

The Application and Analysis of Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties Theory" in Poetry Translation

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Abstract: Xu Yuanchong is a famous contemporary translator in China, and his literary translation achievements are renowned both at home and abroad. He has published more than 60 books in Chinese, English and French, including "The Book of Songs", "Elegies of the South", "Selected Poems of Li Bai", "Romance in the Western Bower", "The Red and the Black", "Vanished springs", "Madame Bovary" and "In Search of Lost Time". In 2014, Xu Yuanchong was awarded the "Aurora Borealis Prize" Award for Excellence in Literary Translation, one of the highest awards in the international translation industry. Mr. Qian Jongshu, a literary giant, once said of Mr. Xu Yuanchong: "Mr. Xu has devoted his life to Chinese culture, and has died with all his might. And he opened up a new path for Chinese culture in the world." This article mainly expounds the background, function and significance of Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties Theory", and through case analysis, compares Xu Yuanchong's specific application of the "Three Beauties Theory" in Chinese poetry translation with other translators, and analyzes its embodiment in the "Three Beauties Theory".

Keywords: Xu Yuanchong's, Three Beauties Theory, Li Qingzhao

1. Introduction

Poetry translation has always been considered the most difficult type of translation due to its unique cultural connotation and the essence of Chinese culture, which has been passed down for thousands of years. Chinese poetry reflects the high literary accomplishments of Chinese poets, and as a result, translating poetry in a way that preserves its original flavor has become the mission of translation scholars [1]. Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties Theory" has played an inspirational role in the translation of Chinese poetry into English, providing guidance for translators in their work [2-4].

As far as the "Three Beauties Theory", Xu Yuanchong, a renowned contemporary Chinese translator, has made a name for himself both domestically and internationally with his numerous literary translation achievements. He has published more than 60 translated works in Chinese, English, and French, encompassing a wide range of Chinese and foreign classics [5]. In 2014, Xu Yuanchong received the prestigious "Aurora Borealis" Outstanding Literary Translation Award, becoming the first Asian translator to be honored with this award [6]. His "Three Beauties" principle about poetry translation, namely "beauty of meaning, the beauty of sound, and beauty of form," has been followed by Chinese classical poetry translators and has played an important role in classical poetry translation [4].

Li Qingzhao, a renowned female poet from the Song Dynasty in China, is known for her elegant and delicate style of poetry, and is regarded as the "number one talented woman of all time." In her poetry, she advocated for the concept of "separation is just like a family." She emphasized the coordination of rhythm, and was an advocate for elegance, skillfully using the technique of white drawing to describe scenes from daily life, a unique form of expression. Her poems are known for their liveliness, naturalness, gentleness, and exquisite style, distinguishes them from other works in the history of Chinese poetry. Her works have been translated into various languages and introduced to different parts of the world, making her a celebrated poet on the global stage.

Previous research on the "Three Beauties Theory" has been extensive, with scholars such as making significant contributions to the field [1-4]. Their studies have analyzed various aspects of the theory, including its philosophical foundations, its applicability to different genres of poetry, and its influence on the translation of classical Chinese poetry into other languages.

Compared to previous research, this study focuses on analyzing and appreciating the English translations of Li Qingzhao's poetry using Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties" principle, aiming to appreciate the beauty of its imagery, music, and form [7]. Li Qingzhao, a renowned female poet from the Song Dynasty in China, is known for her elegant and delicate style of poetry and is regarded as the "number one talented woman of all time." Her works have been translated into various languages and introduced to different parts of the world, making her a celebrated poet on the global stage. By addressing the issue of applying the "Three Beauties" principle to Li Qingzhao's poetry translations, the study aims to demonstrate the significance of using this principle in translating classical Chinese poetry and further to promote the understanding of Chinese culture through poetry translation. "Pursuing the aesthetic origin of translation, exploring the impact of aesthetics on translation, and distinguishing between the artistic and scientific nature of translation from an aesthetic perspective are the three basic tasks of translation aesthetics"[8].

2. Methodology

2.1. Literature Collection

To gather relevant materials for this research, a comprehensive search of existing English translations of Li Qingzhao's poetry was conducted. The search included online databases, published books, and scholarly articles. The translations selected for analysis were chosen based on their representation of the "Three Beauties" principle, translator's reputation, and their accessibility to a wide audience.

