

The Analysis of Xu Yuanchong's Translation Style

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Abstract: This article analyzes the current research on translations by Xu Yuanchong, a literary translator with over sixty years of experience who has translated approximately sixty works, encompassing both literary pieces and translation theory. His translation theory, rooted in extensive translation practice, holds practical value and significant guiding relevance. This article examines Xu Yuanchong's translation characteristics based on his linguistic perspective and features. Finally, through specific translation examples, the article discusses the application of the "three beauties" theory, highlighting its limitations and the existing gap between theory and practice.

Keywords: Literary Translation; "Three Beauties Theory"; Xu Yuanchong.

1. Translator Xu Yuanchong's Biography

Xu Yuanchong (1938-2023) was a renowned Chinese translator and scholar, born in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province. He pursued his undergraduate studies at the English Department of Peking University, obtaining a bachelor's degree in 1960. Subsequently, he pursued a master's degree at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, graduating in 1964. He is a prominent figure in Chinese translation, particularly lauded for his adeptness in translating ancient literature. His translations span a wide spectrum, encompassing ancient Chinese poetry, literary texts, and classical literature, and are celebrated for accurately capturing the mood and emotion of the originals, earning acclaim domestically and internationally. Prof. Xu's notable translations include *The Three Hundred Tang Poems in English Translation* and *The Poetry Scriptures in English Translation*. His distinctive translation style focuses on preserving the beauty and essence of the original works in English, emphasizing rhyme, mood, and rhythm. In addition to his translation work, Prof. Xu was actively engaged in academic research and teaching, imparting his knowledge to numerous students during his tenure at the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages. His scholarly contributions and translation achievements have garnered widespread recognition, marking significant strides in the study and propagation of ancient Chinese literature.

As a foremost translator in China's literary realm, Xu Yuanchong dedicated over 70 years to literary translation, bridging Chinese and Western cultures for over a century until his passing. While many Chinese scholars were involved in translating ancient Chinese poems into English, Xu Yuanchong stood as the first translator adept at seamlessly maneuvering between French, English, and Chinese. Notably, the *Analects of Confucius*, the *Classic of Poetry*, and the *Chu Rhetoric* were not only translated into English but also into French by Mr. Xu Yuanchong. Additionally, he rendered Western masterpieces such as "The Red and the Black" and "Memories of a Watery Years" into captivating Chinese versions. Mr. Xu Yuanchong's contributions have allowed us to traverse the realms of Eastern and Western civilizations, offering a broader perspective of the world. Since the 1980s, Prof. Xu has translated and published an array of classical Chinese poems covering diverse themes. In 2014, Mr. Xu

Yuanchong was bestowed with the Northern Lights Award for Excellence in Literary Translation, one of the highest accolades in the field of translation, marking the first time an Asian translator received this distinction.

As a highly respected translator and translation theorist, Xu Yuanchong's expertise in translating Chinese poetry into Chinese and French rhymes has made him unique in the Chinese and world translation world. During his more than 60 years of translation work, he has published more than 60 works, which are mainly translations of ancient Chinese poems. Meanwhile, on the basis of inheriting and carrying forward the translation theories of his predecessors, he put forward his unique translation ideas and established his own unique translation theory system through a lot of translation practices. From the point of view of Xu Yuanchong's poetry translation works and related theoretical writings, the translator's subjectivity is extremely prominent in his translation theory and practice.

