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Brief Analysis of the Beauty of Poetry Translation from the Perspective of Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties Theory"

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Abstract: Xu Yuanchong is a well-known translator at domestic and overseas, and is regarded as the first translator of poetry into English and French. As a leading translator of ancient Chinese poetry into English, Xu Yuanchong has a rigorous attitude, inherits the doctrines of his predecessors, collects his lifelong experience, and puts forward his unique translation theory "The three Beauties" - in his more than 60 years of literary translation practice and work, advocating the transmission and preservation of the three aspects of beauty in meaning, sound and form. The theory of "Three Beauties Theory" advocates the transmission and preservation of the metrical rhythm of poems and songs in three aspects: meaning, sound and form, which can perfectly reproduce the unique rhythmic flavor of ancient poems and improve the readability and appreciation of the translation. "Three Beauties Theory" has played an important role in the development of Chinese translation theory. "Three Beauties Theory" provides a theoretical basis for making translated poems more pleasing to the eye and the mind. This study examines Xu Yuanchong's translation theory and practice from the perspective of his "Three Beauties Theory", and further analyzes the beauty of his poetry translation from the perspective of his "Three Beauties Theory".

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

1. Introduction

Xu Yuanchong, winner of the "Lifetime Achievement Award for Chinese Translation Culture" and the "Northern Lights" Award for Outstanding Literary Translation, one of the highest awards in the international translation field, is a master of translating classical Chinese poems and songs as well as English and French. The "Three Beauties Theory" is his theory of translation. He has cleverly and flexibly applied Lu Xun's "three beauties" - the beauty of form for the eyes, the beauty of sound for the ears and the beauty of meaning for the heart - to his thoughts on translation. Xu Yuanchong concluded from his more than sixty years of translation practice that "the translation of poetry should take 'beauty' as the starting point, unify the original poem's mood, sound and form, and translate as much as possible the unique flavour of ancient poems for the benefit of the readers." On the basis of this, he put forward the translation standard of "three beauties theory" [1].

With the implementation of the strategy of cultural outreach, the translation and dissemination of Chinese literature to foreign countries has begun on a large scale, and the translation of poems is among them. Although the number of translated works has increased, their recognition in the world literary community is still relatively low, and many translated works have met with a cold reception after being disseminated overseas, one of the major reasons being the poor quality of translation, which has hindered the dissemination of poetry in the world. After some works have been translated, the language is not fluent, and there is the phenomenon of translation accent, which is hard to read and confusing, not to mention playing the role of cultural dissemination. Specifically, there is a lack of cultural transformation in the translation process of many works, and the translations only take into account the superficial meaning of the original words and grammatical rules of conversion, ignoring the differences between Chinese culture and Western culture, and failing to take into account the reading habits and aesthetic habits of readers in the target language countries. Poetry translation is not only the transformation and format correspondence between different languages and words, but also the exchange and collision of various cultures. At the present stage, many Chinese poems are translated, only retaining the literal accuracy, and the deeper meanings contained in the works are not reflected through the translation, weakening the cultural connotation and beauty of the original poems.

Xu Yuanchong advocated that translators should convey and preserve the rhythm and rhyme of poems and songs from the three aspects of meaning, sound and form. Transmission at the three levels of meaning, sound and form can more accurately express the humanistic spirit of the original text, such as details, feelings, thoughts and connotations, through different languages and words. From simple text conversion to the unity of form and spirit before and after translation, not only the original flavour of the work will be presented in front of the readers, but also the translated poems and texts can touch the readers' hearts, so that the readers can interact with the original authors across time and space with the "beauty" of the concise text [2]. Translation is difficult, and the beauty of translation is even more difficult, Xu Yuanchong's "three beauties theory" provides a theoretical basis for translating poems to be more pleasing to the eyes and to the spirit. This paper will analyse Xu Yuanchong's thoughts on literary translation from the perspective of this theory according to the translation concept of "three beauties theory".

2. Brief Introduction of Xu Yuanchong

In the mid-1980s, Xu Yuanchong was studying at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Sociales in Paris. He often went to

bookstores to browse, and found that, except for the four great masterpieces which had been translated into French by Chinese scholars, the rest of the Chinese classics were only in thin pamphlets, which were almost unnoticed by anyone. When Liang Zongdai translated Tao Qian's poems into French, the famous poet Valéry expressed his deep appreciation and personally wrote a preface for the French translation. I think if someone can translate the essence of Chinese culture, such as Tang and Song poems, into foreign languages, the world will understand China better. As I am not well educated, I can only sigh with admiration. Unexpectedly, the times have created a hero, and a great talent who is proficient in both classical Chinese poetry and English and French foreign languages has indeed emerged: Xu Yuanchong.

