Journal of Education and Educational Research
ISSN: 2957-9465 | Vol. 3, No. 1, 2023

A Comparative Study on the English Translation of the Book of Songs

-- Based on the Translation of Xu Yuanchong and James Legge

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Abstract: The Chinese nation has a history of 5000 years. In such a long history, we have constantly developed and created many splendid cultures. Ancient Chinese classics can be said to be the crystallization of all the people of our nation, but also the precious wealth left by ancient ancestors for us. Poetry is a classic of Chinese traditional literature, so the Book of Songs, as the earliest collection of poetry in China, naturally has an irreplaceable position. Civilization is developing, history is moving forward, and the world is gradually becoming connected with each other. As early as the first half of the fifth century, the Book of Songs was introduced to Japan, then to Western Europe, and then to the United States. The Book of Songs was gradually accepted by more and more people, and was translated into many translations. There are many different English versions of the Book of Songs abroad. The two versions selected here are the earliest complete versions of the Book of Songs at home and abroad, which respectively are Book of Poetry translated by Xu Yuanchong and The She King translated by James Legge. Of course, everyone's translation purposes are different, not to mention people from two different countries, their translation purposes must be different. In the contemporary situation, understanding the different translation purposes of foreign translators for Chinese ancient books and conducting a comparative study of ancient books are conducive to promoting the dissemination of Chinese ancient books and the development of our culture.

Keywords: The Book of Songs; English Versions of the Book of Songs; Xu Yuanchong; James Legge; Comparative Study.

1. Introduction of The Book of Songs

The Book of Songs is the beginning of ancient Chinese poetry and the earliest collection of poetry in China. *The Book of Songs* focuses on real life, and most of its poems express true feelings and feelings towards real life. It is the first milestone in Chinese realistic literature and has a profound impact on the history of Chinese literature. The Book of Songs is rich in content, reflecting labor and love, war and corvee, oppression and resistance, customs and marriage, ancestor worship and banquets, and even various aspects such as celestial phenomena, landforms, animals, plants, etc. It is a mirror of social life in the Zhou Dynasty. The historical value, folk custom value and ritual and music cultural value of *The Book of Songs* have attracted the attention of many western scholars in the cultural exchanges between China and the West. James Legge, a famous British missionary and sinologist, retranslated *The Book of Songs* three times, and created three translations in 1871-1879. There are currently 305 poems in the Book of Songs, including folk songs and temple music movements from the early Western Zhou Dynasty to the middle of the Spring and Autumn period, which are divided into three categories: *Feng*, *Ya*, and *Song*.

Feng, which contains folk songs from all over the country, is the essence of *The Book of Songs*. There are chants of beautiful things such as love and labor, as well as laments and anger of nostalgia for hometown, longing for people, and anti-oppression and anti-bullying. Repetitive techniques are often used to repeatedly recite, and each chapter in a poem often only has a few different words, reflecting the characteristics of folk songs. *Feng* includes folk songs from fifteen places, including present-day Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, Hebei, Shandong, and other places, most of which are folk songs from the Yellow River Basin. It contains balllads of fifteen vassal states, so it is also named *Fifteen States' Ballads*. Compared to *Ya* and *Song*, *Feng* is more vivacious, and has a stronger flavor of life.

Ya is divided into "Da Ya" and "Xiao Ya", which are palace music songs that pray for a good year and praise ancestral virtues. The authors of "Da Ya" are all aristocratic literati, but they are dissatisfied with reality and politics. In addition to banquet songs, sacrificial songs, and epics, some satirical poems reflecting the wishes of the people have also been written. There are also some folk songs in "Xiao Ya".

1. The poetries in *Song* are the poetry of ancestral temple worship. There are forty of them, which were used for palace and ancestral temple to offer sacrifices to their ancestors and to pray and praise gods.

2. The constituent of the writer of The Book of Sons is quite complicated and scattered in various regions. According to legend, during the Zhou Dynasty, there were officials responsible for collecting poetry. Every spring, they waved wooden sticks and went deep into the folk to collect folk songs. They sorted out works that could reflect the joy and suffering of the people and handed them to the Grand Master (the music officer in charge) to compose music, and sang them to the Emperor of Zhou as a reference for governance. The works of these unnamed folk authors occupy most of *The Book of Songs*, such as the *Fifteen States' Ballads*. The works of aristocratic literati in the Zhou Dynasty constitute another part of *The Book of Songs*. According to the Shangshu, "*Bin Feng · Owl"* was written by Zhou Gongdan. In the "*Qi Ye"* section of a batch of bamboo slips (Tsinghua slips) from the Warring States period, which were admitted to Tsinghua University in 2008, it is described that King Wu and others celebrated their victory over the state of Li and drank alcohol. During this period, Zhou Gongdan's impromptu poem "Cricket" is closely related to the existing "*Cricket*" in the

"*Book of Songs: Tang Feng*".

