

A Study on Jidi Majia's Poetry and Its Translation

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Abstract: Yi poet Jidi Majia's poetry with a spirit of humanitarianism well reflect the status quo of Yi Traditional Culture and its relationship with the world. Denis Mair as the main English translator of Jidi Majia' poetry fully understand these poems' characteristics and the cultural intension, and gives faithful translations. This paper mainly analyzed the creation background of Jidi Majia's poetry and the features of the translations, further to explore the translation methods to ethnic poetry in contemporary China.

1. Introduction

Jidi Majia not only is the most outstanding Yi poet in contemporary China and the most representative minority poet in the new era, but also is one of a few poets in today's Chinese poetry who have a world vision and speak to the world poetry. ^[1] He has published more than 20 poetry collections at home and abroad, many of which have won awards world widely, and some of which have been translated into English, French, Japan, Spanish, Romanian, Italian, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Czech, etc. The characteristics of Gidi Majia's poetry creation reflect the status quo of Chinese minority literature, especially poetry in the era of globalization. Besides, His unique official status makes his poetry express a kind of universal love for all mankind. To study his poetry translation, is necessary to start with the analysis of the reasons that affect his creation style and understand the poet and the cultural connotation of his poetry.

2. Background of Jidi Majia's Creation

The multicultural influence strengthened Jidi Majia's literary path. His poetry creation, both in content and form, not only conveys the ancient civilization of the Yi people, but also make this ancient civilization obtain modern connotation. At the same time, his poems also transcend the boundaries of his nation and show a broad humanitarian spirit.

2.1 Influence of Yi Culture

Most of Jidi Majia's poems were created according to his native culture. Through the typical images, the poet conveys his deep feeling to Yi culture. Take the image "Bimo" as an example. "Bimo" represents the core of Yi traditional culture. In the poem *Voice of the Bimo*, Gidi Majia uses "Bimo" to describe the traditional ceremony of "Guiding the way" for the dead, which means

“when Bimo of Yi nationality presides over funerals, sacrifices, fasting and other religious ceremonies for the dead, he escorts and guides the dead to return to the birthplace of their ancestors and reunite with their ancestors.”^[2]

In Bimo’s chanting, he listens to his life and his destination after death. It is Bimo who uses the surreal power to guide the coming and going of life to say the “hymn of life and death”. By the poetic illustration of Bimo’s work, Jidi Majia vividly expressed the simple primitive religious concept of animism of traditional Yi culture.

2.2 Influence of Han Culture

One of the most direct influences of Chinese national literature to Jidi Majia’s writing is the misty poetry in the 1980s. Jidi Majia claimed that “when I began to write poetry, it was the era of the rise of misty poetry”.^[3] what he inherited from the misty poetry is not so much the creative content as the creative style. He thought, “poetry is a very strange thing. It is often between ‘yes’ and ‘no’. If you write a poem without any implied meaning, it must not be a good poem.”^[3] In the poem *A Nuosu Speaks of Fire*,^[4] the poet selected the content of Yi traditional culture, but adopted the expression way of misty poetry. This poem does not give readers a clear aesthetic perspective, but supports the whole poem with jumping and implicit images.

If readers understand the traditional culture of Yi nationality, they will naturally understand why the poet takes “fire” as the core and how he connects the traditional cultural images of Yi nationality related to “fire”, such as cultural origin, ancestor worship, animism, religious festivals, concept of life and death, sacrificial customs and so on. At first glance, this poem is a little messy. It seems to be known, but it is difficult to speak clearly. In fact, after the careful analysis, readers will enter the deep feelings of Yi people for “fire” through a large number of metaphors, hints and other techniques of the poet. This kind of writing technique is the inspiration that Jida Majia draws from misty poetry.

2.3 Influence of World Literature

From Pushkin to Senghor, and then to Neruda and Marquez, foreign literary works, especially Russian, black and Latin American literatures, provide another window for Jidi Majia. Those influences make the theme and style of his poetry beyond the limitations of a certain nation. Therefore, in addition to a protector of Yi culture, he is also known as a world poet. Many of his poems tell the fate of the world’s vulnerable peoples and express infinite sympathy and love for them.

In *Between Despair and Hope*,^[4] the poet describes Jerusalem is full of war, death, crying and blood. The poem forms a strong contrast between the two extreme feelings of “despair” and “hope”, and expresses the poet’s infinite sympathy for the suffering caused by the endless war.

In *A Praise Song for Indigenous Peoples*^[4] written for the United Nations Year of the world’s indigenous people, what the poets praise, understand, sympathize, touch and bless actually are all the nations in the world. He expressed his love for nature, understanding of life and sympathy for all suffering nations in the world. In the end, the poet calls on human beings to fight for world peace, freedom and justice in an appealing tone.

