



The Promise and Pitfalls of LLMs in Poetry Translation: A Case Study of Li Bai's "Invitation to Wine"

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Abstract: The rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence is reshaping the practice of poetry translation. Using Li Bai's "Invitation to Wine" as a case study, this research compares an English translation generated by ChatGPT with the classic version by Xu Yuanchong. Through close reading across the dimensions of structure, culture-loaded terms, and rhythm, the study finds that while LLMs can produce grammatically correct and semantically coherent translations proficiently, significant gaps remain compared to human artistry. ChatGPT's output tends to be prosaic in form, literal in handling cultural imagery, and deficient in conscious rhythmic design.

Keywords: large language models; poetry translation; Theory of Three Beauties; "Invitation to Wine"

1. Introduction

Large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT have achieved revolutionary progress in translation due to their powerful text-generation capabilities. However, classical Chinese poetry, characterized by concise language, rhythmic prosody, and refined expression, poses a great challenge in translation, akin to "dancing in fetters". Bassnett notes that translators must... decide what to do when translating a type of poetry that relies on a series of rules that are non-existent in the TL[1]. Whether LLMs can bridge this "poetic gap" concerns not only translation technology but also our understanding of language, literature, and AI's creative limits.

Li Bai's "Invitation to Wine" is renowned for its vigorous and imaginative style, flowing natural language, and harmonious yet varied rhythm. Accurately conveying its profound ideas, unique imagery, and emotions has long been a challenge in translation studies[2]. Scholars have conducted studies on its translations, primarily focusing on analyzing translation strategies and effects through different theoretical lenses[3]. However, research on the translation of this text by LLMs remains limited. Employing case analysis and close reading, this study aims to evaluate the application of LLMs in translating "Invitation to Wine", aiming to reveal its specific strengths and weaknesses and explore implications for future practice.

2. Key concepts

2.1 Xu Yuanchong's Theory of Three Beauties

In Literature and Translation, Xu Yuanchong proposed his poetry translation theory, advocating that in translating classical poetry, the aesthetic features of the original poem in terms of artistic conception, rhyme, and form should be conveyed. This achieves the poetic aesthetic value through moving artistic conception, pleasing rhythm, and appealing form, namely "beauty in sense", "beauty in sound", and "beauty in form". "Beauty in sense" refers to reproducing the artistic conception, emotion, and charm of the original poem, which is fundamental. "Beauty in sound" involves creatively imitating the rhythmic and rhyming musical effects of the original poem as much as possible. "Beauty in form" means aligning with the original poem's line and structural arrangement[4].

These three elements are organically unified, jointly serving to create a similarly beautiful whole in the target language as the original. This concept emphasizes the translator's subjectivity and creativity, advocating for a deep understanding of the original poem's essence and the courage to break free from literal constraints to engage in recreation within the target language culture. Therefore, when evaluating a poetry translation, particularly in comparison to AI-generated translations, the Theory of Three Beauties provides a comprehensive framework that balances appropriateness and creativity.

2.2 Large Language Model ChatGPT

LLMs represented by ChatGPT are fundamentally based on the Transformer architecture, which relies on massive data pretraining and autoregressive text generation. The Transformer model is built around the self-attention mechanism, enabling parallelization and efficient handling of long-range dependencies[5]. ChatGPT excels at parsing keywords, main

ideas, and subtle contextual relationships in input texts, leveraging its vast database and corpora to generate various types of text as required by users. In translation tasks, the advantage of this patterned generation lies in its ability to efficiently produce translations that are grammatically correct, lexically diverse, and semantically aligned.

However, poetry translation involves the originality and aesthetic qualities of literary works, including elements such as the author's unique rhetoric, linguistic style, and culture-specific references. These elements often require the translator to possess a deep understanding of the historical context, distinctive imagery, linguistic forms, and modes of thinking within the target culture. The extent to which LLMs can convey poetic touch is critical to the field of literary translation.

