.” These four dimensions jointly form a complete and systematic theoretical framework. As Xu verbatim summarizes, “Beauty in sense, sound, and form constitutes ontology; transformation in three modes is methodology; understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment serve as teleology; and art stands for epistemology. This is the art of beautification and transformation” (Xu 39).

Based on the above theoretical system, the aesthetic reproduction of historical life in poetic translation is realized through three progressive and interrelated layers. At the literary level, translators adhere to the stylistic principle of “translating poetry with poetry” and adopt the “three

transformations” methodology to complete artistic conversion of the source text. At the aesthetic level, they can draw on Ezra Pound’s imagist poetics. His classic translation of the poetic line “惊沙乱海日” as “Surprised, desert turmoil, sea sun” helps retain condensed and typical poetic images and fully present the original’s “three beauties.” At the epistemological level, translators pursue the artistic state of “being free yet not overstepping the bounds.” This translation practice enables translated poems to retain genuine historical texture while carrying modern poetic tension, generating cross-temporal aesthetic resonance similar to that of Pound’s *Cathay* and fulfilling the reader-centered aesthetic effect emphasized by the “three attainments” teleology. This three-dimensional translation paradigm fundamentally realizes the contemporary aesthetic revival of traditional historical life through the creative transformation of poetic discourse.

Example 3

Original:

沉溪夏晚足凉风，
春酒相携就竹丛。
莫道弦歌愁远谪，
青山明月不曾空。

Translation:

Yuanxi Stream, summer evening, cool breeze,
Spring wine, companions, bamboo grove, ease.
Never say stringed songs lament exile woe,
Verdant hills and bright moon never from me go. (Peng and Jiang 22–23)

Wang Changling’s “Open-Air Feast in Longbiao” was composed during his exile in Longbiao, vividly capturing his real-life experiences and mental state of seeking inner solace in natural landscapes and freeing himself from worldly distress. In translation, the translator adopts a flexible combination of literal and free translation, successfully reconstructing a vivid summer outdoor feast scene for English-speaking audiences. Though Longbiao was a remote frontier region in southwestern Hunan, the integrated imagery of “Yuanxi Stream,” “summer evening,” “cool breeze,” “spring wine,” “companions,” “bamboo grove,” “stringed songs,” “verdant hills,” and “bright moon” faithfully reproduces the original poem’s artistic conception and emotional tone. These layered images immerse target readers in an elegant and tranquil poetic scene, allowing them to fully grasp the poet’s open-minded and transcendent temperament. Despite his unfortunate exile, Wang remained undisturbed by worldly frustrations and attained peace and comfort through communion with nature. The combined imagery of “spring wine, companions, bamboo grove” constructs a delicate triple montage covering the material dimension of wine, the interpersonal dimension of companionship, and the natural dimension of bamboo groves. This structure echoes the ternary material-inner-natural connotation embedded in the original line “spring wine, companions, bamboo grove, ease,” and profoundly interprets the casual and elegant life aesthetics pursued by ancient Chinese literati in spontaneous gatherings. Furthermore, the collocation of “Yuanxi Stream, summer evening, cool breeze” delivers a succinct and forceful linguistic effect. It subtly resonates with the zero-grammar montage technique Ezra Pound employed in translating “荒城空大漠” (“Desolate castle, the sky, the wide desert”). Such stylistic treatment helps the translation read smoothly and naturally, removes obstacles to target readers’ understanding, and

allows English audiences to readily engage with the poem's unique poetic charm.

Example 4

Original:

芦花谢，客乍别，
泛蟾光小舟一叶。
豫章城故人来也，
结束了洞庭秋月。

Translation:

Reeds' blossoms fade, a sojourner's abrupt adieu,
On toad's glow waves, a lone sampan drifts in view.
From Yuzhang Town, an old friend comes in nigh,
To crown Dongting's autumn moon on high. (Peng and Jiang 222–223)

