

# A Cognitive Poetic Approach to the Image Translation of *Er-shi-si Shi-pin*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the cognitive process in image translation of *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* from the perspective of genitive poetics. *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* is a unique and important work in the history of Chinese poetics, which discusses knowledge of poems in the form of image-loaded poems. Translating this work into English is of great help in promoting the cultural exchange between the East and the West. However, the work is difficult to translate as it uses many cultural-specific images. The images in *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* bare the poetic ideas of Si Kongtu, and are the basic pattern of poetic discourses in the late Tang. Translating them into English requires translators to have relevant cognition structure and translation experience, and the ability to apply different cognitive methods. Based on the framework of cognitive poetics, this paper adopts three approaches to analyze image translations of *Er-shi-si Shi-pin*, namely category recognition, literary schema and cross-space mapping. It is found that category recognition, functioning as the basis of other cognitive activities, is the starting point of understanding the images in the original work. And categorization is followed to connecting the images to existing knowledge of the translators, which leads to diverse comprehension of the original work. Then, the mappings among diverse cognitive domains enable the translator to choose appropriate expressions. These findings could contribute to the translating of other Chinese ancient works and to the studies of cultural translation in general.

**Keywords:** Image Translation, *Er-Shi-Si Shi-pin*, Cognitive Poetics

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## 1. Introduction

Image is an ontic category in the field of poetics and aesthetics, and also important in cognitive sciences. It embodies the interaction between the literary subject and object, and is the result of translators' trans-lingual and cross-cultural cognitive process. It is of significance in whole procedure of literary translation, and is especially vital in the stages of understanding and transferring.

二十四诗品(*Er-shi-si Shi-pin*, literally translated as *Twenty-four Kinds of Poetry*) by Si Kongtu (837-907), is a special work in the history of Chinese poetics. It is composed by 24 poems, of which the content is about knowledge of Chinese poetry. To be specific, it is a theoretical work in the form of tetra-syllabic verse. Its ambiguity in style makes translating the images in the work very difficult. The translators have to deal with them

with their own perceptual knowledge in certain cognitive approach. This makes theories of cognitive poetics highly instructive in analyzing the translations of *Er-shi-si Shi-pin*.

Emerged in the 1970s, cognitive poetics has seen a vigorous development. It was originally proposed by Reuven Tsur (1932-2021) from Tel Aviv University in Israel. In his book *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* (1992) the theory is described as an "interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature employing the tools of offered by cognitive science" [1]. In order to put forward a new theoretical perspective of analyzing literatures, Tsur combines literary theories with cognitive science to understand and interpret poems. In recent years, cognitive poetics has attracted growing attention of the literary academic, and many scholars devote themselves into developing this theory in literary studies. Among those scholars, Peter Stockwell is one of the most recognized

theorists. Based on Tsur's theory, he emphasizes that cognitive poetics can be used as a theoretical tool to analyze all kinds of literary texts, and "literature alters our perspective, knowledge, and way of thinking" [2]. In his book *Cognitive Poetics: An Introductory*, Stockwell puts forward a number of specific cognitive tools to precisely interpret literary texts, such as figure and ground, prototypes and reading, cognitive deixis and so on. After him, Gilles Fauconnier further develops the theory by proposing mappings in language and thought. He focuses on the complex brain activities, such as projection and concept integration, which could well explain the creativity in production translations.

Under the framework of cognitive poetics, this paper tries to explore the mind of different translators in translating *Er-shi-si Shi-pin*, focusing on the interaction of perceptions and experiences in understanding, constructing and transferring the images, and then attempts to find the cognitive patterns in translating Chinese classic poetics.

## 2. *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* and Its English Versions

*Er-shi-si Shi-pin* is widely regarded as one of the most recognized and controversial theoretical works in the history of Chinese poetics. During the Qing Dynasty, the work had a special place in the affections of the emperors.

They often used the images in *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* in their own poems and to do poetry criticism. As a result, the work was very popular with the academic circle in ancient China. Although in recent years, there have been voices questioning authenticity of this work, such as who is the true author and when it was created, most of the researchers still consider the work was by Si Kongtu in the late Tang, as no exact evidences could be found to disprove the current statements. Despite of the controversy, few would argue that *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* is of high aesthetic value and theoretical significance. Steven Owen suggests in his book *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (1992) that even though he reserves a large room for suspicion, he still considers *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* has "shaped the understanding of the history of poetics" [3] and make the work a chapter in his book.