3. Case Analysis

This study employed the prompt "You are a professional literary translator, please translate the following Chinese classic poem into English. Pls be aware that this is a Chinese literary text containing classical idioms and cultural nuances". to drive ChatGPT-4 in generating an English translation of "Invitation to Wine". Subsequently, Xu Yuanchong's English translation was selected as the benchmark for human translation. Through a comparative analysis across three dimensions—reconstruction of form and structure, translation of culture-loaded terms, and reproduction of rhythm—this study aims to dissect the strengths and limitations of the translation produced by LLMs.

3.1 Reconstruction of Form and Structure

The beauty in form and structure is reflected in aspects such as line, stanzas, characters, and repetition. These elements collectively constitute the external form of a poem[6]. Classical Chinese poetry imposes strict character requirements for each poetic form, embodying the beauty of its visual structure. "Beauty in form" primarily concerns the line length, symmetry, and structural parallelism in the translated poem. Translators should strive to make the length of the translation approximate that of the original, thereby preserving the poem's structural beauty.

The original poem, "Invitation to Wine", belongs to the "Yuefu" Poetic Song, characterized by flexible line lengths. It interweaves lines of three, five, seven, and ten characters, creating a varied and dynamic visual and rhythmic effect through its irregular structure. In their respective translations, both Xu Yuanchong's and ChatGPT's renditions exhibit distinct characteristics in conveying this form and structure.

Example 1:

Original Line:

天生我材必有用，千金散尽还复来。

Xu's Version:

Heaven has made us talents, we're not made in vain.

A thousand gold coins spent, more will turn up again.

ChatGPT's Version:

Heaven has given me talents fit for use—

Spent a thousand in gold, and a thousand will come again.

The original verse is a complete seven-character line, neat and coherent in structure. The first line expresses confidence and optimism regarding the value of life, while the latter demonstrates a broad-minded attitude toward material gain and loss, reflecting Li Bai's transcendent outlook on life. Although Xu's translation does not replicate the distinct seven-character structure of the original, it achieves formal neatness through creative syntactic reconstruction. Xu divides the first line into two clauses—"Heaven has made us talents, we're not made in vain"—establishing a logical relationship. The second line echoes with a parallel structure: "A thousand gold coins spent, more will turn up again", with "vain" and "again" forming a rhyme. This creates a balanced antithetical effect in both form and sound, reproducing the parallel beauty of the original poem.

In contrast, ChatGPT exhibits a clear tendency toward "prosaic" expression in terms of form. It renders the first line as a complete sentence followed by a dash—"Heaven has given me talents fit for use—"—and connects the two parts of the second line with "and". While this approach preserves semantic completeness, it dissipates the balanced framework of the original. The two lines lose consistency in structure, length, and rhythm, resulting in the loss of visual and structural parallelism. Consequently, ChatGPT fails to reinforce the conciseness and characteristics of poetry through innovation in lines.

Example 2:

Original Line:

岑夫子，丹丘生，将进酒，杯莫停。

Xu Yuanchong's Version:

Dear friends of mine,
Cheer up, cheer up!
I invite you to wine.
Do not put down your cup!

ChatGPT's Version:

Master Cen, and you, Danqiu,
Bring on the wine—let not the cups stand still.

The original poem consists of four lines: the first two are vocative addresses of names, while the latter two depict actions and commands. This creates a terse rhythm of "3-3-4-4 characters", marked by a drum-like intensity that vividly recreates the urgent, lively atmosphere of urging drinks at a banquet. Xu's translation creatively disrupts the structure and sequence of the original lines, expanding them into five reconstructed lines. This approach visually forms a progression of short phrases, generating a bright, chant-like rhythm and a circular effect reminiscent of drinking games or toasting songs. However, this treatment sacrifices the specific names while amplifying the emotion at the core.

ChatGPT translation consolidates the four lines into two. This approach stretches the originally concise and forceful lines into two elongated clauses, lacking the rhythmic division and tension of poetic form. It fails to engage creatively with form as its aesthetic object.