2.2. Sample Selection

The selection aimed to provide a diverse representation of Li Qingzhao's poetic style, covering various themes, tones, and imagery. This sample size was considered appropriate for a detailed qualitative analysis, allowing the researcher to explore the application of the "Three Beauties" principle in various contexts.

2.3. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for this qualitative study is based on Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties" principle, which comprises three main aspects: beauty of meaning, beauty of sound, and beauty of form. The analysis will be conducted as follows:

- a. Beauty of Meaning: Each selected translation will be examined for its fidelity to the original poem's meaning, considering the cultural context, imagery, and metaphors employed by Li Qingzhao. The analysis will identify instances where the translation succeeds in conveying the

intended meaning and instances where the translation falls short in capturing the essence of the original poem.

b. Beauty of Sound: The analysis will evaluate the translations' use of sound patterns, including rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration, to create a pleasing auditory experience for the reader. Comparisons will be made between the sound patterns of the original poems and their translations to assess the translators' ability to recreate the musical quality of Li Qingzhao's poetry in English.

c. Beauty of Form: The form of each translation will be analyzed, focusing on aspects such as line structure, stanza arrangement, and overall visual presentation. The analysis will assess whether the translations preserve the original form of Li Qingzhao's poems and how this affects the reader's experience.

2.4. Analytical Process

The analytical process will involve a close reading of the selected translations, accompanied by a detailed examination of the "Three Beauties" aspects in each translation. The findings will be presented in a narrative form, highlighting the successes and challenges faced by the translators in applying Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties" principle to Li Qingzhao's poetry. Examples from the translations will be provided to illustrate the main points and to support the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

By employing a qualitative approach in this study, the researcher aims to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in translating Li Qingzhao's poetry using Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties" principle, as well as to contribute to the broader discourse on poetry translation and the promotion of Chinese culture through translation.

3. The "Three Beauties Theory": Background, Content, and Significance

3.1. Aesthetic Beauty of Meaning

The aesthetic beauty of meaning is the core and soul of the "Three Beauties Theory". The aesthetic beauty of meaning is the essential part of poetry, while the beauty of form and sound are its external manifestations. According to Xu Yuanchong, if the aesthetic beauty of meaning is conveyed but the beauty of form and sound is not, the resulting translation may not be a good poem, but it could still be good prose.

3.2. Aesthetic Beauty of Sound

The harmony of tone, refined words, and melodious rhythm are the key reasons why poetry can be regarded as a cultural treasure and has been passed down through the ages. However, due to the unprecedented musical beauty of poetry in the artistic aspect, the English translation of Chinese poetry is even more challenging, as English words and Chinese characters are not equivalent. Xu Yuanchong strives to ensure that the translation follows the original text, with strict attention to rhythm and number of characters.

3.3. Aesthetic Beauty of Form

The aesthetic beauty of form mainly refers to the consistency of the poem's line numbers, neatness of length, and well-matched parallelism. Based on the above explanation of Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties Theory", although the aesthetic beauty of form is listed last, it is equally important. Therefore, in the process of translation, efforts should be made to preserve the original form of the poem.

4. Case Study

4.1. Li Qingzhao and "Sheng Sheng Man"

The first line of the poem "Sheng Sheng Man" by Li Qingzhao is:

寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚。

In Lin Yutang's translation, it reads:

So dim, so dark,
So dense, so dull,
So damp, so dank,
So dead!

In Xu Yuanchong's translation, it reads:

I look for what I miss;
I know not what it is.
I feel so sad, so drear.
So lonely, without cheer.[9]

The author believes that Lin Yutang's translation uses double sounds and head rhymes, translating the seven alliterative words as "dim, dark, dense, dull, damp, dank, dead" and using head rhymes. "Dim" and "dark" create the image of a late evening scene, "dense" and "dull" express the feeling of searching but not finding anything, "damp" and "dank" create a sense of sadness that evokes sympathy, and "dead" takes the emotion to its highest point, conveying the protagonist's helpless loneliness, perfectly reflecting the original meaning. The meanings of these alliterative words are equivalent to those in the original work, and the use of seven "so"s also creates a layered emotional progression, blending the emotions and scenes into a perfect portrayal of the helpless loneliness in a drizzly evening, making it an excellent translation.