All translators know how difficult it is to translate, compared to poetry, which is naturally even more difficult because of its metrical and rhythmic nature. Tang and Song poems are so profound that it is not easy to understand them, and to translate them into a foreign language is so difficult that no one but a great man would dare to ask for them. Poetry translation is different from empty theories that can be muddled up with some specious and fashionable terms, but it is necessary to compare the translation with the original text word by word and in a clear manner.

Xu Yuanchong began publishing his translations in 1956, but due to the interference of various political movements, he published only four books in the 30 years after liberation. At the end of the ten years of turmoil, he entered the best golden autumn season of his life at an almost ripe old age. He returned to Beijing in 1983 as a professor in the Department of International Politics and the Department of English at Peking University, and has been writing incessantly ever since. He was psychologically prepared for translating classical Chinese poetry, and with the practice of translating Mao Zedong's poetry, he naturally translated classical poetry with ease and ease. By the end of the last century, Xu Yuanchong had published nearly 60 translations, and by now he has long since broken the hundred mark, covering four genres: Chinese-English, English-Chinese, Chinese-French, and French-Chinese. The English translations of *Chu Ci*, *The Book of Poetry*, *The Story of the Western Chamber*, *The Three Hundred Poems of the Tang Dynasty*, *The Three Hundred Lyrics of the Song Dynasty*, *The Three Hundred Yuanqu Operas*, and *The Three Hundred Immortal Poems of China* are wonderful and prestigious.

3. Overview of the Three Beauties Theory

Xu Yuanchong was born into a family of scholars and graduated from the Southwest Associated University. From his childhood experience to his tireless study, from swimming against the current in the hard times, and from struggling in his old age, Xu Yuanchong has devoted his life to his beloved translation career. The theories that come out of practice will be tested by practice, and Xu Yuanchong engaged in the translation business in order to implement his translation theories. Practice is the only criterion for testing truth - this is also the philosophical basis for Xu Yuanchong's proposal of "creating a Chinese school of literary translation theory". From the perspective of beauty, Mr Xu put forward the "Three Beauties Theory", in which translating from the three levels of meaning, sound and form can perfectly reproduce the unique rhythmic flavour of ancient poems and improve the readability and appreciation of the translated text [3-4].

3.1. The Basic Concept of the "Three Beauties Theory"

Lu Xun put forward the theory of "three beauties" about Chinese literary creation in the first article of his book *Outline of the History of Chinese Literature*, that is, "the beauty of the meaning is to touch the heart, the beauty of the sound is to touch the ear, and the beauty of the shape is to touch the eyes." When it comes to beauty in translation theory, Xu Yuanchong, a famous translator in China, transplanted Lu Xun's theory of "three beauties" to form his own theory of "three beauties" based on his own practice of translating poems.

That is to say, firstly, the beauty of meaning, the translated poem should keep the same meaning as the original poem, to move people with the meaning; secondly, the beauty of sound, the translated poem should keep the same pleasant rhythm as the original poem; thirdly, the beauty of form, the translated poem should keep the same form (length, dialogue) as the original poem.

The "three beauties" are based on "three similarities": similarity of meaning, similarity of sound, and similarity of form. Similarity of meaning is to convey the content of the original text, can not be translated by mistake, omission, translation, but not necessarily able to convey the original meaning of the beauty of the poem; the beauty of the sound refers to the poem should have a stanza, rhyme, smooth, the translator can choose and the original rhyme similar to the original text, but also with the help of the double sound, superposition of rhymes, repetition, the pair of the method of expression; the beauty of the shape of the two main aspects of the neatness of the dialogue, the length of the statement, in the context of the shape can not be reached, but also to do the overall neatness. The beauty of form has two main aspects, namely, neatness of counterpoints and length of phrases.

Therefore, in the eyes of Xu Yuanchong, "the translation does not need to be 'similar in form', it only needs to convey the 'beauty of meaning' of the original poem and reproduce the 'beauty of sound' of the original poem as far as possible." Therefore, the translator should realize the beauty of sound and form as much as possible under the premise of conveying the beauty of meaning of the original text. This theory of "three beauties" was first put forward by Xu Yuanchong in his letter to Zhu Guangqian in 1979, and he decided to pursue the principle of "seeking beauty" rather than "faxing" in his translations.

