

The translation of images in Tang poetry in view of relevance translation theory: A case study of the pipa image in three English versions of *Three Hundred Tang Poems*

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ABSTRACT: Tang poetry is rich in images, and the pipa portrayed in Tang poetry mainly symbolizes compassion and melancholy, indifference and openness, and joy and resentment. With the approaches of case study and comparative analysis, the study built a framework of the relevance translation theory to compare the pipa images in three English versions of *Three Hundred Tang Poems: The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology* (jointly translated by Witter Bynner and Kiang Kanghu), *300 Tang Poems: A New Translation* (compiled by Xu Yuanchong, Lu Peixian and Wu Juntao) and *English Translation of 320 Tang Poems* (translated by Betty Tseng). Then, the contextual effects of pipa images in the three English versions are analyzed with the difference of the translators. The findings are conducive to enlightening translators' mindset of creating optimal context relevance for target readers and maintaining sustainable development of traditional Chinese culture.

KEYWORDS: relevance translation theory; optimal relevance; *Three Hundred Tang Poems*; pipa image; translators' mindset

1. Introduction

Chinese Tang poetry, marked by a unique blend of simplicity, elegance, and profound emotions, represents a pinnacle in Chinese poetic achievement (Chen, 2020). Therefore, Tang poetry is vital for foreigners to learn traditional Chinese culture in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907). Images, also “意象”(yì xiàng) in Chinese, are a group of natural landscapes or concrete human-made objects used in poetry to express the poets' feelings and resonate with readers (Mo, 2010). For example, Tang and Shen (2022) portrayed natural landscapes as images in Tang poetry to emphasize the close relationship between humans and the environment. Also, images exhibit values in conveying emotions, depicting nature, and expressing cultural values (Chen, 2013; Chen, 2020; Xue and Guo, 2022).

Nowadays, with the rising cultural identity and recognition of Chinese culture, the need for transmitting the cultural implications of images to readers around the world has become increasingly urgent. Hence, the translation of images in Tang poetry has garnered significant attention within the field of literary analysis. With empirical research, scholars aimed to establish a cognitive model of images in Tang poetry, and the specific English translation strategies are summarized to achieve the communicative purpose. For example, aiming to promote the restoration of the artistic realm in Tang poetry, Liu (2016) conducted empirical research to build a reconstruction model for images in Tang poetry translation with the gestalt theory. In cognitive linguistics, Jin (2016) concluded the translation strategies for images of places in Tang poetry under the framework of cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetics and summarized

the translation strategy of place name images in Tang poetry. With more Sinologists turning their attention to the translation of Tang poems, scholars also started to explore the translation of Tang poetry images in a cross-cultural view (Owen, 1996; Tang, 2016). However, former studies have mostly focused on the analysis of image translation in one or multiple translation versions of Tang poetry, and many of the translated Tang poetry versions came from Xu Yuanchong (1921–2021), an outstanding translator in China. Therefore, the study chose a traditional Chinese instrument with rich cultural implications as the research object and three full English versions of *Three Hundred Tang Poems* to compare their contextual effects of images.

Pipa, also “琵琶”(pí pa) in Chinese, a popular traditional Chinese four-stringed instrument, is frequently used as an image in Tang poetry (Han, 1986). The popularity of the *pipa* in the Tang Dynasty allowed this instrument to be played at different social strata and on various occasions. Therefore, the concrete feelings *pipa* carries in Tang poetry should be discussed in detail and categorized. In addition, Tang poetry is characterized by concise structures and rich connotations, adding extra difficulty for translators to accurately convey the meanings of images (Mo, 2010). Hence, this study is aimed at analyzing the translation of *pipa* images in Chinese Tang poetry, focusing on their stylistic variations, cultural underpinnings, and enduring legacies. The exploration of the translations of cultural images in Tang poetry can foster cross-cultural understanding and promote a successful delivery of Chinese culture to the world.

2. Relevance translation theory

Sperber and Wilson (1996) proposed relevance theory based on cognition for the first time in *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, introducing that the relevance in communication and communications is an ostensive-inferential one. Because a language or behavior is used ostensive to provide a basic layer of information and the information that has been intentionally made manifest in the first layer, ostensive-inferential communication is a process to make the source language (SL) authors' intention manifest to audiences. The “intention” here is the information that requires inferences. For example: A is showing his/her intention to speak to C, but C fails to notice the intention. B, standing between them, notices the communicative intention of A and steps aside to make his/her intention manifest to C. In that way, C can also assume that B is drawing her attention to A's intention.

Gutt (1991) then made a further exploration of relevance theory and introduced this theory to explain translation since translation is regarded as a part of communication. Therefore, the ostensive-inferential process can also be applied to translation studies. He also revealed the connection between translation and the target language (TL) readers' cognitive environment and the nature of direct translation as the communicative clues in realizing “optimal relevance”, which means TL readers can understand the meaning and the intention of the SL author, and the meaning in the TL provided by the translator is worthy of the TL readers' efforts in inferring the connotations. Pattenmore (2011) provided examples of how relevance theory influences translation decisions and exhibited that the communicative clues should be given with the same perception of efforts and benefits between SL authors and TL readers in achieving optimal relevance. In the late 1990s, it was acknowledged that only if the awareness of the conventions governing communicative events in texts or text types is equipped, can inference be enriched (Gutt, 1998). The text types of the SL text influence the translators' overall choice of translation strategies.

