

Xu Yuanchong's Theory of "Three Beauties" and His Poetry Translation Practice

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Abstract: Xu Yuanchong is a master of English translation of ancient Chinese poetry. In the long translation practice, Xu Yuanchong has formed his own unique translation style. He applied Lu Xun's theory of "three beauties" to English and French translation of classical Chinese poetry, and put forward the theory of "three beauties" in poetry translation, that is, translation of poetry should convey the beauty of meaning, beauty of sound and beauty of form of the original poem as far as possible. At the same time, he pointed out that among the three beauties, beauty of meaning is the most important, beauty of sound is the second, followed by beauty of the form. However, a general survey of Xu Yuanchong's poetry translation practice showed that in the specific process of poetry translation, Xu started more from the beauty of form, and then to the beauty of sound and beauty of sense, and gradually achieved the perfect state of "three beauties" in poetry translation.

Keywords: Xu Yuanchong; Theory of Three Beauties; Poetry Translation Practice.

1. Introduction

Xu Yuanchong is a very important translation theorist and practitioner in the field of literary translation, especially poetry translation. He draws on and absorbs the essence of many literary translation theories at home and abroad, and on this basis, combined with his own rich translation practice, puts forward a translation theory that can effectively guide literary translation and verify translation practice. His literary translation theory, which is concentrated in "美化之艺术,创优似竞赛" makes him a master in the history of Chinese traditional translation theory in the past two thousand years. His translation theory inherits the rich and wise thoughts of the traditional Chinese translation theory and literary theory, with the characteristics of learning from others, being inclusive, inheriting and innovating. The system of Xu's translation theory mainly includes: ontology, epistemology, methodology and skopos theory of literary translation. "Three beauties" is the ontology of Xu Yuanchong's literary translation.

2. The Origin and Basic Connotation of Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties"

2.1. Xu Yuanchong's Pursuit of Beauty

Xie Tianzhen said, "Translators, especially excellent translators, have their own translation principles and unique goals when they are engaged in literary translation." As early as 1949, Xu Yuanchong wrote in his diary: "Life is a pursuit. What I pursue is beauty, an unattainable ideal." It can be said that this sentence has long been integrated into Xu Yuanchong's translation thoughts and has become a powerful driving force for his lifelong pursuit. Beethoven said, "In order to be more beautiful, there is no rule that cannot be broken." Xu Yuanchong believes that "in the translation of poetry, seeking truth is the low standard, and seeking beauty is the high standard." Translation requires truth, poetry requires beauty. If the translation of poetry can be both true and beautiful, that's the best; If both cannot be achieved, then we have no choice but to convey the beauty of meaning, beauty of sound and beauty of form of the original poem as

far as possible without losing the truth."

2.2. Origin of "Three Beauties"

Xu Yuanchong wrote in his memoir, "In 1983, when I went to teach in Peking University, Mr. Zhu Guangqian, who was 87 years old at that time, came to see me personally and gave me a book named *Art and Literature*. It is said in this book 'poetry should make the best use of musicality to make up for the lack of meaning of words' and 'poetry is not only the imagification of taste, but above all the formalization of taste'." From this book, Xu Yuanchong found the basis for the "Three Beauties" of poetry translation.

The theory of "Three Beauties" originated from the first article of Lu Xun's *Outline of Han Literature History*, "When we recite a word, we should recognize three things, that is, the form, the sound, and the meaning. We recite and hear its sound, observe its shape and get to know its meaning, as long as we recognize the three, we can get complete knowledge of a word. Therefore, the writing of an article should contain three beauties: beauty of meaning to the heart, beauty of sound to the ears, and beauty of form to the eyes." In 1978, Xu Yuanchong applied Lu Xun's theory of "Three Beauties" to the English and French translations of Chinese ancient poetry in the preface of the English and French metrical translations of *Forty-two Poems of Mao Zedong* and proposed for the first time that the translated poems should convey the beauty of meaning, the beauty of sound and beauty of form as much as possible. The preface was published in *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* in 1979 with the title "How to Translate Chairman Mao's Poems", and was renamed "The Beauty of Meaning, Beauty of Sound and Beauty of Form" when it was included in the first edition of *The Art of Translation*, and the new version added "Three Beauties" to it. Mr. Xu Yuanchong said that this was the first new translation theory he put forward.