Xu Yuanchong's translation uses the same sentence structure in the first two lines to express the protagonist's lonely search and bleak mood. The repetition of "so sad, so drear, so lonely" in the third and fourth lines reflects the beauty of the original phrase "cold and desolate, sad and mournful," and the AABB rhyme scheme reflects the "phonetic beauty" that embodies the poet's desolate mood. Unfortunately, "without cheer" feels somewhat cumbersome and seems to be forced to fit the rhyme. At the same time, adding the subject "I" to a sentence that initially had none in the beginning, this opening is full of protagonist consciousness, strengthens the action subject, and is more in line with the reading habits of English translations.

The third line:

三杯两盏淡酒，怎敌他、晚来风急？

Translation by Lin Yutang:

How can a few cups of thin wine
Bring warmth against
The chilly winds of sunset?

Translation by Xu Yuanchong:

Hardly warmed up.
By cup on cup.
Of wine so dry,
Oh, how could I.
Endure at dusk the drift.
Of wind so swift?

Both Lin Yutang and Xu Yuanzhong preserved the rhetorical question structure and conveyed the mood of the original text. However, the translation by Xu Yuanzhong may lack some force compared to the original word "敌," which means "resist." Lin Yutang's use of the preposition "against" conveyed the helplessness and despair of the protagonist, who had to face the cold wind alone, and achieved the same effect as the original text in mood and emotion. In addition, Xu Yuanzhong added "hardly warm up" in the translation to express the protagonist's sense of helplessness and convey the sad emotion of the original text, while paving the way for the following scenes of drowning sorrow in wine.

The fifth line:

满地黄花堆积。憔悴损，如今有谁堪摘？

Translation by Lin Yutang:

Let fallen flowers lie where they fall
To what purpose
And for whom should I decorate?

Translation by Xu Yuanzhong:

The ground is covered with yellow flowers.
Faded and fallen in showers.
Who will pick them up now?

In Lin Yutang's translation, "黄花" (huang hua) is translated as "fallen flowers," which may not be accurate from the perspective of "idiomatic translation." Xu Yuanzhong's translation of "yellow flowers" is more faithful to the original text, and the use of "showers" to describe the accumulation of flowers is both vivid and rhyming with "now" in the following sentence, achieving "idiomatic," "melodic," and "aesthetic" effects, making it an excellent translation.

The sixth line:

守着窗儿，独自怎生得黑？

Translation by Lin Yutang:

By the window shut,
Guarding it alone,
To see the sky has turned so black!

Translation by Xu Yuanzhong:

Sitting alone at the window,

How could I but quicken

The pace of darkness which won't thicken?

The poet is lonely and feels the coldness and loneliness, and even staying until dusk is difficult. Lin's translation describes how the sky has turned black, which is quite far from the original meaning. Xu's translation better reflects the original intention, especially with the phrase "Sitting alone at the window," which conveys the poet's solitude by the window. The words "quicken, thicken" perfectly interpret the poet's feeling of finding it difficult to stay alone until dusk, and the rhyme of the two words conforms to the "three beauty" principle.

The seventh line:

梧桐更兼细雨，到黄昏、点点滴滴。

Translation by Lin Yutang:

And the drizzle on the kolanut

Keeps on droning:

Pit-a-pit, pit-a-pat!

Translation by Xu Yuanzhong:

On parasol-trees leaves a fine rain drizzles

As twilight grizzles.

The phrase "点点滴滴" depicts the continuous and dense autumn rain. Lin's use of "droning" appropriately describes the low and monotonous autumn rain, conveying the original meaning. The use of onomatopoeia "pit-a-pit, pit-a-pat" vividly describes the "点点滴滴" of the autumn rain, complementing the original meaning. It perfectly conveys the beauty of the original intention and the beauty of the rhythm, making it an excellent translation. Xu's translation rhymes with "drizzles" and "grizzles," which is close to the sound of "滴" in the original text.[10] The short sound in reading can better express the joy of raindrops falling on the ground, making the reader feel as if they are in it. It achieves "melodic" effect and preserves the beauty of the original intention

4.2. Li Qingzhao and "Ru Meng Ling"

Translation by Xu Yuanzhong:

Tune: "Like A Dream"

Last night the wind blew hard and rain was fine.