3. Among the three parts mentioned above, "*Song*" has 40 articles, "*Ya*" has 105 articles (6 articles in "*Xiao Ya*" have no poetry and are not included), and "*Feng*" has the highest number of articles, totaling 160, bringing the total to 305. The ancients took it as a whole number and often said "*Three Hundred Poems*".

2. Introduction of Xu Yuanchong and James Legge

The two translations selected in this paper are from Xu Yuanchong, a famous translator in China, and James Richards, a famous British sinologist in modern times. In order to better analyze their translations, it is necessary to know the two translators to a certain extent beforehand, combining their experiences, translation ideas and translation theories in order to better understand their translations.

2.1. Introduction to Xu Yuanchong and His Translation Theory

Mr. Xu Yuanchong was born in 1921 in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province. The kind of achievements a person can make is inevitably related to his lifetime experiences. Although genes cannot be changed, the environment plays a key role in a person's growth. At the beginning of growth, the family of origin has the greatest influence on an individual. Mr. Xu Yuanchong's mother was a well-educated woman who did well in drawing and painting, which laid the foundation for Xu Yuanchong's pursuit of beauty in his later translation work. His uncle Xiong Shiyi, also a translator, translated and adapted the famous British play "Lady Precious Stream" and created the Chinese play named "Wang Baochuan". At that time, the production was a big hit in England that the family was able to travel to England, and Xu Yuanchong's interest in English began.

Mr. Xu Yuanchong was also very thoughtful and was able to apply what he learned in life to his own translations. Mr. Xu Yuanchong's father was a working people, but he loved to read poetry and was a neat and tidy person. He taught Mr. Xu Yuanchong to keep the four treasures of his writing room in a place where he could get them easily, so Mr. Xu Yuanchong and he applied this to his translations work, and also applied some of his father's methods of managing accounts to the translation. With his excellent grades, Mr. Xu Yuanchong was first admitted to the Southwest United University, and then earned the opportunity to study abroad. But Mr. Xu Yuanchong's life was not as smooth as we see it now. He was born in such a not-so-peaceful era that he could not do only what he wanted to do without being disturbed by the outside world affairs. Sometimes people only see the glorious moments of a "hero", but ignore the hardships behind him. Such was the case with Mr. Xu Yuanchong, who was attacked several times during political campaigns because of his bold and straightforward character. Despite this, Mr. Xu was able to persevere and devoted his life to translation for all the times.

When it comes to Mr. Xu Yuanchong's translation theory, the "Three Theories" are essential. Based on his translation idea, Xu Yuanchong proposed three "Three Theories": "Three Beauties," "Three Transformations," and "Three Effects". These three "Three Theories" do not exist independently, but are closely related and interrelated, and they each explain the essence of the activity of translation from different aspects. The "Three Beauties" is the essence, that is, "beauty of meaning, beauty of sound, beauty of form", and these three aspects are progressive, the most basic is the beauty of meaning. The methodology guiding the translation is the "Three Transformations", that is, "particularization, equalization and generalization". The methods of "transformation" we use differ from context to context, and each method has its own translation techniques. The "Three Effects", as the effect theory of his translation theory, is mainly for the readers of the translation. According to Mr. Xu, a good translation must make the reader achieve these three effects. These three effects are also in a progressive relationship, so that the reader can continuously move from the surface to the depth of the translation and become interested in it.

2.2. Introduction to James Legge and His Translation Theory

Born in the winter of 1815 to a wealthy Scottish cloth merchant, James Legge was brought up in Christianity and remained a Christian until later in life. He had received a good education since elementary school, and after graduating from university, he came to England because his religion was different from the state religion. He joined the London Missionary Society in 1838 and was subsequently sent to Melaka by the London Missionary Society of the Congregationalist Protestant Church of England to preside over the Ying Wa College. With the relocation of the Ying Wa College, Legge came to China. It was during this period that Legge became very interested in Sinology and began to translate. Before he returned to England, he had translated many Chinese classics. As a missionary, publisher and other identities, perhaps James Legge was not very successful, but as a translator, his contributions and achievements in translation are unparalleled. He was the first translator to translate all the Confucian classics into the languages of European countries, but what made him determined to translate was actually for missionary purposes, because he believed that only with a better understanding of a country and a people could he better advance the missionary cause. He also believed that only by respecting each other's cultures could we leave a good impression on the peoples of the other country. In the cultural history of modern exchanges between China and the West, James Legge wrote an extraordinary page with his decades of hard work. The Chinese classics he translated not only helped missionaries, but also helped Westerners understand China. His translation is still considered the standard translation of Chinese classics and an important research material in international sinology.