It is worth noting, however, that Mr Xu's view is that poetry translation should be conditional on "no loss of truth", and that the pursuit of the "three beauties" should be placed above the "search for truth". Therefore, according to Xu Yuanchong, "In translating poetry, the pursuit of truth is a low standard, while the pursuit of beauty is a high standard. Translation requires truth and poetry requires beauty. If the translation can be both true and beautiful, it is naturally the best, but if not, then we have to convey the meaning, sound and form of the original poem as much as possible without distorting the truth." In Xu Yuanchong's view, in the process of translating poetry, the pursuit of "truth" and "beauty" are not in conflict, and the pursuit of beauty also preserves the truth of the original poem to a certain extent; poetry pursues beauty, and translation pursues truth. However, many scholars of translation theory have pointed out that Xu Yuanchong's idea of translation deviates from the traditional translation concept of "seeking

truth from the text" and raises the importance of sound and beauty to an unprecedented height.

In addition, Xu Yuanchong also emphasized the re-creation of translation, so as to regain what had been lost in the translation of poetry, the so-called "making up for the loss by creation" method. However, this theory was also criticized for being unfaithful to the original text, and there were many debates about whether faithfulness was a matter of likeness or resemblance. However, no matter whether the beauty of meaning is the first, the beauty of sound is the second, and the beauty of form is the last, or whether it is the theory of traditional translation standards such as "faith, attainment, and elegance" put forward by Yan Fu, all of them have provided reference for later translators to translate.

Classical Chinese poetry advocates the complete combination of beauty of form and beauty of content, which involves various aspects such as literature, phonetics, etc. The poetic metre is also a product of the importance attached by Chinese literati to the beauty of form and beauty of content. Ancient Chinese poems and songs are concise and condensed, with the requirements of leveling and rhyming, and have stringent requirements in terms of the number of words, the number of phrases, the sentence pattern, and the rhyming pattern. Translation is not a simple direct translation, it needs to be used flexibly, not only to adjust the use of words, structure, but also to deal with the differences brought about by different customs and cultural differences, the difficulty of translation is even more difficult for the translation of poems and songs that pay attention to the rhythm and rhyme [5]. Not only do they have to have a deep and profound understanding of the poems beyond the ordinary people, but also have to convert their own understanding, which is not different from the original text, into the translation, so you can see how difficult it is.

Thus, this is also what Xu Yuanchong believes in the translation theory of "three beauties": meaning, sound and form are not in a juxtaposition, and among these three beauties, meaning is the most important one, followed by sound and form. In this theory, "beauty" is not just the only thing to be pursued, it is not simply the externality piled up with gorgeous rhetoric and exaggerated language, but the starting point is "beauty", which unifies the original poem's meaning, sound and form, and translates the unique flavour of the ancient poem as far as possible. It is to take "beauty" as the starting point, to unify the original poem's mood, sound and form, and to translate the unique flavour of the poem as much as possible. In the translation theory of "three beauties", it is believed that: the beauty of meaning refers to the experience of feeling the content, emotion and mood of the poem; the so-called beauty of sound refers to the experience of the rhythm, level and rhyme of the poem; the so-called beauty of form refers to the experience of the neatness of the verses and the coordination of the poem [6].

The similarity of meaning, sound and form is the basis of the "three beauties", based on which, then it is necessary to accurately and precisely translate the content of the original text, no mistranslation or omission, and even more according to one's own ideas to create or adapt to change the meaning of the original text. Yan Fu's *Theory of Heavenly Evolution* says that there are three difficulties in translation: faith, attainment, and elegance. Translation needs to convey what the original text wants to express, which makes the "beauty of meaning" in the first place. The "beauty of sound" is to keep the rhyme of the poem to be smooth and rhythmic, and sound good when read aloud. The "beauty of form" is to make the form or format of the translated poem best match the original poem, or to reproduce the structure of the Chinese poem against the English poem's metre [7-8].