With the development of relevance translation theory, many researchers adopted its framework in explaining translation, emphasizing the importance of producing translations that are faithful to the SL text and relevant to the TL readers. For instance, Díaz-Pérez (2014) took a specific focus on pun

translation and analyzed them from relevance theory, shedding light on its effectiveness in translating wordplay and humorous elements. Liu and Jia (2014) used relevance theory to explain audiovisual translation and explored the challenges of translating allusions in a film. These works collectively contributed to a deeper understanding of the theory and offered a possibility to extend its connotation and application to explain the translation. However, most of the previous studies do not coordinate the six dimensions of the relevance translation theory as a complete framework for analyzing or explaining translation activities. Therefore, this study coordinates the framework of the relevance translation theory into the translation process to delve into the reproduction effect of these images and thus serve as a good example for the understanding of the transmission of traditional Chinese culture.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Materials

The most complete version of *Three Hundred Tang Poems* (320 poems) was compiled during the Qing Dynasty (1936–1912) by Sun Zhu (1711–1778), who styled himself as “蘅塘退士” (héng táng tuì shì). This anthology brings together an extensive body of poetry from the Tang Dynasty, a period known for its flourishing poetic achievements and diverse voices of poets from various backgrounds (Chen, 2013). So, images in the *Three Hundred Tang Poems* were chosen as the main research object.

In the study, three English versions of the *Three Hundred Tang Poems* are chosen with different translator identities, times of translation, and cultural backgrounds. *The Three Hundred Tang Poems: The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology* (Kiang and Bynner, 1929), jointly translated by Witter Bynner (1881–1968) and Kiang Kanghu (1883–1954), has shown translators’ deep interest in traditional Chinese culture and their cultural standpoints through early cooperation between American and Chinese translators. *300 Tang Poems: A New Translation* (Xu et al., 1988), initiated by Hong Kong (China) Commercial Press, was compiled by Xu Yuanhong (1921–2021), Lu Peixian (1916–1996) and Wu Juntao (1927–), indicating a phase of active transmission of Chinese culture by Chinese translators. The *English Translation of 320 Tang Poems* (Tseng, 2011) was translated by Betty Tseng and published online, marking the renewal of traditional media in transmitting Chinese culture and the expansion of TL readers.

3.2. Methods

This qualitative research was conducted with the relevance translation theory. Among the 320 Tang poetry in the anthology, “*pipa*” appears 16 times, and some of the *pipa* images are presented with the word “*qin*”, also “琴” (qín) in Chinese, a general term primarily used to refer to all kinds of a plucked string instrument in ancient China (12 times in total). This study seeks to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the image “*pipa*” is preserved or transformed by comparing the three English versions of the *Three Hundred Tang Poems* from the six dimensions of relevance translation theory and conclude the different strategies translators adopted in reproducing the meanings of *pipa* images.

Based on the principles of considering the explicit reasoning process, the context, and the cognitive environment of TL readers (Sperber and Wilson, 1996), this study integrated text type analysis and the selection of interlingual interpretive methods into the framework of analyzing the images in Tang poetry (As shown in **Figure 1**).

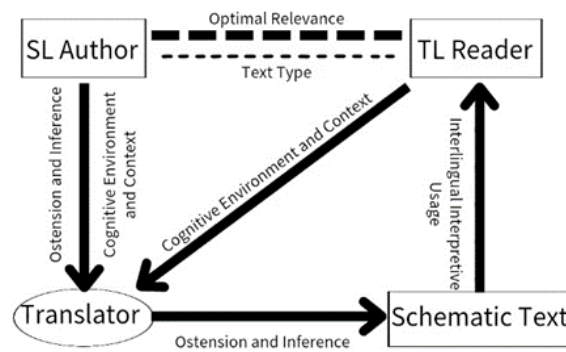


Figure 1. The framework of relevance translation theory.

3.2.1. Ostension and inference

Successful communication between TL readers and SL authors requires two rounds of explicit reasoning (Hatim and Munday, 2004). In translating the images in Tang poetry, translators should convey the SL authors' intention of using this image to TL readers. For SL authors, communication is a process of giving ostensions. The translator understands and deduces the original information to form schematic texts (Lin, 1994), and then selects relevant interlingual interpretive usages according to the context to produce TL text with appropriate translation strategies. In view of the TL readers, understanding the meanings of images is a process of accepting the ostensive information from the translator and the SL author and inferring implicit information. Hence, translators and TL readers need to decode the communicative information based on ostension and deduce the discourse intention of the SL author (Zhao, 1999).

In Tang poetry, image translation requires translators to infer and decode the artistic conception of the image given by the poets, and give hints to TL readers. However, translators should be aware that the motivation of words or the image information of words would not directly influence the translation process. So translators should not exaggerate the cultural differences of words in different languages (Lin, 1994), nor should they pursue a completely static equivalence. For example, for images that are completely unfamiliar to TL readers, translators can replace them with synonymy or similar images in the TL culture.