In Ma Zhiyuan's "To the Tune of *Shouyangqu*: On the 'Eight Views of Xiaoxiang'," the verse "Autumn Moon over Dongting Lake" subtly portrays the tranquil scenery of moonlit boating on autumn nights, reminiscent of understated, profound ink wash paintings. This suite of lyrics adopts plain, unrestrained, serene and refined writing strokes to sketch vivid natural landscapes infused with delicate poetic sentiment. Its harmonious tonal rhythm and polished language deliver strong artistic appeal to readers. In translation, the translator subtly reconstructs the elegant ancient scene of boating on Dongting Lake on quiet autumn nights through core imagery including "reeds' blossoms," "toad's glow waves," "old friend," and "Dongting's autumn moon." While retaining the original poem's rhythmic, metrical and conceptual beauty, the translator presents these images in succinct, straightforward language. The line "On toad's glow waves, a lone sampan drifts in view," for example, faithfully reproduces the original serene scenery and forms distinct visual imagery in the target text, greatly enriching readers' aesthetic perception. This translation approach realizes accurate linguistic and imagistic transformation while triggering cross-temporal aesthetic resonance. By integrating authentic historical ambiance with contemporary poetic tension, the translator builds a dual-temporal poetic realm that bridges antiquity and modernity. In this way, the timeless charm of "Autumn Moon over Dongting Lake" gains fresh vitality in modern contexts, allowing readers to traverse a thousand years of time and immerse themselves in the unique elegance and peace of the original scene.

4.3 Empathetic Communication of Historical Spirit

Empathetic conveyance of historical spirit refers to the spread of the shared values of human civilization carried forward through Hunan poetry, which cover loyalty, responsibility, courage, dedication, pursuit, steadfast commitment, moral integrity, sincerity, perseverance, compassion, and inclusiveness, so as to foster cross-cultural emotional resonance. This communication mode presents three distinctive characteristics. First, in terms of expressive form, poetry does not possess the monumental scale and grand narrative functions of travelogues, prose, novels, fictional writings, and drama, though its capacity to construct vivid cultural images is beyond doubt (Meng Hua 101). Such unique expressive features help fashion a classical Chinese image that is "lovable, respectable, and amiable." Second, in terms of historical origin, the empathetic dimension of Hunan poetry is deeply grounded in its inherent patriotic tradition. Dating back to Emperor Shun's

southern inspection tour, as well as the exile experiences of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi, the fine qualities of “benevolent governance and people-oriented sentiment, persistent truth-seeking spirit, and loyal and patriotic integrity” have been inherited across generations via poetic creation, shaping a noble and humanistic national image of China. Third, in terms of cultural core, Hunan culture is defined by “pragmatic application, patriotic dedication, and innovative boldness” (Huang, Preface IX). These cultural attributes are specifically reflected in its rational tradition of practical statecraft and sincere expression of family and national sentiments. Local poets adhere to the rational ethos of “understanding current affairs and seeking truth from facts,” and convey their political aspirations and sense of mission through artistic expression. Notably, such cultural communication is never one-sided. By revealing the intimate bond between individual destinies and the nation’s rise and fall, Hunan poetry acts as a profound cultural heritage of the Chinese nation and presents a multi-dimensional Chinese image to the world. The poets’ moral pursuit of “readiness to take on responsibilities and face sacrifices” ultimately elevates localized ethical values to shared universal human values.

Example 5:

Original: 满江红 • 贺王帅宣子平湖南寇

Translation: To the Tune of *Manjianghong*¹: Celebrating General Wang Xuanzi’s Victory over the Hunan Insurgents

Note 1: *Manjianghong* (the River All Red) is a traditional *ci*-poem tune (*cipai*) in Chinese classical poetry, evoking the vivid image of a river dyed red by autumnal hues and symbolizing a spirit of valor steeped in Chinese cultural heritage. It was famously employed by a seasoned warrior-poet advocating for the restoration of the Central Plains, who composed a commemorative verse in 1179 upon his posting to Hunan. This verse honors General Wang Zuo (courtesy name Xuanzi, 1126–1191) for his victory over the insurrection led by Chen Dong (?–1179). It also reflects the poet’s martial spirit and yearning to leave a lasting historical legacy akin to the renowned inscriptions on the “Wuxi Stream Stone,” as well as his steadfast commitment to national revival against the backdrop of the Chunxi Era. (Peng and Jiang 176–177)