*Er-shi-si Shi-pin* also draws great attention of the overseas scholars who are interested in studying Chinese literature and literary theories, many of whom are Sinologists receiving academic training in their own country and trying to explore Chinese culture from their cultural perspectives. To do this, they translate *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* into their own languages, spreading the work to many places in the world. The majority of the current translations are in English. By now, there are 12 different versions circulating in the English world, including complete and selected translations, as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Translations of *Er-Shi-Si Shi-pin* in the English world.

No	Publishing time	Translator	Title of the article	Title of the book	Publisher
1	1901	Herbert Allen Giles	SSÜ-K'UNG T'U	<i>A History of Chinese Literature</i>	London: William Heinemann
2	1909	Launcelot Alfred Cranmer-Byng	Ssu-K'ung T'u	<i>A Lute of Jade: Selections from the Classical Poets of China</i>	London: John Murray
3	1963	Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang	The Twenty-four Modes of Poetry	<i>Chinese Literature</i>	Beijing: Foreign Languages Publishing House
4	Unpublished	Achilles Fang	On Ssu-k'ung T'u's Shih-p'in	<i>Papers of Achilles Fang</i> [accessions]	
5	1966	Liu Wu-chi	Majestic and All-embracing	<i>An Introduction to Chinese Literature</i>	Bloomington: Indiana University Press
6	1969	Wai-lim Yip	Selections from "The Twenty-four Orders of Poetry"	<i>Stony Brook</i>	New York: Stony Brook Poetics Foundation
7	1972	Maureen Robertson	"...To Convey What is Precious": Ssu-K'ung T'u's Poetics and the Erh-shih-ssu Shih P'in	<i>Transition and Permanence, Chinese History and Culture: A Festschrift in Honor of Dr. Hsiao Kung-ch'üan</i>	Hong Kong: Cathay Press
8	1975	James J. Y. Liu	Embodying and Describing (Hsing-jung)	<i>Chinese Theories of Literature</i>	University of Chicago Press
9	1978	Pauline Yu	Ssu-K'ung T'u's Shih-P'in: Poetic Theory in Poetic Form	<i>Studies in Chinese Poetry and Poetics</i>	San Francisco: Chinese Material Centre
11	1992	Stephen Owen	The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry	<i>Readings in Chinese Literary Thoughts</i>	Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press
12	1994	Yoon Wah Wang		<i>Sikong Tu's Shi Pin: Translation with an Introduction</i>	Singapore: The National University of Singapore
13	1996	Tony Barnstone and Ping Chou	The Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry	<i>The Art of Writing: Teachings of the Chinese Masters</i>	Boston: Shambhala

From the table we can see that translating *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* has gone through more than 100 years. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, translators did their endeavor to reproduce the features of the original. Inevitably, when

interpreting, reconstructing and representing the images of the original, series of cognitive activities are carried out in the translators' mind. In this paper, the cognitive strategies and cognitive processing are examined and analyzed.

### 3. Cognitive Poetics Analysis: Translating Images in *Er-shi-si Shi-pin*

#### 3.1. Category Recognition and Image Interpreting

Recognizing categories is a basic cognitive capacity of translators, as categories embodies the essential features of things, and is at the basic level of how human mind. In the process of translation, by recognizing the categories, translators could specify the text's style, semantics and cultural particularity, and then give meaning to the linguistic signs of the target language. In the same way, when dealing with ancient works like *Er-shi-si Shi-pin*, translators need to know about the poetic tradition in ancient China from Confucius to the late Tang, distinguishing the work from other Tang poems by recognizing the categories of aesthetic and theoretical values in the original text.

According to Stockwell, the basis of cognitive capacity for categorization is prototypicality, with several core examples displaying prototypicality and acting as cognitive reference points within radial structure [2]. The boundaries of the category are not clear and fixed and categorization can be specified according to the social and historical context. Based on this, the accuracy of translating images in classic works also depends on translators' capacity of recognizing and specifying categories. They recognize categories in the two-stage process:

1. the original is taken as a gestalt whole, and a holistic perception of its style and the content is conducted;
2. the entirety is analytically decomposed into various subtypes, including prototype images and other significant components.

In the first stage, the primary understanding of the *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* is existed before translators actually read the text, as their cultural experience and preconception are ongoing. For this reason, when encountering the text for the first time, many translators recognized it as philosophical poems rather than poetic theory, considering theories in the West are written in voluminous, logical, analytical and argumentative way. In the second stage, salient attributes of the images are picked out, followed by a serial of cognitive actions, such as storing, comparing and examining. Through this flow, translators could realize that under the background of Chinese culture, the source text is talking about certain knowledge of poetry in the form of poems. In this sense, the images are not just for the purpose of aesthetic appreciation, but also delivering theoretical connotations.