3.2.2. Cognitive environment and context

According to Sperber and Wilson (1996), the cognitive environment refers to external factors that can help recipients understand the connotation. The cognitive environment can be divided into environmental information perceived in reality, information stored in human brains, and a combination of the two. They can provide various information and become a potential context in verbal communication (Long and Cai, 2020). As a result, different cognitive modes and inferential processes are formed in different cognitive environments. This means that some connotations of the images may seem manifest to the SL authors or translators, but the TL readers may find them elusive. The purpose of ostension and inference is to find the informative intention and communicative intention (Hatim and Munday, 2004) so that SL authors and TL readers can share the cognitive contexts and achieve mutual manifestness through translators by presenting hypotheses to TL readers. However, it should be noted that, with people's increasing demand for default elements of the original text, translators are required to reflect the cultural information of the SL (Gutt, 2014).

The cognitive environment of TL readers should be clarified to allow them to understand the

connotations of specific images in Tang poetry. Then the translator should find the relevance from the specific context to infer its validity. By placing the images of Tang poems in a specific context, TL readers can understand the true meaning of Chinese culture.

3.2.3. Effort and benefit principle

During the understanding of images, TL readers need to make efforts to process the information to obtain corresponding “benefits”. Aiming for proper comprehension, the process includes inference and the retrieval of relevant information from the TL readers’ minds. The translation of images in Tang poetry, also among one of the communication activities, follows the resource optimization rule, that is, TL readers can receive the maximum comprehensive effect with the least possible effort (Gutt, 2014).

Part of the aesthetic conception of images in Tang poetry lies in the ambiguity and uncertainty of concrete contexts (Cao, 2019). The efforts spent on understanding the aesthetic conception of images in Tang poetry are not “unnecessary”, because these can enable TL readers to understand the poet’s real intention, thus changing the contextual assumption and facilitating smooth communication (Gutt, 2014). Hence, translators need to retain the communicative clues of the poem and reproduce the stylistic features of the SL.

3.2.4. Optimal relevance

Optimal relevance means TL readers can understand the meaning and the intention of the SL author, and the meaning in the TT provided by the translator is worthy of the TL readers’ efforts in inferring the connotation. All these efforts will eventually achieve good communicative effects through the context (Sperber and Wilson, 1996). However, the efforts paid by TL readers should be commensurate with due contextual effect. If the TL text produces good contextual effects for TL readers and no inefficient effort is spent, the goal of communication is achieved as expected (Long and Cai, 2020). But although the optimal relevance refers to achieving better contextual effects without wasting unnecessary efforts, translators should notice that “necessary efforts” are not equivalent to “no efforts”. As long as the readers receive the contextual effects that match or exceed the efforts they expended, the efforts are necessary (Wang, 2000). Since optimal relevance is vital in successful communication (Zhao, 1999), translators should match the cognitive level of TL readers with their ability to understand the images. In that way, TL readers can achieve the maximum communicative effect with the least possible effort and realize the transmission of aesthetic and artistic conception in Tang poetry images.

3.2.5. Interlingual interpretive usage

The translation of images in Tang poetry is an interlingual activity of ostension and inference, which is either pragmatic or communicative (Zhao, 1999). The ultimate goal of translation is the optimal relevance between TL readers and SL authors. Gutt (2014) summarized direct and indirect speech proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1988) and came up with two interlingual interpretive usages: direct translation and indirect translation. Direct translation means that translators make efforts to preserve the communicative clues that reflect the linguistic characteristics of the SL. Both direct and indirect translation are inseparable in intralingual and interlingual use. Cultural differences between SL and TL determine the main status of indirect translation (Hatim and Munday, 2004). In translating Tang poetry images, translators should choose appropriate interlingual interpretive usage according to the SL author’s intention and specific artistic conception. Therefore, whether the image in English can arouse a similar feeling without causing misunderstandings among TL readers is an important principle to appraise the reproduction effect of images.

3.2.6. Text type label

Hatim and Munday (2004) pointed out that although the relevance translation theory analyzes descriptive and interpretive, direct and indirect translation strategies, most theories cannot completely ignore macroscopic structures such as text type or genre. Therefore, text type must be taken into consideration before TL readers make cognitive efforts to fully understand the SL author’s intention. Reiss divided text types into three categories: informative, expressive, and operative (错误!未找到引用源。). In translating images of Tang poetry, text type labels should be assigned to the text before translation, so that TL readers are guided to seek the optimal relevance in the right direction.

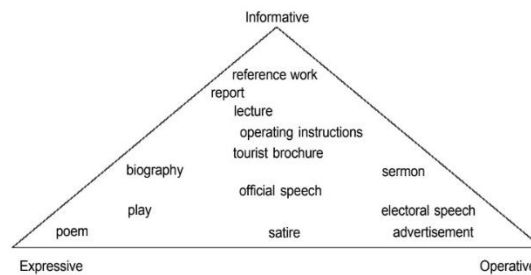


Figure 2. Reiss’s text types and text varieties (Chesterman, 1989).