2. The Status of Domestic and Foreign Research on Xu Yuan Chong's translation

2.1. Current Status of Foreign Research

Foreign scholars have predominantly overlooked Xu Yuanchong's contributions to the field of ancient Chinese poems when assessing English translators and works on ancient poetry. Chen Qimin (2014) identifies three primary reasons for this lack of attention: (1) "limited scope of publication and promotion," which restricts foreign readers' access to Xu Yuanchong's translation works. (2) "Psychological bias of foreign readers." Many scholars and readers in Western countries believe that the English abilities of Chinese individuals are insufficient for completing English-Chinese translations. (3) "The translation methods employed by the translators are inconsistent with current trends in Anglo-American poetics", presenting personal aesthetic issues. Xu Yuanchong prefers rhyming translation, while Zalis is more inclined to the Victorian style, and the two have different readerships. The current mainstream of English and American poetry features free verse with free rhyme, making rhyming poetry less popular with the public. Professor Engelman of Hopkins University praised Mr. Xu Yuanchong's *Selected Poems of Li Bai* as "the most beautiful

translation of Chinese poetry he has ever read” (Zhang, 2006). On the contrary, Williams of Utah State University believes that Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s translation “focuses too much on rhyming, failing to convey the beauty to readers.” (Williams, 2001)

2.2. Current Status of Domestic Research

When compared with the attitudes of foreign scholars towards Mr. Xu Yuanchong, domestic scholars have shown a greater interest in his English translations of ancient Chinese poems as well as in translation theories. These research findings are scattered across various journal papers, dissertations, and academic monographs. Upon searching the CNKI database using “Xu Yuanchong” as the keyword and “poetry” or “translation” as the subject, it is evident that the research on Xu Yuanchong’s English translation of ancient Chinese poetry is primarily categorized into two areas: translation theories and translation practices, with a prevalence of studies focusing on the latter.

Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s most notable translation theory is the “three beauties theory”. This theory emphasizes achieving beauty in three aspects—meaning, form, and phonetics—when translating poems. Wang Xiqiang (2002) considers the meaning of beauty in meaning as the preservation of the original poem’s intended meaning as much as possible. Phonetic beauty underscores the retention of the original poem’s rhyme and rhythm in the translated version. Lastly, formal beauty underscores the preservation of the original form and structure of the poem in translation.

In translation practice, Mr. Xu often translates seven-character poems into Alexandrian style with twelve syllables per line, and five-character poems into lines of six syllables. Some researchers have acknowledged and endorsed this theory. For instance, Zhang Yunxia (2008) cited examples to illustrate the nuances of the “three beauties theory” and asserted that the “decorative art” encapsulates the purpose, essence, and standards of literary translation, signifying the inheritance and innovation of traditional translation theory. Lin Jiayu (2005) summarized the connotation and significance of the Three Beauties Theory, using the example of Three Hundred Tang Poems in Chinese and English to affirm the value and role of the theory in English translations of ancient poems, cross-cultural communication, and the advancement of literary translation.

Although the theory of the “three beauties” has gained recognition among many scholars, some have pointed out that the essential differences between the English and Chinese languages and cultures may limit the application of this theory. For instance, Chen Guojian (2008) argues that the Three Beauties Theory serves as a commentary on translating poetry and has positive implications for translators. However, achieving all three criteria simultaneously is not easy. According to Chen, while the translation of poetry should enhance the beauty of the translation based on conveying the original meaning, it may be challenging to meet all the criteria at once. Notably, Mr. Xu Yuanchong has emphasized that the “theory of three beauties” sets the highest standard for translating ancient Chinese poems into English. He underscores that realizing the beauty of the original poem’s meaning is the most important, followed by expressing the beauty of sound and form. However, achieving all three simultaneously would be ideal (Xu Yuanchong, 1987). It is evident that the “three beauties theory” translation principle also follows a sequential order in Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s

application.

Furthermore, the study of Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s translation practice can be categorized into two parts. One encompasses interdisciplinary research (stylistics, aesthetics, psychology, cross-cultural communication, etc.), evaluating translation works and phenomena from external perspectives. The other delves into the study of internal factors in the translation process, such as linguistic expression, style and emotions in translation, the translator’s subjectivity, translation strategy, and translation impact. Owing to the significant influence of the “three beauties theory,” most scholars analyze translated works from an aesthetic perspective.