The multiple influences of multiculturalism have shaped Jida Majia’s broad creative ideas. Different from the traditional minority poetry, the theme of his poetry not only tells his own nation’s culture, but also focuses on human nature, environment and the fate of the worldwide vulnerable nationalities. Therefore, it is not enough to say that he is not only a poet of Yi nationality and China, but also a world poet with lofty humanitarian spirit.

3. The Background of Jidi Majia's Official Identity

Before Qin Dynasty, Chinese officials have had the tradition of poetry creation. In Chinese history, many famous poets such as Qu Yuan, Du Fu, Su Shi, Wang Anshi are all have the status of officials at the same time. The existence of "official poets" in China has become an internalized national cultural structure, which has continued to this day. These "official poets" did not reduce the literariness of their poems because of their political identity; on the contrary, they understood life and expressed their feelings with a broad mind from the perspective of politicians.

Jidi Majia is an official poet in contemporary China. After graduating from university in 1982, he has successively served as the editor in chief of *Liangshan literature*, vice chairman, chairman and party secretary of Liangshan Literary Federation, vice chairman, deputy secretary and Secretary General of Sichuan Writers Association, Secretary of the Secretariat of China Writers Association and editor in chief of *National Literature*, vice governor of Qinghai Province and member of the Party group of the provincial government. Since 2010, he has been a member of the Standing Committee of Qinghai provincial Party committee and director of the Publicity Department of Qinghai provincial Party committee. Jidi Majia said, "if a politician has the feelings of a poet, he should pay more attention to the people's livelihood and the vulnerable groups of this society."^[5]

Like many official poets in history, Jidi Majia has a higher platform to understand the world and pay attention to the society than ordinary poets, so that he can better perform his duties as a poet. The successful holding of the Qinghai Lake International Poetry Festival is a good example. Besides, He has attended international activities for many times. While bringing out the national culture, he also has close contact with the world, so that other nations in the world know him and feel the spirit of his poetry.

4. The Translation of Jidi Majia's Poetry

The translation of Jidi Majia's works can be roughly divided into civil translation and foreign translation. In foreign translation, this paper will focus on English translation from Denis Mair.

4.1 Civil Translation

Song for the First Love is the first poetry collection of Jidi Majia, which was written in Chinese and published by Sichuan Nationalities Publishing House in 1985. Soon afterwards, it was translated into Yi language by Hailai Muxia, who is a Yi cultural scholar and well-known mother tongue writer.

There are two reasons why he chose to translate Jidi Majia's poems into his mother tongue. The first is the requirements of the times. In 1980s, China was in a period of economic recovery and transformation. While focusing on the vigorously developing coastal areas, Chinese government has also paid more attention to the development of minority areas. In terms of literature, this period was a stage in which a large number of ethnic minority writers' literature appeared. Therefore, it was the need of times to vigorously support the development of ethnic minority literature, especially the literary works created and spread in their own language. The second is the need of national rejuvenation. Jidi Majia, as a Yi poet who came out of the Daliang Mountain, has played an indelible role in the entry of Yi culture from tradition to contemporary into the eyes of the world. He wrote in Chinese and conveyed the deepest feelings in the hearts of the Yi people. However, due to the relatively backward and closed development of Yi areas, most Yi people can not speak Chinese. In order to make them feel the opportunity of these poems, experience the profundity and spirit of the times of their ancient nation, and arouse their confidence and determination to inherit their national culture, it is very necessary to translate this collection of poems into Yi language.

When describing the translation process, Hailai Muxia said: “I deeply feel that his poems are unique. His poems belong to not only Yi People but the world as well. He expresses his views on the world with Yi People’s thoughts and culture. The context and language sense shaped in his poems are the same as the ancient Yi proverb ‘erbirj’. Therefore, the original meaning of his poems can be accurately translated without too much translation skills and language art.”^[6]

4.2 External Translation

Jidi Majia has participated in international poetry festivals for many times and his poems have been welcomed by other peoples and published in many languages. His first English translation is the Chinese and English Bilingual edition, which was translated by Denis Mair, a famous American Sinologist, and published by Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House in 2004. In addition, some poems are scattered in some poetry translation collections. For example, the English translation of *Self-Portrait* is included in *Chinese Literature: Modern Poetry volume*, which was compiled by China Literature Publishing House in 1998 and published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Publishing House; in 2009, *Chinese contemporary poetry*, mainly edited by Jidi Maga and Haibin, published by Qinghai People’s Publishing House, includes three poems translated by Ling Jingyi, which are *Freedom*, *Invisible Fluctuation* and *Time*.