In *Er-shi-si Shi-pin*, the image of “风” (*feng*, literally translated as wind) appears frequently. Si Kongtu uses it in two ways: one is to symbolize his moral courage, just like many other poets at his time; the other one is to demonstrate the beauty of strength in poems. Stockwell suggests that prototype effects and categorization are changeable rather than settled, which are highly depending

on the cultural and historical context [2]. Based on this, when categorizing this highly culture-loaded word *feng*, translators need to specify its prototype according to ancient Chinese poetics, analyze its connotations combining the poetic views of Si Kongtu, and determine what is the best translation in English. In order to acquire more knowledge of the image, translators could refer to the essential category in Chinese poetics – 气 (*qi*, literally translated as air). In ancient Chinese philosophy, the substance *qi* was seen as a fundamental particle constituting the world. When “气” (air) moves, “风” (wind) is formed. Thus, these two categories are close-related in Chinese culture. In Chinese poetics, the most well-known statement of *qi* is “文以气为主” (*wen yi qi wei zhu*, roughly means “literary works is based on air”) [4], which emphasizes that the mental status of a poet is the most significant element of his work. From then on, both *qi* and *feng* are frequently used to signify a poet's morals. In Si Kongtu's poetic views, the image *feng* in *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* is loaded with Taoist ideas that the poet should cultivate his mind and ethics by living a sequestered life. After Si Kongtu's death, the moral oriented connotation of *feng* is recognized approvingly by the later generations in Chinese poetics.

In Western poetics, the prototype of wind, the same as *qi*, is about the movement of air. It can also be used as a metaphor of a person's characteristics. However, when used in this sense, wind is often seen as a pejorative term, such as “be puffed up with wind”. What the Western readers interpret from wind is opposite to the connotation of *feng*. For this reason, wind cannot be adopted as the English equivalence for *feng*. Translators need to categorize the original image, understand the meaning by imagining the feelings of Si Kongtu, and then find an appropriate translation to deliver the cultural implicature. Taking the translations of “不着一字，尽得风流” (*bu zhuo yi zi / jin de feng liu*, literally translated as “Without a single word, the wind-flow is fully captured”) [5] for example, the compound image *feng-liu* has a range of renditions. Herbert Giles translates it as “wit” [6], Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang put it into “beauty” [7], James Liu does a word-for-word translation of “wind-flow” [8], and Pauline Yu renders it into “elegant style” [9]. The diverse translations are the result of translators' recognizing *feng-liu* as a category for poetics, rather than for natural phenomenon. William Yip conducts a deeper categorization by translating *feng* into “flowing grace” and adding a note that it refers to “a Taoist-tinctured way of living” [10]. The word “grace” can refer to a person's charisma, indicating that Yip recognizes the moral implication of *feng* in Si Kongtu's poetic writing. And the added note furtherly shows the translator's understanding of the impact of Taoism on *Er-shi-si Shi-pin*.

From the analysis above, we can see that translators have different cognitive position and heavier mental workload than ordinary readers, who need to be more sensitive to categories in different cultures. Also,

translators' recognizing and classifying of categories in the source text is the basis of their restructuring images in the target text. In this process, as the attributes of the original images are continuously borrowed and constructed, translators' knowledge structure keeps interacting with the source text and changing along with the culturally cognitive context. Then a new meaning combining the elements of the two cultures is produced.

### 3.2. Literary Schemas and Image Reconstruction

In cognitive science, schemas are a concept system to understand, characterize and utilize knowledge. It is argued that concepts of the objective world are reserved as schema in our mind, and are connected with one another to form a particular knowledge structure. Stockwell points out that a literary schema is a higher-level conceptual structure than ordinary schemas, organizing our way of reading literatures efficiently [2]. It is a dynamic and experimentally growing structure, rather than a settled plan or goal. Similarly, in translation process, translators' literary schema develops as they accumulate cultural knowledge and translating experience. When they handle images in a literary work, their existing literary schema might be changed in different ways, as schematized differences in literary assumptions, allusions, readers' expectations continuously come in. Thus, while encountering the variant and deviated images, their schema can be challenged by surprising elements, or be enlarged and refreshed by adding new facts to the existing schemas.