Based on the effect of the specific images in the Tang poetry, translators should label the text type as “poem”, which belongs to the expressive text according to Reiss. This label can stimulate TL readers to associate all the information related to poetry, without generating understanding expectations of other text types. Also, by assigning labels to texts, translators can mobilize TL readers to produce communicative effects. However, optimal relevance may fail if the TL readers have low recognition of the same text type label as the translators or the translators misuse the translation strategies in other text types. With the label of expressive text, translators can also find appropriate translation methods based on its characteristics (Figure 3). Accordingly, since sentence structures should remain invariant in the translation of literary prose and drama, blank and rhymed verse, musical texts, and dubbing (Gutt, 2014), the text types of the poems remind the translators to keep invariant sentence structures and intonations with the SL authors.

Text type:	Informative	Expressive	Operative
Language function:	Informative (representing objects and facts)	Expressive (expressing sender’s attitude)	Appellative (making an appeal to text receiver)
Language dimension:	Logical	Aesthetic	Dialogic
Text focus:	Content-focused	Form-focused	Appellative-focused
TT should ...	Transmit referential content	Transmit aesthetic form	Elicit desired response
Translation method:	‘Plain prose’, explication as required	‘Identifying’ method, adopt perspective of ST author	‘Adaptive’, equivalent effect

Figure 3. Characteristics and translation methods for different text types (Munday, 2012).

4. Results

During the Tang Dynasty, the performance styles of *pipa* were greatly expanded due to the inclusive environment for all cultures at that time (Han, 1986), allowing people from all walks of life access to learn and enjoy this instrument. Besides, since the *pipa* is a four-stringed plucked instrument with varied tones

and complicated performing techniques, the *pipa* songs can also exhibit some contrasting emotions.

Therefore, the study has searched for all the images of *pipa* in the 320 Tang poetry in the anthology and then tried to categorize these images into three groups, representing the poet's political aspiration, the poet's unworldly pursuit, and the poet's attitudes towards the affairs involving national borders respectively. Each group is characterized by the strong or contrasting emotions of the *pipa* to show its features of varied styles of performances and finally reflects the poets' pursuits and the social backgrounds at that time. Hence, some frequent images of *pipa* are concluded as compassion and melancholy, indifference and openness, and joy and resentment.

4.1. Compassion and melancholy

The *pipa* is used as an image for poets to express their empathy for the *pipa* players. During the Tang Dynasty, this instrument was favored by people from different social strata. While girls in the palace expressed their loneliness by playing *pipa*, many Chinese Geisha, a group of poor Chinese girls, were sent to dance, sing, or play *pipa* for a living. So, *pipa* was given a sense of melancholy and often appeared in poems as an image to depict the literati's sympathy for those girls' miserable situation. In addition, the Keju system, a civil service examination system implemented in ancient China, further developed into a rigorous and highly competitive system to select government officials based on their intellectual abilities rather than social status or wealth. Countless people with lofty ideals failed to realize their political aspirations and resorted their feelings of melancholy to words through the image of *pipa*. The following examples are selected from Bai Juyi's (772–846) "Pipa Xing"/"Pipa Xing Bingxu" and Du Fu's (712–770) "Yong Huai Guji (Qi San):

Example 1. 千呼万唤始出来，犹抱琵琶半遮面。

转轴拨弦三两声，未成曲调先有情。

白居易

《琵琶行》

(Qian Hu Wan Huan Shi Chu Lai, You Bao Pipa Ban Zhe Mian.

Zhuan Zhou Bo Xian San Liang Sheng, Wei Cheng Qu Diao Xian You Qing)

Bai Juyi

Pipa Xing

Yet we called and urged a thousand times before she started toward us,

Still hiding half her face from us behind her guitar.

...She turned the tuning pegs and tested several strings;

We could feel what she was feeling, even before she played.

The Song of A Guitar (Kiang and Bynner, 1929).

Repeatedly we called for the fair player till

She came, her face half hidden behind a pipa still.

She turned the pegs and tested twice or thrice each string;

Before a tune was played, we heard her feelings sing.

Song of a Pipa Player (Xu et al., 1988).

It was after many invitations, call after call, before she showed herself,

Even then, she held her pipa close and revealed only half of her countenance.

She picked a few notes as her pipa strings tightened and tuned,

Evoking a sentimental appeal even before a melody was played.

Ode to a Lady's Pipa Play with an Introduction (Tseng, 2011).

In Pipa Xing, Bai Juyi wrote a lot to exhibit the superb playing skills of the *pipa* player, contrasting her performance with the misfortune of her life, showing his compassion for the girl's experience and his criticism for the injustice of the feudal society (Jiang, 2022). From the perspective of relevance translation theory, the three translators all chose to supplement the context in the TT to reproduce the image of the *pipa*.