Ding Juan (2009) delved into Xu Yuanchong’s translation of the Chinese poem “Like A Dream” by Li Qingzhao. She posited that Xu Yuanchong prioritizes unity in the original content, rhyme, and form in his linguistic expression of the translated poem, thereby attaining a balanced aesthetic interplay. He Shanxiu (2005) analyzed two poems translated by Xu and observed that he accurately comprehended the poems and employed flexible translation techniques, deviating from the form of the original text. Consequently, readers are able to experience the full aesthetic charm of the original poems. Beyond aesthetics, certain scholars emphasize the translator’s linguistic features including rhyme, rhetoric, and word choice, scrutinizing their impact on conveying the content, emotion, and artistry of the poems. Zhang Zhizhong (2005) categorized and interpreted the linguistic features of Xu Yuanchong’s English translations of ancient poems in terms of words, phrases, and syntax, exploring his distinctive linguistic style and artistic features. Zhang identified Xu Yuanchong’s habitual use of words common in English poetry, occasionally applying creative usage. However, Zhang’s analysis, primarily relying on intuition, only provided a limited exploration of the translator’s style.

3. Characteristics of Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s Translation language

In the realm of literary translation, particularly in the English translation of Chinese poems, Xu Yuanchong employs a translation language distinguished by four key traits: simplicity, vividness, beauty, and optimization. While choosing the language for translation, Xu Yuanchong predominantly considers three facets: words, expressions, and “neologisms”. Regarding words, he adheres to the principle of the “three beauties” of meaning, sound, and form, selecting words that imbue the translated text with a captivating beauty, making it engaging for readers. Concerning expressions, given the distinct customary expressions in both English and Chinese, Xu Yuanchong chooses expressions familiar to the intended readers of the translated language, aiming to evoke a sense of reading the original works. The creation of “neologisms” involves the meticulous crafting of new words through a thorough understanding of the original text, aligning with English language conventions to bridge cultural disparities between English and Chinese. This approach serves to mitigate semantic loss attributable to cultural differences, ultimately optimizing the translation.

3.1. Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s View of Language

Mr. Xu Yuanchong excels in literary translation, holding the opinion that literature embodies language and art. When translating literary works, the primary aim is to reveal the

artistry of the works. Regarding poems, language should adhere to the poetic form, and simultaneously, it should adhere to the principle of triple aesthetics, encompassing meaning, form, and rhythm to evoke a sense of beauty. Renowned as “the pioneer in translating poetry into English and French,” Mr. Xu Yuanchong is well-versed in the linguistic and cultural distinctions among these languages. As a result, he adeptly employs the concept of the “three beauties” in translation, enabling the accurate expression and conveyance of beauty when switching between languages. Disagreeing with the Western translation theory of “reciprocal translation,” he argues that languages possess significant differences, and therefore, simple equivalence cannot wholly apply in translation.

3.2. Translation Language of “Making up for Losses with Creation”

Given the substantial disparities between languages, achieving complete equivalence in translation is unlikely. Mr. Xu Yuanchong believes that as a translator, the translated content may surpass or fall short of the original text. Especially when complete equivalence is unattainable, a skilled translator should employ creative translation methods to compensate for the losses incurred by differences in sound, form, and meaning between languages. This is particularly crucial in the translation of poetry, where the distinct characteristics and rhythms of Chinese and English poems demand a thorough understanding of the original text to avoid leaving the reader at a loss and failing to convey the beauty of the original. Although there are gains and losses in translating poems, Mr. Xu Yuanchong challenges the notion that the “all lost and no gain” approach in Italian translation is accurate. He asserts that by adeptly employing the creative translation method, the “gain is greater than the loss.” Mr. Xu Yuanchong categorizes this translation method of compensating for loss through creativity as the “superconducting” method and the “cloning” method. An exemplary application of the “superconducting” method is demonstrated in his translation of Du Fu’s renowned poem “On the height.” Through a superimposed phrase, he captures the beauty of sound, thus surpassing the original text in conveying information. The “clone” translation method is exemplified in his translation of this famous line “to face the powder and not to powder the face,” wherein he strategically repeats and rearranges words, realizing the principle of the three beauties of meaning, sound, and form.