Having embarked on the path of translation because of his missionary work, and then later developing a keen interest in Sinology, James Legge moved perfectly from being a missionary to a translator to a sinologist. After living in China for over a decade, Legge, who had already received the influence of good language learning and translation training from the West, also integrated traditional Chinese culture on the basis of existing Western theories. It can be said that his translation ideas have both Eastern and Western characteristics. His translation ideas can be summarized as "loyalty and faithfulness, embellishment, conjecture, and interpretation", which can be further divided below. There are two main points of "loyalty and faithfulness", one is loyalty to Christianity. In short, it means "preaching through Confucianism", that is, using Christian doctrine as a guide and trying to translate Chinese texts with Christian doctrine.

The second is faithfulness to Confucian culture. When translating, we must be careful to understand the meaning behind the words and truly reproduce the meaning of the original text. The word "embellishment" also means deep and rich. "Embellishment" means deepening the connotation and enriching the content. It also means to add quotations, footnotes, etc., so that the readers of the target language can be better put into the context when reading, and to find the "similarities" between the two cultures to make the readers understand better. The word "conjecture" means to speculate and grasp the exact meaning. In other words, you need to fully understand the author of the article and the environment in which it is located in order to accurately understand and grasp the ideas and content that the original text is intended to convey. "Interpretation" means to translate and explain. This is mainly reflected in the translation model it adopts -- "share out the work and cooperate with one another", and the translation practice model -- "interpreting scriptures through scriptures".

3. Introduction to the Two Translations

Different translators come from different eras, family environments, and receive different types of education, which can lead to different understandings of the same classic work. In addition to this, language, ideas, readership, and the purpose of the translation add diversity to the translation. In other words, even if everyone translates with fidelity to the original, the translated works are different. The first English version of *The Book of Songs* was translated by James James Legge in the 19th century, and then scholars in western countries began to translate it. In China, Mr. Xu Yuanchong was the first person to start translating *The Book of Songs*. As a Chinese and culturally well-educated person, he believed that Western translators had some problems understanding the original text, so he began to translate *The Book of Songs* according to his own understanding. Of course, many people both domestically and internationally have translated different versions of *The Book of Songs*. Here, we have chosen a representative Chinese translator's version and a Western translator's version. This comparison can help readers better understand the cultural differences brought about.

The first is Mr. Xu Yuanchong's translation, whose main characteristic is to focus on semantic translation and on the cultural and historical relations of the original text. Mr. Xu Yuanchong's translation perfectly interprets his translation theory -- "Three-beauty Theory". His translation is known for its concise language. In his opinion, classical Chinese poetry is rhymed, so translated works must also use rhyme to reproduce effects similar to the original text. Therefore, in order to maintain this beauty, he has been using rhyme in translation. Mr. Xu Yuanchong's version has a high level of recognition in China, and he has truly achieved the goal of "defending the beauty in the translation with his whole life".

As the first person to translate *The Book of Songs* completely, James Legge has his own research on Chinese Confucian classics, Taoist philosophy and Buddhist classics. In terms of translation, he also has his own style. He has translated *The Book of Songs* three times, and each version has its own characteristics. The first version is a complete translation without rhyme. At this stage, combined with his translation purpose, it is not difficult to see that James Legge is more inclined to be faithful, so the translation is more inclined to literal translation and the length is generally long, and there are many notes. Mr. Xu Yuanchong's translation, on the other hand, is more concise and does not contain much commentary in order not to damage the beauty of the original introduction of *The Book of Songs*. In the second version, on the basis of loyalty to the original text, James Legge began to take the expectations of readers as the center of translation. Ensure a certain level of aesthetics while being accurate. The final version carries a strong religious flavor, and he rearranges the order of the poetry to reflect his understanding of the original text. From these three versions, we can see that James Legge's attitude towards Confucius, Confucianism and religion has gradually changed, his political tendency has weakened, and his academic thought has become more mature and independent.

4. Comparative Analysis of the Two Translations

So, the next section mainly focuses on a comparative analysis of the same original text in the two translations. After understanding the two translators and their translation ideas and styles, it is more conducive to our research.