3.2 Translation of Culture-Loaded Terms

Culture-loaded terms refer to words, phrases, and idioms that denote things unique to a certain culture. These words reflect the unique modes of activity accumulated by a specific nation in the long historical process, which are different from those of other nations[7]. They embody the unique history, geography, folk customs and, social life of the Chinese nation, and serve as key elements in the construction of artistic conception and expression of emotions in classical poetry. Translators are required not only to accurately convey the literal meanings of culture-loaded terms but also to deeply explore their cultural connotations, so as to help target readers understand the cultural images.

Example 3:

Original Line:

岑夫子，丹丘生

Xu Yuanchong's Version: Dear friends of mine

ChatGPT's Version: Master Cen, and you, Danqiu

In the original poem, "岑夫子，丹丘生" were Li Bai's hermit friends, with whom he often drank wine and composed poems together. "岑夫子" refers to Cen Xun, who was born into the prominent Cen clan of the Tang Dynasty and later chose to live in seclusion; "丹丘生" refers to Yuan Danqiu, a Taoist. In the translation of this cultural term, Xu's translation and the ChatGPT translation demonstrate different strategies.

Xu's translation "Dear friends of mine" adopts a typical domestication strategy, completely abandoning their specific historical and cultural identities—for foreign readers, these two figures are empty symbols with no practical significance. This approach, on the one hand, enables readers to instantly immerse themselves in the poetic context, reduces the cost of understanding for readers, and helps them grasp the poet's passion. On the other hand, this translation abandons informativeness, weakens the literary characteristics of the names of literati, and leads to cultural "distortion".

The ChatGPT translation "Master Cen, and you, Danqiu" adopts a foreignization strategy, strictly retaining the personal names through transliteration, and using "and you" to simulate a vocative tone. This method conforms to the structure of the original poem and meets the demand for information transmission. However, these unfamiliar linguistic symbols cannot directly arouse the target readers' understanding of the cultural background, nor activate readers' emotional associations with "friends", sacrificing the appeal and function of the original lines.

In this example, ChatGPT has a limited ability to convey cultural images and emotions; it can handle the literal conversion of cultural symbols but is still unable to conduct an in-depth judgment of cultural context and poetic adaptive reconstruction.

Example 4:

Original Line:

钟鼓饌玉

Xu Yuanchong's Version: rare and costly dishes

ChatGPT's Version: Bells and drums, jade dishes

Here, "钟鼓" refers to the lively and extravagant feasting scenes in wealthy families accompanied by the harmonious sounds of bells and drums; "饌玉" depicts food as precious and magnificent as jade, with its core in expressing the extravagant

and indulgent life of ancient nobles.

In terms of translation, Xu recreates this culture-loaded term: refusing the literal translation of the three specific material images, instead, he explains their essential attributes of extreme rarity and expensiveness, thus conveying the poet's critical attitude towards such illusory prosperity. ChatGPT translation "Bells and drums, jade dishes" retains the elements in the original poem. While it appears faithful in meaning, it fails to evoke in target readers the association of the specific extravagant scenes, resulting in the loss of "beauty in sense". Furthermore, "饌玉" refers to dishes as precious as jade, yet the expression "jade dishes" is rather rigid, which may potentially arouse confusion.

Xu, at the cost of sacrificing cultural symbols, achieves a vivid reproduction of profound cultural implications and the overall artistic conception of the poem, which constitutes a sublimation of "beauty in sense". In contrast, although ChatGPT's version retains cultural symbols, it is unable to promote integration of cultural semantics and poetic transformation, leading to barren beauty and even misreading.

3.3 Reproduction of Rhythm

Rhythm, comprising tonal patterns and rhythmic rules, refers to the level and oblique tones as well as rhythms in classical poetry, and is extended to encompass the rhythmic patterns of sound[8]. The rhyming in "Invitation to Wine" shifts flexibly. For instance, the first two lines employ a level-tone rhyme ("lái" and "huí"), evoking a sense of unrestrained movement and return, while the subsequent lines adopt an entering-tone rhyme ("fà", "xù", and "yuè"), highlighting the lament over the passage of time and the impermanence of life. Rhyming not only endows classical poetry with a musical beauty but also renders the verses melodious and fluent when recited. In the process of translating, it is essential for the translator not only to convey the original meaning comprehensively but also to strive to preserve its rhythm as much as possible, thereby enabling readers to perceive linguistic artistic effects akin to those of the source text.