4. A Review of Xu Yuanchong’s Translation Theory and Practice-- Taking Mao Zedong’s Poetry as an example

4.1. A Detailed Analysis of the Three Beauties Theory in Mao’s Poetry

Mr. Xu Yuanchong was the first translator to use the rhyme scheme in the translation of Mao Zedong’s metrical poems, and he was also the first to apply the theory of three beauties to his translations of Mao Zedong’s poems. Initially, numerous scholars in the field questioned Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s “Three Beauties Theory” for translating Mao’s poems. However, over time, while not universally approved by all scholars, many translators have lauded this theory. This article aims to comprehensively analyze the theory of the

three beauties and examine the translations of Mao’s poems based on this theory, to illustrate the effectiveness and limitations of translation practices under this guiding principle.

According to Xu Yuanchong, the paramount consideration when translating poetry is to preserve the essence of the original work. If this essence is not conserved and the poem is translated into prose, the inherent beauty of sound and form in the original poem cannot be conveyed. In essence, should a prose style be employed to translate poetry, the best outcome may be a mere translation of the content. Xu Yuanchong posits that “Mao Zedong’s poetry is a work of art with the aesthetic attributes of meaning, sound, and form.” Yet, most translations of Mao’s poems by other translators tend to adopt a prosaic style, consequently failing to adeptly capture the inner beauty of Mao’s poems. Thus, the translation of Mao Zedong’s poems should ideally convey the three beauties of the original poems to the greatest possible extent. Xu Yuanchong emphasizes that the “beauty of meaning” relies on the harmony of meaning, sound, and form. Although they are generally aligned, occasional contradictions may arise. How then can the “beauty of meaning” in Mao’s poetry be effectively conveyed to the readers? Xu Yuanchong offers three effective methods for achieving this: 1. Selecting words that closely resemble the original text; 2. Incorporating words that are familiar to the target readers; 3. Expressing the meaningfulness of the original text by utilizing the beauty of sound and form. He defines the “beauty of sound” as the smoothness of sound, rhyme, and rhythm. This translation theory is an outgrowth of the evolution of Lu Xun’s and Mao Zedong’s poetic theories. However, successfully conveying the sound beauty of the original poem to the readers is no easy feat. To address this, Mr. Xu Yuanchong puts forward the following suggestions: when translating Chinese superlatives, one can strive to recreate the sound beauty through rhymes that closely mirror those of the original text. Simultaneously, one can also employ duplicated sounds, repetitions, and overlapping rhymes that are more resonant with British and American linguistics and sensibilities.

Xu Yuanchong divided the “beauty of form” in poetry into two points: length and symmetry. He pointed out that “it is best to achieve similarity in form, or at least to achieve general orderliness.” The beauty of form in Mao’s poems is inherently difficult to realize, and few translations have managed to do so. To convey the beauty of form, we can only strive to excel in terms of contrast and length. Realizing the principle of the three beauties simultaneously is even more arduous, and it may be helpful to address the challenge of conveying the beauty of form and the beauty of sound separately. Xu Yuanchong also prioritized these three beauties, stating, “Among the three beauties, the beauty of meaning is the most important; the beauty of sound is secondary, and the beauty of form is last. If the three cannot be achieved simultaneously, then, first and foremost, you cannot expect the similarity of sound and form. However, in any case, you should convey the original beauty of meaning and sound.” From this quotation, we gain a better understanding of the true meaning of these three beauties and simultaneously develop a deeper understanding of their interrelationship. It is apparent that Mr. Xu Yuanchong did not absolutize his theory of the three beauties; instead, he regarded it as an “exploratory” and “supreme theory” for translating poems. He also emphasized that when translating original poems, every effort should be made to convey the beauty of meaning and sound.

The unique beauty of poetry sets it apart from other literary works. The translation of literary works is a form of artistic creation in itself, and if the translator subscribes to this opinion, he or she should transfer the inner beauty of the original poem to the translated version.