3.2. The Research of the "Three Beauties Theory"

Xu Yuanchong has been engaged in literary translation for nearly seventy years, and his translations mainly focus on Chinese, English and French languages. The main body of his research is the English translation of ancient Chinese poems, and he has formed a unique method and theory of translating poems into rhyme, and his main translations into French include *One Hundred Selected Words from the Tang and Song Dynasty*, and *Three Hundred Selected Words from Ancient Chinese Poetry*. His English translations include *The Story of the Western Chamber*, *The Classic of Poetry*, *Three Hundred Lyrics of the Song Dynasty*, and *Chu Rhetoric*, etc. He has translated so many works in his life that he said that he is the first person to translate poems into English and French, and that he is able to write in both Chinese and English. Indeed, Xu Yuanchong is the first person who can translate between Chinese, English and French flexibly. Xu Yuanchong first put forward the important literary translation theory of "three beauties" in his translation of *Mao Zedong's Forty-two Poems*. He thought about translation from the practical point of view, and updated the translation theory in the continuous translation practice, the theory guides the practice, and the practice tests the theory, not only paying attention to the differences between Chinese and foreign languages, cultures and aesthetics, but also paying attention to the characteristics of the Chinese language from the perspective of the unique rhyme of Chinese poems, which led him to the present "three-beauty theory". This is the reason why we have the present "Three Beauties Theory" [9].

Since the "three beauties theory" of translation was put forward, the papers and reviews related to the study of Chinese-English translation based on the perspective of the "three beauties theory" have emerged one after another, and have become one of the focuses of translation research. As of 2017, some scholars have counted as many as 1,627 translation research articles [10] based on the perspective of the translation theory of "three beauties", of which nearly 1,100 articles were published in the six years between 2011 and 2017, accounting for 65% of the total, which shows that the translation theory of "three beauties theory" has also progressed with the times. With the progress of the times, the "three beauties theory" has a further development trend. Figure 1 shows the trend of the number of articles published in the "three beauties theory" over the years.

Xia Lin [11] and other scholars have studied the Chinese-English translation of classic ancient poems in textbooks from the perspective of "three beauties theory". The authors suggest that in the current era of increasing cultural confidence and value confidence, we need to boost the cultural confidence of the Chinese nation and let the traditional Chinese culture go out, so the foreign translation of ancient poems has gradually become an indispensable learning material for students in their studies. Starting from the theory of "three beauties", the article explores the specific performance of this translation theory in the English translation of ancient poems, starting from the beauty of meaning to the beauty of sound and finally to the beauty of form, and starting from the examples, the English translation

of ancient poems is more appreciated.

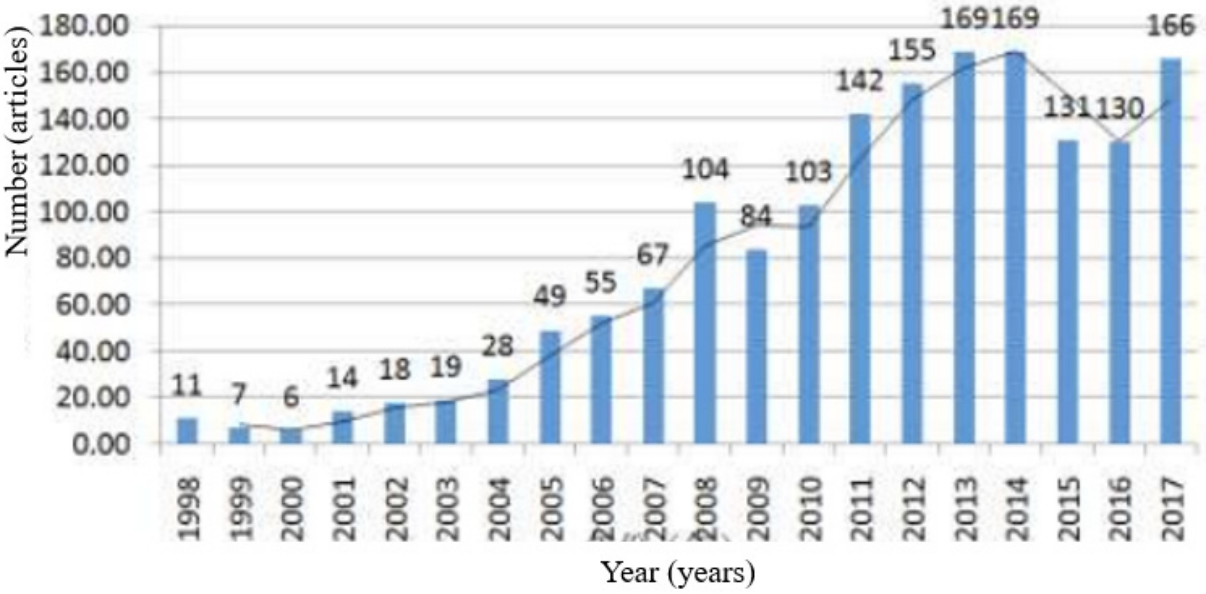


Figure 1. Changes in the number of articles published on the "Three Beauties Theory" over the years