Pipa used to be held horizontally by the player on the horses, but it was gradually played uprightly on the chair (Zhuang, 2019). It is important for TL readers to understand the artistic conception in “犹抱琵琶半遮面”, which means the *pipa* player is hiding half of her face behind the *pipa*. With the Chinese cultural background provided by Kiang Kanghu, Bynner changed “*pipa*” into “guitar” to remind the TL readers of the shape of the *pipa*. In this sense, the TL readers can make less effort to understand the similar appearance of the two instruments, reflecting the translator's social motives and moral norms. However, although Bynner tried to improve the TL readers' acceptance of the translation by replacing unfamiliar concepts (such as culture-loaded words) for the TL readers (Cao, 2019), the replaced concepts may extend its images, which will interfere with the understanding of TL readers. For instance, since “guitar” is a kind of horizontally-held instrument, it is difficult for TL readers to associate it with the picture of the *pipa* player covering her face in the *pipa*, leading to more effort in inferring the contextual effect created by the author. Xu and Tseng paid attention to the cognitive environment of *pipa* playing for TL readers and chose to reproduce the cultural default and translated “琵琶” as “*pipa*” so that the TL readers are offered new cultural information and would not be easily affected by the extended image in their culture.

Besides, Tseng supplemented the word “sentimental” in translating “未成曲调先有情”, which means the *pipa* player's tragedy could be observed even before the song was played. His version also provided clues about the poet's demotion. By adding context to the poet's experience, the SL readers can link the poet's melancholy with the *pipa* player. However, TL readers need to spend more effort to infer the connotations of the *pipa* image and achieve optimal relevance.

Example 2. 千载琵琶作胡语，分明怨恨曲中论。

杜甫

《咏怀古迹》（其三）

(Qian Zai Pipa Zuo Hu Yu, Fen Ming Yuan Hen Qu Zhong Lun.)

Du Fu

Yong Huai Guji (Qi San)

Song of the Tartars on her jade guitar,

Telling her eternal sorrow.

Thoughts of Old Time III (Kiang and Bynner, 1929).

For thousands of years, the pipa has struck out the Tartar's tongue,
But now what sorrow and resentment are heard in that musical tone!

Contemplations on the Historical Sites (Xu et al., 1988).

A thousand years later, her pipa melodies are now accompanied by Hun lyrics
That flows with apparent bitterness and lament in every pick and strum of play.

Sentimental Verses at Heritage Sites III of V (Tseng, 2011).

Yong Huai Guji (Qi San) is one of the representative poems of Du Fu. In the poem, he sang the praise of Wang Zhaojun, who was known as a legendary figure in the Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 220), for her moral character and intellectual achievements. She was selected to be one of the concubines in the imperial harem of Emperor Yuan of Han (75–33 BC) and was sent to marry a nomadic leader to maintain peace and establish an alliance with them (Fu and Zheng, 2022). Although the authenticity of the historical connection between Zhaojun and the *pipa* remains to be further verified, the understanding of the *pipa* image here is not affected since the story of Zhaojun and *pipa* has already taken root in Chinese people's minds. Through the relevance of the *pipa* image and the poet's sorrows, the feelings of melancholy deepened.

The history of *pipa* dates back to the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) which was originally made of wood (Han, 1986). In this poem, Bynner made some artistic adjustments and translated “*pipa*” into “jade guitar”. From the perspective of relevance translation theory, although *pipa* was explicitly named here, “jade” symbolizes different meanings in different cultures. In China, jade is a symbol of power, high status, and noble characters, while in other cultures jade may not resonate with similar cultural connotations. To some extent, it will lead to misunderstandings in this traditional Chinese instrument among TL readers. Bynner and Tseng added the words “eternal” and “apparent bitterness and lament” to emphasize the degree of sorrow, which is beneficial to exhibit the melancholy brought by *pipa* and elaborate the aesthetic conception of poetry. Xu et al. (1988) translated “分明怨恨曲中论” from a declarative into an exclamative sentence, providing ostension of the poet's feelings. Tseng utilized indirect translation to add communicative clues in strengthening the emotional connection between Zhaojun and *Pipa* in the TT. The aesthetic implication of images in ancient Chinese poetry often appeared with vague meanings (Zhang and Wang, 2018). In many cases, complete explicit images or artistic conceptions in poetry lack far-reaching resonance between SL authors and TL readers. In this sense, both the translations of Bynner and Tseng used “her” to refer to Zhaojun in the poem instead of clarifying her identity, leaving the TL readers with space to understand the vague beauty of images.

4.2. Indifference and openness

Pipa is used as an image for poets to express their unworldly pursuit and sense of mental tranquility. The artistic conception in poetry is manifested through the process of attaching the poet's feelings to the external environment. In Tang poetry, the artistic conception of *pipa* may not exist in reality, but it can serve as a specific emotional carrier to deliver the poets' feelings. The Tang Dynasty witnessed a rapid development of *pipa*, and poets usually merged their attitudes toward life and their pursuits into images. The following examples are selected from Wang Wei's (692–761), Zhu Li Guan and Wang Han's (687–726) Liangzhou Ci:

Example 3. 独坐幽篁里，弹琴复长啸。

王维

《竹里馆》

(Du Zuo You Huang Li, Tan Qin Fu Chang Xiao.)

Wang Wei

Zhu Li Guan

Leaning alone in the close bamboo,

I am playing my lute and humming a song.

In a Retreat Among Bamboos (Kiang and Bynner, 1929).

Sitting among bamboos alone,

I play on the lute and croon carefree.