4.2. Application of the Three Beauties Theory in the Practice of Translating Mao's Poetry

China's traditional metrical poetic style constitutes an integral part of classical Chinese poetry, and Mao Zedong's poetry exemplifies this traditional metrical style. Consequently, the translation of Mao's poetry holds vital significance in the dissemination of classical Chinese poetry. Mao Zedong's style not only embodies the romanticism of Li Bai but also encompasses the grandeur of Cao Cao's poetry; it not only exhibits the dash and magnificence of Su Shi's poetry but also embodies the generosity of Li Qingzhao's poetry. Mao's poetry effectively incorporates the style of Chinese Song Poems, infusing new vigor and vitality into classical poetry. Chairman Mao's broad-mindedness, which embraces the world, allows his poetry to evoke in readers a sense of masculine beauty, majesty, and wonder. Mao's poems often feature grand elements such as the "ocean," "sky and earth," "mountains," "rivers," and more, all of which reflect the author's lofty sentiments and aspirations. This is also why Mao's poetry has spawned profound meanings that enable every reader to experience the allure of art.

In the subsequent sections, I will highlight two instances demonstrating the application of Mr. Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties Theory" in the translation of Mao's poems. The first example is Mao Zedong's poem "Tune: Charm of a Maiden Singer — Mount Kunlun," composed in October 1935. This poem carries an anti-imperialist theme, written by Chairman Mao during his leadership of the revolution, embodying the spirit of revolutionary romanticism and realism, indicative of Mao's typical eloquent and bold style. Xu Yuanchong's translation of this work is as follows:

Kunlun, I tell you now:
You need not be so high,
Nor need you so much snow.
Could I but lean against the sky
And draw my sword to cut you into three!
I would give to Europe your crest
And to America your breast
And leave in the Orient the rest.
In a peaceful world young and old
Might share alike your warmth and
cold!

In the translated version, the first aspect that captures our attention is the "beauty of form." Notably, lines 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 10 of the translated poem are aligned on the left side, maintaining the orderliness present in the original poem. Although "now" in the first line and "snow" in the third line do not rhyme, they still uphold the beauty of form due to their strikingly similar word composition. Regarding sound, "high" and "sky" in lines 2 and 4 rhyme with the sound [ai]; "crest," "breast," and "rest" in lines 6, 7, and 8 rhyme with the sound [est]; and "and" and "old" in lines 9, 10, and 11 rhyme with the sound [d], creating a catchy rhythm. As Lu Xun insisted, "when translating poems, we should try our best to keep their rhyme." The beauty of meaning, one of the three beauties, is fully showcased in this poem. For instance, in the lines "I would give to Europe your crest / And to America your breast

/ And leave in the Orient the rest," the word "crest" denotes not only the top of a mountain but also signifies a crown. Similarly, "breast" encompasses the meanings of "mountainside" and "breast." Furthermore, the word "rest" holds dual meanings of "remaining part" and "tranquility," significantly enriching the poem's significance. This aligns with the poem's main anti-imperialist theme while retaining the original poem's implicit and clever sentiment, distinctly reflecting Mao's bold and euphemistic lyrical style in the translation.

Mr. Xu Yuanchong's remarkable translation abilities and precise understanding of the relationship between English and Chinese are truly astounding. Readers can perceive his creative approach in the wording and phrasing of the translated poems. Additionally, Xu Yuanchong accurately captures the content of the original text in the phrase "And draw my sword to cut you into three!," effectively conveying Chairman Mao's resolute will and the poem's anti-imperialist tone. The phrase "share alike" echoes the preceding content about the Kunlun Mountains being evenly divided among Europe, America, and Asia, amplifying the coherence of the translated poem.