Finally, the paper concludes that the study of bilingual poetry by students in compulsory education not only helps to improve their knowledge of traditional culture and enhance their cultural self-confidence, but also improves their English language proficiency and extends the scope of language practice. Ancient poems are subtle and refined, highly condensed, with rich and deep meanings, and only translations under the guidance of the "three beauties theory" can let both Chinese and foreign readers feel the charm of Chinese culture, thus letting the world understand Chinese culture and making China a cultural powerhouse. Wang Yuhan [12] analyses Xu Yuanchong's translation of the classic Song lyrics from the perspective of the "theory of three beauties". The author believes that translation is not a simple translation work, not a process of directly converting the source language into the target language, and that it is even more challenging to translate poems with rhyme, so the use of the "theory of three beauties" in the English translation of Song lyrics will help to enhance the Chinese culture. Therefore, the use of the "Three Beauties Theory" in the English translation of Song lyrics has a crucial role in guiding and enlightening, the author believes that the "Three Beauties Theory" has an indispensable instructive role in the English translation of Chinese classic poems, and at the same time, with the increasingly close international communication, under the guidance of the "Three Beauties Theory", it is possible to translate Song lyrics into English. The author believes that the "three beauties theory" has an indispensable role to play in the English translation of Chinese classic poems and songs. Liu Xin [13] summarises Professor Xu Yuanchong's translation literature from four aspects, namely, translation theory research, translation criticism research, translation practice research and translation teaching research. Based on the 159 articles retrieved from CNKI, the author summarizes and analyses them, and combs through the relevant research content of Xu Yuanchong from the sources of data such as dissertation reviews, based on his rich translation practice experience combined with the previous translators' experiences. Based on his rich practical experience in translation, he proposed the famous "Three Beauties Theory", which had a profound influence on the Chinese translation industry, and he put forward the "Six Theories on Translating Poetry" in his book [14]. The "Six Theories on Translating Poetry" pointed out a long-term guiding direction for the translation of poems. Xu Yuanchong put his theory into practice and optimized his theory in continuous practice. He proposed: "The theory of translation comes from the practice of translation, and in turn guides the practice of translation, and at the same time is tested by the practice of translation."

Feng Zhiqiang thinks that Xu Yuanchong is a lonely but not lonely fighter, in this century of Mr Xu's life, it can be said that a hundred-year-old boy crazy but not delusional, constantly challenging the translation tradition and his own destiny, his life is accompanied by the beauty of poetry and literature, he is an outstanding translator and bilingual writers, constructed a self-contained system of translation thought, and finally became a world-renowned discoverer, creator and disseminator of beauty [15]. Xu Yuanchong's works are not only a source of inspiration, but also a source of inspiration. Xu Yuanchong's works are not only translations, but also creations with a different flavour, which produce the beauty of the mood and the interest of words that make people linger on.

4. The Application of the "Three Beauties Theory" in Translation

Poetry is one of the characteristics of Chinese culture. Poetry expresses the will and words express feelings, a kind of word art to express the soul, and poetry is a kind of language art with emotional colors. Therefore, translating poems is often more difficult, and in the actual translation of poems, the "three beauties theory" plays a crucial role as a guide.

Zhang Fayong [16] uses the theoretical perspective of "three beauties" to analyse how Xu Yuanchong makes use of the translation theory of "three beauties" to reproduce the "beauty of meaning, sound and form" in the poems written by Su Shi. In the analysis, it is argued that the use of

augmentation and deepening of translation can make it easier for readers to understand the translated poems through the subtitle of the words or the original addition of notes.

For example, the line “Impervious to wind, rain or shine, I'll have my will” in the poem *Tune: The Moon over the West River-To the Fairy of Mume Flower*, which means to look back to the wind and rain of the journey, and go back regardless of whether it is wind, rain or shine, combining with the previous lines, expresses Su Shi’s open-minded and cheerful outlook on life. The phrase “I will have my will” combines perfectly with the original text and makes the original meaning of the poem more obvious. Similarly, in the process of translation, due to the great cultural differences that exist after different languages, the regional differences have resulted in the emergence of strong regional and life slang between different regions. For example, in the poem *Sand of Silk-washing Stream*, the phrase “a thousand miles” refers to the vastness of the countryside. Combined with the previous lines, the meaning of the whole poem is that one has travelled all the paths of one’s hometown in one's sleep, but when one wakes up and looks to the south, one only realizes that there is a world of distance between the two. Xu Yuanchong uses the phrase “miles after miles” to outline the sense that the long mountains and distant waters in the original text are blocking his way home.