2.3. The Basic Connotation of "Three Beauties"

As British poet Coleridge once put "Prose is words in the best order; poetry is the best words in the best order", Xu Yuanchong said, "Generally speaking, the translation of prose only needs to reproduce the 'beauty of meaning' of the

original text, while the translation of poetry, in addition to the ‘beauty of meaning’, should also reproduce the ‘beauty of sound’ and ‘beauty of form’ of the original poem.” The so-called “beauty of meaning” means that the translated poem can move the readers just as the original poem. As for how to achieve the “beauty of meaning” of the translated poetry, Xu Yuanchong believes that we can choose excellent words similar to the original meaning, borrow common words in English poetry, and convey the beauty of meaning of the original poem by virtue of the beauty of sound and beauty of form. The so-called “beauty of sound” means that the translated poem should have the same pleasant rhythm as the original poem. In Xu Yuanchong’s words, the translated poem should be “rhythmical, rhyming, smooth and pleasant to the ear.” In order to convey the beauty of the sound, Xu Yuanchong thinks we can borrow the meter frequently used by British and American poets. For example, when translating seven-character poems into English, we can consider using Alexandrian style, that is, iambic verses of twelve syllables per line, while as to the translation of the five-character poems, we can use heroic style, that is, ten syllables per line of iambic verse. We can choose a rhyme similar to the original sound, or adopt alliteration, assonance, repetition and other methods. The so-called “beauty of form” means that the translated poem should keep the form of the original poem as much as possible. A famous assertion about poetry is that poetry, as a special form of writing, is often not about what is said, but about how it is said. The importance of linguistic forms to poetry can be seen from this.

Among the three beauties, “beauty of meaning” is the most important; “beauty of sound” is of secondary importance and “beauty of form” is the third important one. We should convey the “beauty of sound” of the original text as far as possible under the premise of conveying the “beauty of meaning” of the original text. Meanwhile, we should also try our best to convey the “beauty of form” of the original text on the premise of conveying the “beauty of meaning” and “beauty of sound” of the original text, and strive to achieve all three beauties. If the three beauties cannot be conveyed at the same time, then, first of all, we can lower the requirements of the similarity of sound or the similarity of form. But in any case, it is necessary to convey the “beauty of meaning” and “beauty of sound” of the original as much as possible.

3. Xu Yuanchong’s Poetry Translation

3.1. Xu Yuanchong’s Theory of Poetry Translatability

Throughout the ages, almost all poets and translators have lamented that poetry is untranslatable. According to Dante, “no work rich in music and harmony can be translated into another language without destroying all its beauty and harmony.” Shelley said, “It is futile to translate poetry” Robert Frost famously said that poetry is what is lost in translation. People say that poetry is untranslatable mainly because poetry is a unity of content and form or delight and image, and the delight and content of poetry cannot be expressed in another language form. In addition, due to the differences in language, culture, history and other aspects, the delight and association invoked caused by the same image are not the same. Wen Yiduo said in *The English Translation of Li Taibai’s Poems*: “The advantages of a famous sentence naturally formed are too mysterious and too subtle to be able to withstand translation. ... Beauty is untouchable. It is

destroyed when you stick it to your hand.” In Zhu Guangqian’s opinion, “no poem can be translated into prose, nor can it be translated into a foreign language, because the sound and meaning of a poem are both important, and the meaning can be translated but the sound cannot be translated. Successful translations are created, not translated.” He even thought that poetry can not be translated into a foreign language, nor can it be translated into another genre or the language of another time in one’s own language, because the sounds and meanings of a language change at any time. The syllables of the modern text cannot replace the syllables of the ancient text, and the associations of the words of the modern text cannot replace the associations of the words of the ancient text.

But Xu Yuanchong put forward a different opinion. He believed that although the translated poem could not completely convey the delight and image of the original one, it does not mean that delight and image of the original poem could not be conveyed at all. There are gains and losses in the translation of a poem, so we can “make up for the loss with innovative translation” so as to translate the delight and image of the original poem. Inspired by Lao Tzu’s Taoism, Xu Yuanchong (2006) wrote the “Scripture of Translating”: Translating is possible but is not a common translating, forget the form and get the meaning. Getting the meaning is the beginning of understanding, and forgetting the form, mother of expression. Xu Yuanchong’s theory of poetry translatability embodies the translator’s subjectivity and creativity. Because he believes that the main purpose of translating poetry is not to make the poet pass on to future generations, but to make people share the feeling of the poet’s beauty, therefore, in his mind, translating poems should be skillful and creative.