The second poem selected for this article is a five-character octave, a style that differs from the aforementioned ones and has prevailed since the Tang Dynasty. Each poem comprises eight lines, each of which contains either five or seven characters and adheres to a strict rhyme scheme. The third and fourth lines, as well as the fifth and sixth lines, together form a couplet, creating a balanced and symmetrical structure in terms of both sound and meaning. The quoted example below is from a five-line poem:

1955 MOUNTAIN VIEWS
Thrice I ascend the Northern Height;
The city seems lost to my sight.
By Phoenix Pavilion trees tower;
The wind sweeps over Mount Peach Flower.
When it's hot, I seek the Fan Hill;
I face Peak Beauty when it's chill.
With wings like floating cloud so free,
At dusk Mount Eagle welcomes me.

In the translated poem, if we disregard non-essential words such as articles and prepositions, each line consists of approximately five characters, effectively preserving the original poem's form and achieving a beautiful structure. Moreover, by focusing on meter, the [i:] rhymes of "free" and "me" in the final two lines also capture the beauty of sound. These two words could leave the reader with the impression that within the embrace of nature, the poet is as liberated as an eagle stretching its wings under the blue sky and white clouds. It is precisely through the conjunction of form and sound that the beauty of meaning arises. According to Mr. Xu Yuanchong, expressing the inherent beauty of meaning in Mao's poems proves to be challenging, yet the beauty of sound and form can aid the translator in achieving this feat. Notably, the English translation of "With wings like floating cloud so free" showcases the translator's adept use of expressions familiar to English and American readers, effectively conveying the imagery's beauty. Furthermore, the translator utilizes potent verbs like "tower" and "sweep" to capture the masculine beauty of the original poem. Given that English is characterized by logic and realism, alongside the linguistic disparities between English and Chinese, Mr. Xu Yuanchong translates the original poem using terms such as "fan hill", "beauty", and "eagle", hinting at the poem's

inherent beauty. Consequently, a portion of the original poem's intended beauty becomes lost in translation, highlighting the inherent linguistic disparities between Chinese and English, which serve as formidable obstacles to realizing the beauty of meaning. This demonstrates that not all translations can easily achieve the "Three Beauties", indicating that Mr. Xu Yuanchong's "three beauties theory" has certain limitations in the translation process. Indeed, achieving the beauty of sound and form is no easy task for most translators, but Xu Yuanchong's translation of this poem has been exceptionally well executed. Although the "beauty of meaning" may have been lost, he compensates for it through his diction and syntax, creating an excellent masterpiece.

Based on the aforementioned analysis of Xu Yuanchong's two translations of Mao Zedong's poems across diverse poetic genres, we can draw the following conclusion: the "three beauties" standard remains an idealized benchmark for translation. Despite Xu Yuanchong's notable accomplishments in literary works, he does not consistently achieve the "three beauties" principle in the realm of translation practice, occasionally realizing only a single beauty. Moreover, the translations of Mao's poetry that manage to encompass all three beauties simultaneously are indeed few in number. Upon comparing and scrutinizing Mr. Xu Yuanchong's translations of Mao's poems, it becomes evident that the majority of translations achieve the beauty of sound and meaning, yet somewhat lack in capturing the beauty of form. This deficiency may be attributed to the persistent disparities in word formation between the two languages. Attempting to reconcile these distinctions and seek common ground may result in more loss than gain. In summary, Mr. Xu Yuanchong has demonstrated considerable success in both translation theory and practice. Particularly, his "three beauties theory" has paved a new path for literary translation in China.

5. Conclusion

Mr. Xu Yuanchong, a prominent figure in the field of translation, possesses a wealth of translation theories and practical expertise. However, in this paper, I have limited my discussion to his renowned "Three Beauties Theory". It is my belief that while this theory holds significance, it also exhibits certain limitations in its specific application. Consequently, the selected translations of Mao's Poetry by Xu Yuanchong provide only a one-sided perspective. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, it is imperative to compare and analyze his other theories and their specific applications in translation practices. For those seeking to delve deeper into

Xu Yuanchong's translation theory and its practical application, an exploration of his other theories and a broader study of his translations are essential. This comprehensive approach will undoubtedly lead to a more profound understanding of his work and its impact on the field of translation.

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