There are various colors in the Book of Songs. Some of them are purely descriptions of objective things, while others have profound cultural connotations, reflecting the aesthetic sensibilities of the writers and an aesthetic style at that time. That is to say, they are a rich and colorful discourse system, containing a wealth of content. Because everyone has different experiences and different poets have different associations for things of the same color, they have different aesthetic emotions. Therefore, the same color often has different symbolic meanings, which requires readers to carefully appreciate and grasp its accurate meaning when reading.

Example 1: "月出皎兮，佼人僚兮"——《陈风•月出》节选

James Legge's version: "The moon comes forth in her brightness; How lovely is that beautiful lady"

Xu Yuanchong's version: "The moon shines bright; My love's snow-white"

The poetry in *The Book of Songs* regards white as beauty, and often uses pure white as a metaphor for women's beauty. It is also a classical beauty of the Book of Songs era, because white is associated with elegance and purity. We can find that the beautiful women in the Book of Songs are fair-skinned women. The meaning of this sentence is that when the moon comes out, it is so bright and beautiful, and it is also so beautiful and moving. In James Legge's translation, he used "brightness" to describe a picture of moonlight hitting on a beauty's cheek. However, Mr. Xu Yuanchong described the bright moonlight and also referred to the fair skin of a beauty. The two versions, one is to enable readers to better understand, and the other is to convey the artistic beauty of the original poem. At the same time, Mr. Xu Yuanchong also used the ending rhyme, achieving a good pronunciation.

Example 2: "桑之未落，其叶沃若。　　桑之落矣，其黄而陨。"——《卫风•氓》节选

James Legge's version: "Before the mulberry tree has shed its leaves; How rich and glossy are they; When the mulberry tree sheds its leaves; They fall yellow on the ground"

Xu Yuanchong: "How fresh were mulberries; With their fruit on the trees; The mulberries appear; With yellow leaves

and sear”

Our country has always been a major agricultural country. In ancient times, when various aspects were not very developed, agriculture occupied most of people’s lives. For farmers in that society, plants had extraordinary significance. Through hard work, plants can bring them fruits that they rely on for survival. By selling the fruits, they can earn a certain income for them to purchase other daily necessities. The harvest of plants directly determines the living conditions of a family, so people have always held a devout mentality towards plants. However, different genders lead to different perspectives on what they see. Compared to men, women have more delicate personalities and pay more attention to youth and appearance. Human youth is limited, and as time goes by, everyone gradually ages, so most women have a strong desire for eternal youth. Plants, on the other hand, happen to have infinite youth, with new buds sprouting from the changing seasons, so they prefer to use plants, especially bright flowers and plants, as a metaphor for themselves.

These few sentences are excerpted from *“Wei Feng · Meng”*, which tells the story of a woman’s experience and real experience of her emotions turning from strong to weak. The “mulberry” here actually represents the youth of women. With the passage of time, the mulberry leaves will fall off and people will also get old. From James Legge’s translation, we can see that his translation is more like prose. Faithfully translating the images described in the original text can greatly inform readers of what the entire poem is about for foreigners who have not read much of ancient Chinese literature. Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s translation, after reproducing the original meaning, also adopts the rhythm of “AABB”. In addition, in terms of form, the length of each section is unified, making it easy to read. It should be noted that the rhythm of *The Book of Songs* is complex and its usage is flexible. Therefore, the translation of rhythm is a major difficulty in the English translation of *The Book of Songs*. This is also why Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s translation has gained unanimous recognition in China and even the world.

In addition to the differences in rhythm, there is also a difference in the wording used by the two translators. This poem superficially depicts the natural growth of mulberry trees, with leaves turning from green to yellow, from lush to falling, but in reality, it is intended to depict the fleeting youth of women and the dissipation of emotions. For the description of mulberry trees, both translators chose to use a part of the condition of the mulberry tree to describe its changes. The slightly different point is that Mr. Xu Yuanchong not only used leaves, but also mulberry fruits. James Legge used the falling leaves as the time fixed point to describe the changes of the tree before and after the leaves falling. We can visualize the dynamic scene of mulberry trees from flourishing to falling leaves and returning to their roots. Mr. Xu Yuanchong added a touch of color to this dynamic image based on this. In midsummer, the purple fruits constantly become plump in the refreshing green leaves, forming a strong color contrast with just the word “fruit”. In this way, the mulberry tree described by Mr. Xu Yuanchong seems to be better than that described by Legge.