Liu Zongyuan’s *Fishing in Snow From* expresses the poet's noble and lonely thoughts and feelings of getting rid of the world and transcending the world. Xu Yuanchong’s translation is as follows:

Fishing in Snow From

Hill to hill no bird in flight,

From path to path no man in sight.

A lonely fisherman afloat,

Is fishing in lonely boat.

When Xu Yuanchong translated the poem, he used two “no’s” in a row, which invariably gave the readers a feeling of emptiness and lonesomeness. It is also because of this translation that none of the objects appearing in the original poem are missing in the translation, showing the general dynamics as absolute silence and stillness. In such a cold and silent environment, the fisherman is surrounded by his surroundings and concentrates on fishing, so it can be said that Mr Xu Yuanchong's translation is accurate and vivid.

Another example is Meng Haoran's *A Spring Morning*, which Mr Xu translated as follows:

A Spring Morning

This spring morning in bed I'm lying.

Not wake up till I hear birds are crying.

After one night of wind and showers.

How many are the fallen flowers.

The first two lines and the last line of the original poem rhyme with “ao”, forming the rhyme scheme of AABA. Xu Yuanchong’s translation conveys the rhythmic beauty of the original poem in iambic pentameter, and conveys the phonetic beauty in AABB rhyme scheme, with the first two lines of the translation ending in "-ing" and the last two lines ending in “-wers”, so that Xu Yuanchong’s translation reads well. The first two lines of the translation end in “-ing” and the last two lines end in “-wers”, so Xu Yuanchong’s translation also reads well and does not diminish the sound of Meng’s poem [17].

Li Shangyin’s *Untitled*, which Xu Yuanchong translated into English as *To One Unnamed* in response to the title. While the Chinese title *Untitled* has a broad meaning, the English title is more specific, referring to the fact that the poem is dedicated to someone whose name cannot be easily mentioned. The poem opens with the fact that due to resistance, the beloved cannot see each other, and the pain of separation torments them. There is no subject in this opening line. Omitting the subject is a common syntactic feature in ancient Chinese poems, and readers need to guess it by themselves in relation to the context, which makes readers feel the beauty of ambiguity and multiple meanings. Xu Yuanchong added “us” in his translation, which is a logical understanding. From this, it can be deduced that the implied subject in ancient Chinese poems is added to the translation through one’s own understanding, depending on the situation.

5. Conclusion

In the history of modern Chinese translation, there have been many great masters, from Yan Fu, Liang Qichao to Lu Xun, Liang Shiqiu, etc., all of whom have made great contributions to the cause of translation in China, and all of them have left a colourful mark in the history of translation in China. Inheriting the experience of his predecessors, Mr Xu Yuanchong has become a great translator who combines creation and translation, theory and practice. He dared to challenge fate, injustice and himself. He published more than a hundred books and fought non-stop for a hundred years. Because of him, the Western world has felt the profoundness of Chinese culture, the subtlety of poems and songs, and the spiritual world of the Chinese nation; it is also because of him that the West knows Li Bai, Du Fu, Su Shi, Li Qingzhao, and Chinese readers have deepened their understanding of Haberet, Madame Bovary, Romeo and Juliet. Mr Xu Yuanchong used translation to create beauty, convey beauty, and exchange beauty, and used translation as a tool to build a road of communication between different cultures. Mr Xu Yuanchong once said, "The greatest pleasure in life is to be with what I like and to do what I like. It is the greatest pleasure in the world to transform the beauty created in one country into the beauty of the whole world."

At the same time, the development of poetry translation needs the support of high-quality translation talents. In order to better meet the needs of international communication and complete the task of foreign translation, it is necessary to vigorously cultivate composite translation and communication talents who are capable of translation as well as understanding communication. In addition to possessing solid professional skills, rich knowledge reserves and strong foreign language translation ability required of general translators, excellent translators should also enhance their multicultural ability and strengthen their learning and understanding of foreign literature and culture on the basis of enhancing their historical and cultural heritage and academic accumulation. Looking at the famous translators in China, all of them have studied both Chinese and Western cultures and are familiar with the differences in history, culture, social background and values between China and the West, so that they can translate poems in a fluent and skilful manner.

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