The Bamboo Hut (Xu et al., 1988).

Sitting along surrounded by bamboo clusters,

I play the lyre, recite poems, and verify some more;

In a Bamboo Pavilion (Tseng, 2011).

Zhu Li Guan was written during Wang Wei's seclusion. The poem depicts the poet sitting alone under the moon while playing lute happily, which is full of aesthetic value. Through concrete four lines (two lines are listed in Example 3), the poet pictured an unworldly realm with the lute. Although “*pipa*” was not directly appeared in the ST, the instrument it referred to can be inferred from Wang Wei's growing experiences and his reclusive life.

Both the translation of Bynner and Xu et al. (1988) transferred the word “*琴*” into “lute” (mainly referred to a held plucked instrument, such as a *pipa*). “Zither”, another synonym for Chinese “*qin*”, refers to laying plucked instruments (such as a *guqin*) (Zhang and Wang, 2018). Therefore, the two translators directly provided the contextual information to reflect the poet's communicative intention. Tseng translated “*qin*” to “lyre” (the ancient Greek harp with seven strings), misleading the TL readers in understanding the picture with *pipa*. But then “recite poems and versify some more” were added to supplement the context information of the poet's personal preferences and pursuit. Because “lyre” is more familiar to the TL readers, they can activate relevant knowledge in cultural memory relying on their cognitive context and interpret the context selected by the SL author to obtain similar cognitive effects with SL readers. As for the word “Chang Xiao” (literally, singing with a loud voice), Xu et al. (1988) added the “croon” (singing softly with emotion) to demonstrate the SL author's unworldly attitude. In this way, the artistic conception and connotation created by the poet are revealed through communication clues. The TL readers are offered a channel to understand the poet's indifference with fewer inferences to achieve optimal relevance. From the perspective of relevance translation theory, Xu et al. (1988) and Tseng are more helpful for the TL readers to infer the images of *pipa* and finally realize the optimal relevance. All three versions of the translation chose direct translation to remain in the same form as the concise five-character quatrain in delivering the poet's unworldly pursuit.

Example 4. 葡萄美酒夜光杯，欲饮琵琶马上催。

王翰

《凉州词》

(Pu Tao Mei Jiu Ye Guang Bei, Yu Yin Pipa Ma Shang Cui.)

Wang Han

Liangzhou Ci

They sing they drain their cups of jade,

They strum on horseback their guitars.

A Song of Liangzhou (Kiang and Bynner, 1929).

With wine of grapes, the cups of jade would glow at night,

Drinking to pipa songs, we are summoned to fight.

Starting for the Front (Xu et al., 1988).

Fine red wine glitters in a jade chalice that glows in the night,

Before I could drink it came lyre notes giving orders to mount the horse.

Liangzhou Verses (Tseng, 2011).

Of two Liangzhou Ci written by Wang Han, the excerpt is selected from the first piece. The most representative characteristic of the poem is the scenes in and out of the camp. With heavy snow outside, a grand and warm banquet was organized in the camp by soldiers at the frontiers before setting off for the war. The poet created a free atmosphere of drinking alcohol, exhibiting the soldiers' indifference and boldness to life and death. The distilled spirit, also the Chinese Baijiu, is often used in traditional Chinese farewell or gathering parties. People would convey their happiness or indifference through Baijiu. *Pipa*, on the other hand, serves as an important instrument at the banquet to boost the joy of the soldiers, strongly contrasting with their indifferent attitude towards the danger of the war. The bold spirit and the attitude toward life have shown their lofty and heroic state of mind.

In “欲饮琵琶马上催”, Xu et al. (1988) added, “We are summoned to fight” to supplement the context of the war. Soldiers were gathered and were about to fight, so they prepared a banquet to enhance the morale of the troops. In terms of personal expression, Bynner as a foreign translator, used the third person in the poem for his own cultural identity, while Xu et al. and Tseng chose the first person to better link the TL readers with the grand mood created by the feast. The TL readers can thereby spend less effort to infer the boldness and indifference to the life and death of these soldiers. In addition, Xu noticed that the words “悲 (bēi)” and “催(cuī)” rhymed, and translated them into “night” and “fight”. The reproduced rhymes stressed the soldiers' attitude and restored the artistic conception created by the image of the SL poem. the TL readers' understanding of the fearlessness of the soldiers and the author's appreciation for their attitude is deepened.

4.3. Joy and resentment

Pipa is used as an image for poets to express their attitudes towards the affairs involving national borders. In the Tang Dynasty, the peace and stability of the territory is closely linked with the borders. Since the sound of *pipa* is mellow and melodious, the songs lead to either joy or resentment with different moods of the poets. Because *pipa* was especially favored as an accompaniment for dances in the Tang Dynasty, the “joy” indicates the atmosphere *pipa* creates on special occasions. The “resentment” in the Tang poems refers to the insinuation of the emperor's unjustified political orders and the praise for the

frontier soldiers. The sharp contrast of these two attitudes highlights resentment and hatred. The following examples are selected from Cen Shen's (718?–769?) *Baixue Ge Song Wu Panguan Guijing* and Li Qi's (690–751) *Gu Congjun Xing*:

Example 5. 中军置酒饮归客，胡琴琵琶与羌笛。

岑参

《白雪歌送武判官归京》

(Zhong Jun Zhi Jiu Yin Gui Ke, Huqin Pipa Yu Qiangdi.)