3.2. Xu Yuanchong’s of View of Translating Poetry in Verse

Chinese poetry has its own rhyme since there is the form of poetry, even if some people think “Lotus Picking” is the only blank verse, its first two lines “江南可采莲,莲叶何田田” are in rhyme. In Xu Yuanchong’s (1984:131) view, since the author has already used rhyme, the translator should naturally convey the “beauty of sound” of the original as far as possible. Even if blank verse is the dominant form of English poetry writing these days, when translating Chinese poetry, one should never translate classical poetry into modern free verse. If the original author of the poem is willing to dance with the shackles of rhyme, then the translator of the poem has no reason to throw away the shackles. If you lose the rhyme, what you translate is not poetry.

Therefore, Xu Yuanchong advocated inheriting the tradition of Giles’ poetic translation instead of Walley’s prose translation. He believes that prose translation values truth and poetic translation values beauty. As a practitioner of poetic translation, Xu Yuanchong pursues the beauty and joy of poetic translation. He once said, “Translating poetry in verse is like replacing Lanling wine with brandy, although the wine tastes different, it is still more or less wine; Translating poetry in prose is like replacing wine with plain water. Plain water can quench one’s thirst, but it cannot satisfy one’s desire when one needs a high-level spiritual drink.” For Xu Yuanchong, translation is funny, while translation of poetry is full of fun, and translating Chinese metrical poetry into English and French metrical poetry will bring him endless fun.

3.3. Xu Yuanchong's Poetry Translation Practice

3.3.1. The Transmission of "Beauty of Meaning"

According to Lin Yutang, the translation of artistic conception is dedicated to the vivid use of words. That is to say, the transmission of a poem's artistic conception or beauty of meaning depends on the vivid use of words and clever wording, which requires the translator to have a solid language foundation, and sometimes the translator needs to have a poet's inspiration. Some people say that the translator should be a poet himself, or at least have the temperament and cultivation of a poet. Xu Yuanchong believes that the poetic beauty can be conveyed through the selection of "wonderful words" similar to the original meaning. The so-called "wonderful words" are words with beauty of meaning, beauty of sound and beauty of form. If there are two words at the same time that can convey the beauty of meaning of the original text, but if one of them can also convey the beauty of sound, then we should choose the word with both beauty of meaning and beauty of sound. For this, he cited an example of "展" in "风展红旗如画", which can be translated into "unfurl" and "unroll". Comparatively speaking, "unfurl" is slightly better than "unroll", but "unroll" is in rhyme with "scroll", then "unroll" is the "wonderful word" with beauty of meaning and beauty of sound combined. Thus, we can see Xu Yuanchong's attitude of refining words and his pursuit of aesthetics when translating poems.

Xu Yuanchong makes good use of classic words and elegant language in his translated poems, which greatly enhances the poetic flavor of the translated poems. For example, "moon" is very frequently used in Xu Yuanchong's poetry translation to mean month, such as "七月七日长生殿" was translated as "On seventh day of seventh moon when none was near". And "main" is usually used to mean the sea as "江入大荒流" was translated as "The river rolls to boundless main". Some other elegant words often used are "afar, thy, morn, oft, olden", etc.

Artistic conception can be said to be a kind of artistic realm formed by the integration of the poet's subjective thoughts and feelings and objective things. It is a three-dimensional artistic picture with the integration of feeling and scene, form and spirit. The beauty of artistic conception of a poem cannot be separated from the beauty of poetic language. Take 鹿柴 of Wang Wei as an example, this poem depicts to us a quiet scene of an empty mountain and a deep forest in the evening. In the short four lines of the poem, the empty mountains, the looming human voice, the deep forest, the moss, etc., constitute the natural serenity and seclusion. There is not a word "I" in the poem, but the reader can feel the path of a lonely traveler. After Wang Wei was frustrated in the official field, he solved the troubles in his heart by writing landscape poems and pursued a quiet artistic conception. Like other poems of Wang Wei, this poem is imbued with Zen, finite words with infinite meaning, allowing the reader to understand the carefree realm beyond reality in the realm of "no self". The following is Xu Yuanchong's translation:

The Deer Enclosure

I see no one in mountains deep
But hear a voice in the ravine.
Through the dense wood the sunbeams peep
And are reflect'd on mosses green.
Just as every great poet has his own unique phrasing habits,

Xu Yuanchong's translation of ancient poems into English also has its distinctive lexical features. When adjectives are used to modify nouns, they are generally placed before nouns. While in traditional English poems, the positions of the two are often reversed, which can not only enhance poetic flavor, but also play the role of rhyme sometimes. In Xu Yuanchong's translated poems there are many examples of "noun plus adjective" mode, and in this poem, "mountains deep" and "mosses green" convey the artistic conception of the serenity of the deep mountains and moss in the original poem through this common mode. At the same time, "deep" and "peep", "green" and "ravine" are in rhyme, thus reproducing the beauty of sound of the original poem. Each line of Xu Yuanchong's translated poems has 8 syllables, which is particularly neat, and the end rhyme is abab, which reflects Xu's pursuit of poetic style translation and the pursuit of beauty in form and sound. According to Xu Yuanchong, if a poem has beauty only in form, it is not necessarily a good poem, nor a poem a good one if there is only beauty of sound. A good poem should possess "three beauties". Therefore, focusing only on form is not enough. In other words, in the translation of poetry, beauty of form and beauty of sound are the first necessary conditions. But even though the first conditions are satisfied, it does not necessarily mean a good poem. Only after further possessing the beauty of meaning is a poem considered a good one. Therefore, the beauty of meaning is a sufficient condition. However, due to the intervention of the first person "I", the original poem's "environment without self" has become "environment with self", and the way of viewing objects in the original poem has also changed from "seeing things from things" to "seeing things from me", thus deviating the artistic conception and verve of the translated poem, and weakening the transmission of "beauty of meaning".

Let's see another translated version by Burton Watson, American sinologist.

Deer Fence

Empty hills, no one in sight,
Only the sound of someone talking;
Late sunlight enters the deep wood,
Shining over the green moss again.

Watson's translation uses 24 words (6 per line) corresponding to the 20 characters in the original poem, and neatly translates each Chinese word. In the translated poem, more nouns and noun phrases are used and juxtaposed to avoid the appearance of first-person pronouns and conjunctions. Thus, readers may have the feeling that the translator seems to retire from the nature, so the serenity of the original poem is highlighted. Comparatively speaking, this translation more closely reflects the aesthetic mode of "seeing things from things" which is the same as the original poem, and retains the poetic flavor and charm of the original poem. In addition, the combination of the animate verb "enters" and inanimate noun subject "late sunlight" gives full play to the advantages of the translation language.

3.3.2. The Transmission of "Beauty of Sound"

Although Xu Yuanchong put the "beauty of sound" second to the "beauty of meaning", he also believed that the "beauty of sound" and the "beauty of form" are the necessary conditions for translating poetry. Therefore, in order to achieve the beauty of sound of the translated poems, Xu Yuanchong adopts a variety of means, like the flexible use of alliteration, assonance and poetic licence. All show Xu

Yuanchong's unremitting efforts in pursuing the beauty of sound in the process of translating ancient poems into English. Alliteration is widely used in English poetry and is one of the important features of English poetry. However, there is no alliteration in Chinese. The only similar ones are “双声” and “叠韵”. Many examples of alliteration can be found in Xu Yuanchong's translated poems, which is also one of the methods he advocates to “give full play to the advantages of the target language”. For example, in translating “芳草萋萋鹦鹉洲”, Xu adopts three identical “gr-alliteration” as “on Parrot Islet green grass grows fast and thick” to reproduce the phrase “萋萋” in the original poem. In such a beautiful sound, scenery of green grass on the Parrot Islet will inevitably emerge in the readers' mind. Another example is Li Yu's *Crows Crying at Night*, Xu Yuanchong translated “林花谢了春红” into “Spring's rosy color fades from forest flowers”. The combination of the four “f-alliteration” seems to open up to the reader a scene of falling flowers flying with the wind and falling slowly.