Example 5:

Original Line:

烹羊宰牛且为乐，会须一饮三百杯。

Xu Yuanchong's Version:

Kill a cow, cook a sheep and let us merry be,
And drink three hundred cupfuls of wine in high glee.

ChatGPT's Version:

Let us butcher sheep and carve the ox for pleasure;
We must drain three hundred cups in one mighty drink.

The lines exhibit a brisk and urgent rhythm, conveying the poet's exhilaration while drinking. Through rhythmic undulations, the poet guides the reader's emotions, immersing them in the scene. In Xu's version, the first line ends with "be" and the second with "glee", forming a neat "aabb" rhyming couplet. This creates a stable rhythmic expectation and a cyclical auditory effect, mimicking the chant-like quality of the original poem as a "song-style" verse and producing an engaging experience. In contrast, in ChatGPT's version, "pleasure" and "drink" share no rhyming effect, resulting in a disjointed sound between the two lines. The first line, "Let us butcher sheep and carve the ox for pleasure", contains multiple stressed words ("butcher", "sheep", "carve", "ox", "pleasure"), giving it a heavy and somewhat protracted rhythm that loses the briskness of preparing for a feast. The second line, "We must drain three hundred cups in one mighty drink", ends powerfully with "mighty drink", but the line lacks a regular arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables, relying instead on speech pauses for its rhythm.

Example 6:

Original Line:

与君歌一曲，请君为我倾耳听。

Xu Yuanchong's Version:

I will sing you a song, please hear,
O hear! lend me a willing ear!

ChatGPT's Version:

For you I'll sing a song;
Lend me your attentive ear.

In this example, the original poem exhibits distinct prosodic features of the "yuefu" song-style tradition. Through the structural parallelism of phrases such as "君...一.." and "君为...", as well as the phonic resonance created by the characters "曲" (song) and "听" (listen) at the ends of lines, the poem establishes a colloquial and invocatory rhythm, evoking an immediate and interactive performative atmosphere. Xu's version creatively employs close rhyming (hear/ear) between

the two lines and creates a forceful connection through the repeated exclamation "O hear!" at the beginning of the second line, echoing "please hear" at the end of the first. This rhyming and repetition not only mimics the tone of the original but also intensifies the emotion of the poet's earnest plea to be heard, making the prosody itself a direct vehicle of emotion. In contrast, ChatGPT shows no rhyming relationship between the two lines, making them phonetically disjointed and failing to establish the auditory cohesion expected in poetry. The translation connects two clauses with a semicolon, resulting in a balanced yet flat syntactic structure that cannot recreate the sense of live interaction implied by the shift from song to listening in the original.

4. Conclusion

This study systematically compares the English translation of "Invitation to Wine" generated by ChatGPT with the classic translation by Xu Yuanchong, revealing the capabilities and limitations of AI in handling the high-level humanistic task of classical poetry translation. The findings indicate that LLMs excel in processing surface linguistic structures, producing translations that are grammatically sound, lexically diverse, and generally accurate in conveying information. However, significant gaps exist between their output and the artistic creation of human translators in dimensions central to the soul of poetry: the depth of cultural connotations, creativity in artistic form, and aesthetic integration.

The reasons for these gaps are twofold. First, the language generation paradigm of LLMs inherently lacks the "creative treason" essential for poetry translation. Second, the models lack aesthetic judgment and empathy. Unlike human translators, they cannot perceive and actively recreate, for instance, the rhythm in "烹羊宰牛且为乐" or the tone in "请君为我倾耳听".

Nonetheless, as illustrated by the translation examples discussed, LLMs can generate precise translations without errors or omissions, accurately conveying the literal meaning of the original poems. Therefore, in the future, LLMs like ChatGPT should engage in "collaborative work" with human translators in the field of poetry translation. By integrating the precise intelligence of LLMs with the creativity of human translators, it will be possible to produce translations rich in cultural connotations, artistic form, and aesthetic pleasure.

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