In fact, apart from that, looking at the two versions from different perspectives will yield different gains. For example, from the perspective of social semiotics, the translation of some sentences is both deficient. For example, in “*Cooing and Wooing*”(Xu Yuanchong’s version), there is a line that says, “悠哉游哉，辗转反侧,” which describes the man’s feelings of being unable to sleep at night because his beloved one is unavailable. For the translation of the word “辗转反侧”, James Legge translated it as “On his side, on his back, he turned, and back again.”. We can see that it adopts a literal translation method by repeating the preposition to describe the scene that it is difficult to fall asleep because of missing the beloved one. Let’s take a look at Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s translation —— “He tosses all night lon”. Compared with James Legge’s translation, Mr. Xu’s translation is more concise, which is also what he has been pursuing. However, the image conveyed by the double tone rhyming word “辗转” is missing in both translations. The intrinsic meaning has not been fully transformed, and the aesthetic sense possessed by the original poem has also been somewhat discounted. Perhaps this is something that translation sometimes cannot achieve no matter what.

Furthermore, there are often many parallel sentences in *The Book of Songs* to make certain emotions more vivid and intense. Also in the *Cooing and Wooing*, for example, the phrases —— “窈窕淑女，寤寐求之”, “窈窕淑女，琴瑟友之” and “窈窕淑女，钟鼓乐之”. James Legge translated them into —— “The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady; Waking and sleeping, he sought her.”, “The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady; With lutes, small and large, let us give her friendly welcome.” and “The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady; With bells and drums let us show our delight in her.”. “The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady” is used in every sentence, and the syntax is very neat and similar to the original. James Legge’s literal translation method also preserves the meaning of the original poem to the greatest extent, and expresses what the original poem wants to express in terms of information, expression and beauty. Let’s take a look at Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s translation —— “The youth yearns day and night; For the good maiden fair.”, “O lute, play music bright For the bride sweet and slender!” and “O bells and drums, delight The bride so fair and slender!”. From the perspective of rhyme, Mr. Xu Yuanchong has already played it to the extreme. However, from the perspective of semiotics, in order to retain the habit of English language expression, Mr. Xu did not use parallelism, but highlighted rhyme, making poetry easy to read. Although this enhances the aesthetic feeling in language to a certain extent, it does not conform to the expression of semiotics, so it is slightly inferior to James Legge’ translation.

From another perspective, from the perspective of interpretive theory, let’s take a look at the translations of two translators. It is still the poem “Cooing *and Wooing*”, in which an animal —— “Ju Jiu”, a water bird —— appears. However, in this poem, there is actually a metaphor for two people who are in love. Mr. Xu Yuanchong translated it as “turtledove” and James Legge translated it as “osprey”. In fact, both of them are birds. The two translators have different understandings and naturally use different words. By looking up a dictionary, we can find that the word “turnledove” not only refers to an animal, but also sometimes to a couple in love, while “osprey” only means “osprey”. So, from this perspective, Mr. Xu Yuanchong’s translation is much more relevant.

5. Conclusion

We can see that in all the examples above, both translators have translated the original text with their own understanding. It cannot be said who is good and who is bad. From different

perspectives, there will be different results. As a Chinese, you may prefer Mr. Xu Yuanchong's translation because his "Three-beauty Theory" enable the translation to have a certain degree of similarity with the original text. When we read it, we do not feel like we are reading someone else's work. We can experience that our Chinese classics can also be translated into English so beautifully and fluently. As a foreigner who has just come into contact with Chinese ancient books, James Legge's version may make it more convenient and understandable for him to get started. When we learn or understand something new, the most important thing is to first understand it well. Without sufficient understanding, it may cause misunderstandings for subsequent research or learning. So here we compare the translations of the two gentlemen, just to allow everyone to view the translation from different perspectives.

Translation is an activity that inevitably involves two languages, two countries and the two cultures. Translators play a media role in this activity, conveying the cultures of different countries to both sides. The Chinese nation has a history of 5000 years, and in this long river of history, we have continuously developed and created many brilliant cultures. China's translation industry is entering a new stage, but it is also facing severe challenges. So many cultural classics can be said that only a small portion have been translated into translations, and even the quality of translation has not reached a certain level. In such an environment of close cultural exchange, good translation can make foreign readers feel the breadth and depth of our Chinese culture. In today's rapidly developing globalization, the pace of Chinese literature entering the world has also accelerated significantly, and translation, as an essential medium, has played a huge role. Through such comparative research, we can better understand culture and promote cultural exchange.

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