Internal rhyme and alliteration are the main characteristics of English poetry, and the internal rhyme of Xu Yuanchong's translated poems is also unique. Sometimes internal rhyme may also play the role of end rhyme, which enhances the density of rhymes and thus strengthens the rhythm of the translated poems. For instance, Li Yu's *Pu Sa Man*, “寻春须是先春早,看花莫待花枝老”, Xu Yuanchong translated it into “Enjoy a vernal day ere it passes away; Admire the lovely flowers at their loveliest hours!”, in which “day” and “away”, “flowers” and “hours” form the internal rhyme, thus the rhythm is obviously accentuated.

The Russian literary theorist Belinsky said in his *Treatise*: “Plain language is not a unique and definite mark of poetry. But precise grammar is always a sure sign of a lack of poetic flavor.” Poetry differs from prose not because it rhymes or not, but because it uses a lot of flexible “poetic language” that does not conform to common grammatical habits. Although English grammar is far more precise than Chinese grammar, it is common in poetry to break grammatical conventions for expressions and rhymes. Take Xu's translation of “雁已西飞人未还,一帘风月闲” “You don't come back when wild geese westward fly, A screen of breeze and moonlight left before my eye.” as an example, in order to achieve the rhyming effect of “eye” and “fly”, singular form of “eye” is used instead of the correct usage of the plural “eyes”. Another example is the translation of Zhao Yanduan's *Tune: Rouged Lips*, Xu uses “To hear the cicada sings” to translate “寒蝉鸣处”. From the perspective of English grammar, “sing” should not be used in the third person singular form, but Xu adds it in order to rhyme with “wings” of the last sentence.

3.3.3. The Transmission of “Beauty of Form”

Poetry is not what is said, but how it is said. This famous line on poetry emphasizes the importance of poetic form to poetry. The form of poetry has not only decorative function, but also expressive function. The unique form of poetry is the result of the poet's ingenuity, which is helpful to the expression of the poetic sentiment and sense. In the process of poetry translation, the translator should first consider how to transfer the “beauty of form” of the original poem. The so-called “beauty of form” of poetry here mainly includes the number, length, antithesis, cross-line, and the arrangement of lines carefully created by the poet. In order to be faithful to the original poem, the translated poem should not only

accurately interpret the original poem, but also present the visual form or visual beauty of the poem corresponding to the original poem as well as the auditory beauty.

Xu Yuanchong's translated poems never let go of any aspect of the beauty of the original poem form, which reflects a poem translator's persistent pursuit of translation art. In order to convey the beauty of visual order and symmetry of Chinese poetry, and maintain the form of the original poem to the maximum extent, the outstanding characteristics of Xu's translation are mainly reflected in the number of lines, the length of lines, and the rhyme at the end of the lines. Take the translation of *The Peasants* as an example,

The Peasants

At noon they weed with hoes;
Their sweat drips on the soil.
Each bowl of rice, who knows?
Is the fruit of hard toil.

The original poem consists of four lines, the translated poem also has four lines, four lines are translated into four lines. The original poem has five words per line, and the translated poem has six syllables per line, which are very close, and the syllables are symmetrical. In addition, Xu's translation uses the technique of “break of form but connection of meaning” to translate “谁知盘中餐,粒粒皆辛苦” into “Each bowl of rice, who knows? Is the fruit of hard toil”. The form is “broken” due to the insertion of “who knows”, but the internal meaning is linked back and forth, thus greatly enhanced the language expression of the translated poem and increased the translated poem's beauty of change and beauty of rhythm. It is in response to the famous statement in ancient Chinese literary theory, “Writing an article is like appreciating the mountains, the flat ones are the least favored”, that is, writers should avoid blindly laying down the straight narrative when writing, so that the article will be winding and interesting. At the same time, the position of “who knows” at the end of line artfully form the end rhyme with “hoes”, thus forming the beauty of the rhythm.

4. Conclusion

Poetry is a very spiritual style, if the translation of poetry wants to convey the emotion of the original poem, it will undoubtedly weaken the elements of form. In the same way, if the translator fully considers the formal elements of the translated poem, the original poem will be correspondingly limited. Xu Yuanchong chose to use the concept of metrical poetry to guide the translation of Chinese poems into English, so that the translated poems can better reflect the form and style of the original poems. According to Xu Yuanchong, the content and form of a poem are inseparable. From the above analysis of Xu's poetry translation practice, it is not difficult to see that in the process of poetry translation, Xu Yuanchong starts from the beauty of form, then approaches the beauty of sound and the beauty of meaning, and gradually reaches the perfection of the three beauties.

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