Sound sleep did not dispel the aftertaste of wine.

I asked the maid rolling up the screen.

"The same crap – apple tree," she says, "was seen."

"But don't you know,

O don't you know,

The red should languish and the green must grow."

Translation by Yang Xianyi:

To the Tune of Ru Meng Ling

Last night the wind was strong and rain was fine.
Sound sleep did not dispel the taste of wine.
When I ask the maid rolling up the curtains,
She answers, "The crab-apple blossoms look the same."
I cry, "Can't you see? Can't you see?"
The green leaves are fresh but the red flowers are fading!"

Yang Xianyi's translation emphasizes "fidelity," so his overall principle of translation is "not to add or subtract from the content of the original text." His translation is simple, straightforward, natural, and fluent, not constrained by the original text's rhythm, but able to pay attention to the rhythm. For example, the title of the poem "如梦令" (ru meng ling) is translated literally, focusing on conveying the literal meaning of the words, but more or less ignoring the poem's imagery.

Looking at the two translators' translations of the first line, the original text "昨夜雨疏风骤" tells us the time and weather. "疏" in modern Chinese dictionaries means "loose" or "sparse." The meaning of "雨疏风骤" is that the raindrops are sparse, and the evening wind is swift and fierce. "雨疏风骤" implies the poet's concern for the crabapple blossoms.

In translating "浓睡" (nong shui), both translators used the adjective "sound" to express the meaning of "drunken sleep." When translating "不消残酒" (bu xiao can jiu), both translators used the verb "dispel," meaning to disperse or eliminate. But the choice of nouns is quite different: Xu used "aftertaste of wine," while Yang used "the taste of wine." "Aftertaste" means the lingering flavor or impression, while "taste" simply means the taste or flavor. "Aftertaste" expresses two meanings, one is the surface meaning, the aftertaste of wine, and the other is the continuation of the poet's distress: although the female poet used wine to relieve her worries, the emotional distress in her heart remains after waking up from sleep.

In the third and fourth lines, Yang's translation uses a noun clause introduced by "when" to faithfully convey the meaning of the original text, which shows that the female poet is trying to ask the maid a question. On the other hand, Xu's translation uses a present participle as a postmodifier to modify the maid, which is consistent with the original text, which is not a complete sentence but a noun phrase. Both translations in the fourth line reproduce the ingenious layout of the original text, in which the question is not translated directly, but rather the answer is presented.

In the fifth and sixth lines, the original text consists of two interrogative sentences, "Do you know? Do you know?" Both translators have noticed the formal equivalence of the original text. In addition, Xu adds the word "O" in his translation, which often appears at the beginning of a poetic line to convey a specific tone. Here, Xu uses the word to fill the female poet's response to the maid with a sense of regret for the fleeting nature of spring.

In the seventh line, both translators use two parallel sentences, which are also consistent with the form of the original text. Xu uses two verbs, "languish" and "grow," with "languish" meaning wither, decline, and conveys a deeper meaning than Yang's "fresh." "Languish" not only expresses the female poet's regret for the withering of the crab-apple blossoms but also conveys her sorrow for the fleeting nature of good times and the aging of beauty. In contrast, Yang's "fresh" is somewhat straightforward and does not convey the sense of plump green leaves and thin red flowers in the original text.

Chinese ancient poetry is characterized by its concise yet profound language. Translating such poetry requires not only faithfulness to the original text but also the ability to recreate it in the target language. In other words, poetry translation is a form of literary creation that possesses unique artistic charm. Translators must convey the original poem's mood and imagery in another language

to provide the same aesthetic experience for readers in the target language as for readers in the source language [11]. Appreciating the English translations of ancient Chinese poetry using Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties" principle allows readers to appreciate the beauty of the original poem in terms of its imagery, rhythm, and form.

5. Conclusion

Poetry is a highly condensed and comprehensive form of literary art in language. Both Tang poetry and Song ci in China have extremely rigorous forms and metrics. If translators want to reproduce the beauty of poetry, they need to pay attention to the beauty of meaning, sound, and form, and the three cannot be lacking. Through analyzing the two poems above, we can see that Xu Yuanchong's theory of the three beauties provides us with a standard for future translation and thinking.

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