It is sure that translators have a set of schemas of style, text structure and content. Images are the conceptual core of poetry. When translating images, translators will go through a serial of interactions among diverse cognitive elements, such as literary language, emotions and imagination. It is suggested by cognitive poetics that the figure of objects in images will active the world schemas in translators' mind. Take the image “松” (*song*, literally translated as pine) for example. Both *song* in Chinese and pine in English have similar semantic meaning, referring to a kind of tall, erect tree that can survive in wretched conditions. However, in Chinese culture, the literary schema of *song* is different from that in English, implying the poets' fortitude and strong will. Si Kongtu writes in *Er-shi-si Shi-pin*: “筑室松下, 脱帽看诗” (*zhu shi song xia, tuo mao kan shi*; Stephen Owen translated as “He builds his cottage beneath the pines, / Removes his cap, looks at poems” [3]), where *song* indicates Si Kongtu's admire for anchorite ethos in Chinese traditional culture. As a result, by categorizing *song*'s knowledge structure, the literary schema for the image is updated, shifting translator's cognitive focus from the previous schema to a tuned schema in the context of *Er-shi-si Shi-pin*. From the analysis we can see that translators' understanding and interpreting of the text is a mental process of preserving, enlarging and refreshing the explanatory range of the categories they have.

Another good example is “萧萧落叶, 漏雨苍苔” (*xiao xiao luo ye, lou yu cang tai*, literally means “The leaves are falling, / The rain drops on the moss”) in the 19<sup>th</sup> poem “悲慨” (*bei kai*, literally means sadness), where the images of *luo ye* and *cang tai* are connected and superposed with each other, requiring translators activating their schemas to restructure and represent the meaning of the original text. Schemas for *luo ye* in Chinese and falling leaves in English are overlapped, involving the sentimental feelings for the elapsed time and aging lives. Yet the literary schemas for *cang tai* and moss are dissimilar. *Cang tai* in *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* can link to many other tang poems, symbolizing poets' frustrated career and disconsolate feelings. On contrary, moss in English poems is often seen as a praise of tenacious vitality of tiny things. Without enough cultural knowledge and translation experience of these images, native English translators might be deviated from the correct knowledge structure and their literary schemas might be disrupted. Under this circumstance, the translators need to revise the sequencing and structural organization to refresh and restructure the original images. Giles translates the sentence into “The wind whistles, leaves fall, / And rain trickles through the old thatch” [6]. He translates the onomatopoeic word *xiao xiao* into a behavior “the wind whistles”, clarifying the reason of “leaves fall”, which can be seen as the manifestation of his cognitive activities. And *cang tai* is rendered into “the old thatch”, where the image is interpreted as a house roof made with straw, indicating that Giles lacks related literary schema under the Chinese context and fails to restructure the image in English. Stephen Owen's version is “The winds moan through the falling leaves, / Rain drips on the grey moss” [3]. Compared with Giles, Owen almost keeps the holistic schema and build an equally effective space for the target readers to operate their literary schema.

The examples above demonstrate that in the process of literary translation, what the translator's mind going through is cognizing and categorizing the original images. On the one hand, translators continuously expand and extend their existing schemas to deliver the connotation of the source text as much as possible. On the other hand, they have to predict whether the revised schema can activate the literary schema of the target readers. Otherwise, their translations might not be accepted in another culture.

### 3.3. Cross-Space Mappings and Image Conversion

Cross-space mappings in cognitive poetics is an application of mathematic mapping theory. It is suggested by Fauconnier that communication is a hyperspace, and there are cross-space mappings among the counterparts, forming the cognitive basis of generating new space and new concepts [11]. From this perspective, translation is a mental process of cross-space mappings, as the translators continually construct diverse sets of information, use vocabularies, grammar, rhetoric to activate their

conceptual knowledge, and complete semantic interpretation and transferring. There are two phrases of this procedure. At the phrase of understanding the source text, translators read and gain lexical, contextual and background information of the source text to build up related mental spaces. Along with the increase of their mind activities when reading carries on, the related spaces are modified as the text unfold. Till the emergent structure produced by these cognitive handling becomes approximately matching the source text, can translators integrate the concepts in different mental-spaces and obtain comparatively accurate and creative interpretations of the original text. The next phrase is information transference, which involves projection, mapping and blending in trans-lingual and cross-cultural dimensions. At this stage, translators regard the concepts in the source text as one “input space” [11], the constructed mental space in the first stage as another. Then, structures of these two spaces is projected to a third place for several times, of which the outcome is the target text. This is named by Fauconnier and Turner as “blending” [12].