If the *cipai* “*Manjianghong*” is literally translated as “the River’s All Red,” “the River All Red,” “Red All over the River,” “the River Runs Red,” or “Azolla,” foreign readers will only picture a simple scene of “a river full of red.” This inevitably dilutes the historical stories and cultural connotations behind the name. “*Manjianghong*” originally refers to a small floating plant of the genus *Azolla* in the family *Salviniaceae*, which is green in its early stages and turns red in autumn, covering lakes densely, hence the name. The Chinese people’s innate red complex flows in the national bloodline. Red symbolizes courage and heroism, and further embodies family-and-national sentiment. The author of “To the Tune of *Manjianghong*: Celebrating General Wang Xuanzi’s Victory over the Hunan Insurgents” is Xin Qiji, who once joined the anti-Jin rebel army and devoted his life to advocating the recovery of the Central Plains. His *ci*-poems are full of patriotic passion, in a bold, vigorous, solemn, and stirring style. This poem was written in the sixth year of the Chunxi Era (1179), when Xin Qiji was transferred to Hunan. In the first month of that year, Chen Dong, a native of Yizhang County, Chenzhou, led a rebellion and harassed the Hunan region. General Wang Zuo was ordered to campaign against him and triumphed in May,

whereupon Xin Qiji wrote this poem in celebration. Taking the opportunity of congratulating the victory, Xin expressed his own fighting fervor and embodied the patriotic ideal of “carving meritorious deeds on the stone at Wuxi Stream.”

Against this background, translating “Manjianghong” hinges not only on capturing the vivid visual beauty of “redder than fire” but also on highlighting the “patriotic passion and fighting spirit” embedded in the color red. The author adopts the strategy of literal translation, free translation, and annotation, translating it as “To the Tune of *Manjianghong*: Celebrating General Wang Xuanzi’s Victory over the Hunan Insurgents,” and supplements annotations explaining the original botanical meaning and cultural symbolism of the *cipai*, Xin Qiji’s life background, and the historical context of the poem’s composition, so as to convey to English readers the historical depth and cultural core carried by “Manjianghong” to the greatest extent.

Example 6

Original:

中国于今是希腊，
湖南当作斯巴达。
中国将为德意志，
湖南当作普鲁士。
诸君诸君慎于此，
莫言事急空流涕。
若道中华国果亡，
除是湖南人尽死。

Translation:

China today is like Greece of old,
Hunan stands as Sparta, bold.
Should China rise as Germany grew,
Hunan is Prussia, tried and true.
Friends, friends, take this to heart,
No empty tears when crises start.
If China’s end is truly nigh,
It is only when all Hunanese die. (Peng and Jiang 438–439)

Yang Du’s “An Ode to Hunan Youths” dates back to the 29th year of the Guangxu Era (1903). At that time, the poet was pursued by the Qing court on revolutionary charges and fled to Japan. He composed this impromptu poem shortly after reading Liang Qichao’s “On Young China.” The work exposes the plundering atrocities of imperialist powers, portrays the harsh and miserable livelihood of the Hunan people, and eulogizes their indomitable spirit in resisting oppression, while sounding a powerful call for national salvation. To faithfully present the poem’s profound implications, majestic momentum, and revolutionary ethos to target readers, the translator adopts a literal translation strategy. Verses including “China today is like Greece of old,” “Hunan stands as Sparta, bold,” and “Hunan is Prussia, tried and true” fully preserve the original imagery. More importantly, they further accentuate the fine ethical traits of the Hunan people, including bravery, loyalty, a strong sense of responsibility, integrity, and perseverance, endowing the translated text with passion and artistic appeal as intense as that of the original poem.

Classical Chinese poetry carries the profound connotations and cultural memories inherent to Chinese civilization. Its historical discourse serves as a vital vehicle for showcasing the essence of Chinese culture and conveying the Chinese spirit, exerting a profound influence on the shaping of China's national image. Even so, current English translations of classical Chinese poetry still have evident shortcomings. Many translators tend to prioritize formal adaptations, including metrical rhythm and aesthetic presentation, while overlooking in-depth cultural and historical interpretation. In addition, foreign readers generally lack systematic understanding of Chinese history and culture, which often results in biased or inaccurate interpretations of translated poetic works. Such issues greatly impede the effective construction of China's national image and compromise the quality of cross-cultural communication. To tackle this dilemma, translators should "strengthen historical consciousness and cultural confidence" (Xi 4) and follow three core guiding dimensions in translation practice. They need to maintain a correct view of history and a firm political stance, take the initiative to construct China's historical discourse through translation, and convert context-specific Chinese historical knowledge into globally intelligible expressions. These three dimensions interact and reinforce each other, helping shape "collective cultural memory" (Luo 97). With such guiding principles, translators can better serve as "cultural ferrymen." Through the English translation of classical poetry, they are able to tell accurate and engaging stories of China to the world and spread China's voice, thereby facilitating the effective dissemination and meaningful regeneration of traditional Chinese culture in cross-cultural communication scenarios.

Note

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