Cen Shen

Baixue Ge Song Wu Panguan Guijing

But we drink to our guest-bound home from camp,

And play him barbarian lutes, guitars, harps;

A Song of White Snow in Farewell to Field-Clerk Wu Go Ing Home (Kiang and Bynner, 1929).

We drink in headquarters to our guest homeward bound;

With Tartar lutes, pipas, and pipes the maps resound.

Song of White Snow in Farewell to Secretary Wu Going Back to the Capital (Xu et al., 1988).

The marshal has put out wine to bid you goodbye,

With Hun lute, pipa, and Qiang flute performances to entertain.

Bidding Farewell to Magistrate Wu Returning to the Capital with a Snow Song (Tseng, 2011).

The poem describes a farewell dinner for envoys back to Chang'an (the capital of China in the Tang Dynasty), which is now Xi'an, at the border fortress camp in winter. Although the soldiers were reluctant to see their comrades off, the poem is filled with romantic feelings and patriotic enthusiasm. The “胡琴琵琶与羌笛” used juxtaposition of images (Liu, 2015) to describe the scene of the feast horizontally with scattered forms and concentrated expressive meanings. The atmosphere created by these instruments constitutes a warm and solemn farewell. When the banquet began, all kinds of instruments were played with dance, and the soldiers drank freely with their inner feelings completely pouring out. The *pipa* and other instruments have pushed the happy atmosphere to a climax.

The three versions described the main events of the poem in the title for TL readers to grasp the feelings of the whole text. With the third person, Bynner used indirect translation to deal with the juxtaposition of images, while Xu et al. changed the expression to the first person to narrow the distance between TL readers and the SL author, conveying the sincere feelings of the farewell directly. In addition, in translating the image juxtaposition in the original text, the three translators all used the same juxtaposition structure, but Xu and Tseng added “resound” and “entertain” respectively to reveal the pleasant atmosphere created by *pipa*, contrasting the scene of the snow outside and allowing TL readers to spend less effort to feel the burst of emotions during the banquet. In ancient China, the farewell culture was usually filled with joyful moods and accompanied by music, but Bynner downplayed the description of the grand scene here. TL readers need to make more efforts to understand the happy atmosphere created by *Pipa*.

Example 6. 行人刁斗风沙暗，公主琵琶幽怨多。

李颀

《古从军行》

(Xing Ren Diao Dou Feng Sha An, Gong Zhu Pipa You Yuan Duo.)

Li Qi

Gu Congjun Xing

And when the throb of watch-drums hangs in the sandy wind,

We hear the guitar of the Chinese Princess telling her endless woe...

An Old War-Song (Fu and Zheng, 2022).

We beat the gong in sand-darkened land where the wind blows,

And hear the pipa tell the princess' secret woe.

Army Life (Xu et al., 1988).

Soldiers dread the sound of midnight bronze bells, for gloomier than dust storms they are,

Like the Han princess's lute play during her life in the Wusun Tribe, grievous and bitter.

A Poem for the Enlisted to an Old Melody (Tseng, 2011).

The excerpt rendered the bleak and harsh environment of the frontier fortress in Northwest China, exhibiting the tense military life of the frontier fortress soldiers and revealing the author's irony to Emperor Xuanzong (685–762). “Gong Zhu” in the poem refers to Princess Xi Jun, who was originally the daughter of a nobility and later married the king of Wusun (one of the nomadic tribes in ancient China). As a comfort to her journey, the *pipa* songs she played were full of sorrow and homesickness (Fu and Zheng, 2022). These two lines criticize the present with the past to reach lyrical effect, i.e., integrating the resentment of the princess and *pipa* into the depiction of the solemn environment at the border and the desolation and resentment have been highlighted. In the ST, since the background of the princess's distant marriage was unfamiliar to TL readers, they may not be able to relate the princess's grudge to the desolation of the border.

To maintain the original form of the ST, Xu et al. (1988) adopted direct translation without giving clues about the princess and the border. Bynner's translation supplemented the identity of Princess Wusu, another Chinese princess married to a foreign ruler from a neighboring region to foster political alliances, prevent conflicts, and promote cultural exchange between the two parties. In Tseng's version, the princess's identity and the tribe's name were added in “during her life in the Wusun Tribe” for TL readers to realize the relationship between “princess”, “*pipa*”, and “bitterness”.

5. Discussion

According to the findings, different implications of the *pipa* images in the anthology have reflected three different ways of translating images. Consistent with Gutt's Hatim and Munday's findings of the relevance translation theory (Hatim, 2004; Gutt, 2014), this study has integrated the framework to explain the reproduction effects of the translation of *pipa* images. Due to different translator identities, time of translation, cultural backgrounds, and translation purposes, the way they dealt with *pipa* images varied.