Among all the translators for translating Jidi Majia’s poetry, Denis Mair is the main one. In order to accurately grasp the meaning of the original poems in the translation, Denis Mair made a field trip before starting translation. This trip, which is similar to field investigation, allowed Denis Mair to see the traditional buildings, costumes and well preserved traditional lifestyles of the Yi people, as well as the core figure of the Yi culture “Bimo”. Besides, Denis Mair also studied the cultural elements of the Yi people, such as myths and legends, religious beliefs. In addition to the study of the poet’s growth environment, Denis Mair also mastered the poet’s poetry creation and social activities, and put Gidi Majia into the background of the development of world literature. Based on this, Denis Mair’s translation not only stays at the correspondence of literal meaning, but also accurately reproduces and conveys the emotion of the original poem. It can be noted in the following three aspects.

4.2.1 Retention of Inscriptions and Notes

At the bottom of the title, the poet usually adopts inscriptions to give the readers necessary introduction to the background of the poems. These inscriptions mainly have three uses: (1) as a prelude to the story of the poem; (2) as an introduction to cultural allusions or customs of Yi people; (3) as an explanation for the creation of the poem.

In the translation of notes, Denis Mair added new contents to help target readers get more information to understand the poems. For example, in the poem *The Hero’s Knot and the Hunter*, Denis Mair added an annotation, “A ‘hero’s knot’ is a decorative appendage on the traditional male headdress of the Nuosu. Made of tightly wrapped cloth with a round bulge at the tip, it extends upward and forward from the crown of the head.”^[4]This will helpful to target reader to get the image of Yi people’s costume of hero’s knot.

4.2.2 Reproduction of Free Verse

The poet Liu Shahe once summarized Jidi Majia’s poetry form, his poems bid farewell to erbirji (a Yi proverb) which arranges for antithesis. They are unrestrained, like birds in the wind and fish in the water. In his poems, the style of traditional “song” has been very thin. How to translate these poems well involves how to translate modern free poems. Prof. Wang Hongyin put forward some suggestions on how to translate modern poetry with poetic flavor, that is, translators should

carefully study the characteristics of modern poetry from the aspects of schools, poets and works; they should carefully study the original work and find translation methods on this basis. That means they should either “carefully study the characteristics of the original poem and try to translate according to the characteristics of the original poem”, or “consider flexible means to achieve similar effects of the original poem on the basis of studying the original characteristics.”^[7]

Denis Mair’s translation is based on the understanding of Yi culture and the study of the original works and poets, or according to the characteristics of the original works, or looking for flexible methods. In the process of free verse translation, He is not free to translate without any constraints, but makes great efforts to reproduce the structure of the original poem. For example, some poems are arranged in parallel according to stanzas. Basically, there are parallel sentences in the same position of each stanza to strengthen the tone and express a certain rhythm. The translation also intentionally retains this form.

4.2.3 Translation of Cultural Image

As for the treatment of Yi cultural images, Denis Mair basically adopts the method of transliteration (or literal translation) and annotation. It retains the cultural characteristics of the original work to the greatest extent, effectively spreads Yi culture, and coincides with Jidi Majia’s intention to introduce Yi culture to the world. For example, he translated “支呷阿鲁” into “Zhyge Alu”, with the annotation of “a mythic hero of the Nuosu whose exploits are recounted in an epic of the same name”^[4]. Another example, he translated “石姆姆哈” into “a peaceful limbo-like realm between heaven and earth, where souls go after death.”^[4] These translation well brings Yi cultural images to English readers, and make great contributions to the communication between the Nuosu people and the world.

5. Conclusion

The charm of Jidi Majia’s poetry lies precisely in that he has gone beyond the writing method of traditional ethnic minority poetry, but examined the past, present and future of the Yi people and even other vulnerable ethnic groups in the world. Through poetry, he expressed his love for these ethnic groups, thinking about human nature and attitude towards life. As a poet, Jidi Majia belongs to the Yi nationality, China and the world, but the most fundamental factor affecting his poetry creation is still the traditional culture of the Yi people. Therefore, in the study of his poetry translation, whether the translator has the background knowledge of the traditional culture of the Yi people and whether the translation correctly reproduces the connotation of the Yi culture, are closely concerned. The discussion of this paper starts with the reasons for the formation of the poet’s writing style and the theme of the original poem, and focuses on the characteristics of Denis Mair’s English translation, hoping this paper can make a small attempt for the case study of the English translation of contemporary ethnic minority poets’ poems.

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