The images of figures in *Er-shi-si Shi-pin*, like “高人” (*gao ren*), “幽人” (*you ren*), “可人” (*ke ren*) and so on, are the embodiment of Si Kongtu’s moral aspiration. In Chinese poetic thoughts, there is an acknowledged notion “知人论世” (*zhi ren lun shi*), which means the poet’s morals is a prerequisite of his poems. In other words, in Si Kongtu’s opinion, only when a poet possesses moralities like the legendary characters in Taoism, can he write great poems. From this point of view, handling those images carefully are of much importance when rendering the original text. Take translating “畸人乘真, 手把芙蓉” (*ji ren cheng zhen, shou ba fu rong*, generally means “The immortal rides the pure, with a lotus in his hand) in the 5<sup>th</sup> poems as an example. In this sentence, images *ji ren* (the immortal) and *fu rong* (lotus) constitute a space, expressing the unique Chinese aesthetic standard. Translators categorize the two images and find the correlations between them. In translators’ original literary schemas, immortal means a person of enduring fame or a supernatural being, and lotus is an exotic flower that is native to Asia. Then, they reinforce or modify the schemas by schema mapping, projecting partial structure of the two images to the blending space. Combining other information of the context, such as Chinese poetics deriving from pre-Qin philosophies, and allusions in Li Bai’s famous poem 古风·西上莲花山<sup>1</sup> (*xi shang lian hua shan*, literally means to climb the Lotus mountain) [13], new relations and structure are formed.

Image shifting is to generate new images through interactions among the source domain and the target domain [16]. Different translators come up with diverse translations of the image *ji ren*. Stephen Owen renders it into “the man of wonder” [3] and briefly describes his thinking process. He takes this expression from the

pre-Qin Taoist scripture *Zhuang-zi*, where “an unusual group of people that has transcended the material world” [14] are regarded as the man of wonder. Although he admits that in English there is no perfect equivalence for *ji ren*, he considers the translation can indicate the philosophical derivation of the image. However, the knowledge structure of this rendition fails to project Si Kongtu’s worry about his people suffering from social unrest to the target language. *Ji ren* is a person though live as a recluse, still pay much attention to the fate of his state. Wang Hongyin translates the image into “the True Man” [15], of which the grammatic structure is “modifier + noun”, matching that of the original text<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, “true” in English can mean being loyal and staunch to someone, and “the True Man” implies the patriotic feelings of the original author. Therefore, compared with Owen’s “the man of wonder”, Wang’s translation better reveals the deep meaning of the image *ji ren* and encourages target to experience more about the original cultural space.

From the analysis above we can see that constructing image is a compromise of image conversion, as the new structure has to match the semantic space of the original text. With cross-space mapping, the translators can project the image in the source text to another cultural space. This is the basic cognitive capacity of a translator. However, discrepancy in translators’ cultural knowledge, translation experiences, bi-lingual capacity can lead to different mappings, which ultimately cause the differences in diverse translations.

Above all, from the perspective of cognitive poetics, category, literary schema and cross-mapping are three cognitive operations of the translators’ dealing with image translation. These three operations are logically connected. Category recognition is considered as the basis of all the higher-level cognitive activities, and categorization of the images in *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* is the mental starting point of its translation. Meanwhile, categorization need be supported by literary schemas, and schemas are revised as the image get restructured. These cognitive operations increase the mappings among diverse cognitive domains and cultural spaces. At the stage of understanding the source text, in-put spaces automatically match the images with certain concepts, and the subject identify the form and semantic meaning of the source images based on categorization. In the stage of transference, the cognitive activities are more complex. The translators utilize their cognitive capacities and resources to build up a blending space, projecting their knowledge structure for many times and finally make the original text obtain its afterlife in a new culture.

## 4. Conclusion

The images in *Er-shi-si Shi-pin* bare the poetic ideas of Si Kongtu, and are the basic pattern of poetic discourses in

1 This poem conveys Li Bai’s concern of the social chaos caused by wars.

2 Grammatically saying, “Ji ren” is composed by an adjective *ji* (roughly equals unusual) and a noun *ren* (a person).

the late Tang. Cognitive poetics provides an effective theoretical approach to examine the translators' understanding of the original text and their strategies in making translation choices. It is found that category recognition, functioning as the basis of other cognitive activities, is the starting point of translating the images in the original work. Categorization is followed to connecting the images to translators' existing knowledge and the mappings among diverse cognitive domains enable the translator to choose proper words to express his cognitive understanding. At last, these findings could contribute to the translating of other Chinese ancient works and to the studies of cultural translation in general.

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