5.1. Diverse translation strategies

Translation strategies vary with different translators' identities and translation purposes. In Example

1, Xu and Tseng opted for literal translations to maintain the original cultural context and poetic imagery of *pipa*, while Bynner sought to adapt the image to culturally equivalent references in English, which is consistent with the inferential-ostension process. He changed “*pipa*” into “guitar” to remind TL readers of the similar shape of the two instruments with the cultural background provided by Kiang Kanghu. Therefore, TL readers spend less effort to understand the appearance of *pipa*. For the consideration of text types and individual interpretations of the contextual effect of images, the structure of the TL corresponds to the original text, reflecting the translators’ social motives and moral norms (Zhu, 2019).

Xu et al.’s translation marked an attempt to spread traditional Chinese culture to the world. Hence, they coordinated with Xu’s pursuit of beauty in sound, meaning, and form (Hu, 2014), since he was dedicated to transmitting Chinese poetry to foreigners. He paid special attention to maintaining the original rhyme and form of the SL in the TL and adopted foreignization to translate images. In Example 4, he noticed the rhyme of the last two words of these two sentences and thereby reproduced the rhyme in the English version. In this way, the soldiers’ attitudes towards life and death have been highlighted, and the artistic conception created by the image has also been restored.

5.2. Variations in emphasis and style

Prior studies on image translation under the framework of relevance theory have strengthened that translators need to restore all the necessary cognitive environment and context for TL readers (Pattimore, 2011; Gutt, 2014). However, the study revealed variations in the emphasis, tone, and stylistic choice in portraying the “*pipa*” image, which is reasonable in achieving optimal relevance. According to the effort and benefit principle, translators should give communicative clues to the TL readers and reproduce the style of the SL text. Therefore, different emphases and styles of translation can influence the realization of optimal relevance.

In the examples above, Tseng focused on delivering the cultural information to TL readers clearly and reducing unnecessary cognitive effort for them. Out of the passion for Chinese culture, Tseng focused more on giving communicative clues and contexts rather than reproducing the SL forms. In contrast, Bynner and Xu et al. (1988) maintained the vague meanings in Chinese poetry to restore the sense of aesthetic beauty of images (Cao, 2019), leaving TL readers to pay more effort to find the beauty of images.

5.3. Cultural sensitivity

The study has revealed that cultural sensitivity existed as translators grappled with the complexities of conveying a culturally significant image like “*pipa*” to different linguistic and cultural contexts. In relevance translation theory, translators need to match the cognitive ability of the TL readers to reach optimal relevance. However, this study underscores the importance of considering the cultural awareness of different translators in translating images.

In addition, the time of their translations represents different cultural backgrounds. Bynner and Kiang’s version was published in 1929, which was a time when America was experiencing a downturn. Facing the negative attitudes among people at that time, Bynner had the hope of offering people an ideal world created by Tang poetry (Hu and Han, 2021) and used the third person in the poem for his cultural identity to make the cultural image known in America. Responding to the call of inheriting and transmitting traditional Chinese culture to the world in 1988, Xu et al. (1988) restored more cultural images and adopted the first person in some non-subject sentences. Tseng published the translation in 2011 online, representing one of the renewals of the media and allowing people around the world to learn traditional Chinese culture.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the translation of the *pipa* image in three English versions of *300 Tang Poems* with the framework of relevance translation theory. Six dimensions (ostension and inference, cognitive environment and context, effort and benefit principle, optimal relevance, interlingual interpretive usage, and text type label) have been creatively combined to provide explanations for the translation of the *pipa* image. In the examples provided, Bynner facilitated the inference for SL readers by sacrificing the accurate interpretation of some images, reflecting his social motivation and respect for Chinese culture. Guided by poetic aesthetics, Xu et al. (1988) conformed to the text type of Chinese poems. He attached importance to the metrical beauty of the poems and added contextual words to achieve beauty in sound, meaning, and form. But in this way, the interpretation of the image cannot be detailed due to the high demands for vocabulary. Tseng added adequate contexts for TL readers to foster mutual manifestness between the SL authors and the TL readers. But in different poems of his translation, the image *pipa* has been translated into different versions, which may confuse TL readers. Based on the analysis of the *pipa* image in the three English versions, the characteristics of the three versions in translating the *pipa* image can be concluded as (1) diverse translation strategies, (2) variations in emphasis and style, and (3) cultural sensitivity. Then the reasons for translator identities, time of translation, cultural backgrounds, and translation purposes have been analyzed to explain their pros and cons to realize optimal relevance between the SL authors and the TL readers.

The study enlightens translators to change their translation mindset and make a comprehensive analysis of text types, their cultural stance, the contexts of ST and TT, the cognitive environment, and the cognitive ability of TL readers. Then the image needs to be decoded through ostension and inference using strategies like image replacement, aesthetic transformation, and context supplement to promote cultural resonance and achieve optimal relevance. In that way, the sustainable development of traditional Chinese culture can be realized.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, YZ; methodology, JC and YZ; software, JX and YZ; validation, JC, YZ and JX; formal analysis, YZ; investigation, JC, YZ and JX; resources, JC and YZ; data curation, JC and YZ; writing—original draft preparation, YZ; writing—review and editing, JC; visualization, JC and YZ; supervision, JC; project administration, JC; funding acquisition, JC. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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